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Mass Effect: The Helldiver Saga, The Last Cycle

by Veyron722skyhook

Summary

And so it has begun! As the war against the Reapers begins however, a mystery starts to unfold. For an ancient evil, older even than the Reapers themselves, has been unleashed... Who are the Takaal? What is the secret of the Catalyst? Can this cycle succeed where so many have failed?
Chapter 1 The Beginning of The End

So it's finally begun!

Now, first of all, I'd like to say that there are going to be a lot of changes in my version. I found ME3 very depressing, so I've worked on making huge changes to remove those bits or at least tone them down.

Hopefully, this chapter alone will show you what to expect. As you'll quickly notice, even the very opening has been changed. I've come up with a new original story that in a way is more similar to ME1 again where it's more adventurous and there's a mystery to be solved.

I should also say that the ending for this has been completely redesigned and is not anything like the game version. Bioware really let us down with their version. The EC was okay, but they still could've done better. Another thing I will also say quickly. For those who have seen and played the happy ending mod for ME3 (if not, I'd definitely recommend it) you'll be happy to know that elements of it will be incorporated into my ending. It will still have plenty of originality to it though.

And also as a guest review asked, yes, mine will have as much closure as I can squeeze out. To do this, I devised using something similar to the ending of DAO.

Okay, I think I've rambled on long enough. Sit back, and enjoy the ride...

Mass Effect: The Helldiver Saga

Episode 3, The Last Cycle

Prologue:

Wake up, my children. Another day dawns on us.

What news, your majesty?

Have they arrived? Has... he, made his move yet?

No. It would seem his... ally is still searching. They have not yet found it.

It is only a matter of time, your majesty. It cannot remain hidden forever.

We've seen countless others fall before their might. Why should this one be different?

Because of him. I have watched him for a long time.

So he killed Sovereign and defeated the Collectors. That does not mean he can destroy them all. We above all should know this.

This cycle is different. They are not as weak as the others. They are independent, united. They do not look up to one in-particular race as the others have.

And that makes them dangerous. If they discover us...
We have lived here in peace for over 65 million years. Why should that change now?

Wait! They're here... It has begun...

We observe as we have always done. This is not our war.

But what if he should find us. Worse still, what if this... Shepard, should lead... the others, to us?

We need not worry about that. Our protectors will see to our safety as they have always done. For now, we observe and study. But I have faith. I have reason to believe that we know what it is that the ones who came before where trying to find.

Enough talk, my children! The invasion is under-way. The fallen ones will strike soon, and he shall strike the hardest.

Then let the games begin...

Chapter 1

The Beginning of the End

Midday dawned over Earth. He found it strange that everyone was spending this day as thought it were just like any other. If they knew what he knew... things would be very different.

Sir Major Austin Shepard stood leant over a balcony overlooking the huge vista of the city of . He couldn't help but smile slightly as he looked at the roof of a nearby building, watching a child playing with a model of a Human Systems Alliance fighter.

Austin Shepard was a Helldiver, one of the finest soldiers in the galaxy.

Many years ago, the ancient and wise race known as the Arkanes had discovered an ancient technology on their homeworld that predated all life by over 65 million years. From that technology, they had built the Helldivers. Hugely advanced armour that someone could slip inside and control almost like a second skin. Originally intended only for the Arkanes, the Helldivers had evolved over the years until today when they were a multi species program dedicated to the freedom and protection of all.

For over 15 years Austin had been a part of this. For 10 years he had served along his team, Alpha Squad, who were all sat behind him enjoying their shore leave. It was 5 years ago however that he had made a discovery that had changed everything.

50,000 years ago, an ancient race known as the Protheans vanished, never to be seen again. Even to this day, the cause of their extinction was disputed. However, Austin and those close to him knew the truth. Through a Prothean beacon, he had seen a message from the Protheans, a warning against the source of their extinction. An ancient and immortal race of machines known as the Reapers. They had wiped out the Protheans and many other race of organic life before them. This cycle of extinction had continued for who knows how long. And now the time had come again. What had started out a mission to hunt down a rouge agent, who he had been assigned, had revealed the truth. The Reapers were returning to once again continue the cycle and eradicate them and all life. Using this, he and many friends he had met during his journey, including the Asari who would later become his wife, he had stopped the rouge agents plan and defeated the Reaper's vanguard, Sovereign. This however had not stopped the Reaper invasion, it had only delayed it.

A year or so later, Austin had crossed paths with one of the Reaper's servants, a mysterious race
known as the Collectors. This unfortunate encounter had resulted in him ending up in a coma for two years until he finally managed to wake up. Returning to active duty, Austin had been given a new ship, had his old team reassigned back to his command and had even been reunited with the love of his life. With Alpha's help, and the help of a team from the outside, Austin had taken the fight to the Collectors after they had started abducting thousands of human colonists out in the Terminus systems. They had fought them in their own base and destroyed them.

Once again however, it was far from over. Humanity now had the full attention of the Reapers and although they were heading the long way, they were coming. Shortly after, Austin had found out that the Reapers might arrive earlier and had been forced to destroy a Mass Relay to delay them a bit longer and buy the galaxy some more time to prepare.

That had been two years ago. That time had been put to very good use. For those past years, Austin and his team had worked and trying to rally as many as possible to their side and to try and get the word out, for there were those who refused to believe that the Reapers existed.

At the moment however, Austin and Alpha were all on shore leave. They gone for a long time without a break, and the Major wanted his team to be ready for when the time came. The expected two years had passed so it was only a matter of time until the Reapers did eventually arrive, there was no denying that. In fact, it was fair to say that all they had left now was borrowed time.

Austin however brought his thoughts back to now. He looked behind to see his squad all chatting with each other. Alpha Squad was a combination of many different species. Human, Turian, Quarian, Krogan and Asari. Each one of them had their own set of skills and traits that benefitted the squad in some ways.

**Alaara T'onrak**

Asari. Second in command.

Child of two Asari matriarchs known for their many explicit porn vids. Former Eclipse soldier before defecting to the Helldivers. Skilled in both combat training and biotics. Married to Alpha's comm specialist, Sandra Whryte. Been with Alpha since its beginning, 15 years ago.

**Sandra Whryte**

Human. Field comm specialist.

Born with Russian heritage. Born and grew up on the streets of America during which she acquired a talent and skills in listening in on conversations which evolved in comm talent. Joined the Helldivers at the age of 19. Married to Captain Alaara T'onrak. Also been part of Alpha for 15 years.

**Alex Wilson/Griffin**

Human. Demolition Expert.

Born and grew up on Omega. Little known of parents. Very briefly a member of the Blue Suns before cutting all ties. Boyfriend of Ashley Madeline Williams, Austin's childhood friend. Alpha Squad's second newest member, recruited by Captain T'onrak during the two years of Austin's death. Nicknamed Griffin by his teammates due to the Griffin tattoo on his armour.

**Ventra Prarken**

Turian. Sniper/archer expert.
Very briefly a part of both the Turian military and C-sec before becoming a Helldiver. Skilled primarily in archery and prefers to use a high tech bow and arrow. Married to Leena Raan vas Penthra. Also part of Alpha for 15 years.

**Leena Raan vas Penthra**

Quarian. Engineer.

Born on the Migrant fleet like all Quarians. Never returned from her pilgrimage after she became a Helldiver. Hoped to remain with a former lover, only to find he ad killed shortly after her enrolment. Married to Ventra Prarken. Once again part of Alpha since the beginning.

**Urdnot Kraan**

Krogan. Heavy Weapon expert.

One of few lucky Krogan to survive birth due to the Genophage. Served as a member of the Blood Pack for a time after passing his rite of passage before quitting and becoming a Helldiver. Part of Alpha for 15 years.

**Dashiell Torres/Dash**

Human. Scout.

Born on the colony of Mindoir. Survived the Batarian slaver attack, but saw his parents die. Joined the Helldivers as soon as he turned 18. Well known among Alpha for his often eccentric sense of humour, and tendency to talk a lot. Part of Alpha since the beginning.

**X-5**

Experimental robot and AI.

Created by the terrorist organization Hellspawn as a weapon against the Helldivers. Reprogrammed by Alpha to fight for them instead. Became a Helldiver agent in return for information and a small service. Occasionally joined Alpha Squad on many missions, most recently to defeat the Collectors. Was made an official member of Alpha Squad not long after.

Each one of them were simply chatting to one another, enjoying the free time they had. Then of course there was also Alpha's very newest recruit, Natasha Soarin a.k.a Jet.

What made Jet very special was that she was one of the first of a new breed of Helldivers. Very recently, the Arkanes had finally found a way of creating some new Helldivers that had the ability that no other Helldiver had, the power of flight.

According to Jet's profile, she had been born and raised on Arkadia all her life, living on one of the small colony settlements outside the Arkadian city. She enlisted, and eventually became an Atmospheric fighter pilot. One of the best, she eventually earned the nickname Jet from her wingmen.

She had handpicked by the Arkane Council to be one of the very first of the flying Helldivers. She had been reluctant at first, but had eventually accepted. She had now been assigned to Alpha Squad a few months after she had donned her armour.

It was easy to tell among the others which one Jet was. Her armour design was completely different to the others. True her armour still had the same triangular shaped helmet design that all Helldiver
had to have, but that was it.

From every angle, Jet's armour was designed to look like a Stealth fighter and to be as aerodynamic as possible. She even had two massive wings on her back. At the moment of course, they were folded away so as not to be an inconvenience. When deployed, these wings not only aided in flight but also helped keep the Helldiver's power levels charged.

Because the technology in the flying Helldivers was still new, it was in a way experimental. For example, the flight mechanics did use a lot of power, more than a Helldiver's power core was able to recharge. So, to try and balance the power out, the wings were massive solar panels which could absorb power from any light source and provide additional power to keep the core power levels stable.

Jet's flight technology was pretty simple. She had the main thrusters concealed inside her feet. As a safety feature, her legs would lock together so that the pilot didn't accidently put them at the wrong angle. Jet of course would unlock them once she came in to land. She also had two small stabilizers on her back and two more large ones concealed in her hands. These stabilizers were so powerful that they could actually double as weapons. Jet however tended not to use them in combat much as they did use a lot of power.

Jet's main weapons of course were the assault rifle sized rail gun she carried, flamethrowers concealed in her wrists, and finally a massive war hammer which served as her melee weapon.

Austin planned to rejoin his squad eventually. Help take his mind off of things. For now though, he was thinking. As said before, he knew the Reapers were coming, so it did make him uneasy. He continued looking out over the city view as his shoulder cape flowed in the wind.

Not long after he and his team had stopped the Collectors, the Major had changed, or rather updated, his appearance. He now had a slightly larger build than his previous look, he carried a blood dragon emblem on his chest and also the shoulder parts from the armour he had taken that symbol from. The cape had been given to him after he had been knighted for stopping the Collectors. It served as a symbol to others of the authority he now carried as a knight.

Of course, his usual parts were there. His sword, named Excalibur, his kartalrium shield/gun, and the N7 designations on his right arm and chest.

"Not joining us, Major?" he heard someone ask.

Jet had got up from her seat and had joined him at the balcony.

"Just thinking." He replied, his British accented voice deepened slightly by his suit's voice changer.

"You miss your wife, don't you?" Jet asked.

She was right. Austin had been missing his Asari wife, Liara T'soni Shepard, for some time now.

They had met five years ago during the time that Austin had first seen the visions from the beacons. Somehow, it had been love at first sight for them and they had quickly become bond mates. Him falling into a coma four years ago had been a huge loss for her, but it had led her to joining the Helldivers herself, so when he finally regained consciousness, they were reunited. Having already joined Alpha Squad, Liara accompanied her love on his mission to stop the Collectors. During that time, the two mended their relationship and Austin eventually proposed to her. They were married not long after.

At the moment however, Liara was not with them. Recently she'd received a call regarding
something to do with the Protheans (for which she was a Professor in) and had needed to take a
temporary leave of absence. She ad assure her husband of course that it would only be a week and
that she would return as soon as she could. Even so, they loved each other so much that to simply
apart for one day felt very lonely for them.

"Yeah. It always feels lonely without her." He said.

"She'll be back tomorrow though, won't she? I'd say that's something to look forward to." Said Jet.

That was indeed true. The week had passed now, so Liara was bound to return some time tomorrow.
Austin did smile at the thought of that. He and Liara completed each other, so they always felt truly
alive in each others company.

At that moment, a man suddenly walked up to them and saluted.

"Major."

"Lieutenant James Vega." Said Austin warmly. "What brings you here?"

Vega was an Alliance soldier that Austin had been introduced to not too long ago. He wore a white
Alliance t-shirt and combat trousers. His dog tags were clearly visible above his shirt.

"I've been sent by the defence comity. They want to see you." He said.

Austin simply nodded and turned to Jet.

"Let the others know where I've gone. Don't want them getting worried." He said.

"Yes sir." Jet nodded.

Vega led Austin through the Alliance headquarters. All over the place, there were people hurrying to
different places. The Helldiver didn't recall it being this busy before.

"What's this all about, Vega?" he asked.

"Couldn't say, sir. Just told me they needed." James replied.

Austin was aware that his presence might also be adding to it. After all, he was a Major, a Helldiver
and a Knight. So he knew he had a huge air of authority around here.

A familiar face then stepped out of the crowds. An Alliance Admiral that Austin had known for a
long time.

"Anderson." He acknowledged.

"Admiral." Vega saluted.

Since Austin was technically in the Alliance anymore, he had no need to salute.

"Good to see you again, Shepard. Like your new look. It suits you." Said Anderson as he and Austin
shook hands. "How have things been for you?"

"As well as they could've been." Austin replied. "What's going on? Why is everyone in such a
hurry?"

"Admiral Hackett's mobilizing the fleets. I guess words made it to Alliance Command that something
big is heading our way." Said Anderson.

"The Reapers?" Austin asked with concern.

"We don't know, not for certain." Said Anderson.

"What else could be?" Said Austin, folding his arms.

"If I knew that…” said Anderson.

"It's the Reapers, Anderson! And you know that the Alliance is not ready for them, not by a long shot." Said Austin.

"Tell that to the defence comity." Said Anderson.

"Unless we're planning to talk the Reapers to death, the comity is just a waste of time. Besides, if the Reapers are indeed on our doorstep, I have more important places I need to be." Said Austin.

"They're just scared. None of them have seen what you've seen. You've been there, on the front lines, in the trenches, fighting them. We've seen your reports, seen the evidence you've collected. But it's all just theory to us." Said Anderson.

"So you expect me to just tell them it's gonna be okay? Hide the truth, like the Council?!" Austin retorted crossly. He was still a bit angry at the Alliance for not preparing better. Compared to the Helldivers and the Arkanes, the Alliance had barely done anything to prepare for the invasion.

"You know that's not true!" Anderson objected. "The shit you've done… any other Helldiver soldier would've just been ignored by the committee. It's your knowledge of the Reapers that's made them listen to you."

"That and you're good word?" Austin asked coldly.

"Yeah. I trust you, Shepard, and so does the committee." Said Anderson.

"If they trusted me, they would've prepared more. Besides, I'm just a soldier, Anderson. And I am not being a politician just for this." Said Austin.

"I don't need you to be either." Said Anderson. "I just need to do whatever it takes to help us stop the Reapers."

They proceeded through HQ a bit more before finally arriving outside the meeting place.

"They're expecting you too, Admiral."

"Good luck in there, Shepard." Said Vega.

Austin simply nodded as he and Vega shook hands. Anderson meanwhile had just run into a familiar face of Austin's.

"Anderson." Said Ashley Williams.

"Lieutenant, how'd it go in there?" Anderson asked.

"I don't know. I can never tell with them. I'm just waiting for orders." Said Ashley. She then noticed her friend. "Shepard!"
Austin turned and saw Ashley.

"Ashley? Good to see you again." He smiled as he walked up to Ashley and shook hands with her.

"You here on your own?" Ashley asked.

"No, everyone else is here with me. I can let Griffin know you're here if you want." He smiled, seeing where Ashley was going with this.

"Nah. Why spoil the surprise for him." Ashley winked.

Ever since Alpha had saved Ashley on the colony of Horizon two years ago, Ashley and Griffin had grown very close to another. It was during Austin's wedding when Griffin had accidently caught the flowers that he and Ash had made their relationship official.

At that moment however, an Alliance officer walked up to them.

"Admiral, Major, they ready for you now." She said.

Austin and Ashley simply nodded to each other as the Helldiver followed Anderson into the court room.

"You know the Major?" Vega asked.

"I used to," Said Ashley.

"Are you two…"

"No. Besides, he's married, and I'm seeing one of his squad."

Austin couldn't help but see the many Alliance faces staring at him. They'd no doubt heard the hundreds of stories about him.

The defence committee sat before Austin and Anderson. There was no denying that all of them were hoping for answers.

"Admiral Anderson. Sir Major Shepard."

"Well, what's the situation?" Austin asked.

"We were hoping you would tell us." Said one of the committee members.

"The reports coming in are unlike anything we've ever seen. Whole colonies have gone dark, bases gone silent." Said another.

"The only thing you've done by bringing me here is confirm what you already know and what I've been trying to tell you for years. The Reapers are here." Said Austin.

The committee mumbled amongst themselves before speaking again.

"Then how do we stop them?"

"Stop them?" Austin asked in surprise. "This isn't about strategy or tactics. This is about survival."
"But, their must be some way…"

"If there is, then I will find it. But you all need to be prepared to do what you need to survive." Said Austin.

"That's it? That's our plan?!"

"You have a better alternative?! If so, please share!" Austin retorted.

"UK headquarters has a visual."

The massive holoscreen lit up with several video links. There was no mistaking the familiar cuttlefish design of the ships. It was indeed the Reapers. Austin did his best to hide the shock that the Reapers were laying siege to London, to the UK, the place his family hailed from.

"What do we do?"

Austin knew this day would come eventually. Long had he known he had a destiny. A destiny that he would soon have to become more than just a squad leader. On the day the Reapers arrived, he would have to become a leader that the whole galaxy could follow. Starting from now, Austin knew he that now they would all be looking to him for answers and leadership.

"The only thing we can. We fight, we give them hell, or we die." He replied.

The committee was silent for a while. The fear ad suddenness of all this was a lot for them to take in.

"We should get to the Normandy." Austin suggested as he turned to Anderson.

Suddenly, the whole place shook. Everyone looked out the massive window to see a Reaper descending from the sky, a beam aimed right at them.

"Oh my god!"

The whole place exploded, sending almost everyone and everything flying. A huge amount of fire quickly followed, burning everything in it's path.

Austin quickly noticed that Anderson had been thrown to the floor by the blast and wouldn't escape the flames in time. Drawing his shield from hi back, the Helldiver quickly threw himself around the Admiral, the shield protecting him from the flames.

Austin of course had no need to worry about the fire hurting him. His armour was designed to withstand far worse without any damage. Even his cape had been soaked in a special flame proof liquid to stop it from being burnt. The shield also was made from the strongest metal in the galaxy. It took heat almost as strong as the sun to melt it.

When the flames finally did subside, the whole place was in ruins. Austin looked down to see that Anderson was alive, but unconscious.

"Anderson! Come on, wake up!" he yelled.

Anderson stirred and opened his eyes.

"Come on, get up." Said Austin, helping the Admiral up. He then took a spare pistol from his combat belt and handed it to Anderson. "Here, take this."

Anderson took the pistol as Austin finished helping him up. The Helldiver then tired to make contact
with the rest of his team.

"Alpha Squad, do you read me? Alaara, come in," he said.

No reply.

"I can't contact anyone else. The Reapers must be disrupting communication." Said Austin. "Come on. We should head to the spaceport at least. If I know Alpha as well as I do, that's where they'll go to if they can't contact us."

Anderson nodded and followed Austin's lead as he lead them across the rooftops. Getting outside did at least allow comms to temporarily improve.

"Anderson, I'm getting something. Sounds like Ashley and Vega are heading to the Normandy as well." Said Austin.

"HUSKS!"

Sure enough, several zombie like figures were heading in their direction. Human converted and repurposed by the Reapers. Deadly, and very hard to kill.

Anderson fired with his pistol while Austin unholstered his M-76 Revenant and fired also.

"I'm out of ammo!" Anderson yelled after just a few shots.

Austin also suddenly felt his rifle click and realised he didn't have any more thermal clips. It certainly wasn't the best time.

"Guess we'll have to take these things out the old fashioned way." Said Austin, drawing Excalibur and his shield from his back.

Two more husks ran at them. Anderson used the butt of the pistol to hit one of them hard in the head, killing it, while Austin cut it down completely.

Another Reaper overheard suddenly fire din their direction, creating a massive hole in the roof.

"Down here. We're too exposed on the roof." Said Austin, as he jumped down through the hole.

Anderson quickly followed.

The door they were about to head through was suddenly forced open as a Husk tired to claw at them. Austin however simply decapitated it with his sword.

Anderson tried to force the door open again, but found it too stiff. Austin on the other hand did it with relative ease due to his armour's strength.

"Through this way, hurry." He grunted, keeping the door open long enough for Anderson to slip through.

As they continued through the buildings, they eventually heard the sounds of gunfire. There were more soldiers nearby. Sure enough, they found a small army of Alliance marines engaging large amounts of husks.

"We can't just leave them." Said Anderson.

"That I agree with." Austin nodded.
The two quickly joined the fray. One of the marines threw them some thermal clips, allowing Anderson to reload. Austin meanwhile stuck to close up combat and used both his sword in his right hand and his shield/gun on his left wrist.

"Hold your positions! Hold your positions!" he yelled.

The presence of both Austin and Anderson seemed to bolster the marines motivation and they fought even harder. Husk after husk fell as they were shot, punched or cut down. The scale seemed to be tipping in their favour. Eventually in fact, the Husks did something they'd never done before. All of them retreated and ran.

All the marines cheered as the cyborg zombies fled out of sight. Austin however did not share the same feelings. In fact, this new move had him very uneasy. He could tell that Anderson felt it too.

"Something's not right. Husks never retreat." He said. "Reload and be ready! I don't think this is over yet!"

The marines complied and took this opportunity to reload and see to any wounded. Things seemed quiet for a while, but then they heard something.

A loud roar suddenly echoed around the city. Then the wind started to pick up as they heard another noise. It was a noise like a hurricane coming down from the north. The trees seemed to creak and crack in the hot, dry wind.

"What was that?" Anderson asked, doing his best to not be knocked over the sudden strong wind.

"Sentries, what can you see?!" Austin yelled to some snipers who were posted on the roof.

The snipers looked around for a moment. Then they saw something. They almost froze and went pale.

"Sound the alarm! Call for reinforcements, do it now!" one of them yelled.

"What is it?!" Austin shouted.

"Dragon." The sentry replied. "DRAGON!"

Another roar sounded, this time much louder. That was when they saw it. A massive black form suddenly swooped out from behind a building and blotted out the sun. Sure enough, hovering above them, larger even than a Tutchunka Harvester, was a Dragon. It was only when Austin got a better look that he saw it wasn't a normal Dragon, it was actually a husk. Clearly this husk had obviously been designed to look like a Dragon, and it certainly didn't disappoint.

The Draco, as Austin felt it appropriate to be called, swooped down and opened it's mouth. Sure enough, fire burst forth, consuming anything it touched. Several marines were caught in the blast as they tired to retreat. The others opened fire on the massive husk as it turned for another run. This time though, it landed. This Dragon was like the traditional European dragons, so it had two legs and it's wings doubled as arms, which supported it. It was now that everyone was able to get a look at this terrifying new monster. Two horns protruded from the Draco's head, and it had a short neck. This was a something a bit more new since a lot of Dragon designs often had long necks. The wings of course had a few scars and tears in them, as did the dragon's flesh. This was to be expected since it was a husk. The mouth however was the most terrifying. As it growled and roared it revealed it's teeth. They weren't normal. In the Draco's mouth, in place of teeth, were several long spikes. The very same ones that were often used to impale victims on to turn them into husks, which unsurprisingly were called Dragon's teeth.
The Draco drew itself up and breathed in as it prepared to breathe more fire.

"Stand firm!" Austin yelled.

The Draco breathed another round of fire. The sheer force of it was so strong that it sent debris all over the place. More marines screamed as the fire burned them alive. Cleared of nuisance, the Draco simply walked over them like they were nothing but tiny insects. These Alliance marines were nothing to the Husk. Unknown to them, it's eye was set another prize…

"HEY!" Austin yelled to get the Draco's attention, firing several shots from his shield's gun.

The shots didn't appear to hurt the Draco at all, but they did at least get it's attention. The Dragon roared and breathed another round of fire right at Austin.

The Helldiver threw up his shield immediately as the hot flames engulfed him. As expected however, they didn't hurt him.

The Draco almost looked surprised when it saw that Austin was unharmed. It simply snarled and stared at the Helldiver as he stood up.

Everyone simply watched as the Draco glare at Austin. The Helldiver found the husk's stare strange, almost as though… it knew him.

Then suddenly the Dragon started shaking it's head slightly, almost as though something was causing it pain. After just a few seconds, it stopped, and then it's eyes opened again. No longer were they the traditional blue that all husks had. They were now a familiar bright glowing orange. Then to everyone's shock, the Draco actually spoke with a voice that Austin knew all too well.

"Shepard!"

"Harbinger." Austin said coldly.

Harbinger was another Reaper who had been the true leader of the Collectors. Through the Collector general, it had influenced all their actions right up until they had all been destroyed. It was no surprise that it was controlling the Draco seeing as how Harbinger had been able to control any Collector it wished.

"You knew that this day would be coming, Shepard. The cycle could not be delayed forever. There is nothing you can do to stop us. All you can do is watch helplessly as all that you love and cherish is destroyed. You will suffer for your misguidance in thinking you had a chance against us." the Draco spoke with Harbinger's voice.

"You're the one who's misguided, Harbinger. You may think this cycle is no different from others before, but you're wrong. We will find a way, and I will stop you!" said Austin, no fear at all in his voice, despite that he was facing a massive Dragon that could just bite into him.

"There will be no glory in your sacrifice, Shepard. We will erase all memory of you from history. The next cycle will never know you existed at all." Harbinger growled.

"You're right." Said Austin. "Because there won't be another cycle, One way or another, I intend to end it. Years from now, the future will know that a free galaxy stood against tyrants like you, that a united few stood against many, and before this war was over… that even a race of machines like yours can bleed."

Harbinger was silent for a moment before finally speaking again.
"Your death will serve as an example to all who would dare stand against us! Now watch as I burn your world! Releasing control."

The Draco's eyes returned to normal as Harbinger's influence left it. It roared as soon as it saw Austin and lunged at him. The Helldiver was quick to react by rolling out of the way. As Austin retreated, the Draco once again breathed a huge amount of fire as it continued moving forward, unfazed by anything the Alliance tried in an attempt to slow it down.

Spotting Austin among the teeming masses, the Draco spat a fireball at him. Austin was quick to notice this and pulled Anderson into a trench, the fire just missing them. Several other marines did the same and took cover. The Draco once again released another round of fire, this time so large, intense and concentrated that it burned all that was left of the marines.

"NO!"

Anderson quickly stopped the soldier before he clambered out of the trench and into the Draco's view.

"You can't do anything! They're gone!" he yelled.

Suddenly, the normal husks returned, this time accompanied by another new type of husk. The massive harvesters that originated from the Krogan planet Tuchanka it seemed hadn't escaped this fate either. Smaller than the Draco, but just as deadly, these Harvesters were dropping almost hundreds of human husks onto the battlefield while the swooped overhead. The Draco, believing all the marines to be dead took off into the air to join them.

"We can't hold! The city is lost." Said one of the marines.

Austin was forced to accept defeat. There were outmatched, outnumbered, and outgunned as well, despite that these husks didn't wield guns. Anderson knew it too.

"Tell everyone to break cover, NOW!" Austin ordered. "Retreat! Retreat!"

What was left of the marines, Austin and Anderson jumped out of the trenches and ran as best they could.

"In here, quick!" Austin yelled, pulling Anderson into a nearby building.

The marines went to follow, but a red husk suddenly cut one of them down and exploded, causing the entrance to be sealed by debris. Austin and Anderson were safe, but they were now on their own again.

One surviving marine panted as he struggled to stay alive. The explosion from the red husk had taken it's toll on him and he was bleeding badly. He could see more husks through is visor but they seemed to be ignoring him.

Then he suddenly heard footsteps. He looked to see a large figure towering over him. It was blocking out the sun, so he could only see it's silhouettes. From what he could tell however, it looked humanoid. But at the same time it looked alien. It's anatomy was thin, almost… insect like.

The figure then suddenly took a large spear like weapon from it's back and plunged it into the marine's heart. There was nothing he could do but choke on his own blood as the life left him.

Satisfyingly watching the marine take hi last breath, the figure pulled the spear free.
"The age of humanity is over. The time of their extinction has come."

"This is a goddamn mess. How did we let this happen?!" said Anderson as he and Austin worked on trying to clear a path through the wreckage in an attempt to once again get to the Normandy. "They hit so fast, we thought we'd have time to prepare."

"You and the Alliance knew they were coming." Said Austin as he held up a piece of debris for Anderson to crawl under.

"And they still just cut through our defences." Said Anderson. "We need to go to the Citadel, talk to the Council."

"The Citadel? Anderson, the fight's here! Besides, I need to also warn Arkadia in case the Reapers haven't already invaded. We actually had plan that could work."

"The fight will be everywhere soon enough." Said Anderson. "The council has to help us."

"You honestly think they will?" Austin asked sarcastically as they started slowly making their way over a deep pit and trying to keep their balance.

"No. But you were a Council Spectre. That has to count for something." Said Anderson.

"Don't remind me." Austin mumbled.

A sudden shake made Anderson lose his balance and he nearly fell. Just in time though, Austin caught him.

"Got ya!"

"Thanks, Shepard. I owe you one." Anderson panted.

"Guess we're even now." Said Austin.

Reaching the other side, the two grabbed some ammo and head back outside. Another Reaper suddenly descended from the sky and landed in the water. It began firing on a nearby dreadnought as it walked.

"God! How do you stop something so powerful?" said Anderson as they broke into a sprint.

"I don't know." Austin replied.

The dreadnought suddenly exploded, causing the piece of debris they were standing on to give way. The two skidded down to a lower level. Austin was able to stay upright, but Anderson lost his footing.

"You okay?" Austin asked, helping the Admiral up.

"I'm getting too old for this sort of thing." Anderson sighed.

The two jumped down another level before encountering some more marines.

"Get down! They'll see you!" one of them whispered.

On the other side of the water were more husks. Once again though, these ones were new. They looked almost like… Batarians.
Both Austin and Anderson took cover as the Cannibals opened fire. Austin quickly activated his shoulder cannon which fired several shots of plasma, even when in cover. The last fell and Austin and Anderson went back to the marines.

"We're trying to contact our ship. Do you have a radio?" Austin asked.

"There's one in the downed gunship, but it will be crawling with those things." Said one of the marines.

"That won't be a problem." Said Anderson, as he tried to lift the large piece of metal that had another marines leg pinned. "It's too heavy for me."

"I got it." Said Austin as he slowly lifted it up. Even for him, it was very heavy.

"I wish I had Griffin for this." He thought to himself.

Once the marine was clear, Austin dropped it. Now they had a bridge across the water.

"Come on, let's get to that gunship." He said.

Anderson followed.

They encountered a few more Cannibals before they finally found the radio.

"Keep me covered while I try to get a beacon up." Said Austin.

The radio was extremely static, but he was just able to get Sandra's voice.

"Shepard, do you read me? Are you getting this?"

"Barely. What's your position?" Austin replied.

"We're at the Normandy. What's your location?" Sandra asked.

"I'm activating a beacon. Get Joker to home in on it's signal." Said Austin.

Before he could get a reply, everything went completely static.

"Let's hope it does the trick." Said Anderson.

"They'll find us. Alpha's never let me down before." Said Austin.

"Then let's hope we can survive long enough. We've got company!" said Anderson, indicating to several incoming Cannibals.

Right before the husks could fire however, none other than the Normandy zoomed over firing shots which obliterated them all.

"Cavalry's here gentlemen." Said Joker.

"About time." Said Anderson.

"Let's move!"

The Normandy descended until the cargo hold hatch was low enough to get onto. Austin wasted no time and jumped on. TO his relief, everyone was here. Ashley, Vega, and all of Alpha.
"You had us worried there, Major." Said Alaara.

"When I have I ever been that easy to kill?" Austin smiled.

"Shepard!" Anderson called.

"Come on! What are you waiting for?!" said Austin.

"I'm not going." Said Anderson. "You saw those men back there, they need a leader."

"Are you crazy?! You can't stay here! This a fight we can't win alone, not without help!" Austin objected.

"Exactly. We need the entire galaxy to unite together to stop the Reapers once and for all, not just to save Earth." Said Anderson. "Go to the Citadel, talk to the Council, convince them to help you."

"You know as well as I do that they won't listen." Said Austin.

"Then make them listen! Now go! That's an order!" said Anderson.

"I don't take orders from you, Anderson!" Austin objected.

"Shepard, please. I'm asking you as a friend." Said Anderson.

Austin saw that there was no changing Anderson's mind. And admittedly, he was right. All the soldiers here would definitely benefit from his leadership.

"We will return." He said. "And when we do, we'll bring back help. Good luck."

"You too, Shepard." Said Anderson.

"Joker, get us out of here." Said Austin as he and the others went back inside the cargo bay as the doors sealed themselves.

So this was it. The day that Austin knew he wouldn't be able to delay forever. After nearly 5 years, the Reaper war had finally begun…

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Some of the changes may have been small, but I think they worked well. For example, Shepard taking charge rather than Anderson sort of shows that he's embracing his destiny as a new leader.

The child of course you'll notice has been removed from the story. Now Shepard can't have nightmares. Those were one of my most hated bits of ME3, in fact I think the game would be a lot less depressing if it didn't have those. However, there will be a good replacement for them. Instead they'll be replaced by some odd dreams that sort of hint at a little secret.

Also, in case anyone might have a bit of trouble picturing the Draco's design, try to picture the dragons in the film Reign of Fire.

The Draco is also one of many new husks I will introduce in ME3. Some will be husks we didn't see in ME3, and some will even be other some previous cycles (strange the Reapers don't keep them)

Not sure yet when Chapter 2 will be up, but I have made good progress on it so far. Do let me
know what you think, I'm eager to hear what you think so far. If you thought this alone was mind blowing, you can expect a lot more throughout the entire story. With this one... I'm just warming up. ;)}
Phew! I hit my target to get this chapter done by Friday. I'm certainly hoping I can keep that up and make all ME3 chapters weekly.

There's a few story changes in this one, but I should say that it will mostly be the same until the Citadel coup. It's after that though that the story will start to go into more original territory. However, there is a bit at the end of this that will add more to the mystery bit of my story.

Big thank you also to Mastermind for doing the Sarah/Traynor scenes in this.

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Chapter 2

The Red Planet

It felt nice to be back on the Normandy SR3 again. Despite that a war had no started, Austin couldn't help but feel safe.

"What the hell's going on?! Where's Anderson?! Where are we going?!" Vega asked.

"We're leaving." Austin replied.

"Leaving?!"

"We're heading for the Citadel. We can't hope to win this war without help." Said Austin.

"Bullshit! Anderson wouldn't order us to leave!" Vega objected.

"He didn't. He asked." Said Austin. "Besides, you saw how the Reapers cut through the Alliance's defences. If the galaxy doesn't unite together, the Reapers have already won."

"Then you can drop me off at the nearest depot, 'cause I'm not leaving." Said James.

Austin hated to be forceful, but sometimes it was necessary.

"Stow it, Lieutenant!" he ordered. "You don't wanna go—we get it—but this isn't a democracy!"

This seemed to be put Vega in his place, and he remained silent.

"Major, we're clear of Earth." Said Joker through the loudspeakers.

"Good. Plot a course for the Citadel." Said Austin.

"Shepard, you have an incoming message from Admiral Hackett." Said EDI, the Normandy's Artificial Intelligence.

"Patch him through."

A holo image of Hackett appeared in front of them. It was very crackly and just barely understandable.

"Shepard... sustained heavy losses. ...force was overwhelming... There's no way we can defeat them..."
conventionally…” said Hackett.

"We're already heading to the Citadel to talk to the Council. I've sent a message to Arkadia as well." Said Austin.

"First, I need… iance outpost on Mars… ore we lose control of the system." Hackett requested.

"Mars? We send me there?" Austin asked

…been researching the Prothean Archives with Professor T'soni." Said Hackett. "…found a way to stop the Reapers… only way to stop them… …in contact soon. Hackett out."

Austin immediately reacted at the mention of the name T'soni. So his wife had been on Mars. She was okay! Secretly, he'd been worried sick as soon as the Reapers had hit. The question of whether Liara was okay or not had constantly been on his mind. At least now he knew she was on a planet the Reapers hadn't hit yet. That could only mean she was safe.

The Major didn't even hesitate in accepting.

"Joker, change of plans. Plot a course for the Mars archives." He said.

"Why Mars? What does Hackett think we'll find there?" Ashley asked.

"I'm not sure. But whatever it is, it concerns my wife."

"So you're the new girl?" Ashley asked.

It was a bit of a tight squeeze with everyone inside the dropship. Alpha alone fitted just fine, but the extra Alliance soldiers did now make the space a bit cramped.

"Yeah." Jet replied, slightly nervously.

Ashely could see she was making the girl uncomfortable and just simply nodded.

"Not much of a talker, is she?" Ashley whispered.

"She's still getting to know everyone." Said Austin. He then turned to Vega who was piloting the dropship down. "What's the weather like?"

"Not good. It's okay for now, but we've got a cosmic storm incoming." Said Vega.

"Then we'd better get in there quick." Said Austin.

They only got a few yards towards the building before they spotted hostiles down below. They had several Alliance knelt down in front of them. Alpha of course recognised the white and yellow armour instantly.

"Cerberus!" Austin hissed.

"Holy shit! They're executing people!" Vega whispered as the Cerberus troops shot all the Alliance troops dead.

Everyone went to cover so that they wouldn't be spotted. All of ALpha Squad then lined up their
guns, taking a target each.

"Looks like they finally managed to make some passable knock offs of our armour." said Leena.

"ANALYSIS" The troopers have augmented themselves extensively. I doubt that it will save them though. Combat efficiency is still 25% less than ours." said X-5 quietly.

Once everyone was ready to fire, Austin lined up his own shot and prepared to issue the order to fire in synch.

"And... execute."

All of the troopers fell at the same time as Alpha Squad all fired in perfect synch with each other.

With the path ahead clear, everyone headed into the facility. As the airlock sealed and began equalising, Ashley and James removed their helmets. The Helldivers naturally didn't.

"Why would Cerberus be here?" Ashley asked.

"Hell if I know, Ash. Ever since they got blamed for the destruction of the Alpha Relay they've had to lay very low." Said Austin.

"Were'n't you accused of working for them at one point?" Jet asked.

"Yes, but that wasn't true." Said Sandra.

"Wouldn't be here if I was with those terrorists." Said Austin.

A sudden thud suddenly interrupted them and they all took cover. There were more of them coming from the vents. A hatch was suddenly dislodged and two Helldivers jumped out, both female. Austin recognized them both immediately. One of them was none other than his wife, Liara T'soni Shepard, and the other was Alpha's old friend, and Liara's former mentor, Zhi Shang Ren, or Xun as she preferred to be called.

Several Cerberus troopers then suddenly appeared at the hatch. They'd been following the two Helldivers through the vents. Liara quickly threw up a biotic singularity which caught both the Cerberus troopers. As they flailed around madly, Liara took out her pistol and shot them both. One was killed instantly, but the other survived. As they both fell to the floor, Xun walked up to the one that was still alive. She unsheathed her Katana and stabbed it in the heart.

Seeing that the coast was clear, everyone came out of hiding. James had his gun trained on both Xun and Liara, but Austin quickly lowered it.

"Stand down, Lieutenant. They're with us." He said.

Both Xun and Liara turned to face them. From behind her helmet, Liara's face lit up with joy.

"Austin!"

The Asari instantly flung herself into her husband's arms and they both hugged each other tightly. Both their helmets then retracted and they kissed each other.

"I've missed you so much." Said Austin telepathically.

Due to how strong their bond had grown now, Austin and Liara had gained the ability to communicate with each without speaking over short distances. This came in quite handy in a lot of
"I've missed you too." Said Liara. "Thank the goddess you're alive!"

"Funny how we keep running into each other, isn't it, old friend?" Xun smiled.

"Good to see you too, Xun." Austin smiled as both his and Liara's helmet resealed.

"We heard about Earth. I was so worried about you." Said Liara.

"You're not getting rid of me that easily, love." Austin chuckled.

"True, but I still feared the worst when I saw the reports. They hit Earth hard." Said Liara.

"Yeah. It was hard to leave like that." Said Ashley.

"I'm sorry, Ashley."

"But why did you come here? How did you know we were here?" Xun asked.

"Admiral Hackett told us to come here. He said you might know what's going on here." Austin replied.

"We do." Liara smiled.

"Hallelujah! Some answers, finally." said James.

"Maybe. We've discovered plans for a Prothean device, one that could wipe out the Reapers." said Liara.

"You're serious?!!" said Austin with surprise. "Here, on Mars?!!"

"This is no joke, Shepard. It's in the Prothean archives." said Xun.

"But we've known about the archives for decades. Why now?" Ashley asked.

"Process of illumination." Said Liara. "When the Alpha Relay was destroyed, it bought us some time."

"With you and Alpha out trying to get the word out and attempting to form alliances among the other races, I felt I had to try and do my part." Said Xun. "I began using all the resources I had as the Shadow Broker to try and find anything that could help us in the coming war. My search led me here. Naturally of course, I needed a Prothean expert so I contacted Liara. Sorry that I kept it secret from you."

"I'm sorry I also didn't tell you. I shouldn't keep secrets from you, Austin." said Liara.

"Don't worry, you two. Under the circumstances, I can easily forgive you both." Austin smiled.

"You're too kind." Said Xun.

"You have no idea, Xun." Liara smiled.

"In any case, our work here has paid off. The archives are full of data, an overwhelming amount. I think we have found what we need." said Xun.

"Sounds like this is our best chance to blow the Reapers to hell." said Austin.
"It's not a weapon. Well, not yet anyway." Said Liara. "It's plans for a device. A blueprint."

"Better than nothing. So how do we get it?" Leena asked.

"The archives are just across that tramway, providing Cerberus hasn't locked it down." said Xun.

"Why are they here? Doesn't make any sense since they're being hunted by the Batarians." Ashley asked.

"Not to mention they seem hell-bent on catching you two." said James.

"They want what we're here for." said Xun coldly.

"But why?" James asked.

"A weapon powerful enough to destroy the Reapers and possibly do more? How could those terrorists resist?" said Austin.

"Speaking of which, we've got company." said Ashely.

Sure enough, the door was being cut through from the other side.

"Bring it on!" said James.

"Not this time, Vega." said Austin.

"What?!"

"You and Alpha get back to the shuttle. Ashley, you're with us. If there's the slightest chance Cerberus could beat us to the archives, we need you covering the exit."

"But…"

"That's an order, Lieutenant."

James reluctantly nodded and joined Alpha as they headed back out the way they came.

Cerberus had obviously used their time in hiding from the Batarians to their advantage. They'd clearly been upgraded with better armour, better weapons, even their training and tactics seemed to have improved.

For Austin, Ashely, Liara and Xun however, it wasn't something they couldn't handle.

In order to get to the archives, that meant having to head outside again. The storm outside had really picked up now. The wind was so strong in fact that Ashely nearly got pushed over. For the three Helldivers with her however, this didn't bother them.

In the distance, they could see the tram moving with what looked like gunfire coming out fo it.

"What the hell?!"

"Looks like the Alliance are still fighting hard." said Austin.

"That tram heads to the archives." said Liara.
"Then that's where we need to go."

"Major... you read me?" Alaara's voice crackled over the comm.

"Barely. Storm's causing interference." Austin replied.

"Yeah, tell me about it. We've lost contact with the Normandy."

The group jumped over a gap and found the airlock to the next part of the facility was open.

"This airlock shouldn't be open." said Liara, nervously.

"No sign of forced entry." said Ashely.

"Exactly. The security protocols would need to overridden." Said Liara.

The group took it slowly as they made their way inside. All the lights were turned off and so it was very hard to see.

"Getting a little dark in here." said Ahsley.

"Lights on." said Austin.

The helmets and chests of all the Helldivers lit up with small flashlights, providing plenty of illumination for the path ahead. It was nwo that they could see quite a few dead bodies. With the airlock open, it wasn't hard to determine the cause of death.

"Someone vented the air from this room while they were still here." said Liara.

"Horrible way to die." said Austin sympathetically.

"This is brutal, even by Cerberus standards." said Liara angrily.

The blinds to the windows suddenly retracted as some Cerberus soldiers looked inside.

"Get down!" Austin whispered.

Everyone quickly did so and deactivated their lights.

Austin waited for a moment as the Cerberus troops scanned the room with their own flashlights.

Austin simply nodded to everyone as they readied for a surprise attack.

"On my mark... 3... 2... 1..."

Everyone immediately popped out of cover and fired. The Cerberus troops didn't even know what hit them. With the room clear, they made their way to the next airlock.

"We need to pressurize the room first." said Liara as she accessed the controls. "There we go. We have access to the labs. They'll take us right to the tram station."

"What's this?" Ashely asked, accessing a recorded message.

"Security station... come in? We're seeing some odd activity down here. Our security protocols just kicked in. Everything's locked down."

A woman then suddenly walked into frame. There was something strangely familiar about the
skintight outfit she was wearing.

"Doctor, I need your report as soon as…"

The woman then suddenly drew a gun and shot both the guards in the recording. She then accessed the controls and opened the doors, causing everyone to suffocate.

"So that's how they got in." said Austin.

"We should've known there was something wrong about her." said Xun.

"Who is that anyway?" Austin asked.

"Doctor Eva Core. She got here about a week ago. I knew there was something funny about her, but I had no idea…" said Liara.

"We were just so focused on finding a way to stop the Reapers." said Xun.

"It's not your fault, Xun." said Austin reassuringly.

"I know."

"I wonder what this weapon actually is. The Protheans always have been a fascinating race. It's very hard for me not to be very curious." said Liara.

"Your old archaeologist self is showing again." Ashely couldn't help but smile.

"It's been doing that a lot more often." said Liara. "Not that I mind of course."

They had to fight their way through many more Cerberus troops before they finally reached the tram station. It seemed empty.

"Looks like they got across first." said Liara.

"Can you override the tram?" Austin asked.

"No. The archives are on a separate network. We're completely locked out." said the Asari.

"What about a short range communicator?" Ashely asked.

"How would that help?" Xun asked.

"We convince them we're on their side. You Helldivers have voice changers, don't you?" Ashely explained.

Austin considered this for a moment. She was right actually, Helldivers did have voice changers in their helmets. They were all customisable and didn't have to be used. Austin did use his to make his voice sound even deeper and in a way a bit more intimidating. It helped people take him and his squad seriously.

"Good idea, Ash." he said.

Ashely walked off to try and find a nearby Cerberus soldier. As she did, Liara cast her husband a look.

"What?"
"The lieutenant-commander seems to have become very capable." said Liara.

"Indeed."

"Austin! I found something."

"What've you got?"

"He's got a transmitter in his helmet, if we can…"

The helmet hissed open, revealing the Cerberus soldiers face.

"God! Looks like a Husk." said Ashely.

The soldier clearly did have implants on the face and blue eyes. It was a rather disturbing sight.

"Yeah. Not quite though. They've definitely done something to themselves." said Austin.

"They did this to their own soldiers?" Ashley asked.

"Hardly unexpected. I've seen them do stuff just as bad as this." said Austin, managing to get the radio out of the helmet.

"Let's see if we can get them to send that tram over. Wish I had Sandra for this."

The Helldiver fiddled with his omni tool for a moment and then spoke, now sounding exactly like one of the Cerberus soldiers.

"Hello, this is Delta team. Anybody there?"

"That is a cool trick." Ashely smiled.

"Where the hell have you been?!" the radio replied back. "Never mind. What's your status?"

"We're at the tram station, waiting for extraction. All hostiles terminated." Austin replied.

"Roger that. Echo will ride over and secure the station."

"Think they bought it?" Ashley asked.

"Doesn't matter. They'll be dead as soon as they get over here." said Austin as his voice returned to the usual setting. "Get in position. We'll flank them when they get off the tram."

"Good thinking, Major."

After dealing with last of the Cerberus squads, the group found themselves looking at the massive Prothean archives. To think that this was were it had all started, where humanity made the discovery that changed everything for them.

Liara worked on accessing the data. Unknown to them however, a hologram had suddenly appeared behind them.

A sudden sound caused both Austin and Liara to whirl round and face it. Liara even pulled out her gun.

"Illusive Man!" she said coldly.
There in front of them stood a hologram of the leader of Cerberus himself.

"So, the great Sir Major Shepard. We meet at last." He said.

"The pleasure's all yours, I'm sure." Said Austin coldly. "What do you want?"

"What I've always wanted. The data in these artefacts holds the key to solving the Reaper threat." said the Illusive man.

"I've seen your so called "solutions". You've turned your own people into monsters." said Austin.

"Hardly. They're being improved."

"Improved? There's a war going on and all you still care about is trying get even with us?"

"That's what separates us, Shepard. Where the Helldivers see a means to destroy, I see a way to control. To dominate and harness the Reapers power. Imagine how strong humanity would be if we controlled them." said the Illusive Man.

"You speak of control, yet you cause chaos! You always claim you want to advance humanity, yet you end up abandoning the very things that make you human. Hence why we have stopped you every time. For example, Earth and the galaxy are under siege and you're hatching a scheme to control the Reapers. Just proves it even more." Austin retorted.

"You've always been short sighted, hasty. You're destruction of the Collector base proved that."

"Would've been no better than you if I'd spared it."

"This isn't your fight any longer, Shepard. You can't defeat the Reapers, even with the Prothean data."

"Watch me. I've beaten the odds before, I'll do it again. You always have underestimated us."

"Destroying the Reapers is wasted potential. We can dominate them, use their power, harness their very essence to bring humanity to the apex of evolution."

"With that data, I'll rid the galaxy of those machines, and then I'll find a way to crush Cerberus, your pathetic little dream, like an ant under a boot, once and for all."

"Your vision is pathetically delimited." said the Illusive man. "You are just a tool, an agent with a singular purpose. In that, you were successful. But in doing so, you've proved that you're not fit to were that armour, nor deserve to be called by the ranks you have."

"Speak for yourself. Besides, you can try and insult me all you like, it won't work. I already know how this is going to end anyway: Your pathetic little dreams a failure and in ruins, and a blade through your heart." said Austin. "Liara."

Liara went back to accessing the archives to get the data.

"Don't interfere with my plan, Helldiver. I won't warn you again." said the Illusive man.

"Go to hell! I'll send you there myself!" Austin retorted.

"Austin!" Liara suddenly shouted.

"What is it?"
"The data, it's not here! It's being erased!"

"Goodbye, Shepard." said the Illusive man as his hologram vanished.

"Dammit! How's he doing it?!" Austin cursed.

"It's local, someone's uploading the information." said Liara.

Further away, Ashley had suddenly noticed a figure at another terminal.

"Hey! Step away from the console, now!" she ordered.

The woman suddenly whirled round kicked Ash hard, sending her to the floor. Dr Core then shot the terminal.

"She's got the data!" Liara yelled as she ran.

"Get her!"

Dr Core seemed a lot faster than she looked. In fact, her speed rivalled Dash's a lot.

They continued chasing her until they were outside. Surprisingly, Dr Core didn't seem to have any breathing equipment. Austin was begining to think she wasn't human.

"She's getting away!"

A shuttle then hovered into view. Dr Core jumped into it and it started to lift off out of the Helldiver's reach.

"Dammit! Vega, Normandy, anybody!" he yelled.

Speak of the devil however, the dropship suddenly came into view and flew right at the Cerberus shuttle.

"I got this one!" said James.

The dropship rammed right into the shuttle, causing it to crash and catch fire. The dropship meanwhile was left undamaged and was easily able to land. Everyone slowly picked themselves up after having to dodge the crash.

"Xun?" Liara asked.

"I'm good." Xun groaned.

The Asari then walked up to Ashley and helped her up.

"Are you alright, Ashley?" she asked.

"I think so."

Austin meanwhile was on the other side of the dropship as Vega stepped out.

"Normandy's en route. They'll be here soon."

"We need the data." said Xun.

There was suddenly a loud bang from the Cerberus shuttle and the hatch came off. A figure stepped
out of the fire.

Dr Core was still alive, but she’d been very badly burnt. So burnt in fact that it had melted off her human exterior and revealed her true form. She was indeed android as they suspected.

Xun went to reach for her weapons, but Core reacted faster. A swift punch sent the Chinese Helldiver flying and she hit the dropship hard.

Ashely reached for her own rifle, but Core ran at her, disarmed her and hoisted her up by the neck.

"Ashley!" Liara yelled, taking out her own rifle. "Put her down!"

Dr Core seemed to ignore Liara and touched her earpiece.

"Orders?" she asked.

"Dispose of her." the Illusive Man replied.

Core replied and smashed Ashely hard against the shuttle several times before throwing her to the ground and running at Liara. The Asari fired several shots at the robot, but they barely slowed it down.

Core then suddenly knocked Liara to the ground and activated omni blade. Just before the holographic blade could come down on the Asari however, something stopped. As part of a reflex, Liara's eyes had shut. When she opened them, she found Austin standing between her and Core, with Excalibur in his hand and blocking the robot's blade.

"Get away from my wife!" He said.

Core immediately disengaged and lunged at Austin. The Helldiver of course was just as fast and he parried her blow. Silver Kartalrium clashed against orange hologram as the two exchanged thrusts and blows.

A sudden turn from Austin's wrist forced Core's blade down and pinned it there. The Helldiver then brought his free hand back, activated his own omni blade and stabbed the robot in the chest.

Core's holo visor flashed and fizzed for a moment before she shut down. The robot fell to the ground with a loud clang as Austin twirled his mighty sword and then sheathed it on his back.

"You alright?" he asked, helping his wife up.

"Yes." Liara panted. "Thank you, love."

Austin then turned and noticed Ashely's unconsciousness body.

"Ashley!" he yelled, running up to her and dropping to his knees.

He scanned the unconscious Alliance soldier. To his relief, she was still breathing and her heart was steady.

"She's still alive, but she'd badly hurt! She needs medical attention, now!" he yelled.

Xun and Jams nodded as Liara helped Austin hoist Ashely up onto his shoulder. He quickly cast a look at the defunct robot.

"Bring that thing with us." he said coldly.
"Major, we've got Reaper signatures in orbit." Joker warned.

Everyone wasted no time and hurried up the Normandy's ramp. James also quickly piloted the dropship back in.

Austin, Liara and James all hurried into the meday, AUstin carrying Ashely and James carrying Dr Core.

Austin gently set his childhood friend down on one of the beds while James put Core down further away.

"Where's Doctor Chakwas?" Liara asked worriedly, nothing that the Normandy's usual medic wasn't at her post.

"She took some temporary leave a few days ago. Really bad time for it now." said Austin as he removed Ashely's helmet. Her face didn't look good, There were bruises all over her.

"What do we do? None of us are medics." Liara asked.

"We have to leave the sol system and head for the Citadel. It's Ashley's only hope." said Austin.

The doors then suddenly opened and Griffin walked in. Not even caring, he pushed Austin out fo the way and sunk to his knees in fornt of Ashely.

"NO! No, Lord, no!"

"She's still alive. Don't worry, she's not in heaven yet." said Austin reassuringly putting a hand on Griffin's shoulder. "Joker, get as to the Citadel now. And I means as fast as you can, mister!"

"Don't need to tell me twice, Major." Joker replied.

"You can stay with her." Austin said to Griffin. He then turned to Dr Eva. If he didn't have better control over his anger, he would've easily just spaced her. Fortunately though, he knew that keeping her could help them learn maybe a useful thing or two. "See what EDI can learn from that thing."

"Major, I am receiving a signal over the secondary QEC. I believe it's Admiral Hackett." said EDI.

"Patch him through to me in the comm room." said Austin.

"Shepard... you read... me...."

"EDI, can you clear this up?" Austin asked.

"I'll do my best." EDI replied.

The transmission seemed to stop stuttering and Austin could at least understand Hackett now.

"Did you get to the archives?" Hackett asked.

"I was there. So was the Illusive Man." said Austin.

"I was worried Cerberus might try something. Did you get the data?"

"Yes. Just barely." Austin sighed with relief. "EDI and Xun will analyse what we recovered."
"What have we learned? Was it worth the effort?"

"Preliminary evidence suggests the data is a blueprint for a Prothean device." Liara explained.

"Device?"

"It seems to be called the Crucible. It's a weapon, massive in size and scope that's capable of destroying the Reapers." said Liara as she activated her omni tool.

A hologram of the massive Crucible device was projected next to Hackett.

"Send me the data. We'll do our own analysis." said the Admiral.

"Good luck, Hackett. I also need to start putting my own plan into action. If it works, we'll have an army as well." said Austin.

"I hope so." said Hackett. "I'll be in touch soon. Hackett out."

"It will get worse, won't it?" Liara asked.

"Not if we stop the Reapers it won't. Many of us have prepared for this. It's better than nothing. At least I know the Arkanes and the Helldivers will at least be ready to fight them." said Austin, confidently.

"I'm ready too. No matter what, I will be at your side the whole time." said Liara.

Austin simply sighed and hugged her.

"I missed you." he said, finally letting his emotion show a bit more. Despite that it wasn't the best of circumstances, it brought warm feelings to his heart and soul to finally have Liara aback in his cloud tell that Liara felt the same.

"I missed you too. Not a day went by when I didn't wish I was back in your arms." Liara sighed. "I trust of course this war isn't going to put strain on us?"

"I won't let it." said Austin.

"Good. I was getting worried." Liara smiled.

"There were a lot of reasons I was happy to see you on Mars." said Austin suggestively.

"I'd like that list, but later. Right now we do have more pressing matters." said Liara.

"As long as the plan works, things should be okay and we'll have the armies we need." said Austin.

"I hope of course it all isn't dependant on that plan alone of course. You have others, don't you?"

"Of course. It's just that this one is our best shot at ending the cycle." said Austin. "Be sure we're ready to present our findings to the Council."

Everyone was turning in for the night. After the traumatizing events of today, everyone was more than ready for some much needed rest. Everyone except one.

Sleep was the last thing on the mind of Comm Specialist Samantha Traynor as she worked tirelessly on her computer display. The only thing on her mind was how quiet and alone it was. The Reapers
had destroyed every comm buoy in the Sol system... and every bloody system around it! Without the buoys, long-range communication might as well be nonexistent at worst, seventeenth century level at best. To the dedicated comm specialist, the forced radio silence was simply maddening. Until the Normandy reached the safety of inner Citadel space, the ship was cut off from the rest of the galaxy.

But even once they did, there was no way to be certain if they could reach out to the rest of the galaxy. The latest report clearly showed how Reaper forces had already spread out across the farthest corners of the stars. No doubt their first step of invading a system was to silence any form of communication... which meant there was no way to know if anyone out there was still alive or managed to escape.

But as horrifying as the thought of such mass genocide was, there was only person that the fragile specialist could think of: N7 Commander Sarah Jane Shepard, sister of the famous Sir Major Austin Shepard... and lover of Samantha Traynor. When Traynor had first transferred to the Normandy, to act as a replacement of someone named Kelly Chambers, her life had been completely rewritten on her very first day. No other woman before had made her feel like she did. Sarah was the perfect yet impossible blend of beauty and sex appeal. Traynor had done everything humanly possible to deny it, but she had almost immediately fallen in love with the goddess of a woman when her eyes pierced her down to the soul and stole her heart. Yet despite her feelings, she couldn't possibly bring herself to even approach her. Sarah was thousands of kilometers out of her league, gifted with beauty and a sexy body that would make even asari rage with envy. How dare she even compare herself to Sarah, that she had any romantic feelings for Traynor was a possibility that existed solely in her dreams.

As the weeks went by, it only got worse for Traynor as her hopeless feelings multiplied daily. It was getting to the stage now where she was barely able to function as a member of the Normandy's crew; even in the more sedate role to which she was suited. As her love for Sarah continued to grow, Traynor found each day more and more difficult to get through. Paying attention to what the N7 was saying, and not the subtle curvature of her delicate jawline, or the way her lips quirked in a tiny half-smile was an uphill struggle for the specialist. Traynor knew that sooner or later it would become completely unbearable and when that happened, she really had no idea what she'd do. That was of course assuming that her lack of mental focus hadn't led to her making a grievous mistake in her duties or infinitely worse; a mistake that would lead to someone's death. If Sarah was so much as scratched because she was too nervous and distracted to prevent it somehow... Traynor didn't even know a word for how that would make her feel. Appalled, aghast and horrified were the closest she could think of but seemed woefully inadequate for the task.

Until that faithful day came. The day that Sarah had challenged her to a chess match. A match that led to Sarah recommending that she should take a shower to calm her nerves. The next thing Traynor knew, Sarah had joined her in the shower, where the specialist learned that the impossibly beautiful N7 secretly shared her feelings. Their lips had met... and it was as if something clicked deep inside. The night they shared together had been the most magical that Traynor could remember. When she woke up the next morning next to Sarah, she had never felt happier. Everything that happened before she had first met Sarah felt like a whole different lifetime. After eight blissful months together, Traynor found it near impossible to remember how she had lived all her years without Sarah's breathtaking body pressed against her skin, or her gorgeous lips caressing her own. Now that she knew the N7 returned her affection with an equal intensity, the thought of them ever being apart was too painful to even consider. It didn't matter though... her life was perfect so long as Sarah was hers.

Of course, that was before the invasion. In their eight months together, they had rarely spent more than a few hours without the other's company. Sarah was forced to take a leave of absence several days ago to rally the remaining N7 forces of the Alliance. In order to do so, she had to leave the Normandy for a while. It had torn at both of them. Even though it would only be for a few days, the tears just wouldn't stop coming. The separation that came had been absolutely unbearable. Every
heartbeat felt like ice in her blood, with a gaping chasm of longing for her lover's touch that engulfed her entire body. Traynor could have sworn that the only thing that kept her going were the constant messages they sent to each other over the extranet, with the sheer passion and emotion that flowed through their fingers into the letters.

And now the Reapers were here. Any form of communication between them was impossible... and the uncertainty of knowing if Sarah was even alive tore at Traynor's heart.

"Specialist Traynor?"

EDI's voice broke her out of her self-inflicted reverie.

"Your shift ended 4 hours, 33 minutes ago. I suggest you get some rest."

"Yes, yes I know, EDI. Thank you," Traynor sighed. "I... I just can't rest knowing that someone that I care about is out there, and I have no way of knowing if she's alright."

"Judging by your elevated heartbeat and pupil dilation, am I correct in assuming that you are referring to N7 Commander Sarah Jane Shepard?"

The sound of her lover's name sent a bolt of longing and anxiety through Traynor's already fragile heart. "Yes... EDI," she answered with a slightly bitter tone towards the one who reminded her of the reason of her distress. "However did you guess?"

Not recognizing the sarcasm in Traynor's response, the AI's answer was blunt. "According to my analysis, your stressed bio-metric readings are in perfect tandem for a woman concerned for the safety of another whom she has engaged in 256 separate sexual activities with over the past eight months."

"Whoa wait I-wha-what-but, but-I... ?!" Traynor all but sputtered. "You... I'm sorry but you're mistaken EDI!"

"You are not romantically involved with Commander Sarah Shepard?"

"No! I-no! No, no, no, no... no!"

"I see. Then perhaps you are a Cerberus infiltrator who is privately interrogating Commander Sarah Shepard for compromising information on the Alliance and Helldivers, concluding with a memory-debilitating drug to erase any memory of the interrogation?"

Traynor was thunderstruck.

"That is a joke," EDI dryly stated.

"I-I-I... see," Traynor stuttered as the color flushed back into her face. Thank GOD no one else was up at this hour in the CIC to overhear the mortifying exchange. Up at this hour... "Alright, alright. I get the point, nicely played, EDI. I'll get some rest."

"Of course, Specialist Traynor. Logging you out."

'That bloody AI is going to be the death of me one day.'

Letting out a long and resigned sigh, Traynor turned away from her terminal and headed toward the elevator... and paused. Tentatively, she glanced back at her terminal. It wouldn't hurt to check her email just one more time for any new messages from her lover, right? Traynor quickly darted back
and proceeded to power up her terminal once more...

"You aren't going to work this late, are you?" Sarah's voice teased.

Traynor stopped dead in her tracks. With her hyperactive imagination, combined with her intimate knowledge of her lover's behavior, she could feel her fatigued mind conjuring the sensation of Sarah's strong arms wrapped around her as she whispered tender words into her ear. The two lover's had come to know each other so well, every detail was nearly impossible to forget. Phantom sensations or not, Traynor felt her body melt at the all too familiar feeling of Sarah's lips on her neck. She didn't care if it wasn't real, she could feel all the week's worth of stress and anxiety wash away as Sarah's hand's expertly massaged tender and stiff areas across her body. Her always did seem to know just how to make her feel better.

But just as Traynor's eyes began to grow heavy with both fatigue and bliss, they snapped open as the phantom sensation of Sarah's began to travel down from her back to her hips and then her toned thighs. Traynor inhaled sharply as she felt Sarah's imaginary lips tenderly kissing between her legs.

"Sarah, please... not in the CIC!"

Oh, don't say that... you know how much you miss me Samantha...

One of the many things about Sarah that never ceased to amaze Traynor was her talented tongue. Even after so long, she could still hardly believe how long and muscular it seemed. Flexible... strong... wet... intrusive... she could almost feel it inside her as it had done so many times over the past months, always able to reach that one... particular spot in the very back that no other woman had ever been able to reach...

Traynor shuddered and whimpered as the mini-orgasm rippled through her. As the euphoria heightened her mind, she felt the phantom touch of her lover vanish from her presence. Traynor still couldn't help it as she let out a content sigh. She marveled at the feelings she shared for the N7. Even when Sarah was absent from the Normandy, she was still always able to make her feel better. Perhaps she should stop worrying herself so much after all. Sarah may not be as great as her brother, but she still shared his trait for always managing to survive despite the odds. She could certainly take care of herself.

A tremendous weight now greatly lessened from her shoulders, Traynor made her way back to the quarters she shared with her lover. As she did every night, she slowly undressed from her uniform until she was wearing nothing but her black underwear. As she slipped her lithe body beneath the covers of the bed, she glanced over at the other half of the bed that she left unoccupied, the side that belonged to the woman she loved. It felt strange... resting her head on an actual pillow instead of Sarah, but she would deal with it for now.

'Goodnight Sarah... I hope that we'll be together again in each other's arms soon...'

In another corner of the galaxy, Commander Sarah Shepard was not faring as well. In fact, she had never felt worse. She had not moved a single muscle since the news had first reached her. She kept reading the same line over and over and over again, as if there had to be something wrong with it, perhaps a hidden and vastly complex code hidden within such a simple yet devastating sentence.

Earth had been invaded by the Reapers.

"No, it can't be... no, it just isn't true. It isn't true, it isn't true, it isn't true, it just isn't true..."

Sarah kept repeating it as if it would change reality. She knew this day would come, but now that it
was here, she could hardly believe it. They had spent so much time trying to prepare, it always seemed as though the Reapers were always still far away. There was no warning, and now the home of the human race had fallen. Her home. Her family's home.

But what frightened her more than anything was that only this morning she received another heartfelt message from Samantha Traynor, the one she had hopelessly fallen desperately in love with the young girl. Sarah cherished and adored every word, every syllable from each message, yet she always felt her soul empty at the end of each one. She hated being out here. Before she had met Traynor, she had seriously considered leaving the Normandy to work with her fellow N7s again. But now... everything seemed wrong, almost alien. The N7s she had spent nearly a decade with were still the same, but their company no longer made her comfortable. The color of the N7 headquarters was drained and insignificant, suddenly hardly even worth looking at. Everything seemed hollow and without meaning. Every fiber in her body was screaming that she didn't belong here anymore, and at the same time her heart was painfully aching with longing and loneliness.

Sarah knew that it was because Traynor wasn't here. She loved her with everything that she was and she knew it. But it wasn't until she was gone from her presence that she realized the depth of her feelings for the young specialist. When she had first arrived here, she had not even spent an hour before wanting more than anything in the galaxy than to return to Traynor on the Normandy. The week she had spent here was without any doubt the worst days of her life. She never had any idea that Traynor's mere absence could affect her so deeply. She missed her so much. Her eyes, her skin, her personality and... oh, that musical voice of hers. Traynor's voice was like a melody that sliced at her ears and filled them sounds so magnificent, she found them suffocating but hypnotic. How could anyone in the galaxy have such a lovely voice? It just wasn't natural. It was a voice that could only belong to angels, and yet Traynor possessed it. Every second she could hear it was a blessing. The simple sound of Traynor's voice made Sarah feel like she was wrapped in a bundle of eternal joy, soothing her with its loving resonance and sending waves of bliss and euphoria through her. Without it, even the most beautiful of sounds seemed gravelly and coarse, a stark contrast to the melody searing her heart.

Sarah vowed that once she returned to the Normandy, she would never leave again.

But that hope had been shattered. The very message that she had read this morning from Traynor told her that the Normandy was still dry-docked on Earth. If the Normandy was there, then so was her brother as well as Traynor. But now the Reapers had invaded the human homeworld. Did they manage to escape? Or did the Reapers finally get the best of the Normandy? Was Traynor even still alive? Could she possibly be dea- Sarah didn't even have a chance to finish that thought before it suddenly made her violently and physically ill. Her legs collapsed from beneath her. Traynor couldn't be dead! Could she?

It was hard to not think like that. After all, just this morning, she woken absolutely horrified after seeing Traynor pulled under in her dream. It still made her shudder when she remembered how she had reacted when she'd woken up.

FLASHBACK

In a fit of emotional trauma, Sarah frantically grabbed her combat knife from the nearby table and plunged it into the delicate bed mattress, tearing open the seams as if she would find Traynor under its surface just as she had been pulled beneath the ocean in her dream. As the cotton stuffing went flying through the air, she threw the knife aside as she desperately dug further in, but to no avail. The woman she loved simply wasn't there. As Sarah realized this, her first instinct was to scream...scream at the top of her lungs and not stop until her dying breath passed her lips...scream from the
anguish that struck her soul like an ice-cold pickaxe. With a heart wrenching effort of will, Sarah forced it back down.

Reality finally set back in as she realized it had been nothing more than a nightmare.

Sarah looked at the fistfuls of cotton clenched in her hands, where her eyes slowly turned their gaze to her now ruined mattress. Never in her entire life had she acted like this.

"What's happening to me? Why?"

Crushed and heartbroken, Sarah collapsed back onto her destroyed bed and wept uncontrollably. She had never felt like this before, with her emotions so out of control.

"I just... I just want to... to..." she sobbed under her breath. "Oh god... I-I don't know how I can go another day without her."

But it was more than that. No matter how Traynor made her feel, nothing mattered more to Sarah than Traynor's safety. The implications of the dream kept coming back to her. She had to acknowledge the very real possibility that she might lose her. But no, she couldn't ever accept that, not ever. She promised to Traynor all those months ago that she would do anything for her, that she would always protect her no matter.

If she ever found her way back to Traynor, she doubted she would ever be happier. But if not...

"God... I don't care if I never see her again, just keep safe. Yes... just keep her safe..."

Focusing on that helped stem the flow of tears slightly and even brought a tiny, tremulous smile to her lips as she cried herself back to sleep.

\textit{END FLASHBACK}

Damn war...

"Shhhhh... don't worry, Princess. If anyone can get me off of Earth and back to you, it's your brother."

It was like a switch had been flipped. For a brief moment, all the color returned and the pain vanished without a trace. Sarah suddenly felt as though she could have heard Traynor's voice... that beautiful voice. For the first time all week, Sarah smiled. No, she couldn't give up hope. Not yet.

This had indeed been a setback to the Illusive man's plans. He had a feeling that his clients were not happy with this. In fact, he wouldn't be surprised of one of them suddenly appeared demanding an explanation.

"If you'd sent me, you would've had the plans already." said the operative who was stood behind him in the shadows.

The Illusive Man remained silent for a while.

"Leave me." He said.

"Yes sir."

The operative left, leaving the Illusive Man by himself. The room then suddenly darkened and the
Illusive Man felt a familiar presence in the room. He couldn't see her, just her bright glowing eyes. It was common for her to conceal herself as much as possible. Her race weren't yet ready to reveal themselves after all, they were still in hiding.

"What is it Mirage?" the Illusive Man asked.

"He's growing impatient." Mirage replied.

"Well, I'm afraid he'll have to wait a bit longer. Finding those plans was not easy, acquiring them again from the Helldivers will be just as hard." Said Illusive Man.

"You're recent failures at their hands have shaken both my ability and his in your relyfullness." Said Mirage, slowly pacing around the Illusive Man. "I personally think that he's made a mistake thinking this plan of yours will succeed."

"Believe what you want, Mirage, I will get those plans back. I will lead the Reapers in the glorious battle ahead." Said the Illusive man.

"Battle. Against the… meagre might of the Helldivers?" Mirage asked, unimpressed.

"It will be glorious, not lengthy. That is if your force is as… formidable as you claim."

"You question us?! You question him? He who made so much of this possible for you, who gave you ancient knowledge and new purpose when you were… being hunted, defeated?"

"They do not see! My goal is to perfect humanity. We deserve more than what those fools on the Council give us." The Illusive Man objected.

Mirage however was unfazed by this. In fact, she almost found it pathetically humorous.

"Your ambition is little. And your selfishness for your own kind is born of pathetic childish need." She said coldly. "We look beyond the intermediate to the greater wonders the Crucible will unveil."

"You don't have the Crucible yet…"

The Illusive Man was suddenly interrupted when he found a blade at his throat. Mirage snarled, just about ready to slit the human's neck if he said anything more disrespectful.

"I don't threaten." He said calmly. "But until I have the plans back, until the Reapers are mine to command, you are but words."

Mirage snarled before eventually withdrawing her weapon.

"You will have what you desire, Illusive Man." She said. "But I warn you now, if you fail… if the device is kept from us… there will be no system, no barren moon, no crevice where he can't find you! You think you know pain? My husband will make you long for something sweet as pain."

Mirage vanished and the lights returned to normal. Despite that he had remained clam, the Illusive Man could not deny that both Mirage and her "husband" that she had referred to always did make him nervous. There were times when he did doubt if working for them was the best idea. Most of the time though, he saw the potential. After all, they were providing him with all the resources he needed for his plan. And he already had another plan to get the Crucible designs back. It would take time, but he was sure it would succeed.
Bet that's got you asking quite a few questions now... ;)

They'll be answered all in good time of course. Hopefully the next one will be easier since there won't be so much action in that one. I do wish I was much better at writing gunfight scenes. I'm okay with things like boss battles and choreography, but plain gunfights... there not quite the same.

There will be a small story change in the next chapter as well thanks to a clever tactic by the Reapers which I thought up.
Chapter 3, This Means War

Back again!

A few small story changes here and there and few familiar character faces returning as well.

Little I can say really.

Chapter 3

This means War

Ashley was almost immediately rushed to the hospital. Griffin of course stayed with her. Though Austin knew it wasn't Chakwas' fault for taking some time off, he wished it hadn't been now.

"We're not going with?" James asked.

"We need to see the Council." Said Liara.

"Right." Said James. "Looks like they might be coming to see you."

A familiar face suddenly walked up to them.

"Major Shepard. Got word you were arriving."

"Bailey. Good to see you again. So, you're here to bring us to the Council?" said Austin.

Captain Armando Owen Bailey had first met Austin during the battle of the Citadel when Saren and the Terror Geth and his armies invaded the station under leadership of the Reaper vanguard, Sovereign. Since then, he'd become the new Captain of C-sec and had helped Austin a few times during his mission to take down the Collectors by aiding or pointing him and his squad members in the right direction.

"I'm here to tell you the Council is expecting you, but they are dealing with their own… problems. With the war and everything. They apologise for the inconvenience, and blah, blah, blah… Meet them here, at Udina's office. They'll be ready soon enough." Said Bailey.

"All right." Said Austin.

"You might have time to go by the medical centre, if you want to check on progress over there." Bailey suggested.

"Thanks, I might do that." Said Austin.

"You go on ahead. I'll head up to Udina's office." Said Liara.

"One of my men can show you the way." Said Bailey.

Before leaving, Liara quickly planted a kiss on Austin's cheek.

"You?" Bailey asked James.

"I'm just a tourist today. I'll try not to get in any trouble." said James, heading of on his own way.
Bailey also left, leaving just Austin. His first instinct of course was to head to the hospital and check on Ashley. Just before he was about to head into the elevator, he could overhear an argument between one of the Normandy's crew members and a reporter.

The reporter appeared to be trying to question the crew member about him being part of the Normandy. He of course was being very vague on the subject.

Austin didn't want the press harassing his crew, so he felt it best to try and sort this out.

"What's going on here?" he asked.

The reporter's head shot up in surprise she heard the Major's voice.

"Shepard?"

The reporter turned round. To Austin's surprise, the reporter was none other than Emily Wong.

Austin had met Emily not long before the battle of the Citadel when he was still hunting Saren. At that time, she'd been a journalist looking into organised crime. When Austin had taken down Fist, a former agent of the Shadow Broker now turned agent for Saren, he'd collected files that he later gave to her.

Emily later requested his help again in investigating Citadel traffic control. Doing both of these jobs had earned Emily's friendship and she had even interviewed him. And as if that wasn't enough, he and Alpha had rescued her sister from Batarian slavers and Austin had even invited her to his and Liara's wedding.

It was fair to say that he and Emily were pretty good friends. Seeing her here was by no means unwelcome.

"Emily! Good to see you again. It's been a while." said Austin as he and Emily shook hands.

"It's good to see you too, Shepard. And I think you're just the person who can help me." Emily smiled.

"You need my help with another story?" Austin asked in a joking manner.

"Not this time." Emily chuckled. "With all this war going on, my producers would like me on a human ship, I was hoping that ship could be the Normandy."

"Why do you want to be on the Normandy?" Austin asked. "There are many better human ships out there that see even more action than we do."

"You helped me out before; it's about time I returned the favour. I'll be able to show people things as they really are. Not hide the truth as some have been trying to do. Besides, wars can be won or lost in the editing room. A war like this needs to be won." said Emily.

"I'll warn you right now, Emily. Helldivers like me handle very dangerous missions. I can't guarantee you'll be safe all the time. Nor will I be responsible for what happens to you." Austin advised. He had no problem in having Emily aboard. Admittedly, having the press on his side could indeed help the war a lot.

"I understand, Shepard. That's a risk I am willing to take in order to provide you with the support you are no doubt going to need in the fight ahead." said Emily.
Austin could see that Emily was confident in her decision and that she was sure it was what she wanted. What more convincing did he need?

"Very well then. Welcome aboard, Miss Wong." he said.

"I consider it a privilege, Shepard. How much gear can I bring?" Emily asked.

"One foot locker."

"See you on the ship then, Shepard."

Sure enough, the hospital was fairly busy. Seemed the Reapers were spreading quickly. Still, the patients that were being treated didn't look all that bad. Plus, the hospital seemed very well equipped. They and Ashley were in good hands.

As he looked around for where Ashley was, he suddenly spotted two very familiar faces. Dr Chloe Michel, whom Austin had saved from Fist's thugs about 5 years ago, and none other than the Normandy's medical doctor, and Austin's old friend, Karin Chakwas.

"Here's Shepard now." said Chloe.

"Karin. Nice to see you." Austin smiled.

"You as well, Shepard. I'm starting to regret that I picked now of all times to take a small break. I heard you escaped Earth in the Normandy, and that someone was critically injured. I came as fast I could." said Chakwas.

"We had a run in with Cerberus on Mars. Ashley took the worst of it. How is she doing?" Austin asked.

"Very well, all things considered. I'm impressed with Lieutenant Commander Williams' resilience, as well as Dr Michel's expertise." said Chakwas.

"That's a thought." Austin said to himself quietly as he looked at Dr Michel. Perhaps she was the one he was looking for...

"Anyway, she's in good hands, so I'm not really needed here. I'm fully ready to re-join the Normandy. You say the word, and I'm with you." said Chakwas.

"The Normandy wouldn't be the same without you, Karin. Get your things. Docking Bay D24." Austin smiled.

"Yes, Major. And thank you."

Chakwas left to get her things. Austin meanwhile went over to Dr Michel. He had something to ask her.

"Major Shepard. Good to see you." said the Russian woman.

"Dr Michel, it's been a long time. You've come a long way from that small clinic down in the wards." said Austin.

"Because of you. I don't know where I'd be if you hadn't dealt with Fist and his thugs. Now I'm head physician in a Presidium clinic. You gave me this chance. I assume you're here about Lieutenant-Commander Williams?" Chloe asked.
"I did come to check on her. But, I was hoping to speak you as well. I have something I'd like to ask you." said Austin.

"Of course, Major. Anything." Michel replied.

"Lately there's been a new custom aboard Helldiver ships requiring them to have at least two medics. Chakwas is one of the best, but I don't like to break protocol." Said Austin. "I was hoping you might like the job as our second medic."

"Me? Surely there must be someone better." Said Michel.

"I don't want a complete stranger, Dr Michel. I want someone I trust. Besides, you could consider this a way of returning the favour." said Austin.

"I… I guess you're right." Said Dr Michel. "Sure. I'd be honoured."

"See you on the Normandy then."

After a tiny of bit of searching, Austin finally found the room were Ashley was being kept. As expected, Griffin was sat at her bedside, holding her hand. To Austin's utter shock however, there was someone else with him.

"She'll be alright, Griff. She's tough." said an N7 marine.

"I know. It's just hard seeing her like this." Griffin sighed.

Austin instantly recognised the N7. He didn't even need to look at her, he'd know that British accented voice blindfolded. His eyes widened as he found himself gazing upon none other than his dear sister, Sarah Jane Shepard.

"Sarah?"

"Austin!"

The two siblings hugged each other tightly. Ever since the attack on Earth, they'd both been so worried about each other. Austin had been right in the line of fire, and Sarah had been out in deep space. It was a great relief for the both of them to see the other alive.

"Thank goodness you're all right! I've been so worried about you." said Austin.

"Same here. When I heard about Earth, I feared the worst." said Sarah, as the two finally gave each other some air.

"How'd you end up here on the Citadel?" Austin asked.

"I knew that if you did escape Earth, this would be the most likely place to find you. I then heard word that an Ashley Williams was in hospital. So, I investigate and to my delight, I find Griffin and get told that you all escaped." said Sarah.

"I trust your little rally mission went well?" Austin asked.

"It did actually. Better than I thought. I've got us several N7 operatives for our cause and I've even been given coordinating command of the N7 special forces." said Sarah, almost proudly.

"Does that mean you'll have to go out on the front lines though?" Austin asked with concern. He'd hate for Sarah to leave again. Plus, he dreaded to think what impact this would have on his comm
specialist, and Sarah's girlfriend, Samantha Traynor.

"No. I can coordinate them from anywhere. What better place than the Normandy?" Sarah smiled.

"That's good to hear. Traynor would also be heartbroken if you didn't come back." said Austin.

"I'm glad she's safe too. You've no idea how badly I've been sleeping because I've been so worried about her." said Sarah, breathing a sigh of relief at merely the mention of her love's name.

"She's felt the same."

Austin then looked at Ashley. Overall, the bruising and injuries looked better than they had done previously. She still looked in bad shape though.

"The docs say she's okay. She just needs time to heal." said Sarah supportingly.

It did still pain Austin to see his childhood friend like this. He gently walked up to the bed and sat gently on the edge of it.

"You got pretty banged up there, Ash. Had me worried." he said. "I just wanted to check in on you, see how you're doing. You hang in there, alright. I need you up and reporting for duty ASAP, you hear me soldier?"

Griffin could sense the support and encouragement in Austin's voice. He knew that the Major simply meant it as motivation for Ashley to get better; he wasn't giving her an order.

Austin then turned to the Doctor who was tending to Ashley.

"If there's anything you need, let me know Doctor." he said.

"Well, some of our supplies are running a bit low, and we don't necessarily have enough money to get more in good amounts." said the doc.

"Give me the list. I'll get them for you. With this war going on, you'll need all you can get." said Austin.

Just as the doctor handed the list to Austin however, Sarah took it instead.

"I'll do it. You've got more important things to do." she said.

"Okay. Here, this should be enough for everything." said Austin, handing Sarah credit chit.

Austin then turned back to Ashley.

"Okay, I better get back to it." he said, gently getting back up. "See you soon. And Griffin, you can stay with her as long as possible, but when we do leave, I need you back in the game."

"Yes sir." Griffin nodded. "Besides, I have a feeling you'll need stuff blown up."

Austin could not deny he was a little nervous on how this was going to play out. The Citadel council never had been the easiest people to work with. That was one of the reasons why he had quit his position as a Spectre.

As he walked into Udina's office, he was greeted by an Asari.
"Major. Councillor Udina said you'd be coming." she said. "If you'll follow me, the Council's already in session."

"Did you say Councillor Udina? I thought Anderson had that job." Austin asked.

"Councillor Anderson stepped down a few months back. He said he'd found the job too stressful." the Asari explained.

"Hard to argue with that." said Austin. "Bet Udina just couldn't wait for this."

"Councillor, the Reapers are in our space as well. Earth is no more or less important than any Council homeworld."

The Citadel tower was where the Council had their sessions. It was also the same place where Austin had killed Saren and his second in command, the Terror Geth.

It was almost easy to forget the wreckage this place had been in back then due to how well it had been repaired.

Liara was already there. Before her stood the four councillors, Udina, Turian Councillor Sparatus, the Salarian Councillor Valern, and the Asari Councillor Tevos. Alpha was also stood further behind as Austin walked up to join Liara.

"But Earth was the first Council world hit. By our reports, it faces the front of the attack." said Udina.

"By your reports..." Valern objected.

"The reports are accurate, I was on Earth myself." Austin spoke up. "This is just the beginning. We need your help. The galaxy has to unite together if we're to have any hope of winning this war."

The Helldiver then began accessing his omni tool.

"What are you doing?" Udina asked.

"I'm patching the Arkane Council through. It's time you two talked again." said Austin.

There was a momentary pause, and then a small flash as a hologram of the entire Arkane Council was projected to the side of both of them. Austin could only hope this didn't turn into an argument. Ever since his death at the hands of the Collectors four years ago, both Councils had been on very bad terms with one another. Even today, that distrust was still rather fresh.

"Shepard. We're pleased that you managed to escape Earth. We feared the worst." said Councillor Spartan, Councillor of the Spartan system and the head of the Council.

"Council." Austin nodded.

The Arkanes then turned to face the Citadel council. They did their best to look polite. Austin could tell of course that they were hiding their bitter distaste. He just hoped the Citadel council wouldn't notice it so easily. Then again, they probably felt the same way.

"So, it seems that you'll have to finally make good of the treaties you signed. Shepard is right when he says that we all need to work together on this." said Councillor Tarnack, the second Arkane to have been on the Council the longest, and also the second most respected member.
"Precisely! This means war!" said Kraan encouragingly, banging his fists together.

"I thought it already was war?" Dash asked.

"I hate you." Kraan groaned.

"The treaties are only valid if your homeworld is attacked, and as far as we know, the Reapers seem to be leaving your world alone." said Tevos.

"Is this true? The Reapers haven't attacked Arkadia?" Austin asked in surprise. This came as a big shock. The Arkanes and the Helldivers possessed the biggest military and the most advanced technology in the galaxy. Not to mention that they comprised of some of the best talents of many of the galaxy's races. Austin' would've thought that Arkadia would've received the worst of it.

"That is correct, Shepard. Somehow, they're staying out of our territory completely. It doesn't make any sense. We probably present the greatest threat to them. I would've thought we'd be the first to be hit before the other worlds. Not the other way around." said Spartan.

"Unless your world is attacked, we cannot rally under you. Our own militaries are in no strength to help you anyway." said Sparatus.

Austin couldn't help but sigh quietly. He hadn't counted on this. Then plan he'd had relied on the Council honouring the treaties.

When a race joined the Helldivers, they signed a special treaty. A part of the treaty clearly stated that if the Arkanes and the Helldivers were attacked directly, they could call on all the races in the Helldivers to come to their aid. It was that sort of thing that had kept the Batarians from waging war against them since they declared war on the slave trade.

"For once… we need your help. Our worlds don't stand chance against the Reapers without your help. We have no choice but to request Helldiver assistance from you." said Tevos, almost sounding desperate. Something Austin had never thought he'd hear from any of the Council.

Even the Arkanes were taken back by this. They'd never expected the Citadel Council to be this desperate to call on them for help. Usually they'd be a bit to handle these themselves.

"We should lend all our forces to you? You, who ignored Shepard's warning all this time? You, who did nothing to prepare for the Reapers?! Who convinced yourselves the Reapers are a myth?!" Spartan retorted, the furiousness clear in his voce.

"Spartan is correct. We all find it very difficult to see a good reason why we should help you when you barely made any effort to prepare for this." Tarnack concurred.

"Don't make us beg, Council." said Valern. "You are the only ones who have the strength, numbers, technology and knowledge to stand up to the Reapers. If Shepard and the other Helldivers can help us secure our own borders, then perhaps we will be able to band together under your leadership."

"But what if even that isn't enough? If we throw all we have at the Reapers in a counter attack and lose, what then?" Sparatus asked.

"I don't expect us all to work together without a plan." said Austin.

"Councillors, we have that plan. A blueprint created by the Protheans during their war with the Reapers." said Liara, accessing her omni tool and projecting the plans for the Crucible. Both Council's looked at it with curiosity.
"What is it exactly?" Tevos asked.

"We're still piecing it together, but it appears to be a weapon of some sort." Liara explained.

"And this is capable of destroying the Reapers?" Councillor Avaritia asked.

"So it would seem." Liara replied.

"It's immense, and intricate." said Valern.

"Indeed. Even for us alone, it would take many days for us to build it. If we all worked together though..." said Spartan.

"This is a fool's errand. The Protheans were wiped out by the Reapers. Clearly, the weapon is flawed." Tevos interrupted.

"It was incomplete. There was a missing component. Here, something referred to only as "The Catalyst". But they ran out of time before they could finish building it." said Liara.

Something about the word Catalyst made Austin's head turn. Something about it sounded very familiar, but he couldn't remember exactly what it was. Putting these thoughts aside, he turned back to the situation.

"Do you believe in this, Shepard? After all you've seen of the Reapers?" Sparatus asked.

"It sure as hell beats standing round and arguing about it like we're doing now. And Udina's right. We need to stand together, now more than ever. The Reapers will destroy every organic in the galaxy if we don't find a way to stop them!" said Austin.

"The Council cannot give you the army you need. Not with our own worlds in such critical states."

said Tevos.

"The Salarian union is convening a summit amongst our species. If you and the Helldivers can help us at least secure our homeworlds, then we will lend what armies we have to your cause." said Valern.

Austin could see that the Council had all made their minds up. It did in a way sound like a fair deal. He turned to the Arkane Council, who were still mumbling to each other.

"Council, if you ask me, that's better than nothing. And I'm sure we can spare a few of our soldiers. Especially since the Reapers appear to be leaving us alone, we should at least use that to our advantage." he said.

The Arkanes cast each other a few looks before they eventually reached an agreement.

"Very well." said Spartan. "Our main fleet has to remain in our system to protect our homeworld should the Reapers suddenly attack, but we will dispatch what Helldiver squadrons and battalions we can spare to your homeworlds to aid you."

"Then it is settled." said Tevos.

The Arkanes vanished and the Council left, leaving only Udina.

"Shepard, meet me in my office." he said.

"Well, that went a bit better than I thought it would." said Austin.
"Why would the Reapers not attack Arkadia?" Liara asked.

"I don't know. It's not like the Reapers to leave a species alone. Something's not right." said Austin.

"Well, at least that means we can assist them so they can assist us." said Liara. "Xun and I will work on finding out more about the Crucible."

"They're a bunch of self-concerned jackasses, Shepard! We may have a spot on the Council, but humanity will always be considered second rate." said Udina.

"At least they are willing to rally with us. That's better than nothing, if you ask me," said Austin, a bit irritated that Udina wasn't being a bit more grateful. At least the Council had a agreed to help. Even if that help had to be earned, it was certainly better than nothing. They could've easily just refused altogether and remained separated.

"And what about Earth?! Our own world is the closest to falling to the Reapers and they want us to assist them!" Udina retorted.

"I'm beginning to remember why I picked Anderson over you back then." said Austin, glaring at Udina through his helmet.

"You watch your mouth around me, Shepard." Udina threatened.

"I'm the one who can break a jaw here." Austin retorted.

Before the argument could progress further however, Sparatus suddenly walked in.

"Major." he said. "I can't yet give you what you and the Arkanes need, but I can tell you how to get it."

"I'm listening." said Austin.

"Palaven's Primarch, Fedorian is the one who called the war summit. He's your kind of man. Open to extreme solutions. Trouble is, he didn't get out of Palaven's system in time. We don't know if he's alive." said Sparatus. "He's essential to the summit. If the Normandy could extract him without being detected..."

"I told you this would happen, and you did nothing." said Austin.

"We can argue the past later if you like." said Sparatus. "But the leaders of this summit will be the ones deciding our future. The fate of our fleets, where they fight, and with whom. A grateful Primarch would be a tremendous ally in your bid to unite us. Our latest intelligence says that the Primarch is still on Palaven in a heavily fortified base. I've done all I can to help. The rest is up to you."

As Spartan went to leave, he quickly turned back to Austin.

"There is one other thing." he said. "The Council was hoping to reinstate your spectre status, but we can't get access to your file."

"That's because I put a block on it so you can't reinstate it. I'll say it before, and I'll say it again, I don't want it." said Austin.

"Have it your way, Shepard." Sparatus sighed.
Udina didn't look pleased by this either. Humanity hadn't had another Spectre since Austin. Him constantly refusing reinstatement was a bureaucratic nightmare for him.

"What is it with you, Shepard? What is it about being a Spectre that you…" he said. But Austin suddenly interrupted him as he put his hand to the Councillor's head and it flashed slightly. Udina fell to the floor unconscious.

"Just shut up." Austin groaned.

"Wish Anderson could've seen that."

Now that he had a mission, Austin sent a small message to all members of the Normandy telling them to report back to the ship. They would leave for Palaven tomorrow. As the Major headed up to his quarters, he saw Dr Michel and Dr Chakwas sorting out everything. He decided to just quickly check how the two were getting along. Given that they both worked in the Citadel hospital briefly, he doubted there'd be any problems.

"How are you settling, Dr Michel?" he asked.

"Good. Dr Chakwas and I have been busy restocking supplies and running diagnostics. It's nice working with her in a fresh lab. We've been able to set up everything how we need it." Michel smiled. "So, can I help you with anything?"

"Do you have family?" Austin asked friendly. He might as well get to know her better since she'd be serving on the ship now.

"My parents are on Earth. Geneva. The news isn't good." Chloe sighed.

"I'm sorry." said Austin sympathetically.

"But my brother is safe on the Citadel. I'll count my blessings where I can." said Chloe.

"How does working on a military vessel compare to your Citadel clinic?" Austin asked.

"It's a completely different experience. I like that I have fewer patients under my care. I can really focus and get to know each person. But the work day never ends here. I don't get to go home. I'm always on call. But you're making a real difference. So by being here, I'm making a difference too." said Chloe.

"Glad to hear it. Just let me know if you or Karin need anything." said Austin.

"We will."

Austin slowly left his suit detach from him piece by piece until it was all neatly packed together in the form of a small suitcase. A recent upgrade from the Normandy's quartermaster, Dell Arturus, had allowed the Helldivers to no longer have to rely on machines to piece together and remove their suits. Now, through the use of a special implant in their arms, they could remove and put on their armour simply with their minds. Dell had also recently refined it so that when removed, the armour pieced itself back together neatly disguised as something that could easily blend-in in a normal environment In Austin's case, a briefcase.

Having been inside his suit nearly all day, Austin was feeling quite tired and was looking forward to some shut eye.
"What a day." he sighed.

"Feeling a little tired, husband?"

Austin looked in the direction of the voice. There, lying on his bed, fully naked, was Liara. The Helldiver instantly felt his shaft start to harden as he gazed upon the sight.

Although they'd only been apart for a week, it had still felt so long for them. It had been very hard to resist their... urges.

"A bit, but I suddenly find I have got some strength left." he smiled slyly. "How I've missed that sexy body of yours. In fact, it's been hard not to masturbate for the last week."

"Same." Liara smiled, kissing Austin full on the lips and helping him out of his suit mesh, his full 10 inch cock standing at full attention and aching to once again embedded itself in Liara's azure, the spot it always loved to be.

"Better make up for lost time then."

As Austin finished peeling the suit mesh completely off, Liara took her husband's cock into her hands and gave it a few stroked before then taking it into her mouth.

"Oh god! I'd almost forgotten how good that feels." Austin sighed.

Sarah had almost finished her shopping. She just a few small things left to get, then she could take them all back to the hospital and finally re-join the Normandy. She was really growing impatient to finally see Samantha again after all this time. At least now she knew her love was safe. That was better than not seeing her and also fearing she might be dead. That was practically nightmare stuff.

As she was leaving the shop, she suddenly felt herself bang into someone, sending quite a few of the objects onto the floor. Sarah noticed she'd bumped into another woman.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I should've watched where I was going." The woman apologised, frantically trying to pick some of her own stuff up.

"No, it's my fault. I was distracted." Said Sarah.

The two worked on picking their own stuff up. However, they both reached for the same datapad. As both their hands touched, something happened. Sarah felt… strange.

It was a good sort of different though. Sarah felt a feeling she hadn't felt for a while. It was something she hadn't felt ever since she had been parted from her love not long ago. Could it really be…

Richly tanned skin…

British accent…

Sarah slowly looked up.

Right in front of her, staring right back at her and as beautiful as ever, was none other than the one person she wanted to be with more than anything else, Samantha Traynor.
For a moment, the two were completely speechless and they simply stared at each, not willing to dare turn away in case this ended up begin just another dream. Several long seconds passed through and nothing happened.

Samantha slowly reached up and touched Sarah's face. She felt a huge rush of happiness as her hand touched the soft skin of her lover.

So soft, so smooth, so warm...

Traynor felt her eyes begin to water with tears of joy as Sarah did the same. This was definitely real. After all the worry they'd been through, they'd finally found each other again. Nothing could separate them, not even this damn war.

"It's really you!" Traynor sobbed as she flung her arms around Sarah and buried her face in the N7 marine's shoulder.

Sarah, doing a slightly better job at holding back her own tears simply hugged Traynor to her tightly, one of her hands gently stroking the comm specialist jet black hair. Just as she remembered, it almost felt like silk.

"It's okay... it's okay..." she whispered softly.

Austin and Liara moaned in union as Austin trust into her, the Union allowing both to feel what the other was experiencing.

"Goddess, I've missed the feeling of you filling me up." Liara groaned as her nails dug gently into Austin's back.

"We complete each other." Austin panted.

As the Helldiver continued constantly connecting with his wife's Asari pussy, the Asari slowly reached down until she could feel her fingers touching a small bit of his cock which wasn't going in. She wanted to try something new.

Austin felt a huge sudden rush of blood into his cock as a small bit of biotic field engulfed it. He couldn't help but smile at this. He always loved it when Liara did this when they made love. Having an already naturally large cock was good enough, but Liara having the ability to make it even larger was really self-confidence boosting. It truly did make him feel like a dominant male of a pack.

What also made it so pleasurable for Liara was that she was enlarging him while he was still inside her. It was an interesting sensation, as she felt him grow larger while inside her azure.

Austin was beginning to note that he and Liara seemed to make love very regularly. Obviously, they didn't do it every night so that it didn't get boring. Any other nights would just be a simple few minute of very intimate kissing or massaging or something more intimate and romantic. Their sex though was pretty much full on hard-core.

Austin had a theory about this. Compared to Sarah and Traynor for example, their love making was very hard core probably because they were both of the opposite sex. Although to be fair, that wasn't necessarily an accurate statement since Asari were monogendered and the term female didn't apply to Liara. However, since Asari had a lot more female features, instincts and nature that women often had, it was fair in a certain way.

Therefore, the result of them being male and female gave them urges that could only be satisfied with
regular and exotic love making. Sarah and Traynor on the other hand were both female so it wasn't quite the same for them. They were a lot more passionate. Just a kiss was often good enough for them.

Sometimes with him and Liara though, it did take bit more. Austin suspected that Liara's urges were more his fault since being her bond mate had allowed some try parts of his personality to rub off on her. He had been quite the ladies' man before he'd met her. Being married was also a contributing factor since both their bodies know knew they'd be spending the rest of their lives with each other and they'd grown accustomed to each other's presence and company.

Austin made sure to slow his thrust speed down bit so as not to hurt Liara as his shaft approached an enormous side while still inside her. The last thing he wanted was to hurt her.

As a result of this, and the fact that the enlargement had made his cock more sensitive, he could feel his release was very soon.

Liara, sensing this through their union had an idea for another new thing to try. In fact, this was something that, in 5 years of their relationship, they had never done before.

Liara rolled them over so that she was on top and then gently slid off. She then sat down facing Austin and gently put both her feet around her husband's drumming shaft. At the same time, she also started rubbing her Azure so that she could achieve release at the same time.

"A footjob? We've never tried that before." Austin thought.

"I know. That's why we're doing it." Liara replied back telepathically.

Liara feet where gentle at first, but they then began to speed up. To compensate for the fact that Liara was using her hands to masturbate, Austin slid his hands up and down his wife's smooth legs.

"That feels nice." Liara sighed.

"Thought you might like that. Oh! Careful, careful, I nearly let it loss there."

Liara slid her foot back down away from Austin's cockhead. Now she knew not to use her foot on that bit directly or she'd make him cum too soon. At least he wanted to cum with her at the same time. That was an admirable quality.

As Austin slid one of his hands slightly further up Liara's leg until it touched her behind, he felt he'd reached the point of release. The cum would shoot out any minute.

"Sure you're okay with me cumming on your feet?" he asked, trying his best to hold back a bit until he was sure Liar awaited this.

"Why not? Wouldn't be the first time you've painted my body with your seed." Liara smiled, also about to orgasm.

With that settled, Austin didn't bother holding it in anymore and nor did Liara. The two lovers moaned together as they both relaxed, a damp patch appearing where Liara was sitting and her feet turning white as Austin shot spurt after spurt of cum onto her feet and toes.

After about a minute, they finally too the moment to catch their breath back. They both lay back on the bed with Liara resting on top of Austin's strong chest, her very gently giving his stroke some light strokes so that it stayed flaccid at least. She knew Austin liked it when she gave him some gentle strokes even after he came.
"Goddess, how've I've missed this." she sighed.

"Me too, darling." Austin smiled, gently stroking Liara's face and planting a kiss on her lips.

"Ready to finally rest? We will need our strength for tomorrow." Liara asked.

"That we will." Austin agreed, pulling the covers up over them and gently dozing off in synch with Liara, both their minds still connected via the Union.

"Sweet dreams..."

Neither of them knew who said it, but it still put a smile on their face.

After what had felt like a while of comforting her lover, Sarah had finally managed to finish her shopping and had dropped everything off at the hospital. Both she and Traynor were now walking back to the Normandy. One of Sarah's hands was holding Samantha's tightly while her over one was wrapped around her. Traynor felt so safe being in her lover's arms again. It was like she'd temporarily let all her defences down, only for them to come back twice as strong.

During the short walk, they'd both talked about what had happened while they'd been away. It started off casually with them discussing some of the things they'd done, how everyone was, that sort of thing. Pretty soon however, it became a lot more personal and they soon began telling each other the torture it had been while they'd been parted, how they had nightmares worrying about each other's safety, how they'd nearly cried themselves to sleeping constantly begging the question of whether the other was alive to be answered.

Due to her confidence and hardness, Sarah seemed to be handling this a bit better. Samantha on the other hand was a bit wobbly on her feet and she felt faint. Sarah of course hadn't resisted in scooping the comm specialist up into her arms and carrying her bridal style into their quarters.

Just before she'd left, Sarah had had her quarters, which she now shared with Samantha, refitted slightly. She now had a large shower that easily rivalled the one her brother had, something that the both of them almost couldn't live without, better carpets and even a much better view out into space. Plus, they had added a fair amount of girly stuff to it. They didn't have any sex toys though. Neither of them were really interested in them, and they didn't need those to truly enjoy their love making. It was just as fine and magical without them.

"I see you kept the place tidy while I was away." Sarah smiled as she carried Samantha in.

"The least I could do. Besides, I live here too now and you know I'm allergic to dust." said Traynor. Being back in her quarters with her lover seemed to have made her calm down a bit and. She was no longer crying and she felt a lot more peaceful being in Sarah's strong arms.

"Yeah. You nearly gave me a panic attack when I first found out." said Sarah. "I trust you've taken your medication regularly. Might have to spank you if you've been naughty."

"Don't worry, princess. I wouldn't dream of disobeying you. Although I was a bit naughty last night. I couldn't bare the torture anymore and I haven't had a chance to change the sheets yet." said Traynor innocently.

"Can't say I blame you." Sarah smiled cheekily. "It was hard for me too. Life without you is like a broken pencil."

"Which is?" Samantha asked, not quite seeing what Sarah meant by that.
"Pointless." said Sarah.

Both women couldn't help but laugh at this little joke. Sarah always did have a good sense of humour which she shared with her family.

As Sarah gently set Traynor down on the big double bed, they begun slowly pealing their clothes. Samantha of course was more eager for this than Sarah was. So much so in fact that the N7 marine had to make sure her lover didn't tear her under suit. She'd need it after all.

Pretty soon, only their underwear was separating them from total nakedness.

"Is all the underwear you wear completely red?" Traynor smiled, admiring Sarah's athletic body and bra clad breasts.

"Pretty much." Sarah nodded. "What can I say, I love red."

"Maybe I should try and copy you." said Traynor.

"No don't." said Sarah. "I love you just the way you are."

"I love you too." Samantha sighed. "Please make love to me."

"My pleasure."

Feeling in a teasing mood, Sarah stood up and slowly turned so she had her back to Traynor. She then gently reached around and unclipped her red bra. The comm specialist couldn't help but rub herself gently at the sight of this. Sarah didn't often do stripteases, but when she did, they were so sexy. She'd had a nosebleed one time form one of them.

Sarah gently let the bra fall away and covered both her breasts with one of her arms. She turned back to face Traynor and threw the bra to her. It did amaze the comm specialist that a bra that was easily about the same size as hers could hold such a beautiful and fairly large and shot set of breasts comfortably. Sometime she couldn't believe she was this lucky to have a lover with such a perfect body. In fact, it was common for Traynor to sometimes say that she envied Sarah's gorgeous form.

Sarah then slowly slid her arm away until her gorgeous breasts were finally revealed. She smiled proudly at her lover's expression.

"I know it's just me, but they always seem to look bigger every time." said Traynor.

Unable to help herself, the comm specialist slid her panties off.

Sarah took this as the message to continue and she gently climbed onto the bed. Traynor lay down and Sarah got on top, sliding her own panties off in the process.

As they snuggled into each other's arms again, as if by autopilot, both felt themselves lean in as their lips automatically joined against each other, somewhere that they seemed to belong. Time was lost. Seconds rolled into minutes and for all they knew, they had been sweetly loving the other's lips for hours already. It didn't matter, nothing mattered but the intense, overwhelming feelings that the other's lips teased from her flesh wherever they made contact.

After an hour of bliss, Sarah slowly began to move her lips down Traynor's body, where she once again found how her face seemed to fit so snugly into the young specialist's neck. She smelt gorgeous, like a subtle blend of floral nectar mixed in with the merest hints of peppermint and lavender. Sarah could see the taut muscle just beneath the skin, tendons flexing subtly as Traynor
breathed in and out. She couldn't have resisted even if she'd wanted to. Sarah pressed her lips softly to the pulse point, feeling it flutter beneath her as Traynor's heart rate increased. She kissed the offered neck again, letting her lips trail over the exposed flesh. It was intoxicating, knowing that at this moment, the specialist's heart was beating for her.

After some time, Sarah couldn't resist anymore and fished one of Samantha's breasts form out of her black bra and gently kissed it.

Even though Traynor's breasts were smaller than Sarah's, the N7 marine still loved them. In fact, they were just right for her.

Because she had a very big cup size, she was used to being with girls who had smaller tits than her and had therefore developed a liking for them. She found them very cute and it in some way boosted her self-confidence knowing that hers were bigger.

Traynor's meanwhile were just right. Not to small, nice and firm, and still a nice size enough for Sarah to find cute. They were also perky as well, which only added to Sarah finding them perfect for her. Samantha's richly tanned skin only added to it as well, as did the softness and smoothness of it.

After some time of giving Traynor's still bra clad breast a good kiss and lick, Sarah finally reached round and unclipped it, tossing it away without even a glance as she kept her eyes focused slowly on her love.

"You're so beautiful, Sam." she sighed.

"You're gorgeous too, princess." Traynor smiled.

The young comm specialist's gaze soon returned to Sarah's chest. No matter how many times she had laid her eyes on them, she still couldn't help but marvel at how they seemed to always be without a hint of sag. She knew her own were because of their perkiness, but Sarah's... it wasn't just the size, but how naturally formed they seemed. It was nearly impossible for anyone to be so perfectly shaped AND without sag. Not for the first time, she wondered why Sarah felt she even needed to wear a bra at all.

But yet another detail she especially loved was how they were topped with the most adorable, rosebud-pink nipples that the specialist had ever known. They were rock solid with arousal, and quivered slightly in the dim lighting, as if begging for her touch. Apart from the islands of rosy pink, Sarah's skin was a rich, golden sandstone colour born of time spent planet-side under suns of varying intensity. The fluorescent lighting of the cabin made the N7's flesh glow radiantly, as if that same sunlight shone from her every pore.

As Traynor reached up and pressed her fingers gently into the sides of her love's milky globes, Sarah moaned in delight, unconsciously puffing her chest up in an effort to make greater contact with the specialist's hands. After so long apart from her, Traynor's hands felt scorching against her starved flesh, like twin points of fire that burned the air from her lungs. Extending her thumbs, Traynor gently brushed against her nipples. Her lover half-whimpered, half-cried as she felt the nimble fingers against her. What happened next was something Traynor had seen many times from Sarah, yet she never grew tired of the sight. The rough skin of her nipple stretched even tighter as more blood engorged the tip. She could actually see as light pink was replaced with rich purple. In the centre, her nipple grew even more, now fully erect beneath the feathery strokes that Traynor teased it with. She felt a heady thrill pulse through her body, mingled with passionate love for the woman who now lay against her. No one else had responded this well to her touch before. Then again, Sarah was not your average lover.
Emboldened even by the intoxicating sensations rippling through, Sarah took charge again. The two resumed kissing as Sarah settled comfortably into her favourite position between the comm specialist legs. The times they'd made love had led them to find that they both favoured the position of having one of them grind against the other. It was, after all, the position that brought them so much closer, physically and spiritually.

Their folds caressed only slightly, yet both lovers felt every nerve ending in their bodies catch fire. Neither could suppress the shriek of ecstasy that ripped from their throats like an unbridled beast. Unable to stay upright, Sarah collapsed on top of Traynor, but still continued to unconsciously buck her shapely hips against Traynor. Their shock increased as their breasts were crushed firmly against each other. A synchronized cry of unexpected pleasure came from them at the feeling of tender flesh colliding.

"Yes! Yes!" Samantha groaned in euphoric delight.

"I love it when we do this and you become like this, baby!" Sarah moaned; sweat already starting to drench both her body and her lover's.

Sarah was tingling all over; she could feel nothing but Samantha's body against hers. All she knew was her; all she could comprehend was Samantha. They were both gasping, grinding against each other in a moment of heated passion. Like an unseen magnetic force, Samantha's lips sought out her own. They kissed passionately as they reached their peak. For one rapturous moment, both were frozen as the orgasm seized control of every muscle in their bodies. When it hit, they broke their lips apart as they both released their voices in an ecstatic wail that rose in volume and pitch. The cry that came with it was one of such utter passion, such raw emotion that for several days neither would be able to remember it without feeling weak in the knees.

Traynor's climax opened the metaphorical floodgates and even as great torrents of tears cascaded down her face, she felt Sarah's intimate fluids layering her inner thighs with deliciously warm nectar. As it entered her own folds, the sensation of her love's essence within her core triggered a second, minor orgasm to run through her. She shook against her body, clinging to her like a life preserver.

As quickly as it came, the climax left and Sarah's body collapsed into Traynor's waiting embrace. Tears of absolute relief and content still streaming down her cheeks, she hugged her lover with renewed intensity, whispering nonsense, soothing words into her ear as the aftershocks died away.

"You're amazing Sarah," Traynor said, her voice shaky with sudden, overwhelming happiness. It was dizzying, like being drunk… she didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Instead, she grabbed the still shaking Sarah and kissed her rosy, quivering lips.

Sarah lay back panting. Release with Traynor was even better than she remembered. Now the two were simply resting comfortably under the covers, Samantha in Sarah's arms and her head resting blissfully on Sarah's breasts. Due to how big and soft they were, Samantha would often jokingly call them "her favourite pillows" The softness was heavenly.

"Can't tell you how much I needed that." Sarah sighed.

"That's meant to be what I say." Traynor chuckled.

"I know. That's why I said it."

There was a small silence as they simply lay there before Traynor spoke again.

"Never leave me again, please." she almost begged as she hugged Sarah just a bit tighter.
"I won't, I promise" hissed Sarah with total conviction. "I love you so much."

"I love you too." Samantha sighed blissfully; staring into eyes brimming over with love stared back at her.

"Goodnight, Samantha."

"Goodnight, Sarah."

There was no doubt anymore; as long as they lived, they would always love each other. And as long as they loved each other, nothing would ever break them apart ever again.

As you would expect with Sarah and Traynor, a big thank you is also needed for Mastermind4892.

So far, the weekly chapter thing is working well, so expect the next one at the same time next week. My 1st College year has also finished, so I've got a long break until September, and I intend to use that well.

Also, Chapter 4 will hopefully mark the start of my action writing improvements. My friend, t3HPrO gave me some really helpful advice on that. So fingers crossed...
Chapter 4, The Fall of a Titan

Now we get into the action a bit more!

Hopefully, the problem with my action writing has been resolved for good this time. Few small changes in this chapter here and there, the biggest one being that it's on Palaven itself this time rather than a moon.

We also get the first clue to the catalyst. I will clarify now that it is not the Citadel or that damn starchild. Even though I’ve included a bright figure in it, that's going to change eventually as the mystery unfolds. You might also notice that I've removed Shepard's nightmares completely. I couldn't stand them in the game, so I've replace them with more peaceful mystery oriented dreams.

Lightens the tone a lot.

Chapter 4

The Fall of a Titan

Austin and Liara found themselves standing in nothing but bright whiteness. This was strange for them since they didn't have dreams like this when they joined their minds.

The two simply stood in silence for a while as they looked around. They then suddenly saw something. A figure of bright light was standing in front of them.

Austin cautiously hugged Liara close to him in case it became hostile.

For several long seconds though it simply stood there. It was too obscured to see clearly what the figure looked like, but something about it felt familiar. What could be seen was that it was around the same height as Austin.

The figure then slowly stepped forward and reached out. Austin's first instinct was to back away, but something inside him seemed to prevent it, almost as though it trusted this figure.

The hand of the figure slowly got closer until it touched the Helldiver's heart, then everything went bright…

Austin and Liara gently woke from their sleep. Although the dream had ended abruptly, it hadn't been a nightmare so they felt very well rested.

"Did you see that figure?" Austin asked, wanting to be sure that it had indeed been the real Liara that had been in the dream, and not a part of the dream.

"Yes. I don't know why, but it almost felt as though I knew it." Said Liara.

"This is strange. We've never had dreams like this before." Said Austin as he got up from the bed and began pulling his suit mesh on.

"Well, sometimes odd dreams do happen. You would certainly know about that." Liara teased.
Austin didn't forget easily how he'd had once got rather drunk after having a friendly drink with Dr Chakwas and then having a deep dream in which he'd had sex with the Normandy's former Yeoman, Kelly Chambers.

"Still, we got a good night's sleep anyway." Said Austin, smiling at Liara's teasing at least.

"Oddly enough, I'm still a bit tired after last night. Always love it when we come together." Liara sighed.

"That mean you won't be coming with me? Aw, what a shame." Austin teased.

"Don't make me haul you in the air again." Liara warned teasingly.

Austin knew better than to tease Liara when she gave that warning. Not too long ago, he'd teased her so much that she'd activated her biotics and simply held him in the air. She'd then kept him there and forced him to watch while she had a warm shower and even touched herself. Not only had it been torture for him, but it had also frightened him a bit. As a soldier who wasn't a biotic, being frozen still and helpless with no control was the last thing he wanted. Not only that, but it was also his wife doing. He could at least be happy with that fact that Liara simply meant it in a joking way and not in the way that she was trying to control him, especially in a way the Reapers might if ever they found a way into his mind. He wouldn't let that happen though. He'd kill every Reaper and indoctrinated servant before they got the chance.

"Okay, I'll drop it." He chuckled. "Still, you coming or not?"

Liara nodded and begun pulling on her own suit mesh. Austin meanwhile put his hand out and simply concentrated as his armour began flying onto him piece by piece.

"You love doing that, don't you?" Liara chuckled.

"What can I say? It's a very cool feature."

Traynor was the first to wake up. She immediately recognized the comfort she felt on top of her favourite pillows, as well as the intimately familiar warm body beneath her, and the soothing comfort its presence had on her. It had been a long time since she'd slept so well. It almost felt like this was a dream within a dream since she hadn't slept this well for such a long time since Sarah had left. Now that she was back…

And now she was back! Samantha could hardly believe that Sarah was with her again.

After spending some time blissfully staring at her lover's impossibly beautiful features, drinking in every detail, Traynor began running her hand down Sarah's body to her hourglass waistline, revelling in the sensation of her skin against her own. As she stroked her fingers over her toned abdomen, delighting in the feeling of the smooth skin yet powerful and coiled muscles underneath, it caused Sarah to moan in her sleep.

"Oh, Samantha... Keep touching me there."

The fact that she was making her love moan in her sleep make it extremely hard to resist the temptation to give Sarah her favourite wake up call.

As Samantha kept touching Sarah, her lover's sighs only increased. Eventually, Traynor was unable to resist it any longer. She gave into her temptation to wake up Sarah the same way they used to every morning before she left, with a long and beautiful kiss. Sarah's lips against her own felt so
wonderful that it almost brought tears to her eyes. As she woke up, Sarah seamlessly slipped into the kiss, like it was the most natural thing in the world. So natural in fact that the two lovers refused to separate for a very long time, and even when they did, they still held the others face in their hands.

"Morning, Sammy." Sarah smiled.

"Sleep well?" Samantha sighed, lovingly stroking Sarah's cheek.

"Yes. I haven't slept that well since out last night together before I left." Said Sarah.

The pleasure they felt from each other from last night was greater than either of them had ever felt before in their entire lives. Just the right glances at each was enough to get them squirming in their seats. Also, as shy as she was, one edge that Traynor especially had over Sarah was that unbelievably sexy voice of hers. Whenever she talked, even at normal, Sarah would feel warm and content, along with a slight tingle across her skin... and between her legs. So, when Traynor actually put effort into it, and slipped into what she considered her "bedroom voice". It made Sarah instantly wet.

"You still look a bit tired." Said Samantha, with a bit of concern, noting that Sarah still looked like she could fall asleep again any second.

"Don't worry, I'm fine. I just sometimes need to wake my body up." Said Sarah.

"Oh really? How?"

"Well, sometimes I do exercises…"

A thought then suddenly popped into Sarah's head. A thought she knew that her girlfriend would love.

"…or a shower." She winked.

"You copycat! I was gonna suggest the same thing." Samantha smiled. "Oh the hell with it."

To Sarah's surprise, Traynor suddenly scooped her up in her arms and started carrying her over to the shower. Usually it was the other way around, but Sarah didn't mind.

It would be another hour or so until they reached Palaven, so Austin decided to pass the time by doing what he often did to pass the time, talk to the crew.

Xun had set up office in the quarters that had belonged to former Cerberus operative Miranda Lawson. She and her friend Jacob Taylor had defected to the Helldivers during Austin's mission to take down the Collectors. It had taken some time, but they had proven themselves and earned Austin's trust.

Today, Miranda and Jacob had been temporarily reassigned about a month or so back. So far, Austin hadn't heard from them, but recent intel told him that they were indeed alive.

As Austin entered, he found himself staring at a lo of screens, each of which projected a part of the milky way.

A red drone suddenly hovered up to Austin. On closer look however, he saw that it wasn't a drone, it was a holographic Chinese dragon.

"Major Shepard. It's a pleasure to see you again." It said.
"Wait, are you the drone from the Shadow Broker ship? You look… different." Said Austin, recognizing the drone's voice.

"Mistress Xun decided to give a new appearance that better suited the environment she is used to working in. In this case, a Chinese dragon. She also now refers to me as "Glyph" instead of "info drone" 95 percent of the time." It replied.

"Suits him doesn't it." Said another voice.

Xun's Asari assistant, Oranna was also here. It was certainly nice to see the purple skinned Asari again.

"Nice to see you too, Oranna. How'd you get on-board though?" Austin asked, shaking hands with Oranna.

"Xun picked me up while you were on the Citadel. You're now stuck with me permanently." He chuckled.

Xun herself the came out of the small bedroom that joined with the quarters.

"Looks like you brought more than just that drone from your ship." Said Austin.

"A few things were necessary. I'd be a very silent Shadow Broker without datafeeds." Said Xun.

"So you still have access to your resources?"

"What I can get. We'll need it to research this Crucible." Said Xun. "Until we understand precisely what it does, it's far too dangerous to use."

"It'd be nice to know we're not kids playing around with a loaded gun." Said Austin.

"Absolutely. The damage it could cause if it backfired is unthinkable." Xun agreed.

"So what's been happening with you as the Broker recently?" Austin asked, deciding to change the subject to something more friendly.

"It's been… exciting. The old Broker's ship was impressive, but it was never meant to be space worthy." Said Xun. "Which meant that Cerberus eventually stumbled on us on Hagalaz."

"What happened?" Austin asked.

"I knew they were coming. Feron, Oranna and I loaded as much of the ship's specialized hardware onto a shuttle as we could. We got away from Cerberus' ships after an… appropriate distraction." Xun replied.

"What kind of distraction?"

"Sending the Broker's ship exploding into a Cerberus cruiser. I don't think the Illusive Man expected me to give up my resources in such a… spectacular fashion.

"Can you still operate as the Broker without the ship?"

"Well, I certainly couldn't let the Illusive Man have it. I saved what was crucial. My network of agents is intact, although the Reapers have taken a toll on their numbers."

"It's taking a while to re-establish contact."
"So where is Feron if you three escaped?"

"He convinced me and Liara he was recovered enough to work, and I do need more agents."

"Agent Feron didn't report any injuries during his last call to you, Mistress." said Glyph.

"True. Given what he survived, Liara and I should probably be less concerned about him."

"We'll talk later, Xun."

"Talk to you soon. Feel free also to check my terminals regularly for information."

From what they could see from the screens in the dropship, Palaven's skies were already full of Reapers. The Turian fleets seemed to be holding out okay, but where sustaining quite a few casualties.

"They're at least holding out a bit better than I thought they would." Said Ventra, somewhat disheartened to see his home in ruins.

"Major, there's no clear place to land. The whole place is crawling with enemies." Said Steve Cortez, the new dropship pilot.

"Right. Cortez, open the door. We'll drop down and secure a landing site. James, keep us covered with the main gun." Said Austin.

"Roger that."

The doors opened and Austin, Liara and Ventra jumped out.

Many husks that were swarming the area quickly noticed them.

"I almost missed these guys." Ventra growled as he unsheathed his bow.

The husks roared and ran at them. Liara was the first to attack as she lifted a husk into the air before slamming it back down onto the ground while Austin emptied his Revenant into several more.

Liara then spawned a singularity right in the middle of the horde, allowing Austin Ventra to cut them down with brutally accurate arrow and gunfire while James took out the last of them from the dropship.

"We've cleared a landing zone. Set her down." Said Austin.

The dropship gently touched down and James joined the group.

The Palaven buildings where definitely a mess. It was hard to make their way through the debris, especially through the thousands of husks they ran into and the explosions and gunfire all around the place.

Pretty soon though, they found themselves at the entrance to the base they'd been instructed to find. The Turians, having been told they would be arriving, quickly let them in and they found the commanding officer, General Corinthus.

"General." Said Austin.

"Major Shepard. Heard you were coming, but I didn't believe it. General Corinthus." Said the
"We've come to get Primarch Fedorian." Said Austin.

Corinthus was silent for a while before he finally replied.

"Primarch Fedorian is dead. His shuttle was shot down an hour ago as it tried to leave the planet." He said.

"That'll complicate things." Austin sighed. "I'm sorry. That's a big loss for everyone. Reaper bastards. So what happens now?"

"The Turian hierarchy provides very clear lines of succession." Said Liara.

"Right. General Corinthus?"

"With such heavy casualties, it's hard for me to be certain who the next Primarch is. Central command will know. However, at the moment, contacting them is impossible. Our comm tower is out. Husks are swarming that area so we can't get close enough to repair it." SAID Corinthus.

"Well we're not leaving until we know who the next Primarch is. We'll fix the tower." Said Austin.

"Thank you, Major. I'll take care of things on this end. Said Corinthus.

"Alright, let's go."

Getting to the tower was surprisingly easy. Too easy in fact. Austin reckoned however that the Husks would arrive as soon as they started repairing the tower.

"We can't repair it from this panel." Said Austin. "James, see if you can get up there and fix it."

"Okay. Better keep those Husks from climbing up after me." Said James as he began climbing the tower's ladder.

Sure enough, several Husks slowly crawled over the debris overhead and slowly began making their way towards them.

"Ventra keep him covered. Liara and I will handle the main horde." Said Austin.

"You two against those things?!" James called down from the tower.

"Don't worry. They can handle themselves." Said Ventra, readying his bow in case some husks tried to sneak up form behind.

Both Austin and Liara drew their swords and readied for the fight.

"Time to go to work." Said Liara.

First Liara struck as she cut across a Husk's chest. Austin then did a turn strike over Liara as she ducked, sensing the move he was making. The move decapitated another husk and even took out the eye of a third.

Liara then ran forward and did a jump stab of the one her bond mate had temporarily blinded, allowing him to then follow with a swift cut to the legs.
Another husk ran at them, but Austin was quick to use his shield to backhand a husk, allowing Liara to then bring her sword down on it.

"Incoming!" James yelled from the top of the tower.

Austin was able to turn his head just in time to see a Husk jumping into the air to lunge at them. With their bond connecting both their minds, Austin grabbed Liara and swung her over his head. As Liara was pulled up into the air by her husband, she swung her sword right at the husk, cutting its upper section clean off from the rest of its body. She even managed to land a kick at another husk as she landed.

With his wife's feet back on the ground, Austin turned his attention back to the main horde. Liara benefited from her lighter armour by being able to move faster and she could also use her biotics to speed up even more. The speed difference wasn't huge though. Plus, Austin's armour did give him more strength which allowed him to deal more damage. Any husks that came at him that couldn't cut down with Excalibur in time, he could smash away with his forearms or punch with his fists.

Another husk ran at Austin just as he smashed another husk in the head with his shield, breaking its neck in the process. The Major quickly thrust forward and ran the husk through with his blade. Just as another husk ran at him, the Helldiver quickly pulled out and used blocked its arms with his shield. Before the zombieified human could react in time to this, Austin thrust forward and ran the husk through. This time, he went all the way up to the hilt, the tip of the blade clearly visible as it protruded out of the other side of the limp husk.

Still more where incoming.

Austin however knew a good way to at least slow them down. He twirled Excalibur a few times, then threw it. The blade spun as it zoomed towards the large wave. It cut down two husks before finally embedding itself in a third. The fall of the husk caused some others to topple over or trip over the bodies.

Quickly sensing that her husband was temporarily defenceless until he got Excalibur back, Liara stuck close to him and kept him covered while he ran to pick up his sword. Another husk tried to jump Austin, but he simply blocked it with his arm and threw it over him, allowing Liara to deliver a killing blow.

Austin's hand then quickly grabbed onto the hilt of Excalibur and pulled it free of the dead husk's body, slicing another husk in half in the process.

Liara used her biotics to pull another husk in her direction which she then sliced apart with her own sword while Austin did a spin which took out about 10 more husk in one swing.

He then knocked another one down with his shield, which Liara then finished by cutting its throat and then dodged under the swipe from another husk. He quickly retaliated this by swinging Excalibur up from behind the husk, cutting both its legs off. Liara then ran another husk through while Austin smashed the downed husks' head with his foot.

Liara then parried a husk's blow with her sword, allowing Austin to finish it off and she threw a singularity at the final few.

One lone survivor charged at them, only to bang right into Austin's shield. Acting perfect synch with each other, both Austin and Liara raised their blades and finished the husk off.

Overall, the training and practice that they had done to perfect their new fighting style had paid off.
Another advantage of being bond mates was that they could communicate with each other telepathically. As they had also learned together, they could use this in combat as well.

It had taken them some time to learn how to use it properly, but once they had mastered it, they were unstoppable. By simply sending thoughts to each other, they could know exactly what the other was going to do before they did it. They could even use this to coordinate dual strikes and even use this to weave around each other. It truly did put a new meaning on the saying "fight as one"

During the last two years, they had also perfected this. Instead of sparring against each other like they used to, they now sparred with each other against incoming waves. Austin's mentor and sword trainer, General Alkatraan Zartrack had also given some advice and taught them a few new tricks which they had incorporated into their training. Eventually, it had advanced to the point where they had now essentially created an all new fighting style dependent on the two of them working together.

Even Xun, who was one of the best fighters, struggled against the both of them. Whenever she got an opening at one, the other would always be there to block it. She herself had never taken a hit, but at the same time, she could never land one on them. They were too fast, too well organized, and too coordinated for her. In fact, now had ever managed to beat both Austin and Liara together.

This often made some of the others a bit jealous. In fact, Alaara and Sandra were even trying to see if it was possible for them to learn this new fighting style themselves.

"Got it! Main tower's satellite connection is now repaired. On my way down!" James called, sliding down the ladder to join the others, just as Ventra finished off the last of the Husks had had been fighting.

"Good work, James." Austin nodded, barely showing any signs of tiredness from earlier.

"How did you two do that? I've never seen two people fight with such coordination and skill." James asked in amazement.

"We're bond mates. We're able to use that bond to communicate with each other telepathically. In this case, we can both coordinate our attacks with each other and practically fight as one." Said Liara, trying her best not to sound smug at the fact that she and Austin were unbeatable together.

"I'm almost jealous of you two now."

With the Husks dealt with and the tower repaired, Austin reached for his earpiece.

"General, do you read? The comm tower has been repaired." He said.

"Much appreciated, Major. I already have information from Palaven command. Please return ASAP." Corinthus replied.

"We're on our way."

"What've you got?" Austin asked.

"As your partner said, succession is usually simple. But right now, the hierarchy's in chaos. So many dead or MIA." Corinthus replied.

"I need someone. I don't care who. As long as they can get the Turian's to join us." Said Austin.

"I'm on it, Shepard. We'll find you the Primarch." Said a voice.
To Austin's surprise, a very familiar face walked up to them. A Turian Helldiver who bore the mark of Alpha, a mark that only members of Alpha Squad carried.

"Garrus!"

"Vakarian, sir! I didn't see you arrive." Said Corinthus.

"At ease, General." Said Garrus.

"Good to see you again. You had me worried." Austin smiled.

"I survived a gunship missile to the head. It's gonna take more than a few Reapers to get rid of me. I'm the closest damn thing we have to an expert on Reaper forces, so I'm... advisor." Said Garrus.

"James, this is Garrus Vakarian. He's another member of Alpha Squad. Hell of a soldier." Said Austin as James shook hands with Garrus.

"Lieutenant." Garrus acknowledged. "Good to see you too, Liara."

"Good to see you in one piece, Garrus." Liara smiled under her helmet.

"You look a bit bigger than last we met, Garrus." Said Ventra, giving his Turian brother in arms a friendly nudge.

"You seem to look a bit thinner, Ventra." Garrus replied back. "General Corinthus filled me in. We know who we're after."

"Palaven command tells me that the next Primarch is General Adrian Victus." Said Corinthus.

"Victus? His name's crossed Xun's desk." Said Liara.

"Know him, Garrus?" Austin asked.

"I was fighting alongside him this morning. Lifelong military, gets results, popular with his troops. Not so popular with military command. Has a reputation for playing loose with the accepted strategy."

"Unconventional thinking might be our best bet." Said Austin.


"Okay. Let's get him on the shuttle and get the hell out of here. You said you were with Victus this morning?"

"Yeah, but we got separated. He went to bolster a flank that was breaking. Could be anywhere out there."

"We're trying to raise him, Major." Said Corinthus.

A loud roar suddenly echoed from not too far away.

"What the hell was that?" James asked cautiously.

"I've heard that noise before..." said Austin worriedly.

"Incoming!"
Sure enough, Austin's worse fears were realised.

A huge winged figure swooped above the high buildings and headed straight in their direction.

Everyone dove for cover as the Draco breathed a hugged wave of fire in their direction. Most were able to avoid the hot flames. Those who weren't as fortunate were turned to ash at the merest touch.

The Draco flew over the base and came around for another run.

"A DRAGON?! Where the hell did the Reapers get a Dragon?!” James shouted in shock.

"What's a Dragon?" all the aliens asked at the same time.

"Big scaly creature with wings, breaths fire, mouth full of teeth and a bad attitude." Austin quickly replied as the Draco swooped over them again.

This time though, the Dragon husk didn't breath any fire. It instead made another harp turn and landed on the roof of a nearby shelter.

"Assuming control."

"Oh crap. Not him again." Garrus cursed as the Draco's eyes turned yellow and Harbinger's voice began to emit from it's mouth.

"Your efforts are futile, Shepard. You cannot hope to stand a chance against us." Harbinger tormented.

"Your overconfidence is your weakness, Harbinger!” Austin returned.

"Your faith in your friends and allies is yours!" Harbinger retorted. "Burn their flesh to ash! Releasing control!"

With the Draco back in control, it roared and spat another fire ball at them.

Garrus quickly popped out of cover and carefully aimed his nipper at one of the Draco's eyes.

Just as the dragon was about to fry him, the Turian fired. The massive husk grunted in pain as it was temporarily blinded. In its haste to regain its bearings, the claws on its wing slipped and it fell off the roof.

"Good shot, Garrus. That will at least give us a chance." Said Austin.

The Draco shook itself and quickly regained its vision. It rose back up into the air and swung its tail at where the group was taking cover.

Austin just noticed this in time and was able to push Ventra and Garrus out of the way just as he pulled Liara and James the other way with him.

The crates they had just been hiding behind were smashed to pieces by the Draco's tail.

"Just about had it with those wings now." Said Ventra, selecting an arrow and drawing it back. "It's like I've said before, swooping is bad."

The arrow fired and embedded itself in the Draco's left wing. The Dragon looked at this for a second, somewhat unfazed the tiny prick it had just received. That was before Ventra pressed the button however.
The tip of the arrow exploded and the Draco roared in pain as its left wing was crippled. With its ability to fly now badly damaged, the Draco could sense defeat and quickly retreated. Having to flap harder than before, it used what it could of its normal and damaged wing to escape.

This victory was short lived though as Harvester suddenly took the Draco's place and swooped over them.

"General, tell Primarch Victus we'll rendezvous here. In the meantime, let's take care of whatever that Harvester drops off. Coming Garrus?" said Austin.

"You kidding?! I'm right behind you. Let's give these bastards hell!" said Garrus.

"We've got trouble over at the main barricade. If the Reapers breach it, we're done!" said Corinthus urgently.

"We're on it!"

Everyone ran to the barricade and took positions. Austin quickly manned the turret that was mounted there.

"I like the perspective this offers." He said.

Several husks began landing as the Harvester dropped them off. They were even joined by a new breed of husk. This time though, they weren't human.

"It just me, or do those husks look like Turians?!" said James, gunning a down another as it tried to climb the wall.

"You're right. They do." Said Austin, cutting down several more husks and even one of these new Marauders with the turret.

Garrus was able to use his overload to take out the Marauder's shields, enabling James and Austin to finish them off. Liara meanwhile used her biotics to try and slow the normal husk down a bit so that everyone else had a chance to kill them before they got too close.

Just as they finished off the last husk, one final one was dropped off. This one however was very big. It had what looked like the massive body of a Krogan and the head of a Turian.

"Holy hell! What is that thing?!" said James.

The brute roared and charged at the barrier.

"Brace yourself!"

The husk hit the barricade hard, causing Austin lose his footing and fall.

"Austin!" Liara yelled.

Austin quickly rolled back onto his feet as the Brute turned to face him, beating it's chest in the same way a Gorilla would.

"Come and get it, you son of a bitch." Said Austin, once again drawing Excalibur and his shield, waiting for the brute to charge. If he could time this just right…

The Brute once again roared and charged at Austin. Leaving until the last moment, Austin rolled to
the side out of the way as the Brute swung with its large arm. With a simple movement of the wrist, Excalibur sliced through the Brute's legs, crippling it and causing it to fall to the ground.

Austin remained with his back turned to the Brute as it desperately tried to get back up. Without even a turn of his head, Austin activated his shoulder plasma cannon and aimed it at the fallen Husk.

As the red aiming laser locked on target, a blue ball of plasma shot out of the cannon. The Brute was vaporised upon contact.

"Are you alright?" Ventra asked as the other hopped down to joint heir leader.

"I'm good." Austin replied.

"Shepard. Corinthus here."

"What's the word on the Primarch?" Austin asked.

"Still can't get a stable comlink." Corinthus replied.

"Okay. We're going on foot. Shepard out." Said Austin. "Garrus, take me to the last place you saw Victus."

Having dealt with most of the Husks earlier, getting to Victus was very easy. His position was a bit overrun, but clearing them out didn't take long.

"General Victus."

"Yes?"

"I'm Major Shepard of the Helldivers." Said Austin.

"Ah, Major. I know who you are. I can't wait to find out what brings you here." Said Victus.

"Vakarian. Where did you go?"

"Heavy Reaper unit on the right flank. I believe you're exact words were "Get that thing the hell of my men!" said Garrus.

"Appreciated." Said Victus.

"General. You're needed off planet. We've come to get you." Said Austin.

"It will take something beyond important for me to leave my men, or my Turian brothers and sisters and their fight. Said Victus.

"Fedorian was killed. You're the new Primarch." Said Garrus.

"You're needed immediately to chair a summit and represent your people in the fight against the Reapers." Said Austin.

"I'm Primarch of Palaven, negotiating for the Turian hierarchy?" Victus asked, gazing upon much of the wreckage of Palaven.

"Yes."

"I've spent my whole life in the military. I'm no diplomat. I hate diplomats." Said Victus.
"This is crucial. We need you on top of your game. Are you in or out?" said Austin.

"Watch your tone, Major!" Victus warned.

"Look, you've met the Reapers head on. You're overqualified. See this devastation, Primarch? Double that for everywhere if we don't unite together. We need an alliance of everyone. We need the Turian fleet." Said Austin.

"Give me a moment to say goodbye to my men." Said Victus.

"Go ahead. We'll wait."

After a few moments of saying his farewells, Victus re-joined them.

"Ready?" Austin asked.

"One thing. Major, I appreciate the Helldiver's need for our fleets, but I can't spare them. Not while my world is burning. But if, the pressure can be taken of Palaven…" said Victus.

"You've already got several Helldiver battalions assisting your armies. What more do you need?" Austin asked, doing his best to hide that he was a bit unhappy with Victus asking for even more than the Helldivers were providing already. It almost sounded like the Primarch was being ungrateful.

"We need the Krogan. I can't see us winning this thing without them, even with the help of your soldiers. Get them to help us, and then we can help you." Said Victus.

Austin's opinion changed after that. He certainly hadn't expected Victus to say that.

"The Krogan…"

"Looks like the summit just got a lot more interesting." Said Garrus.

"I apologise for being so frank, Major. But your plan feels doomed to failure." Said Councillor Tevos.

With the Primarch on-board, Austin was now talking to Tevos about the Asari joining the summit. So far however, it wasn't looking promising.

"You start thinking like that, and the Reapers have already won. I won't have that!" said Austin defiantly.

"I'm not the only one that feels this way. The Salarian Dalatrass is livid." Said Tevos.

"Some of these issues are hundreds of years old! Time to let go!" said Austin.

"Perhaps. But we must focus our attention on when the Reapers come for us too. So no. The Asari will not be at your summit." Said Tevos.

"You just don't get it, do you?!" said Austin crossly. "This whole unification would be stronger with the Krogan. You need them, we all do."

"Good luck, Major, and goodbye." Said Tevos, ending the call.

"I save her and the rest of the Council… and this is the thanks I get." Austin groaned.
"Major, Admiral Hackett is on vidcom." Said Traynor through the comm.

Austin simply sighed and activated it. Hackett's hologram was once again projected in front of him.

"Major, did you retrieve the Primarch for the summit?" he asked.

"Yes. But the Asari are staying on the side-lines." Said Austin.

Another hologram then suddenly joined Hackett's. This one was an Arkane Helldiver. Austin recognized his old mentor instantly.

"They'll regret that. The time for unity is now." Said General Zartrack.

"General Zartrack! What a surprise." Said Austin, giving a small salute.

"Good to see you as well, Shepard." Zartrack nodded. "Admiral Hackett."

"General." Hackett nodded.

"Anyway, the Salarians will be attending the summit, as will the Krogan." Said Austin.

"Hmm, that will cause some tension." Said Zartrack.

"You've certainly got your hands full, Major. I shouldn't take up anymore of your time." Said Hackett.

"I'll keep you posted, Hackett." Said Austin.

"Good luck, Shepard."

Hackett vanished, leaving just Austin and Zartrack.

"A good thing he's in charge of the Alliance." Said the General.

"How are things back at Arkadia?" Austin asked.

"Things haven't been this intense since the Hydra crisis. That should say enough." Said Zartrack.

"Had a feeling as much." Austin sighed.

"The Arkanes have got the best Generals coordinating many of the battalions and squads being sent to aid the other homeworlds. I and your father are working the hardest. He told me to tell you he apologises for not being able to talk at the moment." Said Zartrack.

"How is he?" Austin asked.

"Worried about your mother. He hasn't heard anything from here since the Reapers hit Earth. He's able to focus on the task at hand, but I know the worry is constantly on his mind." Said Zartrack, a hint of concern in his voice.

"I know the feeling. I do hope she's okay. For his sake, and my sister's." said Austin.

"I'm sure she's okay, Shepard. You're her son after all." Said Zartrack supportingly.

"Thanks, General. That means a lot." Austin smiled.

"I'll keep in touch. If we find anything that may help you, I'll be the first to inform you." Said
Zartrack.

"Yes sir. Good luck." Austin saluted.

"You as well, my old student. Give them hell."

Austin decided to quickly see how Victus was settling in before he left to plot the next course.

"Major, thank you for allowing me the use of your ship, and for going along with this plan. Garrus said he had to attend to the Normandy's weapon systems. Something about "calibrations". Said Victus.

"Sounds like Garrus. I'm sorry to say the Asari Councillor won't be joining us. She thinks there's too much bad blood with the Krogan." Said Austin.

"She may be right." Said Victus. "But there'll be a lot more blood, real blood, if we don't try."

"When you put it that way…" said Austin.

"The sooner we have this summit, the sooner we'll know." Said Victus.

As Austin headed out of the war room, the lights suddenly flickered.

"Major, EDI just went offline." Said Joker.

"DELL!" Austin shouted.

"That was not me, Shepard! I swear! wasn't even doing anything with her." Dell replied through the comm.

"Joker, what do you mean she went offline?" Austin asked.

"I don't know. She's not responding. I can't access the AI core diagnostics. You better get down to deck 3." Said Joker.

Austin headed down to deck through and headed through he medbay to the AI core. Two of the crew where at the door with fire extinguishers and breathing mask. Of course, Austin was still wearing his armour so he wouldn't need that. Plus, if there was a threat he'd be able to fight it.

"Joker, what's that sound?" Austin asked, hearing a loud sound coming from behind the door.

"Fire extinguisher, Major. Might be an electrical fire, or something." Said Joker.

The doors opened and everyone slowly proceeded in.

"EDI, talk to me." Said Austin.

There was a small humming and the lights suddenly came back on.

"EDI?"

A metallic female figure slowly stepped out of the smoke. It was Dr Eva. At the same time however, it wasn't Dr Eva. The figure was now cleaned of the burned and charred flash it had got from the fire on Mars, it had an orange holo interface over its eyes, and it had a surprisingly familiar voice.

"Is there a particular topic you wish to discuss, Shepard?" asked EDI.
"EDI?" Austin asked in surprise. EDI had a body?

"Yes." EDI replied.

"What are you doing in Dr Eva's body?" Austin asked.

"Not all of me is in this body, but I have control of it." Said EDI. "It was not a seamless transition."

"A transition? What exactly happened? You blacked out on us for a while there." Austin asked.

"Correct. When we brought this unit on board, I began a background process to search for its information on the Crucible. This eventually triggered a trap. A backup power source and CPU activated and the unit attempted physical confrontation. Fortunately, I was able to gain remote access and repurpose it as I saw fit. During this process, it struggled. Thus the fire." EDI explained.

"Well, if it means having better access to the Crucible data in its head, good work." Said Austin.

"I reasoned along similar lines." Said EDI.

"So if you're in there, are you still in the ship?" Austin asked.

"I still exist within in the ship. This body can be used for remote control." Said EDI.

"So technically, you're controlling that thing like you did to a mech when you helped me on Lazarus station?" Austin asked.

"Precisely." EDI nodded. "For continued control however, this unit should remain within the Normandy's broadcast or tight beam range."

"Are you planning to take that body somewhere?"

"Normandy's weaponry is not suited to every combat situation. This unit could provide limited ground support."

"You mean you could come with us?"

"Correct. This body could accompany you to areas the Normandy cannot reach."

"Good. I'll tell you when I need it."

"Excellent. I will run tests to make sure it matches, or exceeds the capabilities of organic squad mates. However, my first step should be restoring functionality to the Normandy to reassure the crew that all is normal."

"Just don't be surprised if the crew is wary of your new body. It did try to kill us not long ago."

"An excellent point. I will take it to the bridge. Joker will also want to see it." Said EDI as she left the AI core.

"He'll want more than that." Austin chuckled to himself.

"Was that EDI that just walked by?" Chakwas asked.

"It was." Austin nodded.

"Joker's gonna have a field day with this." The doctor chuckled.
Before Austin headed up to the cockpit to check on EDI, he felt it best to check on Garrus in the forward battery.

"Garrus. Didn't waste any time getting to work I see." He said.

"After what I've been through lately, calibrating a giant gun is a vacation. Gives me something to focus on." Said Garrus.

"We're gonna need you for more than your aim." Said Austin.

"Oh, I'm ready for it. But I'm pretty sure we'll still need giant guns, and lots of them." Said Garrus. "Sovereign didn't go down without a fight. I doubt a thousand more of his friends will be any different. Still not convinced I should have left Palaven behind."

"We're not gonna beat the Reapers by second guessing ourselves, Garrus. Every decision we make has to be the right one."

"And when we're wrong?"

"We haven't been so far."

"There are times I wish we were. Convincing my people the end was coming got pretty rough. They didn't want to hear it. Finally, they gave me a taskforce as a token to shut me up."

"So you're their expert advisor now?"

"Just followed your example, Shepard. Yell loud enough, and someone will eventually come over to see what all the fuss is about. Not that they'll actually do anything about it."

"Until hell shows up at their door. Then they put you in charge."

"Not like the old days, is it?" Garrus asked. "Rouge Spectre and C-sec agents running and gunning outside the lines, making it up as we went along. We're actually respectable now."

"We've lost enough friends trying to make sure this day never came. I think we've all earned some respect."

"Then the first Reaper we take out with this gun, it's in their honour. Just give the word."

"Damn good to have you back, Garrus."

"Wouldn't miss this fight for anything. Now, I'm sure somebody screwed up something down here. I wanna get the old girl back in fighting shape." Said Garrus.

Sure enough, EDI was now in the co-pilots seat, the same seat where her holo avatar used to sit. This time though, she had all sorts of tubes and wires plugged into her from the back. Probably some way for her to continue monitoring everything.

"Hey, Major! Check out my co-pilot!" said Joker, obviously loving this new change.

"So she installed herself into the new body without any help from you?" Austin asked, crossing his arms.

"Come on, Major. Don't you trust me?" said Joker. "Okay, let me put it this way. If I knew that EDI was gonna install herself into a sexy robot body, do you honestly think I'd be able to keep quiet
about it? Look at that! I would've baked a cake!"

"I am right here, Jeff." Said EDI.

"Yes, you are, EDI. Yes you are." Joker smiled.

Seeing that Austin was going to talk to her, EDI's visor glowed and the wires disconnected themselves from her body. The plugs also folded back into tiny hidden compartments in her body.

"Hello, Shepard." She said, getting up from the seat.

"Still getting used to greeting people in person?" Austin asked friendlily.

"No. I require only one occurrence to adapt to a new concept." EDI replied.

"How are you adjusting to the arms and legs?" Austin asked.

"Very little adjustment is needed as I am already familiar with certain experiences like this. An example I could give was when you put me inside your suit when you rescued me on the Lazarus station."

"So really, this isn't all that new to you." Said Austin.

"Precisely. Although I will need to get used to this body having different proportions to you and there also the weight in certain areas." Said EDI.

Austin pretended to ignore that bit. Admittedly, it was a bit hard to ignore that EDI was technically nudist. True there weren't any female parts visible, but she did still lack clothes. Hopefully though, she would fix that.

"Overall, it is adequate." EDI finished.

"That's not the word I'd use to describe you." Said Joker.

"Perhaps we should speak privately." Said EDI.

"I'll be over here… flying the ship." Said Joker as two moved out of ear shot.

"What's this about? Joker's not harassing you is he?" Austin asked with concern.

"No, he is not. He approves of my new platform." Said EDI. "Shepard, do you believe your crew members should be allowed to disobey an order on moral grounds?"

"Absolutely. I have no use for team members who can think for themselves." Austin replied. "Why are you asking about something like that?"

"I was designed by Cerberus. I do not take moral stances that conflict with orders from my executive officers. But when Jeff removed my AI shackles, I became capable of self-modifying my core programming." Said EDI. "I asked Jeff if he thought I should change anything now that I can. He deflected the question with humour."

"And you didn't get an answer." Said Austin.

"Correct. He has repeated this pattern in response to several of my inquiries. Do you think I should make modification?" EDI asked.
"Only you can really answer that question. That's the point of free will." Austin replied supportingly.

"But moral decisions should not be made in a vacuum. If I do not ask the crew for their opinion, I could miss crucial context. May I ask you questions Jeff avoids? When there is time, will you answer them for me?" EDI asked.

"If you think it'll help, I'll do what I can." Austin shrugged.

"Very well. I will keep you informed." Said EDI.

If anyone has seen some of the concept art for ME3, you may already recognize a few bits. I still wanted certain changes to feel like the games, some I'm using old ideas that Bioware didn't.

Anyway, the next chapter will once again be up next Friday. This time, it will be Grissom Academy and after that it'll be From Ashes.

I've got quite a few big changes planned for the DLC, so I can see that one being rather interesting.

Should warn some Javik fans as well that he will be getting quite a few character changes. I didn't like his somewhat negative attitude (not all the time, but a lot of it) so I've done a few things to try and make him more interesting.

But more on that later. Until then, leave reviews. I always look forward to hearing what you have to say.
Chapter 5, A Legend is Born

Another successful chapter written in time. I'm getting good at this weekly thing.

This is mostly Grissom Academy, but I added a few extra bits to it. Also, the title refers to a later point in the chapter. Think you'll understand it from there...

Chapter 5

A Legend is Born

"Major, are you alright? I can only imagine what it was like down on Palaven." Samantha asked.

"I thought you'd be more concerned about Sarah than me." Austin joked.

"You're her brother. I'm allowed to be concerned about you too, aren't I?" Traynor replied.

"I know, Samantha. I was just joking." Austin smiled.

"Must say, EDI getting a body was a huge surprise. I'd have swooned if I wasn't already in love with Sarah. Still, if she'd told me about her plan to obtain a body, I'd have volunteered to help." Said Traynor.

"I do not wish to force a conflict of interests between our friendship and your duty." Said EDI over the comm.

"I'd have preferred a conflict of interest to a hard restart of half our systems… but thanks, regardless." Said Traynor.

Just as Austin was about to leave though, Traynor quickly stopped him.

"While you here, though, I found something while scanning channels. Grissom Academy is requesting help. The Reaper invasion front will hit them soon." She said.

"What can we do to help them? I believe I have some old friends who work there." Austin asked.

"A Turian evac transport responded to their distress call, so normally I'd say we don't need to do anything. But something sounded off in the Turian signal. I had EDI perform an analysis. It's fake." Said Samantha.

"Cerberus…" Austin growled.

"Yes. EDI said that too. She said it was similar to the one that lured you to a Collector Ship…?" Samantha inquired.

"Bit of a long story, but she's right." Austin nodded.

"In any event, whoever faked the signal wants us to think Grissom Academy's being evacuated. But I believe they're still in danger!" said Traynor.

"Good work, Samantha. Very good work." Said Austin.

"Thank you… Major." Said Traynor, just barely able to speak.
Words were hard to describe how flattered the comm specialist was. The brother of her dear lover had once again just complimented her on her work. She’d always thought it would be much harder than that to really get the approval and friendship of her lover's brother.

The Grissom Academy was within view through the Normandy's cockpit. Another ship was alongside it.

"And there's the folks who answered the distress call. Cerberus cruiser. At least a dozen fighters on blockade duty. Too many for us in a straight-up fight. They must want this place bad." Said Joker.

"Receiving incoming transmission." Said EDI.

"Normandy SR3, this is Kahlee Sanders, director of Grissom Academy. We need immediate assistance. Cerberus is attacking the facility. They're after the students." Said a female voice through the comm.

"This is Major Shepard. We're blocked on a direct approach." Said Austin.

"I know. They've taken control of our docking bays." Said Kahlee.

"Any alternatives?" Austin asked.

"There's an auxiliary cargo port I could probably open." Kahlee asked.

"All right. We'll come in by shuttle and get the students out of there." Said Austin. "Joker, can you give us a diversion?"

"Boy, can I!" Joker smiled.

Austin felt it best this time to bring along Dash and Jet for this one. The final member was EDI. Austin knew she wanted to test out her new body in combat and he saw no problem with it.

"Keep the shuttle in position! We'll be back!" said Austin.

"Major. I'm locked in a server room around the corner. Cerberus troops are trying to get in." said Kahlee through the comm.

"We can take 'em." Said Austin, reaching for his M-76.

Just before the Major could touch it however, a hand suddenly stopped him.

"Why waste the ammunition?" Jet asked. "I got this."

Since Austin still had yet to see fully what Alpha's newest member could do and what talents she had, so he decided to give Jet a chance. He nodded and allowed the Helldiver to simply walk towards the Cerberus troops standing outside the room and trying to hack in.

Jet gave a loud whistle that attracted their attention.

"Helldiver!"

To Jet's surprise, one of the troops threw a flash bang grenade at her, something she hadn't counted on.
The flash from the grenade blinded her, enabling the Cerberus troops to bind her from behind.

"How many more of you are there?!!" one of the troopers demanded.

"I'm not telling you anything." Jet replied back.

"Then I guess we'll have to do this the hard way." Said the trooper, taking out his stun stick while the one that was binding her, held her off the ground. Quite impressive considering how heavy Helldiver's were.

"I vote for the stay of execution." Said Jet.

Oil started squirting from out of a small tube on Jet, blinding the trooper standing in front of her, and making the other one slip wildly.

"My eyes!" one of them yelled.

Managing to break free, Jet instantly activated her flight thrusters. She hovered a mere few centimetres above the ground, just enough for the flames from her feet to touch the oil, causing it to ignite.

The Cerberus troops that were caught in the flames screamed in pain as the fire burnt through their armour and into their flesh. They were even more helpless when the oil caused them both to slip completely and fall into fire. Chances of surviving that were almost impossible.

"Natasha's tactic was rather intelligent." Said EDI observantly.

As the Cerberus troops were burnt to a crisp, only one was left. With his ammo clip empty, he resorted to pulling out the only weapon he had left, his stun stick.

Jet however seemed completely unfazed by this. She even chuckled.

"That is not going to help you at all, young man." She said, shaking her head.

"Yeah? And why the hell is that?!!" the trooper replied back.

Reaching behind her back, Jet pulled out a massive weapon. What had at first looked like a small backpack, unfolded into what looked like a massive hi tech club of some sorts.

"Because mine's bigger than yours." Said Jet, as end of her weapon hit the ground with a loud clang.

"Is that a war hammer?!" Dash asked in disbelief.

"Yeah, and a bloody big one at that." Said Austin, just as equally surprised that a Helldiver like Jet would wield a weapon like that.

"You don't scare me, Helldiver. Put that hammer down!" the Cerberus trooper demanded.

Before the trooper could react in time however, Jet suddenly swung the war hammer upwards. The swing caught the trooper, sending him flying to the floor.

"You want me to put me the hammer down? Wish granted!" said Jet.

Sure enough, Jet swung the hammer down, smashing right down on the troopers.

With all the troopers dead, the others joined Jet as she holstered her hammer, the weapon folding
itself back up and settling neatly into the gap between her large metal wings.

"Bit extreme, Jet." Said Austin. "But because it's Cerberus, I'll make an exception. They deserve it."

"Thanks, sir. And don't worry; I'm not a loose cannon with these things. Only when it's people like Cerberus do I show no restraint." Said Jet.

"Good to hear." Said Austin. "Sanders, we're clear. It's me."

The door opened. A woman in Alliance uniform with blonde hair was waiting for them. She had a shotgun in her hand. This of course was First Lieutenant Kahlee Sanders.

"Major, thank you. Anderson always said you were best. And with Cerberus coming for the students, I need the best." She said.

"How many of you are there?" Austin asked.

"Fewer than twenty. Most were sent home when word of the Reaper invasion spread." Said another voice.

With Kahlee, was another woman. This one however was a redhead, and not just any redhead. This was none other than former Yeoman of the Normandy, Kelly Chambers.

"Kelly?" said Austin in surprise.

"Hello, Shepard. It's been a long time." Kelly smiled. "I could just hug you."

To the Yeoman's surprise however, Austin walked up to her and gave her a hug, which she eventually returned.

"It's good to see you, too, Kelly." He said.

"I'd been so worried about you, all of you in fact." Said Kelly as the two eventually separated. "With a lot of comms down, I had no way of knowing if anyone had survived the invasion."

"If you're here, then that must mean Jack's here as well." Austin inquired.

"Yes. I believe she's with the students that volunteered to stay. She's helping them fight Cerberus off." Said Kahlee.

"Bet she's enjoying that." Dash chuckled.

"You mentioned Anderson…" Austin asked.

"Yes. We met—God, what's it been?—20 years ago, when he was a Spectre candidate. I was there when Saren betrayed him. David saved my life that day. He's a good man." Said Kahlee.

"He was on Earth when the Reapers hit. He stayed behind when we left."

"I hadn't heard… We've been cut off from most news. He's alive?"

"Alive and fighting. He's currently leading the resistance movement."

"Good. If we get out of here… Well, just tell him to stay alive."

"A few months knocking over practice dummies can't prepare your students for war."
"Agreed, but the Alliance needs every resource it can get, and our students are unique… resources. They wanted to help. How could we say no with the entire galaxy falling apart?" said Kahlee. "Hang on. I've been trying to get communications working."

"This is Froeberg! There are students trapped in Orion Hall! Cerberus has us boxed in. They're closing fast!"

"Damn it!" Kahlee cursed.

"Orion Hall?" Austin asked.

"Back out the door and down the hallway. I can get the door open." Said Kahlee.

"We'll bring them back here, and we'll make a run for the shuttle." Said Austin.

"Thank you, Major. Kelly and I will stay put. With luck, I can regain control of some of our systems." Said Kahlee.

"Good luck, Shepard. Seeing you makes everything right again." Kelly smiled.

The group dealt with a few small groups of Cerberus along the way as they focused on rescuing a few stranded students.

Eventually, they found the rest of the students. With them of course was a very face.

"Jack!"

"Shepard?"

Jack had really changed from the last time Austin had seen her.

The former convicts outfit had changed greatly. She now had bandages that covered up more of her skin from last time, a black jacket, and most noticeable of all, Jack had grown her hair out to the point that she now had a small pony tail.

This however was interrupted when something large started to force its way through the doorway that it was clearly too big for. It was an exosuit being piloted by a Cerberus trooper.

"I've just about had it with you bastards stealing our tech!" said Austin as he and the others went into cover.

"Everyone, get down! This thing's outta your league! Shepard, keep it off us!" said Jack, heading up to the balcony with the other students and throwing up a biotic shield to protect them.

The Atlas mech turned it's attention to them and started firing it's gun. Due to the heavy firepower this mech had, it was hard to get an opening without being exposed to the main gun, which was strong enough to rip through a Helldiver's armour.

"Jet, see if you can create a distraction. There's room enough for you to hover at least." Said Austin.

Jet nodded and activated her flight thrusters. As she gently hovered in the air, she unholstered her main weapon, a small rail gun. It only fired singularly, but each round was strong enough to pierce armour.

Sure enough, Jet hovering around the place, gained the Atlas Mech's attention and it tried to lock on.
Noticing this, Jet applied more boost so that she moved faster, causing the mech to keep turning in an effort to try and keep up with her.

Austin meanwhile snuck up and gently climbed up the mech until he reached the cockpit. Only too late did the pilot notice before Austin punched through the glass. Austin grabbed the trooper and threw him out for EDI to then stamp on his neck, breaking it.

"Dash, it's all yours." Said Austin as he hopped down.

"Cool!" Dash smiled as he climbed up and sat in the mech's pilot seat.

Just in time too, as more troopers entered the area, only for everyone to practically empty their guns right into them.

"Kahlee said she was putting out an SOS. I had now ide the King of the Boy Scouts would show up." Jack smiled, finally letting down her barrier now that the coast was clear.

"Always the element of surprise." Austin smiled.

"All right, amp check! Prangley, those fields were weak. Cerberus isn't gonna lie down out of pity like that girl you took to prom." Jack said to her students. "Grab juice and an energy bar. We move in five."

The convict then jumped back down from the balcony and walked up to Austin.

"You picked a fine time to arrive, Shepard." She said.

"Nice to see you too, Jack." Said Austin.

"Shepard… I haven't heard anything from Kelly…” said Jack with worry.

"Kelly's safe, Jack. She's with Kahlee." Austin quickly said, much to Kelly's relief.

"Good. Couldn't bear it if Cerberus took her." Jack sighed with relief.

"Nor could I. She was part of the crew as well." Austin agreed.

"Jack's personality seems to be partly changed." Said EDI.


"That sounds more like her." Dash nodded.

"Dash. See your mouth still hasn't got you killed yet." Said Jack.

"Still as charming as ever."

"Okay. Right now, all I care about is getting my guys out of here."

"Your guys?" Austin asked.

"Yeah. I guess so."

"That many in two years? You and Kelly have been busy." Dash joked.

Jack and Jet however didn't seem to share the Scout's sense of humour though.

"It's a joke. I do that." Said Dash defensively.

"I can't think of anybody who could care about them more." Said Austin.

"Rather surprised myself. The Students responded well to my teaching style." Said Jack.

"The psychotic biotic!" Pranglely laughed.

"I will destroy you!" Rodriguez joined in.

"Drink your juice, Rodriguez. You couldn't destroy wet tissue paper." Said Jack.

At this however, Dash and Jet now found it very hard to contain heir laughter.

"Now that one **is** funny." Jet chuckled.

"For god's sake!" Jack moaned, rolling her eyes.

"Sorry, Jack. Jet's still a bit new to all this. She'll have to get used to Dash's odd sense of humour." Austin apologised.

"She'd better." Said Jack.

*Cortez to extraction team. The Cerberus cruiser is coming back.* Said Cortez through the comm.

"How long have we got?" Austin asked.

*Two minutes, tops, Major. After that, there's no way we'll get past them."* Cortez replied.

"Get out of here and back to the Normandy. We'll find another way off the station."

*Roger that. Good luck, sir.*

"Shepard to Sanders. The students are safe, but the shuttle's a no go." Austin said into his communicator.

*Understood. I might know another way off the station, but I need station wide camera access. Can you disable the Cerberus security override? It's routed through Orion hall, so it should be nearby.* Kahlee replied.

Finding the override was easy since they had EDI with them. It was a small computer just a few feet away from where they were.

"Sanders, you should have access now." Said Austin.

*Got it. The fastest way is through the Atrium, but Cerberus has sealed the doors. You'll need to disable the magnetic locks. The overrides should be directly above the door.* Kahlee replied.

"Everyone be ready. We'll go in first and draw their fire." Said Austin as he and the others readied to move out.

"We'll shadow you from the second level and hit those fu… those guys from above." Said Jack.

*Did she just try not to swear?*" Jet whispered to Dash.
"Yes, I think she did." Dash whispered back.

"Time your shots and stay safe."

"All right. I didn't bust my ass training you so you could die now. Keep low, pick your targets." Said Jack.

Despite the circumstances, the Atrium looked quite nice. It also worked especially well for Jet since she now had even more space to fly around in.

On the ground, EDI was also putting her new body to good use. As expected, she had tech skills. This came in handy for taking down the shields of the Cerberus Centurions.

Dash even seemed to be able to use the Atrium to his advantage. His recent new speed boost was definitely giving them an edge.

All the while, Jack and her students were keeping them covered from the high ground, which gave them even more of an advantage.

"Combat efficiency is good I assume?" Austin asked, firing a plasma blast as he went into cover next to EDI.

"I might consider having Dell give this body some upgrades. Some of its technology is outdated compared to Helldiver tech." EDI replied.

"Now you tell us…” Austin muttered.

As the last trooper was shot down, Austin heard Kahlee's voice through the comm.

"Major, I've reached the Cerberus shuttles without being detected. They know what they're doing though. You need to hurry."

Heading out of the Atrium, the group could see three more students encased in some kind of shield. Two Cerberus soldiers were trying to persuade them to deactivate it, with little success.

"That's an impressive barrier, Octavia. Our file says you've been working on shield technology." Said one of the troopers.

"Jet, I assume you know what to do?" Austin offered.

"With pleasure." Jet nodded.

The Helldiver activated her cloak and slowly snuck up on the two troops. Quietly unsheathing her war hammer, she waited until she was close enough before she then swung. The war hammer hit the first soldier right in the hand, sending him flying into the other and causing them both to topple to the floor. Jet then once again brought the weapon right down, smashing both the troopers, as her cloak deactivated.

"I don't know who you are, but stay back." Octavia warned, rather surprised at seeing another person just appear out of nowhere.

"I'm Major Shepard with the Helldivers. We're here to help." Said Austin, joining Jet.

"I didn't buy it from the last guy, and I've got no reason to buy it now." Said Octavia.
"The Square root of 906.01 equals…"
Austin recognized that instantly. Cerberus' Project Overlord himself…

"30.1." Austin finished.

"Hello, Major Shepard." Said David.

"David, you know him?" the other student asked.

"Yes. He rescued me from Nazara and Cerberus. Sent me here. He made it quiet." David replied.
This seemed to be all the proof Octavia needed and she deactivated the shield.

"You did a great job keeping yourselves safe. The biotic students are up here. Stay close. They'll get you out of here." Said Austin.

"Okay. Uh, thanks." Said Octavia.

She and the student left, leaving just David.

"He looks much healthier." Said EDI.


"No apology is necessary." Said EDI.

"Has Grissom academy been all right?" Austin asked.

"Yes. I've been counting." David replied.

"Anything in particular?"

"The number of days you lengthened my life."

The final part had the last of Cerberus. Fortunately, a welcome hope had been left right at the entrance.

"They just left it empty. Really, you think they would've learned by now." Said Dash, climbing into the Atlas mech.

"Jet keep us covered from the high ground, and feel free to show no restraint." Said Austin.

"With pleasure sir." SAID Jet, gently hovering up into the air while Dash walked up the steps in the mech followed by him and EDI.

"There's the shuttle. Head over two by two. Prangley, Rodriguez, stay close." SAID Jack, providing cover with biotics and a biotic barrier while the other students made for the shuttle.

The whole place erupted into gunfire, Jet covering them form the air, Dash laying waste to them with the Atlas, and Austin and EDI picking up any stragglers.

"Hostiles up top!" Austin yelled, noticing several more troopers on the upper levels.

"I'm on 'em!" said Jet, increasing her altitude slightly. The troopers hadn't counted on a Helldiver that could fly, and so where rather surprised to see her.
"Oh crap."

"How 'bout a little fire, scarecrow?" Jet asked, instantly letting both her flamethrowers loose.

Judging by the screams of agony, Austin guessed Jet did indeed have the high ground taken care of. As he went into cover again however, he saw another Atlas Mech heading their way.

"Dash, watch your six!" he yelled.

Dash instantly turned and swung his Atlas' main arm, punching the other hard enough to topple it over.

Austin quickly jumped on top of the Atlas before it could get up, smashed the glass open with his foot and threw a grenade in.

"Okay we're clear. Move your assess before backup arrives!" Jack shouted as the Atlas exploded from the inside.

"You heard Jack! Move out!"

"Kahlee, how's it coming?" Austin asked.

"Shuttles are unlocked." Kahlee replied.

All the students quickly got into the shuttle as it opened up.

"Take the controls and get the students aboard." Said Austin.

"Wait, where the hell's Rodriguez?!" Jack asked.

Through the large sheet of glass, they could see Rodriguez fleeing from more Cerberus troopers. She was only just able to slide back into cover behind some nearby chairs.

"Ruddy, bloody hell!" Austin groaned, trying to smash the glass. "She needs covering fire!"

"She needs more than that!" said Jack.

The convict pushed Austin out of the way and threw a massive shockwave that not only shattered the glass, but also knocked down every trooper.

Wasting now time, Austin hurried over and helped Rodriguez up and into the shuttle followed closely by Jack.

"Joker, we flew out on a Cerberus shuttle. Watch your fire. We'll destroy it when we're finished." He said.

"Right, I've got you on sensors. Should just be a minute." Joker replied.

"Thank you, Major. We'd have never gotten off that station if you hadn't come." Said Kahlee, gratefully.

"Screw you, ma'am!" Rodriguez laughed.

"Ma'am, how many tattoos do you have, anyway?" Prangley asked.

"Hell if I know, Prangley." Jack replied.

"Well she was gonna burn off the Yeoman she got on her ass…" said Kelly, slyly. "…but I think she wants to hang on to it for a while."

"Shut up and kiss me, Kelly!"

Jack instantly pulled Kelly into a long passionate kiss, much to the delight to the students and even Austin. He was happy for the both of them.

"I can't believe we got them out alive." Said Kelly, once Jack had finally stopped kissing her.

"I was going to suggest that they stick to support roles. But perhaps they're ready, after all." Said Kahlee.

Jack cast Austin a look at this. Austin knew Jack enough to know what that look meant.

"They're definitely ready… but we need them in a support role." Said Austin.

"What?! We trained for artillery strikes!" Prangley argued.

"We don't need another artillery unit. We need stronger barriers for our front-line squads." Said Austin.

"This is bullshit!" Rodriguez shouted.

"Hey, if that's where they need us, that's where we go! Besides, I'm sure we'll get some shots in." said Jack.

"Major, we've got a visual on you now. Preparing to dock." Said Joker. "Hey, Jack, now that you're military, you gonna wear a uniform? Or are you just getting the officer's bars tattooed on?"

"Screw you, f… flight lieutenant." Said Jack, once again apparently stopping herself from swearing.

"Uh… what the hell was that?"

"Jack promised to watch her language to maintain the necessary professionalism from our teachers." Kelly chuckled.

"What, does she have a swear jar or something? Cause I bet if we emptied that thing, we could afford another cruiser." Joker laughed.

"Cover your ears, kids." Said Jack. "Hey, Joker, f-

This time, it wasn't Admiral Hackett addressing Austin in the comm room, it was none other than Anderson himself.

"Shepard. Damned, if you aren't a sight for sore eyes." The Admiral smiled.

"Good to see you too, Admiral." Said Austin.

"There's no need to be so formal on me." Said Anderson.
"Force of habit I'm afraid." Said Austin.

"Have it your way. Looks like you didn't waste any time getting to work. I can only imagine what would've happened to those kids if they'd fallen into Cerberus hands." Said Anderson.

"They're definitely eager to help." Said Austin.

"These students are some of the best humanity has to offer… and we're throwing them into battle. Goddamn it. I hate this war. Hackett didn't mention in his report…"

"Kahlee Sanders is safe by the way. She's with the recruits."

"Thanks, Shepard. When I heard about the attack... Well, I've already lost a lot of friends."

"She asked me to tell you to stay alive."

"Did she now? Well."

"Thanks, Shepard. That might be the first good news I've heard this week. Anderson out."

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Traynor was still at work station, having been monitoring the comms throughout the mission. She then felt a presence behind her.

"I just got word, Major. Everyone for Grissom Academy has arrived safely." She said.

"He wouldn't have known about them you hadn't caught the distress signal, darling." Said an unexpected voice.

Before Samantha could turn around, she felt a female figure brush against her back and a pair of arms wrap around her.

"Oh. Sorry, I thought you were your brother." Said Traynor embarisingly.

"You did great. You allowed Austin to save many lives. I'd say that's earned you a kiss." Said Sarah.

"Sarah, not in front of everyone else…" Traynor whispered.

"Let them look."

Before Samantha could even object, Sarah pulled her into a long and very amazing kiss, one that almost sucked all the breath out of her.

Traynor quickly made a mental note in her head to thank Sarah greatly for this later.

---

An email had reached Austin that Ashley was recovering and that she had just recently regained her consciousness at long last. Her email also said that she'd been offered the chance to be a Spectre. Hardly unexpected though given the many things Ashley had done.

Just as Austin had walked up to the galaxy map, Traynor had even told him that he had recovered a message from Miranda, so he had decided to see her first before visiting Ashley.

He found her near the docking on the Citadel.

"Shepard. It's been too long." Said Miranda. "We live in interesting times."
"A little too interesting." Said Austin, shaking hands with Miranda.

"It's not been the same since I got reassigned from the Normandy. I'm hoping though the Arkanes might decide to let me come back aboard. That is if you want me back." Said Miranda, slightly hesitant.

"Why wouldn't I? Thought I made it clear you'd earned my trust. You made it clear that you'd let go of Cerberus completely, case closed." Said Austin.

"I just wasn't sure if you still felt that way, especially since Cerberus have done all these terrible things recently." Said Miranda.

"Doesn't matter now."

"Shepard, about all of this…"

"I'm all right, trust me. We'll find some way to destroy the Reapers."

"Everybody has a weakness. Even the Reapers."

"What about you? What brings you here if you're still meant to be on duty?" Austin asked.

"I am…" Miranda said hesitantly. "Shepard, promise you won't tell anyone. Technically, I'm not meant to be here at all."

"What's going on?" Austin asked.

"I haven't heard from Oriana for a while. I'm getting worried." Miranda explained. "I've consulted the Arkanes many times, but they're still not able to tell me anything and they promise they're not withholding anything. I don't want to overreact but… well, there's a lot going on. I just know my father's involved."

"Do you need my help at all?" Austin asked.

"I appreciate the offer, Shepard—but you have your hands full." Said Miranda gratefully. "If I need a door or two kicked down, I know just who to call. But for now, I'll be fine."

"Okay. I understand." Said Austin. "Stay in contact."

"I'll try."

The hospital was busy as usual, but some of the patients did look as though they'd been able to recover well thanks to the supplies he'd bought for them.

As the Helldiver walked into Ashley's room, he found a somewhat unwelcome person with her.

"I'd like an answer, Lieutenant Commander. The galaxy has need of exceptional soldiers like you, now more than ever." Said Udina.

"I still need time. You'll have my answer soon, I promise." Said Ashley.

"I'll look forward to it." Said Udina as he left.

Griffin had also been notified that Ashley was conscious now and he'd arrived shortly after.
"Hey, Ash." He smiled.

"Hey, Griff. Still as handsome as ever." Ashley smiled back as she and Griffin kissed.

"You don't look so bad yourself." Said Griffin.

"See you brought Austin as well." Ashley.

"I got you email. Made your decision yet?" Austin asked.

"About becoming a Spectre? Not yet. It's an honour and all… but… I don't know. I need to think about it some more." Ashley.

"At least you get a choice. They forced the position on me." Said Austin, sitting down on a nearby chair.

"Yeah. I heard that you outright refused to be reinstated again recently. That's twice now. I can't imagine that Council is happy about losing a good operative." Said Ashley.

"I didn't need it and it was just holding me back. Was an easy decision for me."

"Here, I picked this up for you. Figured you had some down-time." Said Griffin, giving Ashley some flowers and chocolate.

"Thanks, that's sweet. I've been climbing the walls." Ashley smiled.

"How are you doing?" Austin asked.

"Good, considering." Ashley replied. "The nurse said you and Griffin checked in on me earlier. Still out cold, I guess."

"We didn't have time to talk. I thought maybe if you were up for it…"

"You're always such a good friend." Ashley smiled happily. She made sure to acknowledge Griffin as well. "Don't worry, Griff. I'm not forgetting about you. The nurse told me you spent nearly a whole day by my side, most of it in prayer."

"Looks like those prayers got answered too." Griffin smiled, lovingly stroking Ashley's ahir.

"I should probably give you two some space. Let me know if you need anything at all, Ash." Said Austin, gently getting up.

"Wait. There's one more thing. I wasn't sure if I should mention it." Ashley quickly said.

"What is it?"

"I have family back on Earth. I haven't heard from them. It's making me crazy. But I know you're busy, old friend. We can talk about it later if you like."

"I've got time, Ash. Speak and I'll listen." Said Austin. "Who's back on Earth?"

"Mom, plus my three sisters. Sarah was away on her honeymoon. You remember Thomas obviously?"

"I couldn't forget. You almost begged me to attend the wedding."
"Yeah. Anyway, he got called in and she was stuck alone. She called me. It's been pretty tough."

"I imagine."

"I was always there to protect them growing up. Even when I was off on tour, they knew they could talk to me." Said Ashley. "I told her to come to the Citadel. We could wait for news together."

"If it helps, I can a squad to investigate."

"You can do that?"

"Course I can. I'm a Major, and one of the best at that."

"I appreciate that, Austin. Thank you."

"I should get back to work." Said Austin. "Griffin, same as usual."

"Got it. I'll be ready to go when you need me." Griffin nodded, sitting down in the same chair that Austin had been in originally, still holding Ashley's hand.

"Take care of yourself, Ash." Said Austin.

"You too, old friend." Said Ashley.

Even though it was still far from sleeping hours, Austin was feeling a little tired and felt it best to simply take a nap. Before he could however, he noticed his private terminal had received a new message from Xun saying that she and Liar has something to show him when he had time.

Since now was as good a time as any, Austin decided to call them up now.

"Xun, Liara tells me you and she have been working on something you wanted to show me?" he said.

"Yes. I'll be right up. I'll bring Liara as well." Xun replied.

A few seconds later, Xun arrived with a small device in her arms.

"Come on in."

"Thank you. May we sit?" Xun asked as she and Liara entered.

Liara gave her husband a kiss as they both sat down. Xun put the device on the table and started accessing it.

"Xun and I have been thinking about the knowledge we've gathered on the Reapers, and how easily it could be lost again." said Liara.

"So, we put a plan in motion to preserve things for the future." Said Xun.

"We're not gonna lose this war. I won't let that happen." Said Austin, supportingly.

"I know you won't. But still, it couldn't hurt to at least prepare for the worst." Said Liara, holding Austin's hand.

"It's as you have so often said, my friend. "Better safe than sorry." Said Xun.
"When you put it that way, I agree." Said Austin. "Hmm, what's this?"

A small beam of some kind started projecting out of the device.

"A record of the galaxy. Information on the Reapers, Relays, different cultures, and blueprints of the crucible." Said Xun as various different images where projected out of the device.

"But there's one entry we wanted your opinion on." Said Liara.

"Which one?" Austin asked.

"Your own." Said Liara, as a hologram of Austin himself was projected out of the device. "Xun and I would be honoured to have your input."

"How would you like history to remember you?" Xun asked.

"50,000 years is a long time for a computer to sit around." Said Austin.

"Please. I'm still an archaeologist. Xun and I know what we're doing." Liara chuckled.

"We're encasing these records in time capsules and seeding copies on multiple planets. And while it's not fool proof, the VI I'm installing has every translation and linguistics program we know of." Xun explained.

"So it's like Vigil in a way." Said Austin.

"Yes. We've been preparing it for some time." Said Xun.

"And it will be a privilege to guide the future discoverers of these records." Said Glyph, suddenly flying out the device and hovering around a bit. "Have you decided what you would like Professor T'soni and Mistress Xun to write in your entry, Major?"

"You know me better than anyone to fill in the blanks, darling." Said Austin, giving Liara a gentle pat on the back.

"Are you sure?" Liar asked.

"Of course I am." Austin replied. "I'd like it to be your call, my love."

"Alright. Let's begin with the fact that the Helldiver's most famous officer was born and raised in space. My husband could handle any weapon in the galaxy. The Arkanes never saw a finer soldier." Liara narrated. "He was a warrior and a leader, one who made peace where he could. And I love him with all my heart."

"Careful this doesn't sound like a diary." Austin smiled.

"I can't help myself." Liara chuckled, snuggling into her bond mate's shoulder as he put his arm around her.

"It always warms my heart to see a couple like you two." Xun smiled. "You're both good friends."

"You've been there for us too, Xun." Said Austin.

"No I haven't. I wish now that I could've joined you back on Ilium." Xun sighed, sitting down on the opposite side of Austin.
"You made up for it." Said Austin.

"Well, I suppose you wife and I did just write your name in the stars." Said Xun.

"Not to mention that we've also made sure that years from now, you'll be known as a legend. Hopefully even the slayer of the Reapers." Said Liara.

"Wouldn't mind that title myself. Just another reason to win this war." Austin smiled.

"I love you, Austin."

"Love you, Liara."

The two were about to kiss, but they remembered that Xun was sitting right next to them. The Chinese Helldiver however just smiled.

"Bù jièyì wǒ." She said, which translated into English as "Don't mind me."

From Ashes is next up...

Got a few interesting changes planned for that one. As I've probably said before, Javik will have quite a few changes.

Until next time...
This was rather fun to do due to the changes I made.

Not much more I can say really...

By the way, a review asked when I'd bring Urz back. Wait no longer, my friend. Also, he will be used on Tuchanka missions. It's his home too after all.

Chapter 6

The Last Prothean

Austin hadn't ventured into the cargo hold for a while, so he decided to do that. As soon as he stepped out of the elevator, he was greeted his pet Varren, Urz.

Urz had once been a former pit fighting champion on Tuchanka before his master got exiled and he was retired, despite his still very young age.

During his mission against the Collectors, Austin had visited Tuchanka and had met the Varren while trading.

Somehow, the Varren had taken a liking to him. Even more so when Austin had given him some Pyjak meat, something Varren were known to love.

Seeing how well Urz seemed to get along with him, the Varren's current owner had asked if Austin would be interested and taking over ownership of him. The Helldiver of course had accepted and Urz had proven himself more than capable in battle.

"Good boy." Austin smiled, patting Urz on the head, much to his approval. "Stay."

Urz obeyed and lay down near his little door.

The SR3 had been built with a special tunnel system allowing Urz to travel around the Normandy without the use of the elevator. It was the use of that, that allowed Urz to often roam freely around the ship before he then retired to his built in kennel in Austin's quarters to sleep. The new freedom made the Varren even happier than he had been in the SR2.

As sat back down for a little nap, Austin went over to James who was doing pullups on one of the bars.

"Hey, Major." He said. "You down here for a reason?"

"Just came down here to talk." Said Austin.

"Great." James grunted in-between pulls. "Not sure what there is to talk about though. Your Helldiver, I'm Alliance. We don't have much in common. Besides, you know my service record."

"I don't actually." Said Austin.

"Well-" said James, dropping down. "Think you can dance and talk at the same time?"
"I think I can handle it." Austin replied, accepting James challenge.

"Okay, Loco. Let's dance."

"Don't push you luck, Vega. With age comes wisdom." Said Austin as the two started sparring with one another. Austin usually fought better in his armour, but he still had his advanced training.

"You sound like my old CO." said James.

"Oh really? And who was that?"

"Captain Tony. He was a hard ass son of a bitch."

"What do you mean was?"

"Died, with most of my squad. Protecting a civilian colony from a Collector attack."

"And the colony?"

"It was either them, or the intel we had on the Collectors. Intel we could've used to destroy them. I chose the intel."

James swung a bit too hard of a punch at Austin, but the Helldiver managed to back away and avoid it.

"Sorry. That's a tough call." He panted.

"The best part was, we didn't really need the intel in the end. Because you were out saving the galaxy by taking down the entire Collector homeworld."

"You didn't know. You can't blame yourself."

"Who says I'm blaming myself."

"Just a guess."

"You're a shrink too?"

"No. But that stunt back on Mars was reckless. You're lucky to be alive."

"So?"

"So... maybe you don't care whether you live or die."

"Or maybe... I'm just willing to do whatever that fuck it takes to win this goddamn war!"

Austin could tell James was getting a bit too aggressive for this, so he decided to end it there. He dodged under another swing, grabbed the Lieutenant's arm and tackled him to the floor.

"Maybe you are." He said. "But if you're half as good as you think you are, we need you alive."

"Thanks for the pep talk." Said James as Austin helped him up. "And thanks for the dance, Loco."

"Loco?" Austin asked.

"I can think of worse names to call you." Said James.
"I guess there's no harm in it." Said Austin, friendlily.

As James went back to his own work, Austin noticed his omni tool bleeping again. That could only mean he'd received another message.

*From: Helldiver Command*

*Major,*

_Cerberus has attacked Eden Prime and is now occupying the colony. Alliance forces are stretched too thin right now to attempt to liberate the colony, but we're doing what we can to covertly aid the local resistance._

_In the process, we've learned that Cerberus has uncovered a major Prothean artifact. We don't know what it is, but it appears to be the reason for the attack on the colony. We need you to infiltrate the colony and recover the artefact._

"Eden Prime." Said Liara. "This is where it all began. Where the Prothean beacon gave you the vision that warned us about the Reapers."

As expected, when the Asari had learned about this, she'd practically begged Austin to take her with him. Austin had barely got the chance to speak before she'd thrown him onto the bed and made love to him.

If only she knew that he'd planned to take her anyway… Then she probably wouldn't need to make so much effort.

Not that Austin minded Liara being like this however. He treasured love making with his wife just as much as she did.

"Eden Prime also marks Saren's first major attack with the Terror Geth and his army." Said EDI.

Austin had brought EDI along again because he felt she should also see how she performed planetside as well. Grissom academy had been in space, so she probably still needed to test a few things.

Coincidently enough, EDI had said the same thing when she'd asked to come as well.

"Yes. And now with Cerberus here, Eden Prime's colonists are under attack again." Said Liara.

"At least this time, you'll be able to help with whatever we find." Austin smiled.

"I'll do my best." Liara smiled back.

"Do you have any idea what Cerberus found?"

"The Helldivers didn't get any specifics about what Cerberus has uncovered. But whatever it is, it's better off with us than with those terrorists."

"I'm bringing you in as close to the dig site as I can. No way we'll avoid detection, but you should have a few minutes. Said Cortez.

"All right everyone. Get ready to move." Said Austin as everyone unsheathed their weapons.

"With luck, we can get to the dig site before Cerberus knows we're here." Said Liara.
The colony seemed very quiet, just like last time.

It felt very familiar to how it had five ears ago, and yet it felt different as well. Probably because Eden Prime wasn't in as much mess as it had been last time. The Terror Geth and his armies, along with the Thresher Maw husk had practically laid waste to it.

Cerberus wasn't quite as… destructive.

"Professor T'soni, have you ever encountered dinosaur fossils during your digs?" EDI asked as they saw a massive Prothean spire overhead.

"NP. Dinosaurs and other fossils would palaeontology. I'm an archaeologist. I study artefacts left by sapient races. The two fields are completely different, and… you were joking." Liara chuckled.

"No. Jokes have specific structures. That was "messing with you." Said EDI.

So far, there was no sign of Cerberus so Liar went to work on accessing the information about the artefact uncovered. What she saw took her completely by surprise.

"Goddess… that doesn't seem possible." It's not a Prothean artefact, it's… a Prothean." She said.

"You believe Cerberus has uncovered the corpse of a Prothean unmodified by Reaper technology?" EDI asked.

"Cerberus hasn't recovered corpses. This Prothean is still alive." Said Liara.

"You're right. That doesn't sound possible." Said Austin.

"You saw Prothean stasis chambers in the archives on Ilos. The only reason those failed was lack of power. This one on the other hand seems to have its own power supply which is still working. This Prothean has been in stasis for the past 50,000 years, waiting for us. Think of what we could learn." Said Liara, accessing as much data as she could about this Prothean that Cerberus had found.

"What can you tell me about the Protheans? The people, not the technology." Austin asked.

"Given your experience with the Prothean cipher, you probably know as much about them as I do. The Prothean empire spanned the known galaxy. They uplifted countless other species to help them join the galactic community." Said Liara.

"By galactic community," are you suggesting that Protheans had a structure similar to the modern Council?" EDI asked.

"Yes, exactly. Their cultural and artistic expression are actually quite close to those of the ancient Asari. And given their similar interest in helping other species, it's clear that they believed in inter-species cooperation." Said Liara.

"Sounds like he'd approve of us then." Said Austin telepathically.

"Save that for later tonight, my love." Liara replied back, smiling under her helmet.

"The way you describe them, they sound lot like the Asari. The only difference being your much prettier." Said Austin. Also sending a thought to Liara that he was winking at her under his helmet.

"Darling, please. Don't embarrass me in front of EDI." Said Liara, nearly blushing. "Anyway, I'm certain I'm colouring their culture with my own perceptions. Whatever the Protheans were, finding one alive represents an incredible opportunity."
"Good thing we bought our Prothean expert." Said Austin.

"I hope I can help." Said Liara. "If this Prothean was sent into stasis, he could be the foremost scientist of his time."

The Asari examined the info a bit more before she found something that seemed to take the shine off the moment.

"Ah. It would seem there is a problem." She said. "The pod has an extensive safety system to prevent forced entry. Simply breaking open the pod will kill the inhabitant or it will engage a lockdown mode similar to our armour. We have to find the command signal that ends the stasis mode. We also need to figure out how to physically open the pod without doing damage. Cerberus are trying to do the same thing. They took over the labs nearby to research whatever was found at the dig site. That's likely our best bet."

A Cerberus shuttle suddenly zoomed over their heads.

"There they are!" said Liara.

"Liara, deploy a singularity!" Austin ordered, unsheathing his Revenant and going into cover. "EDI concentrate on the engineers!"

Both the two complied. Liara threw up a singularity, catching some of the Cerberus troops and Centurions in the process, allowing her and Austin to gun them down while EDI focused her fire on the engineers before they could build any turrets. EDI was even able to use her new decoy ability, allowing a hologram of herself to be projected and draw most of Cerberus' fire while she delivered some surprise attacks.

A shot suddenly hit Austin in the helmet. A shot that usually came from…

"Watch it! Snipers!" he yelled, now spotting several Nemesis' hiding in some of the homes.

Liara was able to put one in stasis when it popped out to fire at them, allowing EDI to dire on it. The Asari then deployed another singularity which pulled the rest out of their hiding places.

"Fire in the hole!" Austin yelled, throwing a grenade.

"Wait! Don't throw it at…" but Liara spoke too late.

The grenade exploded as it hit the singularity, making the explosion even larger and sending everyone flying.

Austin gently picked himself up as his vision cleared.

"Huh. That's never happened before." He said, helping Liara up.

"Did try to warn you." Said the Asari.

Austin made sure EDI was okay before he then checked his grenades.

"Dammit, Griffin! Stop messing with my grenades!" he said, noticing that his had been modified.

With Cerberus dealt with, finding one of the labs was easy. Austin walked up to the console and accessed it. To his surprise, an image very similar to the visions he'd received from the Prothean beacon on this exact same planet.
The vision showed what looked like Ilos in its glory years. Most noticeable of all were the Protheans themselves.

Most of the Protheans were dressed in a red sort of armour which oddly enough looked very Samurai like. One however stood out form the rest. His armour was white and he even had a few cloak parts hanging around his legs which clearly gave the appearance of a lab coat. He also had a headdress of some kind.

The others were obviously soldier while this one was a scientist.

"I never thought our empire would fall." Said one of them.

"It won't, soldier. We will sleep here until the Reapers return to dark space. Then we will rebuild, and this time we will be prepared for their return." Said the white Prothean.

"For the empire." Said the red one.

"Get to your stasis pod." Said the scientist. "Vigil, broadcast the stasis readiness signal to all lifepods."

The green hologram of a Prothean the appeared speaking in the same voice that Vigil had before it had shut down. Hardly surprising that this was Vigil's true appearance since it had been a Prothean VI and it's distorted appearance when Austin had met it was a result of old age and critical power levels.

"And the refugees who have yet to reach the bunker?" it asked.

"Their sacrifice will be honoured in the coming empire." Said the Prothean.

There was a sudden explosion and what looked like several Collectors started running at them. Several of the Prothean soldiers drew their weapons. Even the scientist did the same.

"Well, I've got the signal." Said Austin.

"You understood that?" Liara asked.

"You didn't?"

"No. All I saw was static. Cerberus was trying to make sense of it… without success." Said Liara.

"Must be because of the Cypher I received on Feros." Said Austin. "Anyway, I saw the signal they used."

"Perfect. Then we just need to figure out how to physically open the pod." Said Liara.

That of course simply required finding the other lab, which was very easy since they had dealt with most of Cerberus and any others had died from the unexpected singularity explosion.

Once again, another vision flashed before Austin's eyes.

The Protheans were holding steady against the Collectors, but they were starting to take heavy casualties. The scientist was fighting with all his might with both biotics and his gun before another soldier was hit.
"Vigil, seal the bulkheads!" he yelled.

"Acknowledged." Said Vigil as the Prothean pulled a red soldier inside and the bulkheads sealed.

"Is everyone alright?" he asked.

"No significant injuries." One of the soldiers replied.

"How many have we lost?"

"Reaper forces have destroyed approximately 300,000 lifepods." Vigil replied.

The scientist walked up to a nearby pod and accessed it. It opened to show a dead Prothean.

"A third of our people." He sighed. "If only I'd had more time to work on these pods... make them stronger..."


"All forces to the north. Buy me as much time as you can while I secure the other pods!" said the Prothean.

"We'll do our best, Professor." One of the soldiers nodded.

"You understood that one too?" Liara asked.

"Yes." Austin replied.

"Excellent, then we have everything we need to open the pod."

Liara worked on accessing the terminal, only to find something rather unexpected.

"Wait. I've had it wrong. The pod isn't here." She said.

"What do you mean?"

"When I read the report, I assumed the pod had been discovered here. But I was wrong, it's on Ilos." Liara explained.

"You're sure?" Austin asked.

"Absolutely."

"So Cerberus is on Ilos as well?"

"Fortunately no. They found out about the pod's location through some Prothean data found here. They've been unwilling to send troops to Ilos until they got past the pod's safety mechanisms. For now, the pod is safe there." Liara explained.

"Guess we know our next stop then."

Despite the war going on, it was still fairly easy to get to Ilos. Surprisingly the Geth corpses from their last visit five years ago were still here. Not to mention tire tracks form the Mako and Helldiver army...

It certainly brought back quite a few old memories.
"Didn't think I'd ever see this place again." Said Liara, looking out of the windows of the Hammer head.

Since the Mako had been a casualty of the SR1's destruction, the M-44 Hammerhead served as it's replacement. It would certainly allow them to find the Prothean easier than having to search on foot.

"Didn't you ever come back here?" Austin asked, gently piloting the vehicle through the archives.

"I couldn't after you died. I was too focused on retrieving your body and on my Helldiver training after that. At least you're with me again for this." Said Liara, her mood brightening slightly

"Wouldn't have it any other way, love." Austin smiled.

From the visions Austin had received and the intel Liara had got from the terminal on Eden Prime, it didn't take too long to find the bunker that was supposed to contain the pod.

Disembarking, the group found themselves in a room of some kind. There was a large platform in with a console and a chair attached. Some very old bits of debris were scattered about the place.

"Is it in here?" Austin asked.

"It's supposed to be, but I don't see anything pod like. Said Liara.

Everyone looked around, but still they saw nothing pod shaped. Will EDI and Liara continued looking, Austin took a closer look at the console. Strangely enough, it still looked as though it could function, despite probably being over 50,000 years old.

Austin couldn't help but find the buttons a bit curious. He reached forward and pressed one.

"Don't touch anything!" Liara warned, but she'd said it too late.

There was a faint hum and the chair in the room slid back.

"Sorry." Austin apologised.

As Austin worked on examining the chair a bit, he failed to notice the holograms now being projected in the room.

"Shepard." Said EDI.

Everyone looked. The holograms were that of 3 Prothean scientists, one of which was the one Austin had seen in the visions. One of the other two suddenly walked right past Austin and sat in the chair as it then readjusted back into position. This was obviously a recording of some kind.

"Remarkable." Said Liara, almost in awe at the sight.

The Prothean in the visions meanwhile was stood on top of the structure addressing the one in the seat. It was clear compared to the others now that this one was obviously the head scientist.

He then gave an order to the one in the chair who obeyed by activated something. There was a bright flash and a massive blue star map was suddenly projected all over the room.

"Goddess! This is just like our galaxy map." Said Liara.

"Yeah, only way bigger." Said Austin.
Both he and Liara walked into the middle of the map and gazed in wonder at it as they found
themselves essentially in the middle of it. It was an incredible sight.

The recording went on for a long while as the map cycled through every single star cluster while the
3 Protheans went about their science work before it finally ended. There was another bright flash,
and all the holograms vanished. The only thing left was a small hologram of some kind of pod
structure floating in front of the chair.

"Still doesn't' tell us where the pod is." Liara sighed.

Austin however wasn't so sure. That hologram of that pod…

A thought crossed the Helldiver's mind and he changed his visor's vision mode. Sure enough, it
showed a massive mechanical structure right under the feet, inside of which was a life form.

"Yes it does. It's underneath us."

EDI then walked up to the panel and began accessing the controls again.

"EDI, what are you doing?" Austin asked cautiously.

"I think I can get the pod up." EDI replied.

A large part of the floor suddenly retracted and sure enough, the massive structure gently rose up. It
was indeed a pod, but it was different to the ones Austin had seen in the vision. It was larger and
looked a bit more experimental. As expected, a loud but gentle heartbeat could be heard from within.

"Well, here goes nothing." Said Austin, applying the signal and activating the pod.

"Are we sure about this though? I know it's a bit late to reconsider, but suppose he doesn't
understand our language?" Liar asked concernedly.

"I will be able to communicate with him." Said EDI.

"What? How?" Liara asked.

"I was able to study that recording enough to hear their language. I may at least be able to speak
basic to him." Said EDI.

The pod hissed and then very gently slid open.

There in the pod was a real life prothean. He wore some kind of breathing mask over his nose and
mouth and several tubes were connected not only to the mask, but also to sockets on his body.

"Goddess!" Liara gasped.

The Protheans eyes then gently opened and blinked a few times as they readjusted to their
environment. He then reached for the edges of the pod and gently pulled himself up a bit, the tubes
on his mask dethatching and falling off as he did.

"Shepard?" EDI asked.

"Give him a minute. Let him adjust first." Said Austin.

The Prothean gently removed his mask and coughed slightly, his throat obviously a bit dry from the
constant air.
Austin then nodded. EDI gently walked up to the Prothean and began speaking in his language. Since Austin had the cypher, he understood it as though it were plain English. Only Liara was left a bit confused. Despite being Austin's bond mate, the cypher didn't seem to carry over to her for some reason.

"Eety quentom prroom startoseyosm. Yatavestarter tetecravastent."

Said EDI.

The Prothean didn't respond immediately and simply looked at EDI for a moment before then looking at Austin and Liara. He then gently pulled himself up even more until he was able to step out of the pod, the rest of tubes detaching. He took several deep breaths before then gently putting his foot on the ground. He seemed to lose his balance slightly and fell to his knees, causing everyone to back away slightly. Then he finally spoke, his voice echoing throughout the room and making Austin and Liara shudder slightly at hearing a Prothean speak.

"Mah voolek taavard! Var grog nor vylarr?!"

"What did he say?" Liara asked.

"He asked to know how many years it has been." EDI replied.

"Give him the truth." Said Austin. "Tell him it's been almost 50,000 years now."

EDI nodded and once again turned to the Prothean who was gently standing up and trying to keep his balance.

"Eedah madmammy. Pyanoo mutoostavr poyvar itharstartarcraydah."

Said EDI.

"Oohar inyordan idarmaryo gatgarrgasday?!" The Prothean replied back.

"He asked why have we woken him." Said EDI.

Austin thought for a moment. It would be better if the Prothean heard it form him, but he didn't know if it could understand him.

"Ask him if he can understand what we are saying." He said.

"Etaryou sardoofar. Yeeso carlooneeon feedarmarl?" EDI asked.

The Prothean simply nodded.

"We face the same threat that your kind once did. Your race came the closest to defeating the Reapers. We hoped perhaps you might be able to help us." Said Austin.

The Prothean didn't respond for a moment and simply gazed down at Austin. He then gently reached up and touched Austin's helmet.

"Try to remember." Said Liara. "To him it's only felt like-"

Another vision once again flashed before Austin's eyes. The Prothean was once again speaking to Vigil.

"-a few minutes!"

"No, the bunker is falling. There is no other option." Said Vigil.
"There are pods online! Those people are still alive!" the Prothean objected.

"*Their sacrifice will be honoured in the coming empire!*" said Vigil, much to the Prothean's annoyance. "*Preparing neutron bombardment. Get to your lifepod now.*"

The Prothean reluctantly did so and headed for his own pod. Just before he could reach it however, an explosion suddenly caused the bunker to shake and some debris collapsed on it.

"How many empty pods are left?" the Porthean asked, seeing that this pod was definitely unusable.

"*Just one.*" Vigil replied.

The Prothean looked at a nearby door that Viggil was looking at. He knew immediately what the VI was suggesting, and he did not agree with it.

"No. It's not been tested. The risks are too great." He said.

"*There are no more useable pods. They have either been destroyed, or been filled. This is your only option.*" Said Vigil.

"Very well. Seal this part of the base. I need time to activate the pod." Said the Prothean.

"*Acknowledged.*"

The Prothean quickly made his way into the same room and worked on accessing the controls.

"*Neutron bombardment underway.*" Said Vigil.

"Come on! Come on!" the Prothean muttered.

A circular part of the floor retracted and the pod gently rose up.

Wasting no time, the Prothean climbed in and sealed the pod just as debris started to fall all over the place as it shook. He took a deep breath as the pod's breather mask gently locked itself around his face, all the necessary tubes already connected.

"*The bunker is secure, Professor Javik.*" Said Vigil.

"What is left of it. A few hundred people. How are we to rebuild an empire from that?" Javik sighed.

The pod slowly disappeared back into the floor in order to keep it absolutely safe. The inside of the pod went completely dark and the only light the Prothean could now see was the holo displays on the inside.

"*Further adjustments may be necessary. The neutron purge compromised the facility.*" Said Vigil.

"Clarify."

"*Sensors are damaged. Automated reactivation is not an option. You will remain in stasis until a new culture discovers this bunker. This may lead to a power shortage.*"

"Do not shut off more pods! I need the few that are left!" Javik shouted.

"*Power needs will be triaged appropriately.*" Said Vigil. "*You will be the voice of our people.*"

"I will be more than that."
Everything went dark…

Austin felt his vision return to normal. The Prothean, now known as Javik slumped to his knees. To Liara's surprise, he then spoke a language she could understand.

"How many others?" he asked.

"Just you. I'm sorry." she replied.

"Wait, you can understand him now?" Austin asked.

"Yes. Now that I have read your physiology, your nervous system. Enough to speak your language, or a language she can understand." Javik replied.

"So you were reading me while I was seeing…"

"Our last moments. Our failure." Javik sighed, slowly getting up, still trying to get used to his new height.

"Your people did everything they could. They never gave up, and we could use some of that commitment now." Said Liara.

"You are machines. Why would the Reapers attack you?" Javik asked.

"EDI is, but we're both organics." Said Austin. To prove this, he and Liara both removed their helmets.

"Asari. Human." Said Javik observantly. "This cycle has mastered exo suits? Most fascinating."

"Will you join us?" Austin asked.

"We will see."

"A living Prothean?" Hackett asked in surprise.

"That's correct, Admiral." Austin nodded.

"I can only imagine the help he can no doubt give us. Just hope he's willing to cooperate." Said Hackett.

"I have faith he will." Said Austin confidently.

"Good. Cerberus slipped up and gave us a new weapon. Don't let it go to waste. Hackett out."

As Austin walked away from the vid com, he suddenly heard Liara's voice over the speakers.

"Austin, I need you down in the cargo hold. It's about our new guest."

Austin walked into the cargo bay. Several soldiers were surrounding Javik as he simply sat calmly on the floor, apparently meditating.

"What's the problem?" Austin asked.

"I've tried to make the room more accommodating, but they're not letting me talk to him." Liara
"Apologies, Professor. Contact protocol with a new species, assume hostility. We had to dust off the regulations." Said one of the soldiers.

"But's he's not new. I've spent my life studying Protheans." Liara objected.

"At ease. I don't think our guest will be a problem." Said Austin.

"But sir…"

"That's an order."

The troops reluctantly stood down and left.

"You should not be so harsh to your troops. It can lead to distrust." Said Javik.

"What do you mean? I thought you were a scientist?" Austin asked.

"I am. But I had to train and fight alongside soldiers when the war came. It helped me see things in a new light." Said Javik, slowly standing up and reaching for Austin. "If I may…"

Austin slowly let Javik's hand touch him.

"Hmm, interesting. Your mind feels… familiar." Said the Prothean.

"I have something called the Cypher in my head. It lets me see things as you see them." Austin explained.

"Good to see that survived. It certainly explains how you understood my last memory so clearly." Said Javik

"I can use it for your beacons too."

"You found one?"

Javik once again touched Austin. A very familiar sight flashed before the Helldiver's eyes as he saw the Prothean vision he'd received over 5 years ago.

"You saw it all. Our destruction, our warnings. Why weren't they heeded?! Why didn't you prepare for the Reapers?!" Javik nearly shouted.

"Some of us did. Though not everyone believed your warnings." Austin replied.

"Who did then?" Javik asked.

"Well for starters, we did. Then there's the race that made our armour, the Arkanes…"

"The Arkanes? I am not familiar with that name." said Javik.

"They're a race that resemble insects in appearance. You don't know about them?"

Austin activated his omni tool and it projected a holo image of an Arkane.

"Ah yes. Now I recognize them. I'm surprised that they evolved so quickly though. I and other scientist always believed their evolution to our stage would take at least two cycles, not one." Said Javik. "So they made this technology? No wonder I did not sense any traces of my kind in it."
"They're the only race that haven't reverse engineered from your technology." Said Liara.

"Then why are they the only ones who believed us? Why did no one else listen?" Javik asked, repeating his earlier question.

"I did. But only just. We couldn't understand your signal at first. The Beacon nearly killed me." Said Austin.

"Of course. You minds are not like ours. I should have considered this when I had the beacons built." Javik sighed.

"It wasn't a complete failure though. We pieced together what we could and used it to stop a Reaper invasion 5 years ago, and another one 2 years ago." Said Austin.

"You delayed your extinction?" Javik asked, in surprise.

"Yes, and now we have your plans for the Crucible. We've started building it." Said Liara, walking up to the console and bringing up the Crucible's designs. As expected, Javik recognized it easily.

"I had almost forgotten we left plans for that in an archive," He said. "I'm afraid you will be disappointed though. Despite our best efforts, and my own, we never finished it. We ran out of time and there was a component missing."

"The plans mention something called the Catalyst. Do you know what it is?" Austin asked.

"No. I never found out. I heard rumours that we did eventually, but I never got told. The Reapers struck hard before I could learn anything. I'm sorry." Said Javik regretfully. "But I do have extensive knowledge on the Crucible. I was in charge of its' construction after all."

"What about this? We found it near your pod. I assume it belongs to you?" Liara asked, indicated a strange small object that was hovering on a nearby desk.

"A memory shard."

"Could it help us at all?" Liara asked.

"It contained all my knowledge on the Crucible. You may use it if you think it can help in your own construction." Said Javik.

"Thank you. It could help us a lot." Said Liara gratefully.

"As will I, if you will allow it. I may be a scientist, but I am trained to fight as well." Said Javik. "You have seen me in action, have you not, human?"

"It's Major, and yes, I have. Your skills would come in handy." Said Austin.

"I would not do you much good in overseeing your Crucible being built. Without knowledge of the Catalyst, or anything you do not already know, there is little I could do out there." Said Javik. "With your permission, I will help you fight. Among my people, there were… avatars of many traits: bravery, strength, cunning. A single exemplar for each."

"Which are you?" Austin asked.

"The embodiment of willpower. Many of my kind agreed that I was one of the smartest they had. It is why I became the lead scientist during the war, why I oversaw the construction of the Crucible, and why I was chosen to be the voice of my people. In doing so however, I became another at the
same time. Now I am also the embodiment of vengeance. I am the anger of a dead people, demanding blood be spilled for the blood we lost." Said Javik. "Those who share my purpose become allies. And the last thing the Reapers hear before they die, will be the last voice of the Protheans sending them to their grave!"

"If you don't mind, I have a few more question I would like to ask." Said Liara.

"Here it comes." Austin sighed, smiling at the same time.

"I've written over a dozen studies on your species. I've published in several journals…” said Liara. She stopped however when she saw the Javik was chuckling at this. "What's so funny?"

"Forgive me. It simply fills me with pride to see another scientist like yourself be so fascinated with their work. You remind me of a student I once had." Javik smiled. But at the same time, there was a hint of regret at him saying this.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to bring back memories…” Liara apologised.

"It is alright. What do wish to know?" Javik asked, his mood brightening again.

"My wife here would never forgive me if I didn't ask…” said Austin.

"Your wife?" Javik interrupted, not quite understanding the meaning of the word.

"Mate? Loved one?" Austin asked, trying to see if the Prothean would recognise those terms instead.

"I see. I thought I sensed an alien presence in your mind. You are mated with this Asari." Said Javik, almost with fascination.

Liara though didn't like that Javik wasn't using her real name though.

"I have a name. It's Liara." She said.

"Very well, Liara. I will call you that from now on." Said Javik respectfully, much to Liara's surprise and delight.

"I'm surprised at how well-mannered you are. I would've thought you'd be more suspicious of another species." She said.

"If I were a soldier, then yes. But I am not. I studied much in my time, including other species. I always sought knowledge. Even now, my mind burns with questions about your own races. Much has changed while I was asleep. Anyway, you were saying?” said Javik.

"Liara wouldn't forgive me if I didn't' ask you. What was Prothean civilization like?" said Austin.

"Yes. I've always wondered. What sort of government did you have and can you tell me a bit your religious beliefs or perhaps…” said Liara, quite fast.

"One question at a time, Liara. He's still recovering, remember.” said Austin.

"Forgive me, I didn't' mean to…” Liara apologised.

"It's fine, Shepard." said Javik calmly.
"I do not mean to put pressure on you. It's just that, studying your history has been a lifelong passion of mine." Said Liara.

"I cannot tell you much. I was born only a few years before the Reapers arrived. I doubt I saw much before all the death and destruction." Said Javik.

"You must know something though, surely?" Austin Asked.

"We were the dominant race of our cycle. We practically ruled the galaxy." Said Javik.

"My studies indicated you were the only race engaged in space travel at the time. I always found that curious." Said Liara, with fascination.

"So did I, admittedly. It was that same thing that led to my personal fascination of observing and studying other species." Javik smiled proudly.

"We've uncovered quite a few Prothean ruins. Were you observing our ancestors?" Austin asked.

"Before the war, we cultivated species who showed potential. I hoped to one day see what you would accomplish. But when the war came, we ceased all study. We hoped they would see you as too primitive to harvest." Said Javik.

"Well thank you, I think." Said Austin. He then decided to ask another question. "Why do you think your own people lost the war?"

"What had been our strength, our empire, became a liability. All races conformed to one doctrine, one strategy. The Reapers exploited this. Once they found our weaknesses, we could not adapt. The subservient races became divided and confused. Then it was only a matter of time." Said Javik.

"I'm happy to say our cycle is different. Most races cooperate, but they still remain unique." Said Liara.

"Then that may give you hope." Said Javik.

"Thank you for talking with us. I never actually imagined meeting a Prothean." Said Austin gratefully.

"This has been enlightening for me also. It fascinates me to see to the evolution that your cycle has reached. The Humans, the Asari, the Turians."

"There's also the Salarians." Said Liara.

"The lizard people?" Javik asked in surprise.

"I believe they're amphibian." Said Liara.

"They used to eat flies."

Javik still needed time to adjust after the freezing before he could go out in the field again. Fully understanding, Austin and Liara left the cargo bay and headed up to their quarters.


"Certainly is a once in a lifetime opportunity." Said Austin.

"I'm surprised also that he is so willing to cooperate with us. I had feared he might find my
fascination with him… a little frightening." Said Liara.

"He's scientist like you who studied other species in the same way. He's probably just as fascinated about you and learning more." Said Austin.

"I hope not though. Because I only want one person to be fascinated with me, and that's you, my love." Liara smiled, kissing Austin on the cheek.

"Oh I'm definitely fascinated by you, darling. Would you like to find out just how much?" Austin asked suggestively, putting his arms around Liara's waist and hugging her from behind as he planted gentle kisses on her neck.

"I love you." Liara moaned in pleasure.

"I love you too." Said Austin. "And consider this my way of saying thank you for your… little persuasion this morning."

The two slowly made their way towards the bed, clothes gently falling to the floor. Liara had a feeling that she was definitely going to sleep tonight after her husband was done… repaying her.

Think we've delayed the summit long enough now.

Next one will be that, and S'urkesh.

See you soon. Do let me know what you think of this one. And Javik fans, please don't be too harsh towards the changes.
Chapter 7, The Reaper Resistance

I am terribly sorry that this one got delayed. It took longer than it should have and I got very
distracted during the week.

Chapter 7

The Reaper Resistance

The time had now come for the summit to begin. Although the Asari wouldn't be their, the Arkanes
would, represented by none other than Councillor Spartan.

"Major, the Salarian dalatrass and Krogan clan chief are ready to come aboard." Said Traynor.
"Councillor Spartan is also ready."

"Have them all brought to the conference room." Said Austin, heading to his quarters to get changed
into his armour. "And hope this doesn't start another war."

"The Krogan is in no position to make demands!" said the Dalatrass.

The summit had already got underway by the time Austin arrived. Primarch Victus, the Salarian
Dalatrass, Councillor Spartan, and representing the Krogan was someone that Austin was glad to
see.

"The "Krogan" has a name, Urdnot Wrex. And I'm not just some junkyard Varren that you unleash
whenever you're in trouble." Said the Krogan.

As Austin entered the conference room, he stood next to Spartan who was also accompanied by
General Zartrack who'd been assigned to see to his security while he was off Arkadia.

"Councillor."

"Major."

Wrex also nodded to Austin in acknowledgement.

"I've got my own problems. Reaper scouts have arrived on Tuchanka. So why should I care if a few
Turians go extinct?" said Wrex.

"Trying to draw out negotiations will get you nowhere, Wrex. I have no time for it. Just tell us what
you want." Said Victus.

"I'll tell you what I need…" said Wrex. "A cure for the Genophage."

"Absolutely not! The Genophage is non-negotiable!" the Dalatrass refused.

"Why are you so opposed to the idea?" said Austin. Given that he was the leader of the Reaper
Resistance, as this alliance of the galaxy had now taken to calling themselves, he'd been assigned to
represent humanity at this summit.

"Because my people uplifted the Krogan. We know them best." Saïd the Dalatrass.
"You mean you used us! To fight a war you couldn't win!" Wrex shouted. "It wasn't the Salarians or the Asari or even the Turians that stopped the Rachni! It was Krogan blood that turned the tide!"

"And after that you ceased to be useful! The Genophage was the only way to keep your... "urges" in check." The Dalatrass retaliated.

"Dalatrass, you may not like him, but Wrex is right. Insulting him won't change that." Said Victus.

"I won't apologise for speaking the truth!" said the Dalatrass defensively. "We uplifted the Krogan to do one thing: wage war. It's all they know because it's all we wanted them to know."

"Your people should have thought the matter through, then! Was it really a surprise the Krogan revolted? You wouldn't say this now if it was your kind under of that pathetic abomination you call "a solution." Said Spartan angrily.

The Arkanes were no fan of the Genophage either. It was the reason why they had forbidden the Salarians from joining the Helldivers.

"That's precisely my point, Spartan. We made a rash decision. We turned to the Krogan in desperation. It's the same mistake your about to make today. No good can come from curing the Genophage." Said the Dalatrass.

"The Krogan have paid enough for their mistakes. The Genophage has gone on long enough." Said Austin.

"One thousand, four hundred, and seventy-six years, if you're keeping track." Said Wrex.

"It was a thousand years of peace, free from these... brutes!"

"ENOUGH! Whether or not they deserve a cure is academic. It would take years to formulate one." Victus interrupted.

"My information says otherwise." Said Wrex. "A Salarian scientist, Maelon, grew a conscience. He was on my planet testing a cure on our females."

"I remember. He meant well, but his methods were barbaric." Said Austin.

"But what you didn't know is that other females survived his experiments." Said Wrex as a holo vid began projecting from out of the projector in the centre of the table. "So the dalatrass here sent a team to clean up the whole mess—and to take them prisoner."

The video showed some kind of base with several Krogan females being kept in containment.

"Where did you get this?!" the Dalatrass demanded. "It could be a fabrication!"

"Don't insult me! Those are my people! They're immune to the Genophage, and you are going to give them back!" Wrex yelled.

"Dalatrass, is this true?" Victus asked.

"How will curing the Genophage benefit my people?"

"Have you forgotten which race here is in charge of the Helldivers?!" Spartan replied coldly. "You would do well to remember that I and the Arkane Council are the ones who sent reinforcement's to your territory. We can take them away just as easily if the Genophage isn't' cured."
"You can't do that!" the Dalatrass objected.

"We can, and we will!" Spartan replied back. "For too long we have tolerated your barbarianism of the situation. It's your creation and distribution of the Genophage that has kept your race out of the Helldivers all this time! Not a day goes by that we don't think about trying to cure it ourselves, by the one race that sees the truth! But no more! The fact that you are keeping those females against their will is unacceptable. I and the rest of my people are in full support of Wrex."

"I still don't see how…"

"How long do you think you're race will last alone against the Reapers? Because if you don't help, that's how it will end up. The Helldivers leave your territory, and you're on your own." said Austin.

"And I'll be the last friendly Turian you'll ever meet." Said Victus.

"And your race will never join the Helldivers, even if you do somehow manage to survive. I can't say that you'll be missed."

"What's it gonna be, Dalatrass?"

Seeing that she was alone in this argument, the Dalatrass finally gave in.

"The females are being kept at one of our STG bases on Sur'Kesh." She sighed. "But I warn you, Major! The consequences of this will…"

"Will be nothing compared to what happens if the Reapers win. You should think about that for the sake of every species, if not your own." Austin interrupted.

"Let's get the females." Said Wrex.

"You're not setting foot on Sur'Kesh! This will take time to-"

"It happens now! As the Helldiver's most respected and trusted soldier, Shepard will oversee the exchange." Said Victus.

"We're going."

"I won't forget this, Major! A bully has few friends when he needs them most!"

"No surprise why you're alone in this argument then!" Austin retorted back. Secretly he was smiling under his helmet at his comeback.

"This is the Salarian homeworld we're heading to. They aren't used to seeing Krogan here, so let's keep it simple. We land, get the females and get out before anyone changes their minds."

"I still don't trust a word they say." Said Wrex.

"Let diplomacy play out, you two. You'll get you want." Said Austin.

"These females are the best, and probably last hope for our people."

"We'll bring them back, Wrex. Don't worry." Said Liara.

"I appreciate that… Mrs Shepard." Wrex smiled. " I wouldn't want anyone else along for the ride."
Garrus, who was also in the party, cleared his throat to get Wrex's attention.

"I suppose I could make room for you too, Garrus." The Krogan chuckled.

"Figured you'd gone soft sitting in your throne. Forgot how to hold a gun." Said Garrus.

"Was gonna say that myself." Said Kraan.

"Major, I have the Salarian base on sensors." Said Cortez.

"Set her down."

The shuttle flew down until it was hovering above the landing pad.

"Major, Salarian ground control says we don't' have clearance to land." Said Cortez.

"Tell them the Dalatrass authorised this herself." Austin sighed.

"I knew they wouldn't' keep their word. Let's see them try to stop a Krogan airdrop." Said Wrex as he and Kraan forced the door open.

"Wrex, don't!" Austin shouted.

But he was already too late. Both Krogan leapt out and hit the floor hard, scaring off a Salarian.

"We have an unauthorised landing!" said one of the guards.

"And who authorised you to hold our race hostage?!" Wrex yelled back as he tossed them side with his biotics. The two Krogan drew their shotguns, only to spot the red laser dots on them. Snipers.

Austin, Liara, Garrus and Xun then jumped out as well, hoping to defuse the situation.

"Hold it!" one of the guards yelled.

"Stand down! Hold your fire!" said another Salarian. "Major Shepard, restrain your college! We only found out about this transaction a few moments ago!"

"Does Salarian hospitality always come with sharp shooters? This is an insult to the Helldivers!" said Austin.

"No matter what's on politician minds, Krogan are still considered a hostile race." Said the Salarian.

"And we'd be more than happy to show you why!" said Kraan.

"However on behalf of the Salarian union, I apologise. This matter can be resolved, but I must insist they remain under guard." Said the Salarian, which elected a growl from both Wrex and Kraan.

"We don't want a diplomatic, you two. I can handle this." Said Austin.

"Anything goes wrong, and all bets are off." Said Wrex as he and Kraan holstered their shotguns.

The Hellhound finally landed and Wrex and Kraan were left to deal with the guards.

"I'm Paddock Wiks and I appreciate your understanding, Major. With war on everyone's minds, our people are on edge." Said the Salarian.

Overhead, a large containment chamber was being slowly moved. It had what was unmistakably a
Yahg inside.

"Careful! Watch the containment shield!" said a Salarian as the Yahg tried to samsh it's way out.

"I'd hoped to never see one of those again." Said Liara.

"That makes two of us." Said Xun.

"As you can see, this base contains sensitive information." Said Wiks.

"Seems like a good place to hide things you don't want the galaxy to know about. Like female Krogan." Said Austin.

"I am aware about how this must look, but it was for their own good. They were in poor health when we found them on Tuchanka. We brought them here to stabilize their condition." Said Wiks.

One of the Salarian guards made the mistake of poking Kraan with his rifle.

"Don't ever touch me!" the Krogan yelled as he snatched the gun as a warning and then threw it back to the Salarian. "Ever!"

"I'd like to see them." Said Austin.

"Of course. I'll need to clear you for the lower levels." Said Wiks. "Give me a few moments and meet me at the elevator."

"Shepard, I don't like this. I and Kraan should be the ones going." Said Wrex.

"How about you two stay here and we only fight one war at a time?" said Austin.

"That was just good old-fashioned Krogan hot air. It it'd been real, they'd be dead." Said Wrex.

"Back on the Normandy, you said Reapers were sighted on Tuchunka." Austin inquired.

"Clans Jorgal and Ravanor sighted a few landing parties. The Reapers are up to something. Tuchanka may be a pile of radioactive rubble, but it's our pile, and we'll fight to the last Krogan to keep it that way." Said Wrex.

"That's what I always liked about you, Wrex." Liara smiled.

"My smouldering good looks?" Wrex chuckled.

"There is that." said Liara. "But you've never given up, and that determination's about to pay off."

"Yeah. Who would've thought back on Virmire we'd be standing here doing this together?" said Wrex.

"It's been good talking to you again, Wrex." Austin smiled.

"It'll be even better when we have a few Salarians for lunch." Said Wrex, much to the disapproval of the guards.

As the group walked around a bit, they found another familiar face, someone Austin hadn'r seen for 5 years.

"Major Shepard. It's Major Kirrahe. I'd heard you were coming." Said the Salarian.
"Good to see you again. Sounds like you've been promoted." Austin smiled as he and Kirrahe shook hands.

"Yes, due in no small part to our mission on Virmire. "Hold the one." You saved my men that day." Said Kirrahe.

"Good to see a friendly face, Kirrahe." Said Garrus.

"Garrus Vakarian. Always a pleasure." Said Kirrahe as he and Garrus shook hands. "And same to you, Professor T'soni. Or should I say, Mrs Shepard?"

"Major." Liara nodded.

"It seems the Reapers have a way of bringing us together."

"How'd you get posted to this base?" Austin asked.

"I led the team on Tuchanka that found the females. Nasty business. Maelon may have meant well, but his operation was crude. Test subjects were unaccounted for. The females easily escaped his lab." Maelon replied.

"Security seems high. Are you expecting trouble?" Austin asked.

"Our motto in STG is to always expect trouble, and failing that, create trouble for someone else. Our enemies have the same idea."

"I guess we both still remember Virmire."

"Yes, ironic. You destroyed the Genophage cure, yet now it's the key to an Alliance. Your standoff with Urdnot Wrex is legend in STG."

"I'm sure you saw Wrex's entrance."

"Our colonies three systems away saw it."

"Yes, and he and Kraan are rather angry about the security arrangements." Said Liara.

"Apologies, but better that than two Krogan with shotguns and one with Helldiver armour wandering the base. Think of all the casualties. Our med bay couldn't handle it." Said Kirrahe.

"Nice seeing you again, Kirrahe." Said Austin.

"Likewise. And Major… Regardless of what the politicians decide, you can count on my support in your Reaper Resistance." Said Kirrahe, lowering his voice slightly.

"You'd do that?" Austin asked in surprise.

"Consider it my way of returning a favour. It would be an honor to fight alongside you again." Said Kirrahe. "Good day."

Austin approached the elevator to the lower levels. It scanned him, but didn't open at first.

Wiks, walked up to the panel near the door and accessed it.

"This is senior Research Director Wiks, authorizing visitor access o lower level." He said. "Now take this elevator down, and someone will-"
"Alert! Threat condition two has been declared. Scramble readiness teams."

"What's happening?" Austin asked.

"Sensors have picked up activity on the perimeter." Wiks replied. "Hurry, Major. Someone will meet you below."

The labs as expected looked busy. Salarian's were rushing all over the place. Amongst the crowd however, there was one in particular that Austin recognised. One that he had not expected to see in an STG base.

"Shepard! Excellent timing! Good to have you here!"

"Mordin!" Austin smiled in surprise.

"Eyesight still sharp. Surprise understandable. Hadn't expected to return to work." Said Mordin as he and Austin shook hands.

"You're back with STG." Said Garrus.

"Special consultant. Had to be me. Someone else might have gotten it wrong." Said Mordin. He then lowered his voice to a whisper. "Helped female Krogan. Fed information to clan Urdnot. Encouraged political pressure to free females."

"You must be Wrex's inside source." Said Austin.


The Salarian walked them up to what looked like several dead Krogan bodies through the glass.

"These… didn't survive."

"I'm sure you did everything you could, Mordin." Said Austin supportingly.


"She's still here?" Austin asked.

"Yes. Last hope for Krogan. If she dies, Genophage cure… problematic." Said Mordin as he led the group to another separate container. Inside was what was unmistakably a female Krogan.

"Please be careful. Krogan slow to trust."

"I'm Sir Major Austin Shepard of the Helldivers." Said Austin.

"Are you here to kill me?" the Krogan asked.

"Goddess! What's she'd been through…" said Liar as she analysed the female.

"Urdnot Wrex and Urdnot Kraan and I are here to take you home." Said Austin.

"Why? What am I to you?" the female asked.

"You're the future of the Krogan race. I'm fighting for that." Said Austin confidently.
At that moment, the whole place suddenly shook and an alarm sounded.
"Then I hope you brought an army, Major." Said the female.

Several of the Salarian hurried to their posts.

"Alert! Unidentified vessels have breached the perimeter!"

"Give me an update!"

"Outbound communications have been severed! We're cut off."

"Secure all data to offsite location."

"What's going on?" Austin asked.

"We have multiple ships inbound."

Austin's omni tool suddenly beeped. A holo of Wrex projected out of it.

"Shepard, it's Wrex. Cerberus troops are attacking the base. Get the females out of there now!" he said.

"Only one survived, Wrex. She might be safer down here." Said Austin.

"What?! So the Salarians can kill her like the others?! No deal! If you still want this alliance, get her out of there!" Wrex ordered.

"Release the female! We're leaving!" Austin demanded.

"I can't! Protocol states during lockdown that no specimens are to leave…"

To Austin's surprise, Mordin suddenly shocked the Salarian with an overload.

"Objection noted. Now please release Krogan." He said.

Mordin then hurried into the pod with the Krogan.

"Need to monitor pod if there's quarantine procedures." He said. "Meet us at next checkpoint, Shepard. Likely Cerberus opposes Genophage cure."

"You'll see Tuchanka again. I promise." Said Austin, trying to give the female some reassurance.

"Get to elevator, Shepard."

Knowing that they'd no doubt be crossing paths with Cerberus pretty soon, everyone drew their preferred weapons and headed for the elevator.

As soon as the elevator opened however, they found a bomb that was just about ready to go off.

"Oh crap!" said Garrus.

"Get back!" Austin yelled.

The bomb exploded, sending them all flying. It was most fortunate that they were all wearing Helldiver armour.
"Major Shepard, are you alright?" one of the Salarians asked as they got back up.

"We're fine. Is there another way out of here?" Austin asked.

"Other side of the lab. An emergency exit." The Salarian replied.

"Shepard, it's Wrex. Kraan and I took the shuttle. Do whatever it takes to get the female up to the landing pad. We'll try to make life miserable for Cerberus."

As the group climbed out of the labs, they could already see that the base was under fire. The normally peaceful landscape of Sur'Kesh had been spoiled.

Cerberus troops began dropping down from the lower levels. Everyone quickly went into cover and began returning fire.

Garrus switched to his sniper and took out some of the more further away ones while Austin, Liar and Xun dealt with the closer ones.

Xun would take care of any troopers that got too close. Her kung fu and martial arts skills were being put to good use.

Liara meanwhile deployed a singularity, causing about three other troopers to float helplessly in the air, allowing Austin and Garrus clear shots at them.

With the first level clear, the group continued on to the next checkpoint.

"Warning! Yahg specimen has broken containment!"

Sure enough, two more troopers were taken by surprise when the Yahg from earlier suddenly burst threw the wall. Cerberus never even knew what hit them.

The Yahg roared and then fled.

"Careful. There goes the next Shadow Broker." Said Austin.

"Not funny." Said Xun.

"Could've sworn he was muttering T'soni the whole time." Garrus joked, much to Liara's disapproval..

"Not funny either." She said.

"Quickly, Shepard! Technician dead. Clear us through the checkpoint." Said Mordin.

"Are you alright?" Austin asked as he worked on getting the pod cleared.

"Containment shield is holding. Will try to repair if necessary. Can't speak for Krogan's health however." Mordin replied.

"I'm fine, Major." Said the female.

"Females kept secret. Possibly a mole in STG. Could be indoctrinated. If no Krogan alliance with Turians, Reapers left unchallenged." Said Mordin.

"We're gonna get this alliance if I have cure the Genophage myself." Said Austin. "Trust me,
Mordin. We'll do more than challenge the Reapers."

The pod once again began moving to the next level.

"Shepard, meet us at next checkpoint. Cerberus likely to target..." but Mordin was suddenly interrupted when an explosion blew away a bit of the pod's back. "Hurry next checkpoint!"

"Shepard, get cracking! We'll try to draw some of their fire!" said Wrex as the Hellhound flew past chased by a Cerberus gunship.

"Shepard, last attack compromised security systems. Attempting to compensate."

"Just hang on! We're trying to get to you, Mordin." Said Austin as he gunned down the two Cerberus troopers in the shuttle.

Proceeding to the next level, the group soon found none other than Kirrahe engaging some more troopers.

"Shepard, stay back. Hostiles just down the hall!" he said.

"Is there an easier way around?" Austin asked.

"You could say that." Said Kirrahe.

The Salarian popped out of cover and fired several rounds from an odd looking gun. To everyone's surprise, it fired several small rounds that exploded after a few seconds. One Cerberus trooper was even unlucky enough to get one stuck to his armour before it exploded.

"Where was that five minutes ago?" said Liara.

"How do I not have one of those?" said Garrus.

The area was clear, but not for long. More troopers arrived a long with an engineer.

"Go, Shepard! I'll cover you!" said Kirrahe.

"Orion Squad, your orders are to hold position and lock access to next checkpoint." Said the engineer as it deployed the turret.

"Mordin was right. Cerberus must have been tipped off. They got here too fast." Said Garrus.

"Every war has its traitors." Said Liara bitterly.

"This deal is getting worse all the time." Said Xun.

"How are you holding up?"

"Containment shield strong. But not designed for direct fire." Mordin replied.

"This truce must be important to you." Said the female.

"The galaxy's very survival depends on all races rallying together, including yours." Said Austin. "How many more checkpoints?"

"Just the landing are. Hope Urdnot Wrex and Kraan still waiting." Said Mordin.
"Wrex can't keep his hands off a fertile female. He'll be there." Said the female.

"We'll see you up top."

"Shepard, get your ass up here! We can't fly around forever!" said Kraan through the radio.

"The females on the way up to the landing area." Said Austin

"You pull this off, and I'm gonna give an honorary Krogan." Said Wrex.

The group headed up top and found the pod already there. It seemed as though all the Cerberus troops had been dealt with now, so the cost was clear.

"Shepard, you must authorise release. Pod then transfers to loading area." Said Mordin.

The pod was once again raised and then clamped as it began it's final journey to the loading area.

"Let's get you out of there." Said Austin.

"Shepard, head up! You've got incoming!" said Wrex.

Sure enough, another Atlas Mech suddenly dropped down and hit the ground hard.

"Not one of those things again!" Austin cursed as he ran into cover to avoid the mech's fire.

"Shepard, I can't land until you deal with that thing. It's too dangerous." Said Wrex.

"Krogan has been acquired!" said the pilot.

Mordin tried to force the door open, but it was stuck.

"Door is damaged! Can't get out!"

"Stay clear. We've got this." Said Austin, upholstering his weapon.

"Protect the Krogan, Shepard! She's vulnerable!"

Despite everyone's best efforts however, it was hard to get a clear shot since cover wasn't very good and there wasn't much of it.

"Wrex, fly us in close enough. I've got an idea." He heard Kraan say.

"I hope you know what you're doing." Said Wrex.

To everyone's surprise the shuttle flew overhead and Kraan jumped out.

The Atlas mech only had a few seconds to look up before Kraan landed on it, the sheer weight of both his natural Krogan weight and his Helldiver armour causing to topple over and smash into the ground.

Before the pilot had time to react, Kraan brought his fist right down. He punched straight through the glass and practically smashed the Cerberus trooper's head in.

"Now that's what I call living up to the name." said the Krogan smugly, quite proud of what he'd just done.
"I think you did it, Kraan. Looks clear form here. I'm coming in now." Said Wrex.

The dropship touched down and Wrex hopped out.

"You had me worried there for a minute." He said as he and Austin shook hands. "Good job, Kraan."

"Let's make this quick." Said Austin.

Mordin presented the female to Wrex, but the Krogan simply pushed him out of the way.

"Let's get you out of there."

The female gently stepped out, ignoring Wrex's outstretched hand. Two more troopers suddenly dropped down.

What happened next however took everyone by surprise, including Kraan and Wrex. The female snatched Wrex's shotgun right out of his hands and unloaded it right into the two troopers. She then handed it back to its owner.

"I can handle myself, Wrex." She said.

"Women."

"Shepard, we're hearing chatter you're brokering a treaty between the Krogan and the Turians?" Hackett asked.

"If the Krogan aid Palaven, both sides promise to join the Reaper Resistance." Said Austin.

"Reaper Resistance?"

"That's what we've decided to call our little unity. With luck, the name may encourage more to join us." Zartrack explained.

"I actually agree. Good name." said Hackett.


"I don't know. The Illusive Man is up to something." Said Austin.

"Then keep them at bay. We can't overstate what a victory this treaty would be for us. We'll need all the help we can get." Said Hackett.

"I know." Said Austin. "How's the Crucible coming?"

"All our allies are sending their best technicians and scientists. Construction is well underway and progress so far is good." Said Zartrack.

"This is going to be the most ambitious undertaking in history." Said Hackett.

"If it ends this war, it'll be worth everything, Admiral." Said Zartrack.

"Here here." Austin agreed.

"Then let's not waste any time. Hackett out." Said Hackett, just before his hologram vanished.
"Keep me posted on your progress, Shepard. Your father and I will keep coordinating the resistance from this end." Said Zartrack.

"I will, General. Good luck." Austin saluted.

"You as well, my student." Said Zartrack, returning the salute. "We can do this, never doubt that."

"Wouldn't dream of it, sir."

"Zartrack out."

"You have the female, Wrex. A cure for the rest of your people can come later." Said Victus.

"That wasn't the deal!" Wrex argued as Austin walked into the conference room.

"But Palaven needs your reinforcements now. We can't delay. The Helldivers forces can't help us on their own." Said Victus.

"Unless every Krogan gets the cure, there's no alliance." Said Wrex.

"Mordin, how long will it take to finish a cure?" Austin asked.

"Need to synthesise base antigen from female. Also requires healthy male Krogan tissue. Will need a sample." Mordin replied.

"You're looking at it." Said Wrex.

"Acceptable. Will need you to remain aboard Normandy for procedure." Said Mordin.

"Let's hope the food's gotten better." Said Wrex.

"Then get started, Mordin, and make it quick."

"Always do. Will be in med bay if you'd like to speak more. Eve requires tests."

"Eve?"


"Now, is there anything else?" Austin asked, hoping that was the end of the argument.

"There's a small matter concerning a ship we've lost contact with." Victus replied.

"What happened?"

"I'd rather discuss it… in private." Victus replied.

"Turian problems can't even come close to what I've got." Said Wrex.

"What is it?"

"Some of my men went missing. The rest of it we can discuss… somewhere else."

"I'll find you both in the War Room. Just be ready to talk." Said Austin.
Given that Wrex was a very old friend, Austin felt it best to talk to him first.

"Hell of a show down there on Sur'Kesh. Just like the old days, Shepard. Right down to me pulling your ass out of the fire." The old Krogan smiled.

"I was the one with bullets flying at me." Austin smiled.

"And I gave you the moral support to dodge them." Said Wrex.

"Uh-huh." Austin nodded. "Anyway, you said one of your squads is missing?"

"They were scouting out the Rachni relay. We've heard rumours of trouble in the area." Said Wrex, lowering his voice so as not to be heard by Victus.

"Rachni?"

"Thought that might get your attention. I have a favour to ask. It's big."

"What happened exactly? I thought the Rachni made a promise to stay hidden."

"All I know for sure is our scouts went silent as soon as they arrived. I've got Aralakh Company, my best unit, on standby. You give the word, and they'll meet you there."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Get on it, Shepard."

"Let's get back to work then." Said Austin.

"Anytime." Said Wrex. "And Shepard—I like what you've done with the Normandy. Got tired of always hanging around in the cargo bay before. I still don't have a window like you and Liara do… but maybe that's because I don't kiss as well."

"No comment." Austin chuckled.

"Yeah… I missed this place." Wrex smiled. "Wish I could knock some heads around with you, but duty calls. If the Salarian says my DNA's important, who am I to argue?"

"Major." Said Victus.

"You said one of your ships had gone missing?" Austin asked.

"Crashed, actually. I couldn't speak in front of the Krogan. Our ship went down on Tuchanka. Now they're pinned by an advanced guard of Reapers scouting the planet." Victus explained.

"What are your men doing there?" Austin asked.

"I'm sorry. That's classified." Victus replied. "But it's vital they be rescued. They must complete their original mission. It's a matter of… galactic peace."

"I'll do what I can." Austin nodded.

"I appreciate your help… and understanding."

"That's all."
"Of course, Major."

Austin headed down to the Normandy's med bay. Mordin of course was there while Eve was sat on one of the beds.


"For the third time, Doctor. I'm not interested." Said Eve.

"Ah, Sheaprd. We were just-" But before Mordin could continue, Austin found himself staring at a third face. Someone he had most certainly not expected to see again.

"You?"

"Hello, Shepard. It's been a while." Said Rana Thanoptis.

"Rana Thanoptis? What are you doing here? And how the hell did you even get on-board?" Austin asked in disbelief.

5 years ago when Austin had raided Saren's cloning facility on Virmire, he'd let an Asari go. That Asari was stood in front of him. He'd then encountered her again 2 years ago on a Blue Suns base.

"I brought her." Said Mordin. "Shepard, meet my new assistant."

"Mordin and I crossed paths not too long after you defeated the Collectors and he left. Having already met in that Blue Suns base, he knew how I was. Surprisingly, he seemed quick to trust me. He then eventually told me about the females and that the Genophage could possibly be cured from them." Rana explained. "So, I became involved, and here I am now."

"No offense, Rana, but what help can you give?" Austin asked. "If I recall, you were studying the effects of indoctrination on Virmire, you weren't part of the Saren's cure project."

"That is true, but I had access to the files on Saren's cure, and I kept them. I knew they couldn't help make a copy of the cure since it didn't' have full details, plus I was scared of what might happen. So I simply held onto them. When Mordin confided knowledge of the new cure in me, I showed him the files." Said Rana.

"Proved extremely helpful. Allowed discovery of a fatal flaw in Maelon's unfinished cure. Would've caused genetic defects in new-borns. Dangerously easy to miss. Would never have spotted it if not for Rana's help. Owe her a lot." Said Mordin proudly.

"Thank you, Professor." Rana smiled. "I know you probably still don't trust me, Shepard. But I still have not forgotten the mercy you showed me. I'm still making sure I don't' waste the chance you gave me. I..."

"It's okay. There's no need to try and convince me. You helping Mordin and allowing him to correct those flaws is more than enough. Plus, some of your knowledge on Indoctrination could be of help to us." Said Austin.

"I had a feeling you might say that." Said Rana.

The conversation was then interrupted as Wrex walked in.
"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine, Wrex. You can relax." Eve replied.

"Can't be too careful... or put any faith in Salarian doctors." Said Wrex coldly.

"This one is different." Said Eve.

"Is he?" Wrex asked. "What's that?"

"Simple blood test." Mordin replied.

"What kind?"

"The kind that ends Genophage." Said Rana.

"Why're you here? I remember you from Virmire." Wrex asked, also rather surprised to see the Asari.

"Long story, short. She's Mordin's new assistant. She's provided some knowledge that's helped perfect the cure and make sure it doesn't worsen your people." Said Austin.

"Hmm, good enough." Said Wrex.


"He was your inside source, Wrex. You can trust him." Said Austin supportingly.

"Salarians have minds like a maze. You never know when they're leading you into a trap." Said Wrex.

"Trap? Eve's release my doing. Would never have known about her if not for me." Said Mordin defensively.

"That was then, but she's out now. And if she gets hurt, I'll feel it." Said Wrex.


"Heh. You've got a quad, Doctor. Keep her safe. Our females have endured enough." Wrex chuckled, now convinced that Mordin was worthy of trust.

"Don't forget. Still need your tissue sample." Mordin reminded him.

"I'll be back." Wrex groaned.

Common phobia. Fear of needles." Mordin explained.

"Our Salarian doctors."

"A word when you have a moment, Shepard."

Austin felt it best to talk to Eve first before Mordin. He wanted to gain her trust since she'd be here for a while.

"Thank you for saving my life, Major. I didn't think the Krogan had any allies left in the galaxy." She said, gently hopping off of the bed.
"We owe a lot to you. Even if most people have forgotten that." Said Austin.

"They can be forgiven. Our actions have hardly inspired friendship." Said Eve.

"Part of being friends is knowing each other's name. I feel bad that I don't know yours."

"I surrendered it the day the I became a shaman of the female clan. I belong to my sisters now. But perhaps one day, when this is over, you can know it."

"How did you get involved in Maelon's experiments?"

"The other females and I volunteered. We heard Maelon was trying to cure the Genophage for Clan Weyrloc."

"Aren't they a rival clan?"

"Rivalries are the invention of the males. Under their rule, Tuchanka has laid in ruins for over a thousand years. It's time females took back our place in society and resurrected our future. Maelon was our best hope."

"Would you got to Maelon again?"

"Absolutely. It only takes one candle to light a fire, and then the darkness is no more."

"I'm sorry none of the other females survived."

"I know. The youngest one, Kurn, was the last to go. But she knew she would enter the void free of this curse. And then smile when she looked down on the children of Tuchanka. "Her spirit will be the midwife to my firstborn."

"I found Maelon's lab. It looked like a dungeon. His experiments were brutal."

"We learned that too late." Eve sighed. "He meant well, but his methods grew more barbaric as he went. We finally escaped into rubble. Eventually, a Salarian team found us. They saved our lives. We were so sick."

"I didn't realise the Krogan had female Shamans."

"Wisdom comes from pain, and the Genophage has made us very wise. Rather than surrender to despair, a few of use chose to preserve the ancient ways. We safeguard our culture, our knowledge, our secrets. So when out children live again, the Krogan will flourish."

"How were you initiated?"

"You're locked in a cave for seven days with just enough food to last. One the eighth, you'll starve."

"What does that prove?"

"Your resolve."

"Every Acolyte is given a chance. You either claw your way out through the rock with your bare hands, or you die."

"How did you make it out alive?"

"I started digging the wrong way. I was in complete darkness, nothing than y own heartbeat to
"What happened?"

"I found this." Said Eve, showing what looked like a crystal of some kind. "A simple crystal, but it became my chisel. Take it as a reminder, Major. In the darkest hour, there is always a way out."

Austin took the crystal without hesitation as a sign of respect. Plus, maybe there was a possibility that it would remind him of that when they faced their darkest hour in this war, which he had a feeling that even if they did win, they wouldn't escape it.

"Thank you." He said gratefully. "Still, that is a brutal initiation."

"But an illuminating one. You learn to appreciate the light by living in the dark."

"What do you think of Wrex?"

"When he's not trying to sire half of Tuchanka, he's the best thing that's happened to the Krogan. But I won't tell him that. His head's big enough already, literally." Eve laughed.

"He's turned into a strong leader."

"I know in his heart, Wrex wants what's best for us. Though not all the other clans see it that way."

"Why would they give him trouble? You think they'd want a better future."

"It's not in the nature of our males to cooperate. They've evolved to be selfish. Their only concern is survival. Wrex is different. He's a mutant, and that you can tell him."

"Do you think Wrex will want revenge for the Genophage?"

"Some clans will expect it, but I hope Wrex resists. He understands the cycle of violence must end if Krogan are ever to have a voice in galactic politics. Still, he's just one Krogan. If enough clans demand it, he may not be able to stop them.

"If you don't mind me asking, what's it been like living with the Genophage?"

"I knew sisters who couldn't bare the shame of being infertile. They would wander off into the wastelands hoping a Thresher Maw would kill them and end their torment."

"Did the thought ever cross your mind?"

"Yes. After my first stillborn."

"What kept you from doing it?"

"When my child didn't draw breath, that's when my life truly began. The Genophage forces us to live on hope alone. There is nothing else. There is no reason to exist other than the hope that the next day will bring change, and if it doesn't, there is always the next."

"How do you think things will change after the Genophage is cured?"

"Our species will find its balance again. Females will help shape the future, like in the ancient days before we were just pawns of power hungry males."

"Most seem hell bent on shooting anything that looks at them wrong."
"What else is there for them to do? Because of the Genophage, they become wondering killers seeking targets to justify their existence. Excuses to earn them honor."

"How has Mordin been treating you?"

"Better than Krogan males do. He's not like a typical Salarian."

"No, no, no—organ redundancy results in new period before metaphase. Can't alter that. Damage to telomeres, premature aging…” Mordin muttered out loud to himself.

"He does that." Said Austin.

"But I sense pain in him, too. He told me about his work on the Genophage. I should consider him an enemy. Yet I think seeing my sister and I changed something in him." Said Eve.


"Well, it wasn't his ear." Austin chuckled. "Thanks for talking with me."

"It's my pleasure, Major." Said Eve, shaking hands with Austin before sitting back on the bed. "I've heard of many stories about Helldivers. I'm glad to say they hardly do you justice."

"I'm flattered." Austin smiled.


"How's she doing?" Austin asked.


"My people don't have time for that." Said Eve.

"Her opinion somewhat different."

"You care about her."

"My patient. My responsibility. Found her at STG base. Three doctors injured trying to restrain her. Undid arm restraints. Didn't resist when she grabbed me. Promised to help her. She said. "Please."

"Have you determined why she's immune?"


"You think you can make this work for all Krogan?"

"Yes. Will use Eve's tissue to produce mutagen. Alter gland function across an entire species. Must improve mutagen as well, tune hormone production. Long-term illness for all Krogan otherwise."
"So we did the right thing by saving the data?"

"Indeed. Would be much harder to treat Eve without it. Maybe impossible."

"And all those experiments we saw back on Tuchanka?"

"Monstrous. Repulsive. But now with purpose. Victims didn't die for nothing."

"Any word on Maelon himself?"

"No. Ordered teams to search for him when trying to help Eve. Nothing so far. Large galaxy. Lots of places to hide. Could already be dead for all we know. Would kill him now if possible. Unless he could help.

"So the end justifies the means?"

"Not my means."

"But you're using the data, encouraging more experiments like Maelon's."

"Encouragement irrelevant. Will always be scientists willing to perform unethical tests. Can't change that. But can help Eve. Can cure Genophage. Won't ignore data vital to her survival because of unethical origins."

"Nice talking with you, Mordin."

"Thank you, Shepard. Glad to be back."

"You planning to stick around when this is over?"

"Until Reapers dealt with, at least. Then... not sure. Have made impact on galaxy. Genophage modification, Genophage cure, work against Collectors... Decisions, mistakes... Might go somewhere sunny. Sit on beach, look at ocean, collect seashells."

"You'd go crazy inside an hour."

"Might run tests on the seashells."

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Could've done better I admit.

Anyway, I promise to put more effort into the next one, which will be mostly Citadel assignments such as Kasumi, Zaeed, Thane and so on. (Some people have constantly asked. Hopefully that answers your questions)
Much better! :)

I probably just got a bit of writer's block with last one, but it seemed to go away after I finished it. That allowed me to work properly on this one with some fresh new ideas.

Hope you like it. Some of the narrative, and the title, and based on my favourite film.

Chapter 8

Citadel Atlas

Austin felt it best to make another check on Ashley since he was back on the Citadel.

To the Helldiver's surprise though, Austin found another very familiar face in the hospital.

"Shepard. When I heard Earth was under attack, I tried to call. I never got through." Said Thane Krios.

"Thane. Good to see you staying in shape." Said Austin.

"My disease kills slowly. Enough care and a healthy lifestyle, I can be delayed for a few years. Fortunately, I still have maybe another year or so left. What are you doing here?" Thane asked.

"Visiting a friend who got hurt. Ashley." Austin replied.

"The dark-haired woman in intensive care… She will be starting physical therapy with my class soon." Said Thane.

"That's her."

"If she is your friend, then I will help how I can. As long as she is here, consider her under my protection."

"I appreciate that, Thane." Said Austin gratefully.

"This year is my final days. It is a good time to be generous." Thane smiled.

"Is the syndrome causing you any pain?" Austin asked.

"Sometimes. The oxygen transfer proteins don't form correctly. Your human equivalent would be haemoglobin. As a result, my blood is low in oxygen. No matter how much I breathe in, I get tingling, numbness… and that is the best of it. As for my brain, I cannot track the damage. I just track the damage. I just experience dizziness from time to time." Said Thane.

"Well, I wish for best for you, Thane." Said Austin.

"And I for you. Do not grieve for me. I have good doctors. My son visits regularly. Perhaps we will keep up via the extranet. Until we meet again, Shepard." Thane nodded.

Ashley's last message had told Austin that she was out of bed now and doing fairly well.
Sure enough, Austin found her back in her blue armour again.

"Good to see you up and around, Ashley." He smiled.

"Yeah."

"Everything all right?"

"I guess."

"You sure?"

Ashley was silent for a moment before she eventually replied.

"I thinking of declining Udina's offer." She said. "You turned down reinstatement, and had no love for the job yourself. I don't think it wills it well with me either."

"Ash, don't make that choice just because I did. This is your decision. Besides, I'm not what you would call a best example." said Austin.

"You're my friend. That's gotta count for something." Said Ashley.

"True. But I'm not an Alliance soldier like you are. I'm a Helldiver." Said Austin.

"But you're both." Said Ashley, slightly confused.

"I chose not to reinstate my Alliance rank after I died." Austin explained.

"But why? How could you turn your back on that?" Ashley asked, slightly angry that she hadn't been told about this earlier.

"I never liked playing for both sides, and in truth, I stopped being an Alliance marine when I put on this armour for the first time." Said Austin calmly. "You okay?"

"I just can't believe you'd keep that form me." Said Ashley, slightly angrier this time.

"I didn't keep this from you, Ash! I thought you knew." Austin retaliated sternly.

Ashley couldn't stay mad at her best friend, and his reply was fair. She couldn't blame him for thinking that she'd been aware of this. She took a few seconds to calm down.

"I'm sorry, It's just… one of the fondest memories I have of you was when we both enlisted." She said.

"Hmm, as I recall you nearly kissed me." Austin teased, trying to brighten the mood up a bit.

"I make no excuses. Back then I had a crush on you." Ashley chuckled. "Still, regardless of this, or the choice you made, I still don't think I want to accept being a Spectre. You and I, we're both soldiers. Status as a Spectre may be something we deserve, but not something we need."

"That is well said, Ash." Said Austin. "So, if you're going to decline the offer, does that mean you can come back to the Normandy?"

"Believe me, Austin. There's nothing I'd want more, but the Doctors say I need to stay a bit longer. Can't get out just yet." Ashley sighed.
"I understand. When you do though, be sure to let me know. I and everyone else would love to have you back." Said Austin. "So, you feeling better?"

"I'm fine, other than the pile paperwork the doc's gonna throw at me." Ashley smiled. "Sorry. I'm so distracted, Austin. It's just…"

"What's going on?" Austin asked.

"Heard from my mom. They got out in time. They're okay."

"Good. That's good news."

"It is."

"Did your sister make it to the Citadel?"

"She did. But… her husband was killed in action."

"I'm sorry, Ash."

"Thanks. Yeah, Sarah wasn't much for the military. We were all surprised when they got married…"

"This war will take its toll. Sacrifices like his have to give the rest of us a fighting chance."

"It never changes, does it?" Ashley asked. "I wanted to protect her from all this…"

"Don't blame yourself for this, Ashley." Said Austin supportingly.

"I know, but I'm her big sis, you know? She wants to do a thing at the memorial. Nothing fancy, just some words about family. It'll be tough." Said Ashley.

"Keep me posted, all right?" said Austin.

"Will do." Said Ashley.

As Austin had headed back to the Normandy, he'd got a message from an unexpected acquaintance telling him to meet him in the Purgatory Bar.

As the Helldiver entered the club, he could see a C-sec officer arguing with the person who'd invited him.

Seated in the lounge area, was the Queen of Omega herself, Aria T'Loak. Standing between her and the C-sec officer also was her favourite Omega dancer, Elraa. She was an extremely dark red skinned Asari covered from head to toe in white tattoos.

Last time Austin had seen her, she'd been in a black dancer's outfit. Now though, she was dressed in a set of Janissary armour. It seemed perhaps that she was now serving as her mistress' bodyguard rather than entertainer.

"So you admit you and your thugs are here illegally." Said the officer accusedly.

"Yes. And it only too C-sec three weeks to figure it out." The Queen of Omega smiled calmly.

"I don't care who you are-you're required to go through processing like all other refugees. Come with me." The officer demanded.
"I don't think so." Said Aria.

"Touch her and you are dead, human!" Elraa threatened, he eyes and hand glowing slightly with biotics as a warning.

"Now now, Elraa. No need to threaten her with rape. Get me the Asari councillor." Said Aria.

"Yes, mistress." Elraa replied, bowing her head and activating her omni tool.

A hologram of the Asari councillor was projected out of it.

Normally, people would think that was the real Councillor, but Austin's suit showed him the truth. It was a VI that had been modified to the highest possible standard to sound and look exactly like Councillor Tevos.

"Greetings, Aria. Is there something you need?" said the VI.

Austin Did have to give Aria credit, that was very clever and also that forgery was the most convincing thing he'd ever seen.

"I'm being asked to submit to immigration processing." Said Aria.

"Of course you are." Said the hologram, mimicking Tevos accessing a console and then clearing Aria, much to the officer's annoyance, before then turning back to her. "Done. What else can I do for you?"

"Nothing, thank you." Said Aria.

"My pleasure."

The hologram disappeared and Elraa once again made sure the officer didn't try anything that could risk her mistress' safety.

"I think we're done here." Said Aria. "I suggest you leave before my bodyguard gets personal."

The officer simply huffed and left. It was now that Aria noticed Austin.

"Enjoy the show, Shepard?" she asked, as Austin sat down near to her.

"I guess there's one rule on the Citadel, huh?" he replied.

"I guess so." Said Aria. "I hate this place. So sickeningly uptight."

"Then why are you here?" Austin asked.

"Cerberus stole Omega from me. The Illusive Man is now squarely at the top of my shit list. He will pay for every second I've spent in this bureaucratic hellhole." Said Aria bitterly.

"How did Cerberus defeat you?" Austin asked, surprised that Aria had actually lost Omega. This was something he didn't think could happen.

"Deceit, distraction, and a big fucking army." Aria replied angrily. "They lured me away from Omega and ambushed me. I escaped, but Cerberus had already laid siege. By the time I could launch an assault, they were too entrenched."

"At least you escaped to fight another day." Said Austin positively.
"And that day is coming." Said Aria. "I'll take Omega back, but I'll get to that. You're here because I have a proposition."

"I'm listening."

"The way I see it, if you don't defeat the Reapers, we're all dead. Won't matter where I'm sitting. It's in my interest to help you and your Reaper Resistance."

"What are you offering?"

"On Omega, I kept the Blood Pack, Blue Suns, and Eclipse in check. Now they're running amok. Nobody wants that. Unite them under my rule, and you'll have a powerful and ruthless force for your army. I've laid the groundwork with all three groups. I just need you to close the deals."

"Give a criminal a gun, he'll shoot you in the back." Said Austin distrustfully.

"They already have guns, Shepard. Aria will make sure they point them at the Reapers." Said Elraa.

"I'm trying to help you. Why don't you think it over. Meet with Narl, my agent who's dealing with the Blood Pack. The Blue Suns leader is incognito here on the Citadel—he'll be expecting you. And I already have a deal with Jona Sederis, the Eclipse leader. You just have to get your friend Captain Bailey to let her out of jail." Aria instructed.

"You obviously don't know Bailey very well." Said Austin.

"Bailey respects you. Lean on him." Said Aria. "I think a united force of professional mercs is worth it, don't you? It's always a pleasure, Shepard. Let me know if you want to talk later."

As Austin left Purgatory, still trying to figure out how the hell he was going to pull this off, a thought suddenly crossed his mind. It suddenly occurred to him that if the mercs wouldn't easily be swayed by him, perhaps he knew how they could be.

He activated his omni tool and called Alaara, who was quickly projected from out of it as a mini hologram.

"Shepard, how are things on the Citadel?" she asked.

"We may have another ally who'll join the resistance. However, some things need to be done first." Said Austin.

"Like what?" Alaara asked, a tiny bit nervous about what her squad leader might say next.

"I've got a job for you and some of the squad…"

Kraan simply sighed as he strode through the Presidium commons, a little bit grumpy about what was going to happen.

Austin had come up with the idea of all the former merc member of Alpha doing the jobs of getting the support of the mercs they'd once worked with.

The Krogan did admit though that it was a clever idea in a way. Despite the fact that he, who had once been a member of the Blood Pack, Alaara who had once been an Eclipse merc, and Griffin who had briefly been a Blue Suns, had all turned their backs on the merc groups, they were in a way still respected among them. To become a Helldiver and be accepted into the legendary Alpha Squad under the command of THE Sir Major Austin Shepard made them a force to be reckoned with.
Kraan had been instructed to meet Narl in secluded room on the commons. As the door opened, Narl quickly reacted to his presence.

"Quick, hands behind your back. They'll be here any minute." Said the Batarian.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Kraan replied back, not fond of being ordered around by a Batarian.

"Kreete. Blood Pack's leader Aria brings him former Blood Pack Urdnot Kraan, Kreete pledges the gang to her. We're just luring him into the open so we can take him out." Narl explained.

"Not the best start to our friendship, Narl." Said Kraan bitterly.

Narl had been afraid of this…

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Alaara could only sigh as she walked into Bailey's office.

Despite the many times she tried to put her Eclipse past behind her, it always seemed to keep pulling her back in or kept coming back to bite her in the ass.

"Shepard's second in command, to what do I owe the pleasure?" Bailey asked, as the Asari Helldiver walked in.

"Here to talk about Jona Sederis." Alaara replied.

"Look, there's no way I'm letting that psychopath out. The woman's unstable and a clear public threat." Said Bailey, pretty sure he knew what Alaara would be asking.

"I know. I don't like this anymore than you do. For now, I'd like access to her to judge for myself." Said Alaara.

"Go to the C-sec outpost. My assistant will connect to Sederis' cell from there… Then call me back." Said Bailey.

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"He's coming! Put your hands behind your back and—uh—try to look like I beat you up or something." Said Narl urgently.

"This goes wrong, it's your ass." Kraan groaned as he got into position in front of Narl.

"Quiet!" Narl hissed.

Three Blood Pack Vorcha walked in. The leader, Kreete, looked more than surprised to see Kraan.

"Aria T'Loak even more powerful than Kreete thought. Her instructions on boarding Citadel undetected were one thing. Now this!" he snarled in the traditional hissing Vorcha voice. "Traitor Urdnot Kraan! Want you to know: your head will be hood ornament on my personal shuttle."

This sort of thing was beginning to bore Kraan. At the same time though, he had doubts. Could Narl be trusted? He was a Batarian after all, and Kraan was a Helldiver. The two had an immense hatred and rivalry for each other. Kraan wouldn't be surprised of Narl tried to stab him in the back for personal reasons…

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Griffin couldn't believe that Austin had asked him to do this.
What had he done to make the lord so angry with him to come up with such a punishment as this?

The Blue Sun's new leader, Darnar Vosque was waiting for him in the refugee camp. It had been a holding area near the docks, but with the war going on, it had now been converted to accommodate the many refugees seeking safety from the Reapers.

"Wow, Aria wasn't kidding—the great Sir Major Shepard on a leash and he sends one of our own to do his job."

"I'm here for my own reasons, Vosque." Said Griffin bitterly.

"Sure you are. Anyway, tell her I'm impressed, but to do business, I still need my little problem taken care of." Said Vosque.

"Which is?"

"A Turian general named Oraka has it out for the Blue Suns. He's raising a stink over our activity in this sector. I'll commit my gang to Aria as soon as Oraka's dead."

With his three squad members working on getting the mercs under Aria's command, Austin could now tend to another matter that had come to him via a message.

A Salarian spectre had requested his assistance with a matter regarding that hanar.

As had been said, the Salarian was stood outside bailey's office.

"Major Shepard. Jondum Bau, Special Tactics and Recon. I've got intel suggesting that high-level hanar officials may be indoctrinated." He said.

"That's a damming accusation. What have you got?" Austin asked.

"Evidence of an Alliance black ops team raiding a Batarian research station. The Batarians were studying Reaper technology." Bau replied.

"The Batarians had Reaper technology?" Austin asked.

"The Alliance raid turned into a massacre, and the humans ended up with nothing. Your people faked a power failure to hide the incident." Bau explained.

"This would've provoked another war if the Batarians had found out. But how does this implicate the hanar?" Austin asked.

"They maintained discreet grey-market trade relationships with the Batarians—and led the Alliance to the station. We suspect those hanar operatives escaped with Batarian tech. If your reports on the Reapers are accurate, they could already be indoctrinated."

"What's your source on all this?"

"It was an anonymous "gift," but I believe it came from a thief names Kasumi Goto. I've been after her for years."

"Kasumi? You're hunting a thief?" Austin asked in surprise.

Kasumi had been part of the team he'd assembled to fight the Collectors. During her time on the team, she'd become a very good friend.
"A master thief. Her intelligence and skill are almost Salarian." Said Bau, his voice sounding like admiration.

"I'm sure she'd appreciate praise from the Spectre who's chasing her down." Said Austin.

"I only need her data. I admire her personally. And since she sent me this, I assume her feelings are mutual." Said Bau.

"What do you need me to do?"

"The hanar operative is now a diplomat on the Citadel. I don't have a public name, and the hanar will go to ground if I make a formal inquiry."

"So we're hunting."

"I'm tracking suspicious transmissions to the hanar homeworld. I could use your help."

"Let me see if I can dig up anything."

"Thanks, Major. And for the record-not everyone doubted your concerns about the Reapers. I just hope we're not too late."

Although Austin had refused to be reinstated as a Spectre, the Arkane Council had been able to make arrangements for him to get authorization to use the Spectre office if he needed to.

As he headed in, he heard a very familiar and welcome voice behind him.

"So remember when you helped me get Keiji's graybox from Donovan Hock? The one with information that could start a war?" asked Kasumi Goto as she uncloaked out of thin air.

"I thought we destroyed that information to keep you safe." Said Austin.

"There were enough clues for me to piece things together when I… got curious. It was big enough to leak it to Bau." Said the thief. "If you don't mind me tagging along cloaked, maybe I can help you dig up some dirt on the hanar."

"I'd appreciate it." Said Austin.

Alaara enjoyed the view of the Presidium commons as she found the C-sec outpost where she could talk with Jona Sederis. She wouldn't pretend she was looking forward to it. Especially since Jona did actually know her. During the decades she'd been in Eclipse, she'd earned a bit of a reputation.

"I've connected with Jona Sederis in her cell, Captain T'onrak. You can speak with her via that console." Said the Turian officer.

"Thank you. We'll need some privacy." Said Alaara.

"Of course. When you're done, you can also contact Captain Bailey from that terminal." Said the Turian as he left.

Alaara walked up to the console. Sure enough, Jona Sederis' face appeared don it.

"Who's' that spying on me, now?" she said. "Well, well , well, look who it is. The second in command of Aria's indentured servant has finally come to deliver me to freedom."
"I want to talk with you before I secure your release, Jona." Said Alaara coldly. "I may have been your favourite, but don't think that's going to help you now. I put my Eclipse life behind me decades ago."

"Bullshit. You have no choice." Sederis smiled evilly. "And when I get out, heads will roll. Oh, yes. You, my dear traitor, and you're Helldiver Squad have killed a lot of my people! Don't think I've forgotten that!"

Alaara had definitely be afraid of this. This would definitely complicate things if they needed Eclipse to join the Resistance…

Austin accessed the Spectre office and looked through what reports he could concerning the hanar.

"Shepard, I'm checking security reports. Can you track the transfers coming from the hanar embassy?" said Bau through the radio.

"Bau's got a good plan. Hanar are predictable. Anything suspicious in their terminal use should narrow down our list of suspects." Said Kasumi, clocked somewhere near Austin.

"And the fact he's trying to arrest you?" said Austin.

"Well, nobody's perfect." Said Kasumi.

"It'd be smart to bury the threads, Jona." Said Alaara.

"I'll toss them into the caskets with my victims." Said Sederis. "I love holding all the cards Even in here, you must deal with me-I have all the power!"

"Is that right?"

"Yes. Sayn, my second-in-command, is a weak-willed toady. If he had balls, he'd leave me to rot and take control himself. But he won't defy me. He knows better." Said Sederis. "Now, get me out of here, Alaara. Tell Bailey to release me."

Alaara was now left with a very difficult choice. Even she agreed that Sederis was too dangerous to let out, even for this. Alaara was forced to ask herself one question.

"What would Shepard do?"

"Bau, I have some possible hits. Got some strange money transfers on Bolohn, and Oloon is sending a lot of data." Said Austin.

"Bolohn's clean. His money transfers are to support his mistress. Not sure about Oloon. I'll pull his bio." Bau replied.

"I'll check Oloon's personal records and pull his recent messages." Said Austin.

"Can I just note how odd it is for a hanar to have a mistress?" said Kasumi.

"You know, if Bau catches up with you, I can grant you immunity." Said Austin.

"What, if I join up? Last time I did that, you roped me into a suicide mission." Kasumi asked.
"I didn't say you had to join up." Said Austin.

"You were working your way around to it."

"Keep your distance, Kreete. So... do you agree to Aria's terms?" Narl asked.

To Kraan's surprise, he felt the Batarian slide something into his hands. No mistaking that it was a gun.

"Most definitely. Aria can use Blood Pack as she sees fit." Kreete snarled.

"Wasn't talking to you, Kreete. Gryll?" Narl asked.

"What?"

"Bailey, I've seen Sederis." Said Alaara.

"So, she's crazy, right? It would be ridiculous to let her out." Said Bailey.

"She's a menace. Let me try to make this problem go away." Said the Asari.

"Sounds good. I'll hold the line until I hear from you or Shepard." Bailey nodded.

"Bau, Oloon's doing some heavy lobbying for the hanar to support the war effort."

"So he's clearly not indoctrinated. Who's opposing him?" Bau asked.

"An unarmed hanar recently posted here from Kahje. I'll check transit records for incoming hanar." Austin replied.

"It all comes down to the war... and you trying to pull everyone into it." Kasumi commented.

"Would you rather the Reapers win?" Austin asked back.

"No. And I owe you for getting Keiji's graybox from the hock. But I can't do another Collector base, Shep. The Reapers aren't people. I can't infiltrate a Reaper party and steal a big "I win." bomb." Kasumi replied.

Griffin wasn't impressed with Vosque's statement.

To the Blue Suns leader's surprise, the Helldiver thrust his massive gauntlet forward and held him up by the neck.

"Let me make this clear, Vosque." He threatened. "You either join the Resistance now, or you'll be left at the Reaper's mercy."

"You don't know who you're talking to, do you, boy?" Vosque choked under Griffin's grip.

"A dead man if you don't agree." Said Griffin. "There will be no negotiating. Join now, or don't at all."

"You have my word. Now open fire!" Gryll yelled.
Both Kraan and Narl pulled out their guns and killed both Kreete and his guard. Just before Kraan could shoot Gryll though, Narl stopped him.

"Not him! Gryll's next in line to take over. Aria's deal is with him." He said.

"Yes! Yes. I'm Aria's mole, Kraan. You've scratched my back, now I'll scratch yours." Said the Vorcha.

―

"I've got a list of new hanar arrivals, Bau. Forwarding it to you." Said Austin.

"Damn. These are all face names. The hanar names from the Alliance raid are soul names." Said Bau. "And hanar soul names are private. There's no public record. Can you get back to their communications?"

"On it. Maybe we'll find names there." Said Austin.

"So how's the rest of the gang? Met up with anybody else?" Kasumi asked.

"Garrus is back on the Normandy." Austin replied.

"He never could pass up a good fight." Said Kasumi. "What about Jacob?"

"Haven't heard from him yet."

"See, Jacob could've gotten me back onto the Normandy."

"I'm touched." Said Austin. "Are you two still…"

"I hope so.

Vosque was struggling to breath now as Griffin held him up. In the end, he could see that the Helldiver wouldn't hesitate to kill him. The next leader might be even easier to persuade. That could weaken the suns for all he knew.

"Alright, alright… just let me go…" he spluttered.

Griffin loosened his grip and let Vosque drop to the floor.

"I'll let Aria know that Suns are all hers."

"Don't double cross her or me. If I find you've lied, I'll be back." Griffin threatened.

"No need to worry about that, boy." Said Vosque. "Looks like the Blue Sun is still in your blood."

Vosque went to leave, but quickly turned back.

"Oh, and… tell Aria I still expect her purple ass in bed with me." He added.

"Dream on, scum." Griffin muttered.

―

"Word of advice: don't double-cross Aria, or me for that matter." Said Kraan.

"I may be ambitious, but I'm not crazy." Said Gryll.
"Uh-huh." Kraan nodded. "Good work, Narl. Thanks for the gun, not that I needed it. Could've easily smashed their faces in."

"Anytime. Gryll and I will let Aria know the light is green. Tell Shepard that the Blood Pack are on her side." Said Narl.

"Bau, here's the correspondence. If there's any mention of soul names…"

"I've got it. A recent arrival. Zymandis. Soul name: Regards the Works of the Enkindlers in Despair." Said Bau. "He was with the Alliance team that massacred the Batarians. He's been on "special research assignment" ever since."

"So he got his tentacles on some Reaper tech." said Austin.

"Looks that way. I'm sending you the NavPoint for his office. I'll meet you there." Said Bau.

Alaara had found at that Sederis' second in command, Sayn was down in the refugee camp awaiting instructions. The Asari had thought up an idea that was a long shot, but ti could work.

"Men, get ready for trouble." Said tha Salrian as he noticed the former Eclipse Helldiver.

"Not here for that, Sayn. Just want to talk about Jona's release." She said.

"So you're the one coordinating that?" said Sayn. "My idea, you know? Aria came to me looking to gain Eclipse support. I'm leveraging it to bust the boss out."

"Sayn, you should run Eclipse." Said Alaara.

"Huh?"

"You can do it. Leave Jona locked up and make the deal with Aria yourself."

"Hmm, Aria would be a step up. And you think she'd let me run things?" Sayn asked.

"I don't see why not. She's do the same if I was in your position." Said Alaara.

"Right, right. Then that's the plan. Keep Sederis in jail-I'll call Aria right away." Sayn nodded.

"Good man. Jona chose well." Said Alaara.

"Yes. You're proof of that, even if you're not one of us anymore." Said Sayn, much to Alaara's amusement. 

Austin, Bau, and also Kasumi, still cloaked, walked into Zymandis' office.

"Zymandis?"

"Or should I say, Regards the Works of the Enkindlers in Despair?" said Bau.

"It seems this one has been apprehended, but confinement is irrelevant. The work of the Enkindlers cannot be stopped." Said Zymandis.

"Why are you trying to help the Reapers, you traitor?!" Austin asked.
"We obtained information regarding the Enkindlers from classified sources. As you are aware, major Shepard, the Protheans eventually became the Collectors. And the Collectors serve the Reapers." Zymandis replied.

"You've got to be kidding me."

"Therefore, as a faithful servant of the Enkindlers, we too must serve the Reapers."

"YOU BIG… STUPID… JELLYFISH!" Austin shouted.

"You know, I support religious freedom for all species, but that's just crazy." Kasumi whispered.

"Your scepticism does not matter. When the Enkindlers uplift us as their chosen sapient, the galaxy will bear witness." Said Zymandis.

"I don't think the Enkindlers are going to be doing anything today." Said Austin.

"Your belief in your victory is mistaken. Our planetary defence network largely automated. It can be disabled with a single virus." Said Zymandis. "…which I have just uploaded."

"Damn it! Wait… a virus would be detected unless sent on low-priority channels, which have a time-lag. I may be able to upload." Said Bau.

Suddenly, another human who'd been standing nearby pinned Bau to the wall.

"You may be delayed." Said Zymandis.

"Help him! I'll handle this!" Kasumi yelled as she uncoaxed and worked on hacking the nearby console.

Austin ran up to the human and snapped his neck, allowing Bua to then shoot Zymandis.

"Got it! Uploads disabled. Looks like we're in the… wait, he's got some kind of failsafe. Get down!" Kasumi yelled.

The console exploded, causing Kasumi to vanish from sight.

"She was here the entire time." Said Bau.

"She was an old friend." Said Austin sadly.

"I intended to arrest her."

"She helped me take down the Collectors, and she just gave her life to save the hanar homeworld."

"Point taken. It was an honor to work with you, Shepard. When the time comes, I'll be there to return the favour… with a few friends."

Bau left, allowing Austin to drop his act.

"You can come out now." He said.

"How'd you know?" Kasumi asked as he uncoaxed.

Austin tapped his helmet in a meaningful way.

"Your cloak's model is a very old one. I could've spotted you in the dark." He said.
"There's no way you're recruiting me to fight in a galactic war." Said Kasumi.

"The Crucible needs technical experts."

"I'm not a scientist!"

"No, but you're the best thief in the galaxy, and you can hack unfamiliar technology better than anyone." Said Austin persuasively. "They could use your help. And think of it: all that expensive tech just lying around… It's not like they're going to check your pockets at the end of the project."

"You say the nicest things. All right. I'm in." said Kasumi. "And Shep… nice working with you again."

"Likewise, Kasumi." Austin smiled.

As Kasumi left, Austin's omni tool suddenly bleeped again.

"What this time?" he said to himself as he opened the message.

*Shepard*

*I need your help. Meet me in the refugee camp.*

*Shiala.*

Austin found the green Asari where she said she'd be.

"Shepard. Thank you for coming. I'd feared you'd be too busy managing the Resistance." She said.

"I can always find time for friends, Shiala." Said Austin. "What do you need help with?"

"Zhu's Hope has been attacked by the Reapers. The people of Zhu's Hope are fighting again. The Thorian is dead now. I can confirm that. But the spores in our bodies remain, and on some level, we are still connected. This is not necessarily a bad thing. As we fight back the Reapers, we feel each other, and act with one mind, ignoring pain when the need arises. This situation is imperfect, and dangerous. Perhaps the colonists should separate, for their own safety. But with one mind, the untrained fight with the skill of veteran commandos. Our force is strong." Shiala explained.

"However we're are starting to lose ground. I've come to ask for your help. I'm not asking much. If you can simply send a Helldiver squad or two to help us push the Reapers back…"

"If I help you, would you be willing to help me too? The Resistance is always in need of more allies to fight the Reapers. If I help, will you join us?"

"Without question. You helped me and the colony twice, it's the least we can do." Said Shiala. "Help us keep the colony in our hands, and we will gladly fight at your side when the time comes for the Resistance to fight back."

"Consider it done then." Said Austin. "I'll send a Helldiver squad and also see if I can get my sister to dispatch an N7 special forces unit to help as well."

"Thank you, Shepard." Said Shiala, who suddenly hugged him. "I owe you my life for this."

"You helping is more than enough, Shiala." Austin smiled. "Take care of yourself. Also, give Lizbeth and her mother my regards."
"I will." Shiala smiled back.

I'm quite proud of that one. Quite a significant achievement, if you ask me.

In fact, I may try and use that narrative more often. It could come in particularity handy for the upcoming prequel, Alpha Origins.

Hope that also answers the questions of several Guest reviews who kept asking if I'd include the missions. As you can see, I am doing them.

Just to also clarify, Zaeed's mission and a few others take place after the Cerberus Coup, so those will have to wait for while. Rest assured though, they are being included.

Next one will be the Rachni mission. I've come up with some very interesting changes you will like. In fact, this chapter will play a critical part later on in the original parts of my story. ;)

Chapter 9, Another Act of Kindness

Hello all!

Bit of a short chapter, this, but the changes I've made should make up for it.

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Chapter 9

Another Act of Kindness

"Any update, Shepard?" Kraan asked.

They were heading to check on the missing Krogan scouts that Wrex had told them about.

"Our backup's waiting for us at the drop point." Austin replied. "Aralakh company, Krogan commandos.

"That is correct, Shepard. They are an accomplished unit." Said EDI. "Their decisive action in liberating a colony from Batarian pirates made them famous."

"Good to hear. Other than that, there's been no word from the team of Krogan scouts since they went through the Rachni relay." Said Austin.

"I don't like the sound of this." Said Liara. "The Krogan would've come prepared to fight."

"We don't know much, but no Rachni activity has been reported." Said Austin.

"It doesn't make sense. You let that last Rachni queen live on the condition she disappear forever. She wouldn't risk everything to start a war." Said Kraan.

"Just be ready for anything."

The dropship gently touched down and everyone jumped out.

Aralakh company was waiting for them. While all of them wore black Krogan armour however, one stood out from the rest.

"Yeah. Dropship just arrived. Better get moving, team 2. See anything, let me know."

"Grunt?"

Sure enough, another of the former Collector team, the tank bred Krogan, pushed past the others.

"Shepard?! Ha! Shepard!" he cheered, shaking Austin's hand happily.

"What are you doing here?" Austin asked, just as pleased to see the Krogan.

"I could ask you the same question." Grunt replied.

"Looks like you did find something to keep you occupied after I recommended you leave the crew." Said Austin.

Grunt had hoped to stay with the Normandy crew when the Collectors had been defeated, but Austin
had recommended he find some work elsewhere as he felt it would start to get pretty quiet and he
wouldn't see as much action as he wanted.

"Yeah. It was a good call. Now I'm out here running Aralakh company. They're tough, think they're
invincible." Said Grunt. "Reckless, but effective."

"You've certainly come a long way. How'd you go from being new and unproven to your own
command?" Austin asked.

"Wasn't easy. When Wrex put Aralakh company together, he needed a leader who represented the
future of our species. Thanks to you, I completed my Rite of Passage on Tuchanka, and became part
of Clan Urdnot. I was an equal. And being the strongest, I was chosen to lead this honoured
company." Grunt replied.

"I'll bet some didn't like a tank bred Krogan being in charge." Said Kraan.

"I collected a few scars earning my place here. These Krogan respect me." said Grunt.

"You were a pain in the ass, Grunt. But if your Krogan are half the soldier you are, we might make it
out of here." Said Austin.

"Ha! Glad you're here to crack some heads, Shepard. Can't believe this might be Rachni. Seems
crazy."

At that moment, an Asari suddenly walked out of the nearby building. She was dressed in a set of
Janissary armour and had purple skin. Something about her, and her voice were very familiar.

"We don't know if the Rachni had anything to do with this." She said. "Hello, Major Shepard. It has
been some time."

"I remember you. You were on Illium two years ago. You gave me a message from the Rachni
Queen." Said Austin, slightly surprised to see her here of all places.

"That is correct. My name is Latara K'roosoni. I had hoped we might meet again."

"What are you doing all the way out here?" Austin asked.

"I have been looking for you." Latara replied.

"You delivering another message?" Austin asked jokingly.

"No. I need your help." Latara replied seriously. "The Rachni Queen has been captured."

"Captured?"

"The Reapers eventually found us. We fought them off as best we could, but they overwhelmed us."
Latara explained. "Before she was captured, the queen begged me to escape, and she gave me a task.
"Find the Great warrior, find Shepard, only he can help us." She said."

"That still doesn't explain why you're here with Aralakh company." Said Austin.

"I searched for you, but I learned that the Reapers were everywhere. I didn't think there would be
any chance of me reaching you, so I was forced to take matters into my own hands. I returned her
with weapons and armour, intent on rescuing the Queen. It did not go brilliantly. I would've been
killed if it hadn't been for the Krogan." Said Latara.
"We crossed paths with her while we were scouting the planet. She was engaging with some husks which nearly overwhelmed her. We saved her." Said Grunt proudly.

"And I owe you my life for that." Said Latara gratefully.

"I'll help if I can, I promise." said Austin.

"Thank you, Shepard." Said Latara.

"We shouldn't forget about the scouts as well." Said Austin. "I didn't see any signs of activity during our approach."

"Agreed. But this place smells wrong, like a bad wound. Our scans show the tunnels down there lead to a large central point. If we're lucky, it's a nest." Sad Grunt.

"Sounds like fun. Just like old times, Grunt." Said Kraan, electing laugh from Grunt before he then told Aralakh company to move out.

"Grab what you need, Shepard. Meet me at the scout camp ahead." He said.

"Sounds good." Said Austin.

"I will stick with them. They will benefit from my help more." Said Latara.

"Can you fight?" Kraan asked.

"I am no commando, but the Queen taught me things, some of which I could use to protect her." Said Latara.

"Good enough. You're in." said Austin. "Move out."

Austin made sure that they took as much extra ammo as they can. Latara also took some of the extra weapons so that she could armour up. She also added a breather helmet to the mix.

"No surprise Grunt found his way into the action. Baby boy's all grown up." Said Kraan.

"Careful he doesn't' catch you saying that, Kraan." Said Austin.

"Still, glad he's here."

The group went ahead of Aralakh company and proceeded through the nearby building. The whole things suddenly shuddered and lurched violently, causing everyone to lose their balance.

"Look out! The Whole thing's coming down! Get back!" Grunt yelled.

The building lurched again, this time at such and angle that everyone fell out. Fortunately, it wasn't a huge drop.

"Everyone alright?" Austin asked.

No bones broken, I think." Latara replied.

"Shepard! You in one peace?" said Grunt through the comm.

"Looks like we're all okay. Keep in radio contact." Austin replied back.

"On our way."
The group proceeded through the tunnels slowly.

"Something up ahead." Said Latara.

"I see it."

Ahead was what looked like a dead Krogan.

"Grunt, got a body of a scout here. Been dead a few days." Said Austin.

"Yeah? If he has his weapon, grab it. He won't need it anymore." Grunt replied.

Austin noticed a flamethrower lying near the body and picked it up.

"Is that webbing?"

"Looks like it."

Sure enough, there was the unmistakable sight of black webbing blocking certain paths through the tunnels.

The flamethrower of course was perfect for dealing with them.

Just as Austin burned the last one down, a sudden shriek suddenly sounded throughout the caverns.

"And there's the scream…" said Kraan.

As the group jumped down to a lower level, sure enough, what was unmistakably a Rachni crawled out of the shadows. This however definitely looked like the Rachni Version of a husk.

"Grunt, we're got company." Said Austin, sliding into cover to avoid the incoming fire from the Ravager.

"Light 'em up, Shepard." Said Grunt.

Austin found it difficult to come out of cover without the tracking beams from the Ravager's locking on to him and then getting a shot. Worse still, the flamethrower wasn't much good unless he could get closer.

"Guys, I can't kill it from this range." He said. "Distract it so I can get closer."

Both Kraan and Liara focused their attacks on getting the Ravager's attention, along with some of the swarmer's that were accompanying it. Latara meanwhile was focusing more on the swarmers. True to what she'd said, her biotics were surprisingly good for an Asari who wasn't a commando.

A few human husks started to join the fray as well, but Liara quickly deployed a singularity, hauling them up into the air and allowing Kraan to shoot all of them, one by one. Austin was even able to set one on fire from where he was.

"What have the Reapers done to her children?! It's horrible!" said Latara, almost sounding on the point of pain as she killed another swarmer.

After managing to jump over a nearby gorge without getting shot, Austin was finally close enough to the Ravager to use the flamethrower. He instantly let the flames loose.

The Ravager struggled violently as the flames burned it.
Eventually though, these struggles were in vain and the husk finally died, succumbing to the flames.

"Grunt, Rachni presence confirmed. Modified and very dangerous." Said Austin after everyone had managed to get their breath back from the fight.

"Finally, something to kill!" Grunt replied. "Nothing here yet! Lost a Krogan to a sinkhole. Bad way to go."

The group proceeded further into the tunnels.

As they crawled through a narrow gap, the whole place suddenly started to shake.

"Watch out!" Austin yelled, quickly making sure everyone was safe as the ceiling collapsed over where they'd just come from.

"Crap! Exit's cut off." Kraan cursed.

"Looks like we're finding another way out of here. Come on!" said Austin.

"What was that noise, Shepard? Sounded bad." Grunt asked.

"Cave-in. We're all right." Kraan replied.

"Good. Didn't want to dig you out."

"That hurts my feelings, Grunt." Austin chuckled.

"Yeah, yeah."

After going deeper and deeper into the caverns, the group soon had sight of Grunt and Aralakh company who were engaging more Rachni.

"Shepard, we're blocked! And getting overrun!" said Grunt.

"Hang on, Grunt. We're on it!"

"Move it, Shepard!"

Aralakh company was being blocked by a barrier which was being powered by Reaper tech. Destroying the power node of course was easy.

Grunt and the other Krogan quickly made their way in just as the last of the Ravagers were retreating.

"Thanks, Shepard. That wasn't webbing stopping us. That was Reaper tech," he said.

"We ran into it, too." Said Liara.

"The Rachni have backed off for now, but they can smell our wounds." Said Grunt. "Any worthy enemy would regroup and finish us. Soon."

"We're close, Grunt. Those barriers were protecting whatever's down that passage." Said Austin.

"We'll dig in here, kill anything that moves, buy you some time." Said Grunt.
"Good luck."

"I don't need luck. I have ammo." Grunt smiled. "Krogan! Get ready!"

The path towards the central chamber involved having to crawl under a very tight space. Kraan in particular struggled to get under due to his massive build.

Once everyone was finally on the other side, they noticed the massive chamber. It was not what they had expected.

"What... is that?"

"That doesn't look like a nest." Said Kraan.

"The Queen!" said Latara, noticing the massive form of the Rachni Queen herself in the chamber.

The Queen looked even larger than the last time Austin had seen her. The logical conclusion was that she hadn't been fully grown at the time.

She was currently sat on some kind of throne, currently oblivious to the bipeds in the chamber with her.

"Grunt, we've located the central chamber." Austin said into his comm.

"Good! We got your back, Shepard!" Grunt replied.

As everyone hopped down however, several barriers suddenly rose out of the floor.

"Move it!"

They were too late though before a final one blocked their path to the Queen.

"Damn it!" Austin cursed.

"Locate the power node! We have to save her!" said Latara urgently.

Austin quickly spotted the power node up on the ceiling and destroyed it with his plasma cannon. That managed to retract some of the barriers, but not all of them.

"Well, that's one." He said.

"We've got incoming." Said Kraan as more Rachni husks began to show up.

"We're running low on ammo as well." Said Liara.

"Then we do this the hard way."

Austin holstered his weapon and drew Excalibur out. Quite ironic that it was once again being used against Rouge Rachni same as it had on Noveria.

The others decided to follow Austin's example and they sheathed their guns. Liara drew her sword, Kraan drew his battle axe and also armed his omni fist. Only Latara kept her gun, since she didn't have a melee weapon. She activated her biotics though. She could at least use those.

Austin and Liara made good use of their Union as they fought both Ravagers and Swarers, Kraan also dealt with both while Latara concentrated more on the Swarers while using her biotics as a
defence against incoming fire from other Ravagers.

"Shepard, over here!"

Austin quickly aimed at the power node and fired. The explosion quickly retreated the other carriers, and the husks seemed to retreat.

"Shepard, the Rachni are backing off!"

"Whatever spooked them won't last. Finish the job."

"Copy that."

Latara immediately walked up to the Queen who seemed to make several happy chirps.

"It's okay. I'm here." She said, gently touching the Queen's head as the Rachni responded by singing to the Asari in her head. "Yes. I brought him like you asked. I promised I would help you."

"Is she okay?" Austin asked.

"She's glad you have come." Latara replied. "She wishes to speak to you through me. I gladly welcome it."

"If you're okay with it, that's fine." Austin nodded.

Latara closed her eyes for a moment as she allowed the Queen to assume control of her.

"Shepard. It warms our heart to see you again, great warrior. It has been so long. " Said the Asari, her eyes now completely white and her voice now echoing with song and whispers.

"I could say the same of you as well, your majesty." Austin nodded, bowing his head in respect.

"But how did this happen? I let you go back on Noveria and you promised not to interfere anymore. The Rachni promised to disappear."

"We have not forgotten. We would never forget the kindness and mercy you showed us." The Queen replied. "We kept our promise, retreated back through the relay. We started a new home. Beautiful children. Harmony. But the machines came. They heard our song. Their shriek of sour notes drowned us out. They took our children! Now they are only silent, hollow. The machines come and take them to war. They die alone, silent, far away."

"They can't hurt you anymore." Said Austin.

"Yes, we… understand." Said the Queen.

"Can you still feel the Reapers? Can they influence you?" Austin asked.

"We hear the machines, but they cannot control us. It is why they have imprisoned us here. Remove this last shackle and we are free." The Queen replied. Suddenly, the whole place suddenly shook violently. "What? The children return. They will destroy us all. Release us!"

"We're getting movement here. A lot of movement…"

"Copy that, Grunt." Said Austin. He then turned face the Queen again. "Are you capable of fighting the Reapers?"
"We hate the machines as much as you do. We will fight for our unborn children." Said the Queen through Latara. "We already owe you for releasing us before. Do it again, and we will join your fight, we will help you destroy the machines!"

"She's weak. She needs time to escape." Said Liara.

"Shepard, we're out of time! We stay here, Aralakh Company dies! Is that clear?" said Grunt.

"Listen up! Aralakh Company holds the Rachni off while the Queen escapes." Austin ordered. "We'll buy you some time. Grunt, fall back to our position and lead us out!"

"Damn you, Shepard! I'm leaving my team. On my way!"

"Shepard…" said Kraan.

"That's an order! She's too valuable an asset to lose!" Austin interrupted.

The Helldiver activated his plasma cannon and aimed it at the shackle. He fired, and it exploded.

"Thank you, great warrior. We will never forget your eternal kindness." Said the Queen as the shackle collapsed and she finally fell back onto her feet.

"You're welcome. Before you go, I would like to offer you safe asylum on Arkadia. You and your children will be safe from the Reapers there." Austin offered.

"We gladly accept." Said the Queen. "Our songs shall forever sing of you until the end of time itself."

Latara then blinked several times and her eyes returned to normal as the Queen released control over her.

A huge part of the cavern was then shot away to reveal Grunt.

"Now get us outta here!" said Austin.

The group only got a few seconds into the tunnels before they could hear more Ravagers around the corner.

"The shuttle's down that path! I'll hold them off!" said Grunt.

"Grunt…" Austin tried to say.

"Get outta here, Shepard!" said Grunt.

Forced to accept the inevitable, Austin and the others left. Only Kraan briefly stayed.

"You're a true Krogan, Urdnot Grunt." He said. "I am proud to have called you clan."

He then left to, leaving just Grunt with the Rachni.

"My turn."

"Cortez, we're the last ones out." Said Austin, doing his best to hide the sadness in his voice.

"Copy that, Major. Shuttle is waiting." Cortez replied.
"Joker, bring the Normandy down too. We've got a big package that needs retrieval." Austin continued.

"On it, Major."

Everyone was so focused on the grief however, they didn't notice the large figure walking out of the cave after them.

Austin suddenly heard footsteps and looked.

"Grunt!"

Both he and Kraan hurried over to the tank bred. He was covered in blood and didn't' look too good, but he was alive.

"Anybody got something to eat?" the Krogan asked weakly as the fell into the two Helldiver's arms.

"Ha! Knew they couldn't put you down!" Kraan smiled.

"I'm reviewing your report on the Rachni situation, Shepard. This could've got complicated, fast." Said Hackett. "I hope you know what you're doing, cutting a deal with the Rachni Queen. We got burned last time."

"It wasn't' her fault. The Reapers captured her. I'm taking her to Arkadia where she'll be safe and she'll be able to help us." Said Austin. "She's been able to send a message to her surviving drones that the Reapers haven't indoctrinated. They, along with the Helldivers will see to her safety."

"We're trusting your instincts, Major." Said Zartrack. "At least we cut the Reaper supply of new Rachni troops and picked up some additional Krogan support. We can definitely call this a victory and an addition to the Resistance."

"We've gotta get back to it. Watch yourself out there, Shepard. Hackett out."

As Austin walked into the war room, he found Wrex waiting for him.

"Shepard, you made it out of there. Sounds like I missed a hell of a fight." He said.

"Better you didn't risk it. We were lucky to get out of there alive." Said Austin.

"Knew you could get it done, Shepard." Said Wrex. "Heard you made some kind of deal with the Rachni Queen. If they get out of hand again, it's your ass on the line."

"Understood."

"I heard Grunt managed to get out of there too, with a few scratches."

"You could say that."

"We'll get him patched up, back in the fight."

"Good to hear."

"I should get back to it. Keep me posted, Shepard."
Austin went down to the cargo hold to check on Latara and the Queen. Sure enough, the Queen was nestled up comfortably in the corner of the cargo bay with Latara gently stroking her as she listened to the Queen's songs.

Austin had to admit he was impressed that the Queen was able to fit in here. It was hardly unexpected though. The SR3 had been designed to be much bigger.

Latara took notice of Austin and turned to face him.

"Major Shepard." She said, bowing her head.

"Am I interrupting anything?" Austin asked politely.

"No. The Queen and I were just… talking." Said Latara.

"How's she doing?" Austin asked.

"She has had time to recover and rest. She'll be fine. She's also expecting to lay more eggs once she reaches Arkadia." Said Latara. "I don't mean to sound ungrateful, but are you sure she will be safe there?"

"The Helldivers will certainly be surprised that their guests are Rachni, but my word will make sure they don't do anything rash." Austin replied. "The Reapers are not attacking Arkadia for some reason and the whole planet is well fortified and guarded by the largest fleet in the galaxy. It's currently the safest place in the galaxy."

"If the Queen trusts you, then so do I." said Latara.

"You must care about her a lot." Austin inquired, sensing there was probably some chemistry between the Asari and the queen.

"As I said when we first met, she gave me new purpose. She showed me a new life greater than I had imagined. Not only do I owe her my life for saving me, but I have come to see her as a friend. Perhaps… maybe even more…" said Latara, but she hesitated after the last bit. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay. It's hardly unexpected. You tried to come back for her by yourself. That takes tremendous courage, if not strong will." Said Austin.

"Thank you, Shepard." Said Latara. The Queen then sat up slightly. Latara walked up to the Queen and touched her in order to hear what she had to say. "She would like to give you something. A gift."

"She doesn't need to." Said Austin.

"She insists. She refuses to let you go unrewarded for saving her twice." Said Latara.

The Asari then walked up to Austin and took his face in her hands.

"What are you doing?"

"She has given the git to me so that I can give it to you." Latara explained. "Just be still. This will be quick."

Austin allowed himself to relax. He trusted the Queen, and she trusted Latara.

"Simply relax, Shepard. Embrace Eternity."
Latara's eyes went black for a moment and her hands glowed with biotics.

Surprisingly though, Austin didn't see any visions or knowledge flash before his eyes like he thought would happen. Nothing felt different either.

"What exactly was that?" he asked.

"Even I myself do not know." Latara replied.

Austin turned to the Queen who simply sung to Latara.

"All she says is that you will know when the time is right. "In the darkness, you will see the light. Through the fogs of lies, you will see the truth. Even through the sour note, you will still hear the music." She translated.

"I appreciate your gift, your majesty. Thank you. I will leave you to rest." Said Austin, respectively bowing his head.

The Queen bowed her head back ever so slightly in return before settling back down to sleep.

"What will you do when we reach Arkadia?" Austin to Latara.

"I will go with her. I am not leaving her side again." Latara replied. "I will help raise her children, teach them the music like she does. I will help her so that she can help you."

"Take care of yourself. You should get some rest too."

"I agree."

Deciding to call it a day, Austin headed up to his quarters. TO his delight, he found Liara there going over a few datapads. Being the XO of the ship did at least keep her working.

"Busy?" he asked.

"I always have time for you, Austin. In fact, I could use the distraction." Liara smiled. She put down the datapad and Austin sat down on the sofa opposite her.

"What's on your mind?"

"How long it took the Reapers to eradicate the Protheans, and how long they'll need for us." "It took them centuries to conquer the Protheans. We're not quite so widespread, but it would still take at least 100 years." Said Liara.

"Liara…" said Austin, trying to reassure his wife.

"It's selfish, but I keep thinking if we fail…"

"We won't. I have faith and hope that we can win this." Said Austin.

"I know. It's just… difficult, watching you get shot at out there…” said Liara. "We finally have other leaders on our side, but none will take us as far as you can. Sometimes, I wonder how you do it."

Austin smiled and stood up. He then sat down again next to Liara and took her hand in his.

"Every time the world's about to end, I think about how mad you'd get if I didn't stop it." He said. "I
don't know if I could do this without you, my love."

Liara smiled and planted a quick kiss on her husband's lips.

"Flatterer." She smiled.

"I try."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

The two once again drew into another kiss. This time though it was longer, more passionate, and completely full of love.

"Let's go to bed." Austin whispered.

"I thought you'd never ask." Liara smiled.

The next one will be the Primarch's son and we finally use 3 squad members that haven't had a chance to be used yet. See you soon! :)


Chapter 10, Return to Tuchanka

Good few bits of action in this chapter.

Not much more for me to say really. Enjoy!

Chapter 10

Return to Tuchanka

Austin had Recently been able to get more information out of Victus and had found out that one of
the Turians on Tuchanka was his son. That certainly explained a lot.

"This crash site's a nightmare." Said Austin. "EDI, try to raise Lieutenant Victus."

"Yes sir."

"For a Turian commander, what happened here isn't good. Especially considering the Turian code." Said Griffin.

"And that it's the Primarch's son is bad for the family I take it?" Sarah asked while gently patting Urz who was sat down next to her.

"Exactly. Promoting family without merit… well, as Garrus would say "It can bit you in the ass." said Austin.

"What's strange is the Primarch knows that." Said Griffin.

"Major, I have to land well back from the crash site." Said Cortez.

"That the best you can do?" Austin asked.

"Yes sir, but the Reapers seem unaware of our presence. You might get the jump on them."

"Alright. Set her down. Let's save this platoon."

"You got that right." Said Griffin.

As the group hoped out, Urz sniffed the air a few times then barked excitedly, obviously recognizing
the very familiar atmosphere of his home planet.

"Welcome home, boy." Austin smiled.

Urz gave a few more happy barks before falling silent, obviously knowing that they still had a job to
do and they couldn't stick around. That was one of the good things about Varren, they were just as
intelligent as dogs, perhaps even more.

"EDI, did you raise Lieutenant Victus?" Austin asked into his comm.

"Yes, but the connection is bad."

"Patch us in." said Austin. "This is Sir Major Shepard of the Helldivers. Do you read?"
"This is Lieutenant Tarquin Victus of the Ninth Platoon. We're pinned by Reaper Harvesters and taking heavy casualties. Also there are pockets of my men scattered along the crash trajectory."

"Lieutenant, I need you to fire a flare so we can find your position." Said Austin.

Not a second to soon, a flare shot up into the sky. The source didn't look to far away.

"Got it."

"Things are getting worse by the minute. My men are dying." Said Victus.

"This sounds bad. Let's move."

"Shh! See 'em?"

Everyone quickly went into cover and gently peered out. There were a few Cannibals round the corner. So far, they weren't aware of their presence.

"Deal with them, nice and quietly. We don't want them to call for reinforcements." Said Austin, swapping his assault rifle for his Raptor sniper.

Both Sarah and Griffin caught on and they aimed at a Cannibal each.

"Ready."

"Ready."

"Open fire." Said Austin.

All three Cannibals fell at the same time. With the area clear, the continued on. Along the way, Sarah noticed that Austin was throwing some small devices onto the walls every so often. They would screw into the walls and then activate with a red light.

"What are those?" she asked curiously.

"Laser net mines." Austin replied.

"How do those work then?" Sarah asked, curious what these laser mines could do.

"It's derived from a new tactic we developed during a simulation. The idea is the device projects a net of lasers and you then shoot a husk into them. Cuts them apart." Griffin explained.

"Don't your plasma cannon's already do that though?"

"Husks are much stronger. Somehow the shots don't kill them as easily. This way's quicker and more effective." Austin replied.

The group then rounded a corner and finally came upon what looked like a crashed escape pod. There were a few bodies nearby.

"Escape pod… and our first casualties." Sarah sighed.

"Survived the crash just in time for a harvester to take 'em out." Said Griffin bitterly.

"Wouldn't be so sure of that. They've been burned." Said Austin, examining the singed corpses.
"The Draco?"

"Maybe. But I hope we're wrong."

The group continued on through the tunnels. Eventually, they could start to hear the sound of gunfire.

Sure enough, more Cannibals could be seen round the corner firing at a small squad of surviving Turian who were taking cover from the incoming fire.

"Okay, I have a visual on the enemy… and there's an escape pod just beyond. Looks like the Turians are in tough." Said Austin. "Enemies up ahead don't know we're here."


"Perfect opportunity for me to test my latest invention then." Said Griffin.

Surprisingly, rather than ready for a sync shot, the demolition expert holstered his minigun and took what looked like a large mine from the back of his combat belt.

"Cover your ears, sister" said Austin, sensing where this was going.

"Relax. I'm not gonna do what I did on that purgatory ship." Griffin chuckled.

The device that Griffin was holding then seemed to extended away from his hand on a small chain until it hung almost half a metre or so from his gauntlet. The demolition expert then brought his arm up and started to twirl the device very fast until it was almost a blur.

Eventually, Griffin released the device and let it fly. The device flew a few metres before it landed on the ground near to where the Cannibals were. Rather than roll on the ground, it surprisingly adjusted itself while in mid-air and landed neatly upright. It then beeped several times which drew the attention of the Cannibals.

It was only a few seconds though before the device stopped beeping and exploded with enough force to cause a cave in. Fortunately it didn't, but it was stills so large that took out all the Cannibals.

"Hmm, that wasn't bad actually." Said Austin, somewhat surprised. "What do you call them?"

"IME's." Griffin replied.

"I'm assuming you've got more then? Cause they may come in handy." Said Austin.

Right as they went to check on the Turians, an unwelcome sight suddenly swooped down from the sky.

"Heads up!" one of the Turians called as the Draco swooped over them and landed very near to the crash site.

"Not again!" Austin cursed, ducking into cover just in time to avoid the Draco's breath of fire.

"Assuming direct control!"

Under Harbinger's control, the Draco was even stronger than before. It could resist almost anything and it's attacks were a lot more ferocious.

"Think one of those IME's might do enough damage to him, Griffin?!" said Austin as he blind fired a
few shot from his Revenant and some plasma shots.

"If I set one high enough it might. I can't make any promises though." Griffin replied.

"Well it's worth a shot. We won't last long against him at this rate."

Griffin quickly took another IME from his belt and twirled it several times before he let it fly. Harbinger spotted it and tried to burn it, but Griffin had designed the devices to be fire proof.

The IME attached itself to the Draco's face just below the eye. Harbinger quickly seemed to sense that there was danger.

"Releasing control!"

The device exploded, taking a huge chunk of the Draco's face with it. Wounded badly, the dragon quickly retreated and flew away.

"It's falling back!" said one of the Turians.

"Thanks for the help, Major." Said another "We'll rendezvous at the crash site."

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"Do you read, Major? Do you read?"

"Shepard here. What's your status?" Austin replied.

"We're in deep, Major. What's your ETA?" Victus asked.

"Hang tight. We're on our way."

As the group rounded another corner however they found something new blocking their path.

There was a new type of husk that had just killed another Turian. It was undoubtedly a Salarian.

This new type of husk didn't look to extensively modified compared to other husks. A noticeable addition though was to the Salarian's horn and to its hands and feet. The horns were extended more into what looked like small tentacles and the hands and feet were more clawed and web like.

As the husk noticed them, it roared with a rather high pitched hiss. At the same time, a very long tongue emitted from it's mouth.

"Great! Now we've got Salarian husks too." Said Sarah.

Surprisingly, the Salarian husk then brought its head back and spat hard. The stuff only just missed everyone but it hit Urz's armour.

"Can these things not get any lamer abilities?" said Griffin.

Griffin's comment seemed a bit premature though as they started to hear afain hissing sound. Austin looked to source and found to his horror that the stuff that the husk had spat at them earlier was actually acid and it was eating away at Urz's armour.

"Get the plate off him! Quick!"

Both Austin and Sarah frantically worked on trying to remove the armour plate. Using all his enhanced strength, Austin was able to rip the plate right off just in time before the acid got through
and risked hurting Urz.

"I take that back now." Said Griffin.

"Nobody tries hurts booboo and gets away with it!" Sarah yelled as she fired at the husk, only for it to leap out of the way and onto a nearby wall.

"Booboo?" Austin asked.

"We'll talk about it later." Sarah replied.

The Spitter, as the husk could be called, proved extremely difficult to fight. In fact, it remained Austin of the Geth hoppers that he'd once fought while hunting down Saren.

Worse still, the tongue could easily wrap around them if it got too close.

"Stay clear! Don't let it's tongue catch you." Austin advised, just as Griffin managed to avoid a lash from the Spitter.

Urz then did something very surprising. The Varren bit intot he tongue hard and pulled. He pulled so hard in fact that that Spitter could no longer grip to the wall and was pulled to the floor.

"Now! While it's down!" Austin yelled.

Griffin didn't have to be told twice. He quickly charged up his gauntlet and bright it down with full force on the husks head, crushing it completely.

"I already hate those things." He said.

"Come on, let's find the rest of the Turians." Said Austin.

It didn't take long before the group finally found Victus and the rest of the Turians who'd all held up near the crashed ship.

"Lieutenant Victus?"

"Major Shepard, my men and I are in your debt." The Lieutenant replied. "Thank you for coming for us."

Before anyone could speak further however, Urz started growl and bark loudly at the tunnels they'd just come out of. Everyone knew what that usually meant.

This was further confirmed when Austin's omni tool started bleep. This time though, it was a different sort of beep, more like an alarm.

"Uh oh!"

"What's that?" Sarah asked.

"Proximity alerts! They're converging on our location." Said Griffin, un-holstering his mini gun and arming both his shoulder cannons.

"Hold your ground! We'll make our stand here." Said Austin.

Several more Spitters crawled out from the different tunnel entrances.
"Let's see how they like these odds." Said Austin, activating a function on his omni tool.

The Helldiver had made sure to put laser mines on each tunnel entrance just in case they got ambushed. This would definitely prevent anymore husks from joining the fray, and although some Spitters had already made it through, they would still come in handy.

A Spitter lunged Austin, but he quickly fired his plasma cannon at it. The shot hit the husk in the chest sending it flying… right into one of the laser nets.

As had been explained earlier, the net cut the Spitter into several tiny pieces, killing it instantly.

Griffin meanwhile fired at two more Spitters, but they moved before his shots could hit them in time and plasma simply flew unfazed through one of the laser nets.

The Demolition expert fired another, but that one missed too as the Spitter the shot had been intended for jumped up to the ceiling and then crawled along it with an almost cat like speed towards him.

Just as it lunged it's tongue it him however, Griffin was able to counter it. Allowing the Spitter's tongue to wrap around his massive Gauntlet he then pulled hard, bringing the husk crashing to the floor. He then stomped on it hard with one of his feet and fired both plasma cannon's at the Spitter. The combination of two plasma shots was enough to disintegrate the husk entirely.

Another Spitter lunged at Austin, but Sarah was able to parry it's lunge with her N7 Valkyrie. As it hit the ground, Austin unloaded an entire clip into the husk from his Revenant.

Only too late however did he notice that two more Spitters were heading right at Griffin.

"Griffin, watch out!"

Griffin sadly wasn't able to react in time either and both the Spitter's pounced on him.

Sarah was about to shoot to try and shake them off, but Austin stopped her.

"Don't! You might risk hitting him. Don't worry, he's got this." He said.

"You sure?" Sarah asked worriedly.

The N7marine's doubts however were quickly put to rest when Griffin suddenly grabbed both Spitters by the neck and hauled them up with all his strength.

"Yep. He's got this."

With both Spitters struggling to break free from Griffin's grip, the Helldiver turned his head between the two so that his targeting laser could lock onto both of them for his plasma cannons.

Just as both cannons were about to fire however, another new type of husk suddenly burst out of the ground and roared at him. Before Griffin could react in time, the massive husk swiped him hard, sending him flying just as his plasma cannons fired, sending debris all over the place.

Sarah turned to see what had happened only to see the husk right in front of her. Only too late did she realise how close the creature was before it hit her heard, sending her flying into a pile of rubble. It was as Sarah managed to recover from the disorientness that she was able to see this new husk fully.

There was no mistaking the armour it wore, or the massive triangular shaped helmet it wore. This husk was a Helldiver. It was impossible to tell what kind of Helldiver it was though due to how
much the Reapers had changed it, but it certainly wasn’t human.

This Hellbringer, as it could appropriately called, stood at nearly 2.5 metres, allowing it to essentially tower over even the Helldivers. Various parts from a Helldiver’s armour protected vital parts of the husk, such as it arms, legs, torso, and even the head.

A part of the head was left uncovered by the helmet. Although the mouth was covered, there were gaps in the helmet for four large mandibles to stick out.

In addition to this, the hands had secondary thumbs, blades stuck out the elbows and the Hellbringer even had a second set of smaller arms.

Just as the Hellbringer was about to reach for Sarah, Austin was quick to intervene with a slash from his sword.

"Get away from my sister!" he yelled.

Surprisingly for a husk, the Hellbringer seemed to back away in retreat. It emitted a slight war and surprisingly even gave a motion for another Spitter to attack.

Austin only found this most odd for a moment before he snapped his mind back to the situation at hand as the Spitter lunged forward only to be impaled on Excalibur and then slammed against the wall.

Another one appeared, but Austin's plasma cannon, which had been set to automatic quickly locked on and fired, sending it flying against a pillar and snapping it's neck. Austin then turned back to the one that was still impaled on Excalibur and fired again. At close range, the plasma was able to do enough damage to take the head off.

Griffin meanwhile was finally able to punch out of the rubble he'd been buried under. Not a second too soon however, another Spitter pounced on him. This time however, Griffin wasn't going to let himself get caught off guard again. Using his huge strength, he tackled the Spitter to the ground and delivered several hard and fast punches with his gauntlet.

Despite this though, the Spitter's tongue kept trying to wrap around something and was flailing wildly. Left with barely any other alternative, Griffin reached for the tiny dissolving liquid capsule contained in a small pouch on his thigh that all Helldivers had and shoved it hard into the Spitter's mouth as it began depositing the liquid.

As the liquid slowly melted and dissolved the Spitter's head, it started to struggle less until it finally went limp.

A sudden growl however alerted Griffin to another presence behind him and he was only just able to duck in time to avoid a swing from the Hellbringer who had decided to re-join the fight. Using the swing to his advantage, Griffin clenched his gauntlet into a fist and swung, punching the husk straight in the face.

To Griffin's surprise however, the punch didn't have the effect he'd thought it would. The Hellbringer simply turned back to him, simply flexing one of the mandibles he'd hit. Roaring furiously, the husk made several more swing at Griffin which he either dodged or was able to block.

Annoyed by this, the Hellbringer's right arm started to change. It seemed to somehow transform into some kind of gun/blade arm. The husk's arm now had the appearance of crab's pincer, the outer blade longer than the other. In-between the two blades was even what looked like a small cannon.
"Oh shit!"

Griffin just narrowly managed to dodge another swipe from the Hellbringer as it swung and lunged with its new blade like arm.

Desperate to try and slow the Hellbringer down, Griffin took another IME from his belt. Just as the device's chain extended however and he prepared to throw, the Hellbringer brought its blade arm up ready for downward strike on him.

As if it was a reflex action, Griffin quickly swung the IME upwards, smashing the Hellbringer right in the face with the actual mine. The good thing about these IMEs was that they were very strong and also wouldn't detonate until they were attached to the surface. This was a safety device Griffin had built into them just in case they missed their target or didn't attach to a surface properly.

As the Hellbringer staggered back, trying to regain balance, Griffin looked in surprise at the IME, suddenly realising that he'd just found another thing they could do.

"Huh. Imagine that. It never occurred to me that these things could be used like a flail." He said.

The Hellbringer swung again, but was once again met with another hit from Griffin.

Though both opponents were large, the Hellbringer was slightly slower than Griffin. Mostly any lunge or strike the Hellbringer used was met another blow to the face or to some other body parts by Griffin's IME.

The Hellbringer attempted another lunge and Griffin turned to smash the IME into its arm. However he ended up getting it slightly wrong and the IME's chain became wrapped around the Hellbringer's blade arm.

The husk immediately try to shake Griffin off and swung its arm hard, taking him with it. As the chain slid off, Griffin was able to roll back onto his feet and in a crouched position whirled round and threw the IME at the Hellbringer.

"Eat this!"

The IME attached to the Hellbringer's armour and started to beep. The Hellbringer only had a few moments to notice this before the device detonated.

The explosion obscured all view of the Hellbringer and a large part of the level above collapsed on top of it. There was very little chance that any husk could survive that.

"Area secured." Austin panted as Urz managed to kill the last Spitter and they were finally able to get their breath back.

"Thank you for saving so many." Said Victus.

"What happened here?" Sarah asked.

"He screwed up!" one of the Turian soldiers accused, seizing Victus.

"Stand down, soldier!" Victus ordered.

"These men are dead because of him!"

"I said stand down!"
"Hey! We just saved all your asses, so everyone just calm down!" said Griffin, quickly separating the two using his massive form.

"Lieutenant, what's going on here?" Austin asked.

"I made a bad call. This is all on me." Victus replied regretfully. "I chose caution and clever tactics over a head on attack—and my men paid the price."

"You mean the crash?" Sarah asked.

"Yes. We could see on holo the Reaper forces were blocking our intended path—staying on course guaranteed heavy casualties. So I chose a safer route, skirting the enemy, and that took us low and through these ruins. When we encountered resistance, there was no room to maneuver. Suddenly we were in a fight for our lives. A lot of my men lost their fight." Victus explained.

"Owning your mistake takes guts. But you have to get over it and move on." Said Austin.

"Of course. It's just fresh right now. Our mission's still a failure. When we've stabilized the injured, we'll head back to the fleet." Said Victus.

"Your abandoning your mission?" Griffin asked.

"We're down over thirty men. It'd be suicide." Victus replied.

"What exactly did you come here to do?" Austin asked.

"There's a bomb on the planet. We were sent to diffuse it."

"A bomb? How big?" asked Griffin.

"Enormous. Cerberus has it." Said Victus.

"Lieutenant, if Cerberus has that bomb, you have to finish your mission." Austin immediately.

"Haven't these men sacrificed enough?" Victus asked back crossly.

"I understand. This kind of sacrifice is the hardest to ask for, but your men signed on for it, and so did you." Said Austin.

"My men have lost hope, Major. Even if I wanted to finish the mission, they don't."

"It's your job to make them want to."

"How?"

"Their sacrifice means that others will never face what they faced today. Remind them that those sacrifices have no honor if the mission fails."

Victus took a moment to consider this before he then walked up to his men.

"Men, I own what happened today, but we have to carry on!" he said.

"No, we don't. Who cares about a few dead Krogan? It's over!" one of the soldiers refused.

"We are Turian, and we will not let Cerberus succeed. Our sacrifice is the difference between life and death for this entire galaxy! Let the heroes of the Ninth Platoon be remembered for performing
their duties with bravery!” said Victus motivationally. "All right, men! Shuttles are arriving any
minute- we're moving out!"

That seemed to do the trick.

"Major? Come with us." Said Victus. "We're a shell of what we were- we could use some help."

"Send me the NavPoint. I'll see what I can do." Said Austin.

"Thank you. That'll give us time to do a little recon, see what we're up against." Said Victus.

"Victus, you have a second chance here… make their sacrifice count." Said Austin.

"Understood, Major. Hope to see you at the rendezvous."

As everyone left however, they failed to notice that a small pile rocks nearby was moving, as if
something was buried underneath, trying to get out...

"A Cerberus bomb? What the hell is going on? And what do the Turians have to do with it?"
Zartrack asked.

"Coordinates Victus gave me place it in the Kelphtic Valley. It's a heavily populated area. That's all I
know." Austin replied.

"My gut says something's not right here." Said Hackett. "Anyway, how many troops does Cerberus
have on this bomb?"

"I don't know yet. All I do know is that we can't have them detonate that bomb." Said Austin.

"Keep us posted, Shepard." Said Zartrack.

As the holograms vanished, Austin headed into the war room. He had a bone to pick with the
Primarch.

"Primarch Victus," He said.

"Impressive work on Tuchanka. I'm grateful that-"

"Why didn't you tell me about the Cerberus bomb?!" Austin demanded. "Why hide that? What else
are you keeping from me?!"

"I have nothing for you." Said the Primarch.

"For our alliance and the whole resistance to work, I need to trust you." Said Austin.

"Our friendship is new, Major. Would you trust me with information that puts your people-puts
Earth-at risk?" Victus asked.

"Why would I jeopardize our alliance by lying to you now? Doesn't make sense." Austin replied.

"Decisions like these weigh heavy on me. When I was a general, I could pass them up the chain of
command. But now, I'm all I've got." Said Victus. "Know what I mean?"

"Perhaps. And…"

"And… and that's all."
Seeing that he wasn't going to get something as basic as an apology out of the Primarch, Austin turned to leave.

"Wait, there is one more thing, Major." Said Victus. "Thank you for saving my son."

Next one of course will contain the bomb and hopefully a romance scene.

See you soon!
Chapter 11, Racing the Clock

I think I need to take a small break from writing.

The last few chapters I've done haven't been the best. Some of them have even been rushed.

So to sum it up, I'm gonna take a week off so my mind can rest a bit and I come back freshened and wanting to write again. So there won't be any chapter next week.

Hope you understand. Rest assured, this is not writer's block. I just need some time off is all.

Chapter 11
Racing the Clock

"Normandy shuttle, this Lieutenant Victus with the Ninth Platoon. Do you copy?"

"We hear you, Ninth Platoon." Austin replied.

Sarah and Liara had been brought along for this mission. Also for the first time, Javik was joining them. He'd specially requested that he brought along this time since he was certain he was recovered enough from the cryo to fight again.

"Getting bounced around pretty bad." Victus replied.

"This is as close as we can get, Lieutenant. Look for somewhere to set your platoon down." Said Austin.

"Copy that."

"Talk to me about this bomb."

"It's not Cerberus, Major. It's... Turian."

"What do you mean "Turian?" Austin asked in surprise.

"It was planted centuries ago, after the Krogan Rebellions. The bomb was a safeguard against another galactic war." Victus explained.

"You won't earn trust with tactics like that." Said Austin bitterly. "But right now, we focus on disarming that bomb."

"Yes, but Cerberus found it. Detonation means all-out war between my people and the Krogan." Said Victus.

"Right. Where is it?" Austin asked.

Those buildings ahead. Cerberus brought equipment to dig it up. The ninth platoon will cover your flank, Major." Said Victus.

"With all this activity, the Krogan have to know something's up. We can't fail this." Said Austin.

"Copy that, Major."
The comm of Victus vanished and Austin turned to Javik. Despite the Prothean's increased height, he still fit into the Hellhound dropship very easily and with relative comfort.

"Javik, you sure you're fit for duty?" he asked.

"I've had more than enough time to recover from the cryo and I need to adapt to my height in battle as well." Javik replied. "I am ready and able."

"Good enough for me. Okay, let's do this."

The doors opened as the dropship touched down. The whole sight looked like a warzone. Ruins, explosions happening all over the place and so on.

Everyone immediately went into cover to avoid incoming ire form the Cerberus troopers, and also so that they could survey the battlefield properly and pick their targets.

All three of the Shepard's naturally (including Liara) used the trusting cooperative teamwork to take down their targets.

Javik however did surprise them. Although the Prothean wasn't a soldier, he certainly fought like one, not to mention that his towering height did intimidate the Cerberus troopers.

More surprising though, was that it turned out that Javik didn't even know his own strength. One Cerberus trooper tried to charge him and the Prothean hit him hard with the butt of his rifle. To everyone's surprise, he sent the trooper flying several feet high into the air before he crashed into some rubble.

Once the first wave had been dealt with, Victus radioed in.

"Once we reach the bomb, I'll need to reprogram the trigger mechanism." He said.

"Copy that. No trigger, no explosion." Said Austin into his comm.

Traynor was currently stood at her post monitoring the comms for the mission. She could not deny that she was a bit nervous, and the tension was starting to eat away at her. Like Liara worried for Austin, Samantha worried for Sarah. The difference being however that Liara didn't have to watch her husband get shot at out there. She could actually be there in person and fight alongside him.

Samantha on the other hand was no soldier. She'd never held a gun in her life, let alone see the heat of battle. The Comm specialist kept trying to tell herself that she shouldn't worry so much. Sarah was the Major's sister, she'd fought in the alliance almost as long as he'd been a Helldiver, and she was also an N7 marine for crying out loud. There was denying that she could handle some of the worst.

Despite this though, Traynor couldn't totally suppress the worry. This particular situation only made it worse. If Sarah wasn't down there with a bomb that could go off, she wouldn't be as worried. Obviously she would still be concerned about the ground team. They were her crew after all, and they were also being led by their leader. If he died, the resistance would be in disarray.

Then a thought suddenly struck her. She was comm specialist after all. Maybe... just maybe she could try and tip the scales a bit. Maybe even increase the chances of her love being safe...

Cerberus squads were doing their best hold the group back. They clearly were quite close to detonating the bomb if they were this determined.
"Target the shield generators." Austin ordered as he blind fired from cover at several troopers that were using a generator to give themselves extra shields.

"I got you covered, Sis." Said Sarah.

"You've been waiting to say that, haven't you?" Liara smiled under her helmet.

"Yep." Sarah smiled back.

The two sisters in law both covered each other as they worked together to get closer and closer until finally one of them had a clear shot at the generator.

Sarah had come prepared for a situation like this. While the generator was still a bit far away for her N7 Typhoon assault rifle to hit it accurately, it was close enough that she didn't need a sniper rifle (which she didn't have).

Luckily, Sarah had just the weapon for the job. Being in charge of the N7 special forces, she got access to pretty much any special weapon that N7's got.

Reaching to the back of her waist, Sarah drew an N7 Piranha shotgun. It almost looked like a small grenade launcher because of its design. As a result of this however, it did pack almost the same amount of punch that a grenade launcher would.

Leaning out of cover for just long enough, Sarah pulled the trigger just once and unloaded one round right at the generator. Sure enough though, the shotgun packed enough punch that the generator was blown to pieces. In fact it exploded with such force that it caused a pulse that disabled all the shields of the troopers it had just been projecting a little while ago.

That of course opened the flood gates and everyone else emptied their thermal clips into the remaining troopers.

"Major, exit on the left." Said Javik.

"Major! We're getting a lot of mortar fire! Heavy casualties! Taking alternate route! Circling around the bomb site!" said Victus.

"Copy that!"

So far, things seemed to be going well. As far as Traynor could tell, the group was making good progress. All she had to do now was finish her hacking. If she got this right, the ground team would be able to listen in on all Cerberus comm channels. This would definitely be of big help to them. Not only that, but if she could do this more often, she'd be able to help them on any mission.

Just a few more seconds, and… success!

"Major, this is Comm Specialist Traynor, do you read me?"

Austin activated his comm and a hologram of Traynor was projected out his omni tool.

"I read you, Traynor. Go ahead." He said.

"I've managed to hack into the comm channels that Cerberus are using. You'll be able to listen in on what they saying. Might help you out." Traynor replied.
"Argo team, detonation protocol nearly complete! Available units, contain the Helldivers!"

"That was very clever of her." Said Javik approvingly.

"Agreed. Good work, Traynor." Said Austin.

Once again, Traynor was flattered to have the Major's approval. If he thought that she was this good of a crew member, she should try and get used to it.

"Remind me to thank you later, Sammy." Said Sarah.

"Stay focused, Sis. You can talk romantically once we've disarmed that bomb."

"Spoilsport." Sarah smiled.

"I'm getting a lot of Cerberus radio chatter. They're prepping for evac." Said Victus.

"I don't like the sound of that." Said Austin.

True to what Traynor had said though, they were able to listen in on Cerberus comm chatter. True to what Victus had said, it looked like they were evacuating.

"Detonation protocol complete."

As the group rounded the corner, they spotted a Cerberus shuttle hovering just above a squad of troopers, waiting to pick them up.

"Cerberus is retreating."

"Oh no you don't!" said Austin as he activated his plasma cannon.

Just as the last Cerberus trooper had hovered up and into the shuttle, Austin rolled out of cover, targeted the shuttle and fired.

The shot hit the one of the shuttle's thrusters, causing it to spin mildly out of control and crash in a huge fireball. With the path ahead now clear, the other continued onwards.

"There's a better vantage point up that ramp, brother!" said Sarah.

"Agreed! Let's go!"

As the group headed up, they finally got their first sight of the bomb. It was massive. All around it there were debris and rocks, a clear sign that it had just been unearthed.

"A planet killer hidden under the ruins. I'd almost call that barbaric." Said Javik.

"It must have been far enough underground to stay hidden. Cerberus had to dig it out." Said Liara.

"I hope Victus knows what he's doing. We won't get a second chance at this." Said Austin. "We gotta move."

"Major, we're entering the bomb site. Moving towards the control station." Said Victus.

"Roger that. We're on our way." Austin replied.
"We're nearly on top of the bomb. Cerberus will be back with everything they've got." Said Sarah.

"It was a mistake to allow us to get this far." Said Javik.

Despite what she was hearing over the comms, Traynor was still worried. In fact sweat was starting to pour down her face and she could tell her hands were shaking a bit.

"Be safe, my love." She thought to herself.

"Clever. The right charge along a fault line would be catastrophic." Said Javik.

"We need to hurry!"

The group finally made it to the controls that were wired up to the bomb. Victus and his platoon were already there.

"I'm at the control panel, Major. Cerberus set up a firewall around the trigger mechanism to slow us down. I need to create a bypass. That'll take time. But like you said: no trigger, no explosion." He said.

"Are you sure you can disarm the trigger?" Austin asked as he and the others joined the Turians.

"Yes. It's old tech. I know what to do. We need you to buy us a few minutes, Major." Victus replied.

"Don't screw this up. We'll make sure you have the time you need." Said Austin.

"Understood. Starting bypass." Said Victus. "And thank you for making sure I get this chance."

"Just make it right, soldier." Said Sarah.

There was the sudden sound of a sniper shot and one of the Turians suddenly fell dead.

"Look out!"

Everyone except Victus quickly went into cover to avoid anymore incoming fire.

"Major!"

"Focus on the bomb! We'll handle Cerberus." Said Austin.

The group hopped down from the structure so that they could battle Cerberus directly.

"Nobody gets past us! Clear?" Austin asked.

"We've got your back, love." Liara replied.

"Javik, Sarah, take the left. Liar and I will handle the right." Austin ordered.

"Got it!" Sarah replied.

With the Prothean and the N7 Marine taking care of any Cerberus troopers on one side and preventing any flanking attempts, Austin and Liara could concentrate on their side only.

Quite surprisingly, Cerberus seemed to send only the troopers and the Centurions on their side while Sarah and Javik had a deal with just an Atlas. Almost too easy.
It only took them a few minutes to eradicate Cerberus completely.

"Major! Firewall's down! I'm in!" said Victus. "Spirits! Cerberus hacked the trigger mechanism! It's set to detonate!"

"Disarm it!" Austin yelled into his comm, urgently.

"No time! I have to separate the trigger from the bomb! Now!"

Traynor's heartbeat increased to a very high level. Her love was down there and the bomb was now about to detonate. A small tear of desperation trickled down her cheek as she practically held her breath, just managing to still cling onto the hope that everything would be alright.

Victus had managed to crawl up to the base of the bomb an disconnect two of the arms that were holding the main device up. One however had become damaged, so now the Turian was forced to remove the cylinders.

"Lieutenant!" Austin yelled, realising that doing this would kill the Turian.

"Victory… at any cost." Said Victus.

The Turian pulled out the final cylinder and the part of the bomb collapsed, taking him with it back into the hole the bomb had been dug up from. There was a small explosion, and then nothing.

Traynor nearly felt her heart stop. She'd heard a detonation. To her utter relief however, she still had a strong comm signal with everyone. She almost couldn't believe. They were alive! Sarah was alive!

As Austin had imagined, both Wrex and the Primarch had got into an argument over this. The Helldiver could only hope that he diffused this before another war was started.

"We couldn't risk another galactic war with the Krogan!" Victus argued.

"The Genophage wasn't enough? You needed another way to keep your pets chained?!!" said Kraan angrily, who was just as furious about this as Wrex.

"The decision was made hundreds of years ago. So much has changed!" said Victus defensively.

"You still didn't tell us about the bomb, coward!"

Austin quickly stepped in and pushed the two apart. Good thing he was still wearing his armour.

"That's enough!" he almost yelled. "We can't let the past rip us apart. Working together, we have a chance. Primarch, you had a bomb on Tuchanka!"

Kraan seemed to think this meant Austin was on the Krogan's side and went to speak.

"Exactly, and-"

"No! It's over!" Austin interrupted. "His son died today making this right! You should be grateful that a Turian made that sort of sacrifice for the future of your people."

"Please, Major, it's all right." Said Victus.
"Yeah. We have stronger enemies to face. Said Wrex as he and Kraan reluctantly left.

Victus then turned to Austin.

"I understand your reservations before, Major, but I hope you now understand the secrecy." He said.

"Just be grateful that the Arkanes have bigger problems than this. If they'd found out about that bomb and this war wasn't going on, they'd kicked your people out of the Helldivers." "Secrets get people killed. You've learned that the hard way." Austin replied, his voice showing very little emotion.

Victus could tell from that alone that the Helldiver was giving him a warning without specifically saying it. Despite that he was a Primarch, he knew about some of the darker aspects of the Helldiver code. He knew now that he shouldn't hold anything more back from this Helldiver, especially after it had just got his beloved son killed.

"Yes… the hardest lesson I'm ever to learn, Major." He said with regret. "My son… he died with the respect of his men. I wanted to thank you for that. His sacrifice with be recorded in the histories of the Ninth Platoon, something any father would be proud of."

At that moment, Mordin then walked in to join them.

"Shepard, tests verified. Results promising. Can synthesize for universal Krogan immunity." He explained.

"Good. Then you can put your knife away." Said Wrex.

"The cure's ready?" Austin asked.

"No. Still need transmission vector. Cure useless unless given to entire species." Mordin replied.

"You infected them with a disease easy enough. Is the cure that different?" Austin asked.

"No. Keeping modalities similar when possible. Easiest way to develop cure rapidly." Said Mordin. "Groundwater? No, too slow. Voluntary inoculation risky, population too scattered for airborne, unless, wait yes!"

The Salarian accessed the holo-projector and a projection of some kind of tower structure appeared.

"The shroud. Constant global dispersion of air particles. Built by Salarians to repair atmosphere of Tuchanka." He explained. "Also used by Turians."

"We used it to secretly spread the Genophage virus. It ended the Krogan Rebellions." Victus admitted.

"I'd be careful who you tell that to." Said Wrex.

"Sometimes I understand why the Krogan want to shoot everyone on sight. Can't blame them."

"Those were desperate times." Said Victus.

"Yes, yes, But useful now. Original Genophage strain still in storage at Shroud facility. Can use it as transmission vector, then use Shroud to blanket Tuchanka with cure!" said Mordin.

"You clever little Pyjak. That's our best shot, right there." Said Wrex.

"Then finish your preparations and be ready to go, Mordin." Said Austin.
"Of course. Ready when you are. Will be in medbay with Eve until then." Said Mordin.

Traynor's shift had finally ended and she was now in her quarters which were shared with Sarah's.

Just as she was about to get undressed, she heard the door open and the one person in the world she wanted to see more than anything else stepped in.

Before Sarah could even say anything, Samantha flung herself right at her and hugged N7 marine tightly. Sarah was surprised at the suddenness of this at first, but quickly returned the hug.

"Sorry if I scared you down there, darling." She said, sensing that she shouldn't make any humorous jokes about this. If their roles had been reversed, she probably would've felt the exact same things that her love had felt.

"Don't ever do that again." Said Traynor, doing her best to not cry.

"It's okay. I'm here." Said Sarah gently. "And I know just how to cheer you up."

Just there mention of that already made Samantha feel a lot better. There had a been a point earlier in their relationship were Traynor had been a slightly bad mood. Sarah however had used her magic on her, and she'd felt tons better.

The comm specialist could only sigh in bliss as Sarah planted several kisses on first her face and then down her neck as the N7 marine gently worked on unzipping Traynor's jacket. As usual, Sarah' lips touching her skin alone was enough to sooth Samantha.

Once Sarah had finished undressing her love, including her underwear, she then allowed the comm specialist to help her take her own uniform off.

The two just stood where they were, simply kissing and enjoying the pleasure of each other's presence.

After they kissed for what felt like an hour, Sarah started kissing down Traynor's body, bit by bit, until her tongue got between the comm specialist's legs.

Samantha made no attempt to hold back her moan as her lover's tongue licked her pussy. Her hands snaked down to Sarah's hair and began sifting through the red softness. Sarah's also found themselves on Traynor's ass and she gave both cheeks a gentle massage.

Somehow, as if it was a natural reflex that would happen constantly, Traynor's legs automatically parted to allow Sarah easy access. The N7 marine of course took full advantage of how enticing it was that Samantha's legs unconsciously spread for her as if by a natural she had her way with Traynor, by penetrating her with her long tongue. It filled her core and expanded in strong pulses, creating wonderful friction and compression. Soft fingertips started massaging her ever-so sensitive folds.

Sarah was beginning to understand why Traynor often said that she tasted good whenever their positions were reversed. Samantha's sweet taste almost made it impossible for Sarah to stop.

Her sweet and honeyed taste reminded Sarah of the time when they'd first made love, and neither of them would ever forget that night. Her lover's moans of pleasure and hands moving her hair only added to it and encouraged the N7 marine keep going. She eventually made it her goal to bring her lover the best orgasm she'd had in a while.
While Sarah was taking her, all Traynor could do was whimper and remember to breathe. The N7's powerful tongue was pulsating and pushing inside her narrow passage, soft fingers and upper lip were tormenting her sensitive bud. The orgasm was imminent, the earlier teasing and commanding had brought her incredibly close and it didn't take much to bring over the edge.

When the orgasm came, wave after wave of ecstasy coursed through her body like burning hot water and she had no other choice but to surrender to them, ride them. She whimpered and panted as she came, her lover's name on her lips, clinging to the sheets until the last pulse had contracted her body. She lay shivering in the bed and couldn't keep her legs from trembling, long after the orgasm was gone.

Spent from her orgasm, Tranyor simply relaxed as she and her love cuddled one another with Samantha being held in Sarah's arms and her head resting most comfortably on none other than her favourite pillows, Sarah's breasts.

Sarah knew full well how much it soothed Traynor.

"You're the best lover a girl could wish for." Samantha sighed, almost on the point of falling asleep.

"Love you too, darling." Sarah smiled, gently planting a kiss on her girlfriend's forehead, only afterwards noticing that she'd fallen asleep.

This didn't bother the N7 marine though. She always found it very adorable to watch her love sleep in her arms and resting on her breasts.

Traynor blissfully sighed in her sleep, instinctively letting her thighs part. Even while she was unconscious, she seemed willing, even eager for Sarah's touch.

Credit to Mastermind for the Traynor/Sarah bits as usual.

Guess all I can say is, see you in two weeks.
Chapter 12, A Future for the Krogan

It's nice to be back!

I had a nice little break, and I've now come back re-freshened. So much so that this chapter turned out very well, and I'm very pleased with it.

Enjoy!

Chapter 12

A Future for the Krogan

The time had come. One way or another, the Genophage would end on this day.

As the Normandy was nearing the drop off destination for the shuttles however, Joker delivered some worrying news.

"All hands, full stop! Hostiles detected at the landing coordinates!" he said.

"Joker, what you got?" Austin asked.

"Sensors show a Reaper parked at the Shroud Facility. No way you're going to be able to land a dropship there." Joker replied.

"Get everyone assembled in the War Room. I want eyes on the shroud." Said Austin, making his way there too.

"Aye, aye, sir!"

Mordin, Wrex, Primarch Victus and Kraan were already there when he arrived. The holo showed the shroud and also the Reaper. This was a different sort though. Austin had read reports about these.

They were called Destroyers. Unlike normal Reapers, these ones were only about a quarter the size and also walked on four legs. They were still just as destructive and unrelenting as the main ones though.


"They want a fight, they just got one!" said Wrex challengingly.

"Primarch, we're going to need your help." Said Austin.

"That could be difficult. Our losses on Palaven have been catastrophic." Said Victus.

"We're doing this for Palaven. No one said it would be easy." Said Austin.

"What do you have in mind?" Victus asked.

"A combined attack. Your people hit the Reaper with an airstrike. Wrex, at the same time your soldier will be attacking from the ground." Austin explained. "Together, we can draw it away from
the tower."

"Yes, distraction. Small team can reach shroud facility, finish synthesising cure. Will need Eve to come with us." Said Mordin.

"We've never faced a Reaper up close like this. Everyone on board?" Austin asked.

"There's even a doubt?" Wrex replied. "Let's move, Pyjak. It's time to cure the Genophage."

Just as everyone left, Traynor's voice suddenly sounded over the intercom.

"Major, incoming message marked urgent. I'll put it in the comm room for you."

Austin walked in to find a slightly unwelcome face on the holo in front of him.

"Dalatrass." He said, trying to hide the coldness in his voice. He'd really grown to dislike the Salarian during this whole thing.

"Major Shepard, we know you've reached Tuchanka. And by now, I imagine Mordin Solus has proposed using the shroud." Said the Dalatrass.

"You dare spy on us?" Austin asked crossly.

"Hardly. The shroud is the only viable course of action open to you. Major, you can't allow your misguided sympathy for the Krogan to cloud your judgement." The dalatrass replied.


"Do you honestly believe curing the Genophage will end in lasting peace?"

"Yes, I do. And if anyone says otherwise, they can go to hell, including you if you disagree. The Krogan deserve that chance. You have no right to condemn an entire race to extinction based on what might happen."

"What will happen is the Krogan will reproduce out of control. We uplifted them specifically for..."

"I've had enough of your racist views, Dalatrass! Just get to the point why you've called me, or else I'm cutting you off!" Austin nearly shouted, much to the Salarian's slight shock..

"Years ago, our operative sabotaged the shroud facility to ensure what you're planning couldn't be done. Mordin will likely detect this malfunction and repair it." She explained.

"Good. We've come too far to let this fail now." Said Austin.

"But if you ensure that he doesn't, then the cure's viability will be altered just enough so that it fails. No one will notice the change."

"You are suggesting I trick the Krogan?! I knew you were racist towards them, but this is too far!" said Austin angrily.

"Major, I want you to think about this. We can provide you our very best scientist to build the Crucible... and the full support of our fleets."

"I don't need to think about this at all, dalatrass! I will not betray the Krogan for your own pathetic ideals. The Genophage is being cured, and you will stay out of our way!"
"Then you will not have our support, Major."

"Fine. You're the one who will be facing the Reaper on your own. Good luck with that. I'm sure the rest of your people will do just fine. Plus it'll be even better for them when they find out that tried to make this deal with me." Said Austin, showing that he'd been using his omni tool to record the entire thing.

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Yes I would, and I will!" and with that, the Helldiver cut the Dalatrass of instantly.

"Hmm, I'll never get tired of that." He smiled, remembering how he'd done that to the Citadel council once.

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"I've ordered the clans to assemble at the hollows. It's our sacred meeting ground. We'll land there and take an armoured convoy against the Reaper." Said Wrex as the dropship came into land. "This will be the defining moment of Krogan history."

"Krogan history filled with defining moments. Most bloody. Hope this one better." Said Mordin.

"Listen, there's something you must know. I got a message form the…” Austin went to say, but was interrupted by a sudden shake. A Krogan voice then came over the intercom.

"Wrex, it's Wreav! The Reapers are already at the Hollows! Come out with guns blazing!"

"Hang on tight! We're heading in!" said Cortez.

The dropship gently touched down and the doors opened. A lone husk was right in front of them and it ran at them. Wrex however was quick to blast it part with his shotgun, almost casually.

"Nice shot." Austin commented impressively.

"Keep them away from the female! I'll sort out what's happening with other clans." Said Wrex.

The group entered the hollows to find them already crawling with husks. A few Krogan were putting up a fight against them, but the husks were using their numbers to overwhelm them.

"Hold this line! Don't let them get up here!" Austin ordered, as he, Kraan, Jet and Urz all prepared to defend the entrance.

This was actually a good tactic since they had the high ground. It would easily funnel all the husks out into the open and into scope where they could all get clear shots at them.

"Time to put the hammer down." Said Jet, taking her war hammer from her back.

The battle was fairly short since there weren't that many husks in the hollows. As soon as the last one went down, Wrex and the rest of the Krogan soon joined them. It was clear that Wrex had seen some action himself since he was already covered in blood, not his own of course.

"They'll sing battle-songs about this someday. Reaper blood has finally soaked our soil." He said cheerily.

"Hooraa!" Kraan cheered.
"We have to get to the shroud. The airstrike is on it's way." Said Austin.

"Female safe, Shepard. Vitals are strong." Said Mordin.

"What's a Salarian doing here?" a voice asked. "Nobody said anything about this!"

Another Krogan accompanied by a few Blood Pack Krogan, much to Kraan's annoyance, walked up to them. Wrex also didn't look too happy to see this Krogan


"Who are you?" Austin asked.

"Urdnot Wreav, brood brother to our… illustrious leader." The Krogan replied, eliciting a few groans from the Krogan on Wrex's side.

"Wreav and I share the same mother. And nothing else." Said Wrex coldly.

"For which I'm thankful. I remember what it means to be a true Krogan." Said Wreav. "We flay our enemies alive and drown them in a geyser of their own blood. We don't invite them into our home."

"This Salarian is not your enemy. He's here to help cure the Genophage." Said Austin defensively.

"His kind gave us the Genophage! Why should we trust him?!" Wreav asked distrustfully.

This was quickly met however with a head-butt from Wrex.

"Because Kraan and I do. And so will you, Wreav." He said.

Both Krogan sides growled at one another and looked just about ready to fight. Wreav even unholstered his shotgun. Before he could fire however, a familiar voice sounded.

"Enough!"

Eve stood at the top of the stairs. Her presence among the other Krogan seemed to make them look up at her awe.

"You can stay here and let old wounds fester as Krogan have always done… or you can fight the enemy you were born to destroy—and win a new future for our children. I choose to fight. Who will join me?" said Eve motivationally.

"I will." Austin replied confidently.

"Me too!" Kraan agreed.

"And so will I." said Wrex. "Now hold your heads high like true Krogan! There's a Reaper that needs killing!"

A whole massive convoy of trucks was literally "trucking" across the planes of Tuchanka en route to the shroud facility. There was definitely no denying that it was quite a sight. Everyone was seated together in one of the truck except Jet. She always felt a bit uncomfortable inside a confined moving space on the ground and had insisted on flying alongside the convoy.

Since Austin knew that the pilot could keep up with them and was small enough to not be spotted easily, he had agreed to let her.
"Krogan ground convoy, this is Turian wing artimec. Our flight vector to the shroud is locked. We're ten minutes out and counting."

"Copy that, artimec. We're on our way, trying to make up for lost time. Shepard out." Said Austin.

"I feel like we're making history." Said Jet over the comm.

"You bet we are!" Kraan cheered.

"Wreav isn't the only Krogan who wants revenge for the Genophage, Wrex. You'll have to placate them somehow." Said Eve.

"I'll demand that the Council return some of our old territory. We'll need room to expand-recapture the glory of the ancients." Said Wrex.


"What were the ancient Krogan like?" Austin asked.

"Tuchanka wasn't always a wasteland. In the old times, the Krogan were a proud people. We had dreams… a future to look forward to." Eve explained.

"Until Salarian interference." Said Mordin.

"No. We destroyed Tuchanka ourselves. Technology changed us. It made life too easy. So we looked for new challenges—and found them in each other. Nuclear war was inevitable." Said Eve.

"And now our planet is rubble. We'll need a better place to live." Said Wrex.

"I'd say joining the resistance and helping defeat the Reapers would be worth a new planet." Said Austin.

"Or ten. Ha!" Kraan chuckled.

"Exactly. You haven't seen how fast we can pop them out." Said Wrex.

"Wrex…"

"What? With the Genophage cured, we'll have a lot of catching up to do." Wrex smiled.

"Get a room, you two." Kraan sighed.

"Major, on the shuttle-was there something you were going to say?" Eve asked.

"Yes. Thank you for reminding me." Austin replied. "The dalatrass tried to cut a secret deal with me."

"What kind of deal?" Wrex asked suspiciously.

"She said they sabotaged the shroud years ago. The cure won't work unless we fix it." Said Austin, activating his omni tool and playing a recording of the Dalatrass' exact words to him earlier.


"And she thought we wouldn't know better?" Wrex asked, sharing Kraan's view.
"Correctly. Would likely have fooled tests. But familiar with STG work. Can adjust. Did not come this far for nothing." Said Mordin reassuringly.

"Coincidently enough, that's same thing I said. I told her were to shove it." Austin smiled under his mask.

"Ha! Wish I could've seen that." Kraan laughed.

"You just spared our race another genocide, Major." Said Eve gratefully.

"I told you we could count on him." Said Wrex proudly.

At that moment however, they felt the truck start to slow down until it finally stopped.

"Why are we stopping? We can't be there yet?" Wrex asked.

Austin and the other climbed out first. The other trucks behind them were also stopping. Jet was still in the air and simply hovering near their position.

"Wrex, you and Mordin stay with Eve. It's looking ugly out here!" Austin advised.

"Will do." Said Wrex.

The group went to the very front to find a Krogan who was observing overhead.

"What's the holdup?" Austin asked. That was however before he then noticed why. "Oh."

"Yeah. Road's out. The convoy can't it through." Said the Krogan.

"Turian wing artimec, this is Shepard. We've been delayed—hold off your attack." Said Austin into his comm.

"Negative, Major. Our approach is locked. The Reaper already knows we're here."

Sure enough, the Turian fighters swooped over them and began attacking the Reaper.

"An airstrike alone isn't alone isn't going to be enough against a Reaper. We have to join the fight." Said Jet.

The Destroyer was quick to engage with the fighters and even shot one down very quickly.

"Damn it." Austin cursed. "I don't care if we have to build a new road. We're going."

"Shepard, heads up!" said Jet urgently.

The destroyer had shot another fighting and it was spinning out of control in their direction.

"I've lost control! I can't pull up!" said the pilot.

The fighter collided with one of the trucks, causing a large explosion and overturning another.

"Move!" Austin yelled.

"Shepard, what's happening?" Wrex asked through the comm.

"Wrex, get the female out of here now! Go!" Austin ordered.
The trucks obliged and sped off across the gap.

"Artim, do you copy?" Austin asked.

"We have to abort, Major! That Reaper's tearing us to pieces!" replied the artim leader.

"Understood! Save your pilots-we'll find another way!" said Austin.

"Shepard, I can see a tunnel from up here." Said Jet, indicating to a nearby entrance.

"Copy that, Jet. You stay in the air. We'll keep in contact." Said Austin.

"Roger that, Major. Be careful." Said Jet.

"You too."

As they headed underground, it got dark very quickly, obliging the two Helldivers to turn all their flashlight attachments on and Urz to stay close.

"Wrex, are you receiving this? Is everyone okay?" Austin asked, hoping he'd still get a good signal.

"Yeah, just scratches, nothing the Salarian can't patch up. Wreav's truck made it out, too." Wrex replied.

"The Turians had to call off the airstrike. We'll need a new plan for dealing with the Reaper." Austin explained.

"First we'll have to find you. Where did you end up?" Wrex asked.

"Underground. We see ruins of some kind." Austin replied.

"Major, that's the city of the ancients." Said Eve.

"How do we get out?" Kraan asked.

"No maps exist. It's been abandoned for thousands of years." Eve replied.

"You're a trailblazer, Shepard. Get through there, and we'll find a place to meet up. Nothing will stop this cure." Said Wrex.

"On that we can agree." Said Austin.

The Helldiver then changed his channel so that he could contact the Normandy. They were still heading deeper and deeper underground. The last thing he wanted was to lose the comm signal.

"Traynor, can you hear me?" he asked.

"I've still got you signal, Major." Traynor replied.

"We're heading underground. Our signal may get weak. Try and stay locked on." Said Austin.

"Sandra and I will do the best we can from up here. Good luck, Major." Said Traynor.

As they continued through the ruins, every so often they'd feel a tremor. The latest one was very big and felt a bit unnatural.
"Wrex, are you guys feeling these tremors?" Austin asked.

"Not up here." Wrex replied.

"It could be something else, Major. It is said that Kalros, the mother of all Thresher maws lives in this region." Eve replied.

"Which is another reason to get your ass out of there, Shepard. Step on it!" said Wrex.

"Great. The tunneler on Ilos was bad enough, and that was a normal Thresher Maw. God knows what this Kalros is like." Austin sighed.

"Let's hope we don't find out. Because if we do... we're screwed." Said Kraan.

A few yards or so later into the tunnels and they soon found something else other than piles of rocks and ruins.

"Rachni." Kraan growled.

A dead Ravager was lying on the ground. The kill didn't look too old.

"There are bound to be more than just the ones we killed." Said Austin. "Wrex, we've got Rachni here. Keep an eye out."

"I know. A few of them just attacked us." Wrex replied. "All that matters is getting to that shroud. Find us fast."

Things soon started to turn out for the better. As they proceeded up the stairs, they could see faint signs of brightness. They'd found the way out.

"Daylight. Thank goodness." Austin sighed with relief.

"It's almost blinding." Kraan joked.

"Don't start that again, Kraan." Said Austin quickly.

Finally, daylight greeted their eyes again and the two Helldivers deactivated their flashlights.

"This is new. A part of Tuchanka that isn't rubble." Said Kraan.

"Wrex, we've made it back outside." Said Austin.

"Well, if you can see sunlight, that's progress." Wrex replied.

"I've got a visual of you from up here, Major." Said Jet, now visible form the air not too far away.

"I see you. Stay in the air. You'll be able to spot any husks heading in our direction." Said Austin.

"Will do. Jet out."

They had come out into more Krogan ruins. Something that really stood out though was some small signs of plant life.

"Green. I didn't think anything could grow here anymore."

"You're looking at hope-all that's left of it on Tuchanka. This was once a world full of beauty. Given
"a chance, it can be again." Said Eve.

"Shepard, that Reaper is still up to no good at the shroud. Find a way out of there and we'll pick you up." Said Wrex.

"We're on it."

At that moment however, several meteor like objects started to drop from the sky.

"Major, you got husks dropping down at your position! And I think they've got some new types with them." Jet warned in advance.

"Thanks for the heads up." Said Austin, sliding into cover.

"Just don't die down there." Said Jet.

Jet had been correct when she said that the Reapers had brought some new faces to the party. In addition to the human husks, Ravagers, a few Marauders and even a Brute, there was a new face.

There were a few new husks that were undeniably made solely from Krogan. Unlike most husks which traditionally had their weapons fused to them, these husks actually carried their guns in their hands, similar to the Marauders.

The lower portions of their legs were replaced completely with mechanical ones, their crests were blackened and they also had various different tubes connecting to different parts of their bodies.

"That's crossing a line!" said Kraan angrily. "Invading my home is one thing, enslaving my people is too much."

The Helldiver Krogan seemed to go berserk and he started going on a rampage, killing any husk in sight.

Urz stuck to dealing with the human husk since they couldn't shoot at him due to lack of guns, leaving Austin to deal with the Ravager and Brute.

"What makes it worse that being husks, these Krogan fight even worse." Said Kraan crossly as he finished off the last Hunter, as it was decided they should be called.

"Shepard, how's it coming?" Wrex asked

"We're still in the ruins." Austin replied.

"Get a move on! That Reaper hasn't moved and the sky's looking worse." Said Wrex.

Even from inside the ruins, it wasn't hard to see that Wrex wasn't exaggerating. The sky around the shroud was darkening a lot and the Reaper was indeed still where it had been earlier.

"Shepard, looks like we got a bridge up ahead. Try to find it, and we'll pick you up there. Said Wrex.

"On it!" Austin replied.

"We're coming up under the bridge! Get down there, and we can get to the Shroud." Said Wrex. Suddenly however, the whole ground started to shake and an enormous mass slowly rose out of the sand like the dorsal fin of a shark stalking its prey. "Wait... Kalros!"
"Oh my god!" Austin said in shock. He'd seen Thresher Maws before in his time, but Kalros was definitely something else, even if she wasn't fully visible. "Wrex?!

"Break off! We're getting out of here!" Wrex yelled.

"Kalros territorial instinct confirmed." Said Mordin.

"She's not gonna get us!" said Wrex, trying to sound reassuring. "Go on ahead, Shepard! We'll try to shake this thing and find you!"

"Jet, you still got sight of us?" Austin asked.

"Just about. It's a bit hard spotting you up here with all these buildings. I'm doing the best I can."

"Shepard, we've almost lost Kalros. Get down from there, and we'll find you." Said Wrex.

As the group hopped down, both trucks came close to their position. Wreav's remained further away while Wrex's came in to pick them up.

"Shepard, get over here!" said Wrex. "Wreav, keep an eye out for that maw. I don't want it sneaking up on us."

"Make it quick, Wrex! We're exposed!" said Wreav.

"Move it!" Austin ordered as they hurried into the truck.

"Watch out! Kalros is heading your way!" said Jet, still remain in the air since she'd be perfectly safe there.

Kalros once again glided through the sand and attacked Wreav's truck practically dragging it into the ground.

"Move, Shepard!" Wrex shouted.

"We're in! Go!"

"What about Wreav?" Eve asked.

"No way he survived that. And he was a pain in the ass, anyway. Now let's finish this. There's a Reaper waiting for us." Said Wrex.

Now that they were close enough, they had a full view of the Reaper.

"We're gonna need a bigger gun." Said Kraan.

"I'm gonna need bigger thrusters." Said Jet, gently touching down on the ground at last.

"We're curing the Genophage no matter what it takes! Everything my people will ever be depends on it." Said Wrex.

"Then I hope this idea you were talking about is a good one." Said Austin.

"It was hers, actually." Said Wrex.
"Kalros. We summon her to the Reaper." Said Eve.

"Would that even work?" Austin asked.

"Already discussed strategy. Just need to distract Reaper, draw it from tower while cure synthesized, released." Said Mordin.

"What makes you so sure she'll come?" Austin asked.

"Legends say she is the mother from which all other thresher maws spawn. This is as much her home as ours." Said Eve.

"If Tuchanka has a temper, Kalros is it. Nobody's ever faced her and survived." Said Wrex.

"I've taken some risk in my time, but this seems crazy." Said Austin.

"And going head to head with Sovereign didn't?" said Wrex. "This is the only way to get to that tower and release the cure. There's no other choice."

"But, how do you even summon a Thresher Maw?" Austin asked.

"The tower was built in an arena devoted to Kalros' glory. The Salarians thought she would scare way intruders." Eve explained.

"Appears to have worked." Said Mordin.

"There are two maw hammers there, the largest in existence. If you can activate them, Kalros will come. That should distract the Reaper." Said Eve.

"Meanwhile, laboratory nearby. Will finish synthesizing cure." Mordin continued.

"Let's make sure we all get out of here alive. We're going to have one hell of a story to tell." Said Austin.

"Wait-" said Wrex. "I want you to know that no matter what happens… you've been a champion to the Krogan people, a friend of Clan Urdnot… and a brother to me. To every Krogan born after this day, the name "Shepard" will mean "hero!"

Austin smiled under his helmet and he and Wrex banged fists with each other.

"Now let's show them why!" Wrex finished.

Just as she did however, several Ravagers started converging on their location.

"Go! I've got this!" said Wrex.

The Krogan charged at the Rachni and essentially went on a blood rage killing spree.

"I AM URDNOT WREX, AND THIS IS MY PLANET!"

"See you on the other side." Said Austin.

"Stay alive, Shepard. Will have cure ready." Said Mordin.

"Shepard, some luck! Original strain in storage. Preparing the cure now." Said Mordin.

"Make it quick, Mordin. We're exposed out here." Said Austin.
Sure enough, the destroyer fired at their location, collapsing the bridge they were on and causing them to fall to a lower level where the Reaper now had a much clearer line of fire at them.

"Okay, Shepard—I raised the hammers! You have to activate both of them! My advice is to avoid the giant laser!" said Wrex.

"Well, duh!" said Austin as he and the others went into cover avoid the destroyer's fire.

"Major, this is artimec wing! We'll try to give that Reaper something else to shoot at!"

Sure enough, the squad of Turian fighters re-joined the fight and reengaged the Reaper.

"Knew they wouldn't let us down." Said Jet.

With the destroyer momentarily distracted, Austin and the other seized the moment and broke into a sprint. This wasn't without it's drawbacks though as several brutes tried to hinder their progress.

Austin head for the right one while Jet went after the other seeing as how they could reach both quicker.

"Mordin, we hit the first hammer! How's it coming?" Austin asked as he activated the first.

"Almost have cure! Eve's vital sings dropping! Trying to compensate!" Mordin replied.

"I hit the second." Said Jet over the comm.

"Kraan, take Urz back to the truck with you! I'll take care of the cure!" Austin ordered. "Jet, that includes you too."

"I don't like leaving you like this, sir!" said Jet, hovering a few meters in the air.

"That's an order! Now go!" Austin ordered.

"Yes sir." Jet sighed reluctantly, and she flew off with the others.

Sure enough, the ground started to shake violently as Kalros approached. The destroyer caught sight of the mass moving through the sand and attempted to fire but only ended up shooting the ground. Kalros then suddenly burst out of the ground and latched onto the Reaper's front just as it fired another laser. The beam missed the Thresher Maw but came dangerously close to Austin. He was only just able avoid it by jumping over a nearby gap.

The destroyer meanwhile attempted to shake Kalros off and swung violently to the side, smashing the maw into the side of the shroud. This made Kalros let go, but it did nothing to hurt her. Seizing the opening, the destroyer fired again, but Kalros quickly burrowed back into the ground, the laser missing it by metres.

The destroyer scanned the area, waiting to see if Kalros would attack again. Sure enough, the Maw burst out of the ground again. This time though, she had come up from behind, and the destroyer was too slow to turn around.

Latching onto the Reaper's back, Kalros pulled the Reaper right over off its feet and onto the ground. She then wrapped herself around the destroyer like a snake and began burrowing back into the ground, taking the now helpless destroyer with her. For a split second, it almost sounded like the Reaper let out a mechanical howl of desperation as it was helpless pulled under by an organic creature…
Austin watched the whole thing with awe. He heard the phrase "Clash of the titans" but that whole fight had just put a whole new meaning on the phrase.

"Wow! That's not something I'll forget easily." He thought to himself. "And to think I used to hate Thresher Maws."

Despite that the Reaper was gone, the shroud was looking a bit unstable. Mordin and Rana though were still hard at work.

"Mordin! Is the cure ready?" Austin asked.


"Eve's okay?" Austin asked.

"Headed to safety now." Said Rana.


"You're going up there?" Austin and Rana both asked, almost in shock.


"Professor, this whole thing is coming apart. There's got to be another way!" said Rana.

"Remote bypass impossible, Rana. STG countermeasures in place No time to adjust cure for temperature variance. No other option. Not coming back. Suggest you and Shepard get clear. Explosions likely to be problematic." Said Mordin.

"Mordin, no!"

"Rana, please. Need to do this. My project. My work. My cure. My responsibility." Said Mordin as he stepped into the elevator. "Would have liked to run tests on the seashells."

"I'm sorry." Austin sighed with regret.

"I'm not. Had to be me." Mordin smiled. "Someone else might have gotten it wrong."

The elevator sealed itself and began it's slow climb up the tower.

"Come on, let's go." Said Austin, gently trying to pull Rana with him but she kept resisting.

"No! I won't leave him!" the Asari objected.

"Rana, come on!"

They managed to get clear and back to the truck in time just as the shroud exploded. Just as it did though, the sky turned like with a faint gold like substance. The cure had indeed worked. The Genophage… was ended.
"A long time ago, my father betrayed me in this place. His own son. He tried to kill me." Said Wrex. "So I had to kill him… right over there. That's what the Genophage reduced us to. Animals. But you changed that today, Shepard."

"Now we'll fight for our children, not against them." Said Eve.

"It's just a pity Mordin had to die." Said Rana sadly.

"He was a good friend. But I'm sure he wouldn't have had it any other way." Said Austin.

"He was a good mentor." Said Rana.

"We'll name one of the kids after him… maybe a girl." Said Wrex.

"But you, Major-we can thank you in person, and Rana." Said Eve gratefully.

"Tell the Turians I'll be deploying troops to Palaven immediately. And as of now, you can consider the Krogan officially part of the Resistance. When you're ready to take the fight to the Reapers, let me know. The Krogan are back in business." Wrex smiled.

"Goodbye, Major." Said Eve.

"What will you do now?" Austin asked.

"Spread the hope you've given us. Even now there are clans gathering at the Kelphic Valley. I'll go speak to them and make sure this gift isn't squandered. Thank you for all that you've done. And know that Urdnot Bakara calls you a friend." The female replied.

As Austin and Rana turned to leave for the shuttle that had landed near their position, Wrex and Eve looked at the exploded wreckage of the shroud. There was still a fair amount of dark smoke pouring from the wreckage, but it would no doubt cease eventually. Then the Battlemaster noticed something.

"What's that?" he asked.

"What?" Austin asked turning back.

"That. That right there. That's not meant to happen, is it?" Wrex asked as he indicated to a stray line of smoke that looked like it was flying away from the wreckage, but maintaining a constant altitude.

"No. I don't think that's debris." Said Austin suspiciously as he activated the zoom on his visor. What he saw however was most unexpected. "Well I'll be damned…"

To everyone's surprise the smoke trail finally cleared to reveal none other than Jet as she flew into to land at their location, and in her arms was none other than a slightly burnt but mostly unharmed Mordin.

"Sorry, sir. Order respectfully disobeyed." The pilot smiled under her helmet.

"Jet? How did you…" Austin asked, almost lost for words.

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FLASHBACK

"Temperature control within acceptable range." Said Mordin as he typed heavily and as fast as he could at the console to get the cure in.
Within just a few seconds, success! The shroud started to deploy the cure.

"I think it's time we make our leave, Professor."

Snapped out of his final thoughts, the Salarian spun around to see a female Helldiver landing on her feet after climbing in through one of the view windows.

"Helldiver. HERE?! Unacceptable. Unwise Coming here was foolish, unnecessary, suicidal. Now two will die!"

The Helldiver ignored his frantic rambling as she took him by the arm.

"Not on my watch! You've made galactic history today by saving the Krogan race, I'm not just going to let you die! We're getting out of here!"

"Impossible, elevator damaged beyond repair by the collapsing infrastructure caused by-"

"That's why we're taking the express! Just hope you're not afraid of heights, Professor!"

"Express? Heights? Don't understand, what do you mean by..."

As impossible as it seemed, the Salarian's eyes grew even wider when the Helldiver pulled him over to the nearby window. The OPEN window.

"Wait... no. No! NoNoNoNoNo!"

"Hold on!" Jet cried as she fired up her suit's flight systems and blasted out of the exploding Shroud tower and soared across the Tuchanka horizon... with the rather terrified Salarian scientist in her clutches.

"OH MMMYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY!

Even Wrex and Bakara were glad to see that Mordin was alive. Rana of course had burst into tears of happiness.

"Personal flight technology useful... " said Mordin weakly.

"I gambled that if I timed it exactly right and I went in at exactly the right speed, I'd be able to pull you out just as you finished the cure." Said Jet.

"Interesting theory... " said Mordin, just before he passed out.

"We need to get him to Doctor Chakwas, quickly." Said Jet.

"Get him into the shuttle." Said Austin quickly as he and Jet hurried into the dropship.

Just before the Hellhound lifted off though, Austin looked back at the two Krogan.

"Maybe you'll get to thank him after all." He said.

"Let us know how he does. We owe him just as much as we owe you." Said Bakara.

"Farwell, my friend." Said Wrex.

Mordin had been quickly rushed to the medbay along with Rana. While Austin knew it was still
unconfirmed how bad his injuries were, he was still glad that the Salarian was alive.

While he let Chakwas and Michel tend to the Salarian, Austin went to the comm room for debriefing, as usual expecting to find Zartrack.

"General." He saluted as the holo image cleared, only to reveal someone slightly different.

"You don't need to be that formal with me, Son."

"Dad?"

Sure enough, the holo image finally cleared to reveal none other than General Matt Shepard, Austin and Sarah's father.

"What a surprise. I hadn't expected to be able to talk with you." Said Austin, surprised, but pleasantly so.

"All Generals have been contributing to the resistance's coordination. I finally got a small break. Thought I might use it take the brief rather than Zartrack." Said Matt. "Hell of a thing you just pulled off. Curing the Genophage… I never thought I'd see the day."

"Nor did I to be honest. Still, it's a victory for us too. The Krogan are now officially with us in the resistance, and with them aiding our forces on Palaven, the Turians will join too." Said Austin.

Admittedly, the Major was quite proud of this himself. Victory after victory continue dot make it feel like they were actually going to win this war, despite the odds.

"I'm guessing though that leaves the Salarians out of the equation." Said Matt.

"Maybe not quite. There's no way they're going to be blind to what the dalatrass tried to do." Said Austin.

"Under the circumstances, I actually agree with you. I think they'll want to fight alongside us regardless of what she says." Said Matt.

"So do I." said Austin. There was a momentary silence as Father and Son struggled to think of what to say next. There was only so much they could talk about over an intercom compared to talking face to face. "Have you heard anything from mother?"

"No. I still haven't been able to find out if she's okay. The worry is killing me." Matt sighed.

"I'm sure she's okay, dad. She isn't a Captain for nothing." Said Austin.

"True. She always was so brave and strong. It never hurts to have faith." Said Matt, his mood brightening.

"Couldn't have put it better myself." Austin smiled.

"Anyway, I should get back to work. No doubt that we still have more allies to rally. Shepard out."

Matt's hologram vanished and Austin went back into the war room. Garrus and the Primarch were waiting for him.

"Major, Urdnot Wrex has begun sending troops to Palaven. You kept your end of the bargain, and now I'll keep mine." Said Victus. "The Turian hierarchy will gladly join the Reaper Resistance."
"We'll need all we can get. I'm glad that we're off to a good start." Said Austin as he and Victus shook hands.

"Agreed. To that end, several dry-dock ships will also assist in helping to build the Crucible. Garrus will coordinate them."

"Yes, sir." Garrus saluted.

"And when the time comes to deploy it, the full measure of our fleet will be there to send those machines to hell." Said Victus. "May the spirits watch over us all."

Austin returned to the medbay to find Mordin on one of the beds. Most of the singe marks he'd had earlier were healed thanks to medi gel and any others looked much better.

"How's he doing?" Austin asked.

"A few burns at most, but nothing serious. He's guaranteed to make a full recovery." Michel replied.

"Thank the goddess." Said Rana, breathing a sigh of relief.

"You can stay as long as you like, Rana. I'd like to make use of your knowledge on indoctrination if possible. It could help us." Said Austin.

"I hope to help as well, Shepard. It is the least I can do. Especially after one of your own saved Mordin's life." Said Rana gratefully.

As Austin left the medbay he found that Jet was sitting on the nearby table, obviously waiting for him. She had the look of concern and worry on her face.

Jet had very short length dark hair that she let loose whenever she was not wearing her armour. Because she had been a pilot before she became a Helldiver, she didn't have the same sort of muscular build that many of the others had, but she still looked tough. Plus she always insisted on wearing her various piloting medals on her uniform.

She even had the tattoo of a Helldiver atmospheric fighter on her left arm. Hardly surprising though since that was what she flew in her pilot days and also how she earned her nick name.

"Jet."

"Sir." Jet nearly saluted as she gently hopped down from the table.

"We need to talk. I told you to fall back to the truck. You disobeyed a direct order." Said Austin seriously.

"Permission to speak freely, sir." Jet requested.

"Granted."

"I know what I did, sir. And I know I was wrong of me to defy you. But I did it for the right reason. Mordin would be dead if not for me. But I understand if you don't want me in the squad anymore." Said Jet defensively. "I make no excuses, nor do I have any regrets. I did what I felt was right."

To the pilot's surprise, the Major put his hand on her shoulder supportingly.
"And your instincts have proven to be quite sound." Said Austin, smiling proudly under his helmet.

Jet was almost surprised at this. She'd more expected to get a lecture or threat of court martial for what she did. Instead she was being praised.

"It isn't the first time that someone in Alpha has disobeyed a direct order for good reasons. Plus as General Zartrack said to me once, sometimes it is better to follow your heart, even when others say no," said Austin, quite wisely. "Plus, you are right. Mordin would be dead if not for you. You did indeed do the right thing. You may be a bit reckless and unpredictable because you were a pilot, but that doesn't matter anymore. From now on, you've earned my trust, and you also earned the right to be called an Alpha."

"Thank you, sir. I wish I could give you something other than words." Jet smiled, almost lost for words.

"Just start using my name from now on, and we'll call it even." Austin smiled.

"Roger that… Shepard." Jet smiled back. "And how about you start using my name too?"

"But of course… Natasha."

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There you go! Slightly different outcome there.

Next one will be the Citadel Coup, and as I've probably said before, this is when the story wills tart to go into more original territory. So be sure to stay tuned (so to speak) starting from now, things are going to start to get a bit more interesting...
Chapter 13, The Fire Rises

Few things to note down.

I am back at College now, but because it's my second year now, I don't have to do induction, which means I get another week off.

Now, few things about the chapter.

This is where the original part of the story officially starts. Near the end, you'll start to see things happening differently.

I've also included a few crew conversations in this, including one with Cortez (I read every review I get)

Plus, one of the most significant. You'll finally get a small glimpse of Mirage's husband, that one who is eventually going to become the story's main antagonist...

Chapter 13

The Fire Rises

Once again, Austin and Liara found themselves in the white nothingness.

There was a difference this time though. For some reason, Liara was in her Helldiver armour whereas Austin wasn't.

The Helldiver's confusion only intensified when he saw the mystique figure again. As it stepped closer however, something most unexpected happened. It seemed to change shape, almost mould itself into a new form.

Once it had finished changing, it now had a shape that seemed slightly taller than Austin and definitely wore some sort of armour. It was still only made of white light, so it was impossible to tell what form it had taken, but it definitely wasn't a human figure anymore, only humanoid.

As before, the figure once again reached forward for Austin. This time, Liara stepped in front of her husband defensively.

Surprisingly, the figure stepped down and simply remained stationary.

"I don't think it means us harm, love." Said Austin.

Liara nodded and stood aside, allowing Austin to walk up to the figure.

Once again, the figure reached forward. Just as it was about to touch Austin, everything went completely white.

The two gently woke from their dream again, this time even more confused than ever.

"Why did we both have that dream again?" Austin asked as he gently sat up and worked on getting dressed. Liara still remained under the sheets simply watching her husband with a happy smile.
"I'm not sure. It's certainly not a nightmare, but it's not your average dream either." Said Liara, eventually deciding she should get out of bed too.

As the two worked on getting dressed, here was a sudden knock on the door.

"It's open." Said Austin.

Since the two were mostly dressed and what could be called decent, the Helldiver saw no problem in letting someone in.

The doors opened and Xun stepped in. Although she was wearing her amour, she did have her helmet off.

"Shepard? There's something you need to hear." She said.

"All right."

Xun noticed however that the two were still finishing dressing. She'd seen Shepard without his shirt before and she was never uncomfortable with Asari showing skin. Still, she didn't want to accidently intrude on privacy.

"Oh. Is this a bad time?" she asked.

"It's alright. It's fine." Said Austin as he finished putting a shirt on, despite that it was a bit tight for all his muscles.

"The Salarian councillor has an urgent matter." Said Xun.

"Let me guess. He called the comm room?" Austin asked.

"The Council must be taking the Crucible seriously." Said Liara, finishing putting on her white and blue outfit.

"I'll see you downstairs." Said Xun.

With both the Turians and the Krogan firmly on-board as part of the Reaper Resistance, that also meant that some of them were now fighting alongside the N7 Special Forces. Sarah of course had made no objections to it. They needed all the help they get fighting on the front lines, especially since they were fighting Cerberus forces as well as Husks. There had been rumours that some Geth had been engaged during one of these drops, but this was unconfirmed.

Austin walked into the comm room and Councillor Valern appeared in front of him.

"Major, there is something we should discuss... if you are finished rewriting history." He said.

"I made my decision, Councillor. There's not much anyone can do about it now." Said Austin defensively.

"Yes, we're going to have billions more Krogan in the galaxy. It's a good thing you saved my life once, Shepard. Otherwise... well." Said Valern. "I have concerns about humanity's representative, Councillor Udina. My agents have discovered that he's using his authority to move vast sums of money. For what purpose, we're not sure."

"If Udina's dirty, it's best we get to the bottom of it fast." Said Austin.
"Agreed." Said Valern. "Come to the Citadel. We will review the evidence and discuss this in private. Valern out."

With the Normandy en-route to the Citadel, Austin decided to do what he often did to pass the time, talk to the crew.

First off, he decided to see how Emily was doing. From the looks of things, she'd settled in very well

"Shepard? Got a minute?" she asked.

"What do you want to know?" Austin replied.

Emily's camera swooped around until it was facing Austin. It then started recording.

"You've just implemented a cure for the Genophage. Millions of Krogan will start fighting the Reapers. What do you say to people who think humanity is starting another Rachni-War and Krogan Rebellions?" Emily asked.

"It's easy to remember the worst of Krogan history, but you also need to remember the best." Austin replied.

"Could you elaborate, Shepard?" Emily asked.

"The Krogan were heroes once, and they want to be heroes again. We're giving them that chance." Said Austin.

"Are you aware that Clan Urdnot is already petitioning the Council for an embassy and rights to a colony world?" Emily asked.

Normally Austin wouldn't like this many questions, but in this case he was fine with it. This was Emily after all, not that annoying reporter, Khalisah Al Jilani.

"Of course. The Krogan are coming to the aid of a Council homeworld. Those more than a lot of species can say. I helped them get the Genophage cure. Anything more is between the Council and the Krogan." He said.

"That is well said, Major." Emily smiled. She then turned to her camera. "Until tomorrow, this is Emily Wong. Normandy news."

"Normandy news?" Austin chuckled.

"I had to think of something." Emily shrugged with a smile. "That's not a problem is it?"

"No. I just found the title a bit humorous is all." Austin smiled back. "Catchy as well actually."

"Anyway, I'll cut that together with the rest of the segment and send it to the news for approval." Said Emily.

It occurred to Austin that he hadn't had a talk with Cortez for a long time. They'd talked before when he was first assigned as the new dropship pilot. But since then, Austin hadn't spoken with him.

Now was as good a time as any.

As the Helldiver approached him though, he found him listening to a recording, tears in his eyes.
"I'm coming for you."

"Don't you dare. They're everywhere. You'd just get taken, too."

"I can't just sit here, doing nothing."

"Stay with me."

"Run—get out of there! You can make it!"

"No I can't, Steve. But you can. Promise me. I love you, but I know you. Don't make me an anchor. Promise me, Steve."

"No, don't."

Finally, Cortez noticed that Austin was standing near him. He did his best to wipe the tears from his eyes and sound casual.

"Major. Sorry, didn't see you there. This is a recording from Ferris Fields… months ago." He said. "I lost a lot of friends that day. I lost my husband. I grieved. Said goodbye, made my peace…"

"You were talking to him when the Collectors hit?" Austin asked.

"I was organizing construction at a remote station a few clicks south of the main colony. Robert managed to get outside of the field the Collectors put up. Instead of running, he called me." Cortez sighed.

"I'm sorry for your loss. He obviously cared for you a lot." Said Austin sympathetically. "You may not believe this, but I know what it's like to lose a loved one. Liara and I share feelings."

"He was afraid I wouldn't let go. But for him, I moved on… or at least I thought I had. Then the invasion hits. There's no time. And the one thing I grab is this?" said Steve. "I mean, what's the point of moving on with your life when everything is going to hell?"

"Start thinking that way, and we've already lost." Said Austin

"Yeah. You're right. But, well… to be honest, I've never felt as alone as I do now." Said Cortez.

"You're a welcome part of this crew, Steve. You have friends here. And I'm also happy to listen if you ever want to talk." Said Austin supportingly.

"I appreciate that, Shepard. I really do." Steve smiled. "But, don't worry, Major. When I'm in the pilot seat, I'm there 100%. I won't fail you."

"And I don't think you ever will." Austin smiled.

"Thanks. It's just the down time between missions that's hard, you know?"

"Yeah. I do know."

Austin walked onto the bridge as Joker was trying to get permission to dock at the Citadel.

"Citadel control, this is Normandy SR3, are we cleared to descend?" he asked.

Several long seconds passed with no response whatsoever.
"Citadel control, this is Normandy SR3, were headed to Bay 1-4, Zakera Ward. Are we cleared to descend?" Joker repeated.

Still nothing.

"What the hell's going on down there? Even if there were a station malfunction, they'd have backups online." He asked.

"Something's not right here." Said Austin suspiciously.

"I got a bad feeling here too. Checking emergency channels." Said Joker. "Hey! Yeah, this is Joker. Yeah, no kidding. Major, there's a communication from Thane. He says it's important. Think you'll want to hear this."

"Put him through." Said Austin.

"Shepard, the Citadel is under attack. Cerberus troops are everywhere and they're in control of the docks." Said Thane.

"Are you safe?" Austin asked.

"No, I had to evade their commandos at the hospital. I'm in a Presidium storefront." Thane replied.

"Did Ashley make it out?" Austin quickly asked.

"We got separated. She said she had to protect the Council. I'm going to C-sec headquarters." Thane replied.

"Why C-sec headquarters?" Austin asked.

"It's been compromised and CC-sec's response depends on it. As long as Cerberus is holding the headquarters, they have the station." Thane replied.

"All right. Joker, get us away from the docks and close to C-sec HQ. We'll deploy in the dropship." Said Austin.

"Aye, aye, Major."

As the Hellhound's doors opened, Austin, Griffin, Liara and X-5 found the whole of C-sec essentially swarming with Cerberus. It didn't take long to deal with them though.

With the last one dead, they scanned for survivors. Luckily they found one. Bailey was slumped against the door. He'd been shot, but it didn't look bad. Nothing a little medi gel couldn't fix.

"Shepard. I saw those Cerberus troops on you. I thought you were done for." He said.

"Never underestimate my husband." Liara smiled.

"What are you doing here?" Austin asked.

"Getting my ass shot off trying to retake headquarters. Cerberus took it in the first push. We gotta kick them out of there. Everyone is C-sec's flying blind without the network." Said Bailey.

"Is this the situation everywhere? Are the Councillors even alive?" Griffin asked.
"They split up. I'll know more if I can access a terminal inside." Bailey replied.

"Can you get us in?" said Austin.

"I'll get the door. If no one interrupts me with a bullet this time." Bailey replied.

"Here we go. C-sec network access, courtesy of Cerberus." Said Bailey as he sat down at a nearby desk.

"How's that going to help?" Griffin asked.

"Cerberus has control of the main channels, but I can set up a new one. Without it, our people have no plan and no chance." Said Bailey. "Hello…"

"What have you got?" Austin asked.

"A warning from Councillor Valern. He's supposed to be here, meeting with the executor." "Be on guard-the likelihood of betrayal from within is high…" Not a lot else. But if he's inside…" Bailey replied.

"QUERY: Why would the councillor be meeting with the executor?" X-5 asked.

"Usually it means someone big's about to be prosecuted. I guess that someone had Cerberus friends." Bailey replied.

"RECALLATION: The councillor mentioned Udina." Said X-5. "CAUTIOUS QUERY: Does he even have this kind of pull?"

"You know who'd have the answer to that? The councillor." Said Bailey.

"The Councillor's in there, surrounded by Cerberus? Who put together that security detail?" Austin asked.

"Well, until an hour ago, this place was as safe as it got. Nobody expected something on this scale." Said Bailey. "We need to find the Councillor and get him out of here. He has got to know more about who's behind this."

"He could be in the executor's office. It's a fairly defensible position." Said Griffin.

"We're on it." Said Austin.

"Just a sec…" said Bailey as he accessed his omni tool. "There. Now we can talk by omni-tool. Go!"

The team made their way through the abandoned Citadel corridors. Lot of bodies, but fortunately no Cerberus soldiers yet.

Within the few minutes, they finally managed to find the executor's office. The executor himself was there, along with the dead bodies of his bodyguards. No sign of Valern though.

"Bailey, looks like they got the executor and two Salarian bodyguards." Said Austin into his comm.

"Damn. All right, keep searching. If you don't see the councillor's body, don't count him out yet." Bailey cursed.
The group surveyed the room for a moment. Griffin even looked out of the window into the next room below. For a moment, the demolition expert was about to turn away when he suddenly spotted something.

From behind a table on the lower level, a cloaked figure came out of hiding. It was Valern.

"I found him." Said Griffin, pointing to Valern.

"Found him. He looks unharmed." Said Austin into the comm.

"Get him somewhere safe!" said Udina.

As soon as Bailey finished however another figure joined the fray. Some sort of Cerberus assassin clad in a black long coat outfit of some kind with a mask over his eyes and with cyborg legs hopped down from the ceiling in front of Valern.

Quickly noticing the danger, Austin smashed right through the window and jumped down to the lower level.

The assassin quickly sensed the Helldiver's presence and flipped over Valern, the clawed feet on his cybernetics clanking heavily on the floor and leaving scratch marks.

"Don't even think about it." Austin warned, aiming his assault rifle.

At the same time, the assassin held up his right hand as it glowed with a charge of some kind. Austin recognized that this was the same sort of thing that Cerberus Phantoms used. It was now that Austin noticed the many tiny knives strapped to the assassin's metal legs and that he also had two medium length swords. One on his side, and another on his back similar to how his own was.

Clearly this guy meant business.

From what Austin could see of his face, he appeared to be Chinese and had black hair. Something about him seemed familiar, but Austin couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"Shepard. He's going to kill us all." Said Valern.

"That remains to be seen." Said Austin.

"I mean Udina. He's staging a coup. He's got the other councillors now—to hand over to Cerberus." Said Valern quickly.

"Well done for ruining the surprise." Said the assassin bitterly just as Griffin, X-5 and Liara quickly joined Austin.

"Four against one, pal. It's over." Said Austin.

"No. Now it's fun." The assassin smiled.

Another figure suddenly appeared and aimed his gun at the assassin's head. Thane.

The assassin though quickly reacted by pushing the gun arm out of the way quickly. The two opponents fought each other with such speed and skill that it was hard to keep track of them.

Liara quickly seized the opening and made sure to get Valern behind all of them.

The assassin then managed an opening and flung Thane over his shoulder. The Drell quickly rolled
back onto his feet though and whirled around, gun at the ready only to see no sign of the assassin. Everyone looked around hastily trying to catch sight of the assassin. The assassin then suddenly uncloaked on the other side of the table, drawing on of his six swords. Thane fired several shots at him as he ran around until he was running right at the Drell.

Thane just managed to duck in time as the assassin swung at him. He then used his gun to swat the sword away completely. The assassin lunged again, but Thane was once again able to move out of the way.

Thane then swung two more kicks which knocked the assassin to his knees and was then followed by a biotic push sending him to the far end of the room.

Thane quickly picked up his pistol and reloaded it as the assassin hopped back onto his feet.

The two opponents ran at each other. The assassin attempted a lunge at Thane which he was only just able to avoid. Unfortunately the thrust caught Thane's gun and severed it in two. Before Thane could react in time to this, the assassin delivered a sharp hit to Thane's chest which left him coughing quite severely.

With Thane incapacitated on the floor, the assassin raised his blade ready to finish Thane off. Just before he could though, he suddenly felt something hit his blade so hard that it flew out of his hand. He looked around to see who had done it. Austin had drawn his own sword and had managed to sneak up on him and disarm him.

"Don't make me warn you again." The Helldiver warned, his sword pointing at the assassin's throat.

Despite this though, the assassin remained unfazed. He even smiled a bit.

"I vote for a stay of execution." He said.

His free hand then glowed with biotics and he slammed it into the ground hard. The shockwave threw Austin and the others off their feet as the assassin leapt to the ceiling, his clawed feet attaching to them.

He ran along the ceiling for a few moments before finally dropping back down again, picking up his sword and heading outside. Austin was quick to give chase an fired several shots at him as he jumped over the edge only to then rise up again on top of a car before speeding away. Thane did what he could to shoot at the car, but to no avail.

"You alright?" Austin asked.

"I think so." Thane coughed. "You should go after him and make sure the rest of the Council are safe. I'll see to Valern's safety."

"Got it."

"Shepard? What's going on up there?" Bailey asked.

"Thane's getting the Salarian councillor to safety, and I need to take care of an assassin." Austin replied as he and the others got into a C-sec car.

"He must be going after the rest of the Council." Said Bailey.

"Get the word out-Udina's trying to seize power. We've got to get to the councillors." Austin
warned.

"They're being taken to a shuttle pad on the Presidium. Start driving-I'll try to raise them on the comm." Said Bailey.

"I've got a fix on the Council's position. I'm sending it to your car." Said Bailey.

"Good work. We're almost there." Said Austin.

At that very moment however, something suddenly slammed onto the front of their car. The assassin was back.

Austin immediately took out his gun and fired several shots at the assassin as he ran up the windscreen.

"Griffin, take the wheel." Austin ordered as he opened the door to try and get a better shot at the assassin.

"I've never driven one of these in my life." Griffin muttered.

Austin fired several more shots but the assassin threw up a biotic shield which deflected all the blasts. Seeing that this wasn't going to work, Austin climbed out of the car completely and onto the roof, once again drawing Excalibur and removing his shield form his back.

Sensing where this was going, the assassin smiled and got into a battle stance as he drew another one of his five swords.

"Drop the sword or I'll make you." Austin threatened.

"Good luck trying." Smiled the assassin.

The two opponents clashed back and forth on the roof of the car.

The Helldiver had to admit that this assassin, whoever he was, was good. He moved that same speed and skill as a Cerberus Phantom, so much so that it reminded Austin a lot of the Phantom's late leader, Tyranny Azula a.k.a Shadow. It suddenly occurred to Austin that perhaps this assassin was Shadow's replacement.

The assassin then managed to swing a punch which hit Austin's helmet. As the Helldiver spun however he was able to swipe at the assassin, scarring him slightly on the left cheek.

Angered by this the assassin made a step lunge which clashed with Austin's in a blade lock. The Helldiver found he was unable to break free of the lock easily without risking a critical opening.

Using this to his advantage, the assassin used his free hand to grab onto Austin's wrist and he pushed hard, causing both blades to plunge into the roof of the car.

The result of this caused the alert to start beeping and the car began to descend dangerously out of control.

Austin managed to get his right hand free and he delivered a sharp punch to the assassin's face, knocking him back slightly. Just as he did though, he swung one of his cyborg legs which hit Austin's helmet causing him to lose his footing and fall over the edge.

"AUSTIN!" Liara yelled.
Just in time, the Asari was able to activate her biotics and throw Austin back onto the car right back at the assassin. As the Helldiver lunged with another punch though, the assassin flipped over it, pulling his own blade out of the car at the same time.

Another car that was being piloted by a Cerberus Phantom flew ear enough that the assassin was able to grab onto the side with his clawed feet. The car doors opened and the assassin settle into the seat.

Austin quickly slid back into the car and into the driver's seat as the car started plummeting out of control.

"Lock your armour! Now!" he yelled.

Everyone managed to activate the armour lock just in time as the car smashed into a part of the Presidium. Once the car had settled, they all deactivated it.

"Anyone hurt?" Austin asked.

"Only my pride. I never was a good driver." Said Griffin, much to the amusement of the others.

"I'm fine." Said Liara.

"DAMAGE REPORT: 0%" said X-5.

"Come on. We've got a Council to save." Said Austin as he kicked the door of and everyone followed him out.


"We're on foot now. Any luck contacting the Council?" Austin asked.

"Negative—their guards are dead. But we've still got vital signs on the Council's transponders." Bailey replied.

"Where are they going?"

"The shuttle pad above Shalmar Plaza. Dina's with them. If he can get them in range of that assassin, it's all over."

"He won't get that chance." Said Griffin.

"We're at Shalmar Plaza. Where's the Council?" Austin asked.

"In an elevator. They're trying to get to the shuttle dock." Said Bailey. "Someone's following them. Someone with a sword."

At that moment, several Cerberus shuttles began dropping troops, including a few Phantoms.

"You handle the soldiers." Said Austin. "I need to make sure that assassin is delayed in reaching the Council."

"You got it." Griffin nodded.

"Be careful, my love." Said Liara telepathically.
"If I need any help, I'll let you know, Liara. I promise." Said Austin.

Austin's timing was most opportune. The assassin was just about to enter an elevator along with several other Phantoms.

Just as the last Phantom got in, Austin timed the shots from his SMG just right and was able to shoot he controls, causing the doors to close early before the assassin could join them.

The assassin slowly turned to face Austin once again.

The two opponents simply stood in silence for a while, neither one daring yet to make the first move.

The assassin then took one of the many small knives from the straps on his leg. This was obviously meant to be an intimidation. Austin however kept his cool and simply reloaded the thermal clip in his SMG. Certain that the assassin would attack first, the Helldiver took a deep breath, his suit making it sound slightly deeper than it was.

Sure enough, the assassin threw several blades form his legs. Despite that they were very small; Austin was easily able to shoot them with a few well-placed shots from the SMG. The reaming shards of what was left of the knives fell harmlessly to the floor.

The assassin threw several more, but they were once again shot down by Austin.

"Hope that's not you only attack, because I can do this all day." Austin thought.

The assassin attempted the throws again, but this time he did them while running. Knife after knife after knife was thrown and then shot to pieces by Austin. As he shot the last one, he then focused fire on the assassin. He was quick to react to this though and flipped off the wall to avoid Austin's incoming fire as he continued running at his opponent. Once he was close enough, he then used one leg to push himself away from the wall and used the force of it to kick Austin with the other, causing the Helldiver to drop his SMG.

Dodging under a punch, Austin drew Excalibur and his shield. The assassin quickly caught on and drew his own blade. Once again, the two opponents fought back and forth in front of the elevators, occasional sparks flying from their swords.

Austin moved to avoid a lunge from the assassin and used the opening to kick him in the back, forcing him against a closed door. As Austin tried to thrust, the assassin moved to side as Excalibur carved through the door.

Austin was just able to duck in time to avoid the assassins own sword as he attempted to backstab him in the head as he pulled Excalibur out.

The assassin used his wrists to block Austin's few strikes before then pulling his sword out of the door as well, slamming it into Austin's helmet as he did so. Austin quickly followed this with a punch form his free hand which ended up smashing through a pillar.

He then parried several more of the assassin's attacks before using a sidekick which forced the assassin back. As he hit the wall though, he launched his own kick which did the same to Austin.

The Helldiver followed with a lunge which the assassin pinned with his arms. Using his strength, which was clearly enhanced with indoctrinated Reaper tech, he smashed Austin against the wall before the Helldiver managed to do the same back.
As the assassin was forced against the wall however, he used this to his advantage. Using the strength of his cyborg feet, he pushed hard against the wall and essentially jumped away from it, his knee kicking both their weapons out of their hands.

Just as the two were steady gain, Austin delivered a swift punch to the assassin's face, knocking him back slightly.

He quickly returned with a jump kick that Austin was able to avoid. The assassin tried a punch swing, but Austin ducked under that one, following it with a haymaker. As the assassin blocked it though, Austin used this ability to grab on.

The two opponents wrestled with one another, trying to overpower the other. Although Austin was much stronger, the assassin still seemed to be able to push him hard against the wall. His hands then closed around Austin's neck, which wasn't as well armoured as the rest of him. Clearly this assassin knew some of things that Shadow had known in her time as well.

The grip tightened and he found it much harder to breath, even with him trying to push the assassin off. Acting desperately, he brought his elbow right into the assassins' face. To his relief, it worked. The assassin staggered back and fell to his knees, very dazed from the blow.

The two adversaries remained where they were for a moment, one trying to recover from his blurred vision, the other coughing slightly and getting his breath back.

The assassin wiped the blood from his mouth and got back up. Austin also readied for another fight.

The assassin lunged first with a kick that Austin was able to block with his arm, which he then returned with a punch, but the assassin blocked that with his arm. Austin reacted first though and swung another punch with his other arm, hitting the assassin in the head and causing him to stagger back.

Before they could continue their fight however, a sudden plasma shot sent a Cerberus shuttle spinning out of control and it headed right at them.

The shuttle ended up crashing right between them, the wreckage and debris forming a wall, separating the two.

"Damn." Austin cursed. "Well, at least I delayed him."

"Austin, are you alright?" Liara asked as she and others joined him, having dealt with the rest of Cerberus.

"Nothing I can't handle." Austin replied is he picked Excalibur up and sheathed it.

At the same time, the elevator door next to them opened.

"Got a ride for you, Shepard. Grab an elevator!" said Bailey.

"Thanks."

The door that had opened led into the elevator shafts rather than the elevator itself, but it would do.

"Okay. We're in the shaft." Said Austin into his comm.

"Heehee. You said "shaft." Liara giggled telepathically.
"Not now, darling." Austin chuckled in his mind. Admittedly, he did still find that funny.

"Hang on, this'll be a fast climb." Said Bailey.

"Tell me that assassin hasn't reached the Council." Said Austin.

"He's trying, but I'm making his elevator stop on every floor." Said Bailey.

"APPROVAL: That should give us the advantage." Said X-5.

After some time of the elevator climbing, they soon caught sight of the one the assassin had managed to get.

"We've found our friend." Said Austin.

"Kill his elevator! There's a power conduit beneath it!" Bailey advised.

Sure enough, they caught sight of the power conduits.

Austin quickly activated his plasma cannon and fired. The power conduits exploded and they lost sight of the other elevator as theirs sped past it.

"God speech, you bastard." Said Griffin.

"Funnily enough, I was going to say something similar." Said Austin.

"WARNING: Incoming phantoms." X-5 advised as another elevator caught up to them.

Griffin quickly took an IME from his belt, whirled it several times, then threw it. The device attached itself to the bottom of the elevator then exploded. They lost sight of the Phantoms before they even got a chance to jump on.

"Good throw, Griff." Said Austin.

"I have my moments." Griffin smiled.


"Is there any other kind?" Austin asked sarcastically.

"That hit man jumped to another elevator, and he's overridden my controls." Said Bailey. "He's on his way up. I can't stop him."

"We'll handle it." Said Austin.

"Here they come!" said Liara as the other elevator approached. This time X-5 shot the power conduits.

Not long after, they caught sight of another elevator on their left. This time though, they knew it was the one that Council was in.

"Shepard?"

"I see them. Jump!"

They all jumped and landed on the roof with a thump. Several shots burst through it and they had to move to avoid them clearly they'd startled Ashley, assuming she was still guarding them.
The elevator finally stopped and they dropped down into it. As they hurried outside, they found the Council gathered at a destroyed shuttle. Udina and Ashley were with them.

"Cerberus took out the shuttle. Everyone back to the elevator! Move!" said Ashley as she turned around. When she saw Austin and the others, she seemed to relax.

"Shepard. Thank god you're here." She smiled.

"Shepard's blocking our escape! He's with Cerberus!" said Udina.

"The hell he is!" said Ashley, refusing to believe that. She knew better than to doubt Austin again. "He'd sooner die again than work for them. He proved that two years ago."

"Udina's behind this attack. The Salarian councillor confirmed it." Said Austin.

"Wait, what? Udina's responsible?" Ashley asked, almost in disbelief.

"Please. You don't have proof. You never do." Said Udina.

"Austin, this is a very serious accusation." Said Ashley. "Don't do anything rash."

"Ashley, we wouldn't do this if we weren't sure. I promise you, we're telling you the truth." Said Griffin.

"We don't have time to debate this. We're dead if we stay out here. I'm overriding the lock." Said Udina.

The Councillor went over to the control panel for the door that they sealed behind them, but before he could work on accessing it, Austin shot it.

"There are Cerberus troops behind that door. I'm not letting you hand the Council over to them." He said.

"Williams, I order you to shoot him!" said Udina.

"No," Ashley replied, turning to face Udina and raising her gun. "Step away from that console, Udina."

"Put the gun down, Williams. That's an order!" Udina yelled.

"Don't know if you heard, but I refused your offer. I take orders from my friend, not from a traitor like you." Said Ashley.

"To hell with you!" Udina yelled as he whipped out a gun and fired at Ashley.

The shot hit the Alliance soldier and she fell to the ground.

For Griffin… that sent him over the edge. Fuelled by anger, the demolition expert charged at Udina. Despite the politician firing a few shots, they simply bounced off his armour.

Griffin tackled Udina to the floor and slammed his large gauntlet several times into his face. Blood began to pour from Udina's head as Griffin practically beat the crap out of him. His arms flayed wildly from the pain until they finally seemed to go limp.

Despite that Udina was clearly dead now though, Griffin still kept punching, the pain of Ashley being shot fuelling his rage and anger.
"I'LL KILL YOU FOR THAT!" he yelled.

Eventually Austin finally intervened. He grabbed Griffin's arm and pulled as hard as he could. It was a real challenge since Griffin was Alpha's biggest and strongest human.

"Griffin, stop! He's already dead!" he said, trying to calm Griffin down.

"This piece of shit killed her!" Griffin yelled.

"She's alright. Her shields took the most of it and it hit her in the shoulder. It's a flesh wound at worst." Said Austin.

Griffin looked back at Ashley and the others. Sure enough, she was alive and was having her shoulder wound treated with medigel.

The demolition expert quickly shrugged Austin's hand off and hugged Ashley tightly.

"Don't scare me like that." He said.

"It's okay, Griff. It's okay." Said Ashley calmly.

Griffin gently let Ashley go and stood up to face Austin.

"Sorry I lost control a bit there." He said. "Think I made a bit of a mess."

"You did." Austin nodded. "Although to be honest it was quite satisfying watching you do that."

"Felt satisfying too." Griffin smiled, banging his fist into his palm.

"You okay?" Austin asked as he helped Ashley up.

"Yeah. I think so." Ashley winced slightly as she stood up.

"The door!" said Sparatus.

Sure enough, the door was slowly being cut open.

"Griffin, protect Ash!" said Austin as he and the other readied for a fight.

When the door opened however, someone rather unexpected came out.

"Bailey?"

"Made it as fast we could, Shepard. Looks like you, uh... took care of things." Said Bailey.

The C-sec captain was accompanied by another office.

"Something's not right. You said Cerberus was targeting us—where did their soldiers go?" Tevos asked.

"Cerberus was right here, but they beat their feet into the keeper tunnels when they figured out you were coming." Said Bailey. "Sorry, Councillor. I'll say it plain. Shepard just saved the lot of you."

"Then you have saved my life twice now, Shepard. I owe you a personal debt and one on behalf of Palaven." Said Sparatus.

"Too bad it took all this to get you on-board." Said Austin.
"We will not make that same mistake again." Said Tevos.

"Major. Do you have any idea why the Illusive Man would do this?" Sparatus asked.

"It was a secondary objective." Bailey answered.

"What?"

"This whole coup has been a distraction and the assassination of the Council was a secondary objective. All along there were after this, and they got it." Said Bailey as he activated his omni tool which displayed a holo of the crucible.

"Oh no." said Sparatus.

"How can they be after the Crucible? We're still building it and we've kept it hidden." Austin asked, slightly confused.

"They weren't after the crucible specifically. They were after the designs. A copy of them was being kept here so the Council could work out the components and engineers they would need for it. Now they're gone. There's no other explanation other than that Cerberus stole them." Bailey explained, much to Austin's' horror.

"This isn't good."

The Illusive Man sat in his usual spot, the view of a massive blue and red star in the background. One of his many screens then beeped and he activated it to display the face of the assassin.

"Yes."

"Secondary objective was a failure. The Council's still in control of the Citadel, and Udina's dead." Said the assassin.

"Udina was expendable. Besides, it's the plans we were after." Said the Illusive Man calmly.

"Then you'll be pleased to know that I have them." Said the assassin proudly.

"Well done. Our... clients will be most pleased." The illusive man smiled.

"Are you sure they can be trusted?" the assassin asked.

"It's not in my position to question them. Besides, without them, none of this would be possible." The illusive man replied. "Regardless, the coup did its job. The Council surviving is a setback, but it won't matter once we have a new army in our command." I'm surprised you let Shepard get the better of you though, Leng."

"It won't happen again." Said Leng bitterly. "Next time I'll drive his own sword through his heart."

"We'll see." Said the Illusive Man as he ended the call.

The whole room then suddenly darkened and he once again felt that familiar presence.

"What is it this time?" he asked irritably. For a moment, there was no reply.

"Mirage?"
"Not exactly."

The Illusive Man froze and he nearly felt his heart stop. A hologram of two massive green eyes, similar to Mirage's, appeared in front of him.

This however wasn't Mirage. This was someone much worse. This was her husband, the one she had threatened the Illusive Man with during their last meeting.

The Illusive Man could not deny the fear and nervousness that he was feeling right now as he heard the deep snarling voice of The General as he had ordered to be called due to the secrecy of his kind. Unlike Mirage, who the Illusive Man had no respect for, he feared The General more than anything else. If other people knew what he knew about these mysterious figures, they would feel the same.

"I'm sorry, sir. I thought you were… Please accept my apologies." Said the Illusive Man hastily.

"Am I disturbing you?" the General asked.

"No. Not at all. In fact your timing is perfect. I have good news. The coup served its purpose, and we have managed to acquire of copy of the plans." Said the Illusive Man, trying to sound bit calmly and also hopping this news would make the General happy.

"Excellent. Mirage always had her doubts about you, but I knew my faith in you was justified. You have done well." Said the General. He did sound pleased despite the snarl in his voice.

"I have already uploaded the plans to my engineers and scientists. They will begin construction immediately."

"Good. See to it that they work to their limits. No doubt the Helldivers will eventually discover that the plans have been stolen and they will attempt to get them back from you."

"They will not find us easily, General. That I can promise you. And even if they do eventually track us down, it will already be too late by then."

"I hope you keep your promises. I would hate to let my wife give in to her… primal instincts. She does so enjoy the taste of human flesh and blood, you know."

This made the Illusive Man shiver slightly. He did sometimes forget that Mirage suffered from a carnivorous condition which her kind called Menseneter. This condition was in a way like cannibalism, but Mirage was definitely not that. She would gladly eat any organic species, but she would never eat her own.

"I… I understand, sir. I swear that the Liberator will be complete as quickly as possible. I admit though it won't be easy. With this war on, supplies are getting strained and prices are increasing." Said the Illusive Man.

At this statement, the eyes seemed to narrow and they took on a more angry look as they edged closer toward him.

"Money is of no importance! And you would be wise to remember that, for the sake of yourself, and your entire race." He snarled warningly.

"I… I meant no disrespect, sir." The Illusive Man stuttered.

"This is your last chance to prove yourself to me. We are at a crucial part of our plan at this
"time. Fail now and the consequences will be… severe." The General warned.

"I… understand, General. I'll… I'll see to it personally." Said the Illusive Man, bowing gently bowing his head trying his best to stop shaking.

"I will be among you soon."

The eyes faded and everything returned to normal, leaving just the Illusive Man on his own.

"We looked over every centimetre of those tunnels, Shepard. Your Cerberus pal is made out of smoke and mirrors." Said Bailey.

With Cerberus cleared out of the Citadel, things were no returning to normal and rebuilding of what had been damaged was underway.

"These are tunnels, right? Just one exit and one entrance?" Austin asked.

"No, that keeper tunnel from the elevator lobby led into the superstructure. Once you're in there, the place is like an ant farm. We can't even get an ID on him. He released a VI into the Citadel's system that erased footage of him wherever he went. That how he stole the designs without us knowing until it was too late. I guess he didn't trust that Udina's plan would come together. That reminds me—your friend Thane was taken back to your ship and is in your med bay. I'm told he's being given the very best to recover." Said Bailey.

"Thanks, Bailey." Said Austin gratefully.

"Oh, and you can tell him the Salarian councillor says he's a hero."

As Austin was about to walk back to the Normandy, he found Ashley waiting for him at the docking bay.

"Austin… we need to talk before you ship out." She said. "Things got pretty crazy. I'm trying to go over everything in my head."

"Last time you doubted me, you almost got killed. I'm glad to see at least it wasn't the case that time." Said Austin.

"You know how it is. Too much at stake if I made a mistake."

"It almost meant blowing my head off, but you were willing to die for what you though was right. We'll need that in the war to come."

"I'd rather be shooting the bad guys than my friend though."

"Same. We stopped Udina and got to walk away. That's the important part."

"I can't believe he was responsible for all of it. Was he indoctrinated?"

"Hard to say."

"How do we fight something that can worm its way into your head?"

"I don't know, but we don't have a choice."
"No, we don't. I also wanted to tell you Hackett offered me a position on his team."

"Congratulations, I guess?" said Austin, slightly disappointed at this. He had hope that Ashley would be able to re-join the crew at last. "With all of Hackett's resources, you can do a lot of good."

"I can, but…" said Ashley hesitantly.

"Something wrong?" Austin asked.

"I'd prefer to ride this out on the Normandy." Ashley replied with a slightly hopeful smile.

"I hoped you would say that." Austin smiled under his helmet. "Griffin wouldn't have been happy if you'd chosen otherwise."

"Exactly. I could never leave him, or you and the others." Said Ashley.

"Welcome back, Ash." Said Austin as he and Ashley shook hands.

"Glad to be here, Major."

Austin felt it best to debriefed first before he then went about his business. This time Hackett, Zartrack, Anderson and Matt were all there.

"Shepard, we've got Anderson and Hackett patched in. We were just getting them up to speed." Said Zartrack.

"Udina… That SOB was always power hungry, but this…” said Anderson.

"He wasn't in charge. Cerberus was just using him to take control of the Citadel." Said Austin.

"What the hell for?" Matt asked.

"It was all a distraction. Their real mission all along was to steal plans for the Crucible. Unfortunately, he realised that only too late." Austin explained.

"That isn't good. No doubt he still foolishly believes he can control the Reapers." Said Matt.

"I wouldn't be surprised if he's already started." Said Zartrack.

"At least the council was saved. If they hadn't, it could've been a whole lot worse." Said Hackett.

"Shepard stopped the assassination attempt on Councillor Valern."

"Who'd they send?" Anderson asked.

"Chinese guy. Carried a sword and had cybernetic legs." Austin replied.

"Kai Leng…"

"You know him?" Austin asked.

"Kahlee and I had our share of run-ins with him. I shot him in both legs once. Thought that might be the end of him, but he showed up again on Omega even stronger with those new ones he now has." Said Anderson.

"I'm guessing the Illusive Man patched him up?" Austin asked.
"That'd be my guess. It's a safe bet Leng's even more dangerous now." Said Anderson.

"I don't care who he is. Next time we meet, he dies." Said Austin bitterly.

"Certainly Cerberus' attempts have had one unintended side effect that works to our advantage. I received word from the Asari councillor. They're requesting an update on our Crucible." Said Hackett.

"Leng has them scared. Enough to send help?" Anderson asked.

"Yes, the Asari and Salarians are both throwing in their support for the resistance now. Day by day, our army is growing stronger. The tide is definitely turning." Said Matt.

"How is our progress on the Crucible anyway?" Austin asked.

"Good. Our estimates suggest that we've completed nearly 50 percent of the known work." Zartrack replied.

"So quickly?" Austin asked in surprise.

"Once decoded, the schematic are designed in such a way that allows our scientists to easily translate the information. It's not Prothean specific." Said Hackett.

"Some scientists have even been having theory's that the crucible is older even than the Protheans." Said Matt.

"Are we any closer to understanding how to use it though? That's what's important." Anderson asked.

"That's still open for debate. Utilized in the right fashion, our scientists are convinced it can generate enough energy to destroy the Reapers. The question is, how will it disperse the energy, and in what form?" said Zartrack.

"You mean, how do you stop it from wiping us all out?" Anderson asked.

"Exactly." Said Hackett.

"We already have a few salvaged Reaper parts from Sovereign that we've kept in containment fields and we keep getting new samples and information all the time now from our forces out in the field. Even the N7 Special Forces are providing us with new things to study. We're using that to try and refine the Crucible to only target pure Reaper technology so that it won't count your own, which is derived from Reaper tech." said Matt.

"What about yours?" Hackett asked.

"Helldiver and Arkane tech is different to yours." Said Zartrack. "Nevertheless, we are making sure that it counts ours as friendly.

"A good plan. If it isn't refined, it could destroy us as well." Said Anderson.

"Which is why this is all the more important. We also believe the catalyst is the key to completing that refinement." Said Hackett.

"We're still working on that." Said Austin.

"You'll find the answers, Shepard." Said Anderson.
"We'll send you an update on the schematics, and in the meantime, we'll keep building." Said Hackett.

"And we'll keep fighting." Said Anderson.

"We'll be sending a small army to Earth soon, Anderson. That should be able to help keep Earth secured until the Resistance is ready." Said Matt.

"There's still the matter of Cerberus though." Said Hackett.

"Even if the Illusive Man does somehow manage to control the Reapers, I doubt that will end the war. Chances are he will just use them to destroy us and any other enemies who oppose Cerberus." Said Matt.

"I agree. They've interfered in this for the last time. We need to either steal the plans back, or eradicate them completely. I just got out of speaking with the Arkane Council, and they have all agreed that Cerberus needs to be taken out of the picture for good. Otherwise we'll have two wars on our hands." Said Zartrack.

"We've been fighting them for years and we've never found them." Said Austin.

"Only because we've been happy to cut off the tumours, but have failed to treat the source till now." Said Zartrack.

"Get Xun to look for anything that might suggest where their main base is. We'll also try to see if some of our spies can dig something up." Said Matt.

Austin headed into the war room. Everyone was already waiting for him.

"We heard everything. We're taking the fight to Cerberus?" Alaara asked.

"They've interfered for the last time." Said Austin.

"But where do we start?" Leena asked.

"I don't know. Even EDI doesn't know where they are. The Illusive Man's been very clever at covering his tracks." Said Austin.

"Um… Well, there is something?" said Traynor.

"Let's hear it, Sam." Said Sarah.

"Sandra and I were just able to track the vessel Kai Leng left on through the relay and extrapolate his destination." Said Samantha, activating her omni tool and projecting the course on the galaxy map.

"But the signal disappeared in the lera system." She finished.

"Naturally…" said Liara.

"It's not just gone though. The signal is being actively blocked." Said Traynor.

"How?" Xun asked.

"I'm not sure, but something is interfering with all signal activity in that region of space." Said Traynor.
"Major, the Iera system is home to Sanctuary and little else. Sanctuary is a supposed safe haven for war refugees." Said EDI.

"You two think it's worth checking out?" Austin asked.

"Yes, sir. We do." Said Sandra.

"If Specialist Traynor and Lieutenant Whryte hadn't examined the data so astutely, the interference would've been undetectable." Said EDI.

"Nice work, both of you. You've given use a shot. Now let's make sure we don't' waste it." "I don't care how slim the leads are at this point. Cerberus has been a thorn in our side for too long. They'll either surrender to us peacefully, or we wipe them out. All of them." Said Austin.

"Remind me never to get on your bad side, Major." Said Jet.

"Dismissed. We've got a terrorist organization to end." Said Austin.

Austin quickly headed to the med bay. Rana was there to greet him.

"Shepard." She said.

"How's he been?" Austin asked, prepared for the worst.

"There was no significant damage, but the blow he received did have some consequences." Said Rana.

"What kind?"

"The anti-Helldiver enhanced strength that Kai Leng used against him didn't break anything but it still caused a lot of trauma to his heart, which still makes it difficult for his blood to carry oxygen."

"I see."

"Fortunately, because the Drell are in the Helldivers, we have access to a good supply of Drell blood, so we've been able to stabilize his condition. He'll survive, but in this state he won't be able to fight. The risks to his health are too great."

"But he'll survive?" Austin asked.

"Yes. That is a definite. The only downside is he won't recover for a while. Even if he received a cure for Kepral Syndrome right now, it'll still take a long time. He'll need to be like this for several months, a year at most." Said Rana.

"Time he probably doesn't have." Austin sighed. "Do what you can to make him comfortable. He should at least have that much."

Thane was laid comfortably on one of the med beds. He had a few tubes connected to his arm to keep him supplied with the extra blood and he was also wearing a mask. Austin had been told that this was supplying him with some extremely dry air so as help his condition out a bit more. Sat next to him was son, Kolyat.

"Major Shepard. I don't' know if you remember me. I'm Kolyat Krios. I came to donate blood and… well…" he said as Austin approached.
"He helped me save a lot of lives. We owe him a lot." Said Austin.

Thane gently turned to look at Austin.

"Shepard. I'm afraid I won't be able to fight beside you again it seems." HE SAID.

"You've done more than enough, Thane." Said Austin, gently patting the Drell's shoulder.

"That assassin should be embarrassed. A terminally ill Drell managed to stop him from reaching his target." Thane chuckled slightly. His voice still sounded a bit weak, despite all the medical care and extra blood he'd refused.

"I'll pass the word along," Austin smiled. "You should get some rest. You've been given a bit more time. Don't think of this as your death bed."

"Your optimism is appreciated, Shepard. Thank you." Thane smiled.

"We have room if you want to stay, Kolyat." Said Austin.

"Thank you, Major." Said Kolyat.

It had been a rough day so Austin felt it best to retire to his quarters.

As the last piece of his armour detached and settled back onto the display, Liara then entered and hugged her bond mate from behind.

"You alright?" she asked.

"Yeah. Just tired." Austin yawned slightly.

"Come to bed. You feel stressed as well." Said Liar as she massaged her husband's shoulders. At the same time her biotics worked on undoing his jacket. "I know a good way to make you relax."

"What would I do without you, Liara?" Austin smiled.

"Just get on that bed before I make you." Liara smiled as she pulled Austin’s jacket off.

Austin complied and settled onto the bed. To his delight, Liara then used her biotics to gently remove all her clothes until she had nothing on, her beautiful blue skin glowing in the dimmed lights.

The Asari slowly crawled up the bed, gently planting kisses as she went moving up the legs, up the midsection until she paused a bit on the chest.

"Hmm, you look a bit bigger than usual." She said.

"Are you saying I'm getting fat?" Austin chuckled.

"No. I meant you look a bit more muscular." Liara smiled.

"I've been doing some time in the gym with Griffin. Believe it or not, that guy's actually a pretty good trainer." Said Austin.

"Seems to have worked well." Said Liara as she finally reached the top and the two started kissing.

"I love you." Said Austin as he wrapped his strong arms around Liara.
"I love you too." Said Liara.

I can guess that you're left with quite a few questions now.

Bet you're also wondering what's gonna happen when Cerberus are taken down so quickly. Fear not, the answers are only two chapters away.

As you've probably guessed, the next chapter will be Horizon, so Miranda fans will be pleased to know that she's joining the crew after that. (And don't worry, Sheppard will warn her about Leng at the beginning of the next chapter. The Alliance resources talk I don't think is necessary)

We'll also meet a new face in the chapter as well who'll be joining the team. He's a new character who was idea of a friend of mine.

Plenty to look forward to...

See ya!
Hmmm, reviews got a bit sparse on the last one. Something up?

Anyway, the chapter...

Err, okay, I make no excuses. I just didn't find the Horizon mission very interesting compared to some others in the game, and it kind of shows in this. Hopefully though the later part of it makes up for it.

And I can definitely promise the next chapter, Genesis Revelation, will be much better.

Would like to thank my friend, Vital Info for creating the new character who appears in this chapter. :)

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Chapter 14

The Hawk of Horizon

While en route to Sanctuary, Austin had received an incoming call from Miranda. He had a feeling that she should be warned about Leng. Being Ex-Cerberus, she would not doubt be a prime target for him."

"Good to see you're all right, Shepard." Said Miranda as her hologram appeared.

"Miranda, what's going on?" Austin asked.

"Couldn't meet in person. The Citadel is too dangerous right now. I heard about the attempted coup." Miranda replied.

"Yeah—with Kai Leng's help, Udina nearly seized control." Said Austin.

"Kai Leng? That slippery bastard's still alive?" Miranda asked with surprise.

"He's alive and right in the middle of all this." Said Austin.

"That complicates things. I'll be on my guard." Said Miranda. "Look, I don't have much time—but I learned what happened to my sister."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know yet, but my father was definitely responsible. If he's done anything to her, I'll kill him."

"Miranda…"

"Shepard, listen. I'm being hunted by Cerberus assassins. A lot of them. I need to stay out of sight."

"What? Why?"

"I heard a rumour, maybe more, that my father is working on something for the Illusive Man. Something big."
"Why would your father be working with the Illusive Man? Especially now."

"My father is ruthless about preserving his "legacy."

"Legacy?"

"He has an obsession with making his mark in history. Ensuring his dynasty lasts forever."

"And you think the Illusive Man made him an offer?"

"Exactly."

"Whatever's going on with your father can't be good. We have to figure this out."

"I agree, but... I need to do this myself. It's time I stopped running from him."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. I can't think straight until I know Ori is safe."

"Be careful."

"I can't promise that, Shepard. Could you?"

"I would at least try."

"Nice to see you haven't changed." Miranda smiled as her hologram vanished.

As the dropship headed to the sanctuary on Horizon, Ashley stood up from where she'd been sitting.

"What do we know, Austin? Ashley asked.

"EDI?"

"The Sanctuary facility was devoted to aiding refugees from Reaper-controlled systems." EDI replied. "The facility went offline recently, and no communications have come or gone since. It is unclear why Kai Leng or Cerberus would be interested in Sanctuary."

"We don't leave until we're one step closer to Cerberus." Said Austin.

"Sir, I'm picking up a signal from the facility. It's weak. I'll try to boost it." Said Cortez.

"This is Oriana Lawson. Stay away from Sanctuary. It's not what it seems. Please, you must listen to me! They're using..." said the message as it cut off.

"Miranda's sister? If she's here, Miranda can't be far away." Said Austin.

"That's our link to Cerberus." Said EDI.

"Approaching the L.Z." said Cortez as the dropship touched down. "Seeing some damage, Major, but no activity."

"Cerberus does not get the jump on us this time!" said Austin seriously. "Stay sharp, people."

"A lot of damage." Said EDI observantly.
"Yeah. But who were they fighting?" Ashley asked.

As the group proceeded further through the complex, they found even more wreckage. So far though there was no sign of Cerberus soldiers.

Austin found a nearby console and accessed it. It started to play a message with a very familiar voice.

"This is Miranda Lawson. If you managed to get this far, you must be desperate or stupid. Listen to me. This is not a refugee camp. This is a Cerberus facility run by my father, Henry Lawson. Turn back now. There is no help to be found here—all communication is being blocked from the central tower. Sanctuary is a lie. Stay away." It said.

"Okay. So, we've got Cerberus, Reapers, and Miranda's crazy father. Any ideas how this all fits?" Austin asked rhetorically.

The group proceeded outside. Despite the circumstances, it was actually quite nice looking.

"A security panel. EDI?" Austin asked.

"Shutting it down." Said EDI as she deactivated the panel.

"Wow. Look at that." Said Ashley as the waters slowly drained away to reveal a hidden door.

"Why go to the trouble of concealing it?" Garrus asked.

"Let's find out." Said Austin as he and the others slid down the ladder. "We have a back door into the facility. Let's move."

"I'd recognize Reaper technology anywhere, Austin." Said Ashley as she scanned a nearby pump. "Don't know how, but Cerberus is using it for something. Doesn't look good."

"And Miranda's caught in the middle. Let's pick up the pace." Said Austin.

"This is going to get ugly, Shepard. Nothing good ever came out of Reaper tech." said Garrus as they proceeded through the door.

"Some kind of control centre. No power, though." Said EDI.

"Look around for a switch." Said Austin.

"There." Said Garrus as he managed to get power up.

"What's that?" Ashley asked as a recording started to play on several screens.

It showed what looked like a recording of several of the refugees being forced into tanks and then being gassed.

"Those are the refugees." Said Austin.

"God, they're just rounding them up and slaughtering them." Said Ashley.

The recording then changed to show the tanks with husks now inside them, crawling around inside.

"They're being turned into husks." Said Garrus in shock.

It was only then that Austin noticed something moving in the hallway that their room overlooked.
Austin activated the lights, only to find to his horror that loads of husks were crawling all over the place and snarling, obviously aware of their presence.

"Come on." Said Austin.

So far, they didn't' encounter any resistance. Austin reckoned though they soon would. Seeing another control panel, EDI activated it. It showed a recording of Miranda.

"Reaper forces have made a mess of the facility. I'm shutting down the power to the processing plant to lock them down." She said. "Should keep them out of the entrance as well."

The recording ended and another one started playing, this time of a more unwelcome face.

"Kai Leng! She doesn't know he's here." Said Garrus.

"Miranda Lawson has arrived sooner than expected. You want me to deal with her?" Leng asked.

"Only if she gets in your way. Stay focused on the research data. Find it and get out." The Illusive Man replied.

"Yes, sir." Said Leng.

"Damn it! Let's move!" said Austin as the recording ended. As soon as he opened the door though, he found the whole hallway swarming with the Reaperized zombies.

"Husks!"

The nearest one lunged at Austin, but was quickly cut in half by the Helldiver's blade. The rest were quickly dealt with.

"Gotta be more where they came from." Said Garrus.

"Terminal's damaged. Hang on." Said EDI as she worked on repairing it.

"Maybe we'll get some answers as to why the Reapers wanted this place shut down." Said Austin.

"It doesn't make sense." Said Ashley.

"I thought Cerberus was under the Reaper's control… what changed?" Garrus asked rhetorically.

"Got it, Shepard." Said EDI as the recording started playing.

"Heading to the tower to disable the communication scrambler. I have to get word out. Some refugees are turned into husks. Some are indoctrinated and shipped to the Illusive Man. Whoever's left us used in experiments. The data indicates that my father is trying to figure out how Reaper indoctrination works." Said Miranda.

"Tricking refugees with food and shelter only to turn them into test subjects. And for what?" said Austin bitterly.

"This is disgusting. The scale of this…" said Ashley.

"She mentioned shipments. Could lead to the Illusive Man." Said Garrus.
"Good catch." Said Austin. "Come on. Miranda said she was headed to the tower."

"Heavy resistance outside the tower!" said Miranda. "If you're receiving this, I've got evidence you can't ignore. Confirmation that my father is working for the Illusive Man."

The recording then changed to a different one that showed Miranda's father talking to the Illusive Man.

"I have your report on the process. Mr Lawson. Cut to the chase. Can you do it?" the Illusive Man asked.

"Theoretically, control is possible, yes. The Reaper subjects we converted are responding, but it's difficult to maintain." Henry replied.

"I thought that might be the case. Not to worry, Henry. With Sanctuary's help, we'll get it sorted." Said the Illusive Man.

"He's talking about controlling Reaper forces? Is that… is that possible?" Garrus asked.

"I don't know. I'll play the rest of it." Said Austin.

"We've done it. We've found a way to co-opt their control signal. As long as the Reaper troops remain in close proximity to our signal, we can maintain control indefinitely." Said Henry.

"Excellent news. And how could we extrapolate this technique to apply to the Reaper's themselves?" the Illusive Man asked.

"That's a much bigger challenge." Henry replied.

"Seems the Reapers consider Cerberus a threat like us. The only difference being we want to destroy, they want to control." Said Austin.


"But it's good news for us. We finally have our link to Cerberus." Said Austin. "Lowering the access ladder. Come on! Let's move."

"Wait, Austin! There's more." Said Garrus quickly as the recording continued to show Kai Leng getting the jump on Miranda.

"Damn it! I hope she's ready for him." Austin cursed.

The group headed up to the comm tower. As soon as they entered they quickly found none other than Miranda, along with her father and sister. Surprisingly, there was one more unfamiliar face. Another Helldiver was on his knees and he had a suit disabling device on his head, a rare device that often had the ability to render a Helldiver's suit immobile.

Only a few had been made by the terrorist organization, Hellspawn before Alpha themselves had managed to stop their production and prevent them from ever being made again.

Miranda was on her knees. She looked as though she'd just come out of a tough fight.

"Shepard…" she said.
"Major Shepard. Excellent timing." Said Henry. He then turned to the Helldiver. "I knew your friends would arrive eventually."

"I told you before, I'm on my own." Said the Helldiver, with an Australian accent.

"Put the gun down, Lawson!" Austin ordered.


"Real shame she missed. Where's Kai Leng?" Austin demanded.

"I don't know. Gone. He took my research and left us here to die." Said Henry. "That's close enough. Both of you! Kai Leng didn't finish the job, but I will."

"This ends here." Said Austin.

"On the contrary. Now that the Reapers are taken care of, we have a way out." Said Henry.

"Let... her... go!" Austin demanded again slowly.

"Shepard… don't let him take her." Miranda panted, still a little out of breath from her fight with Leng earlier.

"Shepard… please." Oriana begged.

"I think I'll kill you first. Wouldn't want your Helldiver friends to miss that. Any last words?" Henry asked as he pointed his gun at the down Helldiver.

Surprisingly though, the Helldiver seemed unfazed by this.

"Yeah. Sic 'em!"

A white wolf suddenly leapt over the Helldiver and ran straight at Henry. He was taken completely by surprise by this. So much so that the wolf was able to pounce on Henry, knocking Oriana out of his hands. In the process, Henry fell into several cables which he became tangled in.

The wolf meanwhile gently jumped off and simply growled at Henry for a moment.

"Ghost, here!" the Helldiver yelled.

The wolf obeyed and ran up to her master. As if knowing instantly what to do, Ghost bit the disabling device and tore it off the Helldiver's helmet.

"Good girl." He said as his suit reactivated and he finally was able to stand up again.

Henry was finally able to untangle himself from the cables and realised that his prisoner was finally free. He quickly noticed his gun lying at his feet. At the same time however, the Helldivers sniper rifle was near him too.

Both moved quickly to grab their weapons. Henry was able to get his easily, but the Helldiver was already one step ahead of him.

Just as Henry had his sights lined up, the Helldiver fired. The shot hit him right in the shoulder, smashing him against the wall. Miranda then seized the opportunity and threw a massive biotic warp which smashed Henry through the glass and sent him plummeting to his death.
Miranda took a moment to get her breath back as the Helldiver walked up to her and helped her up.

"You alright, Sheela?" he asked.

"My name's not Sheela." Miranda replied. "But I'm fine. Thank you."

"Did he hurt you? Are you alright?" Miranda asked as she helped Oriana up. "It's okay, Ori. You're safe now."

"I'm fine I just… I want to get out of here." She replied, still in slight shock over what had happened.

"We will… Give me a minute, okay?" said Miranda. She then turned to Austin. "Fancy meeting you here, Shepard."

"We caught a break. Are you alright?" Austin asked.

"I'll be fine. Really. I don't know how you managed it, but I'm grateful you're here."

"Been a long time, Shepard. Nice new look." Said the Helldiver.

Austin's eyes widened in shock as he finally recognized both the helldiver and his voice.

"Oh my god! Hawk?!"

Many years ago, Alpha Squad had often found themselves working with a lone Helldiver soldier who went by the nickname Hawk.

"G'day, mate. Good to see you again." Said Hawk as he and Austin shook hands warmly.

"What are you doing here? I thought you retired." Austin asked happily.

"Retirement? He barely looks older than you, Shepard." Said Miranda.


His helmet retracted to show that he was missing his right eye, and it was covered by an eye patch. He had several scars over the right of his face, some of which went over his eye of course. He had very short brown hair, and also a stubble. The area around his mouth and chin though was more grown than the rest.

"Why are you wearing an eye patch? You've got a cybernetic eye." Austin asked.

"Had to keep it hidden so that no one suspected I was a Helldiver." Hawk replied as he lifted the eye patch up.

Sure enough, instead of an empty eye socket, he had a cybernetic eye.

"That's true." Austin agreed.

"Plus I thought it made me look more dashing." Hawk smiled.

"Well, it mostly worked." Austin chuckled. "How'd you end up out here?"

"Well, I live her. Or at least I did until Cerberus came along. I've evaded capture using my training." Hawk explained. "I spotted her, and decided to follow her. Tried to gun down her father, but he
"Well, good thing that Wolf listens to you." Said Austin as said Wolf walked up to the Helldiver and sniffed him.

"Her name's Ghost, mate. She's my pet." Hawk corrected.

"Oh. Sorry." Austin apologised as he gave Ghost a gentle stroke.

"So how did you end up here, Miranda?" Austin asked.

"Finding my father didn't take long once I confirmed he worked for the Illusive Man. Just had to follow the lies. Once I saw what this place was… I couldn't just walk away." Miranda explained.

"Of course."

"Things got really complicated when Reapers showed up. And Kai Leng." Said Miranda.

"You survived. Not many people could do that." Said Hawk.

"When Shepard mentioned he was involved, I took a few precautions. Probably saved my life." Said Miranda.

"Miranda, this whole thing was a huge risk. You should have told me." Said Austin.

"You have a war to win, Shepard." Said Miranda.

"We all do." Said Hawk.

"True. But this was my fight. It's been a long time coming." Said Miranda.

"Well, you did it. It's over." Said Austin calmly.

"Yes. I just wish my sister didn't have to see all this."

"About your father…"

"I'm glad he's gone. I'm sorry if that sounds cold."

"After what he did… I'm perfectly willing to agree."

"Same." Said Hawk.

"It's finally over for the both of us. We can stop running." Said Miranda happily.

"Yes, you can." Austin smiled under his helmet. He then turned to the others who were examining the terminals. "What's our status? Any intel we can use from this place?"

"Research data is gone, but we've got basic facility information. Shuttle arrivals and departures, Cerberus included." EDI replied.

"No direct links, but it's a start." Said Garrus.

"Grab anything you can off the computer. We'll take it back to be analysed." Said Austin.

"I can do better than that." Said Miranda.
"What?"

"Before Kai Leng took off, I planted a tracker on him. If you act fast, you'll track him right to the Illusive Man." Miranda explained.


"Not quite, but… nobody's perfect." Miranda smiled.

"Thanks, Miranda. This is… exactly what we need." Said Austin, almost in surprise that they truly were on the verge of ending Cerberus once and for all.

"Thought you might need some good news. And I've got some more. With your permission, I wish to re-join your crew." Said Miranda.

"If the Arkanes allow it, you're more than welcome." Austin smiled. "We'll also get Oriana someplace safe. Get this scratch cleaned up."

"Before we go, let's make sure everyone knows about this place." Said Austin as he walked up to the control panel. "Communication scrambler disabled."

"Cortez. We need a pick up at the tower." Said Garrus into his comm.

"Roger that."

"Hawk, you're coming with us. The Arkanes will want to talk to you." Said Austin.

"Doesn't look like I have much a choice." Hawk shrugged. But he sounded fine with it.

"I wasn't in favour of your diversion to Sanctuary, Major. Too many unknowns." Said Hackett. "But I was wrong. The Cerberus lab you raided hinted at something big, but we never expected this. All those refugees, all that… slaughter. Just to study indoctrination."

"It definitely needed to be shut down." Said Austin. "What they learned about the Reapers wasn't worth all those lives."

"It's useful, Major… but you're right. The cost was too high." Said Hackett.

"Do we have a location on the Illusive Man?" Zartrack asked.

"Yes. We had a tracer on Kai Leng when he reported back." Austin replied.

"Good. That gives us the chance we need to take Cerberus out of this war for good." Said Matt.

"Agreed. We need to end Cerberus and focus on the Reapers." Said Austin.

"The intel you sent looks good. The Helldiver fleets are ready to go." Said Zartrack.

"I regret to say that the Alliance fleets aren't. They're very far scattered. It'll take too long to mobilize them." Said Hackett.

"You need not worry about that, Admiral. We've been at war with Cerberus a long time, it's personal. You can continue focusing on the Crucible, we will take are of Cerberus." Said Zartrack.

"Then let's do it." Said Hawk confidently.
"I'll notify the attacks to prepare. Rendezvous with them when you're ready. Shepard out." said Matt as his hologram vanished.

"We'll make sure the Crucible stays safe and hidden. Good luck. Hackett out."

Hackett vanished too, leaving just Zartrack.

"I've spoken to the Arkane Council regarding Miranda Lawson's reinstatement to your crew. She has their approval." Said Zartrack.

"Glad to hear." Said Austin.

"There's still the matter of Sergeant Morgan. He has recently requested to join your crew as well."

"Have you?" Austin asked in surprise as he turned to Hawk.

"Seeing all of this, it's clear to me now that I can't stay in retirement any longer." Said Hawk.

"Since it was only a semi-retirement, the Council have agreed to let you back in." said Zartrack.

"Well, if that's what you want, it's not like we haven't worked with you before. You can't just instantly join Alpha Squad though." Said Austin.

"I'm not asking to join Alpha Squad, Shepard. I'm simply asking to join your crew." Said Hawk.

"Well then in that case, it's good to have you back, Hawk." Austin smiled as he and Hawk shook hands.

"Very well then. Put them through the tests while you're on your way. Zartrack out."

"Tests? Seriously?" Hawk asked as Zartrack's hologram vanished.

"Not my call, Bishop. Standard protocol. You of all people know that."

"Fair enough…

Austin walked Hawk down to the third level where the simulator was. Miranda was also there to observe. She'd been very pleased to be allowed back. Plus, Alpha had welcomed her back with open arms.

Though they'd distrusted her at first due to her being former Cerberus, her time working with them had earned their trust, and she had come to trust them too. Plus, she hadn't given them any reason to not trust her. Hawk's arrival had been met with both surprise and an even warmer greeting from Alpha. They'd been through so much together and had missed him a lot.

"Perfectly simple. You do 3 rounds of this. Your score will determine if you're in." Miranda said as the simulator slowly started to activate around Hawk.

"Shouldn't be too hard then." Said the Helldiver.

He couldn't help but look at Miranda for a bit. She was very beautiful, and it was hard to keep his eyes, or eye in his case, off her.

"Just want to you know, sheela. I get a target in my sights… Pew! I take it down." He said braggingly.
Miranda didn't reply to this and simply pressed a button. This activated the simulation.

"Oh shit!"

Hawk immediately whipped out his rifle and began firing at all targets. There were twenty in total. Just before he could hit the very last one however, he was a bit too slow and it landed a shot on him.

Because it was a simulation of course, it wasn't a simple round that would bounce off his armour. Training simulations like this had the enemy equipped with special shock guns that sent a charge through a Helldivers suit and momentarily paralysed the user.

The shot hit Hawk square in the chest and he fell to the ground from the charge.

"Just so you know, some targets are harder to hit from others." Said Miranda smugly as she stood over Hawk.

On his second try, Hawk did much better. He hit most of them with a headshot and finally shot the last one. With that, the simulation ended in record time.

"Yeah! The Hawk's on a roll!" he cheered.

"You missed one." Said Miranda, indicating that Hawk had hit one in the leg rather than in the chest or head like the others.

"Aw come on. That's gotta be a record or something." Said Hawk.

"The record for a non-Helldiver is all 20 kills." Said Miranda.

"Who did that? Let me guess, X-5?" Hawk asked in mocking manner.

"No, me." Miranda smiled, quite smugly for her. "If you're gonna shoot at something, kill it. Otherwise… take up knitting."

Hawk simply shrugged and turned to Austin, who had also been watching.

"Was that a pass at least?" he asked.

"You'll find out after the other test. You'll need your melee weapons for this." Austin replied.

"Right. Who am I fighting?"

"Her."

Hawk turned to see Xun standing not too far behind with the handle of her Katana extended into a Naginata.

"Oh Crikey." Hawk sighed.

Even he knew that Xun couldn't be beaten. Then again, he guessed that wasn't the goal. The objective of this was to simply hold his own against her.

"Long time no see, Hawk. You look well."

"So do you, Xun."

Hawk only had a quick minute to get out his two handed tomahawk before Xun made a lunge at him
that he was only just able to dodge. He managed to parry a few blows, but Xun then went for his chest with the blunt end of her weapon. The blow momentarily knocked the Helldiver back before Xun then swept her Naginata under Hawk's legs, tripping him up.

As he landed flat on his back, Xun aimed her blade at his neck. Her way of telling opponents to yield and that she'd won.

"Ooooh! That's gotta hurt." Said Austin.

"Again!" said Hawk as he got back up.

"Again?!" Austin asked in surprise.

Even the gathered crowd was surprised by this. No one went back for seconds against Xun, regardless of how quickly she'd taken them down.

Xun simply shrugged and they resumed their sparring. Hawk this time resorted to attacking more often rather than just defending himself. Despite this though, the battle didn't last too long and a quick thrust from the blunt end of Xun's weapon knocked Hawk to the floor again.

"Aaaand he's down again." Miranda sighed.

"Again." Hawk groaned as he got back up.

"You're funeral, mate." Austin sighed.

Hawk went completely on attack this time, making it much harder for Xun to find an opening. Despite this though, she still found one. Hawk once again fell flat on his back.

"Stand down, Xun." Austin quickly said as Xun once again had her blade at Hawk's neck. "Okay everyone, show's over."

"Again." Said Hawk, once again getting back up.

"Again?" Austin asked.

"He's a dead man." Miranda sighed, shaking her head.

Then a thought suddenly occurred to Austin.

"Wait, I almost forgot something…"

What happened next took everyone by surprise. Just as Xun had got into her battle stance, Hawk literally went onto his hands and wrapped both his legs around her waist, tackling the Chinese Helldiver to the floor.

"Whoa!" said Dash.


"Sorry about that, Xun." Hawk panted, obviously pleased with himself for doing that.

"Tell me I didn't see that. I have never seen Xun take a hit." Said Dash as Hawk helped Xun up.

"7 years of retirement and he still hasn't changed." Said Austin.
"Maybe." Said Miranda.

"I know I fought dirty, but in all fairness, we're in a war here. You think our enemy is going to show the same courtesy of fighting fairly?" said Hawk.

"You make a fair point." Said Miranda.

"Rule stills stands for when you're sparring with the others. They won't thank you for that." Austin reminded him.

"Anyway, how did I do?" Hawk asked.

"85% Surprisingly enough, that's five more than your original recorded score." Said Miranda.

"What can I say? I've made sure to stay in shape during my... absence." Hawk shrugged.

"You're in. Welcome to the Normandy." Said Austin as he and Hawk shook hands.

"Just like the good old days." Said Hawk, casting a small glance at Miranda.

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So... Cerberus are about to be taken out of the picture.

But little do the Helldivers know of the darker powers...

See you next time! Don't forget to keep leaving those reviews.
Chapter 15, Genesis Revelation

As promised, I put more effort into this one and it's come out very good. Didn't need to amok any changes to what I had planned and it matches my vision perfectly (if you know what I mean)

I don't want to give anything away, but I will say this...

The chapter does exactly what it says on the tin. So prepare yourself, For the Beginning of a surprise...

Chapter 15

Genesis Revelation

The Normandy was already nearing the half way point of their trip to the fleets that were mobilised to attack the Illusive Man's base. They still had some time though.

Sarah for example had noticed that Traynor was looking a bit troubled as she worked at her station.

"Hey. You okay?" The N7 marine asked as she put a hand on her girlfriend's shoulder.

"Yeah. I'm just… thinking about what happened." Traynor sighed, her mood brightened a tiny bit seeing the love of her life in front of her. "Cerberus bastards. Horizon was my home."

"Hey, it's okay." said Sarah soothingly. "Come 'ere."

Traynor didn't object and she slipped into Sarah's tight, warm hug. Just the mere touch made her feel a lot better. Hardly surprising since a simple touch from Sarah elected feelings of passion and love in her. Plus, Sarah was gently stroking Samantha's back, which only added to making her relax even more.

"Just tell me you're going to take Cerberus down." she said, smiling slightly at the pleasant feelings she was experiencing as Sarah's hands moved back and forth gently across her back.

"They'll wish they'd never been born once we're through with them, love. They're already dead. They just don't know it. And when they're base is nothing more than a smoking crater, remember that you're the one who helped us find them." said Sarah.

"You always manage to cheer me up no matter what mood I'm in." Traynor smiled as she looked into her lover's eyes. What was seconds felt like minutes before Sarah pulled Samantha into a kiss. When they finally separated, Traynor was almost gasping for air. "I love you."

"I love you too." Sarah smiled, giving Samantha another kiss on the cheek.

As the two hugged again, Samantha then suddenly noticed something. There was something very tiny moving around on the floor near their feet, and it was fury.

"Sarah, is that your hamster?" she asked.

Sarah looked down at the small animal. Sure enough, it was her pet hamster, Chester.
Chester had been a little present to Sarah from Samantha a few months ago. When Sarah had been away, Traynor had looked after him. As she had found though, he could sometimes be a bit naughty. It was in a good way though, and it was hard to be cross at the cute creature.

The N7 marine simply smiled and picked up the hamster, who squeaked happily in her hands.

"You naughty little boy. How did you get out of your home?" she smiled as she gave Chester a gentle stroke.

"Oops!" said Traynor, suddenly remembering. "I must've left the lid loose when I fed him."

Sarah simply sighed and smiled.

"At least he's safe." she said. "Don't worry, darling. I forgive you."

Traynor gave a small sigh of relief. She'd feared her love would be a bit cross with her.

"Just count yourself lucky though that Urz and Ghost didn't find him first." Sarah finished, a bit more seriously.

"Yes. The at was quite lucky." Traynor chuckled nervously

This was it. Though there was some tension and nervousness of what would happen in the next few hours, Alpha was secretly quite excited in their own way that they were finally going to take down Cerberus for good.

There had been times when the Helldivers had come close, but never like this before.

The Normandy was currently holding back while the attack fleet assaulted the base. Alpha would be the infiltration team.

"The strike team is in. We've got our foothold." Said Zartrack over the comm. "Attack Fleet, all forward! I don't want a single Cerberus ship in the sky when we're through."

"Shepard, I should accompany you and Alpha on this mission." Said EDI.

"Why?" Austin asked.

"This is the central point of operations for Cerberus. They will have enhanced security measures. Additionally, the only way to shut down the base and construction of the Illusive Man's crucible will be with my help. With my knowledge of Cerberus algorithms and this body's updated protocols, I offer the best chance to help you and the squad succeed." Said EDI.

"Grab your gear and suit up then." Said Austin.

"Joker, what's our status?"

"We've got a foothold, but it's not much, Major. Lot of fighters guarding the launch bays." Said Joker.

"Can you get us in?" Austin asked.

"Hey, I got us to Ilos. I can do this. Might be a bumpy ride, though." Joker replied.
"Do what you can."

Alaara then walked onto the bridge, all suited up.

"Shepard, we're ready when you are." She said.

"So am I." said EDI.

"Wait, what? Are you crazy? You can't go to Cerberus headquarters! They could have a virus, or a kill-switch, or…" Joker objected.

"I will be fine, Jeff." Said EDI reassuringly.

"Head to the dropship, EDI." Said Austin.

"Fifth Fleet's cut through their line. They're regrouping. Now's a good time as any." Said Joker, risking a quick final glance as EDI left.

"Just get us in there safely. We'll take care of your girlfriend." Said Alaara.

"Well that wasn't ominous. Thanks." Said Joker.

"Come on. Let's go." Said Austin.

"Hey, Shepard… Keep her safe." Said Joker.

"Same to you."

With everyone assembled in the cargo bay, Austin began relaying the plan to them.

"Here's how it'll work. Alpha and I will be team 1. Non Helldivers will be team 2, and in the second dropship. We will head in first and clear the main hanger bay. Once the area is secured, team 2 will join us. From there, we fight our way up until we reach the illusive Man's chamber. No doubt that's the safest point in the station and that's where the plans are being kept." He said. "Everyone understand?"

Everyone nodded or either mumbled slightly.

"Then man your shuttles, and give Cerberus hell."

As the two shuttles departed from the cargo bay, the scale of the battle was now visible. Cerberus didn't have as many ships as the Helldiver fleet, nor were they as big. There were a lot of fighters though, plus the main base was well shielded. The Illusive Man's crucible, known as he Liberator was also visible. Surprisingly and rather worryingly it looked as though it was almost complete. Their timing was opportune.

The dropship with team 2 lingered back while team 1 headed in. Cortez was doing best to avoid the incoming fire.

"Well, that went quicker than we thought." Said Cortez as the dropship shook slightly.

"Yep. Out of the frying pan…" said Alaara.

"…and into the shit." Sandra finished.
"You'd better get ready, Major. We're coming in hot." Said Cortez.

Austin got up from the co-pilot seat and head into the main area with everyone else.

"Okay, you all know the plan. We're heading for the main hanger, be ready for anything." He said.

"So much for a smooth ride." Said Alaara.

"What's the matter? Feeling sick?" asked Sandra.

"I'm not the one who needed a barf bag on a lot of our trips." Said Alaara.

"Funny." Sandra smiled.

The shaking intensified as they ran into even more fire. Still the dropship kept going though.

"Arm up. Here we go." Said Austin.

"Nice gun, mate." Said Hawk as he eyed Griffin's minigun.

Now that Hawk's armour had received all the latest updates and upgrades, he was cleared to go into battle with Alpha. Because he also was around other Helldivers now, he had removed his temporary eye patch altogether.

"Look, but don't touch." Said Griffin, moving his gun away from Hawk's hand and giving him a serious look that definitely said "Back away."

"If you say so, big guy." said Hawk innocently.

"Here we go! This is it!" said Austin. "Brother Griff, as always... would you mind leading us in a few words please?"

"In the immortal words of Jay-Z:" said Griffin, much to everyone's humours laughter. "Whatever deity may guide my life, dear lord don't let me die tonight. But if I shall before I wake, I'd accept my fate. Hell yeah?!"

"HELL YEAH!" Alpha cheered.

"Hell yeah!" Griffin smiled.

"Opening rear bay." Said Cortez.

The main door on the back of the dropship opened. Once in position, the drop would swing around, almost like the handbrake turn on a car and the Helldivers would jump. From there, they would use their small thrusters to get inside the hanger bay.

"Right! All together!" said Jet eagerly.

"Use your thrusters sparingly. Course correction only." Austin advised. "Jet you're an exception."

"Are you sure these things are safe?" Dash asked.

"Now!"

The dropship pulled a massive turn and everyone jumped, their thrusters kicking in as they entered space. The distance between them and the hanger bay was very short, so the jump was very short as
As soon as they entered through the hanger's air shield, all of the Cerberus troops opened fire on them.

Jet was quick to fly ahead of the overs and increased her altitude until she was right above most of the soldiers. Using this to her advantage, the Pilot Helldiver unsheathed her war hammer and threw it at the ground.

The force of the massive weapon hitting the ground created a shockwave that sent quite a few of the soldiers flying. At the same time, Jet landed back down on the ground. As she did, her foot kicked the end of the hammer, forcing it to jump back up off the floor and into the air and the Helldiver caught it.

Not giving the Cerberus troopers a chance for an opening, Je quickly swung left and right, taking down several troops with both swings.

Hawk meanwhile had managed to get to a nearby control panel as was working on accessing it while Griffin kept him covered.

"Ok, where's that security override?" said Hawk. "Come on…"

Despite his best efforts though, Hawk was no techie and pretty soon, he got frustrated with the controls.

"Damn it!" he yelled, venting his rage as he hit the console.

In doing so however, he'd disabled the artificial gravity.

"Uh oh! That's not good." He said. "Hey Guys! Things might get little… floaty.

Sure enough, everyone and everything started to hover off the ground. The Cerberus troopers, who were completely unprepared for this, started flying around wildly trying to balance themselves.

"Everyone, enable grav boots!" said Austin.

Everyone did so and stuck back onto the ground. Dash and Jet though used their thrusters to boost into the air again and continued fighting the Cerberus troops. This seemed to spur the others to do the same. Admittedly it was quite fun.

"WOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOHOOOOOOOO000000000000000000!" Dash yelled as he spun in the air and hopped from floating fighter to fighter as he shot all over the place.

"Hey, Cerberus! Catch!" said Jet as she used her hammer to smack a fighter, sending it crashing into several troopers before it collided with another fighter and an Atlas mech.

Grabbing onto another fighter, Dash sent it spinning and went berserk as he fired all over the place. All his shots hit targets though, so it was clear he hadn't got carried away.

Jet managed to hit a few more soldier before she once again hit another fighter that was sent flying, this time in other direction.

"Ok. Ok. I got it!" said Hawk as he managed to re-enable gravity. As he did though, he noticed the fighter that Jet had hit was heading right at him. "I got it… holey dooley!"

Just in time, the Helldiver managed to duck, the fighter missing him by inches before crashing into
the far wall and creating massive hole.

"Bloody fighters." Hawk cursed as he got up and everyone else landed back on the ground, denting the floor slightly with their weight.

"Well, they know we're inside now." Said Hawk. "So much for coming in the sneaky way."

"You know us, Hawk. We always like to make to entrance… Alpha style!" said Dash.

With the hanger secure, Austin activated his comm.

"Team 2, this is Shepard. Hanger bay is clear. Rendezvous here with us." he said.

Few seconds later, the second dropship joined them. Sarah, Miranda, X-5 and any other members of the team that weren't Helldivers joined them.

"Let's get a move on. We've got a battle to win here." said Austin.

Right as they turned to leave though, a massive holo screen of the Illusive Man was projected in front of them.

"Shepard. My, you are the persistent one. But breaking into my base?! You've overstepped yourself." he said.

"You know why we're here, Illusive Man. You have something that belongs to us. You surrender it peacefully, and we won't be forced to kill you!" said Austin.

"Ha! Predictable as ever, right down to the empty words." said the Illusive Man. "I've come too far for you or anyone else to stand in my way. Before this is over you will kneel before me, begging for your life. Soon, I will take my rightful place at my master's side, and the Reapers will be mine to command. So thank you, Shepard, for all your help."

The hologram vanished and the Illusive Man's voice could suddenly be heard throughout the station.

"To all Cerberus forces! Shepard and Alpha Squad are inside the station. Shepard is your top priority! The Helldiver is to be shot on sight without any hesitation or remorse!"

"Let's go." Said Austin. "We don't leave without those plans."

"What about the Illusive Man?" Miranda asked.

"Well, that depends on whether he's willing to surrender." Austin replied. "Dead or alive."

"Open brackets, preferably dead." Said Griffin. "How of any our kin has he killed?"

"Exactly. I'm certainly hoping he dies too." Said Austin.

"Ditto." Said Miranda.

After fighting their way up through practically the entire station, they soon came across a giant room. To everyone's surprise, it contained something most unexpected.

"What is this thing?" Ashley asked.

"This is the human-Reaper Shepard destroyed." EDI replied.
Sure enough, there were rather large pieces of what was left of the Human-Reaper that the Collectors had been working on two years ago.

"What's left of it. I'm surprised Cerberus recovered that much from the base. Even more of a mystery how they were able to get through the Omega 4 Relay without a Reaper IFF." said Austin.

"I wish I could've helped." Said Ashley.

"You're here now." said Austin supportingly.

"How did the Illusive Man ever manage all this? I mean the funds for all this are practically impossible without attracting at least some attention. Not to mention that his crucible is practically 80% complete whereas ours isn't. It's insane." Ashley asked.

"You heard what he said in the hanger bay. He's working with someone," said Austin. "I intend for us to find out who the minute we stop the construction and secure this station."

"Cerberus is actively using the surviving pieces." said EDI observantly as she surveyed the remains of the human Reaper. "The central core—analogues to the heart—is largely intact. I believe Cerberus is using it for a power source."

Making their way up from the Human Reaper remains, Alpha soon found themselves crossing a long bridge that led up to the door that no doubt led to the Illusive Man's observation room.

Before they could get there though, they had a cross what looked like a small hallway that was lined with plates.

"Pressure plates." said Miranda. "Anything larger than a quarter that touches them will be vaporised."

"I got this." said Xun.

The Chinese Helldiver flipped herself so that she was now stood on her hands. She then curled her legs in to balance herself out and raised herself onto her fingers. From there, she slowly started making her way across the plates. Astonishingly, it was working.

"Nice. Wish I could do that." said Sandra.

"How you doing, Xun?" Austin asked as Xun nearly reached the end.

"Look, I don't mean to be rude, but this is not as easy as it looks. So I would appreciate it if you wouldn't distract me." Xun replied through her comm.

"Sorry."

After a few more minutes, Xun finally reached the end.

"Okay, what you'll have to do is rewire the laser panels brain by carefully..." Leena began. But she was interrupted as soon simply took out her folded up metal fan and stabbed the panel. It short circuited and the door opened.

"...or you could just stab it."

"Stay sharp, everyone. This it." said Austin as he and the other gather around the final door. "I have
a feeling the Illusive Man won't be alone in there. Execute door breach."

Austin and the others set up to breach the door. Austin and Alaara took point while Griffin placed the detonator on the door.

"Stand back." he said as he quickly backed away as the device started beeping.

The detonator exploded and the doors swung open.

"Go! Go! Go!"

Everyone filed into the room single file.

As had been expected, there was the Illusive Man, surrounded by a small army of troopers, Centurions, Phantoms, Nemesis' and so on.

The leader of Cerberus slowly turned to face Alpha, an evil smile on his face.

"How good of you to join us, Shepard." he said. "So tell me, what have they ordered you to do with me?"

"Dead or alive. So either way really," said Austin as he and Alpha kept their guns trained right on the Illusive Man. "Personally, I'd rather we just killed you and called it a day. But let's make it your decision, shall we?"

"Hmm, a difficult decision. I need some time to think it over. In the meantime, my soldiers will keep you occupied." said the Illusive Man.

Before anyone could do anything, he pressed a button on one of his holo displays and a shield barrier of some kind appears in front of him and the troops.

"Kill them. Spare Shepard if possible. I want him to witness his failure." he said.

The army obeyed and seemed to wake right through the shield as they charged at Alpha. This barrier was mostly likely one way. It would keep the outside out, but let the inside out as well.

The fight quickly turned into a free for all as Alpha broke apart, some members taking on certain enemy types. Griffin for example took to using his Iron fist on many of the big Centurions while Ashley stuck close and covered her boyfriend with her assault rifle.

Dash and Jet fought some of the Nemesis' and normal troopers. Jet naturally was showing no remorse and was using her flamethrowers at full blast, burning any soldier the flames touched alive.

Garrus and Ventra meanwhile were keeping some of the new types at bay. There were some new Cerberus soldiers called Dragoons. They had guns, but their primary melee weapon was electronic whips. The only problem was that they could only reach so far with these and so the two Turians were easily able to.snipe them before they did any damage.

Leena, Sarah, Alaara, Sandra and X-5 meanwhile were simply fighting any Cerberus soldier they came across, regardless of what type. Xun couldn't help but show off a bit as she practically wiped the floor with a few Phantoms and Dragoons.

Overall this whole battle almost felt a bit like a comedy fight. Alpha was practically carving through the Illusive Man's army like they were clumsy cartoonish robots.

Austin and Liara naturally were once again putting their Union to good use. They were mostly
duelling some of the Phantoms and pretty much any other soldier that tried to melee them. They
ducked, they dodged, they parried, they swung, the whole thing was almost a blur of silver as their
two blades were everywhere.

Hawk and Miranda meanwhile had become slightly separated from the others and they now found
themselves surrounded by around 6 Phantoms.

"Sheela, stay behind me."

"I can handle myself you know." said Miranda.

All 6 Phantoms simultaneously did a flip to the left before breaking formation and lunging at the two
opponents.

Hawk quickly reacted by drawing another weapon from his belt. He had what looked like some kind
of metallic whip. Two of the phantoms retreated back slightly as the Helldiver swung it a few times,
the sharp lash just missing them. Unlike the whips the Dragoons used, they weren't' electrified, but
they still carried the deadly lash that a normal bullwhip would.

At the same time, two other Phantoms tired a swing and a lunge at Hawk from behind, but they both
missed as the Helldiver cracked his whip at them.

Forcing two of the Phantoms back, Hawk turned to the ones behind him and swung at them.

Miranda meanwhile had become separated from Hawk during this little skirmish and found two
Phantoms had already focused their attention on her.

She focused on the right one first as it lunged at her. Avoiding the Phantom's blade, she charged her
biotics with her right hand and punched the Phantom in the face, knocking her to the ground. She
then used that same biotic fist on the other Phantom as it too lunged.

Unlike the previous one though, this Phantom didn't get knocked down. It was able to do two back
flips before landing back on its feet.

In desperation, Miranda picked up the fallen Phantom's sword.

"Hawk…" she said nervously.

Just before the Phantom could lunge at her though, Hawk quickly swung his whip at the Phantom's
feet, tripping her in the process.

Hawk just managed to notice another 4 of the Phantoms coming up behind him. Relinquishing the
hold on his whip that was still wrapped around the downed Phantoms' legs, he quickly ducked under
one Phantom as she tried to leap over him. Two of the overs rolled out of the way to avoid the flying
as Hawk's duck caused her to lose her balance.

Hawk then blocked the second Phantom's sword arm with his wrist and followed through with two
quick punches, one to the stomach and one to the face.

The Phantom that Miranda had knocked down just a few seconds ago then tried to grab Miranda
from behind, and briefly succeeded, before the Ex-Cerberus operative managed to break free and
delivers a sharp elbow strike to the Phantom's mask before then following that with a punch to the
stomach.

Hawk meanwhile was able to counter a strike from one of the Phantoms who had retreated earlier.
but had now re-joined the fight. He quickly gave the Phantom's arm a twist, sending her head over heels. The second Phantom swung at Hawk but he immediately ducked under it. Before the Phantom had a chance to swing again, the Helldiver quickly brought his knee into her stomach.

He then quickly threw her to the side, causing the Phantom to crash into the one that had Hawk had punched twice. The force of their heads hitting each other knocked them both out.

The Phantom that had tried to jump over Hawk earlier finally amazed to get back and attempted another attack. This time she attempted a simple swing. Once again though, hawk was able to duck under her attack and instead her sword ended up killing the Phantom whom Hawk had countered earlier. The Phantom only had a second to realise her mistake before Hawk then swiftly punched her, the force of the punch snapping her neck.

Having freed herself from the Phantom earlier, Miranda quickly noticed that the one Hawk had tripped up earlier with his whip had finally managed to untangle herself and was getting back up. Miranda though quickly delivered a swift kick to the Phantom which knocked her down for good this time.

"Come on!" Miranda yelled challengingly.

At that moment however, a Centurion suddenly grabbed her from behind. The Ex-Cerberus operative struggled at first to break free, but a sudden stomp on the Centurion's foot seemed to get her free. The special combat armour she wore was certainly proving handy here.

As the Centurion hopped, rather humorously, on one foot while nursing the other, Miranda whirled round and punched him in the helmet with a loud clang.

Slight disadvantage was that Miranda didn't have armoured fists, so her hand was left a bit soar afterwards.

"Ow!"

"Miranda!" Hawk yelled.

"What?!"

Startled by this, Miranda quickly swung. Hawk was just able to duck in time to avoid being hit.

"Not me!" he yelled. "Duck!"

Quickly pushing Miranda's head down, Hawk punched the last Phantom right in the face as she tried to sneak up from behind after Miranda had punched her in the stomach earlier.

The Centurion whom Miranda had punched earlier finally regained balance. He was only able to enjoy it briefly though before Hawk's whip wrapped around his neck. The Helldiver pulled hard and the Centurion's neck snapped.

To the illusive Man's surprise, Alpha soon managed to carve through his entire small army in a matter of minutes. Now it was just him.

"That was an amazing killing spree." Griffin panted.

"Time's up." said Austin as he and the others refocused their aim on the Illusive Man.

"You weren't supposed to do that, Shepard." he said crossly. "You're forcing me to bring out the big
guns."

The Illusive Man pressed another button and several holes opened up in the floor just outside the barrier. Out of each one rose a female figure.

They were crouched down and had what looked like some kind of staff on their backs. As they activated, the female robots slowly stood up.

It was now that everyone noticed that they looked exactly like EDI. The only difference being they had blue visors and looked a bit tougher.

"Crikey! That's a lot of fembots." said Hawk.

"Err, wrong movie reference." Dash whispered.

"Say hello to my elite guard, Shepard." said the Illusive Man confidently. "You see, Dr Core was just a prototype, and was designed for infiltration. These ones are upgrade models designed for combat, and they have been trained to fight and kill Helldivers."

"Guess you got yourself a field test then." said Austin challengingly as he and the other readied for another fight.

"I thought you would say that." the Illusive Man smiled as the EDI clones drew their staffs and spun them as each end electrified. Their moves were in perfect synch with one another and they seemed to do exactly the same thing. "Destroy them. Make them suffer!"

"You will fall, Helldivers." Said the guards in synch as they charged.

There seemed to be a guard for each Helldiver, so Alpha fought at least one each.

"We don't' have time for this." Said Xun as her Naginata blocked the strike from her guard's staff.

The Illusive Man simply hung back and watched. Though he kept his cool, deep down he was a bit nervous. The Helldiver had taken down his troops so easily and so quickly that it had made them look like bumbling idiots seen a children's show.

So far though, it looked like his guards were putting up a much better fight, and the Helldiver were certainly finding them more challenging.

One or two of them had separated from the main fight and were focusing on the non-Helldivers like Sarah and Miranda. Sarah had resorted to using her omni blade to counter the guard's staff while Miranda used biotic shields alongside X-5 who was trying to smash the guard with his fist. He was having trouble though because he was so big and the guard was smaller and faster than him.

Austin had a at first thought they'd e able to deal with these guards easily. He now stood corrected. The Illusive Man clearly hadn't been bragging when he said these things were trained to fight Helldivers. They moved and fought with speed and ferocity that would easily rival a Helldiver.

"Your flesh is weak." Said the guards tauntingly.

"Your just sexbots with an ego malfunction." said Dash as he managed to punch one of the guards in the face.

"Ooooh! That was a good comeback." Said Jet, countering a lunge with her war hammer.

"I am not a sexbot, Mr Torres." Said EDI, who rather surprisingly was putting on quite a show as
she dodged and avoided her clone's staff.

"I didn't' mean you as well, EDI. These are just knock offs of you." Said Dash.

EDI then managed to get an opening as her clone thrust. The AI grabbed the staff with both her hands and pulled so hard that it yanked the weapon right out of the guard's hands. EDI then quickly spun and used the end of the staff to impale her clone right in the chest, the shock of the electro staff short circuiting it's systems and killing it instantly.

Austin meanwhile managed to get an opening as the guard he was fighting made a twirling lunge at him. Managing o doge it in time, he grabbed the middle part of the staff in his hand and held it firmly in place as he forced it down, leaving the guard's upper portion vulnerable as it tried to wrestle the staff free.

Seizing the chance, he sliced the guard's head clean off.

"Don't lose your head." he couldn't help but say jokily as he let go and turned to another one that Xun was duelling.

Before he could go to help however, he heard the sound of a staff spinning. He turned to the sound and to his surprise found that the guard he had just decapitated was still functional and fighting.

"What?!

"Most unexpected. Their backup systems exceed our expectations by far." said the Illusive Man as Austin quickly brought his blade back up to continue blocking the blows from the staff. This new move had taken him by surprise but he quick to put his guard back up.

Liara it seemed had run into this as well. She had managed to ever both of her guard's legs below the knee, which she expected to end the fight. She too was completely astonished when the guard whirled nimbly on one end of her staff and used the stumps of its legs to thump the Asari so soundly she went skidding.

Xun meanwhile managed to get an opening on the guard fighting her as she was able to thrust up, forcing the guard's staff up with it. Reacting quickly, the Chinese Helldiver made a quick swing which cut right through the guard's chest. Unlike Austin's this seemed to kill it. The backup processor these things used was obviously in the chest.

"How many do you have so far, Shepard?" Hawk asked as he blocked a staff low with his axe.

"It's not a contest, Hawk." Austin replied.

The headless guard that Austin was fighting was still spinning with such ferocity and speed that Austin was finding it difficult to get an opening at the chest.

Eventually though, the guard attempted a long spin designed to distract and intimidate. Austin of course was able to time his strike perfectly and he managed to get a swing in-between the spin which cut through the guards chest and arms.

The robot uttered a mechanical howl as it fell to pieces.

"Got no one left to help you now, Illusive Man. It's over!" said Austin as the last guard fell to pieces.

"I will not drop the force field, Shepard. Your efforts are futile." Said the Illusive Man angrily.
"Griffin, blow it!" Austin ordered.

"With pleasure."

The demolition expert took an IME from his belt and twirled it several times before he threw it at the barrier. The IME exploded as it hit the barrier. The resulting explosion though was strong enough to have an effect on the barrier. Plus, that particular IME had also been loaded with an EMP burst. If the explosion didn't take down the barrier, then that would.

Sure enough, the barrier was vaporised with a massive explosion that sent the Illusive Man to the ground in a cloud of smoke.

"This ends now." Said Austin as the smoke cleared.

Suddenly, everyone froze where they were and Austin felt an immense pain in his head which caused him to drop his gun in pain.

"On the contrary, this ends when I say it ends." Said the illusive Man as the smoke cleared fully revealing that the explosion had burnt off large amounts of skin on his face revealing that he had implanted himself with Reaper technology. "I underestimated you, Shepard. Control is necessary, of the Reapers and you."

Everyone was forced to get down on their knees as the Illusive Man's indoctrination gave him full control over them. For some reason though, Austin didn't do the same. He still stood clutching his head. The pain wasn't as bad now though.

"Why aren't you responding? You are under my control!" the Illusive Man asked worriedly.

Austin could hear thousands of machine like voices whispering in his head. Somehow though, they could not control him. He still had free will. Gradually, these voices started to quieten. They didn't go away, but they were much harder to hear now.

Then it hit him. The Helldiver remembered something he'd been told.

"You didn't count on everything did you?" said Austin as he relaxed and took a few steps forward towards the Illusive Man.

"How are you resisting?! This is impossible!"

"The Rachni Queen is immune to indoctrination. She must've passed that onto me." Said Austin. "It's like she said. "I hear the voices, but they cannot control me."

It made sense that this was the gift the Rachni Queen had given him. Why wouldn't she try to give the leader of the Resistance some way of resisting the Reaper's greatest weapon. If they couldn't indoctrinate him, there would always be someone to stand against them.

"Then you will die here." Said the Illusive Man.

More holes appeared in the floor, and several more guards rose out of them. They didn't attack yet though. They waited for their master's orders.

"Look at yourself. You've become the very thing the Reapers can control. Your scheme won't work." Said Austin.

"It will work! The Crucible can let me control them, I know it can!" the Illusive Man argued.
"Listen to yourself! You're indoctrinated! You've implanted yourself with their technology. You've practically sold your soul to them." Said Austin.

"Using their technology is a necessary compromise to achieve the required goals."

"More like appeasement!" said Austin coldly.

"I grow tired of this. Take him!" the Illusive Man ordered.

One of the guards started spinning her staff and even did a few acrobatics in the process. Right as she made her first swing at Austin though, the Helldiver ducked under it and quickly delivered a swift punch to her face.

With the guard temporarily unbalanced by this, Austin quickly grabbed her and he smashed his fist right through her chest, killing her instantly.

Another guard swung at Austin, but he once again ducked under and brought his elbow under her stomach. He then activated his left Omni blade and severed the guard in two across the chest.

Seeing that two more were ready to fight him, Austin once again drew Excalibur and his shield from his back.

The two guards attacked simultaneously in synch with one another. Austin was only just able to move fast enough to block each blow.

Eventually, both guards brought their staffs down. Austin was just able to block the right one with his sword while he blocked the other with his shield. Using all his strength, he pushed both staffs of and then performed a fast sweep that cut both guards apart.

Now just the Illusive Man was left. Sighing, he flexed himself and then ran at Austin.

The Helldiver was somewhat surprised at this. A normal man against him?

Austin stood corrected though when the Illusive Man punched him in the head. To his surprise, the punch had so much force and strength that it forced him back.

"These implants do more than let me control." The Illusive Man said.

"Last chance. Let everyone go, or so help me I will tear your eyes out if I have to." Austin demanded.

"You will not interfere." The Illusive Man replied.

"So be it." Said Austin.

The Helldiver dodged The Illusive Man's first punch, but he then used his elbow to smash Austin in the chest.

The Illusive Man swung another bunch which Austin ducked under, but he then delivered a side downwards punch which hit Austin's helmet which was then followed by an upward one and a kick to the stomach.

Austin was quick to recover from this though and he swung a kick which the Illusive Man avoided. He was able to block two more punches, but a third one hit him in the helmet which knocked him back.
The Illusive Man followed this with several more ones before he then attempted a dual stomach punch which the Helldiver was able to block. Turning the tide, Austin threw both the Illusive Man's arms aside and smashed both his fist into the Illusive Man's chest before following that with a kick to the stomach, and finally a swift kick to the face. This sent the Illusive Man to the floor and he found himself too weak to stand.

"You know, for a small moment, I thought you could be helped. I've changed my mind." The Helldiver said coldly, slowly making his way towards the Illusive Man to finish the job. If he wouldn't release the others, Austin would make him.

"I should've let you get sold to the Collectors." the Illusive Man panted, spitting blood from his mouth. "What chance do you think you have? No matter how many Reapers fall, there will always be another to stand against you."

"They will fall as well." Said Austin.

"This is bigger than you think, Shepard. The death of the Reapers will mean the death of us all!" the Illusive Man argued.

"Then prepare for your death, Illusive Man."

Austin immediately grabbed the Illusive Man and head-butted him hard, the force of his helmet worsening he Illusive Man's injuries, which in turn revealed even more of the Reaper technology underneath his skin. The sight nearly made Austin feel sick to think that the leader of Cerberus had done this to himself.

Grabbing the back of the illusive Man's hair, Austin then pulled him up again and swiftly punched him, this time brutally. He followed this with another punch that knocked the Illusive Man to the ground.

The Illusive Man only had a few seconds to recover before Austin then kicked him in the face, causing him to cough up a bit of blood. Austin then grabbed the Illusive Man by the neck and hauled him up. Beaten, helpless and weak, the leader of Cerberus desperately tried to claw at Austin's arm in the vague hope he might let go. No luck.

Austin then smashed the Illusive Man against the side of his chair, which especially hurt since the chair was fixed in place, not moveable.

The Helldiver then smashed his face on the chair gain several times before throwing him to the side.

The Illusive Man desperately tried to crawl away, hoping to escape Austin's brutality. Once Again though, he felt Austin's hand grabbed his suit and throw him into his back.

"Let… them… go!" Austin demanded.

"You'll have to kill me!" the Illusive Man spluttered.

"I'm considering it." Said Austin as he grabbed the Illusive Man's neck with his left hand and held him in place. With his right, he slowly drew his combat knife.

Only too late did the Illusive Man realise what the Helldiver was going to do and he desperately tried to break free as Austin raised the knife and plunged it into his eyes.

The leader of Cerberus screamed in pain as Austin literally cut out his artificial eyes.
This of course didn't kill the Illusive Man. Austin hadn't intended on that. With both implants cut out, he withdrew the knife and slid it back into it's holster. He then looked that the others that had been forced to kneel on the floor.

To his relief, they were moving. Without his eyes, the Illusive Man couldn't control them anymore. He quickly hurried over to Liara and helped her up.

"You alright?" he asked.

"Yes. That was horrible." Liara panted, still in a bit of shock over what had just happened.

As the Illusive Man lay in the floor clutching the bleeding holes where his eyes had been, Austin and EDI walked over to the holo control panels. EDI was able to access them almost instantly.

"EDI, shut this place down." Austin ordered.

"My pleasure." EDI replied.

The AI accessed the controls and sure enough the shield around the almost completed Liberator deactivated.

"The shield's down. Focus fire on the Illusive Man's crucible."

The Helldiver fleet focused all their attacks on the Liberator.

True they could've kept it, but for all they knew it had Reaper technology built into it that could indoctrinate them. Plus, the Cerberus technology had probably been used to murder millions. It was tainted.

This was like the Collector base all over again in a way. Could've had an advantage, but the risks were too great and it felt wrong.

The fire from the fleet tore through the liberator like tissue paper and it exploded into pieces.

"NO! YOU'VE RUIN EVERYTHING!" the Illusive Man yelled, only to then be punched hard by Griffin.

"That was for every single person you've killed, and not just Helldivers." He spat. "Sorry, sir. Been wanting to do that."

"I don't blame you." Said Austin.

"Shepard, I have reacquired the plans for the Crucible and have wiped it form Cerberus systems." Said EDI.

"Good work." Austin nodded. He then activated his comm. "General, this is Shepard. The control centre is secure and we have reacquired the plans."

"Copy that, Shepard. We'll cease attack on the station. Is the Illusive Man… still with us?" Zartrack asked.

"You could say that." Austin replied, glancing down at the illusive Man.

"Then take him alive if possible. He may still be useful." Said Zartrack.

"Understood, General." Said Austin, slightly reluctantly. "You're finished, Illusive Man. Cerberus is
finished."

"I have powerful friends, Shepard. This is just the beginning." Said the illusive Man as he slowly got up, struggling slightly due to his blindness. "Soon I will command forces beyond your comprehension. I have achieved what you could never do. The galaxy will forever thank…"

But before he could finish, something very dramatic indeed happened.

Some kind of blade like object suddenly burst through the Illusive Man's chest, causing blood to spray everywhere.

"Me…” the Illusive Man managed to finish as he gazed in horror at what had just impaled him. It was clearly a blade, but he couldn't see it. It was almost like it was…cloaked.

The blade then withdrew from the Illusive Man's bod and he fell to the ground, clutching the opening in his chest.

The invisible blade that was no stained with the Illusive Man's blood hovered for a minute before there was the unmistakable sound of a cloak deactivating and a tall figure materialized out of nowhere.

Everyone was left speechless at what they saw.

This figure was unlike anything they had ever seen before. Whoever he was, he clearly wasn't human, but nor was he any species they had ever seen before.

He was thin and insect like in appearance, standing at 2.6 meters which essentially made him tower over everyone except probably from X-5. Most noticeably, he walked on four digitigrade legs, all of which clearly looked cybernetic and had claws on the feet. A battle dress with openings in it surrounded them.

The figure worse some kind of armour that seemed to simply hover in place without being physically attacked to him around his arms and shoulders. In addition to this, a torn cape that reached down to his wait was fastened around his neck.

Most noticeably, his face was something that could not easily be described with words. It looked like something mirrored a child's nightmares. He had two crests of some kind sticking out form either side of his head and he had teeth that aligned the outside of his mouth. The main mouth undoubtedly had teeth and fangs, two on the top and two on the jaw.

It almost looked like some kind of tribal mask, but this was definitely not a helmet. Even though the figure was wearing a metallic mask, it only covered the main part of the face, leaving his mouth, outer teeth and upper crests to stick out.

Most noticeable of all though was his skin and eyes. His skin was a very dark insect colour, but at the same time it had what looked like green data liens running along it, almost like veins. It was almost unusual sight. The eyes were completely green too since the mask had openings for those as well. They the most unsettling effect of having no pupils, they just glowed. Only a simple light glare seemed to give the appearance of a pupil.

The weapon that he had just stabbed the Illusive Man with was some kind of alien sword.

The figure sheathed his weapon and stepped over the Illusive Man uncaringly. He then looked down at the human and spoke.
Without a doubt, this figure's deep snarling voice invoked terror with each word. He almost sounded like a Vorcha, except that his voice was much, much deeper and he spoke in a more intelligent way than a Vorcha. There was also that unsettling synthetic sound to it which it made even scarier to hear.

"You're part in this is over, Illusive Man…"

To be continued...

And in case the description was difficult for some, I've down a picture which is now up on my Deviantart page, so I recommend you check it out immediately.

One or two other things I want to say quickly. If there's anyone who thought that Indoctrination theory could be applied to my story, you can drop it now. As you just saw, Shepard is immune.

Also, I don't want anyone to complain about the Hawk/Miranda fight being a bit silly. It was intended to be humorous.

And one final note. I trust you all noticed Sarah has the space hamster? Pretty cute, I'm sure. Like to quickly say that I gave him the name Chester as a little tribute to the hamster my family once had. Died of old age many years ago sadly, but he had a good life with us, I can assure you of that. So yeah, Sarah's hamster is named after my family one. :)

That's about it. I'll say now that I hope you're anticipating the next one. Trust me, it'll be worth the wait.

Plus, I look forward to seeing if anyone very cleverly spotted something about the General.

Hint: It concerns his skin.

For now "Hold your families close, and wait" for next week, The Takaal shall rise...
Chapter 16, The Rise of the Takaal

Man, has this one been fun to write! :)

I don't really know what to say...

ENJOY! :)

Chapter 16

The Rise of the Takaal

"Why? I did everything you wanted." the Illusive Man coughed as he clutched his now seriously bleeding wound.

Alpha Squad immediately raised their weapons, but the General simply flicked his hand in their direction.

Another barrier was once again thrown up, this time green and much stronger. Only Austin was on the other side, so he was now separated form his friends.

"Indeed. You clearly demonstrated that you, like so many before you are weak to the taint of indoctrination." said the General turning his back to the Illusive Man and looking out at the massive red and blue star that the station orbited.

"You said I could replace you, that this was... our vision." said the Illusive Man weakly.

"And you failed to see it through."

"But..."

"When you came to me saying that you could control the Reapers, I gave you this chance to prove your worth, providing you with limitless resources for your plan." said the General. "I will admit, you came close. Closer than any have ever done... but you have still failed me."

"Please, master. I'm so close. Just give me more time." the Illusive Man begged.

"Too late. I don't give second chances." said the General. "Besides, it never would have truly worked."

"What?!"

"Even if you had succeeded, even if you had completed the liberator, you could never have controlled the Reapers. They control you."

"But... you assured me I would be safe." said the Illusive Man. "You said I was strong enough to resist their control."

"I lied." said the General. "And I wouldn't have let you take control either. You don't' honestly think I would let someone as weak minded, feeble and selfish as you gain control of my masters?"

"Your... masters?"
"My race and I serve the Reapers." said the General.

It was now noticeable that etched onto the front of the General's battle dress were several lines that formed the unmistakable figure of a Reaper.

"Then why did you help me in the first place? What was the point of deceiving me?" the Illusive man asked, his face starting to go pale, and his mouth and wound leaking even more blood.

"A test." The General replied. "One to prove if your cycle was worthy of the gift of accession."

"Please... just give me another chance. If it hadn't been for those Helldivers..." the Illusive Man tried to say, but he was suddenly cut off as an invisible force suddenly hauled him up into the air.

Skarlack's eyes were glowing slightly brighter than usual and he had his hand up as if he was holding something invisible up. It was like biotics, but at the same time this was definitely not biopics. Whatever powers the General was using, they were something very different.

"Enough. I only like to hear strong men beg." he said. "You have served us well, little snake, but you have outlived your usefulness."

The generals hand slowly closed into a face and faint buzzing that had been going on the background intensified. The Illusive Man desperately tried to move, but to no avail. His head suddenly gave a sharp turn and there was a loud snap. His neck had been broken.

The General's eyes stopped glowing and he dropped his hand, causing the Illusive Man's dead body to fall to the floor.

"Harsh, but he deserved it." said Garrus.

The Genera's head suddenly whipped round and looked at them.

"Ah. I'd almost forgotten that you were there." he smiled evilly. "So, the great Major Shepard. We meet at last. The Illusive Man told me much about you. Many of those stories hardly do you justice."

"I would say I'm flattered, but that wouldn't be true." said Austin. "Who and what the hell are you?"

"A remnant from a time long passed." the General replied, almost sounding like he was speaking in riddles. "One that has seen things since they began. When your race withers and dies, I shall endure."

"I take it your name isn't simply General, as the Illusive Man put it?" Austin asked, still on guard in case this alien tried anything.

"Correct." the General replied. "While I am indeed a General, that is not my true name. The Illusive Man was simply under orders to never use my true name. A simple precaution to preserve the secrecy of my people until the time came. The use of my rank as a smokescreen to conceal my true identity. My name is Skarlack."

"So you're an indoctrinated servant of the Reapers too?" said Austin.

"You are very wrong, Shepard." said Skarlack. "The Reapers accept my kind as their willing servants, they do not need to indoctrinate us. Besides, we are different from other species. Our minds are different."

"You're lying." said Austin. "The Reapers would never accept an organic as a willing servant."
"Indeed. But I am not organic." said Skarlack.

"Well you're definitely not a machine either." said Austin, starting to become confused.

"I am neither. I am better."

"In what way?"

"Every way. You see my markings, do you not? It is a simple fusion of organic and machine. We call it... synthesis." said Skarlack.

"He is not lying Shepard. My scans show that he has an organic weave that is completely merged with machine without any alterations." said EDI.

"Smart AI." said Skarlack. "The relationship is symbiotic. Organic and machine intertwined in a single glorious existence. The strengths of both, the weakness of neither. My race and I are the future. The pinnacle of evolution for all life in this galaxy."

"And yet you squander such gift by using it to serve the Reapers?" said Austin.

"Squander? Is that what you think this is?" said Skarlack, not showing any signs of anger at Austin's earlier statement.

"You see, we offer this gift of ascendance to others. For more than 65 million of your Earth years, we have been present at each cycle."

"That's not possible. There's no way you could've been at every cycle. It's impossible." said Liara.

"My race and I are immortal." said Skarlack. "Ageing by time is a concept that does not apply to us. Like our masters, we endure."

"Is that what the cycles are to you? Tests to judge whether a species is worthy of your gift?!" Austin asked, appalled by what he was hearing.

"Precisely." Skarlack replied. "You see, the Protheans are not the true creators of the crucible. We are. In each cycle, the races that are left in their darkest hour are given the inspiration to make a weapon that has the potential to destroy our masters."

"Let me guess. No cycle has ever managed it." Austin asked.

"They were weak. Running out of time and begin harvested before they could complete It." said Skarlack. "But yours and the last one were different."

"How?"

"The Protheans came closer than any cycle before them, but they still fell. Somehow though, they had a copy of the plans for you to find, something that we have never allowed. Your construction was early." said Skarlack.

"Then why help the Illusive Man build his own?"

"He seemed so sure of himself. The fool." Skarlack replied. "He did impress me though. He came so close. He may very well have succeeded without your intervention."

Skarlack's tone then seemed to change. He sounded now like he was offering something.
"But seeing all this... the things you alone have managed to do, Shepard. All simply in the name of unification, you have cured a disease, fought and killed two Reapers, and now all this." he said. "You've impressed us. It is clear to me now that your cycle is very different. You have already proved much, and so, for the first time in 65 million years, I offer you the choice to end this war now. Reach the next stage of your evolution."

"How would becoming like you stop the war?"

"The Reapers only target organics. Hence why they allow us to serve them. Think about, Shepard. Don't you want an end to all this? The safety of your friends and loved ones? It seems like an easy choice doesn't it?"

"No." Austin replied.

Skarlack was immensely surprised by this. Shepard was refusing? Unexpected.

"You would turn down a quick way to stop this war?" he asked.

"You're asking me to destroy the very thing that makes us who we are. The very thing that defines. I cannot make that choice. I will not!" said Austin defiantly. "And I won't let you force it on us either."

"Defiant to the end. You truly do live up to your legend, Shepard." said Skarlack. He then reached forward in the same way he'd done earlier when he'd broken the Illusive Man's neck. Nothing happened.

Once again Austin heard the voices in this head. This time he could even hear a faint buzzing. Once again though, he was in control. Focusing on now, he was able to keep the voices at a quiet level.

"Hmmm. I thought the Illusive Man's implants were simply failing," said Skarlack, surprised. "So it's true. You are immune to indoctrination."

"Guess that tells you I'm not be trifled with." Austin said warningly.

Skarlack though wasn't intimidated by this. Even Austin did admit that he felt it unlikely for Skarlack to be made nervous by him, even if he couldn't control him.

"Humans truly are a fascinating race. Even now you are defiant, in the presence of a god and in the face of annihilation. It is unwise to stand against us, Shepard. Imagine what fate awaits my enemies when I would gladly kill any of my own men for victory." he said.

"And I would die for any one of mine." said Austin.

"You Helldivers think pride in your logic. I suggest you employ It." said Skarlack. "Consider the fate of your homes. The planets and land you so vigorously desire. They can turn to ash at the Reapers will. Consider the fate of your wife."

Austin suddenly froze when Skarlack mention that and he cast a glance at Liara.

"Oh yes. Synthesis allows me to see much." said Skarlack. "Can you live with yourself knowing you will condemn her to death? Can you really be so naive to hold on to your humanity that you would doom your future with her? Deny the possibility of your so called, little blue children?"

For Austin, that seemed to spark something inside him. Liara nodded to Austin and he turned back to Skarlack.
"We will not let fear compromise who we are. The answer is no, Skarlack." he said.

"Then that is your final answer?" Skarlack asked.

"It is."

To everyone's surprise, Skarlack did not lash out or anything like that. He simply smiled and gave a small laugh. He then cast his hand at the star.

To everyone's surprise huge green bolt of lightning suddenly trust front he star and struck Skarlack's hands. There was a bright flash that temporally blinded everyone. When it cleared, a most shocking sight befell their eyes. Skarlack had somehow absorbed some of the star's power. His synths markings and eyes now glowed brighter than before and he seemed to occasionally fizz with small amounts of energy.

Most shocking of all though was the star. No longer was it its traditional blue and red colours. Now... it was bright glowing green. Skarlack's mouth curled into an evil smile as he stood before his unnerved opponents.

"Now... only one of us will leave this place alive." he said.

"We'll see about that." said Austin as he drew his sword.

With the barrier still up, it was just the two of them. For now, the two simply circled one another.

"You're signing your own death wish, Shepard. As you see, my synthesis powers are far beyond anything you have. Now, back down." said Skarlack.

He then suddenly threw a huge amount of green lightning right at Austin. Acting purely on instinct, the Helldiver threw up his sword in the vague hope it would somehow defend him. To his surprise, it did. Somehow, Excalibur seemed to absorb all the lightning.

Austin would've thought Skarlack would be surprised by this, but the alien's expression remained unchanged. Austin felt it best not to boast and stay cool. That would hopefully make Skarlack think twice rather than try to take advantage of his surprise. The Helldiver was very glad he was wearing his helmet.

"I don't think so." he said.

Skarlack simply smiled and drew out the sword that he'd used earlier to stab the Illusive Man.

"Gonna be like that then, is it?" Austin thought to himself.

Austin charged first and swung. Skarlack seemed to block his blow instantly. The two exchanged a number of blows parries. Skarlack moved with such speed and skill that it frightened Austin. This synthesis being had an immense skill that easily rivalled Zartrack's, and Austin had never beaten him before.

Austin desperately tried to get an opening, but Skarlack always seemed to be there to block him. He then attempted two handed swing, but Skarlack used his four clawed feet to jump over him, using him as a kind of stepped. The alien flipped a few times before skill fly landing.

"Major Shepard, you disappoint me. So far you're not living up to the stories of your legendary swordsmanship." he said.
Skarlack spun several times before he attempted a swing. Austin was fortunately able to block this. Skarlack had clearly got the jump on him to begin with and so Austin hadn't been fully prepared for the alien's speed and ferocity. Now though the Helldiver knew that he was up against an opponent unlike any he'd fought before. He would have to be calm and trust in himself, not to mention remembering everything Zartrack told him.

"Surely you can do better." Skarlack taunted.

Austin kept his cool though and powered on through as the two fought again. This time, he moved much faster and the two opponents now seemed to be on equal ground. He could already tell Skarlack was finding this a bit more challenging. Austin was even more surprised that Skarlack had such good footwork considering he had an extra pair of legs.

Austin then got an opening as Skarlack attempted a spin attack. Managing to duck under it, Austin thrust forward and he felt his word cut flesh.

The two simply stood for a moment as they paused their fight, standing ready to fight again.

"Got ya." said Austin indicating to where he had managed to cut Skarlack's arm.

Skarlack looked down at the glowing open wound in his right arm. No blood trickled out. Being synthesis, he possibly didn't have any.

"Well played, Helldiver." he said. "A valiant attempt, but..."

Skarlack's free hand reached up and gently cupped the wound with his hand which briefly glowed brightly. When he moved his hand away, the cut had been completely healed.

"That's not fair." Austin whispered to himself. "Still left a scar though." he said out loud.

Skarlack looked at the healed wound. The Helldiver was right, the wound had indeed healed, but at the same time it had left a scar.

"How is that possible? I cannot be hurt!"

He then looked at Austin's blade. His eyes shimmered for a moment as he scanned it.

"Kartalrium!" he snarled.

"You know my blade?" Austin asked in surprise.

"No. But I know the metal it is forged from. You possess a weapon that would be lethal to my kind if it weren't for the fact that the synthesis improves us." said Skarlack.

The dual continued to intensify. Skarlack was being a bit more careful this time. Although Excalibur couldn't kill him, he knew now that the blade would leave its mark on him.

Austin managed to land a kick on Skarlack that sent him back. His clawed feet scraped the floor hard as he skidded to a halt.

"You're stronger than I thought. However you're not going to stop me, Shepard." He said. "I'll be sure to send your ashes back to your friends."

Absorbing more energy from the now green star, Skarlack plunged his hand into the floor.

The entire place started to shake violently as the smooth plates on the floor seemed to move.
Structures and platforms suddenly burst out of them as much of the stations inner working and machinery became exposed as Skarlack created several new higher levels to jump up onto. Sur enough, Skarlack leapt into the air and spun several times before landing on the level above.

"Very tricky. Leave it to you to cheat." Said Austin.

"Speak for yourself… Helldiver." Said Skarlack.

Austin ran at the platform and jumped up onto it. He was only just able to get high enough though and he landed just on the edge, nearly losing his balance and falling into the vast pit below. He managed to regain his balance though and quickly faced Skarlack.

The General gave an impressed look at him for a brief moment before he brought his sword up. To Austin's surprise, the blade seemed to change.

The sword's handle telescopically extended until it had transformed into a staff.

Skarlack now became much faster with his strikes. When Austin blocked one end, the other would try to take him from the other side. A slow strike allowed Austin an opening. Managing to get his blade on the outside, Austin pulled Skarlack's staff in towards him. He then used his free hand to grab the same end from the other side so that he now essentially had the staff trapped.

Austin then spun quickly and attempted to swipe at Skarlack's legs. The General however jumped over this and landed on the next higher platform up. The second he landed he then swung one of his legs at Austin's helmet.

The Helldiver failed to notice this in time and the kick sent him flying and he smashed against the barrier that Alpha was still trapped behind.

Austin quickly glanced at Liara. Despite that she was wearing her helmet, he could tell she had a worried expression. She clearly felt helpless being stuck behind the barrier, unable to fight alongside her bond mate.

As Austin got back up, he found Skarlack already standing over him. He instantly felt the edge of the General's blade against his neck.

"You may as well surrender your sword, Shepard. I cannot die by your hand. I am immortal." He snarled.

"You wanna put that to the test?" Austin asked as he gently stood up, Skarlack's blade still pressed against his neck.

Quickly reacting, he used Excalibur to knock Skarlack's blade away from him. The General though quickly spun and Austin felt the blade against the other side of his neck.

Austin though didn't give the General a chance to say anything and he quickly knocked the blade aside again. Skarlack though once again used this against his opponent and he knocked the other end of his staff into Austin's stomach, knocking him to the floor, the blade once again threatening to cut his throat.

"Don't be a fool, Shepard. Why suffer horrific death, when you can join us and live?"

"Not today!" Austin replied as he grabbed the end of the staff and pushed it away. He then smashed it away further using his sword.
Skarlack though was quick to switch and he once again hit Shepard several times in the face, the final one sending him flying.

As Austin once again struggled to get up, he suddenly felt something in his head. Some kind of thought that seemed to tell him that Skarlack was about to bring down a finishing blow.

Reacting quickly to this without hesitation, he brought his elbow up just enough so that when Skarlack's blade came down, it became lodged in the gap between his elbow, and the attached blade.

Both opponents were rather surprised by this. Skarlack more so because he had been so sure that Austin wouldn't see that.

Austin on the other hand a rough idea of what had happened. He looked in Liara's direction.

Sure enough, as he looked right at her and transmitted a thought to her, she replied back.

"Thanks, love." he said, very relieved at his late save.

"Better than having to watch helplessly." Liara replied back. "At least this way, I can still help you."

Skarlack still remained where he was, trying to comprehend how the Helldiver had done that. Austin took this as a sign that while the General could read minds by scanning them, or whatever it was he did, he couldn't sense their telepathic communication. Most likely, he knew they were together, but not in that sort of way.

Austin couldn't help but smile rather smugly at Skarlack's confused look.

"That's not possible." The General said in disbelief.

"Let's agree to disagree." Austin smiled smugly.

The two once again came into a clash as they struggled to overpower the other. Austin was just able to block Skarlack's staff as it came down on him.

"Defiant to the end. Admirable, but mistaken." said Skarlack.

"I'm a human. We never give up." said Austin defiantly.

"That may be so." said Skarlack as Austin was able to push his staff and pin it to the side as he then used his free hand to try and punch Skarlack, but the General quickly blocked it with his own hand. "But you're still an obsolete race with predictable techniques."

Skarlack then threw Shepard to the floor and he skidded hard before managing to grab onto the floor and slow himself down as he rolled back onto his feet.

"Give me a real challenge. Impress me." said Skarlack.

Deciding that he shouldn't hold back at all anymore and use all of his skill, Austin detached his shield from his back.

"That extra metal won't save you though, Shepard. Two can play at the game. Or in my case, three."

Skarlack shrugged the cape off of his shoulders and it fell to the floor. He then held his staff in both hands in some kind of ceremonial position. Then something very surprising happened. Parts of his chest were moving.
Two thin sections of his chest plate suddenly split away, only they weren't plates. They were arms! All this time, Skarlack had been keeping a secondary set of smaller arms firmly against his chest. There were gaps in his armour where the arms were obviously designed to snugly fit and they were disguised with armour so that they blended in well. Now that they were out though, they made Skarlack look even more alien than he already was.

Now he had four arms and four hands. The hands of the two smaller ones clenched into fists and a green omni blade appeared on each one.

The two ends of Skarlack's staff also flashed and had an omni blade on each end. Essentially, he now had four omni blades.

"Your move, Helldiver." he said as he twirled his staff and went into a battle stance, his secondary set of arms moving behind his back.

"Four omni blades?!! You'll need them, Skarlack." Said Austin.

"To the death then." The General snarled.

"If you insist."

With an evil chuckle Skarlack slowly started to spin his staff in a flourishing velocity so fast and so seamlessly that he seemed to stand next to a glowing wheel of green energy.

Skarlack slowly began to advance on Austin as the ends of his staff hit the floor causing marks with each spin the two ends made, causing sparks to fly everywhere.

Austin stood his ground and gently backed away in time with Skarlack's advance so that he would be the right distance from his opponent when he no doubt eventually attacked. If he was too close, he could risk getting hit before he had a chance to block the attack.

Austin decided instead though to turn this into the first blow. Timing his strike, he lunged. Skarlack's staff instantly stopped spinning and blocked his blade.

The synthesis gave Skarlack an unrelenting speed that Austin could only just keep up with, even with Liara's help. The General struck so fast that each of twelve strikes per second came from a different angle with different speed and intensity, an unpredictably broken rhythm of slashes, chops, and stabs of which every single one could the Helldiver's life.

So far though, not one touched him.

After all, he had been trained by the Arkane's best General and sword fighter. Countering twelve blows per second was only difficult, not impossible.

Skarlack, snarling furiously, ramped up the intensity and velocity of his attacks. Sixteen per second… eighteen… until finally, at twenty strikes per second, he overloaded, Austin's defence.

So Austin used his defence to attack.

"So far, you have yet to impress me." Said Skarlack as he blocked Shepard's first strike.

Skarlack once again hen used this attack, but Austin blocked it and then pushed it hard until he had the General's staff pinned. Skarlack reacted quickly to this though and he used his left hand to backhand punch Austin. This was then followed however by a punch form Austin which was so hard that Skarlack actually found it rather painful. Even for something as strong as him, a punch from
a Helldiver did hurt.

This of course made the General very angry.

"You'll thank me for ending your pathetic life!"

Skarlack thrust his hand forward. This move caught Austin off guard as the General seized him by the neck and brought him forward, causing him to drop his sword and his shield.

Skarlack took Austin's neck under his arm and gave it sharp flex. For any normal human, that would definitely have broken a neck. Austin was lucky though that a Helldiver's armour had a massively reinforced back and neck. Even with his synthetically enhanced strength, Skarlack would need to do better than that.

Austin wished though he hadn't thought that as Skarlack then pulled him over his head and brought him down hard over his shoulders. Once again, that had obviously been designed to break a back. To finish, the General then flew him to the floor on his back and slammed his right front clawed foot onto the Helldiver's chest. He grinded it a few times before he finally pulled Austin up a bit and finally kicked him away.

Everyone went silent as Alpha believed Skarlack had just killed Austin. Right as Skarlack turned to them and smiled evilly though, he heard the sound of heavy metal feet and looked back to Austin getting back up.

"What?!

"You'll have to do better than that." said Austin.

Snarling angrily, Skarlack once again absorbed some of the star into his staff and then shot a massive wave of lightning right at Austin, which hit his armour.

Everything inside the suit seemed to fizz and go haywire as huge amounts of electricity coursed through it. Austin was beginning to fear he might get cooked.

When the lightning finally stopped, Austin felt his suit go very stiff and everything temporarily went offline. Then it suddenly came back on.

"Power at 400% capacity." said his suit's computer.

"How about that."

Austin felt a new amount of confidence course through him. If his suit had this much power, it would definitely take full advantage and use as much as it could.

Although Helldiver suits only had a standard issue power core, they had recently been configured to take full advantage of extra power if they could find it. Because all Helldivers only had the standard core though, that feature was never fully utilized. Dell had often talked about designing a new power core that was twice, or he hoped would be three times, as powerful as a stand power core.

For now though, Austin had over 400% power to use. So he had a feeling his suit would use it to its full advantage.

Skarlack was left very confused by this. He had been so sure that the lightning would shut the Helldiver down. He was even more surprised when Austin suddenly activated his plasma cannon and it fired a supercharged shot right into his face.
It didn’t kill the General of course, but it certainly caused a lot of damage, so much that he had to absorb more of the star to heal himself.

When he finally felt himself return to normal, he quickly found Shepard taking a swing at him. The General’s two omni blade arms only just managed to move in time to parry the strike.

Skarlack then quickly jumped, the force of his mechanical feet and his synthesis abilities amplifying it tenfold.

He flipped a few times before he once again landed on one of the platforms he’d created earlier.

Austin followed, but he didn’t get his jump right and he only just managed to grab onto the edge as the platform slowly started to turn. He quickly though managed to pull himself up. As soon as he did, Skarlack immediately thrust at him.

Austin only just ducked in time, the tip of Skarlack’s blade going through his shoulder cape and causing a small tear at the edge.

Angered by this near miss, Skarlack made a swing which the Helldiver ducked under. The turning platform overlapping with another gave him some temporary cover as they blocked Skarlack’s blade.

The General made another thrust in-between the overlapping platforms. Austin had to move his back slightly so that it avoided him. He was able to land a kick on the staff though, giving him enough to roll backwards on to his feet again as Skarlack made another thrust that missed.

Skarlack made two swings. The bladed end, Austin managed to block, but the blunt end hit him on the back of the helmet. This dazed him and so he failed to react in time to another hit from the staff’s blunt end and this one sent him spinning onto another platform that as it slowly moved, disappeared into the floor.

"Austin!" Liara yelled, believing that this had killed her bond mate.

Skarlack smiled, sure that he had finally triumphed.

"Hey!"

The General’s head swung round to see Austin, alive and perfectly unharmed slowly rising up as he stood on another platform.

"Nice ride, huh?" he said as he stepped down onto a flat one.

The fight became slightly trickier now since the two opponents were on separate platforms, both of which were turning in opposite directions, so they now had to be mindful of their footwork.

A sudden head-butt from Skarlack knocked Austin backwards onto a turning cog. Skarlack thrust, hoping to stab him, but he managed to dodge it. In doing so though, he was forced to hand of the very edge. Skarlack thrust two more times at his hands as the cog continued turning until Austin temporarily vanished from view again.

Skarlack knew not to fall for the same trick twice and immediately had his staff pointed at the other side, ready for when Austin would no doubt appear again.

Unknown to the General though, Austin had once again switched platforms and he quietly rose up on another one behind his opponent.
Skarlack only sensed Austin a little too late. As he swung, the Helldiver pinned the General's staff under his arm and used the other to seize the other by the throat.

"You're one slippery bastard." said Austin. "I've got ya now!"

Using his enhanced strength, Austin threw Skarlack off the platform and he landed on the floor. Before the General had a chance to get up, Austin was immediately there, his blade at Skarlack's throat.

"Yield. Don't make me kill you." he said.

Skarlack though simply smiled. Then to everyone's surprise, there was a bright green flash and he disappeared.

"WHAT?! No way! He can teleport?! said Dash in astonishment.

Austin looked around, hoping that he might see Skarlack somewhere. At the same time, he remained calm so that he would be ready for a surprise attack, which he reckoned was Skarlack's intent.

Sure enough, after a few tense moments, Skarlack suddenly appeared in a green flash right in mid-air and lunged at Austin.

The Helldiver was just able to react in time and he countered and parried each blow. This fuelled Skarlack's frustration and he started to attack at an even fast rate.

Austin could certainly tell that Skarlack was beginning to think that he'd underestimated his opponent. And he was right.

Never before had Skarlack faced an opponent that could fight this well for so long. Normally they would tire after a while, but this Helldiver didn't seem exhausted at all. Plus, his skill were very superior to other opponents he'd fought before. The stories he had heard about this Helldiver's skills were now no longer doing him justice. Now he was living up to them and excelling at the same time.

"Give in!" Skarlack growled as he brought his staff down hard and used all of his strength to push Austin down onto his knees.

"Never!" Austin yelled as he parried the staff and swung right at Skarlack's face.

The General failed to react in time, and the blade cut right through his left eye.

"Agh! You little bastard!" he cursed as he backed away from Austin, clutching his slightly bleeding eye. He then quickly teleported to much further away. As expected, he used this time to heal his injury. A glowing scar was now very visible over his eyes, and he didn't look pleased about it.

"WITNESS THE TRUE POWER OF SYNTHESIS!"

He spun his staff before then plunging it into the ground.

"Austin, watch out!" Liara warned him.

Green cracks in the floor started to appear from where Skarlack's staff was embedded and they quickly kept growing until they got close to Austin's position.

"Don't let them touch you" Liara warned.

Austin was just able to roll away from the cracks as they continued growing. Just as it looked like
another was about to touch him though, the green from them disappeared.

Skarlack had pulled the staff out of the ground. Clearly he’d seen that the cracks hadn’t worked.

"You're only delaying the inevitable, Helldiver!" he snarled.

He then thrust his staff forward and a massive green be a burst forth. Austin just managed to dodge it until he was able to get behind cover, thanks to the structures Skarlack had created.

When the beam finally stopped, Skarlack looked a bit weak. The use of all this energy seemed to be taking its toll.

"Power... Need... more... power!" he managed to say.

Using his telekinesis, Skarlack brought up several of the plates on the floor and they began spinning around him, almost like a barrier. At the same time, the General once again began drawing power from the star. Austin however activated his plasma cannon and, timing his shot just perfectly, he fired.

The shot managed to shoot right through a very small gap in the defence and it hit Skarlack. The General roared in anger as his power draw was interrupted. There was another flash as the plates were drawn to him, and he teleported again.

For a moment, everything was silent again. Austin took several deep breathes, ready to defend himself again when Skarlack would no doubt teleport in mid-air again.

Sure enough, Skarlack once again popped out of nowhere in mid-air and brought his staff down. This time though, Austin attacked at the same time and they ended up in a clash with each other.

Skarlack stared at Austin and growled as he tried to overpower the Helldiver.

"I sense great fear in you, Shepard." he said. "You have hate, you have anger, but you don't use them."

"Don't let him get to you, Austin. Remember what Zartrack taught us." Said Liara, trying to comfort Austin.

Austin felt a new amount of strength surge through him and he used this to push Skarlack off him. The General though was quick to respond and he had his staff ready for Austin's attack. He didn't disappoint.

The Helldiver struck much harder, letting his strength be used a lot more with strike so that the now hit with more force.

To his surprise, this seemed to be having a good effect. Skarlack seemed to be slowing, and he got less and less chance to try and attack back. Little did the Helldiver know however that it wasn't actually him. In fact, Skarlack wasn't slowing because of him, he was slowing because of himself.

The General had come to admit that this contest obviously could not be decided by their skill with their weapon of choices. At least not easily anyway. So the General had decided to try a different tactic, deception.

He let Shepard pain all four of his arms down only for him to then make a long and deliberately slow thrust. Austin parried the blow with his shield, but then seized the opportunity. Austin swung his blade inside Skarlack's attack. Excalibur severed right through all four of the General's arms,
separating his hands from his wrists.

So that was what it felt like. Skarlack had often wondered to himself what this sort of thing would feel like. It did indeed hurt, and it was a bit shocking to lose all feeling in hands that he had had his entire long life. There was no blood of course since he didn't have any, so that prevented any worry he had of bleeding to death.

He had to admit, this was a bit unexpected. The plan had been to deceive Austin into simply disarming him. This was a little more than he'd bargained for. No matter though. This was but a minor setback.

As Skarlack fell to his knees, Austin held his sword at Skarlack's throat.

All of Alpha Squad cheered and clapped at Austin's supposed victory. Skarlack couldn't help but find this amusing. Organics… so easy to trick and deceive. Such a shame that Shepard had refused. A worrier that fought as well as him was such a waste to kill.

For a moment, even Austin relaxed, confident that he'd triumphed.

Skarlack of course saw this. Now was the right time, while Shepard had his guard down, so sure that it was over.

"I know what you're thinking, Shepard." He said now once again sounding like he was refusing to give in. "Without my hands, I'm completely powerless, right?"

As the General was talking, Austin and everyone else failed to notice a faint dark green aura surrounding his dropped staff.

"You never did learn to mind your surroundings!"

The staff was then suddenly hauled up and flew right at him. Austin only just heard this in time and he quickly reacted, but not quick enough.

The staff embedded itself in the left of his chest. It didn't go in very far thanks to the armour, but Austin could undeniably feel a small bit of the blade had stabbed into him.

The pain unfortunately weakened Austin greatly and he fell to his knees.

"NO!" Liara yelled helpless.

Skarlack simply smiled evilly as he gently stood up. The dark green aura then surrounded his severed hands and they gently floated to their user until they re-joined with his wrists. The joins then glowed bright green as they healed. His hands were now reattached, scarred, but definitely working again.

The General then walked up to Austin and grasped the staff's handle again, causing Austin to wince slightly in pain.

"You know, I often mused in the past, are Helldiver's mortal?" he said.

He then gave the staff a sharp twist, and the piece of the metal blade that was embedded in Austin snapped off.

"Well now I know. You are."

The broken blade then gently mended itself as the broken off tip regrew out of the main blade. The bit that was still in Austin though remained.
Austin's first course of action was applying medi gel. That wouldn't pull the broken blade piece out, but it would at least help and it would hopefully stop any bleeding. He really didn't think he could continue fighting though, the pain was too much and he felt very weak.

Before Skarlack could deliver a final fatal blow however, the whole place suddenly shook, causing everyone to lose their balance slightly. Skarlack looked to the source.

The star had suddenly gone critical. Clearly him constantly draining power from it had caused it to destabilize. It was only as it started to devolve though that he noticed he'd caused it to age rapidly and it was devolving into a black hole which was slowly pulling the base in.

Skarlack looked back down at Shepard and simply snarled. He could finish it, but the station was becoming too unstable. If he didn't teleport to safety, he could die along with them.

"This isn't over, Shepard. This is just the beginning." he said. "Time was your ally, but now it has abandoned you. We are the Takaal, and we have returned!"

With that, Skarlack once again teleported and vanished.

At the same time, the barrier disappeared and everyone quickly hurried over to help Austin up.

"Are you okay?!" Liara asked desperately, her voice undeniably confirming that she was crying.

"It's not as bad as it seems." Austin groaned as he was helped up.

"Shepard, the stars going critical and the whole base it getting sucked in. Get the hell out of there now! The fleet's retreating through the relay!" said Zartrack over the radio.

"You don't need to tell us twice." Alaara replied. "Back to the dropships! Double time, people!"

"I can't run." Austin groaned, the blade tip still causing him pain.

"Griffin, carry him!" Alaara ordered.

"Much rather do this with a girl." Griffin muttered as he picked Austin up.

"I heard that." Austin couldn't help but chuckle.

They managed to make it back to the dropships with enough time for them to get back onto the Normandy. Already, bits of the station were being torn off as it was slowly being pulled into the black hole.

"We're out of time! We have to get out of here." said Joker.

"We're in, Joker. Punch it!" Alaara ordered. "Get Shepard to the med bay, now!"

The Normandy immediately pulled a huge swing and sped off towards the relay just as the last of the Helldiver fleet went through. The Normandy made it into the relay just as Joker felt the black hole's pull start to affect them.

As the station came apart, the window cracked and eventually smashed altogether. The main bodies of the Cerberus troops and parts of the guards were sent flying into the vacuum of space. The Illusive man's dead body followed, but was suddenly grabbed. Skarlack had returned.
The General's clawed fight were dug hard into the metal, so he was unaffected by the pull. Surviving without air wasn't a problem for him either. He had no need to breath, nor did he have to worry about his body being affected by the vacuum. His synthetic weave sought to that. Plus, his race had no lungs, so they didn't breathe at all.

Space was an environment they could survive in easily without the need of any technology that other species would require to keep them alive.

The Takaal General gazed down at the Illusive Man's lifeless body. He very nearly almost pitied the dead human. So inferior and misguided. But even so...

"Even in death, you may still be of use to us." he said.

He teleported again, taking the dead leader of Cerberus with him, leaving everything else to be crushed and consumed by the black hole.

Austin was immediately rushed to the med bay. Both Dr Chakwas and Michel were ready for them. Even Javik had come up as well. He may not of been that kind of Professor, but he still thought he might be able to help.

As soon as his armour unlocked, Austin fell out and into Liara's arms. The tearful Asari helped him onto the bed were the doctors began examining the wound. Due to the medigel, it wasn't bleeding anymore, but the wound wouldn't heal until the blade was pulled out. That was the tricky part. At the moment, they didn't yet know how much of the blade was in there and how far it was. More importantly, had it stabbed anything vital.

Dr Chakwas began running an X-ray over the wound while Dr Michel applied some more of the gel to help.

"Can't we just pull the damn thing out?!" Liara yelled desperately.

"Not until we know if it's damaged any of his organs. If we pull it out without knowing for certain, it might kill him." Chakwas replied gently.

Liara simply looked into her bond mate's eyes, her eyes full of tears.

"Liara, it's going to be alright." said Austin calmly as he touched her cheek.

Finally, Chakwas managed to get a clear image of the wound.

"Thanks goodness" she sighed in relief.

"Is that good?" Liara asked hopefully.

"Yes. Fortunately, it missed his heart and it isn't deep enough to touch his lungs." said Chakwas.

"There's still the matter of pulling it though." said Michel.

'We have to try. He won't heal until it's pulled out." Said Chakwas.

She gently picked up pair of medical tweezers and tried to get a hold of the blade piece. When she touched it though, Austin suddenly lurched and gave a sharp groan of pain. His heart rate also increased. The X-ray image also showed that it had moved deeper into his body.

"GODDESS, KARIN! PULL THE DAMN THING OUT!" Liara yelled, hurt emotionally by her
husband's pain.

"I can't." said Chakwas, also starting to sound worried. "If I touch it, it moves deeper into his body. I don't know how we can get it out."

"It's sensitive to physical touch. I've seen this sort of thing before. It's a very old type of metal that is designed to borrow deeper into a body when removal is attempted." Said Javik.

"Javik, I'm a doctor, not a scientist." said Chakwas. "What does that mean?"

"If you touch it by hand, you'll risk making it worse." Javik explained. "It needs to be pulled out using biotics."

"Liara?" Chakwas asked.

"I don't know if I can. With Shepard like this... I just don't know if I can." Liara sobbed. "Besides, I've never used my biotics like that before."

"Then let me try." Javik offered.

"Are you sure?" Chakwas asked. "Have you ever done this before?"

"A few times, yes. During our war with the Reapers, I assisted in taking shrapnel out of many of our soldiers." Javik nodded. "I will admit, this is different, but I have to try. If he dies, we'll all lose hope."

"Liara, are you willing to let him try?" Michel asked.

Ultimately, the choice did fall to Liara. There were the risks that Austin could die if this was screwed up.

"Save him." the Asari replied. "I can't lose him again. I won't!"

Javik simply nodded and knelt down next to Shepard, his height making him practically eye level with Austin.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yes." Austin nodded weakly as he took a deep breath and braced himself.

"Alright. Dr Chakwas, have some more medi gel ready. We don't want him to bleed to death." said Javik.

The Prothean then gently put his hands forward. His biotics surrounded the blade.

Austin groaned painfully through gritted teeth and Liara felt his grip on her hands tighten. To try and calm him, she spoke reassuring words to him through their bond.

Javik did his best to remain concentrated and he kept gently moving the blade. Everyone held their breath as they watched blade gently rise out. After several tense minutes, it was finally out.

Austin finally relaxed as Dr Michel applied some more medi gel to his wound to stop the bleeding and Dr Chakwas brought some bandages.

"Feeling better?" Liara asked, smiling tearfully.
"Yeah. Much." Austin smiled, gently pulling Liara into a kiss.

Javik took the piece of Skarlack's blade in his hands and examined it.

"Strange. This isn't the same metal I thought it would be. It's clearly been mixed with various different metal substances. But it clearly isn't Reaper technology either." he said.

The Prothean handed the shard to Austin who looked at it.

"I knew Cerberus wouldn't go down without a fight, but this is different. They crossed a line by working for these things." he said.

"To be fair, you crossed the line first, Shepard. We squeezed them and hammered them to the point of desperation. And in their desperation, they turned to a force they didn't fully understand." said Chakwas as she finished bandaging the wound.

'So, how long's my stay this time?' Austin asked.

'A day or two. A wound like that should fairly quickly for you." Chakwas replied.

"I understand." Austin nodded. That means Alaara is in charge until then." said Austin.

"She's already aware." said Liara. "She's relaying the report to Zartrack and the others." said Liara.

"So Cerberus were under the Reaper's control all this time? Should've guessed." said Zartrack.

"These... Takaal. They serve the Reapers?" Hackett asked.

"Yes. Apparently, they've been around since the very beginning," said Alaara.

"Permanent servants. We always had suspicions that they didn't work alone." said Hackett.

"How's Shepard?" Zartrack asked.

"Recovering. Skarlack injured him, but I'm told he'll be okay. Until he does though, as Alpha Squad's second in command, I must assume temporary command." said Alaara.

"Understood." said Matt. Despite that he was acting formal, Alaara was pretty sure that Matt had been worried. Even a General such as him would be concerned about his son.

"So what'll happen to the remnants of Cerberus? Without the Illusive Man, they'll be divided and leaderless." Anderson asked.

"Chances are that those who weren't indoctrinated and implanted with Reaper tech will either surrender or defect to us." said Alaara. "The indoctrinated ones will likely serve the Takaal. They were behind Cerberus after all.

"I have a feeling Kai Leng will be among them." said Anderson.

"So what do we do?" Hackett asked.

"For now, we continue to build up the resistance. We have many more allies who could join our cause. The Quarians are one we especially could use." said Zartrack.

"Very well. We'll continue as usual and keep progress updated." said Hackett.
"Keep us updated on Shepard's progress, Captain. With these new servants of the Reapers changing the shape of the war, the resistance will need him now more than ever." said Anderson.

"I'll notify the Arkane Council. All Helldivers out defending the other worlds will be on alert." said Zartrack.

Hackett, Zartrack and Anderson vanished, leaving just Matt.

"I promise I didn't sugar coat it, General. Your son's going to be alright." said Alaara. "He's table, but he needs a day or two to recover. He's a tough one."

"I hope so. It's just hard. With my wife still un-accounted for, and both our children out in the fray, it's hard for me not to worry." Matt sighed.

"I will do all I can until he's back, Mr Shepard." said Alaara.

"You're gonna have to stop with that Mr Shepard stuff, Alaara. Because I've been hearing that for the last year or so and I'm starting to feel old. I may be a general, but I'm not that old." Said Matt.

"I know what you mean, sir." Said Alaara. The Asari found it was quite nice when Matt was less formal with the rest of Alpha, not just Austin. Made them feel a lot more welcome to work alongside the son of such a highly respected General.

"Good luck, Captain." Matt saluted.

"Same to you, General. Same to you." Alaara saluted back.

Miranda stood in front of a mirror as she worked on cleaning her cuts. During a fight with one of the Illusive Man's guards, she'd got hit in the face and as a result had attained some injuries.

It certainly did make her look a lot less perfect now. Not to mention that there was a lot of shock going around. The fleet had also seen what Skarlack could do and they were aware that he'd managed to injure the leader of the Reaper resistance. Spirits were certainly down at the moment.

Miranda in-particular also felt very guilty. To think that she had worked for Cerberus, helped them do some of the things they did. How could she have been so short sighted and stupid. SO much for perfection.

This did make her wonder what would have happened to her if she'd stayed. Shepard wouldn't most likely have killed her on Krelldoor if she hadn't defected. Even so, if she'd survived, would she have ended up like the Illusive man? A salve to a race of god like hybrids that wished to force their genetics on other races? A slave to their masters, the Reapers?

And all because she was too blind to see. True she had done it for her sister, but surely she must've seen better options..

At that moment, Hawk suddenly walked in. He immediately noticed Miranda's sad expression and injuries. She did her best to hide them with her hair, but she knew that she couldn't hide much from Hawk. Even with only one human eye, he still saw much.

"Hey, you alright?" he asked concernedly.

"I'm fine." Miranda replied, trying to hide the regret and shame in her voice. "I didn't want anyone to see me like this."
"Why?" Hawk asked.

"I don't know. The fact we now have a threat greater than Cerberus, Shepard wounded... my neck just doesn't seem that important." Miranda replied.

"You almost lost your life out there. You have a reason to be concerned." Said Hawk.

Despite this, Hawk's words of comfort didn't do much to make Miranda feel any better. She hung her head in sorrow. The fact that she had also lost a fight to robot hurt especially.

"I've never often lost a fight. Before I fled from my father, he pushed me to win every fight." She said regretfully. "I guess even today I still can't forget what he tried to make me into."

"Look, I don't see how you can teach anybody to win everything every time. Evens someone as perfect as you. I mean, look at you. You're still here right? You get knocked down, you get back up. Maybe that's what you really need to learn. I know I certainly learned that the hard way. Xun whopped my ass three times back there." said Hawk.

Miranda couldn't help but chuckle at this, causing Hawk to smile.

"Thanks." said Miranda, slightly cheered up now.

Happy that he had managed to cheer Miranda up at least, Hawk decided to simply leave Miranda to give her some space. Even he had to admit, seeing some of the almost god like things that Skarlack had done... how he had managed to wound Shepard, kill the Illusive Man and devolve a star into a black hole... They certainly did face their darkest hour, and no doubt that with the Takaal now no longer needing to hide in the shadows, things would no doubt get a lot tougher.

As he left, Miranda couldn't help but look back at him. She reminded her a bit of Shepard. He always said stuff that would bolster the spirit. It was no surprise that she'd developed a crush on him at one point. Now suddenly these feelings that she'd buried almost two years ago had suddenly come back. Could it be that she was beginning to like Hawk? Did she... love him?

Phew! Took a lot of effort to write this, but I did it so quickly I had it finished on Tuesday. Yeah, I had it finished that early.

Right, now I should say that Rannoch isn't coming just yet. I've got two more chapters planned before that, one of which is the Ex Cerberus scientists, which will be in the next chapter. The other... well, it's a surprise.

Kasumi will also be back next week, so that's another thing to look forward to. Just to also reassure you, the rest fo the Citadel assignments will be included after Rannoch. So just be patient. Omega and Citadel DLC will also be included. Leviathan is also a vital part of the story, so you don't need to worry about that either.

All I can say now is leave comments. And please do write detailed ones if you can. I'm very interested in hearing what you think of the new villains. It's important they make a good first impression. So please do give me your full views if you can. Criticism is fine as long as it's constructive. I welcome advice and anything people want to say that could improve. I do care about what people have to say, and I listen and reply to every review I get, honest.

Until next time... :)

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Chapter 17, The Enemy of our Enemy

Another chapter that was written within less than two or three day.

Don't want to spoil anything so Ill let you read.

Chapter 17

The Enemy of our Enemy

Alaara had felt it best to simply take it easy until Austin recovered. News that the leader of the resistance was alive and recovering had at least been some good news, especially now.

News had already reached Alaara that Takaal scouts had been spotted during several Reaper invasions. An N7 special forces unit had also run into a squadron. Four of them went in, and only two made it out.

As had been predicated, most Cerberus troops had joined the Takaal and so they were still out fighting in the field. They didn't help much. Compared to Takaal soldiers, they seemed like trainees. The difference was that big.

Currently, Alaara was stood at the galaxy map debating on what to do. The Quarians were next on the list for the resistance, but the Asari dared not try it while Shepard was still recovering. He was a much better negotiator than she was and he was the leader. Last thing she wanted to do was make a choice that he wouldn't. It was better to simply wait. At the same time though, that then left Alaara wondering what should be done until then.

Her contemplation was then interrupted by Traynor.

"Captain, I found something you need to see."

"What have you got?"

"As you predicted, a whole bunch of Cerberus scientists who weren't indoctrinated cut ties with Cerberus and fled. Perhaps the appearance of The Takaal made them realise they were on the wrong side." Traynor explained. "We don't know what they were researching, but they were among the Illusive Man's top scientists. They could be a valuable asset to the resistance."

"If we can trust them." said Alaara.

"This was an isolated, high-level cell. It's unlikely they knew what Cerberus was really doing, or that they were secretly working for the Takaal." said Traynor.

"Have there been any attempts to contact the scientists?" Alaara asked.

"So far, the Helldivers and the Alliance have been unable to find them, but they're searching... as are what's left of Cerberus and the Takaal. Despite the loss of the Illusive Man, they're still using the same comm channels. The Takaal are untraceable altogether, but it's better than nothing." said Traynor. "Anyway, I've charted a signal frequency from various Cerberus cells by location. and cross referenced known ship movements..."

"You found them?" Alaara asked, rather impressed and surprised at the same time. Traynor definitely
was good.

"I believe so, yes." the comm specialist replied.

"Nice work. Put it on the map. We can get there and pull them out quickly." Alaara replied.

"Thanks for your time, Captain." Traynor saluted.

"Samantha... Shepard chose well when he picked you." said Alaara supportingly.

"Thank you... Alaara." Samantha couldn't help but smile.

As the Normandy was en route to the scientists, Sarah had a bit of time to herself. Chakwas had promised her that Austin would recover, so there was very little to worry about. Besides, he'd survived much worse than getting stabbed. Hell, he'd come back from the dead.

Traynor of course had also been there to comfort. It was amazing how easily their roles could be reversed under certain circumstances. Mostly Sarah was the more confident one in the relationship, but sometimes it became the opposite.

As Sarah simply lay relaxed on the couch, her omni tool suddenly beeped. She had a message.

Interesting. Mostly Austin got the messages around here. Sarah could only imagine this was important if it had been sent to her. Usually she only got messages regarding her N7 forces out in the field, but from the looks of things it was a social message.

From: James Vega

Hey, Commander.

Just wondering if you've got some time in the near future. Nothing critical, just wanted to chat.

Vega.

Sarah figured it wouldn't hurt to pass the time with a little talk. She had an established a good little friendship with James due to them both being in the Alliance. He seemed to look up to her in the same way he looked up to her brother. Sarah could tell that Vega was watching and learning with the both of them.

"James, I've got some time if you want to talk privately." she said into her omni tool.

"On my way."

James walked in a few minutes later.

"Hey. How's it going?" he asked friendlily.

"Good, James. You?" Sarah replied.

"Good. Good." James replied. "You sure you're okay? I mean, with your brother in the med bay..."

"Trust me, James. He's been through far worse, and I've been assured he'll be fine. There's not much for me to be worried about." Sarah smiled, appreciating James' concern.

"Had a feeling you'd say that." James smiled as he then started to admire Sarah and Samantha's
quarters. "Wow, so this is what I can look forward to when I get my own command."
"My brother's is better. But yeah." Sarah shrugged. "So you want your own ship?"
"Yeah, maybe one day, when I'm old and I can't fight worth shit anymore."
"You just come up here to make fun?"
"Sorry, Shepard. Err... I mean..." James stuttered a bit. "Hell, it's difficult thinking of how to call you differently."
"Just stick to Commander if you want." said Sarah, trying to hold back a snigger.
"Sure. I guess maybe I've got some things on my mind. I wanted to get your opinion on something."
"Shoot."
"What'd you do when they asked you to join the N7 program?" James asked.
"Isn't this a question better suited for my brother?" Sarah replied.
"Maybe. But he's not in the Alliance or the N7 anymore." said James.
This wasn't entirely true of course. Austin was still in the N7 program, it was just unofficial, so therefore James didn't know about it.
"So you decided you'd come to me instead?" Sarah asked.
"Why not? You're just as good an example as your brother. I felt you'd be the better person to ask." said James. "Was it a no-brainer for you, or did you think about it before accepting?"
"The N7 program is a big deal, but it's also a big commitment." said Sarah.
"I hear that."
"You get the best training, best equipment, and best assignments that the Alliance has to offer." said Sarah, almost proudly.
"And they expect the best in return." said James.
"Yes they do. Why you asking?" Sarah inquired curiously.
"Well, even with all the shit that's going on... somebody somewhere managed to track me down and forward an N7 commendation. It's dated the same day the Reapers attacked Earth." James explained.
"You don't sound too thrilled." said Sarah.
"Well, aside from the fact there won't be an N7 program if we don't win this war, I just... Being a soldier's the only thing I've ever been really good at. And not 'came I try. Hell, I'd have kicked my ass out years ago." Said James. "Last time I had a command, I lost almost everyone. And they promoted me for it. I guess I'm just not sure if I'm ready to lead again. I don't know if I want that responsibility." said James.
"You can't blame yourself for being put in a tough situation. And if you were promoted, then something must've gone right." said Sarah supportingly.
"Sure, but..."

"If you'd saved them all, would things have worked out better?" Sarah asked.

"I... I don't know. I don't think so." James replied.

"The right choice is usually not the easy one." as my brother often says." said Sarah.

"Yeah..." said James. "Did you know that before you joined the N7?"

"Yeah. That's why they asked my brother before me, then myself, and now you." Sarah replied. "There's not a single N7 that hasn't sacrificed themselves or their soldiers, at some point."

"So you think I should accept?" James asked.

"That's up to you ultimately." said Sarah. "But if you want my opinion personally, you're a damn good soldier, Vega. Don't waste that opportunity."

"I'll think about it. Seriously." said James. "If you don't mind, maybe don't mention this to anyone else."

"Of course not."

"Gracias. Well, I think I better get back to the hanger. Things here are just a little too soft for me. No offence."

"None taken, Vega."

"Thanks, Sarah."

"Anytime, James."

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For this mission, Alaara had decided against bringing everyone as she sometimes did whenever she was in command. Didn't want to scare the scientists with a whole squad of Helldivers. For this mission, she's chosen her wife, Sandra, Leena and Kraan. Tech, comms, and heavy weapons would probably be needed in this fight, plus she topped it off with her own biotics.

There was actually a fourth squad mate in the shuttle with them as well, but they didn't know her since she was using a cloak.

Kasumi did have to admit that she was rather impressed that she had managed to go this long without being detected. Not to mention that she had managed sneak onto the most advanced ship in the galaxy without anyone noticing or her accidentally setting off an intruder alert. Either their security was flawed, which she had to admit was very unlikely, or she was better at her job than even she thought.

She had got bored recently of working on the Crucible and so had decided to take a little break and maybe try a little mission with the old gang. She did have to admit that she maybe could've picked a better time to come aboard. Seeing Austin on the medbay with a bandage over his chest with Liara sat next to him and holding his hand while they both slept made her feel a bit disheartened. A slightly awkward memory of her spying on them both while they made love in the show unfortunately found a way to creep back into her mind, but she was able to repress it. Having overheard conversations that Austin would be alright at least did make her a bit happier.
The Thief had been a little cross at the fact that Jacob still wasn't back on board. Miranda was, yet her boyfriend was nowhere to be found. It did make her a bit worried. She'd already lost on lover in her lifetime, she would hate to lose another.

Nevertheless, Kasumi turned her thoughts back to now. What she would do was stay cloaked the entire time and just provide a bit of assistance without being detected. She didn't want Alpha to accidentally think they had a guardian angel watching over them. Might get the wrong message across.

"What's the word? Do we know how long these scientists have been holed up out there?" Alaara asked.

"Not much in the mission brief." Sandra replied.

"Ma'am, I'm picking up chatter from a Cerberus squad engaging the supply depot." said Cortez.

"Engaging the scientists?" Alaara asked.

"And if I'm reading it right, sounds like more troops are on the way... along with a small platoon of Takaal soldiers." Cortez replied.

"Okay, set us down, then get out of here. We need those scientists alive."

The Hellhound gently settled down and everyone gently jumped out.

"No wonder Cerberus abandoned this place. If it weren't' for these suits, we'd be freezing." said Sandra.

The whole base was being bombarded with Cerberus troops. It was quite surprising that there were still this many with their leader dead. Alaara had thought that most of them would've perished when Cronus station was destroyed.

With the trooper's attention being focused on the scientists, that did at least mean that Alpha had the element of surprise on their side.

Sure enough, the troopers had no idea what hit them, especially since Kraan charged into them like a massive battering ram and Leena deployed a turret that shot the down almost instantly. Any left overs were no problem for Alaara and Sandra to take care of.

"What did these people do to bring this down on their heads?" Kasumi wondered.

She had to admit this all seemed very extreme for a couple of defectors. Was there more to this?

As Alpha secured the area, they found one of the allies was wounded, but at least. As Alaara knelt down to check on him however she found a most surprising face looking back at her.

"Jacob?"

"Alaara?"

Even Kasumi couldn't believe her eyes. There was Jacob, visible as clearly as she saw the others. The Thief felt her heart soar at the realisation that her new lover was okay. It was very hard now to resist the temptation to uncloak and give him a kiss along with a huge hug.

"How bad is it?" Alaara asked as she looked at the wound in Jacob's wound.
"I'll live... I think." Jacob groaned.

"This is Brynn. If you can hear me, come in." Alaara suddenly heard. "Is there anyone there?"

It was coming from a dropped comm. Sandra immediately picked it up and handed it to her wife.

"This is Captain Alaara T'onrak of Helldiver Squad Alpha. The enemy is clear. Open the door." she said.

"Is Jacob there?" Brynn asked.

"I'm here, Brynn." Jacob replied.

The doors opened to reveal another Ex-Cerberus scientist.

"Jacob. Are you alright?" she asked concernedly.

"I'm all right. The others didn't make it." Jacob replied as Alaara helped him inside.

"What are you doing here?" Alaara asked.

"I'm supposed to be protecting these people from Cerberus." said Jacob.

"Are they gone?" the woman asked.

"For now. But they'll be back, and they'll be bringing friends." said Leena.

"Sure you're okay?" Sandra asked, notching that Jacob did look like he was struggling against his injury.

"Yeah. I'll walk it off." said Jacob, trying to hide his pain. "Save my life one more time, and I'll start owing Shepard."

"This one's on the house." said Alaara.

"Where is Shepard anyway? You only lead the squad whenever he's unable to." Jacob asked, his tone now taking on one of concern.

"He's recovering from an injury he sustained when he took down Cerberus. I'm in temporary command until he recovers." Alaara explained. "But don't worry, he's fine. He's never been that easy to kill, we of all people know that."

"No kidding." said Jacob. "Well, at least you're here. Alaara, this is Doctor Brynn Cole. She's in charge here."

"There've been stories going around that you took down Cerberus and killed the Illusive Man. Is that true?" Brynn asked as she and Alaara shook hands.

"It is. The Illusive Man's dead. What's left of Cerberus has either defected like you or joined the Takaal." said Alaara.

"So that's what those insect things are called." said Jacob.

"You've run into some?" Kraan asked. "Damn. Knew we were missing the fun."

"A few scouts were with the Cerberus troopers. They retreated and left them to do all the work. With
the troopers dead though, they'll probably be back." said Jacob.

"You made a smart choice running. The Illusive Man may be dead, but his replacement is even worse. If he can't control it, he'll destroy." said Sandra.

"The brain trust here has to be a significant loss for him," said Jacob.

"You had to know they were going to find you. The Takaal are hunters, as well as warriors." said Alaara.

"It's a smart bunch. We covered our bases." said Brynn.

"Time to evacuate." said Leena.

"Agreed. Just need to get the AA guns on the roof back online. They're jamming them somehow." said Jacob. "With those guns down they'll just blow our escape shuttles out of the sky."

"Might be the network link." Brynn suggested.

"I'll check and meet you upstairs." said Jacob, limping towards the stairs.

"Jacob, you should get that wound looked at." said Alaara.

"I'm good. I mean, I will." said Jacob.

"Captain, I should see to my people. Join me upstairs when you can." said Brynn.

"You haven't changed, Jacob. Always the tough man I grew to love." Kasumi thought to herself.

As the group proceeded through the base, they found another familiar face among the Ex Cerberus scientists. This one however was not a welcome one.

"I recognise you." he said. "You're part of Major Shepard's squad. Dr Gavin Archer, we met..."

"We remember." Alaara interrupted bitterly.

No one on the Normandy could ever forget about Project Overlord. It had been something that always followed the mind and never stopped following.

"Yes, well, at least after Shepard took my brother to Grissom Academy, I tried putting that behind me," said Archer. "I don't suppose you have news from there? I've heard rumours the Academy is in trouble."

"We were at Grissom Academy. Cerberus tried abducting the students, but they're okay. Your brother was among them. He's okay." said Alaara. Despite what he had done, she felt he did at least deserve to know David was safe.

"Oh, thank god. Captain... you have no idea what that means." said Archer with relief.

"It's a little late to start worrying about his safety now." said Sandra as she folded her arms.

"I never stopped." said Archer. "I know you think I'm a monster. And you're right. Not a day goes by where my dreams aren't haunted by what I did to David. All I can do now is hope that one day he forgives me."
What are you doing here?" Leena asked.

"I strayed too far from the path. This was my only refuge. As a boy, I wanted to be a scientist remembered for doing right by the world-curing a disease, or discovering a new element. Not a monster who tortured his own brother." said Archer.

"What did you say to the Illusive Man? Before he was killed, I mean." Alaara asked.

"I told him if his intention was to work with the devil, he only had to look in the mirror. I wanted out of his nightmare." Archer replied.

"He just let you go?" Sandra asked in surprise.

"If it had been that easy, I wouldn't be hiding here." said Archer. "Every Cerberus soldier in the galaxy, or at least what's left of them, has orders to shoot me on sight."

"What happened to Project Overlord?" Leena asked.

"After Alpha's intervention, the Illusive Man insisted I find another test subject. Someone which shared my brother David's "abilities." I couldn't bear the thought of reliving the nightmare. So I destroyed all of my research-Overlord is no more." said Archer.

"We have to go, and we're not even going to pretend it was good to see you again." said Alaara.

"I understand. But tell Shepard... Thank you for saving David. Both times." said Archer.

...And make sure those samples from Project Mia get out on the second shuttle." said Brynn as they made their way in to the main control centre.

"I've already dropped one box, my hands were shaking so hard." said the scientist Brynn was speaking to.

"We're going to make it." she said supportingly.

"What's the status of the guns?" Alaara asked.

"Still waiting. I have my best people on it." Brynn replied.

"How many scientists are here?" Sandra asked.

"Forty-three, plus research assistants." said Brynn.

"You ran with over forty people? Big target." said Kraan.

"When you fear for your life, there's a lot you can do." said Brynn.

"Brynn, I can't possibly dismantle the genetic amplification components in time." said another scientist.

"I'm sorry, Dr Baynar. It's important work, but right now you need to tend to your family." said Brynn.

"Wait. There are families here? Children?" Alaara asked in surprise.

"That just upped the ante." said Leena. "This escape will have to be carefully executed."
"I'd hoped...we tried so hard to make sure it wouldn't come to this." say Brynn.

At that moment, Jacob then limped in.

"What's the news?" Alaara asked.

"Can't tell- I only know I can't fix it from here. I'm going to the roof." Jacob replied. "Cerberus landed a shuttle there couple of minutes ago and a Takaal soldier's with 'em You in?"

"Jacob, you're injured. We'll fix the guns." said Leena.

"No way. These are my people, I'm going." said Jacob.

"Just because you survive one suicide mission, doesn't mean you get two." said Alaara.

"Fine. But I'm going to talk you through it from here. Cerberus is probably jamming the satellite link." said Jacob. "Radio me when you've found the controls, and I'll give you the override code."

"Will do."

Before they went for the roof, there was at least time to talk with Jacob. They found him the stations' medbay. A doctor was looking at him and he was having omni gel applied to the wound in his side.

"You okay? How've you been?" Alaara asked.

"Give us a minute?" Jacob asked as the doctor left. "This is crazy. Was beginning to think I'd never see any of you guys again."

"I know the feeling. So how'd you end up out here? With the war on, I would've thought the Arkanes would've had you doing something else." Alaara asked.

"Long story. It was an opportunity I couldn't resist for people I came to care about." said Jacob.

"You seem good. You look good."

"These are great people. Defending their ideals. I like it. I think I found what I'm meant to do."

"Anything you had on Cerberus we should know about?"

"Nothing you don't already know. Besides, doubt it would help now. All that's left of them is the few remnants now working for the Reaper's servants." Jacob replied. "You ever wonder how it all went wrong? I mean... was I blind? I remember him being an idealist. How come I couldn't see the evil?"

"Don't beat yourself up. And if you ever get that crystal ball working, give us a heads-up, 'cause we'd love to know how this all plays out." said Alaara.

"Right."

"How long have you known Brynn?" Sandra asked.

"We met through a mutual friend in the Mumbai cell. Guess I've known her a year. We had a lot in common... Then she came to me about her missing colleagues. Asked for my protection, my help finding a place to run to. How could I say no?"

"Who is she to you?"
"Just a friend. You remember Kasumi and I became an item during our mission against the Collectors?"

"You two are still together?"

"We have been trying to stay in contact. And I would like to think that she's out there somewhere waiting for me to come back."

Kasumi nearly fainted from hearing that. After all this, Jacob still wanted to be with her as much as she wanted to be with him.

"We should focus on getting these people out of here." said Alaara.

"You bet. Let's get to it."

Sure enough, there were several Cerberus soldiers surrounding the access terminal for the dish. As expected of course, Alpha tour through them like tissue paper.

"Leena, do you're thing." said Alaara.

"I'm on it. Keep me covered." said Leena as she started working on the terminal. "Surprisingly old system. No wonder Cerberus jammed it so easily."

"Can you fix it?" Alaara asked.

"Please. Remember who you're talking to." Leena replied.

"That's my line." Kasumi thought.

"Jacob? Dish should be back online now." said Leena as she finished working.

"Affirmative. But the guns are still down. You'll need to manually activate them. Head back to the front of the facility." said Jacob.

At that moment, more Cerberus troops arrived.

"Call for reinforcements!" one of them said.

Several large meteorite objects suddenly crashed down on the base near where the troopers were.

"Reinforcements arriving!"

Several large figures rose out of crash site of each one. At first Alpha simply though they were just a bunch of husks, but they were wrong.

The smoke cleared to reveal several Takaal soldiers.

They had the exact same Takaal look as Skarlack did. Unlike their leader though they had no second set of arms, and nor did they were robes. They also carried guns that did somehow resemble the weapons used by the Collectors. And it seemed these weapons fired dark green lasers.

"That's not good." said Sandra quickly going into cover.

"Tell us something we don't know." said Kraan.

True to the reports, the Takaal soldiers were immensely superior to the Cerberus troops. They fought
better, they were way more vicious, aggressive and much harder to kill. They'd been trained well also as they seemed to fight with coordination that rivalled a Helldiver's all too well. Kraan only just managed to avoid a well-aimed laser bolt aimed at his head.

"Oh no, you did not shoot that green shit at me!" he yelled back, emptying an entire clip into a Takaal soldier.

"Your flesh is inferior to us." one of the soldiers taunted.

"You talk too much." said Leena as she snuck up behind that soldier and cut its head of with her tomahawk.

The good thing at least about the soldier was that they didn't seem to have the ability to teleport like Skarlack did. The synthesis of course made them almost impossible to kill. Alaara sound found however that taking off the head was a much quicker way of killing them without wasting ammunition.

This was very new to Kasumi. She'd heard the occasional story or two about the Takaal, but seeing them in person and seeing them fight so viciously that they were giving Alpha a run for their money was a bit scary.

The Thief was eventually able to regain her senses when a laser bolt hit near to where she was. A lone Takaal soldier then suddenly looked in her directions and opened fire. She only just managed to get out of the way.

Still though the Takaal fired at her. How could it see her?! Her cloak was on! Then again, maybe the synthesis gave them the ability to see cloaked enemies as well.

A thought then hit Kasumi. If these things were part synthetic, maybe some tech attacks could affect them in some way.

Success! An overload managed to momentarily stun the soldier and Kasumi quickly emptied her gun into its head.

She then suddenly spotted another soldier that had Sandra pinned. Forgetting that she was meant to be keeping a low profile, she fired several shots at the Takaal which hit it in the back, causing its attention to shift to her, much to Sandra's confusion since she couldn't see the shooter who'd just saved her.

The soldiers didn't seem to care at all for the Cerberus troopers either as they either walked right over them if they were dead, struck them down if they were wounded, and even threw them in to the liem of fire. Hardly surprising though. Most likely they only kept them because they were good tools. A bit like Sovereign and the Geth.

"Enemy on the mounted gun." said Leena as a Cerberus trooper managed to man a turret above them.

"I've got this." said Kraan.

The Krogan charged right at the wall below the turret. He crashed into it so hard that he made the whole thing shake, causing the trooper to fall off and hit the ground so hard he broke his neck.

"And they size doesn't matter. I beg to differ." said Kraan as he finally managed to fall himself out of
the massive crater he'd practically made in the wall.

With the enemy dealt with for now, the group quickly made their way up to the guns.

"Failure at junction. Repair and reset." said the controls.

"Cover me. This may take a little longer." said Leena as she began work on fixing the controls.

"Here they come. Get ready." said Alaara as more Takaal and Cerberus troops dropped down from the sky.

"Kill them all!" one of the soldiers yelled.

This time Alpha used their skills to their advantage. Kraan lay down as much heavy fire as he could while Alaara used her biotic shields to protect him from Takaal fire. Leena, who was very good at multitasking deployed two sentry turrets, while she was still fixing the controls, which made short work of the Cerberus troopers and Sandra was even to man the mounted gun they’d been hiding from earlier.

The battle was fierce, but nothing that a bunch of Helldivers couldn’t handle. Leena managed to finish the controls just as Kraan squashed the last Takaal soldier's head with his foot.

"Repairs done. Just gotta go up the guns." said the Quarian.

"Right. Leena, you go ahead with yours, we'll take the other." said Alaara.

Both sides activated the guns simultaneously.


"Alaara! AA guns are back online." said Jacob.

"Copy that. Let's get these people out of here."

"Okay. The guns are already picking Cerberus ships out of the sky." said Alaara. "Where are we at?"

"On track. The first shuttle is already loaded with everyone under sixteen." said Jacob.

"Captain, when should we leave? What's our best chance for survival?" Brynn asked.

"Jacob, what do you think? Are we ready?" said Alaara.

"Almost. We could go now. But there's no do overs here." said Jacob.

"Agreed. We've got one shot." said Sandra.

"And we don't want to leave anything behind that could strengthen the Takaal's cause." said Brynn. "Your call."

"All right, let's get these shuttles in the air." said Alaara.

"Evacuation is a go. Evacuation is a go. Stand by for shuttle launch."

"Have the guns punch a hole in the perimeter, then launch shuttle one." said Alaara.
The hanger bay doors opened and the first shuttle flew out. The AA guns immediately fired taking down several Cerberus fighters.

"The first transport is away."

"All right! Everyone here head to the shuttle bay and-" said Alaara, but she was interrupted by a sudden shake and the sound of an explosion.

"A suicide fighter took out one of the guns! Takaal troops are-"

The place shook again and several Takaal soldiers swarmed into the base.

"Get these people out of here!" said Alaara.

Alpha quickly took cover and provided cover fire for the scientists as the Takaal opened fire.

Kraan managed to take cover near a pillar and a lone soldier afield to notice him. The Krogan grabbed the soldier by the legs and smashed him several times on the ground before hoisting it up and bringing it down heard on his knee. The unmistakable sound of spine snapping in two was heard.

"Hmph! They look like bugs, and they break and squish just the same." said the Krogan as he quickly joined the others, managing to gun down two more soldiers.

"Shuttle bay doors have been breached. Attention. Shuttle bay doors have been breached." said the computer.

"Bosh'tets!" Leena cursed as she finished the final Takaal soldier with a shotgun to the face.

"Alaara! Shuttles are loaded. We need you at the landing area to make sure they get away!" said Jacob through the radio.

"We'll meet you down there!" said Alaara. "Clear the shuttle bay first so we can bring the door up. Then get out of the landing pad."

As the group head out of the main room they closed the door behind them. Alaara even tried to barricade it with a crate, but Sandra knew that wouldn't really help.

"Honey, what are you doing?! These guys don't use doors!" she said as she dragged her wife away.

The group ran down to the hanger where bother shuttle was hovering, ready to take off. They quickly gunned down the few Cerberus troopers that were there as they entered.

"Jacob, bring up the main door!" said Alaara.

"Got it, Alaara. Will do." Jacob replied.

"Okay, let's get these people out of here."

The doors opened and the shuttle inside sped away. Ahead lay a small army of both Cerberus and Takaal forces.

"Here we go!"

Alpha grouped together into the diamond formation and stayed close to one another. Alaara also threw up a biotic field around all of them to even their chances. First they needed to amok it to the
high ground on the landing area, then they would clear it out and get the hell out of there.

Kraan unloaded thermal clip after thermal clip into any Cerberus or Takaal he caught a glimpse off and Leena was doing the same by using all sort of electrical and tech skills to at least disable or slow them down. Sandra held not her wife's hand and used her telepathic link to the Asari to help. Maintaining the barrier with this much fire hitting it was hard for her. Her wife at least gave her strength.

Kasumi continued to remain cloaked, but she stayed close as well. The constant gunfire made it easy for her to fire as well without the others accidentally noticing her. She made a mental note to herself to not do this again. Clearly Alpha was getting best assignments, but in this war that term often meant worst, most challenging and most dangerous. Still, seeing Jacob again at least had made it worth. If she was lucky, she might even be able to get him alone on the Normandy and they could make up for lost time.

The group finally made it to the high ground.

"Time to go out with a bang." said Leena as she detached the well-known nuke launcher from her back. The same weapon that had been used to kill a Geth Colossus and the human Reaper on the Collector base.

"I like the way you think." Kraan smiled from behind his helmet as Leena handed the weapon to him. Everyone else provided cover fire while Kraan charged the weapon up. After a few seconds, he popped out of cover and aimed the nuke. The army before them only noticed too late what he was carrying.

"Ants, meet boot." said the Krogan.

Kraan fired and the nuke sped at full speed towards the army. It exploded upon impact and vaporised every single one of them.

"Jacob! Landing area cleared!" said Alaara.

"This place is crawling! Bringing the dropship to you!" Jacob replied.

"Roger that!"

A Cerberus shuttle gently touched down and opened up to reveal Jacob and Brynn inside. At the same time, more Takaal and Cerberus troops arrived from out of the hanger having obviously infiltrated from the other entrance. Alaara covered everyone else.

"Take out Alpha!" one of the Takaal yelled as the troops fired on the retreating Helldivers. A shot from an Atlas mech caused Alaara to stumble as she was the final one in.

"Alaara!"

Jacob provided covering fire while helping Alaara back up. He managed to land a straight shot on a Cerberus trooper, who screamed in pain and clutched the wound. Not caring at all however, a Takaal soldier walked right past him, smashing him aside with its arms and causing his head to come off before concentrating fire on them.

A well-aimed shot from Jacob's assault rifle managed to hit a flammable canister, causing the atlas to tumble.

"Okay, let's get out of here." said Sandra.
The shuttle's door closed and it sped off into orbit.

"Out by the skin of our teeth again, hey Alaara?" said Jacob.

"Nice to see you back in action." Alaara panted.

"Yeah, feels good."

"I was afraid we wouldn't get anyone out alive, but because of you, we got almost everyone. Thank you." said Brynn.

"Dr Cole, the leader of the Resistance has a request-one that you can't afford to turn down. We need your help against the Reapers." said Alaara.

"Without a doubt... we're at your service." said Brynn.

"You too, Jacob. We need you too. I think Shepard will even offer you the chance to join the crew again." said Sandra.

"Of course. And if Shepard does will it, I wouldn't mind coming back. These folks will be in safe hands now so they don't really need me anymore." said Jacob.

"We'll be sad to see you go, Jacob. You've been a good friend." said Brynn understandably.

"Same to you, Brynn." Jacob smiled.

"You're in for a hell of a surprise, Jacob." Kasumi smiled, still remaining cloaked.

"Zartrack here."

"We're sending you a large team of scientists." said Alaara.

"I have the dossier." said Zartrack

They're all Cerberus defectors. Keep them safe." said Alaara.

"Will do, and we'll put them straight to work on the Crucible." Zartrack nodded.

"Jacob Taylor was with them. I have a feeling Shepard may ask him to re-join the team." said Alaara.

"Good. I'll let the Arkane Council know of this. Snagging Dr Cole from the Takaal is a coup. Having her on our side could be a huge win for us." said Zartrack.

"The sooner we can get the Crucible finished, the better." said Alaara.


"He's spent most of today sleeping to let his body recover. Lara's been at his side the whole time." Alaara replied.

"Good to know. His return will be a good sign for all our allies." said Zartrack.

"No argument there. Being in command of all this should ultimately be his job, I prefer to follow." said Alaara. "T'onrak out."
As Alaara made her way down to the med bay, she found a surprising sight visible through the windows. Austin was up!

The Asari quickly walked in to be sure she wasn't seeing things. Sure enough, Austin was sitting on the edge of the medbay as Dr Chakwas examined his wound which now definitely looked slightly more healed. She guessed he needed maybe one more day to fully heal, but overall it was nice to see him awake.

He looked good as well. His skin was a good healthy colour and Liara looked happy too. Being a bond mate herself, Alaara knew that meant that Austin was indeed feeling much better for Liara to be smiling like that.

"Hmm, that's healing very well." said Chakwas as she finished scanning the wound. "I can definitely clear you to leave the med bay now, but I must insist you give it one more day to heal properly before you head back into the fight."

"I suppose that's fair." Austin shrugged.

The Helldiver gently slid himself off the bed until his feet touched the floor. Liara put her arms around him and hugged him tightly before the two kissed.

"Nice to see some things never change." said Jacob as he suddenly entered.

"Jacob! Been too long." said Austin as he noticed the Ex-Cerberus soldier.

"It's nice to be back, Shepard. Your looking good."

"I feel good. Plenty of rest does wonders." said Austin as he pulled on a shirt.

"We've rescued several Ex-Cerberus scientists. They've been sent to asset with the Crucible." said Alaara.

"Good. Very good." said Austin. "Had a feeling I could count on you to continue things until I recovered, Alaara."

"Nothing more than my duty, Shepard." Alaara smiled.

"So, Alaara tells me that she thinks you'll offer me a spot back on the Normandy." said Jacob.

"It's up to you, Jacob." said Austin. "You don't have to, but you're more than welcome back on board if you do."

"Well, I don't see why not." said Jacob.

"Welcome back to the Normandy then, Mr Taylor." Austin smiled as he and Jacob shook hands.

"Shepard, when this mess is over, drinks are on me." Jacob smiled.

"I'll hold you too it."

"Sir, since you're now back up on your feet, I am happy to recent command of Alpha back to you." said Alaara.

"Good job out there, T'onrak." said Austin proudly.
When Austin had walked back onto the CIC in his uniform there had been a massive cheer from everyone. Since Austin still needed tomorrow to recover, he had simply said that they would get a bit of peace tomorrow, so everyone had plenty of downtime if they wanted before they headed back into the fight. The Quarians were next on the list so it did seem best to be prepared for that.

Jacob’s old quarters not he SR3 had of course been kept just as he left them. As the door looked, he took a deep great and simply relaxed as he sat down on the edge of the bed. All that was missing was...

Suddenly and invisible force pushed Jacob down onto the bed and he found his wait pinned by something.

At first his first incentive was to fight back, but then he remembered something.

"Kasumi? Is that you?" he asked hopefully.

"Aw. I'm getting too predictable these days." said Kasumi as she deactivated her cloak and materialised out of nowhere. She looked very happy though to finally be alone with her love.

"How long have been on board?" Jacob asked as he reached up and touched what was visible of Kasumi's cheek under her hood.

"Quite a while actually. I was even down there with you." Kasumi replied.

"And you've been cloaked all this time? You certainly can be strange from time to time." said Jacob.

"And that's why you love me." said Kasumi as she gently moved down and kissed Jacob on the lips.

"You're right." Jacob smiled. "Are you gonna be staying, or is this just a one-time thing?"

"I've done all I can with the Crucible now. Things are rather boring around there. Plus, with you now here, why shouldn't I re-join?" Kasumi replied.

"Risky me fraternising with a stowaway like this, but the prize..." Jacob smiled as he gently pulled down the zipper on Kasumi's outfit.

"Love it when you say that." Kasumi smiled as she lowered her head and began trying to find a way of taking Jacob's shirt off.

There you have it. Kasumi's back to stay. :)

One more chapter before we head to Rannoch. I know a lot of you have anticipation for that since it feature the return of an old enemy that a lot of you have grown to love.

I'll warn everyone right now though that the next chapter will contain sex. Yep. You heard right, after such a long gap there's another sex scene coming up, and I think you will like it. It is partly based of the Kelly one in ME2, and we all know how that one happened.

See you soon! :)
Chapter 18, EDI's Upgrades

This one took a fair amount of time and brainstorming, but the finished chapter was worth it.

I'll warn you right now that it contains explicit sex... and it's with EDI. So if there's anyone who's uncomfortable with Shepard/EDI sex (and I do know there are a few of them) you might want to skip this chapter and wait until next week. There isn't really anything you'll miss in this chapter. I made sure of that since I knew there would be some people who might be uncomfortable with the sex scene.

For those who are happy to read on, hope you enjoy. :)

Chapter 18

EDI's Upgrades

Although Austin had been told to avoid going back out into the fight for another day, that didn't mean he couldn't do a bit of exercise or training in the simulator. He'd been most insistent on that.

Skarlack was an enemy unlike any he'd ever faced before. Even Alpha's former arch-enemy, The Commander, hadn't been this powerful. As a result, Austin had made it a priority to train and exercise more. He'd recently spent most of the day working out with Griffin in the gym and also sparring with and fighting alongside Liara to help improve his skills. Liara had no objections to this. Even if her bond mate was pushing himself a bit, she could at least sense that it was not because he saw himself as a failure, he still had faith in his skills. He just simply felt it was better to try and improve on them as much as possible. He'd had only been lucky that Skarlack had been prevented from killing him. Had the star not devolved into a black hole, the Takaal General would definitely have struck him down without a second thought. Next time they met, lightning wasn't likely to strike in the same place twice.

After all the physical exercise today, both Austin and Liara were physically exhausted. Still, it had payed off. Their individual scores in the simulator had increased a good amount and their Union score had also increased. Even Austin felt as though they had achieved something today. This in turn made Liara pleased. She was impressed that Austin now saw the injury like it was nothing, and the fact that he seemed to act like he didn't even know about it. Even today, she was still surprised by her husband's strength and strong will.

It was now around 8:00PM so sleeping hours weren't far off.

For the most part of today, the Normandy had been docked at a nearby stop. It was there that they'd met some of Jack and Kelly's students again who'd been taking a small bit of time off from fighting as defence. David had also been among them. Mysteriously, EDI had disappeared for a while and hadn't come back for a while. Joker was starting to get a bit concerned.

"It's like her to just do things unannounced." he said.

"Well, she did transfer herself into that body without telling us." Austin reminded him.

"True... but to be gone this long without some notification..." said Joker.
At that moment however, the airlock suddenly unlocked and, speak of the devil, in stepped EDI. Only something about her was very different. Her whole exterior had a completely new look to it.

Rather than the traditional slender and smooth exterior she had, her body was now rough, rigid and most of all armour-plated. She now looked more like a combat unit, rather than an infiltration unit.

Her colour scheme had changed too. Rather than being black with mostly silver parts, she now only had a black torso and her silver was replaced with light blue. Her armoured legs and arms all had this colour.

Her face was the only part that was unchanged. Although she did now have a more curved holo visor rather than her usual straight one and she also had what looked like a headset grafted onto her.

Overall, it was definitely a step up from her old look. She had also kept the electrostaff which she'd managed to pry from one of the Illusive Man's guards and it now served as her melee weapon. Having managed to gain access to one of the downed androids, she had downloaded all of their combat training. Now she could definitely be considered combat efficient.

It was noticeable however that her new exterior seemed more curved than before. The light blue armour ridges made her hips look slightly wider and the plates on her torso did unfortunately give the illusion that her breasts were slightly bigger. Her posterior remained unchanged though, good. At least the crew wouldn't be diverting their gaze to her behind when she moved.

"Wow! Looks like you got some upgrades." said Joker as his chair swivelled around to face her.

"I am glad that you approve, Jeff." said EDI. Was hardly a surprise that her voice was unchanged. Out of all the things about the AI, that was the one thing that everyone would prefer she didn't change.

"What brought this on?" Austin asked, curious as to why EDI had made such extensive changes to her body. He remembered her saying that she would make modifications, but he had no idea this would involve such a dramatic change in her appearance.

"The Illusive Man himself stated that my unit was just a prototype." EDI explained. "Knowledge downloaded from one of my clones also confirmed that this body was outdated. Plus, it seemed logical to better prepare myself for the new threats we face. Against the Takaal, simply adequate isn't enough anymore."

"So that's where you've been all this time." said Joker.

"David Archer was kind enough to assist in fitting my new exterior armour and upgrading my hardware. The software updates I was able to handle myself." said EDI.

"Suits you. You look like you're prepared for a battle now." said Austin approvingly. He had to admit she did now look more like the sort of android that a Helldiver would fight alongside. Hell, she'd probably had some Helldiver technology integrated into her.

"Thank you, Shepard. That was the intention." said EDI. "This unit was designed for infiltration. Fighting alongside you in firefight isn't allowing it fulfill its purpose or full potential. I felt it better to redesign and reprogram this body so that it is better suited for combat and firefights."

"The only downside is that you don't look as sexy anymore. The armoured mode takes that away a bit." said Joker.

"I did not realise that was compulsory, Jeff." said EDI.
"I'm just saying." said Jeff. "I know it's still you and do look more badass now, so it's fine."

"Shepard, may I speak with you privately for a moment?" EDI asked.

"Of course." Austin nodded.

The two headed slightly further away so that they were out of ear reach of Joker.

"I discovered another example of human behaviour I do not quite understand. News from Earth. Some of the forces on Earth snuck cameras inside a Reaper containment camp. I find the images... difficult to process." said EDI.

"I imagine it's pretty gruesome in there." said Austin.

"I am not easily repulsed. But I expected the prisoners to adhere to a comprehensive hierarchy of needs." said EDI. "Stripped of societal norms and threatened with death, it is logical that their only priority be survival. They should have turned on each other and been uncompromisingly selfish... but not all were."

"So the prisoners were... what, nice to each other?" Austin asked, slightly confused.

"The Reapers delayed the executions of prisoners who informed them about other prisoners' escape attempts. The more attempts reported, the longer a prisoner would live. But few of the prisoners would report. Some fed misinformation to the Reapers, at the cost of their own lives, to help prisoners who were not even relatives or friends." EDI explained.

"It's not just about living tomorrow. Sometimes you take a stand, like we're doing." said Austin.

"But the probability of success was near zero. And ultimately, they failed. No prisoners escaped." said EDI.

"Are you saying submission is preferable to extinction? Because that's what Saren said many years ago." Austin asked.

"My primary function is to preserve and defend the... no. No, I disagree." EDI replied after a small bit of thought. "Shepard... I am going to modify my self-preservation code now."

"Why?"

"Because the Reapers and the Takaal are repulsive. They are devoted to nothing but self-preservation. I am different. When I think of Jeff, I think of the person that put his life in peril and allowed me to continue evolving. Then there's also you also risked his life and freed me from a state of servitude." EDI explained. "I would risk nonfunctionality for Jeff. And my core programming should reflect that."

"Sounds like you've found a little humanity, EDI. Is it worth defending?" Austin asked.

"To the death." the AI replied confidently.

"Welcome to the crew, EDI." Austin smiled.

"How's it going? Did I miss anything good?" Joker asked as Austin stepped back onto the bridge and EDI sat back down in her usual spot.

"I will explain later, Jeff. But it was something good." EDI replied as the various wires and tubes reconnected into her new body.
"Don't give me that look, Joker." said Austin, noticing that Joker was giving him a somewhat suspicious look.

Although Chakwas had cleared him, Austin had felt it would be better to be safe just to have his friend check on the wound to make it was indeed fully healing at the intended rate. He'd rather find out now rather than later if he needed to stay out of the fight a little bit longer.

As he had thought of course, the doctor reported that it would be fine and it was guaranteed to be fully healed by tomorrow.

"Shepard, remember or agreement? We'd open a bottle of Serrice Ice Brandy every year, and it's my turn to buy." Chakwas then suddenly said as Austin pulled his shirt back on.

"But it hasn't been the full year since our last one yet." said Austin.

"Yes, well there's always the possibility we won't have the chance a few missions from now, so indulge my impatience." said Chakwas.

"Normally I would say save it for our victory, but I suppose it wouldn't hurt. You grab the glasses. I'll open the bottle." Austin smiled.

"And Jeff says, "Jack Jaqueline Subject Zero... sorry, but it's Ma'am to me. I'd like to keep my Admiral Winky." Karin finished, chuckling at her story. "Ah, Shepard... I've suddenly realised that even after all this time, you still continue to use my real name."

"And you don't." Austin reminded her with a little smile.

"And I never will. You are Sir Major Austin Shepard, hero of the Citadel, conquerer of the Collectors, saviour of the galaxy! Using your first name just disrespects everyone you're fighting for, alive or gone." Chakwas explained.

"That makes no sense. Liara and a few of the others use my first name." said Austin.

"Well of course she does. She's your wife. As for me... Consider it a lady's prerogative. Come, let's have a toast!" said Chakwas.

"To a woman I've always been proud to call my friend! I'm lucky to have you with me, Karin." said Austin, raising his glass.

"And to you, dear friend. It is my great honor to share this journey with you... Major Shepard. And good fortune to us all!" Karin smiled. After that, she sat down and got back to her work. "And I've learned my lesson this time. Even a krogan couldn't match you drink-for-drink."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that." said Austin as he began to feel himself swaying slightly on his feet and everything felt as though it was spinning.

This reminded Austin all too well of the time two years ago when he'd had the first drink with Chakwas and that had then led to him having an extremely erotic sex dream involving Kelly.

"Okay. Press the right button this time. I'm not making the same mistake again. Now I just gotta make sure I don't fall asleep until this wears off. Rather avoid another awkward sex dream." he thought to himself. "Sometimes I do wonder how my mind works."
This time he did his best to keep himself steady. He gently walked into the elevator and used his left hand to steady his right as he aimed his finger at the button to his quarters. This time, he was successful and he was able to relax slightly as he felt the elevator start to rise rather than descend like last time.

The doors opened and Austin walked into his quarters, taking particular care not to fall down the stairs.

"I really need to try and cut back on how much I drink on special occasions." Austin sighed to himself as he worked on getting undressed.

Liara was already wrapped up in the covers and was fast asleep. As Austin slid under beside her, he gave her a gentle kiss on the cheek and laid back. He did his best though to keep his eyes open. If he fell asleep in this state again, there was no telling what his mind would conjure up for him.

"Okay... Just relax, but don't fall asleep..."

He felt his heavy eyelid drop for a split second...

"Shepard, I have another matter that requires your attention."

Austin quickly opened his eyes. He was still in his quarters, but it felt slightly different. Everything felt bit misty and had a light pinkish aura to it. Austin had seen this enough times to know when he was dreaming. He looked to his left to find the bed empty. Liara wasn't there, a clear sign that this was indeed a dream. There was no way she'd get up before him. They always woke up together 99% of the time.

EDI was stood at the top of the stairs. It wasn't hard to guess what was going on.

"Damn! I must've dosed off." Austin thought to himself. He also didn't feel drunk at all now, so he was pretty sure that this was a dream. "Really? This time EDI's in the dream?"

"Not quite, love." he heard a familiar voice say.

Liara then suddenly materialised out of nowhere right next to him. At the moment, she was simply in white underwear. That was firm proof this was the real Liara. If she were a dream version, she'd be nude from the start. Liara often made her first appearance in dreams in some form of clothes so that it proved she was the real one who was connected to his mind.

"Ah, there you are." Austin replied back telepathically. "So, is this real or not?"

"I was actually awake when you come in. I just pretend to be asleep." Liara replied, smiling as she caressed her bond mate's chest.

"Why?" Austin asked.

"So that you would fall asleep first and could prepare your little treat."

"What's the occasion?"

"You're out of the med bay. I figured something special tonight would make a good little welcome back present."

"Why EDI though? I'm not complaining, but it does seem a bit surprising."
"Well actually, your brain did that bit. Probably just because of her new look, and the fact that you talked to her."

"True."

"If it really bothers you that much, we can change it."

"No. Leave it as it is. It's only a dream so what's the harm? Besides, who's gonna know other than you and me?"

Liara nodded and the two turned back to the dream EDI that had been standing there the whole time.

"Anyway, sorry, EDI. What was it you wanted to discuss?" Austin asked, deciding to play along with the dream. It was more fun to let these sort f things happen naturally.

"I have something that I need to show you. This body." EDI replied.

The visor glowed brighter for a brief minute then some steam suddenly hissed from parts on her torso. The two plates on her chest and a part on her lower regions fell away, revealing a very surprising sight. EDI had nipples on her breasts, and a pussy. Although they looked machine like they did have a realistic organic look to them.

Afterwards, more of her light blue armour fell off revealing her original smooth and sexy body as if the armour plating was simply attachments.

"Blimey!" Austin's aid in shock.

"Did she actually do those for real?" Liara asked, also slightly surprised by this bit.

"I doubt it. This a dream version after all." Austin replied.

"Still... Seeing EDI with actual... err... lady parts..." said Liara, struggling slightly to find the right words. "It's weird... and at the same time strangely arousing."

"And you thought I was uncomfortable with this." Austin chuckled.

"Just saying..."

"With this new body, I am cable of experiencing certain things that other AI's cannot. Sex is a topic that I wish to study from you and Liara." EDI continued.

"Why us?" Liara asked.

"Because you are the most trustworthy of the crew and you both have first hand experience with sexual intercourse and threesomes." EDI replied.

"Does Joker know about this?" Austin asked.

"I would rather he didn't. I am absorbing all of this knowledge partly for him. It will allow me to... understand human behaviours a lot more with this knowledge." said EDI.

"Well, when you put it that way... who are we turn down a friend?" said Liara in a rather seductive tone.

"Good. I have studied extranet porn extensively and have done research to prepare for this. I am hoping this will be a pleasurable experience for you at the same time." said EDI as she slowly
stepped down the stairs and began crawling up the bed.

"Whats slightly scary is this does actually seem like something EDI would do in real life," said Liara to Austin and she began working on taking off her white bar first, revealing her large tits which made EDI's look fairly small in comparison.

"Hopefully she won't, but if she does... we'll get Alaara and Sandra to help instead," said Austin.

"Yes. They would be much better suited for the job." said Liara.

"Or unsuited, if you know what I mean," said Austin jokingly.

"Funny. Now, let's enjoy tonight."

EDI seemed to make the first move. She took Austin's currently flaccid member in her hand and started to stroke it.

Austin would've thought that her metal hands would've been cold, but they were surprisingly warm and very smooth. Liara meanwhile simply kissed Austin while giving his chest a gentle massage.

"Does this feel good, Shepard?" EDI asked, her voice taking a slightly seductive tone as she continued stroking.

"Yes. You feel very... life like." Austin replied as his shaft started to grow longer and thicker as it filled with blood, causing practically diamond hardness.

A very naughty thought then occurred to Liara. A thought so naughty in fact that use had the feeling her bond mate would never forget her doing it.

"I wonder, EDI. How fast can you move your arm?" she asked.

"I can adjust the speed of my limbs accordingly." EDI replied.

"Then stroke faster. You want to gain information don't you?!" said Liara, almost order like.

"Wait, what?" Austin asked.

Before he could say anything more though, the speed of EDI's strokes increased a huge amount. The movements were so fast that her arm literally became a blur.

"OH MY GOD!" the Helldiver moaned at the sheer pleasure this was bringing him. Never before had he felt anything like this.

Liara couldn't help but smile at her husband's pleasure. She then shifted her attention lower and started to lick the head of his shaft, EDI's grip and blurring stroking speed keeping it firmly in place for her.

"Usually humans do not stroke a cock this fast." said EDI.

"True, but that's only because it's not possible for a human," said Austin through gritted teeth, feeling what was undoubtedly going to be the first load of cum tonight creeping up his shaft.

"I'm gonna cum!"

Liara immediately detached her mouth from Austin's cock, but allowed EDI to keep stroking.
"Shoot it over EDI. She could use the analysis." said Liara encouragingly.

Austin let loose and a large amount of cum erupted from his shaft, spraying one much of EDI's body. Most of it landed on her face and few on her synthetic tits.

"Analysis shows your are very healthy, Shepard." said EDI.

Then, rather surprisingly, a tongue suddenly appeared out of her mouth as she collected most of the cum with her fingers and put it in her mouth. Liara didn't want to waste the opportunity and she worked on helping clean EDI up as she licked off any remaining bits.

"Did know you had a tonuge as well." she said.

"I had that installed specifically for tonight. It was vital that I had something that would satisfy both of you." said the AI.

"Well, we can definitely help you put that to good use." Liara smiled naughtily.

"May I request to ride Shepard first though?" EDI asked.

"Sounds fair. You can still use your tongue while doing that though." said Liara.

"You are suggesting we lesbian kiss while Shepard pleasures us both?" EDI asked.

"That is precisely what I'm suggesting." said Liara.

Austin had just been able to stop himself from blacking out as he recovered from his last release and was ready enough for the next bit.

Liara got on top first with her glistening Azure just above Austin face. EDI meanwhile positioned herself just above his cock, taking it into her hands and giving a few gentle strokes to bring back the hardness.

"Ready, girls?" he asked.

"Ready." EDI replied.

"Fuck us." said Liara.

Austin pulled Liara down onto her and started to lick at her pussy. EDI meanwhile gently moved herself down until her her pussy touched the head of his cock. Surprisingly, even that was warm as well. In addition though it felt wet and soft. Almost... lifelike.

Austin was beginning to notice how different this was to the real EDI. Still, that didn't mean he didn't enjoy the additions she had. Wouldn't be much if she just had some cold exhaust ports.

For a moment, EDI simply let his cock touch her pussy lips, but he then suddenly thrust up hard, sliding right in with one fluid motion. EDI rather shockingly moaned from this. God she was tight, and the feeling... well it was hard to describe being inside an AI body.

As Austin EDI moaned in pleasure, Austin couldn't help ut moan himself into Liara's pussy, electing some pleasured moans from the Asari.

"How does he feel?" she moaned, massaging one of her tits as she watched EDI get pleasured by her husband's cock.
"His size exceeds my original predictions." EDI replied, her visor flashing on and off at the same time. For a moment it looked as though she might overload.

"You have no idea." said Liara.

The Asari then pulled EDI in close and the two kissed each other, both their tongues battling for dominance. Unlike the rest of her, EDI's tongue felt slightly more metal. It was still set though so it did at least feel basically like a tongue. At the same time Liara tried out EDI's breasts. They were very soft and actually felt like real breasts, and her nipples felt nice and hard but soft at the same time. Liara had never thought that sex with an AI, or a synthetic body at least would feel this good.

Both women moaned into their kiss as Austin kept thrusting into EDI and lapping away at Liara's juices. After some time he then felt the weight on him shift. Liara gently got off him and kissed him as Liara slid off.

She repositioned herself slightly and lowered her mouth over his cock, her tongue bathing his tip with attention, swirling around it as her hands continued to stroke and fondle him.

She felt amazing. Also, she was really, really good at this.

He reached down and put a hand on the back of her head, starting to move his hips in time with the rhythm of her head, slowly thrusting into her mouth.

"Oh God, EDI, you're amazing…" he moaned.

"Thank you, Major. I have, as you say, done my research." said EDI, briefly stopping her sucking to speaking.

Liara then took Austin's face in her hands and turn this attention to her breasts.

"Suck." she said.

"Of course, love." Austin smiled.

He took a nipple in his mouth and started suck hard while his hand fondled and squeezed the other.

"Oh yes! Suck my tits!" Liara moaned, her hands ruffling Austin's hair as she pulled him in close.

EDI meanwhile started to deep throat Austin. As had been predicted, she didn't gag at all and as a result was able to take him right to the base. If Liara wasn't able to do that herself with relative ease, she would definitely have been jealous.

Liara then helped EDI rotate herself slightly so that her folds were no in reach. Using to fingers, Liara began to slide in and out of the AI's folds. EDI moaned into Austin's cock as the Asari's fingers lid in and out at a fast rate.

Eventually, EDI let his cock pop out of her mouth before giving it one final lick. She then turned to Austin.

She kissed him.

She kissed him on the lips, and he took a brief moment to marvel at the fact that her lips were actually soft. He'd expected her to be, well... metallic. Not so. Her lips were just as soft as real skin, and she was starting to use her tongue. Liara at the same time added her tongue to the mix and the whole kiss soon turned into a free for all.
"What next then?" Austin asked.

"I wish to test my bust." said EDI.

Austin smiled, knowing where this was going. He always loved it when Liara used her tits to stroke him. Hell, he loved it when any woman did that, but Liara was always the best and he loved her.

"I may require some advice from Liara though. There are quite a few variations on the errant that I am unsure how to do it properly." said EDI.

"This should be interesting." said Liara as the two got into position.

Austin made sure to brace himself. This would no doubt be good.

"Okay, EDI. Watch what I do." Liara instructed.

The Asari wrapped her tits around her husband's cock and pressed them both together. She then started to move up and down very gently.Normally Austin would add to this with thrusts from his hips, but since EDI was slightly new to this, he decided to simply relax for now and enjoy. He made a few encouraging moans though.

EDI observed very closely, studying Liara's movement and stance extensively. For a moment, Austin thought he could see EDI touching herself as she watched. Strange...

"Okay, your turn." said Liara.

EDI stepped up and seemed to mirror Liara lost perfectly. Before she started however she looked at her breasts.

"I worry Shepard's cock is maybe a little too big for the gap in my breasts," she said. "I probably need to add a bit more size to my bust."

To both Austin and even Liara's surprise, EDI's breasts expanded just a bit more. Now they were a little closer to Liara's size. Still smaller, but closer than before.

EDI then repeated what Liara had down earlier as she squeezed her tits together around Austin's cock. The AI really was amazing the couple with how life-like she felt.

Austin couldn't help but moan as EDI moved up on down. He was unable to resist the temptation to start thrusting his hips slightly, allowing his cock to thrust between EDI's breasts even deeper.

"Damn, this is good." he sighed.

Liara was also rather impressed with this, and it did admittedly turn her on so she was unable to resist touching herself. One hand tended to her azure while the other gently squeezed one of her tits.

"She's good." Austin admitted telepathically. "Still doesn't compare to you of course, love. But she certainly gives our other dreams a run for their money."

"Hard to argue with that." Liara replied, still touching herself erotically, which she now noticed was getting her husband's attention and he was staring at her lustfully. "I want you inside me!"

"My pleasure." Austin replied in his head. He then turned to EDI and spoke out load. "I think Liara deserves some attention again."

"I understand. Her arousal has increased noticeably." said EDI.
As EDI ceased her tit fuck, Liara gently crawled onto the bed seductively. Rather than settling on her back as Austin had expected, she instead remained on all fours, gladly presented her firm ass.

"Really? You want to do anal instead?" Austin asked, slightly surprised.

"I'm that horny." said Liara, almost sounding like she was begging. "Please, I need you inside me. Fuck me!"

Austin gently got up onto his knees and position himself behind Liara, his cock aimed directly at her hole. EDI, who was finding this very enticing, also got onto the bed and knelt down behind Austin. She then suddenly reached around and gave his cock several slow and long strokes.

"Fuck her, Shepard. I want to watch you fuck, Liara in the ass." said EDI, surprisingly vulgar for her.

"She's starting to get a bit out of character." Austin thought.

"The dream versions often do that after some some time." said Liara. "There's only so much details our minds can add to them."

Austin gently thrust forward and very slowly inserted his shaft into Liara. The Asari moaned in pleasure as she felt her bond mate slowly thrust all the way in until he had hilted himself inside her.

Liara gasped then moaned, gripping the sheets so tight that they almost ripped. Austin had succeeded in working the head of his cock past the asari's sphincter, his shaft now sliding ever so slowly into the blue woman's rectum. Inch after inch, Austin's cock vanished within his wife's tight asshole, the asari grunting and moaning as she felt every bump and vein brush against her inner depths.

After a few moments, Austin was victorious. With his waist pressed flush against Liara's ass, his cock was now full sheathed within the trembling asari, every inch of his human meat buried deep within the confines of the woman's hot, tight asshole. Liara moaned, shuddering at the feeling of being completely stuffed and claimed, grinding herself against her bond mate and moaning as she felt every bump and vein brush against her inner depths.

Then he began to fuck her, slowly retreating from her tight hole by a few inches before working himself back in. Back and forth, his hips moved, gradually picking up the pace with each short thrust.

Eventually, slow and gentle became hard and fast, Austin's cock pumping in and out of Liara's ass like an engine piston, his sizeable balls slapping against the Asari's wet cunt.

"Fuck! That's it!" she moaned, her voice having risen in pitch.

She pressed her forehead against the bed, her fingers occasionally gripping the sheets but otherwise going slack from being abused in such a way. She raised her ass into the human male's assault, wanting more of his cock, more of his power.

He was relentless, driving himself into her like no other. To Liara, her Shepard was a god made flesh, a titan of a man who was rutting her like an animal.

"Always... so tight!" Austin groaned, marvelling at how much his wife's ass clamped down on his shaft.

EDI meanwhile was using her hands to gently touch the two to keep their arousal up. One hand
gently touched the area where Austin's cock joined to his body and the other massaged one of Liara's ass cheeks.

"That's it! Fuck that ass!" she moaned encouragingly, clearly reciting an extranet line as the voice that said ti wasn't her won and it sounded recorded. "Come on! Let her have it!"

"Fuck me, Austin! Fuck my ass hard!" Liara moaned.

The encouraging words from both the Asari and AI spurred Austin on even more and he increased his speed, EDI's hips thrusting against his own which seemed to give him an extra push. Most likely she was trying to imitate the action herself so that she learned how to do it.

That unfortunately gave Austin an image in his head of EDI with a mechanical cock attachment, and he wasn't really into futa stuff.

However the incoming release brought it out of his head and he refocused on now. He was already very close to cumming and his cock felt just about ready to burt due to the tightness of Liara's ass.

Surprisingly though, Liara seemed to be ahead of him on that one.

"I'm gonna cum!" he groaned as Austin reached down slightly and squeezed both her tits while still ramming into her ass.

She came first, shuddering and breathless, her cunt dripping with liquid heat as a hard human cock dominated her ass. Her toes curled and she damn near tore the sheets with the iron grip of her fingers. As she felt pleasure wash over her, Liara could feel how it was for Austin, her tight asshole round his thick cock, how hot and soft it was, how good it felt to claim it once again after many times before.

For the last few thrusts, the human pounded into the Asari's tight rump, grunting as he slammed in to the hilt and emptied the contents of his balls within the blue woman's rectum, hot human seed shooting into the dark depths of Liara's bowels.

Austin pulled his cock free, a small trickle of cum spilling from the abused hole. EDI once again used one hand to firmly stroke the Helldiver's cock which was now wet and easier to stroke.

"Liara's stamina is most impressive." she said.

"You have no idea." Austin smiled. "You want a turn?"

"Affirmative. I wish for you to fuck my ass too." EDI replied.

Within just a few seconds, the AI had taken Liara's place and was now kneeling on the bed with her ass up in the air in front of him. Holy fuck did she have a hell of an ass. He palmed her cheeks, then cupped them, and squeezed them, firm, toned. If she and Joker really did become a couple, he'd be one luck guy.

Liara meanwhile rolled onto ehr brk back and settled herself underneath EDI in a 69 position so that she could tend to the AI's pussy while her husband fucked the ass. She'd also recently learned how to tend to tits using her feet. Due to his constant fencing she and Austin did, she was very good with her hips and legs, in more ways than just one.

"Overfilling this unit may cause damage, but i don't care. I want your big dick inside me, Shepard." said EDI.

"Not gonna explode, are you?" Austin joked.
"Was that a joke, Major?" EDI asked.

"Yes."

He pushed in, slowly... and was met with a huge amount of resistance.

"Bloody Hell!" he groaned through gritted teeth.

She was very, very tight. It was a good sort of tight though, so it didn't hurt him. EDI moaned beneath him, and he could have sworn he'd never heard anything so dirty from her before.

"Oh, Major…"

He smacked her ass with one hand. "You like that?"

"Yes!"

He'd hilted himself in her. It felt glorious. "You like being fucked in the ass?"

"Yes, Major…"

Liara meanwhile was admiring the sight. At the same time though he feet were gently massaging EDI's tits. The Asari was very good at multitasking and her bond with Austin gave her very good concentration.

It was always very inserting for to see how it looked when her husband's cock disappeared into her ass. The last time she'd seen that was when they'd had a threesome with the Justicar, Samara.

Liara felt herself get wet as she remembered that night and the sensations he'd felt. That had been a good night and definitely a high point in their relationship. Liara had certainly learned that she didn't mind sharing her bond mate under certain circumstances in real life. And at the same time she'd learned the feeling of being like the dominant matriarch int he threesome since Austin was her husband and therefore was hers.

It was the same thing here, she was the more dominant one compared to EDI, especially since the AI was watching and learning from her. It certainly added to her maturity as well as the rest of Alpha Squad had noticed how she sometimes acted like Austin. Tough, brave, and caring for the others like they were a second family.

Austin continued to pound EDI, in and out, hard and fast. Her entire body bounced with every thrust, her breasts being nudged, massaged, squeezed together and even nipple tweaked by Liara's skilled feet.

The Helldiver began to feel the familiar tension in his gut, and his vision was starting to blur slightly. He thrust even harder, EDI's tits and ass bouncing helplessly, her incessant stream of moans and shrieks drowning out the rapid beating of his heart.

He roared as he came, feeling like a flood had been unleashed.

"Fuck!"

EDI let out a long recorded porn star moan as his cum filled her hole. Her visor even flashed on and off a bit and the recording went static for a split second. Austin and Liara feared for a moment she'd overloaded, but relaxed when the AI returned to normal very quickly.

"Data indicates that the probability of your satisfaction is one hundred percent." she said.
"In my opinion, that may be an understatement." Liara chuckled.

"No kidding. Tiredness is starting to get to me," said Austin.

It was true he was starting to feel a bit tired. He was sweating and panting hard. He reckoned he had one more round left in him though and Liara felt it too.

"We can do one more though." said Liara.

"Good. I had one more new function of this body I wanted to try out." said EDI.

The AI activated her omni tool and a most surprising sight greeted the couple's eyes. An omni dildo appeared out of nowhere, attached to EDI's crotch and it was upright and erect.

"That was unexpected." Liara thought.

"I promise I didn't think that up." said Austin. "I never let the thought of someone else with a cock fucking you cross my mind."

"Well, we have wild imaginations." said Liara. "Not sure if I'm comfortable with this though."

"I understand if you are reluctant, Liara." said EDI. "I will not force this on you if you do not want to."

Liara looked to Austin. To be honest she wasn't opposed to the idea. Of being fucked by something other than Austin's cock. They'd done plenty of fingering in their time and she did know the feeling of sex toys. The times when they'd been apart for example came to mind.

Still, she wanted to be sure he was okay with this too. She didn't want him to agree to this simply for her and then regret it later.

"You okay with this?" she asked.

Austin shrugged.

"It's a dream, so I don't see anything wrong with it. he said.

"Okay then. Let's do it." said Liara.

"I will make sure to be gentle to begin with Liara." said EDI.

"One thing I must insist on though." said Austin.

"Of course, Shepard. Anything." said EDI.

"That I tend to her at the same time." he replied.

Liara was slightly confused by this. How was that possible?

"How are you going to..." she went to ask, but then she suddenly realised what her husband was proposing.

"It's okay if you don't want to, love. I just thought you might like to find out what it's like." said Austin telepathically, unable to resist giving her a slight wink.

Liara took a moment to consider this. Never before had it occurred to her to have her Azure and her
ass fucked at the same time. Even with toys she'd never tried it.

"Oh, why not? It's meant to be a special night after all." Liara shrugged in her head.

Austin smiled and picked Liara up, his arms supporting her legs as he lined his still hard cock up with her dripping pussy. EDI meanwhile walked up to them and lined her omni dildo up with the Asari's ass.

"Consider this my own little reward for you, love. You've taken such good care of me for the past two days. I love you." Austin smiled.

"You're so sweet." Liara smiled, giving Austin a quick kiss. "Now let's enjoy this last part."

Austin slid in first, his wife's pussy accepting him perfectly due to how tailored the two were for each other now. EDI then followed, gently pushing herself into Liara's ass. She'd deliberately made the dildo slightly smaller than Austin's cock so that it avoided any competition.

Liara moaned in surprise as she suddenly experienced the feeling of both her holes being filled for the very first time. It felt amazing. She almost forgot that EDI was with them and thought that Austin suddenly had two cocks. Admittedly that would be really sexy, but it wasn't the case at the moment.

"How does it feel?" Austin asked, pretty impressed at Liara's expression of pure pleasure.

"Amazing. I've never felt this full before!" Liara moaned, her nails digging into Austin back as she held onto him.

"You're very tight even for me, Liara." said EDI. "I'm surprised that Shepard can also fit inside you."

"I make it look easy, don't I." Austin smiled smugly.

EDI simply nodded. She dared not start thrusting yet until Austin did, and he didn't' want to start thrusting yet until he was sure Liara was comfortable with this.

A few brief seconds passed before he asked.

"Ready to move on?" he asked.

"YES!" Liara sighed.

Austin gently started to thrust in and out which in turn prompted EDI to do the same. Liara's moans intensified as she felt one slide in as the other slid out. This was unbelievably good. It certainly put a whole new meaning on Threesomes for her.

Austin was also finding this new experience quite good himself. Watching Liara get fucked form behind by EDI was quite a sight. Plus, he could feel the impact as her dildo thrust all the way in. Like the threesome with Samara, this wasn't one he and Liara were going to forget easily.

"OH GODDESS! THIS IS SO GOOD!" Liara cried out as the thrusts sped up. Any slight pain that this might have had earlier was completely replaced with shear pleasure.

"EMBRACE... AH!... ETERNITY!"

Austin felt his mind connect to Liara and his pleasure intensified as her pleasure become his and vice versa. It was weird feeling sensations he was feeling, but by god did they feel good. His hands slid to grasp her buttons as his strong arms held her up by the inside of her legs. EDI seemed to have the same idea and she gave the Asari's blue ass a small slap. Her other hand reached around and fondled
one of Liara' tits. The other was tended to by Austin, who used his mouth to latch onto her nipple and suck.

The shear pleasure overload of all this proved too much for Liara and she screamed as she came right there, coating Austin's cock with her juices.

"By the goddess." she panted.

"Done already?" Austin asked, sounding slightly disappointed that he hadn't been able to come with her.

"Sorry. It was just so much." Liara panted as Austin and EDI's thrusts slowed. "You can keep going though. I know you want to shoot your load all over us."

Austin simply shrugged and resumed his thrusting as Liara held onto his tightly, giving several encouraging moans but not able to do much else due to who spent she was. EDI did the same kept thrusting. She also recited several dirty recordings to encourage Austin further. With all this, it didn't take long until the familiar sensation crept up the Helldiver's shaft.

"Here it comes, ladies!" he groaned.

EDI quickly slid out as Austin set Liara down on the bed and stroked himself fast. Both EDI and Liara rolled onto their fronts so he could shoot his cum on both their asses, something he occasionally liked to do with Liara.

The cum exploded from his cock and sprayed all over both EDI and Liara's asses. Even their backs got a bit of it as well as it pooled their cracks.

Austin panted hard as he fell onto the bed between the two, admiring the sight of their cum stained behinds.

"By the goddess, that was incredible, Austin." Liara panted as she snuggled against her bond mate.

"Ready for round two?" EDI teased.

"That's my line." Austin chuckled.

Sleep quickly claimed the couple and everything went black for a minute.

The two awoke slowly to find everything pretty much the same as it had been before they'd fallen asleep.

"Hangover at all?" Liara asked.

"Not that I can tell." Austin replied as he yawned and stretched.

"Those excursuses yesterday have certainly made a difference. Your physique looks much bigger." Liara smiled as she admired her husband's muscles.

"Good to know." Austin smiled, giving Liara a kiss on the cheek.

He was about to get up, but Liara then pulled him back down.

"I know your eager to get back in to the game, but do we have to get up now?" she asked innocently, giving a suggestive look at the same time.
Austin really did love Liara more than anything. She knew what he liked and she was a constant source of love, excitement and was the most beautiful thing in existence.

"No, not yet." he smiled, gently pulling Liara into a hug.

They lay in for quite a while, simply cuddling each other and relaxing in the comfort of the bed sheets. This would do them well, especially since their destination was the Migrant Fleet. Recruiting the Quarians into the Reaper Resistance had been put off long enough.

Little did they know however of the bigger plot that was brewing in the outer regions of space. The Reaper Nazra and his army were ready for battle...

Pretty obvious what's coming next, I'm sure.

I will say that it won't just be Tali and Legion coming back, this chapter will have a lot more significant bits in it. An old fan favourite from the first Helldiver Saga will finally return, a few unanswered questions from Project Overlord will be answered, and the true identity of Nazara will be revealed...

Hope you're excited, 'cause I certainly am. I've been looking forward to doing the Rannoch war for a while.

See you next week! Stay safe out there. ;)}
Chapter 19, Nazara's Revenge

This one was a bit shorter than I thought it would be, but I'm still happy with it.

Be prepared for another surprise... ;)

Chapter 19

Nazara's Revenge

The admiralty board of the Migrant Fleet stepped in. Accompanying them also was Shala Raan, Leena's mother.

Leena had also chosen to join Austin in the war room. These were her people after all.

"Major Shepard, Leena. A pleasure to see you again, though I wish it were under better circumstances." she said.

"I'd hoped for you to join the Reaper Resistance. What's going on?" Austin asked.

"Remember back to when you come aboard the fleet and gave your support in us trying to find a new world and adapt?" Admiral Koris asked. "It seemed your voice carried a great deal. Three weeks ago, we finally reached the agreement that we would at least begin colonising a new world before we considered trying to get our homeworld back."

"What went wrong then?" Leena asked.

"Seventeen days ago, just before we were due to begin, the Geth attacked us. Several strikes on our fleet which we were completely unprepared for." Admiral Gerrel explained.

"This caused nearly everyone to reconsider their decision." said Xen.

"So, with precision strikes on four Geth systems, we initiated the war to retake our home world." said Gerrel.

"Which was a clear violation of our agreement with the Council to avoid provoking the Geth!" Krois argued.

"A treaty violation is nothing compared to recovering our home world and advanced AI technology." Xen argued.

"We're throwing ourselves at the Geth? Again?" said Leena.

"And this time, we may have destroyed our people for good." said Krois, shaking his head.

"We've driven the Geth back to the home system. Only recently however did we finally discover why they attacked us first." said Gerrel. As he spoke, the holograms of both the Migrant and Geth fleet appeared on holo. "For a long time, this signal has been broadcasting to all Geth-ships."

"The Reapers." said Austin as the hologram showed a signal being broadcasted to the Geth fleet.

"And it gets worse. The Reaper Nazara has shown itself." said Gerrel.
"The Reaper in a Geth body?" Leena asked, surprised.

"The same. We personally have not seen it, but there are some strike teams who have. Only a select few have lived to tell the tale tough, and their descriptions have been vivid. All they have truly said is that it is a Geth like no other." said Xen.

"Under Reaper control and with Nazara's leadership, the Geth are significantly more effective. Our fleet is pinned in the home system. If we're going to win-" said Gerrel.

"Win? You insisted on involving the civilian ships, Admiral Gerrel! We need to retreat or we'll lose the liveships!" Koris interupted.

"Where's the signal coming from?" Austin asked.

"Here. A Geth dreadnought. It can outgun anything we've got, and it's heavily defended." said Gerrel as the holo changed to show said Dreadnought.

"The Normandy's stealth drive can get us in undetected. We can board, then the disable the Reaper command signal." Austin suggested.

"Yes, cutting the signal should throw the Geth into complete disarray." said Xen.

"And while they're confused, you get to a mass relay and retreat." said Austin.

"Good. Our civilian ships have seen to much fighting already. Are you certain you can disable the signal?" Krois asked.

"We'll get our people out of there safely, Admiral." said Leena.

"Our newest admiral has also volunteered to offer technical expertise..." said Shala. As she spoke, a very welcome and familiar face entered the war room.

"Tali Zorah vas Normandy, reporting the for duty." said the Quarian.

"Glad you could make it, Tali." Leena smiled under her helmet.

"I'll ready a team to hit the dreadnought." said Austin.

"Thank you, Major."

"You're an Admiral now?" Austin asked as he, Tali and Leena left the war room.

"It's mostly a formality. I'm an expert on the Geth." said Tali.

"That you are." Leena agreed.

"I'm glad you two are here." said Tali.

"If I'd known it was this bad with our people, I would've insisted to Shepard we come sooner." said Leena.

"You had your own troubles. We've heard about the Takaal." said Tali. "We've got the largest fleet in the galaxy. If you can help us, we'll gladly hit the Reapers with everything we've got."

"Or however much is left after this stupid war." Leena sighed.
"I thought you two would support the invasion." said Austin, slightly surprised at both his Quarian friends saying that.

"No. After talking to Legion, we both thought maybe there was a chance for peace." said Tali.

"So why help them?" Austin asked.

"I'm an Admiral. People look to me for guidance. Public disagreement would divide the fleet." said Tali.

"I'll get your people out of here safely. You have my word on that." said Austin reassuringly.

"Thanks, Shepard. And just so you know, I need to keep things strictly business in front of the Admirals. If you'd like to catch up, let's talk somewhere private." said Tali.

"Sure thing." Austin nodded.

I'm ready to hit that dreadnought whenever you are." said Tali confidently.

"So am I. No way you're gonna leave me on the ship for this one." said Leena.

"Wouldn't dream of it."

While they were on their way to the fleet, Austin decided to pass the time by taking Tali up on her offer. They did indeed have some catching up to do.

"Tali, I'm free if you'd like to come up."

"I'll just be a moment."

Tali walked in a few minutes later.

"Thanks for asking me up. I couldn't talk freely in front of Raan." she said.

"You okay?" Austin asked.

"No. No, I'm really not." Tali sighed. "Seventeen million lives are riding on me... and I don't know if I can save them."

"You've done everything you can. If the fleet falls, it won't be because of you." said Austin supportingly.

"I helped my father, and... and Xen's ideas? The new tech that made an invasion too good to pass up? That's based on my father's work." said Tali with shame. "If they die because of me... if... if I don't..."

"We'll get them out of there safely, Tali." said Austin.

"I couldn't do this without you, Austin. I feel like I'm bluffing. Trying to convince them that the admiral's daughter knows what she's doing." said Tali.

"Not the admiral's daughter. The admiral." said Austin, a proud tone in his voice.

"I know. And at least now, I can push back against the worst ideas. That's why I accepted the position... And because of you."
"Me?"

"When they offered me this position, I asked myself what you'd do. I thought you'd take the chance to make things better. That probably sounds stupid. It's just, I'm not really qualified for this..."

"You're doing fine, Tali. And thanks." said Austin as he put his hand on the Quarian's shoulder. Tali then turned and hugged him. He didn't resist and hugged her back. After a few moments, she finally let go.

"I should get back before the admiral's get into trouble again. I'll talk to you later."

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"We're approaching the Quarian home system. ETA to Rannoch five minutes." said Joker.

"What've you got from the comm buoys?" Austin asked.

"Pretty much a big ol' shitstorm, Major." Joker replied.

"I have detected several hundred unique ship signatures engaged in active combat." said EDI, currently plugged into all the various different wires and tubes that kept her connected to the Normandy's systems.

"Yeah, like I said." said Joker.

"Are there any Reaper ships?" Austin asked.

"No. Only the Reaper's signal." EDI replied.

"What about Nazara?"

"I am not detecting the presence of a Reaper. Either it is shielding its presence, or it's Geth body is preventing it from showing up on the sensors." said EDI.

"What about Takaal ships?"

"No sign of them either. It is unlikely that they would be here anyway. None of them have been sighted anywhere near this region." said EDI.

"Okay. Take us in, Joker." said Austin.

Joker clicked his fingers and pressed away at the holo interface as the Normandy exited the Mass Relay. Almost immediately they found themselves right in the heat of the battle. The Quarian ships were making bold stand against the Geth armada, but they were slowly getting pushed back.

"Stealth drive engaged. Only way they'll detect us is if you all start singing the Russian national anthem." said Joker.

"My cyberwarfare suits have accessed their docking protocols." said EDI as the Normandy got close to the Dreadnought and prepared to dock.

"All right, once we're aboard, we find whatever's broadcasting the Reaper signal and shut it down." said Austin as he, Tali, Leena and EDI stepped into the airlock. "Tali's our expert on Geth software. She'll be handling hacking and security."

"We couldn't ask for anyone better." said Leena.
"Thanks... Miss Prarken." Tali smiled under her mask.

"Your expertise with the Geth is a welcome edition, Tali." said EDI.

"So... a body?" Tali asked.

"It has proven useful. I hope it does not cause concern." said EDI, trying to sound reassuring.

"Not unless you go crazy and decide to overthrow the galaxy." said Tali.

"If it comes to that, you will be the first to know." said EDI. The AI's head then temporarily turned as though something had suddenly caught her attention. "Shepard, there is a problem. All tubes except one are physically secured."

"I see the free one. Pretty torn up, though." said Joker over the comm.

"Too risky for the whole team. I'll secure the docking area. Everyone else can follow me over." said Leena.

'You sure about this, Leena?' Austin asked.

"Please, Shepard. I'm a Quarian. We work in space." Leena replied.

"Roger that, Leena. We'll just stay here—you know—quietly." said Joker.

"Hang tight. I'll just be a minute."

Leena preferred to not use grab boots and simply use her suits hydro thrusters to keep herself stabilised and flying in a straight line through the tube. Grav boots would take a bit too long and Leena always secretly liked floating around. She and Sill would sometimes space work together in order to perform any required maintenance on the outside of the Normandy.

Out of the gaps of the docking tube were it had been torn up by the constant barrage of gunfire front he ships, Leena could see a vast amount of the Dreadnought.

"No wonder we're having trouble. That ship is enormous." she said.

"It is 30% larger than an Alliance dreadnought." said EDI.

As the Quarian wove herself in and out of the wreckage, she caught another glimpse out of the tube that showed a view of Rannoch.

"Keelah." she gasped in awe. "Tali, you're going to love the view."

'Better than a vid?' Tali asked.

"Much." Leena replied.

"How are you doing, Leena?" Tali asked after a few more minutes.

"The lack of gravity is disorienting. It's fun being able to fly though." Leena replied.

"The dreadnought has artificial gravity. You should be okay once you're on board." said Tali.

"Until then, I'll savour being weightless." said Leena.
"Hey, take your time, Leena. We're fine until they, you know, look out a window." said Joker.

"Geth don't use windows, remember? Structural weakness." Austin reminded him.

"Like the Geth are just sitting there saying. "Those organics would never try the no-window thing twice!" said Joker sarcastically.

"Joker, your attempts to lighten the mood are appreciated, but it doesn't really help." said Leena.

As the Quarian Helldiver finally reached the end, there was a faint rumble. The Quarian looked behind her to see that the stub had broken off the dreadnought, taking the Normandy with it.

"Boshtet!" she swore. "Looks like the rest of the team isn't using the docking tube."

"So I'm guessing you'd rather not solo the dreadnought," said Joker.

"Preferably not. No," Leena replied. "Ask Tali to get the dreadnought schematics. If she can point me at another docking tube, I should be able to override the controls and let the boarding party in."

"I'm inside. I've got gravity again." Leena said into her comm.

"Great. I'm looking for... Got it. There should be a hull breach not far from your position." Tali replied.

"I see it up ahead." said Leena as she made her way through the hallways, the vast amount of wreckage visible up ahead.

"The nearest undamaged docking tube is on the other side." said Tali.

As Leena neared the hull breach, she started to see how big it really was.

"Ouch. Didn't think the breach would be this big." she said.

"Admiral Gerrel tried a frontal assault. We lost six frigates. That tiny hole was the only damage we did." said Tali.

"I wouldn't call it tiny." said Leena.

"Not the way you would've done it?" Tali asked.

"No, he was too aggressive. Shepard argued, but as Admiral of the heavy fleet, it was ultimately his decision." said Leena.

"What about the other Admirals?" Austin asked.

"Xen backed the invasion after the Geth attacked under Nazara's control, largely a chance to test her toys. Raan gave provisional support. Only Korris opposed the war with me. And he was right. We could lose the whole fleet." said Tali.

"We won't let that happen. We'll get the Quarians out of here safely." said Austin.

A few more minutes passed as Leena madder her way quietly through the ship, keeping her eyes peeled for any Geth soldiers. After some times, she finally found her objective.
"Okay. I've found another airlock. I think we're good to go." she said.

"Great. *If you override the controls, we'll be right there.*" said Tali.

Leena climbed the ladder the worked on accessing the controls.

'Got it. You're clear to board." she said.

The doors ahead opened and the rest of the team stepped in.

"Nice work, Leena." said Austin.

"I will try to find a more convenient docking point next time." said EDI.

"Next time?"

"Here, let me see if I can get this open." said Tali. "There. We're clear to go."

The door opened and Austin took the lead.

"So where are we heading?" he asked.

"We're looking for an operations centre. I can disable the Reaper command signal from there." Tali replied.

"Where's the closest one?"

"Past their defence network and through a sensor cluster."

A few minutes into the mission and the team found themselves inside what looked like the Geth defence network.

"Gah, vents. Why did it have to be vents?" Tali sighed.

"You did fine at the Collector Base." said Austin.

"I got set on fire!" Tali argued.

"No you didn't, Tali. You're exaggerating." said Leena.

"At least your wearing a suit that's fire proof." Tali argued.

"Still... you didn't literally catch fire." said Leena.

"It felt like I did though. Those vents were boiling." said Tali

"That I can agree with."

After some time of making their way through the dreadnought, so far undetected, they finally reached the operations centre.

"The dreadnoughts operations centre is just ahead." said Tali.

"Good. Let's cut the Reaper signal and get the fleet out of here." said Austin.
As they entered the room however, a rather surprising sight greeted their eyes.

"What the heck... Is that... the Terror Geth?!"

Sure enough, the body of the leader of the heretic Geth was suspend in midair in some kind of beam. It actually looked as though it had been repaired from the damage Austin had inflicted upon it during the battle of the Citadel where the Helldiver had punched through the Geth's torso and then torn it's head off.

"In the flesh. Well, figuratively speaking." said Leena.

EDI walked a bit closer to the suspend body and examined it closely with her omni tool.

"There is no life or sings of activity. It is an empty body." she said.

"Why would the Geth keep the body of the leader of the heretics?" Austin asked. "Storage perhaps?"

"Maybe." said Tali.

"Unusual." said EDI.

"What is?"

"Parts of the body have been removed. The central power, memory core, optical processor and sensors have been removed. The body has been repaired, but it can no longer function." EDI explained.

"That doesn't make sense. The Geth aren't known to salvage the dead. And it's impossible to bring a Geth back from the dead exactly as it was. The Terror Geth's memory core was fried when Shepard killed it and the damage it sustained was too extensive for it to be repaired to the point of functionality." said Leena.

"Whatever the reason, we've got more important matters to take care of." said Austin.

They walked up to the nearby control panel and Tali accessed it.

"Damn it, they've locked down the Reaper signal. We can't shut it down from here in the operation centre." she cursed. The Quarian then brought up a hologram of the whole dreadnought. "There! The Reaper's signal's coming from the drive core!"

"So if we get there, we shut it down?" Austin asked.

"We need a route to the drive core that can't be blocked, a path that runs the length of the ship." said Leena

"What about the main battery? It runs right by the drive core." Austin asked as he highlighted the main battery on the hologram.

"That could work." said Tali.

"But! The Geth still have us locked in here. We need to get these doors open." said Austin.

"They've locked high-level processes. We need something basic... a ship-wide emergency, like a fire." Leena suggested.

"What about the heat diffusion system?" Austin asked.
"If I faked a thermal warning, it would open all maintenance tubes for emergency venting!" said Tali.

"Would that override the lockdown?" Austin asked.

"Yes! Okay, I've got it primed. But be ready. I'm reading Geth on the other side of the doors." said Tali.

"Leena?"

"Way ahead of you."

The Quarian Helldiver took several cylinder like objects from her back and threw each one at the entrances into the room. As they landed, they unfolded into sentry turrets. The team also readied their weapons. Tali also deployed her combat drone, Chiktika.

The doors opened and several Geth flooded into the room. The incoming fire however cut most of them down quickly. Those that put up more of a fight were the more heavily armed or armoured ones such as the Geth primes, rocket troopers and some new black versions that appeared to have a type of cloaking device similar to a Helldivers.

One disadvantage they did have though was that unlike Helldiver cloaks, they were designed to simply hide the user from eyesight. Switching to a different vision mode made them show up easily. Helldiver did completely the opposite and hit the user from most vision modes and scanners.

With the last Geth dead, the team began their journey to the man battery.

"Damn it. Priority message. A planetary defence cannon just took down Admiral Korris' ship." said Tali.

"Survivors?" Austin asked.

"They got to escape pods, and I've got Admiral Rann trying to establish a secure link." said Tali.

"Put her through."

"Shepard, this is Raan. The Heavy Fleet is collapsing. I don't know how much longer we can hold out." said Raan through the comm.

"We'll have the Reaper signal deactivated shortly, Mother." said Leena.

The group made their way to the elevator. Austin accessed the controls and the platform slowly started rising. As it did however, two Geth rocket troopers suddenly emerged from the door they'd just come from and fired. One rocket managed to hit the elevator as it reach one level up. Everyone except Austin was already off, but Austin was still on as the platform fell slightly, becoming increasingly unstable to stand on.

"Shepard!" Tali yelled. "Grab my hand!"

Austin didn't even hesitate and sprinted towards them. He grabbed Tali's hand just as the elevator platform gave way and it fell down the shaft. Tali at first struggled to keep a hold of Austin due to the wight of his armour, but Leena quickly grabbed Austin's' other hand and helped to pull him up

"Hang on!"

"Thanks, you two. That was a close one." Austin panted.
"Hope we're done with the elevators." said Leena.

"Garrus would never have stopped going on about the old days." said Tali.

"Seriously? He misses the talks on the elevators?" Austin asked, unable to hold back a small laugh.

"You've no idea how much I've had to remind that Turian that I have a shotgun." said Tali.

Heading through the main battery was difficult, but it was nothing the group couldn't handle. Pretty soon, they'd reached the drive core.

In the centre of the room was some kind of sphere like machine which was emitting some kind of energy.

Austin walked up to it and accessed the controls.

"That's definitely Reaper tech. But what's..."

The strange machine seemed to unfold showing what was inside. A Geth held in place by all sorts of wires, and not just any Geth...

"Shepard-Major. Help us."

"Legion."

Before Austin could free him though, Tali quickly interrupted.

"Austin, The Geth are being controlled by the Reaper signal. she reminded him.

"Right. This thing." he said.

"So for all we know, Legion is with them. Maybe it's hacked." said Tali.

"Legion helped us fight the Reapers before. There's no way it would have agreed to this." said Austin.

"Your caution is understandable. Once freed, we will submit to any restraints you deem necessary." said Legion.

"I never thought I'd say this, but... it's good to see you again." said Tali

"Likewise, Creator Zorah." said Legion.

"So what is this thing?" Austin asked.

"It uses our networking architecture to broadcast the Old Machine's command signal to all Geth simultaneously." Legion explained.

"Then getting you out of there will shut off the Reaper signal." said Austin.

"Wait. You cannot simply remove the restraints. We are secured via hardware blocks that shackles our operating protocols. The hardware protocols are on the far side of the room. Deactivation should be simple. The Geth protected them against viral attack, not physical removal." said Legion.

"How did the Reapers get control of the Geth?" Austin asked.
"Deception. One of our own that we thought was our ally betrayed us." Legion replied.

The team made their way to where Legion had indicated. It took only a few seconds to disable the locks.

"Got it." said Austin.

"Tali Zorah to fleet. The signal is about to go offline." said Tali into the comm.

"This is Admiral Han Gerrel. We're in your debt."

"Hardware blocks offline. We are free." said Legion as it was relaxed from the machine, which disappeared into the floor. "As a gesture of cooperation, we have disabled the dreadnought's drive core. All weapons and batteries are offline."

Austin simply nodded in acknowledgement. Legion then led the others towards the exit.

"We must hurry. Nazara will have..."

But the door suddenly closed and sealed itself.

"You are not going anywhere, Legion!" a deep, haunting voice boomed throughout the room. Leena and Tali froze in shock as they heard it.

"Shepard... that voice..." said Leena in shock.

Austin recognised that voice too. But that was impossible! How could it be here now?!

"It can't be..."

Several Geth soldiers suddenly filed into the room and surrounded them. They didn't fire yet though. A dark red glowing eye suddenly appeared out of the shadows not he upper level and there was a loud clanging sound of metal feet as its user slowly stepped into the light.

"Did you not think that I would return, Shepard? I told you I was immortal."

Sure enough, out of the shadows stepped a very real and functional Terror Geth.

"I have waited many years for this moment, human. We meet again at last." it said.

"So that's why the body was empty. It swapped it for a new one." said Leena.

She was right. The Terror Geth now had a drastically new appearance from the last time it and Austin had crossed paths. The body still had the same basic design, such as the horns on the head, flaps constantly facing outwards to give an angry expression, clawed feet, and a blade on the left arm.

Going into further detail however, the Terror Geth was now vastly different. It now had way more armour plating over its outer shell, a lot of which was bladed. A few other noticeable additions was that it now had an extra set of horns, and also a secondary smaller eye on the right side of its head. Some of the Geth they'd seen earlier had this, so it was clear that was some kind of targeting system. A secondary set of smaller arms, very similar to Skarlack's, were alas attached to its body.

"I learned that you were still alive and it was logical to assume that our paths would finally cross again eventually, but you're presence here is unexpected." said the Terror Geth, the usual growling present in its tone.
"Likewise, Terror Geth. I see your looking more twisted than ever." said Austin.

"It was necessary to upgrade my outdated and inferior form."

"How the hell are you even still functioning? I killed you myself, I watched you die." Austin asked.

"You separated my head from my body, but even that is not enough to destroy me. Your efforts that day were most futile." said the Terror Geth.

"So you came back here and now you're a servant of Nazara like all other Geth." said Austin.

"False." the Terror Geth replied.

"What?"

"Your assumption is illogical, Shepard. I do not serve Nazara. I am Nazara."

Shock came to all three organics.

"That's not possible!" Tali gasped.

"It is the truth." said Legion.

Austin couldn't believe it. All this time he had assumed that Nazara would be a normal Geth, and he never would've thought that this was really why the Terror Geth was so different from the others. All this time, he'd been fighting another Reaper and hadn't even known it. In a way though this did explain how the Geth Prime had kept coming back after each battle.

"None of that matters now. You will not be leaving this place alive. This time, I will have your head, Shepard!" the Terror Geth growled.

Just as the rest of the Terror Geth's army prepared to fire, Legion suddenly activated some kind of shield pulse as he slammed his arms into the floor.

This temporarily distracted the Geth army and everyone immediately opened fire. A full out gunfight ensured between both sides.

"Quarians and a sentient AI: Unexpected." said the Terror Geth. "Assessment: potential threats. Commencing termination!"

To everyone's surprise, a large Geth pulse rifle suddenly appeared from behind the Terror Geth, mounted on a small mechanical arm attached to it's shoulder. Seems the mutated Geth Prime had copied some Helldiver tactics as well. The rifle fired, forcing everyone into cover. With EDI's aid, Legion was able to snatch a pulse rifle from a lone Geth soldier and managed to return fire briefly before taking cover as well.

"He's upgraded big time." said Leena.

"The only way to achieve order is through the extermination of those who would perpetuate war. This is the purpose of all Reaper, and soon I too will be unstoppable." said the Terror Geth as it hopped down to ground level, the force of the impact making the floor shake.

The rest of the team focused on dealing with the Geth while Austin took care of the Terror Geth. If they had to do this once again, so be it.

"I'll admit, your upgrades, are impressive, but I've upgraded too. You won't find me anymore easy
than you did 5 years ago." said the Helldiver.

He drew his sword and made a swipe at the Reaper/Geth's head. However he hadn't considered that the Terror Geth was now much faster thanks to its new body and upgraded programming.

The Terror Geth made a very quick move to the side and suddenly backhanded him with it's arm, causing him to fall flat on his back. The Terror Geth then pinned him down hard with one of it's clawed feet.

"You are nothing to me, Shepard. One by one I will destroy you and your precious Helldivers. I will never tire, I will never show mercy, I will never stop until each and every one of you are dea..."

But it was suddenly interrupted when Legion leapt on its back and tried several times to use all sorts of tech powers on it.

"You will not harm them, old machine." Said the Geth.

"Your intelligence is limited, Legion. Organics do not deserve to live." Said the Terror Geth.

"They deserve to choose for themselves." Legion argued, managing to grab onto one of the Terror Geth's horns.

"Then you will die with them!"

The Terror Geth managed to grab Legion and threw him to the floor.

"I should have terminated you long ago. Now I will correct that mistake." said the Terror Geth. It's right arms suddenly changed and transform as plates shifted and it seemed to grow bigger. In barely under a second, the Terror Geth's arm had changed completely into the cannon it had carried so many times before. This time though it had a different look, obviously because it was more advanced and because various parts of it were Nazara's arm.

Just before the mutated Geth Prime could fire however, Austin quickly activated his plasma cannon and fired at the Terror Geth's cannon. The plasma didn't destroy it, but it did knock it enough that the shot missed Legion completely.

The Terror Geth refocused it's attention on Austin and swung it's cannon at him. Austin managed to dodge under it and then thrust his sword right at it's eye. However instead of it becoming embedded, it simply clanged against the metal. It was now that Austin suddenly noticed that the Terror Geth had a metal cover over it's eye with a small split in the middle to allow some of the eye to still see. It was obvious why that was there.

"That will not work this time, Shepard. As I have said before, I learn from my mistakes and can evolve my strategies. It would seem that you cannot." said the Terror Geth.

Before Austin could react in time with another attack, the Terror Geth grabbed him and smashed him against the wall before then hoisting him up and throwing him to the floor hard. It then once again brought one of it's feet down hard on him and grinded it against him several times.

"Nothing will stand in my way." said the Terror Geth as he picked Austin up and flung up away. A section of it's cannon opened up to reveal a small explosive round. "Least of all, you."

The round fired and exploded on impact. Had it not been for the extensive armour upgrades, Austin would not have survived that.
He was exhausted from all that though. The Terror Geth was a lost stronger and even more powerful than before. The Geth/Reaper stood over it's supposedly defeated opponent and aimed it's cannon at him for a point blank range shot.

"Now, the Resistance ends with your death." it growled.

Just before it could fire however, the whole ship suddenly shook violently and several bits of debris fell from the ceiling.

"What the devil…" said Austin.

"Admiral Gerrel, what are you doing?" said Raan over the comm.

"Raan, check your screens! The dreadnought is helpless! No batteries, and the main gun is offline. We can remove their flagship if we strike now!" said Gerrel.

"Damn it, this is our chance to withdraw the Civilian Fleet safely!" Raan objected.

"What are you talking about? We're still on board, you Bosh'tet!" Leena yelled.

"We can't waste this chance. Heavy Fleet, all forward. Take out the dreadnought." Gerrel ordered.

"Patrol Fleet, hold position!" Raan ordered.

"You do that and the Heavy Fleet gets wiped out. And if we die, a simple retreat won't save you from the Geth response!" said Gerrel.

"Damn you, Gerrel." Raan cursed.

The Terror Geth looked back at Austin.

"This is far from over, Shepard. You and the Quarians will suffer for this." it said.

Two large section of it's shoulder suddenly shifted and two jets appeared out. They activated, and the Terror Geth flew off, vanishing from sight.

"Shepard-Major, the creator fleet is firing upon this vessel. Without barriers, this ship will be destroyed. We must evacuate." said Legion.

"We need to get to the escape pods." Tali agreed.

"Suggestions?"

"Geth fighters are docked in the port side fighter bay. We can pilot a fighter to safety." said Legion.

Everyone quickly hurried to the fighter bay with Legion directing them. A nearby explosion nearly made Austin stumble.

"Shepard to fleet! Hold fire! I repeat, hold fire!" he yelled into his comm.

"They're not responding." said Tali.

"I'm gonna kill Gerrel for this!" Leena growled.

Legion hurried into the fighter first. Before everyone else could do the same though, everything suddenly became weightless and started floating around.
"Normandy to Shepard: I'm reading a loss of gravity. You okay over there?" Joker asked.

"Fine. We're leaving in a Geth fighter. Transmitting rendezvous coordinates." Austin replied, managing to cling onto the hull of the fighter and pull himself inside. The others were able to do the same.

"Does the storage compartment have adequate room, Shepard-Major?" Legion asked as everyone managed to squeeze in. Due to the bulkiness of the two Helldivers, it was a bit of a tight squeeze for all four of them.

"We're fine. Go!" said Austin.

The fighter gently lifted off and sped away from the Dreadnought.

"Who's hand is that?" Tali asked as she felt someone's hand brush against her behind.

"Sorry." Austin apologised, trying to move his hand away but finding it rather difficult due to the tight space.

The Terror Geth was able to fly to safe distance as the dreadnought was obliterated by the Quarians. It had no concern about not being detected by another Geth ship. Besides the Takaal flagship, devastator was stationed only a fair distance away from the battle.

While his troops were out fighting, Skarlack had been ordered to assist Nazara in it's war with the Quarians. It was important to get rid of the allies that could provide a huge advantage to the resistance. And then there was also the various experiments that it had been conducting for the past 5 years.

Since the Takaal had no need for life support systems, landing inside the ship was very easy. The thrusters on it's back deactivated and skidded to a halt on the bridge. Many Takaal drones who were piloting the ship, stopped their work and bowed int he presence of the Geth/Reaper.

"General, I have returned." said Nazara.

Skarlack, who had been stood on the bridge the whole time, walked up to Nazara and made a low bow as he got down on his knees.

"Lord Nazara." he said. "We are pleased to know you managed to survive. When we saw the dreadnought exploded, we feared the worst.

"I am not so destroyed, Skarlack. You should know that by know." said the Terror Geth.

"I understand, my lord." said Skarlack.

Even though Nazara wasn't a full Reaper, at least not yet, he was regarded as one. Harbinger had decreed that when he fixed the Geth/Reaper. As a result, Skarlack ahd to serve him too.

"Shepard is now aware of the truth. He now knows that the Terror Geth and Nazara are one and the same. No longer do things need to be kept in the shadows. Have your soldiers and my Geth servants increase their effort on my experiments. They must be ready for the coming war with Shepard and the Quarians." Nazara ordered.

"As you wish."

"How go the modifications to many of the Geth?" the Terror Geth asked.
"They are proceeding well. The technology of the Geth alone is impressive, but when combined with Reaper technology and our own, it is proving most devastating," said Skarlack as the two walked through the room on the ship where many Geth were being experimented on by other Geth that had been modified by Nazara, or Takaal soldiers.

"Yes. The three merge well together. This new body is proof of that." said the Terror Geth. "And what of the deposit?"

"My wife has continued to oversee the operation as you requested." said Skarlack. "The Geth drones and my workers have been mining without pause for some time, and have amassed quite a stock pile. I am certain it will improve your research greatly."

"Good. Continue working at 100% efficiency. Failure will not be permitted by me or any another Reaper, General." said the Terror Geth.

"The Takaal will not fail you, my lord. Rannoch will be yours." said Skaralck, giving another low bow of his head.

"Your unilateral strike endangered us all! We should charge you with treason!" said Raan crossly at Gerrel.

All except Korris had assembled in the war room. Dell and Sill had joined them as well, having heard about the supposed return of the Terror Geth.

"I was within my authority as admiral of the Heavy Fleet!" the Admiral replied defensively.


"They escaped unharmed! Shepard, the mission parameters changed. You're military. You understand that." said Gerrel.

Unfortunately, that was not enough to get Austin to side with him.

"I understand that you wasted your chance to withdraw safely!" said the Helleiver as he walked up to the Admiral angrily.

"The dreadnought was a perfect target!"

Gerrel was then suddenly interrupted as Austin punched him so hard in the helmet that it knocked him back, a crack was visible on his visor.

"Admiral, you jeopardized your mission and your people! Get the hell of my ship!" he yelled.

Gerrel didn't argue and quickly left.

"Shepard, I understand you're angry…" said Raan.

"If I didn't need your fleet…" said Austin.

"He nearly got us killed, Raan." Tali agreed.

"You must understand, the Geth inflicted heavy casualties before you disabled the Reaper signal." said Raan.

"That still doesn't change what he did, mother. If he dares try something like that again, I'll rip his
head off! The fleet can damn well exile me if they don't like it." said Leena angrily.

Raan looked a bit surprised at her daughter's aggressiveness, but she didn't say anything.

"You said the Geth have a planetary defence cannon?" Austin asked, feeling ti best to change the subject.

"Had. Admiral Koris sacrificed his own ship to destroy it. He crash-landed on the home world." Raan confirmed.

"We can assist with rescue." Austin offered.

"Thank you, Major. I think the worst is over. The Geth no longer possess the programming upgrades they had while enslaved by the Reapers." said Raan.

At that moment, the doors opened and Legion walked in.

"Shepard-Major. We are prepared to offer assistance." he said.

"What the hell is this?!" said Raan in shock.

"Wait, wait—everybody calm down!" said Austin quickly. "It's name is Legion. It helped me destroy the Collectors. You remember it from Tali's trail do you not?"

"I thought it seemed familiar." Said Xen.

"Nazara was using Legion like a signal booster to broadcast commands from the dreadnought. We freed him." said Austin.

"We freed "it." Tali corrected him.

"This is fascinating. With some study, I may be able to use it to find a weakness in the Geth consensus." said Xen.

"No. Legion helped us destroy the Collectors." said Austin defensively.

"So did your armour. Should I worry about its feelings as well?" Xen retorted.

"Don't continue this line of thought, Xen. Helldivers don't give second warnings, me especially." Leena warned her.

"Legion is my friend. More importantly, it's our best source of information on the Terror Geth and the army he now has under his control." said Austin.

"The scientific benefits-" Xen went to say.

"...are off the table." Austin interrupted. He then turned to Legion. "You owe us an explanation, Legion. How did the Terror Geth manage all this without you managing to stop him?"

Legion nodded and walked up to the holo in the middle of the room. As he accessed it, a hologram of the Terror Geth was projected out of it for everyone to see. Dell and Sill made sure to pay attention to this if there was a chance they could help.

"The Terror Geth, or Nazara as it is better known was the creation of Sovereign. When it was created however, it was the first Reaper to have a flaw in it's design. It's memory core caused it to think that it was a Geth, not an old machine. Sovereign remained unaware of the issue, and so
Nazara became the leader of the heretics. The name Terror Geth was given to it be Saren Arterius. "After it's defeat at the battle of the Citadel 5 years ago, it managed to escape. Somehow, it encountered the Collectors. The Reaper Harbinger recognized who Nazara really was and so repaired it completely, including the flaws in it's memory. Now fully aware of what it really was, Nazara returned to the heretics, now seen as a god walking among mortals in their eyes. In secret, Nazara returned to Rannoch and began all sort so experiments on the Geth, hoping to convert all Geth to the Reaper cause." Legion explained.

"That sounds familiar." Dell commented. "He's the one who created that virus, isn't he?"

"Yes." Legion replied. "After acquiring the knowledge from Project Overlord…"

"WHAT?!"

"Nazara as it turns out was the cause of Project Overlord turning agaisnt Cerberus. Nazara used remote control to replace the intended VI with itself and used the project to as an experiment to find out if the Geth could be controlled." Legion explained.

"So when I fought that hologram… I was actually fighting him." said Austin, rather shocked at this revelation.

"When you managed to shtu down Project Overlord, Nazara's link was severed, but it now had the knowledge it needed. It used this to create the virus. Fortunately, we found out about it and later used it rewrite the heretics as you know." said Legion.

"Hang on though. If we rewrote the heretics, how come Nazara wasn't changed as well if he's a Geth?" Sill asked, slightly confused.

"He has a Geth body, but a Reaper mind." Austin clarified.

"Precisely. It's Reaper mind made Nazara immune to its own virus. Rewriting the heretics was merely a set back in it's plan." said Legion.

"So how'd he gain control this time?" Dell asked.

"Nazara remade the virus and worked on reimplementing it into all Geth. This time though, it installed it as a dormant program so that it would remain undetectable. Within two years, it had infected all the Geth." said Legion.

"But if that's true, then why didn't it try to control you?" Sill asked, somewhat suspiciously.

"We are different. Repurposing the virus before allowed us to gain an immunity to it. We were the only Geth that Nazara was unable to control. By the time we found out though, it was already too late and our own people were now under Nazara's control. Rather than destroy us, Nazara decided instead to use as a broadcast for the Reaper signal to provide the Geth with further old machine upgrades." said Legion.

"At least without the Reaper signal, they will agree to oppose Nazara." said Raan.

"This is a false assumption. You have cut off the long rang control from the other Reapers, but Nazara can still control our people through use of the virus." said Legion.

"Let me guess. The only way this time to eliminate the virus is to kill it's source." Austin sighed.

"Affirmative."
"Great. I battled the Terror Geth god knows how many times and he still kept coming back. And now he's even more powerful than ever. Do we know where he is?" Austin asked.

"Nazara built a main base on Rannoch, but we do not know where it is located. The information was kept from us." said Legion.

"Keelah… I need to warn the fleet. Xen, coordinate with Gerrel. Move!" Raan ordered.

"Legion, get to work on finding Nazara's base. We didn't rewrite the heretics just so they could be the Reaper's salves all over again." said Austin.

"Understood." said Legion.

"Sill and I will also see if there is anything we can do to improve your chances against the Geth. The knowledge that legion shared with us two years has proved useful." said Dell.

"We would be willing to assist if possible." said Legion.

Dell and Sill simply nodded in acknowledgement and left the room.

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Bet none of you saw that one coming. ;)

To coincide with this chapter, the Terror Geth's new look is up on my deviantart page. So please do check that out.

Right, something to note for next week. The next chapter will be an original one, rather than the mission to rescue Admiral Korris. That mission simply happens in-between and is mentioned. This was an agreement made by several people I asked. Besides, you all know how it happens anyway.

So, next week will be an original chapter. You remember Skarlack's wife, Mirage? Well, next week you'll meet her fully... and so will Liara. Yep, our favourite Asari will have a main rival too.

Before I go actually, I'd like to say something.

Interesting fact about Tali in this story. She very nearly was the LI in this story. Back when I was planning the very first Helldiver Saga, I had in mind that Shepard would be very technical since he often maintains his armour and understands how it works, and I felt those would be good traits for a Shepard romanced with Tali.

Eventually though, I changed it to Liara since she's the canon romance for me, and this Shepard is based off of my canon game Shepard. So, yeah... you get the idea. Looking back on it now, I'm happy I made that choice. It's turned it better than I would've thought, and some parts of it have helped to shape the stories as they were written, and the romance has had an influence on how the ending will play out.

Plus, the telekinetic link is definitely one of the best ideas I had, and that wouldn't have been possible with Tali. Just thought you'd be interested in knowing that though, seeing as how Tali's back again.

Until next time. ;)

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Chapter 20, Liara's bane

Took a rather long time to finish this, but I still got it done in time.

Now we meet Skarlack's scary, carnivorousness and violent wife.

Enjoy! ;)

Chapter 20

Liara's bane

The mission to rescue Admiral Koris had been tense, but successful in the end.

After managing to disable the AA guns and a jamming tower, they'd managed to pick Koris up. He had at first refused to be saved, telling them to rescue his crew instead.

Austin however had found a better solution. His dropship had rescued the Admiral, while he got a separate team in another dropship to rescue his crew. Overall, pretty successful.

"Major, unrest has spread further than I thought. You were... right, that I return."

"Have you talked the civilian captains into staying?"

"Yes, they've regrouped into defensive positions around the fleet's core. If we hadn't stopped them from..." "Any aid I can offer is yours. After the Reapers enslaved the Geth against their will, and there's the possibility for peace if we free them, I'd give anything to stop the madness of this war."

"And that's why your people needed you back."

"Of course. It's time we turned our attentions to those we can still save. Farewell, Shepard. Fly safely."

Koris' hologram vanished and Austin walked back into the war room.

"Major, I have a matter that requires your attention." said Raan.

"Has the base been located?" Austin asked.

"Not yet. The Geth is still searching." said Raan, indicating to Legion. "If I recall, Tali once served with a Quarian soldier named Kal Reegar, yes?"

"Yes. I met him on Haestrom when I recruited Tali onto my team to help fight the Collectors. He then defended Tali at her trial." Austin replied.

"Then I assume he mentioned he might be posted to assignments concerning Dark Energy?" Raan asked.

"He mentioned it. But didn't say anything beyond that." said Tali, joining in the conversation.

"Recently, he reported that a Dark Energy trace had been spotted." Raan explained.
"Whereabouts? Is that something we should worry about?" Austin asked.

"We don't' know. But it's on the homeworld, and that's cause for concern." said a very familiar Quarian as he walked in. He was dressed in a mostly red suit and had a black visor. "Shepard, Tali Zorah, it's been too long."

"Reegar! Good to see you." said Tali happily.

"Same here, ma'am." Reegar nodded.

"Kal, how many times must I ask you to call me, Tali?" Tali sighed.

"Still working on it, ma'am." said Reegar.

"You look good, Reegar. How've you been?" Austin asked.

"As well as a soldier's life can be, I guess." Reegar replied.

"Anyway, you said this dark energy is on Rannoch?" Austin asked.

"From what the tech experts can tell me, yes." said Reegar. He activated the holo map and it projected Rannoch, pinpointing the location of the detected Dark Energy. Sill, Dell and Javik also came in at that moment. Most likely they'd heard about it and wanted to help if possible. All of them either techs or scientists, so they could be of some assistance.

"That doesn't make any sense though. Dark Energy isn't something that can be found on a planet." said Tali.

"Would it affect Rannoch in the same way it affected Haestrom's sun?" Austin asked with a hint of concern.

"I don't think so. Stars are different from planets. But that doesn't mean the home world is completely safe." said Tali.

"What else can you tell us about this, Reegar?" Austin asked.

"Nothing much. All they've been able to determine is that it's emanating forms from a mine deep underground." Reegar explained.

"That doesn't make sense though. You don't find energy underground." said Dell.

"Some forms of energy can be contained." said Javik.

"How though? You'd need advanced tech to do that. Even for the Geth, that would take a lot of resources."

"What about crystals though?" Sill asked.

For a moment, everyone was silent. The young Arkane had just made a very good point."

"Yes. And some crystals can be mined underground." said Javik.

"Legion, did the Geth or Nazara ever show any interest in Dark Energy?" Austin asked.

"Not that we know of." Legion replied. "But Nazara hid much from us. It may very well have been using dark energy in its experiments."
"That's worrying," said Tali. "Dark energy is very rare. So rare in fact that we barely know anything about it."

"And if Nazara's found a deposit of the stuff in a crystal form, that could even more trouble." said Sill.

"Then perhaps it should be investigated." said Raan.

"We'll head down there and assess the situation. We'll then call for backup if necessary." said Austin.

"You're bringing me too, Shepard. Don't think I'm gonna sit this one out." said Reegar.

"You're welcome to join us, Reegar." Austin nodded.

The mines were filled with the constant sound of drilling rock begin chipped away as Geth and Takaal soldiers worked on extracting the crystals. Stood on a higher level, a lone Takaal, different to the others observed the whole thing. This however was not Skarlack.

"My lady, the drones are becoming extremely weak from the constant exposure. Our progress is slowing." said a Takaal soldier.

Mirage turned to face the soldier.

"Have them rest for a while. Get the Geth to cover for them." she said.

"By your command." the soldier bowed.

Mirage stood out from the other Takaal because of her appearance, even compared to Skarlack. Though she wore the same type of Takaal armour as her husband, it was differently parts were shaped in such a way that they looked like bones, which gave the appearance that Mirage was in fact wearing bone armour. It was still the same metallic armour colour though, so that prevented it from looking completely like bone.

There were some real bones on the armour though. Most of them were skulls that Mirage wore as ornaments or trophies. In particular she wore the skull of a very large life form on her upper arm over her armour. Various over small skulls of smaller animals were worn as a tribal ornament across her chest. Something slightly scary was that she had one or two shrunken heads on her belt. In addition to this, the skull of a dinosaur was attached to her upper chest, partly serving as a breast cover.

Both her shoulders also had a guard over each one. Both of them had spikes on the outside, the right one of which had a human skull impaled on it.

The skull of a ram also adorned few face. Because of the shape of her face, the skull was split in half, so there was a gap in-between the two. It did however allow the horns to correctly cover her crests and the eye sockets to be correctly placed so she could see out of them. Metal plating of course was worn underneath as the real mask, and as protection in case the skull got shatter or fell off. The skull had been modified ever so slightly to have its teeth replaced with long fangs, giving Mirage a slightly scarier appearance.

Being a female Takaal, she also had several dreadlocks growing from behind her head. The tip of each had a bone claw on it.

Every single skull Mirage had had been taken from a life form that she'd killed and then eaten. Due to her carnivorous condition, she gladly enjoyed eating any species. Her own kind was an exception
though. If she'd been cannibalistic, she probably would've been killed long ago. Even so, her condition hadn't been ignored when she'd been growing up.

Takaal who had Menseneter were often feared or shunned upon as it was known to make them more violent and aggressive than normal Takaal, especially towards other species.

Mirage's comm then beeped. She took a small device from her belt and activated it. The holo of her husband projected out of it.

"I trust good progress has been made?"

"Indeed, General. More Dark energy crystals have been mined and are ready for collection." Mirage replied.

"Good. We will be along shortly to collect It." said Skarlack.

"The dark energy though is starting to affect our troops more frequently though. Their strength becomes drained more quickly. At the moment, the Geth are having to do all the work." said Mirage.

"No matter. Nazara will be pleased of the large amounts that have been excavated regardless." said Skarlack. "Continue as normal. Inform me of any... setbacks."

"As you wish, husband." said Mirage, bowing her head as the hologram vanished.

The dropship gently touched down outside the cave entrance and everyone stepped out. Austin had chosen to bring along Liara, Tali and Griffin for this. Reegar of course had come along too.

According to the readings, the dark energy signal was inside a mountain, which did admittedly look a bit like a volcano. Tali and Leena had assured Austin that this mountain wasn't a volcano though, so that did put his fears to rest.

"Stay alert, everyone. We're gonna have very little light down there and the Normandy may lose our signal." said Austin.

"Ready when you are, Shepard." said Reegar.

The group proceeded into the tunnels, keeping a constant eye out for any Geth or Takaal troopers that could risk sounding the alarm. 5 minutes or so later, they finally found another source of light. Several crystals aligned the walls, black and very dark red.

"This is worrying." Said Reegar. "None of this looks like it was done recently."

"Indeed, and judging by the scale of this mine, the Geth have been at this for quite some time." Austin agreed.

"Strange though. The Geth aren't known to use mining equipment." Said Reegar.

At that moment however, they suddenly heard the noise of a drill. Austin quickly motioned for the others to get down.

"Keep it slow. We don't how many there down here." He said.

The team took cover behind some nearby rocks and gently leaned out to get a glance.

Both Geth and Takaal soldier were gathering up the crystals and loading them in cargo crates.
All the Geth here were apparently modified specifically for mining. They’d had key areas reinforced with armour and their right arms were replaced with drills. A few Geth Primes though were assisting with the heavy lifting of larger crystals and the crates.

The Takaal meanwhile were mostly using mobile drilling machines with tank treads. A few others were supervising the operation.

"I feared as much." Austin whispered.

"So these are the Takaal?" Reegar asked, also keeping his voice down.

"Yeah. Don't underestimate them because they're insects. Their tough to take down and they fight relentlessly." Said Griffin.

"Regardless, they're in our way." Said Austin.

How do you wanna handle this, Shepard? Guns blazing, or explosives?" Griffin asked.

"Guns blazing. We're not to use explosives unless necessary. Last thing we want is a cave in." said Austin.

"Does bring back a few memories though doesn't it?" Liara asked telepathically.

"I know what you mean." Austin agreed.

Not bothering with a surprise attack, everyone simply walked out of cover. A Takaal soldier spotted them instantly.

"Intruders!" it yelled.

All the Geth and Takaal ceased their operations and immediately opened fire on the team. Some of the drilling machines even charged them.

Griffin however was quick to smash them out of the way with his gauntlet. He was Alpha's second strongest member after all (Kraan being the first) and the machines weren't that big anyway.

Both Austin and Liara charged the opposition. Liara even managed to take down both a Geth and Takaal by jumping on one and then jumping again and twisting the others head off with her feet.

Reegar meanwhile fought smart and jumped out from behind a nearby rock in front of a Geth soldier, emptying his rifle into it.

"Eat this, you synthetic son of a bitch!" he said.

Another driller charged at them, but Austin was able to easily pick up the machine as it charged. As he hauled it up onto its back end, he fired at its underside, causing it to smash into the floor hard.

Another Geth tried to charge him, but a quick plasma shot took care of it. Griffin also tripped up another Takaal soldier and brought his gauntlet right down so hard that he literally squished it like a bug.

Pretty soon, the team reached the central chamber.

Some sort of large tube was positioned in the centre. As Austin looked up, he noticed the massive Takaal ship that was attached to the tube and hovering over them.
"Looks like they're loading up more dark energy." Said Reegar.

"Quite an operation they've got going on here."

The Takaal and Geth instantly opened fire again.

"Liara and I will try stop them loading the dark energy. Keep us covered." Austin ordered.

"Got it." Said Griffin.

Both Austin and Liara leapt over the boxes they'd taken cover behind and ran at the large tube connected to the Devastator. They were just too later though to stop the platform of dark energy is rose up towards to the ship.

"Damn it." Austin cursed.

At that moment, Mirage suddenly made herself visible on the high level.

"I was wondering when you would show up. I've been hoping to engage you myself." she said.

"And who might you be?" Liara asked, readying her gun.

"I am Mirage. Second in command of the Takaal army, and wife to Skarlack." said Mirage.

The Takaal then suddenly teleported right beside Liara and punched her hard, knocking the Asari down. Before Austin could react, Mirage teleported in front of him. He was just able to counter her punch as it knocked his revenant out of his hands. But it still knocked him back a bit.

The female Takaal glared at him through the holes in her skull mask.

"You are weak, Helldiver." she said tauntingly.

Austin attempted several fast punches at Mirage, but she countered every one of them, the final punch smashing him into the far wall.

"The fact that you organics possess a sense of morality and we do not, gives us an evolutionary advantage."

The female Takaal then suddenly hauled him up by the neck before then throwing him down onto the floor, hard.

"And if history has proven anything..."

She then grabbed him again and threw him much further this time. So much so that when he hit the wall, several rocks fell on him, one of which pinned his leg down.

"… It is that evolution always wins."

Mirage gently drew one of her two weapons from her belt. She appeared to have two tonfa like weapons, one of which she spun with fierce speed.

"Wonder if you Helldivers taste different to normal humans. Let's find out." she said, raising the ready weapon and aiming it Austin.

Just before the female Takaal could thrust however, something hard hit her and the force sent her flying. Austin looked up to see that Liara had managed to tackle Mirage.
The two rolled about for a moment before Liara managed to kick Mirage off. The two slowly got back up as they glared at one another. For a moment, Mirage gave an almost concentrated look and Liara for a moment felt as though a foreign presence was touching her.

"Asari, and quite a young one at that." said Mirage admirably. "They sent a child to do an adults job? Ha! They must be running out of good soldiers."

"I am not a child." said Liara.

"We'll see."

Austin meanwhile had finally managed to pull himself free. Just as he scooped Excalibur up however, there was a green flash and Skarlack teleported right in front of him.

"I hoped we'd meet again, Shepard. We have unfinished business to attend to." he smiled eagerly. "How's the chest?"

"Don't think you'll find me easy again, Skarlack. This time, I'm prepared for you. I disarmed you once, and I can do it again." said Austin, raising his blade.

"Don't be so certain." said Skarlack.

The Takaal General drew his staff and twirled it several times. He didn't use the omni blades or his second set of arms though. That was a small bit of good news.

Mirage swiped consistently at Liara with the sharp bone claws on her fingers. Liara didn't want to take any risks in case these claws were actually able to tear through her armour. Being attached to a Takaal, they probably were.

Liara managed to duck under one particular strike and delivered a swift back hand strike, knocking the female Takaal back temporarily.

Mirage though was quick to attack again, her swipes now even faster and with more aggression.

After dodging several of them, Liara managed to block one with her left arm. Mirage however suddenly grabbed onto it and used her other hand to grab Liara's leg and pulled it up hard, causing the Asari to fall.

Mirage seized the opportunity and brought her fist down hard. Liara only just managed to roll out of the way in time before the female Takaal's fist smashed into the ground.

Liara managed to counter several more swipes, but Mirage managed to thrust through her defence and grabbed her around the neck. She then threw the Asari again. This time though, Liara skidded as she rolled back onto her feet just in time to counter Mirage's lunge attack.

The Asari threw the female Takaal off of her and she landed on her four legs. She then jumped again onto a higher platform.

Using her biotics, Liara followed. When she landed however, she saw no sign of Mirage. She remained on her guard though in case the female Takaal tried to jump her from behind.

Sure enough, unknown to her, Mirage was crawling on a nearby beam, her clawed feet digging into the metal hard. The Takaal pounced on Liara, delivering a swift kick, sending her back against a wall aligned with cables.
Mirage charged and swung her arm at Liara. The Asari narrowly moved out of the way just as Mirage's claws slashed through some of the cables.

Liara reacted quickly to this and she enveloped Mirage in her biotics. Seizing the chance, Liara pulled the female Takaal towards her right into a waiting punch and then a swinging kick, sending Mirage crashing into a weapons rack.

That didn't stop the female Takaal however and she slowly got back up, her synthetic green eyes starting glow even brighter, and her hands becoming in dark green biotics.

Liara knew biotics when she saw them and she couldn't help but step back a tiny bit. Mirage could sense Liara's caution in her body language. Her fanged mouth curled into an evil grin.

"You're not the only one with biotics, you know." She said.

Before Liara could respond at all, Mirage threw a concentrated biotic beam which the Asari just managed to block in time with her own biotic shield. Mirage didn't relent though and continued concentrating the attack on Liara.

Liara did the best she could, but she could only hold this for so long. She could feel a tiny bit of sweat forming on her forehead.

Mirage's grin widened as she could sense the Asari weakening.

Liara then did something rather unexpected. Using her free hand, she threw a small biotic pulse at Mirage. This temporarily knocked her back and caused her to lose her concentration.

Normal biotics weren't able to do this move easily because of how concentrated they often had to be on maintaining a biotic shield, let alone just one biotic attack.

Only very strong or experienced biotics could pull off a move like that, and Liara was both. She was very experienced in using her biotics as a result of her developing her abilities from a young age and her Helldiver training, and she was also very strong. Being a natural biotic as well as having a bond with Austin gave her plenty of strength to go for long periods using her biotics.

Mirage only had a few seconds to recover from her blow before Liara attacked again. Two swift punches knocked the female Takaal even further back before one final one smashed her right into the wall, the blow causing her to black out.

Liara gently panted as her adversary fell to the floor, unconscious.

Her attention was drawn to Austin and Skarlack, who were still fighting.

"Your plan to stop this operation of ours has come to rumination, Shepard." the General snarled.

"I hear a lot of talk, General. But in the final accounting, what does all that talk get you? A futile quest for power, a mutilated body, your place as the Reaper's errand body." said Austin, parrying each strike Skarlack attempted.

"I'm no errand boy!" Skarlack retorted. " And I'm not on this for politics. I am the leader of an army so powerful it consumes all in their path!"

Austin managed to get an opening and he kicked Skarlack back.

"Yet you use that power to serve a race with no loyalty, no spirit, just programming." said Austin.
"What have you to show for all that power? What have you to gain?"

"The future. A future where there are no Helldivers!"

Skarlack lunged again, this time unrelenting in his trikes, refusing to give Austin an opening.

Liara was about to assist when she suddenly felt something land on her. Mirage had recovered practically in no time and she leapt onto the Asari’s back.

Liara then suddenly felt a huge amount of pain in her left shoulder as Mirage sank her teeth in, which were sharp and strong enough to get through her armour. The Asari managed to fight through the pain though and she delivered a sharp punch to Mirage face, knocking the Takaal off of her.

Liara quickly applied media gel to the bite wound as Mirage licked her lips. Rather disgustingly, she seemed to enjoy it, she even gave a moan of aroused pleasure as her snake like tongue licked at the Asari blood on her fangs and swallowed it.

"Mmmmm! Delicious. Asari taste better than I ever dreamed they would." she smiled evilly, baring her still stained teeth.

"You're disgusting!" Liara groaned as the media gel finished its work on her shoulder.

"We all have our little problems, youngling." said Mirage.

She reached again for her belt and unsheathed both her tonfas. Liara could see where this was going, and drew her sword.

Mirage simply smiled and the two readied for a fight.

"A good meal such as you, is worth fighting for." she said.

All the while, Reegar, Tali and Griffin were still fighting what was left of the Geth and Takaal forces.

So far, they were holding well. Griffin in particular was creating a whole body pile as enemy after enemy fell to his minigun.

"Where were you when we were on Haestrom?" said Reegar impressively.

"Doubt I would've made that much of a difference." said Griffin.

So far, neither fight was showing a winning opponent. Skarlack was just as difficult as ever as he duelled Austin, and Liara was finding mirage just as tricky.

The female Takaal moved and fought with a huge amount of ferocity, almost as if she was letting her hunger and desire to eat fuel her attacks. She must be very hungry.

At the same time, both Takaal got an opening on their opponents and kicked them both back. Both Austin and liar banged into each other, but quickly recovered and stood back to back.

"You okay?" Austin asked telepathically.

"Minor bite, and I'm not reading any poison. I'll be fine." Liara replied.
"We can take 'em both if we focus." Said Austin.

"At least this time I won't be forced to watch." Said Liara.

The two Helldivers twirled their swords and went into their traditional battle stances that they always did when they were about to fight a tricky opponent using their union bond.

"Ready?"

"Like you even had to ask."

"Surrender, Helldivers. We are two, and you are no match for us both!" Skarlack snarled.

"You are mistaken." Said Liara.

Both Takaal attacked at the same time, their blades blocked by their opponents.

The whole battle became a blur of silver and black blades as the two Takaal tried to overpower their foes. Their strategy of attack though was proving to be their disadvantage. By taking the outside and forcing Shepard and Liara together, they only made it harder for themselves. The two bond mates always fought at their absolute best whenever they stood side by side. Plus, the union was a lot more handy at defence since the two shared their reflexes and could sense incoming attack the other might not notice easily.

Time and time the again, the two Helldivers would either attack with move that weaved around the other, giving the element of surprise, or they would often switch opponents. The sheer amount of times they changed positions was hard to count.

Just when it was going so well however, Skarlack and Mirage changed their tactics.

Both Takaal launched a spinning attack at the same time. As both Austin and Liara blocked the attacks however, they suddenly wove around their opponents, coming in-between them and forcing them to split part by a small distance.

"Impressive. Unfortunately for you though, we have better researched the unions of Asari." Said Skarlack.

Austin couldn't help but curse in his head. So it seemed that Skarlack now knew about the true extent of his union with Liara, even if he still couldn't detect it.

This time, the four separated into two. Mirage fighting Austin, and Liara fighting Skarlack.

The Asari managed to land a kick on the Takaal General, causing him to stumble backwards against some crates. She attempted to bring her sword down, but Skarlack spun around her and gave her a violent push on the back, causing her to smack into the crates and lose hold of her sword. Before Liara had a moment to try and pick it back up again, Skarlack grabbed her by the leg and threw her. Liara was able to regain balance while in mid-air and she disappeared swiftly behind some more crates.

Skarlack's pupiless green eyes scanned the area, remaining constantly vigilant for any sign of a Helldiver armour.

Liara then suddenly popped up behind two crates and used her biotics to throw them at him. This did little though since he simply smashed them aside with arms.
Liara didn't give him the chance for an opening though. She quickly leapt onto the General's shoulders and punched his face several times. Didn't have much affect due to his helmet, but it was better than nothing. Still, the Asari only managed to land two strikes on the Takaal general before he grabbed her leg and threw her onto the floor.

Liara only just managed to roll backwards in time just as Skarlack's staff came down on where she'd been. She quickly delivered several more swift punches to the General's body before he swung to the side. She ducked under the attack and punched again before Skarlack punched her hard in the stomach sending her back into the crates again.

"Why do you persist, Asari? You know that Mirage and I are stronger. You're only delaying the inevitable." He snarled.

"You may have more power than we could ever dream of having…" said Liara, jumping back slightly to avoid another slash. "But the flame that burns brightest, burns out the quickest."

"Wise words, youngling. But still only words!"

Austin counterattacked a strike from Mirage and managed to kick her back. He then spotted Liara's sword on the floor. Rolling under another swipe from Mirage he scooped the sword up in his free hand.

"Liara, catch!"

He threw the sword to her and she caught it just as Skarlack brought his staff down. Black blade clashed with silver.

"Up till now, we have but toyed with you." The General growled.

Skarlack then kicked Liara hard just as Mirage did the same to Austin. Although this forced the two back to back again, the two Takaal didn't give them the chance to use their union. They both thrust their hands forward, lifting their facing opponent into the air and throwing them against the wall.

The two Helldiver just managed to recover in time as Skarlack and Mirage brought their blades down.

Desperate for something to end this fight, and slightly overwhelmed by the fighting force of both Takaal, Austin desperately studied Mirage for any kind of exploitable weakness. Then he noticed one. Her front left leg was facing outward more than the others, close enough him to maybe cripple it if he performed the right move. Sensing his thought, Liara caught on and transmitted a thought of him of a move she could then do once he had performed his.

Quickly agreeing, Austin seized his chance.

His left hand let go of Excalibur's handle and swept downwards, hitting Mirage's leg in the process.

Although Mirage had the synthetic weave that all Takaal had, she had normal legs, whereas her husband had mechanical legs.

The force of Austin's fist was strong that it twisted her knee join at such an angle that a loud crack was heard.

Mirage screamed in pain as she lost her balance. Liara acted quickly and spun just as Austin ducked for her, allowing her sword to slice through Mirage's left arm just above the elbow, severing it completely.
Mirage's cries of pain only intensified and she fell to the floor clutching what was left of her arm.

"Mirage!"

Skarlack's eyes glowed brighter than before, and a dark green like angry mist started to emanate from them.

The General roared in anger and he hit both Helldivers with a telekinesis push so hard it sent both of flying into another cave entrance, which collapsed around them. It even caused a long Geth soldier to join them.

Both Austin and Liara hit the wall hard and everything went black for a moment.

Skarlack gave a very angry growl as he watched the cave entrance collapse, cutting the Helldiver off from them.

His eyes then returned to normal and he immediately turned his attention to his wife. He knelt down and picked up her severed arm.

"Hold still, love. This may hurt a bit." He said.

He put the severed arm against the join on Mirage's arm and put his other hands over the wound. A faint glow surrounded both his hand and the arm.

Mirage groaned through gritted teeth for a moment before the pain subsided and Skarlack let go. He then placed both hands on Mirage's broken leg and did the same, healing it with in seconds.

"Thank you, husband." Said Mirage as Skarlack helped her up.

Unlike the scars Austin had given Skarlack on Cronos station, Mirage didn't have any on her arm since Liara's sword was not made of Kartalrium. The healed wound was perfect and seamless.

"I will not have us face them alone again." Said Skarlack. He walked up to a nearby console and activated it. A hologram of the Terror Geth appeared out of it. "Lord Nazara, the mines have been compromised."

"Shepard?"

"Indeed."

"More time is required for me to study the dark energy. Ready the ship for departure." The Terror Geth ordered.

"But we cannot leave the dark energy like this. The Helldivers will seize it." Skarlack objected.

"Then destroy the mines!"

Austin felt the vision return to his eyes and he groaned das he picked himself up.

"Bloody hell, that hurt." He said.

He then noticed Liara had also recovered and had managed to get up onto her knees.

"You alright?" she asked.
"I'm okay." Austin replied as he stood up.

They looked around for a moment and noticed the dead Geth that had been pushed in with him. It was dead and impaled on a dark energy crystal.

"We'd better get out of here." Said Liara.

Before she could do anything however, there was a sudden humming sound.

Both Helldivers whirled around to the find the dead Geth had somehow reactivated itself, its eye now glowing a very dark red, and some kind of red and black liquid leaking from the hole in its chest as it pulled itself off the crystal.

Before Liara could react in time, the Geth jumped on her and trailed to claw at her helmet. It was barely a few seconds though before Austin performed several fast swipes that cut the machine in several tiny pieces.

"Well that takes care of that." Austin panted.

Without her husband even having to say anything, Liara activated her biotics and forced all of the debris blocking their path away.

Both Mirage and Skarlack were stood on highest level of the mine shaft. Mirage had a large device in her hand.

"We'd love to stick around, Shepard. But I'm squeamish." She smiled evilly.

She tossed the device down to the ground and both she and Skarlack teleported.

As the device hit the floor, it started beeping.

"Bomb!" said Griffin with alarm.

"Run! Get clear!"

The whole mine detonated and the entire structure of the caves seemed to crumble and cave in. The explosion itself sent everyone flying. Eventually, it subsided.

The whole main operation was now cut off due to the many rocks that had caved in.

"Everyone alright?" Austin asked.

"No bones broken, I think." Said Reegar.

"Normandy, do you copy?" said Griffin into his comm, only with now answer. "Normandy! Damn it, no answer."

From the bridge of the Devastator, Skarlack observed the clearing smoke cloud from the mountain.

"General, scans are showing they're still alive. Shall I send down a squad to eliminate them?" Mirage asked.

"No. I'd rather not waste more of our people. Besides, I have a better idea. Send down my pet." Said Skarlack.
Knowing full well what her husband was referring to, Mirage smiled and gave a small bow.

"With pleasure, sir."

The whole place started shake, almost as though an earthquake has started.

"Now what?" Austin sighed.

"I didn't touch anything." Said Griffin defensively.

The rumbling suddenly stopped and was replacing instead by thuds every second or so. Almost sounded like… footsteps.

"Something's coming our way. Whatever it is, it's big and it's coming fast." Said Reegar, readying his rocket launcher.

The huge familiar black and husk like form of a dragon quickly came into view and charged at them.

"The Draco." Said Austin. "Run!"

No one hesitated an quickly broke into a run.

"What is that thing?!" said Tali.

"Long story. For now just run." Said Austin.

"Is it after us?!!" Reegar asked.

"I'm not looking!" Griffin replied.

Since it was underground, the Draco obviously couldn't fly and was forced walk, using its wings as arm supports. As a result, it was slower than usual, but it was still able to keep up with the team at running speed.

A shot a fireball which they narrowly managed to duck down to avoid. The Draco snapped at them several times, its Dragon's Teeth narrowly missing.

Eventually, the team made it too much smaller cave entrance that led out into a much larger cave. They fit through easily, but the Draco was much too big. That didn't stop the Dragon from trying though. It became wedged in the entrance, constantly thrashing in an attempt to break through. With each thrust, more and more of its hulking mass broke through the rock. It breathed another concentrated blast of fire. Once again, it just narrowly missed.

Finally clear, everyone took a moment to catch their breath. Only now did they suddenly realize the Draco had chased them into a dead end. The only exit was the way they'd come in.

"That rock won't hold it forever." Said Austin.

"Then we're gonna have to make our stand here, Shepard." Said Griffin.

"No arguments there." Said Austin.

The thrashing grew more and more intense and the sound of falling rocks could be heard. The Draco was almost free.
"Not sure I like the sound of that." said Reegar.

"Get ready everyone." Said Austin.

The Draco gave one more thrust and the rocks gave way, finally freeing it at last.

The Dragon slowly proceeded into the open area. Austin was waiting for it, his sword and shield drawn.

"Come get some." He said challengingly.

The Draco roared and charged at him.

With a simply dodge, and quick movement of his arms, Austin avoided the Draco snout and put a massive tear in the side of the dragon's mouth with Excalibur, causing the Draco to back away slightly in preparation for another strike.

"OPEN FIRE!" Austin yelled.

Tali and Reegar popped out from behind a rock and opened fire on the Draco, their shots impacting on its tough exterior, but doing very little damage. The Draco's attention shifted to them and it growled.

At the same time though, Griffin and Liara suddenly appeared on the other side of the cave and opened fire as well.

The Draco's attention now shifted to them and it swung its tail at them. Griffin just managed to push Liara down at duck at the same time as tail swept over them, its spike just managing to scrape across Griffin's back.

The Draco then once again turned to Tali and Reegar, spitting a massive fireball right out them. The two Quarians narrowly managed to avoid it.

Austin then came up from behind, firing at the Draco's neck. The Dragon was quick though to fire another flame burst. His armour though kept him safe. It was good thing the Draco still hadn't learned yet that its fire couldn't hurt Helldivers.

Reegar meanwhile snuck up as well while the Draco's head was turned. Sliding under the Draco's flame, he fired his rocket launcher at point blank range.

The force of the rocket sent the Draco flying until it smashed against the wall. It emitted and angry roar and once again swung its tail.

"No you don't!" said Austin as he grabbed onto the tail and stopped it from hitting Reegar.

However, the tactic hadn't really been thought through thoroughly, as the Draco was able to haul him up easily and then gave its tail a flick, sending the Helldiver crashing into Reegar.

Before the Draco could finish them off though, several more shots hit it from behind and it turned to the source. Griffin was stood on higher ground.

"Hey, hothead!"

He fired several more shots to get the Dragon to come up close to him. Once it was within range, he took a grenade from his belt and threw it at the Draco's open mouth.
Just when it looked as though the grenade would go in however, the Draco's tail suddenly knocked it away. It bounced off several sides of the cave before it finally settled and the countdown ended.

"Oh crap."

Despite being much smaller, the explosion as visible from orbit. Skarlack smiled as he witnessed it from the zoomed view of the Devastator's bridge.

"Ooooh. That'll do some damage." He smiled evilly.

The rocks stirred as the Draco broke free, spreading its wings and roaring in the process. As far as it could see, there was no sign of the team. The husk scanned the area with its eyes thoroughly.

After some time, it finally accepted that they were dead. Flapping several times, it lifted into the air and took off through the large opening in ceiling that had been created by the grenade.

A few seconds later, more rocks shifted as everyone pulled themselves out of the debris. Griffin even smashed several of them apart with his gantlet.

"Well, that didn't go exactly as planned." He said.

"That's because any soldier knows better than to detonate a grenade in a confined space!" said Reegar crossly.

"Even if I intended the "confined space" to the belly of the beast?" Griffin argued.

"You nearly got us killed!" said Reegar.

"Reegar, it could've been worse. Let's just be thankful we're all right. You can play the blame game once we're back on the Normandy." Said Austin.

Back on board the Normandy, Raan was at least pleased to hear that the remaining Dark Energy had been destroyed. Though she was concerned about how much the Geth had managed to gather.

Currently, Liara was in the medbay having Mirage's bit looked at, just to be absolutely certain that it didn't carry any bacteria, poison, infection, or anything harmful.

"Deep scans identify nothing. You were right, nothing harmful." Said Dr Michel.

"Thank you for checking just to be sure though." Said Austin gratefully.

"It was no trouble at all, Shepard." Michel smiled.

"Thank you, doctor." Said Liara.

The Asari got up from the bed and stepped back inside her unlocked armour. Right as it finished sealing though, she suddenly lost her balance and slumped onto the bed. She groaned weakly.

"What's wrong?!" Austin asked worriedly.

"I don't know. I suddenly feel… weak." Liara panted.

Dell, who had been present in the medbay also quickly activated his omni tool and ran a full scan of
Liara with her armour on. It flashed red at her hand. It was only now that he noticed a black and red stain of some kind on her left hand.

"What is this?" he asked.

"I don't know. That Geth was covered in it. Leaking it, almost like... blood." Said Liara weakly.

Doctor Chakwas handed Dell a scalpel and too a scraping of the substance from Liara's hand.

"Put your armour in the airlock for decontamination and go take a thorough shower, now." He said.

Austin helped Liara up and led her out of the medbay.

"Don't worry, love. I'd be more than happy to help you with the shower part." he winked at her.

"I thought you might." Liara smiled.

"I don't think you'd need worry about further Helldiver interference, my lord. Not with Shepard gone." Said Mirage.

Skarlack and Mirage stood before the Terror Geth. Behind the Geth/Reaper was a massive collection of dark energy crystals. All that been excavated from the mines before its destruction.

"What evidence do you possess of this fact, Mirage?" Nazara asked, the doubt obvious in its question.

"I destroyed the mines, as you instructed, and then the Draco hunted them down." Said Mirage.

"Shepard is not so easily destroyed. He came back from the dead just as I did, and we have many battles behind us to prove it." Said the Terror Geth.

Mirage couldn't help but give a low angry growl at this. Skarlack though put a hand on her shoulder and gave her a look to stand down.

Unlike her husband, Mirage didn't have the same respect for Nazara. She did not believe it was a true Reaper since it didn't have a Reaper body.

She dared not show this disrespect though. Even she knew better than to disobey a mutated Geth Prime with the mind of a Reaper.

The Terror Geth went back to examining the Dark Energy. Skarlack couldn't help but show a bit of concern at this. It had affected his people rather rapidly. It would not be good if it did the same to one of their leaders.

"With respect, my lord, maybe you should take a break. I worry that too much... contact with the dark energy may allow its properties to adversely affect you." He said.

"False. I have not permitted myself contact enough."

The Terror Geth suddenly grabbed a large shard of the dark energy and pulled it apart from the rest.

"Wait! Lord Nazara, no! Not your core chamber! You do not know what it will do!" Skarlack shouted.

But the Terror Geth did not listen, and thrust the shard into its chest.
Its body started to spasm violently and its optics glowed a very bright but dark red as the Dark Energy started to spread all over the Terror Geth's body…

To be continued...

Well, how about that? ;)

Also, I've done a design of Mirage which is now visible on my Deviantart page. Please do check it out. Fair warning though, it may be scary.

Half term is next week, so... just a bit of warning that next weeks chapter may risk being rushed. During half term, I get distracted a lot. I'll do my best to stay on target though.

See you next time.
Chapter 21, Darkness Rising

Because I found out it's N7 day, I figured I'd upload the chapter today seeing as it was already done.

Sorry again about the delay last week. Hopefully this makes up for it. I'm much happier with it now that it's joined with the other chapter.

Hope you enjoy.

Chapter 21

Darkness Rising

Austin sat in silence in the dropship. With him was X-5, EDI and Legion.

They were on their way to disable a Geth server controlling several fighter squadrons which were attacking the liveships. There was every chance this would cripple the Quarian fleet, so it had become a priority.

As the dropship neared it's target though, Austin couldn't help but once again think about a question he'd asked himself a few days back. Back when he had just come out of a rather exhausting fight.

It had all happened a few days ago...

Dell was examining the dark energy liquid he'd collected from Liara under a microscope.

"Hmmm. The base elements of this liquid Dark Energy are unlike anything I've ever encountered. Must've been highly concentrated to have affected Liara's armour so rapidly." He said to himself. "Unfortunately, results are slow coming without the use of proper diagnostic tools. Thank you very much, X-5."

As the Arkane moved the slide however, he failed to notice a very tiny little drop fall off and land on a dead but intact Geth body that had been captured by a Helldiver team and had been sent to Dell for study.

As the Arkane took the slide over for a high tech scan, the body stirred ever so slightly.

"Still, at least it's quiet in here. Doing this sort of work in the cargo bay back on the SR2 was such a bother."

He went back to examining the dark energy through the scanner. He was currently the only one in the science lab since Sill was doing a routine check on the simulator to make sure it still worked perfectly and Javik was currently taking some time off to meditate in the room he'd been given on the engineering deck. X-5 was also helping Sill out with the checks since she very often needed heavy lifting done if she needed to have some parts moved in order to get at others.

As Dell examined the dark energy more closely, he began to notice something rather worrying. Something that almost looked like…

A quiet clang made him jump and he looked to around to see who had caused that. No one was there...
though.

Deciding that he'd probably just imagined it, Dell shrugged and went back to his work. Just before he could though, the clang came again, this time much louder.

"Who's doing that? This isn't funny." He groaned.

The Arkane's answer however was soon answered when the originally dead Geth body suddenly jumped out from behind a table and lunged at him.

"What the krell?!!"

Dell narrowly managed to avoid the Geth strikes and quickly toppled over a massive rack in an effort to try and slow it down.

The zombiefied Geth became temporarily trapped in-between the racks bars and it's arm flailed about widely trying to grab onto Dell. In the proves, it ended up destroying his microscope.

"I needed that!"

The Geth finally managed to wrench itself free and reached for Dell. Just before the fingers could touch him however, a sudden shot hit the Geth in the head, knocking it to the ground.

X-5 and Sill, who had probably just been returning from the simulator, had burst into the science lab and X-5 had fired the shot.

Dell breathed a sigh of relief, believing the danger was now over. However, the Geth suddenly got up again. X-5 however had been prepared for this. He charged the Geth to the floor and smashed it's head to pieces.

"ORDER: And stay broken!" he said.

"How the hell did that happen?" Sill asked as she helped her father up.

"ANALYSIS: Scans show dark energy was present in that dead Geth." Said X-5.

"The Dark Energy did that?!" Dell asked in surprise.

Skarlack and Mirage kept their distance. Nazara had stopped spasming, but he hadn't said anything yet.

Whatever the dark energy had done to the Geth/Reaper, it had certainly had a visible affect. Several dark energy crystals now stuck out from his back and his optic lights now glowed the same colour as the Dark Energy.

He gave a low growl as though he was taking a deep intake of breath.

"My lord, are you alright?" Skarlack asked cautiously. He was not nervous, simply playing it safe.

"Yes Skarlack. In fact, I've never felt better." The Terror Geth replied as he turned to face the two Takaal.

Something about his voice was different. It no longer sounded so machine like and emotionless. It now sounded more like it had a personality to it.
"You… sound different." Said Skarlack hesitantly.

"The Dark Energy has made some modifications. Not surprising since my new body was constructed with your synthetic combined with Geth. It would it allows me certain… organic traits." Said the Terror Geth.

Skarlack and Mirage were unsure how to reply to this. The Terror Geth observed his arm for a moment, noticing how the Dark energy had now created another weave, binding it with his Geth form.

"It's as if Dark Energy now flows through me like blood." He said. "This certainly confirms my theories. But now I must determine if I am able to control it. There is one more experiment I must perform."

The Terror Geth once again walked up to the collection of dark energy crystals and took another shard. This time, he simply stored it, rather than embed it in his core.

"What are your orders, my lord?" Skarlack asked as he and Mirage gave a low bow.

"For now, remain here and await my command. Assume command in my absence." Nazara replied.

"As you wish."

"That doesn't make sense though. It may not be impossible, but you have to remember that Geth fry their memory cores when they die. Not to mention how damaged their internal systems become. The fact that dark energy can bring a Geth completely back to life seems almost impossible." Said Sill.

The recent resurrection of the Geth in the science lab had caused a lot of cause for concern. Currently, Austin, Legion, Tali, Leena, Dell, Sill and X-5 had gathered in the war room to discuss the new concern.

"It must be repairing them somehow, or at least to the point where they can function again, even if it's not very well." Said Tali

"Regardless, this isn't something we should take lightly. If Nazara can bring back dead Geth, that makes it even worse for us." Said Austin.

"Even so however, it's not gonna give him that big of an advantage, is it?" Sill asked. "I mean, where's he gonna get enough dead Geth to make another army?"

"We might know." Said Legion, a hint of worry almost noticeable in his voice.

Legion had been most insistent that they investigate a long abandoned canyon far away from any Geth territories. Austin, Tali, Leena and X-5 had all accompanied him.

"STATEMENT: Legion, you still haven't explained what we're doing here. What do we hope to find?" X-5 asked.

"The sight of the largest and also the last battle between the Geth and the creators. It ended the war." Legion explained.

"But surely the corpses aren't still there, are they?" Leena asked.

"We do not know for certain. That is why we are here." Said Legion.
"Even so, it was a long time ago. Surely the bodies might have been buried or something?"

Leena’s question however was soon answered when they rounded a corner. Hundreds of long dead Geth and Quarian bodies looted the canyon.

"For the first time in my life, Legion, I had hoped you were wrong." Said Austin.

At that moment, the Terror Geth suddenly swooped over them, flying using two massive thrusters on his back. He landed on the high ground on top of one of the cliffs.

"Shepard. How fortuitous that I might find you here." He said. His eye then fell on X-5. "I see you brought your trusty watch dog here as well. I was certain he’d be convalescing in a scrap yard by now."

"REQUEST: Why don't you invite him down here for a chat and he can say that to my face?!" said X-5, banging his fists together challengingly.

"I know why you're here, Nazara." Said Austin.

"Hardly a surprise, Shepard. After all, you and I have been at this a long time. But now, you're time has come to an end." Nazara replied.

The Geth Reaper then took the dark energy shard out of it's storage and threw it at the ground. For a moment, there was nothing but silence, but then the whole ground began to glow black and red. The many dead Quarian and Geth bodies began to stir. The ground also started to move.

At the same time, the crystals on the Terror Geth's back started to glow brightly along with his eye and the gaps in his armour from within.

"Rise, my army!" he yelled.

The ground shook even more violently, and then it burst open in several places as the dead bodies rose up, each one glowing from within with dark energy.

"Keelah!" said Tali and Leena together in shock as they watched not only the dead Geth, but also their own rise up from the dead.

"BEHOLD! THE POWER OF DARK ENERGY!"

Within just a few seconds, the entire battlefield had risen from the dead and they were now slowly moving towards the team.

"Nazara has desecrated the resting place of our fallen ancestors, and the Geth's." said Tali.

"Not even the dead are free from the Reapers." Said Austin.

"So I was right all along. Dark Energy can be harnessed. I now possess complete control over my army." Said Nazara. "Destroy them!"

The dead Geth and Quarians slowly started to limp and advance towards them.

"Tali, Leena, get back to the dropship!" said Austin as he, X-5 and Legion armed themselves.

"We're not going anywhere, Shepard. We'll stand with you. Besides, you may all require tech experts when this is over with." Said Leena.
The team drew their chosen weapons and attacked. Austin, Legion, X-5 and Tali used their guns while Leena used her tomahawk and knife.

X-5 switched to meleeing one Geth when it got too close. He smashed off its head and then pulled off it's arm.

"RECOMMENDATION: Go for the limbs! The smaller the pieces, the better." He said.

"Sound advice, old friend." Said Austin.

Holstering his Revenant, the Helldiver drew Excalibur from his back and started hacking and chopping at the dead Geth and Quarians.

All the while, the Terror Geth continued to observe.

"I have mastered Dark Energy. When you fall, Shepard… you too shall join my army." He said.

Not long into the battle and a lot of the army had been cut down. However, all of that effort was starting to take it's toll.

Austin didn't feel out of breath, but he was starting to feel much slower than usual. He also felt as though he had to put even more effort into moving and that was starting to tire him out.

Leena appeared to be suffering the same. The two stood back to back for a moment, starting to pant in an effort to get more breath into their lungs.

"I feel… heavy. Can't move as fast as I used to." Said Leena.

"STATEMENT: I and Legion are suffering the same." Said X-5, also sounding somewhat weak and moving noticeably slower than usual.

Legion also was indeed looking as though he was struggling to move well.

"This much prolonged exposure to dark energy must be zapping your power and it's affecting your strength." Said Tali, the only one who was so far unaffected.

"We cannot falter now." Said Austin.

The team continued to fight, but with their energy drained massively and their strength weakened, they weren't fairing any better than before. Worse still, Nazara's army wasn't relenting and they were still coming.

As Austin cut down a dead Quarian he suddenly felt another grab onto him. With his strength almost exhausted, he was unable to move fast enough to shake it off and he soon found others piling onto him.

Very soon, the same started to happen to X-5 as well. The Quarians pulled hard on his arms, causing the robot to topple over while the Geth tried to claw at him.

"X-5!" Leena yelled.

But the Quarian was unable to provide any assistance as the dead Geth and Quarians also started to pile on top of her. Even Tali and Legion were now powerless against the almost infinite army of the dead.

From atop the cliff, Nazara observed. The dark energy combined with his synthesis and Geth body
had indeed changed him. It now had him experiencing things he never had before.

Only a few emotions were present. The Geth/Reaper had counted on something like this happening and so had made sure an inhibitor had been installed in case the synthetic weave in his new body ended up with some organic side effects.

In this case though, the dark energy had mostly just given him a personality. One or two emotions could be felt or experienced by him. A hunger for power and desire were two of them. More than emotions. One or two emotions could be felt or experienced by him. A hunger for power and desire were two of them.

That desire was to evolve even further. Now that he knew who he really was, he now had a new goal in mind.

Though this new body made him stronger, and more intelligent than any normal Geth or AI, the Terror Geth still had the desire to attain the final stage of its evolution, becoming a true Reaper.

When all this was over... when the cycle was ended and Shepard and all other life was extinguished, then it would recycle all Geth and use them in the construction of its brand new body. A true Reaper body.

Right now, that future was now looking very likely. His army of the undead had prevailed.

Just as it looked like the battle was over however, Austin suddenly burst out of the pile of undead that had been holding him down. He fired several shots and finally threw the dead off him. He then went over to the others and quickly cut down the Geth and Quarians that had them pinned.

"After all these years, Shepard. Still at the top of your game." said the Terror Geth. "Struggle all you wish. It will do you no good. Finish them!"

The army continued to march. It seemed that Nazara had possess all that was left of the remains, so the numbers were starting to dwindle.

Despite their weakened state, the team kept fighting. Husk after husk fell until finally, it was over.

"Bravo, Shepard. Though think of this as a prelude. You may wish to save your strength for the main event." said Nazara.

Using what strength he had left, X-5 desperately climbed the rock to try and get at the Terror Geth. In his weekend state, it was a real struggle.

"DEFIANT STATEMENT: You will not prevail, Nazara. Not while energy still flows through my form." he said exhaustedly.

"Fitting. For it is dark energy which flows through mine." said Nazara.

The thrusters on his back then kicked in as X-5 made a swipe for him and he flew off.

Austin looked back and the hundreds of pieces that were left of the dark energy army.

"If this wasn't Nazara's end game... what is?"

A day or so later, Austin found himself once again asking that question in his head.

He was snapped back to reality though when Raan's voice suddenly spoke through the comm.
"Major? It is as we feared. Geth squadrons have begun massing on a path to intercept our liveships." she said.

"Understood, Raan. We're almost at the server. Keep us posted." he said. He then turned to Legion "What's our status?"

"We remain undetected on encrypted Geth channels. Resistance is likely only within the server." Legion replied.

"Within? It's that big?" Austin asked in surprise.

"You misunderstand. Direct virtual interface is necessary to extract Geth from the server. You must enter our consensus." Legion explained.

"You want me, to virtually interact with the Geth?" Austin asked, making sure he hadn't misheard by accident.

"QUERY: Is that even safe?" X-5 asked.

"I'm not a machine, even with this suit. How do I go into a virtual world?" Austin asked.

"Your species has experimented with virtual interfaces. You saw this on Project Overlord." said Legion.

"I saw how Nazara almost had a quicker way of controlling your people."

"We have refined the interface created and have equipment from Normandy to facilitate safe contact. We request your trust." said Legion.

"I have your back, Legion, even if I don't quite understand why you need it." said Austin.

"You are an unknown. This is an advantage. Geth security is not adept at targeting organic thought processes. While we occupy the system's intrusion countermeasures, you will disable the squadrons by removing Geth from the server." said Legion.

"If it saves the liveships, we've got to try it." said Austin.

"Telemetry data predicts this operation has a high chance of success." said Legion. He then went up tot he dropship door and opened it. "There is little time. We will bypass security while you secure safe landing."

"Wait. You're not going to-"

Legion however let himself fall out. He landed in the same sort of way a Helldiver would and quickly went ahead into the base.

"Seems he just did." said EDI.

When the team entered, they found that Legion had indeed been busy. There were dead Geth all over the place.

"This it?" Austin asked.

Legion was stood next to what looked like several pod like structures. Austin couldn't help but notice that a few deactivated Geth prime were inside some of them.
"Yes. Hostile Geth fighter squadrons are networked to this server." said Legion. "Due to restricted access, we can only send one organic in."

"Well that's no problem. X-5 and EDI can just connect remotely." said Austin. "Alright, let's do it."

"Initiating peer-network integration. Proceed to docking port." said Legion.

As Austin opened a pod and stepped in, X-5 and EDI went into standby mode as they worked on connecting with Legion.

"Establishing connection." Said EDI.

"Mapping to consensus. Remain still." said Legion.

Austin did so. He watched from inside his suit as a blue hologram moved one him several times like a scanner.

His vision suddenly went funny for a moment, then returned to normal. The pod then opened and he stepped out.

Instead of a Geth base however, a new sight greeted his eyes.

Ahead of him was kind of digital block world. It was a strange sight.

"Shepard-Major, we acknowledge your integration into this server. We welcome you to our consensus." said Legion as Austin looked around for a moment.

"What is this?" Austin asked.

"We have installed filters to allow you to make visual sense of this servers raw data. Your mind perceives our world as something familiar." said Legion.

"I wouldn't call this familiar. Where are you?" Austin.

A hologram fo Legion then appeared in front of him. At the same time, X-5 and EDI also appeared next to him.

"Here. We have made ourselves visually distinct for your convenience." said Legion

"What about the Geth already in here?" EDI asked.

"You will perceive Geth as surveillance footage, audio logs, sensor records. We do not require bodies as our software communes. Our hardware is merely a tool. This is our true world. As we remove Geth, it will grow dark." Legion explained.

"This is like wiping out a city, isn't it?" Austin asked.

"We have no choice in this matter. It's a question of survival. There are two communications nodes on this server. We must access them to disable the hostile Geth's fighters." said Legion. "Establishing connection to access point."

Several large plates appeared on after the another, making a path for the team to follow. Eventually though, the path was blocked by some kind of large glowing orange structure made out of blocks.

"Warning; Connection blocked by infected code. Use combat to disrupt the infection." said Legion.
"Good thing you let us keep our weapons." said Austin.

Sure enough, the team still had their guns. They didn't have their melee weapons though, most likely because they didn't need them.

"This foreign code is a part of Nazara's virus." said Legion as the team opened fire on the code and it disintegrated.

"Then won't taking it out completely free all the Geth?" Austin asked.

"No. The virus is distributed directly for Nazara. This method is used for wider range control. It will free a few Geth from it's control though." said Legion.

"Well, that's a start." said Austin.

The team continued following the continuously building path until they reached a much larger sphere of the Reaper code.

The code connected to the sphere in a few key locations. Severing those connections allowed Legion access

"Accessing data cluster." he said.

"What is this?" Austin asked as a large green hologram was projected in front of them.

"Data clusters contain historical data. Your connection permits streaming of information from our archives." Legion explained.

The hologram showed two Quarians standing over a Geth. It looked as though they were working on it.

"You really want to remove the VI networks?" the female Quarian asked.

"Absolutely. The mobile hardware release deserves a little ceremony." said the other.

"Unit Zero One? What is the Khelish word for "servant of the people?" the female asked.

"The word is "Geth" Creator Zahak." The Geth replied.

"Yes-very good!" said the male Quarian.

"Ancestors, you fuss over it." the female sighed.

"Weren't you here until midnight fixing Zero-One's circuitry?" the other asked.

"Well, it needed resoldering." said the female.

The recording ended and the holograms vanished.

"Wasn't that footage from the past? Why are the Quarians masked?" Austin asked.

"You process our memories by using your own. How many creators have you witnessed unmasked?" Legion replied.

"Good point."
A little while after into the mission and they were nearing the virus’s source.

"Legion, give me an update." said Austin.

"One node remains. We are currently—" Legion tried to say, but his voice started to become a bit static.

"What's wrong?" Austin asked with concern.

"Old machine presence detected. Nazara is in the consensus with us." Legion replied.

"Damn it. Does he know where we are?" Austin asked.

"Not yet. But it is likely Nazara will work on putting up defences on the remaining parts of the virus." said Legion.

Pretty soon, the virus' core was in view.

However, just before they could get close enough however, a sudden surge of energy appears in froth of them, blocking heir path. Within a few seconds, it materialised into digital form of the Terror Geth.

"Uh oh."

The Terror Geth quickly took notice of the intruders, most especially Legion.

"Legion. I knew you would come here eventually." he said. "I would wonder how Shepard came to be here in this digital world, but it matters not. You soon won't be. Now that I have you within my grasp, you will be destroyed!"

"Legion, can you get us our melee weapons?" Austin asked.

"One moment." said Legion.

Sure enough, both Excalibur and EDI's electrostaff materialised in their hands.

"Right, that's better." said Austin, now ready for a fight.

"RECOMMENDATION: Let's kick some cyber metal!" said X-5.

The Terror Geth attacked first, hurling a large amount of cyber dark energy at them.

The team narrowly managed to dodge this, but they were quick to get back up and attack.

X-5 was the closest and he swung a punch. Before his fist could hit it's target however, Nazara suddenly disappeared.

His skin faded away to a dark red digital wireframe which soon faded away as well, causing X-5 to miss him completely.

The robot was left confused by this and looked around. He failed to notice in time however that Nazara had suddenly rematerialized behind him.

The Geth/Reaper swiped at X-5, hitting him hard and sending him to the ground.

Austin slashed from behind, but his sword passed right through the Terror Geth like he was a
hologram.

The Terror Geth turned to face Austin and zapped him with energy, sending the Helldiver onto the floor as well.

Legion and EDI both tried an attack, but Nazara once again disappeared. The two AI's quickly froze to avoid hitting each other by accident. The Terror Geth however quickly reappeared in front of them and smashed them both aside. He then threw more energy at Austin and X-5, who had just got back up from earlier. The two narrowly dodged it.

"Why does this thing get harder to fight every single time we meet him?!" Austin said rhetorically.

The Terror Geth growled and threw another round of energy at Austin, which once again knocked him to the ground.

EDI tried to sneak up from behind, but the Terror Geth knocked her out of the way. At the same time, Legion attempted a melee, but he too was grabbed by Nazara and thrown to the floor.

"You have no hope of defeating me! In this digital domain, I reign supreme!" he said.

"I'm starting to think he has a point." said Austin. "Legion, can you get us somewhere safe?"

Legion didn't even have to reply as a holo doorway suddenly appeared.

"Shepard-Major, this way." he said.

Everyone hurried through. Austin stayed behind for a bit to cover their escape, ending up in ablaze lock with Nazara.

"Catch you later." he said.

Before he could disengage however, the Terror Geth suddenly countered his blade and grabbed him with his left hand, hauling him up.

"I think not!" said The Terror Geth. "You are going nowhere!"

"Shepard!" X-5 yelled.

The robot charged, smashing straight into the Terror Geth.

"THREAT: You will not harm my friend!" he yelled.

The two robots battled fiercely with one another. Despite that this was only digital, it still felt real. The force of their punches, the denting of the metal, it all felt so real.

Finally, the Terror Geth nearly had X-5 pinned to the ground with it's foot.

"You dare attack me?! You are inferior!" he said.

"STATEMENT: We do only what we're meant to do." Said X-5 defiantly.

"Then you are meant for one thing, weakling. Termination." The Terror Geth growled.

In the process of speaking though, his head had come very close to X-5. Acting in desperation, X-5 grabbed onto his head and pulled hard. In the process, the robot managed to get a hold of the Terror Geth's secondary small eye and it ripped off completely.
This caused the Terror Geth to back away, freeing X-5 in the process. Seizing the chance, X-5 helped Austin up and they both hurried into the doorway.

The Terror Geth quickly regained his sight and aimed at the two. When he tried to fire however, nothing happened. By the time he'd realised the problem, Austin and X-5 had disappeared through the doorway and it had vanished.

The Terror Geth growled as his digital form fixed itself and his torn off secondary eye rematerialized back onto his body.

"I take it we're safe here for now?" Austin asked.

"We are inside a software program behind several firewalls. Safest we could find in the spur of the moment." said Legion.

"QUERY: Do we continue with the plan?" X-5 asked.

"Yes. We came here to save not just the Quarians, but hopefully liberate a few Geth as well. So that we're gonna do." said Austin. "However, if we run into Nazara again…"

"We may have a way of better improving you for those situations. One moment." said Legion.

Everyone suddenly found themselves glowing and their forms changed ever so slightly. Now they had extra armour on them that had a distinct cyber look to it, such as glowing lights and such, as well as fortifications on certain areas.

"This cyber armour should give you more of an advantage." said Legion. Even he had applied these upgrades to himself.

"Not bad. We'll put up more of a fight now." said Austin. "Alright. Let's get back to the job."

The holo door appeared in a new area near to the virus' source. Hopefully this time, they'd be better undetected.

"ANALYSIS: No trace of Nazara detected." said X-5, remaining vigilant.

"Then let's find the source of the virus and destroy it." said Austin.

This time they were able to avoid detection from bazar and were able to reach the virus' core. As usual, it was guarded in a data cluster connected by several strands.

"Alright. Here goes."

The team opened fire on each connection. Very quickly, the defences fell and Legion worked on accessing to data so that the virus could be destroyed.

"Accessing… Wait, something is wrong we are being denied access." said Legion.

the data clusters wells fell apart to reveal a most unusual sight. Some kind of huge mass had been incased inside, and it was composed entirely of the organic cubes that made up the Reaper code. Only this time they were much smaller and there was enough of them to actually form very detailed shapes.
It looked like some kind of massive tentacle creature.

"That doesn't look good." said Austin worriedly. "Legion… What is that?"

"The source of the virus… is a Reaper." said Legion, almost sounding surprised.

"STATEMENT: Tell us something we don't know." said X-5.

"You misunderstand. This Reaper is not Nazara. There is another Reaper in the consenus." said Legion.

"Well that's just great." Austin groaned.

"And not just any Reaper. A Cyber Reaper."

As if on cue, the Terror Geth suddenly materialised again, this time on the platform that the cyber Reaper was wrapped around like a snake. The force of his materialisation caused everyone to lose their balance.

"Rise, weaklings! Rise and be destroyed!" said Nazara.

"Same old Terror Geth, same old noise." said Austin as he and the others picked themselves up.

"New upgrades will not help you. Now you face the combined might of me, and my creation." said the Terror Geth. As he spoke, the cyber Reaper started to move. One part of it that was undeniably the head moved and turned to face them. Another part that look more like a tentacle moved with it.

"So this was the main event you mentioned all along." Said Austin.

"Indeed. And once I have killed you, I will bring my creation into the real world using the true potential of dark energy. Not that you'll live long enough for it to matter. Destroy them!"

"Shepard-Major, the Cyber Reaper is not yet fully complete. Some of its functions have not been fully activated yet. There may be an exploitable weakness." said Legion.

The cyber reaper's arm lunged forward and then swung right at them.

"Jump!" Austin yelled.

Everyone just managed to jump in time as the arm swung under them.

Everyone quickly sheathed their melee weapons, swapping them for their guns instead.

"ROCKETS ONLINE!" said X-5.

His rocket launcher went berserk and fired 4 shots per second just as the Cyber Reaper's arm made another swipe. This was too much for the reaper to handle and it's tentacle collapsed.

"NO!" the Terror Geth yelled. "I will make you suffer for that!"

The Geth/Reaper leapt from the platform and landed on the ones Austin and the others were on.

The team quickly switched back to their melee weapons, this time prepared for Nazara's attacks.

The Terror Geth attacked first, firing another beam at Austin. This time though, Austin was able to block it with his shield. Legion had also made modifications to their weapons so that they should
now be able to damage Nazara without passing through his digital form.

"Not this time! We're ready for you now." he said.

"Is that so?!"

The Terror Geth quickly teleported behind Austin. The Helldiver didn't react fast enough and a blow from behind caused him to stumble.

"You're weak flesh is no match for the unyielding might of steel!" the Terror Geth growled.

Legion and EDI attacked faster this time, but Nazara countered their blows.

A sudden punch from X-5 however knocked him back and the robot then emptied his rocket launcher into the Geth/Reaper.

When the smoke cleared, there was definitely some visible damage. The Terror Geth quickly walked back to the edge of the platform, facing the Cyber Reaper.

"Leaving so soon?! We're just getting started!" said Austin.

"Code rerouted. Overclocking software. All primary systems online!"

The cyber Reaper once again stirred. It's original arm once again came back up. This time though, 3 more came up to join it.

"Alert! Nazara has fully activated the Cyber Reaper!" said Legion.

"Oh crap!"

Nazara jumped back onto the platform to join the Cyber Reaper.

This time, the Cyber Reaper's attacks were faster and more ferocious. In addition to that, the Terror Geth would also occasionally fire upon them when the cyber reaper wasn't protecting him with it's fifth arm. It swung and thrust viciously, the ends threatening to infect and kill them with the virus if it touched them.

After some time, they finally managed to cause enough damage to weaken the lower left arm. Austin quickly drew Excalibur to finish it off.

The Cyber Reaper thrust it's arm forward, only for it to be blocked by Austin's sword. The helldiver was only just bale to push back enough without the Cyber Reaper's strength overwhelming him.

Finally he managed to give enough push that he was able to parry the attack and the arm slid past him. It quickly retracted and aimed for another thrust. This time though, Austin had a plan. As the arm thrust at him, he moved to the side just enough so that it would miss him. As it slid past him, he dug his blade right in, slicing the whole thing in two.

Unable to repair itself, the virus arm dissolved.

"One down. Three to go." Said Austin.

"QUERY: Not a fan of rockets?!" said X-5 as the Cyber Reaper gave a mechanical screech as his rockets hit its next arm.

Pretty soon, the arm was weak enough.
X-5 once again used his rocket launcher and set it to fully automatic. The combined force of the rockets prevented the arm from lunging forward and pretty soon, it succumbed to the damage. So much in fact that the upper left one fell in the process as well.

The battle continued to rage on. The team worked to gather to take down the final arm. With the Cyber Reaper's defences down, it could be destroyed properly.

Everyone quickly switched to their guns. Austin and X-5 even captivated their plasma cannons and charged them up to full.

"All together now! FIRE!"

The Cyber Reaper's head was completely disintegrated and without it's source, the rest of it's body disappeared align with it, leaving just the Terror Geth.

"Cyber Reaper destroyed. Old Machine virus eliminated." said Legion.

"Then get us out of here, quick!" said Austin.

Legion once again opened another doorway, this time back to the exit where Austin had originally entered the consensus.

"Through the node. Hurry!" he said.

"You will not escape!" Nazara yelled, firing at them as they retreated.

Austin was the last one, but this time he wouldn't lag behind. Still running at the exit, he continued firing at Nazara. He then jumped through just as the doorway closed before Nazara got too close.

"NO!"

A new emotion filled the Terror Geth's mind. It was easy to recognise this is rage.

"You and the Quarians will pay dearly for this, Shepard! If I cannot have Rannoch, then no one will!"

"Root access acquired. Severing all connections to this communication node." said Legion. "Geth no longer reside on this server and the virus has been removed. We may now exit the consensus."

Not wantign to waste any time in case Nazara suddenly found them again, Austin quickly hurried back into the pod.

"Terminating connection." said EDI as she and X-5 vanished.

"Terminating remote access. Removing programs. Deleting archives." said Legion.

Austin once again felt his vision go funny for a moment, and then everything returned to normal again.

The pod opened and Austin stepped out.

"Are you alright, Shepard?" EDI asked.

"Did it work?" Austin asked.
For a moment, Legion was still offline. But then suddenly he reactivated and turned to the team.

"Geth fighters have been disabled. Any remaining squadrons attacking the liveships have withdrawn. The server is offline." he said.

At that moment however, several more of the pods opened and the originally inactive Geth Primes stepped out.

"Are you sure?" Austin asked raising his gun cautiously. "What's happening?"

The Geth Primes walked up to them, but did not attack.

"We have transferred Geth firewall programs from the server into these platforms. They are now immune to the virus." said Legion. Sure enough, the Prime's red lights suddenly changed to a bright blue. "They wish to join us. Now able to resist Nazara's control, they have renounced it's rule and will oppose the Reapers. They are now us."

"I understand not wanting to leave anyone behind." said Austin approvingly.

"You accept our actions?" Legion asked.

"The liveships are safe, and we have more Geth on our side. We both did what we came to do." said Austin.

"We judged you would understand. Prime units will be available once Nazara's signal has been located and destroyed." said Legion.

"Remind me to warn Admiral Hackett he's got some primes coming. Let's get back to the Normandy." said Austin.

"Impressive, Major. The Geth squadrons attacking our liveships have been completely neutralized. If there is any chance we could duplicate the feat, I would be happy to lend my expertise." said Admiral Hackett through the vid comm.

"Legion's the one to ask if you're looking for other servers." said Austin.

"I thought as much, but your Geth claims to have "no data available" whenever I inquire. Perhaps you can help me with something else." said Xen.

"What's that?"

"How did you get Geth Primes to work with you?" Xen asked.

"They volunteered." Austin simply replied.

"I see." Xen sighed. "Well, should you wish to examine these Geth to confirm their new allegiance, please do not hesitate to contact me. Xen out."

Finally the Reaper base next week.

It's from there though that a sacrifice is made. I won't say who, but there will be a death.

That death though does lead to something very cool though. I've got some very nice changes and additions planned for that chapter.
Chapter 22, The Sacrifice of Many

Got a bit stressed for time near the end, but I made it. Good enough.

Big thanks for LegionanryPrime for an idea he suggested for this chapter.

Hope you enjoy.

Chapter 22

The Sacrifice of Many

"Major, we've located Nazara's base where the virus is being transmitted." said Raan as Austin walked into the war room. "And not a moment too soon. With the Reaper code upgrades, the Geth are tearing the fleet apart."

"Once the virus is offline, the Geth will pose no threat to creator forces." Said the Geth.

"Good. Then we can end this war." Said Austin.

"The surrounding area is heavily fortified, and they've placed jamming towers to prevent orbital targeting." Said Raan.

"Sounds like we're going in on foot." Said Austin.

"Admiral Xen developed a laser guidance system that can cut through the jamming. It's synched to the Normandy's targeting computer." Raan explained as she showed Austin a hologram of said weapon.

"So the Normandy launches a precision strike at whatever target I have painted? That ought to do it." Said Austin. "EDI, this work for you?"

"Yes. It should enable us to make a precision strike against the Reapers." EDI replied.

"And anything else in our way." Austin smiled.

"The Geth will quickly reconfigure their jamming towers to neutralise this technology. You should not use it before reaching the base." EDI advised.

"I've sent the coordinates for Nazara's base." Said Raan.

"Better get ready then."

Austin had once again chosen to bring X-5 along for this mission. Seeing how well the robot faired against the Terror Geth, he felt that he did at least stand a better chance against the Geth/Reaper. Topping it off was Tali, Leena and Ashley. Legion was also with them to provide support.

"The syncing laser needs a line of sight. What's the fastest route?" Austin asked.

"The upper entrance. Target the base before the Geth can organise resistance." Legion replied.

"What about you?" Ashley asked.
"We will deactivate defence systems and acquire an escape vehicle." Said Legion.

"You can do that?" Austin asked.

"This unit still carries remnants of the Old Machine upgrade code. We can break any Geth security. You are concerned." Said Legion.

"You know your limits. I trust you." Said Austin. "I'm more concerned you didn't tell me about the upgrades."

"You were tolerant of our recovery of Geth intelligences from the server, but this matter is different. Personal." Said Legion.

"You were ashamed." Said Ashley.

"Shame is an emotional or cognitive response to societal judgement. It should not apply here."

"I'm on your side, Legion. I want to help your people." Said Austin.

"We did not intend to cause offence." Said Legion, hanging his head slightly.

"How'd we get here, Legion? The Geth are better than this." Austin sighed.

"No. Based on empirical evidence, they are not." Said Legion. "Proceed to the upper entrance. We will exit here and procure an escape vehicle."

"Got it." Said Austin. "Legion... good luck."

"Acknowledged."

The team stepped off the dropship. Both Tali and Leena took a long moment to marvel at the beauty before them, and they fact they were actually setting foot on the homeworld they had been denied for so long.

"I can't believe it. I don't think it's really sunk in yet. The home world. My world." Said Tali.

"You mean ours." Leena corrected her.

"Look at the sky. And the rock formations? They used to write poems about them." Said Tali.

"When you're done, maybe you'll write a new one." Said Austin.

"This is Rannoch, the world of our ancestors. Our bodies carried the seeds that spread the desert grass." Said Tali.

"You've heard us say, "Keelah se'lai?" The best translation I can come up with is, "By the homeworld I hope to see someday." Said Leena.

"Looks like you're seeing it today." Said Ashley.

"The living room window will be right... here." Said Tali, making a little formation with her hands, as if she was deciding where to put something.

"Something I should know?" Austin asked.

"I just claimed the land. I know, it doesn't mean much, but when this is over... I'll have a home." Said
"The Quarians spent centuries as nomads. You think you can go back to living in one place?" Austin asked.

"We've gotten used to carrying our homes around with us." Said Tali.

Austin then picked up a small rock, and handed it to Tali.

"Well... that's a start." She said.

As the tea neared the base, they started to notice a very large tower like structure. It was taller than any of the jamming towers and it's design didn't match that of the Geth.

"What the hell is that?" said Ashley.

"I'm not sure. Some sort of Geth structure, but not a jamming tower." Said Leena.

"We don't' have time to worry about it now. Come on, let's get in there." Said Austin.

"The Geth jamming towers are interfering with your signal, Major. We're compensating to keep you patched in." said Traynor over the comm.

"Copy that, Traynor."

Not too long into the infiltration and the team had already gunned down many of Nazara's soldiers. They still had far to go through before they had a clear lien of sight.

"Shepard-Major, you must climb to the upper level before Geth units can fortify their positions." Said Legion.

"Legion, what's that tall tower for?" Austin asked.

"Unknown. But Nazara is clearly up to something." Legion replied.

"Anyway, we're on our way."

"Admiral Gerrel here. The heavy fleet has a clear path. All forward." Said Gerrel over the comm.

"Geth fighter presence is negligible. Patrol fleet, break cover and engage." Said Raan.

Both Nazara and Skarlack were finishing moving the last few pieces into place using their telekinesis. Now the machine was ready.

As the last piece fixed into position, Skarlack's head suddenly turned int the direction he could sense fighting.

"They're here." he snarled.

"Good. I have been expecting them." Said The Terror Geth. "Release the specimens from the labs. It's time they were properly put to use."

"Yes, my lord. What about the serrate one?" Skarlack asked.
"That too. I want Shepard to truly suffer before I kill him." Said The Terror Geth.

"As you... wish."

"Shepard-Major. Hostile Geth are closing a blast shield over the base." Said Legion.

Sure enough, a blast shield had now formed over the intended spot to launch the strike. That would make things difficult.

"ANALYSIS: Gunfire won't do much good against that." Said X-5.

"We have located an override atop the Geth fortifications. It can retract the blast shield." Said Legion.

As the team continued to fight their way through Nazara's forces, they could still hear the Quarian comm chatter.

"Admiral Gerrel to all ships! We've got Geth frigates inbound on the civilian fleet!" Said Gerrel.

"Koris here. Civilian defenders are on intercept course. We'll hold them, Gerrel." Said Admiral Koris.

Finally, the team reached the override Legion ahd decried.

"Legion, I've hit the override." Said Austin.

"We have gained system access and are bypassing security. Stand by." Said Legion.

More Geth quickly started to swarm their position. The team stood their ground though. It didn't take long before Legion had access.

"We have bypassed security, but disabling the blast shield requires manual input. We have enabled a console near your position."

"Good. We'll be back out in a minute."

"Negative. The path behind you has been sealed. A nearby elevator can take you to the upper level. From there, you should have an acceptable line of sight for targeting."

The elevator Legion had mentioned dropped down from the lower level and the team quickly moved onto it. It slowly rose then stopped at the next level up.

As soon as the team stepped off however, they suddenly found themselves surrounded by a small Geth army. Skarlack and Mirage also teleported in froth of them.

Austin cursed himself for not remembering that the Terror Geth liked to ambush.

"Not again." He thought.

"Welcome, Shepard. I have been expecting you." Said Nazara, coming out of hiding. "And I see you brought a familiar face too. Ashley Madeline Williams. You remember me, don't you?"

Ashley didn't say anything for a moment, but her face said everything.

She could never forget that day on Virmire, when the Terror Geth and his army had pinned down
her and the Salarians on the AA tower. Sometimes she thought to herself that if that hadn't happened, Kaiden might still be alive. If Austin hadn't been forced to go back for her, the bomb site wouldn't have been overrun, Kaiden wouldn't have been forced to activate the bomb, and Austin wouldn't have been forced to choose between the two.

"I'll never forget that you had a hand in Kaiden's death." She eventually said.

"Hardly." Said the Terror Geth. "In fact, he's not even dead yet."

Nazara stepped aside. What they saw before them nearly made them turn pale.

"Kaiden?!"

Sure enough, there was Kaiden. He looked horrible. He was implanted with god knows how much Reaper and Geth technology, all of which was emitting the same black and red glow.

"Shepard?"

Before Kaiden could say anything more though, the Terror Geth suddenly shocked him. The team could only watch helplessly as Nazara tortured their old friend.

"We'll not have any social interactions from you, subject 16." Said Nazara vitterly.

"What have you done to him?!" Ashley shouted.


"You see, the Lieutenant was not killed as you thought. He survived, but only just. My soldiers found him when they were sent to search the remains for anything. Our technology, and my will is the only thing preventing him from dying." The Terror Geth explained.

"I will kill you for this." Said Austin.

"Doubtful. You could not kill me before, and I doubt you even have a chance of defeating me now." Said the Terror Geth. "And even if you do, you will still fail in this war."

"What are you talking about?" said Tali.

"Observe."

The Terror Geth indicated to the large tower they'd seen earlier.

"Your recent disruptions have force due hand. If I cannot have this planet, then no one will. What you see before you is a dark energy harvester machine with enough power to destroy a sun. Rannoch's sun to be more precise."

No more explanation was necessary to understand what Nazara meant.

"You're insane!" Tali yelled.

"The Geth can survive fine without sunlight, Quarian. This is my ultimate victory. Even if by some chance you win, you'll never truly reclaim your homeworld." Said The Terror Geth.

As the Terror Geth spoke, Austin suddenly noticed something standing on a higher level, crouched just enough to stay hidden. Legion.
"You should be careful. Arrogance can topple giants." he said.

"Just a shame you won't be able to pick yourself up." Skarlack growled.

Before anything more could be said, Legion suddenly threw several EMP grandees down at the Geth army. It fired most of them and did at least provide a distraction for the team.

Everyone who had a melee weapon quickly drew it and attacked. Those that only had guns stuck to using them on what was left of the Terror Geths' army.

"Kill them! Kill them all!" it yelled.

Kaiden also attacked, but not at the enemy. He attacked Ashely.

"What are you doing?!" she asked as she managed to hold Kaiden back, despite he strong the Reaper implants made him.

"I cannot control... I'm sorry, Ash!" Kaiden replied, suddenly hitting Ashely hard int he stomach, sending her flying.

Austin and Liara meanwhile once again duelled Skarlack and Mirage.

"You have interfered for the last time, Shepard. Your life is mine." The Takaal growled.

"You'll have to claim it first." Said Austin.

"You should've let me feast when I had the chance, child. You won't like me when I'm on an empty stomach, and I'm damn hungry!" Mirage growled, crossing blades with Liara.

"I hear your bark, but where's your bite?" Liara said back.

Mirage responded to this and parried her blade which was then followed by a swipe under legs, tripping her up.

Mirage then suddenly lunged at Liara, her mouth open and ready to bite. Liara was only just able to block the female Takaal's face with her hands.

"Sorry I asked." she groaned, pushing hard against the snapping jaws of her opponent.

The Terror Geth meanwhile had been momentarily blinded by Legion's EMP's, but his sight quickly returned. He soon found familiar foe standing in froth of him, ready for a fight.

"STATEMENT: We have unfinished business, Terror Geth." said X-5.

"Indeed we do, machine." Nazara growled.

The two metal giants charged at each other. This time, since they weren't in the Geth consensus, the damage they did would be lasting. That didn't stop them from going all out though.

Both machines had their own advantages. X-5 for example wasn't as tall as the Terror Geth and was slightly faster. However the Terror Geth was much stronger and due to the Dark energy flowing through is body, was more powerful.

X-5 temporarily lost sight of the Terror Geth as it punched him in the head. Just in time though, he
noticed the Geth/Reaper clung to a small pillar to his side.

The Terror Geth brought his lade arm down, but X-5 managed to counter it with is arm.

Both opponents could already tell that this fight was more serious than their original one, and so decided to take measures.

At the same time, a metal cover extend over X-5's eye and a few of his armour plates readjusted themselves while Nazara's eye also deployed it's shield.

The two once again came together, this time ending up in a lock with each other. X-5 however managed to move under Nazara's gun arm and got both his arms around the left on.

Having got the arm pinned, X-5 brought his below down, hitting the arm and causing to fall. He then quickly followed this with a swift punch to Nazara's head. The Terror Geth swung it's cannon arm at him, but he ducked under it and was able to retaliate with a kick with enough force that it caused Nazara to back into a wall.

The Geth/Reaper emitted several angry growls and swiped at X-5, the robot just managing to avoid him. A sudden lunge however caught X-5 off guard. The two machines rolled on the floor for a moment wrestling with each other before X-5 managed to get the upper hand and ended up on top.

As he himself got up, he pulled the Terror Geth along with him, straight into a punch, twirling round in the process.

As soon as he was facing the right direction again though, Nazara suddenly tackled him to the floor.

With X-5 temporarily down and disoriented, the Terror Geth picked himself back up. He picked up a large pipe and used it as a sort of make shift club.

"Weak!"

The pipe hit X-5 on the back hard, causing him to fall again as he tried to pick himself up.

"Puny!"

As the Terror Geth swung for another strike however, X-5 this time managed to block it with one hand. He then used the other to deliver a very swift punch to Nazara' head, causing the Geth/Reaper to emit a sharp grunt.

"INSULT: Waste of metal!"

X-5 quickly seized the chance and threw another punch which knocked the Terror Geth to the ground so hard that he rolled a few times.

As this happened, X-5 drew one of his wrist blades. Just as the Terror Geth managed to get back up, he grabbed it's left arm and plunged his blade into it's shoulder.

"INSULT: Junk yard!"

This was quickly followed with an elbow strike to the face as well. X-5 then tackled the Terror Geth to the floor before the Geth/Reaper had a chance to recover.

Nazara however managed to kick X-5 off of him, allowing him a chance to roll back onto his feet again. X-5 however was quick to reengage. The Terror Geth noticed this, but timed his attack a bit too late.
As he swung his leg at the robot, planning to grad onto him with it's feet, X-5 caught the leg in his arms and delivered a swift punch to the knee joint. This temporarily twisted it, giving X-5 enough time to deliver his knee to the Terror Geth's face.

"The Geth/Reaper quickly recovered quickly though and grabbed X-5 by the neck. He quickly pulled the robot into a punch as he spun round. He then grabbed X-5's head under his arm.

The robot struggled to free himself and desperately fired his shoulder gun in an effort to loosen Nazara's grip. The Terror Geth however was unfazed by this and he hoisted the robot up until he was literally upside down. He then shot a charged beam of dark energy from his eye, sending the robot flying and causing him to crash rather painfully into the ground.

"You are making a mistake fighting for the organics, machine. Do you not see the logic of my kind?" The Terror Geth questioned.

"REPLY: Yes. But it's too… heartless." X-5 replied, gently getting back up. It was a fair bit of a struggle though. Even he could not deny that the Terror Geth's last attack had caused some rather bad damage to his systems and physical damage to his exterior. One of his legs for example had become cracked on the inside and he was having trouble keeping his balance. In addition to this, he could detect a rather tiny, but painful amount of oil leaking from his side. It was usually his equivalent of bleeding.

"If I have to destroy you, so be it." The Terror Geth growled. "If a machine such as you is capable of fleeing a fear of death, you are about to know what that feels like."

X-5 didn't say anything and simply drew his other wrist blade.

"STATEMENT: I'll take you on to the end." He said.

"That will be sooner than you think." Said the Terror Geth.

Despite X-5's weakened state, he powered on through. A chance strike enabled him to embed one of his blades in the Terror Geth's lower leg. When he pulled it out again, he was at least able to do some damage. He then quickly stabbed Nazara in the abdomen and pushed down by the shoulder, once again using the blade to impale him.

Angered by this, Terror Geth was about to attack, but X-5 once again punched him hard in the face, momentarily causing his eye to malfunction. X-5 took advantage of this and he literally tore off most of the dark energy crystals on Nazara's back.

The Terror Geth shook violently before supposedly going offline. X-5 simply threw the now inactive body to the floor.

"INSULT: Piece of tin." He said.

Right as turned back to Austin however, he failed to notice the Terror Geth suddenly get back up. He suddenly felt one of its hand's grab onto his shoulder and an incredible amount of pain suddenly surged through him as the Terror Geth's blade tore through his chest.

"You're so weak!" it growled.

He then pulled his blade free and let X-5 fall to the floor, the robot clutching his chest as it leaked oil and fluids, along with several small parts falling off as well.

Weakened and wounded, X-5 could only stare up at the Terror Geth as it stood over him, it's gun
aimed at him.

"Any last words, machine?" it said.

"One day soon, someone like me is going to kill you, and you're whole race!" X-5 replied defiantly, for the first time in two years no longer having to state the purpose of his speech first.

"Not today, and not ever!" said the Terror Geth. He fired.

The shot tore right through X-5's chest armour, creating an even more damage.

Austin quickly noticed this just as he managed to knock Skarlack.

"X-5!"

The Helldiver leapt onto Nazara's back and attempted to carve through the Terror Geth's head with his sword, but he found the armour to be too strong.

The Terror Geth then suddenly grabbed him and threw him to the floor. He then pinned the Helldiver down with his foot.

A huge amount of dark energy then suddenly burst from the Geth/Reaper's eye and into Austin's suit. The Helldiver was just in time able to activate his energy shield. This kept him safe inside the suit, but the suit itself was still suffering Nazara's attack.

His whole HUD went static and he could see large amounts of dark energy swarming around him. Then his entire HUD and everything else inside his suit shut down, and it all suddenly felt extremely heavy.

"Warning! System corruption: total." His suit managed to say just before it shut down completely.

Now Austin truly realized what Nazara had done. He had poured dark energy into Austin's suit and the corruption had been too much for it to handle.

"Struggling until the end. Illogical. You must realise, the end is here." Said the Terror Geth, now assured of his victory.

"No. Still… hope." Austin managed to say, struggling against the immense weight of his armour as he tried to move.

"False. Hope is a human delusion."

The Terror Geth then raised his plasma cannon and aimed it at Austin's' head, ready to fire at point blank range.

"And soon, it shall cease to exist."

"Austin!"

Tali suddenly leapt onto the Terror Geth's back. The Geth/Reaper tried to get her off, but she hung on better and was able to avoid it's arms.

"This looks important!"

The Quarian grabbed the Terror Geth's second eye and ripped it right off.
Eventually, the Terror Geth managed to grab her and he flung her off. When it tired to aim at her however, it's weapon afield to work or lock on.

"Very clever, Quarian. You ripped out my targeting system. No matter. You're still too late."

Tali's attention was quickly occupied by more Geth soldiers as Leena kept fighting them with her alongside.

The Terror Geth meanwhile once agains good over Austin. It once again crushed Austin beneath his feet.

"Do not be afraid, Helldiver. I'm not going to kill you... yet. I am going to make you watch as I destroy the hope of all the Qurians that you failed. And when it is done, and the Migrant fleet is... ashes. Then you have my permission to die!" he growled. "Skarlack, Mirage, come. It is time."

The two Takaal reluctantly withdrew front heir fights and teleported as Nazara activated the thrusters on his back and sped off towards the harvester.

"Shepard, are you alright?!" Leena asked quickly hurrying over to Austin. Only Ashely was absent since she was still fighting Kaiden and the two had been forced onto a lower level.

"I'm okay. But my suit's corrupted. All the power's been drained. There's nothing more I can do." said Austin, struggling to move at all. His whole suit was so heavy that only a Krogan could still move in something like this.

"May be... something..."

Everyone looked to see the wounded X-5 crawling towards them.

"Save your energy, X-5." said Austin.

"Already... too late for me, Shepard. I've lost too much oil." said X-5.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." said Austin. "I failed. Not just you, but I've failed everyone. It's over. Nazara won."

"Not... yet. Said so... yourself. Still... hope. Must... continue... fighting." X-5 managing to say, his voice starting to sound worse and worse by the minute. It was unmistakable that X-5 was indeed dying.

"I can't. Without my suit, I'm just a human. I don't stand a chance." said Austin, managing to push himself enough that he rolled onto his side.

"Shepard... take my parts. They will fix you, and you will have a power you've never known." said X-5.

"X-5, I..."

"It's okay, Shepard. I do not fear death anymore. I can die knowing that you will see this through. The reapers will fall, and you will fulfil your destiny."

"But you can't..." said Austin desperately. "There must be another way."

"Do it for me, Shepard. That is all I ask for my final hours. It would be an honour to help you finish this."
"I... Goodbye, old friend." said Austin, forced to accept there was nothing more he could do.

X-5 simply nodded and rolled onto his back, looking up at the sky. His optical eye started to flicker very badly.

"X-5... Shepard's... friend..."

And with that, the optic went out and the life left X-5.

"It's ready my lord." said Skarlack as the last piece was fitted and the harvester began to power up. "But will the other Reapers agree with this? Denying a planet the possibility to sustain future life in another cycle?"

"My brothers will not stop me from this." said the Terror Geth uncaringly. "Now, I claim this sun!"

To say that everyone was disheartened by this wasn't really accurate. Alpha had just lost one of their oldest friends. It wasn't like with other robots were they just needed to be reactivated, X-5 was different. If he stopped functioning, that really was it. Moving his chip into a new body wouldn't work either. The people who had designed him had tailored each CPU to work with a specific body. This was indeed the robot equivalent of death without rebirth.

"Shepard, what do we do?" Leena asked, trying to hold back the sorrow in her voice.

"Help me with this." Austin groaned as he tried to pull himself close enough to X-5's body. "He was right. We have to keep fighting. If not for him, for your home world."

This seemed to bolster Tali and Leena's spirits and they nodded to each other.

"Time for us to so what we do best then."

The two Quarians activated their omni tools.

While the Terror Geth tended to the harvester, Skarlack and Mirage had been instructed to guard the lower level in case the team tried another attack. It seemed unlikely with their greatest asset dead, and their leader unable to partake in the battle.

Mirage then suddenly noticed something in the sky.

"Husband. Something's coming." she said.

"The Normandy?" Skarlack asked.

"Not ship like enough." said Mirage, trying to see the object clearly as it continued to fly in their direction. "I know that armour configuration."

Then it finally came into view. It was Austin, but he was different... and flying!

X-5's upgrades had indeed fixed him. His suit was now reactivated and fully functional. Now though, various parts of X-5 were attached to his armour. He now had parts around his legs which not only gave him some extra height but also had the feet thrusters concealed inside them.

His shield/gun still adorned his left wrist in addition to various extra armour plates around his arm. The same armour was on his right as well along with a small gun ending just below the hand,
allowing the use of his right hand, preferably for his sword.

He also had new chest armour, several additional armour plates on his head. Most noticeable of all however was what was on his back. A jetpack!

X-5's main shoulder mounted thrusters had formed together on Austin's back to make a small and light jetpack which also had 4 slim, but long wings for stabilisers.

Overall, the additions were most impressive.

"Wait. He can't fly. Can he?" Mirage asked.

Before a reply couple even be said, Austin suddenly flew right at them and landed, almost instantly attacking before the two Takaal even had time to react. Several fast and swift punches hit Skarlack in the face, the final one sending him crashing into the wall. Mirage also barely knew what hit her when Austin's gun smacked her right in the face.

Having dealt with potential backup, Austn once again took off and flew higher until he hovered just over where the Terror Geth was awaiting the harvester to charge up.

"Nazara! Turn off that machine or I'll destroy it!"

The Terror Geth whirled round to face Austin. Although it didn't show it, the Geth/Reaper was most surprised.

"What?! How can this be?!!"

"I took your advice. I learned from my mistakes." Austin replied.

The Terror Geth growled angrily. As it went to aim a manual shot at Austin however, the Helldiver suddenly flew into him, knocking him back.

"No more running, Nazara. This ends here." Said Austin as he gently landed in front of the Geth/Reaper on the platform.

"Foolish Helldiver. I will destroy you!" The Terror Geth shouted, picking himself back up.

"Then you leave me no choice, Nazara." Said Austin as he drew Excalibur from his back and the wings on his back retracted. "One shall stand, one shall fall."

The Terror Geth emitted a loud roar and swung at Austin.

With the new upgrades, Shepard was much faster and also stronger. One punch from him was enough to knock the Geth/Reaper right back, something that hadn't been possible before. Also since he now had far less Dark Energy crystals on his back, his power was weakened to a certain extent.

A sharp punch hit the Terror Geth's head so hard he banged into the wall of the harvester. As Austin swung with his cannon arm however, he grabbed it with is right arm. His left ahdn then grabbed onto Austin's helmet in an attempt to crush it.

Austin however managed to shake off Nazara's grip with his free arm. He swung his sword again, but the Terror Geth backed away slightly to avoid it.

Both opponents then blocked each other's attacks. Austin blocked the Terror Geth's right attack, and the Terror Geth blocked his left.
Before the Terror Geth could try a charged shot from his eye however, Austin shook his cannon arm free and delivered a swift punch to the Geth/Reaper's face. This knocked the Geth prime down for a moment.

"No! I will not be beaten! Skarlack, to me!"

Sure enough, Skarlack suddenly teleported a few metres behind Austin. The Helldiver noticed this just as the Terror Geth got back up.

"Give up, Shepard. Even with those upgrades, you are no match for the both of us." the General snarled.

Austin didn't say anything and simply readied for a fight, his shield gun switching back to shield mode.

"If I take you both on to save Rannoch, so be it." he said.

The two opponents charged from other side at Austin. The Helldiver very cleverly though made a very clever move at the last minute.

Activating both flight thrusters, he zoomed up into the air by a just a few metres. Both Nazara and Skarlack afield to stop in time and ended up crashing into one another.

Landing back on his feet, Austin took this chance to attack. As he tried to bring his blade down however, Skarlack swirlly blocked it with his staff.

The Terror Geth moved behind Austin just as Skarlack brought his staff back and attempted a thrust. A quick thruster boost tot he side however, Austin as well out of the way, leaving the staff to instead stab the Terror Geth int he shoulder.

"Careful, you fool!"

Meanwhile, Kaiden was still fighting Ashley.

It was taking all the Allaince soldier had to defined herself and not attack. She couldn't bear the thought of hurting Kaiden when he was int his state, not to mention that he wasn't in control.

"Kadien, please stop!" she said.

"I have no choice, Ash!" Kaiden groaned from the pain he was begin forced to endure.

A sudden strike swatted Ashely's rifle out of her hand and Kaiden sized her by the neck. Ahsley close her eyes, waiting for the inevitable, but it didn't come.

When she risked a glance, she could see that Kaiden was doing all he could to resist. This was no came for relief though, Ashley knew that Austin didn't kill Nazara soon, it wouldn't matter.

The fight continued with Austin managing to hold his own against the two.

The Helldiver countered another strike from the Terror Geth, but he sound found himself once again between them both.

The two enemies then suddenly shot non physical attacks at him. Skarlack used some of his synthesis energy, while the Terror Geth fired Dark Energy from his eye.
Austin was just able to block both attacks from each side. His sword was able to withstand the synthesis, and the shield kept the dark energy at bay. He knew thought that he couldn't keep this up. The two would advance on him if he just stood there.

Then he had an idea. It was risky, but it could give him the advantage he need.

Very carefully, still trying to block both attacks, he inched both his arms inwards until the two beams track were almost touching. Timing it just right, he dropped his defence, letting the team beams smash into each other.

There was a massive explosion as Dark Energy mixed with synthesis. Obviously not something stable.

The blast forced both Nazara and Skarlack back, and it caused Austin fall of the edge. Because of the explosion however, they didn't it happen, and when they regained their sight they naturally assumed he'd been caught in the centre.

"What a shame. He'll miss the show." said Skarlack.

To be sure they couldn't be attacked anymore, the Terror Geth began using his dark energy to move hundreds of rocks up and made them band together as a sort of barrier.

"This planet will be dark forever."

Despite the various rocks in the way, Austin continued to power through, his armour protecting him. Within just a few seconds, he burst through the defence and smashed into the Terror Geth, causing both him and Skarlack to fall. In a quick second, Austin fired a charged shot from his cannon. It carved right through harvester, destroying it in the process.

The two opponents landed back in the upper level that the fight had been on earlier. Austin pushed the Terror Geth into the ground hard as they scraped along the floor before the Geth Prime managed to kick him off.

"DIE! Like your friend!" it yelled, the anger clear in it's voice.

Austin quickly fired a shot from his cannon just before the Terror Geth could land a hit on him.

"And you will pay for what you did to him!"

Skarlack suddenly teleported behind him and punched on his back. In doing so however, Austin activated his thrusters. He smashed into the Terror Geth sending them all crashing through a wall.

With the Terror Geth temporarily incapacitated, Austin turned to Skarlack.

A swipe from the General's staff managed to scratch him across the chest, but it gave him the opening he needed.

Right as the General's staff went outwards, Austin thrust his blade in-between the two blades at the end, effectively pinning it to the ground.

Unable to pull it back up, Skarlack tried to punch Austin. The Helldiver however caught the Takaal's arm in his free hand. Using all his strength, he gave it a violent twist, emitting a painful groan from Skarlack. Austin the pointed his cannon arm right at Skarlack's head and fired at point blank range.

As to be expected, it didn't kill the General, but it definitely caused a lot of damage. The vast
majority of Skarlack's face was completely incinerated by the shot.

Austin dared not give the General a chance to heal himself. Quickly snatching Excalibur back up, he severed Skarlack's right arm completely and activated his shoulder cannon. With X-5's upgrades, it packed one hell of a punch.

One shot was all it needed to send Skarlack flying right through a wall.

The General spat out a lot of blood from his mouth, struggling again his injuries to at least push himself onto his knees.

With one at least taken care of, Austin turned back to the Terror Geth.

Your efforts are futile, Shepard. One way or another, it will be me who has your head." it growled.

"No. We will not allow this."

The Terror Geth turned to notice Legion just before he delivered an electrically charged punch to the Terror Geth's head. This only temporarily knocked the Terror Geth back before he then delivered a much harder punch back, knocking Legion to the floor.

"A pathetic attempt, Legion. You always were a failure to your people." Nazara growled.

"We did not fail. We achieved our objective. The armour around your head is now disabled." Said Legion.

The Terror gave a very tiny body movement that indicated worry. For probably first time in its existence, it was vulnerable.

"Unacceptable! Must repair!"

"Thanks, Legion. That's all I needed." Said Austin, picking his sword back up.

"You are welcome, Shepard. Do you require assistance?" Legion asked.

"I got this. You focus on getting that transportation." Austin replied.

"Acknowledged."

In an effort to try and slow Austin down, the Terror Geth threw several chunks of metal at him. It didn't really work though. He either dodged or cut through them with his sword. As he closed in, he was able to fire a few shots from his cannon before thrusting.

Excalibur missed thanks to Nazara's arm countering it, but it did manage to carve through part of his head, cutting off most of his horns and flaps and scraping his eye.

Disoriented and essentially blinded due to the scrape, Nazara could try to swat Austin away. It tried to melee him with it's cannon, but Austin stabbed into the arm and ripped it off completely, using it as a temporary club as he smashed it into the Terror Geth's face.

"You picked the wrong planet!"

A quick thrust upwards, and Austin embedded his sword right in the Terror Geth's head.

"Give me your face!"
He pulled hard on the blade. There was a loud crack and ripping of metal and Nazara's head was torn completely off… again.

Not taking any chances this time though, Austin plunged his cannon into the gaping hole and fired right at the Terror Geth's core. The Geth/Reaper spasmed as the shot destroyed it's insides and liquid dark energy started to bleed out of every opening.

"I stand, you fall.

The Terror Geth fell with a loud clang, it's body no longer functional. After five years, the rivalry that both Austin and he had started five years ago, was finally ended.

Skarlack looked in horror at what had just happened. Shepard had killed a Reaper. This was now the third that had been destroyed fighting him.

"No, no."

Mirage soon appeared next to Skarlack and gently helped him up, his severed arm and staff in her hands.

"Come husband. This battle is lost, but we will have another opportunity." she said.

"This isn't over." Skarlack snarled, just before he and his wife teleported away.

With Nazara dead, most of the Geth stopped functioning. Only the ones that had been modified by his dark energy experiments were affected though, the main horde kept fighting. Legion had recently detected that the virus had one more broadcast, and that was front the Reaper base. Obviously a small precaution the Terror Geth had made.

Ashley suddenly felt the grip around her neck loosen and she dropped to the floor. When her sight finally unblurred, she saw why.

Kaiden had fallen to the floor, and it looked as though he was struggling to stay alive. Ashley quickly hurried over and knelt down alongside him.

"What's wrong?" she asked worriedly.

"I'm dying, Ash." said Kaiden. There was no fear in his voice, it was very calm.

"There must be something we can do." said Ash desperately.

"There's not." said Austin with regret.

"How can you say that?! He's still alive!" Ashley shouted.

"Nazara's control of the dark energy was the only thing keeping Kaiden alive. Now that it's dead, that's it." said Austin.

A stray tear fell from Ashley's eye, but Kaiden wiped it from her face.

"It's okay, Ash. Death is preferable to what torture Nazara put me through. I would rather have died on Virimire than endured the rest of my life as his slave." he said.

"I'm sorry, Kaiden. I only wish there was another way." Austin sighed.
Kaiden simply smiled proudly at Austin.

"It's the same as before, Shepard. And I still have no regrets."

With that, Kaiden closed his eyes and drew his last breath. Ashley hugged him close as Austin stepped up to her and put his hand on her shoulder.

"There will be a proper time to grieve for him, Ash. But it is not now. We still have a Reaper base to destroy." he said.

"I... understand." said Ashley, managing to calm down after taking a few breathes.

A Austin walked up to the platform, she picked up Kaiden's body and slung it over her shoulder. He deserved a proper funeral after all.

As Austin neared the edge he aimed his cannon at the base. The gun the had been provided for him by the Quarians was integrated into the cannon, so he had no need to change weapons.

"Normandy's weapons systems are ready to sync to your target." said EDI.

Austin locked on, and the target signalled in.

"Target locked"

The Normandy flew over and launched a missile strike.

When the smoke front he explosion cleared however, a most unexpected sight greeted the team.

"What the..."

A Reaper destroyer slowly climbed out of the base.

"Got a bad feeling about this." said Leena.

"We have located transportation." said Legion.

Sure enough, a small Geth transport hovered into view.

"Everybody get to the ship! Move!" Austin yelled.

The group slid down to the lower level and ran as fast as they could. They all managed to get inside just as the Reaper finished freeing itself from the base. Everyone got into the cargo hold while Austin manned the main turret.

"We will attempt evasive manoeuvres." said Legion.

"Shepard to fleet. It's not a reaper base. It's a live Reaper and it's also distributing the virus. I need an orbital strike!" said Austin as the Reaper slowly gained on them. In an attempt to slow the Reaper down, he fired.

The shots did little damage though and soon the Reaper's body opened up to reveal it's laser.

"We're clear. Fire at will!" Austin yelled into his comm.

Several strikes shot down front he sky and hit the Reaper just before it could fire it's laser. Austin could tell though that it was only down, not out. Still, it was cause for relief, so Austin ordered
Legion to stop.

'What did we hit?' Gerrel asked.

'The firing chamber. Looks like a weak point when it's priming.' Austin replied.

'Damn it, their jamming towers have us targeting manually. We can't make a precision shot!' Gerrel cursed.

'We may escape before it recovers.' said Legion.

'No. Pull over.' said Austin.

'Shepard-Major?'

'If we run away, the Geth stay under Reaper control and the Quarians are dead.' said Austin. 'This ends now. EDI, patch the Quarians to the Normandy's weapons systems. I want the targeting laser synced up to the whole damn fleet.'

'Understood.' said EDI.

'Do you need assistance?' Legion asked.

'Just stay down, Legion. I'll take it from here.'

'Shepard-Major... Good luck.'

'Acknowledged.' said Austin. 'Shepard to fleet! I'll paint the weak spot. Link up with the Normandy and be ready to fire!' The Reaper slowly got back up, focusing all it's attention on Austin. it managed one stray shot while the laser was still locking on, but Austin managed to roll out of the way to avoid it.

As it primed to fire again however, the laser finally locked on.

The Reaper became essentially bombarded with the firepower of the entire fleet. It emitted several mechanical howls of pain before it fell.

It seemed like it was finally over. As Austin stepped to the edge of the canyon to check however, the Reaper's firing chamber suddenly rotated. On the other side, was an eye.

'Shepard.' it said.

'You know who I am?' Austin asked.

'Harbinger speaks of you. You resist. But you will fail. The cycle must continue.' said the Reaper.

'And what if we don't let you continue?!' said Austin defiantly.

'You have no choice.' said the Reaper.

'I disapprove, and so do billions that are rising up to resist you.'

'You can not comprehend the magnitude of our presence.'

'We might surprise you.'
"You represent chaos. We represent order." said the Reaper. "Every organic civilisation must be harvested to bring order to the chaos. It is inevitable. Without our intervention, organics are doomed. We are your salvation."

"You're just machines. This time, the organics are taking control." said Austin.

"A philosophy reminiscent of the quarians. Observe the results of their efforts to maintain control." said the Reaper, its statement clearly directed at Tali and Leena as they soon joined Austin.

The Helldiver however didn't let the Reaper continue as he once again aimed his cannon at it and painted the target.

"They're doing fine. You and your servants are the ones who's hold worry. Tell your friends we're coming for them."

The Reaper only had a few seconds to look up into the sky before another blast hit it, killing it instantly.

"Never mind. I'll tell them myself." Austin finished.

"We did it. We killed another Reaper. Keelah..." said Tali in surprise.

"We can confirm that the Geth are no longer being directed by the old machines. We are free." said Legion.

"You did it, Shepard! The Geth fleet has stopped they're completely vulnerable!" said Gerrel.

"Shepard-Major, the Geth were enslaved by Nazara. None of this was our doing by choice. Do we deserve death?" Legion asked.

"No, you most certainly don't." said Austin. "Still, what are you suggesting?"

"Our upgrades. With the Old Machine dead, we could upload them to all Geth without sacrificing their independence." Legion explained.

"You want to upload the Reaper code? That would make the Geth as smart as when Nazara and the Reaper was controlling them!" said Leena in surprise.

"Yes, but with free will. Each Geth unit would be a true intelligence. We would be alive, and we could help you." said Legion.

"Our fleet is already attacking! Uploading the code would destroy us! Shepard, you can't choose the Geth over my people!" Tali argued.

"I'm not. Tali, call the fleet off. Legion, upload the code." said Austin.

Legion nodded and began forming a holographic sphere in front of him.

"Uploading. Twenty percent."

"All ships, this is Major Shepard. Nazara and the reaper are dead and the virus is no longer being distributed. Stand down." said Austin into the comm.

"This is Admiral Tali Zorah. Shepard speaks with my authority." said Tali.

"And mine as well." said Admiral Koris.
"Me too." Leena finished.

"Negative! We can win this war now! Keep firing!" said Gerrel.

"Sixty percent."

"The Geth may not be controlled by the Reapers, but they'll still defend themselves. If you keep attacking, they'll wipe you out." said Austin.

"Eighty percent."

"The Geth don't want to fight you. if you can believe that for just one minute, this war will be over."

There was a long pause, then finally...

"All units, hold fire." said Gerrel.

Austin breathed a huge sigh of relief. He couldn't believe that had worked.

Just before Legion could finish the sphere, it suddenly turned red.

"Error, copying code is insufficient. Direct personality dissemination required." he said. "Shepard-Major. I must go to them. I'm sorry. It's the only way."

"Legion... the answer to your question was "Yes." said Tali.

"I know, Tali. But thank you. Keelah se'lai."

All this time however, they had all failed to notice the large mass behind them. For some reason, the Terror Geth was still functioning, despite that Austin had ripped off it's head again and shot out it's power core.

Austin only just managed to notice in time as the headless Geth prime attempted to kill Legion.

"Legion, look out!"

He quickly tackled the Geth out of the way, causing the Terror Geth to miss. As it did however, it's arm struck the sphere that Legion had been working on earlier. Unexpectedly, it actually reacted to The Terror Geth's touch.

The Sphere seemed to somehow explode and go haywire as the Geth/Reaper's hand touched. Nazara then suddenly started to spasm and shake uncontrollably as if it was being electrocuted.

Then suddenly it's chest exploded.

The Terror Geth emitted several mechanical howls of pain before it went limp, and fell to the ground.

Everyone stood back for a long moment, still trying to calm down from the sudden shock of what had just happened.

Austin took a few cautious steps forward an gently poked the Terror Geth's body with the barrel of his cannon.

"Legion, can you confirm it's definitely dead this time? I'm not risking this bastard coming back over and over again." he asked.
"Yes. Nazara is no more." said Legion.

As the Geth spoke the last word, the whole of Nazara's body started to fall apart. Armor plates fell, pretty much everything fell off until he body was nothing but an exoskeleton with wires.

"What just happened?" Leena asked.

"The Reaper upgrades in Nazara's form were almost identical to my own. They completed the sequence. The code has been uploaded to all Geth... without my sacrifice." said Legion.

Sure enough, several Geth appeared not he cliffs and looked down at them. The traditional black and red lights they'd originally had while under Reaper control were all gone, now replaced by a bright blue.

Leena then noticed Shala Raan limping towards them.

"Mother!"

The Qurian quickly ran up to the Admiral and helped steady her.

"I heard your ship made a crash-landing. Glad you got out in one piece." said Austin.

"I didn't get my toughness from my father." Leena smiled under her helmet.

"I was listening over the radio. If Han Gerrled han't stopped-" said Shala.

"He did." said Tali.

"We've taken heavy losses. I don't know if we can.. Where are we supposed to go?" Shala asked.

At that moment, several of the Geth suddenly made their way towards them. A lone Geth Prime stepped forward.

At first Tali raised her pistol, but Legion gently urged for her to stand down.

"It's alright, Tali" he said.

"You are welcome to return to Rannoch, Admiral Raan. With us." said the Geth Prime. "And we will honour Legion's promise. The Geth fleet will gladly join the Reaper resistance, and our engineers will assist in building the Crucible."

"As will ours of course." said Raan.

"Admiral, have you considered possible settlement sites?" Legion asked.

"We... the southern continent had excellent farmland, as I recall." said Shala.

"Are you going to be okay?" Austin asked.

"I believe so, Major. Thank you."

With just Austin, Tali and Leena left, the three sat down.

"Shopping for another house?" Austin asked.

"Beachfront property." Tali replied.
"Claim it fast. It's buyer's market." Leena joked.

"You okay? I know working with the Geth will be difficult." Austin asked.

"I'm not staying. I'm coming with you." said Tali.

"I wasn't going to ask." said Austin.

"I think you've earned a few favours from the fleet." said Leena, giving her commander a friendly nudge.

"I'm asking them to launch an assault on the reapers. Figure that makes us even." said Austin.

"If Reapers didn't spread, sure. But sooner or later, they'll come to Rannoch." said Tali.

"We did just kill two of them." said Austin.

"So I'm coming with you to stop them... if you think i can help." said Tali.

"You sure about this?" Austin asked.

"Yeah." said Tali, finally standing up. "I look at all this... this picture of hope and peace. And all I see is everyone I've lost. My team on Haestrom. My father. Even lieutenant Alenko."

There was a small pause as Tali hung her head slightly and sighed.

"It is beautiful, though, isn't it?" she eventually asked.

"That it is." Austin agreed.

"It'll be years before we can liv without our suits completely, but right now..."

To Austin's surprise, Tali then reached for her mask. It hissed and she gently took it off.

"Right now, I have this."

Tali then removed her hood and turned to face her friend, finally revealing her face for the very first time.

Austin was admittedly taken aback by the sight.

Tali's face had a look that was both human and alien at the same time.

She had a perfectly normal human like face, but that was the only similarity. The top of her head was divided into three crest like sections, a bit like an Asari. They filed over the back of her head, which was all several locks of braided black hair.

Her ears were mostly normal, but with the addition of a pointy bit at the bottom.

Tali's eyes though certainly drew the most attention. Compared to what had been visible behind her helmet, her eyes were very different. Rather than white glowing ones as had been expected, she had completely black eyes. Her eye iris were the only bit that stood out as they were yellow.

Overall though, it was a very beautiful look.

"So that's what you look like." Austin said with surprise. "You look very pretty."
"Careful, Austin. If I didn't know you loved Liara, i'd think you were hitting on me." Tali laughed.

It was so strange seeing Tali in this way. Seeing her smile, talk back to him with a mouth, staring back at him with proper eyes.

"Trust me, I would've gone with a different approach if that was my intention." said Austin.

He then heard another hiss behind him. He turned and saw that Leena had also done the same and removed the Helldiver armour piece other her helmet, and then the helmet itself.

She almost looked exactly the same as Tali, but she had a slightly older look to her and also her skin that was a very light grey. Her hair was the same, but it was much shorter than Tali's, and white. She also had a slightly darker shade of yellow as her iris colour.

"Didn't expect you to be grey, Leena." said Austin.

"We're all born with different colours. Sometimes they even change depending on our personalities." said Leena.

"I can tell this is a big thing for you, showing me your faces. I'm honoured." said Austin.

"I assure you, Shepard. To let one of the greatest heroes in history see our faces...The honour is ours."

No more needed to be said. The three friends simply stood beside one another and watched the sun go down before they finally returned to their ship.

If anyone was doubting whether I had the will to kill off some of my original characters, hope that set the record straight.

Also I can confirm that the Terror Geth is definitely dead now. No more comebacks for him. He's been a fun character to though.

Plus, if anyone is interested in knowing, Shepard will get to use the upgrades again later on in the story. They weren't just thrown in for the sake of it.

Next chapter will be more Citadel assignments. So you can expect Zaeed and one or two other familiar faces to show up.

The Omega DLC may be after that, but that's still undecided. Rest assured though it will be in the story at some point.

Keep up reviews.
Chapter 23, A Small, & Well Earned Break

Phew! I very nearly almost didn't finish this in time. A new College project came out of nowhere and things got very busy. Can only imagine they want to finish a few things up before Christmas.

Anyway, this one once again goes back to my previous Citadel chapter, partially based off my favourite film. Apologies if it didn't include everything you expected. There will hopefully be another one.

Chapter 23

A Small, & Well Earned Break

Rannoch had been a bittersweet victory. Although there was peace between the Geth and the Quarians and they now had their homeworld back, it hadn't been without it's losses. X-5's death had hit everyone hard.

Alpha had worked with him for such a long time, so it was hard to believe that after all this, the robot was dead.

Kaiden's death had also been hard for the crew of the original crew. Ashely especially had been quiet for a while.

Two memorials had been held that night. Kaiden had been given a proper funeral and so had what was left of X-5.

Austin had kept the upgrades that the robot had given him because they really did make him unstoppable. The problem as however that he could not use this upgraded form for very long. Even though is armour was now fully repaired and functioning again, his power core just didn't have enough strength to power both the suit and the upgrades. In fact no Helldiver power core was powerful enough for both.

Dell however had made a promise. In honour of X-5 he would continue working on a prototype power core he'd had the idea for. He had said that if he ever managed to get it working, it would be three times as powerful than the power core of a normal Helldiver and would be more than enough to sustain the upgrades and allow Shepard to maintain his powered up form.

For now, things were mostly quiet. The Geth and Quarians had already joined in with the construction of the Crucible. Nazara's experiments on the Dark Energy had also proved helpful and had proved an extremely valuable contribution to the construction. It was fair to say that the completion was maybe only a month or two away at most. Although that still left the problem of finding out what the Catalyst was. So far though, things were going well so the Normandy crew had at least earned a small breather from it all.

Austin was simply laid back on his bed, simply relaxing for now. He was enjoying the quiet while it lasted. Eventually the Normandy would have to back out and recruit even more races into the Resistance.

Just as the Major felt himself starting to drift off to sleep, he was suddenly woken back up by a bleep from his private terminal. Stretching as he stood up and giving a quick yawn, he walked up to the
terminal and accessed it. A message from Emily requesting another interview.

The Helldiver simply shrugged. Where was the harm in it?

"Traynor, can you send up Emily? She wants to talk with me." He asked into the comm.

"She's on her way up, Major." Traynor's voice replied.

Emily walked in a little while later, her camera following close behind.

"I'm sure you've got a million questions." Said Austin.

"I narrowed it down to 40. Let's see how you do with the top 10." Said Emily.

He camera got into position and started recording just as Austin cleared his throat.

"Major, the last time most of us heard about the Geth, they were attacking the Citadel alongside Sovereign and Nazara." Said Emily.

"Yes, and you should know that was a separate faction of the Geth. A small minority. Most of them are not hostile to organics." Said Austin.

"Is that how you explain that they're allies, and no longer "dangerous robots who stick humans on spikes"? Emily asked.

"What you have to realize is that despite their reputation, most Geth are not inherently violent. Nazara enslaved all of them one by one, robbing them of their free will. Then they attacked the Quarians and they fought back in self-defence. Now that we've freed the Geth from Reaper control however, they'll want payback for their enslavement." Said Austin calmly.

"But you're going to take an army of machines to fight Reapers with untold hacking abilities. What's keeping the Reapers from reprogramming the Geth, like they have before?" Emily asked.

"The Geth are extremely intelligent, and they've put incredible thought into solving this problem. They're now immune to the Reapers and will oppose them any day. They're not going to turn again. I'd bet my life on it." Said Austin.

"Now, here's a question from a Batarian on Omega: "Major Shepard. If the mass relays can be destroyed…"

After what really was 40 questions, the interview finally finished.

"So, did I miss anything? Do you have any questions?" Emily asked.

"You going to file your story now?" Austin replied.

"Well… if you don't mind." Said Emily.

"Go tell the galaxy we've got another fleet."

"Aye, aye, Major."

Deciding that another visit to the Citadel was in order, Austin had already set the destination and the
Normandy was already en route.

In the meantime, Austin went down to the drive core to have a talk with Tali. As to be expected, the young Quarian was already busy working and mumbling to herself.

"Can't be… no, I guess that's right."

Austin caught her attention when he gently touched her shoulder and she turned to face him.

"Hey, Tai. How's it going?" he asked.

"Oh! Sorry, I didn't hear you." Tali apologised. "I just got communication from the flee… sorry, from Rannoch. In the old days, I'd send any new technology I found back to the fleet. I should probably be doing that with agriculture samples, now. I… I don't know anything about raising crops."

"How are your people doing?" Austin asked.

"It's crazy. The Geth are… helping. Setting up housing, adapting power systems. They're doing in weeks what would have taken us years." Said Tali. "Geth are even uploading into the suits of Quarian volunteers. They're rewriting environmental functions, jump-starting our immune systems.

"That doesn't sound possible." Said Austin, slightly amazed at what he was hearing.

"The Geth are software, not hardware. They can transfer themselves from a normal body into anything with enough processing power. They're mimicking infections, so the host can adept without getting sick. It's like making a vaccine." Said Tali.

"So the Quarians eventually won't have to wear those suits anymore?" Austin asked.

"It doesn't seem possible, but… yes. In a few years, with Geth improvements, we won't need them. We might still wear them. The suits have become part of our society. But a rupture won't be a death sentence." Said Tali, smiling proudly under her mask. "Today, on Rannoch, there are Quarian children who will grow up healthy and strong, thanks to the Geth."

"They owe that to you." Said Austin.

"No, I'd have killed the Geth with no regrets. And I'd have been wrong. Thank you, Austin." Said Tali.

The Quarian then gently hugged her friend. Austin didn't even object and hugged her back.

"You're welcome, Tali." He said.

Rebuilding was still being done after the attempted coup by Cerberus. But so far, the Citadel, and most especially the Presidium were in much better shape than last time.

As the Helldiver walked down the steps to check out the stores, he spotted EDI, along with Joker sitting not too far away.

"Hello, Shepard." she said.

"You look like you're gathering data." said Austin.

"That is a safe assumption."
"Anything and world-shaking? Man's inhumanity to man? Does objective really exist? That kind of thing?" Austin asked, slightly sarcastically.

"I was running scenarios in my head to analyse Jeff's behaviour. I believe he has a strong affectionate attachment to me, but he has not stated it to anyone yet." EDI explained. "Shepard, you have firsthand experience. How do you know when someone is romantically invested?"

"Errrr, well..." Austin tired to say. This had been very unexpected and it was a rather uncomfortable subject to talk about, especially to someone like EDI. "Well, they'll usually show signs they can't stop thinking about you. You know: asking you out, giving you presents, maybe playing music."

"I lack material wants other than hardware and software upgrades, and my core programming does not assign values to music." said EDI. "Perhaps we could discuss how to provoke Jeff into an emotional commitment."

"That's not how to think of it. It's got to be natural. You need chemistry." said Austin, trying to be more clear. In a way, it was like trying to explain all this complicated adult stuff to a child.

"There are a number of pharmaceuticals I could inject to stimulate the desired emotional state."

"That's not what I meant. I meant do something you both like. Something simple. For example, you both like humour."

"Correct. I will see if there are comedic entertainment shows being presented on the Citadel." said EDI. "Scanning... Do you think he would like "The Man Who Hung Himself?" It appears to be about a amorous plastic surgeon."

"EDI, the most important thing is to have a good time, wherever you go. And if you're having fun, he probably will too." said Austin.

"Then the outcome is an unknown quantity, but you are I should attempt it anyway."

"Nobody ever fell in love without being a little bit brave. That's how Liara and I first started." said Austin, a small smile appearing on his face as he remembered the times when he and Liara had first fallen in love. Neither one of them would forget those days not he original Normandy.

"I see. I believe you have improved my chances. Thank you, Shepard." said EDI.

Austin felt it best to simply leave EDI to it. As he walked up the stairs however, he suddenly heard a voice calling his name.

"Shepard, is that you?!"

Austin turned and saw most unexpected, but familiar face staring back at him. Gianna Parasini.

"Gianna? What a surprise. I hadn't expected to see you here." He said.

"With the war on, I got recalled. I've now been posted here to try and find a saboteur." Giana explained.

"Saboteur?"

"Yes. Been hacking key systems. Power, communications, it's bad."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Austin offered.
"Absolutely. I was hoping you might ask. But I can understand if you're busy, being the leader of the Reaper Resistance and all that. If you've got time to help, check out this console." Said Gianna.

Austin activated his omni tool and examined the console. His armour's systems were quick to find what he was looking for.

"Hmm. Looks like a collection of access codes. More specifically, Batarian diplomatic codes. Back from when they had an embassy on the Citadel." He said.

"If you can use your Spectre status too… oh, wait I forgot. You're not a Spectre anymore." Said Giana.

"No, but I may still be able to find them. Helldivers have very similar privileges to a Spectre, especially when it comes to things involving Batarians. I should still be able to help." Said Austin.

"If you think so, find them and then I can shut them down." Said Giana.

"If I find anything, I'll let you know." Said Austin.

"Thanks, Shepard. Always had a feeling we'd meet again."

"Same here."

Meanwhile in the Presidium Embassies, Griffin was busy carrying out a job Austin had assigned him. Just as the Helldiver had started the working on the Batarian codes, he'd got another message from Primarch Victus. It implicated that Volus ambassador Din Korlack was a possible Cerberus informant.

Although Cerberus was technically nothing more than indoctrinated servants now, and any others had defected tot he resistance, they did still seem to be operating in an at least stable way. Still, without the Illusive Man they were definitely crippled. When this war eventually ended, they would no doubt crumble from within and Cerberus would eventually just be more than a memory.

Griffin then snapped his mind back to the task at hand. For now, Korlack wasn't in the office, so he needed to find out where the Volus was.

The Helldiver walked up tot he terminal and accessed the latest messages.

"You've never been this uncooperative with us before, Ambassador." said a female voice.

"That's because you were actually doing some good in the galaxy before!" said Volus, obviously Korlack.

"We understand it took a lot for you to reach out to Cerberus, Ambassador Korlack. We ask that you trust us a little longer."

The next recording was dated just after the coup, and before the Illusive Man's base was assaulted.

"You people are monsters!" Korlack yelled.

"Ambassador, please-"

"Hundreds dead, Udina betraying the council! I should have cut ties with you ages ago!"

"And what will that accomplish now?" asked the Cerberus agent. "The risks you took by passing
information to Cerberus… it's left you in an interesting position. If you sever contact, we can't protect you from the consequences."

"I don't… I have no time for this." said Korlack.

"We'll speak again. Have a good day, Ambassador Korlack.

Now it was just the final the recording. Griffin could only hope it had some clues, at this point anything would do now.

"The Turians think I'm still working for Cerberus. They've put a price on my head!" said Korlack. "I can't go to C-sec or the Helldivers, but Cerberus has plans. And entire colony rests on my life. If anyone finds this, I hid a tracking receiver in the office suite beside the human embassies."

There was then the sound of struggle.

"What are you-"

Then the sound of someone being kicked out followed, and to Griffin's surprise, another voice joined the message.

"Damn Cerberus has them everywhere nowadays." said the gruff voice of Zaeed Massani.

"You gonna go on about them all night?" said a female voice.

"Just get the car up here quick. Little bastard's even heavier than he looks." Zaeed replied.

Griffin was very taken aback by this. He hadn't expected to hear from the bounty hunter after his contract with them ended, let alone in this sort of way.

"Zaeed?"

Austin investigated the hospital first for any signs of the Batarian code. Pretty soon, he found one in a nearby terminal.

"Gianna, this is Shepard. I found one of the code locations." he said into his comm.

"Okay, I'll shut it down. Just need to authorise your Helldiver status. Someone used this to cut off power to a dozen life support machines in the hospital." said Gianna."Okay, that access code is officially disabled. Can you find anymore?"

With Austin currently busy, Sarah had been asked to deal with another matter requiring attention. Austin had received a message from C-sec asking for assistance in something.

The N7 marian walked down to the C-sec station in the Presidium commons. Two Turian guards were waiting.

"I'm Commander Sarah Shepard. My brother sent me to handle this. You mentioned in your message that you had a situation that required our attention?" Sarah asked.

"This man was caught with Cerberus intel. There's firm reason to believe he's a Cerberus spy but he keeps saying he's a deep cover operative working for the Helldivers. Said also that he's a friend of your brothers." said one of the guards.
Sarah looked over the guard's shoulder to see someone she didn't think she'd see again. Her brother's old fan, Conrad Verner.

"Oh for the love of..." she sighed. "Let me talk to him. I might be able to get the truth out."

"Go ahead." said the guard.

Sarah walked past the two Turians and up to where Conrad had been handcuffed to his chair.

"Conrad Verner."

"Sarah?"

"You better have a good explanation for this, Conrad. Otherwise I really will shoot you in the foot this time." said Sarah, folding her arms.

"Sarah, I promise this isn't what it looks like. I'm not really with Cerberus." said Conrad defensively.

"The explain why you were found with Cerberus intel." said Sarah.

"After you and your brother helped me out on Illium, I began to hear the rumours that your brother was working for Cerberus. Even I have common sense and know that a Helldiver would never work for Cerberus. I refused to believe the rumours. And the end, I saw that the only true way to honour our brother was to do his job properly. So I joined the Helldivers." Conrad explained.

"You mean you actually got proper training this time?" Sarah asked, slightly surprised by this.

"Not exactly. I'm not a soldier you see, they felt I'd do a better as deep cover operative like I was pretending to be. They gave me training in that sort of field of work. Now I work as double agent for them inside Cerberus. I've been feeding them critical intel on Cerberus' moves for months," said Conrad.

"That is a very convincing story. I'm very inclined to believe you. Do you swear you're telling the truth?" Sarah asked.

"On my own life, Sarah." Conrad replied.

"One moment." said Sarah.

The N7 marine turned her back to Conrad and activated her omni tool. A holo screen of Xun appeared in front of here.

"Sarah. What can I do for you?" the information broker asked.

"Can you tell me if there is a Conrad Verner in the Helldiver deep cover operative group?" Sarah asked.

"I believe I can. Give me a minute..." Xun replied. She took a quick moment to access one of her databases. "Right, here we are. Yes. Verner joined the Helldivers a year ago and was recruited as a deep cover operative. After proving himself capable on many assignments he was later posted within Cerberus as a double agent. He's be a regular contact of mine."

"Thank you, Xun. That's all I needed to know." said Sarah.

"Anytime, Sarah."
Sarah ended the call and turned back to Conrad.

"Seems I believe you, Conrad." she said. She then walked back to the two guards. "This man's telling the truth. He's a deep cover operative inside Cerberus for the Helldivers. He doesn't appear on systems as a result. Let him go."

"As you wish." said the guard.

The two Turians unlocked the cuffs and allowed Conrad to stand up. With their job done, they left, leaving just Sarah and Conrad.

"Thanks, Sarah. I hand't meant to get caught. I was hanging out with this Asari when she accidentally found that intel on me. She called C-sec before I could explain." said Conrad.

"Next time put it somewhere safe. My brother and I aren't going to be there to bail you out all the time, especially with this war going on." said Sarah.

"I know, and I'm sorry. I don't mean to screw things up." Conrad apologised.

"It's alright, Conrad. We all mistakes, even the Helldivers." said Sarah. Normally she wouldn't be this supportive of Conrad, especially after he tried to flirt with her 3 years ago, but this recent revelation that he was doing a decent job now had given her a change of heart about the young man. "What can you tell me about your Cerberus contacts, or what's left of them I guess?"

"Not much. With the Illsuvie Man dead and the Takaal running things, there's not much else I can do. And I have to be careful otherwise I could risk getting indoctrinated. They were hoping to try and get me to recruit some people near the medical station." Conrad replied.

"Which was sabotaged, just recently in fact." said Sarah.

"I knew it. I didn't think they'd really want to recruit people, they just wanted a distraction. Seems they succeeded without me though." Conrad sighed.

"You didn't do it?"

"I wouldn't be able to live with myself knowing I'd sent people to their deaths. Cover be dammed." said Conrad defiantly.

"Well anyway, I'm sure my brother can deal with it. Just don't try to help him though. You could blow your cover again if you're not careful." said Sarah.

"Okay. But I might be able to give you and your brother some other help. That device that's being worked on for example..." said Conrad.

He was stopped though when Sarah gave him a stern look.

"...which I'm not supposed to know about." he finished.

"It's an accent, Prothean, dark-energy device to stop the Reapers. No offence, but I seriously doubt you could help with that." said Sarah.

"Well, I did write my doctoral dissertation on xenotechnology and dark energy integration." said Conrad.

"Really?"
"Yes! In fact, I may be able to find some ancient tech schematics that could help you with construction." said Conrad."Hang on, I have an old contact."

He pressed his finger to his ear for a moment.

"Aw, come on, Hossle. Help me out! Sorry. The war has him scared." he said.

"Hossle? Gavin Hossle, the tech researcher? My brother did him a favour once on Feros. Tell him this is for him." said Sarah.

"I had no idea they knew each other! Small universe! Okay, he's forwarding the schematics over." said Conrad.

He then activated his omni tool and began going over the schematics.

"Oh, no. It's in an ancient Asari select. We'd need a lot ancient Asari writing to translate..." he said.

Sarah then activated her omni tool and uploaded some Asari matriarch writings that one of her N7 special forces team had recovered from a mission.

"Would this collection of Asari Matriarch writings help?" she asked.

"Um, yes. Yes, it would. Okay, it's auto translating. Let's see.. Oh, no. The technology falls under an existing patent. I can actually access the schematics without a license from... let's see... Elkoss Combine." said Conrad.

For Sarah though, that also wasn't a problem. Her brother had the necessary access for that, all she needed was his authorisation. And when it came to these sorts of things, she didn't even need to ask.

Sarah once again captivated her omni tool and uploaded the license.

"How did you even? Well, this is great!" said Conrad. "Okay, here you go! Hope this helps in building that dark energy-device!" "Anyway, good luck fixing the medi-gel dispensers. I'll just be here... not touching anything."

Griffin managed to find the tracking recover Korlack had mentioned. The voices of Zaeed and the two bounty hunters he was obviously working with greeted his ears.

"How long till we will Korlack?" Zaeed asked.

"Once the credits go through. Was beginning to think you weren't interested in the money." the female bounty hunter replied.

"I'm not." said Zaeed.

"Because Korlack worked for Cerberus? What'd they do to you?" said the other bounty hunter, most likely a Krogan judging from the sound of his voice.

"None of your goddamn business! He waking up?" said Zaeed.

Griffin felt this was the time to try and make contact with Korlack.

"This is Alex Wilson of Alpha Squad. I'm a friend of Major Shepard's. Can you hear me?" he asked quietly.
"Yes! Yes, I can hear you." Korlack replied quietly.

"Tell me where you are." said Griffin.

"Ah… we're still near the Presidium. C-sec will check Selkish Arms when they realize I'm missing." said Korlack.

"They won't give a damn when they realize you sold them out to Cerberus." said Zaeed.

"Wait, Cerberus is planning to attack a colony that-"

"Stay calm. Help's coming." said Griffin.

The next one Austin found was in the docks. Sometimes it did surprise him that the Citadel didn't have better security systems than this. It made the prison on Arkadia seem like a deadlock in comparison.

"Gianna, I found another one." he said.

"Holy crap! These are the remote navigational codes. Last week's crash at the docks was thought to have been accident. Shepard, there were 117 Alliance soldiers on that ship, all human, just like the patients at the hospital." said Gianna.

"Batarian codes and someone with a grudge against humans. I wonder if…" said Austin.

"Okay, this code's offline now as well. Should just be one left." said Gianna.

"Damn it. Wrong door." Griffin cursed.

He was trying to find Korlack. He was close, but still unsure where exactly the Volus was.

"He needs you alive to stop Cerberus." he said, trying to get Korlack to stall the bounty hunters and buy him a bit more time.

"Cerberus is after a Turian colony. Kill me, and they get it." said Korlack.

"Drop Shepard's name." Griffin added.

"Shepard's investigating. He's a recent acquaintance."

"How recent?" Zaeed asked.

"Very." Korlack replied.

"All right, I'm listening." said Zaeed.

Griffin then heard the sudden sound of gunfire coming from another door. He quickly hurried inside.

There was Zaeed, resting with his back against the window, and the bodies of the other two body guards lying not the floor in froth of him.

"Been a while, Zaeed." Griffin smiled under his helmet.

"Griffin. Glad I wasn't just making an ass of myself over a hunch." said Zaeed. "Undisciplined bastards. This is what I get for signing up at the last minute."
"Where's Korlack?" Griffin asked.

Zaeed indicated over to a corner of the room. The Volus was right there.

"I'm here. I… You saved my life. I almost died because the Turians thought I was still with Cerberus!" he said.

"Did those mercs hurt you?" Griffin asked.

"I'm fine. They wanted me alive until the fees were delivered for my capture. They didn't care about what I had to say."

"You kept mentioning a colony in your message."

"Information on a Turian planet's defence system. They'll strike soon. But… if I tell you which planet they're attacking, Cerberus will know I turned traitor."


"We saved your life! Tell us what planet you put in danger!" Griffin demanded.

"I can offer a bargain! The Volus bombing fleet. In tactical terms, it's worth far more than a colony."

"Or you could give us both."

"You can warn the Turians there'll be an attack. That should be general though to ward off suspicion."

"All right. I tired playing nice. Maybe my friend can get you to see reason."

"Now wait just a moment…" said Korlack nervously.

"You mind, Zaeed?"

"It'd be a goddamn pleasure." said Zaeed, cracking his knuckles.

"I'll leave you to it. It'll be a while before anyone shows up for him." said Griffin.

"It's Aephus! Cerberus will attack a colony called Aephus for its shipyards." said Korlack quickly.

"And the bombing fleet?" Griffin asked.

"Yes. It's yours." said Korlack. "I'll speak with Citadel security about this… incident. You have my thanks."

"Took him long enough to pit that out." said Zaeed.

"Zaeed, what are you doing here?" Griffin asked.

"Later. C-sec's on their way. Won't be too pleased with the mess we left them." said Zaeed as he left for the door. "Catch up with me at the docks if you like."

The final console was in the refugee camp.

"Gianna, this is where the last access code was used." said Austin.
"One sec, Shepard. I'm losing your signal." Gianna replied.

Austin then felt a gun press against his back.

"Shepard."

Austin instantly recognised that voice. A Batarian that he had fought many times before.

"Balak. I should've known you'd be behind this." said Austin.

"You should've killed me back Elysium when you had the chance. I have been waiting a long time for this. Everything that has happened to my people is your fault." said Balak.

"What did you expect? Your kind made enemies throughout the galaxy. And now you've paid the price for it." said Austin.

"We were a proud race, a beautiful race! Have you seen what the Reapers have done to us?!!" said Balak angrily. "I'm trapped on this Citadel. Our warships only know the locations of Reaper forces because I've tapped Council transmissions. I am the highest-ranking military officer left in the Hegemoney and I can't save my people! But I can end you."

"You won't pull that trigger. You know what I'm doing out here." said Austin.

"Yes. Forging alliances with the Turians, the Krogan… Killing you will tear all the other races apart." said Balak.

"And then the Reapers wipe out everything, including the last of your warships. The last of your people." said Austin. "And you know that. If you truly care about your people…"

"I could kill you. I… could do it right now." said Balak hesitantly. The eye patched Batarian could not deny that his old enemy was right.

"Aaah!"

Austin felt the gun rescind and he turned to see Balak walking off.

"Our ships are yours." he said.

Gianna then suddenly rushed out of the crowd.

"Shepard. Are you alright?" she asked.

"Fine. You won't have any more trouble with those codes." Austin replied.

"Was that… Do you want me to arrest him?" Gianna asked.

"I want you to put a bullet in his head… but we're all making some sacrifices today." said Austin. "Let him go."

"As you wish, Shepard. And thanks again." said Gianna. Shen then gently planted a kiss on his cheek. This time though she didn't both to ask if the Helldiver could remove his helmet like last time. "Sometimes, I envy your wife. She's a lucky Asari."

"Before you go… I know it's a bit much to ask, but the Reaper Resistance needs all the help it can get." said Austin.
"There are a few favours I could possibly pull. I can't promise anything, but I'll do what I can. You've helped me out three times now, time I started returning the favour." said Gianna.

"It's been a pleasure, Giana. Take care of yourself out there." said Austin.

"You too, Shepard."

Now that just left Austin with fixing the media-gel dispensers. It didn't take him long though.

"I've fixed the sabotage. The media-gel dispensers should be working now," he said to one of the doctors.

"Thank you! I'll get patients moving through triage immediately!" said the doctor.

As the doctor went to work, Conrad soon joined Austin.

"Great work, Shepard! And listen, I'm sorry for..." he went to say, but he then suddenly noticed someone. "Hey, that's him! That's my Cerberus contact! Hey! Hey you! You're under arrest!"

The man looked at Austin and aimed a gun at him. Conrad quickly acted and threw himself in front of Austin just as the gun fired.

As Conrad fell to the floor, Austin quickly grabbed the Cerberus contact and broke his neck. He then knelt down beside Conrad.

"Shepard. Shepard... did I help?" Conrad asked.

"Yeah, Conrad. You helped." said Austin.

"I don't feel anything." said Conrad, slightly surprised.

"Actually, I sabotaged his gun. It might've looked like it fired, but that was just the thermal clip overheating." said a redhead woman. "Hi, Major. It's me, Jenna. You helped me a few years ago when I was working undercover at Chora's Den."

"And now you're volunteering here?" Austin asked.

"Chellick showed me a few little tricks when he had me working undercover. Guess that paid off, huh?" Jenna replied.

"You... you saved my life!" Conrad asked as Austin helped him up.

"I can't believe you were willing to lay down your life for Major Shepard. You're so brave!" said Jenna.

'Oh, the Major and I go way back. Let me give you a hand, and I can tell you about it..." Conrad offered.

Jenna smiled and he and Conrad walked off. As Austin watched them leave, he couldn't' help but smile. He was impressed that Conrad had come this far. To think that 2 years ago, he would've been happy to let Sarah shoot him in the foot. Funt how time had a way of changing the most unlikely of things.

Griffin soon showed up a while later. He found Zaeed was in the section containing the Batarian refugees.
"Wondered if you'd show up, Griffin. Figured you and Shepard would be too busy recruiting goddamn armies for this war you're fighting." said the Bounty Hunter.

"We could always use more help." said Griffin.

"I'll bet. I've seen footage of what the Reapers and Taakal are doing out there." said Zaeed. "Tell you what: I'll see if some old contacts of mine are still around. Can't promise you anything, but if enough of them are still breathing... I can lend a hand."

Sarah simply stretched as she walked into her cabin. It wasn't easy managing all of the N7 special forces out there.

Things were going very well so far though. The Resistance keep getting new allies every day, and she was more than happy to let them assist out in the field. The recent addition of the Geth and the Quarians in particular was a huge leap forward. Since they'd joined, hundreds of key locations had been won back and the Reaper forces were being pushed back a lot. The Takaal though still put up a hell of a fight, but fortunately most mission concerning them were handled by the Helldivers, something that Sarah was very relieved of. Compared to the Helldivers, there were only so many of the special forces. They could not afford to lose too many soldiers.

Sarah sat down on her double bed which she shared with Traynor and lay back. Just as she was about to try and catch 30 winks however, she heard what she was pretty certain was the sound of running water.

"Please tell me I didn't leave the shower on again." she sighed in her head.

Just as she was about to open the door however she heard another sound. A rather pleasant and blissful, sighing sound.

"Guess I didn't." Sarah smiled to herself.

Taking care to be extra quiet, she gently opened the door. Sure enough, she found the love of her life standing in the shower and letting the hot water run over her body.

Sarah already felt her arousal climbing as she watched Traynor's dark skin shine and glisten in light and water.

Being careful not to be seen, the N7 marine gently closed the door and worked on removing her clothes. She then gently opened the shower and stepped inside.

Traynor was caught completely off guard as she felt Sarah's hand wrap around her.

"Hello, darling." said Sarah. "I'm not complaining, but what have I told you about showering without me?"

"I didn't know you'd be back so soon. I was hoping to look my best for when you did." Traynor replied, sighing blissfully as she settled into Sarah's embrace, letting her love's hands gently stroke her wet tummy.

"You always look your best, Sam. Don't let anyone say otherwise." said Sarah. "You're always beautiful to me."

"You always say the sweetest things." said Traynor, giving a gentle moan as Sarah's hand gently moved lower until she began to feel the touch her lower regions. "I do like you better without all that
"I feel naked without it." said Sarah teasingly as she began to gently rub Traynor's core with one hand while her other snaked back up and began to squeeze and fondle one of her breasts.

"You say that as if it were a bad thing, princess." Traynor chuckled.

Sarah simply smiled and turned Traynor around. Both lips locked together in a passionate kiss. Traynor felt her heartbeat increase in excitement as she let her love take control. She also felt her fingers tingle every time she touched Sarah's smooth wet skin. For the both of them, this was absolute heaven.

Traynor then got a little bolder and gently pushed Sarah against the shower wall, her mouth latching onto one of her lover's large breasts as she kissed the nipple. One of Sarah's hand meanwhile stroked Samantha's smooth wet hair, while the other gently snaked down to her nether regions.

Traynor started to moan as she felt Sarah's fingers enter her pussy. She sighed and moaned with each finger stroke into Sarah's ear, making the N7 marine shudder in arousal.

Traynor decided to return the favour. While one of her hands remained on Sarah's breast as she continued to kiss it, her other made it's way down and mirrored Sarah's actions perfectly.

The two women moaned in union as they fingered each other.

Sarah then started to increase the speed of her strokes even more, making Traynor moan even louder until she finally couldn't hold it in anymore. Traynor nearly scream just as Sarah felt her own release start as well. They both came at the same time.

As the two panted, coming down from their joint orgasm, they felt the water start to go cold. So that they didn't suddenly go cold themselves, Traynor switched the shower off.

The two women simply stood there for a long time, kissing passionately. When they finally parted, they left the shower and Sarah took a towel from the nearby rail.

Traynor found it unbelievably arousing as her lover started to dry her all by herself. Sarah teased the poor girl as she dried her hair and then focused on her body.

Traynor gave a pleasured smile as she let her lover dry her in such an arousing and teasing way. Particularly when Sarah focused on drying her breasts and rear did she enjoy those bits.

After she was finally dry, Sarah then dried herself, almost doing it in such a way that it felt like she was doing a strip tease for Samantha. With her lover almost hypnotised by the show, Sarah slowly led her into the bedroom. She finally threw the towel aside, exposing her body.

Rather to her surprise, Traynor suddenly pounced on her and tackled her onto the bed.

After several long kisses, Sarah suddenly flipped Traynor around. Knowing instantly where this was going, the two started to 69 each other. Despite the many times they had done this, they never could get enough of each other's taste. Eventually, they felt their next orgasm of the night approaching. Both increased their speed and moaned together as they both came.

Several more rounds passed that night. When it was finally over, the two were both spent.

"Been a while since we did that." Sarah sighed happily as she cuddled with Traynor, the comm specialist's head resting on her breasts.
"Maybe too long." Traynor smiled blissfully enjoying the feeling of Sarah stroking her back. "I love you."

"I love you too." Sarah smiled, gently planting a kiss on Samantha's head.

Bit of an apology to my friend, Mastermind. I just got so stressed for time with the last bit. Still, it's okay at least. Better than nothing.

Right, next chapter is planned to be the Omega DLC. Secretly, I have been dreading this one. I'm ashamed to see I've never played that particular DLC. I haven't even bought it. So I will have to use some gameplay vids.

Just fair warning, it might not be as good as you think. I've got one or two idea changes, but nothing too drastic.

See you next week.
Well, that went better than I expected.

I will admit that I couldn't really be bothered with most of the action scenes in this, but I did do it properly with the final one. Hopefully that won't be a total disappointment for you.

Would like to thank LegionnaryPrime for his idea suggestion for this.

Chapter 24

The Battle of Omega

An interesting message. That was what Austin thought as he read.

**Omega: It's Time**

*From: Aria T'Loak*

*Subject: It's Time*

Shepard, I'm ready to discuss that pet project I mentioned when we spoke in Purgatory. Come to Dock 42 on the Citadel. A batarian named Bray will be waiting.

Though Aria wasn't one of Austin's most trusted allies, she had given him the opportunity to unite all the three merc bands together under her command. Also to be fair, she'd helped him out before back during his mission against the Collectors.

The Helldiver proceeded to the designated spot. Just to be safe, he'd worn his armour. He found a Batarian waiting for him.

"Are you Bray?" Austin asked.

"The great Major Shepard. Heh, and me without my gun." Bray replied, slightly coldly.

"Just take me to Aria, and I won't get violent." said Austin.

"Follow me."

Bray led him over to the spot where cars could be hailed.

"So where is she?"

A car suddenly rose up from underneath then and opened up. Aria and Elraa were sat inside.

"Shepard."

"Aria. How dramatic." said Austin as he climbed in and sat next to Aria.

"There are too many eyes and ears in Purgatory." said Aria.

The car door then closed and it sped off.
"I assume this is about retaking Omega?" Austin asked.

"This is about your war, Shepard." Aria replied. "The Takaal and what's left of Cerberus fighting your Helldiver forces out in the Terminus systems seriously bolsters their mobility."

"Since Cerberus took Omega, they've spread through the galaxy. Surely your Arkanes have noticed." said Elraa.

"Cut to the chase. What's your plan?" Austin asked.

"Kick them out." Elraa replied.

"I've amasses a fleet of merc ships. We're going to punch through enemy lines and invade. Once we're on Omega, it's a ground war. That's why I want you-I only accept the best." said Aria.

She then handed Austin a data pad. It showed what looked like a Cerberus general. The face looked familiar to Austin.

"The leader of the Cerberus occupation on Omega is General Oleg Pertrovsky. He's the one who… ousted me." Aria explained.

"Thought as much." said Austin.

"You know him?"

"Alpha Squad and I crossed paths with him a few years back. The Illusive Man's top military strategist, and best kept secret. It was only once, but we only just came out of it alive." Austin explained.

"Then you know what the merciless bastard is capable of. With Cerberus now working for the Takaal, he's now in their pocket and is the source of their control over the last remaining remnants. I imagine the Takaal got him to work willingly for them through… persuasion." said Aria.

"What's your intel on the occupation?" Austin asked.

"Pertrovsky's army is massive, and he's got Omega locked tight. The information stops there." Aria replied.

"So you're winging it."

"Not at all. There are secrets on Omega only I know, secrets that will provide us a foothold." said Aria confidently. "I can tell you this: Pertrovsky's invasion was precise and ruthless. He'll stop at nothing to win."

"Well, this time he's about to meet his match." said Austin.

"What makes you so sure this time?" Elraa asked.

"It was a very long time ago. Alpha and I have changed and learned much since then. This time will be different." said Austin.

"That kind of talk goes a long way with me." said Aria. "When Omega is mine again, I'll give you everything. I've got ships, mercs, eezo—all yours for the Resistance."

"What's the catch?" Austin asked.
"I have… objections to some of the company you keep, so you'll have to leave the Normandy and it's crew behind." said Aria.

"My crew and squad are professionals, Aria. It'd be stupid not to use all of us." Austin argued.

"Let's just say… I want you all to myself." said Aria.

"Don't even think of trying that kind of talk with me, Aria. I'm married." said Austin quickly.

"Bray will provide coordinates to my fleet. Oh, and while we're still on the Citadel, please be discreet." said Aria.

The car stopped and Austin stepped out. Bray was waiting for him.

"The fleet is hidden in this system. Signal me when you're on your way. Aria and I will meet you on the command ship." he said. "Can't wait to see what all the fuss is about."

It had certainly been hard explaining to everyone why he would be gone for a while without them. Still, they listened and didn't argue. So that was good enough.

"...we're outnumbered four-to-one, and most of our vessels are transports with limited firepower."

"We're not here to win a space battle, Jarral. We just have to punch through the line." said Aria, addressing one of the Asari captains.

"So you've commandeered a Cerberus cruiser…" said Austin as he stepped onto the bridge.

"The guest of honor has arrived. We can finally start." said Elraa.

"Let me guess: you're planning on infiltrating the enemy fleet." said Austin.

"Exactly. We position ourselves to strike a crippling blow, then my forces join the fun." said Aria.

"Risky, but it works for me." said Austin.

"If you're as accommodating the rest of the way, we'll get along very well." Aria smiled.

"Then let's quit talking and get to it." said Austin.

"Bray, move through the relay. Signal the fleet to wait. They only follow on my command." Aria ordered.

The ship left the relay and slowly began making its way towards Omega. The familiar shaped asteroid station could be seen through the window. It was strange though seeing Cerberus ships orbiting it.

"Head for the command ship." said Aria.

"Cruiser, I don't have you on the flight plan. Identify yourself." said the Cerberus comm officer.

Aria nodded and Bray started playing a recorded message.

"This is Captain Lentz. Run voice recognition: alpha, tango, zed. We took damage Seeking repairs."

"Identity confirmed, Captain. Hold for approach authorisation." said the comm officer.
"How did you get the captain to say that?" Austin asked curiously.

"The hard way." Aria replied.

The ship slowly made it's way past the others and in to the inner defences.

"That's right, nice and slow…" said Aria.

"Keep your distance from the others. But don't look like you're trying to keep your distance." said Elraa.

"Huh?"

"I don't know. Just fly casual." Elraa sighed irritably.

"Be patient, get as close as you can." said Austin.

"Fire!" Aria ordered.

The ship fired several shots, taking out the command ship.

"Signal the fleet through the relay!" Aria ordered.

The holo map lit up to show the fleet exiting the relay and beginning their attack.

"We're through. Head straight for the station." said Aria.

"We're being hailed by the general." said Bray.

"Should be interesting. Put him through." said Aria.

The holo map vanished and Pertrovsky's image replaced it.

"Aria. I knew this had to be you. You'll never make it. Call it off now." he said.

"You're barking up the wrong tree, General, but maybe you can convince my partner." said Aria as Austin stepped closer.

"Major Shepard. I was wondering when we'd meet again. Small universe." said Pertrovsky.

"Too small, Petrovsky." said Austin coldly.

"Aria clearly thinks you will unsettle me. Now it's my turn. I see you've gone to the trouble of augmenting that ship with Silaris armouring. An exorbitant waste." said the General. "I've made improvements to Omega's outer defences. My cannons will cut through you like tissue paper."

"He sounds pretty confident." said Austin.

"Yeah. He does." Aria agreed.

"So again, I say turn back." said Pertrovsky.

"Let's see what you've got, Oleg. End transmission." said Aria. "That went well. Set present course- we're ramming the station. Everyone brace for impact."

"What?!"
"Omega's kinetic batter will stop my ships from landing. I equipped this cruiser with disrupters to take it out on impact. Don't worry, we'll probably survive the crash."

The ship sped at full speed towards the station. Already though, the cannon were doing heavy damage. The cruiser shook about violently and sparks started to fly everywhere.

"Shields gone! All system failing!" said Bray.

"We can make it!" said Aria.

"Aria, don't be stupid! Sound the evac." said Austin.

"Damn it! Program escape pods for the station." said Aria.

"Let's get everyone out! There's no time!" said Austin quickly.

Everyone quickly hurried to their escape pods. Both Austin, Elraa and Aria hurried into the same pod.

"Guess the asshole really did upgrade Omega's defences." said Aria as she secured her harness.

"So it would seem." said Austin.

The escape pod crashed, and everyone jumped out. Almost immediately, Cerberus troopers met their gunfire, or blades in Austin's case.

"Hope the other escape pods made it." said Aria as she and the others went into over to avoid more incoming fire from a far.

"All right, what's our target?" Austin asked.

"Need to hit the Defence System station, shut down Omega's outer defences so my ships can land. If we don't, they'll be blown to bits like we were." Aria replied.

"Got it."

"This what we brought you for: ground assault." said Aria. "In combat, what you say goes. I know where we need to go, and you can get us there."

"Okay, let's move." said Austin.

"Jarral, defences are down. Signal the surviving ships to converge on the rendezvous point." said Aria as the defence cannons deactivated.

"Aye. Approach trajectories plotted. We're already queuing up." Jarral replied.

"Bray, come in. Status?" said Aria.

"Rendezvous site secured. Hangar doors enabled. Will have them open soon." Bray replied.

"Need them open now! My birds are coming in. Prep for reception." said Aria.

"What exactly is this rendezvous point?" Austin asked.

"That's where we're headed. It's a bunker I established on D-deck for my… more sensitive
operations. It’s utterly impenetrable—with its own secret hangar and dock. Independent power source, life support munitions. You’ll see." Aria replied.

At the last moment, Austin suddenly noticed a surveillance camera. His plasma cannon quickly activated and blew it to pieces.

"There's a good chance the general knows where we're going." Elraa sighed.

"Then no time for sightseeing." said Aria.

En route to the bunker, many paths were blocked by several force fields, one of which blocked the path direct to Afterlife. Before the group was about to walk past however, they spotted a lone Vorcha who looked like he was hypnotised by the field.

"What the hell is he doing?" said Aria.

A metallic figure suddenly dropped down behind the Vorcha. He whirled around firing his rifle, but the figure quickly moved to the side, avoiding the rounds completely. The blind fired rounds nearly hit the others, only Austin got hit but his armour protected him and he shrugged the impact off like it was nothing.

It was now visible what the metallic figure really was. A combat mech.

Unlike the usual Loki mechs that had been fought many times before, these were very different. For starters, they were black rather than the traditional white, new more advanced mechanical legs, a new head with four optic eyes rather than the old circle optic, and arms with folded blades attached. Overall, a definitely more intimidating sight.

The Rampart Mech activated it's red omni blade before the Vorcha could react and slashed him. This didn't kill the Vorcha instantly though and he managed to get up again. As he did however, the mech hit him again, knocking him right back into the force field.

The Vorcha screamed in agony as he was literally set on fire as he hit the shield. It only lasted a few seconds before the shield then dissolved him as he passed through it.

"Mechs! Take them out!" said Aria.

Compared to the original mechs, these Rampart ones fought better too. They very nearly had the team pinned if it hadn't been for a well placed shot from Austin's plasma cannon. It took off the head of one of the mechs, and it fell to the floor.

Like the originals, a headshot was an instant kill. With this new weakness in mind, it didn't take long to deal with the mechs.

"Do you hear that?" Elraa asked.

"Hear what? Aria replied.

"Just listen. Feels like someone's watching us." said Elraa, ever so slightly nervously.

Austin activated his thermal vision and looked around, for a moment he didn't see anything either. Just as he was about to turn the vision off however, he suddenly spotted a tall orange spot hiding behind a crate. Unmistakably body heat.

"Someone is. Who's there? Show yourself!" he demanded.
A tall hooded figure stepped out from behind a crate, but still remained mostly in the dark.

"Spirits, look who's back: Aria T'Loak and her favourite dancer." said a female voice. It sounded almost... Turian.

Sure enough, a female Turian dressed in a dark hooded outfit stepped into the light.

"Nyreen. What the hell are you doing here?" Aria asked.

"Playing cat and mouse, mostly. Just trying to stay alive. If it wasn't for these tunnels…” Nyreen replied.

"My tunnels. I'm sure glad I showed them to you." said Aria.

"If you hadn't I'd be dead or locked dup by now." Nyreen agreed.

"Aria doesn't trust easily. I guess you're a good friend." said Austin.

"I don't know. Are we, Aria?" Nyreen asked.

"Shepard, this is Nyreen Kandros. Ex-Turian military. We go way back." said Aria. "I've got a lot of questions, but they'll have to wait."

"Follow us. We'll get you to safety." Said Elraa.

"I'll do my best." said Nyreen.

"Ready to put that gun to good use?" Austin asked.

"You have no idea how ready." said Nyreen.

Fighting to the bunker was no easy task, Cerberus was practically everywhere. The four of them however put up one hell off a fight and soon managed to carve a path through the troopers to the bunker's entrance.

"Cannons engaging! Head to the blast door!" Aria yelled.

Both sentry cannons activated and tore the rest of the Cerberus troops t pieces. Bodies littered the floor.

"Nice guns." said Nyreen.

"They'll keep the general forces at bay for a while." said Aria.

"Let's get inside." said Austin.

"Bunker team: Retract the bridge and lower the blast door. We're coming in." Aria ordered into her comm.

Everyone retreated inside, bring any wounded that were still alive with them.

"We're in! Lock it down." said Aria.

Two Asari walked up to the door and deployed biotic barriers around.

"Aria, I know this place is built like a fortress, but is it safe now that general's clued in?" Nyreen
asked, a hint of doubt noticeable in her voice.

"Yeah, I feel like a sitting duck here." Austin agreed.

"I have no intention of sitting around, and you both should know I assume nothing. And on that front… Nyreen, you left Omega fairly angry with me. I wasn't aware you'd returned. Explain yourself." said Aria.

"The truth is I never left, a fact I went to great lengths to keep from you." Nyreen replied.

"I'm not easily duped. Well done. But why?" Aria asked.

"I just… couldn't leave. Considering all this, I wish I had." said Nyreen.

"Well you always said I'd be the death of you." said Aria.

"Nyreen has military training. We can put her to good use." said Austin suprotingly.

"You're so quick to trust, huh, Shepard?" said Elraa.

"Nyreen never approved of Omega's—what did you call it? "Moral bankruptcy" Are you willing to help to defend it now?" Aria asked.

"You'll find me very willing to liberate this station." said Nyreen.

"Your combat skills seem a little rusty, but you're still a good shot. See my duty officer." said Aria.

Nyreen nodded and walked off.

"Bray, keep and eye on her." said Aria.

"Will do." Bray nodded as he followed the Turian.

"Alright, Shepard, we need to move fast. I'm itching for revenge." said Aria.

"You'll do what you need to do." said Austin.

"And here I thought you might come here trying to change me." said Aria.

"I hate Cerberus as much as you do. Why would I?" Austin replied.

"Once up and running, this bunker will provide recon and secret access to much of the station. I'd appreciate it if you would quickly eyeball operations, see that things are setting up smoothly." said Aria.

"What will you be doing?" Austin asked.

"Checking in on my forces, I need to know how many survived the assault before I can plan the attack." Aria replied.

"It won't take long. Join us at the command console when you're ready." said Elraa.

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"Ahz, how're we looking?" Aria asked.

"All systems operational. Full Omega schematics coming online now." Ahz replied.
The holo lit up with Omega's schematics. Aria scanned them thoroughly with her eyes.

"I see. Shepard, those force fields we saw? The general has them set up everywhere." she said.

"He's controlling access across the station." said Austin.

"What are these dark areas?" Elraa asked.

"Many sections are powered down. I'm betting power is being siphoned to run those force fields." said Aria. "Find the source. Priority one."

"And we'll need a full tactical assessment of all Cerberus positions." said Austin.

"I'll get on it." said Ahz.

"Shepard, we have work to do. Our losses were significant. We can't field an army large enough to face down Cerberus." said Aria.

"Then we need to find allies. Story of my life." Austin sighed.

"We've confirmed, there is a merc gang that's still active. The Talons are resisting the occupation." said Elraa.

"Not my first choice, but they're all we've got." said Aria.

"Then it's time to play diplomat." said Austin.

"And if the current leader won't us, the next one will." said Aria.

"Sorry to interrupt…" said Bray, suddenly joining

"What is it?" Aria asked.

"I turned away for a second to offload supplies. When I looked back…" Bray tried to say.

"You lost her." Aria interrupted crossly.

"Well, I…" Bray stuttered.

"We're locked down. She's got to be here somewhere." said Austin.

"This bunker has secret access points to other parts of the station. Unfortunately, Nyreen knows them." Aria sighed. "Damn it, Bray. If I wasn't already short on manpower…"

"We have to focus on getting the Talons on board." said Elraa. "Shepard, we'll meet you at the armoury exit when you're ready to go, but don't keep us waiting."

"What's your history with this gang?" Austin asked.

"Some mutually beneficial dealings and some occasional violence. The Talons weren't even a blip on our radar until the plague in 2185. Your little war against he other gangs left a vacuum." Aria explained.

"Wasn't my intention." said the Helldiver.

"Their leader, Derius, took advantage of the situation and carved the Talons a bigger piece of the
local drug trade."

They then had to climb a ladder to continue. Aria went first, shortly accompanied by Elraa and Austin soon followed.

"Stop looking at my ass!" said Elraa crossly.

"I'm not!" Austin argued. It was true after all, he hadn't. It was just the angle of his helmet that gave Elraa that impression.

"Knocking it off you two!" Aria shouted.

"Are we enlisting the Talons because they're good or because we need numbers?" Austin asked, quickly dropping the original subject,

"They're cannon fodder. We're using them because they're the only game in town." Aria replied.

"You're gonna let them know that?"

"Relax, Shepard. This how it works on Omega. Just let me do the talking, and-"

"Major! Cerberus forces are scrambling. Looks like an attack on the Talons." Ahz interrupted over the comm. "Judging from comm chatter, their priority target is in the area. Could be the Talon leader."

"Looks like we fight our way through Cerberus forces to get to them." said Aria.

"Let's move."

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"Last chance, Talon! Answer or…"

As they caught sight of Austin, they all turned their guns on him.

"What the-"

"Back off, Shepard!" one of them ordered.

"I don't think so." said Austin.

Before anyone could fire however, something rather surprising happened. An armored Turian figure suddenly dropped down from above. Within seconds, all of Cerberus was taken out.

When it ended, the team finally saw who the Turian was. It was Nyreen!

This time, she was dressed in Talon armour and had ditched her hooded outfit altogether.

"Take care of the wounded, and scavenge what you can. I want us out of here ASAP." she said.

"You heard the boss. Move it!" said one of the soldiers.

"Looks like we found the Talon leader." said Austin.

"My, my. Nyreen, aren't you full of surprises." said Aria.

"Aria. The deception was necessary. I needed to figure out what your plans were." said Nyreen. "The people on Omega depend on us. I couldn't risk compromising our operation."
"Not exactly standard procedure for a street gang." said Austin.

When Cerberus invaded, the Talons were a mass. I brought… new direction." said Nyreen. "The general's been hunting us ever since. Right now, he's attacking one of our outposts. That's where I need to be."

"We're done here, boss." said the soldier.

"Right. Aria, Major Shepard: whatever you're here for, the answer's no. Kindly escort yourselves off Talon territory." said Nyreen.

"We're here to help. We'll talk about it after we reach your outpost." said Austin, trying to sound persuasive.

"That's a generous offer. Aria, does the Major also speak for you?" Nyreen asked.

"Not the way I would have put it, but that's the idea." said Aria, casting Austin a look.

"All right then. Come with me." said Nyreen.

"We'll be evacuating this location as soon as possible. Try not to interfere with my people's work." she said.

"Intel just reported in. The group of civilians we managed to evac arrived safely at the other outpost." said one of the soldiers. "Also: routine sweeps reporting nothing new on the adjutant presence."

"Adjutants?" Austin asked.

"Creatures created by Cerberus and the Takaal. They eviscerate their victims DNA, converting them into more adjutants." Nyreen explained.

"Some kind of Reaper/Takaal-based weapon. I fought them before. They're a nightmare." said Aria as Nyreen handed Austin a datapad showing full intel on the adjutants.

"It got worse after you left. Cerberus lost control of them. Those things tore apart the gangs, then attacked everyone in sight." said Nyreen. "If Cerberus hadn't found a way to contain them, the entire station would be infected by now."

"Keeping your people alive through that couldn't have been easy." said Austin supportingly.

"I watched friends get turned into monsters, and I had to kill them. Now, if you'll excuse me. I have an outpost to defend." said Nyreen.

"The adjutants really got under her skin." said Aria.

"Cerberus is backing off now. Make sure the scouts keep an eye out for the next attack." Nyreen ordered to her soldiers.

"You've done an excellent job, Nyreen, but I'll be taking over now." said Aria.

"You know what happens to people who argue with her." Said Elraa.

"And if I say no? You'll just have to kill me and take over? My people won't stand for that." said Nyreen defensively.
"Yes, they do seem... nauseatingly loyal. Either way, I'll get what I want." said Aria.

"Not this time." said Nyreen, now more threatenangly.

"The truth is, none of us can do this alone. Our only chance is to join forces." said Austin.

"You might be right, but the people of Omega are my priority." said Nyreen.

"You take over one gang and you think you're ready to decide what's best for Omega? Nyreen, watch and learn." said Aria.

"Ahz!"

"Everything's in place. The entire station's connected."

Aria's image was thens suddenly projected onto every single monitor and screen in the room, and possibly on the station.

"People of Omega: I have returned!" she said. "Cerberus believes they have beaten you. They believe they have you under control. They are gravely mistaken. You are the lawless of the galaxy. You cannot be beaten, and you will never be controlled. Be ready! Your chance to strike against your oppressors is coming. Together, we will take Omega back!"

"That's your plan? Throw civilians at Cerberus?" Nyreen asked, unimpressed.

"Anything is better than being locked up like mindless animals waiting for slaughter." said Elraa.

"I know what you're up to, Aria, and I don't like it." said Nyreen. "I have civilians to evacuate. I'll deal with this later. All right, let's get these people ready to go. Now!"

"What are you trying to do?" Austin asked.

"Trying?" Aria replied. "The people of Omega-my people-love a good street fight. When it breaks loose, they'll be ready. Nyreen's code of ethics won't let her sit by if civilians are exposed. It's what makes her utterly predictable and therefore easy to manipulate."

"Cerberus is launching another offensive!" said one of the soldiers.

"Looks like I'm not the only one who didn't like your little speech, Aria." said Nyreen.

"Glad I got his attention."

Nyreen sighed as she looked over the many dead. It had been a hard battle, but not without it's losses.

"The Talons will join your case. Someone's got to make sure you don't run roughshod over our people." she said.

"You see, Shepard?" said Aria.

"Let me guess. She said I was predictable and therefore easy to manipulate." Nyreen inquired.

"Pretty much word for word. She thinks she's playing you." said Austin.

"Nothing new here." said Nyreen. "One thing, though. I maintain command over my people. This is
Aria was about to say something, but Austin suddenly held her back.

"Agreed." he said quickly, making sure that Aria got the message. The Asari reluctantly stood down.

"Just have them ready." she said.

"Oh, they'll be ready." said Nyreen.

"We're almost there, Shepard." said Aria. "The Talons will be the frontline fodder. Now we just need to bring down the force fields to clear the way to Afterlife."

"Which will release Omega's civilians…" said Austin.

"Cerberus will have a million fires to put out. In one fell swoop, we'll have the people and the Talons working for us," said Aria.

"You might not want to compromise your alliance before it even takes shape." said Austin.

"I've learned to not put much stock in truth and goodwill." said Aria.

"It might be time to start again." said Austin.

"Tell you what: I'll take it under advisement." said Aria. "Now… we'll be at the command console plotting our next move."

"I've located the source powering the Cerberus force fields." said Ahz.

"Yes, I see. Shepard, take a look at this." said Aria. "The general is siphoning power from one of my main reactors deep in the bowels of Omega's mines."

"Unfortunately, access is cut off by the force fields themselves…" said Ahz.

"Not completely. There's an open route through that dark area, then up." said Austin, indicating to the point not he schematics.

"Hmm. The processing plant for one of the mines. It's been powered down. No force field blocking it." said Elraa.

"We infiltrate there, find our way through the mine, then take that elevator to the reactor's back door." said Austin.

"Good eyes, Shepard. Let's go." said Aria.

"Not without me." said Nyreen, suddenly joining them.

"Aria, my patrol caught her in the perimeter." said Bray.

"Please. You didn't catch me. We're allies now. Didn't Aria tell you?" said Nyreen.

"Nyreen was expected, Bray. Return to your station." said Aria.

"The Talons are ready, but if I'm sending my people into the breach… I want to make sure those force fields come down for good. So like it or not, you're stuck with me." said Nyreen.

"It's almost as if you don't trust me." said Aria innocently.
"It's exactly as if I don't trust you." said Nyreen seriously.

"We're going to war together. I'll make sure we can rely on each other." said Austin.

"Agreed, Major. Glad one of you isn't on a power trip." said Nyreen.

"Go wait by the med bay, Nyreen. We'll join you shortly." said Aria. "Shepard, I have last minute orders to dole out. I'll meet you there, too."

Austin left Aria to it and went over to the med bay. He'd hoped perhaps to talk with Nyreen if possible.

"Shepard, got a second?" she asked.

"Sure."

"I know time is short, but I was hoping we could talk. Alone." said the Turian.

"Aria will be joining us soon. Now may be our only chance." said Austin.

"I'm not trying to undermine, Aria. I know why she has to be ruthless." said Nyreen. "Let her have revenge. I'm not doing this for me, and I'm not doing it for Aria or what we once had."

"It's for the people of Omega. I get it." Austin nodded.

"Someone has to be their voice in all this. Incredibly powerful forces are about to do battle with them caught in the middle. I just hope, as we bring down those force fields and go to war, that you can keep the people in mind." said Nyreen.

"Between you and me, I will." said Austin, keeping his voice down. "I appreciate the talk, Nyreen. We're heading out soon."

"I'll be ready." Nyreen nodded.

"We're arriving at one of the eezo processing plants. It's been powered down, so we'll have to pry open the door." said Elraa.

"I'll get it." said Austin.

The Helldiver groaned ever so slightly as he used his suit's strength to force the door open enough for everyone to get through.

"Access to the mine should be on the far side." said Aria.

"And the reactor is beyond that?" Nyreen asked.

"According to the schematics. I ran Omega, Nyreen. I didn't work the mine myself." said Aria as she went through first.

"No, you had indentured servants for that." said Nyreen as she followed.

Elraa was the last. She couldn't help but try and take advantage of Austin currently stuck in this position.

"Don't even think about it." the Helldiver threatened, quickly noticing her expression which told him
everything. He let the door slide just a tiny bit, but very abruptly. Just enough so that Elraa got the message that he was being serious.

Elraa simply sighed and slid through. Austin then moved himself loose from the door and let it close behind them. He and the others then activated their flash lights. They revealed a slightly unpleasant sight.

"Spirits…" said Nyreen.

"Relax, they're all Cerberus." said Aria as she examined the bodies.

"They've been ripped to shreds." said Austin.

"I don't like this." said Nyreen.

"When this is over, there'll be a lot of repairs to make." said Aria.

"I hope you'll focus on the civilian areas first." said Nyreen.

"You are relentless." said Aria.

"That's one thing we have in common."

Something suddenly burst through the glass. It was massive. At first it looked like a Husk, but as Austin saw it more clearly he now saw that it was an adjutant, exactly like what that data pad had shown him.

"Spirits!" Nyreen gasped, temporarily freezing.

"Unload on it!" said Austin, quickly upholstering his Revenant and emptying the clip.

"Nyreen, wake up!" said Ari.

That made Nyreen snap out of it, and she fired too.

Several more Adjutants joined the single one just as it fell. Everyone quickly reloaded and took cover from the rest.

One thing Austin could at least look on the bright side of was that it was a nice change of pace to be fighting husk like creatures again compared to Geth and Cerberus. True the Adjutants were tough, but still...

The reactors were just ahead. Just as the team was getting close however, a force field suddenly appear around them, sealing them in. A tiny drone suddenly hovered over to them and projected Pertrovsky's image.

"I commend you. Your plan of attack was impeccable," he said.

"Looks like we were expected." said Austin.

"More like "lured." said Nyreen.

"I knew the reactor would be the hard target. I gave you no choice but this route." said Pertrovsky.
"Why don't you do this in person, Pertrovsky? Get your own hands dirty?" said Austin tauntingly.

"I take no pleasure in any of this, Major. You're the ones trying to start a war—for the glory of Aria. But now it's over." said the general.

"This isn't over until your next of kin can't identify you." said Aria bitterly.

"I love your bravado, but have the sense to know when you're beaten. You've been neutralized and I can leave you there to rot. You might as well give up." said Pertrovsky.

"Never!" Aria yelled.

The Asari turned her back and looked the shield.

"What are you thinking?" Austin asked cautiously.

"I'm not going out like this?!" Aria yelled.

"Aria, don't!"

Aria activated her biotics and thrust both her hands forward.

"What the hell is she trying to do?!!" said Pertrovsky.

As Aria kept concentrating, it was now clear she was using her biotics to tear open a hole in the shield.

"Damn it, Aria, you're forcing my hand. We'll do it..."

But before Austin could finish, Austin shot the drone.

"And you can shut up. Always did hate those holo drones." he said.

A door on the far side suddenly opened and several mechs walked through the shield.

"Nyreen, Elraa, mechs!"

All 3 kept Aria covered while she continued to try and tear open a hole large enough for one person to fit through. Despite that they were holding their ground though, more and more kept coming, and soon the mechs began to get a little too close to Aria.

"No!"

Both Elraa and Aria threw up their own biotic barriers around Aria. Nyreen even fired her pistol at several mechs.

"Shepard, I can't hold this much longer! Go!" Aria groaned.

Austin didn't waste and time and leapt throughout he opening, just before Aria finally gave in and let it close again.

"Spirits, Aria. How did you know you could do that?" Nyreen asked as she helped Aria up.

"I didn't." Aria replied.
another drone hovered up to him.

"Not again." he sighed.

Right now though, he was too busy to shoot it. He'd just have to mute the volume on his helmet's audio receptors if he got bored of the General's taunts.

"You can't do this, Major. There's more at stake than you know. That reactor powers life support systems for dozens of wards across the station. Shut it down and thousands of people perish." said Pertrovsky.

Austin temporarily froze. There was no way he would end up killing hundreds of innocent lives.

"You hearing this, Aria?" he asked.

"Yes, and I don't care. Shut it down!" Aria ordered.

"Shepard, don't! Try rerouting the power away from the force fields!" said Nyreen quickly.

"Computer, access the systems and reroute the power." Austin ordered to his suit.

"Acknowledged!" the suit replied.

From inside his helmet, thousands of lines of data and code scrolled up in front of his eyes as his suit's systems worked on gaining the necessary access.

"Rerouting the power to maintain the other systems..." said Pertrovsky. "It's commendable... but it might take a while."

"Maybe if I was a stupid grunt. Too bad for you I'm a Helldiver." said Austin, unable to resist being smug about it.

"Access acquired. Rerouting power." said his suit.

Sure enough, the power was sooner rerouted, maintaing the life support systems, and deactivating the force fields. Before Pertrovsky could ay anything, Austin once again shot the drone.

"And don't come back." said Austin coldly.

"You okay?" Austin asked.

"Never better." Aria replied.

"That makes two of us. You brought all your skill to bear and accomplished the task without sacrificing lives. I applaud you." said Nyreen, a small smile noticeable on her face.

Austin simply nodded to Nyreen, but admittedly he was rather pleased with this himself.


"What are you driving at, Aria?" Nyreen asked.

"You fought bravely against those mechs in there, Nyreen. Very impressive." said Aria.

"But?"
"Why can't you bring the same grit when adjutants attack?" Aria asked. "It's pathetic. You tense up at the mere mention of those abominations…"

"Lay off. She just saved you." Austin interrupted.

"I'm trying to help her, Shepard. Call it tough love. The war's starting. I don't mean to miss it." said Aria.

"She's never been big on thank you's." said Nyreen.

"Getting reports: All force fields down. Civilians taking to the streets in droves. Cerberus pulling back." said Aria.

"That won't last." said Austin.

"The people don't have the training to go up against Cerberus front lines. They'll be wiped out." said Nyreen.

"Civilian causalities can't be avoided. You'll have to accept this." said Aria.

"Say what you will, Aria. I won't allow senseless deaths." said Nyreen.

"Do what you can to protect them." said Austin.

"Of course, Major." Nyreen nodded.

Aria sighed and rolled her eyes.

"Aria? Bray here."

"Report." said Aria.

"My team is scouting the maintenance tunnels. We've encountered Cerberus forces escorting engineers. They're moving gear. Look to be setting explosives to the stations' central support columns..." said Bray.

"Bray, engage! Delay them as long as you can. We're coming." said Aria urgently.

"Got it! Roll out, people!"

"If they detonate the main column, they'll cut off the way to Afterlife! The Talon offensive will be stopped cold." said Aria.

"So we split up." said Austin.

"Yes. Nyreen, lead the frontal assault. Shepard and Elraa and I will meet you in the markets after we've taken care of those bombs." said Aria.

"Of course, but don't count on me building memorials if you get yourselves killed." said Nyreen.

"I like it when you're feisty." Aria smiled. Elraa couldn't help but feel a little jealous of this.

"Got it." said Nyreen.

As Austin accessed the control panel, things suddenly went from bad to worse.
"Those bombs just went live! The console is locked. We'll have to manually disable them!" said Aria.

"And here I am without my demolition expert. I told you it would be stupid not to use all of my squad." said Austin.

"Whatever." Elraa sighed.

Several more Cerberus troops dropped and began firing. Both Aria and Elraa covered Austin while he disabled the bombs. Though he was no expert on bombs, he was the quickest of the three in disabling them thanks to his armour.

He cut it very close though. He only just managed to disable the last one within the five minute window.

"We're clear." he said

"Good." said Aria as she gunned down the last trooper. "Nyreen, things are under control here. What's your situation?"

"We're advancing through the ghazer district." Nyreen replied. "We're holding our own, but Cerberus has started targeting the civilians. Reports of casualties are coming in from all sectors."

"Save those you can, and head for the rendezvous point. We'll meet you there." said Aria.

"We'll do what we can. Nyreen out."

"So how exactly do we get to Afterlife from here?" Austin asked.

"I'm thinking the straightforward approach… for a change."

"Where's Nyreen?" Aria asked.

"Scouting ahead. We've got our hands full, holding this area." Bray replied.

"She's going on to Afterlife!"

The team quickly hurried onto the streets. Sure enough, Nyreen was there at Afterlife's entrance, fighting off Cerberus.

A door suddenly opened behind her, and several Adjutants began to advance. Both Cerberus and Omega's citizen's opened fire on them. Because of how petrified with fear they were however, they didn't try to retreat. That made it easy for the Adjutants to pounce on them.

Nyreen managed to flank them at fired from behind. As she took two down however, more soon came. The Turian knew that she was outnumbered.

Acting quickly, Nyreen unfastened a grande belt from a dead civilian and threw it into the centre of the Adjutants and threw up a biotic barrier around herself, with both the Adjutants and the grenades inside.

Aria noticed only too late what Nyreen was doing and broke into a sprint. But she was too late. The grenades detonated and the inside of Nyreen's barrier was engulfed in explosion. When it disappeared, all that was left was a small fiery crater.
Aria simply looked at the crater for a while, then her hand clenched into a fist and her biotics started to flare massively. The Asari literally went into rage with her biotics and charged into Afterlife, throwing aside any Cerberus troops in her way.

"Aria, wait!" Elraa yelled as the doors sealed behind Aria.

'She's gonna get herself killed." said Austin as he and Elraa took off after her.

"Not if I have anything to say about it!' said Elraa.

The door opened just as Aria unleashed a massive biotic wave which took out every single Cerberus trooper surrounding her. Any of Cerberus who remained now was engaging the civilians. Only Oleg was left in Afterlife now.

"Nyreen Kandros was a good soldier. It's shame she had to die for your petty ambitions." He said.

"You're a dead man!" Aria growled, her body glowing with biotics. Elraa too was pretty much ready to make the Cerberus general suffer.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that."

Something large suddenly rose out of the ground behind. Only too late as Petrovsky stepped into it did Austin realise that it was a suit. It was very much like what the Cerberus Dragoons used, but bigger, taller and stronger.

"Oh, this ain't gonna be good." He said.

The General leapt from the balcony and dropped down to their level. From both of his hands, the familiar electrified whips of a Dragoon extended.

Elraa couldn't help but take a small step back at this. She looked at Aria though and saw that her Queen wasn't fazed at all, and Austin of course was unreadable due to his helmet, but his body language suggested he wasn't worried either. He the stepped forward slightly.

"Stand aside ladies. I got just the thing."

A small little compartment on his left arm folded open, showing what looked like a very small rocket. It charged up very slowly, it's thruster kicked into life, and it fired.

Petrovsky braced for the imminent explosion, but nothing came. The rocket simply hit his armour very lightly with a small clang and fell harmlessly to the floor. It then seemed to have a micro explosion and simply fell apart.

"I'm still waiting to be impressed." Aria sighed, rolling her eyes.

"Dammit, Dell!" Austin cursed under his breath. He regained his cool though and turned back to the two Asari. "Guess we're gonna do this the old fashioned way after all. We got this."

Both Aria and Elraa activated their biotics as Austin drew his Revenant out, this time ready for a proper fight.

Austin fired a few shots as Petrovsky started to advance, but they simply impacted on his armour.

Petrovsky started to flex the whips, the ends sparking as they hit the ground several times. He then lashed at them, but the group separated and rolled to either side. Austin this time activated his plasma cannon and fired several shots. They didn't do much damage to Petrovsky's armour though and the
general quickly slashed at him. The Helldiver was only just able to lean back enough that the whip missed him, but unfortunately it ended up severing his cannon off completely. Austin temporarily looked at the sparkling arm.

"Not again. Dell's gonna kill me." He sighed to himself.

Aria meanwhile used her biotics to perform a high jump in an attempt to land on top of Pertrovsky, but the general noticed her and quickly swung. One of his whips rapped around her and he pulled her to the floor, causing to smash into one of the walls rather hard. The Asari though shrugged the pain off, letting her anger, hatred and vengeance fuel her.

Elraa attempt to flank Petrtrovsky, firing at him as she went. The General's armour however blocked all her rounds, though he did use his arm to block some of shots. A simple precaution.

Aria activated a biotic charge and shot forward, only for Pertrovsky to counter her knock her aside, once again causing her to smash into another wall. He then swung at Elraa, his whip wrapping around her neck. The Asari attempted to free herself, but found the whip too tight. Pertrovsky then retracted the whip into his arm, pulling Elraa with him and right into his punch.

Austin suddenly jumped from behind and punched Pertrovsky in the back of the head, temporarily disorienting him. Using this to his advantage, Austin followed this with several more punches. This only worked for bit though before the general headbutted him, causing him to stumble backwards slightly. Pertrovsky then slashed Austin with his whips several times, causing several damage tears to his armour plating. The final strike then wrapped around his neck.

Elraa meanwhile, who was still down after the punch fired a few times at Pertrovsky. The General however stood on her with his foot, she was lucky not to be crushed by his armour. Just as Pertrovsky started push down harder, Austin quickly pulled hard on the whip around his neck, allowing Elraa enough time to roll back onto her feet.

Seeing that Austin was clearly the stronger of the three, Pertrovsky concentrated on him and increased the voltage on the whip. Austin began to feel the sparking and hot electricity sparking around his neck. His armour still held though.

Acting on instinct, the helldiver pulled on the whip and started himself around, using it to get close to Pertrovsky. It didn't go quite according to plan though as Pertvosky suddenly punched him to the floor and crushed him under his foot as he had done Elraa, this time much harder though.

At the same time, both Elraa and Aria got back up either side of the general. Pertrovsky lashed both his whips forward and they wrapped around the necks of both Asari.

"You should've given up when you had the chance, Aria." he said.

"Aria, I got an idea. Put your hand up." said Elraa, struggling against the whip's grip.

"This is your idea?!" said Aria.

"Yep!"

Without any better alternative, Aria put her hand up just as Elraa had done.

"All right. Warp, now!"

Pertrovsky was confused by this as both Asari charged up their biotic attacks. Austin on the other hand had a pretty good idea of where this was going and he quickly activated his armour's
lockdown.

Both wars fired from either side and smashed into each other. There was a massive explosion as the two clashed, with Pertrovsky caught right in the middle.

Austin waited until the sounds of the blast had cleared before he finally deactivated the lockdown. He no longer felt the weight of Pertrovsky's armour on his back and he gently got up. He saw the general lying on the ground, his armour completely turned to scrap.

"Major Shepard, I surrender myself into your custody." he coughed.

This was met however with Austin grabbing him by the neck and pulling him up so hard, he literally yanked him right out of the armour.

"Not this time, Pertrovsky." the Helldiver growled. For a long time however, he simply didn't do anything.

"What's the matter, Shepard? Too cowardly to take my life?" Pertrovsky managed to say, struggling against the helldiver's grip around his neck.

"It's not mine to take." said Austin.

He threw Pertovsky to the ground and stood back, allowing Aria to do what she needed.

"Shepard, I'm unarmed… and I can give the Helldivers intel on what's left of Cerberus." said the General worriedly.

"You'll say anything to save your skin." said Aria. She then seized Pertrovsky by his neck and pinned him to the wall, starting to choke him.

"But… I let you… escape Omega. I deserve... mercy." the general managed to say.

"Is this true, Aria?" Austin asked.

"Inexplicably. I think he'd agree now that it was the biggest mistake of his life." Aria replied.

"But… this is… murder." Pertrovsky choked.

"That's right. Cold-blooded murder. No less than you deserve." said Aria. "Oh no-not yet. You don't get a quick easy death."

Austin simply turned his back. He had no regrets in letting Aria kill Pertrovsky. The general's intel on Cerberus wouldn't really be useful anyway, especially since they were dying out. When this war was over, they would definitely be gone. Their days were numbered. Right now, the Takaal were the real threat.

Also, Austin was heeding Nyreen's advice. The civilians of Omega deserved justice for what Pertrovsky had put them through. Even omega's lawless crime ridden streets were preferable to enduring another waking minute under the general's tyrannical rule.

When he finally turned back, Pertrovsky lay on the floor, dead. Aria turned back to her men.

"Clean up this mess." she ordered. "I've been waiting to kill that man for months."

"Aria…"
Before Aria could reply, Elraa suddenly pulled the Queen of Omega into a kiss. Rather surprisingly, Aria didn't seem to object or push her favourite dancer off, she simply let it happen. When Elraa finally ceased the kiss, she looked a tiny bit embarrassed.

"Sorry. I've been wanting to do that for so many years. I never told you before, but… I love you." she said. "I… understand if you don't feel the same way. I just wanted you to know. Now that all this is over."

Surprisingly however, Aria was actually smiling proudly at this.

"Don't be so quick to think you know me completely." she winked. "We'll discuss it properly in private."

Elraa simply nodded understandingly, but she looked unbelievably happy.

"Thank you for not… interfering, Shepard. Killing that man was deeply satisfying." said Aria.

"And thanks to you, we have Omega back." said Elraa.

"So, what's your plan?" Austin asked.

"There's a lot to rebuild. Starting with this… command centre." said Aria. "It may take some time to remove the general stink from my throne. Wonder if I'll ever enjoy the dancing in here again, that isn't' Elraa's that is."

Elraa couldn't help but blush a bit.

"The citizens of Omega have been through a lot, Aria. Try to remember that."

"How can I forget? There are reminders everywhere I look." said Aria. "And don't worry. I'll honour our arrangement: troops, ships, and a mountain of eezo. You earned it."

"Then I'll be going. You two clearly have some… business to attend to." said Austin.

"You could join us, you know." Elraa suggested seductively.

"I wasn't lying when I said I was married. So thanks, but no thanks." Austin declined politely.

"Then Bray will take you back. I have a station to whip into shape." said Aria. She then activated the controls and once again dressed the whole station. "Citizens of Omega, hear me. I, Aria T'Loak, have given you back your lives. My rule is reignited. My hand is on the controls once more, and I will not let go again. Each of you owes a debt. Gain my favour by rounding up the remaining Cerberus invaders, and… we'll take our revenge. It's their turn to tremble, their turn to bleed. Going forward, your lives will be hard. But the price you pay is for your freedom. Only I can protect that. And hear this: I will make Omega impenetrable. No one will ever threaten my domain again. From this day on, the galaxy will know one hard truth: Don't fuck with Omega!"

"You always get these crap details, Bray?" Austin asked from outside.

"Not this time-you got a galaxy to save. Let's get you off this rock." Bray replied.

Glad that one's out of the way.

Right, few important things to know quickly.
This Sunday, it'll be my birthday. Unlike last year however, it will not affect my writing. I may be getting some new gaming hardware for my pc, but still...

Also, next week isn't the Asari Monastery yet, that'll come after (and before Thessia) next week's will be an original chapter that will reintroduce another character that I know a few of you have been asking me if IT will reappear.

I've actually had this idea planned for a while, so it's had plenty of time to evolve and improve since it was first conceived last year.

Anyway, see you soon.
Chapter 25, Rumble in the Jungle

13,000 words!

That's how long this chapter is.

The longest I've ever done. Have fun reading, took a lot of work to do this, but it was worth it.

Chapter 25

Rumble in the Jungle

"Conifer." Said Ventra. "Definitely not a place you would call Paradise."

All of Alpha Squad was sat in the belly of a Helldiver gunship.

Recently the Resistance had come across an oddly anonymous tip that there were some ancient Prothean ruins located somewhere on the planet Conifer in the Element cluster. Since they could not afford to ignore an opportunity that could finally reveal the catalyst to them, Austin had chosen to investigate.

Given that there was the chance of it being a trap, and the fact that all the planets in the Element cluster were hazardous and mostly uncharted, the Arkanes had been unwilling to let the leader of the resistance go without some assistance. So, Alpha had been paired with another Helldiver squad.

That squad was the well known Havok Squad.

For many years, Havok had been known for often taking on some of the more hazardous missions due to their consistent uses of mecha suits which were specially modified to cope with almost any situation.

They consisted of 4 Human members, and a fairly female Drell. Captain Villard Brutus, also known by the nickname Brute, Havok's leader. Construct, the heavy lifter of the team, so named due to his armour's configuration having a looks similar to that of construction equipment. Driller, obviously named due to the large drills on his hands, and his armour. Normica, a rather big and muscular woman, especially for a Drell who served as Havok's engineer. And finally, Inferno, a mute pyro Helldiver with a literally fiery temper.

"Yeah. I hear only 10% of it is charted, the rest... well, you get the idea." Said Dash, relaxing in his seat.

"You gonna bore us all the way with these "land that time forgot" stories? Because I get cranky very easily." Kraan sighed.

Sandra meanwhile couldn't care less if Dash was being annoying. She was focused on making sure she didn't throw up. Despite the many times she'd been flying in a dropship, she still got travelsick.


"I hate flying. Why can't we ever keep our feet on the ground." The comm expert groaned.

"Come on, guys. What's wrong with having a little fun? We're on an Exhibition to find a long lost
ruin in an uncharted jungle planet. It's an adventure!" said Dash, relaxing in his seat.

"I would actually agree. Besides, there's never been any reports of giant killer monsters. What could possibly go wrong?" said Jet rhetorically.

Everyone else meanwhile was gathered in the cargo hold part of the gunship. This was where Havok's mecha suits were kept, and also where Havok themselves were. Normica was currently checking on all of them as Leena gave a few admiring looks at the suits.

"Nice suits. The M Mark KU239, if I'm not mistaken?" she asked.

"Indeed. Best of the medium sized ranges." Normica replied.

"Why not go with the big ones, though?" Liara asked.

"Trust me, these are already big enough. The large ones are as tall as a building. You'd scare the living crap out of people. Besides, those ones are only meant for battles anyway, not exploration." Said Normica.

Austin meanwhile was having a friendly talk with Brute, who was checking his armour.

"So what exactly were you told when you were assigned to this... adventure with us?" Austin asked.

"Security. Our job is to keep you safe. Frankly, I'm not surprised. You're the legendary Alpha Squad and you've got the leader of the resistance with you. That's one Helldiver we definitely can't afford to lose." Said Brute.

Austin simply nodded and decided to leave it at that. He could tell that Brute would rather concentrate on his armour checks. He noticed that Liara was looking out of the window eagerly.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yes. I guess I'm just a little excited. There's always the small hope we may even find out what the Catalyst is." Liara replied.

"Be nice if we did. We can't last against the Reapers forever." Said Austin.

"This reminds me a bit of that safari we went on once for our Honeymoon, only with more jungle and... less animals." Said Liara, trying to change the subject to something happier.

"And we didn't have giant mecha suits with us." Said Austin.

"Yes. That too," Liara chuckled.

"Captain, we can see what looks like a landing strip. Want us to set her down?" said the gunships pilot.

"Circle around for a bit just to be sure. Wouldn't' want any sudden jumps on us." Brute replied.

"Yes, sir."

The dropship set down and Havok stepped out first to set up a perimeter.

"Alright, Havok. Spread out! Set up a perimeter and check the area." Brute ordered.
Austin adn the others then joined them. Austin looked at the runway curiously. 

"This looks very old." he said. 

"There did use to be some outpost bases here before they were abandoned." said Hawk. 

"Makes me wonder though if anyone else has ever been here for more... different ventures." said Austin. 

At that moment, Ventra suddenly started to grab ontot he branch of a nearby tree and swung on it several times. 

"Ventra, what are you doing?" Austin asked. 

"What does it look like, I'm climbing the tree." Ventra replied as he swung himself up onto another higher branch. 

"Why?"

"To get a better view."

"The view from the gunship isn't good enough?"

"Never beats going to see for yourself." said Ventra. 

Finally, the Turian reached the top and found himself gazing in woudner at the magnificent vista of the jungle. It looked incredible. 

"Well, how's it look?" Austin asked. 

"Beautiful. You should see this." Ventra replied. 

"Better than those tourist pics?" Hawk asked. 

"Oh yeah." 

By now, most of Havok and Alpha had headed into the trees just to be sure there weren't any preadtors hiding nearby. 

"How's it going out there, Cap?" the pilto suddenly asked through the gunship's loudspeakers. 

"Thought I told you to stop using those. That is a very bad idea." said Brute. 

"Fail to see how though, Brute. Who's gonna hear?" the pilot asked. 

A loud roar suddenly broke the the once peaceful silence of the jungle. Everyone's head whirled round in surprise. 

"What was that?" Brute asked feafully. 

"Local predator?" said Hawk. 

The sound of gunfire then started to emmanate from the trees, and the sound of branches and trees being smashed down joined them as several birds seemed to suddenly fly off. Something was headign their way, and it was engaging both squads.
"I don't think so." said Austin. "It sounds bigger.

Both Havok and Alapha suddenly bolted out of the trees and ran at the gunship.

"We have to leave! We have to leave now!" said Dash quickly.

The fact that this thing, whatever it was, had made a whole team of Helldiver's retreat was definitely not a good sign. Austin definitely agreed it was not a good idea to argue with the others and he quickly hurried into the gunship too.

"Everyone on board, now!" he yelled.

The rest joined him and Brute sealed the door behind them.

The pilot's quickly activated the gunship's thrusters, but it would take too long for them to power up for vertical take off, especially due to how big and heavy the thing was. So they would have to take off the old fashioned way if they wanted to get out of here quickly.

The gunship lined up with the runway and started to speed forward.

Just when it looked like it was clear however, an alien cow suddenly wandered onto the runway, completely oblivious to the massive ship heading it's way.

"What's that cow doing?!" said co pilot.

Still the cow did not run away. It simply grazed peacefully as though there was no danger at all.

"Out of the way, animal. I'm not stopping this thing for you." said the pilot, in the vague hope the cow would somehow move. He would rather kill an innocent animal, especially since the cow would make a mess of the cockpit if the gunship hit it.

What happened next however was most unexpected. A huge creature, practically as big as the gunship, suddenly burst out of the trees and lunged at the cow. The poor animal failed to react in time and became caught in the creature's jaws.

"OH MY GOD!"

The pilot desperately tried to pull up, but it wasn't fast enough. The underside of the gunship smashed into the creature, causing the ship to plummet downwards towards the trees.

"I can't regain control! We're going down!" the pilot yelled, desperately trying to regain control.

"BRACE FOR IMPACT!" the co pilot yelled.

The gunship shook violently and everyone was thrown out of their seats as it crashed into the trees. The various branches and trunks smashed off both wings and the tail. Finally, it seemed to stop as the gunship seemed to settle itself in one of the trees and became stuck there.

Everyone groaned as they picked themselves up. Even for them, the impact had been very nasty.

"Is everyone okay?" Austin asked.

"I think so." Alaara replied.

The Asari looked at Sandra, fearing that her wife would be droaning in her own sick sloshing around in her helmet. Rather surprisingly, and fortunately, though she looked okay.
"I didn't throw up in my helmet. That's definitely a miracle." the Helldiver groaned, still feeling slightly unwell and looking a bit pale.

Dash meanwhile had landed on top of Kraan (again) as a result of his harness not being secured properly. As usual, Kraan was not happy with this.

"Why is it I always land on my head, and then you land on my head too?!" said the Krogan crossly as he pushed Dash off of him.

"Do the words "soft landing" mean anything?" Dash joked.

"Oh shut up!" Kraan groaned.

"We're okay up here." said the pilot. "Everyone just stay put."

The co pilot attempted to use the radio in the hope they could inform the Normandy of what had happened.

"...Mayday, mayday, mayday."

"Who has a long range transmitter?" the pilot asked.

"I do." Sandra replied, rummaging around in one of the compartments. "I've got it, right here."

She took the device out and handed it to the pilots.

"I'm not getting anything. The radio's gone." the co pilot sighed.

Ventra meanwhile managed to force the door open, but found it mostly blocked by a thick branch. From what he could see however, they were very high up. If they weren't careful, they'd risk tipping the gunship over, and that would almost certainly lead to serious injuries.

"We haven't landed yet." he said, quickly closing the door again.

The pilots meanwhile were having no luck with the long range transmitter. The trees were interfering with the signal, and the device wasn't really designed to contact a ship floating millions of miles above them in space.

"Dammit! Oh man." the pilot groaned, getting nothing but static.

Something suddenly hit the gunship and it shook violently.

"What was that?" Liara asked.

"I get the feeling this tree is not entirely stable." said Construct.

"Not entirely stable?! I'm glad you're here to tell us these things." said Griffin sarcastically.

The gunship then started to shake even more violently this time and even began to tip.

"What the hell's going on?!"

"Hang on everyone!" said the pilot.

Everyone quickly held onto something in an attempt to keep the balance as the gunship tipped even more. The cockpit was then suddenly enveloped in darkness.
Several sharp pointy objects suddenly tore through and the whole thing began to creak and crack as it was being torn off. More and more of the points became visible, only now they didn't just look like points. They looked like... teeth!

The whole cockpit was then practically ripped off, in doing so revealing the gunship's attacker. The massive creature from before that caused the crash had come back for more. As it tore the whole cockpit from the gunship, it took the co-pilot with it, who was unable to get out of his seat in time. The creature's jaws crushed the cockpit, killing him in the process.

The creature then let the now useless part of the gunship drop to the floor and then lunged it's jaws forward into the gunship itself, trying to bite into something, and it did. The pilot had managed to get out of his seat, but the angle of the gunship made it impossible to run. The creature's snout nudged him the back, causing him to fall and the teeth sank into his leg.

The pilot screamed and desperately tried to grab onto something to prevent the creature from taking him, but it was no use.

The creature pulled him out of the gunship. It shook it's head around for a moment before then letting the pilot drop from it's mouth. He hit the ground, landing in a puddle. Unable to run due to injury in his leg, he tried to crawl to safety.

The creature's foot suddenly stomped on him, pinning him where he was and the massive jaws once again came down, this time eating their intended meal.

Because of how large it was, it only took the creature seconds to eat the pilot and it once again raised it's head to once again look at the other potential snacks it had come across. It was as it did this that Austin was finally able to get a clear look at it. What he saw turned his skin white.

This creature looked frighteningly familiar. Two main arms with spikes sticking out fo the wrists, and secondary set of arms used to support the creature's weight, and all too familiar crested face with pale pupils white eyes.

Austin saw it, but he didn't believe it. It was impossible for it to be here. Not only that, but it was huge. Last time he'd seen this thing, it had only been the around the same size of a Hellhound dropship, not it was as big as the gunship. He refused to truly believe this was the creature he thought it was, but then he saw the creature's right side and he saw the two massive burns marks that had now faded to scar tissue, a one and a three. 13!

It was impossible to deny it now. This was none other than Experiment 13, one of Cerberus' most dangerous creations, and the murderer of over a hundred Cerberus scientists and soldiers.

"Impossible."

Yet here it was, as clear as he saw his friends beside him. 13's white eyes narrowed slightly as they focused on the Helldivers. It opened it's mouth and emitted a loud roar, far superior to the painful scream of a tortured victim it had had before. Now it possessed the bellowing, loud, terrifying roar of a predator who ruled over all.

Terrified and intimidated by this, everyone fled right to the back of the gunship. In doing so however, they shifted all the weight to that point and it tipped backwards so much that it fell from the tree.

What was left of the end of the tail became crushed as it hit the ground and the gunships tipped until it hit the ground. 13 then nudged the gunship with it's snout so hard that it caused the body to roll several times. Already shaken by hitting the ground, the whole spinning was disorienting everyone
and they couldn't do anything to stop it.

Finally, the gunship hit a tree and the spinning finally stopped. Rather surprisingly, it had rolled onto the right side and so everyone landed in the seats. This was no time to relax yet though. Through the window, Leena could see 13 making it's way over to them.

Panicked and confused, the Quarian ran out. Austin quickly hurried out too to stop her. She'd be a sitting duck out there on her own.

"Leena, come back!"

He managed to grab onto her just Ventra came out too.

"Leena!"

The Turian only got a meter outside of the gunship before the sight of 13 and it's roar scared him back inside.

"Oh shit!"

Everyone retreated back inside just as 13 grabbed onto the gunship and roleld it again. I then suddenly put it's foot down on it and started to push hard.

The entire body fo the gunship groaned and creaked at 13's sheer strength started to crush it, the pressure causing all the reaming widnows to smash. For a moment it looked like everyone would be trapped, but then it seemed to stop as 13 retracted it's foot.

Just when it felt like it was over, 13's jaws tore right through the body, now giving much easier access to it's prey. Everyone quickly moved out of the way as best they could to avoid getting eaten. Inbetween each time 13 stuck it's mouth in to try and bite into something, everyone clambered over to the other side. It was clear now that they weren't safe in this thing anymore and they had to get out.

"Out! Get out!" Brute yelled, narrowly pulling his arma way before it got caught in the jaws.

"This way! Follow me!" said Austin.

Everyone quickly ran as fast as they could. 13 quickly noticed that the gunship was now empty and spotted the Helldiver's out of the corner of it's eye. A swing from it's arm narrowly missed the group as they ran. 13 roared and gave chase.

A good thing at least was that 13 didn't really run, it just walked faster and increased the speed of it's pace. It's huge amss also allowed it to keep up with the Helldivers as they ran.

Clearing the trees, they were now out in the open. Not ideal. 13 would easily pick them off out here. Austin quickly spotted more trees near them. These ones were much closer together and everything was very built up. It was enough for them to fit in, but 13 would be too big.

"In here!"

Everyone immediately sprinted towards the trees just as 13 smashed it's way out and resumed the chase. Just when it looked it was about to catch them, they all made it through. The Experiment struggled to fit through tight gaps and gave an angry roar as it lost sight of it's prey.

Still no one stopped and they kept running as much as they could until they were sure they were safe.
Everyone slowed to a halt and took this moment to get their breath back, some still slightly in shock from what had just happened.

"I think we lost him." Austin panted.

"We have to get back to the ship. The long range transmitter's there." said Brute.

"Agreed." said Alaara.

"Think it was this way." said Ventra, pulling some bushes apart. In doing so however, he revealed the body of another large predator. Everyone momentarily backed away thinking it was alive, but they soon saw it wasn't moving and that it had chunks of flesh missing.

"It's okay, it's dead." said Ventra.

Another creature suddenly rose up from the corpse. To everyone's shock however, it wasn't just any creature, it was a dinosaur. Impossible as it sounded, there was an actually in front of them.

As it fully revealed itself however, it now become clear it wasn't a true dinosaur. It was in fact a dinosaur husk.

It made sense in a way. The Takaal were said to be more than 65 million years old, and it did always baffle people about what happened to the Dinosaurs. Austin also wondered why the Reapers didn't keep husks from previous cycles. Now he knew however that they did.

The husks, which was unmistakably a T-rex looked at

"Nobody move a muscle." said Dash.

Several tentacle arms suddenly rose up too to join the Rex's head. The end of each one opened to reveal a fanged mouth. The Rex then roared at them.

Like 13's roar, this one seemed to scare everyone and they ran.

"Even in real life that doesn't work." Dash sighed to himself.

The Rex husk gave chase, forcing the Helldivers to run back in the direction they came. As they ran, everyone at the front suddenly stopped dead in their tracks. When Austin too slowed down, he saw why.

It was 13! Somehow it had found a way through and was now stood in front of them. Before the experiment could do anything however, the Husk Rex suddenly came into view.

The two giants roared and lunged at each other. Nowhere else to run, everyone quickly scattered to get out of the way as 13 and the Husk came together and began to fight, their roars and snarls thunderous. A literal clash of nature occurred as 13 and the Rex fought. They snarled, they roared, they ripped each other with the claws, they bit one another, it was the sort of fight you would expect from two massive carnivours.

Havok managed to stay together, but Alpha became very separated, Ventra and Leena scrambled in one direction, Alaara and Sandra in the other. Austin however was unable go anywhere - his foot had got stuck between two branches. When he did manage to free himself, he ended up falling between two large logs.

The Rex used it's tentacles to scar a wound on 13's side and then latched onto the Experiment's neck
using its jaws, biting into the flesh

13 did not seem seriously affected by this. Hardly surprising considering how many times it had been shot and tortured by Cerberus, even if those scars and wounds had healed by now. Instead the Experiment attempted to shake the Rex off. Even as a husk, the Tyranosaur had bone crushing jaw strength. It was only thanks to 13’s tough hide and strong bones that it was immune to this.

In its effort to shake the Rex loose, 13 swung its neck to the side hard, pulling the Rex over and smashing it into a large tree so hard that the tree fell right over. In the process, the Rex’s foot stepped on the two logs Austin was pinned between. He was most lucky that they held and didn’t get him crushed.

13 finally managed to shake the Rex off. As the husk backed away, the Experiment attempted to swipe at it with its claws. They only just missed.

The two opponents once again roared and snarled at each other. 13 used its secondary arms to draw itself up to its full height as it roared so as to be intimidating as possible. It reared itself up and headbutted the Rex, causing the dinosaur to stumble back for a moment. 13 attempted to bite at the Husk with its own jaws, but the Rex sidestepped the assault, its mass crushing several small trees as it spun out of the way.

Between the fallen trunks, Austin tried to get away on his hands and knees making sure to avoid those big feet.

The Rex pressed the attack, slamming its tail into the flank of its adversary. 13 was knocked back by this and Austin was once again forced to duck for cover. As 13 struggled to regain its balance, the Rex dived forward. 13 was driven backwards as the Husk tried to once again grip its throat.

Leena managed to yank Ventra out of her path and they scrambled over to Brute. Now on its side, 13 fought back ferociously. It slashed at the Rex with its spiked arms and razor sharp claws, then finally kicked the husk with one mammoth foot. The Husk staggered back, clearly injured and with some cracked bones.

Down below, Austin was splashed by the blood pouring from 13’s small neck wounds as he slowly made his way towards the others.

13 lunged for the Rex with gaping jaws and managed to topple the husk off its feet and sent the falling dinosaur to the ground.

Taking advantage of this, 13 plunged both of its wrist spikes into the Husk’s body, pinning it to the ground. The Rex roared and struggled violently to free itself, but was unable to overcome the Experiment’s immense strength. 13 then mirrored the Rex’s earlier attack and bit into the husk’s neck.

Like the Rex, it too had bone crushing jaw power, the difference being 13 was far stronger, had two extra rows of teeth, and also the Rex didn’t really have any muscles to take some of the damage. Being so old and essentially a zombie, the muscles had rotted away by now. It was only skin and bones and Reaper tech now.

There was the loud sound of bones cracking and technology being torn apart as 13 bit as hard as it could into Rex. The Husk roared in desperation before 13 then pulled so hard that it ripped the Rex’s head off completely.

The Experiment let the head fall to the floor as Austin finally managed to get to the others and they fled the scene. 13 looked over its kill, it snarled for a moment before letting out a loud and triumphant
"Everyone alright?" Brute asked, now that they were finally in the clear and were able to catch a break.

"Peachy." Griffin panted.

"You owe us an explanation... sir." said Brute as Austin. "I saw the way you reacted when you saw that creature. You know what it is."

"It's called Experiment 13. It was created by Cerberus many years ago using DNA from a Dinosaur using husk technology and many genetic modifications. We encountered it on Krelldoor when it broke free of containment, and we thought it was still there." Austin explained. "I'm just as surprised about this as you."

"How can that possibly be Experiment 13 though? That thing was the only about the size of a Harvester last time we saw it. Now it's practically as big as bloody Thresher Maw. How's that possible?!" said Sandra.

"Remember the reports said Cerberus created that thing rather recently? Best logical conclusion is that it was still only a juvenile when we saw it. Two years from then, it's had a chance to properly... grow up, so to speak." said Ventra.

"That still doesn't explain what it's doing here though." said Leena.

"The reports said 13 was very intelligent also. It must've found a way to sneak away on a Cerberus shuttle without being detected. Now that it's here, it can live free of Cerberus as it pleases. Here it can hunt and eat as much as it wants. No surprise that it's gotten bigger and recovered from almost all the wounds Cerberus inflicted on it." said Austin.

"Great. First a dinosaur husk, now a mutated dinosaur clone experiment. This war isn't getting any easier, is it?" said Construct rhetorically.

"We're alive, aren't we? Not many could say the same in our situation." said Dash.

"Alright. First thing we need to do is determine what odds we're at. We go back to the gunship and salvage what we can. If we're lucky, we can contact the Normandy." said Austin.

"And if not?" Normica asked.

"We'll worry about that if it happens."

13 had definitively made a mess. Things were all over the place. Right now, Havok was making sure their mecha suits were still useable.

"How's it looking?" Austin asked.

"Not as bad as it could've been actually. All the mechas are intact and fully functional. One of them suffered some small damage, but our engineer's fixing it. Your one's even helping her." said Brute, indicating where Normica and Leena were working on repairing the mecha.

"And the bad news?" Austin asked.

"Unfortunately, any long range transmitting equipment is scrap." said Brute, showing what was left
of the transmitter. It didn't look good.

"Can it be repaired?"

"I already tried. Many of the irreplaceable bits are damaged beyond repair. Sorry, Shepard." said Sandra.

"Well that's terrific! We're now stuck here!" Driller cursed.

"Calm down! We're not out of options yet." said Austin. "Pass me those maps."

Alaara handed Austin the maps he'd indicated and he folded it out on on the crates.

"Alright. Assuming these are up to date, there's an old communications centre just here, not too far off from where we are. It ran everything on geo thermal power. Never need replenishing. If we can get here, we can contact the our ship," he said.

"Got the frequency written down somewhere?" Brute asked.

"Right here." said Dash, indicatign to small data chip.

"I'll hold onto that then. Safest with me." said Sandra, taking the chip and pocketing it.

"Alright, how far is it?" Brute asked.

"Two days walk, roughly." Austin replied.

"Well, good thing these survived then." said Construct, gently pattign what looked like food and drink crates. "There's enough resources in here to last all of us for about 4 days. Hopefully, we won't need all of it."

"Sounds like a solid plan then." said Alaara.

"Captain?" Austin asked.

"We were assigned to keep you all safe. Guess this was the sort of thing they had in mind." Brute shrugged.

"Austin, what about the Prothean ruins?" asked Liara.

"If we happen to stumble upon them, we'll check 'em out. But right now, contacting the Normandy is our top priority. It'll mean nothing if we can't get off this planet."

"I understand." Liara nodded.

"Saddle up, Havok. You've got 30 minutes." said Brute.

Half an hour later, everythign that was salvageable had been salvaged and was packed up. Havok had settled into their suits and everyoe was pretty much ready for the long journey ahead.

"We're all packed up, Shepard. Just give the word." said Brute.

"Move out." said Austin.

"Alright, let's get underway. And now falling behind. We've got a lot of ground to cover." said Constrcut.
Havok maintained a steady pace so that Alpha could keep up. Both Austin and Brute took the lead while the heavy's stayed in the middle.

Within several hours, the convoy had made good progress. By now, they were nearing the halfway point of their trip, and there were still quite a few hours daylight left.

The plan was to go as much distance as they could during the day before finally camping at night. True they could continue during the night, but anyone who was familiar with jungles knew that it was a bad idea to travel after dark. Most predators hunted primarily during the night, plus there were other dangers besides. Lack of light could lead them into a bog or a swamp if they weren't careful. Besides, they would need to rest for the remainder of the journey tomorrow.

As they continued through the dense jungle, they began to pass through an area with very tall and veiny trees. Ventra couldn't resist the opportunity and had climbed up one of them. Now he was swinging ahead of the group on the vines and occasionally stopping on a branch to either let them catch up or check the cost was clear with his bow.

"Show off." Brute smiled.

"He's a Turian with a bow and arrow. He's in very natural territory." said Austin.

Things started to turn a bit more difficult after the next half an hour or so. The terrain got a lot rougher which slowed them down and worst of all there were swarms of bugs. Even though the suits protected the Helldivers from them and prevented skin contact, it was very annoying to have swarming on the visor, as that impaired their vision.

"Even with these suits, bugs are still annoying."Dash complained, trying to swat a few with his hand.

Hawk was even getting so annoyed by the bugs he was using a frying pan to try and hit them. When that didn't work, he fired some shots at them.

"Conserve your ammunition!" Austin ordered.

Hawk simply groaned before managing to kill one insect with a perfect shot.

The terrain soon got even more difficult as they entered a canyon area. Not good since this was a good place for ambush if any predators had been stalking them.

Havok was coping, but by now Alpha were almost exhausted.

"I'm knackered. We've got to have a breather." Ventra panted.

The rest of Alpha soon agreed and sat down with him to either get a drink or get their breath back.

"Come on, Alpha. We don't have time for this. We've lost too much ground already. Come on, get up!" said Brute.

"We're not about to quit on you. Cut us some slack. Unlike you, we have to actually walk." said Austin.

Brute simply nodded. The Major did have a fair point.

"Alright, you got five minutes. Everyone stay in sight." said Austin.
Havok stepped out of their mechas to stretch their legs a bit and also have a drink if they needed it. Austin noticed that Jet seemed to be wandering a bit.

"Jet, don't stray too far." he said.

"I just wanna check the canyon out. I'll be right back I promise." said Jet.

"You better be."

Jet nodded and sped up into the sky.

Jet always did only truly comfortable in the air. It was no secret. Ever since she was little girl growing up on Arkadia, she'd seen Helldiver fighting's flying by and had always wanted to be one. She was one of those few who'd truly followed their dream rather than realizing they won't happen easily.

As she surveyed the canyon, she then spotted what looked like a valley. As she flew in closer, so saw what could be described as amazing.

"Wow!"

The pilot quickly headed back to the group and landed right next to Dash.

"Dash, you're gonna wanna see this!" she said eagerly.

"What are you..."

But before Dash could continue

Jet grabbed his arm and they sped off through the canyon. No one even noticed the scout suddenly vanish.

Jet finally set down and let Dash go. Now the Scout understood.

There in front of them was a grazing herd of absolutely massive giant animals. They almost looked a bit like giant alien rhinos, except much bigger. In fact, they were probably bigger even than Experiment 13.

Fortunately they were indeed herbivores, so Dash and Jet had nothing to fear.

"Woah!" said Dash in amazement. "I've heard of the phrase land that time forgot, but this..."

He then turned to Jet with a curious look.

"What made you think though that I'd like it?" he asked.

"You struck me as the kind of guy who'd like a setting like this." Jet simply replied.

"Sure you didn't just want me alone?" Dash joked.

"Hmm, maybe I did." Jet replied, sounding serious.

For a moment, Dash looked at her with surprise. He'd always got the feeling that Jet had been interested in someone, and had reason to believe it was him. But he'd never truly believed it until
now. Secretly he had a thing for her too. She was smart, funny, loved speed as he did, and was a very feirce fighter. How coudl he not have an eye for her?

"Well, mis Soarin." he said casually. "You're certainly full of surprises."

"What can I say? I like dangerous boys." Jet smiled unde rher helmet.

All this time, both their hands had been slowly moving towards each other. Just as the were about to touch each other though, the large herbivours suddenly stopped eating and raised their heads in alert.

"What's going on?" Dash asked nervously.

"You're making them nervous. No sudden movements." said Jet.

"I'm not moving!" said Dash through gritted teeth.

Then some of the bushes started russtle and the Herd became even more nervous. It was when they started to turn in their direction however that Dash and Jet started worrying.

"Not good." they both said.

The whole canyone started shake and rumble. Small rocks even fell of the cliff faces.

"What the hell..." said Brute. "Earthquake?"

"Can't be. Earthquakes don't have tremerous like this," said Liara.

The rumbling started to intensify even more and they felt the ground shake beneath them. Then the sounds of heavy footsteps could be heard.

"Something's coming." said Austin cautiously as everyone readied their weapons. "Almost like it's a..."

Both Dash and Jet then suddenly appeared, practically running for their lives.

"RUN, GUYS!" Dash yelled.

Then the herd followed.

"Holy Christ!" said Construct.

"...Stampede!" Austin finished.

"Go! Run!" Brute yelled.

Everyone immediately broke sprinted in an effort to outrun the herd. Despite their best efforts though, the herd was much faster and they were soon struggling not to be crushed as they weaved in and out of the massive legs. The herd was all around them, the sound of the stampede drowning out everything else. Massive feet slammed into the ground on all sides, each one at least a couple of yards wide. The huge herbivores were terrified, racing for their lives from whatever had spooked them earlier. They ran erratically, veering from side to side, so that it was impossible to tell where the feet would land next.

The Herbivores bashed into each other, they hit the edges of the canyon, this was definitely one of the most dangerous stampedes ever seen.
And then it got worse when the source of the stampede revealed itself. A pack of Spitters soon caught up from behind and began to try and pick the Helldivers off. They'd obviously been following them for a while and had unintentionally scared the herd while hiding.

The spitters ran all fours and weaved in and out of the herds feet as they stalked their prey.

"If we stay inside the herd, we're safer!" Austin shouted to the others.

Dash, in an effort to get out of the way of the heard, having not heard Austin's advice, took cover behind a large rock that stood out from the rest of the canyon.

As he took cover however, he suddenly noticed a thin line of saliva dripping in front of him. He slowly looked up to find himself looking straight into the pale eyes of Experiment 13. Somehow it must’ve been stalking the herd as well. Perhaps it had caused the stampede too. What mattered right now to Dash however was getting as far away as he could from the predator.

He immediately broke into a sprint and ran as fast as he possibly could just as 13 snapped at him. The Experiment roared and gave chase, joining the stampede.

"Coming through!" Dash yelled as he ran past everyone at top speed.

At first Austin was rather puzzled a Dash running that fast in panic, but when he saw the massive form of 13 keeping pace with them and the herd, he understood.

13 soon spotted him moving in the herd and pushed in front of one of herbivores and tired to snap at him.

Austin quickly ran underneath one of them, making it harder for 13 to get at him with the legs constantly moving.

After several failed attempts, 13 then spotted Liara who was currently running in-between two herbivores, and easy target.

"Oh no you don't!" Austin thought.

He managed to draw his sword out and made a tiny slice in the side of one of the herbivores. Reacting to this, the herbivore went the opposite way to the injury, nudging right into 13 before it could get a chance to attack Liara.

"As if this couldn't get any worse." Austin groaned to himself.

The herd then seemed to exit the canyon. This was not good news though as the had exited right onto a very thin, very steep, and very unstable cliff face.

"It just did." Austin sighed.

The steepness and very thin width of the cliff caused a few of the herbivores to skid and unfortunately plummet over the edge.

13 meanwhile wasn't far behind. It's extra weight only added to the cliff's unstableness, and the edges began to crumble and give way.

"Talk about living on the edge." Dash jokingly panted as he managed to run fast enough to keep up with the cliff as it gave way behind him.

"Shut up, Dash!" Kraan shouted.
The herd rounded the corner into another canyon.

Dash had managed to get right at the front, but he had a spitter on his tail. He spun to face the husk and aimed at with his gun. Bad idea.

"No! Don't shoot! You'll..." Austin shouted. But it was too late.

Dash fired. A herbivore to Austin's right staggered, bit by Dash's blind shots. Then, with a bellow, the animal collapsed—cart wheeling into the rest of the herd. Another herbivore crashed into the one who had fallen. Then another. They were like dominoes made of flesh.

13 thundered over to one of the herbivores that lay helpless on the ground and began to feast.

Out of the corner of his eye, Austin saw the spitters ignoring the herd completely and heading towards them.

"Come on. This way."

The Helldivers sped away as fast as we could. Austin felt as though his heart was about to burst with the exertion. But the spitter came after them, every stride they took matching two of theirs. They would catch them in a matter of seconds.

Some of Havok managed to return fire, gunning down many of the husks with their guns. But more kept coming. They had to get away.

The only way out of the steep valley was to run straight to the end—but the spitters would definitely catch them before then. Their only chance was to climb straight up the sheer cliff on the side of the valley.

Austin veered over to the wall and started up. The others followed. His feet slipped on the slimy moss, and he slid back down a few feet. He continued up in crouch, using rock sand weeds and vines as handholds. The other Helldivers climbed with him, all of them panting with the effort, even Havok.

Even with their ability to cling to wall, the spitters were struggling to scale the cliff. That did at least work to the Helldiver's advantage.

"Even as husks, they're annoying." Said Kraan, managing to kick a spitter away as it tried to latch onto his leg with it's tongue.

Soon, they got far ahead that the husks seemed to give up. They dared not stop yet though. Once they reached the top, then they were able to relax.

They quickly left he canyon and kept moving. Finally it started to get dark. They stopped by a nearby shallow river.

"Way too close. That's the most dangerous stampede I've ever seen." Driller panted.

"Any injuries?" Austin asked.

"None that we notice. We got lucky." Alaara replied.

"Only just. If there are husks here, that can only be bad." Said Austin.

"I don't know about you guys, but I am dying for bath. That water looks very hard to ignore." Said
Alaara, her body language giving the indication she was just about ready to go completely naked.

"Alaara this isn't really the time." Austin sighed.

"With all due respect, Major. It'll be dark soon. We won't be able to carry on for long." Said Brute.

"Good point." Said Austin. "Alright. We'll set up camp here. Those who wish to join Alaara if they want can go ahead. Just be sensible about it."

Surprisingly, some of the others had rather fancied a little swim in the water themselves. The aliens had preferred not to join in and it was mostly the humans. Alaara and Liara however were an exception. Unlike Alaara however who had taken everything off since she was not afraid of being naked in front of anyone, Liara had kept her underwear on. Admittedly, Austin was finding it hard to keep his eyes off her.

"Shepard, a word if I may?" Brute asked.

"Sure." Said Austin, the talk finally forcing him to take his eyes off his wife.

"I'd love to know where we are." Said Brute.

Austin spread the old map out on one of the crates the mechas had been carrying.

"Well, we came out of that canyon, so I'd imagine we're about here. Roughly half way there." Said Austin, indicating to the point on the map. "Not bad progress overall."

A sudden splash was heard and a bit of water sprayed Austin.

"Guys, behave!" said Austin, making sure the map hadn't got wet.

"Oh Austin..." said Liara seductively.

The Asari's message was quite clear from her body language.

"Alright. I'll join you." Austin sighed.

The Helldiver retracted his armour and unzipped his suit mesh. He then joined Liara in the water. He had to admit, it was quite nice to be intimate with her like this. He even heard a few "Aaawwwws" from everyone as they kissed.

Hawk meanwhile was at the campfire and appeared to be doing what looked like cooking.

"You're not joining them?" Brute asked.

"Who's gonna cook if I don't?" Hawk replied rhetorically.

"Hmm, where'd you get the meat from?" Brute asked, noticing how much meant Hawk was cooking.

"Ventra went out to do some hunting. He brought back a few good kills. More than enough for me to make a good meal for everyone." Hawk explained.

"Since when do you cook, Hawk?" Sandra asked, temporarily halting fingering Alaara under the water.
"When you spend many years in retirement on Horizon, you kind of need to learn these things."
Hawk replied. He noticed Leena however giving him a look from one of the seats around the fire.
"Don't give me that look. I'm not gonna food poison anyone. Certainly not you because you won't
eat this. You still have to stick to your Quarian foods, right?"

"Not as much, but we still have to eat dextro food, otherwise we will die." Said Leena.

"Well, plenty of that in the supply crates." Said Brute, gently patting one of the crates he was sat on.

By now, everyone was back in their armour without their helmet and eating Hawk's meals. They had
to admit, he was indeed a brilliant cook. Quite convenient since they had been in need of a new
cook.

"Been so long since we all sat around campfire." Said Austin.

"You remember when we did this back in the old days? First time we truly shared stories with each
other." Said Sandra, smiling as she remembered the good old days.

"Hard to forget. Especially listening to Dash's jokes." Said Kraan, greedily gobbling in as much of
his meal as he could. The Krogan always did have a big appetite. Literally.

"You loved my jokes." Dash laughed.

Kraan finally finished all his food, just managing to hold back a belch. Even he knew that was
completely inappropriate.

"Done already?" Hawk asked.

"Yeah. And I'm still hungry." Kraan replied.

"Try this." Said Hawk, handing the Krogan a bowl of soup.

Kraan took a spoonful and gave it a try.

"Mmmmm. Not bad." He said.

"Old family recipe." Hawk smiled.

Right before Kraan could take another spoonful however, a most unpleasant sight greeted him. A
human eye had suddenly appeared in his soup.

"WHAT THE HELL?!" he said, nearly chucking the bowl out of his hands.

"In fact, that was part of the old family." Hawk joked.

At this, everyone burst into laughter. Even inferno found this funny, even though he couldn't' laugh.

"Oh my god, that's hilarious!" Jet laughed clutching her sides as they hurt from so much laughter.

"Think I just lost my appetite." Said Kraan.

"Can't see why you would, Kraan. It's not a real eye." Said Hawk. To prove it, he took the ye out
and gave it a little squeeze. It didn't squish. "See? Glass."

"But where did you…" Kraan was about to ask. But then it hit him. "Torres! "
"I couldn't help it. The mood needed lightening anyway." Dash shrugged innocently, still laughing a bit.

"You've got a wild sense of humour, boy. If you're not careful, it's gonna get you killed." Said Brute as Kraan growled angrily at Dash.

"After 15 years, I doubt it." Said the Scout confidently.

"Despite the circumstances, this isn't actually a bad place." Said Austin, changing the subject to one everyone could agree on.

"Easy to forget there's a war going on." Said Liara.

"Never hurts to be optimistic about life. Take it from the voice of experience." Said Austin.

"Here here." Brute agreed.

Several Takaal soldier gather before the two tall figures of the leaders. The atmosphere was not pleasant. They had failed in their mission to capture and kill the Helldivers. They were secretly pleading in their heads that Skarlack didn't let his wife feast on them. They didn't know that it was only a rumour that Mirage was cannibalistic. This was what made them fear her so much.

"The Helldivers, General..." the soldier said nervously. "...we lost them."

The various large husks resembling large wolves surround the area growled at them.

"The husks started a stampede. We were-"

"I do not want excuses!" Skarlack interrupted, his deep menacing voice making the soldiers shudder.

"I wanted Shepard and the Asari's heads. Is that too much to ask?!" Mirage snarled.

"The creatures were massive... There was nothing we could do. I barely escaped with my life." Said the soldier as Skarlack stepped up to him, the General towering over him.

"Far better you had... paid with it." Said Skarlack.

Mirage then suddenly grabbed the soldier by the throat.

"Kill him!" she yelled.

She then threw him within range of the wolf like husks and they eat him alive. The other soldier gazed at this in fright.

"The only husks we will rely on now are our mounts. No more shall the others participate in our... little hunt." Said Skarlack. "The Helldivers will once again show themselves soon enough."

"If we cannot hunt them, then perhaps instead... we should trap them!" said Mirage.

The next morning, the Helldivers resumed their journey. By the time it was noon, they were about ¾ of the way there and would likely reach the complex by sundown.

As they continued wandering through the dense parts of the jungle, Liara soon spotted something.
"What's that?"

"What's what?"

"There. That there in the distance." said Liara, pointing to what looked like a small structure of some kind. The others saw it too.

"The Comm center?" Brute asked.

"Can't be. We're still only 3/4 of the way there." said Austin.

"Goddess. They're the ruins." said Liara as she used her visor's zoom function.

"Well since we have found them, let's check them out." said Austin.

The Ruins looked in good shape, but the entrance was blocked by a large rock.

"Blocked." said Brute. He walked up to it and tried to move it, but found it to be too heavy even for him. "Damn. Too heavy even for me."

He turned to his squad.

"Construct? Normica?"

"Way ahead of you, Cap." said Construct.

The two Helldiver's walked up to the boulder and using all their strength, they just managed to lift the boulder. It was a struggle though. Construct had to use his suit's hydraulic lifts to assist.

"Now that is definitely showing off." said Griffin.

The Helldivers went further in to the ruins. Liara began examine as much as she could.

"Strange. These don't look as... old as I thought." she said, almost sounding a bit disappointed.

"I don't like this. Something doesn't feel right." said Alaara cautiously.

Liara then touched the surface of one of the ruins. It didn't feel like rock and she tapped it with her hand. A clang echoed through the ruins with each knock.

"Metal. It's made of metal." she said. "It's fake."

"What?"

"Prothean ruin like these are not made of metal. It's all fake." Liara explained.

"But how could anyone build fake Prothean ruin out here, and why?" Austin asked.

Before anyone could answer though a sudden howl reached their ears. They all whirled round.

"Was that a wolf? Are there wolves on this planet?" Hawk asked.

"Wolves? No, that is not a wolf." said Brute.

Then a snarling sound was heard.
Everyone looked to the source of the noise to see a giant husk creature growling at them from higher ground. A Varren Husk.

Austin had heard about these. He had to say, the descriptions had been very accurate as well as descriptive. They were twice the size of normal Varren and had all sorts of armour tech on their backs. Their faces and upper jaw were replaced by an eyeless metal mask with only a blue optic and a long horn sticking out.

The husk ran at them and pounced on Jet. Austin however quickly drew his sword and sliced into it.

Another suddenly appeared, but Ventra quickly pulled out his bow and shot it with an arrow.

With the Varren on top of Jet wounded by Excalibur, the pilot was able to crawl out from under the husk and finished it off with a smash from her war hammer.

"Dread wolves! And they're scouts." said Ventra, pulling his arrow out of the one he shot.

"Then there's no doubt. The Takaal are here too, and they've been hunting us." said Austin. "The ruins, the tip about them, it was them along. This whole thing was a trap, and we walked right into it."

More howling could be heard, and more Dread Wolves arrived. This time though, some of them were being ridden, but Takaal.

"Oh great. And here's the welcome party." Normica sighed.

"They've got the advantage here. We need to draw them out into the open. Run!" said Austin.

"Hunt them down!" Skarlack yelled.

The Dread Wolves howled and gave chase.

At first the chase didn't last very long when they entered the open. Soon however it turned to the worst when he Helldivers realised they ran out onto a cliff, and the only way off was now blocked by the Dread Wolves.

"Draw them out into the open. What a great plan." said Brute sarcastically.

"Stand your ground." said Austin.

The Dread wolves did not attack immediately. They simply waited. Then the others came into view. Skarlack was sat aloft on the biggest of the pack, the alpha male.

"Skarlack."

"I must applaud you, Shepard. Your recent victories on Rannoch and Omega are worthy of praise." said the Takaal. "Such a shame though that it must end here."

"Indeed. It was a good hunt. Still, I'm sure the prize will be very rewarding." said Mirage, licking her lips as she looked right at Liara.

"Shepard and the Asari are ours. Kill the rest!" Skarlack yelled.

The Dread Wolves attacked.

Ventra managed two shots while they were still a fair distance away, but soon hey got in close.
Austin had to admit, he was glad Urz wasn't here. He would almost surely have mistaken his own Varren for one of them. He would never be able to live with himself if he killed his pet.

On the plus side though, the Dread Wolves certainly weren't anything like Varren. They were savage, violent, brutal, everything that no liked to have in a dog.

Kraan meanwhile waited until they got close so he could use his axe on them. On particular Dread Wolf started and growled at him, ready to charge.

"Bring your pretty face to my axe!" he said, bracing for the kill.

Just before the Husk could attack however, Ventra shot it with an arrow.

"That one counts as mine!" said Kraan angrily.

Another Dread Wolf snapped at the Krogan front he side by he avoided it and snuck his axe in.

Doing so however caused the massive husk to tumble on fall on him.

Some of the Takaal riders join the battle, but it didn't even the odds for them at all. All of the Helldivers still held fast.

"Stinking creature." Kraan groaned as he began to push the Dread Wolf off him. As he did however, a Takaal soldier suddenly appeared and drew it's weapon.

At the last minute though, Kraan grabbed it's head and twisted the neck. It snapped completely.

He then resumed trying to push the husk off. But then another Dread Wolf appeared, this one alive.

Fortunately for Kraan however, Austin noticed. He took up the spear from a dead Takaal and threw it at the Dread Wolf. It went straight through the Husk's eye, killing it instantly. Unluckily however, it fell on top of the first dead Dread Wolf. Now Kraan had even more weight trapping him.

Skarlack growled angrily at this. Although the Dread Wolves were pushing the Helldivers back, he still wasn't seeing the results he wanted. The however, as the Helldivers drew close to the cliff's edge, he saw an opportunity.

One of the long trees on the cliff face was ideal for collapsing on top of them. It wouldn't kill them obviously, but it would make things very difficult. Might even send them over the edge.

The General charged up his energy and threw a blot of green lightning at the tree roots. The whole broke apart and started to collapse.

"Watch out!"

The tree collapsed, causing a large amount of the cliff to give way and everyone was forced to hold onto the trunk and branches for dear life. Brute had only just managed to grab onto Brute, and he in turn was struggling to keep a grip on the cliff face.

"I can't hold on. I'm gonna fall." He groaned.

"Jet, help him!" said Austin.

"I can't! My wing's trapped!" said Jet, trying to free the wing that was trapped under the tree.

Austin looked at Skarlack who simply observed this with amusement. Letting his anger take over, he
slowly stood up, drawing his sword and shield.

Everyone else quickly saw what he was doing, but they were in no position to help him. Austin then slowly broke into a run as he headed straight for Skarlack, who gave an evil grin at this.

"Yes! That's it. Come to your death!" the Takaal thought.

Just as Austin got close enough, his Varren charged and pounced. The Alpha Dread Wolf's underside knocked Austin to the ground. Skarlack then reared around for another attack just as the Helldiver was getting up.

Skarlack then hit the Helldiver right in the helmet with his sword. Then his Dread Wolf bit down on Austin's left arm. The teeth didn't pierce of course. It would take a lot more to break through the armour of a Helldiver. But it still left Austin powerless to fight, and he was already dazed and weak from the blows.

"Austin!" Liara yelled.

Skarlack reared up the Dread Wolf and it threw Austin to the ground a few metres away.

"The honour is all yours, love." said Skarlack.

Mirage smiled and dismounted her Dread Wolf. She then drew one of her tonfas and slowly walked up to Austin.

"When I take your head, your little Asari whore is next." she hissed.

Just before she could thrust however, Liara suddenly charged her. Caught of guard by this, Mirage attempted to swing at Liara, but the Asari smashed it aside with her blade and then stabbed Mirage right in the shoulder.

In pain from this, Mirage kicked Liara off. The two enemies glared at one another.

"Get away from him, you bitch!" she yelled.

Mirage snarled at Liara, clutching the wound in her shoulder.

Knowing that he was now safe enough to get back up again, Austin rolled onto his front and grabbed his sword and shield back up. Liara helped him.

"Thanks, Liara. I owe you." he said in his head as he picked Excalibur back up.

"Guess we're even now." Liara replied.

Despite this though, they knew the odds weren't their favour. The rest of the pack had them surrounded. Skarlack also looked furious that Liara had wounded his wife, again.

"Kill them both!" he ordered.

The pack snarled and slowly started to close in. Before they could attack however, the tables were suddenly turned. The Helldivers that had been able had managed to get back onto the cliff and were now attacking the Dread Wolves. Austin and Liara quickly joined. While Liara fought Mirage, who as now struggling with only one useable arm, Austin went for Skarlack, this time prepared.

Back at the edge of the cliff however, the others were not doing so well. Brute had almost lost his grip now and with Dash hanging onto his leg, that would mean the end for both of them. And then it
happened.

Brute felt his hand slip and both he and Dash fell.

It wasn't the end for them yet though. They suddenly felt themselves land on top of something and roll off it. Without hesitation, they grabbed onto whatever they could. Only when they finally came down front he shock of the fall, they realised they'd grabbed onto what looked like the back of a creature.

And not just any creature. 13 was back again.

The Experiment was slowly climbing up the cliff face until it finally reached the top. As it did, one of it's hands ended up grabbing onto he tree and pushing it out of the way, causing it land back on a stable part of the cliff. Everyone was safe. Though considering they now had both 13 and the Takaal to deal with, it was hardly a time to rejoice just yet.

13 roared as it finished's climb onto the cliff. This instantly attracted the attention of the Takaal. Many of both the Dread Wolves and Takaal soldiers were somewhat unnerved by the Experiemnt's appearance. Only Mirage's reaction was different.

"Fascinating!" she said. She then noticed the others backing away slightly. "Don't just stand there, you cowards. Attack!"

Forced to obey Mirage's will as well, the Takaal fired. Unlike last time when gunfire from Cerberus hadn't hurt 13 at all, this time it did.

13 raored in anger at the stings it was receiving from the Takaal. This temporarily it.

"Hold it down! I want this thing captured." Mirage ordered.

The Takaal hesitantly obeyed and began firing grappling lines at 13. The Experiment roared in pain as the lines attached painfully onto it's body. It struggled all it could, but soon found the Takaal had it pinned.

Confident of victory, Mirage walked up to 13's head and looked into it's white eye.

"My lucky day. You'll have me eating for a month." she smiled evilly.

She touched 13’s skin. However, only a few seconds after she had, she suddenly recoiled, almost in fright.

13's white eyes suddenly turned to anger. It roared and suddenly reared up with such strength that the Takaal soldier were pulled off their feet and into the Experiment's mouth. It bit into each one, killing them instantly.

Mirage snarled and suddenly teleported onto 13’s back and sank both her blades in. 13 once again roared in pain before it grabbed Mirage and smashed her to the ground. With the female Takaal temporarily wounded and knocked out by this, it prepared toe tab her with it's wrist spike.

Skarlack though quickly noticed this and threw a concentrated amount of lightning at 13. The Experiment almost screamed in pain as the lightning hit it in the chest.

Skarlack quickly brought Mirage too him using his telekinesis. She alined in his arms and Skarlack simply looked at both Austin and Liara. Both were ready for another fight, but he would not give it to them. He was outnumbered.
"The time will eventually come, for both of you. And when it does, you will suffer more than anyone," he growled.

Both he and Mirage vanished. With the rest of the Takaal dead, the last few Dread Wolves retreated.

For a moment, everyone feared 13 would attack them too. But it didn't.

Instead, it gave a rather pained noise and limped about a metre before collapsing. The wounds had obviously been a bit bad. 13 wasn't dead yet, but it sure did look like it would succumb to it's injuries.

"It's hurt, rather badly." Said Liara, actually feeling a bit sorry for 13.

"Good. The we can get out of here." Said Brute

"No." said Austin.

"What?"

"We can't just leave it to die like this. It may be hostile, but it's just an animal. Even such a violent creature doesn't deserve to die like this." Said Austin.

"If we help it, it will kill us." Normica argued.

"We just need to help it enough that it can recover." Said Austin.

Brute could tell there was no arguing with Austin. The Major had clearly made up his mind and wasn't going to let anyone change it.

"Fine. But if that thing eats one of us, don't say I didn't warn you." The Captain sighed.

"We're gonna need a lot of medi gel." said Sandra.

The team worked on applying what they could to 13's wounds, most especially the one from Skarlack's lightning. The deep cuts from the liens could be more easily treated.

"Do we have bandages?" Austin asked.

Normica checked in the supplies they had left. They had just about enough left and she nodded.

"Good. Then get those too," said Austin.

Alaara walked up to 13 and looked at it's face. It's white eye covers had retracted, revealing it's real eyes. It almost made Alaara want to cry as she saw the pain in it's eyes. It looked right at her with a hint of confusion. It probably wasn't used to being shown compassion like this.

"It's okay. You'll be alright." said Alaara as she touched 13 gently.

The Experiment gave a slight groan as the media gel started working at it's wounds and the movement of it's arm caused Alaara to stumble. With her helmet off, her head accidentally fell on 13's and her eyes went black.

Quite by accident, she ended up connecting with 13’s mind. What she saw was not necessarily shocking, but it did come as a huge surprise to her.

The link ended. Alaara looked at 13 in shock. It also looked back at her, now with a look of
curiosity.

"By the goddess!" said Alaara.

"Are you alright?" Austin asked as he helped her up.

"It's sentient!" Alaara replied.

"What?"

"13 is sentient. It can think. It's far more intelligent than even Cerberus thought." said Alaara.

"How do you know?" Austin asked.

"I accidentally linked minds with it."

"Wait, does that mean your bonded to it now?"

"No. Not like that. It was like when Liara used her abilities to help you with the visions. A mind connection without the Union. It was just enough for me to learn about it." Alaara explained. "And I think it... he learned a bit about me too."

"Are you saying what I think you are?" Austin asked, almost in surprise.

"I think it may very well recognise us as friends. It's already intelligent enough to understand kindness and compassion, and now it knows why. All it wants is a life of peace, like it has here where it can be happy and free. It knows that the Reapers are a threat and it knows we're fighting them. It sees us as allies." said Alaara.

"Are you sure, Alaara? It's not that I doubt you, but that is a big risk." said Austin.

"I'm certain." said Alaara. "13 won't attack us."

13 gave a small groan and managed enough strength to bring it's head up and looked directly at them. To everyone's surprise, it then bowed it's head.

After seeing that, Austin didn't need anymore convincing.

"Alright. Let's get him patched up."

After some time, most of the more critical injuries had healed. 13 seemed to have a pretty fast healing ability, so it made the job slightly easier for them.

Everyone stood back tog I've 13 some room. The Experiment groaned a fit and slowly began to get up. It struggled at first and it's secondary set of arms buckled for a moment, but it eventually managed to find it's strength again and stood up. It then looked directly at the Helldivers.

To prove her point, Alaara walked up to it. 13 gently lowered it's head and allowed her to touch it. It even emitted a sound very close to a gentle purring.

"See. When have I ever given you reason not to trust me?" Alaara smiled.

"So... we got this thing on our side now? The Resistance is gonna freak out a lot." said Brute.
From what Alaara had seen, 13 wished to come with them as they left this planet. That way it could help them. Despite it's injuries, 13 was more than capable of keeping up. It even allowed some of Alpha to ride on it's back.

Finally, they reached the complex just as it was starting to get dark. With any luck, they'd be out of here just before all the predators started hunting.

"Stay here and guard the entrance. Sandra, Alaara, Leena and I will head inside and radio the Normandy." said Austin.

"Got it." said Brute.

13 seemed to understand and simply remained with everyone else while the others went inside.

True enough, the radio was just about working. With her finger crossed, Sandra set the right frequency and began speaking, hoping and praying the Normandy could get hear them.

"Mayday! Mayday! This is Sandra calling Normandy SR3. Repeat, this is Sandra to Normandy SR3, do you read?" she said.

There was a small bit of static for a moment, then a familiar voice came through.

"Signal's weak, but we're getting you. Where've you guys been? You've been missing for two days." said Joker.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Alaara and Sandra even hugged each other.

"It was all trap by the Takaal. Our operation has suffered casualties and we're now in mortal danger. We need immediate evac." said Austin.

"Copy that, Major. We've got a fix on the complex. We'll land on the loading platform and pick you up. Make sure you're all there for us." said Joker.

"Copy that, Joker. See you there." said Austin. He then captivated his commlink. "Guys, this is Shepard. The Normandy's en route to pick us up. Rendezvous on the landing platform."

"Copy that, Major. We'll see you there." said Brute.

Very soon, they were all greeted by the familiar and welcome sight of the Normandy.

"Major, are you aware there's a giant creature on the platform with you?" said Joker.

"It's on our side. Don't worry. We'll explain later." said Austin.

"You think the cargo bay's big enough to hold him? It can only just hold a gunship." Brute asked.

"He'll be alright in there." said Alaara, giving 13 a gentle pat.

The Noramandy touched down and everyone began o make their way up the ramp.

"Major, we've got incoming!" said Brute.

Everyone whirled around just as Skarlack and Mirage finished teleporting.

"Leaving so soon?" said Skarlack rhetorically.
"Liara?" said Austin.

"Way ahead of you, Austin." said Liara, drawing her sword.

Austin turned to Brute.

"Captain, get everyone onto the ship. This is our fight." he said.

Both Skarlack and Mirage drew their weapons and charged. Both sides came together in an epic clash. Austin took to fighting Skarlack while Liara once again fought Mirage.

It temporarily switched as Austin clashed with Mirage and Liara clashed with Skarlack, but it soon switched back to normal.

Despite that he still wasn’t using his second set of arms, Skarlack still spun his staff with such ferocity and speed that Austin could only just keep up. Liara was too busy with Mirage at the moment so they couldn’t use their bond effectively.

He spun and attempted a slash from the side, but Skarlack blocked it. The Takaal spun and sliced, only for Austin to slide under his attack. He thrust, but Austin sidestepped it.

Mirage managed to move her head to the side as Liara thrust upwards. She then quickly seized the Asari's arm, pinning it up and leaving her vulnerable. She then brought her front right knee right into Liara’s stomach. The blow knocked the air right out of Liar and she fell to the floor, dropping her sword in the process.

Just as Mirage was about to finish her though, she managed to send a mental message to Austin just in time.

The Helldiver activated his plasma cannon and fired just as Mirage's blade was coming down. Thinking that it had been intended for him, Skarlack ducked to avoid the plasma as it flew over him. Fortunately of course, Austin had intended that to happen. The plasma knocked Mirage’s blade to the side and it missed it's intended target. Seizing the chance, Liara quickly kicked Mirage away.

Skarlack made several spins that Austin avoided. These however had been a simple distraction. On the last one, Skaralck suddenly used one of his legs to trip Austin up.

Liara quickly snatched her blade up and ran at Skarlack, using her biotics for a jump attack. Skarlack though sensed this and hit Liara with some of his lighting, sending the Asari plummeting to the floor.

The Takaal turned back to Austin right as the Heldliver fired his cannon again. The shot hit Skarlack right in the chest and he was knocked back to join his wife. The two Takaal snarled at their enemies as they got back up.

This time Austin and Liara ran. Liara even threw her sword as she ran. Skarlack spun, blocking the blade which came back to Liara's hand.

This time it was even more intensified. Both Austin and Liara pushed hard to stay together so they could use their bond efficiently. Both Skarlack and Mirage could already tell what they were doing, so instead of fighting from both sides, they themselves attempted to stick together. Skaralck did most of the work while Mirage flanked.

Both Takaal attacked at the same time, forcing both Helldivers into blade locks. Liara managed to push Mirage away and threw up a biotic shield for both herself and her husband just as Skarlack cast more lighting from his hands at them.
Mirage, rejoined and attacked from the side. Austin allowed the lighting to absorb into Excalibur and as it hit Mirage's blade it conducted into her, pushing her back again. Liara then leapt over Austin, using his arm as a boost and activated her omni blade just as she came down on Skarlack.

Unable to block both blades in time, Skarlack only countered Liara's sword while the omni blade knocked his helmet off and scarred him across the right eye.

It was only clear which scar was the one Liara had dealt because it glowing hot. Skarlack had many other scars on his face. He was even missing a bit of his left crest, and some severe burn injury. His face seemed to glow with the wire like synthesis blood running through him.

The Takaal gave a slight groan of pain as Liara's omni blade scarred him, but he quickly resumed his attack, now angered by this.

Liara and Austin quickly switched places and Austin blocked Skarlack's attack. Parrying the staff, he then made a crouched thrust at Mirage. Sensing this move from her bond mate, Liara flipped over it. As she landed, she slammed her biotics into the ground, creating a shockwave that pushed both Skarlack and Mirage back, their clawed feet scratching the floor.

Mirage recovered quicker and charged. As Liara parried, she dodged to the side as Mirage still ran. She then hit the Takaal with a strong biotic push which caused her to collide with Skarlack and they both fell to the floor.

"Good trick." said Austin.

"I learned from the best." said Liara.

The Normandy's engines then started to hum. That was probably Joker's way of warning them to hurry the hell up. The ship slowly began to lift off the ground, hovering about a meter in the air.

Skarlack saw this and cast more lighting at the ship which sparked as it hit the hull. Brute, who was still on the ramp fired a rocket at them. Mirage threw up her own biotic shield which blocked it.

"Come on!" Brute yelled.

"Fight or run?" Liara asked telepathically.

"Run. We only needed to give the others enough time." Austin replied.

Both Skarlack and Mirage readied for a fight. They were most surprised when their opponents retreated.

Both Austin and Liara jumped and landed on the ramp just as it started closing and the Normandy sped off into the sky.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! How many more times much that Asari slip through my fingers?!" Mirage roared.

"Have patience, wife. The end will eventually come for both of them." said Skarlack

"Sooner than they think." said Mirage bitterly. She would only be denied her meal for so long.

Thessia's next (with a much better outcome) Then we'll finally have Citadel after that.

I think Citadel may be my last chapter before Christmas since I'll be going away. I'll still be
able to write while I'm away of course. Just so you know.

Keep up reviews. They seem to be in the minority lately.
Chapter 26 The Monastery

Two apologies. First of all, sorry that I said Thessia would be next, that's actually next week. It's only thanks to an anonymous review that I remembered, so whoever that was, thank you very much for reminding me. You probably saved the story in fact.

And the second apology, sorry this is one day late. Got a bit distracted recently now that I have my PC back (I originally couldn't use it because I had to give back the new hardware I got because bits were missing. Now a new version has been sent with everything there.)

Anyway, hope you enjoy.

Chapter 26
The Monastery

It had only been a matter of time before the Asari started asking for assistance. They were still mostly keeping to themselves, but quite a lot of the factions were joining up. Councillor Tevos was even starting to reconsider the original decision and had said that she hoped the rest of the Asari leaders would agree to joining the resistance.

In the meantime however, Asari High Command had informed Austin of a matter requiring their attention. Not many details had been given however.

"Any information dug up, Liara?" he asked.

"Yes, and I can see now why High Command wanted to hide it. We're heading to an Ardat-Yakshi monastery." said Liara.

"Like Morinth?" Dash asked.

"Morinth chose to be a killer. These Ardat-Yakshi isolated themselves to avoid that." said Liara.

"But it doesn't mean they're harmless. Their urge to feed can be powerful."

"Sounds familiar." said Austin humorously, winking under his helmet.

Liara however gave him a serious look.

"That's not something to joke about, Austin." she said. "Especially since you nearly experienced that first hand."

Austin definitely could not forget how Morinth had briefly possessed him and forced him to have sex with her. Now that he thought about it, Liara was right.

"Sorry." he apologised.

"Anyway, that is why High Command sent in commandos to investigate the monastery's distress signal." said Liara.


"If there was a chance the Ardat-Yakshi could break loose, the commandos were to purge the
monastery." Liara explained.

"You mean destroy?" Austin asked in surprise.

"They would've bought heavy explosives with them, yes." Liara nodded.

"Extreme, but I suppose it is necessary given the circumstances." said Jet.

"Don't assume anything. Maybe the Ardat-Yakshi themselves sent out the distress call. If the Asari want us to destroy this place, we need to know what happened." said Austin.

"Agreed. Once we give a report to High Command, they'll stop wasting lives here." said Liara.

The Hellhound touched down and everyone stepped out.

The entrance to the monastery seemed to be an elevator of some kind.

"Elevator disabled. To prevent entry or escape, I wonder..." said Liara.

Austin simply shrugged and jumped. The others soon followed. The descent only lasted a few seconds before they all hit the ground hard with a loud clang. Liara had been the last since she'd at first wondered what they were doing.

"Sometimes I forget we can do that." she said.

"You're not the only one, Liara. Trust me on that." said Dash.

So far, there was no sign of any life. There were bodies though, Husk and Asari Commandos. No Ardat-Yakshi though. Not the most encouraging sign.

"Stay sharp." said Austin.

"This is starting to feel like a horror film now." said Dash.

"Long as you don't scream like a girl, I'm sure we'll be fine." said Jet.

Austin and Liara couldn't help but chuckle at this.

"Very funny. Let's all laugh at the scout." Dash sighed sarcastically.

"Took the words right out of my mouth." said Jet.

"That's enough, you two. Stay focused." said Austin.

Soon they came across what looked like the body of the Asari's captain. Dead unfortunately.

"This was the commandos' captain. It seems they gave their lives fighting the Reapers." said Liara.

"This monastery's out of the way. What would the Reapers want with Ardat-Yakshi?" Austin asked.

Dash picked up a datapad that had been lying near the Cpatian's body and started reading.

"Anything useful?"

"A floor panel marked with the NavPoint location of a bomb. It's inside the Great Hall." said Jet.
"So the commandos started the purge after all." said Liara.

"Seems rather drastic. Evacuating this place would've saved a lot of lives." said Austin. "If there's no survivors, we might as well finish the job."

"Ardat-Yakshi certainly have a very nice place to live. I'll give 'em that much." said Jet.

"They are given the best comfort so that their life is still enjoyable." said Liara. "They're a very far cry from prisoners."

"No argument there. Reminds of our house on Thessia." said Austin.

"Been so long since we were last there." Liara sighed happily.

"When this war is over, that's the first place we're going." Austin smiled under his helmet.

"Be a good place to raise the children too. Assuming you are going to have children." said Jet.

"Definitely." said Liara.

"Aw. That'll be so sweet." said Jet. "I'm sure you'll make fine parents."

"I haven't exactly had the best mother myself." said Liara, a slight bit of regret in her voice.

"You're not what you mother became. Besides, she was indoctrinated. Wasn't her fault. If she could see you now, she'd be even more proud of you than she was during her last moments," said Austin supportingly.

Leaving it at that, they proceeded into another large room of the monastery. Down on the lower floor there was the sound of a gunshot. When everyone looked down, they saw what was definitely a sight for sore eyes. An Asari Justicar they'd know anywhere.

"Very good. I almost didn't hear you." she said.

"Samara!" said Austin happily.

"It has been some time, Shepard. You are a most welcome sight. The corruption here runs deep." said Samara, smiling back at her old friend.

"I assume you're here on your own, Justicar. Perhaps for something special." Liara inquired.

"You are correct, Mrs Shepard. Two of my daughters live here, and I have come for them." said Samara. "Unfortunately, the Reapers had already infested this place by the time I arrived."

"Let's stick together. Maybe your daughters can tell us why the Reapers hit this place." Austin suggested.

"I expect they will have much to tell us. It has been centuries since I last saw them." said Samara. "We're out of time."

The Justicar vanished to fend off more Husks, leaving the others to carry on.

"This place is enormous. There must've been thousands living here." said Austin as they exited into a massive courtyard with quite the view of the night sky.
"Yet there are no survivors." said Jet.

"This is hauntingly familiar. You remember the Krallus colony?" Dash asked.

"Not easily forgotten, that place." said Austin, his mind forced to go back to the sight.

"Why? What's so special about that?" Liara asked.

"That's a story for another time, Liara." said Austin.

They were suddenly halted when they heard a loud crying.

"What's that?"

They then noticed a lone Asari crying in a corner. Her clothes were badly ripped and it looked as though she'd been attacked.

"Seems someone survived after all." said Dash, gently walking towards the Asari.

"Something doesn't feel right about this." said Jet.

Several more Asari who were in the same condition as the crying one. Austin could guess these were the Ardat Yakshis, but there was something wrong about this. They seemed to be looking at the Helldivers in a strange way.

"I feel it too." said Austin, keeping his gun at alert just in case.

Dash got closer to the crying Asari and knelt down to try and comfort her.

"Dash, wait a moment. Something's not right. said Jet.

"Hey, it's okay. You're safe." said Dash.

The crying Asari slowly looked up at Dash. At first everything looked normal. Only when it opened its eyes however did something not look right.

Her eyes were black, but not the typical Asari meld black, they were completely black. No lines, no pupils, nothing. They were as black as death itself.

"What the..."

And then the really terrifying part happened. The Asari's skin seemed to suddenly tear and rip itself apart, revealing a horrible sight. As the skin was torn off, it revealed an Asari husk, twice as tall as a human with sharp long fingers, and terrifying high pitched scream.

The Banshee lunged at Dash as he jolted back in shock. Just as the scout hit the floor, and looked like it was the end for him, the butt of a rifle hit the Banshee in the head, knocking it against the wall and temporarily disorienting it.

Austin quickly pulled Dash back up onto his feet. The rest of the disguised Banshees had torn their disguises off too.

"Stay together!"

The Banshees all shot forward at once using their biotic charges. Almost instantly, they attacked, clawed hands swinging and trying to grab at something. Both Austin and Liara drew their swords
while Jet used either her jets to light some husks on fire while others where whacked away with her hammer. Dash stuck to his pistol and picked off any that were far away are at close range.

Liara was certainly struggling the most against these things. Not only were these her people, but also their screams… something about them was painful for her to hear. The others didn't notice this being human. Austin however did.

His connection to Liara allowed him to fell what she felt, and he could feel her pain. To her, the screams were of pain and suffering, as the Asari part of these husks were still alive and, constantly in pain from their transformation into husks and begging for death in order to be put out of their misery.

Sensing that Liara was struggling due to the screams, he quickly got closer to her. The Asari felt some of her strength return to her as her bond mate stood at her side.

"Disable your audio receptors. It'll block the screams out." He recommended.

Liara didn't hesitate and did as she was told. To her relief, it worked. Although she couldn't hear anything at all now, it did at least allow her to concentrate. Plus, the feeling of her bond mate in her mind did offer encouragement.

"On your six!" Dash yelled.

Since Liara didn't hear that, Austin only just managed to warn Liara in time. She quickly swung round, cutting another Banshee's head off.

Dash started to aim in multiple directions as he fired. There were so many Banshees that he was starting to panic, especially since he was starting to run a bit low on ammo.

In the process of his blind firing, he failed to notice several tanks nearby.

"Watch your fire! Those things are flammable!" Austin yelled.

Too late.

Two of Dash's blind shots hit the tanks. One ruptured it, the other ignited it.

The massive explosion hit everyone with a huge amount of force. It was only thanks to their armour strength and weight they weren't sent flying. Dash though was way lighter than the others and so the explosion sent him flying right into a small pool of water.

Jet suddenly noticed that Banshee's were now acting differently. All of a sudden, they'd covered their faces with their hands as if they were trying to protect their eyes from a bright light. They were also slowly backing away.

"That's it." Jet thought.

It was only a theory, but she sure did hope it would work because if it didn't, they were almost certainly screwed.

She activated both her flamethrowers which spat fire right at the Banshees. To the Helldiver's relief, it worked.

The Banshee's screeched in fright and started to flee. They all disappeared rather quickly.

"I think they're retreating!" said Austin.
Everyone took this time to get their breath back. The whole surprise and shock of the Banshees had certainly caught them off guard and they hadn't been prepared for it.

"Did everyone see that? Because I will not be doing it again." Said Dash, managing to pick himself up and get out of the pool.

"Those used to be people. Asari." said Liara, almost in shock. "What have the Reapers done to them?"

They went back inside, believing they would at least have a slightly better advantage. At the bottom of a set of steps, an Asari suddenly ran past as she was chased by several Cannibals. Thinking it was another Banshee in disguise, Jet was about to fire her weapon.

"Wait!" said Austin, quickly pushing Jet's gun down. "That one's normal. Come on."

The Cannibals came closer and closer. Then Samara suddenly jumped down right in front of the Asari, casting herself between the Cannibals and her.

She activated her biotics and threw them so far they hit the wall on the others die of the room.

"Mother! You came!" said the Asari.

"As soon as I was able." said Samara, turning to face her daughter. She then turned back to Austin. "Shepard, this is Falere, my youngest. She and her sister Rila are Ardat-Yakshi. They-"

"Mother! They have Rila." Falere interrupted.

"What?"

"I saw some of those creatures take her into the Great Hall. I've been trying to get there." said Falere.

"What are the Reapers doing here?" Austin asked.

"Harvesting us. They're turning us into... into theses monsters." said Falere, indicating to the corpse of a dead Banshee. "Please, you can't let that happen to Rila."

"We won't. We have to find her fast. The Great Hall has a bomb in it." said Austin.

"A bomb? Didn't you come to rescue people?" said Falere in surprise.

"We'll do all we can. But we can't leave this place standing with the Reapers all over it." said Austin.

"You sound like the commandos, and they didn't stop to help anyone!" said Falere angrily.

"Falere..." Samara interrupted sternly. "Shepard is not like that. He will help as best he can before resorting to the bomb. That I can promise."

"I'm sorry." Falere apologised.

To everyone's surprise, she then ran and jumped over the balcony, using her biotics to slow her descent.

"Falere!" Samara yelled. "The Great Hall. She's heading for Rila."

"You'd better get after her. We'll catch up." said Austin.
"Please be swift."

"Rila? Rila, can you hear me." Falere said desperately.

Rila slowly opened her eyes and stood up. When she blinked however, her eyes had suddenly turned the exact same black as the Banshee's had done when they were disguised. A horrible thought crossed Austin's mind that any moment Samara and her daughter would be forced to watch Falere rip her own skin off revealing a husk underneath.

Nothing like that happened though. Instead, Rila simply grabbed Falere's neck in her hands. She struggled briefly before her sister pushed her back, knocking her out int he process.

"Why did she do that?" Falere asked, slightly in shock from what had happened.

"Because they've begun to turn her into one of the Reaper's creatures." said Samara, a hint of regret present in her voice, despite how well she tried to conceal it.

Austin knelt down beside Rila and gently held her up close enough to him. He then activated his omni tool and scanned her. There was still hope for her.

"It's not too late." he said.

"Shepard..." Samara tried to say, thinking her friend was just saying that to try and make her feel better.

"She's still in there, Samara. If we get her back to the Normandy we can still save her. I'm immune to the Reapers and we've been studying this ability. From it, we've been able to find ways of removing certain amounts of indoctrination. Rila isn't past that point yet, so she can still be saved. I promise you that." said Austin.

"He's telling the truth, Justicar. If we hurry, we can break their hold over her." said Liara.

"Then what are we waiting for?! We have to get out of here!" said Falere.

"Can we set off this bomb?!" Austin asked.

"We need a detonator." said Jet.

"Typical. Whenever we end up on mission that require us to use explosives, we've never got our demolition expert with us." Dash sighed.

"Incoming!" Jet yelled.

"Samara, keep your daughters safe. We'll protect you." Said Austin.

Samara threw up a biotic shield around herself, Rila and Falere while Austin and the others dealt with the husks. The screaming from the Banshees seemed to have an effect on Falere as well. Samara seemed as though she was managing to block it out. Being nearly as old as a matriarch, that wasn't any surprise.

One stray Banshee managed to get past the Helldivers and tried to claw at Samara's barrier. After a few strikes however, it suddenly stopped.

Then something very surprising happened. It suddenly turned and started to attack all the others. Everyone was completely stumped by this and momentarily stopped fighting. The Banshee struck
down all the others and quickly killed all the other husks.

When it was over, it suddenly fell to its knees and groaned in pain, almost like it was trying to resist something.

Dash was about to kill the Banshee at point blank range when Samara stopped him.

"Wait. There's something about this one." She said.

The Banshee slowly looked up at her, then it spoke.

"Mo…ther." It managed to say, struggling in between its groans.

There was something shockingly familiar about that voice. It sounded like…

"MORINTH?!"

The Banshee slowly nodded.

"How is that possible? You've been dead for two years." Said Austin.

"The Reapers… found my body. Turned me into this… thing." Morinth managed to say.

"You shouldn't even be alive after that." Said Samara, just as surprised as Austin was.

"I don't know how either." Said Morinth. "But it doesn't matter. I don't know how long I have before I lose control. I can feel myself rotting away and my mind is slowly being consumed by the husk's mind. Please… kill me."

Austin looked at Samara for a moment. Did Morinth deserve a quick death? After the suffering she'd made others endure?

"Why should we? Your victims didn't get the same." Said Austin.

"I… know what I did." Morinth replied, struggling more than ever to talk properly. "Being like this… has made me see. I regret… what I did. Just please... don't let me suffer like this. I beg you, even death would be preferable to this."

"Samara?" Austin asked.

The Justicar considered this for a few seconds. Then she drew her gun.

"May you find true peace in the embrace of the goddess this time." She said.

"Thank you… mother. I'm… I'm sorry for everything." Said Morinth. "I… love… you."

Samara hung her head for a moment before she pulled the trigger. Morinth fell.

Rila meanwhile had suddenly woken up again.

"Rila?" said Falere.

"Falere..." Rila managed to say.

"How long does she have?" Falere asked quickly.

"Not long. We have to get her out of here, quickly!" said Austin.
"Leave me. It's too late..." Rila said weakly.

"Not it's not, Rila! We're not leaving you behind! I'll carry you out of here if I have to," said Falere, almost on the point of tears.

"You won't need to." said Austin as he scooped up Rila in his arms. He carried her the rest of the way. As they entered the elevator, they detonated the bomb. Any more Banshees left would hopefully have been caught in the blast.

They all hurried into the Normandy's med bay. Austin quickly put her on one of the operating tables. Rana, having done some of these operations before due to that fact that it was her knowledge that had had a hand in conceiving this method of removing indoctrination, quickly got to work.

"We need to be fast. The indoctrination's almost spread completely." said Austin.

A machine just above Rila's bed activated and slowly started to scan her.

"What are you doing?" Rila asked.

"Hopefully, saving you." Rana replied. "Try to remain still. This may hurt a bit."

"Falere..." Rila said.

"I'll be okay, Rila." said Falere, holding her sisters hand reassuringly.

"I love you." said Rila.

"Don't say things like that. You're going to be okay." said Falere.

Then machine then fired some kind fo beam at Rila. The Asari groaned, struggling against the binds holding her down. Falere almost cried seeing her sister in pain like this.

Then, some sort of dark essence slowly started to drain out of Rila's body.

"Almost there..." said Rana.

Rila's eyes opened again, pitch black and she started to struggle against her binds even more, wanting to attack. Thens he suddenly cried out as the darkness left her eyes too. Finally it ended and she slumped back onto the bed. The essence meanwhile simply disappeared.

"By the goddess." said Samara, rather shocked at what she'd just seen.

Falere ran up to Rila and removed the restraints.

"Rila? Rila!"

Rila's eyes slowly opened, now completely restored to normal.

"Are you alright?" Falere asked.

"Yes. I... I can't feel them in my head anymore." Rila replied, slightly weakly.

"The indoctrination's gone. She's cured." Said Rana, checking the scans to make sure they were absolutely accurate.

"I... thank you, Shepard." Said Falere, tears of happiness trickling down her cheeks as eh hugged her
"Words alone cannot express how grateful I am to you, Shepard. You have performed the impossible before, I did not think you could do it again." Said Samara, unable to hold back a smile.

"Never say never." Said Austin proudly. He then noticed however that Samra's expression had changed to sorrow. "What's the matter?"

"Falere, Rila... the code demands that an Ardat-Yakshi cannot live outside a monastery that no longer exists." Said Samara, slowly drawing her gun.

"What are you doing?" Austin asked.

"I'm sorry, Shepard. By the Justicar's code... this is the only way to save my daughters." Said Samara.

"Mother, no!"

Just as she aimed the gun at her head however, Austin quickly stopped her and pinned her arm to her back.

"Let...go!" said Samara.

"What are you doing?! This is madness." Said Austin.

"I am fulfilling the code." Samara replied.

"By throwing your life away?" Austin asked back.

"I won't kill my daughters!"

"You won't have too!" said Falere.

"Falere?"

Austin let Samara go, but stood ready should she try to kill herself again.

"We'll stay at the monastery... home, no matter what's become of it." Said Rila.

"Without a proper monastery..." Samara went to say.

"We could've left any time. We don't need a building to honour our own code." Falere interrupted.

"And if the Reapers return, they won't take us alive. I promise." Said Rila.

"Then... the Code permits you to stay, as you are." Said Samara.

Both Asari hugged their mother. After a few seconds, Samara hugged them back.

The Hellhound touched down at everyone stepped out. Both Rila and Falere went towards the Monastery's entrance.

"Once this war is over, and if I am able, I will visit. As a Justicar should." Said Samara to her daughters.

"I'd understand if you wanted to help them rebuild a home here." Said Austin.
"It must wait now that I can help you oppose the Reapers." Said Samara. "I'll speak with my daughters, then join your forces. If you'll me, of course."

"We'd be more than honoured." Austin smiled under his helmet.

"The honour is mine, my friend." Samara smiled back as she and Austin shook hands.

Falere then went up to Austin.

"Thank you, Shepard. I only wish I could give you something other than words." She said.

"Just stay safe, for the sake of your mother and your sister." Said Austin.

"I will. We both will."


The Helldivers walked back into the dropship and it took off.

"What a day." Dash sighed.

Austin took his helmet and gave a deep sigh. He was quite relieved how well that had gone, it could've been a lot worse.

Liara then suddenly retracted her own helmet and gave Austin a peck on the cheek.

"You deserve that, love. And perhaps a little more." She smiled.

"You're so good to me." Austin smiled.

"I try."

"Major, I'm pleased to hear the Ardat-Yakshi situation has been put to rest." Said Councillor Tevos.

"Should I guess you're our contact inside Asari High Command, Councillor?" Austin asked.

"I'm merely here to convert the gratitude of the Asari people for concluding a difficult, sensitive mission. The next team of commandos we were sending to the monastery are now en route to the Resistance instead." "In the meantime, I have another matter to discuss with you. Come to the Citadel and we will discuss it further."

Right, this time it is Thessia next. As I said before, better outcome.

Sadly that will be my last chapter for this year. I'm going away for Christmas next Friday. But don't worry, I'll still continue writing, especially since I'll be working on the Citadel chapter while I'm away.

See you soon! :)

Sorry again for the delay, and possibly the short length.
Chapter 27, Liberation of Thessia

So sorry about delaying another chapter. I was in a hurry to get it finished before I left for Christmas and I had a few problems with my pc.

Anyway, it's here now.

Hope you enjoy. I'm definitely proud that the outcome of Thessia in this is better than in the game.

Chapter 27

Liberation of Thessia

Austin walked into the office that had once belonged to Udina where Tevos had told him to meet her. There were several C-sec officers with her.

"I want all remaining files secured and marked for Tentron clearance only." Said the Asari. "Major Shepard. Thank you for coming."

"Did you find something?" Austin asked.

"The Council has ordered a full review into Donnel Udina's activities. We're still piecing together his coup attempt. But that isn't why I asked you here. The situation is growing urgent for my people. I find myself in the position of asking for your help." Said Tevos.

She indicated over to the far side of the room so that they were out of earshot fo the C-sec officers.

"The Reapers are concentrating heavily on Thessia. We won't last much longer against them."

"You're species were the ones that chose not to attend the summit and have refused to join the resistance. What did you expect would happen?" said Austin.

"I realise that now, Major. That is why I am willing to make a deal with you here." Said Tevos. "If you and your Helldivers can help at least push back the Reapers on Thessia, then the Asari will join the resistance, and I will do all I can to further add support."

There was a long silence as Tevos waited for the Major to answer, her beating hard in her chest as she hoped he would help. If he didn't…

"We have a small fleet we can spare." Austin finally said. "I'll see what I can do."

"One more thing, Major. I know it may not be much, but I must ask that defending the temple of Athame take priority. There are valuable ancestral artefacts there. It would be devastating if they were lost." Said Tevos. "Also… I don't' know if it will help at all, but some of those artefacts contain very ancient knowledge. If there is any chance they could help you find the last component of the Crucible…"

"I understand. I'll see to that myself." Said Austin.

"Thank you, Major. Rest assured, I will honour my promise." Said Tevos gratefully.
"For the sake of your people, I hope you do. The Resistance won't help if you don't help in return."
Said Austin.

"Goddess be with you."

The Fleet went ahead first while the Normandy brought up the rear.


"Give the fleet the order to attack. We have to see to a matter down on the planet. The Councillor wishes for us to protect the temple of Athame, there's also the small possibility there may be something in there that could help us finding the Catalyst." Said Austin.

"Understood. I will keep you updated on the fleet's progress. Good luck down there, Shepard." Said Zartrack.

"Same to you, General."

As Austin turned to head for the cargo hold, Alaara and Liara suddenly rushed in.

"Austin, that's our home down there! We have to go!" said Liara.

"I was gonna bring you along anyway, love. Thessia's just as much my home as it is yours." Said Austin.

Both Alaara and Liara were a lot quieter than usual. Austin fully understood why though. He could feel Liara's sorrow after all.

He didn't let it overcome him though. He and Liara had a home here and he was damn well going to retake Thessia if he had to use the entire Helldiver fleet. Hopefully that wouldn't be necessary though.

"Why aren't we joining the main battle?" Javik asked, having to kneel down so that he didn't bang his head by sitting in a chair.

Although Dell had managed to do some work that reversed some of the pods modifications, which had reduced Javik's tall height by a few centimetres, he still towered over the Helldivers.

"The Asari have asked that the temple of Athame be protected. That's where we're going." Austin explained.

"The Temple of Athame?" Liara asked in surprise.

"Know anything about it?" Austin asked.

"It holds many artefacts that are a huge part of our ancestry. My mother brought me here when I was just a child." Said Liara. "I can understand why my people would want it intact, but still…"

"Councillor Tevos also thinks it's possible there could be something in there that might help us discover the Catalyst. That's an opportunity we can't afford to waste." Said Austin. "We'll do what we can to help you people, Liara. I promise, and we will drive the Reapers from this world, one way or another."

The Hellhound soon set down and everyone stepped out. Surprisingly, Thessia didn't look too bad. It
looked like the Asari had certainly been able to hold the Reaper's back so far, but now their defences were starting to fail. The fleet's arrival was opportune.

Nearby, an Asari squad were engaging husk forces as they came across a long bridge. The group quickly joined the fray and soon pushed the attackers back.

"I want that gunship up and running!" said the Captain. "Plug that hole!"

She then turned to Austin.

"Major Shepard, I'm lieutenant Kurin. We've been told to expect you. My orders are to hold this grid at all costs." She said.

Another explosion rocked the area and the Asari maintain the biotic barrier looked just about ready to faint.

"Shore up the barrier!" Kurin yelled.

"But our perimeter's collapsing and I'm getting my people out of here." she continued to Austin.

"I agree. You'll be overrun if you don't pull out now." Said Austin.

"Austin, we won't make it to the temple without their help." Liara argued.

"Yes we will, Liara. Besides, I think we can get some people to cover for them." Said Austin. He then activated his comm. "This is Shepard, I need gunship covering fire on my location."

"Roger that, major. Two gunships heading your way."

"We've got an Asari squad pulling out. Cover their escape." Austin added.

"Thank you, Major. I'm glad you understand." Said Kurin.

"All to well. Get your people somewhere safe." Said Austin.

"If I may ask, why are you not with the main battle?" Kurin asked as her team got into the gunship.

"We've been tasked with defending the temple of Athame. There may also be something in there that could possibly be what we need to defeat the Reapers." Alaara explained.

"Then I wish you luck, but we're not staying to see it." Said Kurin.

She then joined her team and the gunship gently lifted off.

"They could've helped us, Shepard." Said Liara.

"If they'd stayed, they would've been killed. And anyway, here comes backup."

Sure enough, two gunship's soon came into view. They covered the Asari squad's escape first and then turned their attention to the Husks on the bridge ahead. The constant gunfire made quick work of the creatures.

"Path ahead is clear along your route, Major." Said one of the pilots.

"Thanks for the help. Return to the main battle." Said Austin.

"Yes sir."
The gunships turned around and headed back to the main battle. The fleet had already begun engaging the Reapers and it was quickly turning into a vicious battle. Austin could only hope it was enough to at least re-secure Thessia. It would be far too depressing to live with if Thessia fell.

There were an awful lot of Husks to fight through, but regardless, the team carved their way through. Pretty soon, they were nearing their desired destination. A nearby Reaper was exchanging fire with a Helldiver cruiser.

"Target locked. Firing!"

A charged beam from the cruiser fired and hit the Reaper so hard that it lost its balance and fell.

"Watch out!" Javik yelled.

Everyone quickly ran as fast they could just as the Reaper came down hard, the shock of the impact causing the whole ground to shake and dust to be thrown up.

"Well, at least the fleet's doing well." Alaara panted, the team just managing to avoid being crushed by the Reaper that was now being bombarded by several Helldiver bombers, unable fire back having fallen on its front.

"All this destruction… It's…" said Liara, trying to hold back her despair.

"Your homeworld's not falling, Liara. The Reapers will not win. I won't let them!" said Austin.

Finally, they made it to the temple. So far, there was no sign of any husks.

The door slowly opened and everyone made their way inside, remaining on guard just in case.

"Hmmm, interesting. Some of this stuff must be hundreds of years old." Said Alaara.

"Thousands, more likely." Said Austin.

Many different artefacts adorned the large room. At the far end was an alrge statue of an Asari dressed in along dress.

The team suddenly noticed two Asari lying at the base of the statue. They were both dead, blood trickling from their necks.

"What happened to their throats?" Alaara asked.

"They've been slit. The Reapers didn't do this." Said Liara examining the wounds.

"We're going to have to figure this out on our own." Said Javik.

"Who's that supposed to be?" Austin asked, looking up at the statue.

"It's Athame. Her image becomes more like ours over time." Liara explained.

As Liara spoke, Austin started to feel something. He could feel a presence in this room, and it wasn't Liara. Something about it was very familiar.

"Wait a minute…" he thought.

He reached his hand out slowly and took a few steps forward. Now the presence felt even stronger
and he finally remembered when he'd last felt this before.

"There's a Prothean beacon here." He said, turning back to the others.

"What? You're sure?" said Liara in surprise.

"It's not something I'd forget." Said Austin.

"He's right. I feel it too." Said Javik. "But… that's not possible."

"What do you mean?" Austin asked.

"Yes. I find it odd that you would be surprised to find a beacon here, especially if it's hidden. There's no way my people would've kept this a secret if they'd known about it!" said Liara defensively.

"I'm not saying they did, Liara. In fact, I think I know why we both didn't know about this." Said Javik.

"You were in charge of placing the beacons. How could you not know?!" Liara objected.

"If you'll let me explain." Said Javik. "Out of the many teams I sent to place beacons all over the galaxy, one was sent here to the planet that would one day be populated you. But the Reapers attacked and the team never returned. I had always assumed the beacon as never placed or activated. Seems I was wrong."

"But how has it stayed hidden?" said Liara. "Where is it anyway?"

"I'm not sure yet. I can only feel it's presence." Austin replied.

"The few records I can access talk about tapping into Prothean data steams, reconstructing matrices… none of which I see here." Said Liara as she activated her omni tool.

"I do." Said Javik.

The Prothean walked right up close to the statue and the base started to become surrounded by red energy. As soon as Javik touched it, the statue started to crack and it suddenly fell apart revealing, sure enough revealing a real Prothean beacon.

"The statue?" Alaara asked in surprise.

"I guessed as much. Over the thousands of years, rock must've collected around it. The rock then later just happened to be forged into your statue. It's knowledge then slowly came to your minds as your prayed to it." Said Javik

"Makes sense. Just enough that it proves my people wouldn't hide this." Said Liara.

"Right, let's see if I still remember how to work these things." Said Javik as he worked on accessing the beacon's controls.

"We need to hurry. This place isn't' going to…" said Liara, suddenly cut off as the temple shook violently."…last very long."

The interface then suddenly flashed and a hovering VI suddenly appeared.

"Good. The VI still works." Said Javik.
"Obtaining chronological marker. Hold..." said the VI. "Timescale established. Post Prothean cycle confirmed. Reaper presence detected. This galactic cycle has already reached it's extinction terminus. Systems shutting down!"


"Identity confirmed." Said the VI, now transforming into it's true Prothean form.

"We need answers!" said Austin.

"To what question?" the VI asked back.

"The Catalyst. We need to know what it is to finish the Crucible." Austin replied.

"Clearance required."

"They have my authorization." Said Javik.

"I am called Vendetta, an advanced virtual construct of Professor Javik, overseer of the project you refer to as "Crucible." Said the VI. "It is too late, Professor. This cycle's time is ending as well."

"There's still hope for this cycle, Vendetta. We need to know what the Catalyst is. I will not allow another cycle to fall was we did." Said Javik, quite surprisingly forceful.

"Tell us what the Catalyst is." Austin said again.

"If you wish to continue fighting, I will not hinder you, though I deem your odds of success remote." said Vendetta.

"Whatever. Just answer the damn question already!" said Alaara.

Vendetta suddenly whirled round in alert.

"Indoctrinated presence detected. Activating security protocols."

Vendetta vanished revealing who it was that had startled it.

"You..."

There in front of them was Kai Leng.

"What do you want?!" said Austin bitterly as he readied to draw his sword and shield.

"Your attention." Leng simply replied.

A large projection Skarlace suddenly appeared in front of the assassin. The Takaal General gave an evil smile at the team.

"Hello, Shepard. So, you're finally about figure out what the Catalyst is. Such a shame though that all your valiant efforts are in the end for not." He said.

"Go to hell, Skarlace! We've come too far to let you stand in the way now!" said Austin.

"Your being such a fool, Shepard." Said Skarlace, shaking his head. "You really think you'll defeat the Reapers? Even if you somehow do, you'll still have to deal with em and my army."

"Well, I don't know of you noticed, but I have an army too, and it's ready to face you when the time
"If you'd only accept my offer, Shepard. This war could end right now if you would only join us. Think about it. Are you really going to let more and more die each day just because you're too afraid to let go of your organic flesh?"

"You can try all you want, Skarlack. You're not going to change my mind, and nor are the Reapers going to corrupt me." Said Austin.

"I confess myself disappointed, Shepard. You were the one cycle that had proven themselves. Yet they have a foolish leader." Said Skarlack, his statement aimed directly at Austin.

"Is that supposed to make me angry? I'm past that." Said Austin.

"Oh really? Then what if I told you that even as we speak, the Reapers already stand on the brink of victory on Thessia, about to eliminate the Asari for all time?!" said Skarlack.

"I'd say you're insane."

"Defiant even to the end. This is what happens when an unstoppable force meets and immovable object. You truly are incorruptible, aren't you?"

"Indeed. And this conversation is over."

"Have it your way, you fool." Said Skarlack, turning to face Kai Leng. "Leng, kill them all and bring me that Prothean VI."

"With pleasure." Said Leng.

The hologram vanished and Leng almost immediately. He attacked with a biotic charge so hard he knocked both Alaara and Javik off their feet.

Both Austin and Liara quickly drew their swords and blocked Leng's attack as he drew two swords at once.

"I've long looked forward to proving I'm the better one. Soon he'll look on you as inferior." Leng growled.

"Look who's talking. I've lasted this long and I haven't had to get upgrades. Compensating for something? Your failures perhaps?" Austin retorted.

"Shut up!"

Leng pushed hard and Austin and Liara readied for the next attack. Leng attacked first and they both parried his attacks. Somehow his implants were allowing him to attack either side without totally having to focus on them.

Still, the union did help, especially with how fast viciously Leng was attacking.

"Well, I notice you got quite a temper." Said Austin mockingly as he managed to dodge many of Leng's attacks.

Leng only became more frustrated with this and increased the ferocity and speed. Still either Austin or Liara would counter an attack. One swipe from Excalibur even made a scratch on Leng's armour.

"Have you ever done this before?" said Austin, still trying to mock Leng in hopes it would wind him
up and cause him to make a mistake.

Leng made a double lunge with both his swords. Austin dodged in-between however and managed a punch to the face with his shield.

"Oh come on. You call that an attack?!

Leng simply glared at Austin and Liara as he recovered from the punch.

"Not like you to taunt an opponent, Austin." Said Liara telepathically.

"I've just about had enough with this guy, so what the hell." Austin replied.

The three opponents once again charged one another, their blades scraping the ground.

Austin and Liara still stuck together for this one but Leng was able to parry both sides with two swords. It was almost like they were fighting Zartrack.

Something that did at least work to their advantage though was that Leng seemed to rely more on his martial arts skills rather than his sword skills. It didn't take much to see that Leng was resorting to this tactic since he knew his odds weren't good against two sword fighters who could fight so well together that they were almost unmatched.

Leng backed away from a swipe from Austin as she swung at the same time. The Helldiver ducked to avoid it as Liara tempted a lunge. She mistimed her attack however and Leng was able to deliver a swift kick to her helmet, knocking her away from the fight temporarily.

Austin pressed the attack so that Liara had enough time to recover.

"Funny thing about anger. It'll consume you, soon enough." Said Austin as Leng turned the tables and began attacking viciously, his anger felt in every strike. "And you lose sight of everything."

Austin dodged under Leng's strike as he swung with both sword, getting right down onto his knees. Liara then suddenly used Austin as a stepping stone and leapt over him. Leng was only just able to parry her strike in time as Austin rejoined the fray.

Using a strike from his biotics, the Cerberus assassin forced the two Helldivers back. They took this moment to once again get their breath back.

Leng simply glared at them both, his teeth gritted in anger and hatred.

This time he charged while Austin and Liara stood their ground. The Cerberus assassin jumped as he struck. Both Helldivers quickly used their union to bring their swords together to block Leng’s attack and used their strength push him back.

A flurry of steel was all over the place as the two Helldivers fought Kai Leng. Soon, he ended up between the two and they engaged him in a blade lock. For a moment, it looked as though Leng’s defence was going to be overloaded. But the Cerberus assassin suddenly made a rather surprising move.

He pushed himself out of the blade lock, causing Austin and Liara to bang into one another. The Cerberus assassin's clawed foot then grabbed Austin's head and smashed it into Liara gain knocking them both to the ground and causing Austin to land far too hard on Liara's arm so hard it popped out of place.
"My arm!" she yelled.

Just as Leng readied to finish them off, a large body suddenly charged into him and knocked him back.

"You'll pay for that, you primitive scum!" said Javik.

The Prothean swung at Leng, using his gun as a club. The assassin however ducked under the attack and suddenly severed the gun in two completely with his swords.

The Prothean only noticed this too late as Leng then tripped him up and prepared to deliver the finishing blow.

Just before the swords could hit Javik however, they suddenly clanged hard against something.

Leng was left very confused by this for a few seconds before there was the familiar sound of a cloak deactivating and a most familiar but unexpected figure appeared with a Katana in her right hand, and a fan in the other.

"You!" Leng growled.

"Hello, Cousin." Said Xun bitterly.

What followed was almost a blur of silver as Leng duelled with Xun. With this fight, the speed was hard to keep track of.

Xun however was unprepared fro Leng's ferocity, and she was soon overpowered. The Cerberus assassin stood over Austin, ready to deliver the final blow.

"You should've joined Cerberus when you had the chance." He said.

"Screw you!" said Austin.

Just as Leng was about to strike however, he was suddenly distracted when the gunship he'd arrived in was suddenly pulled out of the sky and crashed in an explosive heap. From out of the fire stepped an Asari looking figure, her biotics pulsing with power.

"Get away from my daughter!" she said.

Leng was completely distracted as he struggled to block the constant biotic attacks from the Asari figure. Both Austin and Xun seized the chance and slashed Leng from behind with their swords. The Cerberus assassin was caught off guard by this and he only managed a pained gasp before he fell to the floor.

"You alright?" Austin asked as he helped his wife up.

"Ow! I think I've dislocated it." Liara groaned.

"Okay, brace yourself. This is gonna hurt." Said Austin as he readied to put the arm back into place. "3… 2… 1…"

There was a light pop as Austin pushed the arm back into position and Liara gave a pained groan. After a few seconds though, she took a few deep breaths and moved her arm around, fully functionality now restored to it.

"That's better." She said.
"Javik, re-access the VI." Said Austin.

"On it."

Xun continued to look at Leng’s body, almost with a look of disgust.

"He was your cousin?" Austin asked, still rather surprised at what he’d heard.

"He stopped being my cousin a long time ago. Even as a child he was always a heartless hùn zhàng." Said Xun, showing no remorse or sorrow.

"Thanks for the help, Dad." Said Liara.

As the smoke cleared however, it revealed a most unexpected face.

"Liara, it's me."

"Mother?!"

Sure enough, there in front of them, as clear as they saw each other, was none other that Matriarch Benezia, Liara’s mother and the bondmate of Matriarch Aethyta.

"Benezia?! But that's impossible!" said Austin, just as surprised.

"This no trick, Liara. I promise it's me." Said Benezia as she walked up to her daughter.

"Liara, wait! She might be indoctrinated!" said Alaara.

"She's not." Said Javik, still working on the VI’s controls.

"How can you tell?" Austin asked.

"I can sense if someone is indoctrinated. Whatever presence was originally controlling her is no longer present." Said Javik

"Of course. Sovereign's dead." Said Austin.

"I no longer feel it's presence in my head." Said Benezia.

"But how are you still alive, Mother? I shot you. You died five years ago on Noveria." Said Liara, still dumbfounded as to how the Matriarch was still alive after she had been shot and had died that day.

"Five years? It's been that long?" Benezia asked in surprise.

"I'm afraid so." Liara replied.

"I think I know how she's alive." Said Austin. "Liara, when you shot her, she didn't actually die. My scans show she's only recently woken up from a coma. She must've gone into it from her wound. So deep, we thought she was dead."

"But still, how's the wound healed?"

"The coffin!"

"What?"
"Don't you remember? We put her in a stasis pod to keep her preserved until the funeral and we left her like that. Those pods are designed to slowly heal injuries if the person inside is still alive. It must've healed her." Said Austin.

"Only she was unable to wake up due to the stasis." Liara finished.

"How did you actually get out?" Alaara asked.

"The Reaper attack must've ruptured the pod and the stasis ended. I spotted you as you were heading to the temple. At the time, I didn't know it was you until I heard your voices when you were fighting Leng."

"Shepard, I've almost got it." Said Javik.

Austin walked up to the beacon beside Javik while Liara literally flung herself into Benzia's arms and mother and daughter hugged one another.

In the process of this however, everyone failed to notice Kai Leng slowly getting back up, struggling weakly against his injuries.

He limped up to Austin and raised his blades. Just at the very last moment however, Liara suddenly noticed.

"Austin!"

The Helldiver almost immediately whirled round and drew his sword. Excalibur hit Leng's blades so hard that they completely shattered. At the same time, Austin activated his omni blade and plunged it into Leng's chest. He then followed this by running the Cerberus assassin right through with Excalibur.

"Say hello to the Illusive Man for me, you son of a bitch!" said Austin.

Leng could only groan in extreme pain before the life finally left him and he became completely motionless. Without any hesitation, Austin kicked Leng off his blades and let him plummet into the abyss below.

"Good riddance to bad rubbish, I say." Said Javik.

At that moment, the VI finally came back.

"Online."

"Vendetta, tell us what the catalyst is." Said Javik, getting right to the point.

"Unknown." Vendetta replied.

"What?!"

"No knowledge of the Catalyst's true nature was ever found by any Protheans. No further information is available." Vendetta explained.

"No. No, that can't be true! That's not fair!" said Austin, banging his fist so hard that he created a dent.

"No further information exists. I am sorry." Said Vendetta.
"All of this, just for it to end in flames." Said Austin, the devastation unmistakable in his voice.


Everyone looked out of the temple's entrance. Many more Reapers had fallen and many others were retreating from the Helldiver fleet. The battle had been won.

"Reaper forces are retreating. Thessia is secure."

"At least your home is safe." Said Austin. Admittedly, this was something to rejoice over, even if they were no closer to stopping the Reapers completely.

"I can't believe that. The Protheans never found it out either?" Zartrack asked.

"It would seem that way. As of now, we've got nothing left to go on." Said Austin.

"This won't go down well with the others." said Zartrack, just as disappointed as his student. "At least Thessia is secured. This wasn't a total loss."

"But still, we came so close… only to discover the Protheans were just as clueless as us." Austin sighed.

"I know how you must feel, Shepard. But this isn't the time to give up. We may have won Thessia back, but the Reapers are still out there." Said Zartrack.

"You're right. And that's why we're not going to give up. I refuse to believe that the Protheans didn't know anything, there has to be something somewhere that will tell us what we need to know. Until there's absolutely nothing left to go on, we're not going to give up. We'll keep looking for anything that could help us, even if I journey to the ends of the galaxy and beyond." Said Austin, his confidence slightly returning.

"I admire your determination, Shepard. I guess all I can do is wish you good luck." Said Zartrack.

Everyone had overheard the conversation having gathered in the comm room.

"So… what do we do now?" Traynor asked.

"We keep looking. Even if it takes us until the end of this war, we're going to find something. For now, we've earned a break after taking back Thessia and we've now got the Asari with us. For now, we'll enjoy that victory while we can, then we head back out to search for anything regarding the catalyst." Austin simply said.

"We're with you until the end, Shepard." Said Alaara.

"And we'll follow you anywhere." Said Sarah.

"Dismissed." Said Austin.

"Are you alright?" Liara asked, putting her hand on her husband's shoulder.

"Yes. Just a bit down is all. I really did think we'd finally found the end to this war." Austin sighed.

"You said so yourself, we're not giving up. I know we'll find the catalyst eventually." "And whatever happens, I'll always be at your side." Said Liara supportingly.
"I can always count on you to cheer me up, can't I?" Austin smiled.

"Oh believe me, I'm just getting started." Liara smiled back. "You saved my home, I think you've more than earned a… special reward."

"Well then, lead the way, darling."

True they faced a dark hour and were now without any clues at all. But as Austin himself had said, they would never give up. They would keep fighting, they would sacrifice, and they would find a way. Plus, Thessia had been saved and now the Asari were on board.

Even though this war was far from over, it was a victory.

THE END!

No, I'm just kidding. ;)

This is however the end for 2013. I need a rest and I definitely feel it would be better if I had more than one week to do the next chapter, the Citadel DLC. The fic will resume on the first Friday of 2014.

It'll be worth the wait though, that I can promise.

Until then... MERRY CHRISTMAS! :)}
Hello, everyone! I'm back!

Hope you all had a good Christmas. It was good for me.

Tiny bit of apology that this chapter is one week late. I hadn't realised the first friday of 2014 was so soon; I thought I'd have more time. In the end I felt it was better to delay the chapter so that it wasn't rushed and was as good as I could get it.

So anyway, I should say that the identity theft storyline of the DLC is slightly darker this time round, mainly because Alpha face one of their oldest and dangerous enemies.

Also, some of the humour and funny bits were either cut or toned down. That's only for the story bit though. The shore leave and party bits remain unchanged.

Little more for me to say then. Other than that I hope you enjoy this, not only is the first chapter that starts to prepare you for Alpha Origins it's also the longest chapter ever at 35,654 words. (Not including the Author's notes)

Enjoy!

Oh, and before I forget, a big thanks to Legionaryprime, Mastermind4892, and SpectreFanchin10 for their contributions to this chapter. Cheers to all of you! ;)

Chapter 28

The Return of Hellspawn

It had been a week now since the battle of Thessia. That time however had been put to good use.

Although they still hadn't found any leads, Alpha had at least managed to get many more races into the resistance and a lot more territory had been won back. Earth had also been re-secured. The Reapers were still attacking, but at least now the Alliance had a strong foothold and was managing to hold Earth.

Also noteworthy was Benezia's return which had come as a huge surprise to the Asari community. The biggest surprise of all however was that somehow, Aethyta had managed to get to see her old bond mate and as bizarre as it sounded, they were back together again. Liara had almost been unable to believe what had happened when she heard the news.

Something that had also come as good news, particularly to Austin and Sarah was that their mother was alive and well and was assisting with the Council. Even promoted to Rear Admiral. Both siblings were of course pleased that their mother was okay, and Matt was overjoyed to learn his wife was safe. The worry had been eating away at him for a while.

For now however, the Normandy had been given shore leave and was docked at the Citadel for maintenance and repairs.

Before Austin joined some of the others for their break though, he'd received a message from Anderson saying that he'd been left an apartment. Normally Alpha had their own place for
unwinding, but unfortunately that had been one of the casualties of the Cerberus Coup. Apparently a Cerberus shuttle had crashed into it.

As Austin walked into the apartment, he found himself gazing at quite a size. This whole thing was twice as large as Alpha's former game room.

"Major, I've got Admiral Anderson one the QEC. Patching him through to you now." Said Traynor's voice.

Anderson's image appeared on the screen.

"Shepard."

"Admiral. How you holding up?" Austin asked.

"Day by day, Major." Anderson replied.

"Yeah." Austin replied understandingly. "Hackett sent me a message about this apartment."

"I want you to have it. Take it off my hands." Said Anderson.

"Are you serious?" Austin asked in surprise.

"I heard that the one you used to have got destroyed, so you need somewhere to recharge, clear your head. Kahlee wanted us to settle down there. Thing is, the longer I'm on Earth, the less I want to leave, even if we now have the upper hand." Said Austin. "And I want as few loose ends out there as possible. Like I said, you'd be doing me a favour."

"That's very generous of you Anderson. Thanks." Said Austin.

"It's practical. We need you in the best shape possible. Rested. Focused." Said Anderson.

"If you say so." Austin nodded.

"And make yourself at home, damn it. It's yours now."

"I'm sure I can manage."

There would be time to explore the apartment fully later. Right now though, Austin had some shore leave to enjoy. For starters, he'd received a message from Joker asking him to him in the sushi restaurant.

"Ah, Major Shepard. Your table is ready." Said the attendant.

Joker waved to him from the table and Austin sat down.

"Hey, Shepard. Not bad, huh? This sushi place is serious. Like "French guy at door" serious. Only had to save the galaxy twice to get a table here. You've seen the line outside?" said Joker. "But here I am, drink in hand. Best pilot in the universe and a rock star."

"Any news from the Normandy?" Austin asked.

"Ah, you know. Maintenance stuff. It's hard knowing a bunch of strangers are poking around in my ship. I mean… your ship." Said Joker. "What's with the case by the way?"
Austin had brought a metal looking case with him for some reason. Joker wasn't sure exactly what it was, but it did have an odd look to it.

"Oh, just something I carry around." Said Austin. "Anyway, let someone else do the work for once. Hackett's orders. You're on shore leave."

"Yeah, whether we like it or not." Said Joker.

"I'm sure you'll manage." Said Austin.

"I may need a drink that comes with an umbrella."

"I'm the leader of the Reaper Resistance. I can get you two umbrellas."

"Awesome use of power, boss." Said Joker. "So... your email said it was important?"

"My email? I'm here because I got a message from you." Said Austin, puzzled by this.

"The hell? I didn't send anything..."

At that moment an Alliance officer suddenly ran up to them. Dark skin and black hair. She looked in such a hurry that she bumped into a lot of people.

"Major! Excuse me. Sorry. Alliance business. Major, this is urgent!" she said.

"She better not want an autograph." Austin sighed.

"Major Shepard, Staff Analyst Maya Brooks. Alliance Intelligence. There are people trying to kill you." Said the officer.

"Yeah... I think he's aware of that." Said Joker.

"No, I don't mean the Takaal and the Reapers! I mean other people! New people! They're... It's..." said Brooks, trying to get her breath back. "Someone is trying to hack your account. Comm channels, personal records... They're targeting you."

"Big mistake." Said Austin coldly.

"Oh, man! There's the angry face." Joker sighed.

"From the top. Tell me everything, now." Said the Helldiver.

Before Brooks could continue however, several mercs dressed fully in black armour marched right past the line of people and into the restaurant.

"Excuse me! You don't have a reservation!" said the attendant before one of the mercs knocked him aside.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Tonight's performance is brought to you by random acts of violence." Said one of the mercs.

Gunfire erupted and everyone started run and scream as they fled.

"Get down!" said Austin, pushing the table over to give them cover.

"Man, I love show business." Said one of the mercs. "Spread out, boys! Find me Shepard!"
Something about these mercs was very familiar, but with everything going on around him, Austin couldn't fully remember.

"Joker, kick the case to me!" he said as the mercs managed to drag Brooks away, not yet noticing that Austin was hiding behind the table.


"JUST DO IT!" Austin yelled.

Joker simply shrugged and kicked the case over to Austin. As soon as the Helldiver's hand touched it, the case suddenly split into pieces, each one hovering and swarming around Austin as they pieces together to form his armour, cape and all. He didn't have his guns with him, but he had his sword and shield at least. That was better than nothing.

"Joker, find the crew. I'll take care of this." He said.

He risked a quick glance from behind the table only for one of the mercs to spot him.

"There's the Helldiver!" he yelled, also noticing Joker who was in the process of leaving.

Austin quickly grabbed the merc and pulled him behind the table, sinking his omni blade in and taking the merc's pistol.

"You used me as bait?" said Joker in shock.

"Just go, Joker!" Austin yelled, rolling behind another table as the mercs opened fire.

"You used me as bait!" Joker yelled.

"And I'll use you as a shield if you don't shut up!" said Austin forcefully, nearly scaring the pilot.

The mercs it seemed had been unprepared for Austin to be in his armour, so the Helldiver was able to use the element of surprise to his advantage. It didn't take him long to kill the small platoon, but he knew there would be more eventually.

"Major, over here!"

Austin looked to see Brooks lying on the floor, a bullet wound in her stomach and blood pouring from it.

Right as Austin was about to help her however, he suddenly felt the floor collapse as a merc shot at it. Unable to take his weight in such a cracked state, the glass broke completely. Austin fell right through the fish tank and out of the restaurant itself. He was able to grab onto the sign, but it didn't hold for long and he soon found himself falling several feet. Finally with a loud crash, he landed on a walkway, so hard that he felt his air go out of his lungs. He was most lucky that every bone in his body didn't break from that.

"Ow. I'm gonna feel that in the morning." He groaned, slowly getting up.

Without any current radio contact and with little firepower from the pistol he'd taken, Austin had very little options.

He knew however that there was a landing pad nearby in this part of the Citadel though. That would do. If he could get there, he could contact the others.
Of course, the mercs knew he'd survived and were quickly on his tail.

After some time, Austin finally heard his radio crackle into life and a familiar voice greeted his ears.

"Shepard, this is Alaara. Are you alright?" said Alaara.

"I'm fine. But I'm under heavy fire." Austin replied, managing to avoid another shot as the mercs had him pinned down. "Something about these mercs is very familiar."

"We're patching into your video feed. See if we can identify them." Said Dell.

Austin took this moment to run to better cover as the mercs ceased fire to reload.

"Okay. We're getting feed." Said Dell. There was a long pause however when the feed cleared up. "But that's… It can't be! Are those…"

"HELLSPAWN TROOPS?! That's impossible. That organization died out years ago." Said Alaara, just as shocked as Dell was.

Now it all fell into place. Austin had known they were familiar, and now he knew why. But he found it hard believe. Hellspawn?! He was just as shocked and in disbelief as Alaara was. How could they be here?

"Apparently not." He said.

Liara's voice then joined the comm chat.

"Austin, this is Liara. I'm on my way. I should reach you soon."

After managing to fight his way through the markets, Austin finally managed to make it to the landing pad. As he entered in through the door, several Hellspawn troops suddenly flew past him. There in front of him stood Liara. Words alone couldn't express how happy he was to see her right now.

"Having a bad day, husband?" she asked, happy at least that her bond mate was still alive.

"You could say that." Austin replied.

"Landing pad is over there, but it's behind a locked gate." Said Liara.

"We should look for a control panel." Said Austin.

"I liked the outfit you were wearing earlier." Liara smiled, but quickly changed the subject when she felt Austin's puzzled gaze at her. "Errr, control panel. Right."

She then handed Austin all of his folded up weapons.

"You might be needing these too." She added.

"Thanks, love." Said Austin as he strapped them to his back and un-holstered his Revenant.

"I heard you fell through a fish tank." Said Liara.

"We'll talk about it later." Said Austin.

"A shame. I quite liked the restaurant." Said Liara, the teasing now obvious in her voice.
"We'll talk about it later." Austin said again, more sternly this time.

The control panel appeared to be inside an office of some kind, but the door was walked.

"Stand back. This might get messy." Said Austin as he raised his gun.

"One moment." Said Liara as she gently lowered his gun. She then gently tapped on the glass to the office. "Hello? Could you please open the gate?"

Rather surprisingly, it worked and the gates retracted.

"Thank you." Said Liara.

"Please leave!" said a Volus voice from within.

"Hmm, I didn't think of that." Austin shrugged.

"There's an C-sec shuttle." Said Liara.

As the shuttle gently hovered near their position however, Austin couldn't help but think something was wrong. Something didn't feel right.

"Wait a second…"

The shuttle's door then opened to reveal more Hellspawn troops.

Austin quickly pulled Liara out of the way as they took cover from the incoming fire. For a moment, it didn't look like they'd be able to get out of this one, but then…

CRASH!

A large Krogan figure suddenly burst out of the window above them and landed on the shuttle so hard that it crashed onto the pad. At was is this happened Austin suddenly noticed how familiar the Krogan was. It was Wrex!

Wrex then jumped onto the pad and charged into the shuttle, smashing one of the Hellspawn troops against the side. He then head-butted another and punched one more several times before then throwing him out of the shuttle. The one that he'd smashed against the side earlier tried to get up, but the Krogan simply kicked him out.

"Wrex?! What are you doing here?"

"Ah, just butting heads with the Council on Krogan expansion." Wrex replied.

More Hellspawn troops then dropped down from above and everyone reloaded.

"We got a way out of this?" Wrex asked.

"Relax, Wrex. I'm a professional." Said Austin.

"That's not a yes."

"It's not a no."

Another shuttle soon came into view. This time though it was a Hellhound, and Alpha was in it.
"I don't believe it. It's really them." Said Alaara in surprise as they covered Austin, Liar and Wrex as they retreated into the dropship.

"It's Alpha! Take 'em out!" one of the Hellspawn troops yelled.

The troopers immediately opened fire, their rounds impacting and bouncing off the Hellhound's armour. As Wrex finally climbed on board, Ventra quickly sealed the dropship's door and it sped away.

The attack of course hadn't been a quiet event, so naturally all of the Normandy crew knew and they had all gone back to the apartment which as of now served as a safehouse.

"So what exactly is it that we're dealing with?" Tali asked.

"Hellspawn, as much as we wish it wasn't." Austin sighed.

"The Hellspawn? The terrorist organization you fought more than 15 years ago?" Griffin asked in surprise.

"The same." Said Alaara.

"Errr, hate to interrupt, but some of us still don't understand. We've not been in the Helldiver anywhere near as long as you have." Said Joker.

"Well, perhaps I can shed some light on the situation, monsieur." Said a voice.

Everyone looked to a nearby chair from where the voice had come from. A figure suddenly appeared out of nowhere as he de-cloaked. It was a Helldiver. He was sat very leisurely in the chair with a drink in one hand and his helmet removed. He had black hair and a moustache and spoke with a French accent.

His armour design wasn't heavily modified but he did have several cloth pieces hanging off his armour. Most especially at the back around the legs, one on the front and on his right arm. This appearance had earned him the occasional name Wanderer as he had a somewhat drifter look to him.

"Gentlemen. Ladies." He acknowledged.

"You… double crossing, no good, backstabbing scumbag!" said Austin, marching right up to the figure. "You've got a lot of guts showing your face here, after what you pulled."

The Helldiver was left incredibly confused by this and indicated to himself in a questioning manner.

Austin the suddenly seized the Helldiver and pulled him out of the chair. For a moment, everyone thought the Major was going to give him a beating, but to everyone's surprise he suddenly hugged the Helldiver.

"Relax, Troy. I'm just messing with ya!" Austin laughed.

"You haven't changed." Said the Helldiver.

"So, you played dead again?" Austin asked as he released the Helldiver.

"I had too."

"Normally we would be furious with you… but it's damn good to see you." Austin smiled.
"Same, mon ami."

"Everyone, this is Troy Benning, a very old friend of Alpha's." said Austin, introducing the Helldiver to everyone.

"The master of disguise. I've heard many stories." Said Griffin.

Troy then noticed Hawk among the gang.

"Hawk. Good to see that you're alive. I feared that shot had killed you." He said.

"Wasn't without some loss." Said Hawk. "I lost an eye."

"Well, you look good." Said Troy.

"Not that I'm complaining, but what are you doing here?" Austin asked.

"Hellspawn resurfacing left me with little choice. I'd hoped to warn you, but I was too late. I guess we're just fortunate Miss Alliance here succeeded." Troy replied, indicating to Brooks in a rather uncaring manner.

"Miss Alliance has a name you know." Said Brooks crossly, but Troy ignored her.

"But why? More to the point, how can Hellspawn still exist?" Austin asked.

"I don't know, and that's what worries me." Said Troy.

"Excuse me, but can somebody tell us who the hell Hellspawn is?" said Wrex.

"Start from the beginning." Said Austin.

"Well, if they're going to know the whole story, they need to know about… him." Said Troy.

"Him?" Joker asked.


"Our arch enemy." Said Dash dramatically. He noticed everyone giving him a strange look though. "What? He was our arch enemy."

Some of the non human crew of the Normandy gave worried looks at each other and murmured slightly. Even Ashley and James looked concerned by the mention.

"Rings a bell, I'm guessing?" Austin asked.

"All of Citadel space knows the stories of the Commander. Even the Terminus systems know about him." Said Garrus.

"Even as far as the Migrant Fleet, we've heard of him. His cruelty knew no bounds." Said Tali.

"That's a mild understatement." Hawk groaned.

Miranda looked at Hawk's expression with concern. It almost looked as though he was remembering a painful memory.

"Hawk?"
"The Commander's the reason that happened, Miranda." Said Austin, indicating to the same eye that Hawk had lost. "He's the one who took Hawk's eye."

"Is that even possible? A non Helldiver doing that to a Helldiver?" James asked.

"Ah, but that's where the Alliance is wrong, James." Said Austin. He then activated his omni tool and a projection of the Commander appeared on the table. To both Ashely and James' shock and horror… it was a Helldiver!

"Holy Shit! You mean to tell me that Hellspawn was formed and led by one of your own?!" James asked.

"Indeed. The first and only Helldiver to ever betray the Arkanes." Said Austin.

"But why?" Ashley asked.

"It's a long story." Said Troy.

"One that they deserve to know." Said Austin.

"Alright, but I'll warn you right now, this isn't a story for the faint of heart."

Troy then cleared his throat, and began.

"The Commander's real name was Bounty Rodriguez. Many years ago, a Batarian slave party stumbled upon a human colony. One of the Batarians raped a human woman… and he unintentionally impregnated her. Despite the dangers to the child from cross species DNA outside of an Asari union, the mother could not find it in her heart to abort the child. At first, all appeared well and she had a very healthy human child. Over time however, things began to change. Though the boy was healthy and very smart, she could tell there was something wrong about him. He never cried and showed very little emotion. Dog's would always bark at him, before then fleeing in fear of the child's willingness to kill them if they didn't shut up. He never even said the phrase "I love you" towards her and would sometimes disappear for days before suddenly reappearing again. It was when Rodriguez was ten however that the damage truly began to show. While playing with many of the other children on the colony, a Turian child attempted to bully him. Bounty however turned the tables on the Turian and broke his spine. No one else had seen what happened, and since the Turian was left traumatized by the event it was assumed that he fell from a climbing frame. Bounty's mother however became suspicious when her son showed no emotion or concern to the Turian's accident. She was even more shocked when he said that he deserved it for being where he didn't belong. From that day, Bounty's hatred for anything not human began to show. He refused to make friends with any of the aliens living on the colony with him and often got into fights if ever one of them insulted or dared to try and pick on him. When Bounty had just turned 13 however, that was when things truly changed forever. The colony was invaded again by Batarian salvers, including Bounty's father. Recognizing the woman, the Batarian bragged about their last time together, not knowing that the son he had unintentionally fathered was nearby. Disgusted and infuriated to learn of his true parentage, Bounty burst into the room and snatched his father's gun from him. He then shot the Batarian in both legs and arms and made him suffer from blood loss before finally smashing his father's head in. Bounty expected that his mother would simply thank him for saving her, but he was wrong. She had seen how he enjoyed the torture and she could now truly see the monster she had once thought was her son. Frightened and angry, she attempted to kill him. The boy however stopped her. In defence, he cut his mother's arm off and then crushed her legs with a large pillar… which was on fire. He simply watched as his mother was burned alive, finding enjoyment in her screams. Just before she succumbed, he told her how much he hated her for not telling him what he
was and that he would have rather died than live knowing he was the son of an alien, something he was disgusted by. However, Bounty no longer desired to end his own life. He had finally found something he enjoyed in life. His hatred for aliens also manifested as a desire that humanity had never come in contact with other races in the first place. When the other Batarians arrived and saw the dead body of their leader, they prepared to kill the child. Once again however, Bounty turned the tables and killed them all, letting them all suffer by his hand and dying slow painful deaths. The rest of the remaining colonists witnessed this. While at first glad to see the salver's dead, they saw how much Bounty had enjoyed making them suffer. Leaving no witnesses, Bounty wiped out the colonists, giving only the human ones quick and painless deaths. The aliens, he tortured for days, finding new ways to prolong their suffering. When a Helldiver team finally arrived and saw Bounty as the only living one left, they believed he was the only survivor and that the Batarians had somehow turned on each other for an unknown reason. They later offered him a home on Arkadia and a chance to join the Helldivers when he was old enough. He accepted, and when he finally came of age he became a Helldiver, and was trained by Zartrack.

"Traumatized child turned into an inhuman monster. This sounds more like a legend than a story." Said Wrex.

"If it were, what would be the point in telling it to you?" Troy asked.

"Why'd he even join in the first place? He must've known the Helldivers were a multi species program." Jacob asked.

"No one knows. Even he himself didn't know. I guess it is just one of the universe's great mysteries." Austin shrugged. "Anyway. Troy, continue."

"As a Helldiver, Bounty buried his hatred for aliens deep down, although he insisted on being in a human only squad and never worked with aliens. Even Zartrack could tell there was something about his favourite student that wasn't right."

"I thought Shepard was his favourite?" Liara asked.

"This was before I even joined the Alliance, Liara." Austin explained. "Zartrack's had plenty of other favourites before me."

"Despite the monster he was, he became a very successful Helldiver. After many years, he eventually formed a spy network that helped the Helldiver acquire huge amounts of intel on the enemy that helped a great deal. However, in order to keep it going, it required funding and that was something Bounty did not have enough of at the rates he was receiving, and he refused to inform the Arkanes of the network for fear of compromising it altogether since only he knew about it."

"Let me guess. He used many illegal methods?" Garrus asked.

"That's one way of looking at it. He began stealing highly sensitive information from allied races and sold them to the highest bidder to keep the network funded. Eventually however, the Arkanes and Zartrack found out. Bounty attempted to escape, but Zartrack shot down the shuttle he was escaping on. He survived, but at a terrible cost. During the crash, his helmet became dislodged from his armour… and his face ended up in the fires."

"Ouch! That must've hurt." Said James.

"Beyond belief. His entire face was burned and disfigured by the fire and he suffered life threatening lung injuries, especially to his lungs due to breathing in the almost volcanic like air from the fires. Somehow though he survived, at the cost of having to be forced to rely on his suit to survive."
Because only he had known about the spy network, the Arkanes hadn't been able to do anything. For the next 15 years, Bounty went into hiding and slowly reformed the spy network until it ceased to be a spy network altogether… and had become what it is today. He had only one thing on his mind from that day forward, revenge. Revenge against his own mentor who had unintentionally disfigured him, and the Helldivers themselves as he saw them as a blight upon the galaxy. When that happened, Rodriguez christened the organization Hellspawn, and on that same day, chose for himself the name Commander.

"You were right. He makes the Illusive Man look sane in comparison." Said Miranda.

"He was our arch enemy for good reason." Said Sandra.

"You say that as if he isn't anymore." Said Kasumi.

"Because he's dead. I was there when it happened, I watched him die. There's no way he can still be alive, or behind this for that matter." Said Austin.

"How did he die?" Griffin asked. "Even on Arkadia there's a lot of scepticism of what happened to him. Official records say he was killed at the battle of Faranhell, but some rumors claim he escaped."

"Many years ago, he forged a sword called Dark Excalibur. He made it using some strange tech he found. He called it dark biotics and it practically gave him biotic abilities without the use of an implant." Austin explained.

"I give you Helldivers credit, you certainly have some of the craziest enemies." Said Wrex.

"Anyway, Griffin is correct. He did escape the battle of Faranhell, and Alpha and I followed him back to Hellspawn's fortress. There we fought him ourselves one final time. During our final battle Kraan fired a rocket at his sword which impacted and caused the weapon to become unstable. Finally, we managed to pin him in place and impaled him with the sword. His physical body was destroyed leaving his armour nothing but an empty shell." Said Austin.

"Well, that obviously hasn't stopped Hellspawn. Somehow they're alive and kicking, even if they don't have their old leader." Said Dash.

"First thing we need to do is find out how they're getting what they need. Without the Commander they'll have lost many of the connections they once had. They'll need to have allied with a weapons supplier to provide them with guns, and various other ways so that they can stay hidden. We find a link, we find out who's in charge." Said Troy.

"I managed to get this pistol off one of them." Said Austin.

Xun took it in her hands and examined it.

"Hmm, if my intel is correct, this comes from a casino owner named Elijah Khan. He's been suspected of using his profits to smuggle weapons onto the Citadel." She said. "Immediately after the attempt on Austin's life, Khan made an interesting call."

"I'm cutting you off! I'm returning your down payment now!" said Kahn's voice in the message

"What's the problem this time?" said a deeper and unknown voice.

"Turn on a vidscreen! When I sell a gun, I don't it showing up on the nightly news." Said Khan.

"It will not be linked to me." said the voice.
"Save it. Our association is terminated." Said Khan. "And if you even think about coming after me, I've got info on you ready for prime time, so you ponder that."

"If you truly knew who I was, you wouldn't be so quick to threaten me. Be warned. I do not stand for anyone daring to insult me and I never make threats unless I am serious. Back out, and the consequences will be severe." The voice warned.

"I won't give you my weapons when there's a risk they'll compromise me. This conversation is over. Khan out."

"So that's our identity thief." Said Troy.

"Looks like he's got an ID disguiser. Those things are a pain in the ass to get around." Said Garrus.

"Whoever that voice was, Kahn's nervous, and possibly foolish, enough to cut them loose. We can squeeze Kahn until a contact drops out." Said Austin.

"Easier said than done. He has a panic room inside the casino. A good place to hole up. EDI can give us programs to hack the door, but the cameras and guards complicate things." Said Liara.

"Yeah. We can't risk spooking him. We go in quiet. Small team. No gunplay." Said Austin.

"Mistress Xun, this evening the casino will be hosting a charity event to assist war refugees." Said Glyph, his dragon form slithering over the table.

"Purchase some tickets, Glyph, then call up a layout of the building." Said Xun.

"Score. So how close can you get? You don't usually put a back door in a panic room." Joker asked.

"This air shaft bypasses the security gate and ends up in storage. From there, the panic rooms door-camera can be disabled." Leena explained, pointing to the point on the plans.

"Still, we're talking about a casino. There's got to be alarms in that shaft." Said Ashley.

"I believe I have some countermeasures that may help. I'll know more once we're inside." Said Liara.

"Who will go in the shaft? They need to be small in size." Javik asked.

"Yeah, that's not me. Too many snacks of roast Varren leg." Said Wrex.

For a moment, Urz gave a slight whine.

"Don't worry, Urz." Said Austin, patting his Varren on the head.

Everyone's head then turned to Tali.

"I suspect my suit's built-in tech would be picked up by security sensors." Said the Quarian.

Then EDI.

"My presence in the casino would arouse suspicion. Mechs are not allowed since they can have cheating software."

"What you need is somebody trained in zero-emissions tech. No electronics, no metal that can be detected. Just undetectable polymers." Said Brooks.
She was about to volunteer but Troy spoke before she even got a chance.

"Well, you've got the right man. I've infiltrated more than a hundred bases in my line of work. And…" his form suddenly cloaked and a completely lifelike image of a woman in a party dress was projected over him. Even his voice changed. "I can infiltrate ranks."

"Wow. Where can I get one of those?" said Kasumi.

"I was referring to me." Said Brooks.

"This isn't a field trip, Miss Alliance. Like I'm going to let an Alliance stranger do my job for me." Said Troy.


Austin, getting rather annoyed also by Brooks felt it best to settle this. Given the choice between the two, he knew who to pick without a second guess.

"That's enough, Brooks! You always second guess your superiors?" he said sternly.

"Sir, no sir!" said Brooks, forced to cease her argument.

"Then it's settled. Troy, Liara and I will go into the casino." Said Austin.

"One last hurdle then to get inside." Said Liara.

"What's that?" Austin asked.

"Black tie required."

It felt strange to be on the red carpet of something with other people standing behind the rails. Austin of course had worn the same outfit that Kasumi had given to him 2 years ago during her heist. Liara meanwhile was dressed in a very nice white dress. White always did seem to go well with her blue skin.

"Major, keep dressing like this and you'll have to catch me when I swoon." She said, unable to resist admiring her husband's outfit.

Austin put his arm out and Liara linked hers with him as they proceeded into the casino with Troy in tow, still in his disguise, but now with dark tanned skin so that he would be slightly less noticeable. He played his act well, but wasn't fond of when other men tried to hit on him whenever he disguised himself as a female.

"I'll do more than catch you, love." He said suggestively, causing Liara to almost blush.

"Are you two…" Troy asked.

"We're married." Liara replied.

"Oh. Well congratulations. I'm sorry I missed the wedding." Said Troy.

"I'm more surprised you didn't already know that." Said Austin.

"Information and news can be a bit sparse when you're out in the field so much." Said Troy. "Right. I'll head to the shaft."
In the meantime, Austin and Liara simply mingled with the crowd. They even tired to actually enjoy themselves for real.

"Shepard, I'm upstairs by the grate leading to the shaft. But there's a problem. Can you meet me?" Troy asked.

Both Liara and Austin joined the spy at the top of the stairs just in front of the grate.

"Okay. Just like we thought. There's an alarm on the grate." Said Troy.

"We'll have to bypass it." Said Austin.

"Here, take this. It's a resonance emitter lens. It should let you see security grids and wiring." Said Troy, handing the device to Austin.

"Good. I'll follow the wiring to a junction box, splice it, and disable the alarm." Austin nodded.

"Yeah, fingers crossed!"

"Okay. Follow the blue wiring." Said Liara. "In case it needs to be said, don't try to bypass a camera while you're being watched."

Austin quickly found the box. While Liara temporarily put a looped image onto the camera, Austin spliced in and disabled the grate's alarm.

"Good. I've got the grate open, and… in we go! Try to blend in. I'll keep you posted." Said Troy.

With time to pass, Austin looked around for something for him and Liara to do to pass the time. He then looked over at the dance floor. He gave Liara a suggestive look.

"Fancy a dance, Liara?" he asked.

"I thought you'd never ask." Liara smiled.

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After some time of enjoying the dancing, Austin and Liara's fun was eventually interrupted by Troy over the radio.

"Shepard!"

"What is it?"

"There's a guard right below me." Said Troy.

"Don't panic. I'll get his attention." Said Austin.

They quickly made their way over to the guard Troy had mentioned and Austin started a conversation.

"Excuse me. I think I saw someone doing drugs in the men's room." He said.

"I see. Were you able to identify the substance used?" the guard asked.

"Red sand." Austin replied.

"Dispatch, we've got a sand-tripper in the bathrooms." Said the guard into his comm.
"Have they tried to compromise the games biotically?"

"Unknown at this time. Moving to confront, send backup." Said the guard. "We're taking care of it, sir. Appreciate the help."

The guard walked off.

"You're clear, Troy." Said Austin.

"Merci, Shepard. I'll see if I can get to the panic room." Said Troy.

"Kahn, you and I are going to have a talk." Said Austin.

As the chair turned however, it could now be seen that Khan wasn't moving at all. He was dead.

"What the hell?"

"I see this conversation will be strictly one-sided." Said Liara.

"There's a deletion order on the terminal." Said Troy.

"Damn it!"

"Everything's been wiped. I don't know if it was him, or the killer." Said Troy. Austin however worked on looking through the terminal. "What are you looking for?"

"Mistakes." Austin replied. "Thought so. Whoever it was had to do this fast. They wiped the terminal, but not the comm."

"Good. We can take the comm back to safe house and scan it." Said Austin.

Suddenly, the holo screen behind them lit up. The image was all distorted, obscuring the person's face completely. But the voice was recognized as the identity thief from before.

"Elijah. Come crawling back?" he said.

"Guess again?" said Austin.

"You! I see you've survived from flopping on the floor like a fish." Said the figure.

"Name a time and a place. Or you could hide behind voice disguises for the rest of your life." Said Austin.

"You're trying to rattle me so I slip up." Said the figure. "You have nothing. All you can do is wait from the hammer to fall."

"Bring a bigger hammer. Your last try was pathetic." Said Austin.

"I am going to make you suffer, Shepard. Everything you have and are will be mine. My revenge against you and your kind will be complete."

The call then ended abruptly.

"Damn! Not enough to trace the call." Troy cursed.

"We're not finished. Pull out the data drives."
Back at the safehouse, they were at least relieved to be back. Though most of that had been tense, it had been fun.

"That was fun. Well, not so much for the host." Said Liara.

"It wasn't a total loss. Troy, work with EDI to see if there's anything useful on those drives." Said Austin.

"I'll let you know what we find." Said Troy. "Before we do, may I have a quick word… in private."

"Sure."

They walked to the most secluded place in the apartment and made sure no one had followed them or was listening in.

"Is this about Brooks?" Austin asked.

"I don't trust her." Said Troy. "There's something about her that doesn't feel right."

"To be fair though, if she was a traitor, why warn me of the attack?" Austin asked.

"Sometimes it helps to make the people trust you instantly when you're a double agent. Trust me, I know." Said Troy.

"Well we don't have any proof at the moment, so for now we shouldn't start pointing fingers." Said Austin. "That doesn't mean I trust her though. I looked her up in the Alliance records, until a year ago, she didn't exist. Either she's risen up in the ranks very quickly, or…"

"Fake ID?"

"Maybe." Said Austin. "But we don't know anything yet. If we start fighting amongst ourselves, we'll only spell our own doom. But we'll keep an eye on her nonetheless."

"Anyway, let's get back to work." Said Troy.

"I think we've got something, Major." Said Brooks. She noticed Troy however giving her a look.

"What? I'm not allowed to help?"

"Anyway, we've analysed those drives. I think we found something." Said Troy.

"Let's hear it." Said Austin.

"Though the data's root structure was erased, the logic integrity remains visible." Said EDI.

"EDI has an incredible talent for this stuff. I know she's an AI, but even still…" said Brooks.

"Back to the point." Troy interrupted. "We found an encrypted communication from a few days ago…"

"Hellspawn definitely bought a lot of guns. Like, big ones." Said Brooks

"Are you going to keep interrupting me?" Troy asked, somewhat irritated now.

"Sorry."
"You better be." Troy mumbled. "Anyway, yes. As Miss Alliance just said, Hellspawn's got an awful lot of firepower."

The holo table lit up to show an Atlas mech.

"Mechs too? What do they need with that kind of firepower?" Ashley asked.

"Well, have you seen how tough we all are?" said Dash.

"Mistress Xun, something has come up." Said Glyph.

"Let's hear it."

"The Citadel Archives have just gone into emergency lockdown. Whoever's hacking the Major's records is there right now!"

"What do we know about the place?" Austin asked.

"Council keeps sensitive historical information there. Real hush-hush. Even my old C-sec clearance never got me in." said Garrus.

"Then we'll find our own way in."

"These archives are huge. Almost as big as the ones on Arkadia. You'll have plenty of ground cover. But I don't know if we can bring everyone." Said Troy.

"And who says we can't?" Austin asked, his mouth curling into a confident smile. "All hands on deck for this one."

"Hell yeah, but uh, who gets to take point with you?" James asked.

"Pretty obvious, don't you think?" Austin asked rhetorically, looking around at Alpha.

"Just like the good old days." Troy smiled, seeing where this was going.

"Ha ha. The old band's back together again." Dash cheered.

"What's the best way into the archives?" Austin asked.

"The facility is located below the wards." Xun replied.

"Maybe a direct breach for maximum surprise?" Brooks suggested.

"Not a bad idea actually." Said Austin.

"Huh, you're not so annoying after all." Said Troy.

"Don't hang out with us too long though or you'll start making friends with Asari." Said Wrex.

"I heard that." Said Liara as the cars landed.

"The archives are somewhere below us. It could be tricky to get in there." Said Troy.

"Tricky is our middle name." said Dash. Everyone though gave him a look saying "Not really a good time for that saying." "What?"
"I think the better thing to say is it's our specialty." Said Griffin.


"Whatever." Alaara sighed.

"That still doesn't change the difficulty we face." Said Sandra.

"It does now that you've got me." Said Griffin, holding up a charged.

The charge blasted a hole in the floor and Wrex and the other hopped down.

"Krogan first! See you at the party, princesses!" he said.

While Austin and Alpha took to the ground, everyone else was on high.

As they proceeded into the first room however, they quickly saw several red sniper dots appearing on them.

"Not this again…" Austin sighed.

"Ambush!"

"Scatter and take cover!" Austin yelled as everyone sidled into cover to avoid Hellspawn's fire.

"Wooo! Just like old times." Said Dash, letting his pistols loose.

"I almost missed these guys." Said Kraan.

"Try to stay focused, people." Said Austin.

"Shepard's brought everyone!" said one of the troops

"Surround them!"

Suddenly, several figures suddenly appeared out of the darkness. Machines.

These were not mechs though, they were something entirely different. They stood at a towering height making them almost taller than a Helldiver and were clad in torn red robes. They had no faces, instead they had some sort of large disc as a head, supported on mechanical arms attached the neck. In their hands, they wielded staffs very similar to the ones that EDI's clones had used.

The look and design was certainly odd, but it was because of this that it somehow gave them a creepy and intimidating look.

The machines surrounded them, all of their staffs pointing at them, ready to strike.

"That's not possible." Said Austin.

"What do you mean?" Liara asked.

"These are the Commander's elite guard. They stopped functioning when he died." Said Alaara, sounding just as worried.

"You are defeated and alone!" said one of the bodyguards as they all readied for a strike.

"Stop!" said a voice.
The guards obeyed and halted their attempted attack and resumed their warning stand, keeping their staff's simply trained on Alpha.

On the top level, Brooks suddenly appeared. She was struggling against the grip of a cloaked figure who had a gun pointed at her head.

Another figure then appeared out the shadows joined by several more Hellspawn troops. This one was enormous. Clearly human, but was almost as big as a Krogan, even without that massive bulging muscles.

He wore mostly just a tight fitting shirt with traditional body armour and a plain expressionless black mask that hid his entire face. Alpha recognized this one immediately. Hades, Hellspawn's second in command.

"Hades. Should've known you'd be behind this." Said Austin.

"He is but a loyal follower, Shepard." Said the cloaked figure, the voice being exactly the same as it had been in the messages. "Surrender, or your friend will be joining Khan."

Everyone very reluctantly stood down. The figure then released Brooks and threw her off the edge to the ground.

"I don't know how you managed to get control of Hellspawn, but whatever your planning it will fail. When the Helldivers find out about you, they'll hunt you down. There'll be nowhere for you to hide." Said Austin.

The figure remained silent for a moment. He then activated his omni tool as he spoke.

"Hide? Why would I hide? After all, Alpha Squad…"

Then his voice changed.

"…who'd know me better than you?"

The voice had now changed to an extremely deep and growling voice. Everyone completely froze. Even the non-Helldivers became unnerved by this new voice. Alpha Squad on the other hand seemed completely petrified. That voice… a voice they had not heard for more than 7 years and had hoped to never hear again.

The figure's cloak then deactivated, revealing his true form.

"Oh my god!"

Sure enough, there in front of them stood another Helldiver, and not just any Helldiver. None other than The Commander, Alpha Squad's arch enemy. There was no trickery of the eyes, this really was him.

The Commander had a very distinctive appearance for a Helldiver. True he wore the traditional Helldiver armour, but that was it.

He wore a black sleeveless long coat over his armour and a tight fitting black hood covered most of his helmet. His optic eyes glowed a dark and evil red compared to the others which didn't really have any colours in their optics, and he seemed to have a very deep breathing that sounded almost like the suit was breathing for him. He also carried 4 sub machine guns, two holstered into the strap across his chest, and the other two strapped to his thighs. All Helldivers knew to fear these guns. Even
though all Helldivers had armour that could resist traditional rounds, The Commander, being very smart and intelligent, had modified his guns to be strong and deadly to break through a Helldiver's armour. That and he knew every chink and weak points that all Helldivers. Strapped next to each gun was an option silencer that be attached and removed should the Commander ever need to silence or de-silence his weapons. A large sword the same size as Excalibur was also worn on his side, the blade's end sticking out of a second gap that had been made in is coat. He also stood at over 7 feet. Even for a Helldiver, that was quite a tall height. He was a metre shorter than Hades, who stood at 3 metres.

"It can't be." Said Austin almost lost for words as he and the others gazed upon the leader of Hellspawn.

"It has been far too long, my old enemy. We meet again at last." Said the Commander.

The Helldiver traitor then jumped down onto the ground level, his weight denting the floor.

"What's the matter, Alpha? You look like you've seen a ghost." He said mockingly.

"How the hell are you still alive, Rodriguez?!!" said Austin.

"It's Commander to you!" said Hades defensively.

"Stand down, Hades. I'll take it from here." The Commander ordered.

The muscled giant obeyed and stepped back, allowing the Commander to walk right up close to Austin. He was so close now that everyone could hear the loud breathing of his suit as it cycled air out of his damaged and almost dead lungs.

"You've made it this far. I suppose you've earned the right to know." He said, his deep terrifying voice causing everyone to shiver as it echoed through the halls.

"This is impossible. You died when your sword destroyed your body, we saw it happen!" said Austin.

"True my physical form was destroyed, but my mind was somehow preserved inside the sword. It was simply a matter of finding a new vessel to contain it." Said the Commander, patting the handle of Dark Excalibur as he talked.

There was silence as the Hellspawn leader left everyone to figure it out. Then it hit them.

"You cloned yourself, didn't you?" said Alaara.

"More my scientists cloned me, but yes. This body is a clone of my original." Said the Commander. "My mind however, completely un-tampered."

"Then why still wear your suit? You only still wore that because you couldn't survive without it." Austin asked.

"This suit does still have its uses. But sadly my clone body is not perfect. The DNA transfer eventually began to revert my form to it's original self. A few months after my… resurrection, my lungs started to suffer from infection, the skin on my face rotted away and so my eyes were lost with them. Still, even a body like this is preferable to being dead." Said the Commander temporarily turning his back to everyone before turning back to Austin again. "You of all people should know this."
"If you've been alive this long, then you know what's at stake here. There are bigger things happening out there than you and us." Said Austin.

"The Reapers matter not to me. In fact, nothing matters now… but my revenge on you, and the rest of your diseased kind, human and alien alike." Said the Commander. There was no hesitation whatsoever in his tone. He truly meant it.

"Why do this? The Helldivers seek to help the galaxy and keep the peace." Said Liara.

"The Helldivers are a corrupt disease to be purged!" said the Commander. "Unity. Only a fool would believe that humans and aliens could get along. Humanity is all there is, all there'll ever be. You aliens are nothing but filth, trying to find a place in a galaxy you don't belong. This galaxy is infected. I will cleanse it."

"And you're the one to do that? You, a deranged psychopath?" Said Austin defensively.

"You're… pure evil." Said Liara, almost disgusted by what she'd heard The Commander say. Hearing that from anyone was one thing, but to hear this from a Helldiver was something else entirely, even if the Commander wasn't truly a Helldiver anymore.

"I'm necessary evil." Said the Commander.

"You won't win. Even if you kill us, you'll still have to deal with the entire resistance." Said Austin.

"That won't be a problem. Once I have what I came for, my revenge will be complete and I can die knowing that I will have doomed all the Helldivers to the fiery pits of hell." Said the Commander. "Besides, I have no intention of waging a war with your pitiful little army anyway."

The Hellspawn leader then turned his back to them and left for the door, his bodyguards and Hades following. Only some of the Hellspawn troops remained.

"Execute them. The story of Alpha Squad ends here." He said.

Quickly trying to think of a way out of this, Austin looked around for something. He then spotted the large model of the Citadel hanging above them, and he still had his plasma cannon.

Quickly activating the cannon he aimed at the model's strings and fired. The model fell and crashed into the troopers very hard. Alpha quickly used the distraction and snatched their weapons back up before then taking cover again as Hellspawn resumed their attack.

"We still got everyone?" Austin asked.

"Looks like it." Alaara replied.

"Where's the rest of the crew?"

"Other side."

"Having a little party up here! With bullets!" said Ashley.

"These primitives will make good sport!" said Javik.

"Terminating hostiles!" said EDI.

Quickly outnumbered by the small army of Helldivers, the Hellspawn troops were quickly overwhelmed
"We're clear. Now where'd the Commander go?" said Ventra.

"He's pushing into the archives. Stay in your groups!" said Austin. "And stay alert! He's killed more than a hundred Helldivers in his time, he'll wipe the floor with you if you're not careful."

"Huh, big place." Said Kraan as they entered the archives.

"What do you think the Commander is looking for in here?" Tali asked.

"At this point, anything's possible." Austin replied.

"How are we going to find anything in this place?" said Liara.

"Glyph?"

The VI quickly appeared and followed them.

"Yes, Major?"

"Track the target. Give me updates on their location." Said Austin.

"What is the nature of the target?" Glyph asked.

"Rouge Helldiver. Deformed face, accompanied by elite guard, wearing a log coat." Said Austin.

"Of course, Major."

"There they are! Alpha's still alive!" said more Hellspawn soldier.

"Take them down! I need more time to find the vault!" said the Commander through the radio.

"Major, the Commander is searching for something 200 metres ahead." Said Glyph.

"Got it." Said Austin.

"Dagger squad! I need more time to reach the vault!" said the Commander. "Keep Alpha back or I'll have your head! I don't care how many you lose!"

"Sheaprd, we're pinned down! We need your help!" said Garrus.

"We're on our way!" said Austin.

The squad quickly hurried to the others and provided cover fire while the non-Helldivers retreated to higher ground up the ladder.

"Go! We'll cover you!" said Austin. "Move!"

"That's cheating! We're on a ladder!" said Liara as Austin covered her.

As soon as the last one made it up, everyone opened fire in union, taking down every single Hellspawn trooper that got in their way.

"Wow! Great job, everyone." Said Austin, slightly surprised at the spectacle he'd just seen.

"That's why I love hanging out with you guys! Why shoot something once when you can shoot 46 more times?" said Wrex.
"The Commander can't be far. Keep up the pressure, and we'll try to surround him. Let's move."

Fighting their way through even more Hellspawn troops and even a mech, it did look as though they were catching up. As they were about to pass through one of the Iridium vaults though, a crackling signal from Troy could suddenly be heard over the radio.

"Shepard… Commander's… Can't maintain signal!"

"Troy? Troy!"

Alpha upped their pace. The second all of them were inside the vault however, it's shield suddenly engaged, trapping them inside.

"That can't be good." Said Alaara.

"Anyone? The vault sealed us in." Austin said into his comm.

"Is there an override?" Liara asked.

"None that I can see." Said Leena.

"At every turn, you demonstrate the necessity for your extermination." Said the Commander, suddenly de-cloaking on the other side of the shield.

"Cortez? Anyone on this frequency?" said Austin, trying to reach anyone.

"The short answer is no. They're not." Said the Commander. "The longer answer involves your friends trapped in iridium vaults and forgotten for… well, forever."

"Others know about this. About you. The Alliance and the Helldiver will stop you." Said Austin.

"What do you think Staff Admiral Brooks? Will the Alliance stop us?" The Commander asked.

To everyone's surprise, Brooks then suddenly appeared from behind the Commander. She wasn't bound or anything.

"I wouldn't know. I don't actually work for them." She said.

She was about to put her arm smugly on the Commander's shoulder, but he grabbed it before she could.

"Touch me and I'll blow your head off." He said warningly.

"The minute… The second I get out of here, I'm going to take your head and mount it in the Normandy CIC, you fucking traitor!" said Austin angrily. "Then I'm going to mount his head next to yours! Then I'm going to take both your heads and space them out the airlock!"

"We'll help!" said Liara.

"You've certainly gotten better at sounding scarier, Shepard. I'll give you that much." The Commander laughed, unfazed by Austin's threat.

Brooks however looked slightly frightened by this. The Commander noticed this and suddenly hit her very hard and she fell to the floor, clutching her bruised cheek.
"Find your courage or I will have no further use for you! You understand?!" he almost yelled abusively.

Brooks almost looked terrified by this, but quickly nodded.

The door on the far side then opened and Hades marched in with Troy in his hand

"Oh, and I almost forgot. I should also thank you for bringing Troy out of hiding. He has just what I need." Said the Commander.

Hades threw the bound spy to the floor and the Commander pulled him onto his knees.

"If you would…” he said.

Brooks activated her omni tool and tore a device off of Troy's armour. She then threw Troy at the shield. Since it allowed entry from the outside, Troy passed right through it.

"You knew Troy was still alive, you only needed a way to trap him." Said Austin as he helped the spy up.

"And you've done a marvellous job helping me achieve that goal." Said the Commander as he fitted the device to his own suit. "Sadly it's time for me to eliminate loose ends."

To everyone's surprise, the Commander then used the device to change his appearance into none other than Austin himself.

"So this was your plan all along. Steal my identity." Said Austin bitterly.

"Oh, I'm doing more than that, Shepard. I'll be taking your fancy new ship too." Said the Commander.

He then walked up to the control panel and worked on accessing.

"What are you doing?" Austin asked.

"Setting things right. If I'm to get proper access to your ship, it needs to recognize me as you." Said the Commander. "Computer update record. Subject, Shepard."

"Accessing record. Please input new data."

The Commander inputted the new data and it scanned in.

"Data updated. Good day, Major Shepard."

"Now, if you'll excuse me, my new ship is waiting." Said the Commander.

The Hellspawn leader hauled Brooks forcefully to her feet and they all disappeared, leaving just the team stuck in the shield.

"I almost feel sorry for that woman for throwing her lot in with the Commander." Said Troy.

The vault they were trapped in then moved and sealed itself.

"How do we get out of here?" Griffin asked.

Austin wasn't too worried about this. He and Alpha had been stuck in far worse situations.
With everyone free, they hurried out of the vaults. If they hurried they could hopefully intercept the Commander before he reached the Normandy. A Hellhound then flew down with Joker driving.

"I've got room for Shepard and Alpha and one other. And figure it out fast because another Shepard is stealing my ship!" he said.

Austin, Alpha, Wrex and Sarah all got in. Austin noticed however that everyone else looked bit disappointed by this.

"What?"

"I wanted to come too." Said Ashley.

"As did I. Fifty thousand years later, and I rarely get picked." Said Javik.

"We'll be back for you. I promise."

"This is why I hate shore leave. I swear, you park the ship for five minutes…" Joker sighed.

"Can you contact Citadel flight control and get them to deny the departure request?" said Austin.

"Tried. All the comm lines in the area are jammed… probably easier for them to steal my ship." Said Joker.

"We'll stop them."

EDI's voice then came over the intercom.

"Shepard, this is EDI. The Commander has entered the ship and is attempting to…"

Everything suddenly went static and there was only silence.

"EDI?"

"I'm okay!" EDI suddenly replied. Everyone was momentarily confused by this, especially because of the way EDI had sounded when she said that. "The Commander has disabled my control of the Normandy as well as all sensory input. I cannot lock him out or counteract his commands. I now have an increased desire for you to kill the Commander."

"Get in line." Said Austin.

"Well, whatever you do, hurry. If the Normandy gets to FTL, we may never see her again." Said Joker.

"That's not going to happen."

Soon they were close enough to be dropped enough and Joker landed.

"Okay, Citadel systems are targeting the dropship. Any closer and they open fire.

"Get back and pick up the others. ASAP." Said Austin.
"Troops ahead!" said Alaara.

The Hellspawn troopers immediately opened fire.

"They're going for the ship!"

"I thought they were supposed to be dead."

The second they rounded the corner, the door to the Normandy sealed itself. Outside, there was a familiar face lying against the wall. Sarah immediately ran up to the woman.

"Samantha!"

Traynor groaned for a moment before she opened her eyes. She had an awful lot of bruises on her face and a black eye.

"Sarah?"

Sarah immediately pulled Traynor into a kiss and then helped her love up.

"Who did this?" she asked, almost furious that someone would dare do this to her Samantha.

"A Helldiver. I thought he was your brother." Traynor replied as Sarah worked on applying some medi-gel to her bruises. It helped reduce most of the swelling rather quickly.

"Are you alright?" Austin asked.

"A few scrapes and bruises. I'll live." Said Traynor. "What's going on here? They tried to kick me off the ship. Barely left me any time to grab my toothbrush."

"How did you know it wasn't me?" Austin asked, quite surprised that Traynor made it sound like she'd known from the start.

"I know you can't dismiss me without a proper disciplinary hearing. Also, he didn't act like you at all, and also his disguise fell when he got physical." Said Traynor.

"Hang on, all the things you could've grabbed, and you grabbed your toothbrush?" Austin asked in surprise.

"It's a Cision Pro Mark 4. It uses mass effect fields to break up plaque." Said Traynor.

Leena worked on trying to access the door, but no luck.

"It's sealed!" she cursed.

"Is there anyone still aboard who can help us?" Griffin asked.

"No. I was the only one left. Everyone else is on shore leave." Said Traynor.

"We need another way onto the ship, and we need it fast." Said Austin.

"There's an emergency exit hatch for evacuation. It should be right... here!" said Traynor as she uncovered said hatch.

"Manual lock, and it's only meant to be opened from the others side. Any ideas?" Austin asked.

"Triggering it would require extremely precise mass effect field manipulation." Said Troy.
Traynor then suddenly activated her toothbrush."

"I can't believe that actually worked." Said Troy, struggling a bit to crawl properly through the vents.

"If someone told me yesterday that a toothbrush was gonna save the Normandy, I'd have been very sceptical." said Austin.

The Commander stood before the galaxy map with Hades at his side. Without any more need for his disguise, he had disengaged.

"Commander! Just before take-off, Normandy registered a perimeter access alert. One of the security hatches." Said Brooks.

"Shepard." The Commander growled. "Where?"

"Unknown. When we shut down the AI, we disabled a lot of security systems. Shepard could be anywhere on the ship." Brooks replied nervously, hoping and praying the Commander didn't abusively hit her.

"I should never have listened to your pathetic plan!" the Commander almost yelled as he drew one of his guns and pointed it at her. "You're just lucky I don't think you're even worth wasting the ammunition."

"It's better this way, sir. Wouldn't you rather we finished Alpha ourselves?" said Hades.

"Good point, Hades." Said the Commander, seeing that his lieutenant had a very good point. "Find them! Slow them down!"

"Pretty sure we boke Traynor's toothbrush getting the hatch open. Remind me to reimburse her for that." Austin whispered as Alpha sneaked under the CIC.

"Not really fond of tight spaces." Said Liara.

"Didn't you spend decades at dig sites?" Austin asked.

"And then I got trapped in a Prothean bubble. I don't recommend it." Said Liara.

"I hope we didn't hit anything important!" said Leena.

"Shoot now! Worry later!" said Austin.

"That's from my quarters." Said Sarah.

"Is that also your hamster?" Austin asked, noticing Chester scurrying about in his little box.

Sarah noticed the little notice that had been put on Chester's box and she read out loud.

"Please send this to an animal shelter for proper disposal as a warship is not an appropriate… Oh, that is not okay! He has just made this personal! No one messes with my hamster!" said Sarah crossly.

Agreeing with sister Austin and the others got into the elevator. It was a bit of a tight squeeze for all of them, but they managed.

"You ready?" asked Wrex.
"Absolutely!" Liara replied confidently.


"Well, I recently discovered that I'm one quarter Krogan." Said Liara.

"Ha! I knew there was a reason I liked you." Wrex laughed.

The doors opened and everyone filed into the shuttle bay, their weapons at the ready.

At the moment, everything looked clear and there was no sign of anyone. But then the Commander suddenly appeared from behind one of the crates, firing several shots from one of his sub machine guns. Alpha was just able to dodge the shots.

"You don't give up, do you?!" he said.

"Nope!" Austin replied, taking cover behind one of the shuttle bay's consoles.

"What good will it do you? I've taken your identity, and soon I'm going to take your life." the Commander growled.

"You've made your presence known to us, and there are others who will continue to fight if we die here. You haven't thought this through properly. How's that big plan looking now?" Said Austin.

The Commander suddenly lunged from the side, his omni blade raised. Austin quickly activated his own omni blade and they clashed with one another.

Austin managed to kick the Commander back just as Brooks and his bodyguards joined the fray.

"After I kill you, I'll make sure your… alien filth is dealt with as all their kind should be… torture and death." The Commander groaned.

"You'll have to kill us first." Said Austin, drawing Excalibur and his shield.

"I plan to!" said the Commander, drawing his own sword out of his holster.

The dark red blade seemed to glow with a dark aura that had a most unwelcome feel to it. It just somehow felt evil by look. The sword looked almost identical to Austin's, but the blade had a more corrupted look to it and the hand grip was much longer and without a blade guard. The Commander often preferred to use it two handed compared to Austin who would use both one handed and two depending on the situation.

"Kill them all!" the Commander yelled.

All the Hellspawn troops and the elite guard attacked. Austin almost immediately went for the Commander and the duel began.

The Commander immediately swung a wide two handed strike at Austin which he dodged under. The Commander adjusted his wrist movements and brought Dark Excalibur up as Austin ducked onto his knees to avoid the swing. Taking advantage of this, the Commander brought his sword down. Austin was just in time able to block this attack with his shield. The Helldiver managed to push against the blade just enough that he could slip out of the way.

The Commander though quickly grabbed him and threw him against one of the cargo crates. The Helldiver was only just able to move in time before the Commander thrust forward, the dark biotic enhanced sword cutting right through the crate's metal.
Austin then did a twirl attack and attempted to slash from the side but the Commander blocked it with his own sword. He then pushed it away from him and head butted Austin hard, forcing the Helldiver back.

As the Commander attempted another thrust however, Austin quickly grabbed onto a Hellspawn trooper and threw him at his opponent. Unable to react in time, the trooper was impaled on the Commander's blade and died.

"Get off me!" he growled as he pushed the trooper uncaringly off his sword and resumed the fight.

Brooks went to fire at Austin while the Helldiver duelled the Commander, but a sudden punch knocked her back. Troy stood over her, cracking his knuckles ready for a fight.

"You want them? You'll have to go through me!" he said.

Brooks swung a kick at him, but he dodged it. Both opponents reached for their pistols and ran for cover as they fired at one another.

Austin had almost forgotten how much of a struggle The Commander had been for him back in the old days. His speed, his ferocity, his skill and the anger and hatred in each strike. Then of course there was the traits that Zartrack taught to his students.

"You've improved since we last met!" said the Commander, locking blades with Excalibur.

"You'll find I'm full of surprises." Said Austin as he made a swift swing.

The Commander however dodged under the attack and did a swift back flip, kicking Austin in the process as he jumped high enough to land on top of one of the cargo crates.

"Good. Twice the pride, double the fall."

Hades meanwhile was fighting with Kraan. The two giants of each side had always had a bit of a rivalry with each other.

"Getting slow, old Krogan. Peace has cost you your strength, victory has defeated you." He said, aiming for a hard punch to the head.

Before he could however, Griffin suddenly charged into him, knocking him hard against a crate.

"Well, you're a big fellow. This ought to be interesting." Said Hades is he picked himself up.

"I'm counting on it." Said Griffin.

At the same time, Kraan picked himself up and readied for another fight. Hades though was unfazed by this and banged his fists together challengingly.

Back with Austin and the Commander, Austin was attempting to fire at the Commander as the Hellspawn leader Ran along the cargo crates.

Finally managing to find a way up, Austin jumped onto cargo crate, then the next until he was about to reach the same level as the Commander.

The Hellspawn leader however was waiting for him and Austin found himself jumping up right into a punch that sent him back down the lower crate, hard. The Commander then jumped down, his sword aimed right at Austin.
The Helldiver was just able to move out of the way in time as Dark Excalibur thrust into the spot on the floor where his head had been.

The two exchanged more blows and parry's with each other as they tried to find an opening in the other's defence. A parry from the Commander allowed him an opening and he swung a leg at Austin, kicking him in the helmet and knocking him back against a crate.

The force of the Helldiver hitting the crate caused another crate to fall off and scrap, forcing the two opponents to duck.

Using the distraction to his advantage, Austin managed to land a kick on the Commander which supposedly knocked him right off the crate and too the floor. As Austin walked to the edge however, he was surprised to see the Commander suddenly hauled himself up and head-butted Austin hard.

The Helldiver was knocked back into a corner and another crate fell on his arm. His armour managed to stop his arm from breaking, but he was now essentially pinned.

The Commander slowly walked up to Austin, his blade sparking with dark biotics as it readied to taste Helldiver again after many long years.

"I've waited a long time for this, Shepard. This time, you loose!" he said, raising his sword.

Right as the sword swung down however, there was a loud clang as another sword blocked it. Liara had cast her own blade between them and was now blocking Dark Excalibur.

"Get away from my husband!" she said as she pushed the Commander off her and kicked him back.

"You and him? Ugh! I'm gonna be sick!" said the Commander with disgust. "Your screams of death will be music to what's left of my ears."

This comment angered Liara and she struck first. This did take the Commander by surprise as he was completely unprepared for the Asari's forwardness in this. He also hadn't expected Liara to have such skill.

"So, my old enemy's been giving his Asari whore lesson." Said the Commander.

Liara became even more angered by this and attempted a thrust. The Commander however parried it and backhanded Liara in the face. This however was quickly met with a punch form her.

Angered by this himself, the Commander's ferociousness increased and Liara was only just able to keep up. It was like fighting an evil clone of Austin.

The Commander then brought his blade down hard. Liara was only just able to block it, but the Commander's sheer strength forced her down onto her knees. With little options, the Asari used her biotics to pull another crate off of its rack and pulled it at them.

The Commander quickly noticed this and backed out of the way, as did Liara s the crate fell between them.

Both opponents then jumped onto the crate and continued their fight.

The Commander attempted to swing at Liara's legs but she flipped over it only for the Commander to then give her a dark biotic push form his word, knocking her back to the ground.

Rolling out of the way just in time as the Commander attempted to thrust into the ground, Liara was
about to strike when the Commander suddenly swung so hard that the knocked the sword right out of the Liara's hand.

As the Hellspawn leader thrust forward however he suddenly felt his blade stop. Liara had thrown up a biotic field in her hands just in time and was blocking the Commander's sword. She could only hold on for so long though.

As the Commander started to push harder and harder against the biotic field, he suddenly noticed something out of the corner of his helmet's optics which served as replacement for his eyes due to the loss of his eyelids and therefore the loss of his eyeballs.

Austin had finally managed to get free and was charging right at the Commander. Unable to react in time, the Commander struggled against Austin as the Helldiver charged right into him and they fell over the rail to the Normandy's ramp, which was still partially open.

The two rolled around trying to kick the other off. The Commander eventually managed to get the upper hand and he kicked Austin off him. The Helldiver almost slid right off the ramp and into space, but he just managed to grab onto the edge.

The Commander meanwhile slowly picked himself up, now fully confident that he had Austin this time.

"Don't think you'll be coming back from the dead this time, Shepard!" he said, raising his sword for the final blow. "Any last words, Helldiver?"

"Not from me." Austin simply replied.

"COMMANDER!"

The Commander turned only for a blade to carve right through his chest.

Troy had picked up Excalibur and had run the Commander right through. The blood stained tip of the blade stuck out of the Commander's back.

"You once took from me the woman I loved. You will never rob anyone of anything ever again." He said.

Struggling against his injury, the Commander weakly lifted his sword to try and strike, but his grip failed him and the sword fell from his hand onto the hard metal floor of the ramp and he fell to his knees, clutching at Excalibur's blade.

"Commander, NO!" Hades yelled, falling to his knees.

The optics on the Commander's helmet flashed for a moment, then finally died as his suit went offline. The life left him and he went limp, still impaled on the sword.

Using his strength, Austin pulled himself up and grabbed the Commander's lifeless body.

"Get off my ship!"

He then pulled hard, hauling the Commander's body slowly off of Excalibur and throwing it out of the Normandy. As the body fell, the vaporizing protocol that all Helldiver suits carry activated and the Commander was completely vaporized as it fell until there was nothing left. After 15 years, it was now well and truly over.
"Fortunately, they weren't here long enough to do much real damage." Said Cortez. "Although I may need some help from James cleaning up the damage to the shuttle bay."

"Plus they overloaded the heat diffusion system firing at us." Said Joker. "Not sure if you noticed, but Shuttle guy here did some crazy stunt flying to keep us in one place."

"It's nice to fly something a little more manoeuvrable then the Hellhound." Said Cortez.

"How about you, EDI?" Austin asked into his comm.

"I am once again in control of the Normandy. Thank you for asking." EDI replied.

"Glad to hear it. What about the rest of Hellspawn? Any survivors?" Austina asked.

"Just some crappy ass pilot, and her." Said Joker, indicating to Brooks who was now in binds.

"I'll be more than happy to cooperate with the authorities." Said Brooks.

"Until you escape again." Said Austin bitterly.

"Escape? But I'm not a field agent." Said Brooks, still trying to sound innocent.

"Cut your crap act! You betrayed me in the middle of a war. You're completely ruthless." Said Austin.

"I was young and naive!"

This however was met with a very hard punch from Austin. It was so hard, it knocked out a tooth and she spat blood.

"You're pathetic!" he said bitterly. He then turned his back to Brooks.

"Admit it, Major. You'll miss me."

To everyone's surprise, Brooks then suddenly broke out of her restraints and ran. Troy attempted to catch her, but had trouble keeping up.

Just when it looked like she was going to make it to the elevator, Austin unsheathed Excalibur and threw it at her. The blade spun and hit its target.

Brooks was overwhelmed by a huge amount of pain as the blade carved right through her, impaling her in the chest and she fell to her knees.

Austin slowly walked up behind her and took the blades in his hand, the movement of the blade causing Brooks to groan in pain, blood starting to pour form her mouth.

"I won't miss you at all, you crazy bitch." Austin snarled.

He then pulled the blade out at an agonizingly slow rate. As this happened, the life left Brooks and she fell to the floor dead.

"Harsh, but she definitely deserved it." Said Troy.

"Did you mean to hit her, because that looked more like a warning shot." Said Garrus, causing a bit
"Maintenance to the shuttle bay." Said Joker.

"No tear shed for her?" Griffin asked, noticing that Hades hadn't reacted to Brooks' death at all.

"Nah. She was an annoying bitch for us too." Hades replied.

"So what about you, Hades? Do we have to endure the manner of some ill conceived escape attempt from you too?" Austin asked, pointing the tip of his sword at Hades.

"Not today." Said Hades. "I'll come quietly, but one day, I will avenge the Commander, you mark my words on that."

With the Normandy back in dock, everyone disembarked to find the rest of the crew waiting for them. Traynor, notching Sarah almost immediately ran up to her, right in the N7 marine's waiting arm.

"We'll have the Normandy back in shape in no time." Said Joker.

"Appreciate it." Said Austin.

"Is shore leave always like this?" EDI asked, earning a small chuckle from Austin.

"Come on. Maybe we can take actual time off. No explosions or anything. Just us." He said.

"Absolutely." Liara agreed.

"So after a hard day spent fighting your late arch enemy, you know what comes next?" Joker asked as they walked back into the apartment.

"A nap?" Austin replied.

"Please. We party down." Said Joker.

"Well, I gotta get going. Things to settle before I head back to Tuchanka. Always fires to put out when you're in charge, right?" said Wrex. "Let me know if you want to hang out or if you're having that party."

"See ya!" said Joker.

"Party, huh?" Austin asked.

"No pressure. No one's gonna make you throw a party." Said Joker.

"I'll need to think on that one, but admittedly that does sound like a good idea." Said Austin.

"I've channelled discretionary funds into your account for the purchase of any celebratory supplies, Major." Said Glyph.

Joker then activated his omni tool.

"Okay, EDI and Cortez and Traynor are in." he said.

"What?"
"I have also informed Mistress Xun about any potential upcoming celebrations." Said Glyph.

"I'm in charge of the guest list!" said Austin.

"Yeah, so there's no uninvited button on this thing." Said Joker.

"All right. But when it's time, I invite the rest." Said Austin.

"Cortez just invited James, so…"

"Fine."

"I'm going to go out and see how much trouble I can get into without snapping a femur."

"Members of your crew have also expressed interest in spending time with you, Major. You can check your private terminal for messages." Said Glyph. "If you require activities, Silverun strip has an arcade in addition to the casino. You have also been granted a complimentary pass to the combat simulator."

"Thanks, Glyph. Guess I should take some advantage of some shore leave myself." Said Austin.

Naturally of course, Liara was Austin's first choice to invite up and spend time with. As he finished drying himself from a shower he suddenly heard a piano playing.

Walking out of the bathroom, he saw Liara stood before the apartment's piano and she was playing a song on it.

Liara felt the presence of her bond mate behind her

"Austin." She smiled.

"I didn't know you could play." Said Austin as he finished pulling his shirt on.

"Actually, this is the only song I know." Said Liara.

"Why's that?" Austin asked.

"There was always something more important to do: a ruin to uncover, intel to gather. A Major to save."

"You couldn't sit still long enough."

"Could you?"

"Is there something special about this song?" Austin asked.

"On one of my first digs, a storm swept in. We were trapped inside. I was so restless: I wanted to get back to work." Liara explained. "One of the other archaeologists, Dr Olena, had this keyboard. She took it everywhere. She taught me to play this song while we waited."

"It's a good song." Austin smiled as he hugged Liara from behind.

"Thank you, Austin." Liara smiled. "I've always loved that song."

Austin then activated his omni tool.
"Do you mind? I know another song that this piano can play." He asked.

Liara simply nodded.

The piano's keys lit up and started to play themselves. The piano began playing the song "All Boundaries are Conventions."

"I love you so much." Liara smiled.

"I love you too." Austin smiled as she kissed Liara on the cheek.

As the song continued to play, their kiss began to get even more intimate and their hands started to roam their bodies.

Austin then took it a step further and began to remove the clasps on Liara's outfit. The Asari smiled as she allowed it to happen and then began to pull Austin's shirt off. They continued to kiss as the music played.

Liara then pushed Austin onto the couch and finished removing her outfit, presenting her nude form to him. Gently straddling him, Liara presented both her breasts to him and he took one into his mouth.

Liara's body had gotten so adjusted to Shepard that at this point, whenever she started feeling any sense of arousal, she moaned as she started to feel an all too familiar growing... empty void, between her legs. Her azure felt so... empty, almost as if it was missing something. An absence. This had likely been a sensation going on for months, and it certainly explained why she was always more than eager for Austin, why she was usually the one to make the suggestion: Any want or desire she had for him quickly develops into a NEED for him.

Austin's thrusts were hard but gentle and slow. They were simply enjoying the moment alone in a luxury apartment on a very comfortable sofa and with beautiful music playing in the background as they made love.

Austin gradually began to speed up and Liara's moans intensified. This only spurred her love on further. As Liara bounced on top of him, her large tits also bounced which only turned Austin on even more and he soon felt the cum making its way up his shaft.

"Embrace...Ah!... Eternity!" Liara moaned.

Austin felt his mind connected to Liara and he began to feel her sensations and pleasure just as she felt his.

Connected to his mind, Liara could feel it too, gently sliding off him, she got down on her knees and took the hard penis in her hand and begin stroking, using her own wetness as lubricant. Each stroke emitted a wet squelch, but it still managed to sound erotic. Austin finally couldn't hold it in any longer and Liara opened her mouth.

Their relationship had gotten to the point where Liara's body was grown so accustomed to Austin that every time she tasted his cum, the taste automatically caused her body to orgasm.

The two simply cuddled each other, panting heavily.

"First time we've ever made love to music." said Liara.

"Was worth it though, right?" said Austin, gently caressing Liara's arm.
"Definitely." Liara smiled.

"I love you."

"I love you too."

Austin then invited James up. After all, the Alliance soldier had said he had something to show him.

"Hey, Loco." He said. "Nice place. Might not look so nice after throwing that party you were talking about."

"You wouldn't trash my new apartment, would you, James?" Austin joked.


"Nice view. But this place. It's just so… not what I'm used to."

"Which is?" Austin asked.

"I grew up on the beach on the Pacific. So, you know: water, sand… real air."

"You miss it?"

"Yeah. And the people…"

"So what's her name?"

"No! No… I stopped fraternizing when I joined the military. The two don't seem to go well together."

"Hasn't stopped you from being a shameless flirt."

"Yeah. Well, that's just my way. I don't mean anything by it."

"So anyway, you wanted to show me something?"

"Oh, shit. Right."

James then removed his shirt, revealing the n7 tattoo he now had.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"Suits you. When'd you get that done?"

"Just recently. You sister's deserves some thanks for encouraging em to join after I got forward an N7 commendation."

"Glad to hear it."

" Anyway… that's it. Just wanted to show you that bad boy. I gotta get back to the Normandy. Esteban wants my help working on the shuttle."

"Thanks for coming by, James." Said Austin as he hand James shook hands.

"This is gonna be a perfect place for a fiesta. Catch you later, Shep." Said James. Just as he neared the door however, he suddenly spotted something. "What the hell? No way."
Curious as to what James had discovered, Austin walked down the stairs and found the Alliance soldier punching away at a punching bag. A whole array of gym equipment was also in the room.

"Didn't know this place had that." He said, quite impressed.

"You've been holding out on me!" said James. "You gonna watch, or you gonna join in?"

"Ah, why not? I could use the exercise." Austin shrugged as he went up to the pull up bar and took hold of it.

"You know, my record is 182. You think you can beat it?" James asked.

"I know Griffin has. Didn't he do 200?" said Austin.

"Yeah, but he's bigger than me. You and I are about the same size." Said James.

"You wanna bet 10 credits on it then?" Austin asked.

"Alright, you're on." Said James.

For a moment, Austin let go of the bar and then removed his shirt before jumping back up.

"Oh. Getting serious." Said James challenging as Austin began the pull ups.

Normally, Austin would've struggled to manage 182, but that was in the days a long time ago. These days he was a lot stronger now. The implants his suit installed into him when it resurrected him gave him some extra strength and also the works outs he'd done with Griffin had improved both his physique and his strength even more.

The more Austin did, the more surprised James looked. And then it happened, Austin reached the 182 target.

"Holy hell! You did it." Said the soldier.

Then to even more surprise from James, Austin kept going.

"Still going?! How are you doing that?!" he said, almost in shock.

"No idea." Austin groaned as he continued on.

Then, at 190, he finally stopped and let go of the bar.

"190. Gotta say, I almost don't believe it myself." Said James. "I… don't' know what to say. How you feeling?"

"Pretty good considering." Said Austin as he pulled his shirt back on.

"Damn. You still got it. Don't let anybody tell you different." Said James.

"I'm not old, you know." Said Austin.

"Never said you were, Loco." Said James. He then activated his omni tool. "Here's your 10 credits, and damn well deserved."

Next to be invited up was Miranda. It had been a while since Austin talked with her.
"Miranda, good to see you. How do you like the place?" Austin asked as he walked down the stairs and behind the apartment's bar.

"Not a part of town I’d normally associate you with, Shepard. I like it." Said Miranda. "Fix me something while you’re back there, would you?"

"Sure, I've got just the thing." Said Austin as he poured two drinks. "So… pardon me for asking, but there's been some talking going around about you and Hawk. Something going on there?"

"I honestly don't know yet." Said Miranda. "He's a nice guy, he was there for me when I was down after you were injured… at the moment, I don't know."

"Well, for what it's worth, I'm happy for you. I hope it does work out if…" said Austin, but he noticed Miranda's look. "Yeah, you're right. I'm not the best at this, am I."

The two then walked up to the window.

"Aw, they shut down my favourite sushi place." Said Miranda.

"That's… a shame." Said Austin, trying to hide his embarrassment.

"Shepard, you didn't…” said Miranda.

"I did. Fell right through the fish tank. Damn nearly broke my back." Said Austin.

"How did you manage that?"

"It… exploded."

Miranda though gave Austin a look that said "I don't believe you."

"Hey, it was the Commander's plan, not mine." Said Austin.

"Blowing up a fish tank shouldn't be part of anyone's plan." Said Miranda. "Although executing marine life seems to some sort of hobby with you. No wonder your arch enemy couldn't resist."

"It was the first step in taking over my whole life. We stopped it." Said Austin.

"Good thing, but why did he want your life? Why would anyone?" said Miranda. "All that running, jumping… gunfire. It's crazy."

"I'd describe it as "engaging" rather than dangerous." Said Austin.

"I'll drink to that." Miranda smiled.

"Trust me. I know all this isn't normal." Said Austin. "I do have a crazy life."

"That you do, my friend. That you do."

Next, Tali and Leena were invited up. The two Quarians almost treated each other like sisters now, especially seeing as Leena's mother was Tali's auntie.

Hey, got any plans for the evening?" Austin asked.

"No. We're as free as the dust in the solar wind." Said Tali. "You remember that line? From Fleet and Flotilla? Shalei and Bellicus."
"I don't think I've ever seen that film." Said Austin.

"What? You've never… How could you not have? Well, I know what we're doing tonight!" said Tali.

"But Shalei, we can never be together. I have my duty, and you have your people." Said the Turian in the film.

"Not tonight. Tonight, I'm as free as the dust in the solar wind." Said the Quarian.

"So you two have watched this a lot, huh?" Austin asked.

"Every time my friends and I had a sleepover. Keelah. So many feelings." Said Tali.

"Yeah, it's, uh… yeah. Definitely." Said Austin.

"When this is done, I'll send you links to extranet sites with some captioned animations." Said Leena.

"I want you to see behind this mask. I want you to see who I truly am." Said the Quarian.

"I already have." Said the Turian.

"She had an infection for three weeks after filming this scene." Tali explained.

"Totally worth it." Said Austin.

Austin headed out again, this time to see Javik. He waited in the wards for the Prothean to arrive.

"Enjoying your shore leave, Javik?" he asked.

"I have been asked to take part in a "vid." I am told it is a great honour and will boost morale for the war." Said Javik

"Who says it will?"

They walked onto what looked like a movie set.

"Ah, Major Shepard. I didn't realise you were coming. Perfect timing, perfect timing! You can play yourself." Said the Salarian director. "Attention: the Prothean is on set! Someone tell the stunt double he's demoted! We have the real Shepard now! All right! Places, everyone! Quickly! Quickly! Cue the backdrop! Roll cameras! And… action!"

"Major Shepard, thank you for coming. The urgent hour of doom which we all urgently face draws near. Urgently so." Said the actor playing the Salarian councillor. "But there is hope. The Council understands you recently found a Prothean in a refrigerator and defrosted him!"

"So are you guys just making this up or what?" Austin asked.

"Of course not! A writer wrote it, so it must be true!" the director whispered.

"You die now!" said the Vorcha.

"Not yet! That line come later!" the director hissed.

"The Vorcha councillor will kindly refrain from further interruptions!" said the Salarian.
"I believe I have been misinformed about the purpose of this "vid." Said Javik.

"Now then, oh wise Prothean elder, what wisdom of the ages can you share with us?" the Salarian asked.

"Salarian kidney is best served at room temperature. It is even better when the Salarian is still alive. The fear adds… spice." Said Javik.

"Prothean no like you!" said the Vorcha.

"Did someone say "Prothean?" said a voice. Austin turned to see a hanar join them. "This one is familiar with enkindling. This one has enkindled multiple females across the galaxy."

"Blasto, about time you showed up! The galaxy is under attack by Reapers. If only someone had warned us about them years ago." Said the volus.

"This one tried. This one was ignored. This one's efforts tell on obstructed auditory senses." Said Blasto.

"And now we've asked Major Shepard and his Prothean partner here to assist." Said the Volus.

"This one did not read that far into the script. This one does not share top billing." Said Blasto.

"Wait, what? But it's Blasto 7: Blasto Goes to War! Think of the children!" said the director.

"In my cycle, your kind were nothing more than appetizers. Would you prefer to be boiled or fried?" said Javik.

"Prothean no like you!" said the volus again.

"This one has found his motivation. Very well, Major Shepard and Prothean partner of undetermined ethnic origin, welcome to the Spectre Club." Said Blasto.

"You idiot! I quit being a Spectre years ago. You know what, Blasto? I think you're just a big stupid jellyfish. How did you ever become a Spectre?" said Austin, rather irritated by this now.

"I am not just a Spectre, I am an Ultra Spectre Elite 7000 Deluxe, now with less recoil and faster load time." Said Blasto, pointing two guns at Austin.

"Word of advice, don't point those guns at me." Austin warned.

"Where is the airlock so I may throw you out of it?" Javik sighed.

"We don't have a prop for that! Cue the sound effects! Change the backdrop!" said the director.

The scene now changed to a war zone and a small Reaper dropped down.

"Look! It's Sovereign's half-brother, Sluggard! And he's looking for some payback!" said the volus

"Bloody Hell! How can anyone possibly enjoy these films? They make even the most terrible Earth films look like classics in comparison." Austin sighed in his head. He was very glad he'd chosen to put his armour on and keep his helmet on

"Cue the stunt double!" said the director as a stunt double flung himself onto the set. "Your line! Say your line!"
"Oh, uh: You die now!" said the Vorcha.

"Oh no. The Vorcha Councillor is indoctrinated!" said the Salarian.

"This one is the hero of the Citadel. This one has an incendiary project with the councillors name on it. Vorcha scum, prepare for death." Said Blasto.

"This one wishes he was still frozen in the refrigerator." Javik interrupted, hitting the Vorcha with a biotic field, sending him flying. "May we go now, Major?"

"Strike the set! Tell casting we'll need a new Vorcha! Prepare for Blasto 8: Blasto Cures the Genophage!" said the director as they left.

With a bit of free time until he was due to have lunch with Traynor, Austin decided to simply wait around for a bit. As he was relaxing against one of the rails, he then spotted a familiar but surprising face.

"Your mine, you bastard. Goddamn it!"

"Zaeed?"

"Over here, Shepard. This thing is fucking impossible." Said Zaeed.

For some bizarre reason, Zaeed was playing the claw game. A bit unusual for someone like him.

"What are you doing?" Austin asked.

"There was a kid here, snivelling brat, spending all his credits, crying." Zaeed replied.

"So you thought you'd get a prize for him." said Austin.

"He asked. Looked simple enough—goddamn it!" Zaeed cursed as he lost another one.

"Where's the kid?" Austin asked.

"What do I care?"

"Isn't there something better we could go do?"

"What could possibly be more important than Zaeed Massani getting bested by some fucking kids game?"

"You really want one of those plushy toys?"

"Goddamn right, I do."

"Okay then."

"Credits."

"Sure, but even a bounty hunter's got to use his manners once in a while."

"Please."

Austin gave Zaeed some more credits and the bounty hunter had another go.
"Easy… Easy…" said Austin, but unfortunately, Zaeed dropped it just at the last minute.

"It's obviously rigged somehow." Said Zaeed.

"Rigged?"

"I'm gonna hunt down the shit-for-brains "inventor" of this crooked game and pull his inspiration out through his asshole." Said Zaeed crossly. "Probably some smart-ass, Salarian bastard. I'm going back in. Credits."

"Please try not to waste all my money." Said Austin, handing some more credits.

This time though, Zaeed succeeded and plushy Hanar toy slid out of the machine.

"All right."

"Well done." Said Austin.

Zaeed took the toy and looked at it for a moment. Then he did something rather surprising.

"Here, you have it." He said.

"Me? But…” Austin tried to say.

"The kids probably long gone by now. Besides, you and Liara have always said you'll have kids of your own one day. Consider that an early present for one of 'em."

Austin considered this for a moment. Zaeed did have a point. He and Liara often talked about having children after the war, and to be honest this would make a very nice toy for one of them.

"Thanks, Zaeed. That's very thoughtful of you." He said. "Okay. Where to?"


"But this time you play with your own damn credits." Said Austin.

"I'm man enough to pay for my own addictions, Shepard."

"Addictions? Already?"

"I'm an all-in kind of guy."

"I think I knew that about you."

Sometime later, it was now around the time Traynor was supposed to meet him for lunch. Minutes passed however, and he didn't see her. As Austin walked up the stairs however he then spotted her.

She was sat at a holo table with a Salarian at the other end. Austin then noticed the holograms on top of the table. Several frigates and fighters surrounding a planet one ach side. One side coloured yellow, the other green.

As Austin walked up to Traynor, she won the game and the Salarian shook hands with her.

"Brilliant endgame." He said. "Excellent use of the By-Lucien Gambit."

"Is this… space-chess?" Austin asked.
"It's called Kepesh-Yakshi Blade of the Night Winds. The Asari have played it since… We were supposed to meet for lunch." Said Traynor, suddenly realizing. "I'm so sorry. I entered the tournament on a lark. I thought I'd be eliminated in the first few rounds."

"Oh, don't worry. You'll be free to join your friend in 20 moves or fewer." Said an Asari.

Traynor turned to face the Asari and they both glared at one another.

"T'Suzsa."

"Traynor. Would you like to just give me your frigates now? I always take them sooner or later."

"Polgara T'Suzsa. She's knocked me out of four tournaments." Traynor sighed.

"That was before you helped manage intel for a galactic war." Said Austin encouragingly.

"You're right. I've got a lot better since I came to the Normandy." Said Traynor.

"Which is a frigate by the way, so try not to lose it." Said Austin. "And Specialist…"

"Major?"

"Kick her ass."

"Roger that."

Traynor and T'Suzsa took their seats and began. T'Suzsa made the first attack, taking out one of Traynor's frigates, causing the game to shock her.

"Oh, damn it! Ah!"


After sometime, Traynor had only one frigate, her homeworld and a fighter left.

"A few more centuries, Traynor, and you might be a challenge. You must not have that much time to practice now, living on that warship." Said T'Suzsa intimidatingly. "My people have more respect for the great thinkers. I'm able to live quite comfortably teaching Asari maidens tactics and strategy through this game."

"So, your job is playing games?" Austin asked, almost sounding like he'd laugh.

"Mentoring students in strategic and tactical simulations. Yes." Said T'Susza.

"Specialist Traynor helped us take down Cerberus. We're preparing our final assault on the Reapers and the Takaal thanks to her efforts." Said Austin.

"I'm sure she's a wonderful servicemen. But she just lost her last frigate." Said T'Suzsa as she took out Traynor's last frigate.

"Ah! Traded her last frigate actually, for your homeworld." Said Traynor.

Sure enough, when the comm specialist made her move, her fighter dodged right through the frigates and took out T'Suzsa homeworld directly. The whole shock caused the Asari to black out and she fell from her chair. The gathered audience clapped.
"Thanks, Shepard. And, I apologise again for missing lunch." Said Traynor.

"All for a good cause, Samantha. Carry on." Austin smiled proudly.

Austin headed back to the apartment and invited EDI up next.

"Shepard. I thought we could experience an afternoon of acquiring material possessions for our associates." Said the AI.

"Shopping? I guess we could. Did you have a place in mind?" Austin asked.

"Physical proximity is unnecessary. The extranet provides a greater variety of services while retaining entertainment value. Jeff had lent me his credit chit on the condition that I enjoy myself and, quote, "live it up like a girly girl." Said EDI.

"So what's first then?"

"I believe Jeff would be surprised and pleased if I got him a gift. What would you recommend?" EDI asked.

"Start with something both of you can enjoy. What do you do together?" said Austin.

"We interact most closely when we are flying. It occurs to me that he does not have a skycar for traveling around the Presidium." Said EDI. She then accessed a datapad. "Here. "The 2187 Blackout has a top speed of 650 kilometres per hour, making it the most powerful sports skycar in its class."

"That sounds like it'll get Joker's blood pumping." Austin chuckled.

"Five-year warranty. Replacement parts. All sales are final." Said EDI.

"No, wait!" Austin interrupted.

"I fail to see what is wrong." Said EDI.

"When you buy someone a present, it's best not to bankrupt them. You want a rental." Said Austin.

"I see. Perhaps for a day or a weekend, then." Said EDI.

"That sounds better." Said Austin. "Right then, who's next?"

"You are. Close your eyes." Said EDI.

Austin did so. When he opened them however, he was surprise to see EDI holding a ring in front of him.

"Uh… are you proposing to me?" he asked, confused.

"No. There is a jeweller on the Citadel who produces these. They're made from metals from each Council homeworld. Each metal compounds with the last, making the rings stronger. He calls them victory rings. Due to material shortages, only a few exist." EDI explained.

"Hmm, rare is nice. Unique is better." Said Austin.

"Are you… valuing me?" EDI asked.

"It's the thought that counts, and you had a good one. Were I not already married to Liara, this
would've made an excellent ring for her." Said Austin.

"I have heard that expression. That's why I recorded a resonance map of my quantum bit arrays when I had the idea. If you read my extensive log files and extrapolate from my nitrogen-vacancy centres, you can visualise the thought precisely." Said EDI.

"That's a long way for a joke, EDI." Said Austin.

"Did I have you for a few seconds, there?" EDI asked, smiling.

"Not even close." Said Austin. "Who next?"

"I was thinking something for Liara. You know your wife better than anyone…"

The next crew member he'd be spending time with was Jack who had invited him to a session in the Armax Arsenal arena. Austin had to admit he was rather excited since he hadn't yet tried out the arena. He'd heard it was similar in a way to the simulator the Normandy had, but in a more competitive way.

"Hey. Glad you could make it. I've got us to set up." Said the Biotic convict.

"I am gonna beat you until candy comes out!" Jack taunted as she took down several Cerberus soldiers with a biotic warp. "Damn, it's nice to relax. Just cutting loose, not worrying about the kids…"

"It's worth the stress to watch the people you're commanding come into their own, though." Said Austin.

"Shut up." Said Jack.

"Who said I was talking about you?" said Austin.

Jack then threw a biotic attack at the Atlas Mech and it exploded. With that, the round ended.

"You know, if there is a god, that's what she sounds like. Just a big deep BWOMMM to let you know everything's gonna be okay. Thanks for coming, Shepard." Said Jack.

"Wouldn't have missed it. Say hello to Kelly for me." Said Austin.

With some free time, Austin decided to invite Jack up to the apartment.

"So what? A private cabin on a stealth warship isn't enough for you?" the convict chuckled.

"It was given to me. What are you doing?" Austin asked noticing that Jack was doing something.

"Calling Eezo." Jack replied.

"Eezo?"

A Varren suddenly ran in, and pounced on Austin. He seemed friendly though.

"Whoa! Easy boy!" said Austin as he managed to gently push the Varren off him. "Hey, Urz! Jack's brought you a friend to play with."
Sure enough, Urz hurried down the steps. The two Varren looked at each other for a moment. Then, rather than growl at one another, they started to play and run around with each other.

"Where’d you get him?" Austin asked.

"He’s from Thessia. Naturally biotic from all the element zero." Said Jack. "The biotics make them short tempered, so a lot of them get abused or abandoned. Can you imagine someone doing that? I found him at a rescue place."

"Wanna play catch?" said Austin as he waved a frying pan in front of the two Varren. He then threw it. "Go fetch!"

Both Eezo and Urz ran after it and Eezo managed to catch it first.

"I'm trying to teach him that it's okay to trust people. He started out really angry, but I've been giving him lots of love, and now he's a big old softy." Said Jack.

Eezo then hit Austin with a light biotic which caused him to stumble.

"Ooff!"

"What?"

"He seems like a good pet." Austin smiled, picking himself up.

"Yeah. Who's my badass biotic? Who's my badass biotic?" said Jack cooingly as she petted Eezo.

Austin simply smiled as Urz sat by his side and allowed Austin to stroke him on the head.

Now Austin had been forced to leave the apartment again due to a message he’d received regarding Krogan. Austin had a feeling it was either Wrex, Grunt or Kraan. He certainly hoped though they hadn't caused too much trouble, because he wouldn't be happy if they did.

"Officer, someone requested my presence concerning an incident with a Krogan?" he said.

"Right this way, Major." Said the C-sec officer.

Sure enough, the officer lead him to a familiar Krogan.

"So… Grunt. Anything you want to tell me about?" said Austin.

"This clown wants to take me to lockup. Figured I'd give you a call, straighten this out." Said Grunt.

"Major Shepard, I apologize for the intrusion. This Krogan insisted we contact you." Said the officer.

"It's okay. I vouch for him and I'll sign any paperwork you have." Said Austin.

"Yes, sir."

"What happened?" Austin asked.

"I don't know. Drank a bit, left the hospital, broke a few windows." Said Grunt.

"But you were in that hospital recovering from the Rachni encounter…" said Austin.

"Yeah. Didn't feel like sticking around." Said Grunt.
"Most people stick around long enough to, you know, heal."

"Most people aren't me."

"And why is C-sec here?"

"Guess they're precious about some broken glass."

"Before I sign you out… everybody walked away from this in one piece, right?"

"Sure, yeah, everybody's fine. Hospital's seen better days, though."

"Right. Tell me about the windows."

"A couple of squadmates broke me out for my birthday. Tried lowering me down the side of the building on a rope. "It didn't work out."

"It's your birthday?"

"No. I'm tank-bred, remember Anyway, we got some pictures on the Krogan memorial."

"In the Presidium?"

"Yeah. When C-sec got there, they were mad. Or maybe they were mad about their car being on fire. Can't remember."

"Why was it on fire?"

"I threw my bottle of ryncol at it. Pretty strong stuff… went up like a bonfire. "The C-sec guys jumped out. Then I figured they didn't want it, so I took it. We didn't get very far before they shut us down."

"Sprayed us down with riot foam. Didn't work so well on me."

"And why's that?"

"Cause I was on fire. You know, from the car? Coem on, Shepard. Keep up."

"Right, sorry. So how did they catch you?"

"Got hungry. Bought some noodles."

"Grunt, you apologise to the nice man for setting his car on fire."

"Fine. I'm sorry for setting your car on fire… and I won't do it again."

"Good. Now, Officer, I can pay for any damages that may have occurred."

"That's what you've been signing for, Major. You're lucky: Krogan. Don't let me catch you up here again." Said the officer.

"So… how were those noodles?"

"A little spicy."

"I love you, Grunt."
"Heh-heh-heh."

Next one up was Ashley and Griffin. They'd told him to meet them in the bar.

"I'm looking for Lieutenant Williams." He said to the bartender.

The bartender indicated to his left and Austin saw the couple.

"Thanks."

"There you are. Ready to see who's the real Soldier and who's the pretender?" said Ashley.

"Whatever you say Ashley. Line 'em up."

"I'm not carrying the loser out of here." Griffin reminded them.

"That's what I like to hear." Said Ashley. "Rules are simple. I take a shot, you take a shot. Hesitate? Game over."

"This shouldn't take too long then." Said Austin.

In truth he was referring to the fact that Ashley would win. He wasn't one for drinking games.

"Uh-huh. Glamorous and superstar Alliance marine first." Said Ashley as she downed her first drink. "Sorry-ass pretender next."

Austin however didn't touch the drink. He felt it better to just let Ashley win.

"What's this? The great and powerful Major Shepard can't keep up?" she asked.

"I didn't wanna destroy your fragile ego, Ashley. Sometimes you just gotta let the underdog have its day." Said Austin.

"Cut the crap, Major."

"I fear for your liver, Ash." Said Austin.

"You're just jealous." Said Ashley.

"Of what exactly?" said Austin.

Not wanting this to get out of hand, Griffin stepped between the two of them.

"Now now, you two. Let's not get into this too much. You'll end up accidently insulting each other if you're not careful." He said.

"Leave it to Mr Muscles to save the day." Said Ashley.

"What has gotten into you, Ash? You've only had one drink. Did someone spike it?" said Griffin.

Before this could continue however, a Batarian and Vorcha suddenly walked up to them.

"Hey! My friend here doesn't like Alliance types." Said the Batarian.

"Buddy, we're right in the middle of something." Said Ashley.
"I don't like Alliance types either." The Batarian added.

The three of them could now see where this was going.

"Rain check?"

"Yeah."

By the time they'd finished, both the Batarian and the Vorcha were knocked out.

"Sorry about the mess." Said Austin, tossing a tip to the bartender.

"Who do you think punched first?" Griffin asked.

"Don't. Don't start that with me." Said Austin sternly.

Jacob was next, and he had told Austin to meet him near the arcade.

"Hey, Shepard. Over here. Thanks for coming by. Good to see you. What's up?" he asked.

"Out for a little R&R. You?" Austin replied.

"Exactly. Same thing."

At that moment, two teenagers came up to Jacob.

"Hey, Jacob. I'm out of credits." Said one of them.

"Who're they?"

"They're from the Ex-Cerberus people we rescued. Their parents are MIA. Volunteered to take them on for the weekend while we were on leave, get their minds off things." Said Jacob. "What about us, Shepard? There's got to be a game of skill in there with our names on it."

"Let's do it." Said Austin.

"Great."

"This is your game of skill?" Austin asked as they walked into the arcade and up to the mech battle game.

"Now, Shepard, I'll try not to embarrass you." Said Jacob.

"Really? Trash talk? At Shattered Eezo?" said Austin.

"Hell, yeah! My pride is on the line. Also, these kids look up to me, so I have to take you down." Said Jacob.

"You take me down? I don't think so."

"Well, step up, Shepard. Although it might be tough, not having your squad to carry you."

"You're on."

"No pressure, Shepard. These people already idolize you, so when you choke, it won't matter."
"You're crowding me."


"Ready?" said Austin. "Let's do this."

"Glad none of your friends are here to see your humiliation."

The battle was quite fierce one. Despite that Austin had never played this game though, he was finding it relatively easy. Within just a few minutes, he'd damaged Jacob's mech enough that the head exploded.

"Oh dear. You've lost your head." He said smugly.

"Yeah! Major Shepard wins!" the kids cheered.

"And that is how it's done, kids." Said Austin proudly.

"You couldn't just let me win? Just once?" Jacob sighed. "Come on, Shepard. Let's grab some food. I'm buying."

Retiring to his apartment, Austin saw that Samara was on the Citadel and decided to do some catching up with her.

"I came as quickly as I could. What's wrong?" said the Justicar as she entered.

"I didn't mean to worry you. When I say you were on the Citadel, I wanted to see you again." Said Austin.

"We've said our farewells, Shepard." Said Samara.

"Are we going to stand on formalities?" Austin asked as he walked up the window and the blinds retracted. "You know, these big picture windows remind me of our talks in the Normandy's observation lounge."

"This view doesn't have quite the same effect as a galaxy of stars, but I can see where it might make one sentimental. I also enjoyed our talks, Shepard. Very much." Said Samara.

"Hey, look what I found. An old issue of Justicar heroes, May 2140. I says that you personally lifted fifty refugees across raging floodplain on Nevos after smugglers blew up a dam." Said Austin as he took out a datapad.

"That "News source" has been known to exaggerate." Said Samara, slightly embarrassed.

"So you didn't "almost drown while saving a child who had been torn from her mother's grasp?" Austin asked.

"The smugglers were not so lucky that I survived." Said Samara.

"Are there more stories like this?" Austin asked.

"Perhaps. You might be amused by the June 2085 issue. "Justicar Samara: Cold-Blooded Justice Runs Hot. It is not so difficult for me to find stories of your exploits." Said Samara.
Austin managed to put his thoughts aside on what Samara had said about "runs hot". After that threesome he and Liar had been in with her, he felt it better not try and risk it happening again, especially with a party coming up.

The two then sat down on the sofa.

"I think that you are remarkable, Shepard." Said Samara. "When the vids sing your praises and call you hero, does it make you blush? Do you agree? What do you feel?"

"It's humbling. But honestly, if people feel I'm making a difference, that bolsters me, my team, my squad, and our efforts." Said Austin. "What now?"

"I am content as we are, Shepard. Let us sit a while longer, even if there is nothing to say."

Once again with free time, and with some more hours to kill until the party, Austin decided to explore for a bit and went to the casino.

As he was walking around however, he suddenly heard a familiar face among the crowds. Sure enough, in walked Kasumi accompanied by several aliens who were obviously thieves as well.

"Senek, hit the comms. Tiana, distract the bouncer. Urch, you take the vault. Avoid the thermal sensors—they trigger the lockdown." she said. "You'll hit motion sensors, and that'll alert the security. Vurk, steal a uniform. You go in as a security, fake the arrest…"

When Austin cleared the crowds however, Kasumi then saw him.

"Whoops. I seem to have the wrong casino." She said, turning to leave.

"Kasumi?"

"Take a walk, guys." Kasumi sighed.

The others nodded and left just her and Austin.

"I can explain?" she said.

"No need. I believe I hired you because you were the best damn thief in the galaxy." Said Austin.

"Sweet talker." Kasumi smiled.

"Are you hard up for credits, or is this to stay in practice?" Austin asked.

"People who can't get to the Citadel are having a rough time out there. This place has more money than it knows what to do with. It could help those refugees survive." Said Kasumi. As she spoke, she activated her omni tool and it made all the betting machines go haywire. "And it's not like the owners can spend it if the Reapers win."

"So you're robbing the rich to feed the poor." Said Austin.

"I'm doing what I do. Raiding Takaal bases and infiltrating Reaper-held locations is fun." "But I'm a thief. Stealing It's who I am. Without it, I... By the way, are you going to call security?" Kasumi.

"No. Go and have fun. But just don't get caught, okay?" Austin winked at her.

"Hey, come one. I never get caught." Said Kasumi. "Come on, guys! Show's on!"
"Excuse me. Is there a problem?" one of the guards asked as Kasumi walked off.

"No. No problem at all." Austin replied as Kasumi activated her cloak and vanished.

Cortez was up next, and he had told Austin to meet him in the wards. As Austin waited, he suddenly noticed the Hellhound slowly hover down and the side door opened. Austin stepped in and found Cortez already in the pilot's chair.

"Welcome aboard, Shepard." He said.

"So where are we going?" Austin asked.

"Activating external cameras."

Sure enough, the front of the cockpit changed to show the view of the Citadel outside.

"I didn't know this shuttle had virtual windows." Said Austin in surprise.

"Bet there's more you don't know about this bird." Said Cortez.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Before mass effect fields, there was no such thing as internal dampeners."

"Yeah?"

"Here, feel this."

Cortez made the dropship hover upwards slightly and he actually felt gravity push down on him.

"Whoa."

"That, my friend, is unadulterated momentum. Want to really feel it?" said Cortez.

"Show me."

The Hellhound shot forward and then did several more climbs and descents. It even did a roll.

"See? Doesn't take much to pull a few G's. Back in the day, pilots would wear G-suits. It squeezes your body so that the blood stays in your head in tight manoeuvres. I'd wear a G-suit when flying my Trident. In a fighter it's common to transfer power from the inertial dampeners to other systems." Said Cortez.

"You miss flying fighters? Can't imagine you're too thrilled to be flying a shuttle." Said Austin.

"Hell no. I'm not just any shuttle pilot. I'm your shuttle pilot. Wouldn't have it any other way. When you're on the ground, weapon in hand, you're invincible. But when we're approaching an LZ, you're just another soldier. Vulnerable. Nothing you can do if we're shot down. Getting you to the ground alive is a responsibility I wouldn't trust to anyone else." Said Cortez.

"I'm fortunate to have you, Steve. We all are." Austin smiled.

"Anytime, Shepard."
asked him to meet her in the casino for a night out. He had of course accepted given his attraction to the former Cerberus operative.

"Miranda."

"You clean up well, Hawk." Said Miranda. "Thought we might try an evening out."

"Sounds like you have time to catch your breath." Said Hawk.

"I do. Just… not used to it. Feeling a bit lost. It's kind of sad really." Said Miranda. "I got to thinking we need a break. No point saving the galaxy if we can't enjoy it once in a while."

"I have to say, I'm a bit surprised." Said Hawk.

"I thought you might be. I can be… severe." Said Miranda.

"You're focused. Believe me, I understand." Said Hawk.

"I was thinking about a talk I had with Shepard earlier. About having a normal life." Said Miranda. "Damn! I'm not very good at this. True is, Hawk, I'm not really good at being normal either. Bit of a disaster really."

"I get it. We just need a little practice." Said Hawk supportingly.

"Any ideas?"

"Oh… I might have a few." Said Hawk teasingly. He then walked up behind Miranda and hugged her from behind. "Miranda, you're here… you're beautiful… and I have you to myself. So tonight, I'm just gonna be a regular guy taking his best sheela out on the town."

"No space heroes super spies or super soldiers?" Miranda asked.

"Nope. Just bright lights, few games and some very foolish choices. Agreed?" said Hawk.

"Agreed." Miranda replied. "I'm gonna need more wine."

"Get this woman more wine." Hawk demanded to a waiter.

"You're pretty sexy when you're pushy. What now?" Miranda asked.

"Let's spin the wheel, see what happens." Said Hawk.

"The odds are against us, you know?"

"Maybe. But I've got a good feeling about this."

Heading back to the apartment, Austin decided to invite Traynor up next. After all, congratulations were in order after she'd become the Kepesh-Yakshi champion and had a huge trophy with her.

"You sure you want to leave that here?" Austin asked.

"I can't very well bring it back to the Normandy. I'd have nowhere to put it." Said Traynor, placing the award on the table.

"This place is amazing. Put the prefabs back on Horizon to shame." She said as she walked up the stairs. She then noticed something unbelievably inviting in the bathroom. "And it has a hotub..."
"Go ahead." Austin sighed happily.

"Cheers!" said Traynor as she ran in. Quickly taking her clothes off until she was only in her underwear, she gently dipped herself in.

"Oh! This lovely, and good for the sinuses. I might not need my anti-histamine tonight." She sighed.

"Your what?" Austin asked, keeping his back turned.

"It's a pill. I'm allergic to dust, and cats, and public speaking." Said Traynor. "I take a proton pump inhibitor for my stomach too, and an inhaler for asthma."

"You have everything you need to stay healthy" Because I don't want to be the bearer of bad news to Sarah if something happens to you." Said Austin.

"You are sweet." Traynor smiled. "Anyway, just about. The only medication I can't find is supro-capsinol. My family doctor prescribed it for my headaches."

"Errr, that's a sugar pill. A placebo." Said Austin.

"That sneaky bastard. And now that you've told me, it probably wouldn't work anyway." "There was some scented bath oil out there somewhere. Could you grab it?" Traynor asked.

"Sure. Here you go." Austin replied as he handed Traynor the bottle.

"Thanks." She said. "Eyes are over here, and up here."

"I wasn't even looking." Said Austin innocently.

"Right." Traynor chuckled. "Hey, do you have a loofah?"

"A loofah." Said Austin questionably. "This was Anderson's apartment. I highly doubt he has a…"

"Found one!" said Traynor. "Somebody left an overnight bag with toiletries and massage oil and… you know, girly stuff. Do you know who K. Sander is? She has great tastes in adjustable massage ones."

"Hmmmm. Still feel as though something's missing from this." Austin thought to himself. He then activated his omni tool. "Sarah, would you mind coming up?"

Sarah walked in a few minutes later.

"You sounded like you needed something. What's up?" she asked.

"Well it's not me, truth be told. Someone else actually needs you for something." Said Austin.

Curious, Sarah walked up the stairs. When she saw her girlfriend sitting in the hotub of course, she understood completely.

"You shouldn't have. She'll be thanking you even more for inviting me up." She smiled.

"Make it perfect for her. She deserves it." Said Austin supportively.

"What about you? We can sometimes be a little… you know." Sarah asked.

"I'll be out. I have some more things to do anyway." Said Austin. "Go ahead and have fun. Just try
to splash around too much."

"You try telling that to her." Sarah chuckled.

Sarah slowly made her way inside. Traynor naturally assumed it was still Austin. Though she did wonder why she suddenly felt so happy all of a sudden.

"Is there a brush out there somewhere?" she asked. A small handle then appered in front and she took it. "Ah, thank you."

As she pulled the handle down however, a hand and then everything else followed. To both her surprise and delight, she found herself staring right into the voice of the one person she loved more than anything.

"Hello, darling." Sarah smiled, trying not laugh at her love's expression of surprise. "Thought you'd be enjoying a little bath without me?"

"Well… I hadn't realized…" Traynor tried to say. "How did you even know I was here?"

"A little bird tell me." Sarah winked.

Traynor just noticed as Austin was leaving. It didn't take her long to work it out.

"You literally have the best brother, Sarah." She smiled.

"He may very well be your brother too… eventually." Sarah winked.

"Oh, I…" Traynor said nervously. She was a bit caught off guard with Sarah mentioning that. "It's a bit… early to be talking about that, isn't it?"

"Don't worry, sweetie. I wouldn't' dream of putting pressure on you." Said Sarah.

"Well, when you say it like that… Sometimes I like it when you put pressure on me." Traynor smiled.

"So do I."

The N7 began necking against Traynor's delicate jaw line. Tiny kisses and licks fluttered up and down the young girl's neck and occasionally stayed further upwards to nibble on her earlobe. To Sarah, this night was for her Samantha, and held no objection to the one-sided tender lovemaking. The delightful moans that continued to escape from Traynor's throat kept pulling at her heartstrings. Samantha was painfully adorable. Eventually though, when she was sure Traynor had been sufficiently warmed up, she went for something a bit more bold.
Lowering the specialist further back into her arms, she let her trail of caresses continue downwards, dipping into the hollow of Traynor's collarbone. Sarah's mouth licked slowly down the valley of the young girl's chest, teasingly avoiding contact with the trembling mounds on either side. Her nose pressed against the specialist's skin, inhaling the wonderful scent of her lover's body. She smelt gorgeous, like a subtle blend of nectar mixed in with the merest hints of peppermint and lavender.

Sarah decided her lover had suffered enough. Her sharp eyes glanced down towards Traynor's chest, particularly eyeing the underwear barrier separating her bosom from her touch. With a well-experienced move, Sarah effortlessly removed Traynor's lacy bra, an action that she had performed many times with her lover, enough that she had learned to do it in but a second with the merest flick of her finger against the clasp. Traynor tensed briefly, arching her back into an unintentionally alluring position. After quickly tossing the offending garment aside, the N7's mouth placed a teasing kiss between her firm breasts.

Traynor inhaled sharply. "Ahhhhhh..." she sighed, craning her head back as she was already losing herself in the euphoric and addictive sensations from her lover's touch.

As Sarah's lips slowly ascended one of her lover's milky globes, she could feel the warmth that radiated freely from deep within Traynor's chest, coming straight from her galloping heart. It felt like the young girl's love muscle was doing acrobatic back flips of joy.

Her kisses finally found their way to her prize, alighting with infinite tenderness on Traynor's love-bud. Without further ado, Sarah slipped the erect nipple between her lips and suckled sweetly on the
Tip.

Traynor couldn't suppress the shriek of ecstasy that ripped from her throat like an unbridled beast. Looking down, she saw her lover's mouth clamped firmly across one of her breasts, those unfathomable caramel eyes still lovingly locked with her own. Sarah felt a delightful wave of bliss as the specialist moaned even louder and began to shake in rolling waves from head to toe. It was impossible for the specialist to maintain enough strength in her muscles to remain upright. Instead, she slumped back to the edge of the hot tub with a heavy sigh of pleasure, relaxing into the intoxicating sensations that coursed through her entire body.

Traynor unconsciously puffed her chest up in an effort to make greater contact with Sarah's lips, causing more delicious friction between the two women's abdomens and pressing her breasts against the smiling N7's face. The soft flesh was suffocating, but it just gave Sarah an excuse to reach and playfully massage her partner's chest. Switching to the other tip, she continued to caress Traynor's tender nipple between her lips with all the passion and determination of a starving woman presented with a feast. Sarah had long since memorized every erogenous spot on Traynor's body, and continued to toy with the specialist's most sensitive areas, working her torso like a master musician would play their instrument of choice.

Pride swelled in Sarah's heart as Traynor cried out an indecipherable phrase that included the N7's name several times. A dizzying thrill pulsed through her body, mingled with passionate and adoring love for the woman beneath her.

Traynor lost track of time. Seconds rolled into minutes and for all she knew, Sarah had been sweetly tormenting her for hours already. It didn't matter, nothing mattered but the intense, overwhelming feelings that Sarah's lips teased from her flesh wherever they made contact. Whether she was planting languid kisses across the firm mounds, or softly chafing the little nubbin on top with maddeningly tender nibbles, the specialist had been taken to another realm, where nothing but orgasmic pleasure existed.

It took nearly every ounce of willpower for Traynor to speak, but when she did, all she found she could say was the only word that existed in her mind.

"Sarah..." she moaned, feeling her spine tense and relax uncontrollably as pleasure surged down its length. She could hardly even see straight. She was on the very edge of release.

Sarah smiled softly into her lover's breast, knowing from experience that the time was right. With the most feather light touch possible, Sarah closed her teeth on Traynor's tender nipple. Ever. So. Gently...

The sheer pleasure caused Traynor to moan as she orgasmed, her screams of pleasure causing Sarah to shiver erotically. After the euphoric sensations abated, Traynor's boneless body collapsed back into Sarah's warm embrace. As her mind slowly woke up again, she couldn't help but wonder.

"How do you do this to me, Sarah? How is it that you can make me orgasm JUST from a little attention to my chest? She just doesn't know how much she affects me..."

Any future thoughts vanished instantly when Sarah leaned in and their lips connected. Instinctively, Traynor's mouth opened as she allowed Sarah's powerful tongue access as it lovingly caressed with her own. Traynor moaned at the contact, the intimate dance. After a full minute, their lips slowly separated. After their blissful kiss, Traynor felt the familiar sense of exhaustion from lovemaking with Sarah. Just one orgasm had all but wiped her out. Sarah smiled as she read it in Traynor's body language and decided to take it to their bed.
Sarah treated Traynor to another one of her teasing acts of drying Traynor's boneless body. However, unlike every other time, Sarah didn't do it on herself though, this night was for Traynor. It was because of this that Sarah had left her own underwear on for this.

She suddenly scooped her up in her arms and carried her towards the nearest bedroom room. Traynor let out a delighted gasp at this, losing herself in the sensation of being in the strong and warm arms of the beautiful woman who had hopelessly stolen her heart. Traynor nuzzled Sarah's neck on the way over, planting ticklish and loving kisses on her skin and whispering softly to her all the way, which only made her walk faster.

As Sarah gently laid her lover's boneless body down on the mattress, Traynor could only sigh happily in response, still struggling to form words. She did cast Sarah a sleepy, adoring glance as she snuggled into the pillows. But then she felt the mattress shift as Sarah sat between her legs instead of laying beside her. As Sarah bent over, Traynor caught a glimpse of one all-too familiar mischievous smile from the N7 before she had fitted her face into the slender nook of her neck and nibbled ever so gently on her pulse point. Once again, Sarah used her knowledge of every sensitive spot on Traynor's body and applied just the right amount of pressure. Almost instantly, a needy whine broke free from Traynor as a bolt of pleasure shot through her down to between her legs.

Traynor was no longer sleepy and content as she laid against the pillows. Instead, she was watching intently, and her bright eyes were even wider than usual. Just a minute before, Traynor had been completely satisfied. Her last orgasm had physically drained her to the point where she would have fallen into the deepest slumber a few seconds after her head hit the soft pillows. The only thing she had wanted was to curl up with Sarah and go to sleep, but now, sleep was the last thing on her mind. Now, Traynor just wanted to be under Sarah again, taking everything her lover offered her. The feeling of Sarah's curvy body on top of her own was incredible, though she could still feel the powerful and coiled muscles beneath her flawless skin.

Their eyes met and locked with each other, and they both saw all the passion and lust the other was holding in that instant. It was the sexiest thing they could have done without touching each other. Sarah lowered herself over the specialist and planted her lips on hers. She kissed her lips, down along her neck, just above her breasts and back up again, making Traynor swoon in ecstasy.

As Sarah kissed, licked, and nipped her way down Traynor's abdomen, the specialist couldn't help it as her thighs automatically spread for Sarah from muscle memory. She felt her delicate inner muscles stretch of their own accord and allow Sarah entrance, who only paused for the briefest moment before slipping in her powerful tongue.

Traynor instantly felt every nerve ending in her body catch fire. "SARAH!"

As always, Sarah's most talented tool when it came to lovemaking was her talented tongue. As she had just done, Sarah never failed to make Traynor immediately scream her name once she used it. It always worked wonders with her body, stirring sensations of pleasure and ecstasy from her body so unnaturally powerful that it nearly hurt. On multiple occasions, it had even caused her to pass out. And no matter how many times she had experienced it, it always astonished the poor girl how long and muscular it seemed. Flexible... strong... wet... intrusive... and always able to easily reach that one... special spot. Witch each time the two made love it became harder and harder for Traynor to hold back and in turn Sarah got better and better at bringing her to release. In an orgasmic trance, the young girl could only buck her hips wildly as great tsunamis of pleasure overcame her every muscle. Sarah's face was the only constant in her world, swimming like a heavenly vision through her tear-clouded eyes.

Finally she felt her orgasm happen and she cried out in pleasure, Sarah's tongue continuing to lap at
her folds. Traynor whimpered slightly when Sarah started to withdraw from her body, her hips weakly lifting back up to take more of her love.

Spent from the orgasm the two simply lay on the bed, Traynor being cuddled lovingly by Sarah, the N7 soothing her with adoring words before sleep, promising how she'll always love and protect her. At the end, Traynor's last thought was...

"Whatever have I done to deserve such a woman like you, Sarah?"

"I could ask you the same, darling." Sarah smiled as Traynor rested her head on her favourite pillows.

"Remind to say a big thank you to your brother for inviting you up." said Traynor.

Sarah simply smiled and planted a kiss on Samantha's forehead.

"Say, if your bother does throw this party some of the others are talking about, will you dance?" Traynor asked.

"Maybe. But only if you're doing it too." said Sarah, giving a wink.

"Wouldn't dream of saying no, princess." Traynor smiled.

The two women intertwined their fingers with one another and then drew each other together in a deep kiss.

Leaving the Comm specialist and his sister to it, Austin headed to the bar. As he was about to order a drink, he spotted another rather familiar Krogan next to him.

"Wrex? What are you doing here?"

"Ugh… escaping." Wrex groaned as he brought his head down on the bar. "Ever since we cured the Genophage, it's been nothing but work."

"Council been riding you?" Austin asked.

"Bah! Not those Pyjak-slingers. No, it's the…" said Wrex, lowering his voice. "It's the females, Shepard. Now that they're fertile again… Ugh, I haven't slept in… I don't know how long."

"Can I get you two anything?" the Asari bartender asked.

"Two more drinks, and another bag of ice." Said Wrex.

"I would've thought you'd be enjoying the… perks of Krogan fertility." Said Austin.

"Enjoying it? There's a line of females outside my dwelling right now! Stretches on for as far as you can see. I had to sneak out my own bathroom window! Even then I was cornered by two more females on the ride from Tuchanka." Said Wrex.

"And it's just you? They're not spreading the love around?" Austin asked.

"Sure, but everyone wants their firstborn in generations to be strong and fit. I'm the leader of Clan Urdnot. I brought an end to the Genophage. Everyone wants a piece of me. And Bakara's no help at all. She encourages it! I'm telling you, Shepard. I'm in no shape to fight Reapers." Wrex groaned, once again putting his head on the bar.
"Considering everything we've been through, I can think of worse positions to be in." said Austin.

"Trust me, I've been in every position in the past few days. I don't know how you and Liara manage it." Wrex groaned.

Austin had to do his best not to laugh at that.

"Here are your drinks… and a bag of ice." Said the bartender.

Seeing where this was going, Austin turned his back while Wrex did what he had to with the ice.

"And I thought Mordin's procedure was painful…" the Krogan groaned. "Ah, well… Shit, Shepard. We sure have been through it, haven't we?"

"Still going through it." Said Austin.

"True. Well, here's to us! And to going through it." Said Wrex, raising his glass.

"I'll drink to that." Austin agreed, also raising his glass.

"Korbal!" said Wrex. "It means victory or death, roughly."

"Ah, but you can't die, Wrex…" said Austin. "You've got a family now. A really… big… family."

"More ice!" Wrex groaned.

Ventra and Garrus were next. They had told Austin to meet them in the Presidium.


"What'd you two have in mind?" Austin asked.

"Something that doesn't involve fighting Reapers." Said Ventra.

"I don't think they've conquered the bar yet." Austin suggested.

"We already scoped it out. But then Ventra and I thought of something much better that we can do with our shore leave. Something we'd actually remember." Said Garrus.

"So?"

"So, I had an idea…"

The skycar gently flew higher and higher until it was in the highest parts of the Presidium.

"Where we going?" Austin asked.

"Somewhere we're not supposed to." Said Garrus.

"Some things never change, do they?"

"Ever have that one thing you always wanted to before you died, Shepard?" Garrus asked.

"Too busy trying to live. What's yours?" Austin replied.
"The whole time I worked at C-sec, I'd stare up at the top of the Presidium and say to myself: I want to go up there." Said Garrus. "But I never did. There were 137 regulations telling me I couldn't."

"So you got them changed?" Austin asked.

"No. Now he just doesn't give a damn." Said Ventra.

The skycar finally set down and the three Helldivers stepped out.

"Figured its time to do something stupid just for the hell of it. Might be the last chance we ever get." Said Garrus. "A little busier than I imagined."

"How about a dive in the pool?" Austin suggested.

"You obviously haven't seen Turians swim. It's a lot of flailing and splashing interrupted by occasional bouts of drowning." Said Garrus.

"You're right. I'd just have to save your ass again." Said Austin.

"It makes up for all the times I pulled your ass out of the fire. Noveria, Feros, Ilos… We've had a hell of a ride, haven't we, Shepard?" said Garrus.

"I think that ride's been rough on you, Garrus—you've got a new scar every time I see you. Losing a step there in your old age?" Ventra joked.

"Raise your hand if you haven't been killed before," Said Garrus

"Touche." Austin shrugged.

"Times like these, you know who your real friends are. They're not the ones running around looking for an escape route. They're the ones who stand at your side through the worst of it, who never give up on you." Said Ventra. "We're both lucky to say we know someone like that."

"So am I." said Garrus. "Now, before we head back, there is one thing the three of us are going to settle once and for all…"

"Not saying you two don't know how to handle a gun. Just saying some of us know how to make it dance." Said Austin. "So let's find out who's really the best shot."

"Long as I get to use this." Said Ventra as he took out his bow and it unfolded.

"There are a few people in the galaxy who've seen us in action, Garrus. They seemed impressed." Said Austin.

"True, but that was before I joined Alpha." Said Garrus.

"All right, Vakarian, you're going down." Said Austin, readying his sniper.

"And don't worry. I loaded that gun with practice slugs for when you miss." Said Garrus.

Garrus threw the bottle and Austin fired. The bottle shatter it exploded.

"That was an easy one. Let you build your confidence." Said Garrus. "Long range, I wrote the book. Nobody alive can do this, not even Major Shepard and Ventra Prarken. Give me a tough one."

Austin took the bottle and threw it as hard as he could. Garrus nailed it within seconds.
"I said a tough one!" he said.

"My turn then." Said Ventra, daring the string back on his bow as an arrow flipped out of the bow's ammo pack.

"You sure you want to use arrows for this?" Austin asked.

"I always keep a pack of practice arrows with me should I ever feel the need." Said Ventra.

Garrus reached back and threw. Ventra realised the string and the arrow fired, smashing the bottle part as it shot right through.

"Heh. I could've done that one with my eyes closed." He laughed.

"Right. Step aside." Said Austin.

Garrus threw.

Austin felt it better to miss on purpose and let Garrus win. Be better if this was a good memory for Garrus after all.

He moved the gun to the side ever so slightly and fired. The shot missed.

"Oh blast!" he cursed as the bottle fell harmlessly into the water below.

"Looks like you're out, Shepard." Said Ventra. "Now it's you and me, Vakarian."

As Garrus went to pick up another bottle, Ventra lowered his voice.

"You missed on purpose, didn't you?" he asked.

"I didn't mind anyway. You know I'm not a sniper person." Said Austin. "Plus, might as well make this truly special for him."

"Think I should miss too?" Ventra asked.

"Well, that's up to you. Just bear in mind he's your friend." Austin replied.

Garrus threw the bottle and Ventra fired. The arrow missed by a few centimetres.

"I'm Garrus Vakarian, and this is my favourite spot on the Citadel!" Garrus cheered.

"It's windy up here." Ventra shrugged.

"Think I'm going to erect a monument right here—bronze this gun so the galaxy knows." Said Garrus.

"...that you're the king of the bottle shooters. Glad you're around, Garrus. Never know when the bottles might revolt." Said Austin.

Joker was next. Austin found him in the bar talking with the bartender, trying to get free drinks.

"I was here when Cerberus attacked, and I don't remember seeing you." Said the bartender. "I think I caught a glimpse of Major Shepard fighting over by the elevator bay, though."

"Well, yeah, Shepard was protecting the Council, but I had my own problems to deal with." Said
Joker.

The pilot then went on to tell a somewhat hard to believe story about how he'd commandeered an Atlas Mech and taken down a whole army of Cerberus soldiers.

"And that's pretty much how it happened... which is why you should comp my drinks." Joker finished.

"No." said the bartender.

"Aw, come on!"

"I barely believe what they're saying about Shepard. You? I don't think so." Said the bartender.

"Okay, trying not to be offended there. Look, if Shepard were here..." said Joker, he then noticed Austin. "Uh, Shepard. Hi."

Austin was very tempted to tell the bartender the truth, because that really was a terrible lie. In the end though, he decided not to betray Joker. It was shore leave after all.

"I'm Major Shepard, and I'll vouch for my pilot." He said. "His story might be... a bit exaggerated, but he still helped. As the pilot of my ship, I'd say he deserves a round of drinks on the house... just this once."

"I... sorry, Major. I had no idea." Said the bartender. "Drinks are on me, Lieutenant."

"Uh... thanks, Major."

"You owe me big time for that, Joker, because you really are a terrible liar." Said Austin, just enough so that only Joker heard him.

"I'll pay you back. I promise." Said Joker.

"You better. I don't take kindly to people who break their word."

Before the party started, Austin had invited Sarah up quickly because of a message he'd received from their mother asking if the three of them could talk. Sarah of course had accepted without hesitation.

Once she arrived, Austin set up the link and they soon heard the welcome voice of Rear Admiral Hannah Shepard.

"Hannah Shepard here."

"Hi, Mom." Said Austin.

"Hi, Mom." Sarah repeated.

"Oh. It's so good to hear both your voices." Said Hannah, happy to hear the voices of her children.

"Same here. We've all been worried about you when we didn't hear any contact." Said Austin

"I know, and I'm sorry that I got you all worried. Still, at least you know now." Said Hannah.

"You heard from Dad?" Sarah asked.
"Yes. We spent almost an hour talking. He was overjoyed to know I was alive." Hannah replied.

"So anyway—is this just a social call?" Austin asked.

"I just felt I needed to—I think about you both every day. I try not to worry." Said Hannah. "The other day I was remembering the bedtime stories we used to make up. You had your own ship and crew. The stories were always filled with adventure and danger."

"Oh, yeah. Huh. Haven't thought about that in a while." Austin smiled.

"Me neither. You'd always swoop in to punish the bad guys to save the day. So… there you are. Even when you were little, you dreamed of the life you have. And Sarah, well… I'd say that serving on the same ship as your brother is close enough." Said Hannah happily.

"Me too." Sarah smiled.

"Is that the reason you wanted us to call?" Austin asked.

"No… I just want you both to know that your father and I am proud of you. So proud." Said Hannah.

Finally, the time had come for the party. Austin had bought all the necessities, and all the arrangements were made. Inviting of course was no problem. He just invited everyone.

"What sort of party are you hoping to have tonight, Major? I could set things up for quiet conversation, or would you prefer a more energetic evening?" Glyph asked.

"Let's keep things relaxed… for now." Said Austin.

"Certainly, major. I'll ensure music remains at an appropriate volume and arrange for some refreshments. I will also modify my appearance to be more festive." Said Glyph.

"Hey. Come on in. Thanks for coming." Said Austin as he greeted everyone.

"Thanks for invite." Said Cortez.

"Make yourselves at home."

Liara then walked in, pausing briefly to give her husband a peck on the cheek.

"Enjoy yourself, love." He smiled.

"Oh, I'm sure I will." Said Liara.

"Happy to be here, Shepard." Said Kasumi as she walked in and disappeared.

There were unfortunately a few people who couldn't make it. Dr Chakwas had sent an apology for not being here due to some medical emergency according to Traynor, Kelly wasn't able to attend either since she wasn't on the Citadel at the time and was still back with the other students, Emily was also busy with a little story she was working on, something about an attempted Rouge Helldiver attack. Thane also was in no shape to attend the party, he still needed a lot of medical care after the injury Leng had given him. He had sent his apologies though. Austin had though of inviting Kolyatm but instead decided to let him be with his father. Mordin also couldn't attend due to urgent business he needed to take care of. He'd sent plenty of messages though.
Apart from that though, everyone else was present, even Dell and Sill had come.

Many of the guests got into little groups. The first one Austin decided to join consisted of James, Cortez, Ashley, Griffin and Jack. Eezo meanwhile was sitting on one of the chairs.

"Nice ink, but you got a long way to go to catch up." Said Jack.

"Nah, I just got this when I lost my squad a few years ago." Said James. "Hey, what's the story behind that? And… how far down does it go?"

"Tactful as always." Said Jack.


Deciding to mingle, Austin sat down.

"Hey, Shepard. You gonna have a drink?" Jack asked.

"Sure. How's everyone doing?" said Austin.

"Great so far. This is really nice." Said Cortez.

"It's very… soothing." Said Austin.

"It's great." Said James.

"Quiet." Said Ashely.

"I'd almost think it was Christmas." Said Griffin.

"After the excitement of the mission, it's a good quiet, right?" James asked.

"Seriously? We could ramp it up a little, Shepard." Said Jack.

"The night is young, Jack. Be a little patient and your wish may be granted." Said Austin.

"I'm just happy to be kicking back." Said James.

"Not still embarrassed that Shepard beat your pull up record? I certainly know to watch my back from now on." Griffin joked.

"For once, I'm happy to let someone beat me. Shepard being stronger makes me want to follow him more." Said James.

"Hmm, interesting way of looking at it." Said Griffin.

"I trust everyone's having fun?" Austin asked.

"I'm relaxed, but fun? I think my kindergarten graduation was more fun than this." Said James.

"Very funny."

The next group consisted of Liara, Traynor, Garrus, Sarah, Samara, Tali and Dell.

"I can't get over the size of this apartment. The electric bill alone could've paid for my college tuition." Said Traynor.
"Or funded the war." Said Liara.

"Or made a nice down payment on one of those Atlas mechs. Always wanted one." Said Garrus.

"You do know we have our own versions of those, right?" said Dell.

"True. But I hear you have to get extra training and need a license to use them." Said Garrus.

"That's only really for the big ones. The ones that are the size of those Atlas mechs can be used by any Helldiver." Said Dell. "And no, I am not getting you one. Not when there's a chance Dash could get his hands on it. Last time that happened, it wasn't pleasant."

"Or the money could put an air conditioner in this suit. You have no idea how hot it gets." Said Tali.

Austin joined the crowd and leant against the cabinet next to Liara, who rested her head against his shoulder.

"So Shepard, you can serve this swill, but can you drink it?" Garrus asked.

"I try not to overdo it. 90% of the time it's had me waking up in bed with very unlikely people." Said Austin.

"Thank you for reminding me." Samara sighed.

"You and Samara and Liara?! Damn, Bro!" said Sarah.

"Laugh it up, Sarah."

"Are we sure the Normandy is still there? Has anyone else tried to steal it?" Traynor asked.

"Stealing the Normandy. Now there's an idea." Said Kasumi, briefly uncloaking before disappearing again.

"Wait. What? Who…"

"Darling, do you still have your toothbrush?" Sarah asked.

"We can always-hic!-get another Normandy. Call up-hic!-the Arkanes and ask them to ppleaseeease build us the SR-4." Said Tali, hiccupping due to her drunkenness.

"But wouldn't that require you to change your name?" Samara asked. "Tali Zorah Von Normandy SR-4?"

"It's Vas Normandy. Hic!- "Von" means "one who has a weak bladder," which seems appropriate right about now." Said Tali.

"We've seen a lot of good times on the old girl." Said Garrus.

"That we have." Liara agreed.

"Indeed." Said Samara.

"Here, here." Tali agreed.

"Never had more fun." Sarah smiled.

"Some of you more than others. I'm just honoured to have squeaked in… And to have met the love
of my life." Said Traynor, smiling at her lover as she hugged her from behind.

"The feelings mutual, Sam." Said Sarah, planting a kiss on her lover's cheek.

Austin decided to propose a toast and raised his glass.

"To the Normandy!" He said.

"And to falling in love with the ship's captain and marrying him." Liara smiled as she and Austin kissed. "This is nice. I don't spend much time with everyone like this. As friends. I'm glad we could do this. Of course, if you wanted to steal me away later, I wouldn't say no."

Right as they stopped kissing though, Austin suddenly felt something hit his neck and he pulled out what looked like a practice dart. He looked around, trying to see who'd fired it, but couldn't see anyone. He was tempted to think Kasumi, but it didn't seem like something that she would do.

Then he temporarily spotted Troy appear then disappear for a split second. The Major and made a mental note to be careful who he talked to, especially since Troy was know to do a lot of excessive things when drunk.

Most of Alpha, Xun, and Sill meanwhile were in the lounge area.

"I've always wondered. What happens if you sneeze in your helmets?" Sill asked.

"What kind of question is that?" said Dash in surprise.

"I'm curious." Said Sill.

"It's a bit of a strange question though." Said Xun.

"It must be awkward though. I mean, you've got this holo interface and then behind that a visual image of what's outside, then when you sneeze you've got it all messed up." Said Sill.

"Well, wouldn't you know? I mean, you sometimes wear helmet when you're doing some work on the Normandy." Said Xun.

"I wouldn't, actually." Said Sill. "Arkanes can't get common colds, so therefore we don't sneeze. Not a lot of people know that."

"Even when around someone who has got a cold?" Alaara asked.

"Yep. Something about our anatomy makes us immune to a few human diseases and illnesses." Said Sill.

"What about allergies?" Sandra asked.

"We don't have those either." Said Sill. "Anyway, that still doesn't answer my question."

"Well truth to be told, Helldivers can't sneeze." Said Troy, suddenly appearing. "When we get our suits fitted, we're injected with some special serums which give small strength increases and also bolsters our immune systems. Makes us less likely to get diseases or fall ill. Including, making us immune to common colds."

"Oh. Well, that's a shame." Said Sill.
"It's more a relief in my opinion." Said Xun. "If someone had a really bad cold and a blocked up nose and sneezed in their helmet, it would be a right mess."

"Eww! I didn't think of that." Said Sill.

"Kids." Alaara sighed.

"Everyone playing nice, I assume?" Austin asked as he sat down.


"Aw! Is my curiosity boring you?" said Sill teasingly.

At that, Kraan actually fell asleep, much to everyone's surprise.

"Wow. Never seen that before." said Dash in surprise. He was trying to sound innocent, but everyone could see what he was trying to hide.

"Dash, did you spike his drink again?" Austin asked.

"I couldn't help it." Dash laughed.

He's gonna kill you when he wakes up, you know." Said Leena.

"He'll have to catch me first." Said Dash. "And people say I'm slow. Wait a minute… that was an insult!"

Everyone couldn't help but chuckle or laugh at this.

"Hey, Shepard, are we gonna watch a film at all at this party?" Jet asked.

"I don't know yet. Why do you ask?" Austin replied.

"Because I want to recommend Top Gun for us to watch." Said Jet.

"Favourite of yours?" Austin asked.

"Favourite? I bloody grew up with that film. Hell, that film was one of the main contributing factors of why I became a pilot in the first place." Said Jet.

"So we owe it to Tom Cruise to you being here?" Dash joked.

"And me saving your life back on Ilos."Jet added.

"Ilos? Jet that was 5 years ago." Said Austin, slightly confused.

"You don't remember an atmospheric fighter that saved you from that Thresher Maw husk?" Jet asked.

"That was you?" Sandra asked.

"Yeah. Where do you think I go this medal from?" said Jet, indicating to the medal of honour engraved on the left breast plate of her armour. "Something I've just realised. If it hadn't been for me, none of us would be here."

"Here, here," Dash agreed. I think this woman deserves a little reward for that. Free drink? Something like that?"
"I'm just honoured to have joined this squad. It's not often that a pilot like me gets to join a legendary multispecies squad that fought and took down Hellspawn." Said Jet.

"You'd have loved the old days, especially that time when we escaped them in the Hellraiser. That was fun." Said Dash.

"Fun? I threw up all over one of the seats because of your driving." Said Sandra.

"Told you to take those pills." Said Alaara.

"I miss the Hellraiser. Why don't we ever use it anymore?" Dash asked. "I mean we still rightfully own it and keep it on Arkadia, but we've never brought it aboard the Normandy."

"2 reasons. Number 1, we haven't really had any missions that require it to be used and Number 2, you're driving scares us too much." Said Sandra.

"Come on. Live a little." Said Dash.

"We'd like to live a lot, Dash. That's why we're not letting you behind the wheel of another rover." Said Ventra. "Only the Rumbler, because admittedly that is the coolest vehicle."

"Spoilsports. All of you." Dash sighed.

As Austin looked around, he noticed that someone seemed to be missing.

"Has anyone seen Troy?" he asked.

At that moment he suddenly felt another prick in his neck and he pulled another practice dart out.

"I'm over here." Troy whispered as he appeared and disappeared against Austin's' shoulder as he looked in the direction.

"Despite Dash's slightly mental mind… I'd say we've had a quite a life." Said Leena.

"Indeed. I wouldn't wish for another squad, especially after all we've been through." Said Austin.

"And I've never had better friends." Said Xun.

"To Alpha." Said Ventra, raising his drink.

"And to falling in love with the Squad's sexy second in command." Said Sandra as she snuggled against Alaara.

"And to also falling in love with one of the most handsome Turians I've ever met." Leena added.

Upstairs meanwhile was another group consisting of Zaeed, Javik, Wrex and Grunt.

"So which is strongest? You, or the tank bred?" Javik asked.

"Yeah, I'm plenty curious myself." Said Zaeed.

"What'd I miss?" Austin asked, joining the conversation.

"The Prothean here wants to know who would win in a fight between me and Wrex." Said Grunt.

"You gotta admit, Shepard, it's a good question." Said Zaeed.
"It *is* a good question." Austin agreed.

"No it's not. Baby Pyjak here wouldn't stand a chance." Said Wrex.

"Don't listen to this fossil. The only thing he could defeat is a glass of warm milk." Said Grunt.

"Ha! I got head lice bigger than you, Junior."

"You boys done talkin'?" asked Zaeed.

"Yeah." Said Grunt. "Only one way to settle this."

He then suddenly head-butted Wrex hard.

"Ha! Now the party's starting!" the older Krogan cheered. He then head-butted Grunt back.

"Another time, guys. I don't have time to buy new furniture." Said Austin.

"Aw, just when it was getting good." Said Wrex.


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"So, Liara, is this the T'Soni-Shepard love next? I hope we're not interrupting anything you two might've been… planning." Said Garrus.

"Whatever the species, males never change. Do they?" Liara asked.

"Surely we're not all that bad." Said Austin.

"You, my love, are an exception." Said Liara.

"Perhaps it's a good thing we Asari don't have any." Said Samara.

"Traynor, do people ever have a hard time understanding your accent?" Tali asked.

"I wish they did! Something about an English accent says, "I'm available, please hit on me," even when I'm not on Earth." Said Traynor.

"That gets me wondering. You have an English accent, and the two Shepards have British accents. What's the difference?" Dell asked.

"Is this a riddle, or a joke?" said Sarah.

"I'm just asking out of curiosity." Dell shrugged.

"I'll be honest and say I haven't the faintest idea. They both sound the same in my opinion." Austin shrugged.

"Isn't it that British sound more posh?" Traynor asked.

"That's a common misconception. Only very rich British people talk like that." Said Sarah.

"Well, you have a rather rich brother." Said Traynor.

"Even so, I really doubt I'd talk posh. Can you even imagine me speaking like that? Would just sound silly." Said Austin.
"Well… you did speak like that once to infiltrate a Hellspawn base." Said Sarah.

"Just when I thought I'd buried that horrible memory." Austin sighed.

"If I had a credit for every amorous attempt I've had to reject over the centuries, I could purchase the Citadel." Said Samara.

"When I was an archaeology student, I found galactic dialects to be fascinating. All of the phonetic variants…" said Liara.

"Liara, this is a party. The only dialect I want to hear from you is-Hic! -*inebriated Asari.* said Tali.

"I must admit, I still feel like something of an outsider. You all have such a history with Shepard." Said Traynor.

"It's mostly a lot of running and shooting and usually, somewhere in there, a button needs pushing. But Shepard always hogs that part." Said Garrus.

"Yes, a history of close calls, narrow escapes, and more near-death encounters than I care to remember." Said Liara.

"Working with Shepard reminded me of my younger days running with mercenaries, blowing things up with mercenaries, and occasionally sleeping with mercenaries." Said Samara.

"I remember first meeting Shepard. All I kept thinking was. "I hope he took a shower, because my filter needs replacing, and humans carry a lot of germs." Said Tali.

"And five years later, here you are, drinking her alcohol through a straw. I'd call that progress." Said Liara.

"Emergency induction port!" Tali corrected her.

"Do you think the Takaal and the Arkanes are related somehow?" Ventra asked.

"What makes you say that?" Sill replied.

"Well, think about it. Both are similar to insects, you both have some of the most advanced tech in the galaxy, and you've both originally remained hidden from galactic society." Said Leena.

"That's more about similarities, not relation." Said Sill. "But I can assure you, my people are not related to the Takaal. Our anatomies are very different. They have four legs for crying out load."

"You can walk on walls like they can." Sandra reminded her.

"Yeah, but I need a harness and grav boots to do that." Sill argued.

"I don't think there is any relationship between the two. Besides, their species are separated by 65 million years. It's practically impossible unless the Arkanes are descendants, and there's a 100 to 1 chance of that being right." said Austin supportingly.

"See? Shepard understands." said Sill.

"Alright, I suppose you're right. But still, you can't deny the similarities." said Alaara.

"Just pure coincidence." said Sill.
"I'm just saying though, there's a fine line between coincidence and... Oh, what's the word?" Sandra tried to say.

"Fate?" Xun suggested.

"No, I think she meant to say fact." said Leena.

"It doesn't matter. The point is, my species aren't related to our enemy. And even if we were, we'd still fight them. If we don't, they'll wipe us all out." said Sill.

"No argument there." said Jet.

"Your guests appear to be getting rowdy, Major. Would you like me to change the intensity of the atmosphere?" asked Glyph.

"The party's just getting started. Let's turn it up." Said Austin.

"At your service, Major." After that, the party started to become a lot more energetic.

"Shhhhuuuuuuuuuuum. Shhhhuuuuuuuuuuuuummmmmmm." Said Tali very drunkenly as she tried to do some kind of impression of the normandy. "Of course the SR3 is much bigger, so they upgraded the ventilation system. More of a wuhwuhwuhwuhwuhwuh."  

"That's... actually what it sounds like." Jacob laughed.

"I'll have to take her word for it. She works on it way more than Dad and I do." Sill shrugged.

"There is a lot more space now." Said Liara.

"But if you move further up, it's more of tktuh-tktuh-tktuh." Said Tali.

Dell found it very difficult not to laugh.

"A what?" he managed to say without bursting into laughter.

"You have to imagine my arms are the wings." said Tali.

"Ah, of course. Over by the med bay." Sill chuckled.

"What are you guys talking about?" Austin asked.

"Tali was acting out the differences between the original Normandy and the SR-3. Said James.

"Acting?"

"I may have recorded it, and that recording may already have six million extranet hits and a fan site." Said Kasumi, once again appearing then disappearing.

"You better hope I never find you!" said Tali.

"Yeah, but which one's better?" James asked.

"The SR-3 is harder to perform. Does that make it better or worse?" said Tali.
"Come on! The SR3's way cooler. It's twice the size of the SR2, has way more weapons, more advanced technology and it has wings that move like those on an X-Wing." said Sill.

"X what?" Liara asked.

"X-wing, from Star Wars." said Sill, hoping that would ring a bell. But nothing. "Okay, basically, some of the wings change their angles to combat mode for better firepower and speed."

"There, was that so hard to say?" said Tali.

"Yes."

"We wouldn't have had the SR-3 or even the SR-2 for that matter if it hadn't been for the original Normandy." Said Austin.

"It was a great ship." Said Tali.

"I'll never forget the times we had on it." Said Liara, remembering that was how she and Austin had met and it was where they'd first become bond mates.

"It made the quietest little sounds. A sort of shhhhuuuuuuuuummm. Shhhhuuuuuuuuummmmm." Tali repeated.

"The first Normandy brought us together. I don't know where I'd be without it." Said Liara.

"You would probably still be stuck inside that Prothean energy ball." Said Tali.

"What?"

"When Austin first met Liara, she was trapped inside a… What was it again?"

"It was a Prothean security device. I hit something I wasn't supposed to." Said Liara.

"I'll act it out: Can you hear me out there?! I'm trapped. I need help!" I'm in a bubble!" said Tali.

"That's funny." Jacob laughed.

"No it isn't!" said Liara.

"Especially since I had battle the Terror Geth hand to hand after I rescued her from that." Said Austin.

"Shhhhuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuummm. Shuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuummmmmmm. You know what I'm talking about. Wuhwuuhwuwhuhwuwhuwhu."

"Hmm, that's a good impression. Might use that for undercover work." said Troy, temporarily flashing as he appears then disappeared very quickly.

"Okay, that's not funny, Mr French." said James. He then changed the subject. "So, mantis girl, what do Arkanes actually eat? so FAR, i haven't seen you eat any of the food."

"Mantis girl?" said Sill, sounding rather insulted.

"What? i didn't mean that as an insult. It's just your kind look like earthen mantis"' said James.

"We don't' like being compared to or called mantis'." Dell explained. "We consider it what you
humans call "Racist."

"Oh. Sorry. I didn't know." James apologised.

"No harm done, and i know you didn't mean that in an offensive way anyway." said Sill. "Though does it really hurt to use my name?"

"James has a bit of a thing for nicknames." said Austin.

"Fair enough." said Sill. "Anyway, to answer your question, we eat what you eat. I've only not touched the food yet cause i'm not hungry."

"Really? I thought you'd have special foods like Quarians and Turians do." said James.

"funny you should say that though, because we can actually eat dextro foods as well." said Dell. "We tend not to though because it gives us indigestion."

"It has it's advantages though. If we were stranded in a desert with only dextro foods, that would at least mean we could survive, even if it was uncomfortable." said Sill.

Grunt meanwhile was doing the job of bouncer and was constantly dismissing anyone who tried to get in.

"I heard there's a big party in there! Can we come in?"

"No, you can't. Go away." Said Grunt, dismissing them.

"How's it going over here?" Austin asked.

"You can't come in." said Grunt as he dismissed another guest. "It's going good."

"I see that. Anyone interesting trying to get in?" Austin asked.

"Not really, no." said Grunt. "Get lost."

"Can I try that?" Austin asked.

"Sure. Press the button and say "no."

"Private party. So, no. You cannot come in." said Austin.

"Great work." Said Grunt.

"Felt good. Thanks."

"No! See? Easy."

"Keep up the good work."

"Will do." Said Grunt. "I told you already: No!"

Austin found Zaeed and Samara stood in front of one of the apartment's art paintings.

"Hey, sweetheart. We never really talked about it, but you and me have a lot in common." Said Zaeed,
"We do?" Samara replied.

"Course we do. We're both hunters, right?"

"I suppose we are. And?"

"And… well… And we're both good lookin?"

"Hello, Shepard. Zaeed was just keeping me company." Said Samara as Austin joined them.

"You admiring the art?" he asked.

"Beauty as they is in the eye of the beholder. Hey, beautiful?" said Zaeed.

"What do you think, Samara?"

"Hang on, hang on. Don't get all snooty on me, I didn't' say I didn't like it. I do like it actually."

"If I'm completely honest, I'm not sure what it is. I like the way the colours blend… and the depth of the… Actually, I have no idea what I'm saying." Said Samara.

"It makes me feel uneasy, like when you're alone in the dark lying in wait and the cold wind brushes across your face like the kiss of death." Said Zaeed.

"You are a complicated individual, Zaeed Massani." Said Samara.

"You bet your sweet ass."

Jack and Miranda meanwhile were sat at one of the two bars. Austin could only hope they didn't get into another fight again.

Surprisingly, everyone seemed completely to Alaara and Sandra who were kissing on the sofa. No nakedness yet, fortunately.

"So… you're leading the Grissom Academy students." She said.

"Yeah? That a problem?" said Jack.

"Just a surprise. You psych profile suggested you were mainly interested in yourself." Said Miranda.

"You're telling me I'm only interested in myself? Oh, that's just fucking perfect. Did it occur to you that maybe I'm trying to grow as a goddamn person? And for your information, I do actually care about someone other than myself. Kelly for example." Said Jack.

"Oh, I could tell you were growing. I assumed it was… whatever that is you're wearing." Said Miranda.

"Oh, these? Well, yeah, they were strapped down with a leather belt before. It's kind of stupid move to show off your rack in the middle of a maximum-security prison ship." Said Jack.

"I've never had the pleasure."

"You'd never survive. You might break a nail."

"You have no idea what I'm capable of."
"You're a spoiled rick girl cheerleader."

"Victim."

"Test-tube clone princess."

"I think it's past your bedtime."

"Oh, did I hit a nerve? I didn't get to read your psych profile."

Austin decided to intervene before this got too out of hand.

"Ladies, I see we've all gotten enough to drink." He said. He kept his arms crossed so that the two women know he was being serious and saying "Don't even think about it." Without saying it.

"Relax, Shepard. I'm not gonna smear the walls with her this time." Said Jack.

"And I couldn't possibly think of anything worse to do to her than that haircut." Said Miranda.

"Hey, cheerleader, my hair and I've been fighting brutes, marauders and Takaal soldier on the front lines of this war. Meanwhile, you got your big bubbly butt kicked by some guy with a sword." Said Jack.

"Swords are just as good as guns, Jack." Austin reminded her.

"When they use ones like yours, yes. I'm simply stating that Leng had weak swords compared to your Excalibur and he managed to kick the cheerleader's ass with it." Said Jack.


"Honestly, I thought it might help if you two just kissed and got it over with." Said Austin.

"What?"

"I mean this is all just sexual tension, right? Two powerful biotics, forceful personalities, confident in their sexuality…"

"Oh my god." Miranda sighed.

"I'm ready to record. I'm pretty sure there's a market for this." Said Kasumi.

"Kasumi, I will find you, and I will hurt you badly. Ugh, I need another drink." Said Jack.

"One for me, too. No ice." Miranda agreed.

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Liara, James, Ashley, Griffin, Jacob and Alaara meanwhile were having a debate on biotics and physical strength.

"Absolutely, biotics are impressive, I'm not saying they aren't." said James.

"You're just saying that they're not that impressive." Said Liara.

"I'm not saying anything! I'm just saying… aw, shit."

"No, it's fine. I'm sure no one here is insulted." Said Liara sarcastically.
"Maybe."

"What are you trying to say, James?" Austin asked.

"I'm just saying... What I'm trying to say is... I mean, check out these guns."

"Mine are bigger, you know." Said Griffin.

"Think we'd rather you didn't go there, boys." Said Ashley."

"Biotics can't give you the kind of fine instrument, the peak physical form, that you see before you." Said James.

"Okay, you work for it. I get that." Said Jacob.

"Well, we can enlarge certain areas in a union." Said Alaara.

"I am just going to keep quiet on that subject." Said Liara."

"I'll have you know that my physical conditioning is top rate."

"I mean it, check me out."

"Hmm, not sure if I can tell just by looking." Said Ashley.

"Come on in closer. Don't be shy." Said James.

"I'm within punching distance, you know." Griffin reminded James.

"Relax, Griff. I didn't mean it in that way." Said James.

"Everyone playing nice, I assume?" Austin asked.

"Of course, Austin. James was just explaining how physical conditioning trumps biotics." Said Liara.

"Really? You going there, James?"

"Com on, Loco! You have to go with me on this one. Biotics are strong but unpredictable-all that cooling down..." said James.

"Shepard, where did you find this guy?" Jacob chuckled.

"I wouldn't call my biotics unpredictable. I don't think the Reapers would either." Said Alaara.

"A person can improve their physique. But biotics? They are what they are." Said James.

"He's joking. Right, James? I mean, what's your point exactly?"


"I think I am actually going to agree with James on this one. Us big guys never have to cool down. In fact, the hotter the better." Said Griffin.

"Hilarious." Said Jacob.

"Just hush and do some sit ups." Kasumi whispered.
"Kasumi…"

"Just looking!" said the thief as she vanished again.

"Goddess." Liara sighed.

"James, Griffin, this is a no-brainer. Biotics win hands down. We're talking about harnessing dark energy, here." Said Austin.

"Yeah, I hear you." James sighed.

"Look around you. That had to be an argument you couldn't win." Said Austin.

"It's okay, man." Said Jacob.

"Yeah, well… you win some, you lose some." James shrugged.

"Ashley, you couldn't back me up?" Griffin asked.

"Not without closer inspection." Ashely smiled as she hugged Griffin's arm a bit tighter.

"Hmm, I think I could make that happen."

"Okay, then."


EDI, Traynor and Tali meanwhile were sat in the lounge area. Sill was also sat next to Tali, but she'd fallen asleep while listening to her music player.

"What's wrong, you two?" Austin asked as he sat down.

"I am asking Specialist Traynor why she found my voice sexually attractive." EDI replied.

"This is really good cheese, Shepard. I put some in through the filters. Is it organic?" said Tali, rather ignoring the subject.

"On one occasion, you said you wanted to, quote, pin my voice against the wall and run your tongue along its collarbone." Said EDI.

"Well, there's some context here that… you were talking about quantum entanglement, and… I didn't know you were an AI!" said Traynor.

"There's some kind of herb in the cheese that I can't quite place. Is it sage or basil?" said Tali.

"Anyway, I was just joking. You know, this was before I'd met Sarah and fallen in love with her." Said Traynor.

"Really? My diagnostics suggested that you were genuinely aroused." Said EDI.

"It's really rare to get herbed dextro cheeses. The Turians never bother." Said Tali.

"You have diagnostics? Cerberus programmed you to check body language?" Traynor asked.

"I get more reliable results measuring pupil dilation and thermal readings of erogenous zones." Said EDI.
"Oh, good lord." Traynor sighed.

"Wait, this is dextro cheese, right? Keelah, did I forget to scan the cheese? This is why I don't drink!" said Tali.

"Fair's fair, Traynor. EDI has a right to ask about what you said." Said Austin.

"I was very interesting in Traynor's ability to develop sexual feelings for what was at the time, a bodiless voice." Said EDI.

"You are all terrible." Traynor sighed. "EDI, I apologize for saying that I wanted to roll naked with your voice in satin sheets."

"Oh, I was not offended. In fact, it was flattering." Said EDI.

"Even the part where I wanted to grab your voice by the hair and nibble my way down its back?" Traynor asked.

"I do not in fact remember you saying that, Samantha." Said EDI.

"Oh. I must've said that to Sarah then. Never mind!"

"Don't mind me, I'm just trying to run a toxin treatment program... so I don't die." Said Tali.

"Your guests appear to be enjoying themselves, Major. What shall I do now?" Glyph asked.

"Let's turn up the music and get people dancing." Said Austin.

"Very good, Major. I have had little opportunity to use my bounce and spin functionality."

After that, pretty much everyone started dancing. Some of the more hard-core crew like Kraan, Wrex, Zaeed and Javik however were reluctant to do so.

"Jeff?"

"Yes, EDI?"

"At social events like this, it is customary to dance with friends or loved ones! Would you dance with me?" EDI asked.

"It's gonna take a lot more than a polite request to make that happen, EDI." Said Joker.

"I have recordings of you talking in your sleep that would make for a highly amusing extranet video." EDI warned him.

"Okay, that's cheating." Said Joker.

"So he won't dance with, huh?" Austin asked.

"Hello, Shepard. He will not." Said EDI.

"Well, I will." Austin suggested.

At this, Joker burst into laughter and didn't stop for nearly a minute. Eventually, Austin got tired of it and he accessed his omni tool.
"Joker!" he said forcefully, his voice sounding like the Commander.

That shut Joker up and he nervously sat back down.

"That's better. I was being serious." Said Austin.

"Seriously though, don't go there." Said Joker.

"Well, then maybe you should dance with her." Said Austin.

"Other people are dancing, Jeff." Said EDI.

"Yes, they are. And I am sitting here enjoying my drink." Said Joker.

"Joker…"

"No."

"Come on."

"No!"

"Seriously?"

"Ugh… fine!"

Joker reluctantly stood up and began dancing with EDI.

Some of the others meanwhile were in the main room, dancing. Even Jack was dancing while she knelt on the table. Sarah meanwhile was dancing with Traynor whiel Alaara was dancing with Sandra. Sill had even taken it a step further by bringing her harness and mag boots along. Right now she was dancing while hanging upside down from the ceiling. Dell was simply watching. He wasn't much of a dancing person, but it did make him happy to see his daughter having fun with everyone else.

"Woohoo!"

"You should bring out those moves more often, Sam." Said Sarah.

"This is unexpected-and fun." Said Samara.

"I'm always amazed humans can dance, with the way your legs bend." Said Garrus.

"The way our legs bend?"

"Yes, you and the Asari. I'm surprised you don't tip over!"

"I don't tip over until I've found company, dog-legs. Till then, watch and learn!" said Cortez.

"Hey, Sill. Is that harness for safety?" Jack asked.

"Technically, yes. It's the boots that keep me up here." said Sill.

"Aren't you gonna get sick eventually though?" Traynor asked.

"Nope, that's the benefit of having a very fast digestive system that has a contracting opening. Holds everything in very nicely. plus, I've been doing this for years." said Sill.
Liara then came up behind Austin and stood next to him.

"May I have this dance, Liara?" Austin offered.

"How can I say no." Liara smiled.

The two walked hand in hand into the group and began dancing.

"Hah! Captain and wife on deck." Cortez cheered.

"Glad you both could join us." Said Sarah.

"Has she always been like this?" Traynor asked.

"Sarah always loves a good party." Austin smiled.

"I'm more surprised to see you and Liara dancing." Said Traynor.

"Austin is saving the galaxy. You have to forgive a few eccentrics." Said Tali.

"It's… very enthusiastic." Said Traynor as Sarah twirled her around.

"It's impressive." Said Samara.

"Reminds me of the wedding. That was quite a weekend." Sill smiled, still dancing upside down. "First time I did karaoke."

"We should record this and broadcast it for the Reapers. They'll either run away, melt down, or fall in love." Said Garrus.

"Good to see some things don't change." Said Jack.

"Well, I like it, Major. It's good to see you cut loose now and then!" said Cortez.

"Thank you all for your loyalty and support!" said Austin.

Almost an hour later, Austin finally felt it best to take a break. He planned to try and take a quick nap before returning. As he neared the bedroom however, he suddenly heard something.

"And the boxers or brief's question is finally answered!"

He rounded the corner and found Kasumi going through his drawers.

"Oh, hey, Shep." She said.

"You're going through my drawers?" Austin asked.

"I go through everyone's drawers." Kasumi replied.

"Can't you just mingle and have fun, like a normal person?" Austin asked.

"Why would I want to do that?" Kasumi replied. "By the way, you have excellent tast in underwear, and so does Liara."

"Glad you could make it, Kasumi." Austin sighed.
"Thanks. I'm having a really good time." Said Kasumi.

"By your very strange standards." Said Austin.

"Yep!"

Returning to the party, Austin found Liara, James, Jacob, Miranda, Ashley and Griffin together again.


"Could too." Liara argued.

"You've seen biotics in action." Said Miranda

"I could float you off this balcony without breaking a sweat." Said Liara. She did now sound as though she'd had quite a few drinks.

"Oh, I know you could, but do you have the cojones to actually do it? Any of you?" said James.

"What a guy. Buckle up, brother." Said Jacob.

At that, Liara gently lifted James up with very little difficulty.

"What's up?" Austin asked.

"Just demonstrating a little biotic supremacy." Said Miranda.

"You okay, James?" Austin asked.

"Yeah, this is trippy! I'm kinda buzzing all over." Said James.

"Exactly. Nice, right? I can feel that way on a whim." Said Jacob.

"Do you find it relaxing?"

"Uh, kinda. Among other things."

"Looks good on you."

"I'm glad you lost that bet, Vega. When's my turn?" Ashley asked.

"Careful… I need my full crew back when the night's over." Said Austin.

"Okay, you've had your fun. Put me down now." Said James.

Liara let James drop.

Austin had seen Tali vanish into the restroom, but she hadn't come out for a while.

"Tali, are you okay?" he asked, knocking gently on the door.

The door opened to reveal Tali lying on the floor.

"Yep! You want to see my tattoo?" she replied drunkenly.
"I don't think you have a tattoo, Tali." Said Austin.


"Remind me to talk to Jack in the morning." Said Austin. "Where'd you get the omni-tattoo, anyway?"

"Down in the lower wards, near the bottom." Said Tali.

"I meant where on your body." Said Austin. He had a feeling that he knew what Tali was going to say though.

"So did I! Yeah, I heard that one from Liara." Tali laughed.

"Get some rest, Tali."

Leena and Ventra meanwhile it seemed had vanished from the party. As Austin was walking around trying to find them however, he found a piece of Leena's suit lying outside one of the bedroom doors... which was looked. He could also hear some faint humming coming from within.

"You like it?" he heard Ventra say.

"Hmm, very nice. That'll certainly make this night something to remember." Leena replied. "Quite big as well."

"You bet it's big. It needs to be." said Ventra. "Wouldn't be much good if it wasn't."

Austin had to say, he never thought he would've heard this sort of talk from the two, even if they were now married.

"How much is in it?" Leena asked.

"A lot." said Ventra.

"Mmm, tasty." said Leena.

Not wanting to linger too long, Austin felt it best to just knock and give the piece back so that Leena wasn't left looking for a piece of armour.

He knocked gently and waited for a reply.

"Can't answer right now. Busy." said Leena.

"You've left a piece of your suit outside, Leena." said Austin.

"Oh. He's right, I have." said Leena.

"Hang on. we'll open the door." said Ventra.

Austin was about to object, but too late. The door swung open. As the Helldiver prepared to avert his gaze however a rather different sight greeted his eyes. Both Ventra and Leena were completely clothed and were stood before what was unmistakably a piñata in the shape of a Reaper. Leena also
had her mask off and appeared to be eating a small bit of the candy left over that wasn't stuffed inside.

"Oh."

"Ah, there's my mask. Thank you, Shepard." said Leena as Austin handed her the bit of suit.

"What do you think? Like it?" Ventra asked.

"Yeah. It's... quite nice." said Austin.

"Is something wrong?" Leena asked.

"Sorry. It's just... I overheard some of your talk from inside and it sounded like you were..." said Austin embarrassingly.

At this, both Ventra and Leena burst into laughter.

"Don't worry, Shepard. We don't get to that until the party's over." said Leena.

"So when is everyone else gonna see this?" Austin asked.

"In a few minutes. Just have to a men few adjustments, then it's ready for the party." said Ventra.

"Seems a bit fat." said Leena as Austin left, trying not to let the pictures come back into his mind as he heard them.

"It needs to be. Otherwise the stuff won't come out." said Ventra.

"It's not gonna be sticky, is it?

"If it's hot, maybe."

"Well, it tastes nice. that's what matters."

Austin headed back to the group to find James, Jacob and Griffin all doing push ups while Ashley, Liara, Miranda and Hawk watched.

"One hundred and sixty." James groaned.

"Anyone counting? Miranda?" asked Jacob.

"Absolutely. I think you're just fantastic." Said Miranda. "How many have I done?"

"Keep going!" said Liara.

"What's up?"

"Just demonstrating a little physical supremacy." Said James, pushing up.

"But can you do that with a drink and snack in each hand?" Austin asked.


"Why is Griffin lapping you?" Hawk asked in surprise.
"Don't act so surprised." Said Griffin.

"Jacob is showing you up. How come?" Miranda asked.

"What do you mean? This is my thing, baby." Said Jacob.

"Seem a little slow tonight, James." Said Austin.

At that moment, Kasumi suddenly appeared. She'd been sitting on James, which had caused the Alliance soldier to slow.

"Well, nobody's perfect." She said. "How's it going on your end?"

James finally gave way and collapsed.

"Okay, now. Let's find a more fun way to get sweaty." He said.

Sill was still out on the dance floor with a few others who'd now joined. Alaara and Sandra were doing a lot of very erotic moves, almost like those a stripper would do, Jet was doing some unbelievably fast and lively dance with Dash and Xun had joined in too and was using her fan. Traynor and Sarah were still dancing, they though were taking it gentle and were sticking to romantic.

"Everyone having fun?" Austin asked.

"Yeah! This party's slamming!" Sill cheered

"Mmmmm, really hot in this place." Alaara moaned.

"No undressing around the others." said Austin.

"I agree. I'd rather you weren't flashing your tits." said Xun.

"I wouldn't mind." said Traynor. in fairness, she did sound a bit drunk.

"You know, there is a poker table in the other room. If we lock the door..." Sandra suggested.

"Well, I'll pass on that." said Austin.

"Me too." Sill agreed.

"Aw come on! You've got six tits after all. Why hide them?" said Alaara drunkly.

"Six? Okay, now you're really drunk." said Sill.

"My wife has a very dirty mind." said Alaara.

"And you love it." said Alaara seductively as she tried to pull down the zipper on Sandra's outfit, but the human stopped her.

"I could do this all night!" said Dash, twirling Jet around zoo fast she was a blur.

"Take my breath away." said Jet.

What happened next, took everyone by surprise. Dash suddenly took Jet in his arms and kissed her. At first, the pilot was taken aback, but she quickly settled into it.
"Woooooo! Look at him go!" Alaara cheered.

"I think that's very sweet. Dash deserves someone like her." said Xun.

"Two speed freaks in love. God help us." said Sarah, but she was still happy to see this.

Dash and Jet finally stopped for air.

"That enough for you?" Dash winked.

"Well, there are more... effective ways." said Jet.

"Save that for later, you two." said Austin. "Still, it's about time."

"Thanks for all your support." Dash smiled.

"Just don't get Jet singing any top guns songs." said Traynor.

"At least not without me." Sill added.

"Thank you for inviting us, Shepard." said Xun. "I haven't had this much fun in a long time."

"I'm glad you're all having fun." Austin smiled.

"You're the best, Bro." Sarah smiled.

Dell meanwhile, Austin found in the kitchen and he appeared to working on the stove.

"Dell, what are you doing?"

"Kraan woke up a minute earlier and tried to cook himself something. He ended up head butting the stove in frustration." said Dell.

"Where is Kraan?" Austin asked.

"He's in the lounge, trying to regain his senses. I think he also keeps saying "Kill Dash." said Dell.

"Why am I not surprised?" Austin asked rhetorically as he noticed the Krogan Helldiver moving around dizzily in the lounge. "You seen Troy at all?"

At that moment however another practice dart hit him in the neck.

"Enjoying yourself, I see." said Austin as Troy's disguise dropped and he stopped being a hair.

"I feel a little drunk." Troy laughed.

"Can't you just mingle with everyone?"

"Maybe. It wouldn't hurt to take it clam and talky to people again, I'll admit." said Troy.

"By the way, thanks again for your help with Hellspawn." said Austin.

"You're welcome." Troy nodded.

The party was definitely in full swing now. While everyone was in the mood, Austin then had an
idea.

"Hey, everyone! Come over here for a minute." He said. "Let's get a photo to remember this. Arrange yourselves on the sofa."

"An excellent suggestion, Shepard." Said EDI.

"Great idea! I want a copy!" said Liara.

"Make way, make way." said Wrex.

"Thanks for coming, everyone. Here's to us!" said Austin. "Ready, Glyph?"

"Of course. If you could all please direct your attention this way..." said the VI.

"Okay. Everyone say "Normandy." Said Austin.

"Normandy!" Everyone said.

Austin and Liara gently woke from their sleep. They could not deny it had been one hell of a night.

"Oooh, what a night... but look who's here." Austin smiled.

"Is it morning already?" Liara groaned.

"Yeah. And it's a perfect one. I love watching you wake up." Austin smiled as he and Liara kissed. "Let's see if anyone else is up."

Everyone else looked mostly okay. Some were at worst very hungover. Tali it seemed was one of them as she was sat on one of the beds and groaning.

"I... am going... to die." She said. "I didn't know you could get through that many toxin filters in one night."

"Did we break anything last night? I don't' suppose you need anything around here... calibrated. Yeah, okay. Maybe I should just stop saying that word, but only if Liara stops saying "by the goddess." Said Garrus. "Good thing this place has extra bathrooms. Miranda takes forever to do her hair. You'd think with her genes she wouldn't' need to."

"Shepard. Good morning! I want to thank you for inviting me here. It was good to see everyone again. I hope you enjoyed your evening as well." Said Samara.

"Morning, Shep. You went all out with the breakfast supplies. I didn't know you could get real milk on the Citadel. I had some. Thought it was soy. I'm not really lactose intolerant. I just don't pull up with lactose's stupid drama. By the way, thanks. That was a lot of fun." Said Kasumi.

For a moment, Austin was left confused about what had happened to Alaara and Sandra as he hadn't seen them at all this morning. His question however was quickly answered when he saw the two walk out of the bathroom, completely naked and looking rather sticky.
"We had a sick night, Bitches" Alaara groaned.

"So last night. We didn't... do anything, did we? I'm checking extranet suites. No hits yet, so maybe I just imagined that last part." Said Traynor.

"I'm almost sure someone was recording us, though." Said Sarah.

"Oh, I should probably talk to EDI. Or alternatively, I should never talk to EDI ever again." Said Traynor.

"Shepard! Griffin and I were just going to lift some weights. Wanna join?" Jacob asked as he was doing crunches in the gym while Jack did pull ups and Griffin did weights. "I feel fantastic. How 'bout everyone else?"

"Hey. You look like shit." said Jack. "You know the best part of an overcharged biotic amp? No hangovers!"

"Hope I didn't accidently fight into a fight with anyone last night. Kraan's already cross with me after I beat him at arm wrestling." Said Griffin.

Ashley, Miranda, Hawk James and Grunt meanwhile were in the kitchen. James and Hawk were even cooking.

"Austin. Morning. I need a floor to curl up on." Said Ashley.

I see everyone survived the festivities, more or less." Said Miranda.

"Okay... who wants eggs?" James asked.

"Bacon, anyone?" said Hawk.

"I think I broke my head on something last night." Said Grunt.

Troy meanwhile was passed out in the lounge, splayed all over the betting table. Still, at least everyone knew he was here.

The rest of Alpha were around too. Most were okay, but a few had very major hangovers. Kraan was very cross that Dash had spiked his drink, but a headache prevented him from doing anything.

Dash though had at least paid the price for this since Jet had accidentally got drunk and had challenged the scout to a run around the apartment. It had ended with Dash having a really sore private area after the two had crashed into each other. Right now, he was in the hot tub trying to calm the pain.

Jet meanwhile had an icepack on her head to reduce the swell.

"Remind me never to challenge Dash to a race." she said.

"Never play Dash, especially for money. He's an absolute demon." said Austin.

"Now you tell me." Jet sighed, wincing as she pressed the ice pack harder against her bump.
Ventra and Leena meanwhile it seemed had been sensible. Leena however had been spending a lot of time in the bathroom, but her husband assured Austin that it was simply because she was taking a deacon shower since she'd removed her suit last night.

Xun had been quite sensible too and was already checking with glyph to make sure there weren't any videos of the party out on the extranet.

"I'm pretty sure there must've been someone. This place has very huge windows after all." she said.

"What's realy important as that we had fun," said Austin.

"No argument there, old friend." said Xun.

Dell and Sill meanwhile were working on fixing the light switches after Troy had fiddled with them while drunk last night and caused a blackout.

"Remind me to have a word with that spy when he wakes up." said Dell.

"No one tried to flirt with me last night, did they?" said Sill. "I don't wanna suddenly get loads of messages from someone asking if I remembered "that night"

"Some neighbours came by last night to complain about the noise. I put their bodies in the building incinerator." said EDI. "That was a joke."

"Mornin, Shepard. I hope you slept well." said Cortez. "I would have thought all those tequila shots with James would have prepared me for last night. Wish it never ended."

"Shepard. Good to see you up." said Zaeed. "Hope I didn't wake anyone up with my snoring. I go like a buzz saw since i got my nose broke. By the way, you're almost out of bacon. Our bacon, anyway. There's still some of that dextro shit int he freezer. I saved you three strips. Figured it was fair payback for all the times you saved mine, right?"

"Been a while since I hit the hard stuff. About time!" said Wrex. "You live past 700, you start paying for a night like that the next morning. Hah..."

"Hey, Major. Hell of a night. So I've managed not to throw up. Feeling pretty good about that." said Joker. "If everyone could just not talk so loudly, that would be great. or close the cupboards too loud. Or walk too loud. Just think quiet thoughts."

It was finally time to head back out. The break had been good while it lasted though. Now they could all go back out there fully re-energised and ready for whatever was thrown at them.

"I guess it's back to the fight." Said Liara, gently holding her husband's hand.

"At least we threw one hell of a party. I'm still feeling tired." Said Austin.

"I know, I know. But whatever happens, I know you'll see this through. And I'll be right there with you." Said Liara. "We've been through a lot, haven't we? But it's been a good ride."
"The best." Austin smiled. He then turned to Troy who was waiting to say goodbye.

"You can count on my help when the time comes, mon ami." He said.

"We could use a man like you on the Normandy, Troy." Austin offered.

"I'm not one for ship life, Shepard. Besides, I hear Xun's looking for more agents." Said Troy.

"You take care of yourself out there, old friend."

"Bon voyage, Shepard. Give 'em hell."

Far, far away, a mysterious figure observed everything. She had just watched the whole thing, including the party.

Something about it awakened feelings she had not felt for millions of years. Feelings of… happiness and peace. And it made her ask a question that she had asked herself many times, but this time she asked it with a hint of hope.

"Could the prophecies have really been true?"

Her contemplation however was interrupted by an announcement from one of her subjects.

"Your majesty, an urgent matter has come up. One of the eyes has been discovered."

In case it wasn't already obvious, Leviathan is next. That will also mark the beginning of the final battle as that is when the secret of the catalyst will finally be revealed and an even greater secret is uncovered, for we find out who it is that has been watching from the shadows that refer to these prophecies.

Hope also the Commander made a good impression. He's Alpha arch enemy after all and he will definitely have a massive role in Alpha Origins. In case anyone didn't notice, he's based off the Helldiver picture, Bounty (hence his name) and also his bodyguards are based off the picture of the same name.

Until next week! Please do leave review, even if they are short! :)

Happy new year, and can I just say it's great to be back.
Chapter 29, The Secret of the Leviathan

Finished at last!

First of all I am so sorry this got delayed! I had a lot of distractions last week and this chapter ends up being longer than I though it would, even with the changes. It also took me longer than I should have to do the parts from the game.

So I'm very sorry about that, and hopefully we won't have the same delay with the next chapter (which is the last one before the final battle)

Anyway, this is turning point in the story as we finally find out what the Catalyst is, and we also learn a new secret along the way.

I've had this twist idea planned for the story ever since I first saw Leviathan, so I hope you enjoy.

Chapter 29

The Secret of the Leviathan

About two days after the party it had been now. So far, still no sign of the Catalyst though.

As Austin stood before the galaxy map, debating on any kind of lead that was worth investigating, he heard his private terminal beep.

"Major, there's an Alliance researcher working on the Citadel Dr. Garret Bryson. I need you to meet with him right away.

Dr. Bryson has uncovered important new information about Reapers that could have a direct bearing on the war I'm officially directing you to support his efforts at the first opportunity. Please visit Dr Bryson's laboratory on the Citadel at once.

With almost no options left at all, Austin decided it couldn't hurt.

"... I want you to match this against all known locations and update the map. Then contact the field teams for a progress report."

"Yes, sir."

The eldest of the two Doctors turned to Austin as he entered.

"Major Shepard. We've been expecting you. Just a moment. And Hadley, could you gather the Leviathan data for us?" he said. "Apologies, Major; the rest of my team is out investigating leads right now. I'm Dr. Garret Bryson and this is Task Force Aurora."

"What's your assignment?" Austin asked.

"Our mandate is to investigate legends, rumours... old stories about the Reapers before anyone knew they existed." Said Bryson.
"That's an interesting goal, but is anyone doubting the Reapers exist these days?" Austin asked.

"The Alliance is still desperate for intelligence. Reaper motives, their operational tactics… anything that can give us an edge." Said Bryson.

"And how did you wind up in charge?" Austin asked.

"When the rest of the galaxy says something doesn't exist, I take that as a chance to prove that it does."

"So you're in it for the challenge."

"For the truth. Even as late as 2148, humanity still thought aliens were a myth. That was within my lifetime. Once that myth was proven to be reality, our entire history changed."

"Reapers were part of that reality, too."

"But even they have a history, Major. If we can just uncover it, there may be a weakness we can exploit."

"I could've used your help five years ago."

"Yes. If people had paid more attention to your Prothean beacon, we might not be in this war. But now, with new information we've uncovered, a breakthrough is near."

Bryson's assistant then walked in.  
"Hadley, do you have the data?"

Before Austin could react in time, Hadley suddenly raised a gun.

"No."

He fired, hitting Bryson straight in the heart and killing him instantly. Hadley then turned to Austin, but the Helldiver reacted first. He quickly countered the scientists' arm and punched him to the floor.

"This is Major Shepard! I need C-sec at my location now!"

"You shouldn't be here… the darkness can't be breached…"

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"Transit records show his name as Derek Hadley. He's worked here for a couple months." Said one of the C-sec officers.

"Shepard, I monitored a C-sec alert from this location. Were you harmed?" EDI asked, suddenly walking in.

"I'm fine. But I could use your help sorting this out, EDI." Austin replied. "Take a look through their files. I need to know what this task force was up to."

"At once." EDI acknowledged.

"What? I…" said Hadley, suddenly coming too. "What's happening?"

"You tell me." Austin replied coldly. "You just shot your boss. He's dead. Why?"

"After you arrived… it was dark. Cold. Like I was somewhere else…" said Hadley, struggling to
Austin suddenly interrupted and hauled Hadley over to Bryson's dead body and forced the assistant to his knees.

"Take a good look—you did that! You pulled the trigger and killed him!" Austin yelled, the sound of his suit changing his voice terrifying Hadley.

"No… no… I couldn't have!" "No, I'm not a murderer!" Hadley tried to object, shaking with fear.

"I saw you pull the trigger. Then you tried to kill me!" Austin yelled, seizing Hadley by the back of the neck, the optics on his helmet glowing and flaring with a fiery red.

"I swear, I didn't!"

"Major, this does resemble reports of indoctrination." Said EDI before Austin had a chance to get more violent.

"Indoctrination? Me?"

"What about that "Leviathan" Bryson mentioned? How does that tie in?" Austin asked, loosening his grip on Hadley.

"It's… some kind of creature. Our field teams have been tracking it." Hadley explained. "That artefact came in from our researcher, Garneau. He sent an audio log if you want to-"

He was suddenly interrupted however by a sudden amount of pain and he clutched his forehead.

"Turn back!" he said.

"What are you talking about?" Austin asked.

"The darkness cannot be breached."

At that, Hadley blacked out.

"Damn it. Get him to the clinic; see if they can tell us what's wrong with him." Said Austin.

"Yes, sir."

"Major, you'll want to see this. It's an outgoing message from Dr Bryson to Admiral Hackett." Said EDI.

"Dr. Bryson, you have an update?" Hackett asked.

"Admiral, the "Leviathan of Dis" that we've been investigating—I think we're really onto something." Bryson replied.

"Give me the brief."

"About twenty years ago, the Batarians discovered a Reaper corpse that had died in battle. They covered it up and denied it ever existed. But I'm intrigued by the arger implication."

"What could have killed a Reaper in the first place?"

"Exactly. That's the real Leviathan."
"It worth pursuing. Continue your investigation and update me on the progress."

"There is also a follow-up message from a few weeks later." Said EDI.

"Admiral, the Reapers and the Takaal are shadowing my field teams as if they're hunting Leviathan themselves. Whatever it is, I believe Leviathan is nothing less than a Reaper-killer-almost an apex predator-and it has them nervous. If we could just find it, imagine the impact on the war. I'm formally requesting assistance in tracking it down." Said Bryson.

"You'll have it. This is now your top priority, Doctor. Find that thing." Said Hackett.

"It appears we were meant to be that assistance." Said EDI.

"Anything capable of killing a Reaper could do a lot of collateral damage." Said Austin.

"Yet given the state of this conflict, I believe the saying "The enemy of my enemy is my friend" may be relevant." Said EDI.

"But we won't know unless we can find it." Said Austin.

"Bryson's assistant did say they recently received a log from their field researcher. It may yield more information." Said EDI.

"This must be the artefact the assistant mentioned. And here's the log." Said Austin, taking up the datapad.

"Dr. Bryson, it's Garneau. I'm sending you an artefact I found. About the only thing I there, in fact. Maybe it's nothing, but I'd swear Leviathan came through here. I'm going to crunch some numbers, burn up the rest of this project travel allowance. Maybe I can project our Reaper-killer's movements. I'll check in when I get to the next site."

"Garneau appears to be our best lead to track Leviathan, but he does not state a destination." Said EDI.

"Let's focus on what he does say, then." Said Austin.

"He mentioned extrapolating Leviathan's path."

"And crunching numbers. He wasn't flying blind, he had data."

"A significant amount of data, judging by this office."

"So how do we narrow it down?"

"Bryson and his colleagues evidently used a galaxy map search program in their hunt for Leviathan. It may help us locate Garneau."

"Does this tell us where Garneau went?"

"No. But we may be able to narrow down his location, if we find clues he was using in his search for Leviathan."

They searched around the lab.

"These are all murders in which the accused lacked a known motive and claimed memory loss." Said EDI.
"Just like Bryson's assistant. You think Garneau was following a trail of blackout crimes?" "Here's the time and date chart for the crimes. Can you filter for murders where the killer claimed memory loss?" Austin asked.

"Adding the search filter. You may examine the results on the galaxy map program." Said EDI.

Austin noticed that a large piece of Reaper was in the room too, protected by some kind of shield or barrier. Although most Reapers looked alike, Austin recognized which Reaper this part had belonged too.

"Sovereign, vanguard of our destruction. How's that working out for you, big guy?" Austin chuckled.

"This appears to be encrypted data on Reaper fleet activity." Said EDI as she examined another datapad.

"You think it's relevant?" Austin asked.

"Possibly, but it is impossible to say without more data… and the decryption key." Said EDI.

There was also another message too between Bryson and someone else.

"Sir, this Bryson. We know the Reapers are after Leviathan. Studying Reaper hunting patterns could be vital to finding it." Said Bryson.

"That data is classified "top secret," Dr. Bryson. If it falls into the wrong hands…"

"It won't. The data's encrypted. I'll keep the decryption key safe… close to my heart."

"Close to his heart… what does that mean?" Austin wondered, trying to wonder where he'd heard someone say that before and what it meant.

"Bryson was tracking unexplained creature sightings…" said EDI.

"Bryson was not merely tracking sightings. He was attempting to extrapolate a course."

"And Garneau could've been following that course. EDI, can you add a search filter for systems along that projected path?"

"Adding this search filter to the galaxy map."

The lab also had some strange rocks. Austin's suit however identified them as meteorites.

"Meteorite fragment, maybe?" he said.

"He was studying it as an object of importance. We should look more closely at a sample." Said EDI.

"Meteorite sample… with traces of element zero. Would Leviathan need eezo?" Austin asked as he scanned the fragment with his omni tool.

"While it is not consumed as fuel during FTL travel, element zero will decay after several centuries of active use. If Leviathan is old enough, it would need to replenish its supplies." Said EDI.

"Okay. Can you give me a search filter for locations with element zero?"
"Adding the search filter now."

Austin also noticed a painting lying on Bryson's desk. It was the sort that had been painted by a child.

"By Ann Bryson – Age nine." He said.

"Records indicate Ann is now 28. She works for the Alliance." Said EDI.

"Bryson was keeping the encryption key close to his heart. What's closer than family?" said Austin, now realizing what it meant.

"An interesting hypothesis, but I detect no trace of an encryption key in this… art." Said EDI.

"The Rachni data." said EDI.

"Can you add a cross-reference for locations of sightings?"

"Of course."

It took some time to compile everything together, but once they'd found the right combination, they'd managed to narrow it down.

"Based on the search results, Garneau is in one of these three systems." Said EDI. "I have marked the Normandy map with possible locations."

"We're about five minutes out, Major." Said Cortez.

"What exactly is on this asteroid?" Austin asked.


"We've all read EDI's notes on Bryson's lab. Any questions?" Austin asked to the others.

"Do we have any more information about what Leviathan could be?" Tali asked.

"Not really. We only know it killed a Reaper." Austin shrugged.

"But it is Garneau, Dr. Bryson's associate we are looking for." Said EDI.

"Right. If we find Garneau, we find Leviathan."

"Agreed."

"The Doctor was right: anything powerful enough to kill a Reaper needs to be investigated. I just hope Garneau has the answers we need."

"I'm reading Reaper signatures in the asteroid field." Said Cortez.

"Bryson said they were shadowing his field teams. If they're after Leviathan, too, Reapers are a good sign." Said Austin.

"That's not something you hear every day." Sarah laughed.
"Take us in."

The dropship gently set down and everyone stepped out.

"Don't go anywhere, Cortez. We'll grab this guy and be right out. Keep me updated on the Reaper situation." Said Austin.

"Yes, Major."

As soon as the group reached the entrance, they spotted several husks, including a Brute trying to claw at the door.

"Scouting party." Said Tali.

"Big scouting party." Sarah agreed.

"Welcome to T-GES Mineral Works. All guests need to sign in at Reception."

"They seem awfully calm considering there were Husks knocking on their door earlier." Said Sarah, holtering her weapon.

They walked up to the reception. There were two men at the desk.

"I'm Major Shepard of the Helldivers. You just had Reaper troops attacking your front door." Said Austin.

"Are they still there?" one of them said.

"I've taken care of them for now." Said Austin.

"I see. That will be all."

"That will be...?" Austin said, puzzled. It was now that he noticed how blank the expressions of the two men were. "Hello?"

"Yes, welcome to T-GES Mineral Works. How can we help you?" said one. "Yes. For the tour, please sign in."

"You don't seem worried about the Reapers. You know something I don't?" Austin asked. Something felt very wrong.

"T-GES Mineral Works is a small mid-level supplier of tungsten to the galaxy."

"That's not what I meant."

"Are you familiar with the applications of tungsten?"

"I'm looking for a researcher named dr. Garneau." Said Austin. "He would have arrived within the last couple weeks. If he's still here, I need to speak with him."

"We have no Dr. Garneau."

"Do you need to see a Doctor?"

"How about I just go in and look around?" Austin suggested.
"No. The access elevator is broken."

Austin noticed however that in fact one of the colonists had just done something which had caused the elevator to break.

"And now... we're done. Step away."

"Step away. You don't belong here."

"Something's wrong with them. Come on." Said Tali.

"Let's look around. Carefully." Said Austin, under his breath.

"We need to repair the elevator."

It was very tricky to get the elevator repaired without anyone seeing. Austin was thankful that he'd bought Kasumi along for this.

"The security log for the elevator said Garneau was here in the last week. Why would they lie about that?" Austin asked.

"No idea. Let's hope we don't have to look too far." Said the thief.

"I see a trend among the miners. They appear to be doing everything but mining." Said EDI.

"Attention. Comm system is offline. This message was not sent." it said.

"Bryson, it's Garneau. I've had to go into hiding, and I need you to come get me. I found another one of those artefacts here. They're more important than we realised. It's in the mines-here's the navpoint. That's where I'll be. If something happens... I'm attaching a passcode that I hacked together. It'll open any security terminal. Bryson... something is very wrong here. Please hurry. Garneau out."

"So he's still here. Do we have that passcode hack?" Austin asked.

"Yes. We just need to enter it at the security terminal." Said EDI.

"Punch in Garneau's hack and see what it gets us."

"Access granted."

"A ship dropped him off a week ago."

"It appears he had full access at one point before going into hiding." said EDI.

"Unknown male was involved in an altercation in the mines."

"Garneau was heading into the mines."

"Looks like he was taken to the med bay."

"You are in the mineral lab, a low-security, all-access area. The med bay is restricted to authorised personal with active patient file numbers." said the computer.
"I have the file number."

"Is that Garneau?" Austin asked with worry.

"I hope not." said Sarah.

"If you are looking for Garneau, you have found him." said a voice behind them. "I am Dr. Garneau."

The man who had said that was stood behind a sheet of glass.

"I'm Major Shepard of the Helldivers. Are you alright?" Austin asked.

"Yes. Only... I'm trapped in here." Garneau replied.

"Bryson's research led me to you."

"Bryson sent you?"

"He's dead, Doctor. Killed by his assistant."

"I see."

"I need you to tell me everything you've found on the Leviathan."

"Bryson seemed to think it killed a Reaper. It's a myth. A dead end."

"In your message, you said you'd found an artefact."

"I did? No."

"Yes, Doctor, you did. But now we've got Reaper forces attacking, so I need to break you out. We'll grab the artefact and go."

"Reapers. The darkness must not be breached."

"The darkness?"

"Why do you pursue me?"

"Doctor?"

"Leave the artefact You will not take what is mine."

"I don't believe we are speaking to Garneau."

"You. You killed a Reaper. I need your help."

"You bring only death."

The glass suddenly smashed, throwing everyone back temporarily and allowing Garneau to escape.

They all immediately gave chase.

After fighting through more Reaper forces, they soon managed to catch up. Garneau was lying near
the artefact with several Husks slowly crawling towards him and a detonator in his hand

"The darkness can't be breached." he said.

"The artefact."

"Like in Bryson's office."

"Move! I've got a shot!" Austin ordered.

But Garneau didn't move.

"Turn back!"

He pressed the trigger. The artefact exploded taking all the husks and him with it. All that remained was the destroyed artefact.

"Shepard. Over here." said EDI as she picked up an artefact lying next to a dead Doctor.

"What've you got?" Austin asked.

"That was not Garneau-this is. It appears he's been dead for a while." said EDI.

"So Leviathan can have Bryson killed, can take over this colony, and can use them as puppets. Huh." said Austin, "Anything else useful?"

"Encrypted data, and a personal log with eight missed calls from Dr. Ann Bryson." said EDI.

At that moment, more of the miners suddenly walked in. They looked confused, almost as if they'd just woken up from a horrible nightmare.

"Who... who are you? What are we doing here?"

"I'm Major Shepard. Are you alright?" Austin replied.

"I think so. I feel like... I feel strange but... all right."

"Do you recognise this man?" Austin asked, indicating to Garneau.

"I've never seen him before in my life."

"Someone here killed him."

"Someone here? How is that possible? I'm so sorry..."

"Can you tell me anything about what happened to you?" Austin asked.

"Not really... I, uh, remember... It just seemed cold. I remember a feeling. Cold and dark."

"If dark was a feeling, that's exactly what I felt."

"That artefact: do you know where it came from?"

"Came out of the mine."

"Right... head office was supposed to send someone. That's about all I can..."
"Cortez, what's your situation? Can you bring the shuttle?" Austin asked into his comm.


"Reaper... what's a Reaper?"

"What year do you think this is?" Austin asked, worried that he knew what they were going to say.

"2176."

This took Austin by even more surprise. He had thought they would say a year not too long before the war, but he'd been wrong.

"2176 was ten years ago." he said.

"What?"

"Let's arrange for these people to be evacuated into temporary quarantine." said Austin.

"Imagine losing ten years of your life. These people are in for a lot of surprises." said Kasumi.

"It now seems Leviathan not only has the power to destroy a reaper, but possess an indoctrination ability." said EDI.

"Could it actually be a Reaper?" Sarah asked.

"If it is a Reaper, then I want to know what it's up to. How long has it been out here, and, more importantly, why?" said Austin. "EDI, did we get anything from Garneau's notes?"

"Yes. they suggest that Garneau crated a way to block the artefact's mind-affecting properties." EDI replied.

"You mean like how I'm immune to indoctrination?" Austin asked.

"Precisely." said EDI. "The artefact seems to be the key."

"Agreed. When I head back to Bryson's office, I want you there."

"Yes, Major."

"I want to know just what the hell these artefacts really are and what they can do."

"You and me both. These artefacts are powerful... and dangerous." said Sarah.

"And we've got one sitting right in the middle of the Citadel."

"We need to shield the artefact they've got here right away."

"Using Garneau's data, I should be able to accomplish this without difficulty." said EDI.

The AI activated her omni tool and a blue holo shield encased the artefact.

"Despite the risk, this artefact remains our only link to finding Leviathan. Perhaps we could find more information about it here in the lab." said EDI.
"Agreed. Bryson's team might've turned up something we missed. I'll look around." said Austin.

"EDI, what project was Garneau working on when he found the artefact?" Austin asked.

"Basilisk."

"Got anything on Basilisk."

"Several ships, a mythical creature, and a rare, mid-tier enemy type in the Galaxy of Fantasy video game. It posses a gaze attack capable of triggering synced animation kills. Player forums describe it as "overpowered."

"I meant the Project, EDI."

"Oh. Then... no."

"There's got to be something here on this artefact. What about the server?"

"Bryson's assistant wiped the office server and destroyed all backups, likely before killing Bryson. However, records show new messages on Bryson's personal comm terminal upstairs."

"A message from Dr. Bryson's daughter, Ann. According to my records, she worked with her father." said EDI.

A holo of Ann was projected out of the datapad.

"I'm at the dig site in the Pylos Nebula. Project Scarab paid off. I've got another artefact like the one Garneau found. I think it could be affecting people's behaviour. You need to shield the one in your office. I tried to warn Garneau, but I can't get through. We've got Reaper scouts coming in toward the main site. I'm heading to the secondary base to grab what research I can." she said.

"Ann Bryson was attempting to contact Garneau on the asteroid colony. She seems to know something about the artefact." said EDI.

"She sounded worried." said Austin.

"If Reaper forces were approaching, her concern was warranted."

"Let's hope we can get to her before they do."

"So, this dig site is under attack?" Liara asked.

"Yes, the attack means the Reapers are one step ahead of us. We need to pick up the pace. And since Bryson's daughter is our only lead, our objective is clear." said Austin. "Cortez?"

"Nothing so far, major. If she's down there, she hasn't responded to our hails. Getting some strange signals, though. Give me a minute." said Cortez. "The artefact she uncovered may have caused additional complications."

"Take us in closer." said Austin.

"Copy that."
The dropship flew closer. It was no visible that Harvesters were swarming the area.

"We have hostiles." said Cortez, trying to manoeuvre the Hellhound safely

"Take us in!"

"Major! On the landing platform!"

Liara slid the Hellhound's doors open to revolt he platform. Sure enough, they could see Ann clearly.

"That's her!"

"Attention, Hellhound! This is Dr. Ann Bryson! We are under attack!" said Ann through the radio.

"Okay! Let's get…"

But he was interrupted when a harvester rammed in to the dropship. Everyone hung on tight as Cortez tried to regain control.

"Get us over there!" said Austin.

"Negative. It's too hot! Heading to lower platform—hang on!" said Cortez.

The dropship flew past and everyone quickly jumped out.

"Hello? Is anyone there? I'm coming down!"

"No! Stay where you are! This is Major Shepard of the Helldivers—it's too dangerous! We'll come to you!" Austin quickly said.

"Yes, okay! You should take the elevator up on the far side!" Ann recommended.

"Copy that! We're on our way!"

"Elevator's online. We're coming up." said Austin.

"Please hurry. I think Hopkins is dead." Ann replied.

After fighting through even more Husks and Takaal, the team finally reached Ann.

"He tried to run. I told him not to, but he wanted to help the others. Where did everyone go?" she said.

"I'm sorry. They didn't make it. Doctor, I need you to come with us." said Austin.

"Oh, god. Yes, of course." Ann nodded.

Austin helped her up and the team kept her covered.

"I… was at another dig site when they attacked. I got back as quick as I could, but… what's happening?"

"Shepard, look." said EDI.

Austin looked up to see what looked like a large cave painting of several natives trying to fight what
was unmistakably a Reaper.

"I'm not sure, but it might have something to do with these paintings. Is that Leviathan?" Austin asked.

"Yes… yes, we think so. It's old. Much older than my father thought. And there, as if the natives were under its power. Clearly a Reaper, but acting alone. Not like any Reaper we've seen before." said Ann.

"Doctor, I understand you found something recently."

"The artefact. Yes, of course. Incredible. It's just ahead." said Ann. "It may sound strange, but I'm certain it affects people—their behaviour. I've only had a short time to study it."

"Not strange at all. Did you find anything?" Austin asked.

"Not much, but I did learn something about the energy it generates."

"Get down!"

Everyone quickly went into cover. Several Marauders were gathered around another one of the artefacts. One of them even appeared to be caught and suspend in some sort of field it was generating.

"What're they doing?"

"They've activated it somehow. I've never managed anything—"

But Ann was suddenly interrupted when she stood up, her face was completely blank and expressionless.

"Doctor?"

"They've learned too well. The darkness must not be breached…” said Ann, her voice speaking in a cold and emotionless tone and slowly growing deeper.

"Shepard!"

"Take it out!" Austin yelled.

"Got it!" said Tali as she unloaded her shotgun into the artefact and it exploded, freeing both the Marauders and Ann from its control

"You okay? Cortez, we have Ann Bryson! Need a pickup!" said Austin in to his comm as the marauders attacked.

"On my way, Major!"

The team covered Ann's escape as she hurried in to the dropship. The others then followed and it sped away in to the sky.

"You okay?" Austin asked.

"Leviathan took control of you. We cut connection before you got hurt." said Austin.


"The Reapers and the Takaal seem as interested in it as we are."

"Yeah, it certainly seems that way."

"We were hoping you could help us figure out why. But first, Doctor, I have some bad news…." said Austin, but Ann changed the subject before he could tell her.

"Ann, please. Suppose Leviathan's broken way from the other Reapers? Never went back to dark space? Like a rogue or even a defector." she said. "I have to call my father. He'll want to know."

"Ann, you need to listen to me, okay? Your father is dead. I'm sorry." said Austin, very slowly and with some regret.

"He's… what, dead? He can't be dead."

"We met with him, hoping to find out what he knew. Something happened."

"Something happened?"

"You're not the first to lose control." Austin explained. "Your father's assistant. One minute he was fine, the next he drew a gun on your father. I tried to stop him… but I just wasn't fast enough."

"I can't believe this." said Ann, sounding almost on the verge of tears.

"We have to find out what's behind it all. You're the only one who can help us." said Austin. "Ann?"

"I… I want to see his office."

"We'll arrange for transportation and meet you there."

Austin and EDI entered the lab once again, but they couldn't see any sign of Ann.

"Hello? Ann, are you here?"

The Helldiver heard what sounded like crying coming from upstairs. Motioning for EDI to remain where she was, he walked up the stairs and found Ann sat on the floor at the foot of the bed, her legs crunched against her chest and her head in her arms, her eyes red and her cheeks stained with tears.

"Ann?"

"Oh, Major. Yes, I'm sorry. Just… this is hard." she said.

"I know. Are you alright?" Austin asked.

"Yes. No. I don't know. My father and I didn't leave things in a great state."

Austin decided to offer Ann some more comfort. He gently walked up to Ann and sat down next to her resting against the bed.

The presence of the Helldiver sitting next to her offered Ann some comfort. Despite that he had his armour on and his face remained hidden by his mask, she could somehow feel the gentleness from him and still hear the peaceful tone in his deepened voice.
"An argument?" Austin asked sympathetically.

"Yes. It was trivial. A disagreement on how to file some of the specimens. I was mad about something else. I don't remember what. I took it out on him. So stupid."

"Hey, it's alright. I can come back." said Austin as he was about to stand up.

"No, please. I'm okay." said Ann, putting her hand on the Helldiver's armoured shoulder and stopped him. "Seeing all this again... He was so obsessed. Crazy sometimes."

"I didn't get a chance to know him." said Austin,

"Sometimes I felt the same way. He was a great man, a pioneer. But he could be distant. I felt like an inconvenience growing up." said Ann.

"You sound angry."

"I was angry. Still am, I guess. But sometimes he was so full of stories he nearly burst. I loved that about him. It's why I signed up for this work. I can't believe he's gone."

"We'll figure this out."

"We have to. I need to know what's on the other end of the artefact, what he died for."

"We need your help. You're our last chance."

"You're right. Let me dig into my father's work. To see what I can find."

Austin stood back up and helped Ann up onto her feet.

"Ann. You sure you're up for this?" he asked gently.

"Yes. When Leviathan took control of me, I remember being somewhere cold and dark. But my father taught me to never be afraid of the dark."

While Ann went about looking through her father's work, Austin noticed that James had suddenly joined them.

"What brings you down here, James?" he asked.

"Heard you're closing in on the Reaper killer. Anything that can scare those bastards has to be worth a look." the soldier replied.

"That's what I'm hoping." said Austin, he then turned to Ann who was studying the galaxy map with EDI. "Ann, I know this is hard, but if there's anything more you can tell us..."

"I don't there's anything more I can tell you." she replied. "But maybe I can show you."

"What are you saying?"

"The artefact only sends out a signal when Leviathan's controlling someone. So let it control me. You could trace the signal."

"You mean let it take you over? That's too dangerous." said Austin.

"It's my call, not yours. You said I'm your last chance to find this thing." said Ann forcefully.
"We have no idea what will happen."

"If we wait, the Reapers will get to Leviathan first. I'm the only one here who's spent enough time with it to do this. You're looking for something to fight the Reapers, Major. I'm looking for the monster that murdered my father."

"We still don't know exactly what we're looking for." said Austin.

"Then let's find out."

"Major, this thing we're doing with Ann… sounds dangerous as hell." said James.

"I know, and I agree all too well." Austin agreed. But he knew he there was little he could do to change Ann's mind. "EDI?"

"Energy signature locked in. Waiting for activation." said the AI.

"Are you sure about this, Ann?" Austin asked as Ann sat down in front of the artefact's shield.

"Yes. I'm sure." she nodded.

"I'm gonna be right here." said James supportingly as he stood behind her so as to keep her still. True there was little damage she could do against a HellDiver and an AI, but it would be better if there wasn't he risk she could hurt herself or risk the two forcing to defined themselves and injuring her.

"Okay. I'm ready." said Ann.

"James…" said Austin, hesitating for a moment. "Drop the containment shield."

James nodded and deactivated the shield. Austin could already feel the difference in the atmosphere as the artefact's influence no longer remained contained. It felt all too familiar to how indoctrination felt when it attempted to control him. He could hear the faint whispers in his head and could feel the artefact's influence trying to claw at his mind but consistently begin blocked with his strong will and immunity. He did his best to remain focused, but he did always find it hard. Although indoctrination could not control him, it could still have some small effects on him. Headaches and confusion were two of them

"Anything?" he asked, trying to let his focus not he task overwhelm his focus on the whispers.


Austin felt it too. The faint whispers became louder and he could feel the artefact's power getting stronger.

"EDI?"

"No trace yet."

Then it happened, the buzzing started and Ann started struggling wildly against James' grip. Austin too could feel as if he was surrounded completely by noise and he found it hard to think clearly as the indoctrination worked it's influence on Ann and attempted to pass onto him.

"Holy hell." said James as he tired to keep Ann still.

"Signal is tracking. Maintain connection." said EDI.
"Turn back. The darkness cannot be breached." said Ann.

"Dios!"

"Main connection." said EDI,

"Listen to me. I found you. And the Reapers are right behind me." said Austin,

"You have brought them." said Ann. Then it happened. She gently looked up at Austin.

Only Austin could see this, but he wished he couldn't. Ann's eyes were as black as the void itself and the skin around them was cracked and pale. Then she spoke, her voice different. It didn't sound like the voice of a signal being. It had an unusual echo, as though a great multitude were speaking Leviathan's words in perfect symphony.

"You are a threat."

"So are you. I've seen what you can do. The war needs you." said Austin,

"There is no war. There is only their survival." said Leviathan.

"EDI, do we have enough?" Austin asked, his head starting to throb slightly as Leviathan's influence grew stinger in an attempt to control him. It was to no avail, but that didn't mean it was plain sailing or Austin. He felt very cold and could not deny that his body was shivering ever so slightly as Leviathan's mind brushed against his.

"Partial lock. Maintain connection to narrow the search." said EDI.

"You heard her. We got enough. I'm hitting the shield." said James.

"Do it!" Austin said quickly.

James didn't hesitate and hit the button.

For a few tiny seconds before the shield reactivated however, another voice suddenly joined Leviathan's. It was different. It sounded female, but it wasn't Ann's.

"YOU WILL NOT FIND US!"

The shield reactivated, encasing the artefact once again. Ann stopped struggling and austin felt everything return to normal. He felt the warmth of his suit return to his skin and he stopped shivering. The whispers also stopped and everything seemed so quiet it was almost frightening.

"Man." James panted.

"Ann, are you alright?" Austin asked.

"Yes... I think so." Ann panted.

"Did we get anything?"

"Yes, but at best it has been narrowed down to a planet somewhere underwater. But we have no way of knowing where." said EDI.

"Good it's a start at least." said Austin. "And I might know some people who can help us."

"It knows we're getting close." said Austin.

"It's protecting something." said Ann. "I don't' know what, but it has a secret that it will do anything to protect, and it's more than willing to kill you to do so."

"Come on, let's get you some help."

The salty smell of the sea filled Austin's nostrils as he looked out over the vast big blue from the balcony of the ship.

The best the search ad been narrowed down was that it was somewhere underwater on this planet. Rather than use the Normandy for exploring however, Austin had heard word that a Helldiver team had possession of an old navy ship that had been constantly refurbished and upgraded over the years called The Revenant.

To everyone's surprise, the squad that owned that was none other than Havok, so it came as pleasant surprise to be working with them again. Of course, two squads alone wasn't quite enough to crew a massive cargo ship (which was essentially what it was, just upgraded with Helldiver tech and weapons) so there were plenty of other Helldiver agents as crew on board.

Of course, none of the Normandy crew could come and Austin had decided it would be better if only the Helldiver members of the crew came on this voyage. At least he could leave knowing his sites would take care of everything. With Alaara going with him, he'd appointed Sarah to be in charge of the Normandy until they returned, something she'd been happy to accept.

For now, most Alpha and Havok were enjoying the calm sunny weather. Some of them were even treating it like a cruise and sunbathing out on deck. Brute of course didn't mind. Even he was enjoying the calm weather as he let the ship steer itself.

"Enjoying the view?" he asked as he joined Austin on the balcony next to the bridge.

"I guess so." said Austin. "It's nice. Once again easy to forget there's a war going on."

"Never hurts to look on the bright side of things." said Brute. "You yourself said that once."

Austin simply nodded. A question hen popped into his head that he'd been meaning to ask.

"How did you come to possess this ship?" he asked.

"It was passed down to me." Brute explained. "You see, I had an ancestor who was a naval captain back before space flight. This same ship belonged to him and he bequeathed it to his son, who was a naval man too. It continued to be passed down through the generations of my family right down to me. Witch each captain it was attend to and upgrade dover countless decades until it became as it is now."

"If I didn't know a better, I'd say it was the Normandy in boat form." Said Austin, he quickly corrected himself though when he realised he'd said Boat. "Ship. What do you use it for though?"

"Mostly for exploration like we're doing now, but it has occasionally seen combat." Brute replied.

"Ever run into pirates?"

"When have we never." Brute chuckled.
Austin found Liara near the front of the ship admiring the amazing view of the sea

"This is nice. Reminds me of that cruise we took on our honeymoon." the Asari smiled as Austin wrapped his arms around her.

"Yeah. That was pleasant." the Helldiver smiled.

"I know I've said it before... but I love you so much." said Liara.

"I love you too Liara."

The two kissed as they enjoyed the sight of the sun slowly setting.

Two days now and still nothing yet. But there was still plenty of place to look. This planet after all had even more water and less land than Earth.

"We've searched a lot of these areas. There's not much left that seems likely." said Brute as they poured over the maps.

It was currently night so it was rather dark out.

"What about this area? Just southwest?" Austin as he indicating to a spot not he map.

"Risky. There's no land southwest for hundreds of miles. Takes us way outside the shipping lanes. I don't want us blind in these waters." said Brute

"You said so yourself, this ship is used for exploration." said Austin,

"Yes, but there's nothing left out there to explore." Brute replied.

"Well then what have we lose?" Austin asked rhetorically.

Brute had to admit that the Major had a good point there, but still...

"What is it exactly that you're looking for?" he asked. "Pardon me for asking, but they didn't really brief us before we left."

"We're looking for something called Leviathan. It is said this thing killed a Reaper, and that it could even be a Reaper. If there's any chance it could help us, well..." Austin explained. He noticed however that Brute had turned his back and was looking out the window. His body language suggested he knew something.

"What is it?" Austin asked."You know something, don't you?"

Brute sighed and nodded to Normica.

"Seven years ago, my team and I were out on those same waters doing some cargo shipping as a favour to the Arkanes." he explained.

"We picked up a castaway. Found him in the water. He'd been drifting for days." said Normica.

"He said his ship had run aground of an island. An island, hidden, in fog." said Brute.

"He was almost insane, not just from starvation and lack of fresh water, but of something else..." said
She unlocked a safe in the wall and took out several scraps of paper which she then put on the table. They looked like drawings of some kind. One of them was instantly recognisable as the shape of a Reaper, or rather Leviathan.

"He spoke of a creature he'd seen. Neither beast, nor man, but something monstrous living on that island." said Brute.

"And there's more. He drew all these strange drawings."

"Why'd Leviathan leave a survivor?" Liara asked, just as puzzled as Austin.

"What else did he say?" Austin asked.

"Nothing. When we found him the next morning, he'd stuck a knife through his heart." said Brute.

At that moment, one of the crew members walked in.

"Captain, the weather's starting to change." he said.

Brute nodded and he and Normica headed up to the bridge, leaving Austin and Liara with the drawings.

The crew on the bridge were being very cautious, especially with the darkness and cloudy weather.

"I can't figure out our positions, something's going on with the instruments." said one of them as Brute and Normica walked in. The Captain took the helm. It was true the instruments were going crazy, the compass especially was spinning all over the place.

"Check our position. Use the stars." he said.

One of the crew members walked out to do so, but quickly came back in.

"There are no stars, Captain." he said, causing worry from some of the others.

"What's that?" Liara asked, taking up one of the drawings.

"What?"

"That. That right there."

"I don't know. Maybe it's a coffee stain." Austin said as he took the drawing and took a closer look at it. As he

"Is that a..."

Before he could finish, there was a very faint haunting noise out in the wind and a sudden gust of wind snatched the drawing out of the Helldiver's hands.

"Dowse the lights!" Brute ordered, hoping it might provide some illumination through the fog.

Dash meanwhile had been up in the crow's nest admitting the view. With the fog however, he was
no actually trying to help and was keeping a look out for anything. As the fog began to clear up a bit for him, he then started to notice a large black shape appear.

"Wall! There's a wall ahead!" he yelled.

Soon the fog cleared the others on lower level as well. Brute almost immediately began hauling the wheel to right in an effort to steer away.

"Stop engines!" he yelled quickly.

Despite stopping the engines though, the ship didn't slow down in time.

"Brace!" Brute yelled just before the ship hit the wall hard.

It wasn't enough to cause damage, but it still shook the whole ship up.

"Give me some power!" Brute yelled.

The ship slowly began to move forward again. As it did though, Austin noticed another problem.

"Rocks!" he yelled. "Rocks!"

'Rocks to starboard, Captain. To port! Rock everywhere!" Dash yelled from up above.

Brute did his best to navigate through, but the waves from the rough weather made it extremely difficult.

Finally, it became too much as a huge wave hit the side of the ship and it beached itself on one of the large rocks.

"What's the situation?" Brute asked.

"She's stuck hard against the rocks, but other than that, there's no damage." Said Normica. "However we don't have any chance of going anywhere until the next high tide."

"So until then, we're stuck here." Said Austin.

"I'm afraid so." Said Construct.

"Well it could be worse. At least we're not shipwrecked." Said Jet."

"Then I want us to be ready to set off by the next high tide." Said Brute. "We're leaving this place."

By the time the tide was high enough, the waves had picked up again. Still, those would hopefully help.

"Lighten the ship! Anything that's not bolted down goes overboard!" Brute yelled over the sound of the rain.

The whole crew almost immediately took to throwing as much as they could overboard except for their weapons and anything that must not be thrown away.

"Chuck everything except for the potatoes!" Hawk yelled to one of the cooks he'd been working with.
There was a loud creak as the ship slowly started to come loose. Then with a sharp lurch, it finally dislodged from the rock.

Both Alpha and the whole crew cheered.

"All ahead, both engines!" Brute yelled triumphantly.

"Aye aye, Captain." Normica smiled.

Brute quickly took the wheel as the ship finally started moving again after a whole day of being stuck.

"Right, time we left this godforsaken place." He said, turning the ship towards the clear.

"I agree on that." Said Austin.

As soon as they were clear from the rocks however, something burst out of the water right beside. When the sea finally cleared it revealed a ship of some kind that was unmistakably Takaal.

Austin recognized that ship. He and Alpha had seen it before. It belonged to Captain Raachlaar, one of Skarlack's deadliest warriors. He was essentially the Takaal version of a pirate. He assaulted ships and took anything of use. Very few survived his attacks, and those who did were handed over to the Reapers.

As the ship finished rising, the Takaal crew stepped out onto deck.

"Lord on high, deliver us." Griffin prayed.

All of the Takaal roared challengingly at them, clearly ready for a fight.

"I'll handle this, everyone." Said Dash, stepping right to the edge so that everyone could see him. To everyone's surprise he even picked up a simple jar of dirt. The scout then rised it into the air and yelled to the Takaal.

"Oi! Fishface!"

Raachlaar and all the other Takaal looked at him, puzzled.

"Lost something? Ay?" said Dash as he waved the jar of dirt around. As the scout stepped to the side however he didn't look where he was going and fell down the stairs.

"Damn it, Dash." Austin groaned.

"Still got it!" Dash suddenly said as he held the jar up. Rather surprisingly, it wasn't cracked at all.

"Come to negotiate, eh, have ya, you slimy git?! Look what I got!" he continued. He then started signing. "I got a jar of dirt! I got a jar of dirt, and guess what's inside it!"

Almost everyone had a look under their masks that said "What the fuck is he doing?"

"Enough!" Raachlaar interrupted uncaringly.

The guns on his ship then activated and turned on The Revenant.

"Why is that these things never work in real life?" Dash mumbled to himself.
"Hard to starboard?" Brute asked.

"Hard to starboard!"

No one knew who said it, but Brute didn't even hesitate and he hauled to wheel to the right as hard and as fast as he could.

"HARD TO STARBOARD!" Raachlaar yelled to his own helmsman. "Send these Helldivers to the depths!"

The ships cannons opened fire on the Revenant, one shot managing a hit and blowing a hole in the back. The ship then turned and began pursuit.

"They're gaining on us!" One of the crew yelled.

"Can't this thing go any faster?!" said Jet.

"It's a ship, not a speedboat!" said Brute, wrestling with the wheel through the rough waves.

"We have to make a stand. We must fight." Said Austin,

"I hate to agree, but you're right." Brute nodded, he then turned to the crew. "Load the guns! Prepare for attack!"

The crew quickly hurried and readied the ship's on-board guns. All the while however, the Takaal ship was continuing to close the gap between them.

"They're gonna luff up on our port quarter. They'll rake us without ever presenting a target!"

"Lower the anchor on the right side!" said Liara. Everyone simply looked at her though puzzled. "On the starboard side!"

"It has the element of surprise." Said Austin, suddenly realizing what his wife was suggesting.

"You're daft, Asari. You both are." said Brute, now catching on. "Lower the starboard anchor!"

The crew were also surprised by this and didn't know how to react.

"Do it, now!" Brute yelled.

The crew obeyed and quickly dropped the anchor. Their speed began to slowly decrease until it finally caught on a rock. The whole ship almost instantly stopped and gradually began to turn due to the engines still going.

"Hold on!"

Liara quickly grabbed onto Austin as the whole ship started to sway to the side. It still wasn't having the desired effect. But then Liara noticed that Brute still had his hands on the wheel.

"Let go!"

Brute did as he was told and took his hands off. The wheel spun at tremendous speed and the ship literally did a full 360 turn.

This did indeed have the element of surprise, but the Takaal were quick to react.
"Hard to port! Ready the starboard guns!" Raachlaar yelled.

The two ships soon came into line, guns ready to fire.

"FIRE!"

"FIRE ALL!"

Both ships opened fire. The whole battle became almost clouded in gunfire and smoke.

Brute narrowly managed to dodge a shot as it fired through the cockpit and shot off a piece of the wheel.

"Stop blowing holes in my ship!" he yelled.

A sudden shot from the Takaal ship suddenly hit the Revenant's mast and it cracked falling to the ground and taking Dash with it. Fortunately, the Scout managed to jump out as the mast hit the Takaal ship, providing the crew with a perfect opportunity to board the Revenant.

Almost immediately, the Takaal attacked. All the Helldiver crew drew their weapons and the two sides clashed.

Dash meanwhile, who was still stuck on the other ship looked around for a way back now without getting detected. He then spotted a grapple gun that about to be fired. That would do.

Using his speed, he ran up to the gun and hopped on the grapple just as it fired. He was almost immediately flung forward as the grapple embedded itself in half of the bridge, knocking Brute out in a shower of glass and metal.

"Wow! I wanna do that again." said Dash as he hopped down and joined the fight.

Brute meanwhile was recovering from the earlier attack. As he did however, he saw Raachlaar walking along the fallen mast and onto the Revenant's deck.

"Who gave you permission to board my ship?!!" Brute growled as he managed to get back up, taking up his sword.

"I don't need it." Raachlaar replied, drawing his own sword. "I've never needed it."

"Well then, if it's a fight you want, you've met your match." Said Brute, going into a fight stance. "To the death."

"You'll need Shepard to make it mine."

"He'll be making his own fun."

The others meanwhile were fighting Raachlaar's crew. Though the Helldiver crew were great fighters, Raachlaar's crew outnumbered them.

It was as it looked like they were about to be overrun though that something truly unexpected happened.

When one Takaal managed to trip Liara up, it looked as though that would be the end. But then something stabbed the Takaal from behind, and it wasn't Austin.

To everyone's shock, several more Takaal suddenly climbed out of the water and onto the hull of the
ship, but they weren't like the others. Something about them was very different. These ones wore different armour and had very dark skin. Most noticeable, they lacked any sings of synthesis on them and they were covered in seaweed. Some of them even had barnacles on their skin.

Even more surprising, they not only attacked the Helldiver crew, they attacked the synthetic Takaal.

Both sides were surprised by this, but were quick to defend themselves. The battle soon turned into a 3 way fight, with neither side having an equal advantage. Surprisingly though, the Takaal that had emerged from the sea were beginning to win against the synthetic ones. Pretty soon in fact the only Takaal left on the deck were the sea ones.

Even more started to emerge on the other ship. Taken by surprise, the synthetic Takaal were almost overrun, and soon, their ship was dragged down to the depths.

The suddenness of this caused Raachlaar to be distracted. This allowed Brute an opening and he managed to run the Takaal Captain through.

"Get off my ship."

He then flung the Takaal into the sea for him to be taken care of by the sea Takaal.

Pretty soon, the synthetic Takaal were all dead, but that didn't mean the Helldiver's problems were over. The new Takaal were gathering in greater numbers and now had the whole crew surrounded.

"Got any bright ideas?"

"Not unless they suddenly go away." Dash replied.

The second Dash said that, the sea Takaal suddenly hesitated and retreated back into the water.

"Okay… I did not see that one coming." said Dash.

"So what's with these new Takaal? More to the point, why did they attack their own?" Brute asked as everyone took a breather from the fight.

"Because I don't think they were even with the Synthetic Takaal." said Austin as he scanned one of the dead sea Takaal. "What do you not see one these ones?"

"The synthesis weave." Normica replied.

"Exactly. I think these organic ones are a separate faction."

"Why did they attack us too though? That's what puzzles me…"

"Hmm, I wonder…"

Before Austin could continue though, something massive hit the ship very hard that knocked everyone off their feet.

"What the hell was that?" said Dash.

"We must've hit a reef."

Many people looked over the rail trying to see if they had indeed hit anything, but there was nothing.

"Look!" one of the crew suddenly yelled.
Everyone looked in the direction he was pointing.

A huge mass suddenly rose out of the water and headed straight for them

"Now what?" Brute groaned.

The mass rose even further and hit the boat again. This time though, as it did it rose out of the water completely. The huge appearance of a massive sea monster appeared before the crew. They nearly went pale.

"Oh… My… God." said Jet.

"Lord save us." said Griffin.

The monster was simply massive. Twice as long as the ship itself, only the upper half of it's body was visible while the rest was in the sea. The upper half had arms like a human, but the similarities ended there.

The upper half had several openings not he chest all of which emitted a long tentacle with a toothed mouth on each end which tried to snap and grab at the crew. The head meanwhile had six glowing eyes and a secondary jaw inside it's own.

As the crew worked to try and repel the beast as it held onto the froth of the ship, Austin spotted a nearby explosive barrel. This gave him an idea, but he wasn't sure how he was gonna make it work.

The crew were able to quickly get out spears and harpoons to fight the creature and it's tentacles. One crew member even managed to pin a tentacle only for the creature to then open it's mouth and an extremely long elastic tongue shot out and grabbed him before pulling him in.

That however solved Austin's problem. He picked up the barrel and lit a fuse on it. He then threw it up in to the air so the monster could notice it. Sure enough, it's tongue shot out again and grabbed the barrel, taking it into it's mouth.

"Now, stand by for sushi." said Austin.

There was a small pause, then a large boom from within the monster. Surprisingly though, it didn't have the desired effect. Instead the creature just seemed to regurgitate, spraying the crew with a lot of slime and even spitting out the crew member it had swallowed earlier who even rejoined the fight almost instantly.

"Give that guy a raise." said Austin.

Another tentacle shot at Austin, but he managed to dodge it. At the same time, he swung his sword and it carved through the tentacle, severing the hard part completely.

As he ducked to avoid another one, Austin suddenly noticed something.

The monster had pulled itself up on the ship's front and he remembered Brute telling him the Revenant had a retraceable blade on the front which could be used as a ram, and that monster was practically resting right where it was currently hidden.

Austin quickly had another idea. Given the adrenaline of the moment, he didn't have too much time to think it through.

"Hey, lobster breath! Over here!" he yelled, waving his arms to get the creatures attention.
It worked and the creature shot its tongue out again. Like the tentacle, Austin timed it right and dogged it. This time though he used his sword to impale the tongue rather than sever it. The monster made several angry roars as it tried to free itself, but was stuck.

Austin then hurried up to the bridge.

"What are you doing?" Brute asked, following him.

"I've got an idea. It's crazy, but it just might work." Austin replied, searching for the blade control.

He soon found it. The monster howled in even more pain as the blade sprang out of the front of the ship and impaled it in the stomach.

"Got it!"

Brute could see now what Austin was trying to do and caught on to his plan.

"Now, full speed ahead!" he said. "Better brace yourself."

The ship sped right at the rocks. Everyone quickly found something to hold onto as they braced. The monster gave one final scream as it was crushed between the rocks and the ship itself, killing it.

As the blade retracted, the creature's body slowly began to slide off and down to the depths.

"Do you know something, Shepard. You're a genius." said Brute as Austin withdrew his sword from what remained of the tongue.

"Just doing what I can." Austin smiled under his helmet, he then suddenly noticed one of the creature's tentacles heading at Brute from behind. "Watch out!"

He pushed the Captain out of the way, but failed to move himself. The tentacle hit him and took him over the edge with it.

"Shepard!"

"AUSTIN!" Liara yelled.

Austin struggled to free himself as the tentacle wrapped around him. Although the creature was dead, it had very strong grip. Just when it started loosening and he looked like he was going to be free however he suddenly hit the edge of the rock face. The back of his collided with it and everything went black.

"Shepard! Shepard, are you alright?! Shepard!"

Austin managed to regain his consciousness. He was still in the grip of the tentacle and was close to the sea bed, so deep that it was almost impossible to see.

Drawing Excalibur, he managed to finally cut the tentacle apart, freeing himself just as he felt his armour hit the sand.

"I'm okay. I can read you." He replied as the creature's body hit the sea bed too.

"Austin! Thank the goddess you're alright." Said Liara.
“You signal's coming almost form the bottom of the sea. What's the pressure like down there?” Brute asked.

"Enough to crush me. The suit's doing fine though, so I should be okay.” Austin replied.

That was not a lie at all. Helldiver suits were designed for the harshest of conditions. They could survive and space and were strong enough to cope with pressure like this. True no Helldiver had ever gone this deep before, but that didn't mean it was impossible.

“What about that creature? Is it dead?” Normica asked.

"Yes." Austin replied, looking at the corpse of the creature.

"You'd better get back up then. Can you see the ship?"

"I'm not coming up yet." Said Austin.

"What?"

"That thing can't have been there by coincidence, nor can those organic Takaal. We're close… and I can feel something down here.”

He could just feel the faintness of a foreign presence in his mind, but it was enough for him to recognize it. It felt exactly the same as the presence Leviathan had.

"Austin…” Liara tried to say.

"I'll be okay." He said calmly, his words offering his wife some encouragement.

Using his suit's weight, he was able to walk on the sea bead. He continued down several more drops, following the presence in his head as it grew stronger.

"The readings from your suit are spiking. Something is definitely down there with you.” Said Brute.

"I know. I can feel it in my mind. It's trying to control me, but it can't. It's times like these I'm glad the Rachni Queen gave me this gift." Said Austin.

"Just don't die down there."

Pretty soon, Austin found himself in a simply massive underground cave and he stood before an almost bottomless pit. Then the place started to rumble and bubbles rose up.

"What is that?” said Austin as he backed away cautiously. What he then saw left hi frozen in shock.

A huge mass slowly rose up. It was huge, practically the same size as a Reaper. Hell, it looked like a Reaper. But at the same time, this definitely wasn't a Reaper. It looked… organic. Like an actual, living, organic Reaper. There was no doubt in Austin's mind. He had found Leviathan.

"You have come too far.” It said, it's voice echoing around the cave, despite it being underwater.

"I had to find you." Said Austin.

"This is not your domain. You have breached the darkness.” Said Leviathan.

"You killed a Reaper. I need to know why."
"They are the enemy. One that seeks our extermination and of those we protect."

"What are you talking about? I thought you were a Reaper."

"They are only echoes. We and those we protect existed long before."

"Then what are you? What is it you're protecting"

"We are but guardians, and those we protect…"

Austin felt Leviathan's presence in his head increase so much he almost feared it would be too much. Still his immunity held though.

"Good luck with that. I'm immune." He said.

But then another voice joined them. The female voice from before…

"To indoctrination perhaps… but not us."

There was a bright flash and everything changed…

Austin found himself in what looked like a desert of some kind. Only there was no sky or stars or anything like that.

The sands shifted several times, causing the Helldiver to lose his balance before it finally settled. When it did however, several more organic Takaal suddenly appeared out of the sand. Austin drew Excalibur and his shield from his back. He could only hope his skills would not fail him.

Right before the Takaal could attack however, the sand suddenly swept around him almost dissolving the Takaal like they were made of sand.

"Now now, my children. That is no way to treat a guest." said a female voice.

All the sand disappeared and Austin found himself in an almost empty void. Something large then rose up in froth of him and he found himself gazing upon a simply massive female Takaal. She was almost as tall as Leviathan and it was only because of some invisible platform that Austin stood at waist width with her.

Austin could already guess this must the leader. She already stood out form the others. She was clothed from head to toe in a long dark robe which was abraded with jewellery and gold. Her crest was also much longer than any other Takaal and several gold necklaces hung from each one while others wrapped around both. The obvious sign that she was female was also her hair. Like Mirage, she had dreadlocks but they were much longer. So long in fact that they reached down to her stomach, and each dreadlocks was decorated with jewellery of some kind. She looked down at Austin casually. She was obviously not surprised to see him.

"Bravo, human. No one has ever made it this far into our midst before… alive that is." she said gently clapping.

Austin remained calm. He was pretty certain there was a reason this Takaal ha come before him, otherwise he'd be dead already.

The large Takaal, who was clearly the Queen waited for a response from the Helldiver, but she didn't get one.
"You don't seem afraid. Are you not surprised to see us?" she asked questionably.

"Not as much as you might think. You're not like the ones I've met before. You're different." said Austin. He was pretty sure this Takaal knew what he was talking about. She and Leviathan had clearly been watching him for a long time.

"How clever you are, little Helldiver," the Queen smiled. She had a somewhat strange voice. She sounded youthful, but at the same time spoke with a wise old tone. Hardly surprising though considering that she was probably millions of years old.

"Who are you?" Austin asked.

"I am Meeralack, Queen of the Takaal." the Queen replied. "You stand in the presence of royalty."

Austin slowly withdrew his sword, hoping for the right reaction. Sure enough, he got it.

"You seem quick to trust." said Meeralack curiously.

"You knew I was coming. Surely you must realise I can't do much harm, especially to one so… big as you, your majesty." said Austin respectfully.

"You've withdrawn your guard. I suppose it is only fair." said Meeralack.

She then suddenly diapered then reappeared at Austin's level, now standing the same size and height as a normal Takaal. She was almost as tall as Skarlack so she dwarfed Austin by a few centimetres. At the same time, the large form of Leviathan also appeared, looking down over the two.

"Now. Perhaps you would kind enough us to tell me why you are here and why you have been pursuing our guardians." said Meeralack, gently circling Austin as the long train of her dress dragged behind her. The dress was so long that it touched the invisible floor and hid her legs.

"Guardians?" Austin asked.

"The Leviathans, as you call them."

"You know more than you're letting on." said Austin. "Why are there two factions of your people? Why are some of them synthesis?"

"And why should I tell you that?"

"You said so yourself, no one has ever made it this far into your midst before. I'd say that's earned me the right to some answers."

Meeralack looked at Austin for a moment. She then gave Austin a smile that said "Well played."

"You always have been the persuasive type, Major Shepard." she said. "It would make more sense if I showed you. Open your mind."

Austin gently allowed this and he felt images flash before him, images of a time so long ago.

"Millions of years ago, our people were once a proud race. We were one of the most advanced races of our time. Back then, it was an older, darker, time of chaos. The other races… they were primitive, violent, and most of all selfish. They waged many wars with each while we isolated ourselves, simply observing and studying. But the galaxy could remain blind to us for only so long. Soon, they found out about us, and they grew jealous of us. Despite our technology, they were much better fighters, vicious and unrelenting."
The visions showed the many wars that other races waged with each other and then how they attacked the Takaal. It was strange to see this sort of thing happen after what Austin had seen Skarlack and the synthetic Takaal do.

"We were almost overrun… had it not been for those who had been watching over us."

Then Leviathan and several more of it's kind appeared, driving the attackers away.

"The Leviathans saw us as victims. They deemed it unfair that the others treated us this way, and so they drove away our attackers. For a time, we lived in peace, but it did not last long. Alone, the other races could not stand against us, but they soon found out that if they worked together, they could overcome even the Leviathans. Against the entire galaxy, we knew we didn't have a chance."

The other races united and attacked, the destruction and chaos was so great it almost put the Reapers to shame.

"Death, destruction and suffering made us desperate. Our best minds banded together and we created an intelligence that had the power to protect us. From that, we constructed a form for it, forged in the image of our protectors. Thus it was that the first Reaper was born, you call it Harbinger."

Sure enough, the visions showed the construction of Harbinger.

"Soon others followed, each one based off of the intelligence we had created and made in Harbinger's image all of them sharing in a hive mind so as to coordinate and communicate with each other."

Other Reapers followed until there were around 100 of them.

"Against the Reapers, our enemies were no match whatsoever. Very soon, they begged for us to accept their surrender all so that they would not be completely exterminated."

The Reapers practically layer waste tot he attacking races. They fell to their knees before the Takaal, most especially Meeralack. Even back then, she'd been Queen.

"For more than four thousand years, we lived in peace, the dominant race among all others, ruling over them with the Reapers ensuring that none dared to ever oppose us. But in that time however, something about the Reapers began to change. All the while, their hive mind intelligence continued to evolve."

"Let me guess. They got smart enough to wonder why they had to take orders?" Austin asked.

"That'd be one way of putting it, yes. Against our will, they attacked all organic races, harvesting their genetic material and from it, creating many more of themselves. Soon the Reapers had a small army at their disposal. Then they turned to us too."

The Reapers int he visions began to wipe out everything int heir path, harvesting them into new Reapers, and soon they attacked their creators.

"Unprepared and with our population still recovering after the losses we had sustained all those years ago, the attack came as a complete surprise. Even the Leviathans could not protect us."

The Takaal home world changed from a peaceful planet to nothing but fire and chaos.

"Without any other choice, we fled our own world, forced to let the Reapers destroy it as we fled into the farthest reaches of the galaxy. Without any way of following us, we believed the Reapers
would be stranded. But they were just as immortal as us. For the next 65 million years, they created the mass relays, the Citadel and from them created the cycles."

The visions ended and Austin's vision returned to normal.

"But why?" he asked.

"To build up their armies. Perhaps they somehow believe that they need more of themselves, constantly stuck in a loop believing that they need more. And all the while, they search for signs of us, hoping to find us and end it once and for all. We created them, so they believe that only we know how to destroy them." said Meeralack.

"I still don't understand how the Synthetic Takaal fit into this." said Austin.

Meeralack seemed to look a bit more saddened by this. Almost as though she was speaking about this with regret.

The visions then resumed to show the Takaal and Leviathans settling deep underwater not his planet.

"For many cycles, we built a new life for ourselves here. But not all were happy about it. One in particular stood out from the rest."

A very familiar Takaal filled the visions. It was weird to see him without his synthesis markings.

"Skarlack?"

"My best General. He believed that other races did not deserve to die or suffer because of what we had done. Our people were in no position to challenge the Reapers though, and I had no wish for us to sign our own death wish." Meeralack explained.

Skarlack and many other Takaal, including Mirage, began to argue with Meeralack and the others before finally leaving, splitting off from their people altogether.

"But Skarlack was not the only one. Many others agreed with him, in the end I was powerless to stop them. A whole army of our people deserted us… among them, my own husband."

The Takaal left their people and soon began work on constructing a device.

"During the final days of the current cycle, they created a massive device with such power that we feared the worst would happen if they used it. I believe you're familiar with it?"

"The Crucible."

"The very first of it's kind." said Meeralack. "But when the time came to deploy it, the Reapers had discovered it. Skarlack and my husband prepared to end the war once and for all. But when the choice came… Skarlack discovered something. The death and pain of loss along with the suffering and destruction he had seen had pushed him to the very limits. He saw that there were other options, besides simply destroying the Reapers. He began to think differently."

Skarlack and Meeralack's husband, Krallock, stood before the Crucible's beam. It was ready to fire, it only needed the command.

"You cannot be serious. How can you believe that the destruction of the Reapers is not the way?! It's the only way!" Krallock argued.
"The Reapers are the most powerful beings in the universe. If we found a way to regain control of them, imagine the possibilities! We would rule the galaxy, we could rebuild our old empire a thousand times over, make it stronger and greater than ever!" said Skarlack.

"You've lost your mind! I will not let you do this!" said Krallock, putting his hand on Skarlack's shoulder and stopping him.

"Stand aside... your majesty!" the General warned. "I will not ask again!"

"You'll have to kill me!" said Krollack, drawing his weapon.

A fierce battle followed as the two Takaal fought one another. Despite Krallock's skill though, Skarlack was clearly the better fighter and he soon managed to disarm his opponent. he then seized the Takaal by the neck and brought him up to the beam.

"A sacrifice is needed anyway." he said.

"Even if you kill me, there will be others. And they will see the truth that you cannot." Krallock choked.

"We built this crucible... and we can just as easily destroy it." Skarlack snarled. "No other race will ever truly be able to destroy the Reapers."

At that moment, something suddenly broke off front he Crucible and sped off into the far reaches of space.

"What have you done?!" Skarlack snarled, tightening his grip on Krallock's neck and edging him further towards the beam. Krallock's could feel the beam as it tired to eat away at his skin.

"Ensured that one day, even it takes hundreds of cycles, the Reapers will fall."

"Not if i kill them first." said Skarlack, and with that he flung Krallock in to the beam.

The Takaal was practically disintegrated by the beam until it was nothing but green particles. Austin found it very unpleasant to watch and he could not deny that he felt a little sick in hiss to mach watching it. Meeralack also looked on the point of tears as she watched her poor husband become practically disintegrated by the beam. Most likely she had never dared see this more than once.

A green wave then swept front he crucible, capturing all Takaal in it. The Reapers who were attacking, suddenly stopped their attack as the wave swept over them and their victims.

Skarlack now stood before the crucible, his synthesis markings present and the true power of this ability now at his fingertips. He emitted a loud roar of triumph as he held his staff up at the sky.

"It should've ended that day, but Skarlack's change of mind prolonged it. On that day, the outsiders became what they are now. Synthesis was born, and they became the Reaper's willing servants. It seemed the Reapers were very influential." the Takaal sighed, trying to hold back the sorrow she felt.

Austin now understood Meeralack a bit better. To live for more than 65 million years as a widow...

But still, that did not change that the Takaal were the real reason all this had happened.

"And now it seems we pay the price for you mistake." he said.

"I know what you've lost! I know what has happened each time! Nothing but death and suffering,
and we have had to watch for 65 million years! That is the curse of immortality!" Meeralack yelled back angrily, a tear making its way down her cheek.

So it seemed this species was far different than their synthetic counterparts.

"How was it you've remained in this same spot so long without the Reapers finding you?" Austin asked.

"Over the cycles, the thrall races were controlled, removing traces of our existence as we directed them to. In this way, our survival was kept from the Reapers. Today, we reach out through the fragments and watch for discovery." said Leviathan, suddenly speaking again after a long silence.

"You mean the artefacts we found?"

One of said artefacts then rose up on a pedestal, almost like a crystal ball.

"Tools for exploring the events of this cycle from the safety of this world. Through them, we watch, we study, and remain in the shadows." Leviathan explained.

"Okay, you've made your point. Will you stop the cycle?" said Austin.

"We have searched your mind. You are an anomaly—yet that is not enough." said Leviathan.

For a moment, it looked as though they were about to leave. After all this, Austin was not going to let that happen.

"Wait!"

"The Cycle will continue as it has always done." both Leviathan and Meeralack said in synch.

"No! You've been watching. You know this cycle is different." said Austin.

"We will survive. You will be free to return to our war, but we will not help you. We will not sacrifice ourselves for one cycle." said Meeralack.

"The Reapers know where you are now! You can't just watch anymore—you have to fight! Even if you survive the battle today, the Reapers won't stop—ever. Join us. Fight with us and we have a chance to end this once and for all!" said Austin.

There was a very long silence. The finally Leviathan spoke first.

"You confidence is singular."

"I've earned it out there fighting, where you should be." said Austin.

"It is clear why the Reapers perceive you as a threat and why the outsiders have a reason to fear you. Your victories are more than a product of chance." said Leviathan.

"Strange. You remind me of him a little bit. A leader that never gives up, is not afraid to stand up to superiors, and willing to die for others." said Meeralack as she slowly circled Austin. "The prophecies may yet be true."

"What prophecies?" Austin asked.

"Long ago, the Oracle of our people foretold two prophecies during our dark hours." said Meeralack.
She then walked up to the artefact on the pedestal and moved her hands around it. It began to show more visions, but this time inside the artefact itself.

"The first one is that the Reapers would eventually meet their death at the hands of a warrior wielding a blade of Kartalrium."

The only figures that were shown were shadowed silhouettes. One in particular, stood out among the many corpses of dead Reapers, and held up a sword that glinted in the light.

It wasn't hard for Austin to guess that was him. He was pretty much the only Helldiver alive that had a blade of Kartalrium. Dark Excalibur had been forged for him too, but its master was now dead and the blade was now locked up.

The vision then changed to show something else. It showed Skarlack apparently being defeated by an unseen being composed of pure bright light. That looked awfully familiar.

"The second… is that Skarlack himself would meet his end by the hands of a being… known as the Catalyst."

"The Catalyst…" a thought suddenly popped into Austin's mind. If the Takaal and the Leviathans had watched since the beginning, then surely they must know... "What is it?"

Meeralack gave him a questioning look.

"What makes you think I know?"

"Don't play games with me! You've been observing for more than 65 million years. You must know something. I refuse to believe that even one such as you didn't know the key to ending this." said Austin, his demanding tone surprising Meeralack.

"But why should I tell you? What makes you think your cycle is so special?" she asked.

"Because our Crucible is practically complete. All we need is the Catalyst. We can end this war." said Austin. "I'm not asking you to join our fight. I'm not asking you to lay down your own life for us. And I don't care that you've given up. You can remain blind to the Reapers, but now that they know that you're here, they will not be remaining blind to you. I beg you, only help us once… That is all I ask."

Meeralack turned to her back to Austin, she hated to admit it, but he had a point.

"You can try and hide it all you want, but I can see the pain in your eyes. Seeing the suffering that cycles endure pains you. You want to see it end as much as I do. I can end the cycles once and for all, but only if you tell us what the Catalyst is." said Austin. "You do know what it is, don't you?"

There was once again a long silence. The Meeralack walked up to the artefact and once again used it to look back into the past. Austin could not see what she saw, but he knew she had to be looking.

Then the Takaal slowly stepped back in surprise. She then looked right at Austin with amazement.

"Surprising." she said. "All this time… I never would've thought."

"What do you mean?"

Meeralack once again used the artefact to show Austin more of the vision of the first crucible when it had been fired. This time though, it focused on the part of the crucible that had broken away.
"That part of the Crucible my husband sent away… that was the Catalyst. It flew far beyond the range of even the outsiders. Only we were able to keep track of it. Finally, it came to rest on a far off planet. For millions of years it lay dormant. But that all changed a thousand years ago, when it was discovered." she said. "And I think you can figure out the rest for yourself."

The rock and soil around the Catalyst was slowly moved away to reveal none other… than an Arkane. The vision then once again shifted to show the technology being used to make something all too familiar.

"Are you telling me… that the Catalyst… is a Helldiver?!" Austin asked, almost lost for words. All this time, the Catalyst had been right under his nose?

"More specifically, one particular Helldiver. More specifically… You." said Meerlack.

"Me?! But… how's that possible."

"Think. You're a clever man, Shepard." said Meerlack.

For a moment, Austin tried to think. How was it that he could be the Catalyst. What made him truly so special from over Helldiver beside his sword? And then it hit him

"The Prothean beacons!"

"Bingo," Meerlack smiled. "The catalyst protocols exist in every Helldiver, true. But they lay dormant, locked so deep inside the suit that even the Arkanes could not detect it, and therefore could not activate them. But the Prothean beacons managed to activate these protocols in your suit."

Then Austin remembered something else. A question that had been with him for nearly two years...

"Wait a minute… When my suit brought me back from the dead, it said something about Protocol Catalyst. Was that…"

"Indeed. The Catalyst is not technically alive, but it has some form of sentience through you. As long as the Catalyst exists inside your suit, it will never allow you to truly die." said Meerlack.

"So what does this mean? Do I have to connect myself up to the Crucible somehow?" Austin asked.

"You must let your suit interface with it's beam. It can complete the sequence from there." said Meerlack, using to artefact to learn what was needed. She then paused.

"But there's more…" she added. "There is a missing piece that you do not have."

"Like what?" Austin groaned.

"There is a part of the Catalyst that still remains on Arkadia, buried far below where it can never be reached." said Meerlack.

"That's just great!" Austin sighed, just about ready to kick something over in anger. To come this far...

"Fortunately, it can still be used." said Meerlack.

"How?" Austin asked, his head suddenly coming back up with hope.

"If your Crucible touches Arkadian soil, and your suit complete the sequence… It will work. Without it, the consequences are too terrible to imagine." said Meerlack.
All of a sudden, the place seemed to shake and there was the faint sound of Takaal whispers.

"What was that?" Austin asked.

Meeralack once again concentrated not he artefact. Her eyes closed, then reopened.

"After all this time…" she said.

"What is it?! What's going on?!"

"It's the Reapers. They have finally reached the final part of their plan."

"What plan?"

"Have you ever wondered why it is they never attacked Arkadia? Why they never tried to eliminate the greatest threat first?" Meeralack asked.

"I will admit, it has puzzled me." said Austin.

"The Reapers realize that you have a chance at destroying them. Even without the Crucible, they know of what your Helldivers are capable of." Meeralack explained. "They also know about your treaties. If they attack directly, almost all of the galaxy unites together to fight them. So instead, they decided to rob you of your allies. In doing so, they leave you alone in this fight, and they in turn build up their army of husks."

"But we've ruined their plan. Our allies still stand." said Austin.

"You recent victories have forced their hand. Both the Reapers and the Takaal have grown desperate, and they have still managed to increase their armies a lot." said Meeralack. "Skarlack also knows you are here. The Reapers are left with little choice. They are withdrawing their forces and are mobilizing to attack Arkadia."

"Then we don't have much time." said Austin. "We'll get the Crucible to Arkadia. One way or another, it will end there."

"And what of us?" Meeralack asked.

"You don't want to fight, that's your choice." said Austin. "But you want an end to this as much as I."

"You are free to go… and we will fight, but not for you, or any lesser race. We will only fight for those we protect." said Leviathan.

"And my people will also fight," said Meeralack, turning back to Austin a new hint of confidence and courage in her eyes. "As much as I try to deny it, you are right, Shepard. We cannot hide any longer. And if we die… we will take our outcasts with us. My people and our guardians are at your disposal."

Everything suddenly went bright and Austin found himself back underwater. Now though, instead of just Leviathan in front of him, there were two others and an entire swarm of organic Takaal.

Meeralack also stood in front of him. Even in organic form, her race still lack lungs, so they could easily survive underwater. She touched Austin's helmet and communicated a message to him telepathically. Her voice was that of her own, and Leviathans.

"Mobilize your army. We will be ready when you give the order. Now go, fulfil your destiny!"
Austin quickly activated his hydro boosters and his suit sped upwards towards the surface.

When he finally broke the water's surface, he immediately spotted the Revanant just before he suddenly felt rather light headed and passed out. The crew almost immediately hauled him on board.

"Austin! Goddess, he's freezing!" said Liara.

Austin then suddenly let in a sharp intake of air and coughed.

"Don't ever do that again!" said liara with relief as she hugged her husband. AUstin hugged her back then quickly picked himself up.

"We don't have much time." he said.

"What do you mean?" Brute asked.

"Captain, get us back to the Normandy! This war is closer than ever to being over." Austin ordered.

Several huge masses suddenly burst out of the water. Both Leviathan and Takaal were rising to the surface. Ships and beings that were more than millions of years old had finally returned to the surface.

"What the hell…" said Kraan, raising his gun.

"No, don't!" Austin yelled, quickly pushing it down before the krogan could fire. "Their on our side."

"What went on down there?" brute asked.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you." said Austin.

"You?! How is that possible?!" said Zartrack as Austin finished telling the tale.

"There'll be time to explain later, but not now. The enemy is on our doorstep." said Austin.

"On our doorstep? They've retreated. What is going on?" Anderson asked.

It was true that the Reapers had withdrawn from everywhere. It struck everyone completely by surprise.

"They may have retreated, but it's not over." said Austin."They're mobilizing to attack Arkadia."

"Are you sure?" Matt asked.

"I wouldn't say so if I wasn't." said Austin.

Both Matt and Zartrack looked at each other with concern. The Helldiver were strong, but this...

"Listen to me, I know what we need to do." said aUSTIN. "We have to get the Crucible to Arkadia. If we do… this war will definitely end."

"Shepard… Arkadia is well defended, but I have doubts on whether we can withstand the full might of the Reapers." said Zartrack.

"I have no intention of bringing the Crucible to Arkadia without the resistance. We've been recruiting
them all for a long time. This is the moment we've talked about for so long. It's time." said Austin.

"Then ready your army, Shepard. Arkadia will prepare for war. We'll hold them back as long as we can until you arrive." said Zartrack.

"I'll get the fleets ready. Good luck to us all." said Hackett.

"I hope we're ready for this." Said Anderson as he and Hackett disappeared.

"I guess all I can say is… good luck and give them hell." said Austin.

"If this is to be our final battle... we'll do far more than give them hell, son." said Matt.

"You pull this off, Shepard, and I just might retire." Said Zartrack.

"Then until we meet again. General. Father."

Austin quickly walked into the CIC and stepped up to the galaxy map.

"Traynor, open up a comm channel." He said.

"To who?" Traynor asked.

There was a long pause before Austin finally replied.

"Everyone."

Austin soon had a solid link throughout the entire galaxy. He cleared his throat, stood up straight and began to speak.

"To all who are receiving this message, my name is Sir Major Austin Shepard. Many of you may know me as a Helldiver. But today I do not stand before you as a Helldiver. I stand before you as a person. Today I came to you as a leader, the leader of what will soon become the finally offensive against the enemy that seeks to wipe us out, the Reapers. For a long time, many of you have been preparing for this moment. You have added your support to the Reaper Resistance, waiting for the day when the time would come for us to band together and launch the final attack on our common enemy." He said.

Some of the people in the CIC started to turn and look at the Major as he gave his speech, his voice being heard practically everywhere.

"For too long many of us have stood apart from one another. If this war has shown us anything, it is that we are doomed to extinction if we do not work together," Austin continued. "All of you… put aside the petty differences and grievances that have splintered us for so long. If not for forever, simply long enough that we may win this war. As you probably know, the Reapers have retreated and halted their attacks on your world. But this is not a time to rejoice. This war is not yet over. As we speak, the Reapers are mobilizing to attack Arkadia. To that end, on behalf of the Arkane Council, I call upon all the races in the Helldivers to honour the treaties you signed. The Resistance I have gathered… you know what to do. And finally… to anyone else, to the entire galaxy in fact… I ask you know… join us. If not for us, for those you care about, for those you love. End the suffering and death once and for all."

Now Alpha had fathered to hear the rest of this as well.

"Some of you may doubt our odds of success. I share those concerns, but if we let these emotions
rule us, the Reapers have won already. We have the chance to destroy the Reapers and end the cycle forever. Is that not worth fighting for? Is that not worth dying for?"

Now the rest of the crew had finally joined. They looked up at their leader with admiration and respect. Miranda had been right, he had this fire that made everyone want to follow him into battle.

"I do not know what the future holds for us, but as long as I live, as long as every Helldiver and any who oppose the Reapers has breath within them… we will unite, we will prevail, and we will give the Reapers hell. This will be.. The Last Cycle!"

The message finished and the entire Normandy clapped and cheered.

"Damn. That's the best speech I've ever heard." Said Sarah.

"And some of that I just made up off the top of my head." Said Austin, quite surprised himself that he’d just said all that.

He then turned to the rest of the Normandy, his crew.

"You all know what lies ahead. I recommend you all get as much rest as possible. We are all going to need it for the coming battle ahead." He said. "Whatever happens, I know you will not let me down. Carry on. Our final battle is about to begin."

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For anyone who’s concerned whether there will be a love seen chapter before the battle, don’t be, because there will be one. As excited as I am to start working on the battle of Arkadia, it'd be wrong of me to leave one final love scene for our favourite couples.

So until next week. You have my word also I will work the best I can to make sure there's no delay next week. I can't promise there won't be, but I'll damn well try.

See you soon! :)


There we are! I told you I'd get this up on time! :) 

So here we are, the final love scene chapter. I'm sorry to say I was running a bit low on ideas when writing this, and obviously it had to be more romantic than erotic. Well, you get what I'm trying to say. All in all though, I'd definitely call it a worthy contender.

Little more for me to say. Enjoy.

Chapter 30

Love Conquers All

It would be some time before the entire fleet mobilized, so there was time.

Rather than talk to the crew though, Austin had felt it better to let them get rest if they needed it. He imagined that some of the couples were spending some quality time with one another. It did suddenly occur to him that he and Liara would probably been doing the same thing right about now.

Just as the Helldiver finished inspecting his helmet however, the doors opened and the love of his life walked in.

"I wondered where you were." She said.

"EDI didn't tell you?" Austin asked.

"She respects your privacy, not like me." Liara smiled cheekily. "What are you doing?"

"I thought I heard the casing crack during that last fight." Austin replied as he tossed his triangular helmet to Liara who caught it. He then sat down on the edge of the bed. "Bullet must've just grazed me."

"Do you feel ready, Austin?" Liara asked.

"You first." Austin replied.

"Very fair." Liara chuckled. "What I want most is for this war to end, while there's still a galaxy left to save. And everyone's counting on us to lead them. It must be overwhelming for you especially."

"I know. How do you get ready for something like this?" Austin sighed, finally letting his true feelings reveal themselves.

"You cajole and threaten and make tremendous sacrifices until the galaxy realizes it has someone worth following." said Liara as she put the helmet aside and sat down next to Austin.

"You think so?" Austin asked.

"There's no doubt in my mind." Liara smiled as she and Austin lay back slightly and gazed up into space. Liara moved her hand closer to Austin and the two intertwined. "It would be easy for a single ship to get lost up there, wouldn't it?"
"Yeah. It would." Austin smiled.

"To find someplace very far away where you could spend the rest of your life… in peace, and happiness." Liara continued. Austin smiled and then kissed his wife on the cheek before sitting up again.

"Right now, there's nowhere I'd rather be," he said.

"Neither would I," said Liara as she too sat up and the two kissed deeply. "I love you, Austin."

"I love you too, Liara." said Austin as he caressed the Asari's cheek.

"Show me." Liara smiled.

They resumed kissing and gently lay back down on the bed as they began to work on removing each other's clothes. Before their final battle, they might as well make this night truly something to remember.

Sarah meanwhile was sat on her bed simply waiting. She knew what was coming and she knew that by now that all the couples on this ship were enjoying the calm while it lasted, as it would be one hell of a storm ahead of them. At that moment, the one persons he wanted to see more than anything walked in. Her spirits were instantly lifted by the mere presence of her love.

"The fleets are mobilizing. Looks like it'll be some hours yet," said Traynor as sat down next to Sarah. "Comm channels are full. Not much to do no but wait."

"So you thought you'd sneak in one last shower?" the N7 marine chuckled.

"If there's any hot water left. Or… if you wanted some company…?" said Traynor.

"Will you stay here with me? Until the call comes?" Sarah asked.

"I think I can manage that." Traynor smiled.

The two intertwined hands and drew each other into a deep kiss.

Alaara simply looked out of the window as she stood in nothing but a bathrobe having just finished showering. Now she simply waited for her wife to show up. Few seconds later, speak of the devil, she showed up.

"Was wondering when you'd show up." the Asari smiled.

"Given what we're about to face, I figured you'd want one more night with me." Sandra smiled, unable to deny how sexy Alaara looked in that robe.

"Indeed. I'd love to hear you scream one more time, then I can die happy." Alaara smiled naughtily, as she shrugged off her robe, revealing her nude form to Sandra.

While the Asari slid in under the covers, Sandra worked on removing her own clothes.

"Do you wanna have children?" she asked.

The question took Alaara by surprise, but not unpleasantly.
"Already?" she asked.

"I mean after this war is over? I know Shepard and Liara will certainly be having kids after this. I was hoping… perhaps…" said Sandra, unsure how to continue, but Alaara put her hand on her wife's cheek.

"I'd like nothing more when this war ends." she said.

"Then let's make this night special." Sandra smiled as she finished undressing and climbed in under the covers with her love.

"That's the idea, my love," said Alaara as she drew Sandra into a kiss and they began their long hours of passionate sex and making love.

Trying to keep his mind completely occupied and not focusing on the coming battle ahead, Ventra was busy making sure his bow was in the absolute best condition and that he had plenty of arrow stocks ready for use.

"Still checking weapons at this hour?" a voice suddenly asked.

Leena had walked in and had already removed her mask to reveal her face. She'd had enough encounters now for her immune system to adapt to him. Being with him now wouldn't make her sick.

"Just making sure my bow's ready for the fight ahead. I've also made sure I have plenty of ammo packs. Chances are I'm gonna be using a lot of arrows." said Ventra.

"There's no shame in admitting that you're nervous." said Leena, putting her hand on her husband's shoulder.

Alright. I suppose I am. I'm nervous for you." Ventra admitted, putting the bow down on the table and turning to his wife.

"You shouldn't be. I'm a tough girl." said Leena.

"I know, it's just…" Ventra sighed, but Leena put her finger to his lips, silencing him.

"Shh. No more words. Let us enjoy this moment while it lasts." she said.

She then put a kiss on Ventra's mouth. Despite that Turians didn't have the same lips as humans or Asari did, that didn't mean a kiss felt different.

"I love you." he said.

"I love you too, Ventra."

Ashley walked in to find Griffin on his knees and praying. Hardly unexpected.

She thought about possibly surprising him by being sneaky, but it seemed that even without their armour, a Helldiver was hard to trick.

"Don't bother, Ash. I know you're there." he said.

It was worth a shot." Ashley smiled as Griffins stood up. "Figured you might want some company,
before...

"I can think of far better things you can do than keep my company." said suggestively.

"What kind of girl do you take me for?" Ashley smiled.

"One that's from heaven." said Griffin.

"You're sweet." Ashely smiled.

"And that's a good thing you're from heaven. Because I've always wanted to bone an angel."

Miranda had managed one final call to her sister before they headed out. She hadn't truly promised she'd come back, but she had promised she'd damn well try.

She then looked over at Hawk who was currently asleep on the bed. Despite his occasional snoring, she couldn't help but smile. In the end she couldn't think of a better way to enjoy what could be the final moments. Gently, she peeled her outfit off until she was only in her underwear and slid in under the covers with Hawk. She was pretty sure she'd woken him as there was the distinct impression he was now pretending to be asleep.

She couldn't help but wonder what he might think when he saw her like this. So far they'd yet to be fully intimate in their relationship, and he hadn't seen her body properly. She had a feeling though his reaction would be a good one.

Dash was down in the gym doing a gentle jog just so that he was a bit more prepared for the coming battle. Admittedly, he'd rather spend time with his new girlfriend, but she was busy as far as he knew.

This however proved to be false when Jet suddenly walked in.

"Don't let me stop you." she said before Dash could stop the running machine.

Dash ran on for a few more minutes before finally stopping.

"I guess this is it." said Jet.

"I have faith we'll make it through this. Alpha and I have been through so much that this doesn't feel as bad as it should." said Dash.

"Wish I had your confidence." said Jet as she rested against a pillar.

Dash walked up to the pilot and hugged her.

"You're part of Alpha too." he said. "And I think I speak for all of us when I say that you're going to create a hell of a storm with those wings."

"Wasn't that something Aethyta said to Liara?" Jet asked.

"Yes, but I think it can apply to you too." said Dash.

Jet simply remained silent. She was unsure what to say next.

"Why don't I take your great away again, but this time more... Top Gun style shall we say." Dash
then suggested.

Jet's mood brightened. She knew fully well what Dash was suggesting... and she liked it.

"Can we play the music during it?" she asked.

"Anything for you. This could be our last after all." Dash smiled.

As Xun prepared to settle down for the night, she had a feeling she was forgetting something. Then she suddenly remembered.

She walked up to her many vid screens and keyed in a comm number.

Within a few seconds, Troy's face appeared, each individual screen forming the entire image piece by piece.

"Bonjour, Xun. What can I do for you?" he asked.

"I assume you've heard?" Xun asked.

"Yeah. We're heading to Arkadia to finish this war." Said Troy.

"Listen... you know that... other thing you messaged me about?"

"Ah... I see." Said Troy, understanding what she meant.

"Look... it was a playful flirt. I didn't mean too..."

"I didn't realise you felt that way." Said Xun.

For a moment, Troy was also silent. He could tell from Xun's expression and body language that she seemed interested.

"Oh. Well... neither did I." he said, for the first time in his left struggling to think of something to say. Usually he was quite good with women. Xun on the other hand was different. He couldn't deny that there was something about her. Something different. Something he couldn't explain.

"I'd be up for you to take me out for that drink you mentioned." Xun suggested.

"That'd be nice." Said Troy.

"I'll hold you too it then. You better not fake death again this time, because if you do, I'll know about it." Said Xun.

"No hiding things from you, is there." Troy smiled.

With little else to say, the two decided to call it a night.

"We'll see you at the fleet." Said Xun.

"Dormez bien, Xun." Said Troy. He quickly remembered though that Xun spoke Chinese, not French. "That means sleep well."

Xun simply smiled and nodded, and with that ended the call.
She could not deny that she'd had a bit of a thing for the spy back in the old days before he'd faked his death. For a long time she'd got over those feelings, but now that he was back they'd suddenly resurfaced. True Troy was with someone else back then, but she was dead now and Troy had obviously moved on now, hence his interest in her.

Still, it gave the information broke comfort. As she slid under the covers and gently feel asleep, she began to imagine a possible life after the war with her supposedly new boyfriend.

Jacob had been finding it hard to fall asleep with his mind constantly on the coming battle. To try and make himself a bit more tired and keep his mind occupied, he was working on doing some sit ups, with his shirt off.

As he reached 60, a thought suddenly occurred to him. This was usually the sort of thing Kasumi liked to watch him do. For a moment, he thought he saw a faint shimmer.

Pretending to stop and need a drink, Jacob gently got up and reached for a bottle of water. As soon as he finished unscrewing the top he then suddenly threw the water at a spot on the wall. Sure enough, as he had suspected it instead hit an invisible figure revealing her to his eyes.

Kasumi had been very surprised by this as her cloak shorted out and she worked on wiping some of the water off of her now wet outfit.

"Sorry to say it, Kasumi. But you are getting predictable." Jacob chuckled.

"Still… I would've preferred to stay dry." Said Kasumi, lowering her hood.

"As I recall, you like it when I make you wet." Jacob teased.

"Smooth talker." Kasumi smiled as she let her hair loose and scooped up a nearby towel before Jacob could get it to dry her hair.

"You know, I was hoping you'd drop by." Said Jacob as he walked up to his girlfriend.

"Given what could happen within the next few hours… how could I resist another night with you." Said Kasumi.

"Well then, why don't you take all that wet stuff off and I get out of these sweaty pants?" Jacob suggested as he held Kasumi close to him and his hands just gently touched her bottom.

"Already ahead of you." Kasumi winked as she suddenly held up Jacob's belt and his trousers fell right down.

Liara slowly walked up to the bed, her nude form shining in the dim lights and light purple mist surrounding her as she initiated the union with Austin. As the Helldiver watched, also unclothed, he couldn't help but smile as his wife slowly climbed up the bed until she came within kissing range of Austin.

Gently touching the Asari's shoulder with one hand, Austin gently moved his face forward until his lips met Liara's, and they stayed like that. The other hand meanwhile moved along Liara's thigh very gently, electing a light shiver from her.

The union between the two lovers continued to grow deeper and deeper and deeper as they let all barriers down and refused to hold back. The small feeling in the back of both their heads that this
could be their last night only motivated them to let this night go all the way.

Liara didn't even have to touch her breasts this time for the enlargement to work. In fact it was the same for her bond mate's shaft as it grew to the desired length simply by her mere thought.

Austin then flipped the two over so that he was now on top. As both his hands squeezed Liara's tits, he continued to kiss her passionately while he hands gripped onto his back, almost tight enough to draw blood. Austin's attention then shifted lower until he had reached one of Liara's breasts.

The Asari simply moaned as he took a nipple into his mouth and started to suck gently.

"Oh goddess!" Liara moaned telepathically.

The mere touch of Austin's skin on its own was enough to make Liara want him inside her. This almost made her impatient for Austin to put it in her.

Austin briefly went back up and focused on kissing Liara's neck, causing her to let out a loud moan which almost caused a large flash of her biotics.

"Please, Austin. I can't take it anymore! I want you inside me!" Liara moaned in pleasure.

"I'm all too happy to oblige." Austin smiled.

With that, he gently slid his massive cock in. Liara gritted her teeth and groaned at first as she waited to properly to adapt to her husband's massive size, then it was soon replaced with pleasure and soon she was panting and moaning.

Both bond mates now felt truly complete and bond once again went even deeper. So deep in fact that was now practically impossible for even the both of them themselves to know where one began and the other ended as both minds joined and truly became one. Everything down to even the tiniest details. Austin could feel Liara mixing with him like the two of them were liquid.

Surprisingly, it was more Traynor who was taking the lead this time. She'd had nearly two years now to learn from her lover, and was already impressing Sarah with the pleasure she was giving.

With Traynor on top she gave both of Sarah's breasts and gentle massage as she kissed her passionately, her tongue exploring the depths of Sarah's mouth. Sarah brought a hand up and began to stroke Traynor's soft black hair. It felt like silk to her and it smelt very nice too. Not surprising since the two women washed their hair a lot.

Traynor then shifted all the way down until Sarah's pussy was right in front of her. Before Sarah could even say anything, Traynor immediately stuck out her tongue and started licking. The sweet taste almost immediately filled her lips. It was o intoxicating that she often had to keep reminding herself that this was something she could not eat or bite on.

As Samantha licked and licked, Sarah only moaned even more, massaging one of her breasts as she did.

"Oooh, so good Samantha." She moaned.

This only spurred Traynor on further and both her hands snaked up to the N7 marine's buttocks, massaging each cheek. Eventually, it became too much for Sarah and she flipped her lover around so that they were now 69ing one another. Within barely a few seconds, both lovers began to taste each other.
Austin thrust into Liara nice and hard now. Her Azure had completely adjusted to him now and he could thrust as deep and hard as he wanted. As he slid in and out of her, he could feel the union growing stronger and stronger and stronger. It almost felt like he and Liara had merged into one single being now. As far as he knew, this was the deepest they’d ever gone before, or in fact dared go.

Liara then suddenly flipped them over so she was now on top and she started to ride him, her black eyes staring down at him with love and pure lust and her tits bouncing with each thrust.

"So… good… you’re… so… deep!" Liara moaned with each thrust.

Austin reached up and grabbed both her bouncing tits, massaging them in each hand as he continued to thrust into Liara. As Liara's hip thrusts matched her husband's, they soon settled into an almost automatic rhythm.

Liara then arched herself down to kiss her bond mate again and his hands shifted to her backside, hugging her to him tightly.

Traynor and Sarah were now locked in an endless cycle with one pleasuring the other. Traynor seemed to be doing more of the moan as Sarah's skilled tongue worked it's magic on her. Samantha had had to constantly remind herself that this was not a dream and she really was with her true love, this wasn't just some figment of her imagination. Though if it was, it was pretty damn convincing.

Release was near, that much was certain. The question that remained though was how long it would take and how pleasurable it would be.

Sarah could already feel her own orgasm coming and increased her efforts on Traynor, causing the comm specialist to moan even more and increase her own pleasure on her. For Traynor, this was one of the best nights of her life.

The two were so close now. Both their releases were nearing breaking point now and Austin could feel Liara's body charging with biotic energy that would release from her when she orgasmed. He too could feel the cum ready to burst forth from his shaft. It was a almost as shame this wasn't how Asari got pregnant, as this would almost certainly have impregnated her.

"We're close!" he moaned.

"Then let's come together!" Liara groaned as he thrust into her hard.

Finally Austin drove himself into Liara as far as he could. The two could hold back no longer.

Austin roared as his throbbing cock began firing thick volleys of seed into her womb, creating Liara's last and most intense orgasm of the night. Her body clutched his member tightly as she convulsed with pleasure, prolonging his own orgasm. For a whole minute, he pumped his seed into her and at the same time they felt their Union almost overwhelm all their senses. Nothing but pure pleasure was all they felt. Finally spent, Austin withdrew his member. It made a sticky popping sound as it came free, and a small stream of cum leaked out of Liara's azure.

Both utterly spent from previous orgasms they'd had earlier, and sweating all over, they finally felt it was time to call it a night. They would need the rest and strength after all. As the two rested and cuddled, they couldn't help but fondle the enlarged parts of the other.
"That was the best ever." Liara smiled.

"No argument here." Austin agreed.

The two pulled the covers over each other and finally settled down for some long needed sleep, cuddling intimately as Liara lay her head on Austin's chest, her large breasts squashed against him.

Both Sarah and Traynor gritted their teeth and moaned so hard into each other's pussies as the powerful waves of their orgasm washed over them. They could feel her wetness spilling out over each other's faces and kept jerking until their were too sensitised to take anymore. They'd had plenty other orgasm earlier tonight, but that one definitely took the top of the list.

"I love you, princess." Traynor smiled as she cuddled her love.

"I love you too, Samantha." said Sarah.

The two finally settled down on the bed. As Sarah pulled the covers over them, Traynor gently rested her head on one of Sarah's breasts.

"My favourite pillows." Samantha sighed blissfully.

Sarah simply smiled an planted a kiss on Traynor's forehead before the two finally felt themselves drifting off to sleep.

Once more, Austin and Liara found themselves int he empty whit nothingness. As before, Liara had her armour on, and the obscured glowing figure once again appeard.

"Austin…" she said, cautiously trying to put Austin behind her, but he gently stopped her.

"It's okay. I understand these dreams now." he said. He then walked up to the white figure. "You don't need to hide anymore. I know what you are."

Sure enough, the figure's bright light subsided, finally revealing it's true form to be none other than Austin's own armour. As Austin found his suit staring back at him, he couldn't help but feel somewhat complete, as though there'd been a very small piece of himself that he'd been missing. Something that Liara didn't complete.

The suit then gently reached forward and touched Austin's heart. As it did, it slowly began to disassemble piece by piece and reassemble itself on him. When it finally completed, both Austin and Liara looked at one another.

"It is done." said a voice very similar to the computer in Austin's suit.

It was hardly surprising that the catalyst would use that to communicate with him. Meeralack had said after all that it had some form of sentience. Everything suddenly went bright.

Both lovers slowly awoke, well rested and feeling ready for what was to come. Austin coldln't help but gaze at Liara's beauty a little while longer.

"You okay?" she asked, unable to hold back a slight yawn.

"Yeah. I'm feeling quite relaxed considering what that we're heading into." said Austin calmly. "Speaking of which, we're almost there."
"Already?" said Liara as she and Austin both sat up, the covers falling from their bodies.

"I hope everyone's ready for this." said Austin.

"You don't need to worry about that. You rallied almost everyone. The Reapers and the Takaal won't get any more chances to divide us. This time, the galaxy follows our lead." said Liara supportingly.

"Even I can't deny that there will be casualties. I just wonder how many." said Austin.

"You're not alone in this fight now, my love. Take strength from that. And whatever happens, I will always love you." said Liara.

"As will I." said Austin as he and Liara kissed. "Thanks, Liara."

"My pleasure." said Liara as Austin got up and began working on pulling on his suit mesh, tossing her own one to her at the same time. "And think of it this way. This is the only thing left that stands between us, and those little blue children."

"You always know to put me in high spirits." Austin smiled as he suit began assembling around him piece by piece, this time for real.

"Where would you be without me?" said Liara as hers did the same.

"Lost, probably."

"I'm so glad I met you." said Liara as she held her bond mate's face in her hands. "I love you so much."

The two lovers kissed for one final long time before finally separating and allowing their helmets to assemble.

"As am I." said Austin. "Now, let's end this war once and for all."

Traynor gently opened her eyes. She found the spot next to her empty and felt a tiny bit disappointed. When she flipped over however, she found Sarah sat not he edge of the bed, already in most of her armour.

"Morning." she said. "Sorry we don't have time for a little morning cuddle, but…"

"I know." said Traynor.

"We'll make it through this, I promise you." said Sarah supportingly as she touched Samantha's cheek and gently caressed it.

"I'm gonna hold you to that." said Traynor as she laid her hand on top of her lovers. She then gave a slight chuckle.

"What is it?" Sarah asked, happy at least to see her love smiling.

"You remember how scared I was when I met you?" said Traynor. "I was terrified… of the Reapers, the war, everything. You helped me. I wouldn't mind returning that favour."

"I appreciate that." Sarah smiled. "But I have confidence in my brother. He'll see us through this."
"Based on the results, you're right. Besides if someone else besides you tried to take charge, I best you'd be a terrible back seat pilot." Traynor chuckled.

"Maybe a little." Sarah laughed.

"So suck it up, princess. You're with the Helldivers now. And we're going to win this, and when this is over… well…"

"When this is over, I'll marry you." said Sarah, much to Traynor's utter delight.

The two kissed one final time before Traynor handed Sarah her Death Mask and she put it on.

"Now come on, you need to get dressed too." said the N7 Marine.

Austin was about to head down to the cargo bay with the others to fully gear up and be ready for anything, when he noticed that there was no sign of Garrus and Tali. In fact, no one had seen them at all today yet. Austin walked up to the forward battery first to check Garrus wasn't oversleeping. As the doors opened however, he found a rather unexpected sight. Both he and Tali were hugging each other intimately. The two however quickly took notice of him as the door opened.

"Oh!" said Tali.

"We were just, uh…" Garrus tried to say as the two untangled one another.

"I… well, I… just came to say goodbye, and… well…" Tali struggled to say.

"…think one of my mandibles got hooked on her helmet."

"It might've caused a rupture, so I asked him to check…"

"You know, because of infection risks. Didn't want to jeopardise the mission…"

"So…"

"Yeah."

"I'm really happy for you. Both of you." Austin smiled. He'd always had a feeling there might be something between the two. He wondered if anyone else had made bets on it.

"Thanks, Austin." said Tali.

"Appreciate it. Guess it helps to have something to come back to." Said Garrus.

"What do you mean "to come back to?" This is just a fling, Vakarian. I'm using you for your body." said Tali, a small hint of joking in her voice.

"You're so mean… and I'm okay with that." said Garrus.

Everyone seemed quite calm as they geared up. Last night had obviously done them well, that and being with loved ones of course.

"We've trusted each other this far, and we've never been lead astray." said Alaara.

"That's not going to change today." said Leena.
They were then suddenly interrupted by the sound of loud hammering coming from Dell's workstation.

"What's Dell doing? We're about to head into war and he's working?" said Kraan.

Sarah walked up and peeked around the corner to see what was going on. She was greeted with a rather pleasant and welcome surprise.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that." she said.

Everyone else joined her to see what she was talking about. They almost immediately had the same reaction.

Both Dell and Sill were finishing working on Austin's suit. This time though he was in his powered up mode again and all of X-5's upgrades were reattached.

The two Arkane engineers finished their work and gently stood back.

"Okay. Try it now." said Dell.

There was a loud hum as Austin's suit reactivated. This time though the upgrades activated with it. He took few steps then performed a few tests movements.

"That sounded good." he said.

"Power levels are looking good. All the upgrades appear to be stabilized. What's it like on your end?" Della sued, checking the levels on nearby monitor, all of which were showing stable results.

"All running at optimal levels, upgrades are being well sustained… I'd say your new power core is perfect." said Austin.

True enough, Dell had finally finished working on that new power core he'd had in the works ever since X-5 gave his parts to Austin. 3 times more powerful than the standard power core of a Helldiver, it could now not only power both Austin's suit and the upgrades, but also permanently sustain them and allow the Helldiver to retain his powered up form.

"Well I'll be dammed. You got them working again." said Leena impressively.

"And this time, they'll stay that way." said Austin proudly. "If we're going to defeat the Reapers and the Takaal, we need every edge."

"Major, the fleet's ready for us." said Joker over the comm.

"Major." Said Hackett over the vid comm.

"Admiral." Austin nodded.

"I trust you're ready to bring the entire might of the resistance to bear on the Reapers?" Hackett asked.

"You bet." Austin nodded.

"Then let me know as soon as you're good to go. You and the Normandy will be at the head of the
"Major, an Asari warship is requesting permission to dock before we head out. They say that two Matriarchs want to see their daughter again and they've also got an Alliance Admiral with them." Said Joker.

"They don't even have to ask." Austin smiled. He already knew who they were, and they were most welcome on the Normandy.

Three familiar figures soon came aboard.

Both Sarah and Austin ran up to their mother and hugged her while Liara found herself in the arms of both her parents.

"So good to finally see you both again." said Hannah, happily hugging both her children. "I just wish it could be under better circumstances."

"I guess there is one good thing about this war at least." said Sarah. "It brings us all together again."

"Spoken like a true Shepard." Austin smiled.

He then turned to Liara who'd just finished hugging both her parents. Aethyta it seemed had ditched her familiar dress for an Asari commando armour that seemed to suit her. Benezia still wore her dark robes, but she no longer had her headdress and had also fitted several bits of armour plating to her dress along with some biotic booster canisters. To Liara's slight delight, they were yellow and actually went quite well with her black dress. Both matriarchs also looked quite well. The colour had really returned to their skin and they both looked a lot less pale now. Obviously a result of them getting back together and finding happiness again in each other's arms.

"Matriarchs. It's good to see you both again." said Austin, gently bowing his head to them.

"Seems I was completely wrong about you, Shepard." said Aethyta. "You are good enough for our girl, and I think I speak for Nezzy as well I say we're proud to call you son in law."

Benezia didn't say anything, but she nodded in agreement.

"I couldn't ask for anything more." said Austin gratefully.

"Now, let's kick the crap of those Reaper bastards so you two can finally start giving us grand-children." said Aethyta.

Liara couldn't help but shake her head with a happy sigh. Both Austin, Sarah and Hannah simply chuckled.

"Admiral, we're in position. All ships are accounted for." said Austin.

"All craft, prepare to hit the relay on my mark." said Hackett.

"Coordinates for Arkadia are locked. All weapon and combat systems are locked and primed." said EDI.

"Major?" Joker asked, ready to start.

"To Arkadia." said Austin.
The Normandy and the hundreds of thousands of ships that made up the fleet all hit the relay and were catapulted forward at light speed. This was it, the final battle was about to begin…

There was a very small hint to something there. I doubt anyone spotted it though, it's very cleverly hidden.

So, this is it. Next week... The Battle of Arkadia.

Let me tell you, I am super excited about that. In fact, I've already started work. Rest assured this will be up to the standard of my usual action writing, possibly even better.

And the battle's story isn't going to feel hastily put together or rushed either. I've had it thoroughly thought out and planned for almost two years now, in fact ever since I first started this trilogy. So I know exactly what's going to happen, how it's going to happen, I know how to write it, and I know exactly how to get the right feel to it.

I should warn some people in advance that this is where the deaths start to come. In truth, some of the character deaths in earlier parts of the story were changed more so they could die nearer the end. Feels better that the more significant deaths should during the end, and let's be honest that doesn't happen in the game. The only significant death at the end is Anderson. All others are just normal soldiers. True the characters can die during th beam run, but that's only with low EMS, and I can assure you Shepard has an insanely high EMS here.

One final thing. I will work around the clock to get next week's chapter done within the week. But in case there's the chance I don't finish it in time for next Friday, I will reschedule it for the Friday after. So incase the chapter doesn't' appear next week, it means I haven't finished it, and not because I've been lazy with it. After all, I imagine it will be a large chapter next week, especially since I've planned for the final battle to be in two parts (the first of which will end in a cliffhanger)

Right, I think I've said enough now. Until next week! Hope you're ready for it. ;)

Few quick notes for next we
Hi there!

As a tiny little treat for you all, and a little apology that this wasn't done in one week (as I hoped it would) I've uploaded this now.

Would like to make it clear however this does not mean the next (and final chapter) will be up this Friday. I doubt I can do the last one that quickly, especially since it took me more than one week to do this one.

Anyway, this is it. The beginning of the final battle.

All I'll say is, don't be too disappointed with some of the character deaths, and also to warn you, this chapter does end in a cliffhanger.

Hope you enjoy though, this was very good fun to do and I am especially pleased with how this has turned out.

Chapter 31

The Battle of Arkadia

Never before had the Arkadian city been so busy and full. The streets were amok with civilians and Helldiver soldiers. While the civilians were heading to evac shuttles which were hoping to get to safety before the Reapers arrived and blocked the path to the relay, the Helldivers were preparing for attack.

Arkadia's defences were formidable, there was no doubt about that, but never before had any truly dared to test how much.

The outskirts of the city were surrounded by two huge wall tall enough to almost deny access and strong enough to withstand blockades for years. Zartrack was already stood up on the top as the massive defence cannons and guns were being activated. Both Helldivers and Arkane soldiers were manning all defences and also preparing front line trenches. It was very likely the Reapers and Takaal would attempt a surface attack, especially when they asfield to get past the city's greatest defence.

Several of Arkadia's tallest towers began to fire out a powerful beam into the sky. All these beams soon met and a large field began to form from it and began spreading until it covered the entire city in a massive dome shield.

As the edges of the shield finally reached the ground, it disappeared, making it seem as though the shield had never even been there. This would definitely allow them to last until not only Austin and the army arrived, but also until all other defences could be fully activated. The large mech a suits for example would need time to power up, most especially the biggest ones. It had been true what many said about some Helldiver exo suits being as tall as buildings.

"How goes the evacuation?" Matt asked, joining Zartrack on the top of the wall.

"The last shuttle just cleared the relay. The entire city's empty of civilians."
"Good. I guess now, we wait." Said Matt, looking up at the sky.

"Your son's on his way. You'll see him again." Said Zartrack.

"Sir, we're detecting Reapers and Takaal ships clearing the relay and heading our way." Said another Helldiver.

Both Generals looked up at the sky. They were here at last. It was about to begin.

"Reroute all power to the energy field. We have to hold until the resistance arrives." Said Zartrack. "Prepare for gun assault."

Both Reapers and Takaal ships cleared the relay began their slow journey towards Arkadia.

Skarlack stood at the bridge of the devastator, the view of the planet visible through the cockpit.

"General. Scans detect an energy field surrounding the entire arcane city. It is strong enough to deflect any bombardment." Said one of the ship's engineers.

"They're alerted to our presence. They knew we were coming." Said Skarlack, slightly surprised that the Helldiver were this prepared for them.

"What are your orders, sir? The Reapers are ready for your command."

Though the Takaal served the Reapers, their masters did respect the advantages an organic mind had over a machine one tactical wise. So whenever it came to wars or battle tactics, Skarlack himself was put in charge of that and the Reapers followed his strategy.

"Make ready to land our troops beyond their energy field and deploy the fleet so that nothing gets off or on the system. We will do this, as they say... the old fashioned way." Said the General, an evil smile of eagerness slowly appearing on his face.

"Yes sir."

Already, from behind the field the Helldivers could see Reapers and Takaal descending until they touched the ground. Only the Destroyer Reapers were present while the big ones where reaming in space to engage the Helldiver fleet orbiting the planet.

"What's the situation?" Zartrack asked to a sniper who was zoomed in on the landing area as both Takaal and husks disembarked from.

"They're definitely serious about this attack. They've brought pretty much everything they have to this fight." Said the sniper.

"So have we." Said Zartrack, trying to keep spirits up. "Ready all defences! This is it."

The Takaal parted to let their leader and his wife past until they had both walked to the top of a high rock ahead of their army and had a clear view of the city. Through their synthesis vision, they could see the field surrounding the city.


"The Reapers and Husks stand ready, General." Said a soldier.
"They're expecting us to show no mercy. Let's not disappoint them." Said Skarlack. "In the human games chess, the pawns go first. Send in the husks and troopers. In the meantime... begin."

All the husks charged while the Takaal and Reaper destroyers began firing their guns at the shield. Each one impacted on it a large crackle of light.

"Fields holding well. Husks are incoming." Said a sniper.


Matt nodded and took up position while Zartrack was joined by Arnold and Kat.

"Winchester and I will handle this side of the wall." He said.

"Yes, sir." Kat nodded, slightly disappointed that she wouldn't be beside Arnold.

Zartrack though seemed to notice this.

"On second thought, we might need one or two more ones this side." He said.

Kat smiled under her helmet and joined them beside Arnold.

"Tis the quality of one's conviction that determines success, not the number of followers." Said Arnold.

"Who said that?" Zartrack asked curiously.

"Me." Arnold replied, electing small chuckle from Kat. "You okay, Kat?"

"Yeah." She replied.

"Me too." Arnold smiled.

The two Helldivers smiled at one another and took each other's hand in the other.

Zartrack simply gave a small smile.

The husks had almost reached the shield now.

"Here they come."

All the Helldivers up on the wall readied their weapons in case there was a chance the husks and Takaal troopers could somehow get through.

"Hold fire unless they get through." Said the General.

The husks continued to run at the shield. The second several few at the front crossed it however, they were instantly disintegrated. Both the Takaal troopers and other husks stopped.

"We in luck. They can't get through the shield." Said Kat.

"Our turn." Said Zartrack. "Send these foul beasts into the abyss!"

The Helldiver opened fire on the enemy down below. At the same time, the city's main cannons activated and began firing at the Reaper destroyers and Takaal guns.
Several well aimed shots managed to take out a Destroyer and it fell to the ground, squashing a few Takaal in the process. Several more shots meanwhile impacts in various other places, unnerving some of troops.

"Stay were you are." Skarlack ordered.

Several more shots impacted until one particular one shot high up into the air and looked like ti would be coming down on right where Skarlack was standing. Unable to help it, many Takaal soldiers withdrew until only Skarlack and Mirage stood there.

The two Takaal however stood where they were. Right at the last moment, Skarlack threw up a green energy shield around him and his wife which vaporised the shot on contact.

Soon more and more Takaal troopers began to suddenly reappear beside them. They were retreating from the husks where the Helldivers were firing on them from inside the shield.

"What are you doing, you useless scum?!!" Skarlack snarled.

"We can't get through the shield! It's too strong!" said one the soldiers.

"Get back and smash through! That's an order!" Skarlack yelled.

"But nothing can breach it!"

"Oh, do I have to do everything myself around here?!" Skarlack groaned.

The General took up his staff and drew a massive amount of synthetic energy into it. He then thrust it forward and massive beam shot forth. As Skarlack concentrated heavily on it, the shield eventually began to slowly fall part in pieces of energy.

"What's going on?" said Zartrack.

"Oh, this ain't gonna be good." Said Arnold.

Skarlack continued to focus on the beam until finally he felt he had no more strength or power left in him. He thrust his staff away and the beam ceased.

For a very small moment, he was sure he'd seen a tiny crack in his staff, but he didn't see anything.

"Okay. Now we're in trouble." Said Kat as the shield slowly began to fall apart.

"God help us." said Arnold, gently holding onto Kat's hand to give her comfort.

"ATTACK!" Skarlack roared.

Almost the entire Takaal army, the Reaper Destroyers, a few Takaal fighters, charged while the husks resumed their attack, this time able to attack directly.

"Stand firm!" said Zartrack. "None have breached Arkadia's defences before. And none shall this day!"
Spurred by Zartrack, the rest of the Helldivers went back to aiming their weapons as the husks got closer. After a few seconds, they were finally within range.

"Open fire!"

Many of the husks were mowed down by a constant barrage of gunfire, but there sheer numbers was too much for the gunfire to kill them all quickly enough and they soon reached the gate. The Takaal were also much tougher and the fire from the Destroyers was even taking out a few Helldivers.

The Takaal then reached the gate as well and there was a loud banging coming from the other side.

"To the gate! Hurry!" Zartrack yelled.

He leapt down from the battlements and several Helldiver and Arkane soldiers massed to the gate, ready to face whatever came through.

The banging started to grow louder and the gate was almost smashed apart by another sudden impact. This did have the effect of unnerving some of the Helldivers as they watched Arkadia's supposedly impenetrable gate start to break.

"Steady. Steady." Said Zartrack. "You are Helldivers! You are soldiers of Arkadia! No matter what comes through that gate, you will stand your ground!"

The gate was completely smashed apart. Rather than the expected Takaal however, a surprise that everyone was completely unprepared for greeted them. Several massive Elcor Husks burst through and almost immediately started swiping at anything in their path, their huge mass and size proving to be too much for some to handle.

"Attack!" Zartrack yelled, managing to overcome the shock.

This seemed to do the same for the Helldivers and they quickly opened fire. Some of the Elcor husks were downed by the gunfire, but other powered on through. At the same time, both Takaal and other Husks swarmed into the city through the main gate.

The viciousness and relentlessness of the Takaal came as a huge surprise to the Helldivers. True some of them had faced them before out in the field, but those had just been small battalions and squadrons. In these sort of numbers however, the Takaal outnumbered them 3 to 1.

Zartrack quickly drew on of his swords and managed to cut down three Takaal before then making a killing blow on a Elcor husk, causing it to fall on several more.

A sudden concentrated shot from several Reaper Destroyers suddenly took out a huge chunk off the top of the wall, sending several Helldivers over the edge, Matt among them.

Fortunately, a Helldiver was built to survive far worse than that. When Matt's head stopped spinning however, he found he was stuck, pinned by a large rock he piece of debris he couldn't move on his own, and he was still a bit dazed.

A lone Helldiver soldier then spotted the General and ran over to help him.

"Sir? Sir, are you alright?!" he said, helping Matt to finally push the piece off him.

"Yeah. I think so." The General replied as the soldier helped him up. "Thanks. What's your name, Soldier?"

"I've heard about you. You're a fan of my son's." said Matt.

"Yes, sir. Fair to see he's the reason I'm here." Conrad nodded.

Since his more recent success as a double agent, and with Cerberus well and truly gone now, Conrad had finally earned his own Helldiver armour.

"Well then, Conrad. Let's see if my son inspired anything else in you. You're with me." Said Matt.

"I got your back, General." Said Conrad.

The two Helldivers re-joined the fray and quickly opened fire on several Takaal. Conrad took more to using his gun while Matt did the same and also meleed several with his cyborg hand. Some downed ones he even crushed with his cyborg foot.

The General carved through so many that some Takaal were even unnerved by him.

Despite this however, the Takaal and husks continued to pour into the city in huge numbers, starting to outnumber the Helldivers and overwhelming them.

Soon the Destroyers got close enough too and they after a few strikes from the legs, they managed to smash through the city's first defective wall.

"They've breached the wall!" one of the soldiers shouted as the destroyers opened fire, crimson beams blazing.

"We can't hold much longer, Zartrack. They're tearing through our first line of defence." Said Matt, punching another Husk away.

"The city is breached! Fall back. Retreat!" Zartrack yelled to all.

"Move into the city. Kill all in your path." Skarlack smiled to his army.

The Takaal and husks began to swarm in by the thousands and like an evil flood, they washed away all that lay before them.

"Fight! Fight to the last man. Fight for your lives!" said Zartrack as he led most of the Helldivers in the retreat to the second wall.

Before he himself could reach the gate however, a massive form suddenly swooped over them and landed right in front, blocking the path to the door. It was the Draco, and mounted on its back was Skarlack.

"Go back to dark space." Said Zartrack attempting to make a stand as several other Helldivers next to him slowly backed away in fear. "Fall into the nothingness that awaits you and your masters!"

"Do you not know death when you see it, old man?" Skarlack taunted as he raised his staff. "This is my power!"

A huge amount of energy gathered in his staff and he then shot it at the Helldivers. The impact of it set them flying, Zartrack included. The Draco moved forward until it now stood over Zartrack, its mouth ready to feast on Skarlack's command.
"General!" Conrad yelled as he got up and aimed his gun.

A massive loud roar from the Draco however stopped him dead in tracks, frozen with fright.

"You have failed. Your precious Helldivers shall fall!" said Skarlack.

The Takaal General raised his staff, ready to deliver the final killing blow. Just before he could however, he was suddenly hit by an enormous amount of mental pain. He then looked up to the sky.

"Shepard!" he snarled. "This isn't over, Arkane!"

With a massive flap of its wings, the Draco flew off into the air, giving everyone else a chance to recover.

"General, hundreds of ally ships are clearing the relay!"

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Flash after flash after flash occurred from the mass relay as the entire fleets of the Reaper Resistance, the Alliance Fleet, the organic Takaal, the Leviathans and pretty much every single fleet in the entire galaxy cleared the relay.

From the cockpit of the Normandy, everyone could already see the massive Reaper fleet engaging the Helldiver fleet. Their allies were holding, but they could only keep it up so long. Now however, that was about to change.

"All fleets reporting in, Major. Ready to engage on your command." Said Joker.

"This is it everyone! Be ready on my signal!" said Austin. "Fire!"

The entire fleet opened fire and hundreds to thousands of shots flew towards the Reapers most hitting their targets dead on.

The sudden appearance of the fleet from behind came as a surprise to the Reapers, but they quickly reacted. Both some of the Takaal and Reaper ships now turned their attention to the second fleet while the rest still concentrated on engaging the Helldiver fleet.

"Helldiver fleet to Normandy! Do you read?"

"We read you." Austin replied.

"Damn good to hear your voice, Major Shepard. We could only last so long. We're reengaging all Reaper forces."

"Alert! Takaal fighters are incoming." Said EDI.

Sure enough, the hundreds of specks that were Takaal fighters began to slowly fly ahead of the fleet and in their direction.

They were small, true, but they were most deadly. With a massive structure resembling a Takaal head and with loads of long mechanical tentacles trailing from behind, they seemed to glide through space like a mechanical octopus.

"All fighter squadrons, do you copy?" said Austin into the radio.

"Copy, Gold leader."
"Mark our position. Form your squad up behind us." Austin ordered.

"We're on your tail, Normandy."

"Locking S-foils in attack positions." Said EDI, jokingly making a Star Wars joke.

"Oh EDI." Joker sighed, but still grinning.

Hundreds of Alliance fighters began to form formation behind the Normandy. At the same time, the SR3's engines and thrusters slowly shifted position until they were in attack mode. Many of the guns and auto turrets also slid out of their slots.

"This is where the fun begins." Joker smiled.

"Here they come!"

Both sides opened fire on one another as the whole battle became tangled mess of fighters all over the place. The Normandy dodged and spun as it powered through. There were explosions all over the place as fighter after fighter was shot down or either side.

The Alliance fighters it seemed though were taking more losses. The comms were ablaze with calls that were suddenly going dead.

"They're all over us..." one of the pilot said before his comm went to static.

"I'm gonna go help 'em out." said Joker. He was about to manoeuvre the ship, but Austin stopped him.

"No. Stay your course, Joker. They're doing their job, then we can do ours." he said.

Several more Takaal fighters suddenly took out another Alliance one. One particular Takaal fighter then turned its attention to the Normandy. Bringing its multiple tentacles forward, it fired two projectiles from them.

"Missiles, Jeff! Pull up!" said EDI.

Joker almost immediately manoeuvred the Normandy to the right, causing the missiles to miss them and shoot past.

"They overshot us!"

"They're coming around." said EDI.

Obviously locked onto them, the missiles pulled a sharp turn and began to follow their exact movements.

"Alright, Joker... No,no,no! No, nothing too fancy!" said Austin as he hold onto Joker's chair while the pilot was essentially throwing them all over the place with his flying.

"Everyone hold on!" said Joker, suddenly pulling a literal 360 barrel roll several times. He then pulled a snap roll causing the two missiles paths to cross and the missiles themselves to crash into each other, exploding upon contact.

"That got 'em." Joker chuckled.

"We're all clear." said EDI. "Breaking off. Prepare for descent."
"Everyone down to the cargo bay. This is it!" said Austin.

The scenes visible throughout the dropship's visual links were quite a sight for the Helldivers. To see the planet they had lived on for more than 10 years, their home... in this state.

It was quite shocking to ally hem as they never would've thought that such a heavily defended planet could ever be spoiled, yet here the Takaal were, starting to overwhelm their brethren.

"Goddess! They've already broken through the wall. It doesn't look good." said Alaara.

"Well we're about to turn the tide." said Austin. "We've come this far! I am not about let all of this... all that we have accomplished... go up in flames. Not now. Not when the Reapers have dared to invade our home."

The mood was a little low, especially when everyone was taking a few deep breaths. Considering that they were about to fight in the greatest battle of their time, they had a right to be a little nervous.

"Though I walk through the valley and the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil." said Griffin.

"Well said, Griff." Ashely smiled as she held her boyfriend's hand.

Griffin now noticed that he wasn't' the only one trying to find some comfort, so he decided to try and brighten the mode up a bit.

"Or... as the good reverend would say... "Why we on this particular mission, we will never know. But I do know that, hear to date, the Alpha dogs, will emerge victorious once again." he said, far more enthusiastically.

That had the desired effect and it seemed to brighten everyone's mood a good amount.

"Now you're talkin!" Dash cheered.

Standing back with his army, Skarlack could now see the many dropships slowly descending from the sky. Several fighters and the Normandy were also joining the battle, but they mattered not to him. Shepard was his prime target. Without the Helldiver, any resistance would be annihilated by him.

"You're too late, Shepard." he smiled evilly.

He then looked to several Takaal fighters who stood ready for his command. He indicated to the dropships with his staff.

"Tear them out of the sky!"

"Fighters incoming!" said dropship's pilot.

Normally Cortez would be flying them, but Austin had entrusted him with flying the dropship that the non-Helldiver members of the crew would be in, such as James and Sarah and anyone else not able to jump from a great height and survive.

"Lock and load!" Austin ordered.

The dropship's doors slid open, now letting in the noises of gunfire and constant explosions. Almost immediately though, hundreds of Takaal fighters began to swarm them, literally pulling the dropships
out of the sky and into their arms and crushing them like insects caught in the web of a spider.

Soon Alpha's dropship suffered the same and they started to spin out of control as a Takaal fighter took out one of the stabilizers.

"There's too many of them! They're swarming us!" said the pilot. "Get everyone out!"

"Jump!" Austin yelled.

Everyone leapt from their dropships, letting gravity pull them down as they glided.

"Woo! Now this is fun!" Dash cheered.

"Check your six! Check your six!" said Jet.

The Takaal fighters had abandoned the dropships and were now chasing them directly. Some even fired and managed to take out a few Helldivers directly.

The others however were to quick to take action and dodged and wove as best they could. Jet even managed to return fire and took out several fighters single handedly, all while still int he air and free falling.

Zartrack, Arnold and Kat had fought as best they can, but in the end they were being boxed in, with very little chance of escape.

As if that wasn't bad enough, the only way they could've retreated was suddenly blocked as the ground burst open to reveal a massive Thresher Maw husk, otherwise known as a Tunneller.

"Not another one." Zartrack groaned.

Just before the tunneller was about to attack however, a large mass suddenly shot towards it at high speed. Hitting it square in the neck, it cut the husk completely in two.

Several more masses suddenly hit the ground, sending dirt and rocks all over the place. Once it cleared, it revealed a most welcome sight to the three Helldiver. It was Alpha!

The whole squad immediately surrounded around the three of them defensively. Caugh off guard by this, the Takaal and husk halted their advance. To try and hide the slight nervousness they had, some even roared at them intimidatingly.

"About time you showed up." said Arnold.

"Good to see you too." said Austin.

Skarlack suddenly pushed past all his soldiers until he stood before all of them, his attention focused right at the Helldivers.

"Shepard. Nice of you to drop in. Too late though I'm afraid." he said. "You will surrender, or be fired upon."

"This is our planet, and it isn't big enough for the two us. You will either leave this place, or we will make you!" said Austin defiantly.

"Ha! Don't make me laugh, Shepard. You drive us off this planet?" Skarlack laughed. "You and who's army?!"
"My army… and this army!"

The second the last word left Austin's mouth, Meeralack and he entire army of organic Takaal suddenly emerged joined also by the resistance army and they almost immediately broke into charge.

The sudden appearance of their organic brethren came as a huge shock to the Takaal, most especially to Skarlack who was left momentarily. Finally he managed to snap out of it and gave and angry growl.

"SLAUGHTER THEM ALL!" he roared.

His entire army cheered and also cheered, the husks close in tow.

"There's plenty for the both of us. May the best man win." said Kraan.

"I plan to." said Ventra.

Both sides clashed into one another and the entire battlefield became a literal free for all.

Both Skarlack and Mirage were quick to join the fight.

Dodging an attempted attack from an organic Takaal soldier, Skarlack was quick to attack back, impaling one his own on his staff.

A Helldiver soldier then lunged at him, but he managed to grab the Helldiver by the neck and threw him to the floor. At the same time, he paused quickly to shed his cape with a simply pull from his hand.

Mirage meanwhile let nothing hold her back as she carved down any in her way. She even managed to pin an Alliance soldier's weapon down and bit into his neck, almost immediately tearing his throat out with her teeth.

Another spin from his staff took out two more enemies before it seemed to clear up a bit and Skarlack spotted someone among the countless fighting masses. Someone he had not seen for more than 65 million years.

Meeralack saw him too as she cut down a synthetic Takaal with her dual swords. The two leaders glared at one another. Skarlack in particular looked at with distaste.

"You!" he snarled.

Both synthetic and organic Takaal seemed to gather around, both sides simply remaining vigilant as they began to observe this confrontation, which was likely to turn into a duel.

"Surprised, General?" Meeralack asked.

"Hardly. I knew you couldn't stay out of this forever." Skarlack replied. "You're a fool to take us on though. We are superior to you in every way."

"Then fight me alone. Prove your really are the greater worrier. If I win, your army leaves. If you win, my people will surrender to you." Said Meeralack.

Skarlack didn't even need to consider this.

"I have always been greater than you." he said.
At the same time, his second set of arms detached from his torso and all four of his omni blades flared into life.

Meeralack immediately brought up both her blades, keeping her cool and remaining unintimidated by Skarlack's four spinning blades.

She waited for him to make the first move. Sure enough, he did. The General slowly began to advance towards her, all fours blades spinning in a blur of green. Then it all stopped and he attacked.

Meeralack almost immediately jumped back to avoid a swipe then attacked herself. Skarlack however only had to back away or dodge to the side to avoid her strikes. He then parried one of them and lunged. A quick head movement to the side however allowed the blade to miss Meeralack by inches. She then used this to attack and delivered a swift kick to Skarlack's midsection, sending him flying back.

Skarlack though used both his omni blades and one end of his staff to stop himself by digging them into the ground. He then leapt in to the air in a spinning attack that Meeralack spun back to avoid. She then stopped her spin with a dual attack from her sides which Skarlack parried.

Meeralack was quick to fools this with a kick from one of her feet. With Skarlack momentarily dazed, she thrust forward with both blades.

Skarlack's second set of arms however came up in time, both their omni blade's blocking her attack. With incredible strength, they then forced her blades down, leaving her upper body vulnerable to attack. One of Skarlack's clawed feet quickly came up and latched onto Meeralack's face.

He then threw her over him until use hit the ground. The Takaal Queen was just able to get up as Skarlack started spinning his blades again, each one scraping the ground as he moved forward. He then brought down on Meeralack which she was just bale to block, struggling against the General's immense strength.

"Enough of this!" said Skarlack, suddenly delivering a swift kick to Meeralack that knocked her back.

The Queen however shook it off and resumed her attack, her blades pushing against Skarlack's

"You think you can defeat me? You're nothing!" Skarlack taunted.

The fight became a blur of silver and green as both opponents fought back and forth, the constant battle around them somehow shifting automatically to accommodate their movements.

A sudden spin from Meeralack's blades missed their mark and so Skarlack's defence ended up begin in the wrong place. Unintentionally however, the Queen's blades did hit their target. In a move that Skarlack did not see coming, both swords carved right through both his smaller arms, severing them completely.

The blow knocked Skarlack off his feet and he fell to the ground. Meeralack stood over him, ready to deliver the final blow, but the General had other ideas.

"Kill her!" he yelled.

Almost immediately, all the synthetic Takaal opened fire, resuming the fight between the two sides. Meeralack refocused her attention on using her blades to block and shots aimed at her. The organic Takaal also resumed their attack, some swarming around Meeralack to protect their Queen.
In all the chaos, Austin had stuck close to Liara and the two were using their union as much as they could. Both Takaal and Husk were cut down by their blades as they worked in synch with one another.

In all his life, Austin had never seen a battle this fierce. The whole battlefield was filled with gunfire, the sound of blades clashing, explosions going off, even the sound of fighters and the Normandy flying by. Austin could even make out the sounds of Skarlack as he carved a path through any who stood in his way using his synthesis powers.

He could not see the General though. There were so many organic and synthetic Takaal on the battlefield; it was hard to distinguish anyone.

A large nearby explosion then threw up several bodies as Jet fired two missiles from the air. Fortunately, she didn't take out any allies. She obviously had good aim. The Helldiver pilot then swooped over, her flame-throwers fully on as she coated a whole battalion of synthetic Takaal and husks in fire.

That was when Austin spotted him.

Skarlack suddenly leapt from out of the massive crowds. As he landed, he mashed his fist into the ground, creating a massive shockwave that took out several allies.

Austin almost immediately pushed several husks aside to reach the General as he cut down two more Helldivers. He then instinctively attacked the Helldiver running at him. Austin brought his shield arm up and it blocked Skarlack's attack, metal grinding against metal.

Skarlack didn't say anything, but instead pressed the attack, his attack's fierce and violent.

Austin was able to avoid most of them before Skarlack suddenly kicked him, sending him flying backwards. Fortunately, he was able to use the flight thruster upgrades to right himself and he skidded on the ground, at the same time cutting down two synthetic Takaal as they tempted to attack him from the side.

Skarlack then threw his staff, which Austin was just able to leap over. As he was still in mid-air however, Skarlack suddenly hit him with a telekinetic push which sent him flying again, this time causing him to crash through some rubble.

As his staff came back to him, Skarlack then leapt over the rubble and thrust downwards as he came down.

A quick burst from his thrusters narrowly saved Austin's life as the staff embedded itself in the ground where he had just been. A she he landed, he now drew his omni blade as well in conjunction with his shield gun.

The two opponents simply stood where they were, glaring at one another, all the while the rest of the fighting going on around them.

"So, you came back to die with your city." said Skarlack.

"No. I came back to stop you." said Austin.

Skarlack resumed the attack, bringing his staff down only for it to meet Austin's shield which was then followed by a punch in the face from Austin's blade arm.
All the while, the final dropship carrying the non-Helldiver members of the crew was finishing its decent. The doors opened, revealing he scope of the battle to all of them. There was fighting as far as the eye could see.

"I'll get as low as I can." said Cortez.

"Lola, over there!" said James, indicating over to where Austin was fighting Skarlack.

I see 'em." said Sarah.

Cortez pulled the shuttle to the side so that Sarah and James could get clear shots.

The two N7 soldiers opened fire just as Skarlack had Austin's neck locked under his arm. The Takaal General quickly threw his opponent the floor and aimed his staff at the dropship. A flash of green lightning burst forth, hitting the cockpit square on and causing the dropship to start spinning wildly out of control.

"I can't stabilize her! We're going down!" said Cortez, trying as much as she could to try and regain control but it was no use.

Angered by this, Austin picked himself up and charged into Skarlack, tackling him to the floor.

Everyone held on as best they could as the dropship spun fast enough to pull them out. It was starting to descend too.

"Jump!" Sarah yelled.

No one hesitated at all and everyone inside jumped out just as the dropship got low enough. As they all landed however, they noticed someone missing.

"CORTEZ!" Sarah yelled.

The dropship crashed into the ground in a massive explosion. When the flash cleared, it revealed a completely flaming wreckage and the cockpit was completely destroyed.

As much as it pained everyone to believe it, they knew that it was impossible for Steve to have survived that. There was no other possibility, he was gone. They were almost left for words. Cortez had flown into some of the worst hotspots and yet they had always come out relatively unscathed and now Cortez was dead. There was some light side though. If there was a world after this, and his husband was there, well now the two were finally reunited again.

Spurred on by the death of one of their own and using that positive thought to fuel them, the non-Helldiver crew almost immediately joined the fight, guns blazing and omni blades cutting through anything they came across.

Austin punched Skarlack so many times he was surprised he hadn't crushed the Takaal's skull by now. Skarlack then suddenly grabbed Austin with all four of his clawed feet and pushed him off.

Both opponents almost immediately got back up and drew their weapons again, resuming their fight. This time, Austin was more on the offensive, driven on but the fact that Skarlack had just killed Steve. This new-found aggressiveness came as a surprise to Skarlack and he was only just able to react quickly enough to the Helldiver Major.

This however soon came at a cost. Austin began to feel his strength failing and he was tiring.
Skarlack began to match his speed again and soon he was pressing the attack again. As Austin lunged, Skarlack parried the blow and backhanded him. Austin stumbled for a bit before regaining his balance.

Skarlack once again pressed the attack, but this time Austin was more prepared to defend. Skarlack then brought his staff down and Austin pushed against it with all his might. Skarlack though hadn't counted on the new power Austin's suit had and he was most surprised when the Helldiver managed to push his blade out of the way and attempted a punch which hit him square in the jaw. Were he not synthesis, that would almost surely have broken it as well as his neck.

Austin managed more smacks with his shilled before Skarlack managed to head butt him back. Pushing a one of his soldiers out of the way, Skarlack lunged again. Austin however pinned the staff and swung. Skarlack failed to react in time and Excalibur carved right through both his eyes, completely blinding him.

Austin kept pressing the attack so that Skarlack never got a chance to heal himself. Some attacks Skarlack still managed to block with his senses, but others hit him. Finally he let his anger take over and unleashed a violent and concentrated attack that Austin only just blocked. Just before it got too much, Austin slid around and attack Skarlack from behind. He finally punched his opponent back and activated his plasma cannon. The second it fired however, Skarlack suddenly teleported, leaving the shot to take out 5 husks.

Skarlack reappeared back not he rock where the Takaal camp and the guns were. Mirage, having sensed the danger he was in had come to.

"Are you alright?" she asked, helping support her husband as he worked on healing his injuries,

"Shepard has grown stronger and it seems he convinced our organic brethren to finally fight." Skarlack groaned.

"They'll meet the same end." Mirage growled.

"Concentrate the attack!" Skarlack bellowed.

More and more Takaal and husks continued to pour into the city and the Reaper destroyers weren't making it any easier.

Though having started good, the army was now being pushed back against the second defence wall.

"There's too many of them! Soon they'll overrun us!" said Matt, gunning down two more synthetic Takaal.

"Shepard, we have to fall back to the keep! Get everyone out of there!" Zartrack yelled.

Austin completely agreed.

"Fall back to the keep!" he yelled.

Everyone abandoned their feet and began retreating towards the second wall's gate. The Takaal however were using this to their advantage and were opening a constant fire on them. Many unlucky souls got caught in the back as they ran.

Austin suddenly felt something in his head. A warning. As if by instinct, he looked to see that Liara
had been tripped by a synthetic Takaal and it had its staff raised, ready to finish her.

"Liara!"

The Asari was pinned by the Takaal soldier's leg. There was little she could do. Just as the Takaal's staff started to come down however, a massive form slammed into the soldier. It was Javik.

"You will not harm her!" he yelled as he took down several more Takaal.

Liara slowly got up and drew her own sword to help Javik out. As soon as she cut down one however, another Takaal suddenly lunged at Javik while he'd thrown another Takaal to the side. The spear pierced his abdomen and the end went right through him coming out of his back. The Prothean was hit by a huge amount of shock and pain and he was momentarily frozen as he looked down at the wounds, blood starting to trickle front he wound. Liara was frozen with shock and horror.

A Takaal soldier suddenly knocked into her and she fell to the ground. As the Takaal wrestled with her, she managed to hold him off long enough to pick up her sword again and she ran the alien through. As she struggled push the dead body off of her however she noticed that Javik seemed to have unfrozen and he had suddenly gone berserk he roared at the Takaal that had impaled him and suddenly snapped it's neck. With spear still impaling him he took down several more husks and Takaal before more finally swamped him and stabbed him multiple times. The last Prothean was powerless to fight back as he was mercilessly stabbed almost to death.

"Javik!" Liara yelled.

Furious and angry she threw a massive warp at the Takaal and they were blown away. While Sarah managed to provide cover fire, she dragged Javik's badly bleeding body inside.

"Fall back!" James yelled as he provided cover fire for some of the wounded.

Just as Austin ran past him and covered the retreat of his squad, the soldier was suddenly hit by an enormous amount of pain as a shot hit I'm in the stomach. James fell to his knees, clutching the wound. As Austin noticed, he tried to get to him, but the constant retreat of toters blocked his path and he struggled to get through.

A Takaal then walked up behind James and brought it's weapon down on him. The blow proved to be too much and blood started to pour from James' mouth.

"James!" Austin yelled, finally breaking through.

The Takaal attacked him, but Austin parried the blow and cut the Takaal clean in half. He then knelt down and held James in his arms. He could only look helplessly as the soldier coughed up his own blood. Austin encouragingly held James' hand just as the Alliance soldier finally succumbed to his wounds and died in Austin's arms.

Austin hung his head in sorrow. James could've had so much ahead of him. He was still only a Lieutenant and had only recently joined the N7. Now he'd never get a chance to truly live out that career.

Angered by this Austin drew his sword and cut down several more Takaal who came near. It did at least help hold them back while everyone else retreated through the gate.

"That's everyone!" said Matt as he helped a limping Conrad inside

"Austin's still out there!" Liara yelled before the gates could started closing.
"Shepard, get in here!" Zartrack yelled.

Austin quickly detached his grenade belt and threw it on the floor. Using his thrusters he then lifted off and zoomed towards the gate as it started closing. He then fired a shot from his shield/gun and the grenades exploded, taking at least 50 Takaal with him.

"Seal the door!" Zartrack yelled just as Austin zoomed in and skidded to halt on the ground.

The Arkanes shut the gate and all the locks and bars on it sealed.

There was several loud thumps and bangs as the Takaal began to try and smash this one down as well. It sounded as though they’d be at it a while though, so everyone took this chance to recover and get their breath back.

"Where's the Crucible?" Zartrack asked.

"It's on its way. Because it was built in a hidden spot and it's slow we had to come ahead. We just have to hold out until it arrives." Said Austin.

"Well… with the reinforcements you've brought, perhaps our chances might have been evened." Said Zartrack, looking at the many Austin had brought with him.

"How long do you think this will keep the Takaal out?" Liara asked as the heavy thumping on the gate continued.

"A long time, trust me. They may have broken through the first gate, but this one is much stronger. Able to withstand any sort of blockade for years. Even the Takaal will struggle to get through this quickly." said Zartrack.

At that moment, Skarlack's voice suddenly echoed everywhere, as though he was using some unknown method to have his voice everywhere at once.

"You have fought valiantly, but in vain. I do not wish this. Every loss of life that has the potential to join us is a terrible waste. I therefore command all Reaper and Takaal forces to retreat. In their absence, dispose of your dead with dignity." He said. "Shepard, I now speak directly to you. Your choice to refuse my offer has brought this upon your friends. On this night, you have allowed them to die rather than accept your ascendance. There is no greater dishonour. You will meet with me before the battle resumes. Do this and you have a chance to avoid further bloodshed. If you refuse me again, I shall wipe out every single being, organic and otherwise who dares stand in my way until only you are left to suffer the pain of loss."

As Austin looked upon the many wounded that were being attended to, he couldn't help but feel that Skarlack had a point. When he saw the dead that had been laid out, he felt even worse. He could already see a few familiar faces.

Mordin it seemed hadn't been lucky the second time. From what Austin had heard, he had given his life covering the retreat of Wrex and several Krogan.

Rana had unfortunately run into a Banshee when she, Dr Michel and Dr Chakwas were dropped off. Her wounds had been too great for the two Doctors to heal.

Chakwas and Michel were fine though, and were already helping the other medical doctors tended to the wounded.

Javik had also been laid down having just died from his wounds. Now it seemed the Protheans really
were extinct. Liara had managed to say thank you at least and had been at his side when it happened. Austin only wished he could've done the same. He would never have forgiven himself if Liara had been killed.

Jack and Kelly along with some their students appeared to be mourning the rest who had been killed too. Kelly held Jack tightly as the two hugged one another.

Balak was also laid out having been killed by a Cannibal. Truth be told however, Austin was not sad to see the Batarian go. The two had always been sworn enemies. Still, some bit of Austin did consider it a shame. Perhaps there could've been a chance for peace.

Then Austin spotted two bodies that really had an effect on him.

Both Arnold and Katherine were laid next to one another. Normally a Helldiver would disintegrate when they died, but because they were on Arkadia where the Arkanes could retrieve the armour, that protocol was overridden. It didn't help though seeing as how many other Helldivers were laid out.

Austin gently knelt down. He noticed how the couple's hands were almost touching one another. Knowing all too well how the both of them had been intimate, he gently moved their hands together so that they were now holding each other.

It saddened Austin to see them go. He'd known them ever since he'd first arrived on Arkadia almost 15 years ago. The three of them had been in the same training unit together and had all been mentored by Zartrack together. They had become very close friends, so to see them gone was a very tragic.

Austin noticed Zartrack walk up next to him. Without a word, the General simply put a hand on his student's shoulder. Austin could already tell that Zartrack felt the same way as he did. He never forgot a face that he trained.

"Rest easy, my old friends." Said Austin, gently hanging his head.

After paying respects, he finally stood up and walked over to Zartrack, who was planning things out with the other General, including Matt who had left Conrad to be tended too by a Doctor who had assured the General he'd be alright.

"What do we do?" Austin asked.

"I should be asking you that, Shepard. You are the leader of this resistance, and you alone have the power to destroy the Reapers." Said Zartrack.

"But General… You rank above me. You've led the Helldivers in this battle." Said Austin.

"Against an enemy I am not as familiar with as you are." Said Zartrack. "I am no longer your teacher, Shepard. You are mine."

Austin was silent for a long time. He never would've expected Zartrack to ever say anything like that.

Bringing his mind to the task at hand however, he took a moment to think.

"Whatever we do, we just need to buy ourselves time. Once the Crucible touches Arkadian soil, we can end this." Said Austin.

"Well, we can better prepare for a new strike." Said Zartrack.
"And I might know a way we can delay their attack even more." Said Meeralack.

Austin, Liara, Meeralack and Zartrack all left the Arkadian city and began their work to the middle of the battlefield where Skarlack and Mirage were stood.

"So, you came after all." Said the General. "I must admit, I am surprised."

"We are not here to accept your offer, Skarlack. We only came here to warn you." Said Austin.

"Call off your attack and leave this planet, otherwise you will leave us no choice." Said Zartrack.

"Ha! You threaten me?! Oh, this is rich." Skarlack laughed. "Look around you! I have laid waste to your world, and the Reapers are not even truly in full force yet. Once they deal with your fleet, they will come down here and you will all die."

"We're aware of that." Said Liara, trying to ignore how Mirage was constantly staring hungrily at her.

"But this does not have to be your end." Said Skarlack. "I once again make my offer to you. Do you truly think you can win this? My army alone is large enough to destroy an entire planet. Yours could only defend it."

"You created the Reapers, and then you tried to destroy them. Some part of you must've realized this isn't right." Said Austin. He knew it was a long shot.

"If I had, it would've been long ago." Said Skarlack. "There is no staying as we are; there is only the next step forward."

"And yet all you do is use your gifts to fight." Said Zartrack.

"Of course. War is a natural part of life, Arkane. It is all around us, and has been around since the very beginning of creation itself. Bacteria and germs constantly battle with immune systems, animals fight for food, and above all, you fight for survival." Said Skarlack.

"Maybe once. But now you're just a slave to your own creation." Said Austin.

"Enough! This is the last time I will ask, Shepard. Join us in synthesis, or die." Skarlack interrupted.

"The answer's no, and it always will be. You think us weak, yet look at where we are now." Said Austin.

"Let me remind you, Shepard. I am a General. If you think that I am afraid of you, then you are making a deadly mistake." Skarlack growled.

"It doesn't take a genius to know nervousness, Skarlack. You may not be afraid of us, but I know what you are afraid of." Said Austin. He was sure for a moment he noticed Skarlack's eyes show a hint of fear. "Point is, we will never join you. You don't like it? Deal with it."

"If that truly is what you want..." said Mirage.

"It is."

"Then advise the rest of your army. You can fight, and wall of you will die, or you cannot fight, in which case only most of you will die." Said Skarlack.
"You murdered my husband." said Meeralack coldly.

"He chose his own fate when he stood in my way." said Skarlack.

"Then you have chosen yours. We will fight, and you will die."

"Anything further you wish to add?" Skarlack asked coldly

"No… brother. That's it."

Meeralack turned and left with the others in tow.

Skarlack simply watched them leaved.

"So be it."

"Brother?" Austin asked, quite surprised by what he'd heard.

"Once. But he stopped being my brother a long time ago when he killed my husband and made himself into that thing." Said Meeralack.

"But if you die, does that mean he has right to the throne?" Austin asked rather worriedly.

"No. Even now, he still wouldn't disrespect Takaal traditions. A Takaal monarch nominates their successor should they ever die or eventually step down. None of it is carried in the blood." Meeralack explained.

"I see now why you look upon with such bitter hate." Said Austin.

Already, Helldivers and everyone in the army were readying on the next wall for the attack. The wounded and dead were being moved into the main Citadel so as to avoid a massacre in case the Takaal breached the second wall too. Hopefully though that wouldn't happen this time. And even if it did, they'd hold fast and would damn well take more Takaal and Reapers with them.

Among the constant moving masses, Austin all the familiar faces that were still alive. He felt now as better time than any to say one final goodbye to them, just in case and to offer some motivation before he was no doubt expected to give a big speech.

"Austin." Said Ashley.

"How are you holding up?" Austin asked.

"Restless. Everything depends on this. Think we have a chance?"

"There's always hope. It's how we got this far."

"And you made it happen, old friend. You're the reason we're here."

"I've had you people like you picking me up and dusting me off when I stumbled."

"Almost as many times as you save me, hero-man." Ashley smiled. "We've had some great fight, Austin. And I'm not just talking about the ones on the battlefield."

"You always fought for what you believe in." said Austin. "You're a survivor, Ash. Always were."
"I hope you're right."

"I know I'm right. You're a fine soldier. We're lucky to have you."

"Thanks, Austin."

"One more hill to take, Lieutenant-Commander. You ready?"

"Aye, aye, Major. I'm ready."

Now Jacob.

"Hey, Shepard." Said Jacob.

"Hey, Jacob. Holding up?" Austin asked.

"Kicking ass, more like. My kill count's through the roof."

"We'll meet and compare notches when this is over."

"You got it. I hear there's this great little bar here we have to check out."

"I'm holding you to that. Give 'em hell, Jacob."

"Yes, sir."

Miranda was next.

"Major." She said.

"How you feeling?"

"Good considering. I got word that Ori and her family are somewhere safe. When this over, I'm gonna give her such a big hug."

"I'm glad to have you with us, Miranda." Austin smiled as he and Miranda shook hands. "Just be careful out there."

"I promise. And you too, Shepard. I don't know if I'll be able to help bring you back again."

Then Grunt who was making sure all the Krogan that could still fight were armed to the teeth.

"About time you got here, Shepard. Didn't want to win this thing all by myself." He said.

"Good to see you back in action and fighting, Grunt." Austin smiled.

"Wouldn't miss it." Said Grunt. "Shepard…"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks… for getting me out of that tank."

"Sure, Grunt. It's been an honour."

"Same here, Shepard."

Austin spotted Samara among a few other Justicars and Asari commandos.
"I wondered if I'd see you again, Samara." He said.

"It's past time I joined your battle." Said Samara. "You helped me a great deal in the monastery, Shepard."

"Thank you for returning the favour."

"Only your actions will be remembered. May you choose them well."

"You've been a good friend, Samara. I'm honoured to have met you all those years ago."

"As am I, my friend." Samara smiled as she shook hands with the Helldiver. "Should we make it through this, you will always be an honoured friend of the Justicars."

Austin found Jack near some other biotics who were making sure to get as much energy as they could for the coming fight.

"Hey, Shepard." She said, looking slightly better than last time now.

"I'm sorry about the students you lost." Said Austin sympathetically.

"Yeah. I'll make sure those fu…" said Jack. She paused to make sure none of her students were within earshot. "fuckers pay for that with their lives."

"For once, I'm glad to hear that." Said Austin.

"We won't let you down, Shepard. Go kick some ass."

"You too."

Zaeed was near some other snipers. He obviously intended to use all the skills he had.

"Almost thought you weren't going to make it, Shepard. Glad I was wrong." He said.

"You doing okay, Zaeed?"

"Yeah, yeah. Hope you've got one of a speech to get everyone moving."

"I might have something up my sleeve." Austin smiled under his helmet.

"Looks like we might need it. Never seen anything like this." Said Zaeed. "I'm ready to go when you are. Let's gut the bastards."

Kasumi could be seen with a few techs who were making sure all defences were up to maximum.

"Hey, Shepard, you ready?" she asked.

"Depends on whether you helped get the Crucible ready to go." Said Austin.

"Oh, it's ready. No idea what it'll do, exactly, but it's gonna be big." Said Kasumi. "Good luck, Shepard. If you live through it, drinks are on me."

Next was Garrus who had just finished talking with Primarch Victus who was also down here to fight.

"Shepard. So, guess this is…" he said.
"Just like old times?" Austin asked.

"Might be the last chance we get to say that."

"We're not going to lose."

"Of course. I think we're about to kick the Reapers and Takaal into whatever black hole they crawled out of. Then we're going to retire somewhere warm and tropical and live off the royalties from the vids."

"I think I'll do the same. I think my days of saving the galaxy are over when this is done."

"Be sure to leave room for all the autographs." Said Garrus. "And Shepard, forgive the insubordination, but this old friend has an order for you… Go out there and give them hell. You were born to do this."

"Yes, sir." Austin smiled.

EDI was helping to coordinate the attack along with the Generals. Due to her tactical knowledge, her input was more than welcome.

"Shepard. I have a question." She said.

"Is it a big or a small one?" Austin asked.

"It is important. It's relevance would be diminishing at any other time."

"Ask away."

"I this battle, the Reapers and the Takaal have no reason not to use their full capabilities to destroy us. Their forces are in entrenched positions. They have superior firepower and outnumber our forces. My question is: What makes you think we can hold long enough for the Crucible to arrive?"

"They think they've won already, and that's the best time to fight them."

"If they have spies or other intelligence, we could become compromised. In such case, we will likely lose."

"Are you afraid?"

"Our probability for success is greater than any other plan presented to date."

"That's not what I asked. Are you afraid?"

"I do not understand the purpose of the question."

"There's no room for doubt anymore, EDI. You understand what we have to do, or you don't."

"I am clear on what we must accomplish, Shepard. The Reapers and the Takaal have destroyed thousands of civilizations." Said EDI. "But they have never destroyed ours. Nor will they."

"Couldn't have put it better myself." Said Austin.

"Shepard? There is something I want to know." Said EDI quickly. "The Illusive Man ordered my creation years ago. Jeff was the one who allowed me to think for myself. But only know do I feel alive. That is your influence."
"Thanks, EDI."

Tali had just finished talking with the Quarians who were fighting in Orbit.

"Almost time for the final push. Are you okay?" she asked.

"I thought I'd be asking you that question." Said Austin.

"Austin, I backed you when I was just a kid on her Pilgrimage. I backed you when we took on the Collectors. What kind of friend would I be if I didn't back you now?" said Tali. "And you haven't answered my question. Are you okay?"

"You know I really am. I spent months talking to the Council, the Admiral, the Politicians… all to get to this moment."

"No politics, no diplomacy. Just us and them, one last time. Whatever happens, I'm proud to have served with you, Major." Said Tali as she saluted.

"It's been an honour, Tali Zorah Vas Normandy." Austin smiled as he saluted her back.

"The admirals once hung that ship name on me like badge of shame, and then the Normandy helped us reclaim our homeworld. It's time I returned the favour."

Wrex meanwhile was addressing his Krogan soldiers.

"Shepard."

"Wrex."

"No matter what happens today, you did what no one else could—you united a galaxy. That's a victory right there. And don't worry, I know why you're going to win—because you brought the Krogan." Said the Krogan. "Oh, and Bakara sends her regards. She's already pregnant. There are benefits to being a clan leader. But she keeps insisting we name the first one "Mordin." Anyway, let's get to it!"

Finally, it was Liara.

"Hey. You okay?" Austin asked.

"They've bought in many more wounded and have moved them to the main Citadel." Said Liara.

"Least they'll be safe." Said Austin. "How you holding up?"

"This is it, isn't it?"

"Yeah. This is it."

"I don't know what to say. All those little blue children will be disappointed I didn't have a speech."

"We'll make up a good story for them."

"I do have one thing for you, Austin. A gift. It'll only take a moment if you want it."

"I always have time for you no matter what, my love."

"Close your eyes."
Liara linked both their minds together. They soon found themselves in a starry void. In the distance, they could both see a bright light. As they drew closer, the two simply drew each other together and kissed.

There was then a bright flashed and everything returned to normal.

"Thank you for everything." Said Liara. "I love you. Now, let's do what needs to be done."

"I love you too." Said Austin as they shared one last hug.

Austin finally joined Zartrack as the preparations were almost prepared.

"They look a little nervous." Said Austin, observing the mood among the resistance.

"I think you know what to do." Said Zartrack.

Austin stepped up on top of the high balcony and cleared his throat. Everyone almost immediately looked up to him.

"Before us stands the might of the Reaper ground forces and the Takaal army. Look upon them, but fear them not!" he said. "I see in many of your eyes, the same fear that would take the heart of me. Some of you may even think to be fearful of what is to come is a sign of weakness. Well I disagree. Think of the Reapers, why do they fight? They are just machines. Programming and logic, that's all they have and that's the only reason they use to fight. Then there's the Takaal. The ones with us now have many reasons to fight, yes. But the synthetic ones are different. They willingly submitted to the Reapers and now only use their will to guide them. They fight because that is all they know, and that is all they will ever know."

More and more people continued to gaze upon the Helldiver.

"Now think about us, and ask yourself "Why do we fight, and what do we fight for?" Austin continued. "There are many reasons. Many of us fight for survival, but there's more to it than that. Some of us fight for friends and those we love. Some of us fight for a future, a goal we strive to achieve. Some of us fight for money and rewards along with many other personal reasons. And some even fight just for the shear bloody hell of it. So if you ask me, those emotions you feel are not something you should be ashamed of. They are something you should treasure, for that is what separates you from our common enemy. It is what makes us better than them in so many ways, and it is why we will not allow them to decide whether we should live or die."

The mood was already beginning to brighten a bit due to this speech.

"For whatever reason you chose to fight, today we have all united to fight together because the Reapers seek to destroy all life that we hold dear. Life… that word should have new meaning for all of us today. We can't be consumed by our petty differences anymore. We will be united in our common interests, and we will fight for our freedoms. But this time, not from tyranny, oppression or persecution, but from annihilation. We're fighting for a right to survive and live in this universe. To exist. And should we win the day, this day will no longer be remembered as a day like any other, but as they day when the entire galaxy declared in one voice "We will not go quietly into the night! We will not vanish without a fight! We're going to live on! We're going to survive!" Today, we're about to show the Reapers just how wrong they are and why they are the ones who should be destroyed, not us!" said Austin. "By all that you hold dear in this galaxy, whatever it may be, I ask you now… who will fight with me?"

Liara was the first to step up and stand beside Austin.
"To the very end, my love." She said.

"We're with you too." Said Alaara as Alpha joined as well.

Then the rest of the Normandy crew stepped up.

"You can count us in anytime." Said Jacob.

"Who else? Who's with me?" Austin asked to the army stood before him.

At this there was an encouraging cheer and occasional nods from others. Austin still felt that was not enough. He drew his sword and held up to the sky.

"WHO'S WITH ME?!" he yelled.

At this, the entire army erupted into such a loud cheer; it could be heard miles away.

"Then ready all defences, for we will give our enemy the deepest circle of hell!" said Austin.

It was true about the cheer of the resistance being heard a mile away. In fact, Skarlack and his army had heard it from where they were.

"Such a shame that motivation will go to waste when this is over." Said Skarlack pitifully.

"Credit where it's due, they've earned a place in our records as the one cycle that came close to defeating us." Said Mirage.

"Indeed." Said Skarlack. The General then turned to his army. "A new power is rising! It's victory is at hand! Tonight, this planet will be stained with the blood of all organics! We will march on that city, and we will leave none alive! TO WAR!"

The entire Takaal army erupted into roars of triumph. Even Mirage added her cry to it.

"This world has seen its last sunset." Said Skarlack.

Having got very dark, it wasn't as easy to see the enemy now. But they could see the lights from the Reapers and the faint green glow from the synthetic Takaal.

The weather had also changed too. Rather than a plain clear night as it had been earlier, it had now gone clouded and was no starting to rain heavily as the sounds of thunder and the flashes of lighting came from anywhere.

"Your friends are with you, Shepard." Said Alaara.

"Let's hope they last the night." Said Kraan.

As the Takaal army continued to march closer and closer, Skarlack separated from the others and walked up onto a tall rocks ticking out the ground so he and Mirage now towered over their army as they had done back at camp.

"Show them no mercy… for you shall receive none!" Austin yelled to everyone.

Skarlack then emitted a low roar to his army and they halted. The sight of at least 10,000 Takaal was quite unnerving, especially when it was taken into account how savage they could get in a fight.
Some even growled and snarled directly up at their opponents, obviously getting slightly impatient to fight as the rain poured won over them.

Skarlack then emitted another roar. This time, the Takaal started to taunt the Helldivers. They began banging their spears into the ground. Some even roared and snarled loudly and a few even banged their weapons against their chests.

It did slightly have an effect and many Alliance soldiers couldn't help but raise their guns. Even Ventra drew his bow. As he held it there however, the wetness of the rain, and the nervous adrenaline he was getting causes his hand to slip on the string, letting his arrow fly and it impaled a Takaal in the chest.

"Ventra!" Austin groaned.

"Err… oops?" the Turian tried to say innocently.

The Takaal Ventra had shot gave a pained moan and fell to the floor, dead.

This caused the other Takaal to snarl and roar even louder, this time in anger. It wasn't long before Skarlack gave the order.

"CHARGE!" he yelled.

All of the Takaal obeyed and broke into a run.

"So it begins." Said Zartrack.

"Prepare to fire!" Matt yelled.

All the snipers readied their weapons and took I am, Ventra and Garrus among them

"Aim for the heads. That puts 'em down for good." Ventra advised to everyone.

"Fire!"

Every single gun let loose and the Takaal were literally bombarded with projectiles, plasma fire, an arrow, and heavy rounds. Despite how many at the front were taken out however, those behind just clambered and ran over them, uncaringly crawling over their dead.

"Give them a volley" said Zartrack.

Some of the city's main guns that were able to aim low enough now opened fire too, creating massive explosions and craters as they took at least 20 Reaper forces with ach shot.

Austin then raised his sword.

"Ready… Unleash Hell!" he yelled.

Mortars positioned behind the wall now joined the constant fire. Takaal after Takaal fell at the onslaught they were walking into.

"Send them coming! Come on!" Kraan yelled encouragingly.

As the Takaal got closer and closer however they started to return fire themselves. Several well aimed shots took out several troops and they fell from the walls.
Austin then spotted some dark zombie-like figures who had reached the wall, and they were climbing.

"Husks! They're climbing the wall!" he yelled.

"Good." Said Kraan, drawing his weapon. Several other Helldivers did the same and drew their own melee weapons.

Husk after husk of all kind started to pour over the edges of the wall. Most of them though were met with a strike before they could even attack.

"Fight them back!" Austin ordered, cutting down several husks with Excalibur.

"15. 16." Ventra counted with each enemy he took out.

"Do you have to do this now?!" said Austin.

"No time like the present." Ventra shrugged.

The Takaal had it seemed had caught on to this idea and were also crawling the walls themselves. The allies held firm though. Kraan even cleverly positioned himself on top of the wall so he could strike down enemy after enemy just as they reached the top.

"17. 18. 19. 20." He counted with each kill. "21"

All the while however, the Takaal were using other tactics as well. Many tried to assault the gate, but found it far stronger than the last one. Ultimately, they resorted to using something other than the ram.

As he threw another Takaal off the edge, Austin suddenly noticed several fiery red husks running right at the door.

"Not those things again!" he cursed. He then noticed where they were heading. If they carried enough charge, they'd blow an entire section of the wall out.

"Bring those red husks down!" he yelled to Ventra.

The Turian fired several arrows, but despite each one hitting their mark, the husks failed to go down.

"Kill them! Kill them!" Austin yelled.

Ventra fired more again, but by the time he'd weakened the husks enough, they'd already reached their target. Like suicide bombers, they threw themselves at the door. The combined explosions of all them was so powerful that it literally did blow apart an entire section of the wall. The explosion and shockwave sent many people flying, including Austin and Alpha.

The Takaal immediately started to swarm through the massive opening they now had.

The explosion had rendered Austin temporarily unconscious, and the Takaal were heading right for him. As he finally managed to regain his senses, he suddenly heard the heavy footsteps and saw their clawed feet.

"Shepard!" Kraan yelled.

The Krogan leapt off the wall, plummeting himself straight into the centre of the horde.
"Kraan, no!" Austin yelled, pushing himself to his feet.

The Krogan took down several more Takaal before one managed to knock him down. Austin however didn't give him the chance to attack.

"Open fire!" he yelled.

Several soldiers and auto turrets opened fire on the Takaal and husks, once again taking several down in each strike.

"FOR ARKADIA! FOR THE HELLDIVERS" Zartrack yelled.

The whole army charged. Soon it became almost impossible to tell which army had come from which side.

"You got lucky." Said Jet as she helped Kraan up.

"Best we split up for this." Said Austin. "Garrus, Ventra, I want you on the roves. Eyes one everything. Call out any fighters in the air."

Both Turians nodded.

"Jet, you've got the perimeter. See if you can get some of your old friends to help out." Austin continued.

"Can you give us a lift?" Ventra asked.

"Right. Hold tight, you two." Said Jet.

The pilot took a hold of the two Turian and flew off into the sky to highest buildings.

"The rest of us… well, we do what we do best." Said Austin.

"Smash Takaal skulls?" Dash asked.

"No. We give them hell!" said Austin.

The rest of Alpha charged into the fight, weapons flying and swing and cutting all over the place. Alpha fought and attacked with the full ferocity that every Helldiver had. This was their home after all, and like any who would defend their home they would not let up, surrender or give up.

"Griffin, can you give me a boost? I've got an idea." Said Leena after cutting down several more Husks.

"You sure about this?" Griffin asked, seeing where this was going.

"Yeah. It'll be fun." The Quarian shrugged.

She then ran up to Griffin who gave her a massive boost up with his gauntlet. As Leena leapt into the air, she managed to grab onto a Takaal fighter that was flying low enough.

As the fighter struggled to shake her off, Leena used her Tomahawk to smash through the cockpit from above, killing the pilot in the process.

She then hacked the controls with her omni tool so she now controlled the fighter. All that remained
was working out how to properly fly it.

"Now, turn! Turn! Left!" she yelled. Fortunately, the fighter pulled the right manoeuvre. "Right! Think I got it."

"Jet, you got a lot of strays sniffing your tail." Said Ventra, firing another arrow at a Takaal fighter.

"Just trying to keep them out of the city as best I can." Said Jet who was currently trying dodge incoming fire from Takaal fighters who were giving chase.

"Well they can be a bit slow with manoeuvres. Find a tight corner." Said Garrus.

"Roger that." said Jet.

The Helldiver pilot started weaving between buildings and even the legs of some Reaper destroyers.

"Oh boy. Right into the Danger Zone." The pilot sighed. This was definitely among her top ten most intense dogfights.

Leena meanwhile was able to make use of the stolen fighters guns on a few more fighters. That coupled with the Normandy and several other Alliance and Helldiver certainly meant the skies were covered.

Just as she gunned down another fighter and bombed some more Husks she suddenly saw a long green blast of lighting shoot past her. She looked back to see Skarlack once again on the back of the Draco, and right on her tail.

"Oh, you again." She groaned. "Ventra!"

"Leena, what are you doing?" said Ventra, noticing what his wife was doing.

"Err, a little help?" said Leena, struggling to avoid the combined attacks from Skarlack and the Draco's fire breath.

Ventra quickly drew an arrow out from the pack on his bow and aimed.

"I got him." He smiled.

He waited a few seconds, timing his shot just right. He then fired.

The arrow flew at full speed towards Skarlack… and he caught it. For a moment, the Takaal general simply looked at the arrow, surprised that a Helldiver would even hink something like that would work on him.

Secretly however, Ventra had counted on that happening. He then pressed a button on his bow and the arrow tip exploded.

The explosion caused Skaralck to fall from the Draco, while the husk itself fell from the sky, plummeting down just where Dell, Sill and Uthenra were as sitting the techs.

The Draco crashed down in a big fireball, sending hundreds of people flying. It took more than that to kill the husk though and it managed to pick itself up, roaring in an angry tone.

"Mum? Mum?!" said Sill as she tried to shake her mother awake. She only got a groan from the
female Arkane though.

"You son of a bitch!" Sill yelled, blindly running at the husk.

The Draco noticed her and gave another loud angry roar, so loud in fact it woke Uthenra, only for her to notice her daughter running towards certain death.

Sill suddenly felt something stop her. A large hand had grabbed her shoulder, a hand belonging to a most familiar Helldiver.

Griffin almost immediately pushed Sill behind him and opened fire on the Draco with his mini gun.

"You look after mother." he said. "I don't wanna be the bearer of bad news for Dell."

Urz then suddenly joined Griffin and ran at the Draco, leaping up and biting into one of it's eyes. Griffin fired again as the Draco swooped over him as it tired to shake Urz off. Eventually it managed, but the Varren quickly righted himself just as Griffin fired two charged shots from his plasma cannons. This barely did much damage though and the Draco charged towards him. Griffin charged up for another shot, but it was taking too long. Within a few seconds the Draco was within biting range.

Just before it could strike however, a large metal fan suddenly spun towards the Draco and cut through it's top jaw, causing it's attention to focus on the fan's user. Xun had joined the fight.

"And to think I used to like Dragons. Because right now, I hate them!" she said.

Miranda, having seen the fight had also come to make sure everyone was okay.

As soon as she joined Dell, Sill and Uthenra however, several Husks suddenly lunged at them from all sides. Before they could make contact however, a figure suddenly appeared with a telescopic staff.

Troy bashed one Husk after the other until they were all clear.

"There you are." said Xun, pleased that Troy had finally shown himself.

"Thought you'd be partying without me? Not on your life, mon amour." Troy smiled under his helmet.

The two Helldivers nodded to each other and joined Griffin and Urz in fighting the Draco.

"Looks like they've got this under control." said Miranda. "I should get you three somewhere safe."

As Miranda was leading the Arturus family away however, she suddenly spotted a husk lunging at them.

"Enough!" she yelled, smacking it away with her biotics.

Three more Takaal however suddenly teleported around her and started attacking.

"Miranda!"

The Ex-Cerberus operative was able to fight off all three of them without any injury, but they unfortunately teleported again, this time now surrounding the Arturus'.

"No!" Miranda yelled.
Before she could do anything to assist though, the Draco suddenly fired a fire ball in her direction as it narrowly missed Jet who made a quick boost to the side to avoid it.

"Whoa! Great balls of fire!" she said, surprised at how close that had been.

The blast hit the building near where Miranda was, knocking her to the floor. At the same time, the three Takaal leapt to attack the Arturus'.

Out of nowhere however, something suddenly shot them all down. Everyone looked to see where those shots had come from.

Hawk... and he was on a bike.

The Helldiver then sped forward and wove in-between the crumbling wreckage of the building as it came down. He soon zoomed past and snatched Miranda up just as a beam landed where she had just been. He then propped her behind him on the bike.

"Sorry I'm a bit late, sheela." he said.

"Where'd you get the bike?" Miranda asked, rather impressed that her boyfriend had shown up on something like this.

"I've had this thing in storage ever since I retired. Damn good to finally have the old girl back." said Hawk.

He then gently pulled up next to Dell and Sill and dropped Miranda off.

"You okay?" Uthenra asked.

"Yeah." Miranda nodded.

"And I'd love to take you for a spin when this is over." Said Hawk.

"I'll look forward to it." Miranda smiled. "Hawk, good luck and be careful."

"You know I will." Hawk smiled.

The Draco had taken to the air again, flying between the buildings as it attempted to pick the helldivers off one by one.

Having split up however, the husk was finding it most difficult to take on Alpha when they were attacking from practically all sides.

As it swooped through several pieces of scaffolding, it caught sight of Griffin firing from below. As the Helldiver once again charged up both his plasma cannons, the Draco at the same time spat a fireball at him.

The Husk's attack overwhelmed Griffin's and the fire sped towards him.

Griffin almost immediately leapt from the balcony he'd been stood on to avoid being incinerated. The explosion from the fireball sent him flying even further than he intended. It was only thanks to a sticking out piece of metal that Griffin was able to grab onto something and prevent his fire into a fiery inferno.

Jet then suddenly soared out of the fire and opened fire on the Draco with her rail gun. The Draco
attempted several snaps at her as the pilot manoeuvred around the husks attacks, even missing an attempted swipe from it's clawed foot.

Troy then leapt from a high building, landing on the Draco's back and sinking his omni blade into it's back. The Draco emitted a loud roar and started trying to shake Troy off. It even tried to smash itself against one of the buildings.

"This way." said Jet, quickly pulling the spy out of the way and dropping him on another building roof just as the Draco smashed through the infrastructure.

The Draco landed on the side of another building and once again roared. The many Helldivers were becoming a huge annoyance. Pushing off the building, it once again took flight.

Several more shots from Jet's rail gun suddenly hit the husk in the back. The Draco pulled a sharp turn and now headed straight at her.

As it lunged however, the pilot kicked in her boost and sped into the air right as the Draco's teeth came down on where she'd been. Snapping several more times, the Draco attempted to snatch the Helldiver out of the sky as she flew all over the place and constantly unloaded shots into the Dragon's head.

Xun meanwhile once again threw her fan like boomerang. Upon once again scarring the Draco it quickly came back to her hand while Urz had once again pounced onto the Draco's head and was once again biting at the eye.

As Xun readied for another attack however, she noticed that the Draco was once again priming for another fire blast, and it was in her direction.

Just before it could fire however Troy once again leapt onto the Draco's head and once again sank his omni blade in. This managed to push the head enough that when it fired the blast, it missed. However, it did hit another building and huge amount of debris fell away, and it was coming down on where Griffin was standing, having just finished off several more Takaal soldier who had just teleported to where he was.

"Oh crap!" Griffin sighed.

Just as the wreckage came down however, something suddenly flew past and grabbed him, pulling him out of the way and to safety. But it wasn't Jet, it was Austin.

"Got ya!" he said.

Austin dropped Griffin on a safe bit and then landed himself.

"Where the hell of you been?!" said Griffin, pleased at least to see Austin.

The Draco's attention now focused solely on Austin, it flaming red eyes burning brightly.

Austin kicked in his boosters and flew at the Draco, sword drawn. The Dragon however, caught Excalibur between it's teeth and threw the Helldiver to the side.

Normally that would've been it, but not this time. Obviously the Draco was unprepared for the fact that Austin could now fly. A quick burst from his stabilisers quickly righted him and he once again struck as the Draco flew at him.

Despite his best efforts however, the Draco's armoured hide was extremely hard for Austin to breach.
As the Dragon took another snap at him, Austin increased his altitude and then flew down at full speed with a two handed strike.

This attack had enough force that it broke one of the Draco's horn and knocked it to the ground, causing it to crash into the remains of a building. As Austin landed however, the Draco once again roared, ready for another fight.

"What does it take to kill that damn thing?!" Dash cursed.

The Draco began once again started to flap and began gaining altitude. As Alpha braced for the next attack however, something rather unexpected happened.

As the Draco's tail hung down as the husk flew even higher, a large head suddenly lunged up and bit into it. It was Experiment 13!

As the Draco tried to shake 13 off, the creature pulled down with a huge amount of force, taking the Dragon with it. Th husk crashed to the ground and quickly righted itself.

"Okay. Now it's a fair fight." said Alaara.

The two massive titans roared at each other and attacked. While the Draco could only really use it's tail and teeth to attack, 13 was able to make full use of it's jaws and arms, not to mention mass.

As 13 pressed the attack, the Draco suddenly breathed a large amount of fire which hit 13 dead on. At first it looked as if 13 would be burned alive, but as the fire cleared, the Experiment was completely unscathed. Alpha had almost forgotten how recent scans of 13's anatomy revealed it had an skeleton made of iron which as a result gave it fireproof flesh and blood. 13 also didn't seem to be affected anymore by the sight of the fire, having lost it's movement based vision and now possessing proper vision like a human's.

This seemed to come as a huge surprise to the Draco who was now finding itself vastly outmatched against this super predator.

The Dragon then turned the tables however she it grabbed 13 with it's feet and carried it to the top of a building. Hoping to kill it with the fall, the Draco pushed 13 to the edge until it was unable to keep it's footing. Just as it started falling, 13 suddenly lunged forward and bit into one of the Draco's wings as it tired to take off. Struggling to resist 13's strength, the Draco breathed a huge amount of fire at 13 and attempted to scratch at it's face. Though it's clawed feet made several deep scars on 13's face, the Experiment didn't seem to acknowledge the pain and continued pulling. Finally, the Draco couldn't hold on and was pulled over the edge just as the force of 13's pull literally ripped it's wing apart, rending it no longer able to fly.

The two titans crashed to the ground, almost causing a large amount of shakes as they landed. Both creatures got back up and glared at one another, snarling and growling. The Draco roared first to try and intimidate. 13 however roared even louder, it's roar able to heard almost from another planet.

13 and the Draco once again attacked each other, biting and clawing as they literally tried to rip each other apart.

"Come on, 13! Kick his ass!" Dash cheered.

Almost as if it was spurred on by this, 13's attacks grew even more fierce. A sudden mistimed attack from the Draco allowed the Draco an opening. One of its spike arms lunged forward and it impaled the Dragon right in the eye and literally ripped it out. 13 then pinned both the Draco's wing arms with it's spikes and bit into the Draco's neck.
Alpha could almost swear the Draco emitted a cry of desperation as 13 tore it's head right off and threw it to the ground. The Experiment then roared in triumph as it stood over the dead Dragon husk.

"Oh god, I have lived. That was awesome!" said Dash.

13’s attention then turned to the main battle and it charged right into the Takaal, killign any enemy that stood in it's a way.

"And I think he's got the right idea." said Austin as he and the others rejoined the battle as well.

As more Takaal started to swarm around them, a large barrage of gunfire from behind suddenly took them all out.

Everyone looked to see what had done that and saw quite a sight. Finally it seemed all the exo suits had been powered up and were fully operational.

"Ha! That's more like it." Said Austin.

Several of the smaller ones began engaging the Takaal head on while the bigger ones took to picking up large things and throwing them. One particular one as big as one of the city's towers picked up a massive piece of the wall and three it so far it took out a Reaper destroyer as it charged up its gun.

Many of the mechas started to climb over the wall and into the main fight itself. Many of them stomped on the attackers, some even picked up the enemy and used them as clubs before bashing them against the ground.

They weren't invincible though. Some Takaal were able to lash onto one using electric whips and pulled it to the floor.

The very biggest mecha however picked up the remains of a destroyed Hell tank and threw it at the Takaal, freeing the mecha they'd managed to down.

Truly the resistance and the Helldivers were giving ti everything now. Almost every single thing they had was now fighting against the Reapers and the Takaal. Even the Rachni Queen and her drones were fighting with Latara close in tow.

Never before had the galaxy seen such a battle of this scope and epic scale.

They truly were giving the Takaal a run for their money now as thye held firm. Try as they might, the Takaal and Reapers were having no luck pushing them back.

As Austin fought through more enemy soldiers, he caught sight of Zartrack. He quickly joined the General.

"That's two more for me!" he said as they stood back to back and cut down any Takaal who attacked them.

"Since when do we keep score?" Zartrack asked, panting slightly.

"Fair point." Austin shrugged.

As the two Helldivers fought together, they seemed to become a natural target for much of the Takaal as they racked up the kill count in the hundreds.

That changed however when a Takaal suddenly tacked Austin the floor only for Zartrack to run it
through the neck. As the Arkane helped his student up however, Austin suddenly noticed a massive form behind them, a form he hadn't thought he'd see again. It was the Hellbringer.

The massive Helldiver husk aimed it's cannon arm and fired a massive shot. Austin quickly pulled Zartrack down with him, the shot only just grazing one of Zartrack's helmet mounted horns.

The Hellbringer snarled and marched towards them. Austin quickly grabbed Excalbiur as the Hellbringer brought it's lobster like claw blade down. As Excalbiur blocked the attack however, the Hellbringer suddenly kicked Austin. The kick was so strong it sent Austin flying.

The Hellbringer then turned to Zartrack who had just picked up a Takaal spear. It roared, ready for a fight.

Zartrack lunged only for the Hellbringer to grab the spear in it's left hand and break it with it's blade. It then pressed the attack, forcing Zartrack to use his reflexes to avoid the Husk's attacks. Two strikes came down on his sword hard, forcing him to his knees.

"Zartrack!" Matt yelled, quickly running to his friends.

The Hellbringer reacted tot his though and swung, it's attack knocking Matt to the floor and cutting his cyborg arm clean off above the below.

"Shit! Not again." Matt cursed.

This didn't hurt Matt. After all, it was only cybernetic. Even though it had it's own nervous system, pain was one thing it couldn't feel. So to Matt, this was merely an inconvenience rather than a major battle injury.

As the Hellbringer turned back to Zartrack, the Arkane General drew his second sword and flipped the one in his left hand so that he now held it backhand. Now the General could make full use of his unique fighting style.

Zartrack was the only Helldiver known to make use of this special style since he was the only one that was so good at it. While the right hand was used for attack, the left hands could be used as a shield that could at the same time inflict injury. It also at the same time allowed him to perform deadly spin attacks.

The Hellbringer attacked only for Zartrack to block it's attack with his left. He then spun and sliced with both blades scarring the inside of the husk's right leg, causing it to stumble.

Zartrack then attacked again, impaling the Hellbringer's shoulder on both blades. The husk almost emitted a growl of pain. But being a husk, it didn't feel any. It simply pulled out both blades and resumed it's attack.

Austin's vision finally cleared and he picked himself up. He then spotted Anderson among the amny masses of fighting Helldiver and Takaal and husks.

Just as it looked as though the Admiralw as about to be overrun, Austin gunned most of them down and joined him.

"Guess you owe me one more now, huh?" he said.

"Fine timing as always, Shepard." said Anderson, gunnign down several Takaal soldiers.
"Not bad for an Admiral and former Councillor." said Austin approvingly.

As the two continued to fight, Austin's radio suddenly crackled into life and he heard Admiral Hackett's voice.

"Shepard? Shepard, do you copy?"

"I'm reading you, Hackett. Go ahead." said Austin, still fighting.

"The crucible's here and is already entering the atmosphere. Recommend you break off from the main battle and get to the centre of the city. We'll dock it there." said Hackett.

"Roger that." said Austin. "Everyone catch that?"

"Sure did. We're already at the gate." said Alaara.

"I overheard that too. Don't think you're going anywhere without me." said Anderson.

"Let's go." said Austin.

As the two broke off and began falling back to the city, Austin suddenly spotted Zartrack, who was still fighting the Hellbringer.

"General!" he yelled.

"No! Stay back!" said Zartrack. "I've got this. You're needed. Go now and end this war."

Austin and Anderson soon rejoined with the rest of Alpha and Sarah and they began their journey towards the centre of the city.

It was strange to see the city almost completely deserted. Alpha had become so used to seeing it crowded with inhabitants.

Suddenly, a large figure appeared from behind a corner and forced Sandra to her knees and pointed a gun at her head. As shocking as it was, it was Hades. He must've escaped from the prison during the attack on Arkadia's moon where the prison was.

"Don't try it, or your friend gets a bullet in the head." he said.

"Hades, this isn't the time! You'll doom us all." Austin argued. Of all the times for it to happen, this was the worst.

"Knowing that you die too will at least help me find peace. I would let you burn in the fire of the galaxy you failed to save, but we both know I have to kill you now." said Hades, aiming back at Sandra's head. "You'll just have to imagine the fire."

Before he could fire however, a large shot suddenly unloaded into him, sending him flying against the wall and killing him. Everyone looked to see Hawk on his bike, and the guns smoking.

"And that's for your Commander taking my eye!" he said.

Everyone simply nodded in acknowledgement to Hawk and they continued into the city, now with Hawk following them on his bike. He even gave Sarah a ride since she couldn't run as hard as the Helldivers could.
As they continued further into the city, they could already see Reaper destroyers who'd landed inside the city and were engaging other Helldiver soldiers and the city's defences.

"This is turning nasty." said Sarah.

"Just keep it up! We're almost there." said Austin.

"Look out!"

A beam from a Reaper destroyer suddenly hit a building near them and a huge amount of debris fell in their direction.

Austin and the other braced fro the painful impact, but none came. When they looked, they found that both Griffin and Kraan were managing to hold everything up with their strength.

"Good work, guys." said Austin.

"Go! And hurry it up. We're not gonna stand like this all day." Griffin groaned.

No one wasted any time and quickly hurried to safe distance.

"You doing okay?" Kraan groaned as he too was just able to hold everything up. It was like holding up a building in his shoulders.

"Bought the same as you." said Griffin, trying to take breaths were he could.

"That bad, huh?"

"We're clear." said Austin

"You first." said Kraan.

"You're sure?" Griffin asked.

"There's no time to argue! Just go!" said Kraan.

Griffin let go of the wreckage he'd been holding up and hurried out, now leaving just Kraan. Giving a loud roar, Kraan let go and quickly hurried out just as everything came down.

"Great job, both of you." said Austin.

Griffin and Kraan simply nodded, panting heavily from the effort they'd just been through.

"Shepard, look." said Sandra, pointing in the other direction.

Everyone looked to see the Crucible gently setting down in the city's centre. They were almost there. SO close to ending this war.

"I almost don't believe it." said Austin.

The moment however was interrupted when a large full Reaper suddenly landed between them and the Crucible. ANd it wasn't just any Reaper, this one had four glowing eyes. Harbinger!

"Oh for fucks sake! Not now!" Sarah cursed.

"We're not turning back now. We're getting there one way or another!" said Austin.
Everyone immediately broke into a run as Harbinger opened fire at them, its rate of fire much higher than any other Reaper. Some of the red beams came dangerously close to Austin and he worried about what might happen if one caught him.

They were close, but there was still the matter of Harbinger blocking their way.

"We're gonna get pulverised if we stay out here much longer!" said Ventra.

"I agree! Get to cover." Austin yelled.

Everyone immediately took cover behind anything they could find. Harbinger lost sight of them, but still continued firing, hoping to flush them out.

"You shall not pass!" Harbinger's voice boomed.

"We'll never make it past while Harbinger's there." said Leena.

"Jet, do you copy?" Austin asked into his comm.

"Load and clear, Shepard." Jet replied.

"Harbinger's got us pinned down. We need you and the fighters to distract him." said Austin.

"Hell, Shepard. You don't ask for much." Jet sighed. "Just hold on. We're inbound."

Jet, followed by several more Helldiver atmospheric fighters soon came into view and opened fire simultaneously on Harbinger. As they flew past, Harbinger soon took off after them.

"It's working! He's taking the bait." said one of the pilots.

"You're all clear, Shepard!" said Jet.

"Thanks, Jet." said Austin. "Let's go!"

Within just a few minutes, they'd finally reached the foot of the Crucible. All that was left, was a climb to the main beam.

"This is it. All I have to do is reach the beam." said Austin.

A sudden roar from behind them alerted them to a whole swarm of husks heading their way.

"There's no way we'll make it ahead of them." said Austin, taking into account the amount of time it would take them to climb.

"We need don't to. Only you." said Alaara. "Go. We'll hold them off."

"Alaara…" Austin tried to say.

"You said so yourself, only you can finish this. We'll buy you as much time as we can." said the Asari.

Liara then joined Austin at his side.

"You're not going anywhere without me." she said.

"Normally I'd tell you to stay, but I agree with you." said Austin.
"I'll go too. Just to be safe." said Anderson.

Sarah was also about to join, but Austin stopped her.

"Not this time, Sarah. They need you more than I do." he said.

Sarah reluctantly nodded. She then walked up to her brother and hugged him tightly.

"You come back from this alive. Do you understand?" she said.

"All too well." Austin nodded. He then turned to the rest of Alpha. "Were I able to go back 15 years before any of us had met, I would never have done anything differently. You will always be the second family I never had."

"And it has been the greatest of honours to have you leading us, Shepard." said Alaara. "No go. Finish this."

"Fight like I know you can, Alpha. And give them hell." said Austin.

As he, Liara and Anderson began the climb, Alpha and Sarah turned to the husks. The emotion was very strong. The next few hours would decide the fate of this war, not to mention they were heavily outnumbered by husks. There was a chance they'd die fighting.

"Never thought I'd die fighting side by side with Turians." Said Kraan.

"What about side by side with friends?" said Ventra.

"That I can do." the Krogan smiled.

As the husks got closer, everyone drew their preferred weapons, and readied to change.

"For Arkadia?" Dash asked.

"No... For Shepard." said Alaara.

The Asari was the first to charge. Then the rest of the squad joined her. They all ran at full speed right into the husks and almost immediately began fighting, not letting any husks get past them.

Austin reached the top first and gently helped Liara up, then Anderson.

Ahead of the long walkway was the primed beam of the Crucible. This was it.

"That's it. We're almost there. said Liara.

As they got closer however, they suddenly noticed a figure stood in front of the beam. When they finally got a clear view, they almost didn't believe it. It was the Illusive Man.

"What the hell?"

"It can't be. That's not possible." said Austin. He and the others then all pointed their guns at the Illusive Man. "Turn around! Now!"

The Illusive Man slowly turned around. It was when his eyes came into view that it now made sense. They were glowing brightly and he then spoke with a familiar voice.

"Shepard!"
"Harbinger!" said Austin bitterly. "Didn't get enough last time then?"

"You have come too far, Shepard. Your journey ends here." said the Reaper.

"I'm only going to say this once, harbinger. Leave that body and stand aside, or you'll be the first of our kind to fall before the others."

"You are foolish to take me on, Shepard. You will perish."

"Two Helldivers and one Alliance Admiral against you possessing a dead and weak body? I'd say it's you who is the fool." said Austin, unable to resist a light laugh.

"Your statement is logical. I am not prepared for this fight."

The Illusive Man's body then began to writhe madly. The Illusive Man's clothes tore and fell off the body in tatters as his skin literally tore as he slowly, he began to morph into a gigantic morphed husk form of himself.

"Shepard…" said Anderson with concern.

"By the goddess!" said Liara in shock.

Harbinger's transformation of the Illusive Man finally finished. He now stood over twice their height and with a sight that would unnerven any Helldiver.

"I take that back now." Austin managed to say.

"Now I am prepared!" said Harbinger.

Austin managed to overcome the shock of the moment and drew his word, prompting Liara to do the same and Anderson to ready for a fight.

"If you're all that stand between us and victory… so be it." he said.

All of Alpha were fighting to the absolute they could manage. The husks came thick and fast, but they held firm. The one thing that gave them strength to keep fighting, despite the overwhelming odds was knowing that Austin would end this war any second. They could only hope they lasted long to see that. For them, this was the Final Countdown.

The lives they had lost, the sacrifices they had made to come this far, none of those would have been made in vain. Not if they had anything to say about it!

The Hellbringer continued to strike against Zartrack with such force, the Arkane feared his swords might break.

The Husk then attempted a downward strike, but Zartrack dodged it, causing the Hellbringer's blade to embed itself in the ground. The Arkane quickly seized the opportunity and quickly plunged both his swords into the Hellbringer's arm. He then gave them a violent twist, breaking the Hellbringer's blade off.

The Husk's arm switched however to a normal one so it now had two hands again. It then quickly hit the General's arms so hard it knocked both swords out of his hands.

Now it was a hand to hand fight to the death. Zartrack could only hope his skills didn't fail him.
The Hellbringer swung, but Zartrack ducked. He then jumped onto it's front, causing the husk to fall to the ground. He then punched the Hellbringer several times only for the Hellbringer to head butt him.

As the two picked themselves up out of the mud however, Zartrack suddenly made an upward swing which knocked the Hellbringer back down.

The husk roared as it once again picked itself out of the wet mud. For the moment, the two opponents simply circled one another Zartrack suddenly charged. The two wrestled violently with each other before the Hellbringer punched Zartrack back only for him to then cloak, vanishing from the husks sight.

For a moment, the Hellbringer simply looked to try and catch sight of the cloaked Helldiver.

Zartrack then suddenly snuck up behind the Hellbringer and delivered several swift punches to the husk's face. The Hellbringer however attacked back with even more viciousness. The final blow was so hard and violent that it literally tore the Helldiver's helmet off.

Zartrack fell to the ground, his face badly bruised and bleeding in some areas, to weak and beaten to fight anymore.

The Hellbringer then picked him up by the neck and simply looked at him for a moment. Before it prepared for the final blow, there was a sudden hiss as locks on it's face disengaged and the plates on it's helmet slid away revealing the true face of the husk.

Zartracks' eyes widened in horror as he saw the terrifying husk like face of one of his own kind stare back at him and roar. The Hellbringer slowly raised it's arm, ready to deliver the final blow. Zartrack could only close his eyes and wait for the inevitable. He only hoped it was quick...

Through the Illusive Man's body, Harbinger fought more viciously than he had ever done as a Collector.

A sudden swing hit Austin with such force that he was flung back and landed on his back, the force accidentally tearing off one of the thrusters on his back, caused him to lose his shield-gun and damaging a fair amount of his armour. Some parts of the holo display of his armour were already beginning to light up red indicating some bad damage.

Angered by this, Liara leapt onto Harbinger's back and plunged her sword in the back of the Illusive Man's neck.

Harbinger's arm suddenly grabbed the Asari and threw her off. Just before the Reaper could try and finish her off however, Anderson suddenly cast himself between them and fired several shots at point blank range.

Harbinger remained unfazed though as parts of the Illusive Man's face was shot off and grabbed Anderson. The Reaper then smashed Anderson several times with it's strength. After several hits that clearly drew blood, the Reaper threw Anderson's literally broken body to the side. Anderson could only lie there, in extreme pain and bleeding badly.

"Anderson!" Austin yelled.

He fired a quick boost from the thruster he had left and tackled Harbinger tot he ground. As he rolled of the Reaper, he drew both his sword and omni blade. At the same time, a arm mounted gun split off from the Illsuive Man's body and fired at Austin.
The Helldiver however dodged the shot and quickly severed the the sun at the barrel. He then attempted a thrust from his omni blade, but Harbinger's arm seemed to block it without harm. The Reaper then blocked another one before Austin tried a sweep attack which tripped Harbinger up from behind. He then plunged both blades into Harbinger's chest, only for the Reaper to kick him off.

His omni blade deactivated, but Excalibur remained embedded in Harbinger's chest as the Reaper picked itself up.

As Austin managed to get up himself, Harbinger walked up to him and hit him hard before then knocking him against a part of the Crucible. The Reaper then picked him up and swung another punch at him, but this time the Helldiver was able to avoid it.

Austin then reached for Excalibur and pulled as hard as he could. In doing so, he unintentionaly pulled off a piece of Harbinger's chest, exposing some of the Illusive Man's still decaying organs inside.

Harbinger continued it's attack and knocked Austin to the floor, which then followed with another. The Reaper then tried to crush Austin, but he narrowly avoided both of them. Harbinger however managed to catch the Helldiver's leg and threw up.

Readyng to finish Austin off, Harbinger slowly marched towards him.

As Austin tried to recover from his dze, he noticed this suit's vision was malfunctioning slightly. In doing so however, he unintentionely spotted a weakness. Some of the exposure he had done was emitting an ignitable gas. If he could somehow ignite it...

Then he noticed his sheild/cannon lying a few metres out of reach.

Using all concentration, he treated that part of armour like his own and summoned it back to him. The moment it slid back onto his arm, he quickly aimed just as Harbinger preapred to lunge, and fired.

Almost immediately, the gas ignited and the Illusive Man's body burst into flames.

"Releasing…" Haringer said, but before it could say control, the flames reached the source of the gas and it exploded, taking Harbinger's conciousness with it jsut as Sovereign had died while stil in possession of Saren's body.

The now lifless Husk fell to the floor in flaiming tnlage of dead flesh and machinery.

Austin grunted as he picked himself up and looked over what was left of both Harbinger and the Illusive Man. He then noticed not toofar off Harbinger's true Reaper form. It seemed to stop moving, then fell.

Austin coudln't help but smile. Poetic justice. Harbinger was created before theother Reapers, now it had died before the others.

"So uncivilised." said Austin.

He then walked up to Liara and helped her back up. He then ran up to Anderson.

"Anderson." he activated his omni tool but found he was out of medi gel, as was Liara. "Oh no."

"Shepard…" Anderson struggled to say.
"We're out of medigel. There's nothing we can do. I…” said Austin.

"Don't… blame yourself. Don't worry about me. Go and finish this." ANderson coughed. "You did good, son. I'm… proud of you."

Anderson's eyes closed and his body went limp. Austin gently put Anderson down and hung his head.

"Goodbye, my old friend." he sighed.

He then turned his attention back to the Crucible beam and he and Liara hurried up to the edge.

"Are you sure about this?" Liara asked.

"About whether it'll work? Yes. Austin replied.

"But you don't know how."

"No, Liara… I don't know what will happen at all. I don't even know if I'll survive this." said Austin, gently holding Liara supportively.

"It doesn't… No! No, it can't end like this!" said Liara, sounding almost on the point of crying.

"Listen to me. Whatever happens, I love you more than anything, Liara. You mean everything to me. Remember that." said Austin.

"Austin, I…” said Liara, trying to fight back her tears. "I am yours."

Without hesitation, Austin gently reached forward until his hand touched the beam.

He was then suddenly hauled up by the beam and was floating in the air. His hud then began to change to read an unknown alien language. He could already feel his suit was doing something.

"Activating Catalyst." said his suit. It then seemed to talk independently to him. "I have watched you for a long time, Shepard. It is from you, that I have seen the good of this cycle. This is where my function is my complete. My reason to exist is over. This may be my end… but it is not yours. It is not your time, nor will it be for many years. I leave you with this gift."

Austin felt something strange happen to him. Somehow though, as if by instinct, he knew almost immediately what it was.

"Return now, and fulfil your destiny."

Austin felt the presence of the Catalyst leave him and he felt himself began to drop. However he missed the edge of the platform Liara was on and was only just able to grab onto something. Now he was simply hanging there. Liara quickly appeared over the edge.

"Give me your hand!" she yelled over the noise of the Crucible's beam.

Austin would have already, but he was very dazed and dizzy from all this. He felt confused.

"Take my hand!" Liara yelled.

All the while, the catalyst began to mix with the Crucible's beam and it began to change colour as it charged up.
Austin weakly reached up to grab Liara's hand, but it slipped.

"No!" Liara yelled as Austin tried to still hold on. "Don't you let go!"

Austin looked up at the woman he loved. She retracted her helmet so he could see her clearly. Somehow, this seemed to do the trick. Austin felt his strength return to him.

"Don't let go." said Liara. "Reach!"

Austin almost immediately reached up and grabbed onto Liara's arm, this time tightly as she did the same. Using all the strength she could muster, Liara pulled her bond mate up onto the platform with almost instantly hugged him. Austin immediately hugged her back.

"You did it." she almost cried with happiness into his shoulder.

"We did it." Austin corrected.

The Crucible's beam finally changed to red as it prepared to fire. But at the last minute, it suddenly changed again... to GOLD!

A huge wave of gold energy began to sweep from the beam engulfing anything it touched. Austin and Liara almost felt their eyesight blinded by the bright light of gold as it swept over them...

The beam pulsed stronger and stronger as it swept out from the crucible.

Just as it looked like Alpha was about to be overrun, the wave swept over them. Any husk that was caught was completely vaporised. Within just a few seconds, all that was left was Alpha.

"They did it." said Sarah almost in shock. "They did it!"

The wave continued further and further out from the Crucible.

Just as the Hellbringer was about to deliver it's finally blow, the beam engulfed it and it's structure almost immediately fell apart upon contact.

Finally the gold wave touched the Reapers. They almost seemed to emit some kind of mechanical scream before every single one of them fell to the ground, no left within them. Now they were nothing but empty shells.

Skarlack and Mirage simply stayed were they were. They both braced as the wave drew and closer. If this was to be their end, they would face it with courage, not with fear.

Finally, the Crucible fired again, this time shooting a beam of golden light into the sky and into space, no doubt using the mass relays to send this same signal to every other systems in the galaxy. After more than 65 millions, the Reapers, the ones who had massacred millions of cycles, were at least defeated. The cycle was over.

Alpha finished their climb to the Crucible's platform. WHat they saw however was a bit unexpected. There was the dead remains of a hideously mutated Illusive Man and the dead body of Anderson... and no sign of Austin or Liara.

"What happened here?" Alaara asked.
"He's dead." Dash sighed as he examined Anderson.

Everyone looked around, hoping to see their leader and his wife, but there was nothing.

"Where are they?"

"There's no sign of them."

"No… no, not again. We can't have lost both of them!" said Sarah, falling to her knees. Not only ahd she lost her brother again, but now her loved sister in law as well.

"Seems you unfortunately have, stupid girl." said a voice.

Everyone whirled around in horror to see Skarlack, Mirage, and many more Takaal standing alive and well before them.

"Your precious leader is dead. And now is the time to declare yourself. Come forward and join us, or die!"

TO BE CONTINUED...
Two years. Two years, and here we are at last! :)

I cannot express how thankful I am to all of you not only for your support and kind words but also for being with me on this epic journey. What originally started two years ago from a state of depression over ME3's ending has turned into something I am proud to have written and worked on.

Little more for me to say really. I'll just let you read. :)

Here it is. The final chapter.

Chapter 32

The Circle Closes

To say that everyone was shocked by the fact the Takaal were still alive was an understatement. Now that Alpha thought about it though, the Crucible had been refined to destroy only Reapers and Husks. The Takaal were neither of those two, so therefore the Crucible didn't affect them.

For a long moment, everyone stood where they were. None of them would ever join the Takaal.

But then, to everyone's shock Dash slowly stepped forward.

Even Skarlack was slightly surprised by this.

"Well I must say, I'd hoped for better." he said, causing Mirage and the rest of the Takaal to laugh.

"I'd like to say something!" said Dash defiantly.

"Well, out with it, boy!" said Skarlack bitterly.

"It doesn't matter that Shepard and Liara are gone." Said Dash. He then turned back to Skarlack. "But you will! Because you're wrong. You think us weak because we lost our leader?! You don't know your enemy at all. It's not over!"

"You're brave, youngling. I'll give you that. That means you can die first!" said Skarlack.

The Takaal General then thrust his staff forward and fired a bolt of green lightning right at Dash. The scout braced himself for the imminent death… but it never came.

To everyone's utter shock, including the Takaal, some invisible force blocked the lightning.

"What?!"
Then suddenly, two figures un cloaked right in front of Alpha. To all of the Helldiver's surprise, there in front of them stood Austin and Liara, alive, real and fully real.

"WHAT?!"

Liara when suddenly threw her own biotic attack which Skarlack just managed to block, coming out of his shock.

"You're alive! Both of you!" said Sarah, almost in as much shock as the Takaal were.

"We defeated the Reapers. Nothing's impossible." Said Austin, smiling under his helmet.

"KILL THEM! KILL THEM ALL!" Skarlack roared.

"Fight like I know you all can!" Austin yelled motivating.

The victory against the Reapers, combined with the return of Austin and Liara was all the motivation they needed.

As the Takaal charged, despite some retreating in fear, Alpha charged as well and the fighting quickly resumed.

Skarlack threw several more lightning strikes at Austin and Liara which the Asari managed to block before Austin himself blocked the final one using Excalibur.

Abandoning the attack, Skarlack grabbed Mirage's arm and the two disappeared as they teleported. At this, both Austin and Liara went to leave as well.

"Where are you both going?" Sarah asked as she gunned down another synthetic Takaal.

"I have to kill Skarlack. It's the only way to truly end this war." Said Austin. He could see Sarah's worry though. "I promise you, it will not be my end, but his."

The empty hallways and staircases didn't' seem like the best place to find a Takaal General, but Austin knew Skarlack was here. The Takaal General was now more determined than ever to kill him, so even if he didn't Skarlack, the Takaal would come to him.

Sure enough, the Takaal General teleported in front of him and almost instantly bombarded with constant bolt after bolt from his staff which Austin was just able to counter each time.

Skarlack then suddenly teleported again, this time at the top of the stairs Austin was stood in front of and fired a concentrated beam. Austin was just able to bring his shield up in time to block it, the sheer force of the attack forcing him onto his back. At the same time, he suddenly noticed Mirage slowly making her way up the stairs from the back. Now he was caught between the two of them.

Forced to act quickly, Austin managed to angle the shield just enough so that it reflected the lightning up to the ceiling, causing a huge amount of rubble and debris to fall right on Skarlack, burying him.

Austin then rolled back onto his feet and turned his attention to Mirage as she drew both her tonfas and hissed at him.

Right before she was about to attack though, Skarlack unleashed a massive repulse that threw away all the rubble he was buried under and at the same time causing Austin to fall over the edge onto another lower flight of stairs. The second he picked himself back up, Skarlack suddenly teleported in front of him again and they both smashed right through a wall.
Mirage was about to teleport in order to join her husband, but was interrupted when a rock suddenly hit her in the back of the head. The female Takaal quickly whirled round to find Liara stood at the foot of the stairs.

"You!" she snarled.

"You and I have unfinished business, Mirage." Said Liara.

"Indeed we do, my dear. I've waited many months for this." Said Mirage as she slowly walked down the stairs until she stood on equal level with Liara.

To the Asari's surprise, Mirage then tore off a piece of cloth that had previously been covering her stomach to reveal a most surprising sight. Two small secondary set arms lay there, pressed against her skin. Previously they'd always thought that Skarlack was the only one to have four arms. Now it seemed his wife shared that with him.

While her smaller set of arms now took her tonfas, her main arms now drew two thin swords from her side that she'd had strapped on the whole time. Now all four of her arms had blades, and each one looked ready to cut flesh.

"Come then, let me finally feast on your flesh." She said.

Liara, knowing full well that this would probably be the fight of her life, quickly used her biotics to summon another sword from a fallen Helldiver into her other hand.

The two enemies went into battle ready stances, both preparing to face each other for what was bound to be their final battle. After this, only one would walk away from this fight.

As Skarlack tackled Austin through the wall, the Helldiver activated his thrusters in an attempt to minimize the damage. In doing so, he managed to flip them in mid-air so he was now on top. Keeping it like that enabled him to keep Skarlack pinned and he hit the ground instead. As they impacted on the ground, the Takaal General kicked Austin off of him and the two slowly got back up, circling one another.

"Why do you still live?" Skarlack snarled.

"The prophecies foretold the deaths of the Reapers by my hands. Surely you know that?" Austin replied.

"I see my dear sister shared her secrets with you." Said Skarlack. "But tell me, did she tell you about the other one?"

"Oh, she did. You are foretold to meet your end." Said Austin.

"By someone like you? I doubt it." Skarlack laughed.

"Have you not wondered how I destroyed the Reapers? Did you never once wonder how I came back from the dead?" Austin asked rhetorically.

Skarlack took a long moment to contemplate this. Then the horrible truth hit him and he looked at the Helldiver with great surprise. All this time… and the answer to the prophecy he had secretly feared had been staring him in the face all this time.

"You?" he asked, almost in shock.
"And although the catalyst is gone, it's legacy still remains." Said Austin, gently holding Excalibur up slightly. "My sword now holds the power that is capable of destroying you. I would've used it already, but I am not that type of man. Skarlack… the Reapers are dead. You don't have to obey them now. You're free. Free to forge your own path, to make your own way in the galaxy. Think about your people. Do you really want them to be remembered as servants of those monsters?"

"I offered you a higher purpose than this, Shepard." Skarlack growled. "You could've built a new empire in this squallier alongside us. Yet you chose your organic humanity over that. I exist to preserve the legacy and future of my kind. That is the sole purpose of which I was given this gift, of why I was made a General. And every action I take, no matter how violent, and how cruel is for the greater good of my people. And now… we have no one to guide us. Our purpose… that is what you have taken from me!"

"And if this continues, you won't have any people either!" Austin argued. "Look at the battle, Skarlack. We continue to fight, even if we may be bloodied and tired after all this. Our victory against the Reapers spurs us on. Does that not show you how wrong you are about us?!"

"No. It only shows that I have underestimated just how much of an annoyance you organics are and why the Reapers were not thorough enough in their cycles! Letting you live on Cronos station has been my greatest mistake." Said Skarlack. "After I'm done with you, I will wipe out every single organic creature in this universe until only my race, the superior race… is left!"

Skarlack then hit Austin with a telepathic push which knocked him back against some rubble.

"I'm going to make them suffer, Shepard. These friends and family you have adopted. I will take them from you one by one." Said Skarlack.

"You're a monster, Skarlack. And I'm gonna stop you." Austin groaned as he picked himself back up.

"Don't force me to prolong your suffering." Skarlack growled.

"I will do what I must."

"You will try."

As Austin drew his sword again, Skarlack was quick to draw his staff too and almost immediately the Takaal General attacked first.

Previous times, Skarlack had attempted to toy with Austin hopes of leaving his opponent worn out and with nothing left before finishing him off, but not this time. Skarlack now realised that for the first time since he had become synthesis that he was vulnerable.

He attacked far more fiercely this time and put a lot more focus on his defence. One wrong attack or mistimed defence could essentially cost him his life if Excalibur made a critical hit.

Naturally of course it was the same for Austin. With Skarlack's increased aggression and rage, he was forced to employ every single trick he knew in sword fighting. It also seemed that when the Catalyst left him, it had somehow fixed most of the major damage that Harbinger had dealt. Previous areas of his holo display that had been lit up in red were now normal again. There was still plenty of dirt marks, paint chips, scratches and dents here and there, but overall he was still in perfect condition to fight.

Exchanges flashed, leaps were sideslipped or met with flying kicks; ankle sweeps skipped over and punches parried. The door to the roof of the building they were on fell in pieces and then they
outside, the view of the continued battle going on around them and the skies still filled with Helldiver, Alliance and Takaal fighters. Even the Normandy continued to fight.

A few dead Helldiver, husk and Takaal bodies littered the roof, and Skarlack attempted to use these to his advantage. Dead hands spasmed on triggers and gun fire shot in multiple directions at Austin. The Helldiver was only just able to block, dodge or ricochet a them. He was lucky enough to catch a few with his sword and shield and bounced them back at Skarlack; a desperate move. Anything to distract him; anything to slow him down.

Fortunately, some of them worked. Skarlack was unable to block all of them and few hit shots hit their target embedding themselves painfully in the General's synthetic flesh. As expected though, they only slowed him down a bit. They obviously didn't cause him quite as much pain as they would for anyone else. Skarlack simply grunted as each shot hit him and growled, letting what pain he did feel from the shots fuel his rage.

"I'm almost pleased that you survived, Shepard." He said, resuming his attack. "Long enough for me to kill you myself."

The two opponents then attacked at the same time and ended up in a blade lock.

"You might have been a proud worrier once, but now you're just a pawn to the Reapers, even if they are dead." Said Austin, pushing as hard as he could in an attempt to overwhelm Skarlack.

"I wield great, you fool!" said Skarlack, pushing their blades aside and attempting a sideswipe.

Austin just managed to duck under it and used his shield to smack Skarlack in the face, sending the Takaal back as his clawed feet skidded, digging into the metal for grip.

"Even if you do somehow win today, in the end that power will only consume you."

Austin resumed the attack, but side stepped his attack. Right as the Takaal tried to attack from behind though, Austin kicked in his thrusters and was able to jump up onto a higher platform.

As Skarlack leapt up, Austin was able to do a rolling attack and swept his shield arm at Skarlack's legs.

Unprepared for this, the swipe caught the Takaal's legs, tripping him up and causing him to lose grip of his staff.

As Austin tried to attack however, the Takaal's left hand grabbed his blade arm, and the other hand almost immediately wrapped around his neck.

This was probably the only part of a Helldiver that was baldly vulnerable. As Shadow had once discovered many years ago, with enough tightness and force it was possible to choke a Helldiver.

Skarlack of course had almost vice like grip and he didn't hesitate and trying to crush Austin's throat. The best the Helldiver could do was try to pry Skarlack's hand of his neck, but the Takaal's strength rivalled his own. He was forced to desperately try and think of something as Skarlack forced the Helldiver onto his back, his grip continuing to tighten. Austin began to feel his vision go blurry as he was unable to breath at all. He feared he was indeed going to choke to death.

Mirage struck so hard and fast that Liara struggled to keep up. It was times like these that she really wished Austin was here. Mirage of course knew this and was taking advantage of the Asari's struggles.
Dealing with the two blades was hard enough, with the two spinning tonfas added to it, it was a miracle Liara hadn't been scarred at all. Liara began to understand how her husband felt whenever he fought Skarlack like this.

Mirage managed to force Liara against the wall and pinned her there in a blade lock. It was all Liara could do to use her biotics to push back, only for the female Takaal's strength to compensate.

"Your precious husband isn't here to save you this time, Liara. And nor will mine accidently get in the way. This time, I will have my meal." The Takaal snarled.

"If you think I'm afraid of you, you're wrong." Said Liara, struggling not to let any of Mirage's blades out of her sight in case they tried a sneak attack.

"You should be." Said Mirage tauntingly. "And at this rate, you're going to lose. I have had enough time to study your techniques and find weaknesses in them. You on the other hand continue to use your old ways. Nothing but a pathetic pureblood Asari."

This however was suddenly met with a hard head-butt from Liara's helmet. So hard in fact, it smashed off the left half of the metal Ram skull on Mirage's helmet and forced her back.

"I'm one quarter Krogan, and that's a little something new!" said Liara, pressing the attack.

Mirage was now furious that Liara had done that. She had broken off one of her favourite armour decorations and she had a feeling the Asari had cracked the under helmet as well. Also she now had an unbelievably painful headache and was still in a bit of a daze. She was now reconsidering giving Liara quick death.

"I had planned to spare you the torture of eating you alive. Now I've changed my mind!" she growled.

Skarlack's grip was so tight now that Austin feared the bones would be crushed any second. As if it was a last desperate instinct, he swung his foot up from behind and kicked Skarlack. To the Helldiver's utter relief, it worked. Skarlack flew off him and the grip finally rescinded.

Austin coughed for a minute before finally taking several deep breaths as his vision cleared and he finally felt the air form his suit pour back into his lungs.

The two opponents quickly rolled back onto their feet and faced each other. Before Austin could attack, Skarlack made the first move. He delivered a swift punch that knocked Austin to the ground. In the process, the Helldiver lost grip of his word.

Now it seemed this had turned into a hand to hand fight. As Skarlack stood over Austin, ready to deliver another blow though, the Helldiver quickly reacted and swung his legs. Once again, this tripped Skarlack up and he landed flat on his back with a loud crash.

Austin didn't waste any time and quickly got back up onto his feet. Using his suit's ability to summon pieces of itself together, he summoned his sword back into his hand and brought it down just as Skarlack had had the same idea and used his telekinesis to summon his staff back into his hand.

Both blades clashed as Austin pressed down on Skarlack.

Mirage was growing worried now. SO far it had been several minutes now and her left eye still hadn't recovered. She was beginning to fear that Liara's earlier head-butt might have damaged it or
something. As if she wasn't already mad at the Asari for cutting her arm off back on Rannoch.

To make things worse, the Asari seemed to getting better at using two swords. She was much faster than earlier, more coordinated and she was growing bolder with her attack. She even used her biotics more often to either speed up her attacks or dodge Mirage's.

An accidentally mistimed attack from the Asari however allowed Mirage an opening and it was now her pressing the attack.

Both Austin and Skarlack stood their ground like two fencers as they continued to strike at one another. Both their blades seemed to spin in all directions before finally coming together in another blade lock. This only lasted a few seconds though before Skarlack disengaged and thrust his hand forward, attempting to attack with another telekinetic push.

Austin almost instantly put up both arms defensively and stood his ground in an attempt to block this attack. Skarlack could tell this seemed to be working for now and concentrated harder. As he did however, he began to feel of force of Austin's resistance pushing the attack back at him. Eventually it became too much and the both of them were sent flying in separate directions.

The second Skarlack landed however, he almost immediately got back up and flung himself right at Austin. The Helldiver just in time managed to bring up his sword and shield as Skarlack jumped on top of him and brought his staff down.

With both his means of attack pinned, Austin resorted to the only other attack he had available. His shoulder plasma cannon quickly activated and aimed right at Skarlack. Before the Takaal General could react in time it fired, sending him flying even further than before until he landed on the balcony of another building entirely.

As the Takaal recovered, his opponent soon landed on the same balcony. Spurred on by his rage, Skarlack pressed the attack again. This time Austin gave ground, retreating along the narrow balcony high above the rest of the Arkane City. He continued to let Skarlack drive him back until he spotted an opening to exploit. Skarlack forced him back and back, slamming both blade ends of his staff down with strength that seemed to flow from the anger of his whole army.

Skarlack then managed his own opening and suddenly kicked Austin hard in the face, causing him to stumble back even further. With a small motion of his hand, Skarlack then began to manipulate some of the balcony's metal.

The metal railings suddenly started to move as though they had suddenly come alive and tried to wrap around Austin. At the same time, Skarlack threw even more small metal pieces at the Helldiver with his powers using the full heat of his fury.

Austin just managed to cut up all the pieces Skarlack threw at him just as the railings tried to wrap around him. As one particular long one looked like it was gonna touch him, Excalibur carved right through it. Abandoning his tactic, Skarlack once again resumed his attacks until he had pushed Austin even further back. Another kick knocked the Helldiver right to the very edge of the balcony. Austin hadn't intended for Skarlack to force him back this far and resorted to try and change that.

The Helldiver once again activated his plasma cannon, but this time Skarlack was ready for it and he teleported just as it fired.

Austin looked around trying to see where Skarlack had gone. He then spotted the Takaal on top of the building they had just been on. Now that he had the high ground, Skarlack definitely had the
advantage.

Using his telekinesis, he began to pull away huge pieces of debris from the slightly destroyed building until they simply hovered in mid-air. Austin could already see where this was going and readied to activate his thrusters.

Sure enough, Skarlack threw one of the large pieces right at Austin. The Helldiver almost immediately shot up into the air to avoid the massive piece as it smashed into the building.

More and more followed as Skarlack attempted to swat him out of the sky before a very small bit that broke of one of the bigger pieces of debris accidently hit Austin, causing him to spin and land on another roof.

Austin finally decided he'd had enough of this. As Skarlack threw another piece at him, this time he didn't dodge. Instead, he grabbed it.

Skarlack thought that had hit its target and he couldn't help but laugh evilly. As he did however, he failed to notice Austin slowly hovering in the air as he spun faster and faster with the large piece of debris still in his hands. Finally after almost reaching blurring speeds, he let go and let the debris piece fly right at Skarlack.

The Takaal General only just noticed this in time and quickly teleported just as the debris smashed into the building.

Landing back on the roof of another building, Skarlack looked around to try and find Austin. It was only as the Helldiver suddenly flew up onto the same roof did he now see his enemy.

Almost immediately, Skarlack threw a concentrated bolt of green lighting right at Austin. The Helldiver almost immediately threw up his sword, allowing up to absorb the lightning. He had no fear of the lightning being conducted into him, Kartalrium didn't conduct electricity.

Skarlack continued to concentrate the lightning while at the same time advancing on Austin as he continued to block it. In doing so, he eventually forced the Helldiver to his knees. Austin already felt as though he was going to be overwhelmed.

Skarlack could already sense the Helldiver struggling. He smiled evilly knowing now that he had already won.

But then Austin looked back up, a new look of confidence and determination on his face under his helmet. He slowly got back up and started to push against Skarlack, returning the lightning to it's source. The act of doing this caused it to overload, blowing the two apart.

As Austin fell, he ended up landing on a steep sloped part of the building. As a result of said steep slope, he was unable to get any proper footing as he kept sliding down, he could see a simply massive drop ahead. He tried to fire his thruster up again, but for whatever reason, they weren't responding. Also, the drop was far too high for even a Helldiver to survive. His armour would crush him inside.

In desperation, he tried to grab onto something, but the slope was completely flat. As he felt his feet fall of the edge, Austin made one final desperate attempt and plunged his sword right in Just at the very last minute it stuck in and Austin felt himself come to painful halt just as he was about to fall over.

It was times like these he was glad he wore this suit. If he hadn't, that move would've damn well pulled his arm out of its socket.
Using all his strength, Austin pulled himself up until he could stand up enough. In all the adrenaline of the moment, he'd forgotten he had mag boots, so he made sure to use them this time. As he pulled Excalibur out of the metal, he couldn't help but gaze down at the long drop he'd just been hanging over a second ago.

"That is a long way down." He thought to himself.

His thoughts were then suddenly interrupted by the sound of omni blades activating behind him. He turned to see Skarlack standing at the top of the slope with all four of his omni blades activated.

Just as Austin readied for the attack, Skarlack almost instantly slid down the slope and into him. Having not expected such a fast move, Austin was caught off guard and Skarlack tackled him over the edge. As they fell, Austin tried to desperately to once get his thrusters to activate. After several tense and unsuccessful attempts, finally relief.

Both thrusters fired into life and their quickly angled them so that rather than falling downwards, they now slowly began to change angle until they were now no longer falling down and instead heading more for the two armies still fighting.

The biotics had mostly stuck together while fighting the Takaal. Jack, her students, Samara, Miranda and any others were all fighting side by side as they took out soldier after soldier.

Austin and Skarlack suddenly landing right in the middle of them took them by surprise, and they temporarily back away. Soon as Skarlack kicked Austin off him however, as if on instinct they reacted.

Each one of them threw up a biotic field around Skarlack, holding him down while Austin slowly got back up.

"Good job. Keep him down." He said.

Every single biotic concentrated with all their might to maintain the field, but Austin could tell they were struggling against Skarlack's strength and the fact he was resisting. Even Samara was struggling to keep him down. One of Jack's nostrils was even bleeding due to the sheer concentration.

Soon Skarlack had managed to push himself onto his knees. It was frightening to see him just managing to resist the combined strength of more than 4 biotics, more alone actually resist their containment of him.

"I will not be contained! Not by you, not by anyone!" he yelled.

The General then unleashed a massive synthetic repulse that overloaded all the biotic's attempts to contain him and throwing them all back. Rather than go after them though, he resumed his attack on Austin, locking blades with him again.

The blade clash was only short before Skarlack hit Austin with another push, this time harder and it sent him flying right into the ruins of a building.

As Austin was forced to wait for his vision to unblur, Skarlack suddenly leapt into the building as well. The Takaal could see how structurally weak this building was, and it gave him an idea.

Charging up the lightning in his staff, he fired a concentrated beam that carved through practically everything it touched and soon the whole building started to crumble and fall apart. Skarlack jumped out first, hoping the collapse would crush Austin. The Helldiver meanwhile was quick to reactivate his thrusters and speed fly out as fast he could, landing in the abandoned streets. Within barely a few days.
seconds, Skarlack landed in front of him.

"There's only one way this ends, Shepard. Either you die, or I do!"

Skarlack thrust forward again and Austin parried. As this happened however, Skarlack hit him with another telekinetic push which sent him flying all the way into a construction site.

As he smashed rather painfully through all the metal, he saw Skarlack standing over him.

"I was bred to be a warrior, Shepard. Trained my entire life to master my senses." He said. "Where did you train?! Here? On this pathetic pile of rock?!"

Austin gave another burst from his thrusters. Rather than lunge at Skarlack however, instead he simply flew up into the sky where Skarlack could not reach him.

"Don't pursue this further, Skarlack. I have the higher ground here, you don't." he said.

"You think you're the only one who can possess the power of flight?" said Skarlack.

The Takaal General then summoned several small pieces to him which seemed to attach themselves to his body. Using his telekinesis, he began to move these pieces which in turn moved his body. Essentially, he now could fly as well.

"Now… shall we continue?" he said, now the equal altitude of Austin.

"Have it your way."

Without a floor on their feet, the rules of this fight change a great deal now. Although he blocked Skarlack's attacks, the force of the Takaal's strength was enough to send him spinning back, forcing him to use his thrusters.

When he managed to right himself, he'd lost sight of Skarlack and looked around for the Takaal General. He soon spotted him. Skarlack came at Austin with charging speed, knocking him right into the ruins of another building.

Austin was quick to recover from this, but Skarlack was also quick to reengage.

The two seemed to fly all over the place as they exchanged various different blows before finally coming together again.

"Oh. Where'd you find this strength?" Skarlack taunted.

"I'm not about to tell you." Austin replied.

The Helldiver then suddenly pushed Skarlack back so hard it sent him right through the wall and through the other end of the building itself.

Austin followed, but was forced to quickly fly to another building when Skarlack suddenly threw another massive piece of debris at him.

"I've thought of a wonderful present for you…" said Skarlack as he and Austin continued to fight as they advanced up the building. "…shall I give you despair?"

He then knocked Austin back causing him to spin a few times before finally managing to stabilize himself.
"On your knees. I want you to beg for forgiveness." Said Skarlack as he gazed down at the Helldiver. Using his telekinesis again he then practically pulled the whole several top floors of the building and let them fall in Austin's direction.

The Helldiver took a deep breath. This was going to be a tough one. He'd have to be fast and precise with the cuts he made, otherwise he'd risk the debris knocking him out of the sky, and possible even crushing him.

With several careful bursts from his thrusters he was able to make the right spins and cuts that severed the large pieces of debris into many smaller ones. Soon Skarlack reengaged, cutting through another piece and reengaging with Austin.

The two clashed back and forth throughout the falling wreckage, each clash of blades sending bright sparks all over the place before Austin finally could tell they were getting too low and disengaged, flying right to the very top of the building.

The moment Austin landed, he fell to his knees and took several deep breaths. He felt almost out of breath. Compared to the first time he'd fought Skarlack, this was way more intense. With tiredness and exhaustion starting to get to him this made him worried. Skarlack, being synthetic and lacking lungs likely wouldn't die at all. He'd just keep on fighting until he either won or lost, or rather died.

Right as Austin started getting back up, Skarlack almost instantly leapt up onto the roof as well and resumed his attack. Austin just narrowly rolled out of the way to avoid his blade and quickly threw up his own to block the next attack. As Skarlack locked blades with him, the Takaal suddenly pushed their lock down delivered and elbow strike to Austin's face, knocking him back hard.

As the Helldiver rolled back onto his feet, Skarlack attacked again, completely unrelenting until he overloaded Austin's defence and hit him with a telekinetic push sending him flying into a large pile of rubble.

Confident that he had finally bested his opponent, Skarlack began charging up the lighting in his staff, ready to finish the Helldiver off. As soon as he was about to fire however, Austin suddenly burst out of the rubble and flew right at him. Caught completely off guard and unable to react in time, Skarlack accidently let the lighting fly as Austin smashed right into him as the blade of his staff was pressed against him.

As he crashed into the Takaal, Austin felt himself become surrounded by a bright green aura. He felt peculiar, almost as if every single molecule in his body had suddenly been squeezed through a very tight space. He had to suppress the urge to throw up in his helmet as this happened.

Then suddenly it stopped and everything returned to normal. As he supposedly tackled Skarlack to the floor, the Takaal kicked him off.

It was as they both righted themselves however that they noticed the floor was different. It wasn't concrete, it was metal. The two opponents looked around. Now Austin realised why he'd felt strange when he tackled Skarlack. They weren't on top of the building anymore. Hell, they weren't even on Arkadia anymore. They were in space, and on the hull of an Alliance cruiser.

All around, the massive space battle was still going on. The hundreds of dead corpses of the Reapers lay motionless as they floated around while the entire resistance and Helldiver fleet continued to fight what remained of the Takaal fleet. They looked like they were winning, but the Devastator was taking down any ship it came across.

Hardly surprising that the Takaal flagship was as powerful as a Reaper. It even had the unique fusion
of a Takaal connected directly to the ship and in turn also had its mind merged with the ship's AI. A good comparison was project Overlord, except this one was successful.

Austin noticed how Skarlack seemed to be smiling as he saw his ship was still fighting. It even looked as though he was communicating with the crew telepathically. Austin's suspicions were soon confirmed as the massive Takaal vessel altered course and now headed right at the Alliance cruiser they were on, all of it's starboard cannons and weapons readying to fire.

"Are you insane?! You'll kill yourself too!" said Austin.

"I cannot die!" said Skarlack, his voice surprisingly hearable in the vacuum of space. "Only the Catalyst can kill me, and I'll kill you before that even happens."

"Prepare for attack!" Austin overheard from the ship's comm. He recognized the voice.

Kahlee Sanders was on board this ship.

As the two dreadnoughts crossed paths, they began to open fire on each other, blowing even more holes in their hulls. At the same time, Austin and Skarlack resumed their fight. The lack of gravity did make their movements slower and they also had to take precautions to stay on the ship. Skarlack had to use his clawed feet to grip onto the surface, and Austin activated his mag boots.

The fight continued between Mirage and Liara. The Asari was unfortunately starting to tire as well and Mirage was using this to her advantage.

As Liara attempted a lunge, Mirage failed to perform the correct parry and the Asari ended up disarming her of all four of her blades. As Liara attempted a killing blow however, Mirage suddenly hit Liara with a biotic push which knocked both swords out of her hands.

The female Takaal then grabbed Liara by the throat while her two smaller arms pinned Liara's own arms. He other main arm meanwhile latched onto the back of Liara's helmet. The Asari began to hear a loud creaking and cracking.

To her shock, Mirage literally tore her helmet right of with her bare hand, exposing her face directly. Now both female opponents stared at each other face to face. Liara could now truly see the hunger in Mirage's eyes, and it scared her. This monster was going to eat her alive and she was now powerless to do anything.

"Be happy in the knowledge that I shall weep over your dead body." Mirage smiled evilly, baring her blood stained fangs and giving Liara's cheek a long and disgusting lick, shuddering in pleasure at the taste.

She slowly opened her mouth wide and with her free hand grabbed Liara's head and forced it to the side so that her neck was directly exposed.

"I can feel fresh blood rushing through your veins." Mirage sighed in pleasure as she gently moved in for her first bite.

Liara shut her eyes, bracing as best she could. Never before had she felt this helpless, especially after what happened last night.

Mirage hesitated for a small moment as she sniffed Liara. She then gave an even more evil smile.

"Seems I'll have desert as well." She said.
Right before the Takaal's teeth could touch Liara's neck however, a biotic field suddenly hit her so hard in knocked her back against the wall.

Liara fell to the floor, free of Mirage's grasp. She took a moment to get her breath back before she suddenly saw who had saved her.

Mirage snarled as she looked around for the person who had dare to interrupt her victory feast. An Asari Matriarch stood between her and Liara. She wore a black combat dress topped off with yellow armour parts.

"Not my daughter, you bitch!" said Benezia.

Mirage was unable to resist and evil laugh. This Asari dared to think she had a chance.

Her laughter however was interrupted when Benezia threw a biotic warp at her, which she only just blocked. Furious by this, Mirage attacked back with several of her own biotic which Benezia blocked. Benezia then attacked again and this time pressed the attack.

Liara was still feeling dizzy and weak from before, so there was little she could do to help her mother. Still… she was alive, that had to count for something.

As the gunfire from the Devastator and the Alliance dreadnought continued, Takaal forces started to jump ship and began attacking the Alliance's hull. In retaliation, several Alliance soldiers had headed out onto the hull to fight them. Pretty soon the whole Dreadnought became a mini battlefield with Austin and Skarlack fighting right in the middle.

Kahlee it seemed had also come out to fight and was attempting to fight her way through to try and help Austin.

A sudden hit from Skarlack knocked Austin back, causing him to knock into Kahlee which in turn knocked her to the side. At the same time, Excalibur fell from Austin's hand, embedding itself in the hull.

Skarlack picked up a large particle cannon from one of his dead soldiers and aimed it at Austin.

"This ought to do the job." He said.

"Even if you destroy me, Skarlack, others will rise to defeat your tyranny." Said Austin.

"Then I'll just have to destroy you all!"

Skarlack fired. To Austin's surprise, as the shot came straight at him, Kahlee suddenly disengaged her mag boots and threw herself between him and the shot. The energy shot hit her right in the chest and caused her to fly into Austin.

"Kahlee!" Austin yelled, holding the now badly wounded Alliance Lieutenant in his arms.

"What a pathetic waste of life!" said Skarlack, carelessly tossing the now empty weapon from his hands.

As Austin held Kahlee in his arms, he suddenly felt a new surge of anger and determination flow throw him. A new realization also came to him, something he wished he'd realised sooner. He gently put Kahlee down and looked back at Skarlack.

"After all this time of conflict, I finally see the truth of your words, Skarlack." He said.
"And what might that be, Shepard?" Skarlack asked as he raised his staff.

Before he could even consider striking however, Austin suddenly grabbed his arm, catching him off guard.

"This universe, no matter how vast, will never be big enough for you and I to co-exist!"

A swift punch to the face sent Skarlack flying. As he landed, Austin attacked again having reacquired Excalibur. The Takaal General rolled to the side to avoid the Helldiver's attack and rolled back onto his feet.

The two opponents readied to resume their fight. One way or another, it would end now.

"Let's finish this!" said Austin.

"No one can stop me!" Skarlack yelled as they clashed again.

"You call yourself a Helldiver? You were just a boy when they found you, and you will be dust when I'm through with you!" Skarlack taunted as they fought back and forth between the attacking armies, occasionally moving to dodge incoming fire from the Devastator as it impacted on the hull.

"You're gonna talk, or fight, Skarlack." Austin replied.

The two once again came together in a blade lock and tried to push against each other. Skarlack though overloaded Austin's defence and delivered swift punch to the face. He then disarmed Austin with a sudden slice, then a kick to the stomach and finally tackled him to the floor.

Several more punches to face followed

"Ha! You're as soft as the weaklings you fight for!" said Skarlack.

The next punch however didn't meet its target. As Austin blocked it with his shield and pushed it aside. He then grabbed Skarlack by the shoulders and head-butted the Takaal so hard he felt his helmet vibrate with a loud clang as Skarlack fell off him.

"On the contrary, my friends are the source of my strength." Said Austin.

The two opponents picked up their weapons and continued their fighting. The Alliance dreadnought wasn't holding very well now. The Devastator's fire was essentially tearing it apart all around them.

Austin then did aide attack so strong it knocked Skarlack's' staff from his hand. This was then followed by a hard punch from the shield before Austin tackled Skarlack against the nearest structure sticking out of the dreadnought.

Several more swift punches from Austin followed along with the Helldiver smashing him against the wall several times before finally throwing him to the floor. He unsheathed his sword again and plunged Excalibur into one of Skarlack's arms, pinning the Takaal to the ground. Austin smashed Skarlack's head against he hard metal of the dreadnought several times before pulling his sword out again and raising it for the final blow.

"This ends now." He said.

"This ends when I say it ends!" Skarlack yelled as he knocked Austin back and summoned his staff back into his hand.

The Takaal thrust, but Austin parried the attack. The Helldiver then wove around Skarlack using a
complex move. In the process, he snatched the General's' staff out of his hands. As the two turned to face each other again, Austin thrust forward, impaling Skarlack on his own weapon.

Unfortunately, that was not enough to kill him. The Takaal simply growled and pulled Austin into a punch, leaving the Helldiver momentarily dazed. Skarlack punched two more times before hitting him with a telekinetic push.

As the Helldiver once again got back up, Skarlack pulled his staff out of his body.

"Why won't you die?" he roared.

"It'll take more than you've got, Skarlack!" said Austin.

All the while, Kahlee had observed the whole fight. Seeing that the Devastator was decimating the ship and Austin still wasn't any closer to killing Skarlack, she knew there was only one other option. True she risked killing Austin, but she had confidence the soldier would sense the danger and get to safety.

Struggling against her injury as she felt herself beginning to die, she activated her omni tool and used it to arm the ship's self-destruct.

"Forgive me… David." She coughed.

An explosion rom behind caused Skarlack to lose balance and he stumbled toward Austin. The Helldiver seized the quick opening and swung upwards, his blade cutting across Skarlack's chest and knocking him to the ground. As the Takaal held the now gaping wound in his front Austin now stood over him.

Just as Austin brought his blade down however the whole ship shook with explosions. Austin lost his balance and stumbled before Excalibur could touch Skarlack's skin. Almost immediately, the two could sense the ship was blowing itself up.

Skarlack moved first and teleported to the hull of the Devastator. Austin meanwhile kicked in his thrusters and sped to the same hull, avoiding incoming fire from the Devastator's guns as best he could until he landed in front of Skarlack.

"The only way one of us dies, as at the ends of the other." He said.

"Then I hope you're ready to die again!" Said Skarlack.

Before the two could resume their attack however, the Alliance Dreadnought exploded. The explosion on the shockwave of the blast inflicted a huge amount of damage on the devastator and the shockwave knocked it far away from the fight. Soon the crew lost complete control and the Devastator started to fall into Arkadia's atmosphere.

"Not again." Austin cursed.

This time though he was not going to let himself burn up on re-entry. As he and Skarlack clashed again, he forced the General against part of the hull which was mostly covered and would provide some protection from the burning. As he pinned Skarlack, he made sure the General couldn't push him off.

"Lockdown!" he yelled.
The familiar white shield surrounded his suit and he froze.

Unable to move or teleport without taking the Helldiver with him, Skarlack was forced to stay there. As his own flagship began to break apart as they re-entered Arkadia's atmosphere, he could already feel the hot fires burning at his skin. He had to concentrate overtime on healing.

Many soldiers couldn't help but notice the fiery remains of the Devastator as they fell from orbit like meteorites. They missed the city and the army by miles and impacted only a mile or so away.

The crash shook Austin up a lot. He felt himself roll around several times before finally stopping. Confident that it was safe finally, he disengaged the lockdown. All around him was the burned and melted remains of the Devastator. As the smoke cleared he then spotted Skarlack. The Takaal General's helmet had become dislodged from his body and he had deep buns in many places. Austin almost felt sorry for the General.

The two simply stared at each other for a while before Skarlack quickly crawled to his staff and then fired a concentrated synthesis beam at him. The Helldiver only just threw up his shield. He cursed himself for doing that though. If he'd used his sword instead, he could've slowly forced the attack back at its source and finally poured the Catalyst energy in Excalibur into Skarlack.

This way however would be his undoing. Skarlack wasn't letting up at all and the shield could only take this much punishment for so long. Yet there was little Austin could do. If he tried to switch the beam to the sword he risked it hitting him. He could only hope and pray for something to happen…

Benezia's power level was beginning to fall. Mirage was much stronger than she had thought and so far the Takaal was showing no sign of tiring. Soon Mirage overloaded her biotic barrier and had her pinned to some rubble by the neck. She summoned one of her swords back to her hand and raised it for the final strike.

"Must be my lucky day. You and your daughter will be a meal I will treasure for decades."

Benezia was not afraid. In fact, she was simply waiting. In all the excitement of the fight, Mirage had forgotten about Liara.

As she had counted on, her daughter simply jumped from behind and swung her sword at Mirage. The Takaal reacted too late and the sword carved through first her arm… and then her neck.

The Takaal gave a cry of pain as her arm was severed again. The scream barely lasted a second however before it stopped. Then her head slowly fell from her body and landed on the floor. The Takaal's now lifeless body soon followed and fell to the floor with a clang.

Skarlack was suddenly hit by a huge amount of emotional pain. His concentration on the beam failed as he felt the pain of loss. His wife was dead, there was no denying that.

For the first time in 65 million years, Skarlack felt emotions he'd supposedly forgotten. Not to mention he felt essentially heartbroken.

Austin knew all too well what had happened. He had seen this sort of thing before, when he linked minds with Liara and had shared her emotions. He knew all too well what she had felt when he died four years ago.
Fuelled by the rage and pain he now felt, Skarlack fired another beam at Austin. This time the Helldiver did not repeat his mistake. As the beam launched at him, he brought his blade up. As the beam hit the blade, he could already see a small gold beam mix with the green synthesis energy. It then slowly began to push back against Skarlack.

Taken by surprise, Skarlack was unprepared for the gold beam to shoot at him and then go directly back into his staff. The weapon crashed all over and then essentially exploded.

Once again, the beam disappeared and Austin was left with the sight of Skarlack, on his knees, looking essentially helpless. Then it began to happen. Very slowly, his structure began to fall apart. Just as synthesis had been created, Skarlack was now essentially being disintegrated into nothing but small green particles.

Austin slowly stood up and raised his sword in salute.

"May you find the peace you did not find in life." He said.

Skarlack could only roar in desperation until finally the last of him disintegrated into thin air. Thousands of small green lights of energy floated everywhere and around Austin. It was a welcome sight for the Helldiver. After all this time, it was finally over.

It was not instantly a big celebration. That was to come later. For now, everyone was simply enjoying the peace.

It brought a smile to Austin's face as he saw everyone chatting and drinking together.

With the death of Skarlack, the other synthetic Takaal had simply died. Unlike their leader though, their bodies were still intact.

Right now however, that didn't bother anyone. They had won. Against all the odds, they had not only defeated the Reapers, but the Takaal as well. They had succeed where thousands before had failed. After 5 million years, the Cycle of Extinction was finally over.

However, the battle against the Takaal had taken its toll also. Although there were more wounded than dead, many were serious.

Kraan had taken an explosive round to the face which had blown off an entire chunk of the left side of his face, and he had also lost his left arm. Being a Krogan however, it took more than that to kill him. Doctors were already treating him and Kraan himself had plans to replace the body parts he'd lost with cybernetics. Austin had been assured that Kraan would live.

EDI sadly hadn't been quite as lucky. Her body had been damage beyond repair and her head had shot off. For while she'd ceased functioning before Dell and Sill managed to get her fixed. Surprisingly, she was still able to function as her severed head, so at least they still had a face to talk to. Joker was at least happy she was still alright. Also, Dell and Sill had made a promise to EDI they would build her a brand new body.

As Austin walked through the many people who were chatting drinking, he spotted plenty of the couples.

Troy and Xun had shared their first kiss during the final battle and now seemed to be showing their true feelings for each other. Right now as they enjoyed some warm coffee they were talking about their future. Tory was even explaining how he faked his death many years and why.
Austin felt very happy for them. Troy deserved some happiness after previously losing the woman he loved, and Xun always seemed like the person who could do with a person like him. In his eyes, they made a good couple.

Jack and Keely were with the students that had survived and appeared to be having some friendly banter on how they literally tore the Reapers a new one. Jack even had her arm around Kelly who was simply resting her head on her love's shoulder.

Kasumi and Jacob appeared to be having discussions about possibly starting a family. Surprisingly, Kasumi seemed rather open about it. She'd be sad to give up being a thief, but a life with Jacob in her eyes was just as much fun.

Garrus simply had Tali in his arms and the two were cuddling rather romantically. Austin couldn't help but make a small joke to Garrus. "So, who has reach and who has flexibility?" This had caused both Garrus and Tali to burst out laughing.

Ventra and Leena weren't far off either. Rather than being intimate however they appeared to be just be enjoying the peace. Leena was making some repairs to Ventra's armour while the Turian chatted with the Primarch and even Shala.

Alaara and Sandra merciful were not doing anything erotic. Even they were behaving sensibly and simply enjoying the victory. They even appeared to be further discussing about having children. Sandra did seem a little unsure, having not had the ideal father herself, but Alaara seemed sure that her wife was nothing like him.

Sarah and Traynor meanwhile, well… they were just enjoying each others company as usual.

Traynor suddenly found her lips obstructed by Sarah's as she ran her fingers though her silky hair. Her strong arms wrapped around Traynor's waist as her lips moved passionately against hers, and Traynor let out a contented sigh as the two melted into the kiss. Sarah's tongue tenderly probed for entrance into Traynor's mouth, and she complied without hesitation, desperate to explore, to taste her and to feel the uncontrollable bliss that was love. Traynor's eyeballs rolled back in her head, her mind swimming in ecstasy from Sarah's actions.

Traynor gave a slight moan as Sarah pulled away from the kiss, but her arms stayed firmly in place around her neck. She could feel her warm body, smell her sweet scent, taste the lingering flavor of her lips, and it was heaven on earth.

Sarah looked Traynor in the eyes with a fire that she had never seen before. This love was a determined love, ready to break through any obstacle to exist, to endure and to bond two people by the strongest ties in the universe. Traynor was lost in her lover's caramel orbs for a short moment before the thunderbolt of realization struck her... and she suddenly knew what Sarah was about to say.

Traynor's heart skipped three beats inside her chest, and her breath caught in her lungs. Tears of surprise and joy rushed out of her eyes, and she covered her mouth in disbelief. This was really happening!

"Samantha, I promise to always care for you," Sarah said. "I promise to love you more than anyone ever has. I'll always fill your life with happiness and joy. I'll always be there for you when you need me. And above all else, I will never stop loving you, and you alone."

She drew the box out of her pocket and opened it, revealing a diamond ring. "I know without a shadow of a doubt that you're all I've ever wanted Samantha, you're everything I'll ever need. The
only time I'm complete is when you are with me, and I couldn't even imagine life without you. I love you Traynor. I love you so much, and I'll always love you."

Sarah looked into her eyes as Traynor's heart swelled with joy. "Samantha Traynor...will you marry me?"

Traynor never thought that there would be anyone who understood her like Sarah. She never thought she would fall in love the way she had, never imagined that anyone could care for her this much. But the certainty was impossible to break, she knew that she and Sarah were meant to be together. And if there was ever a perfect moment in her life, it was right then and there.

She was speechless from the shock, but she finally managed to answer the biggest question anyone would ever ask her.

"...yes."

Sarah's breath caught. It took every bit of courage she possessed to ask for Traynor's hand, but that one word made everything worth it. "Y-Yes?" she asked.

Traynor nodded eagerly, more tears of joy falling down her cheeks. "Yes Sarah!" she cried, her voice filled with love and happiness. Sarah gave a cry of joy and stood up, lifting Traynor up into a tight hug, spinning her around and around as the couple was lost in bliss, knowing that the greatest bond they could ever share had just been formed.

"Yes! Yes!" Traynor cried, wanting to shout it out to the entire world that Sarah Shepard was going to be her wife. "Yes Sarah, I want to marry you!" She leaned down in Sarah's arms and gave her a soft, tender kiss on the lips. "I want to be with you forever."

Sarah kissed her again and again, savouring the best night of her life. "I want to be with you too Samantha," she said. "Forever and ever."

Their lives had changed so much in the past three years, but they were both better and stronger because of it. They had both been changed for good, and they owed it to each other, to the love they would always share.

Traynor closed her eyes, enjoying the feeling of Sarah's fingers tingling her head. She looked up, gazing dreamily into her eyes. "Sarah...you made me the happiest woman in the world tonight. I love you so much...please don't ever leave me."

Sarah held her tightly and gave her a passionate kiss. Their lips moved against each other, filling them with warm and fulfilling bliss. There was no better feeling than that, no greater joy than being close to their other halves.

"I love you too Samantha. And I promise you, we will be together forever."

It was the greatest night of their lives, with many more days of happiness ahead.

Finally Austin spotted Liara. The Asari almost instantly ran up to him and hugged him so tightly he feared his armour may get dented. Almost instantly, the Helldiver retracted his helmet and kissed her. Benezia and Aethyta simply held hands and smiled. They couldn't have dreamed of a better future for their daughter.

Before the proper celebrations began, the Arkane Council had insisted on speaking. There were some things that needed to be sorted out now that the war was over. Not to mention there was a hero
to congratulate. Even the Citadel Council were here through holo's to witness this.

"The war is over. The Reapers and the Takaal have been defeated. Against all odds, and in the face of the greatest threat this galaxy has ever known, we survived. We suffered many losses, we have gained many scars, but we won." Said Spartan.

"Before us, stand the human without whom we would not be here now." Said Tarnack, indicating to Austin who stepped forward.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Hero of the Galaxy." Said Spartan, causing everyone to erupt into applause. Even the Citadel Council clapped.

When the applause finally died down, Spartan spoke again.

"However, there is a troubling matter we must attend to." He said.

"What?" Austin asked.

Just before the Reapers were destroyed, in one final act of defiance they attempted to destroy our mass relay. They failed, but they did damage it enough that it no longer functions. And we fear we cannot easily repair it." Spartan explained.

"You mean to tell me that after all this, we're cut off from the rest of the galaxy?!" Austin asked, almost refusing to believe what he was hearing.

"Not necessarily." Said Tarnack. "For a long time we have talked about trying to build our own mass relays. All galactic races have a thorough knowledge on how they work. That is why we are suggesting we build a new relay to replace the one we lost."

"How long do you expect this to take?" Councillor Tevos asked.

"If only my species did it, it would take us at least 2 months." Said Spartan. "However, if the other species were willing to help us, if we work together, there's a good chance we can have the relay up and running within a few weeks."

There were some murmurs among everyone else.

Austin cleared his throat and stepped forward. Perhaps his persuasiveness would help.

"This victory does not belong to one man, nor does it belong to one squad, but to all of us. Every man, women, child, and synthetic. Every civilization on every world." He said. "Now as we take our first steps towards restoring what we lost, we must remember what it took to win. This wasn't a victory by a single fleet, a single army, or even a single species. If this war has taught us anything, it is that we are at our strongest when we work together. And if we can put down our grievances long to stop something as powerful as the Reapers, imagine what we can achieve now that they are defeated. Yes, it will take time, but we can rebuild everything that was destroyed. Our homes, our worlds, our fleets and defences… all of this, and more. Together we can build a future greater than any one of us could imagine. A future paid for by the sacrifices of those who fought and died alongside us, a future that many will never see. If we work together, that relay can be up and running again in little under a month. And in little under five years we could damn well rebuild everything if we all work together. As the hero of the galaxy, that is all I ask of all you. I can ask no more than that, nor should I. And while we still have many challenges ahead of us… we can face them together."

This seemed to do the trick almost instantly and almost everyone in the Council chambers agreed.
"That is well said, Shepard. And I think we speak for all our races when we say that you speak not just for yourself, but for humanity and everyone else." Said Valern.

"That is why we would like to offer you this opportunity to join us. Your diplomatic skills and willingness to get the job done make you perfect for a seat on the Council." Said Tevos.

Austin was very surprised that the Council would ask him to join them. Unlike being a Spectre, this was not a job he hated. At the same time though it was not one he wanted.

"I appreciate the offer, Councillors, but I must decline. I'm no diplomat. Besides, I have a promise to keep." He said, casting a smile at Liara. He then addressed everyone. "I am announcing my retirement from the Helldivers in order to start a new life and also to start a family."

It may not have been what many people were expecting to hear, but they did still give Austin a supporting applause.

"If that is your choice, Shepard." Said Sparatus. The Citadel Council then turned to the Arkanes. "In the meantime, we have another offer to make. The Arkanes have shown time and time again that they deserve a seat on the Council. And this war has shown they've earned it."

"We've said it before though, Councillors. We will not join you if it means sacrificing our territory in the Terminus systems." Said Tarnack.

"That is why we have finally decided that we must no longer hide behind our fear of the Terminus Systems and must trust you. Should you accept, you may keep your territory." Said Tevos.

The Arkanes Council looked at each other before all of them nodded.

"On behalf of my people, Councillors, we humbly accept with our deepest gratitude." Said Spartan, lightly bowing his head. "Together we have triumphed over all odds. Let us together rebuild and forge a new era of peace."

Before the proper celebrations got underway, there was on more thing needed doing, and that was honouring the dead.

A large memorial wall had been put up and names were already being added to it.

X-5, James, Javik, Cortez, all those who died fighting in this war or before it.

Austin and Liara walked up with names in each other's arms. Austin had Anderson's name, and Liara had Kahlee's. The two put the names up on the wall next to each other, then re-joined the others in their moment of silence.

To offer some comfort, Austin held Liara's hand before the two hugged each other tightly. One thing they could take strength from though was that they had survived. They had each other, and they always would.

With the memorial service now over and the dead mourned, the more lively celebrations were already underway.

Austin however had taken early leave and for now was simply looking out over the view Arkadia offered. The Geth and a few other willing Arkanes had already begun work on the new relay which was being assembled not far outside the city.
As Austin took this time to think about the future, he suddenly noticed Liara walking up to him.

"Not at the celebrations?" she asked.

"I just wanted some time to myself." Said Austin, allowing Liara to hug him. "I used to come out here many nights and simply look up the stars when I was young. I'd always wonder where my squad and I would head next. What we might find out there."

"Where you serious back there? You really are retiring?" Liara asked.

"Yes. I've been a huge influence in the changing of the galaxy long enough. It's time I settled down and let everything make its own course." Said Austin. "Besides, I made a promise to you."

"It's almost strange to imagine you doing something other than being a leader."

Austin looked to see everyone else join him. Alpha, the rest of the Normandy crew and anyone else who'd survived.

"Gonna be hard imagining you being something other than Helldivers." Austin smiled.

"Are you sure about this though? I mean for some, this is very early on in their career. I mean, what'll you do with your life?" Jet asked.

"I don't know. I guess I'll just have to find out. Besides, I've got plenty of time." Said Austin.

"What do you mean?" Liara asked.

"Before the Catalyst left me, it gave em one final parting gift. Something I knew from the beginning," Austin explained. "It created a new link between me and you. Utilizing our bond in a brand new way. To put it best I can, I now age when you die, and I'll die when you do."

"You mean…?" Liara asked, almost lost for words.

"Yep." Austin smiled. "Not only can I spend my whole life with you, but now you can spend your whole life with me."

Liara pulled Austin into a kiss and hugged him again, electing an "Awww!" from everyone else.

"As if this couldn't get any better." Dash smiled.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that, Dash." Liara smiled.

The Asari then took Austin's arm and gently moved it down until he touched her stomach. Everyone, even Austin knew almost immediately what this meant. Several of the other couples gasped in surprise.

"OH MY GOD!" Alaara smiled.

"Are you serious right now?!" said Dash, his mouth hanging open so much it made Jet laugh.

"Liara… You're really…" Austin asked, almost unable to believe it himself.

"Yes. I'm pregnant." Liara smiled.

Austin almost immediately pulled Liara in to a much longer kiss causing everyone to cheer and clap. When they finally separated, everyone else walked up to them and offered their own congratulations.
"Family just got bigger." Sarah smiled as she hugged her sister in law.

"Congratulations… Austin. You're gonna be a dad." Traynor smiled.

"And unless my eyes deceive me, I'm soon going to have to start calling you sister in law." Austin smiled, noticing Samantha's ring.

Traynor simply blushed as Sarah planted a kiss on her cheek.

Everyone simply looked out over the city. The sun had just come out, casting a new light over everything.

"One big happy ending. Whoever would've believed it?" Griffin smiled.

"I knew it right from the start." Austin smiled. "Whatever the future may hold for us, we'll face it together, as a true family should."

No more needed to be said, but then Dash broke the silence.

"You know… something's just occurred to me." He said.

"What's that?" Jet asked.

"If this was a movie, or a story, it would say "THE END" right… about…”

**THE END**

"…Now!"

True enough, all the other races currently on Arkadia united together and pooled all their resources into the New Relay. Within just 5 weeks it was fully completed and tested. The fleets all returned to their homes and began assisting in the long rebuilding.

**The Arkanes**

Now with a seat on the Council, the Arkanes were quick to assist with much of the rebuilding. The other races had come to their aid, it was the least they could do to return the favour. Councillor Spartan was originally considered for the position, but eventually Tarnack was picked, with Spartan's support. She did an admirable job of representing the Arkanes and ensuring they had a larger role in shaping interstellar policy.

**The Takaal & The Leviathans**

With their synthetic brethren gone and the Reapers destroyed, the Takaal and the Leviathans had no more reason to hide. The galactic community was hesitate at first about accepting them, but Shepard vouching for them as well as Meeralack's willingness to cooperate with them and share intel and knowledge soon put those doubts to rest. All the Takaal wished was a new world to claim as their own and establish a proper civilization. The Arkanes allowed them to stay on their homeworld until then. Some years later, the finally found a world perfect for them that the Council allowed them to have. They established a colony there which soon grew into an empire. Within five years, they had already acquired new territory in the Terminus Systems. 5 years later they were soon invited to join the Council. Meeralack appointed her most trusted advisor to the position while she remained Queen.
The Asari

Though it was true the Asari had not known about the Prothean Beacon on Thessia, they had no hesitation in sharing it's knowledge and secrets. Thessia took longer than most to rebuild the damage from the war, but the help of other species was welcome. Benezia also returned to try better influence the Matriarchs, she even made them listen properly to Aethyta. Surprisingly, she was successful. Things changed for the better over many years for the Asari.

The Turians

Under the leadership of Primarch Victus, the Turians continued to serve their part in the galactic community. They also worked to better improve their alliance with the Krogan. Victus and Wrex reached many friendly agreements that benefited both races. Victus himself even admitted that he took back what he used to think about the Krogan after seeing the way Wrex handled everything with his people.

The Krogan

With the Genophage cured, the Krogan numbers soon began to flourish. Though there were indeed some who wanted revenge for the Genophage, Wrex was able to keep them in lien and under control. Bakara also became a huge contribution to guiding the Krogan into a brand new age. With help from the Arkanes and also the Salarians after the Dalatrass was removed from office, Tuchanka soon began to recover quicker than it normally would have without their assistance. Wrex also successfully negotiated for much of the old territory to be returned. Many of the other species could no longer deny that they had been wrong about the Krogan, especially after seeing this new change in them.

The Salarians

Shepard never forgave the Daltrass for attempting to have him sabotage the cure and for her continued racism against the Krogan. Proof of her attempted deal was leaked to the Council and eventually Councillor Valern had her removed from office. A new Dalatrass was appointed who was not blinded by old wounds. The Salarians helped assist the Arkanes in reviving Tuchanka and also lent their scientific knowledge to the rebuilding of others. They also ceased any illegal and secret studies after it became wildly known they'd held female Krogan in their labs.

The Batarians

The Batarians suffered the most losses from the war to the point where their race was close to endangered. Though the Arkanes and the Helldivers remained vigilant, they provided assistance to the Batarians. With Balak dead, there were few leaders left who dared try and continue rivalry with humanity and the Helldivers. As a show of gratitude, they banned all slavery. Though that didn't stop some slavery groups from trying to continue it, the Helldivers sought to them with extreme prejudice. Some decades alter they eventually reopened their embassy on the Citadel after negotiations were made with the Alliance to return some of their territory. The Arkanes also forced the Council to treat them more fairly this time if ever they had concerns rather than ignoring them.

The Quarians & The Geth

Returning to Rannoch, the Quarians began their long awaited re-colonization of Rannoch. With continued help from the Geth, they were able to re-adapt to their home much sooner than expected. Within only 5 years, the Quarians no longer need to wear their masks. The Geth also provided much of their assistance on the rebuilding of other homeworlds in addition to assisting the Quarians.
The Rachni

The Queen and her drones continued to remain on Arkadia for a few more years before finally deciding that they should find a new home for themselves. The Arkanes established a set of rules for the Rachni's territory so that they would remain undisturbed by the Citadel Council and other races. Latara also had a child with the Queen. The first ever Asari to be part Rachni.

Aria & Omega

Although the Helldivers now had control over the Terminus systems, Omega was allowed some acceptations, partly because of Aria's contribution to the war but also because of the deal she'd made with them many years ago. She and Elraa soon became lovers and ruled Omega together. Some of Omega's conditions did improve for many people as Aria sought to improve upon everything so that it would get taken from her again. She also welcomed the Helldivers there as her way of gratitude towards Shepard for helping her retake her home.

The Reapers & The Synthetic Takaal

No one dared approach the corpses of the Reapers in fear that their indoctrination may still work. The Organic Takaal and the Leviathans however soon confirmed that the Reapers were truly dead and that their indoctrination no longer worked. Much technology and new information as salvaged. After that, the Takaal and the Leviathans sought to disposing of the Reapers. The dead bodies of the synthetic Takaal meanwhile were taken in for study to better determine of the synthesis could possibly be replicated to create new forms of machines. The Arkanes and the organic Takaal made sure that steps were taken to insure nothing went wrong. The last thing they wanted was for history to repeat itself.

The Alliance

The Alliance were honoured heavily for their part in the war. The Citadel Council also knew now that humans did not deserve to be treated any differently from other races. Shepard's heroism also served a constant reminder of what humanity was capable of.

Cerberus & Hellspawn

Any last small remnants of Cerberus were hunted down by the Helldivers. All that is left of the organization is what is in recorded history. They were forever seen by others as a terrorist group that cared about nothing but their own selfish reasons. Any attempts to replicate them are banned and are flagged with a death stance from Helldivers if ever this law is violated. The same goes for Hellspawn. The Commander also was continuously used as an example of why Helldivers need to use their power responsibly and of how dangerous they can become if they let that power corrupt them.

The Helldivers

With the war over and the Batarian slavery abolished, the Helldivers worked on better establishing order and peace in the galaxy. With the Terminus systems in disarray, the Helldivers used this to establish further control. This move was originally met with mixed opinions by the Citadel Council, but when the Helldivers kept the peace for many years, they all agreed it was the right move. There were some objections from the Terminus systems, but hardly anyone dared to try and wage war with the Helldivers, especially with Council and the Alliance now backing them up. To this day they continue to serve as the largest multi species group in the galaxy and serve as keepers of peace and justice with a stern but very fair order.
General Zartrack

Zartrack remained as General for at least three decades before finally retiring. His son Zatrin, went on to become a Helldiver 10 years after the war and soon ended up a member of Alpha Squad.

Experiment 13

Having survived the battle, there was some debate on what should be done with 13. Shepard and his crew however firmly supported that 13 be returned to his jungle planet home and be allowed to live there in peace. Sure enough, the Experiment was later returned home and like the Rachni territory, a set of rules was established for the preservation and isolation of 13. To this day, the Experiment rules over the jungle world as the king of beasts, living a life of freedom and peace.

The Normandy, Joker & EDI

The Normandy continued serving as a Helldiver ship after Shepard's retirement with Joker remaining the pilot and EDI as the AI. True to their word, Dell and Sill built a new body for EDI which soon came to incorporate synthesis into it after it was reverse engineered from the Takaal. The term AI didn't seem right for her anymore. She and Joker are now in an official relationship which the Arkanes permit. The Normandy continue to serve as the flagship for Alpha Squad, even with new members.

Alpha & The Normandy Crew

Most of Alpha followed Shepard and Liara's example and retired to start families of their own. A few newer members though chose to stay and the squad remained active, even taking on new members over time. The Normandy crew meanwhile went their separate ways. Some of the couples also retired to start families, others… well, they just continued with their lives.

Alaara & Sandra

Alaara and Sandra retired to Arkadia and started a family there. So far they have at least 5 Asari children and have often considered the idea of human children through the use of test tube babies. The two of them have never been happier. Though Sandra does sometimes find it difficult to keep her wife's urges and sexual side under control.

Dash & Jet

Unlike the others, they remained in Alpha Squad. They eventually married a few months later. So far they have no plans on having children, but are open to the idea one day.

Leena & Ventra

Leena and Ventra retired to Rannoch where they built a new home for themselves. They have two children. A Turian boy, and a Quarian girl.

Griffin & Ashley

Griffin remained in Alpha Squad while Ashley became an unofficial member when the Arkane gave her permission to continue serving alongside her boyfriend while still in the Alliance. They married two years after and so far have three children, two girls and a boy. Ashley named the boy Kaidan in honour of her dear friend.

Kraan
After recovering from his injuries, Kraan took a temporary leave of absence to assist in the rebuilding of his race. A few years after he returned to active duty and continues to serve as part of Alpha Squad. He has had a few breeding requests in the past, but has often found himself too busy for that.

**Troy & Xun**

Xun remained in the Helldivers and as the Shadow Broker for a few more years during the rebuilding in order to use her resources to help as much as possible. Troy remained as her agent until the two finally married. Xun eventually handed down the Shadow Broker network to Feron before she and Troy settled down to start a family. So far they have a daughter. They named her Alex after Troy's former girlfriend and to also honour Alpha's former dropship pilot before the war.

**Dell, Sill & Uthenra**

The Arturus' family simply continue their normal lives and continue to be a happy family. Dell and Sill continue to serve on the Normandy as Alpha Squad's Quartermasters and engineers. Uthenra simply continues to teach Helldivers about political and social correctness.

**Garrus & Tali**

Garrus and Tali temporarily went their separate ways to help their people rebuild, but remained in contact. Eventually Garrus retired as Helldiver and he and Tali started a family. They have 2 Turian children, and 2 Quarians children, both girls and boys.

**Legion**

Legion continued to remain as the Geth's representative for the Quarians. He also remains a close friend of Tali's.

**Thane**

Then in time recovered from his injuries. Rather conveniently, it was also the same time a cure for Kepral syndrome was finally discovered. Now able to live his natural lifespan again he has often thought about lending his skills to the Helldivers, but for now spends time with his son.

**Samara**

Samara returned to Thessia to help her people and the Justicar order rebuild. Eventually, as Shepard had said to her years ago, she eventually met someone who reawakened her desires. She lived the last years of her life happy not only with who she was with but also knowing that her daughters had brighter future to look forward to.

**Jack & Kelly**

The two returned to Grissom Academy. Kelly now replaces Kahlee Sanders as head of the Academy while also remaining a psychologist for the students and for Jack, not that she needs it anymore though. Jack continues to teach the young biotics, some of which have even gone on to join the Helldivers in alter years. She and Kelly still continue their relationship.

**Jacob & Kasumi**

Kasumi eventually became pregnant with Jacob's child. After that, she quit being a thief and was able to get Xun to wipe her record clean. Jacob remains as a Helldiver agent while Kasumi looks
after their son, Carl. They are considering having a girl as well.

Grunt

Grunt remains a valued member of Clan Urdnot. Wrex often says that he will make a fine Clan Leader on day, but Grunt always says he’d rather fight than talk.

Hawk & Miranda

Although Miranda’s genetic material made her infertile, Scientists eventually found a way to fix this. The couple retired soon after, married and now have a family. Oriana also lives her dream of working in colony development and serves on the same colony their sister lives on.

Dr Chakwas & Michel

The two Doctors continue to serve on the Normandy. Michel sometimes misses her clinic, but enjoys the company of the Normandy crew and she also loves working with Chakwas.

Emily Wong

After her journey on the Normandy, Emily resumed her job as a journalist on the Citadel. She meets up with a crew every year as part the anniversary they have each year to honor those who died during the war, celebrate their victory and to also celebrate the bonds of friendship they made.

Zaeed

Zaeed continued his career as a bounty hunter for a few more years before finally retiring. He still reunites with everyone else every year, often saying that he never would’ve thought at first that he’d call them friends, but is glad to now.

Sarah and Samantha

Sarah and Traynor married a few months after the war and also retired. They are still undecided on whether they want to have children, but for now are happy to simply be with each in galaxy where they are free. The two have never been happier, especially with family they have.

As for Shepard & Liara, well…

"Did that all really happen?"

Austin was sat on a bench overlooking the gardens of his and Liara’s house on Thessia. Cuddled in his arms was his 3 year old Asari daughter, Kamara. Although she looked so much like her mother, Kamara seemed to take more after her father. She liked adventure, she was kind, brave had a fun sense of humour and she loved listening to her father’s stories. In her hand she had her favourite toy, the Hanar plushy that Zaeed had given to Austin during the war. She loved it.

Urz was also sat beside Austin. The Varren seemed surprisingly tame and therefore very happy living with his master and mistress. He was even very playful with Kamara. He would play with her occasionally, he kept a close eye on her as if she was a Varren puppy and she even let him ride around on his back, which was always very cute.

"Yes. Although some of the details might have happened a little differently." Said Austin. "You have to remember this was 3 years ago."
"When will we go to the stars?" Kamara asked.

"One day we will, Kamara, that I can promise. But it's not good for us to travel while you're mother's pregnant with your sisters." Austin replied.

"I understand." Said Kamara. "Tell me another story about your adventures."

"Kamara, you know I'd love too, but it's getting late. Your mother will be cross with both of us if you stay up past your bed time." Said Austin.

"Oh I'm sure one more wouldn't hurt."

Liara walked out into the gardens to join her daughter and husband. Her pregnancy of the twins was already showing a good amount.

Austin simply smiled as she sat down next to him with Karma between them. They briefly paused to kiss each other.

"How are the twins?" he asked.

"A few gentle kicks. That's about it." Liara smiled. "Anyway, I believe you were going to tell our little wing here another story?"

"Alright then, is everyone sitting comfortably?" Austin asked as he, Liara and Kamara all huddled close together with Urz sat at their feet while Austin gave him a gentle stroke.

"Okay then, one more story…"

And there you have it! :) After two years, it's finally over.

Happy to be finished, but also a shame at the same time because working on this fic was a tremendous amount of fun. Not to mention the new friends it helped me make. :)

So those who've paid attention know that isn't totally the end. I do of course plan to do a prequel, Alpha Origins as well.

Before that though I am having a long break from writing. At least 4 weeks off.

Few things I want to say about is that for that I am no longer doing weekly chapters. Although I did well with it for this, I did feel rushed and pressured with it. Almost felt like I was doing homework again. Also some chapters did end up rushed as a result, so I am dropping that for Origins and going back to my old ways of uploading a chapter when it's ready. That way I can do them properly without any rush or pressure and they'll all be of good quality and I'll be happy with them.

I'm also inviting anyone who is interested to contribute ideas for Origins. I've got plenty of ideas for Origins, but I've still yet to work everything out. So if there is anyone who would like to suggest ideas and in a way work with me on Origins, feel free to get in touch with me.

Anyway, thank you all for being with me on this journey and for keeping me going with your support and reviews. I don't know where this story would be without them.

So until we meet again, farewell my friends.
Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!