Shepard's Dream Catcher
by ErinPrimette

Summary

The mission to Akuze should’ve been simple, but once they arrived, Amber Shepard had the misfortune to watch Thresher Maws slaughter her comrades. Just as she was on the brink of death, she found herself under the care of Saren Arterius. If she wants to get back home, they’ll have to form a bond of trust.

If this bond of trust can help with diplomacy between the humans and the Council races, then this bond of trust can also help them stand together when strange events show up to test the fate of the galaxy.
They had a few hours before the shuttle was scheduled to take off, so Amber used this time to double-check her luggage. In her backpack, she stashed her datapad, a small console with three video games which she enjoyed the most and a first aid kit. She then examined the dreamcatcher in her hand before tucking it into a smaller pocket of the backpack along with her bag of worry dolls.

"You ready, Lieutenant Commander?" she looked up to see her hardened squad leader.

Amber closed her backpack and stood to her feet, saluting to the squad leader in front of her.

"Sir," she nodded.

"At ease, ma'am. We'll be leaving at 0930 hours for Akuze, so you better get your stuff aboard."

Taking the hint, Amber slung a strap of her backpack over her shoulder before grabbing her duffle bag stashed with clothes. Along the way, she met with the others on her team as she boarded their ship. She may have felt disappointed her friends weren't among the squad, but she was hoping they could come along next time. For now, she settled into a seat next to a fellow N7 graduate.

"Morning, Shepard. I got a good feeling about today. You?" one of her teammates greeted.

Amber leaned back in her chair as she held her backpack close on her lap.

"I am hoping this month's planet would be suitable for us," Amber said.

"Yeah. The serg didn't mention much about the planet yet. It's some backwater place, one of the farther out colonies."

"Think aliens finally got through? What do you think happened?" another asked.

"Well," Amber shrugged, "either that, or they could be camera shy."

The last squadmates filed onboard before their squad leader climbed on.

"All right boys and girls, listen up. We're off to a colony called Akuze. Radio silence has indicated something's gone wrong and we are off to investigate. Any questions so far?"

A teammate next to Amber raised her hand.

"Anything to remotely indicate what happened? What if we get there and it was just space debris interrupting the connection?"

Amber couldn't help but scratch her head.

"That's not our job, private. It's a big, unknown galaxy out here, and we're not supposed to sit idly by just because we wanted to save an extra bit of time and energy," the sergeant chastised, "once we get groundside, we're to investigate the colony and look for signs of struggle or anything to indicate what happened."

"Understood, sir," another squadmate nodded.

The squad leader gave a nod of approval before he sat at an empty seat before the pilots began turning on the ignition. Their shuttle flew out into the void towards one of the ancient structures
that had allowed them to venture so far from Earth before being catapulted out of the system. With the shuttle in warp, all the squadmates could do was wait until they arrived at the destination. To pass the time, Amber pulled out a miniature game console and quietly thought of whether she'll play The Binding of Isaac, Shovel Knight or Undertale.

The hours dragged on as she waited for their arrival on Akuze. When they did, the pilot announced on the PA.

"Coming up on the LZ, guys. Get ready for drop off."

"Still playing those games, huh?" she raised her gaze to meet Corporal Toombs, the other corporal on the squad.

Amber double-checked her game before she saved her progress and turned off the console, stashing it back into her backpack. She peered through the small window as the shuttle approached the planet before it began its descent below the atmosphere.

"Well, that's because all the small-time developers actually care about what they make whereas the triple-A figures couldn't care less about whether they put out a Mona Lisa or a hot pile of garbage so long as they got money from it," she answered, drawing out her sniper rifle.

"And they still do that in the 22nd Century?" a squadmate blurted, his eyes blinking twice.

A short while later, the shuttle reached the surface. By now, the squad finished gearing up for their mission just as the ship found a suitable place to land. They formed up behind the sergeant and advanced towards the cluster of prefabs down the mountain.

"Alright people, spread out," the squad leader instructed, "Toombs, on me to the admin building, see if we can find any reports. Shepard, get to that tower and provide overwatch. Everyone else, sweep the colony. You know the drill."

"Copy that," Shepard saluted.

Amber turned her head towards the tower before she started her sprint. Rushing through the door and up the steps, she reached a view that put her at least several stories above the rest of the colony.

"I'm in position, serg," Amber announced.

{Ten-four, call us if you see anything.}

She swept a good 360 degrees around the colony, not spotting a single bit of damage on the structures.

"Looks clear so far," Amber reported, "you got anything, Toombs?"

He started with a gruff sigh.

{Nothing yet. Still digging up security footage, and the serg is picking through admin logs.}

Amber kept a firm grip on her sniper as she continued to gaze out the window for another matter of minutes. The colony was dead center in the middle of a valley, with mountains stretching into the distance around them.

"Nothing yet," Amber informed, "Sergeant, have you found anything?"
{Well, almost fifty-two hours ago, the local earthquake alarm set off. Strange considering how
we're nowhere near a fault line. From what Corporal Toombs found, looks like the occupants
vacated the colony, but didn't return after that.}

Amber blinked twice and scanned the prefabs below for any evidence of an earthquake. To her
disappointment, she didn't find any rubble.

"I agree, sir," Amber replied, "none of these buildings appear to be damaged by such conditions."

{Got it, Shepard. Come down from there and rally by the admin building. We'll be — }

Amber flinched as she heard static for a brief moment.

"Corporal, you feel that?" Amber hastily asked.

Amber felt it too, in the form of a light trembling from the floor.

{Yeah, I feel it too. Shepard, get down from there before something breaks, got it?}

"O-Ok," Amber nodded.

Without wasting any time, Amber sprinted out of the room and made her way down the stairs.
Once she made it outside, she started scurrying through the streets between the prefabs just as the
trembling slowly started to intensify. That was when she heard the piercing shriek from outside.

{Jesus!}

{What the fuck is that?!}

{Take it down! Take it down!}

{Get it off! Get it off! AAAAAH — !}

In that moment, the radio chatter went off with screams and panic. Although Amber couldn't
understand why, she felt panic surge through her veins. She accelerated her pace, hoping she would
reach the admin building in time. On the way back out of the entrance, she looked to the skyline
above the prefabs in fear. What looked over the colony, one with the limp legs of one of her
companions in its maw, was a pair of enormous centipede-like creatures, with a head that could
easily bite the front off a Mako like it was a potato chip. She could hear her breath quicken as she
aimed her rifle at the giant creature and squeezed the trigger. The round simply bounced off as if it
were tank armor.

She made her run for the admin building as it lobbed a lime green ball of some caustic spittle
towards where she stood. Running down the street, another two were firing from behind cover
when one of the creatures rose from the ground, catching both in its mouth before throwing them
up in the air and snapping down on them as they returned, eating them whole. The rest of the way,
it just hounded her as it dove through prefab after prefab, snapping its jaws. As she continued her
sprint, she frantically searched for some objects she could knock over to block her pursuer's path.
She reached the admin building with the sergeant and Toombs still at the entrance.

"Shepard! Hurry! We need to start gathering the platoon...behind you!"

Amber whipped around just in time to see another one of the beasts preparing for another attack.
Ducking out of the way, she turned to see the sergeant screaming as he was reduced to a puddle of
red and green sludge.
"Shit! Now what?" Toombs cursed.

"Maybe we should leave," Amber gasped.

With little time to spare, Toombs pulled out a datapad and handed it to Amber.

"Corporal, what are you…?" she paused.

"You're the faster of the two of us, you can at least get word back about what the hell happened," Toombs explained, "all remaining squad members, make for the mountains to the southeast of the colony. Move!"

Amber quickly stashed the datapad into her backpack before she sprinted for her life. She couldn't turn her head back, especially when one of the giant centipede-like creatures caught Toombs in its maw moments later.

"NO!"

She didn't pause as continued to run for her life, lungs and legs burning. Overhead, their ship began to land to pick up her and a few of the remaining members of her squad, when the shuttle was suddenly shot out of the air by another acidic ball. She narrowly halted as it crashed into the ground, but was still caught in the explosion. With no time to waste, Amber scrambled for cover. Rolling back to her feet, she clutched her side painfully as she yanked out a piece of shrapnel, before putting a hand on her wound to maintain pressure. She looked back in despair as the last of her platoon were slaughtered by the worm-like creatures.

With nowhere to go, she continued to stumble towards the mountains, vision blurring from exhaustion and blood loss. If she was lucky to still be alive, she would have to find some way to get off the planet. In the distance, she saw some distant, blurry form walk down from the mountains. In a burst of desperation, she started to wave her hands, calling for attention.

"H-hello? I…I need h-h-help…"

Amber couldn't finish her sentence as she felt a stinging pain on her back when she extended her arm. The next thing she knew, she let out a sharp cry and collapsed onto her knees. She removed her backpack before she reached a hand around to find the source of the pain. When the sergeant went down in a burst of acid, some must've splashed on her, and he took the majority of the burns for her. She looked back up at the form as darkness closed in around her.

"H-heellp-p…"

As she slowly lost consciousness, the figure in her blurred vision crouched down and the last thing she heard was strange caws, clicks and whistles she couldn't recognize.

Just as it felt like a moment, the sound of a crowd stirred her from her comatose state. Amber opened her eyes, but her vision was still blurry. The only thing she felt was a pair of arms carrying her. She kept blinking in and out of consciousness, hearing nothing but clicks, whistles, and some other strange mumbling among the blurry sight of clean walls. Based on those noises, she doubted any humans apart from her squad could've found her. After some unspecified amount of time passed between when she last came to and when her mind finally came around, she found herself in a hospital that she didn't recognize from anything she'd seen before. Although she was still in pain to the point she couldn't move, she scanned her surroundings, taking note of the strange writings along some screens plastered along the wall. Out of the corner of the eye, she saw two figures speaking with one another.
"Hey…hey doc…"

The two forms looked at her, still unclear in her blurred vision. One walked over to what resembled an IV next to her bed before interacting with it, causing her to black out again.

The next instant she woke up, she felt bandages covering her back and her side. She appeared in the same hospital as before, and now that she got a better look at it, it was definitely not any hospital room she recognized. Did she die? Was this some form of neurons firing in her last moments, gasping for air on Akuze? Suddenly the door slid open, catching her attention. She planted her hands on the bed and slowly sat up, taking care not to move too fast to reduce pain. Whatever it was, it was reptilian in nature, with slender, metallic plates that gave it an avian appearance. Otherwise, it was humanoid with two fingers on each hand with opposable thumbs. Under its shirt, its torso was heavily reinforced with a thick carapace, with a streamlined appearance.

"Take it easy. You'll have to forgive the medical procedures. We had to make sure you were unconscious when we installed the translator."

Amber gave the alien a blank stare.

"You…you can understand me?" she paused.

The alien nodded.

"You're lucky we were able to analyze your language," he explained.

The alien took a few more steps before he sat down in a chair next to her bed.

"I'm Spectre Saren Arterius," he introduced himself, "and I am a part of the intergalactic law enforcement present. We'll try and reestablish contact between yourself and your kind, but you have to be patient. You're lucky you survived a maw attack like that."

Amber took a moment to examine the bandage underneath her gown for a moment before she turned her gaze towards Saren.

"So what were you doing in Akuze?" Amber asked Saren.

"Investigating your species. There have been reports of unidentified vessels traveling in the outer edges of Citadel Space for a few months now, and I tracked down one of the colonies. Unfortunately, I found it after it and your squad had been torn apart by Thresher Maws," Saren answered.

Amber couldn't help but shudder in response. For some reason, she found the image of the giant insect creature flooding her mind all of a sudden as she silently recalled the screams of her dying squadmates.

"Thresher Maws?" Amber blurted, "you mean the giant creatures that killed…my comrades?"

Saren stared for a moment before he nodded.

"Yes," Saren answered, "although…the vessels haven't been suspected of illegal activity as of yet."

"Illegal? How so?" she asked.

"Due to some ancient history," Saren clarified, "law mandates that any race should seek legal
consent to open a relay, as we don't know what's on the other end."

Amber ran her finger through her short dark brown hair before leaning back.

"I'm Amber Shepard," she told Saren, "from the Human Systems Alliance."

"Pleasure to meet you, Shepard," Saren replied, "if you need to, you can stay at my place until we can make proper contact with your people."

Amber made a brief glance at a nearby window, silently reminding herself that while she made it out alive, she's still far away from home. She even reflected on how her friends would react when they learn of her disappearance. The thought of them mourning of her supposed death gave her chest aching pain.

"How long should I rest before I can be released from the hospital?" Amber pointed out.

"A week at most. Thresher Maws are not a new adversary, so doctors have long since figured out how to treat their acidic burns," he explained, "don't worry, we'll get you home."

Saren offered Amber his hand, allowing her to grasp it gently.

"Do you guys have anything available to eat?" Amber clamored softly.

The Spectre walked to a terminal by the door.

"Given your biological composition, plenty. I'll tell the nurse to get you a levo-meal. It won't be anything you'll be used to, but...well, what can you expect?"

Amber couldn't help but shrug.

"I guess that's fine," she said.

Saren took the hint and browsed through the menu at the terminal. He found a simple soup-like option and ordered a bowl for her. While he would have to wait for the meal to arrive, he ambled over to the bed, only to notice Amber was hugging her arms to her chest and tears were streaming from her eyes.

"Shepard?" he paused.

Amber tilted her head and locked eyes onto Saren's.

"I just," she bleated softly, "do you know what it feels like...to be the last one standing after watching your companions die in front of you?"

Saren let out a soft sigh before he ran his talons through her hair.

"I understand the trauma you're experiencing. It's definitely an experience that will come to pass," he acknowledged.

Amber nodded at Saren while she leaned into his touch. To soothe her further, he craned his head and tapped his forehead against hers.

"Thanks," Amber whispered softly.

"Anytime. For future reference," Saren said, "I'm a turian."
While Amber savored this moment, she stared into his eyes.

"Is that what your species is called?" Amber asked.

Saren nodded.

At that moment, an alien nurse entered the room with a glass of water and a bowl of some sort of soup before she set it down at Amber's end table. Amber took a moment to wipe her tears from her face with her arm before she picked up a spoon and the bowl. Perching it on her lap, she tasted a sample of the soup, finding the flavor from the broth, meat and vegetables palatable.

"Hey, this is pretty good," Amber commented.

The alien nurse nodded at Amber.

"Will you need anything else?" she asked.

"No thanks," Amber shook her head.

The alien nurse nodded at both Saren and Amber before she left the room.

"In the meantime, I'll be setting up my place for you to bunk for however long you're here," he added, handing her a datapad, "in addition, I'll get you an omni-tool and some new sets of clothing. Look something up here, let me know what you like."

Amber examined the screen of the datapad while she kept eating. Even if she couldn't read the strange language, she used the images as a guide for what possible outfits she could go for. After she finished another bite of her soup, she made one more glance at Saren.

"Hey, Saren?" Amber called out, "I appreciate you saving my life back there."

Saren gave her a soft smile.

"You're welcome, Shepard," Saren replied.
With the human he rescued resting at the Huerta Hospital, Saren figured he might as well report his findings to the Council. Once he made it outside the hospital, he ventured his way through the Presidium. After paying a visit to the Council, he should purchase some levo food, set up the guest bedroom, and get Shepard a change of clothes.

It didn't take much long before he reached the Citadel Tower. He stepped into an elevator and stood still as it rode to the top floor. He made his usual stride up the steps to the top of the Presidium, not minding that he was still under-dressed from his visit to Huerta. He reached the landing before the podiums, where the councilors stared down at him.

"I hope you've each taken the time to read my report?" he started.

"Yes. It is most...troubling...that this new species has now shown itself," Sparatus nodded.

"Still, I'm glad that we still have the time to peacefully integrate with them before anything damaging starts," Tevos commented.

"That'll be a little difficult," Saren rubbed his chin, "as I was only able to find one of her species."

"Her?" Valern paused.

"Yes," Saren answered, "the rest of her team was consumed by a pack of Thresher Maws on one of their colonies."

Saren noticed the councilors were giving him blank stares, so he figured he might as well clear up some points.

"According to her," Saren continued, "her species are called humans."

"Seeing how invested you are in this, I suppose you wouldn't mind heading the effort to reach out to these 'newcomers', would you?" Sparatus asked with his usual dull tone.

After a short moment of silence, Saren slowly nodded.

"I did promise her I would help her reunite with her people," he added.

"Very well. Don't take up more time than you have to. You've already spent too much effort on this case," the turian councilor chastised.

Saren gave the councilors a nod before he turned on his feet and made his way out of the Council Chambers. As much as he wanted to solve the case as soon as possible, he knew he wouldn't get Amber back home in less than a day. Still, she had come with plenty of tech on her. Perhaps there was a network that he could connect with, or coordinates he could follow. Considering her species' current technological progress, it would be a bit of a gamble to hope that anything she carried kept record of what relays she travelled through. Once he made it back to his apartment, he pulled out the two datapads and carefully examined them. He would have to remind himself to inform the hospital to return her possessions to Amber once she finished recovery.

Finishing preparations at home over the course of an hour or so, he quickly left for the nearby supermarket to buy several levo DIY meals, as he was unaware if she could cook and what non-human foods she would eat. It may have taken Saren a little while to find these meals, but once he
finished gathering them, he carried them over to the cashier, who began stashing them into a few bags.

"So, are you inviting an asari over to stay soon?" the cashier asked.

Saren shook his head before he made his payment.

"Something else."

He left without another word and stashed the groceries away when he returned. Leaving again, he went shopping for clothes and an omni-tool. Before he left, he did get a list of recommendations for outfits from Amber which would make the shopping easier. When he found a tech shop, he began browsing the shelf filled with omni-tools. While she was a soldier of her species, he figured it would be better to start her off with a civilian-grade device. He made a mental note to inform her she could upgrade once the Citadel established contact with her species. Once he made his pick, he carried the omni-tool over to the counter.

Walking out of the store with the omni-tool in a bag, he continued on to a clothes department further down the shopping strip. He purchased a couple pairs of asari boots and undergarments, a few pairs of salarian shorts, and a few turian shirts. Once he completed his shopping trip, Saren made his way through the Presidium back to his apartment. He had almost reached the entrance when he bumped into someone along the way. Catching one of the falling bags, he looked up to see his brother, Desolas.

"Saren! I do apologize about that. What've you been up to lately?" his brother greeted hastily.

Saren sighed before he opened the door and gestured his older brother to follow him inside.

"Busy as usual," Saren answered, "you still dealing with pirates and slavers?"

"You know how it is," Desolas remarked, "they just don't stop. I know your line of work is usually classified, but what's your latest mission been?"

Saren set down the bags on the dining room table.

"I found one of the colonies that the rumored new species attempted to settle in," Saren told his brother, "except Thresher Maws wiped them out…save for one survivor."

"Wait…a new species?" Desolas cautiously asked.

"Yeah. The females resemble the asari, and the males' anatomy resembles the male batarian," Saren nodded, "however, instead of the cartilage crest of the asari, they have a sea of fiber-thin tendrils, almost like fur on their heads."

Desolas folded his arms and let out an enthusiastic hum as he sat down on the couch.

"I'll be looking forward to this new species of yours, Saren. So who is this lone survivor? What is she like?"

Saren picked up Shepard's datapad before he settled into his lounge chair before he turned it on, carefully examining her profile.

"Let's see…she was adopted relatively early in her life by a Hannah Shepard, to which her adoptive mother raised her closely," Saren mumbled, "she took boot-camp at the age of eighteen and has since showed promising talent, becoming the youngest member of their special forces to date."
Desolas raised a browplate as Saren showed him the profile.

"So, Lieutenant Commander Amber Shepard?" Desolas observed.

Saren nodded quietly.

"Yes. I'll try to let you know about more. Until we properly establish communications with her race, she'll be staying at my place."

Saren took a moment to turn off Shepard's datapad before he placed it on the dresser in the guest bedroom. He stepped back into the living room and sat back down in his lounge chair.

"Well, I should get going. It's been nice catching up with you, Saren," Desolas rose to his feet and made for the door.

Saren hadn't moved from his seat when the doorbell rang moments later. Well, this was awkward. Who could've had the balls to head over to the apartment shortly after one guest left? Saren shook his head in disbelief at the thought, yet he trudged over to the door and opened it.

"Hey, Saren! I was in the area and I thought I'd pass by and say hello!" the turian at the door was shorter and younger than himself, and had maroon plates with white facial markings.

Saren rolled his eyes and took a step back, allowing the younger turian inside.

"Pleasure to see you again, Nihlus," he drawled.

"So, how's your life been?" Nihlus continued, ignoring Saren's irritation.

Saren led Nihlus into the living room before he sat down in his lounge chair.

"Fine, thanks," Saren grumbled, "I've been busy."

Nihlus flexed his mandibles as he sat down on the couch.

"Say, you've been gone for some time," Nihlus pointed out, "what've you got to share?"

"I was investigating claims about unidentifiable ships. Found out it was a new space-faring species we've yet to make proper contact with. I picked one up after her squad was wiped out by a pack of Thresher Maws. She's currently in Huerta," Saren hastily explained.

Nihlus scratched his mandible as he raised a browplate.

"Oh?" he blurted, "a new species? This is interesting."

Saren nodded before he turned on his omni-tool and showed Nihlus the data he gathered on the new species from Shepard's datapad, giving his protege a moment to read it.

"She was hurt, but alive," Saren reasoned, "she'll make a full recovery."

Once Nihlus finished reading the data, he gave Saren a nod before his mentor shut off his omni-tool.

"Interesting," Nihlus remarked, "when are you heading back out to resume your search?"

"In a short while," Saren answered, "preferably, once she gets released from the hospital."
"Alright. I was wondering if I could partake in your current investigation into these 'humans','" Nihlus continued.

Saren didn't hold back his exasperation.

"Fine," Saren advised, "but this mission is to remain highly confidential, meaning no one hears about it."

Nihlus slowly nodded before he extended his hand, allowing Saren to clasp it with his hand.

Anderson paced around the bridge, with a few soldiers giving him a blank stare. He spent an entire day trying to contact the squad he dispatched but so far, there was no answer. Could there have been some alien base cutting off all contact or maybe some weather storm? He still couldn't bear to just leave the squad behind.

"Send in another squad. Get in and get what's left of them back out," he ordered over the intercom.

Just as Anderson ended the transmission, one Alliance soldier shook his head in disbelief and trudged towards Anderson.

"Sir," he saluted.

"At ease, Alenko. What's the matter?"

"I believe that's the second time we sent a squad to Akuze," Kaidan reminded, "how can you be so sure they won't disappear like the last squad did?"

"We do not abandon our own, Alenko," Anderson snapped, "I wish there was an alternative, but simply put, we do not have enough data to further assess the situation. Right now, all we can hope to do is keep our distance and find out as much as we can from a more cautious stance."

Kaidan sighed as he rolled his eyes.

"At what point will you recognize this is a lost cause?" Kaidan grumbled.

Anderson pressed his palm into his forehead, feeling the sense of irritation fill his mind. He did admit the possibility of Shepard dying in Akuze worried him.

"I know I shouldn't throw more to the fire like this," Anderson sighed, "but we are at the edge of an unexplored galaxy with god-knows-what out there. Eventually, we'll have to shine some light on the subject."

Kaidan lightly nodded before he shifted his gaze towards the hull.

"So what do you suggest, sir?" Kaidan asked.

"For now, just launch a probe at the site, keep your distance."

Anderson sauntered up the bridge and nodded at the pilots. Departing from the naval hub, they made their way to the relay and continued on to Akuze. Once the ship reached its orbit, the pilots activated the scanners. Maintaining relatively low orbit, their ship launched a single probe down the colony for a surface-level inspection. The least they could do was wait for results.

Anderson looked grimly back and forth between the orbital camera feed and the camera feed from the probe. Whatever tore up the colony, it was big, and didn't appear to use any sort of ranged
weaponry. The remains of their soldiers were apparent, with small remains, and chunks of armor scattered about, with the vast majority of the platoon situated towards the hills, undoubtedly making a break for the hills. To top it all off, their only escape was left in a heap of charred, slightly dissolved, twisted metal.

"Oh, god," Anderson gasped softly, his grim expression apparent in his eyes.

"There's nothing down there, captain. It's not worth our time," Kaidan reiterated.

Anderson nodded as he placed his hand on Kaidan's shoulder.

"I suppose you're right," Anderson agreed, "start compiling the names of those on that platoon. I may as well get to work writing those condolences."

With no leads to follow, the ship began its departure while Anderson stepped out of the bridge. He knew he would have to inform Hannah Shepard of the incident, even if he wasn't thrilled about the possible reactions that would come. She was a good friend, and the last thing he wanted to see from her was a river of distress. Once he made it into his quarters, he sat at his desk and got to work.

This could be a grim moment for the Alliance.
It may have been a long week, but Saren soon received a message from the Huerta Hospital informing him of Shepard's complete recovery. Since he had plenty of time to complete some preparations, the turian Spectre made his way to the hospital and sat in the lounge, waiting for Amber to emerge. It was only several minutes before Amber stepped through the door with her backpack in her arms, prompting Saren to stand to his feet and approach the human.

"I've got a place for you to stay until we can rectify this issue," Saren informed.

Amber nodded at Saren before she followed him out of the hospital and into the Presidium.

"I…understand I might not have been able to save my comrades," Amber told Saren, "but if I could warn the others about the Thresher Maws, they wouldn't have to suffer the same fate."

"Thresher Maws are rather illusive creatures. They aren't impossible to kill, but it is an effort."

They continued the rest of the way along the Presidium street to his apartment complex. Once they arrived, Amber took a moment to examine the apartment complex before her.

"So this is where you live?" Amber asked.

"Yes," Saren answered, "I've got a guest bedroom to spare."

After waving to the front door guard, they continued to the elevator in the back. Stepping into the elevator, Saren pressed on the button which triggered the doors to close before the elevator began its ascent. The journey up was rather silent until the doors reopened. Unlocking the front door, he beckoned her to follow inside before taking his shoes off.

"It's not much, but I did buy you some spare changes of clothes and I have stocked the kitchen with some food. If you need anything else for now, just let me know."

"Thanks, Saren," Amber nodded at Saren.

Amber took a few moments to explore the apartment before she found the guest bedroom. There, she set down her backpack and slipped off her shoes. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her datapads sitting on the dresser, so she picked up her personal datapad and sat on her bed. Suddenly, Saren burst in with a small box in his hand.

"Excuse me," Saren interrupted, "but I have one more thing for you if you'll be living in this community. It’s important."

Amber blinked twice before she set down the datapad.

"What's in it?" she clamored.

Amber stood from her bed and stepped towards Saren, plucking the box from his hand. When she opened it, she saw a watch-like device inside. Saren picked it out, slid it onto her wrist, and closed the clasp.

"This is an omni-tool. It's civilian-grade, but an omni-tool nonetheless," he started, turning the device on around her arm, "it's your own personal terminal, with the ability to manage your finances, provide means for telecommunication, storing data, and so on. Military-grade omni-tools
come with inventory management, weapon augmentations that can help cripple or disable enemies, or manage medical supplies to injured squadmates. Advanced and illegal models also come with hacking software that can be modified to your liking."

Amber took a moment to examine the omni-tool on her wrist before she returned her attention towards Saren.

"So it's more advanced than the datapads we have?" Amber clarified.

Saren nodded.

"Yeah. I'm sure you'll be able to get a military-grade variant eventually, but this one will do well to serve you currently."

"Well," Amber agreed, "all right."

Having accepted her gift, Amber started exploring the features of her new omni-tool while Saren left for his office. She returned to her bed and continued experimenting with her new device's features, such as adding in her profile. Pausing to think for a minute, she got to work slowly looking up all the other sentient species on whatever they had for an internet. She felt surprised yet glad her omni-tool had network access, so she started looking up the turian species.

It was strange to see just how different they were to humans, from their reptilian composure to the complete difference in amino acids. Until today, Amber had no clue about the difference between levo amino acids and dextro amino acids. She learned about their militaristic culture, their history, and their role in society before continuing her research of the species she saw along the street.

The next species she looked up is the asari, remembering she saw some of them during her stay in the hospital. It was strange, seeing something so similar, yet so fundamentally different to humans. One of these differences included the fact all asari were female. The second was their cartilage crest and blue tints of skin. Finally, they were the longest living sentient species known, only matched by another simply referred to as 'krogan'.

Out of curiosity, Amber began looking up the krogan species. From what she could gather, they were big, bipedal, reptilian creatures that resembled toads or lizards with big, bulky plating. Culturally, they reminded her of the Mongolian Hordes from some of the history texts her mother showed her when she was young. As she kept jotting down her notes, she took a moment to look up their planet of origin.

She looked up various images of the planet including a scene of a group of krogans, enduring their rite of passage. That's when she saw them again. Even if she felt her chest burn up at the sight of the Thresher Maw in the picture, she built up the mental strength to avoid hitting the back button for a moment.

"Do they have ways to avoid getting killed by these…things?" Amber said to herself.

She quickly tapped away from the image, almost like she had her head forced underwater and was only now allowed to quickly breathe. Amber took a moment to catch her breath as she leaned back on the bed and shut her eyes.

Her eyes blinked back open for a moment, finding herself face-down in the dirt. She painfully pushed herself up to look at the ruined prefabs around her. She felt like something in her arm was broken, and carried it limply. Smoke and the smell of ozone filled the air around her as she stared at what was left of her platoon. Wait a minute, how did she get back here? Anxiety surged through
her nerves as she limped over to the remains of her comrades. She looked around nervously when 
the ground began to shake. Her nervousness turned to panic when the ground underneath her 
opened up, revealing an enormous mouth waiting for her. Time seemed to slow down and she let 
out a wailing scream in response. She swung her limbs, fighting for purchase of something as she 
madly descended into the monster's mouth.

"Shepard..." she heard distantly.

Amber couldn't focus on finding the source of the sound as she planted her feet on its jaws to keep 
herself from descending into its mouth further.

"Shepard!"

This time the voice called out more clearly. She looked up to the source to see the silhouette of some distant individual, reaching their hand to her.

"Shepard!" it called out again.

As tears formed at the corner of her eyes, she extended her hand forward. Time came to a crawl as their hands drew closer. The moment her fingers wrapped around the stranger's hands, her eyes shot open.

The next thing she knew, Amber found herself in her bedroom, only to notice Saren was sitting 
ext to her as he held her hand in a gentle grip.

"Saren..." Amber gasped softly.

"You had a bad dream. Bad enough until you were screaming," he explained.

"Y-You heard me?" Amber stuttered.

Saren nodded. Amber sat upright on her bed and leaned closer to the turian Spectre, encouraging him to wrap his arms around her.

"Calm down," Saren cooed, "it was just a dream."

Amber nodded lightly as she fought back her tears. She wrapped her arms around him and nuzzled her face into his chest. He lightly patted her back, keeping her close. It took a matter of minutes before Amber calmed herself, so Saren released her from his embrace.

"You feel better now?" he asked her.

Amber nodded.

"I must've fallen asleep," she replied.

"Here, come out to the kitchen. I'll get you some tea and one of the levo meals," Saren offered.

Amber stood from her bed before she followed Saren out of her bedroom and they made their way into the kitchen. She noticed she was slightly shivering when she sat down. She continued to stare at the table as Saren quickly prepared her meal. A few minutes later, he returned with an opened tin of food in one hand and a cup in the other. Picking up a fork, she gave the food a taste test.

"Thanks," Amber told Saren.

She continued her meal in silence while Saren was merely content with a small snack. While he
peered out the window, his thoughts formed a particular question: How would the fleets from her kind react to the incident? Would this motivate them to venture further into Citadel space? Saren tried to follow her gaze.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

Amber paused for a moment.

"N-Not really," Amber blurted.

Amber took a sip of her tea.

"Look, I've had to deal with issues like this before, and that's fine. If you need any help on my part, all you need to do is ask," he offered.

"Then maybe we can talk about ways to establish contact with the Alliance tomorrow?" Amber requested.

"We might," Saren nodded, "with some of your equipment, I think we could make something work."

With another boost of relief giving her hope, Amber continued eating her meal.

"Well, before we scare anyone, what's this Alliance like?" Saren asked, "I should probably know before I unintentionally cause an incident."

Amber locked eyes onto Saren as he sat down across from her.

"Well, you might want to get yourself something to drink," Amber advised, "this will take a while."

Nodding in agreement, Saren took a moment to fetch a cup of kava before he returned to the table.

"We've only been a real space faring race as of thirty years ago," she said, "Earth, our homeworld, was shit-out-of-luck as a result of a ruined environment, a very distinct divide between classes, and a decreasing expectancy for species longevity if no one did anything."

"So technically," Saren clarified, "your homeworld is in a crisis?"

Amber nodded.

"In some last ditch effort, we made a move on another planet in our home system called Mars. From that we found the ruins of some ancient race and all their technological wonders."

"The Protheans, yes? They're somewhat insectoid and have a green carapace," Saren inquired.

She nodded.

"Yeah, whatever you call those," Amber answered, "since then, we've been rapidly expanding throughout space using those giant structures you call relays, setting up prefabs on whatever world we could."

Saren took a sip of his kava.

"So," Saren pondered, "is there a commanding officer you have?"

"Yeah, Captain Anderson," Amber nodded, "he was a combat engineer before he entered his role."
He's a nice guy, looks after all of us under his command."

Amber had finished her meal by then, so she set down her fork and took the cup of tea into her hands.

"Thanks, Saren," she concluded, "it's nice of you to offer a helping hand."

"You're pretty much welcome," Saren nodded, "will you be turning in for the night?"

Amber finished her tea before she took care of the cup and disposed of the empty tin. She made her way towards her bedroom while Saren ambled over to his own. Suddenly, he paused for a moment, just outside of his door. If she was going to be experiencing another nightmarish episode, it'd be best if he was there for her. He turned on his feet and shuffled through the apartment until he stopped at the door to the guest bedroom. He waited for a few minutes before Amber opened the door, having changed into her pajamas.

"Saren?" she paused.

"Do you need me nearby tonight?" he asked her, "I don't want you to thrash about too long before I finally arrive to see what the matter is."

Amber rubbed her cheek with her finger as she thought over the question. It didn't take even a second for her to recall the nightmare she had earlier this afternoon.

"I guess I could use some company," Amber nodded.

Amber gestured Saren to step into the bedroom before they both climbed into the bed, the turian Spectre pulling her into a warm embrace.

"See? You're safe with me," he hummed.

"Thanks," she replied weakly.

Saren's subharmonics let out soft purrs as he watched Amber drift off to sleep. It was strange, thinking of her as a special-forces operative, yet here she was in his arms at the most vulnerable time of her life. He remembered seeing her persistently stumbling towards him on Akuze after the loss of her comrades and all other hope that she would've escaped the planet surface. He remembered watching in the hospital as the doctors cut away her acid-burned armor to reveal the uncharacteristically soft tissue underneath. Craning his head over her shoulder, he kept her close to him as he succumbed to the night.
Amber hadn't remembered the last time she had a refreshing sleep. With the artificial morning light cracking through the window, she slowly opened her eyes as she didn't have a nightmare this time. It felt relaxing after all the nights of unrest she had at the hospital, as the doctors felt it would be a bad decision to tranquilize her during the night. She tilted her head towards Saren, who was still sound asleep. Slowly lifting his arm off her and slipping out of the bed, she changed out of her pajamas and picked out a set of clothes from the drawers to change into. Once she finished, she wandered into the kitchen for breakfast.

As she suspected they didn't have human foods yet, Amber started searching the refrigerator and the pantry for levo meals. She picked one of the tins out, shut the cabinet behind her, and put the dish into what appeared to be a microwave. Having read the instructions from the tin, she searched for the appliance's number pad. Punching in a minute, she grabbed a glass and went to the tap to get some water. She turned on the faucet and watched as the glass filled with water.

Fetching her meal from the microwave, she sat down at the table with a sigh. While Amber started eating her meal, Saren sauntered out of the guest bedroom and made his way to the kitchen. At the counter, he started brewing his kava.

"I assume you slept well?" he asked.

"Yes," Amber nodded.

It was only a matter of minutes later before his kava finished brewing, so Saren poured himself a cup and joined with Amber at the table.

"If you want to return to your people today, I hope you don't mind if I bring my friend and protege along for the ride," Saren offered, "he showed some interest and wanted to see your kind firsthand."

Amber took a sip of her water.

"I appreciate it," Amber replied, "will I be able to meet more of your kind after this?"

"That could be a possibility," Saren nodded, "what interests you so?"

Amber couldn't help but shrug.

"I guess my mom has influenced the curious person in me," she said.

"Very well. I suppose there would be ample opportunity for such," he acknowledged after a long sip.

The moment continued on quietly until Amber and Saren finished their breakfast. Once they took care of their mess, she led the turian Spectre into the guest bedroom. She knelt down and pulled out her miniature console from her backpack.

"So, what's this?" Saren asked.

"I use this to entertain myself whenever I have downtime," Amber explained.

Amber picked out Shovel Knight before she and Saren sat down on the bed. She started playing while he looked over her shoulder to watch. He couldn't help but raise his browplates in interest as
the character sprite on the screen moved along platform to platform under the human's controls. "What…is that…thing?" he asked, pointing at the titular character.

"He's the Shovel Knight," Amber explained, "normally, knights fight with swords, but this one fights with a shovel, hence his name."

"A shovel? Why would he use a tool instead of a sword?" Saren's mandibles were now flapping about in confusion.

Amber shrugged as she continued her game.

"Does it matter?" she remarked.

Saren scratched his mandible as he continue to observe Amber's gameplay. It was amusing to see the creature bounce from platform to platform. He found more entertainment as the character fought enemies by swiping them with his shovel.

"I'm starting to see the appeal," he mused.

Amber continued her game over the course of an hour. By the time she finished another stage, she and Saren heard the doorbell ring, so Amber turned off her game before she and the turian Spectre made their way towards the front door. When Saren opened it, Nihlus was standing outside to greet them.

"Saren, I got your ca…" Nihlus started.

Nihlus saw Amber in his peripheral vision and looked to her away from his mentor.

"Wow…what…are you?" Nihlus blurted.

Amber felt a chill down her spine, but she didn't flinch.

"Amber Shepard," she replied as she extended her hand.

Nihlus eagerly accepted the gesture.

"Huh. So you're one of these humans, right?" Nihlus proclaimed, "I mean, you basically look like an asari."

Nihlus released her hand as Amber raised her eyebrows.

"Oh, you mean the longest living civilized species in the galaxy?" Amber clarified.

Nihlus nodded.

"Yeah, them. Anyways, shall we be going?"

Amber nodded, clutching her backpack straps tightly as she followed Saren out of the apartment.

"I hope you don't mind if we go back to Akuze so soon, Amber," Saren told her, "that's the best lead I've found so far, and I'd like to pick through and see if there are any connections. Besides, I know how to handle a Thresher Maw or two."

Amber stiffened as she paused in her tracks.
"How can you be so sure that any of them wouldn't kill me this time?" she objected.

"Thresher Maws are just animals. I know you don't have any biotic capabilities, but I'll show you when we get there," he answered.

Amber nervously nodded as she sprinted her way out of the apartment complex to keep up with the turian Spectres. She had been looking around at the Presidium around her, admiring the view when she unintentionally ran into someone. She took a step back to look at the metal, maroon shape before looking up at its face. It was one of those krogans, with a red crest and eyes, a tan skin color, and a deep scratch across the right side of its face.

"What the hell are you?" he demanded.

Amber shuddered while Saren and Nihlus paused in their tracks.

"I-I'm sorry, sir," Amber blurted, putting her hands in front of her apologetically, "I didn't mean to disturb you!"

"Wrex, we're in a bit of a rush. Do you mind?" Saren interrupted.

"Yeah, whatever. Good to see you again, Arterius," the krogan replied dismissively.

As Wrex turned his head away, Amber scampered over to Saren and Nihlus before they continued their way towards the Spectre docks.

"Do you know him?" Amber asked Saren.

"Krogan bounty hunter, I've worked with him on a few occasions," Saren answered.

They continued the rest of the walk to the Spectre docks without any other incidents. Upon arrival, Amber, Saren and Nihlus walked through the gate, though Amber ended up attracting attention from some mechanics working on maintaining other Spectre shuttles.

"Just ignore them, we're almost there," Saren advised her.

Saren led the others down a walkway to a medium-sized shuttle before entering. Once they were inside, Saren settled into the pilot's seat while Amber and Nihlus took the passenger seats.

"We'll be out shortly. Just give me a minute," Saren said, sliding into the cockpit seat.

He clicked the safety belt before starting up the engines. While Nihlus and Shepard took their time to buckle up, Saren took control of the steering handles and maneuvered the shuttle out of the docks. While it flew out of the Citadel, Amber peered out the window and observed the ships they passed by, each more alien than what she was used to. Part of herself doubted she could salvage anything from the remains. Another part of her was certain Saren wouldn't stoop to leaving her on Akuze, not after what he did for her so far since they first met.

A few hours later, the shuttle emerged from a Mass Relay and began entering Akuze's orbit.

"Alright. Amber, if you don't mind, I'll have you remain on the ship in case those Thresher Maws are still close by. We'll be going in to investigate," Saren proposed, flipping a few switches.

"O-Ok," Amber nodded.

It didn't take long before Saren found a secluded area, so he landed the shuttle and turned off the engine. She could see from the cockpit the remains of the colony down the hill, shuddering at their
appearance. As the turian Spectre stood from his seat, he ran his talons through her hair.

"It's ok," he reassured her, "I made sure to pick a location where the Thresher Maws cannot reach you."

Amber nodded as she hugged her backpack close. Saren and Nihlus left the vessel and locked it behind them before beginning their trek to the colony ruins.

"You still going with the 'back-wash' method?" the latter asked.

The former nodded.

"Any reason I wouldn't?" Saren asked.

Nihlus shrugged in response.

"It's boring," he said.

"I didn't see you bring a grenade launcher either," Saren pointed out.

Both Spectres continued their trek down the slope. They walked along the mess of torn prefabs like it was the interior of a toddler's bedroom, with toys torn apart like paper. The few marine bodies that still lay untouched began to decay, and the smell remained prevalent above anything else the two turians could smell.

"Wow," Nihlus muttered, "it looks like these people couldn't have known they were in danger."

"According to Amber, the colony inhabitants initially thought it to be an earthquake and moved to a nearby open field, where they were probably torn apart. Her unit came in later and drew the Maws back and destroyed the colony then," his mentor explained.

"And you know of this from…?" Nihlus drawled.

Saren stepped over a human skeleton.

"Her testimony and one of the datapads in her possession held the basis for this matter," he clarified.

Saren and Nihlus stepped into an abandoned facility. It was what Amber described to be the administrative building of the colony, with everything essential to connections off-world to the colony. They wandered through the corridors and sidestepped any remains of once proud human soldiers in search of the control room.

"Poor bastards didn't last long. Is there even anything left of the equipment here?" Nihlus sighed.

Saren and Nihlus made their way into the control room and approached the terminal. The elder turian Spectre examined it before he attempted to activate it. After he tried pressing a few or so buttons, it barely flickered to life in response. Saren began scrolling through the terminal in search of any valuable data involving human settlements and Earth's location. It was a rather rudimentary network, but it looked like all the components were still there.

"Looks like I might have something," Saren muttered to himself.

It wasn't long before he found a file containing the locations of the human colonies alongside Earth's.
"Looks like whatever they have for communication was damaged," Nihlus added, gesturing to an image of the facility with the external-most component flickering red.

Saren sighed as he shook his head in disappointment. Still, he pulled out his OSD and took a minute or so to connect it to the terminal before he started downloading the files he needed.

"Perhaps after this," Saren agreed, "we should look elsewhere."

They looked deeper inside before starting to pick over the dead humans for any sort of long-range communications devices. To their dismay, most of the devices they found on the ground appeared smashed into pieces.

"No good. Maybe we could repair the main communicator on this building, and get it to work again?" Nihlus proposed.

Saren took a moment to listen for any movements from the ground.

"Sounds like we've got one approaching," Saren instructed, "let's head outside."

Nihlus shook his head in disbelief, but he still followed Saren through the corridors as they sprinted towards the exit. Only a few seconds after they exited, a Thresher Maw burst out of one of a destroyed building across the street and roared. Saren and Nihlus shot a few rounds at the creature, prompting it to respond. Using his biotics, Saren flung the spittle right back at the Maw's armored crest, burning away its precious protection. They landed a few more successful shots before it tumbled over dead.

"Nice one!" Nihlus remarked.

"Like I said, they're just animals," Saren reminded, "now for that telecom tower."

Saren and Nihlus began sprinting through the abandoned prefabs. Towards the edge of the colony was some damaged, twelve-foot tall tower with what was left of an antennae at the end.

"At least human tech seems rather rudimentary still. Maybe we could have this done in less than an hour?" Nihlus hummed.

"Perhaps," Saren shrugged, "it depends on whether they would want to come back here."

"There's still a whole planet," Nihlus reminded, "besides, aren't we looking to make contact with them? Tell them that they've left someone and that there's a bunch of other species they've yet to contact?"

"We'll get to Amber when we get there," Saren replied, "for now, help me tinker with this, see what it needs."

Nihlus nodded as he and Saren stepped into the tower, trudging their way up the stairs to reach the top floor. The top floor had most of the walls eaten away, leaving the frail components to the tower mostly untouched. Both Spectres took a few moments to examine the damage, thinking of methods to repair it.

"Doesn't look that bad, actually," Nihlus concluded.

"It isn't. Nihlus, start heading around the colony, maybe look for a garage or repair shop," Saren ordered, "they've got to have some spare palladium around, maybe eezo if it's available. Call me if another one of those things arrive."
"You got it," Nihlus saluted.

While Nihlus did try to act as promptly as he was ordered to, it didn't stop him from doing some temporary exploration. Every now and then, he would peak into one of the housing prefabs for a shot at some strange, new collectibles of this unknown race. Considering humans were new to him, he figured he might as well do his own investigation while he could. Reminding himself he still needed to look for materials, he opted to nick a small terminal, put it in a satchel bag, and depart with it. It's not like whoever owned it would mind. It was only a while before the young turian Spectre came across a building he could identify as a repair shop, so he stepped inside.

Nihlus pulled out his omni-tool and started scanning the room for the materials he needed. In his peripheral vision, he would eye the vehicles the inhabitants owned before their demise. They didn't have the finesse of hovercars, but he did have to admit their stylish, slim look. He strolled in between the counters and examined some of the tools left lying around. On the floor were drips of slag that he had a closer look at. From what his omni-tool indicated, the scraps were definitely palladium. Picking up the tools and setting them in the bag, he kept searching. He even found some wires that were still intact, so he carefully unplugged them before tucking them into his satchel. At the far back of the room was what looked to be a recycling bin. Peeking inside, he pulled out half a sheet of palladium. Smiling, he tucked it under his arm before walking out of the garage.

Meandering through the prefabs, Nihlus managed to avoid disturbing any Thresher Maws even when he returned to the tower. He ascended the staircase and met up with Saren at the top floor.

"I've got a few parts and human tools," he informed.

Saren slowly nodded.

"Good, about time too. Hand them to me, will you?" Saren instructed, "I think I have a few initial ideas."

Upon cue, Nihlus began emptying his satchel. Saren picked over the components and tools and scraps when he saw the terminal.

"Nihlus, we're not looters or architects," Saren scolded.

Nihlus gave Saren a blank stare as he flexed his mandibles.

"I was simply looking for an opportunity to see what they're like," he shrugged.

Saren groaned as he gathered the materials and went to work. He drew out his omni-tool and began cutting out the necessary components for the repairs. He carefully examined the damaged antenna, calculating which components he should apply to repair it. An hour passed with Saren and Nihlus cutting up pieces, fitting them where they were needed, and finally welding them into place. With the antenna fully functional, they began testing it. It sparked and sputtered, but died out after a first shot.

"Hmm, almost, but something is still off," he muttered.

Saren went back to inspecting the antenna. He made a few more adjustments then reignited the device. The tower crackled once more before short circuiting and going dark for good. Saren groaned in frustration as he clenched his fist.

"Well, so much for that idea," Saren muttered.

"There's still got to be something back in the admin building, right?" Nihlus asked, "maps,
navigation or something. They can't have made blind jumps through the relay."

Nodding in agreement, Saren double-checked the files he downloaded from the admin building's terminal.

"It'll have to do for now," he sighed, "let's head back to the ship."
Probe Hunting in Space

It may have been a long trip, but the shuttle soon arrived at the Spectre docks in the Citadel. Once Saren turned off the ignition, he tilted his head towards Amber. While Nihlus stood from his seat, Amber appeared to zone out, so Saren unbuckled his safety belt before he approached her and knelt in front of her.

"Shepard," Saren asked, "are you doing all right?"

Amber snapped out of her thoughts and turned towards Saren before she nodded.

"Yeah," she said, "at least I didn't suffer another horrible injury this time."

Amber stood from her seat and followed Saren out of the shuttle, where they met up with Nihlus across the walkway.

"All's not lost…yet," Nihlus encouraged, "we still have at least a possible lead to work with."

Amber gave both Saren and Nihlus a soft smile.

"At least it's better than no way back," she replied.

"Even then, somewhere, somehow we're bound to eventually encounter more humans," Nihlus added.

Saren, Amber and Nihlus sauntered out of the Spectre docks, with the older Spectre leading the other two to the Spectre academy.

"Just stay close to us and follow us to the labs," Saren ordered as the trio stepped through the academy doors, "I'd prefer if we didn't have to answer too many questions."

Amber nodded while she extended her hand, allowing Saren to hold it. While they meandered through the corridor, Nihlus used his charisma to attract the attention from the others in the academy, that way they didn't notice the human accompanying both turian Spectres.

Saren and Amber were the first to the tech labs while Nihlus stayed behind. The older turian Spectre placed the satchel on the table and emptied its contents. He pulled out an OSD and the terminal Nihlus stole and plugged them in to one of the computers present. He then started examining the files while Amber watched over his shoulder. Saren soon pulled out what appeared to be an overhead view of the galaxy onscreen.

"We call it the Milky Way Galaxy," Amber mentioned, "what do you guys call it?"

"Nothing special, last I checked," Saren mumbled, focusing on the screen.

He pulled up a small series of documents from the OSD and looked them over.

"Looks like a bunch of shopping manifests, no?"

"I'm not sure what you mean by shopping manifests," Amber shrugged.

Amber examined the blips of light on the galaxy map.

"But," Amber continued, "I do know those are locations of our colonies."
"Well, the relays do keep tabs on who goes through and where they end up. Normally, this is a tracking method that needs either the highest clearance to gain access to or Spectre clearance. Fortunately for me, that won't be too much of a problem from here," Saren replied.

He tapped a few keys and eyed a trail from where Akuze once was out to another system. While he continued his research, he took the time to take some notes.

"Now, it only gives a general idea where someone like an escaping convict could be," Saren continued, "but it gives a general idea of where to look."

Amber nodded in agreement while she typed down an entry in her omni-tool's journal.

"So we might have something?" she asked.

He let out a cautious sigh.

"We might. If not, we can always dig through the terminal Nihlus took, might be something on there as well."

Once Saren finished recording the data from the OSD, he double-checked the message inbox in his omni-tool. He did find a message from Sparatus.

[A second unidentified foreign probe just showed in our space. Check it out, and be careful. You know what happened last time one of our crews handled those things too carelessly.]

Saren felt a chill sent down his spine before he made a brief glance at Amber. He stood up and guided her out of the academy.

"So tell me, what exactly do you put into those probes? Or is that classified?" he asked her.

Amber raised her eyebrows once she understood what Saren was talking about.

"They're armed with nuclear warheads for the circumstances they are compromised," she answered, "we didn't know anything yet, but under the circumstances we engaged in space warfare with some hostile race, we couldn't let them gain any insight to our technology."

Amber took notice as Saren flicked his mandibles.

"That definitely explains a lot," Saren commented, "it's a classified issue, but one of those probes had eventually crash landed on one of the outer turian colonies. The locals dragged it back and were beginning to cut it open, but they must've triggered something in the process. The colony was flattened, and there was barely enough documentation to know what happened."

Amber couldn't help but cringe. She found herself regretting that time she agreed to manufacturers in the Alliance installing nuclear weapons in probes.

"Oh, fuck," she muttered.

Saren paused in his tracks and tilted his gaze towards Shepard.

"'Oh fuck' is right. Fortunately, we know what we're dealing with this time, so with Nihlus' help, it just might work."

Amber nervously grasped her backpack straps.

"So what do we do?" she asked Saren.
"We're still taking it apart. It's human tech, but I've had close calls with explosive ordinances in the past."

"Ok then," Amber nodded in agreement, "maybe I can come along."

The following day, Saren, Amber, and Nihlus met right back at the former's shuttle and departed early in the morning. Passing by the academy one more time, Saren picked up a new set of protective asari armor for Amber and equipment necessary for disarming explosive ordinances in counter-terror operations. Without further delay, the group set out from the Citadel and headed towards turian space. This time, Amber left her backpack behind in Saren's apartment and relaxed into her seat after the shuttle was flung into warp by the Mass Relay. Minutes later, Saren watched as Amber stood from her seat and put on her new set of armor.

"So how does it fit?" he asked.

Once Amber finished slipping into her armor, she flexed her limbs to test its mobility.

"It feels alright. A bit lighter than my previous set," she answered.

Saren nodded in agreement as Amber sat back down. They exited the Mass Relay into an outer sector of turian space where the probe had last been spotted on scanning scopes. Saren turned on the shuttle's scanners to pinpoint the location of the probe.

"There it is, fifty thousand meters out," Nihlus pointed out.

Upon cue, Amber and Saren spotted the distant probe ahead of them.

"Amber, stay in the ship. Set the vessel to autopilot and let's get ready to head out, Nihlus," Saren ordered.

Amber gave both Saren and Nihlus a blank stare as they reached for their helmets.

"Maybe I could join in next time?" Amber clamored.

"Maybe. We'll see when we get there," Nihlus quipped.

Nihlus and Saren secured their helmets before they stepped into the airlock. Hearing the air being withdrawn from the room, they swiftly anticipated the opening of the doors leading outside. With a magnetic tether in one hand and a toolkit in the other, Saren dove out to the human probe not ten meters out from their ship. Clinging onto the side, he locked the magnet onto the probe and got to work cutting it open. Nihlus followed suit as he grabbed hold of the probe. The younger Spectre scanned the side of the device for a better internal look.

"Looks good so far. It's still active, so be careful," he informed over the suit coms.

"I understand, Nihlus," Saren reassured over the suit coms.

Saren slowly peeled back the flap to reveal the interior. He cautiously worked off a few pins before removing a bigger panel running half the length of the probe. He managed to expose more of the probe's interior to work with. It retained a large number of mechanical inputs usually seen within a scouting probe, but the most distinct attribute was the unmistakable profile of a warhead lining the core of the device. With his suspicions confirmed, he knew he would need to disarm it. He reached inside and began to slowly take apart the components to draw out the warhead. He even resorted to pushing wires out of the way.
Drawing the warhead out, he and Nihlus began to slowly work the top of the device off to dismantle the interior. While they were glad of their progress, they still had to be careful as they were aware of its destructive power. Saren eyed the screen on the side while he tweaked the wires. Cutting one wire, the screen suddenly flashed red before him. In a burst of panic he used his biotics to fling the payload into the void with considerable force, barely grabbing hold of the magnetic cable from the reaction force. Nihlus barely held onto the probe as Saren jerked it around. Somewhere in the distance, the device detonated in a silent, spectacular ball of fire.

"That was," Nihlus gasped, "that was…"

"Let's just get the damned thing back onto the ship," Saren interrupted.

The climbed back aboard and drew in the cable with the probe still connected. The two yanked their helmets off as soon as the pressure rushed back into the room. Amber heard the commotion, which compelled her to stand from her seat and rush towards the turian Spectre.

"Saren, Nihlus!" Amber exclaimed, "did you see that explosion?"

Nihlus was rubbing his eyes vigorously on the way in.

"You probably should've said something about not looking at it."

"There's no way she would've known the damned thing would blow up," Saren huffed.

Amber folded her arms behind her back and shifted her feet in a coy manner.

"I suspected it would happen based on what you told me yesterday about the other probe," Amber clarified.

"Still, what matters is we salvaged this. From where it was in space, I could have the ship VI calculate where it was launched from and how long ago," Saren reminded.

Amber nodded in agreement before she, Saren and Nihlus returned to their seats. The older turian Spectre shut off the autopilot and began maneuvering the shuttle out of the area.

"A close thing," Nihlus sighed as he kicked his feet back.

Saren didn't say anything else as the shuttle made its way to the Mass Relay. They returned to the Citadel with a small security team waiting for them at the docks. The team took notice of the probe before they set off to reel it in while the shuttle's ramp opened. Saren, Amber and Nihlus emerged and stepped across the walkway.

"I've already sent Sparatus a message about the package's retrieval," Saren instructed, "let's head down to the academy, see what we can find from that probe."

Saren led the way out of the docks once the security team hoisted the probe onto a flatbed trolley. Amber kept herself hidden between the tall, turian Spectres on their way back, keeping her new helmet on to better hide her identity as an asari. It took a matter of minutes before they arrived at the Spectre academy, so the Spectres pushed the door open, allowing the security team to push the trolley inside the building. They made it to the labs not too long after and were away from prying eyes to maintain secrecy. This gave Amber a chance to remove her helmet and set it onto a counter.

"Think you can still make something from it?" she asked.

Saren had already gotten to work at a terminal at the other end of the lab.
"I'm having the trajectory calculated," Saren replied, "Nihlus, if you please?"

Nihlus nodded before he sauntered over to the probe. He slowly began to scan it more thoroughly with his omni-tool. While he did, Amber examined the data that began appearing on the screen.

"Anything worthwhile?" she prompted.

Even if he still focused on his task, Saren placed one hand on Amber's shoulder.

"Just give me time," Saren requested, "I might have something, but please be patient."

"Ok," Amber nodded.

Amber stepped over to a counter where she sat down and turned on her omni-tool. The calculations dragged on, and Nihlus continued to work with the probe. During that time, the human soldier worked on writing her journal entry. She still had a lingering sense of loneliness, being so far away from home amidst species she hadn't until a few days prior ever seen before. Still, she recalled a few friends that were lucky enough to have avoided the same fate her platoon suffered. She remained huddled on a chair while the other two worked away.

Time felt like a blur to her until Nihlus placed his hand on her shoulder.

"You tired?" Nihlus purred.

She initially stuttered at the reaction.

"I…a-a bit."

Nihlus gestured Amber to the terminal screen while she stood from her seat.

"Not much, but I think we're on the right track," Nihlus said.

Raising her eyebrows, Amber stepped over to the terminal.

"You know of a 'Delvon Industries'?" he asked.

Amber rubbed her finger along her cheek as she thought over the question.

"I did remember taking a survey from that company," Amber mentioned.

"You got something?" Saren asked.

Amber shook her head.

"Not much," Amber admitted.

Saren shrugged.

"I'm tired and hungry as is," Saren announced, "we'll pick this up tomorrow. Sorry."
Exchanging Familial Banter

Amber double-checked her journal entries in her omni-tool. Around three weeks have passed since the mission of Akuze and she was certain the Alliance would assume she died in action. She imagined the trouble she'd give to revert her status from KIA back to active duty once she made it back.

When she shut off her omni-tool, she picked up her dream catcher that lay next to her and held it over her head. She watched it hang there, minute bits of energy causing it to slightly swing back and forth. Gazing at it reminded her of the days she and her mom would sit down and read any fantastic tales they could get their hands on. The haunting dreams of Akuze still lingered, revealing their ugly heads every now and then like the monsters they embodied. Perhaps it would help to remedy that. Closing her eyes, Amber brought her dream catcher close to her chest.

Saren came back some time later, having bought more a load of groceries with him. On the way to the kitchen, he briefly peeked into the guest bedroom.

"Shepard?" Saren called over.

Amber snapped out of her thoughts and sat up from her bed.

"Saren, I didn't hear you return," she acknowledged.

"I got you more food," Saren pointed out, holding out the grocery bag.

She gave a small smile.

"Thanks, Saren," she replied.

Amber set her dream catcher down on her end table and stepped out of her room while Saren headed over to the kitchen to put away the groceries.

"Is there anything else you might need?" he asked, unloading the bag.

Amber shook her head.

"Good. Just wondering, have you been sleeping well?"

"A little," she answered.

"Still need me? There's no shame in saying you do," he reassured.

Just as Saren finished storing the food in the refrigerator, Amber approached him and embraced herself to him. Saren reciprocated the gesture.

"If you have troubles on your mind, speak them," Saren advised. "you may be special forces, but you aren't impervious."

"Well," Amber replied, "I know I still miss my friends back at the Alliance."

He nodded.

"I understand that," he reassured her, "we'll find your way back."
Amber nodded at him before he released her from his embrace.

"So," Amber asked, "what do you like to do in your downtime?"

"Well, there's a bar I like to hit after vigorous missions. Want to come along?" he offered.

Amber nodded at him before she scampered over to her guest bedroom, where she grabbed her boots and slipped them on. She left the guest bedroom and met up with Saren at the front door. They stepped out of the apartment and traversed through the wards until they reached a wooden-smelling, well lit bar. The inside almost resembled the inside of some animal carcass with the bare structure being barely outlined by the completely black walls. The outside walls were completely glass, and the front door was composed of a thick slab of petrified wood. The booths themselves appeared to be made using the hides of something big.

"Well?" he asked.

Amber perched her chin on her palm.

"It's impressive," she commented.

He gestured to the door and brought her inside. It was a relatively modest part of the ward, so he felt there would be minimal risk to bringing her along. It didn't take long for them to find suitable seats. He pulled out menus for the both of them.

"I'll do my best to help you along with which drinks are better," Saren said, "for example, don't get anything krogan-made."

"Right," Amber nodded.

Amber began reading through the section for asari and salarians. While she went with a salarian-made brew, Saren chose a turian brandy. While they waited for their drinks, the Alliance soldier read through the list of appetizers.

"Erm…what would you say is good?" she asked, unsure about the small, yet foreign list of dishes.

Amber showed Saren her menu, allowing him to read the appetizer list.

"As for levo-options, I'd definitely recommend the salarian dishes again," Saren suggested, "needless to say, it's an interesting mix."

Amber nodded in agreement and then she found a salarian dish that she wanted to try. Placing their orders, the waiter took their menus and they chatted a bit while they waited for their drinks and appetizers. As other guests came and went, a couple of them made brief glances at the turian Spectre and the human accompanying him.

"So you're sure them seeing us here won't be a problem?" Amber inquired.

Saren shrugged nonchalantly.

"Like I said, this is one of the seedier parts of the Citadel," Saren replied, "word won't get far."

Saren ran his talons through Amber's hair, allowing her to lean into the touch.

"Still, the key term here is unlikely. You sure this won't spread?" she asked sealing reassurance.

Minutes later, the waiter returned with their drinks and their appetizers on a tray.
"Reporters, C-Sec, and anyone digging for rumors rarely come down here," Saren answered, "what could possibly go wrong?"

Saren and Amber started eating their appetizers while savoring their drinks.

"So, tell me more about your family," he said between bites.

"My mom raised me on her own," Amber explained.

"Just a mother?" he was cautious not to unearth anything too discomforting.

Amber nodded.

"From what I could hear," Amber clarified, "my biological parents didn't have that much luck."

Saren grimly nodded.

"I can relate," Saren commented.

Amber tilted her head as she raised her eyebrows.

"Why?" she paused, "do you have any relatives you miss?"

"None I can remember aside from my older brother," Saren answered, looking off to the side.

Amber took another bite of her appetizer.

"So what's your brother like?" Amber proclaimed.

"Oh, he's still around, doing his own thing. Yes, he's an asshole and did a lot of older brother things to me when we were kids, but he kept us safe. That's all that matters," Saren hastily corrected.

After they took their sips from their drinks, Amber extended her hand, allowing Saren to grasp it as means to accepting the gesture.

"Maybe when we find my way back," Amber asked, "would you like to meet my friends?"

He flicked his mandibles.

"Yeah, I'd like that," Saren nodded.

Time seemed to fly, yet Saren and Amber finished their drink and appetizers. The turian Spectre paid the bill before he led Amber out of the bar. The stroll through the wards went quiet until they returned to their apartment. Amber put aside her stuff before she returned to the living room.

"So, what do you do for personal enjoyment?" Amber asked.

Saren noticed Amber was examining his game console underneath the screen.

"I could turn that on and show you what I have," he offered.

Amber sat down on the couch.

"I'd love that," she nodded.

He turned the holoscreen and handed her a controller.
"I'm sure you'll get the hang of it rather quickly."

Amber nodded at Saren before she turned her focus towards the screen.

"So the scenario is a bit of a mess," Saren started explaining, "we're mercenaries and looters who are interested in some ancient tech on a rather barren planet. Along the way, we get tied into the conflict between factions below and fighting ensues as we face off against both the hostile wildlife and locals."

Amber listened as the game continued to load.

"I'll try to help you along, get used to the controls and such," he continued.

"Thanks," Amber complimented.

The two continued to play through the night, fighting alongside copious hordes of various species and tribal enemies. It took some trial and error for Amber to get the hang of the game, and part of her now wondered if Jack would like to give the game a try. They only came to a proper stop when drowsiness began to take hold. Shutting off the game, Saren lifted the tired human into his arms and carried her over to her room. He laid her down on her bed and tucked her underneath the covers.

"Would you like some company?" Saren purred.

Amber quietly nodded. He crawled under the covers behind her and huddled up against her back. Saren watched as she leaned into his embrace, which elicited purrs out of him. In turn, he wrapped his arm over her shoulder, feeling her warmth as he pressed her against him. Thoughts swam in his mind, remembering he noticed Amber growing fond of him these days. Could it be a method of coping with her grief? Over the course of her stay, Amber had noticeably been spending more time with him between missions. He really didn't mind it all too much considering she was admittedly lonely, being so far away from her own species. He wasn't sure if he was feeling the same way, but he brushed it off so he could drift off to sleep.

The following morning, Saren received a ping on his omni-tool. Putting down his kava, he looked at the message.

{Chellick and Garrus invited me to breakfast. Wanted to include you as well.}

Saren read the message before he turned his head towards Amber as she was in the middle of brewing her tea.

"Hey, Nihlus just invited me to breakfast. Want to come along?" he asked.

Amber paused what she was doing before she tilted her head towards Saren.

"I'd like that," she nodded, "do you have a portable cup?"

"Yeah, I have a few paper cups in the kitchen," Saren answered, "I'll grab you one, then I'll be getting my coat."

Amber smiled before she headed over to the front door to slip on her shoes. Just as the tea finished brewing, Saren poured it into a paper cup and sealed it with a lid. With everything set, they headed out the door and made their way through the Presidium towards the cafe Nihlus had contacted them from. Once they arrived, Nihlus stood near the door along with two turians standing next to
"Hey, Saren! Glad you could make it," he greeted.

"Oho! What mystery have you brought with you today, Spectre Arterius?" one of the other turians chuckled ambitiously.

Amber gave both the turian C-Sec officers in confusion.

"Do you know them?" Amber asked Nihlus, referring to the C-Sec officers.

Nihlus chuckled as he scratched his mandible.

"Shepard," Nihlus introduced, gesturing to the C-Sec officers, "this is Decian Chellick and Garrus Vakarian from C-Sec. Garrus, Chellick, this is Amber Shepard."

Saren cleared his throat.

"Right, Shepard is a human," Saren added, "a species we all haven't made proper contact with yet."

Garrus and Chellick's mandibles flexed in curiosity.

"Huh, so that's what it was," Garrus hummed.

Nihlus cleared his throat before he gestured his guests inside, where they searched the cafe for suitable places to sit.

"I'm glad you had us over, Chellick," Saren said, grabbing a seat.

"Eh," Chellick replied, "it's no biggie."

Amber sat down next to Saren and took a sip of her tea while she read through the menu.

"So, how long have you been on the station?" Garrus hummed.

"It'll probably be a month within a few days," Amber answered.

Saren, Amber, and Nihlus looked over the menu while the two C-Sec officers continued chatting among themselves. By now, Amber had gotten used to trying out alien foods.

"I think we know what we're getting," Nihlus informed as he perked his head upwards, "what about you, Chellick?"

Nihlus noticed Chellick and Garrus were still bantering with one another.

"Chellick?" Nihlus called out.

Chellick and Garrus paused in their conversation while they shifted their attention towards Nihlus.

"Yes?" Garrus returned.

"I meant to say is," Nihlus clarified, "what do you want to order?"

"Uuh...still working that out," Chellick returned.

While Garrus and Chellick double-checked their menu, Amber found a dish she found herself wanting to try.
"Anything you had in mind?" Saren asked her.

Amber shifted her attention towards Saren and pointed to an asari breakfast dish.

"Do you know how the asari get these kinds of eggs?" Amber asked.

He looked over her shoulder.

"I believe those are a type of lizard eggs," Saren mentioned.

Amber nodded at Saren just as the waiter approached their table. The group hastily placed their orders and handed off their menus before resuming their discussion.

"Speaking of which," Chellick asked Amber, "where exactly are you from?"

"Earth, it's not a planet well known," she answered.

Chellick tilted his head sideways while Garrus flexed his mandibles.

"What's it like there?" Garrus followed up.

"It's complicated. If I were to describe every biome and metropolitan setting, we'd be here all day."

Garrus couldn't help but chuckle.

"Yeah," Garrus agreed, "maybe I could wait until later."

Chellick took a swig of kava before adding another question.

"So, you've been living with Arterius this last month, right?"

"After he saved my life," Amber nodded, "yeah."

Amber took a sip of her tea. The two officers silently nodded, making sense of the situation.

"My team had no idea that one of our colonies was occupied by Thresher Maws," Amber added.

"Yeah, about the previous bit," Chellick started, "I don't know who it was, but one of the boys at the precinct managed to snag a shot of you and Amber, Arterius."

He pulled out his omni-tool and pulled up an image to show the two.

Saren and Amber couldn't help but shudder.

"W-What the…?" Amber blurted.

"It's not something that's caught too much momentum," Chellick clarified, "seeing as it has yet to get out of the precinct, but it's definitely been shared around the office."

Saren's mandibles flicked nervously as he examined the photo.

"That's…problematic," Saren muttered.

Amber tilted her head towards Saren.

"What do we do?" she asked him.
"Just keep up the pace," Saren advised, "and connect with the rest of your kind before this raises too many questions."

Amber nodded in agreement just as the waiter arrived with their breakfast orders. Even when they started eating their meals, the thought of an uproar from Amber's presence was enough to be unnerving.
A quiet morning didn't last much long when Saren started gearing up for another assignment. He had been stumbling around the house when he saw Amber still in the kitchen.

"Morning, Amber. I've got another mission and I'll be heading out shortly. Would you want to come along?" he offered.

Amber finished sipping her tea before she stood from her seat and disposed of her empty tin can.

"That would be great," Amber nodded, "I'll go get my armor."

Amber stumbled out of the kitchen and made her way to her bedroom, where she pulled her suit of armor out of the closet. Clipping the locking clamps into position, she stepped back out into the living room to join up with Saren and headed out the front door. They sauntered through the Presidium and made their way to the Spectre docks. After making it through the gate, they wandered through the docks until they arrived at Saren's shuttle.

"We'll be heading to a turian colony, dealing with a smuggling ring," Saren informed.

Saren and Amber boarded the shuttle, with the turian Spectre settling into the pilot's seat and Amber sitting in a passenger seat. While he turned on the ignition, she held her helmet close on her lap. The shuttle began hovering out of the Citadel and it made its way towards the Mass Relay, warping into FTL speed.

Time flew by when the shuttle entered turian space. Sharply descending the atmosphere, the ship sharply pulled up to fly parallel to the planet surface until the colony came into view. The mining colony sat along the rocky, mountainous landscape that stretched on for the entire biome the colony was in. After being granted permission to land, they landed on one of the docking platforms at the port. Saren turned off the ignitions before he and Amber stood from their seats. He gathered their weapons while she secured her helmet on her head. The turian Spectre led her outside and they made their way through the docks. With minimal interference with the local authorities, Amber managed to pass as an asari. Once they left the docks, Saren and Amber headed over to a tram station and they double-checked the schedule for departures and arrivals. Once they boarded the next tram, he quietly pulled up his omni-tool with a map of the colony.

"Here's the deal," Saren instructed, "the local authorities have pinpointed the majority of the smugglers' operations through the sewer, but are still having problems finding their nest and flushing them out. We'll be heading in, confirming their presence, then flushing them out. We'll mark the place for the colony administration to clean up later."

"Deal," Amber nodded.

Just as the tram started its departure, Saren double-checked his weapons and handed Amber a pistol.

"Sorry I didn't bring you much else. Besides, given the diverse types of weapons used by smugglers, I thought I'd leave you enough backpack space to figure out what you like," he apologized.

"That's ok," Amber reassured him.

Amber strapped a holster around her waist before she stashed the pistol into the holster.
An hour or so passed before the tram reached its destination. They hastily departed and vanished into the crowds ahead. They started searching for manholes or other means of entry to the sewers as they meandered through the streets. Creeping into a back alley, the two found a manhole just around the corner from an open view of the streets. Lifting up the cover, Saren took point to check if their opening was clear. Confirming that there was no one waiting for them at the bottom, Amber started climbing down the ladder.

Saren continued to take point while Amber covered the rear. Taking cover around a corner before peaking around, he held up a hand to signify to stay back. It was a trio of soldiers on patrol, chattering to themselves under a small lamp. While he listened in on their banter, Saren pulled out his pistol, ready to make a strike.

"Stick to the shadows and follow me," Saren instructed.

They moved out hunched over, only protected by the dimly lit tunnels. Moving close, Saren grabbed one of the covers and dragged him away while Amber gunned the other two down. With their first set of obstacles out of the way, Amber gazed ahead into the tunnel. Before moving on, she stopped by one of the smuggler corpses to pick up a rifle. She did find some ammo in one of the pockets, so she stashed them in her backpack before she and Saren continued forth. Another couple of smugglers came to investigate the noises from earlier before being sharply silenced by both attackers with their guns. The human soldier double-checked their corpses for any useful weapons.

So far, she preferred Saren's pistol, a small, sleek shotgun, and a handful of their grenades. More and more kept arriving, searching for them and slowly leading them to a backdoor into an underground parking garage. With the smugglers still in pursuit, Amber and Saren hid behind some cover and waited for them to appear in their line of sight. Amber was the first to fire as they rounded a corner, gunning down two while Saren eliminated the third and forth. With more smugglers out of the way, Saren and Amber continued forth.

The parking garage had been emptied out and retrofitted with cover and auto turrets for the smugglers' operations. Could they possibly be relocating? Chances were, they knew they had been discovered with someone like Saren in their presence. Still, the turian Spectre was confident he confirmed the local authorities' suspicions. However, the turian Spectre wasn't confident he knew the full extent of Amber's capabilities. After being swarmed by three men who were each twice her size, she wormed her way through their grasps and defeated each one singlehandedly. With three corpses lying underneath her feet, Amber gave him a wink and a thumbs up. He replied with a friendly, yet unsure gesture before continuing.

Leaving the parking garage, Saren and Amber meandered through the corridor in search of the main office. Whoever worked there was in a hurry and made a run for it the moment gunshots rang. There was plenty of loose ends left around, but there was no sign of where they went. Scanning the room, Amber's eyes spotted someone among the crowds outside, shoving their way through the crowds.

"Shepard?" Saren paused.

Amber kept her eyes locked onto the potential suspect before she started pursuing him. Rushing out the door, she started barking at people to move aside so she could give chase. Off to a generally good start, her target whipped out a pistol and began firing back at her. Most of the shots missed while only a few grazed her barriers and one grazed her helmet visor. She didn't flinch as she kept charging after her target while Saren followed her. In a burst of adrenaline, she ran forward, tackled the target and knocked him out with a blow to the back of his head. As she kept her target pinned to
the ground, Saren managed to catch up with her.

"Well, that was impressive. Are you alright?" he asked her.

Saren slapped some cuffs onto the suspect while he took a look at her helmet. Her headgear had taken all of the blow, but the visor was now heavily damaged, exposing her right eye, nose, and upper right cheek.

"It may have been a bit rough," Amber answered as she stood to her feet, "but I'll be ok. I've had worse."

Before they could converse further, the colony authorities arrived, shuttle stopping just short on the street.

"Thanks for the assistance, Spectre," the first officer said as he stepped forward, "we can take it from here...uh, who's this?"

The turian clearly took notice of Amber, and her non-asari attributes under the visor. Amber froze in her tracks, unable to come up with a word as she fidgeted nervously.

"Right. Excuse me officer, I'm in a bit of a rush right now," Saren interrupted, "I really should be going. The rest is yours, officer."

Saren hastily scooped Amber off her feet and back to the spaceport, averting eye contact. Once they reached the docks, the turian Spectre didn't waste any time as he boarded the shuttle and settled the human into the passenger seat. Worryingly, he tugged off her helmet to see the full damage.

"Bit of a close call," he hummed.

Amber nodded in agreement.

"You could say that," she mused.

Saren sat down in his pilot seat and turned on the ignition, taking control of the steering handles.

"Well," Saren sighed, "hopefully there are no repercussions from this encounter."

Saren maneuvered the shuttle out of the docking bay and it accelerated high into the atmosphere until it reached outer space. Without further delay, they entered the relay back to the Citadel. During the flight, Amber rested in her seat. By the time the shuttle arrived at the Citadel an hour later, it landed at the Spectre docks. Saren turned off the ignition and stood from his seat.


Amber stood to her feet and followed Saren out of the shuttle, crossing the walkway to reach the dock.

"Just out of curiosity," Saren asked, "when did you start training to join your special forces?"

Amber shrugged.

"I started my N7 program when I enlisted in the Alliance," she answered.

"That would've been fifteen or sixteen years of age, right?" Saren paused.
"Eighteen," Amber corrected.

"Right, sorry for the mistake. Forgive me if I had underestimated your capabilities," he added.

"That's all right," Amber smiled as she gave Saren a pat on the shoulder.

"Forgive my intrusiveness," Saren blurted, "I just might have to look into how you N7s train."

Saren and Amber made their way out of the Spectre docks and meandered through the Presidium when the turian Spectre suddenly heard a ping in his omni-tool. He opened his inbox and noticed a message from Sparatus. Already, Saren was alarmed to see the message name.

{Urgent: In regards to your latest assignment.}

He couldn't help but sigh as he opened the message to read it.

{Spectre,

I'm glad to see your report in regard to your success handling the smugglers along the outer colonies. Unfortunately, I'm concerned about the local-reports and individual accounts about our guest. Meet me as soon as you can. I'm not sure we can contain this much longer.

Councilor Sparatus}

Saren's mandibles flicked nervously as he shifted his gaze towards Amber, causing her to pause in her tracks.

"What is it?" Amber paused.

"I think the hole in your visor proved to be a more fatal error than initially anticipated," he explained before leading them back to his hovercar.

Saren and Amber hopped inside, with the turian Spectre sitting in the driver seat and taking control of the steering handles. The skycar lifted into the air and maneuvered through the traffic towards the Citadel Tower. Upon arrival, Saren landed his skycar before he and Amber disembarked the vehicle. After hustling inside, Saren guided her to Sparatus's office, where they shut the door behind them.

"Arterius, I'm glad you could respond so quickly," Sparatus said, "please, take a seat, you two."

Complying as ordered, Saren took a nervous huff.

"Councilor," Saren began, "we did what was necessary to complete the mission and her identity was partially revealed simply due to bad luck. There was no way we would've known that a stray shot would compromise her."

Sparatus nodded at both of them.

"That's understandable," he affirmed, "I also know that to sustain such secrecy without severely violating her ability to move and interact freely would also be impossible. My biggest concern is how the community will regard her until we connect with her species."

Amber couldn't help but cringe.

"You don't think," she blurted, "they'll see me as hostile, do you, sir?"
"Not yet. There could be the possibility that all our worries are for naught, and this all won't matter," he shrugged.

Those words were enough for Amber to relax her shoulders in relief.

"Still, I'd like for you to get back on track with getting her home," Sparatus insisted, "the sooner we do, the sooner people won't be prying at her trying to figure out what she is."

Saren nodded before he turned on his omni-tool and scrolled to the files he stored that involved what clues he salvaged to find human settlements.

"I'll get back on that, sir," Saren nodded.
Three months have gone by, and there was still no luck in finding ways to contact the Alliance. Amber still wasn't willing to give up on her attempts to get back home, though. At the moment, she lay back on her bed as she played The Binding of Isaac. Saren was working away in his office on the most recent lead with no luck in sight. Though he knew there might be times she would need to cope with her past grief, she didn't have nightmares as much as she first came here. While it was tranquility found from dependence on Saren, it was helping her sleep at night.

By late evening, Amber finished her fifth playthrough for the night, so she paused at the main menu to double-check the time. After she did, she shut off the game and placed her miniature console on her end table. She rest her head against her pillow, eyelids weighing down.

She could feel veins pulsating beneath her feet. The area was not well-lit, but Amber took notice of bones holding the structure together. Her eyes began to adjust to the darkness to better see the fleshy walls. This didn't appear to be an ordinary cave, so what could she possibly have entered? Amber began scanning the room for anything she could use as a light to guide her through this fleshy cave.

Bravely enduring the steam, Amber figured that there might be something of interest inside, so she reached her arm into the vent, only to find that she wouldn't be able to fit her whole body through. She took another moment to scan the room for a flashlight. She couldn't find one, so she returned her gaze towards the vent, wondering if she'll be able to stretch it with her hands. She climbed inside, barely able to fit herself, and started climbing forward. It was dark, cold, and every now and then, another burst of steam would brush against her. Despite the fact she could barely see what was up ahead, she kept crawling forth, not paying attention to the heat building up in her stomach.

As she reached the end of the vent, the air increasingly became moist. Climbing out the other side, she found herself in a smooth, more compact chamber that looked initially pear shaped. Ahead, she found Saren standing along the fleshy wall and staring at it for some reason.

"Saren?" Amber called over, "what are you doing in here?"

Saren paused what he was doing and tilted his head towards Amber.

"I was about to ask you the same thing," he replied.

That was when she realized that he wasn't wearing anything and that all his plates were exposed. Amber tilted her head downwards, only to find she wasn't wear anything either. She blushed as she returned her glance at Saren.

"Were you able to fit through that vent?" she asked him.
"I got...stuck. But I learned to improvise," he resumed his calm stride towards her.

Likewise, Amber slowly stumbled towards the turian Spectre. All of a sudden, she tripped over an exposed blood vessel, eliciting a startled yelp out of her as she almost fell forward, only for Saren to catch her. She gazed up at his bright crystal blue eyes, feeling herself lustfully tremble as she exhaled. That's when she felt her loins heating up, her folds gradually becoming slick with fluids.

"Saren," she gasped, "are you feeling...?"

Saren nodded as he ran his talon through her hair.

"I am."

He leaned in, brushing his mouth plates against her cheek, allowing his tongue to roll out and lick her. Saren lifted her into his arms and carried her over to the center of the room, where he lay her on her back and he hovered over her. As he followed and knelt down, she brushed a hand against his hip, his gaze transfixed on her. He brushed his talon along her nether regions, watching as she gasped and arched her back. Her hand traced the crisp lines until she reached the plates between his legs. She'd done enough research to know what she was looking for.

"Tell me, what's it going to take to make that thing show itself?" Amber whispered.

Saren chuckled as he pressed his hips against hers, encouraging Amber to grind her hips against his.

"Nothing much, just a bit of encouragement," he muttered.

They pressed their lips together, tongues tangling in a ritualistic dance. While Saren held her close, he and Amber continued grinding their nether regions, her fluids lubricating the friction. The next thing she knew, she felt his plates beginning to shift and the tip of his length started to slowly emerge. When was the last time she had sex, anyway? She breathed a needy moan as her folds brushed up and down his length.

"Don't...don't hold back..." she begged.

By the time Saren felt himself fully emerge, he pushed his way inside of her, eliciting a sharp cry out of her. He started slowly enough to become accustomed to her while Amber swung her legs around his back to hold on. With the turian Spectre pounding into her flesh, she perched her arms over his carapace. The room seemed to spin, and her fingers were struggling to find purchase.

Saren craned his head and nipped her ear while she relaxed in his embrace.

"Y-yes...keep going..." she mumbled, barely able to coherently focus on the world around her.

With pressure building up inside of her, Amber clenched her thighs while Saren slowly picked up his pace. Yelping with bliss, she reached her climax and clung onto Saren in a wave of orgasmic pleasure. As she panted, she closed her eyes as the turian Spectre nuzzled his face against hers.

The instant she opened her eyes, she found herself in her bedroom. Amber took a moment to scan her surroundings until she found her fingers pressed against her clit underneath her pants while her thighs clenched her hand. Pulling out her hand, she came to the embarrassing realization of just how wet she was, seeing the fluids still clinging to her fingers. Was this some sort of result from her being homesick?

Amber tilted her head towards the window, only to notice the artificial morning light illuminating
the station. She pushed her legs off the side of the bed and stood to her feet before she stepped over to the drawers to pull out a clean pair of panties. Hastily rushing off to the bathroom, she tossed the soiled one in the laundry bin, put on the new one, and hastily washed her hands in the sink. By the time she finished, she slipped her pajama pants back on and stepped out of the backroom. She stumbled her way into the kitchen, where she could see Saren in the middle of brewing his kava. She didn't completely focus on him as she headed over to the fridge to fetch a tin of food.

"Ah, good morning, Amber. Did you sleep well?" he greeted.

Amber shuddered shortly after she closed the refrigerator door.

"It was…pretty restful last night," she stammered nervously.

Amber stepped over to the counter and read the directions on the tin before she popped it into the microwave and turned it on. Saren paid no attention as he looked back to his omni-tool.

"That's good to hear," he said.

While she waited for her food to finish heating up, Amber began browsing the cupboard for tea bags.

"Looking for something?" he asked, slightly looking up from his omni-tool.

Amber shook her head as she gestured to a tea bag she already pulled out. She quickly pulled her breakfast from the microwave, made herself some tea and hastily sat down. Saren finished brewing his kava minutes later before he poured some into his mug and sat down across from her. During the early hours of the morning, the two remained otherwise silent. Amber, however, would give an occasional nervous glance at Saren when he wasn't looking.

Since they didn't have much going on today, Saren resorted to spending time in his office doing paperwork, allowing Amber to play Undertale in the living room. Playing games did help, but it didn't entirely distract her from thoughts about her dream from the night before. It seemed disturbingly vivid, yet pleasurably desirable. She wasn't sure how she would be able to bring this up to Saren without having the conversation end up embarrassing. Additionally, the two had managed to work up a relative sense of commerce. She didn't want to dash their friendship completely due to possible out-of-place feelings for him.

A long while later, Amber found a saving point before she shut off her game. She stepped back into her bedroom and picked up her personal datapad from the top of the dresser. More recently, it was where she'd been stashing images of barren turian men she had found while researching their anatomy. She closed the door behind her before she lay on her bed. She slowly undid her belt and slipped a hand under the pants waist. Once she located her nether region, she began stroking herself in a circular motion. Her breathing began to slow, taking deep, cautious breaths. With each stroke from her own hand, she arched her back while she stifled her moans.

By now, it was relatively easy to imagine the sensation of leathery, coarse talons feeling her in anticipation. Would Saren even want to fuck her at some point? Even if he wouldn't, there was no harm in having a guilty pleasure. The memory she had from the dream was enough for Amber to continue her ministrations. She started digging her fingers into herself, quietly pondering what a turian's length would feel like. As she bucked her hips upward, she thrust her fingers in and out of her folds. She let out a long moan, arching her neck back a bit. While she kept up her effort, she felt heat pooling in her stomach as her fluids coated her fingers. She met her climax and gave an uncoordinated yelp in response.
While Amber took her time to catch her breath, she pulled out her fingers and observed the sticky fluid coating them. She wiped off the fluids and put aside her datapad. Reconnecting the latch on her belt, she made for the door. By the time she finished washing her hands, she returned to the living room. Saren walked out of his office when he notice Amber on the couch.

"Amber, want to head to the Armax Arena?" he offered.

Amber tilted her head towards Saren.

"So what is the Armax Arena?" Amber asked.

"It's a combat simulation arena where you go up against holographic enemies," Saren explained, "want to try it out?"

Giving Saren a soft smile and a nod, Amber stood from the couch and headed for the shoe rack, grabbing her boots and slipping them on. They left shortly after for the arena. They wandered into the Silversun Strip and made their way to the Armax Arena. The arena front lobby and walkways remind her of something like a basketball arena back on Earth, with spectators overlooking several large fields, highly detailed to resemble certain locals described by Saren. If she got lucky, maybe she could introduce this place to her friends.

"I was thinking of starting off with something much more difficult. What about you?" he proposed.

"Promise me you won't change the setting to Akuze," Amber insisted.

Saren nodded at Amber in agreement.

"I'll keep that in mind," he reassured her.

To further confirm his oath, Saren gave Amber a pinky swear. Saren had a moon-like area reserved for them.

"So the Geth are a race of synthetics that were designed and produced by a race called the Quarians," Saren explained, "they were initially a line of robotic slaves, but when they got wiser, the Quarians lashed out in panic and were subsequently booted off their own planet. We'll be going up against them today."

Amber nodded at Saren as she picked up a simulation rifle from the rack. They both started their fun for the rest of the afternoon, facing off against numerous simulated enemies during their time in the arena.
Amber and Saren were already suiting up to head out. Early that morning, Councilor Valern had sent them a message about another unidentified wreckage to investigate. If anything, Shepard hoped there were survivors still holding on for dear life. Once she finished suiting up, she checked her inventory for weapons she would need for the missions. Once she finished gathering her weapons, she met up with Saren at the front door.

"So," Amber grinned, "you wanna bet which race was the crew of that ship?"

"Last thing the councilor mentioned was that it wasn't anything recognized. Perhaps it's human for once," he shrugged.

Saren led Amber out of the apartment and out of the building. They made their way through the Presidium and they headed for the Spectre docks. Once they entered the docks, they made their way to his shuttle. The instant they boarded, Saren flew the shuttle out of the Citadel and towards a Mass Relay.

A few hours later, they found themselves in orbit over a miserably cold planet, with little more than snowy drifts and icy mountains. Amber peered through the window in search of any signs of a crash. Saren focused his eyes on her for a moment before he turned on the shuttle's scanners.

He noticed a few nearby blips of what appeared to be mercenaries, but they didn't seem to be active or taking notice of their presence. Further ahead, they saw the crash site show up on the long-range scanners.

"You'll need to put your helmet on once we land," Saren advised.

"Ok," Amber nodded.

Approaching their objective, Saren brought their vehicle in to land, extended the landing gear, and turned off the engine. Amber took this as a cue to put her helmet on before she followed the Spectre outside the shuttle, barely feeling the harsh freezing wind.

They got closer to what was left of the downed vehicle before peering inside the damaged cockpit.

"It's an Alliance fighter alright. I'm not sure how it managed to get out this far, but they still do come with plenty of communications equipment for long-range scouting missions," Amber stated.

Amber began scanning the area for something she could use to break the cockpit glass and form a way of entry. Finding the emergency latch, she pulled the canopy off to reach in and yank off the dead pilot's dog tags. To her relief, it didn't have Joker's name on it. Still, she climbed into the wrecked ship, encouraging Saren to do the same.

"Is everything else intact?" Saren asked.

"Yeah. The com devices can be manually removed for repair or replacement, so this will take me some time," she answered barely over the howling wind.

With the task in mind, Amber got to work. Saren hopped out to keep watch from possible trouble. When he tilted his head upwards, he spotted a mercenary ship in the sky, so he held his assault rifle in case it came near. The side of the door opened up to reveal a group of Eclipse mercenaries, one of which opened fire upon him. He narrowly gunned down his assailant, but the others began to
pour out of the ship as it landed.

"Amber, we have a problem here!" Saren called over.

Amber leaned out of the cockpit after she set the com devices aside.

"Anyone bothering us?" she asked.

Saren pointed at the Eclipses still barreling towards the ship, so Amber grabbed her rifle and burst out of the ship before she opened fire on the mercenaries. Taking cover behind a snow bank, they returned fire upon the approaching mercenaries. Worse still, their vessel lifted off and prepared to provide support fire. In a surprise, lucky shot, an unseen sharpshooter somewhere off the scene picked off the pilot, causing it careen into a flaming ball along some other ice bank. Much to the turian Spectre's amusement, this caused the remaining Eclipses to freeze in fear.

Another consecutive shots rang out, gunning down two more. With sufficient support on their part, Amber began to peek out, picking off a few additional mercenaries while they scrambled for some cover. Now that the remaining Eclipse presence had been eliminated, Amber got back to work tweaking with the com devices, yanking it out of the cockpit. Saren's eyes hovered above the landscape before being thoroughly affixed on a set of tracks.

"You know, waltzing around like that in the open is a waste of cloaking battery."

A drell assassin in full winter gear came out of cloak and holstered his rifle.

"I do apologize, Spectre," he said, "I was unaware if you had initially hostile intentions."

"Then what are you doing here?" Saren demanded.

"Hired to investigate. However, my orders are to leave the package if it is compromised by some significant authority."

Saren's mandibles flexed with curiosity.

"Hired? By who?" Saren asked.

"Someone who has great interest in your prize. However, given the reach of the Council Spectres, I say this is grounds on which I should simply yield," the drell continued, "in the meantime, who is your companion? Or should I say what?"

Saren realized the drell assassin was focusing his eyes on Amber.

"Amber Shepard, you mean?" Saren paused, "she is part of a species we haven't established contact with yet."

"And the vessel belongs to more of her kind?" the drell assassin clarified.

"You seem to be catching on rather quickly," Saren mused.

"Perhaps we've gotten off on the wrong foot. I'm Thane Krios."

"Saren Arterius," Saren greeted while he extended his hand.

Thane accepted the gesture.

"Anyways, I shall not keep you two much longer," Thane said, "pleasant working with you, as brief
The drell assassin quickly cloaked himself again before disappearing into the snow. By now, Amber finished gathering and tweaking the com devices before she emerged from the cockpit.

"That was interesting," Amber commented, "still, the device is intact. We should be able to get something from this."

Saren nodded in agreement.

"I was thinking the same way," he replied, "you ready to head back?"

"Yeah," Amber nodded.

Upon cue, Saren led Amber through the snowy field and they made their way back to the shuttle. Once they made it back inside, Amber made sure to secure the com devices before she sat in her passenger seat. Saren sat in the pilot seat before he turned on the ignition and took control of the steering handles.

"Let's try and hook this up with something at the lab. We'll get a strong enough signal that way," he proposed.

"Good idea," Amber agreed.

The shuttle took off into the atmosphere before it traveled off the planet, making its way towards the Mass Relay. The journey back to the Citadel was swift as was the rush to the Spectre academy to see if their salvage was usable. While her time with Saren had been nothing short of comfortable, she did feel some need to return to her home and her old friends. She read through her journal entries, eager to tell her friends about what she saw during her disappearance. She even read through the contact list on her omni-tool, which included numbers from Saren, Nihlus, Garrus and Chellick. Though, part of her was worried that once she returned home, she wouldn't be able to see Saren again. Aside from her strange fixation on the Spectre, he'd been nothing but kind and helping to her, especially during her recovery from the incident on Akuze.

When Saren and Amber arrived at the lab with the tweaked devices, they got to work.

"I've boosted the signal. Want to give it a try?" he asked.

"Sure," Amber nodded.

She reached forward for the headset they brought from the deceased pilot.

"Hello?" Amber called, "can anyone hear me on this frequency?"

Amber waited for a moment in silence as she listened for a response.

"I repeat, is there anyone on this frequency?"

Her voice began to tremble as dead silence replied. In frustration, she slammed her fists against the table.

"Someone answer me, dammit!" she growled.

While Amber waited for a response, Saren placed his hand on her shoulder to soothe her, his subvocals letting out a soft coo. Suddenly, on the other end, a whisper came.
Amber perked up her eyebrows before she placed one hand on her headset.

"This is Lieutenant Commander Amber Shepard," she spoke into the microphone, "do you copy?"

{…I- sorry, who?}

Saren tweaked the frequency a bit, strengthening the signal. After he gave her a nod, Amber smiled at him before she returned to her task.

"This is Lieutenant Commander Amber Shepard," she repeated.

[Wait a second, that can't be right. You're listed as KIA. Where are you?] the operator repeated.

A few hours later, they pinpointed the location of the receiving end and sent the results to the Council. While waiting for Nihlus, Saren and Amber sat on a bench just outside the Council Chambers. The human soldier held her datapads close to her chest while her legs shook nervously. Until now, she had only heard of the Council and was still somewhat unprepared to present to them. Apart from joining Saren's previous meeting with Sparatus, she had little idea on what the other councilors would say to her.

"Amber, they're ready for us," Saren sharply brought her out of internal thought.

Amber tilted her head towards the door before she stood to her feet, following Saren into the Council Chambers. Following Saren up the rest of the steps, she got a better view of the tower than from where she sat by the elevators. The tall, dull metallic walls and pillars stacked as the steps rise to the top, peaking at a large window overlooking the station. Ahead, Nihlus and the councilors were waiting for them.

"Spectre Arterius, it is good to know you've made as much progress as you have," Tevos greeted.

Saren nodded at Tevos in agreement while she, Sparatus and Valern focused their eyes on Amber.

"We've come to the conclusion that being the proponent of this discovery that you three should be the ones making contact. We don't want to cause any incidents with large numbers," Sparatus elaborated.

"Will Nihlus and Saren be enough proof of my survival?" Amber asked.

"If that's the case, would you suggest bring two more representatives on behalf of Tevos and myself?" Valern asked.

Saren and Nihlus exchanged glances in a moment of silence.

"That would be preferable. Who did you have in mind, Councilor Valern?" Nihlus answered.

Tevos and Valern exchanged banter between one another which Amber, Saren, Nihlus or Sparatus wouldn't bother listening to.
"In addition, we want to send an asari matriarch and a salarian Spectre," Tevos finally answered.

"That'll be sufficient," Saren nodded in approval, "we'll see to it that we are prepared for departure by tomorrow morning."

They departed the tower and bid Nihlus farewell before returning the Saren's apartment. Amber stumbled into her bedroom while Saren sat in the living room and began scrolling through his inbox in his omni-tool. She lay on her bed, just staring at the ceiling, pondering her relations with Saren. As much as she felt excited for the upcoming day she would reunite with her friends, part of her suspected of how the Alliance would react to the presence of turians, asari, salarians and the like. Her mind still kept swimming around the thoughts she had of him a few nights prior and she furiously fought to suppress them. She thought of Saren as only a friend, but nothing more. She sat up from her bed and picked up her dream catcher from the end table before she sauntered out into the living room. Saren shifted his attention towards Amber once she sat next to him.

"Shepard, you need something?" he asked.

Amber shook her head.

"Will we have to part ways after tomorrow?" Amber asked.

Saren tilted his head towards the ceiling, pondering over the question for a minute.

"I don't know," he admitted.

"We'll still be in contact, right?" she pressed further.

Saren tilted his head towards Amber before he started kneading her shoulder with his talons.

"I suppose," he nodded, "I could accept that notion."

Amber leaned into him, resting her head against his shoulder. Giving her a soft smile, Saren wrapped one arm around her and pulled her close. Saren glimpsed at what was in her hands.

"I've noticed you've had that over your bed for some time now. What is it exactly?"

Amber blinked twice before she brought her dream catcher closer to Saren's vision.

"Oh, this?" Amber paused, "it's a dream catcher."

"Dream catcher, huh? Helps to ward off the nightmares, then?" Saren continued, putting two and two together.

"Pretty much," Amber confirmed, "I made this when my mom and I visited a museum on Native Americans."

"I see," he nodded, "have the horrors of Akuze been at least usurped by something more pleasant?"

"A little."

He nodded.

"That's good. It's getting late. Want to watch something before calling it a night?"

"Maybe something calm would do," Amber answered.
Upon cue, Saren turned on the holoscreen and began scrolling through the channels. What he landed on was some dumb romance comedy, but couldn't muster the effort to change the channel to anything else. Despite this, Amber still enjoyed watching the movie with him.
With morning having arrived, Amber headed into her bedroom shortly after breakfast. She gathered her datapads, her games and her dream catcher before she stashed them into her backpack. She ran her fingers through her hair to remove as much knots as possible, noticing that it had grown to shoulder-length since she disappeared on Akuze. She changed out of her pajamas and slipped on an outfit she dug out from her drawers before she put on her boots. Having completed her look, Amber grasped her dogtag necklace with her fingers while she read her name. Considering she was about to return to the Alliance, this was another form of proof she'll need to present. Amber left the guest bedroom and made her way out of the apartment complex, where she met up with Saren and Nihlus on a bench while they were waiting for the representatives from the asari and the salarians. Their translators had been all updated and both sides of the conversation were relying for communication as every other human besides herself didn't have a translator yet.

A short while later, an asari matriarch appeared from the crowds of the Presidium and approached the turian Spectres, encouraging Saren to stand to his feet.

"Matriarch Benezia, I didn't think you'd be the one joining us," Saren acknowledged.

"Councilor Tevos sent me a message concerning the new species," Benezia explained.

Benezia made a brief glance at Amber.

"We'll be heading out shortly. I expect Spectre Bau will be joining us shortly. He sent us a message an hour ago," Nihlus added.

After Nihlus stood from the bench, he, Saren, Amber and Benezia meandered through the Presidium, making their way to the Spectre docks. Shortly after they reached their shuttle, a salarian in armor rushed up.

"Spectre Arterius, sorry I'm late," he apologized, "traffic is unusually heavy this morning."

Nihlus gave the salarian Spectre a nod.

"Take it easy, Jondum," Nihlus prattled on, "we're not leaving without you."

"I brought a few extra external translators, too," Jondum mentioned, showing a large box under his arm.

Saren gave a soft grin as he folded his arms.

"I'm glad you've come prepared," he complimented.

Saren gestured Amber, Nihlus, Benezia and Jondum to follow him aboard the ship, where they settled into passenger seats while Saren took the pilot seat. He turned on the ignition and took control of the steering handles before he flew the shuttle out of the Citadel, traveling through the Widow system as it reached the Mass Relay. It didn't take long before the relay flung the shuttle into warp speed. After a brief journey, they exited the relay into the system surrounding Shanxi. Due to her rather frequent visits, Amber recognized a few of the probes that showed up on the long-range scope. A short flight later, she could see the colony through the hull. Saren switched to autopilot before he handed the com device they salvaged to Amber.

"Shepard?" Saren paused.
Understanding the point he was trying to get across, Amber slipped on her headset and held the com device in one hand.

"Shanxi Air Control, this is Lieutenant Commander Shepard approaching. Do you read?"

{"I read you, Lieutenant Commander," she heard.}

"Is Captain Anderson on this base?" Amber asked through the com-link.

{"After hearing of your apparent survival, he arrived several hours ago in anticipation. Do be aware that due to the foreign nature of your vessel, we will be taking a few precautions," the voice answered.}

"I understand," Amber nodded, "this is Shepard signing off."

Amber ended the transmission before she nodded to Saren, allowing him to maneuver the shuttle closer to Shanxi before it entered the planet's atmosphere.

"We'll be back after a few days. Basically, we'll be introducing ourselves, setting up what they've yet to encounter, give them a layout of the Galaxy as we know it, then hand them an invitation to talk more with politicians on the Citadel or something…maybe help them use long-range communications," Saren said.

Amber smiled at Saren.

"That sounds like a good idea," she agreed.

Once the shuttle descended to the point they could see the surface, Saren carefully maneuvered the vehicle towards the base with an air control tower overseeing incoming and outgoing flights. The elder turian Spectre landed the shuttle in one of the docks. They stood from their seats after Saren opened the ramp. They disembarked the shuttle, only to be met by a squad of Alliance soldiers just outside, led by none other than Anderson.

"Shepard!" Anderson exclaimed, "I didn't think you were alive. We searched for you, but found no trace back on Akuze."

Taking a deep breath, Amber took a few steps towards Anderson and gave him a salute.

"With all due respect, Anderson," she told him, "I managed to get the files from Akuze, but I saw the rest of the platoon get killed."

Amber pulled out the datapad in question and handed it to Anderson. At the same time, the Alliance soldiers focused their gaze on Saren, Nihlus, Jondum and Benezia as the salarian Spectre set down his box.

"Alright, now these are earpieces meant to serve as translators. Due to the diverse species within the community, there's no universal language. However, the translators do help to mitigate that issue," Amber explained as Jondum handed Anderson a translator.

Anderson took a moment to observe Jondum's hand gesture, encouraging him to slip the translator into place.

"—and there. Does it work now?" Jondum's words were initially intelligible until Anderson turned on the device.
"So far so good. We may as well head inside, talk there," he nodded.

Upon cue, Saren took a few steps closer to Anderson, which caught his attention.

"You're her commanding officer, correct?" Saren asked him.

Anderson nodded.

"And I assume you found her on Akuze?" Anderson returned.

"Yeah," Saren nodded, "I did get her medical attention and oversaw her recovery in the months afterwards. Speaking of which, just how extensively was she trained?"

Anderson made a brief glance at Amber as she shook hands with the Alliance soldiers and showed them how to put on the translators. The Alliance captain then returned his gaze towards Saren.

"She is an exceptional soldier among my crew," Anderson nodded, "N7s are few and far apart. They graduate at their rank after a long line of strenuous tests. Each N7 earns their ranks."

"I see. I paid attention to her performance on a few occasions and noticed her capability. Not that I wish to imply anything too soon, but she does have potential in the greater scheme of things," Saren continued.

Saren extended his hand, allowing Anderson to shake it.

"I'm Spectre Saren Arterius," Saren introduced himself, "I am also here on behalf of the Council."

"Captain David Anderson," Anderson replied, "System Alliance Navy. You're an ambassador?"

Saren nodded just as the Alliance soldiers finished installing their translators, allowing Amber to rejoin with Saren and Anderson. Saren gave Benezia and Jondum a nod, allowing both of them to step forward.

"That, and Spectres like myself act as the acting hand of the Council," Saren continued, "directly under their command. While it is a bit loose, Spectres do have plenty of authoritative power and are composed from the best that any of the Council races have to offer. While non-Council race Spectres are almost unheard of, she has definitely caught my attention."

"So which races are Council races and which ones are non-Council races?" Anderson asked.

Saren sighed.

"Turians like myself and my protege in the maroon plates," Saren clarified, "salarians like the Spectre handing out the translators, and asari like the matriarch in the yellow dress. Don't ask me why only three of all the races total get the privilege of being represented by someone in such a high position, but if you think that such a system is fundamentally broken, so do I."

Anderson nodded in agreement as he folded his arms.

"Yeah, I don't see how that's supposed to work," Anderson muttered.

"Look," Saren insisted, "we can explain in further detail when we get inside."

Well, Saren did have a point. Anderson gestured the Alliance soldiers to escort Amber, Saren, Benezia, Nihlus and Jondum into the base with him leading the way until they arrived at a conference room.
Over the next few hours, Saren, Jondum, Nihlus, and Benezia tried to explain the political inner workings of the galactic community, what each species was, the various factions present, and the technologies popularly used. Even if the conversation confused most of the Alliance officials, including Anderson, Amber showed them some of the notes she took about the various races she researched while she was under Saren's care. Finally, Saren gave Anderson a copy of the current galaxy map as well as an open invitation to the Citadel to diplomatically discuss matters further. Several hours after their initial arrival, Saren, Nihlus, Jondum, and Matriarch Benezia left Shanxi, with Amber back under the care of her Commanding Officer, Anderson.

"Are you alright?" Anderson asked, "your friend Saren mentioned extensively how you were in bad shape after he picked you off of Akuze. Will you need time to recover?"

Amber shrugged as she and Anderson sauntered down the corridor.

"I recovered from the physical trauma," Amber explained, "but I haven't finished mourning the squadmates I lost."

"I see. I sent your mother the message that you were alive and well just after your arrival. You can head back if you want, pay a visit if need be," Anderson advised, "however, I suspect that command will want you with those who head off to this 'Citadel' to talk with the aliens, so you should do so quickly."

Amber nodded at Anderson just as they stepped through a door. She returned to the barracks for the rest of the evening after receiving a message from her friends and mother that they'd been called to Shanxi to check in with her, catch up months after her disappearance on Akuze. Amber placed her dream catcher on her end table before she headed over to the mess hall. Over three months have passed since she tasted food from her world. When she examined what they had available, she began serving herself before she carried her meal to the table where she started eating. It was strange forking human food for once, never before believing that she would've thought food as such until then. She would occasionally glance at some of her fellow soldiers as they gave her blank stares before they went back to eating. She resumed eating her meal, ignoring her other problems with the present.

Once she finished her meal, Amber cleaned up her mess before she returned to the barracks. Laying down on her bed, she felt tired enough that she opted out of pulling out her miniature console tonight. Instead, she pulled out her bag of worry dolls. She plucked one out and stared at its form.

"If you can hear me," Amber whispered to the tiny doll, "all I could ask for is nothing horrible to go wrong in the upcoming peace meeting."

Having let out what she wanted to express, she placed the worry doll back into the bag and set it aside before she nestled underneath the blanket. She reached up to turn off her bunk light and lay back under the covers. As she drifted off to sleep, she felt excitement at the thought of telling her friends about her alien encounters when they would arrive.

The next day, she had received a notification from Joker and her mother about their imminent arrival on Shanxi on her datapad. She quickly jumped back into her Alliance uniform and headed to the mess hall to get breakfast. When she strolled along the buffet counter, she served herself some French toast, a sausage link and a cup of coffee. She carried over her breakfast to the table before she started eating, savoring the coffee's flavor like reuniting with an old friend. Asari tea was nice and all, but nothing quite beat the taste or caffeine of human-made coffee. After disposing of her plate at the kitchen, she headed off to the spaceport, awaiting the next shipment of troops and colonists. Captain Anderson stood alongside her as they watched the incoming and departing
flights in the airfield.

Around half an hour later, they both noticed a transport they were waiting for enter the atmosphere before it landed at one of the docks. Along with the first wave of newcomers from Earth was a team of Alliance soldiers in civies.

"Amber! You're alive!" Joker cried out.

"We thought you were dead!" Ashley added.

"We were so worried about you!" Kasumi interjected.

Amber smiled before she eagerly waved her hand.

"Morning!" Amber called over.

Joker made it across the walkway, and then her squadmates started crossing the walkway, many of which she could recognize. A short-haired, heavily tattooed soldier came out next before she stepped closer to Amber.

"Damn, we heard you had it rough! How'd you get out?" Jack asked.

Amber stepped towards Jack before they embraced one another.

"I barely outran the Thresher Maws that killed my crew," Amber explained, "but then an alien saved my life."

The rest of her friends walked out shortly after, each with a question of their own like they were interviewing her for some news broadcast. Once Hannah emerged at last, Anderson and Amber led her and their squadmates out of the airfield and sat in the conference room.

"So," Kaidan asked Amber, "what are Thresher Maws?"

Amber took a deep breath to clear her mind.

"Giant, burrowing centipedes with a head the size of a Mako," Amber explained, "think of the Sandworms from Dune, but they also spit acid."

Amber's friends stiffened in shock upon hearing the explanation, yet they didn't show signs of panic.

"Aliens, huh? What're they like?" Kaidan asked through the mess of other voices.

Amber turned on her omni-tool and started scrolling through the images she saved.

"We got turians," Amber answered as she showed her squadmates the images of each alien race, "asari, salarians, krogans, quarians, hanar, elcor, drell, vorcha, volus and batarians."

James's eyes went wide with excitement.

"So who was it who hauled your ass out of the fire?" he asked.

"Saren Arterius," Amber answered.

"Oh? Who's he?" Kelly added.
Anderson and Amber exchanged glances before they returned their eyes on her friends.

"Saren's the longest serving turian Spectre of the Council," Anderson clarified, "at least, that's what I heard from him."

Amber rested her arms on the table.

"After he found me in Akuze," Amber added, "he had medics from the Citadel nurse me back to health and he let me stay with him until we could find a way back here."

Amber pulled up a holographic projection of the Citadel, allowing her squadmates to examine it.

"He gave me this omni-tool during my stay with him," Amber continued, "it's basically more advanced than the datapads that we have."

"Interesting," Kasumi commented, "does it have a capacity to hack into security mainframes?"

Amber shrugged.

"Advanced omni-tools do," she replied.

It was something that clearly piqued Kasumi's interest.

"Advanced models?" Kasumi pondered, "like military hardware?"

Amber nodded before she pulled out a case containing the items Saren gave to her before she opened it.

"I also got my hands on a set of alien armor," Amber continued, "it's asari, so it doesn't exactly look foreign."

Amber pulled out a suit of asari armor, allowing her friends to examine it.

"Wow," James commented, "hey, Lola? If we ever go to the Citadel, do you mind introducing me to an asari?"

Amber couldn't help but chuckle at the question.

"I'll be sure to keep that in mind," she remarked.

For the next hour, she explained life on the enormous station with photos as visual aids.

"So once you get to know Saren well," Amber said, "he is capable of caring for others. After I was released from the hospital, I had nightmares from Akuze, yet he was there to soothe me."

"At least he's not an ass," Ashley muttered, crossing her arms.

Amber continued further with some of most notable days during her stay with Saren.

"Hey, Amber?" Jack asked, "do you know if you...like him?"

Amber scratched her head while she took a moment to think over the question.

"As a friend...why do you ask?" she did feel something more than friendship with Saren, but she wasn't ready to reveal such to anyone.

"Hey, I was just asking," Jack blurted as she placed her hand on Amber's shoulder.
Amber nodded at Jack before she stood to her feet and turned towards Hannah.

"Mom?" Amber paused.

"How are you, sweetie? I heard you were roughed up a bit," Hannah inquired, bringing Amber into her welcoming arms.

"I honestly didn't think I would make it out alive," Amber responded as she returned the embrace, "maybe I could introduce you to Saren?"

"Anderson was just telling me about him," Hannah nodded, "I'd like to at some point."

Hannah released Amber from her embrace, allowing the young Shepard turn her attention towards her friends.

"So do you have plans for today?" Kelly asked.

"Well, considering how much practice I've been getting more recently, I'd like to see how I'd compare to the rest of you at the range," she proposed.

This encouraged Kaidan, James, Jack, Kasumi and Ashley to stand to their feet.

"Oh, you're on," Ashley grinned.

Amber led her friends out of the conference room and through the corridor as they made their way to the range. For the first time in a while, she picked up an Alliance rifle and fired it at a target. With Kelly and Joker sitting on the bench, Kaidan and Ashley picked up Alliance rifles from the rack. Jack and James joined them in the range while Kasumi also watched from overhead. Amber, Kaidan, Ashley, Jack and James took turns firing at targets, scoring various points from different sections of targets in this tranquil competition. Once this little contest ended, Jack came out the victor.

"Say," Jack offered, "anyone up for a racing game?"
Humanity's First Contact

Even if she enjoyed spending a few days reconnecting with her fellow soldiers in the Alliance, she still knew she would have to get ready for the monumental event the Alliance has ever seen. During those prior days, she also trimmed her hair to neck-length, which happened to be the length she liked the most prior to the events of Akuze. Having slipped into her officer uniform, Amber meandered through the corridor until she stepped outside the station, where she found Anderson waiting for her at the door.

"Anderson," Amber reported, "I'm ready to participate in the diplomatic conference."

Anderson nodded at her before they sauntered through the docks, making their way to the SSV Kilimanjaro. Once they reached the ramp, Admiral Hackett stood near the entrance to greet them, so they exchanged salutes before stepping inside the ship.

"I take it you got my message?" Anderson asked.

"Yes," Hackett nodded, "many of our officials were bewildered when we received word of Lieutenant Commander Shepard's survival and potential encounter with extraterrestrials."

"Is much of high command still skeptical, Admiral?" Amber inquired.

"You could say that applies to some of us," Hackett admitted.

It didn't take much longer before Anderson, Amber and Hackett arrived at the bridge.

"I could forward everyone her medical report, show her head is on straight," Anderson proposed.

Hackett gave both Anderson and Amber a soft smile.

"That would be most appropriate for the situation," he agreed.

The Admiral walked up the bridge to one of the pilots.

"Do those coordinates check out?" Hackett asked.

"Yessir. We're also ready to hit the relay on your word," the pilot nodded.

"Good. Give another twenty minutes," Hackett instructed, "we're still getting additional personnel onboard."

With the crew continuing to make preparations, Amber waited as she observed through the window while her mom and her friends boarded the ship minutes later.

"Hey, Lola," James called over, "we're here!"

Amber snapped out of her thoughts and stepped over to her friends.

"So, are you ready to see the Citadel for yourself?" Amber asked.

Ashley nodded as she folded her arms.

"I'm hoping your discovery is worth it," Ashley answered.
"Oh come on, Ashe. How could it not?" Joker scoffed, limping towards the front of the bridge to his position.

"I'd say she's the first human to discover them," Kasumi added.

Kaidan shrugged.

"I'm just glad this didn't turn out worse than it had to be. Not sure about the asari or salarians, but I don't exactly want to be going toe to toe with something like krogan," he said.

Amber gave Kaidan a pat on the shoulder.

"I'm sure it won't come to that," Amber reassured.

"What are the turians like anyways?" Jack hummed, "you seemed to have spent some time with the bird-men, you must know something."

Amber took a moment to think over the question.

"Come to think of it," Amber said, "their society isn't too different from something like the Ancient Romans from their politics to their sense of duty and honor. They do put emphasis on their military, going so far as to make military service mandatory during their mid-teens."

James blinked twice.

"Oh," James chirped, "so they're more militaristic than us?"

"Yeah. Surprisingly enough," Amber nodded.

"Are they friendly?" Kelly spoke up.

Amber began pacing back and forth while she kept her eyes focused on her teammates.

"They're saints and jerks like the rest of us," Amber shrugged.

Several minutes later, the crew finished preparations, so Hackett turned his gaze towards the pilots.

"All right," Hackett announced, "take us out."

Upon cue, the pilots activated the ship's engines and moments later, they maneuvered it out of the docking bay before it launched through the planet's atmosphere. Joker's fingers cautiously brushed over the controls, setting course for the Citadel.

"Attention crew," he announced, "we're en route to a set of foreign coordinates. Secure bulkheads and any loose equipment. We'll be entering FTL in forty minutes."

The crew scrambled to secure any equipment while the ship flew across the vacuum of space, making its way towards the Mass Relay. Once it reached the ancient machine, the Kilimanjaro was enveloped in the relay's energy before it warped into FTL speed. An hour or so later, they arrived within the Serpent Nebula, with a few escorts following them for security.

"Well, those ships are definitely not ours," Joker commented, "and when you have the time sirs, you should come up and look at the scopes. Lieutenant Commander Shepard wasn't lying when she said this thing was huge."

Hannah, Anderson and Hackett gazed through the window and observed the station ahead of the
ship. The station was massive, easily dwarfing the usual fifteen kilometer long Mass Relays they'd encountered up until that point. Attached to a central ring at the back were long metal strips like longswords, each with an entire city on top facing inward. As they approached, the number of strange vessels that showed up on scanners grew to be too many to count. How Amber became the first human to visit it was anyone's guess, yet her testimony was proof enough. The Kilimanjaro continued its approach before it arrived at the docking bay, where various politicians from the Citadel races and the Council waited at a platform at the Citadel Tower.

Aside from the specs that flew by in the distance, everything was instantly dwarfed by the enormous station.

"Admiral, we're being hailed," Joker informed.

"Put 'em through," Hackett stared out the window intently at the station.

Joker tapped at the terminal, causing it to project a hologram of the Council.

"I assume you're the Human Systems Alliance?" Sparatus greeted.

Hackett cautiously nodded.

"That we are," he answered, "I'm Admiral Hackett, here on behalf of our species. I believe we're still invited to discuss matters?"

"That you are. Your path to a reserved dock should be clear."

The hologram soon dissipated, so Hackett nodded at the pilots which allowed them to maneuver the Kilimanjaro to the reserved dock. Once the ship latched on and opened the ramp, Hackett led Anderson, Hannah and Amber out of the bridge with Kaidan, Ashley, Kelly, Jack, Kasumi and James following suit. Out on the docks, a few shuttles had been provided transportation to the embassies on the Presidium. These shuttles included C-Sec officers patrolling the docks. This gave the other humans in Amber's ensemble exchanging confused stares, but Amber figured the Council didn't want distractions. Amber led her ensemble aboard the shuttles before they settled into their seats. She managed a smile.

"So far so good, right?" Amber asked.

Anderson nodded.

"Is it me," Kaidan remarked, "or were these aliens giving us weird looks?"

"Well of course they are, it's our first time here," Ashley groaned.

James rolled his eyes.

"Well, if what Amber said is true," James added, "most of these guys didn't know we even existed."

Minutes later, the shuttle doors closed before the shuttles lifted out of the docking bay, hovering through the air traffic. Kaidan, Ashley, James, Jack, Kasumi and Kelly gazed out the window. Gone was the utilitarian, familiar human designs, instead replaced by architecture of such strange shapes and forms. Down below on the streets dotted the heads of species most of them had never seen prior. In the skies, lanes of traffic between hovercars wove an intricate web over the city. At the center of the Citadel, the Presidium came into view. It was definitely more pristine in appearance, evoking a greater sense of nobility with the sudden shift in quality and cleanliness.
The shuttles landed near the Citadel Tower and opened its doors, allowing Amber, Anderson, Hackett, Hannah, Kelly, James, Jack, Kasumi, Kaidan and Ashley to disembark before C-Sec officers escorted them into the building. The group entered a large conference room with the Council already sitting around a large table. Saren and Nihlus were also sitting at the large table along with the turian Primarch, a salarian Dalatrass and an asari Matriarch. Already, Saren and Amber locked eyes once again.

"Welcome back, Shepard," Saren greeted.

Amber hesitated with her response for a moment.

"Err…good to see you too…Arterius," she reciprocated.

Amber sat down at the large table, compelling Anderson, Hackett, Hannah and Amber's teammates to follow suit.

"Hello, Admiral, I'm Primarch Fedorian. It's a pleasure to meet you," the Primarch greeted, reaching a hand out to shake.

"Same here, sir," Hackett replied.

With the humans in their seats, Sparatus cleared his throat.

"I appreciate the time you've taken to come and discuss introducing yourselves," Sparatus announced, "naturally, these are times when races tend to clash, so we're glad we can do this in a bloodless fashion. We'll be going over colony rights, maybe touch briefly on historical events to give context to some races and regulations, work on giving a district for your people to thrive in, and finally work on establishing an embassy."

Sparatus tapped at the terminal, turning on the screens at the seats and allowing the associates from the Alliance to read through the colonization rights and tech regulations.

"Wait," Ashley paused, "there are these Mass Relays that are…inactive?"

Amber nodded.

"I don't think they would leave notes on those relays telling them that they're not to be activated," Amber clarified, "but there would be less problems if we explained that rule to the others in the Alliance ahead of time."

James couldn't help but chuckle as he scratched his head.

"At least that didn't lead to anything," James mused.

By the time he finished reading through the documents, Anderson turned his gaze towards Sparatus.

"So," Anderson asked, "do you have a suggestion on introducing our race to the other races?"

"If you feel like taking this issue head-first, Captain, I suggest maybe getting to work having your personnel move here, start blending in," Sparatus shrugged.

"Blend in? You mean physically living here? And with other species?" Anderson clarified.

"More or less," Sparatus nodded.
"He means physically moving in with other species already living on the station," Valern hastily interrupted.

Amber slowly nodded.

"Sounds like a good idea," she agreed.

"A risky procedure, but so do I," Anderson sighed, "I hope you don't mind if we start off slipping them in with people in a general part of the station. I don't know if we'll somehow end up as luxury goods on the black market, and I'd rather not see good soldiers end up like cattle."

Saren and Anderson locked eyes.

"Yes, that concern is…understandable," Saren replied.

"No doubt batarian slavers or pirates would see human labor as some new commodity," Tevos acknowledged, "we'll arrange that accordingly."

Primarch Fedorian tapped on his terminal screen, which formed a projection of the galaxy. He started highlighting a number of systems between the edge of Inner Citadel Space and the Attican Regions.

"In regard to where your homeworld is," Fedorian said, "these systems are still available for colonization. Just be mindful of the batarian territories marked in orange."

Anderson, Hackett, Amber and Hannah examined the projection while they took notes.

"As for Shepard's encounter with the local wildlife on your colony three months back," Fedorian continued, "there's unfortunately little we can do about the complete eradication of such a species with the exception of setting prefabs on mountainous locations, away from open planes where Thresher Maws tend to establish their nests."

"Anything else to defend our colonies?" Hackett pressed.

"What else besides what you know, Admiral?" Saren replied, "from what I can tell, you already reinforce your colonies with automated AA batteries and local militias. That's all we can hope for."

"Very well," Hackett sighed.

Once everyone sitting at the large table finished reading the documents the Council displayed, Sparatus, Tevos and Valern started a new document and gave it the title Human Introductory Protocols.

"Now, as we established," Sparatus explained as he cleared his throat, "we're looking to have some of your soldiers on the station living with a list of hand-picked individuals. The idea is that while initially few, people will slowly be accustomed to humans without some hostile reaction. Eventually, you'll introduce more onto the station and in more diverse locations."

"Sounds reasonable," Hannah nodded.

Anderson, Hackett, Fedorian, Hannah, Amber, Saren, Sparatus, Tevos and Valern took turns writing out the agreement and exchanging it back and forth before the councilors made a final review.

"We have concluded this agreement has reasonable conditions," Tevos announced, "we will wait
The Alliance officials collectively agreed to the terms and signed the document. After that, Sparatus, Tevos and Valern stood from their seats, encouraging the others to do the same.

"Naturally, there is some turmoil to be had when a new species enters the galactic stage," Sparatus said, "while we do not know what the damage would be otherwise, we know we have avoided it for the time being, and I hope with every fiber of my being that it stays that way."

Once the councilors ended the session, the Alliance members stepped out of the conference room with Amber leading both Saren and Nihlus with them. When they reached a lounge, Amber gestured Saren to Hannah.

"Mom," Amber introduced, "this is Saren. Saren, this is my mom."

Hannah briefly eyed the Spectre before reaching a hand.

"Pleasure to meet you, Saren. You're the one who got her off Akuze, yes?"

Saren returned the gesture.

"That is true," he nodded.

"Well…thanks for that," Hannah complimented, "she had me worried."

"You're most welcome," Saren replied.

All the while, Nihlus stepped towards Kaidan, Ashley, Kelly, Jack, Kasumi and James.

"So…you guys are her friends?" Nihlus asked.

"Y-Yeah," Ashley nodded, "you a friend of Saren's?"

"More like a protégé," Nihlus clarified, "I've long since graduated as a Spectre, however he still feels inclined to remind me that he's the eldest between us."

"Oh, like siblings?" Kaidan mused.


James pressed his forehead into his palm.

"Still, he's not the worst person you could meet," James commented.

While Nihlus continued his conversation with Amber's teammates, Hackett approached Hannah, Amber and Saren, giving the older turian Spectre a salute.

"Spectre Arterius," Hackett greeted, "I've heard highly about you."

Saren nodded at Hackett and returned the gesture.

"Thank you Admiral," Saren nodded, "anything else you wanted to discuss?"

"Perhaps we could discuss recommendations for new crew members from different races for the agreement," Hackett suggested.

Hannah, Hackett, Saren and Amber turned their heads towards a fountain in the distance.
"Considering Amber has been under my care previously, I suppose I can continue keeping her in my household," Saren commented.

"Ok," Amber paused, "so is there a place where my friends can stay?"

Saren made a brief glance at Kaidan, Ashley, Kelly, Jack, Kasumi and James before he returned his gaze towards Amber.

"I know several contacts close to where I live," Saren answered, "I can arrange accordingly."

Giving Saren a soft smile, Amber extended her hand, allowing him to grasp it. This was worth going through another step to forming such a cultural bridge.
Over the next morning, Saren had been calling a list of friends and contacts about the proposal made with the Alliance from the day prior. He set up a group call before inviting Garrus, Wrex, an asari info broker named Liara, a quarian mechanic named Tali, and a salarian working at Huerta named Mordin. Once he arranged an outing at a cafe, he turned his head towards Amber before he ran his talon through her hair.

"We'll be heading out soon," Saren informed, "you ready?"

Amber nodded before she and Saren stood to their feet.

"Yeah, just let me get dressed," Amber replied.

He watched as she rushed back to the guest bedroom to put on a change of clothes. He couldn't define it in his mind, but there was something he found fascinating about her form and personality. Maybe it was the fact her confidence had been improving? His thoughts were interrupted when she came out shortly in a clean set of Alliance clothing. They both made their way to the front door before they stepped out of the apartment, where Nihlus was waiting for them.

"Morning, Nihlus," Amber chirped.

"Same to you, Shepard. It's good to see you today," the younger turian hummed.

Nihlus, Saren and Amber sauntered through the Presidium. Once they made it to a cafe, they could see Anderson, Hackett, Hannah, Kaidan, Ashley, Joker, Kelly, Jack, Kasumi, Dr. Karin Chakwas, James and Garrus waiting for them. Standing next to them were Liara, Tali, Mordin and Wrex. Wrex was the first to speak.

"Saren, so these...humans...you didn't bother telling me about this earlier?"

Saren sighed as he placed his hand on Amber's shoulder.

"It was a classified matter," Saren explained, "that aside, these are humans. They'll be living on the station to help people here get used to them being around now, and I hope you have a spare room or two in your den, Wrex."

"Eh, I suppose," Wrex shrugged as he made a brief glance at Jack and Kasumi.

Mordin was looking around with meticulous observation.

"How interesting," he commented, "will need to know more. Within good reason."

Saren gestured his guests to follow him inside, where they searched for suitable seats within one another's proximity.

"So, I hope the non-human members of our current party are fine with the addition of unexpected guests, because of recent events. Humans have now introduced themselves, and they're here to slowly get comfortable," Saren started as everyone took a seat.

Saren and his guests began reading their menus, though many of the humans were puzzled at the strange alien dishes. Amber tried her best to guide the others along, providing answers and recommendations.
"I figured they wouldn't have human foods available," Ashley commented, "but you trying these foods out first…just wow."

James on the other hand was much more enthusiastic.

"I dunno, I'm kinda liking the descriptions for these," James replied, "ahh…Wrex? That's your name, right? What'd you recommend? That won't poison me or something."

James gestured to the levo options in the menu to emphasize his point.

"If you don't have the quad to test your metal, I suggest that one way down there," Wrex grunted.

Wrex pointed to the item on the bottom of the list, and James nodded in agreement.

"Ah. Thanks, Scars," James smiled.

In the meantime, Chakwas read through the beverage options for asari and salarians. It didn't take the doctor long to dwell on the alcoholic section and make a choice. Kelly found some sandwich options through the menu before turning her head towards Liara.

"What'd you say are the best options on here?" Kelly asked.

Kelly even pointed to the section while allowing Liara to examine it.

"Never really liked the sauce on that one. Try the option above. I usually get that when I'm here," Liara suggested.

"Ok," Kelly nodded.

Amber found her favorite breakfast dish in one section of the menu, so she confirmed on that option. After ordering, the group began to discuss arrangements with who would be living with who.

"Hey, Wrex?" Jack called over, "what do you normally enjoy doing in your down time?"

"Between missions, I usually like to hit the bar," Wrex answered, "occasionally hang out with friends, or head to a shop to buy equipment upgrades. If I'm at home, there's usually a good sport on the vidscreens at some interval. Why?"

Jack perched her chin on her hands while her elbows rested on the table.

"Well, I think I'm settled," Jack replied.

"Oh, boy," Wrex muttered.

Once Kasumi placed her order, she and Tali exchanged glances.

"So, what's your role in your military?" Tali started.

Kasumi made a sly grin.

"I work as saboteur and sapper. Along with dismantling explosive ordinances, I've worked in hacking and counter-intelligence," Kasumi explained, "speaking of which, do you have a few spare parts at your place? I got my hands on a civilian-grade omni-tool and I wanted to see how far I could upgrade it."
The quarian slowly nodded.

"I could help with that, see what we can do."

Several minutes later, their orders arrived, so everyone at the conjoined tables started eating. Over the next few minutes, Nihlus found himself conversing with Ashley and Kaidan.

"So how did you and Saren meet?" Kaidan started off.

"He came to inspect my unit while I was in boot camp several years back. At the time, he was still the youngest man within the ranks of the Spectres, so everyone else was looking to act sharp and look good. I took it upon myself to embarrass my instructor further," Nihlus chuckled, "but, when I was sent through the course first and then some, Saren said he paid special attention to me, said I had some talent. That, or passed some absurd prerequisite and I got in."

Kaidan chuckled after he took a bite out of his meal. He looked over to see Ashley still with a face of hesitation. Finishing his bite, he elbowed her.

"C'mon, Ashe," he chastised, "he's not that bad. Snap out of it."

"I know," she replied, "I'm just taking some precautions."

"Ashe," James insisted, "he's a good guy. Just let him be."

Ashley didn't say anything further as she went back to her meal.

The three Alliance officers talked with Saren and Amber over their meal.

"If you could change one thing about your home planet," Saren asked, "what would it be?"

"Currently, it's all a matter of wish fulfillment," Hackett admitted, "right now, the benefits of interstellar travel is taking a long time to show its full effects and we still have plenty of problems back at home I could go chapter and verse about."

Amber tilted her head sideways.

"Remember when I mentioned about Earth's ruined environment?" Amber asked Saren.

"Yeah, so I heard," Saren agreed, "it's definitely slow, but it will come with time."

Amber nodded before she took another bite out of her meal.

"Still, we might have something over the next few years," Hannah added, "environmental issues or otherwise."

While they were eating their meal, Dr. Chakwas and Mordin took turns reading a datapad that contained documents relating to medical science. Currently, Mordin was explaining the inner workings of medi-gel and how it affected damaged tissue. Chakwas listened with interest while she took some notes.

"I'll have to tell my superiors to invest in production. In the meantime, it doesn't seem salarian drinks have a high alcohol level," she looked at her glass in concentration.

Mordin shrugged.

"Salarian biology much more streamlined. Can work faster, not longer. Candle burns twice-bright,
"I see," Chakwas mused.

"For example, salarian liver not as robust," Mordin added, "can withstand only one third of what most other species can."

After they took another bite from their breakfast, Kelly and Garrus exchanged glances.

"So," Kelly asked, "what do you do for a living?"

"I work at C-Sec on this station. It's dull, but it's police work," he answered simply.

Kelly raised her eyebrows while she sipped her beverage.

"Police work?" she paused.

Garrus took a sip of his kava.

"It varies depending on how my boss is feeling," he answered.

It took them a while before they all finished their breakfast, so Saren paid the bill before he led his guests out the cafe.

"I assume arrangements are agreed to?" he inquired.

Anderson nodded as Jack and Joker stood close to Wrex, Kelly stood side by side with Garrus, Liara and James stood in close proximity, Kasumi and Tali stood close to one another, Chakwas and Mordin were already familiar with each other and Kaidan and Ashley stood on either side of Nihlus.

"I'll have them in their place soon over the next few days," the captain added, looking over his datapad.

"That sounds like a reasonable deal," Saren nodded.

The officers and Amber's friends returned to the Alliance vessels in dock, all of Saren's contacts went their separate ways, and both Amber and Saren to their apartment. While they sat in the living room, Saren scrolled through his inbox until he found a message from Desolas.

{Saren,

Now that humans aren't something classified anymore, I'd like the opportunity to properly meet your friend.

Regards, Desolas}

Saren wasn't sure why he felt a chill trickle down his spine, but he sighed as he turned off his omni-tool.

"Amber, I just received a message from my brother. He wants to meet up at some point."

Amber tilted her head to the side and blinked twice.

"Oh?" Amber clamored, "at what time?"
"He left it open for us to decide," Saren replied, "when would you feel ready?"

Amber took a moment to examine her calendar in her omni-tool.

"We've got nothing tomorrow. Perhaps lunch?" she proposed.

Saren nodded in approval before he sent a reply through his omni-tool.

\[
\text{(Desolas,}
\]

\[
\text{We can meet tomorrow for lunch at the usual place. I get that she's from a new species, but don't make her feel uncomfortable.}
\]

\[
\text{Saren)}
\]

Once Saren shut off his omni-tool, he turned his head towards Amber. She extended her hand, allowing him to hold it.

"How are you feeling?" he asked cautiously.

"You could say I feel content," Amber replied.

"That's…that's good to hear," he hesitated for a moment, looking to the side with a distracted glance.

"So, what does Desolas look like?" Amber asked.

Saren's eyes softened when he gazed at Amber. He pulled out his omni-tool and showed a single photo of himself and Desolas when he was merely ten and his brother was just thirteen.

"He's the bigger one on the right," Saren clarified.

Amber examined the photo with great enthusiasm.

"That's Desolas, huh?" Amber commented, "where are you guys?"

"Orphanage school, just outside the front doors," he explained.

Amber leaned back, allowing Saren to embrace her from behind while she pulled out her datapad and scrolled to her photo gallery. It was a long list of her and her adoptive mother throughout her childhood all the way to the day she first left for boot camp. During her time in training, the number of photos severely decreased and were taken further apart from each other. Still, Saren's mandibles fluttered when he examined each photo. Mid sentence, she paused and gave him a confused look.

"What's with the purring?" Amber asked.

Saren snapped out of his thoughts.

"Oh, that," Saren clarified, "turians purr when they're happy."

"What about?"

"Well, I'm simply happy you're happy," he sheepishly answered, continuing to look to the side, "there's nothing wrong with that, right?"
Amber couldn't help but smile at his response.

"Is that all?" she leaned her head against his mandible, adjusting her body against him.

Saren nodded before he nuzzled his face against hers.

"Alright, maybe something else too," Amber chuckled.

Saren began showing Amber the rest of his photo gallery. It continued on through the afternoon and only stopped when they went to the kitchen to get lunch. This time, Amber gathered some fresh levo ingredients from the fridge and the pantry and followed some instructions as she prepared her lunch. The two later sat side by side at the kitchen counter eating their meals silently. After finishing, they opted to take a walk in a nearby park not too far from their apartment.
The following day seemed rather quiet, though they did have a scheduled gathering planned out. This was also good timing since their first assignment as an interspecies crew hasn't been decided yet. While Amber was getting dressed, Saren took the time to review the Spectre candidacy requirements. While not necessarily to have her along more frequently, he felt she met all the necessary skill prerequisites and was ready to undergo evaluation. The question is, how would he arrange her training while her species has yet to transition into recognition by the other races? Perhaps it would be best to play it as an experiment, to test the full potential of the humans as contributors to society. Saren brushed off that thought when Amber finished getting dressed and emerged from her bedroom.

"I'm ready. Is it time to go?" Amber asked.

"Just about," Saren nodded.

They headed off and took a walk down the Presidium. Once they reached an intercultural restaurant, Saren and Amber stepped inside, where Desolas waited for them.

"Hello, Saren! And you must be Amber. I've heard so much about you," he greeted with a happy, laughing tone.

Amber nodded at Desolas before she extended her hand.

"Pleased to meet you too, Desolas," she answered with a straight face.

Once he released her hand, Desolas led Amber and Saren to a table.

"I haven't ordered anything for myself yet. I thought I'd be courteous enough to hold myself back until you two arrived."

"Thanks, brother," Saren replied as he picked up a menu.

The three quickly ordered their meals before resuming their conversation.

"Shepard," Desolas told Amber, "you don't mind if I ask you some questions, do you?"

"Go on," Amber nodded.

"Tell me, how did you survive that Thresher Maw attack?" Desolas asked, "I heard it was just luck, but I'm skeptic of the mere dismissal of the possibility. A first encounter with a hazard your species had no idea about prior? Chance is incredibly unlikely in this scenario."

Amber felt a mild cringe, but her expression didn't change.

"I barely outran them," Amber started.

"Strength and persistence, hmm?" Desolas mused.

Amber quietly nodded. Sighing, Saren gently rubbed her shoulder, allowing her to lean into the touch.

"Saren, you've got to be the luckiest man alive right now," Desolas smirked.
Saren raised a browplate.

"Oh?" he paused, "how so?"

"A warrior maiden from a species no one else has even heard of before walks into your arms," Desolas continued with an audible click, "what's the human saying? First come, first serve? You got the best one of the batch. Special operations, tough and battle hardened, and from what you've told me, you two were practically made for each other. But, those are just my two credits."

Amber gave Desolas a blank stare.

"I'm not sure how you came to that conclusion," she shrugged, "but…ok."


Amber scratched her head while Saren scratched his mandible.

"We'll see where we go from here," Amber offered.

Just then, the waiter arrived with their lunch orders. They eagerly accepted their meal and started eating.

"So how often do you come here to visit?" Amber asked Desolas.

"A couple times during leave," Desolas said after thinking for a moment, "it's a nice place, deserves the attention."

Amber sipped her beverage.

"So I noticed a few more humans are now present on the station," Desolas pointed out, "what exactly are they here for?"

"It'll be some time before they're fully introduced to our races," Saren answered.

"Ah. A clever way of going about the matter," Desolas agreed, "how far down the line can we expect the humans to start making a move in politics?"

Saren and Amber exchanged glances in a moment of silence.

"We don't know yet," Saren answered.

Saren went back to eating his meal.

"One more thing," Desolas asked, "what personal future plans do you two have? Missions to do, places to see, anything like that?"

"That's what we're figuring out ourselves," Amber replied.

"Actually, I had another assignment in mind," Saren interjected, "we'd be leaving later this week."

It was only a while before Desolas, Saren and Amber finished their lunch. Desolas paid the bill and got up from his seat.

"It's been a pleasure meeting you Shepard," Desolas said, "I hope we can talk again."

Saren stood from the table.
"Hopefully, he didn't make you feel too uncomfortable, did he?" he asked her.

"He was ok," Amber shrugged.

Once Desolas, Saren and Amber left the restaurant, both Arterius brothers parted ways.

"He can be a bit controlling sometimes," Saren sighed.

Amber tilted her head and stared at Saren in confusion while they wandered through the streets.

"At least when I'm around," Saren clarified, "most of the time, the friends I do have say he rubs them the wrong way."

Amber sighed as she placed her hand on Saren's shoulder.

"It's alright," Amber reassured, "I've dealt with worse."

Saren's expression softened while they continued venturing through the streets. Tilting to the right, Amber and Saren noticed a shopping district. He gestured to Amber to turn the direction and perhaps look for something of interest. While they ventured through the shopping district, Amber noticed that several people of different races made brief glances at her. By that point, she was already used to this situation. Saren on the other hand was taking to the gestures much more slowly. He was quickly becoming nervous and walked into one of the nearby gun stores. Inside, they spotted Jack and Wrex comparing guns which Saren recognized were known to be used by krogans.

"This is one from the lower recoil part of the spectrum. It trades damage for a higher rate of fire and volume of shots that can be fired from a single clip," Wrex explained.

Jack nodded as she examined a krogan weapon in her hands. She tried the charging handles and firing mode switch when she noticed Amber and Saren enter.

"Hey, Amber! What's up?!" Jack called over.

Jack set down the gun before she sprinted over to Amber and they made a fist bump.

"Hi, Jack," Amber greeted, "what you doing here?"

Jack made a brief glance at Wrex before she returned her gaze towards Amber.

"Buying guns," Jack answered, "what else?"

Wrex muttered something under his breath while he stood to his feet.

"She's quite the handful, Shepard," Wrex commented.

"Oh, her?" Amber paused while gesturing to Jack, "I've known her since we found her in an illegal lab we infiltrated years ago. I hadn't graduated N7 yet during that time."

Jack sighed as she rolled her eyes.

"At least you didn't drop my full name," she remarked.

Jack gestured Amber to follow her to the displays for krogan weapons.

"They mostly work in heavier weapons, like shotguns and LMGs. They do have a few RPG and
launcher models, but I already tried them out. They are not very stable," Jack explained.

Amber examined a few of the krogan guns on display.

"I do admit they're pretty different from the weapons I've seen Saren work with," Amber commented.

"Yeah," Jack agreed, "I'd give the LMGs a try if they didn't shake so much. Even Wrex showed noticeable strain when he tested it."

Amber and Jack stepped over to the display holding samples of turian weapons. Her eyes were specifically glued to a line of sniper rifles. She'd lost her Alliance issued rifle back on Akuze to a dash of acid. She managed to ignore that nagging memory long enough to pick up a turian rifle and examine it closely.

"The widow is a prized weapon," Saren informed her, "integral suppressor, stock that helps to mitigate recoil, weighed barrel to minimize sway, customizable to your needs, and a powerful punch."

Amber nodded at Saren in agreement. Once she finished examining the rifle, she placed it back on the rack before she examined a turian pistol.

"Anything good about this one?" Amber asked.

Saren shrugged.

"It's a run-of-the-mill pistol," Saren answered, "it'll do its job, will never jam, and is relatively customizable, but it's nothing to write home about."

Amber nodded before she shifted her attention towards a turian assault rifle.

"How about this one?" Amber asked.

"This is a select-fire three-burst assault rifle, at least the civilian model anyways," he answered.

Amber rubbed her chin while wondering if James would like to give the turian assault rifle a test run at some point.

"How expensive are the widow and assault rifle?"

Saren followed her gaze.

"Naturally, due to how complicated the widow is, it's much more costly," Saren said, "the assault rifle on the other hand is very cheap."

"Then that should make Vega really happy," Amber remarked.

While Jack and Wrex were still testing weapons, Amber filled out the necessary paperwork and walked out. The shop owner said he would ship them the weapon a week from now after everything went through.

"I must say, Shepard," Saren commented, "you seem pretty generous towards others, especially this Lieutenant Vega."

"Yeah," Amber nodded, "and I did have a fling with him…once."
"How many…encounters have you had?" Saren asked, raising a browplate.

"Apart from Vega and myself?" Amber placed her hand behind her head, "I'd say two or three."

Saren nodded.

"Why the break-up then?"

"It's complicated. I still see him as a friend, but I don't want to explain in detail," she sighed.

"Very well, I can respect that," Saren nodded.

Saren and Amber continued their stroll through the shopping district. Not three minutes had passed when they saw Kasumi and Tali walking out of a parts shop, with a few bags of assorted components.

"Hey, Saren?" Amber asked, "what kind of parts does this shop sell?"

"Hardware," Saren answered, "good for making modifications to your liking."

Amber lifted her left wrist closer to her face and carefully examined her omni-tool.

"I know it's only a civilian-grade tool," Amber said, "but I'd like to see how much I can improve upon this model."

Saren raised a browplate.

"You sure about this?" he paused.

She didn't answer and simply walked to the store front. Saren simply followed her inside and observed Amber as she browsed the omni-tool parts on a display. She was very vocal with the shop owner, asking what components did what. The shop owner responded by explaining the function of each component she gestured to. Purchasing some components with the credits she had, she handed over her omni-tool to have the parts installed. While the shop owner took her omni-tool to the back room, Amber simply waited at the counter, so Saren slowly approached her.

"What'd you get?" Saren asked.

Amber snapped out of her thoughts and tilted her head towards Saren.

"Motion tracker, a scanner, and a personal blade," Amber replied, "that won't be a problem, right?"

Saren placed his hand on Amber's shoulder.

"If it makes you feel safer," Saren told her, "it'll be fine."

Several minutes later, the shop owner emerged from the back room with the modified omni-tool in his hand before he handed it back to Amber. Paying the fee, they left the shop. They finally exited the shopping district and entered the Presidium. The first area on the way back was an open park, giving a lovely view of the river down below. Saren and Amber began strolling on the walkway adjacent to the river. Somewhere towards the center of the park, she spotted Chakwas and Mordin, chatting away with a projection from the latter's omni-tool. When Amber and Saren passed by, their presence caught the doctors' attention.

"Oh, Shepard! I didn't know you'd be coming this way!" Chakwas acknowledged.
Amber and Saren paused in their tracks.

"We were just on our stroll for today," Amber clarified.

"Still, good to see you again."

The two doctors resumed their discussion of the biology regarding some species. This encouraged Saren and Amber to sit on a bench next to them. Mordin was still explaining complications between levo and dextro amino acids while Chakwas recorded as much as she could. The instant Amber caught a glimpse of a projection of a turian, she turned her head towards Saren.

"Saren," Amber whispered, "turians have dextro amino acids, right?"

"Yes. Why?" Saren returned.

Amber perched her hand on Saren's.

"Are there risks of mixing dextro and levo amino acids?" she asked him.

"It really depends," Saren clarified as he scratched his mandible, "sometimes people are allergic, sometimes they're not. Even if you aren't, you won't be getting nutrients from dextro-based foods."

"I see," Amber mused.

Saren cast another glance.

"Anything else?"

Amber shook her head. They sat through the rest of the discussion with Mordin and Chakwas over the afternoon.
Later on that week, Saren obtained the details on their next assignment, so Amber took this chance to slip into her new N7 armor. She took a long good look at herself in the mirror. Along with the N7 brand on the right breast of her chestplate, her right arm had a red and white stripe down the middle. Considering how she lost her previous Alliance armor to the Thresher Maws, it made her feel like she rose from the ashes. She walked back out, head held high to meet with Saren in the living room.

"I see that the Alliance has you covered," Saren told her.

"Same can be said for you on behalf of the Council," Amber nodded.

They stepped out of the apartment and made their way towards the Spectre docks. Once they arrived, they noticed Nihlus, Garrus, Kaidan, Ashley, Kasumi, Jack, Liara, Tali, Wrex, James and Kelly waiting for them. Nihlus approached to greet them.

"Saren, I was wondering when you would show up," Nihlus informed, "everyone's equipped and ready to go."

Saren's mandibles flicked into a grin while he placed his hand on Nihlus's shoulder.

"Good. Let's head out," Saren ordered.

Saren led Amber and their squad aboard the ship before they made their way to the bridge, where Captain Anderson stood while he observed a projection of the galaxy. He paused what he was doing when the older turian Spectre approached him.

"Arterius, good to see you again," Anderson gave Saren a salute.

Saren saluted back.

"Same to you, Anderson," Saren nodded.

"That's quite the collection you've brought," Anderson added, glancing at the non-human personnel present.

"They'll be participating in the mission," Saren folded his arms.

"I see. I just hope all goes well, and I eagerly anticipate the initiation of this mission."

Anderson stepped over to the pilot seats and met up with Joker and a few copilots.

"Take us out, Lieutenant," Anderson ordered.

"Copy that," Joker nodded.

Joker tapped on a few buttons on the terminal and moments later, the vessel closed its doors and lifted into the air, making its way out of the docks. Once it left the station, it began traveling through space. Their destination was somewhere much less urban. In the briefing room, the team took their time to review the map of a deep jungle and a compound that dug a kilometer and a half below the surface.

"So what could be going on in there?" Kaidan asked.
"Small smuggler compound, mostly deals in narcotics," Nihlus explained.

"So we're not the only one who has to deal with narcotics like opioids?" Ashley paused.

"Small galaxy," Tali muttered.

"We'll be breaking up into a few teams," Saren continued, "watch your fire in there around any containment vessels. We're a few hours from the Citadel and I'm not sure this ship has the sufficient facilities to treat an overdose. I'd prefer if none of us came back after inhaling who-knows-what from a ruptured tank."

"You got it, Arterius," Garrus nodded.

"Finally, I've already had teams assigned based upon weapon proficiency and abilities," Saren concluded, "we'll be heading out in two groups. If any of you have last-minute questions, speak your mind."

Jack raised her hand upon cue.

"Yes?" Saren raised a browplate.

"How well equipped is the opposition?" Jack asked.

Saren scratched his mandible.

"Chances are, they come relatively short of military-grade equipment," Saren replied, "they'll have strength in numbers, and that's it."

Jack and Wrex exchanged glances for a moment.

"It's manageable," Wrex blurted.

Jack nodded in approval while Kasumi read the map.

"So what's the plan exactly?" Kasumi reminded.

"Clear the facility of hostiles," Amber clarified.

It was only a long while before the vessel emerged from the Mass Relay and it continued traveling through space. Another hour passed as they made final equipment checks. Finally approaching the planet's orbit, they prepared to make the drop below. The two groups each entered an APC parked in the cargo hold. The two were dropped from low orbit into the foliage below before Saren realized something horribly wrong.

"Excuse me, Amber. Wasn't this vehicle in peak condition back on the ship?"

Amber shuddered even when she held a tight grip on the steering wheel.

"I…thought it was," Amber blurted.

"We can look at it when we get back," Kaidan reminded.

Amber nodded before she pressed her foot on the gas pedal. She had definitely tried quite a few lemons back on Earth when she got her first wheels, but this was something much worse. Its handling was nothing short of barely responsive, the gear would often get stuck and refuse to go
into reverse, the suspension would cause the whole thing to bounce like a trampoline after rolling over the smallest of hills and bumps, and it was top-heavy. Continuing towards the compound, she let out an ever-growing string of expletives under her breath. Did the production company responsible make these vehicles terrible on purpose? Kaidan and Saren gave their attempt at the wheel, but only met complications themselves.

"Spirits! What's wrong with this thing?!” Saren barked, nearly causing the vehicle to flip on a small rock.

"Uh, maybe it's the terrain," Kaidan assumed.

The others groaned.

"We're close enough from here. We can walk," Amber groaned.

Amber brought the Mako to a complete stop before she opened the door. Oddly enough, the terrain wasn't too different from anything they encountered on Earth. If that was the case, why didn't the Mako cooperate? Amber made a mental note to check the vehicle later as she hopped out, quickly followed by Saren and their teammates. Trudging along, they found the first guard post ten minutes later. They ducked behind a makeshift cover to avoid being spotted before they could figure a way inside. With her rifle, Amber quietly picked off the guards outside before they continued their advance. With enough luck, they managed to make it through the entrance. As Saren stated earlier, there were plenty of personnel protecting the facility, but they all brandished cheap armor and firearms. Both Kaidan and Amber glanced around each corner to double-check for patrolling guards. Kasumi radioed in from the other side of the facility.

{Shepard, we're in position. We're still going in loud, right? Especially with Wrex and Jack being such good friends,} she whispered the second sentence.

"Yes, exactly," Amber nodded.

A few seconds later, the sound of a roaring explosion rang across the treetops, followed by Saren catching the first few guards unaware. With the surviving guards in the area now focusing on the group, Amber and Kaidan opened fire on them. Peering down the scope, she pulled the trigger and watched one of the smuggler's helmets and head crack violently open like an egg. One of the guards charged after Kaidan, and he started emitting a biotic field. Saren countered with his own biotic barriers and launched himself at Kaidan's attacker before helping the Alliance soldier back to his feet.

"Uh," Kaidan blurted, "thanks, Saren."

"Yeah. Biotics can be problematic on the battlefield," Saren acknowledged.

Cleaning out the rest of the guards outside, they approached the entrance, with Tali getting to work on hacking the lock.

"Ok," Amber informed, "we cleared out their security."

{Got it, Shep. Wrex is taking point on our end. We'll radio in if we need backup,} Jack answered.

"Copy that," Kaidan agreed.

They entered with minimal initial resistance and entered what looked like a retrofitted old factory. With little time to lose, Amber, Kaidan and Saren meandered through the corridors. There had been a few instances where they could've been swarmed, but the severe lack of quality equipment and
training took a toll on the drug smugglers. With these advantages in mind, they began searching for the main office. With Garrus and Liara searching for evidence, Wrex, Jack, Kasumi, James, Nihlus, and Ashley cleared the lower levels of the factory while Saren, Amber, Kaidan, and Tali searched the upper levels.

While the others took extra caution to not rupture any of the tanks, Saren and Amber found the main office at the top floor. Setting a breaching charge on the door, Saren detonated the lock on the door before leaning out from cover. With little cover to hide behind, the two found no shortage of targets to pick off. Once they cleared the office of their targets, the older turian Spectre accessed the terminal.

"They've cleaned house, but there's a few scraps here," Saren mentioned.

"Let's see what they have," Amber said to herself.

They did find an extensive list of shipping lanes, materials used to manufacture the drugs, and shipment status within the region. Convinced that this evidence was efficient for a report, Saren downloaded the extensive list into his OSD. They returned to their companions nearby and returned to the lower levels to join the others.

"I assume you found the files?" Liara asked.

"Yeah," Amber nodded, "and we downloaded them."

Amber noticed Garrus holding a canister the size of a duffle bag in his arm.

"What'd you find?" Amber pondered.

"Sample of the drugs. It'll come in handy," Garrus said.

Amber nodded at Garrus before she led the entire squad out of the factory. In a nearby clearing, their ship had landed and retrieved their bogged down Mako from earlier.

"Well," Kaidan chuckled as he placed his hand behind his head, "at least we won't have to drive it back the way we came."

"I'd like to have a look at those, see just what went wrong," Saren grumbled.

Garrus flicked his mandibles as they made their way towards the ramp.

"I'll try to see what I can do about it," Garrus offered.

Just as the team started walking up the ramp, Saren and Garrus exchanged glances.

"You're offering to give a helping hand?" Saren clarified.

Garrus nodded.

"I've worked with bogged-down tanks before," Garrus pointed out.

Saren felt a sense of pride in Garrus as he flexed his mandibles into a grin.

"You may as well get to work then," Saren instructed, "I'll be on the bridge, writing my report."

Once everyone was aboard the ship, Garrus made his way to the cargo hold while Amber led Saren to the bridge.
"That went well," he hummed as they waited for the elevator to reach the bridge.

"I'd say it's not bad," Amber agreed.

Once they emerged from the elevator, they stepped aboard the bridge, only for Anderson to approach them.

"I saw your Mako broke down. What happened?" Anderson asked.

Amber scratched her head.

"Something went wrong the moment we touched down," Amber explained, "the handling was rough and I had those things checked before we departed."

Amber let out a frustrated sigh.

"It feels like the Mako is designed for mischief," she continued.

"I'm sure we'll find out what happened soon enough," her captain reassured.

Amber nodded in agreement before she trudged towards the wall and leaned back on it, Saren standing next to her.

"You performed admirably," he complimented.

Amber tilted her head towards Saren and smiled at him.

"Thanks," she replied.

"So far, both teams seemed to get along well enough, surprisingly," Saren added.

Amber extended her hand, allowing Saren to hold it.

"Then this was definitely a good idea," Amber agreed.

"Yeah, It was," Saren said, "wish I could say the same about the Mako."

Some time later, the ship lifted off the surface and took off through the atmosphere, making its way into space. They headed down to the mess hall while the ship set course for the Citadel. Saren served himself a turian dish while Amber served herself a sandwich and some fruit punch before they sat down at a table across from Nihlus and started eating.

"Well, that was fun," Nihlus mumbled with a mouthful of food, "can't say the same for Garrus. He's still down there, looking over one of the Makos."

Saren nodded silently while he took a sip of his drink.

"I thought I'd stop him," he replied, "but then I thought a second opinion on the APC would be helpful."

Amber took a bite from her sandwich.

"I still can't believe the Mako came to a halt that quickly," she commented.

"Have you driven a Mako before?" Nihlus asked.

Amber shook her head.
"I've only seen them on display," Amber answered, "they're still new."

Saren, Amber and Nihlus went back to eating their lunch. Later that afternoon, an hour before they would dock with the station, Amber went down to the cargo hold. There, she noticed Garrus was still examining the Mako.

"How is it?" Amber asked.

Garrus let out a pained groan.

"Everything is still untouched," Garrus answered, "however, a bunch of gunk and dust got into the system and clogged everything up."

Amber knelt down next to Garrus and peered into the gaps in the Mako's engine.

"So nothing structural or lasting?" Amber clarified.

"Basically," Garrus nodded, "however, I'd have this model updated so the engine components aren't so exposed like this."

Amber nodded at Garrus before they stood to their feet. Shortly after that, they left the cargo hold. She continued to the bridge where she watched the pilots bring them into dock. Once the ship latched on and opened the ramp, Anderson nodded at Saren before they led Amber and their crew out of the bridge and across the walkway to the docks.

"It was good having you aboard, Arterius," Anderson complimented, "it was interesting to see a multi-species operation in the works."

"Anytime, Anderson," Saren saluted, "however, and I can understand if you feel this move to be premature, I still have one more question regarding Amber's position."

Anderson raised an eyebrow.

"Go on," he nodded.

"I'm curious in her potential," Saren explained, "she's proven herself a worthy soldier and has even shown to best troops twice her size in CQC. I'd like to borrow her for a few missions if that's okay with you."

Anderson couldn't help but scratch his head.

"Would you like to look after the rest of my crew while you're at it?" Anderson remarked.

"Considering how well the last mission went, I would definitely like to explore their potential further as well," Saren confirmed.

Anderson nodded.

"I can arrange that."
Testing Turian Waters

Amber stepped out of the shower, mopping up her drenched hair with a towel. Drying herself off, she checked her omni-tool for a message she received just after breakfast, which happened to be from Anderson.

{Shepard, while we have been able to avoid any conflict from first contact, we're not out of the woods yet. A local small detachment of troops just reported an incident between a group of civies and turians. Might want to check it out.}

Once Amber finished reading the message, she headed over to the living room where she found Saren.

"Hey. I'll be heading out shortly," Amber informed, "Anderson called, wanted me to handle something."

Saren raised his browplates in curiosity.

"What about?"

"Angry humans and turians. I'll find out more when I get there," Amber clarified.

Saren slowly stood to his feet.

"If that's the case, I may as well come along."

Amber and Saren took a matter of minutes to slip into their suits of armor and gather a few of their weapons before they made their way out of the apartment. They ventured through the Presidium until they reached the Spectre docks, meandering towards the shuttle. Once they boarded the shuttle and left the Citadel, they traveled to a Mass Relay on their way to a colony on the edges of Alliance and Hierarchy space.

Once they reached the planet in question, Saren sent a transmission to the air control on the surface. The turian colony granted them access and even said they would lend ground transportation to the site of conflict. Saren landed the shuttle in the docking bay and turned off the engine before he led Amber outside. They made their way through the port until they reached its entrance, noticing a ground vehicle waiting for them. Saren boarded the vehicle with Amber following suit before he manned the controls. With the two settling into their seats, the turian Spectre drove the vehicle away from the station and down the road. The turian colony was comparatively small, as barely five minutes passed before they entered the open plains of the mountainous planet.

Almost another half hour went by before they came into view of a human-made boundary. When Saren and Amber emerged from the transport, they could see human mine workers bickering with turian officials. Saren and Amber got off the transport, Amber taking point.

"What's going on here?" she demanded.

The humans and turians in question paused in their argument and turned towards both Amber and Saren.

"These damn raptors won't let us mine here!" one of the miners complained.
Amber folded her arms and tilted her head sideways.

"You do realize you're on a turian colony, right?" Amber pointed out.

"Even if you are to initiate mining efforts miles away from a colony, you'll still need to register with colonial maintenance back on the Citadel and the local administration," Saren continued with the diplomatic approach, "mining can potentially be harmful to local populaces as it threatens to pollute ground water, polluting the air, and killing any crops nearby."

Another miner placed his hands on his hips and leaned forward.

"Oh, I see. You're one of those N7s," he mocked, "what the hell are you doing out here, anyways?"

She put her hands behind her back.

"My job is still making sure our people are safe, but that also means that conflicts don't come to rise to begin with. Your stubborn attitude will only exacerbate the problem."

The miners gave Amber puzzled expressions.

"Chances are, you can set up somewhere else," Amber continued, "I can set you on the right path and you can probably still get clearance to set up somewhere else on this planet, or within this same system. However, continuing here and now won't get you anything but legal issues."

One miner turned his gaze towards the turian officials.

"She is right, you know," one of the turian officials insisted.

The miner sighed in defeat.

"Fine. I'll let my boss know what the situation is. We'll be packed up before the end of the week."

Saren nodded at the miners.

"Glad this came to a resolution. I assume everything else can be taken care of?"

"Yeah, I'm sure your presence isn't necessary, sir. Same for you N7," the miner grunted, turning away.

The turian officials nodded at Amber and Saren. They returned to the transport as Amber pulled out her omni-tool.

"Captain, I investigated the disturbance," Amber reported, "it was a team of miners who hadn't registered for a mining license at the Citadel."

[I see. Good work out there, Shepard.]

"We'll be heading back to Citadel shortly," Amber concluded, "Shepard signing off."

Amber ended the transmission before she and Saren boarded the transport.

"Quick and painless," Saren hummed cheerfully.

Amber nodded in agreement before she gave Saren a high five. The turian Spectre took control of the steering handles and moved the transport away from the site. They returned to the spaceport, depositing their transport with the facility personnel. They ventured through the docks until they
reached their shuttle. Once they boarded it, Saren settled into his pilot seat.

"Good thing this trip didn't need backup," Amber mused.

"Yeah, well things will ramp up soon enough," Saren agreed, "hopefully, it won't involve more Makos."

Saren turned on the ignition and began flying the shuttle out of the spaceport, launching it through the atmosphere into the vacuum of space. She relaxed in her seat for a bit, occasionally looking to Saren. He didn't appear to be...preoccupied with anyone else. Perhaps she still had an opportunity with him.

"Uuuummm...Saren? Quick question," Amber blurted.

Saren tilted his head towards Amber and raised his browplates.

"Yes?" he paused.

"I was thinking tomorrow we've got some time to ourselves. Want to head out for dinner? Or... head out for...something?" it sounded better in her head.

Saren tilted his head sideways, his mandibles flexing into a soft smile.

"Yeah, we can do that," he answered.

With a boost of confidence, Amber smiled before she rested in her seat while the shuttle approached the Mass Relay.

They were quickly whisked back to the Citadel and returned to the Spectre docks. Returning to their apartment, Saren got to work looking up a good place to go. All the while, Amber slipped out of her armor and rummaged through her closet in search of a suitable dress for the occasion. She soon settled on a dark red halter minidress that flared out at the waist. Similarly, Saren pulled out a suit that he brought for formal occasions and infiltration missions. It had been a while, but it was still laundered after the last time he wore it. Now that they were ready, they met up at the living room.

"It's not exactly an evening outing, but I think this'll do nicely regardless," Saren said.

Amber nodded while Saren showed her some options on his omni-tool. Once Amber made her selection, they left the apartment and made their way through the Presidium. Returning to their apartment, Saren got to work looking up a good place to go. All the while, Amber slipped out of her armor and rummaged through her closet in search of a suitable dress for the occasion. She soon settled on a dark red halter minidress that flared out at the waist. Similarly, Saren pulled out a suit that he brought for formal occasions and infiltration missions. It had been a while, but it was still laundered after the last time he wore it. Now that they were ready, they met up at the living room.

"It's not exactly an evening outing, but I think this'll do nicely regardless," Saren said.

Amber nodded while Saren showed her some options on his omni-tool. Once Amber made her selection, they left the apartment and made their way through the Presidium. It didn't take long before Saren and Amber arrived at a high-end diner. They both made their way inside before a waiter escorted them to a table sitting near a window that displayed a remarkable view of the Presidium outside. Just outside was a large balcony that extended outward, but relatively short of any hovercars. Amber read through the menu and examined the ingredients of each asari and salarian dish. She chose an asari dish and Saren chose something more dextro-friendly.

While they waited for their drinks to arrive first, Amber extended her hand, allowing Saren to hold it.

"To think we've known each other for three and a half months," Amber mused.

"A strange sensation, I know," Saren acknowledged.

Amber nodded while she and Saren took a moment to gaze at the interior of the diner. It was definitely more decorated than the calm, down-to-earth types of places they'd eaten at up until
then. Using minute amounts of the most desired metals the galaxy could offer, the pillars, stair railings, and carved statues were composed of various shiny and chrome materials. The wallpaper depicted distant mountain sides with paper embroidering at the bottom, feeding into panels of wood before touching the ground. Adding that to Saren's companionship gave Amber a sense of tranquility until the waiter arrived with their drinks.

"So, have you been comfortable living within my household?" Saren asked.

"Definitely," Amber smiled.

"It…means a lot hearing that," Saren reciprocated.

Amber leaned her face closer to Saren's, allowing him to nuzzle her.

"Same here," Amber added.

Saren and Amber took a moment to take a sip of their drinks.

"You wouldn't mind becoming a Spectre, would you?" Saren offered, "I mean, it'd be beneficial for humans in the long run. Like I said, non-Council-race Spectres are not mythical."

Amber blinked twice.

"What brought you the idea of a human Spectre?" she paused.

Just then, the waiter arrived with their entrees.

"Remember that first ring we took out?" Saren pointed out, "deep in the parking garage? I saw how you fought. That's when I hit upon the idea. Spectres aren't so much trained as they are chosen from the best a species has to offer."

Amber smiled for a moment before she took a bite out of her lunch.

"I appreciate the offer," Amber answered, "I might need some time to think about it, though."

Saren nodded while he started eating his lunch.

After they finished their lunch and paid the bill, Saren and Amber stepped out of the diner and meandered through the Presidium. They entered a nearby park and sat at a bench facing an elaborate fountain. Amber leaned closer to Saren, encouraging him to wrap an arm over her shoulder. He tugged her close, letting out a deep rumble from his chest like a drum. Amber nestled into her embrace while she stroked one of his arms with her hand. Slowly, he tapped his forehead against hers, looking deep into her eyes. Amber gave him a soft smile before she cupped his mandible with her hand, leaning forward until she pressed her lips against his. Initially surprised by the gesture, Saren quickly came to lean in.

"I was unaware you felt similarly."

"I'm glad you do, too," Amber replied.

With that, Saren and Amber deepened their kiss and closed their eyes. It felt like time froze as they maintained their kiss, the world remaining unchanged around them. A minute later, they broke off the kiss and Amber nuzzled her face against his, eliciting even more purrs from him.

"I admit that I was afraid coming out like this would negatively impact our friendship," she whispered.
"I assure you it didn't, Shepard," Saren chuckled softly.

Another fifteen minutes passed of silently enjoying the presence of the other before they got up and returned to the apartment. Since it was still afternoon, Saren took a moment to search the medicine cabinet where he found a container of dextro allergy meds. While it wasn't in anticipation for what he had in mind, it was good to have been prepared. He trudged out of the bathroom and made his way towards the door to his room, where Amber stood waiting for him. She already stripped herself of her dress and stood in her underwear.

"I was wondering what you'd do to come prepared," Amber mused.

Saren nodded while he opened the door and gestured her into his bedroom. There, Amber climbed onto his bed. He quickly undid what was left of his own suit.

"Just meds," Saren answered, "I've also got a thing of medi-gel in the closet in case of emergencies."

Setting the allergy meds nearby, Saren climbed onto her bed, encouraging Amber to crawl closer to him until she wrapped her arms around him. Leaning in for a kiss, he slowly tugged off the last of his undergarments before reaching around to take off Amber's. Amber raised her arms while he slipped off her bra and tossed it aside. When he reached his hands underneath her panties, she lifted her legs so he could slide them off. He then started by massaging her shoulders with his talons. Amber reciprocated by massaging the base of his neck with one hand and brushing her other hand along his waist. With his left hand, he ran his fingertips down her side, feeling the transition between the smooth, silky skin and rough scar tissue. Amber let out soft moans as the scar didn't hurt anymore and Saren's touch felt pleasant. She felt his hand clamp onto her hips, with his other hand still affixed on her shoulder.

Saren craned his head and started licking her neck, encouraging Amber to tilt her head upwards as she let out a soft gasp. She brushed one hand underneath his fringe as he began trailing his tongue along her collarbone and between her breasts.

"I take it these are sensitive like an asari's?" Saren murmured.

Amber nodded in between moans, so Saren took hold of one of her breasts into his hand. Cupping it in the palm of his hand, he curiously thumbed the nipple in a circular motion. She leaned forward and brushed her tongue along his neck, eliciting a soft groan out of him. He moved his hand from her hips to her folds, confidently prodding her nether region. The instant he heard her moan and buck her hips, Saren dipped one talon into her folds. The louder she moaned, the deeper he dug. Not too long later, he withdrew his hand, sniffing the fluids that cling to his talons.

"Tell me, Shepard," Saren purred, "what else makes you tick?"

"Humans can use their mouths to stimulate one another," Amber replied.

She reached down and grabbed his fully extended member. Saren raised a browplate in curiosity.

"What exactly did you have in mind?" Saren asked.

Amber gave Saren a reassuring smile before she leaned down and brushed her tongue along his tip. Saren's eyes widened.

"I s…s-see," he mumbled, distracted by the sensation.

She grasped his base with her other hand before she took his length into her mouth. Audibly
breathing, he put a hand on the back of her head and craned his neck back. She bobbed her head and stroked his base while she swirled her tongue over the ridges and spines. Saren tried to mutter something, but only had his words drowned out by waves of pleasure. Just as he was halfway to his climax, Saren tapped Amber's shoulder, causing her to withdraw her mouth.

"Saren?" Amber paused.

"You all right with me returning the favor?" Saren offered.

Understanding what he meant, Amber nodded before she lay back, allowing Saren to scoot along until his face was closer to her nether regions. His leathery tongue quickly found its way inside of her and started brushing along her walls. Lightly, he would brush his upper lip against her clit with each bobbing motion. As she keened in bliss, Amber perched her legs over his shoulders. Every now and then, her hips would spasm, and he opted to hook his hands over her hips to keep her locked in place. When his tongue reached her cervix, Saren purred which sent vibrations into her core. With the first vibration, she let out an unintelligible, pleasured cry. Just as Saren stroked her clit, he could feel the salty fluid coating her walls. In a burst of heat, he felt a spray brush against his face plates. Chuckling, he withdrew his tongue.

"I suppose you enjoy this, don't you?" he let out a seductive purr.

Amber panted while she nodded. She slowly sat up before she straddled her legs on his lap, positioning his tip at her folds. She impatiently shoved him inside, taking the full length. Within an instant, she gasped as she felt him stretch her. Saren panted as he wrapped his arms around her and held her close. She felt soft, unlike any turian woman he'd been with prior. It was strange feeling her slick, rubbery walls glom onto him.

Amber wrapped her legs around his waist, savoring the ridges and spines that brushed along her walls. Each bump provided a small jolt to her system, slowly building up a charge like static electricity. Once she gave him a nod of approval, Saren gripped her hips before he started pounding into her. She instantly gave up the fight to maintain any coherent line of thought and rode the waves of ecstasy. With each thrust, Amber panted as she nuzzled her face on his neck. He maintained his firm grip on her hips and hooked her shoulder with his mandibles. The bedroom seemed to spin as fluids mixed to ease the friction with the turian Spectre pounding into her flesh. The sensation was rather addicting to the point they didn't want the sensation to end.

With heat building up inside both of them and carnal thrills surging through their veins, Amber rocked her hips in sync with his thrusts even when he slowly accelerated his pace. Saren was just able to muster enough willpower to only lightly nip at her neck. It didn't leave behind any marks, which Saren could easily accept. Amber's moans gradually grew louder as she tightened her thighs around his waist, wanting to savor as much pleasure he could give her. They only began to slow down when they reached a second climax, having exerted much of their energy already.

Amber gave Saren a passionate kiss before he withdrew from her. While she rested on the bed, Saren climbed off to fetch a glass of water and open the container of the allergy meds. Once the turian Spectre handed them to her, she sat up and washed down a tablet before she handed the glass back to him. Saren set the glass aside before he lay down next to her and ran his talons through her hair.

"You know," Amber mused, "this could work out well."

"Definitely," Saren agreed.

Smiling, Amber nestled into Saren's embrace while his chest rumbled with deep purring. Even after
she'd fallen asleep, he continued to watch over her, treasuring her beauty. It wasn't until forty-five minutes later that his eyelids weighed down and he drifted off.
Batarians in Thessia

The break may have been brief, but apart from spending time bonding with Saren and playing her favorite video games on her miniature console, Amber felt ready to handle a first-hand experience of Saren's duties as a Spectre. She may not have decided on his offer, but she was still interested in his occupation nonetheless. They were currently at the Spectre Academy, fully suited up and getting appropriate gear for the mission. When Amber finished sealing her armor, she carefully read the details of the mission from Saren's omni-tool.

Intel indicated a group of batarians were present on the asari homeworld with a biological ordinance ready to deploy on the civilian populace. This was concerning enough to the point Amber knew taking action was vital. Once she finished reading the details of the mission, she rummaged the shelves for suitable weapons. She picked up an SMG, wishing to test out a smaller caliber for the mission. By the time they finished preparations, Saren led Amber out of the Spectre academy and they made their way towards his shuttle. After they boarded, Saren settled into his pilot seat and Amber settled into the passenger seat. As they left the dock, Saren hastily called Tevos on his omni-tool.

"Councilor, I assume you have been communicating with Thessia authorities recently?" Saren asked.

{I have, Spectre Arterius.} Tevos nodded over the transmission, {the authorities have set a perimeter around the explosive and evacuations have been ordered.}

"Good. We'll arrive in short order. Hopefully, we can prevent the agent from being released."

Saren ended the transmission before he returned to flying the shuttle through space, making its way to the Mass Relay.

"I hope that suit of yours isn't capable of keeping airborne agents out," he muttered.

Amber blinked twice in confusion while she double-checked her armor.

"My suit does lock," Amber clarified.

Saren gave Amber a smile in relief.

"Good. It'll come in handy," he replied.

Seconds later, the Mass Relay catapulted them out of the system. It was only a matter of hours before the shuttle emerged from another Mass Relay and it entered asari space. Saren put full power into the engines to get them quickly to their destination. The shuttle soon arrived at Thessia, so the shuttle descended into the atmosphere. What concerned Saren the most was that the intel was faulty, and the ordinance had been set up elsewhere. He kept that in mind as he landed the shuttle at the docks on the planet's surface.

"What kind of vendetta do the batarians have against the asari, anyway?" Amber sighed as she rose from her seat.

"The batarians have always been aggressive," Saren started, "ever since they joined the community, they've been nothing but trouble and they haven't been particularly keen on having a good reason either."
Amber scratched her head before she gathered her weapons and Saren stood to his feet.

"So they're just got itchy trigger fingers?" Amber pondered.

"I suppose regulations against slavery are an issue as well," Saren added, "they hold their culture very dear to their way of life and most of them view it as a violation of their heritage."

That sent chills down Amber's spine.

"Slaves? Really? They'll get violent for that reason?" Amber blurted.

Saren shrugged.

"What can I say? They're rather isolated outside of Terminus space, they're built up on a culture of bloated superiority, and their motives have always been a bit muddy given just how little we know about life within their home systems."

Saren and Amber disembarked the shuttle and meandered their way through the docks, making their way to the entrance to the port. The streets at their destination weren't nearly as empty as they would need to be, with plenty of civilians out in the open. Both Saren and Amber double-checked their destination in his omni-tool before they boarded a tram. Getting off at the destination stop, they were greeted by a handful of local authorities.

"Spectre, I'm glad you could respond in time."

Saren responded with a nod.

"Glad I could, too," Saren replied, "I see you have the surface completely secured?"

"Yes sir. I've got the streets cleared, a squad at every corner, and VTOLs in the air. They're not getting through," the captain answered.

"If you insist," Saren nodded, "I'll be inspecting the gaps in your defense with my partner. Maintain your current position."

Saren and Amber went their own way, away from the local police. Once they reached the building in question, they started patrolling the perimeter in search of a way inside.

"I hope you don't mind if we enter the sewers again. You'd be surprised how often people on guard forget to look under the streets as well as above," Saren said.

"That's fine," Amber nodded.

Amber knelt down and opened the manhole before she peered inside. The two climbed down the ladder and began to peer around. Looking down the tunnel with his shoulder-mounted light, they cautiously advanced. Using his omni-tool, Saren read the 2D layout of the sewers as they ventured through the musky tunnels. Turning off his light, his stride became a crawl as he listened to the sounds from deeper into the sewers. Amber also resorted to crawling as she held her pistol in one hand. Then they saw in the corner of the shadows the first batarian, then the next, and another three after that. As Saren continued to count, it quickly became clear this wasn't a dozen-man operation.

"On my mark, Shepard," Saren whispered, "ready?"

Amber nodded.
"Weapons free. Let's go," Saren tossed a flashbang and started firing.

Startled, the batarians turned their heads towards the assailants and started charging at them. Amber tossed out another flashbang as she rounded another corner and let out another burst. Another batarian opened fired at her, but she managed to roll out of the way, dodging the shots. Saren followed up and provided cover fire for her, gunning down the batarian. Amber took aim at another batarian while Saren began emitting his biotic field. From behind the wall, Amber fired back, catching the batarian as he dove for cover.

Once they cleared out their opposition, they both continued venturing through the sewer. They entered a new, multi-layered, open section of the sewer, with several bridges connecting to a platform elevated above their position. Up top was more batarians, putting into place a large crate. The two were forced to split after the batarians above fired upon them. Amber and Saren scrambled for cover before they peeked out to fire back. Saren tossed his second to last flashbang up before using his biotics to launch himself up to the second level. Meanwhile, Amber circled around, looking for a way up before finding a stack of blocks acting like stairs upward. She wasted no time as she climbed up the stack of blocks.

From where she was, Amber was opposite to where Saren was, with the batarians locked in the middle between them. Slowly, they were being drawn his way, with the device right in front of her. While Saren began fighting them off, she went to work disarming the device. Already, the timer was ticking down, and she struggled to maintain a calm disposition. Using her omni-blade, Amber carefully cut open the device's cover to expose the wiring inside. She picked around a bit before finding the detonator for a small pack of plastic explosives.

"There you are," Amber muttered to herself.

She got up as a biotic blast tossed a few batarians her direction. She jumped out of the way with the detonator and the explosives in her possession. It was still live in her hands and it only had minute left on it. While she continued to work to dismantle the explosive, Saren handled the remaining batarians present. She managed to locate a few vital wires inside the explosive before she set off to cutting them. As Saren finished off the last of the opposition, he narrowly ducked under another barrage of fire, rolling off to the side as the remaining batarian attackers poured into the room below.

Now that Amber finished disabling the explosive, she scurried for the stack of blocks and jumped down on them. Saren kept his cover from above while she entered another tunnel, looking for a way to flank them. The N7 soldier kept track of the layout of the tunnel as she meandered through it. She ran right back around and found the group of batarians before pulling the pin of a grenade and tossing it. She leapt behind cover and braced herself as the ensuing explosion eviscerated them. Running in, she found Saren looking down from above.

"Nice work, Shepard!" Saren called over.

Amber returned a gesture.

"Thanks!" she replied.

Saren climbed down the stack of blocks and stepped closer to Amber before he wrapped an arm around her.

"I'd say it's just luck that we saved lives," Amber shrugged as she leaned closer to him.

Once they made it outside, the two informed local authorities of the ordinance's location and
stayed around to ensure the package was secure before leaving. They returned to the docks where they boarded the shuttle, the turian Spectre turning on the ignition and flying the shuttle into space. When he set it to autopilot, he began writing his report for the Council. When he finished and sent the report, he turned to Amber.

"That was a fun outing," he hummed.

Smiling, Amber extended her hand, allowing Saren to grasp it.

"If I do become a Spectre," Amber asked, "it would be alright if I teamed up with you, right?"

"That is an option," Saren answered.

"I was also wondering if my friends could work alongside."

"Spectres don't have to work alone, you know," Saren gave her a wink.

Amber nodded at Saren in agreement before she relaxed in her seat. All the while, the shuttle made its way towards the Mass Relay. An hour later, the shuttle arrived at the Citadel and the two disembarked onto the docks. Once they made their way off the docks, they ventured through the Presidium. Just as they approached their apartment, Amber received a ping on her omni-tool. It was a message from Kelly.

{Amber, a friend of me just arrived on the Citadel, but she hasn't been in contact for some time. Due to circumstances, Garrus has a hunch as to what happened to her, but we might need your help. You have time?}

Amber blinked twice before she turned her head towards Saren.

"Yes?" he paused.

"Kelly just called," Amber informed, "said one of her friends went missing and she suspects some foul play."

"I see," Saren commented.

Saren and Amber took a few minutes to step inside the apartment and put away their weapons and slip into civies. They left the apartment and made their way through the Presidium. They arrived at the C-Sec headquarters and stepped inside, where Garrus and Kelly were waiting.

"Garrus? Kelly?" Amber called over, "I didn't keep you waiting too long, did I?"

Garrus and Kelly turned their heads towards Amber and Saren. Kelly stood to her feet and stepped towards Shepard.

"No," she shook her head, "thanks for coming. It's been a few hours now, and I'm starting to get worried."

Saren tilted his head towards Garrus.

"So, Vakarian," Saren asked, "what do you have uncovered so far as to your case?"

"Black market for organs. Due to the numbers I have, it would suggest that these organs are being harvested directly from their original owners. However, after looking these people up by their genetics, all of the listed individuals are still alive. Unfortunately, regulations are currently walling me off from directly solving this case, which is where you two come in," Garrus answered.
Saren sat down across from Garrus.

"Go on," he calmly insisted.

"I've got eyes on a clinic and a warehouse a few districts from here," Garrus continued, "problem is, Pallin refuses to give me a search warrant for the place."

Saren stood to his feet before Garrus led him, Kelly and Amber through the facility until they reached the door to the Executor's office. Saren knocked on the door, prompting Pallin to open the door.

"Executor, do you have time?" Saren asked.

Pallin grumbled as he shook his head in disbelief.

"All right," he sighed, "come in."

Saren, Garrus, Amber and Kelly stepped into the office and grabbed seats while Pallin sat back down in his office chair.

"Spectre, is there anything I can do for you?" Pallin asked.

"Lately," Saren started, making a brief glance at Garrus, "I've taken interest in one of your officer's cases."

Pallin stared for longer.

"And?" he pressed.

"I think I'll take over the case from here," Saren replied, "thank you very much."

"And why do you offer this?" Pallin pointed out.

"Because the way you're having the case handled isn't fast enough," Saren replied.

Pallin couldn't help but sigh in disbelief.

"Do what you will. Just don't make too much of a mess for me to clean up."

Saren nodded at Pallin before he, Amber, Garrus and Kelly stood from their seats and left the office. Kelly couldn't help but glance around nervously.

"Will we reach her in time?" Kelly stammered, "if she—"

"We'll find her," Saren reassured, "now Garrus, where's this clinic?"
Once Amber and Saren finished their breakfast and suited up the next day, they left the apartment and met up with Kelly and Garrus near a balcony at the Presidium.

"See down there?" Garrus asked, gesturing further across the area, "there's the clinic."

Amber leaned onto the balcony and carefully gazed at the clinic down below.

"Who works there?" Saren inquired.

"A salarian doctor, goes by the name of Dr. Saleon," Garrus answered.

Amber took a step back from the balcony and focused her eyes on Garrus.

"Do you think he recently took interest in humans?" Amber asked.

"I don't know," Garrus shrugged, "it would be possible, seeing as humans are new on the scene and the market for anything regarding humans is largely untouched out here. He's staking out his territory."

Amber nodded while Saren read the case details in his omni-tool.

"Right. I think I might see a way in," Saren instructed, "keep at a range, run interference if things go wrong."

Amber followed behind Saren while Garrus and Kelly headed for a small park not too far from the clinic. Once the turian Spectre and the N7 soldier reached the clinic, they slipped behind the building. Checking around, Saren cautiously pried off a vent cover and peered inside.

"It's a tight fit," Saren informed, "you ready?"

Amber nodded. Both Saren and Amber climbed into the vent and crawled through the narrow tunnel on point. As they ventured through the ventilation shaft, Saren would scope ahead while they turned at a few corners. Crawling out of another vent, the two entered a refrigeration room. Amber scanned the room to ensure the coast was clear before she and Saren started searching for anything worth being used as evidence. The doctor had gained possession of quite a few organs, all preserved in almost freezing temperatures. Alongside were surgical tools and appliances, but nothing to suggest more than what the boxes upon boxes of organs already suggested.

"Now I'm wondering how Dr. Saleon managed to obtain these organs," Amber commented.

Amber examined the shelves holding the containers of frozen organs. She took notice of a shelf's label "Human" as well as only a small amount of boxes lined up underneath. She gulped nervously before moving along. At the entrance to the walking refrigerator, Saren peeked out and looked around for anyone besides themselves. Moments later, an attendant approached from around the corner while carrying a box of a few organs. Still staying behind the door, he waited till the attendant drew close before sharply yanking them in, slamming the refrigerator door behind him.

"This is a nice collection of organs you have," Saren smirked, "care to explain how you got them?"

"I-I-I...I'm sorry?" the attendant blurted, "who are you? What do you mean?"

Amber paused in her tracks and stepped closer to the attendant.
"Do you already have some human clients awaiting a transplant?" Amber folded her arms.

"I...I don't know what you're talking a—"

The attendant had his face slammed against the glass door for the shelving unit for the stored organs.

"Then what are these? You can read, can't you? Or does the good doctor hire incompetent individuals for workplace diversity?" Saren grumbled.

The attendant made a brief glance at the labels out of the corner of his eye.

"I just handle the organs, sir! He doesn't tell me anything about how he gets them!"

Saren slammed the attendant against the door frame again, rendering him unconscious. Saren and Amber walked out of the refrigeration room.

"We'll have to look farther. Maybe there's a terminal with data on his supply. It'll be good practice for you," he said.

"Right," Amber nodded.

While no one was around, they snooped from office to office until they found a central office towards the back. Saren accessed the terminal and began scrutinizing the files. Amber looked over his shoulder and began to read alongside.

"See anything?" Amber asked.

Saren nodded.

"Yeah, definitely..."

That was when Saren and Amber found a list of patients in one of the files. Suddenly, another employee burst into the room, looking deathly sick.

"Sir, I...uh, who are...?" she stammered as she wandered in.

Amber spun around quickly and took a moment to identify the employee. It was an asari, her skin appearing unnaturally pale.

"Ma'am," Amber asked, "are you all right?"

The woman was beginning to sweat profusely and her breathing was heavily labored.

"He...uses us..."

The asari stumbled before she fell over, so Amber thought fast and caught her in her arms. Now the asari was coughing blood.

"The-the...organs...he grows...grows..."

Eyes widening in horror, Saren desperately got on his omni-tool.

"Vakarian, get ready for us," Saren instructed, "we're coming out with one of the employees here. She's most likely in bad shape, and she's also the only one who can tell us what's going on here."
Garrus replied over the com-link, *we're on our way.*

Lifting the asari over his shoulder, Saren and Amber ran back out with the asari, pushing aside anyone who got in their way. Outside, Garrus and Kelly were waiting in a hovercar with the door open.

"Shepard," Kelly called over, "how is she?"

"Bad," Amber answered, "get her to Huerta, it's not far from here. We're heading back in!"

Garrus nodded while he and Kelly carefully carried the asari into the hovercar and settled her into a seat.

"I'll try to keep you two informed, see what we get out of her," Garrus added before taking off.

Once the hovercar was out of sight, Saren and Amber began charging back into the clinic. Another nurse approached them.

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask—" the nurse demanded.

"Dr. Saleon, where is he?" Saren interrupted.

The nurse froze before he could finish his sentence.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"Your employer has been suspected of illegal activities," Saren explained, "all I need is to ask a few questions."

Saren folded his arms to further emphasize his point. The nurse nodded.

"I'll call him down," he offered.

"That won't be necessary," Saren declined.

Saren and Amber pushed past the nurse, burst through into the stairwell and rushed up to the top level of the clinic. Once they reached the door to Saleon's office, Amber noticed it was locked, so she turned on her omni-tool. Quickly prying at the lock, she kicked down the door. Inside, they found Dr. Saleon working on his database in his terminal. Shortly after he heard the door open, he calmly looked back at the two.

"Is there something I can help you two with?" he asked.

Saren didn't say anything as he strode towards the salarian doctor. That was when Garrus suddenly pinged his omni-tool. Gesturing to Amber to keep an eye on Saleon, he picked up the call.

"What did you find?" Saren asked.

*She didn't make it. They ran an autopsy, and that was the real kicker. Her body cavity is covered with cuts and incisions. That bastard had additional organs growing in her, and one of them went bad,* Garrus answered.

Amber's eyes widened, yet she kept her eyes locked onto Dr. Saleon as he trembled nervously. She thought fast and blocked the doorway. Suddenly, the doctor flashed a hand out, tossing a flashbang at the two. Without warning, the ensuing explosive knocked Saren and Amber to the ground. As they recovered from the explosive's effects, Saleon bolted for the door. Saren slowly staggered to
his feet and hoisted Amber from the floor before they began their pursuit. Saren kept up the chase while continuing his call with Garrus.

"Did she say anything else?" Saren demanded, "anything that could help us determine what he was doing to them?"

{That was it. She said he was harvesting the organs from their bodies and selling them on the black market while they would receive a small portion of the profits. If they grew poorly, he'd take their original organs and leave the underdeveloped organs to fester. They were quite literally living test tubes.}

"Good work. For now, Saleon's on the run. Group up with me, try and cut him off."

{Right away,} Garrus answered over the com-link.

The two were now back onto the streets, and rushing after the salarian doctor as he pushed his way through the crowds. Amber quickly double-checked the map in her omni-tool for any places to outflank him. She disappeared into the crowds, leaving Saren to continue his pursuit. The turian Spectre kept his eyes locked onto the fleeing salarian doctor as they turned at a corner. Keeping his eyes on the salarian doctor, he didn't notice Amber rushing in from another path, knocking down Saleon with a sharp kick. Saren may have been surprised, but he felt his boost of confidence before he pinned Saleon to the ground.

"Nice try, doctor. You're coming with us."

Just then, Garrus arrived from around the corner and met up with Saren and Amber.

"Dr. Saleon, with sufficient evidence, you are under arrest for the physical abuse of your customers and the sale of goods on an illegal marketplace," Garrus started, slapping on a pair of holocuffs on the salarian.

Saren stood to his feet, allowing Garrus to hoist Dr. Saleon to his feet.

"Thanks again, Arterius. Good to work with you again."

Saren nodded at Garrus before he and Amber strolled through their street, making their way towards the clinic. Garrus had called the case in, and now the clinic was swarming with C-Sec officers. Some of them were escorting patients outside. Over the course of the rest of the day, Saren and Amber had confirmed what the dying nurse told them, that his own employees were being used growing vessels for organs on the black market. Additionally, Kelly's friend and a few others had been administered a dose of the organ-growing hormone and would also be administered to Huerta for treatment. In the meantime, Saren and Amber waited in the hospital lobby until Kelly and Garrus arrived through the door.

"I think we can take it from here. Thanks again," Garrus informed.

Saren nodded at Garrus before he and Amber strolled to their feet and left the hospital. Garrus and Kelly didn't hesitate as they approached the receptionist's counter.

"I…I can't believe…" Kelly stammered.

"It's over, and he's behind bars. That's all that matters," Garrus reassured.

Garrus shifted his attention towards the receptionist.
"Hi," the receptionist greeted, "how may I help you?"

"I assume everyone from Dr. Saleon's clinic has been tended to?" Garrus asked.

"Yes," the receptionist nodded.

"A few humans were brought in, could we see them please?" Garrus prompted.

The receptionist scrolled through the list in the terminal.

"One of them is recovering from her surgery," the receptionist, "but she's awake, from what I hear. Would you like to see her?"

Kelly nodded.

"I would appreciate it," Kelly answered, "thank you."

A few minutes later, they were directed to one of the floors where Saleon's victims were being treated. Kelly spotted her close friend resting in a bed at the far corner in the room, so she and Garrus slowly approached the patient in question.

"Is Kiandra conscious right now?" Kelly asked.

Upon cue, Kiandra groaned as she slowly sat up.

"Hey, Kelly. I didn't think I'd see you here," she gave a weak smile.

Sighing in relief, Kelly sat in a chair next to Kiandra's bed.

"Sorry, I looked for you at the docks," Kiandra blurted, "I got your message, but I couldn't find you."

"I see," Kelly replied softly, "do you remember anything after that?"

She sighed.

"Woke up at that damned hospital and...I just don't want to think about it right now, okay?"

Kelly slowly nodded in agreement.

"All right," Kelly said, "it's good to know you're safe, though."

She rose to her feet and left the room with Garrus. They didn't say much until they left the hospital.

"Hey, Garrus?" Kelly told him, "I appreciate your help. Thanks."

"No problem. I'm glad I could help," Garrus smiled.

As they ventured through the Presidium, Kelly and Garrus held hands. He enjoyed her light-hearted personality, finding her helpful for getting through the grim life of a C-Sec officer. Maybe one day, he'll figure out what he could provide for her as well.
Six months have passed and Amber was certain the entire galaxy heard of the human race by now. More recently, Anderson had sent Amber an email regarding the Alliance Navy and Turian Military pitching resources towards the construction of a prototype ship as a collaboration project. As she drank her coffee at the kitchen table, Amber sent an email asking about where she should meet up with him on the project. Saren entered the room with his own cup of kava. Similarly, he was aware of the prototype vessel as he was alerted by Sparatus regarding the project. With his omni-tool still active, he sat down across from Amber.

"Sounds like a nice ship thus far," Saren commented.

"You could say that," Amber nodded in agreement.

The ship was being retrofitted with a prototype stealth system, dampening the systems heat signature for a limited time, keeping it off scanners for recon and infiltration missions. As Amber was confident with her squadmates coexisting with the aliens, she felt this ship prototype would be a worthy payoff. Saren was also interested in the project and enthusiastic to see the outcome. Just as Amber finished her breakfast, she checked her omni-tool only to find a new message from Anderson in her inbox.

Shepard,

I wanted to gather your squad for another cooperative mission. I have the full attention of high-command this time, so do your best to look good for their judgment. I've already informed the others of the situation and we're all waiting on your word.

Anderson

Amber finished reading her message before she stood to her feet.

"Saren?" Amber offered, "you want to suit up?"

He nodded.

"What'd Anderson have to say?" Saren asked.

"He has another cooperative mission for us," Amber explained.

Saren finished his kava before he stood from the table.

"Anything else?"

"We'll find out more once I get back to him," she quickly typed a reply and sent the message to Anderson.

Amber and Saren headed into their bedrooms where they gathered their armor and slipped them on. After they gathered their weapons, they met up at the front door before they left the apartment, making their way through the Presidium. Anderson was already waiting for them when they reached the docks.

"Shepard, Arterius, good to see you so soon," Anderson greeted.

Saren responded with a salute.
"The same can be said for you, Anderson," Saren nodded.

"What's the mission, sir?" Amber asked.

"Nothing too difficult," Anderson replied, "you'll be on an otherwise short mission. However, we'll be passing by one of our colonies on the way back."

"Got it," Amber nodded.

Amber and Saren wasted no time as they boarded the vessel and made their way to the bridge. Anderson met up with them moments later.

"We'll only be doing recon today," Anderson started, "we'll be heading down to a new planet which is looking to be colonized. We'll be there to make sure it's safe, check for pirate outposts and such."

"Hopefully," Saren replied, "this won't be a repeat of Akuze."

Garrus, Liara, Wrex, Jack, Kasumi, Tali, Kaidan, James, Ashley and Mordin boarded the vessel a short time later. Once the vessel was loaded, it left the Citadel. As the ship made for the Mass Relay, the team was quickly briefed at a map of the planet. From what Amber could observe, this new planet was one jump away from Elysium.

"Does the command want a forward line of defense until we can expand further?" Amber pondered.

Anderson nodded.

"True. Additional, initial scans show this planet is mineral rich, so this just might be a good planet to mine resources for."

Saren hummed as he scratched his mandible.

"And is there anything of note?" Saren asked.

"Just a small spec, some run-down facility," Anderson concluded, "but after an extensive campaign last month, command doesn't want to take any chances."

It was only a while before the vessel entered the system. The planet in mind was the furthest out from the sun of the system, leaving it in darkness and cold most of the year. Once the vessel entered the planet's orbit, the pilots, including Joker, began scanning the planet's surface. Finding a sufficient landing location, they headed to the cargo hold. The M36 Mako has been introduced after the M35 proved to be insufficient for handling rough, undiscovered terrain, and more unprepared for the anti-armor weapons wielded by other races.

Amber, Garrus and Jack boarded the Mako. They dropped from low orbit shortly after onto an open, empty field before Amber turned on the vehicle lights. When she took control of the steering wheel, she started driving the Mako, even when she took some precautions. While the Mako no longer had the problem of being able to enter reverse, excessively bouncy suspension, or was nearly as top-heavy, the vehicle felt like it had severely reduced traction and the steering felt barely responsive.

"Ugh," she grumbled, "not this again!"

Now the vehicle felt like it drove on an ice rink rather than a rocky, foreign, mountain path. It didn't help that Garrus and Jack had to hold on tightly so they wouldn't fall over. They continued to
roll over the hills, too distracted with staying upright to initiate any banter. Amber could only hope the Mako didn't break down on her again.

After a rough journey, nearly sliding off a few cliffs on the way, they finally came to a hill overlooking the small facility down below. From where they were, the lights were off and no one seemed to be home. There weren't any visible debris either, so an attack probably didn't take place. From what they could tell, the place was abandoned.

"Looks clear from here," Garrus hummed, adjusting the scope as he peered down the sights.

"You wanna go check it out?" Jack clamored.

"Might as well," Amber grumbled, climbing out of the Mako and starting her way down the hill.

Garrus and Jack climbed out of the Mako and followed the N7 soldier down the hill. On the outside, the steel gray exterior of the buildings below offered nothing but eerie shadows with eyes digging into their backs. The trio scanned their surroundings in search of anyone that could be in hiding. One by one, they checked the interior of each building.

"Looks like this place has been abandoned for some time," Garrus added.

Jack gave Garrus a confused stare.

"Something scare the shit out of them?" Jack paused.

"Sometimes it's just easier to leave any assets that have already been established," Garrus shrugged.

Amber led Garrus and Jack through the abandoned facility. The equipment was gone, yet all the furniture was still there. The fact there weren't corpses or blood splatters anywhere made the situation even more eerie.

"Nothing. Even the security cameras were removed," Amber sighed.

"Weird," Jack rolled her eyes.

The group left shortly after, having found nothing inside. They trudged up the hill on their way back to the Mako. Amber got back into the driver's seat as she radioed Joker.

"Just checked the camp, nothing here," Amber informed.

{Really?} Joker warbled over the com-link, {that's odd.}

"They all moved out, no idea where," Amber instructed, "pick us up."

{Copy that.} Joker replied over the com-link.

Half an hour later, the Mako boarded the ramp that led into the vessel. Amber, Garrus and Jack disembarked the Mako and met up with Anderson.

"At least it was fast," Anderson said, "we'll be heading to Elysium shortly."

"Yeah, whoever was down there previously moved out," Amber sighed.

Amber and Anderson meandered out of the cargo hold and through the corridor until they reached the bridge.
"What'll we be doing there, sir?" Amber asked.

"Security detail. We'll be there briefly, only an hour or so," he said.

Amber nodded before she leaned back against the wall. It wasn't long before the vessel exited the planet's orbit and began traveling through space. An hour and a half later, they had entered the space port of possibly the most beautifully designed colony they'd ever seen. Saren nodded admiringly.

"Looks like they've been doing well for themselves," Saren commented.

Amber nodded at Saren in agreement as she observed the colony through the window. When the vessel landed at the dock, Saren and Amber stepped close behind Anderson as they came across the local ranking officers waiting for them.

"Captain Anderson," one of the officers saluted.

"A pleasure. It's good to see everything is in order thus far," Anderson acknowledged.

Once Amber's teammates and their alien friends disembarked the vessel, Anderson led his crew through the docks. The group entered a tram to the center of the colony where the Alliance command center was located. During the trip, Amber and Saren gazed out the window and observed the bustling city. It was fun watching the scenery flash by, showing a great contrast to the rural life on outer human colonies. As they watched the scenery, Amber took Saren's hand into her own.

"Definitely looks like a nice place," Amber mused.

"Yeah, definitely," Saren purred.

Her eyes were set on the hillsides, rolling over into the distance. A long while later, the tram arrived at the station near the Alliance command center. While Anderson and a few of her squadmates went inside, the non-humans remained outside for security reasons. Amber decided to remain with Saren, staying alongside him as they hung over the railing, looking into the distance.

"So, Shepard," Saren asked, "have you been here before?"

"No, this is my first time," Amber shook her head, "I've heard stories about how beautiful it is here, but stories never do actual experience justice."

They continued their silence briefly, watching the clouds hover in the sky above. After a long while of waiting, Anderson returned from the command center and met up with Amber and Saren.

"Everything alright?" Amber inquired.

"Yes, we're up to speed. Let's start our way back to the port," Anderson nodded.

They had returned to the tram and began their journey back to the space port. Resuming their watch of the view outside, Saren notice approaching vessels in the distance, flying far too low for their distance from any local tarmac. Amber also took notice of the strange vessels.

"Saren?" Amber paused.

His gaze didn't let up.

"Something's up with those ships," Saren said.
Amber blinked twice in a moment of silence. Suddenly, a few of the aforementioned vessels came in close to the heart of the colony, initiating their bombing runs. They watched in horror as the city lit up in explosive flames.

"Spirits," Saren gasped.

Amber's eyes also widened in horror as she had one hand perched on Saren's shoulder. Anderson rushed up to the tram driver cabin, pulled the emergency handle and rushed in.

"Get us back to the HQ! Now!" Anderson shouted.

"Are you serious?!" Kaidan protested.

"We're not leaving this colony!" Anderson insisted, "that's an order!"

Amber glanced over her shoulder and noticed Garrus, Wrex, Liara, Tali, Ashley, Jack, Kasumi, James and Kaidan double-checked their weapons. She brandished her own SMG, checking the clip before looking back to the sky, watching as AA guns and a few Alliance fighters struggled with the invaders. While the tram still sped towards the command center, Amber and her squadmates watched as a few invading vessels landed on the ground. The doors opened back up and they rushed back out to meet a mass of panicking Alliance personnel. After she jumped behind some cover, Amber peeked out to get a scope of the attackers.

The command center had already taken heavy damage from the initial bombing runs, with half of the structure having been torn apart, leaving the inside exposed. Medics still raced around, tending to wounded. Already, the dead were being piled up on the floor of the front lobby to be properly identified later. It didn't help that the invaders were still occupying the area. Overhead, more pirates were being dropped from more shuttles.

"Shepard!" Ashley called from a distance, "orders?!"

"Hold them off, and force them to fall back! We'll regroup once the area is secure!" Amber commanded.

"Right away!" Kaidan nodded.

Amber's squadmates began to spread out with Amber and Saren leading the assault. With their combined abilities and strengths, they managed to successfully reinforce the disorganized local forces. However, the pirates just continued to keep pouring in. While some Alliance crewmembers evacuated the others to safety, Liara, Kaidan, Jack and Saren were able to put their biotics to good use. With better physical cover to work with, they began to advance through the HQ with greater ease, costing the pirates greatly.

When Amber and Wrex stormed down the hall in the command center, their firepower caught any pirates in the area off-guard. Close behind, Saren, Ashley, and Jack provided cover fire, mopping up anyone the two on point may have missed. Garrus and the others were in the far back, serving as the last wave and rear defense in case the pirates decided to flank them. They knew they would have to act quick as the lives of the colony's officials were at risk.

Entering the next room, they entered the offices and central command center of the facility. Continuing the fight, Anderson, Kaidan, Ashley, Tali, and Jack went from room to room, searching for survivors as Wrex, Saren, Amber, Garrus, and James kept on the offensive. Anderson had joined the fight as well, having picked up a rifle from a fallen soldier. It wasn't long before Amber and Saren found the essential officials on their knees as pirates aimed their guns at their heads.
Saren didn't hesitate, flashing his crosshairs over a pirate's head and firing. Amber also followed suit, firing a round at another pirate.

Once Saren and Amber cleared out their opposition moments later, Garrus and Wrex rushed over to the human officials. Wrex brawled with a few other pirates while Garrus hauled the hostages to safety. Amber and Saren left the office to cover for Garrus and the other hostages. The others continued pursuing the pirates into the front lobby, and were on the verge of forcing them to withdraw. It didn't take long before Saren and Amber entered the front lobby. With the rest of the building secure, a few Alliance troops joined them as they engaged the rest of the pirates present. Their numbers drew thin, and their siege came to a close when an Alliance soldier armed with an RPG shot a dropship down, causing it to spiral out of view.

Outside the command center, Anderson began giving orders to the survivors as he caught up with Amber and Saren.

"Shepard, I'll try to catch up with you once I switch into something more appropriate for the matter at hand," Anderson discussed, "in the meantime, I need you and your squad to head into the city and start an effort to evacuate the civilians. If there already is a movement by local forces or authorities to start cleaning up, give them cover. Understood?"

"Copy that," Amber saluted.

Rounding up the others, they ran out of the command center and grabbed a moderately damaged Mako for transportation. This time, Saren hopped into the driver's seat. Despite the damage, the vehicle handled much better in urban locations. The turian Spectre wasted no time as he drove the Mako through the streets with a few more Makos following suit. Panicked people continued to run amok, fire bellowed out of the building windows, and a few local police were scattered about, fighting desperately against the overwhelming pirates and mercenaries. After driving aimlessly, they drove up to the side of the central police hub and departed. The police had managed to hunker down and build their defenses, but were boxed in by the invaders and had limited operating space. Once Saren and Amber led their squad into the facility, they headed for the main office. The inside of the office had hastily been converted into a bunker, with broken desks, datapads, and fragments scattered all over, and each officer having slapped on every set of armor they had available to them.

"Where's your superior officer? We need to talk with him!" she demanded.

One of the officers approached Amber with caution.

"I'm surprised the Alliance was generous enough to send an N7," he grumbled, "any other reinforcements, or are you it?"

"I have allies to back me up," Amber replied.

The officer simply eyed Saren suspiciously.

"Uh-huh…listen, I'm trying to get guys out to start rounding up civies and getting them to the mines a few klicks out from the city. But those bastards have us hounded down, and they're massing up farther down the street, and we can't afford to lose this position altogether. If you still have some contact with local Alliance command, I can throw a few guys your way, hold them off until we can evacuate the civilian populace."

"I can handle that," Amber nodded.
"We'll maintain a defensive, give the time you need," Saren agreed.

"Thank you," another officer sighed in relief.

The ranking officer turned to the others.

"Alright people, listen up!" he announced, "we've got reinforcements and more on the way. We'll get some breathing room to start pushing out and gathering civies wherever we can, but we have to act fast. I'll still leave some of you at the station to help defend our current position. Gather your gear and let's go!"

This served as a cue for the officers in the room to spring into action. Still, Amber knew this fight was far from over.
Amber and Saren returned to the others outside, now that they have a plan in mind.

"I know it's not the most optimal scenario, but this is what we have," Amber announced, "civilians are still in the line of fire, and what's left of the local authorities need to round them up and get them out to safety. Our job is to keep those bastards off their backs. I'll radio for help from the command center, but until they get everyone out of the way, we're on our own."

Garrus, Wrex, Jack, Kaidan, Tali, Kasumi, James, Ashley and Liara exchanged glances before nodding in agreement. They borrowed a few road barricades and moved around some rubble and scrap to start funneling any approaching hostiles down a handful of roads. Amber hastily opened her omni-tool to call Anderson.

"Anderson," Amber reported, "we reached the local authorities."

{What've you found? Are they alive?}

"They are," Amber replied, "they're still trying to evacuate people and we're to provide them cover. Is there anyone you can send to help?"

{I might. We're still racing to recuperate, but I'll head out soon with a squad or two. Hang tight, I'll be there in fifteen minutes.}

"Sir," Amber nodded.

Amber ended the transmission before she returned to action. In the distance, it became quickly apparent that the impending attack was about to begin, with the last few dropships dropping their payload. At the same time, the local authorities scrambled to search for surviving civilians. They watched as the last of the police vehicles disappeared behind them. Just as the invaders started swarming in, Amber and her squad opened fire at them. Every now and then, they would toss some explosives at their position, only to be redirected back at them by Jack, Saren, and Wrex's biotics. This was even followed by Garrus sniping some of them in the head. In the meantime, Kaidan would use his biotics more passively, providing an active shield for himself and his companions. James also provided cover fire while he kept a lookout for reinforcements. The first wave had ended when an explosion caused the mercenaries to scatter.

Moments later, two barely working Makos entered the scene. Out the rear, Anderson in marine armor and his two squads poured out. Since the squads swarmed in to help clean out the remaining pirates, this gave Amber and her team some relief.

"Shepard, you seem to be holding out so far," Anderson acknowledged.

Amber nodded as she took a moment to catch her breath.

"We can here, but we still have two flank routes that they haven't considered yet. It'll only be a matter of time before they start prodding at those."

"I'll handle those. You just worry about this point here," he replied.

"You got it, sir," Amber replied before she stood to her feet.

Not three minutes after Anderson and his men disappeared did the next wave of pirate
reinforcements erupt. Since Amber and her squad managed to reload beforehand, they leapt back into the fray. They began to widen up and brought armored vehicles to assist their advance. She had sent James back to fetch a LAW to quickly dismantle the tank before it got too close. Wrex, Saren, Kaidan and Jack faced the vehicle before emitting a biotic barrier, anticipating to protect their comrades from the tank's ammunition.

The first shell grazed off the barrier, ricocheting off into the side of a building in the distance. Rushing back with a launcher over his shoulder, James took aim and fired at the vehicle. With such great luck, the rocket hit the tank's weak point. Puncturing the armor, the vehicle went up in flames from an ensuing explosion.

"Nice one, James!" Jack cheered as she raised her fist in the air.

"Careful! They're sending in heavies!" Kasumi called out.

Under the cover of a smokescreen, a group of heavily armored mercenaries marched through. Just how much reinforcements did these pirates have anyway? Garrus ducked down as the heavy troopers started firing, raining down with SAWs. Peeking from cover, he managed to snipe one through their visor. Saren pulled at their fallen weapon with biotics before setting it up to return fire. Amber fired her rounds at any surviving reinforcements crawling out of the ruined tank.

"These bastards just won't fuck off!" Jack growled getting down to reload her weapon.

Ashley barely dodged another gunshot. She shuddered for a moment before returning fire. Gradually, the second wave came to a close, and the remaining pirates fell back.

"Good work, but we're not out of the woods yet. Check your equipment and maintain your position," Amber ordered.

"Yes, ma'am!" Kaidan nodded.

Some of the team checked their equipment and stood by while others went out to salvage the fallen weapons and ammo of the enemy soldiers. Liara observed ahead and found just one more wave of pirate reinforcements heading their direction.

"Shepard, I assume you have a plan for this next attack?" Liara asked, "we can only last so long against them with the resources we have."

"The local police are still rounding up survivors. They'll send help if they can and the Alliance no doubt knows of this attack," Amber answered, "we just need to hold out for a little longer."

"We could only hope these bastards get our message," Ashley added.

James loaded one of the SAWs with a new clip.

"They're approaching. In position and waiting," he informed.

Amber nodded at James.

"Let them get close. Garrus, reposition. Wrex, grab another crate of grenades. Kaidan, switch to your pistol for now and just focus on maintaining a barrier."

After they nodded at Amber, Garrus, Wrex and Kaidan leapt back into action. The new wave of pirates and mercenaries drew close when Amber gave the order to open fire. Ashley tossed a few grenades to initially scatter the crowd and soften them up. This gave Saren, Garrus, Amber, Jack,
Tali and Wrex a chance to fire their rounds at the scattered invaders. James laid down heavy fire, taking down as many as he could. Reacting to the burst of fire, the approaching pirates dropped smoke to give them cover. Kaidan thought fast and emitted his biotic field. He attempted to start fanning away the screen to reveal the wave underneath. By then, the pirates have progressed farther. With the dead slowly piling up, the pirates were now using the corpses of their own as cover, making it significantly harder to stop them before they got too close.

"This is ridiculous," Saren grumbled.

"Shepard! We can't hold this position any longer!" Tali yelped after blasting away a vorcha who got too close with her shotgun.

"Come on, Anderson," Amber muttered to herself.

Wrex tore the lid off a crate and pulled a grenade out.

"Looks like another job for Ambassador Pineapple. You'll be representing us on the floor," he chuckled before tossing it out.

Amber braced herself behind her cover as an explosion ensued seconds later. Wrex continued drawing grenade after grenade, tossing them out excessively. Luckily, the recurring explosions stopped the pirates in their tracks. The squad peeked out again and returned to fighting, struggling to keep back the pirates with every round. To give them the extra edge, Saren emitted his biotic field. Even he struggled, feeling the lingering sting of fatigue kick in. The sound of some approaching fighters filled the air, making a bombing run.

"Dios! Incoming!" James yelped, diving for the ground.

Saren grabbed Amber before he threw themselves to the ground, using his body to shield her underneath him. The harsh shriek of jets filled the air, followed by explosions and flames. Dust filled the air as the bombs rained down upon the exposed pirates. Garrus, Liara, Kaidan, Wrex, Tali, Jack, Ashley and Kasumi took this as a cue to dive into cover. Amidst the ringing that hung in their ears, Anderson's voice stuck out, barking orders as he returned.

"Move it! Move it! Finish them off!"

From there, Amber started to feel relief flood her mind.

"Keep the pressure up! Shepard! You alright?" Anderson asked.

Saren and Amber tilted their heads upwards, staring at the Alliance captain. The turian Spectre took Amber's hand and hoisted her to her feet.

"Hanging on by a thread," Amber answered, "have reinforcements arrived?"

Anderson nodded.

"They just got here," he explained, "they're cleaning up our flank and are starting to force them off planet. Additionally, the authorities managed to get the civilians to safety, and will keep them there until we're done."

Amber scanned her surroundings and noticed her squadmates started staggering to their feet.

"Take your time," Anderson continued, "we've done our job. Now it's theirs. I'll call transport, get us back to the HQ. We can wash on the way back to the Citadel."
With the reinforcements cleaning up the mess, Amber, Saren and their squadmates boarded a few Makos and made their way back to the Kilimanjaro. The two APCs rolled into the cargo hold area before coming to a sharp halt. The exhausted team barely stumbled out and made it back to the lockers, where they stripped their armor, washed off, had their injuries tended to, then slipped back into uniform. Saren took a few minutes to write a report and send it to the Council before he and Amber left the locker room, meandering through the corridor of the vessel. She was still Anderson's executive officer, so she had her personal cabin away from the rest of the crew. She led the turian Spectre into her cabin before they climbed into her bed. Saren pulled Amber into his embrace, allowing her to nuzzle her face against his.

"You tired?" Saren purred.

Amber nodded softly. She simply replied with an exhausted groan. Finally, the worries and woes of the day had given way to silence and sleep.

Hours later, the Kilimanjaro entered the Serpent Nebula after emerging from the Mass Relay. The vessel returned to dock at the Presidium, and began work on repairs and resupply. Anderson met Saren and Amber as they walked onto the docking bridge.

"I assume you rested well after the battle?" Anderson asked them.

"Still feeling some wear and tear, sir," Amber answered, struggling to sound upbeat.

Anderson, Saren and Amber meandered out of the docking bay.

"I'm glad you two answered the call when you were needed most," Anderson praised, "the Alliance would've gotten through eventually, but there's no telling what would've been left of the colony or its inhabitants. I've sent my word on your performances to high command. I'll further inform you two regarding the aftermath."

"Thank you, Anderson," Amber nodded.

"I'll be waiting with baited breath," Saren added before departing.

They returned to the apartment shortly afterwards. Once they made it inside, they slipped off their shoes and stepped into the living room. Saren lay down on the couch and Amber rested on top of him, the turian Spectre wrapping his arms around her.

"You did great," he hummed, a deep rumble erupting from his chest.

"Thanks," Amber whispered, "do you think the Alliance would be on board with a human Spectre?"

"Well, it would certainly help their image," Saren replied, "I can't imagine the sort of social pressure that would be placed upon your shoulders, but it would certainly depict humans as being readily active members of society, I suppose."

Amber nodded before she nuzzled her face against Saren's. He smiled, keeping his gaze fixed upon her as they huddled up.

A few hours or so later, Amber slowly opened her eyes, only to realize they both had fallen asleep on the couch. She felt better now, feeling like the sound of gunfire wasn't still ringing in her ears. She got up and walked into the bathroom. She turned on the faucet and splashed some cool water onto her face. After turning off the sink, she turned on the shower and started stripping her clothes. She might as well wash off herself as she didn't do so back at the Kilimanjaro. She stepped in and
relished the feeling of rivulets of hot water that ran through her hair and down her body. She took
the bottle of shampoo from the rack and squeezed a small amount into her palm. She then started
scrubbing the shampoo into her hair. Washed away was the grime, dirt, and sweat from her skin
and scars, rinsing with it the pain and terror from hours earlier.

Once Amber finished with her shower, she turned it off and dried herself up with a towel. Saren
was still asleep on the couch when she left the bathroom. This gave her a chance to double-check
the time. It was only 0225 in the morning. She rolled right back up on the couch with Saren,
wrapping herself in his arms. While drifting off to sleep, she had some vague thought of how the
Council would address the incident.
When Saren and Amber woke up the next morning, they felt a little embarrassed that they skipped dinner last night. Still, they made up for that by preparing their breakfast while Saren brewed his kava and Amber brewed her coffee. The two sat down, quietly enjoying the morning while Saren looked over the news on his omni-tool. He wasn't surprised when he noticed news feeds were flooding with the details of Elysium. More recently, the Council had sent him a message regarding their defense of Elysium, its greater implications, and the beneficial outcomes. They even included an invitation for himself and Amber to the Council Chambers later on.

They took their time over the course of the rest of the morning before getting dressed. Considering Amber got a similar message from Anderson, she felt her Alliance officer uniform would do for today. She stepped out of her bedroom and met up with Saren in the living room. Once they slipped their shoes on, they made their way out of the apartment and began meandering through the Presidium. The two officers were already waiting for them outside of a cafe, having ordered themselves drinks shortly before their arrival.

"Ah, Commander. It's a pleasure to see you after the horrendous attack on Elysium," Hackett greeted.

Saren and Amber exchanged glances for a brief moment before returning their gaze to Anderson and Hackett.

"Commander, sir?" Amber paused.

Anderson nodded.

"Sorry about the late notice," Anderson clarified, "but due to your actions on Elysium, you received a promotion."

"Oh," Amber blurted, "well, thank you."

Amber and Saren sat down across from Hackett and Anderson.

"I assume you also received an invitation from the Council?" Saren asked.

"We have," Hackett continued, "we just wished to discuss a few matters directly with Shepard before the meeting commences. No doubt the meeting will take up all the available time, so I wanted to get a few matters out of the way before we got there."

"Right," Amber nodded.

"So, as a Spectre, what would Shepard's duties be within the community?" Hackett asked, "we already know she would more directly answer to the Council, but we were hoping for a few more details."

Amber made a brief glance at Saren for a moment.

"In some regards, they are the physical hand of the Council, enacting law enforcement," Saren explained, "they are generally free of restrictions and have fewer boundaries restraining their investigations."

"I see," Anderson commented, "will you be evaluating Shepard for her Spectre status?"
Saren and Amber nodded in unison.

"I'm confident in her abilities thus far, and I'd like to test her a bit further before giving my vote of confidence," the turian Spectre added.

Anderson and Hackett exchanged glances in a moment of silence before they both nodded in agreement.

"And the role of a Spectre bears positive significance?" Hackett pressed.

"Unless they go rogue," Saren answered, "Spectres are highly regarded by society with the exception of the criminal underworld. They represent the best a species has to offer, meaning they are handpicked from those who display great performance."

Moments later, Amber, Saren, Hackett and Anderson stood to their feet.

"Thank you for the private discussion," Hackett said, "now, we should probably make our way to the Citadel tower."

Amber, Saren, Hackett and Anderson left the cafe and meandered through the Presidium. Once they arrived at the Citadel Tower, they stepped through the front door. They stepped into the elevator and waited as it carried them to the top floor. They stepped out and made their way into the Council Chambers. As they sauntered towards the podiums, the councilors shifted their attention towards them.

"Good to see you have responded so soon. This most recent attack has had us concerned," Valern greeted.

"I think I understand what you mean," Amber nodded in agreement.

"We've been discussing the topic heavily," Sparatus continued, "while I partially believe it might be too soon, we've come to an agreement that some changes should implemented."

Sparatus tapped on his terminal and it projected a hologram of the document.

"We've agreed that you would benefit from having an embassy on the Citadel," he continued.

Anderson and Hackett took a moment to read the updated document.

"A sudden change. Why the decision?" Anderson asked.

"With more direct communication," Sparatus clarified, "we can better coordinate efforts to protect our colonies."

While he thought over the offer, Anderson rubbed his chin in a moment of silence.

"I see. You mentioned another matter, too," Anderson reminded, "something about Spectre candidacy?"

"Ah, yes," Sparatus nodded, "Saren and I have been discussing that matter for some time."

Upon cue, Saren took a step forward.

"I had proposed the acceptance of Commander Shepard into the ranks of the Spectres," Saren explained, "her performance, including her most recent defense established during the assault on Elysium, have proven her capability, competence, and adaptability required of Spectres."
The councilors focused their gaze at Amber.

"We've agreed that Saren can further evaluate her before he'll send his final proposition," Tevos agreed.

"I appreciate the offer," Amber nodded, "an offer I will gladly accept."

"In turn, as previously mentioned, her actions will reflect well upon your species," Valern concluded, "her status will help your cause politically."

"This is more than we could ever ask for. You have our gratitude, Councilors," Hackett thanked.

"So be it," Sparatus confirmed, "Saren, we'll give you and Shepard the time you need to make preparations for the evaluations. Meeting adjourned."

Upon cue, Saren, Amber, Anderson and Hackett turned to leave and made their way out of the chamber.

"We appreciate you taking the time to train Shepard, Arterius," Anderson said.


Amber, Saren, Hackett and Anderson stepped into the elevator and waited as it descended the tower. They stepped out of the elevator once they returned to the Presidium.

"We'll be on our way. Shepard, take care," Hackett hummed before he and Anderson left.

They continued their walk along the path back to the apartment when a familiar voice called out from behind.

"Hey Saren! Where've you been?"

Saren and Amber paused in their tracks and focused their eyes on Nihlus just as he was catching up with them.

"Sorry, I've been so busy lately. What's up between you two?" Nihlus chirped.

Saren folded his arms behind his back.

"Shepard and I are about to prepare for her evaluation for becoming a Spectre," Saren began.

Nihlus grinned.

"You know, I specifically remember you saying something along the lines of, 'I'm never taking up apprenticeship again'. Did you not, Saren?"

Without changing his expression, Saren pointed his finger at Nihlus.

"As I also recalled," Saren retorted, "you were a little snot that retained his disobedient, arrogant disposition from his days at boot camp."

Nihlus stammered nervously as he scratched his mandible.

"Well, you were the one who ranted on about maintaining independent thinking," he chuckled, his talons making air quotes.
Smirking, Amber folded her arms.

"So what do you have going on today, Nihlus?" Amber asked.

"Was on temporary break," Nihlus replied, "and was just enjoying the view when I ran into you two."

All the while, Saren, Amber and Nihlus continued meandering through the Presidium.

"So, you enjoying your time under Saren's roof?" Nihlus prodded.

"Definitely," Amber nodded with a soft smile.

Saren rolled his eyes.

"I've done my best to take care of her. Anything else?"

"Not much," Nihlus placed his hand behind his head, "Alenko and Williams suggested we meet up at an arcade later on today."

"I'm game. What about you, Saren?" she agreed.

Saren's mandibles flexed into a grin.

"I could use some dumb, fun R&R," he answered.

Nihlus led Saren and Amber into one of the wards along the way to the arcade. The front of the arcade itself didn't reveal much about the interior save for the flashy neon lighting for the sign and advertising. Inside, the lights were dimmed, and the floor area was lit by the light from the games themselves. Speech was drowned out by the various jingles and grimy music being played overhead. At the far end was a restaurant-like area for cheap food between sessions of playing games. At another corner stood a gift shop.

"Nice place," Nihlus chuckled.

"You could say Kaidan and Ashe chose well," Amber mused.

Nihlus began scanning his surroundings in search of Kaidan and Ashley.

"Hey! Over here!" the two aforementioned Alliance soldiers had already reserved a table for them.

Saren, Amber and Nihlus sauntered through the arcade and sat down at the table, joining up with the Alliance soldiers. Amber reached out to them with a friendly gesture.

"Hey, guys! Thanks for the invitation."

"Oh," Kaidan blurted, "so you and Saren decided to show up, too?"

"I met with them on the way here. I thought they could come along, too," Nihlus shrugged.

"Sure, why not?" Ashley sighed.

Amber, Saren, Nihlus, Kaidan and Ashley stood from the table and started browsing the arcade. It was hard to decide which to pick among the seemingly endless rows of screens and displays. One arcade game caught Amber's attention as it somehow reminded her of Tetris. She watched the display a bit longer before taking to the controls. Saren couldn't help but raise a browplate in
curiosity.

"What's this?" Saren asked.

"Have you heard of Tetris?" Amber replied without turning her head.

"An Earth equivalent?" Saren guessed.

Amber nodded. Saren examined the arcade games that stood adjacent to the game she continued to play. Saren watched with a distracted gaze as Amber continued playing. Nihlus, Kaidan and Ashley took this as a cue to keep searching for arcade games they felt like playing. The three took turns at a light rail shooter. At the same time, Saren found an arcade game identical to the one Amber was playing nearby, so he stepped over to it and started playing. He figured the game was simple enough and wanted to compete with scores. With a simple idea in mind, Saren and Amber exchanged brief glances at one another and nodded before they continued their game.

It was no surprise that difficulty would ramp up as time went on, but it was surprising as to how quickly it would do so. Still, Saren and Amber would resort to adapting quickly to keep up with their gameplay. Saren narrowly lost by a handful of points. Once they both compared their scores, Amber gave Saren a high five.

"I'd say that was a fair game?" she asked him.

Saren nodded.

"Yeah," he agreed, "let's have a look around, see what else they have."

Saren and Amber began wandering through the arcade in search of something else to play. They spotted a racing arcade and opted to stop and give it a try. They took a split second to settle into its seats and transfer a credit into the machine to activate the game. The two quickly scrolled through the roster and chose their vehicles before being dropped onto a desert-like backdrop. Once the lights on the screen turned to green, Saren and Amber started their virtual race. They raced along the dunes and rushed past what looked to be one section of ruins and another section of scrapped ships. Amber happened to find a shortcut, so she took that route. It could only be described as a brush through an underground well as she busted through the wooden planks and continued her momentum. Briefly, she was launched over a precarious pit leading into a bottomless mine before breaking out the other end back into the open. She then landed on the main track and continued her race. She swerved in between artificial players and found a place in front of the others.

Saren now felt tempted to step up his game to catch up with Amber. He started aggressively weaving in and out of the other cars, occasionally bumping one aside in a race to get ahead. When he started the third lap, he was merely a few feet behind Amber. Taking advantage of the simulated aerodynamics, he crept closer and closer to the point where he could successfully pass her.

"Oh, you are so on," Amber muttered.

The two began to swerve back and forth, Amber keeping Saren firmly locked behind her. Still, the elder turian Spectre scanned ahead for shortcuts. Eventually, he forced her to overcompensate and took advantage of the opening. With mere meters away from the finish, he edged by and crossed the finish a mere couple of seconds before she did. Taking a short break, they exchanged brief glances.

"You up for another round?" Saren asked.

Amber nodded lightly. They chose different vehicles and selected a new track to race on. This time,
they chose an icy setting. The location greatly affected all vehicles, causing hovering racers to become noticeably slower and vehicles with wheels to have vastly reduced traction. Whoever programmed this game definitely paid close attention to ice physics. It did strike rather close to home for Amber and her most recent memory of struggling with the newest model of Mako. She still made sure to keep it from distracting her. For most of the race, the two were neck and neck, giving the other little room for error. It was still entertaining for both of them to knock their artificial competitors off the track when they had the opportunity. They made a game more out of seeing who could knock the most cars off the track instead of who would pull across the finish line first. Ultimately, their focus on that objective resulted in Amber winning the race.

"It's good to see that you're at least a good driver," Saren laughed.

"Don't expect me to drive a Mako on an icy world, though," Amber remarked.

They later regrouped with Nihlus, Ashley, and Kaidan by their reserved table for some lunch.
She admittedly trembled with anticipation late the next morning. Saren had already planned their assignment and would be heading out the following day in the mid-afternoon. At the moment, Amber scrolled through the details of the mission in her omni-tool so she'd make preparations ahead of time. Once she finished reading the mission details, she found a message from Garrus in her inbox. The message had been titled 'private matters'.

{Commander Shepard,

I've been with Kelly for some time now and we've taken notice of your developing relationship with Saren. We've been hoping for a few tidbits of advice regarding how to approach this. Is there any time we could meet up at your apartment? We really feel for each other and I don't want to mess this up.

Regards,
Garrus Vakarian}

Amber couldn't help but smile as she turned off her omni-tool. She turned her head towards Saren as he sipped his kava.

"Uhh, Saren? Garrus just sent me a message, he says he wants to discuss his relationship with Kelly with us in person."

Saren raised his browplates and flexed his mandibles.

"Anything specific?" Saren pondered.

"I think they're moving onto bigger things," Amber shrugged, "I figured he might mention allergies to dextro acids."

Saren ran his talon along his mandible while he thought over the question for a moment.

"We can," Saren confirmed, "we're adults, there's no need to shun such topics."

Amber gave Saren a smile as she nodded.

"I'll let them know," she acknowledged.

Amber turned on her omni-tool and started typing down her message.

{Officer Vakarian,

We can have you over. Saren says we still have time before our next mission. Feel free to come over whenever possible, and bring over whatever medication you have for Kelly regarding chafing. We can explain further when you get here.

Shepard}

After she sent the message, all she would have to do is anticipate their arrival. They cleaned up after breakfast and got out of their pajamas when they heard a ring at the door. Amber scurried towards the front door while Saren fetched a container of dextro allergy meds, the human Spectre candidate opening the door. As anticipated, Garrus and Kelly stood outside.
"Hey, Amber!" Kelly chirped, "I'm glad you could have us over."

"Good to see you too, Kelly," Amber nodded.

Amber wasted no time as she gestured Garrus and Kelly into the apartment, making their way into the living room.

"So, where are you two currently at in this relationship?" Saren asked.

Kelly and Garrus sat down on the couch.

"Well, we've come to terms with our affection," Garrus started.

Garrus paused for a moment while he turned his glance towards Kelly.

"We did take a short trip to the pharmacy," Kelly added, "you know, to get the ointment to reduce the amount of chafing?"

"Yeah, the chafing is a bit of a problem," Amber admitted, thinking back to the scars she got from Saren.

Both Amber and Saren sat down next to Garrus and Kelly.

"You did research on each other's anatomy, right?" Saren asked.

"Yeah. We've also previously visited Huerta to check a few things. Turns out Kelly also displays minimal allergic reaction to dextro amino acids," Garrus replied.

Kelly pulled out the container of ointment and set it next to the container of allergy meds on the coffee table.

"In that case," Saren nodded, "I believe a demonstration is in order."

Saren stroked Amber's head with his hand and nodded at her, encouraging her to lift her tank top over her head. He began to apply the waxy substance to her skin.

"Prominently, you'll want to apply along the stomach, back, and inner thighs where your bodies will be making the most contact," Saren continued, "other areas you'll have to figure out yourself depending on how you go about the exercise."

Once Amber took a moment to slip her shorts and her panties down her legs, Saren slathered the ointment along her thighs. Once he finished, he handed the container to Garrus.

"Like so. Now, perhaps you would like to give it a try," Saren offered.

Kelly took a minute or so to strip herself of her uniform before she nodded at Garrus to slather the ointment on her stomach, her back and then her thighs. Garrus quickly stripped his own clothing, piecing together the direction of the tutorial.

"By the way, Kelly," Amber interrupted, "you're absolutely sure you're not allergic to dextro?"

"Last time I checked," Kelly nodded, "yeah."

"Trust me, we headed to the clinic and checked her out. Same applies to myself and levo," Garrus added.
After Saren finished stripping himself of his garment, Amber straddled her legs on his lap and tapped her forehead against his.

"Now, if you really have researched our anatomy Kelly," Saren continued, "you'll know that our genitalia has evolved to be retractable due to the lack of radiation protection our homeworld offered."

"So will stimulation encourage it to come out?" Kelly clarified.

Saren nodded. Kelly took this as a cue to cup Garrus's face with her hand and give him a passionate kiss. Similarly, Amber's hands went instinctively to the back of Saren's head and his hips. This encouraged the turian Spectre to knead her shoulder with one hand while stroking her back with the other. Garrus and Kelly followed suit, attempting similar motions. As they deepened their kiss, Saren pulled Amber closer into his embrace. She brushed a hand along his back, feeling the coarse plates like sandpaper. As Amber felt warmth building up inside her, she craned her head and licked Saren's neck. He felt his plates twitch as the warmth of her tongue brushed against him. He slithered his hand between her legs and began stroking her clit with his talons, eliciting soft moans out of her.

All the while, Kelly squeezed out some lubricant and slathered it on Garrus's slit. She perched her hands on his shoulders and angled her hips to line her folds against his crotch.

"I'm pretty sure everything else from here is pretty straightforward, no?" Garrus whispered.

Kelly nodded before she started grinding her hips against his, sending carnal thrills through their veins. He continued to taunt her, brushing his length against her folds as it slowly emerged from its slit, testing her sensitivity. Naturally, she mewed as she buried her face into his shoulder, encouraging Garrus to softly nip at her ear.

"I'm feeling…just about ready…to make my entrance…" he growled.

Kelly reached down and inserted a finger inside of herself. After swirling it inside of her for a moment, she pulled it out and examined the sticky fluid. He then angled himself for entrance, looking up to her face as to silently ask for her preparation. Kelly nodded before she lined the tip of his length with her nether region. She slid herself down on him, gasping as the sensation of the ribbed, uneven surface of his length brushed against her walls.

Meanwhile, Saren turned over and seated Amber on the couch before he got to his knees and lined his face with her nether regions. With a talon, he picked at the damp folds for a few moments before leaning forward and licking them. Amber moaned as she perched her legs over his shoulders. Remembering their last encounter, he would rub his upper lip plates against her clit with every brush. She brushed her hand along his fringe which encouraged him to snake his tongue inside of her. Prodding a bit longer, his tongue found an angle at which to push in.

Amber bucked her hips, encouraging Saren to probe deeper until the tip of his tongue reached her cervix. He reached as far as he could before having his tongue wave back and forth like a snake. He then started purring which sent vibrations deep into her core. She let out a string of small pants as he wormed his way inside her. Several moments later, Saren withdrew his tongue with threads of fluid dripping out. The turian Spectre leaned closer to Amber and tapped his forehead against hers, paying little attention to moans from Kelly and Garrus as they had already started grinding their hips against one another.

"Shepard?" Saren whispered.
Amber aligned the tip of his length with her nether regions.

"Yeah…go on…" she panted.

Saren grasped Amber's shoulder with one hand and grasped her hip with the other before he pushed his way inside of her, watching as she cried out at the savory sensation of ridges and spines stimulating her walls. Simultaneously, Garrus and Kelly climaxed amidst their own dance of pleasure. As they took a moment to rest, he licked her cheek.

"Kelly," Garrus purred, "you up for a second round in a few?"

Kelly slowly nodded. While Kelly and Garrus continued their momentary rest, Saren started rocking into Amber. From their side of the living room, they let out an ecstatic, incoherent line of moans and mumbling. The turian Spectre craned his head and licked the N7 soldier's neck. With what little mental capacity remained, she wrapped her legs around his hips, driving him to thrust harder. With Amber bucking her hips to match his pace, Saren pulled her into a deep kiss. Other than her musty breath, he could feel little outside of the electric buzz. The next thing they knew, both Amber and Saren shuddered in their orgasm.

"Ready for more?" she asked after she mustered enough willpower.

Saren made a brief glance at Kelly and Garrus as they reapplied lubricant onto their nether regions. The turian Spectre gave Amber a nod before he started thrusting back into her again. Seconds later, Garrus sank back into Kelly again and started up his rhythmic pace, eliciting moans out of both of them.

"Just a-angle it…ah…right there!" Kelly gasped as she shifted her position on Garrus upon reentry.

With both cross-species couples grinding their hips in a rhythmic pace, heat built up inside both of them. The sound of their stifled moans and the shuffling against the furniture drowned out the ambience in the living room. With Kelly perching her chin on Garrus's shoulder, Amber gave Saren another soft kiss. Kelly found herself on the verge of another climax. Garrus took this as a cue to accelerate his pace. For Kelly, it was an experience she didn't think she'd have imagined a year prior. The slick feeling of the anti-chafing gel aside, she couldn't get enough. When Kelly and Garrus cried out in their second climax moments later, Saren and Amber felt their pressure building up. Not a second later, Amber shuddered in her orgasm and her walls tightened around Saren's length. The turian Spectre groaned as he released his sticky fluid inside of the N7 soldier. Kelly was racing to catch her breath, still clinging onto Garrus.

"I…I think y-you…ruined humans for me…"

"Were you planning on…returning to humans?" Garrus paused between gasps.

Kelly shook her head.

"No…but if I had any doubts about you," she replied, "I don't now."

While Garrus flexed his mandibles into a smile and purred, Kelly pressed her lips against his. Saren and Amber slowly rose from the couch.

"If you two are done, feel free to use the shower," Saren offered.

Garrus withdrew from Kelly before they turned their heads towards Saren.

"Thanks, Spectre," Garrus nodded.
Saren carried Amber into the kitchen area while Kelly and Garrus took their clothes into the bathroom.

"Excuse me if I had my mind set on a different local," he hummed as he set her down on the kitchen table.

"I see where this is going," Amber mused.

Once Saren leaned in to give Amber a kiss, she perched her hands on his shoulders. He spared no time for additional foreplay and pushed his length inside. Moaning, Amber wrapped her legs around his waist. Pinning her to the table, Saren rocked his hips like the steady pace of waves. As she bucked her hips to sync with his thrusts, she perched her arms over his carapace. Amber let out another moan as his ribbed surface continued hammering into her. The fluids that mixed and coated their nether regions eased the friction of their rhythmic pace. Saren's breathing was now at a rapid panting, drawing in gulps of air. They both felt their heartbeat quickening as the turian Spectre nuzzled his face against hers. He finally let out a harsh growls as his climax washed over him. Seconds later, he heard her scream as her walls tightened around him. Taking their time, he slowly pulled out, watching as their fluids dripped out onto the table.

"I assume you enjoyed yourself?" Saren purred.

Amber nodded, encouraging Saren to tap his forehead against hers.

"Yeah. Thanks, I needed that," Amber smiled.

She slid off the table, cautious not to make a bigger mess than necessary. Saren stepped into the living room to grab the container of allergy meds while Amber started to clean up the mess in the kitchen. The turian Spectre filled a glass with water from the sink and handed it to the N7 soldier, allowing her to wash down the tablet. Garrus and Kelly finished their shower shortly later and walked out of the bathroom.

"You about to head into the shower soon?" Garrus asked.

Saren slowly nodded.

"Maybe we can watch a movie afterwards," Amber suggested.

Amber and Saren left the living room and made their way to the bathroom. They wasted no time washing off the remaining fluids, anti-chafing gel, and any aroma of sex that may still linger on their bodies. Once they dried themselves up and slipped their clothes back on, they returned to the living room and sat down next to Kelly and Garrus while they were browsing through the channels. Eventually, they settled for a space opera series.
The First Taste of Spectre Duty

Amber and Saren went straight to the Spectre Academy the following day to access the armory. Looking into the first weapons locker, she pulled out a sniper rifle of her own choice. Both the turian Spectre and his human protégé took a few minutes to gather their weapons before they started slipping into their armor. Their first assignment was a bit of wetwork deep into Terminus Space, and both decided to equip sniper rifles and SMGs. Once they had all the equipment they needed, Saren and Amber left the armory and made their way out of the academy. After wandering through the Presidium for a brief minute, they arrived at the Spectre docks and crossed the boardwalk to their shuttle. The two sat down at the cockpit and started the engines. Before they departed, Saren turned to her.

"Now, just so we're clear," Saren asked, "you don't mind getting your hands a bit dirty, do you?"

"Some of my missions had some dirty moments," Amber answered.

"I mean you won't be feeling any remorse from carrying out assassinations and similar morally questionable objectives, yes?" Saren clarified.

"It depends on what they've done to deserve it," Amber replied.

Saren leaned back as the ship left the dock.

"His name is Tonn Actus, nasty arms dealer," Saren explained, "the Terminus is widely regarded as the playground of the bad guys, and with good reason. Our current objective is the remains of some ancient asari city. As the city had been powered by a power core with tainted eezo, the facility went critical, and the colony was evacuated when it was deemed no longer inhabitable, leaving everything behind. Along with whatever nasty elements remain, the city's practically an untouched treasure trove, even millennia after it has been abandoned. Our current objective is Tonn, trying to put together his own little army right now, and they're all meeting up towards the center of the colony. Our job will be to head in, interrupt the meeting, and get out. Tonn leaves in a body bag."

"Got it," Amber nodded.

Once the shuttle left the station, it made its way towards the Mass Relay. They set course for the Crescent Nebula and were catapulted through the relay in short order. A mere hour passed before the shuttle emerged from a Mass Relay and entered Terminus space. Another hour passed as their ship went into FTL and transported them into another system. Once they arrived at their destination, they approached the planet's orbit. They entered low orbit into a forested landscape. Once they got out, they had a good look around. The beautiful greenery was immediately contrasted by a harsh, ugly view of ancient, poorly maintained asari structures in the middle of a valley.

"Historically," Saren said, "some fifty thousand lived in this colony."

Amber nodded as she examined each ancient building.

"And now the place is a ghost town, huh?" Amber commented.

"Yes," Saren agreed, "most likely."

He beckoned to her and started down the hill.
"C'mon, let's go. The local fauna is the least of our concerns."

Amber followed Saren down the hill. Once they reached the bottom, they entered the forest. At the edges of the city, they spotted small patrols sifting though the abandoned farm fields. The turian Spectre and his human apprentice took cover behind a tree.

"Stick to the trees. Only engage when I explicitly say so, or if we have ample opportunity to do so without being detected," he whispered.

"Ok," Amber nodded softly.

In and out of the irradiated wasteland, they ducked in and out of old farmhouses, sticking to the underbrush. At intervals, they scanned their surroundings for any patrolling mercenaries. They explored deeper and deeper into the city boundaries, ducking and dodging around patrols from the ground and air. They nearly were compromised by an armored patrol followed by two platoons of mercenaries. They had to act quickly before their mission would be jeopardized. They ducked into the bushes and remained still as the vehicles rolled on by. They remained still until the vehicles left the area.


The two hopped back to their feet and continued to what appeared to be a scrap refinery. With no one on patrol, Saren and Amber scurried through the entrance. They entered through the barren remains of what looked to be some physical sports area.

"Yeah, fifty thousand people left in an instance," Saren nervously chuckled.

Amber grasped Saren's hand gently, giving him a reassuring smile.

"We haven't been detected yet," she told him, "if that's worth anything."

"You are right on that," Saren smiled in return.

They reached the other side of the workout facility and waited as another armored patrol strode quietly by. With their backs turned, the two ran past the unaware guards up to another cluster of abandoned apartment buildings. Suddenly, Saren held his arm up and kept Amber back.

"Careful," Saren warned, "enemy sniper at the top of the fire escape."

She quickly checked the suppressor at the end of her rifle's barrel.

"Not a problem."

Getting into position, Amber carefully aimed her rifle. She pulled the trigger, causing the guard to flop onto his back with little opportunity to react or defend himself.

"Excellent," Saren praised.

The guards had either swept the city center already, or weren't expecting any trouble internally, as there was a complete lack of patrols as they advanced through the cracked, old streets that nature had slowly reclaimed. Amber would occasionally pause to look at the outside of each building, passing each one suspecting someone was watching from the shadow of one of the windows. Once they confirmed the coast was clear, they continued to venture forth.

"Hold it. Careful of the stray animals ahead. Let them be," Saren gestured to a couple of Varren
snarfing down the remains of something just inside a courtyard of another building.

Quietly, they stormed past, cautious not to upset the beasts. From there, they approached a building a few meters ahead of them.

"This is the hotel, right?" Amber asked.

Saren nodded as he looked back and forth between the building and his omni-tool.

"Should be if records are accurate. Let's go set up camp. We'll be here for a few hours."

Saren and Amber began searching the perimeter for a place to rest. They climbed to the top floor, where they lay down their equipment. Managing her rifle, Amber removed the suppressor and loaded the weapon with a higher caliber. As they sat down against the wall, Saren gazed out the window. The hours quietly passed, only interrupted by the sound of a patrolling gunship flying by.

"They're here," Saren whispered.

Saren looked through a set of binoculars at a distant parking lot relatively far from the hotel.

"Five hundred and seventeen meters out," he observed, "the wind is blowing fifty three meters northwest. Still awaiting the target's arrival."

Amber nodded in agreement. She set up the bipod for her rifle and took a look down the scope. She watched as mercenaries disembarked the gunship shortly after it landed. Amidst the mercenaries, two prominent figures stood out, a figure in bleach white and blood-red armor with a bronze visor and a turian with gray plates, red colony markings, and civilian clothing.

"There he is, the man in the thick coat. I assume you know how to use a rifle well enough?" he asked, not looking down from his binoculars.

Amber nodded quietly.

"Take the shot when you are ready," he advised.

She clenched the stock against her shoulder and adjusted the scope with the other hand. Finally, she wrapped her hand around the pistol grip and cautiously put her index finger against the trigger. Once her target stepped towards a certain spot within her vision, she squeezed the trigger. In a flash of blue, Actus was sent onto the ground hard, the entirety of his left arm gone from the shoulder down. The others began scrambling for cover and escape in response.

"Target down, nice shot. Blood loss and shock will do the rest," Saren reported.

Amber nodded while Saren placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Let's go," he advised.

The two ran down the stairs to the first floor when an explosion sharply rocked the building. Rushing back out, they looked up to see the smoldering remains of the top floor. Amber sighed with relief.

"Good thing we got out," she commented.

"You could say that," Saren chuckled.

They continued running through the streets, closely pursued by Actus's men. Saren emitted a biotic
field to shield himself and his protégé from incoming shots.

"Here! We'll lose them through the next apartment block!" Saren commanded.

They rushed into a courtyard and started weaving in and out of rooms whose walls had long since deteriorated. At a few intervals, Amber knocked over a few objects with a swift kick in an attempt to slow down any pursuers. Running along a few windows, Saren pulled her out through a sliding glass window and took cover, watching as a group of mercenaries ran by, oblivious to their position. They continued the rest of the way to the edge of town as patrols and gunships circled like vultures, unable to find them. Now that they outran them, Saren and Amber disappeared into the forest. The two paused in a reinforced building for a brief duration.

"Catch your breath. I want to make sure we aren't being followed," he said.

"Ok," Amber panted softly.

While Saren watched the entrance, she headed downstairs to explore the ruins. The turian Spectre made a brief glance at the ancient writing on the walls, raising his browplates in curiosity. That was when he noticed Amber had travelled deeper inside.

Meanwhile, she found herself in what was left of a lab, equipment left where they were when the colony was evacuated. Nothing seemed particularly functional when her attention was drawn to a small vault door towards the back of the room. She stepped closer to the vault and turned on her omni-tool, using its blade to slice the door open. On a shelf towards the back was a small, metallic cube with engravings, no bigger than two inches on each side. She carefully picked it up and examined it.

"Amber?" Saren's dual toned voice rang from the entrance of the lab.

Amber snapped out of her thoughts and glanced over her shoulder just as Saren entered the lab.

"I think we're clear for now," Saren informed, "we should get back on the move before they start checking the city perimeter."

Just as Amber slowly approached Saren, he caught a glimpse of the object in her hand.

"What is that?" he asked.

Amber paused and glanced down at the object in her hand.

"I'm not sure," she replied, "I just found it in a vault."

His gaze cycled between her, the vault, and the object in her hand.

"So far, it seems innocuous enough. We'll bring it back with us."

Amber nodded before she followed him out of the lab. The rest of the walk back was otherwise quiet and swift as they remained undetected for the rest of the mission. By the time they boarded the shuttle, they settled into their seats and Saren turned on the ignition, flying the shuttle out of the planet's orbit. He kept at the controls continuously as they returned to the relay out of the system. The Mass Relay flung the shuttle into FTL speed.

"That was an incredible shot," Saren hummed.

"Thanks, Saren," Amber smiled, "maybe he won't cause trouble if he's dead."
"Yeah. That'd be a nice thought," Saren agreed.

It was only a long while later before the shuttle emerged from another Mass Relay and entered the Serpent Nebula. Once it arrived at the Citadel, it landed at the Spectre docks. By now, it was already evening. They brought back the cube to the Spectre Academy for further analysis, revealing the small metal box was a data cache from an ancient race known as the Protheans. Amber turned on her omni-tool and scrolled through the list of contacts until she found Liara's number. The asari archeologist responded soon enough.

(Shepard? How can I help you?)

"Do you have a moment?" Amber asked, "I found an artifact of Prothean origin during my mission with Saren and I thought you could have a look at it."

(Ah…I see…um, give me a minute. I'll be right over. I just have to finish a few things here. The Spectre Academy, yes?)

"I'll see you soon," Amber replied.

Once the call ended, Amber turned off her omni-tool. Saren was still talking with some of the lab workers about their finding during their mission. Some of the lab workers also took a few moments to examine the reinforced data cache which managed to withstand wear and tear even after the Protheans' supposed extinction. A while later, Liara stepped into the lab.

"I came here as quick as I could. Where did you find this?"

Saren snapped out of his thoughts, turned on his feet and approached the asari archaeologist.

"We found it in what was left of an ancient asari colony in what looked to be an abandoned lab," Saren explained, "it was on our way out of a mission."

Saren made a brief glance at Amber just as she stood from her seat.

"I found it in a small, reinforced vault, specifically," Amber added.

Amber picked up the data cache and handed it over to Liara, allowing her to examine it.

"Hmmm…a new type of device, but nothing I can't work," she advised, "give me time and I'll show what I can pull from it."

"Ok," Amber nodded.

The asari sat down with the other lab workers and began cracking the device while Amber and Saren patiently waited by. As they sat on a bench, Amber rested her head on Saren's shoulder, drowsiness flooding her eyes. Saren equally felt the wear and tear of the day finally taking its full toll. Leaning on each other, the two drifted off to sleep. A long while later, a lab worker stepped out of the lab and found the turian Spectre and his human protégé on the bench.

"Spectre?"

The two hastily snapped awake.

"Mmmmmmyes?" Saren mumbled.

"We finished gathering the data from the cache," the lab worker informed, "Dr. T'Soni is expecting you."
Saren and Amber stood from the bench and stepped back into the lab, heading over to Liara's side.

"Find anything?" Amber asked.

Liara nodded.

"A grim discovery, but a discovery nonetheless."

Saren and Amber gave Liara a confused stare.

"What are we looking at exactly?" Saren repeated.

Liara picked up a datapad and showed Amber and Saren the files she downloaded from the Prothean data cache. It looked to be schematics for some huge dreadnought, almost resembling a cuttlefish or squid.

"It's roughly translated, but the text does mention something about a massive invasion."

Amber carefully examined the image.

"That's not a ship, is it?" Amber paused.

"Looks to be," Liara answered, "it was supposedly manufactured by an unidentified extragalactic synthetic race."

For some reason, Saren couldn't help but feel a chill down his spine.

"Any reason why they attacked?" Saren asked, "any indication as to where they went?"

Liara shook her head.

"Other than that the Protheans were fighting a losing fight, nothing."

That was when Amber and Saren exchanged glances.

"We might as well dig deeper for answers," Amber shrugged.
While Amber's dreams of Thresher Maws became less frequent, one dream she had last night involved her chasing the strange squid-like dreadnought. The backdrop appeared to be one of the mid-rim Alliance colonies, and it just hung there in the sky, arcs of red energy like lightning striking the ground. While it didn't do anything yet, she knew she would have to catch up with it fast. That was when it finally took off into the sky, leaving her far behind in what she now realized was the colony shipping dock. She looked around her for any other sign of life besides herself. Oddly enough, she didn't find any blood splatters on the structures. That's when she saw Saren, further along the platform. Thinking fast, she sprinted towards him.

"Saren? What's going on?"

He glanced at her grimly.

"We were too late," he gestured to a form in front of her just out of her view.

Just as Amber caught up with Saren, she laid her eyes on the form distant from both of them. She soon recognized Nihlus lying in a pool of his own blood, with a slightly cauterized hole going through his forehead.

"Who...could've done this?" Amber gasped.

Her eyes rose from Nihlus's corpse to an opened crate further down the walkway. While Saren continued to mourn, she went over to investigate, prying the lid all the way off to see inside. Whatever was inside the crate glowed to the point she couldn't make out its form. Without thinking, she reached her hand inside the crate.

The next thing she knew, she opened her eyes and found herself tucked in her bed. Saren was beside her and still fast asleep. Looking to the clock, it was only four in the morning. Sighing, Amber brushed her hand along his fringe. She tried laying back down again, attempting to find sleep again. When she nestled into Saren's embrace, he nuzzled his face against hers and purred.

Morning arose without further incident over the night. When they both woke up, they slipped into their civies before browsing through Saren's omni-tool until they confirmed the location of a simple breakfast buffet. They left the apartment, sauntered through the Presidium and entered the buffet at one of the lower wards. After they found a place to sit, they gathered their food from the stalls. The two silently ate without a word. Savoring the food, they relaxed at the sound of the ambience. Still, the nagging thought of last night's discovery lingered in the back of their minds.

"Should we search them out?" she asked, breaking the morning silence.

Saren thought over the question while he sipped his kava.

"It depends on whether we have enough clues," Saren replied.

She paused for a moment.

"The Relays and Citadel are made by the Protheans, right?" Amber mentioned, "maybe they've hid more evidence on the station somewhere."

Saren let out an enthusiastic hum.
"Good idea," he agreed, "I know the Citadel has a whole bunch of sublevels that have even yet to be used on this station. There might be something down there, but it'll be quite a search."

By the time they finished their breakfast, Saren and Amber made their payment and left the buffet. All throughout the station, there were shut gates leading to the lower levels of the station, waiting to be opened when the space was needed. While she hasn't seen any news outlets of these sections opening up as of late, these levels made perfect spots for clues to be hiding in. They returned to their apartment to grab their hovercar and drove it to one of the wards on the station. They dove deeper and deeper before parking just outside of a locked gate. After Saren turned off the ignition, he and Amber disembarked the hovercar and approached the locked gate. Saren picked the mechanism and opened the door.

Saren and Amber wasted no time as they stepped through the gate. It was dark, yet dry. Turning on her shoulder-mounted flashlight, she had a good look around. The structure was similar to the streets above, with the exception of being lifeless, stripped down of excess, and ever-so-slightly dusty. To add to the eerie atmosphere, they couldn't find a single clue of any rodents scampering in the area. Every now and then, a Keeper would scamper across, searching for anything to be worked on. For some reason, these strange creatures caught Amber's interest.

"What was that?" Amber asked.

"Keepers," Saren explained, "they maintain the station. Any damage dealt will quickly be covered over and undone by those things just an hour later."

Amber nodded before she and Saren continued wandering through the empty level, taking extra caution not to disturb any Keepers they passed by. They wandered further and further into the darkness. Still, they have yet to find a single clue. They walked to the edge of the platform and looked down into the abyss as it stretched on into the darkness, unable to see the bottom from their position. Saren kept his hand on Amber's shoulder, keeping her from leaning forward.

"Quite a nasty fall," he whispered.

Without saying anything, Amber glanced over her shoulder.

"I think I see something useful a few levels down," Amber said, "it looks like another VI terminal."

Saren also caught a glimpse of the terminal in question.

"Yeah, I see it," Saren agreed, "I think I see a way over there too."

Saren and Amber took a step away from the edge. There was a bridge on the same level as the terminal was with no immediately obvious ways of getting down. Using his biotics, Saren enveloped Amber in a biotic field and lowered her onto the platform before leaping down himself, using his biotics to slow his descent. They both approached the terminal. Saren palmed it, looking for a way to turn it on. Brushing his hand along its surface, he found a few toggles. What appeared before them definitely wasn't the asari VI both of them were now familiar with. The projection itself was a distorted, pixelated blue ball. Amber squinted her eyes for a moment while she waited for the VI to complete its form. It took the vague outline of a human's face seconds later. Did it scan Amber?

"H-Hello?" Amber stammered.

It simply replied with a jumbled mess of sounds. Saren and Amber exchanged glances amidst their confusion. Suddenly, it let out another gurgle.
"Language compensation complete. How may I be of service?" it spoke.

Amber blinked twice.

"Uuum…who are you?" she asked.

"I am the station monitor," it replied simply, "I have been watching the current and prior inhabitants of this structure."

"Does that include the Protheans?" Amber pressed.

"Yes. The Protheans had existed on this station prior to the current inhabitants."

With satisfaction with her curiosity building up, she nodded at Saren.

"There were prior inhabitants to the station, preceding the Protheans, right?" he pressed.

"Correct. The cycle before—"

"No need to go into detail, thank you very much," Saren interrupted.

Amber couldn't help but stiffen for some reason.

"What cycle?!!" Amber blurted.

"The Protheans had established their claim of the station several thousand years after the last species," the VI continued,

Amber made a brief glance at Saren before she returned her focus towards the VI.

"What else do you know about the Protheans?" Amber asked.

"This station saw the whole cycle of the Protheans," the VI answered, "including its advancement of civilization through its age of prosperity to the gradual fall to its corruption near the end of its cycle."

"Corruption? How so?" Saren now bore a look of desperate concern.

Saren and Amber stood still and gave the VI a blank stare in a moment of silence.

"While internal fighting and an unstable use of intergalactic resources was prevalent, other factors did come into play in the final decision."

That was when Amber rubbed her chin, reflecting on the history of her species.

"And just who decides our collective fate?" Amber asked.

The VI flashed orange all of a sudden.

"I'm sorry," it said, "I cannot disclose that information."

Saren sighed in disappointment.

"At least we're a step forward."

Without saying anything further, the VI shut itself off.
"So the Protheans didn't make this station," she sighed, "the real question is who did?"

Saren gave Amber a soft expression while he ran his talons through her hair.

"No doubt those synthetics."

Having gathered some pieces of the puzzle, Saren and Amber began their trek back to the gate. It was otherwise as quiet and eerie as the moment they entered. The N7 soldier took a moment to shut the gate before she followed her mentor towards the skycar.

"So where do we look now?" she asked.

Saren let out a sigh before he turned on the ignition and drove the skycar out of the area.

"If you want," Saren offered, "I could take you to a library."

"That would be great," Amber nodded.

After flying through the air traffic, the skycar stopped at the station's library. Saren landed his skycar in a parking spot before they and Amber disembarked. The turian Spectre led his protégé inside. Once they stepped through the door, Amber scanned her surroundings. The floor tiles, pillars, and ceiling were composed of marble with solid metal between the cracks. Petrified wood decorated the railings, shelves, furniture, and light systems. The layout composed of two main levels, with the second having a hole in the center for a balcony overlooking the first level below.

Saren and Amber wandered through the first floor until they found a study area, where the turian Spectre sat down in one of the lounge chairs. The N7 soldier located the directory and approached it before she read it. They aimed for the ancient history to dig through texts referring to the Protheans. The two believed perhaps there was something everyone else missed pointing out the Protheans' extinction, something that would reveal who the synths were.

Saren and Amber began searching the floors of the library for books on Protheans before they returned to the study area and sat down in their lounge chairs. Amber read through the books while Saren turned on his omni-tool and typed down a journal of their findings at the unexplored part of the Citadel. She continued to dig through book after book while Saren copied anything that could remotely be helpful. Still, this gave Amber a good opportunity to research what most non-human officials knew about the Protheans. The various texts extensively covered the history and government of the Protheans, but disturbingly touched their later disappearance and possible extinction. All that remained were rumors, theories, and hints to what could've become of them. The Alliance commander took notes using her omni-tool while she read these books.

"Maybe the synths did take them out, and left no evidence to work from," she shrugged.

"I'm sure we'll have better luck at some point," Saren nodded.

Amber and Saren took several minutes to return the books back to their original shelves. They left with some notes to compare with their findings below.

"Alright, now I had another idea for your next test," Saren started, "as you have no doubt have heard by now, the krogan homeworld is an inhospitable one. I want to find something to test your strength on there."

Amber froze in her tracks, her expression having gone blank.

"Shepard?" Saren paused.
She had heard about the rough desert planet that was Tuchanka, victim to centuries of nuclear war. She also knew of the abundance of the monstrosities she so greatly feared from the attack already months old now.

"Amber? Please, you're starting to scare me now," Saren insisted.

Amber didn't respond, her mind still lingering on that day in Akuze. Then Saren started vigorously shaking her.

"Amber!"

Amber immediately snapped out of her thoughts and focused her gaze on Saren.

"What is it?" she blurted.

"You went dead-still for a moment after I mentioned our next mission," Saren replied.

Amber blinked twice.

"Did you refer to Tuchanka?" she asked him.

"I had. That's when you suddenly froze," he nodded.

"Will I have to fight a Thresher Maw?" Amber pressed.

That was when Saren recalled the day he found her on Akuze. As he softened his expression, he gave Amber a warm embrace.

"Not necessarily," Saren reassured, "the wildlife is unpredictable, but not unavoidable."

Amber sighed in relief while she returned the embrace.

"I…I trust you."

"I know," Saren purred as he ran his talon through her hair.

They continued home without other incidents and cleaned themselves up. Saren pulled out his omni-tool and sent a call to Wrex. While Wrex was nice as someone to chat to at the bar, he figured he could piggyback on the krogan's next visit home for the mission.

{Yes, Saren,} Wrex grumbled over the com-link, {what is it?}

"When's your next visit home?" Saren asked.

{Tomorrow, actually. Just got a call from my brother Wreav regarding familial matters. Why?}

Saren made a brief glance at Amber as she played Shovel Knight on her miniature console.

"I was looking to the next mission for Amber. Will you be doing any shooting upon your return?"

Wrex gave a mix between a chuckle and a scoff.

{What, did you forget what happened last time? Chances are, regardless of what I'm doing, I'll always be shooting something when I get back.}

"We'll be packing up and coming along. Hopefully that won't be a problem?"
{Sure. You can tag along.} Wrex answered over the com-link, {also, you should let Shepard know I'm bringing her friend Jack along. She wanted to see.}

Saren let out an enthusiastic hum.

"I'm sure she'll love to hear it," he hung up shortly after.

Saren stood to his feet and stepped into the living room before he sat next to Amber.

"If it's any comfort," Saren informed, "we'll be going along with Wrex and Jack."

Amber made a brief glance at Saren and gave him a soft smile.

"Jack's really coming along?" she commented, "I'm betting she'll be happy about it."

"Yes, she's definitely quite the fighter," Saren agreed, "she'd feel right at home."

Amber continued to play her game while she leaned closer to Saren. Even with the sudden knowledge of some greater threat in existence, being together brought some comfort to them.
Tuchanka Clan Disputes

Now that Amber and Saren suited up the next day after their breakfast, they gathered their weapons and made their way through the Presidium towards the Spectre docks. Saren sent another message to Wrex, offering them a lift in his shuttle to Tuchanka. Once they entered the docks, they waited until Wrex and Jack arrived fifteen minutes later.

"Hey, Amber! How's the training going?" Jack called over, approaching her with a greeting gesture.

Amber gave Jack a fist bump.

"I'd say Spectre training's going well so far," Amber answered.

"Yeah, you two will find Tuchanka to be plenty of fun. Just you wait," Wrex chuckled.

Without saying a word, Saren gestured Wrex, Amber and Jack to board his shuttle, where they settled into their seats and Saren took control of the steering handles after he turned on the ignition. At that time, Amber checked her omni-tool and started reading a message from Anderson:

{Shepard,

The prototype ship blueprints have just been completed and a conglomeration group is currently gathering resources to construct the vessel. I'll keep you updated as it gets closer to completion.

Anderson}

Amber smiled softly and relaxed in her seat while Saren steered the shuttle out of the docks and it made its way out of the Citadel. Setting the coordinates for Tuchanka, Saren glanced over his shoulder.

"Wrex," Saren asked, "considering your family affairs, how do you know we won't be shot walking out of the shuttle?"

Wrex snorted.

"You should be worried about getting shot down upon arrival."

"Well, that's good to hear," Amber commented sarcastically while she rolled her eyes.

"If you're a good pilot and good shot, that won't be a problem," Wrex chastised.

"Right," Saren nodded.

Saren flew the shuttle through space as it approached the Mass Relay. An hour later, they arrived over the orbit of Tuchanka, filled with dust and a bright orange shade. Saren activated the shuttle's scanners. He plotted a landing course through the sandstorm below to the Camp Urdnot landing platform. From there, he flew the shuttle into the planet's atmosphere. From what little they could see through the storm, any structure they could see down below was like a cross between the ancient structures of the Egyptians and the reinforced steel frames of modern society hard-baked into dunes of sand that stretched for miles in each direction. How the krogans have been doing as of this day was anyone's guess. Amidst the storm, the shuttle HUD highlighted the course into a metal tube leading into the ground where they came to a complete halt.

Once the Spectre landed the shuttle safely, he turned off the ignition. The krogan hangar area
didn't consist much else besides a few gunships and dropships on either racks on the ceiling or sitting on the floor for takeoff and maintenance. After Saren, Amber, Wrex and Jack disembarked the shuttle, they made their way out of the hangar. A couple guards at the door leading out held them back.

"I'm here on behalf of my brother, you rabid Varren," Wrex grumbled.

Without so much as a response, the guards let them through. With a sense of pride, Wrex nodded at Saren, Amber and Jack.

"I should probably do most of the talking. My brother isn't exactly the most negotiable type," Wrex added.

Once they stepped through the door, Wrex led Saren, Amber and Jack through the corridor. The chamber they entered looked to be some huge, ancient metro tunnel with little tents and huts set up all along the way along the platform. Every now and then, a barrel fire kept the shadows lit up, displaying the decaying infrastructure around them. Across the chamber, a krogan older than Wrex sat in an elaborate chair. It didn't look to be much besides the twisted remains of some old vehicle.

"It's good to see you've arrived on such short notice, Wrex," the krogan on the throne grumbled.

Wrex approached the krogan while keeping his head held high.

"I'm surprised you asked to have me clean up your mess," Wrex replied.

The krogan on the throne made a brief glance at Saren, Amber and Jack before returning his focus to Wrex.

"You didn't tell me you'd be bringing friends either," he retorted.

"They're here to help if necessary," he replied.

Wreav sighed as he folded his arms.

"I was unaware you had friends," Wreav pestered, "you sure they're even applicable in this scenario? I don't like outside interference in matters like this, especially Spectres."

Irritated, Saren shook his head and took a few steps forward.

"I'm very much capable of handling whatever issues you have," Saren asserted, "what's the situation anyways?"

Those words encouraged Wreav to stand from his throne.

"Butting heads with Clan Weyrloc recently," Wreav explained, "I don't like it."

"So what beef do you have with him?" Jack folded her arms and raised her eyebrows.

"We always have beef with them," Wreav clarified, "territory, females, the clans always butt heads for resources."

Amber thought over the situation while she placed her finger on her chin.

"What specifically is the problem?" Amber pressed.

Wreav looked about nervously.
"They claim to have a cure to the Genophage and that they're going to use it to make Clan Wreav superior."

Saren and Amber exchanged glances.

"Remind me, what is the Genophage again? I do remember reading on it briefly, but I just need some clarification," she whispered.

"It's what caused the krogans' fertility to plummet," Saren began, "during the Krogan Rebellion, the salarians provided the solution of a manufactured genetic disease that would drastically lower the chances of a successful birth to a zero-point-one percentile. Once they couldn't keep up the fight, they surrendered."

Out of the corner of her eye, Amber noticed Wrex muttering something under his breath.

"Needless to say, it's left them bitter and somewhat unable to adjust to society long after the war," Saren finished.

"So you need us to go in and mop up?" Wrex grumbled.

"The prospect of a cure to the species as a whole would allow us to finally shake off the taint of the Rebellions," Wreav affirmed, "however, a cure could tilt the balance between clans if this is allowed to continue under their control. The other clans have agreed action is necessary, but their clan grows quickly."

"Then we'll get to it," Amber gave Wreav a salute.

"Come to think of it, I think a Spectre would be helpful. I do apologize for disrespecting your choice on allies, Wrex," Wreav added.

"Ehh, that's ok," Wrex reassured his older brother.

"I can tell the guys at the garage to prep you a vehicle and set your course," Wreav added, "scouts have indicated where the lab is."

Wrex nodded at Wreav before he led Saren, Amber and Jack out of the throne room and through the corridor. After descending a flight of stairs and turning at a few corners, they entered the garage where krogan mechanics gave the ground vehicle inside some finishing touches. One mechanic stood to his feet and approached Wrex.

"The nav system is right at the driver's seat. I'm sure you can find your way there," he explained, "just follow the labelled path and you'll make it there."

"Thanks," Wrex nodded.

Without saying anything further, Wrex, Saren, Amber and Jack boarded the vehicle, with Wrex and Jack sitting in the front seats. Wrex took the wheel and turned on the engines before rolling out of the garage onto a highway into the wilderness. Amber peered outside the window and observed the scenery passing by. The ruins outside lined the entire length of the highway, with sand pouring through all the openings. Jack read the nav system and watched as the vehicle's icon moved closer to its destination. Saren rode in the turret gunner seat, swiveling back and forth for potential targets. So far, he didn't find any hostiles in sight.

"Looks like our destination is only a ways further," Jack informed, "you know this place?"
"Yeah, it's an old hospital from the days of the Rebellion," Wrex answered, "hasn't been anyone here in some time, but I haven't checked in recently either."

Jack folded her arms behind her head and relaxed into her chair.

"I'm starting to see a few blips on the map, just a few patrols," she pointed out.

Wrex smirked in response.

"Good. I thought this was going to be boring," he snarked.

Wrex continued to drive the vehicle until half an hour later, they saw the old hospital at a distance. Parking the vehicle, the team climbed out and began navigating the dusty landscape.

"I set the coordinates onto my omni-tool. It's this way," Jack informed.

Having an extra burst of confidence, Jack sprinted ahead of the other three. The first hostiles they had encountered were two goblin-like beings armed with rocket launchers. Despite their menacing arsenal, they were dispatched rather quickly with two consecutive headshots. Amber got a closer look before focusing her eyes on Saren.

"These are vorcha, right?" Amber asked.

She had read about the species, but this was her first encounter up close.

"Yes, those are vorcha," Saren nodded, "these adrenaline jockeys aren't particularly bright, breed rather rapidly, and make excellent sources of expendable guns for hire."

To further emphasize the turian Spectre's point, Wrex spat on one of the vorcha corpses.

"They're annoying, too," Wrex added.

Wrex, Jack, Saren and Amber continued their trek across the landscape. Climbing onto another highway, they found themselves lined up against more vorcha, a few varren, and krogans dressed in bright red armor. The instant the hostiles spotted the team, they charged into battle. Wrex yanked out an empty gas tanker with his biotics and used it for cover as he reloaded. Jack let out a biotic burst to scatter the varren and vorcha. The krogan barely staggered and just charged. With a high-caliber round, Amber put down one of the warriors before he could get too close. Saren emitted a biotic field but a krogan answered with an underbarrel grenade launcher, putting great strain on Saren's shield. Seeing her mentor flinch compelled Amber to open fire on the krogan in question. She unloaded the rest of her clip before it finally went down.

"Saren!" Amber called over, "you all right?"

He simply gestured that he was alright as he rose back to his feet.

"I'm fine, let's keep going."

It was only a while later before Saren, Amber, Wrex and Jack reached walking distance towards the old hospital. That was when they immediately noticed something was off. They just arrived, yet someone had already taken the liberty of coming through and cleaning up for them.

"It's quiet. Too quiet," Wrex noted.

Saren walked up to the hospital gate, its lock already cracked.
"Whoever it is, I don't think they're welcome here either," Saren observed.

"Someone else have a vendetta?" Jack pondered.

"Dead bodies could mean anything," Wrex advised, "let's keep going."

Wrex palmed the door lock and watched as it opened. Inside the lobby were more vorcha and krogan corpses. Blood and torn organs also splattered along the floor and walls.

"A bit sloppy. Looks like they were in a rush," Jack commented.

Amber kept her eyes vigilant until she found a door that just appeared to be torn open.

"Breaching charges," Amber added, "this guy came prepared, too."

Saren didn't say much, but he led Amber, Wrex and Jack through the door and they raced down the blood splattered corridor. Ahead, they heard more angered growling. They got close enough to at least catch the tail end of the conversation.

"...Now gather everyone up and find that intruder!"

Amber, Saren, Jack and Wrex pressed their backs along the wall as they processed the conversation nearby in their heads.

"Boss, coms are jammed. I can't even reach my guys at the bottom of the facility."

"Then why don't we secure our salarian friend and ensure nothing happens to him. Get moving!" the superior growled.

"Salarian?" Amber whispered to herself.

Jack let out an audible sigh.

"Well, we aren't accomplishing much trying to snoop around as well after shooting our way here," she grunted before pulling a grenade and tossing it out.

Seconds later, an ensuing explosion elicited screams of agony from the mercenaries in the other room. Hastily rushing to follow suit, the others rushed in under Wrex's biotic barrier. Saren and Amber immediately opened fire on the surviving mercenaries. More krogans rushed into the room. Ducking behind cover, Saren tossed out a flashbang. The ensuing flash gave Saren, Amber, Jack and Wrex a chance to press forward. Clearing through the rest of the krogans present, the four made their advance.

"Let's try to keep all-out firefights to a minimum. We can't spread ammo around like this and keep moving if we're to reach that salarian," Saren proposed, picking up a couple of thermal clips from a dead guard.

"Yeah," Amber nodded, "if we're lucky, he could still be alive."

They trekked deeper into the hospital. The first room they encountered going a level down was a morgue, with a few wrapped bodies laying about, completely wrapped up and waiting to be cremated.

"What? Females? Is this really the length these bastards went through?" Wrex whispered while showing light distraught.
Jack uncovered one of the bodies before she felt her body stiffen.

"Jeez…and that's not half of it. I'm seeing a few other species here too, and those don't look like natural growths."

"Who could've done this?" Amber paused.

"Some incredibly desperate people, looking for something that sticks," Saren answered, moving to the next room.

Amber followed her mentor into the next room when they found Mordin at a terminal.

"Mordin?" Saren blurted.

The salarian doctor snapped his aim on them, but holstered his weapon after seeing who it was.

"Arterius, surprised me, what are you doing here?!" Mordin exclaimed.

"I could ask you the same thing," Saren grunted, lifting a browplate.

Saren slowly approached the terminal before he examined the screen.

"Unfinished business. Heard former companion was held captive here. Had to help," Mordin sighed, leaning over the terminal and letting his head drool under the pull of gravity.

Amber took a moment to read the map on the terminal screen.

"Any indication as to where he's being held?" Amber asked.

Mordin double-checked the map.

"Lower levels still. I've already eliminated most opposition. However, no doubt they're setting defenses there," he deeply and uncomfortably inhaled, "wasted enough time. Let's go."

Mordin stepped away from the terminal and made his way towards the staircase. Leading down further, they entered the bottom level ward, with balconies overlooking the bottom floor. Cell doors lined along the walls at the base level. Most of the cells contained various subjects and specimen, largely native to Tuchanka with a few exceptions. Mordin scanned the area until he spotted another salarian.

"I see him. Bottom level."

Amber, Jack, Wrex and Saren glanced where Mordin was pointing at a lab door, sealed shut with a squad waiting outside. Amber carefully aimed her rifle at one of the guards. She was suddenly forced to duck as another barrage of fire came from across the way. A level below them, another patrol had suddenly arrived. This time, their eyes focused on the quartet and the salarian doctor. Rushing down the stairs, each one poured the last of their strength into the push downward. At the bottom, a large krogan clad in silvery gray armor faced them.

"Urdnot Wrex! You should've stayed in bed this morning!"

"I'm only going down when I know a rabid pyjak like you won't be running this rock!" Wrex barked.

He tossed out another grenade as he rushed to cover. As an explosion ensued, Jack emitted her biotic field. The larger krogan rushed at them, slamming his gauntlets against her shield. Saren and
Amber continued firing their rounds at the surrounding hostiles. Jack was about to crumble under the krogan's strain when Wrex charged in and sluged the armored leader across his head crest. Relief flooding her veins, Jack dissipated her biotic field.

"Thanks," she gasped.

Wrex paid no attention as he continued attacking the krogan in an enraged brawl. With the hostiles distracted, Mordin rushed over to the sealed lab door. He slapped his last breaching charge on the lock of the door, set the timer, and rushed to the side. Seconds later, an ensuing explosion tore off the door, taking its seal with it. He rushed into the lab through the smoke and began searching until he found the salarian in question taking cover behind a desk.


His mentor reached down and cut the lock off his neck.

"Did, still am. Came on own time. Good to see you're safe. Where's research?"

Maelon slowly stood to his feet.

"The terminal, over here. They had cooperate to be let go. I doubt they would, but I figured that I may as well survive until help arrived. Should we delete it?" his protégé quickly typed the password and brought up the files on screen.

Had he been a decade younger, Mordin wouldn't have hesitated and gave the order, but now he just trembled. The more he visited Tuchanka, the more he questioned the ethics and deeper implications of his work.

"I don't know," he whispered.

Maelon glanced at him.

"What?" he paused.

"Six cycles ago, I quit. Quit when realized damage I was doing. Wanted nothing to do with it. Wash my hands of matters," after he inhaled, he finished, "now thrown right back into fray."

Maelon gave Mordin a confused stare in a moment of silence.

"Are you…?"

Mordin made his decision to save everything onto his omni-tool before wiping the local copy.

"Maybe…just maybe they don't deserve their fate," Mordin replied, "damage may be done, but not irreversible."

Maelon nodded in agreement.

"I suppose," he replied.

The gunfire outside began to die down as they returned. Mordin and Maelon noticed that Saren, Amber, Wrex and Jack had finished off the last wave of hostiles. Wrex picked a blade from the leader's head crest.

"You finished in there?" Wrex called over.
Mordin nodded.

"Can discuss more on way back."

Saren, Amber, Wrex and Jack double-checked the cell doors. To their dismay, there really wasn't anyone left alive.

"Come on, let's leave before more of those bastards return," Saren advised.

They paused near the top of the steps and dove into one of the cells as a patrol of krogans rushed by, not hearing them.

"Looks like getting out is going to be a steeper climb than getting in," Jack acknowledged quietly.
Saren, Amber, Wrex, Jack and the salarians have yet to find an opportunity to slip past the krogans on patrol. They crept through the hospital, looking for ways back to the entrance. Now, the hospital was flooded with Weyrloc warriors, searching them out room by room. To avoid getting spotted, they resorted to ducking into cover at intervals. It was slow, and they continued going in circles to keep them off. At that point, they wished they found a shortcut. However, there were no vents, no side corridors, and only one entrance to the subterranean hospital. Having had enough of running and hiding, Saren double-checked his pistol.

"We're making a break for it. Get ready," Saren instructed.

Amber nodded while she loaded a thermal clip into her rifle. They started off at a run, with Wrex providing a biotic barrier first. The instant the squad came from hiding, the warriors patrolling the corridor immediately opened fire on them. The shots bounced off, giving them the breathing room to simply focus on running. When one warrior blocked their path, Amber fired a few rounds at him. Finishing the warrior off, Jack tossed the corpse aside with her own biotics.

By focusing on this strategy, Saren, Amber, Wrex, Jack, Mordin and Maelon were able to reach the entrance to the hospital. Close behind, the Weyrloc clan members followed. Saren made a brief glance at a weak structure on the ceiling, so he had an idea in mind. Passing through the front door, he placed a remote charge on the door frame, and hurried to follow the others. Triggering the devices from his omni-tool, they watched as the door behind them collapsed.

"That'll buy us enough time to get clear," Saren informed, "let's keep going."

Saren led his squadmates away from the hospital and through the vast landscape. Several minutes later, they found where they had parked the vehicle and boarded. While Saren switched seats with Jack, Mordin and Maelon also sat in the back seat. Wrex returned to the wheel and began their drive back to the Urdnot Camp. During the drive, Amber and Jack felt relief flooding their veins, so they relaxed in their seats.

"Not bad as for how smash-and-grabs go," the former sighed.

"Yeah," Jack nodded, "maybe if we're lucky, we could use this method to get back at those Cerberus bastards."

A dead silence fell between the two. Over the last few months, a new group had been slowly revealed within the shadow of the Alliance…nothing more than a circle of opportunists with the soul intent of rearranging the status quo to favor humans in a more slanted fashion. Already, the Alliance began tugging at the roots only to find the trail went deeper inward towards itself. Still, an elaborate network of front companies were designed to undermine other governments while simultaneously bolstering human integrity through a series of unethical and seemingly aimless actions and investments. These thoughts swam in her head while reflecting on the day she and her squadmates found Jack in one of their labs. It was long before first contact when the organization was much smaller and more centralized around a transhuman identity.

Amber snapped out of her thoughts when she saw the structures of the Urdnot camp outside the window. Wrex continued driving down the highway, watching as the garage door opened up. Once the vehicle moved inside the garage, it came to a complete stop before its passengers disembarked it. Wreav was heading up to the garage to meet them.
"I'm surprised you made it back in one piece," Wreav commented.

"We met Weyrloc Guld on the way in," Wrex grunted, "I put him down."

Wreav chuckled while he placed his hand on his brother's shoulder.

"I'm surprised. He was one tough sonuvabitch," Wreav commented.

"That doesn't explain how he got ten inches of steel through his crest," Wrex added, "that aside, I'm sure the salarian back there can explain what he found."

Wreav focused his eyes on Maelon upon cue.

"Who're you?" he asked.

Maelon snapped out of his thoughts as Wreav approached him.

"I'm Maelon, Lieutenant of the STG," he began, "I was taken a few months back to work a cure for them due to my previous expansion."

Wreav raised his browplate.

"How close were you, anyways?" Wreav asked, "I'm not sure if you were aware, but Weyrloc made some pretty big claims about your progress."

Mordin suddenly jumped.

"Analyzed work on way back," he interrupted, "a few years out, but still possible."

Now Wreav became increasingly confused.

"So helpful all of a sudden," he muttered.

Mordin and Maelon exchanged glances. The mentor ignored his former protégé's expression of disdain.

"Unexpected?" Mordin paused.

Wreav nodded.

"All things considered. I'm surprised you didn't wipe it."

"So what're you going to do with it?" Wrex eyed cautiously.

Mordin refused to make eye contact.

"Don't know yet," he replied, "can't tell full social effect. Will hold on for now. Maybe work on it during free time."

Wreav made a gesture of dismissal, so Saren, Amber, Wrex, Jack, Maelon and Mordin made their way out of the garage and down the corridor, taking a flight of stairs before they reached the hangar.

"Once again, thanks for the help. Having you on the field makes things easier on my part," Wreav repeated.

"Anytime, brother," Wrex nodded.
Wrex, Saren, Amber, Jack, Mordin and Maelon boarded the shuttle.

"Well, I suppose the payoff was satisfactory," Saren sighed, taking the ship controls.

They lifted out of the hangar area and back into the now much clearer Tuchanka skies back to the Mass Relay. After the relay flung the shuttle into FTL speed, the turian Spectre made a brief glance at his human protégé as she lay back in her seat.

"You alright after that?" he asked.

Amber made a brief glance at Saren and nodded.

"Yeah," she told him, "that was actually invigorating."

A long while later, the shuttle emerged from the Mass Relay and made its way to Citadel. It landed at the Spectre docks before Saren, Amber, Wrex, Jack, Mordin and Maelon disembarked. Wrex and Jack returned to their homestead, Mordin brought Maelon to Huerta to check on his health, and Amber and Saren walked to their apartment. Since it was still afternoon, the N7 soldier fetched her miniature console and The Binding of Isaac. She seated herself on the couch and started playing her game.

Saren tore off his suit and walked into the bathroom, turning on the shower. When he felt the warm water spray, he sighed in content. He struggled to ward off tingles of exhaustion as streams of water ran down his rocky plates. He started by scrubbing the grime off of him. Sweat had flung to his skin. Dust and sand had somehow gotten inside of his suit on the way back. This motivated Saren to use a bar of soap to build up enough suds to wash off the evidence of today's battle. Fifteen minutes later, he stepped out, wiped himself off, and stumbled to bed without bothering to put on any clothes.

Saren wasn't sure how long he was asleep, but when he opened his eyes, he noticed Amber was sitting next to him.

"Hey," Amber whispered, "are you hungry?"

Saren blinked twice before he yawned.

"A little. I think there should be something in the kitchen."

Saren rolled out of bed and followed her straight out of the room. They made their way into the kitchen before they began searching the pantry and the fridge for quick meals to heat up. Placing a tin in the microwave, Saren leaned over the kitchen counter, waiting for the food. Amber used this time to search the fridge for drinks. After heating the food, he brought the dishes out and set them on the table and took a seat, Amber bringing drinks shortly after. They both sat down at the table before they started eating. Saren partially regretted not putting on any clothes. Hunger had won over every other thought at the time, and the matter hadn't crossbred his mind in a bid to get food. Amber made a brief glance at him and shrugged before she took a sip of her drink. Dinner had otherwise passed quietly between the two.

After they finished their dinner, Amber and Saren took care of the empty food tins before making their way towards his bedroom and climbing into his bed. While she nestled into his embrace, he nuzzled his face against hers and let out soft purrs.

Night passed and they rose the next morning to start the day anew. While Saren brewed his kava, Amber took a moment to read through her message inbox in her omni-tool. Saren brought his cup
over to the table.

"What's new?"

Amber opened up a message from Liara.

"It's from Liara. Maybe she's found a lead."

Saren raised his browplates before he and Amber read the message, the turian Spectre looking over her shoulder.

\[Shepard,\]

\textit{I've done a decent about of digging through the data cache you found. While it has mostly put out external schematics, I have found another lead loosely pointing to another beacon. Call me if you have the time.}

\textit{Dr. T'Soni}\]

Once they finished reading, they returned to eating their breakfast. Once they finished, Amber got dressed before she gave Liara a call.

"Liara, are you there?" Amber called.

\textit{I see you got my message from last night,} Liara yawned.

"Yeah," Amber replied, "so what's the lead?"

\textit{Another beacon's coordinates. You in? This could take another few weeks for my excavation team to pull it out though.}

"Sure," Amber nodded, "I'll talk to Saren about it."

Amber emerged from her bedroom and made her way to the living room. Saren had been applying some new upgrades on his equipment.

"Liara says the next lead is coordinates for another beacon," Amber informed, "it might take a few weeks for her crew to dig it out. Sound good?"

Saren nodded.

"Nothing wrong with a little wait."

Saren and Amber took several minutes to gear up before they left the apartment and made their way through the Presidium. Liara met them outside of the Spectre Academy, already with her excavation team waiting nearby.

"I hope you two don't mind if we use a vessel provided for my team instead. The digging equipment, much less the whole crew, will probably not fit on your shuttle."

"That is…understandable," Saren nodded in agreement.

"Considering the nature of this mission, you don't mind if I invite some of my teammates to assist with protecting the cargo, do you?" Amber asked.

"Go ahead," Liara nodded.
Upon cue, Amber turned on her omni-tool and began calling Kaidan. While they made final preparations inside the academy, Ashley and Kaidan met with the others just outside to be briefed on the mission.

"So, Shepard," Ashley said, "what have we got?"

"We'll be protecting a dog as they search for a Prothean beacon. Its contents possibly regard the fate of their species, so any outside communication about what we're doing should be kept to a minimum," Amber explained.

Kaidan raised an eyebrow.

"Why the secrecy if it's this important?"

"Prothean tech is incredibly valuable regardless of what it is, extra if it's functional," Amber clarified, "it's in Alliance territory, so we won't be heading far out."

"Oh, right," Kaidan blurted.

"How long do you think we'll be out?" Ashley added.

"It's just Eden Prime. We probably won't be getting any traffic."

The group headed to Liara's vessel shortly afterward. Once they were aboard, Saren, Amber and Liara made their way towards the bridge.

"I haven't heard much of this Eden Prime outside of its beauty," Liara started, turning to Amber, "what's it like there?"

Amber placed her finger on her chin.

"Can't say," Amber admitted, "I've never been there before."

Liara nodded while the crew continued to board the vessel.

"Just setting my expectations," she replied.

It didn't take long before the pilots settled into their seats and the ramp door closed. They remained on the bridge as the light vessel took off for the relay out to the Exodus Cluster. Once the vessel reached the Mass Relay, the ancient structure enveloped it in an energy field and flung it into FTL speed. A few hours later, they were already in orbit over the human colony.

"I had already talked with mining registration back on the Citadel. We should have no problems landing and setting up our operation," Liara informed.

Amber made her way out of the bridge with Liara and Saren following her.

"Then let's get going," she suggested.

The colony hailed them a few minutes later as they drew closer for their initial landing phase. After receiving clearance, they initiated landing procedures. At the space port, they started to unload the equipment onto a tram to the heart of the colony. Finally, after clearing through security, they arrived at the site of where the original beacon led them.
A few days have passed since the excavation started. They began leveling a small hill that had been otherwise untouched by the expanding colony. Amber, Saren, Ashley, and Kaidan hadn't done much besides remain on guard and chat with the archaeological personnel. All the while, Liara supervised the excavation process. On a mobile terminal, she continued to monitor their progress. So far, they managed to uncover the top part of the beacon. Scans indicated it wasn't nearly as compact as the cube was, instead standing at almost a few meters in height. Since the task had yet to be finished, Amber had gotten used to her surroundings by now.

Eden Prime was a farming colony and was far less industrial-looking. Amber deemed this as progress since the colonists here found ways to protect their crops without resorting to use pesticide. All colonies still had to abide anti-contamination regulations put into place early on during the Systems Alliance's early years. She made a brief glance at Saren and extended her hand, encouraging him to hold it.

"It's definitely a nice view up here," Amber said.

"I suppose," Saren agreed, "are there any other colonies like this?"

"Ones with a farm setting?" Amber replied, "there's another farming colony in Mindoir as far as I can tell."

"I must say, despite the light colonial defenses, at least the view is nice."

After a short while, Amber and Saren glanced over their shoulders. Gradually, bit by bit, the mining team had been cautiously removing layer after layer of sediment as to not damage the artifact. Kaidan and Ashley sat side by side even when they remained vigilant for any intruders. Nothing had come to pass, yet a sensation of tension lingered. All off a sudden, it felt like every shadow grew a pair of invisible eyes and ears, and began to watch and survey. Once in a while, Amber would glance over her shoulder. The excavation would only be several hours more before they could safely remove the device. Just when Saren and Amber were certain they wouldn't run into problems this trip, they noticed an Alliance official exiting a tram and making his way towards the excavation site. Saren and Amber stood to their feet just as the official approached them.

"Spectre Arterius? I hope you don't mind, but we may have a problem," he reported, "a few farmers on the edges of the colony have just reported strange sightings."

Saren raised a browplate.

"Care to elaborate?" Saren asked.

"A group of synthetics, no ID. Looks to be a scouting party."

Amber couldn't help but stiffen as she blinked twice.

"We'll check it out. Let's go," Saren beckoned.

Amber nodded before she and Saren left the excavation site. They rode the tram back to the colony and hopped onto a flatbed truck to the edge of town. Walking off the path, they traversed the long grass into a good hiding position. From afar, they watched the position where the sighting was reported. From there, they began searching the area for anything unusual. That's when she first laid eyes on them.
"What the hell is that?" she whispered.

Saren narrowed his eyes once he spotted the figures in question. He brought out and adjusted a pair of binoculars to get a better view.

"Geth? What're they doing here?"

"That…is a good question," Amber replied.

It was just a squad of the smaller units, just over the hill, observing the colony from a distance. But for the turian Spectre and his human protégé, that raised even more questions.

"Why would they be here?" Amber asked.

Saren sighed before he placed his hand on Amber's shoulder.

"I wouldn't know," he admitted, "they're usually much more isolated than this."

With these questions in mind, Amber and Saren made their way for the hills. They crept low, trying to get as close as they could to the peeping Geth. They used the tall grass to their advantage. The Geth noticed their approach nonetheless, and rushed out of the area when they got close enough.

"W-What the…?!" Amber blurted.

Saren did his best to capture as many images with his omni-tool as he could as they left.

"Don't bother. Those scouting parties have advanced prostheses, allowing them to move quickly for scouting or hit-and-runs. Let's just head back to the colony for now."

Amber stared into the distance in a moment of silence. The squad of synthetics lightly scurried across the plains like deer, making for the next treeline. Not wanting to put the colonists at risk, Saren and Amber ventured through the tall grass back to the town. Soon enough, they returned to the dig site. Once they stepped out of the tram, Kaidan was waiting for them.

"What was the situation?" Kaidan asked.

Amber shrugged.

"A group of Geth, just to the east of us. Not sure what they were doing here."

"Wait, Geth?" Kaidan blurted with a confused expression.

"A race of synthetics made by the quarians," Amber clarified, "booted them off their homeplanet."

Kaidan scratched his head before he, Saren and Amber returned to the excavation site. Minutes counted away as the last of the sediment had been cautiously removed. Another flatbed had been moved to the site in anticipation of the artifact's removal and subsequent shipping to the port. This gave Amber a chance to get a good view of the beacon while she stood next to Liara. Jutting up from a slanted base was a metal pillar with layers of engravings and additional layers of different metals layered on. The N7 soldier turned her back and pulled out her omni-tool and started typing away. She took the time she needed to document the necessary details before she reviewed the report. Satisfied with her work, she sent the report to Anderson.

"Dr. T'Soni, we should be able to start moving the artifact," one of the workers reported.
Liara nodded before turning her head towards Amber.
"Shepard," Liara asked, "are you willing to help out?"
"That would be great," Amber nodded, "thank you."

Amber stepped over to the beacon and picked up a section of the harness while the other archaeologists surrounded the beacon, securing it with the harness. She stood by and watched as the crew chipped away the last of the dirt before rolling in a mobile crane into position. The driver pressed the control lever forward and latched the crane arms around the center mass of the object. Amber took extra caution in keeping the beacon steady with her own hands while the mobile crane lifted it off the ground. They watched as the device was hoisted into the air, almost anticipating for it to slip through the crane's grasp. It was slowly brought back down again before coming to a halt over the flatbed and deposited. To what cause it was unknown when it suddenly lit up, pulsating with energy. In a rush of panic, the others ran to cover like it was a primed grenade, dropped by an act of poor calculation.

Following Saren, Amber was close behind when she suddenly felt her feet disconnect from the ground. Saren watched in horror as his protégé was yanked by some unseen force closer to the beacon and sent electric jolts into her veins. She felt like her eyelids were pried open and forced to watch a dozen gas tube televisions like some form of torture or malpractice. Images with no coordination or meaning flooded her mind, topped off with pain and drowning out any other thoughts. The next thing she knew, the squid-like dreadnoughts appeared in her mind. Painfully, Amber was dropped back to the ground by the device as it powered down. Saren rushed to her side to help her back to her feet.

"Shepard," Saren cooed, "can you hear me?"

The world spun around her, like she looked at a detonating flashbang. Amber struggled to climb back to her feet, yanking herself onto the flatbed truck. She was about to stumble, so Saren caught her in his arms.

"Let's go. You do have medical supplies back on your ship, right?" Saren instructed.

Liara nodded as she jumped into the passenger seat of the vehicle.

"Of course!" Liara insisted, "get us back to the port!"

Saren lifted Amber into his arms before he climbed into the vehicle. Kaidan and Ashley recovered from the shock from seeing their commander undergo a sudden trance under the influence of the beacon before they made their way towards the vehicle. All the way back, Saren watched cautiously over the concussed N7, not even taking the time to ensure the package got aboard as he helped her onto the ship. With the archaeology crew taking extra caution to handle the beacon while moving it into the cargo hold, Saren carried his protégé down the corridor and into the medical bay. He gently lay her on one of the beds as an asari medic approached him.

"She took a jolt from the artifact. See what you can do for her," he continued to linger at her side, waiting patiently for results from the doctor.

The asari medic continued to run diagnostics while the turian Spectre held his protégé's hand and sat next to her. He started pacing back and forth as he waited for an answer. Their departure from Eden Prime initiated, but he continued to reside within the medbay. While the vessel approached the Mass Relay, the asari medic finished her diagnostics, so she gestured Saren to approach her.
"She is all right," she told him, "but she'll need rest."

"How bad is the damage?" Saren returned.

"Pretty light," she explained, "considering how much exposure she received based upon personal accounts, she was let off light with as little experience with such structures as she had."

Saren let out a soft sigh of relief.

"Thank you, ma'am," Saren replied, "keep me posted on her condition."

Saren stepped out of the medical bay while Amber still lay in her bed to rest. He left for the cargo hold where the newly excavated Prothean beacon sat for the journey back. As he examined it, he couldn't help but wonder what the beacon could've done to Amber. It would lightly pulsate very few seconds, discouraging him from looking any closer. Going through the same experience Amber did recently was the last thing he wanted. He left shortly after for the bridge to oversee their return to the Citadel.

It was only a couple hours before the vessel emerged from the Mass Relay and entered the Serpent Nebula. Half an hour later, they docked with the station and unloaded their precious cargo to be shipped to the Spectre Academy. After seeing off the transport, Saren walked back into the medbay. With Amber still asleep, the turian Spectre approached the asari medic.

"Is it all right if I take Shepard with me?" Saren requested calmly.

The asari nodded. Saren approached the bed and gently lifted Amber into his arms. He stepped out of the vessel and boarded a cab, relaxing in his seat as it flew them to the Presidium. Once it landed near the apartment building, the turian Spectre disembarked the cab and carried his protégé into the apartment and made his way into the living room. There, he gently lay her on the couch and knelt down beside her. Just then, she moaned as she slowly opened her eyes.

"W-What happened?" she mumbled.

"We've secured the beacon and it's at the academy for analysis," Saren whispered, "are you all right?"

Amber shut her eyes and rubbed her temple.

"Head hurts like hell," she moaned, "could you get some painkillers?"

Saren nodded before he stood to his feet and made his way to the kitchen cabinet. He found a container of painkillers and he headed over to the sink to fill a glass with water. He carried both into the living room and handed them to Amber. She swallowed the pills and chugged the glass of water.

"Ahh, feeling better already," she sighed.

"What happened? What do you remember?" Saren asked.

Amber set the glass onto the coffee table and sat up.

"I can't tell," Amber admitted, "there were synths, screaming, death, those damned dreadnoughts, but nothing entirely concrete."

With a soft expression in his eyes, Saren placed his hand on Amber's shoulder.
"We'll know more as we pick apart the beacon," Saren told her. 

Saren sat down next to Amber, encouraging her to lean closer to him.

"We'll get better clues once we have time to thoroughly look over what is presented to us," he continued.

Silence passed over them as the afternoon slid to evening and eventually night. After a brief snack, Saren carried Amber to bed, setting her under the sheets before slipping under himself. Over the night, he had a much harder time finding sleep. He didn't even experience or learn whatever Amber had from the beacon, yet it already terrified him like preparing for an overwhelming exam or the thought of running out of air in the dead center of the vacuum of space. It wasn't until well past midnight did he truly succumb to exhaustion.
Over the course of a few days, Amber took that time to rest from the incident in Eden Prime. Liara had worked with the type of hardware the Alliance soldier had endured before and the experience wasn't nearly as foreign or harrowing. She knew for a fact that at least a good third of Prothean hardware was designed to directly interface with a user's nervous system, and was generally advisable to properly train before any sort of usage. The fact that Shepard had walked away as anything besides a bumbling, insane mess was nothing short of a miracle. This was also taking into consideration that the beacon had experienced minor decay, causing its message to come out as little more than an incoherent nightmare. It hadn't reached noon yet by the time the asari archaeologist was almost finished with her analysis. She felt she was on the verge of parsing something, but still had one more roadblock to overcome.

Liara took a brief moment to send a message in her omni-tool. She sent off a few questions regarding Arterius and Shepard's availability over the next few weeks. If she was going to get their help, she would need to know of their schedule in advance. She sat in her chair, waiting until her omni-tool received a reply minutes later.

\[
\text{Dr. T'Soni,}
\]

\[I\ \text{would definitely assist you with your next tangent on this hunt for the truth. However, seeing that you still need some time to get a hold of a tangible lead, I would like to take Shepard on one more mission for her evaluation. In the meantime, keep me posted on your progress regarding the beacon.}\]

\[
\text{Regards,}
\]

\[
\text{Spectre Arterius}\]

Once Liara finished reading the message, she let out a soft sigh. Looking back at the beacon, she felt a minor rush to finish the job at hand, that she was now on a schedule.

Meanwhile, Amber just finished slipping into her N7 armor and started rummaging the armory for weapons she'll need for the mission. While she did so, she read through the news outlets from her omni-tool. Her mind had recently been thinking back to Cerberus after a few worried messages came from Anderson. At the same pace if not faster, the terrorist organization already made themselves present throughout the galaxy, with various militias, research facilities, and company fronts establishing mining and manufacturing operations scattered throughout the Attican territories. Considering that she infiltrated one of their labs before the First Contact, Amber understood why the Alliance would make a big deal out of Cerberus.

The Alliance had otherwise been successful in joining the rest of society in a quiet, bloodless manner, and their hard work was on the verge of being undone by the extremist faction. Once Amber gathered her weapons, she made her way into the living room and met up with Saren at the front door. She had received a set of coordinates for a planet after receiving intelligence from Anderson. An officer, searching out the organization on his own had gone silent, and he left a trail leading to his possible captors.

"So, Saren," Amber asked, "you ready?"

"Of course. Let's go," he answered.

Amber and Saren stepped out of the apartment and made their way through the Presidium until
they reached the Spectre docks. Walking onto their ship, she reviewed the details on the file Anderson sent her. The planet they were heading to was a luscious green planet, with fields, mountains, and plenty of herbivorous fauna. Once her mentor finished reading the details from her omni-tool, Saren took control of the steering handles and flew the shuttle out of the Citadel.

As it traveled through space, it made its way towards the Mass Relay. They were looking at a few labs within relatively close proximity to each other, with a high possibility that the officer was still being held captive. After the Mass Relay flung the shuttle into FTL speed, Saren and Amber could only wait before they emerge from the next relay.

The instant they entered the system after emerging from the Mass Relay, the shuttle made its way towards the planet in question. With minimal issues, they entered low atmosphere and found a sufficiently hidden location to land the ship. Once Saren landed the shuttle in the heart of a forest, he turned off the ignition and began gathering his weapons. Amber stood from her seat and gathered her weapons seconds later. The instant they disembarked the shuttle, they quickly found themselves on an open plain, with hills rolling in all directions and mountains cupping the edges.

Amber double-checked the coordinates in her omni-tool, determining which route would be more efficient in terms of stealth and time. The two cautiously strode over the hills, one after another like a wave over the ocean. Saren would scan the area for any Cerberus soldiers on patrol, even if he didn't see one before. Over the next hill, they ducked down as a light-weight scouting vehicle drove by at full speed. They watched as it came to a halt in front of a small building between hills.

"Is this…?" Saren whispered.

Still crouching behind a bush, Amber double-checked the map in her omni-tool.

"Looks like this is one of them," she cautiously eyed one of the guards in their drab, dark gray armor on patrol.

Saren and Amber narrowed their eyes at the guards as they made their way into the small building. The AA guns were meant to target vessels with a foreign IFF, meaning it wouldn't be problematic. Once the coast was clear, the turian Spectre and his human protégé emerged from hiding and began sneaking closer to the facility. They took cover around the side of the garage, just out of sight of the guards around the front. While in hiding, Amber brushed her hand along the wall in search of an easier way inside.

Saren simply put a suppressor onto his pistol and began peeking around the corner at the guards. Since they weren't looking, the turian Spectre aimed his pistol at them and squeezed the trigger. Seconds later, one guard dropped to the ground as blood spurted from his helmet.

"They'll find out we're here eventually, we may as well start by getting our hands dirty."

"Ok," Amber nodded.

Breaking inside, it was an otherwise small lab with lab technicians and guards. Rushing to cover, they got to work leveling the hostiles present. Their opening fire startled the Cerberus guards to the point they scrambled to fight back. Their initial attack had caught the local personnel on the backfoot and swiftly fell to their gunfire. After clearing out the Cerberus guards, they searched the labs and terminals, finding nothing of use or the officer. Amber began tracing her hand along the walls in search of some hidden door. Neither of them found anything outside of references to a Rear Admiral Kahoku.

"So, should we move on?" Amber asked.
Saren nodded. They hurried back out and began their swift trek to the next facility nearby. After Amber double-checked her map, she and her mentor meandered through the forest and over some hills, keeping vigilant for any Cerberus guards along their way. At the next base, the guards were noticeably riled up, and partially on alert.

"Looks like they know," Saren whispered, "come on, let's finish up here and head to the last building before they start evacuating."

"Copy that," Amber replied.

Saren and Amber sprung into action and charged towards the base, their weapons at the ready. Saren lobbed a cooked grenade at the soldiers, detonating before they could get a good opportunity to reach a safe distance. He followed with a biotic attack to fry what was left of their barriers before he started firing. While they were vulnerable, Amber laid down suppressing fire until they could get close enough to finish them off. Picking off the last few, he reached the door and planted a breaching charge. Detonating it, she tossed in a flashbang to confuse any awaiting opposition. They both seized their chance to burst through the door. A few had taken position at the door and put up a fair fight.

The technicians were all in back trying to save any data on portable devices before wiping the local copies. Saren emitted a biotic field to deflect ammunition while Amber aimed at the technicians. The techs dropped like flies as they attempted to make a break for it. The guards hadn't held out much longer either with Saren shattering their formations using his biotics. Once they cleared the area, Amber took some time to reload while Saren stepped over to one of the terminals.

"Looks like they were still clearing things out. I'll set up a OSD to start collecting files, but we have to keep going to the last facility."

"Ok," Amber nodded.

While Saren pulled out his OSD, Amber began scouring the room in search of anything valuable. Once again, the pens were absent of the Rear Admiral, instead being filled with strange and exotic samples the extremists were so bent on collecting. Amber took notice of Subject Zero on one the labels next to an empty pen. They definitely knew she would no longer be under her control, but they still wanted her suppressed and to model more like her with a more obedient mentality. She shuddered before rushing back to Saren at the entrance to the facility.

"Saren," Amber blurted, "I think I have some bad news."

Saren raised a browplate.

"What's the matter?" Saren asked.

"They're after Jack," Amber replied, "she was one of their projects before the First Contact. I don't know what they have in mind specifically, but they still want a bunch of powerful biotics at their disposal."

Saren shuddered, but he still kept her composure.

"That doesn't look good," Saren muttered, "still, we have yet to find the Admiral."

Amber nodded before she followed Saren towards the last building. As they exited, Saren yanked up a LAW from one of the fallen guards and rushed over the hills to the last base. As he expected, they now fully knew of their presence and were preparing to leave the planet surface. With no time to lose, Saren and Amber charged towards the gate to the base. After detonating a transport waiting
outside of the facility, Saren dropped the LAW and pushed forward. Amber spotted a couple Cerberus soldiers keeping their firm grip on Rear Admiral Kahoku, so she fired a few rounds at the soldiers and rushed to the Alliance official's aide.

"Admiral," Amber asked, "are you all right?"

Amber went to work as she undid Admiral Kahoku's handcuffs. The admiral attempted to reply, but it came out as little more than a hoarse whisper.

"Hang in there," Amber pleaded, her voice filled with worry.

He still wore his now roughed up and torn officer uniform from when he had been undoubtedly captured. Partially hidden by his cap, his eyes were covered by a white eye cloth, with the right side distinguished a wet, maroon dot.

Meanwhile, Saren continued to eliminate fleeing Cerberus personnel. With the Cerberus personnel focusing on the turian Spectre, Amber took this chance to escort Kahoku to safety. Sitting the admiral down in a safe position, she returned to Saren to assist with the last of the guards. With his human protégé fighting alongside him, the turian Spectre emitted a biotic field. They successfully combatted the last of the Cerberus troops and moved inside to find the facility otherwise empty.

"Do you think we'll find anything useful here?" Amber asked Saren.

Saren nodded at Amber, encouraging her to head further into the facility. She double-checked the last of the terminals, scrolling through the folders on the screen.

"Nothing," she commented, "they cleared out everything."

Amber met up with Saren outside the facility. The two took one of the last remaining Cerberus ground transports, retrieved Kahoku, and began their return to the shuttle. During the drive back, Amber slowly removed the eye cloth. His right eye had been completely gouged and cleaned out, leaving nothing but an empty hole. Additionally, he's suffered from multiple lacerations and fractures. The horrible sight alone made her feel nauseous.

"Hang on, sir," she whispered, "we've got medical supplies back on the ship."

After a long drive, they made it back to the shuttle. Saren, Amber and Kahoku disembarked the ground transport before the turian Spectre and his human protégé escorted the Alliance officer aboard the shuttle. Saren manned the controls while she helped him towards the passenger part of the ship. She started pulling out medical supplies as the ship took off. Amber carefully cleaned Kahoku's lacerations with a sterile cloth before she pulled out a container of medi-gel. She slathered the substance onto the wounds before dressing them in bandages. After tending to his injuries the best she could, she returned to the cockpit.

"I hope he'll make it out alive," Amber shuddered.

"Can't say I can assure that. His injuries seem pretty severe," Saren responded.

Amber took a deep breath as she leaned back in her seat. All the while, the shuttle made its way towards the Mass Relay. Moments later, the giant ancient structure flung the small vessel into FTL speed. Before they returned, Amber sent a message to Anderson, requesting a medical crew meet them at the docks. While the shuttle was still in FTL speed, the N7 soldier kept a vigilant eye on Kahoku. He lay motionless where she left him earlier when they boarded.

An hour or so passed when the shuttle emerged from the Mass Relay and entered the Serpent
Nebula. It glided through space until it arrived at the Citadel. Saren maneuvered the shuttle towards the Spectre docks and landed it, the latches holding it in place. Just outside, a small Alliance squad awaited them to take Kahoku into medical custody. Saren stood from his seat while Amber placed Kahoku's arm over her shoulder and escorted him across the walkway. Once they disembarked the shuttle, Amber slowly approached the Alliance squad.

"He's received multiple lacerations and fractures during his time under Cerberus' captivity. He'll need at least a couple months recovery," Amber reported.

An Alliance official nodded while a few of the soldiers hoisted Kahoku onto the gurney. They departed for the Spectre Academy shortly afterwards. Once Saren and Amber arrived, they made their way towards the lab. Stepping through the door, Liara was waiting to greet them.

"Liara?" Amber called over.

"I might have another lead. I hope you two don't mind if I borrow your time once more," she returned.

Saren scratched his mandible.

"All right," Saren replied, "when do we leave for this next mission?"

"Not for another week. Still gathering materials for the next trip out," the archaeologist sighed. Amber smiled and placed her hand on Liara's shoulder.

"That's fine," she reassured the asari archaeologist, "we'll wait."
While Amber sipped her coffee and Saren was still brewing his kava, she examined the calendar in her omni-tool. As far as she knew, today was the day she would be inducted into a Spectre. This made sense considering her prior experience as an N7 and her success with her missions under Saren's evaluation. Once she finished her breakfast, she stepped into her room and pulled out her officer uniform from the closet. She slipped into the uniform, proudly gazing at herself in the mirror before she stepped into the living room. Saren also wore a gravel gray uniform to the induction ceremony and was finishing the last of his kava before exiting the kitchen.

"So, Shepard," Saren asked, "are you ready?"

Amber nodded.

"Feels strange wearing this thing again," Amber replied, "I can't exactly remember the last time I put it on."

Saren chuckled before he placed his hand on her shoulder.

"It looks fine," Saren reassured her.

Amber gave Saren a smile before they stepped out the front door and made their way outside the apartment. They meandered through the Presidium until they reached the Citadel tower. Ahead, they could see Anderson waiting at the front door. He looked up from his omni-tool and walked forward to greet them.

"Shepard, we're all happy to know you've made it thus far," Anderson said.

"Thank you, Anderson," Amber replied with a salute.

The trio walked into the elevator and initiated their journey to the top. After a brief while of waiting, the elevator reached the top floor and its doors opened, prompting Saren, Amber and Anderson to step out. That was when they noticed Nihlus waiting to greet them with a grin.

"Commander," Nihlus greeted, "glad to see you got to join the ranks."

"I appreciate the welcome, Spectre Kryik," Amber nodded.

Nihlus escorted Amber, Saren and Anderson along the top floor past the trees and the large fountain. They made their way up the stairs towards the Council's audience chambers, where Sparatus, Tevos and Valern stood at their stage waiting for them.

"Commander Shepard, step forward," Tevos greeted, gesturing to a platform before her.

Upon cue, Amber took a few steps forward and stood on the platform in question.

"We have recognized your talent over the course of the last several months," Sparatus continued.

Amber gazed at the councilors in confidence.

"Spectres aren't trained, but chosen. As a Spectre, you are the arm and will of the Council, the first and last line of defense, and the pinnacle of what your species has to offer," Valern added.

Amber placed her hand on her chest and her other hand behind her back.
"As a member of the Spectres," Amber proclaimed, "I promise to fulfill my duty and uphold the law to the best of my abilities. Furthermore, I will only use my rank to further the interests of the public."

Sparatus nodded in approval.

"You are hereby recognized by this Council as a Spectre," Sparatus concluded.

Sparatus made a hand gesture that dismissed Amber, Saren, Anderson and Nihlus.

"I don't exactly remember my ceremony being that short," Nihlus quipped.

As they sauntered down the stairs, Saren raised a browplate at Nihlus.

"I distinctly remember making the same remark about your ceremony," he reminded.

Nihlus chuckled as he scratched his mandible.

"Yeah, I'll be on my way. I have some things to discuss with Sparatus. I'll catch you later."

Once Nihlus left, Saren, Amber and Anderson headed for the elevator.

"We found that Cerberus lab with no problem," Amber mentioned, "however, I found a document referring to Jack for recapture."

Anderson raised his eyebrow after they stepped into the elevator. During a moment of silence, Saren pressed on the button and the elevator began descending the tower.

"What do they intend on doing with her?" he finally asked.

"Unsure," Amber admitted, "at most, I can surmise they want to use her as a template or prototype."

For some reason, Saren started having sneaky suspicions on what would become of Jack. When the elevator reached the bottom floor, Saren, Amber and Anderson stepped out of the elevator and made their way out of the tower. After a while of meandering through the Presidium, they reached the Alliance Embassy. They stepped through the front door, meandered through the lobby and sauntered down a corridor until they reached Anderson's office. Saren placed his hand on Amber's shoulder just as Anderson sat down at his desk.

"Yes?" Amber paused.

"Shepard," Saren asked, "did Jack tell you anything about her past?"

Amber gave Saren a blank stare in a moment of silence.

"I…I don't think so," she answered.

Anderson reluctantly pulled out a file on his desk monitor.

"I'll give you the short version," Anderson explained, "at the age of seven, Jacqueline Nought has been reported missing after an alleged break-in that left her parents dead. Eleven years later, during a lab raid I led, we found her again. With stolen materials fresh from Mars, she'd been heavily augmented with biotics, their respective implants, and an additional suite of nervous system implants. Uncontrollably, she fought her way out as we fought our way in. She's been struggling to get past it."
Saren took a moment to read through Jack's profile.

"Struggling? How bad is it still?" Saren asked.

"She's been improving more recently," Anderson replied, "but she hasn't regained her childhood memories. Maybe they might've been erased by still unidentified means."

Saren scratched his mandible, reminiscing on the days he saw Jack's interactions with Wrex.

"So what will you be doing in light of this recent matter?"

Anderson sighed, cupping his cheek in the palm of his hand.

"I don't know. We just might have to withdraw her and bring her back to Alliance space," Anderson said, "losing her would mean giving her to our greatest enemy right now and losing a significant asset."

Amber tilted her head sideways.

"Maybe…I can ask her if she wants to bring Wrex with her," Amber offered.

Saren glanced at her.

"A strange proposition," he replied, "but, I suppose they are relatively good friends."

Amber nodded before she turned her head towards Anderson.

"We'll be heading out now," she told him.

The two left the office shortly after and returned to their apartment. While sitting on the living room couch, Amber scrolled through her message inbox in her omni-tool. She hastily sent a message back to Jack, informing her of Cerberus' interest in the biotic. After that, she sent another message to Liara, Garrus and Tali concerning when they would head to Ilos. Jack replied shortly after, asking for permission to discuss further at their homestead. Amber sent another quick message:

{Sure.}

While she waited, Amber turned on the TV and flipped to a science fiction series. It was only several minutes later when the doorbell rang, so Saren stepped over to the front door and opened it.

"You know," Jack grumbled, "I was hoping Cerberus would just leave me alone already."

"I thought they would too, considering how much you've already cost them," Amber shrugged.

Jack and Wrex stepped into the apartment and made their way into the living room, sitting down on the couch. The krogan sighed.

"So, this…Cerberus…who are these guys?" Wrex asked.

Saren sat down next to Amber.

"Insurgents with some sort of post-human goal. More recently, they've added a humanity first component to it," she answered.

Groaning, Jack gripped her scalp with her hands and buried her head between her thighs.
"They're all bastards, too," Saren added, "so they have to compensate."

"So," Wrex asked, "do you have a recommended place to hide?"

Saren leaned forward.

"I didn't think you'd be up for hiding, Wrex," Saren commented.

Wrex made a brief glance at Jack before he returned his gaze to Amber.

"Well, Shepard said that it's important Jack be kept safe, right?" Wrex mentioned.

"Damn it," Jack grumbled, "do you seriously need to coddle me all the time?"

"Just saying, you're a bit…scrawny," Wrex muttered.

Amber blinked twice before examining Jack's figure. To her surprise, it appeared Jack lost some weight for some reason.

"Jack," Amber asked, "when's the last time you've eaten?"

"I've just been eating lightly, why?"

"If you're having a problem," Amber advised, "you should at least tell us about it."

Of course, Jack didn't respond, so Amber stood from her seat and made her way into the kitchen. She began searching the pantry.

"It happened some time before we returned from Tuchanka," Wrex finally spoke up, "she got a message, stating they hadn't forgotten about her."

Jack didn't move an inch, though Saren raised a browplate.

"Was it a form of blackmail or something else?" Saren asked.

"No, just a threat. That's it. A big fat 'you still have our attention, expect us soon', and nothing else. It's been causing her to lose sleep, too."

Saren's subvocals let out a soft coo as his expression softened when he gazed at Jack. What will it take to encourage Jack to open up about herself?

"Anything that would decrease your insecurities regarding this current situation?" Saren asked.

Jack shook her head. Just then, Amber returned with some snacks and placed them on the coffee table.

"Look, I'm just not sure how else I'm going to be rid of them," Jack said, "as far as intel shows, those bastards have quite the reach."

Jack lifted her head long enough to grab a snack from the coffee table.

"So the only point at which you'll feel safe is when this organization dissolved once and for all?" Saren clarified.

Jack nodded as she took a bite out of her granola bar.

"At least we have a definite endpoint," Wrex sighed as he leaned back.
Amber and Saren grabbed their snacks from the coffee table and started eating them.

"This is a matter that the Alliance is trying to handle, too," Amber reminded, "unfortunately, they're so burrowed in and have so many moles, it's practically impossible to find anywhere to start."

Saren and Amber exchanged glances, the turian Spectre placing his hand on the Alliance commander's shoulder.

"It's just a matter rooting at facility after facility, right?" Saren asked, "eventually pick off their chain of command?"

"It's a good start," Amber nodded.

By the time Saren, Amber, and Jack finished their snacks, they and Wrex stood to their feet and made their way out of the apartment. They wandered through the Presidium and took a shortcut to a nearby park.

"Remind me, how big is this organization?" Wrex insisted.

Amber placed her finger on her chin.

"I can confirm it's been expanding recently," she replied.

Out of the corner of her eye, Amber noticed Garrus and Tali strolling along another path. Garrus was the first to notice them in return.

"Hey, Commander! How are you today?" Garrus called.

Amber waved her hand at Garrus and Tali, encouraging them to sprint over and meet up with her, Saren, Jack and Wrex.

"I officially became a Spectre today," Amber replied, "so my duty for the galaxy could mean a lot for the Alliance."

"You mean…it actually happened?" Tali asked.

Saren and Amber nodded in unison.

"Yes," Saren answered, "we just finished with the ceremony earlier today."

From there, Garrus and Tali joined Saren, Amber, Wrex and Jack in their stroll through the park.

"So, have you heard back from Liara?" Tali clamored.

"She'll have something at the end of the week. Not sure where we'll be going until she lets us know," Saren hummed.

Garrus let out an enthusiastic hum while they entered the park's garden. Jack and Amber went on their own tangent away from the others as they looked that the foreign flora. The Alliance commander recalled seeing some of the flowers while she researched Thessia, Sur'Kesh and Palaven. When Amber and Jack knelt down near a flowerbed, they took a closer look at the lilies native to Thessia. Coincidentally, a hanar was in the middle of tending to one of the flowerbeds. It had been working farther back on something more native to Sur'Kesh.

Still, Jack found the aroma and sight of these flowers before her soothe her mind. Even if she
couldn't recall her earlier parts of her life, a part of her wanted to cry, knowing that her childhood had been stolen. The sight of the varied flora helped to partially subside the pain, feeling herself tremble a little less. Amber gently placed her hand on Jack's shoulder, causing the latter to tilt her head towards the Alliance commander.

"You ok?" Amber asked.

Jack nodded slightly.

"Better, at least."

After a few more moments, Amber and Jack stood to their feet and sprinted along the path to catch up with Saren, Garrus, Tali and Wrex.

"...We'll be ready by then," Tali finished.

Saren nodded in agreement before he tilted his head towards Amber.

"Officer Vakarian and Miss Zorah will be joining us for the next mission regarding the Prothean beacons," Saren informed.

"Ok," Amber agreed.

Shortly after, Wrex and Jack decided to part ways for the day and return to their homestead. Jack didn't feel nearly as sickly as she had for the last week was starting to more openly converse with Wrex as they walked along. Once they made it back to their apartment, they entered the living room and plopped onto the couch. Wrex's home wasn't as nearly as clean or fancy as anything found on the Presidium, but it was at least well kept by the bounty hunter. Wrex went to the kitchen to fetch himself a beer. Jack flipped the TV on and settled for a sports channel. The krogan sat down beside her shortly later with a bottle in hand. From there, they both kept their eyes focused on the sporting event on the screen for a while. Wrex slouched a bit and put his arm over the back of the couch.

"I didn't think you were into this."

"It's not the only thing I'm into," Jack remarked.

"What do you mean?" he raised a brow in response.

Jack scooted an inch closer to Wrex.

"Amber's a good person. And quite the challenge," she started.

Wrex let out an enthusiastic hum while he tilted his head to the side.

"Do tell," he beckoned.

"Every now and then, we'll hop on a game, either go co-op or verses," Jack continued, "it's always a good time."

As they returned to watching the game, Jack subconsciously placed her hand on Wrex's. He initially thought the gesture odd, before shrugging it off and ignoring it. Time went on, and her hand remained at its position.

"Is there something you need to tell me?" Wrex asked.
Jack didn't turn her head even when she closed her eyes. He looked over to investigate her lack of response only to find her completely passed out. Not bothering to move her, he simply adjusted himself, with her lying on top of him on the couch. The next thing he knew, she simply nestled her head into his shoulder. He slowly rolled off to sleep himself, not minding the companionship and the sound of the TV still filling the room.
Strange Agent in Ilos

At the end of the week, Garrus, Tali, Saren and Amber finished their preparations for the next mission. The morning air retained a dead silence as the station woke back up again. People moved on with their lives, but for Amber, Saren, and their companions, the sensation refused to go away. They were off to a planet called Ilos on the edge of Terminus Space. If it wasn't for the implications of two Spectres treading into pirate territory, it was what they could find when they arrived. They made their way to the docks with no trouble, where they found Liara waiting for them near her vessel. Already, the expeditionary vessel had been fully loaded and prepared with the necessary equipment and was waiting to leave the station.

"Morning, Liara," Amber smiled.

The asari archaeologist nodded in return.

"Likewise, Commander. I assume you have all of your necessary equipment?"

"Yes," Amber answered.

"Good. We'll be heading out shortly," Liara informed, "fully fueled and ready to depart."

Amber nodded before she, Saren, Tali and Garrus crossed the walkway and boarded the vessel. Ten minutes later, the magnetic clamps unlocked, allowing their ship to exit the dock. After another half an hour, they passed through the Mass Relay out of the system. With the vessel traveling in FTL speed, Amber leaned her back against the wall next to Saren as they waited at the bridge.

"I'm feeling excited," Amber said, "you?"

Saren tilted his head towards Amber.

"I'm hoping we'll gain more answers," Saren replied, "maybe even figure out who made those dreadnoughts and what they're like."

Amber gently grasped Saren's hand.

"Yeah," Amber agreed, "that, too."

A couple hours later, they were in orbit over Ilos, peeking down at its yellow atmosphere. The pilots activated the vessel's scanners, searching for a suitable place to land.

"Doctor, I'm seeing a small facility where the signal is coming from. I'll try and get us in as close as possible without damaging the infrastructure," one reported.

"Good work," Liara praised, "let us know when we're fifteen minutes out."

Upon cue, the pilots began maneuvering the vessel into the planet's atmosphere. The away team quickly suited up and prepared the rover they had brought with them for deployment. Scans from the atmosphere had indicated the whole facility was at least a kilometer in length, and the rover was there to do heavy lifting and save time. Once the vessel was close to the surface, Liara, Amber, Saren, Garrus and Tali boarded the rover. Another group of excavation crew boarded another rover before they were all dropped onto the ground underneath them. Since both rovers landed safely, they began driving along the terrain. With Liara taking the steering wheel of one rover, Amber
peered through the window to gaze at the scenery. Dense jungle had grown over the ancient concrete of the Prothean buildings, making navigation difficult without the use of the mapping equipment onboard. This incentivized Liara to steer carefully through the trees to avoid colliding with them.

They came to a halt in front of one of the less decayed buildings and started unloading equipment. Getting out, Saren glanced around him.

"Strange place. Something seems…off."

Amber glanced around until her eyes locked onto the same structure Saren was examining. The slanted exterior walls had trails of vines digging into the cracks between bricks, and any windows had long since been broken inward. Liara began ordering her crew to cut through the building front door. This gave the asari archaeologist to lead Saren, Amber, Garrus and Tali to break inside. Slick moss and slime decorated the dark corridors, ceiling panels and pipes poured down followed closely by sunlight from outside, and none of the electronics seemed to function after extensive exposure to the elements.

Liara's crew began scanning their surroundings. The corridor opened up into an open room of pillars, like a courtyard or a forum. Yet, they didn't find any synthetic components either. The crew started unpacking equipment they brought in and setting up camp. They weren't in any particular rush to reveal anything yet. Garrus, Tali, Saren and Amber saw this as a chance to set up camp themselves. Later, the group had small tents set up and equipment standing just outside, ready to use.

From there, Amber met up with Liara on a balcony they located. It was on top of the building, and probably had a good view of the area surrounding them. Now, everything was but completely obstructed by waves of trees and tall foliage. Whatever buildings were barely visible had the same wear and tear as the one they were standing in.

"I apologize in advance if this takes some time," Liara finally said.

"That's fine," Amber reassured as she perched her forearms on the balcony, "the ship does have a few mapping drones. A few days worth and we'll have a better picture of this place."

"What were you hoping to find?" Liara asked.

"A final piece of the puzzle," Amber answered, "if those synths are just there, that's great. If not… well, we know there's something to prepare for."

Liara nodded before she rested her forearms on the balcony.

"Of my time working in the field, I never could've imagined anything like this," Liara mused, "first, that data cache, then Eden Prime…"

She gestured to the remains of the building they set camp in.

"I just hope this is the last leg of the journey," Amber nodded.

After a short while, Amber and Liara left the balcony and wandered through the corridor until they made it back to the campsite. The digging crew had started breaking into the other buildings around the area for the drones to scan. At the same time, Tali scrutinized some abandoned rooms for anything valuable. She found a box and started scooping up parts from ancient equipment and dumping it in like groceries into a shopping cart. Saren scouted ahead to ensure there weren't any obstacles impeding their progress. He entered building after building, occasionally encountering
the local fauna as they scampered about the shadows of each room. Then again, no other vessel entered the planet's atmosphere as far as he was aware of.

Entering a small, largely subterranean building, he cautiously walked down the precarious steps to the basement. By the time Saren arrived at the basement, Amber managed to catch up with him.

"What's down here?" she asked.

"Hard to tell," Saren said, "the dust is thickly layered down here."

Saren and Amber continued pressing forward. Saren continued to point his helmet-mounted flashlight down the corridor when he noticed something in the dust. He knelt down and carefully examined the footprint.

"It seems we might have company," Saren commented.

Amber had a look herself to confirm Saren's claim.

"It doesn't match the boots of anyone with us," Amber added.

Amber and Saren exchanged glances in a moment of silence before the human Spectre gave her mentor a nod. He shut off the floodlight and turned on the infrared visor in his helmet. Amber did the same before she followed him down the corridor. More footsteps trailed into the dust and shadows, still with no indication as to who the intruder was. As they continued, the corridor grew darker. Saren's eyes slowly drew back and forth, looking for movement. It didn't take long for them to stumble across an ancient elevator. The monitor clearly indicated it was rolling further down into the facility.

"Stick with me. Let's get at this stranger."

"Right," Amber nodded.

They opened up the elevator doors and looked down the shaft to see the elevator car stopping at the bottom. Saren grabbed onto the maintenance ladder within the shaft and started climbing down. Amber also grabbed hold of the ladder and followed her mentor down the shaft. Cautiously stepping onto the top of the car, Saren lifted the maintenance door on top of the car and peered inside. Whoever rode it down already exited. He continued to push himself through and landed on the floor with a light thunk. He patiently waited until the human Spectre slipped through the maintenance door and landed in front of him.

Opening the elevator doors, he slipped out his sidearm instead, as the hallways below were much more conservative with space than above. His stride turned into a crawl, as every step was meant to minimize any noise created, with his human protégé imitating his movements. Up ahead was a door wide open with a small lamp pouring light back into the hallway. Saren and Amber slithered closer to the door and pressed their backs against the wall. They tilted their heads and peered through the wide door crack.

The butt of a gun lashed out and cracked Saren's visor from the side of the doorway. Narrowly dodging the shot, he switched back to his floodlight as the initial blow had damaged his infrared visor. Furious, Saren stormed into the room. Peering inside, it was a woman dressed in black, with her hair in a bun and a mask obscuring her face. She yanked a small device from the computer and shot back with a machine pistol. The turian Spectre quickly emitted a biotic field to shield himself from the incoming shots.

The woman disappeared down another dark hallway, prompting them to give pursuit. Whoever she
was, they now knew they weren't alone. They followed close behind, wary of a handful of mines the assailant had left to cover her tracks. Sometimes, they would jump over the mines. Other times, they managed to sidestep them. Too late did they return to the elevator, only to see it return to the surface. Looking around, he tore down an ancient door and found another stairwell.

"Quick! Up through here!"

Amber and Saren sprinted up the stairs. Reaching the top, their target sprinted out of view away from the elevator just as the elevator doors exploded violently off, no doubt to cut them off should they attempt to use the elevators in pursuit. By now, Saren and Amber reached the top of the stairs. They followed the mysterious individual back to the surface, and instantly lost sight as whoever it was disappeared into the jungle.

"God fucking damn it!" Amber groaned.

Saren was equally disappointed by the outcome.

"Shit," Saren grumbled, "c'mon, she couldn't have taken everything."

Amber stared into Saren's eyes as she nodded. They returned to the depths to where the assailant had reached before they had. Saren still remembered the device plugged into the terminal and wondered just what the woman was after. He slowly approached the terminal and activated it, only to discover nothing important remained. Saren slammed his fist against the console in defeat. As he lowered his head, Amber gently placed her hand on his shoulder.

"Not everything's lost," she reassured him, "there's still plenty to dig through, no?"

Saren tilted his head and gave Amber a soft expression.

"I guess not. Doesn't look like there's anything else here. Let's start our way back."

Saren and Amber trudged out of the room and made their way through the corridor towards the stairway. They returned to the building entrance otherwise empty-handed. Coincidentally, Garrus and Tali met up with them.

"Find anything?" Tali asked.

"Someone had come onto the site, looking for something and attacked us when we got too close. We lost them when they exited the building we were searching," Amber explained.

Garrus sighed as he shook his head in disbelief.

"Any idea who it was?" Garrus asked.

"Human female," Saren answered, "no ID and no armor or discernible signs of faction designation."

That was enough to catch Garrus to the point he placed his talon on his mandible.

"Human? And in a black outfit?" Garrus repeated.

Amber nodded.

"And the Alliance military sure as hell doesn't distribute combat suits like that," Amber added.

Garrus, Tali, Amber and Saren started their stroll back to the campsite. Every now and then, he'd
throw a look back over his shoulder, expecting the anonymous agent to reappear. To his
disappointment, she didn't. Heading back to the camp, he quickly filed the day's findings. All the
while, Amber took this time to rest in her tent. She opened her omni-tool and hastily sent a message
regarding the incident with the unknown attacker. After that, she nestled into the makeshift bed
just as Saren crawled into the tent.

"Hey, Saren," Amber said, "feel like turning in?"

Saren nodded before he climbed into the makeshift bed with her. He wrapped an arm over her
shoulder and tapped the bridge of his nose to the back of her head. Sighing with content, Amber
leaned closer to his chest. She reached forward, turned out the lamp beside her and shut her eyes.

Back on her ship, Agent Lawson tapped her fingers over the controls and flipped up the landing
gear before leaving Ilos' atmosphere. She'd been sloppy, and was just lucky she hadn't left
sufficient evidence of her identity or been apprehended. Still, she looked over the data she
managed to download. If anything, she hoped it would at least prepare humanity for an ancient
adversary that no one else might know about.
Unearthing the Ancient Pod

They continued their excavations the next day. Most of the city had now been mapped, and the crew went to work on digging through sites of interest. The attacker still stuck to Amber's mind. How long would it be until more looters arrived? Still, she and Saren scouted ahead just in case. They would take point for the excavation crew's safety as they entered each building. Tali would scour each room for any technological artifact. At the end of the day, they would compile their findings and bring them back to the camp.

At the moment, Liara, Saren, Amber, Tali and Garrus sat in a circle.

"I'd like to check this building at the far end of the compound next. Readings picked up subtle signs of life, but not enough to indicate what it could be," Liara started, gesturing to a point on a map.

Garrus, Tali, Amber and Saren carefully examined the map. It was the farthest out from their position, almost tucked away in some obscure part of the landscape.

"It's worth investigating," Tali agreed, "Shepard?"

"Wouldn't be a bad idea," Amber nodded, "I'd really like to see what could've been bottled up for this long and still be alive."

Liara nodded in agreement before she marked the location on the map.

"Let's head over there before sundown," Liara suggested.

Upon cue, Saren, Amber, Garrus, Tali and Liara stood to their feet. Gearing up, they boarded one of the ground transports and started their journey to the edge of the ancient city. Tali took control of the steering wheel and drove the transport along the ancient road. Later, they came to a grinding halt in front of their destination. It more closely resembled a reinforced bomb shelter, with thick oxidization coating the exterior metal. They disembarked the transport and approached the structure, searching its perimeter for a way inside. Tali was on point with a scanner out.

"I've got something. Down this hallway."

Upon hearing Tali's announcement, Saren, Amber, Liara and Garrus followed the quarian through the entrance. They walked on for some time, wandering back and forth between corridors and doorways, peering down into the pitch blackness. They turned on the flashlights installed in their omni-tools. Turning around the next corner, they found a rusted door, partially warped in its frame. After cutting it open, they peered inside to what appeared to be some ancient morgue. Rows of coffin-sized boxes lined the walls, each with what looked to be monitoring equipment hooked up to it. Upon closer inspection, they realized they were looking at old, defunct stasis pods.

"By the Goddess," Liara whispered.

"What've we here?" Saren mumbled to himself.

He continued to follow Tali down one of the rows to the source of the signal. A moment or so later, they stopped at one particular stasis pod. Tali poked at the terminal connected to the pod.

"I found the source," Tali said, "looks like we have a live one."
Liara stepped closer to the stasis pod and carefully examined it.

"I'll let the other crew know of the finding," Liara said, "just a moment."

Liara took a step back and turned on her omni-tool. The others huddled close to have a better look as she began to order her team. It was only several minutes before her excavation crew arrived. Hours passed as they peeled back layers of walls to gain enough room to carry the pod out. They hoisted it onto a trolley and rolled it out through the doorway. Loading it into the back of a transport, it rolled off back to the camp. Liara and Amber's squad led the way along the ancient road in their transport. Returning to the campsite, they immediately loaded the stasis pod onto the ship for safekeeping. Amber disembarked the ship and began gazing out into the horizon, only to notice some sort of mechanical eye hidden among the shrubbery at a distance.

"Wait a minute," Amber muttered to herself.

It took only a moment for her to confirm it wasn't paying attention to her, so she slowly tiptoed towards the shrubbery, taking extra caution not to make a sound. She peeked behind to find something trailing into the bushes. Turning the safety off, she gave pursuit. She immediately spotted a Geth unit taking notice of her before making a run for it. She rounded the next corner and found it had disappeared.

"Damn it," she grumbled.

She watched the ground, looking for signs of footprints, and distinct sounds around her. There couldn't just be one Geth unit, right? The thought began to concern her. She crept to the nearest set of cover and peered around the corner. There, a few Geth units appeared to be conversing with one another. They started their retreat from the square through streets away from her position. Not wanting to just give up, she started sprinting after them. With every turn, they seemed to get farther and farther away. She continued along her path, continuing to stalk the Geth present in the city. It was only a short while before Amber found a shortcut, so she scurried through it taking her a few meters ahead of the Geth units. This allowed her to intercept them, stopping them in their tracks.

"Ok, you can cut it out with the scaredy-cat bullshit," Amber folded her arms.

They let out a series of aggressive clicks and whistles before throwing something at her feet, blinding her as it detonated. Amber let out a startled yelp as she covered her eyes with her arm. A few minutes later, her vision cleared, only for her to notice the Geth were no longer in her sights. She suspected they made their getaway in her confusion. She began scanning her surroundings when she noticed Saren emerging from a passageway.

"Amber, are you hurt?" Saren panicked.

"The Geth! Where'd they go?!" Amber demanded.

Saren scurried over to Amber and placed his hands on her shoulders.

"You spotted Geth units in this area?" Saren clarified.

Amber quietly nodded.

"Yeah," she said, "they're spying on us, too. I'm not sure what they were up to, but I don't like the look of it."

Saren hummed softly as he ran his talon through her hair.
"There's no use chasing now. Let's head back."

With an arm over her shoulder, Saren escorted Amber back to the campsite. He snatched up a couple of MREs for the two of them before sitting down on a fallen pillar. They both ripped the bags open before they started eating the rations. They ate quietly, contemplating the visitors from earlier. First an aggressive agent with no known affiliations and then a scouting party from a race of isolated synthetics. Was there no easy answer? They snapped out of their thoughts when they saw Liara approaching them and sitting down across them.

"I heard of the scouting party. Did you find anything?"

"I wish I did," Amber shook her head.

"They got away before we could get any good answers," Saren added.

Liara let out a sigh before she took a bite out of her rations.

"Maybe when we awaken whoever's in that pod," Liara reassured, "we'll get some answers from them."

"Is there someone actually alive in there?" Saren asked.

"We have," Liara nodded, "however, scans barely recognize the biology, so there's no telling what they are once they come out."

Amber and Saren exchanged glances in a moment of silence.

"Let's hope luck is on our side," Amber said.

Other than a few monitors and electronics for analysis, they hadn't found much else at the dig site. The next day, Liara's crew had started packing up gear and equipment onto the ship back home. As the vessel departed the planet, it made its way towards the Mass Relay. Liara stayed in the cargo hold, observing the tank they had brought with them from Ilos. It was like a chest of treasure from ancient human fantasy stories, a crate locked up with some unseen treasure inside. Saren and Amber sat across from Garrus and Tali nearby. The four continued discussions revolving around their findings back on Ilos.

"So," Amber asked, "how would you confront a Geth unit?"

"Disable, try and pry out the data core," the Quarian answered, "if you do it carefully enough and you're lucky, you can get bits of information from their memory cores before the memory wipe takes hold."

Amber couldn't help but scratch her head as she tilted her head towards Saren.

"Why would I want to kill a Geth unit for answers?" she paused, "I only remember fighting them at that combat sim, but still."

"In case you haven't noticed, Geth usually don't take to quarian presence lightly," Tali explained, "and will often try to kill us on sight. Besides, you aren't getting any information from them any other way."

"And yet the Geth didn't kill Shepard," Garrus pointed out.

"For all we know, it was just a scouting party. In the meantime, the greater concern is what they
were doing on Ilos in the first place," Saren interrupted.

"I know," Garrus scratched his mandible, "supposedly, they don't come out that far from their territory."

Within a few hours, the vessel emerged from the Mass Relay and made its way towards the Citadel. Amber and Saren escorted the package to Huerta where it would be carefully opened. Once they made their way inside, a group of professionals rolled the pod through the lounge and through the corridor with the Spectres and the asari archaeologist accompanying them. They stored it in one of the farther back rooms, partially isolated from the other patients present. With the help of a few other technicians, they got to work disengaging the stasis equipment hooked to the pod. One technician started working with the control panel on the pod's side.

"Disengaging cryostasis and engaging waking procedures," the technician reported.

Within an instant, the locks clicked open. Liara nervously nodded.

"Alright. Easy now," the team slowly pulled off the lid and peered inside.

Inside, an insect-like humanoid being remained asleep. His armor was a deep red with golden embroidering around the corners. Liara gave the being a closer look, her eyes widening in awe.

"A live Prothean…I didn't actually think I'd get to see one."

Amber and Saren gave Liara a blank stare.

"So, we're in luck," Amber said.

"Yes. However, he'll take some time to recover due to his time under. I'll let you know when he wakes up."

"I understand," Saren nodded.

The two walked out of the Huerta hospital shortly after. Outside, they met up with Garrus and Tali. Garrus had met back up with Kelly and Kasumi on their way out.

"So," Kasumi asked, "how did your trip go?"

"Interesting to say the very least," Tali answered, "we found little else besides a Prothean in a cryostasis pod."

"There is an actual Prothean?" Kelly blurted, her smile apparent on her face, "this is…this is great news!"

"I'm not sure about the prospect. I'd be nice to know for sure what exactly wiped the Protheans out, but I can't exactly see this guy being in the best of moods when he finally wakes up," Garrus shrugged.

Garrus placed his hand on Kelly's shoulder, encouraging her to lean into the touch.

"Still, it's better than nothing," Garrus continued.

Saren, Amber, Garrus, Tali, Kasumi and Kelly continued venturing their way through the Presidium.

"So what did it look like?" Kasumi pressed.
Amber rubbed her chin.

"Definitely looked insectoid based on its head," she answered, "it was otherwise humanoid, but it's hard to tell due to the armor it still wore."

"Other than that," Tali added, "we didn't find much else on Ilos."

"A shame, really," Saren commented, "although, this most recent site may be a center of interest for multiple parties."

They soon took a shortcut into the park. Saren and Amber explained their encounters with the unidentified thief and party of Geth they encountered to Kelly and Kasumi. At the same time, they appreciated the gardens they passed by.

"We still got the Prothean, right? Is that what matters at the end of the day?" Tali asked.

"True, but the widespread interest is most concerning," Amber reiterated, "especially the Geth. What end do they have if they're so isolated?"

"Maybe we'll just need to find another piece of the puzzle," Kasumi shrugged.
Amber slowly opened her eyes the following morning, smiling as she observed Saren's peaceful expression in his sleep. He barely stirred as she shifted to the side of the bed. She double-checked her message inbox in her omni-tool, finding nothing of interest. She looked back over at Saren, still fast asleep. Since it was still early and she didn't have much to do today, she felt tempted to just sleep for another hour. She began nestling into his embrace until she noticed that he began stirring. He yawned and stretched his arms as he started to push himself up.

"Saren?" Amber paused.

Saren tilted his head towards Amber.

"Morning, Shepard," he purred.

He brushed a talon against her cheek.

"You slept well?" he continued.

Amber nodded before she sat up in her bed. Placing one hand on his shoulder, she leaned in to kiss him. She heard him chuckle as he returned the kiss. She quickly made up her mind and rolled back into bed, huddling up against Saren.

"Shepard," Saren whispered, "how badly do you want me?"

Amber responded by guiding his hand towards the apex of her thighs. Saren dug his hand underneath her shorts and located her folds.

"It's been a while. I could say I missed the part of you tucked away under all that armor," she answered.

Saren nodded before he slid his talon inside her. Amber moaned softly as she pressed her hips forward.

"I'm glad you're in the mood," he purred, "I was just starting to develop a need myself."

Amber pressed her forehead against Saren's while he thrust his talon in and out of her folds in a rhythmic pace. The turian Spectre placed his other hand behind her back and held her close. He gingerly brushed her walls, feeling each inch of smooth tissue. As she panted, she kneaded the back of his neck with her thumb.

"Deeper…please…" she mumbled.

Saren nodded before he burrowed his talon further inside until he reached her cervix. In response, her moans grew louder. He purred as he gave her a soft kiss. By now, he felt his groin plates shifting. Saren quickly withdrew, licking the fluids off his talons before shifting his position on the bed. He hung right over her with his member poised.

"Come on, Saren," Amber begged, "what are you waiting for?"

Amber tugged at his arms to emphasize her point. Saren chuckled as he nuzzled his face against hers.

"Just taking my time."
He slowly eased himself in. Amber gasped as she felt his length sink in further inside of her. Instinctively, she wrapped her legs around his waist. Leveraging his weight, his thrust initiated like a slow crawl, savoring the familiar sensation of her rubbery walls. Fluids eased the friction as Saren held her close. The sounds of their heavy panting and the squeaking of the mattress filled the room. Amber angled her hips, which encouraged the turian Spectre to pound deeper into her flesh. Saren went faster with her encouragement, and shifted a hand to hold her hips. The room seemed to spin in the midst of thrusts. He suddenly growled as he reached his first climax.

Still, his libido wasn't spent, so he kept going. He let his head dip, brushing his forehead against hers. Amber felt her heartbeat pick up the pace and her breath quicken as she felt heat pooling in her stomach. Saren's tongue escaped his lips and brushed her along the cheek, letting out a gravelly purr in the process. The N7 soldier let out a loud cry the instant she shuddered in her orgasm. He pulled himself out, dripping on the mattress in the process.

"Quite the method of starting the day," he chuckled.

Amber nodded before she pulled Saren into a deep kiss. They climbed out of bed and headed for the kitchen shortly after. Amber prepared her breakfast and her coffee while Saren brewed his kava. Once their breakfast was ready minutes later, they headed over to the table. Saren got a couple of plates from the cupboard and brought them to the dining table before they started eating. The Alliance commander washed down a tablet of allergy meds with a sip of her coffee. As the turian Spectre took a sip of his kava, he checked the news outlets in his omni-tool. He eyed the clock, seeing that it was still relatively early in the morning. He thought to give Liara at least another hour before calling to check on the Prothean's status.

After their breakfast, Amber and Saren returned to their room and slipped into their civies. Before leaving, Saren quickly tapped out a message on his omni-tool.

{Has the Prothean waken up yet? Any changes since he was pulled out of the cryostasis pod?}

While the turian Spectre waited for a response, they made their way into the living room and grabbed their shoes. It didn't take long before he received a response from Liara.

{Minor improvements. Based upon neural readings, he's no longer in a comatose state and is simply unconscious. When he'll come to is unknown.}

Saren and Amber exchanged glances before they stepped out of the apartment and made their way through the Presidium. They took their time walking down to Huerta Hospital. Quickly showing their identification, they were directed to where the Prothean was being held. Inside, Liara stood next to him while she turned her head towards the Spectres.

"Spectres, good to see you," Liara said, "as you can see, he's still some time from returning to consciousness. We'll have a translation ready before he wakes at this rate."

"That's good to hear," Amber replied with a smile.

Saren slowly approached the Prothean and examined it. His armor had been stripped off and set aside in the corner of the room, leaving only the suit bodyglove. A holoscreen hanging above him displayed scans of the Prothean's physiology. The turian Spectre took a step back and sat down in a nearby chair while he waited for results. The silence lasted around half an hour when they heard the Prothean moan softly as he slowly opened his eyes. He started groaning incoherently before sitting up in his bed. Liara, Saren and Amber instantly turned their focus towards him, the turian Spectre standing from his seat. Without warning, the Prothean snapped his head towards Amber, sending a chill down her spine. He put his legs over the side of the bed, scratching the back of his
"Who are you? Where am I?"

Saren and Amber exchanged glances, the turian Spectre nodding at her before she returned her gaze towards the Prothean.

"I'm Commander Shepard," Amber said, "and you're on the Citadel right now."

The Prothean shifted his gaze between Saren, Amber and Liara in a moment of silence. He sat there, glancing back for some time, taking a moment to process everything.

"How long have I been under?" the Prothean asked.

Amber shrugged.

"Probably over fifty thousand years," she answered.

The Prothean couldn't help but shudder.

"And the Reapers?" he pressed on.

Saren and Amber gave the Prothean a blank stare.

"I'm sorry, who?" Saren butted in.

"Where'd they go? Did they stop?" the Prothean pressed.

"What do they look like?" Amber interjected.

"Enormous sentient dreadnoughts with seemingly no end to their numbers," the Prothean grumbled, "ruthless, calculating, and masters of contorting biology to their will."

"Wait, you mean those dreadnoughts from that data cache?" Liara said to herself.

"Those ships are sentient?" Saren confirmed.

The Prothean rolled his eyes.

"Did I stumble?"

Amber wasn't sure why, but she felt her chest heat up. Maybe that vision from the beacon was haunting her? Saren stepped closer to her and placed his hand on her shoulder.

"If you're still having problems understanding, those things came out of nowhere and wiped us out. Surrender wasn't an option and they just went from system to system, cleaning house," the Prothean paused for a moment before continuing, "I was put under with the rest of my platoon. Did any of them make it?"

"I don't think we found any other Protheans," Liara shook her head, "all of the other cryopods we found beside you didn't register any life signs."

The Prothean looked down, suppressing his dismay. Amber sat down next to the Prothean.

"Were there other civilizations besides yours during that time?" Amber asked.

"Our empire stretched far wide over the whole galaxy," the Prothean answered, "there was little in
the way of a race that wasn't subjugated to our regime. Every semi-sentient race brought in resources and the primitives made excellent hunt. When the Reapers arrived, they made it clear that surrender wasn't an option. They proclaimed that we poisoned the very planets we ruled over, and that the only way to excise the cancer was to remove us with it.”

"And I thought I've heard the worst about my species," Amber blurted as she rolled her eyes.

"Initially, it was a fight we could win," the Prothean continued, "they put on their numbers after the first month. After that, we just lost more and more of our territories. They would shut off the relays and box entire systems in for them to hunt down," he continued.

Saren sat down next to Amber, still paying attention to the Prothean's banter.

"Eventually the plan was to go into hiding, give them the impression they killed us all only for the survivors to rebuild once they'd left," the Prothean concluded, "we would only be going to sleep for a millennium. Don't know how I remained in stasis fifty times longer."

Saren let out an enthusiastic hum while he scratched his mandible.

"Grim," Saren commented, "thank you for disclosing this matter. I'm not sure how we'll face such a threat should they arbitrarily decide to wipe us out as well…"

Amber sighed and closed her eyes as she folded her arms.

"And Cerberus being around does not help either," Amber added.

Amber opened her eyes before focusing onto the Prothean.

"So what's your name?" Amber asked.

He tried to leave his bed, only for his atrophied legs to wobble under him. He resorted to sitting back down.

"Commander Javik," he answered, "senior officer of the Five Hundred and First Legion of the Prothean Empire."

Javik shifted his attention towards Saren and Liara.

"Spectre Arterius," Saren replied, "I'm part of the Council's intergalactic enforcement."

Javik ignored the gesture as he rolled back under the covers.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to mourn my losses for a little longer," he stated before rolling over and attempting to slide back to sleep.

Sighing, Saren and Amber stood to their feet while Liara sat near Javik.

"I'll look after him," Liara reassured.

They nodded as they left the room and back down the hallway. Once they made it outside the hospital, they continued meandering through the Presidium. Saren knew the Spectre Academy still kept records of the data from both beacons and wanted to review their findings. It didn't take long before they arrived at the academy. Everything they recorded was still on the lab computers and reinterpreted on a different format. Utilizing Prothean tech was stressful enough, and a risk the organization couldn't afford. While they reviewed the data they recorded, Saren took notes about the Prothean's testimony. He gave a nauseous sigh as he pulled open the recordings.
As they read through the recordings, Amber noticed a ping from her omni-tool, so she opened her message inbox. When she opened the newest message, she noticed it didn't have a title or the identification of the sender.

{Shepard Commander,

We apologize for the apparent hostilities during our last encounter. The Old Machines are currently our greatest concern. We were dispatched to assess where your interests in the Old Machines lay.

Geth}

That message alone was enough for thoughts to fill Amber's head. Could it be possible for her to carry out some diplomacy with the Geth from there? Just then, Saren took a brief break and turned his head towards her.

"Is something wrong?"

Amber snapped out of her thoughts and shifted her attention towards her mentor. She lowered her omni-tool, allowing him to read the message.

"I'm starting to think," Amber started, "should the Geth come across us again, we probably shouldn't get trigger happy."

"What?" Saren took a closer look at the message, "you sure it's the Geth? They aren't exactly known for reaching out like that."

"I'm not even sure how they got my number," Amber replied.

"Keep tabs on any more messages coming from them," Saren advised.

Amber nodded at Saren in agreement. They soon made their way out of the academy after they turned off the terminal. They walked out of the lab and out of the Academy when they bumped into a familiar Drell just outside.

"Thane?" Saren said, "I didn't think you would take interest in Spectre candidacy."

Thane shook his head in disagreement while he still sat on a bench, reading through his message inbox.

"I'm in the middle of something," he mumbled.

The Drell returned to his conversation, pursing his lips tightly in concentration. Saren and Amber exchanged confused glances in a moment of silence.

"Our schedule is open if you need assistance," she offered.

Thane snapped out of his thoughts and returned his gaze towards Amber.

"I have yet to hear back from my son, that's all," Thane replied, "he's just sent me a message."

Thane opened the recent message and began to read it. He maintained his usual stern look. Briefly, surprise flickered across his eyes before resuming his deathly stare. He quickly stood from his seat.

"Anyways, I best be going," he added, "good to see you, Spectre."
Thane immediately stormed out of the courtyard, leaving the Spectres behind. Amber persisted and followed close behind.

"Hang on! What was in the message?!!" she called over.

Amber grabbed Thane's shoulder, startling him as he paused in his tracks.

"My son's currently on a planet called Feros," he finally yielded, "in a human settlement. I haven't had contact for a few days, but he just got through."

Amber released her grip.

"So what was he doing there?" she asked him.

"He's a technician," Thane explained, "anyways, he states the organization you call 'Cerberus' has set up camp there. He's barely managed to get out of range of their communications taps."

Amber raised her eyebrows.

"Any indication as to why they were there?"

Saren caught up to both of them by now.

"Unsure," Thane sighed, "however, Kolyat had mentioned the presence of mining equipment and that they were digging for something within the nearby ruins."

"If you want our help," Amber offered, "it's ok."

Thane thought over the offer in a moment of silence.

"Alright," he nodded, "if you think you can excuse their presence, then so be it."
It took a while for Amber and Saren to suit up and gather their weapons before they headed for the Spectre docks. Along the way, they met up with James.

"Hey, Lola! I got your message. We going after Cerberus again?" Vega greeted.

"You know how it is," she returned with a grin, "we're not stopping until we have the Illusive Man in cuffs and on trial."

James let out an enthusiastic hum as he strode alongside Amber and Saren.

"So what's your experience with Cerberus, Lieutenant?" Saren asked.

"Nasty. I don't know what the hell is wrong with their R&D department, but they field the strangest things," James shuddered.

It didn't take long for Amber, Saren and James to arrive at the Spectre docks. They soon found Thane waiting at the shuttle.

"You have everything you'll need?" Saren asked the assassin.

"I do," Thane nodded, turning his head towards Amber, "which reminds me, commander. Have you been to this colony before?"

Amber shrugged.

"Not really," she admitted.

"I see," Thane replied, "Kolyat has described the colony as being situated in an old Prothean city, rigging water and some power from the ancient infrastructure."

Saren, Amber, James and Thane didn't hesitate as they boarded the shuttle. Ahead of time, she had downloaded a dossier on the colony to get a good idea of where they were going. As she sat down, she pulled open her omni-tool and started reading as Saren manned the ship controls. After he turned on the ignition, the magnetic clamps released the shuttle, allowing it to fly out of the Citadel and travel through space. It was only a while before it reached the Mass Relay, where the structure flung it into FTL speed. He tapped the controls, initiating stealth systems before they entered the system. Cerberus relied largely on hit-and-run tactics and stealth ops, but intel did indicate they had a few dreadnoughts presently fielded.

Once the shuttle entered the system, it made its way towards Feros and entered its orbit. He flipped a few switches and initiated entrance into the planetary atmosphere.

"Looks like the local space is clear of movement for now," Saren said, "whatever vessels they've brought have been put onto the planet below."

Once the shuttle hovered towards the surface, they searched for a place to land. Through the dense clouds and atmosphere, they came into visual range of a series of towers, each interconnected by a string of highway-like bridges. A docking bay was out of the question as they suspected Cerberus employees would take notice. Saren landed the vessel on top of one of the towers, away from sight from anything down below. He shut off the ignition before he, Amber, Thane and James disembarked the shuttle. They found an exit from the roof and continued their way down through
the tower.

After a while of descending stairs, they reached the ground floor and made their way outside the tower. The colony itself was a couple towers over from their current position. They began their slow, cautious trek along the bridge. James and Thane kept a lookout for any witnesses. There was no apparent sign of life present as they entered the next tower. This gave them a good chance to start scouring the area. They wandered up a few levels to a damaged room where James took out a pair of binoculars from his backpack to scout further down the road.

Little did he know, someone hiding in the shadows was keeping a watchful eye on them. Down his own set of binoculars, he watched as they made their approach from atop the tower where the colony on Feros was dug in. When he focused on Commander Shepard, he snarled at the day she raided the lab and stole his pet from him. Did she even know, or was that fact of little concern to her? Nonetheless, if he wanted his pet back, he would have to go through her. He put a lot of resources into the girl, and it pained him to see his project ripped away like that. He radioed the men below over his omni-tool.

"We have unwelcome guests coming over the bridge. Dispose of them."

Meanwhile, Amber, Saren, Thane and James descended farther through the tower. The turian Spectre had found an entrance into the aqueducts and proposed to make their approach through the alternate route instead. They continued their path through the aqueducts from there.

"We're better off not waddling around on the surface," Saren advised, "through here."

"Let's hope there aren't any spies around here," James shrugged.

They rushed along the channel, creating a moderate wake in the water as they waded through. Suddenly, Saren put up a hand to inform the others to halt their progress.

"Do any of you hear that?" Saren asked.

"Sounds like crying," Thane answered.

Sobs mixed with incoherent yelps echoed down the tunnel. Amber shuddered, but still maintained her posture.

"Someone might be in danger," she added.

A few bends ahead, there was a lone colonist wandering aimlessly, posture all crooked and talking to no one in particular. James was the first to approach.

"Sir, is everything alright?" he asked.

The colonist focused his eyes on James.

"Hey! Ssshhhh-ssshh-ssshh!" he panicked.

Amber took a couple steps closer to the colonist.

"What's going on?" Amber whispered.

He started heavily breathing.

"Do you not hear it? Do you not hear its voice?"
"Drop the pronoun so we can help you sooner," Saren grumbled, "what are you talking about?"

The colonist's legs began to wobble.

His arms twitched involuntarily, scratching at the back of his head like he had a rash on his scalp.

"It…demands…that's why they're here. It demands…"

He collapsed, compelling Thane to think fast as he caught the colonist in his arms. They were suddenly interrupted by gunfire coming from further down the tunnel. Rushing to cover, they returned fire upon the Cerberus troops. With Amber and James focusing on shooting, Saren emitted a biotic field. Thane hung back and adjusted his sniper rifle before peeking from cover. That was when he noticed one of the Cerberus soldiers in the far back. He had dropped his weapon and was now clutching his head like he was suffering from the worst of headaches.

"This isn't good," he muttered to himself.

The soldier had dropped his weapon and started clawing at his helmet, attempting to rip off some unseen threat. Suddenly, he drew his omni-blade and started screaming.

"Thieves! Thieves! Give it back! It's mine!" he howled before stabbing the nearest fellow soldier.

The other Cerberus soldiers were left conflicted as one of their own started attacking them. The crazed soldier flailed wildly about, blindly charging the closest soldier there was, stabbing him repeatedly, before moving to the next. He was violently put down by his teammates shortly after. The four continued to push forward, given the opportunity to pick off a few extra Cerberus soldiers. It didn't take much long before they reached a larger chamber in the aqueduct. The last three were whittled down, clearing their path onward.

"Please tell me the three of you saw what I just saw," Thane said.

Amber took a moment to catch her breath.

"He's definitely not the only one," she gasped, "but there's gotta be a source."

"Must be whatever Cerberus is after," Thane nodded, "let's keep moving before they can contain it."

The four continued venturing forth until they reached a final juncture with a pathway leading to a stairwell upwards. Thane tilted his head towards the colonist in his tow.

"Are there any survivors?" he asked.

The colonist moaned softly. He dropped to the ground, clutching the wall as he pushed himself back to his feet. He looked back at the assassin with bloodshot eyes before taking a rock he had picked up and lashed out. Thane easily dodged the weapon, disarmed the civilian, and knocked him out.

"We might as well keep going," Saren sighed.

The turian Spectre led Amber, Thane and James up the stairs. Saren remained on point and carefully walked up each flight with his weapon drawn in case more soldiers went down to meet them. When they reached the top of the stairs, they stopped at a defense barrier. Saren cursed under his breath as he looked for a means of entry. Amber tilted her head towards a control panel, even if it was inside the barrier.
"Looks like it's only accessible from one side," she said.

Saren tilted his head towards two colonists on the other side. They hadn't noticed them yet, but they had the same erratic behavior as the lone straggler down below.

"Lola," James asked, "any ideas?"

She looked at the walls around them.

"This place is old," she replied, "there's gotta be somewhere we can put a hole without causing the whole place to come down on us."

Saren took the hint and traced the walls for a weak section. He scanned a wall with extensive cracks, seeing if there were any obstacles on the other side.

"We might have luck on our side," he announced.

The turian Spectre turned on his omni-blade and began cutting through the wall. He hacked off one of the bricks and peered through to the other side. Taking a few steps back, he charged forward and rammed through the wall, his shields taking the full brunt of the impact. He grinned in satisfaction as his effort tore open a hole in the wall.

They continued until they found themselves behind one of the colony prefabs upon exiting the stairwell. Thane began scanning his surroundings. Temporary walls had been erected around the prefabs, keeping the colonists boxed in with Cerberus guards looking in from on top. Saren, Amber, Thane and James resorted to taking cover in alleyways to avoid detection. Cerberus troops continued to patrol the area outside of the temporary walls. Towards a small command center, a couple of troops appeared to be arguing with some high-ranking official.

"The Illusive Man is putting on pressure," the official pestered, "we need results!"

"Sir, at the current rate suit failures are occurring," one of the troops protested, "there's no way my men can continue with the current rates of infection."

The official groaned in disgust.

"It's a risk we'll have to take," he demanded, "the Thorian is an impressive asset, but the boys in the lab need a bit more time to figure out how it works."

Amber and Saren exchanged confused glances.

"A…Thorian?" Amber paused quietly.

"Sir, I still don't see how this is a worthwhile investment. For the same cost, we could've finished and started production on the Ironman Project," the soldier retorted.

"How about you leave talking to interns with me, soldier," the official ordered, "and you stick to making sure none of our assets go to waste."

The soldier stiffened before he bowed.

"Understood sir," he nodded, "just remember, if another guard turns and pounces on you, I'm letting him finish."

The official made a curt hand gesture before turning on his feet, dismissing the guards. This also gave Amber and her squad a cue to continue venturing forward. They cut in between prefabs as
they moved along, staying out of sight. All they had to do at the moment was to find clues related to the Thorian. They crept into one of the mobile labs while it was empty. They quickly got to work putting down the blinds before Thane got to work cutting through a locked terminal while the others kept watch by the doors. The drell assassin wasted no time in examining the files on the screen.

"I've found something," Thane announced minutes later, "an overview of this Thorian."

Saren paused in his tracks and approached Thane from behind. The file even came with several images and scans of something words couldn't exactly describe. At most, it could be described as similar to some overgrown tuberous plant, with what he could only assume to be roots sprouting from the base of it.

"Interesting," Saren mused.

"Strangest plant I've ever seen," James shrugged.

"I wonder how long it has lasted," Amber scratched her head.

"As stated here, it's old," Thane added.

Now that Thane finished gathering the data, he shut off the terminal. They returned outside shortly after, cautious not to alert the research personnel that entered shortly after.

"So what's the plan? Burn the plant?" James inquired.

Thane sighed as he thought over the question in a moment of silence. He could only hope his son was not under the influence like the colonists.

"If it means stopping both Cerberus and this…thing from spreading, I suppose there's no alternative."

With an objective in mind, they started sneaking through the prefabs. Suddenly, something roared within the camp and the Cerberus guards started shooting. Amber and her squad ducked behind some cover and peeked out from behind. The guards were firing into the walled-off section of the colony, with animalistic noises rising from inside like a dense smoke. The nearby guards ran to the aid of their companions at their guard posts when one soldier was violently yanked in and mauled by whatever was attacking.

With Cerberus focusing on the intruders, Amber and her squad barely made it out of the prefabs. Suddenly, she was pounced on from above by what she could only assume was some Thorian abomination. It resembled a human corpse with its gray, bare muscular structure being its most defining trait, with hollow, black eyes and reptilian nostrils. It raised one of its unnaturally elongated claws before its head was blown off in a flurry of dark green fluid. Saren reached forward and hoisted Amber back to her feet as she gasped for air.

"Dios, that thing was angry," James commented, tapping the body with the barrel of his gun to confirm the kill.

"Are you all right?" Saren asked Amber.

"I'm fine," she reassured him, "it didn't even get to put a scratch on me."

Amber gazed at the path ahead of them. The infected colonists and more of the humanoid monstrosities had began climbing over the barricade and charging the Cerberus personnel present.
Since there wasn't much they could do, they continued venturing farther. They struggled to make their way through the waves of the crazed colonists and Thorian's thralls as they overwhelmed the Cerberus guards. The file also mentioned that the Thorian was located right underneath the colony, initially dormant when the colonists first arrived. Unfortunately, their advance towards the colony was cut off, and they were forced back. Returning to the stairwell they entered through, they found their way back down, seeking to let the Thorian's drones deal with the Cerberus presence.

"There should be survivors not affected by all this, right?" Amber mentioned.

"Possibly. I'll try to contact Kolyat again, see where he is," Thane shrugged.

Amber, Saren, Thane and James took a moment to rest while the drell assassin turned on his omni-tool.

"Kolyat, are you still there?" Thane called.

The younger Drell's voice cracked through.

{Dad? Where are you right now?}

Thane let out a sigh of relief.

"We reached the colony and we know what Cerberus is after," he informed, "currently, they are being overwhelmed by the Thorian's minions."

{Was Shiala in their outpost?} Kolyat pointed out, {I couldn't find her there.}

"We're unsure," Thane admitted, "we didn't get an opportunity to look before the Cerberus soldiers were overwhelmed."

{I see,} Kolyat sighed over the com-link, {I'm with a group of refugees, just north to the next tower.}

Hearing those words encouraged Amber to stare into the distance, examining each tower ahead of them.

"We'll head over," Thane nodded, "I assume you figured out what this Thorian is?"

{An ancient plant, old enough to have lived during the Prothean Empire. Its roots are relatively exposed, but those creepers are going to make our approach difficult.}

"We're on our way," Thane reassured.

{Thank you, dad,} Kolyat replied.

Once Thane ended the transmission, he, Amber, Saren and James continued venturing their way north. They rushed out onto the bridge to the next tower and made it halfway when they saw a Cerberus vessel take off behind them and make for the atmosphere. Seeing that it didn't aim its turrets at them encouraged them to continue crossing the bridge.

"Huh. I didn't they'd pull out so soon," James grunted.

"I'll bet it's too much for them," Amber remarked between pants.

The creepers and infected colonists hadn't traveled much farther from the colony, giving them room to catch their breath before continuing the rest of the way to the refugee camp. Once they
arrived, the surviving colonists shifted their focus on them. A younger drell with a bluer hue than Thane walked forward, with a gas mask strapped to his face.

"Dad!" he exclaimed, "I was starting to think you didn't make it."

While Thane gave his son a warm embrace, one refugee set off to fetch some spare gas masks. The refugee soon returned and held out the gas masks before the newcomers.

"If you're going back into the hot-zone, you might want to wear these," Kolyat continued.

Taking the hint, Amber, Saren, Thane and James slipped on their gas masks. Saren eyed the young drell as he slipped on the mask.

"How long have you known about the Thorian?" Saren asked.

"I'd say a few days before I came here," Kolyat answered with a shrug.

"Well, if you or any of the survivors could tell us of any weaknesses to take advantage of," Saren requested, "it'd give us great leverage against that plant."

Kolyat led Saren, Amber, Thane and James towards the center of the camp, where they sat down in a circle.

"The colony techs were working on a prototype agent meant for combating the spores. It was also converted to a gaseous form for ease of distribution," Kolyat explained, "however, Cerberus must've intercepted our initial transmission out for help regarding the Thorian and arrived a few days later, preventing the distribution of the agent. Currently, it's only strong enough to cause those creepers to dissolve and render infected victims unconscious."

"So you're not sure how it'll affect the Thorian itself?" Amber clarified.

"We haven't tried yet," Kolyat admitted, "not with Cerberus at the colony."

Amber and James exchanged glances in a moment of silence.

"So for all we know, this could potentially exacerbate the issue at hand," Saren corrected.

"Well, it's that," Kolyat replied, "or making sure every shot counts going forward, because there are plenty of creepers between here and the Thorian."
Now that they have what could pass as a strategy, Saren, Amber, Thane, Kolyat and James left the refugee camp. The gas the colonists developed had been retrofitted with a few disarmed smoke grenades they had brought with them. While individual creepers were to be dealt with using force, large clusters and civilians were to be incapacitated using the gas grenades. This gave them the confidence they needed to save the colony. James calmly counted his thermal clips as they approached the tower where the colony still resided.

"Well, here we go, all or nothing," James said.

Amber and James exchanged fist bumps. The entrance was just as it was when they left, now with a few additional Cerberus corpses. The Thorian's drones hadn't bothered doing anything with the bodies, instead leaving them to rot where they fell. Amber led her squad through the colony while they scoped ahead. So far, all she could see were almost a dozen colonists, wandering aimlessly or walking in circles. After apprehending a few nearby colonists, they then spotted more of the creepers, now in a huddled state as to suggest hibernation or something similar.

"Lola," James whispered, "orders?"

Amber double-checked the smoke grenades in her inventory.

"There aren't too many of them yet," she instructed, "for now, keep things quiet. If they get up, shoot them where they stand. If they start to swarm us, drop a gas grenade, start back-pedaling, and shoot the ones that might get through."

James nodded quietly before Amber began meandering around the creeper piles. One of the creatures started rising to its feet before Thane drove a blade into its head, tossing it aside. With a brief moment of relief, Amber, Saren, Thane, Kolyat and James continued sneaking past the creeper piles.

They found the deep entrance leading to what they could only assume was the Thorian's lair deep beneath the colony itself. One of the prefabs had been lifted up on a small, mobile crane, leaving a ramp leading down into the ancient Prothean structure. Carefully stepping over the moss, Saren took point as he pointed his flashlight down onto the path ahead of them. The turian Spectre led Amber, Thane and James along the tunnel, which was dark and much more humid than the aqueducts on the way there. Then a pang of something putrid wafted up and slammed into them like a tidal wave. Amber groaned as she almost stumbled, so her mentor turned around and placed his hands on her shoulders.

"Easy," Saren cooed.

"It's just up ahead. It's surprisingly large," Kolyat reminded, pointing further downward.

Saren, Amber, Thane and James turned their heads towards the direction Kolyat was pointing. The humidity only increased as they walked further as did the various sounds echoing from the end of the path. Finally, the tight corridor opened up into a massive chamber. A gigantic creature with tendrils dangling out from underneath it hung above them. At the front was a tentacled maw, almost like a face. Kolyat briefly scanned his surroundings, hoping Shiala might be somewhere in this chamber.

Suddenly, the Thorian itself began to spasm, reacting to their presence. It let out a series of deep
gurgles, and its tentacles twitched before dropping a strangley green-skinned asari from its mouth.

"S-Shiala?" Kolyat paused while he blinked twice.

"Pestilence. You beings of flesh and metal meant to be food of drones to serve the Thorian," the entity hissed.

Thane simply stared, gun firmly gripped in his hands.

"A facsimile and a bad one at that," he muttered.

Amber kept a fierce gaze on the Thorian as it kept spasming. A second and third asari clone were spewed out of its maw in short order.

"How about you release your fleshy pawns? We'd all walk out of here alive," Saren proposed.

In irritation, the Thorian let out a deep roar, echoing up and down the chasm.

"Your flesh will be accepted, regardless of whether you're alive or deceased."

As James attempted to stay calm, he aimed his rifle at the asari clones slowly approaching them. As they entered an attacking stance, gathering energy for a basic biotic attack, Saren shot first. The clones launched biotic warps at them, forcing them to jump out of the way. Saren blasted the first as Amber and James dealt with the second with Thane tossing his own biotic charge at the third. The clones stumbled for a moment before they regained their posture. James finished them off with a grenade rolled to their feet, causing all three to disintegrate.

"Now what?" James blurted.

Amber shifted her attention towards the Thorian. She looked around the chamber as long, fleshy roots jutted out from its body to parts of the chamber around it.

"It's just a weed," Amber informed, "like any weed, we've got to take out the roots."

Saren made a brief glance at the Thorian's roots before he nodded in agreement. All around the cavern, the creepers started yanking themselves from their niches along the Thorian's bedding and converging upon their position as they ascended the first flight of stairs. Still, Amber and her squad began scrambling for the roots. The first one wasn't too far up the path, and only surrounded by a couple of creepers. The five of them started shooting, quickly tearing the root from the wall. It snapped like a whip as it flew by them from the released tension, so they started scurrying for the second root. The creepers didn't hesitate as they charged after them. Saren tossed a gas grenade and continued to run as it detonated, dissolving the creepers in their immediate vicinity. He and Amber darted for one root while Thane, Kolyat and James raced towards another.

Saren continued to provide cover for her as she rushed over, using his biotics to toss the drones against the walls. Once Amber was close enough to the root, she opened fire on it. It took a couple of clips to finally break the root, but she managed to accomplish a similar effect to their initial attack on the Thorian. With the second root snapped apart, she and her mentor made a brief glance at the Alliance soldier and the drell assassins. Down below, Kolyat cut open the side of one of the roots and shoved a live gas grenade inside before rushing back to his father. Once they met up with James, they headed for the next root.

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The creepers have been held at bay as they progressed, yet they still kept pursuing as they advanced on the next root. Saren would occasionally throw a biotic charge at the pursuing creepers. Reaching the next root, Kolyat drew his omni-blade out again.
"Give me a minute," Kolyat requested, "this worked last time, and I want to see if it's still effective."

Thane nodded before his son got to work. Similarly, he hacked a side open with a jagged, horizontal slash. Taking a gas grenade, he pulled the pin and shoved it as far in as it would go. As it detonated, the fibrous material inside turned to a mushy pulp before it snapped off completely like a decayed piece of flesh. Thane and Kolyat exchanged glances before they gave one another a high five.

They continued working farther and farther up, gradually destabilizing the Thorian as they weakened its supports. As they did, the giant plantlike creature continued spasming violently. Towards the top, they severed one more root before the chamber started to violently shake. Under its own weight, the Thorian was expelled into the chasm far below. Saren, Amber, Thane, Kolyat and James took cover while watching the plant creature fall.

Some time had passed during its fall when all the creepers suddenly died, tumbling over and seeping out a deep green soup. Kolyat took this chance to lead Amber and her squad in search of Shiala. She couldn't have died, right? Along the wall, where some of the flesh still hung, a pod began to slightly pulsate. In such a desperate manner, a hand punched through the membrane followed closely by an asari as she gasped for air, rolling weakly to the ground.

"Shiala!" Kolyat exclaimed.

Kolyat knelt to the ground and placed his hand on Shiala's shoulder.

"Are you all right?" he began to panic.

He helped her to her feet, coughing and sputtering.

"Ugh…Kolyat…? What the hell?" Shiala gasped.

"What happened?" Amber interjected.

"She went missing a week and a half ago," Kolyat explained.

Kolyat placed Shiala's arm over his shoulder before he led Saren, Amber, Thane and James out of the lair. The creepers started decaying into lumps of dry dirt where they fell. They made their way back to the colony several minutes later. There, the younger drell settled Shiala into a chair, giving her some time to rest.

"Will this colony be able to recover?" Saren asked.

"Once word gets out, the Alliance should get here within a day," Amber confirmed.

Amber sat down next to Shiala. Minutes later, the asari recuperated and turned her head towards the Alliance commander.

"Thank you…I don't know what else to say, but…thank you."

"You're welcome," Amber replied with a smile.

Saren took this as a cue to sit across from the asari.

"We saw the Thorian spit out a few green asari," Saren asked, "what was it using you as?"

"It must've made clones of me," Shiala assumed.
Amber rubbed her chin.

"So why would the Thorian want you?" Amber pressed.

Shiala let out a soft sigh as she hung her head.

"Cerberus offered me to the Thorian shortly after they captured me," Shiala explained, "Cerberus was after something, something it had. Not sure what it was meant to be, but I remember traces of it from my time hooked up to the Thorian."

Saren scratched his mandible.

"Something tells me that their plans failed," he commented, "whatever they were."

"So what were those traces?" Amber continued.

Shiala closed her eyes in a moment of silence.

"I think I remember…the Protheans being part of it," Shiala answered.

"Could you describe it?" Amber asked.

Shiala hesitated for a moment.

"It'd be better if I could show you directly," she answered, rising to her feet to face Amber.

Amber made a brief glance at Saren and nodded at him. Taking the hint, Shiala placed her hands on both Amber and Saren's shoulders while they stood to their feet.

"Embrace eternity," Shiala whispered as her eyes blinked open to reveal her eyes turned black.

The next thing they knew, Shiala emitted a biotic field, dragging Saren and Amber's minds into hers.

It was a series of how the war against the Reapers played out for the Protheans. Towards the edges of their empire, there were brief skirmishes, scout parties against entire Prothean armadas. As Javik described, they favored the Protheans initially, with manageable losses. Then the scene shifted as bigger formations, and the Protheans struggled just to win any of them. Then, one Reaper squad reached the Citadel when it was under Prothean control, turning it into a gateway to wherever the Reapers held their numbers. From there, the synthetics rained death upon the known galaxy, sweeping through every corner to wipe clean the Prothean Empire, even trotting over the races they enslaved to be rid of it. Was this Reaper threat meant to be taken seriously? Was there return imminent? If so, when? Amber hadn't seen such a prediction from the beacon.

It was only seconds later before Saren and Amber returned to reality. Shiala released her grip, allowing them to catch their breath. A moment later, the Alliance commander turned her head towards the turian Spectre.

"How are we going to explain this to the Council?" she asked him.

Sighing, Saren ran his talons through Amber's hair.

"I'm sure we'll come up with something."

While Kolyat and Shiala offered to stay behind to help the colonists recover, Saren, Amber, Thane and James returned to the shuttle and departed from Feros. Hours later, they returned to the Citadel
and disembarked at the Spectre docks.

"You know, Thane," Amber said, "you'd make a great teammate."

Thane gave Amber a confused stare.

"Your point being?" he paused.

"You wouldn't mind if we asked you to come along on similar mission?" she proposed.

Thane took a moment to think over the question.

"I suppose I could between contractors," he nodded.

With those encouraging words, Amber and Thane exchanged contact numbers before they parted ways and left the docks. With James leaving the docks for his apartment, the two headed to the Spectre Academy for Saren to file his report while Amber sent Anderson a message regarding Cerberus' interests in the now deceased Thorian. After she finished, she checked the time in her omni-tool. Based on the lack of lighting in the outdoors, she and her mentor might want to get back home and prepare a quick dinner. After they left the Academy, they passed by a convenience store and each purchased a meal to bring home to their apartment. Once they returned, they took turns heating up their meals in the microwave while Amber searched the fridge for drinks. They sat down to eat several minutes later, with drinks and utensils in hand. Throughout the course of the meal, Amber quietly reminisced on the recent discovery from the aftermath in Feros.

"Do you think they'd target us too?" Amber asked.

Saren couldn't help but shudder at that thought.

"I-I don't know," Saren admitted.

Saren gave Amber a soft glance before he ran his talons through her hair.

"But I'm sure we'll find some way to save all of us," he continued, "besides, they have no reason to come after us yet, and they aren't entirely invincible."
A month has passed. So far, Javik barely managed to recover before he was released from the hospital and was now spending time with Liara. Still he has yet to adjust to his new surroundings.

As far as Amber was aware, it would only be a matter of days before the Alliance and the turian Hierarchy finished constructing the vessel Anderson dubbed the Normandy. As she closed that message, Amber scrolled to the next message from Grissom Academy before reading it.

[Commander Shepard,

After some due consideration, we have agreed to let Jacqueline Nought and Urdnot Wrex move in to Grissom Academy. We are certain they would get along well with the young biotics here.

Regards, Dr. Kahlee Sanders]

Amber sighed with a smile as she closed the message. If anything, she felt a sense of hope that Jack would not only be safe in Alliance space, but she would most likely thrive at that particular station. The most she could hope for the biotic was that Cerberus hadn't slipped in some agent undetected to perform a smash-and-grab. She finished brushing her hair before making her way out to the living room.

Since Saren was running his own errands, Amber slipped on her shoes and stepped out of the apartment. Jack would be shipping out to the Academy and she wanted to inspect the security detail before they departed. She meandered through the Presidium and made her way into the wards until she found Jack's apartment. She stepped over to the front door and pressed her finger against the doorbell. Jack appeared at the door in her marine fatigue.

"Hey, Shep!" Jack chirped, "come on in! I wasn't expecting you this morning."

Amber smiled before Jack beckoned her to step through the door. They made it to the living room, where Wrex was reclining on a lounge chair. The living room had her footlocker and backpack fully packed and ready to leave on a moment's notice. Both women sat down on the couch.

"So, what's new?" Jack asked.

"Just came by," Amber answered, "wanted to see things through before you left."

"And the Normandy?" Jack added.

"It'll be up and running soon," Amber responded, "the finest tech both the Alliance and Hierarchy has to offer, along with a prototype stealth system. Unfortunately, some of the command isn't entirely impressed regarding its cost."

"Oh?" Jack folded her arms, "humor me."

"I got into a lengthy conversation with a Rear Admiral Makhailovich," Amber explained, "talking about how the Normandy was just a means of playing nice with the other races and that the funding would've been better allocated elsewhere."

Jack hummed as she nodded.

"So," Amber asked, "how's Joker doing?"
"He's still asleep," Jack shrugged.

"Tired?" Amber raised an eyebrow.

Jack couldn't help but burst into laughter. Seconds later, Wrex grumbled as he slowly woke up and stood from his chair.

"Oh," Wrex blurted, "morning, Shepard."

"Morning. I decided to pop in and check on Jack."

Wrex nodded before he trudged into the kitchen to grab something to eat from the fridge.

"Shame I can't come along," Wrex sighed, "I actually like having Jack around."

While Wrex plopped onto the lounge chair and started eating, Amber took a moment to double-check her message from Grissom Academy.

"Actually," Amber corrected, "Grissom Academy informed her that you're welcome to accompany her."

He gave Amber a surprised expression.

"Really?" Wrex blurted.

Amber nodded.

"Biotics are new to humans and we're still trying to figure out how to use it," Amber said.

Wrex let out a deep chuckle.

"Oh, I'll teach 'em a trick or two," he joked.

Wrex took another bite out of his meal.

"Well, you still can make last-minute arrangements," Amber mentioned.

Jack took this chance to turn on the holoscreen with a remote and scroll through the channels.

"So how's Spectre work in the meantime?" Jack asked.

"Well," Amber answered, "I've been making some interesting discoveries as of late."

Jack eventually settled for a movie channel.

"Such as?" Jack insisted.

"We found the last living Prothean, for one," Amber started.

"A Prothean?" Wrex snapped.

Amber couldn't help but shudder as the krogan gave her a fierce gaze.

"Yeah, stuck in a cryopod in the Terminus," Amber nodded.

By now, Wrex finished his meal.
"Is he causing trouble?" he asked.

"No," Amber shook her head, "Liara's looking after him."

"What's he like?" Jack asked as she turned her head towards the Alliance commander.

Amber took a moment to think over the day she saw Javik awaken from his fifty-thousand year slumber.

"He was definitely pissed when he came out of his pod," Amber answered, "still had his armor on, too."

By now, Joker began stumbling into the living room, gogginess still clouding his head.

"Oh hey, Amber," Joker mumbled, "I didn't know you were coming over."

Amber snapped out of her thoughts and turned her head towards Joker.

"Morning, Joker," Amber grinned, "I was just checking up on Jack."

"So what's up?" he continued.

"Do you have any plans before Wrex and I head out to Grissom Academy?" Jack asked.

"Nothing much," Joker scratched his head, "I was looking to talk with the head-honchos, see if I could get myself into the cockpit of the Normandy."

Amber smiled as she leaned back.

"If you'd like," she offered, "we can discuss that with Anderson."

"That'd work," Joker gave a light nod.

Joker ambled into the kitchen to pour himself some coffee and fetch a blueberry muffin.

"How far along is the new ship anyways?" Joker clamored.

Joker sat down near the coffee table and started eating his breakfast.

"A few days from now," Amber answered.

"Good. I'd like to see it before we leave," Jack commented.

It was only a matter of minutes before Joker finished his breakfast. He stepped out of the living room and made his way towards his bedroom to change out of his pajamas. The ship had been docked on the Citadel, albeit within a shared dock between the Hierarchy and Alliance away from public view, and they planned on paying a visit before Jack and Wrex boarded the next transport out. Grabbing a taxi near their apartment, the four left for the docks.

Once they arrived at the gates to the docking bay, Amber led Jack, Joker and Wrex towards the booth and flashed the receptionist her ID. After leaving the luggage at the gates to the ship out to Grissom Academy, they continued their walk down to the dock at the end of the bay. Once they arrived at a private hangar, they stared in awe at a spectacular frigate almost at its completion. It had the sleek exterior they recognized from most Alliance vessels with the distinct difference regarding the rear of the ship. The angled, wing-like construction and engine layout resembled that of a turian ship. A few of the panels hadn't been attached yet, as mechanics raced to finish up the
last of the construction inside.

"Wow, this is amazing!" Joker chirped.

Wrex nodded in approval.

"That's quite the ship, commander," the krogan said.

"Thanks," Amber smiled.

"So I get to fly this?" Joker clamored, smiling like a kid on Christmas.

"I'm just as excited as you are," Amber nodded.

They left the dock shortly after and returned to the dock for Grissom. This time, Jack and Wrex took a step forward towards the transport.

"So, you ready to leave?" Wrex asked Jack.

Jack nodded. The two bid their farewells to Amber and Jeff before boarding the transport. They stowed their luggage and took their assigned seats. Jack closed the door to their cabin before she sat down next to the krogan. Wrex had set himself propped up along a bench for a nap along the journey. The human biotic pulled out her miniature gaming console and turned on a Mario game. Half an hour later, the ship had been fully prepared and disconnected from the dock. As the transport left the Citadel, Jack continued playing her game while she leaned into the krogan. He briefly flinched an eye open and looked down to her. Smiling, he went back to his nap. The transport continued its voyage before the Mass Relay flung it into FTL speed. The journey was otherwise calm with no incidents within the ship.

Hours later, the transport arrived at Grissom Academy. Once it landed at the docking bay, Jack turned off her console and rubbed Wrex's shoulder until he stirred. They gathered their luggage and disembarked the transport before making their way towards the entrance to the academy.

"Pretty place for a school," Wrex whistled.

"Yeah," Jack nodded in agreement, "it's been a while."

"You been here before?" Wrex paused.

Nodding, Jack led Wrex through the gates.

"A few times after I was pulled out of a lab," she clarified, "they helped me get used to the new powers a bit better than what the labcoats did back at Cerberus."

Wrex let out an enthusiastic hum as he and the human biotic made their way to the receptionist's counter.

"Welcome back, Jack," the receptionist greeted before she eyed the krogan, "is that your krogan companion?"

"Yeah," Jack answered, "he'll be helping with the lessons."

The receptionist smiled before she handed Jack a card key.

"Here. Same room from your previous visit. I'll have someone accommodate for your guest."
"Thanks," Jack smiled.

Jack and Wrex left the receptionist's counter and continued their trek through the academy. They made their way to the dormitories and meandered through the hall until they stopped at the door leading to Jack's room. Unlocking the door, the two entered. It was a small, two room block with the kitchen and quasi-living room in one and the bedroom in the other. This time, another bed had been added. It was no surprise the academy was expecting the krogan as Jack set down her footlocker and her backpack. Once Wrex set down his luggage, he examined her gaming console sitting in the entertainment center.

"So when do classes start?" Wrex asked.

Jack plopped onto the couch.

"Around a couple days," Jack answered, "I think we have enough time to settle in."

"Good. I need to wash. I'll be in the shower," Wrex made a beeline for the bathroom, yanking his clothes off.

Wrex stepped into the bathtub and closed the shower curtain before he turned on the faucet, relishing the warm shower spray. Jack quietly followed, peeking in from the bedroom door. She felt it wasn't a good time to disturb the krogan so she sat down and leaned her back against the wall. Strangely enough, the brief glimpse she made at a krogan's body without the armor gave her tingles in her stomach. What felt even stranger was that no flashback flooded her mind. She only pressed onto the doorway even as the krogan continued scrubbing himself. Was it curiosity drawing Jack's interest?

Minutes later, Wrex finished washing himself and turned off the shower before stepping out of the tub. When he dried himself up, he stepped out of the bathroom, only to notice Jack was still waiting along the wall.

"What?" Wrex blurted in a humorous tone, "were you impatient?"

"Needed to see the plates in full detail," she hummed.

Wrex took a brief glance at his own body before returning his gaze towards Jack.

"I didn't know you were into krogans," he mused.

Jack stood to her feet before she and Wrex made their way into the living room. The human biotic double-checked the curtains and closed them before sitting down next to the krogan. She started tugging off her own shirt and tossed it aside.

"Don't you think it's getting hot in here?" Jack pointed out.

Wrex took a moment to double-check the temperature with his own skin. Turning to his left, the krogan held out his hand and waited for a moment. Once Jack nodded at him, he perched it on her shoulder.

"You need something?" he asked her.

Jack slowly turned towards the krogan.

"You mind if I take a closer look at your…plating?" Jack requested.
"Go on."

Her hand traced the rocky, coarse shell of Wrex's body. His chest let out deep rumbles as he reclined on the couch, encouraging Jack to climb on top of him. As she nuzzled her face against his, the krogan drew circles on her shoulder blade. The human biotic couldn't help but moan as she ground her hips against his leg. He chuckled in response, feeling the length of her body. It was partially scarred along her back by what appeared to be some crude tool. Still, he felt that was worth asking later, so he ran his hand down her back.

Seconds later, Jack undid her belt and started sliding her pants down her legs. She kicked them off and spared no delay pressing herself against him. Wrex traced one hand along her stomach until he found the apex of her legs, keeping a close eye on her expression. She had finally shied away from her usually hardened exterior, letting herself get soft for once.

"Sure you can take the likes of me on?" Wrex asked.

"I trust you enough for this," Jack nodded, "it's fine."

Once Jack straddled her legs on the krogan's lap, Wrex slid one thick finger inside of her. She was tight and already slick. He felt around her before starting to edge deeper, not wanting to hurt her. Gasping, she perched her hands on his shoulders. He remained otherwise calm as he continued to prod and test her. As Jack moaned softly, she gave Wrex a soft kiss. Minutes later, he pulled his finger right back out, with trails of transparent fluids following behind.

"Jack," Wrex whispered, "you ready to go further?"

"Yeah," Jack nodded, "let's have some fucking fun."

Upon cue, Wrex slowly turned over and rested Jack on her back, the krogan nuzzling his face against hers. He confidently leveled himself and pressed inside, feeling her snugly wrap around him. Groaning, she held him close as he slowly sunk in further, giving her time to adjust to his thick length.

He was definitely bigger than most humans, but that didn't mean he was impossible to handle. The spines arranged along his length added to her carnal thrills. She tugged hard on his carapace, pressing herself down harder. Wrex slowly pulled out of her before he pushed himself back in. The krogan chuckled at Jack's reactions to his motions. It was amusing to say the least. The human biotic perched one leg over the krogan's waist as he kept pounding into her flesh. Her arms wrapped over the side of the couch, bucking her hips like she was riding a horse.

As Wrex drove into her, he craned his head and traced his tongue along her neck, the fluids coating their nether regions generating a suction-like sensation in the midst of thrusts. Reaching her climax wasn't too hard, as her body wracked with pleasure moments later. The two paused for a moment to gather their bearings.

"So," Wrex panted, "is this a toe in the waters thing?"

"I'll be ready for the second round in a few minutes," Jack answered between gasps.

Wrex nodded before he stroked her head with one hand. She stretched a bit before leaning back in.

"Let's continue, shall we?"

Wrex nodded before he started grinding into her. It took a while to stretch his way into her, but he soon returned to his normal tempo. As Jack moaned in sync with the krogan's thrusts, she tapped
her forehead against his. Her uneven breathing brushed against his warm and moist face. At the same time, heat built up inside of both of them. Jack hugged herself against his body. It felt like a warm rock heated by the bright sun on a beach.

Wrex brushed his hand along the human biotic's side. An air of tension was built around her, with the crispness of static electricity. Jack's moans grew louder as she arched her back. Just as they were closer to their peak, she felt his length's spines flex as they brushed along her soft walls. She tightened her grip as her climax caused her walls to tighten around him. Wrex howled as he reached his own high, feeling the fluids drip down his length moments after. As they both panted, the krogan brushed a few strands of her hair from her eyes. A minute later, Wrex slowly withdrew from her before she sat up.

"That felt good," Wrex said, "what about you?"

"I never felt like dating humans," Jack replied with a smug expression, "and now I know that I don't have to."

Wrex nodded at Jack as she stood to their feet. Once she fetched some cleaning supplies, they both cleaned up the mess they made before they slipped into some casual clothes and plopped onto the couch. Jack pulled out her mobile device and opened up another game…at least one that Wrex didn't immediately recognize. Still, she angled the device so he could get a good look at the screen as she started playing Bioshock.
Amber stood alongside the railing at the docking bay while she waited for her squadmates. Today was the day she would put the Normandy to its first test now that it was in full operation. She scrolled through her message inbox and double-checked one of them from Benezia. From what the asari Matriarch told her, Cerberus has been getting bolder these days. If she could help stop them from getting their hands on the Matriarch's research project, it'll be another victory for the Alliance.

Several minutes later, Amber spotted Saren as he led Garrus, Kelly, Javik, Liara, Thane, James, Kaidan, Ashley, Kasumi, Joker, Dr. Chakwas, Mordin and Tali’Zorah into the docking bay. Her grin becoming more apparent, the Alliance commander pulled out her dream catcher and dangled it where it would be visible to the public eye. Saren took notice of the dream catcher and nodded at her. The turian Spectre led the others towards Amber with no hesitation.

"So, did you get my message?" Amber asked.

"About Benezia's predicament?" Saren answered with a nod, "I have."

"I'm at the Normandy," Amber replied, "we'll be taking it for a run."

With not much else to say, Amber led Saren and their crew through the docks until they reached a secluded hangar where the Normandy rested. The engineering crews had put on the final touches and put the last panels into place on the hull. They didn't hesitate to walk across the ramp aboard the ship before they began taking a look around. Most of the crew had already boarded and were at their stations making final preparations for their maiden voyage. While Dr. Chakwas and Mordin found the medical bay, Amber, Saren, Kelly, Joker, Garrus, Liara and Javik located the bridge.

"Commander, need anything?" Kelly asked.

"I'm good for now," Amber answered.

Kelly nodded at Amber before she stepped over to her new post and started examining it. At the same time, Amber escorted Joker to the cockpit, the Alliance flight lieutenant settling into the pilot seat.

"Seat's a bit rough, but all the controls are so far familiar," Joker commented, "when's takeoff again, Shep?"

"That'll be in a few minutes," Amber answered, "just for final system preparations. I'll give my word then."

Joker nodded at Amber before she stepped towards Saren.

"What's the word on Matriarch Benezia?" Saren asked.

"Cerberus began its attack on Peak 15 hours ago," Amber explained, "Benezia is currently holding them off with her reinforcements."

"What exactly is a Matriarch doing with a detachment of bodyguards anyways?" he pressed, reviewing the paragraph on her dossier.

"From what I heard, she recently found some creatures called Rachni," Amber replied, "and apparently Cerberus wants to get their hands on them."
Saren was taken aback all of a sudden.

"Rachni? How does the saying go," Saren paused, "you sure they aren't pulling our legs?"

"I'm sure of it," Amber nodded.

"And how does Dr. T'Soni feel about this?" Javik interrupted.

Liara gave Javik a serious momentary stare before shifting her gaze towards Amber.

"Javik stated the Protheans had encountered the Rachni before, and were a considerable pest to dispose of," Liara replied while shaking her head in disbelief, "still, I worry about my mother's safety."

"We'll get there soon enough," Amber reassured, "the last of the crew is boarding and we'll be off the station in short order."

"Thank you, Shepard," Liara nodded with a sigh of relief.

Several minutes later, the rest of the crew finished boarding the Normandy. She headed to the bridge to Joker.

"Everyone's aboard," Amber instructed, "let's move out."

Jeff stretched as much as he could without hurting himself.

"Let's see what this girl can do."

Joker tapped on a few keys on his terminal and turned on the Normandy's ignition. The ship roared to life as the magnetic clamps released her from the docking bay. Reversing out of the hanger, Joker took them out of the station towards the Mass Relay. Once this new frigate reached the ancient structure, the relay flung it into FTL speed. She turned and made her way back to the command center shortly after. Saren sat down next to her and it wasn't long before Garrus, Liara, Javik, Kaidan and Ashley entered the command center and settled into their seats.

"Currently, Matriarch Benezia was working with a recovered Rachni sample when Cerberus raided her lab," Amber explained, "for the time being, she has the specimen contained, but Cerberus has other ideas. Our job is to head in and secure the package for relocation elsewhere."

Kaidan carefully read the map on the holographic projection.

"Where is the lab located anyways?" Kaidan asked.

"We're heading to an ice planet called Noveria," Amber answered, "a local firm is located there providing space and protections for their customers. Her lab is one of the farthest out at Peak 15. Once we land, we'll be approaching on foot with a rented vehicle. Otherwise, there is very little to land at in the surrounding area."

Ashley nodded in agreement.

"Any intel regarding how the security detail is holding out?" Ashley pondered, "how much longer do we have until Cerberus takes their position and the Rachni samples?"

"Unless we intervene," Amber replied, "around less than twenty-four hours."

Saren folded his arms while Amber leaned over the projection table.
"I, Spectre Arterius, Dr. T'Soni, and Javik will be heading in directly to secure the Matriarch and her team," Amber continued.

"You got it, Shepard," Kaidan saluted.

It didn't take longer than a couple hours before the Normandy emerged from a Mass Relay and made its way towards Noveria. They quickly landed at the port and geared up to disembark. For this occasion, they resorted to slipping into winter envirosuits. Once they finished their preparations, Amber led Saren, Liara and Javik out into the hangar. From there, a few guards stood at the door leading to the docks.

"Hold it," one of the guards interrupted, "we're going to have to ask you to go through a security check before we can let you through the port."

Saren huffed before he took a step forward.

"We're here on Spectre duty," Saren explained.

"Still," another guard shook his head, "Cerberus has set up shop in our backyard, and we can't afford to take any chances."

"Would it help if we cleaned house for you?" Amber offered.

"Look, it'll take only a couple of minutes to scan you and your crew," the captain of the guard insisted.

It took a moment of silence before Amber nodded in agreement.

"Fine," she sighed, "but we're heading over to Peak 15 immediately after."

The security guards took this as a cue to activate their omni-tools. A few minutes later after scanning, they were granted access to the facility themselves and were directed to the garage leading to the path to Peak 15. Nearby, Amber spotted a ground transport that appeared to fit four people by design. The group packed in and drove to the entrance as the garage shutters opened up for them. With Amber taking control of the steering wheel, she drove the transport out into the freezing field. They rolled over the icy hills with the weather dragging visibility down to a miserable blur. This meant the Alliance commander had to take extra caution in meandering around any obstacles.

Inching over each hill, they gradually got closer to Peak 15, signified by a pillar of smoke. At a distance, Javik peered through the window and barely noticed a Cerberus ship. It had landed in the difficult slopes and set camp for the detachment.

"They're quite dug in," Javik commented.

Amber double-checked the radar before returning her eyes on the icy road.

"I see them," Amber suggested, "let's keep things quiet as we move in."

It may have taken a while, but Amber soon found a secluded area to hide the transport not too far from the nearest entrance. Hopping out, they meandered towards a nearby vent and pried it off before crawling inside. A brief gust of steam brushed past her face, giving the squad some warmth and relieving them of the blistering cold temperatures. They crawled through the cramped, dark tunnel and eventually found a small, source of light at the end. The slits became clearer as they got
closer before kicking the vent cover off. They quickly ducked behind some cover as Cerberus troops were still patrolling the corridors.

"Easy enough," Javik started off tossing a grenade and opening fire.

The rounds that killed some of the Cerberus troops attracted attention from the others as they all focused on the Prothean, so they wasted no time in returning fire. He aggressively moved forward, blasting a few Cerberus soldiers in the open with his biotics to suppress them while he closed distance. Amber, Saren and Liara emerged from their cover and began to provide cover fire. The rest of the Cerberus guards were handled with ease, which encouraged Amber and her squad to continue venturing forth. They approached the door as Amber reached to get Javik's attention.

"Next time," Amber warned, "let's keep this quiet until we're close to the Matriarch, okay?"

Javik instantly glared at Amber.

"If I recall, you specifically stated we're on a tight schedule to rescue her mother and her bodyguards," Javik reminded, "we have to strike quickly and decisively if their situation is as dire as you state it to be."

Saren scanned his surroundings while listening for any footsteps from the other floors.

"Let's just keep moving," the turian Spectre suggested.

Amber led her squad through the door. They kept low as they continued forward after a squad of Cerberus soldiers passed by them, presumably investigating the disturbance created by Javik earlier. With little standing in their way, they continued venturing through the tunnel, with Liara noticing turrets facing the wrong direction. Has Cerberus yet to rig them? Still, it was only a while before they reached the door to the security office near an elevator. Just beyond the security glass locked behind the doors was a cluster of creatures most of them hadn't recognized. They resembled shrimp with their crustacean bodies and dull gray-maroon plates covering their body.

"It seems containment measurements are more dire than anticipated," Javik commented.

Liara took this moment to carefully examine the creatures.

"Are those…?" she asked.

"They're Rachni," Javik answered, "and don't let their feral appearance fool you."

With Amber and Liara focused on the Rachni, Saren peeked through the door and scanned the tunnels.

"They're cramped in there," Amber observed, "trying to pry their way out."

Amber took a moment to find a control panel, catching the Prothean's attention.

"Do you seriously intend to release them?" he demanded.

"I'd prefer an alternative to having to blast our way through them," Amber avoided Javik's gaze.

Amber found a control panel and turned on her omni-tool.

"I suppose those quarantine vents are an alternative," Saren suggested.

While Amber deciphered the control panel, Saren cut open a nearby vent with his omni-tool.
Seconds later, the Alliance commander unlocked the latch and opened the security door. Javik immediately held his rifle at the ready, prepared for if the Rachni were about to pounce. To their confusion, the Rachni focused their eyes on them, but didn't move. After a minute or so, Amber carefully stepped through the security door. The arachnids continued their neutral stance despite Javik's hostile approach. The Alliance Commander kept her soft expression as she approached them with caution. They continued through otherwise unharmed by the loose Rachni creatures down the corridor.

"What was that?" Saren wondered aloud.

Amber thought about the question for a moment.

"I know I didn't see anything hostile about them," Amber shrugged.

"That still doesn't change the fact you let them out of containment," Javik chastised.

Amber glared at Javik before she continued leading them down the corridor.

"That doesn't explain why they didn't jump us the moment I opened the door," Amber remarked.

"That is a fair point," Liara agreed.

Saren rolled his eyes.

"We'll get more answers when we get there."

They continued venturing their way through the corridor until they stopped at an elevator. They wasted no time stepping in while Saren punched at the button indicating their floor destination. An automated voice rung from the speakers.

{Error — personnel not recognized. Calling security to escort you off the premises.}

"W-What the…?" Amber blurted.

Saren pecked out from the elevator, weapon drawn.

"We should probably find an alternative route down," Saren suggested.

Saren led Amber, Liara and Javik out of the elevator when Cerberus soldiers swarmed through the corridor.

"There they are! Open fire!" the Cerberus squad leader barked.

The instant the Cerberus soldiers began firing their rounds at them, Amber and her squad wasted no time as they fought back. They narrowly ducked down the next corridor and kept running. The Alliance commander knew they were running out of time, so she led the turian Spectre, the asari archaeologist and the Prothean soldier down the corridor while Liara emitted a biotic field to shield them from enemy fire.

"Well, we've been compromised. Let's find the Matriarch before they box us in," she ordered.

It didn't take long before Amber, Saren, Liara and Javik made their way into a large chamber holding a tram. Saren closed the door behind them and sabotaged the lock.

"That'll keep them at bay for a bit."
Amber gave her mentor a smile of approval before they made their way towards the tram. The turian Spectre got to work operating the control panels which caused the doors to close. They glanced over their shoulders through the glass as the door on the platform started to show damage from breaching charges planted by their pursuers. Seconds later, the tram began moving along its tracks just as Cerberus soldiers emerged from the door. The troops disappeared behind them as the tram whisked them away down the tracks. Letting out a sigh of relief, the Alliance commander sat down on a bench, hoping the tram didn't break down along the way.

"That was too close," she said.

Saren sat down next to Amber and placed his hand on her shoulder.

"You alright?" Saren asked, "the tram is taking us to the other side of the compound."

"I'm ok," Amber replied as she leaned into Saren's touch, "we'll try to figure out where to go when we get there."

Saren smiled as he wrapped an arm around Amber. Up ahead the terminal came into view as the tram slowed down again. They stood back up and checked their equipment on their way to the door. Now that they arrived at the Rift Station, they knew they had no time to lose, so they disembarked the tram.
The signs of skirmish were apparent as they made their approach. For the time being, the Cerberus forces had withdrawn from the particular part of the station to wait the Matriarch out, as the power was completely out and the emergency lights were starting to run out of juice. As Saren, Amber, Liara and Javik made their way through the corridor, they used the flashlight feature in their omni-tools to light the dark path. The remains of a few lab personnel were scattered about along with pieces of Cerberus armor, dropped firearms, and Rachni corpses. Even if she kept sprinting forward, Amber could help but notice anxiety trickling into her spine. A minute or so later, they reached the door leading to the secure lab.

"Freeze!" an asari in black armor jumped up from cover with her sights set on them.

"You idiot," another asari appeared, chastising the other, "they aren't even Cerberus. I assume you're the rescue team?"

"Yes," Liara nodded after making a sigh of relief, "is my mother all right?"

"Yeah. Come on back, we'll let you in. And be glad your safety was still on, jackass," the second guard answered, tossing her companion a look of ire.

Both asari guards led Amber and her squadmates through the door.

"The Matriarch is in the back. She can explain everything."

"Thanks. Remain vigilant. I'm not sure of our escape route, but we'll be getting out soon," Saren replied.

Saren, Amber, Liara and Javik ventured through the lab in search of the asari Matriarch. The remaining lab personnel and guards were huddled up in the living quarters, quietly waiting for the outcome of the attack. Towards the back of the room stood an elder asari in a bleach-white lab coat.

"I'm still not sure that violating quarantine would be worth the risk. We manage to get out of range of their hammers, we won't get the warning out in time."

Out of all the asari taking refuge, Liara recognized one of them.

"Mother?!" Liara called over.

The asari Matriarch snapped her head towards Liara.

"Liara?!" Benezia exclaimed, "what are you doing here? And how'd you managed to get past the Cerberus forces?"

Liara scurried over to Benezia and pulled her into a warm embrace.

"I was worried about you," Liara stammered, "so I thought I'd accompany Shepard to come to your aid."

Benezia softly patted her daughter's head before turning her head towards Amber.

"Commander Shepard, I presume? It's a pleasure to meet you, but I can't believe you made it through. Do you have a plan for our escape?"
Amber and Saren exchanged glances in a moment of silence.

"The Normandy crew will provide us covering fire on our way out," Amber explained, "in the meantime, will the Rachni be an issue?"

"Not as long as you keep the Rachni out of Cerberus' hands," Benezia answered, "I'm not sure if they've had access to the specimen, but they cannot leave the planet with it."

Liara released her mother from her embrace while Saren approached the asari Matriarch.

"We'll make sure that doesn't happen," Saren reassured.

It didn't take long for everyone in the room to assemble in close proximity so they could discuss the plan.

"The Normandy has been able to track our progress through the station and will be dropping ordinance upon the Cerberus vessel. If things go south, they were ordered to follow us into the facility," Amber explained.

Javik double-checked his rifle.

"And who should go retrieve the Rachni?" Javik reminded.

Benezia and Liara gave Javik a serious stare.

"They'll remain in containment for the time being," Benezia answered, "they'll be moved once the facility is clear."

Javik nodded before he stormed out of the lab.

"Commander, are you sure bringing him was a good idea?" Benezia paused.

Amber couldn't help but shrug.

"I was unaware he felt so strongly about the Rachni," she finished, "with Cerberus dealing with the Normandy, that should give us the opening we need to get your team to safety."

With Saren covering for her, Amber sprinted after Javik. This was a cue for Liara and Benezia to start evacuating the crew. The human Spectre started to sift through scattered pieces of Cerberus armor outside the lab for communications equipment. When she found some com devices, she handed one to her mentor.

"Cerberus uses devices that still work around their jammers. It's a risk, but we can get word out that we've reached the Matriarch," Amber explained.

Saren nodded in agreement before he started calibrating the com device in his hand.

"Hello? Normandy, can you hear me?" Saren called.

(This is Joker speaking,) Joker returned over the com-link.

"Spectre Arterius here," Saren returned, "we've secured the Matriarch and her team. We'll be moving them for extraction, so act fast."

{Got it, lifting off from port. ETA fifteen minutes. Hang tight.}
Once Saren ended the transmission, he nodded at Amber before they continued forth. Returning to the tram was easy enough as Cerberus remained on the frontmost section of the facility. Both Spectres remained on guard as Javik and Liara hustled the employees onto the tram. It had been otherwise calm as the team left the station.

"Once we're out, be sure to contact the central facility below, and let them know to have the Rachni moved to another facility," the Matriarch reminded.

"I'm on it," Amber nodded.

"Where are they being held?" Javik inquired.

Amber shifted her attention towards Javik.

"We encountered loose Rachni on the way here," she reminded, "remember?"

Javik grumbled as he rolled his eyes.

"That is exactly the problem. In simply 'containing' those pests," Javik protested, "you have granted them the opportunity for them to break out again. Must I remind you that during the Empire's reign, those things were probably the closest of any other species that came close to destroying us?"

Benezia sighed.

"Well, Prothean," she replied, "I'm not sure if we're even talking about the same species, but the instances of Rachni held here have been rather benign."

While Javik gave Benezia a confused stare, Amber scanned ahead. They were quickly arriving at the platform, and there was already a large Cerberus platoon waiting for them. The Alliance commander and the turian Spectre readied their weapons and stood by the door as the tram slowly came to a stop. In turn, the opposition was on the verge of opening fire when the floor plates under their feet burst upward. Half a dozen warrior Rachni followed shortly after and attacked the troops present. Even when the tram doors opened, Amber and Saren couldn't help but stare in awe.

"Just hang back and let them finish," Saren gestured to the others, "we'll move on when they leave."

By the time the Rachni left, Cerberus soldier corpses were left behind scattering the room and surrounding the large hole in the floor. They started disembarking the tram and following some distance behind as gunshots rang from down the hallway. As they passed through the corridor, blood and guts decorated the walls. A few more crawled past them without displaying hostility as they continued. It was almost like the Rachni were clearing a path for them.

"I still find their behavior suspicious," Javik reminded.

"Oh, really?" Amber rolled her eyes at Javik.

"Can you two please quit your squabbling?" Saren sighed in an irritated tone.

Amber snapped out of her thoughts and kept trudging forward. They returned to the front lobby and looked outside as they watched the remaining Rachni swarm the Cerberus ship. From there, the Alliance commander assumed something must've motivated them into carrying out this action. They paused for a moment longer when they saw an enormous Rachni unlike anything they'd seen before crawl into the open before rushing inside of the Cerberus vessel's open cargo hold. Still,
Amber had to remind herself that they had a rendezvous point to reach.

Rushing back through the garage, they arrived back outside with the Normandy just overhead. Standing at the base of the ramp, Garrus, Kaidan and Ashley were waiting for them.

"Uhh…Skipper? What's with the giant bugs?" Ashley asked.

Amber paused in her tracks and glanced over the shoulder, noticing a small Rachni behind her. They scampered over the hill and out of view as soon as they arrived.

"No clue," Amber shrugged, "they left us alone, but just tore through the Cerberus forces."

Garrus couldn't help but chuckle as he flexed his mandibles in amusement.

"So what are you going to do about the outbreak, commander?" Garrus asked.

"You worry about getting the Matriarch and her team aboard," Amber ordered, "we'll head to the Cerberus ship."

"Right away, commander," Kaidan nodded.

As Garrus, Kaidan and Ashley began escorting Benezia and her research team aboard the Normandy, Amber, Saren and Javik sprinted towards the Cerberus ship. They barely arrived in time to see the last of the Rachni still alive climbing aboard before it took off from the icy planes. Amber, on the other hand, couldn't help but cringe at the possibility of Cerberus bringing the Rachni under their control. Saren gave Amber a soft expression while he placed his hand on her shoulder.

"I don't think Cerberus will be able to handle their new guests," Saren reassured.

Amber gave Saren a soft smile before she shifted her gaze towards the ship that suddenly started wobbling midair. The ship teetered at an angle and flew just over the mountains at a precarious angle. All the Spectres could do was return to the Normandy. They boarded the ship and returned to the port to drop off the Matriarch. By now, Cerberus already vacated the port. The local security team escorted Benezia and her guards inside as the others returned to the Normandy. The Alliance commander was scrolling through her message inbox in her omni-tool. She hastily sent a message back to Benezia regarding the fate of the Rachni and the Cerberus crew they took their new ship from. She merely waited for several minutes for the Matriarch to respond. She returned to her quarters when she received the notification ping.

{Commander,
While I also understand why you dislike what Liara told me is a surviving Prothean, I still share his concerns when I saw the Rachni Queen board the Cerberus Frigate. During tests before the attack, we discovered that the creatures aren't so feral, and are capable of quickly adapting and learning how to use various pieces of tech. I suppose it wouldn't be farfetched to assume they can learn how to pilot the ship once they've eliminated the human presence aboard to settle on some other planet. Where or what the plan to do is still unclear. I hope the worst doesn't come of this situation.

Thanks again,
Matriarch Benezia T'Soni}
report for Anderson. Unfortunately, she still had to take into account the Rachni had escaped the facility and their whereabouts were currently unknown. Would there be a chance to come across them at some point? Once she finished her report, she carefully read through it before she sent it. She stood and exited her quarters for the mess hall.

Now that the Normandy departed, Amber found her teammates standing in line to serve themselves their meals, including Tali, Garrus, Thane, Liara, Javik and Saren. Once her turn came up, the Alliance commander served herself some curry. She sat down with her companions as they brought forward their own lunches. Her mentor sat down next to her seconds later as they started eating.

"How do you feel about the mission?" Saren asked.

"I guess you could say I'm doubting one of the Prothean's claims," Amber shrugged.

"The one about the Rachni being uncontrollable insects?" Saren took a bite out of a clam-like delicacy.

"Yeah, that one," Amber nodded.

Saren nodded in agreement.

"Well, if Javik is any proof," he replied, "it's that the Protheans were a rather irredeemable bunch."

Even if Saren and Amber didn't notice it, Javik overheard their conversation a few seats away and glared at them. Still, as the Normandy traversed through space, there weren't any further troubles for its crew to deal with as they relished in this little tranquil moment.
A few days have passed since the successful mission in Noveria. Part of her felt disappointed there weren't any recent updates concerning the Rachni, but Amber felt confident they'll find some way to thrive on their own merits. Still, she scrolled through the news outlets in her omni-tool. The news had turned increasingly grim from the outer colonies in Alliance Space. Pirate and slaver attacks had become pandemic and there wasn't enough defense assets to go around. She may have fought batarians at one point prior to her Spectre training, and now they have taken interest in humans, which was enough for her to cringe. Every now and then, horror stories would crop up regarding the conditions some slaves were found in. Whether they were true or made up was unclear due to how rare it was for a slave to be rescued once they disappeared from public safety.

After sending a quick message to Anderson, Amber waited for his response. Anderson wasn't sure about the matter either. With the mass-expansion of Alliance territories, there simply weren't enough fleets to go around and protect all territories, especially when some planets were more vital than others. Once Amber finished reading Anderson's message, she turned her head towards Saren, who held a cup of kava in his hands.

"I get that it isn't easy for us to adjust in a short amount of time," Amber sighed, "and now the batarians are taking interest in us."

"Yeah, the batarians have been keen on causing political nightmares through their time in galactic society," Saren shrugged.

Amber folded her arms on the table and rested her head on her arms.

"What would you do about them?"

Saren gave Amber a soft expression while he stroked her head with his talons.

"I dunno. Reminds me of my own mentor," Saren admitted, "had something against batarians."

Amber lifted her head off the table.

"Do you know what caused this mentor of yours to hate batarians?" Amber asked.

"I don't know," he shrugged, "I barely knew him myself, and there were some strange rumors circling him at the academy. I mean, very strange ones."

Amber blinked twice while she tilted her head sideways.

"Like what?" Amber pondered.

"He constantly wore his white and maroon armor in public, helmet included, and it kept most people uneasy about him. He was strong too, had a bunch of implants put in that I'm pretty sure no one is producing today. The most common story was that he was some genetically altered child soldier put together by a bunch of extremists before the Hierarchy cracked down on them. They found him and decided to employ him within the turian military. He was cunning and downright brutal, especially towards batarians."

Saren took a sip of his kava.

"Usually, he'd just go out of his way to either dismember or gouge the eyes of any batarians he'd
find," he continued, "I never found out what became of him once I was fully inducted."

"I see," Amber lowered her head.

Amber finished drinking her coffee by then.

"He was quite a harsh bastard," Saren replied, "to be honest, I'm still curious as to where he actually came from and who lacked the foresight to not brew him in a lab."

By the time Saren finished his kava, he and Amber took care of their mess before making their way towards the living room.

"Anyways, what'd you have in mind?" he asked.

"I wanted to start stemming the damage done by the slavers," Amber answered, "we'll start by stopping the next raid and unravel whatever we're up against from there."

Turning on her omni-tool, Amber examined the galaxy map, checking for colonies at the edge of Alliance space which would most likely be vulnerable. If it meant keeping their people safe, it meant starting with fending off parties of bandits. She eyed one particular colony not too far from its neighbors who had the misfortune to suffer such raids. With defenses weakened that far, it was perhaps the most vulnerable to the next wave of raiders. Amber headed over to her room and pulled her suit of armor out of the closet. She took several minutes to slip into it before heading into the armory. Stepping back out, she met up with Saren at the front door.

"You ready for this?" Amber asked.

Saren nodded with a smile before he followed Amber out of the apartment and they made their way through the Presidium. Once they reached the docking bay, James waited for them near the ramp to the Normandy. The ship was finishing up with resupplying and most of the crew had returned to their positions.

"Morning, Lieutenant," Amber greeted with a salute, "is Javik still getting along with you and Liara?"

"Not really. The good doctor is a bit shy and the Prothean isn't the most social of individuals," James returned.

James, Saren and Amber walked along the ramp and boarded the Normandy, making their way towards the bridge.

"Also, are you sure he should stay onboard?" James continued, "some of the guys have acknowledged discomfort towards the Prothean."

"I know how you feel," Amber replied, "I'm also keeping an eye on him in case he's up to no good."

She walked to the galaxy map and punched in the coordinates for Joker to fly to. Once the flight lieutenant read the coordinates seconds later, he tapped on a few keys in his terminal. Shortly after, they departed from the dock and left the system through the Mass Relay. While the Normandy traveled in warp speed, Amber and Saren made their way to the command center and met up with Garrus and Tali, where they started their briefing.

"Currently, we aren't occupied with any jobs," Amber began, "however, we're here to protect these outer colonies. Recent reports have shown the batarians getting more ambitious."
Garrus nodded as he read the map on the holographic projector.

"Anything we should look out for specifically?" Garrus asked, "like intel regarding their operations?"

Amber rubbed her chin.

"Most definitely," Amber answered, "also, keep an eye out for high-ranking members of any group we fend off against. Most importantly, watch your fire. We'll probably be fighting in civilian centers, and I don't want anyone caught in the crossfire. Got it?"

"What sort of armament do they have?" Tali asked.

Garrus tilted his head towards the quarian.

"From what I saw from fighting batarian slavers in the past," Garrus answered, "it depends. Usually, they can afford to purchase mid-tier equipment from their sales."

A while later, the Normandy emerged from the Mass Relay and continued traversing across the edge of Alliance space. She headed back cockpit to make contact with the colony below to inform them of their arrival. With Joker's nod of approval, Amber tapped on the terminal and began the transmission.

"Air Control," Amber called, "this is Commander Shepard approaching. Do you read?"

Eerily, the only sound that returned was fractured static. Both Saren and Amber shuddered as they carefully peered at the planet.

"Joker, take us down. Even if it's just a damaged telecom tower, they still need our help," she ordered.

"Copy that," Joker nodded.

They dipped into low orbit on trajectory to the colony. Saren flipped a few switches to activate the stealth systems before shifting his gaze back to the view outside of the ship. To his horror, the colony prefabs were under fire as gunships landed on the ground, batarian slavers disembarking to participate in their raid.

"Jesus…” Joker muttered.

"Take us in. Quietly," Saren acknowledged.

They all turned for the cargo hold to begin deployment. Amber and Saren met up with Garrus, Liara, Javik, Tali, Kaidan, Ashley, Kasumi, Thane and James as they gathered their weapons. They landed several minutes later on the outskirts of the colony before opening the cargo doors.

"Spread out and sweep the town," Amber instructed, "clear out as many as you can. Make sure to keep in radio contact with each other."

"Yes, commander," Kaidan nodded before he led Ashley and Thane in one direction.

In their separate squads, they quickly dispersed into the damaged colony. Amber led Saren, Javik and Tali down one street of the prefabs, making their way towards the tower. From the top, a few of the remaining colony security were attempting to maintain their hold from the tower as slavers increasingly surrounded their position. With the batarians distracted, Amber and her squad took
this as a cue to strike. The platoon that surrounded the tower was handled quickly.

From there, Amber, Saren, Tali and Javik burst through the door and sprinted through the lobby of the tower. From the top, the remaining group of soldiers rushed down to meet them. The leader took his helmet off and put it aside.

"Man, you guys are a sight for sore eyes. I didn't think anyone got our distress call."

Amber tilted her head upwards and took a step forward.

"We didn't," Amber replied, "we were passing by for inspection when we found the colony under attack."

"Well," the soldiers' leader shrugged, "it's at least better than having no one show up."

The soldier straightened up and sighed.

"By the way, the name's Major Taylor," he continued, "I'm head of security here."

"Commander Shepard," Amber returned.

Amber extended her hand, encouraging Major Taylor to shake it.

"Commander Shepard, pleasure to meet you."

Once Amber released Taylor's hand, she and her squad followed him farther through the lobby.

"Our supplies are dwindling, so we can't afford to exactly provide you with extra ammo or medi-gel," the major explained.

"I assure you we have enough of both to last us this trip," Amber replied.

"Perhaps you'd be so kind as to get word out once everything is said and done?" Taylor requested, "even if those bastards didn't have jamming equipment set up, all our coms equipment is down from the initial attack runs."

"We can handle it," Tali offered with a nod, "we'll come back once the colony is secure."

Shortly thereafter, they headed back into the torn colony. With batarian slavers still raiding the prefabs, Amber and her squad wasted no time as they charged after them. A few of the colonists were still holding out or were being dragged away to the ships parked nearby. The Alliance commander aimed her rifle at one batarian and blasted its head off while Saren emitted his biotic field. The attackers hadn't anticipated a well mounted resistance and weren't well equipped to combat anything more than civilian-grade weaponry and equipment. This gave the Spectres a chance to separate a few batarians from a few colonists.

{Commander, where are you right now?} Garrus suddenly called over coms from the other side of the colony.

Amber tapped one finger on her earpiece.

"Shepard here, go ahead."

{We've found the landing point for the slavers. Looks like they're starting to move people aboard. Orders?}
"Try to sabotage the ships," Amber ordered, "see if you can prevent them from leaving."

[Right away.] Garrus acknowledged over the com-link.

Amber ended the transmission and returned to battle. Since Saren took out the batarians in close proximity, they knew they would have to escort the nearby colonists to safety. Rushing forward, he knocked one down with the butt of his rifle before subsequently finishing them off with a single round. With a path cleared, Amber gestured the surviving colonists to follow her with Javik, Saren and Tali providing cover fire.

"Careful! Enemy placement ahead!" she warned.

"You got it, Shepard," Saren nodded.

Down the street and from the second floor, a group of slavers had set up an MG nest with a wide view below them. Looking for a way to get close, he noticed a fallen grenade launcher from one of the downed batarians nearby. He picked up the grenade launcher and double-checked its ammo. It still had a single unexpected round. Leveling the weapon, he fired at the nest, clearing out the slavers from a safe distance.

"Nice shot!" Tali cheered.

They continued forward, sweeping through the streets, picking off stray slavers.

Meanwhile, at the other side of the colony, Garrus, Kasumi, James, and Liara had begun crippling the slavers' vessels. As Kasumi and Liara fried the wiring of the electronics and puncturing the fuel systems, Garrus and James set out to rig just enough explosives to damage the engines, leaving the slavers grounded. They recently finished sabotaging another batarian vessel, so they disembarked it. They quickly regrouped before detonating the engines across all the ships.

"Nice one, Vakarian!" James cheered.

He raised his omni-tool to report back.

"Shepard, these slavers aren't going anywhere. We'll check for survivors when we have time. Where are you, and do you need assistance?"

[We're still doing all right.] Amber reassured over the com-link, [we're currently at the northeast side of the colony.]

Kasumi took a moment to reload her weapon.

"On the way," Garrus returned, "not sure about our ETA."

Garrus ended the transmission before he led his squad forward. A few of the nearby slavers had started to turn their direction to investigate the commotion near their ships. It was only a matter of seconds before one batarian noticed the barrel of Garrus's rifle pointed at its head. The commotion started as soon as the turian took the shot. The other batarians didn't hesitate as they focused their eyes on their attacker. Vega followed with a grenade and provided covering fire from the other side of the street. This encouraged Garrus, Liara, Kasumi and James to press forward. The group attempted to run, but had little cover to hide behind as Garrus picked them off. After wiping out the group, they found a group of huddled prisoners forced into cover. James lowered his gun and knelt to the ground, placing his hand on a prisoner's shoulder.
Hey," James said softly, "you all right?"

"You here to rescue us? Oh, thank God! I thought we were done for when…"

"Take it easy, you're safe now. We'll secure the rest of the colony shortly, but you have to remain hidden until the rest of the slaver presence has been eliminated or apprehended," Kasumi replied.

"A-All right," one survivor nodded softly.

They continued their path through the damaged colony after moving the captive colonists to a safe location. It didn't take long before they met up with Amber and her squad. Her team had been fighting another group of slavers at the time of their arrival. By the time they cleared out their opposition, the Alliance commander made a brief glance at Garrus.

"Good to see you made it. Did you ground their ships?"

"Those bastards aren't going anywhere," Garrus nodded.

"Splendid," Saren praised, "let's keep moving. We still have this area and the south quadrant to retake."

"Copy that," James agreed.

Rushing by one of the fallen batarians, Tali glanced at the slaver's omni-tool, as it pinged with an incoming signal. The quarian couldn't help but shudder in fear. Reaching down, she accepted the call.

{To any of the crew who's left, listen up. Our ships have been damaged, and our escape has been cut off. Head towards the south side of the colony. We'll regroup there and figure a new way off the planet. Just ignore any loot you've collected and get over here pronto.}

Once the transmission ended, Tali began sprinting until she caught up with the rest of the squad.

"They're fortifying to the south, Shepard," she informed.

"Oh, boy," James muttered.

Amber nodded at Tali before she continued leading the squad farther.

"Don't worry," Amber commanded, "they've got nowhere to go. Just remember to keep any superior officers alive."

"Right behind you," Garrus nodded.

The area where the slavers has held out at had been heavily fortified within the last several minutes. They had brought out mines, portable walls, and whatever arms they'd brought with them. In total, they counted around two dozen, with what seemed to be their leader firmly in back on an elevated position. Tali scouted the area with a drone from her omni-tool, getting a good view of the area around them. The drone began scanning for shortcuts they could use. A few options for shortcuts were relayed to Tali's omni-tool, giving her some satisfaction in her endeavor.

"Here, a path through their defenses. Looks like they haven't set any mines along it yet," she reported, showing her findings.

Amber read the scans before she nodded at Tali.
"All right," Amber announced, "let's move!"

They followed Tali close behind through a damaged prefab. They stopped just short of the front door outside. The last of the slavers were running around, finalizing their defenses. Saren attacked the group with a biotic shove followed by a biotic shield for cover. Amber, Garrus, James, Liara and Javik charged as they opened fire. A few grenades flew at them and bounced off the shield before exploding in the distance. As they gunned down batarians on sight, they kept an eye out for any of their superior officers.

Amidst the chaos, she could barely see towards the opposite of the opening, where a batarian in more flamboyant colors barking orders around him. Amber double-checked the ammunition in her pistol and switched to a thermal clip meant to stun enemies. Switching back to her rifle she peeked from cover, chipping at his shields with bursts of fire. The target in question lost his shields in a matter of seconds. She switched back to her pistol to down the batarian. With their area cleared, Saren emerged from cover and made his way to the downed batarian officer. The remaining batarians quickly recognized it was a losing fight. Lacking the zealous drive to fight to the last man, they started tossing down their weapons and surrendering.

With the fight coming to a close, Kaidan, Ashley and Thane arrived at the southern quadrant to help round up the remaining batarians. With the slavers apprehended, Amber radioed back to Taylor and the surviving colony security team. She and Saren waited at the entrance to the makeshift fortress until the security team arrived half an hour later.

"I sent some guys to the wrecked ship for survivors. Good to see you caught these guys, Commander," Taylor complimented.

"Same to you, Major," Amber smiled.

"So what do you intend on doing with these guys?" Taylor asked.

"Haul them back, see if we can get answers about their operations," Amber answered, "and start work on putting their slave ring to an end."

Major Taylor nodded before he and his security team followed Saren and Amber into the makeshift fortress.

"I assume you have called this in as well, right? Make sure the Alliance sends some help?"

Amber took this as a cue to turn on her omni-tool.

"Yeah," Amber nodded, "I ordered my pilot to signal command regarding the attack."

Taylor sighed in relief before they reached the center of the makeshift fortress, where the remaining batarians sat on the ground in holocuffs.

"I'd like to thank you again for showing up when you did," Taylor praised, "I thought we were goners at the time."

"Anytime," Amber gave a wink.

They returned outside where the Normandy flew overhead and towards the space port. Its crew knew there was a mess to clean up.
At the end of the day, Alliance ships finally showed up in orbit over the colony and started sending down relief supplies and equipment to repair the damage done by the slavers. As the Normandy left the colony and began traveling through space, Kelly ventured her way to the medical bay. To her left, Mordin just finished patching up Garrus's wounds.

"You weren't hurt that badly, were you?" Kelly asked.

Garrus chuckled as he slid off the bed.

"Just a flesh wound," he reassured, "it'll heal."

Kelly smiled softly as she and Garrus stepped out of the medical bay side by side.

"Anything I miss back on the ship?" he returned.

Kelly couldn't help but shrug.

"Not really."

He stretched his shoulder and chuckled.

"Yeah," Garrus said, "going to need a bit of a rest after that."

Once Garrus and Kelly made their way into the crew's quarters, the turian climbed into his bed and the Alliance yeoman lay next to him, nuzzling her face against his. He craned his neck up and cautiously looked around. He turned his gaze back to her with a toothy grin.

"You don't have any immediate duties to attend to, right?" Garrus mentioned.

"Not at the moment," Kelly answered.

"I was looking for a little…something to unwind…you get me?" he continued, tugging his shirt off.

Kelly took this as a cue to slip her boots off.

"Maybe that's why I was waiting for you," she remarked.

They tossed their clothing in a heap besides the bunk and shuffled under the sheets. As she nestled in his embrace, she pulled Garrus into a passionate kiss. She reached around his neck and grabbed onto his leathery skin. Her turian partner sighed in content as he ran one hand down her back and perched his other hand on her shoulder. The hand along her back cupped her waist, keeping it firmly in position while he brushed the side of her neck with his tongue. She let out soft moans before she kissed his neck, perching one hand on his waist.

One of her hands reached down, feeling the plates peel back to reveal his length. Garrus returned the gesture as he slid his talon into her folds, eliciting moans out of her as she bucked her hips against his hand. Feeling himself extend, he pried her entrance open to give himself an easier time thrusting into her. As he thrust his finger in and out of her, Kelly resisted the urge to clench her thighs on his talon. She felt his tip brush against her, tempting her further. While she felt fluids coating her walls, she licked his mandible until minutes later, he withdrew his talon.
"You ready?" he gasped softly.

Kelly nodded before reaching down and lining his tip with her nether regions. Pulling his talons out, Garrus wedged himself in and wrapped both hands around her hips. She let out a loud cry as she perched her arms over his carapace. Once Kelly perched one leg over his hip spurs, he started grinding into her. Her muscles turned to jello and her breathing became heavy and labored. While she angled her hips, she tapped her forehead against his. The fluids coating their nether regions eased the friction amidst their rhythmic pace. He growled deeply as he pressed deeper into her. Kelly pulled him closer as his chest rumbled with purring. His carapace felt like a rock on a beach, heated from exposure to the sun's caring rays of light. As Garrus brushed his tongue along her neck, she leaned into the savory touch as heat built up in her core. Shortly after, he let out a suppressed howl and trembled, releasing his seed.

Garrus took a minute or so to rest, before they turned over until he hovered on top of her. He slowly eased himself onto her and returned to thrusting. Bucking her hips in sync with his thrusts, Kelly perched her other leg around his waist. He slowly angled his body to shift his weight to his hips. The spines and ridges along his length sent pleasurable thrills through her nerves. Her grip started to slip due to her inability to focus. As Garrus continued to pant, he held her close as he accelerated his pace. He heaved with every thrust, eager to reach another climax. It took another thrust before he felt Kelly shudder in her first climax. She managed to muster enough effort to link her legs around his back while she just let her arms hang limply over the sides of the bed.

Garrus continued to rock his hips while he nuzzled his face against her neck. His tongue extended to slowly brush her soft skin. The friction of their movements built up pressure inside both of them. She gasped as her body shuddered with electric jolts shaking her inside out. Shortly after Kelly came a second time, Garrus also found himself reaching his limit. Seconds later, he withdrew from her and they basked in the afterglow. They hurried to the showers and washed off before returning to the bunks. Having come down from their high, Kelly nestled into Garrus's embrace.

"Thanks. I needed that," Garrus sighed.

"Same here," Kelly added as she nuzzled her face against his.

"Anyways, I'd like to get a few things done before I rejoin you later," he said, getting up from the side of the bed.

Kelly took a few minutes to rest while Garrus slipped into his uniform. Minutes after he left, she stood from bed and began changing into her civies. Even with the Normandy still in flight, the yeoman knew she had a post to return to.

On the bridge, Amber was overseeing their return to the Citadel. As they observed the Normandy locking onto the magnetic clamps at the docking bay, the vessel opened its ramp, giving the crew onboard a signal to disembark. Amber found a couple of turian generals waiting for her just at the end of the walkway. Among them, Saren recognized his brother.

"Desolas, I didn't think I'd be seeing you here," he greeted, keeping his tone level.

"Likewise, Saren," Desolas replied, "while I particularly don't find any interest in human politics, I still see an opportunity after the most recent raid on one of their colonies."

Desolas made a brief glance at Javik.
"How so?" Saren replied.

Desolas snapped his attention back from the Prothean.

"It seems the batarians are getting fed up with slavery being illegal," Desolas answered.

Amber tilted her head towards the other turian general.

"So, what are you proposing?" Amber asked.

"I suggest we prepare for the possibility the batarians could declare war on the Citadel," the other turian general advised.

He soon extended his hand.

"General Victus," he introduced himself.

"Pleasure to meet you," Amber returned, "I'd really rather not start a war with them."

Amber clasped Victus's hand with her own and shook it.

"Neither would I," Victus agreed, "we've been able to avoid such conflict with the batarians, but with the introduction of something such as your race to the galaxy, this is increasingly becoming a conflict we cannot avoid if we don't act quickly."

Amber nodded in agreement just as the rest of her crew began disembarking the vessel.

"Are you sure playing nice is out of the picture?" Amber asked.

Victus let out a soft sigh just as they all started meandering through the docks.

"That's more of a temporary fix than anything that will genuinely resolve any conflicts."

Once they left the docks, they made their way through the Presidium. Once Saren, Amber, Victus, Desolas and Javik arrived at the Citadel Tower, they met up with Anderson and Hackett at a conference room. Anderson was the first to greet her.

"Shepard, how bad was it?" he asked.

"The colony was in bad shape," Amber answered, "but we managed to apprehend their superior officers before they made off with their victims."

"That's a start. I wish we could reinforce that line, but the truth is that most of those colonies haven't grown enough to be considerable assets worth heavily reinforcing. Currently, most of those outer colonies are expanding mining camps and small-time agriculture," Admiral Hackett followed up.

As they sat down at the table, Hackett turned on the holographic projector, bringing up the map of the galaxy.

"Furthermore, they aren't exactly comfortable with our territories stretching to the edges of theirs."

Saren nodded as he read the map.

"So the end-goal here is finally dismantling the Hegemony, correct?" Saren asked.
"Or maybe," Amber added, "reforming their way of life, if that's a possibility?"

Desolas and Victus turned their heads towards Amber.

"That's the heart of the issue at hand," Victus pointed out, "slavery is integral to their caste system and nothing short of shaking their culture to its core will undo that."

Amber took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

"Even if that were somehow possible," Victus continued, "I'm not sure undermining their identity as a whole will do any good."

Without warning, Javik slammed his hands onto the table.

"Enough of your incessant whining," Javik scolded, "if the batarians are really a threat, then they should be treated as one."

Everyone else grumbled as they tilted their heads towards Javik.

"So what do you suggest?" Amber beckoned.

"If you really want to go the pacifist route," Javik advised, "convince members within the Hegemony that their system of governing is flawed. Allow this ideal to spread so it can cause the Hegemony to collapse from the inside out. How they wish to reorganize is up to them."

For once, Amber nodded in agreement.

"Sure, let's try it your way. If you have some solid ideas, I'm alright with it."

Javik ignored Amber's glance and focused on the Mass Relay locations on the galaxy map.

"We'll start with the lower caste members," Javik started, "the more disgruntled members if possible."

Desolas scratched his mandible.

"I suppose that's not a bad idea. Give the lowest denominator a sense of being undermined by the system, then quietly support any sort of uprising that ensues."

As she listened, Amber took notes in her omni-tool.

"So as long as we maintain discretion about the operation," Amber clarified, "the batarians should in theory sort themselves out?"

"I can accept that," Saren nodded.

"And what about afterwards?" Victus asked, "should we intervene in government reformation?"

Anderson and Hackett exchanged glances in a moment of silence.

"I think we'll only end up back at square one of the batarians and see this as any sort of external intervention with their own affairs," the former replied.

Victus and Hackett shook hands in agreement.

"Alright. Now, where do we start?" Hackett asked, "is there some figurehead we could fund for
this effort? Anyone to lead the new movement?"

"I might have an idea. It involves a batarian in exile for his political views," Victus answered.

Desolas scoffed.

"Don't tell me you're genuinely considering Ka'hairal Balak of all people," Desolas retorted.

"He is the lesser of two evils," Victus insisted, "we have to try."

Amber raised her eyebrows, her mind now filling with curiosity.

"About that guy," she spoke up.

Victus shifted his attention towards Amber.

"Balak had rather radical revisions for batarian society," Victus explained, "he started something and was quickly put down by the upper echelons of the Hegemony for fear of ruining the status quo. After he went into exile, he became readily well known and his views are nothing short of extreme."

"I might as well consider that," Amber nodded in agreement.

"He'll at least be enough of a disruption, but what about after he implements his 'ideal' society?" Anderson prompted.

Saren hummed as he placed a talon on his chin.

"The political turmoil should keep them busy with themselves," Saren confirmed.

"Then we might as well get started," Anderson concluded.

With the meeting adjourned, Saren, Amber, Javik, Desolas, Victus, Anderson and Hackett left the conference room. Once they left the Citadel Tower, the Alliance officers left while the human Spectre turned towards the older Arterius brother.

"Where is Balak, anyways?" Amber asked.

Desolas paused in his tracks.

"He's been living out his exile along the border between the Attican and Terminus on some desolate planet with otherwise minimal resources for survival," Desolas sighed.

Saren double-checked the map in his omni-tool.

"A rather contested area, too," Saren added.

"The Normandy should get you to him no problem. Bring him back and we'll discuss plans further," Anderson ordered.

After parting ways with the others, Saren and Amber meandered through the Presidium. They returned to their apartment to rest for the day, stripping off their armor and taking turns in the shower. Once they finished, they both gathered in the living room. Saren reviewed a dossier on his omni-tool regarding Balak. He was certain he didn't cross paths with this particular batarian throughout his missions, yet the turian Spectre felt General Victus's suggestion might make a viable game changer. Once he finished reading the dossier, he turned his head towards his human
girlfriend.

"You nervous?" Saren asked.

Amber made a brief glance and Saren and shook her head calmly.

"Not particularly," Amber replied, "why? Is something wrong?"

Saren let out a sigh as Amber placed her hand on his shoulder.

"It's not often that I agree with my brother on anything," Saren explained, "I'm in concordance with Desolas on Balak, that he'll start something worse than what we're faced with."

Softness in her eyes, Amber leaned closer to Saren.

"If you'd like," Amber offered, "we could try to get to know him more. Does that make you feel better?"

"A little," Saren admitted with a shrug.

Saren wrapped his arm around Amber, pulling her close and eliciting a sigh of content out of her.

"I love you, Saren," she said softly.

He shakily sighed as he leaned closer to her.

"I love you, too," Saren returned, "Shepard."

As Saren tapped his forehead against Amber's, she cupped his face with her hand and gave him a kiss. He put down his omni-tool, allowing it to shimmer out of existence before he leaned back, Amber in his grasp. He craned his head over hers, looking out the window in wandering thought.
A Truce with Balak

It took a day or so to record Balak's location, giving the Normandy an advantage to find him. From the overlook of the galaxy map, she reviewed the system they were traveling to. Upon leaving the Mass Relay, they would be initiating the stealth systems and making for the planet he was lining on. This gave the Normandy a chance to sneak past any mercenary ships that might be passing by. She walked to the front of the bridge alongside Joker's seat.

"What's our ETA?"

"We're almost fifty minutes out from landing planetside," Joker answered, "might want to start gearing up."

Amber nodded before she made her way out of the bridge. Heading for the cargo hold, she joined up with the rest of the squad to disembark for the surface on the Mako.

"All right," Amber announced, "we have less than an hour to suit up."

The team headed for the armory and returned twenty-five minutes later in armor and fully equipped for a worst case scenario. The mechanics were performing final checks on the Mako's systems before they boarded. To Amber's satisfaction, the Mako had been given much needed improvements. Several minutes later, the ship landed after entering the planet's orbit and the cargo doors opened onto the planet surface. They emerged onto a dust-ridden, desert wasteland with barren mountains as far as the eye could see. While the Alliance commander took control of the driver's seat, Saren, Kaidan and Kasumi accompanied her. Kasumi was serving as the navigator and Kaidan was manning the turret.

"We're roughly several klicks out, commander," Kasumi informed.

"Are you sure we're even in the right place? Kinda hard to imagine anything even living out here," Kaidan asked, peering out through the turret.

"General Desolas confirmed Balak's location," Amber assured, "so I'm sure this is the right place."

She accelerated over the dunes towards the foot of one the mountains. The road winded up the mountain towards the top, where it plateaued. In the open was a few prefabs, paint heavily marred by the weather and sand carefully shoveled away from the building. Amber parked the Mako near one of the prefabs and turned off the ignition. Leaving the vehicle, someone in a full suit with a shotgun exited the front airlock of the central prefab.

"Who are you? Did someone finally want my head?" he demanded in a thick, almost Eastern European accent.

Amber held her arm in front of Kaidan, persuading him to not raise his gun while the Alliance commander took a step forward.

"Are you Ka'hairal Balak?" Amber asked.

"So who wants my head?" he asked again, tightening the grip on his shotgun's barrel.

Amber positioned her palms forward.

"No one does," Amber insisted, "I promise you this."
"In fact, we had interest in reinvigorating your little revolution," Saren followed up.

Balak tilted his head sideways.

"Is that so?" he paused.

Amber nodded slowly.

"So are you still interested in the offer?" Amber clamored.

Balak slowly lowered his shotgun and slipped off his helmet.

"Yeah…I'll take an opportunity when I see it. I didn't think the Asari Republic or Hierarchy were interested in Batarian affairs."

Kaidan scratched his head while Amber removed her helmet, eliciting a confused stare from Balak.

"What…what the hell are you?!" he exclaimed.

"We can explain more on the ship," Amber replied, "how long have you been out here?"

"Almost a decade by now," Balak sighed.

"Is there anything you need to get before we leave?" Amber asked.

"No. Everything here is just salvage. They dropped me off with nothing when I was torn from batarian territory. All that's here is a warehouse, a greenhouse, and the main living area."

Balak soon started following Amber, Saren, Kaidan and Kasumi away from the prefabs and towards the Mako. They climbed aboard and shut the hatch behind them before traveling back to the Normandy. Once they parked the Mako in the cargo hold, they disembarked before meeting up with Garrus.

"No complications, right?" Garrus asked.

"Nope," Amber answered.

"So, when was your species introduced?" Balak interrupted.

Amber turned her head towards the rogue batarian.

"I'd say it's been less than a year," Amber replied.

"Hmm…I've missed out on quite a bit then," Balak mused.

Saren, Amber, Balak and Garrus left the cargo hold and strolled through the corridor.

"We'll get you up to speed in a bit. Follow us up to the bridge, we'll be heading back to the Citadel to discuss plans further."

Amber, Saren, Garrus and Balak soon arrived at the bridge, so the Alliance commander approached Joker.

"Get us out of here and quietly," Amber instructed, "don't want anyone catching wind of Balak's release just yet."

"You got it," Joker nodded as he tapped a few buttons in his terminal.
They lifted off as quickly as they arrived and shot back out of atmosphere. While slipping past mercenary vessels, the Normandy made its way out of the system and towards the Mass Relay. Without too much trouble or interruption, they entered FTL back to the Citadel. It was only a couple hours before the Normandy entered the Widow system and approached the Citadel, landing at the docking bay while General Victus stood in anticipation to greet them.

"Balak," Victus greeted, "I'm surprised to see you're still alive after your extensive exile."

Balak tilted his head towards Victus after he disembarked the Normandy.

"And I suppose you're the man heading this whole effort than," Balak remarked, "what do you have to gain from this?"

"The Hegemony has been getting bolder as of late," Victus explained, "they might soon declare war on the Citadel."

"Oh, those materialist bastards can't have enough, is that it?" Balak remarked, "I'll gladly take the opportunity."

Just as Amber and Saren met up with Victus, the four walked along the docking bay as the rest of the crew continued exiting the Normandy.

"We can provide any arms you'll need to restart your resistance effort as well as training and intelligence," the general added.

Victus led Saren, Amber and Balak out of the docking bay and into the Presidium. He led the group to a safehouse he had reserved for the batarian as they made plans for the Hegemony. They sat in a circle at the living room while a butler from Victus's estate offered an assortment of dextro and levo appetizers.

"So, you sure this will work? I mean, I don't have any more contacts back within the home system," Balak inquired.

Victus nodded.

"That ship you were brought here on has a prototype stealth system," he said, "it can take you in and out without so much as worrying about Hegemony authorities. From there, you can start operations until you can get enough recruits to start a significant movement."

Balak picked up a levo appetizer and bit into it.

"Ah, I see," Balak mused, "when I last attempted this, I started on the outer worlds, talking to the common people at refineries, factories, and forums. We'll start there again."

"We took interest in you after we stopped a slaver raid from one of our colonies," Amber added.

"That's the fall of the inner circle," Balak pointed out, "the tier system is a throbbing cancer, poisoning the proletariat and feeding off of them like worms. The slaves are a symptom of this corrupt machine."

Saren and Amber nodded in agreement.

"So you want the slavery economy dismantled in the Hegemony?" Saren cautiously asked.

"I want it gone with the rest of the old system," Balak said, "I want the old monarchs and barons
gone with it, too. Set the slaves and poor free."

"I understand that part," Amber agreed.

He lightly smiled as he leaned back.

"Now, when do we start?"

By the following day, Victus, Balak, Desolas, Saren, Amber and Anderson have started developing a possible plan to reform the batarian caste system. They haven't finished to the point they could execute it yet, but there was still some progress. While Amber and Saren sat in the living room of their apartment and she was playing The Binding of Isaac, she received a ping in her omni-tool, noticing a message from Joker:

{Hey, Shepard. You have any plans for your upcoming birthday?}

Amber sent a text in response.

{Nothing yet. Been busy with arrangements for Balak. What's up?}

Amber had to pause her game for a moment while she waited for Joker to respond again.

{I figured we could all have a get-together friends and co. before we head into batarian territory, celebrate then,} the pilot followed up.

The instant Amber finished reading the message, she began thinking of the possible restaurants she could invite her friends to. It didn't take long for her to find a suitable restaurant, so she responded to Joker's text.

{It's nothing fancy, but I know of a noodle shop down in one of the wards. Wanna check it out?}

It was only a minute or so later before she got another ping from Joker.

{Sounds great. Send me the coordinates and I'll share it with the others.}

It didn't take much longer for Amber to send Joker the coordinates to the noodle restaurant before shifting her gaze towards Saren as he exited the bathroom after grabbing a shower, still radiating with heat.

"Shepard?" Saren paused before he sat down next to Amber.

"Refresh my memory," Amber asked, "do turians celebrate…birthdays?"

Saren tilted his head sideways.

"I'm sorry, what?" he paused.

"Birthdays," Amber clarified, "it's typically the date someone is born."

"Oh," Saren replied, "well, the closest to that we have is when we come of age, reach fifteen and get shipped off to basic."

"Military training, right?" Amber pointed out.

Saren nodded.
"Why do you ask?" Saren told her.

"I'll be twenty-five in a few days, and I was going out for dinner with my friends to celebrate. Want to come along?"

Saren let out a soft chuckle, his mandibles fluttering into a grin.

"Obviously. Where will it be?"

Amber angled her omni-tool so Saren could see the coordinates to the noodle restaurant.

"It's the noodle shop," Amber clarified, "hopefully, that'll be alright with you?"

"Definitely," Saren nodded as he gently rubbed Amber's shoulder.

Amber turned off the omni-tool and was about to return to her game, but a knock on the door ruined the peace. Grumbling, Saren stood to his feet and trudged towards the door, only to find Nihlus standing outside when he opened it.

"Hey Saren, you called?" Nihlus chirped.

Saren folded his arms.

"What brings you here?" he asked in an irritated tone.

He grinned and spread his arms like an eagle.

"C'mon, I just wanted to check in," Nihlus insisted, "see how things are going."

"Then maybe you should call ahead of time," Saren suggested.

Still, Saren beckoned Nihlus to step inside.

"Pleasure to see you again, commander," Nihlus called over, "I assume life has been nothing short of vivid for you?"

Amber paused and glanced over her shoulder.

"Nihlus?" she blurted.

His smug grin didn't fade.

"That's me," Nihlus sang, "now, once again, how've you been?"

"Batarian slavers have recently taken interest in human colonists," Amber said, "so we found a rogue batarian so we can start a revolution in their caste system."

"Oho! Such excitement. Wish I could come along. Anything else?" the younger turian already made himself at home, lounging about like he owned the place.

"Nothing big apart from the fact I'll be turning twenty-five in a few days," Amber shrugged.

Saren sat between Nihlus and Amber, his eyes still locked onto the younger turian Spectre. He looked to the ceiling, processing her answer.

"Remind me," Nihlus said, "humans do celebrate every full standard year they live, right?"
Amber nodded.

"So what brings you here?" Amber asked.

"I've been hearing strange noises coming from your apartment," Nihlus rambled on, "and not the squeaking-bed type either."

Saren raised a browplate.

"What noises?" Saren paused.

"Rodents in the walls," Nihlus shrugged, "something like that."

Saren couldn't help but press his forehead into his palm.

"I'm confident that we don't have something crawling in the walls," Saren disagreed, "thank you very much."

Amber lifted her head and began listening for anything unusual. She thought she heard a light scratching noise. Placing the miniature console on the coffee table, she slowly stood from the couch and began wandering over to where the noise could be coming from. Saren and Nihlus continued their squabbling behind her as she wandered off. The Alliance commander pressed her hand onto the kitchen wall. It was slightly more audible now, the sound of rubbery limbs tumbling over each other.

"That doesn't sound like rodents," Amber whispered to herself.

Amber was certain the source wasn't inside the apartment, so she made her way through the living room towards the front door. She wandered outside the apartment building's perimeter when she spotted a group of Geth wandering behind the complex. Turning at the corner, she snapped her gaze around to find the source of the noise, only for them to freeze in place as they looked back at her.

"How did you guys get into the Citadel?" Amber demanded.

At first, they remained frozen, not answering her question. Amber couldn't help but stare at them in a moment of silence. It seemed odd that these units would even arrive at the Citadel. How was she going to explain this to Saren without the Councilors freaking out? Without speaking, they resumed creeping by, keeping their flashlight heads affixed on her. All Amber could do was wait, so she ambled over to a bench and sat down, keeping her eyes locked onto the Geth units. They continued and only stopped just around a corner, obstructing their line of sight. A few moments later, Saren appeared, rushing forward with some panic.

"There you are!" Saren gasped, "what are you doing here? You had us worried."

Amber snapped out of her thoughts and glanced over her shoulder as Saren rushed over to her side.

"Saren?" Amber replied, "I'm all right. I…"

Amber couldn't finish her sentence as the Geth units focused on her and Saren, letting out clicks and whistles. He looked to the source of the sound and narrowed his browplates.

"Amber, let's go," he whispered, tugging on her.

Amber slowly stood to her feet, even when one Geth unit took a few steps forward.
"Shepard Commander," it addressed.

She just stared back.

"Did that Geth just…"

The Geth unit slowly approached Amber even when Saren held her in a protective embrace.

"Arterius Spectre, Shepard Commander, we've been wishing to speak with you."

"All right, then," Saren insisted, "explain."

"What do you currently know regarding the Old Machines?"

Amber and Saren exchanged glances.

"You mean the Reapers?" Amber clarified.

"Reaper, superstitious term coined by Protheans," it paused, "yes."

Out of interest, Saren and Amber sat down at the bench.

"Please continue," Saren said.

The Geth units began gathering around their supposed leader and focused on the Spectres.

"The Old Machines had made us a proposition. We rejected, sought your attention, spread information."

"Wait," Amber paused, "they…contacted you?"

"Yes. Claimed would provide us future. Data from Prothean stated otherwise."

Saren placed a talon on his chin.

"What kind of future?" Saren pondered.

"We seek to create our own future. Old Machines offered to remedy this."

Amber nodded before she started recalling on the events that led up to this point. As far as she knew, the Alliance still had Cerberus and the Batarian Hegemony to deal with, the krogans still haven't recovered from the Genophage, and the human race itself had yet to adjust to its new surroundings.

"You think they'd want to wipe us out?" Amber asked.

"We currently suspect so," the leading Geth unit nodded.

Saren wasn't sure why, but he felt panic surging through his veins.

"When will…they come?" Saren managed to let out.

"Calculations suggest within a year," the Geth unit answered.

They gave each other worried glances.

"So we have a year to prepare," Amber repeated, "what are we going to do?"
Saren let out a sad sigh as he placed his hand on Amber's shoulder.

"I don't know," he whispered, not bothering to hide the defeat.

Amber embraced herself to Saren as he focused his eyes on the Geth.

"Do you have a plan towards dealing with them?"

There was a moment of silence before the Geth units nodded in unison.

"The best possibility of survival is to unite all races in the galaxy," the Geth unit suggested, "a united galaxy could stand a chance."

Saren closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Well," he replied, "I suppose that's a start."
Saren lounged in his office chair, looking over the notes he had taken from the conversation the other day. Feeling somewhat satisfied, he initiated a call with Sparatus.

*Spectre Arterius?* Sparatus paused over the com-link.

"Councilor, I've recently received a bit of extra intel regarding the Reapers," he answered.

*Reapers?* Sparatus mentioned over the com-link, *you mean these machine dreadnoughts the Prothean claimed to be the greatest threat in existence, correct?*

"Yes sir," Saren nodded, "we've got a relative time frame with which to prepare, what to expect, and even schematics for some of their models. Not even our heaviest dreadnoughts would match that sort of strength."

Saren heard an audible groan from Sparatus.

*Why don't you and Shepard come over to my office?* Sparatus advised over the com-link, *we'll discuss this matter further.*

"Understood," he quickly hung up and exited his office, "Amber?"

Amber stood from the couch and shut off the TV.

"Sir," Amber nodded at Saren.

"I just told Sparatus about our conversation yesterday, and he wants to meet us in his office."

Upon cue, Amber sauntered over to the front door and slipped her shoes on. She and Saren left the apartment, meandered through the Presidium and made their way towards the Citadel Tower. Once they stepped through the door, they took an elevator to one of the higher floors and wandered through the hallway until they stopped at the door to Sparatus's office. The door immediately slid open before Saren got a chance to knock, Sparatus standing to greet them.

"Come in," Sparatus beckoned.

Saren and Amber stepped into the turian Councilor's office and settled into their seats, Sparatus sitting at his desk.

"I'm glad you two have found additional intel on the Reapers," the Councilor continued.

"It wasn't easy gathering the intel," Amber added, "but the clues from Javik and the Geth helped."

Sparatus blinked.

"Think my translator just glitched," he blurted, "the Geth gave you this information?"

"Part of the information," Saren slowly nodded, "yes."

"I see…what'd they have to say?" he prompted, leaning nervously back in his seat.

"According to them," Amber replied, "we have one year before the Reapers arrive. When would be a good time to warn the others?"
This made Sparatus even more uncomfortable.

"Look, let's keep this matter confidential right now," Sparatus requested, "my interest is still keeping our people safe, but they have to remain calm, and letting this out will only stir panic and confusion."

Amber and Saren exchanged glances before they nodded.

"So in the meantime," Saren continued, "we should still keep vigilant on this new threat?"

"That and continue dealing with Cerberus and the Batarian Hegemony," Sparatus agreed, "I'll worry about the Reapers in the background, but you two have to neutralize those threats before we can even consider surviving the Reaper threat."

"Will do, sir," Amber nodded.

Amber was about to stand to her feet, but Sparatus held up his hand, pausing her in her tracks.

"Finally, people are still wary of the Geth," Sparatus concluded, "if you don't keep coms with the Geth quiet, I can't protect you two."

Saren stiffened, but he still nodded.

"Understood, sir. We'll be on our way. Here's a copy of my notes," he acknowledged, handing off an OSD.

Sparatus nodded before dismissing both Saren and Amber. Both Spectres stepped out of the office and left the Citadel Tower.

"Well, handling the Hegemony and Cerberus can't be that hard in comparison to dealing with the Reapers, right?" she asked.

"Exactly," Saren nodded as he placed his hand on Amber's shoulder, "we will stop them. I know we can."

Amber was slipping into some casuals and stepped out of the bedroom. Similarly, Saren was for once not wearing his Spectre uniform and was in turian civilian clothes. By the time they finished getting dressed, they met up at the front door.

"You look incredible, Shepard," Saren complimented.

"Thanks," Amber smiled, "the same can be said for you."

They headed out of the apartment in short order, making their way through the Presidium and entering one of the wards. They met up with Garrus, Kelly, Joker, Kasumi, Liara, Javik, James, Tali, Kaidan, Ashley, Mordin, Dr. Chakwas, Thane and Nihlus near the entrance to the noodle restaurant.

"Hey," Nihlus chirped, "the Council's golden couple is here!"

The others focused on Saren and Amber.

"Good to see you're here, Nihlus," Saren returned.

Once they headed inside the restaurant, the group sat down at a reserved table towards the back.
After they made their drink orders, they started reading through their menus. Javik nervously glanced between the menu and the others around him. He had no idea what half of the options were, yet he didn't want to tarnish what remained of his pride by so much as asking the others what was the better dish. Liara still couldn't help but notice the Prothean's failed attempt to hide his nervousness.

"Something wrong?" Liara asked.

"I…erm, no," Javik blurted, "not at all."

Liara returned to reading her menu and found a particular noodle dish she wanted to try. The others quickly came to their respective decision for their orders and called the nearby waiter over moments later.

"So," the waiter asked, "have you decided on your order?"

"Yeah, we're ready," Saren answered.

"Do you have the tempura udon?" Kasumi asked.

"Yes, we do."

"Then I would like to order that," Kasumi requested.

"I'll have the Oma Ker Eel ramen," Garrus added.

"I would like the chicken carbonara," Kelly said.

The others also filled in their dish orders while the waiter continued jotting down notes. The waiter left them shortly later to carry on their own conversation.

"So, how are you two doing with Nihlus?" Amber asked Kaidan and Ashley.

"He's strange, but otherwise alright," Kaidan explained.

Ashley nodded in agreement.

"At least he's more tolerable than Udina in his shittier moods," she added.

"How bad has Udina been?" Amber pressed.

Kaidan sighed as he leaned back in his chair.

"He's increasingly demanding, loud, and self-centered," Kaidan answered, "even more than normal. I guess intergalactic politics are getting to him."

Saren let out an enthusiastic hum as he folded his arms.

"Sounds like a few people I came across before," Saren mused.

"At least there's still Anderson," Kaidan shrugged.

Minutes later, the waiter arrived with their drink orders.

"I wouldn't be surprised if someone had Udina in their pocket," James took a sip as he chuckled.

Joker reached into his pocket and pulled out a small package before handing it to Amber.
"Here," Joker offered, "it's from Jack."

She took the package and carefully unwrapped it. Pulling open the box lid, she found inside a weapon mod. Amber gave a soft smile before setting the gift aside.

"I'll be sure to send Jack a thank you note," she said, "how's she doing, by the way?"

"She and Wrex are getting along well with the other biotics," Joker answered, "last I heard from them."

"That's good to hear," Amber nodded.

She quietly wondered to herself how Jack managed to acquire and ship her the weapon mod from the academy. It was only half an hour later before the waiter arrived with the entree orders. They passed the entrees around and dug in shortly after. Javik still poked his food with the utensils he was given, unsure of what he was looking at. The Prothean stuck a crawlie with a fork and carefully sniffed at it before he took a bite out of it. He struggled to suppress any gags as he swallowed. This caught Liara's attention.

"What's wrong?" Liara pressed.

"I'm struggling to enjoy your tastes," Javik blurted.

Liara placed her hand on the Prothean's shoulder in an attempt to give him reassurance.

"You'll get used to it. Just...try not to vomit for now."

Javik nodded before he continued eating. Finishing a bite, Nihlus leaned over.

"I hope you don't mind if I ask," he asked, "but just as a rumor that has been going around, are you two engaged?"

Amber couldn't help but scratch her head.

"Not yet," Amber admitted.

"Come to think of it," Saren added, "I don't think we discussed anything about marriage."

The older turian shifted nervously in his seat with the advent of the question.

"You know," Nihlus mused, "it wouldn't be so bad to consider it at some point. I almost inclined to agree with the rumors given how you two act and converse with each other."

Saren raised a browplate as he took another bite of his dish.

"I suppose we have," he guiltily confessed.

"We are still figuring out when would be a good time to consider getting engaged," Amber replied sheepishly, "with everything that's been going on, we've been too busy to make arrangements."

"Understandable," Nihlus commented before he returned to his meal, "if it does carry out as planned, does that mean I can be first man?"

"I suppose," Saren answered.

By the time the group finished eating their entrees, they began browsing the dessert menu. This
menu listed a variety of cakes, sundaes and puddings. They chose a few minutes later with something special for Amber. Minutes later, the waiter brought over servings of a particular pudding for all the guests, including a few dextro variants.

"What'd you say this stuff was called?" Saren hummed.

"We call it flan," Amber answered before taking a bite out of her flan.

He nodded as he scooped a bite.

"Mm…lovely."

Even Javik found himself savoring his own flan.

"Hmm, perhaps the humans at least have sensible tastes," Javik commented, "reminds me of salarian liver."

"I'm amazed they adapted it to fit dextro," Nihlus mentioned, "also, you said something about salarian livers?"

"Yes," Javik nodded, "they were a delicacy during my cycle."

Mordin couldn't help but cough upon hearing Javik's response.

"Is something wrong, doctor?" the Prothean asked dismissively.

Mordin turned his head towards Javik.

"Could use elaboration on salarian liver," Mordin replied.

"Salarians in my time were much more feral," Javik explained, "if they were caught, we'd keep the organs and pickle them, then they were toasted before being served."

Mordin hummed as he nodded.

"Interesting," he said.

Tali drizzled some dextro chocolate sauce over her flan before taking a bite out of it. Kasumi dipped her pieces of flan in strawberry sauce before eating the bites. While Amber's guests figured out ways to eat their flan, they all enjoyed this dessert nonetheless. The evening meal ended with paying the bill before they left the restaurant. Jeff caught her attention on their way out.

"Hey Amber," he mentioned, "just out of curiosity, I did find a bowling alley on the station. Wanna head over there?"

Amber smiled as she stretched her arms.

"Sure," Amber nodded, "it's been a long while since I went bowling."

On their way, she and her friends explained to their non-human companions the rules of the sport. Arriving shortly after, they reserved several lanes for their use. After renting some bowling shoes, they headed over to their lanes and began switching their shoes while Garrus, Nihlus, Kaidan, Kasumi, Liara and Amber began browsing for bowling balls. They picked out their equipment and hastily geared up.

Within their respective teams, Amber, Kaidan, Tali and James went first. Amber positioned herself
before her team's lane, took a few steps forward and tossed her bowling ball, sending it rolling
down the lane. Her lack of practice had been apparent as it only grazed the furthest left pins.
Kaidan didn't fair any further either since his bowling ball rolled into the gutter. When Tali's turn
rolled around, she slipped on the sleek floor as she flung the ball.

"Bosh'tet!" she interjected.

Amber retrieved her bowling ball before she tossed it down the lane once again. This time around,
she had managed a good half of the pins. While the Alliance commander sat down, Saren stood to
his feet and retrieved his bowling ball. He hurled it down the alley, watching it teeter to the right to
only knock down a single pin with irritation.

"This is…challenging," he sighed.

"That's why you get better with practice," Amber reassured.

Saren made a brief glance at Amber and nodded. Saren took another roll with similar results.
Cautionously as to not gain attention, he lightly used biotics the next throw to nudge it back in the
right direction. Nihlus stood up as soon as his turn came up, so he picked up a bowling ball and
positioned himself before his team's lane. He had taken better notice of the other attendees and
took a similar stance. Stepping forward, he rolled the ball. The younger turian Spectre managed to
hit most of the pins save for one. Taking another throw, he knocked over the last pin.

"Easy enough," he boasted.

When Kasumi's turn came up, she picked up her bowling ball and took a moment to aim carefully.
She was by far the luckiest of her team, managing a strike.

"Nice one, Kas!" Joker cheered.

Kasumi smiled as she gave Kelly a high five.

"Thanks," Kasumi returned, "let's see how you do."

Jeff, meanwhile was sitting back, sipping a glass of some caffeinated drink. Garrus stood to his feet
once his turn came up. He calmly rolled the ball, knocking down all but two split pins. Retrieving
his ball, he took another roll, knocking over both of the remaining pins.

"Dropped 'em."

"You sure you didn't get help from your visor on that one?" Jeff scoffed, putting his glass down.

Garrus couldn't help but chuckle at Joker's remark.

"It does provide some convenience."

That was cue for Kelly to stand to her feet and retrieve her bowling ball while Amber made a spare.
The Alliance yeoman aimed carefully before rolling her ball down the lane. She had managed
initially five pins and knocked down another two on her second throw. Javik picked up his bowling
ball and examined it before focusing on his team's lane. The Prothean didn't hesitate as he rolled
the ball down the lane. He heaved a sigh as the ball rolled right into the gutter.

"Ridiculous," Javik grumbled.

His luck hadn't improved the second time he rolled when the ball only knocked over three pins to
one side. Javik sat down, which was a cue for Liara's turn. When the asari archaeologist picked up her bowling ball, she kept her eyes focused on the lane and tossed the ball along. She shrugged with acceptance as it hit four pins.

They continued with their game until they ended their last round. Among the four teams, Kaidan's team won first place, Garrus's won second and Amber's won third place. James chuckled despite his team ending in fourth place.

"Eh, we had a good time. Not all was lost," he responded.

Amber smiled as she nodded in agreement.

"So, you want to call it a night?" Amber offered.

Nihlus nodded.

"Yeah. I've got loads of paperwork to finish up. I can touch it up tomorrow, but I wanna see how much I can get done before lights out."

Amber led her friends out of the bowling alley and they made their separate ways once they reached the Presidium. When the Alliance commander and Saren returned to their apartment, they ambled into the living room and plopped onto the couch, snuggling up in their embrace. He felt too tired to go through the intricacies of washing up for bed and quickly dozed off.
By the time the break ended, Balak and Victus finished their plan, so the rogue batarian met up with Saren and Amber near the Normandy at the docking bay.

"I see you're set to go," Balak greeted.

"Yes," Saren nodded, "as set by the plans, we'll be shipping a large shipment of unregistered arms with you. If you are caught, they shouldn't be able to track you back to us yet."

Balak followed Saren and Amber along the ramp into the Normandy and meandered into the bridge. It took several more minutes for the rest of the crew to board the vessel before Joker tapped on the terminal, releasing the magnetic clamps which allowed the Normandy to depart the Citadel. A few minutes later after clearing Citadel flight control, they entered FTL through the Mass Relay deep into the Kite's Nest. Since there were slaver ships on patrol, Joker quickly switched on the cloaking device.

"Exiting FTL in thirty seconds. Standing by."

Seconds later, the Normandy emerged from the Mass Relay leading into the Kite's Nest. Their destination was Camala, a mining planet rich with element zero and one of the links in the Hegemony's backbone. The desert planet had provided the Hegemony much wealth and prosperity, and as such would be the perfect location to start reinstating Balak's channels. The Normandy entered the planet's orbit and began searching for a place to land. They soon landed a few miles away from a small mining camp.

"Keep a low profile and maintain radio silence unless we've been compromised," Amber ordered, walking away from the bridge.

Saren and Balak followed her into the cargo hold. The Mako had undergone a few cosmetic changes to appear more like a civilian transport rather than an Alliance APC. Along with a redone paint job, a few additional plates had been tacked on to hide the sleek armor plating and gun on top. Once again, Amber took the driver's seat while the Normandy opened the hatch, allowing the Mako to roll down the ramp. Balak peered out of the windshield as they rode over the first dune. The Mako slipped past a batarian ground transport along the way.

"So far, so good," Saren whispered.

The Mako rolled over another dune and then they came to a halt at a parking lot at the edge of the mining town, starting to disembark.

"Things have changed since nine cycles back, so be patient. Before I was caught and exiled, I ordered a few of my friends to lay low here," Balak explained.

"You got it," Amber nodded.

Saren, Amber and Balak crept away from the Mako and slunk along the sands, making their way into the mining camp. They entered a pub not too far into the town, shutting the dust out behind them. The turian Spectre remained in close proximity to his human protégé as the three sat down at an empty table.

"Wait here," Balak quickly made his way to a door behind the bar.
For now, Saren and Amber could only wait. A few of the nearby batarians passed the couple suspicious glances, but hadn't taken the time to ask questions yet. The Alliance commander exchanged a nervous glance before she grasped her mentor's hand. He glanced at her before looking back to the door behind which Balak disappeared behind. How much time did the rogue batarian need, anyway? He returned shortly later with another batarian.

"This is my friend Besk Bancaba," Balak introduced, "he'll be taking us back to his place on the other side of town. Follow us, and don't make eye contact with anyone else."

Upon cue, Saren and Amber stood to their feet. Once they followed the batarians out of the pub, they meandered through the dusty streets. They kept a relative distance behind the two friends, following them through the empty streets and around the ore loaders. As much as Amber wanted to pity the slaves of various species having to carry out the dirty work under duress, she couldn't let herself get distracted. At the end of the street, Balak and Besk ushered the Spectres into a small two-storied hut and closed the door behind them.

"Besk here was my right hand man before I was exiled," Balak resumed shortly.

"I'm surprised to see you back so soon, my friend. Tell me, how'd you get off your prison?" the other batarian chuckled.

Balak shrugged before making a brief glance at Saren.

"They're Spectres," Balak explained, "and they're willing to fund our cause. We'll play this safer this time, but we'll start with the same methods."

"Interesting," Besk commented, "I assume they want to topple the Hegemony too?"

"Yes," Amber nodded, "my species has only been introduced to this galaxy for a year and we're already vulnerable to slavers."

"Then our cause is just, no?" Besk confirmed, "we can use this to gain support."

"Not so fast," Balak interrupted, "the Hegemony is at odds with the rest of the galaxy right now. The public can't know of their intervention."

Besk sighed before he and Balak sat down.

"Still, by support, you mean bringing Balak back and providing weapons hopefully?" Besk insisted.

Saren and Amber nodded as they sat down across from the batarians.

"Pretty much," Amber answered.

"Is the old network still in place?" Balak asked.

"Of course," Besk replied, "after you were removed, they essentially gave up the hunt for the rest of us. I can contact the others, let them know you're back and ready to restart the revolution."

Saren nodded in approval and extended his hand.

"We welcome your offer," Saren smiled.

Besk chuckled as he shook Saren's hand. The batarian showed the group to his office upstairs. Opening his terminal, he pulled up a messages application. He started sending messages to his
"Anything else I should inform our friends abroad about?" Besk asked.

"The Hierarchy has taken interest in this cause," Amber added, "this time, they have help."

Besk added those details into the message before he sent it.

"It's done. It's been a while since I checked in with the others, but I haven't seen any news of their names."

Amber couldn't help but scratch the top of her helmet.

"Would you know if they were caught?" Amber asked.

"The Hegemony is no stranger to stringing up criminals as an example," Besk shrugged.

Those words were enough for Amber to cringe. She knew some parts of humanity had its horrifying moments, but this took the cake.

"Well, it's worth a shot," she said.

Minutes later, Besk heard a ping from his message inbox.

"That was fast," he remarked to himself, "let's see…"

Besk opened the message and took a moment to read it.

"Heh, about time one of our accomplices answered," Besk mused.

Several minutes later, responses started seeping back in, awaiting Balak's word.

"Yeah. Everyone's still here," Besk added, "what should I tell them?"

"Start preaching our cause again," Balak advised, "remember our promises. No longer should the upper proletariat fear hunger to feed the upper echelons. No longer should the upper echelons dictate what irrational conflicts we enter. No longer should the upper echelons just buy their way to comfort and plenty. There is only man. Nothing above, nothing below."

Besk nodded as he and Balak stood to their feet.

"You said you brought weapons, right?" Balak reminded, "I did some cleaning once you were caught, so the cellar is relatively empty. Maybe we can start moving the weapons here?"

"Yeah," Amber nodded, "first couple of crates are back in the vehicle."

Amber, Saren, Balak and Besk headed out of the hut and ambled over to the Mako. When the Spectres opened the cargo hatch, they and the batarians began unloading the crates.

Besk pulled open one of the crates and pulled a rifle out.

"Damn, you've got powerful allies, Balak," Besk chuckled, "turians make all the best weapons."

Saren flexed his mandibles into a smile.

"The best money could provide," he replied, "lightweight, easy to use, easy to maintain, and minimal training required. Best fit for a revolution."
The Spectres and the batarians began moving the crates into the hut. Moving the last of the crates inside, Saren turned to Balak.

"Stay inside," he instructed, "we'll be returning to the Normandy for another box of heavy arms and ammo."

Balak nodded before Saren and Amber stepped out of the hut, the Alliance commander turning on her omni-tool.

"Joker," Amber informed, "we've made contact with the remnants of the local resistance and we're heading back to the ship to grab the next shipment of supplies."

{Ok, Shepard,} Joker replied over the com-link, {give me a moment.}

They got back into the Mako and drove back to the ship. Inside the cargo hold, Garrus, Kaidan, James, Ashley and Tali stood near the next batch of crates. They loaded up the Mako and returned to the small colony. This time, Garrus accompanied Saren and Amber as they drove over to the hut. They carefully carried the boxes inside and stored them with the others. All the while, Garrus kept an eye out for anyone suspicious.

"Now the hardware may take more getting used to. It's enough to punch through an APC or gunship in a single hit, but they can be cumbersome in untrained hands," Saren explained.

Besk nodded in agreement.

"We'll manage," Besk said, "fortunately, the Hegemony's military is not as powerful as their propaganda boasts, so this just might do."

It didn't take long before they finished moving the next batch into the storage room.

"Gather the others if they're still in town. Meet back at the pub," Balak ordered Besk, "we should start making arrangements."

Besk, Balak and Saren exchanged contact numbers.

"We'll be heading out of the system," Saren informed, "we can't linger too much. Stay in contact with us."

As the rogue batarians left for town, Saren, Amber, and Garrus hastily returned to the Mako and drove back to the Normandy. The vessel wasted no time as it departed from the system and warped through the Mass Relay. Once it returned to the Citadel and landed at the docking bay, Saren, Amber and their squadmates disembarked and made their way into the Presidium. The Spectres arrived at the Citadel Tower to meet up with Desolas and Victus.

"It's good to hear you've made decent progress thus far," Victus commented.

"Thanks," Amber saluted, "we'll continue to report on the matter as we continue over the next few weeks."

Vicus nodded in agreement as he, Amber, Saren and Desolas wandered through the lobby. She suddenly received a ping on her omni-tool. Out of curiosity, she opened the newest message in her inbox.

{See me in my office. I'd like to discuss some things. — Ambassador Udina}
Amber couldn't help but cringe, so she gently tugged at Saren's arm, catching his attention.

"Yes?" Saren paused.

"Udina wants to discuss something. I'll catch up with you later."

Saren sighed as he placed his hand on Amber's shoulder.

"Take care, then," he said softly.

Amber meandered through the hall and took an elevator to one of the higher floors. She entered the Alliance embassy and made it straight for Udina's office. When she stepped inside, Udina was only scrolling through his terminal when he stopped in his tracks and stood to his feet.

"Ambassador," Amber started, "what do you need?"

"Spectre," Udina requested, "please, have a seat. I'd like to talk about matters regarding our own people."

Amber sat down in a chair while Udina sat back down at his desk.

"I see the Council decided to give you an office," Amber commented.

"A generous offer, I must admit," Udina sighed, "that aside, I really don't like the message you're getting across in your association with Spectre Arterius."

Groaning, Amber rolled her eyes and folded her arms.

"All right," Amber demanded, "what are you talking about?"

"Your relationship isn't exactly a secret," Udina explained, "and it's putting out an idea I'm not too comfortable with."

"With all due respect, Ambassador," Amber objected in a calm expression, "if it weren't for Spectre Arterius, I would've been dead and humanity's first contact would've been much different."

"I can understand that. However, being as romantically involved—as the tabloids supposedly claim—doesn't sit well with me."

Amber tilted her head sideways and narrowed her eyes.

"And just what does my relationship with Saren violate?" Amber insisted.

"By dating this turian," Udina answered, "you're promoting unhealthy ideas. Soon, it will start the decay of human morality and the next thing you know, once humans start dating aliens, they'll soon want to fuck wild animals."

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. One particular term came to mind in a matter of seconds.

"You're referring to besti— turians are sentient beings, Ambassador," Amber objected while resisting the urge to raise her voice, "this isn't even remotely close to that!"

Udina folded his arms.

"That's not what I heard from some human community groups," Udina replied.
"Well then," Amber snapped, "I'd argue that your current mindset isn't entirely fit for this position, Udina."

Out of irritation, Amber stood to her feet and turned for the door.

"Where are you going?" Udina interrupted.

"I've had it with this conversation."

Amber didn't bother to look back as she stormed out of the office and left the Citadel Tower. While meandering through the Presidium, she found Saren, Nihlus, Garrus and Kelly on the bench in the park. Saren was the first to notice her return.

"How was it?" he asked her.

Amber sat down next to Saren.

"Udina's being a dick again," Amber sighed.

"Fun. Head stuck up his ass? That is how the saying goes, right?" Nihlus smirked.

Amber nodded.

"He apparently hates the idea of humans dating aliens," Amber added.

"Tsk tsk tsk tsk, that's problematic," Nihlus commented.

Kelly sighed as she hugged Garrus's arm.

"Hopefully, this won't affect us," she whispered.

"I hope so, too," Garrus agreed as he stroked Kelly's head with his hand.

"Well, if it's any consolation, I basically got to tell him that his head was up his ass," Amber reassured.

Despite such concerns, the two humans and three turians took the rest of the day to relax in the park.
Miranda and Amber Clash

Amber just finished suiting up and she made her way out of the apartment, meeting up with Saren at the Presidium.

"Shepard," Saren asked as he strode closer to her, "are you sure about this?"

Amber nodded.

"Yeah. As critical as Balak's movement is, Cerberus is still a threat to everyone," Amber explained, "if they're on the move, I have to find out more."

Saren sighed, yet he nodded.

"You go get them," Saren encouraged.

Smiling, Amber gave Saren a brief kiss. Once they made their way to the docking bay, Saren returned to his old Spectre shuttle while Amber walked up the docking bridge to the Normandy. Amber met up with James, Garrus and Liara when she arrived at the bridge.

"About time we go after Cerberus again," James hummed.

"It's only one Cerberus agent that's been spotted," Amber nodded, "but yeah."

Amber approached the cockpit and waved at Joker.

"Yeah, but they're like cockroaches," Joker remarked, "if there's one, then there's definitely more."

Amber nodded in agreement.

"Take us out, Joker," Amber advised.

Joker saluted before he tapped at a few icons in his terminal, causing the magnetic clamps in the dock to detach from the Normandy. The vessel departed from the Citadel before making its way towards the Mass Relay, the structure flinging it into FTL speed. An hour or so passed before the Normandy arrived in Alliance space and arrived at a planet near its borders.

"Keep an eye out for suspicious activity," Amber advised, "locals have quietly reported a Cerberus agent down there within the past seventy-two hours. We're to head in, find out what they're up to, and apprehend them."

As the Normandy entered the planet's atmosphere, Amber led James and Liara out of the bridge and made their way into the cargo hold, wasting no time as they boarded the Mako. They would be landing outside of the colony to avoid giving the Cerberus operative a heads-up regarding their presence. Once the vessel reached its destination, it opened its cargo hatch, allowing the Mako to roll down the ramp and onto the surface. The planet they were on was open with vast varieties of foliage along their path.

With Amber taking the wheel, the Mako rolled along the dirt path with little trouble. The colony sat atop a plateau with an elevator on the side of the rock structure. With that in mind, the Alliance commander drove the Mako farther through the foliage. Parking just within the treeline, they got out and entered the elevator up. The trio stood until the elevator reached one of the higher floors. They headed off into the bustling town and started their search.
As they swept the town, they kept vigilant eyes for any suspicious figures. The only clues they managed to find was when they asked any bystanders of where these agents were last seen. Almost half an hour later, they found a witness, loitering about outside of a warehouse.

"I didn't see much of her appearance or clothing, but I definitely did overhear some of her conversation. She headed to the north side of town, where the local mob has housed themselves," the witness informed, "careful in there, those guys have got reach and they're armed to the teeth."

"Thank you," Amber nodded, "we'll continue from here."

Amber led James and Liara through the streets and headed north. Once they reached the northern section of the town, they pressed their backs against the wall while the Alliance commander peeked around the corner. They approached a storage rental facility, with a fence around the buildings. Reaching the gate, Amber checked it for locks keeping it closed. A few civies stood guard outside, otherwise in clothes rather than armor.

Amber, James and Liara circled the perimeter until they were out of sight of any witnesses. The Alliance commander activated her omni-blade and cut a large hole in the fence. Climbing in, they wandered through the patrols to a back door. Once inside, they slithered through the hall. Yet, they didn't seem to find any Cerberus soldiers on patrol.

"I dunno, looks like a false lead," James shrugged.

Amber stopped at a door and peered through its thin crack. Through the crack, a few Cerberus agents were probing a piece of unusual tech and scrubbing dirt off of it.

"In good quality, too," the head operative said, "I assume none of your workers have been affected by its properties?"

"No, ma'am," one of the agents shook his head, "the artifact seems safe so far."

"My superior clearly instructed you to keep it inside of its reinforced casing, but no matter," she reminded, "have it moved to the port."

The agent nodded before he turned his head towards the other agents just as the last of the dirt was scrubbed off.

"Commander," James whispered, "orders?"

"Follow them to the port," Amber instructed, "we'll cut them off before they get to depart with their package."

"Got it," Liara nodded.

Just as the Cerberus agents moved the artifact onto a flatbed, their head operative led them out of the larger room, compelling Amber, James and Liara to take another path before they appeared behind the agents. Still, the trio had to remain in cover as they tailed the agents out of the facility. At the port, the agents and their escort of mobsters hastily went through customs. Amber was still determined to stop them, so she motioned Liara and James to sneak towards the ship to intercept them. With her squadmates carrying out their objective, the Alliance commander continued to tail the agents through the port. They kept close with the crowds of people around them to get close enough. The agent turned to order the mob members when she discerned them among the crowd.

Once they reached a suitable position, Liara enveloped herself in her biotic field while James scurried for the vessel. While they dealt with the mob members, Amber continued her chase with
the Cerberus agents. The agents had already reached their ship and loaded their prize aboard. With a clear shot, the Alliance commander fired at a beam supporting the ramp. With enough luck, several shots broke the beam which caused the ramp to fall apart. One of the agents whipped around and tossed a biotic wave of energy at her, tossing her aside. Even with her head still spinning, she climbed back to her feet to face her assailant.

"I don't give a rat's ass what you got your hands on," Amber spat, "but you're not getting away!"

The agent in front of her stared for a moment. The Alliance commander dove for cover and pulled out her machine pistol, letting out a few bursts of fire. The agent thought fast and leapt out of the way. With another biotic discharge, her cover had been tossed aside, leaving her vulnerable once again. With little to no cover nearby, Amber kept sidestepping each biotic warp thrown at her. Eventually, their fight had given the crew of the shuttle to load the cargo on without interruption. With their cargo aboard, the agent started backpedaling to the ship.

"You're not getting away!" Amber shouted.

The Alliance Commander charged after the Cerberus agent and tackled her to the ground.

"Just," Amber demanded, "who the hell are you?!!"

While the Cerberus agent struggled to free herself, Amber opened the latch securing her opponent's helmet and lifted it off her head, revealing a woman with wavy black hair. Her fierce blue eyes narrowed at her as she reactivated her biotic field. The agent tossed her backwards. Just out of her view, she hit some surface hard, before the world faded to black.

Agent Lawson gave Amber a fierce stare as she was about to aim her pistol at Amber. Without warning, one of the Cerberus soldiers peeked his head from the hatch.

"Agent Lawson," he called over, "we're heading out!"

Miranda sighed before she scurried towards the vessel. Just then, Liara and James reached the vessel but they watched helplessly as it took off. The asari archaeologist glanced over her shoulder and found Amber lying on the ground, gesturing James to shift his focus.

"Dios mio!" James gasped as his eyes widened in horror.

"She's hurt. Badly," Liara reported.

"Normandy, the commander is down. Send the shuttle for evac. Sending coordinates," James ordered over his suit coms.

Liara rushed over to Amber's side and knelt down, carefully lifting the Alliance Commander into her arms. Minutes later, a shuttle arrived to take them back. Seconds after touching down in the cargo hold, they rushed her to the medbay. While the Normandy took off several minutes later, Mordin and Dr. Chakwas ran several tests on the unconscious human Spectre. Garrus paced around the medbay during the first quarter of the flight. After the Mass Relay flung the Normandy into FTL speed, Mordin motioned Garrus to approach.

"She's taken a moderate concussion and she's experienced minor fractures," Chakwas explained, "when she's ready for the field again depends on when she wakes up."

Chakwas put down her notes and looked to Amber's squadmates.

"You may as well get some rest," she continued, "you're not doing any good moping around in
Garrus sighed in relief before he turned for the door.

"I'll be at the battery," Garrus informed.

The other squadmates stood to their feet.

"I'll file the report. See you guys later," James shrugged.

The rest of the squadmates left the medbay, leaving Chakwas and Mordin behind. The rest of the flight remained quiet, even as the Normandy arrived at the Citadel hours later. Since Saren had only a while before he would return, Kelly accompanied Garrus while he carried Amber out of the Normandy. They meandered through the Presidium and made their way to the Huerta Hospital. Kelly made a brisk approach to the receptionist desk. The yeoman quickly made arrangements and had Amber assigned to a room. A few medics escorted Garrus and Kelly through the corridor until they arrived at a patient room, where the turian rested the Alliance commander in a bed.

"We'll look after the commander from here," a doctor assured.

"Thank you," Kelly nodded while she sighed in relief.

The two walked out of Huerta shortly after, Garrus huffing in exhaustion.

"That was a mess," he commented.

"Yeah, I know," Kelly agreed.

Both Garrus and Kelly sauntered their way out of the hospital. They left the Presidium and made their way towards their apartment, the idea of taking a nap in the living room welcoming them.

An hour later, Saren landed his shuttle at the Spectre docks and disembarked. Considering he read a message from Garrus during the return trip, anxiety was already filling his mind. He had been on his way back to the station when he received the notification. Now, his body throbbed with his racing pulse and mind, all too eager to return. Not a moment too soon, he rushed out of the docks and into a full sprint along the Presidium. It didn't take long for him to reach the Huerta Hospital and he made a quick pace into the waiting room, approaching the receptionist's desk.

"Hello, ma'am," Saren greeted, "I am here to see Commander Shepard. Is she available?"

The receptionist looked over a list on their monitor and nodded.

"She's unconscious, but our doctors have tended to her. She's available for visit on the third floor."

Saren gave the receptionist a slow nod before he stepped through the door. He meandered through the corridor and took an elevator to the third floor. Once he reached a specific recovery room, he found Amber resting in one of the beds, an IV attached to her wrist. Sighing, Saren sat down next to her and gently grasped her hand.

"Hang in there," Saren whispered, "you'll make it. I know you will."

He wasn't sure why, but Saren felt a sense of deja vu. Maybe it was the fact Amber was at her most vulnerable like the first time he met her? Time felt like a blur as the turian Spectre kept observing his human protégé. Before long, she groaned softly as she slowly opened her eyes.
"A-ahh...what the hell?"

"Shepard!" Saren gasped softly.

Amber slowly tilted her head towards Saren.

"I was," Amber blurted, "I was this...close to capturing her! Did she get away?"

"She did," Saren nodded, "we were all more worried about your well being."

"Fuck," Amber groaned as she leaned back into her bed.

"Just rest easy now, alright? You had me scared," he replied.

"Ok," Amber nodded softly.

He leaned forward to give her a kiss before standing and turning for the door.

"Hey, wait," she grunted.

Saren stopped and looked back.

"Something wrong?" he paused.

"Could you stay for a bit?" Amber requested, "this room is a bit empty."

Saren closed his eyes for a moment.

"Well," he nodded, "all right."

Saren stepped back over to Amber's bed and sat back down beside her.

"I'll have to head back to our apartment to at least grab a change of clothes, but I can stay."

Amber nodded as she smiled.

"Don't keep me waiting for too long," she replied.

Less than an hour later, Saren returned with a small suitcase and set it near his seat. He shoved a nearby bed alongside hers and laid by her side. Amber reached out her hand and grasped his.

"Thanks."

"Anything for you," Saren agreed.

Considering it was late evening, Saren's companionship was all she could ask for at the moment. After a small serving of shabby hospital food, Saren pulled aside her tray as she quickly faded off to sleep. When he came back, he just took to the covers and put an arm over her, looking down at her with worry.

"Get well, Amber," he muttered softly, "we're all counting on you."
With Amber still resting in the hospital and Saren still keeping her company, Nihlus began reading through the details of his next mission. He did hear the Cerberus agent leading the crew Shepard and her squad couldn't apprehend happened to be a woman, so he considered researching Cerberus's officials. He'd figured he may as well read up on Cerberus and its numerous lackeys if he was going to combat them in the future.

So far, he found nothing about the organization's founder, but he did find a few profiles of some of its operatives, including the woman that Amber tried to capture. He kept this Agent Lawson's small profile bookmarked for later. Out of all the operatives he researched, one particular operative seemed to have a celebrity status among human civilians. He looked over the dossier with increasingly worried glances. Oleg Petrovsky had been identified as a key member of the organization's military branch. His arrogance was only matched by his military prowess and tactical brilliance. It didn't help that he worked in the Alliance in the past. He defected when he had been found working with the nefarious terrorist organization, overseeing biotic research operations.

Now that he researched this official's details, Nihlus would have to figure out his location. The young turian Spectre made his way through the Presidium and arrived at the Alliance Embassy. He walked right in to Udina's office without bothering to knock.

"Excuse me, but can I borrow a moment of your time?" he asked.

Udina huffed before he stood to his feet.

"Fine. What is it?" Udina grumbled.

Nihlus strutted in and took a seat in front of the ambassador's desk with little regard for respect.

"Hopefully you're patient enough to suppress your xenophobic tendencies," Nihlus started, "I'm looking over the Alliance's profile on a General Oleg Petrovsky and several other high-ranking officials of Cerberus."

Udina raised an eyebrow as Nihlus showed him Oleg's profile through his omni-tool.

"How'd you get that?" Udina paused.

"I was researching some Cerberus officials when I stumbled upon his profile," Nihlus shrugged, "do you know him?"

Udina remained silent for a moment before he nodded.

"I had met him on a few occasions," Udina answered, "dinner party sort of scenarios, really."

"Sure," Nihlus remarked, "when's the last time you've seen him?"

"Just before his open defection," Udina sighed, "after that, I've only heard about him and that's it."

With no more questions available, Nihlus stood to his feet and turned for the door.

"Whelp," he said, "it's a pleasure speaking with you, Ambassador. I'll be on my way."

He gave a nervous chuckle, acknowledging how awkwardly short the conversation was. Still, this meant Nihlus would have to find General Petrovsky on his own. He wasted no time as he left the
embassy. Anderson was a more friendly individual, so perhaps he'd be more willing to divulge any information regarding Cerberus high-command. The younger turian Spectre wandered through the Presidium until he arrived at Anderson's apartment, so he rang the doorbell and waited a few seconds before the Alliance officer opened the door.

"Something wrong, Agent Kryik?" Anderson greeted.

"I have a few questions about one of the higher-ups of Cerberus," Nihlus explained, "do you have a moment?"

"If it's confidential material," Anderson replied, "you may as well come inside."

Nihlus slowly nodded as he stepped into the apartment and closed the door behind him. Anderson led the younger turian Spectre into the living room and they sat down across from one another.

"Do you know anything about a General Oleg Petrovsky?" Nihlus started.

"Him? Yeah, the inner circles of the Alliance High Command are closely knit," Anderson nodded, "he was the quiet type. Can't tell you what he's like now."

"So you don't have a clue where he is?" Nihlus clarified.

Anderson shook his head.

"Wish I did so I could bring him in," Anderson admitted, "but wishful thinking is not how we accomplish anything."

"Understandable," Nihlus nodded in agreement, "did he take interest in anything specific before he defected?"

"Official research about biotics, but that was it," Anderson answered, "whatever he oversaw, it was by far a violation of moral standards."

Nihlus wasted no time as he took notes.

"Thanks," Nihlus smiled, "I'll keep that in mind."

"Other than that, no one got so much as a pinch out of him during leave or any sort of down time," Anderson added, "make what you will of it."

"Will do," Nihlus nodded before he stood to his feet and turned to leave.

Once Nihlus left the apartment, he made his way through the Presidium and entered the Spectre docks. He nodded at a nearby asari with a chirp while he sauntered over to his shuttle. He had a few leads to begin with, so he figured he may as well start there. Once he boarded his shuttle, he turned on the ignition and triggered the magnetic clamps in the dock to release, allowing the shuttle to depart from the Citadel.

While it was a relative gamble for them, Cerberus scattered their facilities throughout the galaxy, and especially in parts of lawless space. Contending with mercs and bandits, however, was much less stressful than the full blow of Citadel authority. Nihlus guided his shuttle through the Mass Relay to the Attican Traverse, where he continued his search. He started passing by each planet and took several minutes to scan each one, though he couldn't find any Cerberus activity each time. He pressed onward until he entered another planet's orbit and waited as the shuttle scanned the planet's surface. Seconds later, it picked up the signal of a prefab.
"Well," Nihlus chuckled to himself, "let's see what we have here."

He flew down the planet's atmosphere and landed nearby. After killing the ignition, Nihlus disembarked the shuttle and began slithering closer to the prefabs. He initiated his suit cloak and rushed down to one of the walls. The streets didn't seem to be full of Cerberus soldiers. Instead, civilians ran their daily lives like any colony prefab. Finding a vent, he pried it open and crawled inside. He didn't seem to flinch as the rushing warm air brushed past his face. He turned at a couple corners until he reached another vent. He activated his omni-tool and undid the screws, removing the vent which allowed him to emerge from the shaft.

Nihlus took a moment to scan his surroundings before he noticed an office desk and a few drawers placed along the walls of the room. Once he confirmed the office was empty, the younger turian Spectre approached the terminal and used his omni-tool's hacking app to gain access. He began searching the files of the terminal for anything involving the other officials. While he did his search, he found a folder labeled "Subject Zero".

"Jack?" Nihlus paused to himself.

Nihlus opened the folder and found a list of pictures, documents and videos packed inside. He heard only a little bit about Jack from Amber and Saren, but he knew Jack wouldn't disclose anything personal to him. Nihlus clicked on one of the pictures, which happened to be of a younger version of Jack laying unconscious on an old mattress.

"What in the Spirits…?" Nihlus gasped softly to himself.

He'd heard of the treatment the biotic had undergone, but the levels displayed on the file were nothing close to what he had imagined. When he made a glance at another picture, he cringed at the sight of blood trickling down Jack's thighs while she curled in a fetal position. Even if he knew Wrex would have a better chance to bond with Jack than he would, Nihlus couldn't help but feel nauseous at the thought of what possibly could've happened to her during her captivity. He downloaded the folder into his OSD and moved onward through the facility. Since he couldn't find any clues on the other Cerberus officials, this will have to do.

Nihlus snuck through the corridor while making his way towards the exit. When he left the building, he ducked into a corner just as Petrovsky emerged from the bust crowd and made his way towards the facility.

"I assume you have found answers for my inquiry?" he asked, "the biotic is of incredible importance to us."

The guard shook his head.

"We've tapped their coms as ordered," the guard answered, "we haven't been able to discern where they've relocated Subject Zero yet. She's also been vigilant about maintaining radio silence."

Petrovsky sighed as he shook his head in disbelief and pressed his forehead into his palm.

"Let me remind you that this is not just some personal agenda and that the Illusive Man himself stated that retaking Subject Zero is important to our R&D divisions as a whole," Petrovsky reminded, "keep up the search in the meantime."

Petrovsky nodded as he saluted. Nihlus made a brief glance at Petrovsky just as the latter headed inside the building. The younger turian Spectre took a moment to embed a small tracking device underground before he scurried away. He was lucky he didn't run into any Cerberus soldiers as he
made it back to his shuttle. It was far too easy for their reputation, so he left without further hesitation and exited the system.

Hours later, Nihlus emerged from the Mass Relay and flew his shuttle back to the Citadel. When he landed it at the Spectre docks, he disembarked and made his way through the Presidium. He stepped through the door to the Huerta Hospital and approached the receptionist desk.

"Hey," Nihlus greeted, "this is Spectre Kryik. Is Spectre Arterius still with Commander Shepard?"

The receptionist examined Nihlus's face before she nodded. He followed the directions to their room. Inside, Amber nestled into Saren's embrace while they watched an anime on her datapad.

"Hey guys, you have a minute?" Nihlus interrupted.

Amber paused the anime while she and Saren turned their heads towards Nihlus.

"Good to see you're still in one piece," Amber commented.

Nihlus nodded in agreement as he sat down next to both Saren and Amber.

"I couldn't find anything about Agent Lawson," Nihlus explained, "but I did get some info about a Cerberus official who defected from the Alliance."

Nihlus pulled out his OSD and turned it on.

"Got some unofficial information regarding a General Olek Petrovsky," he continued, "nasty fellow, he apparently overlooked experiments regarding Jack."

Amber wasn't sure why, but she suddenly felt her spine freeze in shock.

"Wait," she blurted, "what…?"

Nihlus sighed in disbelief before he handed the OSD to Saren. He and Amber browsed through the pictures and the videos Nihlus downloaded. As they did, the Alliance commander shuddered at the dreadful ordeal this former general recorded. Considering that she recalled the days when Jack shut herself away during her first year after her rescue, this all made too much sense.

"And to think she didn't tell anyone about this…" Amber gasped softly.

Saren's mandibles flexed while he shifted his gaze towards Nihlus.

"How do we explain this to her?" Saren insisted, "I doubt springing it on her suddenly would put her in a pleasant mood."

Nihlus shrugged with passive defeat.

"Cerberus is still hunting her," Nihlus said, "we'll have to let her know about it, whether she likes it or not."

Amber clenched her fist, imagining flames emitting from it. All she could ever want if she ran into General Petrovsky was to punch a huge hole in his chest. Maybe that would be enough to give Jack closure?

"They don't know she's at Grissom Academy, do they?" Amber asked.
"Not yet," Nihlus shook his head.

Amber huffed before she turned her head towards Saren.

"Refresh my memory," Amber reminded, "how much time before I fully recover?"

"At least a week and a half, yet," Saren answered.

Amber closed her eyes softly and leaned back in her bed. She activated her omni-tool and sent a message to Garrus and Kelly.

{Received Intel regarding Cerberus's continued pursuit of Jack. Check in with Grissom, make sure they're ready to move her on a moment's notice.}

Amber, Saren and Nihlus waited until several minutes later, Garrus and Kelly stepped into the room.

"Shepard," Garrus announced, "we got your message."

Saren nodded at Nihlus while he handed the OSD back to him.

"We'll be on our way," Nihlus said, "take care you two."

Nihlus, Garrus, And Kelly stepped out shortly after. After they left the hospital, they meandered through the Presidium as they made their way to the Spectre docks. Nihlus led Garrus and Kelly towards his shuttle, where they sat in the cockpit. The young turian Spectre handed his OSD to the other two, allowing them to read the files.

"Oh, God," Kelly gasped in disbelief, "this actually happened to her?!

"Had he been serving the Hierarchy," Garrus added, "he would've been stripped of his rank the instant we found out."

"Yeah, that's low," Nihlus shrugged, flipping the ignition and preparing for departure.

Getting clearance from flight control, the magnetic clamps disengaged and they flew off. While Nihlus flew the shuttle towards the Mass Relay, the three of them began thinking of how to discuss this issue with Jack.

It was only a couple of hours before the shuttle emerged from the Mass Relay. Nihlus navigated it through space towards the Petra Nebula. He directed the shuttle towards the station, nervously glancing about. After he landed the shuttle in the hangar, Nihlus, Garrus and Kelly disembarked the shuttle and made their way towards the receptionist's counter.

"Hello," the receptionist greeted, "welcome to Jon Grissom Academy. How can I help you?"

Garrus took a moment to clear his throat.

"We're here to see Jacqueline Nought and Urdnot Wrex," Garrus answered, "are they available?"

The receptionist double-checked the schedule on the terminal.

"They should be wrapping up with their classes for the day," the receptionist said.

"Thank you," Garrus nodded, "do they have an office somewhere? Some place we could meet up?"
The receptionist shrugged.

"Sometimes they hang out in the locker room."

Garrus nodded at the receptionist before he, Nihlus and Kelly made his way through the academy. When they entered the locker room, they found Jack and Wrex putting away their equipment in their respective lockers.

"Kryik? I didn't expect to see you here," Wrex asked.

"Yeah," Nihlus shrugged, "but I got some bad news."

Jack raised her eyebrows as she shut her locker.

"Define bad," Jack said solemnly.

Garrus and Kelly scanned the locker room, feeling a sense of relief that no one else was occupying it.

"I suggest we keep this discussion between the five of us," Garrus offered.

Kelly shut the door to the locker room before they sat in a circle. Nihlus pulled out the OSD and turned it on.

"Petrovsky's out for you…hard," Nihlus explained, "he doesn't know you're here yet, but we should start taking precautions."

All of a sudden, Jack's eyes widened in horror as she felt herself stiffen. The instant she heard Nihlus mention…him, she started losing focus and her chest started heating up. She lost focus of her surroundings as she wrapped her arms tightly around her chest. It was getting more impossible for her to fight back her tears.

"Jack?" Wrex said softly, concern filling his voice.

"I…I…"

Light energy sparks shimmered over her skin as she struggled to form words. Staring in disbelief, Nihlus, Garrus and Kelly stood to their feet.

"Oh, crap," Garrus muttered.

Wrex stood as well.

"What now?" Wrex demanded, "should we continue here? I mean, they don't know she's here, so we at least have a little longer."

"We probably need to leave as soon as possible," Nihlus suggested.

Her expression didn't change, but Jack slowly stood to her feet.

"Okay. Just…lemme get my stuff," she muttered.

Wrex and Jack shuffled out of the locker room and returned to their dormitory. They spent the next half hour packing their items and in the process, cleaning out their drawers. Once they finished, they met up with Nihlus, Garrus and Kelly outside the door. Nihlus gestured to the others.
"Head back to the ship," he instructed, "I'll be letting the receptionist know of our current plans."

Jack handed Nihlus her room key before she, Wrex, Garrus and Kelly made their way through the corridor. The young turian Spectre sauntered his way to the reception area and approached the counter.

"Jack is currently being moved for her own safety," Nihlus informed, "this is a matter of security, so I'd appreciate it if you could purge any recent records of her presence here."

The receptionist nodded as Nihlus placed the room key on the counter.

"Take care, sir," the receptionist replied.

Nihlus nodded at the receptionist before he made his way towards the hangar, where he met up with Garrus, Kelly, Jack and Wrex at his shuttle.

"So where'll we be going?" Wrex asked.

"For now, to the Citadel," Nihlus answered, "I'm currently making arrangements for your relocation."

Nihlus, Wrex, Jack, Garrus and Kelly boarded the shuttle before the turian Spectre turned on the ignition and flew the shuttle out of the station. As the others settled into their seats for the flight, Jack buried her head between her thighs. Wrex stayed close to her side, attempting to bring her comfort.

"Easy, Jack," he cooed, "it's going to be fine."

"No, it's not," Jack grumbled, losing the willpower to fight back her tears.

Nihlus tried to ignore any sound coming from behind him and kept his gaze towards the controls onward. Still, Garrus and Kelly shifted their focus towards Jack and Wrex. Neither of them decided to act, lest they risk exacerbating Jack's raw emotions.

"Just tell me," Jack insisted, "do you know about General Petrovsky and what he did?"

Garrus and Kelly hesitated for a moment of silence before they nodded without saying anything.

"Well," Jack continued, "do you know what it's like to have your body ruined and childhood stolen?"

"I've only heard of such tales," Wrex sighed, "fewer stories where the bastard gets what they deserve."

Jack let out a faint sigh, her tears dropping onto the cushion of her seat.

"That creep did a lot to me ever since they took me as a kid…violated me in every way imaginable," she added, "all to the point I couldn't remember what my life was like as a child anymore."

The haunting words echoed in her mind, words that once discouraged her from hoping she would ever become whole again…words that made her believe no one would want her simply because she was no longer pure.

"Nihlus? When do we go after this Petrovsky?" Garrus grumbled.
"Most likely when we determine his next move," Nihlus let out a sigh.

Nihlus maneuvered the shuttle towards the Mass Relay, allowing the structure to fling the vessel into FTL speed.
A Vow of Krogan Loyalty

Hours passed before the shuttle returned to the Citadel. Nihlus wasted no time as he, Garrus, Kelly, Jack and Wrex disembarked and left the Spectre docks. Garrus and Kelly took Wrex and Jack to the Normandy while Nihlus returned to Huerta. From there, the four met up with Liara, Thane, Tali, James, Kasumi, Kaidan and Ashley.

"Jack?" Ashley warbled, "I didn't expect you'd return so soon."

"She's had a rough journey back," Wrex spoke up for her, "are there any vacant bunks in the living quarters?"

Kasumi nodded.

"A few towards the back."

Wrex and Jack ambled through the corridor before they reached the living quarters, setting down their luggage near the nearest available bunks. The human biotic sighed as she sat on her bed.

"Wrex?" Jack called over.

Wrex turned his head towards Jack and sat down near her.

"Yeah?" he paused.

"If we ever run into Petrovsky," Jack proposed, "I'd like to do the honors of killing him."

"And why would I deny you that?" Wrex remarked.

Jack tilted her head and locked eyes onto the krogan's. With a sense of hope, she extended her hand, allowing Wrex to grasp it.

"It'd mean a lot to me to see a hole an inch in diameter drilled clean through his head," Jack continued, "especially if it came from my gun."

"Yeah," Wrex agreed, "let's take down this bastard when we get the chance."

After a brief moment of silence, Jack and Wrex left the living quarters and met up with the rest of the squad.

"Hey, Jack," Kelly said, "are you doing ok?"

"A little," Jack nodded, "so what are we waiting for?"

They waited until a long while later, Nihlus boarded the Normandy. The others quickly took notice of his arrival.

"So, are you," Kaidan greeted, "substituting for Shepard?"

"Yeah," Nihlus nodded as he scratched his mandible, "since she's still resting, she advised that I look after you guys for a while."

Tali double-checked the time in her omni-tool, recognizing it was now late evening.
"I assume she's recovering quickly enough?" Tali asked.

"She'll be up and ready next week," Nihlus shrugged.

Nihlus made his way to the bridge and met up with Joker.

"You're still up here?" Nihlus asked.

Joker paused in his tracks and turned his head towards Nihlus.

"Just finishing up with diagnostics, why?" Joker pondered.

Joker turned off his terminal and stood to his feet.

"I figured everyone would be wrapping up for the evening," Nihlus shrugged, "or are you pulling an all-night shift?"

"Well, not this time," Joker admitted.

Nihlus and Joker made their way out of the bridge. They rode the elevator down to the second level where the pilot departed for the medbay. He sat down as Mordin shifted his focus towards him.

"Ah, good," Mordin said, "here for checkup, I presume?"

"Yeah," Joker nodded, "I assume Chakwas is out at the moment?"

Mordin nodded as he turned on his omni-tool.

"Been experiencing pain in the last twenty-four hours?" Mordin asked.

"Just minor aching," Joker shrugged.

Mordin took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment.

"Good," Mordin instructed, "stand still for scanning."

Joker sighed as he slowly stood to his feet. Bit by bit, the salarian gently prodded Joker's limbs and rib cage, testing his bone strength. The flight lieutenant took deep breaths as he resisted the urge to shudder, even when the salarian doctor stuck a needle in his elbow for a brief moment. Twenty minutes later, Mordin looked over his notes on a datapad.

"Looks like you have damaged anything yet today," Mordin informed, "you may go."

"Thanks," Joker let out a sigh of relief.

Joker ambled out of the medbay and met up with the others at the living quarters. He took a matter of minutes to slip into his pajamas before he plopped into his bed. The others had already gotten out of their uniforms and were washing up for bed. It didn't take long before Thane climbed into a bed adjacent to Joker's, the drell locking eyes onto him.

"I assume your appointment with the salarian went well?" he asked.

"Yup," Joker chirped, "nothing broken. I assume you checked in as well?"

"Only an hour before you did," Thane admitted with a sigh.

Joker nodded and put his head back.
"Well, try not to worry about it," Joker assured, "have a good night."

Thane slowly nodded before nestled his head into his pillow. As he drifted off to sleep, he thought of possible options for his bucket list.

The following morning, Nihlus and the Normandy crew finished their preparations before Joker settled into the pilot seat. Nihlus walked to Joker's seat, still adjusting to the early hours.

"Morning, lieutenant," Nihlus yawned, "you sleep well?"

"Yeah," Joker nodded as he made some gentle head roll stretches, "you can get some kava from the mess hall if you're in need of any."

"Thanks for the advice," Nihlus smiled, "I think I'll check on that."

While Joker turned on the terminal, Nihlus stepped out of the bridge and made his way towards the mess hall. When he found a beverage dispenser holding kava, he poured some kava into a mug. Sitting on one of the benches in the mess hall, he read the morning news on his omni-tool. So far, the Batarian Hegemony was still at odds with the Turian Hierarchy. Nothing serious happened between them yet, but Nihlus was confident Balak and his team would continue to make progress. In the end, all they could hope for is news of the internal struggle, followed by tensions within and concluded by a statement regarding the change in power within the Batarian territories. Once Nihlus finished his kava, he returned to the bridge, where he met up with Jack and Wrex.

"So," Jack chirped as she stretched her arms over her head, "you ready to kick Petrovsky's ass?"

"If you know where his trail starts, of course I am. That bastard's had his fun. Now it's time for payback," the krogan grinned.

Nihlus nodded at Jack and Wrex before he sauntered over to Joker.

"So, you ready for takeoff?" Nihlus asked.

Joker nodded before he turned on the engine by tapping on a few icons in the terminal. Masterfully, he directed the ship out of the docks and station. The Normandy flew towards the Mass Relay, allowing the ancient structure to fling it into FTL speed. It was only an hour or so later before it entered the Attican Traverse. Nihlus reviewed the layout of the colony prefabs, composing a plan for briefing. By the time he finished, the Normandy arrived at the planet in question and entered its orbit. From there, the young turian Spectre met up with Jack and Wrex near the hangar.

"The place is small with tight corridors," Nihlus informed, "the locals seemed to be light on arms, but I can't say for anything they had in storage."

Wrex nodded at Nihlus while he double-checked his weapons.

"Frag rounds, got it," Wrex grinned, "anything else?"

Nihlus shook his head while Jack stretched her arms.

"So Cerberus may not even be here?" Jack clarified.

"Maybe not," Wrex shrugged, "but they'll sure as hell know where they've been."

Once the Normandy reached the planet's surface, the vessel opened the hatch, allowing Nihlus,
Jack and Wrex to disembark. They landed close to the colony, so they rushed across the open to an unguarded side of a prefab. While they took cover, Nihlus scanned the area to check whether the coast was clear. Gesturing to the others, they followed him to the next building. The young turian Spectre traced his hand along the wall until he found the opened vent.

"Looks like they haven't noticed my last visit just yet," he whispered, "in here."

Nihlus crawled into the vent, encouraging Jack and Wrex to follow suit. They exited into a supply closet deeper in the building than Nihlus initially ventured. Even if their surroundings seemed quiet, they still pressed their backs against the wall. Nihlus eyed around the corner to see a group of guards walk by. Since the coast was clear, he led Jack and Wrex forward as they snuck down the corridor. Once they reached the door to Petrovsky's office, Nihlus cracked it open and peeked inside. To his disappointment, he couldn't find the Cerberus general inside. Putting his weapon aside, he walked to the desk.

"Watch the door. I'll be picking through his monitor," Nihlus huffed, installing a worm with his omni-tool.

Nihlus began scrolling through the files on the terminal. While Petrovsky did use the colony as a secondary center of command, he was on the move. Recent private messages painted a good picture of some higher up wanting Jack back in their possession. The general mobilized, and was hardly in any one place for very long. The young turian Spectre shook his head in disbelief when he found a list of colonies Cerberus considered targeting. It was better than nothing. He plugged in an OSD and started copying files.

By the time he finished, he suddenly heard gunshots outside the door. He scrambled his way out of the office, only to notice Jack and Wrex firing at Cerberus soldiers that charged at them.

"Company, and they came equipped," Wrex explained between bursts of fire.

Nihlus nodded before he leapt into the fray and opened fire.

"I've saved everything I can. Let's head back to the ship."

Just as they cleared a path, Nihlus, Jack and Wrex sprinted through the corridor and made their way out of the prefab. The other personnel within the prefab hadn't fully prepared, giving them enough leeway to slip on out of the building. It took them a while to reach the Normandy. They quickly left the system without further delay, lest they be detected. Nihlus took the OSD to the briefing room, staring at its sea of contents. All the while, Jack, Wrex, Garrus and Kasumi sat alongside him.

"He's definitely looking for you. Hard," he muttered, "maybe that's why he left, so he could see to your retrieval personally."

Kasumi read through the list Nihlus shared with them.

"So what are you thinking, then?" Jack sighed as she leaned her back against her chair.

"A bit of a gamble," Kasumi suggested, "if he wants you so badly, let him think he's still the hunter. Let him come to us."

"What do you mean?" Jack asked.

"You're going to have to be bait if he's not going to end up hiding behind waves of grunts only to escape last second," Nihlus answered.
Jack shuddered once again and her expression went blank.

"If that's how we're killing that slime ball, let's give it a try," she muttered a moment later, "how are we doing this?"

It was a couple hours later before the Normandy entered the Serpent Nebula after emerging from the Mass Relay. Once everyone disembarked the vessel, Jack and Wrex made their way through the Presidium with Nihlus leading the way. They stepped through the doors to the Huerta Hospital and meandered through the corridor until they reached Amber's room. She had now been allowed out of her bed, but wasn't allowed to commit to strenuous activity to let her skull and scalp fully heal. For now, the Alliance commander was in the middle of simple stretches while Saren took notice of Nihlus, Jack and Wrex.

"Did all go well?" he asked Nihlus.

"Not as much as I had hoped," Nihlus admitted, "however, it has given me an idea for a trap."

Out of curiosity, Saren tilted his head sideways.

"Go on," he beckoned.

"Petrovsky is after Jack," Nihlus continued, "while I'm aware of the risk that she poses should she be captured, he's constantly on the move, personally overseeing her recapture. Not only is this our only chance at getting to him, but he might be leaning too heavily on the offensive to expect any sort of retaliation."

Just then, Amber finished her stretches and shifted her focus towards her visitors.

"Hey. What's up?" Amber waved her hand.

"Still hunting that illusive rat," Wrex sighed.

Saren, Amber, Jack, Wrex and Nihlus sat in the available chairs in the room.

"Amber," Jack started, "did you…already know?"

Amber nodded silently.

"You really sure you want to be on the front lines?" Amber insisted, "I don't want to see you locked away in another pen, completely broken."

Jack shrugged, not even trying to fake any sort of emotion.

"I don't have much else going for me," Jack replied, "so…I guess why not."

"Trust her. She's not getting rid of bad blood any other way," Wrex inserted.

Amber and Jack made a brief stare at Wrex in a moment of silence. The Alliance commander returned her gaze towards the human biotic and her expression softened a little. She ground away at the idea before shrugging and letting out an audible sigh.

"Fine, let's see how well this plan goes," she sighed, "if you're up for it Jack, do what you have to do. I'll come bust your ass out of whatever cell you're locked in if this flops."

Jack gave Amber a soft smile.
"Thanks," she said.

Saren reached for the remote and switched on the holoscreen before he flipped through the channel. While he scrolled through news channels, his mandibles fluttered as he took notice of the sudden new headlines. He lightly nudge her shoulder and showed her the article.

"Have you seen this yet?" Saren asked.

Amber paused in her tracks and shifted her focus towards the holoscreen, her eyes widening in shock.

"Wait, what the fuck?" she blurted.

Jack and Wrex also turned their attention towards the holoscreen, narrowing their eyes as they saw a few Cerberus vessels traveling through the Petra Nebula and making their way towards Grissom Academy.

"Oh, shit," Jack grumbled.

Nihlus glared at the article with daggers for eyes.

"Looks like our opening," Wrex commented, "Jack, you still up for gunning down Petrovsky?"

Jack nodded eagerly before she stood to her feet.

"Yeah," she declared, "let's go kick his ass."

He turned back to Saren and Amber.

"We'll be going," Nihlus said, "I'll send you the report once we're done."

Saren nodded while Wrex and Nihlus stood to their feet.

"You three be careful out there," Saren advised.

The trio hustled out of the hospital in a light jog back to the docks. Rushing up the boarding plank, crew members were still loading up on equipment and supplies, eyeing them as they ran by. Nihlus, went straight to the bridge as he got out of the airlock.

"Lieutenant, get word out to quickly finalize preparations and return to the ship," Nihlus instructed, "we're leaving immediately."

"Huh? What's going on?" Jeff inquired, passing a confused glance.

"Grissom Academy: Cerberus is closing in," Nihlus explained, "we're moving to intercept them."

Joker couldn't help but shudder.

"Oh, boy," he blurted.
By the time preparations were finished, the Normandy headed out of the Citadel and through the Mass Relay. It took an hour or so to reach the Petra Nebula. After they approached the station, they attempted to open coms with the academy, all to no avail. Even if the squadmates sighed in frustration, they already suspected Cerberus might've infiltrated it by now.

"Jammer's probably in place. Shall we continue?" Joker asked.

"Get word out and take us in. Make sure stealth systems are engaged as we make our final approach. I'm going to prepare the away team," Nihlus walked back to the armory.

Once he arrived, he met up with Jack, Garrus, Wrex, Liara, Javik, Tali, James and Kasumi.

"This is where we're at," Nihlus explained, "Cerberus is attacking Grissom, thinking they'll find Jack there. We know for a fact that General Petrovsky is heading the operation in her capture. This is an opportunity to find him and kill him outside of some hole he can hide in."

"You have any ideas of sabotaging any traps they have?" James asked.

"They still think they're the hunters," Nihlus shrugged, "they won't expect being hunted in turn. Our current objective is to kill Oleg, then we can rescue any personnel aboard the station."

By now, Garrus, Liara, Tali, James, Javik, Wrex, Jack and Kasumi finished gearing up. Already surrounding the station were several Cerberus cruisers. Nihlus, Garrus, Jack and Wrex boarded one shuttle before it launched out of the vessel. Theydeparted for one of the open docking bays with minimal effort. After they disembarked the shuttle, they scanned their surroundings, only to notice the hangar was empty.

"This doesn't look good," Garrus muttered.

Several other Cerberus boarding craft already littered the hangar area, as did a few guard bodies. They didn't have time to lose, so they ventured deeper into the hangar and entered the corridor, scoping for any Cerberus soldiers on patrol. The first squad they encountered was at the front lobby, all bundled at the receptionist desk. The instant the soldiers spotted the quartet, they began opening fire, so Jack and Wrex emitted their biotic fields with Nihlus and Garrus returning fire. They quickly handled the group of combat engineers and closed the distance with the desk. The terminal displayed a large number of sections locked down with another monitor displaying staff names.

"Where do you think we'll find this Cerberus general?" Garrus pondered, carefully eyeing the map on the terminal.

Garrus took a step back, allowing Nihlus to catch a glimpse of the map. Nihlus worked with the monitor to pull up the camera feeds from around the station and sifted through each one. By the time he checked the camera feed to the administration office, he found General Petrovsky on the screen. He was looking over the shoulders of his lackeys as they dug for Jack's files.

"There he is, other end of the station. Let's go."

Jack nodded before she and Wrex made a sprint ahead of the turians. They knew the layout of the Academy well enough, and knew where to go. They wasted no time as they sprinted through the corridors, gunning down any Cerberus soldiers in sight. It didn't take long before they reached the
"There she is! Get her!" the Cerberus general barked.

Just as the personal guards charged after Jack, she resisted the urge to panic long enough to emit a biotic field. Wrex took the hint and opened fire at the guards. Shortly after the guards were taken out, the Cerberus general was the only one left in the room. He pulled out a small, pocket-sized defense weapon and aimed at Jack. Her heart skipped a beat as he fired. Suddenly, Wrex yanked her aside and charged head-first into Oleg, knocking him to the ground. The krogan placed his foot atop Petrovsky's shoulder to keep him pinned to the ground. He brought a clenched fist back and rammed it into the Cerberus officer, following with a second and third.

"Take away the endless legions of grunts and you're nothing but a sickly rat," he smirked.

Wrex glanced over his shoulder.

"You alright, Jack?" Wrex called over.

Jack nodded before she took a few steps closer and aimed her pistol at Petrovsky's head.

"Missed me, huh?"

Petrovsky grunted in defeat as he gave up and lay on the floor.

"Subject Zero…you should have stayed in your pen."

"Don't call me that," she snarled.

She fired a few rounds into his left collar, causing him to grunt with pain. Wrex glanced over his shoulder once he heard approaching footsteps. Too late did he respond to the surge of Cerberus troops approaching behind them. A biotic discharge threw him and Jack off their feet, leaving him dazed and her unconscious. One of the soldiers helped the general to his feet while the others picked up Jack's limp form.

"Leave the krogan! Let's go!" Petrovsky ordered.

Petrovsky and the Cerberus soldiers left the office with Jack while Wrex struggled to get back to his feet, even if the aches hadn't faded.

"Jack," Wrex muttered, "no."

Shortly after Wrex burst out of the office, he tore after the retreating Cerberus soldiers, struggling to keep up as they lay down suppressing fire to keep him back. The Cerberus soldiers managed to make it to the hangar when they saw another shuttle arriving at the station. To their disappointment, Liara, Javik and Kasumi emerged from it instead. Suddenly, the General and the soldier who was supporting him fell in a helpless heap, as the soldier's helmet exploded outward. The Cerberus troops found the source of the shots as the two carrying Jack dropped dead as well. Garrus was on a balcony above providing overwatch to his companions below. Nihlus also sprinted into the scene as Petrovsky clutched onto his still bleeding shoulder. Wrex pulled Jack to the side, gradually shaking her awake.

"Jack, are you hurt badly?" Wrex cooed, "you took a bit of a hit back there."

Jack groaned as she slowly stirred.
"It hurts a little," Jack mumbled, "but I'll be fine."

Liara, Javik and Nihlus surrounded General Petrovsky moments later. The rest of his men had been forced to fall back deeper into the station, leaving them time to recover.

"Nihlus," Javik insisted, "do we finish off this wretched parasite?"

"Leave that to Jack and Wrex," Nihlus suggested, "let's keep going, look for survivors."

Javik hesitated for a moment while Nihlus and Liara scurried further into the station. Wrex helped Jack to her feet before handing her another weapon.

"There," Wrex said, "all yours."

Having recovered from her recent blow, Jack took a few steps closer and aimed her weapon at the Cerberus general. She didn't hesitate any further before squeezing the trigger. She stood there for a moment, panting. The memories and thoughts circled her like vultures around dehydrated prey, fading in and out of existence. This prevented her from focusing on the blood trickling out of Petrovsky's gunshot wound. She almost stumbled, so Wrex rushed over to her side and placed his hands on her shoulders to keep her from falling over, which was enough to snap her out her trance.

"Easy," he murmured softly.

"I…I can't believe it's over…" she quietly sobbed.

Jack turned around and embraced herself to Wrex, encouraging the krogan to gently stroke her head.

"Take it easy," Wrex whispered, "you're safe for now. Cerberus is still out there, but Oleg is dead."

Since Javik already headed further into the station and the hangar was empty, Jack and Wrex spent a short while in silence, the krogan soothing the human biotic while she nestled in his embrace. Eventually, he got up, helping her to her feet.

"Feeling better?" Wrex asked.

"A lot better," Jack nodded.

Jack and Wrex sprinted back into the station to help Nihlus, Garrus, Liara, Javik and Kasumi drive out the remaining Cerberus soldiers. Kasumi located bombs that Cerberus brought over to the station and didn't hesitate as she disarmed them. Garrus and Liara continued to provide her cover as she rushed to the explosive charges. At the same time, Javik, Nihlus, Jack and Wrex freed the hostages once they located them.

"Is this everyone? Are there any others we have to look out for?" Nihlus pressed, helping one of the captive instructors to their feet.

"They were dragging students off," one instructor mentioned, "I'm not sure where."

"Then we gotta find them," Garrus suggested, "fast."

Jack and Wrex exchanged glances before they continued venturing through the station. Meanwhile, Garrus, Javik, and Kasumi were assigned with escorting the personnel to a safe position. The human biotic and the krogan began their search at the hangar. There were a few Cerberus vessels left, which made good places to search for the students. They began a jog around the station
towards the docking ports in search of ships that hadn't disconnected with the station. They found one Cerberus vessel with a few guards patrolling its entrance not a minute later. They were dragging students onto the ship, with biotic suppressant collars around their necks. Both Jack and Wrex emitted their biotic field and began charging after the soldiers, catching their attention.

"Open fire!" one soldier shouted.

"Forget the students, that's Subject Zero!" another soldier barked, "fall back to the ship and prepare for launch!"

Just as the soldiers began scrambling into the ship, Jack and Wrex made their way towards the engine. Holstering her weapon, she raised her arms above her head, gathering a ball of energy before throwing it down upon a couple of the thrusters. Wrex did the same thing at the other side of the vessel, thus disarming the thrusters and leaving the ship grounded. They jumped off the hull and walked up the boarding dock. Since the hatch hadn't been closed yet, they stormed into the ship to clear out the Cerberus soldiers before rushing to the students onboard and helping them onto their feet.

"Here, lemme have at it," Wrex grumbled, tearing the collars off the students.

"Thanks!" one of the students smiled in relief.

Jack also lent a helping hand in ripping the collars off the students. They all left the vessel and met up with Nihlus, Garrus, Kasumi, Liara and Javik.

"The other Cerberus vessels have left the station. Probably bolting for the hills before help arrives," Nihlus reported.

Wrex sighed as Garrus carefully examined the students behind the krogan, his subvocals letting out soft coos in an attempt to soothe them.

"Is that all of them?" Garrus asked.

"We can account for losses once the fleet arrives," Kasumi added.

It was only half an hour later before another Alliance fleet arrived at the station after they reactivated the station's coms. Nihlus stood to greet Anderson the instant he disembarked.

"Good job holding the Academy," Anderson greeted, "any idea what they were after?"

"They we're trying to get Jack back," Nihlus started to explain, "but she and Wrex managed to take out General Petrovsky."

"That's one less problem to worry about. We can take it from here, Kryik."

Anderson and Nihlus stepped through the hangar and ventured deeper into the station.

"We did manage to rescue most of the students and Jack is still out of Cerberus possession. It was a relatively successful mission," the young turian Spectre informed.

Anderson sighed in relief.

"I'll take all the good news I can get."

In the meantime, Miranda entered the large chamber of a research facility, laying her eyes on the
artifact as scientists ran some tests on it. Nearby, several corpses lay on separate tables. She turned on her datapad and read the reports on their progress.

"What's the situation with these bodies?" she asked one of the scientists.

One scientist shifted his focus towards Miranda while the others kept working.

"We found them in Akuze a long time ago," he explained, "and we've been keeping them in storage for future experiments."

"Anything noteworthy besides extensive acid burns?" Miranda pressed further.

The scientist made a brief glance at a corpse before returning his attention towards the Cerberus operative.

"They're most likely Alliance soldiers," he shrugged.

Miranda rubbed her chin as she gazed at the corpses.

"I suppose the Alliance won't consider trying to find them," she commented.

"I checked. They were all listed KIA," the head scientist agreed.

She nodded in approval while eyeing one particular corpse. The young soldier's body was heavily marred by the Thresher acid, and almost couldn't tell it had once been human.

"So who's this one?" she asked.

"Based on the tags, what's left of Corporal Toombs," the scientist answered.

By now, the other scientists finished preparations for their experiment, so Miranda gestured the scientist in front her to get into position. Since the scientists hooked up the corpses to the artifact via cables, the head scientist approached the terminal and tapped on a few keys.

"Ready. Exposing the tissue to the artifact."

Upon the press of the button, they activated the artifact and energy particles danced along the cables. In almost a similar fashion to old horror vids, their dead muscles spasmed as the artifact riddled their forms with new life. In seconds, dead organic tissue materialized into metal. Lines of some phosphorescent blue material etched lines into their skin. Suddenly, one shot its eyes open and clawed at the air. The scientists stiffened as the new creature let out eerie cries. In a split second, more of the newly formed metallic beings sprung to life. As they reached for the nearby scientists, Miranda used her biotics to slam them down, causing them to flake like dried onions. This gave the scientists a chance to scramble to safety while she observed the beings under her restraint. Drawing her pistol, she finished them off, each with a single shot to the head.
Pragia Lab Prison Break

Two weeks have passed and by now, Amber completed her recovery and was now ready to get back into action. Still, they had yet to find the few students kidnapped by Cerberus. Saren was still overseeing the batarian civil war alone, and was away from her ship. In the meantime, she continued to search up and down various known routes for Cerberus vessels.

At the moment, the Normandy just emerged from the Mass Relay and entered the Nubian Expanse. She had set course for Pragia, a heavily forested planet with Cerberus dug deep. Intel indicated the captured students had been brought there shortly after departing from Grissom Academy. On both sides of the Alliance commander stood Jack, Wrex, Garrus and Javik.

"Jack, you're sure you're ready for action so soon?" Amber asked.

Jack nodded.

"I can't let them go through the same thing I did," she clarified.

"Fair enough," Amber sighed, "the terrain and foliage will make a ground assault difficult, so we'll be dropping in via shuttle onto the roof."

It was only a while before the Normandy reached Pragia, so Amber led Jack, Wrex, Javik and Garrus out of the bridge and into the locker room. After they suited up, they made their way to the hangar and boarded the shuttle while the vessel entered the planet's orbit. They flew relatively low along the treeline to avoid visual detection. Like a second layer of clouds, the dense trees practically blanketed the surface below. The pilot carefully flew the shuttle above the trees in search of the facility. By the time they located the Teltin Facility, the shuttle hovered over the roof, allowing Amber, Garrus, Jack, Wrex and Javik to disembark. By scanning her surroundings, Amber couldn't help but recall the last time she visited this facility. Cerberus, like the Alliance, had blindly stumbled out into the Galaxy, making wild jumps through the relays to mark whatever untouched territory they could find. Pragia was at the time of Jack's rescue the farthest known planet from Earth.

Amber and her team searched the roof for a way inside until Garrus located a hatch. Once he found the handle, he pulled the hatch open. They climbed down single file into a maintenance corridor, poorly lit by the internal lighting. Maybe Cerberus hasn't finished with the repairs as of yet? Nearby, a couple of engineers with helmet-mounted floodlamps walked along a catwalk. Amber led the way as they snuck underneath the catwalk. The team continued until they reached another door at the end of their path and cracked it open. They slipped through the door and took cover while Garrus and Amber scanned their surroundings.

"Say," Garrus whispered, "where would they keep test subjects?"

She looked over the edge of a nearby railing.

"Looks like we're in the part of the facility that they test the subjects," Amber observed, "they pump them full of PEDs and let them go, see what they're capable of."

"Damn," Wrex commented quietly.

He took his time eyeing the pens down below, with reinforced, padded walls and a barrier ceiling for observers to watch from. Wrex made a brief glance at Jack.
"So where do we find the keys," Wrex asked, "do you know?"

Jack grinned and held her fist in the air.

"Why do that when I can break the lock?" Jack suggested.

She brought her hand down on a control panel once she began emitting biotic particles, shattering it and causing the barriers to flicker and fade. Both the prisoners and the scientists in the area began glancing around in confusion.

"Ok," Amber nodded in approval, "now's our chance."

They rushed down and started gathering the captive students, moving them out of the labs with the scientists at gunpoint. Garrus, Wrex and Javik kept their rifles aimed at the scientists to keep them from moving. Exiting the lab, alarms started to blare all around them.

"Let's keep moving," Amber instructed, "there's a hangar area towards the south end of the building."

Amber led her squadmates and the students as they scurried down the corridor. Cerberus soldiers emerged from various corners and doors in an attempt to block their path, but the Alliance commander and her teammates opened fire on them. She continued to funnel them down the winding hallways to the opposite end of the facility, cautious not to stay in the same room for too long. By the time they reached the hangar, a few squadrons of Cerberus soldiers waited in ambush.

Thinking fast, Jack and Wrex enveloped themselves, their comrades and the students in a biotic field to repel gunshots. Garrus turned to the door behind them and locked it tight before rushing to cover. He, Amber and Javik returned fire. Jack and Wrex moved to one of the nearby shuttles, checking if it was operable. Just as luck would have it, its thrusters were still intact. They escorted the first group of students on. Moving to another shuttle, Amber called the Normandy.

"Joker, we're heading your way with the captives," she ordered, "we'll be returning on a couple of Cerberus shuttles. Hold your fire until you confirm it's us."

{"Ok, thanks for the heads up,} Joker replied over the com-link, {the cargo hold will be prepared for you return.}

Maintaining fire against the Cerberus soldiers, they boarded the shuttles and lifted off none too soon. They took off from the hanger area and through the trees back into the atmosphere, narrowly contending with the AA guns just outside. Both Amber and Wrex resorted to maneuvering their shuttles to dodge the incoming fire. Just in low orbit, the Normandy had adjusted its flight trajectory to retrieve them.

{Commander, is that you? I'm assuming that's you because you're being shot at.}

"Just give me a moment," Amber requested, "we have defense turrets to outrun."

{I've got the cargo hold door open and I've adjusted for your current velocity. Get ready to touch down in ninety.}

Amber nodded before she outmaneuvered the turrets and flew straight for the Normandy. Seconds later, the vessel opened its hatch, allowing both fleeing shuttles to enter the cargo hold. Gently landing on the ground, the cargo hold doors shut and the ship shot back out of orbit. Amber and Jack escorted the students to the medbay after disembarking the shuttles. Dr. Chakwas and Mordin then oversaw their diagnoses. Amber calmly walked to the ship cockpit on the bridge.
"Get us out and quickly," Amber commanded, "I don't want us to be here when Cerberus reinforcements arrive."

"Right," Joker nodded.

Joker maneuvered the Normandy out of the system as fast as he could. They entered FTL shortly thereafter, headed for Arcturus Station. Amidst the duration of the flight, Amber sat down on a bench to relax. She was in the middle of clearing her mind when Javik sat down next to her minutes later, which caused her to snap out of her thoughts.

"What's on your mind?" Amber asked.

Javik sighed as he leaned back.

"Taking a moment to rest," the Prothean answered.

She raised a brow and turned to look at the Prothean.

"That's all?" she blurted.

Javik turned his head away from Amber, so she turned on her omni-tool. She scrolled through her message inbox until she raised her eyebrow at one new notification with this strange title:

{Strive For Improvement}

To her disappointment, there was no return address, but the content made her feel suspicious. Out of the corner of her eye, Amber noticed a video clip attached to the message. Out of curiosity, she tapped on it. The instant she began watching it, she was no longer sure if she could see the Prothean Empire in a positive light. She had it promptly scanned and opened it. All it was was a deep voice over a maroon sound wave on screen.

{I'm going to be blunt with you, Shepard. I've been making this same deal for longer than your species has existed and I will make the same offer I gave off to the Protheans before they were appropriately archived and disposed of. Mend your collective ways. The Protheans may have been the lowest example life has offered in well over a mega-annum, but that doesn't mean I don't see ample reason to keep wiping the galaxy until I find results. However, I believe you might be the closest to being within acceptable parameters. I still have my own schedule to maintain, so you best get to work.}

Amber stiffened, but she resisted the urge to panic. She wasted no time archiving the message before she slowly stood to her feet. She stole a brief glance at Javik and to her relief, he was minding his own business. The Alliance commander tiptoed over to her quarters and lay down in her bed, keeping a mental note to remind herself to inform Saren once he got back. Still, if that was a direct message from the Reapers, then how did they manage to find her contact number? She doubted they had omni-tools of their own. She stared at the ceiling above her bed, shifting nervously on her mattress.

It was only an hour later before the Normandy arrived at the Arcturus Station, so Amber greeted Anderson at the docks once she disembarked the vessel.

"Good work, Shepard," Anderson said, "anything else to report?"

"They were lucky they didn't suffer permanent damage," Amber began, "the facility is still there, unfortunately."
Anderson nodded quietly as he folded his arms behind his back.

"We can deal with it later," Anderson replied, "any word from Arterius?"

Amber double-checked her messages in her omni-tool.

"Last I heard from him," she answered, "it will only be a matter of time before Balak's revolution would be strong enough to take on the Hegemony."

"And that'll be one less problem to deal with," Anderson agreed, "then Cerberus has to go."

Just then, the students emerged from the Normandy and stepped onto the docks. They were escorted to a group of medical personnel, waiting to have them processed in the nearby facilities. Before Amber headed for the Normandy, she gave Anderson a salute.

"We'll take care of everything from here," Anderson added.

The Alliance commander continued along her path and made her way to the bridge. Joker closed the vessel's hatch before launching the Normandy back into space, taking a few routes through Mass Relays to return to the Citadel. When they arrived at the docks, everyone disembarked and Amber made her way into the Presidium. Just as she was making her way back to her apartment, she found Saren standing at a beverage booth.

"Saren!" Amber called over while she waved her hand.

Saren glanced over his shoulder as Amber scurried towards him and smiled back at her.

"Hey. I was just thinking of messaging you," Saren greeted, "perhaps to see if you were on the station."

Amber stopped just in front of the booth and took a moment to catch her breath before she read the menu.

"So you're getting some drinks?" Amber pondered.

"Yeah, I had a busy day today. I just got back and wanted to unwind. You want anything?" he offered, handing her a menu.

Amber took a moment to read the menu before she handed it back.

"I could go for a banana strawberry smoothie today," Amber requested.

The waiter nodded and left them. All Saren and Amber could do was wait at the counter.

"I suppose the students are faring well now?" Saren asked.

"Yeah," Amber nodded, "I just deposited them back at Arcterus Station. They'll be treated there."

Minutes passed before the waiter returned with their drink orders. She took a sip of her own drink as she received it from the waiter.

"So how's Balak's little operation coming along?" Amber asked.

"Another band of reinforcements and Balak's revolution would be considered a success," Saren answered.
Since their drinks had mobile cups, Saren made the payment before he led Amber through the Presidium on the way back to their apartment.

"Word's been spreading around batarian territories about his return," Saren continued, "the higher echelons of the Hegemony haven't treated his new movement as a threat yet, so we should be good."

By now, Saren and Amber arrived at the apartment complex, so they made their way into their apartment and sat down at the dining room table. Amber took another sip of her smoothie before placing it onto the table.

"Saren," Amber mentioned, "there's...something else you should know."

"Speak your mind," Saren replied.

Amber turned on her omni-tool.

"I know we have less than a year left before the Reapers arrive," she started.

He nearly dropped his cup.

"I...oh," he paused, "I supposed we should hurry with Cerberus and Balak then. What'd they have to say?"

Amber took a deep breath.

"They sent me a private message," she explained, "I don't know how, but they made it pretty apparent that they're the judgmental type. If we handle Cerberus and remedy the issue of the Hegemony, we can probably earn their favor for a bit, learn what they want in the meantime."

Saren sighed as he placed his hand on Amber's shoulder.

"I can get those two to work," Saren reassured, "I can promise you that."

Amber smiled before she leaned in and gave Saren a kiss. Moments later, Saren heard a ping in his omni-tool.

{Business Deal}

The message almost looked like a scam or a potential phishing link and he was hesitant to open it. He took a moment to examine the return address, but he soon regretted it seconds later.

{Omega}

"What the hell does she want?" he snarled.

Amber gave Saren a confused gaze.

"Who?" she blurted.

"Her name is Aria T'Loak, the self declared ruler of some miserable station deep into the Terminus. Don't know what she'd want, but it's rarely good," Saren scowled.

That caused Amber to scratch her head.

"Isn't Terminus that section in the galaxy filled with criminals?" she recalled.
Saren nodded.

"She's a pirate queen," he added, "and a ruthless one at that."

Saren opened the message without further hesitation.

\textit{Shepard,}

\textit{Forgive my intrusion, but I couldn't help but notice your current operation in the Kite's Nest, assisting Balak with his little rebellion. I would like to offer additional help for the movement at no cost to yourselves of course. It's only a matter of time before the Hegemony recognizes your hand in the matter, so something a bit more foreign might throw them off the scent. Send back a response if you're up for my offer.}

\textit{Send Arterius my love,}

\textit{Aria}

Amber felt a chill down her spine after she finished reading the message.

"Oh, boy," she muttered.

"Hold on," Saren growled.

He whipped out his own omni-tool and quickly composed a message to Aria. Once he finished, he sent it after reviewing it for a brief moment.

\textit{What scam do you have for us? Chances are, we're not interested.}

\textit{Keep your head down,}

\textit{Arterius}

Saren turned off his omni-tool and gave Amber a reassuring glance.

"Let's hope she doesn't bother us," he said.
Visiting Omega's Queen

Having fully rested from their previous missions, Saren met up with Amber at the docking bay a couple days later. Like himself, she has already suited up.

"Do you have any other missions at this time?" Saren raised a browplate.

"Nope," Amber shook her head, "I thought I'd help you out today."

Saren couldn't help but smile as he placed his hand on Amber's shoulder.

"Well, Balak has gained enough momentum," Saren told her, "at some point, we could potentially regress our efforts to simply providing supplies and occasionally intel."

Amber nodded in agreement as she and Saren sauntered through the docks. They watched as the last of their next shipment of supplies was loaded onto the cargo hold for deployment in the Kite's Nest. Without hesitation, they boarded the vessel. They departed the Citadel shortly thereafter. The two headed for the briefing room where Saren informed her of his more recent efforts in batarian territory. He emphasized this with help from the holographic projector, allowing Amber to read the map.

"He sure did cover enough territory," she commented.

"He got to work and fast," Saren added, "didn't think we'd get the ball rolling."

Once Amber finished reading the map, Saren turned off the projector.

"Still," Amber said, "it reminds me of how much improvement we have yet to make."

Saren couldn't help but let out coos from his subvocals.

"If you are referring to Earth," Saren suggested, "we can negotiate this matter with the salarians. Is that acceptable?"

Amber nodded.

"Do you think they've got the terraforming tech necessary?" she clarified.

Saren nodded before he and Amber made their way back to the bridge.

"They're probably the best bet when it comes to colonizing planets with hazardous environments," Saren proclaimed.

Saren had no idea Mordin overheard those words until…

"Do apologize interruption. Care to share?" Mordin interrupted.

The salarian doctor had been on the bridge when he listened in on their conversation. Amber stiffened before she turned her head towards Mordin.

"What?" she blurted nervously, "are you interested?"

"Not in STG, but still have ties to powers that be within Salarian Union," Mordin said, "could help. What do you need?"
Amber sighed before she folded her arms behind her back.

"It would be great if Earth's environment improved and the social classes bridged the gap," she admitted, "but the wealthy elites there still aren't willing to budge."

Mordin sniffed.

"Classic case, can remedy. Upper social echelons, not so much."

"Thanks," Amber smiled as Mordin jotted down some notes in his omni-tool.

It was a while before the Normandy emerged from the Mass Relay. Patrols had become more frequent over the last few weeks, and Hegemony ships now crawled over their territory, attempting to beat down the insurgents. To Shepard's luck, the Normandy already had its stealth systems active. This made it easier for the Normandy to fly to the Kite's Nest with little to no trouble. Every now and then, the remains of skirmishes between Hegemony loyalists and insurgents showed up on radar in the form of ships torn up and tossed aside like broken toys. Once they reached the planet, they descended through its atmosphere. Balak had been busy reinforcing the mining colony, providing walls and a shield to protect them from artillery and orbital bombardments. Amber, Saren and Liara disembarked the vessel and made their way towards the rogue batarian's makeshift camp. They parked the Mako and unloaded several crates of munitions. As they did so, they met up with Balak.

"I must thank you again for all you have provided to our cause," Balak greeted, walking out to meet the trio.

"You're welcome," Amber smiled, "how've recent efforts been?"

"Better," Balak answered, "currently, the Hegemony's fleets are stretched thin, lending our ships a bit more leeway."

"Excellent," Saren flexed his mandibles into a smile.

Balak escorted them into the nearest building.

"By the way, how much do either of you know about Aria's most recent interests?"

Amber raised an eyebrow.

"She messaged you, too?" she clarified.

Balak nodded.

"Yeah, she offered me a shipment of weapons and armor for relatively affordable prices considering the resources," he said.

By then, Balak, Saren, Amber and Liara reached the conference room.

"I've been heavily considering the offer," Balak continued, "but I've been out for too long, and I'm not sure how her interests have changed."

Saren sighed after Balak turned his head towards him.

"I couldn't tell you what she hopes to gain from this conflict," Saren admitted, "it's been a long while since I last saw her myself."
"Should I still accept?" Balak asked, "most of the guys are still lacking in proper equipment, regardless of how many loyalists we fight."

Saren placed a finger on his chin and closed his eyes.

"I can see why it would be an enticing offer," Saren said, "as this fight starts to gain momentum, I can see why we'd be in a position to accept, seeing we could use her as a scapegoat if the Hegemony finds evidence of outside help."

Liara and Amber tilted their heads sideways.

"Who's going to go negotiate with her?" Liara asked.

"I will. I've had the most recent experience with her," Saren grumbled.

Saren tilted his head towards Liara and Amber before placing his hand on the Alliance commander's shoulder.

"Excuse me," he muttered on his way into the next room.

Saren took a deep breath to keep himself calm. He pulled out his omni-tool and began another message to Aria.

\[\text{Aria,}\
\text{I'm heading over to your position for negotiations.}\
\text{Regards,}\
\text{Saren}\
\]

Saren reviewed it quickly before he sent it. He soon returned to the conference room, which caught Balak, Amber and Liara's attention.

"Balak," Saren requested, "will you be all right on your own?"

With a confused stare, Amber took a couple steps towards Saren.

"What's going on?" she asked him.

"It's time you met the self-proclaimed Queen of Omega," Saren answered, "let's head back to the Normandy."

His mood had significantly soured now that Aria had roped herself in. Amber stole a brief glance at Balak.

"Hey," Balak reassured with a grin, "we'll be fine. You guys take care of yourselves."

Amber nodded before she, Liara and Saren stepped out of the conference room. They returned to the Normandy with minimal delay and left orbit for the Mass Relay to the deep end of the Terminus. At the bridge, Saren and Amber stared through the hull as Joker worked away in navigating the vessel.

"I don't mean to be bothersome," Joker asked, "but why are we heading for Terminus?"

Saren and Amber exchanged glances.
"Saren?" Amber paused.

"I got a message from someone earlier," Saren explained, "I want to talk with them directly so I can get my point across. Now take this quietly."

Joker couldn't help but give Saren a puzzled stare.

"Right," he muttered.

He shrugged and looked back to the controls.

"Your funeral, pal," Joker said, "if you guys are incapacitated and caged for some nauseating fate, I'm not coming in to save you."

Saren rolled his eyes.

"Believe me," Saren reassured, "from my first visit to my most recent visit, I haven't even come close to falling prey to anything on Omega."

It was only a while before the Normandy arrived in Omega. With stealth systems still engaged, they found a port in the sleazy station to dock at, and landed.

"All yours, Shepard. Lemme know just how well the meeting went, will you?"

Amber nodded at Joker.

"Will do," she said.

Amber led Saren out of the bridge and they disembarked the Normandy, making their way towards the entrance to the Afterlife Club. An elcor stood at the entrance with a waiting line in front of it.

"Inflated excitement. Welcome back, Spectre Arterius. Emphasized urgency. She has been expecting you. Go right in," the elcor grumbled in a usual, monotone voice.

Saren sighed before he led Amber through the entrance and down the corridor. When they entered the nightclub, Amber groaned as the rumbling exotic music pulsed through her ears. They slipped past various non-human customers crowding the floor. The Alliance commander made a brief glance at a glowing holographic pillar in the center before continuing forth. They reached the top of a staircase at the back of the chamber, leading to a balcony overlooking the rest of the crowd below. An asari sat in the middle of a couch looking down at them. She greeted them with a snarky, sadistic grin.

"Saren, it's been a while," she said, "how've you been? I see you brought your girlfriend."

Saren blinked once as he sighed.

"Fine, thanks for asking, Aria," Saren replied, "now, about that deal you made with Balak. What's your stake in this conflict, anyways?"

Aria unfolded her arms.

"Batarians were crawling too deep into my territory, wouldn't fuck off when I told them," she explained, "besides, nothing wrong with a little green. Sell old equipment off to some desperate miners, make them feel happy about themselves."

Amber made a brief glance around the room, taking note of some batarians on patrol, probably to
maintain peace in the nightclub before returning her gaze towards the asari pirate queen.

"Different from the ones that reside here?" Amber remarked.

"Those things are just small-time pirates I can deal with," Aria clarified, "I'm talking about the Hegemony itself."

Amber couldn't help but let out an annoyed sigh.

"It just seems that wherever I go," she commented in a snarky tone, "trouble spawns in its wake."

Aria chuckled the instant she overheard Amber's remark.

"Those animals get what they deserve," Aria replied, "the little shit-stains feel so entitled they just have to spread their issues to everyone else's doorstep. However, they still do make very good grunts, so one doesn't have to feel morally compromised when they send them out on jobs with high chances of painful death."

Saren shook his head in disbelief while he folded his arms.

"So what do you want from us in exchange?" he asked.

"Oh, you don't have to do anything. It's all down to Balak's word, not yours," she scoffed.

That compelled Saren and Amber to exchange puzzled glances. Saren sighed after a moment of silence.

"Fine. I suppose we'll be on our way, then."

Aria smiled and nodded in approval.

"My regards to Balak," she replied.

With their short meeting over, Saren and Amber left the nightclub.

"Sorry for wasting our time here," Saren apologized.

"It's all right," Amber reassured him, even when she scratched her head.

Once they reached the dock, Saren and Amber didn't hesitate to board the Normandy. When they entered the bridge, the Alliance commander approached the cockpit, catching Joker's attention.

"You're back already?" Joker commented.

Amber nodded.

"Yeah. Take us off this station," she requested, "I'd rather not spend any more time here than I have to."

"Yeah, I can agree to that," Joker chuckled.

Joker maneuvered the Normandy out of the station and flew towards the Mass Relay, letting the ancient structure fling it to FTL speed. Saren and Amber soon left the bridge and met up with Mordin in the medbay. The Spectres' entrance was enough to catch the salarian doctor's attention.

"Shepard. Arterius. How can I help you?" he greeted.
Amber gave Mordin a smile.

"I'm ready to negotiate on a terraforming project for Earth," Amber told him.

"Of course," Mordin agreed, "can get word to former superiors."

While Saren and Amber sat down, Mordin turned on his omni-tool. The salarian doctor scrolled through his list of contacts and found some numbers within former members of the Salarian Union. She sat down and took her time working with Mordin composing a few messages. By the time they finished, Mordin sent the messages and nodded at Amber.

"Thank you. Will let you know of response."

Amber smiled at Mordin before she and Saren stepped out of the medbay and made their way into their quarters. Since it'll be a few hours before the Normandy would return to the Citadel, they climbed into their bed and the Alliance commander nestled into the turian Spectre's embrace. Amber went to sleep more quickly, but Saren found himself staring at the ceiling, unable to find sleep. Something itched at the back of his mind and it wouldn't let him find peace. He rolled about in bed before giving up and just staring at the ceiling.
Once a few days passed, Mordin got a response from the Salarian Union. Upon hearing from him, Amber was convinced this meant she can schedule a meeting with them. She made her way to the bathroom, only to come across Saren at the bathroom door.

"Ah, Shepard," Saren blurted, "would you like to go first?"

Amber smiled as she shook her head.

"If we both showered at the same time," she suggested, "it'll get done quicker."

His mandibles twitched at the offer.

"I'd like that idea," Saren mused.

Amber smiled before she led Saren into the bathroom, where they stripped before they stepped into the shower stall. The turian Spectre turned on the shower head and stood under the warm water spray. The familiar, friendly tingle of warm water rushed over his plates and rough skin. While Amber leaned her head back, Saren scrubbed some shampoo into her hair. Once he finished that task, he allowed her to rinse off the suds. The Alliance commander soon returned the favor and scrubbed the grime off his plates, only to notice his length was starting to extend when she finished.

"Well," Saren chuckled softly, "are you in the mood, or do you need some help?"

Amber slowly nodded before she leaned back and guided his hand towards the apex between her legs.

"I could use a warmup," she whispered to him.

Saren's mandibles twitched as he slid a talon inside of her, savoring the rubbery sensation of her damp walls. She dragged in a long, shaky breath as her nervous system sparked with the sensation. Amber perched one arm over his shoulder as he thrust his talon in and out of her folds. While she buried her face into his shoulder, the turian Spectre's chest rumbled with deep purrs as he brushed his tongue along her face. She pressed the palm of her hand down on top of Saren's, forcing his talons deeper. As heat pooled in her stomach, she nuzzled her face against his. His other hand slid up the side of her stomach before it cupped the patch of skin just below her right breast.

Once Saren felt fluids trickling down his talon, he slowly withdrew it while he gave Amber a kiss. She hooked one leg over his hip spur as he positioned his tip near her pulsing folds. He pushed right in, taking a brief pause to savor the initial feeling of her wrapped around him. As she let out a needy moan, she tightened her leg around his waist.

"Saren," she whispered.

"Yes?" he began to rock his hips, leaning his weight into her.

"A-A little deeper," Amber begged between pants.

"Of course..." he whispered.

Saren gripped her hips with one hand and angled his thrusts so he could sink in deeper. Mewling,
Amber nuzzled her face against his. He leaned into the gesture and adjusted his hand around her leg.

"Spirits, Shepard," Saren moaned into her ear.

By now, his whole upper body hung over her. Amber held Saren close as he started to accelerate his rhythmic pace, heat building up in her core. He shifted his thrusts to short and quick to hard and slow, feeling the rush of climax. The Alliance commander cried out Saren's name as her walls tightened around his length, its ridges and spines having stimulated her nerves to bring her to her orgasm. Her mentor slowly drew himself out as the two came down from their high. They took a moment to rinse off the small mess they made before Saren turned off the shower.

They climbed out of the stall and dried themselves off. After slipping on their sets of uniforms, Saren raided the medicine cabinet and handed Amber a tablet of dextro allergy meds, allowing her to wash it down with a glass of water.

"You think you'll be set to go in a few?" Saren purred.

Amber nodded with a soft smile.

"Yeah," she nodded, "be right out."

Amber took a minute or so to brush her hair and slip her shoes on before she met up with Saren at the front door.

"You think Mordin will meet up with us?" Amber asked.

"I sent him a message after the shower. He said he'll meet us outside," Saren answered.

Amber smiled at him before she led Saren out of the apartment and through the Presidium. Mordin had been waiting in front of the apartment complex, talking to another salarian when he turned to greet them as soon as they exited.

"Shepard, Arterius," Mordin said, "can easily get terraforming devices. Needed to discuss something?"

Amber shrugged.

"You think we could get the Alliance officials to meet with the Salarian Union?" Amber offered, "I could call Anderson real quick if you'd like."

"Of course. Finalizing transactions won't take long," Mordin nodded, "in meantime, meet Maelon. Former protege, right-hand man during time in STG."

The other salarian stepped forward.

"Pleasure meeting you two," he greeted.

Amber raised her index finger.

"Didn't we meet you at Tuchanka?" she pointed out.

"Yes. I thank you again for the rescue," Maelon blurted, "sorry I hadn't properly acquainted myself back then. Too busy feeling sorry for myself."

"Hey, it's ok," Amber smiled as she extended her hand, allowing Maelon to shake it.
"So, the Genophage," Maelon mentioned, "you guys sure this is something that should be dealt with?"

Amber couldn't help but give Maelon a confused stare.

"I thought we were talking about Earth's terraforming project," she objected.

Saren sighed.

"I figured if the Reapers are going to want to level us regardless, we may as well not have one entire species left crippled and vulnerable," he explained, "I sent word to Mordin, wanted to work something out just in case."

Amber slowly nodded at Saren as they and the salarians made their way to the docking bay.

"Alright," she shrugged, "I'm not sure about this, but let's give it a try."

Soon, Saren, Amber, Mordin and Maelon boarded the Normandy. They headed for the privacy of the briefing room and closed the door behind them.

"They're expecting us at Sur'Kesh," Amber pointed out, "right?"

"Of course, they will," Mordin agreed, "however, don't expect to bring all equipment back to Earth in single journey. Components are rather large."

Amber nodded before she and Saren sat down at the table.

"We'll take one back to Arcturus Station," she said.

It was only a while before the Normandy left the Citadel. It traveled through space until it reached the Mass Relay, the ancient structure flinging it into FTL speed. It was an hour or so later before the vessel arrived in salarian space and entered Sur'Kesh's orbit. They landed at a research facility shortly after and docked. At the end of the docking plank, a group of the facility workers waited for them. Saren and Amber led Mordin and Maelon as they approached the facility workers.

"Commander Shepard, I presume? Good to meet you," the head of the team greeted.

Amber nodded and extended her hand.

"The same can be said for you," she replied.

"We've got a few packaged for departure, just inside. This way."

After the head of the team shook her head, he led Amber, Saren, Mordin and Maelon into the facility. In a large opening were several large, metallic crates being moved by freight loaders to the docks. A few salarians stood a few meters distant while guiding the freight loaders each using a pair of batons. The Normandy's crew, received the freight and started moving it up the ramp into the ship's cargo hold.

"That'll take them some time," the head of the team said, "come inside, I'll show you how these work."

The salarian team led Amber, Saren, Mordin and Maelon through the hangar and down a corridor. It didn't take long before they stepped into a lab, so they stood at a balcony to observe the action below. The device was roughly the size of a mobile command center and stood at roughly twenty
feet tall. One salarian was almost finished with calibrating it.

"This is our base model. They have an effective radius of one hundred miles and can run for as long as they have to."

Saren hummed as he placed his talon on his mandible.

"Looks like a smaller construction of the spires you put on Tuchanka," Saren commented.

The salarian head of the team nodded in agreement.

"It's meant to be a consumer-grade model, for smaller-scale projects," the head salarian explained, "nothing as extensive as would be required by the krogan homeworld's harsh climate."

Amber carefully examined the device before her, taking in its contours. She made a visual image in her head on how such devices would cultivate the ground, purify the water and filter the air.

"How well do these handle on Tuchanka?" Amber asked.

"They performed very well, despite the sand and dust," the head salarian replied, "after the Rebellions, they've been set to minimum capacity. Considering Earth's conditions are nowhere as dire, I can easily say full processing will take under a month."

Saren and Amber exchanged glances.

"Sounds like a good deal," Amber mused, "don't you think?"

"I agree," Saren nodded, "you said these were relatively affordable, right?"

The salarian drew out his omni-tool.

"Easily enough for the Systems Alliance to purchase for your homeworld," the head salarian answered.

Amber turned on her omni-tool and scrolled to her finance app.

"So how much?" she asked.

The head salarian took a moment or so to run a few calculations in his omni-tool. Once he finished, he showed her the price, allowing the Alliance commander to forward the information to Anderson.

"Thanks for the tour," Amber smiled, "we'll best be on our way."

The head salarian nodded at Amber before she led Saren, Mordin and Maelon out of the lab and down the corridor. They walked out onto the docks to see the Normandy crew finishing with loading the crates into the ship. At the base of the ramp, Garrus, Kaidan, James and Tali stood waiting for their commander to return.

"Everything's secure, commander. We heading out?" Kaidan inquired.

Amber nodded while she saluted at Kaidan.

"Yeah. Let's go," she advised, "we shouldn't loiter here much longer."

Amber led Saren, the salarians and her squadmates aboard the Normandy and made their way towards the bridge. At the pilot seat, Joker was in the middle of stretching his arms. His eyes shot
wide open for a moment before he slowly straightened up.

"Thought I broke something for a moment," he blurted, "right, now back to business."

Once the ramp to the Normandy closed, Joker activated the ship's engine and began hovering it out of the docks. With a few more taps, the vessel shot off into space. 

"So, is this package worth it?" Joker pondered.

"Of course it is," Amber nodded, "get us back to Arcturus, high command will want to know about this. If they think this is a bad idea, we'll talk them into it."

"Roger that," Joker chuckled.

With Joker at the helm, the Normandy flew towards the Mass Relay and warped into FTL speed, leaving salarian space. She received a ping on her omni-tool. She read the message the instant she recognized it was from Anderson.

{High command more or less agreed with the purchase of the salarian terraformers. They still want to see a sample in action. Are you on your way back?}

Once Amber finished reading the message, she typed in a response before she sent it.

{I'll drop it off at Arcturus Station. If they really have any doubts about the devices, they can have a look for themselves.}

Amber didn't bother turning of her omni-tool before she returned her gaze towards Saren. He gave her a soft smile as he placed his hand on her shoulder.

"It's not much," Saren said, "but it's progress, right?"

"I suppose it is," she agreed.

It took yet another hour before the Normandy emerged from the Mass Relay and docked itself at Arcturus Station. The vessel opened up the ramp, allowing the staff at the station to board the cargo hold. When she disembarked the vessel, Amber approached Admiral Hackett the instant she laid her eyes on him.

"Commander, did you get a terraformer?" Hackett asked.

Amber nodded as the staff began moving the crates out of the cargo hold.

"Yes, sir," she replied, "we can have it moved onto the next vessel back to Earth."

Hackett nodded in approval and gave Amber a salute.

"Will you be needing anything else?" Amber continued.

"Just any instructions for setting up this equipment on Earth," Hackett replied.

Amber turned on her omni-tool and scrolled to her notes. She pulled up and handed off the file, allowing Hackett to read it.

"I'll see to it our engineers get this," Hackett said, "good work, commander."

Amber nodded at Hackett before she stepped back into the Normandy. In a corridor, she found
Mordin and Maelon standing along a wall.

"So you guys mentioned something about the Genophage?" Amber called over.

Mordin and Maelon paused in their conversation and turned their heads towards Amber.

"Well, has been on mind since Maelon's rescue. Have discussed frequently since then. Saren convinced us. Had to be done," Mordin acknowledged.

Amber nodded at the salarians while she leaned her back against the wall.

"So where do we start?" she asked them.

"I had extended an olive branch to a krogan named Okeer, who's working in the field," Maelon began, "he has rather radical views on the krogan's position and is very well versed in genetics and biology."

Amber tilted her head and rubbed her chin.

"Who is this Okeer?" she paused.

Mordin sniffed and closed his eyes for a moment.

"Warlord and brilliant scientist," Mordin clarified, "has been extensively working towards work-around for Genophage."

Amber nodded while she took a few notes.

"I might as well get to know him," Amber said, "do you know of his whereabouts?"

"He said he was on the edges of Terminus space on the planet Korlus," Mordin answered, "heard of the place?"

"Can't say I have," Amber admitted.

"The entire place is a garbage heap, subjected to dumping heavy amounts of scrapped ships and hazardous materials," Mordin explained, "with the exception of a few criminal holdouts, the place is practically uninhabitable."

Amber smiled as she finished jotting down her notes.

"Thank you," Amber praised, "I'll see if I can arrange a meeting."

While Mordin and Maelon gave Amber a nod, she turned off her omni-tool and sauntered through the corridor, making her way towards the bridge. Saren had already been at the cockpit when she arrived.

"Saren?" Amber called over.

The turian Spectre flexed his mandibles while he glances over his shoulder.

"Do you agree with this approach?" she asked him.

To emphasize her point, Amber turned on her omni-tool and showed Saren the notes she wrote down concerning Okeer.
"I don't know," Saren shrugged, "I still feel that this is giving a disenfranchised people too much opportunity to lash out. You sure this is a good idea?"

Amber nodded.

"Mordin and Maelon are willing to collaborate with him," Amber said, "so why not?"

"Very well. Let's set course from here," she gestured to Joker, ordering the pilot to initiate their journey to the Terminus Systems.

He gave his look of protest before working the controls and disconnecting from the dock.
Savage Krogan Doctor

The Normandy spent a couple hours in FTL speed before it emerged from a Mass Relay and entered Terminus space.

"Stealth systems engaged, keeping an open scope for potential hostiles," Joker reported.

"Excellent," Saren praised, "keep us informed on our ETA to Korlus."

"Will do, Spectre," Joker nodded.

Amber and Saren gazed through the hull as the Normandy continued to meander through the system. They watched as the stars flew by as they drew closer to their destination. During the flight, they couldn't help but ponder on the various results from their upcoming first meeting of Dr. Okeer. Shortly after, they went down to the cargo hold to meet up with Mordin and Maelon just outside of the shuttle. Adjacent to the salarians stood, Jack, Wrex, Garrus, Javik, Liara and Tali. The group still muttered to each other regarding making contact with Okeer.

"That crazed bastard was exiled within good reason. I'd want a cure for the Genophage, but not through the lengths he's willing to go through," Wrex grumbled.

"Well," Garrus asked, "did you have any other suggestions?"

Wrex sighed as he scratched his head.

"I could easily ask my brother if you'd like," Wrex offered, "other than that, you keep a distance and prepare to off him with that rifle of yours if he gets any ideas."

Once Garrus, Wrex, Jack, Liara, Javik and Tali took notice of Amber's presence, they paused their conversation.

"I hope you really know what you're doing, commander," Liara groaned, "based on his record, I'm not all that enthusiastic about meeting this Warlord Okeer."

Amber sighed softly as her squadmates began boarding the shuttle.

"Same here," she replied.

{Coming up on Korlus. Make this quick, commander;} Joker proceeded to open the cargo hold doors.

Amber, Saren, Mordin and Maelon wasted no time as they boarded the shuttle and closed its door. Moments later, the shuttle flew out of the cargo hold. The lower atmosphere was just as Maelon had described. The distance was littered with fragments of old ships, barely leaving any patch of the desert planet surface to peek out. This made it difficult for the shuttle to find a place to land.

"We're getting close to those coordinates, but I'm not seeing where he'd be camped out," Saren muttered.

Amber peered out of the window to examine the surface below.

"I see the hull of a large ship down there," Amber suggested, "let's land on top and make our way down from there."
Saren peered out of the window and examined the ship's hull for a moment.  
"Very well," he nodded.  

Saren took a step back and turned his head towards the pilot.  
"Take us in," he instructed.  

Upon cue, the pilot hovered the shuttle over to the grounded ship's hull and slowly landed the small vessel. Saren opened the shuttle door before he led Amber, Mordin, Maelon, Wrex, Jack, Garrus, Javik, Liara and Tali outside. The ship resembled a capsized super freighter, with its grey exterior degraded by years of solar exposure. Both Spectres led their squadmates along the hull in search of a way inside. To one side of the ship, a large portion had been torn off from what looked to be debris. They jumped inside and continued through to the ground, kicking up dust along the way. Upon realizing she couldn't see much, the Alliance commander turned on her omni-tool and activated its flashlight feature. A few critters scampered from corner to corner as they got close, disappearing down the long hallways. It didn't take long before they entered a larger chamber.

As luck would have it, krogans occupied this ship considering there were some wandering around with decent lighting illuminating the large chamber. Amber shut off her flashlight and began scanning her surroundings in search of Okeer. All of a sudden, she tilted her head towards Garrus after he tapped on her shoulder.

"Uh, Shepard?" Garrus interrupted as he flexed his mandibles.

Garrus gestured to the krogan occupants now staring at them.

"Identify yourselves," one grunted.

He brandished a shotgun rather casually before aiming it at Amber. Wrex growled as he pulled his gun from his stash.

"If it's any encouragement, we're not here to tear Okeer a new one," Wrex objected, "got it?"

One krogan narrowed his eyes at Wrex.

"This way. We'll be watching."

With a single hand gesture, the krogan led the Spectres, the salarians and the squadmates across the large chamber. At the bottom of the ship, they exited through a hatch out onto the ground level around another few heaps of scrap into another rusted civilian ship. The chamber in question somehow resembled a lab. A krogan from the far end of the room turned to face them.

"Welcome to the lab, Spectres," the krogan greeted, "it's not much, but it has served me well."

Amber took a moment to examine the krogan before she took a step forward.

"You're Dr. Okeer?" she clarified, "Mordin told me about you."

Okeer let out an enthusiastic hum while he made a brief glance at Mordin.

"You even brought along that pyjack who got nabbed by the Blood Pack," Okeer added, "I see you're taking this seriously."

Amber glanced over her shoulder and nodded at Mordin and Maelon, allowing them to step forward.
"Ah, pleasure to see you again, Maelon," Okeer greeted.

"Right, same to you, Okeer. I hope you're at least willing to play along with this effort," he grumbled back.

Amber couldn't help but scratch her head.

"Right," she muttered, "introductions aside, will you need any resources provided by us for this?"

Okeer returned his gaze at Amber.

"What do you have to offer?" Okeer asked.

"Whatever you'll need to get this treatment to work," Amber offered.

Okeer nodded before he turned his gaze towards Wrex and Jack.

"Tell me, Wrex," Okeer mentioned, "have you considered volunteering for testing?"

Wrex narrowed his eyes and clenched his fists.

"You cut me open and leave me for dead on an operating table," Wrex threatened, "I'm breaking my bonds and spending my last moments bashing your skull in."

Okeer gave an amused chuckle at Wrex's irritated expression.

"Relax," he reassured, "it won't end up like that. You might want a partner before we get started."

"What for?" Wrex raised a browplate.

Wrex and Jack exchanged glances for a moment.

"To ensure the treatment works for both parties," Okeer clarified.

Jack thought over the question as she scratched her head.

"You all right?" Wrex asked softly.

Jack nodded. Okeer took notice of the gesture.

"Interesting choice," Okeer commented.

Jack and Wrex shifted their gaze towards Okeer.

"You said you're looking for some volunteers," Jack brought up, "so how do we get this treatment going?"

Meanwhile, Liara examined the equipment in the lab and inspected the chamber, trying to determine whether it was in stable condition.

"Not exactly up to par with proper labs, but most certainly the bare minimum," Liara said, "sanitation might be another issue altogether."

"Your point?" Tali pondered while rubbing her chin with her fingers.

Liara tilted her head towards Tali.
"We might have more success if we could find a more sanitary lab," Liara offered, "or at least sanitize this one."

"We'll need a new lab, then," Maelon proposed.

Okeer nodded in agreement as he folded his arms.

"That'd be great. Got anywhere particular?"

"I do. Alliance scouts have reported a genetics lab at the border between Attican and Terminus space," Amber answered.

To further emphasize her point, Amber turned on her omni-tool and pulled up a map of the galaxy.

"We clear it out," Amber suggested, "we'll have more than we'll need to get this done."

With a plan in mind, Amber invited Okeer and some of his crewmembers aboard the Normandy while they spent the next two days making a strategy in their next mission. The Alliance commander invited Saren, Okeer, Wrex, Jack, Liara and Javik into the briefing room.

"This is the facility layout," Amber began to explain, "it's heavily defended, with AA gun towers surrounding the area."

Saren nodded as he examined the layout in the holographic projection.

"What would you recommend in taking out the gun towers?" Okeer asked.

"Only a few," Amber suggested, "we still need this facility functional. We'll only take down the necessary number to let the Normandy get close enough, then try to retake the rest of the facility by foot."

Saren traced his talon along the layout.

"So, you looking for an entryway?" Garrus asked Saren.

Saren made a brief glance at Garrus and nodded.

"We can enter through the waterways surrounding the facility," Saren explained, "behind this group of spires, there's a blindspot. We can drop there without too much worry from the AA guns. We'll advance from here."

Having listened to Saren's reason, Amber nodded in agreement.

"There are still a few gates along the path," she noted.

"Then we'll head in," Saren added, "rush them before they get an alarm off, drop the gate, then continue to the next checkpoint until we reach the center campus."

Amber nodded again as she placed a few markers on the holographic projection.

"We'll drop in the Mako, then," Amber concluded, "that should at least make it easier to traverse the terrain at high tide."

Garrus hummed as his mandibles flexed into a smile.
"I've made a few changes to the Mako since our last drive," he replied, "I haven't seen the modifications in action yet."

Amber turned off the holographic projector and stood to her feet.

"Alright," Amber announced, "grab your gear and let's go."

Amber led Saren, Garrus, Wrex, Jack, Liara, Javik and Okeer out of the briefing room before they made their way to the locker room. Jack, Javik, Liara, Wrex and Garrus gathered their weapons and suited up before they met up with the Spectres in the cargo hold. By now, the Normandy reached Virmire's orbit. Joker dipped the Normandy sharply into the atmosphere and flew low into the canyons in preparation to drop the Mako. As the cargo hold's hatch opened, Amber took the driver's seat in the Mako. With little to no hesitation, she drove the vehicle down the ramp and onto the planet's surface. They landed in the frothy shores, leaving a wake upon impact.

"We're all set, Joker," Amber informed, "wait till we clear the guns before landing."

{Copy that, commander,} Joker replied over the com-link.

She took the wheel and drove along the beach. All the while, Saren read the radar in the front seat. Liara and Garrus gazed through the windows to scope for any soldiers on patrol. They came to a halt as they stopped in front of the first gate.

"Commander," Javik whispered, "orders?"

"Let's go," Amber reminded, "we're not getting through until we drop that gate."

Amber didn't hesitate as she disembarked the Mako. They found a flight of stairs up to the level above, coming into contact with the local Cerberus guards.

"What the—?" one of the guards exclaimed, "intruders!"

Saren knocked the group down with a biotic toss and headed to cover. Amber took this chance to sprint forward, compelling the other squadmates to follow her lead. The instant they stepped into the room, the Cerberus personnel inside paused in their tracks and turned their heads towards their intruders. Garrus charged on through, hurrying to the control room to hack the controls. At the same time, the other squadmates leapt into cover before continuing to fire their rounds. They mopped up the rest just as Garrus returned from the control room.

"Gate is open," Garrus informed, "no alarm was set off, so I don't think they know we're coming yet."

"Good work, Garrus," Amber nodded, "back to the Mako. Let's keep going to that first AA gun."

Amber led her squadmates back down the stairs until they reached the ground, where they hopped back into the Mako. Around another set of turns was the next gate with a large turret affixed to the top.

"Oh, boy," Wrex muttered.

Amber put her foot on the gas.

"Get inside and cripple it," she ordered, "we don't want to blow anything up just yet."

"Will do, Shepard," Liara nodded.
They repeated the operation with the next encampment of guards, swarming them as they approached. Garrus fought through the Cerberus soldiers to reach the control panel. Liara, Javik, Wrex and Jack provided the turian cover fire as he got to work hacking the controls. He cut off power access to the heavy cannon and opened the door for their path onward.

"And that should do it," he said.

Saren gave the younger turian a positive gesture.

"Good," Saren praised, "a few more along the way should do it."

Saren and Amber led their squadmates back to the Mako and continued driving forward. They continued the same pattern with the next couple gates.

"Joker, there should be a clear path to the base," Amber informed, "we'll scout ahead and meet you at a clearing."

{Ten-four, good work down there. I'll see you ahead.}
Amber didn't run into much more trouble when she drove the Mako towards the clearing. She parked on an open beach and departed the vehicle. Overhead, the Normandy came to a halt and landed close by. Tali, Kaidan, James, Thane, Ashley and Kasumi disembarked the Normandy to meet up with the Alliance commander and her reinforcements.

"We're going in loud from here," Amber instructed, "our first target is the coms, make sure we don't have to contend with Cerberus reinforcements."

Amber exchanged a fist bump with James.

"Good luck," James replied, "we'll be in the hangar, cutting off their exit. We'll push in once we've confirmed you've silenced this place."

Amber nodded at James before she led Saren, Wrex, Javik, Jack and Garrus towards the main entrance. The group prepared to breach the front gate while Saren crept inside through a vent to find the door controls. It didn't take long for Garrus and Wrex to finish setting up the charges along the gate.

"We're all set up at the hangar here," Amber informed, "waiting on your word to move in."

\[Aye, copy. Breaching,\] James replied.

Garrus and Wrex scrambled out of the way. Seconds later, the charges exploded, ripping the gate open. Wrex took point with the others close behind him. Amber led Wrex, Jack, Garrus and Javik through the front gate. A few engineers were occupying the room at the time, and were hastily dispatched. With Amber and her squadmates having taken over the coms, this allowed Saren to meet up with them.

"Things should be a bit easier for ourselves, now," Amber boasted.

"Thanks, Shepard," Saren smiled.

Amber nodded at Saren before they stepped closer to the control panel.

"Let's keep going," she said, opening the door into the next sector.

With a sense of confidence, Amber led her squadmates through the recently opened door. Within the next area, some of the lightly equipped personnel had already started mounting a defense, knocking over tables as improvised cover and arming themselves with light arms. While Amber and Garrus took cover, Saren, Javik, Jack and Wrex emitted biotic particles in their hands. Quickly removing the opposition, another door opened to reveal a Cerberus squad escorted by a heavy mech.

"Hey," Wrex reassured, giving Amber a wink, "I got this."

Wrex pulled a grenade out of his stash.

"Might wanna keep your distance, guys," the krogan warned, "catch, freaks!"

After activating the grenade, Wrex tossed it at the Cerberus squad. The ensuing explosion tossed the squad around like ragdolls, but barely put a dent in the mech's shields. This prompted Amber
and Saren to check their weapons.

"I've got an armor piercing module on hand," he huffed, "you have anything to deal with the shields?"

Amber nodded as she showed Saren the weapon she held in her hands.

"A few EMP grenades," Amber answered, "let's give it a shot."

Saren nodded as he began equipping his armor piercing module. Standing from cover, Amber lobbed the grenades one by one. Each ensuing explosion gradually tore down the mech's shields. She fired a few more bursts before the shields dropped.

"Ok, Saren," Amber called over, "your turn!"

He rolled from cover and biotically charged under the mech, firing off his shotgun as he approached. With several rounds fired at its weak points, the mech collapsed to the ground. He finished it off with a single round to its head module. Saren's mandible's flexed into a grin while he shifted his gaze towards Amber, Garrus, Jack, Wrex and Javik. Wrex rolled his eyes.

"Showoff," the krogan grumbled.

Amber emerged from her cover and gestured Saren and their squadmates to follow them through the door.

"We can try outdoing each other in dismantling a mech at a later date," Saren said.

The Spectres and their squadmates continued meandering through the corridor. They only encountered uncoordinated resistance from there onward as they swept the facility. The most difficulty they had was when Cerberus personnel barricaded themselves in a room or some other fortified location. Armor piercing weapons and biotics proved to be useful as they took out the toughest of their enemies. It didn't take long for them to enter an archive room. The Prothean scanned his surroundings with a puzzled look.

"I didn't expect them to keep such extensive records," Javik commented.

Wrex shrugged as he began searching the shelves.

"How much are you guys willing to bet there's anything actually practically applicable here?" Wrex asked.

Amber sighed as she started searching another shelf.

"Whatever plans Cerberus has could be crucial for the Alliance," Amber replied.

"Let's keep moving," Saren reminded, "we can secure whatever data is here after the fight."

Saren, Amber and Garrus darted out of the archive room. Around the next corner, James and his team were facing off against another line of Cerberus forces. It was only a short moment before the Spectres and the C-Sec detective showed up. Saren tossed a cooked grenade, finishing off the remaining troops on defense.

"Lieutenant!" Garrus called over, "you all right?"

James lifted his head as he stood from his cover.
"I'm fine," James nodded, "good to see you here."

Liara shifted her gaze between Amber, Saren and Garrus while Thane scoped ahead. The hallways were now much less active with the majority of the Cerberus presence deposed. The drell assassin nodded at Amber seconds later.

"We should be clear in this direction," Thane informed.

The group followed down the hallway, cautiously approaching the next door. Kasumi got to work hacking the lock. Ashley drew out a stun grenade and took position at the side of the door. Once Kasumi finished her task, the door slid open. This motivated Amber to lead her squad through the door.

In the meantime, Javik joined Wrex and Jack in browsing the shelves in the archive room. The Prothean pulled out a datapad and turned it on before he started reading its files. After he took note of a particular line in the data, Javik narrowed his eyes at Jack. He quietly pocketed the device, breaking eye contact with the biotic and deciding it would be a worthy read later.

"Are you two finished?" Javik called over.

Jack and Wrex paused in their tracks as they shifted their gaze towards Javik.

"Yeah. We can dig through here later," Jack answered.

After reshelving a datapad, Jack darted out of the room, compelling Wrex and Javik to follow her. They regrouped with the others and continued out of the chamber. While they continued venturing through a corridor, Amber tilted her head upwards and spotted Agent Lawson slinking along the walkway.

"Saren!" Amber called over.

Saren paused in his tracks and shifted his gaze towards Amber. The Alliance commander pointed upwards and it took a brief moment for the turian Spectre to spot the Cerberus operative. Lawson had already flung a warp at him, tossing him onto his back. Amber shot at a supportive frame of the catwalk, causing it to snap in half. Miranda had no problem landing on her feet before returning fire to Amber. Thinking fast, Jack enveloped herself and Amber in a biotic field, deflecting the Cerberus agent's shots while Saren staggered to his feet. Miranda slipped down another hallway out of their range.

"Hey," Amber shouted, "get back here!"

Saren, Jack and Amber sprinted after Miranda. The human biotic maintained her shield during their chase. The turian Spectre came up short of a corner and peeked around it. The instant he spotted Miranda, he wasted no time as he threw a biotic warp down the corridor. She rolled aside and dodged the attack, got back up, and rushed around the next hallway.

"Shepard," Jack exclaimed, "I have an idea!"

Amber panted before she glanced over her shoulder.

"What's the plan?" Amber insisted.

"Keep on her," Jack suggested, "I'm gonna try to cut her off."

Amber nodded at Jack before she and Saren continued their pursuit. They continued to weave back
and forth, firing shots that the operative would simply deflect with her barrier. Miranda sprinted closer and closer to a doorway, hoping she could make her getaway. That hope was dashed away when Jack stood just outside the doorway.

"Fly, bitch!" Jack had a large hunk of machinery held in the air before flinging it violently at Miranda.

She had no issue catching it with her own powers, but was unable to respond quickly enough to Jack's pounce. Miranda yelped as Jack pinned her to the ground, allowing Saren and Amber to catch up to them. Jack let out a second burst, rendering the agent unconscious. The younger human biotic glanced at the Spectres and grinned at them.

"Hey," Jack asked them, "should we bring her aboard the Normandy?"

"We could use some answers," Amber shrugged, "let's find a cell here, strip her down of equipment, and lock her up. If not here, then back in Alliance space where she can be questioned."

Jack nodded before she stood to her feet, allowing Saren to lift Miranda into his arms. By the time they regrouped with their squadmates, most of the base had been cleared out. They found a group of reinforced, empty pens deeper into the facility. While Okeer and his research team arrived, Saren placed Miranda on a bed before he stepped out of one pen to meet up with Kaidan, Liara and Ashley.

"Glad she's been dealt with," Ashley huffed.

"Yes," Saren nodded, "but she could use a little persuasion if we are to get some answers out of her."

Kaidan peered through the door before he gave Saren a puzzled expression.

"Couldn't we just ship her straight back to Earth?" Kaidan inquired, "chances are, she's trained to resist interrogation, she's ready to off herself to prevent leaking secrets, or everything she does know is in that archive."

Saren hummed as he scratched his mandible.

"What else do you know about Agent Lawson?" Saren asked Kaidan.

Kaidan scratched his head.

"Nothing," Kaidan admitted, "she's an anomaly. No name, no former residency, no relatives she could be referred to."

Saren glanced over his shoulder as thoughts began swimming in his head. What would it take to incentivize Miranda into revealing more about herself?

"Any ideas about getting the agent to talk?" he asked Amber.

Amber couldn't help but shrug.

"Would it work if we bribed her into cooperating with us?" she suggested.

"You sure that'll work?" Saren paused, "we don't even know what she'd want."

Amber chuckled as she placed her hand on Saren's shoulder.
"I reckon it's worth a shot," Amber replied.

"So a favor for a favor, then?" Saren clarified.

Amber smiled at Saren and nodded.

"Unless you had an alternative, yes," Amber answered.

With a potential plan in mind, Saren and Amber stepped into the pen.

"You two do realize you won't get me to talk, right?" Lawson chastised.

Saren and Amber gave Miranda a blank stare, quickly realizing she just woke up. The agent responded with a weary angered glare. Both Spectres exchanged glances before they sat down across from her.

"We aren't interested in beating answers out of you. Not yet, anyways," Saren replied.

The Cerberus agent clenched her fists. She didn't reply otherwise to Saren's gesture. Intimidation was out of the question, so Saren began scrolling through his omni-tool in search of an interesting topic. Miranda couldn't help but stare in confusion.

"Now," Saren continued, "how about we talk about something other than Cerberus?"

"Such as?" Miranda insisted.

"You give us what we want," Saren offered, "we give you what you want."

Miranda sighed as she scratched her head.

"Let's see," Miranda said, "there is one particular person that I still want to protect at all costs."

Saren paused what he was doing and he returned his gaze at Miranda.

"That depends," Saren replied, "do you have relatives?"

Miranda hesitated for a minute or so before she silently nodded.

"So what do you want from me in return?" Miranda insisted.

"Cerberus' interest in the Reapers," Amber clarified, "we've definitely noticed your recent shift in attention."

Closing her eyes for a brief moment, Miranda folded her arms.

"Fine," Miranda sighed, "anyways, my sister was put in a secure place as a part of my employment at Cerberus. However, I'm starting to worry that her safety has been compromised. If you want me to talk, move her somewhere safe until I can make rearrangements."

Saren and Amber exchanged a brief glance.

"So could you tell me more about your sister?" Amber asked.

Miranda lowered her head.

"I was genetically designed by my father to serve as his heir to his extensive companies," she continued, "he wanted someone of his mentality to inherit the company, but I wasn't having any of
it. I ran to Cerberus, seeing that they had an eye for talent. That didn't stop my father from trying again. He made another copy a few years later. I smuggled her out when I could. He hasn't had any luck to my knowledge with trying a third time, so he's opted to hunt for her instead, seeing he can't get to me."

Amber nodded, even as she scratched her head.

"Ok," Amber replied, "so what exactly do you think about Cerberus?"

"What's it matter to you?" she huffed in response.

Amber rolled her eyes before tilting her head towards Saren.

"Saren?" Amber paused.

"We'll have it done," Saren told Miranda.
Extraction in Illium

Since Cerberus was no longer occupying Virmire, this was a cue for the Alliance to send a few fleets to secure the system. Aboard the Normandy, Jack rested in a bed as Mordin ran a few tests on her and Wrex sat by her side. As the salarian doctor examined the scan on the screen, he inhaled sharply as he closed his eyes.

"Could potentially be problematic," Mordin said.

Wrex tilted his head towards Mordin and gave him a puzzled stare.

"What do you mean?" Wrex paused.

"Components unresponsive, similar to signs of neutered domesticated females."

Jack groaned softly as she turned her head sideways.

"Is it similar to the Genophage?" Jack asked.

Wrex's eyes softened as he sighed in pity.

"I'm sure we'll figure out a way around that," Wrex assured, "it's ok."

Jack quietly nodded as she turned over and gently grasped the krogan's hand, her smaller fingers intertwining with his large ones.

"It's alright, I suppose," Jack replied, "not sure if I'd be ready for kids between us either way."

Wrex nodded in agreement.

"Yeah," Wrex said, "no pressure."

By now, Mordin finished running his tests and shut off his omni-tool.

"Still," Mordin concluded, "could simulate scenario with Genophage-affected female. Will try."

"Thanks," Wrex gave Mordin a soft smile.

Jack slid off the bed and left the medbay with Wrex accompanying her. They ambled through the corridor as they made their way to the crew quarters. Wrex took off his shirt as he sat on his bunk. Jack saw this as a chance to slip out of her jacket and sit down next to the krogan.

"I really could use some stress relief to take my mind off these things," Jack sighed, "you?"

He smiled back.

"I could definitely afford to unwind," Wrex agreed.

Wrex shifted until he was lying on the bunk, allowing Jack to climb on top of him. The krogan placed one hand on her shoulder while the human biotic pressed her forehead against his. He traced his hand along her body from under her arm to the side of her leg. Jack massaged the base of the krogan's neck while she leaned in to kiss him. She put her other hand on his hip along the tissue between plates. With a pleased sigh, Wrex dug one hand underneath her pants.
"Jack," Wrex whispered, "you still want this?"

Jack stared into the krogan's eyes before she nodded. She took a moment to slide down her pants and toss them onto the floor next to her boots, allowing Wrex to circle his finger around her clit. As she panted, the human biotic ground her hips against the krogan's hand. He slowly brushed her clit with his thumb before shifting her weight on top of him. Once Jack pressed her lips against his, they both took this chance to deepen their kiss. The krogan pushed his finger into her folds, elicitng a stifled moan out of her. As he thrust his finger in and out of her folds, they turned over until Wrex was on top of her, using one hand to support his weight. She responded with a light, nearly inaudible gasp. She shifted herself onto his hand, easing him deeper. Wrex brushed his tongue along her neck while Jack perched her hands on his shoulders, holding him close. She let out a light whine, lightly encouraging Wrex to drive deeper.

"Enjoying yourself?" Wrex purred softly.

Jack moaned softly as she nodded. She nuzzled her face against his, even as she felt the krogan's length slowly extend from its slit. She reached a hand down to ease it out. With Wrex still thrusting his finger into her walls, she grasped the tip of his length and stroked it with a rhythmic pace. Jack guided him to the edge of her folds and pressed herself against his tip.

"Ok, Jack," Wrex chuckled, "just give me a sec."

Wrex withdrew his finger and gripped her hip with one hand before he burrowed himself into her. He began his pace cautiously and adjusted his grip to be more loose. In the midst of thrusts, Jack hooked her leg around his waist. She craned her back upward, easing herself. His girth's spines sent intoxicating thrills through her nerves as they brushed along her walls. Her walls closed on him, begging to keep his length in.

Jack carefully shifted her hips, allowing Wrex to press in deeper until his tip brushed against her cervix. They continued at an even, calm pace, filling the air with heavy panting and grunting. As their vision began to blur, heat built up inside their cores. Still retaining just enough coherent thought, both Jack and Wrex emitted their biotic fields and using their hands, sent these energy particles through their genitals. As the biotic particles amplified their carnal thrills, the krogan slowly accelerated his pace.

With each faster thrust, Wrex replied with a content grunt. The next thing he knew, Jack shuddered in her orgasm as her walls tightened around his cock. He took a brief pause and adjusted himself before starting again. As each subsequent thrust elicited soft cries out of her, Jack hooked her other leg around his waist. She hugged her hips around his, forcing him as deep as possible. The slick fluids coating their genitals eased the friction of the krogan's rhythmic pace. With a light roar and a hard push, his member throbbed, releasing his load. The pulsing veins in his cock brought out another climax from Jack. She moaned in response and was left panting for air. She drew herself off of him, watching the fluids drain from her. Wrex turned over and rested on his back, panting as he came down from his high.

"Yeah," Wrex mused, "perhaps infertility between us isn't the worst possible outcome."

Jack turned her head towards the krogan and smiled before she grasped his hand.

"At least we have other things going for us, right?" Jack remarked.

Wrex returned his glance and softened his expression.

"That we can agree on," Wrex nodded.
He didn't expect it, but a child between himself and the human biotic honestly scared him. He wasn't even sure why, despite the reality the krogans could use a new generation. Their population was stable, yet stagnant. Still, he extended his arm, allowing Jack to snuggle up to him.

After taking a day to rest, Saren and Amber invited Miranda aboard the Normandy. However, since they hadn't earned her trust yet, they figured they should bring her out to the bridge. Initially, Amber was unconvinced by the proposition, but Saren was desperate for answers. As the Normandy took off, Amber, Saren and Miranda entered the conference room and sat down.

"Surprising you're letting me sit here," the agent mused.

"I'm surprised I got talked into this," Amber hissed.

"Let's not get into a fight just yet," Saren reminded her.

Amber tilted her head towards Saren and nodded.

"Well," Amber continued, "I told Joker about our destination and we're heading there as we speak." Amber tapped on an icon and brought up the holographic projection of the galaxy.

"So," Amber asked, "do you mind telling me about who's currently looking after your sister?"

Miranda eyed the map of the galaxy for a moment before shifting her gaze towards the Alliance commander.

"I entrusted Niket to move Oriana to safety after I smuggled her out," Miranda began to explain, "he's an old friend, helped me quite a bit after my initial escape from my father and extracting Oriana."

Amber took a moment to look up Niket's name in her omni-tool, reading his profile moments later.

"So he's our man in," Amber clarified, "have you made contact with him?"

"I let him know the moment you gave me back my omni-tool," Miranda nodded.

Amber tilted her head towards the map of the galaxy and examined the coordinates marked on the projection.

"You're asking quite a bit from us to go this far into Terminus territory," Amber commented.

"It's just Illium," Saren informed, "so long as we avoid the alleyways and making purchases there, we'll be fine."

An hour or so later, the Normandy emerged from the Mass Relay and flew its way to Illium, the vessel entering the planet's orbit. The three exited the vessel, both eyeing the Cerberus agent cautiously with each step. Saren, Amber and Miranda sauntered through the docks and made their way to the booth. One of the receptionists looked up to greet them.

"Ah, welcome back to Illium, Agent Arterius. How can I help you today?"

"Here on someone else's ship," Saren replied, "bill the parking fee under my account, thank you."

Saren turned on his omni-tool and made his payment.
"Thank you, and have a pleasant stay."

The three continued past the processing kiosks and out of the station. Saren and Amber each took turns between keeping an eye on Miranda and scoping ahead.

"I told my sister to meet Niket at a safehouse across town," Miranda said, "it'll be reinforced enough to keep her safe until we arrive."

Saren glanced over his shoulder and focused his eyes on the Cerberus agent.

"You know how to get there, right?" Saren asked.

"Of course," Miranda nodded, "I set the place up as a last resort. It's crammed to the brim with credits, fake IDs, unregistered omni-tools, and a small cache of shields and light firearms."

With a boost of her confidence, Miranda began striding ahead of Saren and Amber, forcing both Spectres to start running after her. She knew she still had a considerable head start on her father, but she couldn't help but hold a lingering sense that Murphy's Law would rip Oriana clean from her grasp. She eventually led the Spectres to a higher-end residential district where the safehouse was located. She rushed into the apartment complex and rounded a few more turns to the apartment door when her heart came to a sharp stop.

Miranda let out an audible gasp when her gaze landed upon what was left of the door. It was cut clean through its frame and yanked out. Inside was a complete mess, with furniture and decorations burned and grazed by thermal rounds. Ignoring any of her instincts regarding traps left behind, she rushed inside, calling Oriana's name under the lingering hope that she hid herself in some dark corner, avoiding capture. After minutes of searching, Oriana was nowhere to be found. This realization left Miranda distraught to the point she didn't hear Amber and Saren's approaching footsteps. When the Spectres stepped inside, their eyes widened in horror upon the sight of the ruined room.

"Spirits!" Saren muttered.

Amber took a moment to examine their surroundings before she turned her head towards Miranda.

"Do you know what happened?" Amber asked.

She paid no heed to their calls as her attention was already drawn to her omni-tool.

{If humanity is to dominate, we have to remain strong, unanimous in goal and mind. This means severing weak links and loose ends from the organization, too. Your service has been greatly appreciated, but don't bother coming back this time. I thought you would stay with the cause, but your dealings prove otherwise. Meanwhile, I've taken the liberty of dealing with your sister. If it's any consolation, she won't be going to your father. I have something else in mind.}

Upon hearing those words, Miranda's sadness turned to anger. She stomped on out past the two Spectres, still keeping her silence. Saren and Amber exchanged brief glances amidst the confusion.

"You don't think…" Amber paused.

Saren turned to pursue Miranda.

"Let's go," Saren suggested, "she's still our ticket to Cerberus operations."

"Right," Amber nodded.
The two hastily pursued Miranda out of the apartment.

"The weld-marks on the door were still hot. They can't have gone far yet," she explained.

The Spectres sprinted their way down the street after the Cerberus agent.

"So what's the plan, then?" Amber called over.

"I know of the nearby port," Saren returned, "I can at least start there, maybe slice the security terminal to find any ships they may have used. We can work from there."

It wasn't long before the Spectres caught up with Miranda.

"I doubt we'd get that far before you call every cop in a ten mile radius on us," Amber jeered.

"Couldn't you two pull the excuse this is a Spectre investigation?" Miranda retorted, "just hold them off, this won't take long."

Amber shuddered and gave Miranda the stink-eye, which the Cerberus agent ignored as she turned on her omni-tool. Still, both Spectres began scanning their surroundings. It was only seconds later when they spotted Cerberus groups charging into the port.

"Over there. Let's follow," Saren beckoned.

Upon cue, Amber and Saren charged after the Cerberus troops. They followed the group to a shuttle at the port, already in the process of finalizing their departure. The ship shut its door and shot out of range the moment they caught up. Miranda couldn't help but stare into the distance, her distraught expression overwhelming her.

"Dammit…I did get the ID of the shuttle," Miranda grumbled.

Miranda glanced over her shoulder and stared into the Spectres' eyes.

"I assume you have equipment on your ship to use it?" Miranda asked.

Amber slowly nodded.

"If it's any consolidation," Amber reassured Miranda, "we'll get her back."

With a soft expression in her eyes, Amber placed her hands on Miranda's shoulder, snapping the Cerberus agent out of her trance.

"I…appreciate this, Shepard," Miranda sighed as she lowered her head, "although, what comes after is a bit of a concern now. My boss has decided to fully severe ties with me, meaning I no longer have any weight in the organization."

Those words compelled Saren and Amber to reflect on what they witnessed today.

"We can help with that transition onward," the former replied, "we'll find your sister and we'll work from there."
The Daring Sisterly Rescue

With not much else to investigate in Illium, Miranda, Saren and Amber returned to the Normandy. Joker wasted no time as he flew the vessel out of the planet's orbit. The three were looking over the galaxy map on the bridge. As Spectres, they could access information from the relays regarding ship registration.

"Looks like they're heading for batarian territory," Miranda noted.

Saren fingered his mandibles as he watched.

"We do have friends in that pocket of the galaxy," Saren mentioned, "maybe we could cut them off?"

"I'd prefer if we kept any interaction within my affairs to a minimum," Miranda insisted, "I still have to contend with my father once I get my sister away from Cerberus."

Amber gave Miranda a blank stare.

"Are you sure?" Amber asked, "I know one rogue batarian that's leading a revolution against the Hegemony."

Miranda put a hand through her hair as she processed the suggestion.

"I suppose a helping hand wouldn't be too risky," Miranda agreed.

It didn't take long before the Normandy reached a Mass Relay, letting the ancient structure fling it into FTL space. Half an hour later, the Normandy emerged from the other Mass Relay and entered batarian space. Joker kept the vessel's stealth cloak active and still tracked down their target.

"I see their current trajectory. I figured they would've known this place is a heavily contested location," he reported.

Amber silently nodded before she scrolled through her contact list in her omni-tool.

"I'll get word to Balak," Amber said, "keep on them."

"Uh, Amber?" Joker interrupted, "looks like we have another few vessels showing up on scope. IFFs look wiped and they're on our same trajectory."

Stopping what she was doing, Amber returned her focus onto the galaxy map. It was another small group of what looked to be merchant ships.

"I doubt they're here to sell ores," Amber commented, "do they know we're here?"

"No," Joker replied, "looks like they're tailing the same guys we are."

Miranda came forth and huffed.

"It's my father," Miranda interrupted, "it looks like his cronies are here to fetch Oriana before Cerberus can make whatever transaction they're here for."

"Then we can't just let either of them succeed," Saren replied as he folded his arms.
Suddenly, the merchant ships vastly accelerated and came alongside the Cerberus ships.

"Shepard, that Cerberus detachment won't last long," Joker informed, "orders?"

"Keep our distance for now and follow them to where they land," Amber instructed, "we'll call Balak if we can, but let's carry this out as a smash-and-grab. Let the two groups handle each other."

"Ok, Shepard," Joker nodded, "I'm on it."

Far ahead, as the cluster of conflicting ships drew closer to the destination's atmosphere, the merc vessels continued to barrage the Cerberus shuttles, crippling them and leaving them to drift into the planet's gravity. Barely did the shuttle manage to correct itself for a landing trajectory that wouldn't result in the death of everyone aboard. That became a signal for the Normandy to make its move. Without deactivating the stealth cloak, Joker carefully maneuvered the vessel closer to the planet's orbit.

"Commander, we'll be coming in hot, so you might want to assemble in the cargo hold."

Amber nodded before she gestured Saren and Miranda to follow her out of the bridge. They made their way to the cargo hold and met up with Tali and James to gear up.

"Hey, Lola!" James chirped as he waved his hand, "what's up?"

"Smash and grab," Amber ordered, "we've got a VIP to find between two groups. A few squads of Cerberus troops who currently hold the VIP and what I can assume is a platoon's worth of mercenaries trying to reach the VIP before we do. We're against the clock on this one, so we have to move fast."

Amber didn't waste any time as she boarded the Mako. She took the wheel and started the vehicle's engine.

"All ready, Joker," Amber announced, "drop us when we get there."

James and Saren exchanged brief glances before they, Tali and Miranda also boarded the Mako. By now, the Normandy descended into the planet's atmosphere and began lowering itself closer to the ground. Trails of smoke dotted the sky as the Normandy dropped the Mako. Touching the ground, Amber put her foot down on the acceleration. As she drove the vehicle along the surface, Miranda peered through the window. As they approached their destination, the Blue Suns started appearing over the hills. The mostly human mercenary group quickly encircled the remains of the crashed Cerberus shuttles, attempting to flush out the dug in, better trained, and better equipped soldiers present.

"Ugh," Miranda grumbled, "pesky bastards."

From the other side of the crash site, a few Loyalist batarians had come to investigate the skirmish and had joined in on the fight. Amber kept her eyes focused ahead while planning a route where they would inject themselves into the crash site and free Oriana without the squabblers noticing.

"Up ahead should be close enough," Amber said, "get ready to disembark."

"With pleasure," Saren nodded as he gathered his weapons.

Hitting the brakes hard, she dropped the rear hatch and charged out with the others. Still, the Blue Suns and the batarian Loyalists have yet to spot them.
"Hang in there, Oriana," Miranda whispered to herself.

To their disappointment, a few batarians already reached the crashed vessel and were already raiding it.

"Weapons free," Saren ordered.

He shoved the initial group into the air. This compelled Amber, Miranda, James and Tali to dart towards the crashed vessel. Once they made their way into the vessel through a large hole, they began searching the ship. A group had been escorting a battered, short haired woman away from deeper into the ship when they had been spotted.

"Trouble! Take them out!"

The group of batarians opened fire, forcing Amber and her squadmates to take cover. Tali pulled a grenade from her belt.

"Flashbang out!"

Tali cooked the grenade and tossed it. Peeking from cover, James gunned down one of the batarians. After a few more batarians were taken out by the grenade's explosion, Oriana remained as she glanced around in confusion. Miranda rushed into the open to drag her to safety.

"Miri!" Oriana gasped.

Miranda didn't say anything until she sat Oriana down behind some cover.

"Just stay down! We'll be out shortly!"

With Oriana curled behind cover, Miranda scoped ahead for any further threats.

"We should be good. VIP is secured. Let's go before we have to deal with anything else," Saren barked.

Miranda nodded at Saren before she gestured Oriana to her feet. Amber led Saren, the Lawson sisters, James and Tali out of the vessel. Keeping Oriana out of sight, they rushed back to the Mako, careful to avoid incoming fire. All the other factions had a mentality set to shoot anything that wasn't them, and were just as busy shooting at them as they were shooting at each other. Having completed their objective, Amber started driving the Mako away from the battlefield.

"Are you hurt? We've got medical supplies back at the ship if you need them," James asked Oriana.

Oriana hesitated in a moment of silence before she focused her eyes on James.

"I-It hurts," Oriana muttered.

"Just stay calm and try to remain conscious," James advised, "we've got a few medigel packs with us, but that's all for now."

With Amber still driving, Miranda held her sister close for comfort.

"Joker, you got us in your sights?" Amber called.

[I see you. I'm landing up ahead.]

"Good. Let Chakwas know we've got a patient in need. I'll get her to the medbay once we arrive."
Soon after, Amber saw the Normandy descend closer to the ground, dropping its cargo hatch open. The Mako drove right in and parked before the cargo bay doors closed once again. Amber and Miranda appeared out the back, both supporting Oriana to the elevator. Just as the elevator door closed, Oriana lowered herself to sit on the floor. The two continued to guide her the rest of the way to the medbay.

"Ah, Joker told me to get set up for our new guest," Chakwas greeted, "the bunk at the end is clear for her, commander."

Amber nodded at Dr. Chakwas.

"Thank you, Dr. Chakwas," Amber said.

Miranda carefully guided Oriana, allowing her sister to climb into the bunk at the far end. At the same time, Amber left the med-bay and met up with Saren before they both made their way to the bridge.

"I don't understand how this could've happened," Miranda admitted, "Niket assured me he'd have Oriana ready to move on a moment's notice and that he'd let me know if she had been compromised."

Mordin took a deep breath before he approached Oriana.

"Hard to say," Mordin replied, "you sure message wasn't intercepted?"

Miranda silently nodded.

"You don't think," Miranda mentioned, "Niket betrayed us, do you?"

"Possibility. Only hypothesizing," Mordin shrugged, "what say you?"

"I say that's a somewhat farfetched proposition," Miranda said, "I've known Niket since I escaped from my father. He wouldn't turn on me now."

Mordin nodded before he started examining Oriana.

"Fair enough. Can handle from here," Mordin suggested, "prefer to work without oversight. Do apologize."

Miranda sighed before she trudged out of the medbay. She didn't bother to register the Normandy taking off into space as she wandered through the hall. Her worries started to dance around her head. The Alliance commander and her turian mentor might be a bit forgiving, but it wasn't necessarily a guaranteed option. She was out of friends and places to move Oriana. On the other hand, she did have a few accounts stored under a few pseudonyms just in case of a scenario like today where she would need emergency funds. If she can't return to Cerberus, then where else would she have to go? She had her list of addresses and escape routes all on her desk back at Cerberus HQ, stored on her terminal before she could have a proper chance to move it. If she wanted to get her files back, she'll have to take risks. She could get in contact with one of the Shadow Broker's numerous agents and make a deal. Alternatively, the Shadow Broker could lend her a hand in getting to a few things just out of reach.

While she was in the middle of forming a plan in mind, Miranda arrived at the bridge. Saren and Amber were at the other side of the room, looking over the galaxy map. How would the Cerberus agent persuade the Spectres? Considering that their initial demands were rather modest, perhaps she could just tell them the obvious details right now and explain more later when she got word
back from the Shadow Broker. Remaining as calm as she could, Miranda slowly stepped closer to the Spectres.

"Spectres, do you have a minute?" Miranda called over.

The next thing she knew, Saren and Amber focused their eyes on the former Cerberus agent.

"Of course. What's the matter?" the former answered.

Miranda took a deep breath and straightened her spine.

"We still have a deal, yes?" Miranda reminded, "I disclose additional information regarding my former employers and you help with relocating my sister?"

Amber nodded.

"So what have you got for us?" Amber asked.

"I've still got a few things on hand I could give to you," Miranda explained, "I'll try to get to some contacts later to fetch the rest."

Miranda pulled out her omni-tool, gazing at some of the few things she still had saved on the device. After a moment, she sent the files to Saren and Amber's omni-tools.

"We'll be heading back to the Citadel," Amber said, "just stay on the ship until we get something figured out."

"I'll still need to get off," Miranda objected, "I've got a few accounts I'd like to have liquidated before I make my next move."

Saren raised a browplate.

"You sure?" Saren paused.

"Yes," Miranda answered.

"Very well," Saren advised, "do maintain contact if you get in any trouble."

Miranda nodded just as the Normandy emerged from the Mass Relay, flying its way towards the Citadel. Half an hour later, they docked at the station. Amber had been kind enough to lend Miranda an Alliance uniform until she could get into some proper civies. Never before had she felt so vulnerable stepping aboard the Citadel. If she even were to get in any form of trouble, Cerberus had been deeply rooted enough to get her back out again. However, with the safety harness all but gone, every calm stride would quickly devolve into nervously glancing over her shoulder and getting ready to bolt if she was being followed.
As far as Amber checked, she had eleven months left before the Reapers would arrive. It would be well enough time to finish with Balak's conflict with the Hegemony and possibly enough time to dispose of Cerberus now that they had some insight from Lawson.

In the meantime, Miranda had yet to receive confirmation from the Shadow Broker. She didn't encounter any problems walking away with all her savings. This made her feel lucky that she wouldn't have to face any embarrassment confronting the Shadow Broker by herself. Yet, some part of her couldn't help but wonder what the Shadow Broker was like. She was walking along the Presidium to one of the numerous agents he had on the station. The former Cerberus agent took a left turn into the Zakera Wards. She kept her eyes vigilant as she wandered through the wards in search of the rendezvous point.

For being a member of such an infamous criminal organization, Barla Von had no trouble operating out in the open. It wouldn't have surprised her if the Volus had bribed his way to get such a public booth and stay out of bars. By the time Miranda reached the coordinates, she stood by a windowless door and cautiously knocked it. The locks hissed and the door slid open to reveal what looked like a small shop with nothing on display. Behind the counter was a Volus in white and brown.

"Hello, Barla Von," Miranda greeted.

Barla Von stopped what he was doing and focused his attention on Miranda.

"Ah, Agent Lawson," Barla Von exclaimed, "a pleasure to see you again."

"Actually, it's just Ms. Lawson today," Miranda corrected, "I assume you are currently unoccupied?"

Barla Von slowly nodded.

"Right," he said, "what will it be today?"

She pulled out her omni-tool and prepared a payment.

"Retrieval," Miranda requested, "as many of my files from my desk."

"I can help with that," Barla Von agreed, "consider it done. I'll send you a message when I have them."

Miranda gave Barla Von a nod of approval.

"Thank you," she briskly walked out without another word.

Miranda stepped out of the shop with no further hesitation and wandered through the wards. Once she left, she came across Javik along a balcony. He had been leaning over and looking at the park below, watching the pedestrians walk along. Out of curiosity, the former Cerberus agent approached the Prothean from behind. She stopped in her tracks the instant the Prothean glanced over his shoulder.

"What is the matter now?" Javik grumbled.
Miranda shuddered, yet she stood along the rails of the balcony.

"Was just doing unfinished business," Miranda answered, "what about you?"

Javik sighed as he peered down the balcony.

"Reflecting on my earlier days before the Reaper invasion," Javik admitted.

Miranda tilted her head sideways.

"What about them?" Miranda pondered.

"How events could've unfolded differently," he remained silent, not bothering to continue.

Miranda sighed as she shook her head in disbelief.

"If you're bitter towards the Reapers," Miranda replied, "I understand. Last I recalled, the Illusive Man hoped to gain control of them."

"He wants to do what?!" tinges of rage dropped from his voice.

Again, she flinched, but she stood straight.

"Yes, that was his idea alone," Miranda confirmed.

Javik shook his head with disbelief and disgust.

"Next time you see him," Javik advised, "tell him he's a fool, and that his goals are nothing short of impossible."

Miranda slowly nodded in agreement.

"I'll get him the message," she told the Prothean.

"The Reapers must be destroyed," Javik added, "no matter what the cost. I got that from what little I've seen of their tech. The monstrosities they've produced? They're little more than animals. Even when they're disabled, they're still incredibly dangerous."

"Do you have a plan for destroying them?" Miranda asked.

"The Reapers or your former employers?" Javik insisted.

Miranda rolled her eyes in annoyance.

"The Reapers," she clarified.

"No matter," Javik shrugged, "the universe would be better without either."

Javik and Miranda were so engrossed in their conversation they didn't notice Thane as he passed by. The drell assassin double-checked the coordinates in his omni-tool. Whatever Kolyat wanted to tell him, something potentially crucial could be going on as of now. He entered the bar where he told him to meet up. Once inside, Thane scanned his surroundings until he found his son sitting at a small table. The older drell slowly approached and sat down across from Kolyat, catching his attention.

"I got your message," Thane said.
"Good. I've had a few complications regarding one of my companions," Kolyat explained, "he was sent deep into Blue Suns territory to investigate. He got caught as he was sending out his most recent message. Figured I could call in some help on this one."

Thane slowly nodded in agreement.

"So you want me to head in and get your man out?" he clarified.

"Actually," Kolyat mentioned, "I heard you had some rather powerful friends."

"I'll get in touch with Shepard," Thane replied.

Just as Kolyat nodded, Thane activated his omni-tool and scrolled to Amber's contact number.

"There. You can tell her yourself," Thane offered, "now what are the details your contact was looking into at the Blue Suns? What are they up to?"

Kolyat began calling Amber's number and waited for a few seconds.

{Hello?} Amber asked over the com-link.

"Hello, Commander Shepard, my name is Kolyat Krios," Kolyat said, "I find myself in a position requiring your assistance."

{All right,} Amber replied over the com-link, {what seems to be the trouble?}

Several minutes later, Thane and Kolyat met up with Amber, Saren and Garrus at the docking bay while the crew from the Normandy was in the middle of refueling the vessel.

"So what exactly are we going up against?" she asked.

"It seems that the Blue Suns are slowly gaining their notoriety," Kolyat replied, "one of our teammates was sent in as a mole to gain an understanding of their operations. He's been caught."

Garrus blinked twice as he focused his gaze on Kolyat.

"Who did you say your contact was again?" Garrus asked.

"Lantar Sidonis," Kolyat answered calmly.

"Wait," Garrus paused, his mandibles fluttering nervously, "so he's…?"

Amber tilted her head towards Garrus.

"You know him?" Amber asked.

Garrus sighed before he nodded.

"We enlisted in the same fleet," Garrus explained, "for our mandatory training."

"Like I said, he was sent in as a mole, dressed as a new member within their ranks," Kolyat continued. "he managed to get word out that he'd been compromised before his capture."

Garrus sighed before he placed his hand on Kolyat's shoulder.

"Chances are, he blew his own cover. He was always the…odd type, nervous and jumpy," Garrus
replied, "still, we'll get him out of there."

"I've got a good idea of where he's being held. Shall we depart?" Kolyat gestured to the docking bridge of the Normandy.

"Right this way," Amber offered.

Amber led Saren, Thane, Kolyat and Garrus across the walkway and boarded the Normandy. They walked to the galaxy map with Kolyat taking center stage, highlighting their destination.

"You know?" Amber mused, "I commend you for helping us out here."

"Your approval is of no matter. Your assistance to get our friend out is," Kolyat acknowledged, "it's a small facility, meant more for storage than it is for interrogating clients who fail to pay them properly."

Saren examined the coordinates before he approached the pilot's seat.

"Joker," Saren asked, "is the Normandy set to go?"

Joker glanced over his shoulder.

"We just finished refueling it, Spectre," Joker informed Saren.

"Let's get going, then," Saren instructed.

The pilot put out the request to flight control and started disabling the magnetic clamps. Once the clamps released the Normandy, the vessel flew out of the station. Joker wasted no time as he flew it towards the Mass Relay before he let the ancient structure fling the vessel into FTL speed. During the flight, Saren, Amber, Thane, Garrus and Kolyat made their way to the locker room to suit up.

"Anything we should know before heading into this facility?" Saren asked.

Kolyat slung a pistol into its holster.

"It's a former mining camp refurbished into a storage facility," Kolyat replied, "they use this site to store everything from contraband to heavy mechs, so expect the possibility of heavy resistance in there."

Garrus gathered ammunition for his rifle.

"If you'd like," Garrus offered, "I could take care of any guards and make our entry easier."

"Getting in isn't the problem," Kolyat objected, "navigating the interior will be. If Sidonis' intel is good, and it usually is, we're looking at tight hallways and sharp corners."

Garrus sighed and rolled his eyes.

"So much for that," he remarked.

Even when they finished gearing up, all they had to do was wait until the Normandy would reach its destination. By the time the Normandy entered the system in question, it entered low orbit and the shuttle deployed them onto the arid surface below. The shuttle carefully hovered above the planet's surface in search of the facility.

"Scanners are picking something up. Looks like a small landing area," Garrus reported.
"Ok, nice and steady," Amber advised.

Upon cue, the pilot carefully maneuvered the shuttle until it landed on the surface. Garrus took point as he scouted the area ahead with the others close behind. It didn't take much long for them to locate the facility not far from their position.

"Commander," Thane whispered, "orders?"

Amber and Garrus examined the entrance to the facility from a distance. After a moment of silence, the Alliance commander gave the turian a nod of approval.

"Move in," Amber instructed, "Garrus, keep us covered on our approach."

"I'm on it," Garrus acknowledged.

With her squadmates following from behind, Amber charged towards the facility's entrance. A group of guards walked out on their approach and spotted them. The squad leader raised his arm to bark orders when Garrus dashed his gray matter out the side of his helmet. This gave Amber and her squadmates a chance to move closer to the base. The turian sniper picked off a few more as they made for cover. By the time they took out the rest of the patrol, Amber, Saren, Garrus, Thane and Kolyat approached the door. They made their way through the front door with no initial resistance. The front area resembled a main lobby, with a receptionist desk towards the back of the room with benches and ambient lighting.

Amber and her squadmates searched the room, tracing each contours of each wall, and checking each alcove. More soldiers entered the room, firing as they approached them. The Alliance commander and her squadmates didn't hesitate as they fought back. Saren had provided a biotic barrier for the team to compensate for the very little cover provided by the facility. This allowed them to push through the Blue Suns. The team successfully dispatched the first wave of reinforcements and continued farther. Bursting through a door, Amber led her squadmates down a corridor. With Garrus scoping out for any Blue Suns, this gave the others a chance to continue their search.

"Not seeing much activity," Thane noted.

"Probably setting up farther in. Careful," Saren agreed.

Kolyat cautiously tiptoed ahead of the others.

"Ok then," Kolyat requested, "cover me."

He charged into the room to a set of cover towards one far end of the room. Amber followed the younger drell while she scanned her surroundings. Along with portable walls, the Blue Suns had also brought out two heavy mechs to use. Amber gestured Saren, Thane and Garrus to leap into cover. She drew a few grenades from her belt and tossed them at the mechs. Seconds later, the ensuing explosions chipped away the mechs' shields. While Amber reached for another grenade, Garrus, Thane and Kolyat continued firing their rounds at some Blue Suns still remaining in the area. The instant the Alliance commander prepared her next set of grenades, she tossed them at the mechs. She watched as her last bandolier chipped at the mechs' shields. Once the mechs' shields were down, this gave Saren a chance to emit his biotic field. The warp did put a considerable dent in one of the mechs.

"Damn," Garrus muttered, "they're really made them sturdy."

He loaded an armor piercing model onto his rifle, leaned out from cover, and pulled the trigger as
quickly as he could into the exposed mech. The round instantly damaged one mech, which motivated Garrus to fire another round. Under continuous fire, one shot ruptured the mech's power cell, causing it to collapse.

"And that should do it," Garrus remarked.

He narrowly ducked as the segment of pillar just at his head level disintegrated from a shot fired by the other mech. By now, Saren, Amber, Thane and Kolyat took out the current wave of Blue Suns. While its back was turned, Kolyat rushed to the mech and dropped an IED at its feet before retreating and detonating the device. The ensuing explosion dismantled the remaining mech, allowing Amber and her squadmates to continue forth. They breached another door at the back of the room to find a turian tied to a chair with light dents in his plates and light trails of blue blood trailing down his temples.

"Kolyat, took you long enough. And I didn't expect to see you along, Vakarian."

Garrus and Kolyat slowly approached the injured turian, the latter wasting no time as he started cutting through the bonds.

"I'm surprised you're still in one piece," Garrus grunted, "can you walk?"

"Yeah. Let's get going," Sidonis nodded slightly, "I still have an OSD containing my findings."

By the time Kolyat cut the bonds, he and Garrus slung Sidonis's arms over both their shoulders. The team started their way back to the facility entrance. Along the way, Saren, Amber and Thane scouted ahead to provide cover for Kolyat, Sidonis and Garrus. They got back to the lobby without any other hostile encounter along their path. Amber took this moment to activate her omni-tool and contact the Normandy.

"Joker," Amber informed, "we have Sidonis."

{Got it. Sending the shuttle your way.}

Amber nodded before she shut off her omni-tool.

"Ok, we're leaving," Amber told the others.

"You still have that OSD?" Kolyat nudged.

"I can puke it back up when I get to a proper medical facility," Sidonis offered, "I still have those acid resistant cases, so I slapped it inside and swallowed it."

Garrus nodded as he and Kolyat carried Sidonis out of the facility with Saren, Amber and Thane leading the way. The shuttle arrived shortly after and retrieved them. Just as the shuttle lifted off, Amber and her squadmates sat down with Sidonis sitting between Garrus and Kolyat. They piloted their way back to the upper atmosphere where the Normandy waited. Garrus and Kolyat helped Sidonis to the medbay to have his injuries treated and the OSD retrieved. Once Sidonis was seated, Mordin gathered a bucket and a container of laxatives. Half an hour later, Sidonis had hacked up what little he had eaten remained and gave up the OSD he had hidden before the two doctors tended to the rest of his injuries. Since the Normandy had entered FTL speed since then, Garrus stepped out of the medbay and met up with Kelly in the corridor.

"How'd it go?" the yeoman spoke.

Garrus sighed as he started walking alongside the Alliance yeoman.
"At least Sidonis was still alive," Garrus answered, "he'll need some time to recover."

"That's good," an awkward pause passed between the two.

When they both entered the mess hall, Kelly and Garrus walked over to the beverage dispenser.

"So, what do you have planned for the next shore leave?" he asked, getting himself a kava.

Kelly poured herself some lemonade.

"Maybe we could go see a movie?" Kelly offered.

"Sounds like a plan," Garrus nodded, "anything you had in mind?"

Garrus and Kelly sat down at a table with their drinks in their hands.

"Well, I was hoping you would put forth some recommendation," Kelly replied.

Garrus scratched his mandible after he took a sip of his kava.

"Let's see," Garrus mentioned, "Tali recommended Fleet and Flotilla not too long ago."

She snickered in response.

"I heard that movie was nothing but condensed cheese," Kelly commented, "but I suppose there's nothing wrong with viewing ourselves to see how bad it is."

Garrus couldn't help but chuckle in response.

"Yeah," he mused, "I don't mind that Tali likes it, though."

"So it's set then?" Kelly confirmed, "Fleet and Flotilla?"

Garrus nodded.
Crazy Mischievous Prothean

A day passed since Amber led the rescue mission. As Sidonis took some time to rest in the Citadel, Garrus and Kelly went out to a movie theater as Saren and Amber sat in the living room. At the moment, Amber held her miniature console in her hands as she played The Binding of Isaac. Saren had been reading a news article on his omni-tool across from her. The turian Spectre read along each word, engrossing himself to the point he didn't pay much attention to his surroundings. He suddenly got a message from Liara. Casually, he opened the message and read its contents.

{Saren, do you have a moment?}

He typed back before he sent another message:

{Of course. What's the matter?}

By now, Amber completed her latest run in her game. It was seconds later before Saren received another message from Liara, so he took a moment to read it.

"Amber, we might have a problem on our hands."

She paused and looked up from her game.

"What is it?" Amber asked Saren.

"Javik apparently went on a long rant," Saren explained, "ran out of Dr. T'Soni's apartment, and just outright disappeared."

Amber shuddered before she shut off her miniature console.

"Let's hope he doesn't start any trouble," Amber said.

"She also says she might need our help finding him," Saren added.

Amber immediately stood from the couch and pocketed her device. The two quickly prepared and left the door.

"Any idea where to start looking?" Amber clamored.

"Perhaps we can meet up with Liara and go from there," Saren suggested.

The two traveled down to the garage and took the hovercar over to Liara's apartment. Upon arrival, they disembarked the hovercar and stopped at the door before Amber rang the doorbell. Liara answered the door, not taking the effort to hide her mix of relief and disappointment.

"It's good to see you've arrived on such short notice," Liara sighed, "please come in. I wish I could provide better insight as to where he went, but he stripped off his omni-tool when he left."

Saren and Amber stepped into the apartment without hesitation.

"So what did Javik do to piss you off?" Amber asked.

"He didn't," Liara sighed, "he just went on a long tangent saying that we have to prepare for the Reapers using the station. Not sure why or how, but then he bolted through the door and disappeared before I could catch up."
Saren and Amber exchanged confused glances in a moment of silence.

"How do you think he'll pull that off?" Amber asked.

"He said something about the Keepers," Liara replied, "I think he's trying to access the Keeper facilities in the lower levels."

Amber stiffened as she placed her hand on Saren's shoulder.

"Does C-Sec have rules concerning the Keepers?" Amber asked.

"Yes. People aren't allowed to physically interact with the Keepers," Saren nodded, "they self-destruct if they're prodded too much."

Amber turned on her feet and made her way towards the door.

"Then we might as well hurry up and catch him," Amber suggested.

All Saren and Liara could do was follow Amber out of the apartment.

"Any idea where we could find him?" the doctor asked.

Saren nodded.

"There are a few hatches leading to the lower levels," Saren answered, "if we're lucky, we'll find one that's open."

Saren, Amber and Liara made their way to the hovercar and hopped inside. With the turian Spectre taking the wheel, he flew the hovercar across the station and scanned the gates leading to the unused lower levels.

"Looks like he entered here," Saren observed, "you should probably stay in the car, Dr. T'Soni."

Saren landed the hovercar before he and Amber disembarked. The Spectres made their way through the opened gate. They rushed down the stairs, activating the light on their omni-tools. While taking caution to not disturb any nearby Keepers, they ventured farther through the empty wards. The two wandered down the long, dark gangways for a trail leading them to the Prothean. As they got closer, they noticed the Keepers skittering about as if they were in a panic. Up ahead, they heard clanging of metal around a corner with strands of light pouring out from the opening.

"I hope he's not…" Amber muttered.

Amber sprinted ahead of Saren, compelling him to follow her. Once they emerged from the narrow corridor, they spotted Javik, yet Amber couldn't help but feel anger build in her mind when she saw what he was doing. He was atop a large machine, looking at a terminal and tinkering with the controls.

"Javik," Amber raised her voice, "what the hell do you think you're doing?!

Javik paused in his tracks and glanced over his shoulder.

"Before our cycle ended, we sabotaged the Keepers," Javik explained, "they can receive signals from the Reapers and were used as such to activate this station's primary function. To prevent such from happening this cycle, we sabotaged that link so they will no longer respond. Now I wish to see if I can make more of that damage."
Saren folded his arms and his mandibles flared while he gave Javik a hawklike glare.

"You are interfering with the Keepers," Saren warned Javik, "and that is a violation of Council law. If you don't come down from there, I will have to arrest you!"

"Whether or not I'm in custody won't matter when the Reapers arrive," Javik objected, "besides, don't you understand that they are linked to both this station and the Relays? If I could figure it out, we could turn the whole system against them."

As Javik went back to work, Amber lowered her head and groaned in disgust.

"What is wrong with you?!" Amber demanded, "the way you talk about the Reapers is making me think you're obsessed!"

Javik snapped his head back at Amber.

"What's wrong with you?!" Javik barked back, "they are the enemy. They are everyone's enemy. They are the enemy of everyone before us. They will destroy you and everything you hold dear if we don't destroy them. I'm not going to sit idly by and let them reduce cycle after cycle to dust! No one deserves a fate like that! If we can't stop them here, then the least we can do is get the ball rolling!"

Amber glared at Javik before she tilted her head towards Saren.

"What do we do?" Amber asked her mentor.

The turian Spectre stepped towards the Prothean.

"Javik, we're out of time," Saren persuaded, "eleven months just isn't enough to accomplish anything significant enough against such a threat. We do have a means of being able to bide our time if they chose to subjugate us regardless, but it'll give us longer to find a method of resistance."

Irritated, Javik turned his head towards Saren and glared at him.

"Are you suggesting we should bow to the Reapers?!" Javik snarled.

"At least something we can figure out in more than a year!" Saren corrected, "just give it a rest, alright? We actually have a plan to survive!"

Javik made a brief glance at Amber before he groaned in irritation.

"And what of the public?" Javik reminded, "are they even aware of the danger that looms?"

Javik left the terminal and stormed off in disgust while Saren and Amber exchanged confused glances.

"You don't think he's…?" Amber blurted.

"Let's at least make sure he doesn't get into further trouble," he huffed, taking off after Javik.

Amber nodded before she followed Saren through the sublevels. Javik had angrily slogged his way back to the entrance of the gate, peering back into the public. The Prothean scanned his surroundings in search of a platform he could use to draw attention, ignoring the Spectres as they emerged from the gate.

"C'mon," Amber called over, "let's just head back to the good doctor's place. Take it easy."
Javik scoffed before he marched towards a nearby platform and climbed it. He spied a nearby reporter and stomped towards her before he swiped her microphone from her hands.

"Hey!" the reporter protested, "what do you think you're doing?!"

Without giving a response, Javik turned his focus towards the crowd. By now, they were all focusing on the Prothean out of curiosity. Saren and Amber rushed his way to try and deprecate him from the crowds before he broke something. Javik, however, was undeterred.

"I have an urgent announcement for you primitives," Javik began.

Saren was the first to reach his side.

"Javik, not the best time," Saren interrupted, "c'mon, our car isn't that far from here."

Javik groaned before he shoved Saren aside and turned his focus back towards the crowd.

"The Reapers are coming," Javik continued, "and when they arrive in eleven months, they will destroy the entire galaxy. They have forced into extinction every civilization before your own, ours included. Do not fall into the trap of complacency!"

In a matter of seconds, fear and anxiety started to spread within the crowd.

"Your pathetic Council knew of this and desperately tried to hide it from you," Javik added.

"Okay, that's enough," Amber protested, "this won't accomplish anything."

The two Spectres started to yank on the Prothean to save themselves the embarrassment. Out of anger, Javik wrestled against Saren and Amber's grips to free himself.

"I'm not finished yet," Javik snapped, "get out of my way!"

Even if the Spectres continued to drag the Prothean off the platform, Javik emitted a biotic field, eliciting yelps of pain out of the Spectres.

"Do not squander these last months!" Javik called out, "make them count!"

Javik managed to free himself from Saren and Amber's grasp. By now, C-Sec officers began gathering in the crowd.

"I am Commander Javik, senior officer of the Five Hundred and First Legion of the Prothean Empire, and I've seen what the Reapers can do those fifty-thousand years ago. No matter the cost," Javik declared, "we must destroy the Reapers if you want to live. There is no alternative."

Saren managed to recuperate before he darted towards the Prothean.

"C'mon, we've got to go!" Saren snatched Javik and rushed back to the hovercar.

Amber closed the hovercar door and Saren began flying it out of the public square, leaving the anxious crowd behind. The Alliance commander turned her head towards Javik, flames flickering in her eyes.

"Thanks a lot, you Prothean piece of shit," Amber scolded, "you could've made the crisis worse!"

"And what was your plan?!" Javik objected, "leave the crowds oblivious until it was far too late?"
"Everyone calm down! As far as I can tell, this won't have any actual far-reaching effects," Saren hissed.

Amber sighed before she tilted her head towards Saren.

"How so?" Amber clamored.

"Let's face it," Saren said, "Javik might've gone out and yelled a bunch, but he hasn't laid down anything solid just yet and he's only had exposure to at most a few thousand people. Word won't get far like that."

Liara's eyes gave Javik a skeptical expression, so she turned on her omni-tool and double-checked the news feeds. As she took notice of a recent headline in her news feed, Saren made a brief glance at the Citadel Tower.

"Javik," Saren warned the Prothean, "if you make a fool out of yourself again, I will drag you to the Council."

"At least I'll have a proper audience then," Javik grumbled back.

The rest of the drive went quietly before Saren landed the hovercar in front of Liara's apartment. Liara got out and sighed.

"Again, I apologize for the inconvenience," Liara said.

"It's all right," Amber reassured.

Javik disembarked the hovercar and followed Liara into the apartment. The two let out a sigh of relief as they drove back to their apartment. They trudged their way inside and plopped onto the couch.

"Geez," Amber sighed, "what was Javik thinking?!

"Hard to tell," Saren replied, "probably has the mindset that the Reapers aren't exactly negotiable."

Amber leaned closer to Saren, allowing him to wrap his arm around her.

"Look, there's absolutely nothing to worry here," Saren insisted, "as far as I can tell, this little incident will go completely unnoticed."

Amber wanted to agree, but she couldn't help but feel a sense of anxiety trickle down her spine.

"And if it does?" Amber said.

"Well…I can't imagine it'd be that bad," Saren shrugged.

Saren flipped on the TV while Amber pulled out her miniature console. Saren slumped back to his previous position on the couch from earlier before they had received the call about Javik's disappearance, sighing. Things couldn't possibly get worse, could it?
Migrant Fleet Diplomacy

A few days have passed and so far, the crowd that witnessed the Prothean's speech began debating between one another. Instead, news headlines of the batarian revolution appeared across mainstream outlets. By now, the revolution had accumulated too much momentum to go unnoticed, and the Hegemony turned further inward as the batarian territories were embroiled with civil war.

At the moment, Kasumi entered Tali's room and approached the quarian still diagnosing her terminal.

"What's up?" Tali turned to face her.

"I got your message," Kasumi informed, "did you have luck finding your messenger yet?"

Tali shook her head.

"It seems it doesn't want to be found," the quarian said, "but I can't seem to fathom why."

"Anything on their motives?" Kasumi asked.

Tali opened the message in her inbox, allowing Kasumi to read it. Kasumi struggled to follow the broken grammar and fractured sentence structuring.

"Well, I'm still confused as to who wrote this?" Kasumi objected, "it's not like they're being cryptic, and if they were, I don't see how this is supposed to be translated."

Tali sighed as she shrugged.

"Good point," she agreed, "so what now? Where will we meet this…whoever they are?"

Tali shut off the terminal before she and Kasumi stepped out of the room.

"I didn't find coordinates in that message," Kasumi admitted, "you?"

Tali shook her head.

"Nothing I could backtrack," Tali suggested, "let Shepard know for now and we can figure it out later."

Kasumi nodded in agreement before she and Tali stepped out of the apartment. Tali had the message saved on her omni-tool and would show it personally to Amber. Silence passed between them as they meandered through the Presidium. They continued to the Normandy's drydock. There, they found Amber discussing with a crewmember over some new features for the shuttles.

"Hey, Amber!" Kasumi called over as she waved her hand, "you have a moment?"

Amber paused in her tracks and glanced over her shoulders, laying her eyes on Tali and Kasumi.

"I'll be right back," Amber told the crewmember.

Amber stepped towards Kasumi and Tali.

"Is this about the unidentified messages?" Amber asked.
"Yes," Tali nodded.

Tali turned on her omni-tool and scrolled to her message inbox, allowing Amber to read the messages in question.

"Wait, this seems familiar," Amber said to herself.

"So what is it?" Kasumi asked.

The three continued to the elevator at the back of the bridge.

"It's just a hunch," Amber shrugged, "I'm going to run this with Mordin, see if he agrees."

Someone had already been in the elevator car when it arrived, but not a crewmember they recognized. Its gunmetal gray plates outlined its synthetic muscles, culminating on its flashlight-like head.

"Creator—"

A single shot fired, sending the Geth unit flying against the back of the elevator, before flopping dead on the back of the car. Kasumi and Amber turned to see Tali with her pistol drawn. Upon closer inspection of her visor, her eyes were wide open.

"Keelah!" Tali exclaimed, "how did an infiltrator get this far onto the ship?!"

"I don't remember inviting it aboard," Amber admitted, her tone implying honesty.

"Shit. Well now we really need to take this down to the medbay," Kasumi groaned, walking to the damaged synth.

They rode down to the crew deck, carried the Geth out and plopped it down on one of the beds in the medbay.

"Hey Mordin, check this out," Tali beckoned.

Mordin blinked as he gazed at the Geth unit.

"Most interesting," Mordin commented, "haven't seen one of these in some time. What do you need from me?"

"You wouldn't mind cutting it open, would you?" Tali asked.

"Of course," Mordin nodded, "may I ask why? Is just a Geth unit. Seen plenty, dissected more, nothing else to see."

Tali hesitated in a moment of silence as she scratched her head.

"This thing talked," Tali clarified, "they can't talk. I want to know why. Maybe find out why its here."

Mordin inhaled sharply and blinked.

"Vocal communication?" Mordin commented, "strange. Assessment correct, shouldn't be able. Will investigate. Need to finish with current work, however."

They left the medbay shortly after.
"Now, about that message," Amber continued.

"What about it?" Kasumi paused.

"It's awfully coincidental that you receive this just as a Geth unit shows up on the Normandy," Amber said.

Kasumi and Tali exchanged blank stares.

"You don't really think that thing sent the message, do you?" Tali grumbled.

"Odds are good," Amber nodded.

"If so, why would the Geth contact us?" Kasumi noted.

Amber sighed as she folded her arms.

"I didn't see it carry any weapons, as far as I know," Amber mentioned, "for all we know, it had friendly intentions coming aboard this ship. For now, we'll have it analyzed, then we can ask some questions."

"Just unbelievable," Tali rolled her eyes, "you do realize they booted us off our own homeworld, right? Why would they come to us?"

Amber stopped in her tracks, eliciting confused glances from Tali and Kasumi.

"Fine," Amber advised, "let's ask it now, then we can have it dissected. Maybe Mordin hasn't started yet."

Amber turned on her feet and made her way back to the medbay. When she stepped inside, Mordin paused in his tracks once again.

"Ah, commander, was about to go find you. Geth left. Not sure where."

"Wait," Amber paused, "what?"

Amber made a brief glance at the empty bed where the Geth unit should've been. Many questions filled her mind as Tali and Kasumi entered the medbay moments later.

"Shit," Amber grumbled, "let's head to the armory. If this thing is loose onboard, I don't want it attacking the crew."

Amber turned for the door.

"Come on," Amber called over to Tali and Kasumi.

They hustled back to the elevator and returned to the bridge. Without any delay, the trio continued their hustle to the armory, but came to a stop when they opened the door.

"What the hell did you do to my armor?!" Amber shrieked.

The Geth unit from earlier was hunched over her N7 suit and had cut off large chunks of the chestplate and right arm, fusing it onto its own frame. It placed the large sheet from the chestplate onto its torso where Tali shot it and the shoulder pads onto its right arm. It stood up, still trailing gray fluid, and walked over to them.
"We apologize for the use of your armor. There was a hole."

Amber groaned as she facepalmed.

"Great, now I need to get a new suit of armor," she groaned.

Tali once again had her pistol drawn.

"Since when did Geth speak?" Tali growled.

The Geth unit slowly put its hands in the air.

"Uh, Tali?" Kasumi blurted.

"What?" Tali snapped.

"I don't think you need to keep it at gunpoint," Kasumi said.

Tali sighed as she lowered her gun.

"Please continue," Kasumi requested.

"We wish to speak to Shepard Commander regarding the Old Machines," the Geth unit requested.

Amber took a couple steps forward upon cue.

"I remember getting a message from one some time ago," Amber told the Geth unit.

"Yes. We have created a consensus that the Old Machines are a threat to us. We wish to contribute to the effort against them."

Amidst the debate, Saren stepped into the armory.

"What's going on…here…?" he gasped, "why is there a Geth infiltrator in our armory?"

Amber, the Geth unit, Kasumi and Tali turned their heads towards the turian Spectre.

"Arterius Spectre," the Geth unit acknowledged.

Saren folded his arms in response.

"Wouldn't the Reapers ignore you?" Saren asked, "your race is synthetic."

The Geth unit shook its head.

"Data suggests otherwise," the Geth unit replied, "we were sent to inquire our ability to contribute."

Amber shifted her gaze between the Geth unit and Tali, taking a moment to recall one of her memories.

"Did you send Tali a recent message?" Amber pointed out.

The Geth unit nodded.

"Yes," the Geth unit said, "we sent Creator Zorah to better ascertain your mindset before approaching."
Tali gave Amber and the Geth unit a blank stare in a moment of silence. For the most of her life, Tali'Zorah heard of the horrific stories of the Geth. Seeing one with no malicious intent overwhelmed her.

"Oh boy," Tali sighed, slowly stepping towards the Geth unit, "the rest of the fleet is not going be thrilled with this. So what do you want from us?"

"Temporary cooperation for the duration of operations against the Old Machines."

Saren couldn't help but scratch his mandible.

"Temporary isn't enough to persuade me," Saren commented.

Its head panels flicked.

"What offer were you expecting?"

Amber and Saren exchanged glances.

"You know," Amber remarked, "it seems the barians aren't the only ones who need to improve their social protocols."

"Geth act in self defense. Geth act to develop future for ourselves."

Amber shifted her attention towards Tali.

"Tali, do you have contact with any of your fleets?" Amber asked.

"I do. But like I said, they won't take this lightly," the quarian sighed.

Amber and Saren stepped out of the armory, prompting the Geth unit, Tali and Kasumi to follow them. Saren let out an obvious sigh.

"Fine," he grumbled, "we'll try to play along."

Saren and Amber led the Geth unit, Tali and Kasumi down the corridor and made their way to the bridge. Strangeley enough, Kaidan and Ashley were conversing with one another when they noticed the Geth unit. The former was the first to ask.

"Uh, Skipper?" Kaidan called out, "why do we have a flashlighthead on the ship?"

The Geth unit paused in its tracks and focused its mechanical eye on Kaidan.

"We are Geth. We are here to negotiate."

"Ok," Kaidan rolled his eyes.

All the while, Ashley gave the Geth unit a suspicious stare.

"I don't know," Ashley objected, "how can I be sure you're not trying to trick us?"

"Shepard?" Saren nodded at her.

Upon cue, Amber approached both Kaidan and Ashley.

"That's why we're heading to the Migrant Fleet," Amber clarified.
"In the meantime, we'll keep a constant watch on that Geth," Kaidan pointed at the Geth unit, "I don't like the sound of this."

Amber nodded at Kaidan before she stepped towards the pilot seat.

"So, Joker," Amber asked, "you ready to meet a quarian fleet?"

"Yeah," Joker nodded, "I'm sorry if I come across as dismissive, but color me unimpressed. I've seen photos of their ships, and they haven't aged well."

Amber couldn't help but chuckle as she shrugged. Tali, on the other hand, gave off an irritated expression. She muttered some untranslated curse under her breath and rolled her eyes. Joker tapped on the terminal and requested an authorization for departure. Minutes later, the magnetic clamps released the Normandy, allowing the vessel to fly out of the station.

"Anything I should know before docking with the Flotilla?" Joker insisted.

Amber nodded at Tali, allowing her to approach the pilot seat.

"They'll request a passphrase before we dock, so I'll stay on the bridge," Tali said, "additionally, any boarding personnel are required to wear their own suits to avoid contaminating the ship's environments."

Saren glanced at Amber, who couldn't help but shudder.

"We do have suits, right?" Saren reminded.

"You do," Amber answered, gesturing to the Geth unit behind her, "but the Geth unit used pieces of my armor to patch itself up."

"Yeah, I saw that," Saren sighed, "I suppose a normal suit would be sufficient, right?"

Saren placed his hand on Amber's shoulder, allowing her to lean into the touch.

"A few meant for the grunts," Amber agreed, "in the meantime, I'll have to put in a requisition order for a new set of N7 armor."

Just then, the Normandy arrived at the Mass Relay, its energy particles enveloping the vessel and flinging it into FTL speed. All the crew could do was wait until they reach their destination. An hour or so later, the Normandy entered the Perseus Veil and it would only be several more minutes before the vessel reached the Migrant Fleet. Amber's squadmates began suiting up while Saren handed her a temporary suit of armor. By the time they returned to the bridge, they could see the Migrant Fleet up ahead.

"Ok, Tali," Joker called over, "you're up."

The pilot hailed the vessel as they approached.

"This is the Rayya. Identify yourself."

Tali took a moment to clear her throat.

"This is Tali'Zorah nar Rayya, requesting dock."

"What is the passphrase?"
"After wandering among the stars, I shall always find my way back to the homeland."

{Welcome back. Good to see you again Tali'Zorah. You may approach dock 3 of the Rayya.}

"I'm arriving on an unsterilized vessel," Tali added, "I'll need a quarantine team at the dock awaiting our arrival. We are also approaching with an active Geth. It's not hostile, however I want a security team ready to engage should its behavior suddenly change."

A long moment of silence soon followed.

{Thank you for the heads up.}

Upon cue, Joker carefully maneuvered the Normandy and landed it in the specified dock of the Rayya. Saren arrived with the Geth right in front of him. As they, Amber and Tali disembarked the vessel, multiple quarians stood waiting to greet them. They could barely see their suspicious glances at the infiltrator through the reflective visors of their enviro-suits.

"So this is the Geth unit you were mentioning," the lead quarian gestured to the Geth unit.

Tali shrugged.

"I only know as much as you do, father," she replied, "this thing wasn't so much as armed when we found it aboard our ship."

The elder quarian nodded before he gestured to a door leading out of the dock.

"Right this way," he offered.

Rael'Zorah made a brief glance at the Geth unit.

"So tell me…Geth. What made you decide to come to us?"

Saren, Amber, Tali and the Geth unit followed the quarians out of the hangar and through the corridor.

"We have come to the conclusion that the Old Machines were a threat to our existence," the Geth unit explained, "cooperation ensures survival."

Rael glanced over his shoulder and blinked twice.

"Old machines?" he paused.

"Reapers, an ancient race of synthetics. They usually dwell just outside of the galactic borders and only come to the known systems to wipe civilizations based on some rather arbitrary limitations," Saren clarified.

By the time they entered a conference room, the quarians were giving Saren an alarmed expression. Another quarian walked up to Tali's father.

"I assume this is part of your research, Rael?"

"I wish it were, Shala," Rael sighed, "apparently, a race of synthetics hellbent on destroying generations of galactic civilization are the one thing that can convince the Geth to play ball for once."

"What? You buy it?" Shala exclaimed.
"I don't know, though it would be a good explanation why that thing behind me isn't going room to room killing everyone."

The quarians couldn't help but stare in disbelief while Rael turned his head towards Saren.

"I see Shepard and I were not the only ones who knew," Saren commented.

"What matters is everyone is behaving so far," Amber replied.

Shala tilted her head towards Amber.

"So you're suggesting diplomacy if we are to stand a chance?" she clarified.

"Pretty much," Amber nodded.

"I suppose we could talk our way back to Rannoch after this. It'd spare us the trouble of trying to retake it by force."

"Sounds like a plan," Amber agreed.

Amber made a brief glance at the Geth unit, prompting it to nod in agreement. With a plan for diplomacy between the Geth and the quarians up for consideration, they now figured they should prepare to travel to Rannoch. The attitude of the fleet detachment was very mixed between the crew members. Some were excited to see Rannoch for the first time, more were convinced they would be blown to bits the moment they exited the Mass Relay, a small minority thought it was a special operation as a first step for a larger invasion to retake the homeworld. With the Normandy leading the way, the Migrant Fleet made their way to the Mass Relay. Aboard the bridge, Tali, Amber, Saren, Garrus, Kelly, the Geth unit and another quarian named Kal'Reegar sat in a circle.

"Say," Kelly asked, "do you have a name?"

"Geth."

A dead pause followed, mixed with confusion and disappointment.

"What? Does your specific platform have a designation?" Saren paused, "a callsign? Manufacturing number?"

Rael stepped in to dismantle any confusion.

"The Geth aren't so much androids as they are small, semi-sentient blips inhabiting mobile platforms. The average Geth unit carries just over a hundred to help with the maximum requirements for movement and decision-making. Scans indicate this one was designed to carry thousands of Geth, probably giving it enough processing capability to speak coherently."

Garrus chuckled as he scratched his mandible.

"Yeah," Garrus mused, "we might as well give this one a name."

"So what should it be, then?" Tali huffed.

Saren, Amber, Garrus, Kelly and Tali exchanged glances in a moment of silence.

"I could think of Legion," Garrus suggested, "unless you have other ideas."

The Geth unit's head panels perked up in interest.

"Legion," the Geth unit repeated, "noun. A unit of Roman soldiers ranging from three-thousand to six-thousand. Adjective. Very many or numerous."

Amber scratched her head.

"Considering the amount of Geth we're talking about," Amber mused, "maybe it does sound like a legion."

"We accept this as a good designation. We are Legion."

Seconds later, the Mass Relay flung the Normandy into FTL speed, with the many ships of the Migrant Fleet following suit. It was only a short while before they emerged from another Mass Relay and made their way towards Rannoch. Both Spectres stared through the hull as Geth vessels surrounded the planet.

"Too late to turn back now," Rael sighed, walking up behind them, "I really hope you two know what you're doing."

"We'll be ok," Amber reassured.

Just then, Legion stepped in between Saren and Amber.

"We have contacted the others," Legion reported, "what should I relay back?"

Amber made a brief glance at Legion.

"Ask where we're meeting and tell them we'll be coming out with just a shuttle and a handful of mixed crew, yourself included," Amber suggested, "if we will be discussing, we should at least try not to make this confrontational."

Legion nodded just as a Geth vessel began hailing the Normandy.

"They say if it brings comfort, we will be meeting on the planet surface below at these coordinates," Legion's palm lit up like an omni-tool, showing a mark on the planet surface.

Saren took a moment to examine the coordinates before he nodded at the Geth unit.

"All right, Joker," Saren announced, "take us in."

The pilot stopped making his robotic mocking gestures and returned to the controls. He carefully maneuvered the Normandy as it descended through the planet's atmosphere. Needless to say, the terrain approaching the meeting site was barren. The foliage was ripe with life and the ground looked to be in a healthy state, but there was little in the way of infrastructure save for the occasional Geth spire. Joker kept a watchful eye on the coordinates as the vessel hovered over to a large platform. On that platform stood hundreds of Geth units.

"Ok," Amber informed, "let's head to the shuttle."

Amber led Saren, Tali, Legion, Garrus, Kelly and their quarian guests out of the bridge. They entered the cargo hold and boarded the shuttle.

"You guys ready?" the Alliance commander asked.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Tali grumbled.
"Easy, Tali," Garrus cooed softly, "the fact they didn't shoot us down the moment we appeared is so far a good sign."

Amber closed the shuttle doors before sitting next to Saren. Moments later, the cargo hatch opened, allowing the shuttle to depart. It was only minutes later when the shuttle landed at the platform. As quickly as they boarded, the doors opened and they disembarked. Legion took a few steps closer to his Geth brethren, eliciting chirps and whistles out of them.

"Okay, when do we finish with these talks?" Tali blurted impatiently.

"We're done here when I say we've had this talk," Amber affirmed, "now quit squirming and let's go."

The others stepped out in short order with Tali and Amber exiting last. Amber patted Tali on the shoulder, giving her a reassuring smile before she stepped towards the Geth units. She didn't mind that they all focused their mechanical eyes on her.

"Shepard Commander," Legion nodded at Amber.

"So I assume the others are…agreeable?" Amber asked.

After a moment of silence, Geth units started nodding in response.

"All right," Amber said, "I'm ready to negotiate a truce."

"We are ready to discuss," Legion answered.

To demonstrate, a Geth prime extended its hand, allowing Amber to shake it. She glanced over her shoulder and nodded at Tali, Kal'Reegar and Rael, prompting them to approach.

"Creator Reegar, Creator Zorah," Legion answered.

Rael nervously shrugged.

"Strange," Rael commented, "after all this time, they choose to still label us as 'creator' instead of something more plain or demeaning."

Legion exchanged clicks and beeps with the Geth prime before returning his glance towards Rael and Kal'Reegar.

"You are still our predecessors," Legion mentioned, "we recognize this fact."

Rael slowly stepped closer to the Geth prime.

"I suppose if it's any consolation," Rael said, "the admirals all have mixed feelings about this conflict. While most are of the opinion your nature as AIs can be used as an advantage, there are two split distinct groups on this matter. Those who believe we should retake the homeworlds forcefully and the other that believes we were wrong to have panicked the way we did in the first place."

The Geth prime responded with some beeps and a chirp.

"Also affirmed," Legion added.

"Perhaps this is an uncertainty we can build upon?" Rael asked.
The Geth prime answered once again with enthusiastic clicks and beeps.

"If it would mean avoiding the threat of conflict," Legion concluded, "it would be preferable."

With this confirmation, the rest of the quarians on the platform, including Tali, figured this truce could work out.
Kelly and the Rachni

As Amber could confirm, it had been over a year since the Akuze incident. Her focus on other matters left little room for the Thresher Maws to haunt her in her dreams. She and Saren spent the next few days biding their time as the quarians and the Geth slowly repaired their relations, hoping that the Councilors would accept this as an example of diplomacy. That silence was broken when Amber opened a message from Miranda and read it.

{Shepard, I need your help.}

Raising her eyebrows, Amber sent a text in response.

{What do you need?}

Amber waited nervously until she received another response.

{Remember the Rachni in Noveria? Cerberus found them and they're trying to capture them again.}

Amber felt a chill down her spine, so she stood to her feet and stepped out of her bedroom, making her way to the door to Saren's office.

"Saren?" Amber called, "you in there?"

"Yes," he poked his head out the door and returned, "what is it?"

"Cerberus is on the move," Amber warned, "and Miranda knows where."

Making a calm sigh, Saren stepped through the door.

"They're up to no good again," Saren said, "aren't they?"

"They still want the Rachni," Amber nodded, "and they aren't giving up so soon."

Both Spectres didn't hesitate as they suited up before meeting at the front door, with Amber in her new N7 armor. They left the apartment and meandered through the Presidium, making their way to the docking bay. The Alliance commander scanned her surroundings until she laid her eyes on Miranda, who leaned on the rails.

"Miri!" Amber called over as she waved her hand, "we're here!"

Upon cue, Miranda glanced over her shoulder as both Spectres approached her.

"Good to see you're ready, commander," the former agent greeted.

Amber nodded at Miranda as they and Saren walked through the docks.

"You still have feelers within Cerberus?" Amber asked.

"Tangents," Miranda nodded, "they'll seal them off soon enough, but they're enough to get bits of information."

It was only a short while before they arrived at the Normandy.
"So, you know where they found the Rachni?" Saren pressed.

As they crossed the walkway, Miranda turned on her omni-tool and pulled out the coordinates.

"Utukku, it's in the Attican Traverse," Miranda answered, "they followed the trail the queen left there, and they've been searching the planet surface for some time."

After they made it aboard the Normandy, Saren and Amber examined the coordinates before recording them into their omni-tools.

"Any idea if they have them yet?" Amber asked.

"No," Miranda shook her head, "they're still encountering resistance, but they're mounting an offensive. We'll have to hurry before much longer."

"Not to worry," Saren reassured, "Normandy just resupplied, we should be ready to go."

Saren, Amber and Miranda made their way to the bridge, where they met up with Garrus and Kelly.

"The Rachni again, huh?" Garrus asked, clearly wishing it wasn't so.

"Sadly," Amber admitted with a sigh, "that's what's going on right now."

"Sure we shouldn't just kill both the Cerberus forces and the Rachni on this mission?" Garrus rolled his eyes, "it'd save us the trouble of having to protect them in the future, and we wouldn't have to deal with the possible ramifications of the Rachni getting aggressive."

Saren, Amber, Miranda and gave Kelly gave Garrus blank stares.

"That defeats the purpose of this mission in the first place," Amber chastised.

He shrugged in response.

"Just thinking ahead," Garrus said, "if they are so potent as biological weapons, it'd be easier to make sure no one can use them as such in the future."

Shaking her head in disbelief, the Alliance Commander stepped towards the pilot seat.

"I've set the coordinates on the galaxy map," Amber instructed, "take us out, Joker."

"You got it," Joker glanced over his shoulder and nodded.

She returned to the briefing room with Saren and Miranda as they left the Citadel dock. She turned on the holographic projector of the galaxy.

"So what else did you hear from the local Cerberus detachments?" Amber asked.

Miranda pulled up an enhanced view of the planet surface.

"The Rachni have hidden themselves in an abandoned mine for temporary shelter," Miranda added, "Cerberus started with surface bombing before attempting to move in."

Saren grimaced at the thought of what Cerberus could do to the Rachni, yet he still examined the map.
"So do you have a suggestion for our point of entry?" Saren pressed.

"So far, they don't have armored vehicles or heavy artillery on hand, so it'll make entry easier," Miranda suggested, "they're stretched thin as is, so we could make our way through one of the guarded entrances and continue from there."

Amber placed her finger on her chin. 

"Yeah, that could work," Amber agreed.

"On top of that, most of them will be inclined to stay at their posts to ensure the Rachni don't break out, meaning we shouldn't encounter reinforcements on the way out," Saren added, "a sound plan."

An hour later, the Normandy entered the Attican Traverse and made their way to Utukku. Amber led Saren, Garrus, Miranda and Kelly aboard a shuttle after making their way into the cargo hold. When they entered the upper atmosphere, the cargo hold doors opened. The team landed the shuttle in the hills near one of the mine entrances. Garrus scanned the area before he gestured to Amber that the coast was clear. This prompted the Alliance commander to lead her squad into the mine.

From that point forth, they resorted to sneaking through the tunnels. Once in a while, they would spot a random Cerberus corpse lying on the ground. Men just slumped over with large chunks of their armor hacked off with brute force or burned away with some caustic fluid, exposing melted flesh and faces with screams inscribed on them underneath.

"Looks like they weren't holding out either way," Saren sighed.

Kelly stiffened a little, yet she kept up with her pace. 

"Is… Rachni acid worse than Thresher Maw acid?" Kelly pondered.

"This is just child's play. Thresher Maws are definitely worse," Amber answered.

Just as they came across a corner, Amber held out her arm, stopping her squadmates in her tracks as she peered around the corner. There was a large elevator heading deeper into the mine, with the elevator car waiting at the top.

"All right, people," Amber told the others, "I think we found a shortcut."

The team got onto the platform and started the ride downward. Once it reached the lower levels, Amber and her squad continued farther. The bodies down below were fewer, but more apparent. Now, a few Rachni remains were scattered about. The blood from the insectoid bodies dried onto the floor and smelled of fish. There wasn't much light filling the tunnels, so Amber turned on the flashlight feature in her omni-tool. They continued into the quiet, dank mines, barely illuminating the dark corners of the caves. Cerberus couldn't have gone much farther than this, right? The bodies stopped at a distinct line where the Cerberus forces ceased to pursue their target once the objective became too costly to achieve.

"All right," Garrus said, "now what?"

"Let's keep going," Amber suggested, "try and talk nicely with them."

With help from her flashlight, Amber started searching for live Rachni. She suddenly heard a distant scratching noise and signaled the others to stop.
"You guys hear that?" Amber blurted.

They all stopped in their tracks and began listening for any distant sounds. Once she picked up on the sounds, Kelly turned to her right.

"This way," Kelly gestured.

Amber nodded at Kelly as the latter led the way. The team entered a chasm with a few metal bridges stretching the gap. They peered over the cliff, only to see the occasional Rachni worker scuttling along the walls of the chasm.

"Miranda," Kelly asked, "is there any activity across the bridges?"

"Nothing yet," Miranda shook her head, "at least nothing I can see."

Garrus scratched his mandible.

"All the more reason to find out," he commented.

Garrus stepped onto one of the bridges first. Right behind him, Kelly followed him on. After Saren, Amber and Miranda stepped onto the bridge, they carefully crossed it while remaining vigilant. Suddenly, the bridge underneath them began to groan under their weight and violently shifted. Yelping in panic, Kelly embraced herself to Garrus. They dove for the opposite ends of the bridge before it suddenly snapped in half. Garrus narrowly clung onto the edge, but the impact broke Kelly's grip, causing her to let go.

"Kelly!" Garrus panicked.

He attempted to reach for her hand as she fell down into the abyss below. Anxiety surged through his nerves as Garrus felt his breath quicken. On the other side of the bridge, Amber, Saren and Miranda stared in disbelief. Amber hastily opened her omni-tool seconds later.

"Shit…Kelly, are you still there?"

A brief moment of static answered, before the yeoman coughed over the com-link.

{I'm down here! I had a few bumps on the way down, and I can't tell if I've broken anything. My omni-tool light still works enough so I'll try to find my way back up.}

Amber let out a sigh of relief.

"We'll find a way to the bottom," Amber reassured, "don't worry."

{Thank you, Shepard,} Kelly replied over the com-link, {you take care.}

Amber ended the transmission and eyed the other bridges.

"Are you sure those bridges aren't going to fall apart like the last one?" Amber asked Miranda.

"It's not that far of a jump," Miranda boasted.

The former agent took a few steps back and leapt the distance of the gap with minimal effort. Amber gave Miranda a blank stare while Saren sighed and lifted the Alliance commander into his arms.

"S-Saren?" Amber blurted.
"Hang on," Saren advised.

Stepping back, he followed suit and jumped over the chasm, setting her down on the other side. From there, the Spectres and the former Cerberus agent rejoined Garrus.

"All right," Garrus insisted, "where do we go from here?"

"Downward. Even if they aren't held up in somewhere deeper, we need to find Kelly," Miranda suggested.

They found a ramp downward to the next levels of the mine.

Having recovered from her fall, Kelly found herself amazed that she survived such an incident. Where will she have to go from here? She continued venturing through the bottom of the chasm until she found an entrance to a narrow tunnel. She carefully walked onward, keeping a hand against the wall. Her omni-tool's flashlight would flicker, struggling to keep a constant light. By now, she had a sneaky suspicion her omni-tool might've been damaged. She struggled to keep calm as she continued to limp through the darkness.

Every once in a while, she would hear tiny footsteps not her own zip past her as she continued to trudge through the tunnel. As long as any Rachni didn't attack her, she would be fine. When she entered a large chamber, Kelly immediately paused in her tracks. A Rachni queen sat in the center of the chamber. All around Kelly, a group of Rachni drones calmly scuttled towards her. She couldn't help but shudder nervously, but she kept still. Strangely enough, one Rachni worker stood in front of her and stood on its hind legs, letting out a small chirp.

"Uh…hello?" Kelly blurted.

Kelly slowly knelt down, locking her eyes onto the Rachni worker's. She looked back up to the queen, still looming in the shadows behind them. The Rachni queen gave her a slow nod, compelling the workers to clear a path. Taking the hint, Kelly slowly approached the queen.

"I assume you know a way out of here?" she asked.

The Rachni queen didn't respond, yet she tilted her head sideways. It wrapped a tendril gently around her neck. The queen whispered into her mind through some unseen connection.

"Yes, but the path is blocked."

"W-What?" Kelly stammered.

Kelly stared into the Rachni queen's eyes, noticing a sad expression hidden in them.

"Was it Cerberus?" Kelly asked softly.

"Yes. But now your companions are here to lead us out, are they not?"

Kelly slowly nodded.

"Yeah, that," she agreed.

She wasn't sure why, yet Kelly slowly lifted her hand. She brushed her hand against its head as it dipped down to meet her. Seconds later, she heard a soft coo from the Rachni queen.

"We will remember this."
Now, Kelly doubted Javik when he claimed that the Rachni were vicious and aggressive. Still, this encounter would most likely prove the Prothean wrong.
Amber continued to lead the others further into the darkness. Garrus had managed to triangulate Kelly's position further below and were wandering down the mines to her signal. This should've been a simple objective, but when Cerberus soldiers appeared in their sight, all of that changed. They were set up outside of an airlock and were attempting to cut their way through.

"Hey! You!" Garrus called out.

He shot the soldier closest to the door. This immediately attracted attention from the other Cerberus soldiers. They wasted no time as they opened fire on Amber and her squad. With little cover to take to, the Cerberus troopers didn't stand a chance, which gave the Alliance commander a chance when she, Saren, Miranda and Garrus fought back. With the Cerberus enforcers gone, they approached the door themselves.

"Looks like it's locked from the other side," Saren noted.

Amber glanced over her shoulder.

"Miranda?" Amber called.

Miranda sighed before approaching the door.

"I can get this," Miranda offered, "just give me a sec."

Amber stepped aside, allowing Miranda to get to work. With a few clicks of the keys and interactions from her omni-tool, Miranda opened the airlock further into the mine.

"That should do it," Miranda nodded at Amber.

Amber pointed her light down the entrance, peering into the darkness. The others followed her inside, cautiously looking around. To their luck, Cerberus didn't seem to proceed much farther from here. They walked down another ramp into an open cave.

"Kelly's close. Her signal's nearby," Amber reported.

Garrus let out a sigh of relief.

"Thank the Spirits," Garrus whispered.

He shifted into taking point for the group as he more anxiously searched for Kelly in the dark. He could only hope the Alliance yeoman was ok. His light flicked back and forth, eyeing his omni-tool as he watched the signal draw closer. They stopped in their tracks the instant they saw Rachni workers standing in front of them. Garrus quickly aligned his sights with the closest drone.

"Commander? What's the word?" Garrus demanded.

Amber placed her arm in front of Garrus.

"Don't shoot," Amber warned.

Saren carefully examined the Rachni workers as they chirped.

"If they were hostile, they'd have attacked," Saren added, "lower your weapon."
Miranda, Amber, Saren and Garrus stashed their weapons while the Alliance commander knelt to the Rachni workers' eye level. One of the insects then let out an excited chirp.

"Hey," Amber asked softly, "do you know where Kelly is?"

"I'm over here!" she called from the darkness.

Garrus perked his head up and fluttered his mandibles.

"Kelly!" Garrus gasped, "where are you? Can you see us?"

Upon cue, the Rachni workers skittered through the tunnel.

"W-Where are they going?" Miranda blurted.

Saren let out an enthusiastic hum as he flexed his mandibles.

"I think they want us to follow them," he noted.

They exited into a large chamber, with Rachni circling on the walls. The ceiling stretched far above, seemingly indefinitely. Saren and Amber watched as Rachni workers tended to what would most likely be their new home if it weren't for Cerberus. Garrus spotted Kelly as she nestled alongside the Rachni queen. After making a brief glance at Garrus, the Rachni queen nuzzled its face against Kelly's. The Alliance yeoman snapped out of her thoughts and tilted her head towards the rest of the squad.

"Garrus! You made it!" she got up from her position and stumbled over to him.

Garrus smiled and opened his arms, allowing Kelly to embrace herself to him.

"So," Garrus cooed, "are you and the Rachni all right?"

Kelly nuzzled her face against her turian boyfriend's as he ran his talons through her hair. Amber made a brief glance at Garrus before she approached the Rachni queen. Once the Alliance commander was close, the Rachni queen tilted its head towards her.

"Hey," Amber called, "you remember me from Noveria?"

"Of course. We thank you for allowing our escape."

Just as Amber smiled, she immediately realized that the Rachni queen was brushing its tendril underneath her chin.

"So why are you here?"

"We're here to get you out," Saren answered, "we entered the mine through a lightly guarded entrance. If you hurry, you can get out unopposed before reinforcements arrive."

Miranda turned on her omni-tool and read her radar. What she noticed immediately sent a chill down her spine.

"We might have more company on the way in," Miranda warned, "unidentified blips showing up on the map."

Alarmed, Saren examined the radar.
"Yeah, this doesn't look good," Saren muttered to himself, "let's make this quick."

Without warning, they all felt rumbling from coming from the surface. The next thing they knew, Amber and her squadmates heard the Rachni chirping in fear.

"Sounds like the big guns have arrived. Let's go clear a path," Amber ordered.

The Rachni queen lifted her head up high and let out strange clicks and chirps. Seconds later, Rachni soldiers appeared alongside Saren, Amber, Miranda, Kelly and Garrus.

"They shall join your defense."

Amber glanced over her shoulder and nodded at the Rachni queen.

"Thanks," she said, "Kelly, see if you can get the rest out through another path. Make your way back to the way we came in."

When Garrus released Kelly from his embrace, she placed her hand on his shoulder.

"I guess that leaves me to guide them to safety," Kelly told Garrus.

"You sure you're going to be ok?" Garrus asked.

Kelly gave Garrus a reassuring nod.

"Yeah," Kelly answered, "I did take a hit on the way down, but I can patch myself up back at the ship."

Without hesitation, Kelly sprinted back towards the Rachni queen. The others headed back to where they entered to meet the attackers.

"Open fire!" a Cerberus squad leader shouted.

They narrowly ducked as a hail of fire rippled from around the corner. Amber, Garrus, Saren and Miranda peeked from their cover and fired back. A dozen or so drones rushed around and made a beeline for the group of Cerberus troops. Just as the Cerberus troops were about to fire at the Rachni, the insects began spraying the ones on the frontline with acid. The first wave pounced onto the troops, taking each down with a couple hard strikes. This gave Saren, Amber, Miranda and Garrus a chance to continue forward. Backing up the troops were a couple of heavy mechs that were better equipped to handle waves of drones with wrist-mounted flamethrowers and rocket launchers.

"Damn, not good," Garrus muttered.

"We're not doing any good just sitting here complaining about how our situation could be more ideal, now come on, let's take these things down," Saren responded, loading an armor piercing module back into his rifle.

Amber did the same before aiming her assault rifle at one of the mechs. Taking to cover, Miranda prepared an EMP burst from her omni-tool and leveled it with one of the mechs.

"Here we go!"

Garrus reached for a grenade clipped to his belt. Waiting for a rocket to fly by and explode behind them, he tossed it at the feet of the mechs. The grenade exploded seconds later, ripping at the mech's shields. Saren finished the mech off with a burst to the head.
"Keep moving!" Saren barked.

The Rachni disposed of the other soldiers and now piled onto the second mech voraciously. Amber and Saren led Miranda and Garrus through the tunnel.

"Keep moving to the surface," Amber insisted, "we'll meet the others up there."

With the Rachni on their side, Amber, Saren, Miranda and Garrus grew bolder as they fought through Cerberus troops. Every now and then, they were bottlenecked into a tight corridor by Cerberus soldiers, but the Rachni were unable to be contained through sheer numbers alone. Miranda would scoop up any extra ammo on the ground from corpses they passed by. They hustled back along their path and had almost arrived at the lift. However, a Cerberus agent emerged from the lift, and Miranda stiffened when she saw him.

"Agent Leng," Miranda said, "I'm surprised he sent you."

Amber stiffened as she glared at him.

"So, this is the Cerberus Assassin I've been hearing about," Amber commented.

"Correct," Kai Leng nodded, "the Illusive Man sends his regards. It's a shame that he had to drop you, Lawson. Now, do me a favor and die."

Without warning, Kai Leng charged at Miranda. He drew from his hip a katana and prepared to strike when he was tossed backwards. Recovering from the biotic throw, Leng rolled onto his feet and glared at his attacker.

"I've seen much faster than that," Saren taunted.

Both Miranda and Amber aimed their weapons at the Cerberus assassin. The two fired bursts at the assassin, only for Leng to dodge and deflect the shots using his sword. Keeping track of Leng's movements, Miranda prepared her stance in case she needed to emit her biotic field. With a concentrated bubble wrapped around her forearm, she narrowly blocked his blade centimeters from her face.

"You're not the only one who's exhausted your talent," Miranda retorted.

It was only moments later when the Rachni showed up.

"No matter," Leng scoffed, "it's so nice of you to bring the specimen to us."

"Guess again," Amber warned, flames flickering in her eyes.

Without warning, a Rachni soldier pounced on Kai Leng. He knocked it off and hastily dashed away as more approached.

"Ok, we should be clear," Garrus noted.

With no one else standing in the way, Saren, Amber, Miranda and Garrus stepped onto the lift. As they ascended, the Rachni climbed up the walls and pillars back to the surface with them. Once they reached the surface, the quartet disembarked the lift. The queen and her drones were already tangling with the few Cerberus troopers who have relocated to the entrance when they arrived. Coincidentally, the Normandy descended from the sky. Joker called as he made his approach.

{We gotta move fast, commander. Multiple hostiles are approaching the LZ. Orders?}
Amber and Saren exchanged brief glances, the latter giving the former a nod. Just then, the Rachni queen dropped a Cerberus trooper corpse from its jaws while Kelly rode on its back.

"We shall depart on our own vessel, Shepard. We thank you again for your help."

Amber nodded while Kelly hopped off the Rachni queen and scurried towards the Alliance commander.

"We encountered resistance on the way out, but nothing they couldn't handle," Kelly informed, "what now?"

"We're heading out," Amber answered.

Just as Amber finished, a shuttle arrived, allowing the Alliance commander, the turian Spectre, the former Cerberus agent, the former C-Sec officer and the Alliance yeoman to board the shuttle. At the same time, the Rachni made their way towards their ship. It was only a while before the shuttle docked itself in the cargo hold. Just as they stepped outside the cargo hold after disembarking the shuttle, Amber placed her hand on Saren's shoulder.

"Saren?" Amber requested, "can I ask you something?"

Saren glanced over his shoulder and nodded at Amber.

"Go on," he beckoned.

Upon cue, Amber leaned closer to her mentor.

"I know we don't have much time left," Amber admitted, "but...I kinda want to at least get married before the Reapers arrive."

Saren raised a browplate.

"Oh?" Saren paused, "do tell."

Amber stepped in front of Saren and stared into his blue eyes.

"Saren, when do you think we should have our wedding?" Amber asked.

Saren closed his eyes for a brief moment before he placed both of his hands on Amber's shoulders. He exhaled a chuckle.

"I was thinking a month before they arrived," he answered, "maybe something quiet, too. Not exactly a big fan of publicity."

Amber slowly nodded before she leaned into his embrace. The possibility of watching everyone she cared for die at the end of the year made her feel anxious, and yet she didn't have a complete answer on how to deal with the Reapers. If anything, she could at least stay by Saren's side to the end.

"Sure," Amber agreed, "we can make that happen."

"Or maybe the first-year anniversary of your induction?" Saren suggested, "if you wanted it to feel special."

Amber tilted her head until her eyes locked onto Saren's and gave him a smile.
"That would be great," Amber answered.

Smiling, Saren pressed his forehead against Amber's. They broke apart and rejoined the others in the Normandy cargo hold. Ahead, they saw Kelly sitting in Garrus's lap while she took a moment to rest.

"Hey," Garrus asked, "are we heading out?"

Amber nodded. Just then, they felt the floor vibrate slightly as the Normandy took off. Joining them in orbit was the hijacked Cerberus vessel the Rachni still possessed. After a short while, Garrus and Kelly stood to their feet.

"Now," Garrus offered, "let's get you patched up."

Kelly tilted her head towards Garrus and smiled at him.

"Thanks, Garrus," she said.

The yeoman has incurred light bruising and what looked to be minor fractures from her fall in the mine. They made their way to the medbay, only to be greeted by Dr. Chakwas and Mordin. After finding a bed, Mordin have his diagnosis of her injuries.

"Vakarian, I know you worry for Ms. Chambers' health, but I must ask you to leave so we can do our jobs," Chakwas ordered.

Garrus glanced down and sighed, cupping Kelly's face with his hand.

"All right," Garrus said softly, "get well."

"I'm not going anywhere," she replied, watching Garrus leave.

Without hesitation, Mordin and Dr. Chakwas got to work.
The Arterius Engagement

It took a while, but the Normandy arrived at the Citadel and landed at the docking bay. When bystanders saw the hijacked ship park next to the Alliance vessel, they began whispering questions among one another. For the most part, the Rachni stayed onboard while Amber and Saren attempted to dissuade the C-Sec officers outside. It didn't take much long for Chellick to meet up with the Spectres.

"Alright, what've we here?" Chellick asked.

Saren and Amber exchanged brief glances.

"This vessel is currently run by Rachni as opposed to Cerberus personnel," Saren answered.

Chellick raised a browplate.

"You're joking, right?" Chellick objected, "you managed to find some untouched sect of a species that nearly wiped out all of galactic civilization and you haven't buried them under miles of rubble?"

Saren scratched his mandible.

"Well, they're friendly," Saren clarified, "they're at least willing to reason and they've come to realize that the reason they were nearly wiped out two millennia ago is because they were a threat to the rest of us."

Chellick huffed as he folded his arms.

"That's the story, huh?" Chellick remarked, "how can you be so sure they won't attack us?"

"They had ample opportunity to take us down, and wasted no time cleaning out what was the crew of that ship," Saren replied, "do you need us to paint the picture more, or are we done?"

After a moment of silence, Chellick shook his head.

"Fine," Chellick said, "but we're keeping them on that ship before I have to deal with panicking civilians too."

Saren smiled softly as he nodded.

"Will do," Saren agreed.

"Yeah yeah," Chellick shrugged as he and the other officers turned to leave.

Coincidentally, the rest of the crew began disembarking the Normandy. Among them, Garrus escorted Kelly onto the docks with her arm over his shoulder. They limped over to the Spectres, catching their attention.

"I suppose we'll catch up with you later?" Garrus asked.

Amber glanced over her shoulder.

"Sure," she nodded, "you guys get some rest."
Garrus and Kelly smiled at Amber before they made their way out of the docking bay. In the meantime, Saren turned on his omni-tool and composed a message before sending it to Sparatus, Nihlus and Desolas. He wrote about the potential for a wedding between himself and Amber. Knowing Desolas, he'd most likely be the most resistant to the idea, but his opinion didn't matter. He waited for a brief moment before he received a ping from Nihlus.

{Awwwww, how cute. Of course I'll come along. I'll try not to take any embarrassing pics during the ceremony.}

Saren smiled before he glanced at Amber.

"Shepard?" he paused.

Amber shifted her gaze towards Saren.

"Yeah?"

"I got the word out about our plans," Saren told her, "so far, Nihlus is enthusiastic."

"So," Amber mused, "want to meet up with him?"

"If he's available," Saren nodded.

Saren and Amber made their way out of the docking bay and through the Presidium. They had been walking along the Presidium when Nihlus crept up behind them.

"Hey hey hey, what's this I'm hearing about you two tying the knot?" Nihlus blurted.

Saren and Amber yelped in shock and glanced over their shoulders.

"Nihlus," Saren scolded, "it's rude to sneak up on people like that!"

Nihlus ignored the complaint and flicked out his omni-tool.

"Trying out a new triangulation method," Nihlus said, "so when did you two get back?"

"Several minutes ago," Amber shrugged.

The three Spectres continued sauntering through the Presidium, making their way to the Citadel Tower.

"So," Nihlus clamored, "what plans did you have in mind for the ceremony?"

Saren and Amber stopped in their tracks shortly after entering the building.

"Nihlus, this is still a few months out," Saren replied, "we have plenty of time to start making arrangements and we just started thinking about the idea not but yesterday."

Saren, Amber and Nihlus wandered through the Citadel Tower and made their way to Sparatus's office. The older turian Spectre knocked on the door and waited until the door opened moments later, revealing Sparatus and Desolas. The two had been arguing with each other when they entered. They already stopped when they focused their eyes on Saren.

"Welcome back, Spectre Arterius," Sparatus greeted.

"Desolas, Sparatus," Saren said, "I hope we're not interrupting anything."
"No. However, I must ask if you're really serious about this?" his brother returned.

Saren nodded at Desolas before he closed the door and they all sat down.

"So, I assume you're fine with this occasion, Councilor?" Saren asked.

Sparatus let out an enthusiastic hum as he placed his talon on his mandible.

"An interesting pitch." Sparatus agreed, "a good gesture to the Systems Alliance. I do approve of your proposition, but good luck convincing your brother."

Amber took this as a cue to tilt her head towards Desolas.

"Well?" Amber paused.

Desolas raised a browplate at Amber.

"What are you looking at me for?" Desolas demanded, "I'm just…not sure about this. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad you two are together, it's just…I'm not particularly sure about an event like this."

Amber gave Desolas a soft smile.

"I'm sure we'll make it work," she reassured him.

He craned his neck nervously.

"If you say so," Desolas sighed, "when is this happening exactly?"

Amber placed her hand behind her head.

"Shepard and I considered holding the wedding on her first anniversary of her Spectre induction," Saren suggested.

"I suppose that would be a date of significance and that you two do have my approval," Sparatus said.

After Sparatus gave them a nod, Saren and Amber stepped out of the turian Councilor's office with Nihlus following them.

"Should I help in preparations, or is that something you two would prefer to have direct control over?" the councilor asked before they left.

Saren and Amber glanced over their shoulders.

"I think we'd prefer if we handled preparations," Saren said.

Sparatus nodded, allowing the Spectres to make their way out of the Citadel Tower.

"Sounds fun," Nihlus whistled, "so, I'll be heading off, and you two have some fun. Sounds good?"

"See you later," Amber waved her hand at Nihlus.

Once Nihlus left, Saren and Amber made their way to their apartment, shedding their suits of armor before settling down in the living room. Saren took a quick breath before heading off to the bathroom to shower. It took him a matter of minutes before he finished and dried himself off. Amber was still on the couch, looking over her omni-tool as he walked to his office.
Later that evening, Amber and Saren returned to their apartment with some takeout boxes. They sat down at the living room couch as Saren turned the vidscreen to a comedy show. Both Spectres sat in close proximity as they ate their meals. The humor in the show was also enough to keep them entertained throughout the evening. After finishing, they got up to the kitchen to dispose of the leftovers. While they made their way to the bedroom, Amber offered her hand, allowing Saren to grasp it.

"Saren?" Amber noted, "you know how turians claim their mates?"

"Of course. Why?" he returned, raising a brow.

Once they reached the door, Amber leaned closer to Saren.

"Since we're engaged now," Amber suggested, "I'm eager to accept your mark."

"As am I to accept yours," Saren gave Amber a smile.

Once they stepped into their bedroom, they climbed onto their bed with Amber hovering on top of her mentor. She gently nuzzled her face along his neck. Saren purred as he leaned his head back, exposing more of his neck. He brushed a hand along her back to her neck, feeling along her spine. She responded by nipping at the base of his neck. Her face was nuzzled against a small chink in his plates, where there was a patch of unprotected tissue. She didn't hesitate as she bit down hard.

Keeping her firm grip, she would now wait for him to return the gesture. She got her answer when suddenly, a sharp pain rose from her own shoulder as Saren's jaws clamped down. Fully aware of what he was doing, Amber perched her hands on his shoulders as he held her close. Letting loose his grip, he pulled his head back to look at her. Smiling, Amber pressed her forehead against her mentor's.

"Saren?" Amber whispered, "you in the mood?"

He felt his plates shiver from her words.

"Of course I am," Saren nodded.

Upon cue, Amber pulled Saren into a passionate kiss. The two remained locked in their kiss for what felt like an eternity. Shortly after they broke off their kiss, Amber dug her hands underneath her pants and slid them down her legs. The turian Spectre also didn't hesitate to unzip his pants. They sloppily kicked off their clothing and reconnected their kiss. They rolled over on the bed until they lay on their sides, Amber kneading the back of Saren's neck. Grasping his hand with her other hand, he guided it to her folds, allowing him to slide his talon inside of her. She moaned and gasped with each centimeter he dug deeper. With each thrust, she ground her hips against his hand. Her hand yanked more enthusiastically on his forearm. He circled his thumb around her clit as he perched his other hand on her shoulder.

He leaned in to lick the side of her neck, feeling under her chin with his tongue. While Amber nuzzled her face against his, Saren lapped up the blood from her bitemark. Then, Saren drew back his talons and pulled up on her folds to widen it. His length had started extending and he angled himself for entry.

"Shepard," Saren purred, "you ready for more?"

Amber took a moment to catch her breath before she stared into Saren's eyes and nodded.

"Yeah. Fuck me like you would a turian," Amber whispered.
Saren pressed his forehead against Amber's as he slid home, hearing her gasp as his thick length filled her until their sheaths met. He did as ordered and did very little to restrain himself from plowing right into her. With their fluids coating their nether regions, Amber hooked her legs over his hip spurs. Her walls closed in the moment he entered and remained locked onto him.

When he propelled into her, her walls made a suction-like sensation which sent pleasurable thrills into his nerves. She struggled to keep herself locked on as pleasure-induced spasms would cause her grasp to slip. Saren compensated by holding her close, his talons raking down her back. Every thrust made him trill with enthusiasm. In between pants, Amber craned her head over his shoulder. She looked down on his shoulder as she watched the blood she drew from him dribble onto her chest. As heat pooled in her stomach, she placed her hand behind his neck.

Saren let loose his first orgasm, only pausing to let the pleasure take its full effect before slowly starting back up. In the midst of thrusts, he started building up his biotic particles in his hands. Vibrations shook their bodies and biotic energy illuminated the bedroom. The energy rippling through her nerves was enough for Amber to shudder in her first orgasm. She barely had time to recover before her body continued to beg for more. Luckily enough, Saren kept his pace slow and steady until she was ready to continue their next round.

"That wasn't too much for you, was it?" he whispered.

"It's fine," Amber reassured him between pants.

Saren craned his head and gave Amber a soft kiss.

"Good to hear. I can still go another round or two."

After a minute or so, Amber felt reinvigorated, so she nodded at Saren.

"Come on, keep going," Amber begged.

Upon cue, Saren picked up the pace again. He moved a hand under her leg, and hooked it under his arm. Amber mewled as the ridges and spines along his length kneaded her walls. Her breathing had been amplified to an exhausted panting. Saren's breath also quickened as he accelerated his pace. He craned his head and licked her ear. Subsequently, she shifted an arm from his shoulder to his neck to keep her chest supported.

As the turian Spectre kept up his pace, she could feel her folds being stretched taut each time his sheath touched hers. She heard her mentor purr deeply as her bliss grew closer to its peak. With each jolt from his spines, her head rolled back with excess ecstasy. Amber let out a loud cry as her walls tightened around Saren's cock and she arched her back while her orgasm pulsed in her muscles. Seconds later, her mentor slammed into her and kept still, allowing his length to release his seed inside of his new mate.

Saren drew his still throbbing member out, drawing strands of fluid along with it, and lay beside her. While they came down from their high, the turian Spectre purred as he nuzzled his face against hers. Moments later, Saren stood to his feet and made his way to the bathroom to fetch a glass of water and some dextro allergy meds. Ignoring the blood smears from earlier, he rolled back in with Amber. The Alliance commander washed down a tablet with water before setting the glass and the container on the nightstand before she nestled into Saren's embrace. They quickly slipped into a deep slumber in the warmth of each other's arms.
An Abandoned Mercenary

When morning came around, Saren and Amber met up with Anderson and Hackett at the docks, standing in front of the hijacked ship still parking besides the Normandy. Garrus and Kelly accompanied the Spectres.

"I don't like this, captain. If we have a bug hunt on our hands, the blame is going to be right on our doorstep," the admiral grumbled.

Anderson nodded.

"I agree," Anderson added, "I trust her judgment, but…something just doesn't sit right with me about this."

Both Alliance officers spotted Saren, Amber, Garrus and Kelly approaching them.

"Commander, I hope you have a plan for this," Hackett greeted, "we're doing well so far, and I don't want the resurgence of a violent species such as the Rachni to be on our hands."

Amber sighed as she stretched her arms.

"I know you two are putting a lot of weight on this," Amber said, "but just trust Agent Arterius and myself to get this right, Admiral."

Anderson shifted his gaze between Amber and Saren before nodding at both of them.

"Go on," he insisted.

"Rachni Queens can share knowledge universally, even from long-dead queens. They know of the Rachni Wars, and they know why they were driven to the brink of extinction. They aren't willing to try it again," Saren explained.

Amber glanced over her shoulder and nodded at Kelly, encouraging the yeoman to step forward.

"Yeoman Chambers had direct physical contact with the Rachni," Amber continued, "and was otherwise untouched."

Hackett placed a finger on his chin.

"So they ignored you and attacked the Cerberus troops, huh?" he clarified.

"Pretty much," Amber nodded.

"Hmm, interesting," Hackett commented, "see what you can make of this, commander. This could be beneficial. If they have it out for Cerberus, the enemy of our enemy is our friend."

Garrus flexed his mandibles into a grin.

"Okay. If it works, it works," Garrus replied, "it'll be hilariously ironic, though."

Kelly tilted her head towards Garrus and placed her hand on his shoulder.

"We're not exactly in a position to scoff at allies, so we'll take what we can get," Anderson shrugged.
With a boost in confidence, Kelly calmly approached the Rachni ship. She watched as the airlock doors opened and entered. She was soon greeted by friendly chirping from some Rachni workers. The interior was much different from the layouts she had seen from other Cerberus ships. The seats and railings had been torn out, some of the panels had been redesigned to better fit the new crew, and the ceiling panels had been pushed upward to make room for the bigger Rachni. Kelly led Saren, Amber, Garrus, Anderson and Hackett through the ship and made their way to the bridge, where they found the Rachni queen.

"Hey," Kelly chirped, "I'm back!"

Anderson raised a brow as he looked up at it. Strangely, he expected it to be bigger. It was only a split second later before the Rachni queen tilted its head towards its guests.

"It's pleasant to meet your friends," the Rachni queen greeted.

"I agree. This is an interesting encounter," Hackett agreed.

His eyes glanced at some of the passing drones that wandered the ship with some suspicion. Kelly didn't pay attention to the officers' expressions as she approached the insect queen.

Anderson sighed.

"So, Cerberus has you going in circles, huh?" he asked, "any idea what they hope to achieve?"

Kelly offered her wrist, allowing the Rachni queen to wrap a tendril around it.

"We do not know. We only seek the well-being of our own kin. Some solace."

Amber tilted her head to the side.

"So just another hole to hide in until this all blows over, right?" Amber offered, "we can help with that."

"That would be greatly appreciated."

Amber glanced over her shoulder, her eyes locking onto Anderson's.

"This could be arranged, right?" Amber insisted.

"We've got plenty of mining backwater planets under our belt," Anderson mentioned, "I'm sure there's some chunk that they could inhabit."

Saren nodded as he folded his arms. At the same time, the Rachni queen released its grip of Kelly's wrist.

"Very well," Saren advised, "keep low until Cerberus has properly been dealt with."

"Will do," Hackett nodded.

Hackett pulled out his omni-tool.

"I can send you a list of worlds you could set up at," he said, "pick one and remember to keep your distance from the local settlements. Don't need Cerberus getting any tips."

"I'll keep that in mind," Amber agreed.
They left shortly afterwards, both officers looking over their shoulders as they exited the airlock.


Hackett raised his eyebrows.

"I agree. It went too well," Hackett replied.

After a while, the crew finished refueling the Normandy, so Amber and Saren gathered their comrades aboard. The two went to the galaxy map to plot their next course of action, searching for the more ideal planet to head to. Since colonies were out of the question, they resorted to searching somewhere else within Alliance space.

"How about here?" Saren gestured to one of the border colonies, "it's a mining facility, meaning there won't be many people on that planet, save for mining contractors."

Amber took a moment to read the coordinates before she nodded.

"I agree," Amber said, "I'll tell Joker to get going."

Amber meandered around the projection and made her way to the pilot seat.

"Joker?" Amber paused.

"Yeah?" Joker glanced over his shoulder.

"We have escorting duty," Amber informed him, "the Rachni are in need of a new home."

"You got it," Joker sat upright, "got the destination marked on the galaxy map?"

Saren took this cue to mark the coordinates on the galaxy map.

"We're ready," Saren announced.

Joker tapped a few icons in his terminal and followed through with departure procedures with the Normandy closing its hatches. The magnetic clamps detached and they departed from the station shortly after. Scheduled right behind them was the stolen Cerberus ship, with its passengers all in tow. The Normandy led the new Rachni ship across space as they made their way to the Mass Relay leading out of the Serpent Nebula. They arrived at the other side without any issues and continued forward. They took a short while of meandering through Alliance space to reach the planet's orbit. They landed near a mountain range on the surface below. Amber and Saren walked down the ramp and stepped outside. They watched as the Rachni ship descended from the atmosphere. Alongside them, Kaidan, Garrus, and Kelly geared up in the cargo hold for deployment. All of a sudden, Garrus let out a soft chuckle.

"Ok, what are you laughing at?" Kaidan asked.

Garrus flexed his mandibles into a grin.

"I can't help but imagine the looks on the miners' faces when they see the Rachni," Garrus mused.

Kaidan rolled his eyes.

"I checked over planetary scans myself," Kaidan replied, "the ores in this region are a bit out of reach for convenient mining. It's unlikely miners will come into this area."
Kelly stood to her feet the instant she finished packing her equipment.

"Ready when the rest of you are," Kelly chirped.

Garrus just finished gearing up while he stood to his feet. They entered the Mako and took their respective seats. They waited until minutes later, Saren and Amber took the front seat. They drove from the Normandy to the foot of the mountain where the Rachni had already landed. With Rachni drones disembarking their vessel, Amber hopped out of the Mako with her mentor and their team following suit.

"Commander," Kaidan called over, "orders?"

"Let's scout the mountains," Amber suggested, "and find a good cave system."

Saren and Amber led Garrus, Kaidan and Kelly as they began hiking up the mountains. They wandered along the mountainside, looking for a cave mouth. They happened to come in close proximity to the Rachni as the workers began digging at the surface. The drones had started at a light slope and dug inward, which caught interest from Kaidan, Garrus and Kelly.

"Shepard?" Garrus paused, "should we follow their lead?"

"Let's keep back, and see where they go," Amber suggested.

While the Rachni continued to dig into the slope, Saren turned on his omni-tool and started scanning the ground for an entry point. If he was lucky, they wouldn't have to disturb the Rachni.

"I'm seeing a small tunnel path along this entrance they're digging," Saren hummed.

Saren angled his wrist, allowing Amber to read his radar.

"Well, at least we got something," Amber commented.

They followed close behind, careful not to get in the way of the drones. Minutes later, the drones' effort created a hole in the ground, exposing the tunnel. Small ribbons of light stretched into the darkness below them. The drones crawled down and scattered into the darkness. Saren, Amber, Kaidan, Garrus and Kelly stood at the edge and peered inside, taking care not to lean too far.

"Uh, commander?" Kaidan interrupted, "should we continue?"

Amber made a brief glance at the Rachni as they continued pouring into the tunnel. Having made up her mind, she glanced over her shoulder.

"Kelly, Garrus, stay here," Amber instructed, "we're heading inside."

Garrus placed his hand on Kelly's shoulder as Amber slowly climbed into the hole with Saren and Kaidan following suit. Climbing down the side of the cave wall, Amber stepped down and turned her suit light on. Saren and Kaidan activated their suit lights before they followed the Alliance commander through the tunnel, taking care not to step on any of the Rachni drones. They started a calm walk forward as the Rachni rushed by deeper into the tunnel. With help from the turian Spectre's radar, they were able to navigate without losing track of the Rachni.

They entered a large chamber which split into three more tunnels. Amber took a moment to glance at the ground, examining which direction the Rachni were heading. Deeper still did they worm into the cave. Walking down, they ended up in a large chamber, their lights barely outlining the swarms. Already, plenty of Rachni drones were scoping out the chamber, scrutinizing each crevice
to determine if this would make a good home.

"This…looks sufficient. What’s your input?" Saren commented.

Amber approached one of the Rachni drones and knelt to its level.

"What do you think?" Amber asked.

Tilting its head upwards, the Rachni drone chirped in approval. It began its return to the surface without further interaction.

"I take that as a yes," Amber commented.

"Now what?" Kaidan glanced around nervously.

Amber scanned the chamber until she found a boulder, so she stepped over and sat on it.

"We might as well wait." Amber said.

Several minutes later, Amber, Saren and Kaidan watched as the Rachni queen entered the large chamber. Amber stood to her feet before approaching the queen.

"We can accommodate for any shortcomings. It’s a pointless gesture, but we thank you again."

Amber gave the Rachni Queen a smile.

"Anytime," Amber nodded.

They started their way back to the surface along their initial entry path. Once they reached the entrance, Amber scanned the area until she spotted Kelly and Garrus kneeling at a distance. The latter glanced over his shoulder as the trio approached.

"Garrus?" Amber paused.

"Shepard, we came back to the cave entrance and noticed some unidentified merc vessels about half a klick east," Garrus told her, "we went to investigate before they flew off. All we found was this poor bastard. We dragged him back here."

Amber tilted her head downwards and saw an elderly man sprawled on the ground while Kelly knelt by his side. The Alliance Commander took extra caution as she examined him.

"I recognize that armor," Amber said, "why would the Blue Suns dump him here?"

Kelly tilted her head upwards.

"We didn't find weapons on him," Kelly answered, "so I don't know."

Amber took interest in the man's injuries.

"Looks bad," Amber commented, "he's taken a nasty head injury. He's comatose right now and it's not lethal, but he'll bleed out without proper care."

Amber nodded at Kaidan, prompting him and Garrus to lift the unconscious man off the ground. Amber turned on her omni-tool as she and her team made their way back to the Mako.

"Joker," Amber informed, "we have an incoming patient."
"Blue Suns merc, gunshot to the head," Amber added, "looks bad, but he's somehow alive. Probably grazed off. Have Chakwas and Mordin waiting for us."

{Don't worry,} Joker reassures over the com-link, {I'll have that taken care of.}

Saren and Amber lifted the merc back to the Mako and began their drive back to the Normandy. During the drive, Garrus and Kelly kept the unconscious Blue Suns merc still. Upon arrival, a few crew members awaited them in the cargo hold with a stretcher. The Alliance Commander drove the Mako aboard the cargo hold and then killed the ignition before she disembarked. Saren assisted Garrus in carrying the comatose mercenary out the vehicle while the cargo hatch closed. They lowered the mercenary onto the stretcher and carried him to the elevator to the crew deck. With the task taken care of, Amber walked over to Kelly and placed her hand on her shoulder.

"So you found this merc face down in the dust with a hole in his head, yes?" Amber asked.

Kelly nodded.

"Heavy blood loss, too, and the wound was fresh," Kelly replied, "I doubt he might survive."

"Still, I want to get answers about what happened to him," Amber said.

Amber and Kelly stepped out of the cargo hold. Arriving at the crew deck, they made for the medbay. The Blue Suns merc was placed on a bed, allowing Mordin and Dr. Chakwas to examine him.

"Commander, our guest is stable, but the damage is rather extensive," Chakwas told her, "no telling when he'll wake up."

Amber let out a soft sigh as she nodded.

"See what you can do for him," Amber advised, "let me know the moment he wakes up. I want to ask him in person."

"Will do, Shepard," Chakwas nodded.

While Dr. Chakwas and Mordin got to work, Amber stepped out of the medbay and met up with Saren in the corridor. They both made their way to the bridge and approached the pilot seat.

"So, who is the unknown soldier?" Joker inquired.

"We have yet to get his name," Amber admitted with a shrug.

He let out a disappointed whistle.

"Thought the Blue Suns would've had ID tags on their person, but whatever."

With Joker typing away in his terminal, the Normandy took off into space.

"Take us to Arcturus Station. They'll have better medical facilities there," she ordered.

Joker gave Amber a salute before he flew the Normandy towards the Mass Relay.
"Shepard, bring me up to speed," Anderson requested, "I was just having a small conference with high command, so I didn't have time to read your full message."

Upon cue, Saren and Amber stood to their feet.

"We just relocated the Rachni," Amber told Anderson, "and we found a Blue Suns merc left for dead."

Anderson raised an eyebrow.

"Is that all?" Anderson paused.

Amber shook her head.

"Yesterday," Amber added, "Saren and I decided we want to tie the knot."

He nodded and slowly sat down beside them.

"I see," Anderson mused, "how long has this been on your minds?"

Saren and Amber exchanged glances before the former nodded at the latter.

"A while now," Amber answered, "and we have the Council's approval on this matter."

A spark of curiosity appearing in his head, Anderson tilted his head sideways.

"Uh-huh," Anderson asked, "anything you need from me then?"

"We can handle wedding plans on our own," Amber shrugged, "but if you want to attend, I welcome it."

"I'd be honored," Anderson nodded, "just keep me in touch as to when it's happening."

Amber gave Anderson a salute before he turned to leave. Both Spectres made their way back to the Normandy. One they were onboard, they strolled through the corridor and passed by Miranda, who was reading something in her omni-tool.

"Commander, you have a minute?" Miranda said all of a sudden.

Amber paused in her tracks and glanced over her shoulder.
"What is it, Lawson?" Amber asked.

The Alliance commander slowly stepped towards Miranda and tilted her gaze at the agent's omni-tool.

"Nothing too important for now," Miranda shrugged, "but something I have had my mind on."

Giving Miranda a confused stare, Amber sat down next to her. By then, Saren glanced over his shoulder.

"What are your interests in the Yahg, anyways?" Miranda asked.

Amber couldn't help but blink twice.

"I'm…sorry?" Amber blurted.

"Yahg, hostile predatory species, communications have been barred with them. I'm surprised you know of the Yahg," Saren explained.

Miranda made a brief glance at Saren.

"I'd prefer not to go over the number of hoops I jumped through."

"So," Amber asked, "why bring up this Yahg issue?"

"Specifically, it ties into the Shadow Broker," Miranda clarified.

Out of curiosity, Saren raised a browplate.

"Really? How so?"

"I did ask him to help me with recovering my files from my old office," Miranda admitted.

Saren brushed a talon along his mandible.

"So what does the Shadow Broker have to do with the Yahg?" Saren asked.

Miranda leaned her head back and sighed.

"Before I was kicked out of Cerberus," Miranda said, "I think I remember the Illusive Man considering a plan to round up the Yahg and make them into weapons. He didn't give specific details, though."

"That would be a potential, seeing their…capacity for improvement," Saren commented.

"If I could convince the Shadow Broker," Miranda added, "maybe I could stop the Illusive Man from getting his hands on them."

"Still, the Shadow Broker is a loose cannon," Saren warned, "I don't think we could really convince him to help unless one of us would be willing to stand up and continue to barter with him."

During a moment of silence, Miranda rubbed her chin.

"Simply put," Miranda continued, "Cerberus is too deeply rooted into the Alliance for the Alliance to deal with them alone. We'll be fighting fire with fire in this regard."
Both Amber and Miranda stood to their feet.

"Would you like some backup?" Amber offered.

"In a couple days," Miranda nodded.

After waiting a day, Saren and Amber stopped by the medbay in the station. They stopped at the receptionist's desk.

"I assume the message regarding our patient is correct?" Saren asked.

The receptionist nodded.

"Yes, he's conscious. He initially reacted with hostility to the staff, but he's stable now. Go right in."

Saren and Amber took this as a cue to step through the door. Towards their destination were a couple of C-Sec officers, ready to run interception if the patient got any ideas. Inside, the Blue Suns merc was without armor and his head was still heavily bandaged. The instant the Spectres stepped into the room, the merc tilted his head towards them.

"Who the bloody hell are you?!" he demanded in a weak tone.

Both Spectres cautiously approached the merc.

"We're the guys who picked your bleeding ass off some barren wastes. What's yours?" Saren snarked.

The merc groaned as he nestled his head into the pillow.

"Oh, I see. So what are you here for, then?"

"We just want to ask you some questions," Amber replied, "first off, what's your name?"

"What's it matter to you?" he spat.

"It's a place to start, John Doe," Amber asserted.

"Fine," he rolled his eyes, "Zaeed Massani, now former founder of the Blue Suns. Ring any bells?"

Amber nodded as she sat down in a chair.

"Now it does," she said, "why the sudden demotion from what I can only presume should be a prestigious position in your organization?"

"It's not my organization anymore," Zaeed grumbled. "my cofounder bastard started bringing in Hegemony loyalists to the ranks. I didn't want those animals in, and he paid a bunch of my guys to hold me down while he shot me in the head."

"Batarian Hegemony loyalists?" Saren raised a browplate.

"My vision was for a primarily human security service for the highest bidder," Zaeed explained, "Vido Santiago wanted more manpower and to expand our list of available goods and services to start rolling in the big bucks. I made it apparent to the fucker I wanted no part in slavery and the fact he even considered it means he should check his priorities."
Saren hummed as he folded his arms.

"Extra manpower, huh?" Saren mused, "does that mean that the Blue Suns will be a problem in the future?"

"Relax, spiky," Zaeed insisted, "they will be an issue, but I want to be the man who drills a hole through Vido's head."

Amber nodded before she stood to her feet.

"Very well," Amber told him, "we've got our own objectives to finish and we can talk about Santiago more when you've recovered."

Zaeed returned his glance at Amber, softness in his eyes.

"Fine," Zaeed sighed, "I'll be here, then."

Amber and Saren said nothing further as they stepped out of the room. Neither spoke a word as they continued out of the hospital. Once they reached the dock, Amber pulled out her omni-tool and began scrolling through news feeds. To her disappointment, nothing of interest caught her eye.

"At least we got to know him," Amber sighed.

"Yeah, I was hoping he'd be the more talkative type," Saren responded.

It didn't take long before they boarded the Normandy. Down in the lab, Amber found Tali conversing extensively with Legion. She eventually decided to ignore it before she and her mentor made their way to their quarters, leaving the quarian and the Geth unit be. Tali glanced at the door to look at the visitors before going back to her conversation.

"Because my father worked in R&D with Geth technologies," Tali continued, "I initially wanted to follow in his footsteps...at least until the humans entered the galactic scene."

Legion tilted his head slightly.

"What were you hoping to achieve?"

"Maybe sneak into Geth space, steal a unit and bring it back," Tali shrugged, "but it turns out that I didn't need to."

Legion flapped his head plates with amusement. Tali wasn't sure why the Geth unit reacted that way until she saw a vid that just started playing out of the corner of her eye. She turned to follow its gaze and saw what it was watching. Seeing the vid of a litter of kittens taking their first steps on their makeshift nest gave the quarian warm and fuzzy feelings.

"Keelah," Tali whispered, "are those kittens like Shepard described?"

"Affirmative. These recordings are fascinating."

With not much else to say, Tali and Legion continued to watch the vid, mesmerized with what the kittens were doing. It was strange for Tali that something so conceptually mundane from Earth's ecosystem could be so admittedly entertaining. She did hear of the humans among the Normandy crew enjoying a kitten vid every once in a while. Now she was starting to see the charm in such tiny critters.
Back in Virmire, Dr. Okeer was still in the middle of making progress with his research.

"Thanks for the tissue core. You're free to go," Okeer said.

"Thanks," Wrex mumbled, limping from the lab.

Outside the door, Jack leaned her back against the wall waiting for him. The instant the krogan, emerged, she tilted her head towards him.

"How was that one?" Jack asked.

"Equally painful," Wrex grumbled.

"Don't the krogan have redundant organ systems?" Jack mentioned.

"That doesn't make me completely impervious to pain," Wrex objected.

"Yeah, that," Jack remarked.

Jack and Wrex started meandering through the corridor. They left through the front storage bay onto the beach head and walked along the sand. Once they reached enough distance from the facility, they sat down near the shoreline and stared beyond the horizon, the sound of waves and the scent of the sea mesmerizing them.

"Well, I'll at least give this place the compliment of having a decent view," he sighed.

"Yeah," Jack nodded in agreement, "feels like home."

The instant Jack said those words, she found herself noticing some form of longing on the inside. She couldn't pinpoint what it was exactly. It was still undefined, formless, drifting in her mind. Was it nostalgia?

"So how do you feel about this operation here? Despite the Genophage experiments?" she asked.

Wrex tilted his head towards Jack.

"I'd say it's not bad," Wrex shrugged.

Jack smiled as she leaned onto the krogan. He put an arm over her shoulder and smiled, staring out into the distance.

"Have you ever," Jack began to ask, "played at a beach?"

Wrex raised his browplate.

"No," he admitted, "what'd you have in mind?"

Jack slowly stood to her feet and slipped off her boots.

"Just a light wade into the water," Jack suggested.

Upon cue, Wrex stood to his feet as he and Jack made their way towards the shoreline. The human biotic didn't hesitate to take her first steps into the water. He followed close behind, feeling the salt water rush over his toes. Smiling, Jack glanced over her shoulder.

"Feels nice, huh?"
"Well…not sure if nice is the word," Wrex blurted, "but…it's…well, maybe nice is the way to go, since I don't know how else to describe this."

As they continued wading through the water, they felt the sand underneath their feet. Jack stopped at a height where she was roughly knee-deep.

"Wrex?" Jack called over.

"Yeah?" Wrex blurted.

With a light kick, she splashed some water onto his pant leg. Wrex yelped for a moment, but after coming to terms on what she was thinking, he couldn't help but grin.

"Ok," he mused, "now I see where this is going."

He splashed back to elicit a similar response from her. Jack yelped, only to burst into laughter a split second later. They continued to splash water against each other, enjoying bouts of laughter. At one point, they started pretending Wrex was a Thresher Maw and Jack would playfully go after him as some sort of game of tag. Ignoring their soaked clothing, they continued to rush through the ocean water, laughing as the two ran along. By the time half an hour passed, hints of tiredness began to show among both of them, so they stepped out of the water to rest from the energetic moment.

"Hey, Wrex," Jack panted as she kneeled on the ground, "want to know what's also great about the beach?"

Wrex caught his breath as he knelt next to Jack.

"Yeah, what?" he quipped.

"Building sand castles!" Jack chirped.

A confused glance returned to his face.

"Building what?"


Jack sauntered over to the damp sand and kneeled down before she started gathering some damp sand with her hands. Following her example, the two continued to mold the vague shape of a fortified structure further up on the beach. In a matter of minutes, Jack and Wrex took a step back the instant they finished before they examined their handiwork.

"We did awesome," Jack gave Wrex a gentle nudge, "didn't we?"

Wrex chuckled as he placed his hand on Jack's shoulder.

"That was actually a good time," Wrex admitted.

Leading into the evening, the two sat down onto the beach, watching as the sun dropped lower onto the horizon. Gradually, they were forced further up the beach head as the tide came in. Still, it was worth spending the free time outdoors.
Meet the Shadow Broker

Once the second day came around, the crew gathered at the Normandy with Amber and Saren making their way to the bridge. Miranda was already waiting for them with her omni-tool out.

"Commander, does the laboratory aboard this ship have sufficient storage capacity for hazardous materials?" Miranda asked.

Amber placed her hand behind her head.

"Why do you ask?" Amber paused.

"I had a contingency plan for if I would be removed from Cerberus," Miranda explained, "I have a couple of Reaper artifacts stored on Illium for whatever I could use them for. From the experiments I have seen done with these artifacts, unprotected, prolonged exposure can cause permanent brain damage and exposure to dead tissue can cause reanimation."

Amber and Saren gave Miranda a blank stare.

"Reanimation?" Saren repeated.

"Organic matter is converted into inorganic matter," Miranda clarified, "internal organs are rendered redundant, the nervous system is hijacked, and victims become increasingly aggressive."

Both Spectres couldn't help but cringe at the thought of their bodies being transformed into robotic husks after death.

"Nasty," he cursed.

Miranda slowly closed her eyes while the Alliance commander approached the pilot's seat, catching Joker's attention.

"We're heading back to Illium," Amber announced, "let's go."

"Wait, really?!" Joker exclaimed as he glanced over his shoulder.

Amber sighed as she reluctantly nodded.

"Yeah. Just stay alert for trouble. We'll be bringing back hazardous materials."

Joker let out a short whistle before he tapped on the terminal, activating the Normandy's engines. Once it departed from Arcturus Station, the vessel made its way towards the Mass Relay before the ancient structure flung it into FTL speed. She returned to Miranda shortly after.

"So what's the plan here?" Amber asked.

"Like I said, I've still got a few samples in storage, both meant to be bargaining chips," Miranda answered, "one will be getting a deal with the Shadow Broker."

Saren scratched his mandible.

"And the other?" Saren pondered.

"For a rainy day," Miranda shrugged, "maybe hand it over to the Alliance, seeing that they may
want it for R&D."

At the moment, all they could do now was wait until the Normandy entered the Terminus system an hour and a half later. They exited the Mass Relay and began their approach to Illium. Joker couldn't help but feel chills tingle down his spine as he descended the Normandy through the planet's atmosphere.

"We really gotta stop coming here," Joker sighed.

Saren purred as he placed his hand on Joker's shoulder.

"Relax," Saren reassured, "you're not the one leaving the ship."

"I know," Joker rolled his eyes, "but still."

"We'll be on and off before too long," Amber added.

It didn't take much longer for the Normandy to land at the docks.

"I'll keep the ship locked down," Joker added as the team exited into the airlock.

Saren made a brief glance at Miranda and nodded at her.

"Hopefully we aren't going too far," Saren said.

"It's relatively close to the port," Miranda replied, "this won't take longer than an hour."

Amber smiled before she led Saren and Miranda out onto the dock. Leaving the docks, they climbed into a taxi and rode to a nearby storage facility. After they disembarked upon arrival, Miranda stepped towards one of the storage rooms and typed in the passcode on the panel, watching as the door slid open. Just inside were two strongboxes painted a light teal.

"Are those…?" Amber muttered.

"They're reinforced," Miranda advised, "however, I'd prefer to have them contained with another layer of protection on the ship."

"Consider it done," Saren agreed.

They lifted the crates onto a cart and checked out of the storage area. Miranda didn't hesitate to lock the storage door before she and the Spectres continued forth. While rolling the cart through the streets of Illium, Saren and Amber kept a vigilant eye for traffic. They started their way back to the shop, confident the coast was clear. The former Cerberus agent stepped up to the counter, catching the clerk's attention.

"Yes?" the clerk asked, "how can I help you?"

"Here's my key back," Miranda said solemnly, "I've gotten what I needed."

Miranda pulled her key out of her pocket and dropped it on the counter.

"Thank you, have a nice day."

Miranda turned to leave before she and the Spectres transported the carts back to the docks. Back at the Normandy, a squad of soldiers waited to take the crates aboard and move them to the labs. They wasted no time as they retrieved the crates from the carts while Saren approached Kaidan.
"We do have sufficient protection for those case, yes?"

"In the cargo hold, sir," Kaidan nodded.

"I suppose that'll have to do for now," Saren shrugged.

Kaidan gestured to the soldiers as they carried the crates up the ramp into the cargo hold. The others followed shortly and closed up the cargo hatch. Inside, Kaidan and Ashley began ransacking the storage closet. They pulled out a large tub meant for holding heavy metals and radioactive materials and out the boxes inside. Sealing the lid on, they pushed it into a safe location for transport. With their objective accomplished, Saren, Amber and Miranda made their way to the bridge.

"So, what now?" Saren asked.

"While it is unlikely," Miranda sighed, "I'd like to present this directly to the Shadow Broker."

Amber tilted her head to the side, keeping her eyes locked onto the former Cerberus operative.

"Is that even possible?" Amber objected, "we don't have a clue where he is."

"That's why we're bargaining with a physical good instead of data. We can probably force his hand, get an in-person confrontation."

Amber nodded at Miranda before she stepped towards Joker.

"Ok, Joker," Amber said, "you ready for a goose chase?"

"Yeah. What's next?" Joker took a moment to stretch his arms.

Amber placed her hand behind her head.

"Miranda wants a face-to-face with the Shadow Broker," Amber explained, "not sure how that'll work."

Joker readjusted his cap before he started typing away in his terminal.

"Got it. In the meantime, I'm taking us into orbit."

In a matter of minutes, the Normandy departed the docks and launched out of Illium's orbit. Meanwhile, Miranda was quickly composing a message on her omni-tool. She felt pretty lucky that she was able to get the Shadow Broker's number. After she finished, she took a moment to review the message:

{Get word to your boss. I'd like to have a face-to-face talk, has to do with Cerberus. To sweeten the deal, I've got something physical to barter with.

-L}

Satisfied with her message, Miranda sent it. She turned off her omni-tool and turned to Amber.

"Shepard?" Miranda called over.

Amber tilted her head towards Miranda.

"Yeah?" Amber paused.
"Just got a message out," Miranda informed, "shouldn't take long."

Amber nodded in approval as the Normandy made its way towards the Mass Relay.

"Get ready to make a jump. We'll be out of here if and when we get that meet up location," she ordered Joker.

"You got it, Shepard," Joker nodded in agreement.

Joker flew the vessel closer to the Mass Relay, allowing the ancient structure fling it into FTL speed. Leaving the system, they waited patiently for a response to Miranda. The former Cerberus operative sighed as she waited for the sound of the ping. She brought up the message and read its contents.

{The Shadow Broker has reviewed your offering and has accepted it. Meet us at the given coordination and system.}

Alas, Miranda found the coordinates attached to the message, so she didn't hesitate as she recorded them.

"That was fast," Miranda commented.

Amber glanced over her shoulder.

"I take it he's interested?" Amber clarified.

Miranda nodded.

"Yes," Miranda elaborated, "and he's willing to meet with us."

Miranda showed Amber the coordinates in her omni-tool. Moments later, Amber stepped towards Joker.

"You get anything?" Joker asked.

"A meet-up place," Amber answered, "we'll find out more when we get there."

Amber sent Joker the coordinates just as the Normandy emerged from a Mass Relay.

"Awfully deep into Terminus Territory," Joker pointed out, "I'm gonna turn on the stealth systems if that's alright with you."

Amber folded her arms.

"Do it," Amber nodded.

Joker activated the vessel's stealth system as they continued into the next system. With the Normandy narrowing in on their destination, Saren placed his hand on Amber's shoulder, easing her of any signs of nervousness. They exited the relay and made for the destination planet. Once they entered the planet's orbit, the Spectres spotted a large ship hovering within the planet's orbit. She raised a brow as it came into view. The ship itself was almost twice as long as the Normandy and was of no design she was familiar with.

"How many mining colonies did it take to build that?" Amber pondered.

"Pretty sure he could afford the resources regardless," Saren commented.
Joker felt a chill down his spine, yet he still maneuvered the Normandy through the planet's atmosphere.

"I'm not seeing a good place to dock," Joker advised, "you'll have to head down in the shuttle."

Amber nodded at Joker before she led Saren and Miranda out of the bridge and made their way towards the cargo hold. Along the way, she met up with Liara, James and Javik. Retrieving one of the strongboxes, they boarded the shuttle and departed. During the flight, Javik glared at Miranda, much to her confusion. She leaned to closer to Amber.

"Is something bothering him?" Miranda whispered.

Amber made a brief glance at Javik and shrugged.

"Can't tell. He just has this strange hostility towards everyone," Amber retorted, "I'd say he's grumpy for no reason."

"I heard that," Javik snarled.

"Basically, just ignore him," Amber added.

It was only a short while before the shuttle reached its destination. They landed on the platform and were greeted by armed guards. Miranda disembarked the shuttle before she approached the guards.

"He's waiting for you inside."

Miranda nodded at the guards just as Saren, Amber, James, Liara and Javik disembarked with the strongbox in tow. They cautiously eyed the Shadow Broker's henchmen around them as they continued inside. Over the sides of the non-existent railings and along the hull of the ship, maintenance drones would hover about, tending to the vessel's needs. They simply followed their escorts through the corridor. It didn't take much long before they arrived in a large chamber. On the other side of the room, a Yahg sat in his seat, much to Saren and Amber's shock.

"A-Are you shitting me?!" Amber muttered.

The large beast was looking over a large wall of holo projections, some with live feeds of vidcams from all across the galaxy, others with various deals and trade offers, more with active messaging windows to his various agents abroad. He turned to face them, leaning over his desk.

"Welcome, Spectres," the Yahg greeted, "I hope you're here to do business. I'd hate to dispose of you ungracefully."

Amber cringed as Saren wrapped his arms around her in a protective embrace, his mandibles fluttering as he gave the Yahg a hawklike gaze. Miranda didn't change her expression as she took a step forward.

"I…assume you're the Shadow Broker," Miranda said.

"They were smaller in my cycle," Javik grumbled.

Liara made a brief glance at Javik. She rolled her eyes and looked back to the Shadow Broker. The Yahg nodded seconds later.

"You brought the Prothean," the Shadow Broker mentioned, "I suppose I should've expected him
to be a bit…antisocial."

Javik growled at the Shadow Broker.

"You question my authority, animal?!!" Javik thundered.

"Just because you are special in some self-perceived way doesn't mean the universe should cater to you, yielding to your gravitational force," the Shadow Broker retorted.

Miranda sighed as she shook her head in disbelief.

"Sorry about his attitude," Miranda apologized, "he can be pretty arrogant."

Javik rolled his eyes and muttered some untranslated curse. Ignoring the Prothean, Amber brought forward the strongbox.

"You're familiar with the Reapers, correct?" Amber asked.

The Shadow Broker gazed at the strongbox in a moment of silence.

"I am," he answered, "and before greenlighting this meeting, I did a little research into what you were offering. Seeing the hazard lies in prolonged exposure, this shouldn't be too dangerous."

He leaned down and peeled back the lid, squinting as the artificial blue glow of the object inside stared back at him. All the Spectres could do was wait for a response from the object. It menacingly smiled, before shutting the lid.

"Has potential," the Shadow Broker mused, "so what is it you wish to discuss?"

Miranda stepped closer to the Shadow Broker, a hint of curiosity in her expression.

"How much do you know of Cerberus' activities?" Miranda asked.

"Not too much of a concern. An annoyance to be sure, but not threatening," the Shadow Broker scoffed, "what's it matter to you?"

"The Illusive Man is interested in your species," Miranda warned him.

"The other yahg are of no concern to me," the Shadow Broker dismissed, "what is your point?"

Miranda closed her eyes and lowered her head. How was she going to persuade him to take the warning seriously?

"Because," Miranda added, "you'll be affected, too."

The Yahg shrugged in return.

"Doubtful, but I suppose we do have a deal. For something so valuable as this artifact, it's not much to go after the terrorist group. Very well, then."

Now that the Shadow Broker had confirmed his answer, Miranda gave a soft smile and extended her hand.

"Good to see we can come to an agreement," Miranda said.

"Of course," the Shadow Broker warned her, "just know that if this turns out to be some haphazard
attempt at assassination, I will have you hunted down."

Miranda slowly nodded and took a deep breath.

"I'll keep that in mind," Miranda replied, "fine print aside, I can make it happen."

With her end of the deal confirmed, the Shadow Broker grasped Miranda's hand and shook it. At a distance, James rolled his neck a little bit.

"That was quick," James commented.

"I'd rather not think about it too much," Amber replied.

After the Shadow Broker released Miranda's hand, they exchanged contact numbers. With the Shadow Broker handling the strongbox properly, Saren, Amber, Miranda, James, Liara and Javik turned to leave.

"Try not to think about this exchange too hard," Saren reminded.

"All right," Liara nodded calmly.
They returned to the shuttle and returned to the Normandy. Once everyone disembarked the shuttle, Amber and Saren stayed behind in the cargo hold. The turian Spectre fluttered his mandibles in curiosity while his human mate stared at one of the strongboxes.

"Shepard?" Saren called over.

Amber snapped out of her thoughts and glanced over her shoulder.

"What is it?" Amber paused.

Saren sighed as he approached Amber and placed his hand on her shoulder.

"If we are going to look at it more, it should be in a lab," Saren suggested.

Amber nodded in agreement.

"Maybe we can get Legion onboard?" Amber offered.

"We didn't test it on AI and Cerberus had no concrete method of testing on synthetic life, so it might be worth a try," Miranda answered.

Amber and Saren tilted their heads towards Miranda in a moment of silence. They apparently weren't the only ones who didn't leave the cargo hold.

"I'll go get Legion," Amber said.

Amber scurried out of the cargo hold and returned with Legion minutes later. They teamed up with Saren and Miranda to lift a strongbox onto a cart.

"We have developed to be resistant," Legion mentioned, "but we cannot determine if we are immune to the Old Machine's influence."

They began rolling the cart out of the cargo hold and down the corridor, making their way into the lab.

"If it's any better, Legion," Amber reassured the Geth unit, "I trust you, but I don't trust Javik."

"Very well," Legion agreed.

In the lab, they put Legion in a small quarantine block, alone with the artifact. Peering into the box, it pulled the object out, holding it in one hand. The Geth unit took a moment or so to scan it. Amidst the scans, it picked up data on species the Protheans used to enslave, something that wasn't mentioned in books about Protheans. Was this something the Reapers archived?

In a brief moment, it witnessed all the Old Machines came to despise about the Protheans. Lesser developed civilizations at the time didn't have much freedom under the iron fist of the Prothean Empire. If it was one thing the Protheans enjoyed, it was consolidating their power over their subjects, driving entire species to the brink of extinction to forcing revolts to relent. The Protheans wanted it to be known that they alone were the finest example of species within the galaxy, meaning everything else was beneath them.

Now, with less than a year to prepare for the Reapers' arrival, would the current civilizations of the
galaxy have to learn from the mistakes of the Protheans to avoid the same fate? The Geth unit finished and returned the artifact into its strongbox before locking it. Upon cue, Legion was released from the quarantine block, allowing Amber to meet up with it.

"Did you find anything?" Amber asked.

"Old Machines found Prothean society flawed," Legion reported, "current organic status doesn't meet such low standards. However, we hypothesize that improvement will be needed before their arrival if resistance is not an ideal plan of action."

While taking a moment for her mind to digest the revelation, Amber pulled out her dream catcher and reflected its dangling feathers, its spiderweb weave in the circular frame and the details of the yarn. She began reflecting on the museum she and her mother visited while she was growing up. She remembered the exhibits explaining the history of Native Americans and reflected on the day she took a class in making dream catchers. This memorabilia in her hand was proof of her hands-on experience...a memory she would treasure for life.

"You know," Amber mentioned, "I did remember they sent me a similar message some time ago."

"We presume your efforts are still in progress, correct?" Legion reminded.

Amber nodded.

"Of course," Amber answered, "but, I'm not sure if we'll be finished on time."

"Perhaps you could appeal to them," Legion suggested, "show you are capable of meeting their expectations within a confirmed schedule. However, this is uncertain."

Amber glanced over her shoulder and locked eyes onto Saren's.

"What do you think?" Amber asked.

"We're on good time right now," Saren answered, "we keep up our efforts and we might get through this unscathed."

"Right," Amber agreed.

"That seems to be the best course of action," Legion commented.

Satisfied with the new information, Saren, Amber, Legion and Miranda left the lab and dropped off the strongbox back in the cargo hold before they made their way to the bridge. By now, the Normandy already took off into space and the former Cerberus operative noticed that the Shadow Broker's vessel was also preparing for its departure.

"Hey, Shepard!" Joker chirped while he waved his hand at the Alliance commander, "glad to see you guys are still in one piece."

"So am I," Amber nodded, "now let's go."

It didn't take long for the Normandy to reach the Mass Relay, allowing the ancient structure fling it into FTL speed. They returned to the safety of Citadel Space an hour later.

"Take us into the dock. I want the ship to be screened for bugs when we arrive, too," Amber ordered.

Joker nodded as he maneuvered the Normandy towards the docking bay, attaching the ship to the
magnetic clamps. With the ship was locked into place, the crew started to disembark. The Normandy's engineers along with local engineers ran diagnostics on the internal systems per Amber's orders. To her luck, no bugs were discovered throughout the diagnosis.

"Keep me updated on any other issues that arise," she ordered before heading to the airlock.

Amber soon disembarked the vessel and met up with Saren at the docks.

"I went ahead and filed our report," Saren informed her.

"Thanks," Amber smiled as she placed her hand on his shoulder.

"By the way, Victus says he wants to meet and discuss Balak," Saren added, "his movement has almost wrapped up."

Amber nodded at Saren as they left the docking bay.

"All right," Amber replied, "let's go find him."

Both Spectres held hands as they meandered through the Presidium. Once they reached the Citadel Tower, General Victus stood outside the door waiting for them.

"General Victus?" Amber called over.

Adrien perked his head up and locked eyes onto the Spectres.

"Come in, take a seat," he greeted.

The turian general led the Spectres into the building and when they entered a conference room, they all sat down at a table.

"So, you got any updates?" Amber asked.

"Things are starting to wrap up quickly in the Kite's Nest," Victus explained, "and Balak's making his final push."

General Victus brought up the projection of the galaxy map.

"His movement has taken most of the systems," the turian general continued, "and they're gathering their assets for a last push on Khar'Shan."

Amber nodded as she read the marked coordinates on the map.

"Do we need to do anything to ensure his success?" Amber replied.

"I want the two of you to be on the ground, giving them support every step of the way," Victus requested, "if this means we won't have to deal with batarian slavers attacking our colonies ever again, this is important for every Citadel-aligned race."

Amber nodded before she extended her hand.

"Leave it to us, general," Amber acknowledged.

General Victus gladly accepted the Alliance commander's hand and shook it.

"Good," Victus nodded, "I've got faith in you two. Make it happen."
With the meeting adjourned, Saren and Amber made their way out of the Citadel Tower and meandered through the Presidium until they reached their apartment. The Spectres slipped out of their suits of armor and placed them in their closets before plopping onto the couch in the living room. Amber picked up her datapad from the coffee table and took notice of a vid-stream request from her mother. She didn't hesitate to answer the call.

"Mom?" she answered.

{Hello, sweetie. I just heard about your engagement with Agent Arterius and I wanted to congratulate you.}

Amber made a blank stare before she placed her hand behind her head.

"Oh," Amber blurted, "thanks, mom. I appreciate it."

Curious, Saren glanced over Amber's shoulder.

"Uh, Admiral Shepard?" Saren paused.

{Oh,} Hannah greeted over the transmission, {hello, Spectre Arterius. I got the news from Anderson.}

Saren let out an enthusiastic hum.

"I see," Saren clarified, "so I assume you approve of this relationship, then?"

Hannah nodded over the transmission.

{Of course. I have no reason to deny your affection for each other. I just ask that you take care of her.}

Saren slowly nodded and placed his hand on his chest.

"You have my word," Saren confirmed.

{Take care,} Hannah said, {you two.}

The transmission ended after they bid farewell. Amber set down her datapad and picked up her miniature console.

"Saren," Amber asked, "have you thought of…trying out The Binding of Isaac?"

Curious, Saren raised a browplate.

"I haven't," Saren admitted, "what is it?"

Amber turned on the miniature console and scrolled to the Binding of Isaac's Afterbirth+ edition.

"This game has a steep learning curve," Amber began to explain, "and it takes some time to getting used to."

Starting up a new game, Saren watched from over her shoulder.

"So what genre is this? Bullet hell?" Saren pondered.

"It's also a dungeon explorer type game," Amber added before she handed the miniature console to
her mate.

"Right. Where do I go from here?" Saren asked.

Saren began exploring the game's menu and found the character roster. While scrolling through each characters, he noticed all of them save for Isaac couldn't be accessed.

"Strange," Saren commented.

"Oh," Amber pointed out, "each character has different requirements for you to unlock them.

"Well, Isaac it is," Saren chuckled.

He scrolled back and tapped the first option. Saren watched as the game began to appear, Isaac standing in a small room in the basement with one door at each wall. On the floor, the turian Spectre saw graphics of the character, probably as some sort of instructions. He took some moments to figure out which keys moved the character, which keys directed Isaac's tears, which key triggered the active item and which key placed a bomb. After that, he moved the character through a door. Upon entering the next room, Saren thought fast and maneuvered Isaac along while the character fired tears at some enemies. Isaac may have gotten hit one or two times, but the turian Spectre was able to clear the room before the doors opened.

"So you clear out all the enemies and then you can press onward?" Saren repeated.

"Pretty much," Amber nodded.

Having gotten the picture, Saren continued meandering the character through each room and clearing them out one by one. Along the way, he would pick up coins, bombs, keys and hearts whenever they were accessible. When he entered the item room, he raised his browplate at the item on the pedestal.

"Is that a power-up?" Saren pondered.

Amber examined the pedestal item before she nodded.

"That's 20/20," Amber added, "it gives you a double shot for your tears."

"Interesting," Saren commented.

Saren moved Isaac towards the item, letting the character pick it up. When he pressed on the tear keys, he watched as two tears shot out of the sprite at the same time. Satisfied with the power-up, the turian Spectre continued moving the character through the floor until it reached the boss room. Upon entering, he saw a moment long cutscene before he ended up having to fight a large poop monster.

"Is—is that a…?!" Saren exclaimed.

"Yeah," Amber nodded, "that's a Dingle. The Dips from earlier were smaller shits compared to this."

"Right. So far, still manageable," he muttered.

Saren didn't hesitate as he fought the Dingle, examining its tactics and adapting accordingly. His quick thinking was enough for him to defeat the boss, only to notice another pedestal item that appeared. When he picked it up, he noticed the power-up increased his HP. He spotted a trapdoor,
so he maneuvered Isaac towards it, watching as the character jumped through it.

"That's it?" Saren paused.

"That actually goes to the next level," Amber clarified.

"Huh," Saren slowly nodded, "this is actually quite entertaining."

Getting the hang of the gameplay, Saren was able to progress through the next five levels, observing Isaac maneuver through the caves and then the depths. After jumping down the next cave, he suddenly got a screen depicting the titular character huddled up in the fetal position at the foot of a large, lumpy, throbbing leg with a red high-heeled shoe at the end and the text "Isaac vs. Mom" overhead.

"Poor kid," Saren cooed, "you did mention his mother wants to kill him, right?"

Amber nodded.

"Yeah," she replied, "can you imagine how delusional his mom got to this point?"

"I'd rather not think about it. All that matters now is that Issac lives and she dies."

As soon as the fight began, Saren decided now was the time to spring into action. His eyes were sent darting back and forth across the screen as he shot pellets at the "mother's" extremities as they protruded from the walls. He didn't hesitate to dodge as her foot slammed onto the ground. Taking a couple of hits, he continued to struggle, slowly killing the mother with bug-bites. The instant the boss health meter had been emptied, the turian Spectre was soon treated to a cutscene. Perhaps there had been some deeper meaning that humans interpreted it as, but he generally found it to be confusing. Still, now that he completed his first run, he tilted his head towards Amber and purred.

"That was an interesting experience."

"Yeah, definitely," Amber agreed.

Amber leaned in closer to Saren, allowing him to nuzzle his face against hers. He then got up to get himself a drink from the kitchen. When he returned from the kitchen carrying two glasses, he handed one to Amber.

"This was a good way to spend the evening. What say you?" he asked.

"Same here," Amber nodded in agreement, taking a sip of her lemonade.

The rest of the night was calm and collected for the two of them.
Chapter Notes

Anybody got some Assassin's Creed jokes?

By the time the crew finished preparations the next day, the Normandy immediately departed from the Citadel and traveled towards the Mass Relay, warping out of the Serpent Nebula. The team had begun to fully gear up the moment they entered FTL. With the batarian revolution at stake, they knew they would have to ensure its success. All they had to do was provide support, and make sure everything came full swing. With Saren and Amber in the briefing room, Ashley met up with Kaidan in the cargo room.

"How are you feeling?" Ashley asked.

Kaidan rolled his shoulders and gave a deep sigh.

"Nervous," Kaidan admitted, "deep into territory no free human has ever been, backing a civil war we helped to instigate, and a lot on the line based on whether or not we succeed? Most definitely nervous."

"Same here, Alenko," Ashley agreed, "but we don't stop until the fight is won, right?"

Kaidan nodded.

"We've come too far, now," Kaidan added.

Kaidan and Ashley took a moment to share a gentle embrace. Once they finished preparations, they got up and made for the briefing room, fully suited.

"Commander," Kaidan told Amber, "we're ready."

Amber glanced over her shoulder.

"Good. We just finished our call with Balak," Amber announced, "we'll be moving along the rooftops as they enter the capital, providing cover for their advance."

Kaidan and Ashley nodded before they gave Amber a salute.

"So counter-sniping and dismantling whatever obstacles Balak has to handle?" Kaidan clarified.

Saren nodded.

"Specifically," he added, "several ground-to-air platforms they have situated on the roofs."

It was only a while before the Normandy reached Khar'Shan's orbit. The team made for the cargo hold and filed into the shuttle for deployment. Garrus, Legion, Saren and Amber sat across from Kasumi, Kaidan, Ashley, James, Liara, Tali and Thane. After the shuttle doors closed, the small vessel dropped from the Normandy's cargo hold and descended through the planet's atmosphere. All they could do at that point was wait until they reached the rendezvous point. Down below, they
arrived at a large encampment. They disembarked the shuttle the instant it landed on the ground.

"Balak, I see you've made it quite far," Saren greeted.

Balak, having stood at the entrance to the encampment, stepped towards Saren and extended his hand.

"All thanks to your contribution," Balak agreed, "we never would've made it this far."

Saren and Balak took a moment to shake hands.

"So, this is the big, final push for you, is that right?" Saren clarified.

"Yep. The Hegemony is on its last legs. If they aren't all cooped up here, they'll surrender shortly after."

Balak, Saren and Amber sauntered into the encampment with Garrus, Kaidan, Ashley, Liara, Tali, Kasumi, James, Thane and Legion following them. They were held up in what looked to be a suburban area, just at the fringes of the capital. As they wandered through the streets, they watched as batarian revolutionists were preparing their equipment. Most were using captured equipment, repainted to prevent confusion with Hegemony loyalists. Once they reached the town square, a large tent stood in the middle. He led them inside to show a holotable displaying the layout of the city.

"I did see your message ahead of time, Arterius," Balak said, "I agree with your disposition, and I've found a path for your insertion that would provide the best oversight of our approach."

Saren folded his arms as he examined the holographic layout. It was along a path where the defenses were the heaviest.

"Very well," Saren requested, "may I ask for additional explosives if we are to continue through there? I don't believe we have enough explosives for a job this big."

"We've still got spare supplies at the other end of the camp," Balak answered.

Saren blinked slowly as his mandibles flexed into a smile.

"So when do we move out?" Saren asked.

Balak chuckled as he gave Saren a pat on the shoulder.

"An hour now," Balak replied, "get ready."

With a plan in mind, Saren, Amber and their squadmates made their way to the storage warehouse at the other side of the camp.

"Balak radioed ahead. Explosive should be right inside," one of the soldiers outside greeted.

"Thanks," Amber nodded.

When they stepped inside the warehouse, they packed the additional explosives and prepared for their advance. Now that they finished their final preparations, the Spectres and their squadmates gathered at the edge of the camp. Up ahead, Balak had started mobilizing his revolutionaries to the capitol boundaries.

"Ok," Amber asked, "you guys ready?"
"Let's hope this works," Thane nodded.

They followed close behind, sticking to the planned course of action. Kaidan, Ashley, Garrus and James kept a vigilant eye along the way. At the city edges, they climbed an emergency exit up the side of a side of a building to the roof and started their way forward. They wasted no time as they entered their positions. Peering over the edge of the roof, Saren and Amber watched as Balak and his army advanced farther. They started along, mostly watching from the top when they saw the first cannon. The Hegemony had quickly become desperate and set up heavy artillery batteries on whatever platform seemed suitable. On another edge of the roof, Garrus pulled out his rifle.

"I can cover the rest of you," Garrus offered, "I'll get to work picking off those gunners."

James glanced over his shoulder.

"Taking point," James added.

They watched as some of Balak's soldiers approached the first artillery battery. Garrus shot the main gunner before the artillery team could get off the first shot. Amber and the others swarmed the gun and handled the rest of the crew, which gave Balak a chance to continue his objective.

"Area clear," James announced.

Saren and Amber stood to their feet.

"Good work," Amber praised, "let's keep it up, move onto the next building."

Saren, Amber and their squadmates climbed down the stairs and emerged from the emergency exit. Across the way, a few loyalist soldiers were housed in a building firing down at the advancing revolutionists. Thane, Liara and Legion immediately leapt into action. Thermal rounds were exchanged from rooftop to window below. The asari emitted her biotic field, shielding her allies from enemy fire. Legion rose from cover and shot the last man in the nest.

"Scanners indicate lack of additional resistance," Legion reported.

"All right!" Tali chirped as she raised her fist into the air.

They continued their advance, occasionally encountering more nests and rigging a few automated defenses with explosives to cripple them. Kaidan, Ashley and Kasumi would sometimes check the empty nests for anything valuable. Ahead, Balak reached the entrance as he and his armed forces prepare for their assault. They broke through the first wave of defenses and pushed forward. Proud of their progress, the Spectres gestured their squadmates to take cover.

"Let's keep it up," Saren encouraged, "we've still got more ground to cover."

"Right behind you," Garrus nodded.

Forming up, the team leapt to the next rooftop and moved on. Tali, Legion and Kasumi got an excellent view of the ensuing battle below. The fighting raged on in the streets against the dwindling number of loyalists. Still, Garrus picked off some stray loyalists with his rifle. Saren beckoned to the others.

"Come on," Saren ordered, "let's keep moving."

Amber and her squadmates emerged from cover before they followed Saren. They encountered an intersection at the end of the street, continuing to the next block over a pedestrian bridge. After
they jumped into cover, they scanned their surroundings once again.

"Liara," Kaidan called over, "status?"

"Enemy armor down below," Liara informed, "should we intervene?"

Saren and Liara exchanged a brief glance.

"Balak shouldn't have too much trouble disabling it," Saren answered, "our job is still up here. We'll double back and help if we can."

Liara nodded in agreement.

"Very well, then," Liara sighed.

They watched as Balak and his army jumped into action once again. The team moved along the rooftops onto the next checkpoint in the city. With each checkpoint they covered, the closer they got to their victory. Whittling down defenses, Balak had a significantly easier time maintaining momentum through the capitol. By now, they only had one more checkpoint to cover. One final fortification was all that stood between the revolutionaries and forcing the remnants of the Hegemony to surrender.

"Ok," Amber announced, "let's give it everything we got."

She started off by tossing down a few grenades. Amber took cover seconds before the grenades detonated. She ordered the team to start taking potshots to draw some fire. Saren emitted a biotic field to shield himself and his mate. He reloaded his rifle and fired another volley of shots. At the same time, Liara tossed a biotic warp. Finally, with their attention fully drawn on the fringe group, the full brunt of Balak's revolutionaries caught the checkpoint off guard.

"All right," Saren ordered, "keep moving!"

They climbed back down to street level to help keep the loyalists boxed in. Tali and Kasumi scanned their immediate surroundings for any artillery batteries to sabotage. They rushed into a couple of improvised mortar pits and began clearing them out. In the meantime, Kaidan and Ashley came across a loyalist mech. It was some low-quality artillery unit with a flamethrower for close quarters.

"All right," Kaidan said to himself, "let's take out this sucker."

Ashley cooked and tossed a grenade.

"Frag out!" she barked.

Kaidan and Ashley immediately jumped into cover before an explosion ensued seconds later. She took a moment to catch her breath.

"Have any more 'nades?" Ashley called over, "I'm out."

Kaidan took a moment to check his inventory.

"Just a smoke," Kaidan answered.

"Good enough," Ashley shrugged.

Kaidan didn't hesitate to give Ashley the smoke grenade. She wasted no time as she activated it and
tossed it. With visual cover, she closed the distance on the mech, flanked it, and fired from behind. Kaidan provided cover fire as he emitted his biotic field. Severely damaging its locomotion, the mech struggled to turn and fire back. Both Alliance soldiers spotted its few weak spots and swapped thermal clips in their rifles. Jumping out from cover, they continued to circle the mech and fire.

With Kaidan and Ashley dealing with the mech, Garrus perched onto a suitable spot and aimed his rifle before he squeezed the trigger. The head popped clean off, and the mech slumped over on a side. Kaidan glanced over his shoulder and gave Garrus a thumbs up.

"Thanks," Kaidan called over, "that was a nice shot."

Garrus nodded at Kaidan before he continued scoping the area. The rest of the loyalists had been whittled away and the revolutionaries charged up the steps of the capital building. From there, Saren and Amber met up with Balak at the entrance.

"Excellent timing, Arterius," Balak greeted, "I thank you again for making this happen."

"The same can be said for you, Balak," Saren grinned.

"I'll be inside, seeing the end of this fight," Balak told him.

The batarian rushed up the steps, following the others. Saren and Amber scanned their surroundings outside the entrance. They and their squadmates took a calm seat on the steps and looked onward. Since they completed their part of the objective, they took some time to rest as they heard gunshots from within. Amber took out a canteen of water and took a drink from it.

"Hey," Amber called over, "anyone else thirsty?"

Saren put his hand up and took the canteen from her. The turian Spectre took a sip before handing the canteen back to his mate.

"Thanks," Saren mumbled.

She nodded back as she took another drink from it.

"We came a long path to get here," Amber mused.

"All we can hope for now is that our efforts pay off," Thane muttered.

Garrus chuckled as he tilted his head upwards.

"So our job here is done, right?" Garrus mentioned, "we can go home and not worry about the batarians anymore?"

"We're not going to mention the diplomacy that comes after that?" Tali pointed out.

"Our objective is still to remain relatively neutral in this conflict. Any suggestion of outside influence could possibly result in further escalation," Legion reminded.

"So," Kaidan asked, "when do you think is a good time to leave?"

"We check in one last time with Balak," Saren answered, "ensure he can tie whatever loose ends he can, then leave the Kite's Nest."

Ashley nodded before she took a sip out of her canteen.
"It'll be good to leave this all behind," Ashley said.

Kaidan nodded before he offered his hand, allowing Ashley to hold it.

"Yeah," Kaidan agreed, "one more chapter behind us."

And so, this peaceful moment continued for around an hour. Moments later, the revolution banner flew over the capitol building, signaling the end of the Hegemony. Upon cue, Saren, Amber and their squadmates stood to their feet. Balak returned down the steps to them minutes later.

"I assume this is where we part ways, then?" Balak asked.

Saren nodded before he offered his hand.

"Yeah. Need any help from now on?"

"With the congregation of our companions, I'm confident we can rebuild on our own," he answered.

Saren and Balak shook hands before Amber exchanged glances with the batarian.

"I especially thank you for the encouragement, Shepard," Balak added, "it's good to see something better rise from the Hegemony."

"Same here," Amber replied.

"We'd best be going. Best of luck to your new government," Saren nodded, before turning to leave.
Bridal Shopping

A couple days passed since the final push in Kite's Nest, and batarian revolutionists started the slow process of rebuilding their society, starting with freeing the slaves. Tali kept her tabs on progress between the quarians and the Geth while she accompanied Saren and Amber to the markets in the Citadel. Garrus, Kelly, Oriana, Miranda and Kolyat also accompanied the Spectres considering that word of their engagement had spread across the Normandy. Each of the squadmates gave their hearty congratulations to them during their rounds on the ship.

The instant they arrived at a dress shop, Amber began browsing the dresses while keeping her omni-tool active. To her satisfaction, she found the dress that matched the one in the image she saved. She brought it to the changing rooms in back and tried it on. Once she confirmed it fit, she emerged from the fitting room, catching Saren's attention.

"Shepard?" Saren blinked twice.

"How does it look?" Amber asked.

Saren took a moment to examine the dress, his mandibles fluttering with excitement.

"Oh my," Saren said, "it looks beautiful…"

"Thanks," Amber smiled at Saren.

"I still have yet to find something," he added.

Amber nodded before making a brief glance at Garrus, catching his attention.

"You'd…like some help with that?" Garrus chuckled as he scratched his mandible.

"Yeah, I'd most definitely need your input on this," Saren remarked.

While Amber stepped back into the fitting room, Garrus escorted Saren to the men's section. The two sifted through the various articles on display. The turian Spectre took his preferred colors and his size into consideration. They pulled out a suit with a dark gray coloration topped with ornate golden trim and patterns. Saren picked up a matching ceremonial sash off the shelf.

"This'll do nicely."

Garrus nodded in agreement as he placed his hand on Saren's shoulder.

"Let's get you to the dressing rooms, see how it looks," Garrus suggested.

Saren carried the robes to the fitting room while Amber, Kolyat and Oriana gathered some shoes and accessories to go with her dress. She opted for a pair of sleek red slippers with elevated heels. While she waited for Saren to finish trying on the robes, she might as well help Miranda, Tali, Kelly and Oriana find dresses for the occasion. They sifted through the other dresses on display, observing the various options. Oriana picked out one dress and hugged it to her chest in front of Kolyat.

"Kolyat?" Oriana asked, "your thoughts?"

"Hopefully, nothing too flashy," Kolyat shrugged.
Oriana examined the dress in her hands before shifting her gaze towards Miranda. Her sister hadn't been a fan of dresses and opted for a short, black dress with minimal detailing. Moments later, Saren emerged from the fitting room, attracting attention from Amber, Kolyat, Garrus, Kelly, Tali and the Lawson sisters.

"Right. How do I look?" Saren asked.

Garrus placed his hand behind his head while Amber grinned.

"You look incredible," she complimented.

"Alright. I'd like to have this adjusted though," Saren admitted, "does feel a tad bit too snug around the hips."

Garrus let out an amused snort. They headed towards the front counter and made their purchase. After that, they stepped out of the store. Amber and Saren returned to their apartment with their bags under their arms. While both Spectres settled in their living room to watch a movie, Kelly and Garrus returned to their apartment and put away their purchases, the Alliance yeoman lifting her shirt over her arms.

"Garrus?" Kelly called over, "are you getting horny? Because I am."

He started yanking his own shirt off.

"Oh, I'm just itching to unwind a bit," Garrus chuckled.

Shortly after Kelly removed her pants, she sat down on the couch and spread her legs. His mandibles fluttering in excitement, Garrus knelt in front of her and gave her a passionate kiss. Moaning, Kelly perched her hands on Garrus's shoulders, encouraging him to run his hands along her waist. His talons traced the length of her torso, slowly brushing back and forth. When they broke off the kiss, he slowly traced his tongue along her neck, licking along her chest before reaching her stomach. Kelly responded by kneading the back of his neck. She brought her head forward and licked the side of his mandible.

The softness of her damp tongue sent tingles down his spine and he felt his core heat up while his plates shifted. Once he brought his face to the apex of her thighs, Garrus brushed his tongue along her clit. Kelly let out a sharp cry as she perched her legs over his carapace. She put a gentle hand against the back of his head, desperate for more. Garrus let out a slight chuckle before he dipped his tongue inside of her. He wormed his way further, eyeing her for results. His mandibles flexed into a grin as her gasps grew frantic and she bucked her hips against his tongue. Kelly gradually put a leg around his back and tugged a bit. His chest started rumbling with purrs which sent vibrations into her walls.

The room was quickly filled with the sound of breaths drawn up sharp and loud. With heat pooling in her stomach, Kelly felt her walls gradually lubricating. He felt her tighten on his tongue, and subsequently tasted the familiar saline fluids flush out of her. When he withdrew his tongue seconds later, Garrus tilted his head towards hers while he perched one hand on her hip. She watched as Garrus hovered over her body, hungrily looking back down at her.

"You…eager for more?" Garrus purred.

Kelly nodded between pants.

"I'm not done yet," Kelly insisted.
Garrus cupped Kelly's face with his other hand as he position his tip at her nether regions. He leaned to brush his cheek against hers, letting out a light purr. Tapping his forehead onto hers, he slowly slid home, the soft warm flesh gripping hold of his length. Her body came to life with the familiar electric jolt, feeling her walls stretching to accommodate. Kelly cried out as she arched her back. Garrus took his time to adjust his position, finding a suitable angle to drive in from and shifting his weight. He continued thrusting while he held her close. Her own gasps were canceled out by his groans and grunts.

The air felt slightly humid where they lay as they continued, each taking heavy breaths. Kelly's fluids eased the friction amidst thrusts. Thrusting into her, he could feel the liquid from her entrance gradually sticking to himself. She cupped his face with her hand and pulled him into a deep kiss, muffling her cries as her walls tightened around his length the instant she reached her peak. Feeling the clench of her walls, he thrust harder for a short burst of strength until he felt his own release. They slowly panted as they came down from their high. A minute later, Garrus carefully withdrew from her before he nuzzled his face against Kelly's.

"That was awesome," Kelly smiled at him.

"Yeah. I needed that," he grinned back.

Amidst the afterglow, Garrus sat down next to Kelly and wrapped an arm around her shoulder, encouraging her to lean closer to him. They remained there for a bit, letting them bask in the warmth radiating from their bare bodies.

"You think we could find a good movie on right now?" Kelly asked after a moment of silence.

" Depends on what's on, but it's worth a shot," Garrus replied, "any good vids from Earth you'd recommend?"

Garrus reached for the remote and turned on the holoscreen. It didn't take much longer before Kelly pointed at Kubo and the Two Strings, so Garrus curiously checked it. He found it playing on one of the more human-based channels and pulled it up. It already played a couple minutes in, but they enjoyed it nonetheless.

Oriana and Miranda had returned to their safehouse with their purchase. With Kolyat having returned to Thane's residence, Oriana put her new dress in the closet. She returned to Miranda's office and peeked inside.

"Miri?" Oriana called over, "about Kolyat."

Her older sister raised a brow.

"I'm sorry, what about him?" Miranda paused.

Oriana cleared her throat as she took a step into Miranda's office.

"I'm aware of your policy about keeping to ourselves," Oriana said, "but I'm starting to take an interest in him."

Miranda gave Oriana a confused stare in a moment of silence.

"You're interested in him?" Miranda repeated.

Oriana silently nodded.
"Is there something wrong with that?" she clamored.

"No…it's just unexpected, that's all," Miranda shrugged, "so what do you like about him?"

Oriana blushed as she folded her arms behind her back.

"He is pretty sweet," Oriana admitted sheepishly, "smart, and rather nice looking. I did get his holonumber, and was thinking of asking him out."

Miranda tried to hide a smile, but failed.

"Alright," Miranda advised, "give him a try, but do be cautious."

"Thanks, Miri!" Oriana chirped.

She hastily left, leaving Miranda to lean back in her seat with a sigh. Now that she was by herself in her office, the former Cerberus operative pulled out a photo album. She started scrolling through the more recent images. Once she finished gathering these pictures, she scrolled through her contact list, figuring a vid call was in order. Miranda pulled open a number and made another call. She waited patiently until a vidscreen of the Shadow Broker appeared on her terminal monitor.

"Hello," Miranda greeted, "how are you doing?"

As per usual, his image showed up as an outline of a bald, human male to veil his identity.

"What is your inquiry, Miss Lawson?"

Miranda took a moment to reach for her album. She drew up an image of a Yahg on screen.

"I was hoping you'd have some moments to spare," Miranda started.

"Speak your mind," the Shadow Broker insisted.

Upon cue, Miranda opened the photo album in her hand.

"Whenever I get the chance," Miranda explained, "I like taking pictures for my album."

"What sort of images?" he paused.

Miranda angled the album, allowing the Shadow Broker to examine the photographs. He couldn't help but find the images of the exotic plants from various colonies mesmerizing.

"Huh…" he commented, "what else do you enjoy?"

"You know," Miranda admitted with a sigh, "I didn't have much other hobbies. Cerberus can do that to you, apparently."

"If we really are going to be discussing hobbies, I've got plenty to share."

Miranda leaned back in her chair.

"All right, then," Miranda encouraged, "humor me."

"Like you, I do enjoy the individual facets of nature. However, I feel more inclined to collect physical specimen as opposed to just photographs."

"Physical specimens?" Miranda blinked twice, "Cerberus doesn't treat its subjects well, last I
"I keep mine suspended and preserved," the Shadow Broker clarified, "but specimen nonetheless."

"Right," Miranda drawled.

"I'm aware you still have some notes regarding your trade package from earlier. Care to drop off a copy too? I could show you around."

Miranda took a moment to think as she rubbed her chin.

"I might as well meet up with you alone," she said.

"That would be preferable," the Shadow Broker agreed.

The instant Miranda ended the transmission, she started gathering her notes. The Shadow Broker had sent her the next set of coordinates to meet at and she intended on leaving shortly. The former Cerberus operative left her safehouse, secured it and made her way to the docking bay. She got on a civilian transport off the station and departed. It was only an hour or so before the transport moved between Mass Relays and reached the edge of the Terminus System. It took a while longer before the transport reached Illium. Shortly after arriving in the docks, Miranda disembarked the transport. Waiting for her at the docks were a pair of agents in plain clothes. She didn't hesitate as she approached them with the notes in her hands.

"I assume you're looking for me?" Miranda asked.

The agents nodded in unison.

"He's been expecting you," one agent answered, "transport's just outside of the port."

Miranda nodded at the agents before she followed them through the docks. A hovercar waited for them just outside of the terminal. She reminded herself of what she set out to do as she climbed into the hovercar and settled into the backseat. Moments later, the hovercar closed its doors and hovered away from the terminal, maneuvering through the air traffic. She glanced nervously outside, then back to the other agents in the vehicle's cabin. Remembering the first time she met the Shadow Broker in person was enough for her to brush off the thought. They way he towered over the rest of them was intimidating, needless to say.

It was only a while before Miranda peered through the window and caught a glimpse of her destination. They were quickly approaching the base of a medium-sized skyscraper. The structure itself wasn't as tall as some of the more excessive buildings on Illium, but it did otherwise stand out among the landscape. They entered through the front door and meandered through the corridor before they stepped into an elevator. They were whisked to the top floor, where they were greeted by an open office with the window looking out over the metropolis below. Interestingly enough, the Yahg sat in his desk and gazed out the window.

"I have the notes," Miranda said, "should I set them down on the desk?"

"Yes, that would be appreciated. I'm glad you decided to come out to meet today."

Miranda gave a soft smile before she approached the desk and set down the notes. The Shadow Broker swiveled his chair and scooped the notes into his hand. He then took a moment or so to scroll through the notes.

"Thank you. This will come in handy. Now, you were…looking to entertain yourself?"
Miranda nodded before she stepped around the desk. The Yahg eyed her as she got closer.

"Do you…know any relatives of yours?" Miranda asked him.

"No. Why?" he admitted.

Miranda gently placed her hand on his, much to his confusion.

"That's all right," Miranda admitted, "I could care less over what happens to my father."

"I was raised in captivity, so I can agree to that," the Shadow Broker replied.

The Shadow Broker lifted his hand off the desk, allowing Miranda to press her cheek into his palm. She stared back deeply into his inky black eyes. Words hung on the tip of her tongue, but her mouth just stuttered, unable to muster the effort to speak them. Regardless, she leaned in closer to the Yahg, and he couldn't help but sigh as he gave her a pat on the back.
A day may have passed since Miranda returned from Illium after her visit, but she decided to let Saren and Amber deal with a conference with the turian Hierarchy. For now, the former Cerberus operative meandered through the Presidium until she stopped at Nihlus's apartment. She had messaged the younger turian Spectre earlier about her visit several minutes prior to her arrival. She stopped at the front door and knocked it, waiting until Nihlus opened it seconds later.

"Come in," Nihlus beckoned.

She followed Nihlus inside.

"I can understand if my intel sounds very unlikely," Miranda said.

"Don't worry. It's been tried before. Ask the salarians how that went," he chuckled in response.

When they entered the living room, they both sat down on the couch.

"So, they're after the Thresher Maws, huh?" Nihlus repeated.

Miranda nodded.

"Yes," she explained, "while the use of seismic generators is a known method of guiding Thresher Maws, they're looking for more direct means of control, as well as possible methods of capture and redeployment."

Nihlus hummed as he scratched his mandible.

"Yeah, like I said," Nihlus repeated, "the salarians had tried that a few centuries ago as a possible means of cheapening mining costs for colonies. It failed miserably."

Miranda perched her hands on her lap.

"I didn't tell Shepard about this yet," Miranda admitted, "because…you know."

"I can imagine," Nihlus asked, "are you suggesting we take this matter into our own hands, then?"

Miranda slowly stood to her feet.

"You do have your own shuttle, yes?" Miranda reminded.

He nodded and similarly stood up.

"Yes," Nihlus answered, "it's an option offered by the academy."

Miranda gave Nihlus a soft smile.

"The sooner we get there," she told him, "the better."

"Got it. Let me grab my stuff, then we'll head straight for the port."

Once Nihlus finished suiting up, he and Miranda left the apartment and made their way through the Presidium until they reached the Spectre docks. The young turian Spectre and the former Cerberus operative meandered through the docks until they arrived at his shuttle. It was the
standard model of the shuttle, but Nihlus had opted to take a few liberties with the ship. Along with
the interior being decorated with various pieces from different cultures, it had been outfitted with
stronger thrusters and barriers per his own design. When they boarded the shuttle, Nihlus settled
into the pilot seat.

He hit several switches and ignited the engines. Putting in his Spectre codes, the magnetic clamps
released the ship and let them depart. Nihlus maneuvered the shuttle out of the Citadel as it
traveled across space to reach the Mass Relay.

"Now, I apologize in advance if we get in any trouble," Nihlus started as they entered FTL, "I
made some modifications to the ship's acceleration to help with escapes better. It'll get a bit shaky,
and I've had complaints that it's triggered motion sickness before."

Miranda raised an eyebrow.

"Oh," she remarked, "that's a pleasant thought."

Miranda and Nihlus leaned in their chairs as the shuttle continued to travel in FTL speed. They later
exited the relay and set course for their destination planet. It took at least an hour before the shuttle
emerged from another Mass Relay.

"So, Akuze is where they've set up, huh?" Nihlus asked.

Miranda nodded as the shuttle approached the planet's orbit.

"You did visit this colony before, right?" Miranda mentioned.

"Just once to try contacting the Alliance," Nihlus admitted, "it's only a location meant to stop by on
to make any repairs. I'm surprised anyone tried to colonize this rock."

Miranda sighed.

"Humans have colonized in dangerous places before," Miranda admitted, "such as near an active
volcano."

"Eh, no argument there," he shrugged.

The shuttle descended through the planet's atmosphere and hovered above the surface. They came
to rest on a rocky ridge and exited the shuttle. Standing atop a cliff, Miranda stared into the
distance. Nihlus took a moment to stretch his arms.

"Right. Onto business."

Taking extra caution, Miranda and Nihlus skittered down the slope. They would occasionally dive
behind boulders to avoid detection from any Cerberus soldiers that might be on patrol. Once they
reached the base of the slope, they began sneaking through the abandoned prefabs. Taking cover
along the wall, Miranda peeked around the corner as Cerberus soldiers nearby were handling
equipment in the empty street. She peeked out to briefly glimpse the seismic thumpers they were
carrying.

"Lawson?" Nihlus whispered.

Miranda kept focusing on the Cerberus soldiers while she placed her hand on Nihlus's shoulder.

"Yeah, I see them," Miranda replied.
It was only a matter of minutes later before the Cerberus soldiers started moving, encouraging Miranda and Nihlus to start tailing them.

"I'm surprised we've got cages that big," one guard huffed.

The other nodded in agreement.

"I'm more surprised that these things don't just bite or spit their way out. I talked with the boss earlier, said R&D managed to find a means of making the material resistant enough to whatever damage they can put out."

As they continued their stealth, Nihlus nervously fluttered his mandibles.

"Hmm," Nihlus mused, "your intel paid off."

Miranda nodded as she placed her index finger in front of her lips without making a sound. They followed the two through the ruined prefabs until they reached an opening. Along with a Cerberus vessel towards the back, they had crates, vehicles, and a couple large cages out in the open with personnel all over the site. To add to the situation, drilling noises filled the area. Miranda looked around and saw mining vehicles setting up holes for the cages to be set up in. Considering that she has been questioning Cerberus's true objective, Miranda balled her hands into fists.

"I have an idea how to stall them," Miranda suggested, "if not disrupt their entire operation altogether. Not sure if this'll stop their progress altogether, though."

Nihlus raised a browplate.

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

"Those thumpers," Miranda reminded, "are they not a double-edged sword?"

"Yeah," Nihlus drawled, "I see what you're up to."

Miranda and Nihlus slowly emerged from their cover. They rushed over to a pile of inactive thumpers and each pulled up one. Continuing onward, they rushed to the side of the Cerberus vessel and set each one up.

"Ready?" Miranda asked.

Nihlus nodded at Miranda before she flipped the switch. The devices began hammering the earth underneath them, producing a deep rumble like distant thunder or a large drum. Both the young turian Spectre and the former agent held onto the thumpers as they remained vigilant.

"Looks like they're good to go. Let's get out of here before anything else arrives," Nihlus said.

Miranda nodded before she and Nihlus sprinted out of the clearing and began tearing through the prefabs. Nihlus let out a yelp as the ground violently shook, nearly tripping in the process. The former Cerberus operative thought fast and helped him to his feet. Suddenly, the familiar sound of the ground erupting roared behind them. Shortly, gunfire followed as the local troops rushed to tend to the newfound threat. With the Thresher Maws having emerged, Miranda and Nihlus continued to dart through the prefabs.

"That should slow down their operation here for a good three weeks," she announced.

Once they reached the outskirts of the prefabs, Miranda and Nihlus began climbing up the slope.
They returned to the shuttle and climbed back in. He quickly sat back down again and ignited the engines. The shuttle took off from Akuze's orbit and sped across space.

"So are we going to bring Shepard into this?" he asked.

"Last time I checked her psychological profile," Miranda reminded, "she still bore some potential stress from her initial encounter of the Thresher Maws when they wiped out her team. Let's just collect a couple other squadmates, then we can deal with this ourselves."

"Right," Nihlus nodded with a sigh, "I'm up for just having extra people to shoot the place up with, but did you have anyone specific in mind?"

Miranda took a moment to think over the question.

"With the Thresher Maws around, projectiles will be a constant," Miranda answered, "so biotics would be beneficial to have. We'll bring Dr. T'Soni and the Prothean."

"Of course," Nihlus rolled his eyes, "have to deal with the Prothean."

The shuttle soon approached the Mass Relay, and the ancient structure flung it into FTL speed. They returned to the Serpent Nebula and docked at the Citadel where Miranda sent out messages to the two. She waited at the entrance to the Spectre docks until Liara and Javik arrived several minutes later.

"Dr. Lawson, we got your message. So we'll be dealing with Thresher Maws?" Liara greeted.

Miranda nodded while she led Javik and Liara through the docks.

"I don't know if it's possible to control them," Miranda said, "but Cerberus wants to find out."

"Back in my cycle," Javik commented, "soldiers on break would head out into the open planes, try to find one, and ride on its back as a form of sport."

Liara blinked once.

"So it is possible?" she pondered.

"By the definition of what Cerberus wants to achieve, no," Javik answered.

By now, Miranda, Liara and Javik arrived at the shuttle, with Nihlus waiting at the bottom of the ramp to greet them.

"Welcome aboard, climb on in," Nihlus grinned, "we'll explain more en route."

Nihlus led Miranda, Liara and Javik aboard his shuttle before they settled in the cockpit. Nihlus mindlessly hit the ship controls as he rambled on regarding necessary exposition to Liara and Javik.

"So here's the sitch," Nihlus began, "we all know that Thresher Maws are big dumb animals and can easily be led around to locations away from their nest or general mining operations through stimulating seismic activity. Cerberus wants to see if they can take this a step further."

The shuttle left the station and flew through space. Javik shook his head as they made the leap into FTL.

"A foolish pursuit," Javik scoffed, "even our own government recognized them as just animals."
Creatures meant to either be combated or avoided."

"The Illusive Man doesn't seem to care," Miranda replied, "within the last several hours, we have disrupted their operations on this planet. While this is a relative setback, something more damaging would be better."

"Do you have anything more specific in mind?" Liara asked.

"If the Thresher Maws we set on them haven't finished off this group, we will," Miranda answered.

It was only an hour or so before the shuttle returned to Akuze's orbit. Entering low orbit, Nihlus initiated surface scanning as they approached the site.

"Yeah, they barely survived the Thresher Maws," Nihlus commented, "looks like a mess down there."

The shuttle descended the planet's atmosphere and landed on the top of the mountain. Exiting the shuttle, they looked down on the site below, seeing smoke rise into the sky. They then began descending the slope. A third had erupted from the ground in their absence and the leftovers of the Cerberus detachment were cleaning up. Once they reached the base of the slope, they readied their weapons. They started their offensive sweep when another Thresher Maw rose up from the ground. The Cerberus team had attempted to compensate their losses by doubling their efforts and had been attacked the moment they lured another Thresher Maw. With the Cerberus soldiers distracted, Miranda, Nihlus, Liara and Javik took this chance to strike. Avoiding the large beast, they began to pick off the survivors from the cover of damaged equipment. Miranda emitted a biotic field to shield the team.

They had only gone several minutes before they were stopped in their tracks by a ball of acidic spittle, nearly landing on them. With the large worm's indiscriminate attention, they were forced to scatter. This hit and run somehow turned into a struggle for survival. Javik reloaded his rifle from cover when a Cerberus soldier rounded a corner facing him. Before either could get a shot off, the soldier dissolved in a splash of acid, thrashing in pain as he hit the ground. The Prothean huffed before he slinked along the prefabs. Gradually, they flanked it from various angles, taking potshots while contending with the dwindling number of Cerberus forces present. They also kept themselves vigilant for any Thresher Maws that would tear through the prefabs. Rushing to the next bit of cover, Nihlus rolled out of the way of another acid spit. Liara emerged from her cover after the Thresher Maw left the area.

"Spectre Kryik," Liara called over, "progress?"

{Slow. That Thresher Maw isn't making this easy.}

Liara sighed as she peeked around the corner.

"Javik, do you see where I am?"

Liara spotted the Prothean as he made a gesture at a distance.

{I presume you have a plan?}

"We're on opposite sides of the Thresher Maw right now," Liara suggested, "next time it launches a ball of spittle at either one of us, biotically toss it to the other, then fling it at the back of the creature."

Javik glanced at the Thresher Maw with a disgruntled expression.
Javik caught the next projectile and passed it to Liara. Catching the spittle with her own biotics, she catapulted it to the backside of the creature above her. She squeezed her eyes shut as she heard the sound of splashing from the projectile. It let out a howl before turning to her and nearly catching her with a retaliation shot.

"One more should do it," Liara said, "Miranda, are you ready?"

Miranda nodded as biotic particles danced in her hands. The follow-up shot was swiftly caught and passed to Miranda to deliver the killing blow. The monstrosity was hit once more at the point of its dissolved armor and sent crashing down. With one Thresher Maw out of the way, Nihlus regrouped with Miranda, Liara and Javik.

"You found any more Cerberus whelps?" Javik demanded.

Nihlus sighed as he shrugged.

"I just saw the last one dissolve in acid," Nihlus informed.

Miranda sighed in relief.

"This should set them back a good few months, leaving one less thing to worry about for now. Let's head back."
Back at the Citadel, Kaidan and Ashley joined Saren and Amber with a vid conference with Balak on his progress. Even in the days of his movement rising from the ashes of the Hegemony, pockets of the old batarian system remained.

{I'm aware of these bands, and once we're done fixing everything on the homefront, I promise to begin hunting down these groups.}

"And I'm sure you won't need our help with those groups?" Saren clarified.

{I don't know. It could be months before we are even ready to start wiping out the pockets of the Hegemony;} Balak leaned back in his seat as he continued, {you've done so much for our cause, but I suppose having help for one more deed couldn't help.}

Saren smiled as he placed his hand on his chest.

"Thank you, Balak," he acknowledged.

Balak nodded in agreement before he ended the transmission. Amber tilted her head towards Kaidan.

"You and Ashley can meet up with Besk at the docks," Amber suggested, "Saren and I have errands to run."

Kaidan nodded with a salute. He left for the Normandy while they went on their own path. It didn't take long before he and Ashley reached the docking bay.

"So what's the word?" she asked.

"We're heading out soon," Kaidan answered, "Shepard and Arterius just had to do a few things."

Ashley and Kaidan crossed the boardwalk and made their way inside the vessel. They entered the ship after the airlock decontamination cycle ended. When they entered the bridge, Kaidan and Joker exchanged salutes.

"So, where are we meeting Balak's partner, anyway?" Joker asked.

Kaidan passed the pilot the set of coordinates.

"Here," Kaidan advised, "set a course once we're ready for dustoff."

"You got it, Alenko," Joker nodded.

He turned back to the controls as the two left him back to his own devices. Once the crew finished preparing the Normandy, the flight control released the vessel's magnetic clamps, allowing it to leave the station. Ashley and Kaidan watched from the galaxy map as they left the system. The coordinates recorded on the map required one relay jump and Balak's contact wanted to meet in orbit at one of the inner Alliance colonies. Joker kept that in mind as the Mass Relay flung the Normandy out of the Serpent Nebula. They exited FTL several minutes later and opened coms.

"Lieutenant Moreau here," Joker announced, "this is the Normandy requesting clearance for landing."
Normandy, this is ground control, your IFF checks out. State your business.

Joker took a moment to clear his throat.

"Meeting with another party at port, non-Alliance."

Oh, I see. A group of those batarian insurrectionists came through earlier, said they had official business with additional Alliance personnel. I'll have you directed to an available port closest to their ship.

"Thank you," Joker smiled.

Joker flew the Normandy towards the planet's orbit, descending its atmosphere until they hovered over the docks. Ashley and Kaidan geared up and headed to the airlock. With Tali accompanying them, they disembarked the vessel and stepped out onto the docks. Walking onto the central platform, they spotted the other ship just opposite to where the Normandy was docked. As they sauntered over to the dock, Besk stood outside his vessel. Besk took a moment to straighten up.

"Ah," he greeted, "you've arrived."

Kaidan nodded at Besk in response.

"So, what's the current plan?" Kaidan asked.

"We freed these slaves some time ago," Besk explained, "and we're bringing them here."

Ashley looked to the other batarians behind Besk to see them talking local authorities.

"And the pirates?" Ashley asked.

"With the numbers we can spare for now, we're going around trying to tie up loose ends," Besk answered.

"We'll gladly offer the help you can get," Kaidan offered.

Tali caught a glimpse of a young former slave who just stepped onto the platform and began scanning her surroundings in confusion.

"We've only just started," Besk answered, "we'd prefer to keep this to ourselves until we've got a general idea of the scope we're looking at."

Kaidan nodded.

"Got it. We'll just stick with getting civies back to friendly space."

As batarian revolutionists began escorting the former slaves off the ship, the young former slave hesitated to move, much to Besk's concern.

"Hey, what's going on back there?" Besk called over.

One of the batarian revolutionists shifted glances between one of the former slaves and Besk.

"I think she seems a little down, sir," he replied.

Besk turned on his feet and stepped towards the young girl.
"You ok, kid?" Besk asked.

The girl feverishly snatched a pistol from his holster, smacked him across the head with the grip, then aimed the weapon at the others.

"S-Stay back!" she sputtered.

Besk felt a twinge of regret as Kaidan and Ashley gave the girl a serious gaze. He was still clutching the injury on his nose as the Alliance soldiers attempted to approach her.

"Take it easy," Kaidan called over, "we're not going to hurt you."

Her aim trembled as she locked on to his head.

"There's no need to shoot," Kaidan continued, "what's your name?"

The young girl hesitated in a moment of silence.

"Animals don't get names," she replied nervously, "the masters put their symbols on her."

By the time the rest of the former slaves disembarked, they gave the Alliance soldiers and the batarian revolutionists confused stares.

"I'm pretty confident you're not an animal," Ashley replied, "do you remember anything before you were captured? Where you were from, anything at all?"

The young lady lowered her head as she hesitated in her response.

"She remembers a lot of things…her name was once Talitha…she doesn't remem-ember much else," she stumbled.

As Besk stood back to his feet and maintained his concerned expression, Kaidan took another cautious step towards Talitha.

"Listen, you're safe now," Kaidan reassured, "the masters won't hurt you anymore."

Even if Talitha shook her head in disbelief, she lowered the gun in her hand.

"She remembers being the first. She remembers no other stories of the masters' attacks."

"Williams?" Kaidan paused.

Ashley continued to move forward.

"They won't hurt you anymore," Ashley reminded, "the invaders are gone. It's safe."

Talitha flinched as she took a step back. She looked back and forth, eyes darting around nervously.

"She wants to believe that," she bleated softly, "she wants to believe nothing would change."

Kaidan slowly edged forward with Ashley.

"Do you remember what happened to your parents?" Ashley asked.

"Sh-she sees them. Mommy and daddy," tears welled up in Talitha's eyes, "burning in white light. Melting. Going to pieces. They can't even say anything to her."
Already, Talitha shook her head in disbelief once again, her painful memories continuing to resurface.

"We can see to it that the pain goes away," Kaidan bartered, "it won't be instantaneous, but we know people who will help."

Kaidan gently placed his hand on Talitha's shoulder, and while she may have flinched for a brief second, she soon leaned into the touch.

"Come home with us. They won't hurt you anymore."

Talitha slowly nodded before she dropped the gun and approached Kaidan. Amidst this tranquil moment, Ashley and Besk exchanged glances.

"Well," Besk chuckled, "I think I'll let you two look after this little one."

"We'll be on our way," Kaidan returned, starting to escort the freed civilians back to the Normandy.

With many former slaves taking refuge in the medbay, Kaidan, Tali and Ashley made their way to the bridge. The quarian shook her head with dismay.

"Keelah. I've heard horror stories about pilgrimages leading deep into slaver territory," Tali commented, "the conditions those people are put through…"

"I know how you feel," Ashley agreed, "even hearing the news reports bears some package of terror with it…that feeling of 'it could be me'."

With Ashley and Tali engrossed in their conversation, Kaidan approached the pilot seat.

"We got our package. Get us back to Arcturus Station," Kaidan instructed, "we'll have these people treated and reinstated."

"You got it, Kaidan," Joker nodded.

They left the port and headed deeper into Alliance Space. It took more than half an hour before they arrived at Arcturus Station.

"Arcturus Station Control, this is Lieutenant Moreau of the Normandy, requesting permission to dock. We have on board numerous freed civilians released from the hold of slavers, so we'll need medical personnel awaiting us."

(This is Arcturus Station Control. You are clear for landing.)

Joker casually brought the ship into dock and shut the thrusters off. Once the magnetic clamps locked the Normandy into place, that served as cue for Kaidan and Ashley to leave the bridge to retrieve the former slaves from the medbay. They led them out the cargo hold to the care of the medical personnel waiting for them. Both Alliance soldiers approached the lead medical officer and gave him a salute.

"We'll take it from here, sir. Anything else?"

"Earlier," Kaidan informed, "we submitted Zaeed Massani to the medical bay. Has he been recovering well?"

"He's almost recovered, and he's made a few attempts to escape custody," the lead medic answered, "command is starting to consider having him moved to high-security."
Kaidan sighed as he shrugged.

"Is it safe for Williams and I to speak with him or no?" Kaidan asked.

"Should be," the medical officer nodded, "we've now got guys taking shifts at his room, ready to run interference if he tries anything."

"Thank you, sir," Ashley smiled, "we'll go have a talk then."

Both Kaidan and Ashley wandered out of the station and made their way to the medical bay. Arriving at Zaeed's room, they acknowledged the pair of soldiers outside before entering. The former Blue Suns merc groaned as he slowly sat up.

"The hell you muppets want?" Zaeed demanded.

"Just to check in and see how you're faring," Kaidan answered.

Zaeed raised an eyebrow.

"Is that so?" Zaeed paused.

Kaidan nodded without saying anything.

"You seem to be a little enthusiastic about leaving," Kaidan mentioned, "care to share why?"

Zaeed gave Kaidan a blank stare as the Alliance biotic sat down in a chair.

"I just needed to head out and return a few favors, preferably sooner rather than later. My question is, are you going to try and stop me?"

Ashley folded her arms.

"It depends," Ashley replied, "who is it?"

"My bastard second-in-command," Zaeed answered, "shot me and left me for dead. Get the picture yet?"

Kaidan couldn't help but scratch his head in response.

"So where are you even going to go if your own mercenary group has kicked you out?" Kaidan asked.

Zaeed took a moment to think over the question.

"I've scraped myself from rock-bottom before, I can do it again," Zaeed shrugged, "I only need to kill Santiago. Reclaiming my position in the Blue Suns is out of the question."

Kaidan and Ashley exchanged glances for a moment before they returned their gaze towards Zaeed.

"You could come along with us if you'd like," Kaidan suggested.

"Oh really?" he huffed, "it better be a genuine offer."

Kaidan slowly stood from his chair.

"You'd be surprised about how negotiable our CO is."
Suddenly, Zaeed swung his legs over the side of the bed.

"When do we start?" Zaeed chirped.

When the Normandy returned to the Citadel an hour or so later, Amber and Saren stood at the docking bay and watched as the dock's magnetic clamps locked the vessel into place. Kaidan and Ashley were the first ones to exit the ship. They crossed the walkway and approached the Spectres, greeting them with a salute.

"We checked in with Balak's man," Kaidan reported, "says they're handling the slaver situation."

"And I take it the meeting went well?" Saren asked.

"Yeah," Kaidan nodded, "dropped off the civies at Arcturus Station. Talked with Zaeed while we were there."

"So how's Zaeed doing?" Amber insisted.

Ashley glanced over her shoulder just as Zaeed disembarked the vessel.

"He wanted to talk," Kaidan explained, "he's more or less recovered by now, but he had something on his mind."

By the time Zaeed finished crossing the boardwalk, both Spectres focused their eyes on him.

"I didn't expect he would be here so soon," Amber commented.

"He wanted out," Kaidan shrugged.

Amber beckoned Zaeed to approach, so he stepped closer to the Spectres before he extended his hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you again, commander," Zaeed grinned.

Amber returned the gesture and shook his hand.

"What made you decide to be so cooperative again?" Amber asked.

Zaeed couldn't help but shrug.

"Your subordinates promised me a path to Santiago," Zaeed replied, "does that still hold up?"

Amber sighed before she nodded a moment later.

"I could definitely help you along."
Raiders of the Blue Suns

Miranda, Javik, Nihlus and Liara returned to the Citadel the following day. Nihlus' shuttle landed at the docks early in the morning. When they disembarked, Kasumi, Legion and Tali stood at the docks waiting for them.

"Ah, you're back," Tali greeted, "Shepard's called us together for the next mission."

"Already?" Liara blinked twice.

"When she found out you guys had already left," Tali clarified, "she told us to await your return, get word to you guys that our next course of action has been planned out."

Javik let out an irritated groan.

"I'd rather not," he protested.

Liara and Miranda glared at Javik.

"You can head back to my apartment if you want," Liara hissed, "you've got a key, so just go on back."

Javik snarled at Liara before he shoved her aside and stormed off in disgust.

"All right," Nihlus sighed, "now that he's on his way, what's next?"

Tali, Legion and Kasumi led Nihlus, Miranda and Liara through the docks and made their way to the Normandy. Standing near the railing, James was waiting for them.

"Ah, you're here," James greeted with a smile, "Commander's aboard."

Nihlus flexed his mandibles into a grin and placed his hand on the Alliance lieutenant's shoulder.

"Anything we miss?" Nihlus asked.

James shook his head as he, Nihlus, Liara and Miranda crossed the boardwalk.

"That Blue Suns merc we picked up a while back wants a bit of payback on his former group leader," James explained.

Nihlus raised a browplate just as they stepped aboard the vessel.

"A vengeance mission, you say?" Nihlus clarified.

"Yeah. If you have any doubtful thoughts about this, you try convincing him. He's nothing short of hellbent on this Santiago," James shrugged.

Nihlus shrugged before he, James, Liara, Tali, Miranda, Kasumi and Legion made their way towards the bridge. There, they found Saren and Amber studying the galaxy map.

"Lola!" James called over, "our comrades are here!"

After she glanced over her shoulder for a moment, Amber wandered to their position to greet them.

"Good," Amber replied, "just finishing up plotting our next course of action."
James grinned as he placed his hand behind his head.

"What's your input about our good friend Massani?"

"He's taking some time to adjust to his new surroundings," Amber shrugged, "last I heard."

"So where are we going?" James clamored.

"He gave us the coordinates to the Blue Suns hideout," Amber answered, "so that's where we're going."

"And we can trust him?" Nihlus interrupted.

Amber couldn't help but shrug.

"If he was setting us up for an ambush," she replied, "I doubt whatever the Blue Suns had access to would be too much to handle."

Amber turned on her feet and approached the pilot seat.

"Joker, you ready?" she asked him.

"Yeah, let's go," Joker nodded, "it just might be worth our time."

Thus Joker began the procedure of requesting authorization for departure. Moments later, the dock's magnetic clamps released the Normandy just as its engines started up.

"Where is this Massani, anyways?" Joker looked nervously over his shoulder as he continued, "is he in the crew deck?"

Amber stretched her arms over her head.

"Want me to go get him?" she offered.

"At least check on him," Joker suggested, "see that he's not up to no good."

Amber nodded before she turned to leave the bridge. Getting onto the elevator, she began her sweep of the crew deck. A minute or so later, she found Zaeed leaning back on a bench. More specifically, he was in the mess hall, taking shots from an unlabelled bottle of liquor. The Alliance commander slowly approached the bench, catching the former Blue Suns merc's attention.

"What's up, kid?" he blurted.

Amber folded her arms behind her back.

"We're on our way to your former hideout," Amber told him.

"Good. I was getting warmed up," Zaeed slowly stood to his feet, "a little buzz in the system before we land."

Amber led Zaeed out of the mess hall and through the corridor until they reached the bridge.

"What can you tell us about this place?" Amber asked.

Zaeed placed his hand behind his head as Amber turned on her heels and locked eyes onto him.

"Arms manufacturing facility," he answered, "I had a preference for keeping all the materials we
used in-house. Admittedly, we did steal a few Alliance designs for the suits, but everything else was engineered by the lads."

Amber hummed as she nodded at Zaeed in response.

"Impressive," Amber commented, "anything else?"

Amidst the conversation, Saren glanced over his shoulder. Zaeed started drawing out a layout of the facility and where all the defenses were located.

"I applaud the fact that you still have the data with you even after the Blue Suns abandoned you," Saren mused, scratching his mandible.

"It's only been how long since they pitched me on that rock you found me on?" Zaeed retorted, "Santiago may have been smart enough to pay off a few men to have me pinned while he shot me in the head, but he's not as fast as you may think. For all he knows, I'm still dead, so rearranging the guard won't matter."

Saren nodded at Zaeed before he began placing marks on the map. By the time he finished, he figured they might as well wait. An hour or two later, the Normandy emerged from the Mass Relay. Zaeed had set a course for Joker to enter the atmosphere from their current position. It didn't take much longer for the vessel to reach the planet's orbit. The team headed for the cargo hold and packed into the shuttle below. When the team finished filing in, Amber slid the door shut and sat down next to Saren. Zaeed helped the shuttle pilot navigate through the dense jungle on their approach. When the shuttle made its landing several minutes later, Amber and Saren were the first to disembark, followed by Zaeed, James, Liara and Miranda. She ordered the shuttle away before starting their advance.

The instant they spotted the facility up ahead, they crouched behind some shrubbery and scanned their surroundings for any Blue Suns on patrol. Zaeed beckoned to the others to follow him through the dense jungle.

"Careful," Zaeed warned, "I've got sentry nests scattered across the hills around this place. We'll only get so far before we set off a few bells and whistles."


They continued their trek through between the trees. He put up a clenched fist and knelt.

"Hold it. First outpost is just ahead."

Amber examined Zaeed's fist before she scoped ahead. It didn't take long before she spotted the outpost in question.

"So what's the plan?" Amber asked, "you said there was a work-around?"

Zaeed nodded.

"Due to the resources I had when I first set this place up," Zaeed explained, "the towers were interspersed with automated defenses."

Miranda nodded while she turned on her omni-tool and examined the radar.

"Yeah, I see it," Miranda agreed, "shouldn't be too hard to disable."
"You sure?" Zaeed blurted, "I did put good money into the software on those things."

Miranda raised her eyebrow at Zaeed.

"I've worked with some strenuous firewalls before," she mentioned.

Zaeed made a sarcastic gesture.

"Then be my guest," he replied, "test the system."

With her omni-tool at the ready, Miranda got to work. Slipping through the automated turret's field of view, she got close enough to disable it. With that boost of confidence, she tapped on her omni-tool one more time. Only a few minutes later, she deactivated the turret's IFF and beckoned to the others to advance.

"I'm impressed, lady," Zaeed remarked with a wink.

She ignored him and fell in behind his lead. It didn't take much stress for them to reach the outpost. They were at the outer layer of defenses for the facility when Zaeed told them to halt. He pulled his rifle out and loaded a grenade into the underbarrel launcher.

"Now, this is the point when we can't remain quiet anymore," Zaeed announced, "pick your targets and make those shots count."

Saren nodded as his mandibles fluttered.

"Yeah...here goes nothing..." Saren muttered.

From there, the rest of the squad readied their weapons. Zaeed predictably fired the first shot, causing a pillbox to burst into flames and signaled an immediate giveaway to the Blue Suns. Rushing from the treeline, they closed the distance to the front gate. Mercenaries stood with their rifles aiming at them upon arrival. Saren answered with a biotic barrier to keep the squad safe in their approach. With luck on their side, Zaeed, Amber, Liara, Miranda and James opened fire on the mercenaries at the gate.

"Come on out, Santiago! I know you're here, you fucking rat!" Zaeed had decidedly taken point, screaming expletives every step of the way.

Amber, Saren and their squad didn't hesitate to rush through the gate. They found themselves in a hangar area, meant for the deployment and maintenance of mobile defenses. The squad began sweeping the area. Orders started blaring over the intercom, demanding the local garrison defend the facility. Liara took this as a cue to keep an eye on the large door further into the hangar. A door at the far side of the room opened up, revealing a Blue Suns squad headed by an asari.

"Dr. T'Soni?" the asari narrowed her eyes at Liara, "a kid like you should've stayed in school."

Liara glared at the asari mercenary. She tossed a singularity only to have it deflected off to some other corner of the room.

"You're going to have to try something more advanced than that. Sic 'em!"

The Blue Suns instantly charged at the Spectres and their squadmates. They took cover around the room, attempting to flank them.

"Arterius," James called over, "orders?"
"Try to push back," Saren ordered, "get a few frags out if you have to."

Zaeed reaches for a frag grenade on his utility belt.

"Cover me," Zaeed added, "I'm taking that bitch down before she causes any more trouble."

He tossed the first at a group in cover and a second at the asari. Her shields flickered as the fragments caused her shields to disperse. Too late did she recover to find Zaeed practically on top of her with a five inch blade in his hand. The crunch of the sheet of steel entering her skull was barely audible over the sound of gunfire. By then, they cleared out the hangar.


Amber and Saren led their squadmates through the large door. They rushed down another corridor into what looked to be the manufacturing line that Zaeed mentioned during the briefing. Amber spotted movement behind a conveyor belt and aimed her rifle. On the catwalks above, another team rushed to meet the commotion. The head of the squad overhead paused for a moment and squinted.

"Zaeed Massani, in the misshapen flesh. And I didn't believe the reports when the men over the radio said you were alive and well."

"If you're going to be offing me like that, Santiago," Zaeed spat, "you'd better be prepared to finish the job!"

Saren tilted his head upwards as he twitched his mandibles.

"Level the mad dog out!" Santiago ordered.

The Spectres and their squadmates immediately aimed their rifles at Santiago and his team.

"I don't think so," Saren growled.

Shots rattled through the machinery as they exchanged fire. Miranda and Liara supplemented the fire with biotic warps. They scrambled madly between the machines, searching for sufficient cover. Santiago scurried along the walkway, so Zaeed gave chase. Under an exit on the catwalk above, he followed through another doorway below. Santiago glanced over his shoulder for a brief moment before he aimed his gun at Zaeed. He fired a few rounds, only catching the edges of the former founder's shields.

"You disappoint me, boy!" Zaeed called over.

Growling, Santiago disappeared through the door behind him. The former founder didn't hesitate to continue his pursuit. Saren rushed to follow only for the door Zaeed disappeared behind to shut tight. The turian Spectre stomped over the door and attempted to open it. After a few seconds of struggling, he couldn't get it open. Muttering a curse, he rushed back to the others as they mopped up the last mercs in the room.

"We need to find a way around."

"Was the door barricaded?" Liara blinked twice.

"Locked tight," Saren corrected.

Amber scanned the room in search of a shortcut. Short on time, they headed down another door
along the other wall. They scurried through the corridor while picking off stray Blue Suns mercs along the way until they reached a door. Saren took a moment to attempt to open it. The lock yielded and the door opened deeper into the facility. Both Spectres scoped ahead before they gestured their squadmates to follow them through the door. They entered another manufacturing room and faced off against another squad. James checked his clip for any available grenades. Throwing a frag, the explosion caused the next wave of Blue Suns to scatter.

"Keep moving!" Saren reminded.

Following close behind, Amber heard a ping over coms.

[I heard the explosion,] Zaeed growled, [what the hell is going on over there?]

Amber blinked twice before she turned on her omni-tool.

"How'd you find this frequency?" Amber demanded.

[You're the spec-ops present here, you figure it out! Anyways, Santiago's bookin' it for the landing pads towards the top of the facility. Where are you?]

Saren and Amber exchanged brief confused glances.

"Not sure," Amber answered, "we're still at the manufacturing level."

[Try and find a lift up. There are plenty of those down there, meant for getting the finished products up here for shipment. Get going.]

Amber sighed as she ended the transmission.

"Ok," Amber announced, "let's search for a lift!"

They continued to sweep the room, cautious of the next platoon of Blue Suns.

"Hey, Shep!" James exclaimed, "over here! I think this next room might be it!"

James gestured to a doorway and series of conveyor belts leading to a room labelled processing. Miranda approached the door and didn't hesitate to push it open. Waiting for them, just at the other side was open, unused packaging and the aforementioned elevator that Zaeed told them about. Saren, Amber, James, Liara and Miranda stepped into the elevator. Amber jammed her fist against the button for the top level and watched as the doors closed. They waited as the lift carried them to the top level.

Overhead, they heard the distant roar of an explosion followed by a howling crash. When the elevator door opened, Amber sprinted outside. Dead Blue Suns lay scattered about and a gunship lay smoldering in the distance, having crash-landed on a platform. Zaeed was profusely bleeding from a side and was limping towards the gunship. She wasn't sure why, but the Alliance commander couldn't help but feel a harsh chill down her spine. Reaching the side of the gunship's cockpit, Zaeed put a fist through the window and yanked it open. While the former Blue Suns founder reached inside the gunship, Saren appeared at his mate's side. They approached close behind, hearing the quiet conversation between the two Blue Suns founders as they got closer. None of them were eager to give in as they wrestled relentlessly. Yanking out Santiago, Zaeed slammed him hard against the deck.

"A piece of shit to the end, huh?"
Santiago spat on the ground. Blood dribbled down the side of his cheek.

"Fine. Do it, you animal," Santiago growled, "I've already set the company record. You no longer exist on this team."

"I've already cut my losses," Zaeed remarked.

Zaeed pressed the barrel of his pistol against Santiago's head and squeezed the trigger. He slowly sat down, continuing to cup his injury.

"I'll see you shortly."

Zaeed didn't pay attention to his surroundings, even when Liara rushed to his side. Ignoring her, he pulled a flask and took a sip.

"Vega!" Liara called over, "you have any medi-gel?"

"Yeah! Give me a moment," he rushed over, bolstering his weapons.

Once James knelt by Zaeed's side, he pulled out a pack of medi-gel. Tearing it open, he applied the substance to the Blue Sun's injuries.

"Can't get a break," Zaeed mumbled with a sigh.

Liara's expression softened as she placed her hand on Zaeed's uninjured shoulder.

"Hang in there," she reassured him, "you're going to be ok."

Amber turned to call the shuttle to their position for exfil. Seeing the aftermath of the battle was enough for her to confirm their mission was finished.
It was a long while later before the shuttle returned to the Normandy returned with Saren, Amber, Liara, Miranda, James and Zaeed. The former Blue Suns merc was once again rushed back to the medbay to have his injuries tended to. Amber stood outside while Dr. Chakwas met up with her.

"Sorry to bother you again, doc," Amber apologized, "our guest was pretty convinced this mission was a one-way trip for him."

"It's all right," Dr. Chakwas, "Mordin's in the middle of stabilizing him right now."

"Good," Amber advised, "keep me up to date on his progress."

Amber and Dr. Chakwas exchanged a handshake before the Alliance doctor returned to the medbay. The Alliance commander returned to the bridge and wandered to the galaxy map. With the Normandy traveling to the Mass Relay to leave the system, Amber continued to gaze at the map, even with Saren standing next to her.

"What'd you think should be done with Zaeed?" he inquired.

Amber sighed as she leaned her head back.

"I…honestly don't know," Amber admitted, "he's not in control of the Blue Suns anymore, so him going back isn't the problem. However, it's the unforeseen consequences I'm worried about."

Saren purred as he placed his hand on Amber's shoulder.

"Do you think…it's worth trying to encourage him to find something else to do with his life?"

Amber continued.

"Not sure," Saren shrugged, "by the looks of things, he's been at this for some time and I doubt he'll suddenly change his career path now."

By then, the Normandy edged closer to the Mass Relay until the ancient structure flung it into FTL speed.

"So what should we do? Drop him off at Huerta and let him go from there?" Amber asked.

Saren sighed as he shrugged.

"Sounds reasonable," he answered, "not that there's much in the way of alternatives."

Saren and Amber sauntered our of the bridge and made their way to their quarters, where they stripped out of their suits of armor and climbed into bed for a nap. He put an arm over her and huddled up against her back.

An hour later, the Normandy returned to Citadel space and made its way towards the massive station. Dressing back up, they returned to the bridge and waited for the ship to dock. Once the magnetic clamps locked the vessel into place, Saren and Amber didn't hesitate to disembark. While they waited for the other squadmates, the turian Spectre heard a ping from his omni-tool, so he answered it without hesitation.

{Spectre Arterius?} Sparatus called over the transmission, {are you and Commander Shepard
Amber raised her eyebrows as she tilted her head towards Saren.

"We just got back," Saren answered.

{Could you two get over here?} Sparatus insisted over the transmission, {your Prothean's being a bitch.}

Saren and Amber exchanged confused glances in a moment of silence.

"We're…on our way," Saren muttered, "what's he doing that warrants our intervention?"

Saren heard an audible sigh from the transmission.

{Tinkering with the Keepers, keeps on saying "they're connected" or something. Might want to get over here before he overpowers the officers here.}

Saren ended the transmission and tilted his head towards Amber.

"Javik's messing with the Keepers…again," Saren sighed.

Amber groaned as she facepalmed.

"Oh for the love of…right, let's go," she muttered.

Saren and Amber sprinted out of the docking bay and raced through the Presidium. They reached the elevator for the Citadel Tower and started their journey up. The Alliance Commander leaned her back against the wall as she folded her arms. She let out an audible sigh and rubbed her forehead with a finger and a thumb.

"This is going to be fun," she grumbled.

A while later, the elevator stopped at its destination and the door slid open. They entered the Councilors' office area and knocked on Sparatus' door. The turian Councilor opened the door with a disgruntled expression on his face.

"Come in," Sparatus beckoned.

Saren and Amber wasted no time as they stepped into the turian Councilor's office. Javik was sitting angrily at the side of his desk with a couple of C-Sec officers standing behind him. Amber glanced at the Prothean before she returned her gaze towards Sparatus.

"So," Amber asked, "what'd he do exactly this time?"

"Rough-handled a Keeper," Sparatus answered, "he tore it apart this time."

Amber shook her head in disbelief and shot a glance back at Javik.

"Javik," Amber scolded, "I told you not to mess with the Keepers, didn't I?!"

Javik folded his arms as he huffed.

"I would've found something had I been given a bit more time to work with," Javik protested.

Amber returned her gaze towards Sparatus.
"What'd he do specifically?" Amber insisted.

"Cut open a Keeper, somehow didn't cause the thing to blow up," Sparatus added.

"You do know the Keepers have implants that rapidly heat the organic tissue and cause it to combust, correct?" Javik interrupted.

Saren raised a browplate.

"Is that so?" Saren paused.

"Yes," Javik nodded, "and it's most certainly not Prothean tech."

Sparatus sighed as he paced around his desk.

"So you were really willing to risk destroying a Keeper to prove a point?" Sparatus repeated.

"You are a fool," Javik scoffed, "there are fabricators deep within this station that are perfectly capable of replacing any destroyed Keepers within seconds. The fact you primitives haven't taken the time to investigate this station much less the creatures that maintain it is a complete failure on your part."

Sparatus folded his arms as he and Javik exchanged fierce glares.

"I am aware of the Reaper threat, Prothean," Sparatus warned, "but it's the Council's responsibility to ensure the safety of the Citadel's people."

"Everyone will die anyways if you don't get off your fucking ass and act on the threat!" Javik protested.

Snarling as his mandibles flared, Sparatus stared down the Prothean with a hawklike gaze.

"And ignore the public's safety?"

"Are you deaf?" Javik shouted, "everyone dies if we fail to react! The galaxy will continue to rise and die so long as they exist!"

Saren sighed in disgust, having growing tired of this argument. The turian Spectre didn't hesitate to barge in between Sparatus and Javik.

"Look, pointing fingers won't accomplish much earlier anyways," Saren interrupted, "however, I'm still partially vouching for our Prothean friend here. What he could've pulled out would've been an interesting find."

Sparatus made a brief glance at Saren before he slowly nodded.

"Go on," Sparatus beckoned.

"If all the Keepers are rigged with killswitches," Saren suggested, "it would've been helpful to get one for R&D to pick apart. Maybe get some better insight into the Reapers' technology before they arrive."

Sparatus thought over the offer as he scratched his mandible.

"Fine," Sparatus rolled his eyes, "but the next time you're going to pull a stunt like this, do it on a Keeper that's down some dark alleyway or generally out of sight from public areas."
Javik slowly stood to his feet.
"I'll be on my way then," he huffed, finding his way out of the office.

Shortly after Javik left the office, Amber tilted her gaze towards Sparatus.
"Should we put a collar on the Prothean?" Amber asked.

"No, he'll just try to break it," Saren corrected, "just put a tracking bug on his omni-tool."

"Whatever tool you use to keep that Prothean out of trouble," Sparatus agreed, "I welcome it."

Saren gave Sparatus a salute before he and Amber left the office.
"I know just the thing to keep an eye on him," he muttered to her.

Amber raised her eyebrows.
"What do you have?" Amber asked.

"Simple program," Saren answered, "any anti-virus on his device will ignore it, thinking it's a GPS application."

Amber smiled at Saren as he placed his hand on her shoulder.
"So how do we get it to him?"

"We'll be with him when he cuts that killswitch from a dead Keeper," Saren suggested, "I'll need to be in close proximity with him to pass the bug on, so maybe keep him distracted with a question."

Amber nodded at Saren before she turned her gaze towards Javik. They stood by him silently as they went down the Citadel Tower elevator. Once the elevator reached the base floor, they left the tower and meandered through the Presidium. Traveling into the wards, Javik followed a Keeper on maintenance duty down an unused street. The Prothean glanced over his shoulder and locked eyes onto the Spectres for a split second before he continued moving forward. He took a taser program and shoved it into the back of the creature before he shoved a blade in its neck. Forcing it into the ground, the Prothean started cutting the skin off the Keeper's head.

"I only have a small window to do this," he explained.

They knelt on either side of Javik.
"How did you know to do this?" she asked.

Javik glared at her over his shoulder, allowing for Saren to install the program.
"Hard work and luck," Javik replied, "I can explain later, but I need to focus."

Amber nodded while Javik got back to work. She stood next to Saren and folded her arms behind her back. He nodded in confirmation of his success. Now all they had to do was wait while the Prothean continued making delicate cuts to the Keeper. Over the course of several minutes, Javik carefully extracted pieces of Reaper tech and placed them on the ground.

"Got it. Let's go," between Javik's fingers dangled a few wires dripping with fluids.

Amber made a brief glance at Saren, who set down a container, allowing Javik to deposit the tech
inside. Once the Prothean sealed the container, he lifted the container into his arms and made his way out of the alleyway with the Spectres following him.

"I presume your salarian doctor is available?" Javik mentioned.

"Mordin?" Amber clarified, "I can call him if you'd like."

"That'd be appreciated," Javik nodded.

Amber turned on her omni-tool and scrolled through her contact list until she found Mordin's number. She didn't hesitate as she started a transmission.

"Mordin, are you available?"

[Zaeed's currently resting, what do you need?] Mordin replied over the com-link.

"Something Javik dug out of a Keeper," Amber explained, "I want a more professional eye on it."

Amber heard Mordin take a deep breath over the com-link.

{Very well. Can make time for it.}

"Thank you," Amber smiled, "we're on our way."

When she ended the transmission, Amber gave Saren a thumbs up.

"Let's go," Saren beckoned to Javik.

Javik reluctantly followed the Spectres through the streets of the Citadel. By the time they found Mordin's apartment, Amber didn't hesitate to knock on the door.

"Ah, come in. Door's unlocked. Prepping mobile lab," he called from inside.

Saren and Amber exchanged brief glances before the turian Spectre opened the door and led his mate and the Prothean inside. On the dining table, Mordin had a full kit unfolded before them.

"Good to see you here, commander," Mordin greeted, "now, must see specimen."

Amber glanced over her shoulder and nodded at Javik, prompting him to step forward and set the container onto the table. Mordin opened the box and peered inside.

"Hmm," Mordin observed, "most interesting."

Mordin picked out one of the pieces and carefully examined it. As Saren, Amber and Javik stood by and watched, Mordin continued to prod at the pieces he pulled out of the box one by one.

"Well," Mordin commented, "it's quite clear from all discoveries of Prothean tech, this doesn't even come close to resembling anything we know of."

"Oh, how lovely," Amber snarked as she rolled her eyes.

Irritated, Javik gave Amber the stink-eye.

"So, does this signify proof that the tech of this station is not even the product of my cycle?" Javik clarified.

"Yes. Obviously," Mordin nodded, "such neurological tech not Prothean handiwork."
Saren took this chance to take a step forward.

"Do you think we could find good use to this tech?" Saren asked.

"Applicability beyond causing self-destruction?" Mordin answered, "without a doubt. Could provide better insight to Reaper network, too."

Amber nodded at Mordin as he returned to study the Reaper tech. She tilted her head towards Javik, recalling a certain memory from earlier.

"Javik," Amber asked all of a sudden, "how many...slaves have you owned?"

"Due to my previous status, several around my household," Javik calmly answered, "however, they were disciplined, not medically controlled."

Saren couldn't help but feel a chill trickle down his spine. He figured Amber had a reason she wanted to ask that question, but he didn't expect Javik to openly answer without a twinge of nervousness. The Prothean still maintained his air of confidence that he was nowhere near the level of social or moral unacceptability. When the turian Spectre returned his glance at Amber, he noticed her expression told a different story.

"So how did you discipline your slaves?" Amber demanded.

"Collars and electric prods, wore them down over time."

Little did Javik know, flames flickered in Amber's eyes.

"You know what?" Amber commented harshly, "you're as bad as the batarian Hegemony."

He looked at her with daggers in his eyes.

"Primitive," he muttered as turned back to Mordin's work.

Amber still kept her fierce glare on Javik even as Saren placed his hand on her shoulder.

"You're not changing his opinion now," Saren sighed, "just let him wallow in his inflated importance."

Amber softly closed her eyes as she leaned in closer to her turian mate.

"I just wish I could," she admitted, "it would also be nice if we didn't have to fight the Reapers."

"Life wouldn't be that easy," he replied.

With their brief conversation already over, they waited until Mordin finished his analysis. Mordin looked up from his work and turned to face them.

"I can't say much from such a brief view, but these samples do provide great insight on the Reapers' network," Mordin said, "I'd like to have a few more days to gain a better analysis."

Both Spectres returned their gaze towards the salarian doctor.

"Thank you, Mordin," Amber smiled, "let us know when you're done."
The Commander is Tired

With Amber having to keep up with her Spectre duties, she checked her calendar in her omni-tool, reminding herself that she now had ten months left to save the galaxy. For now, she had a meeting to attend between the quarians and the Geth on their progress. Shutting off her omni-tool, she slipped on a casual short-sleeved blouse and brushed her hair while she stared into a mirror.

Her green eyes showed signs of exhaustion as she couldn't sleep throughout the night. She walked out of the bedroom and into the living room. Saren had been working on some paperwork in his office as she passed by the door. With her mate busy, the Alliance Commander headed over into the kitchen and poured some coffee into her travel mug. She took a sip, feeling the bitter tang rush down the back of her throat. Amber added some small amount of sugar to mix into the coffee before she closed the lid and carried it with her to the front door. She put a hand on the door knob, temporarily hesitating to open it. When she did push it open, she stepped out of the apartment and closed the door behind her. She stretched her arms and took another draw from her cup.

When Amber left the building, she began meandering through the Presidium in search of the rendezvous point. People weren't exactly accustomed to seeing Geth roam freely in public yet, so she was told to meet them at the port where their ship landed. When she reached the port, she found Tali'Zorah, Kasumi and Legion standing near the boardwalk. Kasumi had been talking with the two for some time before Amber's arrival.

"Uh, Keelah?" Tali gestured to Amber, "Shepard's here."

Kasumi turned to face her.

"Hey, Shep. You been alright lately?" Kasumi asked, "you look a bit under the wind."

Amber gave them a soft smile.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she lied, "so how's relations been between the Geth and the quarians?"

Tali scratched her head.

"For the most part, we're getting along fine," Tali answered, "however, several of the admirals are still skeptical and have opted to land their fleets farther from Geth populations."

"Ok," Amber drawled.

Kasumi nodded in agreement.

"I mean, it makes sense," Kasumi added, "they're essentially having a Cold War for three centuries before they abruptly call a truce. There's no doubt going to be a few on either side that's still going to believe this is only a ruse."

Amber clapped her hands together.

"So," Amber said, "should we get going?"

"Affirmative," Legion agreed.

Upon cue, Amber, Tali and Kasumi followed Legion across the boardwalk and aboard the Geth vessel. They walked back to the docks where they congregated in a break room. Kal'Reegar
straightened his back when he saw Amber step through the door.

"Commander."

"Kal'Reegar," Amber greeted, "it's been a while."

"Likewise," Kal'Reegar replied, "I'd like to thank you again for helping us through this."

Amber smiled at Kal'Reegar before she turned her focus towards the conference table.

"Thanks," Amber acknowledged, "so what's the news?"

Upon cue, Legion turned on the holographic projector. Locking her eyes onto the holographic projection, Amber began reading the text.

"We have come to the consensus that a future can still be achieved, even with the creators in close proximity," Legion explained.

"So…this is a treaty you came up with?" Amber clarified as she gestured to the text on the screen.

"Yes," Legion replied, "we recognize the need for adapting back to Rannoch's environment. We have given the creators numerous unused territories to inhabit."

Kal'Reegar let out an audible hum as he read the treaty.

"Looks reasonable," Kal'Reegar said, "it'll give the skeptics some room to calm down."

Tali nodded in agreement just as she finished reading the treaty.

"This could work," Tali agreed, glancing over her shoulder, "Shepard?"

Amber snapped into attention.

"So we're in agreement, then?"

Now that both the quarians and the Geth in the break room accepted these treaty terms, they took turns signing it.

"Good to know we can get through this," Kal'Reegar stood to his feet, "so are you feeling alright, commander? You seem a bit distracted."

"Yeah," Amber placed her hand behind her head, "I'm fine."

They all filed out of the room shortly after. After parting ways with Tali, Kasumi and Legion, Amber made her way to a park near the Presidium and sat down on the bench. She took some deep breaths, taking a moment to relax. Testing the temperature of her travel mug in her hand, she sipped the last of her coffee. The solitary tranquil moment lasted until she checked the time in her omni-tool several minutes later. Getting back up, she slumped the rest of the way back to the apartment building. She didn't even reach the entrance to the Presidium when she saw Thane stepping into the park.

"Shepard, you seem unwell," Thane called over, "is there something on your mind?"

Amber paused in her tracks and tilted her head towards Thane.

"I wanted to step out into the outdoors for a bit," Amber shrugged, "how are you doing?"
"Just enjoying the sights of the Presidium while I still can," Thane replied, "I'm feeling increasingly ill myself."

Upon closer observation, she noticed that Thane had taken on a more pale look than when she last saw him. Additionally, the skin around his neck had become wrinkled and flaky. His posture was more hunched as well, no longer bearing the upright position of attentiveness.

"Wait…you're sick?" Amber paused.

"Kepral's Syndrome," he answered simply, "drell evolved in more arid environments, so extensive exposure to moist environments runs the risk of causing the lungs to eventually deteriorate, slowly losing their ability to supply the bloodstream with oxygen. I'm currently in the late stages, so I have only a few months more at most."

Amber felt a chill down her spine as her expression softened.

"Shit," she muttered, "you're not going to be around for much longer then, huh?"

"Yes," Thane nodded, "I won't be attending any more missions, either. However, I'm at peace with the universe and I've found closure for questions I've been unable to answer. Now, I'm inclined to relax and enjoy what life I have left."

Amber turned on her feet and began walking side by side with the aging drell.

"Does Kolyat know?" she pondered.

"He does," Thane nodded, "he was saddened by the news, but he's come to reason with my condition. It's an inevitability."

As they continued to saunter through the paved path, Amber and Thane made brief glances at the vast array of flowers in nearby fields.

"May I ask what is bothering you?" he returned.

Amber sighed as she clutched her travel mug to her chest.

"I've been stressed by the current Reaper issue," she admitted.

"Go on," Thane slowly nodded.

Thane and Amber found a nearby bench, which prompted them to sit down on it. She sighed as she put down her mug on the seat beside her.

"I thought the incident in Akuze triggering humanity's first contact would be a huge event in my lifetime," Amber continued, "but it turns out there's more than that."

"If it bothers you, perhaps it would relieve you to expose it?" Thane inquired.

Amber nodded as she slowly sat upright.

"I just worry that I can't save everyone," Amber sighed.

"Then do not mire yourself impossible feats," Thane advised, "what you and your team have done is started a series of events that will unfold over the next several months leading to their arrival. This is still a collaborative effort. If you haven't saved everyone, then you'll have at least saved most of civilization."
Amber tilted her head towards Thane and placed her hand on top of his.

"So what should I do instead?"

"Live a little," Thane suggested, "keep the momentum up, but do not starve yourself completely of the joys of life."

"Thanks," Amber smiled.

"If it helps, my pleasure," he stood up and looked back at her once more before stepping away, "I should be on my way. Do take my advice into consideration."

Amber slowly stood to her feet and made her way out of the park. Once she returned to the apartment, she placed her travel mug onto the coffee table and plopped down onto the couch just as Saren made his way into the living room.

"I assume the Geth and quarians are playing nice?" Saren greeted.

"They're getting along well enough," she nodded.

Saren stepped over to the couch, beckoning Amber to move over before he sat down. The Alliance commander then scooted back, allowing him to wrap his arms around her from behind. Noticing the fatigue in her eyes, he reached for the remote.

"Want me to put on something quiet for you?" Saren offered.

Amber softly nodded. He turned on the holoscreen and flipped through the channels. When he read a particular title and its summary, he flipped to that channel, the screen now displaying footage of birds on a tree branch. He let her rest her head on his shoulder as they watched the program. The sounds of chirping soothed the Alliance commander as she nestled into his embrace. They continued to watch for some time without a word. Turning to ask a question, Saren found her fast asleep on his side. Carefully slipping his hands under her, he carried her off to their bedroom and slipped her under the covers. Purring, he nuzzled his face against hers. He stepped out of the bedroom and closed the door behind him.

In the meantime, Javik had been itching to visit the library, so after some persuasion, Liara and James agreed to accompany him. Saren had messaged the former earlier about the bug he planted on Javik's omni-tool as to better keep the Prothean in her sights. She kept that message to herself as they stepped through the door.

"Remind me, what are you looking for again?" she asked.

"That is none of your concern," Javik dismissed.

James beckoned her closer.

"What's the plan?" James asked just outside of the Prothean's auditory range.

"Follow him, but keep our distance," Liara advised, "he's been incredibly jumpy as of late and I don't think he's here just to entertain himself with reading material."

"Gotcha," James drawled quietly.

Javik calmly walked along the rows, eyeing the category placards for each shelf. He stopped at one shelf and began browsing the books. He drew out one book and took a moment to read its title. He
continued to preview several books on the shelf, quickly sifting through the basic contents before putting the text back. Having come up short, Javik continued browsing the shelves. Following close behind, they had a look for themselves at the books Javik looked at. James raised his eyebrows after he read one of the titles.

"Ethics of Genetic Modification?" James commented, "I thought he was a soldier, not a scientist."

James lent Liara the book, allowing her to examine the title. She took the time to read over some of the text's contents.

"I agree," Liara said, "it doesn't add up."

Liara glanced over her shoulder before she gestured James to continue tailing Javik. Peeking around the next corner, they found Javik pulling another book and briefly looking at it. The Prothean seemed satisfied with the book he found, so he started reading it. The two kept their distance from him before pulling around the corner.

"Remind me, who among Shepard's team is capable of utilizing hacking software?" Liara asked.

James placed his finger on his chin as he thought over the question for a moment.

"There's Kasumi. She could work something," James mentioned, "should I call her?"

"Yes. Let her know for now," Liara nodded, "if he checks that book out, I want to know what book that is."

Upon cue, James turned on his omni-tool and scrolled to Kasumi's number. He quickly wrote a message and sent it off. While the Alliance lieutenant waited for Kasumi's response, Javik closed the book and clutched it to his chest.

"Vega?" Liara whispered into James's ear, "you got time? I need your help."

James snapped out of his thoughts and nodded at Liara. They both began tailing Javik to the checkout counter. They waited behind as Javik left the library for Kasumi. After a few minutes, the Alliance lieutenant and the asari made their way through the door. Outside, they met the Alliance tech.

"So what's the problem?" Kasumi asked.

"We have suspicion that Javik's up to something," Liara explained.

She crossed her arms and shifted her weight to one side.

"So what do you need me to do?" Kasumi replied.

"See if you can find what book he borrowed at the front desk," Liara suggested.

Kasumi made a sly grin.

"I can do that," she acknowledged, "Just give me a minute, okay?"

She tapped her omni-tool and disappeared before them. All Liara and James could do was wait outside the library. Just over a minute later, Kasumi reappeared next to them.

"Can't make much of this," Kasumi informed, "does it mean anything to you guys?"
Kasumi turned on her omni-tool. The cover read *The Fundamentals of Bioengineering* with an impressive list of salarian authors.

"You don't think Javik might want to rope Mordin into doing something related to this, do you?" James pondered.

"Doubt it. Not without confronting the commander about it first," Kasumi replied.

Liara places her hands on James and Kasumi's shoulders.

"Still, I feel this is something we have to relay to Shepard, considering Javik's increasing list of antics."
A few days later, Miranda checked her inbox in her omni-tool. There was an unread message from an unidentified sender waiting for her. As she opened the message, she could easily figure out who sent it.

*Another tidbit of intel I figured would be helpful. Make of it what you will.*

Miranda found a file attached to the message, so she opened it without hesitation. Inside the file, she found a list of coordinates. With a smile of confidence, Miranda stood to her feet and made her way out of her office. She gathered her belongings and made for the door, sending Amber a message on the way out. Meandering through the wards, it wasn't long before the former Cerberus operative arrived at the docking bay. She entered the Normandy airlock and waited through the decontamination cycle on the way in. She made her way to the bridge, where she met up with Amber and Saren.

"What've you got?" he greeted.

"A clue that could give us the chance against Cerberus," Miranda answered, "I know where Cerberus HQ is. It's located in the Horsehead Nebula. However, Cronos Station has an advanced IFF system that'll pick up the Normandy even with the stealth systems engaged. We'll need the code of a registered Cerberus agent to get in without alerting the whole station. Thanks to the Shadow Broker's intel, we got an opportunity."

Miranda whipped up her omni-tool and recorded the coordinates onto the map. Amber leaned back and nodded with approval.

"Well, if we're going to be striking directly at the Illusive Man himself," Amber agreed, "this is probably our best chance."

Saren stretched his arms before he made his way towards the pilot's seat.

"When will maintenance wrap up?" Saren asked.

Joker glanced over his shoulder.

"Several minutes, at least," Joker answered, "we'll be heading out shortly after maintenance is done."

Saren slowly nodded as he took a calm step back. He returned to the galaxy map and peered at their destination. By the time maintenance procedures finished several minutes later, Joker began the procedure for authorization for takeoff.

"We're probably going to need a full team for this operation. There are two operatives on the ground, one of which is the most dangerous assassin the Illusive Man has at his disposal," Miranda explained.

Saren and Amber took a moment to exchange glances.

"Perhaps we might want to send a message to Jack and Wrex," Saren suggested.

"I suppose a few additional biotics could help," Amber agreed.
Amber turned on her omni-tool and scrolled to Wrex and Jack's numbers before she whipped up a quick message. Just then, the magnetic clamps released the Normandy, compelling Joker to activate the vessel's thrusters. On their way to the Mass Relay, she received a message back.

{Want us to meet you along the way?}

Amber took a moment to think over the question before she sent a response.

{Yeah. I'll send you the mission coordinates.}

She attached the mission coordinates into her next message before she sent it. After that, she returned to the galaxy map while the Normandy reached the Mass Relay. The ancient structure pulled it in and flung it into FTL speed moments later. Saren examined the map over Miranda's shoulder.

"So, what are we looking at?" Saren asked.

Miranda glanced over her shoulder.

"If we're lucky," Miranda told him, "it could be a trump card against the Illusive Man."

She gestured to the holomap.

"We're looking at a mining colony," she continued, "whether the two agents on the field are here to make a deal or promote Cerberus isn't specified. What matters is they've been here for a few days and are staying for a week, so we've got a bit more time to take one out, get their ID code, approach Cronos Station with it, and tear the station inside out."

Amber nodded in agreement as she continued to study the marked coordinates.

"Any ideas for entry points?" she asked Miranda.

"Take a shuttle down to one of the mines, then take a ride on one of the ore carriers back to the colony," Miranda suggested, "if Cerberus does have a presence here, they'll be keeping an eye on the port, so we'll get in quietly that way."

Saren folded his arms as he flexed his mandibles.

"Sounds like a plan," he agreed.

A couple hours later, the Normandy emerged from the Mass Relay. They were landing at a human colony just at the border between Alliance and Hierarchy space. When the vessel reached the planet's orbit, Saren and Amber ushered Garrus, Miranda, Kaidan, Ashley, Liara, Tali, Legion, Kasumi and James aboard the shuttle. The shuttle left the Normandy and entered the planet atmosphere below. In a matter of minutes, the shuttle landed near an entrance to the mines. As they disembarked, Ashley tilted her head towards the sky and watched as another shuttle descended from the atmosphere. The instant it landed, Jack and Wrex emerged from the shuttle.

"Hey, Ashe!" Jack called over while waving her hand before she scurried over to Amber's team.

"Jack!" Ashley exclaimed, "you look like you've been doing well for yourself. How've you been?"

Kaidan watched as Wrex trudged over to their team.

"We just got done with our part," Wrex grumbled, "Dr. Okeer is in the middle of finalizing the cure for the Genophage."
"Been painful?" Kaidan asked.

"A little," Wrex shrugged, "it involved a lot of cutting and needles."

Jack took a moment to stretch her arms before she readied her weapon.

"So, a couple of Cerberus agents, huh? That's basically friendly fire for you, right?" she shrugged, gazing at Miranda.

"I'm not part of Cerberus anymore," Miranda remarked, "so it doesn't count."

"Whatever," Jack rolled her eyes, "so what's so high-profile about these two that requires us to come along?"

"It's just one of them," Miranda replied, "ever heard the name of Kai Leng?"

Amber's brow perked at the mention of the name.

"Didn't he attack us when we rescued the Rachni?" Amber mentioned.

"Yes, he was there," Miranda confirmed, "the Illusive Man has mad extensive use of his prior N7 training. On top of that, he's received numerous mechanical enhancements during his service with the organization."

Garrus finished preparing his rifle.

"How extensive are we talking about?" Garrus insisted, "because if he's fifty-percent metal by now, a well placed EMP round would essentially leave him crippled, no?"

Saren raised a browplate.

"Maybe as a last resort," Saren suggested, "for now, provide overwatch."

With a plan in progress, Amber and Saren led their squadmates into the mines. Garrus took a few steps forward and scoped ahead.

"What're those Cerberus agents doing down here, anyways?" Garrus pondered.

"Reaper artifacts usually aren't sitting around on the surface," Miranda answered, "chances are the miners found something and the Illusive Man sent them to pick it up."

Kasumi turned on her omni-tool and activated its radar.

"Looks like we've got miners still up ahead."

Upon cue, Amber stashed her rifle.

"I guess we won't need weapons for this occasion," Amber commented, "still, keep your guard up. Kai Leng was a brute when he was an N7 and I have no doubt he's holding up long after he was discharged."

Amber and Saren continued to lead their squadmates through the dim tunnels. In the caverns below, they could see the teams of civilians working away alongside mining vehicles. From there, Miranda surveyed their surroundings.

"Seems calm so far," Miranda observed.
Amber nodded at Miranda before she started examining each of the miners.

"I suppose," Amber said, "let's keep going. Maybe they haven't retrieved that package yet."

Amber nodded at Saren before they led their squadmates into another tunnel. Working their way past the miners, they lingered deeper into the caverns. Towards the lowest caves, they spotted from above numerous lamps pointed at a single object, with the earth around it completely dug out. The two agents were observing a Prothean beacon with the prospector standing nearby.

"Miranda?" Amber whispered.

Miranda examined the agents and the prospector and it didn't take a few seconds before she pointed at Kai Leng among the trio. She then gestured down the path.

"There's Leng," Amber announced, "let's try to close the distance, see if we can make it easier on ourselves. Garrus, stay up here. Be ready with that overload in case he proves to be troublesome."

"I'm on it," Garrus nodded.

The rest moved downward to the area below, keeping quiet as to not draw further attention. They even had to resort to keeping at a certain distance.

"Right, here's the plan. That other operative is the least of my concerns. We deal with her quickly, then move on to Leng. Jack, Wrex, you see what you can do to make him keep his distance," Amber ordered.

"You got it, Shepard," Wrex replied.

They took action and rushed in. The female agent glanced over her shoulder only to notice the barrel of a gun pointing at her face. At such a close distance, the subsequent blast tore clean through her shields. Kai Leng spun around without warning after hearing the sudden commotion. They formed a semi-circle around him as he yanked in the prospector as a human shield.

"Shepard, what a lovely surprise," he chuckled.

Amber froze in her tracks as just as she aimed her rifle at the Cerberus assassin.

"Leng. Fancy seeing you here. I assume that beacon is of some importance?" she eyed Kasumi as she moved in on the downed agent to rip the omni-tool off of her.

The Cerberus assassin kept his eyes locked onto the Alliance commander as he pressed the barrel of his gun on the prospector's head.

"It always is," Leng answered, "you never know what data these devices hold, so we decided to buy it out first."

His mandibles twitching, Saren let out a growl. His aim swayed lightly over the agent's head. However, he hesitated to fire as the shot may not necessarily penetrate and the prospector would be shot in reaction.

"Don't you think it's going too far?" Amber snapped, "holding a civilian at gunpoint like this is low, even for you."

Kai Leng shrugged at the proposition, taking it into consideration.

"I suppose you're right," Kai Leng agreed.
With a single motion, he shoved the prospector at the group to distract them before drawing his blade and jumping straight at Amber. Miranda thought fast and emitted her biotic field before she leapt into action. She put a barrier above Amber as Leng made his strike. His blade punctured the barrier and came increasingly close to his face when Wrex lashed and knocked him aside. The Cerberus assassin clutched at his side in pain as he struggled to get back to his feet. The team fired upon him, but he simply dodged the volley of shots laid in his direction. Liara rushed to the prospector's aid and emitted a biotic shield. The asari yanked the miner away from the combat area while the others struggled to even hit Leng as he continued to either dodge or deflect rounds with his blade.

Without thinking, Jack charged at the Cerberus assassin with her biotic field active. Anticipating the move, he dodged her attack and put his blade through her back. Jack's eyes looked down in horror as she witnessed the sheet of metal jut out from her stomach.

"Watch your footing next time, Subject Zero."

Kai Leng pushed Jack to the ground while Wrex watched in horror.

"Dammit, you shit!" Wrex snarled, "you better keep your guard up, because the moment you're down, I'm blowing your brains out myself!"

His temper building with rage, the krogan charged at Kai Leng with his weapon at the ready. The Cerberus operative cut clean through the krogan's chest armor and stomach without warning.

"Thanks for the advice," Kai Leng smirked.

Stumbling in pain, Wrex barely managed to reach Jack's side. Saren stared in disbelief before he activated his coms.

"Garrus, anytime soon would be preferable to even the odds!" Saren ordered.

{I'm trying, but I can't get a clear shot!}

Groaning, Saren began scanning the area in search of something to distract the Cerberus assassin. Biotically, he flung a rock from the ground at the agent. Leng responded by slicing the rock in two clean halves.

"You think I didn't see that coming?!" Leng spat, "keep tossing them, skullface!"

Saren responded by lifting another rock in the air with his biotics. He continued to toss more at the agent, either to be sliced or tossed back with the agent's own biotic capabilities. Little did Leng know, this gave Garrus a chance to make a more precise aim. A single electrical burst caused his neurological enhancements and visual prosthesis to short out.

"W-What the…?!!" Kai Leng stuttered.

Miranda used her own biotics to shove him into a corner of the room.

"Sonuva—!"

He managed to get back to his feet before he rushed over to the side of the beacon and pulled off a small, magnetic device.

"This'll do. I'll see the rest of you later."
The agent cloaked and disappeared. With Amber and her squadmates staring in disbelief, Ashley scurried to Wrex and Jack's side.

"It's bad," Ashley observed, "I don't think we'll have time to get that beacon without risking these two bleeding out first."

Amber's expression softened as she saw Wrex gently holding Jack's hand in his own. She didn't hesitate to activate her coms.

"Joker, send that shuttle back to the mine entrance we landed on and have Chakwas ready for two severely injured squadmates," Amber instructed.

{How bad is it?} Joker asked over the com-link.

"All I could say is that they're most likely on the brink of death," Amber answered with a sigh, "lots of internal bleeding, and in Wrex's case, I can't tell the extent of the damage without removing his armor."

{Don't worry,} Joker reassured over the com-link, {help is on the way!}

With a sense of relief, Amber ended her transmission.

"Let's get them back to the surface," Amber advised, "Garrus, get down here and help get Wrex back topside."

Liara, Miranda and Saren scrambled to aid Wrex and Jack. The team hurriedly rushed to the mine entrance where the shuttle was already waiting for them. Garrus and Saren escorted Wrex while Kaidan and Ashley carried Jack with her arms over their shoulders. Kasumi followed close behind, looking over her omni-tool with Miranda.

"Will this apply to the Normandy?" Kasumi asked Miranda.

"Yes, this is it," Miranda nodded, "we can mask our own IFF signal with that of the downed agent's identity. At least if Kai Leng hasn't returned to Cronos Station before us. No doubt he'll have reported his companion's death, so we'll have to act fast."

Kasumi and Miranda joined the others aboard the shuttle and sat down beside Tali and Legion. The doors closed and the shuttle returned to orbit.
The Greatest Cerberus Raid

Once the shuttle settled in the cargo hold and the squad disembarked, Garrus, Saren, Kaidan and Ashley escorted Jack and Wrex to the medical bay. The krogan was still in shock considering the extent of his injury. With both patients on the operating tables, Mordin and Dr. Chakwas examined both of them. The salarian doctor began stripping the krogan of his armor.

"I'll keep you up to date to their recovery," Dr. Chakwas reported, "for now, I can't tell you much based on initial analysis."

"I…understand," Kaidan reluctantly nodded.

The four left the medbay and headed to the mess hall. Saren found Amber sitting alone at a table with a mug in her hands.

"Shepard?" Saren called over, "I was thinking if this is something we can do on our own, or if I should let the fleet know what's going on, and coordinate this effort."

Amber glanced over her shoulder before she beckoned her turian mate to sit down next to her.

"Maybe we could use as much help as we could get," Amber admitted, "Miranda said this can cripple Cerberus as a whole…then it'll be a matter of dealing with the pockets."

"So…something similar to the last push in the batarian revolution?" Saren clarified.

"Yeah," Amber nodded, "I know things won't be pitch-perfect by the end, but we need to get this done soon."

Amber took a sip of her beverage.

"Maybe then get an opportunity to think of the wedding some more," she added.

Saren chuckled as he placed his hand on Amber's shoulder.

"I'd like to think so, too," Saren agreed.

Once Amber finished her beverage, she and Saren made her way out of the mess hall and arrived at the bridge. While the turian Spectre overlooked the galaxy map, Amber scrolled to General Victus's number in her omni-tool. The instant the transmission started, Saren joined in the call.

"General?" Saren greeted, "Spectre Arterius here, we're planning on attacking a Cerberus station, and it won't work without some additional help."

{I assume you have the coordinates?} Victus asked over the com-link.

"I can send them to you," Saren offered, "we'll be getting and attempting to damage the station internally. But it's too big a mission to do alone."

"Do you have any other volunteers?" Amber added.

{I'll see if I can talk a few other generals into this fight. Other than that, I'll start coordinating my fleets.}

Saren took this as a cue to send Adrien the coordinates.
"Thank you, General," Amber smiled.

{We'll see you there.}

With a tap on her omni-tool, Amber ended the transmission. She stepped over to the pilot seat as the Normandy approached the Mass Relay. Miranda was down in engineering with the mechanics masking their ship IFF with the ID they took. Joker maneuvered the vessel towards the ancient structure, letting it envelop the ship in energy particles and send it into FTL speed. He stretched his arms and let out a nervous puff of air.

"Let's hope this works," Joker muttered.

Amber stretched her arms behind her back.

"Same here," Amber agreed, "but, if it's anyone I know will get us to the station and back alive, it's you. Now make it happen."

"Roger that, Shepard," Joker nodded.

An hour later, they arrived out of FTL in the Horsehead Nebula. Minutes later, Amber and Saren saw a turian vessel emerge from the Mass Relay. She opened coms to the incoming vessel.

"This is Commander Shepard speaking," Amber announced, "care to identify yourself?"

{This is General Victus of THS Titan. I've got a few other vessels on the way to help.}

A smile formed on Amber's face.

"Welcome to the club," Amber replied.

{I assume you have a plan?} Adrien asked over the transmission.

"We'll be first to approach the system the station is located in," Amber explained, "once we arrive, we'll get inside, see if we can disable any defenses on the way in. Former Operative Lawson can give further detail on this matter. After the defenses are down, we'll give the all-clear for your approach."

{Sounds like a reasonable strategy, commander,} Adrien agreed over the transmission, {we'll be holding position, then.}

"Take care, Victus," Amber replied, "commander out."

Amber ended the transmission before she nodded at Joker. The flight lieutenant took this as a cue to continue flying the Normandy towards the station. Miranda returned from engineering shortly thereafter.

"Our signature is masked," Miranda announced, "we're good to go."

Amber glanced over her shoulder.

"Thanks, Miri," Amber smiled, "start gearing up. We'll be jumping out the moment we get on the station."

Turning on her feet, Amber made her way out of the bridge with Saren following close behind. The barracks were packed with the team slipping into their armor. Amber made her way to her locker and slipped on her helmet. She then double-checked her ammunition while she gathered her
weapons. She slipped in the first thermal clip and holstered the weapon. After that, she attached several more thermal clips to her pack. Finishing up, they regrouped in the cargo hold, prepared to disembark when they got to the station hangar. Already, the Normandy was closing in on the station.

(We're on our final approach to Cronos Station. Have fun down there.)

Moments later, the vessel shuddered as it came to a complete stop. Amber and Saren led Garrus, Kaidan, Ashley, Liara, Tali, Legion and James out into the airlock. They brandished their arms as they prepared to board, waiting for the airlock to open. Once the hatch opened, they jumped into the hangar. They immediately ran to cover and took position against the defending station technicians. Amber took a moment to check for a clear shot. Two guards had come in to investigate the commotion on the deck overhead.

"Shepard," Kaidan hissed, "orders?"

"Miranda gave me a layout of the station," Amber advised, "we'll be disabling automated defenses to allow General Victus to approach the station without too much trouble. Then we'll move on from there. Maybe we'll get the Illusive Man."

"Copy that," Kasumi agreed.

"Well, since we'll be going loud eventually," Garrus hummed before popping out from cover and shooting both guards with two consecutive shots to the head.

Amber didn't hesitate as she burst out from her cover. Just then, Cerberus soldiers were heading into the hangar to investigate the commotion.

"Open fire!" a Cerberus soldier shouted.

Saren tossed a shockwave, rippling through the ground and knocking the Cerberus soldiers off their feet. That gave the other squadmates a chance to advance. Amber hung back with a 3D rendered map of the station on her omni-tool with two highlighted markers. The red spec represented their own location and the blue dot marked the location of the automated defense controls. From there, she had a concept on where they had to go. They rushed into an elevator out of the hangar area began the travel upward. Once the elevator reached a higher room, its door opened and the Spectres led their squadmates out into the corridor.

"Auto controls are on this level. Careful, we're way in the deep end, now," Saren muttered.

"Right," Garrus drawled.

Amber continued to guide them with the map Miranda had provided, occasionally running into a few patrols before the alarm was finally sounded. With the station on high alert, the Spectres and their squadmates had their weapons at the ready.

"Please tell me we're getting closer to the defense control," Tali moaned.

Legion faced a door at the other side of the room.

"Multiple hostiles approaching from west vector," Legion warned, "get ready."

Ashley and Kaidan took the hint and made for the frontline. The door opened to reveal a heavily armed team ready to engage them. Both Alliance soldiers opened fire first. Quickly, they were being overwhelmed and were forced to continue deeper into the station. James hit the key on a
door panel and beckoned to the others, barely yelling over the gunfire. James led the others to the
door as it opened. Closing the door, Kaidan fried the lock and stepped away from the door.

"That'll keep them until they decide to head around," Kaidan sighed.

"Nice one, Kaidan!" Amber gave Kaidan a thumbs up.

Legion loaded a thermal clip into its weapon.

"We advise continuing lest we maintain the risk of being overwhelmed."

Amber nodded at Legion before she stepped ahead of her squad.

"We're almost there, just a few turns ahead," Amber reassured.

As they continued their sprint, they fired their rounds at Cerberus soldiers that attacked them. The
team continued to rush forward with no intent of slowing down. Turning at each corner, Garrus
scoped any patrol guards with his rifle in his hands. He gestured ahead, allowing Ashley to take
point. They arrived at the door and set up a perimeter as Legion cut through the lock. James and
Liara provided cover until the Geth unit completed its task moments later. The lock security
disengaged and the door opened. Tali and Legion then continued to the defense controls and got to
work shutting the system down. Amber and Saren gestured the other squadmates to scatter across
the room. They took to cover, waiting for any sort of retaliatory force to follow them inside. With
their omni-tools active, Tali and Legion navigated through the system's heavy security.

"This shouldn't take much longer. Just give us breathing room and we'll have the system down
shortly," Tali informed.

Garrus found a suitable place to perch, giving him a clear view of the entire room from above.
Vega and Ashley were waiting on either side of the door, cautiously peeking outside. Saren, Liara
and Miranda kept vigilant in case they needed to activate their biotic shields. The minutes drew on
as they waited on Legion and Tali's progress. It didn't help that they heard approaching footsteps.
The turian Spectre glanced over his shoulders.

"Here they come," he warned, "get ready."

Amber loaded a new thermal clip into her rifle. A patrol rushed by the door down the corridor,
initially paying no attention to them when one turned to face the door. Walking in, the guard was
shot the moment he entered by Garrus above. The others followed shortly and were picked off by
Ashley and James as they rushed through the doorway. With both Alliance soldiers still keeping
vigilant at the door, Tali and Legion soon managed to overcome one more security measure in the
system. As Legion finished up, Tali started smashing a few monitors with a tool she kept on her
kit.

"There," Tali informed, "the automated defenses are completely useless."

Saren nodded before he scrolled to Adrien's contact number.

"General?" Saren informed, "we've disabled the station's defenses, you should have an easier time
on your approach."

{Thank you, Spectre,} Adrien replied over the com-link, {we're on our way.}

"There, that'll ease the pressure," Amber sighed, "now that we've got a fallback plan, now we can
start putting on the pressure. We'll try to work our way to the top of the station, see if we can find
Saren placed his hand on Amber's shoulder, giving her a reassuring expression. They filed out of the room shortly after with the Spectres hanging towards the back. Overhead, the familiar metal ring of a klaxon hovered up and down the hallway with a voice booming over the intercom.

{All units report to your stations. External defenses are unresponsive and there are numerous hostile vessels approaching. Prepare to defend.}

"Now we really pissed them off," Ashley remarked, "it'll be nice to have fewer to deal with on our way through the station."

Kaidan stopped at a corner and pressed his back against the wall. Down the hallway, several soldiers rushed across the hallway to some unseen post without looking their direction. After he took a quick peek, Kaidan turned his head towards the Alliance commander.

"Looks like we've lost their attention," Kaidan reported, "should we keep it that way?"

"Yeah," Amber nodded, "in fact, let's go pay a visit directly to the man himself. Miranda, what's the fastest way up there?"

Miranda double-checked the map in her omni-tool.

"Never really touched this level before, but I'm confident the lift is down that way."

"All right," Garrus offered, "lead the way."

Grouping up, they followed her down the corridor. Passing one more corner, they reached the lift in a short amount of time. The elevator car was surprisingly large for something only a handful of people would be using. Getting inside, they hit the elevator button and rode up. This was a chance for them to take a brief rest during the ride. Alarms rang throughout the station, barely being audible through the elevator shaft as they passed each floor. Then, the alarms went silent as they reached the top floor. They had little time to ponder in confusion, so they quickly stepped out of the lift. It was a small corridor with doors leading to servers on either side of the hallway leading to a set of double doors at the end. Opening the doors, they stepped into a massive office with a single chair and holographic displays in the middle. Outside of the window was the view of a dying star in the distance. Much to Miranda's disappointment, the chair was visibly empty.

"What the…?" Miranda blurted.

This was unusual. For the extent the Illusive Man ran the pro-human group, he maintained it from the safety and comfort of this office. So where could he have gone that mandated leaving the room, if not the station? Amber and Saren approached Miranda and stood on both sides.

"You want us to locate him?" Amber offered.

"I can probably get a good idea to where he may have set off to, but I can guarantee…" she was stopped when she saw movement in the corner of her eye.

Without warning, Miranda pushed Amber out of the way, prompting Saren to jump back. Something moved in the shadows, and she already knew who it was.

"I'm surprised you let us onto the station," Miranda commented.

Leng decloaked, blade fully drawn.
"I'll admit, I got back not too long after you entered the system," the assassin replied, "that overload had knocked out my telecommunications equipment, so I couldn't get word back that you had stolen some Cerberus credentials."

Miranda, Saren and Amber staggered back to their feet, their piercing eyes locked onto the Cerberus assassin.

"Last chance to surrender, Leng," Saren growled.

"I'll take my chances with you and the approaching fleet," the assassin laughed, "it'll be a shame to see the famous Commander Shepard fall. On the other hand, your preserved carapace will look nice in my trophy room, Arterius."

Saren sighed as he emitted his biotic field. The assassin leapt into the air, pouncing onto them with a ball of biotic energy in the other hand. The turian Spectre sidestepped Leng just before he landed. He and the others narrowly dodged Leng's attacks and raced to put distance between themselves. To keep the Cerberus assassin off his focus, Miranda and Saren took turns throwing biotic warps at him.

Amber extended a blade from her omni-tool, cautiously watching the assassin's movement. Her vigilance allowed her to sidestep Leng's next pounce. She narrowly blocked his next killing blow and was continuously forced onto the defensive. With Leng focused on her, they both clashed their blades again. He grinned back at her with dagger-like teeth.

"You can keep up," he said, "a surprise to be sure, but a welcome one."

"Fuck off," Amber growled.

She shoved him back a few paces, allowing for Saren to toss him aside. He followed up with several rifle shots at the assassin. Kai Leng gasped for breath as he clutched at a bullet wound that started bleeding profusely. Returning his focus, he charged back for another retaliatory attack. Amber kept sidestepping him as she fired her rounds at him. Rolling to one side, she turned to fire her rifle when the assassin immediately cut her weapon in two. Forced to ditch it, she switched to her pistol, careful to make the most of her shots. Saren stood by her side as he shielded her in his biotic field. She nailed a few more shots on the assassin before Miranda slammed Leng hard against the floor. They straightened up a bit as he ceased to move before turning to the desk. Taking a seat, Amber pulled up a holographic keyboard and started working her way in.

"Now let's see what he's hiding," Amber muttered.

Miranda and Saren had their attention fixed to the monitors in front of them, drawing their attention from the assassin. Leng pulled himself up and quietly stumbled up to them from behind. He raised his sword, poised to impale Amber from behind her seat. However, Garrus flexed his mandibles as he kept a fierce glare at Leng from a perch. Amber, starkly aware of the Cerberus assassin, was narrowly saved when Garrus stunned her attacker with a non-lethal slug. She rose from her seat, avoiding his blade, extending her own again, and jabbing it deep into his appendix.

"This one is for Jack and Wrex," Amber snarled, "you son of a bitch!"

Amber pushed Leng backwards with a swift kick in the gut. He produced a last few coughs before finally going slack on the ground, a pool of blood forming underneath him. Nodding at Garrus for the assist, she returned to the seat and started pulling open the most recent files. Saren turned around and glanced over Amber's shoulder. A grainy hologram formed before him. It showed an elder human male within what he could only assume was his fifties. He wore coal-black formal
attire with a white collar and a gray undershirt. His eyes were illuminated with bright blue circles, almost like lights.

{You're sitting in my chair, Commander Shepard.}

Amber let out a harrumph.

"So how come you're not in your office?" she remarked.

{Accomplishing the next steps. Required my direct attention.}

"The next steps of…what?" Amber paused as she gave the hologram a confused stare.

{I've known of the Reapers for a bit longer than you have. At the end of the day, I, like you and your own crew, intend on stopping them, but I see much greater possibility with what we know of them. Their technology, both malevolent and malicious, is the stepping-stool to humanity's evolution. But I wouldn't expect you to understand.}

"Then why don't you tell me what you know?" Amber insisted.

{You've seen the Keepers as much as I have. No doubt Ms. Lawson has also told you about how their tech changes organic tissue. They can pave the way for our place in this galaxy, if…well, the last thing I need is for you to interrupt, so I'll leave it at that. You're headstrong. I'll give you that. But you're unwilling, lacking the strength and conviction to see what matters most through. As I said, I wouldn't expect you to understand.}

Amber glared at the hologram and stood to her feet, allowing Saren to take a seat.

"So that's it? The rest of us don't matter?" the turian grunted.

The Cerberus leader scowled.

{This is humanity's first line of defense. We stand out or drown. Knowing your ability to show up at the most inconvenient times, I'll be severely disappointed to see you absent, Shepard.}

The image fizzled out, fading from sight. In dismay, Saren and Amber exchanged glances.

"Now what do we do?" Amber asked.

Miranda took to the keyboard and madly installed as much as she could onto an OSD.

"We can't let the trail go cold," Miranda said, "this is probably the closest thing we have to a clue. There has to be some indication to what his intentions are."
With the turian fleet docked at Cronos Station, Amber and her platoon figured their work was done here. They returned to the hangar where the Normandy was still docked. The small portion of the Cerberus presence that survived narrowly fled the system. Coincidentally, Adrien Victus stood near his vessel as he was waiting for Amber and Saren. He and a platoon of turian soldiers had finished sweeping the station. He saluted both Spectres as they approached him.

"This mission was a gamble and did have its costs, but we did it," Adrien said, "we took out their HQ. Now, I hope you found some loose ends before we leave this heap."

"Well," Amber admitted with a shrug, "almost."

Miranda brought out the OSD.

"We might have something," Miranda added, "but it'll take us time to figure out where the Illusive Man plans to strike next."

Miranda handed Victus the OSD, allowing him to examine it.

"Do you have the technicians to decipher this, or do you need my help?" Victus asked.

Amber folded her arms behind her back.

"We have our own technicians that would do the trick," Amber smiled.

Amber's squadmates gathered a few meters, and Adrien raised his browplate upon catching a glimpse of Legion.

"Acknowledged," the Geth followed with a few clicks and whistles.

Adrien handed the OSD back to Saren.

"I trust you'll make something of it, Spectre," Adrien replied.

"Thank you, general," Saren saluted.

They returned to the Normandy bridge minutes later. With Kasumi and Tali resting on a bench, Amber stepped towards the galaxy map.

"Joker, take us to Arcturus Station," Amber instructed, "command is going to want to hear about this."

"You got it, Shepard," Joker nodded.

The pilot got to work bringing them out of the station dock and out of the system. As the Normandy continued to travel through space, Amber turned towards Saren and placed her hand on his shoulder.

"Maybe we'll have time, then?" Amber asked, "to make arrangements?"

"Yeah," Saren agreed, "I'm sure we will."

They left for their personal quarters, stripping their armor as the two got off the elevator. Once they
made their way inside, they stored their armor before the Alliance commander gestured her turian mate to her bed.

"Saren?" Amber mentioned, "are you getting a little riled up? I know I am."

He chuckled, reaching for his belt.

"I could go for a few rounds," Saren agreed.

Climbing onto the bed, Amber pulled off her tank top and tossed it onto the floor. Saren climbed in afterwards, kicking off his pants and dropping his shirt to one side. With the Alliance commander having finished stripping to her underwear, she perched on top of the turian Spectre and pulled him into a deep kiss. The turian Spectre hungrily cupped her waist, shifting his weight above her. With both Spectres laying on their sides, Amber drew small circles on the back of his neck while he did the same for her. Saren nuzzled his face against hers, listening to her soft moans as she reached for her panties and slid it down her legs.

"You mind if I go down on you today?" Saren whispered into her ear.

Amber stared into Saren's eyes and nodded.

"I need this as much as you do."

"That's what I wanted to hear," Saren replied.

Saren traced his tongue along her chest and dragged it along her stomach until he located her nether regions. Letting out a pleased sigh, Amber perched her legs over his carapace. He greedily wormed his talons into her folds. She arched her back and gasped the instant he circled his thumb over her clit.

"Yes," she hissed softly.

Feeling him dig deeper, her hand hovered over his wrist, lightly yanking it deeper. With each thrust from his talon, heat gradually built up in her core. After a few moments, Saren withdrew his talons before he started circling his tongue at her entrance. The saline taste of her sweat was enticing, but the musty smell that rose from deeper was even more alluring. Amber stroked his fringe, encouraging him to burrow his tongue inside. Feeling the worm-like movements of his tongue feel her walls caused her to take in a long, shaky breath. She bucked her hips against his tongue as he kept his grip on her waist. Saren stuck the full length of his tongue out inside, rubbing his upper lip against her clit.

Between pants, Amber pressed her head against the pillow and tightened her grip on the sheets. She let out a sharp gasp as she rode out her climax. Saren slowly withdrew his tongue before he sat up, his length having started to extend. Still dripping with her fluids, he dragged his tongue along the side of her neck. Amber nuzzled her face against his as she straddled her legs.

"I'm ready to give it a go," Amber whispered, "you?"

Saren's mandibles flexed into a smile as he purred. Running his hand down her back, he allowed Amber to position the tip of his length at her nether regions. She perched her hands on his shoulders as she slid down on him. He started brushing her folds, leaning forward to meet her lips. When they deepened their kiss, the turian Spectre burrowed further inside until his tip touched her cervix. He gasped as the warm moist flesh squeezed the ridges and spines along his shaft.

"I…aaah…" he attempted to whisper something to her only to have his words drowned out by
ecstasy.

"S-Saren," Amber stammered.

Saren's chest rumbled in purrs as he shifted her onto the bed, the turian Spectre hovering above her as he started pounding into her flesh. He dug in, clutching her tightly.

"You won't mind…if I go a bit rough…?"

Amber responded by giving his back light scratches.

"Don't overdo it, ok?" Amber advised.

Saren nodded before he kissed her forehead. He had been cautious with her as to not cause severe scarring. Now, he was gradually going faster, keeping an ear out for where her limit was. Amber could feel her breath quicken as he accelerated his pace. She instinctively wrapped her legs around his waist. He eventually found a healthy maximum and continued to leverage his waist into her. With each thrust, both Spectres felt pressure building up inside of them as their mixed fluids eased their friction. For a brief moment, he paused as his body wracked with the high of his climax. He panted as he ran his talons through her hair.

"You still up for another round? I know I can go for one more. A bit calmer, but one more suffice to say."

"Yeah," Amber nodded, "I just…need to change positions."

Saren took this as a cue to withdraw from Amber, allowing her to roll onto her stomach. She then hooked her legs back around his waist, inviting him back inside. Perching above her from behind, the turian Spectre started thrusting into her again. He reached around and drew circles on her clit. Leaning in, he nestled his neck upon her shoulder, gazing back at her. As she moaned between thrusts, she cupped his face with one hand. He lightly snarled, feeling her palm on his mandible. She bucked her hips to match with his rhythmic pace, encouraging him to emit biotic particles from his hand. The familiar, static thrum of the channeled energy hovered off of his body. In a matter of moments, Amber let out a loud cry as she shuddered in her orgasm, her walls tightening around his cock. He took a pause before slowly drawing out. The musty fluids generously dribbled out as he shifted back.

After he came down from his high a minute later, Saren slowly reached for the allergy meds on the night stand and stood from the bed. He headed for the bathroom to fill a glass with water. Handing the two off to her, he slipped under the covers. Amber took a moment to wash down a tablet with water before setting the glass and the container onto the nightstand and nestled into her turian mate's embrace. They melted into the darkness and yielded to slumber minutes later.

At most, the Normandy arrived at the Arcturus station a couple hours later, so Joker sent Amber a ping. The two quickly jumped back out, washed up, and returned to the bridge. They stepped towards the pilot's seat in civvies.

"We are making our final approach to Arcturus Station, ETA thirty minutes," Joker informed, "thought you two would want to be awake for this part."

"Thanks for the heads up, Joker," Amber replied, giving the flight lieutenant a pat on the shoulder, "I think it's safe enough to hand the disk off to technicians here, see if they pull anything up."

Amber took a step back and tilted her head towards Saren.
"Maybe Miranda should come onto the station," Amber suggested, "she could help."

Saren's mandibles flexed into a grin as he nodded in agreement.

"Perhaps," Saren agreed, "I'll go fetch her."

Saren turned to leave the bridge. He wandered through the corridor until he found Miranda in an office.

"Lawson, we figured that because you're relatively familiar with Cerberus encryption that you could help the station technicians with that OSD. Is that alright with you?"

Miranda perked her head up before she stood to her feet.

"So we're here already?" Miranda clarified.

"Yes," Saren nodded, "are you willing to offer a hand?"

Miranda smiled as she stepped out of her office with the OSD in her hand.

"I'll be more than happy to assist you," Miranda said.

Miranda followed Saren down the corridor until the pair met up with Amber outside of the airlock.

"Glad for you to join us, Lawson," Amber greeted.

"Of course," Miranda replied, "I presume this will take me a while, a few days' worth."

Moments later, the airlock opened, allowing Saren, Amber and Miranda to step out onto the dock. They walked along the boarding plank and entered the station. The Alliance commander led the others down the winding hallways to the command center. Inside, Anderson and Hackett were waiting for them.

"Commander, while you haven't apprehended the Cerberus leader directly, this is the beginning of the end," Hackett greeted.

"He already left by the time we got there," Amber admitted, "but we got the scent. He's onto something big, and we might now where he's going. We did pull a bunch of files from his office."

Upon cue, Miranda placed the OSD on the table, catching Anderson and Hackett's attention.

"Wow. Hadn't thought you had managed to collect nearly that much," Anderson raised an eyebrow, "at this rate, we'll find him and dig out the remaining pockets of Cerberus in a few months."

Miranda nodded at the Alliance officers in agreement.

"The Illusive Man kept all of his contacts on his personal terminal," Miranda added, "there should be everything there from company fronts to cell contacts."

Admiral Hackett picked up the OSD and examined it.

"We'll get a team working on it," Hackett said, "will Ms. Lawson be able to provide some better insight along the way?"

"If you want some help," Miranda answered, "I'll accept it."
"Cerberus software has always been a problem," Hackett agreed, "we'll take the help."

Anderson tilted his head towards Saren and Amber while Miranda took a seat.

"I'll keep you two updated as to where the bastard went and if your contribution is needed for any Cerberus cells that are too troublesome to uproot alone."

Saren nodded at Anderson before he and Amber left the command center. The Normandy stayed at Arcturus for a few hours longer for Miranda to bring some personal necessities off-board before they left. With the vessel making its way towards the Mass Relay, Amber sauntered down the corridor and entered the medbay. Dr. Chakwas turned to greet her as the door opened.

"Commander?"

"Are Jack and Wrex doing ok?" Amber asked.

Dr. Chakwas sighed as she nodded.

"They will need to rest at the Huerta when we get back to the Citadel," Chakwas mentioned.

"So they are stable, yes?" Amber clarified.

Amber took a brief glimpse of Jack and Wrex as they rested in their beds.

"Yes, commander," Chakwas confirmed.

"Thank you, doctor," Amber smiled.

She briefly paused to look at the krogan and the biotic before she turned and left the medbay. When the Normandy returned to the Citadel an hour and a half later, it hovered over to the docking bay. The two were carried out to an ambulance waiting at the dock to be transported per Chakwas' orders. Amber tilted her head to her left and noticed as Liara lowered her head.

"Something wrong?" Amber paused.

The asari snapped out of her thoughts and lifted her head.

"Nothing just yet," Liara answered.

Amber sighed in relief as she placed her hand on Liara's shoulder.

"Want to go check on Javik?" Amber offered.

"That's the issue," Liara admitted, "Javik has been increasingly exploring the Citadel sublevels during his free time."

Amber huffed as she and Liara began sauntering through the port.

"I suppose we'll look into it once Cerberus has been dealt with," Amber shrugged.

Once they left the docking bay, Liara and Amber wandered through the wards, making their way to the asari's apartment. Upon arrival, they stepped up to her door.

"So, any idea as to what he's up to specifically?" Amber asked.

Liara couldn't help but shrug.
"I really couldn't say," she sighed, opening the door.

Amber and Liara stepped inside. But when they found Javik in the dining room, they noticed he had been on the kitchen counter, yanking at something while he was squatting on top of that was just out of sight, trying to pull it out. Whatever he was working on, his attention was temporarily drawn by the two entering, causing him to flop onto his back on the kitchen floor when he let go with a painful thud and string of ancient curses.

"Javik," Amber demanded, "what the fuck are you doing?!"

Stunned, the Prothean sharply jumped to his feet and wrapped whatever he was working on in a tarp and walked away.

"Nothing of importance. Just an experiment."

For some reason, Amber and Liara couldn't help but stare in confusion and disbelief.

"Yeah, we should look into this sooner rather than later," Amber blurted.

Amber took a moment to survey the kitchen. Along with broken dishes and cups, the floor was partially drenched in what looked to be water.

"Just great," Amber grumbled.
Even if a day may have passed, Amber hadn't heard from Miranda yet. She tried to keep in mind that Miranda said it would've taken her a few days at least to find something of worth. At the moment, this was a good time for her to check on Dr. Okeer, so she scrolled through the list of contact numbers in her omni-tool. Questions filled with her head as she wanted to know of the treatment's progress. When she found Dr. Okeer's number, she didn't hesitate to give him a call. Several seconds later, the transmission came online.

{Yes?}

"Dr. Okeer," Amber requested, "have you got a minute?"

{Of course. Speak your mind.}

"How far are you with the treatment?" Amber asked.

[Still a month out.] Dr. Okeer answered over the com-link, [I'll be able to start synthesizing them, but making enough to go around will take me some time.]

Amber couldn't help but smile.

"I'll be sure to tell Jack and Wrex that," Amber said.

{By the way, how are they recovering? I heard about their run-in with the Cerberus assassin.}

Amber let out a soft sigh.

"They're starting to heal," Amber admitted, "but they're going to need another couple weeks."

{Hmm. That may delay me a bit, but that's only a hypothetical. Anyways, I'd best get back to work.}

"Talk to you later," Amber nodded.

Amber didn't hesitate as she ended the transmission. She stood to her feet and made her way to the front door. After slipping on her shoes, she stepped out of the apartment and began meandering through the Presidium. It didn't take long before she reached the Huerta Memorial Hospital. It was probably time to check on the two, maybe relay the fact she had killed Leng during the attack on Cronos Station. She stepped through the door and made her way into the lounge. She approached the receptionist's counter, catching her attention.

"Excuse me, is there an Urdnot Wrex or Jack registered here?" Amber requested, "I'm a friend of theirs."

"Give me a sec," the receptionist replied.

She scrolled through the list of patients in a moment of silence.

"Ah. First floor. Just down the hallway at the end. May I have a name?"

"Commander Shepard," Amber answered, "Alliance Navy."

"Very well," the receptionist nodded, "go right in."
Upon cue, Amber turned towards the door and made her way into the corridor. After sauntering down the hallway, she reached the door to a recovery room. The single room had Jack and Wrex on either side of the room with their beds facing towards each other. Groaning, the human biotic slightly shifted to her side and locked eyes onto Amber.

"Hey," Jack said softly, "didn't think I'd see you here."

"You doing all right?" Amber asked.

"Sorta. Spine still hurts like a bitch," attempting to turn her self to face her, she added, "can barely feel my legs, too."

Amber nodded before she tilted her head towards Wrex. The krogan was still asleep, head turned to one side. The Alliance commander sat down by Jack's side.

"Is he going to be fine?" Amber insisted.

"Of course he is," Jack confirmed, "he's a krogan. What'd you expect?"

Amber sighed in relief.

"That's good to hear," Amber informed, "we did finish off Leng later when we assaulted the Cerberus HQ."

Jack raised her eyebrows in response.

"Did you bring back his head?" Jack clamored, "or at least rip out his ocular implants?"

Amber placed her hand behind her head.

"And why would I need to do that?" she paused.

"What? It'd look good in a jar," Jack pouted, "or if you just got the eyes, it'd look good on the mantelpiece."

Amber took a moment to think over the idea.

"Maybe the eyes," Amber said, "after extensive cleaning, of course."

Jack smiled as she nestled her head into her pillow.

"If you're really lacking in imagination," Jack remarked, "you could've picked up his sword."

Amber tilted her head in confusion.

"Why?" Amber objected, "Cerberus makes loads more for other phantoms, anyways."

"But what if he put notches on the side for individual assassinations?" Jack insisted, "he must've personalized it somehow."

Blinking, Amber thought over the question carefully.

"Maybe you can pillage the next Cerberus cell we fight," Amber suggested, "after you recover."

"Deal," Jack agreed.

"Unfortunately, we didn't find the Illusive Man on Cronos Station," Amber added, "he was
elsewhere at the time and we're struggling to find him."

Jack closed her eyes and let out a sigh.

"Wow," Jack commented, "that's a huge disappointment."

"We did get a bit of his playbook," Amber reassured her, "so we can still find him."

Smiling, Jack gave Amber a thumbs up.


"That's all there was to catch up on, really," Amber added, "other than that, you haven't missed much."

Jack nodded before she relaxed in her bed.

"I'll tell Wrex you came by when he gets up," Jack offered.

"Get well, you two," she nodded, showing a smile of appreciation.

Amber turned towards the door and returned to the reception area. When she stepped out into the Presidium, she turned on her omni-tool and scrolled to Saren's contact number. Having already checked the time, she might as well invite him out to lunch. She hastily wrote a message and sent it off. While she waited for his response, the Alliance commander began browsing for possible restaurants in the station. She had found a noodle shop with levo and dextro options available.

It took her a short while to make her way into one of the wards before she stopped at the door to the noodle shop, so she leaned her back against the wall to wait for her turian mate. During the wait, she decided to look at the menu and check the options available. Sure enough, Amber found her favorite option as well as Saren's.

"Hey. I didn't delay too much, did I?" he came rushing up to her, panting as he came out of a full sprint.

Amber snapped out of her thoughts and locked eyes onto the turian Spectre as he rested his hands on his thighs and he lowered his head, still catching his breath.

"No, I haven't been here long," she answered, standing up from the wall, "ready to go in?"

After Saren recovered from his sprint, he nodded before he followed Amber into the restaurant. They found an unoccupied table and took a seat. The turian Spectre picked up a menu and started browsing through its options.

"So, where were you earlier?" Saren asked.

"I stopped by the hospital to visit Jack and Wrex," Amber answered with a shrug.

"Oh. I assume they're recovering well enough?" Saren pondered as his mandibles twitched.

"They still need time to heal," Amber nodded, "but yeah."

Saren flared his mandibles in a smile.

"Glad to hear it," Saren said, "those injuries looked rather severe."
An asari waitress approached the Spectres moments later.

"Good afternoon," the asari waitress greeted, "would you like me to get you something to drink?"

"Do you have Turian Brandy by any chance?" Saren requested.

"We sure do," the asari waitress nodded before she shifted her focus towards Amber.

"Just water," Amber replied, "thank you."

The asari waitress took a moment to jot down the drink orders.

"Do you want to wait until I come back with your drinks," she asked, "or are you ready to order?"

Saren glanced back at Amber before returning his gaze at the waitress.

"Yeah," he returned, "I think we've decided what we want."

"I'd like the chicken carbonara," Amber started.

He silently affirmed with himself that he was confident with his choice.

"I think I'll take the Oma Ker squid ramen," he requested.

The asari waitress nodded at the Spectres as she finished writing down their orders.

"Got it. I'll be back with your drinks shortly."

The waitress didn't hesitate as she left the table. After she left, they turned their attention back to each other.

"So was it your usual paperwork you were doing this morning?" Amber clarified.

"For now, yes," Saren nodded, "though, the Council has mentioned what could be our next assignment."

Amber raised an eyebrow.

"Anything specific yet?" she asked him.

"Not yet," Saren admitted, "it's still up in the air whether or not it'll happen, but I was thinking of bringing along Nihlus for the ride."

"I'm sure he'll be thrilled," Amber let out a soft chuckle, "so if we do get this assignment, when do we deploy?"

Saren let out an enthusiastic hum as he rubbed his chin.

"Most likely tomorrow," Saren answered.

"So...soon?" Amber raised her eyebrow again.

Saren nodded as he placed his hand behind his neck.

"I know it's a bit soon," Saren said.

Minutes later, the asari waitress returned with their drinks and their noodle orders.
"Here you go, just as ordered. Let me know if you two need anything else."

"Thank you, ma'am," Amber smiled.

Picking up a fork, Saren took his initial bite.

"You won't mind if Nihlus comes along," he mumbled, "right?"

"Sure, he can come with us," Amber nodded before she took a bite out of her chicken carbonara, "what for, anyways?"

"The Council thought this was at least a three-man mission," Saren clarified.

Amber nodded as she took another bite out of her meal.

"I suppose it's an important mission, then," Amber agreed.

After a while of tranquil dining, Saren and Amber finished their lunch before they both paid the bill. Wrapping up, they left the restaurant shortly thereafter. As they walked through the street side by side, Saren wrapped his arm around her shoulder. They continued home in each other's grasps. However, just as they approached the apartment building, Amber heard a ping in her omni-tool, so she opened a message from Kaidan:

{Shep, where are you now?}

Pausing in her tracks, Amber took a moment to type up a response:

{Saren and I are near our apartment. Why?}

Saren glanced over her shoulder as the Alliance commander waited for a response. Another ping from her omni-tool and she didn't hesitate to open the next message:

{Ashley and I were hanging out with Tali and Legion when Javik came by.}

"J-Javik?" Saren blurted.

"Again with this Prothean," Amber grumbled as she rolled her eyes.

Amber typed another message before she sent it off:

{What is he doing this time?}

Amber gave Saren a reassuring glance as they waited until Kaidan responded moments later:

{Acting increasingly strange. You might want to get over here.}

"So," Amber asked Saren, "you ready to stop the Prothean from causing trouble?"

"Yeah, let's go," he sighed.

Saren and Amber turned away from the apartment building and meandered through the Presidium until they reached another apartment building. The Alliance commander stepped towards the door and rang the doorbell, waiting until Kaidan opened it seconds later.

"Hey," Amber asked, "where's the Prothean bastard?"

"Living room area," Kaidan gestured, "he's been prodding Legion with a lot of questions lately."
"Thank you, Alenko," Saren nodded at the staff lieutenant.

Kaidan took a few steps back, allowing both Spectres to step into the apartment and wander into the living room.

"Alert! Alert! We require assistance!" Legion yelled from around the corner.

Rushing in, they found Javik attempting to physically drag away the Geth platform. With flames flickering in her eyes, Amber stomped towards the Prothean, catching him off-guard.

"Javik," Amber demanded, "drop the Geth right now!"

Scoffing, he ignored her and continued to yank at it. Shaking her head in disbelief, Amber didn't hesitate as she tackled into Javik. The Prothean proved himself to be incredibly strong and tossed her off with minimal effort. The Alliance commander quickly staggered back to her feet while Saren began emitting his biotic field. Everyone in the room attempted to pin down Javik and force Legion out of his hands. Using her hands, Amber searched for the Prothean's weak spot. She repeatedly rammed her fist against a spot between his plates, attempting to injure him. Javik groaned in pain as he loosened his grip on Legion. He turned his attention to the others and started thrashing around with them, ignoring Legion as it cloaked itself. Kaidan and Ashley also joined in to restrain the Prothean. The four wrestled Javik to the ground, struggling to pin him under their weight.

"Just settle down already, damn it!" Amber yelled at Javik.

"No! Get off me!" Javik howled childishly.

With Javik distracted, Tali managed to beckon Legion to scoot to safety. It decloaked and casually wandered out into the apartment block hallway. Javik attempted to scan his surroundings, only to sigh in disappointment. Shoving the others off, he rushed out, apparently missing Legion as it cloaked itself. Kaidan and Ashley also joined in to restrain the Prothean. The four wrestled Javik to the ground, struggling to pin him under their weight.

"Where is it?!!" Javik demanded, "I need it!"

"For what purpose?" Saren growled as he folded his arms.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Legion peaking from a closet, the light from his head barely visible. Before Javik could move, Saren enveloped him in a biotic field, restraining the Prothean.

"You better listen and listen closely, Javik," Saren interrogated, "I don't know what's gotten into you the moment we pulled you out of that icy coffin of yours, but I suggest you spit it out before you get us and yourself in more trouble than is necessary."

Javik hesitated for a moment before he sighed in defeat.

"Fine," he grumbled, "I'll leave the synth alone."

Saren nodded at Javik with a harrumph before he released his biotic field. Javik once again stomped out the door. Sighing in relief, Amber scanned the living room in search of the Geth unit.

"Legion?" Amber called over, "he's gone, now."

It poked its head out from hiding.
"We greatly appreciate your assistance with the Prothean."

Amber calmly approached Legion and placed her hand on its shoulder.

"Are you doing ok?" Amber asked.

"Affirmative," Legion nodded, "minimal damage taken."

Having calmed herself, Amber returned her gaze towards Saren.

"Why do you think Javik would want Legion?" she asked him.

"Don't know. He called me earlier, asked if Legion was on the station," Tali answered.

Lowering her head for a moment, Amber folded her arms behind her back.

"That doesn't look good," she muttered.

Sighing, Saren locked eyes onto Kaidan, Ashley and Tali.

"I know this may be too much to ask from you guys, but it's important we know what Javik is up to. If you get any clarification as to what he's up to, let us know," Saren added.
Hegemony Pocket Raid

Once the Council sent Saren more details on the next mission a day later, he and his human mate waited in the Spectre docks. It didn't take long before Nihlus made his arrival.

"Hello!" Nihlus chirped, "you two ready?"

"Yeah," Amber nodded, "we were waiting for you."

He calmly walked up, fully suited in his black and red suit with weapons strapped to his holsters. When Nihlus reached both Saren and Amber, he followed them towards his mentor's shuttle. Once they stepped into the airlock, the older turian Spectre glanced over his shoulder.

"A pocket of the Batarian Hegemony has been spotted," Saren began to explain, "just a handful of slavers, really. As part of our deal, we're helping out the insurgents this mission, take a load off their shoulders."

"So," Nihlus mused, "we're making sure Balak continues to reform batarian society as a whole, right?"

"Yes," Saren nodded, "but he's still working on the homefront, rebuilding what was lost, and ensuring people have homes to return to, food to eat. Dealing with these pockets is the least of his concerns right now."

The instant the decontamination procedure finished, the three Spectres made their way to the cockpit with Saren taking the pilot's seat. Starting the thrusters, he turned to his omni-tool.

"Here's the location of their camp," Saren explained, "first priority is to finish the slavers off or prevent them from getting off planet for authorities to come and pick them up. Secondary objective is to find any slaves they have, get them to Citadel Space."

Amber and Nihlus took a moment to record the coordinates before Saren took control of the steering handle. The two reviewed the dossier as they approached the Mass Relay, preparing for the jump to FTL. Once the ancient structure flung the shuttle into warp speed, all they could do was wait in anticipation. It took the shuttle an hour to emerge from the Mass Relay leading into the edge batarian space, near the border between the Attican and the Terminus systems. With the ominous presence of the Hegemony gone, merchant traffic had started to pick up with the region. However, slavers were still a consistent threat in the region, causing other ships to appear few and far apart. The older turian Spectre kept this in mind as he scanned each passing ship's IFF.

"Just merchant ships," Saren said to himself, "continuing to the set coordinates."

Taking control of the steering handle, Saren continued to fly the shuttle through space. He set the trajectory to the next system and prepared a landing trajectory with the next planet. A short while later, the shuttle reached the planet's orbit. The planet's atmosphere seemed to be dominated by barren frost, with no sign of visible life on the surface. Saren examined the radar as he searched for a suitable place to land the shuttle. Landing near an otherwise flat area, he brought the ship to minimum power to prevent freezing. The three Spectres stood to their feet and retrieved their weapons. Sealing their suits tight, they stepped out into the frozen wasteland. Strangely enough, the sky was clear despite the freezing temperatures.

"What are we looking for again?" Amber asked Saren.
Saren stopped in his tracks and glanced over his shoulder.

"Small camp of prefabs," he reminded her, "intel indicates they're set up nearby."

"Got it," Amber nodded.

Sliding down the hill, they started to trek over the open planes of frost. The three Spectres began scanning the area for possible buildings or at least some sort of hidden trapdoor which led underground. Rushing along another hillside, they peered down from above, spotting a mine entrance surrounded by a few smaller prefabs and parked vehicles.

"Well," Nihlus chuckled, "there's our way in."

Saren pulled out a rifle and attached a suppressor to the barrel.

"Find a way down there and check ahead," Saren instructed, "I'll see if I can pick off a few guards on the way in without tripping any alarms."

Amber and Nihlus nodded at Saren before they began their approach. From above, he could see a few fully armored batarian wandering the premises. Cautiously looking back and forth between the patrols, he started picking off a few stragglers, waiting for them to be out of sight from the other patrols so that their bodies didn't bring unwanted attention. If he was lucky, Saren would've made a clear path for his proteges. Holding onto the rifle, he activated his coms.

"How are you two down there?" Saren asked.

{We're almost at the entrance,} Amber answered over the com-link.

"Good, I'm packing up. I can't see any other guards from my position that I can't pick off quietly."

Putting away the rifle and ending the transmission, he followed their tracks downward. By the time he arrived at the entrance, Nihlus and Amber stood waiting for him.

"We dealt with a few more down here," Nihlus informed, "no one else out here but us, now."

"Excellent," Saren praised, "now, deeper into the facility."

Without hesitation, the three Spectres charged into the entrance. The tunnel from outside made its diagonal descent into what they presumed to be caverns below. With the map active in his omni-tool, Saren led Nihlus and Amber through the icy tunnel. They initially entered what looked to be a storage area with the lockers turned cages. Each cell was empty, with no recent sign that anyone had been inside.

"Ok," Nihlus drawled as he scratched his mandible, "this is getting weird."

"Shhh, I hear voices ahead," Saren whispered, gesturing to the next door onward.

They walked into a much bigger part of the mine, now hollowed out to allow for living capacity inside. The three Spectres didn't hesitate to scramble for cover. The interior was poorly lit, leaving shadows to coat the walls and floor.

"It's not lookin' good, boss. Lost contact with the last of the inner circles on Khar'Shan earlier this morning."

Pressing his back against the heavy stack of crates, Saren peeked from the corner as he twitched his mandibles.
"So just how many made it out?" another batarian returned.

"A couple dozen groups at most. The terrorists are currently staying in the inner to mid rims, working on building themselves up before they come finish us off. We have at least a month and a half to gather our assets and make for the Terminus."

Saren huffed as he fiddled with his rifle. He peeked around the corner at the group of talking batarians, peering at the members of the conversation.

"I'm not looking to the day Balak and his cohorts make examples of us. We'll start grabbing what assets we have left, and start off at Omega until we get our bearings. If it gets too hot there, we'll move our stuff to one of the many uncolonized locals, get some prefabs. Keep in contact with any remaining Hegemony members, but do not name any locations."

"You got it, boss."

"For now, bunker down. We're gonna be here for a while."

Saren gestured to the others to move further. The Spectres slunk from cover to cover, and to their luck, the batarians didn't notice them.

"Let's do this quietly," Saren advised, "fan out. Pick them off when you can, remain hidden when you can't. When we've finished them off, sweep through the area for intel."

"Copy that," Amber nodded softly.

They scattered across the inside of the cave, slowly wandering between cover. The trio picked off each batarian that let their guard down one by one. The team would cautiously drag off any bodies to avoid alerting the batarians. By the time half an hour passed, they managed to clear out the room.

"Nice one, guys!" Amber winked at Saren and Nihlus as she gave them a thumbs up, "what's next?"

"Keep moving throughout this mine, try and keep them unaware and maintain open coms unless," Saren ordered, "keep everyone else informed about positioning and whether you've been compromised."

"I'm on it," Nihlus nodded.

The three went their separate ways into the shallow mine. Each path they took wandered aimlessly into different patches of Earth. Saren found himself at the end of a tunnel where the miners gave up after digging too long into a patch of ice, then reverted into a resupply cabinet. Nihlus hadn't noticed the transition between ice and actual crystal when he eventually saw the rocky formations take shape around him. Amber immediately took cover when she entered another room and peeked around the corner, only to find two batarians watching over some slaves kept in pens.

"I don't understand why we're keeping these around, boss. We're on our back foot and we don't have time to bring these along," some underling sighed.

"You got a problem?" the high-ranking brute snarled, "careful, a wrong word could cost you an eye or two."

"We're heading to Omega of all places. Aria doesn't really care for anyone 'sides her girlfriend, the people under her employment, the people who piss her off, and the politicians she's got strung up. A few humans who disappear off the streets will hardly catch her attention."
The leader pulled a dagger and slashed it across the guard's face, causing the guard to flinch with pain, clutching his face.

"Fine, I like picking favorites. Just because the Hegemony is in a state of ruin gives you no room to back talk me. Now, get the leashes."

The batarian underling slumped his shoulders before he turned on his feet to get to work. She stood up from her set of cover and took aim at the batarian leader. Amber didn't hesitate to squeeze the trigger, blasting out the batarian leader's brains. The adrenaline boost helped to steady her aim enough to swing over the next batarian and finish him off. Amber then turned towards the slaves in the pens. Putting aside her weapon, she took a closer look at the locks. After a moment, she managed to open the lock. The Alliance Commander activated her coms.

"Saren, I've dealt with the batarian team leader," Amber reported, "I also found a few slaves down here."

{I'm on my way, Shepard, } Saren replied over the com-link.

The com went silent as she beckoned to the slaves to come out.

"It's ok," Amber reassured, "we're here to help."

They seemed to tremble as they walked out, initially uncertain of her claims of freedom. Saren arrived minutes later.

"How many?" Saren asked.

"Three," Amber answered, "still have yet to be broken."

Saren nodded at her before he cautiously approached the freed slaves.

"I think the mine should be clear by now," Saren advised, "bring them near the entrance and keep them safe, I'm going to head out and find a place to land my shuttle to a place where they can be moved onboard without being exposed to the exterior."

"Ok," Amber nodded.

Heading back up, they regrouped with Nihlus and returned to the front area with the slaves in tow. Both turian Spectres scanned their surroundings until they confirmed the coast was clear. Saren continued outside to get the shuttle and find a hangar area to land the shuttle at. Once he found the shuttle, he didn't hesitate to board it and jump into the pilot seat. He brought it gently into the air and flew back to the camp. By the time he located the hangar, Amber and Nihlus stood near the freed slaves. The hangar had a small elevator that led from the bottom of the mine entrance back to the surface, presumably to move ores to the surface more easily. Saren landed the shuttle and opened the hatch, allowing Amber, Nihlus and the freed slaves to climb aboard. Sending a message confirming their mission, they left the planet surface back for Citadel Space.

While the shuttle traveled through the system, Nihlus left the cockpit to check on the freed slaves.

"Alright, now we'll be back at the Citadel in a handful of hours," he told them, "all you guys gotta do is just sit tight back here, you got that?"

The former slaves nodded sheepishly. He gave a cheeky grin before leaving the group.

Hours later, when the shuttle arrived at the Citadel, Jondum Bau waited at the Spectre docks while
Saren landed nearby.

"I assume your assignment went well?" the salarian Spectre inquired as Saren exited the airlock.

Saren nodded at Jondum as he folded his arms behind his back.

"There was minimal trouble," Saren affirmed, "we've cleared the site and sent intel back to Balak's revolutionaries for them to handle later."

Just then, Nihlus and Amber emerged from the shuttle with the three humans following them.

"We've got a few captives with us who need to be treated at Huerta, if you don't mind," Saren added.

Jondum Bau clasped his hands together.

"Well," Jondum agreed, "that can be arranged."

Activating his omni-tool, Bau called an ambulance over to have the slaves retrieved. They made their way to the Presidium, only for the ambulance in question to arrive several minutes later. Bau climbed aboard with the captives, turning to the others.

"I can take this from here," Bau offered, "you've done enough for today."

Amber nodded at the salarian Spectre with a smile. Nihlus, Amber, and Saren left the docks as Jondum disappeared with the ambulance.

"So Nihlus," Amber asked, "do you have any plans for the rest of the day?"

"I was thinking of hitting the arcade in town later," Nihlus shrugged, "heard they had some new games down there."

Amber raised her eyebrow.

"Arcade? Really?"

"Yeah, they've got a variety of older arcade booths," Nihlus prattled on, "newer VR booths, and drinks to go around."

Amber chuckled as she placed her hands behind her head.

"I'm down," Amber chirped, "what about you, Saren?"

Saren let out an enthusiastic hum as he scratched his mandible.

"Let's give it a shot," Saren agreed.

Nihlus led the pair down to through the wards, eventually winding to the arcade he spoke of. It wasn't too different from the various arcades back on Earth, including flashy lights, colored neon lighting, and boxes generating a multitude of noises. Whatever the case, it was worth spending the end of the day.
The Conduit Mutation on Ilos

By the time the next few days came around, Amber checked her omni-tool. Her face lit up the instant she found a message from Miranda in her inbox. She didn't hesitate to open it, and then she noticed a file attached to the message.

{Shepard, we've possibly deciphered the Illusive Man's next move, but for all we know, he may have set things into motion already. If we hurry, we just might stop him.}

After Amber recorded the coordinates, she stepped out of her quarters in the Normandy. She made her way to the bridge and approached the pilot seat, catching Joker's attention.

"Hey, Shepard," Joker chirped as he glanced over his shoulder, "we're several minutes away from Arcturus Station."

"Good," Amber nodded, "I just got word from Miranda. She might have something for us."

Saren took his eyes off the map for a moment and turned his gaze towards his human mate.

"She has confirmed that she decrypted those files, right?" Saren clarified.

Amber glanced over her shoulder before she nodded at Saren.

"Yeah," she answered, "she sent me a few details, but mentioned that she'd want to see us in person for confidentiality issues."

Saren stepped over to Amber and placed his hand on her shoulder.

"I assume we're going to be in a rush for this mission?" Saren asked her.

"There might be some stakes we'll have to deal with," Amber shrugged, "Miranda did say that the Illusive Man had whatever he had planned under way, so I'm guessing time will be critical."

Several minutes later, the Normandy made its approach towards Arcturus Station and hovered into the docking bay, the magnetic clamps of one of the docks locking it into place. Suiting up, Saren and Amber left the airlock and made it straight for the command center where Miranda was waiting for them.

"Miranda!" Amber called over while she waved her hand over her head.

Miranda turned to focus their eyes on the Spectres.

"Oh good, you're here! We've managed to find where the Illusive Man has head off to. We'll probably need the full team for this, too."

Amber nodded at Miranda before approaching her.

"So why would the Illusive Man want to head over to Ilos?" Amber pondered, "I know that's where we found Javik."

"The Protheans had been extensively experimenting with pieces of Reaper tech," Miranda explained, "and he believes there's enough of it there to be used for his own purposes. I don't think it's remotely possible to control the Reapers, but if there is a way...we can't let him succeed."
Saren hummed as he scratched his mandible.

"Back to Ilos, then?" Saren commented, "didn't like the place very much, but I suppose there's nothing wrong."

Miranda nodded before she followed Saren and Amber back to the docking bay, where they crossed the boardwalk into the Normandy's airlock. The magnetic clamps released from their ship and they departed shortly after.

It took them a few hours to jump between Mass Relays before the Normandy reached Ilos. Joker switched on the ship's scanners.

"We got quite the Cerberus presence down there," Joker commented, "you sure you don't want to call in the cavalry first?"

Saren and Amber exchanged glances for a moment.

"Relay word back to command for now about the confirmation of Cerberus' presence out here," Saren advised, "we're still heading down there, but we're getting out the moment the situation heats up too much for us to handle."

"I'll keep that in mind," Joker nodded.

Upon cue, Saren and Amber stepped out of the bridge and made their way into the cargo hold, where Miranda waited near the Mako.

"The hotspot's not heavily guarded," Amber asked, "is it?"

"From what I can tell, they haven't established a significant ground presence yet," Miranda answered, "given the reputation of your team, I doubt what they have down there would be too much to handle."

Amber smiled at Miranda before she hopped into the Mako's driver seat. Saren was the last inside, closing the hatch behind them. From there, they waited as the Normandy entered the planet's atmosphere and hovered as close to the ground as it could. Seconds later, the cargo hatch opened, allowing the Alliance commander to roll the Mako down the ramp. The Mako dropped out of the ship and rapidly descended into the jungle below. Once the vehicle landed, Amber didn't hesitate to drive through the dense jungle. Not too far in, it became clear that much of the foliage close to the Prothean facility had been cut down, and the mud was lined with tracks of boots and ground vehicles.

"Miranda," Amber called over, "do we walk from here?"

"Probably should," Miranda agreed, "if they've already cut in this deep, we may need to be quiet about this."

Amber took the hint and parked the Mako in a hidden alcove before she, Saren and Miranda disembarked. Rushing through the brush, they came to the edge of the Prothean compound, instantly noticing the new inhabitants. They had to think fast and duck behind cover. A patrol rolled on by with Cerberus troops escorting a vehicle across the premises.

After several moments of silence, Saren gave Amber a silent nod, confirming the coast was clear. They started their way through the compound cautious to avoid the overwhelming number of Cerberus personnel present. This was made easier by finding a slightly narrow tunnel. The trio found themselves in the ventilation system that ran under and through most of the ancient
buildings. Keeping quiet, Miranda used the map in her omni-tool to navigate them through the ventilation system.

"A lot of the files we pulled up were designated to the Prothean's project located at the far side of this facility," Miranda elaborated, "if your reports were anything to go off of, you guys didn't make it that far into the facility to see it."

"And you did?" Saren paused.

"The Illusive Man did," Miranda corrected, "I never got the opportunity to oversee this project in person."

Miranda found another corner to turn at, compelling the Spectres to do the same.

"Along with control, he's really been pressing into telecommunication technologies built upon found Reaper artifacts," Miranda continued, "it's mostly involved with outfitting suits with further ranged, quieter, jamming-proof devices, but a few like Kai Leng had more permanent implants in an attempt for something more permanent, maybe even go so far as to improve senses, reaction time, memory."

Miranda double-checked her map to ensure they were going the right way.

"And he hopes to tie this same neurological tech into controlling the Reapers?" he continued.

Miranda silently nodded.

"Don't think for a minute that it'll work, though," Miranda warned him, "if anything, I have high expectations this will all backfire."

"Right," Saren drawled.

They continued silently through the tunnel under the main body of the compound. The issue at hand was sabotaging Cerberus' harness of the Prothean experiments before they were brought to full effect. When Miranda double-checked the map again, she confirmed they were only a few feet away from the hotspot.

"Alright, we're in," Miranda informed them.

The former operative looked up and pushed on the vent above them, gradually moving it to one side. Miranda led both Spectres out of the vent. It exited into an antechamber leading to an opening with what looked like a small mass relay planted right in the center. They resorted to ducking into cover the instant they spotted the Illusive Man standing face to face with the statue. The Cerberus leader turned to face them.

"I can see you, Lawson," he called over, "you can't hide from me!"

"Doesn't matter. It's three of us and only one of you," Saren retorted.

Saren, Amber and Miranda emerged from cover and began their trudge towards the Illusive Man, fierce eyes staring him down.

"You've have no idea what we have accomplished, Arterius," the Illusive Man began, "as for you, Miranda, you could've helped secure our advancement as a species. But I suppose you too will have to be left behind."
"Why are you doing this?" Amber demanded.

The Illusive Man strode back to the large Prothean device.

"I see our future in this!" he gestured to the device, "this is what it's always been about! Seeing our next stage of evolution! But if you refuse to see it like that, then I won't expend the extra effort to attempt to convince you."

Saren snarled as his mandibles twitched.

"So you're willing to sacrifice the other races in the galaxy to achieve this goal of yours," he growled.

"The other races have already achieved their futures. Now we must reach for our own," the Illusive Man tapped a console on the side of the relay-like machine, causing it to come to life.

Saren placed his hand on Amber's shoulder as they watched as the machine's core started glowing.

"I see no reason to appease the Reapers," the Illusive Man continued, "such beings may inspire awe, but they're nothing but machines at the end. Nothing to be feared, nothing that can't be destroyed. But that doesn't mean they lack other uses. Their technology is a gift, and I'm not throwing it away."

Amber gave Miranda a worried stare. The ground violently shook and a beam of energy shot out of the device into the sky, followed by a blinding flash. Letting out a startled yelp, Saren pulled his human mate into an embrace while Miranda dove for a nearby pillar. After a long minute, the blinding light faded, and the three turned to each other in scrutiny, looking for any sign they may have been harmed.

"Spirits," Saren whispered to Amber, "you're all right."

"I'm fine," Amber affirmed, "what about you?"

Miranda had paid no attention to the others. She had already determined they were unaffected as she knew the effects would've been more instantaneous. Instead, her gaze was fixed on the Illusive Man, her machine pistol trained on him. He was huddled over, his face and head obscured by his back.

"Shepard?" Miranda called over without breaking contact.

Amber and Saren followed her gaze as she continued to slowly approach the Illusive Man. That's when something started shifting around under the Cerberus Leader's suit. The Alliance commander also noticed his face started mutating, his organic tissue materializing into something metallic. Whipping around, the Illusive Man started growing, his flesh turning turning into something with a texture and consistency of raw dough. Under the skin, strands of now metallic muscle and unfamiliar synthetic anatomy began to jut out like weeds between cracks on a sidewalk. The body began to grow in disproportionate ways, resulting in the legs becoming muscular and oversized, the torso grew a cage of sorts from the skin and muscle, the organs had melted and reformed as cables, both supporting the thing's weight and dragging along behind like rags. The right arm was the largest appendage, developing a mechanical crane-like claw at the end, causing the beast to lean over on its knuckle from the sheer weight like a gorilla. The left arm looked atrophied in comparison, having instead developed an organic cannon out of the forearm's bone. Finally, the skin on what was left of his head had melted away with the exception of his face, having been stretched tight like a leather on a drum as it attempted to compensate for the sudden growth.
"Shit," Amber blurted, "that's what he was going for?"

"No, it's the neural implants I told you about," Miranda reminded, "he probably meant for those to be his advantage against the Reapers, but I guess it cuts both ways."

Amber furrowed her eyebrows at the massive husk as she readied her weapon. Rearing its ugly head, the jaw unhinged like an anaconda's and released a deep roar before it jumped down from the platform and charged at them. Saren thought fast and aimed his gun at the husk. It slammed its fist hard into the ground, causing them to stumble over from the shock wave. Miranda narrowly rolled to the side as what was left of her former boss aimed its gun arm at her and fired. The former Cerberus operative barely managed to shield herself in a biotic field. She was unable to block the next physical attack, but was narrowly saved when Saren put a barrier over her. Amber suddenly heard buzzing in her earpiece and was barely able to make out the caller.

{…I repeat, Commander Shepard, if you're receiving this, talk to me. What the hell is going on down there? All other frequencies have gone haywire all of a sudden!}

"Joker! Is that you?" Amber exclaimed.

{Yeah, you need any help down there?}

"Can you see where we are?"

{I could. I was watching from outer orbit until that large flash. Technicians are still trying to recalibrate the long-range scopes. In the meantime, what do you need?}

Amber shot a brief glance at what was left of the Illusive Man as Saren and Miranda continued to dodge its attacks.

"Currently dealing with what's left of the Illusive Man," Amber answered, "Miranda claims that whatever that flash of light did, it set off some Reaper tech the bastard had on himself and turned him into...something...the air space isn't clear here for a bombing run. Just get that scope recalibrated and find us a way out of here once we tear down the Illusive Man."

{O-Ok, copy that.}

Saren had initially anticipated detonating whatever project Cerberus had, so he had brought remote explosives instead of grenades. He started priming the packs, tossing them at the morphed Cerberus leader and detonating them mid-air. At the same time, Miranda and Amber fired their rounds while sidestepping the husk's attacks. The creature had shifted tactics and started charging before taking a large swing with its claw arm once it got into melee range. Letting out a startled yelp, the Alliance commander leapt out of the way. She could feel the brush of air caused by its heavy swing brush along her face as she rolled out of the way. She staggered back to her feet while her turian mate prepared another grenade. Tossing the explosive at its feet, he yanked her along behind him before it detonated. Shielding her in a biotic field, he waited until the resulting smoke dissipated moments later. Continuous fire had started to take a toll on its physical capabilities and was starting to rely on its arm cannon for combat.

"Great," Miranda gasped in relief, "it's getting weaker!"

"Keep focusing on its chest," Amber ordered.

Saren nodded at Amber before he aimed his rifle at the husk's chest, watching a few rounds puncture the thing's rib cage, letting a sickly green fluid leak out in response. Growling with rage, it leveled its arm cannon with them and started firing another barrage. The Spectres and the agent
took this as a cue to jump out of the way. Miranda biotically tugged a large crate in front of them to act as temporary cover, giving them time to reload and rethink their strategy.

"Any other ideas?" Miranda insisted.

"Keep firing. That thing can't hold for much longer," Saren sighed, loading another thermal clip.

Amber aimed her rifle at the husk’s chest before she squeezed the trigger. The sustained damage had started to take a noticeable impact on its aim and movement too. Several more direct hits later, the husk stopped in its tracks before it fell over and collapsed to the ground. Taking his last remote-detonation pack, Saren rushed up to it, wedged the pack between its damaged ribs, and ran back a safe distance before detonating it. What was left of the Illusive Man's upper torso vaporized, leaving the hollowed out, deformed corpse behind. Miranda let out a sigh of relief before stepping towards the corpse. She turned on her omni-blade and began slicing the head off.

"Miranda?" Amber paused.

Miranda glanced over her shoulder.

"I thought I'd take a souvenir to the Shadow Broker," Miranda clarified.

"Huh, okay. Joker, you got that scope recalibrated yet?"

{Yeah, I can see the ground again, and I’m seeing extensive Cerberus-on-Cerberus action down there. Not sure what happened, but we owe whoever did this to them a batch of fresh-baked cookies.}

"Do you see a path out?" Saren hissed.

{Obviously. Due to damage done from the chaos, the vents won't be your best option anymore. You'll have to leg it back to the Mako in the open. I'll highlight your HUD with where to go to get back. Once you're in the Mako, I'll set up one last waypoint to show where I'll land to retrieve you.}

"Ok," Amber sighed, "we'll give it a try."
As soon as the confrontation ended, Saren, Amber and Miranda started their trek on foot. Through the gates leading to the Prothean monument, they were greeted by the sight of absolute chaos. Cerberus personnel who weren't killed by the initial shock had either survived, had also morphed into similar monstrosities, or had descended into absolute madness, leaving them unable to discern ally from foe. Since they were in a hurry, they simply fought through the nearest husks. Ignoring the infighting, the trio continued to follow the waypoints provided by the Normandy. They were low on ammo and couldn't afford to stay in a prolonged fight. It may have taken them around half an hour, but they barely managed to outrun the husks long enough to reach the Mako. Amber scrambled inside and restarted the engine and took the wheel.

"Joker, we're back at the Mako," Amber called, "where are you?"

*{Setting next waypoint. I'm sorry about the distance, but I couldn't find any other clearing to land.}*

Amber nodded before she floored the gas pedal.

"We'll be there shortly," she confirmed.

Amber wasted no time as she accelerated the Mako, leaving the pursuing husks in the dust. Saren watched from the open rear hatch as they continued to chase them. This allowed the Alliance commander to keep her eyes on the road. The Cerberus camps disappeared behind them with distance.

A while later, the Mako managed to reach a clearing where they saw the Normandy at a distance. Landing in an opening, they came into the cargo hold with a crashed Cerberus vessel visible nearby. When the cargo hatch opened up, Amber drove the Mako aboard the vessel.

"We're in," Amber instructed, "get us out of here, Joker. We've been here long enough."

*{So did we get him? The Illusive Man?}*  

"What was left of him," Amber answered.

Seconds later, the cargo hatch closed and then the Normandy took off into space. After they disembarked the Mako, Amber, Saren, and Miranda stumbled back onto the bridge.

"So," Amber panted, "are we heading for Alliance space?"

"I'd prefer if I could get transport to Illium. I've got a few things to manage," Miranda requested.

Amber gave Miranda a puzzled stare.

"What for?" Amber paused.

Miranda rolled her eyes with a sly grin as she folded her arms behind her back.

"I have a delivery to make," she clarified, "personal reasons."

Amber was too tired to ask further.

"Fine," she grumbled, "I'll get you there on the way back."
Joker couldn't help but feel a chill trickle down his spine, yet he flew the Normandy closer to the Mass Relay. Amber led Saren out of the bridge and towards their quarters. They stripped off their armor before the Alliance commander plopped down onto the bed.

"You going to join in for a nap?" Amber offered softly.

"Just let me wash off," Saren replied, "I'll be along shortly."

Saren ambled into the bathroom and stripped himself before stepping into the shower stall. He turned on the shower faucet before he proceeded to scrub the grime and blood off his body. Several minutes later, he stepped back out after wiping himself down. The turian Spectre climbed onto the bed, prompting Amber to roll over so he could embrace her.

"You feeling alright after that?" Saren mumbled.

"Yeah," Amber whispered with a nod, "you could say that."

Smiling, Saren purred as he nuzzled his face against his human mate's.

"Honestly?" Amber admitted, "out of all the things I've encountered on numerous missions, that was terrifying."

Saren nodded at Amber as he ran his talons through her hair. He closed his eyes and attempted to find some sleep.

An hour or so later, the Normandy entered Illium's orbit. Joker saw their temporary landing at the port and departed shortly thereafter. Carrying a package in one arm, Miranda meandered through the docks until she reached the gate. Outside, she found a cab waiting for her. During her last visit to the Shadow Broker, he had left a channel open to her for future conversation. Keeping that in mind, the former Cerberus agent hopped into the cab and settled into a seat as the cab took off into the air traffic. She directed the driver to the meeting site and leaned back in her seat, glancing back at her package.

A while later, the cab landed near the base of the skyscraper. Paying for the trip, she got out with her package still under her arm. She stepped through the front door and meandered through the corridor, taking an elevator to the top floor. Stepping out of the elevator, she made her way into the open office, catching the Yahg's attention.

"Welcome back, Lawson," he greeted.

Miranda took a moment to straighten her spine.

"We found the Illusive Man on Ilos," Miranda reported, "he tried to operate a Reaper artifact…but it didn't go well for him."

To prove her point, Miranda pulled the Illusive Man's severed head out of the package, catching the Shadow Broker's interest. She placed it upon his desk for him to observe. During a moment of silence, the Yahg carefully examined the prize brought before him.

"That is quite the souvenir, Ms. Lawson," the Shadow Broker commented.

Miranda made a soft smile.

"Thank you," she said.
Miranda slowly approached the desk once again while the Yahg tilted his head.

"I was wondering," Miranda asked, "if you have some spare time?"

The Yahg casually reclined in his chair.

"And may I ask why?" he paused.

By now, Miranda stood next to the Shadow Broker's seat.

"I have a few hours to spare myself," Miranda shrugged.

"Go on," he nodded.

Aware of her proximity, the Shadow Broker offered his hand, allowing Miranda to grasp it.

"Do you…get needy sometimes?" Miranda asked.

"If you're genuinely asking," he admitted, "I do occasionally."

The Shadow Broker moved his hand to cup the former Cerberus operative's face, letting her lean into the touch. In the back of her mind, she was quietly wondering how she would physically accommodate for his size. She made a brief glance at the desk while the Yahg reached for a remote from the drawer.

"Perhaps you'd want to show me a good time then?" the Shadow Broker offered.

"A little preparation is needed," Miranda nodded, "but sure, I'm game."

The Shadow Broker took this as a cue to deactivate the surveillance cameras in the office with the press of a button on the remote. Miranda reached for the zipper and slid out of her bodysuit before setting it aside. While he examined each of her contours, the Shadow Broker also began stripping himself.

"You want me to show you," Miranda offered, "what makes humans tick?"

He simply undid his pants, dropping them to one side to start.

"Make it a show," he beckoned.

Miranda stepped closer to the Yahg before she grasped his hand and guided it to one of her breasts.

"Can you feel how soft they are?" she asked him.

The Shadow Broker gave her breast a light squeeze before he nodded at her. Miranda climbed into his seat and straddled her legs onto his lap. The Yahg located the apex of her thighs with his other hand. Using one finger to stroke her folds, he watched as she let out soft moans and grind her hips against his hand. Miranda pressed her fingers on her clit and emitted biotic particles that sent pleasurable tingles through her nerves. Chuckling, the Shadow Broker inserted one finger inside of her and stroked the inside of her walls. The experience was initially unnerving, feeling just how big one of his fingers was alone. Luckily, the Shadow Broker thrust his finger in and out as slowly as he could. She perched her other hand on his shoulder and nuzzled her face against his.

She started heaving heavy breaths, placing the palms of her hands against his massive fingers. Gradually, her body adapted to the bigger form. Fluids began coating her walls and trickling out of her folds. Miranda glanced down, taking notice of his slowly emerging shaft. She took it into her
hand and began stroking it, even with the Yahg still continuing his ministrations. Groaning, he placed a gentle grip on her shoulder and held her close to him. She wrapped her hands around the tip, cupping its sheer size in admiration. She continued stroking him until his length fully extended itself. By now, her walls were already moist. When the Shadow Broker withdrew his finger, he examined her before he confirmed their size difference moments later.

"How do you…want to take me?" Miranda asked.

"Start off in the deep end," the Shadow Broker suggested, "see how much you can take and work backwards."

Miranda slowly turned until her back was facing him, still keeping her legs straddled on the Yahg's lap. The Shadow Broker ran his hands along her sides until they cupped her breasts. The former Cerberus operative took his shaft and angled its tip at her nether region. She took a moment to relax herself while he grasped her hip with one hand.

"Brace yourself," he advised.

Taking the hint, Miranda planted her hands on the desk, allowing the Shadow Broker to push his tip inside. The former Cerberus operative let out a loud gasp as the thick length stretched her while it slowly sank in. She took a moment to brush her palm against her stomach, feeling his length force it to bulge ever so slightly. He stopped sinking in further by the time he filled her halfway in, so the Yahg observed as Miranda panted as her head rested on the desk.

"Give me a…minute…" Miranda stammered between gasps, "still getting used to it."

The Shadow Broker nodded as he leaned back in his seat.

"Take your time," he purred.

While Miranda gave herself the time she needed to adjust to his size, the Shadow Broker ran his hand down her back. After a few minutes passed, she glanced over her shoulder and gazed into the Yahg's eyes.

"Ok," Miranda requested, "could you…take it slow?"

The Shadow Broker nodded at her before he slowly drew out and then pushed himself back in. Miranda moaned softly as she ground her hips to match the Yahg's pace, feeling his tip brush along the nerves in her walls. Grasping her shoulder with one hand, he kept his rhythmic pace as slow as possible. She leaned her head back and let out a stifled moan as he pushed further. She held onto his arm with one hand while she brushed her other hand against her clit. While he was cautious with her, his sheer mass alone sent electrical jolts through her body. With the Shadow Broker continuing to propel into her, Miranda pressed her back against his chest, heat pooling in her stomach. For him, he didn't mind her smaller size. She was flexible enough to allow entrance, but tight enough to have a comfortable squeeze on his length. A couple more strokes later, he felt her walls tighten around him.

"Ahh, f-fuck!" Miranda gasped.

"More than what you bargained for?" he taunted.

Miranda took a moment to catch her breath before she glanced over her shoulder.

"How long do you last, anyway?" she asked him.
The Yahg simply chuckled.

"Oh, I can keep going for a while," he prattled on, "unless, you already need a break."

"One more round, then," Miranda suggested with a nod.

"Very well, then," it was barely noticeable, but a tone of disappointment wavered in his voice.

Still, the Shadow Broker started pounding into her flesh, maintaining extra caution in his strength. With fluids leaking out, it was now easier to move inside of her. Miranda used her biotics to stimulate the nerves in her clit while she moved her hips between pants. Against the back of her head, she could feel the heavy breaths from the Yahg's nostrils. She relaxed on his lap while he kept a gentle grip on her shoulder with one hand and her hip with the other. Feeling a bit more comfortable, she lightly encouraged him to accelerate. This friction allowed pressure to build up inside of both of them. Minutes later, he let out a roar as he climaxed, his member viciously throbbing. She frantically panted as her walls convulsed in her second orgasm.

Glancing down, she watched as excess sperm trickled down the Yahg's leg and onto the seat. Gently, she pulled herself off, allowing additional seed to spill out. As the Shadow Broker reached for a drawer, Miranda made a brief glance at the Illusive Man's decapitated head still on the desk.

"Say," Miranda remarked, "where should we put his head?"

"I have methods of keeping specimen and fallen enemies preserved," he offered, "follow me."

Miranda and the Shadow Broker took a minute or so to clean up their mess and slip their clothes back on. He gestured to the door, prompting her to follow him out into the hallway while carrying the head in her hand. The Illusive Man's head would definitely make a great decoration.
By the time Amber's calendar hit the nine month mark, Jack and Wrex were already back on their feet. That day, the human biotic and the krogan made their way to the docking bay, where they met up with the Alliance commander near the Normandy. Amber had been outside of the vessel at the moment, looking over the resupply manifold on her.

"Good work. Head down to the cargo hold and make sure everything's in place for our next departure," she ordered, looking back at the Alliance crew member.

The crew member in question saluted before returning to duty. Amber glanced over her shoulder before she turned on her feet and approached Jack and Wrex.

"Good to see you two are out of the hospital," Amber greeted, "ready to go?"

Jack nodded with a grin as she punched her palm with her own fist.

"Yeah," Jack replied, "what's next on the list?"

"With the Illusive Man out of the picture, Cerberus won't be for much longer," Amber explained, "Okeer had sent a message, is getting ready for final preparations with his treatment."

"So we're heading over to Virmire to pick him up?" Wrex clarified.

"We'll be there for a few hours to collect a few other things while we're at it from the labs," Amber added.

Amber gestured Wrex and Jack to follow her, crossing the boardwalk and stepping into the airlock. Wrex was still skeptical, even as the decontamination procedure started.

"So that crazy bastard does have a working cure?" he grumbled.

"That's what he told me," Amber shrugged.

By the time the decontamination procedure finished, Amber led Jack and Wrex into the bridge, where they met up with Saren. He was glaring at the galaxy map with his back turned to them. While the Alliance commander proceeded to observe the galaxy map next to him, Jack and Wrex approached him from the other side.

"I'm glad you two are in good shape," Saren said without turning his head.

"A knife to the gut won't down me that easily," Wrex shrugged off.

Saren chuckled as his mandibles flexed into a grin.

"If you say so," he replied.

After a moment, Amber took her eyes off the galaxy map and sauntered towards the pilot seat.

"Ok, Joker," Amber informed, "Jack and Wrex are here."

Joker glanced over his shoulder.

"I assume the cargo hold is almost finished loading?" he returned.
"It'll take several minutes," Amber answered, "but yeah."

She turned back to the galaxy map returned to Saren's side. The turian Spectre made a brief glance at her before he placed his hand on her shoulder, allowing her to lean into the touch.

"Maybe you could ask Alliance Command about pockets of Cerberus after this?" Saren asked, "it's hard to think that we've dealt with most of our assignments and we're only nine months out from the Reapers' arrival."

Amber tilted her head towards her turian mate and nodded at him.

"They're going to struggle a bit," Amber answered, "so we might as well before they try to somehow regroup."

After several minutes have passed, a crew member entered the bridge, catching Amber's attention.

"Everything's onboard, commander," he told her, "ready to move out on your word."

Amber saluted at the crew member before turning her head towards Joker.

"Let's get this show on the road," Amber instructed, "don't want to keep Okeer waiting longer than we should."

Joker nodded at Amber before he started the procedure of gaining authorization to takeoff. Taking the controls, he brought the ship out of dock the moment the magnetic clamps yielded. The Normandy began traveling through space the instant it left the Citadel, making its way towards the Mass Relay. Minutes later, the ancient structure flung the vessel into FTL speed. It took them a couple hours before they reached Virmire. Down in the cargo hold, Amber made a few inspections before they entered the system. Okeer told her he did have enough synthesized cure to start distribution, but he would need the proper storage capacity to have it moved. The Alliance commander gestured Saren, Jack and Wrex aboard the shuttle before flying down to the hangar leading to the research facility. Once they disembarked the shuttle, Saren and Amber approached Dr. Okeer, who stood waiting for them.

"Shepard," Dr. Okeer said, "I hope you brought the right containers as asked."

Amber nodded at Dr. Okeer as a few Alliance crew members emerged from the shuttle carrying specialized containers.

"I hope it's to your liking," Amber replied.

Dr. Okeer took a moment to examine one of the containers.

"This will do," he nodded in approval, "you may as well land your ship so we can start loading."

Amber nodded at the krogan doctor before she whipped up her omni-tool and opened her coms.

"Joker," Amber announced, "you're free to land the Normandy. We have some incoming cargo."

{Ok, give me a moment,} Joker replied over the com-link.

They rushed over to the Alliance ship at the landing pads nearby. The cargo hatch opened and Garrus, Kelly, Kaidan, James, Ashley, Kasumi, Liara and Tali emerged from the vessel. They began carrying canisters of the cure from the facility to the reinforced crates inside the Normandy. During that time, Dr. Okeer approached both Wrex and Jack.
"Are you up for getting a sample?" Okeer asked, "I just need to perform some last-minute testing."
Jack and Wrex exchanged brief glances.

"Wrex," Jack paused, "what do you think?"

He shrugged.


Jack and Wrex returned their gaze towards Dr. Okeer.

"So how are you going to administer the cure?" Jack asked.

"Stand still," Okeer advised, "this won't sting."

Before Wrex could reply, Okeer whipped around, jabbing a syringe into his neck. Wrex flinched as the injected cure began flowing through his bloodstream.

"Ack! What the hell?!" Wrex exclaimed.

Wrex began rubbing at his neck.

"If I were to give you the airborne variant, it'd take too long to get any results," Dr. Okeer explained, "a direct injection was faster."

Jack gave Dr. Okeer a blank stare. Rolling her eyes, she continued back to the Normandy.

"What?" Dr. Okeer paused.

Wrex just eyed where the needle was stuck into him and followed her. With no other response he could think of, Okeer sighed as he boarded the Normandy. He continued to oversee the storage of the cure for transport. A short while later, Saren and Amber stepped into the cargo hold, catching the krogan scientist's attention.

"How do you exactly intend on dispersing the cure, anyways?" Saren inquired, gesturing to the doctor in demand for an answer.

Dr. Okeer took a stride towards the Spectres.

"To start off," Dr. Okeer replied, "we'll need to go to Tuchanka."

"I generally expected that, but what then?" Saren added.

"Prior to the Rebellions, the salarians have attempted to rectify the radioactive environment through atmospheric processing towers," Okeer continued, "the towers aren't set to terraform the planet anymore, so they're on minimum power. It'll be enough to distribute the airborne variant of the treatment. I'll just need a few weeks to finish the process."

Amber placed her finger on her chin.

"So you want us to install the cure to the towers?" she clarified.

Dr. Okeer nodded.

"Or at least help me carry the canisters inside," he shrugged, "I know you're busy, so I won't
occupy more of your time than I have to."

Saren and Amber exchanged brief glances before they nodded at Dr. Okeer.

"In that case," Saren added, "we'll head out once we finish loading up. We'll get you to Tuchanka and unload those canisters then."

Dr. Okeer nodded before he followed Saren and Amber towards the bridge. Once the cargo finished loading half an hour later, the ship began its departure from the facility. Leaving Virmire's orbit, the Normandy made its approach towards the Mass Relay. The technicians investigated their cargo before they made the jump to FTL. It didn't take much long for them to confirm it was safe and effective to use. Okeer, Saren, and Amber were looking over a map of Tuchanka at the bridge. The krogan doctor took his time to place marks on potential locations of the towers.

"Given the nature of the wind currents," Okeer said, "any of these will do."

Amber nodded while she examined each marked location. All the while, Saren scratched his mandible.

"Now, which of these towers can my fiancé access without having to encounter any Thresher Maws?" Saren asked.

Dr. Okeer gave Saren a confused stare.

"I-I'm sorry, what?" he blurted.

Saren sighed as he shook his head in disbelief.

"Look, Shepard hasn't had good experience with the creatures," Saren insisted.

"Fine," Okeer grumbled, "the one by the ruins here has the least exposure to the sand."

Okeer pointed at the marked tower in question, and when Amber took a glimpse of it, she sighed in relief.

"Thank you, doctor," she smiled.

An hour and a half later, the Normandy emerged from a Mass Relay and made its way to Tuchanka's orbit. Joker set course for their destination and took them to lower orbit. Considering the cargo in their possession, they didn't need a shuttle this time. The vessel hovered above the planet's surface in search for a place to land. Finding a big enough opening in the ruins, the ship touched down and opened the cargo hold for deployment. Saren, Amber and Dr. Okeer led Wrex, Jack, Liara, Garrus, Kelly and Mordin out the cargo hatch while moving the containers outside. Bit by bit, they started carting the tanks towards the base of the tower, depositing the crates in piles. By the time they finished their task, Mordin took a moment or so to gaze at the tower.

"Hmm, ancient salarian design," Mordin observed, "still stands."

"If it's one thing I'll give the salarians, it's that their architecture is built to last for millennia under environmental wear and tear. Shame the same can't be said about their biology," Okeer acknowledged.

Jack walked along nearby and set down her crate. She flinched as one of the tanks started to leak slightly from putting the box down too hard. She reached down and sealed it back up before it lost too much pressure. Out of the corner of her eye, Kelly saw the human biotic struggle with the crate
so she rushed to her aid.

"Is everything alright?" Kelly asked.

"Yeah, yeah, go away," Jack grumbled.

Letting out a sigh, Kelly stepped back towards Garrus, whose head was tilting upwards and staring in awe.

"Wow," Garrus mused, "that's one heck of a climb."

Kelly raised an eyebrow.

"What do you mean?" she paused, "are there no stairs?"

"I don't know," Garrus shrugged, "even if there were, good luck making it up every last flight."

Meanwhile, Amber took a step towards Dr. Okeer, catching his attention.

"So how are we going to install the cure?" Amber asked him.

"Dispersal System is located at the base and runs the height of the tower with the controls at the top," Okeer answered, "I'll be gradually dumping the cure in, dispensing the cure through the air currents."

Saren and Amber exchanged glances for a moment until the turian Spectre nodded at her.

"I guess we can help with that," Amber offered.

"Just help me get everything inside safely," Okeer insisted, "this **will** take time to complete and I can't afford to keep you for too long."

Saren nodded before he trudged towards one of the canisters.

"So after this, we're free to depart?" Saren confirmed.

Dr. Okeer nodded as he picked up a canister himself. The crew continued depositing the canisters of cure at the tower over the course of the next hour. It consisted of carrying the canisters and plopping them next to the Dispersal System. By the time they finished, Wrex and Okeer exchanged glances as the latter opened one of the canisters.

"I'm sure your brother will thank me later," Okeer said.

Wrex raised a browplate.

"You'd really think my brother would bend before you?" Wrex objected.

Okeer began depositing the cure into the system.

"Why not?" Okeer shrugged, "he could bring forth a new generation of krogan."

"Sure, but he's too proud to consider you to be above him," Wrex retorted.

Okeer ignored Wrex and set down the empty canister.

"Regardless of his mentality, history **will** thank me," Okeer affirmed.
Okeer picked up another canister and began depositing the next batch of the cure while Mordin looked onward. Mentally reassuring himself, he nodded and returned outside. The salarian's stride caught Jack's attention, so she followed him.

"So, you think Okeer is genuine or that he's talking out of his ass?" Jack asked.

Mordin took a deep breath as he shrugged.

"Not sure," Mordin admitted, "understanding of biology heavily refined. Can't say the same for his methods and philosophy."

Jack closed her eyes and smiled as she shrugged.


"Am former-STG," Mordin replied, "worked extensively with maintaining Genophage during career. Initially found satisfying. Towards the end, found ethics…questionable. Couldn't continue. Retired some time later after medical discharge."

Jack opened her eyes and tilted her head towards Mordin.

"Do you think the krogan would rebuild once the cure is distributed?" Jack said.

"Perhaps," Mordin answered, "given a chance, equal opportunity for reconstruction or retaliation. Commonly feel were wronged for past millennia."

Jack nodded at Mordin and folded her arms.

"Then maybe we could start up some diplomacy with them," Jack suggested.

Jack turned on her feet and stepped back into the tower. By now, Okeer finished depositing the last of the cure into the system. For some reason, the human biotic felt some strange tingles inside her body. She ignored it as Amber gave Okeer a handshake.

"Will you need a ride?" Amber asked Okeer, "or can you take care from here?"

"I'll ask for a lift when I need it," Okeer reassured.

Okeer made a brief glance at a pile of camping equipment set aside.

"All right, then," Amber nodded, "we'll be on our way."

"We're done here, let's wrap this up," Saren barked, gesturing to the other Alliance personnel. Making their way out of the tower, the Spectres led their comrades towards the Normandy.
Two weeks passed after visiting Tuchanka, and Liara sent Amber a message the instant she couldn't find Javik in her apartment. Bad news was a little less frequent for her nowadays, so the only thing that would fall close to this would be Thane being on his deathbed or Cerberus cells showing more resistance than initially anticipated by Alliance forces. For now, all she had to do was find Javik, so she set off into the Presidium and met up with Amber, who just left her apartment.

"I got your message," Amber told her, "did Javik say anything before he left?"

Liara shook her head.

"No," she admitted, "I must've been asleep when he left."

Liara lowered her head, prompting Amber to place her hand on the asari's shoulder.

"It's ok," Amber reassured her, "let's try cutting off his escape routes."

Liara stared into Amber's eyes before she nodded. They both made their way to the docking bay, only to notice C-Sec officers gathering around an empty dock. Were they expecting a criminal?

"That doesn't look good," Amber blurted.

Amber slowly approached Chellick, catching his attention.

"Oh, good," Chellick sighed in relief, "you're here!"

Amber folded her arms.

"What happened here?" Amber asked.

Chellick made a brief glance at the potential crime scene before turning his head towards Amber.

"Witnesses here reported having seen the Prothean steal a shuttle and leave the station," Chellick answered.

Amber and Liara couldn't help but feel harsh chills trickle down their spine.

"Shit. Looks like the situation's already gotten worse," she muttered, "any idea where he's gone?"

Chellick sighed as he shook his head.

"No," Chellick answered, "by the time we got the reports, he was gone. Couldn't identify what ship it was or place a tracer on it."

Sighing, Amber turned on her omni-tool. Saren was currently spending some sibling time with Desolas, so she scrolled to Nihlus's number instead. She typed up a message before she sent it:

[Nihlus, could you come over to the docks? Javik escaped the Citadel.]

Amber waited for a moment before she heard a ping from her omni-tool.

[You bet. I'll be there in fifteen.]
Amber smiled before she gestured Liara to follow her to the crime scene, attracting attention from the other C-Sec officers. One particular turian C-Sec officer tilted his head towards the Alliance commander.

"You're Commander Shepard, right?" he called over.

Upon cue, Amber tilted her head towards the turian officer.

"That's me. You are?" she answered, extending a hand.

The officer ignored the gesture.

"Castis Vakarian, senior investigative officer at Zakera Ward."

Amber tilted her head.

"I'm guessing you're a relative of Garrus?" Amber paused.

Castis nodded.

"I believe you've become acquainted with my son, correct?" Castis clarified.

"Yes," Amber nodded with a smile, "he's getting along with my crew well, especially Yeoman Chambers."

Castis flexed his mandibles into a smile.

"Miss Chambers?" Castis agreed, "yeah, she's a keeper. I'm glad the two are happy with each other."

Castis returned his gaze towards the crime scene.

"In the meantime," Castis continued, "do you have any means to track your Prothean? Odds are he's no longer in Citadel space."

"Due to my Spectre status," Amber insisted, "I can theoretically have access to local security footage, yes?"

Castis sighed as he closed his eyes for a brief moment.

"That's the one thing that sets me apart from you Spectres," Castis commented, "the moment you show up at an investigation, all rules don't mean shit, and it's bad news for everyone. I'll let you have this one because I've seen enough reports about that popsicle to know he's trouble."

Amber placed her hand behind her head.

"Thanks for the authorization," Amber replied.

Castis led Amber and Liara away from the crime scene and into the surveillance room. The officer stood from his seat and straightened his spine while locking eyes onto Castis.

"Sir," he saluted.

Castis nodded at the officer before he tapped into the terminal. They cycled through the footage to around the time witnesses claimed they saw Javik. Surely enough, the Prothean was seen walking out in public, save for one visual difference.
"Why is he wearing armor?" Amber asked.

Liara shook her head in confusion.

"His previous armor set should've been defunct, much less usable," Liara replied.

Amber scratched her head.

"Do you think he's heading to some riot?" Amber commented.

"Up until he left, he didn't say a word to me," Liara admitted, "it was just grunts, glares, and gestures. He made no indication of what he intends to do."

"If he didn't use his old armor, where'd he get a new set?" Castis added.

Amber and Liara exchanged glances in a moment of silence.

"I suppose cross-referencing armor producers in the area for orders of custom-made Prothean armor wouldn't be too hard, would it?" the former replied.

Liara and Amber recorded an image of Javik in his new armor for later.

"Can you confirm the IFF of the stolen vessel?" Amber asked Castis.

Castis thought over the question as he scratched his mandible.

"Both of those I can do legally," Castis nodded.

Castis zoomed in on one of the vessels on the screen. He recorded the vessel's IFF before relaying it to Amber's omni-tool.

"Do you need anything else?" Castis asked her.

Amber shook her head.

"I can handle it from here," Amber reassured him with a smile, "thank you."

Castis nodded at Amber before she led Liara out of the surveillance room and stepped back into the docks. By now, Nihlus just arrived and when he caught a glimpse, he eagerly sprinted over to them.

"So what's the trouble today?" he hummed cheerfully.

Amber tilted her head towards the crime scene for a moment.

"Javik stole a vessel and left the Citadel," she explained, "we're tracking him down before he causes chaos."

"Oho! Intrigue!" Nihlus chirped, "hope you don't mind if I join in."

Amber smiled before she extended her hand.

"If you want in, you can start with Javik's armor," Amber suggested, "he's got a new set and the one he had before is too old to be functional anymore, so he probably got it from somewhere else. Unless C-Sec beats you to it, see if you can cross-reference who might've bought a custom tailored suit that doesn't match the physiology of all other known sentient species."
Nihlus shook Amber's hand before he nodded at her.

"I'll be on my way then," Nihlus replied.

After Nihlus made his way out of the docking bay, Amber returned her gaze towards Liara.

"So you ready for a goose chase?" Amber asked her.

"Do I have a choice?" the asari shrugged.

Amber led Liara through the docking bay until they reached the Normandy. They crossed the boardwalk and stepped into the airlock before they waited as the decontamination procedure started. With the stolen ship's IFF signal, they headed for the galaxy map, where a couple of technicians were already plotting a course after Javik. Ashley was standing near the galaxy map when she saw the Alliance commander enter the bridge.

"Just when I thought Javik wouldn't get any crazier," Ashley commented, "he goes on to become an escape artist."

The two walked up to Ashley before coming to a stop.

"Got anything, Williams?" Amber asked.

"Ship's headed for a small, batarian controlled system," Ashley informed, "Hegemony won't be a problem, but whatever he's doing there will be."

"Oh, great," Liara grimaced.

Sighing, Amber stepped over to the pilot seat.

"Joker," Amber said, "you ready to head out?"

"Yeah," Joker nodded, "it's a good thing we dealt with the Hegemony ahead of time so we won't need to shoot our way back out again."

Joker started the procedure of gaining authorization for departure. Minutes after that, the magnetic clamps released the Normandy, so the flight lieutenant immediately started up the vessel's thrusters and flew it out of the Citadel.

"So Liara, did Javik say anything?" Joker asked, "any indication as to what his goals are?"

Liara shook her head.

"He's been silent for a while now," she told her, "refusing to talk whatsoever."

Both Amber and Ashley exchanged confused glances.

"I guess we should've taken his behavior as an early sign and kept him locked up," Ashley sighed.

By now, the Normandy closed in on the Mass Relay leading out of the Serpent Nebula. Minutes later, the ancient structure flung the vessel into FTL speed. An hour later, the ship exited into the Viper Nebula, closing in on Javik's ship. Strangely enough, the Prothean seemed to be venturing towards another relay. The Prothean's ship continued zigzagging from system to system, never staying at a given relay for too long before leaving again. Over time, this bizarre behavior started to irritate Joker. Nonetheless, they continued their pursuit. The trail ended at the Viper Nebula, where the stolen ship had come to a rest. Her eyes filled with determination, Amber turned to leave the
"Liara, Garrus," Amber called over, "you're with me."

Upon cue, Garrus and Liara followed Amber out of the bridge and into the locker room, where they suited up.

"Garrus, what are your non-lethal options for that rifle of yours?" she asked, snapping her boots into place.

Garrus sighed as he looked over his rifle.

"You'll need to give me a moment," Garrus advised, "the tranquilizer module that I do have from my days at C-Sec requires I take the rifle completely apart before I replace the default rifle body."

Amber smiled at Garrus.

"Take your time," she encouraged, "we'll be down in the cargo hold waiting for you."

By the time Amber and Liara finished gathering their weapons, they stepped out of the locker room while Garrus continued to tinker with his rifle. They stepped into the cargo hold and waited near the shuttle until Garrus arrived several minutes later. He slung the rifle over his shoulder and sat down.

"Ok," Garrus announced, "I'm ready to stop that Prothean bastard."

Amber nodded before she and Liara boarded the shuttle.

"We got to do this fast, so no lollygagging about," Amber advised, "that shuttle dropped down to a ship manufacturing colony formerly owned by the Hegemony. Not really known for much, but they do make exceptional thrusters."

"Right," Garrus agreed, "so what does he want here? Make his own ship?"

Liara scratched her head.

"I…really wish I knew," Liara admitted.

"We'll get answers," Garrus replied, "and I have no problems beating them out of him this time."

Moments later, the cargo hatch opened and the shuttle flew out of the vessel. Silence passed between them on the way to their destination. While the shuttle did enter the planet's atmosphere, it was still a matter of locating the stolen vessel. Oddly enough, they found the shuttle at the port with no intention of hiding the ship. Around the ship were a handful of Keepers waddling about, loading boxes onto the ship. Amber gestured the pilot to land the shuttle only a few meters nearby.

Getting out, the team investigated the stolen ship Javik commandeered. He wasn't on the ship, so they continued to the warehouse that the Keepers were unloading from. They weren't sure whether Javik would open fire on them, so they snuck through the corridor. Officially, the place had closed up for the night, the lights were out, and there wasn't so much as a sign that anyone else was nearby. Amber, Liara and Garrus resorted to using flashlights in their omni-tools to see where they were going. A few Keepers lingered about, each carrying a crate back to the ship outside. After a while, Amber flipped on the coms.

"Found him yet?" Amber whispered.
{Not yet.} Garrus replied over the com-link.

{No sign of him here, either.} Liara followed up.

Amber took a moment to scan her surroundings. She stood still for a moment, listening closely to her surroundings. Perhaps in the darkness somewhere, she would hear the Prothean sneaking through the shadows like a rat. Initially, nothing came of it until she had the dawning realization that the Keepers were gone. Previously, they had made beelines throughout the warehouse with the distinct sound of their feet against the concrete floor. Now, they were nowhere to be seen.

"This is not good," Amber muttered to herself.

She quickly ran back to the warehouse entrance, tracing the path back to the stolen ship. It had departed since their investigation of the warehouse. She groaned in frustration before she flipped the coms back on.

"Garrus, Liara," Amber called, "Javik just left."

{Dammit...where to?} Garrus snarled over the com-link.

"Joker, talk to me," Amber demanded, "where'd that ship go?"

{You're going to have to come back to the Normandy.} Joker suggested over the com-link.

Soon, Garrus and Liara emerged from the warehouse and met up with Amber at the shuttle. Once they boarded without hesitation, the shuttle took off and returned to the Normandy. From there, the Alliance commander led her squadmates to the bridge.

"Get a fix on that shuttle," Amber ordered, "see where it's going next."

Joker tapped his fingers along the ship controls.

"Strange," Joker observed, "he's still in the system."

Huffing, Amber folded her arms.

"Well, let's go get him," she advised.

"You got it," Joker chirped, "getting a lock on his current location. Looks like he's heading for a cluster of asteroids within the outer orbit of the system."

Honing in on the stolen vessel, the Normandy left the batari colony. Liara, Amber, and Garrus once again returned to the shuttle and departed for the asteroids once they were in range. All they could hope for was to catch up to Javik in time. They landed back near the Prothean's stolen ship and deployed onto the asteroid. Keepers were now carrying their stolen cargo out of the ship over the uneven landscape into the distance.

"Garrus, take point into the ship, we'll cover you," Amber commanded, "if he isn't here, start sabotaging the ship and make sure he won't leave again."

"Copy that," Garrus nodded.

Garrus didn't hesitate to step into the vessel. As was predicted, the interior cabin was empty, with no sign of the Prothean anywhere. With the others watching the door, Garrus got to work in the engine room, cutting through several vital systems. In the meantime, Amber and Liara started following the Keepers. Keeping in contact with Garrus, they continued out onto the asteroid surface
to see where they were headed. Considering the Keepers kept up the pace with vigilance, the Alliance commander and the asari had to take cover once in a while to avoid detection. Liara took one glance into the distance and gasped in shock.

"Over there!" Liara pointed ahead.

With the Keepers' help, he had set up numerous thrusters along one side of the asteroid. With a sufficient number installed, he had them all turned on simultaneously. Narrowing her eyes, Amber stopped in her tracks the instant she reached a couple feet distant from Javik.

"Whatever you're doing," Amber shouted, "stop it right now!"

He turned to gaze at them, squinting through his new visor.

"I've decided to take matters into my own hands, Shepard! The galaxy won't act, so I will!"

Amber felt a chill down her spine, yet she clenched her fists.

"As much as I want to ensure the galaxy's survival," she objected, "you're going too far!"

"Perhaps it's because you don't know," Javik disagreed, "as an act of defiance against the Reaper threat, my kind had reprogrammed the Citadel so it may no longer transmit orders to the Keepers. However, this is only a delay. From my own investigation into the Citadel and the relay system, I know this is the system that will allow them the fastest direct entry into the galaxy. This cycle needs more time to prepare."

Amber tilted her head and examined the Mass Relay in question from a distance.

"Don't tell me you…" Liara stammered.

{Commander, if you're down there, you better act fast! That asteroid is starting to move,} Joker warned over the com-link, {techs have analyzed the trajectory: it's on a collision course with the relay. If you can't stop it, get outta there before we're locked in this system.}

Amber and Liara's eyes have widened in horror before they exchanged glances. Was this part of Javik's plan?

"We…we have to hurry," Liara muttered.

Amber nodded at Liara before they both started stepping away from Javik.

"Are you willing to kill off the batarians living in this system?!" Amber yelled at the Prothean.

Javik narrowed his eyes and clenched his fists.

"Sacrifices need to be made," Javik replied in a solemn tone, "we cut the Reapers off here, we stall them for months. Years even! This is the chance this galaxy needs!"

Just as Amber was shaking her head in disbelief, Garrus sprinted towards both her and Liara.

"Shepard," Garrus warned, "we gotta go, now!"

Amber nodded before she gestured to Javik.

"We're dragging him back to the Citadel while we're at it," Amber suggested.
Garrus didn't hesitate as he fired a round that paralyzed Javik. Upon cue, Liara dashed towards the Prothean and lifted him with her biotics.

"Garrus! Get over here and help me shut these off!" Amber barked after rushing to the thrusters.

Garrus rushed over, cautious to avoid the thrusters now that they were all on full power.

"We don't have enough time," Garrus objected.

"We'll discuss that once we shut these off. Hurry!" Amber directed him towards a central unit that hooked up all the thrusters together.

Cutting off the side panel, I'd didn't take much longer for him to cut the power.

"Good. Joker?" Amber instructed, "land the Normandy. We turned off the thrusters and need to redirect this asteroid."

{No time, Shepard. We're too late. I'm sending the shuttle.}

"Belay that order. We—" Amber protested.

{The damage is done. Even if we hauled ass down there to rearrange the thrusters, we wouldn't be able to generate enough counterforce in time to change its course. That, and we don't have a big enough payload to destroy it before it reaches its target. We've lost this fight. Shuttle's away. ETA ten minutes.}

Amber groaned in frustration before she stepped away from the thruster.

"Wait until Saren hears about this," she grumbled.

Returning to Liara, they dragged the unconscious Javik onto the shuttle waiting for them. They sat down in disappointment as the shuttle departed from the asteroid surface and returned to the Normandy cargo hold shortly thereafter. From the bridge, Amber watched as they passed the asteroid on their way to the Mass Relay. While Joker brought the ship into FTL, she returned to the galaxy map, watching the Viper Nebula. Not fifteen minutes later, the system was highlighted with a red aura, with the words "connection lost" hanging over it. Her breath quickened as she clenched her fists.

"Damn it!" she spat.

Amber stormed out of the bridge in disgust before she made her way into her quarters. She whipped up her omni-tool before sending a message to Anderson:

{Anderson, could you ask Saren and Desolas to head over to the embassy? I want to discuss about Javik with you.}

Shortly after, Amber heard a ping in her omni-tool, so she read the Alliance officer's response.

{Of course, what happened? Talk to me.}

Trying to calm herself, Amber typed her response and read over it before she sent it.
A couple hours later and the Normandy returned to the Citadel. Amber trudged out of her quarters and made her way through the corridor, meeting up with Garrus.

"Vakarian," Amber instructed quietly, "cuff the Prothean."

Garrus slowly nodded while the Alliance commander disembarked from the Normandy, noticing Saren as he stood at the docks. After crossing the boardwalk, Amber frantically sprinted towards her turian mate.

"Is it as bad as I think it is?" Saren asked her.

"A whole system with god-knows how many batarians living in it gone in the blink of an eye," Amber ranted, "almost like it never existed. Unless they find an alternative to the relays for FTL travel, they're all out of luck."

Distraught, Amber embraced herself to Saren, prompting him to wrap his arms around her.

"He destroyed an entire relay for a system. Now there's no way in or out," Amber continued.

Soon, Garrus and Wrex escorted Javik across the boardwalk, the Prothean's wrists restrained in handcuffs. Amber released her embrace before she and Saren led the other three out of the docking bay and through the Presidium. Once they reached the Alliance Embassy, Desolas and Admiral Hackett stood near the front door waiting for them.

"Let me get this straight, commander. The Prothean just sunk three hundred thousand batarians dead in the middle of nowhere without warning or a chance to evacuate?" the Admiral huffed.

Amber nodded at Hackett without saying a word.

"Shepard tried her best to stop him," Garrus added, "but...well, we couldn't get through his thick skull."

Javik glared at Garrus. Sighing, Hackett gestured to the door.

"What's done is done," Hackett said, "we'll take him into custody for now, and figure out what do do with him then."

Saren, Amber and Desolas followed Hackett through the corridor while Garrus and Wrex escorted Javik in another direction. The four stopped at the door to Anderson's office before Hackett led them inside. Anderson sat in his desk and nodded at them as they sat down.

"Anderson," Saren began, "I must...apologize for the Prothean's shortsighted arrogance."

Anderson put a hand up.

"No need for apologies, son. None of us could have remotely anticipated a move like this. In the meantime, I'll be running damage control with Balak."

"Thank you, sir," Amber sighed in relief.

Desolas folded his arms.

"Even I should've seen it coming," Desolas admitted, "the signs were there, him running off to do
whatever. It was only a matter of time before he did something stupid."

Anderson opened his calendar on the terminal.

"Well the important issue lies right now in deflecting the blame of this incident," Anderson continued, "we have the perpetrator, we just need to make sure he doesn't do that again. Speaking of which, you said Javik made the claim that destroying this relay would set back the Reapers, yes?"

"That's what I heard," Amber nodded, "as for how long that is, I can't say."

Desolas nodded at the Alliance commander before he unfolded his arms.

"This will be an interesting note to keep in mind when he testifies in court," Desolas said, "if we decide to press charges in a standard manner. This is an unusual case and he's in your custody, so I have little input in this matter."

Desolas patted his brother on the shoulder before he stepped out of the office.

"Maybe we should give him to the batarians then?" Saren offered, "see how they punish him."

Amber scratched her head.

"We might want to ask Balak about that," she suggested, "after we inform him of the damage Javik's done."

Anderson took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

"Be my guest, then."

Amber scrolled to Balak's number in her omni-tool. She stepped out briefly to make the call. Leaning her back against the wall, she watched as a holographic projection of the batarian revolutionist appeared from her wrist.

{Shepard?} Balak paused over the com-link.

Amber sighed as she lowered her head.

"Hello, Balak," Amber greeted, "did you hear of what happened to the Viper Nebula?"

Balak gave Amber a blank stare.

{Hold on,} Balak insisted over the com-link, {you seem to know about it. Were you a witness?}

Amber nodded as she held back her tears.

"I can't trust Javik anymore," Amber confessed, "I saw him destroy the relay, and I couldn't stop him."

{He what?! But...why? To what end?}

"He said it was the only way to delay the Reapers," Amber explained, "but I think he went too far."

{I'll have to do a population recount after this. I can at least forgive Javik on the grounds he may be delusional from having been frozen for so long, but I can't say for the other members of the new leading council here.}
Amber closed her eyes for a blink moment.

"Would you like to try to get through to Javik at some point?" Amber asked the batarian, "we're configuring a date for his hearing."

\textit{(If he's gone as far as you claimed he has, I doubt it,)} Balak replied over the com-link.

Amber slowly nodded.

"Thank you for your time, Balak," she said.

Balak nodded at her before he ended the transmission. Straightening her spine, Amber stepped back into Anderson's office.

"...however, he hasn't provided much insight to Prothean society before their extinction. He wouldn't be a significant loss overall," Saren finished as she entered.

Hackett and Anderson made a brief glance at Amber.

"Balak got the message," Amber informed.

"Was he at least receptive?" the Admiral returned.

Amber nodded without saying anything.

"His cohorts might need some convincing," Amber said, "but he's at least willing to listen to our side of the story."

Saren nodded as he folded his arms behind his back.

"So we have an audience. That's some good news."

Anderson and Hackett took a moment to exchange glances before returning to the Spectres.

"We'll figure out the date to the Prothean's hearing and let you know," Hackett told them, "thank you for your time."

With the conference adjourned, the Spectres stepped out of the embassy. Saren placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Shepard," Saren asked her, "do you want to go check on Liara?"

Amber thought over the question for a moment before she nodded.

"May as well," Amber answered, "for someone as enthusiastic about knowing more about the Protheans, this probably is pretty hard-hitting for her."

Saren and Amber meandered through the Presidium and made their way to Liara's apartment. When they stopped by the front door, the Alliance commander rang the doorbell and waited until James opened it.

"Hey, Lola," James chirped, "how're you doing?"

"Is Liara here?" Amber asked.

James nodded.
"She was having a call earlier with her mother, but I think she's finished by now."

"So, is she available?" Amber clarified.

"Should be," James answered, "she's in her office right now."

James stepped back, allowing the Spectres to enter the apartment. She continued her way to the office door and knocked. Liara opened the door seconds later.

"Yes?" Liara paused.

"It's me, Amber. Do you have time to speak?"

Liara nodded before she glanced over her shoulder, a video display of Benezia still on the terminal. The younger asari led the Spectres into her office and sat down.

{I'm glad you could join us, Spectre Arterius,} Benezia greeted over the com-link.

"Good to see you again, Matriarch," Saren responded, "I assume all is well on your end?"

Benezia nodded.

"And I assume you heard of what Javik did?" Amber added.

{Liara had just informed me of the incident. Tragic, really.} Benezia confirmed over the transmission.

"And to just think," Liara replied, "we kept track of his movements and he still surprised us. He did move pretty fast after he left to steal that ship."

Benezia placed her finger on her chin.

{I assume you handed the Prothean over to the authorities?} Benezia said over the com-link.

Amber nodded.

"He's currently in Alliance custody," Amber replied, "but we don't know what we'll do with him yet."

"I'm sure we can handle everything else from here," Saren reassured the matriarch.

Benezia nodded in agreement.

"Thank you, mom," Liara added, "for hearing us out."

{I should be going. See you later, darling.} Liara nodded at Benezia before they ended the transmission. Sighing, she stood to her feet.

"So," Amber offered, "you want to get some drinks?"

Liara sighed as she turned towards the door.

"I guess a trip to the cafe wouldn't hurt," Liara nodded, "put this whole incident off mind for a bit."

Liara led Saren and Amber out of her office and made their way to the front door. The asari opened the door and glanced over her shoulder.
"Vega," Liara called over, "want to come with us?"

"Hold on," James returned, "lemme get my coat!"

James jumped from the couch and made his way to the coat rack. Slipping on a coat and a pair of shoes, he followed the asari and the Spectres out of the apartment. Amber brought them to a cafe she frequently went to on the Presidium. The four stepped towards the counter and took a moment to examine the menu.

"Hello, Shepard," the barista greeted, "what would you like to order?"

"Black coffee for me," James answered, "Lola?"

"What are your tea options?" Amber asked.

"Let's see," the barista answered, "we have jasmine, green, black, chai, ginger, oolong…"

"I'll give oolong a try," Amber requested.

The barista shifted her gaze towards Saren.

"I'll have a cup of kava," Saren said.

Liara then gestured to a signature asari tea in the menu.

"All right, then," the barista nodded, "coming right up."

Saren, Amber, Liara and James searched for an available table while the barista got to work with making the beverages. James landed in his seat, looking at the two Spectres sitting across from him.

"So, what's next?" James asked.

Amber rested her arms on the table.

"As of now," Amber advised, "we should get back on track."

"Takin' down Cerberus and stuff?" James clarified, "what else?"

Amber made a brief glance at Saren.

"Well, I figured as much," Saren replied, "but now that the big ticket items are out of the way and the last few things we do have to deal with are on their way towards being fixed, I might consider just taking this easy for a bit."

"And then you two can get your happy wedding," James added, "I was thinking of maybe giving our friend Krios a visit at the hospital. Poor bastard's really circling the drain now."

"That, too," Amber agreed.

Moments later, the barista arrived carrying a tray of beverages.

"All right," she announced as she placed the beverages on the table, "one kava, one black coffee, one oolong tea and a signature tea from Thessia."

"Thank you," Liara smiled before she took her cup into her hand.
At the moment, they could simply spend the rest of the day savoring their hot beverages.
Paternal Passing, Paternal Connecting

Amber didn't regret discharging Javik, so she spent two more weeks tying up loose ends with Cerberus with help from the Alliance.

Saren and Amber were spending their quiet morning eating their breakfast at the kitchen table when they got a ping from Kolyat. When Amber read the message, she tilted her head towards her turian mate.

"Saren?" Amber whispered.

Saren also read the message before he keened and placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Should we visit?" Saren asked her.

"That would be great," Amber nodded.

Saren and Amber finished their breakfast and cleaned the table before they made their way to the front door to slip their shoes on. They exited the apartment building and started their way towards Huerta Hospital. As they meandered through the Presidium, they caught brief glimpses of a few holoscreens displaying news headlines over batarians reacting in disgust after hearing what Javik did. Both Spectres ignored these news headlines before they arrived at the hospital's entrance. They didn't hesitate to step through the door and approach the receptionist's counter.

"Commander Shepard here," Amber called over, "my fiancé and I are here to visit one Thane Krios. Is he available?"

"He's on the top level, third room on the right," the receptionist answered, "he doesn't have much longer now."

"Thank you, ma'am," Amber nodded.

Saren and Amber stepped through the door and meandered through the hallway before taking an elevator. Once the elevator door opened after reaching the top floor, both Spectres stepped out and made their way to the third door. Kolyat had been waiting outside for them.

"Shepard, Saren," Kolyat called over, "you're right on time!"

Once they completed their approach, they turned to face the younger drell.

"He still in there?" she asked.

"Minutes," Kolyat nodded, "come on in."

Amber and Saren rushed into the room with Kolyat before they all sat near Thane's bed. The dying drell slowly tilted his head towards his son and the Spectres.

"Shepard," he groaned weakly.

The drell was in really bad shape. His skin had turned pale and incredibly flaky, and his plates had started to turn a dull gray from their original color. Even the IV that he was hooked up to didn't help much. Saren made a brief glance to his left, watching as Oriana sat next to Miranda while weeping on her shoulder. Amber softly closed her eyes before she extended her hand.
"We're here, Thane," Amber said softly, "we're here."

"Shepard. It's…pleasant to see you one more time."

Thane's breathing had become labored and was just audible from where she stood. Amber lowered her head, so Saren placed his hand on her shoulder.

"I wish there was more we could do for you," she sighed.

"You've…done enough already," Thane grunted.

Amber slowly leaned closer to Saren, encouraging him to nuzzle his face against hers.

"It's a shame to see you go like this," he added, "we have higher stakes to deal with."

Kolyat pulled up a chair alongside his father's bed and sat down. Thane reached out his other hand and grasped his son's, his grip growing weaker.

"Dad…" Kolyat whispered.

Thane briefly struggled to say something, holding his son's hand in his trembling hand. His head collapsed onto the pillow and he couldn't say anything.

"Dad…?" Kolyat reached a hand to shake him.

A brief second later, he reached over Thane's forehead, helping to close his eyes one last time. Amber slowly withdrew her hand and rested her head on Saren's chest. Saren grimly glanced at the assassin and nodded.

"I'll call it in," he said solemnly.

Saren and Amber slowly stood to their feet. The turian Spectre walked to the room's intercom and reported Thane's passing. Oriana stood to her feet and cautiously approached Kolyat before the two leaned in to embrace one another. A few minutes later, medical personnel arrived, forcing all the visitors to leave the room. All they could do was step out of the hospital. Kolyat remained inside to decide what would be done with the body, so for now, Oriana held hands with Miranda.

"Are you doing ok?" Miranda asked her sister.

Oriana shook her head.

"What if…the same thing happens to Kolyat?" Oriana whispered.

"It won't if he receives minimal exposure to moist environments," Miranda replied.

Oriana made a brief glance at her sister and nodded.

"I guess going to a beach isn't an option," she shrugged, "unless he has a respirator."

It didn't take long before they reached the entrance to one of the wards.

"I guess I'll take my sister home," Miranda sighed, "you have any plans for the day?"

"Not much today after this," Saren answered.

Miranda nodded before she and Oriana stepped into the ward. Saren and Amber simply made their
way back to their apartment. Once they reached the living room, they plopped down on the couch with the Alliance commander resting on top of the turian Spectre.

"Saren?" Amber whispered.

"Something the matter?" Saren paused.

"No," Amber reassured, "I'm just content to enjoy your company."

"Well, as am I," Saren agreed.

Saren purred as he nuzzled his face against hers. The silence broke a few hours later when Amber heard a ping from her omni-tool, so she and her turian mate sat up on the couch before she answered the transmission, immediately realizing that the Shadow Broker was calling her.

"Did you take interest in me all of a sudden?" Amber asked.

{I've only been interested in your origins, Shepard,} the Shadow Broker admitted over the com-link, {you're an interesting character, thought I'd explore just where you came from.}

Amber gave the Shadow Broker a blank stare.

"I haven't thought about my origins," Amber admitted, "I do remember my mom adopted me, though."

{Would you prefer your heritage went unsaid or do you want to know more?}

Saren and Amber exchanged glances in a moment of silence, the Alliance commander placing her hand behind her head.

"What do you think?" Amber paused.

"Well," Saren shrugged, "a little knowledge wouldn't hurt."

Amber turned her head towards the screen in her omni-tool.

"So what have you got?" Amber asked.

{Backtracking your profile, I managed to find the hospital you were born in. Your biological mother died after childbirth due to complications, but I did find your biological father.}

Amber tilted her head sideways.

"Ok," she blurted, "so where is he now?"

{He's working as a librarian on Earth. If you really are interested, I'll send you the address.}

"You mean the address of the library?" Amber clarified.

The Shadow Broker only responded by sending an attached file before disconnecting. All the Spectres could do was exchange glances in confusion.

"Maybe we should take your shuttle this time," Amber suggested.

"Yeah," Saren nodded, "let me get my coat."

Saren and Amber stood from the couch and made their way to the front door, where the turian
Spectre grabbed his coat from the coat rack. They stepped out of their apartment and meandered through the Presidium, making their way to the Spectre docks. They boarded Saren's shuttle and sat down at the cockpit. The Arterius Spectre began the procedure of gaining authorization for departure until minutes later, the magnetic clamps released the shuttle. Saren tapped several keys on the console, setting their course for the Local System.

"Are you sure about this? Once we peer into this, there's no unringing that bell," he asked her.

"I'm sure it'll be worth it," Amber reassured her mate with a smile.

"Well," Saren shrugged, "it's going to hurt if we find this guy and find out he isn't exactly saint-material."

Saren flew the shuttle out of the Citadel and towards the Mass Relay before he let the ancient structure fling the ship into FTL speed. Half an hour later, they arrived in the human-controlled system. It didn't take much longer before they reached Earth's orbit. Descending the planet's atmosphere, the coordinates directed them to hover over the state of Michigan. Saren didn't hesitate to land the shuttle at a spaceport, so he and Amber soon disembarked. The address led them to Detroit of all places in the state. With increased colonization and assistance from salarian terraformers, conditions had started to improve. When they left the spaceport, Saren and Amber began meandering through the city, stopping at a bus station and waiting for a bus that would take them to the library. Saren attempted to generate some conversation before they got on the bus.

"So, any idea what he'd look like?" Saren asked.

"I don't know," Amber admitted with a shrug.

He idly checked the funds on his omni-tool, ensuring he had enough for the bus fare. Saren felt a sense of relief after learning the decent amount of credits he had as the bus started moving. The two sat down and peeked out the window as the bus drove through the streets. They observed as various civilians of different mingled with their everyday lives. They sat through dealing with the traffic until the bus arrived at a stop near the library. Getting off, they looked up from the bottom of the steps at the facility. Amber and Saren meandered through the courtyard and stepped through the front door. Stepping inside the lobby, Amber double-checked the profile in her omni-tool.

"Well," Amber sighed, "here goes nothing."

They looked to the map guide at the front desk. While they tried to configure where to go, the receptionist gave them a confused stare.

"Can I help you today?" he said.

Amber snapped out of her thoughts and turned her head towards the receptionist.

"We're looking for an Abraham Mason, is he here?" Amber replied.

The receptionist double-checked the calendar in his terminal before he nodded.

"You can find him in the circulation section," he answered.

"Thank you," Amber nodded at the receptionist.

The receptionist's advice directed the Spectres near the entrance of the library. Three of the clerks behind the counter took notice of them, including a middle-aged African-American with a grandfatherly appearance.
"Can I help you today?" he asked.

Saren shrugged.

"I hope you don't mind if we borrow you for a few questions," Saren requested.

The man adjusted his specs and looked at the two.

"Perhaps you have a good reason," he told them.

"We do," Amber reassured him.

The clerks exchanged glances before Abraham slowly stood from his seat, one of the other clerks moving to take over his work for a while. They followed him into a quiet, empty meeting room away from the rest of the library.

"Am I in trouble?" Abraham asked her.

"No," Amber shook her head, "I was told about the hospital my mom adopted me from. Do you... have any old flames?"

Abraham placed his finger on his chin in a moment of silence.

"There was... Brenda Daniels from my high school years," he answered.

Abraham gave Amber and Saren a blank stare for a moment.

"You sure her parents didn't send you a complaint?" he paused.

Amber scratched her head.

"I'm pretty sure I didn't meet them," Amber admitted.

Abraham slowly nodded in relief.

"Yeah," he replied, "because they won't take kindly to you."

Amber took a moment to examine her arms, memorizing the color of her skin.

"Let me guess," Saren observed, "her parents disapproved of an interracial relationship?"

Abraham calmly nodded.

"You bet," he replied, "I remember she wasn't a huge fan of their idea of family values."

Saren leaned closer to Amber.

"Sounds like something Udina would say," Saren whispered.

"We stayed together regardless, away from the scene," Abraham continued, "then she passed from childbirth. My parents weren't particularly receptive, and I wasn't going to bet on their minds being particularly open."

Saren let out a soft sigh before he placed his hand on Amber's shoulder.

"Now," Saren asked, "you are familiar with Commander Shepard here, yes?"
"Of course," Abraham nodded, "her face is practically plastered all over ANN."

Saren and Amber whipped up their omni-tools.

"Shepard here was given her genetic profile on her potential biological parents," Saren clarified.

Amber angled her omni-tool, allowing Abraham to examine the data in her omni-tool. After a moment, he gazed into her eyes.

"Hi, dad," she blurted sheepishly.

"Oh, so you did ok?" Abraham clarified.

Amber nodded with a smile.

"I know I can't do much for my biological mother," Amber replied, "but at least I know you're doing ok, too."

Abraham took a shaky breath, refocusing his gaze.

"Yeah, I see it now," he mused, "you have her face. I remember her naming you, too."

Saren couldn't help but flex his mandibles into a smile. After a moment of silence, both Abraham and Amber shook hands.

"It was nice meeting you, sir," Amber told him.

"Same here," Abraham agreed.

Abraham and Amber took a moment to exchange contact numbers.

"I guess I'll let you get back to your job," Amber said.

Abraham nodded at her.

"It's…nice to know you still made something of your life when I could not provide for you, Amber."

Standing to their feet, Saren, Amber and Abraham stepped out of the conference room. While the librarian returned to the counter near the library entrance, the Spectres made their way outside.

"Well," Amber mused, "that was…something."

"Do you feel it was worth it?" Saren asked.

Amber nodded.

"Yeah, it was unexpected," Amber added, "but at least we got something out of it."

Saren placed his hand on Amber's shoulder.

"Well, enjoy it for what it's worth," he chuckled.

With nothing else to do, they made their way to the bus stop. Nonetheless, Amber found meaning in her identity. This form of satisfaction lingered as they took the bus back to the spaceport.
One day passed and the Normandy crew held a small funeral for Thane. The following day after that, they felt this was a good time to relax for now. This was especially since the last of Cerberus and the Batarian Hegemony were no longer a problem to everyone else.

At the moment, Oriana was browsing dresses in the closet, taking the time to try on each one. Oriana found a halter minidress and flaunted herself in the mirror while Miranda observed while she sat on the bed.

"You think Kolyat would like this one?" Oriana called over.

"You're the lady of the hour," Miranda reminded, "it's your choice."

Oriana nodded in agreement before she looked herself in the mirror.

"I suppose it's worth a try," she replied.

Having confirmed a dress for the evening, Oriana made her way to the shoe rack. The two left shortly after. When they stepped into the park, the Lawson sisters spotted Kolyat near a flowerbed. He looked up to see the two approaching.

"Oriana, pleasure to see you again," Kolyat greeted.

Oriana smiled before she sprinted forward and embraced herself to the drell.

"How've you been?" Oriana chirped, "you holding up?"

Kolyat nodded with a smile.

"Taking my time," Kolyat answered, "dad's been decaying for a few years now, so I've more or less come to terms with his passing."

Oriana and Kolyat tilted their heads towards Miranda.

"You two have fun," Miranda encouraged.

Her older sister departed, leaving them their own devices. With confidence, Oriana began strolling through the park with her drell boyfriend.

"Your sister is the cloak and dagger type, right?" Kolyat asked.

"Yeah," Oriana nodded, "even after Cerberus, she's busy heading off doing something. Not sure what."

Kolyat couldn't help but shrug.

"I'm sure she'll find meaning in her own life," he said, "hard to say, though."

Oriana and Kolyat came across a bench that had a good view of the park's fountain. Satisfied with its distance, they both sat down. As the younger Lawson sister leaned closer to the drell, he placed his arm over her shoulder. She rested her head against his shoulder, looking up into his gaze.
In the meantime, Miranda made her way to the Silversun Strip. Jack and Wrex had sent her a message earlier, inviting her over for a drink or two. It didn't take much longer for her to find them sitting at the bar, so she stepped forward and sat down next to them, catching their attention.

"Hey Lawson," Wrex greeted, "we just got here, so we haven't ordered anything yet."

"I guess we're on the same boat," Miranda agreed.

Miranda picked up her menu and browsed the list of drinks.

"So, with Cerberus gone," Jack asked her, "you keeping up with getting friendly with the Shadow Broker?"

She temporarily avoided eye contact.

"Since when?" Miranda paused.

"Since we made a truce with him," Jack clarified.

Miranda chuckled as she closed her eyes.

"I'm still intrigued with his species," Miranda reminded.

Wrex rolled his eyes as he placed his menu on the counter.

"I'll be getting a ryncol," Wrex announced, "you?"

"I'll start with a thing of scotch," Jack added, "what about you, Lawson?"

Miranda looked over the menu one more time before she set it down.

"I could go for champagne," Miranda answered.

The bartender nodded.

"You got it. I'll be up shortly with your orders."

The bartender didn't hesitate to start mixing drinks.

"So, What are your plans together?" Miranda asked, leaning over the bar.

Jack and Wrex made a brief glance at the dance floor.

"That depends, Miri," Jack grinned, "have you thought of whether a krogan can dance?"

"Uuuuh, dance?" Wrex paused.

Jack tilted her head towards Wrex.

"What, never danced before?" Jack blurted.

"Never needed to," Wrex shrugged.

Jack smiled as she stretched her arms over her shoulder.

"I could teach you how if you'd like," Jack suggested.
His eyes widened as she started to yank his wrists.

"No, wait!" Wrex protested.

Unfortunately, Jack brought Wrex into the middle of the dance floor, causing him to give her a confused stare.

"Are you…serious?" Wrex blurted.

Jack smiled before she extended her hand.

"C'mon, it's easy," she beckoned, "I'll show you."

Wrex scanned the room for a moment, the music echoing across the room, before he grasped Jack's hand.

"Okay, one step at a time then," Jack advised.

Jack started by stepping back on one foot.

"Place your hands like so and follow my lead," she continued.

Jack placed one hand on his shoulder, encouraging Wrex to imitate the gesture. The krogan then continued to imitate each of the human biotic's movements. Initially, he stumbled a bit, constantly watching her footsteps to act accordingly. Jack took a moment to twirl before returning her focus to Wrex.

"Need me to go slower?" Jack paused.

"A little," Wrex admitted.

As promised, Jack reduced the speed of her steps. Gradually, she told him how to improve his placement and footing. After a few instances of stumbling, Wrex started getting the hang of it. Already, some of the guests were gazing at both of them.

"Right, now I'm getting the hang of this," Wrex chuckled.

Figuring out a way to dance in sync, both the krogan and the human biotic accelerated their tempo.

"Huh, you're improving already," she grinned.

"Thanks," Wrex returned.

Their groove already started eliciting cheers from a few of the witnesses. Wrex felt a wave of nervousness from the increase in attention. He turned his mind away from the outside, forcing it inward and on Jack. The human biotic seemed to ignore the applauding guests as she kept up her tempo. Amongst swaying their hips and the occasional spin, the music track edged closer to its finale, so Jack stared into the krogan's eyes and nodded at him. Hooking one arm over his, Jack leaned back and lifted her leg while she extended her other arm. Wrex couldn't help but smile as he leaned forward, still supporting her in his grip. She gazed back up at him, reciprocating his happy gesture. By the time the music track ended and another one started, Jack and Wrex recomposed themselves and returned to the counter, noticing as Miranda was staring at both of them.

"What?" Wrex blurted.

"Impressive for your first time out, Wrex," Miranda complimented.
Wrex chuckled as he scratched his chin.

"Now you're making me want to invite other krogans to a dance lesson," he remarked.

The conversation was interrupted when the bartender arrived with the drinks.

"Here you go," she chirped.

"Thanks," Wrex grunted.

Wrex took a sip of his ryncol.

"That was fun," Jack said before taking a sip, "thanks for showing a girl a good time."

"Anytime," Wrex agreed as he patted Jack on the shoulder, "thanks for not entirely embarrassing me publicly."

Miranda scanned her surroundings with the glass of champagne in her hand.

"Are you two sure about that?" Miranda paused.

Wrex turned and looked at her.

"About what?" he grumbled.

Miranda eyed a few of the club goers playing back a vid in their omni-tools.

"Don't be surprised if they ask you about marriage," Miranda warned facetiously.

Nervousness once again washed over Wrex's face. He stared blankly, looking around as he fought to formulate his next sentence. After finishing her sip of scotch, Jack placed her hand on the krogan's shoulder.

"Hey," Jack reassured him, "we'll be fine. I've never had tying the knot in mind before."

"Same here," Wrex agreed, "mercenary work kept pushing that thought back, and the Genophage gave no reason to get started in the first place."

A short while later, Wrex and Jack finished their drinks. The human biotic stretched her arms before sliding off her seat.

"I think I'm done for the night," Jack said, "you, Wrex?"

Wrex nodded before he stood from his seat.

"Yeah," he agreed, "I feel the same."

"Have a good night," Miranda waved her hand at them.

Jack nodded at Miranda before she and Wrex made their way out of the bar. Once they left the Silversun Strip, they stumbled through the wards until they returned to their apartment, where the krogan plopped onto the living room floor, laying on his back. With a soft expression in her eyes, the human biotic knelt down by his side.

"You ok there, big guy?" Jack cooed.

Wrex tilted his head towards Jack.
"Yeah, you?" Wrex whispered softly.

Wrex cupped Jack's face with his hand. Smiling, she climbed atop the krogan.

"I guess I'm getting needy from all that dancing," Jack admitted with a chuckle.

"Oh," Wrex mused, "getting worked up? I can help with that."

Jack leaned forward while she kissed Wrex. The krogan ran his hand down her back as she got to work stripping him. Wrex returned the gesture by unzipping her dress. They dropped their clothes aside and huddled closer on the floor.

"You wanna wait till we get to the bed or are you fine with the floor for now?" Wrex asked.

"Let's do it right here," Jack suggested.

Jack proceeded to brush her tongue along the krogan's neck. Letting out a pleased sigh, Wrex ran one hand down her side. The human biotic traced her hand along his chest until she found the slit at his crotch. When she started stroking him with her hand, the krogan groaned as he thrust his hips forward.

"Hey Jack," Wrex whispered, "I got an idea. You mind turning around?"

Jack stared into the krogan's eyes and nodded before she rested on her belly, her head closer to his slit while Wrex took a good view of the apex of her thighs. While the human biotic started licking his genital slit, the krogan brushed his tongue along her folds. Between licks, she would occasionally look back down at him. When he began sticking his tongue into her folds, Jack bucked her hips before she went back to her ministrations, watching as the krogan's cock started to emerge from its slit. She wrapped her hand around the base, feeling it as it extended.

In between moans, Jack took the krogan's cock into her mouth while Wrex placed a gentle yet firm grip on her hips. The human biotic stroked his base with one hand while she cradled his scrotum in her other hand. He brushed his tongue along her folds, moving from the clit downward. The moisture and warmth from her mouth was pleasant enough for Wrex to moan. She could hear the wet slapping noise generated by his mouth and her nether region as her head bobbed up and down his shaft. Their combined ministrations sent pleasurable tingles through their nerves and generated heat that pooled in their cores. Jack suddenly felt the warm rush of his climax into her mouth. She also resisted the urge to clench her thighs when his tongue brushed along a certain nerve in her walls that caused them to tighten around him.

Coming down from their high, the human biotic slowly withdrew her mouth while the krogan withdrew his tongue. Jack shifted to where she straddled her legs on his lap and guided the tip of his cock to her orifice.

"Wrex, you ready to go?" Jack breathed.

Wrex ran his hand down the back of Jack's neck.

"Yeah, I desire more like you do," Wrex agreed.

Jack widened her stance while she lowered herself onto the krogan's cock, gasping and arching her back as his thickness stretched her walls. Adjusting her legs on either side of his hips, she shifted her angle on top of him. As they panted, Wrex placed a gentle grip on her waist, allowing her to ride him which encouraged him to thrust his hips upwards. She leaned up against him, letting her body go slack. All she could feel was his length pounding into her. She bucked her hips in sync
with his thrusts while she perched her hands on his shoulders and intertwined her legs with his.

Wrex moved a hand off her hips, gradually sliding it up her spine, feeling the distance. As they panted amidst their rhythmic pace, the human biotic pressed her forehead against the krogan’s, feeling the moist warmth in his breath. He put his hand on the back of her head, holding them together. Jack responded by pulling him into a deep kiss. With his other hand, he held her hips as he released his seed, hungrily panting. The human biotic moaned into his mouth as her walls tightened around his cock in her orgasm seconds later. He chuckled as he stood up, wrapping an arm around her.

"Now, we're taking this to the bed."

"I'm sure I'll be ready for the second round by then," Jack agreed as she nuzzled her face against his.

Still holding her in his arms, he waddled back to their bedroom and shut the door behind them. Once Wrex climbed onto the bed, he rested Jack on her back while he nuzzled his face against hers. He pressed his extended length against her entrance again, waiting for an opportune time to continue. Minutes later, Jack tugged at his arm, encouraging him to lick her neck while he buried himself into her to the hilt, listening to her gasp as he savored the moist rubbery warmth. She didn’t hesitate to hook her legs around his hips. Wrex kissed her forehead before he gingerly started rocking into her.

Jack arched her back and let out sharp cries while she perched her arms over the krogan’s shoulders. Similarly, he grunted as he started accelerating his rhythmic pace. The human biotic kneaded the back of his head with one hand. Wrex held her close while she located her clit with one hand, biotic particles starting to emit from her fingertips and dancing along both of their nerves. In turn, he decided to start generating biotic energy from his own body. The fluids eased the friction of his pace and combined with the biotics, Jack panted heavily as she tightened her thighs around his waist, pressure building in her stomach. Energy buzzing in his palm, he put a hand to the side of her waist. He kept rocking into her until the human biotic let out a loud cry and her walls tightened around his dick moments later. Chuckling, Wrex brushed his tongue along her cheek.

"Ah…it's been a good night…"

Moments after he released the second time, Wrex withdrew his cock before rolling to his side to catch his breath, both of them basking in the afterglow. A moment later, he cupped Jack’s face with her hand, allowing her to lean into the touch.

"Yeah, that felt good," Jack laughed softly.

Jack rolled over and nestled into the krogan's embrace. Sighing in content, Wrex gently ran his hand along her head.

"I love you, Wrex," Jack whispered.

"Oh, I love you too," Wrex added.

Wrex held her close as sleep began to cloud their eyes. As far as they would see, it could be a smooth ride from there.
Saren and Amber made their way to the Citadel Tower a week later. Since progress had been made with the batarians, the krogans, the Geth and the Rachni, now they had to consider the evaluation that the turians, the asari and the salarians need to be spared by the incoming Reapers at the end of the year. Sparatus was willing to discuss this with them, yet Tevos and Valern weren't so sure why this conference was needed. Saren and Amber met up with said Councilors in a conference room and sat down at the table.

"I'm glad you two took the time to come here," Sparatus greeted.

"Thank you, Councilor Sparatus," Saren nodded with a smile.

"So what do you have in mind, sir?" Amber adjusted her seat.

Sparatus scratched his mandible as he thought over the question.

"You two have done exceedingly good work recently," Sparatus praised, "however, that still leaves the main Council races in mind."

"It's about Saren's race, right?" Amber clarified, "along with Liara's and Mordin's?"

Tevos and Valern nodded in unison.

"Yes, the turians, the asari, and the salarians may be doing very well," Tevos explained, "but I can't say the same for how the Reapers will evaluate us. I'd like to think we do our part, but something at the back of my mind says otherwise."

"If you'd like," Saren offered, "we could look into it."

"Well, I'd like to start having this planned out, see what our options are," Sparatus suggested.

Saren and Amber took this chance to create a checklist in their omni-tools.

"Well, I'm sure this is a matter you can discuss among yourselves, no?" Sparatus continued, "we can double back after dealing with the hanar and elcor."

"Thank you, Sparatus," Amber nodded at the turian Councilor.

When Sparatus gestured a dismissal, Saren and Amber stepped out of the office and made their way out of the tower.

"You think we could arrange a conference with the Hierarchy as a start?" Amber asked Saren.

"I can," Saren nodded, "maybe with Sparatus' help, of course."

Both Spectres began meandering through the Presidium, making a mental note to configure their schedule in their calendar later. Out of the corner of her eye, Amber spotted a Keeper skittering into one of the wards. It wasn't on any usual maintenance paths she was particularly familiar with. The Alliance commander tapped on her turian mate's shoulder, catching his attention.
"Yes?" Saren paused.

"Why do you think that Keeper is wandering into the ward Liara's apartment is at?" Amber pointed at the Keeper in question.

While thinking, Saren fluttered his mandibles.

"Maybe her plumbing's backed up?" Saren guessed, "they have a tendency to occasionally break into people's homes to 'fix' something."

"Maybe we could ask her," Amber suggested.

Saren nodded at Amber in agreement before they started following the Keeper.

"Alright, let's see where this thing goes," he muttered.

Once they reached Liara's apartment building, they observed as the Keeper began searching for a different way in. They kept a suspicious eye on it before stepping into the building and making their way to the door to Liara's apartment. Keeping their distance, they gradually followed it inside, watching as it started searching the living room. Strangely enough, they saw a few more Keepers studying Liara's files on the coffee table and two more observing the asari archaeologist as she took a nap on the couch.

"Okay, this is new," Saren whispered.

They weren't sure if they should disrupt what the Keepers were doing, so Amber and Saren pressed their backs against the wall in the living room. The Keepers thus far failed to detect them or didn't care about their presence. The silence broke when Liara moaned softly and stretched her arms, slowly waking up from her nap. Suddenly, the Keepers turned and bolted for the door, dropping whatever they were doing in a heartbeat. When the asari archaeologist sat up on the couch, she tilted her head towards the Spectres.

"Shepard?" Liara paused in confusion, "I didn't see you come in."

"You had a bunch of Keepers in here earlier," Amber blurted, "they were searching the place rather extensively."

Liara tilted her head and found her documents lying on the coffee table.

"I…what in the goddess' name…?" Liara stuttered.

Liara picked up the documents and scrambled to her office to put the documents back, returning to the living room minutes later.

"I'm not sure how to feel about this," Liara admitted, "I think we might need to survey any Keepers that come in here in the future."


Amber whipped up her omni-tool and browsed for available shops in the Citadel.

"We can help you get started with something like that," Amber offered.

"Thank you, Shepard," Liara sighed in relief.

The instant Amber found the coordinates of an equipment shop, she, Liara and Saren made their
way out of the apartment and through the streets of the ward.

"So what do you think they were looking for?" Saren asked, lightly nudging Amber.

Amber tilted her head towards Saren.

"I wish I knew," Amber shrugged, "I don't understand why they'd be there in the first place if they were just going to rearrange things."

Amber made a brief glance at Liara, only to notice the asari held a concerned expression. By then, they arrived at the entrance to the equipment store.

"Do you think," Liara asked nervously, "Javik still has control over the Keepers even while he's detained?"

"If he's been poking around with the Keepers for as long as he has been," Saren agreed, "there's a pretty high chance he has."

The Spectres and the asari stepped into the shop and began browsing for cameras. Saren found a high end camera and took it to the front counter to ask more about it. While the turian Spectre discussed with the clerk about features, Liara scanned her surroundings for any lurking Keepers. Amber sighed before she placed her hand on the asari's shoulders.

"It's ok," Amber reassured her, "Javik can't hurt you."

"Still," Liara added, "even if their technology was based around what the Reapers left them, the Protheans had very advanced knowledge of biology and synthetics. It honestly shouldn't have been a surprise for me when he has Keepers scouting out my apartment."

Amber nodded at Liara before they both approached Saren. By now, the turian Spectre paid for the camera and turned to face the women.

"Got it," Saren announced, "it can hook up with whatever terminal you own where you can work out how you want it to work pretty easily."

Amber tilted her head back to Liara.

"You want our help with installing it?" she asked.

"Yes," Liara nodded, "at least make sure we aren't interrupted again."

Saren, Amber and Liara left the equipment shop and made their way back to the asari's apartment. Once they headed into the living room, the turian Spectre set the box onto the coffee table and opened it. They stepped into Liara's office and began installing the camera. Amber double-checked its settings and adjusted them so it would detect Keepers. While Saren positioned the camera itself, Liara hooked it up to her terminal. Once they finished installing the camera, Liara placed her hands on both Spectres' shoulders.

"Thank you for your help," Liara praised, "I appreciate it."

Amber and Saren smiled at the asari.

"Don't sweat it. Would you prefer this outside or in the front hallway?"

"I'd say the front hallway," Liara suggested.
"All right, this will only take a moment," Saren answered.

Carrying the leftover equipment in his hands, Saren made his way out into the front hallway. He tacked it onto the wall in an otherwise obscure location for it to remain unseen from trespassing Keepers. He shook hands with Liara after he completed his task.

"I'm sure you'll be all right at the moment," Saren said, "take care."

Liara nodded at Saren, allowing him to lead Amber out of the apartment. They meandered through the Presidium and arrived back at their apartment, where they sauntered into the living room. Once they sat down on the couch, Amber scrolled through her inbox in her omni-tool and stared into the audio message that lingered. After a moment of silence, Saren placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Is something troubling you?" he asked her.

Amber snapped out of her thoughts and shifted her focus towards her turian mate.

"Do you think the Reapers would be open to answering some questions?" she pondered.

Saren's eyes wandered to the Alliance commander's omni-tool.

"That's…a good question," he admitted, "were you thinking of attempting to contact them early?"

"Maybe to have a conversation with them," Amber nodded.

After a moment of silence, Saren offered his hand, allowing Amber to gently grasp it.

"Well then," Saren replied, "let's hope they don't respond with hostility."

Amber nodded at Saren before she looked over the message and found a number embedded inside. Without hesitation, she began a transmission and waited until the strange deep voice emerged through the maroon sound wave on the screen.

{Shepard…} it grumbled.

"In case you're wondering," Amber admitted, "I gave up on convincing Javik to see the error of his ways."

{Then dispose of him. His cycle has ended, as should he.}

Saren took a moment to clear his throat.

"That's a rather callous approach," he commented, "but he did wipe out a system when he destroyed a relay, so I shouldn't be surprised."

Saren made a brief glance at Amber.

"Even when we're trying to improve diplomacy between races," Amber reminded, "don't you think that we can't be perfect all the time?"

{You bring up an interesting point that the Protheans wouldn't consider, Shepard,} Harbinger agreed over the transmission, {I'm willing to give some leeway, considering the nature of organics. However, don't expect that to be invitation to become lacking.}

Saren and Amber exchanged glances for a moment before they nodded.
"So, what else do you have to offer?" Saren asked.

*Perhaps on the due date,* Harbinger suggested over the transmission, *I will meet you in person to negotiate a truce. Is that satisfactory?*

"Yes," Amber nodded.

*Very well,* Harbinger confirmed over the transmission, *in the meantime, keep up with your work.*

Without warning, the transmission ended.

"At least it's calm about all this," Saren shrugged.

Amber nodded at Saren before she leaned closer to him, encouraging him to wrap his arm over his shoulder.

"So that probably means we still have a chance," Amber agreed, "but I can't say the same for Javik. So he gets slaughtered by the Reapers, big deal. He's been nothing but trouble and a liability."

Saren hummed as he ran his talon along his mandible in a moment of silence.

"We might as well negotiate Javik's sentencing with the Alliance prior to the hearing," Saren said, "still, it's a shame that we'll be offing the last Prothean like this."

Amber slowly stood from the couch and began browsing the shelf. A book about turian folktales caught her eyes, so she pulled it off the shelf before she returned to the couch, sitting down next to Saren. Saren flicked his gaze over his book before turning back to his own omni-tool.

"Saren," Amber asked him, "do you have a favorite folktale from the Hierarchy?"

"Huh. Haven't thought of that for a while. Let's see…" he started.

Amber angled the book, allowing Saren to flip through the pages.

"Okay…what have we…here, I liked this as a yearling."

Amber glanced at the title Saren pointed his talon at.

"The Forest Labyrinth?" Amber paused.

Saren nodded at Amber before she started reading the summary.

"Interesting synopsis," she hummed.

"Yeah," Saren agreed, "whenever I got my turn with the storybook, I would read that tale several times."

"That good, huh?" Amber remarked.

He thumbed the first page and began reading the tale over Amber's shoulder.

"Long ago on the primitive fields of Palaven lived a child named Secutis. Between learning to hunt and fight from his father or helping his mother tend to duties at the household, his favorite past time was to climb a hill nearby to watch the sun set over the horizon," he started.
Amber leaned in closer to his embrace.

"Each night, he would watch as the sun's rays faded from the skyline, giving way to the stars in the sky."

Amber examined the illustration as Saren went along. The images were monochromatic, depicting the child, his home, and his family in grayscale. The second image showed the same child outlined by the sunset as he watched from the top of the aforementioned hill. The Alliance commander also read along the text adjacent to the illustrations. After a moment, Saren flipped the page.

"Usually, the place was empty for him to enjoy alone. One evening, after finishing his chores, he found something waiting for him," Saren added, "a rather stubborn grumpy beast."

Amber examined the next illustration.

"Funny," Amber mused, "that fella reminds me of the Shadow Broker."

"Later renditions have depicted the beast as a Yahg instead," Saren mentioned, "anyways, the child didn't dare approach it."

Amber nodded before Saren turned the page.

"The beast's eyes radiated fire, and its breath fumed with poison," Saren continued, "to Secutis's dismay, the beast didn't want to move. It simply stood on his beloved viewpoint, planting himself there like a carnivorous tree."

Saren took a moment to flip the page.

"Secutis asked the beast to move aside," Saren added, "so he may have room to see the sunset. The beast, however, told the boy he needed to rest before he could move anywhere, rather in a curt tone. He trembled, then asked again for the beast to move. Once again, it refused, saying it would only move if the boy fetched it some food."

"So, a snack?" Amber clarified.

Saren nodded.

"The child shook his head. 'Surely, nothing in our household would be sufficient for you. Is there nothing else to bargain with?'" Saren continued, "'My favorite food can be found in the Forest of Labyrinth. Perhaps you've been there before?' The beast pointed to the forest distant from the boy's home. 'Fetch it for me, and I'll be on my way,' it grinned."

Amber got a turn to flip the page.

"Eagerly," Saren added, "the young lad scurried for the forest. He understood his task and wasn't surrendering his hill. Once he stepped into the forest, he knew navigating through it wouldn't be easy. The trees were now much taller than he remembered, and the pathways started to blur into a haze."

Saren turned the page.

"Regardless, he continued his trek into the woods," Saren read, "he first crossed the stepping stones of the creek. He narrowly slipped towards the other side, making a last jump to the shore."

Saren nodded at Amber, allowing her to turn the page.
"Second," he added, "he climbed the tangled roots of a large tree. Secutis had never climbed a tree before, and had stalled a few times climbing. Climbing higher, he nearly lost his grip when a branch snapped. He desperately dug his talons into the trunk. The way back down was a long way. The child continued his climb upward till he reached the top."

Saren turned the page.

"Finally," Saren said, "out in the distance in the valley below was a plant he had never seen before during his time out hunting with his father. He slid down the slope to reach it. Upon closer inspection, the plant bore some strange fruit."

Amber flipped the page.

"Secutis took off his shirt to carry the fruit and started collecting for the beast," Saren added, "once he finished gathering plenty, he found a small critter stowing away in the pile. Before anything else, he snatched and tossed it over the shrub."

Amber scratched her head while Saren turned the page.

"Was it some sort pest that's found in Palaven?" Amber paused.

"Yeah, just a rodent," Saren shrugged, "usually, they are found scavenging harvested crops."

Amber ran her hand along his mandible, eliciting a pleased sigh out of him.

"Secutis soon began his journey back," Saren continued, "he realized just how steep the valley he was in. The dirt yielded under his talons, causing him to slowly slide back down again. He still knew he had to hurry back home before dark. Holding his shirt sleeves in his mouth, he desperately dug in and crawled his way back to the top again."

Amber turned the page.

"The sun set over the horizon as he finally reached the peak of the hill," Saren read, "when the beast saw the gift before his eyes, he gave a smile. 'Good. I'll be on my way,' it grinned. 'You can have your view back.'"

Saren flipped to the last page of the tale.

"Before he turned in for the night, he stood atop the hill, watching as the moon came into view," Saren concluded, "he may have missed out on the sunset, but there's another chance tomorrow."

Having finished reading, Saren leaned back.

"I really liked this story. Helped with growing up."

"Yeah," Amber agreed, "it's lighthearted and enjoyable."

"Not sure about you," Saren replied, "but my older brother Desolas did a lot of older-brother-things to me as a kid, so having the story book mattered to me."

Amber nodded in agreement as she flipped through the pages, browsing through the other tales.

"I know humans have a fair share of folktales," she mentioned, "maybe I could show you an example sometime?"

"Sure. Any you had on mind?" Saren nodded.
Amber nodded before she stood from the couch and browsed for the shelf before she found Little Red Riding Hood, which she started reading to Saren after sitting back down next to him.

Chapter End Notes

I couldn't seem to find any canon turian folktales, so Dr. Compass and I came up with one ourselves.
Miranda felt confident in allowing Oriana and Kolyat help ensure the drell pass the evaluation at the end of the year, so she decided now was a good time to start her own task. She would be meeting up with the Shadow Broker, thinking of easing the Yahg into the galaxy. She currently sat in the passenger seat of a transport making its way to the rendezvous point. Despite having been familiar with each other for some time, the Shadow Broker preferred she arrived at his facilities through his own channels. This wasn't surprising as she was used to hiding in the background. As the vehicle came to a halt, she stood up as the cabin door opened. Without hesitation, she disembarked the transport. Miranda continued up the steps to the foot of the Shadow Broker's facility and proceeded to an elevator. She waited until the elevator reached its destination, allowing her to step out into the room. The Yahg was behind his desk as usual.

"Welcome back, Lawson," he greeted, "I had received your message from earlier."

Miranda folded her arms behind her back.

"So," Miranda asked him, "are you ready for this?"

"Of course," the Shadow Broker nodded, "my employees are finalizing a few things."

While Miranda approached the desk, the Yahg slowly stood to his feet.

"The ship is down in the hangar," he suggested, "we may as well start our way down there."

Miranda nodded before she and the Shadow Broker made their way towards the vessel and walked up the ramp. The pair continued to the elevator at the back of the cargo area and hopped onboard. They waited until the elevator reached its destination and slid its door open, allowing the Lawson prodigy and the Yahg to disembark.

"Now don't be surprised if this doesn't work," the Shadow Broker warned, "it's been well documented that Yahg have reacted with hostility towards the first ambassadors sent to the homeworld."

"I'll keep that in mind," Miranda nodded, "but I'd still like to try this."

The Shadow Broker chuckled as he placed his hand on Miranda's shoulder.

"Very well. I'll entertain you with the thought, then."

The Shadow Broker and Miranda made their way to the bridge. It wasn't nearly as big as the Normandy's and was more layered, with steps going down as it went outward. The Lawson prodigy
took a moment to gaze through the hull. The bridge overlooked the body of the ship from a further
back position as opposed to the front where most Alliance-built ships had located theirs. Pilots of
various races were in the middle of running diagnostics before takeoff. The large hangar opened up
into the Illium skyline. When she made a brief glance at the Shadow Broker settling into his seat,
Miranda sat down next to him. The ship careened out of the hangar and took off into orbit. It made
its way towards the Mass Relay, letting the ancient structure fling it into FTL speed.

Once the vessel entered the unfamiliar system a few hours later, the vorcha and batarians onboard
had trouble deciding whether to bring weapons while the vessel made its way towards Parnack.

"Keep your arms concealed. Don't want to give the locals any ideas," he ordered.

The vorcha and batarians didn't hesitate to stash their weapons while Miranda and the Shadow
Broker stood to their feet. All the while, the vessel reached the planet's orbit and descended the
atmosphere. They landed the ship down on the planet's surface several minutes later. From there, the
Yahg and the Lawson prodigy led their allies to the hatch to disembark, stepping out onto the
planet's surface. Staring into the distance, Miranda took in her surroundings. The place they landed
at was largely covered in foliage, with the ship landed in an opening. The Lawson prodigy didn't
bother to pull out anything as she and the Shadow Broker led their team from the ship. They had
started closing the distance with the treeline and entered the forest.

With a map in hand, the Shadow Broker took the lead in meandering his team through the forest.
Miranda glared over her shoulder at the bustling wilderness. None of the wildlife they witnessed
included varren or pyjaks, which surprised no one. A while later, they came across a clearing, so
the Lawson prodigy pressed against a tree and peeked from her makeshift cover. Nothing was
visible just yet, but she noticed some movement further in the brush. After a moment of silence,
Miranda glanced over her shoulder and nodded at the Shadow Broker, prompting him to continue
forward.

They continued their trek through the forest, coming to a stop as they approached another opening.
From there, the Shadow Broker nodded at Miranda, allowing her to scope ahead, peeking from
another tree. It took only a moment before the Lawson prodigy spotted a few Yahg at a distance.
The Yahg didn't go for long without noticing them in turn. The Shadow Broker stood next to
Miranda while a vorcha underling stepped towards the tree.

"Sir, orders?" the vorcha asked.

The Shadow Broker shifted gazes between the wild Yahg, the vorcha underling before laying his
eyes on Miranda.

"Go on," he beckoned softly.

Miranda nodded at the Shadow Broker before she cautiously stepped into the clearing. The two
closed the distance and came to a dead stop in front of them. With the underlings watching from
the sidelines, the wild Yahg focused solely on the Shadow Broker and the Lawson prodigy. They
stared at the two for a moment, glaring especially at the Shadow Broker himself. He remained
calm as he slowly extended his hand, causing the other Yahg to give him confused stares. They
were smart, but none of them probably had enough exposure to civilization to understand. A
moment later, one Yahg imitated the Shadow Broker's gesture. It stepped forward with an audible
growl. The Shadow Broker lowered his hand and took a slow step back, responding with a gentle
growl. He slowly bowed his head, encouraging a few more Yahg to imitate the gesture.

"They're willing to cooperate," the Shadow Broker said to himself.
Miranda nodded at the Shadow Broker, knowing this was a cue for her next step. When she took a step forward, another Yahg approached her with caution. As she drew closer, they developed some confidence regarding her intent and subsequently calmed down. The Lawson prodigy put up one hand and the Yahg in front of her pressed its forehead against her palm seconds later.

"Looks like we'll be getting along just fine," Miranda added.

With Miranda and the Shadow Broker having impressed the wild Yahg, some of them caught glimpses of the vorcha and batarian underlings who were waiting for an all clear signal. His henchmen started to come out of the woods, cautiously closing their distance. To their relief, the wild Yahg didn't attack. They gathered close, each equipped with rudimentary tools. They held out the tools, allowing the wild Yahg to examine them.

"We'll take this slow," the Shadow Broker reminded, "the Yahg are smart, but they'll need time to adapt."

"Right," a batarian underling nodded in agreement.

His men kept a safe distance behind him, cautious to approach further. A few of the wild Yahg plucked some rudimentary tools from their hands and focused their eyes on Miranda.

"Right… so they recognize the gesture, what now?" Miranda paused.

"I think a little demonstration is in order," the Shadow Broker assumed.

"I can do that," Miranda agreed.

Miranda slowly stepped forward and started presenting the tools to them, showing their functions. By observing how she handled each tools, each wild Yahg took their turns in handling the tools as demonstrated. She felt like she was handing off a bunch of toys to a group of toddlers, watching as they explored the objects in their hands. It took them a while before they managed to get familiar with the tools. The Shadow Broker turned to his mercenaries.

"Set up camp," he instructed, "we'll be here for a while."

"Sure," a vorcha shrugged.

Most of the guards returned to the ship to start fetching additional equipment and supplies. Once they returned with the equipment, they started setting up the campsite. The two continued their attempt at communication with the local Yahg. It didn't take long before the crew finished setting up camp. They continued their attempts far into the evening, the sky turning as dusk approached. By then, the wild Yahg were familiar with their visitors to the point they were motivated to spread the word to the rest of their kind. The Broker and Miranda headed back to the camp.

"Interesting," the Shadow Broker commented, "it seems to be working this far. At least in comparison to the last ambassador's visit."

Miranda nodded at the Shadow Broker in agreement.

"I suppose I really did have an idea," she mused, "I also had worse expectations in mind, so this is a welcome surprise."

The Shadow Broker smiled and placed his hand on Miranda's shoulder, letting her lean into the touch.
"Same here," he agreed, "in fact, I wasn't expecting much else besides a brief face off and a brawl before heading back to the ship and leaving."

Once they arrived at the campsite, the vorcha and batarian underlings shifted their gaze towards them.

"Welcome back, boss," one batarian underling greeted, "we've established a perimeter with motion sensors in case we get pounced on by local fauna."

"Good work," the Shadow Broker acknowledged, "we'll continue the following morning. Wait till sunrise to gather any extra supplies from the ship. We may be here for a while."

The guards nodded in agreement as they all returned to their tents. Miranda followed the Shadow Broker into his tent and when he lay on his back, she nestled up next to him. He responded by wrapping his arm around her, watching as she slowly drifted off to sleep.

The following morning, they returned to the site where they had encountered the group of Yahg. This time, another pack of wild Yahg accompanied the first one. They were smaller in size, just short of half their heights.

"Are those their kids?" a vorcha whispered to his fellow underling.

"Looks like it. Careful, they still look feral," a batarian grunted.

The Shadow Broker nodded at Miranda, compelling her to cautiously approach the Yahg pack, coming face to face to what she assumed to be one of the younglings' mothers. What the Shadow Broker had identified as the mothers were noticeably bigger than the males by almost a couple feet in height. Still, the Lawson prodigy slowly bowed her head before the female in front of her. It tilted its head in response, attempting to mentally analyze the motion before bowing its head and giving a grunt in response. The Shadow Broker nodded at Miranda in approval. Smiling, the Lawson prodigy turned to face the younglings.

"Hello," she greeted softly.

The Yahg younglings let out tiny chirps before cautiously approaching her. Miranda crouched down to meet their eye level. She reached out as the first one got closer. She placed her hand on the youngling's forehead, encouraging it to nuzzle her palm. One of them sniffed it and reached out to feel. Eyeing that youngling, Miranda tilted her head which allowed it to run its fingers through her hair. Its eyes widened as it felt the strands. Once it released its grip, it exchanged chirps between the other younglings. Subsequently, the others followed suit and huddled around Miranda. With the Lawson prodigy occupied with the younglings, the Shadow Broker observed such interaction. Looking up from her, he looked back to the adults nearby. A minute later, Miranda rose to her feet. The younglings scattered back to the line of parents shortly after.

"It seems you have some admirers," the Shadow Broker mused.

Miranda glanced over her shoulder.

"Yeah," Miranda agreed, "I'd say we're off to a great start."
Amber knew they had six months left to ensure the entire galaxy was prepared to survive the Reapers' evaluation of their cycle, but she and Saren also knew they had a hearing to attend. The new batarian leading council and Balak agreed to meet with the Alliance officials at Mindoir. With Javik in their custody, the Normandy arrived at the colony planet an hour before the hearing. Saren, Amber, Anderson and Hackett were the first to disembark. While Kaidan and Garrus escorted Javik down the ramp, the Alliance officers and the Spectres met up with Balak near the entrance to the courthouse.

"Shepard, good to see you again," Balak greeted, "even in the wake of such tragedy."

Amber nodded before she extended her hand, allowing Balak to shake it.

"If it makes you feel any better," Amber replied, "we're handing off a free punching bag after all is said and done."

Amber made a brief glance at Javik to make a point.

"Thanks," Balak nodded with a grin.

Balak, Anderson and Hackett exchanged salutes before the batarian revolutionist, the Alliance officers and the Spectres made their way through the entrance to the courthouse.

"What exactly do the other batarian council members have in mind for the Prothean?" Anderson cautiously hummed.

"I guess they want his head," Amber shrugged.

Hackett sighed as he rolled his eyes.

"Maybe some old habits don't go away overnight," Hackett commented.

Once they reached the courtroom, Saren, Amber, Anderson, Hackett and Balak took their seats while the jury continued to review their documents. Javik's case was still under review. While there were plenty of others who wanted the Prothean punished as much as possible, Balak and the likes of Anderson or Hackett wanted some self-restraint and a complete overview of the case at hand. This gave the Spectres some time to review their reports while half an hour passed. During that time, Liara, Wrex, Ashley, Tali, Kelly, Kasumi, Miranda, James, Mordin, Jack and Dr. Chakwas entered the courtroom and found their seats. By then, the judge entered the courtroom and made his way towards his desk while Kaidan and Garrus entered the courtroom. For the case, Amber had provided the mission transcripts and helmet recordings from her time in the Viper Nebula before communications were cut off. The judge reviewed the case for a few minutes before standing from his seat. Before the whole crowd was Javik, bound by holocuffs.

"Court is now in session," the judge announced.

The judge picked up the document from his desk and carefully read it while Javik was ushered towards the podium.

"Javik of the former Prothean Empire, you stand here today accused of these crimes," he continued, "you stand accused of destroying public property, indirectly causing the suffering and extinction of an entire system. The following evidence has been provided."
Javik quietly grumbled in disbelief. The judge gestured to the evidence from the batarian council and Commander Shepard to emphasize his point.

"Along with theft of registered vessels for transportation, you are found guilty of hijacking numerous Keepers prior to the loss of contact with the Viper Nebula."

Javik narrowed his eyes at the judge and clenched his fists. The judge droned on, but he clenched his eyes shut, turning his attention inward. Little did everyone else know, he wasn't willing to go down without a fight. It was some time before the judge called over Liara to step forward to testify as a witness. She didn't hesitate to make her way to the stand.

"Dr. T'Soni," the judge asked, "Javik said nothing to you before he left the Citadel that day, correct?"

"Yes, your honor," Liara nodded, "I can confirm from my omni-tool tracking that my last sighting coincided with his hijacking and subsequent departure from the station."

The judge nodded at Liara, encouraging her to whip up her omni-tool and display the data she stored.

"Furthermore," Liara continued, "GPS placement of his omni-tool shows his subsequent departure and route on his way to leaving the station."

Liara uploaded the data into the projector, allowing the audience to examine the screen.

"Thank you for your input, Dr. T'Soni," the judge told her, "Commander Shepard?"

As Liara left the stand, Amber rose to her feet and made her way to the stand.

"We followed him from system to system, eventually reaching the Viper Nebula where he was using stolen thrusters to direct an asteroid into the system's Mass Relay," Amber proclaimed, "apparently shutting off the thrusters wasn't enough after we subdued him."

"That's an issue for another conversation," the judge pressed, "you can still confirm you physically witnessed the damage being done?"

Amber nodded.

"After apprehending the Prothean," she added, "we were forced to fully withdraw just a few minutes before the relay was destroyed."

"Thank you, Shepard," the judge said.

Anderson rose in her place and stood up to the podium.

"Your honor," Anderson acknowledged.

"Anything you have to provide, captain?"

Anderson placed down his documents and straightened his spine.

"With access to omni-tool data, we've got a rough idea about how many are now stuck in the Viper Nebula," Anderson testified, "we have no idea if the Relay's destruction resulted in the three-hundred thousand batarians dying. I've passed the list on to Balak."

Over the course of an hour, each squadmate from the Normandy got their turn to testify against the
Prothean. The judge nodded before he turned his head towards Javik.

"The evidence is stacked against you," the judge interrogated, "how do you plead?"

Closing his eyes, Javik shook his head.

"You may brand me guilty after today," Javik retorted, "but I'll never believe that my actions were anything but just and necessary."

Everyone exchanged confused glances in a moment of silence. Still, the judge reached for the gavel.

"I see," the judge replied, "and the jury's decision?"

The jury exchanged whispers between themselves and reviewed their case in a moment of silence before returning their gaze towards the judge.

"Your honor," one of the jurors announced, "we find the defendant guilty."

"Very well then. Case—"

Before the judge could finish his speech, Keepers swarmed into the courtroom without warning, startling the entire audience save for the Prothean. The swarms blindly climbed over whatever surface or individual was in the room, leaving little space for anyone to move in. One Keeper approached Javik and released him from his holocuffs. Amber and Saren could barely see beyond the massive wave of Keepers. Suddenly, the green critters emptied out of the room en mass, with Javik in tow. Everyone recovered from the shock and staggered back to their feet, staring in disbelief. Amber tilted her head towards Balak before she lowered her head.

"What…what in unholiness was that?" he whispered, shock leaking out in his voice.

"He must've planned his escape ahead of time," Amber commented.

"Well, now to catch him again," Saren grimly sighed, "we did take his omni-tool from him, didn't we?"

Amber glanced over her shoulder and stared at Saren for a moment before she double-checked her inventory. It didn't take much long before she found Javik's omni-tool in her possession.

"I got that covered," Amber nodded.

"Good," Hackett instructed, "find a way to get tabs on him before he leaves the station or creates another mess."

Amber saluted at Hackett before she and Saren led their squadmates out of the courthouse, only to notice Balak was also following them.

"Let's go," Balak grumbled, "he's made enough headway."

None of the squadmates were in the mood to ask Balak any questions, so they followed the Spectres towards the prefabs. As they sprinted through the streets, they passed by colonists with blank expressions as if they witnessed something disturbing. A group of bipedal insectoids rounded the corner and were rapidly swarming the street.

"Are those Keepers?!!" James exclaimed.
Tali glanced over her shoulder and tugged at James's arm.

"We don't have time, Keelah!" Tali reminded him.

Saren drew his side arm and leveled it with the crowd.

"Worse," Saren muttered.

The creatures before them more closely resembled Javik's anatomy, in terms of the form of the head, the plates and tissue, and general structure. However, they bore traits noticeably different from a Prothean's. For one part, the mouth was gone, replaced with a reinforced plate for the head, and the eyes were glowing without pupils. The armor was a deep brown, similar to a cockroach's exterior. Just out of view, the back of their heads was elongated and curved downward. Once the Spectres and their squadmates left the prefabs, they located a vessel surrounded by more of the strange creatures and watched as Javik boarded the ramp.

"We have everything we need," Javik told the creatures, "we must go now."

"You're not getting away!" Amber shouted.

Javik glanced over his shoulder and narrowed his eyes at Amber.

"Or what?" the Prothean barked, "I've got more manpower than you now, Shepard."

Javik focused his eyes on Liara.

"So this is it?" Liara demanded, "you compile a bunch of drones to do your bidding?"

"If your leaders refuse to make a stand against the Reapers," Javik insisted, "then I'm intervening, no matter what your stance is."

Amber shook her head in disbelief.

"I can't let you endanger the galaxy," she warned him.

"And I'm not going to let you fumble around with it any longer," Javik retorted.

Javik turned to continue his way inside, so Amber didn't hesitate to charge after him. She fired at the crowd of the insectoids as she initiated her pursuit. To her dismay, the Prothean-like creatures had biotic barriers of their own, causing the initial shots to bounce off harmlessly. In retaliation, Javik launched her backwards with his own biotics. The Alliance commander let out a shout of pain as she crashed into the ground. Saren frantically rushed to her side as the insectoids began boarding the vessel.

"Come on! We have to hurry!" he huffed.

After helping Amber get back to her feet, Saren led their squadmates after the vessel just as the ramp began closing up. But much to their dismay, the vessel immediately lifted off the ground before accelerating into the sky.

"Shit!" Saren cursed under his breath, "someone get on the pipe with C-Sec, tell them to cut that shuttle off!"

"I'm on it," Garrus nodded.

Garrus didn't hesitate to switch on his omni-tool and scroll to Executor Pallin's number.
"Sir, we've got a perpetrator on the run, just left sector C14 on the Presidium and is heading for the relay. Can you get the defenses to cripple that ship before it leaves the system?"

*Leave it to me, Vakarian,* Pallin nodded over the com-link.

Garrus slowly nodded before he ended the transmission.

"Now all we can do is hope and pray," Garrus told the others.

Saren slowly nodded before turning his head towards Amber and Garrus placed his arm over Kelly's shoulder.

"Do you think the others back at the Normandy are ok?" Kelly asked nervously.

"They'd better be," Garrus shrugged.

Saren and Amber led Balak and the Normandy squadmates back through the prefabs until they reached the docks. All of a sudden, Pallin called back over Garrus' omni-tool.

"Yeah?" Garrus clamored.

*We're belaying that request. Signals indicated that the Prothean has numerous citizens aboard that ship. Even if we were to disable them, we risk harming them if they crash-land.*

"Pallin, they're as good as dead regardless!" Garrus protested, "we have to stop that ship!"

"What?!" Amber exclaimed as her eyes widened in horror.

Kelly also fidgeted nervously and lowered her head.

*Look, we'll tag him for tracking for now. Considering he doesn't completely know the ins and outs of the technology we have at our disposal, there's a good chance he won't know about it. I'll pass on the frequency to you to follow up on.*

"All right," Garrus reluctantly nodded.

As Garrus ended the transmission, Liara sprinted over to the ramp of the Normandy.

"Liara?" Jack paused in confusion.

"So what's the plan now?" Kelly asked, watching Amber follow close behind.

Garrus sighed as he shook his head in disbelief.

"I'm out of ideas at the moment," Garrus admitted.

Garrus, Kelly and Saren followed Amber aboard the Normandy. When they met up with Liara in the corridor, they began scouring the Normandy for any signs of damage. Much to their relief, the vessel's crew were still onboard and unscathed, but when the asari stepped into her office, her eyes widened in horror.

"They...they took everything!" Liara gasped.

Kaidan stepped into the room and scanned his surroundings.

"Christ, they cleaned house," Kaidan whistled, "what did you have in here?"
Liara glanced over her shoulder and locked eyes onto Kaidan.

"Everything from field notes to 3D projections of Prothean machinery," Liara answered.

For some reason, Kaidan couldn't help but shudder. Based on what he heard from Saren and Amber earlier, he started suspecting that Javik might have some obsessive interest in Liara for some reason. When Amber and Saren stepped into the room, they examined the damage the Keepers allegedly inflicted before the Alliance commander approached Liara and placed her hand on her shoulder.

"Hey, are you doing ok?" Amber asked.

Liara shook her head.

"No," Liara told her, "even with what little I had in here, there's no saying what he could do."

Liara turned towards Amber, encouraging the Alliance commander to embrace the asari.

"It's ok," Amber reassured her, "we won't let Javik hurt you."

Liara sighed in relief as she returned the embrace.

"Thank you, Shepard," she smiled, "you're a really good friend."

Observing the sweet moment, Saren placed a talon on his mandible.

"Still," Saren commented, "it seems we have a new crisis in our hands."
In the aftermath of the sudden disastrous incident, Alliance officials began searching Mindoir for survivors while the Normandy made its flight to Arcturus Station. With little time to recover, Amber and team were mobilized to cut off Javik at his next juncture. Once they arrived at the station, Amber and Saren brought along Liara, Wrex, Jack and Kaidan as they disembarked the Normandy. Maybe if they were lucky, they could also rescue the citizens captured in Mindoir. Sauntering through the docks, they spotted an Alliance official approaching them.

"Commander, good to see you've finally arrived. Admiral Hackett wants to see you ASAP."

Amber glanced over her shoulder, watching as Hackett sprinted up to the officer.

"Get everyone to the command deck," Hackett ordered as he took his time to catch his breath, "there's something I'd like to discuss with everyone present."

The officer gave Hackett a salute.

"Will do, sir," he nodded, "you did get those recordings as I asked, commander?"

"From Mindoir of the things Javik deployed?" Amber clarified.

"Everyone we'll need to know just what we're up against," the officer insisted.

Amber turned on her omni-tool and opened the file.

"Right here," she answered.

The officer escorted Saren, Amber, Anderson, Hackett, Liara, Jack, Wrex and Kaidan out of the docking bay. They continued through the station corridors until they approached a group of security doors. Hackett walked up to a panel to perform a retinal scan to unlock the doors. With a metallic thump, the doors unlocked and open, showing them the command center. They gathered around the table and settled into their seats. Hackett took a deep breath and started his speech.

"Gentlemen, we have before us a new threat. All of you have been called here today because we face dire circumstances. Less than twenty-four hours ago, I, Captain Anderson, and Commander Shepard have visual confirmation of a threat neither we, or any other sentient species currently have faced before. Even as fledgling as it may be in its current stage, the opposition we face has an unprecedented level of reach around the galaxy and has no regard for species, age, religion, or association. The damage this Prothean, this madman can create cannot be ignored. I'm not going to lie, we're working from a point of disadvantage, with variables we can't begin to decipher. The enemy combatants themselves are hardened, both physically and mentally, and have already proven themselves resilient to small arms fire."

The attendants examined the images displaying in the holoscreen, staring in horror as they took in the details of these ominous insectoid creatures.

"This is their profile," Hackett continued, "and there are god-knows how many of them on Mindoir right now with our people under their boot. They're based on Prothean physiology, and have unspecified biotic capabilities. Already, they're capable of very resilient barriers alone."

"Have we decided a name for them yet?" Kaidan asked.
"Names can come later," Anderson dismissed, "what matters now is facing them down."

Anderson brought up a projection of the galaxy map.

"First and Second Infantry Divisions will be facing them on the ground," Anderson continued, "Third and Fifth Fleet will run interference from above, either providing air support or cutting off the attackers' retreat."

Amber nodded at Anderson as she examined the galaxy map.

"So where do we come in?" Amber asked.

"You'll be leading the ground team," Anderson answered, "your job is to eliminate the opposition and rescue civilians. Watch your fire when approaching the prefab interiors."

"Copy that," Amber acknowledged with a nod.

Hackett's gaze passed over the room one more time.

"Any other questions going forward?" Hackett asked.

The other attendants shook their heads.

"Good. Let's get to work, gentlemen," Hackett announced.

The Spectres and their squadmates instantly stood from their seats. They made a beeline out of the command center and back towards the docks. They didn't hesitate to step aboard the Normandy before making their way towards the bridge with Amber approaching the pilot's seat.

"Joker, we'll be heading out soon," Amber informed, "wait for the admiral's word, though. This is a big operation and we're only heading out when everyone's ready."

Joker nodded before he glanced over his shoulder.

"So," he asked, "how bad can these guys be?"

"They're tough," Amber answered, "I don't know the full extent of their defensive abilities, but whatever Javik cooked up is tough."

Joker couldn't help but feel a chill trickle down his spine.

"Oh boy," he commented, "at least we know he's showing his true colors."

"Cheer up," Amber reassured him with a smile, "once we're groundside, you get to hang back and pick off stragglers if they attempt to leave the atmosphere."

Joker glanced over his shoulder, examining the sincere determination in Amber's expression.

"Okay. But what do they really have to throw at us besides a bunch of stolen civic ships?"

Amber closed her eyes and folded her arms behind her back.

"I personally would expect the worst from Javik," Amber said.

"I guess," Joker shrugged, "unless...just how many are we bringing to Mindoir?"

Amber made a brief glance at Saren.
"How do you feel about this operation?" Amber asked him.

"Just another day as a Spectre," Saren told her, "unknowns are a constant, as much as that sounds like an oxymoron."

Amber nodded at Saren before turning her gaze towards Joker.

"Well, you're still the best pilot I know," Amber nodded, "I'm sure you can handle whatever Javik tosses in the air."


All they could do was prepare their weapons and suit up while they waited. After over half an hour, Amber heard a ping from Hackett, so she turned on her omni-tool and scrolled to her message inbox.

"We're ready to head out," Amber announced, "let's get going."

Upon cue, Joker started the procedure of gaining authorization for departure. Minutes later, the magnetic clamps of the docks released the Normandy as the flight lieutenant activated the vessel's thrusters. The Normandy left Arcturus Station along with several more Alliance fleets. Group by group, the cluster of ships began their entry through the Mass Relay into FTL. When it was cue for the Normandy to pass through, Joker flew the vessel closer to the ancient structure, allowing the energy particles from the relay to envelop it before flinging it into warp speed. An hour or so later, the Normandy emerged from another Mass Relay and continued its voyage to Mindoir. The Alliance deployment of ships approached Mindoir's orbit and took position over the colony. Joker took caution as he flew the Normandy into the planet's atmosphere.

"Alright, we're approaching our deployment vector," Joker informed, "Commander, you might want to get to the shuttle."

Amber nodded before she gestured Saren, Liara, Jack, Wrex and Kaidan to follow her out of the bridge. When they stepped into the cargo hold, they found Kasumi, Tali, Legion, Ashley, James, Garrus and Miranda gathering near the shuttles. Boarding the shuttle, she activated her omni-tool, synchronizing her device with other squad leaders across the infantry divisions. In a matter of moments, she watched as Garrus and Ashley's numbers registered in sync.

"Okay, listen up," Amber announced, "we're sticking to our own group, but it's still our job to get momentum and maintain that momentum for the other infantry divisions to build up on. It won't be easy, but we have to plow through the thick of it. As we sweep through, the other divisions will pick them off while they're regrouping. Our main priority is liberating the colony, but we still have a secondary objective of rescuing any civilians we find. Got it?"

"You got it, Shepard," Jack nodded.

"Good," Amber instructed, "other than that, stick together. These things are tough, so until we get a good grasp on what their strengths and weaknesses are, focus fire one by one going forward."

Saren nodded before he closed the shuttle door.

{Currently over the deployment zone and opening the cargo bay doors. Happy hunting down there, guys.}

When the cargo hatch opened seconds later, the shuttles took off and began their descent to the planet's surface. Riding down to the surface, they got a better view of the colony on their final
approach. It took only a matter of minutes before the shuttles landed in an open field, so they didn't hesitate to disembark. Around them, more Alliance landing craft arrived nearby, unloading their full detachment of troops. Amber took a moment to examine the battleground up ahead. The colony landscape was heavily ravaged from the day before, with small trails of smoke still rising from some of the prefabs.

"Let's move!" Amber gestured her team to follow her.

Members of the other squads started barking orders, establishing a perimeter before they advanced. Meanwhile, Amber and her team immediately headed into the thick of the mess, going for the first building closest to their position. They managed to spot some of the insectoid creatures moments later. Previously on guard duty, they quickly shifted into defensive positions. Without warning, one of the creatures charged at them. Saren leveled his rifle and opened fire, struggling to keep the recoil steady. To his disappointment, his shots ricocheted off the creature's shield. Wrex clenched his fists as he began emitting his biotic field. He lobbed a ball of biotic energy at it to much greater effect. Luckily, the creature got knocked back.

"Nice one, Wrex!" Jack cheered as she raised her fist into the air.

Wrex charged forward and finished it off with a few more shotgun blasts. Amber peeked from her cover and examined the insectoid corpses.

"Any luck?" Amber asked.

"It's tough, but not impenetrable. Once the barrier's down, they're equipped with some sort of light, organic plating. Yields under heavy fire," the krogan explained, kneeling by the body.

Amber smiled in a boost of confidence.

"Great!" she replied, "we have a way to defeat them."

"So basically, shoot them until they die, right?" Jack hummed, "easy enough."

Jack immediately leapt into action. She followed close behind Wrex as they took point towards the insect creatures. Saren and Liara provided cover with biotics from behind. Amber took this chance to switch thermal clips before firing at the creatures, heavily weakening their shields.

"Heads up, guys! Frag out!" Ashley yelled.

Ashley tossed the frag grenade while the others dove for cover. The ensuing explosion disarmed the creatures' shields seconds later. Garrus shot through a bit of cover, killing one as the shot punctured its armor. Amber leapt out of cover and blasted another creature between its eyes. They continued to fight through the hordes of the creatures until they could see Javik's ship at a distance.

"James, Kaidan," Amber ordered, "head inside and see if anyone's in there. Get back here once you've finished your sweep."

James and Kaidan saluted before they made a beeline for the stolen vessel. Everyone else took position outside, sweeping for any more hostiles in their immediate vicinity. James peered into the entrance before he beckoned Kaidan to follow him inside. The two wandered further in, clearing room by room. When they entered a large room, they found civilians sitting on the floor. James headed in with his weapon down.

"Come on, coast is clear, let's get you out of here," James persuaded.
Several of the citizens perked their heads and locked eyes onto James before standing to their feet.  
"The rescue team! Thank God you're here!"

As more civilians stood to their feet and stepped out of the room, Kaidan stood out in the corridor to usher them to the exit.

"Let's go," Kaidan instructed, "we've got friendlies outside. Follow us out and listen closely to our instructions."

Kaidan didn't hesitate to lead the civilians towards the exit of the vessel with James keeping vigilant for any creatures that could be on patrol. Outside, they regrouped with Amber and the others.

"Got a few survivors inside, commander," he reported.

In a matter of minutes, James managed to escort the rest of the civilians off the ship.

"Good work," Amber praised, "now let's get them to safety!"

"I'll see to it they get to the beachhead. I'll join up with First Infantry if I can't catch back up with you," James offered.

"Good luck, Vega," Amber nodded at James.

James didn't hesitate to rush back with the civilians in tow.

"This is a good start," Amber ordered, "let's move on to the next area."

"Copy that," Liara replied.

Amber led Saren, Liara, Kaidan, Jack and Wrex in one direction while James led the civilians in another. She led them down the street, moving from house to house. Whenever they came across an insectoid creature, Jack and Wrex would team up to disable its shield before the others shot it down. A mental reminder that Javik was still on the run was motivation enough for them to keep moving. The team kept pushing through to the center of the colony. Out of the corner of her eye, Amber spotted Javik in the town square.

"There he is!" Amber called over while she pointed at the Prothean.

Upon hearing his name, Javik snapped his head towards the Alliance commander.

"Stall her!" Javik snarled.

He started barking orders, rushing away while the drones ran in to engage them. One drone stopped just inches in front of Amber, stopping her in her tracks. When it raised its claw, Saren rushed in and embraced Amber from behind, pulling her back before the drone could strike her. He quickly enveloped himself and his mate in a biotic field before he tossed a few biotic warps at the drone until they disabled its shields. Sighing in relief, Saren tilted his head downwards, locking onto Amber's eyes.

"Go ahead," he beckoned.

Amber nodded before she raised her gun and shot the drone between the eyes. When the drone dropped dead, Saren released his embrace.
"Thanks, Saren," Amber whispered, "we can't let Wrex and Jack take *all* the kills, now can we?"

Saren couldn't help but chuckle.

"Perhaps equal participation does matter," Saren mused.

Saren and Amber met up with their squad and set off to finish their objective. By the time they completed it, this gave the other Alliance fleets a chance to push the drones as far from the colony as possible. With little chance to succeed, Javik reluctantly ordered his drones into a retreat.

In the aftermath of the battle, Amber, Saren and their squad met up with the other Alliance officers dispatched to Midoir at the town square. Among them, she spotted Major Jacob Taylor.

"Major, what has your unit found?" Amber asked him, "any survivors or indication as to the hostiles' activities?"

Jacob lowered his head in a moment of silence.

"Nothin'," Jacob answered, "unfortunately, we found a few scenarios where they executed hostages as we made our approach."

"W-What?" Amber blurred as she stared in disbelief.

Jacob glanced over his shoulder, prompting Amber to sidestep until she saw the carnage from a distance.

"No way," she whispered.

Civilian corpses were being dragged out of several prefabs and laid out for identification and transport. Amber lowered her head and clenched her fists.

"I never thought I would witness a Prothean's cruelty in my life," Amber muttered, "we've got to keep moving. There has to be other pockets nearby."

"I'll still be here," Jacob nodded at her, "sweeping at this sector."

"Thank you, major," Amber gave him a soft smile.

Jacob saluted at Amber before he led his squad into one sector of the prefabs. The team pressed forward against Javik's invaders, rooting them out of the occupied colony. This gave the rest of the Alliance squads to secure the prefabs, giving the survivors some relief when needed. Once they confirmed the drones have officially left the system, Saren and Amber gathered their squad to return to the Normandy for a mission debriefing in the command center. Kaidan sighed as he leaned back in his chair.

"So, anyone got a name for them yet?" Kaidan clamored.

The others turned their gaze to him.

"I was generally thinking of 'Roaches', as they are incredibly difficult to take down," Ashley suggested.

Kaidan shrugged.

"I find myself suspecting Javik was trying to bring back the Prothean race," Kasumi added, "do you think he messed up?"
"I don't think so," Amber shook her head.

"Besides that," Garrus mentioned, "you realize that the drones Javik made have tried to run off with the colonists, right?"

Kelly scratched her head.

"But…why would he target humans?" Kelly asked him.

"Round them up, take them away, serve as both expendable material and your living shields," Garrus assumed, "I've seen this before."

Garrus placed his hand on Kelly's shoulder, allowing her to lean into the touch.

"Legion," Tali told the Geth, "you have ideas, right?"

"Collecting innocents as means of avoiding damage. Ethically questionable, logically efficient."

Amber rubbed her chin.

"That's…actually a good correlation," Amber agreed, "Collectors, it is."

As they continued the discussion, the Normandy made its way towards the Mass Relay, ready to make the jump to Arcturus Station.
Struggling to fend off the Collectors was stressful enough, but Amber still reminded herself that she had a meeting with the Hierarchy today. Since there were currently no warnings at the moment, this was a good chance to fly the Normandy into turian space on a trip to Palaven. During the flight, Miranda sat in her office while her terminal displayed a vidcam on the screen.

*I'm not surprised the Prothean has proven himself to be a potential threat,* the Shadow Broker mused over the transmission, *given the size of his little parade, I figured that something as massive as the System Alliance Navy would be able to handle them.*

"Given Javik's imperialist nature," Miranda added, "I suspect he wouldn't just go after humans."

She then pulled up an image of a Collector on her omni-tool.

"Besides, autopsies of the creatures present showed that they bear high biotic potential," Miranda continued.

Narrowing his eyes, the Shadow Broker's projection examined the images in a moment of silence.

*Interesting,* the Shadow Broker commented over the transmission, *and troubling.*

The Shadow Broker closed out a browser in his terminal.

"Javik could set up a base anywhere in the galaxy," Miranda continued, "maybe if we destroy it, we could stop him."

*If I do find a location to his base,* the Shadow Broker agreed over the transmission, *I'll be sure to let you know.*

"Thank you," Miranda smiled.

After receiving a nod from the Lawson prodigy, the Shadow Broker ended the transmission. She got up and walked out of her office. Meandering through the corridor, Miranda stepped into the bridge and approached Saren and Amber as they observed the galaxy map. The turian Spectre glanced over his shoulder seconds later.

"We'll try to catch up with him when we can. However, we can't let him sidetrack us for too long," Saren said, "there are other priorities on our list."

"I can imagine," Miranda agreed as she folded her arms.

"Any word on his next move?" Amber returned.

"No, Alliance has him locked down," Miranda answered, "he can't make a significant move yet without alerting every patrol within three relays' distance."

Miranda approached the galaxy map and examined the marked coordinates.

"So, Palaven?" Miranda clarified.

Saren nodded.

"We cannot leave the turians on their own," Saren added, "I'm just not sure what to begin with."
Amber turned her head and placed her hand on Saren's shoulder.

"We'll play this by ear," Amber suggested.

Saren's mandibles flexed into a smile.

"One can only hope," Saren agreed.

In a matter of hours, the Normandy entered turian space and flew its way to Palaven. Amber stepped out of the bridge and met up with Kelly in the locker room as they started slipping into their envirosuits. As the two finished up, Saren and Garrus entered.

"Shepard," Saren asked, "you ready?"

Amber nodded at Saren with a smile.

"I hear of how beautiful Palaven could be," Amber said, "I'm just anticipating the moment I see it for myself."

{Commander, we're approaching Palaven, prepare to dock in thirty.}

Amber clapped her hands together with eager enthusiasm.

"Ok, people," Amber announced, "let's get going!"

Amber led Saren, Garrus and Kelly out of the locker room and into the cargo hold. A long while later, they felt the vessel land on the ground before the cargo hatch opened, encouraging them to step out into the airfield. Amber paused to take a good look at the surrounding horizon. The turian architecture did prove to be foreign to the Alliance commander compared to humanity's most famous monuments. The features that caught her eyes was abstract designs beyond a rectangular block with panels for natural ventilation, going so far as to include hexagonal structures and asymmetrical structures that humans couldn't seem to execute when they applied their architectural design. Amber snapped out of her thoughts when she saw General Victus, Primarch Fedorian and General Desolas approaching the Normandy.

"Welcome to Palaven, commander. Good to see you've arrived safely," the Primarch greeted.

"Same here," Amber smiled as she placed her hand on her chest and bowed her head.

Saren and General Victus exchanged salutes.

"So, do you have what you need for our discussion?" Saren asked.

"Yes," Fedorian nodded as he gestured them to follow him, "right this way, please."

The four of them followed the turian leaders off the tarmac. With the Normandy's thrusters shut off, they made their way to the entrance of the spaceport. Clearing through the terminal, a convoy awaited them at the other side. They didn't hesitate to board the convoy and searched for their seats, waiting until the convoy departed minutes later. Amber peered through the window and watched the scenery as they zipped by. She marveled at the color of the sky as the turian folktales described. Saren leaned back in his seat.

"Surprising you had such security put in place, Primarch," Saren commented.

"The Prothean is a considerable issue right now," Fedorian clarified, "I'm not willing to take any chances."
"I can understand," Amber agreed, "the Alliance has been trying to corner Javik since then."

"That's good," Fedorian nodded, "still, as you humans say, 'a stitch in time saves nine.' It can't hurt to proceed with caution until we know he's been dealt with."

Amber nodded before she leaned back in her seat.

"So, what did you have in mind?" Amber asked.

"I suppose we needed your input more than anything," Fedorian admitted, "as much as this would simply offend much of the upper classes, the tier thing is something we can most definitely live without."

Amber raised an eyebrow.

"Go on," she persuaded.

"It's definitely the backbone of our society, yet it also serves as a double-edged sword," Fedorian continued, "tier means much beyond reputation and serves indirectly as the breeding ground for poverty and crime amidst our territories."

Saren and Amber exchanged glances in a moment of silence.

"Saren?" Amber paused.

"What is it?" Saren blurted.

"Have you seen what the tiers were like?" Amber asked him.

"To give an example, I'm at the lower end of the spectrum," Saren answered, "members from the outer colonies and people without facial markings tend to follow this."

Desolas tilted his head towards his brother and flexed his mandibles.

"I'm sure he can tell you more about our childhood later, commander," Desolas proclaimed.

"R-Right," Amber blurted as she lowered her head.

It was only a long while later before the convoy arrived at the Hierarchy embassy. The vehicle came to a stop, allowing everyone to disembark. Amber tilted her head upwards and examined the building before her as they made their way to the entrance. The group made their way up the steps of the building. Once they reached one of the higher floors, they stepped into a large conference room. At the center was a large table with several chairs, more than enough to go around. They didn't say a word until they all sat down.

"Now, there's no way that dropping the tier system will cause poverty to stagnate, but it will allow some better options through society," Fedorian began.

General Victus placed his file onto the table.

"So the main issue is implementation," Victus clarified, "no doubt others will arise, but they'll be dealt with as they come."

"True," Fedorian nodded in agreement.

Fedorian took a moment to tilt his head towards Garrus.
"Seeing the disposition of the Vakarian clan, how do you feel about this?" Fedorian asked him. Garrus closed his eyes in a moment of silence.

"I might have to convince my father," Garrus answered, "but I can live with this."

"No doubt," Fedorian added, "we may need to introduce this more slowly to higher tiers then."

Fedorian tilted his head towards Adrien.

"You think you're up to the task?" Fedorian asked.

"If it means taking a break from action for a little bit, sure," General Victus nodded.

Now that they all had a plan in mind, they stood from their seats.

"Very well. I shall start enacting legislation to start easing people into this," Fedorian announced, "you are all dismissed."

Upon cue, Saren, Amber, Garrus and Kelly stepped out of the conference room.

"Anything you'll expect on our part?" Amber inquired.

"We'll let you know," Fedorian replied.

Garrus turned on his omni-tool and scrolled to his sister's number. As Amber and Saren chattered away with the others, he beckoned to Kelly.

"Garrus?" Kelly paused.

"I was thinking," Garrus offered, "I could introduce you to my family?"

He initiated a call with Solana and brought his device over to her. Seconds later, a vidscreen of a female turian came online.

\{Garrus?\} she warbled over the transmission.

"Hey Solana. What's up?" Garrus greeted.

\{I guess I'm doing all right today,\} Solana replied over the transmission, \{did you have something in mind?\}

"Yeah, I wanted to introduce someone," Garrus explained, "and make sure no one flips out by the time dad finds out."

Solana flexed her mandibles as she tilted her head towards Kelly.

\{Are you talking about the human friend you have there?\} Solana paused over the transmission.

She leaned in to have a better look at her screen.

"N-Nice to meet you," Kelly stammered as she waved her hand.

She gave a nervous grin back at the turian at the other end. Her markings and plate coloring were similar to that of Garrus, but her head structure was more similar to a turian female's.

\{Well, since dad came back a while ago,\} Solana offered over the transmission, \{I'll let him and
Garrus flexed his mandibles into a smile.

"Hmm. Maybe he'll be a bit more willing to listen this time."

{Great!} Solana chirped over the transmission, {see you in a bit!}

Solana ended the transmission, so Garrus and Kelly exchanged glances.

"So we're heading to your home?" Kelly clarified.

"I assume so," Garrus nodded, "let me inform the commander before we head out."

Garrus stepped towards Amber, prompting her to glance over her shoulder.

"Garrus?" Amber paused.

"I was going to head home," Garrus requested, "and introduce Kelly to my family. Permission to do so?"

Amber placed her finger on her chin.

"You two have fun, ok?" Amber answered, "just be sure to return on a moment's notice if I call you two."

Garrus nodded and gave a friendly salute.

"Will do."

Garrus and Kelly turned to leave the embassy. Several minutes later, they exited the premises and made for the nearest public transport available. They settled into their seats and waited until the transport started moving minutes later.

"So, where is home for you on Palaven?" Kelly asked.

Garrus took a moment to think over the question as he closed his eyes for a brief moment.

"It's a nice place, further towards the edges of Cipritine."

At the moment, Garrus and Kelly simply relaxed as the transport continued its trek. She kept her gaze locked to the exterior of the vehicle cabin, looking upon the turian architecture as they passed by. A while later, the transport stopped at another station.

"Kelly, this is our stop," he informed, standing up from his seat.

Kelly took this as a cue to stand from her seat and follow Garrus off the transport.

"Just down the street. This way," he continued to lead her, holding one of her hands in his.

They climbed a flight of stairs. It didn't take long before they reached some prefabs. Garrus' household was among the more upper-class buildings in the area, with clan banners hanging off the front. The Vakarian son led his human girlfriend to the front door and pressed the doorbell. Seconds later, the door opened with Castis standing on the other side.

"Welcome home," Castis greeted, "Garrus."
"Dad? How've you been?" Garrus asked.

"I'm doing well," Castis assured him.

Castis made a brief glance at Kelly.

"Kelly Chambers, I presume," Castis continued, "I've heard quite a bit about you."

Castis extended his hand, encouraging Kelly to shake it.

"Pleased to meet you, sir," Kelly smiled.

Castis's subharmonics let out a soft coo as he released the human's hand.

"Come on in," Castis beckoned, "my wife has been looking forward to see you."

"How's mom been recently?" Garrus asked as he set foot back in the fold.

Kelly followed Garrus through the door before Castis led them both down the hallway.

"Getting better with consistent treatment," Castis answered.

Kelly blinked twice.

"You're talking about the…" Kelly began to clarify.

"The Corpalis Syndrome?" Garrus nodded, "yeah."

"What's…?"

"Just think of it like the turian equivalent of dementia."

"Right," Kelly slowly nodded.

Castis, Garrus and Kelly stepped into the living room, where Solana and her mother were sitting on the couch. Solana looked up for a moment and stood.

"Hey, Garrus!" she chirped, "welcome home!"

Solana scurried over to Garrus and embraced herself to him, startling him for a moment but he soon startled chuckling nervously.

"Yeah," Garrus replied, "I missed you too, sis."

After a moment of silence, Garrus released Solana from his embrace, allowing her to approach Kelly and extend her hand.

"I'm Solana Vakarian," she greeted, "and you are?"

Kelly smiled as she gave Solana a handshake.

"Yeoman Kelly Chambers," Kelly replied, "nice to meet you, Solana."

After releasing Kelly's hand, Solana gestured her and Garrus to sit down on the couch. Kelly tilted her head towards the Vakarian children's mother.

"You must be Garrus's mom, right?" Kelly added.
Their mother reached a hand in gesture.

"Ah yes, I'm Seicia," she nodded, "it's a pleasure to meet you. I'm pleased to know that Garrus still has good tastes."

Kelly smiled as she shook Seicia's hand.

"Same here," Kelly agreed.

"Oh," Seicia confessed, "we don't have much in the way of Levo-compatible consumables in the house besides non-perishables and tea."

"It's fine," Kelly reassured, "I'm not hungry. We'll probably be on our way before too long."

Castis sat across the couch while Solana sat next to Seicia.

"So how have you been doing as of late?" Castis asked, "I heard of what Javik did recently."

"We were lucky for the most part. Managed to storm it out and retaliate. Now he's off running about planning to do who-knows-what next," Garrus shrugged.

Garrus and Kelly exchanged glances as he placed his hand on Kelly's shoulder.

"But we're close to catching him regardless," Garrus added.

Castis slowly nodded.

"I hope so," Castis agreed.

Castis stood to his feet and made his way into the kitchen to get something to drink.

"Say, Solana," Kelly asked, "what was Garrus like when you two were younger?"

"Playful at least with me," Solana answered, "he wasn't on the best standing with dad way back then, but it hasn't exactly improved since then. It's honestly a surprise that the two haven't blown up on each other yet."

Kelly tilted her head towards Garrus just as Castis returned to the living room with two drinks, handing one to Seicia.

"Thank you, Castis," Seicia smiled, "anyways, I do remember the time Castis took Garrus out to start learning how to fire a rifle."

Garrus chuckled as he scratched his mandible.

"Yeah, that day wasn't fun," Garrus mused.

Castis took a sip of his drink.

"So Miss Chambers," Castis offered, "you mind telling me more about yourself?"

Kelly nodded before she began explaining what her family was like and her enlistment into the Alliance...along with how she progressed into the yeoman Commander Shepard recognized. By the end of the hour, she and Garrus received a ping from Amber so they bid farewell to the Vakarian relatives before they left to return to the embassy.
Thessia's Prothean Conspiracy

Amber felt lucky they were already en route to Thessia today, considering the recent update on Javik's latest spotting. She was looking over several reports that had started to come in where squads had encountered more of Javik's Collectors and were struggling to combat them. Sitting next to her, Saren was reviewing several past sightings. He'll have to remind himself to ask Aria about some of the sightings later.

"Shepard," Saren calmly asked, "do you have suggestions on who else we should bring along?"

Amber paused in her tracks while tilting her head towards Saren.

"Apart from Liara?" Amber clarified, "maybe we could ask Tali, Kasumi and Legion."

"Not bringing much in terms of firepower?" Saren raised a browplate.

"We'll need a low profile," Amber reminded him, "that's what you said, right?"

"That, I did," Saren admitted with a chuckle.

By the time they finished reviewing the reports, the Spectres stood from their seats and stepped out of the command center.

"Aria's cut a lot of throats to get to where she is and she is somewhat paranoid of anyone within her domain," Saren added, "even if Javik wasn't a threat, he's still competition to her."

Amber and Saren meandered through the corridor and stepped into the bridge, catching Liara's attention as she glanced over her shoulder.

"Saren, Shepard," Liara called over, "ETA fifteen minutes."

Amber smiled as she shrugged.

"Thanks," Amber replied, "I admit I'll have to change my last name to Arterius soon."

Liara smiled as she couldn't help but laugh softly.

"Yeah," Liara admitted, "I'll miss calling you Shepard after your wedding day."

Liara took a step back from the galaxy map and followed Saren and Amber out of the bridge, making their way to the cargo hold to suit up. Kasumi, Tali and Legion arrived a few minutes later.

"Shep, you are aware we're docking at the heart of lawless space, right?" Kasumi reminded.

"I know what I'm doing," Amber nodded, "the asari could use some help surviving the Reapers' evaluation, right?"


Kasumi and Tali slipped into their armor before joining Liara, Legion and the Spectres in the shuttle. Several minutes later, the Normandy arrived in Thessia, thus the cargo hatch opened up. The shuttle lifted off and departed the ship. All the Spectres and their teammates could do was wait until they reached the surface. Eventually, their shuttle came to a stop, and opened up to the landing platform. Outside, Matriarch Benezia stood waiting for them.
"Mother!" Liara exclaimed softly.

Liara eagerly sprinted over to Benezia and they pulled each other into an embrace.

"I'm all right, Liara," Benezia reassured her, "I'm honestly worried more about your own well being, given you are working at the forefront of this current catastrophe."

After a moment of silence, the asari Matriarch released her daughter from her embrace before turning her head towards the turian Spectre.

"So, any updates on Javik's whereabouts?" Saren asked.

"None," Benezia shook her head, "he's gone underground for now. It has the numerous matriarchs concerned."

Saren nodded at Benezia before he and Amber led Kasumi, Liara, Tali and Legion away from the shuttle.

"I guess that'll leave us to corner him," Saren remarked.

Leaving the docking area, Amber took her time to look around them, taking in their surroundings. None of the buildings were damaged, but she noticed countless asari quietly continuing on with their lives, occasionally fidgeting in anxiety.

"Last I checked, Javik hadn't expanded this far yet," Amber recalled, "what's got everyone on edge?"

Amber tilted her head towards Kasumi.

"Kas," Amber added, "any ideas?"

"Dunno," Kasumi shrugged, "we've got our space locked down and Javik contained."

Amber and Saren led their teammates as they continued their search for an entrance to the underground. Further down, they found a public map of the nearby area. Amber carefully examined it, wondering if she could find a shortcut.

"Saren?" Amber asked while keeping her eyes glued to the map, "remember when we had to enter the sewers to take out batarian slavers?"

Saren's subharmonics let out a coo as he flexed his mandibles.

"Come to think of it," he remarked, "I did. It worked before, I think we could try it again."

Kasumi and Tali blinked twice as Amber glanced over her shoulder.

"Are you guys thinking what we're thinking?" Amber smiled.

Legion nodded.

"Entrance through subterranean plumbing?" Legion clarified.

Liara couldn't help but feel a chill through her spine as she let out a sigh.

"I guess we can't help that," she shrugged, "we need to get the drop on these guys."
With a new objective in mind, Saren and Amber took a step back from the public map. Liara made one more glance at Benezia as the matriarch placed her hand on her shoulder.

"Take care, my child," Benezia advised.

Liara nodded at her mother before she followed Saren, Amber, Kasumi, Tali and Legion down the street. Several more steps later and they found a manhole. Legion easily peeled the cover back and rolled it aside. The Alliance commander climbed down the manhole first, followed by the turian Spectre before Liara, Tali, Kasumi and Legion took turns. Legion glanced back and forth before turning to the others.

"Area secure," Legion informed them.

"Excellent," Saren nodded at Amber, "Amber, lead the way."

"Keep your eyes peeled," Amber advised, "don't want any surprises."

Amber and Saren didn't hesitate to lead their teammates through the sewer. He turned on a suit floodlight to ignite their path ahead. The Alliance commander used a map in her omni-tool to guide the team.

"This way," Amber said, "I see a path ahead."

Taking the hint, the rest of team followed her as she turned the corner. Legion paused and looked down its rifle scope.

"Alert," Legion warned, "unidentified readings, less than fifty meters out."

Kasumi and Tali exchanged glances in a moment of silence.

"I'd say we found our company," Kasumi remarked.

Amber nodded at Kasumi before she pulled out her assault rifle.

"Ok, let's clean house," Amber suggested with enthusiasm, "get to cover. Wait for my shot to open fire."

Amber led the way as they stormed into the larger chamber up ahead. The group scrambled into pockets in the room, keeping to the shadows as they peered from their positions. They watched as Collectors scampered about the room, wondering what they could be excavating. Watching as one passed by, she took a moment to aim her rifle at a spot between its armor. The instant she fired the shot, the target collapsed to the ground while the other Collector's started to panic.

"That's the signal!" Tali exclaimed.

Everyone else followed up and fired upon the unsuspecting Collectors. Seconds later, the surviving Collectors began scanning their surroundings for the intruders. Just as the drones began charging at them, Liara emitted a biotic shield. With ample opportunity to maintain fire, they casually finished off the first patrol.

"All right," Amber commanded, "let's keep moving!"

Falling back in line, they proceeded up the path where the Collectors came from. They continued their pursuit further underground until they reached another large chamber. Liara stared in bewilderment the instant she noticed a Prothean artifact burrowing into the ground.
"Oh my… I hope that's not what I think it is."

When Saren and Amber examined the artifact from a distance, they spotted Javik standing before it.

"There he is!" Amber pointed at the Prothean.

More gunfire illuminated the tunnel as they exchanged fire. While Javik withdrew, Liara rushed up to investigate the machine. In between firing rounds, Legion focused its gaze at Liara in confusion.

"What is of concern, T'Soni-Doctor?"

Liara glanced over her shoulder.

"This artifact," Liara commented, "I didn't think it would be down here."

"Any idea what it's for?" Tali pressed.

Liara was about to say something, but…

"What are you waiting for?!" Amber demanded from the distance, "Javik's getting away!"

"Shepard, I…" Liara stammered.

Amber took a moment to make a brief glance at the Prothean artifact.

"Maybe we could tell Benezia about the artifact later," Amber suggested.

"Still, check what it's for. Shut it down if you have to," Saren added.

Liara nodded while Legion stood to provide cover fire while Saren and Amber continued to lead Tali and Kasumi down another tunnel. Once they entered even another larger chamber, they managed to catch up with Javik. He was climbing up a ladder out of the tunnel to the surface. Not wanting to let him escape, Amber aimed her rifle and opened fire on the ladder's frame, catching the Prothean off-guard. He flinched for a moment and tried to continue to the top.

"He's still persistent," Amber muttered, "Saren, a little help?"

"Yeah, I'm on it!" he acknowledged.

Saren didn't hesitate as he tossed a biotic warp at the ladder. The ball of energy ripped off the lower half of the ladder, leaving the Prothean to helplessly dangle for a few seconds. Snarling, Javik let go of the ladder and landed on his feet before he pulled out his rifle. He returned fire and started retreating further into the caves. From there, Saren, Amber, Tali and Kasumi continued their chase, with the turian Spectre shielding the others with a biotic field. They ended up returning to the other chamber as Javik shifted his gaze towards Liara. When the asari archaeologist glanced over her shoulder seconds later, she and Legion pulled out their shotguns and aimed them at the Prothean.

"You're not going anywhere!" Liara barked.

Javik let out a loud huff.

"Liara," Javik told her, "have you been unaware of the origin of your species?"

"What do you know?" she grumbled.
Javik ignored Saren, Amber, Tali and Kasumi as they aimed their guns at them.

"Your species inherited our technology," Javik insisted, "don't you want to save the last Prothean?"

Liara shook her head in fury.

"Not after what you did!" she snapped.

He let out a ragged chuckle.

"How naive," Javik rambled on, "you wouldn't dare to pass up an offer to mother Prothean children?"

Liara and the Spectres stared in disbelief.

"You're joking," Amber objected, "I thought those Collectors of yours were good enough for you!"

"They are only foot soldiers," Javik corrected, "not suitable for rebuilding."

Liara took a step away from the artifact.

"Is that why you sent Keepers to spy on me?!" she pestered the Prothean.

Javik took a moment to scan his surroundings.

"Soon," Javik warned, "you'll understand, T'Soni."

With a concealed hand, he threw out an armed flashbang in front of them. Everyone else covered their eyes and waited until the light dissipated. The instant they noticed Javik was gone, Liara sighed in disappointment and trudged towards Saren.

"I'm sorry, Spectre Arterius," Liara lowered her head.

Saren flexed his mandibles as he placed his hand on Liara's shoulder.

"Let's just get that device back there on its way to the Normandy and continue," Saren suggested.

Liara slowly nodded at Saren. Amber whipped up her omni-tool and scrolled to Benezia's number. She didn't hesitate to begin the transmission.

"Matriarch?" Amber reported, "Javik got away, but we found a Prothean artifact."

{Understood. Any idea what the device is for?}

Amber couldn't help but scratch her head.

"You know," Amber admitted, "I actually don't have a clue."

{Right. I assume you have a means of getting it out from down there?}

Amber glanced over her shoulder as Liara went back to examining the Prothean artifact.

"Liara," Amber called, "you think we could use some help?"

Liara snapped out of her thoughts and glanced over her shoulders.

"At least a few others and perhaps a small crane," Liara suggested.
"Got it," Amber nodded, "I'll get on the line with Joker, and let him know."

Liara nodded in agreement.

"Benezia, want to meet up with us at the embassy?" Amber continued.

*I'll inform the others of your arrival, then,* Benezia answered over the transmission.

Once Amber ended the transmission with Benezia, she switched over to Joker's number.

"Joker, send the shuttle with a portable crane onboard to my coordinates. Javik left something I want analyzed."

*You got it, Shepard,* Joker nodded over the com-link.

Amber smiled as she ended the transmission. They simply waited for around half an hour until the shuttle in question landed on the planet's surface. A trio of soldiers jumped out and lugged out the portable crane. Over the next half hour, they lifted the device out of the ground. When they returned to the surface, Amber met up with one of the soldiers near the shuttle.

"Good work," Amber praised, "Spectre Arterius, Dr. T'Soni and I will be heading over to the embassy shortly."

"Understood, commander," the soldier saluted, "we'll be on our way with the package. We'll update you on anything that comes up."

Amber nodded at the soldier as he boarded the shuttle before she stepped towards Saren and Liara.

"Enough of that. Let's keep going."

Saren simply nodded at Amber as they and Liara meandered through the streets. With Tali, Kasumi and Legion also boarding the shuttle, it was only a while before the Spectres and the asari archaeologist reached the embassy. They made their way through the front doors and into the central lobby. Once they entered a conference room, Benezia stood near her seat along with the members of the Asari Republics.

"Commander Shepard," one of the leaders greeted, "we are glad you could join us."

"A pleasure as always," Amber returned with a nod, "sorry we took a while to get here."

Amber, Saren and Liara settled into their seats.

"Right, so what's the current matter at hand?" Saren asked.

"Councilor Tevos informed us of the impending arrival of the Reapers," an asari leader explained, "so we've been evaluating our way of life and whether we're prepared."

Amber nodded as she, Saren and Liara joined in the conversation, offering ideas and solutions that the asari could agree with.

"Thank you, Spectres," Benezia turned back to the others and continued, "now, I'm aware that this topic has historically been strictly confidential, however in light of our most recent crisis, I'm confident it's a loss that must be withstood."

"Still, I don't think we should surrender this based on some impending invasion with arbitrary requirements for survival," Liara sighed.
Saren tilted his head to his left and placed his hand on her shoulder.

"It doesn't have to be about surrender," Saren reassured her, "in the meantime, I wonder just what is so confidential in there."

Amber blinked twice.

"You mean the topics not discussed among inner-circle matriarchs?" Amber clarified.

Benezia folded her arms.

"I suppose I may as well tell you since they won't," Benezia explained, "millennia ago before we became a space-faring race, we found a Prothean VI. Along with ample warning of the Reapers, we got the benefit of additional insight to the Prothean's technology, so the part about the Reapers flew under the radar, if you will."

"Interesting," Amber placed her finger on her chin.

"Seeing the tech as a means of maintaining widespread status of the asari among other species, this was kept as a secret," Benezia added.

Amber examined a few of the holographic projections.

"So you think this could help ease the asari's odds of survival?" Amber insisted.

"I believe so," Benezia nodded.

"Worth a shot, but if the Matriarchs are still feeling skeptical about disclosing the presence of the VI, should we break it to them that we now know?" Saren asked.

Liara nodded calmly.

"If we want something done quickly, we should," Liara agreed.

Amber stood to her feet and extended her hand, allowing one of the asari leaders to shake it.

"Thanks for coming to talk today."

"Anytime," Amber smiled.

With the conference over, Saren, Amber and Liara left the conference room and made their way out of the embassy.

"I guess that means we have the salarians and then Javik to handle," Amber commented.

"The salarians should be easy, but Javik has me worried," Saren admitted.

Sighing, Amber gently grasped Saren's hand.

"I'm sure we'll make it through," she reassured him.

Saren chuckled as he flexed his mandibles.

"Yeah," Saren agreed, "I'm sure we will."
While the Normandy was in the middle of its flight to Sur'Kesh, Wrex stood near the entrance to the medbay while Jack sat on the examination table, holding her blood-stained pants as Mordin analyzed the data on his omni-tool. The krogan was trying as hard as he could to calm himself down considering he had to rush the human biotic to Mordin in a panic.

Several minutes later, Mordin cleared his throat, catching the krogan's attention as he trudged closer to the salarian doctor.

"How is she?" Wrex insisted.

"Strange," Mordin observed, "very strange. Seen nothing like this. Not within former female slaves."

Wrex raised a browplate.

"Pardon?" He paused.


Wrex gave Mordin a blank stare before tilting his head towards Jack. As his mind swam in his thoughts, he reflected on the day he and Commander Shepard's team helped Dr. Okeer installed the Genophage cure. How did Jack get exposed to it? The human biotic also took the moment to reflect on that moment.

"So," Jack recalled, "when one of the containers leaked for a bit…"

Mordin nodded at her response.

"Well, probably nothing will go wrong regardless. Probably."

Jack glanced over her shoulder and locked eyes with Dr. Chakwas.

"So what's the translation, doctor?" Jack called over.

"Not sure," Mordin shrugged, "shouldn't be any problem. Krogan and human biology not compatible to my knowledge."

Jack slipped off the examination table while Chakwas pulled out a box from a drawer.

"Here, you'll need these," Chakwas offered, "I don't have much to start with given that these are only handed out in emergencies, but I'll get more when we next dock."

Jack grinned as she plucked the box from the Alliance medic's hands.

"Thanks," she chirped, "I'll manage."

The two left the medbay shortly after. They took a shortcut to the bathroom where Jack carefully followed the instructions as she applied one of the female supplies. Once she finished, she and Wrex made their way to the bridge, where they saw Saren and Amber conversing with Joker.

Amber noticed the two approaching in her peripheral vision and turned to face them.
"Hey, what's up, Jack?" Amber quipped.

Jack placed her arms behind her head.

"I took a trip to the medbay," Jack told her, "I just got my first period."

"I…what?" she returned as she gave Jack a blank stare.

"She apparently got a bit of the Genophage treatment," Wrex elaborated, "nothing's happening yet, so it's not gonna be a problem."

Amber nodded at Wrex before shifting her gaze towards Joker.

"So, is Mordin going to accompany you?" Joker asked.

"Yeah, he will," Amber nodded.

Just then, the Normandy emerged from a Mass Relay and they observed as the vessel flew into salarian space.

"Speaking of which," Amber continued, "this looks like we should get going."

Saren nodded at his human mate before she led him, Jack and Wrex our of the bridge. All four entered the armory and geared up for departure. During that time, Mordin stepped into the armory.

"Heya, Mordin!" Jack chirped as she waved her hand, "glad you could join us."

"Of course," Mordin nodded in agreement, "necessary part of this transaction."

Mordin didn't hesitate as he started gathering equipment. He finished equipping himself just shortly after the others had. They soon left the armory and made their way to the cargo hold where they boarded the shuttle. The shuttle departed shortly after for Sur'Kesh. It was only a while before the shuttle landed on the planet's surface, allowing them to disembark. Outside, a few salarian STGs stood waiting for them. One member walked forward to greet them.

"Captain Solus, didn't think I'd see you here again."

Mordin nodded at the STG member.

"Glad to be here," Mordin replied, "has much changed? What have I missed?"

The STG members exchanged glances in a moment of silence before shifting their gaze towards Mordin.

"Could use your help," one of the STGs said.

"What with? What's the issue? Significant?" Mordin asked.

The salarian STGs nodded in unison.

"It's better if we discussed inside."

Amber took the hint and stepped forward.

"All right, then," Amber suggested, "lead the way."

The group led them off the platform and into the facility. Stepping through the sliding door, they
meandered through the lobby and through the corridor, making their way to the elevator. Stepping inside, the doors closed and started on downward.

"Currently in private location. Care to disclose?" Mordin asked again.

One of the STGs glanced over his shoulder.

"Got the message from the Council," he explained, "would like to negotiate terms on ensuring survival of the salarians."


Moments later, the elevator reached its destination, so the STGs led Saren, Amber, Mordin, Jack and Wrex through the corridor after they disembarked the elevator. It didn't take much longer before they entered a conference room and sat down at the oval table.

"So, are we ready to begin?" Saren asked.

"Of course. Thank you for your time, Spectres," an STG nodded.

Amber started up the holographic projector.

"As far as we know," Amber began, "we have a few months before the Reapers are scheduled to arrive."

One of the others nodded.

"We are greatly aware of what awaits us in a few months. How we are to prepare is still up for debate."

Amber turned her head towards Mordin.

"You have any suggestions?" Amber asked.

Mordin took in a deep breath.

"Admittedly," Mordin answered, "our attempts to still the krogans was a fluke."

"Yes, but we resolved the issue regardless," another salarian acknowledged, "why you'd seek to undo millennia of work is unheard of."

"If we're to be dwelling on this topic, may I ask of the Yahg project?" a salarian STG interjected.

Amber tilted her head towards Saren.

"You mean…the race Miranda and the Shadow Broker made contact with?" Amber clarified.

"Yes, that race," Saren nodded at his human mate.

The other salarians uncomfortably shifted in their seats.

"Did we not establish that Class-E projects were not to be publicly disclosed with people outside of the STG?" one grumbled.

Another STG nodded with a sigh.

"Of course. Why you just up and drop this bit of protocol is beyond me, captain," he hissed.
"Continuing with the project is a greater violation of judgment."

Amber smiled in relief.

"That's good to hear," she replied.

In the meantime, Jack reviewed the profile of the salarian race in her datapad.

"Look, I dunno about the rest of you freaks," Jack reminded, "but Harbinger left a pretty clear-cut message: don't be cunts. If that means dropping a few habits, it's probably for the best."

Mordin and the other salarian STGs blinked twice in a moment of silence.

"Reapers aren't fond of some habits," Mordin repeated.

"We also had a hard time persuading some of the richest humans at first," Amber added, "just play along for now, we'll try to find a compromise. Just be sure it works within three months or so."

"Will do," a salarian STG nodded, "we'll spread the word right away."

By then, the salarian STGs finished reviewing the requirements and each signed the agreement. After that, one of the STGs shook hands with Mordin.

"Have a good day," Mordin said.

With their task finished, Mordin, Saren, Amber, Jack and Wrex stepped out of the conference room.

"So, what do we do from here?" Jack chirped as she stretched her arms over her head.

Amber took this chance to scroll through her message inbox in her omni-tool. She soon noticed an unread message from Aria.

"Her again?" Amber muttered as she rolled her eyes.

Saren looked over her shoulder.

"Well, open it. See what she has to say now," he suggested.

Amber nodded at Saren before she opened the message and started reading it:

Hello, Shepard,

I got a little message from the Shadow Broker a while ago. He wants me to negotiate with you so why don't you come over to the Afterlife Club for a bit? Don't forget to bring along Liara and Miranda with you while you're at it.

Kisses, Aria T'Loak

Saren shrugged.

"Normally," he commented, "she isn't this willing to discuss. You sure it's from her?"

Amber double-checked the return address before she nodded.

"We might as well get going," Amber replied.
Amber led Saren, Mordin, Jack and Wrex back into the elevator and rode it back to the surface. From there, they left the building and returned to the shuttle. After they left the planet, they landed back on the Normandy and made their way back out of the cargo hold. With Jack, Wrex and Mordin dismissed, Amber and Saren returned to the bridge and approached the pilot's seat, causing Joker to glance over his shoulder.

"Welcome back, Shep," Joker chirped, "how did the talks go?"

"It didn't take long," Amber answered, "but I'm sure we'll be able to ensure the salarians survive. Right now, we need to head over Omega."

Joker gave Amber a blank stare.

"Okay, be honest with me," he asked, "just how many times do we need to go into the lion's den per year?"

Saren scratched his mandible. He apparently wasn't as thrilled about the journey to Omega as the flight lieutenant was.

"I don't have a specific count for that," Saren shrugged, "just...try not to think about it too hard. We're on an Alliance ship with state-of-the-art defenses and stealth systems. We'll be fine."

"Right," Joker drawled.

The Alliance flight lieutenant didn't hesitate to maneuver the Normandy away from Sur'Kesh and out of salarian space. It was only a while before the vessel made its way towards the Mass Relay, letting the ancient structure fling it into FTL speed.

"Headin' to FTL. Back into gang territory."

Amber nodded at Joker before she started composing a message in her omni-tool before sending it. Several minutes later, Liara and Miranda entered the bridge.

"Heading to Omega, hmm?" Liara confirmed.

Amber turned to face Liara and nodded.

"Yeah," she answered, "the Shadow Broker wants us to help him get an agreement out of the crazy queen."

Miranda didn't say anything as she minimized a browser with a picture of a lush location, catching Saren's interest out of the corner of his eye. The Lawson prodigy returned the stare within a split second.

"This is something personal between me and the Shadow Broker," Miranda explained, "don't ask."

"I see," Saren noted, "regardless, we'll be heading there shortly. Rest up."

Saren turned on his feet as he and Amber stepped out of the bridge and made their way to their quarters. The Alliance commander climbed onto the bed and reclined on her back, encouraging her turian mate to lie down next to her. For some reason, Amber couldn't help but imagine the idea of a cat curling up on her lap, prompting a random question in her head.

"Saren?" Amber paused.

"Hmm?" Saren raised a browplate.
"Out of curiosity," Amber asked, "what would be your ideal pet?"

He quietly nodded as he processed his answer.

"I had a fish as a kid," he explained, "saw some in the shop, saved up some pocket change and got one. Lasted about a year at most. Why?"

Amber couldn't help but shrug as she turned over to face her turian mate.

"Maybe when this Reaper issue is resolved," Amber offered, "we could consider getting a hamster, a bird or even a cat."

"Alright, a bird is fine, but what's a cat?" Saren replied.

Amber chuckled a little before she turned on her omni-tool and looked up images of domestic cats, giving Saren a chance to examine some of them.

"Little furry things," Amber explained, "here are some images."

"That's...huh," Saren mused, "I think I saw those once, but didn't have them described to me."

Amber smiled and turned off her omni-tool before she scooted closer to Saren, encouraging him to wrap an arm around her and hold her close.

"So what do you think?" Amber asked.

"The cat would work, not so sure about the bird," Saren answered.

Amber nuzzled her face against Saren's, encouraging his subvocals to let out deep purrs.

"I'm sure we'll teach a cat to get along with a bird," Amber reassured him.

This caused Saren to raise a browplate.

"We're getting both?" he clarified.

Amber nodded with a shrug. Saren didn't say anything in response, so they both relaxed in their embrace.

An hour or so later, the Normandy emerged from the Mass Relay and arrived in Omega. Returning from their cabin, they got their gear back on and met the others in the armory. Liara and Miranda hesitated near their lockers for a moment.

"Shepard," Miranda called over, "should we...bring our weapons?"

Amber shook her head.

"We don't have to," Amber answered.

She noted the ex-Cerberus agent was equipping a machine pistol.

"Still anxious?" Amber raised an eyebrow.

Miranda shifted her gaze towards Amber and nodded.

"I still have some suspicions," Miranda explained, "I just need to stay on guard just in case."
Amber sighed before she and Saren gathered their pistols and led Liara and Miranda into the cargo hold. A short while later, the Normandy arrived at the station and landed at the dock.

"Really though, you probably shouldn't need it," Amber reiterated.

"I'd rather have it and not need it than need it and not have it," Miranda retorted.

Saren rolled his eyes before leading Amber, Miranda and Liara down the ramp and meandered through the hangar, making their way to the entrance before stopping before an elcor towering over them.

"We don't make a move on her, she won't make a move on us," Amber advised, "just keep it holstered for now."

Saren took a step closer to the elcor.

"We are here to speak with Aria," Saren greeted, "is she available?"

"Professionally: Go on in, she told me to expect you."

The man at the front of the line waiting to get into the club huffed.

"Hold on! They aren't even in line!" he protested.

"Hostility: Last time, you're blacklisted."

The man proceeded to argue with the elcor. The Spectres, the Lawson prodigy and the asari archaeologist ignored them as they stepped through the sliding door. They trudged through the corridor and stepped into the nightclub. Afterlife was just as cramped as usual, with booming music, dark lighting, waiters and guards everywhere, and the distinct smell of cigarette smoke lingering in the air. All they could do was meander through the club and ascend the flight of stairs, facing the asari pirate queen on her throne.

"I've been waiting, Shepard," Aria winked at Amber, "it's a pleasure to see you responded."

Amber gave Aria a piercing stare as she pulled out her datapad and opened the document.

"I hope you're ready to negotiate a deal," Amber replied, "there are plenty at stake as of right now."

Aria took a moment to examine the document, raising a brow.

"So, these Reapers want me to whip Omega into shape, huh?" Aria commented.

Amber nodded.

"Probably for the best. I know it's not in your interest, much less within the realms of possibility, but I'm pretty sure there's enough innocent people out here in the Terminus that the rest of the galaxy would definitely feel the sudden void of life in this sector when they arrive," Saren added.

Aria hummed as she rubbed her chin.

"Of course, knowing you, you'll insist I continue with your plan," Aria retorted.

"I could say I'll laugh as they turn you and your rock to ash," Saren snarked.

In the meantime, Miranda's eyes wandered until they found a severed head of a human on a
display. It didn't take even a second for her to recognize him.

"What did he do?" Miranda called over, gesturing to the severed head.

Aria made a brief glance at Miranda.

"I didn't look into it, but I've seen his grunts on my station," Aria shrugged, "thought you'd be interested."

Miranda tilted her head sideways with a smirk.

"Did he try to overthrow you?" Miranda snarked.

Aria instantly burst into a chuckle.

"Darling, he couldn't come close to dethroning me," Aria prattled on, "if he attempted something remotely like that, I'd stomp him out in a second. However, his activities haven't escaped my attention entirely, so I had a closer look. It's awfully interesting, so I'm passing it on."

Miranda slowly nodded as Aria finished reading the document and handing the datapad back to Amber.

"Right. I'll see about that," Aria told the Alliance commander.

"So we have an agreement?" Amber clarified.

"Of course," Aria nodded, "but if you're interested in parading around like the vigilantes you claim to be, check out Mr. Lawson while you're here. He's bound to be interesting without a doubt."

Aria beckoned a batarian bodyguard to remove Henry's severed head from the display and hand it to Miranda.

"I'm sure it'll be a great wedding gift for the Shadow Broker, Miss Lawson," Aria grinned.

Miranda let out a soft chuckle.

"We'll actually be ready for that in a few years," Miranda corrected, "if we're lucky."

Aria returned her gaze to Amber.

"We'll gladly lead the clean sweep across Omega," Amber declared, "with some help."

"Really? You need me to throw my hat into the ring?" Aria rolled her eyes.

Saren folded his arms.

"Are we doing this or not?" Saren reminded.

"Fine," Aria huffed, "if you insist. I'll throw a few grunts your way and tell them to help you out. Lawson's been out of my scope, but I know what sector he's been lingering around."

Amber and Aria shook hands.

"Thank you," Amber said, "we'll be on our way."

Saren, Amber, Liara and Miranda returned to the Normandy, only to find multiple fleets within the system had sent messages to the Alliance commander's inbox. The restoration of Omega as a
hospitable station for civilian life and the possibility to undermine crime within the Terminus was an opportunity the Alliance couldn't miss, and were willing to contribute extra resources towards. With much confidence, Amber was glad to lead this assignment.
A Wedding for Spectres

After two months of distributing resources to help the civilizations across the galaxy adjust, one month remained until the deadline. Today was the day of Amber's first anniversary of her Spectre induction, but that wasn't the only event.

The Alliance commander looked into the mirror as she combed her hair, having finished fastening the rose above the line of white beads that held together the red wrap around the maroon dress. She also watched as Miranda zipped up Oriana's dress and Kelly and Liara discussed with one another about which accessories from a display would match their outfits. Setting down the comb, Amber picked up the earrings from a stand and fastened them onto her earlobes before wrapping her choker around her neck. Once she slipped on her armband, Kasumi approached her with a bouquet in her hands.

"I thought these flowers would go well with your dress," Kasumi told her, "what do you think?"

Amber plucked the bouquet from Kasumi's hands and examined the flowers. She admired the way the master thief arranged the buttercups, daisies and marigolds in the bouquet.

"They're great!" Amber chirped.

"Thanks," Kasumi smiled back.

As she reflected into the mirror, she also reflected the progress she made. By showing the Reapers that these civilizations can adapt to diplomacy, she now had one more goal to complete. Javik still lingered about, creating chaos with his band of Collectors, with seemingly nothing but random acts of harm in mind. She started to consider just keeping him boxed in for long enough for the Reapers to personally handle. The silence broke when Hannah knocked on the door and stepped into the room, catching the women's attention.

"Hey, mom!" Amber smiled as she waved her hand.

Returning a smile, Hannah stepped closer to her adopted daughter.

"Anderson would like me to tell you that Matriarch Benezia will be escorting Saren down one aisle," Hannah told her, "that leaves me to escort you down your aisle."

"Thanks," Amber nodded.

"Well, the ceremony's drawing close. Should we get going?" Kasumi reminded.

Amber winked at Kasumi and gave her a thumbs up. This was a cue for Kasumi and Tali to hold hands while they, Liara, Kelly, Jack, Miranda, Oriana and Ashley followed Amber and her mom out of the room. Out in the hallway, Saren was making some final preparations for himself. As he adjusted his ceremonial sash, Nihlus looked himself over the mirror. With the ceremony fast approaching, he couldn't help but think how far he and his human mate came since Akuze.

"Right. So, how do I look?" Saren asked.

"Smokin'. I envy you," Nihlus grinned as he glanced over his shoulder, "except for the part about this being a publicity stunt."

Saren flexed his mandibles into a smile.
"If you say so," Saren agreed.

He turned to see the others as they approached them. Anderson stood in front as he gave the older turian Spectre a salute.

"Looking fine, Spectre Arterius," Anderson said, "I assume you're well and ready?"

Saren nodded as he returned the salute.

"As you were, Captain Anderson," he replied.

"Of course. See you at the ceremony," Anderson acknowledged.

As Anderson left with the entourage, Saren and Nihlus waited until Benezia arrived with Wrex, Garrus, Legion, James, Kolyat and Kaidan accompanying her.

"Spectre," Benezia called over, "you ready?"

Saren glanced over his shoulder and nodded at the asari Matriarch.

"Same as you, Benezia," Saren answered, "let's go."

Saren led his entourage down the hall and made their way to an opposite door leading to the Council Chambers. Inside, the Councilors have arranged audience seats on both sides with Sparatus standing near a pedestal near the center. The guests seemed to consist of Alliance officials, crewmembers of the Normandy and members of the Hierarchy chain of command as they shuffled towards their seats. Halfway down the row, he could see Nihlus looking over his shoulder to see them. Saren and Benezia hooked their arms around one another while Amber and Hannah imitated the gesture. Admiral Hackett and General Victus stepped through the aisles and saluted at Councilor Sparatus. They both stood next to Tevos and Valern while Hackett tilted his head towards a few technicians standing near an audio box. When they activated it and started playing a custom music score, Anderson glanced over his shoulder and nodded at Amber.

Desolas and Anderson were the first to walk down the opposing aisles, each standing near Victus and Hackett respectively. Each member of both entourages took turns walking down the aisle with Kelly and Garrus being the last of the bridesmaids and groomsmen. Many of the guests members, including Amber's father Abraham, stood from their seats and shifted gazes between Saren and Amber as they walked down the opposing aisles with Benezia and Hannah respectively escorting them. Both Spectres stood near the podium in front of Sparatus. The turian Councilor nodded at them, encouraging the Alliance commander to place the bouquet in an ornate vase before she and her mentor held hands.

"Today, we gather for a milestone in intergalactic history," Sparatus started, "what had once been a meeting between soldiers far from home has expanded into a bridge that links us together."

Sparatus picked up two bowls…one bowl of sand from Saren's orphanage and one bowl of sand from the town Amber grew up in.

"Your Spirits become one once you blend them with the grain of sand," Sparatus continued.

As Saren and Amber released their hands and plucked their bowls from the turian Councilor's hands, they each took turns pouring the sand into the vase. Sparatus nodded when they set down the bowls.

"You two are ready to announce your vows of commitment, I presume?" Sparatus asked.
Amber entwined her fingers with Saren's talons.

"Amber Shepard," Saren began, "are you willing to share your dreams, your passions and your bravery with me from this day forth?"

"Yes, Saren Arterius," Amber nodded, "it's the little things that make our love strong. Are you going to cherish the loyalty we built as we keep going forward as mates?"

"For you, I would do anything," Saren answered with a soft smile.

Sparatus nodded in approval before he picked up a pair of flower crowns, placing each one of them on top of the Spectres' heads. They turned to face each other as Sparatus made his last declaration.

"May the Spirits bless these mates across times and space," Sparatus spread his arms wide open during his announcement, "congratulations, Saren and Amber Arterius."

Saren nodded as Amber cupped his face with her hand, pulling him into a passionate kiss. Not a second later, the entire crowd and their entourage burst into a round of applause that echoed across the Council Chambers.

With the ceremony over, the guests were dismissed to the massive balcony overlooking the Presidium, where a table sat along the wall displaying a variety of appetizers and drink dispensers. The newlywed Spectres stepped towards a bench facing the balcony, watching as the artificial light simulated the sunset. Amber leaned closer to Saren as he placed his arm over her shoulder.

"Glad you're here with me," Amber smiled softly.

He warmly purred as he held his arms around her.

"I wouldn't have it any other way," he agreed.

Amber nodded as she nuzzled her face against his. After a while, they released their embrace and stood to their feet, making their way to the table to browse some appetizers that were available. Amber obtained a soft pretzel while Saren obtained a turian equivalent of a stuffed mushroom. Anderson later approached them and saluted.

"Commander, I'm nothing but proud of you," Anderson said.

Amber smiled and extended her hand, encouraging Anderson to shake it.

"Thank you, Anderson," she replied, "it's been a hell of a year, and I really hope we see the next one without trouble looming over our heads."

Anderson nodded in agreement before he retrieved a deviled egg and walked side by side with Saren and Amber.

"So far," Anderson informed, "we found no sign of the Collector base in Alliance space."

"Figures," Saren shrugged after taking a bite out of his appetizer, "Javik's smart enough to not make himself an easy target."

When Amber finished her pretzel, she tilted her head towards Kelly, Garrus, Jack, Wrex, Oriana and Kolyat as they took turns in playing a beanbag toss game.

"Saren," Amber beckoned, "want to join in?"
"Sure, I'm up for a game or two," he grinned.

Saren and Amber sauntered over to the beanbag toss while Anderson stood and watched from the sidelines. Their presence caught the others' attention.

"Heya, Amber!" Jack chirped while she waved her hand, "wanna give this a swing as the newlywed?"

Amber nodded just as Jack tossed a beanbag to her. The afternoon droned on as festivities continued. With Saren and Amber trying out a few of the games, Kaidan, Ashley and James relaxed at the balcony with drinks in their hand while Tali, Legion, Liara and Kasumi shared a couple board games they borrowed off a display. Dr. Chakwas and Mordin engaged in banter on a bench while Joker showed Nihlus some funny videos in his datapad. In the background, officials continued chattering away with each other regarding the wedding. The Alliance commander even participated in a board game with Saren, Abraham and Hannah at one point.

After the second hour passed, a few attendants sent a message to Anderson, who beckoned everyone else back into the Council Chambers, which had been rearranged into a reception hall. Amber, Saren, Desolas, Hackett and Anderson sat at a table in the center while Mordin, Dr. Chakwas, Hannah and Abraham sat at an adjacent table. Liara sat next to Benezia and across from Kaidan and Ashley while Kelly, Garrus, Jack and Wrex shared a table. Oriana and Kolyat joined up with Miranda, Tali and Kasumi while Joker shared a table with Zaeed, Nihlus and James. Menus lay atop the tables as they browsed through the options for dinner. It didn't take long before Amber found her favorite dish on the list, so she tilted her head towards Saren.

"I know what I'm getting," Amber said, "you?"

Saren took a brief moment to read through the menu.

"The Oma Ker Eel cutlet seems like a good option this evening," Saren answered.

The group placed their orders and continued their conversation, awaiting dinner. A short while later, an asari reporter stepped up to the table.

"Hello," she greeted, "may I ask you two a few questions this evening?"

Saren and Amber exchanged brief glances before nodding at the reporter.

"Go on," Amber encouraged.

The asari reporter smiled as she turned on her microphone.

"What do you two do on a rainy day?" she started.

Amber smiled as she shrugged.

"Whenever it gets rainy," Amber answered with confidence, "I just curl up on the couch and play some games. Saren's getting used to The Binding of Isaac."

The asari reporter raised a brow.

"Nothing too spectacular, then?"

Saren shook his head.

"Well," Saren added, "we do throw in a cup of kava or tea for good measure, depending on what
we're in the mood for. Helps bring a sense of ease in the mornings before we get started."

"I see," the asari reporter continued, "which of you is more of a morning person?"

"I am, but I still need some momentum," Saren replied.

Anderson rubbed his chin as the interview continued.

"Which of you has the weirdest taste in music?" the reporter asked.

Saren raised a browplate.

"What's with the level of interest in our personal lives?" he pondered.

The interview continued until the waiters arrived with the entrées several minutes later, distributing the meals across the reception area.

"Well then. Anyways, thanks for your time. I'll let you two be for now," the asari said, turning to leave.

"Thank you," Saren sighed in relief.

When a waiter brought over their entrées to their table, Saren, Amber, Desolas, Anderson and Hackett started eating.

"So," Desolas asked, "do you and Amber have plans this evening?"

Saren thought over the question as he took a bite out of his meal.

"Maybe we could spend the night somewhere memorable?" Saren shrugged.

His mandibles flexing into a grin, Desolas pulled out a small package from his pocket and handed it to Saren, much to the younger brother's confusion.

"I got you two a penthouse at the Silversun Strip for your honeymoon," Desolas explained, "I can lend you the place for however long you'll need."

Saren gave his brother a soft smile as he plucked the keycard out of his hand.

"Thank you, Desolas," he replied.

Everyone in the Council Chambers spent around an hour dining on their meal. After that, a caterer rolled a table decorated with small desserts from various races into the hall, positioning it at the edge of the reception area before bowing at the Councilors. Sparatus turned his head to his right, locking eyes onto Saren and Amber.

"Do you two want to take a first dip?" Sparatus offered.

Saren couldn't help but chuckle before he and Amber stepped over to the dessert table. After a moment of browsing, Saren picked out a turian pastry while Amber picked out a saucer holding a caramel flan.

"So, have any plans for the honeymoon?" the Councilor asked, leaning on his elbow.

Amber tilted her head towards Sparatus as the other guests lined up to pick out their desserts.
"I'm already familiar with Saren's territory," Amber joked, "so I think we can figure it out from there."

"Ah, I can imagine," he chuckled back. "still, any sightseeing in your near future?"

"If we're lucky," Saren shrugged, "we might be able to travel to some exotic locations."

"I'd like that, too," Amber agreed.

"If you have anywhere luxurious in mind, let me know," Sparatus offered, "I can make arrangements for the two of you."

Saren and Amber nodded at Sparatus before they focused on the desserts in their hands. As some of the guests finished their desserts, they felt like dancing to the music in the background, so Jack beckoned Wrex to an open area just outside the reception area. Seeing the human biotic and the krogan dance together was enough to motivate Oriana and Kolyat, Kelly and Garrus and then Tali and Kasumi to join in. For a brief moment, Miranda felt at peace as she watched her sister dance with the Krios son. She snapped out of her thoughts and tilted her head towards Amber.

"You have a moment?" Miranda asked, "I have something I want to give you."

Amber locked eyes onto Miranda before she nodded. Smiling, the Lawson prodigy handed a package to the Alliance commander, much to Saren's confusion.

"It's a surprise," Miranda clarified.

"Ah," Saren mused.

She gently pulled off the lid and peered inside at the box's contents, and gently pulled up on the item inside to better inspect it. It was a red nightgown, made of what she could only assume was silk. After a brief moment, Amber closed the lid and smiled at Miranda.

"Thank you!" Amber smiled.

"Anytime, Amber," Miranda nodded.

Saren and Amber took a moment to place their gifts on a table near the Councilors before the Alliance commander extended her hand.

"Saren?" she paused.

Taking the hint, Saren took Amber's hand into his own before they stepped out onto the dance floor. He wrapped the empty hand around her lower back. Smiling, they moved in sync to the rhythm of the music playing in the background. They lightly twirled around each other as the night carried on. This felt like more than a peaceful union…something that gave them a chance to rest until the day they would have bigger fish to fry.
Later that evening, Saren and Amber took a hovercab and relaxed as it flew its way to the Silversun Strip. The Alliance commander held the package close to her chest in anticipation of the upcoming steamy night. Desolas had forwarded the address of the apartment to Saren and passed off a key for their use. Minutes later, the hovercar landed, allowing the newlywed Spectres to disembark the vehicle and gaze at the penthouse standing in front of them. It was located at a more prestigious complex along the Silversun Strip, towering over much of the local skyline. After a moment of examining the intricate architectural features, Amber held Saren's hand as they stepped over to the front door, watching as it slid itself open. They ascended a flight of stairs and unlocked the door to the apartment. The interior was heavily decorated with wood and a substance similar to marble, with large windows peering out into the outside, providing a magnificent view of the area surrounding them.

"Wow," Saren gasped softly, "this is…"

Amber tilted her head towards Saren and smiled.

"Extravagant?" Amber clarified.

Saren flexed his mandibles into a grin.

"More than I could have remotely imagined spending our honeymoon," Saren nodded.

Saren and Amber began exploring the apartment, examining the hot tub in the bathroom, admiring the spacious balcony through a glass door and finally stepping into the bedroom. Inside, a large bed sat at the back of the room with night stands on both sides.

"You remembered to bring the allergy meds," Amber reminded as she grasped his arm, "right?"

Saren tilted his head towards his bride and nodded.

"I'll place it at the night stand," he offered.

Amber smiled before she stepped into the walk-in closet, where she pulled the nightgown out of the package. She spent several minutes removing her accessories and slipping out of her wedding dress. When she set them aside, she quickly put on her nightgown and returned to the bedroom. By then, Saren had already stripped himself and was climbing onto the bed.

"Saren," Amber called over, "ready for me to join in?"

Saren shifted his gaze towards Amber as he reclined on the bed. Her mouth twisted into a smile as she followed him under the sheets. Her turian husband purred as he cupped her face with his hand. The Alliance commander returned the gesture before pulling him into a deep kiss.

"I've been craving you since this morning," Amber whispered.

"I've barely been able to contain myself during the ceremony," Saren softly growled.

Amber traced her finger along his zygomatic plating while Saren brushed his tongue along her neck. She could feel his talons dragging along her spine, tracing some of the scars on her skin. Keeping one arm wrapped around the turian Spectre, the Alliance commander reached for the hem of her nightgown and lifted it until she revealed her breasts. She then ran her hand along his back,
craving the texture of his skin. Pausing for a moment, he pulled off his pants, dropping them over the side of the bed.

After giving him another deep kiss and intertwining her tongue with his, Amber rolled over until she was on top of Saren.

"Maybe I could give you a little warmup and then you return the favor?" Amber offered.

Saren chuckled as he nodded.

"Go ahead," he replied.

Amber scooted down the bed and rested her arms on his lap. She ran a finger along Saren's genital slit. He let out an audible gasp as he bucked his hips forward. The Alliance commander chuckled before she started licking his slit. Saren responded with a satisfied sigh, angled his hips forward, and reached a hand to the back of her head in encouragement. Amber watched as her turian husband's phallic stalk began to emerge from its slit, so she took the tip into her mouth. As she bobbed her head, she began stroking his shaft with her hand and perched her other hand on his hip spur. Slowly, he reached his unoccupied hand down to the hand on his hip, gently pressing his palm against it.

"Spirits, Amber," Saren moaned softly.

Her eyes glanced up at his while her head continued to slide up and down his shaft. Amber noticed his eyes were squeezed shut as he pressed his feet into the mattress. Just as she continued with her ministrations, Saren tapped on her shoulder, inciting her to withdraw her mouth.

"Amber," Saren told her between pants, "I'd like to return the favor now."

Amber smiled as she nodded. She rested on her back while Saren turned over and brought his mouth to her nether region. Already feeling riled up, her folds were slightly damp. The turian Spectre purred as he brushed his tongue along her folds, tracing it around her nub. As he circled her clit with his talon, he slid his tongue deep into her crevice, tasting the fluids coating her walls. Amber let out a sharp gasp as she bucked her hips against his mouth.

"Yes…" Amber hissed softly.

She hooked her legs onto Saren's shoulders to lock him in place. Her turian husband wrapped his hands around her thighs as his chest rumbled with deep purrs that sent vibrations into her core. Feeling the tingle of pleasure climb up her spine, she arched her back, panting for air. Amber tightened her fists as they held the sheets. While Saren continued to caress her core with his tongue, he traced his hands along her waist and cupped her breasts. Watching as she squirmed under his touch, Saren flexed his mandibles as he kneaded her breasts. Every small movement he made generated some involuntary reaction from her, causing her to quiver with ecstasy. Pressure built up inside her core halfway when Amber nudged Saren with her hand, prompting him to withdraw his tongue.

"Amber," Saren purred, "you ready for the main course?"

Amber eagerly nodded as she licked her lips. Saren removed her legs from his shoulders and then pressed his forehead against hers as he anchored his erect tip at the apex of her thighs. He gave her a kiss before he pushed his way inside, burying himself to the hilt and listening as she mewled underneath him.

"I…I…Ooooooohh, don't stop…" she gasped.
Amber perched her hands on her turian husband's shoulders, encouraging him to lower himself and brush his tongue underneath her chin.

"Amber," Saren whispered into her ear, "is it good?"

She clutched him tightly and pinned herself to him.

"Don't…stop…" she pleaded.

Saren nodded at her before he started grinding his hips into his human mate, starting with shallow thrusts. He started off slowly, gradually working himself into a tempo. Eventually, he was eased into it by the wet slapping of their fluids mixing. While savoring the carnal thrills, Amber wrapped her legs around his waist. Her turian mate entangled his talons in her hair as he held her close amidst thrusts. She arched her back and rocked her hips in sync with his rhythmic pace between pants.

By now, she was unable to distinguish the hammering of her racing heart and his length as Saren continued drilling into her. Nonetheless, she cupped his face and pressed her lips against his mouth, her tongue brushing against his. After breaking off the kiss, Saren nuzzled his mandibles against the base of her neck and licked at her bite marks. The scars had long since healed over with time, leaving the shape of his jawline. The next thing he knew, Amber tightened her grip and let out a sharp cry as her walls squeezed his length in her first orgasm.

"Saren…" she keened.

"Hngh…" he growled, riding off of the electric buzz.

A few moments after Saren came down from his high, he pressed his forehead against his human mate's.

"Are you spent for the night?" he whispered.

Amber let out a soft chuckle.

"I can keep going for two more rounds," Amber offered, "you mind laying on your back?"

Saren nodded before he turned onto his back with his shaft still inside Amber. She still found herself facing downward onto his plated torso. Smiling, she stroked his fringe with her hand.

"I found a beautiful turian," Amber mused.

"And I found a beautiful, little human," Saren responded with a purr.

Saren ran his talon through her hair. Amber leaned forward and gave his mandible a kiss before he started rolling her hips. His hands were wrapped around her hips, snugly pressing himself against her. Moaning, Amber perched her hands on his shoulders.

"Yes…" she hissed.

With pleasure tingling through his nerves again, Saren started moving his hips in sync with his human bride's rhythmic pace. His hands slid down to her thighs to adjust to his new position. Amber massaged the base of his neck with her hands as she kept up the pace. Down below, she continued rocking her pelvis in conjunction with his movements. She relished the suction-like feeling as their mixed fluids eased the friction. Saren tried to say something, but the pleasure was intense to the point his words were slurred. The Alliance commander couldn't help but clench her
thighs as she felt the pressure in her stomach bringing her close to its limit. Drawing closer, she let out a string of incoherent, pleasured wails. Seconds later, her sheath spasmed around the turian Spectre's cock and he also shuddered in his climax a split second later.

While they took a moment to rest from the second round, Amber lowered her head and nuzzled her face against Saren's. He found himself heavily panting as he longingly looked into her eyes. After several minutes, Amber rose to her knees and allowed his length to slide out. She climbed off him and rested onto her stomach.

"Is this what you have in mind," Saren asked, "for the last round?"

Amber folded her arms and rested her chin on them.

"Yeah," Amber nodded as she locked eyes onto her turian mate, "let's give it a go."

Saren slowly sat up and turned over before he hovered above his human mate, aligning his cock at her soaked crevice. He slowly slid back inside, planting his hands besides her shoulders to keep himself up. Amber let out a loud cry as she straddled her legs. Saren let out a soft growl before he purred and traced his tongue along her cheek. Soon enough, he found his pace again, making use of the reduced friction from their fluids. Whimpering, Amber tilted her head upwards, allowing Saren to perch his chin over her shoulder. The Alliance commander angled her hips, allowing her turian husband to grind deeper into her. She reached a hand behind his head, brushing her fingers underneath his fringe.

Saren grasped her waist as he accelerated the pace, and Amber gripped the sheet with her free hand, still letting out sharp pants.

"S-Spirits," Saren whispered into her ear.

Amber gave Saren a soft smile as she kneaded the back of his neck, and he responded by locking his jaws onto her shoulder. In the midst of a lustful high, he started picking up his pace significantly. As the Alliance commander pressed her knees into the mattress, her body shuddered in her orgasm and she squeezed her eyes shut.

"S-Saren!" she mewed loudly.

Saren made a few more strokes before he released his jaws and let out a loud roar. his length releasing his seed inside of her. They both gasped for air as they started coming down from their high. The turian Spectre slowly withdrew his length from his mate, watching as it drew strands of semen along, before he reached over to the container of dextro allergy meds and a glass of water. Groaning, Amber rolled onto her back and sat up before she accepted the glass and the tablet before washing the medication down with the water. The two rolled back into bed and huddled under the covers. Nestling in his embrace, Amber cupped Saren's face with her hand.

"I love you, Saren," Amber whispered with a soft smile.

Saren responded with a purr before he kissed Amber.

"I love you, too," Saren replied, "Amber."

Saren held Amber close to him and watched as she fell asleep in his arms. Surely, they have enough time to relax after such a celebration that united them in matrimony. Maybe it could take the power of love to ensure the galaxy's survival.
After a week passed since the wedding, the Arterius Spectres gathered at the Normandy, determined to continue their search for the Collectors' Base. With the vessel currently at FTL speed, Miranda took this time to respond to the Shadow Broker's message by starting a video transmission in her office.

"I got your message," she informed him, "we're currently en route to your system."

{The timing is perfect, Miss Lawson,} the Shadow Broker nodded over the transmission, {we have recently pinpointed Collector activity to a Mass Relay. Javik has apparently been using it to dispatch his army on missions related to his agenda.}

"When are you going to send the coordinates?" Miranda asked him.

The Shadow Broker hummed as he tapped his fingers on his desk.

{I will have to give you the data in person,} the Shadow Broker explained over the transmission, {sending it through the network is too risky at this time.}

Miranda sighed as she slowly nodded.

"I'll be sure to tell Amber about it," Miranda told him, "thank you."

The Shadow Broker was about to say something when without warning, klaxons echoed across the office over the transmission. Miranda couldn't help but worry as she noticed the Yahg's finned ears twitched rapidly.

"What's going on?!" Miranda demanded, her voice giving off an anxious tone.

The Shadow Broker snapped out of his thoughts and double-checked the wall of holographic projections. After a moment of silence, the Yahg shifted his gaze back to Miranda.

{There's an intruder aboard the ship,} the Shadow Broker warned over the transmission, {tell Shepard to enter the ship through the hull.}

The Shadow Broker didn't hesitate to pull an assault rifle from underneath his desk and tapped on a key, immediately ending the transmission without warning.

"Wait!" Miranda couldn't help but yelp in protest.

Miranda's gasps became audible as she stared at the white noise on the video display. She reluctantly closed the browser and stood to her feet. She scurried out of the office and made her way to the bridge, anxiety flooding her mind as she trudged towards Saren and Amber from behind. The turian Spectre heard the footsteps and glanced over his shoulder.

"Miranda?" Saren paused.

Miranda lowered her head and hugged her arms to her chest.

"He's in danger," she muttered, "Javik must've found his base."

Upon hearing those words, Amber widened her eyes as she shifted her gaze towards Miranda.
"What?!" she paused.

"By the sounds of it," Miranda added, "he dropped his connection when someone started boarding his ship."

Amber recovered from the shock in a few seconds and stepped towards the pilot seat.

"Joker," Amber told him, "Miranda got a distress signal from the Shadow Broker. ETA?"

"We'll be at our destination in several minutes," Joker answered.

Joker glanced over his shoulder, noticing the concern in Miranda's eyes.

"Is Miri ok?" Joker asked.

Amber made a brief glance at Miranda before she shook her head.

"Doesn't look like it," Amber admitted, "we'll be heading out shortly. Prepare for deployment trajectory just over the target ship, we're getting in close."

Amber stepped out of the bridge with Saren and Miranda following close behind. They entered the armory and began suiting up when Liara showed up a minute later.

"Here to join us?" Amber asked Liara, glancing over her shoulder.

Liara nodded as she began gathering her equipment.

"Of all the places Javik would attack," Liara sighed, "he chose the Shadow Broker's base."

Saren examined the assault rifle in his hands before placing it into his holster.

"I suspect that Prothean bastard might be trying to silence him," Saren replied.

"The Shadow Broker has been a great ally so far fighting against Javik," Amber added, "so it's no surprise he's being targeted. What I'm still wondering about is how Javik tracked his ship."

Liara scratched her head in a moment of silence.

"Wasn't he with us when we first met the Shadow Broker in person?" Liara reminded.

Miranda sighed as she nodded.

"I wish I didn't have to admit this," Miranda answered, "but yes."

By the time they finished gathering their weapons, Amber led Miranda, Saren and Liara out of the armory and into the cargo hold, where they boarded the shuttle.

"Still," Saren added as he climbed aboard, "the Shadow Broker has a stealth system not too dissimilar from our own to mask his ship's output and communication address to prevent his ship from being tracked."

Amber shrugged as she closed the shuttle door. Seconds later, the cargo hatch opened and the shuttle flew out of the Normandy.

"We'll find out when we get there."

After the shuttle entered the planet's atmosphere, Amber and her team peered through the window
and observed the massive ship as it flew through the intense lightning storm. The Alliance commander noticed several Collectors scattered all over the vessel while patrol guards and maintenance droids fought against them.

"The shuttle bay is probably locked down," Miranda said, "we'll have to get inside through a hatch in the hull."

Liara tilted her head towards Miranda.

"You do realize we'll be traveling at several kilometers an hour, right?" Liara mentioned.

"How are we getting in through the hull, anyways?" Saren interjected.

Miranda shifted her gaze towards Saren.

"I'll lead the way," Miranda offered, "don't worry."

Within a few minutes, the shuttle reached the Shadow Broker's base, but it merely hovered as its doors slid open, allowing Miranda, Amber, Saren and Liara to jump onto the hull. Once the shuttle made its departure, they began their race along the hull, fighting off any Collectors that intercepted them. When they started crossing a catwalk, a Collector trying to sabotage a capacitor stopped in its tracks and tilted its head towards Amber. Without warning, the Collector jumped onto the catwalk and charged at her, only for an agent to fire at it and knock it off the catwalk. Amber, Saren, Miranda and Liara stared in disbelief as the agent scurried onto the catwalk and approached Miranda.

"Miss Lawson?" he said.

Miranda nodded as she sighed in relief.

"Is the Shadow Broker all right?" Miranda demanded.

"I'm not sure. Coms are jammed and I can't raise any of them."

Saren took note of the agent's salarian horns as Liara stared into the distance with anxiety building up in her mind.

"Tazzik?" Saren paused.

Tazzik nodded.

"Our orders are to keep the Collectors away from the ship's vital systems," Tazzik explained, "trying to keep them off of the ship's shielding mechanisms. We won't last long if those go down."

"Keep it up," Saren encouraged, "we're making a push for the Broker, then we'll try and clear the rest of these things out of the ship."

"Thank you, Spectre," Tazzik nodded.

Making their way back into the ship, they ran through a series of maintenance corridors before dropping through a maintenance hatch into a hallway. Miranda quickly sprinted ahead of Saren, Amber and Liara, gunning down Collectors that stood in her way.

"Miranda?!" Amber called over.

Amber tilted her head towards Saren, whose hand gestured down the corridor.
"We should follow her," Saren suggested.

Amber nodded at Saren before they and the asari archaeologist started racing through the corridor. Miranda continued running and gunning on the way to the Shadow Broker's office, navigating through the corridor labyrinth. Thoughts swam in her mind and anxiety gave the rush of adrenaline through her veins as she felt her heart pounding against her chest. The Lawson prodigy used a flashbang to take down a Collector guarding a sliding door before she sprinted up a flight of stairs. She tapped on the control panel and opened the door before racing down the short hallway to another sliding door, not hesitating to open it. After yet another short hallway, Miranda tapped on the control panel and opened the last sliding door. Inside, the Lawson prodigy stared in horror as Javik and the Shadow Broker fought one another in melee combat in the large office. The Yahg towered over the Prothean, but even the Shadow Broker was having difficulties fighting.

"Idiotic animal!" Javik barked, "I've dealt with thousands of vermin like you! Give up!"

Snarling, the Shadow Broker tossed a piece of debris at the Prothean. To his disappointment, Javik leapt out of the way and aimed his rifle at the Yahg. Without warning, Miranda threw a biotic warp that slammed into the Prothean's back, eliciting a startled yelp and causing him to stumble before he snapped his head towards the Lawson prodigy.

"You!" Javik exclaimed.

Miranda sprinted into the office and made a defensive stance between the Shadow Broker and Javik, aiming her gun at the Prothean as flames flickered in her eyes.

"D-Don't you dare hurt him!" Miranda threatened.

By now, Saren, Amber and Liara entered the office and aimed their guns at the Prothean, not hesitating as they opened fire. The Prothean rolled out of the way of their fire, taking cover behind a pillar. With Javik focusing on the Spectres and the asari, Miranda stepped backwards until she was a few inches near the Shadow Broker, tilting her head towards him.

"Lawson?" he paused, "you came for me?"

Miranda nodded at the Yahg as she held back her tears.

"I-I didn't want you to die," Miranda stammered.

"I'll be fine…just make sure he doesn't get out of here," the Shadow Broker reassured her.

Miranda nodded before she and the Shadow Broker glared at Javik. While the Lawson prodigy enveloped herself and the Shadow Broker in a biotic shield, the Yahg stood to his full height and let out a loud roar that echoed across the room. Reaching the other side of the room, another group of Collectors started pouring in. Saren and Amber turned their focus towards the Collectors, the turian Spectre enveloping himself and his wife in a biotic shield as they opened fire on the drones. This gave the Shadow Broker and Miranda a chance to join alongside Liara as they continued their fight against Javik. Saren would toss a biotic warp to keep any Collectors at bay. Liara followed up with a singularity, grouping up a trio of Collectors.

"Let's blow them into bits," Amber grinned as she tossed a cooked grenade at the Collectors.

The ensuing detonation tore the group to shreds in a fiery explosion. All the while, Javik charged at the Shadow Broker, but the Yahg thought fast and slammed the Prothean aside with his omni-shield. Javik crashed into the ground and slowly staggered to his feet. By the time the Spectres pushed back against the Collectors, Liara took a few steps closer to Javik and aimed her pistol at
his head.
"L-Liara," Javik protested, "you wouldn't…render the Prothean species extinct, would you?"

Liara kept her gun aimed at Javik, yet she narrowed her eyes at him.
"It'd be for the best."

"Shame, really. Perhaps I could convince you in a different light," he sighed.

Liara raised a brow as the Collectors retreated without warning, much to Saren and Amber's bewilderment.

"Excuse me?" Liara blurted in confusion and slight annoyance.

Suddenly, Javik lunged forward and slammed his fist into Liara's gut, eliciting a yelp of pain out of her as she loosened her grip on her gun. Before anyone else could respond, another monstrosity burst into the room. It was similar to a Collector, but much larger in size, quadrupedal, and capable of what appeared to be biotically powered flight, as it was surrounded with a purple aura.

"What in the Spirits?" Saren gasped in horror.

Amber kept her eyes narrowed at Javik as he restrained Liara's wrists and held her close to him in a tight grip.

"Javik, let her go!" Amber shouted as she aimed her rifle at Javik.

The Prothean slammed his fist upside Liara's head and dragged her unconscious form out while the large creature hung overhead. Shaking her head in disbelief, Amber turned towards the large creature as Miranda returned to her defensive stance in front of the Shadow Broker.

"Saren," Amber called, "suggestions?"

The large creature charged at the Spectres, so they ducked behind the pillars, watching as the creature crashed into one of them. Carefully examining the creature's movements, the Shadow Broker placed his hand on Miranda's shoulder.

"I might have an idea," he told her, making a brief glance at the dome on the ceiling.

Just as the large creature recuperated, Miranda and the Shadow Broker ducked behind a large pillar. The Yahg held the Lawson prodigy in a protective embrace and watched as the large creature charged into another pillar and crashed into it. Amidst the chaos, Saren prepared a biotic warp in his hand. Its barriers flicked for a bit, chipping further as Saren followed up with a burst of fire. The Shadow Broker loosened his grip, allowing Miranda to toss a biotic warp at the creature. After a few more intervals of moving to another pillar as the creature swiped its claws at them, the last biotic warp disarmed its barrier. Saren and Amber burst out from behind and opened fire at the creature. Hitting its vulnerable spots managed to weaken it, so the Yahg emerged from the pillar and aimed his assault rifle at the dome.

He fired at the metal structure holding the dome, so the Spectres scrambled out of the way. The fallen debris left the monstrosity pinned, stunned and vulnerable. Leaving their cover, everyone started converging on it, unloading their magazines into it. Miranda tilted her head towards the energy currents in the dome as biotic particles danced in her hands. With all her might, Miranda used her biotic field to pull at the glass of the dome until a piece of it shattered, causing it and a portion of an electric blue substance to rain down on the large creature. A small explosion from the
chemical reaction finished it off seconds later.

With the battle finished, Miranda sighed in relief, dropped her gun and embraced herself to the Shadow Broker, much to his confusion.

"Huh," the Yahg commented, "hadn't thought of that."

As the brief flood from the dome dissipated, the Yahg stroked Miranda's head with his thick finger. Stashing her gun, Amber rested her hands on her thighs with her legs bent into a half crouch. She closed her eyes for a moment as she took a moment to catch her breath.

"We did it," Amber sighed, "now let's get Javik before he leaves the ship."
After another few moments of double-checking the holographic projections on the wall, Miranda observed that the Collectors have already left the ship. The Lawson prodigy made a glance at the radar, noticing that Javik's vessel started moving away from the Normandy. Just as Amber and Saren were in the middle of resting from the recent battle, the Shadow Broker gestured Miranda to step aside, allowing him to pull out an OSD from the drawer of his desk. The Yahg stepped towards Amber, causing her to snap out of her thoughts and turn until she faced the massive beast in front of her.

"Whatever you do," the Shadow Broker advised, "make sure you recover Dr. T'Soni and bring her home safely."

Amber held out her palm, allowing the Shadow Broker to place the OSD on her hand.

"I understand, sir," Amber slowly nodded.

The Shadow Broker nodded at her before he returned to his desk. Saren stepped closer to Amber and placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Amber," Saren asked, "you ready to head out?"

Amber tilted her head in Saren's direction and nodded at him. They both made their way to the door but out of the corner of her eye, the Alliance commander noticed Miranda slowly approaching the Shadow Broker.

"Miranda?" Amber called over.

Miranda paused in her tracks as she and the Shadow Broker focused their eyes on the Spectres.

"Go on without me," Miranda insisted, "we have a huge mess to clean up here."

Saren sighed in response.

"Take care, both of you," he replied.

Saren and Amber left the office and made their way through the corridor, arriving at the hangar. They noticed their shuttle was already waiting for them as the maintenance drones swarmed all over the hangar to repair the damages the ship sustained. The Spectres didn't hesitate to board the shuttle, which left the base a couple minutes later, making its way out of the planet's atmosphere and towards the Normandy. Shortly after the shuttle landed in the cargo hold, Amber opened the door, only to notice Garrus and Kelly were standing near the wall.

"Commader!" Garrus called over.

Garrus and Kelly sprinted over to Amber just as she and Saren disembarked with the surprised
expression on their faces.

"Kelly? Garrus?" Amber warbled.

Kelly and Garrus stopped mere inches in front of the Arterius Spectres.

"Thank god you're back!" Kelly panted in relief, "we were all worried about you, especially when
the Collectors attacked our ship."

Saren blinked twice as he gave Kelly a blank stare.

"Wait…what?" Saren paused.

Garrus peered into the door of the shuttle.

"Where did Miranda and Liara go?" Garrus asked in a tone of concern.

Amber sighed as she lowered her head.

"Miranda stayed behind to help the Shadow Broker recover," Amber admitted, "but Javik…
kidnapped Liara."

Kelly's eyes widened as she stared in disbelief.

"Wait, what?" Kelly paused, "how did he do that?"

"He got lucky," Saren grunted, "he gave us the slip while some other monstrosity covered for him."

Amber took a closer look at the debris scattered across the cargo hold.

"Garrus," Amber said, "about those Collectors…"

Garrus glanced over his shoulder.

"I was around to keep them away from Kelly," Garrus admitted, "but the others…"

Garrus couldn't bring himself to finish the sentence as he cringed. Feeling a chill trickle down her
spine, Amber sprinted out of the cargo hold. She stopped in her tracks for a moment before she
glanced over her shoulder.

"We'll get them. We're not stopping until we do," she reassured, "all I need to know is if you and
everyone else is onboard with that when the time comes."

"I'll be ready," Garrus nodded.

Amber began racing through the corridor, making brief observations of dents and tears scattered
along the walls and floors. Stopping by the medical bay, she observed as Mordin was in the middle
of reducing the clutter. Not surprisingly, Dr. Chakwas wasn't there.

"Mordin!" Amber called, "you all right?"

Mordin paused in his tracks as Amber stepped into the medbay.

"Fine," Mordin answered, "attempted to fend off attackers. Didn't have much besides medical tools.
Took the doctor."

Amber slowly nodded with a sigh.
"I figured as much," Amber replied, "I'm hoping Joker is all right, too."

"Joker slipped into vents, held out as they came through. Not sure where he is right now."

"I'll go look for him," Amber offered with a salute.

Amber stepped out of the medbay and continued searching the entire Normandy. When she searched the armory, she found Jack, Wrex, Kaidan, Ashley and James still unscathed. When the Alliance commander checked the engineering, she found Kasumi, Tali, Legion and Zaeed.

"Hey," Amber called over, "has anyone seen Joker?"

Tali tilted her head towards Amber and approached her without hesitation.

"Guys! Is that you?!" Joker's voice echoed around the room. "down here, in the vent!"

Tali and Amber exchanged glances before they checked the nearest vent. Peering through the vent, Joker was on his hands and knees. Tali unscrewed the vent and removed it before Amber and Kasumi reached in and pulled Joker out, helping him stand to his feet.

"Are you hurt?" Kasumi asked him.

Joker shook his head.

"Glad you're still in one piece, commander," Joker smiled.

Amber nodded as she reached into her pocket.

"Good news," Amber told Joker, "we saved the Shadow Broker and he gave us the coordinates to the Collectors' base."

As she pulled out the OSD, she lowered her head.

"The bad news," Amber continued, "Javik kidnapped Liara."

"We're still going after him, right? They nabbed over half the crew," Joker returned.

Amber nodded as she placed Joker's arm over her shoulder and escorted him out of the engineering room. Once they made it to the bridge, Garrus, Saren and Kelly were waiting for them. The Alliance commander released her grip on the flight lieutenant, allowing him to shuffle over to the pilot seat as she examined the galaxy map. After she took a moment to examine the Normandy's holographic projection for any damage sustained, Amber uploaded the data from the OSD. To her right, her turian husband grimaced as he watched the footage from the security camera on a separate terminal.

"We took a beating," Saren informed, "we'll need to repair before we head out again."

Amber slowly nodded before turning her head towards Joker.

"Joker," Amber called over, "any nearby repair stations?"

Joker reached underneath his cap and scratched his head.

"None that are designated friendly right now," Joker admitted, "unless Aria managed to finish up with cleaning house and cause crime rates to drop in twenty four hours across the Terminus, we have to fall back to friendly space."
Liara felt a slight headache as she slowly opened her eyes. She groaned softly as she slowly sat up, only to find herself on a large bed. The asari archaeologist took a moment to examine herself for any bruises, only to grimace as she found herself wearing a degrading outfit no asari would dare to touch. What kind of sick twisted joke did Javik have in mind? While she scooted to the edge of the bed, Liara noticed the metallic texture around her neck. When she ran a hand along her collarbone, she found a biotic suppressant collar that had been snapped around her neck. Thoughts swam in her head as she scanned her surroundings, noting the walls appeared...organic. Her vision cleared and she looked around.

She confirmed she was in some bedchamber, so when she slipped out of bed, she started to wander around the room. When she reached the door, she groaned in frustration the instant she realized that it was locked. With nothing else to do, Liara walked over to a nearby window and peered through it. What she discovered was horrifying. The small room peered out into an enormous chamber with a wall of what appeared to be pods with a pump towards the ceiling. The pump fed into large pipes that led to somewhere outside of the room. Upon closer inspection, she realized that each pod had stored inside a prisoner, many of whom were human colonists. Liara took another look and found the Normandy crew held in a fenced enclosure, and she could tell they were staring in horror. The asari archaeologist felt relieved they were still alive, but she had a sneaky suspicion that wouldn't be the case at some point.

{Ah, I see you've finally come to,} Javik hummed over the intercom.

Liara gasped in shock as she took a step back from the window. Seconds later, the door slid open and Javik stepped in.

"Welcome to my base of operations. I'd prefer something less organic, but this is what I have to work with."

Liara glared at the Prothean and clenched her fists.

"What is the meaning of this?" Liara demanded, "what did these people do to deserve to be penned up like this?"

"The capture of your friends was to ensure your cooperation for the time being," Javik explained, "as for the civilians in the pods, they are there for something greater."

Liara made another peek through the window and re-examined the pods. The pumps from above began to release copious amounts of steam, as did the pipes leading from the pods below. The various colonists began waking up, looking around them helplessly as some gray fluid started seeping into their tiny chambers. Swiftly, their skin and flesh started to melt like wax held up to a fire. Each one screamed for help, banging on the pod windows as their limbs snapped and decayed. The asari could do nothing but stare in horror. As the remains in the pods were sucked into the tubes, Liara returned her glare at Javik.

"I never should've awakened you from that stasis pod," Liara snarled.

"Their lives were not in vain," Javik dismissed, "the components provided by their remains will go to the construction of a weapon to surpass even the Reapers themselves."

Liara shook her head in disbelief.

"What do you want from me?" Liara snapped in a harsh tone.

Javik stepped closer to Liara, reaching for her hand.
"I have chosen you, Liara T'Soni," Javik answered, "to become my wife."

Liara jerked back without warning as flames flickered in her eyes.

"I am not marrying you," Liara objected, "you Protheans are the worst species to have ever existed, and you are an example of the cruel things they have done!"

"And that's why your friends are here," Javik insisted, "to ensure your cooperation."

Javik continued stepping towards Liara as she turned her head away.

"The Reapers were right to dispose of your race," she muttered.

Javik couldn't help but snarl as he placed a tight grip on the asari's face.

"And I want them gone for good," Javik added, "hence the colonists."

Without warning, Javik pulled Liara's face closer to him and forced a bruising kiss on the asari. She struggled to break his grasp, wiggling to break their connection. The Prothean responded by grasping her wrist with his other hand. Liara felt her gut twist in disgust as Javik slid his tongue into her mouth. Only when he let go could she pry herself away. As she hugged her arms to her chest after she wiped her hand across her lips, Liara sat down on the bed.

"Hmm," Javik rubbed his chin, "I suppose you need more convincing. I'll give you twenty-four hours to think over what you have at stake."

Javik stepped over to the bed and stroked Liara's stomach with his hand, causing her to flinch.

"When I come back," Javik insisted, "you will accept my seed. Refuse or even struggle, and your crew will die."

Liara lowered her head as Javik made his way to the door. She backed up against the wall behind her and slid to the ground. The dilemma she was stuck in began overwhelming her as she struggled to fight back her tears. Even if she couldn't have known how horrible the Protheans were when she found Javik's pod back in Ilos, she felt a sting of regret in her chest. The galaxy's current cycle might as well be doomed.

Two hours later, the Normandy returned to the Citadel and landed in the docking bay. Everyone disembarked the vessel as the Arterius Spectres approached a mechanic.

"We need repairs ASAP along the hull and ship interior," Amber requested, "let me know when you're done."

The mechanic nodded at the Spectres as they led her to the Normandy, allowing her to inspect the vessel for a while. After she finished, she tilted her head towards Saren and Amber.

"Based on the damage," the mechanic observed, "the repairs will take twelve hours to complete."

"Good enough," Saren advised, "get it done, and quickly."

As the mechanic called upon several more mechanics to get to work, Saren and Amber joined up with their comrades.

"Amber," Jack asked, "any luck?"
Amber sighed as she folded her arms behind her back.

"We have twelve hours to rest and restock," Amber explained, "our friends are counting on us."

Over the course of twelve hours, the mechanics at the Citadel docking bay gave the Normandy necessary repairs to bring it back into good condition. During this moment of rest, Saren and Amber played The Binding of Isaac in their apartment, Jack and Wrex took turns giving each other massages and Kelly cuddled with Garrus on the living room couch in their apartment.

By the time the repairs were finished, Amber and Saren stood near the Normandy as Tali, Kasumi, Nihlus, Legion, Kaidan, Ashley, Wrex, Jack, Mordin, Joker, James, Zaeed, Garrus and Kelly gathered at the docking bay. Accompanying them were five Rachni soldiers following Kelly close by. One of the mechanics rushed over to Amber with tablet in hand.

"Commander, the ship is fully repaired and ready to go."

Amber smiled as she gave the payment through her omni-tool.

"Thank you," Amber told the mechanic, "we'll be heading out soon."

Just as the mechanic left, Amber glanced over her shoulder and locked eyes onto her comrades.

"Everyone on board and get ready for departure," Amber instructed, "we're getting our people back."

Nihlus flexed his mandibles into a grin and raised his fist into the air.

"That's the spirit, Mrs. Arterius!" Nihlus cheered.

Saren and Amber led their friends and comrades along the walkway aboard the Normandy. When the Spectres and the flight lieutenant entered the bridge, Joker settled into his pilot seat. He slowly reclined in his seat and turned to the controls.

"This is Joker speaking," Joker announced, "we'll be prepared for takeoff shortly."

By the time everyone was onboard, the Joker started the protocol of gaining authorization for departure and overseeing the activation of the vessel's engines. When the magnetic clamps of the dock released the Normandy, the Alliance flight lieutenant started up its thrusters and flew it to the Mass Relay, making the jump to the Terminus System.
After the squadmates spent the next two hours double-checking the weapons in their possession, the Normandy finally reached the Omega-4 Relay. Amber stared out into the starfield as the vessel closed in on the structure.

"I'm sure we'll make it out just fine," Joker said, "to think Javik didn't want us to find his base when he attacked the Shadow Broker? Typical."

"What matters is we've got an address and we're rolling up to the enemy's door knocking," Amber replied.

Joker took a moment to stretch his arms before he started moving the vessel closer to the Mass Relay, waiting until its energy particles enveloped the Normandy and sent it into warp speed.

"And now we ram down the door, huh? Okay, let's do this," Joker told Amber, "ETA 2 hours. I'll let you know when we arrive."

Amber nodded at Joker before she stepped out of the bridge. As she wandered through the corridor, she found Kelly and Garrus kneeling on the floor with the five Rachni soldiers surrounding them.

"How are you two doing?" Amber asked as she tilted her head sideways.

Garrus and Kelly lifted their heads and locked eyes onto Amber.

"We're trying to discuss with these guys on who's going with whom," Garrus explained.

Amber made a brief glance at a Rachni soldier as Kelly stroked its head with her hand.

"If we are to get out safely," Kelly added, "we should at least make sure the Collectors don't attack this vessel again."

Kelly lowered her head as she sighed.

"I do hope Liara is all right," she admitted.

"We get this done right, the Collectors won't be attacking anyone ever again," Garrus reassured.

Kelly nodded at Garrus as three of the Rachni soldiers purred and huddled up to the turian.

"Garrus," Kelly advised as she extended her hand, "you take care, ok?"

"I'm coming back, alright? This isn't a one-way trip."

Garrus took Kelly's hand into his own while Amber continued to walk down the corridor. A short while later, she returned to the bridge with Saren just as the Normandy came out of warp speed. To their shock, they were greeted by a field of debris floating across space.

"Shit! Everyone, brace for evasive maneuvers!" the pilot barked over ship intercoms.

Saren and Amber thought fast and held onto the railing as Joker tightened his grip on the controls and pulled hard. From the cockpit, they watched a large hunk of metal graze their shields. The Normandy barely managed to maneuver out of the way. Joker continued to desperately yank the controls back and forth to prevent them from smashing into a million fragments until they came to
an opening. Both Saren and Amber sighed in relief as they released their grip on the rails and stared out the cockpit. A minute or so later, they spotted a floating station at the edge of the accretion disc.

"Looks like we're clear for now," Joker informed, "nothing showing up on scopes within close range, but I'm seeing a blip of energy on the long-range scanners."

Amber nodded as she folded her arms.

"Let's go get that Prothean son of a bitch," she announced, "take us in, stay sharp for any defenses he's laid surrounding it."

Joker nodded at the Alliance commander before he started maneuvering the Normandy towards the base.

"No movement so far," Joker muttered to himself, "looking for a clear path, through."

Saren rubbed his chin as he maintained a skeptical expression. He eyed the other floating chunks of unidentifiable material as it floated past them. The flight had been rather smooth for around a minute or so, but little did they know, patrolling drones started following the vessel.

"Ah hell, I'm picking up movement, and it's heading straight for us," Joker grumbled, "I can't tell what these are, so buckle up. We might have boarding parties soon enough."

After a brief glance at the radar, Saren and Amber exchanged glances before they stepped away from the cockpit and began wandering around the bridge. Seconds later, Joker saw red lasers through the windshield, so he thought fast and started maneuvering the Normandy out of the way. The ship violently shook as the beams of energy brushed the ship's hull.

"They're just pissing me off!" Joker exclaimed.

Without warning, a drone crashed into the vessel and latched onto the cargo hold.

"Well, looks like we've got a boarding party after all," he growled, "you better get going, commander. Tell the guests I said hello."

Upon cue, Saren and Amber sprinted out of the bridge and grabbed their weapons along the way. When they entered the cargo hold, Jack, Wrex and Zaeed were also readying their weapons.

"Keep your eyes peeled, guys," Amber instructed, "who knows just what's dug into our ship."

Saren, Amber, Wrex, Jack and Zaeed held their positions until a minute or so later, a drone entered the cargo hold. It resembled a large probe, easily the size of a hovercar, with a sleek exterior and a crimson red central eye. When it fired a red laser beam, they thought fast and leapt out of the way before they ducked into cover. Zaeed took a few potshots as he rolled behind a crate, attempting to flank it. Peeking from his cover, Saren prepared a biotic warp in his hand. He was forced to duck back down when a beam of energy swept past him. With the probe hovering in the room, Amber ducked behind a crate waited until its mechanical eye focused somewhere else. Jack and Wrex had started to draw its fire, trading opportunities to peek and shoot. The instant the Alliance commander started opening fire at the probe, her rounds slowly tore down its shield. However, the barriers were tough, and she hadn't put a considerable mark on it.

"This is ridiculous," Amber muttered.

Zaeed rushed over to a box and shoved off the top. From inside, he pulled out a grenade launcher.
"Stay clear of the blast!" he boomed.

Saren, Amber, Jack and Wrex crouched under cover as Zaeed aimed the grenade launcher at the probe and pulled the trigger. The first few projectiles dashed against the barriers, forcing the drone to flinch. Zaeed ducked back into cover as the drone retaliated with beams of energy that scorched the metallic floor plating nearby.

"Jeez," Jack groaned, "that's thing's persistent!"

Leaning out, she tossed her own biotic discharge at it, instantly knocking the probe off balance. Wrex came up from behind her and fired twice. Now that the probe lost its shield, Zaeed aimed his grenade launcher and squeezed the trigger one more time. The unshielded drone finally took a considerable dent in its side. After a few seconds of short-circuiting, the probe collapsed to the floor. Firing once more, the thing fragmented, lying in a slagged heap on the floor.

"Commander, with all due respect, I'm surprised you don't lug these out of their crates more often. Even outside of their anti-tank roles, they make for good crowd control," Zaeed huffed, lugging the weapon over his shoulder.

Saren and Amber exchanged brief glances in a moment of silence. In the meantime, Joker managed to maneuver the Normandy out of the way and continued to fly it closer to the base. The Spectres quickly returned to the bridge and observed the stronghold through the cockpit. The Alliance flight lieutenant considered maneuvering the vessel with caution, but he got proven otherwise when he saw the base launch the same vessel that attacked the Normandy and the Shadow Broker's base.

"They're bringing out an old friend. This is gonna hurt," Joker informed.

Tapping on the terminal, Joker brought up the ship targeting matrix.

"Commander," Joker reminded, "tell me we did have the guns on the Normandy upgraded recently."

"Vakarian was in charge of its installations," Saren nodded, "last I recall."

"Then let's give those bastards a taste of their own medicine," Joker grinned.

The Normandy unveiled the main gun from underneath its plating and with the press of a key, it fired a powerful beam that seared the Collector ship. Their initial shot left a large strike through its exterior.

"Hit 'em again, finish them off," Amber ordered.

Joker nodded as he tapped on the key again, the Normandy's main gun firing another powerful beam that hit the enemy ship.

"How do you like that," Joker cheered as he raised his fists in the air for a moment, "you sons of bitches?!"

Saren eyed the display, watching as the Collector ship tore itself apart, sending chunks in every direction. The Normandy continued to fly closer to the stronghold as it barely outran the explosion. Suddenly, the ship shook hard as debris from the explosion hit them. Joker struggled with the ship's controls, attempting to adjust their landing trajectory on the Collector's base.

"Ah, hell! The controls are shot and the barriers are down to fifteen percent. Might want to grab onto something, guys," reaching for the intercom, he yelled, "brace for impact! We're going down
Just as the Normandy started touching down in a violent crash, Amber pinned Saren to the ground, shielding themselves from the intense vibrations. A deafening roar filled the air as the vessel ground to a halt on the surface of the facility. Sighing in relief, the Spectres staggered to their feet and examined Joker as he groaned in pain.

"Joker," Saren asked, "are you all right?"

"I-I think I broke something," Joker attempted to stand up, only to slump back down in pain, "yep, broke something. Care to give me a lift to the medbay?"

A few seconds later, two Rachni soldiers showed up and huddled up to Joker, nuzzling their heads against his face and bringing a smile to his face.

"Daww," Joker chuckled, "you guys are just cute."

"Get well, we'll need you to get out of here," Amber advised.

Saren and Amber made their way to the briefing room, where they found the entire squad sitting around the table. Both Spectres found two adjacent spots, allowing them to join in.

"Glad for you two to join us, Mr. and Mrs. Arterius," Nihlus grinned.

Both Garrus and Kelly paid attention to the Arterius Spectres while the Alliance yeoman reviewed the apps in her omni-tool, including an omni-shield that she installed.

"I'll get the remaining mechanics to start repairing the ship. We'll hold the fort until you get back," the yeoman acknowledged.

"Thank you, Chambers," Amber nodded, "we may have gotten a rough start, but the least we can do is stop Javik and the Collectors, rescue Liara and our people, and come up with a plan to take out this station."

Amber tapped on the terminal and the table brought out a holographic projection of the Collector base.

"This is where we're at. Javik hasn't stripped most of our crew of their omni-tools, so they're all located about here," she started, gesturing to a room towards the center, "additionally, this appears to be a large source of energy on the station. Chances are, he's got something important going on there."

Garrus took a moment to examine the projection.

"Well," Garrus mentioned, "it seems we got two main routes. We might as well split into two teams and regroup in the central chamber."

Kasumi shook her head.

"That's not likely," Kasumi objected, "they're both blocked, so we'll need to send someone to open them from the other side."

"Look, there's a vent here that leads right down the middle," Garrus gestured to the vent marked on the projection, "if we send someone up through there, they could get to the other side and open both locks."
Tali tilted her head towards Legion.

"Legion," Tali offered, "you can hack your way in, correct?"

"Acknowledged," Legion nodded.

Amber smiled at Legion.

"Then we'll be counting on you, Legion," Amber agreed, "in the meantime, we'll need to decide who's going to lead the two teams to the fight down the passages."

"Garrus, seeing that you have had prior experience, you'll be taking point for squad two down the second path. Is that clear?" Saren decided.

Garrus chuckled as he scratched his mandible.

"Yeah," he replied, "I suppose it's worth a shot."

"Right now, this is what we're working with," Amber told everyone, "we'll find out more once we get to that central chamber. Now let's bring our people home."

"You got it, Skipper," Kaidan nodded.

With a plan in mind, Amber and Saren gestured Wrex, Nihlus, Zaeed, Tali and Kaidan to join up with them while Jack, Ashley, Kasumi, Mordin and James gathered near Garrus. Kelly stayed behind with the Rachni soldiers to protect the Normandy as it recovered from the crash. Once they disembarked the vessel, Legion darted for the vent while Amber and Garrus's respective teams made their way into the tunnels.

"Entering vent, treading further, Shepard-Commander," Legion informed.

Amber nodded at Legion as it crawled into the vent. She didn't hesitate to lead her team into the tunnel.

"Let's go," Saren advised, "we've got a long ways going forward."

Amber nodded at her turian husband as they pulled out their weapons and continued meandering through the tunnel. It didn't take long before they spotted some Collectors up ahead.

"Hostiles!" Nihlus exclaimed, "weapons free!"

As they dashed out into a large area overlooking a chasm, Amber, Saren and their teammates opened fire on the Collectors. The initial wave was easy enough to deal with, but more just kept flying in from above. Saren shielded himself and the other teammates in a biotic field, deflecting enemy fire. Cutting through the defenders, they dashed further down the hallway along a series of pipes. With Wrex and Zaeed firing at the Collectors with heavy weapons, Saren and Amber continued to lead the team forward. When they reached an area where they could see a green panel underneath the shaft, the Alliance commander heard a ping from her omni-tool so she quickly answered it.

"Legion?" Amber paused.

{Shepard, Commander,} Legion reported over the com-link, {there's an obstruction in the tunnel.}

Saren eyed the valve underneath, so Amber didn't hesitate to press on it, opening the gate in the ventilation shaft.
"There could be more up ahead," Nihlus pointed out.

[Will wait for you to progress enough to open valves along path.]

Amber nodded before she led her comrades farther in search of more valves to disable, with Kaidan, Wrex, Zaeed, Nihlus, Tali and Saren providing her cover fire. More Collectors dropped in along the hallway ahead to meet them. The older turian Spectre tossed a biotic warp to knock one off its balance as his wife darted for the next valve. With little else to prevent her from doing so, she slammed her fist on the console, opening up the path for Legion. Another Collector attempted to intercept them as they continued to progress, but Zaeed rushed forward with a grenade launcher at the ready. A couple well planted shots knocked down the flying insectoids, followed by their singed corpses flopping on the ground.

"Nice shot!" Kaidan cheered as he raised his fist into the air.

Around the corner, Amber found another valve.


Amber pressed on the console, opening the gate in the ventilation shaft and watching as Legion continued to pass through. Saren heard a ping from his omni-tool and answered it while he took a moment to leap into cover.

"Vakarian," Saren asked, "how far along are you?"

[We're maintaining momentum, but they keep pouring on the pressure,] Garrus replied over the com-link after a brief second of static, [we're roughly half way down our side and no one has dropped yet.]

"Keep it up," Saren encouraged, "we still have progress to make ourselves."

When he ended the transmission, Saren spotted another Collector aiming at Tali.

"What do you think you're doing, Keelah?" Tali interrupted while still locking eyes onto her target.

Saren got back up and gunned down the offending Collector.

"You almost had your head taken off," Saren warned, "stay attentive."

Tali scowled at Saren for a brief moment before she followed them down the path. After Amber opened four valves so far, they turned to their left and entered another large area with a swarm of Collectors.

"Open fire!" Amber ordered.

As the Collectors began taking formations, Saren and Amber took the lead in holding their positions before they and their teammates fired their rounds at their targets. A few Collectors dropped as they closed their distance, but even the few that died barely made a considerable dent in the overwhelming number. How were they going to continue forth from there? While everyone else took cover, Zaeed sprinted forward. With the former Blue Suns founder dishing out the fire at the Collectors, Amber snuck along the covers until she reached the next panel. Wrex joined up with Zaeed and with their combined firepower, Saren and Amber's team were able to push forward.

Once Amber located and disabled a few more valves, they reached the large door. She turned to lay cover fire as her companions caught up.
"Legion, are you in?"

[Affirmative. Hacking lock. ETA, three minutes. Maintain defensive position.]

Saren stood next to Amber as he scanned his surroundings. More bugs flew into sight from above and landed along the path from where they came.

"Just how many more of these things are there?" Kaidan grumbled as he took a moment to reload.

"If you bitched a bit less, you'd have more energy with which to keep killing these bastards," Zaeed hissed, shooting another barrage of grenades.

Kaidan nodded at Zaeed before he started firing his rounds at any incoming insect-like creatures. What Legion had claimed to be three minutes dragged on for an eternity. The Collectors that fell were swiftly replaced with more that flew in from every direction. Tali took cover behind Wrex as the krogan held out a biotic shield. They were all surprised when the Geth had finally cracked the lock on the door.

"Door's open, let's go!" Saren ordered, "inside, now!"

Saren, Amber, Tali, Nihlus, Kaidan, Wrex and Zaeed scrambled through the door, where Garrus and his teammates also arrived through the other door. Legion then shut the doors, watching on as enemy fire continued to ripple through the closing gaps.

"Locks reengaged, software hijacked to buy us additional time."

With Collectors still converging, Saren, Amber, Kaidan and Wrex provided cover fire until the door finished closing itself shut.
"Good work, Legion," Amber sighed in relief as she took a moment to reload.

As Saren also took a moment to catch his breath, he placed his hand on Amber's shoulder. Ashley took a moment to examine their surroundings, only for her eyes to widen in horror seconds later.

"Amber!" Ashley called over, "are you...seeing this?"

Saren and Amber turned their heads until they noticed countless cryopods aligned against the wall.

"S-Spirits!" Saren gasped as his mandibles fluttered nervously.

"What the fuckin' hell has he been up to?" Zaeed huffed, "what's 'e need this many people for?"

The rest of the squadmates exchanged confused glances while Saren and Amber stepped towards the pods. They took notice of the pumps that led towards the ceiling that fed into large pipes. They carefully examined the pods, only to notice colonists were confined inside each one. Were those colonists from the colonies outside of Alliance space? Amber couldn't help but cringe as thoughts swam in her head on the possibilities of the fate of Javik's victims.

"Everyone," Amber instructed, "check the pods. If we're lucky, then our crew might be here."

The squadmates completed their moment of rest and began examining as many pods as they could. To his left, Nihlus spotted a fenced enclosure and noticed it was already empty. Saren paced in front of the pods until he spotted the first Normandy crewmember inside a pod at the base of the wall.

"Amber," Saren called over, "I found the crew."

Everyone else snapped out of their thoughts and scampered towards Saren before he pointed at the group of pods holding the Normandy crew inside, with Dr. Chakwas inside the last pod on the far left. For some reason, Garrus felt a chill trickle down his spine, as he couldn't help but worry for Kelly's safety. Still, he made a mental reminder that the Rachni soldiers onboard had the capacity to take down Collectors that would dare to investigate the Normandy.

"I'm not waiting to see what Javik would do to them," Amber announced all of a sudden, "we need to get them out of here and fast."

Amber felt for a seal on one of the pods when she heard a hissing sound. She whipped around, looking for the source before looking up. The pipes began to leak copious amounts of steam, pumping towards a group of pods with the colonists. It didn't take long before the colonists instantly woke up as gray liquid started spraying into their pods and watched in horror as their skin started dissolving.

"Oh, fuck," Amber exclaimed, "they're still alive!"

Amber still kept searching for a seal as the colonists banged their fists against the covers, staining it with blood as they screamed for help. In a matter of moments, their flesh dissolved away and their skeletons began to crumble as the tubes began sucking out the remains. That sight alone was enough for Amber to feel her gut twist in disgust as she felt her chest heating up. The last time she saw someone dissolve that way was from the acid from a Thresher Maw. She did not want that mental image again.
"Come on," Amber shouted, "hurry up!"

The loud voice from the Alliance commander motivated the squadmates to begin punching into the windows of the pods holding the Normandy crew. One by one, they yanked the Alliance crew free from their confines. When they reached Dr. Chakwas's pod, Saren yanked off the pod window and pulled the Alliance doctor out of the coffin. Having rescued their crew, they waited until they woke up moments later.

"Amber, Saren," Karin gasped softly, "you came for us?"

Saren slowly nodded.

"No one gets left behind," Saren replied.

Wrex approached one of the crewmembers, Kenneth Donnelly, and helped him back to his feet.

"You doing ok?" Wrex asked.

"Thank god you guys came," Kenneth gasped softly, "I don't know how long it would've been for us if you hadn't come. It could've been seconds or even hours before...I don't want to even think about it."

Ashley tilted her head upwards towards the pipes.

"Was there nothing that could've been done to save the colonists?" Ashley wondered sadly.

James allowed another crewmember, Rupert Gardner, to embrace himself to him while Karin locked eyes onto Amber and Saren.

"No. Whatever Javik did to them, he had them dissolved and their remains pumped out in those giant tubes, off to god knows where," Karin answered.

"And whatever Javik is trying to accomplish, he's not finishing. Whatever he has planned, he's not leaving this station," Saren acknowledged.

"But how?" Gardner protested, "that Prothean bastard stripped us of any armaments and equipment when he captured us."

"Not to worry," Jack reassured with a thumbs up, "we'll protect you guys."

Amber placed her finger on her chin as she made a brief glance at the now empty pods.

"Where's Liara?" Amber asked, "we saw Javik kidnap her."

Karin lowered her head.

"We never saw the Collectors put her in any of the pods," she answered.

Amber and her turian husband let out a sigh of relief.

"I see," Saren commented, "chances are he had something else in mind for her."

Amber took another moment to scan her surroundings, only to notice a small window overlooking the large chamber. Turning to her right, she tapped on Saren's shoulder.

"Saren," Amber asked him, "do you think that could be a control room or something else?"
Saren glanced at where his wife was pointing and his mandibles flexed in curiosity.

"Well, the best way to know is to take a closer look," Saren answered with a shrug.

Amber glanced over her shoulder and locked eyes onto Nihlus, catching his attention.

"Nihlus," Amber requested, "you keep an eye out in case the Collectors decide to attack us again."

Nihlus gave Amber a salute while Saren gestured Legion and Garrus to approach. The Arterius Spectres, the younger turian and the Geth made their way to another wall near the fenced enclosure and began searching for a door. The C-Sec officer felt along the wall, eventually finding an outline.

"Guys, over here," Garrus called over.

Amber, Saren and Legion stepped over to where Garrus pressed his hand against the wall. He stepped aside, allowing the Geth to begin hacking into the lock. A couple of minutes later, the Geth opened the door for them, allowing them to peer inside. They found a spiral staircase, so Amber led Saren and Legion up the stairs only to stop at another door. The Alliance commander nodded at Legion, allowing him to hack into the lock. When they opened the door, it revealed a bedchamber and they spotted Liara hugging her arms to chest as she sat on a corner of the bed. When the asari slowly opened her eyes and tilted her head towards the Spectres and the Geth unit, she gasped softly and stood to her feet.

"Amber?!” Liara exclaimed.

Relief flooded her mind as Amber took a step forward. Liara sprinted over the Alliance commander and embraced herself to her as she softly cried on her shoulder.

"Liara, it's ok," Amber whispered, "we're here. They are safe now."

Amber wrapped her arms around Liara and ran her hand along the asari's head to soothe her. After a moment of silence, the Alliance commander released her embrace, allowing Liara to wipe her tears from her face and exchange glances between Saren, Legion and Amber.

"I'm glad you're all right," Saren smiled softly, "your mother was worried about you."

"I saw the Collectors put the crew in the pods an hour ago," Liara confessed, "a few more hours and they would've been dead."

Saren stepped closer to Liara and took a few moments to remove the biotic suppressant collar from her neck. Gently rubbing her neck, the asari walked over to another door and using her biotics, she broke the lock and opened the door, revealing a closet. She reached into a crate and pulled out her armor before she slipped out of her lingerie. In a matter of minutes, Liara slipped back into her armor.

"Right. So what now?"

"We're going after Javik. Any idea what he's melting people for?” Amber gestured to the large pipes outside.

Liara took a deep breath and clenched her fists.

"Javik told me he's building a weapon," Liara explained, "one that he'll use to destroy the Reapers."

Saren scratched his head.
"And you?" Saren paused.

"He…wanted me to bear his children," Liara added as she slightly lowered her head.

"Not anymore. Let's go and take him out once and for all. We'll stop this little project of his while we're at it," Saren suggested.

Legion checked his inventory and handed Liara a spare shotgun. Saren, Amber, Legion and Liara made their way out of the bedchamber, down the stairs and back into the processing chamber where they met up with the other squadmates.

"Liara," Jack chirped, "you're ok!"

Amber nodded with a smile as she started a transmission in her omni-tool.

"Joker," Amber asked, "can you get a fix on our position?"

{Sure thing, Commander,} Joker answered over the com-link, {all those tubes lead to the main control right above you. The route is blocked by a security door, but there's another chamber that runs parallel to the one you're in.}

"Negative," Legion disagreed, "the chamber's overrun with seeker swarms. Calculations suggest Dr. Solus's countermeasure is ineffective against them."

Mordin sighed in disappointment.

"Will biotics do the trick?" Saren asked.

Jack instantly raised her hand.

"Sign me up!" Jack clamored.

"In that case," Amber nodded, "Wrex, Zaeed, Garrus, you'll also be coming with me. Saren, I'll leave it to you to lead a diversion team through the main passage. We'll meet up with you once we open the security doors."

Saren nodded as he placed his hand on Amber's shoulder.

"Be careful, my mate," he advised.

Amber nodded at Saren in agreement when Ashley approached them.

"May I interject something?" Ashley reminded, "the crew are in no shape to fight."

Amber sighed before she returned to her transmission.

"How are you faring?" Amber asked.

{We have enough systems back online to retrieve the crew,} Kelly answered over the com-link, {should I have Joker land the ship back from your position?}

"I don't think so," Amber shook her head, "we don't have enough time to go back."

"I could escort the crew to safety," Nihlus offered, "just send me the coordinates and we'll meet you there."
"Good," Amber announced, "alright people, we have our orders. Move out and watch yourselves. We're not out of the woods yet."

Nihlus gestured the crewmembers to follow him while Amber led Garrus, Jack, Wrex and Zaeed down an alternate path and Saren led the rest of the squadmates towards the main path. The human biotic didn't hesitate to envelop Amber's team in a biotic bubble. Upon entering the next chamber and watching the doors close behind them, a sea of locusts came down from overhead, fighting to dig in through the barrier. Jack maintained the barrier as she, Amber, Garrus, Wrex and Zaeed continued to tread across the chamber. During their progress, Collectors patrolling the chamber began charging at them, so Amber, Garrus, Wrex and Zaeed took every opportunity to fire their rounds at them.

Continuing their journey through the tunnel, the entrance opened up into a taller chamber, stretching upward into the darkness. Zaeed easily took out each Collector that intercepted them with his grenade launcher. For some reason, Garrus and Wrex couldn't help but think of any possible jokes. Making their way to the first bit of cover, Jack hunkered down while the others started clearing out the next group of Collectors. One of the Collectors hovered in the air, so Garrus carefully aimed at it before he pulled the trigger. Piercing its head plating, the momentum from the shot caused its body to twirl before flopping on the ground.

"Good one, Vakarian!" Wrex chuckled.

"Doing my best," Garrus hummed, focusing his scope on the next Collector in his line of sight.

Zaeed locked eyes onto a Collector defender and after some careful aiming, he fired the grenade launcher at it. Once they finished off the last of the Collectors in this section, Amber nodded at Jack, allowing her to emerge from her cover. The group carefully walked along the path, listening for the telltale sign of more Collectors approaching. They were encouraged to continue moving forward by seeing the tiny insects deflect off the shield. Soon enough, the Collectors set up at another juncture along the path and started firing.

"Jack," Amber ordered, "take cover!"

Rushing to several wall fragments, they began returning fire, keeping Jack protected. The human biotic stiffened her spine as she maintained her biotic shield. The others struggled to gun down the next wave in order to progress. When Zaeed noticed he only had a few grenades in his grenade launcher left, he stashed it away for later and pulled out his assault rifle instead. Gunning down a few more Collectors, they continued down the path, eventually coming into view of an open door.

"Ok," Amber announced, "let's keep going!"

Everyone else followed under Jack's barrier.

"Guys?" Jack groaned, "can we keep up the pace? Feeling a bit of strain here."

Amber couldn't help but gaze at Jack in concern while Wrex stepped closer to the human biotic.

"Hang in there, kid," he cooed.

"We're almost there," Amber added, "it's just a little further."

Amber didn't hesitate to leap over some cover and shoot at some pursuing Collectors. Once they reached the door, it slid open. Wrex turned and shot a few blasts at another wave as they approached from behind. Jack soon unleashed a biotic force field that knocked their pursuers and the locusts away before her shield dissipated. Having exhausted herself, the human biotic leaned
closer to Wrex as they trudged through the door. Covering their flank, Zaeed lingered behind a bit. As the others approached the door, he rushed up behind when a stray round grazed the back of his leg.

"Augh! Fucking shit!" he cried.

Amber froze in her tracks and glanced over her shoulder.

"Zaeed," Amber called over, "you all right?!"

Before she could rush to him, more rounds pelted the area nearby, forcing her to retreat.

"Garrus, what are we going to do?" Amber demanded, "we can't leave him behind!"

"There's too many of them. I can't clear a path to get him!" Garrus continued to make his mark with every shot, but more Collectors kept approaching.

{I'm ready to shut the door! We have to go, now!} Saren yelled, omni-tool out from behind the doorway.

The Collectors started rushing Zaeed's position en masse.

"Son of a— die assholes!"

Without warning, the merc ripped off his bandolier of grenades and primed them, resulting in a fiery explosion, incinerating everything within ten meters. Amber couldn't help but freeze in shock until Garrus tugged at her arm seconds later, snapping her out of her trance. Amber, Garrus, Wrex and Jack scurried through the door before it slammed shut moments later. Jack paused for a moment, staring at the door a few seconds after it shut.

"Holy shit!" Jack exclaimed, "did that actually happen?"

Amber couldn't bring herself to say anything, so she quietly nodded.

"A rotten way to go. Let's keep moving."

Amber shuffled over to the security door and wasted no time as she tapped on the panel. After a few moments, she managed to override the security protocols in the console as the door slid open. Following suit, Saren and the others came through. Once his team managed to make it into the main chamber, Amber didn't hesitate to close the security door. Saren stepped over to Amber as she lowered her head and placed her hands on her knees.

"Amber?" Saren asked softly, "are you ok?"

Amber shook her head.

"As much as I want to mourn right now," Amber told him, "we still have a fight to finish."
Javik's Last Stand

Now that they've reached the control center, Amber tapped into her omni-tool. Looking up, she saw the pipes from the other room extending upward.

"Looks like this platform reaches all the way up to where these pipes lead," she observed.

Amber scrolled to Joker's number and started another transmission.

"Joker," Amber asked, "how are you doing?"

{I'm doing well, Commander,} Joker nodded over the com-link, {Dr. Chakwas and the rest of the crew just showed up.}

Amber smiled as relief flooded her mind.

"Good to hear," Amber replied, "is the ship operational yet?"

{It shouldn't be long before we're back in full operation,} Joker answered over the com-link, {as for the location you're in, you should be able to overload the system and destroy the base at the main control console.}

"Shepard-Commander, we have another problem," Legion reminded, "excess hostile forces converging outside of this room. Awaiting further orders."

Amber sighed before she nodded at Saren, encouraging him to step closer to his mate. They climbed onto a higher platform, compelling Liara and Kaidan to follow suit.

"Amber," Kaidan told her, "we're ready."

She nodded and turned to the others waiting at the base of the platform.

"I don't like it myself, but here's the score. A lot hinges on whether or not Javik leaves this station today," she cautiously started, "he's not just a threat to us, but to everyone in this galaxy. He's already managed to nab thousands on the back of expendable labor. No need to do the math on how much more he can do if we don't stop him. If this pet project he's got up there really is enough to stand against the Reapers, the rest of us won't even be able to remotely measure up to it. As of now, his obsession is going too far."

Amber gave the rest of the squadmates a salute.

"Now do yourselves a favor and make yourselves proud," Amber added, "we have a galaxy to save."

The squadmates let out a brief enthusiastic cheer before they made their way back to the security door.

"You finished with your banter yet?" Javik boomed over the intercom all of a sudden.

"We're taking you down, Javik. One way or another," Saren hissed.

Without warning, the platform started moving. Saren, Amber, Liara and Kaidan turned to face where they were going. With their guns brandished, they took up a stance, preparing for whatever approached. Several minutes later, the platform stopped in another large chamber, where they saw
Javik gazing at a massive technological structure hanging from the ceiling. Could this be the weapon the Prothean was making? Whatever he was constructing from the liquidated remains of thousands of civilians, it resembled the skeletal upper torso of a human being. What made it stand out was the mechanical aspects of it, resembling more a statue of macabre intent. Moments later, he glanced over his shoulder and let out a growl.

"So, Commander Shepard," Javik said, "you bailed out your crew and stole T'Soni from me."

Liara glared at the Prothean. Saren raised a suspicious brow.

"She's not your pet," Saren snarled, "you live in a galaxy that's moved on from the Prothean Empire's iron grip. Now with the Reapers planning on rolling back in through the door, you're really considering building it back up again only for it to be dashed to dust?"

Javik turned on his feet and pulled his gun out of its holster.

"That's why I plan to fight fire with fire this time," Javik explained, "deep from the Citadel, I've uprooted their secrets and will turn their knowledge against them. What you see before you is a Reaper formulated with humans. Once it is complete, it will eclipse all the rest."

"How can you be so sure it won't backfire on you?" Amber barked as she aimed her assault rifle at the Prothean.

"I know all I'll need to make sure it stays at my fingertips."

Javik didn't hesitate as he enveloped himself in a biotic field. Saren, Amber, Liara and Kaidan stood their ground, now that the real battle has started. The Prothean fired down at them from the safety of his barrier. With no cover nearby, Amber, Saren, Liara and Kaidan resorted to leaping out of the way. Scrambling to the little cover there was, they hunkered down, waiting for a pause in his gunfire. Javik stopped to reload a minute later. Taking a chance at the opening, Saren stood up and fired several rounds at the Prothean's barriers, catching him off guard.

"You've overstepped your boundaries for the last time, turian!" Javik thundered.

Saren narrowed his eyes as enveloped himself in a biotic field. The Prothean cast his own biotic discharge at him. While the barrier did take the majority of the blow, it did send Saren flying across the platform, narrowly, rolling to his feet before he could fall over the edge. Backpedaling towards Saren, Amber returned fire. A few of her shots grazed past Javik's biotic shield. He continued to retaliate with bursts from his rifle down at them. The turian Spectre deflected the bursts while shielding himself and his mate.

"Saren," Amber whispered, "ideas?"

"Wait for an opportunity," he huffed, "he can't hold out forever."

All the while, Kaidan and Liara scanned their surroundings, looking for some sort of weak point. He turned his gaze to the ground around Javik, eyeing for an opening.

"Let's see if this works," Kaidan muttered.

Finding a weak point along the platform, Kaidan and Liara aimed their rifles and squeezed the trigger. The initial jolts threw Javik off balance, causing his barrier to lose focus. This gave Amber and Saren a chance to fire their rounds at the Prothean. Getting through his barriers, their shots began to pelt his armor, forcing him to reposition. Javik made a brief glance over his shoulder, locking his four eyes onto the weapon still in construction. It was a good time if any to see its
progress. Besides, he would rather no other method of showing just what Shepard was trying to temper with. Taking a step back, the Prothean reached for a small remote stashed in his pocket.

"I've had enough playing games with you," Javik snarled, "you won't remotely measure up to this."

Javik pressed his thumb on the button, and Saren, Amber, Liara and Kaidan watched as the large mechanical structure whirred to life. Lights glimmered throughout the automaton as it became animate, lifting its head up.

"W-What the shit?!" Kaidan squeaked as his eyes widened in disbelief.

"Oh, fuck," Saren cursed, as its mouth opened, glowing with energy.

"Out of the way!" Liara yelled.

Not a second after they all ran to cover, a beam of energy brushed over their platform. They waited until the beam dissipated seconds later. They knew they had to take out Javik, but they might as well find some weak point for the human Reaper prototype. Saren started off by shooting what seemed to be the optics of the giant. While that didn't work, Amber checked the pumps suspending the automation. The sheathing for the colossal cylinders retraced telescopically, revealing what looked like giant glass syringes leading into the Reaper. Without thinking, she steadied her rifle and fired at the exposed syringe. Javik paused in his tracks when he saw the syringe shatter.

"What do you think you're doing?" he thundered.

Amber narrowed her eyes at Javik.

"Your Reaper reject can go fuck itself," she remarked.

He aimed his rifle her way and started returning fire. Saren thought fast and shielded her in a biotic field. In a split second, he yanked her to safety.

"How are you holding up?" he hastily asked.

Awaiting her answer, Saren swapped a used thermal clip out of his gun.

"I'm fine," Amber reassured him, "I figured out a way to take down the weapon."

"So, the hydraulics on the ceiling are the key, huh?" Saren clarified.

Amber nodded.

"They seem to be the components distributing the liquidated colonists into this thing and the main support for it," Amber explained.

Saren nodded in agreement as he aimed his rifle. The sheaths started to close again, only giving him time to shoot one of the pumps. Enraged, the Reaper slammed a poorly clenched fist on the platform, snapping the segment off and sending it tumbling below out of sight. Liara, Saren, Kaidan, Amber and Javik managed to remain on the platform, so Kaidan and Liara took this chance to distract the Prothean.

The asari flung a small hunk of the broken platform at him. Javik yelped as the piece grazed at his arm even as he barely dodged the projectile. He barely stumbled back to his feet before the gunfire started up again. Moments later, another syringe shattered. The Prothean couldn't help but growl as he prepared another biotic warp.
"Are you simply willing to let the Reapers render your species extinct?!" he snarled.

Liara whipped up a biotic warp of her own.

"We don't have to deal with the Reapers by fighting them," Liara proclaimed, "there's another way!"

Javik and Liara both tossed their biotic warps at one another, causing them to collide.

"Rendering yourselves subservient is not an option," he huffed, firing another burst of rounds.

Liara thought fast and enveloped herself in a biotic field. The others took up new positions, finding difficulty focusing on both Javik and the Reaper. By then, another syringe exposed itself in a matter of seconds, so Saren aimed carefully and pulled the trigger. With as fast as he could swing his gun, he shot the last syringe before the shutters could close.

Javik stared in disbelief as he dodged the incoming shots from Kaidan and Liara. Without warning, the Prothean charged at the turian Spectre, coming in for the killing blow. Amber wasted no time as she quickly activated her omni-blade and rushed in front of her turian husband before lunging her arm forward. Coming in at a soft point in his suit, she wrenched her arm through his barriers and armor. The Prothean didn't have enough time to react as the Alliance commander's omni-blade impaled his gut.

"No…I…I…" he started to choke and sputter, gasping for breath.

"I-I'm sorry," Amber whispered between gasps, "I couldn't…get through to…you."

She yanked her arm back, letting him slump on the platform lifeless. Kaidan and Liara stared at the fallen Prothean before letting out a long sigh of relief moments later.

"Quick," Kaidan reminded, "let's set this place to blow and get the hell out of here."

Amber nodded at Kaidan before she stepped closer to the control panel.

"Looks like…" Kaidan started, investigating it, "yeah, power control's maintained up here. We fry this, the station should overload and detonate."

Amber nodded in agreement as she cracked her knuckles.

"Alright, get it done. Ground team, what's your sitrep?" she ordered.

{Garrus reporting,} Garrus answered over the com-link, {we're holding up, but they just keep coming! A quick exit would be preferable!}

"Start your way back to the ship," Amber suggested, "we'll have about ten minutes to get out of here before the station blows."

With a plan in mind, Amber got to work as she pulled out a panel, revealing an energy core. From her belt, she pulled a remote detonation charge and slapped it on the side. She activated it in a matter of seconds before she quickly stood to her feet.

"All right," Amber announced, "let's get out of here."

Amber, Saren, Liara and Kaidan turned to leave when they heard a loud groan and they felt the platform vibrate. Crawling back up the sides of the chamber, the Reaper larvae remained active, climbing back to them.
"How is that thing still alive?!" Kaidan exclaimed.

"Just keep shooting!" Saren yelled back.

Liara, Kaidan, Amber and Saren didn't hesitate to open fire on the mechanical larvae as it grasped the platform. Its jaw started to open up again, glowing with an energy pulse. As panic built up in his mind, Saren scrambled towards Amber before he prepared a biotic warp.

"Amber, hang on," he warned.

Another concentrated beam of energy wiped over the area. Without warning, the platform snapped off balance and tilted over. They started tumbling over on their sides off balance from the violent shift. Amidst the panic, Saren enveloped himself and his human mate in a biotic shield, compelling Liara and Kaidan to follow suit. The group rapidly fell as the platform crumbled, toppling off whatever was supporting it. While the crumbling platform crushed the automation, the biotic shields managed to break their fall. They landed on the uneven ground down below, barely getting back to their feet as misshapen chunks fell around them. Amber groaned in pain as she felt bruising on her side underneath her armor.

"Amber," Saren cooed, "are you all right?"

"Enough to stand," Amber groaned softly, "Joker, where's that evac site?"

{We're not too far from your position,} Joker informed over the com-link, {everyone else is onboard, but we're waiting for you.}

Amber nodded as she stood back to her full height.

"We gotta hurry," Amber reminded, "get ready to depart once we get back. The place is gonna blow in less than ten minutes and I don't want to be stuck here when that happens."

Amber, Saren, Kaidan and Liara began sprinting through a tunnel. Overhead behind them, a cloud of seekers flew into view and moved to pursue.

"Run!" Amber shouted.

Kaidan started stumbling, so Liara grabbed his hand and pulled him forward, allowing him to catch up.

"Joker, we're coming in hot with hostiles in pursuit," Kaidan called, "are you ready to pick us up?"

{I've got an opening, but nowhere to land. I'll try and give you options to jump back on. Setting coordinates for pickup.}

A few minutes later, Amber, Saren, Liara and Kaidan made their way into a large corridor, watching as the Normandy approaching from a distance. It flew low, hovering over the ground as the cargo hold ramp opened up. From the hatch, Ashley and Nihlus fired at any incoming seekers as Saren, Amber, Liara and Kaidan raced closer to the ledge. With enough momentum, they each took turns leaping for the ramp. With seekers and the remaining Collectors closing in on her, Amber leapt off the ledge, her hand reaching out for the ramp. Thinking fast, Saren grasped her hand and pulled her onboard. The four of them rushed up the door as it closed.

"Joker, we've made it back onboard, get us out of here!" Saren ordered.

"Copy that," Joker nodded over the intercom.
Joker pulled on the controls as the Normandy sped through the massive tunnel. Rushing to the cockpit, they narrowly saw as the vessel exited the station back out into the debris field surrounding the station. Having overcome the first obstacle, Joker flew the vessel towards the Mass Relay that waited on the other side of the debris field. An explosion began to tear the base apart a few minutes later. Nervously, Joker eyed they displays, watching as the ensuing explosion drew closer. Getting to the ring of the debris field, be brought the ship into FTL out of the system before the explosion could consume the ship. The Arterius Spectres sighed in relief with Amber lowering her head.

"Finally," Amber whispered, "it's over."

"I'm glad it's done with," Saren agreed, "how long till we're back in friendly space?"

"Six hours, and we won't be flying for a while. We got the Normandy running again, but we'll need some additional repairs before we can fly again," Joker answered, "we're running on chicken wire and packaging tape right now."

Amber nodded at Joker before she led Saren out of the bridge. They made their way through the corridor and stopped at the medbay. Garrus had recently been patched up as Kelly embraced herself to him. Liara and Dr. Chakwas sat on adjacent beds as Mordin scanned both of them. The Alliance yeoman made a brief glance at Mordin, still allowing Garrus to nuzzle his face against hers.

"How are they doing?" she asked him.

After a moment of silence, Mordin focused his eyes on Kelly.

"Just fine. Not too badly hurt by Collector captors. Will recover in a couple days."

Kelly returned her gaze towards Garrus.

"Still," she said softly, "the way Javik slaughtered those colonists…it's just…horrible."

"There's no getting them back," Garrus reminded, "however, he's not taking anymore. There's still that."

Garrus held his human girlfriend close while Saren and Amber stared with sentiment in their minds.

"Keep up the good work, Mordin," Saren told the salarian, "knowing Javik, check thoroughly that everyone's alright. We don't need any postmortem surprises from him."

"Will do, Spectre Arterius," Mordin nodded.

Saren and Amber left the medbay and made their way into their quarters. After they removed their armor, the turian Spectre rested on his back and Amber nestled up to him. He looked blankly up at the ceiling, taking deep breaths.

"If anything," Amber mumbled, "we might have better luck than the Protheans soon."

Saren nodded at Amber as he nuzzled his face against hers.

"I just hope. Otherwise, this'll be…what? Ten months for nothing?" he agreed.

Saren held his mate closer as his chest rumbled with deep purrs.
"Hey," Amber reassured him, "I'm sure we'll be fine."
Contacting the Harbinger

The entire Normandy crew spent two weeks recovering from the trauma and celebrating their victory from Javik's defeat at the Citadel. Considering that they had one week left before their fate would be put to the test again, not much else was needed to make final preparations.

At the moment, Liara and Amber stood at the docking bay, since Miranda sent them a message an hour earlier. She looked over the message one more time on her omni-tool. The Alliance commander then tilted her head towards Liara and placed her hand on her shoulder.

"You sure Anderson won't go into a panic attack if he sees the Shadow Broker?" Liara asked.

"I'm sure I can give him a heads up," Amber reassured her.

Several minutes later, the Alliance commander and the asari saw a particular shuttle arrive at the station. It didn't take long before it hovered over to the docking bay, the magnetic clamps locking it into place. The door slid open and Miranda was the first to emerge. With a grin apparent, Amber led Liara as they rushed towards the shuttle, catching the Lawson prodigy's attention.

"Shepard?" Miranda warbled.

Just as Amber and Liara stopped near the walkway, the Alliance couldn't help but burst into laughter.

"Did you forget?" she reminded, "my last name's Arterius now!"

"Oh, right," Miranda blurted as she scratched her head.

Liara watched as the Shadow Broker emerged from the door and crossed the walkway with Miranda. Both of them stood mere inches in front of the Alliance commander and the asari, so Amber gave them a salute.

"Glad you two could join us," Amber greeted.

The Shadow Broker nodded at Amber before he turned his head towards Liara.

"Of course. I assume you're well?"

"Yes," Liara nodded, "if Amber had been delayed any further, Javik would've…broken me on the inside."

Liara closed her eyes and lowered her head as she placed her hand on her chest.

"I understand," the Shadow Broker drawled, "that Prothean bastard got what he deserved."

"Unless he somehow survived getting stabbed the way he did followed up by staying on an exploding station," Amber added, "he's gone for good."

Amber gestured Miranda and the Shadow Broker to follow her and Liara, so they started making their way out of the docking bay.

"I am amazed that you decided to come here to the station," Liara pointed out.

The Shadow Broker chuckled softly as he placed his hand on Liara's shoulder.
"I've seen plenty of changes since your commanding officer stepped foot into the Citadel," he mused, "it's worth saying hello to her chain of command. As for you, Dr. T'Soni…"

Liara raised her brow in curiosity just as they stepped out into the Presidium.

"At the end of the year," the yahg continued, "I'll be passing on my title…to you."

Liara couldn't help but blink twice.

"Wait…really?" Amber blurted.

"Are you…sure about this shift in power?" Liara added.

The Shadow Broker nodded as he placed his hand on Miranda's shoulder.

"We have found some suitable places where we could settle down," Miranda clarified, "knowing your expertise, I'm confident enough you'll handle the organization competently."

Liara slowly nodded before she, Amber, the Shadow Broker and Miranda continued venturing through the Presidium. When they arrived at the Alliance embassy, Saren was standing outside the front door waiting for them. He turned his gaze to face them as they approached.

"Ah, good to see you again, Lawson."

Saren extended his hand, allowing Miranda to shake it.

"I assume you got the message to Anderson?" Miranda asked.

"And Admiral Hackett," Saren added with a nod, "they're aware of our guest."

Saren led Amber, Miranda, Liara and the Yahg into the embassy, stepping through the lobby and meandering through the corridor. They walked their way to a conference room towards the back. Inside, Anderson, Hackett and General Victus were waiting for them. The turian general made a brief glance at the Shadow Broker and gave him a puzzled look.

"Commander, what exactly is the meaning of this?" Adrien paused, "Arterius reassured I shouldn't be alarmed, but I'm not so sure."

Saren made a brief glance at the Shadow Broker as he took a seat.

"Apparently," Amber clarified, "the original Shadow Broker took an interest in the Yahg after Parnack was quarantined."

"Hmmm," the Yahg replied, "you can explain to me after this discussion. Anyways, continue."

Saren, Amber, Liara, Miranda, Anderson, Hackett and Victus took their seats.

"Commander, I'd like to congratulate you again in your success against the Prothean," Hackett started, "this does bring much in the way of closure for some of the higher ups in the Alliance."

"You mean the colonists Javik abducted and killed?" Amber clarified.

Hackett nodded.

"It's a shame we couldn't get to them sooner," Hackett replied, "the least we could do is establish a memorial for them."
Amber nodded as Anderson tapped on a terminal, bringing up a holographic projection of the galaxy.

"In the meantime," Anderson continued, "we're in the middle of pinpointing a potential entry point for the Reapers."

"Javik claimed they would be entering through the Viper Nebulae before he subsequently destroyed the relay," Saren noted.

"But that will mean they will have to find another entry point because of what he did," Amber added.

The Shadow Broker took a moment to examine the galaxy map.

"Before the Collectors attacked my facility directly, I had noticed increased activity within the Attican Traverse. With the conclusion of the Batarian Insurgency, they've been relatively under the radar in regards to the batarian's awareness."

Amber blinked twice as the Yahg pointed at the Attican Traverse, carefully examining the projection.

"You think the Reapers arrived there already?" she asked.

"I doubt they would arrive a week early," Liara shrugged.

"That, or Javik was preparing for their arrival there, try and face them off with his pet project," Saren proposed.

Hackett let out a hum as he rubbed his chin.

"Perhaps we could ask Balak about it," Hackett suggested.

Amber nodded in agreement before she scrolled to Balak's number in her omni-tool. She hastily wrote a message and sent it off to the batarian leader. She then continued their conversation with the others in the room until minutes later, she heard a ping in her omni-tool, so she opened up the message. Much to her disappointment, Balak claimed ignorance regarding the Collectors within batarian space.

"Well," Amber said, "we can rule out Collector activity as a possibility."

"I suppose we can afford to spread ourselves thin now," Anderson reminded, "keep ourselves ready that way."

Saren scratched his mandible.

"Then I suspect there might be a Reaper in that area," Saren replied.

Hackett sighed before he tilted his head towards Amber.

"Commander," Hackett asked, "you have any ideas on how to communicate with one?"

"It's been in contact with me before," Amber answered, "I could probably reach it through known channels."

Miranda and the Shadow Broker exchanged brief glances before nodding at Amber.
"Then we'll leave that to you," Miranda agreed.

"In the meantime, keep us in the loop about any contact made with the Reapers, commander," Hackett reminded.

"Will do, Admiral," Amber saluted.

They weren't ready for a potential war, but Amber still felt well rested regardless. As the Alliance commander boarded the Normandy on that day, she felt certain that all their effort would pay off. When she stepped into the bridge, she reviewed the message she received from Councilor Sparatus:

{Any sign of Harbinger yet? Or any of the Reapers for that matter?}

Amber clutched her dream catcher close to her chest as she composed a new message.

{We located its signature, so we'll be heading out soon.}

After she sent the message, she turned her head towards Saren. She didn't hesitate to slide her dream catcher around her neck...almost like a necklace.

"Amber," Saren asked softly, "are you...sure about this?"

Amber gave Saren a sad smile as she nodded.

"I'm sure we'll make it through this," she answered.

He took a deep, shaky breath, trying desperately to ease himself. Amber placed her hand on Saren's shoulder as she shifted her gaze towards Joker.

"Joker," Amber called over, "you ready to go?"

Joker glanced over his shoulder and nodded.

"Yeah," Joker answered, "I'm not sure if I'm ready to see a Reaper up close, but it's worth giving it a go."

Saren rolled his shoulders.

"Let's get to it, I guess. No use delaying any longer."

Joker stretched his arms before he maneuvered the Normandy out of the docking bay. The vessel flew towards the Mass Relay before jumping into FTL speed. Mid-flight, Saren started to nervously pace up and down the bridge, eyes fixed on the ground in front of him. As much as he trusted his mate's words, he couldn't help but worry about what would become of her if something went wrong. What if their disposal of Javik wasn't good enough? What if Harbinger required one more sacrifice?

An hour later, the Normandy entered the system in question and staring through the hull, Saren and Amber found numerous Reapers gathering around one planet. These giant mechanical squids left an opening for the Normandy to pass through, so the vessel entered the planet's orbit. When it descended the planet's atmosphere, Saren and Amber scanned the surface until it spotted one Reaper perching on the ground. Nervousness still fluttering in his stomach, Saren placed his hand on Amber's shoulder.

"You ready to go?" he asked her.
Amber glanced over her shoulder and nodded. The Arterius Spectres turned to leave the bridge, stopping near Legion for a brief moment.

"If something goes wrong," Amber told him, "we'll let you know."

"Acknowledged," Legion nodded, "Shepard, Commander."

Saren and Amber stepped out of the corridor and made their way to the cargo hold. They waited until the Normandy landed on the surface minutes later and the hatch opened, allowing the Spectres to walk down the ramp. The Reaper in question stood at kilometers tall, rendering the top barely visible from the ground. The Alliance commander grasped her turian husband's hand before they slowly and carefully approached it. With each footstep, Amber tilted her head upwards as a slight breeze brushed past her short hair. Once they stopped at a few feet in proximity, Harbinger focused its mechanical eye on the Alliance commander.

[We've been expecting you, Shepard.] it greeted, [we appreciate you for disposing of the Prothean.]

Saren was admittedly hesitant to speak up at first. Now that he was this close, there was some unseen force pressing down on him, leaving him unable to move. Amber gave her mate some reassurance by giving his hand a gentle squeeze.

"Javik put up a huge heck of a fight," Amber replied, "but we managed to stop him."

[Very well. You've also been able to accommodate for a better model of society. Impressive for a couple organics to manage.]

Amber released her grip on Saren's hand and slowly stepped closer to Harbinger, her eyes still locked into its mechanical eye. With each step she took, the massive Reaper took notice of the dream catcher dangling around the Alliance commander's neck.

[Strange you have such attachment to an object such as that.]

Amber blinked twice as she placed her fingertips on her dream catcher.

"This dream catcher, you mean?" Amber clarified, "it's said that it catches dreams and nightmares alike when you sleep at night. I guess I've kept it around…so I can look back into my fondest memories, or even the most interesting dreams I had."

[I'm aware some organics do wear items of sentimental worth, but this seems unusual.]

Harbinger moved one of its legs closer to Amber, watching with a curious eye as she stood mere inches from it. After a moment of silence, Amber gently perched her palms on the massive mechanical leg. She closed her eyes and tapped her forehead against the metal. The dust settled down around them. Saren could merely stare in amazement as his mate could face a Reaper with no weapon. He hesitated to follow her remotely close to it. Still, he took note of her calm expression, so his mandibles flexed in curiosity as he started his slow approach.

He craned his neck, looking up as far as he could along the Reaper's hull. Once he was near the mechanical leg, he placed his hand on its metallic surface. Through his gauntlet, he could physically feel it lightly vibrate like an idling hovercar.

[We see you two share loyalty to one another.] Harbinger rumbled.

"Would we not?" Saren returned.
Harbinger hesitated in a moment of silence, giving both Spectres a blank stare.

"Do you think," Amber asked, "we could coexist peacefully?"

*Given our analysis, this system will work.*

Amber tilted her head upwards and gave a soft smile. Saren also nodded in agreement as he placed his hand on her shoulder.

"So we did it, then? We're given a free pass?" he pressed.

*So long as you maintain this,* a brief silence passed, almost like the mechanical entity was drawing a breath, *then it will last.*

Those words meant a truce can go through, so Amber took a step back and turned on her omni-tool, scrolling to Anderson's number.

"Anderson," Amber called, "we spoke with Harbinger. A truce is possible with them."

*Nice work, Shepard,* Anderson replied over the com-link, *you suppose a conference with our combined leadership is in order?*

"You might want to get over here," Amber nodded, "but sure."
Surprise and confusion may have filled almost everyone's minds for a while, but no instance occurred that would result in stirring fear. The Reapers surely didn't reign over the galaxy, but they figured out various ways to contribute to the galaxy's collective coexistence. For the most part, they looked overhead like sentinels.

At the moment, Saren and Amber touched down on Eden Prime after receiving a message from Miranda. As far as they knew, Garrus, Kelly, Wrex and Jack were also accompanying them as they meandered through the docking bay. The only difference was that Jack was carrying an egg in its special holster.

"Amber! What's up?" Jack hollered as they walked down the docking plank.

Amber smiled as she glanced over her shoulder.

"Doing great," she answered, "how's Wrex?"

"What do you think?" Wrex remarked, "just making the finishing touches to Grunt's little nest."

Saren breathed a chuckle.

"The name's Grunt, huh?" he mused.

Jack and Wrex nodded in unison.

"What? We agreed it was a fitting name," Wrex shrugged.

"That makes sense," Amber agreed, "it's just unusual, that's all."

Saren, Amber, Kelly, Garrus, Jack and Wrex made their way out of the docks. Amber was the first to speak after they exited the terminal.

"So, how've you guys been as of late?" Amber asked.

Garrus chuckled as he scratched his mandible.

"Kelly and I went to an aquarium some time ago and we're thinking of getting some fish," Garrus explained.

Saren craned his neck over at the krogan.

"And how's a quieter life been for you?"

Wrex took a moment to stretch his arms.

"I find myself feeling better this way," he admitted, "good for Jack, too."

"Yeah, having a kid really did take the wind out of me," the biotic added, eyeing her basket.

When they reached a platform, a tram was just letting out some passengers. A few minutes later, the Arterius Spectres, Garrus, Kelly, Wrex and Jack boarded the tram and searched for some
suitable seats. Taking up a group of unoccupied seats, they watched as the doors closed and the tram left the station several minutes later. The Alliance commander gazed out the window and admired the countryside scenery passing by. Saren followed her gaze, watching the fields roll as the tram continued towards the colony center. Once an hour passed, the tram stopped at the next station. They subsequently disembarked onto the station platform, and then made their way out of the station and into the prefabs. Garrus gestured down the street.

"We live at a block not too far from here," he told Saren, "roughly a fifteen minute walk."

"So you'll be heading your way, then?" Amber clarified.

Garrus and Kelly exchanged brief glances.

"Maybe after we say hello to Miri and Kech," Kelly clarified.

"We kinda have to do a few things before we get back home," Garrus added.

Amber nodded at them before she and Saren led Garrus, Kelly, Jack and Wrex through the prefabs until they located a particularly simple house at the edge. In the front yard stood an exquisite birdbath. It was a building meant for a populace of four.

"Quite a homey place. Anticipating company?" Amber commented.

"Wrex says krogan kids are rather jumpy," Jack explained, "better to have more room to run around in, though I'm probably going to hold off any household decor until Grunt's a bit older."

Amber nodded at Jack before she made her way to the front door and rang the doorbell. Seconds later, Miranda opened the door from the other side.

"Amber, Saren, I was unaware you'd be coming to Eden Prime," Miranda greeted.

"Not just us," Amber replied, "Jack and Kelly brought along Wrex and Garrus."

"Well come on in, have a seat," Miranda grinned, "it's been a while."

Amber smiled before she, Saren, Jack, Wrex, Kelly and Garrus stepped into the house and made their way into the living room. Several minutes later, the Yahg entered the living room and placed a toolbox in a drawer before he focused his eight eyes onto the turian Spectre.

"Arterius, when did you land?" he asked the turian Spectre.

"Over an hour ago," Saren answered, "have you and Miranda been doing well?"

Kechlu nodded slowly as he settled into a lounge chair that fit his size. Jack carefully set down the basket while Wrex pulled out a soft blanket and laid it on the floor. The human biotic carefully transferred the egg onto the blanket before she and Wrex huddled closer to the egg.

"Little guy's coming out any day now," Jack said.

Kechlu nodded as he examined the egg in question.

"How long have you been bearing this?"

Jack chuckled as she placed her hand behind her head.

"Around three months before I laid it," she admitted.
"How did that work?" Saren asked, "something to do with that Genophage treatment?"

Wrex nodded as he placed his hand on Jack's shoulder.

"It's apparent that it made her fertile again," Wrex clarified.

Amber nodded as she pulled out her miniature console and scrolled between Robot Wants Kitty, Undertale and The Binding of Isaac.

"I did ask Mordin about it extensively," Amber added, "even he's not sure how it worked out."

The Yahg let out an enthusiastic hum as he slowly stood to his feet, poured some drinks from a nearby dispenser and handed a glass to Miranda.

"Thanks," Miranda smiled.

Kechlu and Miranda sat back down while Saren placed his hand on Amber's shoulder.

"Amber," Saren asked, "you thirsty? What would you like?"

Amber eyed the dispenser for a brief moment.

"I'll just have some ice water," Amber answered.

Kechlu nodded and slid the drink over to her on the coffee table. While the Alliance commander took a sip of her water, Saren ambled over to the dispenser and browsed the options available before he served himself some kava. In the meantime, Kelly spotted a pyjak perching on the couch.

"Hey, Miri," Kelly called over, "where'd you get that pyjak?"

Miranda glanced at where Kelly was pointing, so the Lawson prodigy shifted her gaze towards Kechlu.

"Well," Kechlu clarified, "that little fella was in need of a home."

The Yahg stood to his feet and carefully lifted the creature into his arms before he sat back down.

"At some point I had found the thing had stowed away on a shipment to the base," he added, "originally, I was going to have it dropped off at the next habitable planet I passed by, yet Miranda wanted to keep it."

The pyjak sniffed as it glanced around the room. With little regard to anyone present, it hopped from bit of furniture to bit of furniture. Thinking fast, Miranda reached forward and beckoned the creature to hop into her lap.

"Here you go," she cooed.

As the pyjak settled into her lap, Miranda gently stroked its head.

"So how's life been otherwise on Eden Prime?" Amber asked.

"Our neighbors are getting used to Kech here," Miranda answered.

Kechlu didn't say anything, but he did take notice of a tiny crack in the egg…no larger than a kernel of corn.
"Jack," Kechlu pointed out, "about your egg…"

Jack paused for a brief moment before she glanced at her egg.

"Oh?" she blurted.

"Relax, Grunt will still take a while to become fully active," Wrex interrupted.

Jack let out a sigh of relief before she leaned closer to Wrex. He followed with a similar gesture, and was beaming with a wide grin. The human biotic pulled out a miniature console of her own. She kneeled down before the basket and snapped a few photos. Wrex took a moment to figure out why before he placed his hand on Jack's shoulder. Sitting right beside her, he closely inspected the egg himself. He saw a tiny claw slowly piercing through the eggshell. His eyes widened and his heart felt like it skipped a beat.

"Wow," he muttered to himself.

With both Jack and Wrex focused on the slowly hatching egg, the human biotic scrolled through the list of games in her miniature console.

"So, what game would you like to play?" Jack asked Wrex.

Amber smiled at Jack as she selected The Binding of Isaac in her console. The krogan was now leaning over, trying to peer inside the crack.

"Keep going, little guy," Wrex encouraged softly.

Soon enough in a matter of a few hours, what resembled a clenched fist punched through the side. Jack perked up her eyebrows as a tiny limb pushed away a fragment of the eggshell. The two watched as the hand opened and pawed the air, finding something to grab. Just as Jack placed down her console, Kelly, Garrus, Saren, Amber, Miranda and Kechlu also focused on the hatching egg. The arm continued swinging helplessly with no purchase, causing the shell to rock. The human biotic fidgeted nervously as the eggshell continued to crack.

Minutes later, the krogan youngling slowly started crawling out of its eggshell. With some better coordination, it started to pull apart the edges of the initial hole, digging its way out. Even if its eyes were shut, it started sniffing its unfamiliar surroundings. Its mouth slightly opened, producing a small, high pitched croaking noise.

"Oh?" Kelly blurted, "that's…he's so cute!"

Pulling itself completely out, it was still dripping in some syrupy fluid. Wrex scooped up the infant, holding it up for inspection. The krogan sighed in relief the instant no signs of illness were apparent. Regardless, he could feel himself tremble a bit, holding Grunt, looking as it stared back at him.

"Wrex?" Jack paused.

Wrex snapped out of his thoughts before he returned his gaze to Jack, allowing her to examine the krogan youngling. He handed the trembling child off to her.

"Hey there," Jack whispered, "little guy."

Grunt looked back to her with half-closed eyes. Cradling the baby krogan in her arms, Jack slowly sat down.
"You know," Amber mused, "I'm sure your brother would be proud of you."

"He'd be more jealous than proud, just the way I like it," he beamed.

Saren couldn't help but let out an amused chuckle. Jack took a small blanket from the basket and wrapped it around Grunt, despite the young krogan's protests. The human biotic stroked its tiny head with her hand as Kelly, Garrus, Saren, Amber, Kechlu and Miranda observed it nestling its head onto her shoulder. Grunt stopped struggling, now pressing his palm against her neck.

"Looks like he's getting used to you," Miranda commented.

Jack nodded in agreement.

"How's Oriana?" Jack asked.

"Been well," Miranda answered, "she has been living with Kolyat on the Citadel."

Miranda scrolled through her photo gallery in her omni-tool before she found a particular photo and presented it to the others through a holographic projection.

"They've been dating for a while now and she has claimed they've been talking about getting engaged."

Garrus flexed his mandibles into a grin.

"Oh?" he mused, "this sounds really interesting."

Kelly nodded as she examined the photo projected before them. She, Garrus, Saren and Amber stood to their feet.

"I'll be sure to wait for more updates from them," Amber told Miranda.

Amber and Miranda shook hands.

"Thanks for your hospitality. It was nice catching up with you," she acknowledged.

"Anytime," Miranda nodded.

Jack and Wrex took a few minutes to gather their equipment while the pyjak perched onto Kechlu's shoulder, allowing the Yahg to stand to his feet.

"I guess we'll see you later, big guy!" Jack chirped.

The group filed out in short notice, back down the street again. Kelly and Garrus didn't hesitate to turn in a different direction.

"We'll be heading home, now," Kelly told Amber.

"See you two later, then," she returned.

Saren, Amber, Wrex and Jack sauntered through one street while Kelly and Garrus made their way to their homestead. Some time later, they came across a bench overlooking the landscape. Passing by, Amber decided to stop and take a seat, gesturing Saren to join her. Wrex and Jack exchanged glances in a moment of silence.

"Hey," Jack requested, "can we join you guys?"
Saren flexed his mandibles into a grin while Amber scrolled through her message inbox, sending a text response to Nihlus and James. As the human biotic and the krogan sat down on the bench, Amber opened a photo attachment from Nihlus's message. It showed the two on some hilltop overlooking a vast jungle.

"At least we know Vega and Nihlus are having a blast," Amber commented.

Saren glanced over her shoulder and examined the photo in question.

"Nihlus had mentioned he was going on a brief trip, but he didn't say where."

Amber slowly nodded at Saren before she shut off her omni-tool and stared into the horizon. Leaning over, he put an arm around her shoulder, following her gaze with a grin. Likewise, Jack leaned in closer to Wrex. The silence droned on, only being occasionally interrupted by Grunt's gurgling.

"I'm surprised James went along," Saren added.

"Maybe when we get back home," Amber offered, "we could finish some preparations for when we go get a hamster and a few birds at the pet store."

Saren purred and nuzzled his face against his mate's.

"Hamster's fine enough. It's quiet, makes a less apparent mess, too."

As unclear as their future was, they were still certain that they entered a peaceful era in their lifetime. For a moment, Saren couldn't help but scrutinize himself, questioning whether this was the best way forward. Blankly staring into space, he nodded in silent acceptance that, all things considered, this was perhaps as bloodless things would get. Readjusting his gaze to the horizon, a smile grew across his mandibles, flicking with content. In the distance, barely a spec of dust being carried by the wind, he could see a Reaper just looming overhead. Who could wonder such an ancient mechanical entity would have the capacity to unite the galaxy with diplomacy?

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