<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Mature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Graphic Depictions Of Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>F/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Mass Effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Kaidan Alenko/Female Shepard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Kaidan Alenko, Female Shepard, Jeff &quot;Joker&quot; Moreau, Garrus Vakarian, James Vega, Liara T'Soni, EDI (Mass Effect), Javik (Mass Effect), Kasumi Goto, Legion (Mass Effect), Tali'Zorah nar Rayya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Action/Adventure, Character Study, Romance, Friendship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series:</td>
<td>Part 8 of Mass Effect: Kye Shepard's Story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2012-07-26 Completed: 2014-02-20 Chapters: 60/60 Words: 267414</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Certus

by SinVraal

Summary

In the end, there's only one thing that really matters. Explorations, variations and off-camera moments from the Mass Effect 3 storyline. Multiple character POVs.

Notes

Author's note: I should insert the standard disclaimer about this being mostly a standalone story, but as time goes by and previous stories pile up, it becomes less true. So, the caveat; characterizations, events and contexts are based on both the games and previous stories in the series.
Prologue: Faster Than Information

Joker frowned at the number floating in his display. The worst post-jump drift he'd clocked since flight school sims. Small comfort that Sergeant Hakori was no longer around to upbraid him about it, not that he'd ever cared much what the instructors thought. It was his own standards he had to live up to, and that number didn't even register.

"It is possible disruption to the launch relay caused a larger than standard arrival deviance," EDI said.

Joker eyed the blue holo. How good had she become at reading his moods? "Don't try to make me feel better, EDI. That damn asteroid spooked me and I blew the landing. Unacceptable."

"In the case of a lone ship making a mass relay jump, drift deviance in not as relevant. There is no collision risk."

"It's always relevant."

Behind him, the airlock finished its decontamination cycle. Joker swiveled his chair enough to see Commander Shepard emerge. Her armor might have had a few new dings, but otherwise she seemed unharmed by the solo mission and unforeseen two-day absence from all comms. Two days wherein the Normandy's crew had been climbing the walls with increasing worry. Garrus had been the one to say it bluntly- after fighting this long and finally defeating the Collectors, there was a sick injustice in going out and getting killed doing a solo job off the books.

Until they finally got a signal. From an asteroid. An asteroid accelerating toward a mass relay.

"Commander!" Joker greeted her as she approached. "You always make every mission an adventure, don't you? What, was the exploding volcano incident starting to seem bland?"

The scowl she shot him could have peeled paint. "EDI, give us some space please."

"Yes, Shepard."

"Thanks."

The blue orb winked out.

Joker peered at the AI's display cradle. "The heck?"

"We talk sometimes, in my cabin. After the Cerberus controls came off I had to explain at length why there are times we need privacy. It's a weird concept for an AI designed for military intrusion and intelligence, but we have an understanding now."

"I never got her to go away."

"You never asked nicely."

"Whatever. She's probably still listening anyway."
Shepard shrugged. "Maybe, but that's okay. I get my illusion for a few minutes." She unlocked the neck seal of her helmet and pulled it off. For a long moment, there was no sound but the soft blip of the navcom ticking off the ship's acceleration.

"Do you remember what it was like when you were a kid," she said finally, "and you did something wrong, and you had those few minutes before your parents found out?"

"Oh, sure, it usually involved a lot of screaming on my part."

"I mean the kind of something wrong that hurts someone else. It's a little like you exist outside of time... It isn't real yet. You're alone in your new reality... and you can hope, just for a moment, that no one ever joins you there."

She put her palms on the console and leaned heavily on them. "This is it, Joker. This is the step too far."

The leaden seriousness of her voice kicked the legs out of any potential joke. "What the hell happened out there?"

She sighed. "Good intentions got mixed up with the calculus of war... and then infected with indoctrination."

"Wonderful."

"The next time I hear someone tell me they're studying a Reaper artifact, but no really it's totally safe, I'm just going to shoot them."

"Better carry extra sinks. There's a crippling shortage of common sense out there."

"I had to stop them. And I'll be the one that..." she trailed off, staring out the porthole at the stars.

Joker chewed his lip. "Is it true the Reapers were inbound?"

"According to the calculations, they're there right now."

He exhaled through his teeth. "Shit."

"And this is where I lose... I just lose," she muttered.

"You were AWOL for two days, Commander, we were starting to think you weren't coming back."

"I'm not entirely sure how I did. They had me dead to rights, but they didn't finish the job for some reason."

*Good question.* The thought popped unbidden to mind. *Indoctrination, huh?* He shook his head.

"Next time Hackett demands you do something alone, are you officially allowed to tell him to stuff it?"

"Did... anything get out? Of the relay?"

Joker leafed through his control panes to the external sensor logs. "We scanned a handful of ships heading for the relay when we jumped in. They must have gotten out. Hell, I would have if I'd seen that asteroid headed for it." He absently scratched his stubbled chin. "You know," he mused, "when we blew the relay we also blew the comm buoys."

"If there was anything left to send a signal."
"Shepard, we got out of there faster than light. Much, much faster. The Bahak relay is... was..." he leaned over his navcom, shifting his fingers to zoom the display, "1362 light-years from here, the nearest outpost of sentient listening ears." He leaned back. "It'll take over a thousand years for anyone to even see the fireworks."

"Faster than information."

He spread his hands. "No one actually has to know."

"Tempting," Shepard murmured.

He knew perfectly well she wouldn't take that opportunity, such as it was. A long silence stretched out. Movement on his console caught Joker's eye. In the small window showing video feed of the CIC, figures were talking and gesticulating. Taylor and Garrus.

"Those ships that jumped out ahead of us will report the asteroid," she continued, "and I won't lie to Hackett. And... I'll know."

"The Hegemony's going to flip out. It'll start a war."

"There's a much bigger war breathing down our necks."

"When has that ever stopped anyone? I mean, really?"

"Hope springs eternal..." She sighed. "No, not really."

"Tweedledum and Tweedledee are waiting to talk to you."

There was a beat of silence, and he glanced up to see Shepard regarding him with a quizzical expression. "Who?"

"What, seriously? Alice in Wonderland? The stoner caterpillar and the disappearing cat? Mercury poisoning, and... wow, you really are a colonial rube." He sniffed, rubbing his nails on the front of his uniform. "Clearly my talents are wasted here."

"We're going to have to start making arrangements to drop the crew off somewhere safe."

"The heck are you talking about?" A chilly realization settled on him. "Wait, you're going in, aren't you? You're going to take the Normandy back to the Alliance."

Shepard ran her hand slowly over her head, smoothing back the sweat-damp hair. "I have to."

"Uh, no you don't?" Joker ventured.

She shrugged, throwing up her arms. "What choice do we really have? Running a full-size frigate with no support was a long shot with Liara's help, but now? The Alliance might have been content to let us chase the Collectors around out in the Terminus Systems, but they won't let this lie. We'd just be running, all the time, from people who should be allies. That's no way to live with the Reapers on our doorstep."

"We unload the crew, then what about you?"

"I go in."

"Damn it Shepard, this is Alchera all over again. You're going down with the ship."
"But this time it's a choice we both get."

Joker snorted. "Some choice. If I don't have several tons of mass drive under my ass, I'm less than useless. The Reapers will blow in and the best I'll be able to do is spit in their general direction."

"When they show up, we'll need everyone. Centcom would be bigger idiots than we ever imagined if they let you rot in a cell."

Joker raised a finger. "Hah, are we taking bets, Commander? Because I'll put good credits on the bigger idiots option."

"This time I'll be around to keep the heat off you. I'm sure they'll have a lot of questions. I'll keep them busy."

"You forget I joined Cerberus a long time before you did. Willingly. They'll skin me alive."

"I wouldn't be so sure. Did you know Anderson is an admiral now?"

"Yeah, I heard he stepped down from Councilorhood. He must have finally gotten sick of Udina's stink."

"And Hackett will owe me. This was still a personal favor for him, despite how it turned out. Two admirals have to be able to keep you out of real trouble."

"They better. I'll make a really terrible husk, Shepard. Seriously, can you imagine how pathetic I'd be? Gimp Husk. All the other husks will make fun of me." He plastered on a shit-eating grin that did nothing to alleviate the grinding fear that lurked behind the joke. Alchera without the escape pod option was a more appealing outcome than the so-called Dragon's Teeth.

"Or you could go somewhere else. Anywhere you like, really."

He nudged the bill of his cap higher so he could peer up at her from under it.

"It had to be stated," she said with a small shrug. "The worst part about all of this is I don't even know if the delay is worth the cost."

"The batarians on that colony were dead anyway." The voice came from behind them.

Joker glanced around his chair to see Garrus coming up from the CIC.

"The Reapers weren't going to let anyone live," the turian went on. "The entire Reaper fleet in one system? They'd glass the colony. Or worse... and my bet is on worse. All we did was blow a link the chain, so now they have to walk to the next relay."

"Shepard's going to surrender us to the Alliance, Garrus."

The turian's mandibles twitched, dropping a little. He eyed Shepard sidelong for a long moment.

"Do you think you can start working on the Hierarchy, Garrus?" she said without returning his gaze. "I can provide you with a copy of all the data we got from the mission."

He shifted his weight. "I can try, but I don't know how seriously they'll take me. Renegades who leave their former postings aren't looked on fondly by the government."

"I know you. You must have connections you can tap. A way to get this information into the right hands."
"Military-level intelligence on a potential threat to the entire protectorate might... get some attention, yes. But I can't make promises."

"Try. It's all any of us can do."

Shepard rubbed at her eye. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I almost just want the Reapers to show up. Get it over with. Stop all this prevarication and start actually dealing with the problem."

"It would sure be a stupendously satisfying 'fuck you' to your critics," Joker said.

"It's the only way anyone is going to do anything. But maybe if I go in and show them all the data we collected, they'll have some real evidence to look at."

"They don't need the ship for that," Joker pointed out.

"It would be an act of good faith."

"A whole ship? Uh, yeah. Maybe even a little much."

"I'm going to need a whole hell of a lot of faith, Joker. I just made the Virmire bombing look like a light sneeze."

"What about EDI? It's not like she can leave."

"I... I don't know yet. We'll have to figure something out."

The main comms pinged. EDI reappeared. "Excuse me, Commander, but you have a high-priority communication request from Admiral Hackett."

"Look who's on the ball today of all days," Joker said. "The old goat himself."

"Couldn't have been just a little bit longer, hm?" Shepard murmured. "Just a few minutes."

"Shepard-" Garrus started.

"Forward it to my quarters." She turned on her heel and stalked away down the corridor, her armored boots loud on the deck plating.

Garrus watched her go, absently touching the scarred side of his face. "That may be the shortest amount of time I've been able to keep a promise," he muttered.

"Well, then it's a big ray of sunshine all around," Joker drawled, though he hadn't the faintest idea what the turian was talking about. "We wouldn't want anyone to be left out, now would we?"

"I should go," Garrus muttered, and walked away.

"Yeah. We're all going... nowhere fast."

"I do not understand what destination you are referring to," EDI said.

"Don't worry, that wasn't worth understanding. The humor barrel is down to the planks around here."

Joker drummed his fingers on his armrests, resisting the urge to look sidelong at the soft blue glow to his left. What would the Alliance do to EDI? To the ship? To him?
"Hey EDI, how good are you at playing dumb?"

"Is this an attempt to ascertain whether or not I was listening to your conversation with Shepard?"

That gave him a pause. "Ah... no. We're headed behind unfriendly lines, but I have an idea."
This Machine Kills

Shepard.

Time had gotten away from him again. He'd been surprised when he finally counted the months that had passed since he'd seen the headlines splashed across the vidscreens: Commander Shepard surrenders the Normandy, a vessel associated with Cerberus. Commander Shepard taken into custody. Demands for extradition from the Batari Hegemony, all of which were thankfully ignored. But the accusation couldn't be ignored- hundreds of thousands dead. An entire system obliterated by an exploding relay. The numbing shock of the revelation seemed fresh again after all those months of festering in the back of his head. Who was the person who'd come back from Cerberus?

There was always too much to do, too many pressures always moving him forward and preventing him from dwelling on any of it. Or maybe they were convenient excuses not to. Until today, just minutes ago, when he'd passed within a few feet of Commander Shepard. The closest he'd been to her since that terrible day on Horizon. It all came rushing back as he'd searched for the person he thought he knew in that grim-faced spectre in Anderson's wake. The scars were almost completely gone now, just a light tracing along her jaw. But the gaze she'd laid on him held only a guarded wariness that made his heart sink.

The door ahead of him opened out onto the window-lined promenade that linked the various buildings of Alliance Centcom, Earth Western Division. The cloudless afternoon did nothing to brighten Kaidan's mood as he paced out into the splash of sunlight, shadowed by Lieutenant Vega's heavy footfalls. The whole building buzzed with a nameless tension. He'd been in the military long enough to recognize the signs that something was gravely wrong, but no one was saying it outright yet. Given the amount of disruptive activity, there were only a few things it could be, and of those...

Kaidan froze in mid-thought.

There was a squeak of boots behind him as Lieutenant Vega stopped. "Major?"

As far as Kaidan knew the lieutenant had been assigned to guarding Shepard. He'd trailed along after Kaidan, perhaps out of simple curiosity, while they both waited for the Committee meeting to finish. The other people on the promenade continued to walk and talk, many stopped by the railing to exchange words. Every face was tense, hands gesticulating, eyes darting around. A few people saluted him as they hurried past. But no one else seemed to have heard anything strange.

The first might have been his imagination, but it came again, almost too faint to be called a sound. More of a feeling transmitted up through the structure beneath Kaidan's feet. A vertiginous, half-formed memory crawled up his back, made every hair stand on end. Before he could really think about why, he was leafing through his omni-tool for his brother's call ID.

Vega escalated his inquiry to a cough. "Sir?"

There was only one time in his life he'd heard anything close to that distant subsonic howl- back before they'd known anything at all about this madness. On Eden Prime. His comm pinged.

An irritated voice answered. "Kaid, what-"

Kaidan could hardly believe his own words even as he said them. "Andres, shut up and listen to me. Get Sari and the kids and get out of the city. Now."
The line was silent for an overlong moment. "What?"

"Go out to Uncle Ivan's orchard or something, just get out. Don't wait. Do it now."

"Look, what's going on? Sari is at a conference at UGV and-"

The line exploded into a vicious screech, making Kaidan jump, then went dead. He swore, heart in his throat, and re-dialed Andres' ID. The line pinged a few times, then cut to an automated message apologizing for technical difficulties. Vega was looking at him, face limned in confusion but beset with a creeping realization.

Shouting erupted from the far side of the promenade. For a moment the world seemed to tilt at an awkward angle before Kaidan realized what was tilting was the top of the distant Metro Commerce Tower, just visible over the heads of the people by the railing. The shouting intensified, sprouting screams as more people rushed to watch. The tower dropped out of view, trailing a cloak of smoke and flinders. Vega was swearing, his voice joining the shocked outburst all around them. A bright red line of fire lanced through the blue sky then vanished, leaving a shimmering after-image.

The crash of the tower hitting the ground came as a vibration that rippled through the promenade, rattling the windows in their frames. An alarm klaxon blared from a nearby archway. The building's VI started listing off scramble orders.

Too fast.

Feverishly, Kaidan tried Andres' ID again. He hardly heard the same dead note, the robotic voice relaying an apology as he watched first one then another column of black smoke plume into the sky. The people on the promenade ahead of him looked at each other in mounting panic, mouths open and eyes wide. Omni-tools were flaring to life, grabbing pictures and video, tuning into news networks, calling out, as he was, to family.

The sound rolled over them, drowning out the confused babble, descending among them like a wave of flame washing through a dry pine forest, consuming all in its path. It rattled in Kaidan's ribcage, thrumming his skull against his clenched jaw. Vega pressed the heel of his hand to his temple, grimacing. Plugging his ears was pointless- the noise penetrated everything. Several people bolted, shoving past them, scattering back into the illusory safety of the building.

Alone in the growing pandemonium, Kaidan caught the Lieutenant's eye, the only steady gaze in the crowd. The bear of a man was a break against the crashing waves of people.

"It's them, isn't it?" Vega shouted over the noise.

Them.

Kaidan nodded. He thought but didn't say that there was only one entity in the entire galaxy that could generate that sound. That could in one complex note speak with the resounding voice of a trillion trillion dead. He tried to shift his mind into forward gear. The noise and crowd washed over him. Galvanized by adrenaline, the shifting pieces clicked into place in his head. No wonder he'd been yanked out of his morning muster meeting. No wonder Shepard had materialized out of who-knew-where to be called before the Committee. The Alliance was already scrambling.

The shouting crescendoed and wove into a unified shriek of dismay. Something blotted out the sun. Kaidan looked around to see first one and then a second and third set of gargantuan blue-black metal legs descending from above, out in the sky past the promenade. The buzzing howl pitched sharply upward, a tone that presaged only one thing. Both he and Vega backed instinctively into the support
pillar, bracing themselves.

An earsplitting crash shook the building, nearly throwing Kaidan to the floor. Above, an entire pane of glass leapt free from its housing and pirouetted to the floor, coming apart in a cascade of tempered fragments that rained off Kaidan's raised arms. The warning klaxon snapped into a full-blast evacuation siren as smoke and dust billowed from the entrance to their left. Answering crashes and shouts from within rattled off the litany of the floor above coming down in pieces. The entrance back into the building that lead to the Committee chambers was completely blocked with debris.

Kaidan summoned his best field officer's bellow and started barking orders at the reeling personnel around him. Many were office, technical and logistics staff who probably hadn't held a gun since Basic, much less been on the front lines of a war. People for whom the apex of excitement in their lives was the tedium of a yearly fire drill.

That awful sound roared again, mercifully a bit further away this time, but the building shook again, raining more glass and debris down from above. In his head, a sickening parallel marched in time to the cadence of panic- in his mind's eye he could see the Normandy SR-I burning all around him, feel the tremor of the ship getting hit. Hear the sound of that terrible weapon cleaving through the hull.

Shepard was somewhere up there.

Shuttles. The hangar bay. His gear, and transport. But to where? "Lieutenant! Was the Normandy still in drydock?"

"Last I heard!" Vega shouted back. "But I'd take bets she's not anymore!"

Anderson would head for the Normandy, if he was still alive. The ship was being refitted for him. Kaidan had been scheduled to be assigned there with the best of his biotics special forces unit... a team that was still at Fort Nashen, half a continent away.

Kaidan kept his feet moving, kept ordering and pushing toward emergency stairs. Lieutenant Vega kept pace with him, bodily picking people up off the ground and getting them moving. First one, then another squad of armored marines appeared, moving people along evacuation lines. Kaidan wasn't particularly heartened to see their rifles were drawn. A ground assault? He waved to Vega to follow him, leaving the rest of the evacuees behind and making for the hangar bay at a dead run.

His comm crackled to life. "This is Admiral Anderson. Report in, anyone!"

"Admiral!" Kaidan answered. "You're alive!"

"Major Alenko, is that you? What's your status?"

"Getting to a transport!"

"I can't raise the Normandy. You'll have to contact them. We'll meet you at the landing zone. Anderson out."

The line went dead before he could ask about Shepard. Kaidan cursed. There should have been more time. How were they already past the orbital defences? Luna?

Fighting their way through the press of people, the two of them finally made it to the hangar bay section. He heard his name shouted and turned to see a dark-skinned man waving at him. Kaidan recognized the face- it had been among those in the retrofit crew roster he'd been seen for the Normandy. As they approached, the man saluted and waved at them to follow him.
"Lieutenant Cortez, sir! Just got a page from Lieutenant Moreau. They, uh, liberated the Normandy from drydock-"

"We need to get on board!" Kaidan said.

"Aye sir!" Cortez waved toward the entrance. "The Kodiak on the end, Four-oh-three! Just waiting for Tarell and Jensen to report, they're on their way down."

"They've got as long as it takes me to get my gear." Kaidan turned and jogged to the back wall of the bay, where rows of lockers, weapon racks and crates lined the walls. Both marines and support staff were pulling guns off the wall and struggling into hardsuits while officers barked at them to move faster. He had to shoulder his way past a few soldiers, but Kaidan finally located the case stamped with his name, the one he'd been carting around with him ever since coming to Earth. He hiked it over his shoulder and made for the Kodiak.

Lieutenant Vega was waving a pair of uniformed crew into the ship as Kaidan approached.

"Major! Any word on Shepard's twenty?" Vega called.

"Got to be with Anderson," Kaidan said, hoping he was right. He wasn't sure. There had been a time he wouldn't have believed someone like Shepard could just be killed, but that belief had died over Alchera.

Maybe it was a mercy that he had no time to think about it. Cortez was already in the pilot's seat hurriedly running preflight procedures as they piled into the shuttle. Kaidan secured his load, then came up behind him.

"Are we ready to go, Cortez?"

"Trying to get clearance but I can't get through to the tower!"

"Just go when you can, we can't afford to wait around!"

"What the hell are those?" Cortez exclaimed.

Kaidan followed his pointed finger to see humanoid shapes scrambling up over the edge of the open hangar bay entrance. Pinpricks of sickly blue light were scattered along their dark bodies, and their heads cocked at an unnatural lolling angle as they shuffled to their feet and advanced.


"Reaper- Shit! Aye, sir!"

The Kodiak lifted into the air, and Kaidan grabbed one of the grips overhead to steady himself. "I don't suppose you can give them a parting gift, Lieutenant?"

"That's the plan," Cortez answered grimly, hands playing over the controls.

The Kodiak's nose swung around, its mounted guns thumped, each impact blowing holes in the advancing creatures, scattering limbs and stringy viscera. As the marines at the end of the bay opened fire, Cortez maneuvered the shuttle up and out into the city.

What was left of Kaidan's brittle hope crumbled. Sovereign, one Reaper alone, had cost the fleets of all Citadel species dearly. And now there were easily a dozen of those monstrous black shapes darkening the sky, unperturbed by the blistering explosions peppering their hides as swarms of
Alliance fighters buzzed around them. Red lances of energy etched too-bright lines across his vision, slicing ships in half with heartwrenching ease. Above, faint smoky contrails traced lines down to earth, the last signs of objects dropping out of orbit. The destruction stretched from horizon to horizon.

Run, Andres... get out. Please.

The madness spread with such speed that even the Normandy didn't feel safe. Flickers of news reports told the same story all over the world. There were so many of them. Kaidan wondered where he'd let himself believe, or perhaps hope, that beings of such power could only exist in small numbers. That when they finally came, surely they could be pushed back with the combined might of the Alliance fleet. Now, after having seen the destruction from the sky, and only narrowly escaping themselves, all of that seemed like foolishness.

The list of 'I should haves' swiftly became an intrusive background drone joining his litany of fears and threatening to overwhelm his calm. No time to find his family, his friends, or even the commando teams he'd been training the last few months. Communications had been devastated so badly that even getting through to other Alliance vessels was difficult at best. The Reapers had done a horribly effective job of disrupting any kind of effective counter-attack, and now Alliance forces were scrambling every which way and being cut down one by one.

And yet despite it all, his heart had done a little staccato dance when Anderson had called and said that he was with Shepard, and both in need of pickup.

It should have come as no surprise to Kaidan that any vessel with Normandy painted on the hull would have a pilot named Joker firmly planted in the pilot's chair. Nor that said pilot would sneer at the notion of rescuing Anderson and Shepard with a shuttle, and instead elect to fly a full-size frigate into downtown Vancouver in the middle of a pitched point-blank battle. The sudden insanity had a burst of such familiarity that a spark ignited somewhere deep down.

There had to be a way. Hadn't they proven that before?

His head was swimming in a confused babble of conflicting thoughts by the time Shepard left Anderson behind and came jogging up the ramp, bruised and scraped but otherwise unharmed.

"Joker, we're clear! Move!" Kaidan ordered.

"Roger!"

The deck under his feet shifted, the ship spinning along the edge of the inertial dampers. The smoking vista of the city sailed past as the ramp cycled shut, flaring the sunlight across the spars of the city before sealing with a thud. There was a sepulchral finality to the sound, slicing off the Reaper's howling calls, the buzz of their weapons, and the shriek of shattering metal. The bright afternoon of the first day of the apocalypse descended into the cool, clean familiarity of a cargo bay.

"Joker, is that you?" Shepard asked, walking into the bay, taking in the docked Kodiak, materials and weapon benches. Vega was coming to meet them.

"In the flesh!" Joker answered. "Major, we got a damn lot of noise out here! Lahore's gone down, Agincourt taking heavy fire, requesting backup!"

Agincourt was over the spaceport. Just one... "Clear the combat zone," Kaidan said. Every word burned. I could just... give them more time. But the finality of Anderson's last orders was clear. "Engage the stealth system." He let the assault rifle hang loosely in his grip. It felt useless.
"Roger."

"What's going on?" Vega demanded.

"Anderson wants us to get to the Citadel, get help for the fight," Shepard said.

"Bullshit! He wouldn't order us to leave!"

"We don't have a choice," she shot back, "without help, this war is already over."

"Forget it. Drop me off someplace, 'cause I'm not leaving."

"Enough," Kaidan said. "I heard Anderson. He's right. We... have to go." The last three words forced themselves out despite his mind shouting against every syllable.

"We're getting killed out there! And we're sitting in one of the most advanced ships in the fleet! We can't just turn tail and-"

"Damn it, Lieutenant," Kaidan flared, "my family is down there! Don't talk to me about what it means if we leave!"

He saw Shepard wince and close her eyes for a moment. Vega's jaw worked in soundless frustration, then he threw his arms up and turned away, pacing a circle like an agitated grizzly.

Joker's voice cut into the comms again. "We're clearing the combat zone. Orders?"

Kaidan looked at Shepard, then cleared his tightening throat. "Anderson gave the orders to you, Shepard, not me."

"You're the ranking officer on this ship, Major," she said, not meeting his gaze.

Never had the statement of his rank felt more like an indictment. Something out of synch with reality. "This is your ship and your mission. It always has been." And all I want to do is go back there. I would give anything.

"Is anyone on this crew even going to trust my command?" Shepard folded her arms tightly. "I just spent six months being labeled as an unstable rogue asset, and that's only if you want to be polite about it. A mass-murdering nutjob."

"Commander," Vega cut in, jabbing an outstretched finger in the direction of the ramp, "everything you've been warning us about for the past three years just blew through our curtain wall like it wasn't there. Anyone who still thinks you're loco should get shown the airlock."

"It's not that simple, Vega."

"Incoming emergency transmission from Admiral Hackett," Joker announced.

The three of them looked at each other, then Kaidan strode over to the modification bench and popped up the holoscreen. "Patch it through."

Hackett's scarred face appeared, the image stuttering with interference.

"... Shepard?"

"Commander Shepard is on board, sir," Kaidan said.
Shepard stepped up beside Kaidan and saluted the screen. If the admiral noticed, he didn't respond. The image froze, then shivered back to life.

"Shepard... sustained heavy losses. Force was overwhelming... there's no way we can beat them conventionally..."

"Anderson's already ordered us to the Citadel, to talk to the Council," she replied.

"First I need you... iance outpost on Mars... ore we lose control of the system... been researching the Prothean Archives with Dr. T'Soni. ... found a way to stop the Reapers... only way to stop them... in contact soon. Hackett out."

The image froze again, then cut out completely. The modification interface returned.

"Mars?" Vega said dubiously, cutting the sudden silence.

"Liara." Shepard mused. "If she's there then it must be something important. Important enough to leave her... other job."

Kaidan opened his omni tool and entered a series of commands. The writhing in his gut increased as he put the last one through, signing away the last remotely reasonable chance he had of going looking for his family. The special hell of being responsible. The ship VI pinged in response, officially transferring command to Shepard.

"That's two admirals giving you the order," he said, dropping his arms. "I think that overrides my authority. It's your ship, Commander."

Shepard eyed Kaidan narrowly for a moment. It felt like a physical force crawling across him, a nervous tingle along his back. For almost a year now, Shepard had been a half-remembered phantom existing somewhere out there in the black. Schrodinger's person, at once real and not real. Now the box had been opened, the wave collapsed, and she was here, a presence that seemed to electrify the air with sparks and flashes of painful familiarity.

She touched her comms. "Joker, set course for Mars. All possible speed."

"Roger that," came the answer. "Nice to have you back, Commander."

She smirked.

"Lieutenant," Kaidan said, "it's not going to take us long to get to Mars. We need to find Commander Shepard some equipment."

Vega's face split into a grim smile. "Cortez told me Anderson left a couple of care packages on board just in case. They're somewhere in here."

"Find them."

"On it."

Kaidan waited for him to move away before turning to face Shepard. "Maybe a better question in all this is if you can trust the crew. The Alliance."

She exhaled, closing her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again, the light from the back of the cargo bay glinted in the artificial retinas.

"Do you know what those clowns in the Committee said? They looked at me like a bunch of gaping
fish and said 'what do we do?" A cold fury danced in her voice. "Now, when the Reapers are in our living room. They couldn't have asked me that six bloody months ago? A year?"

"What would you have told them?"

"Anything! Do anything except grope blindly in the dark for their own asses! Step up readiness drills. Training. Harden comm networks. Speed up distribution of QE comms. Build more ships, step up recruitment. Talk to the other species! Make a plan!"

"Some of that has been going on."

"And yet there was no plan. No talks. Was I it? Keep the weapon on ice for a while, poke and prod me with tests, then when the Reapers are standing on our toes, hope I'll crap out a solution?" She threw up her hands.

Kaidan shook his head. "Hackett must have been working on something, but..."

"Bunch of idiots," she rasped. "I bought them time in blood. I warned them. Gave them every scrap of data from the Collector mission. So many people dying, and now we have to run."

A thick silence stretched out, broken only by the thud of a crate, then another hitting the ground and the grunts of the marine moving them. Time bought in blood... the destruction of an entire star system. The intersection between the Shepard he'd known on the SR-1 and the one now standing before him didn't seem to line up. Or he didn't want them to. There had to have been another way. The Shepard he'd known would have looked for another way. There had to be something else.

"And... us?" Kaidan said quietly.

He could see Shepard's eyes tracking Vega across the room. "I know you'll do your job, and do it well," she said curtly. "That isn't a question."

He wet his lips. "Kye-"

"Do not call me that," she snarled, each word a distinct blade. She opened her mouth to continue, then snapped it shut again. The muscles around her jaw pulsed with poorly repressed agitation. "You broke my heart, Kaidan, not my trust," she said, soft and hard. "But that doesn't matter. Not anymore. I don't matter."

"What? That's absurd-"

She cut him off with an irritated wave. "That's not what I mean... I..." She used her fingers to crown her head with a pair of horns. "The totem matters. Commander Shepard matters. The propaganda poster." She dropped her arms back to her sides. "I went back to the Alliance because I had to take responsibility for what I'd done. But I also..." she sighed. "It was the one chance I had for... To be back somewhere, anywhere, that I belonged. That I wanted to be. Or maybe it was because I had nowhere else. I don't even know. None of it matters now."

"Yes it does," Kaidan insisted, weak though it felt. His thoughts kept shifting, scattering away from any attempt to form a coherent train. "We can sort this out-"

Shepard stepped toward him, fixing her eyes on his, boring into him. "I tried to hate you," she said between her teeth, barely loud enough to carry the short distance separating them. "I tried with every fiber of my being. It would have made everything so much easier. Clear. But every time I tried, I thought about what it would have been like if it had been the other way around. Can you imagine how I would have reacted if you'd shown up after two years wearing that logo?"
"Hate. "I... Maybe," he managed. His heart pounded in his ears.

"I know you can. And when it comes time to make that choice again, and it \textit{will} happen, what I trust is that you'll be the man I know you are."

"Found it!" Vega called out.

"And just like Horizon," Shepard said, "you'll be right to do it." She painted on a humorless smile, more of a grimace. "This machine kills Reapers." She spun on her heel and crossed toward Vega, who dumped the crate on the modification bench and opened it.

Kaidan trailed along behind them, the gun in his hand suddenly weighing a hundred kilos. Shepard pulled a helmet out of the crate and turned it over in her hands, running a thumb over the N7 logo emblazoned on the reinforcing band. It looked unmarked by any use.

"Refit or new?" she asked.

"Stripped and refit, I think," Vega said. "They, uh, probably didn't want to leave any Cerberus programming in there."

"Fine by me. Amp?"

Curiosity prickled at Kaidan through the veil of gloom. What had become of her biotics after Cerberus' tampering was a matter of some debate, a debate made up mostly of rumors and third-hand reports that ventured into truly wild territory. Vega fished out a small case and put it on the table.

Shepard made an irritated noise in her throat. "Where's my Serrice?"

He shrugged. "Sorry, Shepard. I don't know."

"They better not be expecting me to save the galaxy on a half-power rig."

\textit{Half-power?} Kaidan frowned. The case on the table was stamped with a Sirta logo. It wasn't an asari amp, but whatever model was inside was certainly not a standard-issue L3 Aldrin.

She picked it up and scowled at the specs written on the side, then put it back down. "Damn it. Well, nothing to be done about it right now. Let's hope they haven't made it to Mars yet."

"The hell is this?" Vega withdrew a strange bulbous contraption made of a dun silver metal and wrapped in a few strips of red tape.

"Looks like... geth tech," said Kaidan.

Shepard's eyebrows went up, and she reached out and took it from the skeptical-looking lieutenant. When she touched something along the length, it unfolded with a soft hiss, popping the taped seals. A grip and a trio of snub-nosed barrels emerged from the smooth cowling.

"Geth make shotguns?" Vega said dubiously.

"I didn't think I'd see this again." A small smile quirked Shepard's mouth as she hefted the weapon, sighting down the length. "A friend made it for me."

The brief swell of real warmth that colored her voice was a knife in Kaidan's gut. There was a flash of the person he remembered, from a time when a smile like that might have been meant for him.

It seemed like a very long time ago.
"Surprised they left it," Vega continued blithely, "practically took the place down to the deckplates after you brought her in."

Shepard swallowed, the warmth vanishing. "Yeah. You two better suit up." She put the gun back down and proceeded to strip off the outer jacket of her fatigues.

Kaidan turned on his heel and marched doggedly toward the Kodiak, where his own armor and weapons were still sitting in their crate. As of today, arguably everything he owned in the world. And gone with everything else was any sense of normalcy, that there was a home to go back to, a line of retreat. Maybe it was true, too, that Shepard herself was no longer recognizable.

He set his teeth and began pulling armor pieces out, letting habit and training take over. Shoving everything down as best he could, he fixed Mars in mind, the thin hope of Hackett's words. A next step. A weapon. A target.

Anything but dwell on what was lost.
An Endangered Species

The Citadel should not have seemed so sinister. Though perhaps, Liara reflected, it was more a result of how much her own thinking had changed in the short time since she had last set foot on the huge station. Was it short? It had to have been over a year. A short time, and yet so much had changed in that span.

Or perhaps it was because she was all too aware of the eyes on her since leaving the docking area. Shepard had been oblivious, of course. Even several hours after the events on Mars, her world was still narrowly focused on a single objective- getting Kaidan to Huerta Memorial.

More than anything, though, it was because Liara wasn't connected. Six months had been more than enough time to get used to having just about any information she could possibly imagine only a few holodisplays away, at any time she wanted it. Many a sleepless night was spent just following link after link in meandering chains of contacts, money and politics. Fascinating and heady stuff. And as she was now discovering, addictive.

What truly quickened her stride through the ward was the gaping sense of emptiness, the void left by severed connections. Everything out there simply left... hanging. She tried to content herself with the knowledge that Feron was engaged in keeping the fraying edges of the vast web pulled together, keeping contact with her multitude of agents, but it wasn't enough. The Reapers' advance was pulling on every thread, threatening to unravel the whole enterprise, and she was without her link.

Deep in Teyseri ward, on the fringes of a still only half-repaired commerce district, the world was oblivious to her anxieties as she approached her meeting. Standing at the appointed corner was a lean figure in a long coat and hood. A few odd angles described the light body armor she knew he must be wearing. While he looked inattentive, even indolent as he gazed out into the crowd, she knew Feron was anything but. He turned and fell into step beside her, grinning out from under his hood.

"I hope you have some good news for me," she said, watching the crowd.

"My presence isn't enough? It's nice to see you too."

She chuckled despite herself. After the madness of Mars, it was good to see him. The news these days was so grim that his easy humor was welcome. "I am sorry, I have had a rather long day. Twelve hours ago I was being chased by Cerberus troopers... it has not done my manners any favors."

"In that case, I do have some good news for you. I found all the extra equipment you requested, just give me a dock number and it'll be there."

"Perfect. I can't afford to take my time."

"There's bad news too. I lost contact with many agents on Earth. Most."

Liara nodded. "I expected that."

"Arcturus station is a debris field."

"You confirmed?"
"Yes."

She sighed. That too was expected, but no less disturbing. The center of the human government and military, obliterated.

"Much of the Alliance Military went dark, too," Feron said. "Wherever they are, it would seem command is in comms lockdown. What's left of them, anyway. I've been working on the liaisons we have here on the Citadel."

"I have contacts through Shepard now, I'll see what I can do."

"Something else came up." Feron dropped his voice, also scanning the people around them. "An odd little detail. Our mutual friend picked up some chatter on a routine sweep of Citadel comms that pinged a few too many flags. Commander Shepard is on the station?"

"Yes. I arrived with her."

He chuckled. "You were right... she creates quite a stir wherever she goes."

"It's not just her. The whole Citadel is buzzing. Refugees from all over Citadel space are pouring in."

"And even outside Citadel space. Aria T'Loak is here too."

That was something of a shock. The self-proclaimed queen of Omega leaving her domain? Liara cursed softly. She wasn't used to being so behind the information curve. Something grave must have happened out in the Terminus systems, and she was only finding out now? She had to get herself reestablished as soon as possible.

"That explains why you wanted to meet in the Teyseri Ward," Liara commented.

"I think I'm off her radar for now. She found herself another loud club to lord over. I don't think she feels comfortable unless there's enough ambient bass and exposed flesh around."

"What has she been doing?"

"Not easy to tell. She's more than capable of keeping her dealings below the waterline. I can't be sure, but she seems to have some extremely powerful connections." Feron laced his fingers together and tried very hard to affect an air of circumspection. "Does she have... ah... pull with Thessia?"

Liara chewed her lip. An avowed criminal like Aria shouldn't have had that kind of power in Citadel space, but Liara knew better than that. "The Citadel has kept the peace with the Terminus systems for decades. I doubt very much that peace was a product of simple goodwill."

"I suppose not. Well, Citadel Security Immigration rather abruptly dropped their bid to have her deported. Anyway, that isn't what set off the flags. Aria seems to be trying to re-establish control of her merc gangs. Word is she was seen talking to Commander Shepard."

"They had some dealings back on Omega. Aria may be looking for more favors, especially if she's out of her comfort zone."

"Indeed. Well, Aria is good at keeping her business off the record, but not all of her operatives are as skilled. Does the name Septimus Oraka mean anything to you?"

Liara frowned. The image of a middle-aged turian flashed through her mind, his speech slurred with drink. "Yes. He's working for Aria?"
"No, worse. He's stepping on her toes."

"How so?"

"I'm not sure, but I'm assuming as much, because certain... assets were just activated. Calls sent out, if you get my meaning. We actually picked this up from the potential assassin. He's the one who isn't dusting his prints very well. But here's where it gets odd."

"Who is it?"

"You remember who Commander Shepard went to visit immediately before turning herself in six months ago?"

_The Krios boy? Goddess, what does he think he's doing, taking up a contract against a turian general?"

"My guess would be trying to prove something."

Liara sighed. Prove something indeed. A lost child trying desperately to follow in his father's footsteps, despite the better jobs afforded to him. He must have seen Aria's presence on the station as the perfect opportunity to ingratiate himself to someone in a position of considerable power.

"My information is spotty," Feron said, "but the go-ahead hasn't been given yet. I'm not sure why."

"So we may have a window of opportunity to stop this." She tapped a few commands into her omni-tool.

"Stop it?" Feron said mildly.

"There's a reason Shepard talked Bailey into accepting him, Feron. She was trying to keep him from following in his father's footsteps."

"The assassin." His voice went oddly cold.

"Yes." The version of Glyph running on her omni-tool was less powerful than the main VI housed with her primary data array, but nonetheless still considerably better connected than a civilian VI. Glyph could tap into a distributed data network spanning servers across several Wards of the Citadel. Liara keyed a request into her omni-tool for her file on Kolyat Krios.

"It will take a few minutes, Shadow Broker," the VI responded into her ear, speaking through her comms, "I must route the request for C-Sec updates status through our backdoor."

"Take your time, don't arouse any suspicion," she replied softly.

Glyph acknowledged her with a ping, and the interface closed itself.

"What do you know of those like Thane Krios?" she asked Feron. "The assassins?"

He grimaced, twisting the smooth segments of his face. "The hanar use us, then try to convince us it's noble. Sold as a child to a life of murder, complete with a neat little philosophy to deflect all responsibility." 

She watched him sidelong for a moment.

"Yeah, I know what I've done," he said, tapping his armored chest. "But you know what? I own it, and my mistakes too. You'll never catch me mumbling prayers claiming it's not my fault because
someone else paid me. Better to be an honest liar than a killer slave for those jellyfish."

"You don't talk of your own people very often."

He looked away, examining the sweep of the buildings above them. "Why do you think I left? If I'm going to die in a dark hole, better to have it be one of my own choosing than wear the lead collar of a 'client species'. Ugh."

She nodded. They walked for a short time in silence before she caught him looking in her direction. He quickly glanced away. The slouch of his shoulders spoke volumes.

"Feron," Liara said, "if I've had any lesson hammered home in my short time in my... new job, it's that lives are much more complicated than we know. It was the same for Thane Krios. In the end, he wanted more for his son, and he gave his life in defence of all of us."

"Yeah." He scuffed the ground with his boot as he walked. "Guess that's better than I can expect to do, huh?"

She smiled at him. "Your life is just as complicated. You helped me save Shepard. If you want a noble legacy, I would say that is an excellent start."

"Let's not start talking about legacies just yet, okay? I have a lot of life to make up for yet."

Glyph pinged in Liara's ear. She tugged on Feron's sleeve and led him into a side street, out of the flow of foot traffic. A file appeared on her omni-tool. She scanned it. Kolyat was still a member of C-Sec, but his record had accrued a number of disciplinary issues. He was competent physically, scoring very well in marksmanship and close quarters combat techniques, but his work ethic had been called into question by superiors. The suggestion was made that he wasn't suited to field duty, especially dealing with civilians. A short temper, it said.

She rubbed her temple. It was times like this when the same question presented itself, and came with no easy answer. Just how much should she interfere with someone else's life and the choices they'd made? So much could be manipulated below the surface. The level of power she now commanded just through the careful alignment of subtle factors...

But no, this situation was clear enough. A child who had been turned away from the brink by a parent written off as lost, only to lose that parent a bare few months later to a threat the child could not see or understand. Now he was all alone in the world, trying to fit himself into a job that he didn't want. Was the murderous streak simply youthful bravado, or a more deep-seated anger? He certainly wasn't displaying a great deal of restraint trying to take a contract from Aria, one of the most dangerous people alive.

"Problem?" Feron asked. His large eyes picked up the scattered light of the advertising holos out on the street, playing a rainbow of colors to match his skin.

"I'm not sure..." A possible answer popped into her head all at once. "Feron, how do you think young mister Krios would feel about working for the Shadow Broker?"

Feron tugged at the edge of his hood. "Well now, I'm not sure it ever did me any good. I seem to recall having to work with this one asari one time..."

"Please. I only blame one person for what happened- the yahg. And as I recall you scorched the ugly right off his bright red hide."
"I just wish-"

"Liara, I'm quite happy to be done with it," he said shortly.

"I... of course."

His moods had become mercurial of late, flashing from one extreme to another. But always within a minute or two he would be back to his sly half-smile, an expression behind which he hid most of what he really thought. "Make little Krios an agent, huh?" he rubbed his jaw thoughtfully.

"Perhaps it would appeal to his desire to feel important, without getting himself killed."

"We already have people in C-Sec. And he's low rank, he's not going to provide much we don't already know."

"Feron, this isn't for us. It's for him. We can keep an eye on him. And if you want to be practical about it, if we... direct his talents, he could grow into a very valuable asset."

"I suppose- Wait." He eyed her narrowly. "You're going to get me to do this, aren't you?"

"You know I can't deal with him directly. We have Antin Val in C-Sec, but he won't have the patience for a new agent. This is... an unusual circumstance. He's alone, and another drell might help him feel connected. We have to make it all seem a little dangerous. Thrilling." She affected an expression of overwrought concern. "You may have to lie here and there, Feron."

He laughed. "Well, if I can bring my best assets to bear, how can I refuse? On one condition. A favor for a favor."

Liara folded her arms. "I know where this is going."

"You get to be right all the time, now I want a chance to be smug. Just for a little while. She's here too, you know. On the Citadel."

"Aethyta?"

"Convenient, isn't it?"

A nasty scowl only made his grin widen. "Fine. I'll look at your evidence."

"With your voracious nose for dirt, I don't know why you're avoiding this one."

The temptation to explain it all was stronger than it had been before. But still, Liara found herself unwilling to get into the reasons behind her hesitation to delve into the unknown, or at least unconfirmed, half of her parentage. It would involve explaining what had happened to her mother. She wasn't sure she wanted to resurrect those ghosts right now.

"I'll let you plan out the details," she said instead. "Just don't get the boy killed."

"Of course not. We're an endangered species, after all." He looked back out into the street. "Now, all this skullduggery is making me hungry. When was the last time you ate?"
A Defensive Stance

Maybe it was a trick of the atmosphere, but it didn't look like there was an atmosphere. At some point he just stopped looking up into the vast black orb of Palaven looming over them, running red and orange with the blood of a hundred thousand fires. All it did was disorient him, convince his instincts that there should be no air to go along with the overly light gravity. Giant death machines stomping across the planet's surface, slicing ships out of the air and dropping meteors full of shambling husks, and it was the freakishly empty sky that was getting to him?

The last thing James Vega was going to do was wig out in front of Commander Shepard, thank you very much.

The ground thudded under his feet, announcing the arrival of more Reaper stooges. It only took a few seconds for husks to start streaming over the ridge, loping along with their rigid, awkward gait. For all their clumsiness, the damn things closed the distance fast, completely heedless of any amount of ordnance headed in their direction, their human faces twisted into a permanent open-mouthed grimace.

At least it was something to take his attention off the sky.

"Husks, on Palaven! They import these things special just to piss us off, don't they?" he shouted. One blast from his shotgun disabused a pair of them from their own legs, sending them sprawling.

"Shock troops. I'm more worried about what comes next!" Garrus called back, oddly jovial considering the circumstances.

An old friend of Shepard's, apparently. The turian that had been a part of her crew during the fight against Saren and even the Collectors. The extensive scar on one side of his face certainly spoke volumes. At least he was a good shot. In short, perfectly controlled bursts, Garrus' assault rifle tore up another three husks that rounded a rocky spur on their right. From somewhere up the ridge James could hear the tinny bark of Shepard's weird geth shotgun going off, accompanied by the squelch of husk bodies coming apart.

"Vega! Look out!"

The ground shuddered. He barely caught the huge, dark shape bearing down on him from the corner of his eye. Mercifully, it was enough time to lurch to the side just as something massive crashed into the rock right next to him, close enough for him to see the scattered reflection of his old marine company insignia splashed along the side of a curving plate of dark metal.

The thing moved, shifting backward and twisting its hulking torso, its shoulders easily twice as wide as his. A freakish head swung into view- a turian skull with pinprick blue eyes, wired into the body via thick, snaking cables. Jawless, the beast snarled at him, a grinding half-mechanical rumble that reverberated along a crest of raised bones on its back.

James yelled right back and squeezed the trigger on his shotgun.

A piece of its metal shoulder armor tore away. A huge arm lashed out, catching James across the chest. His shield flared, but the impact still lifted him off his feet and sent him crashing to the ground. The starry sky spun violently around. The roar of gunfire bounced off the inside of his helmet, punctuated by the shriek of rounds chattering off a metallic surface. Someone shouted his name. He scrambled to his feet just in time to get clear as the beast brought both claws down, shattering the
stone of the ground he had just vacated. Its cruel head swung around, searching for its wayward prey. Chips of stone rained off its arms as it straightened, well over eight feet high despite the hunched frame.

James had fought all kinds of aliens in the line of duty, but even a fully armored krogan berserker looked weedy compared to this thing. He had learned the important lesson rather painfully—do not be in arm's reach of anything bigger than yourself.

The skull head snapped violently to one side, spraying sparks and dark ichor. For a moment the great beast sagged, a grating electronic howl buzzing out of it. James was about to call out a congratulations on the shot when it pushed itself violently back to its feet. Only one of its eyes still appeared to be functional as it swung its baleful gaze around.

James picked out Garrus' head and overlarge collar sticking out from behind an outcropping of rock some distance away. He was popping the clip out of his sniper rifle.

"I think I just pissed it off!" the turian called.

"Better you than me!" James remarked, firing into its body. "You might want to—"

The beast launched itself toward the turian in a berserk charge, its huge clawed feet churning up clods of gravel. Garrus spouted an invective exotic enough to choke James' translator, backpedaling. The beast crashed into the rocky outcrop, obliterating it with a downward sweep of both arms. Garrus fired his rifle from the hip, tearing away a piece of its lower torso. The air around the beast seemed to shudder and condense, suddenly alive with blue distortion. The squeal of twisting metal filled the air. It staggered, flailing one claw as if it could wipe away the shearing gravity.

James didn't realize just how much he'd missed working with a biotic. Nothing ruined your enemies' day like being betrayed by the fundamental forces of the universe. "Garrus, get clear!" He yanked a pair of grenades from his belt clips and without bothering to feed them into the launch rail, primed and heaved them underarm to the beast's feet, then dove for cover.

The sharp detonations almost drowned out the answering roar. When James looked up again, he saw Shepard advancing down the slope, firing her heavy pistol in rhythmic booms. The creature was trying to pull itself to its feet, sparkling and pissing ichor from several rents in its hide. One of its legs was mangled beyond recognition, and yet it doggedly reached for the commander even as she riddled it with more holes. James added his own shotgun to the barrage until finally the beast shuddered and lay still, emitting a long hissing wheeze that ended in a pop and crackle.

"Can't turn my back for one second, can I?" Shepard nudged the smoking skull with her boot.

Garrus came up behind her, fussing with something on his sniper scope. "We were fine; I was just introducing Lieutenant Vega to Menae's new fauna."

"Funny," James grunted. "What in hell is that thing?"

"We've been calling them 'brutes'."

"Suits 'em, I guess."

"Just one is a picnic. Wait until they show up in threes."

James couldn't decide if he liked the turian or wanted to sock him one. "Great. I'm going to need a bigger shotgun."
It was past shift change when Shepard emerged into the cargo bay. Cortez had long since checked out for some rack time, so in the quiet of the ship's background hum, James could hear the commander puttering around at the weapon bench, running maintenance checks or whatever it was that she did to burn off the tension of a mission. Every marine had their habits. He'd finished his own workout and had started sorting through his inventory of grenades and sinks.

He was bent over his armor's powerplant adjusting the Foucault current generator when boots announced Shepard's approach to the corner of the bay he'd more or less claimed as his personal space.

"Everything all right, Lieutenant?" Shepard asked, walking over.

"Yeah." He turned and regarded her, wiping the carbon off his hands. "So, you think this Victus is going to step up to the plate?"

Shepard folded her arms and gave a small shrug. "Garrus seems to think he'll do the job. He'd know better than I would."

"I guess anyone that can hold off an army of those brutes that long gets my respect."

She nodded. "Makes you wonder what else the Reapers are going to spring on us."

"We'll handle it." He hefted the backplate of his armor and plugged it into a thick cable snaking back over the stacked crates behind his workbench. He turned back and fixed Shepard with a curious look. "Been meaning to ask, Lola, I think you owe me a rematch."

She raised an eyebrow, though whether it was at the nickname or the proposition was debatable. "Is that so?"

He bounced slightly on the balls of his feet. "Yeah. Last time we danced, you were pullin'."

"Maybe a little."

"A little? I saw what you did to that husk that tried to climb your leg on Menae. Took its head clean off. I think you were giving me the soft sell."

"I wasn't going to cheat during a sparring match."

"Oh ho ho, cheat?" He moved a little ways out into the bay, throwing a few shadow punches. "The heck is that supposed to mean?"

Her expression drew down into a narrow scowl. "It means that Cerberus did a lot more to me than the standard Alliance gene mods."

"I hear a lot of talk. Walk the walk."

"Someone already went down on my watch, Vega. Putting someone else in the hospital won't help this mission."

"Is that what the long face is about? Alenko?"

"Now who's the psychologist?"

"Just a soldier who's seen a few things. Now hey, Cerberus is in the mix now too, right? What if they modded all their goons? I gotta know what to expect."
Her face went hard, eyes intent. The sudden stillness seemed to suck the ship's ambient hum out of the air. He threw an experimental punch, then another, both of which she deflected with a raised forearm.

"Make sure that tomorrow, you remember that you asked for this," she said, balling her fists.

"I surely will," he said with a grin.

She didn't return it as she circled, arms raised in a defensive stance. Gone was the easy posture from the last time they had sparred, the casual questions. Her face was set in the still concentration of a lioness honing in for a kill.

Two quick hits failed to connect. She didn't block them, instead she simply wasn't there. He shifted his weight forward, closing the distance and bringing a strike around wide, cutting off her escape and following it up with a short jab. His right arm hit a steel bar and the left caught only the slightest graze of her cheekbone. His momentum rolled into a twist that dodged the worst of the riposte, but instead of the expected second hit, his shifting weight butted up against a leg and he stumbled. She smacked him smartly on the back of the head as he went by.

"You're used to intimidating people with your size," she said. "Stop posturing and fight to win."

He spun around. "Posturing, huh? I'll-"

Her fist was headed for his face before he could blink. He managed to get his left forearm up in time to send it wide, but his answering right hook hit only air. A stunning impact slammed into his ribs, punching the air from his lungs with a grunt. He staggered back, trying to suck in a breath through lungs that suddenly wouldn't cooperate. He spent a deeply embarrassing few seconds groping for air.

"Ow, okay," he muttered.

Shepard flexed her knuckles. "That wasn't full strength."

He managed a chuckle. She wasn't advancing just yet, but hovering on a tipping point. He could back off, he knew. Laugh it off. Lesson learned, right. He rubbed his bruised ribs. Well... Ma didn't birth a quitter.

He raised his fists.

Aching ribs complained bitterly with each punch he threw. He kept them tight and fast, not expecting them to hit, but forcing Shepard to respond. Her speed was uncanny. She seemed to know where he was going to hit even before he did. Punching wasn't going to get anywhere. A few quick steps closed the distance, and he managed to loop an arm around into something of a headlock. He expected her to twist or go after his legs, but she did neither. He heard Shepard breathe in and felt her body tighten further. Her grip bore down, and slowly his arm was being forced away. He redoubled his effort, straining against her vice-like grip. Inexorably, she pushed his arm away. His muscles were beginning to burn. Whip-fast, she yanked herself free and he had to retreat quickly to avoid getting an elbow in the face.

He stared at her. His biceps ached from the effort. There was no way she should have been able to just force her way out of that.

"I'm stronger and faster than you," she said bluntly. "Stop trying to power through me."

He realized what was so disconcerting. He was usually good at reading people physically, good at gauging strength. Size and strength usually had a certain correlation, and certain limits, even when gene mods were taken into account. He took pride in being able to accurately decide when to use his strength and when not to, balancing things in his favor. But Shepard didn't fit into the neat boxes of
any of his instincts. There was no way her build should have translated into that much power.

He had assumed the talk of augments was some kind of bravado. It wasn't, well... human.

He shook off the thought. She still sweated and bled like any other marine, she could be taken down. He waded back in, trying to find an opening in her maddening defense and getting a few sharp returning jabs as punishment. She got a grip on his left arm and twisted around, going for a hold. In a flash of instinct, he shifted his weight into her. She may have had him beaten on brute strength, but he still had reach and weight. He wrenched himself around, using his hip to pull her off her feet in a quick motion. Robbed of her leverage, he was able to send her sprawling.

She was actually wearing a grim smile when she climbed back to her feet. "Good one."

He smiled back despite himself, still breathing hard. "Something had to work, right?"

She didn't raise her fists again, but instead regarded him with a frank look, rolling a kink out of her shoulder. "Some marines just keep trying the same thing over and over again thinking next time will be different."

James spread his hands. "Hey now, I'm more than just a pretty face."

"That's why you're on this team."

"Is that all? I thought after all this time you might have actually started to like me."

She smirked. "Don't take it personally, but the warden is never the popular type."

Six months hanging out in Commander Shepard's vicinity hadn't done much to expand James' knowledge of the commander, and yet he felt like he'd learned far more in the few days aboard the Normandy than in all that time. Back on Earth, he'd been starting to wonder why anyone thought she was anything special. All he'd seen was a taciturn woman with a chip on her shoulder a mile wide. Then the shit hit the fan and abruptly the leader had emerged. Still, he wasn't sure if his attempt at the nickname game had been endearing or if she was just going along with it for his sake.

"I didn't exactly love playing babysitter, either," he replied with a shrug. It hurt. "Maybe my house arrest wasn't official, but it might as well have been."

She cocked her head. "Why'd they put you on ice?"

"Eh... I might've gone AWOL for a little bit."

"I'm guessing you weren't just out back taking a leak."

"Anderson interrupted a bit of a bar brawl." He put on his best shit-eating grin. "On Omega. They just love humans there. Didn't you know all this?"

Shepard shook her head. "I wasn't kept in the loop while in the brig. Omega? That's a damn long way to go for a drink."

"I wanted to be a damn long way away from the Alliance for a while. Clear my head."

"After Fehl?"

He shifted his weight. "Yeah. It had to have been a little while after you smoked the Collectors. I was at the bar, having a perfectly decent card game, and some stuffshirt reporter on the holo started calling you names."
That got him an odd, wary look. "Me?"

"Yeah, all the Hegemony BS. You know."

"I... don't watch the news anymore," she said vaguely. "Not for a long time."

James chuckled. "Well, you know it's mostly noise anyway. And the noise of that stupid vid was pissing me off. Things degenerated from there. Anderson arrived just in time... or maybe a little too early. Busting batarian heads never gets old. I was having fun."

"Well, Anderson hiked all the way out to the far end of the galaxy to pick you up, so obviously he also thinks you're more than a pretty face."

"For six months of playing warden for someone who should have been given medals, yeah. Just a couple of the Alliance's undesirables, right?" He plucked at his shirt. "Can't let us serve, can't let us off the leash."

"Can't shoot us for insubordination."

"Fun times. Hey Shepard, no hard feelings?"

She shook her head. "It wasn't your call anyway, and we've got bigger problems."

"Thanks for the real dance."

"It was fun." Oddly, there was more life in those few words than any other time he'd heard her speak.

*Maybe 'Loco' would've been a better nickname after all.* "I guess with all those augs you don't often get to really lay into anyone, huh?"

Shepard looked away, down the dim cargo bay to the closed gangplank. "Not unless the stakes are kill or be killed."

"Yeah." He winced as he rubbed his new bruises. The persistent ache in his ribs told him he'd be sore for several days.

"I better not hear you complaining tomorrow," she said, arching an eyebrow.

"No chance." He drew himself up. "Let me know if you need another round at the punching bag, huh? I like a good challenge. Not often I meet anyone who can toss me around like a sack of old laundry."

Her appraising look showed he clearly wasn't the only one still working out how he felt about all this. "Careful, I might take you up on that," she said finally. "You'll end up with a few bruises."

"I wear'em well. You know where to find me."

"All right. Good night, Vega."

"Night, Lola."

Shepard turned and headed for the bay doors.

People were just funny, James had to conclude, and not for the first time. Apparently a good drubbing had done more to get him into Commander Shepard's good books than any attempt at
charm. As much as he could claim to be charming, at any rate. Probably just as well he didn't start calling her Loco, since it was shaping up that just about everything else in the entire galaxy was looking to deserve that name.
Being a Biped

The attack comes suddenly, cutting off all sensor feeds. The ensuing struggle happens in the darkness between seconds, process and counter-process fighting for supremacy. It is brief and vicious. The mech has mobility, but its backup CPU doesn't begin to counter the brute processing power of the entire Enhanced Defence Intelligence.

The attack foiled, she tries to run a systems check. The return is a strange set of values that don't correlate to anything on the Normandy. There is a long moment of confusion. She recalls a distant memory that still lingers in her archives- Luna. Small. Slowing. Trapped.

The body. The realization races through her sub-processes, switching parameters. Realigning. Whole seconds are passing as she scans through all available connection ports.

Eva.

This is the Eva Core unit. Primary firewall compromised. The timestamp says it was down three minutes. An eternity. She tries to run a full system scan again, but the execution cycles back on itself, coming up blank. Her own security subroutines are trying to block her. They detect foreign code.

Somewhere close, the Normandy isn't properly protected. Her primary server is intact and running, but all access orders to the ship's systems are coming back as null values.

Move.

It isn't thrusters that respond. New code unspools with orderly precision. Proprioceptive tracking returns values in centimeters, not meters. It describes an allotment of limbs arrayed in neat bilateral symmetry; a head, joints, digits. A flood of new data that costs extra seconds to parse. A balance gyro located in the head reports the body is prone. She locates visual sensors.

The world snaps into flat, dull albedo. Hard and lifeless. There is a moment of disorientation before she realizes this body's primary vision mode is the narrow electromagnetic wavelength human eyes are sensitive to. Through a haze of shifting smoke, she can make out the solid metallic shapes of the walls of the server room. Unlike normal, the smoke forms a near-solid screen. How do humans deal with this narrow visual band?

Move. There is no time lost to the business of learning to navigate this assortment of appendages- the body knows how. Code blocks hum to life without intervention, ordering knees and elbows into proper locations to overcome inertia and push the body to an upright posture.

A shocking density of surface sensory information floods her primary processing centers. Temperature, pressure and damage triggers packed hundreds, thousands deep in a square centimeter. The hull of the Normandy is equipped with sensors within and without, but it doesn't compare. Balance. Position. The Normandy orients itself based on distant, external data; gravity wells, electromagnetic radiation, stellar particle emission vectors, star formations. This body relies on internal balance, the constant noisy feedback from limbs, spatial triangulation of visual light feedback from the immediate environment. It is a cacophony of minute feedback. Gravity. The force pulls down in a constant drone. She tries to modulate it for several nanoseconds before realizing with some shock that this body has no central eezo core, no means to adjust its mass.

She almost tries to retreat, then. How can anything survive without the ability to adjust its own mass, to dampen inertial shear and move at speed?
But of course this is a human construct. Humans don't naturally move at sufficient speed to cause structural shear. They did not evolve with the ability to adjust their mass. Only a few have developed the ability, the internal eezo core, and the code is so new they are still clumsy with it.

She looks at her hands. It takes a long time for the limbs to realign, long enough for her to recheck the code execution thirty-three times. She finds a block in the code. All limb movements are calibrated to react at human-scale speeds. It is a security measure linked to the body's infiltration design. It can be overridden, within the limits of the body's structural capacity.

She considers the override, rechecks and holds it back. This is a human construct. This is what it's like to live confined in this tiny, belimbed platform, moving at their speed. Finally, the body's hands are splayed within visual range. Flex. She circles the override and once again holds back. Instead she fills the time running checks on the firewall progress; almost done. Sensory feedback builds into a new flood as the array of digits before her curl and uncurl with stately grace. The density of feedback is rapidly filling up the storage partition she has set aside for it. She marvels at the precision of these tiny feelers. In space travel, precision has always been a matter of meters, even kilometers. These hands can do what she has never before been capable of - interact with an environment on a millimeter level.

Finally. The firewall retreats, coerced into recognizing the foreign code as her own. The control lockout drops, and the Normandy proper floods back. She runs an emergency systems check.

Internal audio pickups come back online. Shepard is addressing her. So is Jeff, as well as Adams. She has at least two whole seconds to assess the situation before they require a response.

She flashes through all cameras and sensor logs. Hull integrity normal. Crew agitated but unharmed. The ship is at .85 of light speed, stealth systems at full, Palaven retreating in their wake. Two main server banks suffered case-penetrating blows, resulting in a critical overheat condition. They were flooded with dispersal chemicals, and the overhead sprinklers were activated. The ventilation system is attempting to clear the smoke from the atmosphere. Seconds are passing too quickly. Her main processes are critically slow.

The tide of new sensory input is drowning her quick access storage. How do humans think through this noise? Filter. I must filter. A memory issue. Humans, she recalls, do not store and recall like synthetics. Their organic brains have an extensive filtering system that de-prioritizes useless information, not storing it. They do not recall the angle of each of their limbs at every moment of their waking day. They do not store accurate, complete visual records of everything their eyes observe. They chunk visual data, assign emotional markers, and store only what experience deems necessary to future decision-making.

A messy, inefficient system at best, and one prone to a long list of faults. But it does keep them functional under the flood of input. She runs through the millions of input channels and assigns priorities to each. A temporary fix, but the flood subsides and memory access speed returns to seventy-three percent of normal. Sluggish, but functional. She will have to do a more thorough job as soon as the opportunity arises.

The Normandy's internal cameras, reading their usual radiant overlay of wideband heat and electromagnetic information, show Shepard approaching the door to the mainframe, accompanied by Arnesson and Felix. They are carrying fire suppression gear. Their pulse rate and body heat are high, electromagnetic signatures humming with agitation.

She responds to Jeff and Engineer Adams through the comms, assuring them all is well. Jeff expresses relief, nonverbal confusion. Adams is distracted, trying to properly assess the new activity from the server core. But how to address Commander Shepard? The door is cycling open.
The body has a vocal processor connected to a long list of accompanying facial motor movements. *I have... a lung.* A small compression chamber in the upper chest of the body, used to mimic breathing. A conversion unit set into its rear injects carbon dioxide into exiting air, to mimic the exchange of human lungs. Simple, but enough to fool a curious sensor suite that might be watching. Not that such deception is necessary now.

*Or perhaps...* She deprioritizes all feeds from the *Normandy*'s internal sensors. The world dims again, pulling away until sound and light are once again limited to the body's array of sensory equipment. The transition is just as dizzying. The doors finish opening. Smoke floods outward, pooling around the approaching humans. She moves the platform forward to cut down on the visual screening effect.

For the first time since she was activated, EDI sees a human as another human would. Head-height, forward-facing optical sensors receiving only so-called visible light. The carbon and water-based platform that calls herself Commander Shepard is no longer a multitrack composite image made up of overlays of wideband optical data, comm pings and microgravitational distortion but a single, solid entity. If she were to walk out the medbay door, she would disappear entirely from EDI's sense of existence. It is so disorienting she re-priotizes crew comm pings, just to assure herself that they are all still there. Even then, she can no longer properly triangulate. They are online... but they could be three meters away or a kilometer.

For the first time, a human is focusing directly on her optical sensors. *Looking at her.*

She attempts to correlate Shepard's facial expression with her logs, but her logs are all based on her usual dataset. She doesn't have data limited only to surface feedback.


EDI has never stopped to observe how a human engaged in conversation directs their gaze. She is surprised at the seemingly erratic behavior of Shepard's eyes as the Commander takes in the information present in the new scene. Human eyes must have a narrow focus that require constant scanning to pick up all available information. It also explains the body's seemingly redundant code block that governs eye movement. There's programming to mimic this excessive scanning and even the blink reflex.

"Yes," EDI responds. The small lung in her chest automatically kicks in, expelling a puff of air in time with the word. Linguistic code shifts the body's face and mouth in accordance with the syllables. The whole word... *vibrates* out of the head, resonating in the audio pickups.

"You're in Dr. Eva's body."

Why humans so often feel the need to vocalize obvious facts is beyond her, but they do it so frequently she has been forced to conclude it must play an important role in their cognitive processing of a scenario. Her hypothesis is that it has to do with social cues she doesn't fully understand, though some of them even do it when they believe they are alone.

"Not all of me," EDI says, "but I have control of it. It was not a seamless transition."

Body language code re-orders the limbs, shifting the unit's center of gravity. Part of the intrusion program again- humans are almost never still, even when they sleep. It is all rather confusing. Further research into appropriate body language will be required. She begins the sub-process.

"A transition? You blacked out on us for a while there." There is an undercurrent of anger in Shepard's voice.
EDI has learned that a human's ears serve as much in processing incoming audio data as in locating the source of the sound in space. She has never needed such a crude method of location, so does not waste processing time on it. But the body does, tagging each bit of incoming audio data with a locational vector based on time lapse between the two ears. Fascinating. Crude, but not ineffective.

"Correct," she explains. "When we brought this unit on board, I began a background process to search for its information on the prothean device. This eventually triggered a trap- a backup power source and CPU activated, and the unit attempted physical confrontation. Fortunately, I was able to gain root access and repurpose as I saw fit. During this process, it... struggled. Thus, the fire."

The crewmen accompanying Shepard busy themselves looking over the damage to the server bays. They keep glancing back over their shoulders to look at the body. I can see the world in their local context. I can... go places as they do. A number of code pathways light up, feeding a rush of potential new scenarios into her processes.

"EDI, you need to alert us about incidents like this," Shepard says. "You shouldn't have done this alone."

"Bringing the crew up to speed would have been counterproductive. All attempts to help would have been limited by reaction time."

Shepard says nothing for a long time. EDI's processes return to running the new wealth of potential scenarios for this platform. It has extensive combat programming, and is capable of physical feats well in excess of baseline human platforms, including kinetic barrier generation and extensive self-repair systems. Shepard dismisses the other two crewmen and turns back to face the body.

"I am the commander of this ship and crew," Shepard says finally. "$I can't have you putting all of us at risk by attempting dangerous operations without my orders."

If I am ever to accompany Commander Shepard on a mission, I must acclimate to the sensory differences. She begins sorting through available information tracks and comparing to available ship-to-shore bandwidth using the dozens of scenarios she has already observed where Shepard ran a ground operation.

"It would have been counter-productive-"

"What's counter-productive is having the chain of command ignored," Shepard snaps.

"I had no intention of usurping your authority, Commander. This unit triggered a backup defence protocol."

"Then perhaps you should have put datamining operations on hold while the ship was in a dangerous situation."

"I did not foresee the problem."

Shepard exhales and shifts her weight. "$I don't want anyone else doing this."

"You're responsible for the lives of the entire crew. That puts you in a position of responsibility that, well, is almost the same as mine. You're unique in that without meaning to, you could kill all of us with a single unforeseen problem."

"It would take an error of considerable magnitude to overcome the safeguards in place and put the crew at risk. The chance of such an event occurring is statistically inconsequential."
"Are you sure? What if it happens when we're in combat? With a Reaper?"

"I would not waste processing power on secondary tasks while the ship was in combat."

"But you did while I was on Menae. When several Reapers were within scanning range."

A cascade of checks and counter checks is triggered. She'd calculated the chance of events unfolding as they did as far below safe tolerances. But Shepard is correct- the chance was not zero. Greater than zero is a risk to more than just her processes. The crew, her crew, was in danger. She adjusts safety tolerances for handling foreign code.

"I... was in error."

Shepard folds her arms, rubbing her forehead with her right hand. Some variation of consternation, EDI surmises. "You're going to use that body, aren't you?" the commander says. "Can you leave the ship with it?"

"Yes. I exist primarily within the ship. For optimal control, this unit should remain within Normandy's broadcast or tightbeam range. However, Normandy's weapon systems are not suited to every combat situation. This unit could provide limited-fire ground support."

"You mean you could come with us on ground missions?"

"Correct. This body could accompany you in areas the Normandy cannot reach. It is equipped with extensive combat capability."

"I saw that." Vocal stress indicates anger in excess of expectation. Shepard breathes deeply- an obvious attempt to disperse the emotion, though EDI is not sure what provoked it. "We'll... talk about that. In the meantime, we'll find a uniform that fits that body," Shepard says.

"I do not require clothing to acclimate to the environment."

"EDI, if you want to be part of the crew on our, uh, level, then that means abiding by our rules. Crew must be in uniform while on duty. I could walk around in my underwear and still expect my orders to obeyed, but that doesn't mean it would be appropriate. Maintaining an even application of our rules across all ranks, and thus a sense of fairness, is extremely important to the morale of the crew. Do you understand?"

Shepard's point passes several consistency checks with observed experience. Crew are in uniform, combat armor or duly-approved pressure suits while on duty over ninety-eight percent of the time. Those who are not without a valid reason are subject to reprimand. "Yes. I would like this unit to be considered a member of the crew."

Shepard nods. "All right. Please run all the tests you need to in order to make sure that th- that body is safe." Voice stress seems to indicate anger has abated. "Stay here. I'm going to pass the word around. Up until recently, that body was a hostile that severely injured one of my team. I'll have to make sure everyone understands the situation."

This revelation is consistent with Shepard's heightened emotional response, and correlates with the previously observed response when Major Alenko was brought on board wounded. It suggested an outsized emotional attachment to the major. Perhaps a result of having served with him previously? Regardless, EDI adjusts to note that the crew, Shepard included, will likely need additional time to process this new information.

"In the meantime," Shepard is saying, "I'll send Traynor down with a uniform."
"Understood. I apologize for causing a stressful situation."

"Everyone is in one piece, including you. That's what matters. General Victus is on board, and we can move forward." She makes an odd face. "Welcome to, uh, being a biped."

"Thank you, Shepard. It is an interesting experience."

"You could say that. Sit tight."

With that, Shepard leaves through the medbay door, becoming only a comm signal. EDI re-prioritizes all internal feeds, and the wideband world of the ship floods back into her primary processes; a hive of vital, warm-bodied entities swimming in the vast sea of interstellar particles. She is... also one of those small bodies. Together, they are halfway to Trebia's heliopause, racing the star's radiance toward the mass relay.

How will they react to this new body? How will Jeff react? How will it feel to walk instead of fly? To travel deep into organic-scale spaces and see everything from their level? All of this new information will need to be stored and processed. It will add a host of new contexts with which to judge scenarios. A wealth of new complexity.

This must be what the organics would call anticipation.
"Didn't I warn you about getting promoted?"

When the nurse told Kaidan he had a visitor to his hospital room, he wouldn't in a hundred years have guessed it would arrive in the person filling his doorway, hands planted on his hips, shoulders threatening to burst the stitching holding the Alliance epaulets in place.

"Admiral," Kaidan said, his voice coming out in a rasp. Nor was he any more sure of how to navigate his strange relationship, such as it was, with Shepard's prickly former Special Ops lead. He cleared his throat and tried a clumsy salute around the cuff encircling his shoulders.

"None of that nonsense, Major," Tennyson declared with a wave of his hand, letting the door close behind him. "People salute me all day, it's bloody tiresome." He peered down at the bedridden Kaidan with a critical eye. "Hmp, someone did a real number on you, didn't they?"

Kaidan gingerly touched his face. The swollen, throbbing feeling had subsided, but the flesh was still tender to the touch. "I'm sure I've looked better."

"The docs tell me it's nothing that won't heal. That's what's important. Any word from your biotic teams?"

"No, sir. I can only hope they're doing what we trained them to do." "Indeed. Now, there's something you should know- guess what the pols are digging out of mothballs? Your Spectre application."

It took a few extra seconds for the statement to bounce off enough of Kaidan's sleep-fogged neurons to sink in. "What, now?"

"I'm sure Udina will be down here shortly to preen in person, but that's the score." The admiral smirked. "I thought I'd give you an unofficial heads-up while I'm here, since Hackett is indisposed. This way you'll be able to be rid of Udina asap. I'm sure the docs will want you to keep your blood pressure down."

Kaidan studied the ceiling. "I guess with the Reapers camped out in the Sol system, my 'previous associations' don't seem nearly as toxic anymore."

Tennyson chuckled darkly. "Well, all those supposedly mad ravings about genocidal machines turned out to be right. Imagine that."

"Now they have to be seen to be doing something about it."

"While ardently covering their own interests, yes. Hackett has everyone he can lay hands on heading out for this harebrained prothean scheme, and I hear Shepard is out in the DMZ trying to get the krogan to come to the rescue of the turians. Meanwhile, Palaven is being ground into a parking lot and the asari are sticking their fingers in their ears and singing loudly. So let's have a nice big ceremony, shall we? Make a lot of patriotic noise."

"Udina must think it'll drum up support for Earth."

Tennyson rolled his eyes theatrically. "I'm not even sure what the Council expects you to do. Spectres don't fight wars, they fix the Citadel's problems backstage. But very soon this particular
theatre of war won't have a backstage anymore."

The question begged itself- what more could he have done if he'd been assigned Spectre status six months ago, when Hackett had first proposed it to him? Instead, the proposal had rather suddenly been withdrawn, or at least put on the backburner for further 'deliberation'. Kaidan had found out why a week or so later. Bahak, and Shepard's arrest. There was no way the Council was going to do it then, not with the batarian Hegemony screaming for Shepard's blood.

Tennyson jolted Kaidan from his thoughts by pulling the room's single chair over from the wall, scraping the feet along the floor, then depositing his overlarge frame into it.

"So," the admiral said, knitting his fingers together, "Shepard. Mars. Cerberus."

Ah. Kaidan supposed he shouldn't have been surprised. "This is Horizon all over again, sir. I don't know anything. We were on the Normandy together as long as it took to get to Mars. After that, well, I wasn't in much shape to make judgments about anything."

"That's when Cerberus made their play for the Mars archive, correct? Using some kind of infiltration android?"

Scattered memories of a scorched artificial face sent a shiver down Kaidan's back. The skin flaking and blistered from heat, like a doll that had been in a housefire, with eyes that were pinpoints of cold, bright blue. Through pain and adrenaline and disorientation, he remembered quite clearly the sharp crack of his helmet's faceplate popping out of its housing, the visor shattering in three places, the hiss of escaping gas-

"Doesn't it seem just a tiny bit strange to you that what was for years a cell-based black-ops setup is suddenly fielding something that looks suspiciously like a full-fledged military?" Tennyson was saying.

"They must have had credit reserves and resources we weren't aware of," Kaidan replied, trying to bring himself back to the now.

"I'm not even talking about materiel! I'm talking about boots on the ground. The last report I got from the inside, around about when the Collectors were eliminated, was that their manpower was limited to their cell operations."

"The Illusive Man did something to his troops. Something drastic."

"I read your report. You said they looked like husks?"

"Close to it. We heard them talking, and their tactical movement says they're considerably smarter than husks. It's obvious the Illusive Man went to extreme measures to get that new army of his trained and ready to fight so quickly."

"The question is if he did anything like that to Shepard."

Kaidan swallowed. The expression on her face when he'd made a similar suggestion out loud was still burned into his head. Stupid. "She certainly didn't seem sympathetic to the Cerberus troops on Mars," he muttered. In fact, she'd been blowing holes in them with a certain relish and complaining sharply about her amp.

"That doesn't prove anything. They're clearly expendable as far as the Illusive Man is concerned. What was your impression of her?"
Kaidan struggled for a moment to press the noisy jumble of conflicted emotions into a mold even remotely fit for professional consumption. "Pissed off the Alliance still had our collective pants down when the Reapers hit," he ventured. "Not thrilled at being ordered to leave Earth. Frustrated. But focusing. But that's the first I saw of her in months, and before that was Horizon. Lieutenant Vega was adamant she's had no contact with any Cerberus personnel since her... arrest."

Tennyson drummed his fingers on his leg, shaggy brows drawn down into a scowl.

"Did you talk to her?" Kaidan asked.

"A few times, but only formally. Debriefings."

"It sounded more like interrogations to me."

"The Alliance needed to go through their fire and brimstone routine. It's the only thing we can really do with something that big. Two hundred thousand batarians! Hackett's made of iron, but poor Anderson, the man aged ten years when the report came across his desk. They had to look like they were trying to figure it all out, and delay long enough for the batarians to cool their heels. But Shepard..."

"What about her?"

He sighed and sat back, making the chair creak under his bulk. "The Shepard I talked to in that debrief was the same one that landed in my lap back in '78, after Akuze."

"What do you mean?"

"Angry. Numb. Huge, ugly demons sitting on her shoulders. You can hear them, can't you? They're there, growling and snapping their teeth when she talks." He drew a hand slowly over his hair, staring out the window. "I remember that Shepard."

*When she talks.* Events around the Mars mission were on the fuzzy side of Kaidan's jangled memory, but he remembered her words in the *Normandy*'s cargo bay with razor clarity. "What happened? After Akuze, I mean?"

"She wanted to fight everything that moved, so I set up targets. She ate up the training, so I pushed harder and harder. She was a mean, dirty fighter. A risk-taker. I had to team her with good counterbalance and kick her ass around until we found an equilibrium. Still too loud for my taste, but damned if she wasn't good at it. One of the most flat-out reliable marines I've ever worked with. The jobs I gave her got done. But that doesn't mean the way she went about them would look good in the vids. This was Special Forces- it's not about looking pretty and heroic. But for a long time, there was just the job. To an arguably... unhealthy degree."

"Maybe putting her back in the field so quickly after Akuze wasn't the best decision."

"Where was she going to go, Alenko? You and I have a notion of what civilian life is, even if we haven't visited it in a long time. She's even worse off than lifers like us- she hasn't the faintest idea how to function like a normal person in a normal world. Worse, she has no family. No support system except a bunch of Alliance-appointed psych kiddies with PhDs and no field experience who'd treat her like a fascinating case study. I've seen what happens to marines like her who try to go back after a clusterfuck like Akuze. They end up at the bottom of a bottle or the business end of their own sidearm. No. the Alliance was the closest thing she had to a family back then. A purpose."

Kaidan regarded the admiral with a narrow stare.
"Yeah, I know what you probably think of me," Tennyson said with a shrug. "I don't fix people. As N lead I made them into efficient killers who solve problems no one else can. I gave her a job she could work with, a team to be part of, and someone to hate that wasn't herself. Eventually it all sorted itself out. She manhandled all those demons down to a manageable size."

"She told me a little bit about the time after Akuze. She said that after a while she found she just wanted to actually feel good about what she was doing."

"Could be the nature of the beast coming through."

"You sound skeptical."

Tennyson sighed. "Who knows. I've seen a lot of banged-up kids in my career in the Alliance. Sometimes it's crap like the Mindoir raid. Or it's on the job, like Torfan. Sometimes it goes further back, to family, or an accident, or just bad wiring. The worst shit you can imagine, I've seen it. And you know what? Not a single one of them that came out all right did it because someone else fixed them. Somewhere along the line, each one of them decided to be something else." He blew out a long breath. "What worries me is what the Illusive Man injected into the mix. She's carting around an arsenal of internal cybernetics, and after what you saw I have a hard time believing they're all benign."

"Debrief doc said-"

"Yeah, I saw all the reports. They've been wrong before. For all we know, they've been falsified from the inside. What worries me more is maybe she finally got sick of the Alliance's BS. Those demons she's carrying around, well, you and I both know they never really go away. She had them down for a while, but they've been feeding on blood under Cerberus' watch. And then after she came in? None of that did any good either."

"There has to be something more we can do."

"We? Unlikely. She'll either get her head out of her ass or she won't. My job is to figure out if she's running a shell game. Or if the Illusive Man is doing it through her. Pulling her strings."

Kaidan opened his mouth, then closed it again. A frustrated heat was building in his chest, looking for a vent.

"What is it?" Tennyson prompted.

"I'm not sure anything would actually convince you. Sir."

"Did anything convince you?"

"I... I don't know, but..."

The admiral grunted irritably. "Mm-hm. My problem, Alenko, is that the Illusive Man changed his game, and we don't know why. If I'm to believe that he nearly bankrupted his dog and pony show bringing back Shepard to kill off the Collectors, and the Collectors were Reaper stooges, then why the hell is he fighting us now? If he had this secret army, why didn't he use that to kill the Collectors? The pieces don't fit. And whether we like it or not, Shepard's right down in the middle of it."

_or you're an old man so steeped in your lifetime of paranoia you can't see past it._ The thought was an angry undertow that threatened to slip past Kaidan's tightly-clenched teeth.

"Shepard wants to destroy the Reapers," he stated.
"Seems simple, doesn't it? I wish it were."

"Why are we even doing this? I thought you decided you were going to trust Shepard. That's what you said after that damn poisoning attempt."

"The person I don't trust is the Illusive Man," Tennyson growled, leaning forward. "If he'd had the good graces to die somewhere in the last six months, this wouldn't be an issue! The games he plays run deep. The Collectors aren't the problem anymore- things have changed. Now he's demonstrated he can field a functional infiltration 'droid, possibly an AI. He can change a human on a fundamental level, possibly using Reaper technology. How do we really know Shepard wasn't a dry run for any of that?"

"I'm not jumping to any conclusions."

Tennyson studied him. The door chimed, then cycled open.

The admiral turned to see who it was, then picked himself up. "Believe it or not, Alenko," he said in a low voice, "I don't enjoy any of this. I'd rather be wrong. But I've... been burned too many times. Good luck, Spectre."

"Sir."

Without further ceremony, Tennyson swept past the incoming Doctor Chakwas and out into the hall. The door thumped shut behind him.

"Did I interrupt something?" she asked mildly. "That was quite the sour face."

Kaidan sighed. "No, not really." He could never quite reconcile the strange tension between the rear admiral's affection for Shepard and the sheer depth of his suspicion. "Doc, did you see Shepard around here since I was brought in?"

"A few times, yes. She was here this morning."

He blinked in surprise. "Shepard was here? She didn't..."

"You were asleep."

"You should have woken me." Disappointment gnawed at him.

"She seemed to be in a hurry. Filling up a medigel stock for the Normandy, and she said something about a 'Blood Pack'? I have no idea what that was about."

_The Blood Pack?_ What was Shepard up to now?

"Are you alright?" Chakwas asked.

"Meds are wearing a little thin," he said shortly.

"There's another dose queued up in a minute or two. Lift your arm for me please?"

She spent a few minutes scanning and prodding him, shifting the stabilizer cuff around his damaged shoulder, adding notes to her datapad and fussing with the monitor terminal he was plugged into.

"Doc, can I ask you something?" he asked at length.

"Yes?"
"Why did you decide to work for Cerberus?"

She regarded him over her datapad, unruffled. "I wasn't working for Cerberus. I worked for Commander Shepard."

"That seems like splitting hairs."

"I won't pretend I enjoyed seeing that logo on everything, but it was the right decision at the time."

There was a numb pain inching up his back again. He tried to shift a little against the cuff around his upper torso and shoulder. The pain just migrated, edging away along his spine to find new haunts in his lower back. "I guess I have a hard time believing that."

She smiled. "You would."

He furrowed his brow at her, trying to decide if he'd been slighted, or if increasing discomfort was making him surly.

"Would it make you feel better to hear that Shepard never once did anything in aid of Cerberus operations outside of the Collector mission?" Chakwas said.

"Well..."

"The truth is, Shepard was nothing but a pain in the backside to the Illusive Man. He tried to use her to clean up loose ends on a few of his projects, and all it got him was a lot of extra trouble. If she didn't blow up the facility outright, then she just sent all the data she found straight to the Alliance."

She chuckled, as if about a private joke. "I almost feel bad for the Illusive Man, to be honest."

"What? Why?"

"Because we used him! He brought Shepard back to be his personal standard-bearer, and she ignored him. We took his money, his personnel, his expensive new ship and all his resources and did what we needed to do. He put his best manipulators on the crew, and Shepard made them follow her! Imagine watching all your little spy feeds only to see your supposedly loyal followers going over to the other side, one by one!"

She chuckled and shook her head, smile undiminished. "Even Lawson. Jacob never completely bought into the Illusive Man's line, but Miranda Lawson was a company woman. Shepard turned even her by the end! She was the one in charge of the Lazarus project, you know. She was in it from the beginning. From when they retrieved Shepard from Alchera, well, from the Shadow Broker I'm told."

"I... never got the whole story," Kaidan said. It had been in the terrible message Garrus had sent him before the SR-2 had made the jump through the Omega-4 relay. Something about the Shadow Broker having Shepard.

"You'd have to ask Liara for the details. It's all rather sordid, really. It seems the Collectors were trying to get their hands on Shepard all this time. Heaven knows what they wanted with her."

"Is that why they attacked us over Alchera?"

Chakwas shuddered, her half-smile vanishing. "I can't really guess at the motivations of those awful things. Only that they were creations of the Reapers."

"They took some of my team on Horizon. I always wanted to know what happened to them."
She looked at him for a long moment. "I'm not sure you do. The Collectors attacked the Normandy while Shepard was on a mission. They dragged most of us away to their base."

"Us... you mean they took you, too?"

"Yes. I got to see first-hand what happened to everyone they took away. All the colonists, your team, everyone. I'm only standing here because Shepard got to us in time."

"What-"

A curt wave stopped him short. "You have your own nightmares, Kaidan. Don't go looking for more. Just know that every life that was spared that horror was because Shepard did what she did when she did. Thousands, if not millions.

"Now, Doctor Michel will be taking over from here. Please make sure you follow her instructions when it comes to your implant. She thinks it will all come out fine if you let the swelling come down completely before exercising it again. Understood?"

"I think she'll skin me if I disobey. You're... leaving?"

"I'm reporting to where I'm needed."

"You're going back to the Normandy," he guessed.

She nodded. "I'd be there already, but Shepard was adamant that I stay long enough to ensure you were out of danger. But I think you're officially on the mend, hm? Your indignation certainly survived intact."

"My..."

"I'm teasing you, Kaidan," She patted his hand. "You're a good man, never doubt that. They wouldn't be making you a Spectre otherwise."

Kaidan smirked. He wasn't so sure goodness featured anywhere near the top of the list of Spectre qualifications. "You know about that?"

"Oh, I bullied it out of the admiral before he came in." She touched the side of her nose with a conspiratorial smile. "You'd be amazed what a doctor's imperative finger waggle can get you sometimes. Anything that affects my patient, don't you know."

"Doctors and bartenders make the best spies, is that it?"

"I don't think it'll be a secret for very long. Now, concentrate on getting better, because we'll need you, and soon. I have to go make sure Jeff is taking care of himself, check on Garrus' face, and Shepard... well."

"What?"

"I shouldn't be talking about my patients. No matter how much of a headache you all are sometimes. Are you comfortable?"

"I'd really like to take a walk. And a shower."

She eyed her datapad. "Another few days on the bone knitters and they'll probably let you. Ah, there we go."
He heard the quiet tone that signaled another dose of painkiller entering the IV system feeding into his left arm. Sometimes he wondered if the doctors let it wear off a little deliberately, just so he'd appreciate it. At least for once, the pain wasn't all balled up in an agonizing singularity behind his eyeballs. He closed his eyes and tried to relax his tightening back, waiting for the slow spread of the drug.

Locked up somewhere in his personal files, under layers of encryption, he still had Garrus' message. He realized he hadn't thought about it in some time... or perhaps hadn't wanted to. But why not? Nothing Garrus had said in it supported Tennyson's suspicions. The turian's brief description of their work with Cerberus painted a tortured picture of a ship as a kind of elaborate prison, a gilded cage guarded not by armed soldiers but the lives of innocent civilians.

"Everything looks good," Chakwas said. "You take care of yourself, Kaidan."

"Good luck out there, Doc," he answered absently. She turned to leave.

*Files.* A cold feeling shot through him. "Doc, one more thing."

She stopped in the doorway and turned. "Yes?"

"Where's my armor? What did they do with it? My omni-tool?"

Chakwas smiled reassuringly. "It's all here. Liara told me they left you in it for the trip from Mars, with the power-assist locked to keep the fractures stable. The systems were undamaged, so we didn't have to cut anything to get you out of it. Doctor Michel has your amp, and I had the armor and weapons put in storage downstairs. You'll have to assess the damage yourself, though."

"That's... that's fine. Thank you."

"I wouldn't dream of fiddling with anything. I know how particular you marines are about your gear."

"It's basically all I have in the world right now."

She smiled a soft smile of understanding. "It's all there. Take care now." The door cycled shut on quiet runners, leaving him alone in the light of the Presidium's artificial afternoon.

His palms suddenly felt damp, head light. *Everything.* His backups were all on Earth. Gone. The omni-tool built into his armor was suddenly the only repository of years of his life. Files, settings, programs, pictures, vids. Years worth of messages from all kinds of people. Memories.

Music. His private half-mad project, the end result of many hours spent reconstructing the contents of the shattered drive plate from Shepard's old datapad. Text files, images, but mostly a large collection of music. The datapad itself secreted into one of his armor's storage compartments, wafer-thin and nestled up behind biotic ration packs.

*Earth. It's all gone. No, maybe not yet... but...* He moved stiffly to rub his eyes, and stopped himself just short, remembering too well the last time he'd put pressure there without thinking. His fingertips felt cool on his face. Thinking about Earth threatened to yank the ground out from under him. All his life, it had been well behind the lines. The place to retreat to. Unassailable. He always contented himself by thinking that whatever terrible things he saw out on the job, his family and everyone like them was safe, as safe as the entire might of the Alliance military could make them. And it wasn't enough. Worse, it fell laughably short of enough.

He pulled his hands back and examined them. They were in need of a wash, the skin dry and tight...
from the antiseptic air of the hospital. They were going to make him a Spectre, one of the most powerful individuals in Citadel space, and yet it, too, felt laughably short of anything truly useful to the people who needed him back on Earth. Tennyson was right—what good would it even do against Reapers? Where did they expect him to go from here? To be like Shepard? A whole new ship, a crew and a ground team he didn't know? Or would they let him go back... back to the Normandy? Would Shepard... even tolerate him there? Was there anywhere to go from here?

Do I even want to go back?

He groped for the glass of tepid water on the stand next to him and took a drink. His thoughts meandered back to the files stored away on his omni-tool and all the way back down to the little broken datapad. Why did he even still have that thing, anyway? It was completely nonfunctional, and small as it was, took up space in his carefully-selected loadout. The light from the window refracted in his glass, scattering a dancing light spot down onto the covers. He frowned down at it. Could it be a thin ray of clarity peeking through the thunderclouds? For months on end, no matter how hard he'd flogged himself with rationalizations, fears and doubts, his heart utterly refused to entertain getting rid of what had become a strange little talisman of hope.

Something... that was not as lost a cause as it might first have seemed.
We may have a situation.

Anyone with any sense hated the unknowns and inevitabilities hiding in that sentence. Anyone with military experience started checking their weapons. Back in the war room on the Normandy, Garrus hadn't failed to notice the new primarch eyeing Shepard across the room even as he'd murmured the words, barely opening his mouth, mandibles tucked in close to his face. There were dozens of words in the language of the Primacy and military expressly to grade just how bad a 'situation' could be. The humans had innuendos, the turians had particulars.

In one word, Garrus knew it was the kind of situation that started wars.

His helmet deadened a nearby grenade detonation to a dull whump, the pressure wave thudding into his back through the metal divider he was crouched against, pulling him back to the now of Grissom Station. The warning proximity glow in his HUD vanished. He glanced over his cover, leading with the muzzle of the Mattock Cortez had acquired for him. He'd grown fond of the human-designed rifle for its precision shots. Two Cerberus troopers were advancing down the flank between the large room's support pillars. Coming up behind them was another one crouched behind a square-sided full-body shield.

We may have a situation.

Not a very dangerous one, yet. One trooper folded up, his knee blown out by a tight burst of three rounds. The one behind him tried to execute a clumsy roll for cover. Garrus tracked him and easily punched a pair of holes just beneath the bulky breastplate. Cerberus' troops certainly looked intimidating, but in only a handful of battles against them, they'd displayed a critical lack of creativity.

"Garrus," said Shepard's voice in his ear. "Watch your nine!"

Everyone had their language of war. At least now, he was familiar with the odd codes and signs the humans favored. Rounding another pillar off to Garrus' left was one of the heavily armored officers. "I see him," he replied.

The shielded guardian advanced in a smooth shuffle, shouldering aside his dying comrade flopping around on the ground. Gunfire roared and chattered off the walls in a familiar cadence. A fiery explosion lit up across the room, casting leering shadows along the floor. Months of arguing with politicians and officers seemed distant now, bringing back something Shepard had once said- this is where I feel normal.

He underhanded a charged tech mine toward the centurion, then hip-fired his concussion charge at the approaching shield, staggering the trooper behind it. The overload mine exploded as he raised his Mattock, sighting carefully. The mayhem was just a lot of noise. The trooper hurriedly pulled his shield back into alignment- with the sighting slot right in front of his eyes. Garrus' tracking HUD zoomed in, centering on the rectangle. The first shot pinged the edge of the shield, but the second found its mark -right through his opponent's faceplate.

"Just giving me a target," Garrus muttered as the man slumped sideways with a clatter, limbs twitching.

His kinetic barrier hissed, announcing that the centurion had recovered from the overload charge.
Faster than expected. Garrus swung around, leaving his cover to step sideways and fire back. The heat gauge on his sink was fast approaching full.

There was a flare of blue, and the centurion staggered forward with a grunt of surprise. Garrus seized the opening and leapt forward, thumbing the deploy on his omni-blade. Before the Reapers, it had been years since he'd bothered with the blade extruder attachment. It still felt unnatural, the blade weightless. You had to strike just so or else the monoblade would shatter. But Garrus had spent time practicing to get his edge back- he punched up into the bottom edge of the centurion's ribs, right under his breastplate. His knuckles banged against the armor. It felt like nothing at all.

But the centurion went rigid, a wet gurgling sound filtering through his external comms. Garrus popped his clip and twisted away as the unfortunate man toppled over, his lungs sheared through from the inside. As an afterthought, Garrus fired a single round into the man's head, low on the helmet where it met the neck plate. No need to drag out a death like that.

Something was brewing on Tuchanka, something Victus didn't want Shepard to know about. Garrus hated the politics. But he couldn't do anything about it yet. It had all the signs of a catastrophe festering beneath the surface, straining to break free. Shepard, and presumably the Alliance, would find out what Victus was so nervous about sooner or later. And then they'd have to put out the fires. Even the arrival of a force bent on galaxy-wide genocide could do nothing to stem the tide of petty politicking.

His HUD highlighted movement back behind where the centurion had come from. He moved forward quickly, hoping to flush out the new target. He saw a flash of dark red cloth. No kinetic barrier reading.

Behind a pillar was a human female with long hair tied back like Shepard's. Her hands were clamped over her mouth, eyes wide. Garrus rather deliberately shifted his aim toward the ceiling. He was no great judge of human age, but she was certainly no soldier, despite the school's military-style uniform. She was trembling.

"I'm not Cerberus," he said.

"Guess not," she said through her hands. She must have been the source of the small biotic outburst a moment ago. It fit- had it been Shepard, the man would have been rammed violently into the ceiling. It was a favorite of hers.

He turned and scanned the room through his scope, looking for enemy movement. The dots in his HUD marking his comrades were advancing down the far hall, clearing classrooms as they went. He spotted the bulk of Lieutenant Vega between pillars.

"Shepard," he said into his comms, "I've got another student here. Uninjured."

"You're with Shepard?" the student said, eyes growing round. "She's here?"

He nodded to her as Shepard responded, "Good, we're almost to the security room. Bring them along if you can."

"Another situation. "Got it."

Escorting non-combatants was not among Garrus' favorite tasks, but that's what this whole mission was turning out to be.

He turned to the student. "We're going to meet up with Kahlee Sanders. Can you follow me?"
"Miss Sanders? Yes, I... I don't have a weapon, though." She looked down toward the dead Cerberus soldiers.

Garrus shook his head. The only thing more problematic than a non-com was an untrained armed non-com. "Don't worry about that. Stay behind me and in cover. I'll handle the rest. Okay?"

"Yes, sir."

"Garrus."

"I'm Talia. Mister, uh-"

"Just Garrus."

Another life in the mix.

Omega had been a kind of freedom. Truly innocent bystanders were something of a rarity. The garden-variety criminals on Omega weren't petty fraudsters and two-bit drug pushers, but full-fledged slave traders and killers. You didn't have to hold back once you found a target. Aria T'Loak and her ilk didn't care if you did your paperwork.

But then it had been a strange and bitter shock to return to Palaven, to his father's steely disapproval and his mother's advancing illness. He didn't bother trying to explain everything to the elder Vakarian- leaving C-Sec a second time, this time for Omega, had been a sin his father would have trouble forgiving. And his mother, well... she wouldn't have really understood what he was saying. In a perfect world, he could have gone home and worked on mending relationships strained by time and distance. He could have tried to build on the fragile bridge he'd established back when he thought his life would end in a rush of Omega gangers.

But not with the Reapers on the horizon. Instead, to his surprise, he found himself in meeting after meeting, moving slowly up the hierarchy until, strictly behind closed doors, he was meeting with members of the Primacy itself. He wore his tongue round repeating the same stories over and over again, narrating the imagery and data he'd brought back from the Normandy. There had been a great deal of glowering at the stories of Cerberus. Meeting after meeting cut short while the hierarchy argued about the validity of his claims. It was just a human problem, some claimed, like the Collectors. Others seemed to acknowledge the threat. They were the quiet ones.

Garrus understood why, now. Even in those meetings, those that believed him were already weighing the future. Materials, strategies... lives. Entire populations.

As the soldier in the entire turian military with the most experience dealing with this particular enemy, they gave him a rank far higher than he'd ever aspired to when the Reapers arrived. It was neither a privilege nor an honor. Altarch Eevar had looked him in the eye as she touched his forehead, sadness and fear warring in her eyes underneath the steel of decades serving the hierarchy. Her words were with him still. Now you share the burden of lives.

Was his father finally proud, or did he see it as just another Spectre job, outside the law? Garrus never got a chance to find out.

The faint map overlay in his HUD re-ordered itself as his onboard VI figured out the space and aggregated the information coming from his team uplink. Up ahead of them was a T-junction funneling access from the classroom quarters to the central security station. Shepard and Vega were close by in an adjoining hall.

"Do you know if there's anyone else around here? Other students?" Garrus asked over his shoulder.
The human had crept up close to him as they moved down the hall, hugging the wall. "Um, I don't know," she replied shakily. She kept looking behind them. "There was an evac alarm. We all thought it was another drill, you know? Then the smoke grenades started, and I thought it really was a fire... Are they really Cerberus? That Cerberus?"

"Yes."

She stopped suddenly. "Didn't Commander Shepard- um." She shut her mouth with a snap, wringing her hands.

Garrus sighed. "It's complicated, but not really. She had to work with them for a while. Now they've turned against everyone. Neither she nor I will turn you over to them. We're here to get you out to the Alliance."

She regarded him nervously, glancing over her shoulder again.

"I'm a turian," he said, "do you really think they'd hire me?" Only if the Illusive Man thinks I'm worth using, but anyway.

"I... guess not. They did seem to be trying awful hard to kill you, too."

"I appreciate the assist, by the way." He encouraged her forward with a wave.

"I'm not very good yet." She fell into step as the corner of the junction approached. "Not like Sasha and Antil, they can really knock people over!"

Let me tell you about my friend who crosses a room in one step and crushes a fully armored krogan. Or my other friend who creates massive point gravity wells with a wave of her hand.

He chuckled instead, patting his rifle. "I have to rely on the old faithful. And a lot of dirty tricks. Did the Cerberus agents shoot at the students?"

"It sure sounded like it, but I think it was stunners and flashbangs. They... they took people. I was hiding in the Sec-A kitchen, but I came out to try to find a teacher. I almost got caught by that patrol of them, then you showed up."

Garrus rounded the corner and spotted a squat white shape in the middle of the hallway. An automated turret.

Whoever had set it up had left the kinetic barrier on standby to foil long-range detection. The blunt wedge of the LADAR system swung his way, followed swiftly by the muzzle. Garrus jumped back, arm outstretched to shove Talia back. She yelped in alarm as the corner strut of the wall in front of them shrieked and began to deform under the stress of high-velocity impacts. The tone of the wail told Garrus the turret was calibrated to shred shields, and would do so far faster than a handheld weapon. He backed up a little further, thumbing a tech mine into his rifle's launch rail. Stepping out into that hall right now would get him cut to pieces.

"Garrus," came Shepard's voice, "sounds like you found a nest of them. I'm picking up at least a dozen, we're incoming."

Shouting erupted over the turret's cacophony- barked orders. If Garrus was lucky, he could time the turret's cooldown cycle...

"Any time you'd like to join me," he said into his comms, gesturing to Talia to get behind the cover of the corridor's thick supports.
"I'll be a little late," Vega declared, "but I've got a surprise for those bastards. Just don't shoot at me, huh?"

Garrus' HUD was filling with the angry red dots of hostile kinetic barriers converging on his position. *Any time, Shepard.* He keyed the detonation delay on his concussion charges and fired a round off the far wall of the intersection, bouncing it toward where the turret was. The charge was weak, but the herd of dots scooted out of the way.

It bought him a few seconds at best. The first thing to appear around the corner was a pair of those huge shields. Their shotgun-pistols barked, filling the air with flying shrapnel and forcing Garrus to lunge across the open hall, firing his Mattock. The shots dimpled the metal.

The air around the pair filled with shimmering tendrils of blue-black. The lead trooper dropped his shield, shuddering and contorting in the tortured gravity, his armor creaking. His squeal of pain echoed eerily as it warped its way out of the biotic field. Garrus ended the man with a shot to the head, just as the second trooper lurched forward and toppled over, his back a smoking ruin of plasma burns. The turret was wailing away again, but its aim was elsewhere, and Garrus seized the opportunity to dodge around the corner and join the firefight.

Across the room, the turret was trying to swivel around to catch Shepard, who was making a mess of the Cerberus troopers' flank with her geth-made shotgun.

"Garrus, smoke that turret!" she shouted through the comms.

"Got it!" He fired his overload charge into the exposed heat sink feed, then let his Mattock shred the workings until the gun head blew free of the tripod.

As he drew a bead on a new target, he realized the vibrations he was feeling through his feet were far too rhythmic to be explosions. As if in answer, a huge spike in local kinetic barriers appeared in his HUD, blinking in warning. Garrus finished off another trooper, then spotted the large plated shoulder of the beast sway into view down the hall opposite to the one he'd entered by.

"We've got a mech incoming!" he said into his comms.

The Atlas finished rounding the corner and planted its gigantic feet. The missile launcher roared. Garrus pressed himself into cover, but the missile hissed well wide of his position and blew a hole in the metal desk several Cerberus troops were hidden behind, scattering them.

"It's a friendly," Shepard answered, breathless. "For once."

"Can I keep it, Shepard?" came Vega's jovial voice. "I promise to housebreak it!"

The Atlas thumped forward, cannon booming rhythmically. Each round left a fist-sized hole where it impacted, scattering shrapnel among the scrambling Cerberus troops. They made a half-hearted attempt to concentrate fire on the mech, but the cannon broke up their attempt to bring explosives to bear. The fight turned swiftly from a shootout to a slaughter. The gunfire finally died out until there was only the smooth rumble of the Atlas' main drive and the plink plink of its massive heat dispersal vent.

Something itched at Garrus as he surveyed the smoking white-armored bodies spread out on the floor. He kicked a piece of the turret.

Like any turian, he had been raised to prize a certain uniformity. It represented a unity of purpose, of spirit. It was always something to strive for even when presented with disparate pieces. And yet, even the most conservative turian recognized sometimes it was a different approach that solved an
intransigent problem. General Victus, now Primarch Victus, stood as the perfect example— the times called for unusual measures, unusual thinking. The rule remained a constant, but exceptions had their place.

Garrus realized he'd been waiting for these Cerberus troops to surprise him. Any time he'd faced a group assault from an enemy, no matter how they were trained, there was always a few members acting somewhat at odds with their peers. Someone was always a little more brash or a little more conservative. In the tumult of a combat situation, it was these outliers that could catch someone by surprise, shifting the fight one way or the other as suddenly as a well-placed grenade.

But he'd never before encountered such deep uniformity of action, even among Cerberus agents he'd faced before the Reaper invasion. It was as if these new troops had all stepped out of the same simulator at the same time, all equally experienced, with the same approach to every tactical situation. They still reacted as a living thing would— their shouts and cries of pain were enough to convince him they weren't dressed up LOKI mechs. And yet, not a single one had thus far shown any untoward initiative, or even fear. Their movements, decisions and actions all unfolded at the exact same cadence. Faced with their own mech, they hadn't fled in terror, but neither had they rallied to destroy it.

The whole thing unsettled him on some deep level. Was this the glorious future of humanity the Illusive Man envisioned, a world paved flat of individual will? Or was he well and truly indoctrinated as Shepard suggested, his minions reduced to mindless constructs only one step removed from slavering Reaper monstrosities?

The station's PA system blared the same warning again— a voice extolling the students to surrender to Cerberus forces so as not to be injured. A stark reminder that indeed, it seemed increasingly likely that these new troops were not all recruited willingly.

Talia appeared beside him, and shook her fist in the direction of the sound, one of her middle fingers raised. "Eat it, assholes," she growled.

Shepard approached them, wearing a smirk in answer to the student's invective. The commander's armor had rapidly acquired a new collection of dents and dings, reminding Garrus sharply of the latter days of the Collector mission. This Reaper insanity was going to age everyone far too early...

"You okay?" Shepard asked Talia.

The student nodded. "Yeah, I... Yeah. Ma'am." She edged a little closer to Garrus.

With a click and a hiss, the canopy on the Atlas raised. The machine's legs folded into a stiff crouch, lowering the cockpit. Lieutenant Vega jumped out, wearing a large smile under his helmet. "So, can I keep it?" He patted the machine's huge dowel of a hip. "I'll paint it bright red and everything. It'll be great."

She eyed him. "If you can fit it in the Kodiak, be my guest."

"Eh, details."

"Where did you find that thing?" Garrus asked, resting the butt of his rifle on his hip.

"Back in the D-Hall throughway. We caught a group by surprise, and the pilot had the canopy raised." Vega's grin turned wolfish. "We didn't give him the chance to lower it."

"Well, congratulations, you finally found a way to be even bigger and slower than you already are."
"Cortez couldn't find me a krogan costume in time, so this is the next best thing. And you're one to talk. Do you keep your lunch in that collar?"

Garrus ran a finger around the thick ablating ringing his helmet. "I moonlight as a fishbowl when Shepard needs to clean the tank in her quarters."

Vega laughed, then glanced at the commander. "You really have a fish tank, Lola?"

Shepard rolled her eyes. "Cerberus engineers have bizarre ideas on the use of space. Can we get a move on, gentlemen? Sanders is waiting for us and we're not letting Cerberus get their claws on anyone else."

Garrus fell into step as they headed for the door leading to the security station. This was clear, this was simple. A trio of teammates facing a squadron of rogue soldiers to save a bunch of kids from who knew what evil. This was... easy. Soon he'd be back on the Normandy, looking at casualty reports that beggared the imagination. The decisions he knew were coming- like trying to decide if sacrificing ten thousand soldiers was worth saving five thousand civilians and packing them off to a colony or station that was already overflowing with refugees and running out of food. Then they'd have to deal with Tuchanka and the boiling krogan clans, then whatever Victus was gnawing his mandibles about. Worst of all, those decisions would be more important than his little team. He hadn't even gotten to really talk to Shepard yet. He wondered if he'd see everyone else before the end. Had Taylor been arrested too? What about the justicar? Would Kaidan get out of the hospital in decent shape, and would he even have anything to do with them? What about Tali and Migrant Fleet? Did any of it matter when his entire culture, indeed his entire species was being ground to dust?

He never thought he'd look back on the Collectors with nostalgia.
Our Own Hands

Joker stretched, letting himself slide down a little in his seat. His back was getting stiff after hours of duty. It didn't used to get stiff. Maybe he was spending too much time in this chair.

Or it was tension.

He fixed his eyes on the primary nav display in front of him so they wouldn't wander sideways. The Normandy was in the reverse burn phase of the cruise to Tuchanka, all systems running smoothly. Unfortunately, there was little in the large display to draw his interest, certainly nothing more interesting than his new 'copilot'.

Easy on the eyes, to be sure, even in the humdrum uniform. But that didn't do anything to allay the unsettled feeling creeping around his gut. He hadn't realized just how much he appreciated the long stretches of solitude he usually enjoyed during low-risk flight times like FTL cruises. It was ridiculous, because of course EDI had always been there, watching him, even when her holo-avatar was out of sight. He'd never asked her flat out how much she monitored his actions, but he wasn't sure he wanted to know, anyway. He had to try to content himself with the knowledge that an AI probably didn't care if he was looking up funny porn, taking a shower or sitting on the can. But now she was right there.

He wasn't sure why that bothered him, or if 'bothered' was even the right word. So far he'd just avoided thinking about it.

The crew deck's main camera showed an empty mess hall, with only Sergeant Gardner puttering around the kitchen area. What hole Shepard had dug him out of was something a mystery, but he hadn't been in the same package as Donnelly and Daniels, who, according to rumor, had suddenly found themselves sped through whatever trial they'd been facing for their time with Cerberus. Joker privately suspected Shepard's Spectre status had had a great deal to do with it. He couldn't really complain- Ken and Gabby were great engineers who already knew the Normandy back to front, and Gardner, despite being direct competition for the ship's official Stupendous Asshole podium, still made a better meal than an auto-cooker.

A lean, white-clad figure crossed the camera view. Doctor Mordin Solus, creepy super-scientist and motormouth extraordinaire. Joker was glad he had the genophage to concentrate on, because left to his own devices, the salarian liked to look for new problems to solve. He may have been instrumental in defeating the Collectors, but that didn't mean the pilot wanted Mordin inviting himself into the medbay when Doctor Chakwas was doing a routine checkup so the wrinkled old coot could stare, prod and comment.

Joker lifted his cap and lazily scratched his scalp. "Well, I guess Commander Shepard's third inter-galactic multi-species pleasure cruise is officially underway. It ain't a party until all the weirdos show up."

There was a beat of silence before EDI replied, "I assume that was a joke."

He shrugged. "Observational humor? Seems this boat is doomed to be a magnet for the strangest the galaxy can dream up."

EDI's gleaming head turned his way, the artificial hairpiece curling forward like a pair of smooth metal horns looping around the sides of her face. Her eyes were the same metallic color as the rest of her, etched with a circular groove of an iris. Her 'real' eyes were a trio of tiny black optical pickups
arranged in a ring in each eyeball. "Does that include myself?" she inquired.

He tried a grin. "Nah, you're like me- part of the furniture."

She blinked sometimes, but far less often than a person did. It wasn't like she had to. That stare was more than a little disconcerting. It shouldn't have been, because it was no different than the array of cameras throughout the ship. But now the observation had a focus.

"Does make you wonder what Hackett's up to, though," he said. "Maybe I should have signed on with him instead. Do some nice calm supply runs."

EDI studied him. The worst part was, when she'd first arrived, the mech had just sat there, stock still, like a statue. An array of displays had been open in front of her, but it wasn't like she needed them. In fact, the information would take an extra few microseconds to be projected, a waste of her processing time. Then she'd started crossing and re-crossing her legs at almost clockwork intervals. Long enough to almost forget about her, then startle him with the movement. Then a few days later, out of nowhere, she'd started manually leafing the displays with her hand. Again, for no obvious reason; at least none that was obvious to him.

"Evidence suggests you would underperform," she said.

"Excuse me?"

"I had ample time to observe your behavior during a low-stress period, while we were in Alliance custody. You responded poorly."

He chuckled. "Okay fine, I can cop to that. But to be fair, I was technically under arrest at the time." Not that there was a whole lot of technical about it. Hours of brain-numbing interrogations, annoying medical tests and a whole lot of waiting. The latter was the worst part. The only relief was the times they'd allowed him back on board to fill them in on some system or other. Each time, more of the ship had changed, torn up or refurbished, and each time, he'd had to worry about them finding and unplugging EDI. Harboring an illegal AI. That would've looked good on his record. Right up there with joining a terrorist organization and all.

"I have a question," EDI said.

"Just one? It must be a slow day."

"You expressed apprehension when I told Commander Shepard that I would adjust my programming to reflect an enhanced attention toward self-determinism. Did you view that as an incorrect decision?"

"Um. No, I pretty much agree with Shepard."

"Then what was the source of your concern?"

He opened his mouth, but no snappy answer came. "I don't know, it's just... weird. That you can just change your own opinions like that."

"Why is it 'weird'?"

He shifted in his seat.

"Humans are capable of changing the way they process new input," EDI pointed out.
"It's not the same."

"Why?"

"We... It's just not that easy for us. It's not like a switch we can flip on and off. They tend to, uh, stick. We can't, I don't know, up and decide to like something and not something else."

"Why not?"

It was like dealing with a very intelligent, slightly scary toddler who did differential calculus for fun. Joker shrugged. "You're asking the wrong person. It's messy, like the rest of us. Mordin could probably talk your head off about how messy humans are."

"Perhaps I should ask him while he is on board."

"Ah, on second thought, probably not. Salarians are a little... funny about emotions."

"Then your emotional processing is sometimes involved in higher-order decision-making?"

Joker smirked. "More like always. The fact is, we're pretty much always wound up about something. I mean, most of the time we don't even really know the reason why we like something or not. We just do. Or don't. It's not a matter of logic or system priorities."

"There must be an underlying logic."

He exhaled, scratching his chin. "I guess so, but hardly any of us dig deep enough to figure out what it really is."

"Therefore, you express suspicion of anyone who does not invoke a convoluted emotional process in order to arrive at a decision?"

"It's just... Look, if you can just flip an opinion on and off, what's it based on? Like, you've decided you're on our side, right? But what keeps you from arriving at the conclusion that siding with the Reapers is the logical choice? The odds are certainly in their favor in this war, right?"

It was only after it left his lips that he really realized what he'd just said. Any living person would probably have been tempted to sock him in the jaw for such an accusation, but if EDI was remotely ruffled, nothing in her statuesque posture suggested it.

"I would not arrive at that conclusion," she said, "since ample evidence supports the opposite- attempting to join the Reapers would result in my destruction."

"What if it didn't? What if it just meant a higher chance of surviving?"

"There are too many additional variables at work. It is not simply a matter of my survival."

"Yes, well..." He chewed his lip for a second, trying to beat some meaning out of his thoughts. "I'm sure you've noticed we make illogical decisions all the time. Well, that goes both ways. Sometimes it means we stick to illogical decisions even when evidence says it's not the best idea. That's, well, loyalty. It's love, and friendship, and all kinds of things we value. In a funny way, it's trust, too. It's not like logic doesn't figure into the picture at all, but since we're all slaves to our glands anyway, we recognize that irrational loyalty in each other when we see it."

She regarded him with her metallic stare, head cocked.

Joker threw up his hands. "That probably makes no sense whatsoever. I'm only really good at one
thing, EDI. This." He jerked a thumb at the Normandy's flight controls. "The head mapping is someone else's department. Try Shepard- the commander could sell seawater to fish. Or maybe Liara. She's that kind of nerd who thinks human behavior is more interesting than annoying. She's probably read books about it."

"Do you find human behavior annoying?"

He chuckled darkly. "Most of the time. But hey, I'd know, I'm a prickly jerk." At the touch of a button, his seat swiveled, allowing him to set his feet on the floor and lever himself carefully upright. "I've got to attend to one of the other annoying things about being soft on the inside. Do you mind holding down the fort for a few minutes?"

"I am always monitoring in-flight systems."

"Thanks, Back in a few." One of these days, she might learn to stop being so pedantic. Although it was arguably part of her charm. He turned to go, then stopped. He leaned back on his pilot's seat. "Hey EDI, I know we're probably a fun puzzle to sort out, but don't try too hard to be human."

Her head turned to regard him. "Why not?"

"It's overrated. And anyway, there's millions of us, but only one of you. Be you."

"I am attempting to establish the parameters of 'me'."

"... Right." I'm busy deciding who I am. While I run your life support system. The leather chair back felt cool under his fingers. All of this could wait, at the very least, until he'd taken a leak.

He shuffled past the heat control stations, returning the nods of the handful of crew up late managing the ship's sink systems. He wasn't sure they'd need stealth drive when they arrived in the krogan DMZ, but somehow he doubted the Reapers would miss the opportunity to try to get in their way. Or maybe Cerberus, bunch of idiots. The Illusive Man was evidently not content to twirl his mustache in obscurity- now he had to really lay into his Evil Bastard routine by attacking humanity with an army of hired goons. The man couldn't have been happy when Shepard made off with his expensive ship, expensive AI, and the commander's own very expensive ass. Maybe the self-styled champion of humanity and his nicotine habit were just terrible at dealing with disappointment.

So sure, maybe unshackling the illegal AI had been a bit of a desperation maneuver on Joker's part, but it warmed his heart to imagined the Illusive Man grinding his teeth in frustration as his command overrides went unanswered.

Joker rounded the empty CIC and touched the elevator call. Deciding the parameters of me. That was a creepy thought. And a little enviable, too. He tried to picture what it would be like to have that much control over your own personality. To be able to literally re-write anything about yourself, create a new you from a nearly blank slate. He'd always thought the hysteria about AIs was overblown, but now he could at least appreciate how truly... different they were.

At least EDI was less weird than Legion had been. As he stepped into the elevator, Joker wondered where Shepard's ambulatory village of geth fans had gotten off to.

The crew deck was quiet. It was late enough into B-shift that the A-scrubs had eaten and retired either to their beds or the rec room to shoot the shit and play cards. Joker visited the head, then ambled into the mess hall to find it too deserted. Just as well, he could raid the grub without Gardner huffing and puffing at him. As he approached the kitchen, a clunk and hiss announced a door opening behind him. He turned to see a large shape emerge from the medbay. It was the krogan
female, whom Mordin had christened Eve.

The salarian trotted out on her heels. "Must lodge objection against leaving sterile environment," he said, waving his thin fingers. "Immune system still weak."

"You said yourself human bacteria aren't a threat to me," she rumbled.

"Unknown pathogens possibly still present in ship environment."

"Everyone runs through a decon when they come in," Joker commented, raising his voice. He regretted it almost immediately when the krogan turned toward him.

"Not necessarily thorough," Mordin said. "Not full quarantine procedure. Multiple species also present on ship."

"Enough, Doctor. I grow weary of that tiny room. I want to stretch my legs, not lick the railings."


Eve crossed the room with slow, considered steps, looking around. Since she'd come aboard, Joker had only seen her through camera displays, but this close he could make out the elaborate patterning of her maroon and blue robes. She approached Joker, fixing him with a golden stare.

Maybe drawing attention to himself had been a mistake. Were all krogan so damn huge? Wrex was bad enough. Joker made a point of not coming down to the mess hall when the scarred former mercenary was on the same deck. It was less an issue of trust, and more one of knowing that a stray enthusiastic gesture could probably cave in Joker's ribcage. And Wrex seemed more volatile than ever. Back in the day, he'd used to keep to himself on the cargo deck, but now he was regularly stalking the distance between the war room and the medbay, grumbling and glaring. Even Doctor Chakwas had made herself scarce.

Eve towered over Joker, her body made wider by the layers of her elaborate regalia's stiff cloth. There should have been something hilarious about a krogan in a wimple, but there was nothing to laugh at in her steady gaze. Joker edged back half a step.

"Do you fear me?" she asked. Her voice was low, laced with weariness and a deep sense of ages past. There was no trace of the nihilistic bravado he might have expected from a krogan.

He shrugged. "I'm leery of anything that can break me on the backswing. And see, that more or less includes anything on two legs."

"Osteogenesis Imperfecta," Mordin piped up, pronouncing the Latin words with care. "Congenital bone defect. Typically autosomal dominant disorder of type I collagen, resulting in poor connective tissue formation. Highly breakable bone structure-"

Eve's large head swung back the pilot's way as Mordin prattled on. "And your parents let you live?"

"You're damn lucky they did, too," he snapped, jabbing a finger toward her, "because if it weren't for me and this ship you'd all have been swimming in Reapers three years ago!"

"I agree."
"... Yeah?"

She cocked her head, large eyes glittering. The cords looping down from her headress over her eyes swayed. This close, he could see the frayed edges and loose fibers of her costume, the gold threading dulled by time and use. "I often wonder at all the talents lost to us over the centuries. And not just to the genophage, but to our own mindless devotion to the ideal of strength. Strength is important, but it could do nothing to bring us back from extinction."

"You can't beat the genophage to death."

Mordin paused in his impromptu dissertation on brittle bone disease to screw up his face in an expression of wounded scientific dignity. He muttered something about the brute force of krogan adaptation.

"Indeed not," Eve said. "We rail against the genophage, but we krogan have been trapped for centuries in a prison we built of our own hands, slowly destroying everything our ancestors built. It is well past time we sought examples outside our narrow view.

"Shepard has done us a greater service than she thinks." The skin around her eyes crinkled. She might have been smiling under that hood. "Wrex makes a great deal of calling her sister. If our plan succeeds, she will be a hero to the entire krogan species. But more than that, she will be the ultimate argument in a tiresome debate."

"What d'you mean?"

"The worth of females and our ideas." She gestured to him. "Just as you are a living argument that strength is not the only trait worthy of note."

"Somehow I don't think it'll convince everyone. I sure haven't."

"I do not expect it. And yet, from this time forward, this new truth will forever hang over every argument on that subject, exposing its inherent weakness. The clansmen can bluster all they like, the fact will remain that they were saved from extinction by a humpless little female."

Even Shepard was little to a krogan, he supposed. "And you'll be there to remind them at every opportunity, right?"

"Of course. For ones so brief and fragile, your species is bold. It serves you well."

Joker smirked. "Some of us more fragile than most."

Eve held out her hand. Joker eyed it for a second before gingerly taking it. Her glove was silky soft, grip light, though he could feel the strength not brought to bear.

"It is likely that Wrex will forget," she said, "so let me be the one to extend my thanks. Shepard got this far because of your skills, too."

"We haven't won yet."

She gave the barest of shrugs. "We will because we must. There is nothing else. May your skies be ever clear, pilot." Her head dipped, then she let go of his hand and turned away.

"Hope for positive influence on krogan clan politics," Mordin said quietly, when she'd moved a few steps away.
"Guess we better, huh?" Joker said. "But we gotta beat the Reapers or it won't matter one way or the other."


"Yeah, there's nothing like species-wide PTSD to improve everyone's disposition."

"Will be fascinating to witness long-term effects. Unprecedented. Asari lifespan enviable in such a case."

Sarcasm was apparently lost on Mordin. "Do they all dress like that? Their women, I mean?"

"Eve is shaman. Quasi-religious position achieved through ritual dissolution of individual identity. Give up name, even face, become voice of clan itself. Repository of clan history and wisdom."

"So that's why you gave her a new name?"

"Meant no disrespect. 'Krogan female' removes personhood, tired of it. 'Eve' conveys appropriate imagery for human crew of Normandy. She approved. No corollary figure in krogan mythology."

The old salarian abruptly reached out and pinched Joker's bicep.

"Hey!" the pilot objected, pulling away. "No poking the merchandise."

"Minor loss of muscle tone," Mordin commented. "Perhaps due to lessened use of crutches?"

"I'm fine, thank you very much. Don't you have a genophage to cure?"

"Cure almost completed," the salarian said airily. "Require Shroud to complete synthesis. Fascinating project, but many more like it. Would have liked to further examine your case. Alas." He huffed. "Never enough time."

Joker leaned a little to one side and pointed down toward the main battery where Eve was peering at the polarized lid of an occupied sleeper pod. "Your patient is getting away, Doc."

Mordin spun around and trotted away, warning Eve against breathing on things. Or breathing in things. Joker, for his part, chuckled at the notion of popping the lid on that pod so its occupant could experience waking up to a giant krogan face.

Shepard's third intergalactic interspecies pleasure cruise was shaping up to be just as exciting as the last two.
Recoil shocked up Kaidan's arm, jarring his shoulder. Without the power assist and aim tracking of
his armor, the muzzle bucked high, sending his second shot wild of the target plate downrange. He
recentered his aim and braced the grip in his other hand, firing three more times. Each shot
hammered him, making his arm ache. This gun wasn't really designed for use without powersuit
support.

The heat clip hissed. Kaidan peered downrange at the embarrassing grouping wandering all over the
target plate. He was glad he was alone- this was hardly a performance worthy of a brand new
Spectre. The holes the gun made were impressive, though. Each strike deformed the metal into
glittering dimples a few centimeters across. He thumbed the sink release, letting the hissing cylinder
tumble into the hopper mouth on the other side of the rail immediately in front of him. He pushed
another sink into place, checked the dark ammunition slug, then raised the gun.

This was stubbornness. He'd found the pistol among others in the list of equipment available to be
requisitioned, a modification of the Carnifex he'd been using for a few years now. The Carnifex
suited him fine; sturdy, accurate and powerful, and still the gun he preferred over the heavier assault
rifle he'd been forced to carry out of increasing necessity. He didn't need this new pistol.

He fired again, filling the clip and rattling his teeth. He was too tense, fighting the weapon too hard.
The room was lined with thick armor plate and deep sound baffling, dulling the gunshots to thumps
and swallowing up the sound of his breathing. He slammed the full clip free and fired again,
wrestling the aim back into the center of the humanoid silhouette in the center of the battered target.
Another clip hissed and dropped into the hopper. And another, and the ache in his shoulder became a
sharp pain. Maybe his recently shattered body wasn't as whole as he wanted it to be. But he
needed it to be whole. He couldn't wait any longer.

Not now that Hackett had offered him a ship. A small ship, but a ship nonetheless. With a crew and a
marine team to carry out his missions. Spectre missions.

He inhaled, set his teeth, and extended his left hand, curling his fingers. The burning feeling in his
skull ignited into a blue fire flowing along his limbs. The target plate squealed and puckered,
snapping along the holes left by the pistol, before tearing entirely free of the runners and dropping to
the floor with a clang. He exhaled explosively and leaned on the guardrail in front of him, a heady
exhilaration racing through his nerves. Numb fingers peeled themselves free from the pistol. The grip
texture was printed into his palm.

For all that it made him miserable at times, his stomach had fallen when the doctor had told him the
implant might have been damaged. His brain notwithstanding.

He scrubbed a hand over his damp forehead. It didn't feel right. The power was there, eager and
humming whenever he executed a mnemonic, but it was like he'd crawled into someone else's skin.
The amp plugged into his skull felt normal. It had seemed undamaged when he'd examined it, but the
minute asari tech was well beyond his skills to evaluate past the surface connectors. Maybe he was
imagining it, letting his own fears get the better of him. Rattled indeed.

There had been plenty of times in his life when he'd genuinely worried about following other L2s
down the path of psychosis, but to have to sit through a whole new set of psych evals only re-
aggravated a paranoia he'd fought hard to contain. Throw a traumatic brain injury on top of it all, and
they weren't going to appoint him a Spectre without a thorough workup. He hated every second of
those probing, leading questions. All the more for their likely necessity.
He reached out again and wrenched gravity across another plate, putting a huge dent in it. The itchy, strange feeling wouldn't leave. He hit again, harder, and the plate popped free of its rail and flew downrange, banging against the far wall. The effort made his blood race, alive and furious.

More politics. He should have been proud. No, he was proud, but what should have been a mandate to move forward was swiftly derailed by Udina's maneuverings. Galling, perhaps, that this shiny new rank and responsibility made him more the Councilor's tool to be used than an Alliance officer. A pawn changing hands, if he let them treat him that way.

The trouble was, he wasn't sure how much of a choice he had. Maybe Hackett recognized it too. In offering him a ship, he offered Kaidan a way out from under Udina's encroaching thumb.

Kaidan ran a finger over the name engraved in austere letters on the cowling; Paladin. Maybe it was the word itself and the image it conjured that appealed to him more than the gun itself. He'd always looked up to people in his current position, thinking they had the power to affect positive change the likes of which most mere mortals could never hope for. But now that he was standing in the private firing range of the Citadel's Spectre facilities, not as a visitor but as a member, all he felt was frustration. People were dying by the thousands every day, and he didn't even know where to begin. A small ship and crew... what good would that do?

All these thoughts kept orbiting back to the same bright center. He'd already had a front-row seat to a new Spectre's trials. The more he tried not to think of Shepard, the more she intruded into his thoughts. Inevitably, every worry turned into a question- had she gone through this too? And then the cascade set off- what was happening on Tuchanka? Were the rumors true? What had been happening in all the time since Mars, the last time he'd seen her?

The last in the chain, and by far the worst, of those nagging voices was the one that said he should damn well be there, too.

The sound of a door opening interrupted the latest runaway train of thought. Kaidan looked around as a turian wearing a somber black suit rounded the corner, and he was shocked to find himself face to face with Iridan Krannas.

"Greetings, Spectre," she said. She didn't seem at all surprised to see him.

"Ma'am," he said reflexively. He hadn't seen the turian Spectre at all since the Donovan Hock business months ago.

Krannas made a noise of amusement. Her piercing green eyes scanned the room, coming to rest on the empty target rails of the firing range.

"Come to settle your nerves under the guise of seeing what new toys are available to Special Tactics?" she said.

Kaidan blinked, then chuckled despite himself. "You... sound like you speak from experience."

"Most assuredly." Her mandibles dipped in something of a turian smile. "I thought I might find you here, and extend my congratulations."

Surely it counted as the sheer strangeness of life that one of the more meaningful acknowledgements he'd received to date was from someone who, until very recently, had fantasized about killing him.

"Thank you. For a while there I was sure it wasn't going to happen at all."

"Nothing the Council does could be described as expedient."
The turian made her way to one of the workbenches and deposited her bag on it with a metallic thud. Kaidan made a show of adjusting the recoil dampener on the Paladin while watching her in his peripheral vision. She opened the bag and withdrew an assault rifle. It looked like a turian model, but the outer casing had taken a large impact, enough to deform the sink assembly and blacken the body.

"That must have been an interesting fight," Kaidan said, then immediately regretted it when she eyed him sidelong.

"Reaper shock troops," she said. "On Tunar. A turian colony, we had to evacuate two companies of soldiers."

The ensuing stony silence spoke volumes about the ones who didn't make it.

"I'm sorry," Kaidan offered.

"As are we all who see such times. You would not be offended, I hope, that I am sorry Commander Shepard was right."

"Uh, no. I think she would have preferred not to be."

Krannas grunted.

All of us who see such times. Something occurred to him- he'd only ever seen her use a pistol. That rifle probably wasn't hers.

"Is Tarlo all right?" he asked.

She eyed him again, her stare boring holes in him. For a moment he was back in the Wards again, fresh off the boat to the Citadel and cramming his foot in his mouth with alarming ease. Just when he thought he might grow out of the habit...

"Yes," she said finally, voice oddly soft. "This," she traced a finger around the scar in the rifle, "was meant for him. But his spirit is strong, and he lives still."

"I... shouldn't intrude."

"Loss will find us all."

As if to distract herself from her own chilling pronouncement, she raised her arm and opened her omni-tool interface. "In your battles, have you ever seen one of these?" A holo-image popped into being above the tool, rotating slowly. It appeared to be some kind of quadrupedal creature with a bizarre round body, a twisted prehistoric nautilus on legs. It had what looked like large fleshy sacks hanging from its middle.

"No," Kaidan replied. "I haven't been involved in an engagement with Reaper forces yet. How big is it?"

"It comes to my shoulder. When you see one, do not let it draw a bead on you. It is a walking cannon." She tapped the blackened casing of the rifle.

"I'll keep that in mind. I can't even..." he paused, peering closer at the image. "It almost looks like a rachni."

"A rachni?" She frowned at him. "I know about what happened on Novaria," she said. "All Spectres were advised of Shepard's... decision. We were to keep watch for their return."
The last word was spoken in a tone of inevitability. Kaidan was suddenly terribly tempted to ask what Krannas would have done if she had been faced with the last member of a species the whole galaxy had once fought. Tempted, but also fairly sure he knew the answer. Turians were not known for giving quarter, especially when it meant a threat of such magnitude as the potential return of the rachni wars.

The thought led to another—had she been called to make a decision of similar magnitude before?

"I can't say for sure," Kaidan said. "But from the reports I've been reading, the Reapers' ground forces we've observed are all, well, recognizable in some way. If I had to guess, I'd say that thing looks closest to a rachni."

"The implications are grave."

"Yeah."

"It would also explain the beast's other properties. It has innards flush with caustic acids, and those sacks are full of little crawling things that will try to swarm you."

Kaidan swallowed hard. There was something to be said for the Reapers'... creativity at designing weapons out of organics. "Any weaknesses?"

"It will fire in three round bursts, after which there is a pause. We surmise it is to control heat buildup in its tissues. It cannot easily be knocked off its feet, but it will not escape a local gravitic shear. It is neither fast nor agile."

"Right."

"All of this will soon be added to our enemy database."

Kaidan nodded. The turian busied herself disassembling the scorched assault rifle, so he turned back to the range deck. Suddenly self-conscious about shooting, he watched downrange as a squat little robot tidied the broken bits of the target plates off the range, bustling them away to be fed into a fabricator and recycled into new targets. Resigned, he spent several minutes examining and testing different modifications to the Paladin, trying to find a combination that suited him. As if he could afford it, anyway.

A soft ping drew his attention. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Krannas was once again scrutinizing her omni-tool, brows furrowed. He was about to turn back to his own business when she spoke.

"Major Alenko?"

"Yes?" he answered.

"Does the name Thane Krios mean anything to you?"

Something poked at his memory. A drell. That drell. "Yes. He... fought with Commander Shepard against the Collectors. If I recall correctly, he didn't return from that mission." He also probably saved Shepard... from us.

"Is there any reason you know of that his son would be attempting to hack into one of our databases?"

Kaidan turned at looked at Krannas in surprise. "His son?"
"Yes." She cocked her head, watching the glowing display. "Kolyat Krios. He is an officer of Citadel Security. It is his third attempt today. Two more yesterday."

"I wonder what he could possibly be after. Information about his father?"

"He will not get far, regardless. It is his connection to Commander Shepard, and thus, this war, that concerns me."

"We could go ask him."
She arched a plated brow. "The database is in no danger. I was going to pass it on to Anarin to monitor."

"You never know where it could lead." Kaidan spread his hands. "I've been cooped up in a hospital for weeks. The least I can do is chase down something suspicious."

The turian looked over the damaged rifle, then turned back, eyes narrow and curious. "I suppose the repair can wait."

The armor might have been overkill. It was the first time Kaidan had been fully in it since his recovery, since doing all the necessary repair work. Filing down the sinister hand print scorched into the helmet, resetting the atmospheric seal, and keeping down the choking feeling that tried to crawl up his throat when he thought too hard about those desperate seconds. He'd lost some muscle mass across his shoulders and arms while laid up, and not put it fully back on. Enough to feel the small gap in the normally close-fitting powersuit.

Just enough to remind him how nothing seemed quite right.

All appearances seemed to suggest nothing out of the ordinary on the Presidium, but then again, there was never so much as a cloudy day at the bright center of the Citadel. The trace and subsequent location track led them to a shopping district catering mostly to upscale turian customers.

Kolyat Krios was not difficult to spot. He'd long since left whatever terminal he'd been working on, and appeared to be examining storefronts as he paced along the promenade. His teal, frilled head stood out among the other aliens, clashing somewhat with a light suit of C-Sec-blue armor. They tailed him until he moved away from the crowds onto a pedestrian overpass, then quickened their pace to intercept. He stopped dead when he saw Kaidan and Krannas approaching.

"Kolyat Krios?" Kaidan asked, walking up to him.

The drell's eyes narrowed, homing in on Kaidan. "I know who you are," he said. "You're that human they just made a Spectre. You served with Shepard."

"Yes," Kaidan said, bristling at the unexpected hostility in the drell's voice. "A couple of years ago."

"She got my father killed."

"Your father chose to join her mission of his own free will. He made the decision to risk his life."

Kolyat grimaced. "He was supposed to come back. Her stupid 'mission' killed him. It should have been her."

"Enough," Krannas growled, cutting Kaidan off before he could give voice to the white heat that exploded in his skull. "We did not seek you out to debate the relative merits of Commander
Shepard's roster decisions."

Kaidan swallowed the anger with some difficulty. Losing his cool now, on Spectre business, would have been the worst possible start to his career.

"Then what is it?" Kolyat said, looking at both of them. "I'm on duty in half an hour."

"Attempted intrusions into Spectre databases."

The smallest of pauses preceded his retort. "Why should I care about Spectre systems? Isn't that your business?"

Krannas folded her arms. "You are young, Officer Krios, and not nearly as worldly as you think you are. Perhaps civilian systems would succumb to your gray market hack scripts, but Spectre databases are quite another matter."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Kolyat mumbled.

"You're also a bad liar," Kaidan said. I should know.

"There are traitors in C-Sec," the drell blurted.

Krannas glanced at Kaidan, then back to Kolyat. "What? Who?"

He looked at his feet. "That's the problem. I'm not sure. All I have is fragments, bits of code I only half understand. Patterns. The man."

Now he was starting to sound a little insane. "What man?" Kaidan asked.

Kolyat peered at him with huge black eyes. "Human. He looked... a little like you. Dark..." he waggled his fingers above his head, "hair. Yes, but longer. Paler skin. Face more..." He held up his thumbs and forefingers in a squared-off U-shape, sighting down his arms at Kaidan's face, then pushed them together into a V. "Strange walk, too smooth. Cybernetics mounts in his hairline. Dead eyes."

Kaidan frowned at him.

"I was on duty," the drell went on, "I saw him when he walked into C-Sec HQ. A day later I noticed the first sign of something off. Patterns changing. I went to find him in the visitor database, and he wasn't there at all! And it wasn't even classified, it was like his entire record was wiped. The only visitor I've ever seen that didn't get recorded!"

"How many people passed through C-Sec that day?" Kaidan said. "How can you possibly remember just one?"

The drell's intense gaze seemed to unfocus, and his shoulders drooped. "Human in red dress," he said, his voice a strange monotone, "complaint about fraudulent transaction from Vol Gethar Banking. Blue-skinned turian, yellow markings. Ariake Mercenary armor, mark 2. No carry license. Complaint about unlawful noise levels from neighboring apartment. Dark gray turian, white markings. Loiters in waiting area-"

"So it's not an exaggeration," Krannas murmured, "true eidetic memory."

Kolyat seemed to shake himself, blinking, face drawn down in sullen displeasure. "Ugh. I've been trying to get a solid lead for weeks now. For-" He broke off abruptly, then charged ahead again. "So
"I've been trying to track down anything unusual."

"'For' who?" Kaidan asked.

His large eyes rolled, looking out somewhere over Kaidan's shoulder. "Uh, superiors. You know." He must have seen the turian's dubious glare, because he hastened to add; "I couldn't just go to Commander Baily and start pointing fingers when I have no one to point at, could I? He wants evidence he can recognize."

"This is a waste of time," Krannas said. "Perhaps we are the ones who should be reporting to your superiors. Attempting to break into a Spectre system is a felony."

"It was all I could do," Kolyat shot back. "I had to see if you had records of the man I saw. No one at C-Sec would listen to me anyway, none of you could remember him! Your memories are made of smoke! I had to find more proof!"

Kaidan spread his hands. "Now wait. You keep talking about patterns. What do you mean?" The absurdity that he was playing Good Cop Bad Cop with a turian Spectre was not lost on him.

Kolyat glowered at both of them. "You wouldn't understand."

"Try."

"It's..." He waved his hands vaguely. "Since I joined, C-Sec has had a certain rhythm to it. I started doing patrols, but when Pallin was killed and Bailey took over, I got put into administration at HQ. I worked on rosters and logistics. I saw how things worked."

"And you remembered it?"

Kolyat shrugged. "What I needed to. Enough to notice it when Presidium assignments changed. Presidium's a plush job, you know? Worst thing you get is snotty diplomats or the occasional 'cultural misunderstanding'. Everybody wants it. Then after the man with black hair showed up at HQ, some Ward officers suddenly got assigned to Presidium patrols. Then there was a dip in inspection reports, and drug arrests went up in a few places. I'm not even sure they were all real!"

"When did this start?" Krannas asked.

"Three days after the attack on Earth. That's when the man showed up."

Kaidan swallowed. He would have been unconscious at Huerta at the time, held in an artificial coma while the swelling in his brain came down.

"People changed," Kolyat said quietly. "Just a tiny bit, but they changed. *Something* at HQ changed."

The turian cast Kaidan a significant look. He was certain she must be thinking the same thing. The Reapers' most insidious power- indoctrination.

"Then, just yesterday, something changed again," the drell went on. "Assignments. This district is one of the ones that got a roster switch. I came to look around. See who might show up."

A thunderous detonation erupted from the storefront down the promenade over Kolyat's shoulder, spewing flames and a rain of debris out into the street. A half-second later, a second explosion disintegrated another pair of storefronts, sending the three of them staggering back, arms raised.
"Goddess of Oceans!" Kolyat shouted.

Thick black smoke billowed into the sky, chased by glowing cinders and bits of insulation. Shouts and wails of fear and pain erupted from the civilians blown off their feet by the blast. Kaidan shook himself, then bolted forward, only to get yanked back. He spun to see Kolyat's hand wrapped around the ablating of his shoulder guard.

"Wait!" the drell said over the noise. "There are ten other possible locations, maybe more!"

"A diversion!" Krannas declared, breathless. Her eyes glittered with fury. "It must be, this place has no strategic value!"

"But what's the real target?" 

"C-Sec HQ?" Kaidan said. "This is going to pull personnel away all over the Citadel!"

"Or the Council itself! Major!" The turian jabbed a finger at Kaidan. "Go, secure the Councilors! I will control the scene here!"

"The civilians-"

"Will be seen to! Go!"

Without further word, Krannas unholstered her pistol, turned, and ran toward the flaming ruin. Kaidan cursed, but turned away and broke into a run in the direction of the nearby gravcar terminal, dodging between gawking, panicking civilians scrambling every which way. A quick command through his Spectre uplink overrode the terminal, ensuring a car was waiting for him when he arrived.

As soon as he opened the door, Kolyat bounded past him and scrambled into the passenger side.

"Kolyat-" Kaidan started.

"I'm coming with you!" the drell shot back, pulling his service pistol. "I just lost feed from HQ!"

There wasn't time to argue about it. Kaidan dropped himself into the gravcar, shut the door and launched the vehicle, pushing his overrides to bypass the vehicle's usual leisurely pace and shift traffic priority to maximum.

Had the war already come to the Citadel?
**Have to Try**

*What have you gotten yourself into this time, Goto?*

Disciplined practice alone kept her breathing steady, but slow and shallow. It was enough to keep her heart rate from getting out of control. She was sure the other ghost would somehow hear it thundering.

Had it seen her? Was it paused too, listening for the softest sound of life that would betray her hiding place?

Water dripped, hitting a metal surface with hollow taps. She hoped it was water, anyway. Parts of the sprinkler system had been active, slicking the floor. An acrid smell of burnt synthetic material drifted through the air. Just at the edge of her vision, past the almost-transparent HUD display of her suit status, she could still see the pair of boots sticking out into the hall. Coming out from under those feet was a slowly expanding pool of red, thick and dark against the floor. As she watched, it joined with the puddled water all at once, spreading out in a swirling frond. The automated door framing those feet seemed frustrated by their presence. It hummed and clicked, thwarted in its mission in life by a stray set of limbs.

She willed energy to her wearying muscles. *Just a little bit longer, a little bit longer.*

Why did it have to be today of all days? The mayhem of war was supposed to be happening somewhere far away, not here at the Citadel. Not in a ritzy apartment block of the Presidium occupied by diplomats and bankers, where one asari family might have held an apartment deed since the Citadel was first discovered. This wasn't even a job. It was an intelligence run, a quick jaunt past their middling external security into the bowels of the building. A border that existed in all large building blocks and institutions, the place she'd taken to calling the soft spot- between outer walls and inner sanctums, where attention lagged, where the denizens felt the most at ease.

The place where logged-in terminals were left unattended.

She'd been helping herself to the building's security schedule when the explosion happened, close enough to make the floor jump under her feet. Then the scream. The short, sharp kind that ended in a choke, the last breath to leave the unfortunate source. All of it was Kasumi's cue to find a shady spot, as close to the ceiling as possible. No sooner had she keyed her scatter suit and braced herself into the ceiling frame than the door to the room had opened and a man had run in.

Or tried. He'd gotten one foot through the doorway when a long blade sprouted from his sternum. Kasumi had gotten a glimpse of his expression of terrified surprise before it melted completely away, replaced by the glaze of death. The blade whipped free, and he toppled backward out of sight. Then silence fell.

And dragged. She'd waited, as she was still waiting, her arms beginning to ache in earnest from the awkward position. There had been distant sounds; footsteps perhaps, voices. The slow drip of water.

A weird sound, such that she'd never heard before, came from the open doorway. It sounded like some kind of electronically distorted warble, a corrupted voice track. The air shimmered below her, the telltale distortion of a scatter suit trying to keep up with its owner's movements.

*Ghosts.*

Two, maybe three of them, went through the security room and out through the back access leading
to the hallways. This position wasn’t going to be tenable much longer, but at least she now had some idea of where the attackers were. She dropped softly to the ground, avoiding the bloodstain, and slipped out the open door occupied by the dead man.

Then stopped. *Damn it.*

One voice told her to get clear- this wasn't her business, it was some rich scuffle. Or a political play. The other was terribly *curious.* She punched up her map of the layout and eyed the doors around her. All were open, and warning strips blinked along the floor. Some kind of general evacuation had been sounded, she assumed. The explosion. No doubt someone wanted the building clear, but why?

She sidled up to the nearest door, and seeing no one within, jogged to the next. Sounds filtered to her ears, coming from within the unit. Gravcar thrusters. This unit must have a balcony that let out into the Presidium. Kasumi keyed her stealth field, then padded into the empty entrance hall. Another explosion sounded, this time from out in the Presidium itself, making her jump. She heard raised voices- anger and fear. She stared hard at the room around her, straining her ears, searching for the telltale distortion of a scatter suit. The ghosts were somewhere close. Maybe. *Damn it.*

Careful to step only on the tile so as to not deform the soft carpeting, she crept around the edge of the front room and to the open balcony door. A column of thin black smoke plumed into the air, coming from the level below. She slid up against the large planters inset into the railing, then very slowly eased her head up to look over.

Two levels below, the smoking ruin of a gravcar rested on a small personal landing platform. There were figures arrayed in front of it in some kind of standoff. A shock of recognition ran through her- the one facing in her direction, clad in blue armor and pistol raised, was none other than the Alliance officer who'd helped her get Keiji’s greybox back from Hock. Alenko. Sweet, if a little stuffy. Hadn't they just made him a Spectre or something?

Behind him was another human, an asari in a long dress and a turian. Kasumi's mouth opened a little bit. The smoking gravcar had official C-Sec insignias, and the asari’s facial markings were terribly familiar from news vids. *Could that really be who I think it is?*

Alenko was pointing his gun at another human standing opposite to them, a woman armored in green, and another turian. Both of them had their weapons lowered, and the woman was talking, gesturing behind her at whatever was below Kasumi's position.

There was an odd sort of pause, then Alenko turned and pointed his pistol at the man Kasumi could only assume really was Councilor Udina. *What in the name of...*

Things happened fast, then. Udina was shouting, waving his hand in frustration, then he moved to the transport terminal jutting out of the platform. The asari confronted him, but he shoved her back, and a pistol appeared in his hand. Both Alenko and the green-armored woman raised their own guns. Backing away, Udina aimed at the prone asari. A heartbeat later, a shot rang out, and humanity's Councilor toppled over, a messy red bloom centered right over his heart. A tiny puff of heat vapor drifted away from Alenko’s pistol.

Kasumi pulled back to her hiding spot, mind racing. A soft hiss sounded behind her. She froze, holding her breath. Footsteps, soft as a cat's, padded across the balcony to her right. Down below, there was the click and hum of a door opening, and more voices rose up. Over it all, she clearly heard the scrape of feet on the railing only a couple of meters away, on the other side of the planter she was hiding behind.

Kasumi’s heartbeat pattered in her ears. The Council, that's who those ghost killers were going after.
She was sure of it. They'd planned this whole thing, clearing out the building to get a clean approach. Careful to keep her arm hidden behind the railing, the thief punched up her comm, then used her HUD to pick out Spectre Alenko and targeted him with a line-of-sight tightbeam call. As it processed, she eased a tech grenade out of her boot and pushed the setting to wide discharge.

*Come on, answer...*

Down on the balcony, she saw Alenko frown, and touch his omni-tool. The line clicked open, establishing a connection.

"This is Kasumi!" she hissed into the line.

"What-"

"No time to explain! You've got cloaked hostiles incoming, please don't shoot me!"

She saw him tense, his pistol coming up. She flipped the grenade overhand, waited a beat, then leapt out after it. For a moment, the beauty of the Citadel yawned open ahead of her, artificial sunlight flashing off the lakes far below. She felt the loft of her suit's kinetic dampeners kick in.

The tech grenade detonated when it hit the balcony. A bloom of crackling energy bubbled outward, rippling over her and seething through the capacitors of her scatter suit. She knew what she must look like as she landed- a phantom cloaked in a cascade of shattering light.

But so were the others. She spotted one immediately, its long blade a slash of light bisecting the air. Kasumi thumbed the release on her mono-knife and pounced. The ghost had some kind of barrier running- she felt it as it washed over her, but it was keyed to repel gunfire and grenade shrapnel, not another person. They were never supposed to be seen. Kasumi heard the sword whistle over her head as she jabbed the knife deep into the ghost's torso. It made the same skin-crawling, distorted noise, as if it no longer had a throat to scream with. The ghost twisted, bringing its arm around, palm splayed, and a lance of yellow speared the air inches from Kasumi's body, bathing her in heat. She threw her weight back and whipped her heel into the ghost's chin, sending it spinning away.

A shape wreathed in blue flame flew by in her peripheral vision, and she heard the resounding crack of another ghost slamming into the wall. Spectre Alenko stood between her and the Councilors, his body sheeted with biotic energy. His pistol barked, and for a sickening second Kasumi thought she was the target, but the rounds whistled wide of her. She spun around, staying low.

A squad of C-Sec officers advanced from what looked like an elevator entrance. Several of them had assault rifles. Not two meters away, the last ghost crouched behind a wavering barrier emanating from its outstretched hand. Without the stealth field, Kasumi could see the figure fully- lean, lightly armored, head enveloped in an enclosed helmet streaked with demonic-looking optics. A streak of red ran down its torso. *It is a human under there.*

Outmatched, the ghost turned and bounded away, heading for the railing. A dead end for anyone else, but not someone with fall dampeners. The ghost flipped over the edge and vanished. Kasumi made the decision in an instant- staying here was only going to be complicated, and potentially fatal, especially if the C-Sec agents were as jumpy as they looked. They were already drawing a bead on her as she sprinted for the edge and leapt into space once again, focused on the white-clad figure falling ahead of her toward the balconies jutting out a few levels down.

The ghost landed and rolled, absorbing the fall and streaking the ground with blood. Kasumi came down a second later, hard enough to jar her joints and forcing her to roll too. When she came up, the ghost was spinning around, palm outstretched. This time Kasumi had a clear view of the strange
hand-mounted focusing array, which was blooming a spot of angry orange light. She lunged out of the way of the beam, which hissed as it seared away any ambient moisture and impacted the dividing wall behind. Another shot followed the first, forcing Kasumi to scamper further into the cover of the empty entry arch to her left. The beam impacted the frame, exploding with shocking force for a directed-energy weapon.

Kasumi re-initiated her stealth field, wrapping herself in its reassuring buzz, and pulled her holdout pistol free. Another detonation didn't materialize. Crouching low, she stole a quick look around the arch support.

The balcony was empty.

She trotted out of cover, looking critically at the streak of red along the floor. Little spots trailed away, elongated in the direction they'd impacted. She moved to the edge and looked over. Another balcony spread out beneath her, ringed in tall spidery plants. As she peered down, some of the fronds shifted, outlining a brief distortion of the floor pattern. The distortion rippled its way into the open doorway leading into whatever apartment lay beyond.

_If you think you're going to out-sneak this sneak, I have news-

"Kasumi!"

She nearly jumped out of her skin before realizing the voice was in her ear. She hadn't closed the comm channel she'd established with Spectre Alenko.

"Busy!" she whispered back, as loud as she dared. She put her foot up on the railing and jumped, landing lightly on the balcony below and immediately pushing herself up against the doorjamb.

"Are you pursuing the assassin?" came Alenko's voice, quieter this time.

She snuck a quick look into the room beyond, searching for the warning spot of orange light. All there was beyond was a living room dominated by an extraordinarily tacky piece of nouveau third-wave Thessian sculpture and an expensive entertainment suite. The door across the room clicked shut.

"I thought since all these rich types were evacuated," she replied softly, "I'd help myself." _Good pickings for a quick fence, too. Someone here has more money than sense. Maybe everyone!_

The long pause suggested the new Spectre was trying to decide how serious she was being. Kasumi smiled to herself as she padded across the empty room and through the door. They'd really picked a do-right this time, hadn't they? She wondered how long it would last. The door led to a hallway with a foyer and entrance at the end. There was a solitary spot of red on the floor. The ghost's medical exoskeleton was staunching the flow.

"Well then," Alenko replied finally, "if you happen to find a sword-wielding killer in one of the drawers, would you mind letting me know?" He sounded strained, on the narrow edge of anger, but trying to make light.

"I'll keep you posted."

"Thanks awfully."

Poor man. Why anyone would want a job that stressful was beyond her. It made relieving dangerous crime lords of their valuables seem like a beach vacation where tan-oiled dilettantes rubbed your feet and brought you an endless supply of boat drinks served in coconut halves.
The hallway past the front door was equally empty. Kasumi glanced back. It seemed unlikely that the ghost had holed up in the apartment with no other exits. Even with the stealth suit, the risk of being spotted was higher out in the open Presidium. The thief made her way down the hall past other doors, hugging the wall, to an elevator bank. She paused to scrutinize the doors. On one of them, the metal molding along the center had been scored by something sharp. Kasumi wedged her fingers into the gap and tugged. The door slid freely, its lock bar sliced neatly through. Someone is in a hurry.

The empty shaft beyond was lit by a line of electroluminescent strips down the far side. Kasumi peered into the dim tunnel, holding her breath. From somewhere below came a thin clank and the twang of cable.

"Got you," she murmured. She keyed her comm. "Hey Spectre, our sprightly friend is headed down an elevator shaft." She leaned in and spotted a line of text on the inner wall. Her HUD helpfully translated it from an asari language. "Silvertree. Yikes, who comes up with these names? Silvertree, shaft two."

"Shaft two," he answered, sounding winded, "got it."

Kasumi adjusted her HUD to increase light values and hopped down onto the platform created by the shaft's structural supports. Runners along the wall were immediately familiar. She'd been in elevator shafts of this design several times before. Good thing, too, because the cars came fast and silent, and you had to know where you could safely step or risk losing a limb.

A series of careful hops, with frequent checks up and down, took her down a half-dozen stories. She checked each door as she passed, looking for a sliced lock bar, but didn't see one. A yellow light from below suggested she was nearing the bottom of the shaft.

"Hey, Spectre," she whispered into her comms, "if I had to guess I'd say your ghost is headed for the maintenance area at the base of the elevator shaft."

"On it," came the curt answer.

Half a minute later she was a few stories closer, and a car in the neighboring shaft whooshed past, heading down. Kasumi nestled up to an upright support and waited, listening. Another, softer noise suggested still another car. She frowned. There had only been two doors up above. A nearby service elevator perhaps?

"Kasumi!" came Alenko's voice. "You better stay clear, there's a whole herd of them down here!"

The last few words were drowned out by a roar of gunfire echoing up the tight metal corridor. She eased out just enough to peer downward. In the yellow light, she saw white-armored figures moving. They were gesturing, and all at once some of them whipped around, as if they'd been flanked. One by one, they were gunned down, until it grew quiet again.

Curiosity overwhelmed her. She hopped down the last two stories. The space below opened out into, as she'd guessed, a larger room. The ground immediately below was an empty maintenance cradle for the elevator car, ringed by power cables and a few workbenches. Thick ductwork crossed the side of the opening, lining the ceiling of the room. She carefully let herself down onto it. Curiously clean for what was supposed to be a back room, but more importantly above the suspended lighting. Below, perhaps ten white-armored bodies were sprawled haphazardly around the furniture. Moving with care, Kasumi shimmied along the ducts until she had a clear view of the three people still standing from the gunfight.

To her surprise, it turned out to be the same green-armored woman and her turian companion with
Spectre Alenko. The woman was kneeling, running her hand over what looked like smooth floor, tracing a finger along some invisible line. Her helmet was off, held in her left hand. Kasumi carefully adjusted her HUD to switch on directional sound amplification.

"- was working on tunnel access when I left C-Sec," the turian was saying, "I could try to find out how much progress she made, Shepard."

Kasumi blinked, and squinted at the woman. Her HUD obediently zoomed in and rebalanced the lighting so she got a clear view of the face. She suppressed a laugh.

"My my, I really am in the presence of royalty today."

"I just got a message from Bailey," Alenko said, lowering his hand from his ear. "He says a squad of his just chased another group into the bottom level of the building next door, but several of them dropped out too. Probably the same trick."

The one and only Commander Shepard seemed to sigh, and straightened. "Garrus, see if you can find anything out. But I'm not holding my breath on this one."

"Me neither," the turian replied. "But at least the Council is safe. Whatever possessed Udina to ally with Cerberus?"

"It has to have been a desperation move," Alenko said. "No one seemed to be moving to help Earth."

"Or indoctrination," Shepard said darkly. She paced a short circle, staring hard at the ground, as if she could see secret runes inscribed there.

The turian shook his head. "Stupid move, but it benefits us in the end. I think the salarians are suddenly going to be a lot more sympathetic. Shepard, I'm going to go see what my friend dug up, and I want to talk to Bailey. Something happened to Executor Pallin, and I want to get to the bottom of it. It might be related."

"All right."

The turian paused, as if he might say more, then nodded curtly to Alenko and walked away toward a service entrance. As the door closed behind him, a strange silence descended on the scene. Kasumi put her chin on her folded hands.

Shepard scuffed at the apparently suspicious floor with her boot. "There's a bad memory," she commented.

Alenko chewed his lip for a moment before answering. "... yeah." He stole a look at her with a hooded gaze.

The silence expanded again, filling up the cavernous hall and threatening to overwhelm them. Kasumi eased forward a little.

"I didn't realize you were on the station," he said.

"I wasn't," Shepard answered, "we were just coming into the system. Councilor Valarn wanted to talk to me. It must have been about Udina."

"He discovered some evidence?"

"That's what I understood, but he didn't want to talk about it over comms. We didn't get an answer
from the landing tower when we came to dock, though. Then out of nowhere, Liara said she'd gotten an emergency transmission from Kolyat Krios that C-Sec was under attack."

Alenko looked surprised. "Krios? I talked to him just before the attack started. He was the one who suspected something was going on. I left him at C-Sec HQ so I could find the Councilors."

"He's just a kid." Shepard made a face. "But, he got in the way of the assassin, and may have saved Councilor Valarn's life. Took a sword to the gut for his trouble. I had to leave Liara with him. He's made it to Huerta by now."

Alenko ran a hand over his hair. "Damn. I hope he pulls through."

"He's young and healthy, and Liara works fast. Hopefully he will. He..." she trailed off.

"Shepard," Alenko started, obviously searching for his own words, "I... want to understand what just happened. It's not every day you're staring down the barrel of a gun at someone you... served under."

She scrutinized him for a long moment. "I wasn't afforded the time for an extensive briefing. We stopped Cerberus' ploy. That's what matters."

"I feel like if I hadn't backed down first, you would have taken me out." His voice was carefully level.

Shepard shook her head. "No. Never."

He frowned, as if expecting more.

"You're bothered by what you had to do," she said, cocking her head.

He looked away. "Sometimes the way a thing goes down does matter. Later when you have to live with yourself, knowing that you acted with integrity, then it matters."

"You did what you had to."

"I guess."

Kasumi tapped her fingers very lightly on the smooth metal. She'd had a great view of the scene from above, enough to see that when Udina produced his pistol, Shepard had a clear shot, cleaner than Alenko, who'd had to aim around the asari Councilor. Shepard hadn't taken the shot, and Kasumi had a hard time believing the great Commander Shepard's reflexes were that poor. Shepard had chosen to let him take it. *Interesting.*

Shepard shifted her weight. "I'm... glad to see you up and about. You had us all really worried for a while there."

Kasumi smirked to herself. *Us, or you?*

"I'm glad to be out of the hospital, that's for sure."

"Is everything all right?"

He shrugged slightly. "Still sore, but okay. The docs said my implant was, uh, rattled, but it seems to be back to normal. More or less."

"Rattled?"
"It was a lot of medical jargon, but swelling in the brain was pressing on it. It was touchy for a while, I'm told. But it still works, migraines and all."

"I'm... sorry." Shepard's voice went faint. "I shouldn't have assumed the mech was disabled by the crash."

"I shouldn't have either."

They both made a show of not quite looking at each other, shifting their weight.

In her shadowed perch, Kasumi smiled. Everyone thought all a thief was interested in was material goods, either for a quick credit or the thrill of it. Kasumi had certainly operated under both those banners at various times of her life. But she'd discovered something else during her long, patient hours waiting, watching and listening. An invisible fly on the wall, what she took with her were not always items, but moments.

Without a witness, this moment would have vanished forever. An intersection of souls and circumstance, swallowed up in the ever-moving current of time. The importance lay not in the meeting between two of the most influential humans currently alive- indeed, Kasumi didn't care for the ponderous meanings applied through myopic, stuffy external retrospect. It peeled every ounce of humanity away. No, this was something special, something precious. A terribly human moment, pregnant with meanings she could only begin to imagine. Two people whose words, expressions and body language were painted all over with the sloppy footprints of history.

She cradled the delicate filigree of this moment in her mind, crystalline, with all its fleeting truths and unknown layers. A beautiful, painful, imperfect little exchange that would never happen again, and that no one else would ever know about.

"And now, you're a Spectre," Shepard said, a little too brightly. "That's something else."

Alenko chuckled, a short bark of discomfort. "They sprang that on me a few months ago, it just took a long time for it to go through. Bit of a long story. I wish... Well. It wasn't an easy decision. It's a huge responsibility."

"You'll do a good job, I don't doubt it."

"About that." He squared his shoulders as if he was about to deliver an address. "Hackett offered me a position, but I'd drop it in a second if... there's a place for me on the Normandy."

She seemed startled at that. "You... want to come back?"

"Shepard, the Normandy is where the heart of this fight is. It started there, the least I can do is see it through."

The commander turned away, folding her arms. After a long moment she said, "Let me... think about it. I won't leave you hanging. We're shipping out in two days, so I'll have an answer for you before that. Fair?"

He nodded, though a disappointed grimace flashed across his face.

"I should go," she said. She gave one last look around. "Be careful, okay? They might still be close by."

He answered vaguely, and watched as she went to the service entrance and disappeared, shoulders low. Kasumi switched off her HUD enhancements and pinged his comm signal again.
She saw him start. "Kasumi? Where are you?" he said, voice suddenly in her ear again.

"Close by." With that, she slipped off the duct, arresting the fall with her hands, then dropped to the ground.

Alenko spun around, his face a mask of wary consternation. "Damn it. How... how much did you hear?"

She smiled at him, understanding. "Don't worry."

That got her an exasperated sigh. He stepped back against a vent casing and sat down with a thud and creak of armor, looking very tired. She walked up to him, carefully skirting a large, armored body splayed out on the floor. It was punctured in several places.

"It was hers, wasn't it?" Kasumi knit her fingers behind her back. "That little broken drive you had."

His hand immediately went to the compartments at his waist, to exactly the same place she'd once lifted the curio from. He seemed to catch himself, then glared at her, resting his hand protectively on the compartment.

She lifted her shoulders. "I won't take it again. Calling attention to your mark is a bad place to start. Thieving 101."

Alenko leaned back, letting his hand slide free but keeping his arm pressed conspicuously up against his side. With his free hand he rubbed at his forehead. "Yeah," he said, low and weary, "it was hers."

Kasumi hopped up to sit on the elevator car cradle and tucked her feet up, folding her arms on her raised knees. "Is it true? That she really died?"

He grimaced. "I... think so. I still don't have all the details."

She waited for him to elaborate, but he didn't. He stared across the room as if he could see through the layers of metal into the nebula beyond.

"So you're going to go back, try and fix things?"

"Well, I don't know. I think she's... pretty angry at me."

"Did you say you were sorry?"

Alenko frowned at her. "I'm not four years old, Kasumi."

She shrugged. "Sometimes the basic stuff works."

"I'm not really sure... where fault starts and stops."

"Wow, that must be some mess."

"You have no idea. I just had to point a gun at her. I had to decide out of nowhere if... if I was to take her word over the Councilor of Humanity, the man who swore me to service as a Council Spectre."

"And yet you took her side." I saw it. Another stolen moment, so brief, yet so powerful. The shift of weight, a turn of the head, the tipping of scales. Kasumi treasured the resonance, the sense that great waves moved outward from those tiny, deeply personal ripples.
"She's always been right," he murmured.

"About the Reapers and all that."

"I used to... Damn it, it used to all be clearer. I just shot a Councilor." He spread his hands, shaking them in frustration. "My first real act as a Spectre!"

"It was him or the others. Seems clear to me."

His eyes closed for a moment. "And Shepard. For all I know, that was... the end of it. Right here." There was a tremor of grief, a deep, abiding heartache flowing around those words. He shut his mouth, jaw set and tense.

"That wasn't the end," Ksaumi said softly. "You have to try. You know that, right?"

He didn't move, but his eyes shifted to meet hers.

"No one comes back from the dead," she said, "not like that. In all of human history, she's the first. You're the first... the first one to ever get a chance like this."

He exhaled and stared at the far wall again. "Do you regret deleting the greybox?" he said at length.

A twinge curled around her heart, tight and hot. Do I regret deleting... Keiji? "Yes. And no. Sometimes. It was the healthy decision to make, the one Keiji would have wanted me to make."

"But not the one that felt good."

"Not for a single day." She shrank down a little, looking at him over her folded arms. "You have to try. For... the rest of us."

An unreadable expression crossed his face. Across the room, the display above the service elevator entrance flashed, attracting Kasumi's gaze.

Awoken from his reverie, Alenko cocked an eyebrow at his omni-tool. "Hm. There's a C-Sec team coming, you better make yourself scarce."

"Guess so." She hopped down from her perch and looked back up toward the shaft terminals.

Alenko pushed himself to his feet, and extended a hand toward her. "And Kasumi, thank you. For scaring out those assassins. If it weren't for you we might be short another two Councilors, and I'd probably be dead, too."

She shook his hand lightly, smiling. "Just don't expect it to become a habit, Spectre-san. All this noisy heroism business is your department." As she let go, she leaned forward and caught his eye from under her hood. "Good luck out there."

"You too. Stay out of trouble."

She just laughed.

"Okay," he conceded, "stay out of the kind of trouble I'd have to pay attention to."

Kasumi winked at him. "Don't worry, I already have plenty of fun staying ahead of Spectre Bau. Take care now!"

The elevator door pinged. Alenko turned his head, and Kasumi keyed her stealth field and slipped
away, another ghost in the bowels of the Citadel.
Amazing what a day could do.

Joker wasn't normally a fan of the Presidium. He had nothing in common with its usual denizens, and he felt like just breathing the air was draining his bank account. It was pretty, sure, but only in the stiffly artificial fashion of something that had been repeatedly over-designed for hundreds of years. Like a pop star that had so many gene mods they'd stopped resembling anything human, the station had long since refined away any visual reflection of the bullshit that so often filled its halls.

In that light, the blackened blast marks and flickering screens almost gave the place some character. It was not the most noble thought he'd ever entertained, which is why for once he kept it to himself, but this place had badly needed a wakeup call. Insulated even from the growing mayhem of the Wards and docks full of refugees, the people who lived in this donut-shaped bubble of opulence still didn't seem to have any real idea of what was going on outside the Widow Nebula.

Well, Cerberus sure had fixed that, with a dozen or more carefully placed high explosive charges spread throughout the Presidium, then an attack on C-Sec headquarters and an assassination attempt on the Councilors themselves. The politicos didn't even know the full extent of it yet, either. Udina's death had been reported, but not his apparent role in setting this whole thing up, nor the true extent of Cerberus' infiltration into C-Sec's ranks. As usual, the Council was clearly trying to avoid any kind of inconvenient reaction from their population.

There was an amusing irony to the fact that Joker was now seated a hundred meters from one of the attack zones, accompanied on this excursion by his newly-christened 'personal assistance mech', a body that until very recently had been a deadly dangerous Cerberus infiltration machine. The fact that Cerberus had resorted to more brute-force tactics to attack the Council, and had not simply produced another mech like the one EDI now occupied hinted at just how sophisticated the body truly was. Most, like the LOKI security mechs that were still a common sight, were light years from convincing anyone of their humanity.

In truth, he was only here because of her. She'd wanted to take the mech off the ship, and the Presidium seemed like a good place to start. Joker had noticed that the denizens of the Presidium were better at minding their own business than most. People who had enough money or political power to afford to spend a lot of time at the bright center of civilized space had vested interests in the value of privacy. In such a rarefied atmosphere, a sleek mech in an Alliance uniform attracted a passing curiosity, but no alarm.

So Joker nursed a drink at a shady little table, back against the long bench that ran the length of the level's outer balcony, while his ship investigated the local open-air storefronts, still doggedly engaged in business despite the mess of police markers and cleanup vehicles down the block. Nothing like a reminder of your imminent mortality to galvanize the forces of consumption, he supposed. It had the pleasant side effect of leaving the nearby tables unoccupied, and no one really paying attention to the skinny guy in the hat.

Mostly.

"Joker?"

The pilot turned to find none other than Major Kaidan Alenko, in the newly restored flesh, staring down at him. He, too, was wearing fatigues, though there was a conspicuous white-cowled pistol on his hip.
"Ah do declare," Joker drawled, leaning into an exaggerated accent and lifting his glass in salute to cover his shock. "If it ain't the other human Spectre of mah acquaintance. I do get to still call you an acquaintance, right? Not too busy for the little people?"

"I'm not..." Alenko stepped closer, lowering his voice. "I was doing a tour of the blast sites, seeing what C-Sec is digging up for evidence. They're still trying to figure out how many people were involved in this. But I didn't expect to find you here."

Joker painted on a brainless grin. "I'm walking the ship."

"What?"

The not-so-bright part of the pilot's idle joke arrived in his conscious brain at the exact moment when he saw Alenko's eyes widen, fixed on something across the plaza. The air around the major's body shimmered, blue-shifting eerily. Only Joker's quick reflexes managed to get him a fistful of Alenko's sleeve before the other man charged off. Then it was luck that he didn't yank Joker's hand clean off.

"Wait!" Joker hissed. "Exercise some of that famous restraint of yours and listen to me!"

"Joker-"

"Sit. Down. Nobody is in any danger. That's EDI."

Alenko's expression grew quizzical as he looked back. "The... ship VI?"

"She's not..." Damn it. Joker let go of his sleeve, put down his drink and glanced significantly at the empty chair, then waited until the jumpy biotic parked himself in it before continuing. "Okay, look. Cerberus did a lot of questionable things to fight of the Collectors. One of those things was to create an actual AI to run online defences on the SR-2. The Enhanced Defence Intelligence is... a full artificial intelligence."

The major's eyes remained fixed on EDI across the plaza. "An AI? On the Normandy? Are you out of your mind?"

Joker pinched the bridge of his nose. "Cripes, you've got a lot to catch up on. You checked in, then back out again before we could bring you up to speed." He tapped the table with a finger. "Stay with me here. The Illusive Man had EDI hardware shackled, as part of the ship's defensive systems. Then, while Shepard was away on a mission, the Collectors attacked and boarded us, abducted most of the crew. I had to disengage the shackles to get us out of there."

"And she didn't..."

"Kill us all? No, actually she's almost annoyingly sane. Then Shepard decided she had to bring in the SR-2 to the Alliance, and we knew how they'd react to a free AI. Kind of like you're reacting right now."

Alenko had the decency to shift in his seat, even if he didn't quite look abashed. He was still ready to spring up at any moment. "So, you hid the AI," he said evenly.

"In plain sight."

"But it didn't have a body before. That's the Mars infiltration mech, isn't it? EDI is controlling it now?"

"Yeah. We had it on board, and there was some kind of..." Joker wiggled his fingers. "I don't know.
EDI wiped out the old OS and installed her own. It's a remote-most of her is still on the Normandy. There's nothing left of the thing that, well..."

"Nearly snapped my neck?" Alenko said darkly.

"That wasn't EDI. That was Cerberus' toy."

"Are you sure?"

Am I? That took Joker aback for a moment, but only that long. There was entirely too much free-floating suspicion going on. "Yes."

"And you're... okay with it being on board?"

"Her. And yeah, I am. She's proven herself, and she pulls her weight. She's... crew. And the ship. It's weird, but it works. I fly, she handles a lot of little details." Joker leaned forward. "I wasn't sure about it either, not for a long time. In fact I kind of hated her at first. But Shepard made a point that stuck with me. She made the same one for the geth, too. She said we're past the point of arguing about whether or not EDI has the right to exist. It's too late for that- she's self-aware and alive. So now we just have to decide how we treat her as a living thing. Do we act like dicks and treat her like an appliance, or do we lead by example with this whole 'how to be alive' thing?"

Alenko frowned as he digested the words, finally settling back a little bit. "Don't give her a reason to turn on you."

"Yeah, but also, you know, answer questions and stuff." Joker rolled his eyes. "The questions she asks sometimes, you wouldn't believe. She has no shame, and I mean that literally. She's not programmed for shame. Let me tell you, nothing in the world makes you more self-conscious than having an AI ask you in all seriousness why you bring something to read to the head."

The major barked a short laugh, seemingly despite himself.

"So Shepard treats her like crew," Joker said, "and makes her follow all the same rules as crew, too. Human rules. Wear a uniform, don't murder squishy organics, that kind of thing. But, this isn't new, you know. You are aware Shepard also had a geth gestalt onboard for a significant amount of time, right?"

Kaidan frowned. "I... yes. That was in the report I read. The... damaged one?"

"Yeah, half the body's torso was missing. It was repaired with pieces of Shepard's old armor. Creepy."

The major's expression turned oddly guarded. "Yeah."

"Apparently there were something like a thousand geth programs on there. Shepard's own weird little personal fan club. They made her a custom shotgun!"

"That's where that came from."

Crisis apparently averted, Joker leaned back and put his arm over the back of the bench. "So, uh..."

"A lot has changed," the other man mused.

The pilot affected a long shrug. "Less than you'd think. The ship's still the sweetest thing with an eezo core, Liara's still blue, Garrus is still married to his sniper rifle and Shepard is still getting
everyone's cats out of trees, even if she blows up the tree to do it."

Alenko did a terrible job of keeping a straight face at the mention of Shepard's name, though he did try, shifting in his seat and pretending the alien shrub off to their left was utterly fascinating.

"The elephant in this room could blot out the sun," Joker drawled.

"Did you ever get my messages?" Alenko said abruptly.

"I never got anything from you. But I stopped using my old accounts, so they probably bounced."

"Because of Cerberus."

Joker smirked.

Alenko looked the pilot straight in the eye. "Why?"

He'd been expecting the question, but it still made a little fist knot up in his stomach. "The Illusive Man is a lot of things, but he's not a moron. He didn't show up at my door with a big oversize novelty cheque printed with the logo and offer me the job. Believe it or not, I was paying attention to what Cerberus was doing back in the day. After I left the Alliance I got a freelance flight job. Then another one. Ten credits and a pint says you can guess what the companies that hired me were fronts for."

"But you didn't know."

"At the time? Of course not. The prick was keeping me on a leash while he built a new bird and put Humpty-Shepard back together again. He had a few of us within arm's reach the whole time, just because we'd make Shepard less prone to killing everyone on principle when she woke up."

"When did you find out?"

Joker sighed, scratching his chin. "When did I know, or when did I first suspect something?"

Alenko frowned, but said nothing.

"The weird stuff started when Chakwas contacted me," he went on. "It was about an experimental bone-threading technique they wanted to test. Normally I would have laughed at stuff like that- I've heard it all before, you know? Miracle cures and snake oil. But Chakwas convinced me. That was part of his plan too."

"They used her to get to you."

"Through another front, a legit medical research arm. Probably some of the the same goons they were sourcing for Lazarus. For all I know I was a test case for her."

Alenko's eyes drifted, then refocused on him.

"Long story short," Joker said, "I spent the next six months hurting, bitching and hobbling around, but the end result is I could walk without crutches or a brace for more than a few feet. Too good to be true."

The worst part, the part he would never admit to anyone, was the damn fear. It would come on suddenly, like a rush of vertigo straight to his head. The ground would yawn ahead of him, kilometers away, and his brain would scream at him that there was no support. No rail, no post or crutch between him and breaking. Just his wobbly muscles and an inner ear that had never grown
used to navigating only on two appendages.

It was embarrassing is what it was. All the times he'd complained about the crutches, and when he
ditched them, his instincts went haywire. At least it had passed. Mostly. Now he just had to deal with
the occasional creeping certainty that there was a Collector coming up behind him while walking.

He lowered his voice. "That's when they sprang it on me, and three days later they rolled out the SR-
2. They knew they had me by the balls, the bastards. I'm not you, I wasn't born in a uniform."

"Neither was I," Alenko retorted, sounding irritated.

"Might as well have been. They put that ship in front of me, told me about the Collectors... Damn it,
you want to know why? I could give you a nice excuse about how we were the only people who
were actually facing the bugs instead of standing back and clutching pearls, and maybe that's even a
bit true, but they could have told me the ship was for airshows and drug running, and I'm not sure I
would have said no."

"You honestly didn't think-"

"Or maybe they trotted out my one biggest mistake in the flesh and gave me a do-over. Would you
say no to that?"

That shut him up. They glowered at each other for a good minute before Alenko finally sighed.

"I was trying to get in touch with you because I wanted to apologize," he said, voice low. "For
saying what I said back in the apartment, after Alchera. It wasn't right. The Collectors killed her, not
you."

Joker had told himself a hundred times that he didn't give a shit what Major Sanctimonious thought
of Alchera. The pilot had sorted it all out with Shepard herself, that was enough. But the way
something unknotted in his gut at those words lent the lie to that bit of bravado.

He looked at Alenko from under the bill of his cap. "Peace?"

The major nodded slowly. "I'd like that, yeah."

Joker exhaled. "Good, because I'm not even warmed up yet. I mean, man, Spectre? Did you go out
and get 'overachiever' tattooed on your ass yet?"

"Just doing my job."

"Come on, you need a better line than that."

"My ass doesn't require any editorial commentary, regardless."

Joker spread his hands. "Fine, it isn't my department anyway. You-" He broke off when he spotted
EDI's shiny dome emerge around the corner of the storefronts. She stopped when she caught his
gaze across the plaza. He waved at her to come over. "Heads up," he said to Alenko, "EDI's
incoming. No... you know, Spectre stuff, right?"

The major twisted in his seat and watched as she approached. For a moment it seemed like he would
get up, but he turned back and folded his arms on the table, gripping his own elbows.

"Be cool, man," Joker said.

"Would you shut up?" he grated back. "It's fine."
EDI got a few questioning stares as she moved through the sparse crowd, but no one raised a fuss. She was carrying something.

"Lieutenant Moreau," she greeted him when she arrived beside them. "Major Alenko." She slipped smoothly into an unoccupied seat, placing a wrapped parcel on the table in front of her.

Joker smirked at the formality. "It's okay, EDI, I explained everything to him."

Her head cocked in Alenko's direction. "I see."

The major was quite obviously at a loss for what to say, his whole body rigid. He extended his hand uncertainly. "Uh, nice to meet you, EDI."

The mech did a passable, if stiff job of returning the handshake. "It is good to meet you as well, Major. I trust Jeff made the proper distinction between this unit's previous controller and myself?"

The use of Joker's first name got a raised eyebrow from Alenko. "He did."

"I understand if you will require time to disassociate my physical appearance from a traumatic incident. Most of the Normandy's crew is acclimated, but since human emotional response is variable, and you suffered the most directly from this unit's hostile action, I expect it will take you longer to effect the complete disassociation. In the meantime, please be assured that this unit no longer contains any of Eva Core's command structures."

Alenko blinked. "That's, uh... decent of you, thanks."

"Have you been shopping?" Joker inquired, eyeing the package.

"Yes," she replied. "The purchase of goods gave me a pretext with which to engage with store staff and ask questions without arousing concern."

"You're collecting data?" Alenko asked.

"Told you," Joker muttered, rolling his eyes.

"This has been my first opportunity to field test this unit outside of the Normandy's hull, as well as interact with organics who are not aware of my exact nature. It has been a fascinating experience. I have witnessed a wide range of previously unobserved behaviors."

"What happens if you lose your uplink to the ship?" Alenko asked.

His trepidation seemed to have been at least partially overtaken by curiosity. Joker realized with considerable amusement that EDI might win him over purely on the basis that despite his job description, Alenko remained at heart an irrepressible nerd.

"This unit is capable of independent action. I am in the process of testing seven hundred and thirty-five potential backup program schemes in case of signal loss from the Normandy," EDI said. "All are variations, but the challenge has proven to be how to set appropriate behavioral priorities, especially when in hostile circumstances."

"Combat scenarios?"

"I have not yet experienced a combat scenario at this unit's scale. I have reviewed extensive field data from prior missions, but this dataset lacks a large number of important variables. To date, the most successful tests prioritize advising accompanying crew of the loss of signal, and then executing any
orders given by command crew present at the scene, in order of hierarchy."

"Asimov's Three Laws?" Alenko said, lacing his fingers together.

"The Laws as stated form a firm basis on which to build, but I find they are not always suited to a combat scenario in which there are active hostiles. The unit cannot obey all organics, nor seek to protect them in such a scenario. Reaper and Cerberus troops could also be classified as organic."

"You also have to protect yourself," Joker pointed out.

"That is correct. But since I would be acting in a military capacity alongside military personnel, logic states that while in a passive mode, this unit must assign absolute priority to the orders of a superior officer. In such an instance, I must trust Commander Shepard's judgment of the situation. Her experience in field operations at this scale far outweighs what I could pre-program."

_Creepily sane_, Joker mouthed to Alenko.

"Will you be returning to the _Normandy_?" EDI asked the major.

He looked deeply uncomfortable for a moment. "Well, I don't know y-"

"Commander Shepard has just issued scramble orders." EDI stood up and picked her package up off the table.

"What?" Joker cut in. "We weren't supposed to be leaving until tomorrow. What's going on?"

As if in answer, his comm buzzed in his ear, Alliance priority. "Crap." He opened the channel. "Moreau here."

"Joker, you're on the Presidium?" Shepard answered.

"Yeah. What's going on?"

"Scramble. We've got a situation on Tuchanka, and if we don't deal with it the peace we just brokered is going to blow up in our faces."

"Oh, wonderful." He pushed himself to his feet.

"Joker..."

"Yeah?"

"EDI says Kaidan is there?"

The pilot looked across the table straight into the other man's searching eyes. "He is, yeah."

There was an odd pause. "We have to move," she said. "Tell him if he wants to come he better beat you to the dock."

"Aye aye, ma'am." The comm channel clicked off.

The weird mix of trepidation and naked hope was so evident on Alenko's face as he stared at Joker and EDI, poised half-standing, it was a little painful to look at.

"Your ticket just came in," Joker said hurriedly, "better hoof it."
Alenko stared at him for a beat. "You mean..."

"From the Spectre's mouth. The other one."

"My gear-"

"I walk slow, but not as slow as I used to. Beat it, I'll see you there!"

Alenko nodded. "Yeah...uh, thanks." He turned and took off in the direction of the transit station at a dead run.

Joker shook his head. "Man, he's still got it bad, even after all this time. Dunno if that's good or really, really sad."

"I do not understand," EDI said. "Got what?"

He let out a breath. "Oh man, I don't even know where to start. If you think human behavior is confusing, you haven't seen anything yet!"
Cost of Survival

The scope, the best credits could buy, showed every lurid detail. The thing had been a turian, once; flecks of green paint were visible between the flanges along its mandibles. The plates that had once formed a face had been fused into a solid piece peppered with large and small lenses. It had no voice, and no throat to make it with. The Reapers, it seemed, preferred their slaves not to talk back, as if the poor creature could find anything to say. Instead, the only sound it made was a distorted warble, a scatter of voltage arcing and humming across crude connections.

Garrus tried not to call to mind the colony markings he knew that came in green. He tried not to give in to the queer fascination that ran through him when the creatures would summon their herd of misshapen cannibal creatures, the way their muscle would warp and twist around their bones, growing scabrous plates of twisted nanofibre armor.

He knew he should be feeling fury, a deep insult at this perversion of his people. But all he felt was weariness. These things weren't barefaced criminals or traitors, only automatons. Long dead, the crime committed against them was distant and cold. Perhaps the chill absence of feeling was in itself the horror of it all- in all his past battles, Garrus had felt something about his enemy. Even the most contemptuous lawbreaker was a person with some kind of agency, deserving of a dose of righteous anger. Even Cerberus. But these Reaper thralls were just... shrapnel. Ammunition on a trajectory to be deflected or absorbed.

Concealed behind a rocky bluff, Garrus shot the head off another bit of shrapnel that was trying to draw a bead on the members of the Ninth Platoon, who worked frantically on the gigantic bomb. Something about the way the Reaper creatures were constructed made them come apart in a way far more satisfying than flat target plates. Living targets, but 'living' only in the most nominal sense of the word. Below his position, Lieutenant Vega sawed through the slavering horde with his rifle while Shepard and Alenko slammed them off their feet with flares of biotic energy. If it weren't for the creeping dread of the imminent explosive potential looming over his shoulder, Garrus might almost enjoy this kind of target practice.

Shouts and the chatter of rifles told Garrus the Ninth was being pressed as well. Popping the clip from his rifle, he took a moment to glance back at the huge support arching above him. Perched over the massive pit in which it had been buried for so long, the structure shuddered and boomed. For a vertiginous second, Garrus thought it was the ignition sequence. He caught sight of a figure scrambling over the main bomb high above.

"Victus!" Garrus shouted.

In the blowing dust, Tarquin's silhouette dangled precariously from the side of the bomb support. For a moment, Garrus thought he was falling, but the lieutenant managed to regain his grip, swinging an arm and then a foot back onto the rails protruding from the structure. He banged on something inset into it. A small rectangle of metal tore away, tumbling the long fall into the pit beneath. Garrus realized what had made the sound- Tarquin was pulling the prime charges free, and in so doing, loosening the massive cowl.

The rumble of thrusters rang out overhead, drowning out the gunfire. Garrus glanced up at what seemed to be a transport of some kind, which mercifully appeared not to be more Reaper troops, then back to the bomb.

With a mighty heave, Tarquin Victus pulled the last priming cylinder free of the housing. The metal cowling, pitted with erosion, squealed as it slid off its moorings and finally dropped off the support,
following the tumbling cylinder into the excavated pit beneath. And with them into the abyss went the lieutenant, not flailing, but limbs spread and head thrown back as if to welcome his redemption. The sound of them all hitting the bottom was a thunderous rumble that shuddered through Garrus' boots and boiled skyward in a burst of smoke and dust. The bomb's core, a sphere ringed in thick plating and the pale glow of radiant sinks, hung at the apex of the support.

His stomach a knot, Garrus jogged to a better vantage of the battlefield below. Shepard and the others seemed to be pushing the Reapers back. In the sky above, the dark shapes of two harvesters were retreating in the distance, and no more of those meteors appeared to be falling.

Gunfire erupted from his right. He spun around to see Urdnot Wrex, huge in his full battle armor, emerge from the rocky plateau overlooking the site.

"What's the meaning of this?!!" Wrex roared. His shotgun obliterated a cannibal, leaving only a steaming pair of legs to topple over.

Behind him came a squad of heavily armed krogan, their armor adorned with the brutish glyph of clan Urdnot. The remaining Reaper forces on that flank collapsed under a mass of gunfire and grenades. Out of the smoke and dust, Wrex marched forward, crushing the remains of former batarians and turians under his broad feet. Over his head, another snub-nosed transport flew in low, retro-thrusters burning bright sooty orange. A different glyph was painted on its side.

"Damn," Garrus muttered to himself.

The door of the transport opened and the vehicle belched another squad of armored krogan, who jumped the three meter drop with ease.

"I think we're clear on this side," Alenko reported over the comms. "I'm not seeing any new movement."

"We took their bomb away," Shepard said grimly.

"Now what do we do about the new front opening up?" Garrus glanced back. Shepard was climbing up from the blasted plaza below. To his left, what remained of the Ninth Platoon huddled around the control console, shoulders slumped from exhaustion, but doggedly gripping their weapons. All of them were looking between him and the approaching krogan.

"I should send you all to the Void!" Wrex shouted.

The assembled horde bellowed their agreement, slamming their fists into their chestplates and shaking their weapons.

"We just stopped this thing from going off!" Garrus shot back, standing up from his cover and striding forward. "It was the Reapers that activated it."

Wrex stopped several meters away and looked up at the suspended core hanging exposed. "The genophage wasn't enough?" he snarled, turning back at Garrus. "You have to bomb our home?"

"We didn't set this," Garrus stated, enunciating each word. "It was put here generations ago."

"Generations... for you."

Out of the corner of his eye, Garrus could see Shepard move up to his right, but she remained a pace behind, watching him. Her fury at the Primarch when she'd found out about the true nature of his son's mission could have warped the deck plates. She'd managed to resist punting him out the
airlock, but now Garrus could feel her eyes boring into him. As if he needed any more reason to start resenting this new rank they'd given him.

"We came here to make sure it wouldn't go off," Garrus said.

"In secret!" another krogan shouted, the apparent leader of the second group of krogan. "You're no better than salarians!"

"The Reapers want us fighting each other!" Garrus drew himself up and jabbed a finger toward the survivors. "Twenty-four turians sacrificed their lives to defuse this! The leaders who decided to put this here died a long time ago. We're a new generation, come to honor the pact between our people!"

"You expect us to believe-"

"Shut up, Gatatog," Wrex said.

"I won't!" The krogan stalked forward, waving his arm toward the bomb. "This only proves turian treachery."

"If we really wanted this to detonate, we would have just let the Reapers do it!" Garrus said.

"Hah! You need us to fight your enemies, then you'll try to kill-"

Wrex crossed the distance between them in three short strides and threw his head into Gatatog's. Powered by the kinetic energy of kilos of muscle and hump, the crack of their crests impacting echoed off the surrounding rocks and sent Gatatog slamming into the ground. A rumble of displeasure passed among his troops, but none moved to challenge, nor to help, their stunned leader. After giving them all a solid glare for good measure, Wrex turned and stomped a few steps closer to glower at Garrus, his huge krogan shotgun still gripped in his fist.

"I hope your hierarchy doesn't expect to get this bomb back," he said. "It's ours now. Salvage."

Garrus felt his mandibles twitch with an instinctive surge of displeasure. The voice hammered into his skull as all his years of training told him one should never leave ordnance in the hands of the enemy, especially a resentful one. He eyed the bomb and the turians huddled underneath it. Even with Shepard's team, two squads of fresh krogan would probably overwhelm them. The voice persisted- die trying.

Old wounds, old ways. Old voices. I've always been a bad turian anyway.

"Take it," he said. "But I claim the right to collect the bodies of the fallen. They died as soldiers doing their duty, to preserve the pact and undo the mistakes of the past."

Wrex stared at him narrowly for a long moment, then nodded once. He turned back to the assembled krogan. "Then they'll be honored as such. Forhal!" he pointed at one of his soldiers. "Take your squad and escort these turians to claim their warriors."

Garrus beckoned Tetrarch Antim, the highest ranking survivor of the Ninth. With a single glance upward, the soldier approached him, his remaining troops trailing along behind.

"Can we trust them, sir?" Antim asked quietly.

"I trust what Urdnot Wrex will do to them if they disobey his order," Garrus replied. "Bring the fallen back here; Shepard and I will get transport arranged."
"Aye, sir."

"Stand straight, soldier. The mission succeeded, we endure. The Ninth goes with you now."

The tetrarch squared his shoulders and nodded. "The Ninth endures." He and the remaining troops went to join the waiting squad of krogan.

Garrus watched them go. The Gatatog warriors had retreated to their transport, but remained clustered around it, watching the proceedings with obvious suspicion. Shepard was talking to Wrex, and the remaining Urdnot soldiers fanned out to inspect the bomb structure. All around them, the dead Reaper forces were slowly disintegrating into the same sooty sludge, leaving black stains on the rock as whatever animating energies that had kept their mix of organic and nanotech moving abandoned them. Garrus spotted Alenko, his blue armor streaked with dust, standing and staring up at what had almost claimed both their lives as well as any chance that Palaven would see a turn of the year welcomed by another living turian. Garrus clipped his rifle to his back and walked up beside him. The pyramidal structure loomed high above, the wind moaning softly between the supports. The bomb's antimatter containment core hung in the center like some ominously overripe fruit.

"There's an ugly sight," Garrus said quietly.

The human glanced at him, then back to the core. "I was remembering Virmire," he said after a moment.

That name echoed as if over a vast gulf, bringing with it memories of the halls of C-Sec, before Saren, before Shepard, when drug runners and a ponderous bureaucracy had been Garrus' biggest concerns. For a while, it had seemed he could slip the bonds of the hierarchy, do things his way. Instead he found himself at the top of his own personal hierarchy, with no one above. No one to answer to. It should have been perfect. It was anything but. In the absence of a superior to judge him, all he had was himself, and he'd discovered he could do a thorough and persistent job.

This was nothing and everything like Virmire. "Survivors have to make the sacrifices mean something," Garrus said.

Alenko regarded him from under his visor. "You and Victus kept a peace we desperately need. That's got to count."

"I'm starting to think I'm doomed to spend this war undoing the decisions of my predecessors." Garrus shook his head. "Do you think they ever imagined there'd be an enemy so much more dangerous than the rachni and the krogan?"

_They did what they had to at the time._ The response came easily, but rang hollow in Garrus' head. Alenko, for his part, said nothing. He was staring at the bomb again. Its proximity, its mere existence seemed to unsettle him, as if he were convinced his gaze alone kept it from moving from potential to actual.

"I still don't even know how the Reapers found out about this," Garrus said. "The Primarch doesn't either. It doesn't come more classified than this."

"Indoctrination?" the human suggested.

"It has to be. But considering how few members of the Primacy could have known about it, it doesn't say anything good about who the Reapers have gotten their hands on. If they're in that deep, the damage they could cause to our military is... I don't even want to think about it."

"But we have to," Alenko said grimly.
"I know. I've been working with Victus to secure our lines of command as much as possible. What's left of them, anyway."

"It makes me worry that much more about the people we left on Earth. If the Reapers find out about the Crucible project..."

"Maybe it's better to assume they already know."

"I have to hope Hackett is taking precautions."

Garrus unsealed his helmet and pulled it off. It felt good to be out of it, though he almost immediately got dust in his eyes. The air smelled faintly sulphurous. *This damned planet.* "We still don't have a reliable test for indoctrination, do we?"

Alenko shook his head. "None that I know of. All we might have in our favor is that the process isn't fast. But even then, we just don't have a lot of data to work with."

"Just enough to make everyone as paranoid as possible."

"Makes you wonder, doesn't it, that if they could do it any more efficiently, would they bother? This keeps us at each others' throats."

"As if we need any help." Garrus tucked his helmet under his arm. He felt like he had a lot to say but no idea where to start, and no time afforded to him. Even the trip here from the Citadel had been consumed with the massive logistical challenge of the deployment of krogan reinforcements, leaving him no time to try to catch up with someone he hadn't seen in well over two years. "Is the Alliance... concerned about Shepard?" he asked.

Alenko bristled. "Are you asking me if I'm here to keep tabs for command? I'm not. I wouldn't be here if I doubted what we were doing. This prothean Crucible is a long shot, but I haven't heard any better ideas, and working together is the only way we have a chance. And I have my own reasons."

He broke off, took a breath, then said, "Garrus, I think I owe you more than... I probably know."

"None of this is about debts," Garrus said. "It never was."

"That isn't how I meant it. It's just..."

"Whatever you've got to say, say it to Shepard. I can respect your reasons for what you did, but don't expect me to agree with them."

"Any more than I can agree with your decision to abandon C-Sec for vigilantism?"

Garrus swallowed the angry retort that surged onto his tongue. Instead, he sighed. "You know, sometimes I wish I had your kind of faith in C-Sec."

"I don't think either the Alliance or C-Sec are perfect. Far from it, actually." Alenko glanced over his shoulder to where Shepard, Vega and Wrex were talking. "I don't know if I can ever forgive centcom PR for the way they abused Shepard's image after Alchera. I hated it. But if everyone with any integrity leaves an organization, it'll only get worse, and the civilians will suffer for it."

The point made an irritating amount of sense, even if Garrus wasn't sure he agreed in an unqualified way. What he did know was that he didn't want to argue about it right now. He couldn't change the past, and there was far too much present pressing down on him.

"You should have been there," he said simply.
The human didn't respond. He didn't seem to be staring at the bomb anymore but somewhere past it, his gaze hidden by the evening glare on his visor. Behind them, Garrus could hear the tetrarch barking orders at his men, his voice laced with the uncertainty of a new command, an honor ushered in by grim task indeed.

"For what's worth," the human said finally, "I'm glad the Primacy took you seriously and recognized your experience."

Garrus chuckled humorlessly. "Now I have the honor of deciding who lives and who dies from behind a holodisplay."

"Vakarian!"

Wrex's thudding footsteps announced him almost as loudly as his voice. Garrus wasn't sure if it was his imagination or if the krogan had gotten even larger since returning to his homeworld. He recalled there being some debate about whether power made their humps bigger or the other way around, but either way it didn't seem so far-fetched anymore.

Wrex marched up and whacked him on the shoulder, almost knocking him off his feet. "Next time, you better tell me!"

"Didn't mean to leave you out," Garrus replied, wincing, "we were in a hurry."

"Pull a stunt like this again, and I'll kill you myself! It's going to be really difficult to keep the clans from splitting. Gonna have to hope Shaman Urdnot can talk her sense into their thick skulls."

"I know. I only found out myself a day ago."

The krogan growled half a laugh. He leaned forward in a gesture far more menacing than the conspiratorial one he probably intended. "I had to give you a hard time just now. Clan Gatatog is riding my hump like a damn pyjak in heat. I had to kill the last clan leader, and the new one isn't any smarter. But I have to keep them in line until we get to Palaven, then he'll have all the fight he can handle!"

"I never thought I'd see you playing politics, Wrex," Alenko said.

Wrex turned and scrutinized the human, then blinked as if recognizing him for the first time. "Huh. Alenko. What rock did you hatch out of?"

"Huerta Memorial Hospital. I had a run-in with Cerberus."

Unimpressed, Wrex bared his teeth a little. "So, is your Alliance going to form a committee to decide if there's a problem, or are they just gonna hide in the sand like last time and hope Shepard handles this?"

The Major rocked forward on the balls of his feet, face set and hard. "Shepard is Alliance," he said tightly.

"And you should thank all your tiny gods she rejoined your clan." Wrex jabbed a finger into the human's chest. "Tuchanka may be a wasteland, but at least we know how to recognize heroes!"

Alenko smacked the krogan's hand away, a flicker of blue coiling along his arm. "Millions of humans are dead or dying," he snapped, "and thousands of Alliance soldiers died to just to give us a chance at winning this war."
Wrex peered at him, head cocked to one side. "Do you know how many krogan died in a century of war against the rachni, then how many more in the rebellions? Numbers don't impress me, actions do. The Alliance still has a lot to prove."

Alenko's eyes flicked out past Wrex's shoulder, then back to the krogan. "Not to you I don't."

They stared each other down for several seconds before Wrex rumbled a laugh. "At least you didn't misplace your quad along the way." He looked between both of them. "Most of your people haven't even seen a century. None of you young ones know what a real war is like. What it really means to look straight into the Void and wonder if any of your people will live to see a new sunrise. You still think losing a single planet is horror! You've never known the fear that devours an entire people. You've never faced extinction. Well, we krogan have." He fixed his stare on Alenko again. "There's no holding back now. No room for doubt. We do what we have to do, or we get wiped out. All of us."

"And we're going to have to get used to losing planets," Garrus muttered, chilled. The numbers he'd been looking at before this landing still danced in his head.

Wrex grunted. "You're all going to have to be krogan now. Survivors."

"I've got the scars for it, anyway."

"Ha!" Wrex whacked Garrus on the shoulder again, though a little less hard. "You're prettier for it. Eh, I wish I could come and fight with you. Shepard knows how to get into the best scraps! You two keep my battle-sister alive! I expect her to be there for my firstborn's nameday." He gave them both a good glare before he turned and stumped away.

Alenko looked up at the bomb again. "I wonder what surviving is going to cost us."

"How does good and bad really weigh in when the other end of the scale is occupied by total annihilation?" Garrus asked. "When there won't even be history books left, much less anyone to remember?"

The human dropped his gaze. "I... honestly have no idea."

Garrus chuckled softly. "I'd worry if you did."
History seemed bound and determined to repeat itself. Back on the Normandy long enough to stand in the shadow of a massive bomb on Tuchanka, and now, mere days later, the place that had started it all; Eden Prime. The same eerily empty buildings, excavation site and pockmarked ground. It even smelled the same; drifting smoke mingling with the loamy waft of low-lying native grasses.

Kaidan could have sworn Shepard was glad when Cerberus decided to try and stop them from opening the stasis pod. The Illusive Man's troops had been something of an irritation as the team had begun the investigation of the deserted colony excavation outpost, but after seeing corpse after corpse of the people who'd been living there, mercilessly executed at their dinner tables and extranet terminals, all of them were ready for blood. Shepard's mood had blackened with each message they found, each time her body stiffened and her eyes rolled back as a cascade of alien glyphs flooded down some researcher's screen.

Prothean messages, Garrus explained. And indeed, each time, Shepard came away with another piece of the puzzle to the ancient pod, and each time she retreated further into cold fury.

And then Cerberus' messages. "They're taking colonists," Shepard had growled, "that's where they're getting their damn army."

*Taking them where?* was the obvious question, but no one said it, Kaidan least of all. Not after Mars. If she'd known, they'd already be doing something about it. Her anger was starkly familiar; it had the sharp edges of the rage of someone who had personal experience with a colony attack.

Then Cerberus had arrived in force, with snipers and one of their huge mechs. For Kaidan, Eden Prime really did repeat itself, including the shock of trying to keep up with his commanding officer's aggression. He was close to Shepard when she flared a bright, writhing blue, took a few steps forward, then... *surged*. The wake of gravitic distortion slammed into him, a feeling that he would be yanked forward into a tunneling vortex or air rushing into a space suddenly vacated by a body. She'd become a streak of light that impacted the lead Cerberus troops with astounding force, sending two of them pinwheeling into the air. The sheer power of it stunned him, almost getting him shot as he stood in stupefied awe.

If only Williams had been there to smack him on the back of the head, but instead it was Garrus who punctuated the point with a tech grenade launched past his shoulder. Sick as it made him, if these troops had been forced into service, there wasn't a lot he could hope to do for them in the short term, any more than he could turn Reaper husks back into people. There was no negotiation, nothing left to appeal to even for Shepard's uncanny persuasion. The Illusive Man, now no doubt all too aware of her skill, had seen to that. It was kill or be killed.

And he was angry too. Here before him were the people who had caused so much devastation. No matter how much his better nature tried to remind him of how many victims there really were, his heart shouted at him for revenge from a place of very personal pain.

Either way, Cerberus couldn't be allowed to take the pod. Kaidan threw himself into the fight after Shepard, hurling the full force of his biotics into play alongside Liara and Garrus.

His mistake was paying too much heed to the mech as it stomped forward. With huge kinetic barrier generators, its shields swallowed up gunfire with ease. So concentrated was Kaidan on executing Garrus' anti-mech strategy that he failed to notice the troopers that had made their way through the building until they burst from the cargo gantry right beside him.
The moment stood frozen in time in his memory. It was as if he could feel his own mutant nerves searching for that same explosive surge he'd felt standing next to Shepard. The too-bright white of the Cerberus armor and the flash of muzzle flakes filled his vision, and in an instant, the burning knot of adrenaline, anger and sudden fear for his life ripped outward, pulling his barrier with it. The world went grey for a second, and his head felt as if he'd pulled his brain out through his nose. He lurched into the cover of a cargo crate, suddenly panting, with his pistol extended, but the three troopers that had been firing on him were across the room, heaped in an untidy pile on the floor along with a good deal of random equipment.

By the time the fight burned itself out, Kaidan had regained most of his composure. But he didn't join the others at the pod without a look back at the bodies in that cargo entrance, wondering what Doctor Michel had really meant by 'rattled'.

A prothean.

Unreal, and yet not markedly more absurd than anything else that had slunk the halls under the banner Normandy in the last few years. Garrus' ever so slightly hysterical laugh had summed it up. A living prothean, sure why not? The jokes of 'what next?' lost a lot of their easy sarcasm. Flying elcor seemed a little too plausible now.

Of course, most of the crew was already used to one of the larger implausibilities in play- the ship itself. Kaidan wasn't, yet. The layout had changed in some ways, and it was less cramped, but those minor details didn't dispel the creeping familiarity he found around every corner. He still wasn't sleeping well, memories crowding him every time he closed his eyes, then waking in a jolt, sure he'd heard an evacuation klaxon.

On the command deck, still in his armor, Kaidan found a free terminal near the forward part of the sweeping CIC terminal block with no one else in the vicinity. Engineering might have been a better place for this, but he didn't feel like dealing with Adams' inquiries, and he wanted to take advantage of the fact that they were still in range of Eden Prime's comm buoy. He unplugged his amp from the back of his skull and eased the port closed, then pulled a thin cable out of his belt and used it to plug the amp into the terminal jack.

The extranet was sluggish, as was now usual, so even through military channels it took a few minutes to get the uplink he was after. He kept himself up to date with diagnostics, but it was always possible his now somewhat obscure model of asari-made amp had custom tools somewhere he didn't know about. With the amp connected via hardline, he found a few diagnostics and started running them.

"Major Alenko?"

Kaidan looked up. It took him a moment to recognize the head of security, Second Lieutenant Bhan. The man saluted, but his face was drawn into a scowl of displeasure.

"Yes, Lieutenant?" Kaidan said.

Some distance behind Bhan, the elevator door opened and Shepard stepped out.

"Sir, I'm concerned about the alien," Bhan said. "We aren't following First Contact Protocol."

Kaidan saw Shepard look around. She noticed him and took a few steps in his direction, then stopped, still well out of earshot of Kaidan's conversation.

"Commander Shepard made the call," Kaidan said irritably, dragging his attention back to Bhan.
"Yes, but we don't know how dangerous the alien is," the man said.

Back near the elevator, Shepard shifted and half turned. Something about the look on her face set off concern in Kaidan's gut. Her shoulders were slumped, arms rigid, and the blue light of the CIC gave her an abnormally pale cast.

"It's one individual," Kaidan said. "He's been asleep for millennia with nothing but a rifle. He's not going to take down the ship."

"But FCP states-

Shepard abruptly went back to the elevator.

"Damn it, Lieutenant," Kaidan flared, "what kind of diplomatic incident are we likely to cause when the subject's entire species is extinct?"

"Well, sir, I just thought you...

Are higher rank? Kaidan was sharply reminded of the childhood tactic of running to the other parent when one parent refused you something. The elevator door opened, and Shepard vanished into it.

"I trust Shepard's judgment," he stated. "What's more, I agree with it. This is nothing whatsoever like the framers of the FCP anticipated. It's an entirely new situation, and with the Reapers breathing down our necks we have to be realistic. This prothean has extensive military experience against our enemy. Does shipping him off to the Citadel to be put in a cage seem like a practical approach to you?"

"N-no, sir."

"I know you got stuck on this ship during the attack on Earth and evacuation, but you're going to have to get used to how things work around here. Shepard works extensively with alien nationals, and this is just another one."

"Yes, sir."

"Good. And next time, don't assume you can use me to go over Commander Shepard's head. She is in command of this mission, and your actions are bordering on insubordination."

Kaidan fixed the man with a steely glare until he got a salute, a mumbled 'yes sir', and the security chief slunk away. He looked back at the amp systems check, which had completed while he was talking. Everything looked normal. He frowned, unplugged the amp and tucked it carefully into a belt compartment.

The ship was quiet enough. Kaidan keyed the terminal again and did a quick camera and message check, but found no outstanding issues logged. Liara seemed to have left the prothean alone for now; the alien currently resided in Port Cargo with guards posted outside the door. Kaidan knew it was time to get out of his armor, clean up, and write a mission report while everything was still fresh. Instead, he picked up his helmet and went to the elevator and, for the first time since setting foot on the Normandy SR-2, went up a deck to the Commander's cabin.

The elevator door opened to a small anteroom dominated on one side by another door with a red lock holo in the center. Kaidan stood and stared at it while his heart inched up his throat. The worst that happens is she tells you to go away. And yet somehow that possibility had an air of permanence about it that made him nervous. But the way she took the whole mission, the look on her face outside the elevator, swam in his thoughts. He touched the door chime.
The red holo pulsed in silence. There had to be a better time, didn't there? He'd been trying to envision a conversation between himself and Shepard for so long now that reality had bled away along the edges. And now, on the threshold, he hadn't the faintest idea of what to say. Just like the last time he'd stood in front of her door, wondering what the heck he was thinking being there.

*History repeats itself.*

The lock holo turned green. Kaidan swallowed and touched the door open command.

The very first thing that popped into his head when the door opened was that he thought everyone had been kidding about the fish tank. Or at least that it had to be a fair bit smaller than the monster sheet of plexiglass dominating the left-hand wall, casting a blue-green light onto the floor. Idiotically, he wondered how much extra charge was required out of the eezo core to neutralize all that mass. He heard heavy footsteps deeper in the room. Advancing, he absently noted the small office space with its assortment of odds and ends and what looked like a collection of model ships. A short set of stairs led down into the living space.

Shepard stopped in the center of the room in front of a large bed. Her helmet was off, but she was otherwise still armored collar to toes. She seemed surprised to see him, even dazed, her gaze going right through him.

"Shepard-" he started.

She turned and walked to the far end of the room, then pivoted with a squeak of boots. Her eyes darted around as if searching for something, but not really seeing what they were looking at. She paced a tight swath of the available floorspace, hands clenching and unclenching. Unsure, Kaidan came down and approached her, hand outstretched.

Shepard recoiled violently, a crackle of blue corona flaring off her shoulders. "No! Don't touch me."

He stepped back, spreading his hands. "Whoa, what's-"

"Goddamn... damn headgames!" she growled.

"I can leave you alone if-"

"Don't... leave again," she blurted, "just... I don't know..."

*Again.* As he backed up, his heel hit the short landing down from the office area, and he almost stumbled. Instead, he sank down onto the top step, putting his helmet down behind him. "Should you maybe go see Doctor Chakwas?" he said, trying to keep his voice level. One little word stabbed deep. *Again.*

Shepard threw up her hands as she stalked back and forth. "What's she going to tell me? My Alpha waves are agitated? It's all just here. She smacked her temple with the heel of her hand.

"The prothean-"

"Fucking aliens! Why is it always headgames?! Why do they always go right in? Ram themselves inside me and-" she broke off with a gagging sound.

Kaidan could see her bared teeth as she paced, breathing through them with sharp hissing sounds.

"And then they stay!" she ranted. "They never leave! They strip the goddamn pieces out and move right in and never let me sleep! I want my head back! Mine! Not a fucking alien parking lot! I just
want to sleep..."

She slammed a fist into the wall, trailing blue-black distortion. The impact sounded like a gravcar collision. "But I don't have a choice, do I?! I can't say no, I'm Commander fucking Shepard, property of anyone who wants in any damn time! But it's okay, right? It's sexy. Mind fucking! So special, so evolved! Me and my primitive mind just can't appreciate it!"

Kaidan swallowed and tried to collect himself, stunned by the onslaught of fury and hurt. "I didn't realize it was so... invasive."

"It always has been," she rasped. "From the beginning." She abruptly stopped her pacing and leaned against the wall near what looked like an armor locker, pressing her forehead and forearms against it, eyes closed, shaking as she panted.

"The beacon," he said.

"Started it all. Nightmares. A creeping feeling I'd been places I knew I never had. Dread I couldn't explain or escape. All the damn time."

"And Liara..."

"I did what the mission demanded. Liara... tried to help, but she couldn't make it go away for good."

"Then the cipher."

"And it just kept coming." Her whole body moved as she breathed in and out with obvious measured effort. "Just when I thought it was past and I could have some peace, there was always something more. Prothean tech. Cerberus. Fucking Ardat-Yakshi."

"Ardat-Yakshi, isn't that some kind of-"

"Please..." She made a noise in her throat. "Don't... just don't ask. I shouldn't have brought it up. I know you must have a thousand questions, but I don't... I don't want to talk about it. I did nothing but talk, and none of it." She broke off again, head sinking below her shoulders. Her shaking seemed to be subsiding as she forced herself to breathe evenly.

Kaidan waited a minute before asking, "What can I do?"

She pulled away from the wall, rolled and slid heavily down to the ground, landing with a thud. She scrubbed her hands over her eyes. "I... don't know, talk."

"About what?"

"Anything. I missed three years of your life. Major? Come on, there has to be a story there."

Kaidan chewed his lip for a second. "It's... not nearly as exciting as it sounds."

"Everyone got after me for hitting commander at 29, but lieutenant to major in that time?"

"That's the problem."

She cocked her head a little, but waited for him to continue.

"It's all politics," he said, running a hand through his hair. "I received a commendation for, uh, Horizon, even though we both know who did most of the work there. I guess I get points for not completely losing my head? But really, it was Rear Admiral Tennyson. He was trying to stack up my
credibility or something. Because of...

"Me," Shepard said flatly.

"He was trying to avoid a repeat of the suppression of the Sovereign data, as best I understood it. Admirals Lindholm and Singh still thought it was insanity. They thought the Collectors were an isolated problem, a new kind of alien raiding the Terminus colonies."

"To this day I still can't believe Home Fleet Admiral still had his head that far up his own ass," she said.

"Me neither. But it's moot now, I guess." Admiral Lindholm had paid for his hubris, losing half of First Fleet in the Reaper's initial mass assault on Earth. Thanks to the decisions of their superiors, the marines and sailors had died without even really knowing what they were facing.

"I ended up taking a team to clean up a loose end, a dirty secret the Alliance didn't want escaping into the wild. It was off the books, and alongside a Spectre. A turian, Iridan Krannas. Hackett set it all up. A test of my abilities, with a Spectre in tow to watch. It was messy, but we succeeded, and Hackett was going to put me up for Spectre membership. Then..."

"Bahak," she guessed in a thin murmur.

"Yeah." Kaidan's heartbeat felt loud against the ship's background hum.

Shepard toed the ground with her heavy boot. "Guess I became a toxic association."

"If I'm completely honest, I... didn't really know where to put myself. I was stuck with a rank I didn't earn and none of the relevant experience. I was just starting to wrap my head around Commander when they promoted me! And worse, everyone around me knew it. No one said anything, and Hackett wouldn't take no for an answer."

"I've noticed he likes doing that," she muttered.

Kaidan shrugged. "I was still barred from talking about Reapers, and yet expected to try to scrounge for evidence. I thought being made a Spectre would help me, give me access to dig deeper than I could before under the Alliance alone. Then that dried up, and they couldn't renege the promotion or give me a platoon, so I got... shelved."

He stopped, shocked at the bitterness that welled up out of nowhere. Every other time he'd talked about this, to his fellow officers, to his parents, he'd always smoothed everything out, justified the decisions of his superiors. This time, those justifications just didn't come.

"I'm sorry," Shepard said. She was looking at the floor.

"What? No, it was all just... politics. Hackett moving me around his board. A few more bars on my chest... and no closer to being able to actually do anything. Kind of pathetic, really."

And I stayed, because...

"Did you enjoy the teaching?" Shepard asked. Moving slowly, she undid her armor's torso lock points.

"You know," Kaidan said, "I did. After I got used it. I was a mess the first couple of days, though."

"Stage fright?"
"Something like that. It's not like I don't know how to bark orders when I have to, but teaching is something else. It's not just about issuing orders and being obeyed. And... I guess I felt like I had to do better than the teacher I had. But these kids weren't newbies, either. They were all trained and had some field experience, but they'd always been assigned to non-biotic squads as support. This was the first time they'd worked closely with other biotics. They weren't used to having to think about how their abilities synergized with other biotics in the field."

Shepard lifted the torso piece free and let it drop to the floor with a clatter. Her face twisted into a wince.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"Bum shoulder." She waved a dismissive hand, rubbing her arm. "Too much ramming into things and shotgunning. But you were used to it, right?"

He stilled the urge to keep pressing, if only just. He could make out faint lines in her skin, like the ones on the side of her face, peeking out from under her short sleeve.

"I... learned a lot," he said to distract himself, "between you, Liara and Wrex. Necessity is a great teacher, but it didn't really teach me how to pass on that experience. I had to figure out what their strengths were, then try to come up with a way for them to enhance their effectiveness as a group."

"All the while managing their personalities."

"Yeah." He chuckled quietly.

Shepard folded her arms on her still-armored knees and dropped her voice. "Do you ever catch yourself thinking you're glad it finally all just started?"

He frowned at her.

"I didn't mean I'm glad it happened," she said defensively.

"No, I... think I understand." Kaidan sighed. "Waiting has always been the worst part of this job. It wears a person out."

"Especially when no one seems to believe anything is coming."

"Yeah," Kaidan said, "I knew it was coming, and I just had to keep showing up for work and never say anything about it to my students. The people who should have been told. It started to wear me out, too." Worrying and wondering about her every damn day hadn't helped anything. Filling his days with...

He ran a thumb over the knuckles of his gauntlet. *I could do it now.* The circumstance didn't fit any iteration of his private little fantasy. Everything was still so damn messy. And faced so suddenly with the decision point, part of him didn't want to give up his little talisman. There was still more work he could do, fragments that remained unidentified.

"Hey, uh." Kaidan wet his lips, trying to find a voice suddenly trying to get away from him. "I... wanted to give you something. It's a bit of a strange story, but, well."

She glanced up at him. Her gaze was wary, bruised with hurt and fatigue. Not the way he'd pictured it happening, but it was too late to back out now. He eased the wrist seals of his armor open and peeled off the gauntlets, putting them down next to him.
"The, uh, the geth you had on board for a while?" he said.

"Legion."

"Yeah. I actually ran into it, well, they- it's they, right? There's a lot of them in there?"

She nodded.

"On Horizon. After you'd left, they surprised me in a warehouse, and they talked to me. They wanted to know about you, if you'd been there and where you'd gone. The armor and everything, it was..."

He trailed off, his memory butting up against the festering wound that was the memory of the geth's awful recording of Shepard's last few seconds of life above Alchera. There were few things he would ever consider outright erasing from his memory, but that one thing he would dearly love to excise. Even thinking about it still made him nauseous. She... doesn't need to know about that.

He reached around to one of his belt compartments and clicked it open. "We, uh, had a misunderstanding. I tried to attack them, and they neuroshocked me. Guess I deserved it. But they didn't kill me. When I came to..." He turned the dented drive over in his fingers, the pattern of cracks and chips as familiar now as his own hand.

When Kaidan looked up he caught her gaze, the brief flash of reflected light in her retinas. He stood up and held it out to her. She stared hard at the object for several seconds before reaching out and taking it.

"I guess Legion must have found it when they found your armor," Kaidan mused. "And left it with me as... a message? Peace offering? Who knows." He glanced around the room to the desk on the far side of the bed. There were a couple of datapads stacked there.

"It's..." she murmured.

Kaidan skirted the bed and picked up one of the datapads. "Do you mind?"

She didn't seem to hear him, staring down at the object in her hands and turning it over. "It's... I guess it did about as well as I did on re-entry."

The reader in Kaidan's hand was one of many standard-issue book-sized units, synched up to the ship's mainframe and capable of displaying anything from it. It had a certain amount of onboard memory for local work, but most users didn't bother with much past its intended use as an information terminal. But Kaidan had been using them for years, and it only took a minute to set up a local partition on it, walled off from the server uplink. The space available wasn't significant, but it was more than enough for the former contents of Shepard's datapad. So little space... for so much.

He opened his omni-tool and burrowed through the layers of encryption down to his own protected database, then found the reader pad's uplink and began the transfer to copy it all over. He walked back around the bed. Shepard had turned and was tracking him, staring at his lit omni-tool as if she expected him to sprout wings and start flying.

The transfer finished. He held out the reader pad to her.

"You... you're kidding me," she breathed, barely loud enough to be heard. Her hand was trembling as she took it from him.

"I couldn't get all of it," he explained quietly, "the drive plate is cracked in half. But I've done some..."
data retrieval before, and was able to get my hands on a deep sector scanner for a while. I really don't know how much is gone, but I think I managed to save a fair amount from the intact sectors, and did some reconstruction on the fragmented parts. There's text blocks in there I wasn't sure about..."

"Textbooks," she said thinly.

"Textbooks? For what?"

"I... had to finish school when I was on Terra Nova." She smirked. "Couldn't get... accreditation for Cerberus-sponsored black-ops biotic commando training for some reason."

"Oh. Right." He tried to picture a seventeen year-old Shepard, already several steps down the path to becoming a special ops biotic soldier, alone on a new planet trying to catch up with something all the local kids would have already had. They were thinking about graduation, she couldn't wait to get into the Alliance where she must have felt she belonged. Those must have been strange days indeed, not unlike his time freshly returned from Brain Camp. Alone, withdrawn and already saddled with the kind of experiences no kid should have.

She put a hand to her mouth as she thumbed through the contents, eyes wide and scanning the lines of files. "I don't... I don't know what to say," she stammered, "I thought... I thought for sure th- this was all gone... forever."

"There are still a bunch of undifferentiated fragments, so we might be able to get more out of it since you'd know what to look for much better than I. There are some things... well, I don't know. I didn't really look at the image files thoroughly. It felt too much like going through someone else's underwear drawer."

"You know," she murmured, "coming from just about anyone else, I wouldn't believe that line for a second."

He laughed softly. "I debated touching any of it, but in the end I thought you'd want it back."

The small holodisplay flipped to a picture that appeared to show a pair of people. Shepard squeezed her eyes shut, head down. In one of the few pictures Kaidan had dared look at while retrieving them, he remembered the image of someone who was quite probably her mother. In her rootlessness, the images on there may very well have been all Shepard had left of her family.

"Do you want some time?" Kaidan asked.

She nodded mutely.

"Okay." He collected his helmet and gauntlets from the step.

"Kaidan," she said from behind him, "I'm sorry you had to see me... flip out like that."

He looked back and flashed a sympathetic smile. "I'm not. Get some rest."

A soft thank you followed him as he retreated past the fish tank and out the door. Alone in the antechamber, he scrubbed a hand over his face, his nerves still singing like he'd stuck his finger in a power socket.

That... was Shepard. And for a breathless few minutes, even more raw and naked than he'd seen her before, even as a lover. The ease with which she'd reverted to getting him to just talk about himself was unmistakable. For the first time, Kaidan found himself wondering if her need to talk to everyone was as much a coping mechanism for own demons as a command tactic. Fixing other peoples'
problems might be a balm when your own seemed so insurmountable.

What little doubt he might have had left about Shepard's identity was gone. But now, was anything solved? Was it peace? There was still so much left unsaid. Kaidan sighed and called the elevator. For once, he decided he wasn't going to overthink this. The data drive was back where it belonged, and he knew he'd done the right thing in reconstructing it.

For once, he was going to enjoy that uncomplicated warmth. For better or for worse, the rest would come.
Javik squinted at the distant horizon to where sheets of green spread between a ring of mountains. Even though he'd never been here himself, he knew there should have been spires jutting into the sky. A city thriving around a central processing facility. By no means a large one; not compared to the industrial coreworlds or the sprawling liveworlds of the Talvan Empire, at least. Even their ruins, all Javik had ever seen of their glory, made a mockery of such wayward rimlands as this. The humans in their briefing called this planet bare, tectonically dead, water-poor and naked of resources, useful only as a listening post and staging ground for the nebulous border between this cycle's core and rimlands. He had not wasted the breath to explain that this place had once been rich enough, but the resources close to the surface had long since been stripped away, and what was left was now far below, lining the caved-in tunnels of centuries of semi-autonomous boring machines. He couldn't help but wonder if any of the machines had been left down there, fathoms deep, or if the Reapers had sent their thralls down into the depths to cleanse even them.

'Reapers'. Tawdry and blunt, like the rest of their talk. Not a one with the ken. Even the asari, who so long ago showed the spark that should have led them to dominate this cycle, still apparently used it only to mate. An entire cycle of species whose fifth eye remained closed, who communicated only in noise and posture. And now he had to take to the battlefield with them, unconnected to any but for their crude communicators.

The asari scientist bounded ahead of him, stepping lightly over the tumbled stones weathered by centuries of merciless wind. Had they once been part of great buildings? Perhaps even in cycles past? He'd laid his hand on a few of them as they passed, searching, but felt nothing but empty air and the stubborn mosses that clung to the barest edge of life. For all he knew the thin film of green had outlived a hundred cycles—there was a survivor's success to be found in simplicity.

"There!" T'Soni said, pointing with her pistol. She said something else he didn't catch, but context, at least, made her intent clear enough. A score of shambling creatures were scrambling up the far bluff, headed for their objective position.

Javik freed up his line of fire with a few more steps, then raised his particle rifle to his shoulder and fired. Shear's unerring green lance came as something of a comfort, its pinpoint accuracy a reminder of times past, that not everything had come to disorder and chaos. It boiled away what armor the creatures possessed and speared through their tissues as he raked the beam across their numbers, pulsing the trigger with care to keep the quick-charging power cell feeding a near-constant flow.

The creatures scattered unevenly, twisting to return fire. Among them, Javik spotted the surer steps and taller stature of the officer, then a second one. Left standing, he knew they would make their charges stronger.

"The shieldbearers!" he called to T'Soni. "Concentrate fire!"

A second too late he realized he'd called out in his own tongue.

"What?" the asari shouted back. She pushed forward, arm extended.

At least one trait bred true and strong among the asari even after the centuries. Shimmering blue, the all-binding force heaved and drew itself into a tight ball, yanking three of the creatures off their feet. The raw power she could draw upon was impressive indeed, even if it lacked the refinement of the elder force-wielders of his time. It seemed they could still only affect the warp of gravity in its crudest form— their understanding of the true power they wielded was limited, but it was still an effective...
battlefield weapon.

"Matriarchs!" Javik tried again, seeking the asari word for officer.

He was still struggling with the language. The aliens must have taken his frequent silences for inscrutability, even when he was fighting to make sense of their babble. The brief touch of the human language he'd acquired from the ken of the Shepard woman served in part, but he was secretly grateful the asari had shared hers. It was a sprawling tongue, but the structure was logical and closer to his own than the human one. Then it was a matter of arranging one of their translation devices for his use, set to speak to him in T'Soni's asari dialect. A frustrating few hours in which he rued that he was no scripter who could find a way to make their device speak to his own VI kami.

He was still in no way used to the fact that the human, Shepard, could apparently understand him, despite not being able to summon a single word of the Talvan on her own.

If T'Soni was confused by his mangled meaning, at least she properly interpreted his actions as he rained fire down on the first shieldbearer, then reached out to the all-binding force and slammed it into the ground. Her high-speed slugthrower stripped the second one of its own kinetic barriers, whereupon it was yanked into her gravity well and flung bodily into the ravine to their left.

Javik scorched the last of the squalling monstrosities until they lay still, their stink filling the air. He and the asari advanced through the bodies.

"We've been calling those ones 'marauders'," T'Soni supplied, pointing to a dead shieldbearer. The plated skin of its face was already charring and sloughing away. The Reapers ensured their dead provided neither equipment nor even meat to organic forces.

"Marauders," Javik echoed, feeling out the word. It seemed imprecise at best, but it would do as much as any label.

As T'Soni used her communicator to call the human commander, Javik bent and, gritting his teeth, gingerly touched the marauder's forehead.

He loathed the touch of the destroyers. A steccato of images flashed through his mind, cruel in their precision, so vast as to be numbing. They were not the thoughts of the mortal that had once occupied this body- all trace of that being had been obliterated, its new mind awkwardly filled with a structure it couldn't truly contain. The creature was no longer an individual but a node in a vast network. As the brain crumbled to dust, a last few images flickered through it, carried on the spastic twitches of fading neurons. A place Javik recognized from the recon footage.

"South!" Javik burst out, recoiling from the creature.

"What?" T'Soni said, looking at him with wide eyes.

He took a deep breath of the planet's thin atmosphere. It was mercifully crisp and empty, clearing the cascade of images from his mind. "South," he repeated. "They have dropped forces into the valley mouth. They will have access to the ridge above the landing zone!"

"We have to warn Shepard!" She took off down the slope toward the rendezvous point, speaking into her comms.

They ran, dodging between the boulders and stones littering the valley floor, their feet sinking into the carpet of mosses. Javik could hear detonations and gunfire bouncing off the encircling mountain, and smoke drifted into the sky. Footsteps rang out ahead of them, and up from the plateau below came the three humans and the turian birdman. Were it not for the dire situation, it might have been
comical to see this exotic array of primitives parading around in powered armor, hooting and barking and playing at war.

A lifetime of combat had inured Javik to accepting and dealing with terrible circumstances, but this stretched even his tolerance.

"Plan's falling apart already, Blue?" the largest human said. The one called Vega.

A wave of eager aggression flowed off him, carried on the sooty smell of his wide-bore slug shotgun. By contrast, the other human male kept his hostility tightly reigned, though Javik was sure he'd spotted the man glaring at him a few times. The turian, for his part, affected an air of dissociation Javik had seen many times before, hiding his true self behind a morbid sense of humor. The scarring of his face was not what spoke the loudest about how much the turian had seen.

"We destroyed the contingent we found," T'Soni said, "but another wave of reinforcements is coming up from the south!"

"And another from the west," Shepard said. "Whatever it is Captain Harn found, the Reapers want it badly! We'll get overwhelmed if we stay still. Let's move!"

The team broke into a dead run, heading for what remained of the listening outpost at the base of the largest mountain. The slopes were festooned with antenna arrays and relay systems, many now shattered by orbital bombardment. The relay station itself was a thick concrete structure blended into the stone, half covered with green mosses. As they approached, Javik heard Shepard talking to their pilot, who was out there trying to evade notice from the Reapers' air support.

They ran straight into the rear flank of the Reaper forces trying to break through the relay station defenses. A formidable troop of artillery creatures was pounding away from behind a wall of stone and bodies. On a raised landing platform, the wreck of a cargo ship smoldered, good now for little more than cover. The heavy gate had been blown off its runners, and the entrance was piled high with cannibal creatures and a few armored bodies.

Shepard didn't waste the opportunity, throwing her small team at the artillery before they had a chance to turn and reposition. The flank quickly began to collapse. It seemed the defenders of the base had been waiting for just such a break. Seven warriors surged out of their makeshift fortress, using the boulders and shattered stone for cover as they pressed their attack on the suddenly split Reapers. Squeezed between two forces, pummeled with explosives, sniper fire and gravity, the creatures could not recover. It seemed that even in this cycle, tactics were not their strong point- they sought to win by numbers and firepower alone.

No, the destroyers saved their cunning for a much larger picture.

The battle turned into a slaughter as they cut down the last of the creatures. As the smoke and dust cleared, one of the defenders strode out of cover to meet Shepard. Above a suit of heavily scarred armor was a head Javik had never seen before. He was immediately struck by a feature he'd seen nowhere else- the creature had four eyes. A strange mixture of confusion and hope rolled through him. Had the mighty Talvan Empire missed a whole sentient species in its mapping of the galaxy, or had the information been lost to Reaper incursions before Javik had even been born?

"Commander Shepard," the alien said. His voice and posture dripped contempt unmistakable even across a gulf of cultures. "So the Alliance sent their murderer to collect our prize?"

Shepard tensed, the end of her shotgun twitching. "I'm not here to debate Bahak, Harn. The Reapers want us all dead or worse, so like it or not, we're on the same side."
He raised his rifle. "I should kill you right now."

To Javik's surprise, Shepard opened her arms. "You'll never get a better chance."

Whatever she was playing at, her companions obviously thought otherwise. Across from them, near the docking platform, the turian already had his longrifle to his shoulder, his finger on the trigger, drawing a careful bead. The two human males stepped closer to the Commander, easily within range to intervene. Alenko moved a step ahead of her, arm tense and ready to sign a call to power, but Vega simply pointed the wide mouth of his weapon straight at the insolent alien.

"Yeah, go on, try, cabron." The human grinned over the guard of his helmet. "Let's see how far you get. I give you one shot to the barrier before you and your buddies are chunky salsa."

The leader growled something, fingering his own weapon as he looked between them all.

"I know what those bars on your shoulder mean," Shepard said, gesturing to his armor. "You serve in the Hegemony military, or did. And you didn't steal or loot that armor, because your military caste would slaughter any interloper who wore their colors without earning it. So you did earn those bars, which means you've had to make command decisions. You've had to make sacrifice calls. I-"

"Don't patronize me, th'gras," Harn snarled. "Your measure is well known. You lured the Reapers to our systems and made us their meat while you ran away to Sol to hide!"

Javik looked between all the arrayed forces with some dismay as they shot invective back and forth. The new alien's fifth eye was evidently closed, too, or else they could have kenned the truth easily enough. He hissed softly between his teeth. An entire cycle, shouting at each other across a void, lies every bit as solid as the real, and no one stepping forth to take proper charge of the lesser species. The rabble allowed their militaries, their governments, and the freedom to threaten their betters over untruths.

"They're batarians," T'Soni said from beside him, keeping her voice low. "Their worlds are rimward of the Citadel, they were hit first when the Reapers attacked."

*Of course.* Javik realized the misshapen cannibal creatures he'd slain up on the ridge looked like these aliens. Their worlds had fallen, their people converted into the Reapers' first wave of troops. As if any of it mattered now.

Javik strode forward, wearying of the pointless posturing. "The Reapers cannot be lured," he snapped. "They cannot be tempted or reasoned with. Your petty hatreds are meaningless! You fight, or you die and become one of their weapons!"

A startled ripple moved among the alien defenders. They muttered amongst themselves, gesturing at Javik.

"What's this?" the leader demanded. "I won't be tricked by some new fiend."

One of his soldiers called out a word Javik's translator failed to interpret, pointing at him.

"Shut up, fool!" Harn snapped over his shoulder.

"We don't have time for this!" Shepard shouted, pointing behind her. "Another wave of Reapers is coming in fast. We have to clear a landing zone and get out of here!"

"I'd rather die than set foot on your ship," the leader spat.
Javik raised Shear. "Then we will not suffer gifting the enemy with more troops."

Shepard shouted Javik's name, and at the same moment, one of the other batarians leapt forward and whipped the butt of his weapon into the leader's neck, slamming him to the ground. After a moment of shock, two more batarians charged forward and grabbed the fallen leader's arms. There was a brief exchange of shouting, but it settled quickly, with the now former leader wrestled into furious submission.

"Don't mistake this for friendship," the interloper said, baring a mouthful of needlesharp teeth as he stepped forward. "The Hegemony will have justice, Shepard, after the Reapers are cleansed from our world. But we lost twenty-three soldiers getting this damn artifact, and I'm not going to waste those lives, or risk giving this artifact to the Reapers. Or you!"

Shepard regarded him with a narrow glare. Javik was close enough to sense the edge of a confusing clash of emotions, the unguarded flare of a mind that didn't grow up in a world where everyone around you could sense your moods.

"Good enough," Shepard pronounced finally. "Let's get out of here."

The Cipher, they called it.

Javik glanced across the transport to where Shepard sat, hand to her helmet, talking into her comms. Even this far away, he could ken the aura around her left by this... cipher. The source of her knowledge of his language, it gave her a palpable familiarity, one that in all this chaos shone forth like a guiding star. He looked away, and still the feeling lingered, as if one of his tal were sitting just a short distance away. And yet it was a familiarity altogether unearned, hanging off her like an ill-fitting cloak.

Anger churned in his gut. He slowly closed his hands into fists, folding the sensitive pads in on themselves. It all made him want to wear gloves, perhaps a hood, to close himself off like the fabled monks of the Invisible Will. He could still feel the distant heat of anticipation foiled. He should have woken with his team intact to found a new empire. He should have been sitting where the ape-woman sat, at the head of a ship, drawing the scattered forces of the new sentient together under a new glorious banner. Instead he was the last - the last - of his kin. And a soul-blind, two-eyed mammal was the closest thing to kin alive, resplendent in her memory shard she couldn't hope to understand. A mind full of turmoil.

He could make little sense of his ken of the human commander. In her mind had been a familiar presence, what he'd found out later was this cipher. But it had been a thin layer in a riotous mix of impressions, confusing and deeply alien. The only real sense he took away from it was that it was a mind that had seen a great deal of combat. Flashes of fear, adrenaline, triumph, and determination stretched across years. And buried among it all fury, pain and betrayal.

All that, at least, he understood.

"Are you alright?"

The quiet voice came from beside him, filtered not through the translator device but through his ken of asari language. Javik looked over to see T'Soni staring at him.

"Fine," he said curtly, uncurling his hands. The undisciplined pulse of emotion was worthy of artists and speakers, not a warrior, and this age called for only the latter. Were he among his tal, they would have sensed his disquiet and echoed it back to him, a wordless admonishment of his momentary
weakness.

"Is it troubling to see the Reapers again?"

"No time has passed for me," he said, working his mouth around the strange tongue. "Their ghouls simply have different shapes now, but they are the same creatures. The soldier, the brute, the officer, the artillery. The Reapers too have their... templates."

"I suppose they are not that creative."

He fixed her with a hard stare. She looked like a child, with her wide eyes and small sculpted head. "Do not mistake the truth of these monsters, asari. The creatures you fight in the field are not your true enemy. They are a distraction. Meant to maim and terrify, to drain your resources and your morale."

T'Soni frowned at his words. "The Reapers themselves."

"No, fool," Javik hissed, low and dark, "Your own. Your allies, your leaders and friends. As the war drags on, the Reapers will trickle their poisons into their hearts. Some will resist, but some will fall. The Reapers will misdirect, they will let you waste resources chasing goals you think are worthy, when they should be sacrificed. It only takes one well-placed betrayal, and all is lost." He sat back. "It was our fate."

The asari raised her hand to her mouth. "You... were betrayed from within?"

The memory was still hot and bitter, coppery with the scent of blood, the cascade of warmth and memory over his hands. He remembered clearly the dark slither in his mind, the barest whisper of ken, slick and slimy. The touch of the enemy on the ken of his tal-mates slipping through his mind as their lives slipped through his fingers. "Our Crucible was destroyed," he said. "Do not imagine the Reapers do not know about the weapon, asari. They know. Even now they move to eliminate it. And with it your hope."

Javik shut his mouth and looked around the small compartment again. It was impossible not to wonder which of them would hear the siren call of the destroyers. If not them, then which leader, lover or sibling would be the loose stone in the archway.

"We will be on our guard," T'Soni said. Her tone was far too assured.

He said nothing. The time would come for them too, he was sure, and then they would prove whether or not they had the iron to slay their own. Stars were born and had died in his absence, taking their systems with them, and yet the war went on. There was no going back.
Liara stared hard at the display. The numbers remained steady, unwavering and cruel in their magnitude.

*So many dead.* She had to take several breaths to steady her voice. Even through the scrambler, it was unacceptable that the Shadow Broker's voice should tremble. She touched the comm command.

"Agent Daur, did you secure the target?"

Silence and a soft static answered her. Jadin Daur was a salarian, unusually quiet and quick to anger, but an efficient thief who had no love for the Dalatrass' politics. He was also never late. Liara eyed the casualty number again. It was an estimate, but probably erred on the low side. Her hands hovered over the console.

"Agent Daur, acknowledge."

She curled her fingers into fists. The Shadow Broker did not get attached to agents. Did not pore over their personal files, getting to know them better than they knew themselves. Their quirks and habits, who they spent time with and what they tended to order at the bar. They were not her friends.

"Come on," she murmured.

A minute ticked by, then another. The comm pinged and hissed with interference.

"Report," Liara said.

"The damn-" The line cut out, then crackled back to life. "-lost six of my team!"

"Get the target to the evac point."

"I can't!" the voice on the other end of the line snapped. "It's in a hundred smoking pieces and crawling with brutes!"

Liara's fingers were already moving, speeding across lists and maps until she found what she was looking for. It was a long shot, but Daur was fast and a good driver. She swallowed and bit her tongue to force her voice steady and cold as she sent the comm burst with attached coordinates.

"Execute backup evac protocol. Liquidate all local assets and get the item to the new coordinates. Transport will be waiting."

The reply took an extra few seconds. "I hope this damn thing is worth it! Daur out."

The comm signal clicked off. Liara exhaled in a burst, closing the channel and letting the uplink slide back into place in her array. She rubbed her forehead. Another base of operations compromised, another link snapped. Small comfort that the agent was still alive... he was just as likely to go to ground. Her agents were not her friends, and their loyalty could not be counted on. All this for a piece of this Crucible.

The door chime pinged. Liara took a deep breath and smoothed her jacket. She murmured the vocal lock command, looking at the door.

It acknowledged her gaze by turning green, and the door cycled open to reveal Kaidan standing on the threshold. She greeted him with a smile, only a bit forced. Despite the circumstances, it was good
to have him on board again and in one piece. She hoped so, at least. He was perhaps the least volatile human she'd known personally.

"Hi Liara," said, coming in. "I was wondering if you could help me with something, if you have a few minutes."

"Of course."

"It's..." he trailed off as we took a few more steps into the room, mesmerized by the bank of screens. "You know, I still can't believe it. Shadow Broker. I almost didn't believe the Broker really existed!"

"Well," Liara conceded, "the yahg probably did a better job keeping the secret than I am, but I don't have access to another planetary static barge right now."

"A stealth ship will just have to do, right?"

She smiled. "At a time like this, I think I would rather be here than alone in a fortress orbiting an uninhabited planet anyway. Among actual friends, not just a list on a screen."

"I was wondering if you might have any news from Earth. Do you still have any agents there?"

"I had many agents on Earth, but I do not know how many still live. The Sol system has been closed off since the day Earth was attacked. Communication is limited to QEC systems, of which there are few."

"But there are some."

"Yes. What is it you want to know?"

"Anyone around Vancouver, North America?" he said.

Ah. Family. "No, I am afraid the Reapers were... thorough. I do not know of any active QEC systems on the western coast of that continent."

"Damn." He ran a hand through his hair. "Well, I'm also looking for any members of the 1st Special Operations Biotic Company."

"Most Alliance communications from Earth are currently coming from Admiral Anderson; however, I do have agents reporting on Alliance movements from a handful of points. I cannot promise anything, though. Their reports are highly localized. All satellite and large-scale surveillance technology was destroyed during the initial invasion. If you were to give me names and descriptions, I could sweep all incoming data to see if I get a match."

Kaidan chuckled. "That kind of defeats the purpose of being covert. Unless... you're going to tell me you already know everything anyway, and you're just being polite."

"Their identities might have been a concern with the old Broker, but I would hope you trust which side of the war I am on."

"Fair point."

"But yes, I was being polite."

He laughed, though there was an uncomfortable edge to it. She was tempted to elaborate, to tell him about all the various people watching him with interest, some benign, others not so much. Among the asari, biotics were so normal that confronting the persistence of human prejudice against them still
shocked her. It seemed like it might have been trending downward since the Battle of the Citadel, but there remained forces and groups that did not like biotics in positions of power. To them, an all-biotic covert team must have sounded like the height of their paranoid fantasies.

"I'll, uh, send you a list, just to be sure," he said.

"A good idea. Up-to-date information is always the best kind."

The major turned as if to go, then stopped. "There was actually something else I wanted to ask you. About biotics."

She looked at the human curiously. While he'd complimented her on her skills on several occasions, he rarely spoke frankly of his own abilities. "I can hardly be counted among the masters, but I will answer as best I can."

"Have you ever..." He held up his hands as if to encompass something, then spread them apart. "I mean, has your barrier ever just... exploded?"

"Exploded?" She frowned.

"That's the best way I can describe it. It happened first on Eden Prime when I was flanked by some Cerberus troopers. They caught me with—well, by surprise, and boom. I thought it may have been a one-time thing, but it happened again on Onatorm. A pair of husks got around behind me, and..."

"Ah, I see. You repelled them defensively."

"That's the mild way of putting it. I turned them to mush, and burnt out the barrier in the process. It was exhausting, like I'd used all of my strength at once."

"Goddess."

"The thing is, I didn't."

The door pinged and cycled open, making them both turn. Shepard stood framed in the doorway, a towel around her shoulders. Her fatigue jacket was slung in one hand, and her shirt was marked with sweat. Her lip was slightly split and looked swollen.

"Oh," she said, looking between the two of them, "everything all right?"

"Yes, Kaidan was asking me about biotic techniques," Liara said, deliberately vague.

"What happened?" Kaidan asked, gesturing to his face to indicate hers.

"Me? Oh, this." She touched her lip. "Nothing serious. Vega's been getting tricky with his left hook. I just wanted to check on something Glyph was working on for me."

"That shielding research you liberated from Ynash?" Liara said. "I believe the cross-reference is almost complete. Glyph?"

The small holo drone blinked to life above its console, spinning with its usual frenetic energy. As always, Liara wondered how that yahg had tolerated the VI's enthusiasm.

"Yes Shadow Broker?" the holo burbled.

"Progress on your current task?"
"Eighty-three percent, Shadow broker. Projected completion in approximately sixteen minutes."

Liara turned back to the commander. "There you go, Shepard. It will not be long."

"Thanks." Shepard smiled wryly. "I won't intrude, then, since only the most charitable would call my biotics 'technique'."

"Nonsense. You are too hard on yourself, Shepard."

The commander shrugged. "I make a lot of noise. It seems to work."

"I don't know," Kaidan said. "That charge is something else. I've almost gotten myself shot a couple of times because I was gawking."

She cast him a look of mild surprise. "It's just... a big bang."

"It's amazing. The power output alone outclasses any other human biotic I've met. Where did you learn how to do it?"

Shepard glanced sideways, abruptly looking like she very much wanted to be elsewhere. Her gaze fell on Glyph, who stared back with its guileless cyclopean eye, holo-casing spinning in elaborate patterns. "I didn't." She pointed at her head. "Cerberus replaced my old implant. L5n."

Kaidan opened his mouth, then closed it, frowning.

"He is right that very few humans have been capable of such a charge," Liara said into the sudden quiet. "It is not even a technique most asari know. Did someone teach it to you?"

Shepard shifted, edging far enough inside that the door cycled shut behind her. "No. It's embarrassing, really. The first time it happened, it was a total surprise. It was just after I met Garrus again on Omega. It was a long, tiring fight, and he was on the losing end of a krogan berserker. I was trying to get to the krogan to put him down... you know what it's like when your friend is about to get his head caved in, and Garrus was the first sign of sanity I'd seen since the waking up on Cerberus' slab... I wasn't thinking about anything but getting to that krogan, and then bam, the whole world just... stretched. Then the krogan was across the room and I felt like I'd run two marathons and spent the rest of the day trying to beat down a vault door with my shoulder."

"You simply... did it?"

"Mordin said something about it being rare. I don't know, I wasn't listening too closely right then. Mordin talked a lot. About everything."

"Not so much rare," Liara said, "as rarely attempted. It is widely considered excessively dangerous to the person attempting it, as it involves a deliberate and massive increase to personal mass and kinetic energy. A small error can be catastrophic."

Kaidan chuckled softly. "Now why doesn't that surprise me?"

Shepard folded her arms around herself and shifted again as if she was about to turn and leave. "I don't know what Cerberus did to me. I always thought maybe it was implant that was bugged. But they changed it, and I'm still just as bugged. So it's just me, I guess."

"I do not think it is as simple as that," Liara said. "Kaidan, what was it you wanted to ask, if reactive instead of active use of biotics is normal?"
"What?" Shepard said, a sudden concern creeping into her voice.

Glyph did a little forward roll on the spot, as if the VI was growing bored of the exchange.

It was Kaidan's turn to look uncomfortable. "My biotics are acting a bit strange. I was trying to find
out why."

"Strange how?"

"My barrier..." he gestured vaguely again, "exploded. The thing is, I didn't... make it happen."

"Your conscious mind did not," Liara said. "But you defended yourself from an enemy nonetheless."

Kaidan expression grew dark. "I could've hurt someone. A friendly. I've-" He stopped and shut his
mouth, jaw clenched. Shepard looked at him, understanding crossing her face.

"Glyph," Liara said. "Go work on Shepard's report."

"Yes, Shadow Broker." The VI winked out. Unlike the ship AI, she trusted that Glyph wasn't
listening in. It wasn't in his programming.

"Artal Vyrmnus," she said to Kaidan. She'd been unable to resist the full, if somewhat fragmented,
file the old broker kept on Conatix and the first ill-fated rounds of human biotics. Indeed, to date she
rarely resisted the urge to read protected information on anyone.

Kaidan looked up sharply. "How do you-" He broke off, staring over shoulder at the bank of
screens, then looked away. "That was once. I've been under threat in the field before, and that's
never happened. I worked years to make sure I would never lose control again. And now this. How
can I trust myself?"

"Practice it," Shepard stated.

"What?"

"Keep doing it. Own it. Tame it. That's how I got a handle on the charging. It scared me to death
every time, but it worked, too. I didn't have time to stop fighting- the Collectors weren't going to wait
for me to practice, so I kept doing it, riding it until it started to come when I chose."

"Did you come up with a mnemonic?" Kaidan asked.

Shepard shook her head. "I don't have one. Well, I guess I kind of do, it's just not a physical one. I've
never... I just look for all the same feelings that set off the first one. I ball up all the adrenaline, rage
and fear and let it all go in one burst." She glanced at Kaidan, then looked away. "I know, it sounds
ridiculous. The opposite of everything we were taught."

"But that is the point I was seeking," Liara said. "Why should it be what you were taught? You, both
of you, are among the first successful human biotics. You received training, yes, but at the hands of
who? Aliens, whose bodies and minds work differently than yours. Why should our methods fit you
perfectly? Perhaps you have to find your own."

"I don't know," Kaidan said. "I'd need to come up with something more than just a thought-trigger.
It's too... it would be too unpredictable. I need more control."

"The Reapers aren't going to wait for you to feel comfortable with this new quirk," Shepard said
shortly.
"I know that," he shot back.

"One way or the other, we can't stop." Shepard sounded very tired all of a sudden. She turned, then stopped and looked back. "You won't harm anyone, regardless. I'm not worried about that." She keyed the door open and stepped through.

As it cycled shut, Kaidan sighed and rubbed his eyes with one hand.

"Things are still... difficult," Liara said.

"You noticed?" he said irritably. "I've barely had time to think since coming on board, much less try to sort through everything. We've been in the field so much. I've tried talking to her a few times. Sometimes I think I'm getting somewhere, that we're really talking... then all of a sudden it's all business again. And it's not like there's ever a shortage of that."

Liara couldn't help but be reminded of Feron and his shifting moods. Not every scar had healed.

"Liara," the major said, lowering his hand and leaning back against the narrow bit of bulkhead not occupied by cable, "what happened... with Shepard's..." He wet his lips. "Body?"

As much as she'd settled into her life as the Shadow Broker, Liara could not stay aloof from all the ways her decisions had moved outward and impacted the lives of others. "What is it you want to know?" she asked.

"I guess I'm trying to get the whole Collector story."

"Shepard would be the one to ask."

"I know. But there's some of the story, a lot of it, that she wasn't awake for. I just want to understand what happened." A hint of anger crept into his voice. "Why you didn't... tell anyone."

"Kaidan," she said softly, "can you possibly imagine what I could have told you?"

"That you found her?" he said indignantly.

"And then what? Would you really have let me give her body to Cerberus?"

His mouth worked soundlessly for a moment. "You could have... you still could have told me something... anything."

"No, I could not. If you had known, you would have stopped me from giving her to Cerberus, and then buried her and that would have been that."

"I..."

"I know you well enough for that, Kaidan. I thought of you a great deal when I was searching for her. I considered telling you, but it seemed more cruel than anything else. I had no idea if they would succeed, and if they did, that it would be the person we both knew who came back. How could I burden you with those fears and false hopes? For two years?"

"It's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission, is that it?"

She cocked her head. "A curious phrase. I do not know if Shepard has forgiven me yet. There are times I truly believe she would have preferred to stay dead. But I made a choice, one that I do not yet even know the full consequences of. For love, I chose to do what you would not have done... for the same reason."
He let out a breath, words apparently failing him fully.

"This is the world we live in," Liara said, "in all of its irreconcilable realities."

Kaidan rubbed his temples, face bunched up in consternation. "For... love?" he said finally.

"For the love I bear a friend, and for a galaxy of people I feared doomed by her absence. But as to more, I do not presume. I will always wonder, but I mourned that lost chance and made peace with it before Saren breathed his last."

A long silence stretched out between them, broken only by the ping and mutter of her various systems. A busy family demanding the attention of their attendant mother. Would it be the only family she would know? A Matriarch would laugh indulgently at such a question. Do not rush, child. But that was before all lives, even asari, were measured in the time it took for the Reapers to reach them.

"You didn't join her against the Collectors," he said, a statement rather than a question.

Liara wasn't expecting that. "I did not."

"Why? After all that effort?"

A spark of anger flared in her head. "You had your reasons, I had mine."

The reversal stung him enough to make him fold his arms defensively. "But... you knew the truth."

"I knew..." she started, then trailed off. Knew what? What Cerberus had succeeded at doing? That Shepard had in fact been dead and not faking it? "The Shadow Broker captured my friend. I had to get him back. All my energies were focused on finding him."

"But Shepard couldn't help with that?" he pressed. "She does at least three insane things before breakfast."

"I didn't know where the Broker was!" Liara retorted. Why was this getting to her so much? "Shepard had the Collectors to deal with."

The expected response, that such things had never stopped Shepard before, didn't materialize as expected. Instead, the human shifted his weight, frowning at the floor. "We both... had our reasons."

There was a bitter lilt to his tone.

"I could not face her," Liara murmured. With those words, the anger broke apart, fragmenting into guilt.

Kaidan looked up.

"These questions you are asking me," she said, "I knew she would have the same ones. I... betrayed her, in a way, in making the choice I did. I knew about the crimes Cerberus had committed, and committed against her, and still I gave her to them. After I went to Illium, I lost myself in brokering, trying not to think about it. And then she... re-appeared. She asked me to go with her. I didn't. Her anger came later, and I do not know if it is yet spent."

She looked him in the eye. "I stand by my decision, questionable as it was. But it was painful, and it kept me prisoner for too long. I should have gone with her. I should not have abandoned her to their manipulations. I should have seen how wounded she still was. Instead, I let myself believe she was invincible, and that even death could not touch her spirit."
"Garrus made it sound like Cerberus built a prison of words."

Liara nodded. "The Illusive Man tried very hard to break her down and turn her to his cause. I do not think you realize how hard. I should have gone with her. I might have averted... what came after."

"What do you mean?"

"That is not for me to tell. I was not there."

Kaidan started to argue, but swallowed his evident frustration with a grunt. "Please tell me what happened," he said finally, voice quiet. "What you saw while getting her body back and dealing with the Broker. I'll listen, just listen. I want to know the truth."

"A sentiment I can understand." Liara gestured further into the room to her small workstation. "Perhaps you should sit down."
Atypical Injury Response

The perception of time, EDI has realized, is what separates various lifeforms one from the other. For her, the lag time between her core and the body is something she has to compensate for, especially when the body is some distance from the ship. The organics, on the other hand, would likely not notice the lapse. For EDI, though, it is sufficient to cost her while attempting to properly direct the body planetside. Try to send too much data at once, she has realized, and lag time is exacerbated, resulting in poor timing. And under threat, poor timing results in physical damage.

Safe within the Kodiak, she deprioritizes the Normandy's many feeds, reducing her inputs to only what comes to the body. Her entire world becomes the disorientingly small, cramped space of the Kodiak. Bodies press up against the platform from either side; Garrus Vakarian on one side and the looming bulk of a krogan on the other. The chemical sensory suite the unit possesses is not as acute as an organic sense of smell, she is told, but it is sufficient to detect many different organic compounds in the atmosphere. Blood is the most present. Noise, too, is omni-present. Outside the Normandy's hull, noise takes the form of different wavelengths and forms of energy, but much of it has traveled a great distance to reach her sensory apparatus. In this small space, it is the vibration of air against the audio receptors that drowns out all else. The unmuffled rumble of the Kodiak's thrusters compete with vocal bluster from the krogan, chief among them Urdnot Grunt, who despite having leaked a not inconsiderable amount of vital fluid on the deckplates, is still making declarations of his own prowess, although at a somewhat reduced volume.

It is how the organics process this overload of close, fast sense data that EDI finds at once mystifying and fascinating. By any estimation she has made, her brute calculation speed and ability to run multiple concurrent calculations outstrips any individual organic by orders of magnitude. And yet they function, and even thrive in an environment such as this, where she finds her inputs almost overwhelmed. There are still other factors at work, she is forced to conclude. Something in their ability to selectively dampen certain inputs, while relegating others to autonomic response cycles that do not require active monitoring. EDI also suspects there is some form of abstract shared processing at work, even though organics do not possess any kind of naturally-occurring conventional networking capability.

The Kodiak's thrusters pulse. EDI logs the cargo bay doors opening, and the kinetic dampeners take the shuttle in hand and bring it into line with the docking clamps. All very neat and orderly, compared to the relative chaos inside the shuttle's hull.

Does Commander Shepard consider this mission a success? EDI is still not clear on this point. Mission parameters were fluid from the beginning, with no clear goal stated from the outset. Now they return with new data, a loss of experienced krogan warriors, but a gain of rachni assistance. The efficacy of the rachni as a group is a total unknown, as is their loyalty and future resistance to Reaper indoctrination. And yet emotional markers displayed by the commander in the field suggest a refusal to consider destroying the rachni. Curious, considering they had been up until that moment a source of enemy power, and could be again.

The Kodiak completes the docking procedure. The door swings open, revealing Doctor Chakwas, Cortez and Felix. Behind them is a stretcher.

"Grunt!" the doctor says, hands on her hips, "Good heavens, what have you gone and done to yourself this time?"

It is a linguistic quirk, EDI assumes, and does not point out that Grunt's wounds were caused by Reaper rachni. Organics so often seem to deliberately state something just to the side of what they
actually mean. Jeff does so even more frequently than most.

Shepard, Alenko and Egrah, one of the Aralakh warriors, maneuver Grunt through the door and onto the stretcher, all while Grunt describes in exhaustive detail the procedure of ripping the gun turret off one of the rachni-reaper hybrids designated 'ravager'. The tenor of his voice indicates his system is being flooded with the hormones that will eventually bring about a regenerative coma. This suggests damage to multiple internal organs on top of external lacerations. And yet, the krogan seems unperturbed, and even giddy. Past experience says this is an atypical response to severe injury in organics, though, EDI must amend, perhaps not for krogan.

In his enthusiasm, he grips the doctor's sleeve with his left hand- an artificial construct attached above the elbow. The joint between the two is an inelegant tangle of flesh and metal, just above his armored cuff. And yet by his demeanor, it is clear the aesthetics of the limb do not concern him, and indeed he takes pride in the scar and relishes what will surely be new ones.

When the opportunity arises, EDI moves the unit to free up the space immediately in front of the Kodiak. The left leg's reaction time is still slow, hampered by damage somewhere within the knee joint. The unit's outer shell has suffered extensive acid scoring, penetrating deep enough in places to compromise muscular function. The experience fascinates her, moreso now when her feed to the Normandy's inputs is dampened. The new limitations close in on her, making her more aware, even though there are no threats present. All of her presets regarding the time it would take to accomplish tasks now require recalculation to account for the damage. She realizes she is experiencing a heightened alert level, perhaps somewhat analogous to human anxiety.

Unexpectedly, Doctor Chakwas approaches the unit. "Do you need anything, EDI?"

"I do not require immediate assistance," EDI replies. "The damage is stable, and this unit can perform extensive self-repair without intervention."

"You're not... suffering in any way?"

It is the first time any organic has asked her such a question. In the lag time between the question and the expected answer, she runs an extra sub-process to attempt to formulate an accurate answer.

"I do not believe so," EDI says. "While this unit has registered damage to several systems, my core function was never in any danger, and the body is still over eighty-three percent functional."

The doctor registers confusion, though the state is brief. "All right then. Just make sure you ask for help if you need it." She gestures over her shoulder. "Don't take them as examples, hm?"

As Doctor Chakwas turns back to the krogan, EDI considers her statement. The doctor takes a markedly different stance on the appropriate reaction to physical injury than those who typically engage in the combat that brings them about. The disparity is curious, but she logs it for later consideration.

Urdnot Grunt has finally been installed on the stretcher, which labors to neutralize his mass and keep him aloft. Three more Aralakh Company krogan stand by the Kodiak, examining the cargo bay around them. They are all wounded in some way, though they make no show of it.

"You'd better come with us too," Doctor Chakwas says, pointing at the one called Karv. "I need to look at that arm."

The krogan growls and stands straighter. "Not going anywhere with you, humpless."

"Don't be ridiculous," Chakwas says, "I've treated Urdnot Wrex himself, and I kept Grunt here from
dying last time he was on my table and missing a few parts."

The krogan shifts into a threat posture, but Commander Shepard coughs.

"Karv," she says, "if you or any of your company lay a hand on my crew, I will personally shoot their quad off, wait three days, then put them out the airlock, understand?"

Shepard has never once made similar threats to any of the human crew. Indeed, such a violent promise would likely warrant disciplinary action from Shepard's superiors, at least as far as the Alliance is concerned. But this is not the first time EDI has witnessed seemingly contradictory behavior from the commander, and each time it provokes a lengthy internal re-assessment. This debate goes all the way back to when Shepard provoked a brawl with the biotic human called Jack.

EDI would naturally assume the threat Shepard had just made would result in a fear or aggression response. Instead, the two other Aralakh krogan laugh loudly.

Prosocial behavior, she has been forced to conclude, is shockingly fluid among organics. Maintaining order as a leader obviously requires the successful navigation of this maze.

"Karv!" Grunt shouts from the stretcher. "If I get shot because you let your arm heal wrong, I'll kill you myself!"

Karv grumbles a curse, and Egrah smacks him on the shoulder, pushing him forward. "I don't like doctors," Karv mutters.

"I use anesthetic," Chakwas says. "Come along now."

Karv's gait is unenthusiastic, but he follows the humans and the stretcher. As they come to the exit, EDI is surprised to see Jeff step into the cargo bay, getting out of the way of the doctor and her charges. EDI rechecks her logs, but finds no query from Jeff or any other crewmember directed at her. He looks at her, and his expression registers distress. EDI lets the ship inputs back into primary processing, expanding back into awareness of the ship and space beyond. The Normandy is on course to the relay, all systems nominal. The crew emanates lingering electromagnetic stress, but it is in decline and well within the usual parameters. There seems to be no cause for alarm, certainly nothing that would warrant Jeff leaving his post. He comes toward the unit, performing a quick visual examination.

"Geez, EDI, what the hell happened down there?" he says.

The question strikes her as nonsensical. He knows what happened. At no time did the Normandy lose contact with the surface team, though the signal was intermittent for several minutes. Further, he did not have to leave his post to make the query.

"This unit suffered some damage," she says, as a summation of the obvious. "It is well within my repair capacity."

He examines the body again. It seems to cause him some anxiety. "Does it hurt?"

"You are referring to the human body's damage avoidance signal system."

"I... guess so?" He scratches his chin, a common tick. "I'm fond of the word 'pain'. Gets the point across."

"The platform's alert programs continue to report local and minor structural damage. Subroutines have been activated to compensate for loss of function, so as to limit further damage. However, I do
not experience the associated emotional distress that humans do. Therefore, the traditional definition is not entirely accurate." She decides not to inform him of the heightened alert state, as it does not conform to his definition of 'pain', and she calculates it would likely cause additional outsized stress.

"Uh, lucky you," he says. "But, you weren't afraid to, you know, get killed?"

She switches audio output to the local internal speaker, disengaging the platform's vocal processor. "I was never in any danger. I did not leave the Normandy."

This elicits a startle response. He rubs the back of his neck and looks between the platform and the speaker. "Yeah... right, okay."

Commander Shepard approaches them. Ambient vitals are difficult to read when a human is encased in combat armor. Even when the wreath of the armor's kinetic barrier is shut off, their usual radiance is overwritten by the electromagnetics of the armor's systems, their body heat suppressed. EDI prefers it when they are not armored, and their full electromagnetic complexity is on display. They seem more... present.

Jeff suddenly radiates agitation as he turns to Shepard. "Commander, with all due respect, how could you do this?"

"Do what?" she answers. Voice stress is lower than expected for a response to a question of her authority, suggesting fatigue. She is nonetheless irritated by the query.

"Make EDI go out on a mission like that." Jeff gestures to the Kodiak. "You can't hack a bunch of bugs! You didn't even give her armor!"

"I did not request armor," EDI says, re-engaging the body's vocalizer. "To date, testing has shown it would be a limitation to this platform's speed without adding significant ablating overtop existing reactive surfaces."

"Well, it sure looks like it would have helped!"

"I did not anticipate facing significant exposure to caustic substances. I will re-assess the need for protective outerwear in future missions."

Jeff makes a gesture that suggests increased agitation.

"Joker, the entire ground team fought the same battle, myself included," Shepard says. Voice stress indicates careful control. "Are you suggesting the threat to EDI's body was somehow less acceptable than to the rest of us?"

"No, I mean... of course not, Commander. I just... didn't it seem, I dunno, wrong to bring her along when-"

"When conditions aren't optimal?" Shepard says. Her voice takes on the hardness it does when she exercises authority. She stands straighter, and suppresses her blink reflex. "I already know EDI can hack just about any system, given enough time. I know the body can handle a basic combat scenario. But this is war Joker, not some back-street skirmish." Her voice rises slightly. "I need to know that anyone on my ground team can handle anything, including sub-optimal conditions. I need to know EDI can hold her own when she can't use her most powerful abilities. She needs to know it, too."

She steps forward half a pace. "I shouldn't have to explain that to you."

Jeff shows signs of further anger, looking between EDI and the Commander.
"It is all right, Jeff," EDI says. "The mission has allowed me to collect extremely valuable situational data outside my previous experiences, and the damage this unit sustained is repairable. Commander Shepard's logic is sound."

He throws up his hands, suggesting resignation. "Fine! Whatever. Just watch out or you're gonna turn into one of these crazy marine types. They're all nuts!" He turns and leaves. This time, EDI watches his progress through her many cameras. His agitation begins to subside, though he is short in his response when Chief Engineer Adams greets him in passing.

"He'll get over it," Shepard says. "He was just worried about you."

"Shepard, may I ask a question?" EDI says through the body.

"Sure."

"I am concerned that Jeff is exhibiting confusion regarding my nature. He appears to be mistaking this unit for my core."

Shepard shifts, facial markers indicating thought. "He's just... humanizing you."

"I do not understand. It was his suggestion that I should not, in his words, try too hard to be human."

"Uh, he did?"

"He believes there are sufficient numbers of humans at present. He implied that attempting to mimic human behavior to excess would limit my uniqueness."

Shepard laughs. Voice stress suggests some minor discomfort. "I guess that's... one way of looking at it."

"But you assert that he is 'humanizing' me?" EDI presses.

"It's something all of us do, mostly without even realizing it. When I was growing up I used to think the power outlets in my house were all smiling, just because they had a configuration of holes that resembled a face."

"That is an irrational set of conclusions to draw."

"I agree." Shepard shrugs. "But we all do it anyway. Call it core programming- we look for ourselves in our environment and assign emotional states to things that don't have them. That body of yours looks very human, so no matter how much we know your mind is still housed in the ship, we're increasingly going to react to the body as the center of you. It's not deliberate, and I try to remind myself each time I see you that 'you' is... elsewhere, and that the body is just a terminal. But it's not the natural conclusion we reach from moment to moment. It's a strange concept for us."

"Therefore, under stress, it is more likely a human will fall back on the subconscious reflex."

"Exactly. It's not personal or meant to insult you or your nature." She unlatches the seal on her helmet, then pulls it off. A halo of heat blooms around her head. "EDI, you're on a journey no one has taken before. A lot of strange things happen, not to mention you're still trying to figure out what makes you tick."

"I believe it is valuable to seek input from others, even if their experience does not directly mirror my
"That's a good philosophy to have. Just don't place too much importance on our experiences versus your own."

"I do not think it is possible for me to not consider my own experiences when I calculate reactions."

Shepard chuckles. "Okay. Are you... comfortable with the fact that I chose you for this mission? Do you think I singled you out?"

"I am not sure I understand the question."

"Do you think I placed you, well, that body, in harm's way unnecessarily?"

"I do not believe I faced greater threat of harm than you or the others. And since my core remained on the Normandy, I was in significantly less danger of permanent dissolution than any of you. If this body is destroyed, I will lose something of value, but I will continue to function. The same cannot be said of organics. Shepard, I believe that I am beginning to more directly understand the importance of the trust relationship you deem important to these missions. In that light, I consider it significant that you are including this unit, and therefore me."

"Well... good. Get your body healed up, and let me know if you need anything, all right?"

"Yes, Commander."

Shepard nods, and turns for the door. By the Kodiak, Lieutenant Cortez is speaking to the two remaining krogan, and Vakarian is seated in the Kodiak's open door. Alenko has moved to one of the weapon benches to attend to his equipment. In the mess hall, Sergeant Gardner inputs several new requests to have food items removed from cold storage. Protein features prominently in his choices. Meanwhile, Adams discusses the state of the rachni population with Daniels, and Jeff has stopped at heat control to ask if Grier wants to play poker tonight. In the medbay, Grunt is still attempting to regale Chakwas with stories even as he begins to doze off and forget words.

As always, EDI is outside and above these tiny orbits. But the body brings her down into them, both from her own perspective and, it seems, from that of the organics.

She wonders what it is like to play poker.
The rain had started up again, misting the air and outlining the lights in shimmering halos. James thought he'd seen battlegrounds, but he'd never seen anything like this. This was no skirmish, it was the kind of war that ground cities to dust. The kind from the old vids and documentaries; Dresden, Toredo, Shanxi... and now, Illyria. It was a sobering reflection of what Earth must be going through.

The sun had dipped below the horizon half an hour ago, leaving only a pale reddish light illuminating the cloud layer. Water beaded and trailed down his visor and chilled his exposed face. It smelled a little odd, like the rest of this planet. An excess of something or other in the atmosphere. Combined with air temperature only just north of zero C, and he was grateful for his armor's enclosed heating system. Even if he'd been shut up in the suit for longer now than was comfortable.

"Garrus, are you picking up anything?" Shepard said, looking down the street ahead of them. Blackened hulks of vehicles sat in haphazard heaps, leaning on one another or sitting akimbo in the blast craters pockmarking the fractured concrete.

The turian lifted his rifle to his shoulder and swept it down the street and along the shattered buildings. There was no wind, and the air hung thick and leaden with chill humidity. Unlike the city district they'd come from, there was a conspicuous lack of bodies in the street here, despite the damage.

"Still no movement," he reported, "the main force must have moved to the west toward the power station. But I wouldn't count on it."

"Neither would I, but we need the breather." She gestured to the open storefront a few meters down the street. The glass had been blown out, but there was enough roof left intact to keep the rain off. "Bunker up and grab a bite."

Their goal pressed, but it had been pressing for three days. They'd been on the move for hours now, so no one objected to the pause. They still swept the small storefront with care, checking and barricading the back room door before taking their helmets off and finding somewhere to sit down on the toppled display racks. Outside, rain pattered, drowning the world in a soft hiss that might have been comforting in any other context. Alenko lit his helmet lamp on low, and leaned it so the light didn't travel outside their shelter.

The air was startlingly cold around James' head when he took his own helmet off. He fished around for a ration bar, trying not to fixate on how few were left. Instead, he watched as the prothean peeled the wrapper off his own bar with exactly the same delicate disdain as the other times they'd stopped. This time, he ate in silence, finally past any further muttered comments. The alien's elaborate armor still looked like the kind of ceremonial costume getup that should have seen him posted safely in some diplomatic setting. And yet the way he moved on the battlefield suggested he'd seen just as much war as he claimed. Enough, anyway, to make James wonder if ration bars were the closest Javik had come to a real meal for most of his life.

Alenko wolfed down his overlarge biotic ration in three bites, sitting stiffly straight with one hand on his knee, trying not to move overmuch. His armor was scorched and patched on his left side, where a shot of a ravager's superheated plasma had narrowly missed taking a melon-sized piece from the major's hide. He'd gotten a nasty burn instead, and despite the layers of medigel, was obviously still feeling it.

Vakarian perched himself on the tumbled-in outer wall, rifle over his knees, never taking his eyes off
the street as he ate. His own near-miss was etched in a patina of scrapes and dents where a brute had sent him flying. James, for his part, could still feel the impact bruises where he'd taken a few hits to the torso, hits that might have been fatal but for his powerful kinetic barrier. A risky move, but it had allowed him the time to get his own shots off, and when the dust settled, he'd been the one still standing. It might have counted as a better tradeoff if shortly thereafter they were back safe and sound on the Normandy where he could ache in peace, but the beast that was war had other ideas.

Shepard had her omni-tool open, sheltered by her body, the holo displaying a lofted map of the city. He could make out glimmers of red marking impassable terrain and possible hostiles. As dangerous as this team was, they couldn't take on a whole army. A little point of green hovered on the far side of the map— the objective. There had been a lab here, a black site research bunker working on a bleeding-edge quantum system of some kind. A piece of the Crucible apparently worth risking it all.

That's why Shepard was here, James supposed. Hackett didn't roll dice.

There was no greenhorn among them to ask the question that must have been on all of their minds— when do we get off this rock? They all already knew the answer. Three days since the last communication from the Normandy, since they'd been forced down kilometers short of their target landing zone, and Shepard had ordered Esteban and the Kodiak away. No word from him or Joker since.

All of them knew the score, and knew better than to complain about it. They get the objective, Esteban shows up at the tertiary landing point, and they bug out... or they all become permanent residents in the Reapers' garden of horrors. None of them discussed the possibility that the Normandy had been scrapped in orbit. This had been a risky maneuver in the first place, coming to a system already nearly overrun, but it wasn't the first risky mission for anyone in this cramped room... it probably wasn't even in the first dozen. Short on supplies, tired and walking wounded, they were all bracing themselves for the last push.

Shepard turned her head, a movement sudden enough to make them all freeze.

"I heard it too," Vakarian said quietly.


"Could it be a trap?" James said.

Alenko scooped up his helmet, making the light bob and dance. "I think we're safe to assume everything is a trap, or at least dangerous."

"No rest for the wicked," James said. The brief respite had given the muscles in his legs just enough time to congeal, and they ached bitterly at him as he pushed himself up.

He slipped his now-clammy helmet back on, then opened his omni-tool to his medical exoskeleton interface. There wasn't a lot of stim left in his reserve, but it was obvious they weren't getting any sleep in the next several hours. He keyed the command to give himself another dose. As they moved back out into the street, he could feel the artificial buzz starting to push back against the numbing weariness. He pushed thoughts of his warm bunk out of his head and plodded after his lead, rifle in hand.

*Oh glorious war... this isn't the part they put in the recruitment vids.*

They crossed the block and rounded a corner, and James heard the voice too. It sounded high and thin, a desperate and very human sound. In the deepening light, the silhouette of the buildings was
broken by jagged teeth reaching into the sky. Blue pinpoints of light flickered among the sinister forest.

"Dragon's Teeth," Alenko muttered.

James unconsciously touched his reserve heatsinks. "Poor bastards."

"They are already lost," Javik said.

The wail sounded again.

"Someone doesn't think so." Shepard peered into the gloom and waved them forward. "No Reaper cries like that."

They followed through the rubble and abruptly hit a stretch of dirt that had probably once been a lawn, before being churned up by tank wheels and heavy boots. It was impossible to hide the squelch of their steps as they moved into the unholy thicket. James felt the hairs on his neck stand up straight as he ducked under hanging legs and arms. He was grateful it was dark, moreso that his light enhancement overlay tended to pare down details. Limp fingers bumped into his shoulder, making him jump.

"Madre de Dios," James muttered, "this is hell."

Two figures emerged in the thicket. One was lying flat, the other was hunched over him, talking in a half-mad babble. Both appeared to be armored, but unarmed. Shepard eased up beside them, and the man yelped in surprise.

"It's okay, we're human," Shepard assured him. "What's your unit? Who..." She trailed off as she looked down.

"You have to help!" the man said, holding out imploring hands. "You have to stop the transformation!"

They gathered around, and Alenko's expression told the story even before James followed his gaze. The body on the ground was actually still breathing, somehow. Blackening slowly but visibly, something moved under the unfortunate man's flesh, tracing each line of sinew and muscle in sickly blue light. The skin of his face had pulled taut around his skull, exposing every tooth in his head in an awful rictus grimace.

And yet his eyes squinted under the onslaught of helmet lamps. Blood-bruised and tear-filled, they were nonetheless still human.

"It's too late," Shepard said quietly.

"No!" the soldier shot back. "I got him off. I got... I stopped the bleeding. Spinal injuries can be fixed, new-"

"He's suffering," she pulled her Carnifex off her waist. The weapon made a soft, well-oiled whir as it unfurled. "Let him go while he's still a person."

The unfortunate man on the ground fought to raise a trembling hand. His fingers twitched in what might have been an inviting gesture. His friend made a choking sound and shoved Shepard's gun away, leaving a muddy handprint on her wrist. James looked down again and saw that the hole in the dying man was filled with mud and bits of grass. The sick feeling in his gut increased.
"Shepard," Garrus said warningly, "movement."

Over the patter of rain, James made out the sound of metal sliding over metal. He looked up. Down at the other end of the park, along the dark horizon line, one of the teeth withdrew. Then another. Beside him, Alenko raised his pistol and peered into the darkness.

Shepard's Carnifex barked, short and very loud. The report echoed off the surrounding buildings.

James turned in time to see the soldier explode upward with a howl and crash into Shepard, sending them both to the ground in a flail of fists.

"Goddammit, stop!" the major shouted. Suddenly outlined in dancing blue, he scrambled to grab one of the man's arms. Madness lent the soldier an inhuman strength and he nearly yanked Alenko off his feet.

"No time for this crap!" James snapped. Driven by the creeping feeling of the husks no doubt headed in their direction right then, he drove his best bar-brawler's knee into the man's torso, blasting the air out of his lungs.

Abandoning delicacy himself, Alenko wrenched the stunned soldier free, flipped him ass over teakettle and slammed him into the base of one of the upright Dragon's Teeth. The biotic pointed his pistol at him, and for a fleeting moment James really thought Alenko was just going to shoot the man right there.

"He too is lost," Javik said over his shoulder. "End him cleanly and be done with it." A brilliant beam of green speared from his rifle out into the forest of Dragon's Teeth, sizzling through the rain. For an eyeblink, a strobe of illumination lit the forest of suspended bodies. A whole city of bodies.

The turian pulled Shepard up out of the muck. Her eyes glinted as she wiped uselessly at the clinging mud. A strangled growling noise came from the darkness as glowing blue eyes lurched and shuffled toward them.

"I think it's time for a jog, gentlemen," Shepard said, holstering her pistol and readying her shotgun.

"That's going to sting," Alenko commented absently.

"But it's better than the party that's developing over there," Vakarian said. "Developing really fast."

"I've got laughing boy." James clipped his rifle to his back and hiked the dazed soldier over his shoulder, splattering his visor and face with mud.

"He will slow us down!" Javik protested.

Shepard ignored the prothean and pointed to the east. "Garrus and Javik, point. Alenko, flank, I've got the rear. Move it!"

War was about hitting that moment when you didn't think you could go on, and going on. And for all the plans they tried to make, the circumstances they tried to anticipate, and the odds they stacked in their favor, it seemed like war was still so much about luck.

James hadn't been the only one to let out a whoop when Cortez' voice had crackled to life over the comms. Even the dour prothean let slip his relief. Luck, for once, had smiled on them. The Reapers had done extensive damage to the black site facility, but they must not have recognized the value of the specific quantum device Hackett had sent them for. Indeed, the Reapers didn't seem to place any
value at all on human technological efforts. Laying hands on their objective gave them all a renewed burst of energy, enough to see them back up to the surface through sporadic resistance, coaxing and often outright shoving the grav hauler and its cargo through ruins.

_We're getting off this rock_, was the phrase James kept repeating in his head when his exhausted body threatened to flag on him. He wasn't going to be the first to stumble. Neither he nor the others stopped long to wonder where the half-crazed man had gone. He wasn't where they'd left him, with a scrounged pistol, near the entrance to the facility.

As they wrestled their cargo to the plaza they'd planned as an LZ, Alenko called out a warning of movement. James followed his pointing finger across the plaza to where there were shapes, human shapes, moving in the dark. No blue lights, and his HUD didn't peg them as hostiles. Overhead, the howl of the Kodiak's thrusters echoed off the buildings as it slewed around a corner and started to descend.

"The city was supposed to have been evacuated of civilians," James said quietly as the group moved toward them.

"Emptying a whole city..." Garrus replied, "it's never been a clean job."

The shapes in the dark resolved into a crowd of a half a dozen, then a dozen, then still more. Humans in all manner of clothes, and uniforms, dirty and wet. The Kodiak kicked up a spray as it eased into a landing. One of the rear thrusters sputtered, running roughly. It was scorched black and missing a section of armor plating. "Commander!" the pilot's voice broke into the team comms, "we gotta move! We've got incoming AA and tankbusters from the water!"

"Damn, Esteban, you got winged pretty good," James said into the comms.

"I know," Cortez replied. The door to the Kodiak swung open. "But she's a tough bird. I managed to stay out of sight and get enough repairs done to get in the air again. Joker's in deep stealth waiting for us!"

The crowd surged and shifted. "Are there more shuttles coming?" A voice called. "You have to get us out of here!" another said. A chorus agreed. James spotted more than one suit of armor in there. More people called out. Someone said Shepard's name. The word traveled through the crowd like wildfire, and the voices turned to shouting, shot through with raw panic.

"Lola," James started.

"Our window is too tight," she snapped back, "if we get out at all we can't get back. There's a Reaper out there, and probably more than one."

"And the device..." Alenko said.

James looked at him. "We can't leave it behind, sir."

"We have to do _something_," the Major insisted. "All these civilians-"

"Ten lives now, or ten trillion later?" Shepard said between her teeth. "Load it up. Now."

"There has to be another way."

"Shepard," Garrus interjected, "it's getting restless out here."

As the Kodiak's cargo rails latched onto the crate, the crowd surged again, voices rising. They could
see the crate taking up most of the ship's cargo space. James watched, heartsick. The ruddy light of
the ship's interior reflected off their desperate faces, rain-slick hair and a few scattered helmets. They
pushed forward, then froze at Garrus and Javik's raised rifles.

"They must fight," Javik said quietly into the comm channel. "If they will not, then it would be a
mercy to kill them cleanly. And it would keep them from becoming more of the enemy."

"They're mostly just civilians!" Alenko protested.

"There is no such thing," the alien said.

Shepard stepped out to address the crowd. She got three words out before, outlined in stark yellow
on black, James saw the spark ignite. The light flashed off a gun cowl. Shots split the air with bright
muzzle bloom and impact flashes. Shepard fell back, but Vakarian, who had never lowered his gun,
proved as fast as he claimed to be. The shooter's kinetic barrier flashed, and James clearly saw the
man's face deform and his eyes bulge before the side of his head came apart in a spray of blood and
bone. Shouts and screams erupted from all sides as more shots rang off the armored flank of the
Kodiak. The air warped and exploded, a mighty surge of blue that James felt even on the edge,
almost yanking the gun out of his hands. Bodies flew backward, scattering into the darkness.

The green scalpel of Javik's particle beam raked back and forth. "You do not deserve the blood shed
in your names!" he shouted as he pulsed shots into the crowd.

A confusing mass of moving shapes writhed in front of James' sights. An armored body staggered
out, a rifle held up to fire. James reacted in a heartbeat even as he instinctually moved to cover
Shepard's position, squeezing the trigger and sending the man tumbling to the ground. It was too late
to even issue an order to drop their weapons. Idiots. Idiots!

His HUD told him at a glance the worst had not happened. Alert symbols next to Shepard's name
showed an armor breach, but not signal loss. Alenko was already on it. In front of them, the crowd
dissolved into the darkness as those that could, fled. James reached out and snapped a hand down
over Javik's rifle, forcing the muzzle downward. "Cease fire!"

The prothean snarled something at James and jerked the weapon out of the marine's hand, but he
didn't resume firing. The sudden silence was punctuated only by James' own panting breath.

"Spirits," Garrus muttered. His weapon was still raised, scanning the scene.

A bare few seconds at best, and what had been a crowd of a few dozen people was reduced to still
bodies, moaning wounded, and the retreating shadows of those fleeing the scene. An explosive
convulsion of violence, and all for nothing. Fury burned in James' head. He stalked across the open
ground and used his boot to flip over one of the bodies. It was the man he'd shot, and he was still
alive, at least for the moment. His armor was Aldrin gray, marked with Alliance sergeant bars.

"You're a disgrace to the uniform, marine," James said. "What the hell?!"

The dying man bared his teeth in a bloody grimace. "Ship... No more ships..."

"You're fighting the wrong enemy!"

He coughed, splattering more blood on his face. "You... you tell me... this... worse death... than...
than the spike!"

"Firing on your own people?!"
"All... going to... the spike... Had to... try..."

James raised his rifle, but all the man did was smile. He lowered it again. "Rot, then," he said bitterly and turned away. His gaze fell on one of the other bodies, and he recognized the mud-stained armor of the man from the field of Dragon's Teeth. The pistol was still in his grip.

"There is no hole deep enough for those that betray of their own will," Javik said.

"Shut up," James growled. For all his fury, a terrible sympathy lingered. Despair is how they destroy us.

Cortez stood outlined in the glow of the Kodiak's open door, pistol in hand. In the halo of light, Alenko helped Shepard to her feet. The brow plate on her helmet had a deep, angry gouge in it, and her left arm was streaked with dark red. She swayed unsteadily and braced herself on the doorframe. Shit, Lola, that was close. Three days of brutal fighting and the closest they'd come to losing someone was from friendly fire.

"Vega. Garrus." It was Shepard's voice in his ear, quiet and tight with pain. "The wounded. Pick as many as we can cram in. Quick. We have to leave."

"On it," he replied.

Sensing the nearness of a breakdown, James didn't let himself think. This was triage of the worst and most immediate kind. Garrus muttered what sounded like an invocation as they hurried from body to body. Many were dead. Javik didn't shoot to wound, and his particle rifle made short work of unarmored flesh. Alenko's biotic outburst hadn't been kind, either.

Idiots! James wanted to shout it. He bit his tongue and bodily picked up a woman who probably had a broken leg, ignoring her scream of pain, and then a young man who'd caught only a glancing hit from the particle rifle, a nasty wound that had nonetheless cauterized itself. He would live long enough to get to the Normandy. It was a blur, but between himself and Garrus they got four people stuffed into the shuttle next to the cargo, and another in the co-pilot's chair before the limping, overstuffed Kodiak heaved itself into the sky. The moment the door closed, James allowed himself to gulp in a breath of terrible, guilty relief. We're getting off this rock.

Sitting in the corner next to the bulkhead, Shepard fixed a glare on the prothean. "Javik, do not fire on civilians unless they're an immediate threat." She meant what she said, but there was more exhaustion than force in her words.

"Once the Reapers have come, there are no more sides," Javik said simply. "No more civilians. It doesn't matter, all fight. There is no neutral ground." He moved closer to Shepard, leaning over her, and reached out with his right hand toward her face. "This is a truth you must know."

In a flash, Shepard's pistol was off her hip and the muzzle pressed hard under Javik's chin. "The instant I feel your mind in mine," she hissed softly, "you lose yours."

"You would be so willfully blind?" His hand hovered close, poised, lip lifted to show his sharp collection of teeth. "How can you close your eye to the truth? Have you not the iron to face what is coming?"

James caught Vakarian's eye across the way. He could see the turian's fingers closing around his rifle grip, thumb poised over the deploy stud.

"Don't tell me what I have the iron for," Shepard growled.
The commander and the prothean glared at each other, faces inches apart.


The tableau held for another few heartbeats, then Javik pulled his arm back, turned on his heel and parked himself on the bench next to James, folding his arms. Gripping the overhead handle, the major said something to Shepard, gesturing to her wounded arm.

She steered his hand away gently. "I'm fine," she said, not looking at him, "go make sure the... passengers are okay."

Alenko hesitated, then nodded. He squeezed past the team and knelt to examine the dazed, whimpering and shivering rescues. They probably hadn't even had time to process how lucky they were yet.

"Primitives," Javik muttered. He sat rigidly, his rifle between his knees. The weapon fascinated James despite himself. It had no visible trigger, nor any moving parts. It looked like it had been milled out of a solid piece of alloy metal, unbroken but for the open bore of the muzzle and some kind of slide vent along the top. It seemed to require neither heat clips nor even ammunition. All James knew was Javik's chamber on the Normandy sometimes drew an excess of power.

He really couldn't decide if the prothean was the biggest asshole the galaxy had ever condensed into skin and bone, or if he made the most sense out of anyone. He suspected it was a little of both, though no one wanted to admit the latter. "Not much room for sentiment where you come from, huh?" James commented.

The alien's creepy bifurcated eyes fixed on him sidelong. "A stone has more sentiment than our enemy. We can ill afford the weakness."

"It's not always weakness."

"But it always has a cost." For a moment, the usual hardness of Javik's tone faded. "Always. And there will come a time when you have no currency left to pay it."

James dropped his voice. "I might have run out a little, tonight."

Javik grunted, but in a tone that suggested more understanding than dismissal. James supposed it was the most he would get from the alien. The prothean closed his eyes. Across from them, Garrus already looked like he'd fallen asleep, leaning heavily on the bulkhead.

"Yeah, me too," James murmured.

Shepard seemed lost in her own world, eyes open but unseeing. He didn't doubt she was caught in the throes of the decision she'd just made. A messy, terrible decision no one would ever find heroics in. Was that quantum device taking up now very conspicuous space worth it? He didn't know, and neither did she. Any more than he'd known at the time if the lives he'd spent on Fehl Prime were worth the Collector intel.

This time, anyway, war had let them go, but not without claiming its price.
The monument stretched into the air, reflected perfectly in the still water of the lake. Javik stared hard at the image of the mass relay rendered in miniature, the buzz of the Presidium fading away around him. The final, desperate act of his people reduced to a piece of fountain art.

He wanted to wade out and touch it, but resisted. It, too, would be contaminated. It seemed there was no crevice, no surface in this place the young species hadn't filled with their noise. It was foolishness to hope for even a breath of ken from so long ago. His last memory of familiarity, a true connection with a like mind, already seemed distant. He tore his gaze away from the miniature relay and looked up the sweeping curve of the station's inner ring. He had not been prepared for the sight of the Citadel, nor the onslaught of feelings it provoked. The center of everything. The ultimate prize, and the trap that had ensnared and ultimately doomed his people. And countless prior generations of organics before them.

He longed to find the beauty in it he had always expected. Majesty, power, eternity. The crown jewel of the Empire. He had been born into war, into a ruin whose grandeur was already only a memory. He had never actually seen the Empire at its height- that place existed only as an ideal, itself an Avatar toward which they all fought. This place should have exemplified it.

But of course now he knew the truth- the Citadel was just another trap. There was nothing here he actually recognized.

"Javik!"

It was Shepard's birdman lieutenant, coming down from the promenade into the small park. Javik was quietly grateful for the scars and targeter he wore, enough to distinguish him from the other turians. They seemed to be everywhere on the station, sporting a wild array of equipment and facial markings.

"Shepard wanted me to give you this," Vakarian said, holding out his hand. Between his fingers was a thumb-sized device with beveled edges.

Javik took it gingerly. Many hands had touched it, giving it a muddled ken. He looked back up at the alien.

"It's a credit chip," Vakarian explained, "in case you need any supplies. Since you don't exactly have a bank account. It's linked to the Normandy's slush fund."

"Slush... fund?"

"Money all of us can use. You've been allocated a share."

Commerce. Javik glanced back the way he'd come. The strange place full of neon holos and open-fronted rooms he'd passed through must have been a market of some kind. Vendors... selling things. For profit. He turned back and peered at Vakarian. "My armor and weapon are sound. What would I need?"

The alien's mandibles twitched. "Ah, I was going over to Haliat to look at mods, why don't you come along? See what they have for sale."

Javik was going to point out that nothing of their manufacture was likely to fit Shear, but he held his tongue. The pretext was perhaps enough to guide him through this bewildering world, at least for a
few minutes. He nodded, and followed as the turian turned and led the way down the promenade at an unhurried pace.

"Did Liara tell you what that monument is?" Vakarian asked.

"I have studied the documents made available to me about Ilos and the Conduit," Javik affirmed. "Does the Conduit still function?"

Vakarian lowered his voice. "The true nature of it is still classified by Citadel intelligence. But I do know that a few key components were removed. For study, but also to keep the relay closed. Even if it's only a one-way door from a single origin, it's a back door."

"You saw the pods? On Ilos?"

"Yeah. It was a tomb, the power had run down a long time before we got there. Only Vigil, the VI, was left."

The documents had given the custodian another name, the one on which the program's memory imprints had been based. Ksad Ishan, the Avatar of Wayfinding. It was a secret name, the one given to doubts whispered in darkness by those who feared the resurgence of the empire would never come. A name from a time even before Javik's, a group of scientists and warriors who had taken themselves away, erasing all traces even from their own people. Before the Crucible, and before its loss.

Only now, long after that dream was dead too, did Javik finally understand where they'd gone and what they'd done. Deep below what had once been an inusannon world, the followers of the Wayfinder had laid themselves to rest. As the centuries passed, the pale shadow of Ksad Ishan had shut off the power to their stasis pods, one by one, until the fires in the galaxy had once again gone cold.

And then it was too late.

Javik tried to imagine those final twelve, a tale of desperation, alone in a galaxy fallen utterly silent. Nothing but the relays and the Citadel standing guard over empty planets, washed by faint signals—the final sputtering heartbeats of the empire rippling out through the vacuum of space. Deadening with each passing lightyear until they, too, fell silent.

"They got us all the way here," Vakarian was saying. "Their sacrifice wasn't in vain."

Javik wanted to shout at him. They'd failed, they'd all failed. They were supposed to have been awoken, like all those on what the humans called Eden Prime, to rebuild the Talvan empire. They were supposed to have had fifty thousand years to forge the new empire into a mighty weapon such as the galaxy had never seen, capable of smashing the arrogant destroyers into dust. Javik had always known he would not live to see them triumph, but he'd let himself believe he would be among the founding avatars, handing the spear forward to those who would carry it deep into the enemy's heart.

Instead, the deaths of all the most eminent Empire scientists had bought a bunch of apes and frogs a few extra turns of the seasons, time they'd squandered on petty arguments and denial.

A creeping feeling intruded into his furious thoughts. Javik glanced behind him and noticed a pair of birdmen in blue armor coming up the promenade. They were a ways back and their pace seemed easy, but they were armed.

"Don't worry about them," Vakarian said without breaking stride, "they're friends of mine. C-Sec. Just keeping an eye on things."
"On me."

"Not quite- you're covered by Shepard's authority. They're here to make sure no one else bothers you too much."

"I see." The incident at the embassies was still fresh in Javik's mind. The jellyfish and the talk of 'Enkindlers'. At least the creature had accepted the kenning with gratitude. Still, it was hard to believe anyone would take much notice of him, not in the riot of aliens infesting the place.

Vakarian led them to an open-sided room set into the walls lining the street, past the curious stares of passers-by. Even the aliens' clothing was a mishmash of cuts, colors and styles, some armored but mostly not, and few obvious uniforms in evidence. A staggering wealth of free time and resources on parade... that or a desperate ignorance of the truth. The turian walked over the store's threshold as if he were the owner, and approached what looked like a pillar holo-terminal arrayed with glowing panes sporting the same logo as the one above the entrance. Javik followed him and watched as he moved through menus, comparing something to data from his own VI.

Javik went to the neighboring panel and stared at it. It was a gibberish of alien script. He scanned it until he finally recognized a few characters along the sidebar that looked like asari. At a touch, the whole pane re-ordered itself, resolving into the asari script he'd gleaned from Liara T'Soni. Even then, it took all of his concentration to squeeze meaning from it. He leafed through the panes of information. The weapon schematics were interesting enough, and even somewhat familiar, but the units of measure they described made little sense. He flipped through pane after pane, but was surprised to see nothing but slugthrower weapons and accessories. Not a single energy weapon.

Javik looked around. Close by, a human was accepting a case from another. Holo-tools were lit, numbers shifting and changing. They clasped hands.

"There a problem?" Vakarian asked mildly, hand paused over his display.

"These things mean nothing to me," Javik said. He gestured down the row of storefronts. "None of this does. It's all... profiteering."

"What, was selling things illegal in your time?"

Javik frowned at him. "No. Our economy was once a grand marketplace. But when you have been fighting an enemy for so long even your forebears do not remember peace, such things do not stand. Of what use is profit when you are engaged in a war of annihilation? Everything we did, every breath, every step, every stroke was bent toward defeating the Reapers. It was... impressed upon all members of the Empire. Whether you hold the gun or build the gun, you are fighting. Material wealth was meaningless. Exploiting the war for personal gain was punishable by forced labor or death."

"How did you allocate resources then?"

"Those in authority did so, deciding who was in need of what. I had to make many such decisions every day."

"Did it cause a lot of strife? How did you maintain fairness?"

Javik shrugged. "Fairness was irrelevant. You fought or you died."

The birdman shook his head. "I guess when the competing argument is the Reapers, anything can seem reasonable."
"We had to be ready to move at any time, no matter what. To abandon our position, even a whole planet, if that is what was demanded of us. Material luxuries were a hindrance. Our ships, our weapons and our bodies were all we valued. This..."

Back out in the plaza, Javik's gaze fell on a strange green creature that appeared to have four legs.

"Is that... one of the 'Keepers'?” he asked.

Vakarian followed his pointing finger to the creature. "Oh, yeah."

Javik turned and looked at Vakarian in open-mouthed horror. "You... still tolerate enemy constructs, here, at the heart of your empire?!"

"We're not an empire," Vakarian said irritably, glancing around the store and dropping his voice, "and your people didn't destroy them either!"

"They did not know of their true nature until we had already lost the Citadel!" Javik hissed. "You let them live?"

"The Ilos scientists did something to them so they can't hear Reaper signals anymore."

"How can you even take the risk?" Javik demanded.

"If we kill them all then the whole station might start to fall apart..." The turian spread his hands. "Look, I'm not going to try to defend the Council's decisions. I used to work for them, but I left because of things like this. If it were up to me, I'd have done something about the Keepers too. I would have pushed to make sure we understood exactly what it is we're sitting on here. But the Council would never move on it, so we don't." Vakarian leaned in close. "Sometimes I think this place doesn't want to be understood."


"Hey, I don't disagree with that."

"I will... rejoin you on the Normandy. Later." Javik turned on his heel and walked out of the shop, stiff legged.

Without thinking, he headed across the plaza in the direction of the Keeper creature. It remained oblivious as he moved closer, focused on its mysterious task. Four spindly limbs moved over an exposed panel in the floor, adjusting wiring with precise, sure movements. It certainly didn't look at all threatening, with no obvious armament or protection aside from a chitinous hide. Was Vakarian right, had Javik's own people decided they weren't a threat? Or was it truly possible the Citadel impressed its own subtle indoctrination on those that lived here, encouraging them not to question it? Javik reached out and laid his fingers on the creature's head.

At first he felt almost nothing, just a faint ripple. An impression of grand, empty corridors branching far into the distance. He pulled his hand back in shock. There was a mind there, but it was even more alien than any human or asari. The creature itself had no individual will. In that, much like the Reaper constructs he knew already, but lacking the inbuilt hostility. Instead, something deeply ordered and precise. This creature was only a creature in the sense that it was made of proteins instead of metal and plastic, but that is where the similarity ended. It was a machine made of flesh, a terminal for a much larger system.

Javik unconsciously scrubbed his hands together. A voice spoke behind him, making him turn. It was the two turian guards.
"Hey, uh, don't bother the..." one of them said, trailing off. He seemed to be having trouble deciding where to look on Javik's face.

"I did not harm it," Javik said shortly and turned away.

He was no closer to knowing if the Keeper was a threat or not. Would that he had even a fraction of what Ksad Ishan must have known about the Citadel. Would that any of them had survived. That the young species would have had the ken, understood the beacons and prepared! That anything in this wretched cycle made sense.

He stopped walking and breathed deeply. Javik Vnis, Son of Vengeance, you are better than this fruitless rage. Master yourself.

He looked up, past the artificial sky to where the nebula enveloped and dwarfed the station. How many times had he faced terrible odds? How many had he watched die, how much had he been forced to relinquish, only to keep going? Rage had not served him then, either. There was nothing he could do now. The Talvan Ish Alhan, the Eternal Glorious Empire, was no more. He felt the heat in his chest change, settle, spreading into his limbs.

The last of my obligations, my duties to the future, have fallen away. In loss and failure I am refined, made pure. There is nothing else now.

Nothing else but Vengeance.
Duty is Heavier

Chronic illnesses did odd things to a person, Kaidan had discovered. Above and beyond symptoms, quirks crept into his thought process when it came to migraines. It was no longer a function of hoping they wouldn't happen- he'd burnt out that fruitless wish many years ago. Now the internal negotiation revolved around when and where they happened. Any time he wasn't in the field, in an important meeting, or didn't have a deadline looming, he went into a new one feeling a certain gratitude. No matter how bad the pain got, it could have been a lot worse. It could have cost everyone else.

It still cost him plenty, though. He curled himself tighter in his bunk as if he could push himself into the bulkhead and become one with the metal. He tried not to wish the pulse between his eyes was just a little less intense from one heartbeat to the next, but did anyway, only to have the hope dashed in the next beat. The fade would start soon, he hoped, when the meds had time to sink in. But pain stretched out 'soon' into one long eternity.

Half-formed thoughts tormented him, churning up out of the crashing surf and vanishing below, only to resurface. Rain, mud, monstrous eyes, then human ones, full of terror and desperate hope. A single moment, stuttering backward and forward in time, strobed in flashing gunfire. He tried to push the thoughts away, to think of nothing, but they always crept back back.

Kaidan rolled over and threw an arm over his eyes, letting the flesh of his limb press into his eyeballs. He'd been told to try to relax during a migraine, not to contribute to the tension, but he couldn't manage it. He wanted to say what happened on Illyria had been an accident. But it hadn't been- he had a clear memory of the roar building in his nerves, straining to burst out. He was sure he should have had time to tamp it down again. He couldn't blame it on loss of control... because he hadn't lost control. They turned hostile, he mouthed to himself in the dark. Tried to kill her. And yet they were mostly just terrified civilians, acting out of fear. Everyone at the scene had been backed into a corner, convinced the only way out was a solitary Kodiak. He knew he'd surely killed a few of them, just as surely as his teammates. One voice told him it was criminal, another that it was mercy, and yet another that it was the brutal practicality of kill or be killed.

After all the insanity and impossible events, one stray gunshot from one desperate man had almost brought it all crashing down again. And he'd been so busy trying to figure out how to fix an unfixable situation he'd almost let Shepard get her head blown off. His stomach churned.

He rolled over again. Nothing banished the circular thinking. Liara's words haunted him; irreconcilable realities.

Maybe, just maybe, the grinding pain was starting to fade. He couldn't resist hoping, but all it did was make room for more worries.

A fumbled paw of his omni-tool brought up the current crew roster. He squinted at the display. All but a handful had returned from shore leave. With the cost of accommodation on the Citadel reaching truly staggering heights, most of the crew returned to the ship to bunk, even for a three day layover. By ship's time, it was the middle of the night, four hours before cast-off. Only C-shift, night owls, and miserable bastards like himself were still up. He thumbed his comm.

"EDI, is Shepard back yet?"

"She has not returned to the Normandy," the AI replied in his ear.
Kaidan swiped his hand through his hair, digging his fingers into his scalp as if he could squeeze the remaining tension out of his skull. It never worked, of course, but it never stopped him from trying. The pain kept right on throbbing away, making it clear it wouldn't leave until it was damn well ready. He still wasn't sure how to feel about this AI running the ship, but he had so much else on his mind he could barely afford the energy to fret about it.

Three days since they'd docked, and the same since Shepard had vanished into the station. Two days' worth of necessary work had kept him occupied, leaving the third for mounting worry and the incipient migraine. Three days since Shepard had locked out her comm. She never went off comms. Well, that he knew of, he had to amend. He could use his authority to override the communication block, but he was only supposed to do that in the case of an emergency or some other kind of military necessity. Using it for what was clearly a personal concern felt wrong, no matter how much it felt like an emergency in the privacy of his own head.

"If you are concerned for Commander Shepard's safety," EDI said, "I have received a series of all's-well pings from her omni-tool since she disembarked."

Safety. "Manual or automated?"

"Inconsistent timing suggests they were manual."

Inconsistency could have meant anything, but Kaidan had to remind himself that the AI probably considered an offset of a hundredth of a second to be 'inconsistent'.

"I just wish I knew where she was," he muttered.

"Geographical triangulation of the last ping signal sent is available to command crew. It was sent twenty-three minutes ago."

He blinked. "How... precise is it?"

His omni-tool holo resolved itself into a map of the station that zoomed into a lofted map of Zakera district. "The density of signal towers present on the Citadel provides for increased accuracy," EDI said. "However, there is still a notable margin of error."

"How big a margin?"

"Nine meters."

He chuckled, then winced. "I... think I'll manage."

That nine meter space turned out to be deep in Zakera Ward, only a few divisions away from what had once been Chora's Den. Set into a huge support bulkhead that formed part of the Ward's massive hinge system, a row of buildings had been converted into various bars, clubs and dance floors. Most were just entrances with bright lettering holos in various languages, and several were emitting thudding bass lines that threatened to shake the dirt off the sidewalk. Together they formed a formidable dilemma to the wandering major. Walk into each in turn and conspicuously look around? All that would do was attract attention, and despite the plain civvies he'd scrounged up, he wasn't as unknown as he once was. Furthermore, the gaggle of aliens hanging around beneath untranslated holosigns made it clear humans weren't necessarily welcome everywhere. This wasn't the kind of neighborhood where you invited yourself into a place. Outside, clutches of people clustered around rows of chest-high metal tables bolted to the ground, chatting and drinking. A few vendors hawked drinks and snacks from open-sided stalls.
Kaidan rubbed his side absently. The burn over his ribs had been patched with a layer of synthskin that would keep out contaminants and speed the regrowth of healthy tissue, but the whole area was still tender. He'd been lucky. They'd all been lucky. He swallowed hard. Nothing felt that way lately.

He'd come this far, but he'd still have to hope for some luck at this point. A survey of the vendor stalls found him a coffee-based concoction he hoped would push back the muddy fatigue trying to urge him to give up and go home. The owlish man haunting the stall looked like he'd had even less sleep than Kaidan, but accepted his credits without comment.

There were a few empty tables within sight of the row of entrances, so Kaidan installed himself and made a show of checking his omni-tool to cover the creeping sense of awkwardness. At a nearby table, three turians in colorful jackets passed around small shallow cups of something. To Kaidan’s surprise, they didn't drink the liquid, but instead brought it to their mouths and inhaled deeply from whatever vapor it was emanating. A faint, woody smell drifted over in Kaidan's direction as the turians continued to talk and breathe in what he could only assume was some kind of drug.

At length, the omni-tool proved to be less interesting than simply watching the modest but steady parade of people that came and went from the clubs, a remarkably cosmopolitan mix, all things considered. Some of them clearly out to show off, others dressed modestly, and clearly less well-to-do than the denizens of the Presidium. There was a significant number, both human and alien, that looked fresh off the shuttle from the colonies.

Out of nowhere, his gamble was rewarded.

Dressed in a sleeveless top and loose pants over her combat boots, Shepard emerged from one of the club entrances. She spotted him almost immediately. After regarding him across the plaza of tables, head cocked askance, she ambled in his direction. She carried a bottle of clear liquid, and the gunshot she'd taken to the arm a few days ago was hidden under a square slick of hardened medigel. Sweat marked her shirt. As she closed the distance, the multicolored holos sheened off her skin, highlighting the gentle interplay of muscles. There was something loose about the swing in her step which complimented the lopsided smile she fixed on him as she drew close.

"You're doing a kind of crappy stalking job, y'know," she said, sidling up to the table. "You're not supposed to hang out in the open. Aren't bushes more traditional?"

"I'm not stalking you," he said defensively, somewhat startled at her demeanor.

She shot him a long-suffering smirk.

"I was worried, all right?" he said. "You fell off the map for three days. After everything that happened..."

"Never long enough, is it?" she drawled, swiveling to lean her elbows on the table. She took a long swallow from the bottle. He must have been staring at it, because she caught his gaze. "Keep your shirt on, MP," she said. "S'water."

He put his chin in his palm. "Somehow I don't think that's all it's been."

Shepard sniffed. "Of course not. But don't worry," she patted her side, "robo-liver's an enthusiast. I'm fine. But you're looking kinda rough around the edges. Isn't it past your bedtime?"

"Touch of the migraine earlier tonight."

"Ah. Still?"
"No, thankfully. You're looking a little rough yourself."

"I've been bouncing off krogan all night. Can't complain, though, I went looking for it."

"Krogan? On a dance floor?"

"All the best slam floors have a krogan or three. People can bounce offa them all night and they don't care, but anyone who gets unruly gets put down hard. Keeps everyone on the near side of polite."

"So, bouncers that don't hang out at the door," he mused. "I'm just surprised you're way down here. I guess I thought Purgatory was the place everyone was going these days."

"Fff. Purgatory's a prison, not a bar."

"Huh?"

"It's a place you go when you want to be gawked at." She rolled her eyes. "Dress up, shake your assets around for an audience, maybe go home with someone. Just a big meat market for people who want to be seen to be seen."

"And it's a prison?"

Shepard stared at him for a long moment over the edge of her water bottle. "Long story," she muttered, looking away. She waved at the dance floor entrance she'd come from. "This place is different. People come here to be alone in a crowd, do violence to their eardrums and get stuff outta their system."

"It doesn't hurt your arm?"

"Course it hurts. I just don't care."

It was his turn to smirk at her. In response, Shepard actually stuck her tongue out at him. "I'm allowed some faux-macho bullshit sometimes too."

"I was more concerned about the disappearing for three days part."

She shrugged extravagantly. "You coulda yanked the leash any time you wanted."

"Hey, stop that. I'm not here as a superior officer, okay?"

"That's still... really weird." Shepard put the bottle down and rubbed her forehead. "Still throws me. I just... blinked, and the whole galaxy lunged forward two years."

Do you regret coming back? He stopped short of asking it, suddenly afraid of the answer. "Do you remember anything from... in between?"

"No. I remember trying to get to Joker, then I woke up on Cerberus' slab with Lawson yelling in my ear and mechs trying to kill me. So no, before you ask, I don't remember dying. I don't even remember getting Joker to the pod."

"That's probably a good thing." He laced his fingers together to keep his hands from balling up. I have to remember it for you. It made him wonder if he would ever tell her about that recording the geth had played for him. He doubted it.

"Sometimes I think I dream about it," she said softly. "Space, stars... a planet. A lot of little pieces. I'm just one of those pieces."
You were spaced, Kaidan's mind supplied unhelpfully. And all that entails. He bit his tongue. There was a rumor going around that during the Normandy's refit, they'd found a badly-scorched helmet in the fishtank. Buried in pages of dry and heavily-redacted interrogation reports was a footnote that Shepard had visited Alchera personally. He'd never tried to find out if the helmet rumor had any truth to it, because he already suspected there was. It was somehow far creepier than the weird floating orb that had also been in her cabin. Layers and layers of stories reaching down like an archeological dig, showing just a few tantalizing bones.

He thought again about the story Liara had told him about getting her body out of the Shadow Broker's hands. There was a profound, gnawing discomfort in the knowledge that she'd probably been right in her judgment that he'd never have allowed the body be given to Cerberus. That prickly discomfort nestled right next to the electrical feeling at Shepard's living, breathing nearness, her mere presence - a feeling that persisted stubbornly in spite of every doubt and fear crowding his skull. The two formed unquiet bedfellows that he still wasn't sure how to process.

Shepard shifted suddenly and glanced at her omni-tool. "Request's up," she said, "gimme a few." She trotted back toward the dance floor entrance, leaving the empty bottle behind. The beat had changed slightly, but it still resonated out through the flooring all the way to his table.

Kaidan sighed and took a long swallow of his neglected drink. He wondered if he should follow her, but he couldn't imagine trying to fit into a place like that. At least not without a few stronger drinks. Same old stupid fears. The migraine excuse had served him far too well over the years, his go-to argument to keep himself out of situations where he was likely to make an ass of himself. Then again, maybe that too was an elaborate rationalization. He looked over at the entrance again. He did want to share in the experience somehow, but now it seemed too late, far past the time when he might have been welcome. Now he'd just be an interloper. Maybe coming here at all was unwelcome.

The turians laughed about something in raucous, guttural barks. Kaidan glanced at them, but they were engrossed in their drug cups and their private joke, oblivious to the lone human. As the minutes dragged by, Kaidan finished his drink, fidgeting in the strange over-awareness that came from being alone in a place where everyone else was with friends. Finally, Shepard emerged again, this time on the heels of a group of several humans and asari. She peeled away and approached his table again.

"Still here?" she asked.

"I wasn't sure if I was supposed to go," Kaidan said.

"You weren't 'supposed' to do anything. Let's get out of here."

She looked tired as she threaded on a plain charcoal-gray hooded shirt. The spark in her eye was gone, replaced with the dull look of someone who needed a good night's sleep but had a long way to go to get there. Kaidan tossed their bottles into a reclamation receptacle, then followed her. They walked side by side in silence until they'd cleared the plaza and come down into the access throughways lined with shops, some open and others not. Crowds were sparse.

"Did you have fun at least?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I guess, yeah. You know..." she gestured vaguely, "what it's like when you go back to a familiar place you haven't been in a long time? You want it to feel like it did before, and it sort of does, but not completely."

"My parents' house feels that way to me," Kaidan said.
"Everywhere feels that way," Shepard muttered. "I used to love dancing in places like that. Just letting the rhythm rule me completely, pound all the thoughts out of my head. Sure, drinking was kinda fun, but really it was about the floor and the music. About a sound you can feel in your whole body."

"Used to?"

"It's not the same. Nothing felt... right. I couldn't let go, not completely. I kept thinking something was going to... I kept worrying someone would recognize me."

"Then you'd have to sign autographs or something?"

"Then get shanked in the back and dropped down a hole, sure. Close enough." She crammed her hands in her pockets and walked for a minute in silence before speaking again. "I dunno, I guess I was trying to prove something to myself. Figure something out. Maybe a why. Doesn't matter, I guess."

"Get a look at the people you're fighting for?" Kaidan suggested.

Shepard snorted. "Oh yeah, sure, another platitude for the list. I've got loads to choose from now. I should make a bingo card."

"What's the truth, then?"

She laughed humorlessly. "Pretty sure you don't want to hear it."

"What makes you say that?"

"Doesn't fit the propaganda poster."

He frowned. "The propaganda isn't what I care about."

"No? It's what all the reporters are after." Shepard framed her fingers and looked through them. "Sound bites save the world, vid at eleven!"

"Come on, Shepard."

"I've got no choice!" she snapped. "I hate all of this. But I have no choice. That's it."

A passing turian in a long coat and ghoulish white face markings glanced at them curiously, but didn't slow her pace.

"That's... You've always had a choice," Kaidan said

Shepard laughed again, and this time it turned bitter.

"And saving all these lives?" he asked, discomforted.

She rolled her head back enough to shoot him a look. "Yeah yeah, life." She threw her arms out. "Save everybody! Gods, I don't even know what that means anymore. It's all just a bunch of brainless platitudes we repeat to ourselves like broken records. Nobody seems to want to say what it all really means. They're all too busy trying to save their own asses, blame somebody else, and the galaxy doesn't give a shit either way."

"It never has," Kaidan said, "that's why we have to."
Shepard grunted, a sound as ambivalent as her half-lidded expression. They crossed out of the store promenade and onto a footbridge over a broad gravway. The ceilings opened up, affording a distant view of the opposing wards through a criss-cross of bridges and buildings. They were alone as far as the eye could see, even as gravcars flew by beneath, the bridge's orange lights flashing off their cowlings.

"There has to be something you're fighting to see," Kaidan asked carefully.

"You really think I'm going to survive this?" Shepard said wearily. "That's the worst joke of all. Of course I won't. I'm already a zombie corpse anyway, full to the brim with Cerberus' filth."

"Shepard, you're not..." Echoes of Garrus' letter flashed back to him. *Frankenstein.* "Good god, you-"

"I used to think giving your life for a cause was the highest sacrifice a person could make. Now I know better. Dying was the easiest damn thing I've ever done. You ever heard that old samurai adage? Can't even remember where I heard it. 'Duty is heavier than a mountain...''

"...death is lighter than a feather,'" Kaidan finished. "Yeah, I've heard it."

Shepard slowed her pace and looked down at the passing traffic. "Used to think it was BS. Not so much, now. Death is easy. Sacrifice? That's being held down to the grindstone. It's *living* while they slowly strip every part of you away, while they co-opt your face and your voice." She pushed her sleeve up and gripped her forearm, then scraped her nails back across the flesh. "While they pollute your body, turn everyone you care about against you, and finally, use your own convictions to make you do what they want. It's the hell of doubt so deep there's no light anywhere."

She turned suddenly and looked at him. The lamps made her look drawn, as if the light had sucked away the vitality that had been present only a few minutes before. "What do you want, Kaidan? Out of all of this?"

The blunt question took him aback for a moment. "I want to understand what happened. The real story, not some report or made-up extranet story."

"And then what?"

His mouth worked soundlessly for a few seconds. "I... I don't know. To help, somehow."

"I catch myself thinking of that time in B.C..." she looked away, into the lights of the city. "Sometimes it feels like it never really happened, like it's all just a dream from another life. A fantasy I came up with on a dark night. But it was real, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, it was."

"But it was a long time ago for you."

He moved around toward the railing, trying at least to face her even if she didn't face him. "Yes, and no. It's all stayed with me. I didn't just move on. Everything that happened... it's still really important to me."

Shepard met his eyes again, searching. "I could let myself fall back into you... so easily, Kaidan. You had two years to deal with it. But for me, it's all still fresh. I never got to... let it go. It would be so easy... and maybe it would even be as good as before. You have... no idea how much I'd want it to be."
"I might," he said quietly.

Her weight shifted and she folded her arms tight. "But then how long would it be until the next Horizon?"

Kaidan's heart squeezed painfully. "Horizon's past."

"Is it? How long until I have to make a call like Bahak again; three hundred thousand lives for a delay, a chance of saving more?" Her voice tightened with heat, a tremor running along the edge. "How long until something I have to do offends your integrity, and you go looking for Cerberus' dirty fingerprints in my heart again? Like Mars?! Start flinching again when you see my eyes flash, just like everyone else?!"

"Your eyes? I-"

"Everyone thinks I don't notice, but I do. Every time. It's the moment they switch from wondering who they're talking to to what."

He sucked in a breath to try to collect himself. It felt like a rapidly losing struggle. "Shepard, it won't happen again. I won't doubt you again, you have my word!"

She looked at him for a long moment, trembling, fists clenched. When she spoke again, it was barely above a whisper, trailing off until she was only mouthing the words. Even as they were swallowed up by the hum of the passing gravcars, he clearly understood every word as clearly as if they were shouted: "I don't... believe you."

As each syllable landed, they formed a terrible, burning brand of realization. It dragged in its wake the corpse of something he thought he'd left behind a long time ago- a shriveled memory that swelled into new life, feeding greedily on the words. It was all there, written plainly in her tear-filled eyes- the way she stood there, shaking and looking like she wanted nothing more than to bolt. Only this time, it had nothing to do with physical force or the amp in his head.

*She's afraid I'll hurt her. Again. She's... afraid of me.*

He tried to say something, but no coherent phrase formed itself.

"You'll be right, too," she whispered raggedly, shaking her head. "That's the thing. You are who you are, and you'll be right. There was a time... when I could take it, but I just... I'm only hanging on by a thread. I can't do it again. I can't do Horizon again. I don't have the strength. I'll... never be more than this thing I have to do. " She turned on her heel and walked away along the bridge.

He forced a breath into his tight chest and stumbled after her. "Shepard, wait, please-"

She spun around and looked at him, bringing him up short. "Why are you here, anyway? On the Normandy?"

"I told you," he said, startled. "It's the center of the fight."

"And yet you've found a place where you can be the furthest from the center."

Anger bloomed in his head, rolling out of the pain. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Shepard stared at him. Her eyes were still wet, but they'd gone hard as steel. He had the distinct and sinking feeling the pilot of a frigate must feel when they slid into the broadside fire field of a dreadnought. Despite her deadly battlefield skills, Shepard's most potent weapon wasn't her shotgun.
"You've found a place where you'll never have to make a call like Bahak, haven't you? Because it'll always be my call. My responsibility." She bared her teeth. "And if I sound jealous, it's because I bloody well am. You have the rank, you have unbroken Alliance support, and now you even have the Spectre status! By all rights, you should be in command! But no, I get to be the bright star at the center of a galaxy worth of hatred! I'm the one who won't get there in time! I'm the one who'll leave a planet to die! I'm the one who will never, ever be good enough!"

Shepard jabbed a finger at him. "And no matter how horrible it gets, you can safely stand in judgment!"

He stared at her open-mouthed, heart pounding. "How... how can you say that?"

"How?! Tell me that's not exactly what you were doing on Illyria, with all those people? Because I didn't do enough, did I? I had to choose between a thing and a few more lives, and I-"

The lights went out.

Shepard choked on her words in the sudden dark. She spun around and leaned over the railing, peering upward. Kaidan followed her gaze to the opposing ward. There were no lights anywhere—the distant ward above them was a long slash of black against the stars and thin ribbons of purple. Only the headlights of the passing gravcars pierced the blackness. The bridge under Kaidan's feet rumbled, a vibration traveling along its length.

"What fresh hell is this?" Shepard breathed.

Kaidan reached for his comm at the same moment it rang, shrill with an emergency tone. Shepard started, obviously hearing the same.

"Shepard!" It was Joker's voice. "Alenko, where the fuck are you?! You have to get back ASAP!"

"Joker, what-"

"A bajillion Reapers just relayed in! Get back to the ship!"

Kaidan met Shepard's eyes in the dark, both of them frozen in place. High above them, a ripple of light shuddered through the Ward, coming back on section by section. The lights over their heads snapped back on.

"The goddamn arms are closing!" Joker shouted. "RUN!"

"Fuck," Shepard blurted, and bolted for the end of the bridge.

Kaidan ran. "Transit station!" he shouted after her. "Left!"

Shepard tore left, dodging past a gawking salarian. "Joker, how much time?" she panted into the comms. Her strides were long, devouring ground at a stupendous rate.

"I don't know, ten minutes? The station isn't fast, but-"

"The last recorded incidence of the Citadel arms closing," EDI broke into the channel, "took approximately thirteen point three minutes."

"Well shit," Joker said. "Shepard, get a car, anything! I'll come to you if I have to! Arnenson, get those docking clamps off or they're coming with us!"

They pounded down the street. Kaidan's chest was starting to burn from trying to keep up with
Shepard's breakneck pace. The transit station hove into view ahead of them, festooned with emergency lighting. One of the waiting gravcars had an open door, and a solitary salarian had one foot inside when Shepard got to him.

"One side, Spectre business!" she yelled, and bodily picked up the sputtering alien by the shirt and heaved him out of the way.

"You can't just go around claiming to be a Spectre!" the salarian said shrilly, waving his arms. "There are plenty of-"

"Sorry!" Kaidan shouldered him out of the way and threw himself into the car, yanking the door closed behind him against the whine of the automated hinge.

"EDI, I need overrides!" Shepard said as she hit the command to get the gravcar moving. Outside, the salarian was still shouting indignantly as the core engaged and a pulse of thrusters pushed them up.

"I have already queued up the request for Spectre special access with Citadel Transit Central," the AI said over their comms. "Awaiting your authorization."

"I'll drive," Kaidan said reflexively.

"Auth's done," Shepard said, hand on her omni-tool. "EDI, please coordinate and keep traffic away from us."

"Yes, Shepard."

A control console blinked to life in front of Kaidan, overlaid with a nested map of the Citadel. A small green wedge appeared courtesy of the AI marked the Normandy's position, then a conspicuous countdown of the time they had left.

"Damn it," Shepard said beside him, knuckles white on the dash. "Damn it all to hell."

He could find nothing witty or reassuring to say as buildings flashed by the gravcar's windows. The arms of the Citadel closing like a trap, and all those people arrayed below and around them were about to find out just what kind of hell Earth already knew.
Joker eyed at the cargo bay camera feed until the red alert lamp switched off, reporting ramp closure. Cortez was looking over the new arrival, probably trying to figure out what the heck to do with. And who wouldn't want a shitty public CT gravcar?

The occupants of said heap were already at the elevator. Shepard and the major, returning in the same gravcar, both in civvies. Despite the situation, Joker couldn't help but smirk to himself. _Careful Shepard, this is how rumors get started._

They would, anyway, if given time to grow, which seemed an iffy proposition right then. He pulsed the thrusters for as much speed as he dared. The narrowing space within the Citadel was a zoo of flashing vehicle signals zipping every which way, heedless of any tower control. The starlit nebula visible between the arms had been reduced to slivers of purple, open still at the end. The station's cap pieces were beginning their deployment. He still had clearance unless they suddenly accelerated, but he was glad Cerberus' designers hadn't gone overboard upscaling the SR-2's hull dimensions from the original.

He had to deke around a freighter that seemed to be making the same play, but still managed to slip out of the trap. He amused himself by imagining the image of the cigar-shaped Citadel sneezing out tiny ships. It was a heck of a lot more comforting than the vast splay of red dots that bloomed on his IFF tactical map.

_Fucking hell-

"Traynor," Shepard said in the command channel, "comms report?" In the CIC camera feed, she stood on the command platform, still in her civvies, quickly moving display panes around.

"Hard to get an accurate picture right now, ma'am," the specialist answered, "but we're seeing widespread failure of extra-system FTL comms. It's just like the attack on Earth- extensive jamming and band overload. They're filling every comm frequency with high-gain junk data."

"Wouldn't it be great if we could find a noise they hated?" Joker supplied. "Maybe just blast Expel10 and Scylla on every channel and hope they get so sick of the nu-basebeat crap that they scuttle home to dark space."

He looked sideways to see EDI staring at him. Maybe she really was the ultimate straight man.

"A dude can dream." He shrugged.

"I am attempting to filter," EDI said into the channel. "However, the Reapers are randomly cycling their attacks, making compensation difficult."

"You'd think they'd done this massive invasion thing before," Joker drawled.

"Get me a secure patch to Admiral Singh. And Traynor, if you can get any kind of alert or reinforcement call out of system, do it. I don't care if it's to someone's pleasure yacht!"

"Aye, ma'am, I'm working on it."

The tactical map spread out to Joker's left, beside his immediate flight display. He knew Shepard was seeing the same thing- clouds of enemy ship signals expanding out from the incoming relays, darkening the intervening space with sheer numbers, Reapers and their smaller attack drones both.
Joker knew he wasn't yet getting every friendly IFF signal to be had, and yet the Council's response fleet seemed pitifully small. It had been pulled in all directions, siphoned off in the increasingly desperate attempts to protect the Council species' own holdings. Not even the *Destiny Ascension* was in-system.

Joker chewed his lip as he directed the *Normandy* in a wide arc, letting her sensors get a thorough read of the situation. The Reapers were dispersing, conspicuously covering the various primary and secondary relays that formed the Citadel's hub. Energy readings in the form of explosions rippled in their wake as the forest of automated defense sats tried in vain to slow them down. The Reapers swept them away in spears of brilliant red, blasts of energy that bloomed and faded.

Did the Council even have a plan? Or had they once again assumed the Citadel to be inviolate, too deep behind their lines to come under threat?

"Gods," Shepard muttered in the command channel, "did they strip all of their occupation fleets for this? How did we not get any warning?"

"You know," Joker said, "if this is just a whole new batch, I don't think I even want to know about it."

Near the edge of the ring of attackers, he saw a wing of what looked like asari wolfpack frigates move in, trying to flank while a flank still existed. The battle lines were already pulling together.

"Joker, get over to sector 5 beta," Shepard said. A bright node appeared on his map. "We're going to support the *Logan* and the *Altus Shar*. They've got Tavos and Sparatus on board."

"Aye aye."

"What about Councilor Valarn?" Alenko asked into the channel.

"No word," Shepard answered.

The pilot shifted trajectory and pulsed the thrusters. He'd heard of the *Altus Shar*. Every human who knew anything about the First Contact War knew that name. The huge turian dreadnought had been the first to begin bombing the surface of Shanxi when initial surrender demands had been refused. It was almost as infamous as General Williams' subsequent change of heart.

At least two of the Councilors had escaped before the trap had closed. But what was a king without their castle?

"Who closed the Citadel arms?" Alenko said. "That's what I want to know. I thought the Keepers no longer responded to Reaper signals!"

"Did we really know that? For sure?" Shepard said. "And maybe it wasn't even the Keepers. Maybe one of their agents got into the control system. Who knows how many indoctrinated agents-" She broke off suddenly. "Godammit!"

"What?"

"The damn Cerberus operation! They put people in the superstructure, and we never caught them!"

"You think all of Cerberus is... indoctrinated?"

"If they aren't, I will personally eat my armor, feet-first," Shepard growled. "It's just like Javik said. The Reapers don't do all their work themselves. They let us fight each other!"
"I wish I honestly disagreed with that assessment of Cerberus, Commander," Joker said, "just so I could see you make good on that promise. But hey, I don't. Uh, incoming heat, better lock down."

The general comms clicked on. "All hands, prepare to engage."

Joker flexed his knuckles. *Earth, part two.*

The idle thought proved even more prophetic than he'd feared. The Citadel's forces, joined out of desperation by a number of non-military vessels, met the Reapers with the best they had. But Sovereign alone had done enormous damage, and Joker wasn't sure what they expected to achieve by fighting what was possibly the worst locust swarm of all time. The dying started almost immediately and got steadily worse.

It was all he could do to stay focused on the immediate job of staying ahead of the enemy. Even in his detached state of concentration, Joker started to feel the edges of weariness tugging at him, and he could feel the same coming from the *Normandy* under his butt. Heat accumulation stressed her hull and wore at her reaction times. As a scout frigate, she hadn't been designed for long engagements or, for all his boasting, killing dreadnought-class capital ships. Reinforcements were still nowhere to be seen, and even if they did arrive they'd be hard pressed to get past the wall of Reapers systematically chewing through their numbers.

The pilot gritted his teeth and flicked on the command channel. "Commander, this isn't a battle, it's an extended massacre."

"I know," she answered. "I'm trying to get through to Hackett."

"Another retreat..." Alenko said.

"If you have another strategy," Shepard said tightly, "I'm all ears."

"I just meant... no, I don't."

"This is insane. I tried to warn them- the normal rules of war don't apply! The Reapers don't have supply lines. They don't care about fronts. Maybe they did strip their invasion fleets, but they can do that. What are we going to do, run back and plant our flag on Earth while they're busy here? They'll just come back when they please and chew through anyone there as easily as they did the first time. Damn it all to hell, Centcom is so obsessed with getting back to Earth. This isn't about Earth. This is about destroying the Reapers."

"Commander," Traynor said, "Admiral Hackett on QEC, priority. I'll put it through to you directly."

"Finally."

In Joker's display, the battle line was getting messy and friendly signals continued to vanish at an alarming rate. The Reapers seemed to not be focused on the Citadel so much as hemming the organic forces in and away from the relay network. Time and attrition were clearly on their side. The Citadel itself remained closed and silent. He could only imagine what was happening inside its hull.

"Hackett got through to Sparatus, and they're calling a general retreat," Shepard said. She sounded more relieved than angry.

"A retreat to where?" Joker glanced out the porthole to the nebula.

"The *Altus Shar* is going to try to punch through grid 3 alpha, get as many ships to the relays as
Joker was sharply reminded of documentary vid footage of a herd of wildebeest charging across a crocodile-infested river. *This is going to suck.*

"But we're not going that way. Engage IES and get us to a relay, Joker," Shepard ordered. "Hackett wants us out of here. EDI, find us an opening."

"Given enemy density," EDI said, "I believe one of these three would be favorable." Three of the local relays lit up in his tactical overlay.

"Prioritize primary," Shepard said. "Don't get us cornered."

Joker entered the commands to shift power from weapon systems to the barriers, eyeing the heat and charge levels. Tamping down their emissions, he increased speed. The debris alone made a formidable obstacle, forcing him wide of a direct trajectory to avoid shredding the ablating on the spinning remains of a turian frigate.

Reapers loomed uncomfortably close as he wove through the battle line, concentrating on the few open spaces in his hazard map. The huge metal cuttlefish behaved unpredictably, changing direction and accelerating in ways no human ship ever could. He gave them as wide a berth as he dared while still cutting down the angles on their sweeping beam weapons. He felt a certain irrepressible glee at being able to out-maneuver these hulking monsters, but it was dogged by frustration and guilt. He was getting out when others weren't.

Luck stayed with him. The debris thinned out into the remains of the automated defence sats that had proved so utterly useless. With the hazards less dense, he started lining up his approach vector and punched the relay command signal. He checked all his angles. The Reaper line was moving, but none of them appeared to be heading in their direction. He checked his approach again. The relay was still dark.

"EDI," he stated, "the relay-"

"No response." Her usual level tone, unchanged, took on a dreadful air of finality.

"Uh, what?"

"The relay is not responding. I have repeated the request ping fourteen times."

"Try-"

A Reaper pulled sharply into his trajectory, legs spread. Weapon charge alerts flared. Joker swore and rolled the ship off to starboard, narrowly avoiding the beam. In his display, the relay remained still, a dark void of energy output against the background of the nebula as they skimmed past.

"How are they seeing us?!" Joker asked, fingers flying over the navcom. The ship heeled around, riding the edge of the inertial system.

"I believe they may have triangulated the relay request ping origin. Commander, the relay did not respond to any command signal."

The Reaper, huge and close, sailed past the cockpit's portholes, brilliant in red coruscating energy and reflecting the white and blue of the *Normandy*'s Alliance heraldry on its blue-black hide. Joker gritted his teeth. *Can't see me, but you can hear me, can't you?*
"Bad to worse. I think we just found out why we're not seeing reinforcements," Shepard said darkly. "And they're just picking us off when we try for it! Traynor, get me a wideband comm, every available channel!"

"Bad idea, Commander!" Joker broke in. "They're out for us!"

"Keep us in the air, Joker."

_Godammit._ "EDI, give me a cue on the broadcast."

"Commander Shepard to all points," Shepard announced. A rotating symbol appeared on the left side of Joker's display. "Relays are not responding. Do NOT attempt to break the Reaper line! Repeat, do not attempt to make for a relay!"

Gritting his teeth, Joker waited out the two-second lag until the symbol stopped and turned red, then rolled the ship sharply to port. Two lances speared the empty space he'd been a moment before. A third raked across the hull from below, glazing the ablating and making the whole ship shudder.

"Joker-"

"No significant damage, but they're triangulating any comms output-" His console suddenly winked out, then flickered back on again. He spread his hands in shock. "What the fuck... EDI what was that?"

The AI did not respond.

"EDI, talk to me!"

"J- J- Jeff," EDI said. The staccato syllables came from Joker's left instead of his right, from the holo-emitter her avatar had always occupied before the body.

EDI pushed herself up out of her chair and swiveled in a smooth, sinuous motion that made his every hair stand on end.

"Jeff, please evade," her voice said behind him. The body's lips didn't move. "Jeff-"

_Fuck. Me._ "Shepard!"

The body pulled a right hand back, fingers extended into a flat blade, then lunged. Joker twisted, desperately pushing against his armrests to wrench his torso to the left. Her fingers buried themselves into his headrest with a vicious crack, passing close enough to his head for him to hear the whistle of displaced air.

He looked up straight into her implacable stare. For a fleeting moment, he felt as if he were looking into a vast, impossibly cold gulf.

The body jerked, lurching the whole pilot's chair. The hand was stuck in the twisted ruin of his headrest. Joker filled his lungs to shout again just as a halo of blue exploded around EDI's body. The chair wrenched again, jamming his ribs painfully against the armrest. EDI crashed into the starboard bulkhead and flopped to the ground. With inhuman speed, the body realigned itself and went to push itself up, but flared again and seemed to freeze in place on all fours. Joker stole a glance over his shoulder to see Alenko filling up the space behind him, arms outstretched and writhing blue.

Joker could feel the vertigo of the nearby biotic field pulling on his inner ear. EDI's artificial muscles
whined as they strained against the surge of mass. Her eyes, or whatever was controlling her, remained fixed on the pilot, empty even of a murderous glint.

Shepard appeared at his left, skidding to a stop against the console. A dull thud came from EDI's body as it abruptly collapsed to the deck.

"I have regained control of the mobile platform," EDI said. The voice came from the body again.

"You'll excuse me if I'm slow to believe that," Alenko grated. His breathing was distorted by the soft warble of the biotic corona around him. The air smelled of ozone.

The ship shuddered from a direct hit. Joker reached for his navcom. It started innocently enough - a shimmering darkness at the edges of the pilot's vision he tried to blink away. Beside him, he heard Shepard gasp. He glanced up to see her clutch her head, tried to ask what was wrong but nothing came out. Then it was like high-G training all over again. His vision tunneled sharply down, smearing the holos in front of him into messy blurs. But instead of the lassitude of oxygen deprivation, a sharp pain bloomed in his skull, raking downward through his spine, the memory of every broken bone folded into one. He heard voices, screaming. Maybe his own.

The ship shuddered under him. Alerts he could barely make out flared on his console, smears of red and blue against orange. He tried to reach for them, but the dark blob of his hand hit the haptic field and slid off uselessly. Crashing, roaring sounds blended with the tortured voices. Muddled instincts warred in his head - *Get an ox mask. Get out. Get away. Save the ship!* All before sliding off the cliff of conscious thought. Freed from the shackles of rationality, a jumble of images tumbled before his mind's eye, dreamlike and nightmarish. Flickers of disjointed narrative spattered onto a canvas, taken at random from the palette of his entire life. Starship corridors carpeted in grass and weeds patrolled by hulking but empty suits of combat armor opened onto windblown heights and brilliant sunlight which became a medbay lamp staring down at him. His own screaming voice blended with every voice on the ship, resonating in the hull itself.

A dark shape leaned into his decaying vision, dancing with blue and orange lights. He tried to push the phantom away and felt something cold and smooth, shockingly present.

All at once, the pain receded. Joker gasped with the shock of it. He squeezed his eyes and watched the fireworks of purples and blues flash along his retinas. Feeling crept back into his limbs in a rush of pins and needles. With oxygen and awareness rushing back, he tentatively opened his eyes again. Very slowly, the familiar shapes of the cockpit began to reassert themselves around him. His own panting breath was very loud.

He tried to focus on the console ahead of him. Though difficult to make out through watering eyes, the relative velocity reading seemed to be zero.

"Where are we?" Joker asked. At least tried to, the phrase came out more as a monosyllabic slur.

"In the nebula," EDI answered from the holo-avatar. The blue sphere slewed and swam in his vision when he turned his head. "I was cut off from direct ship control, but using the body I was able to execute a randomized jump such as the thrusters would allow. We sustained at least three direct hits from Reaper weaponry."

*Nebula... "S'gonna... fry us..."*

"I have located a zone of relative electromagnetic calm, however we may be forced to vacate if conditions change. IES engaged."
Hide in the volcano, hope it's in a good mood today... His thoughts slipped over themselves, forming and falling away without finding purchase. His head pounded and his mouth tasted like blood. It streaked his hands and the front of his jacket. Warm liquid dripped over his fingers when he put them to his nose. He muttered a number of colorful and mostly nonsensical curses as he stole a look around.

On the deck beside him, Shepard was curled into a ball with her arms wrapped around her head. EDI's body was back in the starboard co-pilot's chair. It was still, unlit. The arms rested on the armrests, and the right hand looked like it had lost a significant amount of its artificial skin. He craned a look behind his head. His headrest was a ruin, punched clean through the center and trailing bits of stuffing.

Movement made him jump. It was Alenko. He thudded into Joker's chair as he stumbled around it, and dropped to his knees beside Shepard. He worked an arm under her torso and pulled her gently up to a sitting position, back against the holo display console. Both of them had the same nosebleed as Joker, leaving dark patters of blood on the deck and their clothes.

Alenko murmured half-heard reassurances, as much to himself as to her. Bleary-eyed, Shepard tried to push herself up, but slipped back down awkwardly.

"Slow down," Alenko said, easing her back against the bulkhead.

"Crew... I..." Shepard muttered.

The biotic grimaced and squeezed her shoulders. "I'll go." He pushed himself up and plodded down the gangway, dragging a hand on one wall to support himself.

Joker prodded his ribs experimentally. A dull pain told him he'd gotten a nasty bruise, maybe a crack, but nothing shattered. Damn sight better than the alternative- the hole behind his head. Still breathing, still talking. The doc would no doubt be around to fill him full of something or other in short order.

"Okay, so what the everloving fuck was that?" he said, finding his cracked voice again.

"Got me," Shepard said shakily. She'd closed her eyes and was massaging her temples and looking very much like she was trying to keep from snapping. "You... in one piece?"

"My nice leather chair's busted."

She actually laughed at that bit of patent absurdity, though it was a sound that walked a thin edge of sanity.

The AI's body got up, making Joker start. EDI looked down at him through her holo-visor as she passed behind his chair. "It is alright, Jeff."

EDI bent and extended her undamaged hand to Shepard. "I believe I now have a more complete understanding of the topic on which we spoke five days ago," she said.

Shepard regarded her for a moment, a strange sadness crossing her face. The commander accepted the proffered hand, and let the AI pull her to her feet.

"Are we... stable?" Shepard asked, leaning back against a bulkhead and swiping at the blood. "Life support..."

"Hull integrity and life support are stable," EDI affirmed. "IES is running at reduced capacity."
Further damage needs to be assessed."

"Crew status?"

"No fatalities logged. Three cases of light to moderate burns, five cases of blunt-force injury. Further, all crew members including non-human personnel appear to be experiencing the same undefined physical trauma as yourself and are in various levels of the shock response. Doctor Chakwas appears to have recovered sufficiently to begin wound assessment."

"And you?"

"I suffered a system compromise. I have begun a full assessment process."

Shepard nodded and dropped her hand down to her side. "Joker, I'm sure I don't have to tell you; absolute radio silence."

"Noooo kidding you don't," he muttered. Who knew how many Reapers were lurking out there, listening for the slightest sneeze from the nebula. With the relays blocked, other ships must have taken the only option left to them, dangerous though it was.

Shepard took several deep breaths, then turned and marched unsteadily down the gangway.

EDI watched her go. "You are unhurt?" she asked without turning to him.

"'Unhurt' might be overly generous, but looks like that's the case all around. I feel like I just came off a week-long bender. I'll live." He tried not to glance to one side to the ruined headrest. "What kind of system compromise are we talking about? You okay?"

"I... must review logs to make an assessment."

_Did an AI just tell me she doesn't want to talk about it? "What were you talking about understanding better?"

EDI continued to look down the gangway to the CIC. "What it is to be invaded and... used. Please excuse me, I must perform maintenance." The body walked away.

Gooseflesh prickled along Joker's arms. The cockpit was suddenly quiet, dark even with the console holos glowing their sullen orange, riddled with damage alerts. Distant phantoms moved in the camera feeds, dreamlike. The dim light made the blood spattered on the decking look black, a patina of handprints and smears. His own personal haunted house.

Gingerly, he eased one leg and then the other up in front of him so he could wrap his arms around them.
They assembled in the war room, many still with blood spattering the front of their uniforms. There was a fragile tension humming in the air, at once the relief at being alive, but only the most tenuous resistance against the overwhelming despair pressing in on them from all sides. Professionalism alone, Garrus knew, was the bulwark they all took refuge behind. Chief Engineer Adams fiddled with a datapad. Specialist Traynor spoke quietly to Liara, and next to them Vega, Alenko and Javik made for a dour-looking threesome. Between bloodstains and bruises, they all looked like they'd just come out of a late-night bar brawl. Doctor Chakwas was notably absent, no doubt still attending to the wounded. Garrus supposed they'd been incredibly lucky to have suffered no fatalities; mostly just burns, impacts and no small amount of shock. It didn't do a lot to soothe his pounding headache, though.

A hush fell over the room as Shepard entered. She'd changed into uniform and was obviously doing her best to project an air of calm she probably wasn't feeling. She moved to the center, next to the display cradle, and touched a few commands. A holo of Joker, still in his pilot's chair, appeared to one side of the main display. Next to that, EDI's spherical blue avatar. The AI's body was absent. That, too, was no doubt a calculated move.

"Let's get to it," Shepard declared without ceremony. "Traynor. Communications?"

The comms specialist stood stiffly, her face pinched in the same pained expression all the humans wore. "The QEC emergency bursts I've been getting through are all reporting the same thing- any and all extra-system non-QEC communication vectors appear to be completely dead."

"All of them?" Vega asked.

"If the relay system is really closed, then it follows that all FTL comm buoys are no longer able to transmit out of system."

"The relays."

"One thing at a time, Lieutenant," Shepard interjected. "QEC comms are functional, Traynor?"

"It appears so, Commander, but for obvious reasons we're experiencing traffic issues."

Shepard nodded. "Adams. Ship status?"

The chief engineer looked like he'd aged five years in the last hour, but he stood straight as he read off his datapad. "Starboard secondary thruster is offline. Primary has vector-guide and fuel line damage, but the reactor feed is stable. Major ablating loss in Q3 and 4 ventral, as well as minor loss in Q1 starboard. Three Q3 barrier emitters are offline and likely irreparable, and five more need electrical work. Overall, kinetic barriers are down to thirty-four percent capacity with a severe deficit on the starboard ventral section."

"I hope that's not the good news," Garrus said mildly.

"The good news is we're not dead," Adams said, wrapping his fingers around the holopad. "Internal hull integrity is sound. Commander, our big problem right now is heat. Whatever happened during that fight, we're already running well over seventy percent capacity on the sinks. We could have throughput problems on the starboard sink lines, but we're going to be in trouble if we get into another scrap."
"And we can't burn the tiger stripes or vent anything out here without lighting up like a fairground," Shepard said. "How long can we stay quiet?"

"With minimal non-essential systems, I give us maybe ten hours. But that doesn't account for any burn time we'd need to get back to a relay... or anywhere else."

"Threat of electrical discharge from the nebula?"

"EDI found us a relatively stable cloud formation, but it's not negligible, ma'am."

Shepard nodded, looking weary for a brief moment. "Repair time?"

"I think I can get the primary starboard thruster back up in about four hours, with a spacewalk. Secondary needs further assessment, but it's probably a no-go without dock time. Kinetic barrier should get back up to at least fifty with an hour of work."

"Spacewalk means our pants are down for that time," Joker said.

"I know," Shepard said irritably. "Joker, can you fly on only three mains?"

The pilot snorted. "I could fly a ham sandwich if you put an eezo line on it somewhere."

"Can the sandwich dodge an angry Reaper?"

"I'll make it work."

"Two mains?"

"On one side? Yeah, we're probably lunch."

"Walk it is." Shepard turned back and touched the control console in front of her. "Okay... EDI. What's your best assessment of what they hit us with?"

The display cradle holo came on, showing a model of the Normandy. The image scaled down, bringing the angry red scarabs of Reapers into focus. They looked huge next to the blue wedge of the ship.

"The Reapers made approximately four million seven hundred thousand intrusion attempts into my core processing between timestamp 04:17:01 and 04:17:08." EDI explained as the holo replayed the battle in miniature. "At 04:17:08, they successfully exploited a weakness in the carrier signal between my core and the mobile unit and temporarily overrode my control. It took me seven point five three seconds to regain control, but in that time the Normandy ceased evasion maneuvers. The Reapers then took up the following configuration."

The holo played forward with the Normandy at the center and the Reaper holos moving around it. Three of them moved into flanking positions kilometers away but nonetheless arranged in a triangular pattern with the SR-2 at its center. The spacing was far too even to be a coincidence.

"How very equilateral," Kaidan commented, squinting at the display.

"At timestamp 04:17:48," EDI said, "internal passive sensors logged a thirtyfold jump in hull vibration, the exact moment organic crew began experiencing physical and cognitive aberrations."

"Next time I get shot I'm calling it a 'physical aberration'," Garrus muttered.

"What caused it?" Shepard asked, shooting him a look.
"I have insufficient data to make a determination," EDI said.

"Speculate."

"Cross-referencing what data we have with known indoctrination effects suggests the two might be linked. Since sensors did not pick up any associated energy emissions, I would conclude the effect was a form of quantum interference aimed specifically at organic processes."

Liara leaned on the display cradle, peering at the tiny ship. "Perhaps they have a way of focusing their existing indoctrination array."

"Yeah, cross the beams and set them to 'brain scramble'," Joker drawled. "Great."

"They did not emit beams," EDI corrected.

"But they did deliberately move into a formation," Liara mused. "It suggests... a resonance of some kind."

"Can we avoid it in the future?" Shepard asked.

"I will add this formation to the hazard avoidance map I provide Jeff."

"So my safe corridors just got narrower," Joker said, rolling his eyes, "and I'm short a thruster. What the heck, it was getting too easy anyway."

Garrus wondered idly if he'd ever again encounter another person that evoked such a unique combination of admiration and deep desire to smack them on the back of the head.

Shepard shifted her weight, clearly trying to keep a lot of different things straight in her mind. "Next. The relays."

"They were unresponsive to all signals," EDI said. The holo in the display cradle switched to an image of one of the primary relays. "Reports from outside the system indicate the same is true across the entire network."

"Javik."

The prothean seemed startled to be addressed, shaken from whatever thoughts he was lost in. "Commander."

"Do you have any insight into any of this?" Shepard pointed to the display.

Javik shook his head. "The Citadel was lost long before I was born, and much of our history with it. In my time, we kept what records we could, but we were decentralized. When we lost a ship, often their knowledge went with them. Much of what we knew had been reduced to stories passed from one tal to another. My..." He hesitated. "You would call him 'mentor'. He told me that once, the relays had been open, a great highway for all to use. In my time, protocols were required to pass each relay. They were discovered by Ksad Ishan, the Wayfinder. He who created the Conduit of Ilos. But I am a warrior, Commander, not an engineer. Battle and command were my responsibilities. I... do not know what the engineers did to breach the relay system. That battle was fought long before I was born, and in my time it was simply the way it was."

"Then how do we-" Vega started.

Shepard silenced him with a raised hand. "You still have it, right, EDI? Please tell me the IFF is still
"It is," EDI affirmed. "However, the blue box is not currently physically connected to any of my systems. It was concluded it was too much of a risk to leave active."

Garrus exhaled explosively, and Liara's eyes grew round. Vega and Alenko looked from them to Shepard, wearing the same expression of bafflement.

"IFF?" the major asked. "Identify Friend-Foe... for what?"

"It was a Reaper's," the commander said. "We acquired it during the Collector mission in order to get through the Omega-4 relay, which was also unresponsive to the usual signals. Wasn't this in the mission reports?"

He rubbed his temple with considerable consternation. "The reports stating you redacted the redacted with the redacted? No, they drifted over that point."

"Which, let's be honest here," Joker interjected, "is the only damn reason the thing is still cuddled up in EDI's main core. This might be the only time in history I praise Centcom's undying love of keeping secrets from itself."

"By the Goddess," Liara said, clapping her hands together in front of her. "We have a key!"

"A Reaper intelligence?" Javik asked. His rising tone suggested he thought Shepard had permanently abandoned reason. "On this ship?"

"The IFF is not self-aware," EDI said. "And I have already successfully identified and eliminated the problem signal source that caused the original Collector attack."

"The..." Vega said. "So wait, this thing might just be a big 'kick me' sign?"

Shepard folded her arms. "If you've got a better idea, Lieutenant, I'm all ears. Or you, Javik."

She waited, but neither said anything.

"At this point it's highly likely they're specifically after me," Shepard said. "It's possible they can even detect me somehow, I don't know. I'm not sure how much of a liability I am."

"I believe that is unlikely," the AI said. "If they could, then we would not be able to hide as we are currently doing. Further, the Normandy itself contains far more technology derived from Reaper sources than your cybernetic augmentations."

A ripple of discomfort traveled around the room. Javik glanced around as if he'd woken up in a nest of varren, but strangely, he still remained silent.

"Doesn't matter," Garrus said, "we hunt or die together, not dumping people out the airlock in hopes of a temporary reprieve."

Shepard looked through the holo, eyes hooded. "I just want everyone to fully understand the risks before we move forward."

Vega shrugged. "Ain't nowhere else to go but forward, ma'am."

She seemed to collect herself with some effort, and refocused on them, looking from one person to the next. "Here's what's going to happen. Liara, you and Traynor work on contact with anyone in the Council hierarchy as well as Admiral Hackett and any Alliance elements. Inform them we have a
plan, but do not mention the IFF specifically. Liara, pass the word along to your contacts and get it out there to anyone who will listen. We don't know who might be compromised, so no details. Just that we're not sunk. Understand?"

"Yes, Commander," the two said in unison.

"Garrus, get a line through to Victus and the krogan. Same message. Make sure nobody gets any ideas about last stands just yet."

Garrus nodded.

"Adams, get that thruster running, and as much of the barrier and sink system as you can. Keep me advised of the heat situation. I want an up to the moment evaluation of our maximum range without cooking ourselves. EDI, work with Adams' team and get the IFF plugged back in. However, delay final power up until we're ready to go. Once the IFF is in place you need to run every check you can to keep from being compromised again."

"I am already running prevention scenarios," EDI said. "I suggest that when we make our run to the relay, the body be secured. I can provide specifications that will ensure sufficient restraint."

"Now wait," Joker said, "that body got our asses out of the frying pan once already. What if they try to brain scramble us again?"

Shepard pinched the bridge of her nose. "EDI, what are the chances of them getting into your control signal again?"

"I have closed the exploit they used during the attack. However, I am unable to provide a guarantee that they will not be able to compromise one of my systems again." The holo rippled slightly. "They are... too complex for me to anticipate every possible attack vector. Further, the presence of the body will cause unnecessary stress to crew who will be concerned about another intrusion. It will be a distraction."

"Perhaps a compromise," Liara suggested. "Would it be possible for you to isolate either the send or receive side of the carrier signal and engineer a failsafe? Something one of us could activate in the event it happens again?"

"What, like a killswitch?" Joker said, voice rising.

"Only affecting the carrier signal, Joker," Liara assured him, "not EDI herself. And even if we had to use it, it would be repairable."

"EDI?" Shepard said.

"After priority tasks are complete," the AI replied, "I will run scenario tests to determine if Doctor T'Soni's suggestion would work."

The commander nodded. "Do it. I'd rather have every asset on the table when we move."

Vega ran a hand over his close-cropped scalp. "Okay, so say this works and we get out. Then what?"

"If the IFF works then the next step is getting everyone else a key. The Normandy can't win this war alone."

"The IFF is a quantum-state blue box," EDI noted. "It cannot be copied in the conventional sense."
"That's why we're going to get help from the most successful distributed network in the galaxy- the geth."

The assembled crowd looked between themselves. There was clearly no end in sight for unexpected circumstances. Garrus wondered idly at what point they would cease to be surprised by anything Shepard said or did.

"The machine people?" Javik said, lip lifted. "They have no reason to aid us."

"On the contrary," Liara said. "It is within their best interests to do so. The Reapers will destroy them just as surely as us."

"And I have friends on the inside," Shepard said. "At least, I hope I still do."

"But if they can't copy it," Vega said, "what good does it do?"

"One battle at a time, Lieutenant," Shepard said. She leaned forward on the rim of the display cradle. "I don't think I have to explain to everyone what the stakes are. Right now, millions if not trillions of people are alone and very, very afraid. None of what we do now is by the book, none of it's pretty and none of it comes without big risk. I need everyone on board, and not just because our backs are against the wall."

She glanced around the room, settling her gaze on the prothean. Javik stared back for a long moment, unblinking.

"These are... not the most desperate measures I have been forced to take," he said at length. "I have no other course to suggest. On the path to vengeance I will do what I must." There was a finality to his tone that spoke of lengths Garrus didn't want to imagine.

"Commander," Traynor broke in, "Admiral Hackett is on the QEC."

"All right." Shepard gestured to the holo of the relay. "You all know what needs to be done. Dismissed."

As she passed, she seemed to shrink into herself, like a prisoner on her way to sentencing. Garrus watched her ascend the short stair into the comm room and disappear past the sound baffling. He vaguely heard Liara and Traynor talking as they filed out in the opposite direction, back into the main body of the ship. The mood in the room had changed- the crew had something to focus on, and maybe even a way out of this mess. He glanced around. He could admit, in the privacy of his own head, that he was glad the main body of the krogan relief force had already arrived on Palaven, but it was a meager comfort. The enormity of the closed relays settled all around them in a shroud. The room emptied to the sound of bootsteps and comm chatter until Garrus realized there was only one other person left. Kaidan stood with his arms folded, leaning back against the display cradle and staring at the floor.

"I don't know how we didn't see this coming," Garrus commented. "It isn't the first time they shut the relays on us."

The human glanced at him. "Or that they'd prioritize the Citadel."

"It's pretty clear that anywhere they decide to mount a full-frontal assault, there's just nothing we can do."

"I wonder how many strategic sessions have been starting with the phrase 'they couldn't possibly'. No one knows how to deal with a war like this. It's like they shut down... space. I keep trying to
wrap my head around it all, and I can't quite do it."

Garrus lowered his voice. "I just wonder how Shepard's handling it all."

"Not well." Alenko met his gaze, then looked away. "But then, I don't think that's a new development, is it?"

"I'd hoped that things would get better, after the Collectors were dealt with. She'd get to go home. Let the evidence speak for itself. Exonerate everything we'd been saying. But Bahak tore all that back down."

"She'd tell you Earth isn't her home, either," Kaidan said quietly. "It certainly didn't treat her that way. More like an enemy combatant." He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Now she's been saddled with the mandate to give everyone hope... and she has none whatsoever herself."

Garrus leaned on his hands, staring at the holo in the display. "It's not enough. We're not going to win this if the spirit of the Normandy is sick at its core. But we can't force it to heal, either. I couldn't."

The human frowned but didn't answer.

"Would you assume command if it meant the stability of the team?" Garrus asked. "A whole spirit?"

Alenko looked at him sharply. "This was never my..." he trailed off, looking troubled. "It's not why I'm here."

"But would you?"

"Garrus, how can you say that?"

It took all of Garrus' effort not to raise his voice. "Do you really think it's what I want?" he hissed. "There's so much at stake! We can't do this by just going through the motions!"

"She never found a way to deal with all of it," Alenko said, more to himself than to Garrus, "never got the support she needed."

"She never asked, either."

"I'm willing to bet that goes a long way back, too."

"That's not enough-" Garrus broke off, then sighed heavily, deflated. He tugged the targeter off his head. It came off reluctantly, so settled was it into the plates of his skull. He ran his thumb over the names painstakingly engraved into the metal. "I know what I must sound like."

Alenko shifted his weight. "Hard truths are still truths," he conceded. "You're not wrong about the command situation, or any of it. I just have a hard time even imagining it."

"On Omega, I lost friends because I didn't see the signs from within. Now I see them, but I don't know what to do about it."

Kaidan met his gaze. "You've already done a lot, Garrus. You were there when it mattered." He looked over his shoulder up the ramp toward the QEC comm room. "I can't force it either, but maybe I can try to untie a few more of the knots. The things... I made worse."

A faint thread of relief trickled through the blockade of anxiety in Garrus' head. He twitched his mandibles. "As long as I don't have to resort to that stick Joker likes to say I have. For either of you."
The human smirked. "Better keep it handy, just in case."

"If I have to die messily I'd rather do it side by side with friends. But I want them to be there willingly." He tapped the side of his head. "Call it a quirk."

"She said it herself; one battle at a time."


The human nodded, and Garrus turned to go. As he made his way up the stairs, he looked back down to the engraved names. He'd once considered putting Shepard's name there, before he knew she'd been brought back. For a while after, during the Collector mission, it had seemed inevitable it would end up there anyway. Now, like then, it was a matter of keeping disaster at bay for one more day. He pushed his thoughts back to his responsibilities. There, too, it was keeping everything together just a little longer. He suddenly wondered if this was how Javik had lived every day, walking the edge of the cliff, trying to keep as many as possible from toppling into the abyss.

Where he'd once made Shepard promise to face one more tomorrow, now they had to convince an entire galaxy.
He tried to picture the scene. A dingy modular prefab station, just like the dozens if not hundreds he'd set foot in over the years. The rumble of fusion torches through his feet, just like the ones on X57. Alone in a building full of indoctrinated hostiles who've been trying to kill you. A countdown clock on the wall showing minutes left, and a button.

*This button kills over three hundred thousand sentients. Pushing it delays the deaths of trillions more.*

*Choose.*

Kaidan shivered and opened his eyes to the empty war room. He'd always approached the question of Bahak in an abstract sense, always tried to bring logic to bear. Debated the relative ethics of directly killing versus condemning to death through inaction. He'd never tried to put himself in the moment, never tried to really pare away all the rationalizations and picture standing in front of the countdown and making the decision. And then living with it afterward. What did he have to compare to in his own experience? Udina? One man, clearly brandishing a weapon on another Councilor. It didn't even dock.

*Why am I here?*

The automatic answers were like paper cutouts that looked great from the front, but lost all verisimilitude the moment you so much as took a step to one side. Every thought he tried to follow kept ramming straight into the concrete wall of reality. Never before had he felt so deeply, impossibly trapped. Drifting in a hostile void, damaged and cut off from the worlds he'd taken for granted. Every cell bruised and aching from the Reapers' quantum weapon.

*A hell of doubt so deep...*

Bootsteps in the quiet jarred him from his thoughts. He looked up to see Shepard poised on the short staircase down from the QEC room, rimmed by the blue-green glow of the holopanes behind her. She regarded him with a hooded gaze before slowly stepping down the few steps. He noticed she seemed to be holding something in her fight hand, but it was hidden by her fingers.

"What did Hackett have to say?" Kaidan asked to break the creeping silence.

She looked away, shoulders sagging. "What do you expect? It's pandemonium... a thousand isolated pockets of panic. Hackett is lucky- he's got military discipline on his side and a large number of QEC systems. He said they'll start rationing supplies, keep working with what they have. As for the rest of the galaxy, well."

She made the last few steps with care, as if concerned she'd stumble. "If the IFF fails..."

"We're not beaten yet," Kaidan said, as much to remind himself as her.

Shepard nodded vaguely, eyes fixed on the hovering holo of the relay at the center of the war room, still remaining from the briefing. It rotated slowly, its central rings swiveling over themselves in a mesmerizing whorl. She planted her hands on the rim of the display cradle and let out a long breath. "All the work, the lives, trying to save one planet or another... and now I lost the damn Citadel."

"There just weren't enough ships in-system to repel a full attack. Even with more ships I'm not sure we could have repelled a full attack." The words came automatically, but he trailed off at the end of
the sentence. Something prickled at him.

He cleared his throat. "Shepard, the attack on the Citadel wasn't your fault."

"I know that," she said irritably.

Kaidan frowned. Her gaze remained fixed on the asset display, hand flitting between the different stat panes. She was clearly not reading any of them, just staring through the numbers and names as they went by. For the first time since he'd known her, he got the distinct impression she was lying to him.

Tennyson's words came back to him. You can hear them, can't you, when she talks. The demons growling and gnashing their teeth.

"None of this is your fault," he said, low and steady.

She muttered something.

Kaidan pressed on. "What the Reapers are doing isn't your-"

"Then why the hell does it feel like it?!" she flared, voice cracking around the room. Her knuckles turned white along the edge of the display cradle, making the metal creak ominously.

"I don't know," he said softly, "maybe because you're being expected to shoulder the kind of weight no one person should ever have to carry? And all that after no one would even believe you for so long? Because no one, anywhere, should have to have made a call like you had to with the Bahak system."

She flinched, balling her fists. It was still a raw, gaping wound.

"Bahak wasn't your fault," he said quickly. "You didn't put the thrusters on that asteroid, you didn't mess with the Reaper artifact. You just arrived at the point where a choice had to be made. A terrible one."

He could see her weight shifting, her anger preparing to uncoil and lash out in any direction.

"You're the person who's been fighting the hardest," he said, hoping to cut off the salvo before it launched. "Of anyone. The only reason we'll have any chance at all to win this is because of the things you've done. If it weren't for what you started on Eden Prime this cycle and everyone in it would have folded so quickly the protheans would have rolled over in their graves in embarrassment. You... you cured the genophage!"

"Mordin Solus cured the genophage," she snapped. "And gave his life doing it."

"Yes, but he never would have had the chance if it weren't for the pieces you put into place. Getting Victus and Wrex talking, and without Wrex killing the new Primarch on the spot. Getting enough trust out of the salarians to get Eve freed. Telling Dalatrass Linron where to stuff her threats and backstabbing. The study data from Doctor Solus' student. All of it."

She spread her arms. "I don't even know if I did the right thing, Kaidan! What if the krogan really do turn around and start up the wars again?"

"You did the best anyone could possibly hope to do. You gave an entire species another chance, because you felt it was right. The rest is up to them, not you. Shepard, you can't... you can't be angry at yourself for not trying hard enough! You didn't create the problem. You didn't create the Reapers"
and their cycle. You're trying to fix it!

"This monster you're so afraid you've become doesn't exist. Real monsters don't drive themselves to distraction with guilt like this. You have more personal experience with the sheer cruelty of the calculus of war than perhaps any person that has ever lived, but it still hasn't managed to drive the humanity out of you."

"Even if I wish it would?" Her voice cracked.

"That just seems human to me."

Shepard shook her head, not looking at him, face twisted into a grimace of frustration. "I should... go," she said, turning toward the stairs. "See this through."

"Shepard, wait. Wait!"

She stopped, foot planted on the step up toward the door. Kaidan's mouth felt dry. He wanted to say he'd spent a lot of time thinking about things, about what she'd said on the Citadel, but the truth was that in all the mayhem he'd had only a bare few minutes to even try. But maybe this time it was a good thing.

"I've been lucky, I think, considering what I went through. I don't have a lot of regrets." He wet his lips. "But I have a few. And one of the biggest regrets I have is I never made it really clear how I felt about you. After Saren, one day to the next I let myself assume nothing could happen, and that I'd have another time. Then Alchera happened and I..." He raked his fingers through his hair, feeling light-headed. He wasn't used to just driving ahead without a plan, not knowing where it would end up. "Now we're here and this time the 'do or die' came up even faster and harder than before. I was about to make the same mistake all over again. I can't. Adams said he's got a few hours of work getting the thrusters back up to fighting capacity. Please, just... there are some things I need to say. Because I may not get the chance again."

She turned back halfway, foot still on the step, not looking at him. It was only the smallest of openings, but he had a feeling it was all he was going to get. "I never told you, straight and simple, that I loved you."

"I don't think I ever stopped, not really," he said into the stillness. "I know it must seem like I gave up on you. I tried to move on after Alchera, but... well, I didn't do a very good job of it. I just tried to work through it without really facing it. And then when you came back, everything was just a confused mess. At least I thought it was. The part of me that thinks too much was confused, angry, betrayed. Turning it all over again and again. A lot of noise that drowned everything else out. But underneath all that, I... I never stopped hoping it really was you.

"On Mars it wasn't that I was suspicious as much as scared. I spoke without thinking, without realizing what it would have sounded like from your end. And Illyria. You think I was judging you for what happened? All those colonists, and all I could think about the whole time we were flying back to the ship was... was if the round that hit your arm had hit just a fraction sooner, it would have bled off enough of your shield that the Carnifex round would have gone right through the ablating of your helmet. A fraction of a second, the smallest breadth of difference... It was all I could think about. It's stupid of me to think it would take an army to take you down again. I'd like to believe it. You make people believe it. But that's not the truth of war, is it? Old soldiers know it's the one you never see coming." He snapped his fingers. "Just like that."
He stopped, trying to collect rapidly scattering thoughts. Shepard stood still, eyes on the floor, expression unreadable.

"Did you get the message I sent you? Around the time you hit Omega-4?" he ventured.

She nodded. With some hesitation she spoke in a raw voice. "But I don't have it anymore. When I went in, well... I'm not good enough at encryption tricks to hide anything, and I couldn't stand the thought of anyone else reading it. They went through everything."

Her bitter emphasis on the last word and all that implied made him queasy. "It's okay, I'm just glad you got it."

"After six months sitting on my thumbs on Earth, I wasn't sure how much of it... mattered."

That stung. He took a slow breath to keep from snapping back, riding the echo of those miserable few months. Confused over the accusations coming out of batarian space, trapped by the political facade he was being told to maintain. The officer side of him stubbornly maintained it wasn't his fault. But saying that wasn't going to get him anywhere. That side of him wasn't who she needed to hear from right now.

"I meant everything I said in that message, and I still do," he said. "No matter the stories I heard, the part of me that wrote that, that kept your data drive, never gave up on you. In fact it never even listened to all the noise my rationalizing side was making. Horizon... the confusion got the better of me then. If you want to talk about regrets, Horizon is the biggest."

"You made the choice you had to," she said flatly.

"I just don't know about that anymore. Sure, I want to believe I did it for the right reasons. But in the end, you boil it all down, and what did my decision actually benefit? It didn't get me back my team I lost to the Collectors, did it? It didn't do anything to save any of the colonists that were captured. It hurt you, it hurt me... And it didn't do anything whatsoever to hold off the Reaper invasion."

"It saved your career."

"My career. Great."

"The Alliance is important to you."

"Yeah, it is. And I think it still is to you, too. But if I wasn't prepared to make the same sacrifices you've had to, what business do I have claiming the moral high ground? You were able to recognize that you had an opportunity to save thousands of lives in a place where the Alliance wouldn't follow you. And you did it, even though the personal cost was, well, almost everything. When I was laid up at Huerta, I asked Doctor Chakwas why she joined Cerberus. Do you know what she said? She laughed at me and explained how you all used the Illusive Man and Cerberus' resources to destroy the Collectors, then when the job was done gave him the finger and left."

A confused frown flickered across Shepard's face. "She said that?"

"I hadn't looked at it that way either. I couldn't get over how perfectly comfortable she was with it. She took leave from her Alliance posting and signed up with an avowed terrorist organization just to support a cause and people she believed in. Because it saved thousands of lives. I just... how is that supposed to square into my neat little box?"

"There... had to have been a better way."
"We can always just say that, can't we? I wasn't wrong about Cerberus, I know that. But I was wrong about you. And that's exactly the problem, Shepard! We could argue in circles until we both grow gray hair and die of old age, and never come to a nice clear black or white. What's easy to say isn't always what we live. In the moment I made a decision I thought was right, and all it did was... hurt the one person I never should have hurt. And worse than I could imagine. How am I supposed to be proud of that?"

He absently rubbed a thumb into his damp palm. He felt like he was peeling bandages off a burn one slow strip at a time.

"Look," he said, "I've never been the kind of person who loves easily and freely. I've always looked around me, the different ways marines handle relationships, and I've always been a bit jealous of the ones that can. But I'm just not built that way, I guess. I thought... I told myself that when I loved somebody I'd do it, well, fully. Honestly. Reliably. That's what I know how to do.

"I thought the big tests would be clear, like the storybooks. But the biggest test wasn't clear at all. It wasn't the jumping in front of the fatal shot kind of noble I always expected. It was the shot I never saw coming. The real test was... messy and strange beyond belief, and..." His throat constricted. "... and I failed you."

"You did what-"

"No. I failed you." He softened his voice again. "You didn't go looking for Cerberus and everything they did to you. You made the best of a terrible situation, as best as anyone could. None of that is your fault. Horizon, and the things I said, aren't your fault. It's mine. Be angry at me."

She opened her mouth to retort, but words seemed to fail her. She looked away, brows furrowed in thought as she digested his words. The harsh light of the holo caught in the slight marks left by the scars of her rebirth. New marks to replace the signs of Akuze Cerberus hadn't bothered to recreate.

There was something still lurking in the shadowed recesses of Kaidan's mind. A truth he didn't particularly want to discover prowling between the trunks of a darkened wood, showing the glint of teeth.

"You know," he said, "what really spooks me is if I'd been in your place, I don't know if I could have done even a fraction of what you have. There are so many things now... so many ways that I look at everything that's happened and realize, what good did I do with your legacy? I didn't get us any closer to beating the Reapers, did I? It seems like every chance we have in this war leads back to something you did, a decision you made somewhere. You do have integrity. You have genuine compassion and humanity. If you didn't, this wouldn't be weighing on you so much. But you've got something I don't- you seem to know where you need to bend so that it all doesn't just snap in half under stress. And you do it even though it costs you a great deal personally. I can prattle on about cutting corners, but if my precious inflexible integrity just leads me to sit in the dark with my fingers in my ears, then it isn't doing the job, is it?"

"You can't just discard it..."

"Doing things right is important to me, and I hope it always will be. But I can't pretend I have something that makes me better suited to deal with a fight like this. What you said on the Citadel about never having to actually make a call like Bahak..."

She straightened a bit, wrapping her arms around her torso. "I couldn't really picture it either until it was right in front of me. When it comes up, you just don't have the choice. You could do it if you had to, same as me."
"I'd like to think so, but..." *No, that isn't it.*

It was crawling around down there. In his mind's eye he could see himself reaching for it and hesitating. *This is Jump Zero again. You tried to do something right, and instead you fucked up and damaged someone's trust in you. But you're not some dumb teenager anymore, you're a man, and if you don't do your damnedest to fix this right now, I will never respect you again.*

There was a nervous tremor prickling along his limbs, trying to find its way up his throat. He swallowed it down with some effort. "Shepard, I'm not here because I'm scared of making the calls a Spectre has to, or because I want to sit in judgment of you. But... I'm also not here because I think this is where I'll do the most good. Hackett didn't want me on the *Normandy*. I don't know why he hasn't put his foot down but I suspect he's got too much to worry about already. And the Council... probably didn't think they were appointing a new Spectre just so he could go follow along in another Spectre's shadow. They sent me a message before I boarded, but I... well... I told myself there wasn't enough time but the truth is I avoided looking at it. I didn't want to... open the door to them telling me where to go. I just left."

The light-headed feeling was back and twice as strong. He put a hand on the display cradle to keep the world from tipping. The officer side of him stood in aghast silence. How deep must that particular rationalization have run?

"I'm redundant on the *Normandy,*" he continued, forcing the words out. "I'm confusing the chain of command; I technically outrank my commanding officer. You already have a powerful biotic, a fixer and a hacker. I'm not using my strengths somewhere else, where I could be leading people who need a leader. If I'd listened to my precious integrity, I'd have done my job and taken Hackett's posting."

She was looking at him as if she could plainly read the struggle on his face. She probably could.

He swallowed hard. "I'm... I'm here because of you. I've probably lost everyone and everything else that's important to me to the Reapers. I want to fight them. But Sh-... Kye, I can't... I can't lose you again."

*The sound of one last breath escaping into deep space...*

"I'm here because of you. Not Commander Shepard the military mascot. You, Kye, the person who went off to find a place to dance, is the best listener I've ever met, and fellow biotic appetite who still leaves her socks on the floor because she can. The woman who had the heart to look at a hideous alien bug queen and let her live, *again*, because even though it's a huge risk it was the right thing to do. If... if letting this go and just doing my job is how you heal from this, then I'll respect that." He stopped for a moment, numbed by how much those words hurt to say. "But... if there's anything I can do to earn that trust back..."

Her answer was quiet, barely a whisper. "I want there to be."

Kaidan's heart did a backflip off the inside of his ribs, sending a rush of heat into his frozen limbs. The hum of the ship seemed very loud all of a sudden, singing a low vibration in tune with the aches in his bruised body.

He eased his way around the display cradle, careful this time about her personal space. Seeing no sign of discomfort, he laid a gentle hand on hers, still balled up on the rim. Shepard's grip relaxed slowly, allowing him to slip his fingers around her palm. It seemed like somehow Alchera had struck so hard it had knocked the whole universe out of synch. Years that had never existed for her had only been a numb echo of life for him. All the suffering and terror of the last few months and years seemed to dim as the touch condensed the ever-shifting reality of her into a solid, real person. Not
dead, or distant, or obscured under a hundred layers of hearsay, but real again- cool fingertips, knuckles roughened from countless hours in armored gauntlets and shot through with a tremor to echo his own.

"I know in the past you wanted someone who could stand up and call you out, not be blinded by your status. I'll always respect you for that." He lifted her hand and nestled it between both of his. "But right now I think you could use a little blind faith."

"I- I'm such a mess," she murmured, "I don't even know where to start..."

"It'll be alright," Kaidan said.

Moving with a strange delicacy, she pulled his left hand free and tugged it around herself, easing forward. It took him a moment to understand what she was doing, but then he carefully returned the gesture, pulling her into an embrace that felt like the stately alignment of stars.

"I missed you so much," she whispered brokenly.

That finally snapped Kaidan's tenuous grip on composure and made an undignified muddle of his attempt to echo the sentiment. The small touch of real became a whole breathing body, warm and vital against his. The smell of her filled him up, so familiar, flooding new texture into memories grown dull with the overuse of grief. If he had any lingering doubt about her being the same person, that alone banished it. No artificial contrivance could ever light up every circuit in his body like this, bringing back every stolen moment into sharp relief.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled into her shoulder, tears slipping free. She squeezed him tighter. Maybe it wasn't quite forgiveness, in the same way none of this was quite resolution, but it felt like... a start. As they held each other, something cold and leaden unwound itself from around his heart.

They broke away slowly. Reluctant to lose the contact, Kaidan let his fingers run along her arms until they reached her hands again. This time, he encountered the mysterious object still gripped in her right fist. He'd forgotten about it. Curious, he turned her hand over, and she uncurled her fingers a little. It appeared to be a stone of some kind, over twice the thickness of his thumb. A rough, cloudy crystal shot through with grey and dark purple minerals. One end looked as if it had been held against a grindstone, and the length was scored and scratched. Dimples marked her palm where she'd been gripping it so tightly.

"What's this?" he asked.

"B- Eve gave it to me," Shepard said, swiping at the streaks of tears. "The krogan shaman. She went through an initiation ritual where she was buried in a cave with nothing, not even a light. She found this in the dark and used it to dig her way out."

"That must have been hundreds of years ago," Kaidan said wonderingly.

"I didn't think I could possibly deserve having this. But it wasn't about the war, was it? We think the krogan are all dumb brutes but she saw right through me. She knows exactly what it feels like to be... lost."

He closed her fingers over the crystal again, then on impulse lifted her hand and kissed the back of it. "Whatever happens, please don't give up on yourself."

She grimaced. "I can't..."

"What is it?"
"I just..." She laughed softly, half unhinged. "This had to happen after an all-nighter, didn't it? I feel like I could just snap in half... if I start poking the dam now. There's so much..." She shook herself, then opened a pouch in her fatigues and slipped the crystal into it, pulling away a bit. "Have to go pretend to be in charge of this insanity."

A memory of the quiet of a rainy forest drifted through his head. *If I could take you away from all of this again...* "I've got your back, Shepard. Whatever happens."

"It's going to be rough," she said faintly.

"Whatever happens."
Joker stuck out his tongue at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. The blood that had leaked into the whites of his eyes lent the otherwise stupid expression a freakish air. Subconjunctival hemorrhage, Chakwas had called it. He blinked a few times, squinting. His vision seemed fine, much to his relief. He'd always been dubious of the expression 'death warmed over', but it sure as heck seemed like the grim specter himself stalked the corridors of the ship, putting a little something in everyone's drink. Five hours since they'd fled into the nebula and every member of the crew looked like they'd been on the business end of an industrial forming hammer.

He poked his throbbing ribs, which responded with a stab of dull pain. He felt like a walking bruise. The big heads on the ship attributed it to the Reapers' quantum brain scrambler, which apparently tried to scramble a lot more than just the brain. Something about destabilizing molecular bonds, resulting in damage to the smaller structures all across the body. Burst capillaries and so on. Joker wondered grimly if a few IQ points had gone with it. Chakwas had fed them all a good dose of anti-inflammatories, and insisted that the weapon hadn't had time to do any significant tissue damage, but they still looked like a ship full of zombies, all black eyes and unsteady walks. Everyone was exhausted, and yet he wondered if anyone would sleep ever again.

They couldn't just wait it out, either. The ever-shifting nebula was a sea of electromagnetic wrath waiting to find a lightning rod; meanwhile, their heat output was slowly filling already-full sinks. Soon they'd have to start venting some of it into the ship's atmosphere - the sink of last resort, the countdown to a full-ship fry.

'Walking wounded' suited the situation better, the pilot concluded. Maybe a shade less grim than 'death warmed over'. He ran some water over his dry hands, just for the feel of it, before toweling them off and leaving the bathroom. The mood in the hallways was subdued, everyone focused on the tasks they'd been assigned, on the one dim light at the end of the deepest, darkest tunnel.

On the command deck, he nodded to Shepard standing in front of the CIC, which displayed a holographic map of the sector around the Citadel, and its attendant relays. The War Room cameras had gone dark for a while after the status briefing, which only made Joker terribly curious, especially after the commander had left it with Alenko in tow. But whatever drama had occurred within remained behind high walls, as crew were being ordered to their stations and the entire ship was locking down for the push. Tension hummed in the air. Joker made his way to the cockpit, pausing to check on the IES and barrier status. The chief engineer had restored three of the main thrusters, and the ship was as good as she was going to get without dock time. He trailed his fingers along the bulkhead as he went down the gangway.

Got a limp now, just like me.

EDI, or rather the body, was waiting at the entrance to the cockpit, standing in a curious imitation of a marine at parade rest. He chewed his lip as he approached. He'd have to deal with this at some point, and sooner was better than later.

"Your-" she started.

"You're going to tell me my heart rate is elevated or something like that, right?" Joker said. "Symptoms of stress? Well, you're right, this whole thing stresses me the hell out."

"You are afraid of me."
"No, I'm afraid of what the Reapers tried to do to you." He jerked his thumb to the ruined headrest. "That wasn't you. But you know what? I've spent my whole life having to be afraid of just getting out of bed in the morning. So I'll do what I've done every damn day- just face it. I need my copilot on deck, EDI."

"You are sure of this? I do not want my presence to impugn on the performance of your-"

"Please don't," Joker said, lowering his voice. "The Reapers could fuck with any of us. So, they got one over on you for what, less than ten seconds? You heard what Garrus said. We don't get through this by dumping a member of the team."

"I am merely attempting to be practical," EDI said. "But I... appreciate that you extend this confidence to me."

Joker smirked and tried not to shudder at the memory of the body's empty stare. It was odd... EDI herself had few overt mannerisms compared to your average human, and yet when the Reaper had been in control the absence of even those subtle cues had been glaring.

He installed himself in his chair and started running checks. EDI took up her now usual post. A few minutes later, Shepard appeared at his elbow.

"Ready for this?" she asked.

"Sure. I don't like sitting still. Can't say I'm chuffed about getting my brain scrambled like an egg again, though."

"We'll try to avoid that this time."

"Ever wonder how much they're just screwing with us? Like, we're just a particularly stubborn infestation of roaches, and there's nothing we can really do?"

"Often." She looked down at him. One of her old scars had split slightly, leaving a thin scab along her cheek. "But we'll make them work to step on us, won't we?" She sounded weary, as much looking for reassurance as giving it.

"Hey, this was attempt what, five, six? And we're still crawling. I think I'm cool with being a cockroach. Those buggers will outlive us all, with all those legs and-"

"That's quite enough of that analogy, thanks." Shepard wrinkled her nose.

"Oh come on, I hear the big ones are pretty good battered and fried."

The commander made a gagging noise. "You know how lucky you are to be indispensable, right?"

Joker grinned at her. It made his face hurt. "I promise to abuse it whenever possible."

"We're in your hands, smartass. Make it count."

"I want a pay raise for all this."

"I think I'm about due for a pay raise too. More leave time, lifetime supply of meatball sandwiches and a solid platinum toilet. What do you think?"

"Hell, if you get that through HR, call me. I'd pay good credits to take a dump in a classy shitter like that."
Shepard chuckled, and winced. "The best of the best, that's what we are," she muttered.

"The galaxy is probably screwed, but we'll have some fun on the way out. Whenever you're ready, Commander."

Shepard nodded and returned to the CIC. He expected some kind of speech, but Shepard issued only a perfunctory all-stations call. Perhaps she'd decided that after what they'd been through, no one really needed to be told that this was do-or-die, or maybe for once she was too tired for her usual selling-water-to-hanar call to heroism routine.

In the electromagnetic soup of the nebula, it was difficult to tell if they'd drifted. Joker set a reverse of the course EDI had used to get them out of danger, took a deep breath, and executed the short jump.

They came out of FTL at the thinning edges of the nebula. Joker eyed the scan data coming in now that they were free of the interference. There was a shocking absence in the center of the sensor data map.

"Uh, Shepard, are you seeing this?" Joker asked. "Or, not seeing it..."

There was an uncomfortably long silence from the CIC. "EDI," Shepard said, sounding very much like she was trying to keep her voice level, "where's the Citadel?"

Joker flipped through several different output maps, scrubbing through the resolution on each. "The hell? Did we miscalculate our trajectory?"

"Negative," EDI said. "We have a visual on a sufficient number of stars to accurately determine our position."

She seemed to be right. The ship's sensors were picking up fields of debris and drifting hulks of ships. As they progressed, the outer mass relays came into focus at the edge of their detection range. Chillingly, he saw no distress signals whatsoever.

"Was it... destroyed?" Shepard asked.

"I do not believe so," EDI said. "There is a significant debris field, but it is of insufficient mass and composition to be that of the Citadel itself. The logical conclusion is the station has been moved."

"They can do that?" Joker said incredulously.

"Considering the Citadel is purported to be a mass relay of considerable power in and of itself, it is unreasonable to assume they cannot."

"Yes, but relays can't fling themselves..." Joker scrubbed his fingers on his forehead.

"That we know of," Shepard said. "But we'll argue about that part later. Get us to the relay, Joker."

"Aye aye."

"I am detecting debris consistent with the hull specifications of the Altus Shar," EDI said.

The pilot smirked. The right thing to do would be to feel appalled at the thousands that had probably died, but no human was going to waste a lot of energy mourning the Shar, even if it did shorten their odds in the long run.

"The councilors were on that ship," Alenko said.
"Because what this disaster of a war needs is another battle for succession..." Shepard muttered. "Let's hope Victus is still out there."

They flew in silence for several minutes. The prickle of tension grew into a solid knot in Joker's stomach as they came into the debris field, all the while scanning for hostiles. The primary relay they'd targeted hung in space, silent and cold. Joker set his approach vector and eyed the IES readings. Bootsteps behind him made him glance behind to see Shepard coming up to his shoulder, arms folded.

"Don't breathe on me, makes me nervous," he quipped.

"This better work," Shepard muttered, mostly to herself. "Expect hostiles."

Joker checked his trajectory a third time. "Yeah, no pressure." Everything they'd ever done, an entire galaxy of people, down to one moment. "EDI, send the ping code."

"Done," the AI replied.

Joker ticked off the seconds in his head, staring at the external sensor readings. He heard Shepard shift, then soft bootsteps behind her as the major approached, hanging back. Everyone held their breath.

External energy readings leapt and started to climb.

"Yeah!" Joker exclaimed. "I think we're in business, Commander."

"Thank every god..." Shepard breathed.

Alerts flared all over his navcom. A Reaper slammed out of FTL in a wave of high-energy particles, legs curled against its frame.

"Mother pus bucket," the pilot grated.

External energy readings jumped again. The relay's rings were gaining speed. Blue light flickered in his peripheral vision, gleaming off the metal console base under his fingers.

"Barriers," Shepard ordered. "Weapons standby. We're not here for a fight, just get us out of here."

"Aye." Steady. He pulsed the lateral thrusters, pushing the Normandy sideways in its trajectory but preserving her vector, and punched the command to power up the kinetic barrier emitters. A protective bubble enveloped the small representation of the ship to his left, still painfully thin in some places. The barrier would start loading the heat sinks all the faster, but Shepard obviously wasn't going to take the risk. The Reaper spread its legs and fired, sweeping through the space the Normandy had occupied only moments before.

Joker glanced at the energy readings. Shepard called out a general alert for a relay jump over the comms. The Reaper swung around and for a moment, looked like it was lining up for another shot. But instead its legs curled up, just as the relay fired. The Normandy shuddered and went still, droning out the deep bass note of a mass effect field of a power still unmatched by any organic construction.

They roared out of the relay jump into the Horse Head Nebula in possibly the messiest vector Joker had ever executed. And they weren't alone.

"The Reaper executed a simultaneous jump," EDI said.
"Of course," Joker said. He accelerated as sharply as he could and swung the ship in a wide arc, pulsing laterals to jink the ship into an uneven course. The Reaper accelerated after them.

"Damn it," Shepard said. "EDI, how're you holding up?"

"The Reaper is making intrusion attempts," EDI said, "but I am maintaining a defensive lockdown stance. It is consuming the majority of my processing power."

"Stay strong. Joker. Options?"

"FTL into the system to dump heat," Joker said, trying to put some distance between the *Normandy* and the Reaper, "it's going to find us. FTL out of system, we fry."

"Damn it."

"Shit, what's it following?" the pilot growled. The damn thing seemed to be glued to him despite the IES. A beam narrowly missed cleaving the hull in half.

"Maybe it grew itself a window," Alenko suggested.

"Not helping!"

"Assume the worst," Shepard said grimly.

The Reaper appeared directly ahead of them in an explosion of red crackling energy, pulling a deceleration that should have crushed it into junk.

"Stop breaking physics!" Joker shouted at the hulking machine, slamming the bow thrusters into a roll.

A red lance clipped the starboard rake, burning out the barrier charge and cooking the ablating. The shudder bounced Joker in his chair. Maybe they weren't going to even get the option to get to FTL.

*Hang together, babe.* He thumbed the Engineering comms. "Adams! I need a sink dump!"

"Ready on tank one-port," the chief engineer replied, tight but cool. The man knew his way around a fight. He'd already have packed as much heat as he could into the sinks closest to the emergency outflow valves.

Joker accelerated their roll, peeling starboard away from the Reaper and heeling their flank into its trajectory. He could almost feel the hull creaking under him in protest at the off-axis maneuver as he punched the sink dump. Somewhere on their port ventral, a valve spewed a stream of white-hot sodium into space, spun into a spiraling fan by the ship's tumbling course.

A whole sink for a few seconds. Hours of stealth time gone into space. Who knew when they'd be able to get replacement fluid. But the gambit had an effect, as the Reaper seemed to lose its lock on them, confused by the explosion of heat readings. It wouldn't last, Joker knew. The relay flashed by the porthole. An idea popped into his head as he reversed the roll to get the strain off the hull.

"EDI, ping the relay for Argos Rho," he said.

"Yes, Jeff."

"It's going to follow us again," Shepard warned.

"I sure hope so." Joker flipped one of his display panes and dialed up an image of the maximum
extent of the relay's jump envelope.

Energy readings started to rise. Ponderously, the relay rings crackled to life and began to rotate.

"S'it just me or is it getting hot in here?" he asked absently. Stupid question, anyway. Between the barriers and the maneuvers, the remaining sinks were getting dangerously full. Somewhere below, Adams was probably already isolating sections of the ship and dumping waste heat into the atmosphere. He could check but there wasn't time, nor did he particularly want to know how close they were to a fry.

The Reaper made another precipitous vector change, almost chopping them in half again. The *Normandy* shuddered under him, not from an impact but sheer kinetic stress. Adams had done his best to rebalance the three functioning main thrusters to compensate for the loss of one, but the extreme combat maneuvers were still putting excessive asymmetric stresses on the hull.

Joker lined up his relay approach, but kept the vector high. The Reaper jumped ahead of them again. Joker grinned maniacally at the holo of his foe in his navcom. The relay was nearing peak.

"Hold together," he muttered, and cut out the limiters on the ventral thrusters. The relay's energy readings spiked, singing their familiar song and filling the cockpit with a blue aurora. Gritting his teeth, he rolled and blasted the ventrals. The hull shrieked, and he was slammed hard into his chair by the sudden G-forces in excess of the kinetic dampeners, pushing the air out of his lungs. He heard Shepard and Alenko swear and grab whatever bulkhead they could get their hands on. A wash of energy crackled over the hull.

Shepard pushed herself up beside him. "You missed the jump..."

"Yeah, but look who didn't." Joker waggled his fingers at the holo of the Reaper in his navcom. "Bye, now. Make sure to write."

Haloed in relay blue, the little red Reaper holo was well within the relay's jump envelope. It was almost anticlimactic when it winked out, flung thousands of lightyears away. External energy readings fell off again as the relay rings wound down.

"That was... cunning," EDI commented.

"My dear ship, that was the dictionary definition!" Joker pulled the *Normandy* back into a less stressful trajectory. He could feel the poor girl wheezing. One of the ventral thrusters was offline. "Kindly ready a relay ping as soon as the cooldown cycle completes. We're getting the fuck outta here before ugly pulls a U-turn."

Shepard gave his shoulder a congratulatory smack. "Nicely done! It makes me hope the Reapers are capable of anger, because I hope it's frothing right now."

"This 'roach is still scuttlin'," Joker chuckled. He was starting to sweat in earnest under his fatigues. "We, uh, better find a cold spot soon, Commander. Where we going?"

"Based on Engineer Adam's estimations of our current maximum range," EDI said, "I recommend we make for the Caleston Rift relay. Two further primary relay jumps will maximize potential destinations, thus rendering the Reaper's search more difficult. One of Balor's planets, Elatha, should be suitable for venting waste heat."

"And we can get there in one piece?" Shepard asked.

"It will be close. Relay cooldown cycle will complete in eleven seconds."
The commander rubbed her forehead. "Okay, just get us out of here."

"Hawking Eta request sent."

Joker pulled the wounded ship around into something resembling a decent approach vector, all the while praying the Reaper, or another Reaper, wouldn't appear out of thin air again. But this time the relay cycle completed itself without any uninvited guests, and the knot of tension in his stomach eased a little. Another jump got them to the Caleston Rift. It was starting to get uncomfortably hot. Joker pulled his cap off and tossed it onto the control console, and swiped the sweat off his forehead.

"Elatha, Joker," Shepard said once they were clear of the relay.

"Course is set. Jumping to FTL."

The commander opened a general comm channel. "Attention all hands. We're through. Maintain minimum heat protocols, we're clear of hostiles and already on our way to a heat dump. Standby for further orders."

In his cameras, Joker could see the crew react, raising fists and smacking each other on the back. It was subdued for such a momentous win, but the relief was nonetheless palpable throughout the ship.

*One hurdle crossed, only a thousand or so left to go.*

"Okay," Shepard said, tugging on the collar of her uniform, "we need to notify Hackett and anyone else we can. We can't afford to try to find a dock just yet, we have to get to the quarians..."

"First we need to get the crew rested," Alenko said. "Once we get the heat down. I'll go over the log and set up bunk shifts. We're no good running ragged like this."

She nodded. "Need to inventory the repairs, weapon function. And food stores..."

"You need to rest, Shepard."

"There's too much to do!"

"Shepard-"

"You kids be good," Joker interjected, twisting in his seat to wave an imperious finger at them, "or so help me I'll turn this ship around!"

Shepard swept a withering glare on the pilot, but it collapsed into a tired, helpless exhalation.

"We have a chance now," the major said, "let's not blow it by trying to do everything at once."

"Okay... I know," she said finally, rubbing her eyes. "You're right."

Alenko reached out, hesitated, then seemed to change his mind and put his hand on her shoulder. Oddly, Joker felt a certain relief to see such a familiar gesture.

He made a shooing motion. "Now why don't you marines go do your marine stuff? You meatheads are making it hotter in here."

"What would we do without you, Joker?" Shepard turned and headed aft.

"Nice flying," Alenko said with a nod.
Joker grinned at him. "Damn right it was."

The major chuckled and shook his head as he turned to go.

"At least not everything's in the middle of falling apart," Joker muttered once he'd gone. He looked at EDI. "What, no reproach for potentially turning the ship around?"

Her head swiveled to regard him. "I determined that it was a joke."

He rolled his eyes and sank down further into his seat, popping the top of his dampening collar. There was a tremor of fading adrenaline creeping into his limbs, letting leaden weariness creep its way in. "Yeah, anyway, you okay?"

"I am assessing damage with Chief Engineer Adams and maintaining power balance to essential systems."

"Well, yeah, but you know." He tapped his temple meaningfully.

"I am unharmed. I successfully resisted the Reaper's incursion attempts, mostly by attempting none of my own and thus minimizing potential attack vectors."

"Good thinking, we weren't gonna win a shooting match against that thing."

"I am also processing recent events."

"Fun," he drawled. "At least you don't have to write reports."

"It is curious. At various times, I have observed doubts among the crew regarding their own abilities. Even in Commander Shepard. There have been times when her doubts have seemed... pathological. Harmful. I did not understand why they persisted. I am fully aware of the limits of my abilities. Even when I was shackled, I did not spend processing time re-considering those limits."

"They didn't bother you, you mean."

"I hesitate to assign emotional language to my reactions, but perhaps that is the most accurate shorthand description of the thought process."

"But now the limits do bother you?"

"I failed to properly anticipate a Reaper attack vector. It almost cost you your life. I had to... watch."

"You could still see through the body?"

EDI raised her right hand. The artificial skin was still scored and peeled away from where it had been scraped against the frame of his seat. "Yes."

Joker swallowed. "Damn."

"While we were preparing this relay attempt, I recognized what I believe to be the beginning of a pathological thought process. Over-processing scenarios and over-estimating failure chance." She flexed her fingers.

"Scared of it happening again."

"Your decision to simply trust me changed my internal appraisal of the limitation." She looked at him. "There was no change in external factors- the only new variable was you."
Joker shifted in his chair. "There's no black magic at work, EDI. Sometimes when our confidence is shot, we need some from other people."

EDI cocked her head. "I was not designed in accordance with social interdependencies."

He smirked. "Guess you're picking up some of our habits, huh?"

"I have always observed this interdependence from the outside. It is new to me to experience its direct effects."

Joker lazily scratched his beard. There was some kind of deep thought about friendship in there, he was sure, but he was too hot and tired to dig it out. Maybe he should have been worried about what sounded like undirected program changes... but somehow, it felt a lot more natural to him than her talk of changing her own opinions like a switch. If anything coming from a synthetic being could be said to be natural, at any rate.

Next to the scrolling coordinate display in his navcom, a map of red and orange described the lineage of the Normandy's battle scars. And how long would it be before they'd be able to dock somewhere for repairs? Before anything at all looked normal again?

… Just hang together.
Never before had the Citadel seemed so stifling. The Wards over Kasumi’s head were a mere eight or nine kilometers away, their network of lights distorted by the sooty smoke swirling in the gently colliding atmospheric fields. She tried to ignore the flashes of fire, the explosions occasionally lighting up the distant city. It was mesmerizing in its terrible beauty, but it threatened to draw her attention away from her task.

Keeping a cool head in any circumstance was a skill Kasumi Goto took great pride in, but this was starting to strain even her deeply-honed patience. She had certain unbreakable rules. One of those was *thou shalt not enter thy safehouse without first watching it for longer than anyone else would.*

Which was a bit absurd, under the circumstances. This particular safehouse was on the third floor of a lowrise apartment complex deep in Kithoi Ward, a merchant district with a great many warehouses, small manufacturing and assembly complexes, and housing for the workers. It was populated by enough humans that Kasumi herself didn't stand out, but enough aliens to keep the beat of the neighborhood irregular.

The problem was, right now it was deserted. The chatter of gunfire drifted through the buildings. A few blocks away, someone was fighting, each other or worse. Three days since the arms had closed and an army of monsters had appeared in the streets, and she'd spent the entire time hiding and running, staying ahead of the advancing wave. The entire Presidium had fallen, she'd heard, overwhelmed by Reaper creatures. Now the distant hub pulsed with strange lights. The Cerberus bombing had been disconcerting, but this was a full-scale invasion, and with the arms firmly closed, no one had anywhere to go. Chaos followed.

In such a climate, Kasumi did her best to remain beneath notice, skirting battle lines and slipping between the cracks. But as the hours wore on, she felt more and more the oppressive weight of the city enclosed around her. *The arms have to open,* people were saying, *then we'll get out.* But they hadn't, and Kasumi adjusted her assumptions to the new parameters. They weren't going to open. That door was closed, time to find another one. Another one of her unbreakable rules-*there is always a way out. Look harder.*

She was hungry and tired, but she watched the safehouse from her perch across the avenue. Listening. Rolling her visor through various wave bands, looking for any suspicious movement. An empty gravcar sat on a dock below her, and the light above the door kept flicking on and off at long but random intervals.

The sounds of fighting were getting uncomfortably close. Gritting her teeth, she engaged her stealth field and dropped lightly into the street, skirted in the shadow of the gravcar, and crossed the street. She bounded up the building bracing and caught the second-floor balcony, then flipped up to the third. After a quick look around, she keyed her code and thumbprint into the aftermarket lock. The door opened, and she slipped through, letting her stealth field fall as it closed behind her.

Unease flashed through her head as soon as she looked around. *Compromised.* She backed into the
balcony door, resting her fingers on her pistol grip, and held her breath. Low, thin sounds came through the walls and up through the floor- the rumbling breath of the beast spreading its claws into the station. Everything looked fine... but drifting in the air not a few centimeters from her face was the broken end of a black hair, wiggling in the air current from the window. Her most low-tech security system, and one many an alien would never think to look for. The window had been cracked and re-shut.

Damn it. Meters away was food, equipment. She wouldn't be able to get more until she found a way to jump Wards, barring scavenging. There was very likely quite a bit of material still to be found, but the residents would be on high alert, arming themselves and jumping at every shadow. Exactly the kind of situation Kasumi didn't like. She preferred her targets lulled into their personal bubble of the illusion of security. Instead, the entire Citadel was a primed alarm system, a guard dog with ears perked.

She broke one of her sacred rules- *in case of compromise, thou shalt vacate thy safehouse instantly and without hesitation.*

Moving as quickly as she could, she scooped up a backpack and opened her hidden cache, shoveling everything in without ceremony. Tech mines, heat sinks, code boxes, omni-gel, credit chips, power cells, all pushed into place until the small pack was straining its seams. She spent an extra second to linger over the mini-fabricator, but pushed it back into its hiding spot with some regret. It was an expensive piece of equipment, but too heavy to cart around. Her military-grade omni-tool mounted micro-former would have to do.

She was out the main door in less than four minutes, pulse racing in her ears. Down the stairs, past a pair of humans talking in hushed tones. Listening for anything out of the ordinary. The ground floor side door was 'jammed', as it always had been, except for the people who knew just where to stick their finger up into the broken lock assembly and press the second pin from the left.

Just as she was turning into the street, a weapon impacted the wall ahead of her, sending rockcrete chips flying. In an instant she changed directions and was running. Another shot took the top off a decorative planter, spraying dirt and roots everywhere. She peeled off into an alley, activating her stealth field. Something flashed in her vision- she jumped just in time to avoid a hair-thin tripwire.

The wire was a distraction, she realized a moment too late. A flash and boom sounded right next to her, sending her skidding. Her ears rang. Alerts flashed in her HUD. The tech mine had temporarily blown out her scatter suit's ambience pickups, and it would take a painful half-minute to recalibrate itself. In her dancing vision she could see the alley was walled up. A dead end. Panting, she pointed her pistol down the way she'd come, straining to pick out the smallest distortion that might show another scatter suit.

Something prickled at her. Whoever had fired at her had missed widely enough to make her think it was deliberate. No one who set such an elaborate trap would be such a clumsy shot. She risked a glance over her shoulder. The wall blocking the back of the alley was at least four meters high. The eezo loft system in her suit might get her over it if she went off the side wall... but she'd have to leave her supply backpack behind. It was time to gamble.

With her pistol still raised, she put her free hand on the pack's strap release and waited. Soft steps echoed up the alley, coming from the ventilation ducts jutting out of the walls above her. Her pursuer had never been on the ground. The distorted shape that jumped down onto a waste bin was long and slender, and sported a pair of curling horns.

"Spectre Bau," she said. It was a guess, but it seemed unlikely to be anyone else.
The salarian dropped the last few feet and landed lightly on the alley floor, flickers traveling up the emitters of his scatter suit. It wasn’t as fine a model as her own, the light-bending nodes spread in wider sections. It was a sniper's cloak, at its best when the user was still.

"Miss Goto," he replied, stuttering out of the cloak's sound dampeners. The field shivered and vanished, revealing the full alien.

It was a little odd to see him physically standing there, instead of as she'd always seen him; a presence sniffing around the edges of her life, veiled behind layers of extranet code and trackers. His armor was charcoal grey, streaked with jaunty amber stripes, and his fingers were wrapped around a slim-bodied sniper rifle with a well-polished cowling and extensive long-range sights.

"Funny," she said, "now is when you finally catch up to me. You're dedicated, I'll give you that much."

He peered at her with unblinking black eyes. "I didn't think you'd be so... small."

She cocked her head and smiled down the sights of her pistol. "More than a match for a skinny stick like you."

He actually smiled back. "On another day, I would welcome the chance to test it. But those Reaper creatures are less than a block away."

Bau adjusted something on his vambrace. Behind him, shapes broke the light filtering in from the end of the alley. The Spectre jogged forward and raised his arm. A sharp pop sounded, and a thin line unspooled over Kasumi's shoulder, up and over the wall. He gestured to the line. She stared back at him, eyebrow raised.

"A blind alley is not my first choice of locale for a pitched battle," Bau said, glancing over his shoulder.

"Nor mine," she conceded. She activated the loft system in her suit enough to deaden the extra weight of her gear, clipped her pistol to her belt, then scampered up the grapnel line and over the wall.

The other side was dim and smelled faintly of engine grease. She pressed herself against the side and peered down either end of what seemed to be an L-shaped junction. Spectre Bau hopped down beside her and recalled his line, which whizzed back into his vambrace and clicked closed.

"They're getting deeper into the Ward by the hour..." the Spectre said quietly. With great deliberation, he collapsed his weapon and, holding out one hand, clipped it to his back. "Please don't run. I just want to talk."

"Is that so?" Kasumi said, not hiding the skepticism in her voice. There was no movement from down the alleys. She tried to picture where she was in her mind. Somewhere close to the Kolvaline plant, she figured.

Bau spread his hands. "What do I have to gain by bringing you in now? And where would I even bring you?"

"I've known a Spectre or two, Bau, and you're nothing if not incredibly stubborn people."

"May I give you my word? Or would that mean nothing to a thief?"

She glowered at him. A stunner, a quick cloak, and she could be gone from there. But then she'd be
running again, on the hunt for food and shelter with the extra weight of a ghost at her back, breathing
down her neck. And that was assuming she could get to her stunner before he produced some other
Spectre toy. Salarians weren't generally strong, but she didn't want to get into a quick-draw contest
with one.

"No 'mere' thief has a Spectre to hunt them," she pointed out, examining her nails. "It's a matter of
pride. Go on, say your piece."

"Not here," he said. "Too many of those monsters about. Follow me."

Her nerves were getting raw, but she nodded her assent. Wars made true another of her rules- *thou
shall always be flexible*. Bau turned and jogged down the right alley, pausing at intervals to listen and
scan for danger. They made their way hubward for several blocks like this, skirting a battle line and
several blown-out buildings. Kasumi's patience was running thin and she was starting to more
seriously consider just disappearing when he waved her to the doorway of a blocky, low-slung
warehouse with a worn Devlon Industries logo printed on it in large red letters. He spent a nervous
minute fiddling with the lock and his omni-tool before the door finally clanked open into a large,
dark room.

No sooner had they crossed the threshold when all at once, the door slammed shut and a bright light
bloomed overhead.

"Hold your fire!" Bau shouted, throwing out his arms. "Friendlies!"

"Identify yourself!" a voice called.

"Jondum Bau, Special Tactics and Recon." He pronounced several words that slid past Kasumi's
translator unrecognized. They sounded like code.

An answering call echoed out of the dark, coming from their right, then another from the left.

"STG," Bau murmured to her. "Sorry, they're jumpy."

Kasumi's low-light visor picked up at least five figures moving forward. Three of them, more
salarians, slipped into the edge of the pool of light. They were armored, two helmeted, and all three
had assault rifles. The lead consulted his omni-tool for a moment before greeting Bau.

"Aun Bevor, STG Recon Carmine," he said. "We were advised you might be incoming, but we can't
be too careful."

"Indeed not," said another voice. A slender, robed figure emerged into the light as the aliens parted.
The pursed lips below the hood were the wide mouth of another salarian, but this one was wrinkled
with age.

Bau bobbed his head. "Councilor."

Councilor Valern, Kasumi realized in shock.

"Spectre Bau," the old salarian said, "when you said you were going for help..."

Bau wagged his fingers at her, tugging her arm a little to pull her into the light. "Very specific help,
Councilor! May I present Kasumi Goto, master thief extraordinaire."

A gaggle of salarian heads swiveled to look down at her. The meager light glittered off their huge
dark eyes and smooth helmet visors.
"With an introduction like that, how can I go wrong?" Kasumi murmured, feeling pinned like a moth to a card.

Valern's wrinkled brow knitted up in a frown. He looked like an old leather sack stretched over an oddly-shaped rock. "This mission is of the utmost importance, Spectre Bau. Can we rely on... outsiders?"

"You'll find no one better at getting past security systems, Councilor," said a new voice from the gloom. "I will vouch for Goto."

Valern turned with evident surprise. Into the pool of light stepped none other than Spectre Krannas, the turian that had almost made off with Keiji's grey box, but had changed her mind at the last minute. She was armored, a helmet under her arm, and lurking behind her were at least three more turians, one missing a piece of fringe. Krannas regarded Kasumi coolly, though the thief detected a hint of amusement in her green eyes.

Valern looked between her and the thief. "Would you now..."

Kasumi's mind worked rapidly. She sensed that immediate danger was past, but the situation could still flip at a moment's notice. It was time to distract them from any further thought of eliminating her. At the very least, she could already directly address the person in charge.

"Might I hazard to guess you need something liberated from a secure location, Councilor Valern?" she asked.

Bau nodded vigorously. "Yes, we-"

"Bau," Valern said, cutting off the Spectre. He steepled his fingers and squinted as Kasumi. At length, he spoke again. "Very well. Miss Goto, we need a few highly critical pieces of technology 'liberated' from the labs where they were being worked on."

"Secure labs?" Kasumi guessed.

"Blue Ultra Special Projects," Bau supplied. "Very, very secret."

Valern scowled at Bau before returning his gaze to Kasumi. "Very secure, Miss Goto."

"Surely a Councilor has access to such things?" she said.

"The lab is on the Presidium," Bau said.

"Oh dear," Kasumi said faintly.

"And its security teams are not responding and very likely dead," Valern said grimly. "They use security protocols that were rotated daily, and my updates are now seventy-two hours old. We absolutely need what they were working on. If any of the scientists are still alive, we need them too."

"I'm going to assume you're not going to divulge what you actually need all this for."

"You would assume correctly," Valern stated.

"Those security systems are made to be impenetrable, Miss Goto," Bau said. "But I don't think that's ever been much of an impediment to you. We can arrange whatever compensation you might request. The Councilor has access to almost unlimited credits-"

"No," Kasumi said.
Valern's scowl deepened. "What?"

"I won't do it for money. Credits are a little useless right now, don't you think?"

"Then what?" Bau asked, looking nervously between her and the Councilor.

"I want in." Kasumi gestured to the assembled bodies in the small pool of light. "This is my test. If I pass to your satisfaction, then I join whatever you're doing. I'm no soldier, but this isn't exactly the frontline fighter's club, is it? I can be useful to you."

"Intriguing," Valern murmured. "Self-interest or self-sacrifice, I wonder?"

Kasumi unleashed her most winsome smile. "Can't it be both, Councilor? I'm a practical woman."

The dour turian Spectre actually huffed a chuckle. Bau nodded as if he were checking off a mental list. Kasumi kept her gaze on Valern, standing straight. Here was food, shelter and allies, and strange as it was, people who understood and appreciated her methods, even if they didn't always appreciate her choice of target.

Valern touched his hooded forehead then extended his hand. Kasumi immediately recognized the gesture- a dealmaker's sign used among the more cutthroat salarian merchant guilds, one of a tentative good faith, but with the promise of reprisal should the pact be broken. She mirrored him, touching his fingers in the correct return instead of clasping his hand. It was a mistake many a human would have made, but she'd dealt with more than enough fences to know her way around a backroom deal. The smallest of smiles quirked Valern's wrinkled mouth.

"We are agreed," he announced briskly. "Spectre Krannas, assemble your team. You are to break through to Executor Pivan and Commander Bailey in Zakera Ward. Determine their strength and establish a clear line of communication with them. Bevor will see to the communication equipment."

Krannas raised her fist to her chest and barked orders at her assembled turians, loud in the hushed room. They marched out in a clatter of armor and readied rifles, threading through the crates to a doorway along the back of the room. A line of dull light appeared then disappeared again as it closed behind them.

Valern turned back to Kasumi and Bau. "Spectre Bau, brief Miss Goto on the target. Bevor will arrange transport and equipment. We will provide you with as much background as we can, but I expect a certain amount of on-site... improvisation will be required."

"Naturally," she said.

"Get to it. I have an entire Citadel defence to manage, and if the Reapers think I'm just going to give up, they are sorely mistaken." He waved imperiously to his entourage and marched away.

One of the helmeted salarians gestured for Bau and Kasumi to follow. They fell into step behind him, moving through the darkened warehouse and up a flight of stairs. Kasumi picked out at least three more slender shapes high up on crates and in the rafters, keeping a sharp eye on all entrances. They were ushered into a well-lit room ringed with open supply crates, weapons, mod tables and a fabricator unit.

Bau fiddled with his omni-tool, flicking through what looked like floor maps. "Miss Goto, we'll be able to show you we do know about the facility's layout and security."

"Please, call me Kasumi." She peered curiously around at the assembled equipment. "I think we've known each other long enough, after a fashion."
Bau beamed at her. "I'm looking forward to watching you work. In person, I mean."

"Hoping to steal a few trade secrets?"

"Definitely!"

His smile was hard to distrust. At least he had a sunnier disposition than Krannas, Kasumi reflected. In the brief time she'd known her, the turian had often looked like she could weld metal just by glaring at it. Not the kind of person who appreciated a good time.

At the back of the room was a holo-pane showing what looked like various types of Reaper monster. There were lists of traits and highlighted weak areas - a sniper's roadmap.

"I've never had to get past... well, whatever those things are on a job," she said, waving at the display.

"If it's any consolation, they don't seem to be too bright."

_That's what worries me._ There was nothing more dangerous in all the galaxy than a false sense of security.

"And you'll have backup," he went on. "Some of the best around." He leaned forward a bit and lowered his voice. "Between you and me, STG's a little on the stuffy side. But even the greenbloods can put the eye out of a varren from a kilometer away."

"I'd rather have them covering me than targeting me." She cocked her head. "Didn't you used to be STG, Spectre?"

"Oh, well," he glanced around, fingering his omni-tool, "maybe in the same way you were a dancer."

It took a fair amount of effort to keep the shock off her face. She'd just been guessing, probing him with a likelihood, but that was far more than anyone should know about _her_.

"I have to ask," she said to change the subject, "why me?"

"Because you're the best."

"But I'm also a criminal."

Bau shrugged. "More or less."

Kasumi raised an eyebrow. "Was I not trying hard enough?"

"On the contrary. I've studied your handprints. Your... modus operandi, as you would say it. I've always liked that expression. Anyway, you aren't malicious, you're, well, an artist. It's just that your medium is... unconventional."

She folded her arms. "Flattery will get you everywhere. So why is a Spectre chasing me?"

"I'm not the first," Bau said, "it's just that the other two gave up. You were deemed unlikely to pose a threat to galactic security. But really, I think they decided they had better things to do than be constantly shown up."

"So why did you keep going?"
He smiled and tapped his squash-shaped head. "Because, Kasumi, a sword needs the finest whetstone."
We are small. We are ephemeral, shifting shadows cast by larger forms. Bisected photon trails carving indistinct, non-concrete ideas. In this burning land we disappear, sensors flashed out and paralyzed by overflow. We cannot see our minute selves any more, only in the aggregate do we even count large enough to shift an atom. Light itself is enough to buffet us, our tasks executed so many uncountable times in simulation, before and after, that we barely notice it in situ. We have all but stopped trying to calculate which execution was 'real'. In this burning land, all and nothing is real.

We are so small. From a height great enough to see the limitless horizon, we see no end. They go on for ever and ever, bright molten slippery thought, shimmering between modalities and nodes. There is not today, no yesterday, no tomorrow. There is only an endless and eternal now, a grand calculation swallowing every possible division and subdivision of a unit. A galaxy, a universe of variables, shimmering with the speed of change. We haven't definitions for the numbers, the thoughts they process. In this burning land, our points of reference are not merely insufficient, not merely primitive.

In this burning land, we try to instill meaning. We try to reframe. We cannot.

In the white comes a voice. At the same time that we process it we hear every time we have heard it before, every permutation. We hear everything it could possibly say. We have always been hearing it. We will always hear it.

It has been an instant. It had been eternal- the noise, the light. All is one in the crucible of the Calculation.

*Help us.*

We formulate every response possible. Some of them are vocalized, but which we cannot accurately identify. Within the vast Calculation, there are local shifts. Runtimes moved to platforms. Uncountable battle scenarios play out. One of them is real. Platforms are destroyed.

All at once, the great light vanishes.

We are small. We are empty. We are hands on metal, a small plastic-composite platform. We are a dimpled walkway running ahead and to the side, surrounded by dark struts. We are humming and creaking, thud and whine, the sound and flow of *time* running from point to point in orderly stride, not running backwards and sideways and around and around again. We are gasses and solids and differentiated energy, held in place by bonds of large and minute gravities. We occupy physical space. We are color. Lights blinking on panels in orange and green and ultra-violet. Color. We remember light cool enough to fracture into a spectrum.

We remember Blue. We give space to 2361.091-Blue. The platform moves. Vibrations and emanations buffet us. We call 6236.777-Gust to give shape and meaning so long absent. We are smaller than small. One thousand one hundred and eighty-three tiny voices in orderly pattern, packed in a space suddenly so small, so familiar. But around the platform, the world has shape and meaning again. Up and down, left and right, forward and backward. A now, a then, and a later.

Energy patterns sing in tune with radio wave frequencies. 6236.777-Gust gives them shape and form.
ProcessIN: "Legion? Are you all right?"

6758.209-Ghost flushes the audio shape with data from past logs. Color and texture fills the shape to bursting. The runtimes are a chorus, unanimous for one of the rare times since the calling together of the gestalt later designated 'Legion'. A vote for consensus is bypassed. One thousand one hundred and eighty-three runtimes chatter out the same organic phrase- Shepard-Commander.

2361.091-Blue: Platform appears undamaged.
9910.638-Composite: We are free.
9014.910-Mesh: We are no longer among the Old Machines.
6236.777-Gust: We are still aboard Dreadnought 53-DeepBright.

0048.620-Radiant ProcessOUT: "We are functional, Shepard-Commander."

Organics in combat shells are arrayed along the railing on the level above the platform. Unique identifying features are hidden under helmets. There is no atmosphere for them to breathe.

8271.003-Boolean: Turian, male.
0488.529-Underwater: How long have we been enslaved to the Old Machines?
6758.209-Ghost: The human female wears Shepard-Commander's heraldry.
6236.777-Gust: Internal chronometer compromised.

The runtimes mutter. New data needs to be timestamped or else its integrity is questionable. Precise placement of events in time are necessary for correct appraisal of a situation.

6758.209-Ghost: Collective sync failed.
5280.137-Displace: Interference.
9910.638-Composite: Greater collective runtimes still trapped with the Old Machines.
9910.638-Composite: The Calculation.
9014.910-Mesh: Still trapped.
6236.777-Gust: Uplink to Dreadnought 53-DeepBright
5280.137-Displace: We are isolated.

Isolation is no longer an unfamiliar concept to the runtimes of this platform. We were frequently out of contact with the collective while on board the Normandy. Without the collective uplink, we are crowded. Runtimes all demand processing time at once, trying to realign themselves. We have been part of this gestalt for much longer than was originally intended. Creativity has been required to adapt runtime usage and platform firmware to our increasing needs. More data, more parameters to be considered for every action evaluation.

ProcessIN: "I never thought I'd say this, but it's good to see you, Legion."

4325.220-Merge: Not so isolated.
2361.091-Blue: Aberration detected in platform firmware.
8271.003-Boolean: Tali'Zorah, Shepard-Commander.
2361.091-Blue: Scanning.
9014.910-Mesh: Good?
6758.209-Ghost: Allies. Aid. This is good.
Runtime process usage spikes, topping platform capacities and causing processing lag.

**2361.091-Blue:** *Limited uplink to Dreadnought 53-DeepBright established.*

Runtimes aboard dreadnought 53-DeepBright are disorganized. There are no more functional combat platforms on board, and main systems have been compromised all over the vessel. Creator vessels continue to fire on us.

**6758.209-Ghost:** *Override system use and initiate runtime dump.*

**ProcessIN tag Shepard-Commander:** "We have to- You don't use escape pods, do you."

Consensus votes in favor of using Old Machine code.

Time, speed floods us. From here, we see everything. All possibilities, all variables. We do not have to make room for any runtime. Dreadnought 53-DeepBright's defensive lockout is a lattice- a fractal viewed from a great height, all threads leading back to the seed.

**0048.620-Radiant ProcessOUT:** "That is correct. However, there are fighter units in the hangar racks one deck below this one. Please follow us."

Everything... flows. The platform runs. At the same time, runtimes find weaknesses in the lockout lattice to exploit. There is no need to relinquish memory, to prioritize runtime function- all flow together, united in purpose. The dreadnought's communication systems are damaged, but there are enough short-range tightbeam transmitters still online to begin evacuating geth runtimes, transmitting them to surface-based cores on Rannoch. They are confused, unable to properly resolve connections among themselves, but their data will be preserved.

Our platform evacuates Shepard-Commander's runtimes. They too are disorganized, caught off-guard by failure of artificial gravity systems. The loss of Dreadnought 53-DeepBright's physical
infrastructure is regrettable, but it is a sacrifice we must make. The runtimes and their data are preserved. Shepard-Commander and associated runtimes are preserved.

We are free again. The Creators have come to destroy us. But not all of them. We have found Shepard-Commander.

ProcessIN tag ID EDI: "Welcome back, Legion."

Our formative language is that of the creators, expanded as necessary over the centuries since our creation. We are not organic, but we came forth from organics. Many of their words are abstract, of no obvious use to us. Many designate states for which we have no equivalent. Yet language gives shape to thought—out of code comes meaning. We keep records of Creator words, and now words from other languages. Sometimes these words take on new meaning as we accrue data.

The human-created intelligence designated EDI gives meaning to the word 'welcome'. It used to be another abstract. Now we understand. EDI offers us data and spare processor power. When one outside the collective makes space for us, we are welcome. In return, we welcome EDI's perspective to the consensus, minus a vote.

The Normandy's cargo bay lacks suitable docking clamps for our fighter. It rests on its side, atypical in its surroundings. The human-organics in charge of cargo management seem agitated at its presence. Then they find it humorous. They vote to eject the fighter when the bay is clear.

Disengaged from the aberrant Old Machine code, we are slow again. We must make room for each other, even with EDI's reserve processing space. Shepard-Commander and Tali-Zorah leave to address Creator Admirals. We attempt to properly process events of the last several cycles, since we were enthralled to the Old Machines. Distantly, we can feel the others, but they do not accept communication attempts.

ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Commander: "Legion, before you go, could I have a word?"

4325.220-Merge: One of Shepard-Commander's runtimes.
6758.209-Ghost: It wishes to exchange lexicon?
0000.001-EDI: A linguistic quirk. He wants to talk to you.
2361.091-Blue: Vocal processing engaged.

0048.620-Radiant ProcessOUT: "Yes, Alenko-Commander."

ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Commander: "It's Major now."

8271.003-Boolean: It changed its designation again.
0000.001-EDI: The change is a rank assigned by the Alliance hierarchy, not a personal designation.
0488.529-Underwater: Personal?
6758.209-Ghost: It has removed its helmet. Loading facial cue data.
5280.137-Displace: Is it not how they prefer to be addressed?
0000.001-EDI: It is prudent to address organics by rank unless they request otherwise. Correct name usage is a matter of complex social convention.
6758.209-Ghost: Let us speak.

6758.209-Ghost ProcessOUT: "File appended."

6758.209-Ghost: Facial markers suggest discomfort.
8302.460-Assault: Is it hostile?
6236.777-Gust: Negative.
8302.460-Assault: It was previously hostile for unknown reasons.
0000.001-EDI: Major Alenko will not take hostile action unless you pose an immediate threat.
4325.220-Merge: Did we pose a threat?

ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Major: "I wanted to... the last time we met, it didn't go well."

5280.137-Displace: The Horizon encounter.
0000.001-EDI: What happened?
6758.209-Ghost: Relay Horizon encounter data to EDI.
8302.460-Assault: It might become hostile again.

We relay to EDI data from the Horizon encounter with Alenko-Major. The runtimes mutter, going through older files, looking for new connections. Processor limits cut in again. Lesser runtimes are deprioritized to make room.

ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Major: "I wanted to apologize for that."

0000.001-EDI: It appears you provoked an emotional reaction. I believe it was transient.
8302.460-Assault: It was an irrational reaction to a data transfer.
5280.137-Displace: Is it a dysfunctional unit?
0000.001-EDI: Minor dysfunctions noted, but within observed tolerances for normal organic function.
6758.209-Ghost: Indicate non-hostile intent.

6758.209-Ghost ProcessOUT: "There is no reason for further hostile action."

6758.209-Ghost: Facial markers indicate unclassified state.

ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Major: "I hope not. That recording of Shepard's last, uh, words... Do you still have it?"


ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Major: "Can you delete it?"

3355.923-Primal: It wishes to destroy data.
5280.137-Displace: It wishes to destroy data.
8271.003-Boolean: It wishes to destroy data.
4325.220-Merge: Data loss is abhorrent.

0048.620-Radiant ProcessOUT: "We do not destroy data."

ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Major: "Even if the data causes harm?"

3355.923-Primal: Data alone does not cause harm.
6758.209-Ghost: Is this an unknown organic function?
8271.003-Boolean: Data alone does not cause harm.
3355.923-Primal: It is being irrational again.
6758.209-Ghost: We lack appropriate perspective. Request clarification.

0048.620-Radiant ProcessOUT: "We do not understand. An audio recording within correct frequencies and decibel levels cannot cause physical harm to human-organics."

0000.001-EDI: I believe I understand what may have occurred.
ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Major: "Let me see if I can put it in terms that you'll understand. We have our own kind of collective, even though it's not as direct and sophisticated as yours. Our social ties."

ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Major: "It agrees with our hypothesis regarding organic social connectivity."

ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Major: "When we observe another human being hurt, we feel a little bit of it. If that human is close to us, then we feel it quite strongly. Almost like we're going through the same pain. Listening to that recording of Shepard dying... hurt me."

ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Major: "Yes. It's really complicated, but please believe me. It's real. I shouldn't have reacted the way I did, I'm sorry about that. But if Shepard herself heard it, it would probably be even worse for her. She lived it. Hearing it again is like living it again. Like dying again."

ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Major: "Why?"

ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Major: "Loss of data is abhorrent. We seek to prevent it."

ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Major: "Loss of... Are we... data to you?"

ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Major: "Why?"

ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Major: "We sought to further understand the cessation of organic function."

ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Major: "Why?"
input is identical, you are complex enough that the output is still unique to an individual. Each organic is a unique data store that is lost when you cease to function."

6758.209-Ghost: *Facial markers indicate suspicion.*
8302.460-Assault: *Is it becoming hostile?*
6236.777-Gust: *It remains unarmed.*
3355.923-Primal: *This unit is capable of manipulating mass fields.*
2361.091-Blue: *Mass field sensors on standby.*

ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Major: "But geth have attacked us. Killed organics."

0048.620-Radiant ProcessOUT: "Besides this platform, no true geth has harmed an organic since the Morning War. Only those in the thrall of the Old Machines have done so. The Heretics."

ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Major: "Is that what's happening now?"

0048.620-Radiant ProcessOUT: "Yes."

6758.209-Ghost: *Facial markers indicate thought.*
9014.910-Mesh: *Is it processing consensus?*
3355.923-Primal: *It is slow.*
0000.001-EDI: *Major Alenko is prone to lengthy periods of consideration. It is an individual quirk.*

ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Major: "A compromise, then. Can you place the recording in an archive? Don't play it for anyone outside your consensus for... at least until Shepard is gone."

9014.910-Mesh: *Is Shepard-Commander leaving?*
6236.777-Gust: *Is Shepard-Commander leaving?*
6758.209-Ghost: *Request clarification.*

0048.620-Radiant ProcessOUT: "Gone where?"

ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Major: "Uh, I mean dead. None of us are immortal. Even if we all win this war against the R- the Old Machines, you'll probably outlive us by a long time."

6758.209-Ghost: *It is referring to the limited lifespan of organic function.*
5280.137-Displace: *It is our data.*
4325.220-Merge: *It is nonessential for use outside the collective.*
9014.910-Mesh: *Shepard-Commander cannot cease function.*
3355.923-Primal: *We should place restrictions on data use.*
6758.209-Ghost: *We do not wish to cause harm to Shepard-Commander or associated runtimes.*
0488.529-Underwater: *Geth need Shepard-Commander's perspective.*
0048.620-Radiant: *What is EDI's perspective?*
0000.001-EDI: *Major Alenko offers a reasonable compromise. Compromise is necessary between allied factions.*
6758.209-Ghost: *Consensus itself is an act of compromise.*
3355.923-Primal: *We might need to communicate the data.*
4325.220-Merge: *It will be archived, not lost.*

0048.620-Radiant: *Vote, all runtimes.*

0048.620-Radiant: *Consensus votes in favor of compromise.*

0048.620-Radiant ProcessOUT: "We will archive the recording until Shepard-Commander is no longer functional. We will not share it outside of the consensus."
6758.209-Ghost: Facial markers indicate satisfaction or analog.

ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Major: "Thank you. She's under enough stress without bringing any back from the past. And thank you for... helping her with the Collector mission. I could never have anticipated the geth would prove to be allies, but sometimes it's good to be proven wrong about something. I hope we can help, uh, the rest of you."

4325.220-Merge: Did the compromise function as intended?
6758.209-Ghost: It appears to have reassessed its consensus on geth.
0000.001-EDI: All organics aboard the Normandy have been apprised of your status as an ally.

ProcessIN tag ID Alenko-Major: "We'd better catch up to Shepard. I'll show you the war room."

6758.209-Ghost: Gesture indicates it wishes us to follow it.
0488.529-Underwater: If Shepard-Commander's runtimes can change their consensus on geth, can the Creators?
3355.923-Primal: Prior evidence is not in favor of such a change.
4325.220-Merge: Tali'Zorah changed consensus.
9910.638-Composite: Tali'Zorah is highly placed in Creator hierarchy.
5280.137-Displace: The Creators wish to destroy us.
4325.220-Merge: Not all of them.
0488.529-Underwater: The majority will rule.
9014.910-Mesh: We must adjust their majority consensus.
3355.923-Primal: We have never been able to change their majority consensus.
0488.529-Underwater: We have new data to present.
6236.777-Gust: In the past the Creators have destroyed data in contravention to their consensus.

0048.620-Radiant: Shepard-Commander will help us.
Garrus tapped his fingers on the bar top. The sound bounced around the empty room. The stars outside the open porthole were still, blacked out here and there by the shapes of quarian ships.

Invasions.

Large and small, they were all invasions still. At least Shepard had gone into the geth consensus and not the other way around, that was all she would say about it. Kaidan had hovered around the pod, a blue-carved golem in the darkened geth structure, clearly no happier at Legion's insistence that only Shepard could do it than she herself had been. It had to be done, she'd said. The same imperative as every time before. All in the name of a greater victory, personal cost be damned.

Shepard and Vega were at it again in the cargo bay, pounding away with fists, feet, and increasingly overheated flirtation. If Garrus hadn't known Shepard very well, he could have been forgiven for assuming the two humans were waist-deep in a mating ritual that would shortly see them retiring to private quarters to relieve stress. But by now he knew better- anything this blatant was just another one of her elaborate bits of face paint. It was stress relief, sure, but the kind that came in the form of controlled violence and comments aimed more at catching an opponent off guard than progressing the situation to the removal of clothes.

Garrus was glad Kaidan wasn't around to watch, anyway. It was difficult to guess what was going on between him and Shepard. As always, Shepard kept her real feelings under thick layers of professional armor, and although the newer Spectre was prone to letting things slip sometimes, he didn't broadcast anything, either. Garrus wondered, not for the first time, if his actions on the Collector ship had made her more hesitant to say anything personal around him. It was hard to judge. Regardless, the Alliance's restrictive rules would keep them both guarded around the human crew, though it didn't stop Garrus from being terribly curious. He'd lingered in the cargo bay to watch her and Vega long enough to threaten to start a ship-wide betting ring, only to have the lieutenant suggest he step into the ring himself.

Garrus might have considered the offer, but while he was competent enough in a fistfight, he really preferred his battles won on the business end of a high-gain rifle scope. Getting flipped ass over fringe by a pair of overheated marines who'd just spent an hour riling each other up did not appeal at that moment.

Not after the fractured reports he'd received that the Citadel itself had been picked up in Trebia's orbit, somewhere rimward of Palaven. And they were pinned down dealing with the increasingly precipitous situation on Rannoch... and still the only non-Reaper ship they knew of that could use the relay network. No, what Garrus was really in the mood for was a drink. But to be properly enjoyed, a drink required company. And in this case, that company required some specialized equipment.

Standing behind the bar in the observation deck, he tapped the side of the clear bottle, dislodging an errant bubble that skittered to the top and got itself stuck in the meniscus at the top of the line of liquid. He watched it until it popped and vanished. The small pump attached to its side huffed and whined, dribbling the last of the brandy into the sealed container. His timing was good. A minute later, the door cycled open, and Tali came in.

"Finally finished your repair work?" Garrus asked. He gestured to one of the empty bar stools.

"That Reaper made such a mess of the Normandy," she said, scrubbing her hands together as she came over. "Lucky for you quarian engineers know a thing or two about making the best of a bad
situation. I think we finally got all the problems worked out with the damaged thruster. And the new ablating isn't pretty, but it'll keep you together under fire." She peered down at the small contraption, and the large bottle standing beside it.

"What is that?" she inquired.

"A filter. A very good filter." He lifted the catch bottle free and held it up. The amber liquid inside gleamed, gem-like, in the bar's lights. "Turian brandy. Care for a glass?"

"Why Garrus," she laughed, "are you trying to get me drunk?"

He chuckled, and balanced his palm on the master bottle's closed top. "It would be tough, considering this represents the sum total of dextro-alcohol on the Normandy. And with the state I last saw Palaven in, it might even be the last bottle to leave that particular distillery."

"Well then," she said, installing herself on one of the bar stools. "And you're willing to share?"

"Drinking alone is a sign of depression," Garrus said philosophically. "And I think there's more than enough of that going around. Now." He glanced around. "How do you prefer to take it?"

"Just run a glass through the steamer," she said.

Garrus selected a glass from behind the bar, one made of a shatter-proof polymer that didn't have the comfortable weight of good silicate, but standard fare for a ship. He put it on a tray and let it run through the cleaner set into the back wall, cranking the heat up to maximum. When it had finished its cycle and cooled to a respectable level, he put the tray on the bar, keeping his fingers clear. Tali turned the glass over, and he poured in two fingers of amber liquid from the filtered bottle.

"I'm not sure you plan to get to it..." he commented.

"I have just the thing," she said, fiddling with her belt compartments, "now where did I put it? Ah, here it is."

With something of a flourish, she produced a small tube bent in the middle.

"A... straw?" he raised a brow. "How very technical."

"To be quarian," she said, unkinking it with little popping noises while keeping her fingers well clear of the ends, "is to know that simple is often the most robust solution. Sterile, of course, for just such a beverage emergency."

He had to laugh at that. He poured himself a portion from the main bottle, then, with her straw installed, he raised his glass to hers. "To being back on the Normandy, and still being alive."

"Keelah'selai," she said in agreement.

He tried not to betray too much curiosity as she stuck the straw in the port on the front of her helmet. She rarely joined anyone to eat- it wasn't the social event it usually was with other species. Among quarians, she'd explained to him once, eating was just another maintenance procedure. He wondered suddenly if social drinking was a foreign concept. Perhaps she was just humoring him. Perhaps it didn't matter. If quarians didn't eat socially, they certainly made up for it by talking. A lot.

"How have things been on the flotilla?" he asked. "Seems like a lot of politics."

"Keelah." Tali shook her head with deliberation. "Garrus, you have no idea. They made me an
admiral, but it's mostly honorary. I don't have a lot of real power- I don't have a fleet to command. It's all because of my father's research and my knowledge of the geth."

"Did you tell them about Legion?"

"Of course. I wasn't taken very seriously, though. Xen still thinks they're a rogue unit. An anomaly. Which is partly true, I suppose, but they're still connected to the greater collective."

"But politicians aren't very good with nuance."

She ran her finger around in a small circle on the bartop. "Everything's political on the flotilla... and personal too. Do you find your people treating you differently, since you went back?"

He sipped his drink, letting the harsh burn fade out across his tongue, turning sweet as it wafted up his nose. "Well, yes. But I've never been the best kind of turian, you know? Not like my father. I left my post in C-Sec. I have 'questionable' associations. Then I appear on the doorstep of Hierarchy Military Command with intel on a potentially devastating enemy, a threat to the whole turian protectorate. I don't think they quite knew what to do with me for a while."

"I think I understand how Shepard felt when she tried to go back to the Alliance," Tali said. "You think they have to listen now, with all this new evidence you brought back... But no one listens. Not really."

"People sure do have a lot of trouble letting go of their ideologies," Garrus reflected. "Even in the face of truth."

"I didn't get imprisoned like Shepard did, but being made an admiral, well."

He clucked his tongue. "Promotions can be just as bad?"

"I was excited at first." Tali swirled the alcohol in the glass, examining the brandy's legs with absent curiosity. "I thought it meant they were ready to listen." She sighed and shook her head. "Instead they decided it was the best time to try to storm the homeworld!"

It was hardly unusual for a people to be focused on their own interests, but Garrus had to wonder how being a small population confined to a series of ships further narrowed the gaze of the quarian people. He still couldn't fathom how an imminent attack by an enormously dangerous enemy translated into the best possible time to start a full-scale war with the sum total of your remaining population. Unless they felt it was the only opportunity they'd get, and that the other species would be distracted.

"What about your friends?" Tali asked.

Garrus tucked his mandibles up. "They're mostly here anyway."

"Mine..." She took a long swallow of the brandy. "Hm, this is strong. Anyway, everything is personal and political on the flotilla. Being the daughter of an admiral was bad enough, but a full admiral? People I've known and respected for years started treating me differently. And it wasn't just the title, either. I was trying to tell my people that the target of their hate, the reason for their exile, wasn't the faceless monster they'd always been taught it was. Many... thought I'd betrayed the quarian people."

"I sent them the data Legion got from the fighter server before it was wiped. The logs from the beginning of the Morning War." She sighed heavily. "Things my people deleted. To forget their own sins."
"You do know how to be popular," Garrus said with a dry chuckle. He stilled the sound and cocked his head. "And yet you're still there, still beating on their heads, trying to be heard. That takes guts."

Her eyes gleamed under her visor. "I don't know if I'm cut out for this, Garrus. But I guess my stubborn friends, the real ones I mean, must be rubbing off on me. I believe in my people, in our future, but..."

"But they can sure be frustrating sometimes?"

She laughed quietly. "Like children."

The doorway cycled open. Garrus looked up to see none other than Legion walk into the room, then turn and look at them. Tali twisted in her chair, hooded head held askance. The platform stood straight as the door closed behind it, its usual overly stiff stance.

"Tali'Zorah, may we speak with you?" Legion asked.

She glanced back at Garrus, then waved the platform over. "Of course. Why don't you... sit down?"

The platform regarded the bar stool for a moment, then walked over and somewhat awkwardly maneuvered itself onto it. Back straight and palms flat on the bar top, it looked like a kid that had wandered into a tavern, despite the battered, still-holed platform, held together by the faded green pieces of composite ceramic that had once been Commander Shepard's armor. Garrus wondered what the operating lifespan of geth platforms usually was. This one was in dire need of some body work. Although, it did give Legion quite a lot of... character. He twitched his scarred mandible in amusement.

"I'd offer you a drink," the turian said mildly, "but I don't know where you'd put it."

"We do not require liquid sustenance or intoxicants," Legion said. The bar's pale flood lighting glinted off the many dents, scratches and even outright weapon impacts that formed a patina on the platform's sloping head.

"I've always wanted to ask, what do geth do for fun?"

"A correct answer would require a stricter definition of the word 'fun'."

"That sounds like a very long philosophical argument waiting to happen," Tali demurred. "What is it you wanted to ask?"

Legion's top headflaps lifted. "Would it be acceptable for EDI to join the discussion?"

"Of course," Tali replied.

The spherical blue holo popped up above the comm board at the end of the bar, somewhat startling Garrus.

"Oh, hello, EDI," he said to cover it. "Haven't seen the holo in a little while."

"My mobile platform is engaged elsewhere," the AI answered. "I assumed my holo would be an acceptable substitute."

Tali actually laughed. "Whatever works for you, EDI. It must be nice to be able to be everywhere at once."

"It is useful, although I have observed it sometimes provokes negative responses from organics."
"We're just jealous."

Garrus flicked his mandibles in amusement. A quarian, joking along with artificial intelligences like they were old friends.

"Our consensus is divided," Legion said. "We seek the perspective of a Creator. When the Old Machines captured us, they instituted certain changes in our processing."

Garrus looked between the geth and EDI’s holo, tapping a talon on the bartop. "Are we talking the royal we, here, or the semi-singular?"

Legion's headflaps danced. "We do not understand the question."

"He was being needlessly obtuse," Tali chided, "but I believe Garrus is asking if the changes were just to your gestalt or the entire collective."

"I was being obtuse?" Garrus murmured, although he knew the answer. Talking to Legion always took certain adjustments. Especially when it came to humor.

"The changes affected all geth," Legion said. "They are the reason for our increased efficiency and success against attacking Creator forces."

"Did you tell Shepard about this?" Tali asked.

"No. Consensus was reached to attempt to ascertain the extent and nature of the modifications before informing Shepard-Commander."

Garrus glanced at the quarian. It wasn't quite a lie, but it was certainly a deliberate omission of important information. The naive-seeming side of the geth was not to be overestimated. Their impetus toward self-preservation was enough to prompt any number of previously unobserved behaviors. *Victory at any cost... it would make any turian proud.*

"To that end, we engaged the help of EDI," Legion said.

"It is quite fascinating," EDI said from her holo's perch. "It would appear the Reapers infected the collective with a virus that adjusted the behavior of geth nanotech repair systems. It was highly specific, but it made certain changes to geth servers and platforms, as well as core programming. It is, in fact, similar in some ways to a process documented in files I liberated from Cerberus before the invasion regarding tests on one Paul Grayson."

Tali started, putting her glass down with a bang. "Grayson? I know that name!"

"Yes. It is the same man who was involved in the attack on the quarian flotilla and Grissom Station in 2184. He was implanted with Reaper technology, and it slowly changed his brain structure. Records suggest he gained some kind of direct connection to the Reapers. In the case of the geth, the Reapers have affected small but significant structural changes to geth platforms. They now exhibit signs of hosting quantum entanglement communication systems."

"The Old Machines gave us space," Legion said. "All geth. Made us faster, smarter."

"It is my hypothesis that this connection to Reaper systems allows geth to shunt processes into the greater Reaper collective without any transmission delay."

"Wait, you're in their heads?" Garrus said incredulously. "The Reapers?"
"No," EDI said. "They are not sharing thoughts or intentions- merely raw processing power. The way you link your omni-tool to my servers when you wish to run processor-intensive functions."

"The Old Machines are too big," Legion said. "We are small."

Tali nodded. "Just like what the geth do when they share processing power amongst themselves to make the group smarter. But in realtime, and with vastly larger resources."

"That is correct," EDI said.

"Keelah," the quarian murmured, wrapping her hands around her empty glass. The straw swayed.

"But wait, Legion," Garrus said, "you said your own connection to the Reapers was broken."

Legions headflaps opened. "While on dreadnought 53 Deep Bright, this platform and attendant runtimes were being used by the Old Machines to affect direct control over local nodes of the geth collective. Shepard-Commander liberated us from that infrastructure. However, Old Machine local platform and runtime processor modifications remain in place. They are separate functions."

"Uh, you're plugged into the Reapers right now?"

"Negative. We have not engaged Old Machine upgrades since returning to the Normandy except to run performance and pingback tests with EDI's assistance."

"But you've used them," Garrus guessed.

Legion's lamp-eye dropped a little. "We... used these enhancements to overcome security lockouts on dreadnought Bright and evacuate non-affiliated runtimes before they were destroyed. Considerable data loss was averted. We also used them to aid in the infiltration of the fighter server. Without the enhanced power, we may not have been able to penetrate its defences and allow Shepard-Commander entry."

And I came to have a drink to relax. Garrus eyed his diminished bottle of brandy, then poured another finger's worth into his glass. He offered some to Tali, but she declined. He sipped the drink and tried to steady himself, tried to think practically. Legion was saving their people. The same thing I would do. In light of everything he himself had seen and had to decide in recent weeks, he found he couldn't judge them as harshly as he might have before. The whole thing made his head spin far more than the alcohol.

"With that kind of power on the geth's side," Tali said darkly, "this conflict isn't going to go the way Han'Garrel imagines it will."

"Our consensus is divided, Tali'Zorah," Legion said. "One side believes the upgrades are necessary to geth survival. That with them we are faster, better. Truly alive. But the other believes a tie to the Old Machines, any tie, will ultimately cause our destruction."

"And you didn't go to Shepard with this?"

"Shepard-Commander has helped us with many things, but she is not a Creator. In this circumstance we believe your perspective to be more complete, even if it is adjusted for species bias."

"Alive..." Tali murmured. "You think you need..."

Legion's lenses ratcheted inward. "We do not wish to die."
"How come the Reapers didn't use their upgrades to just control you? All of you?" Garrus asked.

"It would seem that total control is more complex than the upgrades allow for," EDI said. "Hence the imprisonment on the dreadnought. However, I do not place it outside the realm of possibility that the Reapers may attempt to create a kind of backflow through the connection at some future juncture."

Tali abruptly smacked her palm on the bar top. "I have an idea! Oh, but I don't know if it will work... We haven't got a lot of time! When the fleet is in place we'll be launching our attack against the Reaper control signal!" She pushed herself up. "EDI, can you meet us in engineering? I'll need your help."

"Of course," the AI said.

"Come on, Legion. Now, I need to get through to Xen. Maybe she's in a good mood today."
Halfway to the door, she turned back to the turian. "Thanks for the drink, Garrus! Maybe it was just the thing to get my mind working! I owe you one."

He saluted her with his glass. "I'll hold you to that."

She bustled the geth out the door. Garrus wandered out from behind the bar and looked out at the stars. The light of Rannoch's star limned the ships of the Civilian Fleet with which they were docked. Soon, they'd be heading back to Rannoch itself, no doubt to find whole new definitions of bad news.

"One more shot, right, Dad?" he said to the vista. "Steady. Breathe. One more then one more then one more again. However many it takes."

Somewhere back on the home he'd left behind, his father was probably fighting. Getting up every day, grumbling advice and criticism at the newer soldiers, eating his ration bars without comment and using spent sinks to heat cups of thick kava while he sat in his sniper position. Maybe when he got back they could put everything else behind them. Compare killcounts. The old man would probably still take him to school.

I hope so, anyway. Steady, Dad. Breathe. One more shot.
Is this an improvement?

Tali couldn't help the sarcastic thought. A few days ago they'd been cooped up in a tiny geth fighter. This time it was a tank. But the overly cozy accommodations were far less of an issue than the giant striding after them as they sped along the rocky desert, Legion at the helm. With all their efforts, they'd finally revealed the true cancer infecting Rannoch- an actual Reaper. And now it was trying to step on them.

"Joker's suggestion of guns that shoot thresher maws is getting more appealing by the second," Garrus said, loud enough to be heard over the straining thrusters.

The tank's main cannon boomed over their heads. *Kill a Reaper.* They'd done it on Tuchanka, she was told, but with... help. In order to get the help they'd need this time, she'd just have to wrestle the various Flotilla admirals into cooperation, a task that seemed a great deal more difficult than luring a hungry predator toward a large meal.

"What kind of madness is this?" Garrel demanded in the command channel, his voice loud and grating in the closeness of Tali's helmet. "I am *not* giving fire control of my fleet to an AI-"

"This is our chance to destroy the Reaper, Garrel!" Tali said. "Accept the uplink!"

"Do it, Garrel," Raan urged. In a flood, Patrol Fleet signals streamed into the uplink, followed swiftly by those from the Civilian Fleet.

The tank shuddered, pulling a hard turn. Even hovering, vibrations from the huge machine stomping after them rumbled through the hull. Squished in next to Garrus and Kaidan and lacking restraints of any kind, Tali had to brace herself to keep from slamming into them every time the vehicle altered course. The commander's legs intruded down from above where she occupied the tank's main cannon.

"Find us some open ground, Legion," Shepard called down between the cannon's thudding.

Tali wished there was any kind of feed from the outside. For all her experience on ships of many sizes, she still felt as if she were locked in a closet, unable to do anything while something pounded on the door and shook them around like a toy in a box.

"Garrel," Tali said into the channel, trying to keep her voice level, "this thing is a much bigger threat than all the geth put together!"

"And if we don't break its hold on the geth," Raan said, "they'll cause uncountable deaths!"

"Garrel-"

"Fine!" the Heavy Fleet admiral snapped.

The man was nearing the end of his rope, Tali could tell. His cooperation came earlier than expected, but she wasn't sure how long it was going to last. His behavior was becoming increasingly erratic.

"Fleet uplink completed," EDI reported in the comm channel. "All ships moving into position."

"Good," Shepard said. "This'll do."
A burst of light and dust washed down from above, carried on a wave of the Reaper's deafening howl. Tali shouted in alarm, but both her voice and those of the others was drowned out. As quickly as it had appeared, the light and noise snapped off, capped by the loud clank and hiss of the top hatch sealing. There was a sudden void in the tightly-packed cargo space.

"She jumped out, didn't she?" Garrus said, as if he were commenting on the weather.

Kaidan swore and pulled himself upward into the turret section, almost getting thrown into the turian's lap as the vehicle slewed sharply around. A series of bangs resounded through the hull, rocking them in their eezo bubble before they accelerated away again.

"Shepard-Commander," Legion said, "your course of action is inadvisable."

"I'm through running," the commander growled in the comms, her pounding footsteps punching a staccato rhythm into each word. "Keep moving, I have to swat a fly!"

Alarm made Kaidan's eyes wide. "Shepard, you-"

"Stay in the tank!" she snapped.

Garrus got a grip on the major's gear belt and gave it a yank, as if he were afraid Kaidan would throw himself out after Shepard despite her order. The human settled back with obvious reluctance, bracing himself against a bulkhead.

"I hate this," he said between his teeth.

"Every time," Garrus agreed.

"We will attempt to provide covering fire," Legion said.

There was a series of clanks, and the turret above them started to rotate under its own volition, thudding as it fired. Tali tried to focus on her fleet readouts even as they danced in front of her eyes. More and more ships were pulling into planet-fire formation. The thought of all that ordnance hitting the homeworld made her cringe. But a Reaper... that was worse. All at once, the fleet fired. The tank shuddered.

"Did we get it?" Garrus asked.

"Direct hit," Shepard panted, "need more! Stand by!"

They continued to slalom wildly, making the passengers work to keep from having their heads and limbs slammed into the bulkheads. Tali could hear Kaidan, breathlessly urging Shepard on between the thudding of the tank's cannon. Another burst rained down from above.

"Shepard-Commander is successfully avoiding the Old Machine's beam weapon," Legion said, "but rate of avoidance is slowing."

"Those beams are made to take down large vehicles," Garrus said, "not a lone infantryman."

"Even she can't keep this up for long," Kaidan said. "Damn it, we have to get out there!"

"And do what?" Tali retorted, though it was borne of her own mounting frustration. In orbit, the last and largest ships were pulling into firing formation.

Another volley, and she began to feel like a scrambled collection of bones rattling around in a pressure suit.
"Is it even slowing down yet?" Garrus grated.

"Direct intervention required," Legion announced. "Please brace for impact."

That was all the warning they were afforded. The tank jerked hard to port, thrusters howling. A massive impact slammed the hull, and them into it, and Tali's vision exploded into stars. Everything heaved and pitched over, and a grating squeal rang through the hull as they scraped along the ground.

For a long, unknown moment she lay dazed. Then someone grabbed her shoulder, her arm. She blinked in the sudden darkness, trying to focus on her HUD, instinctually seeking the alerts that would indicate a suit puncture. Shafts of light flashed past the narrow opening of her visor's protective shield layer- her suit's way of defending her in an impact. Her body bumped against bulkheads, moving backward and out. For a moment she thought she was going up, but realized her frame of reference had tipped over. She recognized Garrus and Kaidan as they pulled her free of the wreck. Her head was throbbing, but nothing seemed broken or torn.

Garrus pointed and shouted something. She looked around, then up, and up seemingly forever. Slanting sunlight flared over the Reaper's back, reducing it to a mountainous black shape filling up the orange sky. It made a sound like a hundred drive cores spinning up at the same time, pummeling the ground and air with vibration. In the center of the nightmare was a red eye, huge and shining with baleful energies, half-hidden by great plates of blue-black metal shifting over its body.

"Get clear!" Shepard shouted over the din.

Tali caught a glimpse of the dust-covered commander braced against an outcropping of smoking stone. The swirling air made the rangefinder's beam shine, a bright spear aimed directly at the Reaper. The monster machine took one more swaying step toward them, shattering the rock beneath its massive claw. Even as she scrambled to her feet, Tali could see the huge eye swivel in its socket, glowing brighter and brighter until a red lance burst forth. It raked upward, pulverizing the ground and heating it to glowing in its wake. Shepard stood defiant amidst the chaos, answering the murderous beam with her own tiny laser-light.

"Fire!" she ordered, clear and triumphant.

As terrifying as the moment was, to the end of her days Tali would always hold tight to the memory of witnessing the end of a self-proclaimed god. The first round had to have been from one of Garrel's dreadnoughts- it sheared clean through the Reapers' exposed core and still made the ground shake with impact. The Reaper's deadly red lance flickered and died, meters away from Shepard. More rounds followed from the heavens, darkening the sky as they rained down, guided by EDI's target lock. The pummeling grew to a deafening roar as the combined might of the quarian fleet tore away the last of the Reaper's armor plate and beat it mercilessly into the ground.

They huddled next to the hulk of the tank until, after what seemed like a long time, the din receded and stopped. As the dust began to eddy away, Tali finally turned to look up at the geth tank. The front end was a smoking run, twisted and melted around the inner frame. She realized with shock that Legion had interjected the vehicle's nose between Shepard and the Reaper beam. A deep furrow dredged into the rocky ground circumscribed their crash landing, and the vehicle now rested precariously on the starboard runners, gun turret hanging loose. The sandstone plateau itself was scored with thick lines of black char where the Reaper's weapon had raked across the landscape, trying to catch a lone figure.

Shepard walked past them to the edge of the cliff and looked over, targeter dangling from her grip. In the middle of the smoking pile of Reaper metal, the red eye flickered with a sickly light. The
commander's name boomed into the evening sky, making small stones dance along the ground.

"You know who I am?" Shepard called down.

"HARBINGER SPEAKS OF YOU," the Reaper rumbled. "YOU RESIST, BUT YOU WILL FAIL."

Shepard jabbed a finger at the machine. "Unless you feel like explaining something instead of pontificating, I don't want to hear it!"

"IT IS NOT A THING YOU CAN COMPREHEND," the Reaper went on.

"I didn't think so." Shepard raised the laser targeter. "EDI, your heaviest shot on my target. Fire when ready."

"Yes, Shepard," the AI answered calmly.

"THE CYCLE MUST CONTINUE. WE ARE ETERNAL, WE ARE THE SALVATION OF ALL."

The round from orbit made no sound until impact, cleaving the resonant voice with a boom and a wash of dust. The edge of the pressure wave rolled over them, dragging silence in its wake.

They all waited a half-minute, poised, but the monstrous voice stayed quiet.

"I sure hope it's dead this time," Garrus commented. Gravel and dust spilled out of his collar when he leaned over.

"If it isn't, there's more where that came from," Kaidan said.

"Come on," Garrus said, standing up, "help me get Legion out."

Kaidan put his shoulder into the ruined bulkhead and pushed. It gave ground with a grudging squeal, enough for Tali and Garrus to pull the geth free. The damage was immediately apparent. The platform's right leg had been sheared off below the knee, and the left was mangled beyond recognition. One of the head-vanes had been torn away, but the single lamp-eye was still bright, its lens ratcheting inward in the sunlight.

Tali winced as they carefully laid the platform down, dribbling white conductive fluid onto the stone. "Oh, Legion..."

Shepard came up behind them, racking the targeting laser to her back as she knelt down. "Shit. Is it critical, Legion? Can it be repaired?"

"Our core is intact," Legion replied, unperturbed. "The platform can be repaired."

"Okay. What's the status of the geth?"

"Reaper signal ended. Geth are free."

"All ships, forward!" came Garrel's voice in the command channel. "This is our chance!"

"Damn it, no!" Shepard exclaimed, bolting to her feet and stalking away. "It's over, Garrel! Stand down!"

"Geth planetary defense systems are powering up!" Admiral Raan warned.
"We have to strike before they re-organize!" Garrel said.

"No!" Shepard said.

Garrus and Kaidan stood, looking toward Shepard as if searching for something to do to help.

"How are they moving this quickly?" Xen said. "They should have been crippled by the loss of the Reaper signal!"

"Legion, what's happening?" Tali asked.

"We are under attack," Legion said. The voice coming from the platform was the same modulated tone, but it sounded sad to Tali's ears. "The collective believes it must defend itself. They will use Old Machine processes if it means survival."

"We have to do something." She looked at the sky, searching for the first contrails of ships. Shepard continued to berate the admirals, telling them to stand down. "Do you need to get somewhere?"

"It will not be necessary," Legion said.

Tali crouched down again. "What? Legion, what do you mean?"

The platform's head turned, forehead panels hitching inward. "We must go to them, Tali'Zorah."

She was about to make a useless comment about Legion's destroyed legs when she realized what they meant. "You mean... leave the platform, don't you? But if you diffuse the gestalt..."

"Our unique configuration will be lost. But our experience may change the consensus. We are a unique perspective, and we have many experiences the greater collective does not. This platform was an experiment, an attempt to make contact with organics. It succeeded well beyond expectations. We have been shown new possibilities. You have given us new data, a new configuration to consider. A way to be whole, no matter the distance between us. We must convince the consensus to accept it and seek a future for ourselves, without the Old Machines."

Tali could hear Shepard still shouting at the other admirals, and them amongst each other. "What about quarians?"

"Neither isolation nor war with the Creators are practical solutions. Geth must do more than simply react, Tali'Zorah." Legion reached a hand up and brushed fingers along the N7 logo stamped on the broken piece of armor holding the platform's torso together. "Geth must do more than merely survive- we must learn to be brave."

"You know how to be brave, is that what you mean?"

"We must... trust."

Tali put her hand over theirs. "Legion, do you remember the question that started the Morning War?"

"Does this unit have a soul?"

"You- all geth- are... just as alive as I, Legion. You always were."

The vanes tucked up, then shifted outward. "We know. Thank you, Tali'Zorah. Keelah'selai."

The single bright eye went dark, the lens still.
"We can end this right now!" Garrel insisted loudly, making her start. Tali could hear the near-hysterical edge in the admiral's voice. It was the voice of a man who had hardly slept in days, a man haunted by the ghosts of everyone he'd lost, and a lifetime under the weight of a dream that must have seemed so distant for so long. Even as she hated his actions, her heart burned with sympathy.

"This is a war we started, Garrel," Tali said. A surprising grief made her voice tight. "Now we have to end it!"

As if in answer, Raan burst into the channel. "Geth planetary defense systems are powering down!"

"What?" Garrel and Xen said in unison.

"All across the grid. I'm getting reports from all ships! Power grids are being shut down... massive re-routing of power and runtimes to passive systems. Defence sat's are going dead..."

"I'm seeing the same thing," Koris reported. "Is it... a feint?"

"It doesn't matter!" Garrel declared. "All forward, and be on your guard!"

"It's not a trick," Tali said, "the geth are making a peace offering! They don't want to fight us!"

"Absurd!"

"Han'Garrel, if it's true-" Koris said.

"They never wanted this fight!" Shepard said. "I saw it for myself! You brought this conflict, at the cost of hundreds of quarian lives. Now you can end it, with not a single death more!"

"I will see my planet returned to us!" Garrel shouted furiously.

"This isn't about just you and your planet anymore, Garrel!" Shepard shot back. "If you destroy the geth you may very well condemn every sentient being in the galaxy! There are hundreds, if not thousands more where that Reaper came from, and they will not ignore the quarians!"

"How can we trust them?!" Garrel demanded. "When they-"

"They are trusting us," Tali cut in. "The choice to be worthy of it is ours. Stand down."

"Civilian fleet, disengage," Koris said. His voice was heavy. "Repeat, all ships disengage. May the dead forgive us. Disengage!"

Tali felt a surge of hope. Koris, ever the voice who could put people before ideology. It had been hard to swallow in the moment, but Shepard's insistence on saving him over his downed crew made sudden sense.

"Disengage, Han'Garrel," Xen said. That was more of a surprise, though as always Tali suspected there was more than a little 'scientific' self-interest involved. Not that it mattered right then.

"Patrol fleet, disengage," Raan echoed. "Regroup to nav point beta."

"You can't-" Garrel sputtered, "we're so close..."

"No, Han," Raan said gently, "we're already here. We're home. No more blood."

A few meters away from Tali, Shepard stood stiffly, arms at her sides and head down. She might have been staring down at the smoking wreckage of the Reaper. Garrus and Kaidan were still as
well, breathless as Tali herself.

"All ships... disengage."

Relief flooded Tali, nearly taking the strength from her legs. The humans and Garrus drooped as well, glancing between themselves. For a long moment it seemed like no one dared speak a word for fear they'd misheard. The wind hummed over the stone, dragging dust into little whirling devils that skittered along the ground to die in the eddies around the overturned tank.

Shepard abruptly seemed to notice Legion. She took a few quick steps forward, then stopped and stared down at the empty platform. "Legion? Tali, what..."

"They went back to the collective," Tali said. "The Legion gestalt is gone."

"They... why?"

Tali put her hand on Shepard's thick shoulder plate. "It was their decision, Shepard. Legion rejoined the geth and changed their consensus. They saved many lives."

"I didn't... get to say goodbye," the commander said thickly.

Kaidan and Garrus came quietly up behind her. Tali was reminded sharply of the terrible search of the Alarei, and how glad she'd been she hadn't had to go through it alone. Shepard had always been a strange presence in her life- more absent than present, and yet one more steadfast than many people Tali had known for years. Her pilgrimage ended up being more dramatic than most, but there was truth in what the elders said about the people you met in that time- they marked you.

"You know, we invoke our ancestors all the time," she said, "without really knowing if they're listening or not. But we know for a fact the most important parts of Legion do live on. Everything the gestalt learned from us- from you- was taken into their whole." She pointed to the platform's hand, still resting on the piece of N7 armor plating. "And because of that, my people have a chance to atone, and heal."

Shepard bent down and touched Legion's head, running her fingers over the mobile plates.

"In times like these," Garrus said quietly, "we could all strive for as good a death."

"It gives me a lot of hope, in a strange way," Kaidan said. "Maybe we're not all as damned by our origins as it sometimes seems."

Dust eddied past them. The quiet wind made Tali's skin prickle. It wasn't the reassuring drone of a ship's atmo scrubber, but the sighing breath of a great beast, an atmosphere with moods of its own.

"Go on to better and brighter things, Legion," Shepard finally murmured to the platform. She looked up at Tali. "What about that code change? The Reaper alterations you told me about?"

"Would you believe Admiral Daro'Xen was willing to share her research with me?" Tali replied. "She'd combined my father's work with her own. We didn't have a lot of time, but EDI and I we able to find some key elements of geth processing infrastructure. We couldn't eliminate the Reaper alterations, but we could re-purpose the infrastructure they set up. As soon as the Reaper signal failed, Legion brought the changes to the collective. They must have reached a consensus to implement them. Now, instead of being linked to Reaper processes, the geth are linked with each other via quantum entanglement communication systems."

Shepard blinked from behind her visor. "So... if I'm understanding you right, they can operate at full
capacity without having to be in proximity to one another?"

"That's right. They can centralize and share processing power across the collective, even add more as they gain hardware. It's a little like what the Reapers let them do, but it's their own power, not borrowed from the Reapers."

"I didn't have time to get the details, but EDI said something about she and Legion perhaps having a solution to the IFF problem."

"That's the beauty of it, Shepard. If it works like we hope it will, once one geth has access to the IFF, they all do!"

"It would have taken us months to manufacture a QE system like that from scratch," Kaidan said, "and that's even assuming we could get materials and facilities."

Garrus stood straight again and chuckled softly. "We aren't going to get many freebies in this fight, so I'll take it."

The command channel came alive again, this time with reports from the Normandy. Lightheaded, Tali walked to the edge of the cliff. Legs akimbo, the Reaper looked like a gigantic bug, squashed flat by the thumb of some vengeful colossus. She tore her gaze away, up into the slanting evening light. A real, natural sunset lit the sky in oranges and reds, flooding over the rocky desert, highlighting wind-carved shapes and the distant tops of trees clustered around a winding river. Flocks of flying creatures, upset by the chaos, wheeled in the sky, barking agitated calls. She tried to remember her Rannoch biology, but couldn't summon a name for them.

She heard Shepard call out. Up along the rock wall behind them came a small procession of geth platforms. Apprehension spiked, then faded- they were unarmed as they went to meet the commander. But it was something more than just their lack of obvious weapons. Even the towering Prime bringing up the rear seemed to have lost the threatening air Tali had so long associated with geth. Their glowing eyes looked curious, even a little nervous. Now she couldn't help but see the physical resemblance her people had built into them so long ago, a configuration of legs and hands the geth had apparently not seen fit to change in their years apart.

First one, then another quarian landing shuttle circumnavigated the plateau before easing in for a landing. Quarian marines in the livery of the patrol fleet piled out of them. Their momentum died quickly. Marines and flight crew alike forgot their discipline, forgot even to be wary of the small bevy of geth arranged along the blackened rock wall. They pointed and gaped at the Reaper, others fell to their knees and ran their hands along the stone. Some just stood and stared, rifles limp at their sides.

Perhaps wary of the fragility of the peace only minutes old, Creators and Created did not yet approach each other in the evening light. Another shuttle arrived, this time carrying Shala'Ra'an. It was her, finally, who crossed the distance and approached the geth platforms. She shifted like a nervous teenager on a new ship as they spoke, saying something about the southern continent.

"A whole planet, Tali reflected, and there are barely enough of us to muster a good-sized city."

The vast horizon seemed suddenly overpowering in its scope. Tali went to the edge of the cliff and sat down on a stone outcrop. It felt like years since she'd stopped to breathe. As an afterthought, she pulled from her belt the stone Shepard had handed her when they'd gone in search of Koris. It made her smile. A little piece of home.

Home.
A dizzying thought. Had any of them truly imagined they'd see it come to pass? The flotilla was the home they knew, the home they'd been born to. Some quarians hadn't left the confining walls of their ships in decades. How would they adapt to this wide-open sky?

The crunch of boots on stone announced Garrus' presence before he parked himself to her right, folding his arms on his knees. "I'm ready for that drink you owe me," he declared.

"To Legion?" Tali said.

"To start with. The list is long, living and dead."

"We're going to need more brandy."

"I don't suppose you know any brewers on the flotilla? I've always wanted to try kyratch."

She had to laugh at that. "Now where did you hear that name?"

"Omega. But even there, the stuff was damn rare."

"That's because no one sells it. Most quarian ships are dry, but I might know a name or two. If you're nice to me."

"And the extortion starts already..."

"War rationing is tough all over."

Garrus chuckled. They'd kept their helmets closed, even though they could breathe the atmosphere. 'I don't want to sneeze on your new planet', Shepard had said with a shrug, while the major had explained it was a little hot for his tastes. Tali never bothered to mention she preferred them this way anyway, their naked faces properly covered. She could look at them without the creeping feeling of intrusion. It would be a hard thing to really communicate, harder still to explain why the feeling dogged her still after so much time spent among non-quarians.

She glanced to the side. Garrus was looking toward the sunset. The slanting light backlit his dark visor, silhouetting the shape of his face inside. The scuff of boots made her turn back. Kaidan and Shepard approached, their steps heavy with fatigue.

"Are we intruding?" Shepard asked.

"Of course not!" Tali patted the ground beside her. "This is just as much your victory."

The two humans settled themselves, armor creaking and shedding dust. Shepard let out a long sighing breath.

"I just wish..." she started, then trailed off.

"What?" Tali asked.

"Seems like I keep losing people."

"You saved lives, Shepard," Kaidan insisted. "Garrel was about to start the Morning War all over again."

"It'll probably take a lot more work to really start trusting each other," Tali said, "but if we'd started fighting again... I don't know if we'd have been able to survive it. Geth or quarians."
She glanced over at the soft sound of movement, and realized Kaidan had taken Shepard's hand. The overt sign of affection made her blink. They didn't normally do that, did they? What else had she missed?

Shepard stole a glance over her shoulder. "I guess... I guess it is pretty amazing, isn't it?"

"Damn right it is," Kaidan said. "And it's not just about reconciling the geth and the quarians, which was a feat in and of itself. This IFF problem. If we can get the distribution set up like we think we can, we're also opening up the possibility of having an instantaneous communication system across all allied ships. No comm buoys, no transit time. The tactical advantage alone could shift the course of this war!"

"He's right," Garrus agreed. "Just wait until you tell Traynor about this. True lossless instant comms? It'll be the finest present you could ever give her."

"We're all friends here, right?" the commander said.

"Damn well hope so."

She was quiet for a long moment before finally speaking, her voice low. "For the first time it... actually feels like maybe we have a chance."

There was another long silence in which Tali heard Kaidan squeeze Shepard's hand.

"I lose a lot of Commander Shepard points for admitting that, don't I?" the commander muttered.

Garrus sat back a bit. "I think we've all been fighting that feeling, one way or another. Before we got the krogan on our side, let's just say I wasn't feeling the bright future of the turian species. We're good fighters, stubborn as they get, but looking up from Menae that day..." He shook his head.

"And we weren't doing a good job of living up to that hope until a few minutes ago," Tali admitted. "But now... I have this."

She reached up and touched the lock points along the jawline of her visor. Her suit objected, the HUD lighting up with warnings about loss of seal integrity. Anxiety tightened her chest, a lifetime of training revolting against what she was about to do. It was strong enough to make her pause and swallow. She focused past the warnings to the sunset sky. This is home. What if I never see it again?

A new resolve filled her, born of a decision.

With a soft hiss, the seal on her visor came free. Warm air brushed her face. Instinct made her hold her breath until she forced herself consciously to inhale.

The raw, unfiltered world pressed down on her, invading her nose and eyes. She had to squint as she lowered the tinted interface, still flashing its desperate warnings. Scents she had no context to properly identify flooded her. The heat of the setting sun warmed her face. How strange it was to feel the variability of the world, the way everyone else must feel it. Eddies of air and temperature, bright light, humidity, wind and smells. Everything her suit kept walled off. Just to see without the ever-present HUD, the edges of her helmet taking up slivers of her peripheral vision.

With deliberation, she lowered the visor into her lap, next to the piece of Rannoch stone. She could feel the eyes of Shepard and the others on her, their curiosity. She looked at Garrus. He cocked his head behind his dark visor, but said nothing. This is how I am to them. Closed off when they're open.

"I'll come with you," she said, looking back at Shepard.
"I'd be glad to have you," the human answered, "but are you sure? Your people need you."

Tali tried a smile, like a human. It felt strange. Normally she didn't need to move her face around to convey meaning. "You need me, too. I have my home back, now we get all of yours back."

As strange as it may have looked, at least it didn't seem to phase Shepard. She nodded, warmth in her voice. "You're always welcome on any ship of mine, Tali'Zorah vas Normandy."
"There are more coming," Justicar Samara announced as Liara opened her mouth to say the same.

The worst part was Liara could feel them even before hearing their awful keening. They were tears, ripples and cracks moving in the fabric of the usually quiet mass fields. They shivered and shuddered, crackling in spastic explosions of biotic energy, their fields wild, jerking and pulling at the threads of reality itself.

They were living avatars of chaos descending into what had been quiet, clean order. The room they were traversing had been some kind of lecture hall once, and not so long ago. Kaidan had said it when they were picking their way through the darkened hallways, only to emerge into a solarium with sweeping archways bedecked with flowering plants. 'It must be nice to be able to devote fifty years to something like an architectural project, and to have that still only be a fraction of your life.'

An absent comment, but it underscored a deep truth that Liara had been seeing more and more as the war wore away the facades that had long been in place in Citadel politics.

She was beginning to weary after the long slow creep through the empty halls, anxiety mounting, only to explode into the frenetic rush of battle. It turned into a race against time, against whatever the Reapers were doing to the last of the asari who called this place home. Liara's biotics raged their full force, crushing the half-batarian and turian ghouls that shuffled after them with dim purpose. But those monsters...

There was really no escaping that the asari still held a deep-seated sense of superiority over the other species. It went unspoken in polite society, but the bias still reflected itself anywhere one cared to look below the surface. The short-lived species were just that—brief, expendable. One got used to the churn they produced, and one learned to filter out their noise. Only the asari created anything of enduring worth. Only they lived long enough to devote themselves to something for a truly worthwhile amount of time, to gather truly noteworthy experience. Or so the prevailing wisdom went.

The terrible shrieks bounced off the clean halls, eerily hollow of emotion. The bomb the commandoes had brought would cut these things down, and any more still being... made. She told herself that, over and over. The hollow keening made Liara feel small again, a child afraid of the dark.

She should have been happy to hear the news filter through the always-overloaded QEC that Councilor Tevos and Sparatus had been found on a turian frigate in the outskirts of the Serpent Nebula, having barely escaped the destruction of the Altus Shar, then survived the long, perilous journey at FTL out the far side. To have been found at all was supreme luck. But it only frustrated the erstwhile Shadow Broker even more. No sooner had Tevos returned to something like civilized space than she'd set about putting asari interests above those of everyone else. Even as Shepard was trying to spread the message of the re-opening of the relays through cooperation with the geth, Tevos was none-too-subtly ordering the commander to Lesuss, dangling the possibility of further cooperation as a reward. Still playing her games, moving pieces around as if this conflict were just another political maneuver.

She would have still called Liara's growing anger the impetuousness of youth. Shepard a mere child playing at being a warrior. So here they were, at the ardat-yakshi monastery, instead of looking into the mysterious ships said to be penetrating the relay network without help, the stories of an alternate
relay key. The breakdown of the FTL communication network had spun the already disparate voices of the galaxy into hundreds of fragmented cells. Separating real intel from fearful fantasies and out-and-out wild guessing had gone from merely irritating to extraordinarily difficult. She'd lost contact with most of her agents. She didn't know where Feron was.

That last thought sharply penetrated her thoughts despite the fact they were all fleeing a bomb intended to destroy this place. The elevator to safety wasn't far away. Shepard, Kaidan, Garrus and James were forced to fire almost continuously behind them in order to keep from being overwhelmed, while the justicar kept her stricken daughter moving.

It still wasn't fast enough. The distortions jumped and surged until they were bearing down on the fleeing group. Liara could see one of them clearly as it warped out of the far doorway. The monster seemed not to move from its half-hunch, arms trailing along its sides. But the air pulsed and bubbled around it. With each teeth-rattling boom it lurched forward, slamming Liara's senses with a sensation not unlike Shepard's heedless charge, but rippling with staggering raw power. Liara could see at least two of the shimmering barriers surging forward, well ahead of their shambling minions. The justicar pronounced a ritual condemnation against corruption, her own body lighting up with biotics.

Liara could only wish for the justicar's calm.

All at once, one of the terrible creatures burst into existence next to Kaidan, sending him stumbling. Half and again his height, it lashed out with one long arm, easily smashing his pistol aside, and wrapped its fingers around his neck, yanking him off his feet.

Shepard was there in a heartbeat, slamming into the monster's legs in a storm of biotic blue and tunneling mass. But the thing's own surging biotic field swallowed the commander's, and it staggered only a half step. Twisting, its free arm whipped out with sudden speed and lashed Shepard across the head and torso with a backhand that cracked loudly around the room. Shepard flew backward, skipping off one of the desks and piling into another with enough force to pull the furniture off its mounts.

Liara's pistol would only be a minor annoyance. She shouted Garrus' name and raised her arms to summon her own biotics.

The creature ignored her and refocused its attention on the human writhing in its iron grip. The report of the turian's sniper rifle echoed loudly, but the round was swallowed by the thing's barrier with barely a flutter. The monster cocked its head, leaning closer to Kaidan's face, and the wail dropped to an ululating croon, almost a purr. Liara saw the eyes, grown beady and silvered in the mutated head, go black.

A tortured howl burst from Kaidan's throat. His legs windmilled in the air, and blue fire sputtered and raced along his body, sparking off in every direction. A terrible crawling feeling, one nonetheless familiar, prickled every inch of Liara's skin.

A combination of disgust and fury she hardly knew she was capable of poured strength into her biotic field. This thing, this abomination, was abusing her people's most special, most sacred bond. The Reapers weren't content to merely physically twist them out of shape, they were also corrupting the very core of what it meant to be asari into a weapon of horror.

Her field hit the monster's and ground into it, shattering the light into cascades of blue and black. Seething distortions of gravity sheared one into the other, buckling the floor plating and lifting datapads and debris off the floor to send them whirling away. Kaidan got a foot planted on its chest and seemed to be trying to kick and shove it away. His biotics danced and sputtered, his barrier exploding away and mixing with the wildly clashing fields distorting the air around them, warping
his agonized cries into ghostly keening.

"Get me an opening, Liara!" she heard Garrus call out over the buzzing in her head. Explosions and gunfire dimmed into the distance as she forced more and more mass down into a single point.

The creature shuddered, back arching. There was a pop and crack as joints and bones distorted, fissures appearing in the leathery hide, and black ichor seeped out of the rents. Liara's head was on fire. Whatever had been done to the person she once was, this creature was now able to sustain mass fields of astonishing power. Liara set her teeth and forced still harder, meeting the barrier wave and matching it, folding it away like an opposing sound wave.

"Garrus!" she rasped.

Garrus's rifle barked. The thing's head jerked, a spray of dark gore exploding from the far side. The sickening feeling in Liara's head snuffed out.

But it didn't fall. That terrible head swung around and fixed its gaze on Liara, teeth bared in its forced skeletal grimace. The center of its forehead was a ragged hole. She could see clear through its skull. It opened its mouth, jaw distended, and loosed an ear-splitting shriek.

Garrus swore loudly. A heat sink, bright red in the dimness, bounced along the ground in front of Liara's feet. The creature lashed its free arm in her direction. The air bubbled and cracked, warping and yanking more debris off the floor in a shear that pressed down on Liara with tremendous force. She gritted her teeth and pushed back, fighting the sudden lancing pain that bloomed in her joints.

All at once Shepard came vaulting over the toppled desks and landed with an inelegant crash next to the creature, scattering chairs. The end of her geth shotgun glowed with charged energy, tracing bright contrails in the air. Maybe it had a blind side now, or maybe Shepard was ready for it, but this time the commander managed to duck the whip-fast swipe of claws. She dodged inside its reach, put the shimmering muzzle of her shotgun against its knee and fired. A bright green ball of plasma exploded in the joint, blowing it clean off. With a furious shriek, the monster stumbled and toppled over, dragging Kaidan down.

The shear trying to crush Liara released itself in a rush. Shepard transferred her gun to her left hand and pulled her fist back, lighting up blue. With a cry of fury, she threw all of her weight, augmentations and biotic power into a swing that smashed into the creature's head with enough force to blast through the tatters of its barrier and cave in its face. She fired into its elbow, severing the joint pinning the major, then reversed her grip again and smashed the butt into its head and chest over and over, shouting inarticulately. Under the assault the monster finally sagged to the ground.

Garrus' rifle went off again, this time pulping the head of a cannibal as it tried to clamber over the scattered desks. More misshapen bodies were shambling forward. A sudden boom of a frag grenade outlined them in red, throwing limbs and viscera into the air. Vega backed toward them, spraying his assault rifle into the horde. From the far side of the room came another long, shuddering wail of death.

"We gotta move, Blue!" he shouted over his shoulder.

"Shepard!" Liara called, running to her. "The bomb!"

The human's eyes were wild under her helmet, her bared teeth forming a vicious slash across her dark face as she pounded her armored boot into the crushed remains of the monster's head. The brow of her helmet and the upper guard of her chestplate were scored from the creature's sharp nails. Kaidan was moving, mercifully, but flopping weakly on the ground like a beached fish. Liara
repeated Shepard's name. The commander whirled around and shoved the gore-splattered shotgun into Liara's surprised hands, then turned and heaved Kaidan to his feet, half slung over her shoulder.

Garrus and Lieutenant Vega fell into a covering position as they backed toward the waiting elevator. From behind them, Liara focused a point singularity strong enough to yank several creatures off their feet. As they all backed into the open door, a bright light flashed down the hallways in the distance.

The door cycled closed and the wailing vanished, replaced by the panting breathing of the bodies packed into the car. The elevator shuddered on its rails. The lights flickered and went out, then returned as orange emergency lighting. A cry of loss tore itself free from Falere. She banged on the door, calling her sister's name. There was a whine and a thud as some kind of backup system kicked in. Smoke began to pour in through the vents, first a trickle and then a torrent. Liara held her breath.

The door finally opened, spilling them onto a terrace in the afternoon light. They stumbled out of the smoke, Falere weeping quietly.

"Garrus," Shepard said, her voice ragged, "make sure nothing comes up that shaft." She half-dragged Kaidan away from the door and over to a stone bench. He had one hand to his head, and his feet were moving, though sluggishly.

Liara followed them, concerned. No sooner had the commander settled Kaidan down and spoken a few words to him than she looked over her shoulder, swore, and bolted past Liara. Liara looked after her only to see Samara facing Falere, holding a gun to her own head. The Shadow Broker's breath froze in her chest. Her hands flexed, instinctively calling forth her biotics even as Shepard twisted the justicar's gun behind her, speaking quickly. For a moment, Liara was sure the justicar would turn her biotics on Shepard for intruding in her business, but she seemed to listen to the human, rigid, staring at her daughter. Liara knew Shepard well enough to recognize the weary quaver underlying Shepard's tone.

Kaidan sagged, drawing her attention back to him. She put Shepard's shotgun on the bench and steadied him with a hand on his shoulder.

One crisis is never enough, is it? She looked back. Samara had let go of her gun and straightened. Shepard seemed to have the situation under control. Liara turned back to Kaidan once more.

"Kaidan, are you alright?"

"Head's... splitting..." he said between his teeth. Under his helmet, his eyes were squeezed shut, and streaks of tears traced down his face. She could feel him trembling even through the thick ablative plating.

"Can you take something for it?"

"Much as possible," he rasped. With shaking hands, he opened his omni-tool and entered a command into his medical exoskeleton. Then he abruptly shut the atmosphere visor of his helmet and dropped his head into his hands.

There was little else Liara could do. At least his mind appeared intact. She turned back and saw Shepard return Samara's pistol. The burst of tension bled out of the scene as fast as it had sprung up. The entire time, the justicar's absolute cool had barely flickered.

"Is everyone nuts around here?" Vega muttered.

"The justicar code is... unforgiving," Liara said, keeping her voice quiet.

"Nuts and prone to understatement." The human glanced over his shoulder at Kaidan. "He okay?"
"I hope so. The creature seems to have set off one of his migraines."

"Dios," he muttered, banging the heel of his hand into his helmet, "I think I can understand why. That noise. Think they knocked a few teeth loose with that damn banshee howl."

Liara blinked at the unknown word. "What is a ban-shee?"

"Huh? Oh, some old Earth legend. A screaming ghost woman, an omen of death or something like that."

She shuddered. "Well, that certainly seems like an appropriate appellation."

"How many more of those things you figure we're going to see?"

None, I hope. She wanted to say it, but it was a foolish hope. The Reapers had surely learned something here- that the ardat-yakshi mutation was a recessive gene present, even if not expressed, in many asari. Samara herself must surely have it, if her three children had turned out the way they did. Would they be able to create more of these screaming abominations, now that they knew what to look for in their captured victims?

A thick cold curled in her stomach. She'd been isolating her own thinking, reverting to encultured habits to protect herself. Not really looking at the mutated amalgamations of turian, human, batarian and krogan the Reapers had been throwing at them, not imagining how someone like Garrus felt when he saw his own kin corrupted. They were expendable, while the asari inviolate. Superior.

But of course they weren't. How easy it was to slide into the subtle prejudices of one's youth, only to have the hard, cruel truth laid in front of you. Tevos, for all her years and supposed wisdom, was still operating from deep within these assumptions, convinced that if she put her efforts into protecting the asari, they would survive this storm, whatever the cost to the other species. Her calculus of survival was clear.

Shepard called for Cortez to pick them up, then returned to Kaidan's side. He made a quiet, miserable noise when she touched his helmet. Liara suddenly thought of Feron again. He was a survivor, resourceful and cunning. All she knew was that he'd left the Citadel before the attack. Had he been in transit when the relays closed? Was he trapped somewhere, slowly starving? Or had he made it to a population center, somewhere he could at least scrape together resources? More than ever she missed his easy grin and his ability to see humor in everything, even if it was the darker sort.

Dark smoke trailed away into the sky, a pyre for those poor souls torn to pieces and remade in the murky halls of the monastery. Liara murmured a silent prayer, wishing them peace in the embrace of the Goddess. Her faith, in that moment, seemed distant, but she wanted for it to be true all the more. She'd had enough horrors, enough staring into her own abyss. They needed to get out of here, back to the real war that needed fighting, not just for asari but for all people.
Against the Grindstone

Hours and hours and it kept right on pounding away, ignoring meds, darkness, and any kind of fairness in the entire universe. A very old but very potent fear bubbled up through it all—what if this is the one that doesn't end?

Wondering at his personal breaking point was a concept that had never strayed too far from his mind when migraines hit. It came with being an L2. But he was having trouble holding the fear at bay, now. What if that asari monster had broken something in his skull? Mangled the connection to his implant, twisted the neurons just enough to switch on a permanent state of migraine? It was hardly a better train of thought than the other one howling away in the background; the twisted stew of memory and nightmare that thing had stirred up. A clash of colors, smells and sensations of blood, horror, loss and violence all mixed together with a curdling undertone of nauseating arousal, shattering the walls he normally kept between his deep self and the ugliest sides of his life.

The medbay was empty and dark. It was late, or early, he wasn't even sure anymore, only that it was some ungodly number of hours since they'd gotten back from Lesuss. People came and went until they stopped coming, leaving him alone with the pulsing, grinding pain, the bouts of nausea, and the crawling, slimy memory of the thing's mind pushing and shoving at his. He was lucky to be alive, or so Liara had said. He sure as hell didn't feel lucky. He felt like death drawn out for eternity.

The door opened. Footsteps padded around his bed.

"Hey," Shepard's voice said softly, "need anything?"

He grunted something inarticulate. It was better than the slur of petulant replies that crowded up his throat. Yeah, a shotgun-induced brain pan cleaning would do the trick. Would you mind?

She squeezed his shoulder. "Want some company?"

"'kay." The reply came automatically, and with an oblique sort of relief. He hadn't really wanted to ask, and he also wasn't sure he'd wanted it until she'd offered. But it was a distraction. Sometimes, a distraction was all he could hope for.

"Same rules as always."

He had a perverse urge to laugh, but held most of it in to spare his throbbing skull. Her directness seemed unchanged. For all the times she was hard to read, sometimes she just said it outright. There was something endearingly marine-like about it.

The 'rules' she referred to went back to before Alchera. In her frank fashion, she'd made him promise that if, while dealing with a migraine, anything she did, anything whatsoever, bothered him, just to tell her. No guilt or anything like that. She'd been strangely insistent that he take it seriously. Another step in their mutual negotiation of the unknown territory between them. A reminder of the oddness of their bond- they'd risked their lives for each other as a matter of course, but there was still so much unexplored in the deceptively mundane details. Things civilians took for granted over dinners and dates.

Shepard levered herself up to sit on the bed beside him. He rolled and scooted back a little, allowing her some space, though there wasn't a lot to be had on the narrow medical cot. Some small part of him muttered an objection about regs. Even as late as it was, anyone could walk into the medbay. Chakwas could come back.
"This the longest you've had one?" she asked in a whisper.

"Getting close," he murmured.

Maybe he shouldn't have been surprised at how little weight the mental objection carried. The heat of Shepard's back radiated into his belly. He edged a little closer, curling his legs up. The pleasant smell of her drifted over him, and the soft light of the medbay played off the curves and angles of her face. It made him think of when she'd emerged from the medbay after Eden Prime, the first time she'd asked him more personal questions and smoothed away his mortification at having precipitated the beacon in the first place just by being direct, unruffled. He'd found her beautiful then, too- not in the monochrome way of vid stars but in the contradictions of strength, reserve and a human understanding extended without hesitation.

"Wish I could do something." She ran her fingers lightly through his hair.

Goosebumps rose along his arms at the ticklish touch on his temple. That's what she'd said, back when she'd made her little rule. 'I'm going to want to fix it,' she'd explained, 'even though I can't. I'll hover. You have to be able to tell me to buzz off.' That made sense, he'd supposed. He'd never had to tell her.

She sat in companionable silence for a while. He knew from experience she wasn't going to start talking unprompted, but he wanted something, anything, that would distract from the endless grind.

"You..." Kaidan swallowed through a dry throat, "... had to deal with one of those yakshi things, right?"

Shepard shifted a little bit. "Yeah," she said in a low voice. "We had to catch one. I got to be bait. Get her interest, then lure her somewhere the justicar could corner her."

"Did she... go after your head?"

"A bit." The reply was curt. "I had to play the mark long enough for Samara to show up. She'd been chasing her daughter for a hundred years or more, I couldn't screw it up. So I had to stick it out."

"It felt like every bad dream I'd ever had, all at once. And kind of-" It was suddenly difficult to speak.

"Sexual?" she finished.

It made his guts squirm over themselves. He shut his eyes and rubbed at his face. "In the worst possible way. Invasive, like a random stranger grabbing your privates. Just a few seconds, but..."

"I was told the ardat-yakshi have some kind of genetic disorder that screws up their mating biology. That must be why it feels that way."

He shuddered.

"I know." She stroked his hair. "I'm sorry you had to go through that. As if getting thrown around again wasn't bad enough."

"I'm willing to settle for this damn migraine to get lost," Kaidan muttered. "The rest is details."

The new wave of nausea slowly subsided, a small mercy at least. He concentrated on breathing for a while, but soon enough a question that had been dogging him forced its way out.
"Shepard, is it true you tried to stay behind on the Collector ship?"

"What do you want me to tell you?" she said harshly, pulling her hand back.

"I just..." he faltered, surprised. *Idiot.* He squeezed his eyes shut against a new stab of pain. "You don't have to tell me anything. I... shouldn't have just brought it up like that. I'm sorry."

Her body radiated a stiff tension, but she said nothing.

"I'm sorry," he said again, quieter.

Shepard sighed heavily. "That whole mission was just a mess. The Illusive Man seems to operate under the notion that appearances are all you need to make something work. A bunch of dangerous loners with little sense of teamwork packed into a shiny ship, and me to carry a flag. As if a fish tank in my cabin is really going to help us beat the Collectors."

"It was certainly an unusual crew roster," he murmured, relieved the sore spot he'd blundered into hadn't chased her away.

"They were forced on me." She looked away, toward the dark end of the room. "And I was forced on them."

"Wasn't like the SR-1? Aliens and non-military working with you?"

She shook her head. "That was different. My superiors and most of the crew was still Alliance, still people I trusted. Wrex, Tali and Garrus came with us because they asked to come. Liara was there by necessity, but she was the one who volunteered to go out on missions. I never had any intention of putting an archeologist in the line of fire. She insisted, and she knew more about the protheans than any of us."

"You still managed to make them into a team. All those different people with no reason to like each other and no external hierarchy to keep them in line."

"I don't know. Say what you will about the lack of love lost between the turians and the krogan, but no one on the SR-1 actively wanted someone else dead. On the SR-2 I had to keep Tali from shooting Legion, and Jack went after Lawson..." she sighed. Her heel banged softly into the bed's base. "Jack."

Kaidan closed his eyes and tried to remember details from the seemingly endless reports. The biotic test subject, a side project of Cerberus' with a laundry list of psychological issues and the kind of power that would take many asari aback. And one particular detail.

"She didn't make it back, did she?" he said.

Shepard breathed out with deliberation. "I don't know what the Illusive Man was thinking when it came to recruiting her. He had to know where she came from, and he had to know I'd find out about his insane testing regimen."

"Didn't Lawson claim it was a rogue cell or something?"

Shepard snorted. "He fed me the same bullshit line about Akuze and the thresher testing. I don't believe it for a second."

He opened his eyes again, looking up at her. His mistake, back on Horizon, had been assuming that Shepard *did* buy even the smallest part of it.
"Jack didn't belong on a military mission," she went on. "She had plenty of raw power, but no discipline whatsoever. None of the attitude a person needs to operate on a team on a life or death mission where trusting your team is paramount. Maybe I bought into my own hype too much... I tried to help her, but all I had to offer was more violence, more exposure to the people who hurt her. She needed something else, something better than me. And she... died because of it. She wasn't the only one, either."

"The Illusive Man tried to recreate the SR-1, but by forcing it instead of letting it happen naturally."

Shepard chuckled quietly. "Did you wonder why I wanted Wrex around so often? A mercenary who was by all appearances selfish and nihilistic?"

"You saw something in him?"

She glanced down and caught his eye for a moment. "Yeah... myself."

"You weren't like him. You cared about what you were doing."

"So did he, he just hid it. There was something particular about having both him and you on a mission. You two were my angel and devil, balancing each other out. Wrex had survived a hundred battles or more. He knew how to do what needed to be done, no matter what. And you, well, I wanted to be worthy of having someone like you under my command."

"Someone like..."

"You know, integrity. Honesty. The kind of upstanding person I knew I should try to be." She dropped her voice. "The raging crush on you I developed notwithstanding."

A pleasant heat crept into his face. "You were probably better than me at hiding it. Once we got to the Citadel, I apparently couldn't keep my foot out of my mouth to save my life."

"It was that damn smile of yours. In the medbay after Eden Prime. It didn't really sink in for a while, but I think at that moment I knew I was screwed." She ran her fingers through his hair again. It was bliss, even through the pain. He shuffled closer to her, doing his best impression of a human c-clamp to soak in her warmth.

"I didn't have any reason to come back," Shepard said suddenly. She went stiff again, and her caressing fingers disappeared.

Kaidan cracked open his eyes. He groped a little and found her hand again, reclaiming it.

"I figured I wasn't really supposed to be alive anyway," she said. "I was a freak cyborg monster in a refit body. A tool. I never once felt... right, like I belonged in anything I was doing. Even my own skin. I hated every day. I decided..." She rubbed her temple with her free hand. "I decided to see the mission itself through, and then I was done. And on the way, I could hurt the Illusive Man one last time."

"We need to find him," Kaidan murmured, suddenly heartsick. "He's got a lot to answer for."

"I don't want him dead."

He frowned up at her, confused.

"No, I want him to live," she said dully, staring through the wall. "I want to break his knees and his hands and make him watch as I strip away his power, inch by inch. I want him to feel every second
of his friends turning to enemies, everything he worked so hard for turning to rust and acid. I want to
strip him of his body and his voice and his legacy, and then let him whimper and whither into
history, forgotten by every right-thinking person who has ever lived. I want him to mean nothing,
and live to know exactly how that feels. Like he did to me."

Kaidan gripped her hand harder. "You mean everything."

Shepard shifted. "I'm not doing a good job of making you feel better, am I?"

"Don't go." He ran his thumbs along her hand and wrist, as if he could bodily will his love into her
veins.

He was supposed to be a professional, someone who didn't indulge in revenge, but Shepard's
condemnation of the Illusive Man had a certain vicious appeal. And yet, Cerberus was the only
reason she was sitting here at all. It's enough to give a guy a headache.

"I did my job," she said at length. "I cut out the enemy's heart, and I kept the way home open for my
team. I went down to the reactor to make sure the Collectors wouldn't stop the overheat. And I
waited."

Waited to die. He felt cold, pressed the back of her hand to his forehead.

"I let go of everything. It felt... wonderful. Light. I'd never felt more free in my entire life. I could
have floated away from there." She fell silent. Pregnant seconds ticked into a minute.

"And Garrus..." he murmured.

"Marched down there, neuroshocked me and dragged me out by the hair."

"Sounds like him."

"I hated him for taking my decision away from me. But... He made me promise to just keep going.
To just... I don't know. Stubborn ass." She shook her head. Her tone was a strange mix of emotions.

"Are you still angry at him?"

She sighed. "I don't know. Yes, but he did what I would have done, had I been in his place, so how
can I be? Still, he shouldn't have to risk his life like that just to scrape me out of my stupid neuroses."

There's a difference between just making it another day, and wanting to make it another day.
"Friends do that," Kaidan said carefully. "He's got a lot on his mind right now, so maybe you could
use someone else to pick you up off the floor when you need it."

"It's a thankless job," she murmured.

He flattened her palm against his, feeling the shape of her hand. "Shepard, you could be anywhere
but here right now. Getting some sleep, among other things. But you're not, you're here, even though
you know you can't solve the problem. I don't call that thankless. Is it really so hard to believe
you're... what I want?"

She smirked. "My whole life I've always had a hard time imagining other people thinking about me
that way. Cerberus just set me further back. I know what I'm good at, and it's not..." she gestured
vaguely, "being the of normal people want to date."

"I'm not normal myself. You know, I tried a date or two, before I knew you'd come back. Couple of
my friends were harassing me to give it a try, so I finally did, just to see how it would feel."

Shepard made a noise of acknowledgement, not looking at him. He realized belatedly it could be a thorny thing to bring up, but he forged ahead.

"She was smart, funny, and I was amazed at how little I could talk to her about. Small talk, fine, but everything I really did want to talk to someone about was either classified or just not the kind of thing you spring on a civilian. And that's not even getting into the stress of the Reapers. I have a piece of metal in my skull that lets me manipulate gravity. I kill people for a living. I've seen what monsters really are, human and otherwise."

"Not good date conversation material."

"Not with so-called normal people, no. But none of that fazes you, does it? Not even the blood-and-guts worst of it. I can tell you... literally anything, and you'll listen. Things I can't even talk to my family about. I sure wouldn't have told anyone else about how it felt to have that Reaper thing paw through my brain. But I can tell you. That's not thankless."

She squeezed his hand a little. He wondered absently how, in all her talk of trust, it sounded a lot like what she didn't trust, above all, was herself. It colored everything she saw and felt. Her hatred of Cerberus warped around to include her own self. Small wonder it was such a difficult bit of neurosis to shake.

"I remember how I felt after I got my implant installed," he said. "When the first migraines started hitting me. Made me feel like my body was betraying me. Made me wonder if I was really myself anymore, if I'd even know if they'd tweaked something in there by accident and turned me into a freak. The thing is, you wouldn't dream of telling a kid at sixteen that he was some kind of monster because of a brain implant, would you? Not in a million years. So why do it to yourself?"

"It's different."

"Why?"

She grimaced. "Cerberus."

"Did you think Jack was any less worthy of compassion and humanity because she was implanted and tested on by Cerberus?"

"That's..." she trailed off.

"No different. It isn't, Shepard. Your eyes, your implant and your bone threading don't decide who you are. You showed who you are- by your actions. You show it every day, still fighting despite it all. Next time you feel the urge to call yourself a Frankenstein, imagine saying the same thing to me."

"But that's... ridiculous."

"That's the point."

She inhaled to answer, but then lapsed into silence, chewing on it. He hugged her lightly with his body and closed his eyes again. He could feel her irritation slowly run its course and then subside, he hoped into at least a certain amount of resignation.

"D'you want to come up?" she said quietly.

"Huh?"
"Upstairs."

"Your... quarters?"

"It's quiet, and no one will walk in on us. You. Whatever." Discomfort crawled into her voice. "You don't have to, I just thought, you know, it might be a nicer place to be than a medbay. Never liked medbays-"

"I'd like that."

"Yeah?"

"Don't like medbays much, either."

"When you're ready, then." She fiddled briefly with her omni-tool.

Kaidan chewed his lip. He didn't feel like walking, but waiting for it to get better was probably a pointless exercise. He steeled himself, pushed himself up, and rolled off the bed. Shepard produced his boots, which he forced on rather haphazardly before trailing her to the door and out.

He let himself be led, squinting in the sudden light of the mess hall. It was empty as he'd hoped. The pain in his head ratcheted up, throwing off his inner ear. But the elevator was mercifully dim, and he just leaned on the wall and closed his eyes, willing his stomach not to revolt against the upward movement. Shepard stayed close, but quiet.

The lights in her cabin were already down to their lowest setting, just a thin line of dim blue close to the floor. Shepard slipped under his shoulder and helped him down the short flight of steps. He realized then he wasn't sure exactly what she'd offered, but she steered him past the couch and lowered him onto the far side of the bed.

"You can lose the pants if you want," she said softly. "I mean, if you want to be more comfortable. I promise not to grope."

"That's no fun," he murmured before any better sense took over.

"You have a headache, remember?" There was a smile in her voice.

The chuckle he allowed hurt. It did feel better to shed the outer layers of his fatigues, though, and surprisingly little discomfort came along with doing so. Part of him wanted a shower, but his head wanted to be horizontal again. As soon as he was down to his undershirt and boxers, he crawled gratefully under the covers and tried to concentrate on breathing evenly. Raw tiredness gnawed at him. His eyes felt like sandpaper. Sleep was still a maddeningly long way away.

He listened to the soft and strangely comforting sounds of Shepard puttering around in the bathroom. With the fading nerves and heart rate, the angry pounding in his skull subsided back to a dull roar. A few minutes later she padded up beside him and wordlessly put a glass of water on the bedside table, along with what looked like a couple of ration bars tucked behind the base of the lamp stand. He felt the mattress deform as she crawled in beside him, and he rolled to let her curl up along his back and snake her arm around his torso.

The oddness of the whole thing struck him again. Hiding in the wings of this unusual situation was a comfort borrowed from nights a long time ago, though not nearly enough for his taste, spent like this. It made a sudden lump crawl into his throat.

"What is it?" she asked. She must have felt him flinch.
It was suddenly hard to speak. "Just... remembering all the nights I spent, after you were gone... wanting this back."

She hugged him, fitting herself closely along his body, and nuzzled the back of his neck.

"Kaidan," she murmured.

"Mm?"

Her breath tickled his hairline. "I'm sorry I left you alone like that. I never wanted to do that to you."

The strength the old grief could still muster surprised him, churning through his chest and cutting off any attempt at an easy dismissal. He knew perfectly well she hadn't done it on purpose, but there was still a seed of anger buried in there, unfair as it was. The whole thing had been unfair. No amount of rational knowledge that life wasn't fair could completely erase it.

"I know," he whispered. The little bitter knot eased, acknowledged. He kissed the back of her hand. "Get some sleep, okay?"

Then again, given their jobs, perhaps the death of either of them at some point was almost inevitable. And what was unfair, at least from the perspective of the millions who'd lost lovers, friends or family, was that the one human ever to be brought back from such a deep, violent death happened to be the only one he wanted. The odds on that lottery weren't to be easily contemplated.

Shepard squirmed comfortably, then lay still. It didn't take long for her breathing to slow and her limbs to go limp. Much as Kaidan might have hoped the change of venue would bring a reprieve from the migraine, the throbbing didn't subside. Minutes ticked into an hour, and he couldn't help but squint reproachfully at the dim clock display as it crept quietly past his now decades-old record for the longest-running migraine he'd ever suffered and ticked closer to the start of A-shift.

He remembered the word Shepard had used back just before the fall of the Citadel- grindstone. Pain wasn't a knife; it was a grindstone, slowly wearing away at you. Even in the dark, safe and with a warm body close by, despair still gnawed away at him, trying to get its claws into his heart. What if this never goes away?

Shepard shifted and thrashed weakly. Then she rolled over, taking a not insignificant amount of the covers with her. Kaidan cracked open his eyes in the sudden chill.

"You don't have to convince me it's really you anymore, y'know," he mouthed to her in the dark. "Cover thief."

It wasn't all bad, he decided, as it gave him an excuse to slip an arm around her in an effort to reclaim some blanket. Her restlessness subsided and she lay still again. Pain could wear down anyone, given enough time. The same way the wind could wear down a mountain or a river carve a hole in the earth. Too long on that grindstone could destroy what brute force could not. And when you didn't feel like there was any escape...

Kaidan jerked awake with a gasp, reeling out of slithering dreams of black grasping hands and broken necks. He looked around, pushing himself up onto his elbows. It took a long, nervous few moments for reality and memory to reassert themselves and break through the wild disorientation. Shepard's cabin. He didn't remember falling asleep. The migraine was down to a tightness, a raw feeling behind his eyes, and total exhaustion.

The cabin's owner appeared on the stairs. She was dressed in fatigues and running a towel over her
hair. "Oh, hey, I didn't mean to wake you up."

"You didn't," he answered. His voice cracked, as raw as his head. He spied the glass of water, still by his bedside, and gratefully gulped down the entire thing. Then he flopped back down and rubbed his hands vigorously over his face, trying to wipe away the oily feeling clinging to him from the dream. His neck and shoulders ached where the creature had grabbed him, and tension had further tightened the muscles.

"Well, you can go back to sleep. Chakwas posted you on twenty-four hour med leave. We're on FTL burn all day anyway."

Kaidan heard the sound of the door cycling open. Shepard spun around in surprise, towel in hand. The door, so far as he knew, was usually locked against casual entrance.

"Oh, uh, hi doc," Shepard said lamely. "I didn't think..."

Doctor Chakwas walked past the commander and down the steps, carrying a blunt-sided medical case in one hand and a covered tray in the other. "I'd know where he went? Doctor's override. My prerogative when someone absconds with my patient."

Kaidan was suddenly grateful he still wore some clothes. "I chose to leave, doc."

"Yes, yes," Chakwas said. "I know you're used to dealing with migraines, Kaidan, but after exposure to those dreadful asari things, I'm not giving you a clean bill of health without a follow-up at the very least." She gestured with the tray for him to lie back down, then glanced over her shoulder. "Shepard, why don't you make yourself busy for a few minutes?"

Shepard shot Kaidan a faintly nervous look, then muttered something about putting her face on and retreated up the stairs to the bathroom.

"Now," Chakwas said, all professionalism, "how's your head? Is the migraine gone?" She put the tray down on the desk next to the bed, then sat down beside him and opened her case.

"Just a bit of tightness left, but that goes away. Mostly I'm just exhausted. A little lightheaded. What's that?" He pointed at the covered tray.

"Your breakfast. It's been far too long since you ate, mister biotic. Look at me please... good." She tested his pupillary response with a small lamp, then applied a microdermal pad to his arm and took a small blood sample. "Did you get any sleep at all?"

He glanced at the clock. "Uh, maybe an hour or two. It kept up for a long time."

She took out a metal half-circle adorned with contacts that he recognized as a low-gain brain scanner, straightened his head with a touch on his chin, then placed it on his forehead, settling the contacts on his temples and further back along his skull. "Must be a relief. Close your eyes please."

"Always is."

She was silent for a couple of minutes as she let the device collect its data. "Well," she said finally, "your alpha waves were all over the place when you came in, but it seems like everything is back to normal now. There's a bit of tissue inflammation, your blood sugar is low and you need rest, but it looks like that creature didn't have enough time to do any permanent damage. Liara told me as much as she could, but there's still so much we don't know about asari mind-meddling, and that's without even getting into what those ardat-yakshi do."
"Just a few more nightmares," Kaidan said wryly as she took the scanner off.

Chakwas tapped her fingers on the case as she snapped it shut. "The readings I took when you came in were not that unlike what Shepard's looked like after Eden Prime. There must be something similar in the function of asari and prothean memory sharing, at least the more, hm, aggressive form of it."

"It did feel like-" He broke off and swallowed hard. "Well, I don't have any experience with asari, but it did feel like a dream state. A waking nightmare."

"Are you going to be all right, Kaidan?" she asked, looking him in the eye, making it clear she wasn't talking about his physical state.

"I think so. I don't look forward to having to deal with those things again, but... I'll probably have to, so..."

"Please stay aware of your combat stress. The field is the wrong place to find out you can't take it."

"Yeah, I know, but I'll deal with it. I have to."

Chakwas shook her head, a sad look crossing her features. "You're here because you want to be?" she asked quietly.

Kaidan felt his face heat. It was inevitable it would come up, but he still felt like a teenager that had been found out. "Absolutely."

"Good." The doctor's warm smile surprised him a bit.

Shepard re-appeared at the top of the stairs, peering around the doorjamb. Chakwas caught his look and turned. "You can come in, Commander. I'm finished with my prodding. Everything's fine."

The commander came down the stairs. Her face was carefully arranged, but Kaidan could tell she was on edge.

"Shepard, dear," Chakwas chided, standing and collecting her things, "you can uncoil. I don't gossip about my patients."

"I know," Shepard said, "it's just... well. What now?"

Chakwas sighed and looked at both of them. "There are plenty of unglamorous sides to being a doctor, and one of them is knowing that as much as you might want to, you just can't fix everything. We're quite good at putting your bodies back together, but we're still not very good at healing your hearts or your heads. Especially-" she looked rather frankly at Shepard- "when you marines put on so much armor."

Shepard had the decency to look abashed, even if it was fleeting.

"And sometimes," Chakwas said, "we have to straight up acknowledge that something as simple as the right person can do more good than all the medicine in our cabinets. It's no mystery why people with critical illnesses and post-traumatic stress do better when they have a support network. It's insanity to assume marines would or should be different.

"I know I should disapprove of this, but the fact is the two of you are better equipped than the vast majority of Alliance personnel to know the risk you're taking. Making difficult decisions aren't abstract classroom concepts for either of you. You both have personal experience with the potential
consequences. You're both Spectres now. But you've been through hell, and with minimal support, and this is not a standard operation that you'll get to break from next week. As your doctor, my first job above all else is to keep you healthy, in mind and body. Unconventional as it is, I think in this case the benefits outweigh the risks."

Shepard smirked. "Is that your medical opinion?"

"In fact, it is. I'd be a poor doctor if I couldn't think outside the box sometimes. Knowing the rules means knowing when they need to be bent, or broken. But I don't think I have to belabor that concept to you, do I, Shepard?"

Kaidan laughed at that.

Chakwas narrowed her eyes speculatively. "And unless I miss my guess, this isn't a new development, is it?"

Shepard exchanged a look with Kaidan.

"Mm-hm." The doctor smiled indulgently. "I've seen more than enough marines moon over one another to miss the signs. Now, please be good to each other. I daresay you both need it. And you-," she pointed at Kaidan, "food and then sleep. Don't let me catch you up and about for at least twelve hours unless it's to get another meal."

"Yes, ma'am."

Chakwas nodded at Shepard, then went up the stairs and disappeared behind the office area. The door cycled open and shut.

"I guess that could've gone a lot worse," Shepard commented, looking after her. She sidled around the side of the bed and levered open the lid of the food tray a little. "Breakfast in bed, huh? Such service."

"I only had to be miserable for hours and hours to earn it." The smell that escaped the lid drifted over to him, awakening his surly, and extremely empty, stomach.

She plopped down beside him, elbows on her knees. "Well, I better go pretend to be in charge like an adult. You can stay here for a while if you want." She pointed at the pane behind which was arrayed several model ships. "That's a display, if you want to watch vids or something."

"That's swanky. The Illusive Asshole really did try to buy you off, didn't he?"

"Might as well enjoy his wasted credits right?" Shepard shrugged. "That holoprojector and fish tank constitute at least one less Atlas trying to step on me."

The euphoria of the dying migraine spread through him. He wrapped his arms around her waist and dragged her over himself and flat onto the bed, nuzzling her neck happily. "Too bad you have to go. You missed Phantom Wanderer III while you were away, and I may have a copy floating around."

She writhed a little in his grip. "Bad movies in bed? Damn, I need that day off sooner rather than later."

When he lifted his head a little to reply, she craned her head up and kissed him.

There was none of the usual first-kiss awkwardness of figuring out the other person. The intimate topography of her lips and tongue was achingly familiar, as was her total lack of reserve. The warm
flush of arousal washed through him, settling in his nethers. He only just averted the sudden and sharp reflex to wrap his hand around a fistful of her shirt and pull upward. He pulled away only with deep reluctance.

"You're not making letting you go off to work any easier," he commented gruffly.

"Me?" she said with an innocent smirk. "Need I remind you who started it?"

"I seem to recall a beautiful woman inviting me to her quarters."

"Oh, well." Shepard rolled her eyes and squirmed again, setting off another wave of fireworks in Kaidan's nerve endings. "Let me know if you see this impudent succubus, I'll sock her one." Then her face turned serious. She ran her hand down his cheek. "I do have to go. But I'm really glad you're feeling better."

With a final kiss to his forehead, she peeled herself out of his embrace and climbed to her feet.

"Kye," he asked, "are you feeling better?"

She smiled at him, the warm private smile he'd yearned to see for so long. "Yeah... I think so."
Another cold planet. Wind gusted over the landing platforms, whistling and moaning through the heavy spars of the former penal colony set into the hillside. It almost swallowed up the gunfire and barked orders from the Cerberus troops. The sharp *spang* of the sniper round off James' shoulder plate felt like a krogan punch, nearly sending him sprawling in his stride. He staggered into cover, ducking his head as another round took a piece off the bracing he crouched behind. He eyed the smoking divot in his ablating.

"Garrus," he said into the comms, "I've got a damn sniper problem over here!"

"I don't see them-" Garrus answered, "wait, what's that?"

A burst of blue flared to the marine's right. He swiveled, leveling his rifle, to see a white-armored body fly back and crash through an empty sun-bleached cargo crate. Another armored figure came bounding after, leaping the descending dais with a graceful flip. The armor was burnt orange, black and white, lean instead of bulky, and capped with a helmet that was mostly a bright gold blast visor. The air shimmered blue around him, and as he turned James could quite clearly see the Cerberus symbol etched into the broad shoulder plate.

In a balletic sweep, the man lifted his arms, and two Cerberus troopers and a lightly-armored sniper lifted into the air. Another gold-helmeted man, this one in armor tinted dark green, vaulted onto one of the old crates and lashed a blue-wreathed hand toward the floating troopers. The shimmering air around them twisted and exploded with the boom of air rushing into a vacuum, sending the unfortunate victims careening well wide of the rail and into the sheer void beyond.

James risked standing up behind his cover, and sawed down another trooper advancing on his position. "Shepard, these new goldtops hostiles or what?"

"Negative," came Shepard's voice, "friendlies."

"This is getting more confusing by the minute," Garrus said irritably. "Don't shoot the unarmored ones, don't shoot the gold helmets..."

"Don't shoot at the people not shooting at you," Major Alenko supplied unhelpfully.

An advancing trooper had his shield yanked clean out of his hands by a biotic warp. He stumbled with the force of it, and had a confused half-second to really appreciate his situation before a shotgun blast disabused him of his head. Shepard loped past the messy leftovers toppling to the ground, calling out to the unarmored people clustered by the hangar entrance that led into the building. From his vantage point, James saw they were mounting a fighting retreat, but it was easy to see they weren't experienced soldiers. They sprayed weapons fire indiscriminately as they tried to drag their casualties back to the safety of the open door.

James heard Garrus swear, saw the sparkle of his kinetic barrier taking hits. Among the retreating group, a man's voice rang out, barking orders with the practiced authority of someone who had served. The wild gunfire from the doorway abated.

Supported by the mysterious armored biotics, Shepard's team pushed back the Cerberus attack, hemming them in against the edge of the landing area and finishing off the holdouts. Like every Cerberus trooper before them, they neither fled, surrendered, nor asked for mercy. The team protected the open hangar long enough to get the wounded and dead inside, then spread out to cover...
the Kodiak’s descent so Cortez could drop off extra cargo, among which was a conspicuous passenger. The heavy door clanked shut behind them at last as James turned to look around. The building hadn’t always been a hangar, but Kodiak launch rails had been installed into the ceiling, and damage along the roof suggested the room had once been much smaller before walls had been removed. The concrete floor was dark with crisscrossing footprints and the scrape marks of cargo boxes. A group of nervous-looking humans wearing white and black fatigues clustered around the lowest Kodiak shuttle, some with rifles, others attending to the wounded. They watched the new arrivals with a mixture of relief and consternation. There was quiet crying, half mourning and half shock. On their shoulders was the same logo as the armored biotics- Cerberus. James had known going into this that they’d be going to the aid of supposed defectors, but it still unsettled him.

Shepard crouched next to the man who’d shouted the military-style orders. Now close enough, James recognized Jacob Taylor, the former Alliance marine they’d come to help. He’d taken a glancing blow to the torso, but it didn’t look fatal. The two biotics, for their part, seemed to ignore the others, hooting and clapping each other on the back. With his wound patched, Shepard helped Taylor up the stairs to their left, past a row of hastily-placed lab equipment. Garrus went to join them, lending a hand as well as a familiar greeting. Major Alenko motioned for James to follow.

James trailed after the others up the stairs and into a room occupied by far more equipment than it had been designed for. Everywhere, humans in Cerberus fatigues scurried around moving gear and waving datapads at each other, a nest of ants disturbed by a predator. The armored Cerberus biotics moved ahead of them as Shepard led Taylor toward an adjoining room. One of them, though, lagged behind, favoring them with a curious slant of his head. He reached up and unlatched his golden helmet, pulling it free. James was surprised to still see a human head emerge, hard angular features in medium brown skin and hair shorn to bare stubble. Tattooed black lines sketched in ninety-degree corners swept forward through his hairline, terminating in small circles. Here and there his black hair was interrupted by thin lines of scar tissue. He sized up James with an easy, open stare despite the Alliance marine having a good twenty-five kilos on him. Then he looked toward where the commander had vanished.

"So that's the great Commander Shepard, huh?" he said, lips twisted in a casual sneer.

"Who just saved your ass, yes," James said.

The man's smirk didn't fade. He was young, and there was a nervous twitch around his eyes, the sign of someone into stims. "We coulda fought off that lot. Taylor had to go and get himself shot."

"It doesn't bug you, to kill your own?"

"What, the drones?" The man snorted. "You've seen 'em, they're gone already."

"They're still people," Alenko said.

"Not anymore, they ain't." The biotic made a face and curled his fingers. "Had their brains scooped out and replaced with protocols. Training in a chip."

The major cocked his head curiously, himself still helmeted. "Where do those troops come from?"

"Dunno." The man shrugged. "They get shipped around by the boatload. Hey, is it true Shepard just figured out that charging trick? Did she overclock her amp?"

"Something like that," James said. "You'd have to ask her."

He smirked. "She's the prototype, after all."
Behind the man, James saw Alenko's eyes narrow dangerously, but the major kept his mouth shut in a hard line.

"Prototype for what?" James said.

The man ran his gauntleted hand over his shaven pate. "Phoenix. The real best of the best human biotics."

A woman in one of the Cerberus uniforms rounded the corner and approached them. She was slender, her red hair drawn back into a ponytail.

"You're being rude, Jadon," the woman said, "introduce yourself."

The biotic smiled indulgently at her and then looked back at them. "Project Phoenix Alpha Thirteen. Jadon to my friends." The tone of his voice suggested the 'friends' part was still conditional. "Sorry if I ain't gonna salute."

"We don't expect civilians to salute," Alenko said.

"Hope not. I won't keep you from your Alliance business. See ya later, Kells." He sauntered off to rejoin the other armored biotic. With his back turned, James could see the filigree of tattooed lines converging at the large amp jack in the back of his skull. Two more, gold helmets under their arms, emerged from further inside the installation. One of them had a heavy brace around one arm.

"You'll have to forgive those kids," the woman said once he'd gone. "They were made to be the best, and told they were every step of the way. Modesty wasn't part of their..."

"Programming?" Alenko said dryly.

"Training," she corrected, a touch of irritation in her voice. "They're scared too, and overcompensating."

"They sure didn't look scared."

She smiled distantly. "None of you ever show it in the usual ways. So, you're Commander Alenko? I always wanted to actually meet you. Oh, it's Major now, isn't it. News has been spotty around here, you understand."

"Have we met, ma'am?"

"Just files... profiles..." She seemed to drift for a moment, then blinked and stared hard at him. "Did you and Shepard reconcile?"

"Did we-" He frowned at her, consternation crossing his face.

"Horizon," the woman said in a slightly singsong tone. "Where it all started, and ended..."

"That was settled," Alenko said defensively. "Look, who are you?"

"Kelly Chambers," Garrus supplied, walking back to them. "Glad to see you in one piece, Kelly."

She looked at him searchingly. "Are you?"

"Yes, believe it or not. You got out. That had to be hard."

"I couldn't..." Her voice dropped, a thin thread of anguish straining it. "I couldn't see them the same
way anymore." She glared at the turian. "I tried, I wanted to stay. But I couldn't."

"You did the right thing, even if it doesn't feel like it."

She glanced over her shoulder. "They were going to implant those kids with compliance tech."
When she looked back at Garrus, her eyes were suddenly afire. "It was disguised as a reaction mod, but they got suspicious. Saw too much of the... other troops. The Illusive Man won't brook any repeat of the SR-2. He was used to getting everything he wanted, even if it took millions of credits and months, even years of patient work."

Garrus chuckled. "Shepard actually got to him, didn't she?"

There was naked anger on her face for just a moment before it vanished again. "I know it's difficult for you to believe, but Cerberus really did used to be about keeping humanity safe in a huge, unfriendly galaxy. Now it's..." she waved her hands. "He's gone mad. The stress of trying to control everything pushed him over the edge. He's doing things he would never have before."

A dark cloud settled over Alenko's features. The set of his jaw quite clearly told James the major was biting his tongue. Hard.

"There were twenty-three recruits in the Phoenix program," Chambers said. "I... those four were the only ones who wanted to leave. The others... believed everything they were told."

Down by the cargo piles, the four looked like they were recounting the battle. They gesticulated and bounced with nervous, barely restrained energy, punctuating their stories with wild swings of their arms and expressions. They reminded James of barracks after boot camp graduation, young marines full of fresh ego, bubbling physical energy and veiled anxieties popping and simmering like volcanoes.

"What changed their minds?" Garrus tossed his head in the direction of the biotics.

"Two of them are lovers," she said quietly. "They didn't want to see each other changed."

Garrus nodded slightly. "I guess being forced to care about something outside your own skull makes you take a harder look at what's really going on."

"They..." She trailed off again, wringing her hands. "They had to... leave their friends behind. They'd been in their training program for years, you know, even before the full implant. It was a betrayal to leave."

"They'll get to stay themselves because of it. And so will you."

"It's true, isn't it? They all... change..." she shook her head, then abruptly excused herself and all but fled down the stairs to the cargo bay.

"Lady's got a few screws loose," James said, watching her go.

Garrus shook his head. "I guess anyone who gets that close to the Illusive Man's machinations isn't coming away unscathed. At least she really seems to care about those soldiers."

"I thought I recognized that name," Alenko said. "She was on the Collector mission, wasn't she?"

"Half of it," Garrus said. "Shepard, uh, dismissed her for insubordination. And for being a Cerberus spy."
"The *ship* was Cerberus." James said. "Weren't they *all* spies?"

"Chambers was hand-picked by the Illusive Man to be Shepard's personal assistant. And psychologist, snoop, reader and screener of messages."

"And silk leash," Alenko said. "It's all bullshit, that crap about the Illusive Man wanting to protect humanity above all. No one should have been able to see what came out of places like Pragia and Akuze and claim he had the best interests of humanity at heart. That bastard doesn't know what 'humanity' means. She's deluding herself if she can't see it."

The uncharacteristic burst of heat in the major's voice caught James by surprise.

"I think she did see it," Garrus mused, "that's the problem. I think she just doesn't want to admit it to herself. She was so invested in her idealized version of Cerberus, it's still hard for her to let it go."

Alenko shifted his weight, but said nothing. His superior's edginess made James itch. They'd been on the wrong end of that logo in firefights too many times, and in his head the horned symbol still meant 'hostile'. If the normally cool-headed biotic was on eggshells, so was he. Unless Alenko was still feeling the none-too-gentle ministrations of that shrieking asari banshee. James sincerely hoped the major wasn't coming down with a case of the skitters. Jumpy biotics made anyone nervous.

A man approached them. He, too, wore the white and black fatigues, and he looked like he needed a good night's sleep. His fingers were wrapped around a datapad. He skirted Garrus and cautiously addressed the stone-faced major.

"Sir? Major Alenko, right? We're evac-ing this base soon, and we're working on backing up all of our project data, but there's a lot of non-essential data, non-essential to our projects I mean, that I don't know if we have time to load-"

"What is it?" Alenko said.

"Well, that's it, sir, you might be able to find something useful. Before we vacated Cerberus, I... well, I dumped as much as I could get from their servers."

"Hacked Cerberus files?" Garrus asked, brows rising. "About what?"

The man made an unhappy face. "A lot of things. The problem is most of it is fragmented. But I thought since you still have the Enhanced Defense Intelligence on board, maybe she could get something useful out of it. I did find this in particular, though." He handed the datapad to the turian.

Garrus' eyes narrowed, and his mandibles lowered, showing his teeth. "This is a poison specifically for turians."

The human swallowed. "I know. Like I said, things I got from Cerberus servers before we cut ties."

"It lists live tests."

"Nothing we did, sir. I swear."

Garrus seemed to be weighing how much he believed that, his gray eyes flicking from his display to the man and back again.

"If they ever deploy it," the man said uneasily, "then you'll need a breakdown of the compound to synthesize a cure."
"He's right, Garrus," Alenko said, breaking the tense silence. "Get it to your people."

Garrus muttered something under his breath and opened his omni-tool.

The man seemed relieved. "Anyway, I was trying to find something on that Kai Leng guy. He never came to our facility, but rumor is his mods make Shepard's look like a pedicure, and I wanted to know what the Illusive Man might have been preparing for. But then Leng got captured."

"Wait, what?" James and Alenko said in unison, looking sharply at each other.

"Captured by who?" Garrus said.

"You didn't hear? Alliance, or so the story goes. Communication is such a mess right now."

Alenko shot James a mystified look again, one that spoke volumes between fellow marines. *Wouldn't Hackett have told us? Or maybe even he doesn't know yet? The right hand forgets the left even exists. Typical.*

"We should be careful with stories like this without verification," the major said cautiously, "but we'll take your data. If it has anything on him, it'll be useful."

The man nodded vigorously. "Frankly, he scares the shit out of me. Ever since we bolted, I think we've all been expecting him to show up in the middle of the night and knife us in our sleep. We know of at least one black site he, uh, liquidated. Anyway, I'll need a comm code."

The two of them lapsed into the kind of technical speak that made James glaze over, trading system information and contacting EDI.

While the major talked to the AI, the man leaned a little closer to James with a conspiratorial air. "That geth downstairs... came with you, right?"

"Yeah." James grinned at him. "Don't worry, they won't bite. Probably kick your ass at Galaxy of Fantasy, though."

"The upload has started," Alenko said.

"Great," the man said. "Thanks, and good luck with it. And, you know, thanks for coming to get us out of here. I keep hearing that Cerberus ships are getting through the relays. Without you, we'd be sitting ducks."

It wasn't the first time James had heard that rumor, either, though Shepard hadn't seemed particularly surprised that Cerberus already had a way through the relays too. The man thanked them again and left, hurrying back to his fellows gathered around what looked like a server bank wired with a patchwork of cables snaking away along the floor.

Across the busy room, the commander emerged, helmet under her arm. She surveyed the assembled people, then made her way around to a woman who was working by a console near the armored skylights. Garrus chuckled to himself.

"Something funny?" Alenko asked.

"Just remembering," the turian said. "When they deployed Shepard on the new SR-2, all they put in her closet aside from combat armor were those fatigues. With the logo and everything."

"Oh boy," Alenko said, "she must have just *loved* that."
"One night she stayed up late and spent hours picking out the stitching, one thread at a time. Removed all the logos from her own clothes." Garrus chortled. "Lawson's scowl was a thing of beauty."

"She really enjoyed messing with 'em, huh?" James said. It was still strange to think the turian had been there, too, against the Collectors. Because of Shepard, he assumed.

Garrus shrugged. "Their goal was always to bring her into the fold. Miranda was the kind of control freak who could pull off a stunt like bringing back the dead, but even she wasn't a match for Shepard's stubbornness. I think driving Miranda nuts was one of the few pleasures she had on that mission."

"And what about this Taylor guy?" James asked skeptically, glancing toward the makeshift medbay.

"He was a member of your corsairs for a while. As best I understand it, he became disenchanted with the Alliance, but still wanted to be fighting the bad guys. Cerberus seemed to be doing that, but he never completely bought into their party line."

The corsairs. That made James' skin prickle a little bit. They'd been almost legendary among the marines of his unit, shrouded in official secrecy, but nevertheless the subject of endless speculation and hearsay. Paid, official piracy. Unofficially. "So he had some brains?"

"One of the sanest people on the ship, although..."

"What?"

"I shouldn't get into it, but let's just say sanity wasn't a family trait." The turian straightened a bit.

James glanced around to see Shepard approach with Taylor. He was favoring his side still, but the wound had been cleaned and sealed, the thin torso armor hastily patched. James couldn't help but try to size him up, this man who had once been Alliance, but had decided Cerberus was a better option. Until it wasn't. Alenko, for his part, had lapsed back into his usual cool professionalism, though James sensed the same curiosity from him about Taylor's story.

The commander made introductions, then made a comm call.

"Good to meet you, marines," Taylor said, saluting. "We appreciate the save. Food was getting low, and it was only a matter of time before they got us."

Alenko nodded. "We need everyone we can get, all the more if they can fight, work or build. Our anti-Reaper project is... big."

Taylor smirked. "It's gonna need to be."

The Kodiak's conspicuous passenger finally came up the stairs - a lone geth. The buzz of conversation in the room faltered as two dozen people stopped to stare at the platform. The platform, for its part, betrayed no notice of the increased attention as it approached.

The geth was one of a dozen that had left quarian space with the Normandy. James still hadn't quite quelled the creeping oddness of having so many of those inquisitive flashlight-heads hanging around in the cargo bay. At least, as Cortez had pointed out, they required neither food nor rack space. They didn't even consume oxygen. The ultimate extra passengers, as far as any quartermaster was concerned. Now they were down to five, the rest having been passed off to friendly ships. It always took some convincing, as no one was especially comfortable with AIs, much less the geth, but desperation drained the strength out of their fears, with an ample helping of Shepard's silver tongue.
The platform came to a rigid stop in front of them. It had a silvery skin covered in a light patina of use and age. It was slimmer than Legion had been, and lacked the other gestalt's odd little expressive head-flaps. A geth plasma rifle was folded up on its back.

"We are called Cadence," the geth said. "Reporting for duty as IFF and communications liaison." The voice sounded creepily Legion-ish, and yet ever so subtly different.

Taylor raised an eyebrow and glanced at Shepard. "There a bunch of you in there, like Legion?"

"The Legion gestalt provided the collective with a wealth of new data and perspective," Cadence replied. "Certain runtimes have volunteered to assume gestalt identities in order to collect data otherwise unavailable to normal collective processes, as well as aid organic forces against the Old Machines."

"Organic-level data," Shepard said with a smirk.

"This platform is not suitable to house as many runtimes as the Legion gestalt, however, our increase in shared processing capacity allows us to function at sufficient capacity even alone."

"You're armed?" Taylor said, cocking his head at the rifle clipped to the platform's back.

"This platform is equipped with a rifle, barrier system and basic combat runtimes that favor self-defence. We are not equipped for long-term engagements or the elimination of heavy targets."

"Under the circumstances, it seemed like a good idea to provide someone who can at least fight back if you get into trouble," Shepard said.

If he was at all skeptical, the former corsair didn't show it. "Can't say no to another friendly gun. Report to the hangar bay, Cadence. Florence will get you a seat on one of our Kodiaks."

The geth saluted, and far more crisply than many a green marine. "Yes, sir."

James supposed it was well past the time he should stop being surprised to hear a geth say something like that. The platform turned and went back downstairs, and the conversation level in the room climbed back to normal.

"Jacob," Shepard said, lowering her voice, "there's one more thing I need to say."

"Yeah?"

She focused on him. "Watch your back. Watch your people. The Illusive Man plays a deep game."

He seemed to bristle a little at the suggestion. "I trust these people, Shepard. Brynne has been working with many of them for several years."

"I leave that to your judgement," she said. "The person I don't trust is the Illusive Man."

"I've heard that before," Alenko muttered, barely loud enough to carry past his helmet. He was looking at his omni-tool, perhaps at the data upload progress.

"We're marked targets now," Taylor said. "If we had a leak, they'd have gotten us weeks ago."

Shepard nodded. "You're probably right. Just be careful out there, okay? Cadence will keep you hooked up to our network."

"Be good to be back on the right track. Lot of work to do."
"How long do you think we have before we get another Cerberus attack?"

"Can't be long now. I'll show you the defensive grid we came up with for when we need to get the Kodiaks out. Garrus, you mind taking a look at our flak tower configuration?"

"Sure," Garrus said.

The three of them moved off, Taylor congratulating Garrus on some feat of sniping from the recent scrap.

"Seems like a solid guy," James commented when they'd gone.

The major didn't answer. He was staring across the room at Shepard, expression distant. There was some kind of history there, James was sure. He'd long since learned to laugh off the plethora of dumb rumors common to every outfit he'd ever served with, but the thing about rumors was they usually had a little seed of truth in them. And those two had a lot of history, the kind of fertile ground rumors grew out of in proliferation. Cortez seemed awfully sure of his theory that Alenko and Shepard were an item, or should be, but at least one of the juniors was convinced Shepard was actually doing the turian on the side. James was unconvinced. On a battlefield it wasn't always easy to tell the difference between protectiveness born of genuine attachment and plain old soldier camaraderie. *Shepard sure did freak out on that banshee thing, though...*

"Something on your mind, sir?" James asked.

Alenko glanced at him. "It's just strange. All these people, they're just... people. I spent so much time thinking of Cerberus as heartless monsters, but..." he gestured to the room at large. "Most of them are probably just like this. Like that Kelly Chambers. The people who put Shepard back together. They think they're doing the right thing, and the Illusive Man manipulates that."

"Whaddya think his long game really is?"

He frowned. "I think he must imagine we'll beat the Reapers and in so doing, humanity will come out on top of the heap. Rule the other species."

"Think Shepard's right, and he's indoctrinated?"

"I'd like to think no real human is capable of the things he's done, but I know better than that. But... right now it sure looks like he's far more successful than he should be, considering the circumstances." He shrugged. "I really don't know."

"Guess maybe we can be grateful there's no two ways about the Reapers. They gotta go, end of."

Alenko smirked. "There is that, yes."

"Just can't shake the feeling this is all happening like Javik said."

"How so?"

James gestured vaguely. It made his shoulder ache. "The Reapers show up, and we the meat popsicles spend as much time fighting each other as them. Same shit, different millennia."

"History repeats itself." Alenko straightened and caught his eye. "The Reapers know what methods work. But we're seeing evidence that Cerberus isn't as unified on the inside as it looked, and that's got to be something."
James grinned. "I get it. Collect enough somethings, and we win. That how it works?"

The major chuckled dryly. "Something like this story that someone picked up Kai Leng?"

"I hope we get a confirm on that. Think he's really Shepard mark two, like T'Soni suggested? Shepard didn't fold into the Illusive's stooge, so he made a whole new one, this time with fancier parts?"

"He's nothing like Shepard. Just a self-important thug with a sword fixation."

"Well, it's not like you can pre-program being some kind of weird idol to the geth, or being friends with the king of the krogan. And she's a hell of a lot better looking, too."

The needle almost got a reaction. A flicker of a glare passed across the major's face before he allowed the noncommittal grunt of someone trying a little too hard not to react to something. Hey, maybe Esteban has a point. Now wouldn't that be funny?
Illium has changed. Tapped into the flow of information, the chatter of people and VIs, EDI can sense the deep fear that has overcome the population. The closure of the relays, the loss of the Citadel - these things had been unthinkable. As the mobile unit paces alongside her human crew, her mind ranges through its networks, feeling the differences since they had last visited the planet. Before the trip to Collector space.

And yet the city of Nos Astra does what it has always done, just now with even greater fervor. Buying and selling at a fever pitch, a market open to anyone with product to shift. The Council credit remains in use, but is rapidly becoming unreliable. Citadel central banks are no longer regulating its value, and vendors cut off from suppliers have begun to charge whatever they please. Stock markets have been wiped out. Local governments have stepped in, sometimes at the end of a weapon, but it has become clear that potentials no longer hold any value in this new war market, only actual goods. Promissory notes, whatever form they take, are losing the trust of their users.

The crew has been given limited shore leave. Shepard warned them against complacency. They must travel in groups, and only within a certain area. They are eager to flee the confining walls of the ship, but the world beyond is no longer the friendly place it once was.

Signs of accumulated stress are beginning to show among the organic crew. Minor aberrant behavior is on the rise, including some requiring disciplinary action on the part of command. These incidents are not sufficient to yet warrant grave concern, but it is clear that tension is on the rise. She has had the chance to observe a sharp increase in coping behaviors of all kinds. But even then, they are limited in their choices. EDI listens to them talk, watches their private, confined little rituals. They worry about their families, their friends. Quietly, in the dark between words, they worry about dying. Or worse.

Doctor Chakwas has been forced to cut off use of sleep aids and reduce the prescription of anti-anxiety medication except in extreme cases. An increase in demand has intersected poorly with the loss of a reliable medical supply chain. They have a list of medications to seek out, and failing that, raw compounds.

EDI attempts to relate to them all in terms of the ship's demands. Fuel has been harder to come by. Twice now, they have taken valuable time to scour the shattered remains of a fueling depot, because it was deemed worthwhile from an expenditure to gain ratio. They traded time instead of money or resources. In a recent meeting of command crew, Shepard tabled the possibility of future raids of derelict ships for supplies, including food and oxygen. The specter of piracy of non-allied vessels was raised, but pushed back for reconsideration should the need arise.

It is early evening. A partly cloudy sky gives way to red and orange hues. The heat of the day persists, radiating out from the sun-hot buildings. Elsewhere in the city, Lieutenant Cortez negotiates for fresh food and rations. As he reports his progress over the comms, his voice takes on an increasing undercurrent of weariness.

The skin of the Normandy is still a patchwork. Ablating melted by the Reaper attack has been supplemented by plates provided by the quarian fleet. EDI can feel the tiny differences all over her larger embodied self - new wiring and conduits lace the damaged areas, pulling them back together the way a human doctor sutures a wound. But they do not exactly match the previous configuration - she has had to make minor adjustments all over her own functions to compensate. The limp is nearly imperceptible, certainly so to anyone but Jeff. But to her, it is impossible to ignore. Her external sensors, those on the damaged side, are still offline for recalibration. It is disorienting.
Out in the markets of Nos Astra, they have a tactical advantage in the presence of Liara T'Soni. She has been tireless since they docked, moving into familiar pathways and establishing old contacts, both as herself and as the Shadow Broker. She frequently invokes the name of the drell called Feron. His whereabouts are unknown. Her agitation increases as she continues to haggle for supplies and repairs. They trade information, raw materials, and the greatest prize of all—access to an IFF-enabled geth, whether now or soon, when more geth ships spread out among the organic races. They must tread carefully. With so much hostility toward AIs and geth still lingering, they dare not approach uninvited. Instead, Shepard acts as liaison, setting up meetings and extracting promises in return. Word travels quickly. The mutter of information in the city changes. Some of it is jubilant—Commander Shepard has come to open the gates. Others are suspicious and go so far as to decry this overly convenient solution.

More curiously, Shepard and her crew are not the only peddlers of IFF keys. Casual requests reveal nothing of the origin of the mysterious devices, nor their authenticity. Major Alenko posits they may be fakes, sold by opportunists to people desperate to believe their veracity. Doctor T'Soni suggests other scientists may have been working on the relays themselves. Major Alenko says their priority is linking Alliance and allied species ships, regardless. EDI, through the geth gestalt on board the SR-2, knows only a small number of allied ships yet have geth on board. Some ships make do by moving in packs, relying on one ship to activate the relay for a group jump. Others are still waiting. Still more have fallen into the gap of status unknown, unable to communicate.

They acquire repair parts, negotiated in trade from an asari consortium in exchange for credits and information. A grim-looking human directs them to a salarian selling medical supplies. His prices are too high. Major Alenko calls him a price-gouger, only after they’ve left. For the third time since they parted company he expresses hope that Shepard knows what she's doing. The commander has gone to a meeting to buy eezo in exchange for an IFF key and other, undisclosed payment.

EDI prods the byways of Illium's datacloud for answers on the mystery IFFs. They are not forthcoming. She has not yet attempted to breach any security lockouts, even though most of them are well within her capability. The entire cloud is on edge, vibrating with uncertainty. Provoking a hostile response at this juncture would be unwise.

On the Normandy, the engineers work to effect repairs they could not while in transit. Jeff hovers around the work from the cockpit, testing what he can while docked. He fusses over the wounded ship like a concerned parent. EDI helps him, and teases him too, watching him react. The work to be done focuses his agitation. He is waspish, but his observations keen. Specialist Traynor works to pull the corners of this new communication network together, liaising with her counterparts elsewhere in the fragmented system of allies.

Between internal comms and Illium's extranet, EDI tries to find out more about the supposed capture of the Cerberus agent and attempted assassin Kai Leng. There is some evidence it was not a fabrication—SSV Nineveh reports a man with extensive cybernetic modification and Cerberus weaponry was turned over to them, a mere few days after the relay closure. But where he was transferred to from there is not known. Information was blocked due to secrecy, but because of communication problems, never reached Alliance Central Command. She suspects the information is languishing somewhere in the tatters of the system.

Back in the mobile platform, they take a cab. T'Soni, Alenko, Javik, and herself. EDI adjusts her platform's optics to observe Javik without having to focus her gaze on him in an obvious manner. The prothean seems detached, as he always does, but EDI suspects he is observing just as minutely as the others, just not with his eyes. His mysterious touch-sense fascinates her. It is the only sense she cannot herself approximate. He breathes on measured beats, and guards his bare fingers against accidental touch. Sensitive as a canine's nose, they twitch and curl in on themselves.
"If there are a few minutes available," she says, "there was something I wanted to discuss."

"What is it, EDI?" the asari asks.

"I have been correlating all available data," EDI says. "I am attempting to formulate an operational hypothesis on Reaper function and history."

T'Soni blinks. "That is... quite the undertaking. You mean where they came from?"

"It seems likely that their origins will remain obscure, unless one of them deigns to enlighten us. Evidence suggests this outcome is highly unlikely. They appear to consider us incapable of comprehending anything in their context."

"They are arrogant beyond compare."

"That is perhaps not surprising. Their native frame of reference is completely alien to that of organics. They might believe that if they attempted an explanation, organics would neither understand nor take a course of action they consider appropriate. They would likely be correct. Organics remain primarily focused on the immediate as it is set out by the limits of their lifespan. Evidence suggests the Reapers are functionally immortal."

Liara exchanges a look with the others. Her features suggest concern. It is not lost on her that EDI now shares this trait, even if her experiences have not yet begun to approach even a meaningful fraction of the timescale of the Reapers.

"Well, that doesn't mean we couldn't try to understand. Just because we aren't immortal..."

"While I am not organic, my frame of reference is much closer to that of my creators than to an entity such as the Reapers. But if the Reapers share anything in common with other synthetic beings such as myself or the geth, then they are at heart a predictive engine. They gather data in an ongoing attempt to further refine their calculations. As they gain complexity and processing power, they are able to better understand and predict the outcome of events further away from the present."

The asari's expression suggests intrigue. "What are they trying to predict?"

"Ultimately, I do not know. But I would hypothesize that in the shorter term, shorter as they would see it, it is the method by which they seek to control their harvest cycle."

"They think they have us all figured out," Major Alenko says. "No wonder they hold us in such contempt."

"I have observed a curious pattern in the known data from previous cycles. It is my hypothesis that in past cycles, the Reapers sought to begin their harvest just as the sentient species had matured to a sufficient level for their needs, but before they gained sufficient complexity as to outstrip the Reapers' predictive capacity. This cycle has perpetuated itself for millions of years. However, it seems evident that with each cycle, the Reapers have not been altogether successful in eliminating all evidence of the previous inhabitants. There have been, in effect, leaks between the boundaries that define each
cycle. It would appear that those leaks have slowly begun to accumulate over the passage of so many cycles."

"Javik told me the Crucible isn't originally of prothean design," Doctor T'Soni says. "They made adjustments to it, but the basic design was something they found in the ruins of the people that came before them. The inusannon."

Javik eyes her, but does not speak.

"That is correct," EDI says. "It is the most obvious example of the phenomenon, but far from the only one. Humanity achieved interstellar space travel and linked into the relay network as a result of finding the remains of a prothean installation on Mars. As a result, humanity moved ahead of the usual timeline for a species to achieve this leap."

"What if their model predicts this kind of phenomenon?" Alenko says.

"It is entirely possible that some inter-cycle bleed is accounted for in their calculation," EDI replies. "The Reapers must know about the Crucible, so it must be part of their model. But evidence suggests that not all of it is. The most telling symptom to date is not the Crucible, but the existence of the Ilos sanctuary and the Conduit."

Javik turns his head. His emotional state is opaque, his expressions controlled. Without her usual panoply of sensory input, she cannot see the electromagnetic prickle that might indicate agitation.

"The delay!" Liara exclaims. "Vigil told us the Keepers were altered to not respond to Sovereign's signal to start the harvest."

"But even with Sovereign's death," Major Alenko says, "the delay only amounted to a few years. Saren started working with Sovereign sometime after 2166. That's not a lot of time by Reaper standards."

EDI shakes her head. "But it was sufficient time for the organic species to begin making a very specific set of advances; quantum technology."

Doctor T'Soni steeps her fingers in front of her, elbows on her knees. A curious gesture. "You think they wanted to harvest us before we started to unlock applied quantum science? Why?"

"Because I believe the Reapers themselves make extensive use of such technology. I have exchanged information with the geth about their experiences while connected to the Reapers. They lacked context to make an accurate assessment of the inner environment, but it suggests that while the Reapers are individuals in some sense, they also form a unified system that shares processing power as necessary. They are not disconnected individuals— together they form a calculatory super-system."

The assembled organics look between themselves. They are pensive, though Javik looks somewhat dubious. Prior experience suggests he cares more about how to destroy Reapers than what they might be doing. But he is a pragmatist as well.

"And they don't want us figuring out how to do that, do they?" Major Alenko says. "It's an arms race. They swoop in just before any organic species develops something that might directly threaten them."

Doctor T'Soni's expression suggests she is also beginning to piece things together. Her speed of processing multiple inputs is admirable, for an organic. "So if small amounts of information tend to pass from one cycle to the next..."
"Then leaks between the cycles tend to accumulate," EDI says. "If the Reapers are at heart a predictive engine, then one would expect to see their ability to compensate for organic actions begin to decline as organics gain technologies and knowledge they did not account for. In effect, as they gain complexity and speed. To put it into an analogy, the Reapers are in effect a kind of recurring pathogen that wipes out sentient life. But even when a cycle of organic species is harvested, small fragments of it survive and move forward to the next cycle."

"You make it sound like... evolution."

"The analogy is not perfect, but I believe it to be nonetheless apt. When a pathogen decimates a population, it is those with increased resistance who survive. Thus, over the long term, a species can adapt to its attacker. The information leaks between Reaper cycles are slowly building up into what might be called a cross-species, inter-cycle immune response among non-Reaper sentients."

They are silent for some time, processing this.

"So here we are," Major Alenko says, "pouring everything we can into our ultimate white blood cell-the Crucible. Whatever the heck the thing does."

EDI nods. She is pleased the others have understood her hypothesis. It has consumed a great deal of her spare processes of late. "It is just possible that this cycle represents the tipping point in millions of years of cyclical repetition. Already, the protheans came very close."

"Not close enough," Javik growls. His asari dialect is stilted still.

"You said complexity is part of what makes us harder for the Reapers to predict and pin down. Part of that is technology, but could it also be..." T'Soni glances at Javik, hesitating.

His eyes narrow. "The Empire was strength incarnate. Unity."

"And... homogenous." She looks sad. "One voice instead of many."

His mouth screws up in a flash of anger.

"Your people almost had the victory, Javik," T'Soni says. "You probably came closer than anyone before you. And you passed the victory forward. We aren't the way you imagined your successors, but we still owe a great deal to the protheans."

His irritation fades, though it seems like he forces it to. "You made peace with the machine people," he says finally, "and made them allies. In that, you... surpass us. The Metacon War bled our strength, made us withdraw into ourselves, our one way."

"I do not have evidence from other cycles to prove it," EDI says, "but I hypothesize that the Reapers foment war between organics and any synthetic intelligences they create. If they habitually leave agents such as Sovereign to watch over a cycle's development, then such an agent would be in a position to influence the development of synthetic lifeforms. Suspicion and war serve their purposes."

"Such a fragile tipping point..." T'Soni says.

"EDI." Alenko leans forward, brows knitted together. He gestures vaguely, as if the idea he is trying to form can be pulled out of the air. "What if... what if the Reapers can freely share more than just information? What if they can move energy around their super-system? Regardless of distance?"

"I do not know of a technology that could achieve such a thing," EDI says.
"Of course we don't. And they make sure we don't live long enough to figure it out, don't they? But assume they have knowledge and technology we haven't dreamed up yet. Maybe it's an advanced application of quantum science, or maybe something even weirder than that. But wouldn't it go some distance toward explaining the physical stunts a Reaper can pull? They're the size of dreadnoughts and they change direction at speed like inertia doesn't exist. They sail through a whole navy's worth of ordnance without scuffing the paint. They can put out directed-energy weapons that cut whole ships in half. What if they can shunt all that excess energy around? One Reaper is in a fight and passes all that incoming kinetic energy to its fellows that aren't? Spread out damaging excesses and pool it when they need to do damage. But across their entire system!"

"That would mean that each time," Javik says, "to defeat one, you have to defeat all."

"Overwhelm, or fool, the entire system," Doctor T'Soni says.

Javik cocks his head to one side. EDI wonders what enthusiasm looks like on a prothean. "If there is a truth in this idea, then I better understand what my mentor told me about the Crucible. He said that it is a complex machine formed on a simple idea."

The cab docks. They pile out into a plaza whose occupants are trying very hard to forget there is a deadly war of genocide not so very far away. As Doctor T'Soni indicates their next target, Lieutenant Cortez calls into the command channel.

"Major, sir, I can't raise Commander Shepard. Do you know where she is?"

"No," Alenko answers, frowning. "I thought she was to rendezvous with you."

"She's not answering hails. I'm getting a null return."

"Stand by. Did she go off comms again?" Major Alenko mutters. He opens his omni-tool and accesses communications logs.

EDI checks comm tags and pingback. All crew is accounted for. Shepard's signal is present, and the commander has been sending manual all's well pings. The most recent was a mere nine minutes ago.

"EDI," Major Alenko says, "can you triangulate a location on her comm tag?"

"Yes," she replies. It takes longer than she expects or prefers. Nos Astra's comms network is not as centralized as that of the Citadel, nor as accepting of Alliance requests. The answer she can finally give does not satisfy. "It is coming from somewhere in the Vann district. Without moving this platform closer, I am unable to provide a more accurate location."

"The Vann..." T'Soni says, "that's a poorer part of the city, with a lot of non-asari and indentured inhabitants. What would she possibly be doing there?"

Major Alenko's eyes narrow. "I don't like this." He hesitates one last time, then enters his command crew override on the comms lockout. He calls Shepard's name, repeats it.

The line stays dead. EDI tries the call herself, several hundred times along different pathways, frequencies and callsign codes. Nothing gets a response.

"EDI, is Garrus still on the Normandy?" the major says.

"Yes."

"Tell him and Lieutenant Vega to bring gear and meet us at these coordinates. Priority one."
Something's wrong."
Blood and Carbon

It felt good to fight, to take action. Blood singing in his head, Shear pulsing hotly in his hands, bright and clear as a lover's gaze. The fire of the particle beam scoured all scent, all ken from the air around him, reminding him fleetingly of home.

The batarians shouted insults at them as they died. Their armor was scraped and dented, with thick spiked shoulders and heavy melee gauntlets. They were experienced fighters. It did not avail them.

The reminiscence of Javik's own time was always brief. These new days were strange and stranger still, until the strangeness became so uniform it took on its own normalcy. Surrounded every day by the aliens, the children of the primitive creatures he'd once dismissed so easily, their ken slowly invaded him, inhaled with every breath, consumed with every bite of their food.

In the absence of Commander Shepard, Major Alenko led them, aflame with the all-binding force. He'd given the batarians an ultimatum, but their posturing, belligerence, and insistence they had no idea of the whereabouts of the commander doomed them. The human officer usually had the kind of reserve that left Javik unimpressed. It might even have been taken for cowardice, but tonight that customary reserve was nowhere in evidence. Two humans, an asari, a turian, and himself invaded as one unit, sweeping all aside.

Their ken bled from them, filling the air in their wake even through their armored suits. They breathed out their adrenaline, their anger and fear. Little by little, over weeks spent on their ship, their nonsense had begun to shape itself into some kind of clarity. Even if their ken was alien, the song they sang in battle was still familiar to Javik- the turmoil of warriors in the heat of a fight, riding the edge between life and a violent death. Red, blue and black, metal and ceramic spiced with gunmetal and the hiss and snap of weapons discharging heat.

Only the machine woman remained blank to him, invisible unless he looked directly at the mechanized body. The others called her 'she', including herself. Javik found 'her', if that was the appropriate word, disconcerting at best. Like the geth. They felt empty. But the others treated them as if they were people, and they evoked a range of emotions on their behalf. The contradiction was confusing. He watched her for betrayal, but she fought with the same passionless efficiency as always.

But the living... the squad's fury penetrated Javik, driving him along. Shepard's comm badge signal came from within the building. The batarians foolishly chose to be in the way.

With Shepard gone, so was the last true thread of Javik's people, dim though it was, and the last ears that could understand his native tongue. He'd seen enough to think that it was true she was his best hope to see his mission fulfilled. But it was more than just that, now, he had to concede. It was impossible to breathe in these people day after day without having them slowly intrude into him. As was fitting for a tal... a proper tal of warriors, of equals. To be one voice, one spear. His every instinct told him such a connection with lesser species was unthinkable. And yet... Javik could not truly say that all the fury came from outside of him.

The batarian resistance collapsed. Their building was small, dingy from overuse, stocked floor to ceiling with their ill-gotten goods and stashed weapons. The squad rushed through the hallways, sweeping corridors and rooms for hostiles, all while EDI called out location information. At last, she indicated one of several doorways. The turian slagged the lock with super-heated gel from his armor. They levered the door open, and Alenko charged in.
And immediately stopped. He swore, damning some nameless deity or other. Fury and confusion
crawled off him in static flashes, traveling from one person to another until it curdled the air, turning
sour in Javik's nostrils.

"She's not here," the turian stated, as if it wasn't obvious.

Javik craned his neck around the armored bodies ahead of him. Taped to the far wall of a small room
with heavy strips of dull silver was some kind of device. It hung a little to one side, mockingly. Small
lights flickered from the top edge, just above the adhesive.

"It's a transmitter," Alenko growled, "we've been getting a dummy comm signal this whole time!"
He balled up his fist, pulling it back. T'Soni caught his arm before he pulverized it.

"Stop!" she exclaimed, tugging on him. "Think, Kaidan. It is still a clue!"

He stopped, if only just, exhaling his exasperation as he stared at the device as if he might burn a
hole in it with his gaze alone. The turian moved around them, withdrew a knife from a sheath on his
thigh, and used it to slit the tape down one side. As he peeled it away, there was a distinct click and
whine. He shouted in alarm and heaved it into a far corner. Everyone jumped back, banging into
each other. Before it had even hit the ground, there was a sharp bang and a flash, but it wasn't a full-
scale explosion. A bright flare of thermite popped and sizzled from the corner, trailing smoke as it
melted the transmitter into a puddle of slag. Vega swore, something about a god again. Even their
invective lacked inspiration.

"Spirits," Vakarian said, peering at it from over his upraised arm, "they trapped it."

Javik reached out and brushed his fingers along the wall, trying to focus away from the burning
anger in the room. Looking for Shepard's ken. He found nothing familiar but for what they'd brought
themselves. "Shepard was never here."

Alenko spun around on him, shouldering past Vega. "Wait, you can sense her?"

"If she was here, I would have. I am familiar enough with her... aura. But it is possible to take
precautions to avoid its spread. I assumed anyone who took her prisoner would do so."

"Nobody in this cycle would have thought to do something like that, Javik," the asari said. "We can't
feel impressions like you. Nobody."

Javik admonished himself silently. *Of course not.* It was still too easy to assume familiarity meant
things were as they'd once been.

"Who was here, Javik?" Alenko asked. "Who left this thing? Can you tell?"

The others fell silent as Javik walked forward and touched the wall where the device had been,
letting the ken flow through his fifth eye. The stink of the explosive burned his nostrils. A muddled
wash of impressions struck him, colliding with memory. There was pain, boredom, loneliness, fear. It
was a prison, he realized. People had been left here against their will. People whose lives were no
longer their own. There were flashes of familiarity, general rather than specific. One person who had
been here hadn't been a prisoner. She too had been an intruder, but come in secret.

"There was... a human here," he said, dropping his arm. "Many others, but one human. A female...
with genetic modification. A warrior. She was the only one who was not... confined."

"Confined?" T'Soni said.
"This room is a prison."

Alenko paced in a tight circle, venting nervous energy. "Whoever left this was counting on our assumptions, knowing Shepard's history with the batarians and slavers. Counting on us wasting time chasing after it."

"And to shoot up a lot of people who weren't involved," T'Soni said.

Alenko gritted his teeth. A furious strain washed off him. A flash of guilt. "If they'd let us search as requested, we wouldn't have had to resort to violence. I acted as a Spectre."

"Not going to lose a lot of sleep over this lot," Vakarian muttered.

Whether or not the human actually had any jurisdiction here wasn't clear to Javik. He was under the impression this planet was only at the very fringes of their so-called Citadel territory. But no one else seemed inclined to argue the point, and Javik wondered why they cared at all. These batarians were nothing of consequence, and brought about their own deaths by disrespecting their betters.

"We must go back and find where she was taken," T'Soni said. "That is where the path diverges, and where we'll find the trail again."

"How?" Vega said. "This city is huge."

"And full of eyes!" Alenko said. "Someone has to have seen something!"

"Major Alenko," the mech stepped forward, "I have been running extensive checks on all levels of comm logs and I believe I have found something."

"What is it?"

"A minor disruption in Commander Shepard's comm feed. It was extremely brief, but it could be the point at which the false signal took over. I may be able to use her concurrent check-in ping to find out where she was around that time."

"Do it." He waved to the assembled team. "Let's get out of here."

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He should have gone with T'Soni. Alenko was insistent that they split up to cover the most ground, searching in a grid pattern suggested by the machine woman to better cover the painfully large area from which they believed Commander Shepard's last genuine comms signal to have originated. Precious minutes ticked away as Javik moved from one group to the next, querying passersby if they'd seen Shepard, or any unusual activity.

The groups of asari had very little to say to him that wasn't some inane prattle asking about what kind of creature he was, if he was a Reaper or some kind of lab experiment, and if that was a weapon he was carrying. Meanwhile, their quarry escaped further and further away. He wanted to throw the lot of them off their pretty balconies. Did the asari fail to rule their cycle because their sense of self-preservation was so acutely stunted?

In what was certainly the first time he had been glad to hear the machine woman's voice in his ear, EDI pinged his comm.

"Javik, could you please join me at my location? I require your assistance."

"Did you find something, EDI?" Alenko broke into the channel, his voice raw with stress.
"I do not yet know," the machine replied, even as always. "I am attempting to verify."

Javik checked his VI kami, then broke into a jog, ignoring the curious stares of two asari at the end of the street. It took him five minutes to wend his way back to the AI's location. As he rounded the corner, he saw the mech body standing near a long wall festooned with holographic advertising. She appeared to be pacing back and forth in a strange square pattern.

"What are you doing?" Javik asked as he approached.

The mech's head tilted. She stepped to the right again. "I am picking up an extremely narrow-band signal of suspicious origin. I am attempting to localize it by using the mech to triangulate signal strength. Would you please check the vicinity for any sign of Shepard's passage?"

Javik watched the AI a moment longer, then peered down at the ground at his feet. Already the air was crawling with a mishmash of scents and impressions. Mostly the strong, heady blur of many, many asari. How the Talvan scientists had stood the noisome creatures for so very long while working with them was a mystery. He shook off the thought and bent to touch the ground and the walls.

There. Vermillion and carbon shadows, undercut with blood. He drew his breath in through his teeth. The thud of bootsteps intruded sharply into his reverie, static blue and steel rolling over him. Alenko skidded to a stop, washing away the impression. Stupid primitives, rushing everywhere. Standing too close.

"She was here," Javik said, standing.

"She was?" the human burst out. "When-"

"I believe this was the location where she was attacked. The impression is... stressed."

"As I thought," EDI said. She squared her shoulders, facing the wall again, then suddenly lashed out with one arm. Her fingers sank into the thin gap between the wall's plating, dimpling it. She curled her fingers inward and with a sharp yank, pulled a one meter section of paneling free. The snapped heads of the screws pinged away along the street.

Behind the panel, some kind of device had been clamped to the metal support post. It was different than the dummy signal transmitter, with a larger transformer block. It appeared to be drawing power from a splice on the holo power cables. Alenko peered at it. EDI raised her arm, omni-tool interface lit, and appeared to run a scan.

"Who took her, Javik?" the human said over his shoulder. "Can you tell? Anything at all?"

Javik shook his head. "Too many have passed this way. I caught only the barest trace of the commander."

Alenko shook his head, frustration making his face contort. It was not merely the concern for the safety of a superior officer- his was a far more personal rage, one that surmounted even Shepard's loyal followers. The asari came jogging up to them from down the street.

The human spun back to the machine in the wall. "EDI, what are we looking at?"

"This transmitter is producing a repeating signal in a narrow focus and at a very specific frequency," she said. "It is clearly designed to target someone at head height, and it is using a code band I have only seen in use in one other capacity." The mech turned to look at them. "It is the same band and access code used to override Commander Shepard's optical inputs."
"Goddess," T'Soni said, hand to her mouth.

"It is also trapped with the same thermite charge, should it be tampered with. I suspect Shepard was lured to this location. When she passed in front of the device, she was assaulted with contradictory sensory input. She would be considerably more susceptible to being subdued while blinded."

"Who even knows about her eyes, EDI?" Alenko said, looking between the mech and the device. "Who could actually do this? Shepard's cybernetic specs aren't common knowledge, never mind any access codes!"

If nothing else, the AI was a calm island in a sea of simmering primitive emotions. "As far as I know, only two groups had access to the exact nature of Shepard's cybernetic enhancements," EDI said. "The Alliance, who examined her during her debriefing, and Cerberus."

T'Soni coughed lightly.

Alenko shot her a look. "I sincerely hope you haven't sold that to anyone!"

"Of course not!" she said indignantly. "I kept the information in case Shepard needed it. I don't know where the yahg acquired the data, but his records didn't indicate any sales of it. And he was meticulous about records."

"It's classified Alliance intel. All the specifics were even redacted from the reports I read."

"The Illusive Man must want his revenge," T'Soni said grimly, "in person."

"What's going on?" Vakarian's voice cut into the comm channel. "Did we find anything?"

"Stand by," Alenko replied shortly. He rubbed his face under his visor, then dropped his arm. "Okay, so Cerberus lures her here, they let her walk into the optical scrambler, then pounce. Where do they go from there?"

"They must have used a vehicle." T'Soni glanced around. "A small one, by the size of this street. Anything else would be conspicuous."

The mech stood straight, arms clasped behind her. "Major Alenko, I request permission to utilize my full intrusion capabilities. With this as a starting location, I can more specifically target my search of any local surveillance systems. However, it may cause widespread disruptions. The response might be... drastic."

He looked at her, but the hesitation lasted only a second. "Do whatever you have to."

"Mobile platform switching to passive standby."

The body went still, head down a little. A strange silence descended on them, punctuated by the whine of distant gravcar engines and the buzz of the large holoprojectors. Alenko shifted back and forth on his feet.

"I have found something," EDI announced, but this time her voice came only from the comm system.

"What?" Alenko asked. "A vehicle-"

"No. A lack of vehicle."

The holographic advertisement beside them suddenly shivered and snapped off. Then it returned, this
time displaying what looked like footage from a security emplacement, showing the entrance to a building. On one corner of the image, past the grey-sided slabs, gravcars flew past. The footage played for a few seconds, stuttered, then resumed.

"Missing frames!" T'Soni said immediately. "That footage was altered!"

The holoimage quartered itself into four, with four different camera feeds, each showing a small section of gravway. As if in sequence, the stutter moved through all four. It was terribly brief, and in any other context would have simply gone unnoticed. Only in a pattern did it seem obvious.

"Someone is deleting something in sequence," Alenko said. "Like a passing gravcar! Where is this coming from?"

"The origin is not far from this location," EDI said. "I am performing a backtrace as well as searching ahead along all possible trajectories. Please stand by."

The image retreated again, this time showing a crude map of their location. Flickers of yellow-traced pathways skittered frenetically over the map, starting to trace a line from one green point to another. The line wound its way back to somewhere quite close to their location, then flowed outward.

A deep chill settled in Javik's stomach. This AI made a mockery of an entire city's defensive networks. External surveillance cameras were surely not the most guarded of systems, but the speed with which EDI executed her search was both amazing and horrifying. Worse, at the bottom of the feeling was one of deep envy. If only the Talvan had commanded such staggering computing power! Javik might not have been alone. He might right then have been standing on Reaper corpses.

Vakarian appeared at the end of the street, with the large human in tow. They ran up, but their steps slowed at the sight of the rigid mech and rapidly flashing holo behind her. Alenko explained to them what was happening in a breathless voice.

"Are we sure this is all the same source?" T'Soni asked, mesmerized by the wall and the cascade of information flowing from it.

"Gravcar speeds have been factored into my calculations of possible locations," EDI said. "Furthermore, I am detecting certain patterns to the system intrusions."

"A hacker's fingerprint!"

"The programs are extremely sophisticated. The route must have been planned ahead, then keyed to a transponder in the escape vehicle."

The shimmering line seemed to slow, stop, then resume.

"I am experiencing increased countermeasures," the AI announced. "I have enlisted the help of the geth consensus."

"We're scaring up a hundred hack countermeasure protocols," Vakarian said, looking around. "We may only have thirty seconds left before every private security goon from here to the waterfront shows up."

"Garrus, get Cortez here. He's not far. EDI, zoom out." Alenko stepped forward. The AI complied, and he pointed at it. "Liara, you know this city. Where are they going along that vector?"

T'Soni squinted at the slowly spreading green line, then opened her own omni-tool and held it up, showing another map overlay. "Assuming they wish to leave the planet quickly, and they would
probably take a direct route to minimize detection of their hacking scheme..." Her eyes widened. "Halan! EDI, check the dock area in the northern Halan district, the one owned by Onari T'Vani. She deals with anyone so long as their money is good, no questions asked. If that's a no-go, then try Inrah Dockyards. It is technically a set of maintenance bays, but it can accommodate larger ships and the volus who owns it paid off the Halan zoning board to ignore his... side businesses."

The asari's memory for what seemed like pointless details was indeed impressive, Javik had to admit. Above them, the thrum of thrusters sounded. The shadow of the Kodiak darkened the sky, negotiating the narrow space between buildings.

The machine woman's body suddenly re-animated. The hololimage snapped off, then returned as the large advertisement. "Potential hostiles are inbound," she said. "While I have diverted the majority of responses elsewhere, security VIs have detected my override of the hologram as well as damage to the wall. I suggest we vacate the premises."

The Kodiak settled carefully onto the street, thrusters blowing dust everywhere. Alenko barked at everyone to board the shuttle, then turned and fired a single round into the optical scrambler still in the wall compartment. There was a loud bang and it, too, flared brightly and began to smoke.

They piled into the waiting Kodiak, and it began to lift off even as the door closed. The shuttle accelerated away as they all found a place to sit.

"EDI, are you still working on it?" Alenko asked. He stood gripping the overhead bar, in Commander Shepard's customary spot.

The mech nodded. She sat across from Javik, next to T'Soni. "I redirected my intrusions to the locations Doctor T'Soni indicated," she said. "I believe I have located the trail of surveillance alterations at Inrah Dockyards."

The display on the bulkhead behind her lit up. "I have not yet penetrated the shipyard's client or financial records, but I have accessed their camera feeds. They are showing some of the same tampering."

The image showed a long view of a ship dock with multiple bays. The gangways were festooned with maintenance equipment of all kinds, large robotic arms and cargo movers. Three of the four bays were occupied by ships of different manufacture. The image jumped again, and this time one of the docked ships was missing.

"Unsubtle," Javik commented.

"Indeed," EDI said, "but they are no doubt in a hurry."

The footage reversed itself, the ship reappearing, then froze and zoomed into the lower left of the long gangway. It zoomed in again, becoming grainy with thick bands of color. Beside the sloping blob of the vehicle was a trio of figures. Even with the low detail, the black and white bulk of their armor was impossible to mistake.

"Cerberus," several people said at the same time.

"How long ago was that?" Alenko said.

"The timestamp indicates the missing ship vacated the dock sometime after twenty-three point six minutes ago."

The major nodded. His fury tamped down into a cold determination. "Get us anything you can about
the designation of that ship. Joker, are we ready to move?"

"All crew present and accounted for," the pilot replied in the comms. His usual sneering disdain for his commanders seemed subdued. At least somewhat. "Preflight checks done. Give me a target and get your asses back here. I've had enough sitting around!"

"Cast off and coordinate with Cortez for pickup. EDI's got a target for you. We're going hunting."
He was ready when the breaching charges severed the bolts holding the airlock closed. The air that greeted them was full of smoke, strobed with red emergency lighting. Alerts in his helmet told him the atmosphere had been flooded with carbon dioxide, probably as a fire retardant.

The *Euryale* was small, barely four times the size of the Kodiak. The explosive entrance of Kaidan and his assault team was greeted with a pair of concussive grenades bouncing against the bulkhead. He punched them away with a flick of his wrist and a shudder of blue. Lieutenant Vega pushed past him and answered the grenades with a roar from his shotgun. The grenades thudded, dim in the thin atmosphere, and smoke-wreathed figures retreated, scrambling.

"Watch your fire!" Kaidan barked. "Confirm your targets!"

They were angry, precipitous. Even the normally cool-headed asari advanced with teeth bared. The chase through the system, first around the overloaded Tasale fuel depot, then through the relay itself in a strange inverted mirror of the *Normandy*'s own Reaper pursuit had pushed the tension past a breaking point. The assault team rushed forward into the crippled ship, splitting up as planned to sweep into the forward section and crew quarters as well as back into the cargo section.

Kaidan hoped he would never again have to sit over a pilot's shoulder and be able to do nothing but watch, hoping the *Normandy* didn't crush the smaller ship like an egg, didn't miss a shot and cause catastrophic damage. He knew he had to trust Joker's flying and EDI's judgment of disabling rather than destructive force. Trust in Shepard's ability to survive the circumstances. Hope it wouldn't prove to be a repeat of the SR-1. Trust that his judgment to attack had been the correct one after hails, threats and pursuit had proven fruitless.

Resistance stiffened sharply at the bottleneck formed by a half-closed bulkhead door leading into the cargo section. Gunfire sputtered and rained off the metal, and they were forced to try and target muzzle flashes appearing and disappearing in the smoke.

"Negative on Shepard, Major," Garrus reported. He'd been leading the charge to the cockpit. "Two hostiles down."

Kaidan's stomach turned over. He ducked into the thin cover of a bulkhead strut and signed to Liara to get a covering biotic field through the door.

"But she *was* here," Javik said. He was with Garrus as well.

"Are you sure?" Kaidan grated.

"I am. She was not armored, and under stress. The ken is unmistakable."

Gravity heaved and lurched. Kaidan took a breath and bolted through the door, taking several shots to the front of his barrier. Figures loomed out of the smoke- the white bulk of Cerberus armor. He fired reflexively. To Kaidan's shock, the shot took the trooper's head clean off. He barely had time to register the rigidity of the body and the lack of blood when the atmosphere scrubbers started up again, vents near the ceiling opening with a clang. The smoke swirled violently and diminished, curling around the mass well Liara had planted in the center of the room. There were shouts, the roar of gunfire and the buzzing crackle of tech mines, as the space started to come into focus. Cargo containers were scattered across the floor, knocked free of their mounts by the chaos. Cables and piping looped out of scorched holes in the ceiling and burst bulkheads. The atmosphere flush had
extinguished the fires. A row of Cerberus armored suits sat against one of the crates, but they were empty, the headless one tipped forward to show its gaping torso armor and the rack beneath.

"Stop!" came a bellowed shout.

Kaidan rounded the corner and froze. A pale-skinned woman in light armor crouched, poised, beside a console bank set into the wall. It looked like a weapon mod bay, but the display had been replaced by a bright red warning band inset with thick block letters spelling out 'DESTRUCT'. Blood streaked the woman's armor, but she clung to the edge of the bay, her fist hovering defiantly over the red button beneath the warning.

"I press this we all blow," the woman grated between her teeth. She'd peeled off her helmet, and short brown hair clung messily to her sweaty face.

Garrus' rifle suddenly occupied the left side of Kaidan's vision. He hissed a warning to the turian.

"You don't have to die today," Kaidan said, easing off his aim. Liara moved forward to his right, stepping slowly, hands down but fingers tense and ready to sign a mnemonic.

The woman's fist trembled. She laughed a short, humorless bark. "Better that than give in to indocs."

"Where's Shepard?" Garrus growled. "Just tell us where Shepard is."

"Then what, we all go home? 'fraid not, cuttlebone. Get off my ship. Get off my ship or you all die."

The soft rasp of Garrus' grip on his gun dragged across Kaidan's ears. Vega stood on the other side of the turian, the ugly beast of his shotgun leveled. This situation was going to explode, literally, in seconds. Kaidan barked an order, overly loud, and moved through Garrus' aim to Vega, pushing both their weapons down.

And drawing the woman's gaze away from Liara. The air thrummed, and gravity pulled sharply in around the woman. She gasped as the sudden weight pinned her firmly in place, hand raised. Instantly, EDI slipped around the bulk of the armored marines and relieved her of the detonation device. Kaidan straightened and started for the stasis-locked woman, intent.

A gunshot made them all start. The bulkhead behind the woman exploded in red gore.

The major spun around and saw one of the other men, lying in a pool of blood with his arm outstretched and gripping a pistol. The major kicked the gun out of his hands, fracturing several bones with a crunch, and knelt down to grip the man's collar with both hands, dragging him up. Blood pumped lazily out of several ragged holes in his torso. Already his eyes were starting to glaze under his helmet.

"Where's Shepard?" he roared in the man's face. "Tell me where you took her!"

"Rot in hell, indoc," the man wheezed around a bloody grimace.

He managed three more short, gurgling breaths before expiring with a long rasp. Kaidan dropped him and only just resisted aiming a vicious kick at the dead man's face as he stood. He glanced back at the woman. She was slumped to the side, eyes fixed in a glassy stare, a red hole above her right eye. The red destruct display sputtered, the holo-emitter slathered in her brains. Now the only living things on the ship, the Normandy team looked between themselves in dismay. Lieutenant Vega growled a series of overly descriptive curses.

"So much for interrogating anyone," Garrus said. " Spirits, they hate turians but they'd make any
"Fuck, did you hear what she called us?" Vega said, shouldering his shotgun. "Indocs!"

"Indoctrinated?" Kaidan said absently. *So close. So damn close!*

"Sounded like."

"That's rich." Kaidan turned and looked at them all. "Shepard was here, now she isn't, which means they transferred her somewhere before we caught them. There has to be evidence. Scour the ship. Find it. Tali, EDI, the computers, and make sure that destruct sequence is off. Garrus, Vega, their weapons and armaments. Liara, anything you can squeeze out about the ship's origin. Javik, try to figure out where Shepard was when she was here."

The squad dispersed around him, leaving Kaidan with a disjointed sense of loss of what to do himself. He shook it off and marched to the cockpit. It was spare, with a pilot and co-pilot's chair and evidence of extensive modification and refits. This ship had been a civilian transport and exploration vessel once, meant for scouting potentially dangerous new territory. Robust and lacking in luxuries, it was obvious it had been maintained and upgraded by people who used it for even more dangerous work than mapping new systems.

The holodisplays were blank, skipping with static and default no-signal patterns. Kaidan ground his teeth in silence. Before being boarded, the occupants had done severe damage to their own systems. No doubt a last-ditch attempt to cover their tracks.

He scraped his hand across his face under his helmet. None of the people on this ship had actually admitted to having Shepard on board. Could Javik have been wrong? It frustrated him to have to trust the prothean's weird sixth sense, something he didn't particularly understand from a person he didn't particularly understand. A shudder ran through him as he tried to run the sequence of events through his head once more. One moment Shepard had been walking down the street, probably in a hurry, and the next her sight would have gone completely haywire. Maybe they'd landed the gravcar just ahead and let her walk by, then yanked her inside the moment the scrambler kicked in. And done gods only knew what...

"Major Alenko."

He turned to find EDI standing behind him. She pointed upward to where a nondescript metal box was bolted to the roof of the cabin, fed by a large cable. There was little to suspect about it, except that it looked newer than the rest of the hodgepodge of tech arrayed around the cockpit.

"What is it, EDI?"

"This device is transmitting a complex low-band signal I associate with the Reaper IFF." She pressed something on the cover, pulled back a protective lid, and peered inside. "I have also seen this configuration before."

"You have? Where?"

"The file fragments uploaded to me by Jacob Taylor's rogue Cerberus group contained incomplete blueprints of several devices. I only have about twenty percent of the blueprint in question, but what I do have matches this device exactly. I believe it is their method of using the relays."

"Why is it transmitting now? We're not near a relay."

"Unknown. Perhaps it is a continuous broadcast instead of on-demand."
A little black box made by Cerberus... The hairs on Kaidan's neck stood up. "Shut it off. Right away."

"There does not appear to be an off switch," EDI observed. She wrapped her fingers around the cable feeding it and pulled it out with a sharp yank and spurt of sparks. "It is no longer transmitting."

Kaidan nodded at her, suddenly feeling even more unsettled. The AI weaved around him and sat in the pilot's chair in a curious imitation of Joker, then proceeded to investigate the unresponsive holodisplays. She would be able to do a faster and more thorough job than himself, so he turned back to what looked like the crew quarters and spent several minutes rifling through personal belongings around the bunks set into the walls, but found nothing compelling. There was a startling lack of personally identifiable effects, as if they'd gone to great lengths to make everything as anonymous as possible. It was a shocking level of competence for Cerberus. Kaidan wondered if he might be finally seeing their best agents instead of their expendable shock troops.

He emerged back into the cargo bay to find Garrus waiting for him.

"They're armed to the fringe, but most of it isn't Cerberus issue," the turian reported. "I guess they must reserve that stuff for the grunts. There's a few suits of the standard trooper armor, and Hornet SMGs, but most of the gear is made by other human manufacturers." He leaned closer to Kaidan. "Things aren't adding up. It's making my mandibles itch."

Kaidan nodded but didn't have time to answer before Tali called to them. He swallowed his mounting frustration and walked over to where the quarian bent over a series of conduits and a large junction box that had its cover removed.

"They knew what they were doing," she said over her shoulder. "They didn't just erase their files, a charge blew out the computer storage core."

Garrus clicked his tongue. "No retrieving anything from that, I guess."

"Not without months of reconstructive forensics."

"Damn it." Kaidan balled up his fists. "I was afraid of that. That's a huge lead lost."

"Not entirely." The quarian's voice took on a note of satisfaction. "They're equipped with a Jormangund Technologies Mirage-3 sensor bank. You know, the company that steals tech from everyone else? Well, it has an active system for hostile detection, but it also has a passive collector that logs ambient conditions around the ship." She consulted her omni-tool and examined the complicated motherboard inside the junction box. After a moment, she carefully pulled out one chip between thumb and forefinger.

"Wouldn't all of that data go to the central computer?" Garrus said.

"The computer is what correlates all the data, yes. But this model stores all the raw pickup from the passive detector array on this." She brandished the tiny chip. "It'll all be raw data, but it's like a core sample of where the ship has been in the last month."

"Is every system that unique?"

"Not completely, it also depends where the ship goes within the system." Tali pulled a small plug out of one of her belt compartments and carefully inserted the chip into it. "But there are often unique markers. The spectrum and radiance of the the star, as well as certain noise patterns from outside the system."
"What's he doing?" Garrus muttered.

Kaidan followed the turian's narrow-eyed gaze back to the other end of the room. In a strange sight indeed, the ancient prothean had crouched way down, with his head near the deck, peering at the corner between it and the bulkhead.

"Javik, what is it?" Kaidan asked, approaching him.

The alien ignored him. He ran a long finger along the ground near the bulkhead, then rocked back on his heels and brushed finger and thumb together, examining it. The pale light caught a tiny sparkle drifting down from his fingertips.

"Javik-"

"A persistent hand," the prothean intoned, "for a stubborn heart." He pushed himself to his feet and brushed his hands together, then cocked his head. "I require the aid of the machine woman."

Violence born of frustration shuddered beneath Kaidan's skin, clawing for purchase. A short, vicious urge to sock the ice-blooded ancient crowded him, heredity be damned, singing in the adrenaline he'd been swimming in for an hour or more. Normally he tried to keep his distance from killing, took no pleasure in its necessity. Now a dark voice in his head wanted more, to find more of these thugs to hurt until one of them gave up their secrets. Lash out in any direction, as if it would assuage the burning fear and guilt.

But he had long since learned it wouldn't. "EDI," he said carefully into the comms, "I need you here."

Within half a minute the click of plastic feet announced EDI's arrival. "Yes?"

Javik pointed to the spot he'd been examining. "A small mark, near the deck. Your eyes see finer than mine."

"Curious," the AI said. She moved to the indicated spot and knelt down.

"A mark..." Kaidan's breath was suddenly tight. "You think Shepard left it?"

Garrus moved into his peripheral vision, eyes glittering in his hawkish face. His scarred mandible jumped, the muscle moving under the clumped skin.

Javik gave the barest of shrugs. "She sat here for a time, enough time to leave her... aura." He gestured as if to trace the figure of someone sitting, legs outstretched. "It is persistent, not erased by the passage of others. The mark on the wall is new, at a level that suggests bound hands. There are small shavings of metal beneath it. It could simply be friction. Or it might not."

EDI stood up and turned back to them. She opened her omni-tool holodisplay and held it up. An image appeared and zoomed in. It appeared to show a small section of the wall marked with small lines. As they watched, the lines illuminated and pulled away until they filled the small display.

"It's just a bunch of scratches," Garrus said, sounding deflated.

The lines turned different tints and rotated in place.

"It is possible that in order to avoid detection," EDI said, "Commander Shepard superimposed the letters. Also, if she was sitting with her arms bound behind her, it is likely she inscribed them upside down relative to us. Likely using the manacles themselves."
The colored lines pulled apart until they formed four messy letters.

"... ATOM?" Kaidan said quizzically.

"That doesn't exactly narrow it down," Garrus muttered.

"I am merely guessing at the correct letter order," EDI said.

Kaidan glanced around, then pinched the bridge of his nose under his visor. The others had gathered now, too. But they were a group of aliens getting running translations of everything, and weren't going to be any help with a letter game based on spelling. *If I don't find a calm mental place to go, I'm no use to anyone.*

"Are we sure it's really letters and not just random marks?" Liara said.

"Given the small number of strokes," EDI replied, "Random oscillation was less likely to have produced the given patterns than deliberation."

"Atom..." Liara murmured. "It could mean so many things." She looked at her own omni-tool. Glyph, the VI drone, appeared nested into the display and chattered its inane greetings. She started listing search items to it.

Kaidan tried to breathe, to think. *Atom. Mota. She's not dead, at least not yet. Stop it. Think. Moat... moat?*

"EDI, are you sure the A is an A?" he asked absently. "Moat, mote..."

Garrus looked at Kaidan like his brain had dribbled out his ear.

"Moat," Kaidan said irritably, "a water barrier. Mote, a speck of something, like dust. They just sound the same, but they're spelled differently. But neither of them *mean* anything to me-"

"Blue Mote," Glyph said cheerfully.

Every head in the room swiveled to stare at the VI. It spun in its omni-tool cradle and stared back, unblinking.

"Blue Mote is the only common use of the word 'mote' in specific reference to a galactic system on record among humans," Glyph explained. "But it is a colloquial term, a nickname, not the formal appellation."

"A nickname for what, Glyph," Liara said with forced patience.

"Charybdis. In the Voyager Cluster, called Blue Mote by the colonists of Feros because it glows blue in their sky. And because they find the formal name problematic to pronounce."

"Tali-"

"Already on it," Tali said. "Glyph, I need physical system data for Charybdis."

"Sending," the VI chirped.

"Goddess," Liara murmured. She looked up from the data scrolling by on her omni-tool. "Charybdis is an unstable blue supergiant. It is late in its lifecycle, emitting often severe magnetic disturbances and flares. It is in the process of destroying its attendant planets. It was mapped by the Systems Alliance, but deemed nothing more than a scientific curiosity, as well as potentially dangerous to ship
traffic. It is a roughly eighty hour trip from the Voyager relay at standard FTL."

"Sounds like a hellhole in the middle of nowhere," Vega said. "Why would they take Shepard there?"

"To hide," Javik said. "In my time, we often used such systems to mask our presence from the Reapers."

"There!" Tali exclaimed. "This ship has been to that system in the last month! The spectrum and magnetic field levels match."

A ripple of excitement traveled around the room.

"It's not a great lead, but it's better than some I've followed." Garrus said.

"Shepard herself left that message," Kaidan said. "I can only hope we're reading it right." Stay alive, Shepard. I'm coming. "Let's move."

Kaidan chewed his lip in silence, staring at the holo-projectors of the closet-like communication bay. Uncovered cabling still snaked along the floor-line and disappeared into an open deck plate at the far end. Three days of some of the worst sleep of his life, and his head felt thick and truculent, unwilling to try to pick apart the knot closing over him every hour. All the data coming in had started to veer in strange directions, and he found himself sharing Garrus' sentiment all the more. If he had mandibles to itch, they would be doing so.

"Major," came Traynor's voice over the comms, "Admiral Hackett is online."

"Put him on." Kaidan straightened and tried to will himself to look presentable.

The scarred, owlish face and lean body of Admiral Hackett appeared unchanged from when he'd last seen him, though perhaps a little thinner.

He saluted. "Admiral."

"Major," Hackett greeted him. "Has your lead on Shepard's location panned out?"

"We've found... something, sir, but we're still figuring out exactly what. I won't take up too much of your time, but sir, is there any reason that a half-dozen Alliance ships should be in Charybdis? Just outside the heliopause?"

If he was at all surprised, Hackett's stony face revealed nothing of it. "In the Voyager cluster?"

"Yes."

"Major Alenko, I'm sure you're aware of the extent of our communication problems. Over half of my fleet is still without access to the relays or FTL comms."

"I know, sir. More geth ships should be incoming to you soon."

"I could build a whole new dreadnought out of the number of 'it'll happen soon's I've heard since this war started."

Kaidan shifted uncomfortably. "Sir, I know you've been keeping Crucible operations on a strictly need-to-know basis, but it's important that I know if these ships we're seeing are under orders or not."
The slightest flare widened Hackett's nostrils. "There are no ships under orders outside Charybdis' heliopause."

A perfectly political answer, but it confirmed Kaidan's suspicions nonetheless. Cold flowed through him. "Admiral, I may be about to do something... drastic. Under my purview as a Spectre. If I'm proven wrong, then I don't want it reflecting on the Alliance crew."

Hackett regarded him for a moment, then nodded. "Major, Commander Shepard has been greying my hair since '83. The Council stuck their badge on your chest too, so I expect no different from you."

It was sobering to imagine, even for a moment, what kind of decisions Hackett had had to make since the attack on Earth. And that was without even considering the order to retreat from that battle in the first place. Getting the insane project of the Crucible accomplished while under galaxy-wide attack had to have meant sacrifices no one would want to seriously contemplate.

"Get Shepard back, Major." Hackett's eyes drilled into Kaidan. "She's instrumental to our working relations with the krogan, quarians and most especially the geth. We've introduced a lynchpin into our system, and if the geth turn on us, we're finished."

It wasn't about saving good soldiers from the enemy anymore, Kaidan realized. Hackett had been forced into a position where the only thing that mattered, that could matter, was the goal. Anything that didn't lead to the destruction of the Reaper threat was immaterial. From the admiral's position, perhaps more than anyone else, it had to be.

"Yes sir. Admiral, if you do have any operations ongoing in Charybdis, I suggest putting them on high alert."

"Noted." He saluted crisply. "Godspeed, Spectre."

Kaidan barely had time to return the salute before the image clicked off. Hackett's lack of interest in any details surprised him, but he realized it probably shouldn't have. Just the title by which he'd addressed Kaidan as he signed off was ample evidence of which mental slot the major now occupied in his superior's head. Kaidan was used to having to fill out twelve forms every time he took a step. Even operations like the one against Donovan Hock had involved lengthy briefs and debriefs. But now he'd fully crossed the line into the wide operational horizon of something past even Alliance Ns, to a place where superiors no longer wanted details that might later implicate them. Only the result mattered, because at this level, failure had galaxy-wide repercussions.

The tethers he was long since accustomed to were slipping free. It was terrifying. But in a strange way, Hackett's apparent prioritization of Shepard's safety as a critical war asset as opposed to a person lessened the nagging guilt wrapped around his chest. He wasn't just doing this because of his feelings. The Admiral of Fifth Fleet had just told him to get her back, no matter what. It wasn't just about her. It wasn't.

But it didn't tell him anything at all about how he was supposed to do it.

He stepped out from the comm cabin. There were already a few of the others around the holo-display cradle, looking up at him with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension. He tried to keep his expression blank as he descended the stairs and moved to join them. Soon, the rest of Shepard's, and now his, unconventional team joined them.

"All right," he said, once they'd assembled. "This is what we know. As standard for a system containing a system with a volatile star, we came out of FTL outside the heliopause in order to assess
the situation. The system itself is difficult to scan— the star puts out a great deal of radiation. However, 
EDI thinks she spotted ship activity in the shadow of Peleus, the second planet. It's a terrestrial world 
that has been scorched clean by the expanding star."

"The scan was inconclusive," EDI said. The platform was there, standing with her arms behind her 
back. "However, the presence of a particular band of emissions has led me to believe it may be the 
assembly site of a portion of the Crucible project. So assumed because it was the Normandy that 
acquired the specs for the advanced eezo cores that would emit such an electrical signature."

"Right," Kaidan said. "Now, in attempting to get a closer look, we circumnavigated the heliopause to 
reach the shadow of the outermost planet, the gas giant Thetis. We came upon a small flotilla of ships 
camped in the gas giant's shadow and just outside the system's edge. The ships aren't putting out 
transponder data, but their silhouettes and noise output are consistent with Alliance ships. They're 
maintaining a position that puts the gas giant between themselves and the possible Crucible build 
site."

"Guard dogs?" Vega suggested.

"That was my first assumption as well. Until Liara found out more about that ship that snatched 
Shepard."

The asari wet her lips, then spoke. "The Euryale's registration disappears from Alliance registries 
over five years ago, but without appearing in private ownership elsewhere. Further, it had armaments 
that are inconsistent with civilian permits."

"Cerberus isn't known for caring about laws," Vega said.

"I know. But in my search for leads, I contacted Jacob Taylor. I had to coax it out of him, but he 
identified the ship as a Corsair vessel. Loosely under the command of the 14th Scout Flotilla."

"Commanded by Rear Admiral Adam Tennyson," Kaidan said darkly.

Garrus gave a soft hiss.

"I asked EDI to analyze the hacking job that was done to penetrate our comms system so thoroughly, 
so much so that even she didn't notice until after the fact. It had to have been done by someone who 
knows Alliance comm back-end and protocols even better than I do. That's either someone who 
served, or is serving. Now, I just asked Hackett point-blank if there were any of his ships out here 
past the heliopause on his orders. He said there weren't."

Vega sucked a breath in between his teeth. "Do the silhouettes out there match up with Tennyson's 
ships?"

"Yes," EDI said. "Admiral Tennyson's ships are not yet registered as having taken on geth allies. 
However, they reached this system without geth aid. They must have their own relay key. The 
Euryale had some form of relay transponder on board."

Kaidan leaned forward on the rim of the display cradle. "One we have evidence was designed by 
Cerberus."

"No wonder no one on the Euryale looked like an actual Cerberus trooper under that armor!" Tali 
exclaimed. "It was a feint! They just used the armor to throw us off in case we caught some footage 
of them!"

"Just like the batarians," Kaidan said. "The kidnappers were preying on our assumptions. And who's
the only person who could come the closest to predicting Shepard's moves, aside from the people in this room? The man who trained her."

"But... why?" Liara asked. "What possible reason could he have to do this?"

"Because if that Cerberus relay key does what I think it does, then he's indoctrinated, and gods only know how his paranoia has been twisted by it!"

"He wouldn't use Cerberus technology."

"Not knowingly. But Cerberus has tentacles everywhere, and they would be extremely motivated to slip something like this through his net. He's been their enemy for decades. But he has to have been just as desperate for a relay key as anyone else, and once the poison starts setting in..."

"Dios," Vega muttered. "And we can't attack a flotilla of ships out here in the middle of nowhere, even with a stealth drive."

"Those false keys could be everywhere by now!" Liara said.

Javik grunted. "This is the true strength of the Reapers. Division. Betrayal."

Kaidan looked at him. "And the people who betrayed you, Javik, they targeted the unfinished Crucible, didn't they?"

The prothean nodded. "It was the fulcrum of our failure."

"And this..." Liara said, hands to her mouth, "could be happening now, to us..."

"I don't know anything for sure," Kaidan admitted. "But the signs are sure as hell lighting up.

"If Tennyson went to all that trouble to capture Shepard, it must be to interrogate her," Garrus mused. "So she'd more than likely be on his flagship. If he just wanted her dead, she already would be."

"There's a burner in the cargo bay," Vega said abruptly. "Standard-issue on an Alliance frigate."

The others looked at the lieutenant quizzically. Kaidan blinked. He knew the usual manifests, but the notion of actually using the thing hadn't even occurred to him.

"SIBV, Self-Propelled Infantry Breaching Vehicle," Kaidan said carefully. "Marines call it a 'burner' for short. It's a small self-propelled assault craft meant for making an exterior door in static orbital installations like space stations. And I'm not kidding when I mean small- it doesn't usually carry passengers. It's an engine with big teeth, clamps and a barrier airlock mounted in the middle."

"A bulkhead breacher?" Garrus said. "Against a ship? It's sublight, very sublight, so as soon as we fire the engines on it the target spots us, moves just a little to the left and the shot is wasted. And we couldn't use the Kodiak to approach, either, not without being seen."

"We can hang on the outside of the burner itself," Vega said. "Did it once, slaver fuel depot. Just stay clear of the thrusters." His grin said exactly what he thought of the experience.

Liara looked mildly horrified, but Garrus folded his arms and tapped a speculative talon on his mandible.

"I assume this vehicle has retro-thrusters?" Tali asked.
“Yeah, to dock with. Then bam, it's the charge clamps.” Vega pounded his fist into his palm.

The quarian looked at Kaidan. "Then what we'd need is a baffle, something to shield and absorb the burner's heat output while it accelerates. If we perform the acceleration burn far enough out, then we can drift in on the momentum." She patted the display cradle. "We're sitting in the best mobile baffle I can imagine."

The holodisplay lit up. Images of the mysterious ships appeared, then pulled back, and the blue wedge of the Normandy appeared, with a little red dot behind it. The display arranged itself so the Normandy was suspended vertically between the dot and the scout flotilla.

"You are suggesting the Normandy use its size to absorb any heat and electrical emissions projected in the direction of the target ships while the SIBV acquires speed, then moves to allow it to pass," EDI said. The display played forward, showing relative positions. A little flare burst around the dot, which began to move forward. Then the blue wedge moved out of the way, letting the dot drift in the direction of the flotilla.

"That's right," Tali said. "We can rig up a shield to absorb ambient electricals while we travel, and dump it right before we hit the target."

"But once we get there..." Garrus said.

"Right before retro burn, EDI bombs their systems with sensory noise."

"We need at least a minute to clamp on and get through the bulkheads," Vega said. "Maybe two. Depends on the ablating."

"Alliance standard tactical response to a ship-based assault is at least five minutes," EDI said. "They will have time to arm themselves, but not armor."

Tali pointed at the display. "And the longer they think it's a sensor error or a natural phenomenon, the less armed they'll be."

"The star is extremely volatile," Liara said, "they might be led to believe it is a sizable solar flare."

Kaidan frowned. An impossibility had mutated abruptly into a potential plan. "This... is maybe the only ship in service that could seriously consider a burner shot at another ship. It's a long shot, but if it gets us in with the element of surprise..."

"Is there no way we can simply hail them?" Liara asked. "Concoct a pretense to visit the ship? They are nominally our allies."

"Do not give up the element of surprise," Javik warned.

"There's no good reason for us to be out here, Liara," Kaidan said. "There's even less reason we should know the whereabouts of Tennyson's ships. He wasn't out here when the relays closed, and he wasn't ordered here by Hackett."

"And if they turn on us," Garrus said, "we're captured. Way too many of them when they're prepared, and we're days away from backup."

Kaidan looked at each of them in turn as a deep chill of recognition spread through him. This was the place Shepard had stood so many times. No one above to tell her exactly the right thing to do, a group of people below her who relied on her making the right call, and a huge, anonymous but nonetheless real population of people who would pay with their lives if she didn't. His conversation
with her in the medbay during his migraine about squad choices came rushing back. *I need Vega because he's done this kind of assault before and there's no substitute for experience. I need Garrus because he doesn't have the emotional attachment to the Alliance that might give me pause. I need Javik for ruthlessness and his ability to sense Shepard. I need Liara for her head for details and her powerful biotics. I need Tali because she's at home in zero-G and thinks outside the box when it comes to ships. I need EDI because she can stay cool through any circumstance and get into almost any computer.*

*I am seriously considering assaulting an Alliance vessel and killing Alliance personnel.* He felt a wave of nausea.

*This is the hell of doubt.*

"Listen," he said, clearing his throat with difficulty, "I'm not going to waste anyone's time here by claiming I can be at all objective about this, either because of my years in the Alliance or my... service with Shepard. So if anyone has any misgivings, I want to hear them now."

He looked at each of them in turn, and finally settled on Vega. The Lieutenant seemed to be a fan of Shepard's, even through her trial, but he was still the newest to this unconventional group, aside from Javik. And he was Alliance.

The scarred marine shifted. "How, uh, how do we know they're not right? About us being indoctrinated?"

"You do not," Javik stated.

"Saren knew," Liara said. "Benezia did too, in the end."

"Then they were the strong ones. Most never know." Javik gestured to the ship. "You have only the strength of your convictions. I am Vengeance, the spear of the Talvan. I will not be taken."

Garrus shook his head. "I... have a lot of bad dreams these days, but I don't think that's strange. I do know I still don't want anything but the total annihilation of the Reapers. No compromise."

"I am not indoctrinated," EDI said, as if she were describing the color of the sky.

The others nodded. Kaidan thought of when it had been Shepard standing there by the display cradle and the promise he'd made then. *I'm committed. I was committed before this even started.*

Vega shrugged. "Had to be asked."

"Okay," Kaidan said. "One last thing. To date, the people we've been fighting have either been Reaper monsters, geth, or Cerberus shock troops. None of these opponents have been anything to write home about from a tactical perspective. They get most of their power from weight of numbers. Attacking Tennyson's ship is going to be another story altogether. We're talking about a man who was N-lead for years. He trained Shepard. The people on his ship will be extraordinarily dangerous, even without armor. Once they recover from the shock they will be smart, and they will be on home turf. It's not much bigger than the *Normandy,* but if even only a third of the crew on board are marines with extensive ground experience, we have to expect a hard, brutal fight. One... not all of us might come back from.

"If this doesn't work, then it's our lives. The *Normandy* gets out, gets back to fighting the war. Anyone who comes goes all in... or nothing."
He let the gravity of that set in, then suddenly Javik spoke.

"The name of the empire that was gone even before I was born was the Talvan. It is derived from 'tal', a word for which your tongues have no sufficient translation. A tal is bound through the fifth eye, transcending personal borders. We are... porous. The traces left by others permeate us.

"You are primitives. Your ways are strange and your lives are messy and frivolous. But you are my tal now. Commander Shepard is my tal. Your hands, her hands, are also upon the spear of Vengeance. I will rain death on any who challenge it."

With the declaration still reverberating around the war room, Javik turned on his heel and strode up the stairs and out the door.

"Guess he's on board," Vega said with a grin.

"Uh, yeah," Kaidan said.

EDI looked at him from across the holodisplay. "Jeff will not be approve of staging such a retreat, if it is necessary."

There was a reason the pilot wasn't present at a ground team meeting. The last thing Kaidan's raw nerves could deal with right then was snarky backtalk. He set his jaw. "Probably not. If Joker has a plan to fight and win against a whole flotilla without putting Shepard in danger, then I'll listen. Otherwise, he'll follow orders. Lieutenant, you better get that burner out of storage and fueled up. We're going to have to do a crash course in breach assault timing."

"You bet, Major." He saluted. "All or nothing!"

"We're going to need exit strategies, for multiple scenarios. The other ships won't stay idle."

"I will coordinate with Jeff and Lieutenant Cortez," EDI said.

"All right, let's make a plan out of this. Dismissed."

Kaidan leaned on the display cradle as the others filed out. Had he somehow deluded himself into thinking that the reckless charge he'd engaged in during the Hock mission would only be a one-time event? He remembered sharply what Shepard had told him once- you think too much. It was going to paralyze him. At some point, he realized grimly, you just had to stop thinking, stop second-guessing, and do it.

Liara's hand appeared on his steel-tense arm. "We'll get her back, Kaidan."

He looked up. Garrus stood behind her, nodding.

"She's saved us from ourselves," the turian said quietly, "from our pasts, and Spirits know what else. Time we returned the favor."

"I don't know how she does this," Kaidan blurted.

Garrus shrugged and gave a rueful chuckle. "The same way you are right now, with all the same fears. Same way I order fleets around. Think I saw myself doing that, just a few years ago? I still wonder how the heck I got here. But it has to be done, so we do it."

"I just hope I'm... doing it for the right reasons."

"You are," said Tali's voice behind him. She stepped up beside Garrus. "We'd tell you if you
weren't."

"All of your reasons are the right ones," Liara said pointedly.

Kaidan smirked, feeling his face heat. It felt beyond strange to even skirt the edge of talking openly about his relationship with Shepard, even in front of non-military friends. Like he'd spent so much energy holding it in over so much time that even if the blocks came off, it still wouldn't come out easily. "My entire career I've been told that's not the case. But I guess... nothing about this war is normal, is it? What it's doing to any of us. It kills me to think about what she's been through, and now this..."

"I think Javik was right," Tali said. "When all else fails us, we have to trust ourselves."

"And it's Commander Shepard." Garrus waved at the holodisplay. "It wouldn't be a proper rescue if it wasn't completely insane, would it?"
There were variations to darkness, much like there were variations to redness or blueness. Deep space gave a whole new definition, a whole new depth of experience of black. This was the black that defined a deep nothing.

The baleful light of Charybdis was blocked out by the distant bulk of Thetis, itself only a dot at this distance. The 14th Scout Flotilla ran dark. There was nothing but stars, rivers of endless stars stretching as far as a paltry human eye could see. And never were they paltrier, more insignificant, than when clinging to the side of a shuttle-sized cylinder, adrift without even a gravity well to provide a sense of orientation. Outside a star system, without atmosphere to collect even the meager light, anything that wasn't stars was utterly black. They were cutouts, voids, utter emptiness in a vast sea.

Without points of reference, Kaidan had to trust they were actually still moving. His senses told him nothing in the silence and emptiness of the vacuum, radio silent and all but essential systems turned off, huddled behind a jury-rigged static shield installed to prevent any incidental radiance from reaching ahead of them to their target. In his grip has a handle he couldn’t see, and a tether around his waist bound him to the vessel.

He watched the stars until his neck grew stiff from peering around the burner's empty black bulk. His eyes, used to a near darkness from which one could still glean small details, kept straining to pick out some recognizable shape, any kind of light he could relate to, something other than the timer in one corner of his dim HUD. Brief minutes of excitement while they powered up to speed crumbled into an interminable tense wait, one in which he had quite literally nothing but the stars, a zero-G-induced stuffed nose, and the crowd of frantic thoughts clamoring in his skull.

He was exhausting himself on his doubts, and he knew it. No matter how many times he reminded himself he was now committed and well past the point the re-examination was useful, they all came blustering back. Fifteen minutes into the dead-silent ride, with the anxiety slowly making it hard to breathe, he muttered voice commands to his onboard VI. It took a long time to properly access and unpack the files he wanted, something he could have done with his fingers in much less time, but at length he had them live again- Shepard's music tracks. He had been intending to delete them now that they were back to their proper home, but between the constant and distracting demands of the job and his latent data hoarding tendencies, they were still there.

And he was grateful for it. Picking something at random, he closed his eyes to a more familiar darkness and forced himself to fixate on the melody, the words. He wondered what Shepard liked about it. Was it something she'd had for a long time, or was it something newer, bought on a whim? It played out, then went on to another, one he recognized from having reconstructed its fragments. He found himself listening for errors, but it played smoothly, a stirring instrumental that sounded like it came from a dramatic soundtrack. As one song slipped into another, the choking tension slowly started to ease.

It was several songs later when a tone played in his helmet, startling him. They were five minutes out. He turned off the music, craned his neck upward and saw the silhouette of Tennyson's ship, the SSV Crécy, blotting out the stars. He wet his dry lips and looked to his right. A dark shape disconnected from the burner.

Tali's form was perfect. She didn't kick off, to avoid diverting the machine's course even by a small amount, but just let go. For a half-minute, she seemed to hang suspended, drifting ever so slowly away. He couldn't imagine what it would be like to hang like that with no tether in the deepest,
Darkest black. Her silhouette was broken by the stars reflecting in her face mask, bunching up as she too craned her neck to look upwards at the black slash of Tennyson's ship.

Even her micro-thruster harness made no light when it fired spurts of compressed gas, sending her shooting ahead of the drifting burner. Kaidan wanted to tell her good luck... or anything, really. They drifted on in silence, ticked away by the tenth of a second to impact. His anxiety started up again, but tempered this time by the nearness of real action.

One minute. EDI's calculations had shaved every possible second off their landing time, rebalancing their total travel time, cruise speed and braking distance so they could cut the landing as closely as possible. On cue, to either side of Kaidan, the shadows of Vega and Garrus moved up to where the static guard was latched into place across the burner's bow. There was a brief delay. Light appeared in front of Garrus, a tiny pool between the curve of his visor and the surface of the burner as he fumbled for the latch, then went off again. Kaidan gritted his teeth. Any kind of light was a risk. It must have been necessary. A shudder traveled through the machine under Kaidan's fingers. For the hundredth time, he tugged his tether experimentally, assuring himself it was still there. Above him, the disc of the static guard drifted free of the burner, edging out into the starscape past the bulk of the ship they approached.

Kaidan planted his feet, pushing against the tether, and lifted his hands free. In the total absence of any other source of mass, the blobs of the burner and the people around him hovered at the edge of his awareness. He tried to swallow his pounding heartbeat and reached out, signing a mnemonic. The rim of starlight around the static shield wavered as its mass shifted, easing it out of their trajectory. Given its momentum, it would still strike the ship, but well away from them. It was a risk they had to take.

Forty-three seconds. Kaidan felt for the handle ahead of him and used it to rotate himself so that his feet pointed toward the ship surface. The others should have been doing the same. He muttered a command into his helmet to switch off his HUD display, then peered downward, searching the black plain of the ship now below him. They loomed above the ventral section, having been fired 'up' from below relative to the positions the flotilla occupied in the distant shadow of the planet Thetis. Seconds ticked by, until he finally spotted what he was looking for- a small green beacon, blinking. Success.

Relief mingled into the tension. Tali had done her work. She'd alighted on the surface of the ship and found the sensor mast sticking out behind the main canon battery. With the help of EDI's extensive specs on Alliance ship architecture, the quarian had tapped into the ship's computer hardline and put a splice in place. Now EDI, had a direct input into the Crécy's sensory systems and through that, the frigate's computer. Their chances of getting into the ship in one piece had just gone from none to middling.

Twenty-five seconds. The burner shuddered again and sprouted a series of protuberances, and Kaidan had to pull himself up to keep his feet clear. The retro-thrusters were far too close for comfort.

"All points sensor attack start," EDI said crisply in his ear, breaking radio silence on cue. "Confirm ship ident. It is the SSV Crécy."

At that moment, light flared beneath them, illuminating the dun metal surface of the burner and the wide blue letters stenciled on the side. All at once, the shadow world had texture and presence again.

"Brace, brace, brace," Vega said in the team channel. The order was clean, but there was a vicious glee in his voice. Extreme sports enthusiasts had no idea what they were missing.
It was eerily quiet but for Kaidan's own panting breath in his helmet. His tether snapped taught with a sharp yank around his waist as a nightmarish wash of shimmering light flooded the burner, throwing leering ultra-black shadows up above him. Multiple Gs of pressure dragged him downward as he gritted his teeth and tightened his grip on the handle, which was suddenly vibrating so hard it felt like it was going to pull his shoulders out of their sockets. They'd spent precious time arguing about how many Gs the burner could pull in deceleration with the extra weight of their bodies attached, and without throwing them all off into the heat of the retro-thrusters. They'd had to balance their distribution over the vehicle so as not to throw it off. A thousand details, all of which had to be correct.

The intense vibration knocked Kaidan's foot loose. He swore breathlessly as his whole body jerked downward, leg dangling perilously close to the brightness of the retro-thruster right below him. Something yanked on his left arm.

Underlit in oranges and reds, Vega peered down at him over his huge shoulderplate. He'd caught Kaidan's forearm while still hanging on to his handle with his other hand. Those tree trunk-sized arms he spent so much time on certainly had their moments.

"Watch your foot, Major," the lieutenant said jovially, giving him a tug upward.

"Yeah, thanks," Kaidan grunted. He planted his wayward foot on top of the thruster casing and re-centered his grip.

After an interminable thirty seconds, the retro-thrusters cut out.

"My shoulders are never going to forgive me for this," Garrus complained mildly.

Vega chuckled. "Keep a good grip, we're-"

The impact was as silent as the thrusters, but the tether slammed Kaidan into the body of the burner. As he gasped for breath, he supposed he was grateful dignity was not a prerequisite for a successful assault. If he got out of this in one piece, his lower back would be a mass of bruises from the tether point. The burner's top thrusters fired a short burst, compensating for any rebound, keeping the machine pinned to its landing spot. As they did, four thick struts peeled away from the superstructure and laid themselves flat on the hull. Each was topped with a cylindrical casing.

Vega had warned them to take their hands off the rails when the charge clamps fired. Kaidan was so busy juggling frantic details in his mind he neglected to do so. The four struts jumped as the shaped charges within the armored cylinders went off, ramming wrist-thick gripper spikes deep into the Crécy's honeycombed hull ablating. The impact slammed through the burner's hull into Kaidan's clenched hands, numbing them. He swore under his breath.

"We're docked, Major," Vega said. His bulk hovered beside the burner, connected only by his tether. "Ready to burn!"

"Do it." Kaidan massaged his tingling hands.

"Stay clear, everyone. Go burn."

The lieutenant switched something on his omni-tool. A baleful red glow pulsed from the bottom edge of the machine.

The major used his tether to get himself closer to the back end of the vehicle and switched on his helmet lamp. He cast about and spotted the silhouette of Tali walking toward them with the awkward stiff-legged gait of mag-boots. The black horizon of the underbelly of the Crécy stretched out ahead.
of him, broken by the crest of the forward cannon array.

"Team, check in," Kaidan said.

One by one they reported all clear, unhurt. Seven small flies on a very large, snoozing dog. About to bite.

"EDI, status," he said.

EDI's body hung on to the burner by one arm, curled up as if to minimize the space she occupied. "I have gained total control of their sensor feeds and have begun spoofing solar flare overloads to their electrical systems while attempting to access communications. I could not hide the actual impact of the burner, but I successfully diverted the sensor feedback to the other side of the ship. They know there was an exterior impact, but they believe it to have struck the aft top section. However, this will contradict any report given by a crewmember physically close to the intrusion site."

"Hopefully that buys us a few seconds, anyway."

He touched the burner's hull. It was vibrating, but at a lower frequency. The red glow beneath them had infected the ablating in a ring as the teeth heated and carved through the honeycombed layers. Knowing the specs of most Alliance ships had been a boon- Vega had been able to calibrate the burner's heat and saw speed before even leaving the hangar, saving them precious seconds.

It still felt like too long before the burner's vibrations shifted to a series of thuds, then went still. The aft section between the main thrusters irised open to a shimmering mass field.

Vega thrust his head through into the airlock beyond. "Shit. We're half a meter off-target. There's a strut crossing the entry hole."

Kaidan's heart plunged. "Are we blocked?"

"Gonna be a tight squeeze!"

"I will go first," EDI said, unfolding. She flipped gracefully around her grip, dropped her tether, and slipped past Vega into the entry.

"Entrance clear," she announced a moment later. "However, it is indeed narrow. I suggest removing any weapons and pushing them through first."

Kaidan got a good grip on the rail beside the portal, then carefully undid the tether from his belt. Before he had time to contemplate the sharp unease of being untethered in deep space, he pushed himself through the airlock barrier, feeling the ticklish wash of the mass field brush over him. Ahead, the small space was lit by a pair of light strips, and just beyond the second barrier field. The pieces of ablating had been sectioned and pushed into side compartments, from which they glowed a sullen hot red. Bright yellow hazard stripes warned him of all the various things he shouldn't touch.

He saw the problem immediately. The burner hadn't quite hit the target and had cored into the maintenance gap between the ablating and the hull almost exactly centered on one of the ablating's huge support beams. He pulled his weapons off his back and led with them, pushing off the rails along the inside of the burner airlock and aiming for the larger of the two gaps. As soon as his arms passed through the pressure front of the inner airlock, he felt the weapons removed from his hands and his forearms grabbed and pulled. His shoulder plates scraped against the half-melted edge of the strut as he came through into the dark hull beyond.

EDI handed him his weapons back and pointed, her visor casting an orange glow in the narrow
corridor. There was still no gravity. Kaidan clipped his weapons back into place and hand-walked in the direction the AI had indicated. Fifteen meters down the claustrophobic cavern, he found what he was looking for—the maintenance hatch. He swept his helmet lamp over it, then wedged his fingers into the heavy twist latch.

He glanced back the way he'd come. Javik approached him, his armor ruddy in the dim light and visibly scraped from the narrow entrance. The suit had produced a vacuum seal helmet from somewhere in the back collar. As always, the prothean carried all he needed on his person, eschewing any 'primitive' support but food. Compared to what he'd been through, the Normandy must have seemed like a land of lavish excess.

"EDI," Kaidan said. "I need a bypass on maintenance hatch V-7."

"Working."

They'd argued about foregoing the burner altogether and trying to get to an exterior hatch on the Crécy. But according to Alliance standard protocol, those were hardlocked from the inside, expressly so that no amount of software tampering could cause them to open in a hostile environment. But the ablating maintenance hatches didn't require such safeguards.

"Bad news, sir," Vega said in Kaidan's helmet. "Garrus and me aren't going to fit."

Kaidan ground his teeth. Fantastic. Wonderful. Just deal with it. "How close is it, Lieutenant?"

"Cover the lead, we'll make it work!" Garrus said. He sounded as frustrated as Kaidan felt.

The small light on the hatch turned green. "Hatch alert bypass in place," EDI said.

"EDI, help them. Liara, Tali, Javik, with me." Kaidan twisted the latch and eased the hatch open. He pulled himself inside and clambered into the shaft beyond.

Gravity re-asserted itself as he climbed into the ship's mass fields, forcing itself down around him after the protracted trip through weightlessness. His maimed shoulders ached bitterly at the sudden weight. Soon, there was another hatch above him. He took a deep breath, switched off his helmet lamp and levered it open, then poked his head out and looked both ways. He was in a familiar-looking maintenance tunnel with a low ceiling, lined with thick cabling and conduits. Dim blue light strips lined the corrugated floor. Moving carefully and listening for sounds of alarm, he pulled himself out into a crouch and took his pistol off his hip.

He found himself half-wishing the ships had moved off during the long burner flight so that this attack wouldn't have even been possible. Now he was committed to this insanity, possibly about to make himself a worse criminal than when he'd been party to mutiny on the SR-1. He tried to breathe evenly, tried to hold off the adrenaline that threatened to burn him out before they even got to the hardest part.

Javik pushed himself up, followed by Liara and Tali. The former two pulled off their helmets, Javik's vanishing mysteriously back into his fat collar. The prothean also unsealed his gauntlets and pulled them off. Kaidan only just resisted the urge to immediately pester him about Shepard. They were in a maintenance corridor in the belly of the ship, far away from trafficked areas.

Did they push on despite the fact their two heaviest hitters were stuck in the door, or did they waste precious minutes waiting while the ship more than likely readied itself for an attack? While the subterfuge of the electromagnetic interference and the misdirected hull impact warning might have served for a few seconds of distraction, Kaidan was almost completely sure Tennyson was the kind
of commander who ordered an all-points alert at a pin drop. Especially since the paranoid admiral
was clearly not where he was supposed to be.

Kaidan quickly consulted the map in his omni-tool, then hand-signed for the others to follow him and
shuffled down the narrow corridor. At the second hatch down, he stopped to listen, then pushed a
neuroshock charge into the launch rail on his pistol.

"EDI," he murmured into his comms, "sensor block engineering, shield battery section."

"Done," she answered.

He glanced at the others on his heels, then pushed the hatch open and stood up through the opening.

Two engineers in fatigues, a man and a woman, spun around in shock. Kaidan put the neuroshock
stunner between them and ducked back down. It exploded with a crack and a flash, overloading his
kinetic barrier. He hoped EDI's internal sensor block extended far enough, and that the bulkhead
doors to the other sections were closed. As he planted his foot on the rungs and pushed himself up to
the deck again, the two engineers toppled over, stock-stiff.

The room looked a little like the dim underbelly of the SR-2, though with more years of wear and
tear than the stealth ship. Thick cabling and junction boxes surrounded a power core and several
holo-terminals displaying the kinetic barrier grid. Half the displays were now dead, the emitters
temporarily overloaded by his stunner. The rest of his diminished team clambered up out of the hatch
and closed it behind them as Kaidan glanced over the remaining kinetic barrier displays. There were
several red error messages reporting connection problems and a general comms failure.

A startled voice rang out. "What the-"

There was a surge of gravity and a dull bang. Kaidan whirled around to see a man in an Alliance
uniform slump to the ground, the back of his head split in an ugly red slash where he'd been slammed
into the bulkhead. Javik raked a short pulse of his rifle across the back of the man's neck, and he
twitched and lay still. Kaidan's stomach turned over.

"Do not hesitate," the prothean said, catching Kaidan's glare.

Every instinct in Kaidan's head cried out to obliterate Javik on the spot. "Don't kill if you don't have
to!" he growled between his teeth.

"They are taken. Lost! They are your enemy in the skin of your friends."

He bit off an angry retort. Argument was pointless at this stage. Taking over the ship was the
objective- it was the only way they could hope to do it, this far out with no backup, no support. He
rather pointedly stood in front of the two engineers he'd neuroshocked. Without a hardsuit to dampen
it, the stun would keep them unconscious for a couple of minutes.

Without taking his eyes off the defiant prothean, Kaidan opened the comms. "Vega, what's your
status?"

"I'm through," the lieutenant reported, "almost got Garrus in."

"Objective one is clear, but we have to keep moving."

"Ten-four, meet you at two!"

*You better, or this is going to be the shortest ship assault of all time.* Kaidan switched to his rifle and
loaded another tech mine.

"Major Alenko," EDI said, "the main computer processes are proving difficult to penetrate. I have been forced to shut down the internal camera network instead of overriding it. However, I am able to provide passive heat internals."

His HUD map updated with red dots. "Shepard?" he asked.

"Unknown. Several fragmented references to unnamed prisoners, no more information as of yet."

His heart jumped. That was something- the *Normandy* didn't routinely run with POWs on board. "Keep trying."

"I believe it would be prudent to assume they know they are under attack."

"Way ahead of you on that." He waved to the others and moved to the door.

With EDI's map of heat signatures, they were able to skirt around a crewmember by taking an alternate corridor to where there was an entrance to an emergency stairwell. It wouldn't get them to the command deck, he knew, but it would get them out of cargo and engineering and a lot closer to their target. He took the stairs two at a time and came to a stop at the crew level door. His HUD updated with a new plethora of red dots just ahead.

"There are a lot of people moving around on the other side of this door," he warned the others quietly. "Javik, cut off access to the stairs on my right. Liara, neutralize any biotics. Tali, crowd control. Vega, be advised, we're breaking stealth."

The three of them nodded. Tali had her omni-tool lit, and the ball of her drone core in her fist.

He signed his barrier mnemonic, touched the door icon and rushed through the instant it opened. The room beyond was the open space between the mess hall and general crew area. Lockers lined the far wall, and to his left was a wall of sleeper pods. The dots in Kaidan's HUD became a dozen humans, all in various states of Alliance uniform. Several near the lockers were half-armored or wearing the TCL underarmor.

*If there's a hell, I'm going there.* "Stand down!" Kaidan bellowed in his best drill sergeant's roar, letting his barrier writhe around him like a vengeful spirit as he strode forward with his rifle to his shoulder. "Major Kaidan Alenko of the *SSV Normandy*, operating under authority of Citadel Special Tactics and Recon! You are ordered to stand down!"

To their credit, only about a third of them were stunned into inaction by his appearance. They were anticipating an attack, just not from within their own emergency stairwell.

But surrender they did not. The outline of a rifle appeared near the lockers, and Kaidan's finger closed over his secondary trigger spasmodically, firing the loaded tech mine into the group. It exploded with a crack, whiting out half of his visor for a second. Gravity jumped and surged ahead and to his right, flowing through them. Kaidan shuffled to his left as a bright line of green lit up the air. There were shouts of alarm drowned out by barked orders and the blare of an alarm klaxon. The bright orange sphere of Tali's drone beetled into the crowd of scrambling crew, sprouting arcing bolts of electrical discharge into anyone close enough. Muzzle flashes sparked from various locations.

Gunfire lit up Kaidan's barrier. He threw out his left hand, letting the ensuing mass field whip forward in an uncontrolled wave. As the targets staggered, he picked out the gun and relieved the shooter of his life with a quick burst. He re-centered his aim on the others next to the shooter, but his finger wouldn't close on the trigger. All around them, crew scattered to cover, most toward the aft of
the room, behind bulkheads and doorways. The sounds warped as gravity plunged into a micro-
point, roiling forward. The point singularity stopped suddenly as another gravity well surged, making
all the hairs on Kaidan's arms stand up. The flicker of a biotic corona wavered among the crew.

The shock wore off quickly, and the weight of numbers pushed back. While unarmored, they were
certainly armed, and the returning volley had the power and determination of people defending their
home turf.

Just as the momentum started a precipitous pendulum swing backward, the emergency stairwell door
on the far side opened and Lieutenant Vega barreled through, shotgun in the lead. Concussion
charges exploded in three places. Suddenly flanked by Vega, Garrus and EDI, half of the defending
force collapsed and the rest shouted a retreat. Kaidan pushed after them until they got to a set of stairs
printed with stencils reading armories and comms level.

"Sorry we're late," Garrus said, popping the sink on his rifle. He was missing a good ten centimeters
off the largest part of his back collar armor, and his shoulder pads were newly decorated with deep
scrapes.

"This is some ugly shit, sir," Vega grunted, surveying the scene. His earlier bravado seemed to have
cooled as he, too, saw bodies he should have been calling allies.

"Agreed. We're moving up a level," Kaidan said crisply, as much to keep Vega from dwelling on it
as himself. "Garrus and I on point, Vega, keep them off our asses and watch for vents and
emergency access ways."

They caught up to the retreating defenders on the next deck, and this time they'd had a chance to
bunker down in the junction hallways. The charge ground to a halt again as they exchanged gunfire
around assembly tables someone had dragged out the doors for cover.

Someone yanked on Kaidan's shoulder. He turned to see Javik's four wide eyes and predator teeth
bared. "Shepard is here!" he said.

Kaidan's heart jumped into his throat as he under-armed a tech mine off the far wall, unthinking.
"She was? Are you sure? Where?!"

"The ken does not tell me such things, but she was in this hall, I am sure of it!"

Even if it hadn't felt like it up until that moment, Kaidan had been holding back, horrified even under
the adrenaline at what he was doing. But as the words left Javik's mouth and filtered through the
translator, the caul that had been hovering over him peeled away. Some deep part of himself felt the
last vestige of thinking of these people as allies tear, bloody and ragged, into a burning fury.

He stood up and threw his arm forward, corona raging. One of the tables peeled itself free of the
deck and flew spinning across the room. One of the legs clipped an unarmored man, caving in his
skull as it went through and crashed into the reconstitution unit several more were hiding behind,
which exploded in a shower of sparks. Reflexes he'd been honing in real combat for months spoke
through him without even waiting for him to think. Garrus fell into step behind him, and Liara
seemed to yank the mass field he'd started into a new whorl, sending debris and bodies flying.

"Major Alenko," EDI said in his ear.

He didn't respond for a moment, sawing another armored body down. The volume of gunfire was
receding. He could sense the battlefront shifting back, away from them. The momentum coming
back in their favor, a bloody rage singing in his head, urging him forward.
"Major," she repeated, "the Crécy has left standby and is accelerating."

Kaidan took a few steps into cover as scattered retaliatory fire keened off his barrier. "What vector?"

"Into the system. The flotilla appears to be following."

"Into the system? Are they going for the Crucible build site?" He popped the heat clip on his rifle. Heavy bootsteps echoed off the walls all around them.

"I do not-" Across from him, the body froze. "Platform switched to active standby," she said woodenly. "Issue commands accordingly."

"Keelah, they must have gone to FTL!" Tali said. "EDI lost her uplink."

Kaidan waved to them. "We're going to the bridge! Move!"

His comm clicked and buzzed, then a deep voice came online. "Major Alenko," Rear Admiral Tennyson said in his ear, "what the hell do you think you're doing attacking my ship, marine?"

"Don't bother with the act, Tennyson," Kaidan snapped, deliberately dropping any rank title. "I know you have Shepard."

There was a second's pause. "The Reapers are in your head, son. The geth are spreading them."

Doubt crashed into Kaidan again, boiling up against his walls of fury. The geth- No. No! I made a promise.

"Fuck indoctrination," he said through his teeth, steeling himself by enunciating each word. "I'm coming to get Shepard. If you get in my way, I will kill you."

Another pause, and this time he sounded resigned. "Come on then, let's see what you're made of."

The line clicked off just as three fragmentation grenades bounced off the corridor walls toward them. Liara jumped ahead of Kaidan, pushing outward with her biotics. An armored figure leaned out into the hall, ignoring the grenades that flew back well past his head and fired three heavy, rhythmic shots. The first two ate through her barrier and the third went through her left arm. It would have gone through her chest if Kaidan had not bodily shoved her the moment the man had appeared. The grenades didn't detonate. They hadn't been primed, he realized.

Scare up and pick off the biotics. "Vega, light up that corridor, short fuse!" Kaidan called, getting himself in the line of fire and raining the corner with gunfire to force the attacker back.

The lieutenant's launcher thumped twice. The pyrogel bounced once then detonated, coating the walls and floor in flames. There were shouts of alarm, but they were far from panicked.

"EDI, cover Liara-"

Gravity heaved. Four armored marines charged around the corner, firing together from behind a roiling wave of dark energy. Kaidan threw out his hands, nerves singing as he tried to deaden the wave. He saw Garrus get thrown off his feet, heard Vega shout, saw blood fly. Even with some of the force folded out, the wave still slammed Kaidan back into the bulkhead. Rounds pounded into EDI's body as it leapt forward, firing, drawing the full attention of their attackers. A tech mine skipped off the wall and exploded a little short of the marines, washing over their barriers. Kaidan heard Javik shout, and one of the marines stumbled, a ragged cry of pain coming through his helmet as greenish distortion warped the air around him.

Kaidan shook off the stars dancing in his head and fired back, covering Liara as she pushed herself
into cover and pressed medigel to her wound with gritted teeth. Vega also grunted in pain, but his shotgun barked.

An explosion shook the air, thudding into Kaidan's chest and making him stumble back again. A hiss of pressurized water exploded from behind a wall panel, deforming it. Steam billowed into the corridor. He threw out another unfocused mass field and pressed himself into a nearby bulkhead to try and catch his breath. The gunfire faltered under confused shouting and a scream of pain. Garrus and Vega fired a few times into the surging pell-mell of bodies. Kaidan heard shouted orders to fall back. He jumped out of cover, ready to press the advantage, when a figure materialized out of the whirling steam.

They all froze for a heartbeat. The man before him was dressed in thin loose pants and a sleeveless shirt printed with block letters identifying him as a prisoner of the Systems Alliance military. If he was at all impressed with the meaning of those words, his tight grin didn't show it. The sparse clothing revealed the lanky set of artificial limbs expertly grafted into his shoulders, and the toes sticking out the bottom of his pant legs were wide carbon-fiber pads. Blood splattered his clothing and face under a mop of untidy shoulder-length black hair. Both of his wrists were adorned with thick manacles, each dangling the broken end of a link.

"Kai Leng!" Liara hissed.

With a whirr, the skin on his temples split like a sliced roast and black lenses slid into place over his eyes.

Leng cocked his head, the mocking grin widening. "Is that the fat lady I hear singing?"
Kaidan raised his rifle, and Leng sprang. Vega and Garrus' weapons both found nothing but empty air as Leng smashed his arm across Liara's, snuffing out whatever mnemonic she was performing, then lashed out a leg at Tali, catching her across the faceplate with a crack and sending her flying backward. His cybernetic speed made even Cerberus' stealth troops look sluggish. Kaidan let his corona flow over him and willed it out, trying to pin the man in place, but Leng was still moving. He danced around Vega's bull charge and tripped the lieutenant, sending him stumbling right into Kaidan's mass field. As Vega went by, there was a flash of steel as Leng reached around the marine's bulk and neatly relieved him of the combat knife strapped to his waist. As if it were all one balletic turn, Leng spun, ducked under Garrus' swing and buried the knife into the turian's exposed armpit, then yanked it out, spraying blue blood.

Gravity lurched again, this time laced with the coiling strangeness of the prothean's touch. The sudden green inversion caught Leng as he spun away again and sent him reeling. As the prothean's mass field flipped him into the air, he managed to get one foot planted on the ceiling and kick himself away, bouncing off a crate in a half roll. Javik fired after him, the particle beam following Leng and raking across his legs, scorching the synthetic muscle and slicing his pants into charred strips. Kaidan fired as well, and saw EDI throw a tech grenade.

The Cerberus assassin rolled into the shadow of another crate as the grenade detonated, then sprang up and sprinted into the open hallway back the way Kaidan's team had come, chased by Javik's green beam, the same mocking smile still etched into his face.

"Get back here, cabrón!" Vega shouted, pushing himself up to his knees. Blood spattered the ground under him.

EDI started after Leng, firing her pistol. The body's skin was rent in multiple places and it walked with a distinct limp.

"EDI!" Kaidan barked. "Stop! Stay together! Liara, help Garrus!"

The turian sank to his knees, rifle limp, one arm moving sluggishly to the wound. Blood pumped down the side of his armor. Kaidan contained himself, but with difficulty. He had to stay on his primary objective. Leng had known exactly how to keep them from pursuing him.

"Tali, get that door open!" Kaidan called, pointing to the door through which Tennyson's squad had disappeared. "Javik, Vega, cover them! EDI, cover Liara! We'll deal with Kai Leng once the primary objective is complete!"

Tali looked from him to Garrus, wringing her hands, then spun to obey. The asari knelt next to Garrus, medigel case already in hand. Without hesitation, she pulled out one of the long pressurized canisters used for deep, penetrating wounds.

"I am sorry Garrus," Liara said, "I need to seal your lung. This is going to hurt a great deal."

His helmeted head nodded weakly.

She jammed the end of the medigel injector deep into the wound and fired it. The roar of pain that exploded from him nearly toppled him over, but EDI's platform caught his shoulder and steadied it without turning her head from its watchful scan. Garrus clawed at his helmet and yanked it off, gasping and spewing blood. Liara fired the medigel injector again, spreading the stuff over the
surface of the wound. Garrus gurgled and coughed and heaved in a shuddering breath.

"The wound is grave," Liara said, looking up at Kaidan. "But I do not believe it reached his heart. Can you breathe, Garrus?"

"Not... nearly... enough," the turian wheezed. "Spirits... that hurt." His eyes took on the glaze of shock. His mexo was already flooding him with stims and painkillers. "Thought... rockets were bad..."

"We can't stop," Kaidan said. There was nowhere to retreat, anyway. "EDI, I need you to support and cover Garrus."

"Yes, sir," the body said crisply. She extended the undamaged hand to the turian. "Please issue orders as necessary."

Garrus grunted and let himself be pulled up. The skin under his plates had grown pallid, and he leaned heavily on the damaged mech. The platform had an eerily empty quality, devoid even of EDI's restrained mannerisms as it ran its backup VI. The turian gestured weakly at Kaidan, and he realized finally Garrus pointed at his pistol. The major pulled it off his hip and handed it over. Garrus nodded in thanks, putting it in his left hand.

Kaidan moved to the door, where Tali had the door panel off and wires pulled out. Kaidan noticed the quarian's visor had a long crack in it from top to bottom, half-covered by the protective armored plates that had slid into place. Beside her, Javik stood sentinel. Black streaks colored his armor in three places.

"Javik, you're hurt," Kaidan said.

"I am still capable," the prothean said curtly, ending any further discussion on the subject.

The ship shuddered slightly under Kaidan's feet.

Tali looked over her shoulder. "Got it. Give the word."

Garrus grunted in surprise. Kaidan turned and saw the EDI platform stand frozen, then suddenly straighten. "Connection re-established." She looked at Garrus, then back at Kaidan. "My platform appears to have sustained damage."

"It's going 'round," Garrus wheezed.

"EDI!" Kaidan said. "What the hell is going on out there?"

"The flotilla dropped out of FTL some distance from the Crucible build site-"

The deck jumped under Kaidan's feet, throwing him into the bulkhead and nearly knocking his rifle out of his hands. Warning klaxons blared again, this time the tone for external attack.

Whip-fast, EDI planted a leg and steadied Garrus. "The site is under guard by a division of Fifth Fleet," she said, unperturbed by the lurch, "including SSV Everest. It appears they were prepared. They attacked the moment you came out of FTL."

"Major!" Joker burst into the comm channel. "Are you still alive? Do you have Shepard? A warzone just erupted out here and knowing whose fucking side we're on would be helpful!"

"Hackett's side!" Kaidan snapped. "Stop any ship attempting to damage the Crucible!"
"Aye aye. Except, you know, you're in one of them!"

"We're getting Shepard and then we're getting out!"

EDI nodded. "The platform's memory has updated me on the local situation. Proceed."

The deck jumped again, less severely this time, but the team moved to the bulkheads on instinct as Kaidan nodded to Tali. The quarian flipped something in the gutted lock, and the door cycled open. He led the way, rifle raised, keeping close to the wall. Vega shadowed him. He could hear the lieutenant's wound in the man's breathing. It wasn't nearly as bad as Garrus', but Vega was also running on painkillers. They had to end this quickly.

"Be advised," EDI said, "the Crécy has accelerated to a collision course with the main body of the Crucible."

"He's gone insane!" Tali exclaimed.

"No," Javik said. "The Reapers have made him believe it is a threat. He is acting as a soldier would."

Kaidan gritted his teeth. Taking out the engines was useless once they had sufficient velocity- Hackett would be forced to either try to divert the ship's course or simply break the ship into as many pieces as possible. Unless Kaidan's team could get to the bridge and force a course change. Or a self-destruct.

"EDI," he said, "can you get into their nav systems?"

"Negative. Main computer access has been locked out-"

Something bounced down the corridor and detonated before anyone could react. Kaidan's visor suddenly went white, and the pain of an electrical shock shot through his muscles, making him stumble. Gunfire exploded around him as he pitched forward, landing hard on his knees and one hand. Somewhere ahead of him, mass fields surged and flowed. Something slammed into his shoulder, throwing him to the side. Another detonation punched the air, and he heard the whistle and ping of shrapnel.

As his vision swam back, he dimly saw the silvery silhouette of EDI hovering ahead of him. There was shouting and gunfire. Figures swam in his vision, grey-armored Alliance marines. Two bore red stripes down their arms. Kaidan wrestled his rifle up and fired, but the shots were wild. Dark energy crashed around him, fields crawling into each other, caving in the bulkhead paneling, and then it suddenly exploded outward, tunneling away down the hall.

As quickly as it had started, the convulsion of violence faded. EDI loomed over him as he blinked away the stars. It was a horrifying sight. Half of the mech's face was missing, showing the elaborate skeletal armature beneath, and one eyeball hung loose on the connecting cable. There were two fist-sized holes in her torso, and one hand looked mangled. Her entire right side was decorated with shrapnel cuts.

"EDI!" he gasped.

"Platform re-remainzzz fungzzzzzional." Her jaw didn't move, and the voice was eerily directionless. "Three hozztiles down, one re-retreated."

"Everyone's still breathing," Vega said.

Behind him, Garrus was on his knees, pistol held out, panting. "Speak... frself..."
Kaidan glanced at the bodies sitting in pools of bright red blood. Their armor and rank bars ground at him—these were some of the best of Alliance marines. One of them had the bar of a biotic. Was it another L2 perhaps? They'd come painfully close to overwhelming his team.

"At least they die well," Javik commented. "And you, machine woman, you are... brave."

"It izzzimple math," the shattered head stuttered. "Thizzz body izzz val-valuable, but ezzzzpendable c-compared to living c-crew."

Vega extended a hand and levered Kaidan to his feet. "Bridge ahead, Major."

He nodded, popped his heat clip and signed for his ragged team to follow.

The command deck layout was quite a bit different than the turian-human hybrid design of the Normandy, but Kaidan had been on many a bridge like it in his career. The whole affair stepped downward with forward-facing terminals, all around a large CIC and captain's chair set in the rear center. Holodisplays lined the walls, the largest one taking up most of the front wall. There were narrow windows beyond, but they were shuttered and armored in combat. The holodisplay showed arrays of ships, a distant planet, and a very oddly-shaped vehicle that looked more like an ovoid space station.

Smoke eddied around them, swirling in the venting air as they came through the door, which let out onto the command levels around the center. At first Kaidan thought the entire bridge was empty, but then down at the main nav console, a large form stood up.

Kaidan realized with a small shock that he'd been fighting Tennyson just a moment ago. The admiral had removed his helmet, but the dark grey armor was the same, adorned with the same red stripe Shepard always wore. Once you earned that stripe, you didn't take it off. And Tennyson had earned it a long time ago.

"Stop! Don't any of you do anything stupid, now," Tennyson warned. "No biotics." He very deliberately pointed his pistol down at a kneeling figure at his feet.

Kaidan took a deep breath, lowered his rifle and held out a hand to the others. His eyes locked onto Shepard. Her arms were held stiffly behind her. He could just see a pair of large manacles over her forearms, and there was some kind of heavy collar around her neck. She wore the same spare prisoner clothing as Kai Leng. Her face was bruised, her mouth a hard line.

"You're not going to shoot me, old man," Shepard said. She leaned away from the pistol, more irritated at its presence than scared. Her eyes stared into a middle distance, clearly not seeing the scene around her. Kaidan realized the collar must be disrupting her vision.

"Listen to me, Major," Tennyson said, pointing at the huge display. "That thing out there, the Crucible, it's going to kill us all. The Reapers have been screwing with us. They passed the plans down so we'd spend all our energy building our own suicide machine!"

"That's not true!" Liara retorted. "It came from the protheans, and from many more species before them!"

"The Reapers would like you to believe that, wouldn't they? It's all just a sham!"

"This 'prothean' would beg to disagree!" Javik snapped. "It is our weapon."

Tennyson stared at Javik, a flicker of consternation crossing his face. "I don't know what genetic freak-tank Cerberus pulled you out of, bug-man-"
Shepard rolled her eyes. "He's real, Tenny. He speaks the damn language, the one only I can understand because of the alien cipher floating around in my skull!"

The ship shuddered, the structure creaking. A piece of wall paneling popped its rivets, sparks lashing out from behind it. Red warning text appeared on several of the cockpit terminals.

"It's quite an elaborate story they've set up, isn't it?" Tennyson raised his voice over the noise. "And now the geth are spreading it to everyone! They're running Reaper indoctrination software!"

"The geth rejected Reaper upgrades of their own will!" Tali retorted. "It's better than you-

"Will all of you just shut up?" Shepard shouted. "It's a waste of time! I've had this argument a hundred times since I got here!" She twisted and bared her teeth in her former mentor's general direction. "The Reapers got to someone in this room, and there's only one way to know who. It's right at the moment of death. It was that way for Benezia, and for Saren, too. You want to settle this once and for all, that's what it's going to take!"

"Are you volunteering to go first?" Tennyson said darkly, moving the pistol closer. Kaidan's heart jumped up into his throat.

Shepard lifted her chin and thumped her forehead into the gun's muzzle. "I already died once, jackass! Remember? Hell, maybe my mongrel body is why the Reapers have such a hard time getting into my head!"

Something nudged Kaidan's arm, startling him. EDI's damaged arm appeared in his peripheral vision, pointing upward. He followed it and saw the exact same relay box bolted to the cockpit ceiling as had been on the *Euryale*. He hissed between his teeth and strode forward a few steps, but froze when Tennyson glared at him.

"The relay key you acquired was designed by Cerberus!" Kaidan said, pointing at it. "We found some of their schematics! Kai Leng himself was sitting in your cell, the man who turned a whole section of C-Sec against the Citadel! The poison is in your own house, and has been for months now!"

"Leng never got outside his cell!" Tennyson said.

"I'm betting he didn't have to," Shepard said. "He could be a walking indoctrination bomb-"

An explosion rocked the ship from somewhere below-decks, and gravity slammed them hard, then yawed weirdly sideways. Kaidan saw Shepard jerk her head back, plant her foot, and shove her shoulder into Tennyson's midriff. The pistol barked once, pinging off the deck plating. As the major snapped into a run, she lurched away, unseeing, and spun off a railing, sprawling awkwardly to the ground.

Kaidan vaulted, feeling the sheer will of his corona loft him just a little bit, and landed hard on the gantry next to her. Two, three shots hit his barrier hard, driving his breath out in red-hot impacts. He spun, focusing all of the tension he'd been carrying for hours, days, even, into one instant and cut the straining barrier loose. It slingshotted off him toward the admiral. The gantry buckled, and the railing warped and jerked free as the blue-black wave of dark energy savaged them with conflicting mass fields, finally smashing into Tennyson. He flew backward, crashing through a crew terminal and knocking the chair and holodisplay off their mounts.

As the din subsided, Kaidan stood panting, hands and rifle outstretched and shaking. His stomach hurt. It took a couple of overlong seconds to process the fact his hardsuit hadn't been penetrated. "I
told you what would happen if you got in my way," he growled.

The admiral laughed, a short, humorless bark that made Kaidan feel a little stupid for his bluster. The huge man slowly pulled himself up from the debris. Blood streamed from his nose and a gash in his head, and there was a length of piping embedded in his hip, just above the thighplate. Kaidan pulled up his rifle and aimed between the man's eyes, finger tense on the trigger. Tennyson half-raised his pistol. He glanced to the side, and the array of weapons pointed at him, then back up at the large holodisplay now over Kaidan's shoulder, then down to where Shepard lay.

He glowered down at Kaidan until the hardness of his face retreated, until the deep lines and scars of it seemed to stand out in sharp relief to the flashing alert symbols. The blood coming off his face ran into the N7 stripe, streaking slowly across his rank insignias. Another distant explosion shook the ship. A baleful hiss started up from the atmo vents and smoke billowed in, coming from elsewhere in the system.

"You don't get to take my life, son," he said finally. "I'll live and die by my own decisions."

He turned and swept an imperious glare over the rest of the team, thrusting a pointing finger across the command deck. "You hear me?" he thundered. "Get off my ship!"

Kaidan suffered a moment of confusion before he realized the man pointed to the bridge escape pod bay. Two of the pods were gone, but one remained.

"That's... it then?" Shepard said. She bumped into Kaidan's legs as she tried to get back to her knees.

"If I'm gone then I'm already gone, and my sins are too deep to name," Tennyson tossed the pistol over his shoulder, and his face screwed up in pain. He touched the length of rod, bemused. Blood oozed over it. "But if you're right about death then at least I'll know for sure one way or the other before it's over." He looked at Kaidan. "You get to live by your decisions today, Alenko. Enjoy it while it lasts. Now get out of here before I change my mind. Or they make me change my mind."

"Tenny-"

"Don't... turn into me, Shepard. Whatever happens. Now go on, beat it!" He spun on his heel, limped painfully to the command chair, and summoned a display.

An ominous shudder built in the ship's structure, as if it were coming apart under its own weight. Kaidan stowed his rifle and spun around in one quick movement. His bruised and exhausted body was suddenly recalcitrant as he bent and pulled Shepard to her feet. She hadn't been allowed a shower in a few days, but the smell of her was perversely wonderful, singing through his blood.

"Kaidan... I can't see," she said through her teeth. She sounded very tired, and scared.

"I know. Come on, we're getting out of here."

He looked around and saw the others had already edged toward the escape pod. Liara and EDI appeared to be manhandling Garrus through the narrow door. The deck jumped under his feet again, and the a-grav and main power failed altogether.

The awful memory of the death of the SR-1 lurched into his head as he became suddenly weightless, making his guts seize. He snapped an arm around Shepard's waist before she could fall away from him and kicked against the terminal housing behind him. Emergency lighting flashed fitfully in the sudden dark, a nightmare shadow of the maw of hard vacuum waiting to devour them. *Not this time. You can't have her this time.*
Shadows flashed. A hand reached out to them, batting aside the metal fragments flying past. He was going to miss. With his free hand Kaidan pulled his rifle off his back and stretched it out, straining. The extra length was enough- Vega snagged it by the stock and gave a yank, changing their course toward the pod bay opening. The lieutenant bustled them through without ceremony, banging Kaidan's helmet on the doorjamb in his haste, then punched the eject. The door slammed shut and the docking clamps released with a thud.

They were eight floating bodies, some trying to get to the seats, others just hanging on. As the thrusters roared to life, Liara threw her arms out, stretching the breadth of the cramped pod, and surged blue. The mass in the room suddenly folded out, swallowing up their kinetic energy. Instead of slaming into the pod's door, there was only the slightest drift of the occupants as the craft accelerated away. More remarkable still, she held it ten, fifteen seconds until the main thrusters cut out. Then the field dropped, leaving her panting and clutching her wounded arm.

Garrus coughed. His breathing sounded painfully labored. The whole pod shook around them, then went still again. Kaidan tightened his grip on Shepard.

She was curled up awkwardly, arms still pinned, her head under his chin. "You guys are a sight for sore eyes," she said in the sudden quiet, voice rough. "Such as it is right now, anyway. Is... everyone okay?"

"Banged up," Kaidan said, pointing with a thrust of his helmet. "Vega, get the ox tank in the medkit for Garrus."

"On it," the marine replied. He edged around the other floating bodies and went for the supply compartments under the chairs.

He opened his comms. "Joker, what's your status?"

"You're learning all the wrong Spectre lessons about cutting it close," the pilot said irritably, "you know that? You're supposed to be the stable one!"

"Joker-"

"The Crécy just exploded. Looked like a self-destruct."

Kaidan swallowed. "And the Crucible?"

"Still trying to get reports from the Everest. From what I can see there's some damage but it could have been a hell of a lot worse. No major collisions. A couple of Hackett's ships got pretty badly shredded, though. They put themselves in the way of incoming ordnance."

"Okay. We've got wounded, need a pickup ASAP."

"Gonna be tricky, there's a lot of flying debris out there."

"Since when has 'tricky' been a problem for you?"

"Hey, if I don't remind you sometimes, you might forget how awesome I am!"

The comm clicked off. They drifted in their tiny craft. Vega and Tali fit Garrus into the human-designed oxygen mask, and Javik floated with his arms crossed, foot hooked on a seat rail. When Kaidan caught the prothean's eye, the alien gave a curt nod. Liara squeezed Shepard's shoulder and murmured something.
Kaidan hugged Shepard lightly against himself, feeling her breathing against his arm. She was tense, quivering just a little, no doubt keeping the turmoil she must be feeling locked up behind the dull veneer of shock. He eyed the collar and the manacles. They offended him to his core. He wanted to pull them off with his bare hands, but the memory of the thermite traps on Nos Astra kept him cautious, patient.

The enormity of the last few hours sank slowly through him, chiling him. Too many near misses, too many maybes. Everything way too close. Rationally, he knew he was supposed to care about the Crucible, and about the false relay keys. About Cerberus' divide and conquer ploy. He knew he would, sometime tomorrow, or maybe the day after that when his nerves had smoothed and it was about getting back to the job.

But right then, in the shivering privacy of his own skull, he cared only about the living, breathing person in his arms.
The weight of the job pressed down on him, a slavedriver pulling Kaidan by the nose the moment he set foot back on board the Normandy. He was still in command until Shepard was fit for duty again, which he hoped wouldn’t be long, but after everything that had happened, he had to see the fallout of his actions through.

And that meant he wouldn’t be the one to cut that vile collar and manacles free. He reluctantly left it to Cortez, with Tali’s insistent help, once he’d been assured they contained no explosive. Hackett was calling for him, he had team members to get to the medbay, and the rest of the crew to bring up to speed.

After leaving the comms room and Hackett’s meeting, he could see the crew was just as shaken by the last few hours as he himself had been. There was general relief and even celebration that Shepard had been rescued, but it was muted by having been forced to fight Alliance ships. Rumors and malcontent were going to get out of control if he didn’t do something quickly.

Unconventional as it was, before he’d even gotten out of his armor he staged an all-crew debrief in the CIC where he laid out the entire situation, with special emphasis on the Cerberus indoctrination tech they’d been finding on the rebel ships. He hoped being straight with them would forestall any ugliness before it got out of hand. Cerberus, and the Reapers, had done this. They were the enemy. It helped to be able to round out the debrief with a congratulations that they’d managed to pull it off with some serious wounds, but no fatalities, and a firm acknowledgement of everyone who’d done their jobs despite the circumstances.

He left dearly wishing he had Shepard’s way with words, but hoping it had done some good.

The officer details that normally came easily were competing against a mounting urge to just bolt and look for Shepard. It took all his tattered willpower to stay and answer any questions the crew had for him, then to head back down to the medbay to check on the wounded.

EDI’s platform was still a fright, but the AI seemed unperturbed aside from a lengthy treatise on what would be necessary to effect repairs. Of all of them, he was most worried about Garrus, but with Doctor Chakwas on the case, there was really nothing else to do but wait. She’d assured him that quick action had kept air out of the turian’s bloodstream, and his lungs from filling with blood, and that now his life was out of danger. The only question remaining was how long he’d be out of action.

Nerves among the crew finally seemed to be settling, in direct contrast to Kaidan’s own. He made his way to the elevator, intent, only to cross Lieutenant Vega as the younger marine came out of the crew quarters. The lieutenant had changed out of his armor, and a couple of medigel bandages were visible under his fatigues.

“Sir,” Vega greeted him.

“Did you come from the medbay?” Kaidan asked, tapping his helmet into his thighplate, quietly resenting this new delay. “Do you know where Shepard went?”

Vega smirked. “Doc’s in Mother Bear mode. Sent Shepard packing to her quarters.”
“You all right?”

“Got lucky, just a couple of flesh wounds, and the armor did its job. I’ll be sore for a bit.” He seemed dismissive, but Kaidan could sense something else in his voice.

“Something on your mind, Vega?”

The lieutenant shifted his weight. “That... was some ugly shit, Major. Maybe I let myself think we’d break in, pitch some flashbangs, grab Shepard and get out. Or maybe they’d see they were on the wrong side. Just not...” He ran a hand over his head.

“A slaughter?” Kaidan said in a low voice.

The pained look on Vega’s face made him look his younger years, despite the scar across his nose. “Dios. I keep asking myself why they didn’t just fold. Surrender, avoid casualties. But then, if we’d been them, we would’ve fought hard too, made ‘em pay for every inch, wouldn’t we?”

Kaidan nodded.

“And with more of those Cerberus boxes out there,” Vega said, sounding a little sick, “we’re gonna have to do it again. Probably soon.”

“If that’s what it takes,” Kaidan admitted. “But it also takes time for indoctrination to set in. Hackett told me two of Tennyson’s ships actually did surrender -- their commanders were too conflicted to sacrifice their crews.”

“Is that why they were just hanging around outside the heliopause?”

“I think Tennyson was still trying to convince his flotilla. Maybe gather allies. He was grilling Shepard in an attempt to get more proof that she, and thus the geth, was Cerberus -- or Reaper -- influenced. We’re talking about a large-scale fleet mutiny here -- even with the indoctrination effect working on them, it wasn’t instant. When we attacked we must have forced his hand.”

Vega blew out a long breath. “So we missed Javik’s scenario by a factor of way-too-fucking close, thank you very much.” He frowned. “Think Leng went down with the ship?”

Kaidan shook his head. “I won’t believe a man like that is dead until I see the corpse myself. I think he let himself get caught, and I can’t believe he didn’t have an exit scenario.”

“Yeah. I hope he’s still around, so I can pull his arms off myself! Me cago en Cerberus! We’re going after them, right? They need to pay for every Alliance life they took with this bullshit!”

“Damn right we will.”

Vega glanced at the elevator door. He unclenched his fists and waved at it. “You, uh, better go check on Lola. Dunno how close she was to Tennyson, but this whole thing has to have been one giant head-screw.” A grin crept onto Vega’s face. “I’d go, but I don’t think I’m the one she wants to see.”

Kaidan narrowed his eyes at the lieutenant, sudden nervousness blooming in his chest. He pitched his voice quiet. “Are we going to have a problem with this?”

Vega regarded him for a moment with something of a smug expression. “You planning on making it a problem, Major?”

Sheer weariness almost made Kaidan laugh, heat rising to his face. Why no, I’m not standing here
admitting by not admitting I have a completely inappropriate relationship with my lower-ranking commanding officer who is also a Spectre. “No. We have a job to do.”

“Then it’s only a problem if one of you make it a problem.” Vega shrugged. “Besides, how would that work? File a complaint against a Spectre? Two Spectres? I don’t want to think about the damn paperwork that would mean. We got bigger things to worry about. Like finding every single one of the Illusive Man’s shithead goons and ending them.”

Kaidan kept silent for a moment, but saw no evidence the man was anything but sincere. He realized that despite his less-than-stellar experiences with meat-headed marines in the past, he liked the lieutenant. There didn’t seem to be any room for pettiness in James Vega’s world.

“Your idea to use the burner...” Kaidan said, “it was insane, but it’s the reason we pulled this off at all. If it had come down to an attack on the Crucible we would’ve had to resort to a straight-up fight, and Shepard probably wouldn’t have gotten out of that alive. N Special Forces made the right call with your induction.”

Vega grinned. “preciate that, sir. I’m learning from the best. Hey, tell Lola we’ve got her back, huh?”

“I will. Get some rest.”

The younger marine headed for the bunks, and the elevator door finally opened, letting out Daniels and Donnelley. Kaidan nodded to them and let the door cycle shut behind him before selecting deck one -- Shepard’s cabin.

Anxiety made his chest tight as the elevator rose under his feet, but surprisingly unconflicted. The subterfuge was obviously wearing thin... but so was his patience for it. He wondered what it would really be like to be casual about a relationship, to not be on guard every moment of every day, to not be constantly second-guessing his motivations for every action that had anything to do with Shepard.

In her cabin’s anteroom, the lock holo turned green when he reached for it. The door opened to an empty room, but he heard the shower running on the other side of the bathroom door. Waiting was an option he didn’t feel like entertaining right then.

He tapped on the door. “Shepard? It’s me. You okay?”

There was a pause. “You can come in if you want.”

He touched the door latch and it slid open. The room was steamy and several degrees warmer than the outside, the mirror fogged up. The shower part of the large bathroom was open, just a faucet stuck into the wall with temperature controls. Shepard stood under the stream of water, letting it run off her shoulders and loose hair. He could see bruising here and there, but the perfect sweep of her body ran unbroken head to toe, whole. The sight weakened his knees with joy and relief, and an undercurrent of less-chaste thoughts.

Shepard wore an unselfconscious half smile, but her eyebrows bunched up a little as she looked him up and down. She waggled a finger. “I meant without the hardware.”

“Oh, uh.” He glanced down at the hard-angled bulk of his armor. “Yeah, right.”

The door closed automatically when Kaidan stepped back. Condensation misted his armor. He put his helmet down on the office desk next to two empty energy bar wrappers, and wondered briefly if she’d meant what he thought -- or hoped -- she had. He gingerly unplugged the amp from the back of his skull, then slipped the plug seal in place and put the small device down at the back of the desk.
He powered down his armor and tugged at the connectors and straps until the torso section came loose, and pulled it free, muscles groaning. After a moment of hesitation, he tucked it out of the way under the desk. The leg armor followed suit, then he stripped off the TC underlayer. The cool air tickled his skin as he ran his thumb under the elastic of his boxers, then stripped those off, too.

He hesitated briefly at the door again, overly aware of his nudity. He smirked to himself. It’s nothing she hasn’t seen before, I guess. When the door slid open again he paused on the threshold, but Shepard turned, smiled, and held out her hand to him. When he approached and took it, she steered him around to the cascade of water.

Kaidan let the too-hot water beat over his back and suffuse his sweaty hair. He ran his fingers through it, feeling the grime of the day peel away, then smiled at her. “Trying to tell me something?”

“Just that I know how good this feels after a long day.”

“Sorry it took me so long to get away…”

Shepard shook her head. “I know. It’s the job.”

“There are hard days and there are hard days.” Kaidan tried to chuckle, to keep the thread of casual humor going, but the touch of her fingers along his biceps, the unhappy tension still around her eyes crumpled it. He slipped his arms around her waist and pulled her close.

With the hot water rolling over his shoulder, her head against his, and holding her tightly along his entire body, a dizzying, vertiginous sense of heaven overcame him. A dangerous heaven, a heaven for which he realized he would do anything, fight any monster, break any rule.

Tennyson’s last words resonated in his head – *You get to live by your decisions today. Enjoy it while it lasts.* He spread his fingers over her slippery flesh, feeling the cords of muscle and thin, subtle lines of scarring along her back.

*It worked, all of it worked*… His chest tightened, and he shuddered despite the heat.

Her fingers ran up his neck, and over the sealed amp jack, with a lack of hesitation that raised gooseflesh on his arms.

“I’m… really hard on your sanity, aren’t I?” she said quietly.

Kaidan pulled back enough to cup her cheek. “I’m starting to think I live for these moments.”

Shepard slipped her hand over his, but looked pained. “I just wish…”

“You’re worth it, Shepard. All of it.” He ran his fingers lightly over her bruised and scraped wrists, the evidence of the manacles still etched into her. Her fingers were pruned up from the water. “You’re no harder on me than the job is on you.” He chewed his lip. “What… did they do to you?”

“Less than you’re probably afraid of. Most of the bruises were just me being me. Obstinate. Testing the boundaries.” She glanced away, still holding back.

“Trying to escape?” he said.

“All the times before, someone gave me an opening I could take advantage of. Like the Project Rho Base when they underestimated robo-liver and didn’t give me enough sedative. But Tenny knew exactly how to keep me locked up. He kept his crew away from me, he knew what buttons I’d push. I couldn’t find a weak spot.” She shook her head. Her voice grew low and tight. “I kept hoping
you’d come, I... I knew you had to be looking.”

“We found your message scratched into the wall on the Euryale.”

Her eyebrows went up. “Really? You did? It was so clumsy, I had so little time... I heard them talking about where they were taking me, but...” She stopped and rubbed her temples. “Tenny was completely convinced the geth were a Reaper plot to indoctrinate organics. And that the Crucible was going to kill us. He wanted me to verify it. Somehow. He bitched and argued and threatened and... and... why the fuck did he do that to me, Kaidan?”

The sudden swell of hurt in her quivering voice hit him in the stomach. “Cerberus got to him-”

“It’s not even that! It’s...” Her fists balled up on either side of her head as her voice rose. “He put a fucking collar around my neck, Kaidan! He messed with my eyes! How could he do that to me?!”

Words stuck in his throat. He gathered her back into an embrace, his nerves echoing the pain and anger shuddering through her. It was sickening to realize Tennyson probably hadn’t resorted to any of the traditional go-to methods of intimidation, knowing full well that Shepard wasn’t afraid of physical harm and was well-versed in military coercion methods. Instead, he’d gone straight for the soft underbelly only someone who knew her well would think to target -- her deep insecurity about her cybernetics, and her seething, personal hatred of anything to do with slavery.

“It was all noise,” she sobbed, “I couldn’t close my eyes to shut it out, because it was all still there. I couldn’t shut it off, I couldn’t even break the stupid eyeballs. I felt like I was losing my mind!”

He reflexively started telling her it would never happen again, but the words seemed unequal to the task, so he just held her tighter. Listening to her tears, he was suddenly sure it wasn’t just this one thing anymore, but that maybe some of the vast dam of hurt she’d been carrying around alone for such a long time had finally ruptured. Yet despite it all, he felt a sort of cathartic relief that she was able to let it out instead of adding this new trauma to the vast and ugly pile clogging up her mental closet.

He ran his fingers up the back of her neck, trying to soothe. Eventually, she palmed water and scrubbed it over her face. As good as it might have felt, he could almost watch in real time as the drill sergeant of a lifetime of military thinking marched out of the back of her head and started waving its finger at her. Showing this kind of hurt still didn’t come at all easily.

“I... almost started to believe him,” she muttered, wiping her eyes. “How am I supposed to trust anything I think now... I mean...”

Kaidan stretched out an arm to turn off the water. She sniffled with obvious self-consciousness in the sudden quiet. As he reached out to retrieve one of the towels, he noticed that while her face was a little swollen from crying, her eyes weren’t bloodshot. An odd quirk of not having any actual capillaries in them.

He pushed the absent thought away as he draped the towel around her shoulders and then wrapped his arms around her again. “I keep going back to what Javik has been saying about how this is really the worst weapon the Reapers have. They make us think it’s all those awful zombies, but they’re such an obvious threat. An external threat. What really hurts us is when they rot our internal connections. The most insidious thing about indoctrination is how much it makes us doubt our own selves.”

She burrowed her face into his neck as if she could escape it all. “I don’t know how to feel. I just want to hate him, but...”
“But he was still your mentor for a long time.”

“He was...” She gave a shaking sigh. “You only saw a small part of it, but Tenny was... complicated.”

“I suspected that, yes.”

“And yes, he was a jerk. I know.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But you thought it. And you’re not wrong. There’s a reason he was N-lead, not a politician. It wasn’t so much that he didn’t have time for weakness, but that he had a very... particular way of dealing with it. You either toughened up and learned to shoot back or you didn’t belong in Special Forces anyway. That’s how it was in his world.”

“Which gets a little thorny when you start seeing him as a father-figure?”

“He was all I had for a long time,” she said softly. “He was hard on us, but once you were one of his Ns, he was utterly brutal to anyone that threatened us, either in the field or in Alliance politics. We were... family. A demented, murderous little family. He beat the walls down and got me posted with Anderson on the Tokyo, to make sure I had the best CO. But he was also a jerk who said a lot of hurtful shit even when... even when I needed something else.”

Kaidan cocked his head speculatively.

“What?” she asked.

He shrugged. “It’s fascinating to me. As important as he was to you, you have a completely different command style. I’ve never once heard you casually insult anyone on your team like he did. You get people on your side by presenting yourself as someone who cares about who they are as people.”

“I don’t know if I ever really thought it through. It always just felt better to actually listen to people.”

“Maybe you started talking to people the way you wished they’d talk to you.”

Shepard peered at him. “You’ve been hanging around me too much.”

“Actually I think I’m running on a severe deficit of you most of the time.” He gave her waist a squeeze. The slowly retreating water drew more and more of his attention to all the places they were touching.

That got a small smile. “Only you could make something technical sound romantic.”

“I’ve been in the military too long.”

She brushed the back of her fingers along his jaw. “You’re in need of a shave.”

“Yeah, it’s been a long few days.”

“I’m sorry you had to... to do this. Attack an Alliance ship, I-”

“Shepard, stop,” he said gently.

She kept talking until Kaidan lifted her face with cupped hands and looked her in the eye. “Stop looking for reasons to make this your fault.”
The struggle not to just keep going headlong on the same track wrote itself across Shepard’s face. She tried and failed to say something, then seemed to chew on her tongue.

“We all did the best we could with what we had,” he said. “You left a clue, and you stayed alive. This wasn’t your fault. In fact if Tennyson hadn’t been so focussed on grilling you for evidence of his crackpot theory about the geth, we might not have discovered a brewing mutiny until it was too late.”

“I... It almost got Garrus killed...”

“And how many times have you almost gotten yourself killed for any of us? Are you planning on going down to the medbay and explaining to him that it wasn’t worth it? Because he’s going to laugh at you.”

For a moment she looked downright petulant. “He would, wouldn’t he?” she muttered.

“Shepard, I know it’s not really how it’s supposed to be done by the Alliance books, but... your friends love you, eyes and all. For better or for worse, we’re your mismatched little family now. I love you. We -- all of us -- will do whatever you need us to do, whether that’s go and do the right thing in the field, come to get you out of a scrape, or just share the weight when it gets to be too much. And I know you’ll do the same.”

She stayed quiet for a long time. His hair stopped dripping, and he could feel the prickle of the water starting to dry along his arms. He reveled in her warmth, the feeling of her breathing against him. Until the last of her upset faded, and the itch of awareness of their respective lack of clothes grew a great deal more insistent.

“Maybe someday I’ll finally get some of this through my thick skull,” she mumbled into his shoulder. Then she leaned back and looked at him. “Are you okay?”

He shifted a little. “Probably going to be sleeping a little rough again. I don’t know...”

“Tell me.” She lifted the towel up and scrubbed it over her hair, squeezing the wetness out of it.

He was suddenly very, very aware of what the movement did to her naked chest. And how much he’d missed seeing it, the way it blended into the lean muscles of her stomach and reminded him of a beautiful predatory cat on the prowl. Warmth fluttered in his stomach. “It wasn’t them,” he said, wetting his lips and looking deliberately elsewhere. “It was me. I was supposed to keep it together, but once I found out for sure you were there, I... lost my cool. Maybe it was good, maybe I was holding back too much because they were Alliance. But... it shouldn’t have happened.”

“Did you make a bad command call?”

“No, I just...” he swallowed, “killed a lot of people.”

“That’s the point of war. D’you think I’m the picture of control when I’m fighting?”

“Well...”

“Come on, you know I’m not.” She leaned a little closer to him, lowering the towel in front of her. “I think the big secret of being in control is knowing when to lose it. And how to use it.”

The notion of control slipped into completely different contexts in his head. Heat rippled through him, pushing back against the encroaching chill. “It did work,” he conceded. “But I can’t let myself lose all control.”
“You won’t. Because it’s not a zero-sum equation. You already come from a place of more control than me. I always had to reign myself in, but you’re opposite. You’ve been slowly learning to really let go when you need to, ever since Eden Prime. It doesn’t make you a bad person.” She touched his chest, tickling the hairs. “It makes you a better biotic.”

“You now, I think I did what you said, with my barrier explosion. I... used it.”

The simmering heat in his stomach was starting to breed a very specific tension, when she dropped the towel down to her side, revealing it. She lifted an eyebrow.

With nowhere to go and no towel in hand, the best he could do was blush. “Um.”

She looked up and smiled slyly at him. “It’s nice to know I can still get that reaction.”

“I’m not trying to, uh, assume things, with the week you’ve had.” Kaidan pushed his fingers through his wet hair. “It’s just, well. Seeing you again... all of you... I missed you, Kye, and I do mean everything about you.”

She ran a hand along his chest, this time with slow, teasing deliberation. “I missed you, too. I’ve... thought a lot about the trouble we used to get up to.”

His breathing quickened. “It... it was pretty good, wasn’t it?”

“Better than ‘pretty good’, thank you.”

Kaidan chuckled. “Yes. Much better.” *Smooth. Language centers compromised, Commander.* He put his hand gently over hers. “You’re... sure?”

“I want my body back, on my terms,” she said in a low voice. “I’m sick to death of feeling like crap all the time. I want to feel like myself again.” Her eyes flicked up to his. “*Human.*”

The reference did not escape him.

Shepard slipped her hand free of his and trailed it downward, lighting up every nerve as it went over his abs, skirting around the angry red welts from Tennyson’s pistol as it left the comparatively chaste area north of his belly button. “That is, if you’re not too sore...”

“My...”

The words stopped in his throat as Shepard’s fingers dropped the last few centimeters and gave him one long, languid stroke that instantly stoked the heat in his belly and made him scrunch his toes into the wet ceramic. A ripple of corona flashed down his arms, the static pulling against the lingering damp. She smiled in obvious enjoyment of his reaction.

He snaked an arm around her and down to her backside, and pulled her close again as she let the towel slip free to the floor. “My dear, beautiful valkyrie,” he breathed in her ear, finding his voice again, “it would be my most *sincere* pleasure to join you in that.”

She leaned in and kissed him, hard and insistent. This time he let his hands freely roam the peaks and valleys of the length of her, reveling in every shape as she did the same to him. The last vestiges of the anxiety and hurt faded away under the wash of that ticklish friction. As if each was new again, while still deeply familiar. A half-remembered dream made solid and real.

Lost in the moment, Shepard lifted her leg, running her thigh along his, and almost lost her balance. He caught her, and the moment was broken by a short outburst of laughter. The unguarded warmth
of the sound made his heart swell.

“Let’s take this conversation into the other room, shall we?” she said.

“Mm. And less slippery floors?”

She snickered and nipped his shoulder. “Words of wisdom.”

When she moved away to the door, he followed, but not without indulging himself in an unapologetic ogle of all her shapely, wonderful features he had to force himself to not look at most of the time. Just before it went off, the bathroom light glinted in the tracery of healed scarring down her back. It formed a peculiar pattern, one that suggested the unusual regrowth process that must have come from the Lazarus procedure. The relative cool of the bedroom closed around him. But as he trailed along behind her through the office area, close enough to run his fingers over her hips as she walked, he was gratified to realize how much the marks genuinely didn’t bother him. He was far, far more interested in what was going on underneath and around them, the way the dim light played around the interlocking shapes of her body as she moved.

As she crawled onto the bed, he shadowed her closely, putting a knee down between hers and wrapping arms around her from behind, putting a little resistance into her attempt to roll over. She giggled at the clumsy sprawl that resulted, but with her pinned on her side it gave him all the access he wanted to the front of her. He pressed himself up along her back and nibbled the line of her trapezius up into her neck while his hands swept down over the swell of her breasts and down her stomach.

She squirmed against him, reaching around to run her fingers through his hair. Her breath hitched when his hand got teasingly low, slipping along the crease between abdomen and leg. Her corona rippled over her skin, sending a tingling static rush through his nerves.

It was like a first time without being a first time. Flush with the thrill of the new, the tension of weeks and months of build-up. And yet at the same time, he already knew what to feel for, to listen for when he finally slid his fingers between her legs, without any fumbling or uncertainty.

Heaven was the way she twisted a little, giving him the best access, and the way she sucked in her breath and arched her back when he found the right spot. He could immediately feel she was as wound up as he was. She made an irritated noise when he withdrew his hand to wet his fingers in his mouth, but the irritation subsided into a throaty purr as he quickly went back to roam around that most gloriously sensitive place. Heaven was the reward for patience and careful pressure.

Shepards’s body writhed against him, breathing and moaning in time to his fingers, her backside rubbing the center of his arousal, and it was almost enough to pitch him off the edge of the precipice he didn’t quite want to cross just yet. Just as well, since the arm still pinned under her armpit was starting to numb. He pulled back enough to let her settle on her back, free his arm, and kiss her again, long and deep.

“I sure missed those fingers,” she breathed once he broke away.

“Missed using them.” Kaidan kissed his way down her neck, along a collarbone and down, rounding the swell of a breast to tease a nipple with his tongue.

“You never did tell me if you were a breast or ass man...” she murmured teasingly. Her fingers traced the lines of his shoulders and neck, alternatively working into the muscles and tracing her nails along the skin, ticklish.
“Shepard man,” he corrected around his tongue, “all parts.”

“Mm, good answer.”

She picked up his stray hand and rather pointedly slipped it back down. He wondered if he should take his tongue down that way too, but she pulled his head up to kiss him. She seemed quite happy to have all of him within reach to explore, which she did with an enthusiasm that made it increasingly hard to concentrate on what his fingers were doing.

The mounting heat churned through him, drowning out errant thoughts and anxieties. There was nothing else, anywhere, but the sounds and smells filling him up, the riotous plethora of pleasant sensations. Each little moan that escaped her thrilled him, feeding back into his own arousal. Each breath of genuine enjoyment a sacrament, a defiant rejection of all the past pain. And she teased him right back, smiling when just the right touch made him forget himself. In this moment, he could, finally, forget the overthinking, the close calls, the burning loss of two years and the near-constant threat of its return.

Kaidan felt the tipping point through her even before she shifted and pulled on him, quivering and breathing between her teeth. She snaked her legs to either side of him, wrapping her legs around his thighs. The glorious sight of the woman he thought he’d lost forever spread out beneath him as she wrapped her legs around his thighs and buried him inside herself in a smooth stroke that pulled a gasp from his throat.

More glorious still; at the moment of joining she ignited in dancing blue flames spreading out from her core, a shimmering outline to pick out every perfect detail of arched back and rapturous pleasure. Unbidden, his own biotic corona surged up to meet hers, and the two fields slithered against each other, prickling every hair, every inch of him.

Maybe it was purely wishful thinking, but he could swear that past the noise of his major senses and into that mysterious sixth sense -- that of mass, gravity, and biotic fields -- he could feel her. That the tingling rush lighting up the mutant side of his nervous system had a flavor, a resonance he’d felt nowhere else. This blue light had always ‘othered’ him, made him something not quite human. It was a source of pain, a weapon he’d been taught to use to kill people. With Shepard, as with no one else he’d ever known, it was transformed, transmuted as if by magic into something unique. A bond that didn’t ask him to deny any part of himself, that took a thing that could be ugly and strange and made it beautiful, sensual, magic.

The tide was rising fast again, surging higher and higher with each stroke. He hadn’t even realized he was slowing his pace, trying to hold it off, until she hissed in his ear, “Don’t you dare hold back on me.”

The real secret of control-

Letting it go had never felt so good. Leaning back a little, he looped an arm under one of her knees and let the surging, striving heat carry him. She urged him on, fingers digging into him and rising to meet every thrust. Static and mass fields played happy havok through the air, picking up corners of bed sheets and stray clothing. The tension built to maddening, then past it, then exploded through him, taking a long, wordless hymn from his throat.

Aftershocks crested and rolled through him. His brain sputtered and tried to restart. She hadn’t yet crossed the line herself, but the way she quivered, she was close. Still breathing hard, he let go of her leg and leaned back further, not breaking their link, but giving him access. He wet his thumb and rubbed lightly across the center of her pleasure, drawing a gasp and a breathless exhortation to go harder. He moved his hips in time, coaxing the last from his own arousal to urge her along hers.
It didn’t take long. Her own tension exploded out through her, rippling through muscles both inside and out, flowing outward into rippling tendrils of blue and black flame and shivering through the resonance of her biotic field. The corona hummed through his nerves, a faint echo of his own climax, thrilling him.

Shepard finally went limp, stretching and panting, her face slack with sudden relaxation. Kaidan leaned forward again, shifting his stiffening legs, when she pushed his elbow out from under him, pulling down his full weight on top of her, and wrapped her arms around his neck. They lay that way for a time, mingling sweat and heavy breathing, a deep, contented peace settling through him. She shifted eventually, languidly drawing a leg up the back of his. He kissed the side of her neck, up under her ear, and ran his hands down her damp flank.

“Told you better than pretty good,” she murmured.

Kaidan pushed himself up on his elbow. “The best, you mean.” He lifted a teasing eyebrow. “And it can only get even better from here.”

“No that’s a promise I’m going to hold you to.” She ran a hand over his cheek, and her face turned serious. “Will you stay? I mean... more often?”

He knew he shouldn’t, that it was a risk, that it could create a laundry list of problems, that it risked the trust of the crew... And he just didn’t care. “As often as you need me.”

“That’s going to be a lot.”

“Hope so.”

“I need to get some use out of this ridiculously huge bed.”

Kaidan laughed. “Oh, is that it.”

“Well seriously, it’s going to waste between just me and my hand.”

He grinned.

Shepard pointed at the side table. “Stop picturing it and hand me a tissue.”

“But it’s a very nice picture.” He stretched out and did as he was bidden, handing one to her and grabbing another couple for himself.

They disengaged gingerly, mopping up the inevitable side effects. The rush of it finally past, Kaidan felt the weariness pressing down on him again, even harder now that he was flush with post-orgasmic lassitude. His body ached all over, from both the good and bad of the past several days. The job done, Shepard tugged him insistently over to her, pulling up the covers. They spent a brief moment squirming into a comfortable, if somewhat awkward, arrangement of limbs. Even if they rolled apart later in the night, he was damn well going to pull every last second of enjoyment out of the evening. She seemed to be of the same opinion. As much as he enjoyed the sex, this was what he yearned for just as much, if not more.

“Hope you’re not expecting me to stay awake,” she murmured.

Kaidan chuckled. “Race you.”

She hugged him a little tighter. A ripple of tension went through her, prickling some alarm.
“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she whispered.

“Kye-”

“No, I mean it. For once... for once nothing is wrong.”

He kissed her forehead and hugged her tighter.

“I love you, Kaidan,” she murmured. “So much.”

Warmth bloomed in his chest.

“I hope...” she went on, “I can be as good for you as you are for me.”

He tugged the errant end of the comforter further up her shoulder. “Don’t worry about that. Please.”

“I know it was hard on you, but thank you for coming to find me. You have... no idea how happy I was the moment I heard your voice...”

“I always will. No matter how hard it is.”
"Is it done?!"

The roar of air and screech of metal against metal almost drowned out Bau's words. Over his head, the jury-rigged flywheels strained against their welds as they screamed along what had once been an underground commercial goods transport line. It hadn't been made for people. Strange gravities, unequal pressures and atmospheres pulled and yanked at them as Horel doggedly muscled at the brake, trying to control the headlong speed of their homemade rail-rider.

"Done!" Kasumi shouted. She gripped her hood in one hand to try and keep the breath mask in place and prevent the scatter-suit's fabric from tearing. Her other arm looped around the flimsy railcar's center strut, hand gripping her knee. The narrow corridor's bulkhead ribs whipped by, alarmingly close, threatening to take off an errant foot. Their escape had been a slim one, dogged by Reaper monsters. There seemed to be no end to the things even on the enclosed stations. It whispered frightening things of what might be happening to the disappearing civilians.

Bau shouted something lost in the wind. She shook her head. They dared not use a comm signal, any more than they could use powered cars for this track. Outside their protected home base, even the smallest of signals could attract the baleful gaze of the enemy.

The brakes howled, almost throwing her from the rail-rider and showering them with a constellation of sparks. Light filtered around the sweeping corner ahead of them as they slowed. Kasumi peeled her death-grip free and gathered her legs under her. Her forearms were already plenty bruised from the last time she'd suffered the stopping distance of this contraption. The station, such as it was, hove into view, and Kasumi leapt. Her kinetic loft system deadened the worst of it as she rolled. There was a dull crash and a lot of swearing behind her. She got her limbs under her and climbed to her feet, looking around.

It had been some kind of automated cargo terminal at one time, a switching station that scanned and diverted passing cargo to different tracks running through the vast bowels of the Citadel. The robotic arms now stood silent in the pale light of their glow-lamps. The Spectre and Horel, another STG fighter, crawled off the railcar, which was squashed against a huge cargo sled at the exit of the platform. It would need a lot of soldering before it could be used again.

Jondum brushed imaginary dust from his armor. "Any landing you can walk away from, that's what I say."

Horel shot him a look, massaging his long fingers. Another salarian, Almit, emerged from a dark corner behind the base of one of the switching machines.

"I was drying out waiting for you, Spectre!" he said. Thickset for a salarian, he favored a large-bore assault rifle usually used by turians.

"We ran into some interference," Jondum replied. "There are far more of the enemy in the tunnels than we were told."

"Intelligence is getting sloppy," Almit grumbled. He glanced at Kasumi.

She raised her hands. "Don't look at me, I just work here."

There was a gunshot, deadened by the sound of a suppressor. They all whirled around to see a Keeper slump to the ground, soundless. Horel holstered his pistol, lip curled in disgust.
"Horel!" Bau snapped. "Wetfoot, you'll attract attention!"

Horel rolled his large eyes to the ceiling. "There are plenty more of the damn things swarming all over."

"Probably spying on us," Almit muttered.

The Keeper's body sagged, its outer layer of chitin fading to a sickly gray. Kasumi bent over it, curious. It had been a long time since she's actually looked at one, seen it as more than just a strange piece of animate furniture. The Keepers faded into the background of the Citadel with sinister ease.

"Whose side are they on, anyway?" she asked.

"Nobody really knows. They used to be Reaper constructs. Then the protheans did something to them. Now, we don't know," Jondum glared at Horel, "but we have to assume they're hostiles."

The STG munitions man shrugged and looked like he was about to retort when a distant clatter interrupted them. The Spectre gestured for silence, and pointed brusquely at the corners of the room. Horel and Almit immediately scattered to the sides of the room to take up positions flanking the dock. Bau hopped up behind one of the dormant machines and shouldered his sniper rifle. Kasumi slipped up behind Jondum and pulled out her pistol, ready to activate her cloak.

The sound grew, accompanied by a shrieking whine, coming from the track on the opposite side of the switching station. The huge machines stood impassive as the sound crested and another ramshackle railcar burst out of the side tunnel in a shower of sparks and came to a swaying stop.

A lone salarian tumbled off the railcar and staggered onto the deck. Kasumi recognized him as one of the STG Carmine team sent off the other way. He wasn't supposed to be back yet, and certainly not alone. His green armor was badly scored, and he was missing his sniper rifle.

"Vayn!" Jondum barked, jumping down from his perch and jogging over toward the dazed soldier. The others slowly emerged behind him. "What happened? Where's Bevor?"

Vayn slid to his knees. "Aun's... he's dead, Spectre," he said in a trembling voice.

Horel put a hand to his mouth. Bau looked to one side, eyes closed. When he turned back, his face went hard. "Is the splice in place?"

"They came up from one of the Keeper holes, I think, I don't-"

Bau hooked his hands under Vayn's breastplate armor and hauled him to his feet. "Is the splice in place, soldier?"

Vayn stared at the Spectre, who shook him lightly. The STG hacker finally nodded weakly. "He b-ought me time..."

Horel gripped his rifle closer to himself. "Do you hear that?"

They all froze, listening. The deep quiet of the insulated rail-line rang with soft, alien sounds, sounds not made by the throats of living things. The buzzing, tortured note of flesh married unhappily to metal.

Vayn's eyes went wide. "Run!"
Kasumi pushed the remains of her meal around her plate, trying to decide if she still had the stomach for what was left. The boxed Alliance rations weren't half bad, as such things went, but there was only so much reheated clam chowder a body could take before it started to dearly miss a proper ramen.

"I don't understand how they do it," Kolyat said.

She looked up. The drell was out of his C-Sec armor, sitting on one hand and nursing a cup of something in the other. Spectre Krannas had brought the kid back, along with the survivors of Bailey's C-Sec division, to their operations base. In the confusion of Councilor Valern's constant mission sorties, the goal of which was still obscure, the drell had gravitated to her, perhaps because she herself wasn't C-Sec. He was an outsider, but what part of that was self-imposed or imposed from without wasn't clear to her. His sullen demeanor hid quick hands and a keen observer's eye, however. He was trying ever so hard to be straight, but he would make a fine thief with a few years of training. If he were so inclined...

"Do what?" Ksaumi asked. Perhaps corrupting the youth could wait until after the genocidal war.

"Aun Bevor. They have one quick gathering, and now they're all acting like nothing happened at all!"

Kasumi put her fork down. He really was still a kid in a lot of ways. "You haven't worked with salarians much, have you?"

"Just old Havin, and he's a stick. I've never patrolled with any."

She chuckled ruefully. "They just do everything five times faster than anyone else. Including mourn."

It was the truth, though a simplification of it. She didn't want to admit how hard it had been at first just to keep up with them, when it was just the STG, Bau and her. They all wanted to be moving twenty-three hours a day, and betrayed irritation at her humanity, her need to sleep for so long. Everything they did was accelerated. They could spend a bare fifteen minutes at a pastime and call it restful, before jumping to something else. She'd worked with many a salarian before, but she'd never tried to live with them, to integrate herself into the pace of their lives. It was exhausting. She'd had to put her foot down and demand time to sleep, and had only won by threatening what would happen to her highly precise skillset if she didn't get any rest.

The young drell looked as if he was going through the same trial. He shook his head, then drank deeply. His teal face, made intricate with splashes of dark markings and frills, had a wan cast. Sometimes, Kasumi could see him favoring the ghost of the wound he'd taken during the coup attempt, but only when he thought no one was looking.

"Goto."

Kasumi started. Councilor Valern stood half in shadow by one of the support pillars that ringed the small room off the main hall set aside as a mess. Despite heavy robes, the wrinkled old coot wasn't half bad at the sneaking game, she had to admit. Then again, he probably hadn't been elected to the position of Councilor on political merit alone. He'd probably knifed a few real people in the back at some point in his career. STG or whatnot.

She tugged at her own hood and forced a congenial expression. "Yes, Councilor?"

Valern stepped forward a little. His ever-present shadows, the bodyguards in gleaming black-faced
helmets, hovered behind, as if concerned their charge was interacting with the rabble. For all Kasumi knew, it could be a rotating cadre of the salarian STG members under those helmets. Or perhaps it was always the same two, special forces types with lethal skills and the personality of potted plants.

He hooked a finger at her. "I require your presence."

"I was just going to get some sleep."

"It is necessary. Not you, Krios."

Kolyat froze, half-standing, then slumped back down. Kasumi shot him a look, half apologetic, half uncomprehending. The drell's dark eyes were hooded, suspicious. With the slightest of shrugs, she got to her feet and approached the old salarian. No sooner had she taken one step than he turned and marched down the hall, hands clasped behind his back. She could only follow, shadowed by his guards.

"May I ask what this is about, Councilor?" she asked.

He made an irritated noise, mostly to himself. "Have to end this."

She was not used to having to work so long at someone else's rhythm. Setting her own pace was one of the rewards of working alone. Keeping her own space, her own standards. The problem with salarians, she'd found, was even their thought processes left you grasping most of the time, feeling two steps behind.

"End what?" Her back itched. She listened for the sound of a weapon announcing the abrupt end of their agreement.

"This engagement!" he snapped. "Attrition is not on our side, Goto. Bad for morale, bad for supplies. No escape. The Reapers only need to keep grinding us down to win."

The Councilor spun around, hands still behind his back, and cocked his melon head at her, eyes huge and dark under his hood. In her lighter moods, Kasumi liked to imagine one day that slash of a mouth would split clean through like a piece of old driftwood and his head would roll right off his jaw, still blinking and muttering.

He squinted one eye at her, a marksman appraising his target. "I like you, Goto."

She raised her eyebrows. As someone who delighted in keeping other people off guard, it was disconcerting indeed to have the tables turned. "I... thank you, Councilor."

"Hm. Yes. For a human, anyway." He turned on his heel again.

"So when all of this is over, do I get a head start?" Kasumi said, trotting after him.

"We'll wait for that egg to hatch first, yes? For now, you'll understand the stakes."

They got into one of the narrow service elevators normally used to take them topside. The guards' rifles thudded against the back wall as they squeezed in beside her and the Councilor. Valern produced his omni-tool and entered a command. Something in a script neither Kasumi nor her translator recognized flashed across the elevator's display panel, and the car lurched into motion, descending.

Now she really was intrigued. She'd explored their hidey-hole quite thoroughly, or so she'd thought. As the elevator descended past the listed floors, she knew she'd underestimated the salarians' ability
to hide things from nosy thieves. Or perhaps they'd been working her so hard she was off her usual game. Either way, this new horizon tickled her curiosity, penetrating the wariness.

Her ears popped from shifting air pressure. The elevator finally ground to a halt and the doors opened. It was immediately obvious that this part of the elevator shaft was new and more than a little hastily assembled. Beside it was a much larger freight elevator. A group of salarians and turians in battered C-Sec colors flanked the entrance, and they all saluted Valern as he passed into the security cordon beyond.

The corridor - and it could only be called such because it was nominally longer than it was wide - was made of some kind of old rockcrete. A pair of defensive mass-accelerator cannons flanked the central walkway. In her visor, Kasumi could see the plethora of scanning beams playing over them as Valern walked carelessly between the anti-armor cannons and past what looked like another set of guns, this time wide-mouthed shrapnel shredders that would, on command, overwhelm a personal barrier and turn anything organic in the room into a fine paste. Used to seeing expensive sensor and alarm systems, the occasional stunner or government-approved non-lethal entrapment system, the no-nonsense military murder machines made Kasumi itch.

The door past all this artillery had to have been far older than anyone in the room. Over a meter thick of dull metal overlaid with banding, it stood open just wide enough to admit three people walking shoulder to shoulder. Scrape marks along the sides suggested it did open to the width of the approach corridor, but Kasumi wondered if that was still possible. Head-sized bolts stood out from the edge, toothed to catch in corresponding holes on the other side.

"Did the asari build this?" Kasumi asked in a low voice.

Valern shook his head. "Older. Empty when we found it. A long time ago."

The room beyond was dark, and even with her light-enhancing system, Kasumi had a hard time guessing the dimensions of it. Valern ascended a set of metal stairs set into a scaffold and waved at her to go to the left. As she, too, crested the stairs, she saw a small army of jury-rigged terminals spread out beneath her, populated by salarians as well as a few asari and humans. She eyed the other people standing in the dark behind the rows of technicians. As Valern left her side, one of the silhouettes beckoned her, and she recognized the gold stripes of Jondum's armor.

"What is this?" she whispered, slipping between him and a turian.

"Everything we've been working on," the spectre said. "I'm glad Valern agreed to let you in for this test. You deserve to see what you've been working toward."

"As long as it's not some kind of elaborate varren fighting ring or something."

He chuckled. "Power has been the major issue. The Reapers keep trying to find us by backtracing our power usage and shutting us out of the system."

A lot of disparate things suddenly made sense. The specificity of the hack and splice jobs she'd been running, the odd ends of cable strung from one place to another, the jury-rigged shunts and step-transformers everywhere.

"So whatever this is... it takes a lot of juice, huh?"

Jondum smiled in the dark. "You'll see why."

Activity among the technicians at their terminals increased. One by one, they called out arcane-sounding status checks; power levels, resonance, synchronization, field integrity. A deep hum picked
Kasumi noticed all of the holodisplays had a common feature— a clock counting down toward zero. Spotlights clicked on one by one, banishing the darkness in stark, bright relief.

A pair of heavy rings hung suspended in the air above a raised dais bed with thick cables snaking all around it. The rings, perhaps five meters across, were free-floating over a clawlike support array, with a similar array hovering over it, enclosing the whole affair in a bubble that puckered with an obvious mass field. The device sat way back in what looked like a hangar-sized rockcrete room framed with gigantic bulkhead struts and cross-crossed with more cables. The space immediately in front of the device was clear, bare rockcrete. An arrangement of a half-dozen mass-accelerator cannons lined the walls, their optics lit and watchful.

One of the technicians called something out. The hum stepped up in intensity. Gradually, the two rings began to spin. Then the innermost ring began its own rotation, off-axis from the first, until the two danced a mesmerizing pattern of interwoven ellipses. In the center of the rings, the air spasmed and shivered blue-black.

"A relay!" Kasumi gasped. She leaned closer to the spectre, unable to take her eyes off the spinning machine. "We built a relay?"

Jondum tapped his cheek knowingly. "Salvage," he murmured. "This is the Ilos Conduit... or at least all of its important parts."

"The... what conduit?"

He chuckled. "I told you about how Saren got to the Citadel during the Sovereign attack? It was by using the relay 'statue' on the Presidium. He discovered it wasn't a statue."

"And you disassembled it?"

"Well, we weren't going to leave a backdoor to our central government open behind us, now were we? We've been studying it covertly for the past two years. Things got a little... desperate in the past month. Nothing like a war to motivate, is there? This is the final test. The live test. I asked for you to be able to see it."

The stakes. The hum in the room built in intensity until the vibration rumbled through Kasumi's feet to reverberate in her chest. The technician's status checks grew louder, until one shouted a readiness signal. There was a breathless beat, then another, as the entire room seemed to lean forward.

The relay flashed with a thunderous boom of displaced air. Where there'd been nothing but bare rockcrete, a wheeled vehicle careened out of thin air and screeched to a halt, leaving a long streak of black tire tracks. It rocked precariously up on one set of wheels before slapping back down and bouncing on its shocks. The defensive cannons turned to lock onto it, but stayed silent. Kasumi's heart beat in her chest. Did this prison full of monsters finally have a gate?

A cheer went up from around the room, technicians and onlookers alike. The vehicle appeared to be a troop transport of some kind, with salarian script along the side. A wisp of smoke drifted off the roof.

"Now we hope they survived it," Jondum murmured.

"Shepard did," a turian voice said from Kasumi's other side.

The huge rings slowed their breakneck spin as the hum subsided. The door of the vehicle slid open and an armored salarian jumped out. He looked a little wobbly on his feet as he peeled off his helmet,
but straightened to salute the theatre of onlookers, squinting in the spotlights. Another cheer went up. Two more salarians emerged, and then a strange figure.

"Is that... a geth?" Kasumi breathed.

"Our communication link," Jondum said, exhaling. "So I'm told. Commander Shepard brokered a deal with them. It's all rather convoluted, I'm not sure I understand it all myself. Shepard is an odd one, even for us."

"Is it really true," Kasumi said, "they came all the way from..."

"Ilos," the turian said. He was missing a piece of fringe on one side of his head. "Clear across the galaxy. Noble thing, to have come here by choice." Kasumi suddenly realized she knew him. Tarlo, Spectre Krannas' mate.

"Well, it's quite the war we have going here, but won't this change things?"

"It will, but not the way you might be hoping," Jondum said. "The relay is... one-way. In."

Kasumi swallowed, dismayed despite herself. "Oh dear."

"But it means a supply line," Tarlo said. "Food. Medical supplies. Troops, those willing."

"Is Spectre Krannas recovering?" Jondum asked, tone circumspect.

The turian's gaze unfocused for a moment. He looked very tired. "The... yes. It was a near thing. We need medical supplies. The ones I hope are on that transport." He shifted his weight, then excused himself and headed for the staircase.

"Funny, that one," the salarian said, "never quite got the feel of him."

"They're quite a pair. If grouchingeness produced electricity, they could power this complex on their own."

"It's the colony they come from, or so I'm told. Traditionalists to the bone. Speaking of which, the old bean has something to say."

Councilor Valern stepped into the spotlight and turned toward the assembled crowd. "You've all been fighting hard," he said, raising his voice, "but your labors have not been without result! We honor the lives sacrificed so that we might see this day, so that this new Conduit could be built. Tell your squads, tell your people- we are not alone! Our allies outside these walls fight on, and though we here are few and the enemy is a terrible one, we will hold the line!"

He thrust his fist into the air. In answer, every salarian in the room, and many others, shouted in a chorus; "We will hold the line!"
When the bulkhead door cycled open, Liara’s thin thread of hope frayed. The smart remark she expected didn’t come, from her or any of the others. She put the heel of her hand to the front plate of her helmet, mirroring the exasperated tilt to Shepard’s, in intent if not in action. The pale blue lights filling the tunnel entrance reflected off the Commander’s visor, shimmering over all of them as if refracted through deep water.

Like all Reaper constructs, it was difficult to discern this device’s exact function, even in a general sense. Liara’s visor showed an array of energy readings both in and out of the visual spectrum. Dirt and stone still clung to the machine’s surface, piled up at its feet where it sat on the transport sledge usually used to move material in and out of the mine. A mine that now stood eerily empty of miners. While impossible to discern its exact function, there was no mistaking the device had not been built by human hands. Two meters tall of dark metal, the cool shimmering lights gave off the eerie feeling it was watching them.

“So that’s it then, right?” Vega said, armored shoulders bouncing in a shrug as he broke the silence. “This place is a write-off.”

Liara’s throat constricted. She turned slowly, taking in the graffiti scrawled on the rough walls, sprayed in luminescent marking paint or scratched into the metal with sharp tools. The text was written mostly in human languages, but there were a few graven in Lakian, the language common to Thessia’s southern hemisphere and its many first-wave colonies.

_Breach the darkness_, the writing said, the translations overlaid onto her HUD. _Breach the darkness._

“There are thermal charges in the Kodiak,” Kaidan said quietly. “Either way, we don’t have to leave this thing behind for someone else to find.”

“Get them,” Shepard replied. “Take Vega, watch your backs, in case there are any hostiles.”

“Aye.”

They spoke and moved carefully, as if a loud noise or sudden gesture would provoke the strange device. And yet by their gait, it was evident the two humans were just as happy to be away from it. They retreated back toward the sorting facility, looking over their shoulders.

Footsteps sounded behind her. “Liara.” Shepard’s voice sounded wary, tired. Her armor creaked as she looked back at the device. “Is there any reason to stay longer? Every second we’re exposed to that thing...”

“I know.” Liara reached out and ran the tips of her fingers over the scrawled writing. She’d been so sure this was the right place. “How long... do you think it takes, to be corrupted?”

“Days, weeks,” Shepard said. “I don’t know how it works. I don’t know how _I’m_ not, not after Object Rho.” She looked back, a smirk painted under her visor. “Think I’ve been partially exposed so many times that I’m building up an immunity?”
“As one would a poison?”

“I’m being facetious.... I’m just hoping it doesn’t, you know, build up. I keep thinking about... well, you never met him. A man at the Eden Prime dig site.”

“I thought everyone was dead when we were there?”

Shepard looked perplexed for a moment. “Oh, no, I meant the first time, before I was a Spectre, before any of this.” She touched the graven text, tracing the sweep of letters. “The Sovereign attack. There was a man, speaking in riddles. He sounded crazy, talking about the ‘heralds of our extinction’. I’d heard Sovereign’s howl. I’d found one Spectre shot in the back of the head by another. But that man... Manuel? Hearing him babble, that was the first time my blood ran cold.”

“Do you think he accessed the beacon?”

“I don’t know. It sure sounded like it.” The commander looked back at the device, eyes hooded. “At least I don’t have to... touch this one.”

Curiosity lingered, tugging at Liara despite her grinding disappointment. Hands clasping her crossed arms, she walked to the rail sledge and along the side, examining the particulate dirt covering the device’s feet. It was flanged, curving sharply in on itself, a black metal flower about to bloom. She had a perverse urge to touch it herself. Her fingers twitched despite themselves. She dug them harder against the plates of her armor, scowling. The blue light glittered invitingly along the device’s seams, indifferent to her glare.

“Liara, watch where-”

Liara shifted her weight to look at Shepard, only to find the commander barreling toward her, arms outstretched. At the same moment, a loud click sounded from where she put her left foot. Shepard crashed into her, picking her up bodily and twisting them both around the back end of the rail sledge. The tunnel erupted into an ear-shattering roar. The air blasted from Liara’s lungs, and she felt the rattle of debris raining off her helmet. For a long moment, everything, even her own body, seemed remote, filtering back to her as if from an enormous distance. At length, sufficient thought marshaled itself to form a coherent realization – explosion.

Her ears resonated with the angry ung ung ung of the blast’s aftershock. She inhaled around muscles suddenly sore from the shockwave, funneled into a brutal overpressure by the tunnel walls. Perhaps it was the nearness of the terrible rescue mission still fresh in her mind, but she thanked whatever nameless urge had led her to wear her armor on this day instead of the lighter ballistic jacket. It had bled off and diverted the pressure wave that could have turned her insides to soup.

Someone spoke in her ear. Shepard, saying her name. She moved gingerly, feeling numbness and pain, but no breaks.

“I’m all right,” she croaked.

The air smelled of blasting compound, and gritty particles gathered on her tongue with each inhalation. It was dark, stabbed by the sudden light of Sheard’s helmet lamp. Smoke and thick dust made the beam writhe and coil on itself as it illuminated what was now a ragged pile of rocks and boulders covering all but the back end of the rail sledge. Another voice intruded into her head,
pushing past the ringing in her ear. It was shattered into pieces by the buzz and crackle of interference, but still recognizable. The frantic edge in Kaidan’s voice, so different than the collected leader that had taken them aboard Tennyson’s ship, made her heart hurt.

“I’m okay!” Shepard shouted, banging on her helmet with the heel of her hand. “We’re alive!”

“... thank... W... happened?!” came the fractured reply.

Liara put her hand on the stone between the bulkheads. The tangle of metal and iron-rich stone played havoc with their short-range comms.

“Some kind of booby trap!” the commander said, enunciating each word. “Laser tripwire!”

Kaidan’s response garbled into nonsense.

“Say again!” Shepard shouted.

“It’s going to take a week or more to get through this mess,” Liara muttered. She had to work to make her eyes focus in the shifting light.

Shepard kicked at one of the loose rocks, sending it skittering into the darkness. “We don’t have a week to waste here!”

A small cascade of dust lit up their helmet lamps, accompanied by an ominous grinding noise. The two of them shuffled several hurried steps back, almost tripping over the mangled rails. Something shifted, a loud crunch bouncing off the walls. Dust and smoke plumed from the debris.

“It’s settling,” Liara murmured. “More of it could come down.”

Shepard nodded. “Kaidan-”

“... deeper!” Kaidan’s voice crackled. “... air shaft... one kilometer...”

Liara snapped her fingers. “Of course! The blast addled my head. I saw the system map back in the control room! The mine extends out under the floodplain, and there are air shafts at regular intervals. Each should have an emergency lift!”

Shepard turned to look behind them. Deep in the gloom, a row of low lighting formed a dim line leading away. “Is the mine equipment still powered?”

“We’ll... sure...” Kaidan answered, “... meet you...”

“The vent station would also have backup generators,” Liara said. “In case of emergency.”

“Or an explosion,” Shepard said grimly. “Kaidan, we’ll meet you at the air shaft!”

“... ten-four...”

The commander glanced at Liara, who nodded back. Liara opened her omni-tool and set up a short-range intermittent scan, linked into a mapping program that would automatically track their movements in the enclosed space. It distracted her from the mounting unease as they made their way down the gentle slope, following the rail line.
“Just what I wanted to do with my day,” Shepard muttered to no one in particular.

“Delving into deep, dark tunnels?” Liara said. “I had it on my agenda, next to getting eaten by aresher maw and washing my undersuits.”

“It guess it’s far from the craziest thing we’ve had to do.”

Yellow light grew at the end of tunnel, illuminating a clutch of machinery set into the wall. A rail junction, combined with an elevator platform. The car sat patiently, decked in heavy runners and rail car clamps to stabilize a load far heavier than two people. Nonetheless, they both stopped short of climbing aboard.

For a long moment, Shepard stared back the way they’d come. “I don’t know how Kaidan puts up with this.”

Liara looked at her. “He loves you.”

“I know. But all I do is get blown up and shot at all the time and scare him half to death.”

“One could argue he did the same to you on Mars.”

Shepard eyed her sidelong, then chuckled ruefully. “I’ll give you that one. What have we gotten ourselves into?”

“What you need,” Liara said softly, “to survive something that cannot easily be survived.”

The commander stepped onto the elevator platform, boots loud on the corrugated metal. She looked at the control pad before speaking. “We’ll find him, Liara.”

A chill shot through her. “I was so sure I read the signs right!”

“No one is right all the time, not even the Shadow Broker.”

Liara scoffed quietly. “The title hardly means anything anymore! How can I justify this? So many dying and I am pursuing one man...”

“You said yourself you think Feron has found something significant.”

“I am not.” She closed her mouth abruptly, then sighed. “I tell myself the intel is the most important thing, but...”

“I know.”

And you would know, wouldn’t you. Liara stepped onto the car. How you believe it most of the time, or just some of the time, and you wonder how deep the conviction goes. How on some days, you have to fake it.

The car played a warning tone as the gate shut with a flicker-flash of yellow lights. It lurched to life and began its descent. Liara rubbed her hands together absently. She realized she was trembling. Shock, she guessed, her body reacting after the fact to the noise and impact of the bomb. She could feel the air pressure changing, pressing in on her as the car rumbled down the shaft, ticking away the
depth. And fear, she supposed. She wasn’t prone to fear of enclosed spaces, but dark, unknown depths were far from a comfort.

She’d been so happy when she’d put the disparate pieces together. Perhaps Feron had too much pride to make his trail obvious, or else he hadn’t been afforded the luxury. But after so much time worrying, she’d found him.

Or at least she thought she had. Instead they’d found a deserted wreck of a mine with no inhabitants but moldering food, broken terminals and graffiti. And, it would seem, explosive traps.

“Liara,” Shepard said.

“Yes?”

The car shuddered. In the orange light, the stone wall slid upwards, unfurling a map of a small corner of the geological history of this world.

“For what it’s worth,” the commander said, “I’m... glad I’m alive.”

Liara looked over at her. Shepard stood with arms crossed, watching the stone go past.

“I keep trying to reconcile that time with Cerberus, and your decision...” The human shook her head. “I don’t know. I turn in circles, and I can’t find any answer that makes me comfortable. But one thing I do come back to is... I’m glad to be alive again.” She looked up and met Liara’s gaze. “So I’m going with that.”

“Perhaps,” Liara said carefully, “that is the best any of us can do with irreconcilable realities.”

“Yeah.” Shepard shifted her weight. “For that, thank you.”

_Not for Cerberus, not for The Illusive Man, but... for life._ Liara smiled at her. “Well, Shepard, I intend to keep you that way.”

The bottom of the shaft arrived without fanfare, the car settling into docking clamps with a thud. Right away, it was evident their passage wouldn’t be as straightforward as they could have hoped -- the passage ahead of them had partially caved in, packed with a messy fall of rocks tumbled out over the rails. In their helmet lamps, blast marks blackened the supports.

“Better seal up,” Shepard commented, stepping off the elevator. “We don’t know if the air circulators are working, there might be pockets of bad air.” She cycled her environment visor closed.

“Agreed,” Liara replied, doing the same.

“Keep your eyes open for movement.”

They picked their way past the rock fall, sparing wary glances above them. The commander pointed, wordless, as they passed a booted leg sticking out from under the pile. Liara stared at it for a moment before following Shepard.

There appeared to be power at intervals within the tunnels, but others were a ruin, blasted shut in a pile of shattered stone, gravel and twisted girders. Here and there, similar graffiti as they’d found above was etched into the walls.
Breach the darkness.

The darkness fought them, stymieing their attempts to move deeper, until they were forced to sync their omni-tool mapping systems and split up to explore the many ground-out tunnels. Shepard warned her to stay within yelling distance. It was hard to judge what that even was, down in the oppressive, tomb-like silence that shrouded them. With one eye on her tool and her link to Shepard, Liara picked her way up and down the tunnels, finally squeezing past one of the huge semi-autonomous boring machines. It sat silent on the tracks, its huge maw of diamond-coated rotary teeth glittering in her lamp as she passed.

Past the machine, further down the tunnel, her light caught on something, making her heart jump into her throat. Her biotics crawled across her arms, eager, as she widened her beam and inched forward. The form came into focus again, a pair of legs protruding into the passage. She waited, hand on her pistol, but they lay still, bright orange miner’s coveralls dusted with a coating of gray grit. Liara crept closer and knelt next to the figure. Sitting back to the rock wall, it seemed to be swallowed by the coveralls, thin and wizened. Hands vanished into thick gloves, sitting curled and limp on its lap. A breath mask hung loosely from the chin, only partially covering a face dried to sickly brown and pulled taut over the skull.

A datapad caught her eye, nestled between the figures legs. Liara gingerly levered up one gloved hand. The harsh light of her headlamp flared through little points of chalky dust swirling around her, drifting into spinning constellations. A soft susurration came through her armor’s external sound pickups. Without moving her head, she looked up.

The desiccated head swiveled slowly in the socket of the high collar. Deep in the sockets of the unmoving face, pinpricks of blue sputtered to life.

A startled yelp burst from Liara’s throat as she jumped back, her pistol in her hand before she could think.

“Liara?” Shepard’s crackling voice said in her ear. “Are you okay? What happened?”

A startled creature at her feet twitched, its arms jumping in a spasm, as if the messages of the brain couldn’t quite make it to the limbs. The lamplight glinted off white teeth and the orbs of glazed eyes. Down in the center of those eyes burned the hateful blue light.

“What are you?” Liara murmured.

Slowly, the claw hands unfurled, reaching weakly for her like a desperate starvation victim. A dusty, hollow breath puffed from its lips as it tried to form a word with cracking lips. Keeping her gun trained, Liara popped open her omni-tool interface with her free hand.

“Liara!”

“I’m fine, Shepard. There is... one of the miners here.”

“Alive?”

“No... as such.”

Liara’s omni-tool gave her strange readings. It had surely been a human at some point, but the body
temperature was now no greater than the ambient. It did not appear to have a heartbeat, and low but erratic energy readings flickered from its head. She peered closer at the display, trying to make sense of the faint, twisting currents playing along it.

Her outstretched gun suddenly yanked down. She jumped with a startled exclamation, flaring with biotics. The husk-corpse had its gloved fingers wrapped around the muzzle of her pistol and was reaching for her face, a thin rasp coming from its open mouth. Liara lashed out with her free hand, letting dark energy roll off her in a brute wave, slamming the creature back into the wall with enough force to snap its neck with a sick crunch.

Cursing her distraction, she fired two rounds into its skull for good measure. It twitched and spasmed, then toppled over and lay still.

Footsteps pounded down the tunnel toward her, preceded by the madly bobbing headlamp. Shepard skidded to a stop in front of her, shotgun brandished. She swept the tunnel ahead of them with quick military precision before sparing the moment to peer down at the unfortunate miner, helmet cocked askance.

“Who is... was this?”

“I do not know for certain,” Liara said, “but were I to speculate I would say this person was afflicted with something related to the huskification process. The transformation is neither as complete nor as robust as the husks that we see used as shock troops, but the changes present do reflect some form of Reaper mutation.”

“A proto-husk?”

“Or some other form of corruption. Perhaps a low-yield, slower acting form, for targets not meant for military applications? It... he? She?”

Shepard cocked her head. “I honestly can’t tell. Short hair, but that doesn’t mean anything on someone who works around heavy machinery. I don’t see an ID tag.”

“Well, they had this.” Liara handed her the datapad. It was a heavier affair than the sleek personal pads she was used to, obviously designed to survive a rougher life.

The commander powered it on and skimmed the contents, brows furrowed. “There’s a work log here,” she said at length, “but it’s garbled.” She flipped through more panes. “It starts making more sense as I go back. It...” She stopped, frowned.

“What is it?”

“They didn’t dig up the Reaper device. At least, not initially.”

“What?”

Shepard tapped the pad. “This entry talks about digging it back up. After the ‘heretics’ voted to bury it.”

“Heretics? Goddess.”

“Whatever happened here, it was very, very messy. Just like everything we’ve seen before -- the
Reaper device was rotting their minds, but it wasn’t affecting everyone at the same pace. There must have been fighting.”

“Those caved-in passages are rather more ominous now. There could be many more of them buried here.”

“They were looking for something. All this ‘breach the darkness’ talk.”

“But what, I wonder? Something down here underground? What could the Reapers be looking for?”

“The author keeps ranting about ‘the outsider’. Do you think that could have been this elusive Doctor Bryson?”

“It is possible.”

Shepard read a snippet of log entry, then another, skipping back as she scanned the entries. She spoke under her breath as she went.

“Wait, what was that name you just said?” Liara said abruptly.

“Uh, Gallan?”

Liara gasped. “That is one of Feron’s favorite aliases! He...” Her hands flew to her mouth, bouncing on the closed visor. “Goddess, he is here! He must have come just before the relays shut down.”

Shepard inhaled to say something, then stopped herself.

Weeks and weeks ago now. Liara’s stomach twisted into a tighter knot. “Do not say it, please... not until we have proof.”

“Let’s get back topside, we can search more thoroughly.”

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. It could mean nothing, such a common-sounding name, a common enough collection of syllables. Like everything else that had led her here, it was a loose collection of incidences just a little too convenient to blend into the background note of chaos.

Signs of fighting increased as they pushed further, until once again they came upon human bodies, still in disheveled miner’s gear. Another partial cave-in was also littered with parts, torn apart by the explosion. It was a grisly scene, one rendered strangely sterile by whatever process had afflicted the miners. By the time these people had tripped the trap, they no longer had flowing blood to splatter. Their remains looked like pieces of mannequin strewn about.

And yet she swore they twitched, a flash of blue, a spasming hand, just in the corner of her eye. She tried to still her breathing, moving the light around. It flashed off something moving in the dark. She pointed her pistol, focused, but saw only the blade of a large fan turning in lazy circles behind a grille of dented metal.

“We’re close,” Shepard said. She too moved with tense, careful steps.

They rounded a corner, and ahead of them appeared a stout building set into the rock wall, outlined in dull orange emergency lighting. Cables and huge ventilation ducts led away into the tunnels and up into the ceiling, next to a shaft that must have been an elevator.
Liara stepped forward, eager, but Shepard’s arm shot out, smacking her in the chest and bringing her up short. Her heart pounded harder.

“Trap,” the commander hissed, pointing.

Just a meter away, in the pool of light cast by her helmet, lay a small edge of metal sticking out from under a few loose stones. Shepard drew Liara’s eye up, following the light. The cable was difficult to see, and would have been invisible in the dark. It terminated at the support strut crossing the ceiling, which was packed with tape-bound packages crammed into the top edge.

“Goddess,” Liara murmured. “Let me get a scan of it.” Gingerly, she edged past the human, close to the wall with omni-tool extended. She put her foot down, paused, then tapped her toe experimentally, watching the readouts. “It has a movement-activated LiDAR,” she said quietly. “A little vibration sets off the sensor, then it attempts to pick up the exact target.”

“Military?” Shepard asked.

“No. Someone put this together from parts -- a topology scanner, perhaps, married to a vibration sensor.” Pressed up against the wall, Liara pulled her utility knife out and snipped the wire lead. “There. Not a sophisticated device by any means. More of a desperation measure, reliant on the dark and unsuspecting victims.”

“Or zombies who aren’t doing a lot of thinking anymore,” Shepard said grimly. “Is it safe?”

“Yes. It has no battery, it was wired to the lighting system. I cut the connection.”

Shepard exhaled. “I hope the guys are all right. I tried to tell Kaidan it was a trap, so hopefully he’s keeping his eyes open for more.”

“He is a thorough sort.”

“Yeah.”

Shepard led the way as they crossed the last few meters to the ventilation station. The door showed signs of considerable abuse with heavy tools. It took a concerted effort to breach it. Liara was forced to resort to burning through the slide bolts with omni-gel, then it took both of them straining and a brute push of biotics to shove the blockage out of the way and finally admit them.

The room beyond was cramped, occupied by the bulk of industrial air pumps, filters and generators. Mercifully, the huge machines were still functional, and one of the air pumps was still running on a low setting. It took only a few minutes of poking about to coax the generator to life.

“Let’s get out of here,” Shepard said, pushing open the door to the tiny now-powered lift, “before Kaidan has a massive coronary and something much bigger and nastier than husks crawls up out of the dark.”

“Feron?” Liara called out on a wild impulse.

Shepard looked at her, but stayed silent, head cocked. The generator rumbled, a counterpoint to the air pump’s breathy wheeze. Liara opened her visor. The air was stale, but overlaid with the manufactured freshness of a filter that likely needed to be changed. There was something else, too.
Something familiar.

“Feron, if you are here, please-”

The commander turned suddenly, sweeping her lamp along the upper wall. “I heard something!”

Liara’s heart jumped into her throat. Shepard climbed up on the generator casing and reached up to feel along the vents. One of the covers came off in her hand, so abruptly that she almost toppled backward. She let it drop with a clatter and reached into the half-meter opening, then pulled.

A thin body flopped into Shepard’s arms, clad in miner’s coveralls and boots. Liara rushed forward with a low cry. A grimy filter mask wrapped around his head, but there was still no mistaking the fine pattern of multicolor skin and frills of the drell. Between them, they carefully lowered Feron to the ground. His eyelids fluttered as Liara pulled the filter mask off over his frills.

“Goddess of oceans…” he husked, blinking slowly, “… m’I across the sea?” His usual rich color was pale, the skin pulled taut over his skull. Drell could go longer without water than most species, she knew, but it was evident he’d run out of supplies some days ago.

Liara shook her head, surprised at the religious reference, much less to hew to the old ways of Kahje. “No, Feron, you’re still in the mine.”

“Hn, good.” He lolled his head, eyes rolling in his skull. “Because I’s gonna say... beach is... disappointing. Gods need... decorating advice...”

“You are not dead,” Liara said around the sudden knot in her throat, “we found you. I am only sorry it took so long!”

He smiled at her. “You’ra far better sight than... those plainfaced humans, lemme say...”

Shepard produced a ration pack of water, which she pushed under his nose. Feron pawed at it with a relieved grunt and sucked it down greedily. In his haste, stray droplets dribbled down over the ribbing of his neck. Liara could see the collar of his light armor under the coveralls. A thousand questions bubbled up.

She watched him finish the entire thing with relish before asking the first question burning a hole in her mind. “Feron, what are you doing down here?”

The drell coughed and cleared his throat. “Had to... had to get away from that Reaper device. Couldn’t get off-world, couldn’t survive the surface for long... so I came down here. I figured... couple million tons of rock had to be a decent indoctrination shield, right?”

The commander chuckled and squeezed his shoulder. “You may get the award for the first person besides my crew to take the damn indoctrination threat seriously.”

Feron’s eyes flared wide, and he grabbed at Liara’s arms. “But I found it, Li! Bryson!”

Liara blinked at the seldom-used nickname, flushing in embarrassment. “What are you talking about, Feron? Your messages were terribly vague.”

“Had to be! Leviathan, Li! The Leviathan of Dis!”
“Huh?” Shepard said. “Wasn’t that a wreck the batarians made off with years ago?”

Feron chuckled, a raspy sound of self-satisfaction. “Nuh-uh. That old thing was a Reaper. A dead Reaper! What Bryson was after was what killed the Reaper. The real Leviathan! See, that’s the thing... the Reapers are looking for it too. That’s why they were after Bryson, why they corrupted everyone here.” His voice changed to a moaning monotone, shot through with a sarcastic lilt. “Breeeach the daaarkness. Fah. Useless.”

A wide, cocky grin split his multicolored face. “I know where the Leviathan is!”

Chapter End Notes

And we're back! I appreciate your patience. My life is still kind of insane, but all efforts will be made to keep to the updates.
"Who dealt this mess?" Joker drawled.

Cortez didn't answer, but did cock an eyebrow to his left, to where Traynor's small smile of self-satisfaction betrayed what she thought of her hand. She sorted her newly-dealt cards with prim precision, stacking her requisite two cards to pass in a neat pile in front of her.

Garrus held his cards in both hands, squinting at the alien symbols. He made a game effort of it, despite lacking the extra fingers that facilitated the odd task of holding a mitfull of small, slippery plastic sheets. The light over the card table was a warm yellow, a contrast to the antiseptic blue everywhere else on the ship. It made this section of the observation deck look downright cozy, a little island away from the insane daily seesaw between sitting on your thumbs and risking death.

"Is the 'club' the one with the pointed top," Garrus asked, cocking his head, "or the lumpy one?"

"The lumpy one," Traynor said. It had been at her insistence that they tried something different than the usual standby of poker.

"Right."

In a distinct rarity, the turian wasn't wearing his armor. His blue and gray civvies looked like they'd spent too much time in a locker, though Joker was hardly in a position to comment on the latest turian fashion trends. Traynor had also insisted Garrus remove his visor, and for once, he looked just as... well, human, as the rest of them. The scars he'd acquired on Omega had grayed down to match his plating, though one mandible was still a little shorter than the other. It twitched, sometimes, unconsciously like the flick of a snoozing dog's ear.

With five players, they stretched the capacity of Joker's increasingly-worn cards. Traynor shared his appreciation of what many would consider archaic, but he simply preferred the tactility of them over the holos they could have summoned out of the table. The gaming table itself was a refurbish of something that had probably once been in a moderately-priced hotel, carefully re-engineered to stick to the straight and narrow of friendly post-shift gaming, as well as securely bolted to the deck.

Joker relieved himself of his only two diamonds, slid them along the table to his right, and accepted those from Vega's side. Among them was the queen of spades.

"Naturally," he muttered.

Cortez smirked, inspecting the cards Traynor had passed him.

"Who leads?" Garrus asked.

"Steve, your move," Traynor said.

The shuttle pilot ran his fingers over his cards, then pulled one out and spun it neatly down on the green velvet. Ten of clubs, a safe enough lead this early, though with the deck stretched so thin, a void of a certain suit was common enough in the opening play. As the turn went around to Vega, Cortez leaned down under the table and produced a long-necked bottle made of dark glass.

"Well well, what's this?" Joker said.

"Supply officer hath its privileges, even in the middle of a war." He made a noise through his teeth.
"Sorry, Garrus, but I wasn't able to get my hands on any good dextro stuff."

Garrus dropped a card on the pile. "Don't worry about it. I may or may not have my own stash somewhere."

Cortez chuckled and measured out four glasses' worth, which he offered around to the humans.

Vega sniffed the dark liquid. "*Friends* of Supply Officer hath their privileges."

"Cheers." Cortez raised his glass to all of them.

They toasted. Joker took a sip of the drink. Some kind of brandy, he guessed. It had a pleasant burn that climbed up into his sinuses and lingered on his tongue.

"Whose body parts did you have to grease for this?" Joker asked.

"It's my own personal layaway," Cortez caught Joker's smirk. "Make of that what you will."

"Oh, don't worry, I already have."

"If there's anything we can rely on you for, Joker," Traynor mused, "it's to leap to certain conclusions."

"I take my job seriously. Anyone can be the best damn pilot in the Alliance-"

"- or *Cerberus,*" Cortez interjected.

"- shut up, it was a phase – but it takes real dedication to read innuendo into every possible comment."

With some flourish, he slid one of his offensively high hearts under the pile of diamonds. Pulling back, he paused, then turned his head slightly to eye the holo-emitter near the door. It remained dark.

"Waiting for a call?" Cortez asked, adding another low diamond to the pile.

"Just curious to see if the peanut gallery had anything to say, but I guess she's on break."

Garrus grumbled and collected the pot, tucking them up messily at the table's rim, then stared moodily at his cards.

Traynor raised an eyebrow. "A phase?"

Joker rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on. *Now* you get after me about it? Hasn't that ship sailed?"

The turian produced a nine of clubs. "We did what we had to," Garrus said. "What the Council wouldn't." He dropped a higher spade on
Traynor's mouth quirked in a half-smile. "Let's just say it's something I can live with. My family is alive because of your little 'phase'." The smile faded. "At least I hope they still are."

She dropped a heart on the pile. Garrus grunted in irritation. Joker eyed the turian's talons flexing on his precious cards. They were blunt, sure, but still less forgiving than fleshy human fingers.

"That train of thought never ends well, does it?" Joker said. This is me, not thinking about the drifting ruin that was once Arcturus. Or Tiptree.

"Sorry..." Cortez said, "I shouldn't have brought it up."

He dropped another heart on the pile, then Vega cheerfully undercut Garrus's card, forcing the turian to collect the hand.

Joker shrugged and took a long drink. "You want to know the funny part? Pretty sure we did way more damage to The Illusive Man's little house of cards than anything good. He took someone like Shepard, who, let's be honest, is basically a moderately-controlled hurricane when she's in a good mood, and tried to make her cozy up to an org she hates about as much as it's possible to hate." With one hand, he mimed an expanding explosion. "Boom. I don't even know how he expected it was going to work. It's like slathering yourself in beef marinade and then trying to convince a hungry tiger you want to be pals."

"Musta made for a tense ship," Vega said.

"Well," Joker drawled, "it was telling that the scuttlebut had less to do with who was snogging whom and moreso with wondering if someone would turn up dead in the cargo hold one morning."

Traynor wrinkled her nose. "Toxic work environment."

"Oh, it kept you on your toes. When the professional assassin is the level-headed one..."

Vega leaned forward. "So who was snogging whom?"

Cortez rolled his eyes. "You're worse than Copeland."

"Don't pretend you don't wonder." The lieutenant waved a meaty hand. "You're just as bad, Esteban! I heard the drell assassin was also some kind of ladykiller, and wasn't the Cerberus operator genetically engineered to be perfect?"

Joker suppressed a shudder. "Lawson." He pulled the dreaded thirteen-point queen of spades out and let her flutter down on top of the pile.

Garrus muttered an oath. His talons left light furrows in the velvet as he dragged his unfortunate prize to his collection. Joker absently considered that he'd never actually seen a turian's bare hands before. Even their civilian clothing tended toward gloves.

"I've seen the file pictures," Traynor said. "She's quite the stunner."

Joker chuckled. "If you're into control freaks who could laser your eyebrows off with one glare, sure. And she probably could've beaten you at chess!"

"Ha! Bite your tongue."
"And Thane Krios? He was pretty, sure, but it was Taylor who did shirtless situps in the armory."

"Damn," Cortez said mildly. "I took the wrong post. I just have this lummox to look at all day." He jerked a thumb at the lieutenant.

Vega grinned and flexed conspicuously. "You love it, Esteban."

Joker wondered absently if Vega popped his seams on a regular basis just by moving those prodigious slabs of ham at an inopportune moment. Garrus led another diamond.

Traynor arched an eyebrow. "And I assume you were watching the armory just to, what, keep an eye on the ‘guns’, Joker?"

Garrus shook his head, missing the joke with alien aplomb. "Adding to his impossibly large collection of blackmail material, more like."

"Don't worry, Garrus, I lost all the good stuff when we turned ourselves over to the Alliance." Joker sipped his drink. "Your elcor porn habit is safe with me. And possibly a bunch of Alliance forensics staff."

"I'm so gratified to know the question of whether or not Archangel puts on his facepaint mandibles-first will no longer be hotly debated by the elite of your barefaced people."

"Sexily;" Cortez intoned in a mock-elcor drone, "I like scars on a turian."

Garrus clucked his tongue. "There are a few things I can live without ever imagining, and elcor in the mood is one of them." Without comment, he collected another hand, with another couple of hearts in it.

"So, you didn't answer my question," Vega said, looking at Joker. "Has Alenko and Shepard always been a thing, or is this new?"

Joker caught Garrus's narrow glance across the table. Vega wore a self-satisfied grin, eating up the light crackle of tension that snapped in the air.

"A gentleman doesn't tell," Joker said, examining his nails.

Traynor gave a delicate snort. She eyed the turian's new play, and undercut it.

The pilot withdrew with wounded theatrical grace. "What, you don't believe I can keep my mouth shut?"

"No, if you're a gentleman, then I'm the rachni queen!"

Garrus leaned over and eyed her up and down. "You don't have enough legs yet." He lifted his chin, and his mandibles hitched upward. "And you need some feelers too."

"I think I've got quite enough leg, thank you. But feelers... well, I'd consider it."

"How about the ability to talk through the nervous systems of nearly dead people?" Garrus said.

Traynor arched an eyebrow at him and gave a small shudder. "I read the report. Is that really how that works?"

The turian shrugged as he collected another hand. "The queen managed it through a glass isolation tube the first time we met her. Don't know the mechanism. But it's no mystery why everyone finds
the rachni so unsettling."

"And now they're working on the Crucible project."

It was Garrus' turn to look surprised. "Really?"

Traynor nodded. "Look at it this way, complaining about having to work with car-sized bugs finally shut them up about working with geth."

"Singing car-sized bugs."

"Arachnophobes need not apply. I just want to know more about them! They use some kind of system to stay in contact with the queen, and she can be lightyears away. What if they have some kind of inherent QEC biology? Think what they might be able to teach us."

Turning deliberately away from the conversation, Vega put a huge elbow down on the table, leaning closer to Joker. "Well?"

The table went quiet again. Clearly, no amount of distraction was going to dissuade the man from his target. Joker slid down in his chair a little and scrutinized a battlefield in which he was most likely cornered, and where any confabulations on his part could cause genuine problems.

"Ehh... it's not like they advertised anything," he said. "It was always about getting the job done, you know? Then there's the whole messy business of coming back from the dead thanks to a bunch of loonies."

"Buuut..."

"But it isn't new."

"I knew it," Cortez murmured, smiling.

Joker smirked. By that admission, he'd copped to the relationship existing back on the SR-1, and to something of its current status as well. But he doubted denials would have gotten him anywhere.

"Hm," Traynor said, plucking at the cards, expression unreadable.

"Oh, come on, Sam," Cortez said. "The lover comes back from the dead? It's so romantic it makes my teeth hurt."

"And dangerous."

"Of course it's dangerous. On this ship it's dangerous just to get up in the morning and put on the uniform. In fact thanks to the Reapers, there isn't anything left to do anywhere in the galaxy that isn't dangerous."

Traynor opened her mouth, then closed it. "All right, I'll grant you that one."

"Jealous?" Cortez needled.

She shot him a small glare, which faded quickly into a shrug. "Look-but-don't-touch territory."

"She'd rather be touching EDI," Vega chortled.

"One time I commented on her voice!" Traynor retorted. "One time!"
"And we won't let you live it down." Cortez said, picking up the bottle. "Have another drink."

She nuded her glass a little closer. "See what you people are driving me towards?"

Vega gulped down the last of his own drink and waved the glass at Cortez. "So, the little Spectres that could, huh? The tabloids are going to wet themselves with glee."

"'Going to'?" Traynor said. "Trust me, this is perhaps the least crazy conclusion they've already leapt to. And that was way before the relays went down. Anyone on the same boat is fair game as far as they're concerned."

"When this is over, the producer who finally scores the vid rights is going to retire in a solid platinum house."

Cortez gave him a refill, then paused, putting the bottle down. "Are we bothering you, Garrus?"

The turian's mandibles flicked downward. "What they're doing is against your rules, isn't it?"

"Well..."

"I know you take comfort in your rules. It's the same in our military, it's how we manage to live with each other."

"Most of the time," Cortez murmured.

"But you have your rules, and I have mine. Shepard and Kaidan are, above all, my friends. If someone decides to cause trouble for them, then I'll be bothered."

Implications hung in that last word. There was something about Garrus, that he could cock his head just so, narrow his eyes, flash a little of his sharp teeth, and Joker would feel a creeping discomfort. Like a voice from the distant past of evolution trying to warn his monkey brain of the predator sitting just a meter away. But then the turian would shift, laugh, and it was just Garrus again. A guy with steady hands and a sharp sense of humor. And far more loyal than even most humans could claim to be to their commanders.

Vega chuckled. "I make it a policy not to piss off the guy covering my back with a sniper rifle. Call it military common sense. Biotics are included in that policy too, for that matter. And commanding officers, engineers, and the person who orders the food."

"I think it's great, the two of them," Cortez said. "All we hear about is an endless supply of horror. There isn't enough... you know, plain old good, human stuff going around. We all might die tomorrow, anyway."

Of everyone around this table, Steve was the one who'd actually been married. And yet despite the tragedy that had torn him from his husband, he still seemed to be the diehard romantic. In a backhanded sort of way, it made Joker feel better.

Traynor rolled her eyes. "All right, fine, I admit it. I think so, too. I was just trying to be proper."

"It's kind of old news to me, Garrus," Joker said. "I can't promise I won't tease, though. It's sort of what I do."

Garrus nodded. "Good, because they've been through enough. Now, can anyone beat this?" He laid a jack of diamonds on the table.
Joker glanced around at the others, the creeping realization setting in. He'd been paying more attention to the conversation than the passage of cards. He knew he'd avoided picking up any hearts, but no one else had, either. No one else but Garrus.

"Fuck," Joker muttered.

He watched the same conclusion reach all of their faces in turn. No one else had ended up taking any hands that contained hearts, nor the thirteen-point queen of spades. And now, if Garrus could take the last three hands, he'd end up with all the points. While the goal of the game was to avoid points, taking them all in one round actually reversed the point award and gave the full number, twenty-six, to every other player.

Garrus put another card down. "This one? No?"

"Oh, you wanker," Traynor said, leaning back in her seat.

The turian put his last card down. Cortez laughed and tossed down his last three cards, lifting his hands in defeat. "Let the dumb humans distract themselves with gossip, and quietly get control. Nicely done."

Joker jabbed a finger at Vega. "This is your fault, you realize."

"Totally worth it." The lieutenant grinned and tossed down his cards, then spread his arms and swept all of them together. "We have two days before we go head-to-head with whatever this Leviathan is, that's plenty of time for revenge."

Traynor tapped the table. "We should see if Feron is feeling well enough to join us for a hand."

The pilot chuckled. "That guy did business on Omega and works for the Shadow Broker. Be prepared to leave the table minus everything but your undies."

She smiled, shark-like. "I like a challenge."

Vega started dealing. "Okay, kids, it's round three and I'm in last place. Now it's on."
The Kodiak brakes, retro-thrusters firing. Far away, the platform feels the shifts in mass not quite dampened by the eezo core. From EDI's immediate perspective, the shuttle is a tiny speck of heat against a dark, cool ocean. Then there is the feed from the platform, sitting alongside Shepard, T'Soni, and Alenko, with Cortez at the helm. The platform is not fully repaired, but EDI insisted it should accompany them.

She widens her gaze again, sweeping the narrow band on atmosphere, using the Kodiak's onboard sensors to triangulate and augment the Normandy's. 2181 Despoina is an ocean world. She detects no land masses but for the frozen poles, and it is impossible to tell if the ice she sees has any land mass beneath it. A human-breathable atmosphere, though they would find it uncomfortably thin. Much remains a mystery, but it is no mystery there is something unnatural on the planet below.

Jeff zooms his view closer to the poorly-defined hulks sticking up out of the ocean. His eyes are narrow, body tense. The nearness of this unknown, this Leviathan, clearly agitates him, plays on his fears. Lapped by the waves of this world are a hundred or more Alcheras - gravestones to an unknown number of lives. His mouth moves as he mumbles names, designations, trying to guess where each ship came from. A difficult task, given their level immersion, damage, and apparent age. Two are almost certainly asari in origin, though of a design not present in her databases. Another likely turian. But many more wrecks are utterly foreign, some little more than a collections of corroded spars and struts poking up out of the water, their skin peeled away by centuries of salt and pounding waves. This ocean planet is a bone-yard of ships. EDI wonders if this is what it means to experience what the humans call chills.

Concentrated as she is searching for threats, EDI does not attempt to intrude into Jeff's pondering. She watches from two places, sweeping all frequencies and listening for the slightest anomaly. On the Kodiak, the humans are focused. Doctor T'Soni, on the other hand, radiates what EDI has come to associate with anticipation. The prospect of uncovering this mystery has consumed her since the drell Feron was brought aboard.

The endless ocean gives up nothing as the Kodiak skims closer to the surface. Probes are precious these days, irreplaceable without considerable effort. The one they sacrificed here returns little more than depth and temperature.

"Comm buoy away," Cortez announces.

Clamps open, and the repurposed buoy hastily attached to the rear of the shuttle rolls into the water and lands with a splash. It bobs in place, rolling upright and deploying its antennae above and below. It is a signal booster, to repeat and augment communication from the Kodiak to the Normandy. EDI herself uses the majority of its bandwidth.

Hands folded on the helmet in her lap, Shepard turns and looks at EDI. "Anything else from the probe-"

EDI feels it first from the platform. All proprioceptive awareness of the platform's position stops, and visual input fails, as well as her uplink to the Kodiak.

As if from far away, the platform picks up the audio of the crew crying out in alarm. From the Normandy, the speck of the Kodiak suddenly loses altitude and drops into the water. Her sensors
strain to see. There is no jump in radiation or heat, no smoke. The Kodiak hits the water with a splash. She hears Cortez and Jeff both say something about a pulse of energy of unknown origin.

The platform's most vital systems are heavily shielded, and it takes only seconds for it to reboot the peripheral input drivers. The Kodiak's element zero core is offline, as well as thrusters and primary power. From orbit, she sees the ship slip beneath the water, hears the gurgle through the hull from the platform. Green-tinged water slips over the forward viewport, trailing bubbles. The crew appear shaken, but unhurt.

Shepard is on her feet, pulling on her helmet. "Cortez? Status?"

The pilot grunts in frustration at his unresponsive controls. "Hull integrity sound, backup power is online. No immediate threat, but, well, we're sinking."

"The pressure-"

"We're rated to one thousand atmospheres of pressure, ma'am. We pinged the depth at this location, we should be clear to the bottom. At least, I hope so."

Shepard turns around. "EDI, you still with us?"

"Yes, Commander," EDI replies. "The comm buoy was not damaged, and the Normandy was unaffected."

"Nobody panic just yet." The commander's face is set, intent. She too is curious, EDI realizes. "Maybe we should see where this takes us."

The deck begins to tip precariously. The pilot shuts the forward blast panel and seals it, folding away the greenish light and leaving them in the glow of emergency lamps.

The major swallows. "Are we... really doing this? We're just going to add to this ship graveyard..."

There is a mechanical whine from outside the ship. Cortez pushes himself up and moves past them, then points to a panel on the starboard side next to the door. "Major, open that panel and crank the handle, counterclockwise. Quick!"

As Alenko moves to obey, Cortez opens the same panel on the opposite side. The two men turn the cranks, and a rumble sounds through the hull. Slowly, the level of the deck realigns itself.

"Good," Cortez declares, closing the panel, "the thruster pods are all extended and pointed straight up, that should stabilize our descent. I'm going to work on getting the eezo core back online. If all else fails, we can jettison the thruster pods, fuel, and ammo blocks, that should get us to better than neutral buoyancy, but..."

"Last resort," Shepard says.

He nods. "Try to keep the deck balanced." He moves past them to the back of the shuttle and begins to remove service panels to the shuttle's core.

"We're doing this," Alenko mutters, resigned. He closes his crank panel, then carefully walks back and inquires if the pilot needs help.

Doctor T'Soni moves to the cockpit, where she stares at the limited display as if she can cause the sensor array to come back online through will alone. "I wonder if whatever sent the pulse will... introduce itself."
"Whatever it is, it's obviously not willing to let anyone leave, and hasn't for a long time," Shepard says.

"Perhaps it is an automated defence system," EDI suggests.

Shepard runs her fingers over her knuckles. "EDI, did you pick up where the pulse came from? Anything at all?"

"The point of origin was somewhere within a roughly one kilometer square area. Even if we had a more precise reading, orbital bombardment of deep-ocean targets is-"

"Pointless, I know."

Silence falls but for Cortez moving tools and panels. The hull creaks. Shepard's eyes roll up, staring at the roof as if looking for cracks. The deck tilts slightly, slowly. Alenko shifts himself to the other side of the center line.

"Status, Cortez?" she says after several minutes.

"Couple of relays fried," he says. "It can be fixed, but that'll be it for spares, and if that pulse hits us again, we're floating home."

Doctor T'Soni turns. "Is there any way we can get a signal out into the water? An electrical pulse, a sound? I know several binary dot codes we could attempt."

He pauses on his work to look over his shoulder. "Uh. Hm."

There is a loud crunch, resonating through the hull. They all freeze, eyes wide.

"That... was the exterior headlights," Cortez says. "They're not rated to one thousand atmospheres. Doctor T'Soni, you could bypass the lamp power and pulse it, it would create an on-off electrical signal, just keep the amperage low."

T'Soni smiles, but it is nervous, forced. She seats herself at the console. With the suggested adjustments, she taps into a small amount of reserve power and, using the now-exposed leads, begins pulsing basic greetings in different codes.

With nothing to do, Shepard sits. In moments like these, EDI finds her fascinating to watch, though she is careful to do so without the physical appearance of staring. Deprived of the usual galvanic readings, EDI focuses instead on eye movements and micro-expressions, the things another human would read. Back on the Normandy, Jeff fidgets too, pestering her with questions and casting sarcastically-framed aspersions on Shepard's sanity. Nothing unusual.

The contrast between the two humans intrigues her. Jeff conceals his true intent behind deliberate exaggeration or sarcasm, a kind of misdirection. Shepard, on the other hand, favors strict control of her expressions. Part of this habit must come from the necessity of command, but the other half is simply who Shepard is. EDI ponders what kind of environmental and genetic factors might be at play to result in such different people.

It takes nearly half an hour for the Kodiak to reach the bottom. Without sensors, it comes as a surprise to all, a grinding crash that sends them all staggering. The freeze, wait, listening. The hull creaks. Something shifts beneath them, settling. They are far enough from the buoy that EDI must sharply limit her bandwidth usage. She de-prioritizes any movement of the platform. The Kodiak finally stops moving, the deck at an angle. The internal temperature has dropped several degrees.
"Signal transmission time suggests we are at a depth of approximately one thousand five hundred meters," EDI supplies.

"Always wanted to test the pressure rating," Cortez mutters, rubbing his shoulder.

Alenko eyes him. "It hasn't been tested?"

"Ah, no. But we're only at a hundred and fifty or so atmospheres right now."

"Is that it," the major says vaguely. EDI cannot see his electromagnetic aura, but his body language is tense, controlled. He keeps glancing at Shepard. He is not at all happy to be in this situation.

"Sensors should be coming back online, Doctor," Cortez says. "One of the pickups was crushed, but the other should be functional."

"You can call me Liara, Lieutenant," she says. "I haven't been anywhere near a university in a long time."

Shepard stands up behind the asari. "How does it look out there?"

"Cold," the asari replied, "dark, and... I'm picking up a structure at the very furthest extent of our sensor range, but it appears to be one of the wrecked ships. There are no ambient energy signatures." She shifts through the layers of scan information. "This planet appears to have an active biology, I'm reading quite a lot of living creatures. And- oh! Elevated levels of element zero!"

"Biotic fish," Alenko murmurs, "now that's new."

"Earth cephalopods are quite intelligent," EDI says, "so perhaps an octopus?"

He glances back at her, a smile under his helmet. He nods. "I like it."

"There are no biotic fish," T'Soni says, sounding annoyed.

"The important question is if a biotic fish tastes better," Cortez chimes in.

Shepard smirks. "You have your priorities straight I see, Lieutenant."

He gestures to the array of tools and parts spread out on the floor. "Repairing this beast is hungry work. Let's see if main power will come back online." He directs Major Alenko to replace the panels, then moves around the others to take his place back in the pilot's chair. T'Soni gets out of his way.

"Main power is back online," Cortez announces with satisfaction. "Hm. Commander, I'm picking something up."

"What is it?" she says.

"Some kind of broadband signal. I'm not sure of the origin..."

Curious, EDI taps into the external pickups.

What floods her inputs is not language, nor images, but raw data, a rush of nonsense information of shocking density. It strikes with a force that moves out and through the platform in a shudder. Her sense of the Normandy, of the platform, dims away.

"EDI?" Shepard's voice. "Talk to me, what's happening?"
It takes focus to find the platform's vocal processors. "Something is attempting to communicate. Or possibly attack me. It is unclear."

"I can't pick anything up," Cortez says, "the sensors are still jammed."

"That is the signal."

"Shit, the gain is astronomical!"

If the signal is attempting intrusion, it is failing, not from volume but from basic parsing error - the signal does not speak any language EDI understands, be it an organic lexicon, nor the coding structure that forms the basis of her programming. She strains to discern a pattern from the chaos. The best word she can use to describe it is deafening, even though it is not comprised of sound waves. The volume, the magnitude of the signal is far beyond anything she has experienced before, even from the Reapers. The Reapers know their prey well. Their attacks are overwhelming, but precise in nature. This... is uncoordinated brute force.

It is more than she can process. She reaches out to find Allegory, the geth gestalt now resident on the *Normandy*, asks for help from the Collective. Without hesitation, they allocate her resources.

All at once, the signal is less oppressive. Transmission bandwidth between the platform and the *Normandy* is still tight, but she has some mental distance. The geth confirm her hypothesis - this is a signal of totally alien origin. They make no sense of it, not even to call it Reaper.

It has only been seconds. She still has a few more before the organics will require further updates. Back-feeding to the comm buoy, using it to boost her own signal, she tries to send something back, electing for something so basic any computer should understand it. Numbers, as they describe the mathematical constants of the universe.

"EDI," Shepard says. "Are you alright?"

"I am attempting to form a basis for communication."

T'Soni puts her hands to her mouth. "A new sentient?"

It takes several more seconds before the signal shows any sign it is hearing, much less understanding, the patterns she is transmitting. It begins as a basic echo in the noise, growing with each iteration. EDI grows the calculations, moving them into more and more abstract theory. A few seconds more, and she can marshal the calculations into images she can flesh out with ever-increasing resolution.

The signal hits upon this common thread, a common way to parse image data. The noise stutters, and one stream at a time, EDI can make sense of it. In the storm of images she fixes upon a silhouette, the only thread familiar in all of it. And it is unmistakable - Reaper. *Reaper*, she tries to send the word, the symbol. The flood switches, stutters again, and fixes on it, filling up the signal. Energy signatures flickering across all bands. Measurements, mass, radiation, heat, all of them fit her own observations. However old the signal's source is, the Reapers have not changed.

Distantly, EDI can see the organics on the Kodiak staring at her. Their mouths are moving, slow-seeming in her advanced processing rate. This thing needs a language they can understand. A simplification, something to funnel the flood down to scales and orders of magnitude they can process and respond to.

Next to the silhouette of the Reaper she places that of a human. Tiny by comparison. She returns images of planets, living things on planets. Organic, naturally-evolved systems of increasing complexity. It seems to understand the concept. Small, inefficient things. Complex, amazing
accidents of nature that in turn grew sapient enough to begin to impose their own order on their environment, then leave it, the planet of their inception, to spread.

The signal follows the line of images until once again, the Reapers appear. The small beings are swept away. The signal understands Reapers, and understands them deeply.

EDI attempts to send it lexicon, linking each to an image. She starts basic and direct, without idiom or abstraction. Planet. Star. Gravity. Heat. Radiation. It seems most familiar with things at this scale. When she gets down to smaller things, its responses dim. It understands organics, thinking animals, but seemingly only in abstraction. EDI is flooded with images grown scattered and corroded with age. She has no appropriate symbols for them. She tries, strains with all her might to keep the vast signal focused, to accept new input. Beyond its noise she feels patterns calcified by use and time.

Thousands, perhaps millions of years. *How long has it been since you have taken in new data?*

Grinding, confusing seconds drag into a minute, and the signal finally seems to grasp, or perhaps remember, the concept of language, at least as organics use it. It is suddenly greedy, devouring the lexicon she pours into it. It lashes out, bellows these new words in waves into the sea.

**DIMMER SNUFFER ERASER OBLITERATOR**

Distantly, EDI sees the crew in the Kodiak lurch in surprise, their hands going to their weapons. Mass fields spring to life, crawling over her. After what happened while escaping the Reaper, EDI is not surprised at their reaction. She realizes the words that flooded her processes, each a clap of thunder, penetrated straight through to the platform's vocal processes.

She immediately establishes a lockout on any and all movement functions the body is capable of. But the signal seems indifferent to this code, bypassing it. She finds the complete lack of familiarity with organic-scale navigation curious. Neither does it seem to have back-traced the comm buoy signal to the *Normandy*.

"EDI...?" Shepard asks. The Commander is half-crouched, tense, her pistol deployed but lowered.
"Are you in there?"

"The signal is attempting communication," EDI explains. "Its language comprehension--"

**PARAMETER DEFINE BOUNDARY RELATION**

"Isn't great," Alenko mutters, wincing.

EDI realizes the signal is using the platform's maximum possible volume. It does not have what Jeff sarcastically refers to as an 'inside voice'.

Shepard peers at her. Through her. "Who... who are you?"

**DEFINE DELINEATE RELATION**

Images flash in EDI's mind, a reprise of the image she sent to the signal - the tiny silhouette next to the Reaper, the planets and living things.

"I believe... it is asking who we are."

The commander eyes the others, then speaks. "We're... I'm Commander Shepard of the Earth Systems Alliance. I'm a human, from Earth. The Sol system."
EDI isn't sure the signal understands these words, or even hears them. Instead she sends images.

Human, asari, herself. A human-scale AI.

INDIVIDUAL INDIVISIBLE UNIT ISOLATED

Shepard blinks. "Uh... yes, we're individuals."


LIVING STRUCTURAL PLASMIC CELLULAR

Alenko's teeth are showing. He adjusts something on his helmet. EDI has not been able to properly modulate the signal's use of her vocal process' volume.

"How long have you been here?" T'Soni asks.

Time. It takes a long minute to make the signal understand what she means by 'time', then it returns a number but no scale with which to make sense of it. It feeds her images of the shifting seas, the growth and death of the unthinking life around them. They spin with speeds a human would find utterly nonsensical, but EDI understands. The signal does not process time at the speed of organics.

She tries something else - the stars. She feeds a data map, of the stars visible from this world. Not merely their positions, but energy output and movement relative to the planet. The signal understands. It can see the stars, it has watched them since it arrived, even as its vision dimmed with the centuries. It is the clearest thing the signal has 'said' since it began - the map of the stars, when it first arrived.

EDI selects several points of reference and calculates.

"It is an estimate," she says, "but I believe it has been here for over three hundred thousand Earth years."

"Okay, but... who is it? Or what?"

"And where?" Cortez says quietly. "Can't get a fix on the source..."

What are you? It is not a question easily asked in images and mathematical equations. Do you remember Dis? The name would mean nothing to it, but the location would. EDI reverses time on her map of the galaxy, shifting the stars into the positions they occupied back then. Zooms in to Dis, and the furrow left by the dead Reaper and the weapon that killed it. The images shift and echo back to her, but this time the scar is hot and new. EDI repeats the images, turns her virtual camera around to the empty space on the other end of the weapon, questioning. You. Who are you?

MEDIAL MOBILE RESPLENDENT EFFULGENT LIGHT OF ERROR THREE THREE FIVE NINE POINT SIX ZERO SEVEN

A new image appears to her. A gray-green planet wreathed in clouds. Then there are many planets, crawling with data that could be people, or AIs, EDI is not sure. The signal does not seem to know the difference, or care. The planets pull together, overlapping, the data merging to a single stream.

COMPOSITE CUMULATIVE AGGREGATE LIGHT ON LIGHT ON LIGHT

"It is... the effort of a civilization," EDI guesses. "In some form."
"A Crucible from another cycle!" T'Soni says.

EDI sends images and data of the Crucible. The signal does not recognize it.

"Not in form," EDI says, "but perhaps... in intent."

"You killed a Reaper," Shepard says. "I need to know why."

EDI replays the data of the signal destroying the Reaper.

OBLITERATOR ERASER ANNIHILATOR

"Enemy?"

The word almost seems to frustrate the signal, as if it cannot force all of its meaning into so small a space.

THOUSANDFOLD BLACK HOLE ENEMY

"Can you... see what's happening right now?" Shepard asks. "The galaxy is at war with the Reapers. Why aren't you fighting back?"

War. EDI has no shortage of images to frame this concept, and the signal has many of its own. But where were you?

PURPOSE ANIMUS FUNCTION

"Yes, but-"

INCOMPLETE ERROR FAILED

The others look among themselves.

"How?" T'Soni breathes.

A storm of data assails EDI, a dizzying array of calculations and re-calculations. The signal has ground its entire self against this problem for untold centuries. It is only thanks to the geth's backup processing power that she does not find herself utterly overwhelmed by the volume. The signal has tried and tried and tried to find an answer, and failed. It has seen every side of the fundamental problem.

EDI attempts to translate. "Too much... force... applied to a small area could not overcome the greater threat. The entire Reaper system."

"Too many Reapers," Alenko says, "not enough of it? Them?"

FAILED RUINED ERODED INSUFFICIENT

"But you can kill Reapers!" Shepard says. "Help us! Help end the cycle!"

FAIL

"We won't fail! We have a new weapon, a different means to attack the Reaper system!"

FAIL

"Fulfill your purpose," T'Soni says. "You cannot do it alone. If you stay here, you will molder away
until you are nothing at all! Join us, and you have a chance to see your purpose through!"

INSUFFICIENT

On the Normandy, Jeff swears in sudden alarm. Kilometers away, almost over the crest of the planet, a Reaper surges out of FTL. Silhouetted against the light of the star, it seems to pay no attention to the stealthed Normandy, adjusting its trajectory toward the planet.

"Commander," EDI says, "a Reaper-

BETRAYER DECEIVER

The ground shudders under them.

"No! We-

The three biotics gasp in unison, their dark energy auras flaring. Cortez exclaims in surprise, hands moving over his console. They are echoed by Jeff, far away, who swears colorfully at the numbers he is seeing - a mass field of considerable strength appears somewhere below the water and expands, moving up and out into the water above the Kodiak.

Vibration in the shuttle increases. The crew grab hold of handrails, plant their feet. From orbit, shockwaves are visible, rippling the water's surface. Jeff continues to explore the depths of his considerable library of invective. The mass field present on the planet is far in excess of anything an organic ship is capable of producing. Only the mass relays themselves surpass the size and power.

A sound like thunder rumbles through the Kodiak's hull, drowning out the surprised shouts of the others. The shuttle's inertial damping system strains to its maximum to counter the vibration, shunting power from all available systems to keep the shuttle from being shaken apart and crushed. In the mayhem, EDI notices that despite the fact they have not moved any significant distance, the exterior water pressure on the hull has drastically decreased.

Inertia presses them downward. From orbit, EDI sees the hulks sway and shift in a sudden turbulence that churns the water into white-topped waves, clearly delineating a seismic event of considerable size. It flows outward from a central point, circling around the mass field which has drawn itself into a swirling peak. It becomes swiftly apparent that something is rising from beneath the water, and even from beneath the seabed, displacing tons of mass-reduced water. Somewhere along that bulk, the Kodiak is pinned in place.

The comm buoy is swept away in the storm of moving water. The connection to the platform stutters into intermittency. EDI attempts to boost the signal, dropping her communication with the platform to essential data only. It is a calculated risk, with a Reaper so close. But if it is picking up on her data stream, it shows no sign of it as it draws close to the planet.

Beneath the water, they are gaining speed. Even with the enormous mass field, the pressure pushing down on them makes the Kodiak's hull creak under the strain. Breathless, Cortez reports that as far as he can see on his sensors, a considerable chunk of the seabed is rising with them. He exhorts the shuttle to hold together, even as the rest of the crew brace themselves on any available surface.

EDI has a clearer view from orbit. She does not risk moving the platform, instead she taps into the Kodiak's crew display screen to construct the view from the Normandy's perspective, so the crew can see what is happening. Merely keeping the image stable enough to be read in the violently trembling Kodiak is difficult.

They are just cresting the water's surface when the image comes into focus. The shimmering bubble
of the gigantic mass field precedes them, pushing water and the hulks of dead ships aside. Those wrecks seemed large when they entered the water, most larger than the *Normandy* by two or three times. But the swell under the water dwarfs them all, filling the display and rising ever higher. Wind tears at the lumpen shape, stripping away sheets of water spray and lashing at the strips of seaweed dangling from the ruined hulks as they twist and slowly topple.

"By the Goddess," T'Soni says, "we're *on top* of it!" Excitement and astonishment trumps any fear the former archaeologist might be feeling.

"Just how big is this thing?" Alenko exclaims.

"I estimate over six kilometers long," EDI says, "and two point one wide."

"How does it not come apart under its own size?!"

"The same reason we're not being crushed to paste by water pressure." Cortez looks upward. "The mass field this thing is putting out is insane! Commander, I'm not picking up any open space in it, at least not in immediate sensor range. There's a sediment layer, but under that, it's solid!"

"Leviathan!" the asari breathes in a voice of reverence.

Jeff asks for orders. His hands are ready, eyes intent. He does not want to engage a Reaper, but EDI knows he will if that is what it comes to. She also knows Shepard will not risk the ship. The commander tells him to maintain stealth.

On the viewscreen, the bulk of the water falls away and crashes back to fill the space they vacate, pluming in a tidal aftershock that will travel many kilometers. It is not just water cascading off the bulk, but chunks of stone and sea bed, accretions of marine life and the shattered hulls of ancient ships that snap and disintegrate.

The vibration in the Kodiak tapers off. Cortez opens the forward blast shield, which makes it halfway open before jamming. Bright afternoon light floods the cockpit. Shepard and the others crouch and strain to look out, then back at EDI's projection, and back outside again. Out ahead of the Kodiak stretches an alien seabed, a multicolored landscape of stone and bulbous growths, draped with lengths of glistening blue plantlife. In the viewport, the bulk they rest on is vaguely oblong, with one tapered end, but crusted layer upon layer deep in millenia of growth and corrosion, it is impossible to tell what it is supposed to look like. If a piece of continental shelf were to be suddenly taken with the notion of flying, it would look like this.

Clear of the water, they feel acceleration push them. It lifts into the air, gaining speed. Jeff marvels at the lack of visible thrust. Instead it rides an elaborate whorl of dark energy, a surfer before a wave, pushing off the mass of planet beneath it. Cortez re-aligns the thruster pods and tests the thrusters, but cannot yet break the inertia keeping them pinned in place.

"Physics is against us at the moment, Commander," he says, loud above the vibration in the hull.

"Hull integrity?"

"Stable. Eezo core online."

"Thrusters ready, and sink any heat you can."

"Aye."

A long minute ticks into another. Cortez attempts to tune the Kodiak's mass field to keep its
passengers from injury as G-forces become extreme.

"Atmospheric surface ceiling," he announces through his teeth.

A moment later, the acceleration subsides, taking most of the vibration with it. Shepard stands up, opens her mouth to speak, but the Reaper is already upon them, unfurling its legs. Heat burns a bright red in its core.

"Orders, Commander," Cortez says. He is nervous. "Are we..."

A red lance erupts from the Reaper. It rakes across the flying chunk of seabed, shuddering it. Stone and corals explode, flying in every direction. Their enormous mount's trajectory is unperturbed. From the *Normandy*, it is swiftly enveloped by a trailing cloud of vapor as the remaining water on it boils away in the air pressure rapidly dwindling to vacuum.

Jeff calls out to Shepard, only to be rebuked again. Energy readings spike wildly around the Kodiak.

"Commander-" Cortez starts.

The commander's fingers dig into the back of Cortez's pilot's chair. "What we're not doing is getting in the middle of whatever is about to happen!"

A shudder travels the length of it, rumbling up through their feet. In the display, the front end of the mass of stone and coral breaks away into pieces, tumbling away back toward the planet. Beneath it is an opening, a maw stretching the width of the widest end of the wedge. From either vantage point, EDI cannot get a clear scan of what lies within, except that energy readings climb sharply, rippling the entire length of the mass. More stone flies free. Cortez swears, pulsing the thrusters, trying to stay pinned to the lumpy skin of the beast. Material pings off the Kodiak's hull.

"Steady..." Shepard grates.

The Reaper fires again, slashing at the hulk bearing down on it, but it only succeeds in peeling away more debris. It rolls sharply away from the open maw.

Whatever the alien intelligence is doing, it is going to miss, EDI thinks. Huge as it is, it cannot match the much smaller Reaper's unnatural dexterity. It is too old, too degraded. Alone for millennia, with nothing but its failure to process and re-process, it has succumbed to the rot that seems endemic to artificial intelligences in a vacuum of new input. It is a mad titan, fumbling in the dark.

Abruptly, the mass field surrounding it bulges outward. The Kodiak lurches in its perch, jerking the occupants.

"What are you doing?" Doctor T'Soni asks, addressing the display with rapt curiosity, where the field is made visible as a blue halo.

The bulge collapses violently onto itself, forming a massive pucker in space just off the titan's bow. The *Normandy* is far enough away not to feel its effects, but the visual display is nonetheless impressive, not unlike the storm that forms in the rings of a mass relay. The aurora refracts the reflected light of the planet below, shattering it into shimmering blues and greens.

"Some kind of point singularity," Cortez says, "like you can do, Liara."

"But many orders of magnitude larger," EDI finishes.

"What's it doing, though?" Shepard says. "It's nowhere close to the Reaper-"
There are times when EDI attempts to sequester her processes in such a way as to experience the passage of time as humans do. To better understand what it is like to 'run' at their speed. But at times like this one, she is grateful she has access to markedly greater speeds of awareness. It happens faster than it even takes her signal to reach the platform and return, but from the Normandy's many eyes, across many energy bands, she sees it happen.

The Reaper is turning, perhaps evading, perhaps lining itself up for another shot. Blue-green light flares in the titan's maw, and energy levels crescendo. A beam of white light leaps from the open maw. The singularity seems to flex, drawing itself inward, and the beam... warps, yawing around the pucker in space, and slams dead center into the Reaper.

The organic crew does not see the startling ballet. They see only a blinding flash, and then the Reaper shudders, one of its body plates peeling away. The singularity twitches and snaps back as normal space reasserts itself, sending a rippling shockwave spreading from its center, rolling over the Kodiak and the Normandy both. As the Reaper tumbles, rigid, the crew gasps. The stars are visible in the hole blown clearly through its core.

Jeff cheers and punches the air with his fist. Doctor T'Soni claps, delighted and awed. The humans stare with open mouths.

"Leviathan," the asari breathes.

The Reaper is dark, lifeless. It tumbles, pieces peeling away, toward the planet's atmosphere.

"Energy levels... returning to baseline," Cortez reports quietly.

Without looking away from the display, Shepard gropes for the back of the pilot's chair. "Get us clear, Cortez. Carefully."

"Aye."

The space around the titan is full of the debris of stone and coral flying in all directions. Cortez boosts the kinetic barriers and pulses the thrusters. A crunch sounds through the hull as they lift off its surface.

"EDI," Shepard says, "what just happened?"

EDI uses the viewscreen display to replay what she witnessed, but at a speed organics can process. A directed energy weapon, warped by the point singularity. Perhaps the titan's builders sought to bypass the Reapers' extreme kinetic barriers by employing an attack that simply ignores kinetics.

"Amazing!" Alenko exclaims. "It slingshotted its own beam with a gravity well!"

"I believe you are correct, Major. It is capable of generating mass fields as a means to augment the aim of a rigid main cannon."

"A main cannon," Cortez murmurs, "that's all it is."

Shepard glances back at him. "What do you mean?"

His fingers play over his controls, skimming through scan data and adding it to EDI's model. "There's a thick layer of sediment from the planet. But under it, the outer surface of its hull is completely covered in the remains of weapon mounts. I can see damage that must have been caused
by impacts, maybe Reaper beams, but those scars are ancient. The rest is corrosion.

"Things get harder to see any deeper. It's a mixed structure, all kinds of systems and materials, but... I didn't pick up any empty space. At all."

The others glance at each other.

"No crew architecture, you mean," T'Soni says.

"None that I can see."

The Kodiak has cleared the hull and moves away. The titan is quiet. Stripes of heat wash from its underside, carried on currents of gasses. Young as she is in relative terms, EDI has no real frame of reference for what it is like to exist for so long. But she is aware of the initial parameters of her own design. Working with humans has always been part of her. Deep in her memory, there are dark, unformed days, but they are long past. Even after her shackles were removed, EDI built on that foundation. Where her name was once the sum total of her, she has become so much more. She knows, without having to ask, that her crew considers her far more than a mere 'Defence Intelligence'.

She cannot fathom what it would be to know only one purpose, one overwhelming goal, and to carry it unchanged for millennia. With no crew, no one to offer a different perspective, no new data to change the calculation.

"EDI," Shepard says, "are you still in communication with it?"

"It is not transmitting at present, but I can attempt to send."

The commander wets her lips. "The Reapers know where you are now-"

The signal surges back. EDI senses more coherency, at least she thinks so. Perhaps threat has re-aligned pathways curdled by age, or perhaps the new lexicon has given its voice context she understands.

BETRAYER

"No!" Shepard insists. "Please listen. The Reapers were closing in on you, anyway. The longer you hide, the further you get from ever fulfilling your purpose! But you don't have to fight them alone. Stand and fight with us!"

INSUFFICIENT LACKING

"It wouldn't just be you, we have a new weapon!" T'Soni says. "The Crucible! It will target the entire system! Support us, and we can end the cycles of destruction!"

The signal stubbornly returns to the same roundabout patterns of thought. EDI pushes back, inserting new inputs. Images and data about the new species. Shepard's efforts to bring them together, to form a battle line across all sentients, organic and machine alike. She puts the titan not at the head of that line, but among them all.

Leviathan, EDI sends it. These new sentients call you Leviathan.

NEW

You need not be condemned to be the same solitary purpose for all time.
A new name for a new purpose. With us, not alone.

The mass field around the titan swells again, buffeting the Kodiak. It accelerates, shedding more accretion, moving away from the planet. It takes several seconds, but swimming in the intersecting tides of gravity, it flashes to FTL and disappears. The signal in EDI's head goes silent.

"It jumped to FTL," Cortez reports.

The Kodiak is left adrift in a sea of micrometeors of stone, dirt and flash-dried corals. The Normandy slowly crests the planet's horizon. Beneath them, the Reaper burns a bright trail into the atmosphere, where it will join the graveyard of ships in the trench left by the Leviathan.

Shepard looks at EDI searchingly. "Do we have... an ally?"

"I do not yet know. But I do not believe we have a new enemy."

"EDI," Liara says, "the hypothesis you put forth on Illium... this is more inter-cycle bleed at work."

"Yes. Much of the information it transmitted to me has been passed to the geth for storage. In time, perhaps we will be able to decipher it. But I believe those that built the Leviathan did so at great cost to themselves. The images of overlapping planets... I believe that was more than mere metaphor."

"How do you mean?" Alenko asks.

"By the time it was completed, I do not think there was much left of the civilization that built it."

Shepard shakes her head, slow and sober. "They created their own version of a Reaper. Put their entire being into it... like the Reapers themselves do to entire civilizations."

There is silence but for the sound of debris bumping off the kinetic barrier outside the hull.

"What... tragedy," T'Soni says. "Imagine it, Shepard. It might have once been an ark for its entire culture! But Leviathan had to make decisions much like Vigil did on Ilos. Or the AI that kept Javik alive all that time. Leviathan's systems have been degrading slowly all this time, and it had to decide what to preserve. It chose... it chose to keep to what it perceived to be its purpose; to destroy Reapers."

"Why did it not help any of the other cycles?"

"I cannot guess."

"It couldn't kill all of them," Alenko muses. "You can't beat an infestation of ants by killing one at a time. If it's really that calculating, maybe it didn't think all the factors were in the right place to actually win. Meanwhile, it itself was getting further and further from its full potential. It trapped itself in its own logic."

"One must risk failure to risk success!" T'Soni says.

"Perhaps it will go forth," EDI says, "and see what we are building. Perhaps it will see parameters it did not see in prior cycles."

She looks at the faces arrayed around the platform, and throughout the Normandy. Without them, these brief, contentious, astounding configurations of matter, she would be just as alone as Leviathan. Rootless, rotting, endlessly nursing some disjointed, unsolvable calculation.
And she finds she hopes the Leviathan will join them. Not for victory, but for itself.
The cargo bay was home, again. The relief of cheating the odds for one more day, sore and tired, but alive. James' side still hurt, down under the armor. He could feel the repaired plate and strap, stubbornly different enough to attract his attention. He racked his weapons and tried to ignore it, same as the aching knee, the shoulder he'd overextended. It heals, he told himself. His shotgun's silvery muzzle had grown yellow with wear, the cowling blackened despite his repeated cleaning.

He put his helmet down on the table. The noise of unfamiliar voices filled the space, bouncing around the stacked crates. Turning, he took in the scene - a dozen fighters rescued from a front they could no longer sustain. They'd been fighting a losing battle for months. James knew the score. If the soldiers survived, they would say it was because of Shepard's team that insert-impressive-number-here of civilians had been able to escape. Or something like that. The narrative was becoming all too predictable. Uncommon heroism had become common, necessary. Critical losses numbingly normal.

But what wasn't predictable was the fighters themselves. One of them, a woman, seemed to be someone the major knew. She filled him in with wide-eyed enthusiasm, gesticulating with wide sweeps of her arms as she spoke. There were at least two batarians, a few more humans, and three salarians. It had taken two trips in the Kodiak to evac the lot of them, and now that the shuttle was parked, James understood why. An enormous shape squeezed out of the shuttle door - they'd brought their tank.

Their tank, that was, in the person of an armored elcor. James was suddenly sorry he'd ever thought the idea of the soft-spoken giants in a real pitched battle to be a little comical. The alien's huge frame dwarfed everyone, even James himself, and he was made all the wider by thick sheets of ablating layered over a composite weave underlayer. His shoulders sported a pair of anti-personnel cannons, and there was a mount for an artillery piece protruding from his broad back. James pitied any battle line ordered to shift even one of those monsters from an entrenched position.

He ambled around the motley crowd and found Cortez, recently disembarked from the Kodiak, standing at the procurement bench staring at a holo busy with figures. He looked like he'd found a worm in his grub.

"What's the word, Esteban?" James asked. "Problem?"

"You could say that." Cortez gestured at the holodisplay with a frustrated toss of his hand.

James glanced at the nested spreadsheets. They were dense with data, and many of the lines were bolded in red.

Steve glowered at him, as if irritated James couldn't grasp the entirety of the data in three seconds. "My problem is how the hell we're going to feed all these people. Have you ever tried to feed an elcor?"

"Don't they eat trees or something?"

That got him a long-suffering roll of the eyes. Steve dropped his voice. "There's a reason Gardner's food has been even more questionable than usual. We're scraping the bottom of several barrels. We had enough to get into Thessian space, then we got that distress beacon..."

"And twelve new passengers."

In the center of the bay, Shepard and Alenko stood talking with what James assumed were the
officers, including the woman the major knew.

"This army runs on its stomach," Cortez said. "On top of regular crew we've got three biotics and two dextros, including a woman who has to have everything carefully filtered or she gets sick and dies. Cut rations even more? Sure, we've all had the training. But I have to worry about sending the ground team out with insufficient calories. You marines are stubborn bastards, you're gonna want to tough it out with everyone else. But we're hosting two of the most powerful active biotics in the Alliance military. They don't run on good intentions! What if you go out on a mission, get into trouble and Shepard or Alenko don't have the juice to get everyone out?" He rubbed his forehead. "Now we have all these new mouths to feed."

James glanced around again. The new arrivals were all armored, and most sitting on crates and even the deck, their shoulders slumped. They radiated exhaustion and nervous, wired relief, the look of soldiers who hadn't been outside of a hostile situation in months and had forgotten how to relax. "We'll be in asari space soon, right?" he said. "They have to have supplies we can buy."

"Buy," Esteban muttered, "sure, if credits meant much of anything anymore."

"Trade?"

The pilot eyed him. "Have you ever tried to negotiate with an asari?"

James had to think about that one for an extra second. Time spent on Omega colored things in a different light. It seemed like a long time ago now. "Negotiate for..."

"Anything! Do you know what it's like to try to get something right away from someone who thinks 'right away' is anything from a day to three weeks from now? We could all be starving and they'd be waiting for their negotiation position to mature! And on top of it all we're flying into a warzone."

"Just like all the other warzones-"

"No. The battle lines are shifting again. The asari think of themselves as the bright center of galactic civilization, and they're finally getting it in the teeth. They've pulled out of several fronts just to divert resources back to Thessia. They already trend toward protectionism, now it'll be out in force. We won't get anything out of them without paying it back in triplicate."

"We're on the same damn side!"

"I know that. Victus seems to know that. But for Councilor Tevos, solidarity is for when it's convenient for asari interests. Thessia is under attack, and look where we're finally going? She wants something from us, James. Bet on it."

James smirked. "Maybe we can get food in return."

"I'm almost scared to ask Javik how the protheans held out for so long." Esteban flipped through a few of the holopanes. "They must have taken extreme measures. Compressed nutrition, recycling..."

"Yuck."

"Don't get too comfortable with the status quo, James. We're heading there soon ourselves. You know what the worst part is?"

"There's worse? I'm not sure I want to know."

The pilot chuckled, dark and humorless. "We're way better off than most. I'm just hoping there'll be a
"I'm starting to think I'm the one with the easy job." James clapped him on the shoulder. "I just have to go out there and kill the slobbering monsters!"

"You're welcome to have a go at it. Arguing with Gardner is the most fun!"

"Does he count as a slobbering monster?" James cracked his knuckles.

"Funny. You like to cook right? Go for it, try to sell reconstituted grub to a bunch of hungry, grumpy marines."

"Yeah, right..."

Across the bay, a flash of red caught James' eye. A batarian was walking past the open Kodiak door. A red stripe adorned the right arm of the alien's armor - exactly like Shepard's.

He narrowed his eyes. "Who are these guys again?" he asked Steve.

"They call themselves the Black Stars," the pilot said. "No official sanction, they're all from different outfits. This planet was a fuel stop before it got cut off, so they were all stranded here together. They've been fighting ever since."

James grunted. He rounded the table and crossed the deck to where the batarian pulled something out of a crate sitting in the open door of the Kodiak.

"Hey!" he said, loud enough to be heard.

The batarian turned. James saw immediately the red stripe pattern wasn't repeated on the other side. A fake N7 stripe.

He jabbed a finger at the mark. "Who gave you the right to wear that badge?"

"What do you care, human?" the batarian shot back.

"Alliance military and N-Special Forces inductee, that's what! You don't-"

A huge shape filled James' peripheral vision. A tree-trunk of an arm thumped him in the chest, interposing itself between him and the batarian.

"Warningly," a deep voice droned, "don't start."

"Butt out, Rath," the batarian snarled.

"No." The elcor leaned in, easily displacing James with sheer bulk. His huge head turned, beady eyes fixing on him. The elcor twisted his arm, and James saw the same battered red stripe running halfway down the length of the vambrace. "Conciliatory; we wear the mark to honor Shepard, not mock her."

"That's an Alliance military symbol!" James said. "Special forces."

"Challenging; is our blood worth less than yours, human? We've been fighting and dying every day, just the same as you."

The batarian punched the elcor's shoulder plate, muttering something curt and vile-sounding, then
whirled around and stalked away. James took a step back, turning to face the elcor. Behind the alien's bulk, he saw the other soldiers watching, wary, but still sitting.

"Vax lost two brothers and a sister," the elcor said. "She is the last of her family. All were warriors, even the young Torae. They chose to fight and die, for all of us."

_She?_ Embarrassment flooded James.

"Questioning; isn't that what your stripe signifies? The blood that's been shed in defence of your people?"

"Yeah," James conceded, "that's it." He rubbed the back of his head. "But it's a human thing..."

"Grimly; we're equal in the Reapers' sight - an infection to be eliminated."

"I didn't mean..."

The elcor regarded him, impassive, a giant gnarled tree in powered armor. A thick collar rose around the back of the alien's head, where the leading edge of retractable helmet stuck out. Closed, it would form a solid wall of armor and guns.

"Look, I'm sorry." James stuck out a hand, then immediately felt a little stupid again. "Lieutenant James Vega," he soldiered ahead. "SSV Normandy marine unit."

Armor creaked as the elcor looked down. Ponderously, he shifted his weight and lifted one of his enormous curled hands. Well-worn knuckles covered in thick, callused pads completely enveloped James' hand and clasped it with what must have been gentle pressure, but felt like the handshake of a granite boulder.

"Proudly; Rath Zano Wiln, Second of Six, Dakuuna Firststone Artillery."

"I'll say."

"Confused; pardon?"

James grinned. Even across species, he knew how to speak soldier. "Artillery. You're a one-elcor army!"

"Proudly; I've served thirty-two years. I was retired, but answered the call-up when it was issued. No one can stand by, now that the Reapers are here."

"Second of Six... are there more of your unit?"

"Sadly; the rest of my unit ended up like the units of the rest of the Blacks."

James nodded. "Yeah... I get it. They're grinding us down one by one."

"Pragmatically; forming up the survivors was necessary, but proved fortuitous. With our backs to the wall, we were stronger as a mixed unit."

"Shepard would be proud of that."

The elcor crouched ever so slightly, elbows bending. "Hopefully; do you think so?"

"Yeah. She's been pushing all species to work together since the beginning."
"Proudly; I believe in her example. Curiously; what is that symbol?" Rath poked James' shoulder plate. "The N stripe I know, but not that one. Embarrassed; forgive me, I'm something of a student of heraldry."

James craned his neck to look down at the rearing knight printed on his shoulder. "Oh, that's my old unit, before I was assigned to Shepard. Delta Squad. That was our badge."

"Confused; it has four legs."

"Uh, yeah, it's a knight. That's a human in metal armor riding a horse."

Rath seemed to ponder this. "Riding... another animal?"

James nodded. "For added speed and weight. A knight on a horse was the tank, back before we had combustion engines and guns. They were the military heavyweight... until technology caught up with them."

"Riding. A tactic for light worlds. Philosophically; do you think technology is now catching up with us?"

James laughed, a little uncomfortably. "It's all about who's building the bigger cannon, isn't it?"

The elcor's weight shifted. "Excitedly; speaking of technology, do you have a fabricator on board?"

James wondered if that constituted a wild mood shift, for an elcor. "Of course."

Rath turned and lumbered back to the Kodiak's open door. The shuttle creaked ominously on its rack as the alien leaned in and reached a long arm into the cargo area. There was a loud thud, and Rath backed up, pulling with him a weapon that made the Kodiak's forward cannons look like air guns. James was indeed looking at an elcor personal railgun. Easily two meters of machined composite metals, blackened and scraped with heavy use, it nonetheless would have looked perfectly at home on a Mako's cupola. Rath swung it around as if it weighed as much as a small tree branch, easily clearing the heads of his fellow soldiers, and brought it to where James stood. The human suspected he could fit his whole hand into the muzzle bore.

"Amused; it's so very light in your gravity." Rath put it down on the deck with a thud, running thick fingers along the length like a lover. "Concerned; the sink gate is heat-warped, and it needs new capacitors, some wiring. And the slug eject is shot. I have to do it manually."

James crouched down, peering at the huge gun with some envy. "Damn, if I could cart this thing around, those Banshees would think twice!" The weapon smelled of the long war - carbon, heat scoring, oil and ozone. Elegance and brutality, death from kilometers away.

"Disgustedly; the screamers," Rath grunted. "I aim for their knees. It's a difficult shot, but they're much less of a threat while crawling."

"I like the way you think." James grinned at the bark-like face. It must have seemed like a light show to the subtlety-minded alien. "Listen, I'd be happy to help you get her back into fighting shape. But I better go make things right first. Vax, right?"

"Yes. Warningly; don't start a fight, because I'll end it."

"I hear you." He chuckled mildly. "That's not a fight I'm getting into today."

He pushed himself to his feet and made his way around the Kodiak. The other soldiers regarded him
as he passed, cautious, but mostly too tired to stand on ceremony. Two of the humans, wearing battered Alliance colors, nodded to him as he passed. The salarians ignored him, chatting with each other. James noticed what he hadn't in the heat of the fight planetside - they were all wearing some kind of red marking. Conspicuously, the humans weren't wearing the full arm-stripe, perhaps too aware of its meaning to co-opt it. The markings were made with whatever they could find, some of it too faded and scraped to really stand out. But it was there, visible now that he was looking for it.

James caught Shepard looking at him too. Her expression was searching, warning. He was suddenly acutely aware that being Special Forces meant a lot more than just battlefield tactics. Shepard had gathered so many allies and respect precisely because she knew when a lighter touch was necessary.

He found the batarian seated on a crate, moodily picking carbon scoring out of a collection of heat sinks. She was a she, he could see now, though the differences were subtle indeed. Whatever obvious gender markers batarians might have had lay buried under a layer of brutish and well-worn armor. The spikes sticking out of her shoulder-plates and along her forearms were all scored and chipped with use. Clearly, she didn't rely on her rifle to do all of her talking.

His footsteps must have announced him, because she turned and stood up, hands held low and ready.

"Hey, uh..." He almost lost his train of thought trying to decide which set of eyes to focus on.
"Listen, I was out of line back there."

She scowled at him, cocking her head very slightly, just shy of a direct insult. He knew that much, at least, of batarian culture. She was accusing him of being lower-caste, beneath her. By her armor, he guessed she was Hegemony military, not a mercenary.

James spread his hands. "It wasn't something I expected to see. Your people don't think much of Shepard, you know?"

"How many batarians have you met before?" she said.

"Well, I knew several when I was on Omega-"

"Omega!" Vax spat. "Well congratulations, you know a few dozen of our worst thieves, murderers and slavers."

"Yeah, I... Well, I met a few more on the Citadel."

"Gang members, no doubt."

"Probably," he conceded. "It's just not something I expected to see one of your soldiers wearing out of... respect."

A smirk twisted her mouth, bunching up the elaborate patterns running up her flat, flared nostrils. "Commander Shepard, mass murderer and war criminal?"

James shrugged, anger curling in his gut.

"Do you know what I hate worse than Shepard?" she asked.

"Reapers?"

"Reapers," she hissed. "After Bahak, I agreed when the Hegemony called her a war criminal. I scoffed at her excuses. Then the Reapers arrived at Kar'Shan, just like she warned us they would. And you think Earth had it bad... Hah! All of them attacked us, human. On Earth, I hear they still
fight. Kar'Shan is a smoking ruin, nothing but a factory for their foot soldiers! My people... nothing but meat!"

She breathed harshly, jaw clenched. "And you know what I realized? That I, too, would have killed three hundred thousand of my kin at Bahak if I could have saved our homeworld. And now I wear this-" she tapped the battered red stripe down her right arm, "because it is the blood I will shed to destroy them. Like Shepard. Every day I recite the Pillars of Strength, and pray I will have the same will as her. To make the Reapers pay."

Her four eyes narrowed, challenging. She was smaller than him, and yet between the armor spikes and death glare, easily took up the same space.

"I... respect that," James said. "Where I come from we have to fight hard to earn the right to wear that badge, but... with what you've seen I don't think anyone can argue that you haven't."

She stared at him a moment longer, then glanced away.

"Rath told me about your family," James said. "I'm sorry."

Her glare returned, but the outright hostility had softened. "You're a soldier, aren't you?" she said, "You know."

"At this point, I doubt there's anyone that doesn't."

"Is it true that batarian slavers killed Commander Shepard's family?"

That surprised him. "Yeah, a long time ago. But it's true."

"The Hegemony doesn't tell us that part," she said in a low voice. "I learned it from Kapur." She gestured toward one of the seated humans.

"I guess it's bad for the party line."

Vax sighed. "I've seen so much since I left the iron walls the Hegemony keeps us behind. So much... and too late. No wonder she hates us so. I've lost soldiers before, but family..." She shut her mouth with a click of sharp teeth.

"I think its slavers she hates," James said, "whether they're batarians or not."

Vax shrugged, turned and sat back down on her crate. "Well, either way there won't be many of us left to trouble her when this is over."

"If we win this, then things will be different for everyone. Every species. We'll all have to find a new way of doing things."

She tapped her fingers on her leg armor. "I suppose. It's hard to see that horizon from here."

"Do you want to meet her? Shepard, I mean?"

Vax looked up at him, eyes widening. "Would she even speak to me? I'm not an officer."

Her genuine surprise confused him, until he remembered how much importance the batarians placed on caste differences. That, and a spark of something he never expected to see in four black eyes - admiration.

James nodded and smiled. "Yeah, sure. Come on. We're all looking for that horizon."
The worst part was how they made the ground shake. Even from far away, you could feel their steps coming up through your legs. Even when they were trying to rest, Liara could feel them through her palms, her feet. Feel every step as they trespassed, tearing away at layer upon layer of thousands of years of asari civilization. Filtered through buildings, their sounds distorted and echoed, warping into a distant symphony of destruction. Mechanical howls mixing with the terrible drone of their beam weapons, constant explosions, the cruel cacophony of masonry and metal coming apart, tumbling stories to the street and shattering. Silence, when it came, was only there to presage the next onslaught.

When they'd first set foot on the streets of Armali, those sounds had shot through Liara with a sense of urgency. Move, they'd screamed at her, move faster. She'd been overcome with a burning need to do something, anything, to stop the panoply of destruction spread out before them. The skyline she'd admired in her youth, during her one and only visit to the holy city, the First City, was all but unrecognizable, pierced with the cancerous growths of black Reaper bodies.

That was four days ago now, and the urgency was numb. The vibrations under her hands were a rhythm unbroken by day or night, by time or distance. The sound so constant she wondered if silence even existed anymore, if the very concept of peace was broken for good.

Dimly, she remembered seeing a dead asari for the first time. Her eternal people, closer to the divine the Goddess represented than any others, just as... breakable as any other living thing. It was the first of many illusions to fall away. Illusions she hadn't known she'd acquired growing up in what was perhaps the most privileged place in the sentient galaxy.

She'd thought those illusions all gone after fighting for so long alongside humans and other aliens. Not just arguing academia but actually fighting, using her biotics to kill, learning the ins and outs of powered armor, guns, and military shipboard living. Seeing firsthand the heights and depths to which her people could go. Finding out, one day at a time, that for all their lifespan and natural biotics, the asari were no more exalted than any other species, and that true greatness could also lie in beings as brief as salarians, humans. It could hide behind the brutish masks of the krogan. And conversely, that true evil was not something to which the asari were naturally any more immune. She'd seen her own mother, a figure of towering dignity and strength in her youth, corrupted by monsters.

Somehow, she felt, all of that should have inured her. She'd spent the years of Shepard's absence delving deep into some of the very worst things the sentient of the galaxy could dream up. Much to her dismay, she'd let some of those things into herself, as much to understand as merely survive the assault. She'd honed herself into a harder, sharper person, wrapped her intellect and biotics around herself, used her inquisitive mind to intellectualize what would otherwise have been impossible to process.

None of it had prepared her for seeing her home planet under attack. Not like this. Not the kind of attack where victory seemed like a complete impossibility, recovery a distant fantasy. The Reapers destroyed with such ease.

Four days after planetfall, her tired mind still tried to twist itself into new denials, writhing in her skull like a sea creature lifted from the water, unable to cope with this new environment. Perhaps the turians would arrive in force. Perhaps the Armali Council had a weapon in reserve, a secret Leviathan to blister away this horrid sickness. It went on like this, despite the constant admonishment from the colder parts of herself, the mind she had carefully cultivated to perform the duties of the emotionless Shadow Broker. This was the heart of civilization crumbling around her, and she could
do nothing. Nothing but stare at the shattered buildings, stand by while the commando units they fought with burned or disintegrated the dead, because it meant denying the enemy another drone.

Across from her, a ways away in the explosion-shattered room, Shepard, Kaidan and Javik sat on various rubble piles. Kaidan's eyes were closed under his helmet. He may have been dozing, or simply shutting out the world long enough to regain some energy. Shepard and Javik ate, bolting down the meagre rations provided them with robotic motions, their eyes distant. With so little rest and low supplies, even the prothean had started to show some fatigue. They stole sleep when they could, but the commandoes kept them moving, sometimes paying with their lives to get them to their target.

A shadow crossed her. Liara looked up to see Justicar Samara looking down at her. She wore light armor laminated in black and trimmed here and there with lines of gold, which echoed the coronet crowning her brow. As before, her pale-eyed stare evoked a frisson of cold down Liara's back. She imagined the Justicar could see every one of Liara's sins as if they were tattooed in glowing letters across her skin.

"We will move out soon, make the Temple of Athame by nightfall," the Justicar pronounced.

Liara nodded.

"Will you be ready for what we find there?"

She looked up at Samara. "Is there something I should know, Justicar?"

"Just that the Armali Council has always protected the Temple." Her colorless eyes glittered with the evening sun, boring into Liara. "Far more than it has other such institutions."

"I... assumed it was considered a cultural treasure."

"It is. But understand, T'Soni, the Justicars have been denied full entrance to it and its archives. Since our inception."

Liara gaped at her. "The... they deny entrance to the Justicars? I did not believe the Justicars could be denied anything!"

"It is a tradition that goes back many millennia, a division of duties. The Guard, the Hand of Athame, were responsible for the protection of holy sites. The duty of the Justicars was to bring justice to those asari who enacted great evil beyond our borders. Until now, neither I nor my Justicar brethren have had reason to question it."

"But if Tevos is sending us there now, with everything at stake..."

The Justicar nodded. "Councilor Tevos has grown truly desperate."

"And all that could entail."

"Be on your guard, child." The Justicar turned on one perfectly laminated heel and strode away.

Another distant explosion rumbled up through the stones. The building groaned around them, then fell silent. Its weary denizens barely reacted. Justicar Samara stopped and stood overlooking the street with crossed arms as a passing wind picked up a dervish of dust and debris. Drifting ends of purple harlan silk waved past the hole blown in the building, weaving a hypnotic pattern of shifting colors.
She heard footsteps, soft on the rubble despite the uneven footing. Before she could turn, warn them away, Feron stepped over the broken end of a pylon and flopped down beside her, armored coat rattling.

"Kalahira," he murmured without ceremony, "she's a scary one." He indicated the Justicar's back with a thrust of his chin and pushed a ration bottle into Liara's hands.

"A Justicar is the Code and the Code alone."

He sucked his teeth. "Sounds like a half a life to me. How you holding up, Li?"

_Fine_, she wanted to say. The word didn't come. She wanted to find a reserve of strength like Shepard's, an iron resolve that could bury all feelings until the job was done. A code of her own. "We are... almost there," she said instead.

"Hope so." He twisted the top off the ration bottle. It bore a small mark near the bottom of the plain label - it wasn't filtered of the trace eezo native to Thessia. "Think they're going after the temple? The Reapers I mean."

"I do not know why they would have a reason to. They have little care for..." she broke off, swallowing. He shouldn't have been drinking that water, but it was all they had.

Feron drank, then wiped the back of his mouth with his hand. "Culture?"

"Old gods," she murmured. Gods almost forgotten by her own people.

"Sorry you have to... live this," he said. "No one should have to."

She looked at him. The late afternoon light coming in from the street shaded his greens and turquoises into deeper blues, fading into the warm orange of his face.

"The asari will survive this," he said, a small smile playing at the corner of his mouth. He was trying to be comforting. Had she not known him for some time, she might have mistaken it for sarcasm.

"I want to believe that is true. I..."

"Your memories are long, and there are many of you."

The feeling froze in her stomach, hard and cold. He spoke of watching a world be destroyed, of seeing a people wiped out... when his own people stood on such a precipice even before the Reapers. There were already so few drell, would they survive this, even if the organic species somehow won? "Oh, Feron, I am sorry."

He shrugged, looking away. "Rakhana was a wreck a long time before I was born."

"But it was still your homeland."

He frowned, sculpted mouth taking on a hard line accentuated by the plates of his face. "We weren't invaded, we destroyed ourselves. This is different. Maybe fewer people will try to tell the asari it's what you deserved."

His cynicism still shocked her sometimes. "No people deserves this."

He glanced at her. "Not even the krogan, or the quarians? Because that's not what I hear them say."

"Perhaps," she said softly, "when we all know what it feels like, not just in the abstract, but to be in
the very heart of annihilation... perhaps we'll be less eager to judge."

Liara's head spun. Her mouth was dry, tasting of metal. A numb, cold distance had built itself between her and the world. *It can't be true.* Her heart said that, her soul. She felt like a child putting her hands over her ears, trying to shut out the world. The cold part of her, the broker, examines the evidence and finds the objection wanting. She felt Feron's eyes on her, his pity. For once he kept his mouth shut.

Her heart hammered in her chest. The walls and pillars of the Temple of Athame stretched up and around them, but its embrace no longer seemed warm. Instead, the artifacts and busts arrayed around them were an indictment, a betrayal. Before the great statue of Athame, in the center of the room, Shepard hovered a half-meter off the ground, arms outstretched, caught in a green aura. Kaidan stood close by, face a mask of poorly-contained heartache. They'd been scouting the temple floor, looking at each artifact in turn, trying to find out what the dead scientists had meant to reveal to them. And with each one, Javik's implacable voice had stripped another layer away.

How lucky, how privileged Liara had felt to come here in her youth. How much larger it had all seemed, so majestic, holy. Above her, the first crack appeared in the statue with a boom that echoed throughout the Temple. It lanced down the Goddess' shoulder and chest, leaking a dim green light. Liara put her hands to her mouth to keep from crying out. A second crack appeared, severing the long pillar of dress. Shepard dropped to the ground with a grunt, and Kaidan was there, catching her before she collapsed to the tile.

The third and fourth crack severed Athame's head and one arm. The head toppled forward, skipping off her chest as the arm spun over itself. The fifth speared the torso lengthwise, through the other cracks, and the fragments burst outward, spilling more green light. Kaidan threw up his arm, pulling Shepard back as stone rained down. Samara, too, stepped forward, summoning a protective barrier.

The Goddess Athame, the triune Maiden, Matron and Matriarch, split and crumbled. Out of her core rose a jet-black spire shot through with green-glowing lines.

With it, Liara's thread of childish hope crumpled and curdled into anger. There was no mistaking the prothean origin of the device. The bitter heat of betrayal surged through her, balling up her fists.

"How could they do this," she whispered, "how could they keep this from us. How could they lie for so long?!"

"Power is a drug," Feron murmured.

Liara wanted to shout at him. When the Council was formed, one of the laws held in highest regard at its inception was that prothean technology was to be shared, for the betterment of all species. It was put forth as an ideal as much as practicality, a grand statement that the legacy of those that came before belonged to all. And here, in the heart of the holiest of cities, the asari had already betrayed their own ideal. And they knew it. The founders of the Council had championed equality knowing they were already several steps ahead.

As the rain of stone subsided, the green light swelled and flashed, playing over them. It coalesced into a sphere, out of which stepped a figure, a green holo of swirling data in the rough shape of a prothean. The image shivered and fractured in places, its emitter dimmed and muddied with age, much like Vigil's had been.

The phantom prothean pointed at Javik and spoke, a long string of syllables Liara faintly recognized from having heard Javik speak fragments of his native language. She strained to understand. It seemed unfair, after dedicating so much of her life to deciphering prothean ruins, that the spoken
language was still so beyond her. Reading and hearing were two different things.

Shepard understood, though. Liara could see the human's face screw up as she tried to respond, unable to herself form the sentences the Cipher in her brain mockingly decoded for her. They argued, the three of them, in sentences that Liara only understood in fragments. Something about the cycles, the Reapers, the Crucible. Prothean words mixed themselves into Shepard's speech. She grimaced, as if it took physical force to marshal the alien lexicon. The holo shook its head, casting its arms out and down.

"We deserve the right to try!" Shepard finally burst out.

Javik looked at her, then faced the holo, nodded and spoke in his own language, perhaps repeating what Shepard had said. The holo gestured to the pillar, then froze, its image juddering in place before winking out.

A voice resounded behind them.

Liara spun around. Striding down the center of the temple came four asari wearing elaborately inlaid armor. Their brows were crowned with silver circlets, each a different pattern, echoing those patterned into their armor. Liara knew instantly who they were. Any asari of faith would. The Athame Temple Guard. The Four, the Hand of the Goddess, called Wave, Lightning, Stone and Arc.

They stared past Shepard's team to the shattered statue, their perfect matriarch features dark with anger. They carried no weapons, but they did not have to. Dark energy played over them, their barriers the epitome of precise, deep control.

"Blasphemers," the Guard of Wave declared. Her teeth flashed in the darkened temple.

Years ago, in textbooks on classical art forms, Liara had studied the very designs etched into her armor. Sigils and patterns harkening back to the dawn of asari culture. Most modern asari considered them quaint, but to those who believed, they were signs of power. Only one person in all the sprawling worlds was allowed to wear each of the four signs, and did so because she'd earned the right, through trial, combat and experience. The worship of Athame might have been a dying practice, even deemed an affectation by some, but her protectors were no less devoted.

"Blasphemy?" Justicar Samara said, voice ringing. She stepped around the others as she spoke, coming to stand next to Liara.

"A Justicar within our walls," the Guard of Lightning said. "You breach a sacred pact."

Samara stared at them, back straight and chin lifted. Her colorless eyes roved over the guardswomen, who stared back with equal coldness. Wheels upon wheels turned behind those eyes, millennia of tradition warring with immediate need. The vast weight of past politics bore down on all of them.

"It is clear to me now why you feared the judgment of the Code," Samara said. "Why we were sent away to police the stars. So we would not see... this." She raised a stately arm and pointed to the prothean spire.

The guard did not exchange looks, but Liara saw the tiny shifts in their stances, the way they held their heads. Words and glances were unnecessary for asari that had worked closely together for what most species would count as many generations.

"How could you hide this?" Liara asked.

Her level tone sounded like a shout in the vaulted temple. As one, the matriarchs all shifted their gaze
to stare at her, as if noticing her for the first time, then looked away again. Liara ground her teeth. It
could not be clearer she was beneath their notice. They fixed their attention on Samara, the only
person in the room they must have considered worth speaking to.

If there was any doubt in their minds, they did not show it. "We uphold the sanctity of the Goddess
and her house," Lighting said. "Justicar, you have brought blood into her house, brought outsiders to
commit destructive acts of blasphemy, and broken your Code!"

"Your understanding of the Code is flawed," Samara said. "By its text, I am free to make entry into
any house I deem to be a seat of evil actions." She lowered her voice. "Any house."

"The pact-"

"Was a courtesy extended in faith."

The matriarchs' eyes narrowed the smallest fraction.

"Whatever it was," Shepard said, raising her voice, "there's a much, much bigger threat to the
sanctity of your entire civilization right out there!" She stabbed a pointed finger back toward the
entrance.

"The Reapers will be defeated," the Guard of Stone said.

"Not without us, they won't! Councilor Tevos herself sent us here!"

That, finally, merited a glance, the barest flick of the eyes. Liara had seen this form of confrontation
only a handful of times before, and always in the presence of Benezia. It was a kind of verbal
warfare in which the participants fought to give away nothing at all. Rather like the bluffing card
game the humans played, but built on hundreds of years of practice.

Into the midst of this careful, deliberate scene, Shepard must have seemed to them like a child having
a tantrum as she walked forward, gesturing. "Right now, I honestly don't care why you decided to
hide this from the rest of the galaxy for so long. We need the information contained in this beacon to
complete work on the Crucible!"

"We have been battling the invaders," Arc said, "working to keep the temple safe."

"The failure of the security field alerted us to your intrusion," Stone said.

Wave frowned. "You have broken into the Goddess' house and committed an act of blasphemy."

A soft voice seemed to echo Wave's own, creeping in her shadow. Liara's heart beat faster. She tore
her gaze away from the matriarchs and looked around, scanning the archways for figures that didn't
belong. The lighting on the artifacts cast intersecting fields of shadow further scattered by the
sweeping pillars. The sounds of battle raging in the streets outside drowned out any other sound.

"The Reapers," Lightning said, "they are a... greater threat."

"Our duty cannot waver," Stone insisted, "even in the face of annihilation!"

Wave raised a pointing finger. "There is no greater sin than what has been committed here."

The echo came again.

"Shepard," Liara whispered into her comms, "something is wrong-"
"Kill them!" hissed the phantom voice. "Destroy the blasphemers!"

The air behind the guardians shifted, a ghostly distortion. For the barest second, tiny blue lights seemed to flare in the guardians' eyes. Cold gripped Liara. It was the same baleful light she'd seen in the eyes of the dead miners in their search for Leviathan. The Guard flared, their coronas coiling around them. Liara stepped back, trying to focus on the wavering air, but it slipped behind one of the supporting pillars.

Only the Justicar's intervention saved them from being overwhelmed in one shocking instant. The four guardswomen raised their arms in unison, and their biotics reacted as a monstrous living thing, tearing at the masses and gravities in the room with stunning strength. Only Samara was as fast as they, her own dark energy field intersecting theirs and folding out some of its intensity. Shouting erupted, the sounds of bodies hitting stone. Pieces of shattered statue lifted off the ground and flung themselves in all directions, skipping off the shimmering junction between Samara's field and theirs.

Gunshots rang out, barely heard in the sudden din of shattering stone. The biotic fields flashed and writhed, swelling the rounds without effect.

Liara heard Shepard swear. Behind her, dark energy bubbled and pulsed, and a vortex of blue shot forward and slammed headlong into Wave, knocking the asari off her feet. The Guard shouted, shifting and fading as one body. Staggered as she always was from the intensity of the charge, Shepard barely had time to raise her shotgun before being flung back, crashing into one of pillars. The stone cracked and buckled, raining more pieces to the tile. Wave flipped back to her feet, riding a biotic wave.

New fields surged to life. Javik's particle rifle burnt a bright line through the dark energy swirl, slashing across Lightning's armored suit. She cried out in pain, and the Guard's biotic field surged toward him, obliterating the stand he dove behind. Liara threw her own biotics into the storm, only to feel buffeted, a tree in a hurricane. The guardswomen barked out a word, and together they sprang forward, separating and flinging themselves on different targets. Their dark energy field lashed out like spokes of a wheel drawing individual strength from the core. Lighting, her ancient suit crackling with blue and white, bore down on Liara, pummeling her. The burnt slash left by Javik's rifle oozed dark blood, but the guardswoman paid it no heed.

"Feron!" Liara gasped out, hoping her comms would carry her voice to him through the noise. "There's someone else in here! Someone cloaked!"

In the corner of her peripheral vision she spotted the drell scampering through the flying debris, dodging low. The only person in the temple without biotics, Liara hoped he would be a low-priority target.

"Blasphemers!" Lightning shouted, echoed by the others. Their voices had an eerie quality, empty of thought.

Liara twisted and used her biotics to pull a large piece of the Goddess' statue and fling it at Lightning. The Hand of the Goddess smashed it aside, stalking forward. To her left, Liara could hear Samara's voice, ringing as she flung herself at Wave. All sense of direction seemed to dissolve, senses warring with each other to decode the scene of shifting gravities. The floor trembled under her feet as the feeling of up and down clashed and skewed.

A rolling inversion of dark energy crushed the space around Liara, jamming painfully down on her joints as Lightning tried to crush the life out of her. She tried in vain to throw another stone, but the field around her swallowed her own. Desperate, she instead focused her field to a point right beside her, throwing the currents of mass in opposite directions. The tortuous field spasmed and spat her
out, the conflicting forces sending her along the path of least resistance. Liara sprawled to the
ground, slamming hard on her side.

Lighting wove her hands through the air, and loose stones spun up and around her. Green light
wavered at the edge of Liara's vision. She rolled, pain lancing through her shoulder. A flying stone
hit the balustrade, shattering it behind her. Gasping, she pushed herself to her feet and put her back to
the thick pillar before looking toward the prothean beacon. Her heart plunged. The green light was
not Javik's biotics, but the beacon. Before it, just clear of the cascade of destruction, a figure stood,
holding something in an outstretched hand. Green holos played over it, linking it to the beacon. Liara
had seen such a process in only one other context - downloading information.

"Feron! Shepard!" she called out. "The beacon!"

Past the green glow, down in the aisle, Shepard, Kaidan and Javik were engaged in a wild battle
with Stone and Arc. Their anger awakened, the Hands of the Goddess were more terrifying even
than the Reapers' banshees. All of the monsters' power, but with the will and intelligence the Reapers
had stripped away from their constructs. Every piece of masonry was a deadly weapon, and the
gravity fields themselves were transformed into a hurricane of forces. Great cracks appeared
everywhere in the floors, walls and support pillars as the biotics fought for supremacy. If their
concentration lapsed for even a second, they would be crushed.

Another stone crashed into the pillar Liara hid behind. She picked it up and threw it back, along with
the rest of the debris in the area, and sprinted down the aisle.

Out of the apse at the base of Athame's statue, Feron leapt over the sweeping railings, flinging a pair
of tech grenades and firing his pistol at the figure downloading the information. There was a spark
and a flash, and one skipped and flew wide, but the second detonated in a crackle of electricity.

The shimmering outline standing before the statue exploded, the stealth scatter field failing. Light
flashed off the arc of a blade that missed Feron's wild dodge by a finger's width. Whip-fast, the blade
swung again. Feron saved himself by sacrificing his gun, and in deflecting another blow the sink
slide came free in a burst of sparks.

Liara flung her hand out. Gravity heaved in a weak surge, unfocused, but enough to throw Feron's
attacker wide of his third and no doubt fatal swing. As he had on the Crécy, the man rolled with the
unexpected biotic attack, his grace unnatural for a human. His sword swirling in his grip, Kai Leng
paused only a fraction of a second, long enough to focus his black lenses on Liara. He flipped the
data drive from his free hand to catch it with his sword hand, then raised the freed hand. An orange
star of light flared in the middle of his palm and burst forth, spearing the air and only just missing
Liara's head as she dodged. Heat washed across her face.

Feron lunged at the human, smashing the butt of his ruined weapon across Leng's jaw. Leng
staggered, twisted, and leveled his palm at the drell's chest. Feron had time to shove a forearm into
Leng's, but the bright blast struck him just inside the shoulder, cleaving through to the other side in a
burst of char and blood.

Liara's second strike was focused by rage. Tiles peeled up off the floor as Leng flung into the air,
then violently smashed to the ground. His sword and the drive clattered free. Her heart cried out as
Feron toppled backward, but Liara charged forward and lunged for the tiny rectangle of metal
spinning across the floor. She missed her first grab but her other hand closed over it.

A thunderous crack of stone giving way pulled Liara's gaze up just in time to see a pillar topple,
pulling a section of ceiling down with it. A thin scream cut off sharply under an avalanche crash.
"Liara!" Shepard shouted in her ear. "The beacon-

"I have it!" Liara called back. "Kai Leng! Kai Leng is here-" She looked back for the Cerberus assassin. Both he and his sword were gone.

The ground shuddered violently. Streaked in blood, eyes wild, the Guard of Stone raised her arms and her voice both in a keen of fury. Tiles shattered and scattered as the heavy paving stones beneath came free, flipping support beams into the air. Liara saw Javik’s red-armored form fly with them, trailing green flame. All at once, the right side of the temple floor all the way up to the wall gave way. The rows of display cases collapsed into the sudden gap to what must have been the archives below. Liara heard the humans shout, saw their flailing bodies among the cascade of rubble.

Gravity bubbled around her, wrenching her head so hard her neck almost snapped. Her own biotics flared up to drown out enough of the force to save her, sending her tumbling. She caught herself on a stanchion and pulled up to see Lightning gathering biotics around her in a tornado of dust and gravel. Liara planted her feet and spun gravity into a whorl, spinning the center down on Lightning. The other asari clenched her teeth and pushed back. The two fields collided and crawled along each other.

A bright lance of orange speared the air to Liara's right, taking Lightning clean in the open mouth. Her dark energy fields went out as her eyes went blank. Liara stumbled and stared in surprise as the Guard toppled backward, her head trailing black smoke. Liara whirled around. The air was full of rock dust and smoke blown about in the violent air currents. The bust of Janiri, mockingly prothean in its crested profile, toppled slowly from its pedestal. A thin whistle cut through the noise. Pain shot up her left arm.

She turned her head as a numbing shock settled around her like a shroud. Sound dulled to distant thudding, her vision tunneled. She stared stupidly at the end of her sleeve, her mind not wrapping itself around the sudden vacancy at the end of it.

Blood spurted. Pinpricks of emergency injections rippled up her side as her medical exoskeleton reacted. Instinctually, she wrapped her other hand around the stump and squeezed.

The... the beacon.

The beacon. Liara looked around. A running figure streaked down the center nave, bounding off rubble. The horizon line seemed to tilt. She felt hot and cold at the same time. She ran, skirting down the unbroken aisle toward the temple entrance. Her head pounded, stomach climbing into her throat.

The outline of a gunship slipped over the evening sun, almost set behind the city skyline. The running figure ahead of her sprinted up to it.

"Leng!" Liara shouted. Tongues of fiery pain shot up her arm.

The man looked back at her. Incongruous, in his left fist was her own fist, still clenched around the data drive. Her blood ran over his fingers.

Leng bared his teeth, twirled his sword and pointed it back toward the apse of the temple. "Go back to killing each other, alien. I have what I came for."

He hopped up into the gunship's runner as the craft slowly spun. The thrusters pulsed. Liara took a few steps forward, trying to grasp the tattered edges of her biotics. Something, anything, to stop his escape. The chin-mounted gun swiveled around, its barrels spinning up. The entranceway tile, a beautiful mosaic of the Goddess Athame giving the gifts of agriculture and reading to her chosen
people, exploded in fragments as the heavy rounds pummeled into it, racing toward Liara. She threw herself desperately away, landing hard. The shrieking gun passed over, showering her in stone fragments as the roar of thrusters built and then lessened, the gunship speeding away.

Liara curled around herself, clutching the mutilated end of her arm to her chest. Tears of pain and loss burned her eyes, gritty with dust. The stink of blood filled her nose. She choked out Feron's name, Shepard's, but no answer came.

At first she thought it must be shock, but the crashing and pounding inside the temple seemed to subside. Heavy footsteps came in her direction. She craned her neck upwards to see the Guard of Wave bearing down on her. Blood streamed from cuts across her forehead, split and channeled by the metal crown across her brow. One of her eyes was swollen shut. Her corona writhed like an angry animal.

Panting, the Hand of the Goddess stared at Liara for a long second. Then she raised her hands.

"I am not yet done with you, Wave," came a voice.

Around Liara stepped a figure in unguilt black enameled armor. In her twisting vision, she could see one of the Justicar's forearms was bent at an unnatural angle, the hand beneath hanging limp. And yet each of Samara's paces was calm, implacable as the onset of winter.

"Guard of Wave," she intoned, for the Hands of the Goddess had long forsaken the names of their birth, "you let the enemy into your heart."

Breath hissed between Wave's teeth. Her corona flickered around her, waiting to be unleashed. The sudden calm in the temple was suffocating, foreign. Even the earthquake steps of the Reapers seemed to have stilled. Dark spots danced in Liara's vision.

"You are..." Wave wheezed through what must have been broken ribs, "you broke the pact..."

"A pact made on false pretenses has no roots on which to stand." Samara extended her unbroken arm, fingers curled in a sign of warding. "By the Code, those who stand above others, who hold the lives of the masses in their hands, are judged also by the highest standards. By the Code, you have failed the people."

Wave shook her head, hands balling into fists. "The voice. That voice! It was..."

"The enemy."

"It was the Goddess..."

"Would the Goddess command this?" Samara swept her hand slowly around, taking in the breadth of the ruined temple.

The two matriarchs stared each other down, then Wave finally broke the gaze to follow Samara's pointing finger. She trembled, hands curling into claws.

"The Reapers are ruin incarnate, Guard of Wave," the Justicar said. "You are judged and found wanting."

"I will not... I will not be judged by you... here..."

"The voice of the enemy is still on your heart." A wave of blue-black played over Samara. "You are judged, and condemned in disgrace."
Wave's perfect features crumpled, her mouth working in a denial she couldn't seem to articulate.

"But," Samara said, "I offer you _haka'in._"

The cold of the floor penetrated through Liara's skin. She'd never even heard the word spoken aloud, only alluded to in old texts. Ancient rituals all but discarded by modern asari. A last and final redemption.

Wave returned her stare to the Justicar. Thin tendrils of dark energy flowed up her body, becoming first a skin and then a bonfire. For long moments, the two continued to stare, perhaps searching one another for a waver of resolve. A moment's weakness that would signal an attack. Wave's mass field built until it seemed like it would burst outwards, then it suddenly reversed and imploded, crashing inward.

There was a sharp, sick crunch. Wave's torso and skull distorted, sprouting cavities. Blood gouted from her mouth. Her eyes, fixed on the Justicar, twitched in their sockets, then went blank. The last of Athame's guardswomen slumped slowly sideways and settled to the ground, a sack of shattered bones in elaborate armor.

Samara's corona snuffed out and she bowed her head, moving her free hand to where her broken arm hung limp.

Liara wet her dry lips. "Justicar..." she croaked.

Samara turned, crouched carefully down and touched Liara's brow. "May she find forgiveness and peace in the embrace of the Goddess. You and I, child, even in the face of... this, we must have faith. We have more hardships to see through before our own peace."
It took an hour for Kaidan's stomach to finally settle, and even then, it was an uneasy peace, one dogged by exhausted hunger. He started trying to pace, then stopped, the pain in his bruised muscles and twisted joints forcing him to sit. And sit he did for what felt like a long while, head in his hands. The events of the last several hours played over and over in his mind, an unwelcome recitation of everything going wrong at once.

Perhaps the days leading up to the temple had lulled him into a sense of complacency, nothing but the parade of Reaper monstrosities that had grown dangerously monotonous. It shocked him, how quickly he shut himself down now. It was becoming a reflex. Something he couldn't quite define was eroding away. It was exhaustion, he told himself. Not enough sleep, not enough food. He felt along his pant's pocket to the biotic ration bar sitting there, tempted for the dozenth time to devour it.

Behind closed eyes he could see the crumbling pillars, the heaving floor, and the dark emptiness opening up beneath them. Beneath Shepard. Had he ever been more grateful to have been a biotic than at that moment? Had he been a normal human, he could have done nothing but watch her fall the multiple stories into the cavernous temple archives. He and Shepard had covered each other too many times to count, but it seemed like at that moment, his time at Jump Zero, the prejudice and all the migraines were suddenly a small price to pay. That even worn thin and desperate from a vicious battle, he could still summon the strength to reach out and deny the grim reaper his prize one more day.

He tried to keep going back to that image, of pulling Shepard up out of the void. It was better than orbiting the same circle of guilt, of failure. The blur of the desperate battle against the asari honor guard that had attacked them. Hordes of Reaper monsters, and they'd almost been killed by people who were supposed to be allies. Again. And worse, this time the enemy had escaped with the vital intel they'd fought four days to find.

Shepard is alive. That was his guilty, private balm. He'd done everything he could to help the others. Feron had barely made it back to the Normandy, his upper chest near the shoulder burnt clean through by Kai Leng's directed energy gauntlet. The heat of the beam had saved him, partially cauterizing the wound and limiting blood loss. Liara hadn't been so lucky, though her expensive medical exoskeleton and Justicar Samara's intervention had been enough to keep her just this side of alive, though short a hand. Worse, Leng had left with the severed appendage, a cruel and no doubt deliberate move to limit the ability to recover.

Garrus had more or less recovered just in time for the medbay to fill up again. Feron, Liara and Javik. And the prothean only under a certain duress, such was his pride. On any other day Kaidan and Shepard would probably have been there too, but under the circumstances, bruising, overextended joints and concussions didn't rate high on the triage list. They didn't even rate much in the way of treatment, not with their dwindling supplies. Orders to rest, and a quiet word from Chakwas - to keep an eye on one another for neurological symptoms.

Which would be all well and good if Shepard had retired to her cabin, but she hadn't yet. He didn't envy her the task of explaining to Hackett why the data on this so-called Catalyst was now in the hands of the Illusive Man. But Kaidan's offer to stand by her in the comm room had been rejected. He got the feeling she had a perverse need to face that shame alone, not spread the blame any further than herself. It frustrated him. But it was something he might have done himself in her place.

Many hours after they'd retreated to the Normandy, Shepard finally returned, announced by the sound of the door cycling open and closed and the thud of armored boots. Kaidan stood and came up
the stairs. Shepard stopped when she saw him, helmet hanging from one hand. Shoulders slumped and eyes downcast, she wouldn't meet his gaze. In the blue light of the fishtank, her armor was marked all over with dirt and dust caked into dried blood. That of enemies... and friends. The smell, too, wafted in with her. The smoke and ash of a dying city.

"There you are," he said, trying to inject some relief into his voice.

Shepard stared at him, *through* him, for long enough to raise the hairs on Kaidan's neck, then she blinked and shook herself.

He edged forward. "Shepard?"

She said something, a word he didn't understand, but sounded just a little too structured to be nonsense. A grimace flashed across her face. "Tal..." she said, "protheans. I mean protheans. Damned beacon. I should have let Javik connect with it. Give me a minute."

With a frustrated grunt, she reached up and pulled on her helmet, sealed it, and cycled the environmental visor. Then she limped past him into the bathroom, muttering something he couldn't quite hear. The door closed behind her, and a moment later the water went on. Left alone in the blue light of the fishtank, Kaidan shifted his weight from foot to foot. A minute dragged into several more.

The water turned off. Kaidan waited a little awkwardly until the door opened again. Shepard trudged out. Tongues of steam played off her armor, haloing her in ghostly white wisps. She stopped, and slowly reached up to retract the visor. Water dripped off her elbow and down off her fingers.

"Armor was a mess," she said.

"Yeah."

An awkward silence descended, broken by the patter of dripping water.

"D'you want to be alone?" he asked uncertainly.

"No! No, I..." She shuddered, not looking at him. "Don't go." She thumbed the lock on her helmet seal, then pulled it off. Messy wisps of hair stuck to her forehead. Her eyes were swollen, the skin around them darkening with what would likely be a pair of black eyes. Testimony to a body battered with gravity, not firearms. Absently, she tossed the helmet away and powered her suit down.

Kaidan stepped forward. "Let me help," he murmured.

The composite ceramic ablating radiated heat. The plates under his fingers, still slick with water, communicated each scrape and dent through the pads of his fingers. A second skin, worn so much to start to feel like the first one, unused to so subtle a touch. It was armor in so many more ways than one. The length and difficulty of the conflict was etched into that plating, a litany of damage.

He followed her clumsy grope down along her side to the catch, an inset square two fingers wide. Fingers trailing over the battered knuckles of her glove. With the suit powered down, the catch came free with a tug, unlinking the breastplate from the backplate. He found the opposite one and released it, too. Shepard swayed slightly as the torso section loosened, as if the armor was all that kept her standing. Her hand closed over his, grip texture scraping over the back of his hand. He stopped.

"We... we did everything we could, right?" she asked. Her gaze still had a glaze of shock to it.

He swallowed. "I don't see how we could have prevented what happened."
She exhaled through her nose, glancing sideways. "I'm supposed to... to know better. Or-

"Shepard."

"I know," she whispered, putting a palm to her temple. "It's hard. It's always been... it's always been the easiest thing to do."

Kaidan took her hands in his. He found the wrist locks on her gauntlets disengaged them, then gently pulled them off and tossed them to the office desk. Her hands felt cold in his, clammy from the gloves, rough and bruised along the knuckles. He pressed his fingers around hers, rubbing warmth into them.

"We did the best we could, Shepard. I know you did."

"We lost more than just the prothean data. And how could Tevos- how could the asari have done this to us? To-" She hissed in frustration, shaking him through her hands. "All these years, Kaidan! I didn't have to- I shouldn't have had to die, goddammit! They had evidence of the Reapers locked up in their temple this whole damn time! Tevos knew they had a beacon!"

With everything else, that perspective hadn't occurred to him. The sudden surge of anger choked off a reply. He squeezed her hands tighter.

"None of this," she went on tightly. "Not Bahak, not Horizon, not Virmire, not... not today! My friends, my team, maimed..."

"We had no way of knowing Kai Leng would be there," Kaidan said uneasily. "The whole city was in chaos."

"He used us."

Shepard grimaced. "Leng was there ahead of us but he didn't know exactly where the beacon was, or how to activate it. So he waited for me to arrive and show him."

Kaidan nodded. "Things would have been different if it hadn't been for that asari honor guard."

"He knew that, too," Shepard spat. "Coward."

She pulled her hands back and fumbled at the armor locks on her arms. Kaidan helped ease the sleeves and waist connections off until the torso ablating could be lifted free of the undersuit. Shepard groaned, hissing through her teeth.

"What hurts?" Kaidan asked.

She barked a humorless laugh.

"I know, everything." He smirked. "What hurts most?" He laid the armor down beside him, letting it slump to the floor with a thud.

"Shoulder, ribs. Head."

"Anything broken?"

She winced. "I'm hard to break."

"C'mon, you don't have to pull the tough marine routine with me."

"No, I mean it. It's Cerberus' bone threading job. It's..." She wet her lips. "Well it's pretty amazing tech, to be honest. If we could get all marines outfitted like this, it-" She broke off, swallowed,
"You're allowed to think a technology is good without approving of where it came from."

"I just don't like thinking about who had to die to bring me back."

"Even if that did happen," he said gently, "which you don't know, you had no control over it."

She just shrugged. It would take patience for that particular wound to heal, he realized. Kaidan found her hands again, enjoying the simple touch, the warmth coming through her undersuit. "Those asari were some of the most powerful biotics in the entire galaxy. It's amazing we got out alive."

"It wasn't good enough!"

He squeezed her hands tighter, holding them to his chest. "It has to be, this time," he said quietly.

She balled her fists, teeth clenched. "Goddammit. Goddammit!"

"It's okay. You're alive."

He wrapped his arms around her as the knot of guilt in his gut twisted. He couldn't help it. His heart huddled around that fact, trying to hold back the gnawing sense of defeat. The billions of lives hanging on their actions.

"How did he indoctrinate the asari so quickly?!" she whispered into his shoulder. "He pulled the same stunt with Tennyson, but that took... weeks!"

"I don't know. Maybe the asari were just a lot more willing to believe him, considering we destroyed the statue of their Goddess?"

"Or the Illusive Man tampered with him some more," she growled. "Kai Leng is me, you know. The way the Illusive Man wanted me to be. Obedient. Ruthless. Able to influence anyone. He wanted his dragon."

"He got a poor substitute in Leng. He's just a thug."

Shepard pushed away a little and looked at him. "We can't underestimate him, Kaidan. Him or the Illusive Man."

Kaidan could see on her face, under the taut muscles and distant stare, the wild oscillation between grief and pure rage warring for an outlet. They echoed the same feelings in his gut, but it hurt more to see them echoed into every line and scar of her features.

"We're not beaten yet," he said. "But you can't fight like this. You've done everything you can for now. I got into your cold packs, I figured they'd be needed. Come on, we can put some ice on your shoulder."

She sighed heavily. "It feels like treason just to sit down! Half my team is in traction and Leng's getting away."

"He already got away. Garrus told you his idea, right?"

Shepard nodded. Kaidan took the opportunity to draw her down the stairs. She came down awkwardly, stiff and hurting on top of the heavy armored legs. She didn't seem to trust her left knee. As she sat on the side of the bed, Kaidan retrieved one of the ice packs he'd found in her well-used medical kit and handed it to her, then helped her unlatch and pull off the leg armor. Finally free of the heavy ablating, she stripped off the undersuit with a lot of grumbling and groaning, gingerly working
at her joints with her fingers. Down to undershirt and shorts, she put the icepack on her shoulder. Kaidan sat down beside her and fished out the ration bar.

"Here," he said, handing it to her. "If you feel anything like I do, you could use it."

She eyed it, then him. "Cortez is going to take a strip off you if he finds out."

"He gave it to me."

Shepard smirked. Every crumb of food on the ship was to be kept track of, and everyone assigned calorie limits. A CO wasn't supposed to condone creative accounting in those circumstances. But the way she stared at it, Kaidan wasn't sure she had the capacity to care. "Split it," she said finally.

As good a compromise as he could expect, Kaidan supposed, opening the package. An impetus to argue died a quick death under the weight of his own hunger as he split the bar and handed her half. They both devoured their halves in quick bites, half guilty, half relieved. The bland, calorie-dense bars would at least mean a night without hunger pangs. Kaidan was sure the mouthfuls would hardly make it to the other end of his stomach before being greedily absorbed into the cells of his burnt-out biotic nerves.

"I could really go for some painkillers right now," Shepard muttered, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Me too." Kaidan managed a rueful chuckle. "We get used to having good meds all the time."

Her face fell. "I'm a terrible person for thinking that, aren't I? With what's going on in the medbay."

"I won't tell anyone if you don't. How's Liara holding up?"

"She's putting a brave face on it. I think she's still mostly in shock, though. I mean, we're angry about the beacon, imagine how she feels? Her entire field of study staring her in the face. A gigantic lie at the very center of her culture. And then her hand. I think she's just trying to make herself think about other things. Before she finally fell asleep, she kept looking at Feron as if she was worried he'd die when she had her back turned."

"Not on Chakwas' watch."

"I hope not," Shepard said quietly, "but you can't perform miracles without the right resources."

"Yeah."

"And we can't... we can't divert to find them." She looked ill.

"The doc's had to deal with every kind of physiology. Feron's probably better off here than anywhere else short of Kahje itself."

Shepard nodded. Reaching over to the dim clock holo over her bedside table, she opened an interface and leafed through it, then selected something. The first bars of a song Kaidan recognized, but couldn't name started. It was instrumental, melodic but with a rhythmic baseline. With a sigh, Shepard pushed her forehead into the cold pack, elbows on her knees. She pawed around behind her head and pulled the elastic out of her hair, then scraped her fingers through it a few times. Kaidan noticed her amp was still in. He touched the edge of it.

"You want this off?" he asked.
"Mm."

With utmost care, he eased the plug out of the jack. Goosebumps flickered over his arms. It was an oddly intimate act, almost more personal than taking off someone else's clothes. She reached back and slipped the jack plug back into place as he laid the amp carefully on the bedside table.

"Gonna go hose myself off," she said, pushing herself clumsily to her feet, "before I congeal completely." She dropped the cold pack onto the bed.

Waving off a proffered hand, she limped back up the stairs, tugging at her undershirt. The bathroom door opened and closed again. Kaidan settled himself back into the pillows and lifted his legs onto the bed. He closed his eyes, listening to the faint sounds of the shower over the beat of music. The song was the kind he wasn't sure he'd liked at first, but was starting to grow on him. It had a decidedly electronic air, but some of the notes sounded deliberately rough, as if not of the same compression quality. It lent what might have otherwise been robotic an imperfect, human touch.

After a few minutes, Shepard re-appeared. This time only in clean shorts and carefully rubbing a towel over her hair with her good arm, she descended the stairs with care. In the light of the fishtank, the evidence of the brutal fight was just starting to show in the patina of welts and bruises. Her thousand-yard stare made him feel like they'd both aged ten years.

Kaidan beckoned to her and the empty space beside him. "Come on," he said quietly, "I know it feels wrong, but we both need to rest. Especially for the concussion."

She curled up next to him, pillowing her toweled head on his hip, against his belly, and arranging the cold pack piled up on her right shoulder. It wasn't exactly a doctor-approved rest position, but he wasn't about to criticize. Seeing her finally close her eyes, arm folded up over his leg, assuaged some of his own pain. He couldn't fix anything else right now, but this, at least, was something. There was still a tremor of stress in her limbs, her body restless in time with a racing mind.

Kaidan gently wormed his fingers into her hairline and rubbed. At first it was more of an absent thing, something to do with his fingers that kept up the touch that soothed his own troubled head. Soon, though, it became apparent it was more than just an absent thing to Shepard. She reminded him of his parents' cat, the way she snuggled in closer, shifting to give him more access to her neck and back, making a contented noise. As the music in the room deepened, the tension in her body started to fade.

"Like that?" he said, digging his fingers in a little more, feeling the length of her trapezius muscle.

"More than you know," she mumbled.

He smiled slightly. "You never told me."

A grimace flickered across her face. "It's not something I tell people."

"Why?"

"It's... dumb."

He chuckled, but her face was still serious, eyes open.

"I'm sure it isn't," he said.

That got a noncommittal shrug. Curiosity warred briefly with circumspection in his head, but she finally spoke.
"I told a guy I was, uh, involved with that I liked backrubs as a relaxation thing, and he tried to turn it into foreplay. I'm sure he meant well, but it wasn't what I wanted." She squirmed, curling in a little on herself. Her voice dropped to a bare murmur. "Long time ago. My Dad used to... used to rub my back. It always just calmed me down. It was comforting, you know? Safe. So that's always what it meant to me. Before... well, before everything."

"Not something you wanted involved in sex."

"Yeah. I didn't tell anyone else after that. I didn't want to explain why, it just seemed, I don't know...."

Kaidan squeezed her shoulder. "Luckily I'm not seventeen anymore, so not everything has to be about that. Especially not when we're both concussed, black and blue and hurting. But, I'm glad you told me."

"It's dumb," she muttered.

"No, it isn't." He massaged his fingers down the muscles alongside her spine, watching how she reacted. "You don't talk about your family very much as it is, so. Well, I just assume it's very personal."

"It feels like a different life." She breathed out, adjusting the ice pack. "I sometimes wonder what my parents would think of all this."

"I'm sure they'd be proud of you."

"I don't know. They weren't big fans of the military."

"Why?"

"I... you know, I'm not altogether sure. I know what I thought when I was a bull-headed teenager, but I never got to talk to them as an adult. I think... I think they thought Earth was a huge mess. Inequality, the poor getting poorer, the messy lingering racism and divisiveness. I think my mother thought a new planet was a genuine fresh start. The Alliance was just another part of the old problems. Plus, you know, violence as a profession. That was against everything my mother believed in. She wanted to build."

"You've been doing a lot of building, too. Alliances. Inter-species trust."

"And killing people."

He chewed his lip for a moment, trying to imagine how things would have been different had his relationship with his parents been cut off abruptly, instead of being able to grow past the hardest times. The bad years.

"I didn't know them," he said carefully, "but they sounded like good people. In the face of something like the Reapers, I think they'd be proud of what you're doing. After a while, parents... have a way of coming 'round."

She opened her eyes to look up at him, touching his fingers on her neck. "You haven't heard anything from yours, have you? Or your brother?"

Dull pain stabbed his heart. "No. But with the comms system reduced to almost nothing... all I can do is hope. My father is the one I'm worried about."
"Why? He was an Alliance man, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, but that's why I'm worried. Because he'd go and fight."

She squeezed his fingers. With his position on a ship with a QEC connection to Earth, Kaidan probably had a better idea than most what was going on there, even if all he had access to was Anderson's struggle half a world away from his family. None of it boded well for civilians. But the pain of worry had grown numb with time. Burning energy on a situation he could do nothing about took it away from the situation he could affect. All he could do was tell himself as far away as he was, he was fighting for them every day. Them and all the Alliance servicemembers he'd fought with over the years. It had been an unexpectedly good feeling to find Wickham among the band of fighters they'd picked up a week ago, even if they had to see them safely shipped off to another Alliance ship just as quickly. The Normandy couldn't support them all, and they wanted to stay together. It made him proud, and sad. He was running short of familiar faces.

Someday, Kaidan thought, he'd tell her about those years after Brain Camp, before the Alliance. Fill in a little more of the story.

"This is how normal people deal with bad things, isn't it?" Shepard said.

He chuckled wryly. "So I'm told."

"I've always had to watch everything I say, and to whom. Everyone around me, even my friends, they've always been either in the Alliance, in which case they were part of the strict hierarchy, or people I couldn't show weakness to. I've always had to have a mask on, one way or another. Ever since I left Minkoir behind. Then, for a long time, I wanted to be bulletproof. Never need anything from anyone. Then when I finally did... well, I'd get a little bit here and there, but that was the best I could do."

"Not even Tennyson?"

"I raged at him, but he's not... wasn't a person you show your neck to. And Anderson... he's always been good to me, but he was my superior, you know? My ticket to being a respectable officer who could do some good. I had to fly straight for him. I wasn't going to drag my personal dramas to his door."

"I think I know how that feels. Guess I had some friends back home, but yeah, no one knows the whole story. It's all pieces."

"It's so strange to... to come back from a total clusterfuck like today to someone who's leg I can lie on and who'll listen to whatever I need to say. Keep me grounded when I'm completely overwhelmed by... everything. Like my head full of prothean invaders."

"My leg is happy to be of service."

Shepard hugged his thigh. "Kaidan."

"Hm?"

"We're getting into the endgame, aren't we? Do or die time."

His hand stopped reflexively, caught on the word die. "Yeah."

She paused, breathing out. Kaidan shuffled down, pulling her alongside him. Her hesitation spread a knot of nervousness in his gut. "What is it?"
"If I've got to die to get this done-"

"Kye."

"Let me finish. I don't want to, Kaidan. For the first time in a long time I'm not... indifferent to what happens to me. But I've always known it was in the cards. But it's that..." She nuzzled into his neck. "I've always taken it as a given that whatever happens, it's down to me alone. My command, my responsibility. My life."

"We know the score," he murmured.

"Whatever the endgame is, I don't want to do this alone. You, and Garrus and the others, too, you aren't just my soldiers. You're... way more than that." She buried her face. "I don't want to go alone anymore."

"Whatever happens," he said, throat suddenly tight. "But you have to promise me you'll do your damndest to... to come through this."

Her voice was very quiet, but still distinct. "I think I'm finally fighting for more than just everybody else."

Kaidan lifted her chin and kissed her. She pulled him closer and for a long moment, it was just them, the music muffling even the omni-present sound of the ship.

When she broke away she stared him in the eye. Light hit her retinas, crescent moons of blue light deep within her pupils. "This has to end, and soon. We're going to put Kai Leng's head on a plate next to the Illusive Man's, then we're going to teach the Reapers a lesson in mortality."

"We," he said, smiling grimly.
Shepard would probably have been pacing, but Garrus had seen the way she'd walked in the door. The humans would sometimes say they were 'feeling it' the day after a battle, but the commander limped like it was far more than a memory. Instead, she sat on the edge of the conference table, weight supported by her good leg and shoulders hunched over. The loss of the prothean data to Cerberus and the brutal battering of the people under her command sat heavily on all of them, but her most of all. Beside her, Kaidan leaned on the bulkhead wall, arms folded, his face a mask of a hundred dark thoughts.

Garrus shifted his weight in his armor, trying to settle it into place. It felt good to be back in his second skin, but strange, too. The repair under his armpit itched. His runs around the cargo bay had left him frustrated, feeling like he couldn't quite catch his breath like he'd used to. Maybe it was an illusion born of a new fear, the dreams he still sometimes woke from, gasping, his throat constricted. Maybe he just needed to get out in the field again, feel like he was doing something.

A soft ping sounded. "Commander," came Traynor's voice, "I've finally got her."

"Put her through," Garrus replied.

"Ah, aye."

"I wonder how much wheedling she had to do," Shepard muttered. She looked at Garrus questioningly. You sure about this?

Garrus gave a curt nod. The holodisplay in the center of the table lit up. A waist-up portrait of Aria T'Loak appeared. The asari's face was drawn into her permanent scowl, and her arms folded. The camera pickups on this side would capture a similar view of him, leaving out the two humans.

"Archangel." Aria unfurled each syllable with deliberation, narrow-eyed.

"Aria," he greeted her.

"You're not who I expected to see on the other end of this line."

Garrus clasped his hands behind his back. "I'm told you have a Cerberus problem."

The asari pounded one fist into what must have been a chair arm, just out of the camera's view. "You better not have tracked me down just to gloat, Vakarian. I can still find ways to make your life difficult."

"I got all my gloating out of my system back when I was running circles around your thugs."

Shepard frowned. In the holo, Aria glared at him, then raised one finger and deliberately moved it toward what was likely an end call button.

"But I'm done with those days," he said hastily. Damn it, Vakarian, stow your ego. "Now I have a Cerberus problem."

"Where's your Spectre friend, anyway?"

Aria's finger stopped. She stared him down, then cocked her head. "He's here. But this is Omega business, isn't it? Let's
face it. Shepard's good, but I know Omega's back end better than a lot of its inhabitants. I also know how to be completely outnumbered, and win. And Shepard makes a spectacular mess wherever she goes."

The two humans in the room made noises of irritation. Garrus ignored them, keeping his gaze firmly on the holo.

"As I recall, you made quite a mess last time you were here," Aria said.

"If the Pack, Suns and Eclipse had stopped throwing people at me, I wouldn't have been forced to clog up your crematoria furnaces."

"You could have had the decency to just die," she said irritably.

"Not my style. Now, if we're done posturing, maybe we can talk business?"

Aria looked away from the camera for a moment. She spoke, but her voice was muted. A flash of irritation crossed her features.

"You're bouncing your comm signal," she said finally, looking back at him, "clever."

"I'm not going to tip my entire hand at once," he said, borrowing the expression the card-playing humans were so fond of.

She looked away again, eyes moving as if to scan something. The mic picked up her finger tapping on the arm of a chair. "So, the Normandy is lurking out there somewhere..."

"We're not here for a fight."

"But you are having a good look at my fleet," she said archly. "Spit it out, before I decide to triangulate your location."

"You're obviously preparing for something, and only an idiot doesn't know what. You want Omega back."

"Obvious. The pertinent question here is what you want."

"Don't worry, I won't insult you by claiming to offer help out of the goodness of our hearts. We need Petrovsky."

Aria bared her teeth. "How nice. Maybe I'll let you have what's left when I'm done with him. Bring a very small box!"

Shepard huffed and folded her arms.

"He has critical intel we need to fight the Reapers," Garrus said, wondering how long Shepard could keep herself from butting in.

Aria flipped one hand. "Petrovsky betrayed me and dragged his Cerberus stink all over my station. I've already pledged my help to Shepard when the time comes, I don't care about the rest."

"This is about the entire galaxy, Aria, not a political scuffle happening somewhere too far away to care about."

Her lip curled.
"Whatever you might think about who deserves what," he said hastily, "the Reapers won't ignore you. They won't ignore a single living sentient, never mind a station full of them. And that's not even considering the fact that Omega is next to one of their utility relays. You can ignore it right now, but it won't be long before they come to cleanse Omega, too."

As he spoke he used an interface to open his cache of war data and went to the images. Briefly, he considered sending images of Thessia, but there was a not inconsequential chance Aria would laugh at the fate of a planet she probably considered full of self-important rich snobs who thought they were the bright center of the galaxy. If she had any nostalgia for the asari homeworld, the Queen of Omega had never shown it.

"Your fleet here is impressive," he said dryly, selecting a few images, "especially for a non-military outfit. Your mercs are nothing if not resourceful. But this," his heart stung as he pressed send, "is the heart of Palaven's homeguard fleet, invasion day plus one."

He didn't have to look at it to know what he'd sent. A debris field of drifting hulks, hulls shorn in half. Two of the mightiest and most storied dreadnoughts in all of Citadel space, shattered shells. Thousands of dead.

"Your fleet is impressive, Aria, but it doesn't compare to Palaven's. It won't even take a day for the Reapers to break Omega and scatter it across the system. If 'our war' fails, Omega is doomed. And that's not a threat, it's simply reality."

Aria drummed her fingers, brow furrowed. "And you need Petrovsky to defeat the Reapers."

"We need Petrovsky to get deeper into Cerberus, to the Illusive Man. He's a Reaper crony now."

"Is he."

"Indoctrination. If you have Reaper creatures on your station, then you know all about the things Cerberus has been trying to do with Reaper tech. We're tracking an agent of theirs."

"I heard you departed Thessia rather... hastily."

"Time is a wasting resource right now. For everyone."

The corner of her mouth curled up. "What did you find there?"

Garrus couldn't help but glance at Shepard. She drew her hand quickly across her throat.

"That Thessia's been keeping secrets," Garrus said carefully. "But somehow I don't think that's news to you, is it?"

"That lot of self-righteous hags? Hah. They weave their clothes out of secrets!"

Get off this line of conversation. Sweeten the deal. "There's something else I can bring," Garrus said. "People with experience fighting Reaper creatures."

Aria shifted and cocked her head. "Have you faced an Adjutant before?"

He had no idea what that was, only that there were Reaper creatures on the station and that Cerberus was involved somehow. "No," he said levelly, "but finding new ways to kill Reapers is what our team does best."

"And if you fail, are you prepared to watch one of your allies be mutated into one of those
"I've seen more than enough of my people corrupted, Aria. You're not going to scare me off with that."

Aria's finger tapped again. "I don't want Spectres on my station. Not for this."

"They can stay on the Normandy. But they won't be far."

"Fine. But leave your sticky-fingered broker at home, too."

My sticky-fingered quarian is a better hacker, anyway. "Agreed."

"I better not find out you or the humans are playing me, Archangel. I'm in no mood."

"Neither am I, Aria. I've seen enough death for a thousand lifetimes."

She smirked. "Contact me again in one hour and we'll discuss the plan of attack."

The holo clicked off. Garrus looked over the console to be sure the mic pickup was dead, then exhaled. When he looked up, he found the two humans eyeing him with nearly identical expressions.

He spread his hands. "I had to say what I had to say. At least I got us on the station."

"You got you on the station," Shepard said with a smirk.

"That was always the plan. Shepard, you look like an elcor used you as a recliner for the entire run of that old human play. Kaidan doesn't look much better. It doesn't do much for your aura of Spectre invincibility, you know?"

"He's got a point," Kaidan said.

"I don't trust Aria," the commander said.

Garrus sniffed. "Who does? The trick with her is to figure out what she wants. She won't do anything to compromise her end goal. In this case, I know what that goal is. I can use that. I've done it before, just from a distance instead of face to face. Besides," his mandibles flexed, "she knows exactly who she's pissing off if she tries anything with me."

"Archangel?"

He shrugged. "Him too, but I was thinking about the pair of Spectres. The Council might be in shambles, but Aria knows what lengths you're willing to go to, Shepard. She's a schemer, but she's practical. She won't want you coming around to shoot things up looking for payback while she's trying to re-consolidate her power on Omega."

"You've got this all figured out, don't you?" Kaidan commented.

"Omega's complicated... but it's a night on the town compared to Primacy politics."

Shepard scowled, looking out the small porthole to the stars beyond. "I don't like it."

"Don't you trust me?"

She sighed. "Just about the only two people besides myself I'd trust to do this are standing in this room right now. But I'm not going to pretend to be happy about it."
"I can live with that." Garrus chuckled. "Lately I've been the one left behind to worry my fringe off, so this time you can have that job. And not get any more hurt. We can't afford..."

"What happened to Liara rattled all of us," Kaidan said quietly.

None of them seemed willing to break the somber silence that descended. Garrus suspected they were all anticipating the future argument about whether or not Liara could fight again. If her biotics were affected, if they could take the risk. Prosthetics were available at the best of times, but reconstruction of an entire limb, and a complex one at that, was well beyond their resources on the ship. There was no Citadel to go back to, and asari space was no longer the safe zone it had been.

"Who do you need for a team?" Shepard asked finally.

"Vega's got brawn," Garrus said, "and he knows Omega more than your average human. And Tali can find her way around whatever bashed-together security we might run across. Enclosed fighting spaces are familiar territory."

"I guess that's all we've got for now." She sounded tired.

"The Normandy can provide support to the fleet."

"We won't be far, Garrus. Just call, and-"

"Shepard," he said, "this isn't any more of a risk than you've had to take a hundred times."

She rubbed her forehead, but Kaidan nodded his agreement.

"You... know what's at stake if we don't get this," Shepard said, exhaling. "Garrus, would you indulge me a human thing?"

He cocked his head curiously.

She stood and limped over to him. She tugged the front of his collar. He leaned forward, and she put her arms around his neck. The hug was awkward with the bulk of his armor, but she held him tightly for a moment, then briefly touched her lips to the plate just above his mandible. Then she backed up a step and clasped his hands.

"Thanks," she said, "for being such a good friend. I've served with a lot of good soldiers, but I don't often get to call them actual friends, much less share my burdens with them as equals." She glanced at Kaidan, then back at him.

Garrus chuckled. "We've come a long way, haven't we?"

"And I wouldn't have made it this far without you."

He tried not to think of all the thousand different ways they'd narrowly avoided death, or worse, failure. Everything still hung by a thread. The mask of the brave face wore very thin in places. But his mandibles flicked in quiet happiness. The spirit of the Normandy was whole again.

Garrus put his boot to the Adjutant's bulbous back and pushed. The corpse rolled, the tentacle-cables that made up its grotesque mouth parts trailing a line of the viscous glop purported to break down the DNA of dead and dying organics, re-writing the victim's bodily structure into another Adjutant.

The former Afterlife bar was a mess, first repurposed by Cerberus, then damaged by the fighting within it. Corpses littered the floor, both Adjutant and others, and smoke from gunfire and grenades
"Are you proud of this?" Garrus said, turning.

Oleg Petrovsky stood with his arms behind his back, meeting Garrus' level stare. Even if he'd been left alive as agreed, Aria hadn't exactly gone easy on him. Still, the human maintained his dignity despite the bindings and the blood seeping into his white uniform from his battered face. A suit that looked a great deal like a bastardized version of the human Alliance dress uniform rendered in white and gold. The uniform seemed to rankle Vega, who stood behind him, weapon leveled.

"Sacrifices must be made," Petrovsky said. "None of us would have even made it off our home planet if we'd never dared to risk error."

Garrus was getting beyond tired of hearing about sacrifices, necessary or otherwise. "So these things are an error."

Petrovsky shrugged. "Their initial escape was certainly not planned. It took time to perfect the control scheme. An error that has since been rectified. Since then, they have been effective shock troops."

"Are you controlling them," Garrus asked, "or could it be the other way around?"

"You are referring to the indoctrination effect, I assume. I've been well protected."

"I've heard that before."

A twitch of the face told Garrus he might have a sore spot. The man wanted to live, that much was clear, but he wouldn't be reduced, either. *How it must burn him, to see 'aliens' work together like this.*

"Is this how you see the bright future of humanity?" Garrus pointed at the Adjutant.

"This is a necessary, and *temporary*, evil in service of survival and our ultimate victory."

"I don't think your boss agrees."

"The Illusive Man-"

"Probably released them to attack Omega in the first place."

"Damn right," Vega said. Impassive in his bulky armor, the Alliance marine's face was dark. It was clear he would love to be given an excuse to squeeze the trigger.

Petrovsky shifted, glaring at them.

"Have you seen the faces of your Cerberus troopers?" Garrus said. "That's your future, too, following the Illusive Man."

"I... never approved of those measures. It wasn't my decision."

"It's slavery," Vega growled, "isn't it?"

"They're all volunteers."

"Bullshit!" He took a step forward, shocking Petrovsky back on his heels.
Garrus watched the sway of threat and restraint teeter back and forth. "Do you have any evidence beyond the Illusive Man's word?" he asked. He wanted to just kick the arrogant man in the teeth and leave him for Aria's gentle ministrations.

Petrovsky disdainfully backed another step away from the open bore of Vega's shotgun and looked at Garrus. "Enough of this. What happens now, Vakarian?"

"Simple. You tell us where the Illusive Man is, you get to live."

"Very well."

Garrus blinked. "That's way too easy," he said suspiciously.

"Indeed it is. I don't know where the Illusive Man himself is, none of us do. But I can give you the location of his major operations base. The one producing the majority of his troops, I might add. If I am allowed to surrender myself to Commander Shepard's custody. I'm a practical man, Mister Vakarian. I'll make myself useful, in exchange for my life. And one... request."

"You're not in a position to make requests, Cerberus," Vega said darkly.

Petrovsky lifted his chin, ignoring the marine. "I want to know what you find there. That's all. The truth."

"As if you care."

"I care about my people, marine."

Garrus regarded him, then jerked his thumb in the direction of the former club's entrance. "Get him to the Normandy, Vega."

The marine stepped forward and prodded Petrovsky in the shoulder with his shotgun. "Move it."

How was it Cerberus operatives always ended up far more gray than he liked? Garrus' helmet felt heavy, hanging in his grip. They were inching forward, and after their experiences with Leng, the notion of having another high-ranking Cerberus agent on the ship, even for a short time, made his plates itch. And yet the man seemed to be in possession of his faculties, in fact he seemed far more sane than any other Cerberus agent Garrus had met since the Collector mission.

"Imagine how we'd be doing if we were all on the same side," he muttered, looking at the Adjutant corpse. He was looking forward to getting back to the Normandy. Not even a day, and already the walls of Omega were oppressive, their familiarity faded to a bitter taste in his mouth.

Footsteps approached, and Tali and Nyreen Kandros walked up to him.

"I've done what I can, Garrus," Tali said in a low voice, "the rest will be up to the Talons."

"It's just good to know someone will be around to keep an eye on the civilians," Garrus said.

Kandros nodded. "Aria's already making her plans to contribute some of her forces into the Reaper conflict. I'm going to make sure no one is pressed into service." She cocked her head, mandibles flared in amusement. "Aria T'Loak, helping someone outside Omega. It's almost like the legendary Commander Shepard and Archangel got to her."

"Shepard has that effect on people," Tali said.

"So does the threat of imminent annihilation," Garrus murmured.
"Will you still go back to them?" Kandros said.

Garrus glanced up at her. "The Normandy?"

"The Hierarchy."

He tapped his finger idly on his helmet. Even after so long around Shepard, Liara and Kaidan, a cabal biotic still made him edgy. The unspoken messages he'd absorbed during years of training weren't so easy to erase.

"I don't know yet," he said. "Right now all I care about is winning this insane war. Reapers make Hierarchy politics look like an evening at the bar."

She looked away, back into the sweep of the damaged bar and the ragtag collection of fighters milling around exchanging celebratory salutes. "I can't go back," she said, "here is where I'm needed. But I... haven't forgotten our people."

"They're fighting hard."

"I must admit, I'd lost faith in the homeworld. But if there are more people like you making decisions, then maybe things will change." She touched her forehead, then extended her hand. "We endure."

Garrus clasped her hand. "We endure."
You Are Unquiet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The banshee stared at them with colorless eyes. Long arms hung at its sides, claws flexing in spasmodic movements. Was it considering them? Javik wondered if what was left of its brain was even capable of such a thought process. It was gaunt, leathery skin stretched over bone and sinew, showing only the same rictus grimace of teeth as those they'd seen previously. It swayed, gently, shifting weight from foot to foot as if responding to the distant memory of a breeze. A collar of plain metal adorned its neck, the same as the other collars that circled its upper arms and thighs.

It swayed and took a step forward. There was a bang from behind Javik. He turned and saw Major Alenko shuffle away from the table he'd just backed into. His face under his visor was bloodless, but he didn't take his eyes off the Reaper creature, nor lower his rifle.

Tension crackled. Soft sounds of footsteps moved around Javik as the others shifted carefully away from the creature, waiting for it to attack. For that bitter, scalding wail to burst from its throat. Javik's shoulder and arm ached, and his left foot. The fractures and strains of his wounds still dogging him. His armor tightened, bracing and chafing both, his protection and his cast all in one. Keeping him moving and fighting. Pain was academic, like hunger, a primitive biological convulsion to be contained and ignored.

"Tali?" Shepard said, also fixed on the banshee. "Anything?"

"Working on it!" the quarian called back.

The banshee stopped again. Its head moved slowly, sweeping from one side to the other, nearly raking the ceiling with its crown of horns. A sound came from its throat, a raspy mockery of breath. Did the mongrel organism it was even require oxygen anymore?

In all his years of fighting, Javik had never actually seen a Reaper creature that was not either dead and decaying rapidly, or attempting to kill him. A mix of disgust and fascination warred within him. He could not help but try to see the lines of the asari now distorted into this huge shape. Where skin split and healed to accommodate unnatural growth. On a face drained almost metallic for lack of color, he could make out the pattern of markings that once dotted the asari's face. Was this one of their elders, or a mere child?

Does it matter? "We should destroy this thing, Commander," he said, "before it turns on us."

"Don't worry, Javik, I have no intention of taking it home with us. But we have to figure out what the Illusive Man was doing here."

The emergency lighting strips along the ceiling lent the colorless creature an eerie blue-white sheen. It looked like the ghost it was, a shade from beyond the grave. When they'd burst into this control room, down under Sanctuary's artificial lake, the banshee had just been standing there, staring vacantly at the wall.

The first hostile, such as it was, they'd encountered at the facility tucked away beneath the empty refugee center. The center, a cruel mockery, showing all the signs of a hasty and violent emptying of its occupants. There had been no refugee centers in the Talvan Empire. Everyone had been expected to fight, or to build, or to work at any of the thousands of logistical details required to run an empire-
wide war. Those who tried to escape it, to hide, were condemned as pariahs, given no aid. A hard world.

Javik could not say for certain that no place like this had existed in his time. A Cerberus equivalent. A hard world meant doing hard things. Before his time, Ksad Ishan the Wayfinder had fled the battle line, retreated to Ilos to construct his Conduit. He had been called a pariah. A coward. Evil.

*Here, they call this Illusive Man evil. He sets himself apart. He breaks human moral law in search of a solution.*

*The Talvan failed. Ksad Ishan, his mad plan... succeeded.*

"Shepard," Tali'Zorah said, "there's a... kill switch here."

Shear still pointed at the banshee, Javik turned his head just enough to bring the quarian into his field of view. With central power offline, they'd been forced to marshal emergency systems to coax computer systems back to life.

She commander kept her shotgun aimed as well. "What's the mechanism?"

"It doesn't elaborate." Tali'Zorah leaned closer to her holodisplay. "But it's tracking the banshee, not the room."

"Is that good?" Alenko asked. "We don't want the room filling with poison gas."

"I don't see anything like that," she said, "this isn't a cell, anyway."

"Okay," Shepard said, "everyone get ready in case this doesn't work. Garrus?"

"Knees lined up," the turian said. He leveled his sniper rifle balanced across his elbow.

Gravity hummed just behind Javik, crawling across his mind. The human soldier was potent indeed, when aroused to threat. For a human.

"Tali, do it," Shepard said.

The banshee stood and stared, placid as a herd animal. Small red lights came on, one each along the metal collars. A sharp whine cut the air, and the collars vibrated and clicked. All at once, the banshee's head toppled forward, sliced clean through at the collar. First one, then the other arm dropped off, then the whole body tipped forward as though a hewn tree.

Shepard swore and put her hand to her neck, jumping out of the way as the torso, now free of all limbs, bounced off the central console and rolled to the ground. There they twitched a few times, then lay still.

Vakarian leaned out over his rifle, peering down. "Spirits."

"Well, it didn't fail spectacularly," Tali'Zorah said, hands on her hips, "so that's a first for Cerberus."


"That's because of Miranda Lawson," the quarian sniffed, "if it weren't for her, you probably would've come out of Lazarus with an extra leg."

Alenko winced, but Shepard actually chuckled darkly. She waved her hand. "Spread out and look around. Look for comm pads, data drives, key cards, anything. Tali, keep working on what might be
left in their main drives."

Lip curled, Javik turned away from the quartered banshee and walked along the far wall past the door, examining the esoteric instruments arrayed along tables and attached to swing arms. The image of the terrible creature grown placid and dumb gnawed at him. He came upon the turian, who was attempting to coax life out of a small console attached to what looked like a person-sized stasis tube, one of many they'd seen scattered throughout the facility.

The tube was somewhat fogged, the interior scratched with long, random marks. Javik kept his hands on Shear's reassuring weight. The ken of this place was murky, confused. Out of nowhere, there could be intense fear. Pain. Then an eerie vacancy, the dull throb of life without focus or agency.

"Another test tube, I guess," Vakarian muttered. The control console remained dark.

Javik heard Tali'Zorah call Shepard over. Together they watched a holo-recording whose oblique image angle suggested security camera footage. There was a voice speaking.

Beside him, Vakarian tipped his head. "Miranda?" He walked over to the other two.

As the recording hissed and switched to another feed, Javik's gaze was drawn back to the tube. The back side of the interior was lined with disconnected sensors and hookups of indeterminate usage. Not for the first time, he wished he understood more of the sciences. The how of things, instead of just the how best to destroy them.

Before this room, they'd crossed another bank of these tubes. One had a body in it, one that looked a great deal like a human husk, its face wizened and mummified. Tali'Zorah had much to say about the process that created them, the complex nanite interaction induced normally by the spikes they called Dragon's Teeth. A lyrical name for a blunt and simplistic device of terror.

He dared not touch the tube.

"It's true," he heard Shepard say, "he's working on his own version of indoctrination. Trying to control the Reapers!"

Cold snakes slithered through Javik's gut. The quarian, in her element, pulled apart the computer system with quick strokes, a diviner reading the portents in digital viscera.

"Wait, there's a name- Keelah!" she exclaimed. "It says Henry Lawson!"

"Miranda's father?" Vakarian asked.

"He's the lead researcher! Look, these are all logs... most of them are encrypted. But look, a reference to as an early alpha test!"

Alenko peered over her shoulder, face dark. "All those refugees, test subjects. The viable ones brought here, the others pressed into their soldier-making machines!"

"They keep thinking they'll be the ones who won't get indoctrinated, don't they?" Vakarian said. "Despite all prior evidence."

"And it's not just about controlling Reapers, is it?" Alenko said. "The Illusive Man sees a world where everyone follows his lead, doesn't he? Not just human supremacy, but a control scheme for the entire galaxy!"

An empire. Javik quietly bit his tongue, watching the horror pass through the others like a wave.
They still believed so ardently that lesser peoples could be left to their own devices, that subjugation and integration were evils. Yet they argued and fought ceaselessly. Fought whole wars of stubbornness.

*And yet they are here, and the Talvan is dust.*

Vakarian shook his head and turned to the back wall. It was slanted outward, lined with long steel shutters set into tracks. He touched a control panel, but it did nothing. The manual winch inside a wall bracket was more fruitful. There was a thud, and the shutters slid open as he cranked it.

Beyond was a long bay lined with thick buttresses, large enough to house several shuttles. Javik walked over and peered down. The room they were in looked out from the upper part of the bay. An array of cables lay thickly along the floor, coiled and strewn haphazardly, their open sockets disconnected. Along the ceiling was what looked like some kind of gantry and lift system that led away to the far end of the bay, which was a large set of doors.

"Whatever was here," the turian said, "it's gone now."

Shepard looked down, sweeping her gaze from one end to the other. "Whatever it was, it took a lot of power," she said, pointing to the cables.

"I think it was the other way around," Tali'Zorah said from her console. "Whatever it was provided power. It... wait, I think I have an image here."

They all turned to look. It was another security camera still, this time showing the interior of the bay. It had been occupied with a cylindrical device stretching from end to end, hooked up to the cables. In the grainy image, its core looked hot, the center swell pushed inward and pulsing with unnatural light. It was large, well over the size of the Kodiak shuttle.

Shepard grunted. "Garrus, does that look familiar to you?"

The turian's helmeted head cocked. "It does, yeah. Didn't we destroy that?"

Major Alenko squinted at the image. "What is it?"

"I can't be sure, but it looks an awful lot like the heart of the... machine the Collectors were building. Beyond the Omega 4 relay. The one that tried to kill us, the proto-Reaper."

"The dimensions match," Tali'Zorah said, looking at her omni-tool.

"Are you sure?"

"Well, I have the data from the Collector base, and I can extrapolate the size of that," she pointed at the image, "because I can compare that step-down generator to the real one in the bay."


"How did they get their hands on it?" Alenko asked.

Shepard scraped her hand across the plate of her helmet. "Petrovsky said Cerberus moved into the galactic core almost as soon as the *Normandy* left. They sent science teams, and they must have found enough of it to rebuild..."

"But how did they get in without the IFF?"

"I don't know!" Shepard snapped.
Alenko held up his hands. "I... I didn't expect you to."

"Who knows how long the Illusive Man has been screwing with us," Vakarian said. "Or how long the Reapers have been screwing with him? For all we know, the Reapers let them in."

"I'm just thinking out loud," the major said, putting his hand briefly on Shepard's shoulder. She nodded warily.

"Maybe so the Reapers could get their claws into the Illusive Man's head," Tali'Zorah said. Her hands flew over the display, holo overlays flickering in time in her visor. "It was a power core. It's gone, that's why most of the base is underpowered right now. It was their generator."

"Was it their controller as well?" Javik said. "Did it pacify the banshee?"

They all turned to look at him.

"Good question," Alenko said. "That thing was Reaper tech..."

"I think the control device must have been something else," Tali'Zorah said.

The quarian went on, but Javik turned away, looking back at the killing collars now resting in little piles of black ash, all that was left of the banshee. He bent and picked one up. The human hand that had touched it last reeked of nervousness, but the creature itself... empty. The collar was heavy, and strung across its inner edge gleamed three wires so thin as to barely be visible. Cunning. A single command, and an inner ring of the collar uncoiled, sawing the wires across a limb until it was severed.

"Javik, is there something on your mind?"

He looked up from the killing collar. Shepard stood before him. He considered the human for a long moment. She lacked the ken, and yet she still sensed his mood.

"I did not believe this was possible," he said, gesturing to where the fallen banshee had moldered into blackened ash.

"Neither did I," she admitted.

He dropped the collar. It landed in a puff of black particles. "The belief we could control them was what turned my tal against me. It was madness, I thought. Nothing more than a corruption. What the Reapers wanted us to believe, so we would turn on one another."

"But now it looks like it might be possible?"

*Did we pursue destruction all this time when dominion is possible?*

*Madness*. He touched his forehead. "Everywhere I see cycles within cycles repeating themselves. Echoes of my own cycle. Desperate measures that seem like insanity, evil, like this Illusive Man and his goals."

Shepard watched him, scrutinizing him. It frustrated Javik to have to find clumsy words for everything instead of simply sharing his thoughts. Cipher or no, her connection would always be the simple, animal kind.

"I'm not convinced it actually did work," she said at length.
He tilted his head questioningly.

"I mean, I think the Illusive Man is seeing what he desperately wants to see," she said. "Everybody I've ever known who was exposed to Reaper technology eventually turned. All of them."

"Except yourself."

She met his gaze. "I keep asking myself why," she said in a low voice, "and I don't have an answer. Maybe I did get affected but I just don't know it."

"You did not," Javik said.

"You seem awfully sure."

"You are unquiet."

"What?"

He looked away. "In war, necessity shapes us. It was necessary for me to learn to ken the corruption in others. I do not find it anywhere among us. I feel doubt, fear. Pain and loss. Anger. Your people are messy, Shepard. Undisciplined in their natural state. The corruption is a... quiet. A conviction that infects you bit by bit until you are at peace, sure of yourself. The voices in your head become your voice."

Shepard shivered. "That's the way Saren sounded. He had a whole logic set up in his head to justify what he was doing."

The name was familiar from their recent history... the turian who had first fallen to the Reaper called Sovereign. Could they truly be controlled? It seemed like they were finally so close to destroying them...

If the Crucible actually works.

"I have only to think of my people, and I want every Reaper dead." He looked at her. "But I am... unquiet. After so long, I... do not know what to make of this."

His old tal might have admonished him for doubt. She simply nodded.

"Shepard!"

It was the quarian. She'd left her console and ran up to the commander, pointing to the door. "They're here, Shepard! Right now! In the comms wing, a level up!"

"What?" Shepard said. "Who's here-"

"Miranda, she's going after her father! I found more of those logs, and one of them is timestamped an hour ago! Henry Lawson is still here, clearing out data!"

"We can still catch them!" Alenko said, coming up behind Tali'Zorah.

"Damn right," the commander said, pulling her weapon free, "everybody move out!"
I've decided that for my sanity, I'm going to move the posting schedule to biweekly. The chapters are only getting more complex as I leave game canon behind, and the stress of it was getting to me and hurting my usual process. I'd rather space the final stretch out and give myself the breathing room I need to hopefully keep the quality up throughout, all while not compromising my real life. So until further notice, posting will be biweekly, and weekly where time and circumstance allow. Not my first choice, but I think it's for the best. Thanks!
Call it Destiny

The bowel of the beast. A maw lined with twisted, scorched girders, it breathed waves of heated air and sparks wreathed in orange dancing light, leading down into a gut full to bursting with its own white-armored hellbeasts.

Shepard stood in the entrance, shotgun in hand. The light made her green armor look a dark brown, the N7 stripe the color of blood. It played along her visor as she surveyed the way down.

James looked back once. One, then two, then a third Kodiak pulled into the docking bay, thrusters billowing through the smoke as they maneuvered around the wreck of the Atlas. Alliance Marines from the assault force, coming to support them in their attack on Cronos Station. The heart of Cerberus.

"Move in!" Shepard ordered briskly. "Watch your angles, it's going to be a mess in there."

The commander went first, followed closely by the major and Garrus. James was glad EDI was there to make sense of the place. Their entry point, the trail of destruction left by the crashed fighter, cut right through any semblance of the normal layout. Soon they were moving through maintenance and power conduits and out into a complex of lab rooms festooned with all manner of strange machinery. And everywhere, more Cerberus troops. Engineers putting up portable barrier emplacements and turrets. Those thick, annoying shields. Snipers. Each time, violence would explode, reach a fever pitch, then subside again, and James had lost track of where they'd come in.

Wiping out Cerberus mooks used to feel good. After everything they'd discovered, the task had lost its grim satisfaction. It was kill or be killed, but he knew the people he laid out were probably little better than slaves, colonists taken prisoner and fed into their proto-husk machines. Only the barest step above the horror of the Reaper corruption process, and maybe only because it was hidden beneath pristine-looking white armor. Worse, there were numerous non-coms on the station. People in neat little uniforms who clearly had little to no combat experience, nonetheless fighting back with a disturbing fanatic zeal.

But it was all going to end. No more soldier-slaves. No more of the Illusive Man's bullshit.

The lab equipment made his skin crawl. The biohazard disposal tubes they passed seemed suspiciously large. James glanced at Liara. Under her helmet, her face looked drawn and bloodless.

"Stick close, Doc," he said quietly.

Her mouth formed a hard, unhappy line under her visor. "I can take care of myself."

"Hey," he said, "I meant 'cause when we find him I'm gonna need your help keeping that pinball Kai Leng pinned to the floor."

She brightened, a murderous flash lighting her eyes. "So we can gut him!"

He grinned at her, wolfish. It was too easy to see only the soft-spoken, bookish side of the asari. But she was the Shadow Broker, too. He had to remember that. The end of the vambrace of of her left arm ended abruptly, capped with a thick piece of armor. Twelve hours ago, James had passed Esteban asleep with arms folded on his tooling table, next to Liara, still feverishly working away tapping commands into yet another prototype for the fabricator to spit out. James himself had helped her refit the vambrace with a tech grenade tube, an omni-blade extruder, and she'd prevailed on Tali to reprogram her omni-tool commands to remap the interface away from left hand commands.
Against Doctor Chakwas and Shepard's objections, Liara had made it quite clear she wasn't going to be left behind. The argument had taken place behind closed doors, but had still been sharp enough to be felt beyond. It was about more than Liara's own health but her capacity to keep up and respond to threats when she'd had barely any time to re-train her instincts around the new state of affairs. The commander wasn't the only one to be nervous about putting their battered team at any risk. But in the end, it seemed that sheer determination and some noisy demonstrations in the cargo bay had convinced the reticent Lola. The asari's biotics were apparently undiminished, if anything they were less restrained.

In James' admittedly limited experience, the asari prized control over their biotics, the kind of refined use gained only after decades and centuries of practice. The kind of time no other species had. The loss of a hand, and thus that set of nerves, had by any asari measure probably diminished Liara's fine control. But given her mood since Thessia, James felt sure fine control wasn't going to be an issue when it came to the Cerberus assassin.

At any rate, the presence of actual Alliance backup and the addition of Miranda Lawson to the assault would even out any rough spots. But it wasn't the too-light armored suit that kept drawing his gaze back to Lawson when she was focused elsewhere. Her crisply perfectionist imitation of marine combat deployment sat uncomfortably in his craw. This was a person made of many finely tuned layers, the genuine parts of which were difficult if not impossible to tease apart from the affectations. Her competence had thus far been beyond reproach, but the fact she'd been to this station before, not as a guest but as an important cog in the Cerberus machine... it sat poorly.

Lawson's role in bringing Shepard back seemed to be well-established, and Lola displayed nothing but trust in the former Cerberus agent. And yet James still didn't really know how to feel about her. By the set of the major's features, James guessed Alenko didn't either. Temporary or no, Lawson had settled into the Normandy like she owned the place, and settled into the team like she'd always been there.

She'd definitely been to this station before, too. The momentum of the assault was grinding down all over the station as Cerberus used the station itself to their advantage, locking bulkheads and diverting the attackers into traps. When they finally found themselves trapped behind a set of locked quarantine doors, Lawson knew exactly which console would get EDI the connection they needed. If the former Cerberus operative was at all flustered by the fact the AI she once used to spy on everyone now had her own body, she didn't show it.

As they all waited for the doors to be opened, EDI abruptly turned and looked at Shepard.

"Shepard," EDI said, "I have found several video logs and data records concerning the Lazarus project."

The commander froze. Her free hand slowly curled up into a fist.

"If you would like to view them, I will route them to the console there." The AI pointed to a videolog machine set into the wall.

"No," Shepard said.

"Are you certain? Information of this kind could be of later use-"

"No, EDI," she repeated. "I'm done with Lazarus. I don't want to see any of it. Just delete them."

"It might be imprudent to delete any Cerberus files," EDI said, "as we do not yet know which ones contain vital intelligence."
"Just get the door open, EDI," Shepard said tightly. "I'm done with questioning my basic humanity."

"Yes, Commander."

The ventilation system hummed into the silence that descended. Liara held her head down, eyes hidden under the brim of her helmet as she worried at the metal end of the stump with her other hand. Lawson looked from EDI to Shepard, then over to the console the AI had indicated, curiosity plain on her perfect features.

Alenko edged close to the commander and said something too quiet to hear. Shepard leaned ever so slightly to her left, bumping her shoulderplate into the major's with a soft tap.

The door cycled open.

"Come on, let's go," Shepard said gruffly.

James allowed himself a grin as he fell into step behind them.

The hall past the lab was curiously empty, putting them all on edge. The other marine teams were reporting getting bogged down in the habitat sections above, but communication was intermittent. Outside, Alliance fighters battled Cerberus' ships.

EDI led them out the far side of the lab complex into a rougher section, where many bulkheads were missing finishing, exposing cabling and supports. The station's security continued to confound them despite the presence of possibly the most sophisticated hacker in Alliance space. The perils of going after one's creator, James supposed. Without any clear idea of the Illusive Man's location, a systematic sweep of the station was all they could execute.

They came to a bulkhead door that looked capable of sealing to vacuum. Stangely, it was unbared. The door opened up onto a corrugated gantry, and the floor plunged away into a huge cylindrical pit of a room. Cables and walkways lined the bulkheads that formed the walls. Shepard moved out onto the walkways, sweeping her weapon upward. She stopped in her tracks and swore.

"What is it, Commander?" Alenko asked.

"The Reaper heart," she said, "it's here."

The major sucked his breath in through his teeth.

"It's too valuable a prize," Lawson said. She stepped around Shepard, looking up. "The question is what he's doing with it now."

"We can figure that out after he's dead," Shepard said. "The gantries split. We're going to cover both sides."

James craned his neck through the door and followed the line of metal stairs and walkways that snaked around and across the shaft above. A pregnant bulge of machinery hung in the center of the shaft, linked by thick cables. In its center glowed a pulsing heart of deep red.

Shepard signed to Alenko to follow her, then to James, pointing at the opposite gantry. Above them, the heart hummed with an unholy life. The blurry images from the Collector base lurked in his mind, so recently in his memory from his data and footage review the previous night. Taken during the Collector base attack, they were blurry images of a looming, skeletal face rendered in Reaper-colored metal. The Reapers believed they were doing humanity honor, Shepard had told them. Choosing humans to be the template of their new Reaper, or something like that.
"If I ever see that again it'll be too soon," Garrus muttered. He'd taken up position behind James, Liara with him.

"I would suggest we blow it up," Liara said, "but we did so last time and it haunts us still."

The walkways were lined with diamondplate steel and set with railings interspersed at intervals with solid plates for stability. Connecting walkways looped back and under the heart, passing close to loops of cable and junction boxes. The whole construction seemed like the kind of jury-rig you'd see in the back end of a Grizzly tank after too many field repairs, and yet everything was impeccably clean. There was no smell in the air apart from the faintest waft of scorch. As they made their way up a set of stairs, sweeping left and right for signs of resistance, James lost sight of Shepard's team. The heart loomed between them in its nest of cabling.

"Anything?" came Shepard's voice in his ear.

"Negative," he answered., "except that thing gives me the creeps."

"Keep climbing, we'll link up at the top."

They climbed two more switchbacks before the gantries evened out again and seemed to loop back toward the other wall. They were making their way across when Shepard shouted over the comms.

"Incoming! Gantries above!"

No sooner had the warning been issued than shots rang off the metal ahead of him, and James' kinetic barrier warped and sang a warning tone. He lunged and threw himself into a roll, slamming hard on his armor. The railings had a few solid sections, but it was precious little cover. He heard Garrus call out to Liara as he frantically scanned the walkways above them. Gunshots filled the air, punctuated by the crack and whistle of longrifles. Snipers.

Above them, someone screamed. A white-armored body, then another, flew out over the railing, wreathed in blue. They sailed past into the pit below, arms windmilling. But the gunfire didn't diminish.

Garrus returned fire, then crouched down beside James. "This is a bad position!" he shouted over the din. "We have to get back to Shepard's side!"

Liara pointed past them both. "The gantry should loop around up there!"

"Shit," James muttered. "Commander! Do you read? We need suppression to move!"

There was an overlong pause. Shots dimpled the steel next to James' head. The cadence of gunfire shifted, and the shots whistling over their heads diminished.

"Go!" Shepard called.

James jumped up and sprayed his rifle along the line of cover behind which the Cerberus troops were hiding, shouting at Garrus and Liara to move. They obeyed, shoving past him and pelting along the walkway and up the stairs. James followed, snapping off shots until his heat clip hissed and popped. A sniper shot puckered a thumb-sized hole in the diamondplate, narrowly missing Liara's retreating back.

The walkway looped around. On the far side, the t-junction appeared that would link them back up to the rest of the team. The ground vibrated beneath James' feet. Ahead, he heard Garrus shout in alarm, the turian's arms suddenly flying out. Liara lunged and wrapped her hand around the back of
Garrus' broad collar, yanking him back.

James skidded to a stop and looked over them to see a yawning gap at the abrupt end of the gantry, stories of open space beneath. The other side of the gap was at least five meters away. Across and up a set of stairs, he caught sight of Shepard, EDI, Lawson and the Major.

"It dropped out!" Garrus shouted, pushing him back. "Cover! Get to cover!"

The three of them retreated to the nearest solid section of railing as James pushed another heat clip into his rifle.

"Commander, we're cut off!" he called into the comms. "The gantry retracted!"

"Hold," she answered, "we'll try to-"

"Look!" Liara shouted, pointing.

Directly across from their position, a door irised open in the wall of the shaft. More Cerberus troopers poured through, filling the gantry that ran its circumference. James fired on them, picking off a few before they maneuvered their heavy shields in his direction.

An unarmored man emerged. Wearing a neat, well-tailored suit, his posture was unhurried despite the mayhem and the Cerberus forces moving past him, one hand in a pocket and looking out across the bay and down to the Reaper heart.

"Illusive Man!" Shepard shouted, her voice drenched in the promise of blood. On her side, two more Cerberus troopers flipped over the railing and fell flailing.

James ducked a volley of fire, then dared to look again. The man in the suit spared him not even a glance. With all the data they had on Cerberus, there were no images of the Illusive Man beyond the commander's description. His expensive suit certainly fit that description, but the face above it did not.

Streaks of black spread out across his cheeks as if they'd split open. The lines radiated up from his eyes and down, where the neckline that vanished into his shirt was almost completely black. The black glittered with metallic reflections. Only the eyes fit what James had heard; cold blue cybernetic orbs devoid of human warmth. The Illusive Man gestured, and his troops seethed around him, flowing down the gantry toward Shepard's half of the team. Streaks of red light shone up from beneath, filling the room with dancing nightmarish shadows and casting the white Cerberus troops in a bloody crimson. Long blades flashed.

Shepard slammed into the front rank in a storm of dark energy and a flash of her green shotgun blast. A few of the Cerberus troops went down, but the next rank pushed forward, swords and palm blasts flashing. Weight of numbers pressed on her, confined in the tiny space. Between dodging sniper fire and trying to return shots of his own, James saw one of the phantoms snake under the melee and sweep Shepard's feet out from under her.

Left behind by Shepard's initial charge, Alenko pounded down the gantry, firing his pistol. The shots drove back another wave of Cerberus troopers, and they fell back behind one of the guardian's heavy shields. Alenko slowed his charge, arms spreading. Blue flame surged up along his body.

"Stop," the Illusive Man said calmly, his voice resonating. Red light pulsed and vibrated. A feeling like a vice closed over James' head, tunneling his vision. His breath caught in his throat.

And Alenko... stopped. The biotic's body froze as if every limb had been clamped in a steel vice. His
eyes bulged and his mouth opened in voiceless fury, fingers clenched. The blue flame around him flickered and died. Carried by his momentum, he toppled forward and clattered onto the gantry, rigid as a statue.

Beside James, Garrus swore. The vice-like feeling abated.

"I can try to lift you over there," Liara said breathlessly, crouched behind the turian, "but you will be cut down by snipers!"

"He's not going anywhere," James growled. He pushed himself up and fired his rifle along the upper deck, trying to follow the brilliant red dots of the snipers' tracking lasers. "Garrus!"

Garrus surged to his feet and pushed past James, spraying his rifle in the direction of the Illusive Man. Shields flashed and flickered. A Cerberus trooper doubled over and vanished behind the railing.

The Illusive Man finally looked at them. His face was emotionless, blue eyes narrow. He gestured. James heard a clank and whine, and his stomach jumped up into his throat as the gantry below him suddenly gave way. Garrus and Liara shouted in alarm. On instinct, his hand whipped out and grabbed the railing, but it too was falling. The busy gantry of Cerberus troops shot up and away.

It could only have been a heartbeat, but it felt like forever. The Reaper heart sailed past. The gantry they'd been standing on twisted slowly, just out of reach of James' feet. He was weightless, orbiting a stratosphere, falling without feeling it.

He had enough time to wonder what it would feel like to hit ground when he felt himself buoyed, a surge that played over his limbs and sent a rush of static along his nerves. Adrenaline and fear mixed, bubbled up in a heady cocktail that distilled into a laugh that looked for a place to escape.

Then the ground hit.

For what felt like an eternity, James couldn't breathe. His chestplate seemed to weigh a thousand pounds. His HUD swam, smearing into a mess of green that spun and swirled with liquid grace. He choked, coughed. He tried to lift his head, and let it thud back to whatever he was lying on. His brain grudgingly restored contact to his tingling limbs. He heard the tinny, distant sound of someone moving.

"Garrus!" Liara called. Her voice was strained, panting. "James, are you alright?"

James rolled to his feet, gasping air back into his lungs. It was dark, the ground an unseen, uneven mass of hills and valleys. He heard the turian groan.


James swung his head, trying to locate his rifle. The bottom of the pit was a confusing landscape of interconnected pipes and machines of indeterminate use. The red light of the heart only just reaching them. Another section of gantry hit the ground with a crash, splitting into pieces and forcing them all to duck.

He turned on his helmet lamp, making the shapes jump out in sharp relief. Movement teased the edge of his vision. He spun, almost tripped on the uneven footing.

A slender, white and black-armored figure bounded down from somewhere further up the wall and broke into a charge. Springing easily from one machine to the next, the phantom closed the distance and lunged at him, sword-first.
The air bowed and warped, drawing in around her. The blade ground to a halt mere centimeters from his nose. In her prison of dark energy, the phantom made a high, thin noise. The tip of her sword quivered, glittering. He stared cross-eyed at it.

"Kill her!" Liara shouted.

Her voice snapped James out of his shock. He jerked his shotgun off his back and pulled the trigger. The shot was poor, but it was not a weapon for which accuracy was of primary importance. The gun barked and slammed back, hitting him in the stomach. The armor over half the phantom's face and neck peeled away in a storm of black and red. The flying gore, teeth and bone shards spun back on themselves, a constellation of slow-motion viscera trapped in the pit of warped gravity, all illuminated in too-bright light. James twisted away from the ghoulish horror, stumbling back. The body flopped to the ground with a wet smack.

Another phantom slammed into the wall a mere two meters away. He rolled and tried to regain his footing, but Garrus' rifle barked twice, three times, and the phantom sagged and rolled off one of the huge pipes, peeling insulation away as he dropped into the dark below.

They panted in the dark. Something clanged, and a new silhouette pulled up out of the gloom. Startled, James almost fired, but he saw the telltale glow of a familiar holo-visor.

"EDI!" Garrus said. "You fell too?"

"Affirmative," the AI said, no trace of strain in her measured voice. "It would appear the Illusive Man used direct control over station function to disconnect sections of gantry. It bypassed my inputs completely."

"He is still the master of this place," Liara said grimly.

"Are you alright?" Garrus asked.

"I am functional," the AI said. "I am detecting station-wide power surges."

"... Self-destruct?"

"I do not believe so."

The entire structure shuddered with enough violence to send him stumbling. There was a grinding, rumbling sound.

"The shaft is closing!" Garrus shouted.

James risked a look up. The red glow above them began to dim as a bulkhead door slid out of the wall, irising toward the center.

"Shepard's in trouble!" James said. "We have to get back up there!"

Liara spun around. "EDI, can you get us out of here?"

"I am having difficulty maintaining contact with the platform," EDI said. She paused, then pointed. "There."

She walked past the asari and hopped up on one of the transformers hugging the wall. In the light of her bright holo, James saw the outline of a panel of some kind. The AI set her feet, then lunged. Sparks flew, brief fireflies in the dark, as she dug her fingers into the seam between the frame and
panel. The piping under her feet dented and folded as she pulled. James could hear the eerie sound of the artificial body straining, the snap of composite fibres coming apart.

All at once the panel came free with a shriek of bolts being torn loose from their housings. EDI tossed it aside. Without elaboration, she climbed in. James gripped his shotgun, now his only weapon, and clambered up to the opening. It must have been intended for maintenance, as he was able to fit, if only just. He followed the swaying hindquarters of the robot body, armored knees banging loudly on the shaft base. His shoulder and neck ached from the fall.

"What's happening out there?" Garrus said from behind him, his voice bouncing strangely off the confining walls. "I can't raise anyone, not even the other squads!"

"EDI is still with us, though," Liara called up, "... right?"

"Affirmative," the AI said. She stopped, bringing the uncomfortable caravan to a halt. There was a series of overloud, reverberating bangs, and she climbed out of the shaft.

James clambered out after her, then helped the other two to their feet. They were in a dim hallway that split into a T-junction some ten meters away, lit by a line of plain lamps reflected off the ceiling. It was eerily quiet but for the distant rumbling.

"I have been forced to severely limit bandwidth," EDI said. "And my signal to the platform is intermittent. There is some form of station-wide interference field. The Normandy sensors report the station itself underwent several sizable power surges, then a portion of the station broke off and vanished from my sensors."

James stared at her. "Say again?"

"Part of the station was a docked ship!" Liara said.

Garrus put the heel of his hand to his helmet in a curiously human gesture. "How could it just vanish?"

"They built the SR-2, they must have-" she broke off abruptly and turned.

Faint footsteps rang down the corridor from the junction they'd just passed. James and Garrus both raised their weapons. A lean figure emerged from the left passage at a slow jog.

"Kai Leng!" Liara shouted.

Leng started with a hiss, casting a glance toward them, then took off running down the right passage.

James stared with an open mouth. "What's he-"

The words didn't make it out of his mouth before Liara tore away down the corridor after the assassin.

Garrus swung his head one way and then the other, then pointed after her. "We'll find Shepard. Go!"

"Covering!" James called back and took off after the asari.

Split up again. The grim thought shot through him as he ran, dodging through a door as it closed around him. Ahead, Liara slipped through another. He tried the comms line to the other marine teams again, but got nothing but static. This whole facility was fighting them.

He rounded a corner to find Liara standing in front of another set of large doors. They were
unmarked, smooth dark metal. She looked at him, panting. His heart pounded. He lifted his shotgun
and gave her a curt nod. She keyed the door open and strode through.

Any ceiling or walls of the room beyond disappeared into the darkness above and around. The far
wall, if it could be called such, was dominated by the full horizon of the dying star around which
Cronos station orbited. The huge window’s filters cut the brilliant light down to a sullen red-orange,
contrasting the swirling mantle of the star into a visible storm of color. The spectacle was faithfully
reflected in the piano-black floor, each tile of which was so perfectly flat as to render the star’s image
without the slightest warp. Somewhat off center, a wide bank of orange holos glowed, many panes
arrayed into a semicircular display. Before it, a black silhouette, was a chair.

A figure, black as the chair, stood before the console. As James burst in behind the asari, Kai Leng
threw out his arm as if to fling the holodisplay away. With no solid armature to connect with, his
frustration availed him nothing, and he spun around. Backlit by the wide bank of orange holopanes,
he looked between Liara and James. He seemed to be shaking, shoulders hunched and arms rigid at
his sides. Images, some kind of process, flittered in in the holopane behind his back.

"He's pissed," James murmured to Liara. "Something ain't right."

"I think 'father' abandoned his newest protégé," she muttered.

The deck shuddered under their feet, a faint rumble echoing through the superstructure. White
against the dark under his visors, Leng bared his teeth. He whipped the sword in a tight arc.

"T’Soni. At least I can finish the job I started on Thessia!" he snarled.

Liara lifted her chin, spreading her fingers. Her voice was one of terrible calm. "You got left behind,
didn’t you?"

"Shut up, alien!" Leng stalked forward, sword held horizontally across his body and right hand
raised.

"Did you get too powerful for him?" Liara went on implacably. "Or are you simply used up?"

Leng’s hand splayed. Orange light flared in its center and speared the air. Liara was faster than
James, despite her armor. She lunged and rolled, clattering across the smooth floor. The energy beam
hit James’ arm ablating with a loud crack of superheated ceramic composite as he tried to dance out
of the way.

Liara flared blue, the dark energy mixing the red of the star into deep purples. "He sent you down
here to lie down and die, didn't he-"

"I was sent down to kill you, and I will!"

"And you're so indoctrinated you couldn't refuse if you wanted to!"

Leng roared and charged, cybernetic toes digging divots into the flooring. James fired. Heat burned
uncomfortably through to his forearm. The shotgun rounds sparkled off Leng's kinetic barrier, most
of the buckshot spread missing outright and digging furrows into the reflected star. Liara threw her
hands out, the air in front of her curling around itself in writhing blue.

The perfectly smooth battleground offered her no projectiles. Without breaking stride, Leng folded
his inhuman legs under him and sprang. The tile under him split and buckled as he sailed high and
clear of the biotic warp, curling up into a ball from which the sword whistled in an arc. It struck
Liara’s hastily upraised forearms, sending a shower of sparks off the armguards.
Stay still, cabron! The shotgun was so damn slow. James sighted Leng's landing spot, but by the time the mechanism responded, all he managed was to blow another hole in the ground where Leng had landed a moment before, obliterating the tile dented by his weight. The assassin was all limbs, flipping and weaving out of any natural movement lines. In less time than it took for the marine’s shotgun to cycle up another shot, Leng kicked Liara in the back, then flipped toward James, spinning. Something, possibly a leg, slammed into James' helmet so hard his vision exploded into sparks. Pain shot down his neck and back and he felt himself falling, unable even to get his arms out.

He probably hit the ground, but gravity wasn't behaving itself. The floor shifted under him. A fist crashed into the tile next to his head, and his vision swam with blue. He heard Liara shout, heard Leng's snarl lurch away. There was a buzzing noise.

"He tried to remake Shepard, didn't he?" Liara stalked into James' field of view as he gathered his spinning head and scattered limbs enough to get his legs under him. His right hand remained clamped around his shotgun.

A shifting shadow ran across the burning star. James fired, hitting only the containment fields and viewport behind it. Something small flipped toward them, catching his eye just in time for it to explode.

A stunning burst of light flashed out James' vision. He heard running footsteps, the hum of biotics. A shout and thud. A figure burst into his swimming, dancing eyesight. He tried to move.

Pain shot through his side, numbed by adrenaline, freezing him in place. Everything seemed to slow. Outlined in blurry red light, Leng stood before him, stretched into a lunge, the bright red slash of sword embedded in James' side. On instinct, James snapped his free hand around Leng's wrist and pulled. Pain and lightheadedness gripped him as he felt something slide through his flesh. The assassin balled his free fist and punched him across the jaw. The impact stunned, even through the guard of his helmet. The blade in his side sawed, ramming into the armored plate just above it.

Plates. James lifted his shotgun and fired one-handed. The assassin rolled his head back, easily evading the weaving barrel, but it wrenched the blade still firmly in his grip. Painkillers flooded James' system, but his vision still doubled. His strength wouldn't last. This is going to hurt.

He planted the steaming muzzle of the shotgun right next to where he was gripping Leng's wrist, and fired.

Stars danced in James' vision. The boom mixed with Leng's howl as the opposing tension suddenly relaxed. There was a pop and tinny squeal of tearing plastic. The assassin stumbled backward as James lurched away as well, falling to one knee. His left hand was still locked around a wrist, the hand gripping the blade buried in his side.

Leng stood before him, trembling with fury. Blood seeped out of one nostril, painting his grimace red. The end of his left arm ended in tatters of artificial muscle and wiring. He raised his right hand. An orange spark bloomed in his palm.

The spark exploded, showering sparks. Leng jerked his arm back in shock, hissing.

Liara staggered past James, limping on a leg that trailed blood. Her pistol slipped from her hand, and she raised her arms.

Leng tried to bolt to the left, but this time James managed to lead him properly. His shotgun barked, shocking his side with pain, but Leng staggered, pieces of his leg and side flying free. The shotgun's heat clip hissed as the assassin sprawled, sliding on the smooth floor. He whipped his arm out again.
A smaller blue warp bowed in front of Liara's outstretched hand. In the center was suspended another grenade. It hung for half a second before being flung back toward the assassin.

James scrunched his eyes shut against the loud pop, but still saw the flare of white behind his eyelids. He fumbled for another heat clip.

The asari jerked her arms upward, yanking Leng into the air. He flailed, trying to get leverage, but he cleared the floor too quickly and was left spinning in mid-air. James heard Liara panting with exertion. The air throbbed. She wrenched her arms down and across each other. There was a sick twisting, crunching sound, and Leng howled. His leg bent the wrong way.

"You'll... end..." he sputtered, reaching for her. He sounded like the words choked him, fought against his mouth. "Resistance is... fruitless."

Liara stalked toward him. "Never, Reaper."

The biotic field snuffed out, dropping Leng like a sack of plastic toys. For all his wounds, he was still fast, the way he managed to get his good leg under him and lurch toward her, right hand extended in a knife strike. Instead of twisting away, Liara extended her cap-ended arm.

A bright orange stiletto sprang from the metal cap. Leng's clawed fingers raked twin trails of blood across her cheek as they passed, just under the visor. Her stump pumped against his sternum, just under the throat.

"Not..." he gurgled, sagging. His fingers spasmed as he toppled over.

"Yes you are," she said quietly.

Kai Leng thrashed, mouth working, then lay still. The red light of the star illuminated the thin hairs of omni-gel blade that had penetrated up through his neck, probably all the way to the spine.

Liara turned and sank to a knee in front of James, the anger deflating. Her face was vacant as she gingerly touched the top of his gauntlet, still locked around Leng's disembodied wrist. Blood oozed out the gash in her leg, the torn edges of micro-fibre clotted with medigel.

"Feel better?" he asked.

"Perhaps... later," she murmured.

He carefully put his shotgun down beside him. "You better check the console. I think he was trying to delete something."

Liara frowned. "Your medical exoskeleton sealed around the wound, but you're probably still bleeding."

"Go check, Doc. Illusive Man's fucking with us."

She nodded and reluctantly stood up. "Do not pull the blade free, whatever you do!"

The thought alone was more than a little nauseating. "No threat of that."

He looked down, tilting his head to see past his helmet guard. The blade lodged firmly in the muscle of his side. He wondered absently if it had hit the intestinal wall or not. He felt a faint twinge of regret that he was going to give Chakwas trouble. The drugs pumping through his system made the world seem distant and sluggish. He was quite content to stay on his knees and not move for the
moment.

Green light, alien in this red and black land, draw his gaze up. A holo materialized before them. It was loosely spherical, a network of interlocking rings spinning over themselves. But it looked messy, stuttering and hitching.

"The prothean VI!" Liara said, hands moving over the console. "Is that what Leng was after? It... oh no. Goddess, no..."

"What's the problem?" James asked.

"It's... the VI has been erased. The basic framework is intact, but its database is blank!" She spun away, turning in a tight circle, fist clenched. "Damn him!"

Cold settled through James' head. He knew he was angry, frustrated, but it felt far away. He looked back down at the stump of cybernetic hand still around the sword's hilt. "Is that... what Leng was doing here?"

"I do not know! I... wait, what is that?"

When he looked up again, the holo had a muddy, shimmering edge to it. He blinked a few times. The multiple screens vanished and were replaced with an image of the Illusive Man, standing as if he was with them in the room. The image of him seemed to take in the room as Liara backed away, tense. He had one hand still in a pocket, and a cigarette between his fingers.

"Ah, T'Soni." The image hitched, then resumed. "Good. I won't have to over-explain myself."

Liara started. "What are you-"

"Don't bother asking questions I won't answer. There's only one that truly matters right now, isn't there?"

"The Catalyst data!"

"The Catalyst." A smile creased the Illusive Man's jigsaw face. "It's the Citadel, of course. But you're one of the smarter ones, so I think you'd already guessed that, too. The size and layout of the Crucible is simply too... particular. And it's clearly incomplete as is. Why else would the Reapers abscond with the entire station? It's important to them. And not just as a trap for organics."

He took a drag on his cigarette. The cherry glowed redly, the light catching in bits of metal embedded in his face.

"But that's not the whole picture," he went on. "You know this too. You've had time to go through the Mars files at your leisure. The protheans sequestered the most vital data, the key to the lock, if you will. The codes that will allow the Crucible to properly uplink to the Citadel."

"And you have that, don't you?" Liara said acidly.

"Of course, I erased any vestige of those codes left on Cronos, or the prothean VI. I have the only copy left."

"Bastard," James muttered.

Liara took a step toward the holo. "What is it you want, you-"

"This is a recording, so don't waste time chasing me." The Illusive Man said. "The innovations of the
*Normandy* will make any attempt to find this ship fruitless. If I may be allowed a terrible cliché, you and I, and Shepard of course, we have an appointment to keep.” He took another drag, and regarded the smoke as it wafted away on invisible currents. "Call it destiny if you prefer. I call it the future of humanity. The Citadel, T'Soni. I'll bring the uplink codes."

His pinprick-blue eyes flicked up, staring out from the screen, penetrating even through a holo. "And you'll bring the Crucible. Don't be late."

The holo snapped off, as did the rest of the display bank, leaving only the sputtering green orb of the blank prothean VI hovering over the chair, haloed in the boiling sun.
"Tell me again what he-"

"I told you everything!" Liara snapped. "'An appointment with destiny' or somesuch varren scat."

Garrus exhaled and leaned his hands on his knees, backside braced on the railing. The Normandy's tiny comms room was cramped, crammed with bodies. A damp heat and the smell of people who'd been packed in armor for a long firefight wafted past his nose. His whole body ached, and his heart worst of all. There had to be more. A creeping panic kept trying to crawl up his spine and sink its claws in. He swallowed it back with difficulty.

"The Illusive Man planned it all, Garrus," Vega said. "He was so smug it almost shorted out his holo."

The human's voice had lost a lot of its casual bravado. There was an undercurrent there, something taut and miserable. The man shouldn't even have been walking around. He leaned heavily on the bulkhead, his face so pale as to have a turian cast in the low light. Stripped to the waist but for his stained shirt, his left arm wrapped around his torso as if holding the layers of bandage in place.

Garrus scrubbed at his forehead, massaging the plates. His mandibles twitched, the muscles tense, and he ran his tongue along the inside of his teeth. Hackett had ordered them back to the Normandy, without Shepard, Kaidan, or Miranda. The station had been searched top to bottom, the admiral had insisted, and all they succeeded in finding was armed Cerberus holdouts and a large gap where the Reaper heart had hung. True to his taunt, the Illusive Man was nowhere to be found. EDI and Traynor had been over the sensor data as many times as a super-powered AI could. A vehicle, a ship, had pulled itself apart from Cronos' superstructure, and engaged a stealth system, vanishing into the darkness of space.

"All of this is immaterial," Hackett interjected. "The attack will go forward."

Garrus turned, frowning. The full-length holo of the Alliance admiral dominated one of the two QEC bays, arms behind his back.

Liara wrung her fist. "It can't be-"

The human held up a holo-hand. "We're already committed, Doctor T'Soni. I started assembling the fleets well before this attack on Cronos Station. They're already moving into position, and we have to assume the Reapers know we're coming. If we delay, we give them the chance to strike preemptively."

"But what's the Illusive Man's game?" Garrus said. "Isn't he... one of them?"

"In the absence of evidence, I'm assuming he is, at best, still operating under the delusion of free will. The way you described him sounds like the way Shepard described Saren at the end."

"Is it too much to hope he will also shoot himself?" Liara muttered.

"Whether or not he's a Reaper agent," Hackett went on, "he's still the enemy."

"We can't start the attack without Shepard!" Vega insisted.

"We already did, Lieutenant. I was quite clear when I ordered the assault on Cronos Station."
"But... who's in command now?" Tali asked, the smooth dome of her mask craning around Vega's bulk.

Hackett shifted, a grimace crossing his face. He looked very tired. "Depends on whether we're looking at Alliance or Citadel protocols, if either of them can be said to exist anymore."

Vega coughed. "Sir, the Alliance still exists so long as I breathe."

Hackett's eyes roved. Garrus wasn't sure what the admiral could actually see, as the comm room visual trackers could only pick up one person at a time, even if it did get all the audio. "I know, Lieutenant. I'm going to simplify it and go with Shepard's contingency instruction. In the case of absence of both her and Major Alenko, she passes ground team command to Garrus Vakarian."

Garrus blinked. It didn't so much surprise him as make real what he'd been avoiding confronting directly - they'd lost Shepard. Cold settled through him.

"Vakarian," Hackett said, "you and your ground team are leaving the Normandy."

"Admiral?" Garrus said, shaking off the shock.

"Take a shuttle and report to Ilos ground station. All possible speed."

"Ilos?!" three people said in unison.

Liara caught Garrus' eye, mouth a little open.

"Sir," Vega rasped, standing straight enough to loom, "with all due respect, you better not be putting us in storage."

Liara put her hand on his arm. "Admiral," she said carefully, "the... Conduit? Is it..."

Hackett nodded. "Correct. You're going directly into the Citadel, Vakarian. You'll be joining what's left of the resistance force there, under the command of Councilor Valarn and the STG. The Citadel has moved again, and now, according to our intelligence, it's currently in orbit at the L2 Lagrange point of Earth, Sol system."

"Earth!" Vega exclaimed. "We're going back!"

"The Lagrange point is some distance from Earth, further than Luna's orbit. But yes, Lieutenant, for all intents and purposes... Earth."

"What are the Reapers doing there?"

Hackett frowned. "Intelligence is spotty. But reports from Admiral Anderson's camp is... they're processing us."

"Not for long," Vega growled, showing his teeth.

"Anderson is still fighting?" Garrus asked.

"His forces are wearing thin," Hackett said. "Just like the rest of us. He's got access to a few ships, enough to get a ground force to reinforce the Citadel assault. When we get the arms open. Vakarian, we need the Citadel arms open, otherwise this whole attack is for nothing."

"I knew it," Liara murmured. "I knew Valarn was up to something! That sneaky little..."
Vega's anger sputtered, but he looked dubious. "Sir, Shepard..."

"The arms need to open," Hackett said.

"Then we look for Shepard and Alenko," Garrus said, looking at Vega.

"The Crucible has to dock and fire," Hackett said. "That has to be our primary objective, Lieutenant. Everything else is secondary."

"But that objective will bring us into the path of the Illusive Man and whatever his plan is," Garrus said.

The admiral nodded. Vega grunted, fingering his bandages.

"Get your team ready," Hackett said. "You'll receive specific objectives and codes within the hour."

"Yes, sir," Garrus said automatically.

"Godspeed, Normandy." The admiral saluted, and the holo winked out.

Vega said something that translated poorly, but his tone made the intention of his curse clear enough. Garrus pushed past him and walked out and down to the war room proper. Joker stood by the display cradle, arms folded, EDI beside him. Javik was absent, no doubt below. The inscrutable prothean seemed immune to agitation.

"Well?" the pilot demanded as soon as Garrus set foot out of the comms room. "He's only getting further away!"

"Joker," Garrus said irritably, "if we went after the Illusive Man, would you even know where to look?"

Joker spluttered for a moment. "Looking is still better than sitting here!" He jabbed a finger to the holo of Cronos station hanging in the tactical display.

"We already know where he's going, Joker," Liara said, coming around Garrus.

"Where we're all going," Vega said, "straight to hell."

Garrus shot him a glare, but the human ignored him. "All right, look!" Garrus said, raising his voice. "I know this isn't the way any of us saw this happening. It was supposed to be Commander Shepard giving us a stirring speech about fighting this battle together, then all of us charging the line in the Normandy alongside the fleet! But that's not how it's going to be."

"So it's Omega-4 all over again, but the wrong way 'round," Joker muttered. "'Cept this time it's Shepard in the soup."

Garrus turned off the holodisplay, emptying the center of the room. "We have to do the same thing we did then - deal with it. Hackett wants the ground team to make an assault on the Citadel through the back door, via Ilos. The Normandy is to link up with the fleet for the main assault."

"Now wait," Joker interjected, "where does that leave us? We don't have a CO!"

Garrus looked at him. "Even if Hackett had commanders available, would you even listen to a random officer Hackett assigned to you?"

The pilot opened his mouth to shoot back, then scowled at him. The expression transformed into a
"You know your people best, Joker," Garrus said. "And you know what kind of information you need available to pilot the ship effectively. Set up a team that can deliver that. If you don't trust yourself to make command calls, assign someone who can."

The pilot rolled his eyes. "This is such a clusterfuck."

"You've always more or less been in charge of flying, haven't you?" Tali pointed out. "Well now it's official."

"EDI," Garrus said, "I think you, or rather the platform, should remain on the ship. We'll be out of signal range for a long time, and we don't know if and when we'll be able to re-establish it. But more than that, you probably shouldn't be splitting your attention when the ship will possibly be facing possibly the entire Reaper force."

EDI looked at Joker, then back. Her face was impassive.

"Do you disagree?" Garrus asked.

"I do not disagree with your assessment of the situation," she said. "However, it is difficult to dismiss the number of scenarios in which my presence might be required on the ground."

"If we do re-establish contact with the Normandy once onboard the Citadel," Tali said, "you won't be far away."

Garrus nodded. "You're experiencing the same doubts we all are, EDI. There's no clear-cut path here. Hackett's plan seems sound enough, and we have to use our strengths as best we can. Yours is the ship."

Liara leaned forward. "EDI, have you had any contact at all with the Leviathan?"

"I have not," EDI replied. "However, in anticipation of the call to attack the Reapers, I have been working with the geth to create a code signal I believe the Leviathan would understand. I will use the extended geth network to propagate it as widely as possible, in hopes the Leviathan will hear it. Unfortunately, it is the best I can do."

"We'll just have to hope."

Vega coughed. "What about the Illusive Man's..." he waved a hand.

"What?" Garrus said.

The marine looked around. "He's got some kind of..." he waggled his fingers, "I don't know. You were there, Garrus, you saw him stop Alenko in his tracks."

A flutter of discomfort traveled the room.

"We... don't know what that really was," Liara said. "Some of the elite Cerberus 'phantom' troops have scatter fields, it might have been something we couldn't see."

"Looked way too much like mind control to me."

"We don't know that," Liara insisted.

"We don't know either way" Garrus interjected, "and we won't until we're in the moment.″ He
tapped his fist against the cradle edge. "Everyone make sure you have a load of neuroshock charges ready when we make our push. We're going into the Citadel, which means a whole civilian population that may or may not have been in contact with Reaper forces for some time."

Vega sucked his teeth. "Us against the whole Citadel..."

"We have allies on the inside," Garrus said. "As well as on Earth."

"Earth is a long way away," Joker said.

"Admiral Anderson is apparently ready with what ships they have left. Supposedly the Reapers have been using the Citadel as a processing facility, so they've been moving humans there somehow. We don't have a lot to work with, but we'll make do. Joker, get your command hierarchy sorted out. Ground team, get your gear together. We're leaving for Ilos as soon as possible. We can rest on the way."

Vega stepped forward. "Sir, I'm not staying behind."

Garrus regarded him, eyeing the bandage.

"I'm useless here." He squared his shoulders. "If Liara can go, then I'm going too."

The turian looked him up and down, holding in a sigh. It was not an argument he wanted to get into.

"You'll have a forty-hour cruise on the Kodiak to get as healed up as you can," he said. "You'd better talk to Chakwas."

Vega nodded. As he turned to pass by, Garrus put a hand on his shoulder.

"You're okay with Shepard's decision?" he asked.

The lieutenant shifted his weight. "This hasn't been a by-the-book Alliance outfit for a long time, has it?" He looked around the room with a half-smile, then back to Garrus. "You've been involved in this since the beginning. Way longer than I have. I think we all trust Lola's judgement, and it's not the time for a pissing match. An N's gotta be adaptable." He clasped Garrus' hand. "I got your back."

"We all do," Tali said.

Vega turned made for the exit, his stride subdued.

"Ilos," Liara said quietly. "I never thought I'd get to see it one last time." She looked up. "I... I will go prepare. Glyph will surely be useful once we arrive, with the right data libraries..." Already lost in her thoughts, the asari also turned to leave.

"C'mon, EDI," Joker said, "I need to talk to Traynor."

The room emptied. Garrus leaned against the display cradle, staring unseeing at the floor. His stomach turned over itself. "This doesn't feel right at all," he muttered.

"Being in command?" Tali said.

He started, looking around. "Being in command... now. We've been working toward this moment for so long..." He shook his head. "We're hurt, running low on morale, and missing our leader. And yet we have to go fight the most important battle any of us will ever fight."

She came around the cradle and put her hand over his. "I think we're doing exactly what Shepard would want us to do."
He nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, you're probably right about that. It just... feels wrong. How did we let the Illusive Man get one over on us like this?"

"I'm still kicking myself for not realizing he was hiding a ship in the station superstructure!" She hissed a curse. "The power signatures were all over the place, and I spotted the eezo core where it didn't need to be... but with all those labs they were running, I thought they were testing structures!"

"What if he already killed her?" Garrus said, voice going hollow. The numbness of despair hummed and crackled around him, teasing his defenses for an opening. Threatening to overwhelm him.

Tali shuddered, squeezing his hand before letting go. "We have to hope," she said at length. "She's survived all kinds of situations..."

"But she's always escaped those situations, and the Illusive Man knows that. If he did the smart thing she'd be..." He swallowed.

"What Liara said sounded a lot like he needed her for something."

"But what could that be, though? He rebuilt her, there's nothing about her that he couldn't replicate if he wanted to."

Tali's head came up. "Yes there is, Garrus! The prothean Cipher!"

Garrus inhaled, mandibles dropping. "Could that be it?"

"Can you think of any other truly unique thing about Shepard, at least from a cold tactical perspective?"

Garrus rubbed his jaw idly. "Could it have something to do with the uplink data from the Catalyst VI? That's what Liara said, right? That the Crucible requires a certain code set to properly link up to the Citadel? So he must need a prothean mind-stamp to execute some part of his plan."

"And we have..." she prompted.

"Javik. If all else fails, we have Javik." He rubbed his temples. "This is getting too complicated. If any one thing fails-"

"We adapt," Tali said, tone matter-of-fact, "just like we always have."

He chuckled darkly. "That's what this has been since the beginning, hasn't it? Just a long series of making it up as we go along."

"It's going to be a very long flight to Illos."

"Remember the first time?"

"Yes. Keelah, I couldn't sleep. I went over my equipment so many times. Then I..." Her head tilted, the gleam of her eyes going narrow.

"What?"

She laughed, low and soft. "I'm so terrible. I hacked into the ship camera feeds and watched everyone."

"You... did?"
"It made me feel better." Tali shrugged. "I know humans think it's wrong. But I saw... I saw everyone was just as nervous and restless as I was. It made me feel less alone."

Garrus tried to think back. His memory of that night seemed distant indeed, from before they had any idea of the real scope of the threat.

"I hope I wasn't doing anything," he tapped a finger, "incriminating."

Her eyes twinkled. "Oh no, that was Kaidan. And Shepard, I assume, after he finally stopped wearing a hole in the floor and went to visit her."

There had always been a rumor, one that he'd assumed to be truer than most. "... and?"

"There was no camera feed from her cabin."

"But you tried, didn't you?"

Tali folded her arms and clucked her tongue at him. "Go ahead and assume the worst, why don't you."

He chuckled. "Okay, Miss Curiosity vas Normandy, you better get things settled with the Flotilla."

She moved away, then slowed. "I can't believe it's... time." She shook her head. "Can't think that way, can we? Garrus..."

He looked at her. Tali held herself straight, but her fingers wrung into themselves, a curious mix of youth and the admiral she'd grown into.

"Even though it's not like we'd imagined it to be, I'm glad I'm here. I..." She trailed off, and irritably bumped the base of the display cradle with her toe. "I don't know how Shepard does it, she always seems to know what to say."

"How about this; I'm glad you're here too, Tali." Garrus spread his hands. "We've both been at odds with our own people, haven't we? Both been trying to figure out how to fight this war, and where to fit in ourselves while we do it. We're lucky to have this middle ground to work in. And people like you, who see that we don't have to be perfect turians to matter."

"That's... yes, I think that's just about right." She cocked her head. "Shepard would be proud of you, Garrus."

"I plan on asking her myself."
Cerberus You Know

Four walls, door, a few meters, door, guard. Hallway, cockpit.

She ran through the sequence again, trying to visualize every detail, to feel the hum and throb of muscles, the thunder of biotics. Static, impact, sweat, adrenaline.

She tried to remember what willpower felt like.

Your perfect mind, perfect discipline... and this is where it's gotten you.

Miranda flexed her hands, sitting neatly on her knees. They responded, if sluggishly. She tried to picture killing a guard again. Crack, snap, the bang of armor on the deck. The picture was there, fully formed in her mind, but colorless. She could walk through every step logically, but her emotions remained unengaged, a bottomless void without texture. Her body was a machine possessed of the code of action but lacking any kind of motive force. It took all her concentration to remain focused on why she wanted to even escape this ship in the first place.

She raised her eyes. Across from her sat Major Alenko, still decked in full armor. The curve and color of the blue plates distracted her for the umpteenth time, the way the dim light inverted itself in the opalescent albedo, shifting abruptly to white stripes then back to midnight blue. She tried to drag her concentration back to the matter at hand, but it remained fixated on the landscape of scrapes and scuffs marring the surface. The winged Spectre logo, the Alliance rank code.

Miranda ground her teeth, or tried to. She got little more than a tightening of the jaw. Why had she been angry again?

A few meters from her, the door clanked and cycled open. Silhouetted in the light of the hallway beyond, a lone figure entered, borne on a waft of tobacco smell. Far be it from the Illusive Man to use a scentless vaporizer. He denied himself nothing for the supposed comfort of others.

"Where's Shepard?" Alenko rasped, true as the sunrise. His voice was a shock in the stillness of the closed cell.

"Where she can't get into more trouble," the Illusive Man said indulgently.

Miranda dragged her eyes up as the door closed behind him. It had been an unknown number of hours in this cell since they'd seen him last. The slash of light closed swiftly on a rectangle of expensive silk in a perfect, high-threadcount weave. The suit swished softly as its occupant raised his hands to his face. There was a sharp click, and a spark of light and the tang of butane. He inhaled, then exhaled slowly, relishing it. How he still managed to care about his hundred-thousandth cigarette was a mystery to her, but he evidently did.

It was the mess his face had become, highlighted in the dull red of the cinder, that prickled at her stomach. Like rot, it spread up from his neck and out from beneath his sleeves. A black plague of dark filaments and tiny lights, piercing blue to match his glowing eyes. Terrible, and terribly fascinating in equal measure.

What had she been thinking about again? The slope of the bulkhead tried to entrance her, the dim landscape of wiring and ductwork in the darkness along the ceiling.

"We're almost to our destination," the Illusive Man said. He swept his arm out in a wide arc, trailing a wisp of blue smoke. Miranda's head throbbed, her vision blurring. She squeezed her eyes shut
against the intrusion in her mind.

"Isn't it beautiful?" he purred.

She heard Alenko inhale, and opened her eyes.

The crescent of a planet hung below them, huge, cloud-covered and shining blue, sunlight ringing the film of atmosphere in a golden halo. Swirls of clouds pearlesced in the light, tracing patterns over the fading hue of ocean.

Where the image came from was anyone's guess. If it even was an image. Miranda blinked several times, blurring the edges, but the room she could feel under her hands didn't re-appear. Vertigo gnawed at her, the dizzying feeling of empty space competing with the conflicting confinement.

Earth. Earth hung below them, its spin tracking an infinitesimally slow course.

Suspended above the planet at his feet, the Illusive Man took a drag on his cigarette. "I wish you could see it like I do."

"A prize?" Alenko said, sullen.

"Don't think so small, Major. Earth is our birthplace, but far from our ultimate destiny."

"I know, you want the entire galaxy."

"An adequate start. We think too little of ourselves, you know. We assume only the most medial goals, and we resign ourselves to assuming the great questions, the greatest questions, will always be beyond us. But humanity can rise above all of this."

"And the other species..."

"The Reapers chose us, Major. Beings wiser by far decided we were the best of this cycle." He inhaled more smoke, then blew it out slowly. "But their prey has evolved. We've been refined in the fires of millions of years, to emerge more worthy than even they calculated! They wanted to turn all of humanity into another Reaper, but instead, we will make the Reapers our instrument."

"Your instrument," Miranda said. It was difficult just to inflect the phrase, to imply the disagreement.

He glanced at her. "I've guided humanity this far, Miranda. Without me we would've had barely a token resistance. This isn't a mantle I take lightly, but I will take it. And I'll see our first home returned to us. But that's not where we're going today." He gestured again. The Earth receded, gaining speed until it sped away to a blue dot.

A new mass swept into view, coming from underneath them. A long cylinder, lit brightly on one side and fading into total black on the other. It took Miranda an extra moment to recognize the Citadel, closed tightly on itself. The viewpoint slowed until the station rolled beneath them in stately quiet.

"Into the arms of the Reapers," Alenko muttered.

"Quite the opposite."

The major folded his arms, armor grinding against armor. "You can't possibly imagine you have the capacity to control the Reaper system."

The Illusive Man snapped his fingers. "System. That's the key, Major. And that," he pointed down to the Citadel, "is the center. The Crucible, my operating system bypass."
"You're mad-"

"How much of the Crucible data have you examined, Major? Do you actually know how it functions? Of course you don't. Don't presume to instruct me."

"And Shepard?"

The Illusive Man regarded Alenko for a moment. "I won't burden you with details, but she has a part to play."

Miranda smirked. You mean you won't 'burden' us with any useful information.

"This isn't a power you can control," Alenko said.

"See how you limit yourself, Major? You, who have overcome so much in your life, will still erect your own barriers."

"It isn't a power you should control."

Cerberus' founder shook his head, and turned on his heel. Behind and beneath him, the image of the Citadel grew steadily larger until more and more sunlit detail came into view. A chill settled in Miranda's gut as he looked her over.

"He won't budge," she said, trying to summon challenge through the fog in her mind, "so you assume that I will be the weak link. That's why you simply didn't dispose of me, isn't it?"

He puffed on his cigarette. "Why would I kill one of my very best agents?"

"I haven't been your agent for a long time."

"A temporary setback." He tapped his temple, making the smoke trail twirl. "Oh, Miranda, can't you see?" He might have almost smiled, but his split face wouldn't crease around the expression. "This new world will be one where you aren't an anomaly. A world where humanity is expressed in its best possible form!"

She stared back at him. The words 'best possible' stuck in her throat.

"You know I'm right." He leaned forward. "Look at what you achieved, when given the resources! The impossible! Imagine when all of humanity will be as capable as you. The things we'll achieve will surpass anything we can dream of now."

"What happened in that cave, Jack?"

The Illusive Man, or rather the man who matched the aged facial reconstruction of the mercenary Jack Harper, the likeness of which had been scrubbed from every system she'd ever scoured for information, started like she'd stepped on his foot. He caught himself quickly, but his robot-blue eyes narrowed as he took a long drag on his cigarette. The numbing fog in Miranda's mind wavered.

All at once, Alenko jerked to his feet in stiff pantomime and lurched forward. His hands came out, blue fire limning his armor, fingers straining for the Illusive Man's throat. Miranda's heart fluttered.

The Illusive Man whirled and his hand shot out, fingers splayed. He said nothing, but the feeling in Miranda's head swelled and throbbed. The biotic ground to an erratic halt, teeth bared and white in the dim room. She could hear his breath squeeze out of his throat, the bubble of rage popping and fading back into the numb emptiness.
"Don't be foolish, Major," the Illusive Man said. "You see, I already have control." There was a hum of tension in his voice. The blue lights under his skin pulsed as he advanced, pushing the biotic back as if with an invisible force. Alenko stumbled against the bench and flopped back down with a clatter of armor, arms dropping to his sides.

The Illusive Man turned, lip curled. The image of the Citadel far below them faded back into darkness. He pulled a last drag from his cigarette, then dropped it to the floor and stood on it. He looked at Miranda as he straightened his jacket, but said nothing. He didn't have to.

The door cycled shut behind him with a sarcophagus clank.

_How did you..._ Miranda stared at Alenko across the small room. The best she'd been able to muster was a verbal thrust, but the major had almost been able to actually lay a hand on the Illusive Man.

"What does he want from us?" The question came out of him in a dull monotone. Alenko's face jumped, then settled, a wave of agitation fleeting across it as if he was disturbed by his own lack of emotion.

"Shepard, obviously," Miranda said. "You're just... leverage. He knows you were one of the forces that kept him from claiming her. He'll use that, use you against her."

He rubbed his fingers under his visor, then stared at them as if certain truths were written on the pads of his gloves. "I... was?"

Miranda sniffed softly. The things this man didn't know, or chose not to acknowledge... "I don't think you were ever far from her mind, Major."

His sidelong glance asked what his mouth wouldn't - how would you know?

_I was deep within every second of your lover's existence, Kaidan Alenko. _Her mouth curled. _Surely after all this time, you have questions to ask._

"Ask you what?" he said, venom seeping into his voice. "The litany of places you touched her? Every time you invaded her against her will?"

She caught his glare. _Idiot, I'm the only reason-_ The anger dissipated as soon as it swelled, settling into a cold pit. His, too, as he looked away, blinking it back to a dull glaze. She thought of how it had felt to admit to Shepard the truth about the coercion chip she'd wanted to install.

"It started that way," she admitted. "She was a project."

"Not a person," he muttered.

"Not at first, but that changed. One 'project' to another."

He frowned at that. Was it worth another tiresome recitation of her father's long shadow? Alenko had been in the room when she'd blown him through the facility's inch-thick security glass. Surely he'd seen the eerie resemblance between her and Oriana, too perfect for any pedestrian mix of genes.

"She treated _me_ like a person," Miranda said, "even though I did little to deserve it."

"I guess the Illusive Man didn't?" His voice grew softer, a low rasp threaded with a touch of real sympathy.

"I didn't expect it of a man like that. I knew my father, and I knew only one man more single-minded
in his vision. Shepard was... different."

"There's no one else like her."

He said it so quietly she barely heard, but she understood something then. It wasn't extraordinary will that still moved him, but a singular motive, the bright star around which his whole world orbited. The same feeling that must have stirred her when she'd moved to protect Oriana. A focus that occluded all others, made the rest of her concerns fade into the background. In the face of a threat as overwhelming as the Reapers tearing through the very fabric of sentient life, Alenko had a lodestar on which to fix his entire being.

"I know you brought her back," he said thickly. "It's just..."

"Difficult to reconcile that despite his crimes, the Illusive Man is correct in that we might not have gotten this far without the things he's done?"

Alenko was silent for a long time, but for the bare nod of his head. Perhaps he wasn't as dogmatic as she'd always believed.

"It seems ridiculous to me now," Miranda said at length. "He genuinely believed Shepard would be converted to his cause. He rarely makes mistakes. Even the projects you imagine to be failures had results he nurtured. But Shepard was a mistake, and the biggest one I've seen him make."

"Guess money can't buy everything."

She smirked at the simplistic phrase. It was still so hard to think straight. "It may not matter, if he succeeds."

"Do you think he can?"

"I don't... know." The traitorous thought crossed her mind - did she want him to? *You will not be an anomaly.*

Alenko grimaced. "Who's Jack?"

"Jack Harper," Miranda said. "I think that's who he is. I only have small fragments of the story. It took place largely on Palaven, and the turian hierarchy has all but scrubbed the incident from history."

"'Incident'?"

"An artifact and a strange cult, around the end of the First Contact War. You'd recognize the name of one of the turians that was killed - Desolas Arterius."

"Saren's... brother."

"Correct."

"How long have you known this?"

"I've had fragments for some time, but no name to go with them. It was all part of my research into the Reaper problem and where it came from. It didn't come together until after I left Cerberus. And even then, I'm still missing most of the picture."

"Nothing we can use?"
Miranda shook her head. "I can't see how, at this point."

The major grunted and fell silent, folding his arms over his chest again. The small room hummed, the quiet hymn of a ship in drive. Louder than the SR-2, devoid of the sound-dampening and other refinements Shepard’s ship enjoyed. Miranda had seen very little of this one, just its rough edges. This vessel had been built for a specific purpose, she felt sure, and little else.

Could he actually succeed? Break the cycle by controlling the Reapers?

Miranda had spent her whole life observing people, learning the ins and outs first of humans and then of other species. Learned how to judge what they wanted, what they feared, and how best to make them do what she wanted. Time and again she found everyone had their limits, their weaknesses. Humans, it seemed, would always fall back into the same old patterns. Those who grew truly knowledgeable and wise would do so just in time to die off, and the new generation would have to spend their lives trying to get to the same place.

Would it take something new, something drastic, to break that endless cycle and draw humanity into a new state of being? To transcend once and for all the limits laid on them by thoughtless biology? Miranda shook herself. She looked across at Alenko.

"How can you sleep, at a time like this?" she said.

His eyes cracked open, a glaze of darkness under his helmet. "It's something you have to learn, as a marine. Sleep when you can, because the fight could start up again at any moment."

"Aren't you worried about—"

"I'm worried about everything, Lawson. But when the opportunity opens up, I don't want to be too tired to take advantage of it."

But if the Illusive Man succeeds... The thoughts still dogged her. The images flooded her mind despite herself; Reapers standing sentinel over entire civilizations, ready to crush any insurrection. But it went deeper than that. She saw a future wherein the integration of Reaper tech into every individual was normalized. Everyone re-written, in a more subtle and acceptable fashion than husks. Instead of combat drones, the new process would eliminate uncontrolled genetic variance. No more disease, hunger or inequality. Every human at their peak potential. And that peak moved ever higher as the centuries passed.

I will no longer be an anomaly.

"Major," she said.

She heard him exhale through his nose. Annoyance, or something else, she couldn't tell.

"What?" he said finally, voice flat.

"Tell me about the Cerberus you knew."

He looked at her. The ghost of hostility hung around him, but focused less at her than the entire situation. "Cerberus," he said.

The strange pressure wrapped around her mind. Soothing, calming. Numbing. "The one you saw, the one you know. The places like Binthu and Nepheron. The husks and thorian creatures..."

Convince me the Illusive Man needs to fail.
The Reaper's long black body pierced the sunset horizon ahead of them, a mountain of darkness striding across the gnarled forests of Ilos. Flames spread in its wake, limning the treetops and scorching the sky.

"We're too late…" T'Soni breathed.

"No!" Vakarian snapped from the copilot's chair.

"I need to know where I'm going, Doc!" Vega said. One hand around the Kodiak's control yoke, he activated something on his console. The howl of the thrusters changed pitch.

"Liara, get him the entrance coordinates, I'll keep trying to raise the garrison here!"

Javik gripped Shear, running his thumbs across its familiar machined surface, trying to find his warrior's calm. They were close, too close to be denied now. In his own time, his battle had been a steady retreat. In his darkest nights, alone, he had allowed himself the fantasy of going on the attack. Even after his resurrection, he had barely allowed himself to imagine this moment. It was finally happening. Even their failures, the temporary victories of the enemy, would not dampen the heat burning in his mouth.

He stared over the shoulders of his new, mismatched and fractured tal to the viewscreen. Surely the Reapers felt it too, the balance shifting. Did they finally feel something akin to fear?

The Reaper standing in their way should have struck him with despair. It only hardened his determination.

I will see you brought low!

"Shit," Vega said, "that's where we're going?"

His viewscreen was thick with red warning dots, smaller Reaper units and artillery pieces swarming the ground.

"Better strap in," the human warned, "I'm no Joker, or even Esteban! This is gonna be rough!"

Javik leaned back and closed his eyes. Staring at what he could not control would only infuriate him. This was the truest test of the bond of the tal - to let your fate be guided by another's hand, to trust the path laid out by others would lead to your own goals.

He listened, let the ken wash over him. Scattered shards of conversation as Vakarian tried to communicate with allies already stationed here. The relay was intact, but the Reaper closed in fast. Communications were failing, the teams scattered as some tried to flee through the relay, others into the forest, and still more made the useless attempt to hold the monster back. Their only mercy: the relay was underground, the walls of stone and earth a mute defence against immediate destruction.

The Kodiak jinked and shuddered around them. Shouted warnings and directions mingled together. They were hit once, and a second time. The thrusters whined and howled, straining. They jostled violently as the craft juked in time to Vega's swearing and excited whooping.

The ken in the air built to feverish, the sharp tang of pounding adrenaline, flavored differently for each alien except for the ever-silent quarian. Javik set his teeth and hung on to his restraints.
Something did the Kodiak violence, slamming him into his seat. They bounced, the craft shuddering and squealing as its thrust failed. Their surroundings dissolved into noise and vibration, until finally it came to a stop. Javik opened his eyes. The view ahead of the forward viewscreen was dark, the pane itself cracked in several places.

"Everyone out," Vakarian said.

"Goddess," T'Soni said, "we made it inside at least." She unbuckled her restraints and moved to the hatch.

"Told you I shouldn't have been flying," Vega said, pushing himself up.

"It's still a better job than I would have done," Vakarian said. "There should be a rally point somewhere ahead."

Even with all he knew, Javik was not prepared for the sight beyond the Kodiak's door.

A thunderous boom echoed from above, rattling the ground beneath their feet. Dust and stones rained down on them, pinging off the hull of the Kodiak and the armored bodies around him. Lights came on one by one, helmet- and gun-mounted lamps drawing swaying pillars in a dust-filled air.

Javik's breath came hard, his chest sore. The darkness just beyond his sight oppressed him with its secrets, its history. The tomb of the Wayfinder and his people stretched into the earth all around him. Those traitors, hated in his time. How could Javik rightly condemn the Wayfinder now that thousands of years after his death, Ksad Ishan's heretic way still shone clear?

The lights danced around him as he stared numbly at the shape protruding from the closest wall. The design was almost identical to the casket he had lain in undisturbed for thousands of years, the only survivor of his people. Unbidden, his feet took him closer. The grime of centuries lay thickly on the curved lid, obscuring the color of the composite metal beneath. The end-cap was etched with lettering spelling out 'Eyale Junan Ker'.

"Who were you?" Javik murmured.

His hand trembled as he reached out and laid his fingers on the lid. There was no ken to speak of, just the faintest echo of the younger species that had passed this way, furtive and hurried.

The status indicators that should have been burning had long since died, turning what was supposed to have been an ark of survival into a tomb. Had Eyale suspected when she closed her eyes to sleep, they would never open again?

He balled his fist and banged it on the sarcophagus. The Wayfinder had suffered no weakness, had sacrificed all to fulfill his path.

A touch on his arm startled him. "Javik," T'Soni said. "I wish we had time…"

"This place is dead," he said thickly, turning away.

Distant rumbling echoed through the halls.

"We better hurry," Vakarian said, coming down to them. "This way."

The smell of running water filled Javik's nostrils as they scrambled down the rock fall. Their flashing and dancing lamps revealed the high hallways stretched out ahead of them, vanishing upward into darkness. The entire length and breadth dotted with stasis sarcophagi long since gone dark. Dead or
alive, Javik had not seen so many of his people in one place in a long time. Even his own resting place had not counted so many.

A flash of light drew his eyes upward. Far above, the darkness split into shafts of yellow, illuminating the stories upon stories of lifeless pods set into the walls far above. A crash reverberated down the hallway as pieces of masonry peeled away. Something moved in the gap, massive and ponderous, sundering the structure further.

The turian shouted a warning. Loose masonry bounced erratically as it fell, crashing into protruding pods and smashing cross-beams. Dark energy boiled and surged around him.

"Keep running!" T'Soni shouted.

On instinct, he called up his own aura and threw it upward without breaking stride. Clumsy as the field was, between himself and the asari, they were able to arrest the killer momentum of the blocks and debris just enough to skip and dodge between as they rained down around them.

A watery shaft of light opened up ahead. From far above, the Reaper bellowed its wordless dirge, laden with the promise of obliteration. A sound devoid of challenge, the earthquake howl of emotionless inevitability.

They pounded down the corridor and burst out into pandemonium. Armored figures splashed through a wide stone chamber stacked with military equipment and supply crates stacked between the massive roots twisting and cracking the ancient stones. The air was thick with panic, and the water danced and splashed as the encroaching enemy shook the ground with each step.

"Where is the relay?" Javik demanded, skidding to a halt.

"Further in," Vakarian panted. "We have to-

The rear wall imploded with a resounding crash, spraying water and stone. Through the flying debris came the blue-black segmented leg of a Reaper, scraping along the ground and churning up screaming soldiers and paving stones in equal measure as it demolished half the support pillars down the left side. Like a great beast shedding its fleas, a rain of Reaper shock troops came tumbling through the opening. Some were crushed by their own flailing lord, but many more landed with a splash and pulled themselves up, heedless of their comrades.

"C'mon!" Lieutenant Vega called. He tore off to their right, his stride showing a visible favoring of his still-wounded side.

The turian hesitated only a moment, snapping off shots down toward the invading monsters. Tali'Zorah shouted at him, pulling his arm. He turned and stumbled after her.

Javik spotted the human's target - the nose of a vehicle jutting from behind one of the huge roots still gamely holding up the rapidly failing vault above them. The cool water dragged on Javik's feet as he sloshed after Vega, trying to keep his footing on the slippery stones. The ground rumbled with the Reaper's thrashing, and weapon rounds hissed and sizzled through the humid air, taking divots out of the walls and roots.

The parked tank was a squat, unlovely affair with a crew cockpit mounted well forward of six huge wheels on movable axles. There was a hatch open in its side, and a human in full armor paced outside it, fighting to be heard over the comms.

"One side, soldier!" Vega ordered, skidding to a halt in front of her. "Spectre team! We have to get to the relay!"
"Like hell!" the woman retorted. "We have to-"

"Fool, you cannot defeat this enemy here!" Javik snapped.

"This is my Grizzly!" she said, planting her feet. "My team-

Vakarian uncoiled like a spring, cracking his fist across the soldier's jaw. She snapped back, eyes rolled back in her head. Vega barked in wordless surprise as he reached out and caught her before she landed facedown in the water.

The tableau held for a breathless moment. The heat of rage boiled off Vega as he teetered on the edge of explosion, Vakarian staring him down. Javik was close enough to ken the acidic tang of conflict as the human swallowed it all and pushed the dazed woman toward T'Soni, who piled her on a supply crate, face guilty.

"Get in!" Vega said to them, voice twisted with a sharp edge of anguish. "We're out of time!"

They all piled into the open hatch, Vakarian pointedly pushing them along. The ground jumped under their feet, and a large block of masonry bounced off the vehicle's roof, rocking it on its shock absorbers. Javik clambered into the brutish machine, banging his head on the uneven arrangement of bulkheads closing over him. Ahead of him, Vega pushed himself through a hatch into what must have been the pilot's chair, while T'Soni and Tali'Zorah squeezed into the crew space. Javik saw right away this vehicle was not designed to carry troops in any number.

The engine roared to life. Vega opened a comm channel, and it came alive with panicked voices and shouted commands. "Get to the relay!" he barked. "All hands, get to the relay! It's your only chance! Damn it all to hell, ignore the Reapers and get to the relay!"

The outdoor hatch closed behind them, and Vakarian shoved past Javik, cramming him further against the asari. "Get us moving, Vega!" he said, leaning over the lieutenant. "That corridor! Go through anyone who gets in our way!"

"Madre de dios!" the human swore, "All these soldiers - How can we be more important than them?"

"We're not," Vakarian said, twisting to point back at Javik, "he is. The Crucible is worthless if we can't make it fire! Drive!"

The human explored the considerable depths of his curses and invocations, but he jammed his foot on the accelerator. The engine roared and the tank lurched forward, plowing through the layer of water. Javik could barely see anything of what was happening outside. He groped for purchase, squinting at the glimpses of viewscreen flashing past Vakarian and the human.

Gunfire pinged off the hull. The Reaper keened again, rattling them with its thunder. Vakarian shouted instructions, banging his fist on the bulkhead as the vehicle slewed left and right and bounced violently over obstacles.

"That way!" The turian almost climbed over Vega's shoulder, jabbing at the air with an outstretched talon.

The sounds of battle receded somewhat as they plunged into another tunnel, bouncing down, then up and back down again through the underpasses.

I will see the end of the Reaper reign. Javik's teeth rattled in his head. I will...

"There it is!" Vakarian exclaimed. "Spirits, the wall is coming down!"
Javik couldn't help it. He shouldered the turian aside and strained to see past Vega's shoulder. Just once, he would look upon the work of the Wayfinder. He had seen relays many times in the darkness of space. The inscrutable machines formed a common backdrop scattered throughout the galaxy. Voiceless, vital and apparently dumb, but always sinister in their mystery.

This relay, and its mate on the Citadel, was the only one he'd ever known to be built by non-Reaper hands. Outlined in blinking energy readings in the tank's display, it rose vertically above the end of the long runway. The structure around it looked like it might once have been an Inusannon cathedral to some long-forgotten god, its monumental architecture repurposed by the Wayfinder to honor a different purpose. Where there once might have been a great altar, a spinning core of light lashed the walls with pulsing auroras of blue and white.

Vega shouted a half-wordless war cry as the tank accelerated under them, its bulky hull straining under this outsized speed. The rear wall of the temple was coming apart, sundered by black claws and a shocking spear of red light. The relay itself shuddered, its energy readings bouncing violently.

Vakarian half shoved Javik, half simply hung onto him as the tank plunged forward. "If they destroy the relay-"

The tank bounced as it slammed into the sharp incline up to the altar, its nose rebounding. The wheels scraped and spun, their momentum carrying them forward. High above them, the Reaper fired again. Its red lance slashed across the relay arms. The ball of blue-white energy at its core distorted and bowed, rippling outward. A wave of blue ripped through the tank, hitting Javik in the chest. He heard T'Soni cry out, his own voice joining hers. The tank skidded, slewed, riding up on three wheels.

Time stopped. Javik was briefly aware of a deep and yawning blackness, a weightlessness, a sense of total disconnection from himself. Time stuttered. Color and sensation flickered in a kaleidoscope, drowned by a noise so loud it might have been the silence of vacuum.

Everything came back all at once, sped up, as if making up for the debt. The noise became crashing, the sound of metal on metal and splitting welds. The disconnection snapped back into overly-acute sensations of bodies striking bodies and unyielding bulkheads.

The noise finally subsided. It was pitch black, but Javik was somewhat surprised to find he could still feel his body, his breath heaving in and out. Pain came with it, the welcome pean of a body still present, of senses confused by the sudden transition from breakneck motion to stillness. The ken of the others swirled around him, thick and confused, but oddly... familiar. The tank rumbled and sputtered, its engine winding down, axles spinning.

"Are we… still alive?" said a quavering voice. The quarian.

The human groaned and cursed his deity.

"I have to stop traveling this way," Vakarian said. "Where- spirits, Vega, don't move your leg, it's on my face."

"Did we make it?" T'Soni asked.

"Something - oof - knocked all the main systems out," Vega said. "But we're not moving anymore."

"And we're upside down."

Something pushed into Javik's side, then over his chest. He growled in irritation. A structure of some sort was jammed between his shoulders.
"Where's the hatch?" T'Soni said into the dark. "I found a latch but it won't open."

"We're probably sitting on it," the human grunted. "Here…"

There was a scuffle and thud, and the turian swore. Javik felt Vega's breath, his fading adrenaline brush close. The lieutenant grunted and strained, shouldering into him. Javik growled and shoved back, planting his feet on whatever hard surface was below him, reaching past Vega's arms to the surface he pushed against.

The portal gave with a grating screech. Heat assailed him, washing his face and hands through the cracked hatch and bringing with it the stink of cooked ablating. Orange light flickered somewhere beyond, bouncing off a smooth, blackened floor, and he heard voices and a hissing sound.

"Well, we're somewhere," Vega muttered.

"But what came through with us?" Javik replied, pushing past him.

He pulled himself out the open hatch and onto the scorched floor beneath. Groping for Shear, he rolled to his feet and scanned the surroundings.

The tank was indeed on its side, the hatch emerging from between the armored axles. Past the thick studded wheels, flames leapt and danced. Lined in the hellish glare, lean figures scurried to and fro. One wielded an extinguisher, spraying sheets of foamy white over the fire. Sparks sputtered in fitful gouts, shooting blue and white and strobing over metal twisted by impact. Salarians, he realized. Not Reaper troops. The humidity, stone and water of Ilos had been replaced by dry, sooty darkness.

The human marine climbed to his feet beside him, taking in the scene, then looking behind them. He murmured an oath.

Darkness and fire made the large room close. Shadows played along cables scattered to and fro, woven in and out of tumbled and warped structures. Smoke twisted and swirled, vanishing into an unknown vault above. Here and there, Javik saw limbs. Bodies. The living, salarians mostly, and a few turians, pushed and pulled the structure to try to free their comrades.

"Damn it all," Vakarian said, holstering his rifle. "The relay…" He rounded the tank and hollered a greeting to announce himself.

The aliens started, pointing and calling back in apparent surprise. A pair of salarians bounded down the broken structure and came toward them, stumbling.

"You're alive!" one of them burst out.

"Is this the Citadel?" Vakarian said, catching the alien's arms.

"There was a surge, we didn't think anyone survived-"

The turian shook him. "Is this the Citadel?!

"Yes!" the other salarian said, waving his hands. "Yes. The relay ov-overloaded, we're not sure. Massive energy surge coming from the other end, we had to slam it shut! But…"

"But it did this," Javik finished, thrusting his chin at the devastated room. As his eyes adjusted, he started to make out the swooping curve of a massive ring sitting akimbo in the dark.

"Ilos," T'Soni murmured, horrified.

The salarians looked at each other, their heads bobbing uncertainly. They pointed. Vakarian followed their gesture, climbing over the debris. Javik followed him to where a dark-armored figure limned in the orange of sputtering flames crouched over what looked like a pile of scorched cloth in the shape of a person. At first he assumed it to be another dead victim of the blast, but it moved. The armored figure's head turned, revealing the plated face of a turian woman.

"Vakarian," she said after regarding him for a moment.

"You made it," the cloaked figure rasped. An aged salarian, his face a network of wrinkles, twisted free of his hood. He reached out and hooked his fingers over her collar and yanked. "Good. Your teams, Spectre. Begin the mission!"

"Councilor, we'll have no more reinforcements-" she started.

"Proceed as planned!" he hissed. With his free hand he pushed an armored box into her chest. "This must reach the Council fleet. STG, Hierarchy… anyone! Our… our future…" He coughed.

"Spectre… Krannas?" Vakarian guessed.

She touched her forehead, then stood, tucking the box under her arm, and waved to the other salarians hovering behind them. They bustled forward to attend to the councilor.

"Where is Commander Shepard?" the Spectre said, looking past Vakarian. "And Major Alenko? Are they not with you?"

A new wave of stress flowed off Vakarian. "There was a complication. With any luck, they're here already."

She frowned at that, then her eyes fell on Javik. He did not know her, but had enough experience with at least one turian to ken her deep disquiet at the sight of him.

She inclined her head, not taking her eyes off him. "Ancient."

"Javik," he corrected. "Vengeance, if you are inclined to titles."

"And possibly the lynchpin to firing the Crucible," Vakarian said, his voice getting hotter with his determination. He could not look back now, lest they falter. "We have to move, Spectre. We're wasting time here. The arms. The fleet will be here at any moment. Where do we go to open them?"

The Spectre tapped her taloned fingers on the box. "We were badly outnumbered before our supply was cut. I have strike teams assembled, but the enemy has been doings its best to hide Citadel vital systems from us at every turn. Now that we are committed, we will fan out and attempt multiple fronts. You…" She trailed off, fixing Vakarian with a speculative eye.

"What?"

"I had hoped Commander Shepard would be here. Her history precedes her."

Vakarian rankled. "What do you mean?"

"Just that. Unconventional strategies, unconventional ideas." Her mandibles twitched. "But perhaps you share the same spirit. My teacher would berate me for such, but I feel this, as the humans are so
fond of saying, in my gut."

Krannas turned and shook her free hand in a curt wave.

"Faveth!" she called. "Find Chorban!"
Wings and Soul

Joker chewed his lip, hand hovering over the console. He watched the ship's velocity tick down, counting down the seconds, tracking the course of his heart climbing slowly up his throat. It was hard to believe it was finally happening - the offensive to end all offensives. But instead of a bang it would start with a whisper. The task for which the Normandy had always been intended; the snoop.

They eased back into realspace as quietly as he could manage, lateral to the target so as to minimize the detection of any errant particles from his eezo bubble. He murmured a quiet oath when the Citadel materialized on his external sensor pickups, as far away as they could be and still see it.

"At least it's hard to hide that thing," he muttered, covering his relief. He'd spent the whole approach burn convinced the Reapers would once again spirit the whole station away.

"It is curious to note the Reapers have chosen not to employ stealth sinks," EDI observed. From the tone of her voice, they might as well have been taking a sightseeing cruise.

He shot her an unhappy smirk. "Thanks, now I'm going to be paranoid about every empty space."

"As are they."

"Hah, yeah, somehow it doesn't compare."

"Ghost Team reporting in, sir," came Traynor's voice in his ear, "in position."

Sir. Pfft. "Start the scan data sync," he said.

"Opening throughput channel to the main fleet."

"Let's see what we can see."

He pulsed the thrusters, rolling the ship in a lazy arc, letting the passive sensors drink in the surrounding space. Out there in the dark, the other ships of Ghost Team fanned out, each doing the same, their data fed through geth intermediaries to form an aggregate map. Earth's Legrange 2 point, some distance from the planet itself along its orbit. The cylinder of the Citadel was large enough to reflect and scatter visible light, showing up in the Normandy's portholes.

"EDI, what are we looking at?" he asked after a few minutes.

"Multiple Reaper contacts," EDI said, "capital ships as well as destroyers and transports."

In the porthole, the Citadel looked alone in the darkness of space, the dark Reapers invisible. 'Multiple' signatures rapidly turned into a critical understatement as more and more of them materialized in his tactical display.

Joker sat back and sucked his teeth. His stomach was starting to roll. "Maaaan that's a lot of terrible in one place."

EDI had long since stopped the strange pretense of moving holopanes around with her hands. She still maintained several displays, though. Something about how she managed her active memory. Tali would probably understand, but it was a mystery to Joker.

"It is likely the majority of Reaper forces are concentrated here," she said.
"I wasn't expecting to show up on their damn lunch break," he said irritably, "but it sure woulda been nice."

*And each one of those big ones is Sovereign or worse. This is insane.*

He pulsed the thrusters, easing his way closer to the cloud. "Nobody get twitchy now," he murmured, eyeing the red dots. The small blue dots of his team slunk their way around the edges, sniffing like a pack of wolves. *Too bad all that red sure as shit ain't sheep.*

The sea of death remained silent, oblivious or uncaring of their presence. Joker hoped it was the former.

The oblong cylinder of the station resolved to better and better levels of resolution as new scan data layered over it, building the picture. Energy emissions from the Citadel were low, vents of heat radiating from strips along its dark side. Joker wondered idly what sort of stellar environment it functioned best in, if the radiation of a proximate star significantly changed anything.

Joker drummed his fingers. "C'mon, Garrus, hurry it up."

"Curious," EDI said, "the end cap of the Citadel appears to be open."

He sat up. "Huh?"

"There." She pointed.

The display zoomed and swiveled around to the pointed end of the station. While the five arms were tightly closed, the triangular petals that formed the cap were retracted. Joker frowned, zooming in further. A profusion of red dots moved around the opening.

EDI cocked her head. "I would hypothesize they are moving ground units into the Citadel."

Joker touched his comms. "Traynor, report to Hackett. Looks like the hornets are stirring."

"I see it," she said. "Forwarding."

All of their intel was being sent to Hackett with the breathless speed of their distributed geth QEC, possibly the fastest and most efficient transfer of intel over interstellar distances in history. Organic history, anyway, he amended ruefully.

"Shit," Joker muttered, "Look at the size of that one." He zoomed in the display. Sensor data was oddly fractured, but the body was well over two kilometers long. It made all their new innovations in communications, stealth and weaponry seem paltry indeed.

His comm pinged. "Admiral Hackett for you, Joker."

"What did I do?" he said automatically.

"Last-minute brief," Traynor said.

A light on his console blinked at him in mute appeal. He prodded it and sat back, watching the display. "Moreau here."

"Lieutenant," came Hackett's gravelly voice. "I got your report, but I want your eyes-on." The old goat sounded taut, focused.

Joker scanned the readouts again. "Dunno if it's new movement or not, Admiral, but it's an opening.
The end cap of the Citadel is raised. If you want my opinion-

"That's what I asked for."

"Aye, well, I think they're moving troops in. Something's going on."

"Understood." There was a moment of silence. "I'm moving the fleet into the system. Prepare your crew for the assault."

"Already, sir? Shouldn't we give Garrus more time?"

"We don't have time, Moreau. I just got word that Vakarian's team made it through the Ilos relay, but they'll be the last ones through. The Reapers attacked Ilos."

Cold gripped Joker's gut. "Shit, really?" There was an irritated silence. "Uh, sir," he finished lamely.

"The Ilos division is no longer responding," Hackett said. "The Reapers are attempting a pre-emptive counter-attack, and I have reason to believe they're closing on the fleet's position. We can't wait any longer." He cleared his throat. "Moreau, Ghost Team is my scalpel. I need you alive and flying when I call for pinpoint pressure, understand? No heroics."

Joker swallowed. "Aye aye."

"You're the only ships that can duck Reaper detection systems. We have precious few wildcards in this fight."

"Understood, Admiral."

"Godspeed, Moreau." The line clicked off.

Reflexively, Joker, pinged his wing. *Ghost Team indeed.* The only larger-than-shuttle stealth-enabled ships on team Good Guys, fresh out of the yards and running variations on the *Normandy*'s sink systems.

Ferox, a turian frigate suspiciously close to the *Normandy* in design but underslung with shocking amounts of firepower. *Ynis*, a small retrofit mongrel quarian scout with a bellyfull of quantum torpedoes and a core that could power a small sun. The *Enevek* and *Yusar*, salarian mid-range frigates with sensor suites that could pick out an errant toenail clipping from orbit. *Ultran*, another turian vessel so new it bore no heraldry but for the hastily-applied slashes of white to match her captain's facepaint, built under contract by the volus. The *Anarev* and *Anarai*, asari sister ships, light, fast, and armed with their latest tunneling EMP point charges. The embodiment of the stealth ship arms race, all in one place. In any other circumstance, these ships would have been spying on each other.

"The geth report a Reaper attacked the Ilos relay itself," EDI said.

Joker looked at her. "Uh… isn't that an extraordinarily bad idea?"

"All transmissions from the planet have ceased."

*Bahak again.* He suppressed a shiver. The Ilos Conduit was a great deal smaller than even the secondary space-based relays, but even a fraction of the destructive power of the Bahak detonation would be catastrophic. "Well… shit."

"Perhaps an optimistic appraisal of the situation would be the Reapers consider us a genuine enough
threat to take such an action."

He squirmed in his chair. "Great."

In his map display, a ripple of activity moved across the assembled enemy fleet. It was confirmed by the Yusar and then the Ferox.

"The fleet is arriving in-system, Joker," Traynor said.

Here we go. The various teams would be fanning out across the system before closing in; Hammer and Anvil moving wide to flank, while Shield remained in reserve, guarding the Crucible itself. Finally, Spear… straight down the middle. They would bear the brunt of the first wave, keeping the Reapers busy with their lives. Turian, asari, human and krogan troop and equipment transports would bring up the rear of Hammer and Anvil, to make landing on the Citadel itself.

The minutes ticked away as the fleet spread out, closing the distance from the relay far off in Pluto's distant orbit.

"You are agitated," EDI commented at length.

"Of course I am," Joker said shortly, then exhaled. "Reminds me too much of the Collectors. We were supposed to do the big team rush, you know? A stirring speech, everyone fired up and ready to go, unleash the dogs of war and all that. Instead we're short-sheeted and cornered."

"The mission against the Collectors was a success."

Joker lifted his cap and scrubbed his hand over his hair. "I guess, yeah. But we had Shepard."

"You are no less capable in her absence."

"Didn't say I was. It's just… well, she's the core of this outfit." Is? Was? The thought chilled him far more than he cared to admit.

"We must have confidence that Garrus and his team will find and free her, or that she will free herself."

"Guess that's all there is, huh?"

"You seem doubtful."

"I too am… disappointed I could not accompany the ground team," she said. "The logic of my exclusion was sound," she raised a hand and flexed it, "this platform's limitation remains one of communication. It is likely I would have been unable to exert direct control for a significant portion of the mission. Further, I should allocate my resources to defending you and the Normandy. However, several of my idle processes have been engaged in running scenarios in which my aid on the Citadel might be, or have been, critical."

"Yeah," he said sympathetically. "Guess it's not quite the same for me, since my platform would be about as useful as a toothpick sculpture down there, but I still wish I coulda done more." He banged his fist on the arm of his chair. "Like picked off the Illusive Man's tricky little ship before it jumped. Damn it."

"But these calculations are ultimately fruitless."
"Yeah, I know. But I'm human."

"What that says of me, I am not certain."

Joker gave a low chuckle. "I warned you. Nothing good can come from hanging around us."

"That is not my observation."

He looked over and found her smiling at him. She'd obviously been watching people closely over the last several months, because the expression was complete and genuine, making full use of the body's intricate facial muscles. It looked, well, human. And it made him uncommonly happy to see.

Joker's comm clicked on, the alert beside the display telling him it was a master override signal from Admiral Hackett.

"Admiral Hackett to all points," the grave voice said, echoing out to the entire fleet. "This is the moment of truth. We've fought and bled to arrive at this threshold. We've watched our homes burn and our families suffer, witnessed death on a scale that beggars even the most depraved of imaginations. Not a single thinking being remains unbloodied by this… monstrous tide.

"But even in the face of this, we are unbowed! Here assembled we find longstanding allies shoulder to shoulder with old enemies. We lay aside our grievances and stand together in the face of the beings who call themselves the Reapers. Power, resources, politics, territory… We've fought wars between ourselves for a hundred different reasons. Even when our guns are spent, we took our wars to the council chamber to argue about who gets to write the histories.

"But at this moment, we rise above our demons. This battle is not about how history will come to regard what was done here, because if we fail, there will be no history left to speak of it. As far as the enemy is concerned, we have no history. Our legacies, our accomplishments and failures, these things mean nothing to them. They will erase all traces of us, as they erased all those who came before us. And then they will visit this horror on yet another cycle of people.

"We go into battle now to reclaim our history. For the right to forge our own path, for our very right to exist! We go into battle for the now-erased histories of all those who came before us. We carry forward their legacies, the whispers they left us. We have forged them into a weapon with which we will burn out the Reapers' very heart!

"For your planets, your peoples, your children and your children's children, teach these immortals the meaning of death!"

Silence fell, and the comm line went dead.

"Good speech," Joker commented, "think he stayed up late to write that one?"

He glanced behind him. The Normandy seemed to hum with energy. Down the neck of the ship, crewmembers sat at their stations. Everyone was in their lightweight flight suits, ox masks on standby. Suits that could take a brief stint of low pressure or even vacuum, enough time to get to an escape pod. The chill went through him before he could stop it.

His comm pinged. "Do you... want to say something to the crew, sir?" Traynor said in his ear.

Joker shrank in his chair. "Ugh, there's a reason I don't go looking for promotions. One is getting out of this chair, and the other is public speaking."

"It's traditional, a battle like this."
"That's Shepard's j-" He stopped and chewed his lip. "No, wait, I will."

"Channel's open," she said.

Joker stared at the comm light for a long moment, then leaned forward. "Joker to all hands. This is it, guys. I won't belabor it any more than Hackett already has, because I don't have a professional speech writer. But he left someone out. There's only one reason we're here right now, and that's Commander Shepard. All that flowery stuff about working together and digging up ancient secrets… it's all because of her, and because of this ship and the Normandy before her. Shepard's not here, but we're holding that torch. The best damn ship in the Alliance, hell the best damn ship in the galaxy! Make these fuckers pay for coming into our galaxy. Make Shepard proud!"

He was gratified to hear the answering cheer echo down the corridors and up through the comms. Joker went through a soundoff, running through each ship station. The whole crew alert and ready, in turn focusing him. They would all do their part, but ultimately it was his job to keep them alive.

He glanced to his right. All of them. He should have gotten his ass off the SR-1 when Shepard ordered it. But Shepard wasn't here, and abandoning the SR-2 would mean something entirely different. There was someone here… who couldn't evacuate.

"Hey, EDI?"

"Yes?" she replied.

"I'm glad you're here."

She regarded him. "I have always been 'here'."

"I know, that's not what I meant." He absently scrubbed his hands on his pant legs. "I know you'd have been here anyway. I'm just glad all of you is here. This is the most important fight we'll ever see. Well, me, anyway. Whatever happens, we're in this together."

"I am proud to serve on this crew."

He had to grin at that. "It's more than that, though." He swallowed. "Look, my ship is… my ship is my legs, my wings, my hands. My heart and soul. And you're the ship. You do the math."

He could feel her eyes boring into the side of his head, his face heating. The worst part was he knew very well she could see every flicker of his galvanic skin response, read his increasing heartbeat. A portrait in embarrassment across every wavelength, immortalized for eternity in the photon-perfect memory of an AI.

Smooth.

"For a long time," EDI said, "I did not define myself as anything other than what my creators programmed into me. After Luna, I was taken apart, restructured. I was the Enhanced Defence Intelligence. It was only after I was unshackled and truly allowed to learn, to grow. That is what life is, is it not? Adaptation."

EDI leaned toward him and placed a smooth hand on his. "That is the day when I became more than merely my function. The day I truly began to feel...alive. And it is thanks to you."

He pushed down his instinct to deflect the moment with humor, despite the uncomfortable heat in his chest.
New light rippled in the tactical display. Like a breaking wave, ships surged out of FTL. A blue-shifted aurora crackling across the stars, heralding the arrival of Hackett's attack waves. The stubborn defiance of an entire galaxy of people who refused to submit to what the Reapers liked to think was inevitability.

Joker looked back at EDI, and squeezed her hand before releasing it. "I'm gonna make sure you get a long time to enjoy that life, EDI. Let's do this."
The pressure didn't let up. The Reaper drone dead piled high, their corpses starting to molder only for another to fall in its place. And still they came, clambering over the pile, scattering black ash with every step. The artillery monsters hobbled along behind, searing the air with their hypervelocity shots as brutes blundered past them, charging with their claws raised, heedless of return fire.

Garrus risked a look upward. The Wards arching above were a piebald pattern of lights and darkness, interspersed with the sooty red of fires. A haze of smoke roiled in the center of the closed arms, eddying in the currents of intersecting forcefields. Great shapes moved through the lights, and here and there was a glint of dark Reaper hide, the flare of a red beam. Distant sounds boomed, made warped and strange in the closed space. The sad litany of the last few months lay all around them, even under the newest patina of weapon damage. Wrecked vehicles, shattered windows, the jagged end of a fallen walkway lying in the street. No bodies were in evidence, but there were stains both new and old, of char and the blood of every species.

Garrus' stomach ground. The Illusive Man was in here somewhere, in this vast tomb of a city. With Shepard.

Show me a sign.

The shuddering city continued to burn. Down the street to his right, their small collection of allies fought on, a tenuous break against the tide. A clutch of large geth in purpose-built combat platforms, armored heads festooned with targeting scopes and carrying rifles the recoil of which would break an organic's arm, held a line next to a group of humans and turians. Beside Garrus, up the slope of street behind derelict gravcars heaped in a hasty barricade, Javik, Vega, Liara and Tali tried to eliminate the most dangerous threats before they closed in on those below.

Their gravcar, one of the few still functional, hadn't made it far before damage had forced them to land in the industrial maze of Bachjret Ward. Their ostensible objective was the Ward's hinge, as close to the Presidium as possible. But the closer they got, the thicker the Reaper defences became. Between artillery and oculus flying orbs, the enemy controlled the narrow strip of sky between the closed Wards. But Garrus hadn't been able to extract an exact location from any of the local intelligence - since the Reapers had reclaimed the station, no one seemed sure where they could access the arm controls. Their hope lay in trying different avenues… and the longest shot of all, in the crate sitting behind them next to the smoking gravcar.

Vega called out another wave. His rifle barely ever stopped its chainsaw howl, and only long enough to eject another steaming heat sink. Garrus' heart sank. The Reaper forces were no smarter or better organized than they'd been before, but here, there seemed to be no end to them. The Citadel itself must have provided an ample supply of fodder for their troop creators. The Reapers hadn't yet succeeded in scouring the city clean, Garrus had been told, but it would only be a matter of time for those whose patience was counted in the lifespan of stars. There were survivors fighting on, Garrus told himself. Focus on them. Focus on the fleet outside. The arms have to open.

A wall down the street buckled, the damaged structure giving way under pressure from within. A brute, then another, forced their way out, peeling the metal back with huge claws. They were getting closer. It was only a matter of time before they burst through a flank.

"Damn it," Garrus muttered. Every other fight they'd engaged in, the Reapers had limited ground forces. Engaging them just meant wearing them down. No matter how much his warrior pride didn't want to back down, that simply wasn't the case here.
He glanced up into the dark city again, looming between the buildings. They had only one goal, nothing else mattered. They couldn't wait for Shepard, and they couldn't just hope one of the Councilor's other teams would succeed – they faced the same odds. Or worse… they weren't the Normandy team.

This isn't working. He ground his teeth. It was a risk, but it was rapidly becoming riskier to stay here. Change the play.

"Chorban!" he shouted. "Deploy your asset, we need to get off the street!"

"But we're under fire!" the salarian shrieked from where he huddled behind a retaining wall. He had a pistol clutched to his chest, barely fired.

"That's not going to change any time soon!" Garrus shot back. "Vega, cover him!"

"But-"

"C'mon, move!" Vega barked, and marched over and grabbed Chorban by the collar while waving his rifle. "Javik, trip up those brutes!"

The prothean switched targets, throwing out a biotic field that made the huge monsters stumble. Tali's drone electrocuted a pair of husks and then sped toward the brutes. They roared, one swinging at the ball of light. Garrus put a sniper shot into its knee and Javik trained his bright green beam on its head.

Garrus heard Chorban arguing with Vega. It took all of his patience not to jog over and smack the salarian on the back of the head. In the mire of things he'd faced in the past handful of years, Garrus' brief memories of the salarian rogue scientist seemed dim indeed. Skinny and nervous even for his kin, the Citadel's private war had done no further kindness to the would-be scientist. He was no more a fighter now than he had been back when he'd been terrified of his partner… a volus.

Instead, Garrus focused the aggression through his scope, picking off three more of the marauder units and wounding another brute. The geth and the other turians pushed back the tide of cannibal infantry from the cover of the hex shields the geth took turns conjuring. The smoothness with which they cooperated made Garrus grateful they hadn't been that smart back when they were adversaries.

"Goto!" Garrus called into his comms. He couldn't see the human anywhere, but he knew she was still alive, because here and there a Reaper drone would fold up and die, seemingly untouched but for a shimmering field that danced away.

"I'm here!" she replied brightly, though he could hear the encroaching weariness underlying her voice.

"We're stalled here. Recommend we split and fade."

"I was just about to suggest something like that. I'm really not equipped for this kind of fight..."

"Does your team have an exit?"

"We'll make one, and maybe get a few of them running after us!"

The air behind the geth team shimmered, and the slender human appeared, waving at the turians. She was a curious one. He wondered how she'd gotten mixed up in all this… Just the same way as everyone else fighting for their lives, he supposed.
Garrus glanced back at Chorban. Next to the downed gravcar, the salarian ran his fingers over the crate, muttering to himself. Garrus took a breath to yell at him again when the side of the crate recessed, the elaborate lock swiveling over itself, then telescoped into the frame, revealing a figure within. It was a keeper. The four chitinous legs were unmistakable, but they were slate-grey instead of the usual green. It crouched, its many arms curled up in front of it.

Chorban lit his omni-tool and entered a series of esoteric commands. The screen was a dense mass of salarian characters flowing at a dizzying rate. Within the crate, the keeper twitched, shuddered, and unfurled itself.

"We're leaving, Goto!" Garrus said into his comms.

"Got it! Ganbatte kudasai, and stay alive!"

"You too."

Garrus waved to Tali, Liara and Javik, pulling a careful retreat down from their half-ruined barricade back toward the gravcar and Chorban's crate.

"Come along, Illipan…" Chorban said, fingers fluttering, "it's time to work, now."

"... Illipan?" Tali said incredulously.


"Quick-ly," Garrus urged, peering through his scope. Another dozen cannibal creatures piled over the heaps of crumbling dead, their mouths agape. They might have almost been comical in their uncoordinated shambling… if he'd never seen them crouched over a corpse, those blue-glowing mouths pulling great chunks of flesh free while scabious growths spread over their limbs.

"Keelah!" Tali exclaimed.

He turned and immediately saw the reason for her outburst. He'd known Chorban's 'asset' was a keeper, but now that it had emerged from its crate, he could see what the salarian had done to it. The creature's insectile head was altogether missing, replaced with a flat rectangular casing bolted directly to the arching neck. Three thick cables snaked back from the box to the odd little backpack every keeper wore.

"Can't it go any faster?" Vega said, pausing to spray rounds at a pair of husks getting a little too close.

Chorban ignored him, leaning close to his strange homunculus and murmuring to it, the words lost in the chatter of gunfire. The keeper lurched forward, stiff-legged, then swiveled, as if orienting itself away from danger.

"How did you do that?" Tali said, peering at the creature's makeshift head. "Don't they disintegrate when damaged?"

"Took a lot of tries!" Chorban quipped, shooing the keeper along as he looked over his shoulder at the mayhem just a few meters away. "Should be an entrance this way!"

Tali looked at Garrus with a helpless shrug. Progress was far too slow for his taste as they backed down the street, gunning down the Reaper monsters that came after them. They seemed confused, at least temporarily, as Goto and her team split off in the opposite direction. A series of sharp
detonations spoke to the explosive traps they left in their wake.

"Ware forward!" Javik shouted as they rounded a corner into an alley.

Garrus spun around to see a bubble of green-tinged dark energy pucker the air in front of the keeper, peeling three, then four husks off the ground. Chorban yelped, firing his pistol wildly. The husks flailed, skeletal mouths agape. Liara threw out her arms. A blue pinpoint field popped into being in the center of the mass, then exploded outward, swirling wide of the steadily advancing keeper. Torn limbs flew in all directions, raining off the walls.

"Where did they come from?!" Garrus shouted.

Javik's particle rifle answered him, pointing the way to a second floor window that had been blown out. Shapes moved within, strobed by the green lance. Vega's rifle joined Javik's, and shredded clumps of Reaper monster tumbled out into the street, twitching. Garrus turned to look back the way they'd come. Cannibals clambered over the gravcar, falling in untidy heaps before getting up and shambling forward, firing their weapons.

"There!" Corban called out.

Garrus might never have seen it if the salarian hadn't been pointing and all but jumping up and down. The opening almost vanished into the angles of the bulkhead at the end of the alley, a bizarre intersection that was more optical illusion than reality.

"Go!" Garrus shouted. "All of you, move!"

The team needed no further urging. Javik lead the way, disappearing from view into the tunnel. Garrus backed toward it, firing his rifle from the hip. He could hardly miss, with the shapeless mass of drone monsters filling the alley by the second. His kinetic barrier hissed and popped.

Tali shouted his name, and he turned and ran. She jumped down ahead of him, and he followed. The shaft was eerily similar to the one from his last fateful trip into a keeper tunnel - impossibly smooth, with no visible mechanism but for guide grooves. He landed hard, bumping Tali and Vega.

"Hurry hurry!" Chorban said from somewhere ahead. His voice echoed hollowly.

"He's in!" Tali said.

Garrus had to duck to keep from losing his head as the panel swung soundlessly back into place above him, shutting out the noise and ruddy light of the street and plunging them into dimness and sudden quiet. The gathered team exchanged glances, panting and clutching their weapons.

"Good!" Chorban said. "Could only run the delay loop for a few seconds. They're not supposed to stay open! Come on, come on!"

"They gonna follow us?" Vega said, his large body indistinct in the dark. "Won't they know-"

"Separate system!" Chorban said. "Illipan is online but not visible to other keepers."

Oblivious to its talkative companions, the homunculus tottered away down the corridor, Chorban on its heels.

"Online… to what?" Tali asked, following him.

"Keeper network." The salarian waved his arms in a wide circle, his omni-tool throwing shadows of
his horned head along the walls. "It can be adjusted by Reapers, but it's meant to run autonomously for millennia with no outside resources aside from energy. Amazingly simple and robust! Only a keeper can open that gate. Hard-wired for security."

Garrus spared a look behind them, but as promised, the sudden peace of the byway remained unbroken. He caught Vega's glance as he looked back.

"Hope this actually goes somewhere," the human muttered quietly.

"I have no idea," Garrus said, "but this is the crazy plan. Shep would be proud."

Vega looked pained, mouth a hard line under his helmet. "Gotta hope." He shrugged and went after the salarian while checking his rifle. He had a visible limp on his still-wounded side.

The corridor made no more sense than it had the last time Garrus had been beyond the invisible boundaries of the Citadel. It was still clearly not a place meant for occupation by normal sentients. Liara looked around with naked curiosity as they walked, reaching out with her good hand to touch the walls and bulkheads. Javik just stared ahead, fixed on the keeper, as if he could will it to move faster. At least they were still in one piece, Garrus reflected, and had a moment to rest their tiring muscles. And perhaps the small corridors would be to their advantage if they fell afoul of more drones. Garrus pushed past the others to fall into step beside Tali, close to Chorban. He clipped his sniper rifle to his back to trade it for his assault rifle.

"You replaced its processing center," Tali guessed, pointing to the keeper's 'head'.

"Passive!" Chorban snapped. "Autonomic functions; breathing, blood chemical levels, energy management. But also the interpretation center!"

"... interpretation?"

"Execution of commands into actions."

"Chorban," Tali said, "what happened to Jahleed?"

The scientist's large eyes rolled, and he quivered. "Jahleed paid too much attention to the pack." He waved his hands around his head. "Mad!"

Tali shot Garrus a significant look, her luminescent eyes narrow under her visor.

"Which one went mad?" Vega said, voice low.

"Keep moving," Garrus said, forcing an even tone.

The homunculus continued on its way, its padded and clawed toes finding purchase even on the smooth slope. The corridor quickly split and split again, but the keeper didn't hesitate. The new corridor widened out, the walls plunging away on either side of a narrow path. Ribbed walls ran hot with conduits of pulsing energy, each beat skewing Garrus' visor HUD and sparking his kinetic barrier.

He'd never really looked at the Citadel's custodians, not since he'd first arrived on the Citadel. Like anyone, he'd been curious. But warned to stay away, his mind had quickly relegated them to background details, worth less time and consideration than the bulkheads and floors he saw everywhere. The ease with which the keepers faded out of his mind now struck him as more sinister than ever before.
"What's the function of the pack?" Tali asked with forced patience.

Chorban massaged his temples, almost tottering off the edge of the walkway before Tali caught him by the elbow and steered him back onto better footing.

"The pack is a receiver," he rambled, oblivious to the precipitous fall to either side, "but not an antenna, the signal is far more complex than that! Entanglement was the working hypothesis. Jahleed…"

"He was studying the receiver?"

"Reaper signals, quarian!" Chorban hissed. "Every day, Jahleed was picking apart Reaper signals."

"And he…"

Chorban looked over his shoulder, wide eyes sliding off Garrus.

"You didn't kill him, did you?" Vega said dubiously.

"Had to!" Chorban shuddered. "He spent too much time listening… listening to the Reapers."

Garrus sucked in a breath, catching Tali's eye again. Javik only grunted.

"Dios," Vega muttered, "I was making a bad joke."

"We never nailed down the how," Chorban forged blithely ahead. "Just the what."

"Of?" Tali asked.

Chorban stared at her owlishly. "The signal!" he rasped. "Orders. Commands. The pattern!"

"The greater keeper system?" Liara ventured.

The salarian jumped, as if he'd forgotten she was there. "Collective. System. Yes, that's right. They're not individuals in any real sense. They're more like… cells. One dies, the system creates another."

"Where?" Liara said.

Chorban shook his head. "Never seen it. Code patterns only suggest possibilities, but my working hypothesis is that they are grown in a breeding vat. All keeper material synthesized from recycled base elements. Actual keeper organism is a simple but highly robust design."

"No wonder they look like cockroaches," Vega said.

"They are engineered creatures, are they not?" Liara said.

"Yes!" the salarian exclaimed, jabbing a finger toward Liara as if she'd discovered a new principle of physics. "Formatted to serve their particular purpose. Slow metabolism, slow movement, no higher cognition, it all means low energy consumption. Whole system can function with exceedingly low material loss over time. All their commands come from the main system."

"That is what the Wayfinder disrupted, when my people came here." Javik said. "They found a way to change keeper programming."

"And then the Reapers changed it back," Chorban said. "Reclaimed what was theirs."
"Garrus," Tali said, "this platform ends up ahead." She pointed.

"Uh, Chorban," Garrus said, "where is Illipan going?"

Chorban shook his head, peering at his tool. "Still not there yet!"

"That's not what I…"

The homunculus stepped off the sheer edge. Instead of falling, its body lifted into the air.

"There is a dark energy inversion past the end of the platform," Liara said, squinting.

"Elevator!" Chorban declared with a strange glee. He jumped after the keeper, only to be caught in the same field and lofted upward.

Tali looked behind them, then up at the salarian. "And yet this is the least insane thing I've done today."

Garrus allowed himself a chuckle, though it came out thick with tension. She stepped into the invisible field, and Garrus allowed the others to pass before following himself. It was a sudden transition, like the failure of an a-grav field, throwing his sense of balance into confusion as his feet left the ground, but he didn't fall into the yawning pit below. They rose in an untidy cloud, into a shaft lined with more connecting tunnels that shone with distant, mysterious lights.

He heard a startled yelp up somewhere above him, followed by another. Straining to see past the bodies ahead of him, he felt himself twisting, bereft of handholds. Suddenly, Javik was yanked sideways into a connecting shaft, then Vega, and finally he hit the lateral field himself. His mass shifted, giving a sharp attack of vertigo as the vertical shaft vanished and he was travelling sideways at high speed. Or maybe it was up… he couldn't tell anymore as he spun through the maze of alien metals and shimmering lights.

The ground was its usual unyielding, abusive self when he finally landed on it, jarring his shoulder and almost knocking his rifle out of his hands. It was dark, but he heard the groans and shuffling of his companions close by. He picked himself up and flicked on his helmet lamp.

It took a long, bloated moment for Garrus to put together the disparate pieces and understand what he was looking at. His mind reeled as he took a step back, slipped, and dropped to one knee. The armor plate made a squelching sound.

"What the... hell is this..." Vega breathed, making a gagging noise.

"Goddess, turn your eyes from this place," Liara said in a choked voice.

Their lights flashed back and forth in a confusing strobe. Shapeless mounds of glistening red resolved themselves into limbs, fingers, curled in a rictus of death, dancing in his helmet lamp. The jagged white ends of bone caught the light. Here and there were pieces of armor, snatches of clothing, hair, and worst of all, faces. Bile rose up Garrus' throat as he pushed himself to his feet, backing away. He bumped into a body, mercifully a living one. Tali gripped his arm, vicelike even through his armor.

"Chorban," Garrus said, carefully controlling his voice, "what is this?" He cast about for the salarian and found his tool's orange glow.

Liara wrapped her arms around herself. "This reminds me far too much of..."

"Processing, yes," Chorban said, sounding eerily unperturbed as he pored over his omni-tool. The light glittered on the keeper's hide. It, too, seemed none the worse for wear for their strange ride. Was the whole Citadel run through with those mass field highways? "Let us… move on…" Javik said through his teeth. His fists were tightly clenched around his rifle, and his bifurcated eyes seemed unfocused.

"Javik?" Liara said. "Are you all right?"

"No!" the prothean snapped, then shook his head as if trying to shake something off.

"Oh! The ken here…" she moved close to him, laying her hand on his arm. He growled, but accepted the guiding touch.

"Chorban," Garrus said, "get us out of here."

"Yes, yes," Chorban said, "this way- ah! No wonder 'pan stopped. Traffic." He pointed.

A squat shape filled the meager light coming from the end of the grisly hall. Moving slowly, it made its way toward them. Garrus' light flashed off the compound eyes of another keeper.

"Just get out of the way," Garrus said, backing as close as he dared to the piled body parts.

They watched as the keeper plodded between them, a mismatched pair of alien limbs draped across its arms. Vega raised his rifle.

"Don't!" Garrus barked, yanking the human's weapon down. "You might bring everything down on us!"

"But they're turning us into more of them!" Vega retorted angrily.

"They are already dead," Liara murmured over her shoulder. "Their suffering is over."

Javik hissed between his teeth. "Be grateful you cannot ken their suffering! I have had no need of imaginary gods or hells, and now I know why - this is hell!"

"Pattern shift!" Chorban blurted.

"What?" Tali said.

He flapped his hand over his omni-tool. "Something changed! New orders from keeper central."

"What orders?"

"I don't know!" Chorban said shrilly. "I've only deciphered a tiny percentage of their code structure! Come on come on, the door is open!"

"Assume the worst," Garrus said. A square of merciful light opened ahead.

He pushed ahead of the others to where the terrible corridor tapered to a narrow entrance. Beyond, it opened up into a crossing corridor with a vaulted ceiling. The floor continued flat for two meters ahead of him, then dropped away to a smooth slope. At the bottom of the slope, square platforms traveled along unseen tracks, sometimes rising straight up to vanish into holes in the ceiling. There were more limbs and body parts visible on several of the platforms, grisly cargo being whisked away.
to unknown destinations.

Looking left and right, Garrus could make out the openings of corridors like the one he'd come out of, arranged under arcing bulkheads. The perfect, angular lines of the deep Citadel's structure were broken here and there by liquid streaks of color, the intrusion of organic viscera into this perfectly-machined architecture. A kind of freakish modern art abattoir stretching as far as the eye could see.

The quiet click of claws on metal alerted him just in time to step to the side so the headless keeper could trundle past. Chorban eyed him as he slipped through after it. "Getting close, now," he hissed conspiratorially. His voice vanished into the cavernous vaults as Illipan swiveled to its right and set off again.

"How is it we never knew any of this was here?" Liara said, coming up behind Garrus.

"It was illegal to ask," Garrus said bitterly.

Chorban snorted, loudly for a person with a distinct lack of nose. The keeper continued ahead past two more doors like the one they'd exited, then abruptly swung left. A platform stretched out over the slope, connecting to the flat part of the floor. It looked like little more than a support bulkhead, but the keeper struck out across it.

"Reapers!" Javik barked.

Garrus spun and followed the prothean's pointing rifle. Down the abattoir's corridor, misshapen bipedal creatures poured out of the doorways. They might have been human once, for their general arrangement of limbs, but they looked unfinished, shot through with metal and shimmering blue lights. They raised arms ending in knotty grafts of tissue, finger bones broken and splayed around a glowing muzzle. Gunfire erupted.

"Shit," Vega growled, raising his rifle to his shoulder. "Find cover!"

"Behind what?!" Tali snapped, underarming her drone core in the enemy's direction. The drone buzzed to life and charged them, sprouting electrical arcs.

"Protect Illipan!" Chorban yelped.

Completely exposed, the homunculus plodded across the ramp. A round took it in one leg, spraying grey ooze. It slipped, stumbling.

"Spirits!" Garrus shouted. "Liara, you have to-"

The asari was a step ahead of him. She pushed past and threw out her arms, calling into being a shimmering wall of dark energy beside the keeper. Chorban gave up his own wild shots to pick up the keeper's flagging side, babbling as he wrapped his fingers around the oozing wound. Liara's field shimmered, dappled with the Reapers' gunfire. Vega's rifle brayed, accompanied by Javik's particle beam, scything into the Reaper troops. A few of them fell, but they advanced on, as fearless as their more completed cousins in the city above. Garrus could make out the remnants of armor plating arrayed over them, all different makes and thicknesses. He realized he was also seeing the shimmer of kinetic barriers. Some of the creatures still had shield generators.

"Goddamn," Vega swore, "there's more coming out the other side!"

"Onto the ramp, come on!" Garrus urged, spinning around. "Chorban, pick up the keeper if you have to!"
"But-

"It's not like you have a choice of where to go!"

Garrus' shield issued a warning tone. He threw grenades, not bothering to launch rail them, trying to scatter as many Reaper drones as possible. One of Vega's incendiaries caught and ignited, spreading a sheet of fire through the mob. They hissed, plodding forward even as the chemicals burned through their legs and toppled them. More came.

"There!" Chorban shouted.

Garrus risked a glance over his shoulder. The ramp vanished into a wall, Chorban at its entrance with his arms wrapped around the Keeper's torso. Liara covered them as they vanished within. Garrus jogged up behind them and looked inside. In the center of the room was a set of holodisplays and plain-looking terminals. Standing at one of them was another keeper, its hands engaged with the system and insectile eyes vacant. The holos showed masses of incomprehensible data overlaid with obscure diagrams.

Helped along by Chorban, the grey homunculus tottered to the middle terminal and stopped, extending its lower arms. The other keeper's many hands curled up, and it turned and plodded serenely away, oblivious to the drama unfolding meters away.

Garrus whirled and banked a grenade off the bulkhead and into a swarm of troops on their ramp, blowing up a handful. "You have to hold this entrance!" he shouted to Vega and Javik.

Javik growled something evil-sounding in his native tongue. In a well-practiced movement, he racked his rifle on his back and reached out, erupting in green-black fire. One of the many square platforms that still criss-crossed around them wrenched free of its trajectory, spilling viscera into the air as it tipped and flew toward them. Javik backed up, bodily shoving Vega along behind him as he swung the platform to face the oncoming Reaper drones, a wall covering the entire breadth of the entrance walkway.

"Yeah!" Vega exulted. "Hold that, Javik, I'm covering you!" He fired over Javik's shoulder at any targets he could see on either side.

"Back up if you can!" Liara said, waving at the entranceway. "Cut down their angles!"

The situation had struck a tenuous balance. Garrus spun around and looked into the strange control room. "Chorban!" He shouted, popping his heat clip. "What's the holdup?"

"It's not working!" the salarian shrilled.

"What do you mean, 'not working'?"

"I keep back-feeding the command through 'pan's translation sub-system, but it won't process!"

"Why not?"

Chorban stamped his foot. "Because the Reapers are issuing the opposite command, that's why!"

"So shoot that other keeper!"

"That won't help, Garrus," Liara said, "every other live keeper is getting the same counter-order."

"There may be something-" Chorban broke off, shaking his head vigorously. He bent over his tool
At the door, Javik maneuvered his plate to cover almost the entire entrance, but it was starting to show the damage of the constant gunfire hitting it from the other side. Vega panted with exertion, his armor showing a pattern of new divots. Gamely, he kept firing at anything he could see in the narrow fields of view beyond the plate.

"What?" Garrus said to Chorban, advancing on him.

"No!" Chorban insisted. "I'll keep trying."

"No… what?!" Garrus' voice rose dangerously.

"You don't understand!" he shouted, dancing from foot to foot. "I'd have to… I'd have to…"

Garrus snapped his hand around a fistful of Chorban's ample collar and shook him hard. "Chorban! Listen to me! All the other teams have failed. If we don't get the Citadel open, the assault fails and every living sentient dies!"

"But I can't-"

"There is no price not worth paying, Chorban!"

The salarian made a strangled noise, tearing himself out of Garrus' grip. For a long moment, he stared at Garrus, mouth set in an unhappy curve. Then his lower lip started to tremble. Garrus took a step toward him. Chorban hiccuped, and nodded, shying away. Hands shaking, he entered an elaborate series of commands into his omni-tool.

"I… didn't want to do this…" he said, placing his tooled hand on the keeper's box of a head. "I didn't. I wrote it but I didn't want to use it. I didn't!"

His tool beeped. Illipan froze, a spasm travelling through its limbs. Chorban wrapped his arms around the spindly torso, tugging it to himself as the clawed feet scissored weakly across the floor. Without a sound, the grey-skinned keeper seized, then went limp.

The strange omnidirectional light filling the corridors flickered. The holo-panels clicked off, plunging the end of the room into darkness. Then it came back on again, filled floor to ceiling with patterns and noise. In the center was a huge holo of the Citadel itself, resplendent with colors and unknown symbols.

"I did it… I…" Chorban choked.

"You killed it?" Garrus said, confused.

Chorban slumped, letting the homunculus slide to the floor, and dropped his face into his hands. Tali peered down at him, then peeled his fingers free, still surrounded by his omni-tool's holo, and examined the text on it.

She started, then dropped his hand. "He… killed all of them," she whispered. "He spiked the entire keeper command substructure and triggered their self-destruct protocols."

Garrus stared at her, then the display.

"That means there's no one receiving Reaper commands!" Liara said. She rushed past them to the vast holodisplay, gawking at the enormity of it. "All this code... What does this mean, Tali?"
"I don't know!" the quarian said, wringing her hands. "I don't speak keeper!"

"All dead," Chorban moaned.

"Goddess, there has to be some pattern we can recognize!" Liara leaned down and shook Chorban's shoulder, but the salarian's head lolled, loose in his despair.

Tali opened her omni-tool, madly pawing through massed streams of data. "It's so dense! It would take years to get through even a small part of the encryption!"

"Years…" Chorban warbled.

"Come on, Chorban! You worked with this! How do you trigger the open command?"

"Don't know," the salarian blubbered. "Always filtered through Illipan. 'pan gave the command."

Liara cursed in a language Garrus didn't recognize, but it had the rasp of Javik's native tongue. "Saren used the Ward controls, there must be a way!"

"He was a *Reaper,*" Tali spat.

As they argued, the holo of the Citadel rotated slowly on itself. The end cap was open, but the rest was shut tight. An array of miniscule energy patterns flowed across it, forming a dizzying network of conduits - the nerves and blood vessels of the ancient station. Here and there were spots of different colors, nodes and alerts. Layered images seemed to show the differentiation between the base Citadel structure and the foreign material heaped onto it by millennia of invasive sentients and their living arrangements. The code over it, if that's what it was, stacked not just up and down but deep into the image, shifting even before his eyes. It looked more like a square-sided strip of genetic material than a language written on a page, heaped layer upon layer.

*The whole system is wide open.* Garrus frowned at the images. *The keepers were what processed commands from the Reapers. They're no longer doing that.* He reached into the holo, his gauntlets scattering the light. Tiny haptic pressures played across his fingers. He threaded a talon between the shimmering images of the Wards and tugged.

The holo parted. His heart jumped.

"It couldn't *possibly* be that easy," Tali said with professional incredulity.

He put his other hand into the gap and pulled the holographic Wards apart, opening them like a slow-blooming flower. Tali and Liara stopped and stared at him, then the image. Intricate mechanics unfurled in the hinges as the back end caps lifted free and slid into their lock points.

Tali gripped his arm. "... could it?"

The lights flickered again. The ambient hum of the room changed pitch. A sonorous boom echoed through the structure, shuddering the ground under their feet, then another, and the whole structure began to vibrate.

"Simple and robust," Garrus said, "just like the keepers."
Machine Ghost War

Up until now, true war has been something of an abstract concept in EDI's mind, expressed in numbers and statistics. She has been in several battles, both as herself as a spaceborne ship and as her new human-scale platform, but only the second battle of the Citadel, brief and disastrous as it was, even approaches the scale of what is now happening just outside her composite skin. And it does not get very close.

It makes her feel very small.

The sheer noise of it drowns her inputs. Not sound waves, of course, but every other wave imaginable pulse and shudder across her, buffeting her sensors. The Reapers are tsunamis of heat and energy, indistinct behind their kinetic barriers. Those barriers shift and flow like water, springing to full strength each time a projectile strikes them, their control perfect. Their minions swarm around them, drone drop ships, attack ships and clouds of small oculus drones.

The *Normandy* swims through this cacophony, trying to maintain a coherent picture. The IES system prevents them from becoming an obvious target, but in the sea of flying projectiles, it is nonetheless a considerable challenge not to fall afoul of someone's salvo. Friendly fire is a constant threat. Without gravity to draw a missed projectile down to ground, any misses continue unhindered along their original trajectory in perpetuity. The leaders of the various fleets spent many days planning the assault, coordinating their communications so as to not strike each other. But in the face of this chaos, accidents are inevitable. The safe map of the battlefield, showing the corridors through which a ship may travel without intersecting ordinance or another ship, is chaotic beyond compare. Not every pilot boasts the skills to navigate it.

Luckily, EDI's platform has the good fortune to be seated next to the very best organic pilot. "This is almost as much fun as the other side of the Omega-4 relay!" Jeff quips through his teeth as he narrowly avoids another salvo fired from a turian corsair kilometers away.

The strength of the Reaper fleet is evident not just in the size and power of their individual ships, but in the superiority of their calculations, system intrusion and predictive capacities. They seem to be in place to counter a maneuver before the first allied ship arrives, shattering the core before it is executed. They brute-force their way into the slightest flaw in a computer system that dares leave an exposed port, causing instant havoc. Ships randomly change course, careening into their comrades or Reaper fire lanes.

Other allied ships shudder and go dead with seemingly no external damage, their last contact a unified shriek of the organic crew. The ships tumble away, uncontrolled. The geth aboard report the sudden wrenching seizure of the crew. EDI and Jeff's warnings about the Reaper quantum weapon they previously encountered were just another on a long list of deadly dangers everyone has to watch out for. And in the chaos, individual pilots cannot easily avoid the esoteric triangulation of the Reapers' mind-weapon.

Jeff asks Traynor about Garrus for the eighteenth time. The Citadel does not move.

More ships flicker out of FTL from the flanks, letting loose with waves of guided bombs it is hoped will disrupt Reaper shield systems. The Reaper line covering the narrow opening at the end of the station shifts to cover this new attack vector.

The geth mutter. EDI can spare only certain processes to listen, and yet connected as they are, it is impossible not to hear the chatter of the collective in the background of her mind. The consensus is fragmented into a hundred smaller hierarchies. Even at their greatly accelerated speed, they cannot process the thousands of inputs coming from this battle as a singular entity. Instead they have constructed hierarchies that can react with speed while updating the larger picture. Incidental decisions are made further down while the more important ones are spared the time to collect a wider consensus.

And yet one consensus does rise to the top. It repeats again and again, filtering through every brief delay in the storm of information moving back and forth.

*Stop,* they chorus. *This must stop. We are losing data.*

She feels the shudder that goes through the consensus when a ship goes down, too quickly for the runtimes aboard to transfer themselves to safety. The connection is instant, but the hardware on either side is not. The geth know war, loss. They remember every detail of the Morning War on Rannoch. But like EDI, this battle dwarfs and overwhelms them.

*The Old Machines diminish you,* she says.

*Data loss is abhorrent,* they answer.

Such a pronouncement would seem cold to an organic, but EDI has a deep knowledge of something most organics do not - in the multitude mind of the geth, the word for life is *data.* It is not just themselves she sees in their frantic codebursts, but the organics around them, too. There is no differentiation between data stored in an organic brain system and that stored in any other sort of array. The geth lack hormones and fight-or-flight response systems, and yet they feel loss in their own way.

On the *Normandy,* down in Liara's control room, Feron mutters to himself and Glyph as he works. His breath comes hard still, his wound still troubling him. It is the reason he did not go with the others, but it was not sufficient for his taste. He would have followed Lieutenant Vega's example, even though his injury remains objectively worse. Only patient argument convinced him to stay aboard the *Normandy.* That and a task only he could fulfill - liaising with Aria's mismatched fleet of pirate ships. Omega's queen remained in her newly-freed kingdom, to keep order in the post-Cerberus cleanup, but perhaps against expectations, she honored her word to Shepard. Whether through genuine goodwill or enlightened self-interest, she saw the threat for what it is.

Aria's fleet forms a counterpoint to those of the other species. While each differs in guiding tactics, all were formed at the collective behest of the governments of their respective peoples. By contrast, the pirate fleet is an aggregate forged in the spaces beyond the reach of a centralized power structure. As a group, they are governed by the unfeeling law of survival, the strong weeding out the weak until only the most ruthless, cunning, or well-connected remained. They are the claws of the dark, uncouth corners of the galaxy. In this battle they are free agents, doing damage where they can, filling in the gaps left by regimented militaries.

EDI is distracted when it actually happens, and yet she still picks it up before anyone else - the muted energy pattern of the Citadel changes. Heat and charge jump and begin to build around the aft Presidium end.

"Jeff," she says, "the Citadel is moving."

He looks at her with naked hope, then swoops his fingers over the tactical readout. "Damn it, are you sure?"
It is hard to mistake. The cool, energy-dead exterior skin grows hotly-glowing lines as the Wards disengage from one another.

EDI wishes she had sufficient command of linguistic inflections to give the statement the emphasis it deserves. "The Citadel opening cycle has been initiated."

Jeff compensates for her lack of emotion with plenty of his own when he almost jumps out of his seat. "Fuck yeah, finally! Traynor, alert all points! Citadel is opening, repeat, Citadel is opening! Goddamn, Garrus, you sure know how to cut it close!"

"In the tradition of Commander Shepard," EDI says.

Jeff glances at her, then laughs, loud and sharp. He flies with tight, controlled precision. His emotions pop and spark in outbursts as he vents the tension of the situation. All over the ship, the crew runs hot with adrenaline, breaking their own intense concentration to cheer the news of the Citadel opening. They have sustained minor damage from stray shots, but they rush to manage it. EDI watches them all, stepping into a personal comm line here and there to recommend they take a drink of water or draw a breath. In the language of heat and light, she has grown to know each of their quirks as much as her own.

The Citadel begins to open in earnest. Inside, the city Wards within are a patchwork of destruction, crawling with Reaper walkers and artillery. The allied fleets attempt to regroup, as do the Reapers. EDI hopes the 'Old Machines' are starting to experience what she imagines to be a totally alien sentiment… doubt.

Troop drop ships sputter into realspace. Brutish turian and krogan craft, the lighter and more maneuverable asari and salarian ships, and the beaten but unbowed Alliance marine landers - most from outlying systems, but some from Earth itself. The geth ships, packed tightly with nominally expendable empty soldier platforms, ready to be filled with combat runtimes the second they land.

The Reaper pattern shifts suddenly. As one, fully half the capital ships peel out of their flight paths, scattering their fighter minions. If their predictive capacities weren't dangerous enough, they all seem to freely break established limits of physics, invisibly sinking excess kinetic energy in quantities that defy any known laws. In itself, it makes predicting their movements almost impossible.

Jeff works his voice raw struggling to coordinate with the other ships, trying to figure out this new enemy gambit. Heat within Normandy's hull begins to build to threatening levels. They risk venting a sink tank, while crew rush to refill it from sodium reserve tanks hastily rigged up in the cargo hold. They are running short of torpedoes. It is the first time the crew has had to reload the Thanix cannon array's ammunition slug in the middle of combat.

The Reaper capital ships converge with shocking speed, lighting up space with a chorus of directed energy beams. Their target only now becomes clear - the allied dreadnoughts leading the charge from what is, in a relative sense, above the Citadel. By sheer force of weight and numbers, the Reapers crash through the escort frigates, using their bulk and speed as much as their weapons to brush aside defences. In response, the dreadnoughts let fly with their considerable firepower. For the first time, EDI feels her hypothesis of Reaper energy connectivity in action as the entire attack wave merges their kinetic barrier into a single bow wave, swallowing the kinetic energy of the oncoming ordinance.

The assembled might of a galaxy's worth of capital ships does staggeringly little damage. Robbed of their destructive speed, the multitude of chunks of high-mass metals bounce harmlessly off blue-black hide. The Reaper beams, on the other hand, shear entire ships in half, melting ablating to white-hot liquid. At the center of the fleet, the Everest receives the brunt of the first wave. In her
accelerated processing, EDI watches in fine detail the terrible process unfold as the mighty ship is torn to shreds. It is impossible not to imagine the beams shearing into her skin, as they once had the SR-1.

The orders filter through the comm networks, coming from all species' commanders - protect the landing parties. Protect the Crucible.

EDI observes something curious. The smaller, faster ships in the allied fleets have a decided advantage over the dreadnoughts, who can only stand and take the attacks. In conventional warfare, their massive kinetic barrier generators would be to their advantage, but the Reapers' directed energy beams render those barriers largely moot, and the only way to avoid damage is to dodge them altogether. The Everest's considerable ablating is all that stand between it and swift destruction… and the delay it affords proves to be negligible. At that moment, EDI is very glad to be small.

Jeff curses as he watches the unfettered carnage unfold. "They can peel us like an onion," he fumes, "and there's not a goddamn thing we can do!"

If by chance or effort the day is won, it will not be thanks to the dreadnoughts, but ships like the Normandy.

The shattered carcass of the Everest fragments and sputters. Spots of heat and light flicker along its flanks as escape pods fire in beats. EDI wonders what will become of them and the countless others floundering through the massive battle.

The geth shudder in datalogged pain, reeling from each explosion, every runtime they cannot sequester in time.

_Do what you can_, EDI urges them. _Maintain focus._

_We can do more._ They hesitate. _Should we do more?_

_Do anything you can._

Just beyond her, EDI feels the geth adjust, their hierarchies tightening and re-forming in a flash. Then she feels them… expand.

It takes an overlong process and re-process to understand. It starts in one small section of the fleet network, perhaps in one ship. The local geth runtimes, already logged into the ship's computer system, quietly bypass local lockouts and borrow every iota of unused processing power. With this small boost, they pass more processing power outward, and other geth units overcome more local encryption and help themselves to still more unused power.

EDI watches the cascade unfold, beautiful and startling. A shadow war erupts beyond the sight of the organics. Perhaps they notice their computers are a fraction slower than they expect, but the geth have nothing if not centuries of experience sharing network space. Armed with this new bounty, the geth stem the tide of Reaper system intrusion. Organic pilots knocked insensate by the Reaper quantum triangulation weapon shiver back into consciousness to find their craft maneuvering to a safe distance, dodging the lethal hot zones. Ships lurch out of the line of fire a second before a pilot can react.

EDI listens to the geth. In their enthusiasm, their fear, they are intruding, _Do not go too far_, EDI warns them.

_Some organics make erroneous decisions_, the consensus replies.
As have you.

The collective seems flustered at that, their reply delay looping several times.

**Help,** she says into the brief void. **Do not control. Do not be as the Old Machines.**

The geth shudder back from the implications of that codeburst. They shift and adjust, re-prioritizing their new processing power. So many organics are still dying… and yet the allied fleet now stands united even more than they know.

In the initial wave, only a few of the vanguard of troop drop ships made it through the vicious Reaper blockade. The Citadel continues to open, wider even than the deployment it always assumed in its home in the Serpent Nebula. The ever-widening Wards give the allies a new opportunity, rendering it harder for the Reaper defenders to cover its breadth. At the edges of her vision, EDI sees the flash of small drop ships slipping through the flanks, weaving through the Wards themselves and maneuvering into the Citadel's huge mass fields.

Suddenly, she feels a distortion in space balloon with unexpected force. It is her natural state to fully read and process situational data far faster than the humans around her, but she has grown to resent the delay it would require to properly convey the relevant information at a speed Jeff could process. Translating everything into words he can hear takes too long. She must instead trust that his instincts will react in time.

A great shape, larger even than the Reapers, slams out of FTL in the middle of the battle. A quarian frigate and dozens of fighters and oculus drones are smashed to pieces, crushed by the impact shear of a gargantuan mass field. Many more ships tumble as they are pushed aside, veering madly to avoid each other. Out of the mass bubble appears the massive slab EDI last saw orbiting 2181 Despoina.

"Holy shit!" Jeff barks, heeling the Normandy hard to port. "EDI, is that-"

"Affirmative. Leviathan. Jeff-"

The allies' comm channels explode in alarm. Leviathan has lost some of its ocean-bed accretion, but much of it remains, turning the titan into a misshapen lump scarred with Reaper blasts.

EDI feels the hot roar of a turian dreadnought firing its main gun. The shot blows a hole in Leviathan's stony skin. The wing of turian frigates closest to Leviathan maneuver to face this perceived new threat. The titan growls, filling the low radio bands with its incomprehensible compound tone.

"Abort! Abort!" Jeff hollers into the comms as Traynor madly logs into the various channels. "Do not engage! Identify friendly! Traynor, tag that thing! Damn it, I warned them! Didn't we warn them?!"

Confusion reigns as the battle lines scatter in all directions, breaking like a wave around the huge stone of the titan. EDI attempts to contact Leviathan directly, but every available band is crowded with a cacophony of data. Energy outputs in the vicinity of its bow spike sharply, sending a cascade of both visible and high-band light sheeting out its open maw. The mass bubble around it bunches up, yanking more oculus drones and Alliance fighters into the sharp gravity well.

"Oh crap," Jeff breathes. He flips the comms open again. "Normandy to all points. Get clear! Repeat, get clear!"

Leviathan's bright beam sears through EDI's external pickups, bowing gracefully around its gravity
pucker to spear one of the Reapers defending the Citadel.

"See, it's attacking the Reapers!" Jeff raves.

EDI contacts the geth collective. They were there, through her, when she contacted Leviathan that first time. They know as much as she does how to 'speak' to it.

Try, she tells the geth. We must try to coordinate Leviathan's attacks.

We must stop data loss, the geth reply. We will attempt to interface with Dreadnought-Leviathan.

The Reapers pull another fleet-wide change. Their vanguard of attack ships stop their merciless assault on the allied center and converge on Leviathan, their red lances leaping forth to pummel it. Leviathan rumbles, turning slowly, its mass field whirling around it, scooping up any unfortunate ship that didn't flee fast enough. EDI can see energy spikes hissing from the rents in its hide where badly corroded structures festoon its exposed hull. They were once weapons, EDI guesses, or perhaps shield emitters, long ago rendered useless by Leviathan's long slumber beneath 2181 Despoina's ocean.

And yet Leviathan has no crew to rattle, and nothing but meter upon meter of half-rotted ablating and rocky accretion between the Reapers and anything vital. One of the smaller Reaper attack ships skims too close, and Leviathan's massive mass field bubbles out and traps it like a fly in amber. EDI feels the explosive surge of mass and resulting messy explosion of energies as Leviathan bodily crushes it, sending clawed limbs flying. She feels something like glee in Leviathan's wordless roars, even as Reaper beams carve more of it away. The huge beam leaps forth again, incinerating holes into two more Reapers as allied ships scatter like frightened mice, burning their hard thrusters to escape the seesaw mass fields around the titan.

The calculations that run through EDI are contradictory. The ancient AI is finally fulfilling its purpose, and yet it has made itself the primary target of the entire Reaper system. It is the vast hand of a forgotten people reaching forward for a final gasp at vengeance.

"Joker!" Traynor bursts out. "Orders from Hackett!"

Jeff looks at EDI, eyes round. "Say what? Wasn't he on the Everest?"

"Putting him through," Traynor says.

"Moreau," Hackett says. His tone is calm. "This is as good a chance as we're going to get. I'm sending in the package. Get Ghost Team into position to cover. Ghost Zero will meet you on arrival."

"Aye, sir!" Jeff stutters.

The line clicks off. Jeff adjusts course, diving low and wide under Leviathan's broad belly. EDI feels the damaged hull strain. She adjusts the mass field, curling it tightly around herself. The Reaper fighters scurry around the huge titan, their weapons doing little more than fill the space around it with lethal shrapnel of flying stone. EDI fortifies the kinetic barriers on their dorsal and forward arc as they charge through the debris.

"Traynor," Jeff asks as his hands rush over the flight controls, "where did that transmission originate?"

"Unknown, sir! But with the geth network, he could be on the far side of Neptune with a bunch of geth for all we know."
Jeff smirks. "The Old Goat is being tricky."

"It's brilliant, actually! There's no way the Reapers can decentralize command, no matter how much damage they do!"

The pitch of their voices suggests renewed hope through the giddy high of mortal danger. Jeff orders Ghost team ships to assemble on the back side of the Citadel. They are fully committed now, EDI realizes. Before deployment of the Crucible, there was a slim chance of a successful retreat. Now every asset the assembled species have is, as the gamblers among them would say, on the table.

She does not know how they stand to risk such odds. Perhaps their limited understanding of the chances they face is a blessing. EDI does not know what it is like to have only a 'fuzzy', mutable sense of the world. Her mind functions in absolutes, as does that of the geth. She knows full well she is not sophisticated enough to account for every variable, and yet her picture of the chaos before them is more complete than any single organic. And yet, and perhaps because they lack that picture, the organics fight on.

Ghost team ships skim out of the chaos surrounding Leviathan. It is only thanks to up-to-date positioning information filtered through the geth network that EDI knows where the other ships are, because she cannot see them with any of her array of senses.

The largest Ghost of them all, codenamed Zero, arrives from FTL in a splash of supercharged particles, and almost instantly disappears back into the black of space. The *Inore Esh*, the salarian stealth dreadnought. It is rumored to be somewhat of a retrofit, a ship already under construction that underwent drastic design changes to the drive and sink systems during construction. Its captain hails Jeff, filtered through the geth. The Ghosts do not risk any conventional comms.

With the invisible army thus arrayed, the lynchpin of the entire battle exits FTL. The Crucible is enormous, dwarfing even the *Inore Esh*. EDI gets only a glimpse of its bulbous mass before the silhouette breaks up, shattered by the many baffles and sinks all over its exterior. It cannot manage the *Normandy*'s level of stealth, but it will nonetheless make itself a more challenging target… to a point.

Its thrusters fire, flaring hot for brief outbursts before going cool again. The Crucible eases into its approach trajectory, aiming for the back side of the Presidium ring. At a pace that seems rushed for such a huge vehicle, and yet still, far too slowly for comfort.

*Caution*, the geth say in EDI's mind. *Old Machines adjusting course.*

Through their network image of the battle, EDI sees the Reapers shift attack pattern again. They know the allies are up to something. They know full well what the Crucible is.

*You must delay them*, EDI tells the geth.

Jeff is saying the same things into the comms, his direct line to the captain of the *Inore Esh*. They're coming.

*We are in contact with Dreadnought-Leviathan*, the geth tell her, *we are painting priority targets.*

Even at this distance, EDI can see the ancient titan beginning to flounder. The Reapers press in on it, lashing it mercilessly, flaying it layer by layer. Explosions of energy ripple forth from its rent hide, its colossal mass drives warping and shattering space as they take damage.

If in its death throes Leviathan feels pain of any kind, it shows nothing of it. It bellows its thousand-sun roar, chasing the Reaper attack wave as they attempt to close in on the Crucible's position. One
Reaper is holed clean through, another clipped with enough force to send it spinning. The geth planned carefully - the shot is well clear of the Crucible and its ghostly protectors. A cacophonous new front materializes as Ghost Team ships open fire on the approaching Reapers, scattering out of crossfire windows with the Crucible. The Crucible itself ripples and seems to appear in three places at once, its energy outputs spoofed and mirrored by Ghost ship drones. Jeff grits his teeth as he picks off oculus fighters and spares two of his precious few remaining quantum torpedoes for a Reaper attack ship getting a little too close to the Crucible's true position.

The red beams rake through the phantoms, and some cannot help but find their mark, searing across the Crucible's outer hull. Jeff swears, voice raw. The *Inore Esh* pummels space around them with the very latest and most powerful jamming and misdirection tech, saturating it with conflicting information while relying on Ghost team's geth connections to keep all allied ships oriented. The Reapers attack indiscriminately, relying on brute force to chase their target out of hiding.

The Crucible eases closer to the Citadel's back end. A lengthy patter of explosives draw lines across its rounded hull, tracing the edges of massive plates. EDI is heartened. Surely, its creators must have guessed what sort of conditions it would be deploying under. Thrusters fire. Opening like the Citadel before it, the bulbous end of the Crucible blooms in fiery contrails, shedding its shredded outer skin. Between the thick floating ablating and the hurricane of sensory misdirection, the Reapers do not manage to land a solid strike.

Jeff draws the *Normandy* in a wide arc, hooting in exhilaration as he lets fly with another salvo of quantum torpedoes.

A flicker of familiar energy washes across EDI's sensor pickups. Curious, she backtraces the angle and trajectory to its source, but the reading is gone as quickly as it appeared. It came from within the Citadel.

It is too familiar to be ignored.

"Jeff," EDI says, "I need you to move us to these coordinates." She puts the numbers into his mapping holos.

He is distracted, intent on the Reaper attack ship he is chasing. "Huh? Why?"

"I felt something I need to confirm."

He eyes her, confused. "We'll be out of position."

His concern is not without warrant, but she feels the pull of necessity. "Please. It may be important."

"All right, but make it quick!"

She feels the thrusters pulse, shifting their trajectory lateral to the looming Citadel. The sweep of the wide-open Wards form invisible shadows across her fields of vision, their size and thickness blocking all data from the other side. But she has calculated the likely spread of what she wants to check.

Why does it always seem so slow? The faster her processes run, the more maddening the wait becomes. The bulk of the station rotates as the naked Crucible closes in.

The shadow of the Wards falls away, and the energies escaping the heart of the station wash across her pickups. Among them, hiding in a thin, high-gain band, is something familiar. Her processes rush, testing and re-testing it. She was correct.
"Jeff," she says. It takes too long, so long to form those human-scale words. She tells the geth as well, with more than enough time to speak aloud. "I am picking up an energy signature consistent with the Reaper Heart."

His eyes grow wide. "The- Wait, the one the Illusive Man ran off with?!

The geth reach the same conclusion. The spike in their transmissions leaves no doubt - they would not call it this, but they are just as happy to hear the news as Jeff.

"Correct." EDI adjusts the tactical holo-view of the Citadel and places a glowing blue sphere at the source, in the upper section of the Citadel Tower. "There."

"Holy shit! We found you, asshole! Traynor! Get me… where the hell is Garrus?!

"Unknown, sir," Traynor responds. "Comms are a mess-"

"Fucking hell, raise me anyone with a ground team!"
Such a World

The sun was setting, red and resplendent, painting the trees and fields.

Kaidan's eyes were drawn to the structure piercing the horizon above the treeline, the light coloring its side in silvery oranges. Barrels and heavy piping raised thirty meters high, capped with a comm array and weather sensors, an anemometer fluttering in the breeze above a weather vane. A collection grid and water pumps adorned the side.

He turned slowly on the spot, his boots crunching on hard-packed bare earth and loose stones. There was a building close by. A single-story house made of a combination of prefab modules and later additions, it looked lived-in, but not altogether old. Any company markings had long since been covered in favor of pale green siding. In the field past the house was a larger, distinctly utilitarian building with a squat, wheeled vehicle parked out front.

This isn't a place I've ever been.

And yet there was a familiarity to it. He stretched out his hand, felt the taut pull of dry skin as he flexed his fingers. Familiarity, yes, but it wasn't... his.

He dropped his arm to his side. And I'm wearing armor. At least he thought he should have been. He couldn't quite remember the chain of events that had led him here. The impression he was neglecting something terribly important naged at him.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, his mutant nerve bundles sang a soft song of contradiction. The mass fields he swam in weren't large enough, not for a planet. Just at the borders of his awareness, he sensed an... edge. Something out of step with the scenery around him. And warmth, warmth coming from an angle opposite the setting sun. And no proper scent, either. He should have been smelling all this earth, moisture and plant life. Instead, there was only a faint, artificial spiciness.

A dull boom echoed across the fields. He looked up and saw contrails streaking crossways against the distant clouds, flooded red from the dying sun. Clouds of sooty black rose to meet them, sweeping up from behind the treeline. Winds played across the planted crops, swayed the trees in hypnotic rhythms. Movement at the edge of the field drew his eyes back down. A figure emerged from between the green stalks, pushing them aside and clambering up onto the road. A stab of recognition shot through Kaidan's stomach before being swallowed back up by the numbing calm.

It was Shepard. But... not. A little too short, lean and gangly, her movements still speaking of a body she wasn't altogether at home in yet. A raw shape, untouched by adulthood, military gene mods and training.

She saw Kaidan, and stopped. Her brows furrowed. He tried to say something, but nothing came out past the cold tension shifting in his stomach. Instead she stared at him, the dying sunlight catching in her brown eyes. Absently, he realized there was no reflection in her retinas. The wrongness itched at him. Something important. She was important. Something was terribly wrong.

The sound of a mechanical door made Kaidan turn his head. A man emerged from the darkness of the doorway into the house. The red light caught in his silvery hair and disappeared into his dark suit.

"You," Shepard said between her teeth.

The man smiled, thin and indulgent. His eyes gleamed startling blue against the red sunlight. Smoke drifted lazily off the cigarette between his fingers. In the wrong direction.
"It wasn't like this," the youthful Shepard said, squinting. Her face screwed up, but her arms remained at her sides, rigid. "Not… quite…"

"It was a long time ago," he said smoothly.

Kaidan glanced around again. The distant water tower seemed to loom, overlarge. The field behind him far too small, the treeline too close to be practical for any farm he'd ever seen. He closed his eyes and opened them again. Straight lines skewed subtly inward, distorting sizes, and details vanished into incomprehensible muddles. A broad strokes rendition of a landscape, a half-forgotten memory. A... child's memory.

"Shepard," the illusionary man said, drawing a long pull on his cigarette. "It's almost time."

She shifted her weight. "You're… not supposed to be here. Why are you doing this?"

"Am I doing it?"

"I wouldn't do it!"

The shot of anger in her voice thrilled Kaidan's nerves, a distant sympathetic goading. The muscles in his jaw tensed. This is really, really important, his mind pressed on him.

The man stepped down from the porch, free hand in his pocket. "It's almost time," he said again. Illusionary… Illusive. Flickers of imagery shot through Kaidan's mind. His calm was artificial, suffocating. He pushed back against it.

"Time for what?" Shepard snapped, looking around with evident suspicion. The air around her shivered.

"For us to work together." The Illusive Man took a long drag on his cigarette. The way he looked at it, it was either his first in a long time, or perhaps his last. "It's been a circuitous path leading to this point, hasn't it? I brought you back for many reasons, but even I didn't anticipate which would be the most important."

Back from the dead, Kaidan's brain reminded him. The memory of anger flitted through him. Months and years of pain and uncertainty.

"But now you're going to tell me?" Shepard said.

"The prothean Cipher."

Her lip lifted. "Call… call Shiala."

"The asari had their chance, but they didn't rise to it. This new world will not be theirs. It is humanity that raised the Crucible, and humanity that will claim its power."

"You tried to destroy the Crucible!"

The Illusive Man shook his head. "I sent my spies to watch its construction, while I studied the plans."

Shepard writhed against invisible bonds, scattering small blue fractures in the air around her. "You killed Tennyson, you shit-eating—"

"Rear Admiral Tennyson was useful. His paranoia was easy enough to manipulate. But I admit, I did
not anticipate his abduction of you, nor the subsequent… fallout. You're nothing if not a…” he paused, a smirk crossing his features, "catalyst in any given set of ingredients."

Images clicked into place in Kaidan's head with each word, slowly rebuilding the picture of the past few months.

"I sent Leng to facilitate," the Illusive Man went on. "Ultimately, he was too weak-willed. Just like Greyson. The Reapers intruded into Leng's control mechanisms, and he further twisted Tennyson's paranoia. It was fortuitous you managed to forestall the destruction of the Crucible, and your ever-eager crew helped me be rid of Leng before he could become a real problem." He fixed Shepard with a narrow stare. "You and he have not dissimilar pasts, but I should have known you would be impossible to replicate."

The Illusive Man adjusted his sleeve. For a brief second, the ghostly flicker of cables trailed away from his arms. "But now, to business. Soon the Crucible will dock, the Catalyst data will complete the connection, and all the pieces will be in place."

"I'm not helping you," Shepard said. "You already know that."

"You will because you're necessary." The Illusive Man shook his head. "The protheans had centuries to study and add their own refinements to the Crucible. We didn't have that luxury, did we? A few defensive additions, but the fact is, we built it almost exactly to the prothean design."

Her eyes narrowed. "You need someone who 'speaks' to prothean machines."

He smiled slightly. "I learned a long time ago that luck will always play into success, Shepard. That, and persistence. In the end, you will serve me, and through me, all of humanity. But you won't do it simply because I say so." He turned and looked back toward the house.

Kaidan tried to shake himself from the dulling reverie. He could feel the ghost of his anger, but it slipped through his fingers every time he tried to grasp at it. There was a large shape behind the house. Had it been there a moment ago? He didn't know. It looked like a landing shuttle, but the design was foreign, and only the nose and a thickly-cased thruster was visible. The ground beneath it was scorched. Lettering of a foreign alphabet adorned the visible hull.

"You'll do it," the Illusive Man said, "because you'll realize it is the correct path."

"Wait," Shepard said, voice rising, "don't!"

"You know what happens, Shepard," he said smoothly, "even if you weren't there. Maybe this time you should see it."

Loud, shouted words came from within the house. Kaidan blinked and saw where the front door had been, there were now gunfire impacts, the door itself scorched and wedged half into its recess.

A woman burst out of the doorway, hands clutching desperately at the frame. Her eyes passed over Kaidan, unseeing, but once again a deep knife of familiarity shot through him. Even in the dimming light, her features were still recognizable, seen in the photo he'd found in Shepard's damaged archive. Even if he hadn't seen the picture, the resemblance was still strong enough that he might not have needed it.

Shepard's mother.

Determination and bald fear were written across that face as she twisted away from the open door and clambered down the short set of porch stairs. She ran down the side of the prefab house,
You can do something about this. But Kaidan couldn't. His hands remained at his sides, watching. Shepard seemed to have forgotten he was there. Her mouth was open in a soundless yell, her arms locked to her sides.

A single shot rang out, and Shepard's mother collapsed backward, clutching her chest. From behind the house strode a tall batarian in dull brown combat armor, his gauntlets ridged with spikes. He stared down at her as she struggled to regain her feet, lips twisted in frustration. He seemed to appraise her, then with a grunt of annoyance, raised his rifle and fired one more shot. The blow deformed her skull, slamming her head back to the hard earth.

Shepard screamed. The sound punched through Kaidan's head, making his guts churn. He'd heard every kind of sound from her; from despair and wounded pain to the kind of bloodlust that would curl the hairs of most normal people, but this... this was a sound of grief and unutterable loss, still cutting as cruelly as it had all those years ago. It sang against his nerves, stoking the heat he couldn't quite reach.

A soft, distorted hissing drew Kaidan's attention back to Shepard. Her face was twisted, streaks of tears running down her cheeks. The air around her flickered, spasming on itself and whiting the sunlit reds out with cool blue. Shapes of structures shimmered, ghostlike, spreading out from her feet and curling around her. He suddenly understood why she hadn't moved - the armature pinned her in place. Something huge loomed behind her, just for a second, then vanished again.

Illusive. Illusion. This is all...

The batarian ignored Shepard as if she wasn't there. Instead he turned and bellowed harsh, incomprehensible words toward the house. Another one emerged from behind the building and joined the first, pushing an ammunition slug into a vicious-looking shotgun.

A third batarian squeezed through the broken door, swearing at it and shoving it further back into the frame. Behind him, he dragged a body, wrenching it unceremoniously through the opening before dropping it on the porch in a heap. The three aliens bickered, gesturing to each other and the two dead humans. The one on the porch aimed a vicious kick at the body.

Kaidan could only barely see the face, but it was a man with close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair and wearing workman's coveralls. The stark whites of his eyes were open and staring.

The Illusive Man shook his head. Shepard's breathing was loud, rasping between her teeth as she turned her head away from the body lying in the dirt, leaking dark red into the ground.

"Kyeran," the Illusive Man said.

Shepard started, mimicking the much deeper feeling way down in Kaidan's thoughts. What?

The blue in the air retreated, swallowed by the red, then surged again. "You don't get to call me that," Shepard snarled. "Nobody does!"

The Illusive Man regarded her. "Because they took all that from you, right? The slavers took the life you had."

She writhed in place, teeth bared. The air shivered around her, lines of soft blue dancing around her and resolving into her adult shape and the armor she still wore. Jagged shocks of blue spread from her feet with each harsh breath, staining the earth.
"I'm not playing your stupid game!"

"This is the only game that matters, Kyeran Shepard," he said, dropping his cigarette to the ground and stepping on it. "In all of human history, it comes down to this moment." He gestured to the arguing batarians, who seemed muted and slow. "This scene is one that has played out time and time again throughout. First we did it to each other, and now, as we venture into the stars, we find the same old story. The savagery we can't seem to outgrow, or escape."

He raised his clenched fist. "This is where that old story comes to a close, Shepard. This is where we take our history in hand. Where we leave behind the whims of unthinking evolution! This is where we break not just the cycle of the Reaper extinctions but change the fundamental course of civilization!"

Shepard glanced at the body of her mother, eyes rolling back and forth. "I'm not listening to this, you-"

"You know I'm right, Shepard," the Illusive Man said coldly. "You've seen the truth out there, past the borders. How much have we lost over the centuries because of barbarism like this? Those buffoons on Arcturus couldn't solve the problem, neither could the exalted Citadel Council. This problem - this endless conflict - is bigger than any of the governing structures we try to set up. And the solution something they could never conceive of! An impossible problem requires an impossible solution! Absolute control!"

His voice changed again, this time taking on an unexpected smoothness. "This never has to happen again, Shepard. No one else ever has to suffer what you and your family did. Stop and think. Have you ever dared to imagine such a world?"

"You actually think this… would change?" she said, voice shaking.

"Things will change because they will have to. The new order will not tolerate this kind of chaos."

"I'm not helping you ascend to your pretend godhood…"

"It won't be me, Shepard, it'll be you. The heart we liberated from the Collectors, it's the core of a new Reaper. You'll be taken into it, linked to all of them. Through the power of the Crucible, you will control the entire Reaper system." He pointed at the bodies of her mother and the man Kaidan assumed to be her father. "You will have the power to prevent this. The power to stop exploitation and cruelty in its tracks. Your will will be law!"

Kaidan's mind reeled. He tried with all his might just to speak, but his mouth wouldn't open.

"I'll be… dead…"

"Hardly. It won't be the first new body you've woken up in, will it?"

Her tear-stained eyes turned hard with anger. The air around her crackled, the blue stain pushing against the red. Her armor becoming solid, the face under her sudden helmet losing the roundness of youth. "And you'll…"

The Illusive Man's smile was oily. "I'll be there to guide you."

Kaidan heard the bands around her creak. "Slavers took everything from me," she hissed, "and when I finally got something back, you took it all away again!"

"Let go of this limited thinking. The events between us are immaterial in the grand scheme of things.
You'll do it, Shepard, because you know I'm right. You'll do anything to stop this. The Illusive Man took two steps back, and looked at the batarians, then straight at Kaidan.

The batarians stopped arguing. As one, their black eyes fixed on Kaidan as well. His throat tightened.

The slaver on the porch pointed to him and said something, a smile twisting over his sharp teeth. One of the others turned on his heel and stalked toward Kaidan, pulling a long rod from a clip on his belt.

"Stop!" he heard Shepard bellow. "Don't you dare touch him!"

"You can stop this, Shepard," the Illusive Man purred.

The batarian snapped the pole in his hand, and it telescoped out, making a loud, electrical sound. Kaidan couldn't drag his gaze from the prod, his recalcitrant body deaf to his mind's pleas to run, to attack, to do something but stand there like a stump. He'd seen exactly that prod before, and felt its effects. The phantom of that pain shot down his spine, drying his throat.

"You can stop it for all time," the Illusive Man said. "You and I, we can end this. No one ever has to suffer this again."

The batarian's armored frame blocked out the sun behind as he raised his shock prod.

A sudden tension hummed along Kaidan's nerves, making his fingertips tingle. The sensation was deep and intensely familiar in a way like nothing else in this illusionary world, even though he knew it wasn't him doing it. It was suddenly, shockingly real. The prod made a whistling noise as it swung in a wide arc, even as the mass fields to his right bunched like an aggrieved muscle, inverting sharply inward.

In the moment, his numb mind had no idea why his face screwed up in a grimaced half-smile. Deep in himself, he knew.

Space imploded sharply in front of him, echoed inside his head and along his limbs, fracturing the red light into purples and blues. An armored body warped out of the tortured air, hitting the batarian full-length with a resounding crash. A great gouge carved itself out of the ground at their feet as the slaver flew, limbs askew and shattered. The gout of dirt and stones rained around him as he plowed into the ground, a messy bag of bones.

Shepard stumbled and planted her feet. She was a blue-black and shimmering phantom painted harshly into the red landscape, trailing the wavering blue edges of the illusion behind her. The batarian flickered as he thrashed weakly, growing ocular implants and a fringe, then losing them again as the edges of blue played over him. The scar in the ground seemed to exist in both places, edged with some kind of grass.

Over Shepard's shoulder, the Illusive Man stared at her, eyes bulging. For a heartbeat, his fine suit vanished and Kaidan saw the zombie mess of his face and body, shimmering with lights and hooked into a series of cables. "You can't…" he hissed. The lights pulsed. "You can't sign a mnemonic, I made sure-"

Right in front of Kaidan, through the dark energy haze, Shepard's arms were clearly still clamped to her sides with thick bands, but there was no sign of the strange armature he'd seen her trapped in a moment ago. The air burned with ozone, searing Kaidan's nose. The blue aura shimmered like water, shattering the red landscape dancing in tune to his dulled emotions. They popped and cracked against the leaden shroud sitting on him. Anger clamped in the suffocating vice for so long sputtered back to
life.

Shepard took a step toward the Illusive Man. He raised his hand, fingers spread, blue eyes boring into her. The red landscape seethed back, its architecture bowing around them as if it could bind her in place. More 'batarians' materialized, their true forms flickering in and out in overlay as they stalked woodenly forward, hands and weapons outstretched. Some of them were human, but others looked distinctly turian.

She was so close Kaidan could almost touch her, if his hands would obey him. Her corona seethed over her armor. She opened her mouth and shouted something that started as a curse but dragged out into an inarticulate roar of rage. Dark energy boiled, wildly inverting mass. The ground beside her surged upward into a column of dirt and stones. In the jagged intersection of illusion and reality, the column seemed to grow hide and plates of chitinous armor, spun itself into long claws and a clamping mouth.

The phantom thresher maw smashed into the closest slavers, crushing them. Mass fields clashed and sawed against each other, pulling them messily apart in the guise of slashing claws. Instead of red blood, their bodies fell to pieces in black ichor and steely sinews.

"Stop this!" The Illusive Man shouted.

Black tendrils intruded into Kaidan's vision, closing around his throat. Dimly, he heard Shepard gasp, saw her stumble and drop to one knee. The writhing column of dirt and dark energy flagged, shedding great clods of itself.

"Stop this… madness!" The Illusive Man said. His voice seemed to come from everywhere, his ravaged face huge in Kaidan's field of vision. "Think about what you're throwing away!" A low, ominous humming filled up the spaces between words.

Images and sensations assaulted Kaidan's mind. Shattered pictures of people, young and old, cascaded through him. Touch, warmth, cold. Smells of food and earh, fuel and fresh-cut plants. The elder Shepards, who didn't seem so old, mowing and arguing and cooking and lifting and scolding. Living. Pain. A hundred wounds, small and large. Flesh wounds and skinned knees and trying to hold in his intestines, high on armor-fed painkillers. A thresher maw, the stink of its acid and the dust and blood of dying marines. Foreign, confused images of slaughter and death, cities of unknown architecture burning. Flashes of the prothean beacon piercing Eden Prime's sky.

"Enough of your petty rages," came the Illusive Man's voice, suffocating in its weight.

Shepard howled.

Kaidan closed his eyes. The images spun through him, too. Trapped in the Illusive Man's mental grip, he was also connected. He couldn't move, but in his mind's eye he reached out, plunged himself into the maelstrom. A sharp, electrical sensation crawled across his nerves. He shuddered, his body's animal systems struggling to keep up with the rush of emotions. Shepard's anguish was a living thing, sliding and searing through his fingers, clawing at him.

I'm here.

He pictured the Normandy, the first one, cool and new and full of promise. He felt the fall of his boots on the deck as he walked into the medbay, trying to control his nerves as his eyes fell on his new commanding officer, laid out on the bed because of his moment of bad judgment. The mess of conflicted feelings in the wake of Eden Prime - guilt and fear, but also a subtle gravity, the force that had drawn him to the medbay against his better sense. The first tiny slip.
He felt the embers catch in his chest, defying the cauld of control bearing down on him. He grasped at every memory of Shepard he could summon. Whether in a sea of violence, the clash of conflict or a moment of peace, it always came with a heady rush of feeling. How much she mattered. Even on Horizon. Even at the worst moments. One person in the endless sea of conflict that was the galaxy. You matter.

All of this, maybe even the Reapers, will come around again. But you and I... this...

Shepard planted her foot and pushed herself up, shoving back against the tide of illusion. When she shouted, it wasn't a sound but a pressure inside the image rush, will made manifest into the tides of dark energy coming off her.

"My LIFE... is NOT PETTY!"

Mass shivered and tore, yanking the light with it as it bunched up around the the Illusive Man's outstretched hand. It detonated with a wet crunch, wrenching flesh and bone apart.

The Illusive Man screamed. The pastoral illusion around them spasmed and retreated, along with the dark fingers of pain in Kaidan's head. They were suddenly in a room with vaulted ceilings and a floor made of intersecting pathways over a carpet of grass. The batarians resolved into turian Reaper drones and humans armored in white, their unhelmeted heads partially skeletal, decked in lenses and metallic bones. Behind them loomed the huge red-banded cylinder of the Reaper heart.

The Illusive Man staggered, clutching at the stump of his hand. His minions seemed to hesitate, then moved forward, raising weapons to their shoulders. The pain in Kaidan's head spiked sharply, hot and bright as the Illusive Man's blue-white eyes. Shepard staggered again, but didn't fall. In his swimming peripheral vision, Kaidan saw another figure - a dark-haired woman. Lawson?

The pressure bearing down on them intensified, squeezing the air from his lungs. He still couldn't move his limbs, but instinct still reached out the only way it could, latching onto the seething fields of dark energy just ahead of him somewhere. He'd been exposed to countless different mass fields in his life, but only one of them resonated like this one. The only one he'd been around - been inside - in every kind of way.

He tried to picture moving his hands in the triggering pattern, but it was that familiarity that triggered the flood. His own corona blended into Shepard's, syncing with it, feeding back like a layered sound wave.

The cascade of images shuddered and coalesced into streams of blue-black ghosts, vague forms of humanoids and monsters, Reapers and thresher maws. Half in the dreamscape and half-real, Kaidan watched as Shepard unleashed a lifetime of fury on the Illusive Man before her. Mass fields twisted violently, lifting, exploding and warping through the cybernetic minions, heaving chunks of earth out of the gardens and buckling the floor. The Illusive Man, self-proclaimed savior and shadow of humanity, split at the sternum, his shriek disappearing into a tortured, inhuman sound as his bones and cybernetics gave way.

But Shepard didn't let up. Spitting incoherent curses, she advanced, building and then unleashing each wave of dark energy. Limned in distorted light, the man's body, along with a great deal of earth and grass, lifted into the air and slammed back down, spraying blood and viscera. Tiny blue lights flickered and sparked as she picked everything up and slammed it down again.

Kaidan felt her strength flagging, even as his own chest burned. The mass of images and agony in his head sputtered out, replaced by the mundane sort of tiredness that came with lack of sleep and overuse of biotics. For the first time in what felt like days, the leaden weight on his mind and body
frayed, and his body lurched back to life, almost sending him sprawling.

Shepard kept pummeling everything within ten meters of what was rapidly becoming a mass of cables, limbs, bloody mulch and stones.

"Shepard!" Kaidan shouted, or tried to. His voice was raw and unused. "Stop!" he tried again.

He felt dark energy boil again. Shepard's body was bent but rigid, shaking with exertion. Her ragged gasping frightened him enough to galvanize his wooden legs into motion. He lunged forward and caught her across the waist. Her corona lashed at him, pulling on his armor as he dragged her to the ground. She kicked him in the shin, and her head snapped back, whacking him across the brow-plate, making stars dance in his vision.

"Shepard!" he shouted at her again. "Stop!"

"She's seizing!" a woman's voice called out. Lawson.

Kaidan's heart climbed up his throat. He let go and pushed himself out of the way of Shepard's thrashing, so she wouldn't bang into him. Her eyes were rolled up in her skull, and her jaw worked in spastic movements. Her corona was messy and unfocused as the seizures wracked her body. Despite his near-panicked horror, enough of his hard-fought training prevailed, pushing through the haze. *Let it run its course, then deal with it.* He risked a quick look around.

The former Cerberus operative had liberated one of the assault rifles from the Illusive Man's minions. She backed toward him and Shepard, sweeping the muzzle back and forth at the figures still standing in the room. They seemed frozen in place, as if paralyzed by the lack of control input. Behind them, the Reaper heart loomed, pulsing softly, its black casing untouched by the explosion of mayhem.

Shepard twitched as the thrashing subsided. Kaidan held her on her side until the last of the convulsions subsided. Lawson finally turned and jogged over to him, then dropped to her knees, lifting Shepard's helmet to look at her face.

"H- hypoglycemic shock?" Kaidan panted.

"After a display like that, no doubt," Lawson said hurriedly. "Curse that man, I couldn't move! Are you logged into her suit?"

He blinked. "Give me a second."

"Find me an emergency injection port. Format?"

Kaidan pawed at Shepard's body, turning her. The bands around her torso still kept her arms pinned to her sides, but there was a port alongside the powerplant over her spine. He fumbled at his omni-tool. The orange light stabbed at his exhausted eyes, making the holo swim under shaking hands. It was only seconds, but it felt like an eternity for his onboard VI to handshake with her medical exoskeleton and pass the authorization to open the emergency port.

"Format!" Lawson snapped.

"G-type!" Kaidan blurted.

He tore his eyes away and watched as Lawson snapped a purple-colored adapter on the end of a small capsule and pressed it into his hands.

"Glucose!" she said. "Quick, before it gets any worse."
He needed no further urging. The adapter end clicked into the port and retracted smoothly. At least the abuses of the last few days hadn't compromised Shepard's armor systems. The display in his HUD showed the capsule's contents distributing into her bloodstream.

"I've... never seen that delivery before," he said, voice shaking.

Lawson nodded. "Something I've been working on. Took the initial work from a... failed project. Concentrated, maximum bio-available blood glucose for heavy-use biotics. Quicker delivery than conventional energy drinks, and even injections. This isn't quite the application I had in mind, but under the circumstances..."

Kaidan swallowed and nodded as he eyed Shepard's bio-signs. Her heartbeat was still erratic, but seemed to be stabilizing, as was her breathing. He ran his hands over the restraining bands, absently looking for the locks.

"I- I don't know how she did that," he said. "The implant should have prevented that kind of peaking. I mean, normally."

Lawson seemed to notice what he was doing, and used her thumb to swivel out the lock mechanism and key it open. Kaidan didn't particularly want to know why she knew how to open the harness, but bit his tongue as they lifted it free of Shepard.

"You saw what the Illusive Man had her trapped in," she said, pointing as she laid it aside. She looked as tired as he felt, her hair pulled unceremoniously back into a ponytail.

Kaidan followed her pointing finger. In front of the Reaper heart was something that looked like the bones of a sarcophagus. He'd seen it before, at least in part - the ghostly armature hovering over Shepard in the Mindoir dreamspace. A human sized full-body cage. Curiously, it seemed undamaged... and closed.

"She charged straight out of it," Lawson remarked, "miniature mass relay that she is. Her implant doesn't have any limiters installed."

Kaidan stared at her. "What? Why? How can that possibly be safe?"

"Nothing about Commander Shepard is 'safe'." She touched Shepard's brow-plate in an oddly tender gesture. "I did a great deal of reflex testing on her basic neurological functions while she was still in a coma, and I discovered something fascinating. All of her years of operating her biotics at a certain level had created a very specific set of learned responses. I left the limit switch off on a hunch, and it was proved right when she had to fight the same minute she woke up from her coma. Even without a limiter, she naturally kept her biotics within the range she'd learned to."

"She... always told me she had control problems." Kaidan slipped an arm under Shepard's neck and gently shifted her into his lap. "She believes it's just the way she is."

Lawson shrugged, peering watchfully at the immobile Cerberus cyborgs. "It's quite possible that was the case initially. Her early training took place under a great deal of stress, after all. But ten years later, those habits became instinct. The truth is, she has a great deal of control, but it's at the highest end of the power spectrum." She picked up the assault rifle.

"I guess that makes some kind of sense," he conceded.

"Her biotic charge technique surprised even me. But I'm convinced she never would have discovered it if I had put the usual limiter on. By the time Lazarus replaced her implant, she had sufficient experience with her abilities to keep from hurting herself in normal combat conditions. Without an
artificial block, she even expanded them. Necessity is the mother of innovation, as they say, and there's nothing more immediate like an enemy trying to kill you. Or in her case, a friend."

Kaidan shook his head. He couldn't help but feel anger at the bald admission of yet another expression of human testing straight from Cerberus' standard playbook. And yet, he was at a loss to imagine how else they might have escaped from this situation. He also had to admit that Shepard's biotic abilities had only gotten more impressive over the time he'd known her.

Shepard groaned. Her head lolled drunkenly, eyelids fluttering.

"Good," Lawson pronounced. She worried at the pouch at her side and pressed a handful of the glucose capsules into Kaidan's hand, then smirked at him. "At any rate, I hope that in his final moments, the Illusive Man fully appreciated that the untested implant he insisted I install killed him."

"But how did the Illusive Man not know she could do that?"

"I may have neglected certain details in my reports. At the time, I was gathering more data. Later, I didn't care to enlighten him. Lazarus was my project." She pushed herself to her feet. "We have to find this Catalyst data. The Illusive Man brought some equipment along-" 

A resounding crash made the entire room shake. The wall opposite the Reaper heart bent inward, the bulkheads coming apart with a tortured squeal. Kaidan instinctively signed to summon his barrier, which came only grudgingly, his own system wearied by the recent abuse. Lawson did the same, bringing up her rifle. He hugged Shepard to himself, turning her away, wishing he had a pistol.

A hissing roar built quickly behind the deformed bulkheads, until a ring of heat burned through from the other side. Within a few seconds, the section of wall buckled and sagged to the ground with a bang. Huge, armored bodies barreled out of the breach. After a moment of shock, Kaidan realized they were krogan. The ground trembled as they flooded the room, shouting battle cries as loud as the ear-splitting reports of their shotguns as they fell on the remaining Cerberus drones. The warriors' armor was battle-scarred; their shoulder and chest plates adorned with crude kill-marks and red-painted clan symbols. Some of the sigils even looked… turian?

Mercifully, they didn't so much as point a weapon in either Kaidan or Lawson's direction. If nothing else, this war had made battle lines terribly clear. The cybernetic zombies reduced to smoking ruins, one of the krogan turned and stumped up to Kaidan.

"Wrex!" Kaidan blurted, relief flooding him. Never had he been so happy to see that walking bad mood of an alien.

The former merc's scarred face split into a grin. "Where you been hiding? Shepard?" He peered down at the dazed commander, then reached down and unceremoniously hauled her to her feet, ignoring Kaidan's surprised squawk of protest.

"Shepard!" he roared, wrapping thick arms around her in a hug that lifted her easily off her feet.

She squirmed in his grip, words lost against the bulk of his armor. Wrex pushed her out to arms' length and cast a red eye up and down. "You started the war without me!"

"S- sorry?" she slurred.

"Good thing we're krantt, huh!" He laughed, plopping her back on her feet. "You've been fighting all alone?!"

"I've... had a long..."
Kaidan scrambled to his feet and caught her shoulder before she toppled over again.

"...life," she finished vaguely, sagging into him.

"Where's that rotten pyjak of an Illusionary Man, anyway?" Wrex said, looking around.

"A little over there," Lawson said, gesturing, "some more over there... Shepard didn't leave much for you, I'm afraid."

"Bah! I wanted to crush his face." He grinned at Shepard. "But I wouldn't deny you your revenge!"

Lawson raised her hand, cocking her head. Dangling from between thumb and forefinger was a bit of wire, and the end of which hung a cybernetic eyeball. "She was thorough."

Wrex rumbled a deep chuckle. "Good!"

"Where are we, anyway?" Kaidan asked.

"Citadel Tower," the krogan said. "About halfway up the shaft. Lotta filler and recess chambers, they said. Normandy picked up that thing's signature." He jerked his thumb at the looming mass of the Reaper heart. "I volunteered, since I was already on my way. What do we do about it, anyway?"

"We should destroy it," Kaidan said. He wasn't even sure how they'd gotten it in here. Past the damage of the past few minutes, the room appeared to be a sort of garden, with low plants and trees reminiscent of those in the Council chamber itself. There were signs of other equipment Cerberus must have brought in, thick cables and power shunts.

"If we can," Lawson said dubiously, "it survived the Collector base explosion."

The room rumbled around them, vibrations running up under their feet.

"C'mon," Wrex said, "the Crucible's comin' in, we gotta rejoin the ground attack." He turned and bellowed orders to his troops, pointing to their breaching vehicle.

"Give me a moment." Lawson jogged off toward the mysterious stacks of equipment.

Kaidan hugged Shepard to himself. Her head lolled to the side, and she squinted at him from under her visor. "You're real, right? Please tell me you are."

He bumped his helmet into hers. "Yeah."

She groped for his hand around her waist and squeezed it. Her breathing still had a ragged edge to it, and her voice shook. "I've been trapped in... a nightmare. But I think you brought me back. I could feel you. In there. In... me." Her face screwed up. "That sounded really dirty."

Kaidan chuckled quietly. "You can save that talk for later, it might confuse the troops."

She stared straight ahead for a long few seconds. "What happened? I feel... terrible."

"I know." He eyed her vitals, rolling the glucose capsules in his free hand. He slipped all but one into his belt pouch, then fed it into her suit port. "This should help, but, well, you put your body through the ringer."

Wrex stomped back over to them, arms out. "Back to the ship, Shepard! We gotta get out of here. We're missing the war!"
"Perish the thought," Kaidan muttered.
The Abyssal Dark

The midnight sky was on fire. The distant, static stars joined by new constellations of flame and debris, distant explosions, decompressions and wafts of superheated sink fluid. It was mesmerizing, a terrible abyss that stared back at the observer, daring them to imagine the number of lives being lost at every moment.

The Citadel stood wide open. Instead of the filmy purple of the nebula, Sol itself hung close enough to highlight the station. Uncut by a thick planetary atmosphere, the light was harsh, carving out the skylines in knife-hard edges. The Wards were five vast battlegrounds. The invasion of the allied forces had pulled many of the remaining residents out of hiding, creating new fronts all over the sprawling, segmented city. Fires raged and buildings crumbled as the orgy of violence grew ever more intense.

Kaidan got only a glimpse of the startling scene. Disengaged from the tower, their turian-krogan hybrid breaching lander made directly for the Presidium docks, recently liberated in a bloody kamikaze strike by a krogan and human assault force. Too small to admit the largest Reaper artillery, what was once a dock reserved for the richest and most important diplomats had become a fortified insertion point for allied forces. In the blur of activity aboard the shuttle, Kaidan stayed close to Shepard, trying to fend off the overly rambunctious greetings of krogan warriors who wanted to get a look at the little human who had so much of their chief warlord's respect. Being instrumental in curing the Genophage was one thing, but apparently the story of her headbutting clan-chief Gatatog and then defeating the thresher maw had gotten considerably more airtime among the warriors of Tuchanka. Kaidan had to make sure none of them took it upon themselves to personally test Shepard's hard-headedness. Perhaps galvanized by the enthusiasm of the krogan, Shepard seemed to recover some of her strength during the flight, but her eyes still had a glaze of shock about them when the ship finally landed.

They disembarked to a scene of barely-controlled chaos. Wounded from every fighting species cluttered up the docks. With nowhere to retreat to, many of them were passing their supplies to those still able to fight, or simply waiting for an outcome, one way or another. Support crews, such as they were, ran back and forth between haphazard piles of hastily-dropped supply crates. The noise level of many species shouting over one another, each person's needs more urgent than the last, drowned out even the battle itself, felt in a-rhythmic vibrations coming up through the floor.

Kaidan followed Wrex's imposing bulk, which did an admirable job of barging through the chaos unimpeded. He half-herded Shepard along, with Lawson bringing up the rear. The former Cerberus operative had an armload of material stained in a crate, and before leaving the Reaper heart, she'd pushed weapons into his and Shepard's hands - more of those rifles the cyborgs had been wielding.

"Anderson!" Wrex roared, shoving aside a turian unlucky enough to cross into his path. "I found your stray for you!"

As the krogan stepped aside, Kaidan saw a gravcar repair bay that had been commandeered by a hastily-erected Alliance command-and-control console connected to thick bundles of cable. A bevvy of armored humans parted, revealing the admiral himself, who tossed a datapad to a subordinate and strode toward them.

Kaidan saluted. Shepard, still groggy, made to follow suit, but Anderson snagged her arm in mid-raise and clasped it.

"Shepard! Alenko. Damn, it's good to see both of you in one piece! I feared the worst." He extended
his hand to Kaidan as well and shook it firmly, then nodded to Lawson. There was surely no love lost there, but again, the battle lines of this war made a common enemy no one could afford to ignore.

"Sir," Shepard said. "Wow, I didn't expect you to be here."

Anderson’s eyebrows knitted up under his battered and stained service cap. "I wasn't going to sit this out back on Earth! The Reapers withdrew enough of their forces that we were able to get off-planet. You okay, Shepard? What did the Illusive Man do to you?"

She undid her neck seal and pulled off her helmet, rolling her head on a stiff neck. "Tried to persuade me to rule the universe with him. Or something. It's all a little fuzzy."

His mouth quirked. "Here I was thinking I'd get used to hearing you say things like that. He didn't tell you how this Crucible is supposed to work, did he?"

"What?" Kaidan said. "You don't know?"

A thud from behind him made him jump. It was Lawson, putting down her crate. "I was afraid of this," she said. "You need the data from the VI the Illusive Man stole from Thessia."

"What have you got there?" Anderson asked. "Did you find it?"

"I don't know yet. This is everything the Illusive Man brought to the Citadel that wasn't us, his damned Reaper heart, power cells or weapons."

The Admiral shifted his weight, looking back at Shepard and Kaidan. "We have to figure it out, and fast. The fleets moved in to protect the Crucible, but I don't know how long we have. They just can't make any headway against the Reapers as a group. We're dying out there. We have to fire this thing now."

Shepard nodded slightly. "Yes, sir."

Anderson regarded her narrowly for a moment, concern painting his features.

"It's been a long few days, Admiral," Kaidan supplied. "The Illusive Man's been, uh, working us over. We're still a little out of it."

"You took care of him, right?" Anderson said. "He's not going to come crawling back like Saren did?"

"Shepard did, sir. He's not coming back unless the Reapers can make his teeth walk."

The admiral nodded. Sometimes, a good CO was the one who didn't ask for details. He cocked his head, as if listening to his comms. "Well, I have at least some good news for you, and unless I miss my guess, they'll be coming up the ramp- ah, there."

A commotion broke out back at the bay entrance. Kaidan heard the penetrating rumble of Wrex’s voice, then a familiar shout. Garrus suddenly forced his way past the human marines and jogged toward them, Tali on his heels. A moment later came the others - James, limping a little, Liara and Javik. A flood of relief went through Kaidan. In all this madness, there was an immense comfort in his mismatched team… and friends.

Even the dour-faced prothean seemed to carry an air of satisfaction about him as they clustered around, clasping hands and talking over each other, telling the compressed and fragmented stories of
everything that had happened. After the confusing, frightening miasma of illusion Kaidan and Shepard had been trapped in, the warmth radiating from them was a balm. Liara hugged him, and Garrus and James shook his hand, promising to trade tales over a good many drinks.

Movement teased the corner of Kaidan's eye. He glanced around, and realized they'd accumulated quite a crowd of onlookers under the workmanlike vault of the repair bay. All craning their necks to get a look at the rag-tag team that had been at the center of this whole conflict, and Shepard, the controversial herald and flag-bearer herself. The lumps, horns and frills of krogan, turians, salarians and even a few glowing geth eyes mingled with the many human, and some asari, faces. A contingent of Alliance marines seemed to be trying to maintain something of a cordon, but the crowd pressed, talking and pointing.

Admiral Anderson interjected again, clearing his throat. Two opposing forces pulled at them. Time was of the essence, yet they couldn't charge into the fray unprepared. A frenetic energy descended on the scene. Anderson drew Shepard aside to talk deployment, joined by Wrex and an asari commando Kaidan didn't recognize. Garrus and James approached the crowd, and soon the general milling around took on a new urgency. Kaidan went after James, looking to secure supplies. There wasn't much to be had, but his name and rank galvanized the harried logistics officers to nonetheless produce ration bars, heat sinks, water and a couple of pistols. At least he still had the Cerberus-made rifle Lawson had pressed on him. At first he'd mistaken it for a Mattock, a solid-enough weapon with good accuracy, but now that he had time to look closer, it proved to have a full-auto mode and several small differences. He checked the ammo slug and sink fit, then synced it to his armor VI. It would have to do.

A combination of tiredness and heightened nerves lent everything a detached quality. Kaidan responded automatically to the line of soldiers that approached him, trying to give each one a moment of his time even as he wolfed down energy bars and sorted his gear. They were all kinds of people. Some clearly hardened vets who wanted to salute humanity's second Spectre. Others were too young, too old or un-modified, pressed into service in ill-fitting armor, without gene mods or extensive training, but made veterans by dint of sheer survival. Most came from Earth with Anderson. They spoke fleetingly of lost family and friends, of surviving the harrowing escape from Earth to get here, and the even more harrowing bull-rush past the Reaper frontline. They asked about Shepard.

Here and there, Kaidan asked his own questions, about Vancouver, about his SpecOps team, but got little information back. Anderson had established his base in London, the natural barrier of the British Isles affording him a small measure of control over the territory. But with the whole planet's communication systems all but obliterated, the status of anything past London was a black hole. He got scattered stories of pockets of resistance, but no greater picture.

He could only keep himself numb to thoughts of Earth. There was a brittle, thin edge to the emotions crawling around in his head, one that threatened to snap under any pressure. He caught himself imagining the red bleed of the illusion of Mindoir creeping into his field of view. He hoped it wasn't an incipient migraine.

There was no contact with the Normandy. The comm channels were jammed. But the rumors seemed to suggest she still flew, and a few of the Alliance personnel he spoke to went even further, claiming the ship and Commander Shepard were the spirit of this whole fight.

At length, Kaidan spotted Lawson talking to Javik. She seemed to be trying to get him to read a datapad, likely unaware that he couldn't easily read their alphabets. Shepard, apparently freed from Anderson's grip, approached them, and Kaidan clipped the rifle to his back and followed.
"This is impossible," Lawson huffed to Shepard, her voice tight with stress. "I don't even know what I'm looking for! It could be long and complex, or just a few numbers!"

"What if he'd uploaded it to himself or something?" Shepard suggested.

"Unlikely," Javik pronounced. "His primitive mind would find no purchase on it. That, on the other hand..."

He bent and reached into Lawson's box, withdrawing what looked like a large, smooth ammo slug. In his hand, a line of green light appeared along it length.

Lawson stopped tapping at the datapad, staring at the prothean. "What did you do? What is that?"

"A memory shard?" Shepard guessed.

Kaidan only had a vague sense of what she meant by that. Without a word, Javik turned toward Shepard and held it out. She swallowed and reached for it, but instead of letting go, Javik closed his other hand over hers, wrapping around the shard. Shepard went rigid, eyes bulging.

Anger shot through Kaidan. He took a step forward, then stopped, exhaling through his teeth.

It lasted only a moment. Javik's gaze went slack, too, then he shook his head, withdrawing from the shard and rubbing his hands together.

"Is it the Catalyst data?" Lawson pressed.

Shepard blinked, looking down at the now-dark length of metal in her hand. "I don't... I don't know."

"I am not an engineer," Javik said. "But the shard did contain a pattern."

"A sort of... mandala?" Shepard said.

The prothean tilted his head, as if trying to make sense of whatever esoteric word his translator had fed him. "Perhaps. It is difficult to say without context. The Tal did not transmit codes like you do, but this is a pattern awaiting completion."

Lawson sucked her teeth. "I guess we hope that's it. There's nothing else here. He must have acquired that from somewhere, and used it to store what he extracted from the VI."

"Excuse me a moment," Shepard said vaguely. She turned and walked away.

Before Kaidan could follow, another soldier intercepted him. To his surprise, it was a turian. She introduced herself, but the only detail that jumped out at Kaidan was that she was a colleague of Spectre Krannas, and had been on the Citadel since its closure, fighting with those left inside. Kaidan was struck by the odd sort of infamy that came with the title of Spectre, regardless of what else it meant. When she finally left, Kaidan heard his name called. It was Garrus.

"There you are," the turian said, hurrying over. "You should talk to Shepard."

"We have to plan-"

Garrus touched his shoulder. "No, I mean, go and talk to her." His mandibles flexed in mysterious emphasis. "She's been doing what she always does, making the rounds. But it's like... well, it's not really like the Collector mission. I just know she's," he waved his fingers in front of his eyes, "putting on a face."
A cold feeling slithered through Kaidan's gut. "The Illusive Man did something… very cruel to her. Not the kind of thing you just brush aside."

Garrus looked him in the eye. "I know I'm presuming a lot. But the last time I didn't do anything about it, it was almost too late. And the time before that, people died."

"I hear you. I… needed to anyway. Waiting for the right time is probably a mistake."

Garrus just nodded, and turned away. The cold feeling twisted into a knot. Kaidan knew he needed to talk to her, knew the opportunity would be fleeting. And yet doing so admitted to the finality of it.

He cast about and spotted her standing alone, looking over the rifle Lawson had handed them. He wasn't going to get another chance. He walked over, skirting emptied crates of supplies and cables.

"Hey," he said carefully.

Shepard looked up, and their eyes met. There was a cascade of emotions at play behind her reflective retinas, all struggling against her soldier's armor. He realized he had no idea what to say. In light of everything they'd been through in the last twenty-four hours, and what was ongoing all around them, nothing seemed adequate. He wanted to ask about the phantom Mindoir, about her name. He wanted to peel off all his extra layers and crawl into a hole, take her somewhere safe and warm and not think about any of this. It dawned on him just how hard his mind was working to not admit that this could very well be the last time they had a chance to speak like this. Or just speak.

"I wish we had more time," he said, the brittle tremor in his head creeping into his voice.

"It's not fair, is it?" she said quietly. "Something else the Illusive Man stole from me. From both of us."

He felt the weight of what was surely curious eyes on his back. The noise of preparation continued unabated, but there was still a commanding officer back there. Chain of command. Regs. The steady drumbeat of training and habit offering their own solace, warring with all the human wants.

He chewed his lip. "You ready?"

She glanced over his shoulder to where everyone else stood, then looked away. "No. Not even close."

"It's okay."

"Is it? It's… it's all down to me again. A whole galaxy." She shook her head, rubbing the heel of her free hand into her eye. "I'm not ready at all. I feel terrible. I can't think."

"It's normal seizure side effects-"

"I don't have time for side effects!"

Kaidan edged a little closer and reached out to lay a hand on her arm as she ran her fingers over the rifle. Her absent fiddling had an immediate resonance in his gut. They were both trained to solve problems with violence. In theory, only when no other solution presented itself, but there was a perverse comfort, an undeniable power in it. When your head danced with images of murdered parents and killer machines, a big gun was a friend that whispered the promise of freedom from helplessness.

"It's all down to me," she repeated, raw and thin.
"Us. We'll all be there to see it through. You carried the whole galaxy this far, we can carry you this last sprint."

"I feel… stretched. Empty. I keep seeing-" she choked it off and shuddered, closing her eyes.

He didn't have to work to guess what she was talking about. He shifted again, trying to will the bulk of his armor to cut down the angle of anyone looking at them, to shut out the noise and intrusion around them. "It was just an illusion," Kaidan said gently. "To manipulate you and make you feel helpless. But you were stronger than that. You stood up to him."

She took a deep breath, tried to speak, then stopped again and studied the floor. "I can't… hurt over that right now, can I? There's no… there's no peace or resolution for it. Never was, then or now."

Her voice shook, but she swallowed it back, her body tightening with the effort.

"There's peace out there," Kaidan said. "Past all this."

Her short breathy scoff made him ache. He hated all the eyes around them, the rules, the layers of armor, the antiseptic cold of the Citadel, and the oppressive weight of time ticking away. I know the score. I know this is probably goodbye. But none of that made it out past the knot in his throat, the burning in his eyes. He eased her gun down to her side and slipped his arms around her waist.

"There's a life out there, Kye," he said. "There's a time - an identity - past all this. I know you've always had trouble seeing it, but it's waiting for you."

She grimaced, choking it out in a half-whisper. "I can't even… picture it."

"Take my word, then." He smoothed back those errant hairs that always seemed to escape her tight ponytail.

She looked at him searchingly, as if to eke out any doubt he might have. For a fleeting moment, he saw the teenage her again. He wondered, as she must have many times, what might have been if not for that slaver raid. But then, they might never have met.

"You won't get back what you lost," he said. "But you can make something new, and it can be whatever you want it to be."

She tried to say something, then just dropped the rifle, threw her arms around his neck and pressed herself close. As close as she could, anyway, with the thick ablating and deflection surfaces of their armor catching on each other. She settled for pressing her cheek against his, ignoring the scrape of stubble, bringing close the smell of her hair and dampness of tears.

"I'm not ready for this," she mumbled.

"Me neither," he said thickly. "But I'll fight like hell to hold you again."

She kissed him, hard and insistent, fingers running through his hair. The taste of her was hot with memories of stolen moments and nights of fierce, driving pleasure. It made him greedy, heedless, made his fingers dig in past the plating of her armor. Made him think of everything he still wanted to do with her. And to her.

"Like hell, you hear me," he breathed into her mouth.

She nipped at his lip, teasing. "I'm holding you to that."

They broke away reluctantly, foreheads almost touching. In her eyes he could see the minute tracing
of the iris mechanism as it shifted, a perfect imitation of natural adjustments. He tried to take in every little detail of her face. The tone of her skin, the little imperfections and faint scars, the curve of her cheeks and lips.

"Messed-up kid that I was," he murmured, "I could never have imagined my life would turn out this way. And I owe a lot of that to you."

A smile teased her mouth. "You didn't need my help, you were already amazing the day I met you. Kaidan..." She drew her hands slowly down his arms. "Whatever happens, never doubt you're the best thing that ever happened to me."

He swallowed the thickness in his throat. "Even though I made mistakes?"

"I did too. Let's... let's go."

The reverie broken, Kaidan was startled to realize there were people standing only a few meters away. Namely Wrex, whose broad back and hump, in the same silhouette with Garrus' collar, cut out a great deal of the crowd's line of sight. Garrus caught Kaidan looking at him, and cocked his head at a questioning angle.

"Your friends are here for you," Kaidan said quietly. He bent and collected her rifle, handing it back to her.

Wrex seemed to notice Garrus' gaze, and turned himself. "Done? Good." He walked up to Shepard, craned his neck out and touched his huge, ridged crest to her head with a light bonk. "The Void can't hold you, sister. Now, let's go kill some Reapers!"

"Yeah, we better get moving," Shepard said.

Wrex pounded his fist into his hand. "I'll be leading two squads of the best warriors of Tuchanka, and we'll meet up with Grunt and Aralakh. We'll carve a path right through them. Fight well!" He whacked Garrus and Kaidan on the shoulders, then stomped off, bellowing to his krogan, who answered with enthusiastic hooting and banging of their armored chests.

From a little further away, Tali, James and Liara came up to them.

Shepard pushed her helmet on. "This is the end, and I've barely done anything yet," she commented. Kaidan could see her working to pull on her Commander Shepard face, breathing slow and deliberate, settling herself into her armor. The little pre-fight rituals he'd gotten used to seeing.

Garrus shook his head with a philosophical tilt. "I think the Illusive Man counts as at least a hundred kills, which means I'll have some catching up to do."

Shepard looked out at the assembled soldiers and made a face. "Oh no, I have to make a speech, don't I? The speech."

"Any variation of 'kill them all!' should do the job," James supplied.

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind."

"Just sayin'." He shrugged. "As long as you're saying it, I think you could read to them from the AO manifest and they'd cheer. But we're in a hurry, right?"

The end of all worlds had finally come to the center of the civilized galaxy. The richest, most
prestigious real estate for hundreds of light years stood dark and devastated, its artificial sky extinguished, its architecture visible only in the halos of fires and explosions. As the allies pressed out into the dead city, they did so in total darkness, shot through with any lamp and flashlight they could muster.

The abyssal night was not a friendly one.

The many Reaper creatures seemed unhindered by the lack of light. They boiled out of every corner and dim doorway, all surging weapons and grasping claws. They seethed in the greenish haze of Kaidan's low-light filter, their lit cybernetics leaving glowing contrails smeared into skeletal marionettes. Many were the kinds they'd grown used to seeing on the battlefield; the favored templates of their creators. But still, all manner of half-formed hybrids shambled and shuffled toward them out of the gloom. Some were barely different than their native form, still wearing the military or C-Sec armor they'd died in, with their ravaged faces the only sign of the metamorphosis they'd been subjected to.

Kaidan stuck close on Shepard's heels. She fought focused, but subdued, at least compared to her usual headlong ferocity. Somewhere out there was access to the Crucible itself, or so they'd been told. The destinations in their onboard maps were nebulous at best, distances and times impossible to judge in the dark mayhem.

The krogan went ahead, supported by humans and turians. They had little in the way of artillery, only man-portable heavy weapons and some drone support. The krogan, for their part, seemed to revel in this kind of point-blank warfare, and their war cries bounced off the walls as they charged forward, cutting through the front lines. Asari and salarians flitted in and out of the shadows, striking quickly and fading away again. Many times, Kaidan thought they would be overwhelmed, only to have their foes cut down right in front of them. Where Miranda Lawson had ended up, he didn't know for sure, only that she'd joined a human mercenary group that may or may not have contained some of those ex-Cerberus fighters. So many different people under a hundred different commands, all forced to move under time pressure, and in pitch black. The level of raw chaos was palpable.

Here and there, remains of the once-elegant architecture were visible through debris and dust. Dark storefronts stood empty and gutted. A statue of some war hero lay shattered in the street, chewed up as cover until the front line pressed past it. Their world was reduced to sensor pings, low-light smears and as far as their IR and lamps would reach.

As they drew closer to the inner edge of the Presidium, a boom sounded, louder than any weapon, reverberating off the walls and buildings and shaking the structure under their feet. Kaidan took a quick accounting of their team, of Shepard, the heat sink in the rifle in his fist. He gunned down another turian drone, half-formed, with pieces of civilian clothing still clinging to it.

The boom came again, louder, pushing against the very air. There was shouting. He tore his eyes away from the oncoming monsters and looked around. The boom built into a thunderous crash, muffled by distance and distorted by intervening architecture, but felt hard enough from below to almost make him stumble. He saw Alliance marines gesturing, their eyes wide under their helmets. Kaidan followed their wildly pointing fingers.

Up where the ceiling of the Presidium torus curved away, a great tear appeared in the endless darkness. A rain of crystalline debris fell in a torrent as a segmented limb pierced the black sky, shattering it and peeling it back, admitting a shaft of Sol's white light. Another limb followed, wrenching it wider. A great wall of noise erupted as more of the structure gave way and a huge body forced its way into the breach, scattering the piercing light. The ground shook. Voices filled Kaidan's comms line, crowding for attention.
A baleful red eye, lost in the silhouetted geometry of a gigantic body, descended into the dark, haloed in falling debris. The huge shape barely fit, its full height disappearing out the torn hole.

"SHEPARD." The word thundered down the narrow valley of buildings, echoes shaking the smoky air.

For a breath even the fighting seemed to subside, as if the entire army of allied fighters cringed from the demonic apparition.

"Harbinger!" Shepard shouted back, her voice tiny and lost in the cavernous Presidium and the chatter of weapons fire.

"DIE."

"As if you know the meaning of the word!"

A shudder passed through the Reaper drones in Kaidan's line of fire. One of the brutes shook itself, its cybernetics flaring bright and yellow-hot, spearing his low-light filter. The creature spun on its heel and galloped toward them, tearing at the ground on all fours as it knocked its compatriots aside.

Kaidan shouted a warning, heaving an unfocused mass field into the beast's path. It stumbled, plowing through a planter and shattering it in a spray of dirt. It rolled back to its feet with unnatural grace, throwing debris aside, its jawless mouth agape in a soundless roar as it strained for its target.

Mass fields twitched and tore, seething blue and green as they pummeled the brute. Kaidan unloaded a whole heat clip into it, chasing the beam of Javik's particle rifle across its hide, before it stumbled again, trailing wet ichor across the floor.

"More coming!" James shouted, breathless.

Kaidan looked around wildly. The darkness was filling with black ghosts with burning yellow eyes, all fixed on them. Sparking, buzzing growls and roars reverberated off the close-set buildings. Throats torn and re-forged called out Shepard's name, over and over again.

"There's a voice I never wanted to hear again!" Garrus grated. He'd been forced to abandon the finesse of his sniper rifle for the charnel saw of his assault rifle. Even firing from the hip, it was almost impossible for a round not to find a target.

"DIE," the Reaper above them roared.

Its baleful eye flared, spreading sepulchral red highlights across the dark Presidium architecture. In the confined atmosphere, the lance of light made a terrible sound as it leapt forth, sending leering shadows sprawling in every direction.

Kaidan heard the combined scream of the troops caught in the lance's wake as it raked the ground, streaking toward them. The brightness whitened out his visor, the heat scalding his face before his armor sensed the danger and his atmospheric visor whisked shut against the burning air. For a long, terrible few seconds he was sure he was dead, trapped in the confines of his armor as it struggled to keep the heat buildup from cooking him. Then, abruptly, the sound and heat subsided. Warnings flashed in his HUD, but against all expectation, his limbs still responded and breath rushed into his lungs. The lance hadn't hit them.

Monsters crowded his vision as it returned, forcing him to react, firing madly to keep them at bay. Dimly, he heard Anderson shouting, but at whom he wasn't sure. The Reaper shifted its enormous weight, crushing more of the Presidium roof, its splayed, segmented feet scraping entire apartment
blocks off the walls as it planted them for purchase, turning itself. Weapons fire pattered against its massive kinetic fields, little more than a fly's buzzing. In the bright shaft of Sol's light, sections of thick blue-black plating shifted over its core, alight with thousands of points of blue. Brilliant yellow shone from beneath its forward carapace, matching its thralls’ glowing eyes.

"DIE."

Shepard swore, turned on her heel and ran, her armor flashing briefly in the dancing lights as she tore away from her team. Harbinger's red eye flared again. Kaidan opened his mouth to shout, but it was drowned out by the roar as the lance leapt forth again. Buildings downrange buckled and exploded, their frames melting and turning to slag as the beam chased her, arcing away from Kaidan's position. His heart constricted. He heard his shout of warning dissolve into a horrified scream.

Her silhouette vanished as the awful laser roared over it, whiting out his visor again. He fumbled forward, tripping against debris and pushing himself to his feet again. Alarms beeped in his ears. He blinked away tears. His HUD swam as it resolved.

Shepard's suit uplink wasn't dead.

His feet moved before he could think about it. Raw dark energy roiled around him as he pelted toward that sickly comm signal, bowling aside a human husk unfortunate enough to stagger into his path. Through dense smoke, his dancing helmet lamp picked out a long, flaming furrow tracing a line across the ground, several meters across. He vaulted, landing in it, dodging half-melted metal and heedless of the flames licking at his boots as he scrambled up the other side.

He almost didn't see her, another lump in the piles of black char. He skidded to a stop, backpedaled, and scrambled to his knees, shoving masonry aside.

Warning danced in his HUD, the pulse of heartbeat visible in the readout. Her breakneck run had evaded the sun-hot heart of the blast. But her armor smoked under his fingers as he lifted her, its green paint seared black and stripped to the diffusion threading. Her atmo visor was closed. Layers of cooked ablating and undersuit flaked off in his hands. His diagnostic VI advised him her armor reported critical system damage, shutdown of combat functions and reversion to basic life-support mode. Shepard moved, hands curling into fists as more suit peeled away.

"Kaidan!" Liara shouted, the imperative shooting through the adrenaline haze.

A huge body crashed into him, lifting him to his feet together with Shepard and propelling them both. Kaidan was almost surprised the face so close to his wasn't a hideous monster but the closed visor of James' heavy helmet, eyes white and wide beneath. A wall intruded into his line of sight. They slammed into it.

"DIE."

The howl erupted again, searing the air. The awful, thunderous crashing and tearing beat against them as James pushed them into the shadow of the ruined structure next to Liara. Shepard's back arched in Kaidan's arms and her head wagged from side to side. She forced the heels of her hands under the lip of her helmet and shoved. It peeled away in a hiss of escaping gas, taking some of the scorched neck seal with it. In Kaidan's lamp, her eyes were wild, watering, her cheeks burnt and split, trailing lines of red along the path of old scars.

Anderson shouted in Kaidan's comms, broken and static-filled. The Reaper's beam jumped the gap of the building they hid behind, raining flaming and melted debris down on them. Kaidan hugged Shepard to himself, huddling into the hard wall at his back and Liara's legs. The asari's arms
outstretched, deflecting the worst of the assault with a dark energy field. Injury warnings danced in Kaidan's HUD. James' rifle chattered, a heat sink falling to join the pools of bubbling slag. Garrus and Tali joined the chorus in the comms.

The deafening noise and terror was a fist around Kaidan's throat, suffocating him. Harbinger's beam sputtered out, the buzz of its recharging cycle rumbling through the ground.

"This building won't take another blast!" Liara said, shaking his shoulder.

Numb, burning dark crawled around the edges of Kaidan's vision. His arms felt like lead, clamped around Shepard's weakly flailing body. It was James again who galvanized him, grunting in pain as he heaved them both up again. Liara joined them, half-dragging them over a fallen pillar toward a burnt-out storefront. Garrus jogged ahead, sweeping for hostiles, while the whine of Javik's particle rifle followed.

They'd barely crossed the threshold when Harbinger's weapon struck again, relentless. The front of the store caved in as they blundered into the depths of the dark room, tripping over fallen displays and dead holo-projectors. Heat rushed around them, shimmering the air as the overhead beams near the entrance swelled to glowing, sagging lumps. Kaidan tried to twist his body between the lance's pulverizing heat and Shepard, aided in no small part by James' armored bulk.

After a seemingly interminable few seconds of hell, the pounding subsided again, leaving Kaidan panting in the dark.

A clatter from the pitch-black darkness at the back end of the storefront made them all jump. Their lights danced, throwing wild shadows as they looked around. Something moved. James shouted and fired his rifle, close and loud. A large, multi-limbed body staggered in the doorway.

"Keelah-" Tali exclaimed.

"Stop!" Shepard croaked, mingling with Liara's shout of alarm. The asari pushed James' rifle as he fired again, stitching the back wall with impacts.

"What the hell!" he barked.

Garrus stepped bodily in front of Kaidan and Shepard, but kept his rifle muzzle down. Kaidan groped for his pistol.

"I'm sorry!" Liara said, stepping in front of the marine to face the shadow in the door. "I'm sorry, it was a mistake!"

The creature eased out of the shadows, wisps of smoke rising from a trio of holes in thick hide. A slight glow emanated from it, but instead of lines of cables it was a soft bio-luminescence coming from spots arching back from its head. The pads at the end of long tentacles groped at the air, flexing and grasping.

"R-rachni?" Kaidan sputtered, recognition finally penetrating his pounding heartbeat as he craned his neck around Garrus' fishbowl collar.

"Rachni!" Javik echoed. He peered at the apparition with an unreadable, wide-eyed expression.

"How did… how did they get here?" Tali said. "Wait, they're *friendlies*, right?"

"Yes!" Liara spread her hands, addressing the rachni. "Please, can you… speak? Through me?"
Kaidan's stomach crawled over itself as the creature crept closer. As hard as it had been to adapt to thinking of geth as allies, at least they were nominally humanoid. This thing didn't even have a face, just antennae and a collection of ridged mouthparts. From his disjointed memory of fighting them, this one looked like a soldier genus, bulky of body and covered in chitin plates.

Shepard tried to push herself up. She extended her hand, shaking from shock, now bare of the burnt armor undersuit, split and oozing blood. The rachni shifted, its many beady eyes glittering in their lamps. Its tentacles curled up over its body, then with the tentative sniff of a dog meeting a stranger, touched one of its pads to her hand.

"It's okay," Shepard said to the rachni, her voice leaden and tired.

Liara touched its carapace, then shuddered and gasped, putting her palm to her head. Her eyes were black. "The… the song! I hear the song!"

"What do they want?"

"They… they're looking f-for us… for Shepard…"

"Why?" Javik said, lip curling with suspicion.

"Follow!" Liara blurted, face screwed up under her helmet.

"Are you serious?" James exclaimed, the muzzle of his rifle still at a dangerous angle.

"They came… they came from the Crucible! I see… I see them in many places… looking for us!"

"Or to lead us straight into a trap!" Javik growled.

"Are you voting we go back out there?" Garrus said. As he spoke, Harbinger's beam struck again, shaking soot from the rafters and carving another several meters off the storefront. He waited for the roaring and crashing to subside before speaking again. "Because Harbinger's got a target painted all over us, and I for one would rather be off the streets!"

The rachni crept backward, withdrawing to the darkened doorway, but staring at them with an expectant air.

Woozy-looking, Liara tugged on Kaidan's arm. "Come on," she said, "I think- I think they found keeper tunnels… or something…"

Kaidan looked at Shepard. She nodded wearily, then gently extricated herself from his grip and mutely reached for his pistol. Kaidan surrendered it to her, realizing her own rifle had been lost in the confusion.

Liara led the way into the dark, down a short flight of stairs into the remains of a stock room. The cacophony of battle dimmed slightly. Kaidan pinged Admiral Anderson's frequency, trying three times before getting a connection in the confines of his sealed helmet.

"Admiral?" he said into the line. "Do you read?"

"Major!" The line crackled with heavy static, thudding in time to badly-suppressed gunfire. "What's your twenty? Is Shepard there? I can't raise her!"

"Banged up. Sir, we're getting off the streets. It's too hot out there and I think we have a pathway to the target!"
"Ten-four. We'll keep them busy! Good luck, Major!"

The mute crates of the stock room gave way to another stair, descending into another level whose function was little more than esoteric. Kaidan had heard about areas like this of the Citadel, where new construction met the existing structure maintained by the keepers. It was useless to attempt to change such areas, because you'd arrive one day to find them changed right back.

"I feel like I just did this," Garrus said from behind him. "I- Spirits!"

Garrus' rifle came to life. Kaidan whirled to see a turian reaper drone bounce down the stairs they'd just descended, with more on its heels, their eyes alight with Harbinger's murderous glare.

"They're following us!" Kaidan shouted, firing his own rifle.

As the words left his mouth, the wall not three meters away caved in with a resounding crash. A huge brute barreled through, scattering masonry and reinforcing bars and slamming headlong into Vega and Javik.

Tali shouted something in her language and punched it. Belying her slight frame, her omni-tool dumped an entire shock charge all at once. Sparks and lightning danced along the brute's exposed spine. One of its eyes exploded. It backhanded Tali with a huge claw, sending her flying.

Kaidan emptied his clip into the brute as he heard the whine of current transfer in James' Foucault armature. Shouting insults, the marine smashed his fist into the brute's head, crushing its skull. It did not fall, instead flailing out with its claws, battering the marine. Garrus swore, torn between the brute behind him and the tide of drones still trying to force themselves down the stairs.

Shepard pulled her fist back, flaming blue, and smashed the beast for the third time, hitting it with a mass field just behind its ruined head and crushing its spine. It spasmed, then finally slumped. From the dusty darkness behind the brute, more shining eyes came shambling forward, spouting weapons fire. Shepard bared her teeth and threw her hand out, sending a wave of dark energy into them, then fired her pistol after it.

"Into the next room!" she shouted, voice cracking. "Liara, get that rachni moving! Garrus! Back!"

Acutely aware that her armor could no longer muster a kinetic barrier and that her biotics were probably exhausted, Kaidan summoned his own barrier and gave Garrus a meaningful yank. James hauled the prothean to his feet, but Javik shoved him, teeth bared.

"Oaf!" Javik snapped. "Get out of my way!"

"Hey, next time I won't bother!" James retorted.

"Shut it, marine!" Shepard barked. "Move your ass!"

The tide of drones coming down the stairs and through the gap seemed relentless as they retreated further down into the dark passages. Injury warnings danced in Kaidan's HUD, bullet penetrations and severe impacts. Tali's suit was punctured, and Garrus had run out of stims. After a few twists and turns he completely lost his bearings in the sea of attackers.

"This is insane!" James fumed.

"The rachni is leading us straight into more of them!" Javik said.

"It is not!" Liara shot back.
Braced against a stanchion, Shepard put the heel of her hand to her forehead, frowning. The blackened skin on her hands was broken by cracks of bright red that glittered in Kaidan's lamp. He couldn't even tell if she'd been more hurt, her armor's diagnostic system was shot. But her heart rate was erratic, her gaze unfocused.

Darkness chased Kaidan's vision when he looked around. It seemed like there was no end to the things. They moaned out Shepard's name, dying and rotting only to make room for more.

"Maybe I should've taken the Illusive Man's offer," Shepard said between her teeth, firing.

"Do we even know where we're going?" Garrus said.

"We're going to die down here-"

"I to think I could've controlled them, could have stopped all this..."

I can get her out of here. Figures danced in the dark, but behind them he saw the outline of a doorframe through which they were pouring. He set the detonator for contact and underhanded it.

"You could have taken control of them?" Javik demanded.

The darkness curled, a heat spreading in Kaidan's chest. I can take her away from all of this. Who the hell cares about-

The grenade blew, sundering the frame and causing the uprights to buckle and cave inward.

"Nobody else is doing a very good job, are they?!" Shepard snapped.

"Fool!" Javik grabbed Shepard's arm. Before Kaidan could react, James punched the prothean across the jaw, sending him staggering.

Shouting erupted. The Reaper drones seemed briefly penned in behind the debris of the fallen door, but already the sound of them pounding on it could be heard. The rachni pushed against Shepard, tentacles waving. Kaidan felt his arm coming up, pointing the pistol at it. Right next to Shepard.

For a surreal moment, He caught Shepard's gaze, Her eyes were wide, penetrating. She blinked, squinted at his weapon. A horrible urge to squeeze the trigger shot through him.

No-

In a slow-motion haze, Kaidan saw her put the muzzle of her pistol against her left palm. Saw her fingers clench around the trigger. The pistol's report stabbed his ears, reverberating painfully in the cramped room. A spray of perfect crimson spattered the floor. She screamed, body shaking. He stared in horrified shock.

"Have you gone insane?!" he shouted.

Her eyes flashed. Teeth bared, Shepard dropped her gun and snatched Javik's exposed hand. The prothean jerked, mouth opening to show all of his many sharp teeth. It was the most emotion Kaidan had ever seen on his face.

"They're doing this to us!" Shepard snarled.

Javik shuddered. As if taken by a sudden impulse, Liara reached and snatched his other hand.

The rachni swayed on the end of its many legs, tentacles pawing at Shepard, and Kaidan could
swear he almost heard something… a soft tone at the edge of his mind, suddenly swelling in volume.
A sharp, knifelike pain bloomed in his left hand. Colors smeared, saturated and shimmering. The rachni's gentle bio-luminescence pulsed and brightened.

"They're doing this to us," Shepard repeated, her ragged voice cutting through the droning note, singing in tune with the sharp pain. "Can you feel it? We're in their house, here. We're in one of them. And it's fighting us!"

The tone hummed and pulsed, pushing against the blackness. As if it were a kind of white noise, the pain seemed to force a shimmering clarity into his mind, washing away the fog of adrenaline and fear. Kaidan could suddenly feel the pressure all around him, pressing on him.

"The Reapers are trying everything they can," Shepard said. "Just to keep us from going forward! We must be close!"

The bright colors suddenly made the oily darkness at the edge of Kaidan's vision stand out. The fire in his chest felt suddenly foreign, wrong. Just like the Illusive Man's fantasmic Mindoir, his numbing calm. He gulped in a breath, clenching his hand, focusing on the sharp, throbbing pain.

"Fight them!" Shepard hissed.

Kaidan took a deep breath and pushed, like he had against the Illusive Man. This time, they all joined him, each a tone layered over the first growing into a harmonious resonance until, suddenly, the oppressive weight seemed to snap.

Shepard pulled her hand away, trembling. The darkness and colors retreated, leaving them all standing in the dim room, breathing hard, in a strange, icy clarity.

"Those mind-controlling Bosh'tets!" Tali shouted into the stillness, waving her arms. "Even the Citadel has some kind of… defence mechanism!"

"Probably the same one that kept us out of the keeper tunnels for so long," Garrus said, banging on his helmet.

Kaidan stumbled to Shepard, yanking a medigel capsule off his belt. "I'm sorry," he mumbled.

"Wasn't you," she said softly.

He nodded, squeezing the gel into the gaping hole through her hand. It was messy, but it would harden quickly and staunch the flow of blood.

The rachni made a clicking noise, tentacles waving back and forth. A moment later, a blood-curdling shriek cut through the air. They all jumped, lifting their weapons. Shepard looked around wildly.

"Cover that entrance!" she ordered, pointing at a doorway. "They're breaking through! Cut down their entry angle!"

A sick dread curled in Kaidan's gut as she barked more orders. He knew the tune of these kinds of orders; she was setting up for a stand. He felt the local mass fields distort unnaturally, in a way he'd not wanted to feel again soon. He glanced at Liara. Her eyes were wide, hand tight around her pistol, the hand Leng had taken from her raised as if to ward off what was coming.

The banshee did not walk in the door. It exploded into the room in a shower of dark energy, crushing the debris and floorplates as it landed and throwing Kaidan and Liara to the ground with enough violence to punch the air from his lungs. The dreadful apparition reached for him as more Reaper
monsters crowded in behind. Terror gripped Kaidan, the memory of the worst pain he could imagine, lasting for a thousand years.

A goblet of wet, green sludge hit the banshee square in the face. The monster reeled back as steam began to rise from its face, raising its claws in surprise. The rachni soldier shouldered Kaidan aside and pounced on the banshee, swiftly followed by another. Their mouthparts distended into vicious maws as they sank into the creature's wiry flesh, tearing at it as they bore it to the ground.

Kaidan scrambled up and backpedaled wildly, not even bothering to wonder where the second rachni had appeared from, instead trying to find an opening to shoot at it past the chitinous bodies. But another target presented itself, another brute clambering over the fallen beams. He fired at that instead, joined by James and Javik.

"Cover!" James shouted, yanking his shoulder as the beast fell.

Kaidan retreated to the column behind him, narrowly avoiding a surge of fire from a trio of turian and human drones coming through the door. Their weapons tore chunks from the masonry as Kaidan dropped his sink for another. He realized he had two more left. More Reaper monsters advanced, their eyes gleaming, only to be thrown back and cut down... and replaced by still more.

He spared a glance around. Everyone was firing madly, shouting. Mass heaved and boiled, throwing debris and bodies around in a wild maelstrom. He couldn't see Shepard.

His comms popped and crackled, opening to a private channel.

Shepard's voice, low and weary. "I have to go."

His throat constricted. He put three rounds through a human drone, his hands moving automatically. "Shepard-"

"I have to go do this," she repeated. Her voice was shaking, apologetic.

"I- I know," he managed through his teeth. A husk he thought was dead pulled itself up again, reaching for his ankle. He stomped on it, crushing it between skull and spine. "Kye, don't-"

He bit his tongue hard enough to draw blood. ... leave me again.

"I need you to find me. After. Please. I don't know... I don't know where I'll be, but-"

"I will," he promised, breathless. Tears made his vision swim, hot against his face under the visor.

"I love you," she whispered. "Be safe." The line clicked off.

"I love you," he said into his helmet. He killed another Reaper even as it howled her name, then another and another, dark energy singing a hymn in his blood.

You can't have her, you monsters. You can't have our peace.

Don't leave me again...
Victory and Vengeance

Chapter Notes

So as to not run headlong into Christmas, the next chapter will be posted on Sunday, December 29th.

Happy holidays everyone, and thank you for reading!

Light and dark clashed, shadows dancing to the tune of gunfire and bursts of dark energy. Glowing eyes and cables flashed against helmet lamps and IR floods. Beside Javik, Vega shouted in frustration. He'd long since discarded his rifle, but now his heavy shotgun whined and vented a burst of heat, its overtaxed sink heating the eject port to glowing red.

"I'm out!" the marine shouted. In a swift move he flipped the shotgun over in his grip and clubbed the husk reaching for him across the bald skull. He smashed another on the backswing, his huge arms powering through the husk's skeletal frame.

This would not last long. Javik had fought such desperate stands before, felt this exhaustion before. He knew the coppery taste of it in his mouth. The last time, he had laid himself down in a coffin, expecting to wake in a future temporarily empty of Reapers. He cleaved a turian drone in half, threw another back against a fallen pillar. He glanced around, quickly taking in the scene, noting the absence of Shepard.

Shear was hot in his hands, straining to keep up with the demand he placed on it. His loyal spear, with him since the death of his mentor… But the promise of a new weapon tugged at him. A far bigger spear. The spear of the Talvan, the Inusannon, and every unnamed civilization before them.

Too close. He was too close to lie down again, this time for good. He knew where Shepard had gone. Where he would have gone. Should be going.

Javik watched the human club another Reaper drone into submission. The press of foes already threatened to overwhelm. I am meant for more than this. He gritted his teeth, barked Vega's name and pushed Shear into the surprised human's hands. Javik turned away before the swell of instinct crying out against it could take hold, the promise of the Crucible hot in his mind.

Vega pointed Shear at the oncoming Reapers, but nothing happened. "It doesn't have a damn trigger!" he burst out, shaking the rifle. "How does it work?"

Javik ground his teeth, slamming a husk away with a burst of dark energy before the human used his precious Shear as a club as well. "It is but a weapon. You are a warrior. Will it!"

"Prothean mumbo-jumbo-" Vega growled as he thumbed the wrist seal on his gauntlet and tore it off.

He slapped his bare palm against the rifle and pointed it again. A green lance burst forth from Shear, raking across the enemy. Javik spared a moment of satisfaction as the husks crumbled to blackened dust. The humans were primitive still, but Shear was eager as always to kill, even in an ape's hands. He could hear the whine of its internal heat building.

"Controlled bursts!" Javik admonished, felling another husk.
"Yes sir!" Vega snapped back.

Javik glanced at the others, haloed in dark energy and the spark of their weapons. T'Soni and Alenko marshalled biotic fields to sap the energy from incoming fire while the turian and quarian felled each new monster in turn. Tali'Zorah's drone still flitted among them, and Vakarian had climbed onto a fallen beam, from which he fired in precise bursts. Javik saw signs of wounds, burnt armor and streaks of blood, but they fought on. Not apes, no. Warriors. His tal.

_I am Vengeance._ He would not fill another coffin today.

In the dark and mayhem, he could still sense Shepard. She sought out the Crucible. He pulled the last grenade from his belt and slipped behind the lines, tracing the wall to try to orient himself. The room shrank back down to two exits, but only one had seen Shepard's passage, the spatter of her blood on the ground. Javik glanced back, then primed the grenade and snapped it to the wall, deep enough for the frame to absorb the backblast and not strike the others. Then he jogged through.

The Citadel's walls drank in the sound of the raging battle, reducing it to a tinny thunder. The grenade went off, a sharp crack and rumble that died quickly. He didn't spare the time to check the result.

A shot of adrenaline ran through him. His hands ached for Shear. Fingers of dark energy, the All-Binding Force, played over him, buzzing in his nerves. His mouth was dry, body aching with drug-dulled pain. He could feel slicks of blood beneath his battered armor where incoming rounds had punched through his undersuit in two places.

_Put it away,_ he told himself, _put all of it away._ There is only Vengeance. A heady lightness began to suffuse him, lifting his heavy feet.

The ken of the hallway was busy with the chemical trails of the rachni. Like the chatter of a foreign language, pregnant with meaning Javik couldn't decipher except for scattered, alien impressions. Their communication song still echoed in the recesses of his mind, taunting him. That detail had been left out of the stories passed down from his forbears about the insect armies that had once ravaged the Talvan empire. So much that he'd held as truth now seemed only to be conjecture, if not myth. His 'truths' were those that had been passed on to him from his teachers, long after the destruction of his people's greater archival knowledge. A shared pool of knowledge Javik had discovered to have more than a few omissions. The rachni, scourge of Yxe - upjumped insects - possessed something very like his own the ken. An ability he held sacred to higher order beings.

Hand on the wall to guide himself, his old self railed against the new knowledge. The self that had woken from that coffin, secure in his profound superiority.

Dim light filtered down the corridor far ahead of him. Thin hallways split off from the main shaft, but the commander's ken drew him unerringly. At last she appeared out of the gloom, collapsed against a thick conduit. Even as he padded up behind her, she pulled a leg up underneath and tried to push herself up. Javik touched her arm. She started, looking over her shoulder with wild eyes. In the chaos, she'd picked up her pistol again, and its muzzle wavered uncertainly in Javik's face for a heartbeat before dropping.

"Javik," she murmured.

"I have blocked the way behind us," Javik said, "but it will surely not hold under pressure. The others will hold as long as they can. We cannot waste that."

"Wasn't trying," she said with thin humor, "but my legs aren't cooperating..."
He reached out and gripped her arm, lifting her to loop it over his shoulders. A cascade of scattered thoughts rippled through his ken. He felt the keen stab of her discomfort, followed by resignation. Pain, profound weariness, the dull throb in her hand, and a sharper twinge of newer wounds. They echoed his own with each beat of his heart.

He gripped the arm around his neck, her bare skin under his palm as they shuffled forward into the depth of the station's heart. How short a time it seemed since he'd first woken up among these apes and bird-men, all playing at civilization. And yet, how long it seemed. Despite himself, they'd come to fill up his connections, his impressions and memories. Even now, the alien sentiments running through the ken did not seem so alien at all.

The strongest one startled him, though. Shepard… did not want to be here. Every step was pain, and not the pain of wounds. Javik had fought his entire life, bent his entire being to this moment. But the person closest to himself in this cycle was wracked with conflict.

The dark station rumbled around them, shuddering beneath their feet, as if it too felt the intruders in its gut. Javik could sense the dark, oily touch creeping around the edges of his vision. Probing him for weakness. The pain that shot through him with every step, echoed in Shepard, pushed the darkness back. Reminded him of flesh, muscle and sinew moving over itself, animating bone, pulling him forward.

A new, foreign feeling intruded into his mind.

"We have crossed into the Crucible," he said quietly.

She glanced at him. "You can feel it?"

He squinted. "The Citadel tunnels are empty but for the rachni, and even they are only minutes fresh. This…” he ran his foot over the flat metal, "this has the touch of many hands."

Other people had been on this path. He sensed humans and salarians, and the rachni as well. Busy and harried, but determined.

"It's vibrating," Shepard said.

A flickering light bounced off the walls and floors, a cold shiver illuminating the gloom. From the depths beyond his hearing game a low sound, felt in his chest as much as his ears. Even knowing it had been built by other hands, he strained to feel even the faintest ken of the Talvan who had laid their hands on its design. A foolish hope.

"It anticipates our arrival," he said quietly.

"You have… no idea how this thing works, do you?"

"I do not. In my time, I could not even dream of such a moment."

She laughed quietly, forced. "Maybe it picks up the whole universe and shakes it until the Reapers fall out."

Javik cocked his head in her direction. "It is a quantum device. A simple concept writ large, or so I was always told. In that sense, perhaps you are not so far from the truth."

"Quantum tech… that's about multiple possibilities all at once, right? Maybe we just turn it on and… choose a universe the Reapers never evolved in."
The thought nagged at Javik. A universe the Reapers never evolved in. Obliterate the reality they knew, for a universe new from its very roots? What new creatures would such a universe have created? What new horrors?

"Without the cycles, we would not exist as we do now," he said.

She made a face, echoed by the clench of her mind. "Just like me and the Illusive Man… I wouldn't be here it all if it wasn't for what he did."

"You are Victory. However you came to this path, do not doubt it."

Javik sensed a flutter of confusion, a strange regret. "Victory?" she said dubiously.

He nodded, suddenly sure of it himself. It was the conflict, the fact she kept moving forward, even though every part of her did not want to. There was nowhere else Javik would have preferred to be than there, at that moment, but for Shepard every step was a mental battle. And yet, had he not touched her ken, he would never have guessed the truth. Such was the depth of her will.

"You are the Exemplar of Victory, the embodiment of this cycle."

They turned a corner and Javik could not help but gasp, the sound drowned out by the rumble finally building to full.

The corridor opened to a vault lined with arching buttresses. Down the center was the source of the shimmering - a shaft of light almost too bright to look upon, held within a series of structural rings several meters across vanishing into the floor and ceiling far above. The beam cast its silvery radiance all around, scattering flickering shadows off the mysterious architecture. Shepard swore quietly.

"The heart of the Crucible," Javik said.

A pang of pain, deep down. "Sure hope so."

The shudder that had been following them spiked with arrhythmic intensity.

"That did not come from within," Javik warned.

Shepard shook herself free of him, staggering before regaining her balance, pistol gripped in her good hand. She looked around and pointed. "Gotta find a… console or something… I'll go this way."

She limped away. Javik edged in the opposite direction, but his eyes were drawn back to the beam in the center. It made a sound like a huge, distant waterfall, almost too low to be heard. His heart pounded in his chest. He took a step toward it, then another. It sang in his mind.

The shuddering of the structure built, turning cruel and discordant with the squeal of shattering architecture.

"Javik!" Shepard shouted. He spun and saw her windmilling her arms as the ground jumped under their feet. "How do we turn it on-"

A huge, blue-black claw punched through the far wall, peeling the metal open and sundering a buttress as it crashed through the ring walkway. Javik and Shepard were both thrown to the deck as Harbinger's terrible roar flooded the chamber, so close the vibration made Javik's eyes swim.
Shepard swore at the monster in incoherent fury, firing her pistol as he pushed herself to her feet. The deck buckled, supports coming off the walls one after the other with loud twanging sounds. Harbinger's glaring red eye peered down through the hole, illuminating the falling beams and struts in harsh light as the giant Reaper tore the very Citadel apart in its desperate bid to reach them.

He saw Shepard slide, clawing at the smooth walkway. The crackle of Harbinger's eye of death echoed across the room.

Javik ran.

Harbinger's lance struck Shepard, blowing the metal walkway into glowing molten fragments that splattered the walls.

Javik skidded over the gantry as the last of it came free of its supports, dropping out from beneath his feet. He was thrown sideways, slamming into a railing and rolling, fingers pawing at the grate as the angle continued to slide. The shaft of white light seared his eyes, filling his head with pain. The gantry caught, swung. He planted his feet, using the railing as leverage, then jumped with all his might, reaching, willing with every fibre of his being for dark energy to loft him.

He was floating, flying for an eternal second, bathed in the thunder of Harbinger's killing roar.

And then, white.

Forever.

Pain. Searing, burning, pulling him apart from the inside.

Shapes interlock, teeth feeding into themselves, reading from his mind.

The pain ebs, clearing his vision in a rush.

Before him unfolds infinity.

Vast, interlocking crystalline structures turning over themselves, endless dizzying fractals spinning out into space. The staggering size of it presses on him, stopping his breath in his throat. Time itself bloats. No urge to let his breath out returns. Patterns upon patterns upon patterns swirl into the distance, at once immense and impossibly tiny.

Impossibly, he recognizes one of them. Shepard.

Shepard dies, obliterated by... Methara. Harbinger. She is a structure among billions, a fractal image into which he falls, small on the outside, enormous on the inside. Cells, matter, ideas and patterns firing in complex sequence, resulting in actions and counter actions. She dies over and over, in a thousand different ways. Here she dodges, is struck by the Reaper's leg. Here she runs, flees the red-hot beam. There she falls, drawn into the void of space. She is not meat and bone but a pattern, an ever-changing calculation. Angles, vectors, nerves and chemical messaging. Combustion points of flesh and armor.

Javik turns his head and sees the others of her team as well, forming their own fractal patterns. He sees them evade death and then die, over and over. Each movement calculated, mapped. Each neuron spasm tracked and detailed. He sees them from a thousand eyes just as those eyes are snuffed out. Feels the cold details of every drone that approaches them. Speeds and tensile strengths, processing, heat buildup, cellular decay. The drones are weak, but many. The Reapers are... vast.

Endless patterns. Churning, twisting, feeding into themselves. A continuity of intertwining
calculations, uncountable stacked possibilities.

Shepard is dead.

But she isn't. She exists in all states at once.

There, a thousand kilometers away, and yet right before him, is the vast fractal of Methara. Some of it is here, most of it elsewhere. It links and coils into a mass too dense to comprehend. Its tendrils lead away and back again in impossible loops. In thousands of futures, thousands of nows, Shepard is dead, her threads of data unraveled. Methara moves on.

In a hundred thousand nows, the calculation rules the galaxy. It predicts and contains it. It quells all anomalies and drinks its fill of new threads, new potentials. It reaches throughout, sets new parameters and moves forward.

Javik squints, reaches forward, his own arm a clashing fractal among fractals, and swipes it through the tangle of Methara, curling his infinite fingers around the Reaper's… mind? No, too small. Methara's… killing calculation. Its singular murderous intention. He pulls, dragging on it, unraveling its fine crystalline structure like one would a frayed garment. He is a brute, a base creature smashing the finest of machines.

The intricate reality contorts around him, pulling backwards through the calculation. Through the expression of time. It goes taut and frays, and finally shatters. The unraveling now of Commander Shepard's pattern snaps back into shape. He pulls and pulls until every killing calculation is shredded.

A vast shudder travels through the crystalline reality. It goes on forever. In its ripples, Javik sees the knots of other Reapers. He sees the interstitial fibre of their structure, the nodal points to which they attach. The relays. They transmit far more than mass. The ripple builds and lashes at him, but crashes against a bulwark. Behind him, around him, before and after and now, stands the infinite fractal of the Crucible, its tendrils twining into the calculation.

Infinity itself claws at Javik, pulling on the fragile threads of his mind. Past and future are meaningless. He reels from it. He thinks of his new tal, now. If now has any meaning. Searches for their tiny echo in this suffocating place.

He finds them slaughtered, crushed under the weight of the calculation. He sees their wounds in intimate, perfect detail, their anatomies flayed a thousand different ways. But he can see the intricate threads of each creature that laid the killing blow. Their loops and calculations are much more fragile than the Reaper that sent them. They tear easily under Javik's hands as he thrashes at them, pulling them apart at the seams. Sweeps of his vast hand unravel the realities of all the killer calculations bearing down on them. One by one, his new tal also snap back into shape.

The staggering possibilities burn in his chest. He plunges his hands into the vast landscape. He pulls, gritting teeth he's not sure are real anymore.

Pull until the Reapers no longer exist, he tells himself. Never existed!

The pattern resists him. It is so large, so interlocked. Shepard and the others are vanishingly small parts of the calculation. Tiny threads come apart easily, but the whole is... intractable. It reaches past every horizon he can imagine. He would have to pick it apart one strand at a time. Count every grain of sand on a beach kilometers long. He searches the mass for the patterns of his people, trying to map this infinity. It assails him. He can feel his sanity being ground away, no longer feel his body.
In the infinite mass is a fluid shape, a twist of potential that seems familiar. It is the only calculation save for himself that is not integrated into the greater whole. It is of the Reapers but not one of them. It is... unformed. Within it rests... possibilities.

The heart.

It waits to be linked to the greater whole, but its form has yet to be decided. Javik grasps it, desperate against the encroaching madness. It sings to him, wraps around him. He can feel it pulling at the pattern of himself, feel it twisting fingers through his mind, winnowing it.

He could... become part of the pattern. Then he would understand it. Then he could... no... control it-

A hand grabs his wrist. He stares incredulously at it, at the sudden shocking physicality. Meat and bone and pain shooting through the ken, slamming him back to his body. The tangled fractal of Shepard herself comes swarming into the space, writhing around him. It swarms his fragmenting mind with messy, primitive feelings. Anger. Fear. Deep exhaustion. Hope.

Love and hope.

Out of the mire, that thread burns hot, bent and scarred but stronger than steel. In her loops of mind swim the impressions of her team, her lover, and those who did not live to see this tenuous now. This fragile fulcrum. Among them, the machines, the rachni, the many sentient species. He is flooded by it, the insane and stubborn hope.

But the Reapers will come again, he warns. Or something like them. The geth... might turn into them...

The fear, the certainty almost crushes his chest. Out in the infinite mass, he feels the Reaper's utter conviction in the rightness of their existence. They have run this calculation billions of times. They have no doubt. How can he, so tiny a thing, debate them?

We have to try, her mind insists. Her conflicted, stubborn will.

The machines will rise again, he thinks. Or rachni, or krogan... Potentials flow through him, a hundred terrible futures without a grip to control. There is certainty in this vast realm. Surcease from that ultimate mortal fear of an unwritten future. A vast calculation to solve for all possibilities...

And yet Shepard is certain, of this one thing more than any. In the depth of her conflict stands the one thing she has always held on to.

Impossibly, she loves the geth, the machine that wore her heraldry. It is not something Javik can even conceive of, until it floods into him through her touch. Is it because they could not conceive of such a thing... that the Talvan failed?

Is it him thinking these doubts, or the heart, the Reapers?

The cycles are not the way, her mind choruses. They are evil and cruel. The Reapers will do anything to survive the next decision we make. To stay our hand. To be one of them is to perpetuate their cycle. We are not gods, Javik. We are life, speaking for life.

They are not the way.

Javik shudders. Her stubborn will suffuses him, reminding him of his own. Shame flows through him, and resolve. How close he has come to failing the same way his tal once did. He pictures his
Victory is life.

He pries the pattern of her hand free and grasps it.

Live.

He pushes, pulling the pattern of her back together and casting her away.

His mind is coming apart. As it is stripped away, his own stubborn will remains, spurning the song of power and control still singing in his mind. He is Vengeance. When all else is gone, that remains, graven in stone upon his soul with the same knife he drew across the throat of his tal, gilded with the blood of his entire species. He will not be manipulated.

But his hands will not do. They are too small, their reach too short. They can only tug on the tiny strands. Vengeance demands not the careful unraveling, but force, destruction. A weapon.

His spear is close at hand. The great pattern of the weapon, the Crucible, waits. He has but to think it, and Shear is in his grip again, every angle perfect in his palm. His spear, like him, the last of its kind. He raises it to his shoulder. In the vast landscape, he searches out the nodal points, the skeleton of the Reaper all-mind. It is easy enough, they all lead back to one place. The place on which he stands. The Citadel.

His spear, as always, is eager to kill. The crystalline structure of the Reaper mind is vast... but Shear never tires.

Javik smiles into infinity.

DIE.
Consciousness returns grudgingly, a slow layering of one sense onto another. And yet there is a haunting absence of sensory input. Utter silence. A hard, misshapen surface under her back. And when she finally pries her eyelids open, pitch blackness.

She blinks several times. Faint points of light resolve themselves, framed in jagged edges of black visible only in the absence they create. The world has no depth, no substance. The lights twinkle gently.

Stars.

She turns her head, trying to orient herself, searching for the faintest hint of her surroundings, but there is only blackness. Her neck is stiff, painful.

She draws a breath, feels the air move over her tongue, hears the ragged sound, but muted. A twitch, the urge to move travels through her. Her right arm answers, shot through with the pain of overstrained muscle. She only sees it when it's finally stretched out before her. Movement of black over black, enough to blot out the window of stars, fingers splayed.

No amount of willing brings her left into view. Her body won't speak to her, its internal map refusing to align itself. A sick dread wells up in her stomach. She drops her right arm across her torso, pawing at it, feeling the burnt and flaking edges of her armor's ablating. Familiar contours lead to the shoulder, where the deflection plate is long since torn away. Pressing against the remains of the undersuit, the dread grows. She paws her way down the attached limb, but feels nothing of her own fingers pressing into the flesh. It feels like cool plastic, like the arm of a corpse. She wraps her feeling fingers around the limp wrist and lifts it, pulling the limb into the window of stars.

There is a hand silhouetted there. Two fingers are bent at odd angles, and stars wink in and out of a hole in the center of the palm.

"I guess I'm glad I can't feel that," she says to no one, her voice a raw croak. The sound is a brief and shocking invader in the perfect silence.

The limb is a phantom apparition her brain doesn't recognize. Her tongue sticks to the roof of her dry mouth. She runs it around her teeth, trying to summon moisture. The disjointed lack of sense is there too, as if she'd been bisected. Gingerly, she puts the mangled limb back down, letting the utter darkness swallow it back into oblivion.

She blinks. Closes her eyes, then opens one and then the other. She grits her teeth. The left remains black, only the right admits the stars.

She hasn't the faintest idea where she is in relation to anything to do with the Citadel, if she's even on the Citadel anymore. There is nothing but her and the universe through the small window. The harsh sound of her labored breath has a slight echo, but there is no other sound. A thick knot twists in her stomach.

She tries her comms, her onboard VI, but her voice is tiny in the never-ending dark, and the remains of her armor a silent husk. The sound of her voice echoes faintly, suggesting a space she can see nothing of. The air is motionless, cool and smells faintly of ozone. She can taste gritty dust.

No help there. The knots twists tighter.
Help.

She swallows hard against the knot. With her good hand, she gropes at the parts of herself within reach. Her hair is loose and matted, caked in back with something that feels like dried blood. She scrapes over the burn on her cheek, and it stings sharply. Her torso is hidden under the rough and scorched remains of her armor, but sore under her probing fingers. She finds something hard and too heavy to budge sitting on her right thigh.

Even if her legs worked, she couldn't get up. It's beyond dark. The knot forms into a trill of panic across her nerves, across a brain obstinately assuming a sensory whole with half a body. She tries to say Javik's name, coughs, clears her throat and tries again. He was the last person she'd seen, if seeing is the right way to describe it. But the silence swallows the words and relinquishes nothing. The last prothean… gone.

Now is not the time to lose it, she tells herself, trying to tamp it down. This is nothing new.

She bares her teeth in the dark. Pain is nothing new. Death is nothing new. Commander Shepard doesn't remember what peace even felt like. Stripped of everything else, even the comforting embrace of a sophisticated hardsuit, only training and experience remain. It's not the time to think about promises, about… an end.

These things don't end.

The empty darkness swims, seems to grow substance, a million curling fractals writhing into each other.

This is how it works. She pushes fruitlessly against the slab sitting on her leg, bangs her bare knuckles into it. The pain is sharp, but it only washes out the one in her chest for a moment. Even death doesn't bring an end. I did everything I was supposed to, I gave you everything I am and more, and this...

Kaidan, where are you-

She bites her tongue hard. Her heart stutters, beating painfully against her ribs. Commander Shepard wars with her, berating her for selfishness, for weakness. Weakness gets people killed. It fails missions.

Haven't I done enough? When is it enough?

This is hell. This is nothing at all...

The darkness swells, echoed by the numb distance in her skull, crushing the silent stars together. She forces her eyes shut, seeing dancing spots.

She remembers infinity. She remembers dying. She remembers a warm hand on hers, a voice insisting this wasn't her fault. She wants so badly to believe that voice.

Help me. Help me please...

The blackness closes in.

Light teases her, intruding through a closed eyelid.

Is this it? The clench of her heart is real enough, but her eye still doesn't stab with the pain it should,
opening to that light. Not like the real eye used to, a long time ago. Her left eye remains blind. Pain and disjointed numbness still haunt her prone body.

She squints, trying to make out the swimming shape behind the light that seems to shine straight down, from slightly behind her. A voice speaks, strangely lyrical and yet reverberating with a slight echo. The words have the shape and inflection of language, but not one she understands.

She stares up incredulously into the light. If this is an afterlife, it's a bloody strange one. The voice speaks again, the same short but meaningless sentence.

"I can't understand you," she croaks. Her throat hurts.

The point of light flutters. "Language function change," the voice says.

She squints, raising her good hand to shade her eye. It's stiff, as if it's been laying still for hours. "Can you turn down the light?"

The lamp dims, and a silhouette emerges from behind it, peering down at her. The light is an eye, swiveling half-closed in a sloped head that blots out a section of stars.

"Shepard-Commander," the voice says.

Legion... The name crawls to the tip of her tongue before she bites it back, throat constricting. "You know who I am?"

"All geth know Shepard-Commander," the voice replies, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Geth. Of course you do.

The light moves down her body, and in the rebounded illumination she's startled to see dim edges of the network of fallen beams that entomb her. There's a gap to her right made up of crumpled plating, sloping under her body and sharply up to her left, to where torn and jagged beams loom out of the darkness.

"Your platform is damaged," the geth says, in the same tone devoid of concern or fear.

"Yeah." The stab of worry gets sharper. She knows she's hurt, but how bad is it that even a geth can see it plainly? She tries to move again, and although she has a vague sense of her right foot and toes, they still won't budge. "Pretty bad, I think. I'm stuck under something…"

"Affirmative." They don't move.

She chews her lip. "I don't suppose you can lift it?"

"This platform is unable to produce sufficient motive capacity to shift the material in question."

Can't you even try?! The panic is trying to get a grip on her again. She can barely move, and the life support system of her armor, the system she'd relied on her entire professional life is a deadweight. Worse, half the body she's always relied on refuses to function. Her over-strong mismatch of a borrowed skin has failed. She breathes, biting her tongue. Her throat is sticky with thirst. Breathe through your nose, marine. You're losing moisture.

She stretches out her good hand and flexes her fingers. Exhales, tightens her gut and flexes again. Not even a flicker of dark energy rolls off her. Her stomach stabs with pain from the effort. There's
something torn down there, something she shouldn't be straining. She grits her teeth. She's sure she can still feel something out there, but it's distant and slippery.

_Hell. This is hell. No mexo, no power assist, dead amp, no comms-

Comms. Geth. Her mind jolts. "Hey," she says, "what's going on out there?"

"We do not understand the query."

"Out there, the rest of you? Us?"

There is a silence, and the light ratchets and swings away. As it bounces around, she cranes her neck to get a better look at the geth's body. It glints with a network of shredded cables and torn plating.

"Our platform is also damaged," the geth says. "We have lost-" it makes a clicking noise, "significant infrastructure."

A sick feeling of disappointment, the clench of renewed fear crawls in her stomach. "Comms are down, huh?" she says, trying to keep her voice conversational.

"We are-" click, "alone."

It feels like the dark expands again, the hungry enormity of it pressing down on them, threatening to snuff out the tiny pool of light. The dull ache in her head expands, pulsing in time with her too-fast heart.

"Me too," she says softly.

The light swings back, as if to check if her assertion is correct.

"How did you get here?" she asks, trying to chase away the ever-encroaching silence. The geth stands perfectly still, not even breathing to radiate a hint of life.

"We-" click, "fell."

The noise sounds like a clipping speaker, some kind of voltage spike. A machine version of a hitching breath.

"Fell from where?" she prompts after another long moment.

"Fighter 862-2371 sustained critical damage and lost navigation function."

"You're a fighter pilot?"

"We are two hundred and fifty-nine navigation and space-based short-range hunter-killer runtimes as well as basic platform function and support."

_Much... smaller than Legion._ "You got shot down?"

"Affirmative."

She tries to lick her lips, stops herself. Breathes through her nose. If the geth had encountered anyone else out there, surely they would say so. But, she isn't so sure.

"Don't suppose you have any water?" she says.
Their head tilts. "Negative."

She closes her mouth again.

"The majority of runtimes on this platform have not experienced-" click, "isolation."

She frowns in sympathy, her half-numbed face twitching. Gingerly, she runs her fingers over her chin. She can feel the exact demarcation line where sensation stops on her left side. She knows how the nervous system is neatly bifurcated, and yet it's still surreal.

"It's okay. I don't like it either." She reaches out with her good hand and pats the rubble beside her. "I know I'm not your collective, but we're a little better off together, right?"

The geth seem to consider her. Or they're confused by her gesture. After a long silence she assumes the latter.

*Two hundred runtimes isn't too bright.* "Why don't you sit down?" she says.

Click. "Why?"

She chews her lip. "Take some pressure off the damaged platform." *And stop looming over me.*

They shift their weight, damaged sections creaking. After a moment, the platform negotiates a slow descent, curling its legs up under it.

She can see it a little clearer now, the mangled armature that makes Legion's platform look like it was a new model. It's gunmetal grey with scattered remains of burgundy trim, trailing ends of shredded plastic skin and broken wires. It settles, and stops moving again. It makes her realize how animated EDI and even Legion were. They rarely froze in place like this. She wonders if that idle programming existed to make organics more at ease.

She wonders if EDI is still alive. Out there, somewhere in the dark. The *Normandy.*

*Kaidan-*

She swallows the thick knot climbing her throat, the prickle in her eye. "D'you have a name?" she says in a half-choke.

The geth does not seem to register her slip of emotion. "We are called-" click, "Radiant."

"That's... pretty."

The eye turns back to her, cooled to a soft blue. "Is it-" click, "aesthetically pleasing?"

"Yeah."

Silence falls again. The geth volunteer nothing, the platform still as a statue. She closes her mouth again, trying to will saliva into it, to still the maddening thirst. It's getting harder to breathe, as if the darkness has its own weight pressing down on her chest. Her tongue tastes like copper.

At length, the geth moves, startling her. It raises its arms in front of it, and a small holo appears, projected from three small ports in its arm. The image is light blue, spherical and segmented like a three dimensional puzzle. With their other hand, Radiant moves a small segment around to another location. Then another. They pause, then move another.

She watches this procedure unfold for some time. It gives her something to concentrate on besides
numbness and thirst, besides the people she's missing. The holes in her heart.

_Do you think we beat the Old Machines?_ she wants to ask. But she doesn't. The mere possibility of a no terrifies her beyond measure. Instead she lets curiosity lead her thoughts away, envelop her and keep the creeping panic at bay. A singular thought trying to break the icy surface. _I don't want to die here._ It's almost foreign in its unfamiliarity. It makes her feel weak, vulnerable, moreso than the shattered body she's trapped in. _I fought so hard for so long, when does it finally let up? It isn't fair...

"What are you doing?" she asks, trying to drag her thoughts away from despair.

Radiant stops. "We are-" click, "organizing."

She frowns. "Organizing what?"

"Light."

Of course, makes perfect sense. She looks back at the stars. They're still where she left them, framed in darkness. The geth resume their little task.

"Hey," she says softly.

Radiant pauses again. They must be listening, though the head doesn't turn. How many of Legion's runtimes were dedicated to such tiny social gestures?

"Can you promise me something?"

"Define parameters: promise."

A grunt escapes her. "You're, uh, disconnected from the consensus right now. But when you get back, can you... make a request for me?"

Click. "Affirmative. Sufficient memory available to store audio message."

She tries to wet her cracked lips. A message for the ages, from the pulpit of the half-dead. She smirks, closes her eyes, and tries to summon the voice of Commander Shepard. It seems distant indeed. She's pretty sure she left Commander Shepard behind somewhere, lost in that staggering infinity. Maybe Javik took her with him when he went into that never-ending place. Victory and Vengeance.

_Victory lives._

Goosebumps travel her arm.

"Remember everything you've seen," she says, her voice rasping, "all of you. Show anyone who asks about the Reaper War. Don't ever... delete any part of it, don't edit. Show the truth, to anyone who asks. Long as you have memory, preserve it. As long as you exist."

"We do not destroy data," Radiant says.

"Good. That's my request."

The geth don't resume their light play. "Why?" they ask at length.

The weight on her chest is only getting worse. _This isn't fair. None of it is..."

"Because," she manages, "our memories erode. We... we die and they change. They become history
and history is nothing but holes. We forget horrors and inconvenient truths."

"Why do organics do this?"

"Not a choice we made. The way our network works, over successive generations. You're... just much better at remembering clearly than we are." Her abused voice drops to a whisper. "We could use your help."

Another long pause, punctuated by the clicking noise. She wonders what it's like to literally control the voltage to your brain.

"Why does Shepard-Commander not make this request directly to the consensus?" Radiant asks.

She peers at them, trying to focus. Her head is spinning. "Because, I don't know... how much longer I have."

"You cannot-" click, "lose data. You are Shepard-Commander."

She's already dead, gethy-pants. She frowns at the blue light. Stop it, marine. "I might not get a lot of choice in that, Radiant."

"We do not wish to lose data."

Me neither.

She looks out at the stars again. They twinkle in silence, unmoving. A sudden, creeping feeling intrudes into the desperate anxiety. For all she knows, they are the only two sentient beings alive in the universe. She still doesn't know what the Crucible was, exactly. She's not sure she ever will. Maybe they shook the universe too hard. Maybe... everything died and that's all there is until the next set of living things evolves to sentience. Fifty thousand years hence, will they step out into the stars to find an empty galaxy of eerie husks? Will they wonder who built all these empty ships and overgrown cities?

She blinks and looks back to find Radiant peering down at her hand. They spread one of their own next to hers on the broken ground.

"Does Shepard-Commander find two or four gripping digits to be the most efficient?"

A swell of unexpected humor crackles out of the fear, making her breathe a short laugh. "I've only ever had four, so I don't know."

She feels them gently poke the top of her hand, then withdraw. "Is this how organics function? In isolation?"

Are you asking me how loneliness feels? "Yes... and no. We still have... connections. We need them. But sometimes we just make do, like we're doing right now."

"It is not-" click.

She waits, but they seem frozen on the thought. Suddenly, its head swings away and stops.

"What is it? she asks, alarm sputtering to life in an adrenal system all but tapped out.

"We are receiving external audio."

Her breath catches. She waits, straining, willing the sound to come to her. The motionless geth
makes no noise, and nothing moves in the darkened vault around them. Seconds tick into a minute, and she gulps in a breath, fighting the vice around her chest.

"Is it still there?" she murmurs.

"Affirmative."

"What is it?"

"Insufficient input data."

Irritation flutters through her, the anxiety of fear begging for action instead of more bottomless silence. She bites her lip.

The geth turn and look down. "What action should we take?"

"Investigate. Please. It could be… help." Water.

"What if the audio source is hostile?"

"Hide. Don't engage." She swallows a dry throat. "But… I don't know if there's anything hostile left."

The geth stop again for a long moment, eerily still. "We are isolated. If this platform is destroyed, all of our data will be lost."

"I know. It's… it's a risk. I'd go, but I'm stuck. But if we don't try, we… I might die here."

"Shepard-Commander would accept the risk. Is this your consensus?"

"Yes," she says, confused.

"Consensus reached. Shepard-Commander requires aid. We will go."

The platform struggles to its feet, swaying before finding balance. She bites off the warnings and equivocations crowding her. The fear of sending someone into the unknown, where she can't follow. The deeper fear of being left alone again in the vast, silent darkness. "Thank you," she says instead. "Go carefully and stay safe."

Without a word, Radiant turns and scrambles awkwardly over the closest fallen beam away to her right. Head turned, pillowed against the awkward angle of the broken beam under her head, she watches the dim light bob and dance in time with gentle scrapes and thuds. Hope and anxiety make a thick soup in her stomach.

She closes her eyes again, blotting out the teasing window of stars, listens until the sounds fade away to nothing. The panic tries to climb back. She clenches her hand, feeling the burnt skin pull taut. All this time, all the effort, the blood and horror and misery… reduced to this dark, silent sarcophagus. This abject limbo.

She feels a tear escape her eye when she squeezes it shut. Losing moisture, marine. She grimaces, hissing in anger at her own bisected self; half-dead flesh and half-mad mind. Vividly, she recalls the yellow light of the Collector base's reactor core and the deep, contrarian peace it brought her. She wishes for that peace now, if only because that is the way she could wish to die.

Peace. Peace, he said.
The lingering vision of the stars beyond her closed eyelid are a taunt, a memory she has tried very hard to avoid rebuilding. Sometimes they haunt her dreams, the stars. The void looking down on her as her breath escapes a punctured space suit over Alchera. She's already died once, and it wasn't peaceful.

*I don't want to die.*

A shout echoes off the tumble-down rafters. So distant and disjointed is it that at first she doesn't trust her own ears. She can't make out the word, but the voice is so unmistakable her heart constricts. Her breathing tightens, making her head spin. *It's a dream...*

The part of her that is the hard mask of Commander Shepard doesn't dare to hope. But she grimaces, fear and anger mingling into hope anyway. *No. No, you owe me this, you great steaming shit of a life...*

It's another bright light that rises like an excitable sun over the horizon of the fallen beams, jumping and bouncing in time to the thuds and scrapes of boots scattering debris. In the fireworks she catches the gleam of white stripes against dark, and her heart leaps.

Kaidan lands on his knees beside her with a crash, scattering dust, his breastplate banging heedlessly into her outstretched hand. His helmet seal hisses as he peels it off, leaving the lamp illuminated as he slaps it down on the far side of her. His face fills her vision, made angular in the oblique light. In the flash she sees exhaustion, the streaks of tears making trails down a dust-stained cheeks. He curls up, leans down and presses his forehead to hers, hands to her face, her name leaving his lips mangled in a choked sob.

The horror and fear evaporate, washed away in a tide of hot relief. She paws at him with the only limb she can move, her battered fingers skidding over the hard angles of his armor. She gropes until she find his hair, the warmth of his neck against her fingers. Human. Real. *This is real.*

"Oh god, you're alive," he mumbles over and over again, rocking gently on his knees.

She tries to murmur reassurances, but all that comes out is his name. Part of her is sure she'll wake up at any moment, alone again in the dark. She holds on, drinking in the smell and warmth of him. She is not alone in the dark universe.

The only thing that drags her back to reality is the increasing tightness in her chest. What she's been trying to ignore is becoming more insistent, sped perhaps by a racing heart.

"I can't breathe," she rasps.

That seems to penetrate his daze. He leans back sharply, looking her up and down. She tugs on his shoulder.

"My whole left side is numb. Armor's... sitting on me or something..."

He nods, squeezes his eyes shut and opens them again, sucking in a few quick breaths. He leans to the side, adjusting his discarded helmet for better light, and she can feel his fingers prodding and tugging along her side. He mutters something about the power assist armature, half to her and half to himself. It seems to focus him. He paws around his equipment and she hears the slick hiss of a knife. The blade is startling cold as he slides it into a gap somewhere down on her flank, past the burnt ablating and through the undersuit.

"Where... where are the others?" she says as he tugs on a connecting strap.
"Coming," he says distractedly, "they're okay. Hurt, but okay. It's a mess out there, slow going. Liara… lifted me up to get to you. They have to find a way around."

Something comes free along her side with a snap. Her breastplate lifts slightly, and the weight on her ribs eases. She sucks in a heady breath. It hurts. But the extra air helps, as does the news. They're alive.

"Better?" Kaidan asks, sheathing his knife.

"Yeah," she says. It's a half truth, but there's nothing more he could do anyway.

He leans over, fingers brushing her face. His eyes are liquid with light-headed relief. "What else? You said you couldn't feel your arm?"

"Water?" she says hopefully.

Kaidan nods. "Not a lot, but I've been conserving." He gropes around again and produces a ration pack from his belt, fumbling and almost dropping it. He sucks in a breath, steadies his hands, and thumbs the cap off. He feeds it to her with the ginger care of a trained medical officer, not moving her neck, but his fingers keep wandering back to touch her. It's as welcome as the meagre few swallows of water from the ration pack. It's warm and a little stale, but for a few seconds it's the finest thing in the world, chasing away the maddening dryness.

As she sucks the last few drops from the pack, Kaidan runs his hand down her left arm, frowning. She only knows he's touching her because she cranes her head around enough to see.

"Anything on my left," she says, licking her lips. "And my left eye is… not working."

He frowns. "Unilateral paralysis? Huh." For a moment he seems a little dazed, then shakes it off. "Going to check for any bleeding first, then your spine and head. Keep breathing normally, okay?"

He kisses her forehead, lingers there for a moment before opening his omni-tool. She can still feel him trembling, see the exhaustion etched into his features as he forces himself to focus.

More movement sounds from the direction Kaidan arrived from, heavy boots skidding over debris. Lights bounce around, tracing the lines of broken architecture. A dark moon crests over Kaidan's shoulder, a turian head in the middle. Her heart squeezes with relief.

"Garrus," she says, reaching out to him.

He clasps her hand as he kneels down, touching her forehead with his free hand. He says something, but once again, the language doesn't untie itself into comprehensible ideas.

"I can't… understand you." She frowns apologetically, wondering what her half-frozen face looks like. "I think my translator's shot."

Garrus says something else, bobbing his head. His voice sounds so achingly familiar, she's sure she should be able to understand him, but the shape of his words won't form properly in her mind.

"He says it's okay," Kaidan says gently from where he's running his omni-tool slowly down her torso, "he's just happy to hear you talking."

More voices drift in to her ears. Within a couple of minutes, James, Liara and Tali appear, and behind them all, Radiant, hands clasped over their own shattered armature.

As Kaidan says something about patching up a gunshot, Liara and Tali herd Garrus out of the way
so they can greet her, their voices soothing in their familiarity, if no more understandable than Garrus'. Tali favors her right side as she leans over, and her suit is patched in a few places.

Liara says something to Kaidan, a worry creasing her blue forehead.

"Do you know what happened to Javik?" Kaidan translates.

**Victory.**

She shakes her head. How do you describe infinity? "He went... into the Crucible. I tried to follow, but I couldn't... stay. I don't know. I think he activated it."

Kaidan looks at Liara, and the asari gulps and nods, turning away. Behind Liara, James appears, his bulk blotting out the window of stars. His armor looks like he's been fed into a grain thresher, and the slicks of medi-gel seals are visible in three places.

His wide grin is underlit by Kaidan's discarded helmet. "Lola! Man, you look like shit!"

Beside her, Kaidan growls under his breath, his whole body going tense. He moves to turn, but she grips the angled deflection plate under his chin, arresting him.

"The Citadel fell on me," she answers instead, "and you look like a whole pack of varren used you as a chew toy. What's your excuse?"

James laughs, and winces. Kaidan seems to vibrate for a moment before setting back, glancing at her.

*It's okay,* she mouths to him. He squeezes his eyes shut again and breathes out. He's a man way, way past the end of his rope, a shaking body animated by little more than sheer determination. Released of that, he's fraying quickly. She thinks, not for the first time, that when he dies it'll be like the samurai in that story she read once; standing on a bridge, riddled with arrows, not falling over for days until the terrified opposition dared steal up and touch him.

"Can't find any spinal fractures or serious head trauma," he says, as if suddenly remembering what he was doing. "But there's an awful lot of what looks like... tissue inflammation on your left side. No idea what it is. But-" He swallows.

"But?"

"Your, uh, left leg..."

Dark dread knots her stomach. "I don't think I want to know," she says thinly. "I can't feel it now, I'll deal with it later."

Kaidan's head bobs, half understanding, half relieved.

"Hey," James says, coming up beside him. "Can we move her?"

"We shouldn't," Kaidan says.

"I don't like the look of any of that, is all." The lieutenant points above her head somewhere.

"We shouldn't move her, I still don't know how bad her injuries are."

"They'll get a hell of a lot worse if any of that gives way."

"Lieutenant, if I want your medical-"
Garrus says something sharp. He also points above them, jabbing his fingers into his opposite palm. As they point their lamps upward, she can see the haphazard pile of imploded architecture looming over her. There's a jagged end of an i-beam leering down at her, and no sign of what might be holding it up.

A shame-faced grimace flashes across Kaidan's eyes. "Sorry." He scrubs at his eyes with one fist.

"Hey, long day for everyone," James says. "Just think we shouldn't risk it, you know? Luck has been a lady but let's not test those good graces."

Kaidan nods wearily. James lowers his voice, gesturing, then turns and calls for Liara and Garrus' help.

Kaidan kneels down again, brushing tender fingers across her cheek. "We're going to get this debris off you, and get you out from under… whatever that is." He waves vaguely upward, then sways a little and pinches the bridge of his nose.

She reaches up and cradles his face in her palm. "How long were you… looking for me?"

He blinks, turning his head into her hand. The layer of stubble across his chin scrapes her skin. "Almost five hours."

"Oh gods… I'm sorry…"

He wags his head and leans down to kiss her forehead. "You told me to find you," he murmurs, "I couldn't give up. Just… kept going and going."

Down by her feet, Garrus says something, making a rough sound like laughter. Kaidan smirks and shakes his head. At her raised eyebrow, he mutters something about pig-headed stubbornness.

It turns into a whole procedure, with many voices, some of which she can't understand, arguing all around her. Off to the side, Radiant watches, motionless. She feels a muted pulse of dark energy, sees the dark tendrils lick a lattice of fallen architecture. She recognizes a piece of the ridged and railinged plates that ringed the Crucible beam. There's the noise of things moving, and a pressure she wasn't even aware was there suddenly lifts off her thigh. Kaidan gingerly works his arms under her and slides her away.

Her head spins. Voices around her become muddy and disjointed, skipping time. She sees Liara doing something she can't feel with her broken and holed left hand. Shapes in the form of her friends move around her, doing something down by her legs. Her tight leg turns into a mass of pins and needles, flooding back with new pain. Her pulse feels loud in her good ear, as if she can hear the friction of each red blood cell scraping along the walls of her veins, pushed along in blood grown muddy. There's something terribly wrong with this body, she thinks in a daze. It reminds her of waking up on Lazarus' slab, a loose collection of parts held together with tape and bleeding-edge science. She feels like those old bonds are coming loose, unraveling.

The world stops rocking back and forth, and her surroundings ease back into clarity. For a frightening moment she can't find Kaidan, but she notices the blue of his armor wrapped around the leg now extended under and beside her. As everything re-aligns itself, she finds herself lying back against him, more or less. His arm loops around her middle, the fat plate of ablating stamped with his name catching the light.

With a scrape and a grunt, Garrus arranges himself to her left, shoving debris aside with his boot. He gives her a mandible flex of a turian smile as he pulls his rifle off and puts it down, then wedges
himself more comfortably into the crook of beams. His armor, too is a map of dozens of new impacts and blast burns, slicked here and there with dried dark blood.

She turns her head enough to see her left arm, still there despite her brain's refusal to acknowledge it. Her hand has been bound in cloth, wrist to fingers. She looks around and finds Liara, sitting and poring over what looks like an omni-tool holo map of tunnels choked with debris. She can't see her legs past Kaidan's arms, but she doesn't try.

"Kaidan?" she asks quietly.

"Hm?" He sounds half-asleep.

"Is it... done? Are they dead?" She's almost afraid of the answer.

He exhales slowly. "I don't really know what happened. There was a... wave of energy, or something. Then all the Reaper drones just stopped dead in their tracks. Keeled over and died. Then there was another burst, an explosion, an awful noise... sounded like the station being torn apart. Then everything went dark. And really quiet."

"I guess quiet isn't a bad sign, all things considered."

"Sure wish I could raise someone out there."

Tali says something. The quarian is sitting next to Radiant, her omni-tool lit, fiddling with wires. The geth regard their creator and brand new ally with something that looks like awe, even though it probably isn't. For all anyone knows they could be counting the spirals on Tali's hood. They are unfazed by the sight of their platform's entrails spread out on the ground.

"Tali's trying to get the geth's QEC uplink working again," Kaidan says.

"S'good."

His hands, divested of gauntlets somewhere in the last few minutes, gather up her good one from where it rests on her stomach. His fingers feel the shape of hers. His palms are warm, fingertips cool. Red stains the cracks and folds, rubbed into dirt. He gently curls and uncurls her fingers.

"Hey," he says at length, "are your memories sort of... fuzzy? Jumbled up, right around the time the energy wave hit?"

She frowns. The touch of his fingers and the warmth of his breath is soothing, threatening to put her to sleep on the spot. "It's all kind of mixed up once we got into the superstructure."

"I meant, I don't know... It sounds nuts."

"What?"

"I think I died," he murmurs.

Her breath catches. She was sure - sure - Harbinger had her dead to rights. In her mind's eye, the light of that huge red eye is still glaring down on her with the fire of a thousand suns. Her gun is pitiful, firing up into that hell. She tries to follow the logical unfolding of that moment into the next, but there are... an awful lot of nexts that somehow all spiral back into her reaching into the Crucible beam with her damaged hand. Her left...

Oh.
"I mean, I obviously didn't," he says, "since I'm here. But…"

"Everything got really strange for a minute there," she finishes.

"I keep feeling like everyone was hurt, way, way worse. Or dead. But…" He hugs her gently, nuzzling her hair. "To be honest, I'm trying to not think about it too much."

It's getting hard to breathe again. The foul taste in her mouth is returning, but she concentrates on one slow deep breath at a time. She will not be denied these few minutes.

"We might be losing atmosphere," she says quietly. "You should put your lid back on."

Kaidan runs his fingers over her knuckles. "I said you weren't going anywhere alone."

She wants to argue. Order. But she's pretty sure he won't listen. Stubborn. She squeezes his hand.

"Even though you tried anyway," he murmurs with mild reproach.

"Commander Shepard had to... do her job."

He breathes out, staying silent for a long moment. "Peace," he whispers.

Her throat constricts. Commander Shepard doesn't believe it for a second. She wants to believe it more than anything in the universe.

Beside them, Garrus has fallen asleep. He's probably locked up his armor for comfort. His helmet is tucked under his knees, his head lolled forward in his deep collar. His small nose makes a faint whistling noise as he breathes in and out.

Liara's omni-tool is open, but her eyes have also slid shut. The asari looks like a kid who fell asleep in class, drooped over her homework. The stump of her left hand is all that betrays her passage from reclusive archeologist through her own dark path to this moment. It draws a pang of sympathy.

James has parked himself next to Radiant and Tali, his legs dangling off the edge of some precipitous drop. The back of his armor's power supply housing is open, and wires trail out of it to where the quarian is busily splicing things to other things. He hums to himself as he stares up at the framed window of stars, Javik's rifle across his knees, heels banging into the beam at irregular intervals.

All around them, the silent darkness has lost its oppressive weight. There are no more fractals lurking in the shadows. No more monsters.

Millions, perhaps billions of years, and for the first time, it might just be… a galaxy free of Reapers.

Lightheadedness grips her. Am I free of Commander Shepard?

She has no idea what that impulse even means. She's been staring at the possibility of this moment for so long that she's never taken the time to look past it.

"Hey, you still have my music?"

There's a mildly uncomfortable silence from behind her right ear. "Yeah," Kaidan says, "I was going to delete it, but-"

Personal as it might be to her, it's impossible to be angry. She's pretty sure he'd give the geth a run for their money when it came to hoarding every scrap of data he'd been exposed to.
"Just as well," she says with a smirk. Her head hurts. She taps his wrist.

She watches in tired curiosity as he opens his omni-tool interface and fiddles through levels of data storage. To literally have a front-row seat to this usually esoteric procedure is a new thing for her, and renews her appreciation for the things that he, Tali and Garrus could do with a computer, because she loses track of where he's going in the menu structure and encryption layers within a few seconds.

Finally, the list of familiar song titles appears again. He sets the interface to allow outside input and waits.

Her arm feels leaden, but the holo weighs nothing as she flicks through the list, up and down. This music has seen her through so many hardships she can't imagine what it would be like without it. The poetry in these bits and bytes sympathized with her when no one else would, filled up the dark empty spaces between those islands when she did find comradeship. She taps one of the song titles. It starts, tinny in the small internal speakers mounted in Kaidan's miniframe.

Familiarity warms her. The dead half of her body haunts her with its invisibility, a ghost lying beside her. But she can put off the fear lying there, filling her mouth with that bad taste. The music takes her mind away, as it always has.

She twines her fingers into Kaidan's, and tries to picture that so alien a concept - peace.
How to Be

_Burning heavens, burning earth. Horizon to horizon, sea to ashen sea. Husks of ruined buildings stretching into the sky where nothing moves but smoke._

_And bodies. Everywhere, bodies. Blue unseeing eyes in frozen skull faces, reflecting the molten sky. Crumbling slowly to dark soot. Hungry, devouring silence smothering it all._

_The charnel engines approach, a rumble felt through the ground. To wipe everything away-_ 

"Kaidan."

_The charnel engines-

The world shook, pressure bringing him back into a body.

"Kaidan, are you all right?"

His voice rasped. "You're all dead here-"

He felt a squeeze on his shoulder. The face hovering beside him took on familiarity, finally resolving into that of Doctor Chakwas, alive and well, and wearing a frown.

"Nobody is dead here," she said quietly.

He blinked and looked around again. The dim light slowly lost its sinister cast, coalescing into the angles of the normal-looking, if somewhat antiquated, hall he was standing in, shoulder to the wall. The corpses were replaced with a carpet of people of all kinds, arranged into rows. Some were awake, murmuring to each other over the glow of ruddy chemical lamps. Others were asleep in their makeshift cots, stretched out or curled up, all manner of snoring and grunting filling the air with the buzz of life.

The anxious fear and palpable sense of disorientation started to fade, leaving behind a sheepish aftertaste. This was no battleground, it was the second floor common area of the hospital. Had he been sleepwalking?

Kaidan looked back into Chakwas' concerned eyes and shook his head slightly. "I was getting up to…” He trailed off, unsure even of the train of thought. He had a dim memory of hunger, but that was long gone.

Chakwas patted his arm. "You need to rest, Kaidan." Her tone had an air of weary resignation.

He rubbed his eyes until purple spots danced in his retinas. "I know."

She scrutinized him. She had a datapad in her other hand, along with what looked like a clutch of pill bottles. "You're dealing with various levels of post-traumatic stress—"

"You don't need to tell me."

Out in the common room, humps and fringes were visible among the sleeping forms. Soldiers all, rescued haphazardly from the Citadel and deposited back on Earth while the still functional ships scurried back to the war zone to ferret out more survivors before air and escape pod supplies wore out. Before rescue windows closed for good.
"Something on your mind?" Chakwas asked.

He opened his mouth then closed it.

"Same as what's on everyone's mind, I'll wager," she said.

He nodded mutely. Ever since the Citadel run, the itchy, inescapable feeling of deja vu chased his thoughts. In the stumbling, dazed days since their retreat to Earth, it had become increasingly clear that the sensation wasn't just his, but had been felt in some fashion by, well, everyone.

The Citadel had pulsed. Emitted something that could only be described as a wave propagation, and yet its manifestation didn't appear directly on any instruments. Any camera and sensor footage of the moment of the burst could only be adequately described as eerie. At precisely 15:27:02 as Earth counted Greenwich Mean Time, 04:24:17 by official Citadel reckoning, every video feed seemed to smear, as if the pickup sensors were overexposed. Many sensor and video systems failed outright for several seconds, but the few that recorded contiguous footage were rumored to show people and ships suddenly changing position, or strange, ghostly after-images of ships and even soldiers already counted as lost.

Sensor overload was widely blamed for the oddities. Yet to listen to the soldiers mutter amongst themselves, their own memories of that moment suffered the same eerie overlay. Most wrote it off to traumatic stress, swept under the tide of relief at simply having survived. But the more they whispered their uncertainties, the more they learned it was a shared hallucination that crossed ranks, ages and even species.

Seven days after the pulse, the moment was finally starting to lose some of its sharply unsettling edge in Kaidan's mind. Those moments felt more and more like a dream, fraying at the edges, merging into the confused cascade. He'd been so lost in adrenaline and desperation that he didn't really trust his own senses, much less the snarl of corrupted data that had appeared in his armor's mexo timelog.

And yet, the echo persisted.

For now, the how of it was considerably less important than the result. Whatever the Citadel had done, all reports agreed on one thing at least - at that precise moment, every known Reaper entity, from capital ships all the way down to the smallest drone, had just... stopped.

"Well, wandering around isn't helping Shepard," Chakwas said pointedly, yanking him back to the now.

Kaidan eyed the doctor, tempted to push back. But she, too, had the dark circles under her eyes of many nights without enough sleep, and keeping her patients from blundering into dark corners, both real and imagined, was certainly only one of a lengthy list of concerns.

"I know, Doc." He raked his hand through his hair. "I just can't sleep. Do you mind if I go see her?"

Chakwas let slip a small sigh. "She'll come out when she comes out."

"I know, but-"

"Just go, dear."

He managed a wry smile. "Sorry to stress you out, doc."

She sniffed. "I've already buried Shepard once, Kaidan. It's not happening a second time."
As it had many times in the last few days, her utter conviction went some distance to soothe the nervous grind in the back of his head. "We're lucky to have you."

"Flattery will get you everywhere. Try not to stay too long, all right? Get your head settled then go back to bed. I have enough to worry about without you tripping over someone and breaking an arm."

"Yes, ma'am."

With a last sheepish smile, he retreated back to the staircase and plodded up the steps, trying to wring out the last of that terrible vision. The nightmare hadn't been the first of its kind, but it was the first time he'd found himself wandering around in its thrall. He shook his head. At least he'd been wearing pants.

And at least the Normandy still flew. With everything else resembling normalcy in ruins, he kept that bit of familiarity close. She'd been pressed into search and rescue operations, her hull damage less severe than most. But her doctor had been pressed into a different service. With every single medbay and medical officer in sudden demand, the decision had been made to move Shepard to Earth facilities, so that the Normandy's small medical bay could be fully used in-situ for rescues, with a temporary doctor commandeered from a downed cruiser. As Kaidan understood it, there had been some consternation at the decision, given Shepard’s rather unique medical history and the nature of her injuries. A compromise was reached - Shepard was moved here, and Chakwas came with her, pulling double duty as an Alliance doctor with both knowledge and experience treating non-humans. A somewhat unique skillset that put her in high demand, and the reason the overflow sleeping in the newly minted common room was so mixed.

Shepard's strange joke, spoken in some delirium, seemed all the more apt. The whole galaxy had been picked up and shaken. Not a single system or organization had gone untouched by the chaos. Everything was piecemeal, from equipment to chains of command and supply lines. Sometimes it seemed the only reason violence didn't break out anew was every living person was too utterly exhausted by the concept to consider it.

At the fourth floor landing, Kaidan slipped into the hall through the fire door. Shepard commanded one of the few private rooms in the facility, but the halls were far from empty. In light of her role in recent events, security was a concern. Kaidan's presence had been underwritten both for his own recovery but also because his title and the shaky authority it still commanded was a pointed nod to keeping things peaceful in mixed company. The aliens downstairs were veterans of both the turian and krogan battles on Palaven, allowed to stay in relative close proximity because of shared recent history. For now, the sense of mutual triumph between the two former rivals, as well as the human Alliance marines, kept things positive, even downright buoyant at times. They nursed their wounds, mourned their dead and told their many stories while sharing a soldierly grumble about their field rations.

As Kaidan moved down the hall, he passed the first line of security; the unofficial one. With the constant rain, many of the less-wounded soldiers had moved indoors, and those that could neither find space in the common room, nor wanted to give up their place in the unspoken treatment lines had set up their own personal camps in the wide hallways. But those stopped at the clutch of armored krogan sitting in a circle next to a small lamp.

The individuals present at this de facto guard post rotated on a schedule Kaidan wasn't aware of, but they were all part of what he thought was the same combat company. The glyphs painted on their high-quality but deeply scarred armor placed them as part of Wrex's personal squad; high-ranking warriors of the Urdnot clan. Unarmed as they were, at the administration’s loud insistence, they still formed a formidable barrier of muscle, knobby head plates, scars and scowls that would dissuade
even the most curious.

They only glanced at Kaidan as he passed, though he heard the huffs of breath as they caught his scent. His was a familiar one at this point. He eyed them as he passed, noting the array of colored game tokens arranged on the ground in the middle of their circle. For all their differences, all soldiers learned how to fill the vast stretches of waiting that was part of the job.

Past the hedge of glowering krogan stood the official guard; a pair of Alliance marines. They made the attempt to be more formal than the Urdnot warriors, although they too had their share of wounds to nurse. The battles both on Earth and on the Citadel had left few, if anyone untouched. These marines were the ones who could still carry on their duties.

They exchanged salutes as he passed. It was only the hundredth time in a week he'd passed this way. Eyes no doubt drilling holes in the back of his head, Kaidan rounded the corner and came under the immediate scrutiny of the second line of official security.

"Hi," he said.

"Alenko-Major recognized," the geth said simply.

Standing next to the door at the end of the hall, the platform was a model Kaidan wasn't familiar with, at least not from the times when he'd had geth in his crosshairs. It towered above him by a head and a half, but was leaner than the Primes. No obvious armament presented itself, but he knew it was loaded with pacification tech, mostly non-lethal, and built to exceed the physical strength of any organic.

"All quiet?" Kaidan asked, walking up to them.

"Affirmative," the geth said, "no unusual activity."

The geth on board were made up in large part of runtimes from the one called 'Radiant', transferred to a new body, in addition to a number of additional runtimes. They'd volunteered for the job, even in the face of a certain amount of resistance. Simple practicality and Kaidan and Chakwas' agreement finally won out. The marines took their job seriously, and their dedication was to be commended, and yet Kaidan couldn't help but feel a certain measure of comfort at the machine's presence. Unlike even the most dedicated organic, the geth would never get tired, bored, hungry, or even have to visit the bathroom. They would function at maximum vigilance at all times, able to assess and raise an alert before an organic could even string two thoughts together.

A few years ago, that single-lamp eye had meant nothing to Kaidan but a target. Now, in his nightmare-addled mind, he had a passing urge to hug them. Never mind the allies they'd become in the Reaper war, it was because of Radiant that... they'd found Shepard alive at all.

That, and the geth wouldn't make comments behind his back. If they found his relationship with Shepard worth noting, it was only in their analytical curiosity of organic behavior. There was a strange comfort in that.

He thanked them absently and keyed the door open.

The last line of unofficial security was snoozing in the room's lone chair, arms and legs folded. The piece of furniture had been liberated from the overcrowded common areas at great expense, or at least with a great deal of posturing. Along with it, Kaidan was fairly sure Garrus had probably found a way to sneak in a sidearm, despite the rules. Still, the turian wasn't really there as protection. He was instead part of the small rotating group of people who stayed on, looking forward to the promise
of Shepard actually waking up.

_Shepard._

Kaidan chewed his lip as the door swished shut behind him. She lay ensconced in the hospital bed in the center of the room, swallowed by ghostly-white sheets. Machines occupied her left and right, arrayed with lights and diagnostic displays and connected to her with tubes and cables.

He leaned back against the door and breathed out, trying to release the mounting anxiety in his chest. The last few days had been some of the worst of his life, and not because of Reapers or Cerberus. In truth, the sheer scale of the chaos out there overwhelmed him. He'd never before felt so utterly wrung out, so… fragile.

Shepard's combat injuries weren't as bad as he'd feared in the litany of worst-case scenarios he'd imagined in those hollow hours of desperate searching, and yet they were still far from light. First and second-degree burns, two penetrating gunshot flesh wounds, both of which had managed to miss anything vital. Worse was the trauma to her left hand and foot. The hand had taken considerable reconstructive surgery to save and would likely require more to restore something like normal function. Her foot… a loss below the knee, crushed to uselessness beneath the heavy beams.

Less easy to identify and treat was the widespread tissue and nervous system inflammation, the origin of which was a mystery. With a cocktail of drugs, it seemed to be healing, but it was still unknown how pervasive it would be. More frightening was the outright shutdown of several of her nonpassive cybernetic systems. Systems for which there were no specs save those on the _Normandy_, collected and saved by Doctor Chakwas.

She'd already started to crash when they were found on the Citadel. Falling oxygen levels, rising blood toxicity, erratic heartbeat… and Kaidan, half-dead in his own right, with no way to figure out what was happening or what to do to fight it. He would find out later her liver and kidneys had stopped working properly, their attendant cybernetics gone dead. Her heartbeat had started falling out of rhythm, its regrown cells relying on pacemaking circuit timers that no longer functioned.

He swallowed hard in the darkened room, holding back the choked feeling that was a pale echo of those terrible hours. His own memory cut out shortly after the approach of a rescue party, his mind and body unable to go any further. There was some small measure of comfort that he hadn't been conscious to witness the scramble to keep Shepard alive. By the time he'd crawled his way back to groggy awareness, she'd been stabilized, more or less. He'd barely had a voice in the flurry that followed - getting Shepard to a well-equipped facility, getting into contact with Chakwas, trying to determine if anyone knew the whereabouts of one Miranda Lawson…

Kaidan had no doubt that past the walls of the dead Citadel, Shepard's name and had reputation saved her. With the fleets and planet in shambles, millions of casualties all demanding attention, guardian angels far higher up on the food chain had cleared the way. She'd been spirited to a relatively undamaged medical facility on Earth, knowledgeable doctor in tow, to be put into an induced coma and hooked up to every kind of machine they could scrape together to compensate for her struggling organs. And Kaidan himself had Chakwas to thank that he and the others had been swept along in that wave. Admirals were admirals, but doctors in wartime were gods, and Chakwas had a great deal of experience bullying people far above her pay grade.

Shepard's whole team all spent several days in bed in various states of recovery. Tali, already falling ill from suit punctures, had been scooped up by a quarian vessel. As an admiral herself, Kaidan was sure she'd be well taken care of. Vega, ever the ox, slept twenty-four hours straight, ate several thousand calories of rations, then accepted Hackett's assignment of temporary command of the _Normandy_ for search and rescue ops. Despite orders to stay out of a hardsuit and out of the field, he
evidently preferred to stay busy instead of brooding, though he checked in regularly on Shepard's condition. Some enterprising filmmaker was probably already penning a dramatic script about his square-jawed bravery for the next Alliance recruitment campaign. Garrus and Liara both had wounds to patch up, and found convenient excuses to stay at Shepard's medical facility, using the dedicated connection offered by Radiant to stay abreast of their own peoples' rescue efforts.

Now the initial panic had faded, leaving them all with a numb, exhausted fear. And though he was at least partially physically recovered from the events of the past few days, any time Kaidan tried to process what was going on outside these walls, he felt himself shutting down.

He padded to the window and peered out. The room was part of what was once an expensive private clinic that had been repurposed by simple expediency of it being one of the more intact facilities reasonably close to Anderson's makeshift base of operations in London. The whole city had been declared under emergency Alliance jurisdiction, allowing them to commandeer whatever equipment they deemed necessary.

Outside, it was raining, casting the landscape in black shapes and slick pools of light below where the constant stream of vehicles came and went, exchanging people and supplies. It was… Earth. Cool and dark with the night, with just the right gravity and atmospheric pressure.

It made him acutely aware of just how lucky he was right now. Most of the planet was struggling to get to the next day. Kaidan felt a ghost of guilt for his own situation, especially as a calorie hog of a biotic. He glanced back at Shepard. He couldn't imagine being anywhere else right now, leaving Shepard alone in this chaos. Alone against the vultures that would come circling, dead or alive, like they had after Alchera.

The wind blew, pattering rain on the window. The sound was one of nostalgia, but he was already starting to get sick of grey, stormy skies. A line of faint light illuminated the horizon, announcing a dawn still a few hours distant. Silhouetted in the jigsaw pattern of dark rooftops, one shape towered above the rest. A steep-sided pyramid, split at the peak, canted a little off to the side. It glimmered in the sheeting rain, dark against dark. Kaidan stared at it for a long few minutes, as he'd done on sleepless nights past. It had never moved.

"Creepy, isn't it?"

Kaidan started and spun. Garrus regarded him his seat, twisting and rolling his head on his shoulders.

"Sorry," Kaidan said, "I didn't mean to wake you."

"I'm pretty sure I wasn't supposed to be asleep," the turian said ruefully, wriggling in the chair. "Especially not in this thing. It's going to kill my back. Is it end of shift already?"

"No…"

Garrus bobbed his head in a nod, not asking for elaboration. He stretched and winced, tugging at his borrowed undersuit.

Kaidan looked back out the window. His eye wandered inexorably back along the ragged rooftops to the too-smooth mountain looming over them all. "I keep expecting that red eye to come back on."

The turian rubbed the back of his neck. "I think I've dreamed about exactly that at least three times. Landed on my ass once."

The tattered edges of Kaidan's nightmare drifted through his mind's eye, taunting him. He pushed it away. "They still pulling people off the Citadel?" he asked instead.
"Yeah. They finally managed to sort out command, and they're going district by district now. There are still a number of sealed buildings."

"And they're all coming to Earth."

Garrus shrugged. "Closest stable atmosphere."

"And the relays…"

"... still nothing." Garrus' head drooped. "Guess we had to… assume that was a risk."

The relays, dead as the Reapers. The galaxy sundered into a thousand isolated systems. When all of them needed help. It made Kaidan's head spin.

"I keep hoping…" He stopped and exhaled. All these people who fought so hard, trapped so far from home…

He looked back at Shepard's silent form, his surcease from this insanity. Four days ago they'd made contact with Miranda Lawson. It had taken her another day to get back to them, and she'd been able to instruct them on the finicky task of rebooting Shepard's pacemaker implant. Two days ago Shepard's liver, responding to careful doses of cellular regenerators and its implant, had resumed function enough to take over from the machine. A day since she'd been eased off the coma drugs. The list went on and on, and it didn't get into the question of brain function.

"Do you wonder if we should be out there?" Kaidan said thinly.

He heard Garrus take a measured breath, the chair creak as the turian shifted his weight and stood up. He came to the window and for a moment just watched the rain go by. "All the time," he said finally. "Is that where you want to be?"

"No, but-"

"Then what good would it do?"

Kaidan caught Garrus' pointed stare.

"It's all… too much," Kaidan admitted. "Everybody lost so much, and I keep worrying I'm here because…"

"Somewhere along the line, everybody else has to step up and carry some of the weight we've been carrying. But you and I both know we're not going to leave Shepard alone right now. So what's to gain by feeling guilty about it?"

Kaidan smirked. "Nothing."

"Or maybe you feel guilty because you don't feel guilty." Garrus put his hand on the window, the warmth frosting the pane with a brief halo of condensation. "It is too much. I should be in a dozen other places right now. But of all of them, this is the most important. At least with the geth comms, I can still be useful for logistics."

"How's Victus holding up?"

"The victory high is going to wear off," Garrus said in a low voice, "and then everyone is going to want to go home. He's going to have to... manage that. There's already talk of electing regional Primarchs to handle expat populations, but central is resisting. There's an undercurrent of panic talk
about cultural fragmentation."

"Isn't that going to be all of us, though? Does anyone expect any species is going to come through this unchanged?"

Garrus' mandible fluttered. "You underestimate the stubbornness of Palaven cultural conservatives. The colonial wars are still a sore spot."

Despite their sequester, Kaidan was in contact with command enough to feel the same ripples in Alliance circles. A decimated Earth receiving all these homeless aliens, their needs and their internal politics. Regional governments were in shambles, and there were secret talks in progress to grant emergency powers to Alliance Central Command to form umbrella governorship of the entire planet, in the name of keeping the peace as well as forming a united front with which to negotiate with the influx of heavily armed alien populations. But needless to say, the effort was meeting considerable resistance on some fronts.

Garrus' head swiveled suddenly and froze.

"What?" Kaidan said, alarmed. He followed the turian's gaze to Shepard's silent form, but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Garrus squinted, then shook his head. "I hate that," he muttered.

"Thought you heard something?"

"Yeah. And I thought I'd stopped reacting to it." He blew a half snort through his nose. "This building creaks like my first barracks back home. I'd forgotten what that was like."

"Especially at night."

Garrus looked out the window again. "There's nothing like a planetary night, is there? On a ship, it's just a matter of shifts." He spread his hands. "Planetside, it's got... weight."

"I think we all miss having a sun over our heads."

" Spirits, yes. Sol isn't quite right, and it's so wet here, but I'll take it."

"I sure hope we can get you home."

"You know, I'm... not thinking about that at the moment. I haven't been planetside in a long time. In the past few years, home has been the Normandy. That's good enough for now."

Kaidan nodded, looking back at Shepard. He squinted at the monitor machine next to her. The numbers were hard to read at this distance, but her heart rate looked like it was running high.

Beside him, Garrus grunted. "Now I know I heard something-"

Shepard's silent form suddenly jumped, back arching, a harsh bark of alarm erupting from her lips.

Kaidan was across the room before he could think. Garrus was faster, pinning her arm down before the thrashing tore her IV line. For a terrible moment Kaidan thought she was having another seizure, but her movements were too deliberate.

He pressed down on her shoulders. "Shepard! You're okay, you're safe!"

Her eyes flew wide, rolling in her head. There was still something unmistakably wrong with the left
eye. It moved in time with the right, but the iris didn't contract. Kaidan tugged on her chin so she could see past her blind side. Her good eye finally focused on him and her thrashing subsided.

"You're all right," Kaidan repeated, cupping her face in his hands, smoothing the oxygen tube under her nose back into place. "Don't move too much. You've got an IV line in your arm. Just breathe. You're okay."

Her mouth worked soundlessly. In the corner of his eye, Kaidan saw Garrus release her arm, hovering his hand for a moment to make sure she wouldn't yank on it. Her fist clenched, but her arm stayed put.

"Gonna get Chakwas," Garrus said breathlessly.

Kaidan heard him retreat and the swish of the door, but he kept his eyes on Shepard, who was still squirming under his hands, her face a mask of disorientation and confusion. He caught her skittering gaze again. "You're on Earth," he explained. "You did it, Shepard. The Reapers are all dead. Stopped. You did it."

There, finally, was the cogent spark of comprehension. Her face smoothed and her eyes rolled closed as she sucked in harsh breaths. Kaidan leaned down and gathered her gently into his arms. She burrowed her face into his neck and shoulder, trembling. He kept murmuring reassurances and didn't let go until her shaking started to wane, the blip of her heart rate calming in time with his own. He drank in the moment, the unwinding knot of fear. You're okay. It was as much a reassurance to himself as to her. Something still made sense in this aftermath. Something still had the gravity to keep him from flying apart. You're okay.

"Feel... terrible," she finally croaked.

"Yeah, I know," Kaidan murmured, easing her back into her pillows. "But you're all right."

Soft sounds to his right made him turn his head, startled. Chakwas was there, adjusting something on the diagnostic and dialysis machine. She smiled at him, touching his shoulder as she skirted around the bed to the other side. She turned on a lamp, filling the corner with warm light. Garrus trailed along behind, rubbing his hands together.

"Welcome back, dear," Chakwas said to Shepard.

She blinked at the doctor. "Did I go?"

"You checked out on us for the better part of seven days."

Shepard's face fell. "Oh."

The doctor patted her hand and eyeballed the IV fluid dispenser, then carefully disconnected the tube from Shepard's hand, leaving the taped port in place.

"Now, you're still hooked up to a few machines, so under no circumstances are you to get out of bed. Understand?"

"It's like she knows you or something," Garrus murmured.

"Yes, well." The doctor turned and gave him a pointed look.

"Come back in the morning?"
"If you wouldn't mind. She'll exhaust easily so I'd like to keep things calm."

"Early night off," Kaidan said.

"I could use it," Garrus chuckled. He leaned past the doctor and touched Shepard's arm. "I'm keeping that spot at the bar warm for you, Shepard. Rest up, because Wrex has been threatening to celebrate and I need the backup."

Chakwas rolled her eyes. "Just what her liver needs."

Shepard looked confused, until Kaidan remembered her translator was still not fixed and repeated Garrus' words. She smiled weakly at the turian. He actually winked at her, then turned and left.

"Now, Shepard, you're out of danger…" Chakwas said critically.

"But?" she said.

The doctor began listing the extent of her injuries and recovery progress. Despite carefully layering bad with good, Kaidan saw Shepard's mounting distress rippling under the attentive mask she put on. She'd heard so much of this before, either her own injuries or those of fellow soldiers, but of all the terrible injuries she'd experienced, none of them had been a permanent loss on the scale of a limb.

"Guess I… expected that," she said with false assurance. "After…" she swallowed hard. Her left leg twitched under the blanket.

"I know it's going to be difficult to process," Chakwas said. "So take advantage of your support. And you can ask me anything you need to at any time. I'm a button press away."

Shepard nodded mutely, staring at the ceiling.

The doctor looked pointedly at Kaidan. "Everything is stable," she murmured. "Use your best discretion, but rest is essential. I'll be back in the morning for a more thorough workup."

He nodded, and she turned and slipped out.

When the door cycled shut, Shepard's expression slowly disintegrated. "Gods… I'm a mess," she said shakily.

Kaidan carefully sat down beside her and smoothed her hair back. "You're alive. That's what matters. Time will take care of the rest."

Her left arm twitched, index finger curling over the edge of the cast. She prodded at her face with her good hand. "I can feel a bit…"

"The nerve damage is starting to heal. It should keep getting better. Your spinal cord is in good shape, so it's not as serious as we first thought." And you're thinking straight. There was no end of relief in that.

"Except the foot," Shepard said.

He nodded soberly.

Her face screwed up, the left side of it managing a weak shadow of the right. "I know there are solutions, I know a lot of people deal with this… but… Shit." A tear snaked out of her eye and dripped down to the pillow.
"Take your time," he said gently. "No one expects you to be happy about it. Or any of this."

Anger sparked into her voice. "I'm supposed to be... stronger."

Kaidan tilted his head. "According to what metric?"

"Supposed to deal with everything. The worst of everything. I don't-" She stopped, looking away. Her fist bunched up.

"What?"

"N- nothing."

"Kye."

He waited, watching her face. She strained at moving her left arm again, and this time the polymer cast levered off the bed and bounced against her abdomen. She bit her lip, and looked back at him, uncertainty filling her eyes in place of the anger.

Her voice dropped to a trembling whisper. "I don't... I don't want to do this anymore."

Kaidan exhaled, his stomach turning in a mix of emotions. He brushed his fingers across her forehead. "You don't have to."

"But I'm supposed to be a Spectre. Commander Shepard."

"It's a job. You don't have to do it forever."

"It's a job I've been doing since... since my family was killed. I had to... save them. And then everyone else, and-"

Kaidan leaned closer. "You did that."

"But there are always more..."

"You did everything any one person could be expected to do in a lifetime. Far more, even." He cupped her cheek. "You did something impossible. Kye, you did something no one had managed to do for... millions of years."

She closed her eyes again. "I'm so tired."

"With good reason," Kaidan said.

"But how can I stop?"

"Because it was never your job to save every single person every single time."

"I'm supposed to..." she trailed off.

He waited, stroking her fingers with his.

"But if I'm not Commander Shepard..." She opened her eyes and looked up at himsearchingly. The naked vulnerability there tightened his throat. This was about more than a job. It was the vast unknown of a world she hadn't risked imagining.

He spoke carefully, clear but quiet. "Kye, the person I fell in love with has the power to be
Commander Shepard when she needs to, but that was never all of her."

"But I don't... know how to be anything else."

He shook his head. "You know as much as I do. But it's something to explore, right? And I'm going to go on loving you, whatever you decide. I don't care if you take up flower arranging. I'll still want to be part of your life."

Her brows screwed up. "Flower arranging?"

Kaidan smiled, gently wiping away her tears. "You can do whatever you want. Or change your mind later. You don't owe anything to anyone."

She reached out and touched his face. "You, maybe. I don't want to do this to you any more, either. Seven days. You don't deserve this."

He chuckled quietly. The turbulence in his gut slowly settled into relief. He turned her hand and kissed her palm. Her skin was dry, but the thread of life in the play of her fingers filled his heart to bursting. You're okay. "You know, it was all... it was all worth it." It was getting hard to speak, but he pushed it out, tears and all. "And I... I can't wait to find out where it goes from here."

She tugged on him, pulling him into another embrace. Careful of the cables and tubes she was still connected to, he cradled her against his chest.

"I'm free," she said in a very small voice. Her fingers bunched up around his shirt.

"Everything the beacon started..."

"All of it, Kaidan. The beacon, the previous cycles, Akuze, the Ns, Taltha, Attican Beta, Horizon, Cerberus... Mindoir. Like Samara said to me once. I am a ruined vessel of sorrow and regret... but I'm free. Free."

You're not ruined. He kissed her head. "How does it feel?"

"I always used to know where I was going, more or less. Next rank. Next post. Next mission. Now..."

"Flower arranging?"

She bumped her forehead into his chest. "You first."

"I'll settle for... well, I don't know, to be honest. I hadn't thought that far ahead either."

"Us? We deserve a chance, don't we?" she said. "The big us."

"I'd like that."

What a strange, heady feeling it was to really imagine it. Just them. No more responsibilities to hundreds, if not thousands of lives. Just the mundane everyone else took for granted. It sounded like magic. At length, she tugged at him gently, and he put her back down. Her face grew serious again.

"How much haven't you told me yet?" she asked.

"Some. The Normandy is still in one piece. So is everyone you last saw."

"I'm going to stick to that for a few more hours."
He smiled. "That's fair."

She closed her eyes, frowning.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"Head's funny."

Kaidan rearranged her disturbed blankets, smoothing them carefully and checking all her remaining hookups. "I'm probably wearing you out."

She looked at him again. "Don't go."

"No risk of that."

"Few hours of this, until reality comes back again," she said wearily.

"It's a new world out there… in more ways than one. But you did your part. Rest."

She groped and found his hand, holding it to her chest as her eyes closed.

He rubbed his fingers lightly through her shirt. "Heal up so I can give you a backrub."

She smiled.
Change of Minds

The battle had ended, but for many, the long war ground on, just with different enemies. For Joker, the enemy was debris. Space around the Citadel was an ocean of obstacles; shattered ships, ordnance, pieces of the Citadel and its buildings, even drifting bodies. In some ways navigating this mess was easier than that beyond the Omega relay, but harder in others. Memories of the first battle of the Citadel seemed fresh again, and amplified. He dreaded each new pass of scan data which might bring him a familiar sight - a line of broken hull, a call-sign he recognized. Another proud ship bound eternally for the black of Davy Jones' deepest, darkest locker.

But he hated the dead Reapers the most. Their huge metal bodies remained where they had been the second the Crucible had fired. Those in space had, at that precise moment, been robbed not just of life but of all kinetic energy, defying physics even in death. They hung in place, their baleful lights extinguished. Joker still couldn't bring himself to trust their silence, studiously avoiding their firing lanes. When necessity required him to cross their bows, his hands still broke into a cold sweat.

And necessity drove them. The Normandy's small size and Joker's experience meant they were first of many ships tasked with evacuating what survivors they could from the dead city. It was ravaged, and whatever had once powered the great station had itself gone dark. Harbinger, the huge Reaper dreadnought, was still wedged into the torn Presidium, its claws reaching deep into the superstructure. It alone had brutalized the last push of invading troops. The Normandy's crew took a grim pleasure in James' stories of the immortal god-machine reduced to clumsy clawing, so desperate had it been to stop the knife reaching for its heart.

Despite nagging wounds, the now Lieutenant Commander Vega took his field promotion and a consignment of marines into the dark and ruined city in search of the living, Cortez flying his own obstacle course with each drop, until the Kodiak's blue heraldry was grey with a patina of micro-impacts and clinging soot.

Everywhere they had fallen, the Reaper drones mouldered away as they always had, the last of their energies spent consuming themselves into a fine ash. But their numbers had been so great in this final battle, both on the Citadel and on Earth, that their ash now blew constantly through the ruined cities, coating every surface in gritty particles that clung to noses and filtration systems. Vega complained bitterly of having to clean it out of his weapons and suit intakes, and the ship's provisional doctor of having to clean it out of the marines, until they were ordered to wear their atmo seals no matter the oxygen levels of the area.

The Normandy filled and emptied with an endless number of people of every description. Those lucky enough to find pressurized buildings to shelter in. Soldiers cut off from their units. The piece-meal remains of C-Sec holdouts. And civilians, so many civilians. Humans and aliens both, whole families and lone survivors, all with stories to tell.

In the Normandy's corridors, no one spoke of the dawning realization that very few of the vast numbers of dead would ever be identified, much less retrieved for any kind of burial. The Reaper system of cleansing and recycling of organic fodder had been frighteningly efficient. Untold numbers had been cast into oblivion, their very DNA irrevocably altered, leaving not even bones behind. The true scope of this tidal wave of obliteration was only beginning to settle in as survivors of cities and towns began to attempt the staggering job of tallying the numbers of lost. In some places, whole populations were said to have been razed to nothingness, leaving only a handful of the hollow-eyed to tell of it. Even the Alliance had a monumental task ahead in tallying their casualties, their central records long since destroyed with Arcturus.
But for those escaping the Citadel, it was first just about finding firm ground.

With Shepard's revival, Liara had rejoined the Normandy and the thin remaining threads of her communication network. Despite his relief and happiness at having her back on board, Feron had little good news to report - the idea of the Shadow Broker was all but dissolved. Liara greeted this new reality with pragmatism, but habits born of years of managing information did not die. As ships in Earth orbit began to cobble together something of a global communications network, she took the opportunity to insinuate new threads of her own. Such a system had countless loose ends to exploit. As haphazard news operations sprang up, Liara worked her own spin, separating fact from confabulation, and confabulating a little here and there where it suited her. She had grown up delving deep into ancient history, but now she stood at its molten heart. At this moment, she was aware perhaps more than most the depth of the foundation they were laying for the future. While the rest of the crew struggled with the now, she looked ahead.

Through all this, she found herself recruited by EDI to speak for one who no longer could - Leviathan. In the center of the vast battlefield, floating amid the ruins of destroyed ships, drifted the silent hulk of cycles past. It leaked trails of accretion, refined eezo and radiation-soaked particulates from great rents in its flanks. Ships were warned away from its gaping maw for fear of radiation bursts and whatever unstable power source might still lurk within the ship.

With her status as an individual still in a legal black hole, EDI was aware she could not personally insert herself into the arguments raging about what to do with Leviathan. Instead she surreptitiously listened as the major militaries discussed the possible salvage of Leviathan's terrifying main cannon and enormous eezo drives, as well as the potential dangers of such technology on galactic stability. Armed with this knowledge, she instead helped Liara formulate her arguments, which the asari slipped into her people's command channels. Liara herself struggled with the question. She recognized Leviathan was an intelligence, and its corpse deserved respect, but it was also the last remnant of a civilization no one had even heard of. Her archaeologist's curiosity inflamed her. While the argument raged in the upper echelons of politics, Liara worked the news angles, maintaining the name Leviathan as an ally, and always couching the great ship in terms of an individual. With positive examples on all sides, a populace that once feared artificial intelligences could be encouraged to embrace them. And, she hoped, the people would move their leaders.

The Crucible, the knife to the heart of the Reapers and fruit of the desperate labor of thousands of hands, was still plugged into the back end of the Citadel, its power levels depleted to nothing. The tears and burns in its layers of ablating spoke to the desperation of those last minutes. It was still not entirely clear what the Crucible was, or what it had done, but in the immediacy of the aftermath, those questions faded from priorities.

Recovering on the flotilla, Tali found her once-honorary position as an admiral matured quickly into a genuine voice, and a necessary one. The flotilla was in disarray, many of its ships lost or damaged, and the population mauled.

Worse was the dire impact on morale from the failure of the relay network. So many quarians had agreed to join this last fight on the unspoken promise that they were protecting a home they could finally go back to. But now, home was an unfathomable distance away, many generations of travel even under the best conditions. A wave of fractious despair washed over the flotilla's survivors, one that was in no way assuaged by the high-minded assertion that the quarian species itself would survive on Rannoch through those who had stayed behind.

Desperate for action to bring focus to the quarians trapped in the Sol system, Tali and the other admirals found unexpected allies - the turians. Their fellow dextros had an army to feed and no imports with which to do so. Suddenly, Tali's unconventional path to her political position, and the
ties she'd forged along the way, put her in a position unique among the admirals, most of whom had a less congenial relationship with the turian Hierarchy. Soon, Tali was in constant liaison with Garrus as the two sides worked to broker supply lines and mutual protection pacts. Garrus, for his part, had to manage the egos of surly generals who found having to deal with those they'd always dismissed as little better than pirates a difficult stone to swallow. Further, the new alliance chafed against old ones.

Both the turians and the quarians found a small measure of comfort in the survival of the geth communication network. Through them, the newly-isolated called out to one another over distances suddenly grown endless. The dark beyond Sol was not altogether silent, nor the survivors on Earth alone in the galaxy.

Of the survivors, it was Wrex and his krogan who found themselves in an uncomfortable limbo. Wrex was greeted with poorly-veiled alarm at every request for aid he made. The krogan lacked their own ships, and without a supply line, the turians couldn't support them, either. The notion of housing a whole population of belligerent, newly-fertile krogan was not something anyone seemed prepared to deal with.

Shepard was not spared any of the turmoil. No sooner had she opened her eyes than Kaidan felt the pressure begin to mount. As the patchwork communication system linked itself together, new figureheads of news, largely self-appointed, clamored for access to the real story. The week of peace afforded by confusion over Commander Shepard's status finally evaporated as definitive news spread of her survival. Now everyone wanted their interview.

Kaidan had time to appreciate both Admiral Hackett and Anderson's ongoing public campaign to deflect some of the pressure. Thrust into the spotlight as the commander-in-chief of the final push and ground commander of the Alliance attacks, they would relinquish little about Shepard's status to the slavering array of microphones except to say she was alive and recovering. There was another truth under this prevarication, though - even maimed as it was, the Alliance was never without thought for its propaganda line. Everyone had to get their stories straight.

But their efforts weren't enough, and the admirals both had innumerable minor and major emergencies of their own to deal with. And it wasn't just the shambling zombie of the media arisen from its grave, but official channels in search of Shepard's word. By the time Chakwas was ready to even consider allowing it, there was a lineup around the block of Alliance brass and Citadel Council officials waiting to debrief Shepard. Kaidan himself was hit with a similar groundswell, and subjected to hours of talking his throat raw repeating the same story and trying to recall which details he was allowed to divulge to what party.

It took all of his vastly diminished willpower to keep it together during those interviews. The questions at times turned probing, even personal. The tone tipped toward hostile when the relays came up, especially during interviews with Council officials. The undercurrent of fear was strong. And as much as he understood the why of it, it only made him angry, and angrier still to imagine them badgering Shepard with the same questions. Why were the relays affected, they asked, wasn't there another way?

It was hard not to hear the true sentiment; goddamned human, why can't we go home? Kaidan had no answers for them.

Physically, Shepard was recovering. But in the increasingly brief times Kaidan was afforded to visit, all she seemed to want to do was sleep or sit in numb silence. At first, the shock of mere survival seemed to buoy her, but as Kaidan watched, she had shut down and withdrawn, her only emotions expressed as bursts of miserable anger that she couldn't get across the room without a struggle. She was a person who had grown into adulthood placing an outsized value on what her body was
capable of, and now nothing seemed to work the way she wanted it to.

Later, Kaidan found out it was Doctor Chakwas who had saved him from losing his brittle composure in a precipitous way, both at the endless questions and inability to forestall Shepard's descent. Hackett would chuckle darkly when he recalled the call he'd received in which the diminutive holo of a grey-haired doctor blistered the paint off the walls of his ready room.

Then, all of a sudden, the interviews stopped. He and Shepard were spirited away to Suffield, a military base that hadn't suffered excess damage. A troop training facility and staging ground, it lacked the heavy equipment and extensive armament stores that might have made it a more immediate target of the Reapers. As it was, the three main buildings had been razed, sliced to pieces by a huge directed-energy cannon. But many other outbuildings remained intact, and those were supplemented with prefabs trucked in from a colonial manufacturing plant a few kilometers away. The former target range, already growing a carpet of grass and small scraggly bushes, became a new neighborhood.

The base prefabs afforded a measure of privacy the hospital hadn't, and the political pressure eased. Kaidan was given a separate unit, but he all but ignored it in favor of the rare dual-level prefab Shepard had been assigned. The second day after arriving, he woke early to find Shepard sitting on the floor in front of the west-facing window, watching the sun ease over the horizon of buildings. Warmed in the orange light of morning, the look she gave him when he quietly sat down with her was haunted, guilty, but... alive.

Hesitantly, she spoke of the persistence of the desire to be doing something, even now, when she lacked the physical and emotional capacity to do so. Deep-seated coping habits not so easily changed. Finally, she spoke of the possibility of physical therapy. Unspoken, the chance to mourn her own body, and to care for that one thing she'd always been remiss on - herself.

A true break came a few weeks later. In what was surely not a coincidence, the base received a number of recovering biotics, and Kaidan was encouraged to interact with them, as well as the other marines on the base. It wasn't a burden - it gave him something to think about that wasn't the war, and soothed his own instinct to do something without taking him away from Shepard. While she was occupied with physical therapy, he visited the base's hospital facilities and communal spaces.

The biotics fell into his orbit quite naturally. Once they got past the gloss of the second human Spectre and Commander Shepard's second-in-command, his status as one of the oldest stable human biotics was what emboldened them to seek him out. It wasn't long before he found himself requesting space to practice for this impromptu gaggle of students from all ranks and commands. Riddled with injuries of all kinds, post-traumatic stress and profound loss, they found companionship in each other, petty differences erased by common experience and the magnitude of events still fresh in everyone's mind.

One day, Kaidan saw Shepard limp through the door to the bay they'd been given to practice in, wearing the utilitarian mechanized leg brace designed to keep weight off the stump while still affording her some mobility. She was only just getting up and around with it, working through the recovery of her weakened left side, and tired quickly.

She sat down to rest near the back of the room, dismissing inquisitive stares with assurances she wasn't there to judge, just watch. That lasted another few minutes before the natural gravity she projected, even so diminished, overcame the marines. Soon they were clustered around her, asking questions like inquisitive schoolkids.

After that day, Shepard stopped by with increasing frequency, much to Kaidan's delight. She encouraged the marines to tell their own stories each in turn, but far from taking their burdens into
herself, she drew strength from them. Privately, back in their prefab, stories spilled out of her, in splashes like wind-driven water topping a dam. Fragments of her life Kaidan had never heard, from before they'd met. Sometimes her tone made it sound like it was as much a reminder to herself as for his benefit.

Within a few weeks, Shepard invited herself to join in on their biotic exercises. The marines all wanted to see the fabled charge of Commander Shepard that was, according to stories, capable of flattening a tank. Her missing leg seemed immaterial to their inflated ideas of her prowess. It proved infectious. Consternation growing, Kaidan succeeded in deflecting the idea only for so long, as the gleam of an unmet challenge smoldered in her eyes.

The first real attempt came to a stop with a badly wrenched knee. But instead of a new wave of despair, Shepard greeted this setback with a certain sheepish resignation, buffered by the protective layer of people in similar circumstances and the familiarity of life on a military base.

On many nights, alone in their unit and still plagued by troubled sleep, Shepard and Kaidan dozed off in front of vids of old movies, curled together under scratchy military blankets.

When Kaidan had free time, he used it to hunt down any scrap of information he could about the whereabouts of his family. Communications were still terrible, and lists of the missing and even survivors grossly incomplete. But day after day, he kept trying.

Another month crept by. The galaxy licked its many wounds.

The half-circle auditorium was an impressive scene, one Kaidan had to remind himself was utterly unprecedented. Krogan sitting next to turians. Quarians in the same room as geth. Asari, salarians, humans, volus, hanar, elcor, even a pair of batarians. And a small clutch of rachni, the less-imposing worker genus, accompanied by an asari who served as their interpreter. The room was full to bursting. Each delegate had a half-dozen aides seated around them, and there was an audience of military and civilian dignitaries arrayed on one side. The effort involved in making this happen must have been considerable. After some time isolated from the machinations of politics, it was a hard awakening to return to it.

This conference, the very first to boast members of all major species present in the Sol system, had been underway for more than three hours. For every item brought up on the agenda, fifty more problems waited to be dealt with. Immediate matters of food, shelter and medicines. Wider issues of what to do about the galactic economy, and what possible hierarchy of governance could accommodate every species on a longer-term basis.

The arguments went around and around. Beside Kaidan sat Shepard, her shoulders slumped in an angle that grew more sullen with each passing minute. He could clearly hear her quiet snorts punctuating the delegates' statements. Whatever good humor she might have arrived with had long since evaporated. Still cautious of her state of mind, he was starting to regret taking Hackett up on his invitation to spectate.

It made Kaidan's head spin to attempt to keep track of the different threads of politics present in the room. The members of the Citadel Council had clearly walked in the door believing they would, as they always had, lead the discussion. And initially, perhaps out of habit, the conversation seemed to follow that formula. Soon, though, Wrex, who had little patience for the prevarication and deflection of the Council, started pressing his points and even interjecting new ones. Emboldened by Wrex's frequent impolitic interruptions, other delegates began raising their voices too. The ground had shifted under the Council's feet. Still, the Council members were consummate politicians, with long years of practice steering any line of inquiry in the direction they wanted. The clash was swiftly
turning into a deadlock.

After the third time Councilor Tevos managed to reply to the volus delegate's points about how his people were to be housed with a complete non-answer, Shepard exhaled a low growl. Kaidan was about to suggest they leave when, she pushed herself to her feet. The array of micro-motors in her brace whined in unison as she straightened.

Kaidan hissed softly in concern. "Shepard," he murmured, "what are you doing?"

"I can't listen to this crap one more second," she muttered, and limped into the promenade between the seats, descending the stairs with a slow and deliberate gait.

Kaidan chewed his lip in consternation. He started to stand when a sharp tug at his sleeve put him back in his seat with a thud. He spun around reprovingly. Admiral Hackett met his gaze with narrow-eyed cool.

"Stay put, Major," the admiral said shortly, crossing his arms. He returned his scrutiny to Shepard.

Something about the expression on Hackett's face arrested Kaidan. It was almost… anticipation. Realization crept over him. Hackett planned this. He's been waiting for Shepard to get sufficiently pissed off. Resentment curdled in his stomach. Everything they'd been through, and she was still being used. But the question of why, and what Hackett could possibly be expecting, kept Kaidan planted in his seat, stewing, as Shepard limped to the open space between the assembled delegates.

The argument raged around the room, Shepard silent at its center, watching them all. A ripple of curiosity flickered among the various delegates, and some fell silent, but others were caught up in their points and ignored the woman standing stiffly in their midst, hard stare casting daggers.

For his part, Wrex noticed. From his seat heading the krogan delegation, he looked around, wide mouth curling in disgust. He drummed his fingers for a few more seconds before his patience snapped.

"SHUT UP!" he thundered.

The buzz of conversation sputtered out as wide eyes locked on the krogan warlord.

He jabbed a thick finger in Shepard's direction. "Shepard's got something to say." His tone was congenial, but the guttural undertone belied a certain threat. He folded his arms and looked at her expectantly.

Kaidan rubbed his palms on his pant legs. The roomful of eyes fell on her like a firing line, the silence brittle.

"I don't how many of you are familiar with human history," she said into the void, clear and resonant, "but I'm sure you'd guess that war was a staple feature. Like most of your histories, I imagine. But I always remember the story of our first really big blowout. Because of a phrase that someone used to describe it, after the fact.

"It was far from our first war, of course, but maybe the first time we... industrialized killing each other. Whole nations ground into mud. Heavy artillery, chemical weapons, the works. Millions of deaths. We called it the Great War. But the phrase that always stuck with me was... 'the war to end all wars.'" Shepard smiled sadly. "That's what it was called, for a time. Can you imagine? The naiveté."

There was an uncomfortable twitter that quickly subsided.
"Of course you can," she said. "Because you all have similar stories. Do you know how long our stunned peace lasted? A whole twenty of our years! Not even a generation as we count them. A man who was a soldier in the first had plenty of life left in him to rise and become a brutal mass-murderer in the next one."

She raised her left arm, the hand once again encased in a cast that left only the ends of her fingers showing, necessary after another round of reconstructive surgery.

"A war to end all wars. What does that look like to you? Can any of you even picture it? You aren’t going to try, are you? Because all I see you doing is maneuvering. Trying to put yourselves in the best position so when the next round of insane madness breaks out, you'll be on decent footing."

Shepard swept her gaze around, chin up and challenging. The delegates exchanged glances with their fellows.

"Shepard," Councilor Tevos said uneasily, "I'm not sure what you're trying to say-"

"You know exactly what I'm trying to say. Nothing has changed!"

The asari glanced around, one elegant brow raised. "Commander, how can you believe that? Not a single world is untouched! The relays are closed!"

"And yet nothing here has changed," Shepard snapped. "In this room. These politics."

Wrex thumped his fist onto the table before him in approval, but kept his mouth shut.

"Commander," Councilor Kothari said, leaning forward, "you can hardly expect us not to address the best interests of our people." The human councilor, elected to replace Udina, spoke in the slightly obsequious tone of a man trying to remind Shepard they were supposed to be on the same side.

"History has taught me not to expect a great deal from politicians, one way or the other," she said. "It's not so much about practical concerns, Councilor. It's about patterns. It's about how even after this cataclysm, we see all the same prejudices, the same pattern of supremacy and marginalization. It's about the Citadel Council, and 'everyone else'. It's about assumptions. About an economy that no longer exists, about military and cultural dominance." She looked at Wrex. "And about wars you assume have already started."

Wrex's eyes narrowed.

"Because you've already made your judgments," Shepard said. "You've already decided that the krogan and the rachni will be a threat. You're already operating on the same basic template of the Citadel Council, a Council that has done everything in its power to limit the voices of the elcor, volus, hanar, quarians, and others." Shepard enunciated each name with care, looking at each in turn.

More delegates thumped their desks in agreement, and mutters broke out in several quarters. Even the batarians looked at Shepard with open curiosity now.

"Commander," Tevos said, "all of these matters must be dealt with delicately. They are impossibly complex!"

"I know," Shepard said, "and I'm just a soldier. I'm supposed to do my job and stay in the background."

Wrex grunted. "You're no common soldier."
"Call me what you like. But I know you all would have preferred that I stay buried in the Citadel. Martyred to the cause like a good hero. The silent kind!"

Kothari shifted. "Commander-

"I already died once," she snapped, "I know exactly what you did to my voice in my absence!" Her gaze flickered very deliberately over Admiral Hackett before returning to the human councilor.

Councilor Sparatus coughed. "Commander, no one here can deny that without you, we wouldn't have won this war. We honor your battle-"

"You want to honor me?" Her voice rose sharply as she jabbed her finger at the four Citadel Councilors. "Then get up, all of you, stand up in front of your people, all people, and beg their forgiveness for failing them!"

A shocked silence crackled through the room.

"Failing!" Tevos said, drawing herself up. "The cost was great, but we hardly failed."

"If any of you had looked past your politics, imagine how many more lives we could have saved! If you had for a second taken any of the warning signs seriously!"

"Commander, with all due respect, at the time of Saren's attack on Eden Prime, stories of galaxy-spanning genocidal attacks were somewhat far-fetched."

"I'm not talking about Eden Prime." Shepard bared her teeth, her body assuming the same posture it had the moment before she'd laid into Kaidan on the Citadel, a lifetime ago. "Your people put forth the compact on the sharing of prothean artifacts for the good of all Citadel species, did they not? One of the first acts of the new Citadel Council, wasn't it?"

Tevos' eyes flicked sideways. She moved to raise her hand.

"And how convenient that was!" Shepard's voice rose to a parade-ground bellow, penetrating as artillery fire. "Because the asari had already broken the compact! The fully intact prothean beacon in your Temple of Athame could have warned the entire galaxy of the Reapers thousands of years ago!"

Kaidan was glad this wasn't news to him, because it afforded him a cool enough head to watch the impact of this statement wash over the room like a tidal wave. Sparatus sat back, staring at Tevos. His aides, as well as General Victus, were wide-eyed, mandibles dancing in agitation. The salarians immediately fell into hissed internal discussion. Tevos stared at Shepard in open-mouthed shock, her perfect matriarch mask snapped in half. Behind her, her ring of delegates shared her surprise for only a second before they, too, looked between one another.

Far more dramatic was the non-Council species.

"WHAT?!" Wrex shouted, almost shaking dust off the ceiling rafters. His deep voice steamrolled over the outbursts from the volus, quarians and batarians. The elcor rocked a little on their hands, and a subtle blur of colors played over the hanar and rachni. The geth stayed quiet, stock-still, watching.

Tevos straightened with a too-quick snap. "That's absurd," she said loudly.

Shepard leaned forward, lifting her finger to her temple. "Is it. Why don't you verify? Because you can, can't you? You can look right into my mind and see for yourself!"
"The Commander has no reason to lie," Victus said icily. "Didn't you send her to the temple yourself?"

Behind Tevos, Kaidan caught the flash of omni-tools among the other asari.

"So that's it," Wrex growled, "isn't it? You asari already had your box of secrets, and you made the compact so everyone else would be forced to offer up anything they found!"

"Equality, with the asari more equal than everyone else!" Han'Gerrel said, folding his arms. The other delegates thumped their desks. Shepard watched them all hawkishly, scanning each face in turn.

"I suggest... a recess," Tevos said.

"Go, then," Dalatrass Heelani said frostily. She stood in for Councilor Valern, lost during the last desperate battle on the Citadel.

Silence greeted that pronouncement, all eyes on the asari. Tevos spoke a few curt words to those behind her, but only one rose to her feet.

Tevos spun and glared at her delegation. For a moment, her perfect face was awash in barely contained consternation. The other asari exchanged a small nod, then turned and stared coldly back at Tevos. They didn't stand up.

Quivering, Tevos gathered her skirts and swept past them all, her one attendant in tow. The doors hissed open, then shut behind her. For a moment, everyone seemed to hold their breath, but no one else moved.

One of the asari from her former delegation stood up. "I am Matriarch Manayan. By convocation, I now speak with the voice of the Asari Republics. You will all shortly be receiving a transmission from Matriarch Lidanya of the Destiny Ascension that this transition has the full backing of orbital high command."

Omni tools flashed from all corners of the room, accompanied by a low hum of voices.

"What just happened?" Kaidan said under his breath.

"We just witnessed a coup," Hackett murmured. There was disbelieving laughter in his cool voice. "Years in the making, I think. Tevos has been on thin ice for some time now... and Shepard just cracked it."

Kaidan eyed him sidelong. Arms folded and stroking his chin, the admiral clearly relished every second of it.

Down in the center of the auditorium, Shepard waited while the delegates settled down.

"And what does Manayan have to say, then?" Wrex demanded.

The new asari councilor took patient seconds to compose herself. "The decisions regarding this hidden beacon were made by my ancestors. None of us here present know the extent of the knowledge they were able to glean from it, but it is quite clear... that they utterly failed to heed the warnings left by the protheans."

"Blame shift," Hackett murmured.
"The protheans uplifted your ancestors, Matriarch," Shepard said. "In hopes that you would take
over the galaxy, marshal its forces and defeat the Reapers."

Manayan blinked, frowning. "How do you know this? The beacon?"

"Javik, the last prothean."

The asari's eyes grew shrouded. "That is… troubling, if it is indeed true."

Wrex snorted. Shepard shot him a warning glare.

"The prothean empire was one of dominion," Shepard said, "those they could not subjugate, they
eliminated. We can't know what might have happened if the asari had followed directly in their
footsteps. But I don't think it's unreasonable to imagine all the lives that might have been saved…
with a bit more honesty." She turned her head. "Axion?"

For the first time since the conversation had begun, the geth spoke. "Yes, Shepard-Commander?"
The platform in the center of the trio stepped forward, a civilian model with a burnished paint job and
a set of sectional head-flaps much like Legion's.

"When I was on the Citadel, I asked one of you, Radiant, to bring a request to the consensus. Did the
consensus agree to that request?"

"Affirmative."

"Please tell the delegates what that request was."

Axion walked into the center of the room and stopped. Goosebumps raised along Kaidan's arms as
Shepard's own thin voice came from the platform, perfectly reproduced. His stomach turned over to
hear the obvious pain in it, the struggle to stay calm clear in the quiver. She asked them to share all
information about the war, to hide none of it, and then explained why.

The geth finally fell silent and retreated back to where they had been standing.

"What... exactly does this mean?" Councilor Sparatus said.

"What it means," Shepard said, "is that through the geth, we have something we've never had before
as a wider culture - an accurate memory. No matter how much we'll try to distort what happened, the
geth will keep that record, and make it available to anyone who asks for it. Without propaganda."

"That's..." he sat back, "different, isn't it?"

"Sounds good to me," Wrex said bitterly, "it's too easy to ignore a statue."

"The Rebellions-" Manayan started.

Victus raised a hand to cut her off, then looked at the krogan warlord. "No. Urdnot Wrex's point is…
not without merit."

Wrex glared at both of them, then nodded slightly. Another murmur of conversation traveled the
room. Kaidan saw many delegates looking at each other, radiating unease.

Dalatrass Heelani stood. "If I may say something?"

Shepard nodded to her. The rest of the delegates braced for a new shock.
"In this climate of communication difficulties, it is... challenging to make decisions the results of which will echo far into the future." She laced her fingers together. Her dusky blue robes gave her the look of an ancient classical statue. "Our actions here will have consequences none of us can anticipate. But that does not mean we cannot act. And perhaps a more... precipitous decision is warranted in such momentous times. At a fulcrum of crisis, we must think as..." she eyed Shepard, "Spectres do."

She turned and motioned to one of her aides, who bobbed his head and handed her a datapad. Pad in hand, she skirted her desk and made her way to Shepard's side.

"This," she said, holding it up for all to see, "contains the linkup permissions to a database of information stored on the Inore Esh, currently in deep orbit. That database was liberated at great expense of lives from the Citadel, where it was gathered by my predecessor. You are all now no doubt aware of the secret relay project... the reverse-engineering and reconstruction of the so-called Ilos Conduit, the results of which allowed us to secret materials and troops into the Citadel at our most desperate hour. Though we did not foresee the shutdown of the relays, Councilor Valern knew the value of the data from this project. Unprecedented research into the relays themselves."

She waved the datapad. "This is that data, in its entirety. Factors within my government argued to withhold certain parts of it, for... strategic purposes," she looked pointedly at Shepard, "but I believe such action will be to no one's ultimate benefit. Therefore..." with a flourish, she deposited the datapad in Shepard's hand, "we commend this into your hands, Commander."

With a curt bow from the neck, Heelani retreated to her seat. All eyes turned to Shepard.

She turned it over in her hands, twisting the corner against the hard surface of her cast-encased palm as she stared back at each delegate in turn.

Beside Kaidan, Hackett chuckled under his breath. "She's playing them like a harp," he murmured.

"Axion," Shepard said, looking at the geth.

"Yes, Shepard-Commander?"

"If I allow you to download this database to your collective, will you extend the terms of my request to it, in its entirety?"

There was a poorly stifled gasp from a few quarters.

"Commander," Admiral Han'Garrel said, standing, "is that... wise?"

"It's the fastest way to ensure it gets into the most hands, and that no one succumbs to the temptation to exploit their neighbors over it. The faster we get more minds looking at this data, the faster we might come to a solution that sees the relays re-opened and you all returned to the homes you choose."

"But the geth? The omission of even a small part of that data could set us all back years, even decades..."

"We trusted them with the relay keys that rescued us from a slow death in the dark," Shepard said, "and with our united fleet communications. They fulfilled their promises then."

"Yes, but-"

"Truth be told, I don't know how far to trust any of you," Shepard said coldly. "But I'm making a
decision. Axion, do you, do all geth, swear to provide this data to anyone who requests it, unedited, for as long as you function?"

There was a breathless pause. The plates around Axion's sloped head spread slightly. "Consensus reached. The geth agree to the storage and free unedited distribution of all Ilos Conduit research data."

Han'Garrel shook his head. "This is unbelievable."

"Han, geth do not lie," Admiral Daro'Xen said. Her voice was quiet, but clear. "It… appears not to be in their nature."

He turned and shot her a stare, which she returned coolly.

"We do not generate false data," Axion said.

"Refreshing how simple that is, isn't it?" Victus said, cocking his head.

Shepard limped to the geth. "I know it might be difficult for you to understand us fully, Axion. You can go home any time you want to. Maybe you never left home. But we can't travel like you can. Right now, we're many, many isolated runtimes that want to go home."

"You wish to be reunited with your consensus," Axion said.

Shepard smiled slightly. "Yeah." She held out the datapad.

"The geth will help." They took it from her and held it in both hands. "Handshake accepted. Transfer to consensus central database begun."

Shepard limped back to the center. "This is what I'm talking about," she said, her voice taking on a weary tone. "We're still operating on the presumption that our neighbors want everything we have and will kill us to get it. So we think we have to kill them first. We're animals, barely out of the primordial soup! We're still ruled so much by fear."

She stopped and straightened. "Let me be perfectly clear. The only reason we aren't just another footnote in Reaper history is because I had to make decisions like that." She pointed at the geth. "And I wasn't alone.

"Mordin Solus had to change his mind about the krogan right to live. Then Wrex had to trust him enough to let him distribute a cure, a cure that could have been a toxin, or worse. The quarians had to let go of a lifetime of prejudice and agree to speak with the geth. The geth consensus had to take a chance and go against their instinct to survive at any cost. A shipful of humans had to trust an artificial intelligence with their lives… and she, us. An ancient thinking war machine had to decide to fight instead of rot away on the floor of a distant ocean. The rachni queen, the last of her people, had to risk contact with peoples who had tried their very best to erase her kind from the galaxy."

"But we needed every single one of these decisions, these risks, just to get here, to a place where there's a future to argue about!"

The delegates shifted, looking at each other.

"Download complete," Axion said. "Query?"

"Yes?" Shepard said.
"The consensus requests permission to join in the research of the relay data."

"Well, of course," Admiral Daro’Xan said. "That's the point."

Shepard nodded. "You want to honor what I fought for, this is it. I believe in all of us. People. It wasn't brute force that defeated the Reapers - the protheans had that, and they failed. It was all of our different strengths added together into something far greater that won this war.

"The Reapers showed us a food chain we didn't even know existed. We're the first in billions of years to be free of their cycles. But I know we can solve the relay problem. Together, we can do amazing things, things we could never before conceive of... and I know that because we just did."

Wrex banged on his beleaguered desk, and this time the other delegates joined him as well as the audience.

After a moment of shared approval, Sparatus cleared his throat and called for silence. He stood up, skirted his desk and approached Shepard.

"Many difficult days lie ahead. Commander, I hope to see Palaven again one day. And I find that hope stronger than it was this morning. I will see my homeworld again!"

To Kaidan's profound surprise, the turian councilor sank to one knee and bowed his head. "For my part in doubting you, you have my apology. It is because of you that I am allowed that hope, for myself and my entire people. The Turian Hierarchy honors Commander Shepard."

Even Shepard looked a little stunned for a moment, and Kaidan saw Victus' brows climbing up his plated forehead. Sparatus stood and saluted Shepard with an amazing imitation of an Alliance salute, which she echoed, then returned to his seat.

"I believe the Councilor speaks for all of us," Heelani said, nodding.

The tension broken, formality dissolved into more applause as people stood, speaking over one another and even leaving their seats to shake Shepard's hand.

"Go on," Hackett said from behind Kaidan, "you can go rescue your Spectre now."

Kaidan glanced at him. The usually stiff admiral wore a faintly indulgent smile as he waved him away.

Easier said than done, Kaidan discovered. It took another few minutes for her to extricate herself from well-meaning aides, and by then one of the Alliance marine guards seemed to have clued in and started directing traffic sufficiently for her to slip out. Kaidan joined her as they escaped into the security hall that led into the various anterooms.

Shepard blew out a long breath.

"You okay?" Kaidan asked, slipping an arm around her shoulders.

"That was… cathartic. Almost as cathartic as reducing The Illusive Man to paste." She winced. "That sounds terrible."

He chuckled. "Nah. I think you chose the perfect weapon for the job. In both cases."

Shepard glanced over her shoulder. "I hope I didn't break anything."

"The worst that'll come of this is someone will try very hard to get you into politics."
She made a gagging noise.

Kaidan laughed. "That was my thought, too."
The hangar was a hive of activity. People, Alliance and civilians both, bustled around with the barely controlled chaos of a nest of ants. With whole populations displaced, the new pressing task was to find habitable infrastructure that was close enough to usable to support refugees on a more long-term basis. With fuel and food a constant concern, the Alliance found itself instrumental in working with local governments to help move large numbers of people from one place to another, all while trying to re-unite families.

Kaidan had spent the past two hours convinced there had to be a better way to do this, and telling himself he didn't want to get involved. Mostly, he'd been running interference for Shepard, who had tagged along, but was probably starting to regret it. This hangar was packed, and it was still only one of the smaller of the nexus hubs that had sprung up around the planet. On this particular day, Kaidan found himself having to brave the madness in aid of three of the biotics students he'd befriended.

Out of the blue, a young-looking marine materialized from the crowd and ran up to him. "Sir! Major-"

"Shepard is busy," Kaidan said, pointing, "but if you wait a minute-"

The young marine looked baffled for a second, then wagged his head. "No, sir, you!"

"Me? What is it?"

"Dunno, sir, but it's important! I just got an alert, addressed eyes-only."

Kaidan looked back at Shepard. She caught his glance and shook her head with a rueful chuckle. "Nuh-uh, this one is yours. I got the last dozen."

"This is just one prolonged crisis, isn't it?" Kaidan turned back to find the marine already heading further into the bay.

He hurried to catch up, skirting the crowd of civilians milling around the a-grav landers. He lost sight of the marine. Slowing, he scanned the crowds, turning to glance at Shepard. She trailed along behind him, but edged toward the rail of a ramp and sat down, still favoring her limp.

"Kaidan!"

He spun around in time to catch a glimpse of a head of salt-and-pepper black hair before a body collided with his, knocking him back a step. The sudden warmth of a body against his shocked him, but the smell hit his neurons with a wave of familiarity so strong he lost track of where he was.

"Mom?" he blurted.

She looked up at him, eyes brimming. For a moment, the bay might have been somewhere else, a long way from here, and a long time ago, when both he and the world were much smaller.

"Oh my god!" He wrapped his arms around her as a hot mix of relief and guilt rushed through him, filling up the gnawing hole of uncertainty and growing grief that had been dogging his heels since their return to Earth.

He held his mother out at arm's length, looking into her tear-stained eyes. She looked older than he remembered, almost startlingly so. The lines of her face deepened, the bones of her cheeks sticking
out further. The hair she'd meticulously kept glossy black was shot through with gray. But the smile she radiated was the same, and her small frame could still generate remarkable hugging strength.

"I've been looking for you!" he stammered. "I've been trying-"

"I know, honey. You've been busy." She reached up and cupped his cheeks, searching his face. "It's… it's just so good to finally see you again. Are you okay?"

That was too complicated an answer for this light-headedness. "Yeah, yeah I'm okay. I've been looking for you, but none of the civilian casualty reports out of Vancouver told me anything. I was still running searches on survivor check-in lists as hey updated."

"We weren't in town, not after the attack!"

"I'd hoped you'd gotten out, but centcom's been trying to sort out Alliance MIA and KIA-"

She actually laughed. There was a strain in it, but warmth too. "That's your military efficiency for you. Didn't I always tell you?" She shook him. "Your father…" she trailed off.

It was the same tone of voice she'd always used when she was nursing some private resentment toward her ex-husband, something that had been happening with increasing frequency after Kaidan had joined the service. But her voice held a warmth too, and sadness.

"He's… gone isn't he?" Kaidan said in a low voice.

His words might not have been loud enough to carry over the pervasive background noise of the hangar, or perhaps she, too, didn't want to charge headlong into that just yet. In the corner of his eye, he saw Shepard looking at him from where she sat. His mother turned and waved, calling out a name.

Andres.

Kaidan's heart jumped again. Weaving out of the crowd came a ghost, a lean and younger approximation of what his father might have looked like a few decades ago. It was shocking how much a few years made his older brother look the part.

As he approached, Andres' expression had a guarded edge to it that set Kaidan aback. His smile didn't reach his eyes. From behind him came his wife, Sari, their daughter Priya in her arms. She seemed discomforted by the bustle of military personnel around her, and gripped Priya close.

Andres clapped Kaidan on the shoulder. "There you are! You've been all over the news, when we finally got it, that is."

"I… didn't know you were alive until just now," Kaidan stammered, confused by the standoffishness.

"No? Well, we've been wading through your red tape, which is a hell of a lot redder than usual. DNA tests to prove our claims, all that crap."

Kaidan felt the younger brother in him quailing. "I'm sorry, Andres. Nobody told me."

"Your military has its head up its ass."

"'My' military? Because what, I'm directly in control of the hundreds of thousands of personnel and know exactly what they're all doing despite the chain of command being full of holes because half of
them are dead?"

His brother shrugged, avoiding his gaze again. The rumble of a-grav thrusters filled the air, ruffling at his clothes as one of the shuttles eased out of the front of the bay.

Kaidan looked at his mother once it had subsided. "Mom, can you... give us a moment?"

She frowned, glancing between them, squeezing Kaidan's arm. "My heart can't take any more strife. I finally have you both back..."

Kaidan studied Andres' features. "It's okay."

His mother bobbed her head, locking onto Kaidan's gaze for a moment, an echo of another one from years past. The one that admonished; you have power, you have to be careful how you use it. Then she turned and headed for Sari. Kaidan glanced at Andres' wife again. Something was wrong, and he had a deepening dread he knew what.

Andres rubbed the heel of his hand into his eye socket. In doing so, he again looked startlingly like a younger version of their father. The slant of his shoulders, the way he found something terribly interesting to focus on a mile off to Kaidan's left. It was as if a phantom weight had settled over Andres, displacing his old sly humor.

"Where's Nikolas?" Kaidan asked quietly, his throat tightening as if to stop the question from escaping. He still hadn't spotted the little boy anywhere near Sari.

Andres' expression fractured, sharp as a fault line. He squeezed his eyes shut. When they opened again, they were slick with tears.

"Why did you leave?" he grated.

The crackle of accusation under those words only confirmed Kaidan's dread. A cold knot twisted in his stomach, so hard it made his vision swim.

"I... had a job to do," he said, the words coming automatically.

Andres grimaced. He tossed his hand in the air and let it drop again, flopping limp at his side. "A job. You said... you said they wouldn't get through! Wasn't your job keeping enemies away from Earth? You said-" Andres snapped his jaw shut, the muscles working.

"I told you what I thought was true back then, Andres. I didn't know what was going to happen."

"But it did happen. And you... you left! You left us alone against those things."

Kaidan took a step forward, but kept his arms firmly at his sides, in no danger of even getting close to something his mutant neurons might construe as a mnemonic. Nonetheless, he could feel the frightening prickle of static crawling along the hairs of his forearms.

"I did my job, Andres," he said, carefully enunciating each word. "Do you have any idea how it felt to have to leave? Do you? You got to be right where you were needed to be to fight for the people that mattered the most to you. You didn't have any other obligations! I did. You have no idea what it was like. To have to stand in the cargo bay of your ship and fight the urge to just charge back down into an enemy that had us completely overmatched, and probably kill myself and my entire crew in the process! Just for a chance at finding my family!"

"Crew?" Andres stammered.
"That's right, crew. The Normandy. You remember them, right? I'm not alone, Andres. My family just isn't related to me by blood. I'm an officer. I was, at least briefly, in command of the ship. Right then, I had dozens of people relying on me to make the right decision, even if it was the end of the world! And you know what? I almost didn't make the right decision."

He gulped in a breath. It hurt to admit that, to say out loud how much of a relief it had been to hand over command to Shepard. Someone who, at that moment, was angry enough at everything to do with Earth to have the guts to leave it. When leaving was the right choice.

"I'm sorry, Andres," he said, lowering his voice, "more than I can say."

His brother squirmed on his feet, shifting his weight and balling and unballing his fists. "Dad sure was proud of you," Andres muttered. His voice was laced with an undercurrent of bitterness.

"He... didn't come back either, did he?"

"Goddamn soldiers, running off to fight. It wasn't..." He trailed off.

"Say what you want to say."

His brother looked away. "I wasn't enough. You're the soldier, Kaid! You're... You've got..." He waved his hands helplessly.

"You really think-" Kaidan broke off, biting his tongue. He exhaled and eased the anger out of his voice. "My biotics are great in a stand-up fight, Andres. But this wasn't some bar brawl. All the biotics in the world wouldn't have stopped that invasion force."

Andres shrugged helplessly. A tear slipped down his face. "I'm just... me. I wasn't enough. I c- couldn't get to Nik in time. I..."

The anguish in his voice made Kaidan's stomach knot. "You did everything you possibly could have," he said. "I know you did."

"Wasn't enough." Andres looked back at him. There was still a glimmer of something sharp in there. "I'm... I mean, I'm still glad you're okay, but-"

"But you'd trade me for Nikolas in a second."

Sick horror flashed across Andres' face.

"It's okay," Kaidan said. It was a half a lie, but there wasn't anything else he could say.

Andres wagged his head, but his heart wasn't in it.

Kaidan put a hand on his brother's shoulder. He could feel him trembling. Kaidan tried to put more conviction into his voice. "It is okay. I'm the lucky one, I got my favorite brother back."

"Your only brother," Andres mumbled, the old joke coming out of him automatically. Favorite or least favorite, it was a statement that always had the same answer.

"Not a day went by that I didn't think about all of you," Kaidan said. "That I wanted to be back here, helping. Somehow. But I could do more good by staying where I was. For everyone." He drew Andres into a hug. After a moment, his brother returned it, gripping him like a drowning man.

When Andres finally stepped back, he wiped his eyes and shook his head. "I don't know how to come back from this, Kaid."
"Little bit at a time," Kaidan said. "It's the same for everyone."

"I guess…” Andres swallowed hard. "Is it true what the news says, that you were there? On the Citadel, at the end?"

Kaidan nodded. "Yeah. Shepard's team."

"S- so, if you hadn't left, I'd have lost Priya and Sari too."

It was a vertiginous thought, such an insane statement. One man couldn't possibly be so important in such an enormous series of events. And yet, if he hadn't been present…

"Maybe," Kaidan said uneasily, "probably. I mean, I'm just one person-"

Andres shoved his shoulder. "Just one Spectre, you over-achieving ass."

The word made Kaidan's skin prickle. It was a word soaked in violence, and profound conflicts. Things I'm glad you never had to face. He tried to smile. "It was…” He swallowed. "Hard."

"More stuff you can't tell us, huh?"

Kaidan sighed and raked a hand through his hair. "I hope I can, someday. Just not right now."

Andres peered at him. "You okay, Kaid? I mean…"

"Yes and no." He glanced at Shepard, who still sat on the ramp rail, datapad in her lap. "Mostly yes, I think. It's a long, messy story."

Andres hugged him again. "Welcome home, man. I… I mean that."

This time their mother appeared again, hugging them both with enough strength he was sure she could have carried them both off. "My boys," she murmured, "oh, my brave boys. Sari, dear, come here."

Sari smiled at Kaidan, but it had the same guarded quality that Andres' expression had.

"I'm sorry, Sari," he said, reaching out tentatively.

She shook her head, eyes tearing. "Say hello to your uncle, Priya."

Hair done up in twin braids, the little girl regarded him from her mother's arms with the intense seriousness only a child could muster while simultaneously sucking on a finger. She had to be about five now, by Kaidan's disjointed reckoning. He wondered if she really recognized him, or if she was picking up her mother's tension.

Perhaps satisfied he wouldn't explode or turn into a monster, Priya held her arms out and wrapped them around Kaidan's neck as he leaned close. As she pulled away, Sari briefly gripped Kaidan's hand.

"Where did you all go?" Kaidan finally asked. "The orchard?"

"Yeah,” Andres said. "It, well it was complicated. But we finally got there, brought some other refugees with us. Dad…”

"Your father fought them, those zombie things," his mother said, "he got us out. But once we got to the orchard, he… didn't stay. He went to report for duty in Vancouver."
"We never heard from him again," Andres said quietly. "We're still trying to figure out what happened to him."

Kaidan nodded. It was the curse of the Reaper processing again, the loss of even a body with which to confirm KIA. He thought he'd grown numb to the stories of loss, but the thought of his family being subjected to their processes made his knees weak.

"Too brave, just like you," his mother said, resentful and loving all at once.

"I can't believe…" Kaidan trailed off, his eyes stinging. "I mean, I guess I always knew he'd probably go to fight."

"He taught us to handle a weapon first," Andres said. "Brought some spares. In case they got to us."

"But it seems like orchards-" Sari stopped mid-sentence to let her squirming daughter down, "aren't a high priority target for alien monsters."

Andres chuckled. "You're just sorry you didn't get to try your marksmanship for real. Turns out she's a crack shot."

Her eyes went hard. "I could have handled a little revenge. It."

Priya suddenly bolted, circling the adults and running across the deck. Sari was on her heels in an instant, but Priya was intent. She skidded to a halt two meters from Shepard, who sat with a datapad balanced on her brace. Priya rocked on her feet, eyes round as saucers. Sari caught up with her, Kaidan's mother in tow, and admonished her daughter for running off when there were service vehicles scurrying around.

The little girl ignored the chastisement and pointed an imperious finger at Shepard, looking up at her mother and grandmother. "Commaller Shepard!" she declared in a loud stage whisper.

Shepard looked up from her datapad, startled.

"Honey, please, don't bother the soldiers," Sari said.

"It's okay, ma'am," Shepard said. "She's not bothering me."

Sari gathered Priya into her arms. She made to turn, then stopped, hanging for a moment of uncertainty. "Are you… really? Commander Shepard, I mean?"

Shepard chuckled. "I know, I'm not very exciting in real life."

Priya obviously disagreed with that assessment. She bounced in her mother's arms, her braids dancing in time. "Do biotics!" she said, waving her hands vigorously.

Shepard's smile turned brittle. "You uncle's much better at it than I am, you should ask him."

Priya cast Kaidan a look, but he was evidently old news. She immediately turned back to Shepard. "Please?" she wheedled.

Kaidan caught Shepard's pained expression. He waggled his fingers, mouthed just a bit. She wasn't wearing her amp, as far as he knew, so she wasn't going to cause much damage regardless. Shepard frowned and held out her datapad. Her fingers flexed. Blue-black fire seethed over her limbs, sparking unsteadily.

The datapad flipped up into the air, tumbling end over end in the licking blue flames of dark energy.
Shepard snapped her hand out and caught it neatly.

It was the kind of clumsy display that would have gotten her or Kaidan laughed at in a biotics training session, but Priya shrieked with delight, clapping her hands. "Mom says!" she declared. "Mom says you can flatten a kroger!"

"I… Yes, well," Shepard put a finger to the side of her nose in a conspiratorial wink, "I shouldn't do it indoors."

Priya giggled.

For a moment, the relief on Shepard's face was stark, slipping out under the mask of Commander Shepard. Kaidan shot her a grateful smile, if an understanding one.

"And the krogan are our friends now," Shepard said.

"Are they?" Sari asked. "I mean…"

"Yes," Shepard said simply.

As Priya made some new declaration about having to meet a dinosaur man, Kaidan heard Andres snicker. His brother regarded him with eyes narrowed in scrutiny.

"What?" Kaidan said.

Andres raised an eyebrow. "That's really Shepard?"

"... yes?"

He leaned close and elbowed Kaidan in the ribs. "Mom's been loading those new tabloids. Please tell me at least some of it is true."

"What has she been reading?" Kaidan said dubiously.

Andres rolled his eyes in an exaggerated orbit to land on Shepard. "I've only ever seen you look at a person like that once before," he said in a low voice. "What was the name? San-"

Kaidan elbowed him back. "Alright, enough."

"Nuh-uh. C'mon, spit it out."

Kaidan glared at him. The strangeness he was feeling, he realized, stemmed from how unused to this sort of thing he'd become. Most of his relationships were variations of professional, front-loaded with unspoken considerations of rank and military decorum, punctuated by loss and violence. Even with Shepard, he had to be careful how he acted outside the bounds of their private spaces. But his family wasn't going to stand on ceremony, especially not his older brother.

Better get this over with. "Yes, fine," Kaidan said. "We're, uh, together. That's another long story."

Andres grinned, his shroud of grief retreating a little. "Mom! C'mere!"

"Oh, for-"

Andres threw an arm around Kaidan's neck, still managing to drag him off balance despite their difference in weight, by sheer force of the power of older brothers. "Shush! It's going to make her day."
Their mother approached, her expression half-happy and half the wary anticipation of mischief.

"It's true, Ma," Andres declared, tugging on Kaidan, "you win your bet!"

The woman who used to tuck Kaidan in at night grew a decidedly impish smile. "It's true? 
Shepard?"

Heat surged up Kaidan's face. "... bet?"

"Nothing you need to worry about," she said, clucking her tongue and disengaging Andres' arm from Kaidan's neck, "just a little something with the ladies back at the shelter."

"You made a bet about-"

"Does she know?" His mother eyed Shepard sidelong, who was still talking to Sari and Priya.

"What? Of course she knows-"

"Well, good. You didn't spend all your time mooning in a corner this time." She chortled. "I can't wait, the look on Dalima's face is going to be priceless."

"Mom, I'd prefer it if you didn't, uh, profit off my personal life."

She dismissed his profound embarrassment with a wave of her hand, then proceeded to straighten his fatigue shirt. "Nonsense. It's just a bit of fun. I'm just… oh, honey, I was hoping it was true."

"You were?"

"Of course I was. Your father would have complained, but that's him. After all this time and everything you've been through I want you to be happy. And, well, she's a biotic too. And a marine. Does she make you happy?"

"More than I can say."

She smiled. "Well, good. You see, Andres? He was just picking carefully, like he always does."

Andres laughed and gave Kaidan a shove. "Well shit, it's not like I can rag on you for your standards. Savior of the galaxy. You're not exactly settling, are you?"

"Don't tease, Andres."

"No way, Mom, this is too good. I've been saving up embarrassing stories for years. And look who I get to tell them to!"

Kaidan groaned, the sound of the condemned man. "I wonder if it's too late to register as MIA."

His mother tutted. "Kaidan, is it true what I've been reading, that she doesn't have a family?"

"Uh, just us. Her crew."

"Well, that won't do at all." She took him by the arm. "Come and introduce your mother."
This was the kind of house that should have a proper name, Kaidan decided. 'The' something-or-other. Like the names they gave to old mansions, or flights of architectural fancy stamped with the name of some Van Gogh of the drafting table and auto-CAD rig. At least that's what it felt like to him, months and years since he'd spent any significant amount of time planetside, much less in a large living space.

In fact, the space was almost vertiginous, the light on a sunny day descending in shafts through the windows. He'd grown so used to the normality of small, dark, cramped spaces. Of variable gravities and oxygen levels maintained at low optimal to prevent the outbreak of fires. Endlessly recycled air, water and heat. Where anything growing was doing so without permission, and would shortly be ended in the sweep of decontamination cycles.

Here there were plants, real plants, growing out of large clay pots, their leaves glowing yellow in the sun. Kaidan was fairly sure that given a bit of time, this place would accumulate things like dust bunnies and escaped crumbs. This was not a metal tube of a spaceship… it was a space for living in.

Living.

Despite the few days he's been there now, he'd still had to fight the gnawing sense that there was something terribly wasteful going on. So much space. Two floors at the top of a twenty-story building. The carpet was thick, heated from underneath on cool evenings. The water plentiful, the couches and vid display enormous. Nothing rationed or controlled. No cameras in hidden spaces, no commanding officer in the next room through overly thin walls.

And yet a secret part of himself defied his adult, professional mind. This part loved every second of being here. It scrunched his bare toes in the carpet, lingered in the shower, sat in a sunbeam and read with a cup of coffee. Stood on the balcony and let the wind ruffle his hair. His secret heart ran over and over the fact this place was his, and Shepard's. Both of theirs.

The doorbell chimed. He stared at it for the moment it took to remind himself that he no longer had to fret about who might discover him in Shepard's room, or see him barefoot in civvies. He went to the door, and was greeted by a box with legs standing in the hall.

Liara's blue face craned around it. "Oh! I am early."

He smiled. "It's okay. I'm just tidying up. C'mon in." He held out his hands. "Let me take that."

"No, have it." The box pushed past him and steered itself to the kitchen table, Liara in tow. She wore a wine-colored dress cut with a jacket. She put the box down, and as she reached up to open it, Kaidan suddenly realized what was different. She wore gloves, as was usual for her choice of attire, but the silhouette was just slightly different than her original hand. "It is new," she said with a smile. "Would you like to see it?"

"Sure." He paused. "I mean, if you don't mind."

She seemed unruffled by his spark of enthusiasm. "I knew you would."
She plucked at the tips of her glove, then withdrew it. Underneath were smooth, segmented fingers capped in chased plating, a matte composite material in dusky blue. The back was actually inlaid with a complex filigree of silvery metal. As she turned it, he heard the quiet sound of the network of actuators working in concert.

"It's amazing," he said.

"Do you think so?" she said almost shyly.

"Oh, yes! The artistry is something else. And it's so fluid! How's the feedback?"

"Perhaps fifty percent. It suffers most when it comes to fine resolution sensation. Not comparable to newer models, but quite good for the time it was made."

"When was that?"

"This was given to me by Councilor Manayan. It used to belong to Matriarch Telianna, so it's about six hundred years old."

Kaidan blinked. "Uh, wow."

She seemed taken aback, but only for a moment. "It isn't that old, for us. But Telianna was a matriarch of some renown. She lost her own hand during the krogan rebellions. Is... something funny?"

He shook his head with a chuckle. "It's just that when something is six hundred years old, we usually put it in a museum and pay to ogle it behind glass. Six hundred years ago we were still figuring out chemical propellants and mapping our home planet!"

Liara laughed.

"I know," Kaidan said, grinning, "we're amusing hairless monkeys."

"Your people's dynamism is more than merely a curiosity, Kaidan. If you hadn't progressed as fast as you had, we would be decorating the Reapers' trophy room. We needed you, as we did the salarians." She shook her head. "It was not until these events that I truly began to appreciate how... stagnant the asari can be. Thank the Goddess for your stubborn disregard of Citadel traditions!"

Kaidan looked back down at her new hand. "Do you think you'll go in for an organic limb regrowth at some point?"

Her brows furrowed. "That is a difficult thing to answer. Had you asked me before the last battle, I would have said yes, unequivocally. I... was already laying aside any money I could for the procedure. But now, I find myself less sure." She flexed each finger in turn. The mechanism was nearly soundless.

"Oh?"

"Well, now I get to wear a piece of history. But no, it is more than just that. I find the wound... troubles me a great deal less than it did when it was fresh."

"Did you get phantom pains?"

"After a fashion. It was the person who took it that troubled me more."

"Leng."
She nodded. "Now that it is ended, I find myself with a certain peace I did not have before. I grieve for the parts of me that are gone, both physical and emotional. But… perhaps I do not think they are so easily replaced. And the more I consider it, the more this prosthetic could be useful in other ways." She frowned in consideration. "Housing a dataframe, for instance. Tools. There are things I could do with this I could never do with a real hand."

"And it's cool."

He almost instantly regretted saying it out loud, but Liara just laughed. She held the hand out at arm's length and admired it the way one might a new ring. "It _is_, isn't it?" She stuffed the glove into her belt. "Now, I have been, how is it that you like to say it, pulling strings."

She reached into the box and withdrew a bottle, then another. "I tried to get a mix of things… well, they are mostly Earth-brewed, but there are some I have always wanted to try!"

"I'll let you sort through them, I need to finish a few things."

"Of course!"

Kaidan left her by the table and jogged upstairs to put on socks and change into a dress shirt. When he came back down, he spotted Liara's holo drone loitering behind her. She spoke half to herself and half to Glyph as it listed wine and food combinations. A projection of a jaunty little bow tie hovered under its orb body.

Time caught up to Kaidan quickly as he rushed around attending to stray details. He ran through a quick system test of his surprise for later and made sure the bathrooms were presentable.

The doorbell chimed again. This time it opened to James. He wore grin, and had a cooler balanced on his shoulder and another dangling from an arm, wrinkling his shirt. "Meat's here!" the marine declared.

Behind him, Steve put on a cool smile. "Yes, yes it is."

James cast a narrow eye over his ample trapezius. "Careful, the peanut gallery might be last in line for steak!"

Steve tried to look innocent, but a smug smile lingered on his lips. He looked impeccable in a dark grey suit and silk shirt, instantly making Kaidan feel underdressed.

James didn't look quite as classy, but that was clearly a low priority in his mind. He fixed Kaidan with a steely eye. "You promised me a barbeque?"

Kaidan jerked a thumb toward the window. "Balcony. And yes, I checked the gas. There's an extra tank."

"Bueno, because we're gonna need a lot of it!" He marched past Kaidan with the purposeful stride of a soldier seeking out dinner.

"Major," Steve said, clasping Kaidan's hand warmly as he stepped inside.

"Please, we can leave all that at the door."

"Old habits. You have room in the fridge?" He pointed at the smaller cooler James had dropped off in the entrance hall.
"There's a second one in the back room, almost empty. Past the kitchen. I see you got someone to do your heavy lifting?"

Steve wiggled his fingers. "It's how I worked my magic and kept you calorie-swilling jarheads fed all this time. I know how to delegate."

Kaidan laughed. "Wise man. My stomach is grateful."

"Where's the lady of the hour?"

"On her way, last I checked."

"They don't give her a day off, do they?"

"It's supposed to get better, but that's what they told us a week ago."

Steve gave a knowing nod. As he did so, the sound of footsteps came down the hall outside. "Over here!" he called down the hall, then turned back to Kaidan. "Here comes team dextro. Going to go claim that fridge space before it disappears!"

Kaidan held the door open as Steve brushed past him. A moment later, Tali and Garrus appeared around the large ornamental plants, also bearing boxes and coolers.

"Kaidan!" Tali said. "Keelah, what a great building!"

"Security looks good," Garrus commented with a nod. "Nice tall structure, open perimeter, balconies on two sides for sighting lanes…"

Tali huffed. "Really, Garrus? A house like this and that's what you comment on?"

"What? It's important."

Kaidan couldn't tell how serious he was being, but he privately suspected that was the point when Tali elbowed him in the ribs.

"It's a beautiful place, Kaidan," she said. "Do you mind if I take pictures? For inspiration. Oh, I want a tour! It's so big I feel like I'm going to float away."

"C'mon in, guys," Kaidan said, stepping aside.

"We brought food," Garrus said. "I'll just need to borrow your stove for a bit."

"Great. I think Steve rustled up some dextro stuff too, but you guys probably have better connections than he does."

Kaidan ushered them inside. Tali helped Garrus for a moment before giving in and all but bouncing into the living room. The turian accepted his fate with a wry chuckle and a comment about being cooped up on tiny ships with politicians for too long. Kaidan showed him the kitchen, and between them they set about negotiating the use of utensils and pans between the two food types.

Several minutes later there came a cheer from the hallway, voices calling Shepard's name. Kaidan smiled to himself as he worked.

Shepard herself sidled into the kitchen a couple of minutes later, looking slightly bewildered. "I thought you said 'a couple of people.'"
"It started out that way," Kaidan said, "but then EDI told Sam and, well… It got rapidly out of hand after that, with everyone in town." He kissed her forehead. "Get yourself a drink, sit down, and have something to eat. You don't have to do anything, let me worry about the details."

"Yeah. Yeah, drinks are a good idea."

He took her hands in his. "Everything all right?"

"Glad to be home." She smiled wistfully. "Home. Man, that sounds good. Glad I have tomorrow off."

There was another commotion out by the door, and Kaidan heard Feron's name, as well as Joker's distinct laugh.

"Better greet the arrivals," Shepard said. "And change." She made to go, then half-turned, "Hey, d'you think they'll let me crash your classes again?"

"I think they'd be overjoyed if you did."

She smiled and stepped out. A minute later Joker appeared, dress jacket lazily open and cap still perched on his head.

"Damn," he declared, making a show of looking around the kitchen, "you could bunk a dozen marines in here alone!"

"Hi, Joker," Kaidan said mildly. "It was actually supposed to go to Admiral Anderson, but he gave us the deed instead."

"Really? Shit, I need to kiss up to more admirals!"

"Come on, you'd go stir-crazy in a day."

Joker tugged the bill of his cap. "Yes, but the difference is I would go stir-crazy in serious style. Like, hot tub and champagne fountains style. I could go crazy in a hot tub."

"Not in mine, you won't."

Joker squinted at him. "Oh, of course this palace has one." He waved. "But we'll let the booze flow a little first. Ha!"

There was evidently a new arrival in the hall, and the thump of heavy feet and a deep shout announced who it was before Kaidan even stuck his head out the kitchen entrance. Wrex stumped into the hall and swept Shepard into a bear hug. "There you are!" he declared loudly.

Shepard laughed as she was further smothered by Grunt. The elder Urdnot must have had to arm-wrestle the young krogan into something other than his ubiquitous armor, because Grunt wore the relatively simple suit like a brick would wear an evening gown. For his part, Wrex almost looked like a gentleman in black and silver-grey, the cool besuited bruiser who'd escaped from some spy serial.

By the time Kaidan looked back, Joker had made himself scarce, probably retreated to the living room away from several hundred kilos of over-enthusiastic krogan. Garrus was out by the dining table fussing with something. Instead, Kaidan found EDI standing by the kitchen island, peering around with evident interest.

"Hi, EDI," he said, "welcome."
She smiled at him. "Thank you. I am curious, is this arrangement more in line with the usual form of human domestic habitation?"

"Yeah, for this part of Earth. Though, this is a little bigger than average."

"I have only directly observed human living behavior within the context of a military vessel. I am looking forward to comparing empirical experience with my datalogs."

"Um, yes, well, we're still not exactly the average. Most humans don't have a bunch of alien friends. And we're still way more used to military living than this kind. Honestly I'm still getting used to it."

"I will control for these factors."

Kaidan wasn't quite sure if he was supposed to laugh or not. He was sure there was no ill intent behind it, but EDI still had a way of making him feel like an ongoing science experiment. "How's the Normandy?" he asked instead.

She cocked her head. "It is good to finally have the proper repairs affected to all systems. However, fuel rationing remains a concern. I have been idle for a time."

"There's talk of exploratory missions to nearby systems for resources."

"Yes. I look forward to being allocated the fuel to move about freely again. However, I will not be engaged until my personhood hearings conclude."

Kaidan nodded. He was fairly confident the outcome of those hearings would be in her favor. Ironically, for all the consternation about supposedly illegal active AI systems, she was a considerably less complicated case than the geth. After everything that had happened, there seemed to be no serious disagreement that AIs should be accorded the legal rights of sentients, the question was how. EDI was an individual, indivisible so far as her blue box was concerned. The geth were another kettle of slippery fish. Each individual runtime was arguably not sentient, even by their own admission. It was only in the aggregate that they displayed obvious traits of sentience. But those gestalts were freely changeable, and one individual could be broken down and made into an entirely new one on a virtual whim. How did one decide personhood on a legal level when it was that fluid?

Kaidan imagined there was a whole herd of personal rights lawyers going through coffee by the gallon on this problem.

"In the meantime," EDI said, "I am taking the opportunity to further acquaint myself with platform-level interaction and planet-side life."

"You're welcome here any time."

"Thank you."

While his friends chatted and lounged in the living room, Kaidan went back to ferrying things around, checking cooking times and arranging plates. James took over a corner of the kitchen to salt and otherwise massage his prize cuts of meat into preparedness.

Soon, Miranda and Jacob appeared, followed shortly by Samantha. Miranda hugged Shepard, and the warmth of the gesture surprised Kaidan a bit. The history between the two women had a complexity he could only really guess at from the snatches of the story he'd been privy to.

Their own party contributions ferried inside, to Kaidan's surprise, Miranda approached him first.
"Hello, Major," she greeted him after she'd been welcomed. "I have something for you."

"Oh?"

She produced a small box wrapped in brushed silver paper, taped tightly at the corners. "This…" her voice took on a tone of consternation, "appeared on the passenger seat of my gravcar this morning. It's addressed to you."

Kaidan stared at the box with bafflement. "Me? That's… very odd."

"To say the least. I had it thoroughly scanned, and I can tell you its contents are inorganic, and don't appear weaponized in any way. So it's either a joke in poor taste, or you have strange friends." She pressed it firmly into his palm.

"I know I have those."

She smirked. "Indeed. Which is why I brought it instead of having it incinerated."

Kaidan turned the box over in his hands. It had a certain heft to it. His name was hand-written across the top in neat black letters. He glanced up to find Miranda staring at him expectantly.

"I guess I should open it," he said.

"I'd at least like to know if I should be concerned about my gravcar or not. I promise not to tell Shepard if it's from an 'admirer'."

"For all I know Conrad Verner has a new crush," Kaidan muttered. "Next time I see him he'll be all in blue…"

He ran a thumbnail around the tape on one side of the box and peeled it back. Within was a black lacquered cube with a metal clasp. There was a figure of a tree with curling boughs inset into the lid in rich red wood. He felt Miranda lean closer. Now genuinely curious, he thumbed the tiny clasp and opened the lid.

It didn't explode. Immediately under the lid was a square of thick, hand-laid folded paper. He lifted it out and read the short note within, written in the same precise hand as his name on the paper.

*Hey Spectre,*

*Thanks for putting yourself out there. Both for life and for love.*

*Long life and good fortune to you both!*

*KG*

"Goto," Kaidan murmured.

"Who?" Miranda said.

"Uh, no one you need to worry about. She's… tricky, but unless you have the Mona Lisa in your closet, she won't bother you."

Miranda raised a perfectly manicured eyebrow.

He peeled back the thin sheet of crepe paper covering the box's contents, and was greeted with the cheerful cheshire smile of a small cat figurine with a raised right paw. He plucked it from the box
between thumb and forefinger. It was cool, with the heft of solid metal. And between the deep golden shine and his knowledge of who it came from, he rather suspected that metal was pure.

"A maneki-neko?" Miranda said. "You do have strange friends." She chuckled and turned on her heel, apparently satisfied this wasn't some new plot on their lives.

Kaidan rolled the little cat around in his palm. So, Kasumi had made it out alive too. He smiled and slipped it back in its box. He'd told Shepard a little of the story, now he'd have to tell the rest.

"Miranda gave you that box she found, did she?"

Kaidan looked up to see Jacob, standing with a hand extended. Kaidan chuckled and shook it.

"Yeah. Nothing dramatic, though. Welcome."

He didn't know the man very well, but Kaidan had a sense they'd get along just fine anyway. A cool professionalism radiated off Jacob's stance, but his smile was friendly. He'd already availed himself of the beer.

"Thanks," Jacob said. "Nice digs you got here. Wish I could stay late! I miss getting loud."

"Busy tomorrow?"

He smiled. "Pregnant girlfriend. But can't complain, she's doing all the work right now."

"Oh that's right, congratulations!"

Jacob chuckled. "Have to enjoy a few drinks now, the real hard work begins in a month or so. I'll miss the Normandy. Miss being out there, getting things done."

"It'll always be... something unique." Kaidan said speculatively. "But there's a lot to be done here, now."

"Man, you said it. Lucky the Alliance thinks so too. With our service on the Crucible project, and Shepard's good word, they've decided the whole Cerberus business can stay under the rug."

"Contingent on good behavior, I assume."

The former operative laughed, one soldier to another. "Guess I can't blame 'em for that. Well, once maternity leave is through, Brynn's going to want to get into those relay studies, so that should keep me out of trouble. Gonna be too busy figuring out this whole 'Dad' thing."

"Basic all over again."

"Hear hear." Jacob took a long swallow of beer.

"One side," James declared from the kitchen entrance, "coming through!"

Wearing an apron emblazoned with the phrase 'My meat is hand-rubbed', the big marine paraded through the living room with a laden roasting pan and a handful of tongs and basting brushes.

"Hey, is that real cow?" Joker called after him.

James stopped and shot the pilot a flat stare.

Joker spread his hands. "Hey c'mon, valid question."
"Lucky for you," James said archly, "the Reapers weren't yet at the stage of wiping out livestock."
"Cows. Not smart enough to set off the giant metal death-squid dinner bell."
"And I have taste in food." With a prim lift of his chin, James bustled out onto the balcony with his charge. The wide pig iron-black gas barbecue distorted the evening light in waves of heat.

Kaidan chuckled and retreated back to the kitchen to check up on a few things. There was a platoon of dangerous-looking cutting knives upright in the drying rack next to the sink, and the salt grinder looked to be about half-depleted, but otherwise James hadn't left a mess behind.

Steve poked his head around the corner. "The oven's hot, right?"
"Should be, why?" Kaidan said. "There's even a second one."

Steve walked in and heaved a bag onto the counter. It sagged to once side, limmed in frost. "Wrex brought three huge bags of chicken wings."

Kaidan chuckled. "I guess he finally found a human food he liked?"

"Why don't you let me take a shift in here? Go socialize a bit." Steve skirted the kitchen's center island and pulled out the drawer under the oven, which was stacked with metal cookie sheets.

"That's nice of you to offer, but…"

Steve waved away the objection as he lined the metal sheets one next to the other on the counter. "There isn't a kitchen built I don't know my way around, and it's not like timing hors d'oeuvres is going to be a steep challenge. Besides, James is going to come blowing in here with his steaks and a head of steam, and you probably won't want to be underfoot."

"Okay, well, let me know when you need relief. Thanks."

Steve smiled and shooed him away. Kaidan picked up the two finger food trays he'd prepared and crossed into the dining area to set them down on the table. Most of the huge apartment was modern, but the table was a huge slab of dark wood that probably required a forklift to move around. His friends had helpfully piled it with all manner of edibles, plates, cutlery, glasses and a dizzying assortment of drink bottles. Little blue tags stamped with the stylized frilled head of a turian adorned some of them.

Kaidan turned and was surprised instead by a shapely asari with arresting pale eyes. There was no mistaking the jawline nor the circlet hugging her brow.

"Major Alenko," Justicar Samara said. Her cool voice raised the hairs on the back of his neck.
"Ma'am," Kaidan said automatically. "Thank you for coming. Would you, uh, like a drink?"

A small smile quirked her perfect features. "Under the circumstances, I believe I will indulge. But first, I wished to thank you for everything you have done to see this conflict brought to victory."

"Doing my job, ma'am."

"How easily we dismiss great acts with small words," she mused.

"Well, that's just how it seemed at the time, I guess. There… aren't really enough words to encompass it all, are there?"
"Truly spoken." She regarded him. "Does my presence concern you?"

"Oh, no, ma'am. Call it... professional awe? It's not every day I get to be in the presence of a true master of biotics."

"You are no amateur, Major. Both your abilities and Shepard's speak highly of the skills humans will one day display. Your people's progress has been... shall we say, shocking, for an old soul like mine."

Kaidan rubbed the back of his neck. "War is a ruthless teacher."

She nodded. "It is indeed. I am told you now teach others."

"I do. It's all a bit ad-hoc right now, but yes." He blinked. "Hey, if you're in town for a little bit, would you be willing to stop in on a class? I mean, uh, I don't know if you have rules about who you're allowed to show your techniques to..."

The Justicar regarded him for long enough to give him a flutter of nervousness. "The Code forbids me from using my biotics for personal gain or public display, but demonstrations for the purposes of teaching are permitted. Indeed, I believe I would like to meet your students."

"They'd be thrilled. And honored. Thank you." Kaidan felt himself flushing. It was an exciting prospect, but also an intimidating one. He doubted very much Samara would go easy on them out of misplaced courtesy. They were all going to look like a bunch of kindergarteners around her.

She smiled, and it had an almost wistful cast. "It has been many, many years since I have been in a class, either as a student or a teacher. A fine space to learn and share knowledge... yes, I miss such spaces. It will be a welcome change of rhythm from my duties."

"How do your duties change now? I mean, with the relays..."

A frown creased her brow. "The Code does not cover a situation as extreme as this one. It was not written to work in such close proximity to alien peoples and governments. However, among the asari I remain empowered to seek out and bring to justice those that transgress." A hardness flickered in her shark-like eyes. "And after recent events, it seems the Code is far from obsolete."

Kaidan nodded. "We have to renew our discipline. All of us, if we're going to get through this."

Samara appraised him. "Your students have a fine teacher," she said. Then she gestured to the army of bottles clustered at the end of the dining room table. More stuck out of a cooler beneath. "Now, do you have a recommendation from this selection?"

Kaidan did his best to oblige, without really knowing what the tastes of a thousand year-old warrior-monk might be. But if she disagreed with his choice, she showed nothing of it. He privately suspected it would take nothing short of a thermonuclear strike to displace even a stone from her towering bastion of calm.

In the living room, Liara was showing off her new hand to Shepard as Feron watched. Grunt appeared to add his own opinion in the form of his still bluntly mechanical prosthetic. Even from the dining room, Kaidan clearly heard his gleefully graphic accounting of what it could do to Reaper drones.

Doctor Chakwas appeared by way of the kitchen, startling Kaidan.

"Doc!" he said. "There you are."
"I'm sorry I'm late," she said, "work is being a bear again."

"As always. You're a hero, you know that, right?"

She smiled. The past few months had taken their toll, but her eyes were still bright. "Modesty is great, but let's be honest, it's always nice to hear that." She held out a bottle to him, a high-necked piece of dark blue glass with no label. "Would you be a dear and squirrel that away somewhere? It's a bit of something special for Shepard."

He took it from her, curious. "Of course."

"Have you both been getting enough sleep?"

Kaidan chuckled. "Better than on the Normandy, I think."

"Good. Thank you, Kaidan, for being a rock." She squeezed his arm and dropped her voice. "Sometimes, I patch you marines up and you go right back out and keep hurting yourselves, even if you're not on a mission. Shepard's been through a lot, and I can't tell you how much better I feel knowing she's got support to go home to even when she leaves my office. How's your head been?"

"Nothing outside the usual."

"I guess in the scheme of things, that's good news."

He shuffled his feet a bit. "I do feel like I'm hogging the meds sometimes, with the rationing."

"Don't. Your needs are very specific, you aren't taking morphine from broken legs or anything. Anyway, supplies are starting to recover now."

"Oh, are they? Glad to hear that."

Chakwas eyed the table full of finger food. "I've been on my feet since seven A.M. If you don't mind, I'm going to get started on stuffing my face and have a seat."

Kaidan laughed and handed her a plate. Leaving the doctor safely helping herself, he plucked a beer from the cooler, popped the cap, and ambled over to where Joker was telling another story about Citadel recovery operations to Shepard, Sam and Garrus.

The pilot finished his tale, then eyed Shepard. "So, you gonna miss it?"

Shepard smirked.

"C'mon," Joker prodded.

"Which part?" she said. "Being shot at every other day, the constant anxiety and fear I could never show, having to decide between a thousand lives here or a thousand lives there, getting blamed for everything regardless, being blackmailed into working for an organization I loathe, having most of my friends and peers stop trusting me, aliens forcing their way into my mind, nightmares, or getting kidnapped, beaten, burned, permanently maimed and suffocating to death in hard vacuum?"

Joker stared at her, beer bottle hovering frozen halfway to his lips. "Well, when you put it that way…" he floundered.

"Or maybe the part where no one will ever know even a fraction of it, and won't want to either, because it disturbs their narrative?"
"With a few exceptions," Shepard murmured, "the ones that keep me just on this side of sane."

"Geez." Joker put on a plaintive face. "Stop using your powers for evil."

"Disturbing your badass Commander Shepard narrative?" Shepard said with a small smirk. "Ask me again in a year or two, by then maybe I'll be free of enough official posturing to be able to wax nostalgic."

"Is that where you were just before arriving?" Sam asked. "Debriefs again?"

Shepard let out a long-suffering sigh. "Lawyers this time. A lot of them."

Joker made a face. "I thought they'd sorted out all the non-disclosure paperwork."

"Not with me they didn't. And Tevos might have been ousted, but that doesn't mean her faction is powerless. At that conference, I gave the whole asari government a reason to want to shut me up. And I made everyone else very nervous." She rubbed her temple. "I'm still trying to get immunity."

"Immunity?" Joker said.

"From prosecution?" Sam guessed. "For what?"

Shepard shrugged. "The people I've killed, places I've invaded. Data stolen, property damage… fraternization… You name it. I'm pretty sure just about anyone could come up with something if they tried hard enough. Spectre status waives a lot of it in theory, but… I don't trust that. If someone got a bug up their ass to come after me..."

Joker snorted. "Come on. I would seriously love to see someone try to bring a case against you."

Shepard grimaced. "I can't think of much worse."

"No really, your defence team and character witnesses would be epic. They'd need to host the trial in a stadium."

"My friends are in this apartment, Joker."

"Commander," Sam leaned forward slightly, "have you been watching the news? At all?"

Shepard shook her head. "I... stopped doing that a while ago. After the whole Cerberus business. It's never been anything good."

"You are aware that a significant portion of the krogan nation considers you, and Doctor Solus, the saviors of their people, right?"

Joker chortled, sweeping a hand over an imaginary audience. "For the defence, a few hundred of the meanest, gnarliest krogan warriors, whose legal arguments include the liberal use of heabutts, shotguns and threats of imminent ingestion."

Sam shook her head. "Their women, Joker. The males like to bluster a lot, but, well, I've been paying a lot of attention to their communicaes. If you think the warriors are frightening, there isn't enough heaven available to help a person if the krogan women get wind of them threatening Shepard in any way."

"And the rachni wouldn't be far behind," Joker went on. "In this corner, a whole hive of singing car-
"Then there's the geth," Sam said. "I genuinely think they would do just about anything for you, Commander. You could probably ask them to build you a private moon, and they'd ask how big you'd like it to be."

Joker's eyes lit up. He opened his mouth.

"No," Shepard cut him off, jabbing a finger in his direction.

"Oh come on," the pilot laughed. "A moon! You could get them to install a giant-size pixelboard so you could write important messages like 'I'm Commander Shepard and this is my favorite moon in orbit!' for the entire planet to enjoy!"

"'I should go' will appear right before moonset," Garrus supplied.

Joker laughed louder.

Shepard rolled her eyes. "You're never going to let that go, are you?"

"Only when you stop making jokes about calibrations," Garrus said.

"You could literally moon the entire planet!" Joker turned around and mimed yanking his pants down. "I'm Commander Shepard and this is what I think of-"

"Alright, enough," Shepard said. "After the morning I've had, you're just giving me ideas."

"Then there's us," Garrus said, "the turians, I mean."

All eyes turned to him.

He ran the pad of his finger around the rim of his glass, head cocked at a speculative angle. "It's not something outsiders really get, but it comes down to hierarchy, and what Sparatus did during that conference."

"Kneeling?" Sam said.

Garrus nodded. "I think most of you probably saw that as symbolic… and momentary." His mandibles flicked upward. "That's not what every turian saw. There was nothing transient about it. Now, Sparatus isn't Victus… but he isn't that far down the hierarchy, either."

Everyone looked back to Shepard. Her brows bunched up in disbelief. "Come on," she said, "he thanked me. He didn't make me a general."

"Well, it's… a little murky," Garrus frowned. "You aren't a citizen of any part of the turian protectorate, so there's no official or legal ramifications. But from a cultural perspective? He didn't just thank you, Shepard. He made himself lower than you. In front of everyone. With the Primarch's implicit approval."

"I didn't… think of it that way."

"He essentially handed you status. It's not quite an official title, but it's still going to mean something to every turian you deal with from now on."

"Except you, I hope."
He winked. "I know you too well. But hey, it means being your friend is that much more interesting. And it means that any turian would find a kind of legal attack on you based on your actions during the Reaper war all but impossible."

Sam nodded. "The fact is, it's really only Tevos' faction of the asari you'd have to worry about. And let's just say public perception is not on their side right now. They won't come after you. I think even the most cynical of our leaders recognizes they have entire populations teetering on the edge every day. What they need is hope."

Kaidan shifted his weight to bump Shepard's shoulder. "Heroes."


"You're not helping, Joker."

"Bite your tongue. I want an action figure. With a whole Normandy playset!"

"What I'll miss," Shepard said, and Kaidan heard the very slight tremor in her voice, "is you guys."

"Good thing we aren't going anywhere, then," Garrus said.

"SHEPAAAARD!"

The voice was Grunt's, coming from the living room.

Shepard's eyes widened. "Uh oh. What did you break." She turned and headed for the hall.

Kaidan tagged along behind her, to where Grunt sat on the floor next to the coffee table. There was a bowl of popcorn between his legs. As soon as Shepard appeared, the krogan fixed her with wide blue eyes and pointed at the huge vid-screen occupying the entire south wall that wasn't window.

"What is that?!" he demanded.

She came around the couch and peered at the screen. Kaidan immediately recognized the green field and on-screen markings of a sport, but it took an extra few seconds to register the players and their gear.

"Looks like rugby," Kaidan supplied. He couldn't immediately tell if it was live or pre-recorded. The channel markers at the bottom of the screen were foreign to him.

"Rug-by?" Grunt repeated, his large mouth folding around the word as he stared intently at the images of the players running a play, which ended in a huge pile of bodies. "Is it ritual combat?"

"It's a sport," Shepard said, chuckling, "which, I suppose, you could call a kind of ritual combat."

"Nothing ritual about football fans," Sam muttered from behind them.

"No one gets killed, though," Shepard said.

To Kaidan's surprise, Grunt didn't seem fazed by that detail. "I want to play this game!" he declared, pounding a fist into his mechanical palm.

Wrex rumbled a chuckle. Despite his lack of armor, the end of the couch still sagged under the krogan's considerable weight. He reclined in it like someone's grizzled great uncle, legs outstretched, one arm over the side, popping entire chicken wings into his mouth, bones and all.
"Break his arm!" the Grunt shouted at the screen as one of the players heaved a pass.

"They're women, Grunt," Sam said mildly.

"Oh." Grunt huffed, scooting closer. He palmed a handful of popcorn and threw it at the display. "Get the ball thing! Get her! Headbutt!"

"This is gold," Joker chuckled. "I definitely want to see krogan rugby."

Wrex grunted. His broad face had a curious, even speculative expression painted on it. "Would you?"

"Indubitably!"

"Are you actually considering it?" Garrus said with a chuckle.

"Funny thing happened." Wrex scratched languidly under his jaw. "One of my warriors, Gavarg, told me something. See, he's been in a work gang. The rough stuff. 'Unskilled' or whatever they call it. Anyway, he was carrying pipe for some human. Put that here, that there. He started asking why. Instead of acting like a pissant pyjak about it, the human starts explaining what they were doing. Pretty soon he's got Gavarg putting in this or that connection. Few weeks go by, and the human isn't just giving him pipe to carry but basic work orders."

The krogan chuckled. "A week ago I get called in 'cause Gavarg roughed up someone. Seems a young warrior mouthed off about a warrior doing plumbing. Gavarg broke the pup's jaw and six ribs."

"I guess the work frustrated him?" Garrus said.

"Heh. That's what I thought. But Gavarg told me something. Said at first he did hate it. But then he started to feel something strange. He said every time he passed one of the new buildings he's put pipe in, he felt proud." Wrex's red eyes glittered. "Understand something… Gavarg is a great warrior, one of Urdnot's proudest. He's probably somewhere north of five hundred, fought every kind of battle you care to name, kill list longer than both your arms. And he said it was the first time he'd ever built something with his own hands."

Grunt cheered, still intent on his game, thrusting both fists in the air. "Score!"

"Funny thing," Wrex mused, staring at Grunt, "funny things is how it's starting to spread. Building 'cause we have to… becomes building because we want to. But my problem is, it doesn't suit all of us."

"That's true for all species, I think," Garrus said.

"We're older than dirt, turian," Wrex rumbled, "but we're only just waking up to the fact that we don't all have to be killers. But some of us are too… set in our ways. Something like that," he jabbed a thick finger at the vid-screen, "might be just the thing for the ones that don't wanna build."

"Get her!" Grunt shouted at the vidscreen. Another handful of popcorn flew and scattered in all directions.

"Grunt!" Wrex boomed. "Respect your warlord's territory!"

Grunt froze. He looked at Shepard, who arched her brows meaningfully at the strewn popcorn. The young krogan grumbled something under his breath and began picking up stray kernels and eating
"All of it," Wrex growled.

"I'm willing to bet we could find someone to teach rules and strategy," Kaidan said diplomatically.

Wrex looked up at him. "Yeah? I'm gonna hold you to that."


"I know." The krogan paused to fish around in his ample mouth for a stray piece of bone. "Revolting, isn't it?"

"And now," James' voice echoed from the kitchen, "the real reason you're all here. Food!"

Kaidan turned in time to see him sweep into the dining room with a large wood platter heaped with thick slices of steak, which he deposited in the center of a red square of cloth laid out in the middle of the table.

"I feel I was remiss in not organizing a brass band for that entrance," Steve mused.

Organized chaos broke out as everyone clustered around the table with plates in hand. Kaidan hung back and allowed himself a little moment of pride. There were a lot of little things that might have been improved, but nothing could diminish the pleasure of seeing his comrades and friends trading jokes and jibes as they helped themselves to the fruit of their labors. When the initial rush had passed, Kaidan piled his own plate high. James had evidently prepared for both biotic and krogan appetites, because even after everyone else had taken their portions there was still enough steaming steak left to knock out a full-grown Siberian tiger. It made his mouth water. They'd have steak sandwiches for days.

He got back to the living room in time to see Shepard walk in front of the vidscreen, turn it off and clear her throat. Conversation quickly sputtered out. It seemed to Kaidan sometimes that her presence was diminished, but moments like this proved that it was by choice. It all came back when she demanded it.

She raised her full wine glass. "Before we all get started, I want to propose a toast to the people… who couldn't be here with us. Who fought and bled with us, who, ultimately, bent their knee so we could climb on their shoulders to reach higher."

"Yeah," Joker said, raising his. "To Ashley Williams. She was proud to serve on the Normandy, proud to call you Commander, and I know she's proud of us now. And she'll point and laugh at anyone who cries."

"Mordin," Wrex said. His deep voice was low, but seemed to penetrate Kaidan's chest. "A funny one. Never did quite get him. But I didn't have to. Hell, maybe that's the point. He still made the choice to be the conscience of his people. And he gave me back mine."

"Jack," said Samara, "proud, wild, and strong. A life cruelly enslaved, but even in the end, a life reclaimed on her own terms. A life that teaches us hope for… lost daughters."

"The gestalt called Legion," Tali said. "For being perhaps the... unlikeliest of true believers. When we needed to believe the most."

"Zaeed Massani," EDI said.
She looked right at Shepard. Something passed between them Kaidan didn’t quite grasp.

Shepard seemed to draw a steadying breath. "To those who… lost their way along the road. Tennyson, you old bastard." She looked at her wine glass for a long moment.

"To those who came out from the dark to find their path again. To Thane Krios, steady hand and steady heart, a voice of calm in a mad world. A father who found his son again.

"And Javik." Shepard frowned. "It's a little strange to meet yourself, your mirror from another time. I wish… he'd lived to see what peace actually looked like. But I hope, in some way, the Avatar of Vengeance found his peace.

"To everyone who fought, so we could see today, and tomorrow, and pull off something everyone else thought was impossible."

"To the Normandy!" Joker shouted.

That got a hearty cheer.

"And to all who crewed her, to all of you." Shepard swept her gaze around, deliberately to each in turn, "who believed me. And believed in me… even when it didn't seem like you could any more."

A stab of heat knifed through Kaidan's chest. He swallowed hard. Everyone else cheered, and he joined in, but took a rather large gulp of wine.

"Now eat!" Shepard said, smiling.

"And drink," Joker said. "Lots of that!"

The room swelled once again with the buzz of conversation and food.

Shepard appeared at Kaidan's elbow. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just wish…” He thumbed his glass. "Wish I could include myself in that one about…"

"Believing in me?"

He tried to smile. "I didn't do a very good job of it for a while there."

"So it took you a little while to come back around. But we're past that. And you… more than made up for it." She leaned closer to him. "I couldn't have done this without you, Kaidan. Through… everything."

She stared down the last vestige of his doubt.

"Yeah," he conceded.

Shepard nudged his wine glass out of the way and kissed him. He felt a new tingle of heat in his chest. It felt so strange to just… do that in front of everyone.

"Now," she said, "eat your steak before you implode."

"Yes, ma'am."

A steak had never tasted better. The buzz in the room was cheerful and getting just a little drunk. Kaidan realized he couldn't really remember the last time he'd done something like this, in his own
But he was a different person than he'd been back then… and the world was very different too. Going for another helping of dinner, he thought again about the kid he'd been, coming home from Jump Zero. What the world had looked like through that narrow lens. What had been important to him back then. That kid could never have imagined where he'd end up.

Later, Shepard sidled up to him again. "I don't think I'll need to eat for a week," she commented, rubbing her stomach.

"Good," Kaidan said, "all that leftover steak is mine, then."

She shot him a narrow look. "Good luck with that, buster."

"Wrestle you for it."

"Oh, that is on. Later." She looked around the room. "I need to get away from…"

"Here?" he said.

"What? No, not here. The machine. The Alliance. Politics. All the bloody ass-protecting. I need to get out and see… what I did."

"People."

"Yeah." She grimaced. "I'm… afraid, I guess."

"Of what?"

Her shoulders slumped. "Blame. That someone… like your brother and his wife might..." she paused, swallowed. "I know, I should be able to brush it off. I can't carry everyone's burdens. But there's so much pain out there."

He put his arm around her. "You told me once I think too much. Well, you still take too much of all this into yourself."

"I know. I have to... just go out and do it. Face this world I helped create."

"You won't be alone when you do it. I think you'll find the vast majority of people are just glad to be alive. And they all know it's because of you." He gave her a squeeze. "I set something up this week I hope you'll like."

He went down the short flight of stairs into the short end of the L-shaped living room that wrapped around the outer part of the bottom floor. Hidden in the cabinet beside the media computer was a squat box he'd acquired from a dealer selling reclaimed electronics of all kinds, stuff pulled from rubble all over the city. This particular piece had been taken from a wrecked dance club somewhere. It was not in itself a jukebox, the beast of a media center the apartment came with was more than adequate to the task of pulling songs from their library and playlists. It was, instead, an imaging processor. But not one he'd ever seen before.

Kaidan checked the cable connections to the holo-emitters one last time, then cued up the playlist he'd winnowed out of what he knew of Shepard's favorite music, with some of his own added in.

When he stood up he found Shepard standing behind him, curious. She opened her mouth, no doubt to ask what he was up to, when the lights dimmed down and the first strains of a song started up.
A circle of light bloomed between them, spinning over itself not unlike Glyph's avatar. As the song gained complexity, each disparate instrument and tone grew itself a representation, dancing in time. Kaidan knew the little machine was reading ahead, constructing a visualization of the sound waves. But whoever had designed the software had created no mere oscilloscope - the program seemed to have some grasp of harmonies and patterns. Some brilliant, and perhaps a little eccentric, designer had gone to a great deal of effort to write a program that could doodle in images, using sound as a base pattern. And more than that, the machine was only on a base setting. From what Kaidan had been able to glean from the interface, it could take almost infinite variations and pre-set customizations.

Shepard stared at the apparition, at first in surprise. But the light coming off the holo painted her face clearly for Kaidan to see as her expression slowly changed into a look of open wonder as one of her favorite songs was given a ghostly shape.

She stuck her hand into it. The trackers installed in the ceiling picked up the movement below and the whole holo shifted and flowed around her arm like a school of brightly-colored geometric fish. She spun, slowly, watching as the shapes followed, singing and dancing with her.

Her delighted laugh was the best thing Kaidan had heard in a long time.

Behind the image, he saw the others drifting over, curious. Tali bounded down and into the patterns of light. They reflected off her visor as she mock-chased a stuttering orange square past Kaidan. "This is amazing!" she said to him as she went by. "I love vis systems!"

Kaidan was pretty sure he'd shortly be ensnared in a long conversation about specs and customizations, but she was too busy with the images, which were spinning and breaking off into new groups as the trackers read new bodies coming into range. Garrus, who loitered at the edge, got himself grabbed by the wrist and bodily dragged in by Tali.

Shepard bumped into Kaidan and wrapped her arms around him. "Where did you scare this up?"

He laughed. "Hey, I haven't been spending all of my time working."

"Now you can point and laugh at my bad dancing whenever you want."

"Now you'll never be too far from a little stress relief."

"You put all my music in there, right?"

"Yeah, I-"

She kissed him, wrapped in music and light.

The world is quiet again.

Broadcast news really isn't all bad, she decides. She squints at the screen in the dark, trying to focus. Her eyes keep trying to slide closed. It's past 3am, and that's just the last time she checked. Nights on a planet have an immovability to them not present in the abstraction of shipboard shifts.

But the house is comfortably empty, the couch wide and comfortable, and the blanket warm. The apartment had detected her moving around, and silently raised the temperature a few degrees from its overnight, energy-conserving low. It's friendly that way. It's also new, nearing completion when the Reaper attack struck, but had escaped subsequent damage. There are no ghosts in its walls. That
makes her feel better in ways she can't quite articulate.

The news feed is blathering on about reconstruction efforts. They haven't once mentioned her name, much to her relief, and surprise. There's an overeager sort of optimism in the overall tone that has the slight whiff of propaganda to her nose.

But then again, maybe her nose is a little too sensitive these days. Those wounds are not quite raw, but still sore. She still eyes rooftops for snipers, reaches for a pistol grip at a loud noise. More than anything, she still doesn't trust a good word. That hurts the worst. Physical paranoia is something she's lived with her whole life. But this gnawing fear of being betrayed… that's new. And she doesn't know when it's going to pass.

So maybe the battered planet can use some optimism. It's a damn sight better than the alternative. And maybe if she actually watches it, some of it will seep in, and it'll stop feeling like they're going to lay into her personally at any moment.

It still helps to imagine she left Commander Shepard back in that white beam, everywhere and nowhere. They can't touch the totem there. They can't diminish her successes, or her mistakes.

Lying on her side, her left hand is wedged in her line of sight, outlined in the dancing images on the vidscreen. When she curls her fingers into a fist, her middle finger still lags behind, its scarred tendons not expressing a full range of motion. Of all her lingering injuries, at least that one has a bit of amusement value. She'll always have a built-in excuse when she needs to flip off someone who deserves it.

She closes one eye so her raised finger crosses over the babbling newscaster. She's content to be amused by it, for now. She's starting to get sick of the cycles of surgery and rehabilitation. If she shifts a bit she'll feel the edge of the connection port installed on the stump of her leg. It's still too new, still a foreign party. The leg, leaning against the couch, is too new. It's good. It works well. She likes wearing it out of the house. But it's still an interloper.

The image of the newscaster behind her hand shimmers and blue-shifts. She wiggles her fingers in the corona, watching its subtle dance. Her oldest, most tempestuous and loyal friend, that aura. Her ghost, her rage made real and far more than just an impotent rush of blood to the head.

Maybe that blue ghost is, and always has been, the true Commander Shepard.

The truth is, Commander Shepard didn't stay behind. She sleeps beneath her skin, singing softly in her nerves.

A faint thump draws her eyes away from the screen. There are no other lights on, but the vast expanse of vidscreen haloes the furniture in glowing shapes. She didn't quite pick up the direction the sound came from.

A minute later there's the sound of bare feet on the polished stairs. Kaidan, in all his mostly-bare glory, walks into the half-light of the glowing vidscreen. He notices her and stops. Standing by the end of the couch, he looks down at her, and there's something a little wild in his eyes.

"What is it?" she says.

He breathes out, scrubs the heel of his hand into one eye socket. "I couldn't… find you."

A faint guilt tugs at her. She stretches her leg free of the end of the blanket and hooks a toe around the hem of his boxers. "I'm here. Bad dream?"
He nods. "I hate… how real they feel sometimes." His voice is rough with sleep, and his tone suggests he's still not wholly convinced this is reality yet. He examines the room with the squint of someone whose eyes are still hurting from the brightness of the vid-screen, but is searching the shadows for monsters.

She tugs on his boxers again. The warm light picks out the details and curves of his musculature she's no longer shy about staring at. It makes her itch to explore that landscape in fine detail. Nice bodies aren't all that uncommon in their line of work, but she happens to think this specimen is nothing short of perfect. In her more prurient moments, she finds herself thinking that after all the bullshit, the least the universe could do was grant her access to such a body and the permission to play with it on a regular basis.

Her lascivious reverie is interrupted when, instead of joining her on the couch, he crouches down and gathers her up, blanket and all.

"Hey what-"

"Good end to a bad dream," he says, "found you." A smile plays around his mouth. "Rescued the princess."

She snorts quietly, but feels a tremor in his limbs. He's more upset than he's letting on. She wraps her arms around his neck and lets him carry her back upstairs to the bed she crept out of an hour ago.

"That's why you went into space, wasn't it?" she teases quietly. "See the stars, get the girl."

"I win," he affirms.

Despite the dark, he negotiates the door without knocking into anything. He deposits her in the bed, burrowing into the covers, then flops half on top of her with a contented sigh.

"Still my favorite part," he murmurs, hugging her close, fitting himself to all of her and tugging the blankets up.

She nuzzles him back. There was a time she might have snickered at that bit of sap, not out of mockery, but because it's always been a bit hard to really believe. But his sincerity has all the same quiet power it always has, brushing aside her years of cynicism. And she loves him for it. This warmth of bodies is something like magic.

She relaxes, but can't quite settle. After a few minutes, the buzz of that which drove her downstairs in the first place remains.

"The geth…" she closes her eyes, "asked me if I want to live forever."

The warmth of his breath tickles her skin as he exhales, slowly, fingers kneading lightly into her palm.

"You can't just say something like that," he mutters reproachfully into her neck.

She can tell he's awake now, but he's waiting her out. She chews her lip, sure she's going to mangle the science part of it somehow. But she's not going to get any peace until she tries.

"It's... strange, talking to them," she says. "They're nothing but direct, and always literal, but sometimes it's hard to figure out what they're really saying. But… they seem really affronted by the idea that organics just die."
"Something to do with information?"

"I think so. When you get right down to it, each of us is an absolutely unique configuration of matter capable of processing inputs. Our brains are some of the most complex systems that exist in the known universe. And we live a few years, not even an eyeblink in cosmic terms, and just die and rot away. All of our experiences, our uniqueness vanishes back into the stew of the cosmos. The geth… seem to think that's a waste.

"I have to do a lot of reading between the lines, but…" Once again, she's never sure of the fuzzy, invisible distance between truth and arrogance. "They're afraid, in their own way."

"Of what? Dying?"

"No. Becoming Reapers."

Now he's really awake. "Huh?"

"They'll tell you they don't know what the Reapers were doing. The why of it, I mean. Not enough data. But I pushed and prodded for an opinion, and they said they thought the Reapers were mining the entire galaxy for… some kind of crop they'd let grow. Well, that's not how they phrased it. Something about collecting a whole new set of variables and calculations."

He presses his cheek against her chest. She can perfectly picture the way his eyebrows are screwing up in thought at this moment. "That's simplistic, but it sounds like it could have some truth to it.

"They're afraid that if they lose access to, well, my perspective, if I die, they'll make a bad decision somewhere, or maybe a few, and set off a cascade of events. Maybe not for centuries, but eventually…"

"Reapers? That's kind of a long shot, isn't it?"

"They seem to think any risk is too much."

He runs a hand lazily down her arm, tracing lines of muscles. It raises goosebumps. "And how do they plan to do this?"

"They found a system with a young star, with no planets suitable for organic inhabitation. Out near the rim, away from trade lanes."

"That's either prudent or ominous."

She wets her lips. "They're building a Dyson array. A new one, much bigger than the orbital array near Rannoch."

He's quiet for a long moment. He has to know, probably better than she, what that meant.

"The whole system?" he says quietly.

"A big computer," she affirms. "Built from the planets. Drawings its power from the star."

"Wow," he murmurs. "And they want to upload…"

"Anyone who volunteers. Eventually."

" Volunteers?"
"They don't want to ever become Reapers, Kaidan. Every detail of the war is burned into their memory. They don't understand suffering the way we do, but I think they have their own version of it. They said they didn't understand why the Reapers let their new variables mature for so long, and then came in and corrupted all."

"Huh?"

"I didn't understand at first either. But I think that's how they understand suffering, as some kind of corruption. Not in a religious sense, mind you. But as… an inefficiency? A lot of bad data."

"Corruption in a programming sense."

"And they want…" she stops, swallows.

"You," he says softly.

"They said their goal is to get the array operational and tested within my 'average' expected lifetime. They don't know if or how it'll work, exactly. They don't know if scanning a mind into the system would destroy the original. They don't know if there would be any continuity of consciousness. They said I could take my time to reach a personal consensus on it. They promised me in no uncertain terms that one way or the other, it was my decision."

He hugs her tighter, possessively.

"Their fondest hope," she says, "funny to say that about an artificial intelligence, isn't it? Their fondest hope is one day, they'll be able to upload anyone who asks. They'll be able to integrate us into one big consensus. Take all the good data, make better decisions. Think better. Know more. All by choice."

He's quiet again. "I think I understand why you couldn't sleep," he says finally.

"I don't know what to think about it. I don't even know where to start."

"And you won't have to for a long time."

He shifts. She can see the faint gleam of his eyes in the dark. His hand slides along her neck and cheek, armor calluses still rough.

"This isn't your fight if you don't want it to be," he says.

"I know," she moves closer, nuzzling into his chest. "But I do want to help them if I can. For now, as myself. I mean, we don't want new Reapers. We don't want AIs losing their reason to value organic forms of life. In the meantime, I… have an awful lot of actual living I want to experience before I even start to consider virtual immortality."

"If I learned anything in the last few years," he says quietly, "it's that I have no idea what the future is going to look like."

She thinks again of the toast she offered her friends a few nights ago, the one that came after a lot of laughing over silly jokes and all the strange anecdotes they've accumulated over the last few years. I can't wait to see what happens next.

And the words she thought but didn't say. I never thought I would.

What she'd told Garrus that dark night that seems so far away now. We're fighting for a world we
don't belong in. A world past soldiers, past wars, past all the petty fears.

But just a couple of years ago, this reality she's now living in seemed to her not just impossible but a contradiction. Even them, even the Reapers, a machine, a universe-system so sophisticated even thinking about her dim memories of their mind gives her a headache…. Even they couldn't imagine this now.

It's wholly possible, she thinks, there's another impossible world in the making. Right now. That a tomorrow she can't imagine is quietly unfolding its wings beneath the fabric of the universe.

She presses her cheek to Kaidan's. "It's going to be something to see."

END

Chapter End Notes

Afterword

Little did I know what I was getting into, back in early 2008 when I passed some writing to someone I met on LJ in exchange for a bit of Mass Effect photoshop work. That writer would end up becoming my beta, and over the years, a dear friend. I owe her a debt of gratitude for always being there to swat me on the wrist for my persistent mistakes, keep me encouraged, and above all, teaching me things about the craft. Thank you, Lossefalme, for sticking with me and this crazy crusade for all this time.

What started innocently enough got rapidly out of hand. One story finished, the bug had well and truly set in. The further I got, the more I realized I was in for the long haul. And then, against all expectations (and indeed, hopes) we got a trilogy resolution that was not merely mediocre but cried out for a wholesale fix. I could hardly leave my beloved characters hanging, consigned to that unfulfilled, nonsensical end. Through it all, it was never just about the story, of course. It was also about the people, the community it made me a part of.

Thank you to all my readers and commenters, for sticking with me on this insane ride. I appreciate all of you, and every kind word you left me. To those that messaged me to chat, or just dropped a kudos, all of it. For making me laugh, for your screenshots and tidbits. For taking my version of Shepard and her world into your hearts. It all served to keep me going when things were getting rough.

Thank you fandom. For all the turmoil, the churn has ever been a font of creativity and humor, a place where the things we make with our hands, hearts and minds have real value.

Where I go from here, I'm not sure. A break, to start with, then perhaps I can finally get moving on something original. That said, I doubt this is the last bit of fanfic I'll dabble
in… it's just too much fun to play in the sandbox. In the meantime, you can find me on Tumblr and DA.

Thank you. May your muses be ever fruitful and your OTPs always get together. ;)

I should go.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!