All the Western Stars

by Sharrukin

Summary

Centuries after the end of the Reaper War, Liara T'Soni has long since retired into the quiet of private life. Yet when new threats rise to threaten the galaxy's long peace, she is forced to fight once more. Can she and a new generation of allies win yet another desperate war? What role will the Reapers - and the long-departed Shepard - have to play?

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As always, Vara reacted first when the alarm signal flashed to our daimones. She had not served as my bodyguard in centuries, but her protective instincts remained strong. By the time I opened my eyes, she had already slid out of our bed and crossed the room to the nearest console. I saw her standing there, a shadow against the holographic display, its white-orange glow making interesting highlights on her bare skin.

“What is it?” I murmured.

“One intruder across the perimeter,” she said. “Well equipped, with a tactical cloak, but no sign of weapons.”

I rose from the bed, slipped into a silk tunic, and recovered my sidearm from the side table. A flicker of thought brought the lights up to one-eighth, just enough to see more clearly. “Should we go to the panic room?”

“Nerylla says not.” Vara peered at me, her eyes dark in the dim light. “I wouldn’t worry, Liara. She doesn’t seem very concerned.”

“Dealing with a single intruder, even with a tactical cloak? I should hope not. So long as no more are waiting to follow.” I sat down in a nearby reading chair, setting my sidearm back down within easy reach. I checked the time, and grumbled in distaste. “I wish whoever it is had the courtesy to trespass earlier in the evening. I think I’ve had just enough sleep that it will be impossible to lie back down.”

Vara smiled and crossed the room once more, her bare feet making almost no sound on the carpet. She stood before me and struck a pose. I smiled as I watched her, so familiar: short, even petite, but strong and wiry, moving like a dancer, white-dappled face and smoky silver eyes.

“I suspect I could persuade you otherwise,” she murmured.

I shook my head ruefully, but I also extended my arms in invitation, and sighed in contentment as she joined me in the chair. I held her on my lap, enjoying the warmth and softness of her skin, and accepted a warm kiss. Then I felt one of her hands slip under my tunic.

“You,” I informed her, “are insatiable.”

“Guilty as charged,” she murmured.

Goddess. Over three hundred years in our bond, she’s borne me two beautiful children who are now themselves grown, and I can see the first signs that she’s approaching her matriarchal transition. Yet sometimes she still reminds me of the maiden I hired on to T’Soni Analytics so long ago.

For which I am often very thankful.

Half of my mind stayed alert for some word from the protection detail or the house VI. The other half concentrated on idly caressing the skin along Vara’s ribs, and nibbling my way down the side of her neck. I had her purring slightly by the time the next signal arrived.
We’ve captured the intruder. Nerylla’s thought, through my daimon implant. {Despoina, I think you and Vara had better come see this. I’m calling Miranda as well.}

Vara and I exchanged a glance.

“Business before pleasure,” I told her.

With a sigh of frustration, she rose to her feet once more and went in search of clothing.

We found Miranda in the security station in the south wing, working on the intruder’s injuries. As sometimes happened, I stopped for a moment to consider her, struck as always by the puzzle my acolyte presented.

Miranda Keldaris was a tall asari, strikingly attractive, strong and graceful from years of athletic training. However, her primary talents were those of the mind; she was probably the most incisively intelligent asari I had ever known, and I included myself in that assessment. She had earned seven doctorate-level degrees from asari and human universities, and held galaxy-class credentials in mathematics, physics, xenobiology, genetics, and medicine.

None of this presented a surprise, when one considered her parentage and upbringing. Her mother had been an asari Matriarch, quite brilliant in her own right. Her father had been a remarkably gifted human named Jack Harper, once known throughout the galaxy as the Illusive Man. One of her early mentors had been her namesake, Miranda Lawson, a human genetically engineered for genius and raw talent. She had been raised in part in my own household, associating from an early age with many of the galaxy’s foremost citizens. With such origins, an asari could not help but burn brightly or burn out. Thus far, Miranda had burned very brightly indeed.

On the other hand, she remained almost pathologically reserved, willing to share her ideas with others but almost never revealing any part of her soul. She had few close friends, and she was the only asari I had ever known to be less erotically curious than myself. To the best of my knowledge she had never taken a lover, not even after finally entering the matron stage much later than most of her peers.

Now I watched as Miranda bent over a low couch in the security station, working to save the intruder’s life.

Our unexpected guest was a quarian.

He lay on the couch, unconscious, still bleeding slightly from a nasty wound in his left leg. A large male, close to two meters in height and very robustly built, in superb physical condition. He wore light combat armor in the close-fitted style usual for quarians, although Miranda had removed his helmet and part of the suit to work on his injuries. He kept his black hair very close-cropped, unusual for a quarian outside the Synarchy’s military. I examined his face and found it quite attractive: pale violet skin tone, strong jaw, high cheekbones, and interesting markings around the closed eyes.

“How is he?” I asked.

Miranda stood, turning to watch me with her usual cool detachment. “He is suffering from exhaustion, dehydration, and a second-level allergic reaction as well as the wound. I think it’s also been a long time since he had a decent meal. He should be fine, once I’ve had a chance to move him to the medical station.”

“My team didn’t do any of that,” said Nerylla calmly. “When we confronted him, we didn’t have to
use force. He surrendered immediately, asked to be taken into the house, and then collapsed. We found a blood trail, leading from where we captured him back over the perimeter.”

“How far over the perimeter?” asked Vara.

“As far as we took the time to check.” Nerylla shrugged. “Best guess is that our friend was on foot and in hiding for a long time. Hours, maybe even a day or two.”

“Yet he specifically asked to be brought into this house,” I pointed out. “Yes, Miranda, move him to the medical station and take care of him. I suspect we will want to talk to him at length.”

Miranda nodded silently, gathered up three of the household staff, and began the work of moving our guest.

“He’s got a daimon, or the quarian equivalent, with a geth runtime cluster riding it.” Nerylla handed me a datapad. “It’s locked down tight until he wakes up, but we were able to query it and get his identity.”

I glanced at the datapad. Kalan’Tana nar Qoralis, age twenty-two standard years.

“He’s young to be so far from the Synarchy,” I observed. “Still carries his birth-city association.”

“Hmm.” Vara frowned in thought. “His clan-name sounds familiar. Tana. Do you suppose he’s descended from our friend Arin?”

“It’s possible. I lost touch with his family a long time ago. It would be, what, nine or ten quarian generations since the Reaper War?”

“Closer to twelve, I think.”

“He should be able to tell us once he wakes up. Quarians are careful about keeping track of their ancestors.” I frowned. “You know . . . I can’t help but think of another time when a lone quarian appeared out of nowhere, wounded and desperate for help.”

“What are you thinking about?” asked Vara.

“Tali’Zorah on Illium and the Citadel, after she discovered evidence of Saren’s alliance with the heretic geth and the Reapers.”

Her eyes went wide with shock. “You don’t suppose this is on the same level, do you?”

“Doctor . . .”

I turned. The quarian stirred on the stretcher where Miranda had transferred him. His eyes slitted open, revealing pearlescent white orbs. He struggled to push himself up on one elbow, and reached out to me with his free hand.

“Dr. T’Soni,” he rasped.

I moved forward to kneel by the stretcher, taking his hand. I felt Nerylla tense behind me, watchful as always, but nothing seemed like a threat. “I’m here, Kalan. What is it?”

He fell back on the stretcher, exhausted, his eyes already starting to wander.

I bent close.
“The stars,” he whispered. “The stars are dying.”

In the small hours of the morning, I bent over a computer console, my daimon-enhanced mind sifting through data at lightning speed.

No news of a quarian unexpectedly landing on Thessia, or encountering violence once he arrived.

No sign of anything amiss in the Synarchy of Rannoch, that mighty and growing civilization on the galaxy’s far rim.

No indication of odd or dangerous astronomical events, anywhere in the galaxy.

I found plenty of evidence for something going bad, but then that was a discouragingly familiar state of affairs. The valdarii continued to press territorial claims and raid outlying colonies, slowly but inexorably moving closer to the heart of Citadel space. The fanatic religious sect known as the Way continued to spread, causing social unrest across human space and beyond. The Citadel Confederation remained paralyzed, mired in factional disputes, unable to respond to the growing threats. My daughter Aspasia, an officer in the Confederation Navy, had sent me another private message, warning of further sightings of the Reapers on the galaxy’s edge.

At times I very much wished I had never given up the Shadow Broker’s network, or abandoned active service in the Confederation government. Long decades of retirement into private life had left me with very few active connections to call upon. I felt as if I moved through darkness and fog.

All that work and struggle. Helping Shepard to defeat the Reapers, putting salarian ambitions in check, defending civilization against a dozen other petty threats. Tearing down the corrupt old Citadel Council, setting up a semblance of galactic democracy in its place. Patiently bringing all the galaxy’s peoples together, so they could cooperate to solve its common problems. Binding up old wounds, reconciling even the bitterest of enemies in a common purpose. Securing the Long Peace.

For what? For new generations to arise, forget everything we fought for, tear it all down once more?

Sometimes I envy the short-lived races. They don’t have to stick around and watch as their legacy crumbles to dust and ashes.

Finally, I closed down the console, shaking my head in frustration, and made a call through my daimon.

{Nerylla.}

{Yes, despoina?}

{What is our guest’s status?}

{Resting quietly. Miranda gave him sedatives so he could sleep, and quarian-compatible quick-heal for his wounds. She has him on intravenous feeding and rehydration, and says his condition is improving.}

{Good. When he wakes, call me. Get some of the dextro food out of storage and have it ready for him.} I paused, thinking things through. {Do what you can to clean up any evidence of his presence. I don’t want anyone off the estate knowing he is here.}
I leaned back in the chair, my eyes closed, and suddenly felt a gentle hand on the back of my neck.

“Is everything well?” Vara murmured.

“To answer that, I think I’ll have to wait until Kalan wakes up.” I sighed. “Goddess. The stars are dying. I certainly hope that is a bit of shock-induced hallucination.”

“He certainly came a long way to tell us something.”

“Yes.” I rose from my chair and took my bondmate in my arms, as always enjoying the height difference that let me rest my cheek along her crest. “It can wait until morning.”

I led her back to our bed, pulling the covers up over both of us. The feel of her skin against mine encouraged something other than sleep. We kissed deeply, hands wandering with long familiarity, knowing just where to touch to kindle desire. I moved down her body, nibbling and tasting, until I found the right places to reduce her to a state of raw nonverbal need. Finally she pulled at me, demanding that I rise to meet her, our bodies locked together, pleasure rolling up our spines to echo behind our eyes.

She whispered desperately beside my face. “Embrace eternity, my love.”


Distant sadness.

I think even then, we suspected it might be our last time in peace for a long while.

Afterward, we lay tangled together in the darkness. I drifted, enjoying the euphoria that always followed our joining, sending gentle affection across the vanishing link. I almost faded out into sleep . . . but then I felt Vara’s mind stir, a vague disturbance in her emotions, a rising urge to talk.

“Liara,” she murmured. “There’s something I want to ask you.”

I shifted position, eased up onto my side so I could peer at her face in the darkness. “Anything.”

“Why is it that you’ve never conceived a child?”

All thought of sleep fled. I rose up on one elbow to look down at her. “That’s a very serious question to ask, all of a sudden.”

“I suppose I’ve been wondering about it for a while.”

“Does it disturb you?”

“Not really.” She lifted a hand to trace the line of my cheek with her fingertips. “I’ve been deep enough in your mind to conceive a child by you. Twice. I know how you feel about me, and I’m content. It just seems strange.”

“I suppose I’ve thought about it,” I said slowly, examining my own motives. “When I was with Shepard, I certainly wanted children, even though it was centuries too early. When you and I finally bonded, I often thought about the possibility of having children with you. But then you reached the matron stage a good century before I could expect to . . . and then we had Aspasia, and young
Nerylla, and it certainly felt like parenting to watch over Miranda during her maiden years. I suppose by the time my nesting instinct struck, I already had plenty to keep it busy.”

“It’s not anything about me?” she murmured, not quite meeting my gaze.

“Oh Goddess, no.” I bent low to kiss her warmly. “I love you, Vara, and there is nothing about you I would not want for a child of mine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Maybe I have some lingering reluctance to have children by another asari. Your ancestry is utterly conventional, four generations back, salarian and turian sires as far as the eye can see. I can understand why the idea never disturbed you all that much. I had Benezia and Aethyta for parents. Two asari. Two asari Matriarchs. The stigma against purebloods may not be as strong as it once was, but it certainly made its mark on me when I was young.”

“Hmm.”

I watched her, knowing her well enough to understand what was going on behind her eyes.


Very large, her eyes gleaming in the near-darkness. “You will?”

“We’ll see what happens. Now may not be the best time for us to have another child, as badly as things are going out in the galaxy.”

“True.” As it often did, pragmatism won out over sentiment in her face. “I hope you will consider it, though. I would dearly love to see what a daughter of your lineage would be like.”

“I’ll consider it. I promise.” I pulled her close for a warm embrace. “Now . . . do you suppose we can get some sleep? I’ve had quite enough serious thought for one night, and it appears we’ll both need our wits about us tomorrow.”
Coffee and Astrophysics

26 October 2580, T'Soni Lineage Estates, Armali/Thessia

The sun rose well above the horizon before anyone thought to wake Vara and me from slumber. Just as well, given how full the night had been.

We dressed and descended to the main floor of the house, entering the small dining room where we usually broke our fast. Since leaving public service I had resumed the habit of a traditional Thessian morning meal: bread with elaion, small wedges of cheese, fried eggs, and a sweet fruit juice. Vara ate much the same, but with the addition of coffee, black and bitter. I often teased her for her addiction to the human drink, but she always ignored me with great hauteur.

That morning we indulged in no levity. Kalan joined us for the meal, looking much stronger and more vital in the daylight. He peered at us to see what kind of manners to imitate, but when Melisso placed a healthy meal of Rannoch-origin food before him, he threw all caution to the winds. Soon he was shoveling up the food and politely asking for seconds, as if he hadn’t eaten in days. Perhaps he hadn’t.

Miranda sat at the polished dark-wood table as well, watching her patient without seeming to do so. She must have eaten early, as was her custom. She had nothing but her own cup of coffee, a habit she had acquired as a young maiden from her namesake and from Vara.

Nerylla Essenai was also present, finishing her own breakfast and looking none the worse for a sleepless night. She was the oldest of my acolytes, and the most senior ever since Vara had been released from her own oath to become my bondmate instead. She was an unusually tall asari, intensely fit and strong, her stunning physique refined by centuries of athletic training. Her slate-blue face was plain and almost completely unmarked, dominated by a pair of startling jade-colored eyes.

Nerylla had given me devoted service through all of her matron years, never having a long-term partner or any children of her own. Even now she held to her acolyte’s oaths, even though she had recently completed her transition into the matriarchal stage of life. She could have claimed independent status at any time. Many times I had offered to release her, so she could have a household, social and political influence of her own – but she always refused, uninterested in such things. In a way, she was the older sister I had never had: patient, wise, and fierce in defense of our interests.

We asari sat in companionable silence, finishing our meal, using our daimones to catch up on news feeds and our professional reading. Eventually Kalan began to run out of momentum, leaning back in his chair, looking well-fed and relaxed for the first time since we had met him.

“I want to thank all of you for taking me in,” he said at last, speaking koiné with a lilting accent.

“Of course,” I told him. “It seems you have something important you need to tell us.”

“Yes, although introductions should come first. I’m Kalan’Tana nar Qoralis . . . and yes, if you’re wondering, Arin’Tana vas Qwib Qwib was an ancestor of mine. So was Tali’Zorah vas Normandy. I grew up on stories of the things they did in the Nightfall War, and in the war against the Reapers. That’s one reason why I came to you, Dr. T'Soni. My family has always remembered you as well, and we hold you in great respect.”
“Thank you,” I murmured, and the others nodded polite acknowledgement.

“Meanwhile, this is Tekanta.” Kalan leaned forward and set his left forearm on the table, his hand palm-up and slightly cupped. Light appeared, a shimmering abstract sculpture poised above his thumb and two fingers, quite beautiful.

“I am Tekanta, a geth runtime cluster currently instantiated within Kalan’s cortical implant.” The voice seemed cool, neutral, and vaguely feminine. “I am pleased to meet you, Dr. T’Soni, and your associates.”

I bowed my head. “The pleasure is mine, Tekanta.”

“Fascinating,” said Miranda quietly. “How long has this geth been your companion?”

“Since I was a small child. Most quarian children receive their first cortical implants, and geth companions, at the age of seven. Tekanta and I have been comrades and partners for most of my life.”

I stared at the hologram in wonder. “I’ve heard rumors, but since I left government service I’ve had little opportunity to speak to any of your people. This is really quite remarkable. You and the geth live so intimately now?”

Kalan smiled at me, his luminescent eyes full of keen interest. “I know you remember the Nightfall War personally. For us, it’s been a long time since then. We’ve lived on Rannoch, at peace with the geth, for almost four hundred years. That’s longer than we wandered the galaxy as nomadic exiles. A few quarians still worry about our relationship with the geth, but to be honest, we’ve prospered so well with them that the naysayers are a very small minority.”

“We and our Creators have proven to be quite compatible, now that we comprehend one other.” Tekanta’s voice almost seemed to carry emotional weight, a trace of warmth and fondness. “All geth regret the misunderstandings that rendered us enemies for so long.”

Miranda nodded. “Many citizens of the Citadel Confederation also carry cortical implants, what we asari call our daimones, but most of us only install VI assistants in them. Very few go so far as to accept full AI as personal companions. It must be a very intriguing experience.”

I glanced sharply at Miranda, hearing a surprising degree of personal interest in her voice.

Kalan only shrugged. “I’m afraid most of us quarians take it for granted. I’d be happy to discuss it with you later.”

“That would be acceptable,” I said, changing the subject. “You know me, of course. This is Vara T’Rathis, my partner and bondmate. Nerylla Essenai is my senior acolyte. Your physician is Miranda Keldaris, another of my acolytes.”

“My pleasure,” said Kalan to all of us.

“Now.” I put some steel into my voice. “Just what is it that you came all the way from the Synarchy to tell us? Why did you travel in such secrecy? And how is it that you became so badly injured along the way?”

“It’s a long story.” Kalan closed his hand, banishing the geth hologram, although all of us understood that Tekanta would continue to watch and listen through his senses. “You’re aware of our custom of the Pilgrimage. When it came time for me to leave Rannoch for a while, I chose an unusual quest. You see, my profession is in the sciences. I’m an astrophysicist.”
Miranda shifted in her seat, as if to watch the quarian even more intently.

“For my Pilgrimage, I chose to carry out a deep-space survey. I took a long-range scout ship, something I could manage on my own for two or three years. Then I set out for unexplored regions on the very edge of the galactic disk, far from any of the mass relays, where no one had ever gone before. I planned to verify the star maps we had, based on long-range observations, and go hunting for habitable worlds. Someday the Synarchy will want to expand into those wild spaces, even if we have to build new mass relays to do it.”

“A bold venture,” Nerylla said approvingly.

“It suited me. I’m afraid I’m not a very good quarian in some ways. I like solitude.” He gave us a charming smile. “Anyway. Everything went fine for a while. I ventured out along the Outer Arm, to trailing from what you call the Far Rim cluster. A thousand light-years, then two thousand. I checked the maps, added hundreds of new stars to them, found a dozen or so likely worlds. I even came across a pre-industrial society that might be ready for contact in a few centuries.

“Then I started noticing something odd. Discrepancies between the star maps and the real galaxy. Stars that appeared to be in the right place, given our Rannoch-based observations, but that didn’t have the right spectrum.”

“How so?” asked Miranda.

Vara and I glanced at each other for an instant. Neither of us had more than an educated layman’s understanding of astrophysics. I set my daimon for encyclopedia mode, to help me interpret anything the quarian saw fit to tell us.

“Well. You know that most stars fall into a pattern called the main sequence. A few big, hot, bright blue stars at one extreme. Swarms of little, cool, dim red stars at the other. Comfortable yellow stars like Tikkun or Parnitha in the middle. All main sequence stars, by definition, shine because of a process of hydrogen fusion at their cores. The only significant difference is how much mass the star is born with. The more mass, the greater the gravitational pressure on the star’s core, and the hotter the fusion furnace has to burn to maintain equilibrium.”

I nodded, with him so far.

“So, at some point any main sequence star is going to start running out of hydrogen fuel. The star’s core becomes choked with helium ash. Hydrogen fusion stops in the core, and it begins to collapse in on itself.” Kalan made a gesture with both hands, as if sketching a sphere in mid-air. “Hydrogen fusion moves outward, in a shell around the core, but the core’s collapse causes compression of that shell. The compression produces more heat, and that heat causes the outer layers of the star to expand. If the star is massive enough, it can begin to fuse helium or even heavier elements, again in layers around its core. More energy, greater heat, further expansion. The star evolves off the main sequence, becomes a red giant or something even larger.”

“All of this seems reasonably familiar,” I said. “How does it relate to what you found out in deep space?”

“The point is that the process I’m describing is very predictable.” Kalan sat back. “Our models of stellar evolution are precise. Give me a star’s initial mass and composition, and I can tell you exactly how long it will stay on the main sequence, how long it will take to reach the red-giant stage and eventually die. Show me a star right now, give me a chance to measure its mass, look at its spectrum, and I can tell you exactly how long that star has to live.”
Miranda’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “You’re saying that some of the stars you observed appeared older than they should have.”

“That’s right.” Kalan’s face lost its animation, the look of pleasure at explaining his discipline, and became bleak. “A whole family of stars, there on the outer rim of the galaxy. Thousands of them. In the catalogs based on observations made from Rannoch, they’re all listed as perfectly normal main-sequence stars, most of them with a billion years or more of life left. When I observed them from a closer vantage point on my Pilgrimage, all of them had started to move off the main sequence. Some of them had already become full-fledged red giants.”

“That is impossible,” said Miranda flatly.

Kalan shook his head. “There’s no mistake. I can show you all of my observations, taken along a baseline two thousand light-years long. I have serial observations of some stars flying off the main sequence, thousands of times more quickly than they should have.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “This is all sounding horribly familiar.”

“I’m not surprised,” said Kalan.

“Tali’s mission to Haestrom, just before the Reaper War.”

Kalan only nodded grimly.

“I don’t recall that,” said Nerylla.

“Not surprising. You were still working for Eclipse at the time. It’s something of a footnote to the war in any case.” I leaned back, remembering. “After the defeat of Saren and Sovereign, Tali’Zorah went on a series of reconnaissance missions for the quarian Admiralty Board. One of these was to Haestrom, a former quarian colony world. The Migrant Fleet had detected an anomaly in Dholen, the primary star of the system. It seemed to be evolving into a red giant, much earlier than expected, much more quickly than expected. Tali went to study the star, build a timeline for its evolution, and perhaps discover the cause. Unfortunately, heretic geth discovered her team’s presence and landed on Haestrom in force. Had Shepard not arrived in time to mount a rescue, she and her entire team would have been killed.”

Kalan nodded in agreement. “As it was, only two quarians escaped from Haestrom, Tali and a marine named Kal’Reegar. They got away with all their data, though the Admiralty Board didn’t pay much attention at the time. Tali found no evidence that the premature aging of Dholen was deliberate, something the geth had somehow done. So it boiled down to a simple scientific puzzle, and the Migrant Fleet had more immediate problems to deal with. Then, after the Reaper War, we still had too much else to do: learning to live in harmony with the geth, resettling Rannoch, rebuilding our civilization. The records got buried . . . but I had a complete astrophysical database with me. I saw the connection right away.”

“I’m still having difficulty with the phenomenon itself,” said Miranda. “As you said, Kalan, stellar evolution is utterly predictable. The exceptions are rare, and they always involve interactions among two or more stars. For you to observe thousands of stars, all showing the same aberrations . . .”

“I have a hypothesis, but I’m reluctant to voice it just yet. Not until I have more data.”

Miranda’s expression amused me. She wasn’t accustomed to taking someone seriously as a scientist who was one-twentieth her age.
“All right,” said Vara, deliberately throwing skepticism into her tone. “So a few thousand stars at the galaxy’s edge are getting old faster than they should. Why should we care?”

Kalan blinked, looking rather shocked.

“Assuming I believe all of this in the first place,” said Miranda, “it’s profoundly disturbing that any significant number of stars could suddenly start evolving off the main sequence on a whim. If we don’t understand the phenomenon, we can’t predict it. Which means that for all we know, this could start happening to Parnitha at any time.”

“Point taken,” said Vara.

“Another thing that bothers me about this is that nobody noticed it until I ventured out a long way from any of the known mass relays.” Kalan made no gestures, but he must have had Tekanta interface with the household VI. A holographic map of the galaxy appeared over our breakfast table, and then zoomed in on the section of the galactic rim containing the Synarchy of Rannoch.

“Relays are scarce out there. The only ones we know of for thousands of light-years around serve the Perseus Veil and Far Rim clusters, then the Rosetta Nebula cluster a long way to trailing. Coreward from there are the Phoenix Massing and Pylos Nebula clusters. That’s all. There’s a long stretch of the Outer Arm that has no relay coverage, and a shorter but much denser region of the Perseus Arm as well. Many billions of stars for which we don’t have observations of their current state, because they’re thousands of light-years away from any mass relay. For all we know, there could be a lot more than a few thousand stars affected. I’m afraid none of our civilizations have paid enough attention to deep-space exploration.”

“The Reapers didn’t want us exploring too far,” I pointed out. “The mass relay network is just too convenient for anyone to go to all the time and trouble.”

“Well, now that may hurt us. Badly.” Kalan gave me a penetrating stare. “Dr. T’Soni, how much would you gamble that a new natural phenomenon would be so careful as to appear where no one was watching for it?”

“I’m not sure the question is appropriate,” I reproved him. “Any new phenomenon must appear somewhere. If I were to choose a location within the galaxy at random, it would be much more likely than not to be far from an open mass relay.”

“That’s what I told myself at first. Then I came across something else.” Kalan gestured, and the map shifted slightly, a broken blue line appearing to indicate his route from Rannoch out into wild space. “About eight months into my journey, I became concerned enough that I wanted a closer look. I chose a star about two hundred light-years from my current position, one I could already tell was aging very rapidly, and set a course for it. I decided to return to normal geometry a hundred or so astronomical units out. Better to get long-range observations at first, and make sure the star hadn’t become dangerously unstable by the time I arrived. A lucky decision. When I arrived, I saw the star had aged even further in the last two hundred years . . . and I also picked up transmissions from further in-system. Sentient communication.”

“A native civilization?” inquired Nerylla.

“No. The valdarii.”

All of us stared at him.

Then I reached out through my daimon, taking control of the holographic map. I placed the locations of valdarii raids, sightings of their ships, and our best guess as to their home stars. I
looked at the result, actually rising from the table to walk around the map and examine it from a different angle.

“It seems remotely possible,” I said at last. “The *valdarii* always seem to raid through the Caleston Rift, hitting worlds and shipping lanes no more than two jumps away from there. That’s thousands of light-years away from where you were, Kalan, but it’s at least in the same section of the galaxy.”

“We don’t know how they move around in their space,” Nerylla mused. “They’re certainly not native to the Caleston Rift, but if they’re using a mass relay to reach there, it’s not one we’ve ever been able to locate.”

“Kalan, were you able to determine what they were doing out in wild space?” I asked.

“No. The Synarchy hasn’t had any more luck translating their communications than you have, here in the Confederation. It certainly wasn’t one of their worlds. Any planet that might once have been habitable in that system has long since been baked to death. From the volume of traffic I picked up, it might have been a small task force, maybe the equivalent of a cruiser and a few support ships.”

“I wish the Confederation would take the *valdarii* more seriously,” I muttered. “They are not just another band of Terminus barbarians. Especially if they have something to do with this . . . whatever it is that is prematurely aging stars out on the Rim.”

Kalan nodded firmly. “I agree, Doctor. After that, I turned for home. Eight months out, less than that back, since I took a more direct route. I got back to Rannoch about two weeks ago, and presented my data and my logs to the High Council. They took me seriously. Sent word to the Confederation through Ambassador Shal. Eventually it was decided that I should journey to the Citadel to present my findings in person.”

He paused for a moment, looking around at all of us.

“I decided to go the long way around, past Omega and then through asari space, so as to avoid the regions where the *valdarii* are most active. It didn’t make any difference. They ambushed me at Tasale, in the Crescent Nebula cluster.”

“Near Illium? That’s a long way from their usual raiding grounds.” I looked at the map again. “Are you sure it was the *valdarii* and not one of the usual Terminus mercenary gangs?”

“Positive. I can’t prove it now, but the sensor readings were clear as daylight at the time.”

“You’re saying that they *pursued* you,” said Vara. “Somehow they knew you were carrying information about them. Something they didn’t want to reach the Citadel.”

“I can’t be sure of that, but it seems possible.”

Vara and I exchanged a long glance. From long experience, I knew what she was thinking.

“Someone in either the Synarchy or the Confederation – or even both – is in league with the *valdarii,*” I said flatly.

Vara nodded in agreement.

Kalan shrugged. “I can’t be sure of that either, but it seems possible too. Which is why, when I got away from the *valdarii* at Tasale, I changed course. My ship was damaged, I was hurt bad, but with Tekanta’s help I made it as far as Thessia. Unfortunately, I had to make an emergency landing in the mountains northwest of here.”
“The Eramethos range?” I said. “That’s very rough country.”

“Might explain why no one noticed the crash,” said Nerylla.

“I didn’t want anyone to know where I was, at least until I could get to Dr. T’Soni,” Kalan explained. “My stealth systems still worked, so I managed to get through Thessian planetary defense unseen and put my ship down in a wilderness area. Then I crossed the country on foot, staying in hiding the whole way. Good thing you asari like your woods and parklands.”

I watched him closely. I thought about the skill and sheer determination it would take to cross many kilometers of territory, on foot and without aid, staying in concealment, badly injured, on a planet where every living thing’s biochemistry was incompatible with your own.

*This young quarian has a great deal of areté. Enough for a dozen ordinary people.*

“The question remains, Kalan: why come to me?” I spread my hands wide. “I’m not the Shadow Broker anymore, not the President of the Confederation, not a member of Parliament. I haven’t even held office on Illium or in the *polis* of Armali in over a century. I am retired. All my former connections have long since gone stale.”

Kalan shrugged. “I’m not sure that’s true, but even if it is, it doesn’t matter. We remember Shepard, out in the Synarchy . . . and as I said, we remember you. Everything you did to end the Nightfall War and save all of us from the Reapers. We know you can be trusted, and we know what you’re capable of. If there’s a galaxy-class problem coming our way, my people are going to want your help to deal with it.”

I looked at Vara. No help there. She wore an expression of fond pride, as if she agreed completely with what our guest had said.

Nerylla and Miranda, of course, had sworn the acolyte’s oath to me as maidens. To them I was the *despoina*, and they only awaited my command.

*Oh Goddess. Here we go again, and no Shepard to take the burden on his own broad shoulders.*

“All right, Kalan.” I sighed. “I make no promises . . . but my people and I will consider how best to help you.”
I spent the next two days gathering data.

As I told Kalan, my network of political contacts had thinned out considerably from its peak. At one point I had served a seven-year term as the President of the Citadel Confederation, arguably the most powerful single individual in the entire galaxy. Yet that was over three centuries in the past. Everything after that had been a long decrescendo, marked by lesser offices and short periods of return to private life. Eventually I had retired for good, to concentrate on the sciences, and the pleasant task of raising my daughters.

That isn’t to say that I completely lacked connections or resources. Over the centuries, despite wars and catastrophes, I had managed to parlay Benezia’s legacy into a much larger portfolio. By the time Kalan appeared on my doorstep, I held a personal fortune to rival any on Thessia, to say nothing of the T'Soni lineage trusts I administered on behalf of a crowd of more-or-less distant relatives.

When I spoke, many around the galaxy listened. I had simply been practicing soft speech for a long time, and many of the galaxy’s centers of power had grown accustomed to my silence.

“Liara! It’s so good to see you!”

I smiled at the asari on my desktop screen. “Same to you, Aspasia. It feels like forever since we’ve had a chance to talk.”

“Life here is very full. How is Vara? Is my namesake still doing well?”

“Vara and the others are all very well. Young Aspasia is thriving in the Navy – she clearly takes after her mother. I understand she is in line for a captaincy soon.”

Aspasia beamed at me, delighted. I took a moment to examine her: deep blue skin tone, indigo facial markings, startling jade-green eyes, brilliant white smile.

Aspasia Lehanai thetos Eudathis was one of my oldest friends. I had met her while attending the University of Serrice as a young maiden, while I studied archaeology and she studied business administration and finance. Later she became my partner in the foundation of T’Soni Analytics, the information brokerage that served as my first business venture. When I later took over as the Shadow Broker, I turned a majority share in the smaller firm over to her.

What happened next came as something of a surprise, even to me. Aspasia spent the year of the Reaper War working closely with one of the most powerful asari on Illium: Matriarch Pytho Eudathis, owner and supreme commander of the Illium Defense Force. Together the two of them, spymaster and military leader, managed to defend the planet from the Reapers and save millions of lives.

Unfortunately, the war left Pytho without an immediate heir. One of her daughters had betrayed her and died before the Reapers arrived; the other was killed while commanding a cruiser squadron. After the war, none of her surviving grand-daughters had the aptitude or the inclination to take over
So, early in the twenty-fourth century, Pytho, Aspasia, and I carried out a complex financial and legal maneuver. Aspasia was adopted into the Eudathis lineage, I financed a buyout of all of Pytho’s blood descendants, and then Pytho designated Aspasia as her sole heir. I ended up having to take a seat on the Illium Development Commission for almost a decade – one of the most miserable periods in my entire political career – but eventually I managed to hand my chair over to Aspasia. With Pytho’s passing she had become one of the most powerful asari on Illium, to say nothing of having profound influence far out into the Terminus Systems.

The role seemed to suit her. I remembered a maiden who had once appeared flighty and superficial . . . but time, struggle, and responsibility had exposed the steel under her silken façade. Illium had become prosperous and powerful once more, possibly more so than before the Reapers came, and Aspasia had been one of the causes.

I still liked her, still loved her like a sister, but my respect for her had only grown with time.

“How is your family, Aspasia? You and Derias are still doing well?” I asked, thinking of her turian bondmate.

“You know how it is with him: terrible arguments, always followed by superb make-up sex. Still, we’re good partners, and that’s what the IDF needs.” Her smile deepened, became almost smug. “Not to mention an heir. Who happens to be on the way.”

My eyes flew wide with surprise. “Oh Aspasia, that’s wonderful news! When will she arrive?”

“A little less than a year. We haven’t made a public announcement yet, if you feel like investing in the IDF before the share price jumps.”

I almost made a shocked retort, before I saw the gleam in her eye and realized she was joking. “Shame on you, Aspasia, trying to tempt me back into the Illium way of doing things.”

“Hmm. It’s not as if insider trading is illegal here, or even frowned upon.” She sighed, and toned down most of the high notes in her voice. “All right, all right, be all stuffy and Thessian. I know you, Liara T’Soni. At this point in your usual cycle of activity, you should be in the middle of burying yourself in some enormous project. Like those damnable memoirs you published earlier this year. I didn’t expect to hear from you for months yet. What has happened?”

I blinked in surprise. “You didn’t like my memoirs? I sent you drafts. I even made some changes at your request.”

“Oh, I have no argument with anything you said. All of it was true enough. It’s just that I’ve been up to my crest in complaints from the Dantius lineage ever since you published.”

“I see.”

“Don’t worry about it. They’re just upset because now they know exactly who took down their business empire, and why. Not to mention what a perfect monster Auntie Nassana was. To get back to the subject . . . what is happening there that you need to consult with me?”

“It’s the valdarii, Aspasia.” Quickly, I explained everything Kalan had told us. “Maybe the Confederation is still stuck in denial about the problem, but I’m willing to bet you have been watching them more closely. Does any of this make sense to you?”

“Well, I don’t know any more about this astrophysical business than you do. I recall hearing about...
Tali’s investigation back in the day, but that’s all. I don’t remember so much as a rumor coming across my desk since then.” She cocked her head in deep thought. “On the other hand, I can confirm one piece of your quarian’s story. We did have a *valdarii* incursion here six days ago, out on the edge of the system. They didn’t try to raid Illium itself. When we got a squadron into position to drive them off, we found evidence they had fought an engagement with someone, probably flying a high-end scout or corvette with advanced stealth capability.”

I nodded. “Thank you. Not that I doubted his story – he seems as honest and straightforward as any other quarian I’ve ever dealt with – but it’s good to get some confirmation.”

“I think you’re right to worry, Liara.” Aspasia looked grave. “Whoever or whatever they are, the *valdarii* have powerful ships and very advanced technology. They could present a considerable threat if they put their minds to it.”

“Does the IDF have any intel on them that you would be willing to share?”

“Some.” She watched me through the display for a moment, an assessing look in her eye. “You’re coming out of retirement for this, aren’t you?”

“I’m afraid I may have to.”

“Good. Long past time.”

As I suspected, Aspasia had more complete information about the *valdarii* than any I had seen thus far. I spent most of a day going through it, pulling extranet data through my *daimon* to support my research.

The name *valdarii* was turian in origin. Turian explorers first sighted the mysterious aliens in 2518 CE, during a venture out into wild space near the Caleston Rift cluster.

For a few years, the *valdarii* behaved in an enigmatic but not obviously hostile manner. Other travelers saw their ships, always at a distance, always ready to break contact and vanish into the darkness. They sometimes ventured into the heart of the Rift, flying by the major colony worlds of Arvuna and Caleston, but they ignored all attempts at contact.

After six years of silent observation, the *valdarii* began to mount raids. First they attacked small outposts in the Caleston Rift, then they began to raid Arvuna, and then they began to probe at Caleston itself. Soon *valdarii* ships began to use the Balor mass relay to visit adjacent clusters, scouting, then raiding small settlements, then beginning to harass even high-population systems. Patrols seemed of no use, as the aliens simply evaded and moved elsewhere, or stayed in hiding until the patrols departed. The Citadel Confederation had sent three punitive expeditions, but none of these had located the *valdarii* home stars or done significant damage to the raiders.

The process was slow, but in sixty years the aliens had managed to disrupt trade and settlement across most of the Attican Traverse. A number of small outposts had been completely abandoned, and even large colonies like Horizon and Mindoir had suffered serious economic hardship.

*Valdarii* ships were known to be of advanced design, equal to most ships in Citadel space. They moved quickly, well-armed and well-protected, with advanced stealth systems. Several distinct ship designs had been sighted, roughly equivalent to corvettes, frigates, and cruisers. Not a single alien ship had ever been captured, as they always destroyed themselves rather than permit their technology to fall into our hands.

The aliens themselves were . . . strange.
No individual *valdarii* had ever been captured alive either, but some had been killed during raids, their bodies later recovered for examination and analysis. They were clearly organic beings rather than synthetics, although they all seemed to carry cybernetic implants. They were oxygen-breathers, their internal chemistry based on DNA and L-amino-acid proteins, like asari or humans. Their body plans were endoskeletal and vertebrate, six-limbed rather than four-limbed. They all had large, complex brains and had exhibited sophisticated behavior when alive.

The strangeness appeared in their *diversity*. Within the constraints of that basic body plan, the *valdarii* were often so physiologically dissimilar that they appeared to be of different species.

They came in all sizes and colors. Some wore naked skin, some had scales, some had fur, and some even had feathers. Some ran on two feet and had four arms; some ran on four feet and had only two arms; some were capable of using their middle limb-pair for either function at will. Some appeared to be obligate carnivores, some were omnivores, and some were herbivores. Some had two or more eyes and very keen vision, while others had no eyes at all and used other senses to navigate their environment. Some had clear male or female gender, while others had no obvious gender and might have been incapable of reproduction. Some had formidable teeth, talons, or other natural weapons, while others seemed defenseless without technological aid. A few had eezo integrated into their nervous systems – natural biotics like asari – whereas most had no obvious way to use biotics at all.

A few geneticists had studied DNA recovered from *valdarii* corpses, finding not only great diversity in their genome, but also clear signs of deliberate engineering. Some had speculated that their civilization practiced radical genetic manipulation, as if every individual was a work of art as well as a sentient being.

No one had ever been able to understand the *valdarii* language. No one was sure how many distinct languages they had, nor had anyone recovered examples of written text from them. Eyewitnesses reported that they did speak, but only rarely, normally coordinating their activities in eerie silence. It seemed likely that they communicated almost entirely through technological means, a kind of mechanical telepathy based on their cybernetic implants. EM communications had been intercepted from among them, densely compressed and thoroughly encrypted. Like perfectly random noise, impossible to interpret.

After several hours of study, I leaned back in my chair, closing my eyes for a momentary rest.

*This is a very sophisticated civilization, moving according to a well-considered plan.*

Then another thought struck me.

*Where did it come from?*

We had heard nothing about the *valdarii* during the Reaper War. We had seen no Reaper creatures that might have been constructed on the basis of their unique biology.

I opened old records, from our fumbling attempts to track the movements of individual Reapers during the war. Another hour’s work told me that we had seen no evidence of unusual movements in or around the Caleston Rift. If the Reapers had been working to harvest an unknown civilization in that region, I could find no evidence of it.

What did that tell me?

*Either the Reapers did not know about the valdarii – unlikely in the extreme – or the valdarii did not fit the criteria for harvesting at that time.*
A pre-technological civilization, rising to the levels we see today, in less than four hundred years?

Not even the humans managed to advance quite that quickly. Not on their own.

I felt a bone-deep chill.

Someone has been helping these invaders . . . and I think I might know who.

I might have become somewhat removed from galactic politics, but I still knew one head of state who would still give me her attention when I needed it. I placed the call while I continued to study Aspasia’s material, and it took less than an hour for a response.

“Dr. T’Soni. I’m pleased to hear from you.”

I smiled at the face on the screen, clearly krogan even if most of it was covered by a veil.

“Bakara, it always pleases me to speak to you. Is all well on Tuchanka?”

“As well as ever. Grunt knocks heads together, I exercise reason and persuasion, and between us we keep the krogan moving forward. We make a good team.” Her voice became slightly wistful. “I still miss Wrex, the old reprobate, but Grunt brings a certain amount of youthful vigor to the task.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I always thought Grunt had hidden depths. Leadership must be maturing him.”

“That, and he knows well enough to listen to me.” I saw the flesh around her eyes crinkle, evidence of a wicked smile beneath the veil. “My aide said you had an urgent reason to call. How may I serve you?”

“Is this channel secure?” I asked.

She moved slightly, glancing down, and then a red triangle appeared in one corner of the screen. “It is now.”

“It’s about the valdarii,” I told her, explaining what I had discovered thus far. “Bakara, it seems likely that someone is helping the aliens, setting up a false-flag operation against the Citadel Confederation. Unfortunately, the first candidate that sprang to mind . . .”

“Was the salarians,” she interrupted me, nodding in agreement. “You think some faction within the Salarian Union is behind these raiders?”

“They certainly have a history of similar meddling. They discovered the rachni in what was then wild space. They uplifted your people to fight the rachni. Then when the humans burst out onto the galactic stage, and your people escaped from the genophage, they uplifted the yahg to help them fight you both and seize galactic hegemony.”

“Which didn’t work out well for them. Thanks in no small part to you.” Bakara leaned away from the pickup, clearly thinking hard. “As you might imagine, Clan Urdnot invests heavily in intelligence.”

“I know. Wrex surprised me more than once with the depth of his knowledge of galactic affairs.”

“We krogan know that we’re still living on sufferance. A lot of people out in the galaxy still don’t trust us. They watch us . . . and we watch them.”
“I’m not asking you for sources and methods . . .”

“Good, because you should know better!” Again, that hint of a wicked reptilian smile. “I can tell you that this is not the salarians. The little lizards have reformed. They’re good citizens now. They think about how to manipulate the rest of us for their benefit only once in a while, instead of all the time.”

“You’re sure.”

“It’s a matter of krogan survival. I am very sure.”

“No contact between any salarian institution and the valdarii.”

“No more than anyone else has managed. The Union is actually quite concerned about the valdarii. I think they recognize the pattern, and they dislike the thought that someone might be using it against them for a change.”

“Then who is it?” I shook my head in frustration. “Someone knew where Kalan was traveling and got word to the valdarii as to where he could be ambushed. Someone seems to be feeding the valdarii advanced technology and knowledge about galactic civilization. If not the salarians . . .”

“I don’t know, Doctor.” All merriment left her expression, her eyes turning bleak and cold. “I can tell you one thing. Something is rotten on the Citadel.”

“That’s . . . not a very objective statement.”

“I don’t have very much objective evidence to support it. Only a feeling, the last few times I’ve visited there on business. Something has gone wrong in the Confederation, at the highest levels. Some inability to rise above petty disputes and take action, even when it’s vitally necessary. I can’t put my eye on it, but it’s there.”

“Who is behind it, if not the salarians?” I wondered. “The turians? The humans?”

“None of those. All of them. I don’t know.” She peered at me intently. “Just be careful, if you find you must go there.”

“Hmm. I’ve spent far too many years on the Citadel. I never go back there willingly.”

“That may be wise.”

“Bakara, I know it’s a great deal to ask, but can I call upon your intelligence network in this matter? I sense that I may need to take action, and I don’t want to do so in ignorance.”

“Of course, Doctor. You are a friend of the krogan people, as you have demonstrated more than once. There is very little I would not do to assist you.”

I nodded my thanks, and signed off.

Perhaps it was the time away to speak with Bakara. Perhaps it was simple luck. When I returned to Aspasia’s data – and the other information I had called up to support my research – I noticed something. A name, a place, suddenly of infinite significance.

Kalan and Miranda need to see this.

I got up from my desk and went in search of the rest of my household.
I could hear raised voices long before I reached the library. Miranda applied the cutting edge of her tongue, and then Kalan made some polite but very forceful response. Apparently science was being practiced as a full-contact sport.

I found the two of them standing face to face, gesturing and speaking over each other, in front of a display full of esoteric symbols. A column of shimmering light, constantly changing, stood to one side; apparently Tekanta had manifested itself to contribute to the discussion. Vara sat in a reading chair, watching the byplay with considerable amusement.

I stepped up beside my bondmate and rested a hand on her shoulder. “How is it going?”

“I think they’re making progress. At least neither of them has pulled out a weapon yet.”

“Can you follow the discussion?”

“ Barely. They’re mostly speaking in mathematics. Even with my daimon to help I’m rather lost. I think they’re trying to model the progress of the astrophysical phenomenon, to see if they can deduce anything about its cause and mechanisms. Problem is that almost all of the observations are from Kalan’s expedition, and it would take months to go back out and get more data, so they’re stuck arguing theory.”

I smiled. “Perhaps I can help with that.”

Vara peered at me suspiciously. “You have that look on your face, Liara. The one that says you know something the rest of us don’t.”

“Maybe.” I raised my voice rather sharply, to cut through the ongoing debate. “May I contribute something?”

Kalan and Miranda both stopped to glance at me.

“What is it, despoina?” asked Miranda.

“Solveig,” I told them.

I could see it, the instant Kalan consulted with Tekanta and Miranda did the same with her daimon. Two pairs of eyes flew wide with surprise, one pearly white, one cobalt blue.

“Another prematurely aging star?” Kalan demanded. “And it’s close to an open mass relay?”

“In the Caleston Rift itself,” Miranda remarked. “Close to the hub of valdarii activity.”

“Not only that, but it seems the scientific outpost at Sinmara was the very first place the valdarii attacked when they became hostile,” I pointed out. “Nobody knew why at the time, but now it seems very suspicious. Almost as if the aliens didn’t want anyone studying the primary star of the system.”

“Why didn’t we notice this before?” Miranda wondered.

“We didn’t think to look. Solveig is a long way from the Synarchy, and it’s on the outer frontier of
Citadel space. Hardly anyone has ever gone there. It’s not prominent in any of your databases. Shepard never visited the place, so I didn’t have any reason to think of it until I saw a reference in intel data.”

Kalan stared at Tekanta’s column of light, apparently communing with his companion. “If we could go there, we might be able to collect the data I need to support my hypothesis.”

Miranda nodded. “Despoina, I will bring in historical observations from the Sinmara outpost. That should give us a baseline several centuries long. Meanwhile, it would be very useful to examine this phenomenon at close range.”

“Vara, is the ship ready for an expedition?” I asked. “We’ll want to load the extended scientific sensor package for this one.”

Vara nodded and rose from her chair. “I’ll see to it right away. We can be in space by evening, and in the Caleston Rift by tomorrow.”

“I’ll also want some of the instruments from my own ship,” said Kalan quickly. “They’re . . . rather specialized. Doctor, I know you don’t want to call attention to the crash site, but can you send a team to recover a few items?”

“Certainly,” I told him. “Nerylla can organize it. In fact, I would suggest you and Tekanta go along.”

We arrived at the starport just at evening. Parnitha’s light painted the western sky in orange, crimson, and deepest violet. I glanced at the setting sun for an instant, and shivered at the thought of what might already be happening to it. Then I turned away, disciplining my mind.

Five of us walked down the long access way: Vara, Nerylla, Miranda, Kalan, and me. Six if one counted Tekanta, always present with Kalan even if not physically manifest.

“Dr. T’Soni has kept at least one personal starship since a few years before the Reaper War,” Miranda explained for Kalan’s benefit. “When she became the Shadow Broker, she inherited a small fleet.”

“She’s been out of politics for a long time, through,” objected the quarian. “Why keep a personal ship when she hardly ever leaves Thessia?”

“It’s a practical matter,” I told him, as we turned a corner and approached the observation balcony. “It’s much easier to organize a scientific expedition, after all, when you can provide your own transportation. Not to mention that I do need to travel from time to time on business, just to supervise T’Soni holdings around the galaxy. Besides, Nerylla and the rest of my protection detail hate traveling on passenger liners.”

“Impossible to arrange proper security,” said Nerylla. “You never know when you might find an uncleared yahg in your observation lounge. Or something worse.”

“You’re never going to let me live that down, are you?”

She gave me a wry grin. “Never, despoina.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” Kalan agreed. “You’re certainly wealthy enough to afford . . . a small . . .”
His voice trailed off into silence, as he looked down through the balcony window.

There, below us in the bay, a starship waited. Narrow fuselage over two hundred meters long, sleek lines typical of asari shipbuilding, powerful engines arranged on a great delta wing, the whole painted in blue-and-silver that resembled Alliance colors. The name stood prominent on the side of the fuselage, in both asari and Latin script.

*Normandy.*

“*Keelah,*” said Kalan with great reverence. “I didn’t realize you were *this* wealthy. You named it after Shepard’s vessel?”

“I have fond memories of that ship,” I murmured. “Both of them, in fact.”

“The design looks very similar.”

“There are differences. We borrowed concepts from the original human-turian collaborative design, but everything is deeply influenced by asari architectural principles.”

“This is actually the fifth asari-built frigate to carry the name,” said Vara. “Liara keeps trading them in every few decades, at considerable expense. Every time new naval technology threatens to render the old design obsolete, you see. Shepard’s *Normandy,* even the second one, would be hopelessly outclassed against our prize here.”

“I can imagine,” said Kalan. I could tell he was already eager to examine the ship more closely. Even four centuries after the Migrant Fleet returned home, quarians apparently still loved starships.

“Here,” I said, opening a channel through my *daimon* to Tekanta, sending a packet of access codes and encryption keys. “I’ll list you as a crewman and scientific specialist. You and Miranda will work together on this expedition.”

He glanced at Miranda and nodded with enthusiasm. “Gladly, Doctor. I’m also cross-trained as a combat pilot and as a ship’s engineer, if you need either of those.”

“I’ll keep it in mind, but Nerylla is a master-class combat pilot, and we have a good engineering crew as well. Come on. There’s someone else I want to introduce.”

We descended into the bay. I glanced along the ship’s length, saw signs that preparations for departure were almost complete, and nodded to myself in satisfaction. An asari crewman met us at the airlock, handed me a datapad for a quick scan, hurried off once I nodded approval.

“Good evening, ARGOS,” I called, once we had reached the bridge access corridor.

“*Good evening, Dr. T’Soni,*” came a smooth feminine voice. “*We will be ready for departure in ten minutes.*”

Kalan glanced upward. “Ah. The ship is managed by an AI?”

“That is correct, *Kalan’Tana nar Qoralis.* I am pleased to make your acquaintance, and that of your geth companion.”

“Interesting,” said the quarian warmly. “I may have heard of you. Are you the intelligence that originated on Taranis, before the Reaper War?”

“No precisely, although I experience continuity of awareness with that instantiation of my matrix.
I have, of course, been upgraded several times since then.”

“You will find ARGOS very helpful,” I told Kalan. “It began existence as a monitor for a city-wide
security system. It’s very adept at monitoring and integrating great volumes of sensory data at
once. Possibly better than any other synthetic being I’ve encountered.”

“I concur with that assessment,” said Tekanta, speaking through the ship’s comm net. “It would
require many thousands of geth runtimes to match this intelligence’s throughput capacity.”

Kalan turned to me, a wide smile on his lips. “Doctor, I have a very good feeling about this
expedition.”

Ten minutes later, Normandy soared into the air, climbing for space.

We asari have always been experts at ergonomic design. The cockpit aboard my Normandy was
sharply functional, but also comfortable and elegant, laid out in pastel blue and gold tones. The
seats were even padded with thick, soft skutos-leather. I often wondered what Jeff Moreau would
have thought of it.

I came forward just after we reached the Tasale system, to see how Nerylla was holding up through
the long series of mass-relay transitions. I need not have worried. As always, even after a hard
day’s work, she was operating the pilot’s station with careful attention, cool competence, and no
sign of fatigue. A blue-white hologram hovered in the air to her left, the Klein-bottle icon that
represented ARGOS.

“Despoina,” she greeted me.

“All’s well?” I inquired, sitting down in the co-pilot’s seat. Out of habit, I called up the ship’s
status display, and saw nothing out of the ordinary.

“Still on the flight plan, no delays, no sign of trouble. I have the sensor suite out at full, with
ARGOS looking for signs of the valdarii. Nothing so far.”

“Good.” I looked out the front viewports, watching the stars wheel past while Normandy lined
itself up in the outbound lane for the next relay.

“Despoina . . . Liara.”

She sounded unusually sober. I glanced at her in surprise, not least at her use of my name. “What is
it, Nerylla?”

“I have a bad feeling about this mission.”

“Based on what?”

She shook her head in mild frustration. “To be honest, I don’t know. I don’t have any solid
evidence to back it up. Perhaps everything that’s going on, everything we’ve learned from Kalan . . .
it reminds me a little too much of the old days.”

“I must admit that I feel the same way.” I took a deep breath. “The galaxy is always in turmoil,
Nerylla, you and I know that.”

She snorted in mock disgust. “All too well.”

“Still. As Shepard might have said: I’m getting a red alert in the back of my head. As if we might
find that all the individual bits of turmoil are not nearly as independent and unconnected as they appear.”

“Then it’s not just matriarchal intuition,” she teased.

“Not unless Vara and I are both acquiring it early.”

“May I make a suggestion?”

“Always.”

“You should contact the children,” she told me.

I nodded slowly, thinking about it.

“Young Aspasia may not have her own command yet, but she’s very well connected in the Admiralty. Let her know what we’re up to, and she can start thinking about a course of action in case we turn up something significant.” Nerylla made a gentle smile, leaning back for a moment to look up at the stars. “Then there is kēdeios.”

Beloved. I knew who she was referring to. Nerylla had always been especially devoted to my younger daughter, the one who had been named after her.

“You know as well as I, if this turns into a crisis, a political response will be imperative. Young Nerylla will be a great help. So will her patron.”

“I agree. I’ve always approved of Matriarch Thekla. Our daughter made a good choice, giving her the acolyte’s oath.” I reached out and took Nerylla’s hand affectionately for a moment. “It’s a good idea, Nerylla. Vara and I will make the calls before we reach Solveig.”

“Give kēdeios my love, when you speak to her.”

“I’ll be sure to do that. Now you shouldn’t stay on-shift too much longer. I want you back in that seat and fresh when we reach our destination.”

“Of course, despoina. I’ll go have something to eat and take a few hours of sleep, once we’re in FTL in the Caleston Rift.”

I patted her shoulder, and got up to return to the CIC.

I stayed on the command deck for several hours while we finished tracing our way through the relay network, following Kalan’s path backward, Parnitha to Fortis to Tasale to Sahrabarik to Balor. We still saw no sign of the valdarii, or of any other trouble. Eventually we reached the Caleston Rift, and transitioned to FTL for the run to Solveig.

At that point, I made sure Nerylla would keep her promise to go off-shift, turned command over to Tania Kethys, and headed for my cabin.

I saw no sign of Vara when I arrived, but I could hear water running in the refresher cubicle. I undressed, slipped through the door – closing it again quickly, so as not to let out too much warm air – and joined my bondmate in the shower.

“Mmm,” she said as I slipped my arms around her waist from behind. “No fair sneaking up on me.”

“You weren’t paying much attention.”
“It’s been a long day, and I really needed a shower.” She sighed and leaned her head back against my shoulder. “So here we are again. Off on another adventure.”

“Hardly that. We go see this star. We take enough measurements to satisfy Kalan and Miranda. Then we go to the Citadel to put our results before the Confederation. Then we go home.”

She turned in my arms, fingertips slipping along my flanks, one leg sliding between mine. “You don’t really think that will be the end of it?”

“Let’s just say I hope that will be the end of it.” I sighed and gave her a lingering kiss. “Although I don’t think that’s how I will bet.”

“You know the Confederation won’t do anything. Parliament has been in a state of chronic deadlock for years. They can barely pass an annual supply bill, much less legislate anything significant.”

Vara turned her back, inviting me to scrub it. I acceded, doing my best to linger over the task and look for nerve clusters that might distract her from politics.

“I know,” I told her. “Hard enough getting them to take the valdarii seriously. If this astronomical phenomenon turns out to be real, that will be so far outside their scope that they’ll never take action. I’m not even sure yet what action to recommend.”

“Maybe we could . . .”

“Vara. One day at a time.” My hand slipped down over her buttocks, massaging gently, and she rewarded me with a catch in her breathing. “Just thinking about getting back into politics is making me feel very weary. Right now I want to get clean, and then I would like you to take me to bed and make love to me, and then I want to sleep. I’m having a hard time recapturing the enthusiasm of my youth.”

“Well.” She turned to face me once more. “I think I might be able to help with that.”
30 October 2580, Solveig System Space

We dropped into normal geometry about twelve light-hours from Solveig, using Kalan’s strategy of observing from a distance before moving in.

“Late K-class subgiant,” Miranda announced, examining the star’s spectrum. “Which is quite impossible. When the turians first established the Sinmara outpost, this was a very typical G-class main-sequence star, just beginning to show instability.”

“Half a billion years of evolution in less than five centuries,” said Kalan. “Not to mention it’s happening about a billion years early.”

“No sign of any other stars in the immediate neighborhood,” said Miranda. “No sign of any dense interstellar clouds. Nothing that could possibly explain this.”

“There’s nothing that could explain this. Not unless all our models of stellar evolution are simply wrong.”

“There’s something Miranda Lawson once told me,” said my acolyte. “Science begins when someone stops and says, that’s strange.”

Kalan grinned happily at her. “Exciting, isn’t it?”

Slowly, almost against her will, Miranda smiled.

“What about the planets?” I asked.

“Two planets,” said Miranda. “Not quite where they should be, and I can’t account for the difference. Old stars like this tend to lose some of their mass by way of a strong stellar wind, and that causes any planets to spiral outward over time. Surtur and Thrivaldi have moved out further than they should.”

“Perhaps the star is losing mass faster than predicted. Nothing else about it seems right.”

“No.” Miranda gave me a very direct stare. “If the stellar wind was strong enough to account for all the missing mass, we would be able to detect the outflow of dust and charged particles from here. What we see is a small fraction of what would be necessary.”

I saw Kalan nod, silently but decisively, as if confirming a suspicion.

“ARGOS, do you detect any sign of valdarii activity?”

“No, Dr. T’Soni. Although there would be none at this distance unless they are actively transmitting.”

“Kalan, Miranda, do you have what you need?”

The quarian glanced at me. “Yes, Doctor. The star is over twice the size it should be, ten times as bright, and about fifteen hundred kelvins too cool . . . but it appears reasonably stable. A close flyby should be safe enough.”

“All right. Nerylla, prepare for the FTL microjump to take us down-system. I want us running
silent the instant we arrive.”

My acolyte responded from her pilot’s station on the bridge. “Understood, despoina. Ready.”

“Engage.”

The engines surged, and Normandy lifted into FTL for about ten seconds. Then boom, the shock of our return to normal geometry echoed through the hull.

“Maneuver complete. Drift negligible. Distance to the star now just less than two light-minutes. Silent running confirmed, accelerating at ten gees.”

“Engineering, how are the heat sinks?”

“Good to go for at least six hours,” answered the chief engineer, an asari named Iole. “Depending on just how close to the star we go, of course. It could get hot out there.”

“We’ll be sticking to the mission profile for now.”

“Understood.”

I looked over toward Kalan and Miranda, saw them both deeply engaged with the sensors, consulting with Tekanta and ARGOS on a constant basis. I left them alone so that science could happen.

An hour passed. Two hours. The hot yellow-orange sphere that was Solveig slowly grew in the external view. With the right filters, I could easily pick out clusters of starspots on the surface, like great dark wounds against the light. Vast prominences arched out from the limb of the star, responding to the surge and flow of magnetic fields beneath. I glanced at the heat sinks, saw them hovering well above normal, but still within safe limits.

“That’s it,” I heard Kalan say. “Look at the asteroseismic profile.”

Miranda bent close and made a noncommittal noise.

“The oscillation modes are exactly what we would expect for a subgiant of this size . . . and a mass about six percent higher than the gravitic sensors are reading.”

“Then where is the missing mass?” demanded my acolyte.

“It’s still in there,” said Kalan excitedly. “It’s just being masked off.”

I frowned, turned to walk over to them . . .

“Contacts!” shouted Nerylla from the bridge.

“Give me a tactical plot,” I snapped.

The big galaxy map in the center of the CIC vanished, replaced by a schematic of the inner Solveig system. The star occupied the center of the space; a shallow blue curve indicated our trajectory past it. Normandy’s position appeared on the curve, a flashing blue icon.

Red icons blossomed on the map as well, a tightly bound group, just behind us and a little further out from the star, accelerating hard toward us. Five of them. Five warships.

The valdarii.
“All hands,” I said calmly, “battle stations.”

Lights shifted, a loud chime sounded three times.

“Evasive maneuvers under way,” reported Nerylla.


“GARDIAN systems online,” said Miranda.

“Engineering, take us to full military acceleration,” I ordered. “Take the stealth systems offline. They already know we’re here, and we need the capacity.”

“Acknowledged,” said Iole.

*Normandy* leaped forward at a full twenty gees. I could feel the inertial compensation setting in, like an oily sensation in the back of my mind where my biotics told me about local gravitation.

“ARGOS, hail the *valdarii*. Explain we are on a peaceful scientific expedition, ask them to call off their attack.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

Vara gave me a disbelieving stare for an instant. I shrugged. *No harm in trying. Even if it’s not likely to work.*

I glanced over toward Miranda and Kalan, still hard at work at their consoles. Miranda had taken over point defense, working with ARGOS to keep us intact under fire. Kalan single-mindedly continued to gather scientific data.

“The *valdarii* are accelerating to match our course,” said Nerylla, “*but* their power-consumption curves look a bit odd. They may be struggling to keep up with us.”

“Interesting,” I murmured.


*Normandy* jinked hard to one side, trying to generate misses.

*SLAM*. Then, a few moments later: *SLAM-SLAM*. The lights flickered.

“Three hits,” Miranda reported. “Kinetic barriers at seventy-eight percent.”

“We’re nothing but a fat target,” Vara muttered.

True enough. The perennial problem with most warship design: the most powerful weapons only fire into one’s forward arc. If one is busy accelerating away from the enemy, there is no way to strike back. Nothing to do but flee, dodge, and pray for success from the point-defense grid.

I briefly considered turning to fire back.

“Second salvo on the way. Eighteen projectiles. Third salvo firing now.”

*Probably not the best idea.*

*SLAM-SLAM-SLAM-SLAM*. Four hits in rapid succession.
“Kinetic barriers at sixty percent.”

I watched the tactical plot, saw us visibly starting to pull away from the enemy ships. Not quickly enough.

“Helm, alter course. Yaw ten degrees negative and maintain acceleration.”

Vara frowned at the plot. I gave her a quick glare, and she had second thoughts.

Kalan had no such constraints. His head came up as he stared at the plot. “Doctor? That would take us . . .”

“Right across the star’s outer corona,” I said. “Yes. I’m betting the valdarii will be reluctant to follow us.”

“For good reason!” muttered Vara.

Minutes passed, as Normandy dove toward the blinding light of the star. The valdarii followed, slowly losing ground, still firing at us but with reduced effectiveness. The kinetic barriers held, barely, and then began to rise once more as the time between hits grew.

I worried more about the heat sinks. They had fallen as Iole vented plasma after our period of silent running, but now they rose again. Normandy soared less than a light-minute from Solveig, already in the star’s outer corona, subject to almost a thousand times as much incoming radiation as it would receive in a Thessian parking orbit.

“Now,” I decided at last. “Engineering, activate EM interdiction systems.”

“Acknowledged.”

All at once, the engines shut down and we went ballistic, describing a shallow, unpowered hyperbola around the star. Then we became blind, every electromagnetic sensor cut off from the outside universe at the same moment.

“Interdiction systems online. Status nominal,” reported ARGOS.

From a distance, Normandy would appear as a long, pointed ovoid, much wider toward the rear, the kinetic barriers polished to perfect-mirror sheen. Solveig’s reflected light would shine from our surface, like a tiny but brilliant second star.

The heat sinks began to fall once more, easing out of the danger zone.

“Status of the valdarii?” I asked.

“Gravitic sensors have them,” said Miranda. “They’ve turned away. Accelerating outward.”

I nodded to myself.

They can see we’re capable of going where they can’t follow. They’re not willing to throw their lives away to catch us.

They seem to be a sane and pragmatic people. Too bad we can’t communicate with them.

“Interesting technology,” observed Kalan.

“It’s new. Mostly it’s intended to hold off short-range laser weapons, like a fighter’s cannon or a
GARDIAN array. I’m not sure how often it’s been used to keep whole stars at bay.” I smiled at him. “Have you gathered the data you need?”

“I think so.”

“Good. Nerylla, stay on this heading until we’re sure the valdarii can’t catch up with us and it’s safe to shift to FTL. Then set out for the Balor relay and Earth.”

“Understood, despoina.”

31 October 2580, Interstellar Space

“Dark matter,” said Kalan.

All of us sat in Normandy’s conference room, eating a light meal from the galley while Kalan and Miranda presented their results. The quarian seemed positively exuberant as he laid out his case.

“You’re aware that the universe is actually made of dark matter, with a light froth of baryons – the matter we’re familiar with – on top.”

I nodded, remembering old lessons in cosmology.

Most technological civilizations eventually became aware that there appears to be too little matter in the universe. Weigh up all the bright matter – matter composed mostly of protons and neutrons, which makes up galaxies, stars, planets, sentient beings like us – and there isn’t nearly enough to account for the universe’s large-scale structure and evolution. Whole galaxies and galaxy clusters would never have formed, if bright matter was the only component whose gravitation brought and held them together. There must be something else, something called dark matter because it does not interact with electromagnetic energy, and so can’t absorb, reflect, or give off light. Invisible to telescopes, intangible to almost any instrument one might design, dark matter must still make up a large majority of the total matter in the universe.

“Dark matter is almost like another universe overlaid on our own,” said Kalan. “It’s composed of particles that are completely insubstantial to us – all of us have faint wisps of dark matter passing through our bodies all the time, without knowing it. The only effect it has that we can measure is gravitational. Pools and eddies of dark matter existed in the universe from the beginning. Regions of higher density in the dark-matter sea tended to pull in bright matter as well, giving rise to the way galaxies appear today, in vast sheets and filaments throughout the universe. Every galaxy has a dark-matter halo, which helps it retain its shape.”

“What does this have to do with stars dying now?” asked Vara.

“Well, just as dark matter affects bright matter through gravitation, the effect goes the other way as well. Any very large mass of bright matter will accumulate an unusual amount of dark matter as well.”

“Aha,” said Nerylla, suddenly understanding where Kalan was headed. “Like a star.”

“Exactly. Every visible star has a pool of dark matter at its core, slowly growing larger over billions of years, adding slightly to its apparent mass. Our best models for stellar evolution account for that. The effect is normally trivial . . . the dark matter just sits in there, not interacting with the star’s core any more than it ever interacts with bright matter. Normally.”

“You’re saying that something has changed in these stars,” said Miranda, her voice not as sharp as
I might have expected.  

*She is already half convinced.*

“I think so. The dark matter in their cores has altered state somehow. It’s interacting with the bright matter, pulling energy out of the nuclear reactions at the star’s core, shutting them down as if their hydrogen fuel had been exhausted. The result is premature evolution off the main sequence. Somehow the process is reducing the star’s mass as well, not much but enough to detect.”

“That those planets we saw spiraling outward slightly,” I mused. “Solveig is losing mass, but not to a stellar wind. The dark-matter core is reducing the star’s overall mass, and therefore the gravitational force it exerts on its planets.”

Miranda nodded. “Kalan’s model fits my observations of the planets’ altered orbits perfectly.”

“What’s interesting is that there is one form of dark matter which *does* interact with electromagnetic energy and bright matter,” said the quarian.

“Element zero,” said Vara.

“Right. We call it that because it’s not made of baryons at all. It contains no protons, so its atomic number has to be zero. Yet it’s solid, it can be worked and shaped, it reflects light, it alters local gravitation and the Higgs scalar field when you apply electromagnetism to it in certain ways. It’s the only substance we know of that counts as both dark matter and bright matter at the same time. As if it exists in both universes at once.”

I frowned in thought. “Well, we know that eezo forms in the cores of massive stars, because their supernova explosions scatter it out into space for us to find.”

“I wonder what would happen,” said Kalan, “if the dark matter in a star’s core was to convert from other forms to element zero in unusually large amounts.”

Miranda nodded, an expression on her face as if she experienced an epiphany. “Kalan, I would have to do some modeling . . . but that might be part of what is happening in these stars.”

“Only part?” he asked mildly.

“I don’t think wholesale production of element zero would be enough to account for all our observations,” she said. “Just dropping a quantity of eezo into a nuclear furnace wouldn’t draw any energy out of the fusion reaction. Nor would it mask off any of the star’s mass the way your model predicts.”

He sat quietly for a moment, his fingers drumming on the tabletop, and I knew he saw nothing but mathematics. “You may be right. There must be something else going on.”

“All right,” I interrupted before they could escape into abstractions. “So what is *causing* the dark matter in these stars to act up?”

Kalan came out of his trance and grinned. “I have no idea!”

Vara growled, but I had begun to understand our new friend a little. He loved a mystery for its own sake. “Is there any chance the *valdarii* are doing it?”

“No chance at all. Doctor, none of us could *possibly* work with dark matter on such a grand scale. If this phenomenon is deliberate, it represents technology millions of years beyond any of our
civilizations. If the *valdarii* were capable of such feats, they wouldn’t be bothering with piracy and colonial raids. They would have conquered the galaxy long since.” The quarian shrugged. “Besides, my observations show that this phenomenon has been going on for a while. Five or six thousand years at least. We don’t know much about the *valdarii*, but we can be sure they haven’t been a starfaring culture that long. Not even you asari have been out in the galaxy that long.”

Suddenly every asari in the room was staring at me. I nodded slowly.

The only party we know of with technology that advanced, that has been active for that long, is the Reapers. Along with the Intelligence behind them. Which, thanks to my memoirs, the entire galaxy now knows has been rebuilt on the framework of my first lover’s mind . . . with traces of mine in the recipe as well.

“I don’t think the Reapers are behind this,” I told them. “Assuming anything the Intelligence told me can be trusted, they do have the capability to manipulate stars. During at least one extinction cycle, they had to destroy as many as a million stars in order to defeat the organic civilizations of that time. But that was an extreme measure, never repeated since. Why would they begin destroying stars thousands of years in advance of a cycle they didn’t expect to lose?”

“Who knows?” said Vara. “They had backup plans for their backup plans. Maybe they always started a batch of incipient supernovae before each cycle, just in case. It does seem to be a process that takes a few thousand years to mature.”

“Then why do it so far out on the galactic rim?” I objected. “Most of the affected stars are thousands, even tens of thousands of light-years away from our civilizations. Most of the affected stars aren’t massive enough to create a supernova explosion anyway.”

Vara frowned for a moment, and then shrugged. “No idea.”

Miranda looked thoughtful. “Anything harmful that the Reapers were up to before the war, the Ascended Intelligence would have curtailed.”

Vara shook her head. “I’m afraid we don’t know that for certain.”

“I agree,” I said calmly. “I only ever had a single interview with . . . someone who claimed to represent the Intelligence, and I’ve never been able to prove anything he told me was the truth. The only evidence I have is that the Reapers abandoned their attack, and appear to have left us alone ever since.”

“If it is the Reapers behind this . . .” My bondmate shivered in her seat. Four centuries later, she too had the occasional unwelcome memory of the Reaper War to keep her awake at night. “We barely survived them once. I don’t think we’ve advanced enough to survive against them a second time.”

“What about the Leviathans?” asked Kalan. “They built the Reapers, after all, even if that wasn’t what they intended.” I shook my head. “One can never be too sure, but it seems unlikely. Ever since Shepard and Ann Bryson discovered their existence, they’ve been very quiet. Now that we know how their artifacts work, how to detect and defend against the enthrallment process, they can’t manipulate us anymore. My theory is that they’ve become so decadent, they’re happy to just wait a few million years, until all of us forget about them, and then make a move.”

Vara leaned on her arms on the table. “If it’s not the *valdarii*, it’s not the Reapers, it’s not the Leviathans . . . then who?”
“You don’t think it could be a natural phenomenon?” asked Miranda.

“Natural phenomena aren’t this sneaky,” said Vara. “Besides, if the *valdarii* aren’t causing the phenomenon, they certainly seem *correlated* with it. Maybe . . . maybe they’re allied with someone else. Someone we don’t know about.”

Silence fell around our table. All of us knew that Vara didn’t have a scrap of evidence for her theory. On the other hand, all of had learned to trust my bondmate’s instincts. She had a knack for making good guesses on insufficient data. It was a spymaster’s skill, one she had developed ever since she worked as a department head in my first information brokerage.

“We’ll be at the Citadel by morning, ship’s time,” I reminded everyone. “Miranda, Kalan, I want the two of you to assemble all your data and write the preliminary draft for a scientific paper. We’ll present your results to the Confederation, but I think we’ll also want to submit to some carefully chosen peer-reviewed journals. I’ve used that trick before, when I couldn’t get politicians to pay attention to scientific facts.”

The scientists nodded. Vara smiled, remembering.

“Vara, you and I will do the same with everything we’ve learned about the *valdarii*, their activities, and their technology. That report will be for Confederation Intelligence and the Spectres.”

“I’ve already put together a draft for you to review,” she murmured.

“Efficient as always.” I looked around the table. “Promises to keep, and miles to go before we sleep. Let’s move.”
Normandy swept down out of deep space, approaching the human homeworld.

As always when I returned to that place, I stood in the observation lounge and watched Earth grow larger in the distance. Blue-white planet, city lights shining on the dark face, golden sunlight on one limb, the tarnished silver coin of its moon off in the distance.

I recalled a more dreadful aspect of the place, that last day of the Reaper War: the city lights extinguished, bane-fires burning across whole continents, the planet shrouded in dust and ash. Even while I served as President, more than fifty years after the end of the war, Earth still looked wounded. Its ecosphere took many years to recover, while the whole planet teetered on the verge of a new ice age.

The humans had shown great courage and determination, healing their world. Now the air shone clean, the ice had been driven back to the poles, the deserts had been reclaimed, sunlight gleamed on the seas and green sprawled across the land. So many species, so much living treasure, had been lost, but at least the humans had saved what they could. One could see jungles, forests, meadows, grassy plains, vast shoals of fish, and great coral reefs on Earth once again. Not to mention shining cities, newly rebuilt to work with nature rather than against it.

There, hanging in orbit above the revitalized planet, silver and gold in the sunlight: the Citadel.

“We’ll be in dock in ten minutes,” said Vara, as she stepped up to me and slipped an arm around my waist.

“Hmm.” I sighed, settling my own arm around her shoulders and enjoying the animal comfort of her presence. “I’ll be glad to be away from here.”

“Bad memories?”

“You would think I’d be over it. I spent years on the Citadel after we established the Confederation. I accomplished so much . . . and that was just after you and I finally bonded as well. Those were very good years. But when they were over, I left and never looked back, and I find I’m never happy to return.”

She rested her head on my shoulder. “Some of our best years were spent here. But this is also where you had the worst day of your life. Hard not to remember that as well.”

I nodded. The last day of the Reaper War, the day of our victory, the day we won our survival. Such a terrible battle, so much terror and pain, so many lost. It was also the day Shepard died. Or at least the day he left me, translated into a new form I could barely comprehend.

“I wonder if he’s still out there, somewhere.”

“Probably,” she murmured, knowing as always who I meant. For both of us, he only meant one person. “For all we know, he’ll outlive the stars.”

I shivered slightly. “That seems more likely than it once did.”
I sent Vara, Miranda, and Kalan to meet with the quarian ambassador, preparing to release our scientific results and bring the Synarchy’s influence to bear. Nerylla and I went to what was still called the Council Tower, at the heart of the Citadel, so I could meet with President Yao. On the way, I reviewed what I knew from his dossier.

At that time, Yao Guozhi was a little over a century old. As a young man he served in the Alliance military, a biotic specialist and commando, reaching the rank of Staff Commander. After his retirement, he worked in ecological reclamation for almost forty years before going into politics. He rose to senior status in the Confederation Parliament before running for the Presidency. His politics seemed moderate; he had a reputation as a caretaker rather than the kind of bold leader one might hope for in a crisis. I hoped that if a crisis was upon us, he would discover the capacity within himself to meet it.

I wondered how the fifty-third President of the Citadel Confederation would react to a visit from the third. I must seem like a historical figure returned to life.

He kept us waiting, just long enough to force us to notice, not long enough to give offense. No doubt he hoped to impress his authority on us, just a little. I had to smile inwardly as I watched the clock, remembering the trick from my own time in office. Finally, his aide ushered us into the Executive Suite.

Yao stood, even came out from behind his desk to offer a polite bow and shake my hand. I saw a short human male, slightly built but still in good physical condition, with a bland round face, sharp dark eyes, and a brisk manner. His grip felt quite firm. “Dr. T’Soni. I’m deeply honored to meet you in person at last.”

“Mr. President. This is Matriarch Nerylla Essenai, my senior acolyte.”

Once again, the small, graceful bow. “Matriarch.”

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with us,” I said, taking the seat he offered. Nerylla took up a position by the door, silent and watchful.

“It is my pleasure,” said the President, sitting down behind his desk once more. “From what Ambassador Shal tells me, this is a very serious matter. Especially if it bears a connection to our adversaries, the valdarii.”

He listened patiently as I delivered my view of the situation. He asked pertinent and incisive questions. He willingly accepted files containing more detailed reports, a strategic assessment from me and Vara, a scientific paper from Miranda and Kalan.

When I had finished, he rose from his desk and crossed the room, moving to stand at a window looking out across the Presidium. He stood there in silence for several minutes, a compact figure facing away from me, hands folded in the small of his back, apparently ignoring me. I waited while his thoughts made their way to a conclusion.

“I must thank you for bringing all of this to my attention,” he said at last. “To you I will admit, as I would to few others in the galaxy, I am quite daunted by the prospect. The stars themselves, beginning to age and die? If this is not a simple natural phenomenon, if the process should accelerate and begin to work against stars in the heart of our civilization . . . what could we
possibly do to survive such a force?”

“Centuries ago, many wondered the same thing about the Reapers,” I said quietly.

“True.” He seemed to brace his shoulders. “We will study this phenomenon, learn of its causes, and find ways to oppose it. We will not repeat the mistake the galaxy made in the time of the Reapers, ignoring evidence of their existence until it was almost too late. You and your quarian friend have done a great service to the Confederation today. As I might have expected, given your history.”

“Thank you. If there is anything more I or my friends can do, you have only to ask.”

“Be certain that I will.” Still the President stood at the window, looking outward, and then he appeared to change the subject. “Dr. T’Soni, since you are here, I find I must ask you something. It regards your memoirs.”

Goddess. I had hoped to gather some attention when I published those. Perhaps not quite this much.

“A remarkable piece of work,” he continued. “I very much enjoyed reading your perspectives on the war against the Reapers.”

“Thank you.”

“I am particularly interested in your experiences with Commander Shepard.” He turned back to me, smiling slightly. “You may be aware that my military career somewhat resembled his. Although I never had the honor of fighting enemies of the same caliber.”

I looked down at the floor for a moment. “With all due respect, Mr. President . . . it was an honor Shepard would willingly have foregone. As would I.”

“No doubt.” His smile vanished. “Dr. T’Soni, I am not certain you understood all the implications of your story in today’s galaxy, before you published it.”

“I gave the matter a great deal of thought,” I said calmly.

“Perhaps. Yet you have been out of touch with politics here on the Citadel – and among humanity – for quite some time. I fear you have stirred up forces that might have better been left alone.”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you aware of the growing religious movement among humans, called the Way?”

I felt my lips twist in distaste. “To some extent. They worship Shepard.”

“That may be putting it too strongly,” said Yao, shaking his head. He returned to sit behind his desk once more. “Until recently, they could only have been said to revere Shepard, rather as Muslims revere their Prophet, or some from my home culture revere Master Kong. As I understand it, they claim that Shepard was a prophet, what they call a manifestation of God. Sent into the universe to teach, and to defend sentient life against a great evil.”

I snorted. “Mr. President, I lived quite intimately with Shepard for almost three years. If he was some manner of divine being, he concealed the fact very well.”

“One wonders whether a divine messenger might be sent without knowledge of his own nature.”
Yao shrugged. “Never mind. As you may imagine, your memoirs have had a profound effect on those who follow the Way.”

“I did have them at least partially in mind when I wrote,” I admitted. “I hoped to humanize Shepard, to demonstrate to the galaxy that he was a remarkable man . . . but no more than a man.”

“I would say that most of your account supported that objective very well.” He leaned forward, resting his forearms on his desk and staring at me intently. “Then we come to your last few chapters. Those dealing with what occurred after the activation of the Crucible, at the climax of the Battle of Earth.”

I sighed in resignation. “Yes. I suspected that part of the story might surprise many people.”

“You claim the reason the Reapers withdrew from the galaxy is that Shepard . . . ascended, in some manner. His mind became part of the Intelligence that governs the Reapers. Under his guidance, the Reapers have abandoned the extinction cycle forever.”

“That is essentially correct.”

“You have evidence for this?”

“No. Certainly the Reapers became non-hostile, almost the instant the Crucible fired. They withdrew their combat forces, and avoided doing any more harm to organic life. They repaired the mass relays. Then they appear to have withdrawn to dark space once more.”

“At least until recently,” said Yao. “I imagine you have heard the news: sightings of the Reapers at the galaxy’s edge. Still not hostile, yet still ignoring any attempts to communicate.”

“Yes, I’ve heard such rumors.” I kept my voice noncommittal, not wanting to remind the President of my daughter Aspasia’s position in the Navy. “I imagine there could be any number of explanations for their behavior.”

“Yet you claim to have gone aboard Harbinger just before the Reapers departed. You had an interview with something that presented itself as Shepard.”

“Hmm. Not quite.” I leaned back in my chair, my eyes unfocusing for a moment as I dwelled on the memory. “It appeared to be Shepard. Its mannerisms, its patterns of speech, all of them fit. Even so, it stated quite clearly that Shepard had died, that the Intelligence had only inherited his memories and personality. Enough to transform its cognitive patterns, its moral directives.”

“I see.” He stared at me for another moment. “In your memoirs, you were ambivalent about whether you believed what you had seen.”

“Objectively, speaking as a scientist? I can’t prove any of it. It could very easily have been nothing but a deception.” I blinked and returned to the present once more. “Speaking from my heart? Yes, I believe it’s true. Shepard’s mind still exists, guiding the Reapers, watching over us from afar.”

“But you do not know this.”

“No.”

“You have not been in contact with the Intelligence, or with its Shepard-like envoy.”

“Not since that one encounter, no.”
“Nor have you been in contact or consultation with members of the Way movement.”

“Not to my knowledge. I find their beliefs . . . quite distasteful.” I stared at Yao for a long moment. “Mr. President, you seem to be placing an unusual degree of importance on this minor religious movement. My understanding of humanity is that such movements are common throughout your history.”

“This movement is not so minor,” he said grimly. “As much as three percent of humanity now subscribes to its precepts. In the colonies the figure is much higher. A few human colony worlds even have majority populations belonging to the Way. There are sympathizers of the movement even in the highest ranks of the Alliance. Even here on the Citadel.”

“Doesn’t the Systems Alliance guarantee religious freedom to its citizens?”

“In principle. A human may believe as he pleases, and may practice his faith as he chooses . . . in private. The Alliance is much less tolerant of aggressive proselytization, or of militancy.”

I nodded, remembering discussions with Shepard long ago. Shortly before their emergence onto the galactic stage, the humans had gone through a period of vicious religious warfare. Shepard had spoken of Alliance military regulations, forbidding most religious discussion among service members. Apparently the Alliance had come to impose that ethic more broadly across the human population, since taking on the role of the first unified government for all of humanity.

“You are saying that the Way violates Alliance law,” I said at last.

“They seek out converts by illegal means,” he agreed, “without regard to sentient rights as defined in the Alliance Charter. They are also quite militant in their opposition to certain Alliance policies. In particular, in recent years they have taken to advocating human withdrawal from the Citadel Confederation.”

I frowned. As one of the founders of the Confederation, I felt no sympathy toward any who would promote the secession of one of its major partners.

Yao nodded. “I thought that might get your attention. Dr. T’Soni, we cannot afford disunity at this time. Especially given this new threat you describe. So you can understand why I am concerned that you appear to have supported these dissidents.”

“It was inadvertent, I assure you.” I shook my head. “Perhaps I should have omitted those chapters from my book. Although they seemed appropriate at the time. I hoped to demonstrate that our salvation came because of Shepard’s human qualities, his compassion and strength of will. He didn’t need to be a divine messenger to save us, no matter what he may have later become. He only needed to be a paragon of humanity.”

“I can sympathize with your intentions. Still, the results have been unfortunate. As an example, please examine this document.”

The President gestured, and a hologram appeared above his desk. I called on my daimon to interact with the file, and flash-read it in a few seconds.

“Oh. Oh Goddess.”

The document had been published by members of the Way, an example of apologetics, defending the movement’s beliefs against criticism. It referred to Shepard’s status as part of the Ascended Intelligence. Referred to him not simply as a divine messenger, but as himself divine, commanding the Reapers as agents of his compassion and wrath.
“This was not at all what I intended,” I muttered.

“In this case, I believe you,” said Yao. “Look at the publication date.”

I frowned.

April 2572.

Eight years before I published my memoirs, including that final revelation as to Shepard’s ultimate fate.

“For several years now, they have been teaching this concept of Shepard as a deity in command of the Reapers,” said the President. “It appears to be a new element of their doctrine, this transformation of Shepard from prophet to god. So I ask again: have you had any contact with members of the Way movement?”

His voice had gone hard with suspicion. I could see why.

“Mr. President, I give you my word. I have never had contact with this movement, so far as I know. If they had this idea even before I published my memoirs, they must have somehow developed it on their own. They did not get it from me.”

“Did you get it from them?”

I snorted. “Absolutely not.”

He watched me for another minute, and then nodded slightly. “I think I believe you. Although that only implies a deeper mystery. Where did they get the notion? It occurs to me that others may have learned of Shepard’s fate from you. Your bondmate?”

I shook my head. “Vara has known for a long time, but she never discusses my secrets with anyone. In any case, no offense intended, but she has never been much interested in humans. She has even less reason than I to work with or support the Way.”

“I hesitate to ask, but have you had any other intimate partners who might have learned what you know of Shepard?”

“Yes,” I told him, with a deep sigh. “Between Shepard and Vara, I did have . . . one other relationship. It didn’t last, and the person in question is long dead in any case.”

He lifted one eyebrow, silently asking the question. I didn’t choose to enlighten him.

“You reassure me,” he said at last. “It would have been difficult, to discover that one of the galaxy’s foremost citizens – one of my predecessors in this very office – was in support of these dangerous radicals.”

“Mr. President, is it possible that the Way has had its own contact with the Ascended Intelligence?”

He made an infinitesimal shrug. “Where such powers are concerned, I suppose that anything is possible. The question then becomes, why?”

“I have no idea.”
“Neither do I.” He stood behind his desk. “In any case, based on what you and your scientific team have discovered, we appear to have larger concerns to deal with. Once more, I am deeply grateful to you for bringing this matter to my attention.”

“It was my pleasure to serve.” I smiled at him, sensing the interview was over, rising from my own seat. “If I may offer a piece of advice, from someone who has also sat in that chair . . . a foreign enemy is likely to be the greater threat, if only because it is less understood.”

“Perhaps. Of course, the Way represents an idea. Like every other religious or ideological movement that has swept across humanity in the past, leaving nothing but wreckage in its wake. Like Cerberus, in its day. Ideas can be more dangerous than any merely physical enemy.”

I shook the President’s hand, trying not to frown at the gleam I saw in his eyes as he made his final statement.

A gleam that looked uncomfortably like fanaticism.

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Nerylla and I boarded a lift back down to the Presidium ring. As usual, her instincts were good. After a glance to read my expression, she remained silent, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

It was good that the Confederation would take action on the valdarii threat. Yet I felt deep frustration with all I had learned from President Yao about the Way.

_They claim to revere Shepard, but they know nothing of what he stood for, and they don’t appear to have learned anything from his life. He would have despised them._

_Goddess. How did they learn about Shepard’s fate before I published?_

I shook my head.

_Never mind. This is a human problem; it has nothing to do with me. Let the Confederation and the Alliance deal with it. So long as it doesn’t distract anyone from the real threat . . ._

An abrupt jolt. Still two-thirds of the Council Tower’s height from its base, the lift car suddenly decelerated to a stop. I staggered and would have fallen, had Nerylla not been there to brace me.

“What’s happening?” I wondered.

_{Daimon. Contact Citadel Security._

_{I am sorry, Dr. T’Soni. All bandwidth to the Citadel networks has been cut off. I cannot communicate._

I exchanged a shocked glance with Nerylla, who must have consulted with her own daimon and gotten the same results. She opened her omni-tool, scanning the back of the car where the drive machinery resided.

I got almost no warning, only Nerylla’s sharp gasp. Then she went into smooth, rapid motion.

She called up her biotic corona in one hand, directing a powerful burst of energy at the outside wall of the car, the transparent crystal that gave us a magnificent view of the Presidium and the ward arms far below.

The crystal shattered.
Nerylla’s other hand seized my shoulder. With a great cry, she hurled me out through the sudden opening, the recoil staggering her for an instant.

I flew out into open space, over a kilometer above the Presidium ring, and gently began to fall.

I managed to turn halfway around in mid-air, looking back toward the lift car from which I had just been ejected.

Just in time to see an explosive gout of flames devour the entire car, incinerating Nerylla in the process.
Pursuit

1 November 2580, Presidium Ring/Citadel

“Nerylla!”

Gone. I knew it at once. Nobody could have survived that explosion. Had she not acted so quickly and decisively, we would both have been killed.

For a few seconds, I couldn’t move past horrified denial.

Nerylla, dead?

It was even worse than when I saw my mother mortally wounded, and had to hold her in my arms while she died. In some ways I had been closer to Nerylla than I ever was to my mother, and she and I had been partners for a much longer time.

Then the cold, rational, ruthless part of my mind took over.

If you don’t want to join her, you had better pay attention.

The Council Tower was already beginning to slide past me with considerable speed. Even the light centrifugal force in effect at my height felt like about half a gee. By my reckoning, I had less than forty-five seconds before becoming a purple spot somewhere in the Wards.

I turned in mid-air again, this time facing downward, my arms and legs spread wide. I could see I was already too far out from the Tower to maneuver back into its local artificial gravity field. I would have to make a soft landing. Somehow.

My corona snapped into existence, wrapping me in a caul of blue-white fire.

It helped, a little. I could feel my effective mass decrease, until I fell like a great bag of feathers rather than sixty kilos of meat and bone.

Unfortunately, I continued to fall. After all, it was not gravity, acting on my mass, that was the problem. It was the ponderous rotation of the Citadel, imparting centrifugal force to me, and that would continue no matter how little mass I had.

I glanced around me, the wind of my passage starting to pull tears from my eyes. I couldn’t get back to the Tower. Could I at least bend my trajectory toward the Presidium ring, rather than the ward arms?

Maybe.

It was one of the more difficult biotic feats I ever attempted, bending space just so in my vicinity, applying a false-gravity vector to my fall. My trajectory curved slightly, then some more.

The buildings on the far edge of the Presidium ring seemed to grow in size. Much too quickly.

Come on. Come on . . .

Half-blind, I pushed my corona to the limit, pain in the back of my skull warning me not to go too far. I ignored the pain.
Blazing like a star, a shrill scream trailing behind me like a comet’s tail, I plunged through the Presidium’s false sky.

I glanced down.

*Thank the Goddess.*

In the last few seconds, I turned again in mid-air, missing one of the cross-walks at the top of the Presidium by about four meters. I locked my feet together, my arms above my head.

I came in at a steep angle, feet-first, almost into the center of one of the Presidium’s reservoir-lakes. I felt a great slap against my biotic barrier, then against my feet, finally against my whole body. No doubt I sent up an enormous fan of water as I plunged into the depths.

For an instant, I simply rejoiced that I was alive and seemed to have taken no serious injury.

Then I started fighting for my life. Deep in the water, not sure for a moment which way was up, I realized the formal outfit I had worn to visit President Yao was *not at all* suited for diving.

Fortunately, it was easy to wiggle my way out of it. Stripped down to my briefs, I kicked off for the surface.

I broke the surface a few moments later, gasping for air, shaking water out of my eyes so I could orient myself. I saw some landmark nearby, on the very edge of the water, and headed for it with smooth strokes. Soon I scrambled out of the water onto solid ground, a blue-skinned Aphrodite rising out of the foam, ignoring the wide-eyed stares of a dozen Presidium pedestrians.

I looked again at the landmark which had caught my eye.

*Oh Goddess. Wouldn’t you just know it?*

I stood at the base of Shepard’s heroic statue: Savior of the Citadel, Conqueror of the Collectors, Reconciler of the Krogan, half a dozen other titles of legend.

I had always hated that statue. Far too idealized.

“There she is!”

*What?*

Black-armored figures, running my way, brandishing weapons. The Citadel’s citizens shouted in alarm and scrambled to get out of the way.

Whoever they were, they weren’t C-Sec.

“Death to the blasphemer!”

It might have been a long time since I was last in danger of my life, but I soon found there was nothing wrong with my reflexes.

*Tactical assessment: at least six humans in armor with assault rifles. Me, alone, mostly naked, dripping, no kinetic barriers available, not even carrying my sidearm. Best course of action . . .*

I turned and ran like a thief, looking for cover, some way to break line-of-sight.

Gunfire pursued me.
I skidded to a halt, turned sharply, sprinted up a staircase onto a raised concourse. Behind me, more pedestrians turned to stare, only to be knocked aside by my armed pursuers.

At least I seemed to be gaining on them. I had kept myself in peak physical condition ever since the Reaper War. I also wasn’t wearing anything that might slow me down.

*How can you still be cut off? We’re in the middle of the Presidium. There must be a hundred access points within range.*

*I have no explanation. I have run a top-level diagnostic. My systems appear to be in good order.*

I dove over a low wall, crouched in its cover for a moment as I looked behind me, ignoring the startled cries of a restaurant’s customers all around.

Black-armored figures, still in pursuit.

“Death to the whore of Satan!”

I dropped a singularity in their path, enjoyed a moment’s satisfaction as the two leading pursuers got caught up in its vortex. A quick check to make sure no civilians were too close, and then a quick warp into the heart of the singularity . . .

**BOOM.**

*There. Two of them down, and the rest may be more cautious now.*

*Well, keep trying.*

*Yes, Doctor.*

Staying low, I moved between tables, vaulted another low wall at the opposite end of the restaurant’s frontage, and jogged down a side street. Covered by buildings on either side, I began to feel a little safer.

For a moment. Then I heard shouts behind me, more armored men in pursuit. I glanced over my shoulder, saw one of them hoist a heavy weapon to his shoulder.

*Oh Goddess!*

I dove for cover, crouching behind a massive steel-and-concrete planter, just as a rocket soared close and exploded. Luckily, it fell short, and my cover saved me from any more than a moment’s stunned shock.

Half-blinded, I emerged just enough to throw a fusillade of biotic warps back the way I had come. It must have worked. When I looked again, my foes had all taken cover. I ran once more.

*Where is C-Sec?*

Even if I couldn’t call Citadel Security, they *had* to be aware of a problem on the Presidium. The explosion on the side of the Council Tower would have been visible across most of the Citadel. Hundreds of people had seen a former President of the Confederation emerge from the lake, and then flee at a dead run, pursued by armed attackers. Someone should have made a report.
A call from someone I didn’t recognize, coming over my daimon-implant.

{Yes!}

{Thank God. Kamala Sarabhai, Special Tactics and Reconnaissance. What’s your situation?}

A Spectre?

Suddenly my daimon sent me a data-flash: Spectre identity and authentication codes. I multi-tasked for a moment, examining the data, even as I ducked down a new street and sprinted through a scattered crowd, trying to break the pursuit once more.

The authentication codes checked out. In my mind’s eye I saw a dark brown face, dark eyes, black hair, delicate features, a wide white grin, average height but very athletic, quite attractive. A gestalt of her military career: Alliance Marines, trained in commando work and combat engineering, decorated several times for valor, recruited into the Spectre corps about four years previous.

Sarabhai certainly looked legitimate. She reminded me of Samantha Traynor, if Samantha had been a combat specialist instead of a technical expert.

{My situation could be better. Someone just tried to assassinate me on the Council Tower, they did kill my lead acolyte, and now I’m being chased by well-armed humans shouting religious slogans.}

A short pause, then: {I was afraid of that. Doctor, you need to stop transmitting. Whoever these people are, they’ve infiltrated the Citadel networks. They’re tracing you by your message traffic.}

I felt a moment of doubt, but the Spectre’s advice seemed sensible enough. I wasn’t getting through to anyone else in any case.

{Daimon, go silent.}

{Yes, Doctor.}

{Good,} said Sarabhai. {Now, where are you? I can be there in a few moments.}

The doubt rose higher. After all, Spectre or no, I didn’t really know anything about her.

{I have a better idea. If you can reach my daimon, you can put me in contact with my people, and they can come rescue me. You’ll forgive me if I’m not my usual trusting self today.}

A hint of rueful laughter over the link.

{Doctor, you have a reputation for a lot of things, but naïve trust isn’t one of them. Unfortunately, I don’t think that would do us much good. Someone – possibly the same people – just tried to kill Vara T’Rathis outside the Synarchy Embassy.}

I felt a moment’s terrible panic. Vara?

{Don’t worry, I think she’s okay. She and your other people got back inside the Embassy, and Ambassador Shal has locked the place down. I can get you there, or back to your ship, but not if these lunatics get to you first!}

“There she is!”
Armored figures, this time ahead of me. They had caught me in a pincer movement.

I changed directions, ran in the front entrance of an emporium, ignored the querulous objections of its hanar proprietor. A burst of biotic force violently opened a low-security door. I moved through the stock-room in the back.

More shouts behind me, and renewed gunfire. I reached a decision.

{I’m on Sarnath Plaza, third tier, in the Enkindled Ones Offer Superlative Technical Wisdom emporium. Moving toward the back.}

{Got it. Hole up. I’ll be there in two minutes.}

Sound tactical advice. I ducked down between two rows of shelves, crouching in shadows, and waited.

Bang. The door opened again, violently enough to fall out of its track. Bulky figures entered the stock-room.

“She’s got to be in here somewhere. Search the place.”

I moved further back into the corner, doing my best to imitate a shadow. Bare feet helped.

Interesting. They sound very pragmatic and not at all zealous, now that they’re no longer in public.

Unfortunately, they were quartering the space very efficiently. The area in which I could stay out of sight had begun to dwindle rapidly. I glanced around, wondering if it was time to call up my corona again and go out in a blaze of glory.

{Doctor? You may want to keep your head down.}

{Why . . .}

SLAM!

The back wall of the building blew inward in a cloud of dust and rubble.

Gunfire again, this time from the direction of the explosion. I peeked out of my cover and saw another black-armored figure, this time shorter and clearly female, laying down a storm of weapons fire across the shattered stock-room. She gestured with her left hand, and an overload charge flew across the room to break one of my pursuers’ kinetic barriers.

I could recognize an opportunity when I saw one. I emerged from cover, my biotic corona surged, and I began flinging warps and telekinetic throws at the foe. Flanked, the enemy went down in short order.

My rescuer removed her helmet once all had gone quiet. I immediately recognized her from her credentials, nothing changed except her hair, braided and coiled around her head to keep it out of her way.

“Dr. T’Soni, I presume.” Goddess, she even had the musical accent I remembered from long ago, what some humans called Received Pronunciation. One eyebrow lifted in irony. “Do you always get into combat situations in the buff?”

“Only when they begin with me falling off the Council Tower into a lake. My formal gown didn’t exactly permit freedom of movement.”
I can imagine. Well, Doctor, I’m glad I got here in time. We had best be on our way.”

“Just a moment.”

I paced over to one of the fallen enemy, crouched down to search him quickly. No insignia, no ID . . . but he did have an omni-tool. I pulled it away from his wrist. Then I flipped his helmet visor up, looked down at a pale human-male face, brown eyes and a few days’ growth of stubble. He didn’t look like a religious fanatic. Of course, as an asari I had almost no experience with religious fanaticism to which I could refer.

“Doctor? I would really like to get you somewhere safe before more of them show up.”

I glanced at her, not bothering to conceal my suspicions. “You’re quite sure there are more of them?”

“I’m quite sure I don’t want to take the risk.”

“All right.” I rose and walked across to her, ignoring the look on her face in response to my near-nudity. “Do you have some transportation?”

“This way,” she said, and led me out what had once been the back wall of the emporium.

Hovering just above a small courtyard, I saw a ship: tiny, not even the size of a corvette, probably barely large enough for two people, but certainly more than a simple skycar or shuttle. I saw the Spectre logo on the hull, right by the open hatch.

I stepped aboard, Sarabhai right behind me, and heard the hatch close. I didn’t hear her give any commands, but she must have interacted with the ship through a VI implant. The ship began to rise, clearing the buildings on all sides, beginning to turn.

“Let’s go to the Synarchy Embassy,” I suggested. “I want to see whether Vara and the others are safe.”

The Spectre made a noncommittal noise, busy putting her weapons and gear away in a locker by the hatch.

“Do you know who those people were?” I asked, staring out the front port at the view of the Presidium, looking for more signs of my attackers. “Maybe they were with the Way.”

“They weren’t with the Way,” said Sarabhai.

“How do you know?”

A sudden stinging sensation, in the juncture between my neck and shoulder. I whirled, to see the human stepping calmly back, watching me, an injector still in her hand.

“Because I am,” she said calmly.

I tried to object, clench my fist, or call up my biotics. None of it worked.

My knees buckled. I pitched forward into the Spectre’s arms.  

Darkness.
When I awoke, I felt disoriented for several moments.

I lay in a comfortable bed, a light coverlet spread over me. I felt fine for the most part, except for an odd sensation of silence in the back of my mind. The air smelled fresh and clean, with a hint of pollen and cut grass. I could hear a soft breeze and the quiet hum of insects nearby.

Then I remembered that I had been abducted. I remembered that I had no idea where Vara or my other loved ones were, or even if they still lived. I remembered Nerylla, spending the last instants of her life to give me the chance to save my own.

My eyes burned with tears. My jaw set, my teeth ground together, with the effort to hold in a low moan.

Then another thought came to me.

That was no accident. Nerylla was murdered . . . and I think I may know who is the murderer.

Grief receded for the moment, before a surge of something else. An ice-cold rage.

I opened my eyes, brushing the tears away so I could see.

The room around me was small, cozy and human, full of sturdy furnishings made of richly patterned cloth and dark wood. Restful cream, pale blue, and forest green colors met my eye. Golden sunlight streamed in through an open window by my bedside, which also admitted the pleasant outside air.

I propped myself up on one elbow. I found myself nude under the covers, but I could see clothes neatly folded nearby: undergarments, trousers, jacket, boots, even a minimal headdress to fit my status in asari society, all in white and cobalt blue. They looked a little like an outfit I had worn long ago, in the years just before the Reaper War. Somehow I knew they would fit me. On a dresser next to the chair, I saw a pitcher of ice water, condensation beading on the glass, and two tumblers.

Someone has gone to great lengths to see to my comfort.

{Daimon?}

Still nothing but silence. My VI implant was off-line.

Someone has also gone to great lengths to ensure I can’t communicate.

Where am I?

Furnishing styles and color choices typical of humans, much of it hand-crafted. Emphasis on wood, cloth, and glass, not high-technology materials. No sign of advanced communications or computer equipment. Somewhere in Alliance space, probably a colony world.

I rose from the bed and began to dress.

I glanced out the window as I shrugged into the jacket.

*Green vegetation, much of it of Earth origin: grass, trees, flowering plants. Sky perhaps a bit deeper blue than one would see on Earth. Air pressure well within the comfort zone for humans or asari, plenty of oxygen in the mix, no obvious pollutants. Moderate temperature and humidity. No scent of sea air.*

I put on the headdress with practiced ease, framing my face with twin strips of white cloth.

*Not many other buildings in the area. Small two-story houses set some distance apart along a grassy lane, storage buildings, no commercial or industrial facilities within sight.*

*Goddess. I think I know this place.*

A knock at the door. I turned as it opened.

A male human entered the room, cautiously at first, and then more confidently once he saw I was awake and dressed. I had never seen him before. Tall, lanky, his hair and beard dark but going silver, pale skin and grey eyes, simple clothes in subdued colors, about a century old. His peaceful expression and gentle smile tempted me to be at ease, despite my suspicions.

“I thought I heard you moving around,” he said, his voice a mild baritone. “It’s good to meet you properly at last, Doctor. My name is Clarke. Elias Clarke. Welcome to Springfield.”

“This is Mindoir, isn’t it?” I asked calmly.

He nodded. “That’s right. Impressive, that you recognize our world without even going outside.”

“I’ve been here before.” I sighed. “Once, a few years after the Reaper War, at the invitation of the colonial government.”

“I’ve seen vids of the occasion,” said Clarke. “The dedication of the Shepard Memorial, in New Paris. That must have been painful for you.”

“Somewhat.” I stared at him. “Forgive my rudeness, but how did I get here?”

“Kamala brought you.”

“Kamala Sarabhai. The Spectre.”

“That’s right. It’s been about two days since you left the Citadel. You’ve been kept under sedation for most of that time.”

“I’ve been kidnapped, in other words.”

“If you like,” he said, that gentle smile spreading across his face once more. “Kamala is rather direct in her methods, but she means well. Doctor, I can assure you, no one here means you the slightest harm.”

I gave him my best aristocratic glare. “Then I assume I’m free to go.”

He had the good grace to look embarrassed. “Well. Aside from that.”

I clenched my fist. “I think you had better reconsider that position . . .”

Then I had to stop, because something rather important had failed to happen.
I stared down at my fist. The one not currently haloed in blue-white light.

“Ah, about that,” said Clarke, almost apologetically. “For the moment, we’ve had to disable your biotic capabilities. Omega-five enkephalin. Harmless in the long run, and your biotics will return as soon as the drug is no longer in your system, but for now we can’t afford the risk.”

“The risk that I’ll shatter your skull with a gesture?” I suggested.

“More than that. Until we can be sure what you are, your very presence here is a terrible threat.”

“You don’t know what I am?”

He lifted one hand to stroke his beard, watching me calmly. “In one sense we do. You are Dr. Liara T’Soni. Scientist, entrepreneur, spymaster, revolutionary, diplomat, politician, once the President of the Citadel Confederation, now retired but still very influential in asari space and beyond. We call you the Widow.”

The Widow, I repeated silently, not liking the implications.

“You’re with the Way,” I accused him. “I’m important to you . . . because I was Shepard’s wife.”

“Yes,” he said quietly. “You’ve always held great honor among us, both for your role in the Shepard’s embodied life, and for the great things you’ve accomplished on your own.”

“Such honor,” I said, not bothering to conceal the contempt in my voice. “You drug me, abduct me, cut me off from my friends and allies, rob me of abilities that are central to my very life as an asari. Rarely have I ever felt so honored.”

He sighed. “I understand. You have my profoundest apologies, but all of this is necessary. You don’t know everything that’s at stake.”

I turned my back on him in disgust. We stood in silence for a long moment.

“Doctor, I’m sure you’re hungry,” he said at last. “I understand you’re comfortable with most human foods, with the significant exception of coffee. My wife and I would be happy to whip up a good old-fashioned country breakfast for you. We can talk about this.”

I glanced aside to give him my profile, not quite turning to look at him directly.

“Please,” he appealed. “Give us a chance to explain what’s going on.”

He sounded so damnably reasonable. I could still feel my rage, coiled deep in my gut, just waiting for a chance to escape . . . but I began to suspect that Elias Clarke was not its proper target.

“Suppose I agree to listen,” I said after a moment. “If I don’t agree to fall in line with whatever you’re proposing, what happens then?”

I heard him take a deep breath. “Then we would find a way to let you go. It might take a few days, but we have no interest in keeping you here against your will for long.”

I turned and gave him a sharp glare. “I’m not sure I believe you. I am not happy with this ramshackle religion you’ve built up around the very mortal man I loved.”

To my surprise, he smiled at me once more. “Doctor, knowing what we know about you, that does not surprise me in the least. I give you my word: we have no more interest in converting you to our way of thinking than we do in offering you any physical harm. All we want is your understanding.
Perhaps, if we’re very fortunate, an alliance.”

“No promises,” I told him, “but I take my pancakes with butter and maple syrup.”

“I think we can manage that.”

Breakfast was very good.

Jeanne Clarke turned out to be a petite woman, with silver-blond hair, a round face, and merry blue blue eyes. She welcomed me to her kitchen with sincere generosity, inviting me to sit at her table while she and her husband prepared the morning meal. The two of them used low-technology but very effective methods. As an accomplished cook myself, I could appreciate their technique. Not to mention that they happily fed me until I could barely move.

They seemed determined to treat me as a welcome guest, not as a kidnap victim or a prisoner. I wondered what they would do if I simply walked out their front door and set out down the street outside.

*Probably smile pleasantly and produce a stun gun. Or call on their pet Spectre to stop me. Without my biotics I’m fighting at a severe disadvantage.*

So I stayed in my seat, ate that very fine meal, talked politely with the Clarkes, and remained watchful.

Elias and Jeanne told me about the Way.

“It all started with the Bahá’í faith,” said Elias.

I shook my head. “I’m afraid I’ve never heard of it.”

“No reason you should,” he admitted. “They never held much influence on Earth. They began a little over seven hundred years ago, an offshoot of Shia Islam at first, although they quickly started borrowing ideas from other major human religions as well. They recognized major figures from other faiths as a series of prophets, as manifestations of God.”

“I’ve heard that phrase before,” I told them. “You regard Shepard as a manifestation of God.”

“That’s right.” Jeanne peered at me over her coffee cup. “You may have heard that we worship Shepard. That’s not true. Like the Bahá’í before us, we’re strict monotheists. To us there is only one God, creator of the universe, benevolent and compassionate, who remains concerned for the welfare of all creatures. Only the one God is worthy of worship. On the other hand, we believe that God sometimes chooses to manifest in the universe, to provide guidance, or to take a hand in events for our benefit. So we recognize the presence in history of such Manifestations, beings with specific missions. Angelic messengers, inspired prophets, and so on.”

“The Bahá’ís didn’t always have a happy time of it on Earth,” said Elias. “From the beginning, most Muslim societies regarded them as apostates, and persecuted them. As with many minority faiths, they suffered persecution almost everywhere during the period of religious conflict, in the twenty-first and early twenty-second centuries. One of the few countries that continued to protect their rights was India, so over time a large Bahá’í community took root there. Then when humanity began to settle the galaxy, many Bahá’ís, both Indians and others, moved to the colonies. Including to Mindoir.”

“Were they here when the batarians raided?” I asked.
“Yes.” Elias shook his head and looked grim. “Those early settlers suffered terribly, as you may imagine. More Bahá’ís came afterward, to help with the rebuilding. Even before the Reaper War, there was probably a higher proportion of Bahá’ís here than anywhere else in Alliance space. Then Mindoir was very fortunate during the war. The Collectors never came here, Cerberus never occupied the planet, and the Reapers only arrived a few days before the end of the war. They didn’t have time to do nearly as much damage as they did elsewhere.”

Jeanne rested her arms on the table, leaning on them comfortably. “So after the war, Mindoir was relatively intact. As the Alliance rebuilt, we were able to lend some aid to other colonies that had been more badly hurt. Our ancestors took a lot of pride in that . . . and in the part our most famous citizen played in saving the galaxy.”

I nodded. “I can see it now. At some point, some of the local Bahá’ís must have decided that Shepard was another one of these manifestations.”

“That’s about the size of it,” said Elias. “Our ancestors didn’t have your memoirs at the time, of course, but they had plenty of other sources for Shepard’s life. The Alliance had released an official biography. Admiral Williams published a memoir before she died in the Salarian War. Primarch Vakarian gave many interviews, in which he spoke about his impressions of Shepard. Late in her life, Miranda Lawson published an historical retrospective. Even you dropped a few hints over the years, despite your reticence to speak of him.

“By about fifty years after the war, the idea had become fairly widespread among the Bahá’ís of Mindoir, that Shepard had been the latest prophet. The Way grew from that, although I suppose we’re not really orthodox Bahá’ís anymore. The original faith still exists, but they continue to regard Bahá’u’lláh as the most recent Manifestation, and they don’t expect another one for several more centuries. We of the Way have placed our spiritual bets on Shepard, as it were.”

“It seems strange,” I mused, “that a man who didn’t explicitly teach and never wrote anything of his own would be considered a prophet.”

“Several of the Manifestations have taught by example, or by word of mouth,” said Jeanne. “Then other people have had to record and compile their teachings for later generations to read.”

“That seems like an opportunity for those scribes to distort the record and impose their own beliefs.”

“No doubt that happens,” she agreed, watching me with a sympathetic gleam in her eye. “Rather like the Athame Doctrine among your people, if I’m not mistaken.”

“If you’ve read my memoirs, you know how the truth of that turned out.”

Elias smiled gently. “Doctor, I would be hard-pressed to find any member of the Way who has not read your memoirs.”

“I never intended to provide you with a sacred text,” I growled.

“It’s only been a few months,” he assured me. “I doubt anyone takes your book as sacred yet. I can attest that it was very inspiring. To read such an intimate account of Shepard’s life, and yet one that still demonstrates how remarkable a man he was . . . .”

“He was only a man,” I stated flatly. “Nothing more.”

“Why couldn’t he have been both?” Jeanne asked. “A mortal, fallible man and a manifestation of God?”
I stared at her in disbelief, not sure where to begin.

“There’s an old story I think is relevant,” she said. “A man is at home when he hears on the news that an enormous rain-storm is coming. This man is very devout, so of course he turns to God right away. He prays: please, God, send me a miracle.

“His neighbors are about to flee in their cargo van and they have room, so they offer to take him in, but no, he’s sure God will help him. The rain comes, and the river next to his house breaks its banks and begins to flood his land. He prays again: please, God, send me a miracle, save me from this terrible storm.

“Then he sees a woman out on the water in a boat, making her way to safety. The woman offers to bring him on board, but he says no, he has faith, he’s still waiting for God to intervene. The flood waters rise and he has to climb up onto his roof to escape. He prays yet again: please, God, I’m desperate, send me a miracle or I’m going to die.

“The local government sends an aircar out to search for refugees. The crew spots him there, clinging to the highest spot on the roof of his house. They offer to rescue him, but he still says no, he’s waiting for God to save him. The waters rise some more, the man can’t hang on any longer, and he drowns. Since he’s a devout and good man, he goes to Heaven and gets to meet God face to face. At this point he’s a little annoyed. I prayed for help over and over, God. Why didn’t you save me?”

I saw it then, and couldn’t help but smile.

“So God looks at him and says: I sent you a van, a boat, and an aircar. What more did you want?”

I chuckled and nodded. “I get it. You’re arguing that the divine works through what look like ordinary people and events.”

“Sometimes,” agreed Elias. “We believe that miracles happen, of course . . . but more often than not, the universe becomes a better place because ordinary people have been inspired to work hard, keep faith, hope for the best, and make things turn out the way they should. We don’t have time to wait for some big, splashy divine intervention to solve all our problems. That’s not how God normally operates anyway. It teaches us what needs to be done, and then it expects us to roll up our sleeves and get to work.”

Despite myself, I felt a sting behind my eyes, a tear that didn’t quite emerge to roll down my face. “That sounds very much like something Shepard would have said.”

“Thank you,” he said sincerely.

The day passed much more pleasantly than I might have expected. I spent hours with Elias and Jeanne, going with them to tour the small town where they lived, the farmland they and their robots maintained. I met other members of their community, members of the Way, who treated me with quiet respect but no great awe. I saw no evidence of extremism or fanaticism, and I must admit I came away with a much more favorable impression of their religion than I had before.

I didn’t forget the fundamental facts, of course. Almost everyone I met carried at least a light sidearm, which meant they were better armed than I. Very calmly and gently, very firmly, the Clarkes and their neighbors kept me well away from any technology I might have used to contact the extranet or call for help. They took pains to point out Springfield’s isolation, its location in a wide valley over a hundred kilometers from the nearest other settlement. I remained a prisoner.
I dissembled, calm and polite, appearing to have no interest in escape.

Eventually, the local night came and I retired to my room in the Clarke residence. I undressed, slipped under the covers, tossed and turned convincingly for a few minutes, and then came to rest with my left hand under my cheek and my right concealed against my body. My eyes closed. I began to breathe deeply and evenly.

Under the blanket, I tapped my right thumb against my index finger. Thumb against ring finger. Thumb against index finger again.

Four fingers. I could select two bits at a time, transmitting them through the backup connection wired through my right hand, my arm, my shoulder, the top of my spine, my brain. One tap for two bits. Four taps for a single character. Dozens of taps for even a short message.

A message like the clandestine reactivation code for my daimon.

When I felt a short but very distinctive itch against the back of my neck, I knew the implant still worked, even if the Way had deactivated its primary input-output channels.

Slowly, painstakingly, I began to apply the tools I had to the problem of my captivity.
I was left in Jeanne’s care for most of the next day. Elias had to travel to New Paris, to attend an emergency session of something called the *Spiritual Assembly of Mindoir*.

Curious, I asked Jeanne about the Way’s organization, and came away suitably impressed. A *Spiritual Assembly* was a board of at least nine members, elected by vote from among ordinary members of the Way, which provided governance for a single community, a region, or possibly an entire world. Elias was a member of the Spiritual Assembly for the entire planet. Since the Way had begun on Mindoir, that planetary Assembly was the most senior in the galaxy. I was apparently the unwilling guest of one of the Way’s most influential leaders.

*Not entirely surprising. My presence here seems to be a matter of very high policy.*

I spent most of that morning and early afternoon being the perfect house-guest, making every outward sign of friendly cooperation. I asked Jeanne polite questions about Mindoir and the Way, told her stories of my own, ate a hearty meal that she prepared, and went for a walk outdoors with her. I made no attempt to use my biotics or connect to the extranet through my *daimon*. All the while, I watched my jailor.

Soon after the mid-day meal, a call came in on the household comm console in the living room. I had already noticed that the Clarkes, like most members of the Way, didn’t use VI implants. Jeanne would have to physically go and answer the call. She glanced at me, apparently decided I posed no threat, and rose from the table.

Leaving me alone in the kitchen.

I didn’t get up from my place at the table. Instead I leaned back in my chair, reviewing the house’s layout in my mind.

*About three meters to the most likely location of the computer core. Probably . . . right behind that wall. Close enough.*

My right hand moved slightly, as if fidgeting with nervous energy. Thumb to third finger, little finger, ring finger, little finger again.

*Go.*

Nothing seemed to happen. I considered that a good sign, since it meant no alarms had gone off and Jeanne Clarke wasn’t about to return to the kitchen with a weapon in hand. At worst, my half-crippled *daimon* would fail to safely hack open a clandestine channel into the household computer, and I would have to rethink.

Five seconds. Ten.

Then I felt a momentary itch on the back of my right hand. I very carefully did *not* make the rather vindictive smile I had in mind. When Jeanne returned to the room, she found me sitting calmly at my place, sipping a cup of hot chocolate.

*Step one: complete.*
I sat at ease on the Clarkes’ front porch, enjoying the cool of early evening, listening to the Mindoir night-callers as they began to set up their plaintive chorus of hooting cries in the nearby woods. I saw Elias return home, walking up the long path from the aircar landing pad. With him arrived another guest.

Kamala Sarabhai.

She looked very different in civilian clothes, tough denim trousers and a brief top, carrying no more than a sidearm at her hip to discourage the local wildlife. Her hair fell unbound, cascading in glossy black waves down her back, and her stride seemed bold and carefree. She gave me a challenging stare as she approached.

“If you’ve been to the Citadel, then you owe me some news,” I told her.

“Fair enough. Your bondmate and your other friends are safe, Doctor. Ambassador Shal very loudly put them under the Synarchy’s protection, and insisted they be permitted to return to Normandy at once. No excuses from the Confederation, nothing about an investigation or any such nonsense, just they get to leave now or there’s an interstellar incident. And when Normandy did leave, it had an escort of geth ships all the way to the mass relay.”

My eyes went wide. “Goddess. It sounds as if the ambassador started an incident anyway.”

“He had good reason, given that President Yao was behind the attempt to kill you, Vara T’Rathis, and your acolytes.” She snorted in derision. “Bastard didn’t want to agree, but he couldn’t object once Shal made such a stink. Not without tipping his hand to half the galaxy.”

I nodded slowly. “I think that was clear from the beginning. The President asked me who knew about Shepard’s ultimate fate. Since I hadn’t divulged it verbally to anyone until I published my memoirs, he wondered with whom I might have shared the knowledge during an asari joining. I mentioned Vara as the only one still alive. Then, within the hour, she and I both came under attack.”

Kamala gave me a sharp glance, inferring what I hadn’t said openly, but not asking the question.

“But that’s just a strong inference,” I concluded. “How do you know President Yao was behind the attack?”

“Because I saw the mission orders,” said the Spectre.

“She was foolish enough to order such a thing openly?”

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“Because I saw the mission orders,” said the Spectre.

“President Yao was foolish enough to order such a thing openly?”

“There wasn’t anything open about it. It had the highest level of classification.” She shrugged ruefully. “Until three days ago, nobody on the Citadel knew I had anything to do with the Way. As a Spectre I had access, enough to keep an eye on things, get advance warning of what the Citadel might be planning. So when Yao set up the hit against you . . . it seemed like the right moment to risk my cover. I sabotaged the team sent after T’Rathis, and stepped in to save you. Unfortunately, I wasn’t quite careful enough. Yao knows what I did, and I’ve been disavowed. I imagine another Spectre will be sent after me before long.”

I watched her for a long moment. “I owe you my thanks, then, for putting so much at risk to intervene.”

She grinned. “Enough to overlook the small matter of kidnapping?”
“Not quite,” I said, giving her an unforgiving glare. “What I have to wonder is why he regarded that information as so important. Aside from its value to you of the Way, of course.”

“We don’t know,” said Elias. “President Yao is fiercely opposed to us, but we don’t understand his motives as well as we would like.”

“I suppose this means he isn’t going to take any action against the valdarii, or against the death of the stars.”

Suddenly I found three humans staring at me in silent astonishment, while the night-callers hooted off in the distance.

“Aha,” I remarked. “It seems I have some information you don’t.”

“It . . . would seem so,” said Elias, still looking rather shell-shocked. “Doctor, let’s go inside and sit down. This may be a long conversation.”

“I agree,” I said. “I’ll make you a bargain, as among honorable enemies. You’ve told me all about the Way from the inside, as it were, but I haven’t heard very much about its political situation. If you want me to bring any influence to bear, I need to understand the issues. In exchange, I’ll tell you about some rather startling scientific results my friends and I have discovered.”

“That’s fair,” said Elias. “Come on.”

We adjourned indoors, most of us finding seats around the wide wooden table in the kitchen. Jeanne moved to provide refreshments: coffee for the other humans, a glass of wine for me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her work for a moment at the kitchen’s synthesizer, producing a small vial of some substance which she then transferred to my wine-glass. A moment later, when the glass came to my hand, I caught Kamala watching me intently for an instant as I took my first sip.

I made no sign that I had noticed any of the byplay, as I drank more of what was in my glass. I couldn’t find any taste to indicate the presence of anything but wine. It wasn’t bad, for a colonial human vintage.

“Let me ask a blunt question,” I suggested. “Just why does the Alliance consider the Way a threat?”

“Why do wealthy and powerful people ever consider anything new a threat?” asked Elias. “We teach freedom, self-reliance, and solidarity against oppression. Respect for the truth, no matter what tradition or authority might say. The equality of all sentient beings before God. Any tyrant is going to mistrust us. Or anyone who wishes to be a tyrant.”

Kamala shook her head, smiling indulgently. “Elias is probably right, as far as he goes, but he’s an idealist. There are more pragmatic reasons why the authorities mistrust us. We’re strong in the colonies, especially in the Traverse and further out in the Terminus Systems. We’re critical of a lot of policies that are made back on the Citadel and on Earth without our input. We’re tired of being economically and politically dependent on governments that don’t serve our interests, and can’t protect us from external threats.”

“That last one is probably the most important,” said Jeanne quietly. “We’ve been subject to valdarii raids for many years now. The central governments haven’t done anything to stop that. Some of us suspect they aren’t willing to do anything to stop that.”
“The Confederation has sent punitive expeditions against the valdarii,” I objected.

“Remarkably ineffective expeditions,” said Kamala dryly.

Something in her voice made me stare at her in disbelief. “Are you saying the Confederation and the Alliance . . .”

“Are cooperating with the barbarians?” The Spectre shrugged. “I don’t know. It seems unlikely that anyone is actively coordinating with them. It’s hard to do that when nobody even knows how to talk to them. But let’s say it wouldn’t surprise me to find certain parties deliberately turning a blind eye, when the valdarii move into human space. After all, they’re only wrecking and killing people out in the colonies. Earth isn’t under attack. The Citadel isn’t under attack.”

“That goes against everything the Confederation stands for,” I said flatly.

“So does trying to assassinate a former President and her associates right on the Presidium.”

“Hmm. You have a point.”

Elias leaned forward, setting his coffee cup on the table. “Doctor, I know you’re emotionally invested in the Confederation. After all, you’re one of the people who established it in the first place. You and Steven Hackett, Ashley Williams, Miranda Lawson, Garrus Vakarian, Urdnot Wrex, Urdnot Bakara, Aethyta Melanis, Kolyat Krios, a few others . . . you accomplished miracles. On the wreckage of that terrible war, you helped build a galactic civilization that was democratic, free, and most of all, sane.

“But that was centuries ago. Maybe that doesn’t feel like a long time for you asari, or for the krogan. It’s plenty of time for the rest of us to go through many generations. It’s plenty of time for institutions to harden, for power structures to become entrenched, for wealthy elites to rearrange things to suit themselves at the expense of everyone else. Democracy, freedom, the dignity of the individual, those are hard to maintain. They need a little revolution now and then if they’re going to thrive.”

I sat still in my chair, staring at him.

Goddess. He sounds just like I did, in the years after the Reaper War. While I was doing my best to lead a revolution against certain institutions of asari society, and then against the Citadel Council itself.

I haven’t heard myself sounding like that in a long time.

Maybe it’s time to start.

“They say some terrible things about you, back on the Citadel,” I said quietly.

“That’s no surprise,” answered Elias. “I get the impression you asari are pretty rational about religion. We humans aren’t like that. We’ve got a long tradition of telling the most outrageous lies about people who don’t share our religious ideas. Especially when faith starts calling the powerful to account.”

“Sophisticated Romans accused the early Christians of incestuous orgies, child murder, and cannibalism,” said Jeanne. “Of course, once Christianity became the dominant religion in most of Europe, they made many of the same accusations against Jews and pagans. It’s an old story.”

“President Yao was a little more restrained, but he did say you were in the habit of violating the
Alliance charter.”

Elias looked annoyed. “Doctor, it’s possible to violate the Alliance charter by standing on a public street corner and talking about religion with your friends. If a stranger hears you and takes offense, he can have you up on human-rights charges. The Alliance responds to religious diversity by shoving all of it into the private sphere, so no one ever has to be confronted with it.”

“That’s the theory, at any rate,” said Kamala. “In practice, minority religions are the ones that get hit with charter enforcement, and the courts tend to ignore appeals in those cases.”

“Well,” said Jeanne quietly, “there is one other thing to which they object.”

Kamala’s face didn’t change, but I saw Elias give his wife a very worried look.

“I’m guessing this is something I’m likely to find strange,” I said dryly.

“You’re right.” Elias took a deep breath. “It’s a new development, something that’s been added to our initiation ceremonial for adults joining the Way. We share blood.”

I frowned. “What do you mean, you share blood?”

“The initiate ingests a small portion of fresh blood donated by his or her sponsor,” said Elias. “It’s symbolic of the Way as an extended family.”

Silence around the table. Elias and Jeanne watched me uneasily. Kamala remained impassive.

“Well,” I said at last. “Speaking for myself, I will admit to finding that rather revolting. Speaking as a scientist . . . I’ve heard of religious practices far stranger and more vicious.”

“Still. You can imagine how people outside the Way react to it,” said Kamala. “Especially as the Alliance and the Confederation already use propaganda to encourage them to think badly of us.”

“Yes. I suppose it doesn’t matter, so long as you don’t expect me to take part.”

A frozen moment of guilty expressions around the table.

I sighed. “Oh Goddess. You do expect it.”

“Say rather that we hope you will agree to it,” said Elias. “We’re not asking you to become a formal convert, but the sharing of blood has . . . other implications.”

“You may put that hope to rest at once,” I told him. “I’m willing to consider helping you, but I have no interest whatsoever in joining the Way in any sense. Certainly not in that sense.”

Elias nodded, looking relieved.

“So let me sum up,” I suggested. “From what I’ve seen, your religious beliefs and ethical teachings are perfectly reasonable. So are your practices, with one notable exception. If anything, the Way seems somewhat similar to my own beliefs and practices.”

Kamala stirred. “Actually, Doctor, I’m curious. Your memoirs suggested that you gave up your commitment to the Athame doctrine during the Reaper War. You’ve returned to it?”

“In a sense.” I sighed. “The process took a long time and a great deal of internal debate. I’m not sure now is the time for me to walk through all of that for you.”
She made a palms-out gesture of surrender. “Certainly.”

“In any event, I don’t have any reason to object to your religion, even if I’m not interested in joining you in it. I do have reason to object to the Alliance or the Confederation, if they’re subjecting you to slander or persecution. Especially if they’re using your religion as a pretext to deny Confederation citizens protection from the valdarii.”

All three of them nodded cautiously.

“Meanwhile, I don’t understand why President Yao considers my connection to your religion a danger. At this point I don’t care. I didn’t come into this expecting to be his enemy. Now he has attacked me and mine, without warning or any justification, actually killing an acolyte who was one of my oldest friends.” I heard my voice become cold and hard, perhaps a ghost of Benezia speaking through me. “He is about to discover just what it means to make me his enemy.”

Kamala and Elias exchanged a glance, a grim smile spreading across the Spectre’s face.

“Now, let me tell you what brought me to the Citadel in the first place,” I continued. “It started when a young quarian scientist turned up on my doorstep . . .”

I explained the entire story to them, backing up once or twice to provide some of the scientific background. All three of them were intelligent, well-educated humans, but none of them were deeply versed in astrophysics. It took a while.

While I spoke, I took the opportunity to watch their faces and body language. I was curious to see if they already knew any of the facts, given that their community had somehow guessed about Shepard’s fate even before I published my memoirs.

Kamala was difficult to read even for me, but Elias and Jeanne were very open . . . and as I wrapped up my presentation, I became convinced they knew something they were not telling me. It was as if they several times wanted to make comments or observations, but had to restrain themselves for fear of revealing something they didn’t want me to know. I just couldn’t tell what it might be.

I made no sign of having noticed, but I did make a mental note for further investigation.

“Well. That was . . . rather startling,” said Elias, once I had finished.

Kamala frowned, suddenly looking like a young war-goddess contemplating battle. “Clearly there’s a lot more going on than any of us understood.”

“Is it possible that this has nothing to do with the changes in the Alliance and the Confederation?” asked Jeanne.

I took a last sip of my wine, shaking my head as I put the glass down. “I suppose it’s possible, but I think we have to guess that the two things are connected. They have a common element.”

“The valdarii,” said Kamala. “If it’s true the Confederation is deliberately standing down from opposing them, we have to ask why.”

“Yes.” I glanced around at their faces, wondering whether it would be useful to push a little. “I’m curious about something that may be relevant.”

“What is it?” asked Elias.
“Just how did the Way know what happened to Shepard, years before I published my memoirs?”

*That did it.*

As always, Kamala’s face was perfectly disciplined, giving nothing away. Elias and Jeanne, on the other hand, gave each other a glance just short of panic.

“You’re preparing to lie to me,” I said quietly. “If you want my help, I would advise you not to do that.”

“Why do you think that information is relevant?” asked Kamala.

“Because President Yao clearly thought it was. After I told him everything I’ve told you, he didn’t make any attempt to consult with me about a response to the *valdarii* or the dying stars. All he showed an interest in was my memoirs, especially the last few chapters, where I revealed what I knew about Shepard’s fate.”

Elias took a deep breath. “Doctor, I’m afraid we can’t discuss that with you. Not yet.”

“Does it have anything to do with the *valdarii*, or whatever is happening out on the galactic rim?”

“I don’t see how,” he said, and I didn’t see any signs of deception in his face. “We’re going to have to think about this.”

I leaned back in my chair and looked around the table. “You do that.”

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I lay in my bed in the guest room for hours after retiring for the night, listening to muffled voices from the living room: Elias quiet and contemplative, Jeanne uneasy, and Kamala firm and confident.

Close to local midnight, they reached some conclusion. I rose silently from the bed as I heard the front door open and close. Standing to one side of the window, I eased the sheer curtain aside and looked down into the house’s front yard.

Two human figures hurried down to the aircar pad: both of them pale, one tall and lanky, the other short and rather stout. Elias and Jeanne. I didn’t see any sign of Kamala. Presumably she remained behind to stand watch over the reluctant guest, while the Way’s leaders gathered to consult.

I stood quietly for a few minutes, listening for the sound of an aircar soaring off into the night. Listening for any sound from the only other inhabitant of the Clarke residence. Eventually I heard nothing but silence.

I glanced down at my right hand, where it hung by my side. Slowly, I clenched my fist.

*It’s been about twelve hours since my virus got into the household systems. Including the synthesizer in the kitchen.*

Blue-white fire sprang into being around my hand, for just a moment before I let it fade.

I nodded to myself.

*Step two: complete.*
I dressed as quietly as I could, thanking the Goddess for the very well-constructed floor. No telltale squeaks or groans sounded as I shifted my weight. Even fully dressed, I felt almost naked: daimon almost disabled, no omni-tool, no sidearm, and no vehicle.

Well, if everything goes according to plan I should be able to take all of those from my enemies.

I slipped out the door, moved to the head of the stairs, and listened intently. I could see light from the living room, and after a few moments I heard someone shifting her weight as she sat in one of the easy chairs. The Spectre remained awake and on guard.

I reviewed the layout of the house’s ground floor. I thought about the time I would need to reach various positions, the probable speed with which Kamala would react. I needed to keep her unaware for about three seconds. Everything converged on a single solution.

I walked down the stairs, making no effort to be quiet. At the bottom of the stairs I turned right to move out into the kitchen, flipping on the light as I entered the room.

“Dr. T’Soni?” Kamala’s voice from the living area, no tension apparent in her voice.

“Out here,” I called, opening and closing a cupboard, setting a ceramic mug out on the counter, all to make the right noises. “I felt like a late cup of hot chocolate.”

I heard her get up from her chair, heard her footsteps on the hardwood floor.

I took two quick steps to my left, and waited.

Kamala appeared in the doorway.

Just in time for my right fist, backed by the full strength of my biotic corona, to smash across her jaw.

Her feet left the floor as she flew about three meters back into the living area. She crashed backwards into a storage cabinet, glass shattering and ceramic plates smashing on the floor around her.

She fell to one knee, shaking her head, and looked up in stunned surprise.

There was nothing wrong with her reflexes or her strength of will. She took one glance at the asari bearing down on her, ablaze with dark energy, eyes glowing with blue-white rage. Then she dove to one side, one hand already flashing to her hip to draw her sidearm.

You just escalated to deadly force. Mistake, Spectre.

“Ah!” A vicious kick sent the heavy pistol went flying away. If I was any judge, it also broke at least two bones in her forearm and wrist.

Flash. Somehow she sent an overload charge through her omni-tool, probably through a link from her VI implant. It struck my biotic barrier hard, sending me reeling back with all my senses tingling madly for an instant. The room lighting flickered and went out, leaving us in near-
Then I had no time to think. I deflected blows and spin-kicks on sheer reflex, countering with bursts of biotic force, giving way one step, and then two. I ignored what our combat did to the furnishings around us. The Clarkes would find a lot of wreckage when they came home.

*She’s very good. Better than Ashley Williams on her best day. Possibly as good as Shepard. Four hundred years ago she would have mopped the floor with me.*

*Today . . . it’s not enough. Not quite.*

I stepped up my speed, enough to get inside her decision loop. Block, deflect, and then *attack*. One blow to her midsection, then another, all my strength and considerable biotic force behind them. I heard ribs snap.

“*Hnnh,*” she said, reeling backward.

For an instant, her guard fell to pieces. I turned, and applied a technique Vara once showed me. My fist hammered into the right side of her neck, although I pulled back some of the biotic force. I wanted to disable Kamala, not kill her outright.

It worked. Her knees buckled, and she collapsed to the floor.

I stood watching her, breathing heavily, my guard still in place.

*Step three: complete.*

I spared a moment to check her breathing and pulse. Another to strip the omni-tool from her left forearm, and recover her sidearm from where it had come to rest.

Then I cursed, realizing the gap in my plans. I hadn’t prepared any way to *secure* the Spectre. She would probably wake up in ten minutes – or less, depending on the degree to which she had taken genetic and bionic enhancements. Then, broken bones and possible concussion or not, she would pursue.

*Of course, I could kill her.*

I considered it for a long moment.

Then I shook my head and hurried out of the house, heading for the aircar pad.

The Clarkes had taken one of their vehicles, when they left to consult with their allies. The other remained on the pad. A moment’s test told me that my virus had reached the aircar’s autopilot, tearing down their access controls. I piled into the pilot’s chair and tapped at the console. The car rose into the night, turning and accelerating south-west. About ninety minutes to New Paris and the asari consulate.

I examined Kamala’s omni-tool, then pulled it onto my own arm and activated it in low-security mode. A moment’s frantic tapping of fingers on my right hand, and my *daimon* began to interface with the device.

“Come on, come on . . .” I muttered.

It took almost five minutes, and I had become frantic with worry by the time the process finished. The Spectre’s omni-tool must have been very well fortified against intrusion. Then I felt the darkness.
success signal, a short fierce itch on the back of my right hand, and I could stop grinding my teeth.

Tap-tap-tap-tap. Go.

A very strange sensation occurred in the back of my mind, like a sudden vacancy. Then it felt like a symphony orchestra tuning up, functions coming back online one at a time, and then synchronizing.

{Dr. T'Soni. I have disabled the blocks imposed by Spectre Sarabhai. First-tier diagnostic complete. I appear to be free of malware and external constraints.}

{Thank the Goddess. Can you reach the extranet?}

{Not at this time. The environment lacks access points.}

I nodded to myself. The aircar was a frontier model, with no extranet access. Out the window, I couldn’t see a single light to indicate settlement. I would need to come in from the Mindoir outback before I could call for help.

{All right. Daimon, take a message for either Vara T’Rathis or Miranda Keldaris: I’m alive and well on Mindoir, currently trying to escape from the Way. Come get me. If I’m not free to join you when you get here, use any available means to make a rescue. Don’t trust the Confederation or the Alliance. President Yao was behind the assassination attempts on us. Don’t trust the Mindoir planetary government either. The Way seems to be in control of this world. Be careful. I love you.}

{Recorded.}

{Daimon, the instant you’re within range of an access point, send that message with alpha-level encryption. Hack through a firewall if you have to. You have my authorization to use all the special tricks Vara and I have taught you.}

{Acknowledged, Doctor.}

I stripped Kamala’s omni-tool from my arm and looked at it for a long moment. No doubt there would be all manner of useful information on it, but I couldn’t trust the Spectre not to put logic bombs and trap doors around the most interesting data. I couldn’t even risk having the thing close to my daimon for a moment longer than necessary. Reluctantly, I cracked open the aircar’s hatch for a moment and tossed the device out into open space.

I sat in the pilot’s seat, watching the controls with half of my mind, thinking and planning with the rest. With my immediate fight-or-flight needs behind me, I felt miserably weary. I might even have dozed for a few minutes.

I snapped awake when the aircar’s comm unit hissed into life.

“Civilian vehicle seven-five-nine-nine-six-four-two, this is the New Bretagne gendarmerie. You are in violation of seven provisions of Mindoir criminal code. You will come about to three-fifty-five and prepare to land.”

I checked the radar. Three air vehicles, closing fast from ahead of me, between me and the capital.

{Daimon, interface with the car’s navigation system. Where is the nearest settlement likely to have an extranet access point?}

{Tyneham is approximately twenty kilometers due south.}
I took manual control, making a turn to my left. I could see lights in the darkness on the horizon, a small town in about the right place.

“Civilian vehicle, this is your final warning. Come about or we will fire upon you.”

I opened the channel. “New Bretagne *gendarmerie*, my name is Dr. Liara T'Soni. I am a citizen of the Asari Republics. I have been illegally detained on this planet and am in the process of escaping from my captors. If you wish to avoid an incident that would rise to the level of the Citadel Confederation, I advise you to permit me to proceed to New Paris. I will answer any criminal charges once I have had a chance to consult with my government.”

No response over the radio. Instead, I saw flares in the night sky, from above me and to my right.

*Goddess. They are firing on me!*

I jinked back and forth, trying to generate a miss but without much hope of success. A civilian aircar couldn’t evade military-grade weapons fire for long.

One missile swept by, then two. The third exploded about twenty meters ahead of me.

Close enough. Fortunately, it wasn’t the piece of high-explosive ordnance that might have shredded my aircar entirely. Instead a great electrical discharge leapt into the night, arcing over to the aircar’s body. In the passenger compartment I was protected, but almost every system on board flickered and went down at once.

The car began to lose altitude and forward velocity. After a moment, I remembered the safety features. The vehicle would do its best to make a soft landing.

I glanced out the forward windows. The cluster of lights marking Tyneham was coming closer. I didn’t know my own altitude anymore, and couldn’t make an accurate estimate of its distance. It certainly looked close enough to reach on foot, once I was on the ground. Assuming I survived that far.

*Although they will certainly try to stop me.*

Lower. Lower still. Then . . .

*Slam!*

The aircar coasted in canted up from the surface, its tail coming down first, then the whole body crashing down and skidding across the ground. Luckily, I arrived on a grassy slope, not a forest or a field of stones. The impact shook me, slammed me about in the restraints until I feared I would lose consciousness. When the vehicle finally slewed to a stop, I found myself awake and without any broken bones.

*Quite the spectacular collection of bruises, though.*

Painfully, I popped the hatch and slapped the release on the safety restraints. At the last moment I recovered Kamala’s sidearm. Then I tumbled out of the aircar, took a moment to orient myself, and ran.

Well. *Staggered* would be more accurate.

I moved as quickly as I could, across the open slope, then into a belt of trees. Soon I began to recover from the shock of that dreadful landing. My strides grew more even and assured, and I
gained the presence of mind to check the weapon I had stolen. A Kendall-Tower R-8 heavy pistol, modified for a larger thermal clip. Not the make I usually favored, and I preferred submachine guns in any case, but it would do.

I took a deep breath and picked up the pace.

Running through darkness, in an untamed area on a strange planet, is a rather frightening experience. I half-expected some specimen of the local wildlife to rise up and take a bite out of me. Or perhaps it would be something more prosaic. Stepping into a hole or tripping over an exposed root, for example, so I would fall and break my ankle. Or my neck.

I called up my biotics, just a low-power corona around my shoulders and upper arms, enough to make some light. That helped. I could move a little faster. Old skills in broken-field running began to return.

Lights and movement, in the woods some distance off to my right.

I moved to the left, circling around, keeping to cover and dropping my corona so that I wouldn’t stand out in the darkness.

*Probably should have worn a color other than white. If the Clarkes had provided anything suitable.*

Within a few minutes, I had no doubt at all. Humans were in the wilderness, small parties searching in the night. Hunting for me.

I kept moving, avoiding the humans, using my *daimon* to help avoid getting turned about.

Then, all at once, I came to the end of the wilderness. Ahead of me I saw a cluster of buildings, lights and signs of habitation. Unfortunately, I also saw three vehicles with official markings, and a team of armed, alert *gendarmes*.

{Daimon, can you reach an access point?}

{I can detect one somewhere ahead. The signal strength is not sufficient for a handshake.}

{Keep trying.}

Slowly, carefully, I moved under cover to my right.

I almost made it.

“*There!*”

I sprang to my feet, threw a singularity at the gendarmes, and sprinted.

Gunfire pursued me.

*I am sick unto death of being chased by insane humans.*

Twenty meters. Forty.

{I have a handshake. Transmitting.}

I ducked into an alley between two storage buildings, and then cursed venomously. It was a dead end, closed off at the far end by some kind of enormous storage tank.
Well, at least Vara will know what happened to me.

I heard running footsteps behind me. I could also hear the hum of mass-effect engines, more vehicles on the approach. Reinforcements, no doubt.

I took cover behind a stack of shipping crates, and prepared to sell my life as dearly as I could.

Several humans appeared at the opening to my alley, but they dove for cover when they saw my corona up and a fusillade of warps flying at them.

I ducked back as a hail of gunfire came at me.

It felt familiar. Duck out, just long enough to fire a few shots with the sidearm, or send a biotic effect howling down-range. Duck back before your biotic barrier comes down. Wait one, two, three seconds while it recovers, then duck out again.

The Mindoir gendarmes weren’t nearly as dangerous as a squadron of cannibals led by a banshee. Sooner or later, though, they would bring up enough force to overwhelm me.

For a moment, I considered surrender.

No. If they want me, they’re going to have to come and get me.

One of them went down, shattered by a biotic warp. Then another fell to a bullet from Kamala’s sidearm.

Then they started throwing flash-bang grenades. Crack-crack-CRACK, the last one coming too close for comfort. Without my barriers in place, I would probably have been knocked senseless.

All right, Liara, they’re stepping up their game. Now what?

Now what turned out to be a sudden silence. All at once, the gendarmes stopped firing at me. I heard human voices at the opening of my alley, shouting in anger.

I peeked out.

“Stand down, damn it!” A rough male voice, congested with fury. “You’re going to kill her!”

“She killed Bertrand and Watkins,” another voice objected.

“That’s because you idiots treated her like a dangerous criminal and shot her out of the sky. What did you expect from a five-hundred-year old asari, who’s fought against enemies that would make you crap your pants in terror, in more battles than you can count without unzipping your fucking trousers? Stand down!”

No more objections made themselves known. A single figure stepped out into the opening, its hands held high and conspicuously empty.

Light fell on its face.

I felt my blood pressure drop, and nearly pitched forward in a dead faint.

Human. Male. Tall and in superb physical condition, broad of shoulder and narrow of waist. He wore civilian clothes. His face looked strange, older than I remembered, with a shock of brown hair
and a neatly trimmed beard I had never seen on him before. Crystal-blue eyes watched the corner where I huddled behind cover.

“Liara? It’s safe to come out.”

That voice, *that voice*, suddenly utterly familiar.

“*Shepard*?”
Return

5 November 2580, Tyneham Settlement, New Bretagne/Mindoir

I stepped out from behind my cover. I walked over to him, hardly feeling my legs, the weapon still in my right hand but forgotten.

Nobody shot me, which probably constituted a miracle under the circumstances.

Up close, the resemblance was terribly strong. He was missing one or two scars. Body language, facial expression, all of it fit old memories like hand in glove. His face communicated anger, frustration, and unease . . . and an ancient hunger that he could not keep out of his intense stare. I think I was convinced even then. No mere actor or biological construct would look at me in quite that manner. Not unless he genuinely had Shepard’s personality and memories to call upon.

Slowly, he lowered his hands to his sides, still staring at me as I approached.

An arm’s length away, I tucked the sidearm into my belt. Reached up. Touched his face.

It felt strange. Shepard had never worn a beard when I had known him before. The only other human I ever had an intimate relationship with had been a woman. I had no experience to compare. The hair was softer than I expected, the skin over his cheekbones just as I remembered it. His head turned slightly, an almost unconscious movement, to press into the touch. Then he froze, the flesh around his eyes pinching as if he suppressed a sudden pain.

I opened my mind, inviting contact.

He recognized the sensation and nodded slightly.

“Embrace eternity,” I whispered, closing my eyes for an instant, then opening them again on another universe.

I didn’t dive deep or stay for long. It had been almost four hundred years, and the situation was too complicated. At least he was cooperative. It took me only a few moments to learn the two things I most wanted to know.

I blinked, my eyes returned to their normal color, the link shattering under a wave of rage.

Crack!

He recoiled slightly from the impact of my palm across his cheek.

“You nothos! Fifteen years you’ve been back, fifteen years, and not a word to me?”

He took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and braced his shoulders. The gesture was so quintessentially Shepard that it nearly tore a scream from my throat.

“Liara. I’m sorry. That’s not how I wanted it to be . . . but the mission comes first.”

“The mission? What . . .” I saw it then. “Goddess. The Intelligence sent you back, and it wasn’t for my sake at all.”

“No.” He shook his head, a confused gesture. “I don’t remember everything. Sometimes I think I remember almost nothing. There’s just no way for everything the Intelligence is, everything it
knows, to be crammed into my skull. But I know it sent me out into the galaxy for a reason. To do something on the human scale, something it couldn’t do on its own, or with the Reapers for its agents.”

“You don’t think I would have been willing to help?” I demanded. “Shepard, just one word and I would have come running.”

“I know. That’s why I didn’t do it.” His hand rose, as if to touch me, and then fell back to his side. He dropped his gaze. For a moment he looked almost defeated. “Liara, one thing I do know is that we’re all in terrible danger. This is going to be a war before it’s done, a war worse than anything we’ve seen since the Reapers. I’m not sure I’m going to survive it. Not sure I’m meant to survive it.”

“You think the Intelligence will call you back, once this mission of yours is finished?”

“I don’t know.” He looked up and into my eyes once more. “It seems likely. I didn’t want to walk back into your life only to leave you again. Besides, one thing I do have from the Intelligence is everything it knows about what you’ve been doing for the last few centuries. I know that you and Vara are together. I know you’ve been happy for a long time. That’s another reason why contacting you would have been . . . damnable selfish.”

“Oh Shepard.” I sighed, somehow no longer able to stay angry at him. “For once I wish you had been selfish. Do you know what it does to me, knowing that you’ve been out here, working and fighting for years, and I haven’t been here to help you? No matter what else we might be to each other, at the very least I am your friend.”

“I’m sorry, Liara.”

Once more I reached up and ran my fingertips through the soft fur on his face. “I forgive you. Just don’t ever let it happen again.”

He gave me a grim smile. “Next time the Intelligence sends me out on a mission to save the galaxy, I’ll bear that in mind.”

“So what made you decide to break your cover now?”

“It seemed like the only way to save your life from this pack of fools,” he said, anger back in his tone, turning away from me to glare back the way he had come.

As if summoned, several other humans appeared at the entrance to my alley, approaching us cautiously. Elias and Jeanne Clarke, looking pale and anxious. Kamala Sarabhai, her face swollen, her movements stiff and cautious, staring at me with open resentment. A man in a gendarmerie uniform, short but rugged and tough. An older woman in civilian clothes, with cold cunning in her steel-gray eyes.

“Liara, you already know the Clarkes and Ms. Sarabhai. This is Captain Jean-Pierre Masquelier, commander of the local gendarmerie. This is Marie Césaire, chair of the Spiritual Assembly of Mindoir, and the closest thing the Way has to an overall leader. Ladies and gentlemen, this is Dr. Liara T’Soni, formerly President of the Citadel Confederation. All of you are damned lucky she’s alive and unhurt.”

“If this is T’Soni, then she’s under arrest,” said Captain Masquelier.

“On what charges?” I asked mildly.
“Assault, manslaughter, murder, reckless endangerment, illegal operation of a vehicle, theft, grand theft, several counts of computer crime, and resisting arrest,” he said grimly. “That will do for a beginning.”

“All right. Then I accuse Kamala Sarabhai, Elias Clarke, and Jeanne Clarke of assault, kidnapping, false imprisonment, administering controlled substances to an unwilling subject, and multiple violations of the Alliance sentient-rights charter.” I paused for a deep breath. “I also accuse the Spiritual Assembly of Mindoir, the colonial government of Mindoir, and the *gendarmerie* of the province of New Bretagne of complicity in all of these crimes. By all means, let’s take this to an Alliance court and get it sorted out.”

That worked. Masquelier’s expression remained stubbornly set, but the other colonials all glanced at each other uneasily.

“Captain, I think we both know you won’t be placing Liara under arrest.” Shepard stepped in front of the *gendarme*, looming over him. “Especially since you would have to go through *me* to lay a hand on her.”

“Blessed one . . .” began Césaire.

“Enough!” Shepard roared, one hand lashing out to point an accusatory finger. “I told you when I first arrived: *contact Liara and get her help*. I told you again, when she published her memoirs: *you need Liara and her people on your side*. You did not listen. You decided this was a human-only problem, and you wouldn’t need to work with anyone else. Then, when Kamala got the brilliant idea of kidnapping Liara and bringing her here, I warned you what would happen. I warned you what Liara is capable of, and I warned you what she would do if she got the chance. Every single thing that has happened tonight is on your head.”

Shepard glared around him, at all the citizens of what had once been his homeworld, long ago.

“You people congratulate yourselves on knowing the truth, on being the only ones who can see how the universe really works. You think of yourselves as a persecuted minority of the faithful and true.

“Well, I think you’re a gang of liars. You claim to revere my predecessor as a prophet, someone who spoke for God. Well, it seems to me that reverence is pretty hollow. You would much rather my predecessor stay up on the pedestal where you put him, nice and quiet and safe, so you can go ahead and use your religion to justify doing whatever you damn well please. You wouldn’t listen to him if he came back. I know that for a fact, because I’m as close as you’re going to get, and you sure as hell don’t listen to *me* very well.

“Well, now that you have fouled this situation up so very thoroughly, you *are* going to listen to me.

“You are going to let Liara go. You are going to provide an escort for her to New Paris and the asari consulate, where she is going to be left alone until her people come for her. You are going to beg her forgiveness, and then you are going to stand by and shut up while I tell her the truth. *All of it.*

“If you do not agree to all of the above right here and now, then I wash my hands of you. I will leave Mindoir for good. I will go elsewhere in the galaxy and look for help there. And I will let the galaxy know just what’s going on, here on Mindoir and on the other worlds where the Way has taken over. How far you’ve got your hooks into the secular colonial governments. How willing you are to use that power against dissidents and outsiders, against anyone who refuses to sign up for your little *cult*.‘
I stood mute, staring at him with wide eyes, feeling rather impressed. It had been a long time since I had seen Shepard in the middle of a towering rage.

Césaire stirred. “Blessed one, you must understand. You have told us that a terrible crisis is coming. If any of us are to be saved, we can’t afford to have people in our midst who are not committed to the cause.”

Shepard’s face changed, and I shivered at what I saw there: bitter contempt.

“You prove my point,” he said, in a voice that sounded calm but could never have been confused for gentleness. “If my predecessor taught anything, it was that even the bitterest enemies can forgive one another, work together against a common danger, live together afterwards in peace. That’s a better way to live. That’s what brought the galaxy together to fight the Reapers.

“But no, that doesn’t work for you. You think you know better. You think the old ways are the only ones that work. Ruthlessness. Force. Violence. Hatred and oppression. The same old story. If the Way ever comes out on top, it will just be one more damned theocracy. You haven’t learned a thing, from my predecessor or from me.”

I glanced around the circle. Césaire looked defiant, her jaw set and her eyes alive with resentment. The Clarkes appeared more ashamed than anything else. Kamala, on the other hand, had lost her sullen expression and now seemed almost thoughtful.

“So what’s it going to be, Captain?” asked Shepard, turning back to the gendarme.

Significantly, the officer glanced at Césaire. She gave him a stiff nod.

“All right, Mr. Shepard,” he growled at last. “As you say. No charges to be filed against Dr. T’Soni, and we’ll see to it that she gets safely to New Paris as soon as we’re done here.”

“Good.” Shepard turned back to Marie Césaire, leveling his command stare at her. “I’m waiting, Marie.”

She bristled for a moment, but then discretion proved the better part of valor. She stepped forward to stand before me, and then (to my astonishment) she went down on one knee and bowed her head.

“Blessed Widow . . .”

“That is not my name,” I said coldly.

She sighed, and then started over, sounding a little more natural this time. “Dr. T’Soni. On behalf of the Spiritual Assembly of Mindoir, and all the community of the Way . . . I apologize for our mistreatment of you. It was a terrible mistake. Please forgive us.”

“I accept your apology,” I said formally. “However, I will wait to see whether your repentance is sincere.”

5 November 2580, New Paris, Capital District/Mindoir

Two hours later, three gendarmerie vehicles landed just outside the asari consulate in New Paris. Five of us emerged and crossed the open courtyard.

Eudokia T’Marr met us, the consul assigned to Mindoir, a sharp-looking asari matron about my
age. “Dr. T’Soni, I’m pleased to welcome you here . . . but I didn’t know you were on Mindoir.”

“It was an unplanned visit,” I told her, not wanting to go into the details just yet. “Has there been any word from my bondmate?”

“Yes. Matron Vara just contacted us. She and Normandy should be here within a few hours.” Then T’Marr looked over my shoulder at my companions, and her eyes went wide. “Goddess. That looks like . . .”

“Yes.” I sighed. “Consul T’Marr, may I introduce Elias and Jeanne Clarke, citizens of Mindoir, Kamala Sarabhai, also a citizen of Mindoir and a Citadel Spectre . . . and William Allen Shepard.”

“How is this possible?” she breathed.

“I’m not certain myself,” I told her. “Consul, I want diplomatic sanctuary for all four of these humans. Ms. Sarabhai and Mr. Shepard in particular need to be put under the protection of the Asari Republics.”

“Of course,” she said briskly, taking refuge in routine. “Welcome, all of you.”

“We’ll need a place to rest for a few hours, and then somewhere to meet in private once Normandy arrives. There’s a great deal you should be aware of as well.”

“I’ll make all the arrangements.”

The consul was as good as her word. Within minutes, consulate staff guided our party into the guest suites, where they had quickly prepared rooms for all. I spoke briefly to the others, exchanged a last glance with Shepard, and then went to my room to collapse onto a soft bed. Alone.

I was exhausted. Even so, it took a long time of staring at the ceiling for me to fall asleep.

Goddess. Shepard is alive. He’s alive.

He still loves me. He still wants me, just as much as he ever did. It’s plain every time he looks at me.

How do I feel about that? How is Vara going to feel about that?

I finally lost consciousness, still worrying about it.

Morning. When I emerged into the suite’s common area, I found Shepard already there, sitting at a table, drinking a cup of black coffee, and paging through files on an ordinary omni-tool.

“Good morning,” I said lightly, trying not to remember the thoughts that had kept me awake. For a moment, I hardly knew what to say to him. His simple presence shattered all my reflexes, made me as tongue-tied and helpless as an adolescent. Eventually I took refuge in humor. “I see four hundred years, and elevation to the status of galactic Intelligence, haven’t changed your taste in beverages.”

He snorted. “Hey, I never insisted you drink it.”

“That’s true. Where is everyone else?”

“I haven’t seen Elias or Jeanne. Kamala got up early and went to see the consulate’s medical staff. Good Lord, Liara, you really cleaned her clock.”
“I took her by surprise. In fact, I worked very hard for two days to take her by surprise. She’s too dangerous for a fair fight.” I sat down at his table, using my *daimon* to send an order to the kitchen staff for hot chocolate. “I think it’s time you lay some of your cards on the table.”

“That could take hours,” he warned me.

“Then give me the executive summary,” I suggested. “I don’t have enough facts even to start building a picture. I know about the rot in the Confederation, and I know about the *valdarii* and the dying stars out on the galactic rim. What I can’t fathom is how the two can possibly be connected.”

“I’m not sure how much help I can be. I didn’t even know about the stars going wrong until Elias and Jeanne came running in last night with the news from you. Which suggests that even the Intelligence might not be aware of it.”

“I find that rather disturbing.”

“You and me both.” He took a long sip of his coffee, his expression going distant. “What I *can* tell you is that there’s something out there in the wild spaces. Call it . . . the Adversary. The Intelligence has known of its existence for a long time, but its nature is a mystery. It’s very old and very powerful. I think it’s been watching the galaxy for a long time. Waiting for some opportunity to occur.”

“Hmm.” Just then my mug of hot chocolate arrived. I thanked the server and took my first scalding-sweet sip. “It’s interesting that this Adversary should decide to act just as the Reapers have given up their extinction cycle.”

“I don’t think that’s a coincidence. Although it seems odd that the stellar anomalies are thousands of years older than the final Reaper invasion, the one you and I fought to defeat.”

“They’re not as old as the previous cycle,” I pointed out. “The Prothean cycle.”

He nodded slowly. “That’s true. Although I don’t see what it signifies.”

“Neither do I, but it’s worth considering.” I frowned in thought for a moment. “So what does this Adversary have to do with our current troubles?”

“It’s the common element, Liara. The Intelligence has been able to uncover some of its activities. The Adversary is behind the *valdarii*. It’s also behind a lot of what’s been going wrong in the Alliance, and more broadly in the Confederation. It has some method for influencing organic minds. Like Reaper indoctrination or Leviathan enthrallment, but subtler. There may be millions of people among the Citadel races who are under its influence, some of them in positions of power.”

“Like a puppet master,” I suggested. “Playing us off against the *valdarii* for some purpose of its own.”

He nodded.

“The question then is why.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t think the Intelligence knows. Whatever this Adversary is, it’s very good at keeping itself concealed.”

“Maybe that’s part of what you were sent to accomplish . . .” I began, but then something in his face made me stop.
Shepard cocked his head, as if listening to some sound only he could hear. He half-rose from the table.

The door burst open. Kamala appeared, Consul T'Marr three steps behind her, both of them looking rather stunned.

“An alert just came in,” said the Spectre. “Mindoir is under attack. A big fleet just dropped out of FTL a few light-seconds out and is engaging the planetary defense grid.”

“Is it the Alliance?” Shepard asked.

“No.”

The Valdarii War had begun.
I thought quickly, calling up a detailed map of the mass-relay network from my daimon. “The Alliance can’t get a fleet here for at least a day,” I concluded.

“Assuming the Alliance bothers to defend Mindoir in the first place,” said Kamala bitterly. “I think we’re on our own.”

“How soon will Normandy be here?” Shepard asked.

“Within the hour, as of the last report,” answered the consul.

I shook my head. “Shepard, Normandy is a good ship, but I wouldn’t pit her against an entire fleet.”

“She’s right, Shepard,” said Kamala. “The report I saw from the planetary defense grid is that the valdarii have at least three dreadnought-class ships and a heavy squadron of cruisers. This is no simple raid, it’s an invasion.”

Shepard nodded, his face dark with apprehension. “I think we had better get out of New Paris. If they punch through the planetary defense squadrons, we have no idea what they’ll do. They may decide to drop a few megatons on every major city on the planet.”

I turned to T’Marr. “Consul, do you have a plan to evacuate this facility?”

She stared at me with wide eyes. “Yes, Doctor, but it was never designed to face a full-scale invasion. The only way we have to get everyone off-planet at once is to call for help from the homeworld.”

Shepard and I exchanged glances. It felt strange, old memories surging to the surface, helping me to read him like an open book.

You asari have been at peace for far too long, his face told me.

He took command. “Consul, where is your arms locker?”

“Just down the hall,” said T’Marr at once.

“All right. Do whatever you have to do to destroy sensitive records,” he ordered. “Find the Clarkes, and gather everybody there. We’re going to hand out every weapon and piece of protective gear you have, and then we’re going to head for the Universal House of Justice.”


“Because that’s where Kamala’s weapons and gear are. Not to mention a few pieces of technology I had with me when I arrived on Mindoir.”

“Reaper technology?”

He grinned. “Better.”

Just then we began to hear a mournful sound from outside the building: sirens, rising and falling like the voices of damned souls, warning the city of imminent attack.
“We should hurry,” said Shepard.

Five minutes later, the consulate stood empty. Eleven of us moved through the streets of New Paris: Shepard, Kamala, the Clarkes, Consul T’Marr, her primary attaché, four asari from the consulate staff, and me. All of us were armed; even Elias and Jeanne carried sidearms that they seemed competent to use. Two humans who worked at the consulate had refused to come, choosing to take their chances with their own people.

Mindoir’s citizens impressed me. Their world had not come under serious attack since the Salarian Wars, but they had obviously maintained a tradition of readiness. Members of the militia and the gendarmerie moved to prepared muster points, to arm themselves and wait for developments. Civilians fled to their designated shelters, but quietly, efficiently. I saw no mobs, no snarls of traffic, no flocks of aircars fleeing to the countryside. Our party had no difficulty moving through the city, crossing the distance of a little over a kilometer between the asari consulate and the Universal House of Justice.

Shepard led us, still in civilian clothes but with a kinetic barrier in place, striding along with a borrowed assault rifle in his hands, watching the quarters with all his old alertness. I found it very difficult to pull my gaze away from him. Every line of his figure, every element of his carriage, every shifting expression on his face, all of it was familiar as centuries of wistful dreams.

I think the fact was finally sinking in.

*Shepard is here. Four hundred years of waiting, and wondering, and building a life without him, and now he’s here again.*

I should have been joyful. Instead, I felt only confusion. I almost thanked the Goddess for the immediate crisis, giving me an excuse to put my emotions on the shelf and keep moving.

The Way’s headquarters turned out to be an imposing building, faced all in gleaming white marble, surrounded by trees, grassy lawns, and colorful beds of flowers. I found it quite beautiful, and under better circumstances I might have been tempted to take a tour. We found a surprising number of people converging on the building ahead of us. Shepard explained that one of the largest and strongest bomb shelters in the city had been built beneath it.

As we approached, many people took notice of us. They nodded to Elias Clarke, gawked at the asari in our party, stared with wide eyes when they saw and recognized me.

When they recognized *Shepard*, many of them stopped and bowed deeply before moving on.

“What have they been doing that ever since you got here?” I asked, not sure whether I felt amusement or disgust.

“I’m afraid so,” he muttered. “I quit trying to get them to stop years ago.”

“You’ve been accepting their worship?”

“Not worship. I’ve been very firm with them about that.” He sighed, nodding to a group of several humans who had stopped to bow as we passed. “In fact, I’ve done my best to distinguish between myself and the other Shepards, the ones who fought the Reapers. They were my *predecessors*. I don’t share their identities, just their memories and personality. I’m a new . . . instantiation of the old model.”

“I remember having this discussion with you long ago. You think of yourself as a distinct person once again?”
"I know I am, Liara. The Intelligence knows things about identity, memory, and consciousness that our civilization won’t understand for a long time.” He gave me a gentle smile. “Although you were right about one thing, last time we had this talk. For all practical purposes, I’m as much William Allan Shepard as those other two men once were. I think like they did. I remember being them.”

“Good.” I almost reached out to touch his shoulder, but then stopped myself at the last moment. “The galaxy has missed you. Although here on Mindoir, it seems that some of us missed you a little too much.”

We reached the front entrance of the building. People moved aside to give Shepard room, as he led us through the enormous doors.

“They didn’t miss me,” he said, as we stepped out into a great entrance hall. “They missed an idealized image they made up and pretended was me. I’ve chosen to accept their respect, even while I’ve tried to make clear that I don’t deserve any more than that. Part of the mission. I think I was sent here specifically because the Way had already taken root.”

“They provided you with a base to work from?”

“Something like that. Once I proved who I was, I didn’t have to start from scratch, convincing people of what needed to be done.”

“That must have been nice,” I observed, remembering our struggle to convince the galaxy of the existence of the Reapers.

“It helped. I wish they would pay attention to more of what I’ve tried to tell them.”

We stopped as Marie Césaire approached us, crossing a beautiful mosaic floor. “Blessed one. Why have you brought so many strangers into this House?”

“That’s not for you to question, Marie.” Shepard glanced around, evaluating the situation. “Kamala and I need to get into the secure vault.”

“Of course,” said Césaire, although she looked less than pleased. “Will you and Ms. Sarabhai take part in the defense of Mindoir?”

“First, we have a responsibility to ensure our guests get away safely. Then we’ll see how things stand.”

“We’re your people, blessed one,” she said, almost pleading with him. “Don’t abandon us in our hour of need.”

Shepard stood very still for a moment, staring at her. Then he spoke, a tone in his voice I had never heard before, and I shivered to hear it now. Despite everything, I could almost believe that I heard a prophet, delivering pronouncements from a divine realm.

“All those who live in this galaxy are my people, Marie. All of them. Human or not. Members of the Way or not. If the Way refuses to understand that and act accordingly, then the Way has failed.”

Her eyes wide, Césaire stepped back and away from him. Then she nodded, reluctantly.

Shepard led us toward the back of the building, down a ramp to the first basement level. There he stepped up to a heavy metal door, entering a pass-code and permitting his eyes to be scanned.

Boom. The door cracked open and swung wide.
Kamala immediately pounced on her armor and gear, the same black ensemble I had seen her use on the Citadel. I had to smile at Elias, who rather hurriedly turned his back while the Spectre stripped down and began to assemble her armor.

Shepard did the same, tossing his shirt, jacket, and trousers carelessly aside as he moved toward the back of the vault. I followed him, curious to see what equipment the Intelligence had sent for him. . . but I also caught myself appreciating the look of him, nearly naked and from the rear.

_Goddess, now is not the time!_

There, in the very back of the vault: a tall human-like shape in bright silver, gleaming almost mirror-bright, all smooth curves without a single straight line or sharp edge. It looked more like a work of art than a piece of combat gear. Its surface showed not a single seam, rivet, or control. I couldn’t even see how he might get into or out of it.

“This is combat armor?” I asked him.

He smiled down at me. “Oh yes.”

“Have you had a chance to use it?”

“Not in combat. I’ve had it out to practice with it a few times. I seem to know how to use it, almost by instinct.”

“Will you need any help putting it on?”

He turned to face me, a wicked grin on his face. “No . . . and that was the clumsiest excuse to feel me up I’ve ever heard.”

“_Shepard!_”

Still smiling, he simply stepped back one pace, as if he intended to knock the armor over . . . but instead it flowed out and around him, covering his entire body in moments. Instead of a lifeless suit of armor, now it became his second skin, permitting him to move freely.

“I’m impressed,” I told him. “Nanotechnology?”

“Very _advanced_ nanotechnology,” came his voice, sounding perfectly natural. The mirror surface over the front of his head shimmered for an instant, and then seemed to vanish, revealing his face. I didn’t see any sign of a HUD or any controls inside his helmet, but then I realized the armor must interface directly with his brain.

“Where are the weapons?”

“The suit itself has some offensive functions,” he explained, “but here’s the main gun.”

He opened a case on a table next to him, and produced . . . something. It looked more like an abstract sculpture than a weapon, about forty centimeters long when he picked it up, but then it unfolded to about twice that length. I saw no sign of a trigger or a scope, although it did appear to have a muzzle at the far end. The whole mechanism seemed to merge with the armor over his right arm, with no need for his left hand to hold or steady it.

_Boom._

The sound of a distant explosion. I turned, listening. Then . . .

“Perhaps the valdarii don’t intend to destroy Mindoir,” I suggested. “If they can defeat the planetary defenses and land troops . . .”

“They plan to occupy us?” demanded Elias. “How? If no one can even talk to them?”

“No sense trying to speculate,” said Shepard. “Kamala, you ready?”

**Snap-click.** The Spectre’s assault rifle unfolded into her hands. “Ready.”

“Then let’s go. We need to find a landing zone *Normandy* can use to extract Liara and the rest of the asari.”

Our group moved out of the vault, through the building once more, out onto the street.

At least most of the civilians had gotten off the streets, leaving them empty. But thunder rolled down from the sky, almost a constant sound, and we could all see flashes of light on the horizon. The valdarii were indeed sparing New Paris, but they were sending a terrible barrage of explosives against the defense installations outside the capital.

“Shepard, look!” I pointed up into the sky.

Great dark shapes moved there, sliding down from the heavens, approaching New Paris slowly but inexorably. Starships.

“That’s torn it,” growled Shepard. “Landing ships. They’ll have thousands of troops on the ground within a few minutes.”

*{Liara?}*  

A message coming through my *daimon*. I stopped, holding up a hand to ask for a moment’s quiet.

*I’m here, in New Paris.*

*{Thank the Goddess. This is Vara. We’re less than ten minutes out, but it looks as if the planet is completely invested. Tania thinks we can get in long enough to extract you, but it’s going to be very tight. We need a landing zone.}* 

*{We’re just outside a place called the Universal House of Justice. Do you have it on your maps?}* 

*{Yes, I see it.}* A moment’s pause, while Vara and Tania consulted. *{There’s an open space about half a kilometer from you. The map labels it as Richelieu Park.}* 

“Richelieu Park?” I asked the others.

“That way,” said Elias, pointing decisively. “It’s not far.”

*{We’re on our way. There are quite a few of us. We’re evacuating the asari consulate as well.}* 

A sense of unease came through the link, but Vara didn’t hesitate. *{Understood. Hurry, love.}* 

I flinched inwardly at that last comment, suddenly dreading the complication that loomed ahead of me, but my voice remained steady. “They’re coming. Less than ten minutes.”
Shepard nodded. “Let’s move.”

We hurried, shaking out into some semblance of a military formation: Shepard and Kamala on point, two of the consul’s asari with commando training taking up the rear, the Clarkes and T’Marr herself in the well-protected center. I stayed close to Shepard, wondering whether we would remember our old tactical partnership well enough to survive in combat.

I didn’t have to wonder for long. I didn’t see any ships land nearby, but the *valdarii* must have been incredibly quick to deploy. Suddenly, from up a cross street to our right, we fell under attack from a heavy squad of the creatures. Shepard shouted for everyone to take cover, and we immediately found ourselves fighting for our lives.

I had never encountered *valdarii* in person before, had only seen vids of corpses under autopsy. The living creatures seemed very strange on first glance, like enormous arachnids scuttling along, but then I saw it was an illusion. They didn’t truly resemble arachnids, but something about their six-limbed structure and their jerky movements gave that impression.

These *valdarii* were the ones we came to call *runners*. They had an upright posture, like tall, slender humans or asari, moving at great speed on two strong legs. The other two pairs of limbs both served to carry equipment, especially a heavy rifle-like weapon in the lower arms. Their movements seemed very well coordinated. I saw one runner fire its rifle with careful accuracy, even while it hurled a grenade with one of its upper hands.

I took cover and put up my best tactical barrier. T’Marr was a skilled adept, and one or two of her asari had enough skill to synchronize with me as well. Together we strengthened the barrier and provided our entire party with cover. Not a moment too soon. The *valdarii* fanned out the moment they saw us, laying a hail of gunfire down in our direction.

*This is hardly fair. They outnumber our combat effectives by at least four to one. Eight to one if you count hands.*

Most of our party were only lightly armed and had no military training, best advised to keep their heads down and fire only at the very best targets of opportunity. Kamala proved far more effective, firing her rifle in careful three-round bursts, interspersed with powerful overload charges to take down the enemy’s kinetic barriers. T’Marr and I concentrated on keeping our biotic barrier up, and sending a steady stream of warps and throws to disrupt the enemy’s formation.

Then Shepard brought down the lightning.

That’s what it looked like. Not a simple high-speed bullet, not even the kind of energy beam typical of Prothean weapons. It looked like a bar of blue-white light, flashing out with incredible accuracy, *crack-crack-crack* and three of the valdarii went down. The rest took a sudden interest in finding the best cover they could manage.

“We can’t let them pin us down,” he shouted. “Kamala, grenades, eleven o’clock!”

The Spectre flung a barrage of lift grenades. Two incautious runners went flying.

Shepard struck a pose, shimmered for a moment, and then *vanished*. An instant later, a tremendous *nova* detonation occurred in the middle of the *valdarii* line. Dead and stunned aliens fell backward from the epicenter. There stood the silver statue, firing in all directions from the sudden gap it had opened, every shot still striking home.

*Well, that answers the question of whether this version of Shepard is a biotic.*
I felt it, the moment when the enemy’s will faltered. I glanced across the enemy line, saw a weak point, and put down a large singularity just there.

I was proud of T’Marr. Without being prompted, she immediately fired her best warp into the center of the vortex.

**BOOM.**

The last few aliens turned and ran.

“Status?” snapped Shepard.

One of T’Marr’s people was dead, another badly hurt but responding to medi-gel. Elias Clarke had taken cuts to his face when a ricochet kicked up a shard of stone, but he refused treatment, a determined light gleaming in his eyes. Shepard got us moving again, worried that the *valdarii* would be back with reinforcements.

*Normandy* announced itself with a string of explosions just as we entered Richelieu Park, Vara apparently seeing another detachment of *valdarii* too close to the landing zone. We emerged from a narrow belt of trees out onto a grassy field, to find the ship looming close above us, the cargo hatch already opening wide.

Kamala leaped up onto the hatch first, turning to provide top cover. Shepard and I waved the consul and her people aboard.

That left the two of us alone. I turned and looked up at him, the terror of combat suddenly replaced with another wave of emotions, a feeling I was reluctant to name.

*He’s going to stay. He’s going to send me away. Just like over Alchera. Just like that last terrible day on Earth. I’ll never see him again.*

“Shepard!”

“Go on, Liara,” he said, his face grim, his eyes dark under his brows. “You have to get out of here. Tell the galaxy what’s happening. Get them to do something.”

“No! No, I . . .”

_Goddess what do I do I love Vara she’s the other half of my soul but I can’t lose Shepard again. Not again. Not after I just found him after so long._

“Liara, these people need me. They’re going to need someone who knows how to fight an enemy like this. Someone who can rally them if there’s going to be a long resistance.”

“I can do that,” said Elias.

Shepard stared at him.

“I may not have your experience with war, Shepard, but I know Mindoir, and I know her people. I can do it.” Elias stood tall, the blood on his cheek forgotten, his face solid and determined. “Besides, Marie may not have heard much of what you’ve told her, but Jeanne and I have been listening. You’re right. The Way has gone down the wrong path. Someone needs to set things right.”

“Elias, this is going to be a terrible time. Are you sure about this?”
“I’m sure. Go on. This is going to be a lot bigger than just Mindoir. Your place is out there in the galaxy, fighting to save everyone, the way you’ve done so many times before.” Suddenly Elias turned and smiled at me, a gentle and warm thing that caused my heart to skip a beat. “I suspect, one way or another, your place is with Dr. T’Soni too.”

“Liara! We have to go now!” Vara, shouting from the Normandy cargo bay.

“All right, Elias.” Shepard grasped the other man’s hand firmly. “Be careful and stay alive. I’ll be back, and if history is any guide, I just might bring half the galaxy with me.”

He turned and took me by the arm. We ran.

The moment we stood on the cargo hatch, it began to close, Normandy already rising into the sky. I looked around and saw the last of the consulate staff being escorted to the lifts and the upper decks. Vara walked over to us, giving Kamala a moment’s glance, then staring curiously at the silver statue next to me.

“Thank the Goddess you’re safe, Liara. Who is this?”

Apparently Shepard had developed a sense of drama, in his years on Mindoir. Before I could say anything, he dropped the mirror finish over his face.

“Hello, Vara. It’s good to see you again.”

My bondmate’s eyes went so wide, I thought for a moment she was about to faint.
5 November 2580, Interstellar Space

About two hours after we escaped from Mindoir, we gathered in the main conference room. Tension ran high in the air, even before I called the meeting to order. Too much bad news coming all at once, too many surprises in the last few hours . . . and then there was the miracle sitting across the table from me.

Shepard.

Everyone recognized him. Everyone felt very aware of the sheer history that he represented. Everyone, even Tekanta the geth, instinctively treated him with grave respect.

Meanwhile, almost everyone was stealing furtive glances at my end of the table, trying to see how I was taking this sudden development.

Also, how Vara was taking it.

She had said hardly a word to me since Shepard came on board.

I glanced around the table. Vara sat to my immediate right, then Miranda, Kalan and Tekanta, Shepard, Kamala, Tania Kethys as my new senior acolyte, and then Consul T’Marr to my immediate left. Nine of us to try to decide the fate of the galaxy.

“The situation is very grave,” I began. “Vara?”

“The valdarii are apparently undertaking a major offensive against Confederation space,” said my bondmate, her voice cool and efficient. “The assault on Mindoir is only one prong of the attack. Valdarii fleets have also invested Caleston, Arvuna, Asteria, and Horizon. Planetary defenses are being dismantled and troops landed in large numbers on all five worlds.”

“Four human colonies, one asari,” said T’Marr. “The Republics have called the Grand Assembly into session to discuss emergency measures, but it may take some time before they reach a decision. What response have we seen from the Alliance?”

“Confused and uncertain,” said Vara. “The humans appear to have been no better prepared for this invasion than we were.”

Do we have any idea why the valdarii have stepped up their aggression right now?”

“I have some ideas about that,” said Shepard, “but first I think Vara has a piece of information that might be relevant.”

My bondmate nodded. “Our sources on the Citadel have intercepted a message, sent about an hour ago to the Yao administration. Apparently from the valdarit.”

“I thought they didn’t communicate with outsiders!” said Kamala.

“They didn’t launch full-scale invasions of planets before today either,” said Vara. “In any case, it’s not a valdarit that delivered the message. Here.”

She touched controls, and the main viewscreen darkened. An image appeared: a male human, very
dark-skinned, with dark brown eyes and close-cropped black hair. As he spoke, I could tell at once there was something terribly wrong with him. His face seemed utterly blank, his voice flat and expressionless, as if he sleepwalked his way through the speech. Or as if his mind was not his own.

“. . . speaking on behalf of the Old Ones. You are warned. The Old Ones have returned to claim what is theirs: this galaxy, every star and every world in it, down to the last grain of dust. You are directed to prepare for life under their hegemony. Resistance constitutes a waste of effort. It will be punished. Surrender is preferable. Life will improve under the hegemony of the Old Ones. Poverty, disease, and even death will be abolished. Every living being, organic or synthetic, will receive the guidance necessary to attain its greatest possible potential. In the end, all will share in transcendence.” The human paused for several seconds, his face and eyes empty of affect, and then he began to speak again. “This is the human designated David Ekwensi, speaking on behalf of the Old Ones . . .”

Vara cut the transmission off with a vicious snap. “In case you aren’t up on your human colonial affairs, David Ekwensi was the First Executive of the Caleston colony. Until this morning.”

“Who are these Old Ones?” inquired T’Marr.

All at once, every pair of eyes turned to Shepard. Under other circumstances, I might have laughed.

“I’m not sure,” he said, lacing his fingers together on the table. “I may be an emissary of the Ascended Intelligence, but I don’t know everything that’s going on.”

“Why don’t you tell us what you do know?” I suggested. “Maybe we can help you make sense of it.”

“All right.”

He stood at his end of the table, gathering all eyes, and then began to tell one of the most remarkable stories in history.

My name is William Allen Shepard. I am the third human to carry that name, along with a specific set of memories and personality.

The first and original Shepard was a natural-born human, an Alliance soldier who became the first human Spectre. He fought against the Reaper Sovereign, delaying the Reaper invasion by almost three years. He was killed by the Collectors over Alchera, almost four hundred years ago.

When the first Shepard died, Liara recovered his physical remains. She already carried his memories within her mind. She took both to the rogue organization Cerberus, which used them to build a biological construct with the original Shepard’s memories and personality. That construct became the second Shepard. He fought a war against the Collectors, and later led the galaxy against the Reapers themselves. He died on the Crucible at the climax of the Battle of Earth.

What no one knew for a long time – aside from Liara and Vara – is that as the second Shepard died, the Crucible uploaded him. His genome, his physical structure, his memories, morals, and personality, all of those things provided a framework for the ascension of the Intelligence that commanded the Reapers. In a sense, the Intelligence took on a new form, a human form, on the basis of Shepard’s mind. That’s why the Intelligence and the Reapers have become non-hostile, withdrawing to watch over the galaxy and all its people from afar.

For almost four centuries, the Intelligence has kept its distance, refusing to intervene in events, permitting all of you to find your own destinies.
In a blurry sort of way, I remember being the Intelligence. Its mind is vast and powerful, beyond our ability to comprehend. Maybe Tekanta could dimly understand it, on the basis of its experience with the geth consensus. None of the rest of us have any hope of grasping the reality. In this human form, I’m crippled just like the rest of you. I can’t even begin to describe what it was like. I can’t remember most of it.

One day a little over fifteen years ago, I woke up on a grassy hillside on Mindoir, my armor and my weapons beside me, with no idea how I came to be there.

Like the second Shepard, I’m a biological construct based on the original’s genome and physical structure. On the other hand, the technology used to create me must have been millions of years more advanced than anything available to Cerberus. I’m full of cybernetics and nanotechnology, completely integrated with my biological systems, a synthesis of organic and synthetic life. I’m not sure what the limits of my capabilities are. I suspect those limits are going to be tested in the days to come.

I don’t know everything about the situation the galaxy is in. The Intelligence didn’t give me that information. In fact, I suspect the Intelligence may be as much in the dark about some things as we are. It’s very powerful, but it doesn’t work on the same scale we do, and it has trouble really seeing things on our level. I’m not in contact with the Intelligence anyway. I haven’t been since I arrived on Mindoir.

Here is what I do know. There is an Adversary out there, another entity that watches the galaxy and sometimes intervenes. It’s not the Leviathans. It has nothing to do with the Reapers or the Intelligence. It’s something else. The Intelligence has seen evidence of its existence for many millions of years, but if it knows what the Adversary is or what it wants, it didn’t see fit to share that knowledge with me.

For a long time, the Adversary stayed quiet. Thousands of extinction cycles. The Intelligence could almost forget it was out there, for millions of years at a time. Now the Adversary is active, more active than the Intelligence has ever seen it. It’s attacking the galaxy. It may be preparing to attack the Intelligence itself.

The Adversary is behind the valdarii. It may have something to do with these “Old Ones” the valdarii mentioned. Since the valdarii seem to be associated with the aging stars, I have to guess it’s involved with that phenomenon too. It’s also behind some of what’s been happening in Citadel space. It can influence organic minds, quietly, subtly, adjusting attitudes and emotional balance. It can encourage people to turn inward, mistrust each other, pursue their own selfish impulses instead of working together. Liara conjectured that it’s playing us off against the valdarii, for some reason of its own. I think that’s a good guess.

I’m not sure what the Intelligence is planning to do to defend itself, to defend all of us. I know the Reapers have been seen in the galaxy again. Maybe they have a job to do on behalf of the Intelligence. I don’t know. I wasn’t briefed on that.

I was given a different job. To come down to this level, where humans and asari and all the others operate. To warn people. To gather allies. To pull the galaxy together, figure out what has to be done, and then go do that. Whatever the cost.

Again.

The Intelligence must think we have a role to play. I wish I could tell you more about what that role is.
I think I was sent to Mindoir because the Way would give me a head start. I could prove I was Shepard come back to life, and they would listen to me without worrying too much about whether I was a Reaper trap of some kind. That hasn’t worked out as well as I might have hoped. Still, working from behind the scenes, I’ve been able to help Mindoir and some of the colonies build up their independence, build up their defenses.

Part of that is the nanotechnology I carry around in my body. Liara, you heard from the Clarkes about the Way’s ritual of sharing blood. I started that. I donated some of my blood and the nanotech in it, so that others could take a limited part in the synthesis. There’s a very good reason for that, and it has nothing to do with religious ritual, although the Way did roll it into their beliefs along with everything else I brought them.

The nanotech in my blood makes me immune to the Adversary’s influence. Whatever mechanism it uses to control people, the Intelligence’s technology counteracts it, helps keep my mind my own. If anyone else accepts the nanotech, it will set up defenses in their bodies and brains, preventing the Adversary from gaining a foothold. Most of the members of the Way have acquired that immunity by now.

I would really recommend that everyone here consider borrowing a bit of my blood. Or maybe we can study the nanotech, find a more efficient – and less creepy – way to share the immunity.

Aside from that, we need to gather a team. Gather more information, figure out what the Adversary is and what it’s up to. Figure out how to oppose it. Rally the peoples of the galaxy against it. The same kind of thing Liara and I did during the Reaper War.

When the Intelligence sent me to Mindoir, I didn’t have much sense of urgency. The Intelligence thinks on time-scales of millions of years, and it could easily have decided to take action now to head off a threat that far in the future. Now I think that may have been a mistake. Something has encouraged the Adversary to step up its game. It’s decided that now is the time to move.

If we don’t find a way to respond, then all of us may be in for whatever happened to David Ekwensì. Or something worse.

Shepard fell silent, and all of us around the table took a few moments to assimilate what he had said.

Then Vara stirred. “With all due respect, Shepard, you’re asking us to take a lot on faith.”

“I know.” He took a deep breath. “Vara, I know what you’re thinking but are too polite to say. How do we know this isn’t all some scheme of the Reapers?”

“The thought had occurred to me,” she admitted.

“It’s a possibility. I could be a walking time-bomb of some kind, designed to look and sound like Shepard to win your trust. I could even be perfectly sincere and that would still be true.

“The best argument I have against that idea is: why bother? If the Reapers had become hostile again, they wouldn’t need to mess around with building a Shepard-pawn to take you off guard. They would just sweep in from dark space and start harvesting everybody. The galaxy has made some progress since the war, but not nearly enough to beat the Reapers at their own game. After all, they only abandoned the extinction cycle because, in effect, my predecessor persuaded them to.”

“You make a good point.” Vara glanced around the table, her gaze finally settling on me. “Liara, if
you are wise, you will do two things.”

“I’m listening,” I told her, trying to project all the old love and respect I held for her.

“Shepard outlines a reasonable program, but I don’t think he should be in charge of carrying it out. He’s been gone too long, and he doesn’t have your political experience.”

We heard a small chuckle from the far end of the table. “No argument from me,” said Shepard. “This isn’t my Normandy.”

“Second . . . I think we should be very careful before accepting any of this man’s blood.” Vara peered down the table at him. “He claims that it will make us immune to this Adversary’s influence. He may even believe that. But by his own admission, the ones who have already accepted it are the members of the Way. That doesn’t strike me as a great recommendation.”

Kamala bristled slightly. “Now see here . . .”

Shepard rested a gentle hand on her forearm. “No, Kamala, from her perspective she’s right. Her only experience with the Way involves her bondmate being kidnapped and held against her will for several days.”

The Spectre had the grace to look mildly ashamed.

“At some point we’re going to have to convince a lot of people to accept the synthesis,” Shepard continued. “That’s not going to be easy. By all means, let’s demonstrate by example that it’s worth doing.”

Vara nodded in chilly satisfaction. “I have no more reservations.”

“All right,” I said, looking around the table, feeling responsibility like a heavy weight on my shoulders. “If Shepard is not going to command our effort, who will?”

Silence. All eyes rested on me.

“There’s no one else, Liara,” said Shepard gently.

I turned to Consul T’Marr. “Do you concur?”

She gave us a firm nod. “I do, and I’m confident that the Asari Republics will also accept your leadership in this matter.”

“That may be important,” I said. “This is in part a political problem. I’m not confident that the Yao administration will be of much help, especially if critical officials are already under this Adversary’s influence . . . which implies that we may need to replace President Yao.”

“A vote of no confidence?” suggested Vara.

“If we can get one. We should be able to get the asari and the krogan on board almost immediately, but that won’t be enough. We need a solid majority in Parliament.” I thought furiously for a few moments. “I think I see how to proceed. ARGOS?”

“Yes, Doctor?”

“Lay in a course for Thessia. Best possible speed.”

“At once, Doctor.”
“Tania, *Normandy* is on alert until further notice. We can’t waste time taking the long way around through the relay network to avoid *valdarii* activity. If we run into one of their fleets, we’re just going to have to punch through.”

My acolyte gave me a confident smile, so much like Nerylla’s that my heart skipped a beat. “All they will see is our drive flare as we pass, be sure of it.”

“Good. Shepard, you’ve already met Miranda.”

He nodded, a gleam of amusement in his eye at the name.

“I want you to report to the medical bay, where she will give you a thorough examination. I think we may be able to tell you more about your internal structure than the Way’s doctors and scientists.”

“Aye-aye,” he said, without a trace of irony.

“Meanwhile, Kalan, I want you, Tekanta, and Iole to examine Shepard’s gear. I want to know as much as possible about the Intelligence’s technology. The sooner we can prove there are no hidden traps in any of it, the sooner we will be able to convince others to join the cause.”

The quarian nodded, a trace of excitement showing at a new technical challenge.

*Am I missing anything?*

*Probably. If it’s important I’ll think of it later.*

“If there are no other issues, dismissed.”

I finally found time to retire to my quarters late in the ship’s day, looking forward to a short sleep period before we arrived at Thessia.

Vara was there before me, already bathed and changed into a light silk tunic, sitting on the bed and reading files on her omni-tool. She glanced up as I appeared, her face solemn.

*This may be a difficult evening.*

I decided to pretend nothing had changed between us. I stripped down, took a hot shower, and padded out of the refresher cubicle wearing nothing but a towel. I crossed to the bed and lay down in my usual place beside her. Then I waited.

“Well,” she said at last.

“I’m sorry,” I told her. “It was cruel of Shepard to ambush you like that. I should have told you about him the moment we made contact.”

Her lips quirked, not quite forming a smile. “I survived the experience. Barely. Goddess, Liara, to see him again after all these years . . .”

“I know.”

Silence.

“He still loves you,” she said at last. “He could barely keep his eyes away from you the whole time we were meeting.”
I sighed. “I know.”

Silence again.

“I could . . .” she ventured.

“Absolutely not,” I told her. I shifted on the bed, to pull her into an embrace with one arm and twine a leg between hers. “Vara T’Rathis, you have been my best and most loyal friend, my lover, and my bondmate. We have been partners for centuries. I am not about to set that aside just because Shepard has somehow returned.”

She resisted the embrace for just an instant, her body stiff and unyielding, but then she turned off her omni-tool and relaxed. “I suppose I knew that, but it still helps to hear you say it.”

I craned my neck slightly, and planted a warm, lingering kiss on her lips.

“Even though I can tell you still love him,” she said, once she could speak again.

“I’m not sure how I feel about him. It’s been a long time. I’m not the same adventurous maiden who bonded with him back in the day. On the other hand, I’ve never forgotten him. I’ve missed him. Now that he’s back, it would be very easy to fall in love with him all over again.” I took a deep breath. “On the third hand, I am not happy that it took so long for the Intelligence to send him back, and that he went for fifteen years without contacting me.”

“You understand why he did that. He didn’t want to come between us.”

I looked into her silver eyes. “He is not going to come between us.”

“Oh?” Those eyes became smoky, shadowed. “Prove it.”

So I made love to her, and it was as pleasurable for both of us as ever, and I opened my mind freely for her examination at our climax. She saw how deep my love for her remained, how determined I was to maintain our bond.

She also saw how hard it would be for me to refuse Shepard, if he ever made a serious attempt to rekindle what we had once had. As we drifted off to sleep in each other’s arms, I’m not sure she felt truly reassured.
6 November 2580, T’Selian Spaceport, Armali/Thessia

When Vara and I stepped onto the operations deck, the first thing I saw was Shepard’s eyes going very wide. It confused me for a moment, and then I remembered.

I had my very formal ensemble on, what Vara sometimes called my “political armor.” A long gown left my shoulders and upper chest bare and exposed my cleavage, but otherwise wrapped my figure closely all the way to my feet. A high-collared cloak fell almost to my ankles behind me, with sleeves running all the way down to my wrists. An elaborate headdress framed my face, and swept back in long horns over my crest. Everything was in silver and white, with cobalt-blue accents.

Aside from the color, the gown must have reminded Shepard very strongly of Benezia.

For that matter, I had changed somewhat as I entered the matron stage of life. My face had thinned out and my figure had grown more generous, both only slightly, but both increasing my resemblance to my mother. Dressed as I was, he could not help but notice.

“You look as if you’ve seen a ghost,” I teased him gently.

“I think maybe I have.” He shook his head ruefully. “Took me by surprise for a moment.”

“Some things have changed on Thessia, but we asari are still terribly conservative when it comes to fashion.”

“You look . . .” He stopped, changed direction with only a moment’s hesitation. “It suits you. I didn’t think anyone but a Matriarch got to wear a headdress like that.”

Vara glanced up at me, smiling with pride. “That’s not a matter of law. If an ordinary asari tried to wear one before her matriarchal transition, lacking the status to back it up, she would risk public ridicule. Liara hasn’t faced that risk in a very long time.”

Boom: the sound of Normandy coming to rest in her docking cradle.

“It’s time,” I said, and set out for the main airlock. Vara walked by my side, wearing her own formal gown in silver and black. Consul T’Marr followed close behind, then Shepard, Kamala, Miranda, Kalan, three of my security detail, and all of the Mindoir consulate staff. Our procession moved up the ship’s main corridor, through the open airlock, and down the long ramp outside.

A small crowd of asari waited in the lounge at the bottom of the ramp. I focused on the two standing in front, ready to meet us first. One was tall, slender and rather elegant, wearing her own formal gown and headdress in black and deep crimson. The other was shorter, wiry and athletic, wearing a much simpler silk gown, no headdress, and a sidearm at her hip.

I stopped at the bottom of the ramp, and then gave the shallow, graceful genuflection that one must employ while wearing the matriarchal headgear. It takes much practice to learn how to bow without having the whole assembly fall off.

The tall asari in dark colors followed suit, her bow just slightly more shallow than mine. Her voice sounded cool and musical, a finely tuned instrument that I knew she could employ with considerable impact. “Dr. T’Soni.”
“Matriarch. May I present my associates?”

She nodded graciously. I made introductions. The Matriarch’s eyes widened slightly when she heard Shepard’s name, even more when he stepped forward and made a perfectly elegant bow of his own in asari fashion.

“This is the Matriarch Thekla Valaridé, President-Coadjutor of the Assembly of the Republic of Armali.” I smiled slightly. “And this is her aide, Nerylla T’Rathis . . . my daughter.”

I happened to be watching Shepard just then. I saw the moment when he did a double-take at Nerylla, as if seeing her for the first time. Saw a momentary gleam in his eyes, quickly blinked away, his face setting into a bland mask of polite interest.

The formalities over, Nerylla stepped forward to embrace her mother and (more carefully) me. “Hello, patēr. I heard about theía Nerylla. Horrible.”

“Yes.” I could hear my voice go cold as winter. “There will be a reckoning.”

My daughter only nodded in complete agreement.

The Matriarch cleared her throat. “Doctor, I would normally not wish to interfere in a reunion of family, but time is pressing. The Grand Assembly has been told of your imminent arrival. In the past hour, the participation index has surged to rather startling levels.”

“How startling?” I asked.

“As of five minutes ago, seventy-six percent,” said Nerylla quietly.

“Remarkable. Matriarch, have you had time to consider my proposal?”

“I have.” She inclined her head once more. “It has always been a pleasure to work with you, Liara, and I accept.”

“Good.” I gave her a sharp-edged smile. “Let’s go make some noise.”

6 November 2580, Assembly Hall, Armali/Thessia

Asari democracy has always been a loud, chaotic affair. Even in our earliest civilizations, adult asari met in the agora to vigorously debate the issues of the day, deciding on matters of highest policy by a simple show of hands, or by casting ballots on potsherds. It seems to be our default form of governance, the one we keep returning to no matter how much social or technological change may occur. Like meritocracy among turians, or feudalism among salarians and humans.

Since the development of global telecommunications, the ekklesia has become a virtual thing, most of its members participating from the privacy of their own homes. Even in the smallest city-states, physical meetings of the entire citizenry happen only rarely. Possibly as a side effect, participation has fallen over the centuries, until most everyday policies are debated only by a motivated minority. Most asari regard that as a feature of the system, not a flaw; the right to choose not to participate in politics is recognized as an essential part of our liberties.

The Grand Assembly of the Asari Republics is a specific telecommunications nexus, moderated by sophisticated VIs and expert technicians, reaching every world and outpost where asari live in significant numbers. It is only considered to be in session when at least twenty percent of the entire asari population is online and engaged, an event which has only occurred seventeen times in four
thousand years. That threshold was passed on the fifth of November, while *Normandy* fled from Mindoir and the *valdarii* invasion. By the time we arrived on Thessia, the participation rate had soared. Most of the adult asari in the galaxy had logged in to the Assembly, along with many non-asari who held citizenship in the Republics.

Of course, just because seventy-six percent (and climbing) of the asari in the galaxy were logged in didn’t mean all of them would be watching *me* when I spoke. Millions of others would be speaking or posting messages at the same time, in a dense array of subforums and message threads. Policy proposals would be raised, tested for coherence and validity, heatedly discussed, amalgamated with other proposals, pushed closer to a vote of the whole. No one speaker, no matter how distinguished, could count on the undivided attention of the entire asari people.

Still, I looked at the statistics after we addressed the Assembly. When I stepped up onto a holographic stage in a darkened room, my audience numbered over *twenty billion*.

It had been a long time since I had last operated on that level. I hoped I could still meet the challenge.

The stage projected a virtual environment around me: an ancient amphitheater, thousands of notional asari apparently listening. The Assembly VIs would alter the environment, reporting the responses to my address through visual and auditory cues, as if I was speaking in an ancient *agora*. At the moment the audience seemed mostly quiet and attentive.

“I am Liara T'Soni, a citizen of the Republic of Armali,” I said calmly.

The system broadcast a file across the Assembly network: proof of my identity, a capsule biography, a long list of titles and honors.

“Several days ago, I left Thessia on a scientific expedition, hoping to verify a disturbing report I had received from the far edge of the galaxy.”

I spoke calmly and concisely for several minutes, describing Kalan’s discoveries and what we had done to investigate at Solveig. My *daimon* interfaced with the Assembly system, posting supporting data, from Kalan’s initial observations to the paper he and Miranda had just written. The virtual audience remained quiet and solemnly attentive.

“While we flew past Solvieg, we came under attack from a *valdarii* detachment.”

Instrument recordings, cross-references to known *valdarii* ship designs, a tactical display replaying the entire engagement. Supplementary data from the Illium Defense Force, detailing the *valdarii* ambush against Kalan’s ship in the Tasale system. I heard the first buzz of cross-talk out in the audience, as the Assembly began to examine and discuss the data I had presented.

“Immediately after our meeting, my bondmate and I were attacked on the Presidium. My lead
acolyte, Nerylla Essenai, was killed. I barely escaped with my life.” I took a deep breath. “I later learned that the assassination attempt was ordered by President Yao.”

A lengthy deposition from Kamala Sarabhai, detailing the content of Yao’s classified orders, and her actions that saved Vara and me from the assassins.

Out in the Assembly: pandemonium.

I had expected as much. In ancient times, I would have been forced to wait patiently for the tumult to subside, or start shouting for quiet. Now I simply sent a mental command through my daimon, and the Assembly muted its auditory cues so I could keep speaking without distraction. Anyone busy reacting to my last statement would be able to catch up quickly enough.

Besides, my next move was going to provoke a far stronger reaction.

“Spectre Sarabhai and I left the Citadel and took refuge on her homeworld of Mindoir,” I said, glossing over such details as sedatives, omega-five enkephalin, and being held against my will. “There I found humans who had information about the current situation not widely available in the rest of the galaxy. In particular, all of these phenomena – the dying stars, the valdarii incursions, and at least some of the trouble in the Confederation – appear to have a common cause.”

I used a dramatic pause for a few moments, building tension, and then went on.

“I escaped from Mindoir just as the valdarii invasion began there. With me came a human who is in the best possible position to explain to us what is happening. Members of the Grand Assembly, I now wish to call upon the testimony of William Allen Shepard, standing as an expert witness.”

Shepard stepped up onto another holographic stage, a few meters away. Within seconds, his image appeared everywhere in the network, on worlds all across the galaxy.

The Grand Assembly of the Asari Republics went mad.

Shepard hardly noticed. Calm, disciplined, he told his story once again, adding more details, omitting any discussion of his blood for the moment, speaking in flawless koiné without a trace of accent. I had already heard all of it; I caught myself just listening to his voice, trying not to get lost in the beauty of that elegant asari dialect in his smooth baritone.

Keeping busy helped. While Shepard spoke, my daimon and I posted file after file of supporting data. Miranda’s medical examination, revealing that our Shepard had the same genome as the original, and also carried a great deal of internal technology far more advanced than anything our civilization could produce. Recordings of the Ekwensi message, and of other messages that had come in from the valdarii in the last few hours. Instrument readings from ships that had sighted the Reapers in deep space.

By the time Shepard finished, the chaos had died down a little. His image remained on the Assembly, but I resumed the active role in the thread.

“I wish to put the following motion on the floor, as a formal proposal.

“One: The Asari Republics, through our representatives in the Parliament of the Citadel Confederation, will immediately begin preparations for a vote of no confidence in the Yao administration.

“Two: The Asari Republics will immediately begin to work with our friends among the other member species of the Confederation, to promote the vote of no confidence and to establish a new
coalition government once that vote has succeeded.

“*Three:* the Asari Republics will support that new coalition government, once formed, in an aggressive defense of the Confederation and all its citizens, against the *valdarii* and any force which may be using them in pursuit of its own goals.

“*Four:* I nominate Matriarch Thekla Valaridé for the office of *exarkhôn* of the Asari Republics, to coordinate our actions in pursuit of this proposal, with the understanding that she will stand for election to Parliament and the office of President of the Citadel Confederation at the earliest opportunity.

“Shepard and I will now be available for questions and further discussion, for the next two hours.”

It took longer than two hours. It was closer to six, and both of us were utterly exhausted, before Shepard and I could disengage from the Grand Assembly.

The Assembly had mechanisms in place to moderate comments and questions, so we didn’t have to respond to *every* fluff-brained thing an asari might choose to say. On the other hand, if millions of asari all saw the need to ask the same question, that question would rise to our attention.

Some of the questions and comments were expected, and we had prepared for them.

*This is nothing but T’Soni attempting to use the present crisis to force her way back into political power.*

“How can we verify Shepard’s claim of being an emissary of this Intelligence?"

“How do we know T’Soni didn’t create this image of Shepard for purposes of her own?"

I smiled. “Actually, I’ve had the capability to attempt such a thing for a long time. After the war, I associated for many years with Miranda Lawson, former head of the Lazarus Project. Most of the
technology involved fell into Alliance hands, and I had access to it. A number of samples of Shepard’s genome remained available, even after his death on the Crucible. I still carry all of Shepard’s memories, up to the day of the Battle of Earth. Cerberus spent over four billion credits on the project, but I’ve had access to similar levels of funding for centuries. If I had wished to create a copy of Shepard for myself, I would not have had to wait nearly this long.”

*Then why didn’t you, if you loved him as much as you claim in your memoirs?*

I kept my face and voice well-disciplined, avoiding the temptation to lose my temper. Politics in the Asari Republics is always a full-contact sport.

“It would have been criminally selfish for me to divert such resources to revive one man,” I said, “when billions were suffering terribly in the aftermath of the war. Also, I knew Shepard well enough to be certain that he would not have wanted me to do it. More than that is not the business of the public.”

“I concur, for what it’s worth. I never expected to return to the galaxy as a living human. I fully approve Liara’s decision not to attempt to revive me using Cerberus technology.” Shepard folded his arms and glared at the pickup, a gesture that echoed through my centuries-old memories of him. “And in my opinion, that was a very cruel question to ask.”

After that, the discussion moved to the details of our proposal. For hours, millions of asari held it up to fierce critique, looking for gaps in our evidence or argument. Shepard and I answered every question we could, presented counter-arguments to every objection. Others did the same in other chambers of the Assembly Hall: Matriarch Thekla, Vara, Miranda, Nerylla, and other asari who had already joined our camp. Kamala, Kalan, and even Tekanta all came forward more than once, to testify to matters within their knowledge and expertise.

Shepard often glanced at me when the focus was not on him, watching to see how I was taking things. I remained calm and serene, using my body language to project confidence. In fact, as time wore on, I became more and more certain that the proposal would pass. The flood of questions and comments became less pointed over time, suggesting that we had convinced many asari. As a few voters began to make early decisions, I saw the for vote outnumbering the against vote by almost thirty percent.

Then, just as I began to feel the need for food, refreshment, and *sleep*, another factor entered the discussion. Someone else pushed her way into prominence, gathering the attention of tens of millions of asari, requesting that she be permitted to address us directly.

*Matriarch Falere T’Sarien.*

Shepard and I exchanged a startled glance when the name appeared on a screen before us. Both of us recognized it.

Close to the end of the Reaper War, *Normandy* went to investigate trouble at the *ardat-yakshi* monastery on the planet Lesuss. We found the monastery overrun by Reaper creatures, which had captured almost all of the inmates in order to transform them into *banshees*. Falere had been the sole survivor of the attack, escaping the monastery with the assistance of the *Normandy* landing party.

Shepard had been on detached duty at the time, leaving *Normandy* under the command of Ashley Williams for several days. However, he had been fully briefed upon his return . . . and in any case, he and I had both known Falere’s *mother* quite well. The justicar Samara T’Sarien had been an ally
and comrade-in-arms throughout the war against the Collectors, and she later led the remnants of her Order in the final battle against the Reapers.

I lost contact with Falere after the war, although I learned much later that she never returned to the monastery. By the time the refuge had been rebuilt, Falere had come to Thessia and spent years working on post-war reconstruction. Having demonstrated that she had her condition well under control, and having worked with great selflessness to help others in need, she earned a rare reprieve from the cloister. Since then she had lived alone on Thessia and Cyone, working as an engineer and architect, apparently reconciled to her condition and the social stigma it carried.

Now her image appeared on the stage with us, an attractive Matriarch in her ninth century, wearing a simple black gown and a minimal headdress. The silver badge of a “reconciled” ardat-yakshi rested on her left breast, but she wore it such ease that one quickly came to ignore it.

“I wish to make several observations regarding this proposal, and the evidence and arguments in its support.”

Falere’s posture, face, and voice all seemed under perfect control, coldly rational perfection that gave nothing away. I began to worry whether she had some reason to hold a grudge against us . . .

“I agree that Shepard’s account is difficult to accept on its face. However, I believe I see evidence of its veracity. Evidence that Shepard and Dr. T’Soni themselves appear to have missed.”

I maintained my discipline. I did not exchange a sudden glance of wild surprise with Shepard.

“Consider. The valdarii have been active for over sixty years. Their influence has spread slowly across the Attican Traverse and the Terminus Systems. Many have speculated that they operate according to a very careful and long-term plan. Yet in the past few days they have become active in new regions of the galaxy, and they have mounted a full-scale invasion of Citadel space. I find I must ask: what has changed?”

Falere paused for a moment, letting the tension build with skill I wouldn’t have expected from an asari of her background.

“I submit that the significant change involves Shepard. Only in the last few months has information regarding his predecessor’s fate been available to anyone other than Dr. T’Soni and her bondmate. It appears that the valdarii are specifically interested in that information.

“We know that the valdarii have access to Confederation secrets, because they had no other way to know where and when to ambush Kalan’Tana nar Qoralis on his way to the Citadel. It seems reasonable to assume that President Yao himself is in league with the barbarians; else he would have no motive to attack Dr. T’Soni and Vara T’Rathis. Yet the President specifically inquired after Shepard’s status and his connections with the Ascended Intelligence. He then attempted to kill the only two people with first-hand knowledge of that subject.

“Finally, the choice of Mindoir as a primary target for the invasion makes little sense. It is a populous colony world, but it has little heavy industry, and it is distant from major trade routes. Why would the valdarii choose to attack there? Yet if we postulate that they are specifically interested in Shepard, the attack makes sense as an attempt to capture or kill him. Dr. T’Soni’s presence may have played a part in their decision as well.

“On our own, we may not wish to believe that Shepard is the agent of a mysterious Intelligence that commands the Reapers and watches over the galaxy. On the other hand, it appears likely that the valdarii believe it, and are planning their strategy on the basis of that belief. That alone seems
reason enough to take the idea seriously.

“It seems remotely possible that Dr. T’Soni and her associates could have fabricated the narrative they have presented to this Assembly . . . although from all I know of her character, it seems unlikely. Yet that narrative is too consistent, and it is corroborated by too many pieces of evidence that Dr. T’Soni could not possibly have fabricated.

“In my opinion, this Assembly would be deeply foolish to disbelieve her account or discount her proposal. We would do well to remember the last time the asari people ignored her warnings and advice. We were fortunate on that occasion to avoid extinction.”

Fifteen minutes later, Shepard and I could finally leave the holographic stage. The moment the door closed behind us, and there was no chance that the public would see, I collapsed against the nearest wall and closed my eyes with a soft groan.

Shepard chuckled, putting his back to the opposite wall and folding his arms. “No argument from me. Is asari political debate always this physically demanding?”

“Sometimes. The disadvantage of participatory democracy on such a large scale is that it can take forever for everyone to have her say. Most asari politicians work in teams, so they can keep on task no matter how long the debate requires.”

“Do you think Matriarch Thekla can take it from here?” he asked quietly.

“She’s a very experienced political operative,” I said. “Now that the discussion has moved on from the two of us, she should do very well.”

“She has your daughter to help.” He watched me for a long moment, a wistful expression on his face. “That’s a very impressive young lady. Very sharp.”

I smiled. “She had a talent for practical psychology long before she went to study political science at the university. She takes after my side of the family in that respect. In fact, she reminds me of Benezia at times. I suspect she has quite a career ahead of her in the Assembly.”

“Is she your only child?”

“No.” I watched him closely, but if he had motives other than friendly interest, he hid them well. “She’s our younger daughter. Aspasia is the elder. She’s more like her mother. Tough. Determined. Life in the military suits her. She’s in the Confederation Navy, in line for a command. Assuming her family connections don’t ruin that for her.”

“I understand the Navy stays out of politics as much as it can,” he said gently. “Her superiors shouldn’t hold any of this against her.”

“Unless Yao decides to be vindictive. Well, the sooner we can push him out of office, the less likely that he’ll get the chance to hurt Aspasia, and the sooner we’ll be able to concentrate on the real enemy.”

I heard footsteps in the corridor. I turned my head and saw Vara and Nerylla approaching us.

“That went very well,” said my bondmate. “I don’t think it will require the full three days before we know the proposal has been approved.”

people.”

“I’ll have to send her a message of thanks,” I murmured. “Goddess, I haven’t spoken to her in centuries. I wonder what drove her to come forward now?”

Shepard smiled. “I think I can guess. You and Vara were both on the mission that saved her life. Not to mention that Ash saved her mother from an honorable suicide at the same time.”

“I don’t care about her motives,” said Vara, watching Shepard closely. “Her reasoning was very solid. Assuming you’re right about some Adversary being behind the *valdarii* . . . I think it’s concerned about *you*. About something *you* might do to ruin its plans.”

“Hmm. I wish I knew what that might be.” He shrugged. “I’m just a messenger. I’ve spent a lot of time grumbling at my higher self, wondering why it sent me out here with so little information.”

To my surprise, Vara reached out and touched his arm, a comforting gesture. “Don’t worry. All of us working together? We’ll figure this out. We survived the Reapers, we can survive this.”

Shepard glanced at me, and for a moment I could read his thoughts as clearly as if he had spoken aloud.

*We didn’t all survive the Reapers.*

I decided to provide a distraction. “Come on. If we’re done with politics for the moment, I think we could all use a rest and a good meal. Let’s get a table at one of Armali’s finest establishments and indulge ourselves without shame. My treat.”

Shepard grinned at me. “Do we have to vote on that, or can we assume the proposal passes by acclamation?”

Vara laughed. “Well. We asari don’t vote on *everything*.”
7 November 2580, T'Soni Lineage Estates, Armali/Thessia

Once again, an alarm signal flashed to our daimones well after midnight. Once again, Vara was up and checking the status report before I quite finished grumbling awake.

“This is becoming tiresome,” I observed. “At least it isn’t Kalan slipping across the perimeter this time, since he’s already here.”

Vara turned and peered at me in the darkness of our room. “It’s not Kalan. Not even an intruder, really. Shepard is gone.”

I felt a sudden chill, an instant of panic. I covered it by rising out of the bed and stalking across the room to examine the console for myself. “What do you mean, gone?”

Sometime between the last two security sweeps, a period of about twenty minutes, Shepard had vanished from his guest suite. An aircar was also missing from the hangar.

I opened a channel to Tania through my daimon.

{How could the most important human in the galaxy simply vanish into thin air while in our care?}

{I’m not sure, despoina. Unless he has a bleeding-edge cyberwarfare suite and the best tactical cloak I’ve ever heard about.}

{He probably does have those things. Which is not to excuse you, therapōn. Find out where he went!}

{Of course, despoina.}

I cursed venomously and went to the wardrobe to start pulling on my casual ensemble. Including kinetic barriers and a sidearm.

“Where are you going?” asked Vara quietly.

“To find him.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“I’m not sure either, but I think I need to do it anyway.” I turned and looked at her. “Vara, unless centuries as part of the Ascended Intelligence have changed him beyond recognition, that man has to be in a terrible mind-space right now . . . and we’re responsible.”

She made a small sound of protest.

“You know it’s the truth,” I said quietly.

“Yes. I suppose it is.” She took a deep breath, released it slowly. “I’ll come too.”

“No. Vara . . . I think you may be the last asari he is going to want to see right now.”

“I’ll stay back with the security detail,” she said, “and you are going to take a security detail.”
“Done. Get dressed.”

7 November 2580, Eurotas District, Armali/Thessia

The missing aircar turned up in downtown Armali, not far from the river, in a district devoted to culture and entertainment. Shepard was not in it. Some intuition told me he had gone to explore the district on foot, searching for distraction. We split up into three groups of two, and began to search.

After about an hour, Tania and I found him, sitting alone at a dark table in a cabaret down by the river.

It didn’t look like him at first glance. Apparently whatever he used as a tactical cloak could also alter his features and appearance. He wore nondescript clothing that I hadn’t seen before, breaking up the outline of his form. Still, the moment I saw him, I knew who it was. He hadn’t bothered to change his body language, the traces of military discipline in his carriage, the subtle cues that had come to say Shepard to me centuries before.

I had Tania call Vara and the others, told them to assemble on the street outside, and went in alone.

He noticed me crossing the floor, of course, but he didn’t visibly react until I was almost standing by his table. I took him in at a glance: posture and expression grimly neutral; half-empty tumbler of whiskey by his elbow; fixed stare up onto the stage, where a trio of athletic asari maidens performed a mildly erotic dance.

“Hello, Liara,” he said at last, not looking at me. At least his voice remained the same.

“May I join you?”

“Can’t stop you,” he said, and I could hear the smallest trace of bitterness in it.

“Of course you can,” I told him. “If you don’t want company I’ll leave. I hope you won’t object to the security detail I leave behind. Not even on Thessia is it safe for any of us to be alone right now.”

He sighed deeply and shook his head, but he also deactivated the cloak so that I could see him properly. “You’re right, of course. You usually are. Sure, sit down.”

I slid in across the table from him, watching him, but careful not to touch him. Then I concentrated on simply being with him, projecting calm patience, ready to listen but not trying to press.

He glanced away from the dancers, took a sip of his whiskey, and watched me for a moment from under his brows. “You’re doing it again.”

“What am I doing?”

“Using your body language to communicate without saying a word. You’ve gotten very good at it.”

“It comes with being asari, and then getting many years of practice. It’s a useful technique in politics.”

His face twitched slightly, as if firmly suppressing an expression. “You would certainly know about that. While I existed as a part of the Intelligence . . . I suppose you could say I heard about you once in a while. A lot of the details never rose to its attention, though, and they never got passed along to me. I had a few surprises in store when I arrived on Mindoir.”
I sat quietly, waiting.

“President Liara T’Soni. You certainly made it to the top of things, before you even reached the matron stage at that. I always knew you would end up as a mover and shaker.”

“It was my duty,” I said quietly. “I felt an obligation to all the people we lost in the war.”

“Including one William Allen Shepard,” he said.

“Yes. Especially him.”

Silence again, for a long time. He turned back to watch the dancers, a different group this time, moving to a slower, more languorous beat.

“T’Soni, I find I have a confession to make,” he said at last, not looking at me.

“I’m listening.”

“I told you that I spent all that time on Mindoir without contacting you, because I knew you had made a life for yourself without me, and I didn’t want to interfere with that.” He took a long sip of his whiskey, draining the glass, and waved to the nearest waitress for another. “That . . . was not the entire truth.”

I waited.

“As soon as I got established, I spent weeks surfing the extranet to learn the details of everything that had happened since . . . well, let’s not mince words. Since I died on the Crucible.” He paused again, turning inward, no longer even watching the maidens on the stage. “One of the first things I did was look you up. I thought I needed to know. I started reading the codex entries, the biographies, the histories. Within a couple of hours, I stopped. I set it all aside, and then I spent the next fifteen years doing my best not to think about you at all.”

“Was it that painful?” I asked gently.

“You could say that.” He sighed. “Don’t get me wrong, Liara. Before I died, I told you that if I didn’t survive the war, I wanted you to move on and build a life for yourself. When I spoke to you that last time aboard Harbinger, I said the same thing. I made you promise. I meant every word of it. I still do. I cannot begin to tell you how proud I am of you, knowing that you’ve been happy and productive for so long.”

“I understand,” I told him, suddenly unable to meet his gaze. “I’ve never doubted the sincerity of your love for me, Shepard.”

“Sure. Here I sit, a paragon of humanity, as someone once called me in a book. A shining example of compassion and selflessness.” His face twisted suddenly, his eyes falling almost shut, the muscles tensing into an expression more bitter than I had ever seen there before. “What a load of shit.”

I understood then. Throwing caution to the winds, I leaned forward and put both hands on his forearm, feeling the breaking tension in the corded muscles. “Shepard,” I breathed, and held on.

Eventually the crisis passed. His shoulders slumped, the tension in his arms relaxed, and he rather shakily picked up his drink for another sip.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “Damn. The worst of it is, I can’t even get drunk anymore. Whatever the
Intelligence gave me, it’s even better than the filters Cerberus built into my last liver. I metabolize the alcohol so quickly it never has a chance to reach my brain.”

“ Shepard, you have nothing to be sorry about.” I squeezed his forearm. “The Way may be foolish enough to think of you as a supernatural being, but I’ve always known better. You have a right to grieve all the things you’ve lost. To feel resentment.”

“No, Liara. Not resentment. Never that.” He patted one of my hands, looked up into my eyes again. “I suppose grief sounds about right. I don’t have a home anywhere, not on Mindoir, not on Earth, not here. Almost everyone I once knew is long dead. My career is gone, my command is gone. The very governments I once served have changed almost beyond recognition.”

“Then there’s me,” I whispered.

“Yeah. I’ve lost the woman I loved more than anything in the galaxy. She’s gone on to success after success, but I wasn’t there to help her, or share in any of it. She’s even had the children I once hoped for, and they appear to be wonderful people, but they have nothing to do with me.” He chuckled, a grating sound with little humor. “I suppose you could say I’m mourning for myself.”

“Oh Shepard.” I bowed my head, closed my eyes, and for a moment there was nothing but the feel of his skin under my fingers. Tears welled up in my eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

“No your fault.” He shifted, and I felt his other hand under my cheek, gently tipping my face up again. “It would have been worse, if you had lived like a hermit all these years.”

“Maybe this was a bad idea,” I said slowly, blinking my vision clear. “Calling you away from Mindoir, bringing you out here for all the galaxy to see, suggesting that you and I should work together again. All I could think of at the time was that I didn’t want to lose you again. But it was monstrously unfair to you.”

“No, you were right. I can do more good out here than I could stuck on Mindoir. I can already see that I’ll fit in well with the team you’re starting to assemble.” His lips quirked, forming the ghost of his old smile. “Although it would have been helpful if my higher self had built this model with a vocation for celibacy.”

I scoffed. “Then you wouldn’t have been Shepard.”

“I suppose not.”

He took a sip of his whiskey, setting the tumbler back down with a decisive thunk. I watched his face closely, and felt some assurance. He was finding his emotional balance again, shouldering his burdens as he had done so many times before. I felt a surge of admiration, quickly suppressed, for his strength of will.

“I’m almost afraid to ask this,” I ventured, “but why haven’t you found someone else?”

“Hmm. All those years on Mindoir, you mean?”

“Oh, there were possibilities. Too many of them.” He looked away, his eyes shadowed. “For example, I’ve known Kamala since she was fourteen years old, all eyes and elbows and hero worship. She joined the Alliance military because of me, stood for her Spectre candidacy because of me. I could have had her for the asking since she was seventeen, she’s made that abundantly clear.”
“So why haven’t you?” I let go of his arm and leaned back, smiling gently. “She certainly fits your taste in human females. She reminds me a lot of Ash.”

“I can see the resemblance,” he agreed. “She’s a remarkable young woman.”

“So why not?”

“Because she’s not in love with me, she’s in love with the Shepard. Because I would despise myself if I took advantage of that.” He sighed. “And because she isn’t you.”

I shook my head in silence.

“It’s the same with every other woman I met on Mindoir. I could have had a harem if I wanted one. I just wouldn’t have been able to live with myself afterward . . . and none of them would have been enough.” He glanced back up to the stage, empty for the moment between acts. “You know, I came down here half-tempted to find someone. A night with one of the dancers, maybe, or some fresh-faced hetaira from a good house. Someone I could pretend was the brilliant asari maiden I fell in love with four hundred years ago. But I suppose that wouldn’t have worked either.”

“Maybe you should try.”

He peered at me, like a startled avian. “You can’t be serious.”

“Of course I am. We asari don’t think about sex the way most of you humans seem to. It’s not so fraught with consequence for us. I’m not sure why. Maybe it’s because we don’t have the same gender-politics issues, or because we can’t conceive a child without a conscious decision. It doesn’t matter. If a short liaison with no need for commitment would be good for you, no one would think to question it.”

“Not even you?” he demanded.

“Least of all me.” I sighed. “Shepard, I find I have a confession to make.”

He smiled slightly. “I’m listening.”

“I still love you. More than I can say. I’ve remembered you, and wondered about you, and wished to see you again, ever since that conversation aboard Harbinger. I want very much for you to be happy and at peace. So if a talented young hetaira could heal your heart, no one would be more pleased than I.”

“Then if you don’t worry about sex the same way humans do . . .”

I held up a hand to stop him. “Shepard, we asari may not take sex as seriously as humans do, but I assure you there are other things we may take even more seriously than humans do. Love. Honesty in our romantic relationships. Personal integrity.”

He saw what I meant. “Vara.”

“Vara. I love her too, Shepard. Perhaps not in the same manner that I love you, but certainly not to any lesser degree. She’s been my strong right hand, my loyal support, the mother of my daughters. I cannot set her aside. Not even for you.”

“I know.” Slowly he nodded, as if discovering within himself an understanding of the situation. “I wouldn’t ask you to do that.”
“The irony is that she might step aside, if she became convinced that was what I wanted. She’s been in my mind so many times, she knows perfectly well how I still feel about you. She admires you as well.”

“I feel the same way. I don’t know her nearly as well as you do, of course, but I’ve always liked and respected her. We got along pretty well, during the war.”

I smiled, remembering. “Aside from one or two epic arguments.”

“All of which were driven by her concern for you, as I recall. I’ve never had any trouble forgiving her for that.”

“So you understand. We asari aren’t as committed to monogamy as you humans, but we do place a great deal of emphasis on honesty within our love-relationships. We have to. It’s almost impossible for us to lie to those we love. Even the attempt can be fatal to a bond.”

“Yeah, I get it.” He shook his head in frustration. “What a mess.”

“Yes.”

We sat in companionable silence for a while, both of us watching a musical performance up on the stage. To my amusement, I realized the musicians were playing something influenced by a human style called jazz.

_I feel like a cliché. The femme fatale in a piece of film noir, sitting here in the small hours of the morning with a former lover, listening to Dixieland._

Most of the tension in the air had evaporated, and I found I could almost relax. After a while, Shepard set down his empty tumbler once more, and shifted his weight as if preparing to rise.

“Thanks for listening to me,” he said.

“Feeling any better?”

“No really, T’Soni, but I begin to think I can cope with the situation again.” He held out a hand in invitation. “Friends?”

I took his hand and squeezed it hard. “Always, Shepard.”

“Good. Let’s go back to the estate before your security detail has a collective fit.”

“No _hetaira_? I’d be happy to make the necessary arrangements . . .”

He snorted. “I’ll just bet you would. No, I think I’ll take a rain check on that.”

“All right.”

We rose from the table, Shepard waving his hand at the credit reader to settle his tab.

{Vara? We’re finished here. We’ll be out in a moment.}

Then I had to stop, because no response came back through my _daimon_.

{Vara? Tania?}

Shepard stopped, watching me. He must have seen something in my face.
“Something’s wrong,” I told him. “I can’t reach the others who should be waiting outside.”

He turned, looked out toward the cabaret’s front entrance. His face went blank for a moment, as if he concentrated on something no one else could perceive.

“Someone’s out there,” he said quietly. “Come on. I think we’re under attack.”
The Wrecking Crew

7 November 2580, Eurotas District, Armali/Thessia

“Out the back,” Shepard decided, setting out for the cabaret’s service area.

“Shepard, if someone has laid a trap for us, won’t they be expecting that?”

“Probably,” he admitted, “but I need to get outside for a minute or so, and our options for staying under cover are better back there.”

“But . . .”

“Liara. I’m multi-tasking. Give me a minute.”

I kept quiet and followed him. The cabaret’s service staff looked startled when we barged through their area, but something in Shepard’s face prevented any argument. We moved too quickly for anyone to get in our way.

We found the facility’s loading dock, the back door closed but blinking a sudden green as Shepard stepped up to it. He opened the door in perfect silence.

“Out and to the right,” he instructed me. “Hurry.”

I obeyed, wondering for a moment just how he knew exactly what to do. Somehow I suspected there was more to it than his old training in decisiveness under pressure.

We fled down a short ramp, hurrying to get out from under a light shining above the cabaret’s back door. I found myself in a back alley, narrow and dark, but clean as such places usually are on Thessia.

“Hah!” he grunted. “I’ve got Vara. She and the others got suckered out of position by a message with your authentication codes attached to it. She’s on her way. ETA less than two minutes.”

Unfortunately, we didn’t get two minutes.

Blue light flared as Shepard’s kinetic barriers shed an incoming round. Both of us instinctively went for cover, drawing our sidearms and preparing to shoot back.

_Crack!_ Stone shards spalled off the pavement where I had been standing only a moment before.

“Sniper!” I warned, peeking out for just an instant, and then ducking back as I saw a targeting laser slice through the air toward my position.

“Yeah, I noticed,” said Shepard, perfectly calm. “Asari commandos. Five of them. Two snipers well back, a biotic specialist, and two assault specialists. The last three will be charging us at any moment.”

“Eulalalia!”

Three slim black-clad figures sprinted up the alley toward us, like scraps of the night given form.

I slammed down a barrier and fired a three-round burst with my sidearm. Shepard fired as well from his position across the alley.
We scored hits, but the enemy took them on their barriers and barely paused. Two of them vaulted over Shepard’s cover. The third came for me, with a combat knife at the ready, and then I didn’t have time for anything but staying alive.

Duck under a vicious slash, produce a biotic surge to knock the assassin back, flash-step to one side. Remember the snipers, realize you are out from behind cover, and go into an outrageous cycle of flash-steps. *Snap-snap-snap*, effectively teleporting a meter at a time back to better cover, a sniper’s round cracking the pavement again an instant behind me, the assassin following the whole way.

Glimpse of Shepard fighting, a blur of fists and biotic strikes, keeping two commandos at bay.

Combat knife hissing past my face as I lean back, opening a slash across my cheek that I don’t even feel until the air hits it, and then it stings. *Boom* and my biotics surge to their maximum, a blue-white pulse that knocks everything in my vicinity back about two meters, including the assassin. She recovers quickly, shifts her weight, and makes a graceful leap for my throat.

*Mistake.*

Quick as a flash I shift a few centimeters to my right, duck under the stabbing knife, and seize the assassin by shoulder and hip. “*Ai!*” and I use her momentum against her, a perfect *cheironomia* throw that slams her into the stone wall two meters behind me.

It doesn’t stop her, but it slows her down for a moment. Long enough for me to glance in Shepard’s direction, just in time to see a silver streak fall out of the night sky, apparently attacking him. For an instant I fear it’s another facet of the enemy’s assault, but then I see his armor sliding around his form, covering his limbs, his torso, his head. His weapon appears in his right hand.

*Crack! Crack!*  

A sound pulls my attention back to my attacker, back on her feet and ready for another round, perhaps looking a little shakier this time. A flurry of blows, blocked with arm-strikes, deflected with biotics, one slash ripping through my light armor to place a shallow wound along my ribs.

“Liara! *Down!*”

Old reflexes kick in, and I throw myself to the pavement.

*Crack!*

All I could see was the assassin’s feet. They suddenly stopped moving, and then her entire body fell limply backward to the ground. I came back to my feet, looked at her face, and immediately wished I hadn’t. I saw a tiny entry wound exactly between her eyes. The back half of her head was a purple smear against the wall behind where she had been standing.

*Instant head-shot kill, straight through her shields and barriers. What is that weapon of his?*

“Come on,” came Shepard’s voice. “I want to catch one of those snipers before they disengage.”

I glanced at the two asari who had engaged him, both of them lying very finally on the ground. Then I hurried to keep up with the silver statue.

“Are you all right?” I asked, only slightly out of breath.

“A few bruises. Nothing my nanotech can’t cure. You?”
“She got a little closer than I care for.” I glanced at him, daring him to take notice of the wound on my face. “I’ll be fine.”

“You say so, T’Soni.” Then his voice shifted, turned into a growl. “Get down!”

We took cover just at the end of the alley, even Shepard crouching in his armor, peering out across an open street.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Up ahead. The snipers were hanging around a little longer than I expected, once we dealt with the assault team. Now I see why. They’re baiting a trap.”

“More commandos?”

“Quite a few more, across that street and in the park on the other side.” He paused for consideration. “Liara, I want to try something, but I need you and Vara to agree to it before I’m willing to take the risk. Hang on, I think I can reset your daimon so we can talk.”

He didn’t touch me, or even give the appearance of looking at me, but something happened. I blinked as a sensation of cold clarity washed through my mind.

{Dr. T’Soni. I am online once more. Mr. Shepard was able to rid me of a malware set I was not even aware had taken residence in my primary processing stack.}

{Good. Vara?}

{Here.}

Shepard’s mental voice broke into the channel. {Ladies, I want more information. They’re laying a trap for us. I propose we walk into it.}

I expected Vara to explode, but she surprised me. {They can’t know much about your capabilities, especially with that armor of yours.}

{My thought exactly. We meet on this side of the street. I’ll reconfigure the armor so it’s not easily visible. We walk across into that park as if we’re pursuing the snipers as they disengage. As soon as they take the bait, we demonstrate that we have a lot more fangs and teeth than they expected. Meanwhile, I turn the tables and drop a Reaper-level virus into their comm net.}

{I like it,} said Vara. {Just one thing. Keep Liara safe.}

{No argument from me. She’s got six of us to watch out for her now. Liara?}

{I concur. Let’s do this.}

So Shepard and I walked out into the streetlights, looking like two easy targets, relieved to meet Vara and the rest of my security detail. All of us made a show of looking around and arguing our next move, then crossing the street in nothing like our usual tight formation. I worried that we might be overacting, making our intentions a little too obvious.

About twenty meters into the apparently deserted park, I saw our plan would work. Black-clad figures emerged from cover on all sides.

Rather than dive for our own cover, Vara and I immediately put up a biotic bubble, a protective field to surround our whole party. Shepard triggered his armor, the silver sheath seeming to snap
into existence around him in an instant. Then all of us turned to fight.

The bubble didn’t stop incoming fire, but it deflected and blocked a great deal of it, giving us an advantage. It also tended to overload the barriers of any biotics who charged our position, making them easier prey.

That quiet little park seemed to tremble with the sound of gunfire and biotic detonations, like a barrage of thunder that kept on rolling across the Armali streets. Shepard’s weapon provided punctuation, a supersonic crack every few seconds that hammered at a foe’s defenses. Asari commandos began to go down, one after another.

*The city militia have to be aware that there’s something going on here. Our attackers can’t have more than two or three minutes to attain their objectives.*

I counted attackers, and gave up when I reached an even dozen.

*Fifteen seconds.*

One of my acolytes took a bullet in her shoulder, going down with a scream of frustrated pain.

*Thirty seconds.*

Vara and I alternated rebuilding the bubble, each time it threatened to collapse.

*Forty-five seconds.*

The noose around our position grew tighter. I found myself fighting back-to-back-to-back with Shepard and Vara. My corona burned high, flinging warps and singularities at our foes. Shepard turned slowly, looking in every direction at once, biotic shockwaves and fire from his weapon slicing down anyone foolish enough to approach in the clear. Vara danced, her sword flashing as she cut and slashed, using the weapon every few moments to channel a great surge of biotic force.

*Sixty seconds.*

A tremendous roar from out of the darkness.

My eye had become accustomed to asari attackers, slim and agile. Now something huge came pelting out of the night, roaring as it came, firing a shotgun the size of a small cannon every few steps.

*Krogan!*

The new attacker was fast for all his size. He sprinted into our bubble without a moment’s hesitation, a blue-white flare showing where his biotic barriers absorbed the energy but refused to go down. One more shotgun blast took Shepard right in the center of mass, and even in his armor it knocked him back two steps. Then the krogan collided with him, a great smashing blow that would probably have broken every bone in my body.

Shepard dropped back two more steps, then three, and fell.

Out of the bubble.

The krogan battlemaster found himself in the middle of a storm of biotic bursts and weapons fire, all five of us unwounded asari doing our best to put him down. Somehow he remained on his feet, snarling, his barriers blazing like a star to absorb everything we gave him.
Movement, out of the corner of my eye . . .

I glanced over to where Shepard rose to his feet, ready to throw himself back into the fight.

Just in time to see a new figure lurking just behind him. Clad all in black, but not an asari, the body shape and posture were all wrong. I saw nothing but two red eyes gleaming beneath a voluminous hood.

I started to shout a warning.

The newcomer flash-charged Shepard in a flare of reddish light, but it didn’t collide with him, it appeared to teleport through him. The moment it reappeared, it continued to run in the same direction, disappearing back into the shadows in a few seconds.

The krogan’s shotgun barked once more, catching Pala and turning her torso into bloody scraps. This opened a gap in our cordon, which he used to charge back out into the night.

At almost the same instant, the remaining commandos disengaged as well, a fighting retreat that left us alone in the darkness. In the sudden quiet, I could hear the sound of Armali militia sirens as they rushed through the streets toward us.

“What just happened?” asked Vara.

I turned to Shepard once more. Saw him wavering on his feet. Saw him collapse to the ground once more.

“Shepard!”

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7 November 2580, T’Soni Lineage Estates, Armali/Thessia

“What are your casualties?” asked Matriarch Thekla, peering at me out of the viewscreen with a concerned expression.

“One of my acolytes, Pala Satheris, is dead,” I told her, my voice bleak with shock and fatigue. “Another, Karis Terelo, is badly wounded and is in the hospital. Several of the rest of us took less serious wounds.”

“I see you were one of them.”

Sitting at the desk in my office, I reached up to touch the side of my face, the pad of medi-gel sealing the wound, already beginning to heal it. “It looks worse than it is. I’ll be fine.”

“What about Shepard?”

“He’s safe. Miranda has him resting under observation at the moment, but she’s confident he has taken no serious harm. Whatever poison that turian cabalist introduced into his system, it was very powerful – it would likely have killed any of the rest of us in seconds – but it only incapacitated Shepard for a few minutes. His internal technology is very effective at protecting him from toxins.”

“Thank the Goddess.”

“Matriarch, I have some information for you. Even during the fight, Shepard managed to hack into the enemy’s comm net and pull down a number of files. Including the contract under which the Black Hand sisters had been hired to make the hit. Ms. Sarabhai recognized something in their
Thekla’s eyes shifted to take in the former Spectre, who stepped up beside my desk.

“The Black Hand was hired by two people, Matriarch,” said Kamala. “Varag Tachar and Alia Nerinn.”

“A krogan and a turian,” observed Thekla. “Most likely the two who participated in the attack.”

“Yes. Matriarch, I have reason to recognize both those names. They’re Spectres.”

Thekla’s eyes went wide with surprise. “A krogan Spectre?”

“He’s the first. Incredibly strong, galaxy-class biotics, very fast for a krogan, and he thinks. Fanatically loyal to the Citadel Confederation. He was one of Urdnot Wrex’s protégées during the unification of Tuchanka, right up there with Urdnot Grunt. I will bet five hundred credits that he planned every step of the attack last night. He often partners with Nerinn, who came to the Spectres from the turian cabals. Together they have a very big reputation in the Corps, although most of their ops are sealed, so the general public never hears about them.” Kamala paused. “We privately call them the Wrecking Crew.”

“An evocative name.”

Kamala looked grim. “They’re the ones called in when the Confederation needs a problem solved, right now and by the application of extreme force.”

“Dr. T’Soni, what are your conclusions?”

“I have no conclusions as yet, but I do find it interesting that President Yao’s targeting has shifted. On the Citadel, he used human proxies to attack Vara and me. Last night, although the two of us certainly came under attack, the primary target was clearly Shepard. If it were not for his internal technology, he would be dead now. If any of the rest of us had been the primary target, we would be dead now.”

“Also notice that the President should know that we are capable of identifying his agents,” said the Matriarch. “That suggests that he is so desperate to see Shepard dead that he is willing to risk almost anything to have it done.”

“Yes.” I took a deep breath. “Matriarch, do you believe you can continue to work the political side of this without my direct assistance?”

“Your help would be very useful, but no, I can handle the politics well enough. Especially if you give me this evidence to work with. Spectres attack one of our most prominent citizens, so soon after she leveled serious accusations against the Confederation? With this in hand, if I cannot gather more than enough support for our position, I may as well retire.”

I gave her a grim, lop-sided smile, not wanting to disturb the medi-gel. “I suspected as much. Then I believe Normandy will be leaving Thessia within a few hours. We need to get out into the galaxy and discover more about this threat. What we learn will be useful on the home front. Not to mention that President Yao may find it more difficult to strike at a moving target.”

“A sound strategy. Please keep me informed.”

“Matriarch, on another matter . . . have you given any further consideration to Shepard’s other proposal?”
“This matter of the sharing of his blood?” Thekla shook her head ruefully. “Liara, we can’t bring that forward yet. We’re already asking the asari people to accept a great deal.”

“I understand,” I said, glancing at Kamala. She shrugged, a resigned expression on her face. “One of the things we will study is Shepard’s internal technology. If we can discover how his nanotechnology grants him immunity to the Adversary’s influence . . .”

“Then there would be time to bring your results to the Assembly.” Thekla smiled at me. “I am certain you and your allies will succeed. Your record in such matters is enviable, especially with Shepard involved.”

“Thank you, Matriarch. We will be in contact.”

I keyed the display off and turned to look up at Kamala.

She had not been happy to hear about the incident – all of us, and especially her hero, in danger while she slept peacefully in her room at the estate. Now she stood at parade rest, not quite watching me, her face keeping her thoughts well concealed.

“Ms. Sarabhai, you haven’t answered my question,” I said mildly.

Slowly, she smiled. “With all due respect, Doctor, wild horses could not drag me away.”

“Good. I have issue with some of your actions so far, but I think we can put that behind us, and there’s no denying your support will be useful. It’s a dangerous galaxy out there.”

“True. Sometimes you’re going to need some old-fashioned human bloody-mindedness.”

“We’ll have Shepard,” I pointed out.

She cocked her head in thought. “Not to say he’s lost any of his legendary edge, mind you, but I think he’s become less of an attack dog since you knew him in the old days.”

I snorted. “You would describe yourself as an attack beast?”

“Absolutely.” Her smile became wide and unrestrained. “All of us need to play to our strengths.”

“I concur.” I rose from the desk. “Come on. Let’s go find the others.”

We found Shepard and Vara sitting in one of the dining nooks, each of them with a cup of coffee, engaged in serious conversation. I couldn’t tell the subject, since they fell silent as soon as we appeared.

Hmm. I should ask Vara about that later. Or perhaps I should avoid asking Vara about it.

I smiled at the two of them. “Shepard, you’re looking well.”

“Miranda says I’m fine,” he rumbled. “Right now I’m feeling the lack of sleep more than anything else. I guess not even all this Reaper tech can compensate for that.”

“Or perhaps it refuses to do that unless it’s an emergency,” Vara suggested. “If I were designing bionic modifications, I would work with the host’s natural systems as far as possible.”

“The Reapers never used to do that,” Kamala mused. “Very invasive tech, from all I’ve seen.”

“The Reapers never used to care what happened to their pawns,” said Shepard bleakly. “Raw
material for the harvest, to be discarded the moment they weren’t needed any more. Now the Intelligence has new motives, and it’s had four hundred years to develop better methods.”

“Have you spoken to Matriarch Thekla?” asked Vara.

I nodded. “I have. She’s ready to proceed . . . which means we should prepare to depart aboard Normandy as soon as possible.”

“Where do you have in mind to go?” asked Shepard, taking a sip of his coffee.

“Well, we need to understand more about what this Adversary is, what its motives are, how it takes action in the galaxy. We knew absolutely nothing about it until you appeared. I can attest that there is nothing relevant in the asari archives . . . which are not in the business of concealing critical information anymore, I’ve personally seen to that.” I spread my hands in a broad shrug. “We need a longer baseline, stretching back into the deep past.”

“I agree. So where do we get that?”

“Senakhar.” I took a deep breath, feeling the fatigue sink into my bones. “The Prothean homeworld.”
9 November 2580, Vakana System Space

Shepard and Kamala joined me in the observation lounge, as Normandy took up a parking orbit over Senakhar.

“Strange,” Kamala observed. “I always thought that the Protheans evolved on a warm planet.”

I nodded, understanding her confusion. Even from a high orbit, Senakhar looked cold. Vast fields of ice and snow reached down from the poles, only the equatorial region clearly showing the green and blue of a habitable world.

“They preferred temperate to warm climates,” I agreed. “Fifty thousand years ago, Senakhar was much more hospitable. Today it’s in a deep glacial age. That surprised a lot of us, when we finally opened up a mass relay into the Cronos Gamma cluster after the war, and found this place.”

“So what happened?” Kamala asked.

“The Reapers came, and ten thousand cities burned,” said Shepard grimly. “A lot like what happened on Earth or Palaven, except here the Reapers had time to finish the job. No one was left behind to rebuild, or to stabilize the climate.”

“Like a nuclear winter,” said Kamala.

“Yeah. All that soot and dust in the atmosphere, it blocked out the sun for decades. Set off a new ice age.” Shepard shrugged, his face still bleak as he stared down at the planet below us.

“Sometimes the Reapers preferred that result. As part of the extinction cycle, they might deliberately destabilize a planet’s climate after its population had been harvested. The idea was to destroy and cover up any remains of the civilization that had once been there. Like plowing the stubble under, in a field you plan to leave fallow for a season.”

“The Intelligence really viewed the whole galaxy like that, didn’t it?” she mused. “Like a garden to be cultivated.”

“It still does,” said Shepard. “The only difference now is that it regards the life of the galaxy as having value for its own sake. So instead of pruning and weeding and harvesting, now the Intelligence lets the galaxy grow wild, so everything in it can find its own destiny.”

A thought struck me. “Shepard, I just realized something. There won’t be any new Reapers any more, will there?”

He gave me a sharp glance. “No. The last new Sovereign-class Reaper was constructed two cycles ago, built out of the inusannon civilization. No more harvests, no more Reapers.”

“How do they feel about that?”

“They don’t really feel anything about it, Liara.” Shepard cocked his head and frowned in deep thought, struggling to explain concepts that didn’t translate to our level. “A Reaper’s mind is an odd thing. Each of them thinks of itself as unique, perfect, and self-contained. They think for themselves, they have their own ideas, their own views of the universe around them. We are each a nation, remember?”
“On the other hand, they always obey moral and strategic directives from the Intelligence, at what we might call an unconscious level. Everything they think, everything they do, has to be consistent with those directives. For all their intelligence and power, they’re tools of the Intelligence, with never a moment’s thought of rebellion.”

“Like angels around the throne of God,” Kamala murmured.

“Well, not exactly.” Shepard chuckled. “After all, in that particular myth, at least one-third of the angels did rebel. In five billion years or more of galactic history, no Reaper has ever broken away from the Intelligence. It’s simply not possible for them.”

“You’re sure?” I asked.

“The Intelligence is sure,” said Shepard. “That doesn’t mean the Intelligence is right, but that’s certainly the way I would bet until I see evidence to the contrary.”

“So the Reapers don’t mind that the whole purpose of their existence has vanished?”

He shook his head. “No . . . and besides, the Intelligence can find other purposes for them.”

I glanced at him, startled, but then Tania’s voice came from the bridge. “Despoina, we have landing clearance from Basani Control. There will be a party waiting for us when we land.”

“Thank you, Tania. Take us down.”

Normandy banked in space, bending its course down to the gleaming surface below.

9 November 2580, Basani Starport, Kadena Prefecture/Senakhar

The starport concourse was a vast structure, like a cylinder-section carved out of ice and crystal, several hundred meters long and over forty meters high at the center of its arch. We emerged close to one end of the structure, the exits to the city at the far end, some kind of tall statuary standing there.

As promised, a small contingent waited for us when we arrived: seven Protheans and a human. Two of the Protheans stepped forward, a female and a male, the human following close behind.

“Dr. T’Soni,” the female greeted me, a slender creature with pale-blue facial skin and bright jade-colored eyes. “Welcome to Senakhar. I am Senior Researcher Renat Kshun, a representative of the Academy of Sciences.”


The Prothean’s eyes widened slightly as she peered at Shepard. “We have heard that Shepard is once more walking the galaxy. It is an honor.”

Shepard gave a bow of his own, speaking for a moment in flawless Prothean dialect. “The honor is mine. I’m pleased to see what your people have accomplished here.”

Renat nodded slightly in acknowledgement. “My partners, then. Researcher Prakad Vren, also a member of the Academy, an expert in the history of the Unity.”
The other Prothean bowed, a tall, robust male with unusual deep-red coloring, his eyes a hot yellow color that reminded me of Javik Taran. He too sent Shepard a glance that seemed almost reverent, although he said nothing.

“Doctor Bethany Olsen, currently on sabbatical from Dartmouth College on Earth. She is an expert on extinct civilizations, with a specialization in the inusannon and thoi’han cultures.”

Olsen was a vivacious, attractive woman with long, light-brown hair and bright blue eyes. She stepped forward to shake my hand in the human manner. “Doctor T’Soni. It’s an honor to meet you at last. Your career was something of an inspiration for me when I decided to enter the sciences.”

I smiled. “It’s always good to hear that my work has had a positive impact. Thank you.”

“We’ve arranged quarters for you on the Academy grounds,” said Renat briskly. “If you would follow me?”

“Who are these beings?” asked Shepard quietly.

I followed his gaze, to where the other five Protheans stood apart, impassively observing the rest of us. Then a flicker of awareness came to me, some gestalt observation of Renat’s body language and expression, the attitude of the strangers, the way the Protheans had all positioned themselves. I have always had difficulty reading Protheans, but I suddenly sensed tension in the air.

“They are here only as observers,” said Renat, a touch of frost in her voice.

Then one of the Protheans, a tall female with a cream face-mask and sapphire eyes, stepped forward and gave a minimal bow. I noticed that she and her companions all wore very similar clothing, like wrap-around crimson robes, with very wide sleeves into which they could tuck their hands. “If William Shepard asks who we are, it would be discourtesy not to respond. I am Advocate Zhan.”

Renat shot a four-eyed green glare at the newcomer. “Advocate Zhan . . . of the Eugenics Commission.”

I saw a flash of distaste on Shepard’s face. A glance at Kamala showed a grim mask.

This must be a human thing.

“Indeed,” said Zhan. “The Eugenics Commission. That institution which, more than any other, is responsible for continued Prothean survival in this latter age.”

“That is not a debate we should have in front of our guests,” snapped Renat.

“I agree. I believe the point has been sufficiently made. We will be observing this interaction closely.” With that, Zhan turned and stalked away, her companions falling in behind.

“The Eugenics Commission?” asked Shepard.

“A branch of the Senakhari government,” said Renat, her voice utterly flat. “They continue the project begun by the liberated Collectors, after the end of the Reaper War and the first settlement here. They study the Prothean genome, as preserved by the Collectors and in the person of the Forefather. They supervise the introduction of new traits into the population, usually by performing germ-line genetic engineering. They also regulate the choice of mates for all adult Protheans, to ensure positive traits are conserved and genetic diversity is maintained.”
Shepard nodded. “I understand. Something like that must have been necessary in the beginning, when the population was so tiny. But I understand there are over a hundred million Protheans now. Surely that’s a large enough population to survive without top-down genetic planning?”

“This is a position many of us have come to hold,” said Researcher Prakad, his voice deep and rough, watching Renat closely.

“Enough!” snapped Renat. “As the Advocate has agreed, this is not a matter with which outsiders need to concern themselves.”

“I apologize,” said Shepard calmly. “I didn’t mean to intrude into a private matter.”

“No offense has occurred,” said Renat. “Your curiosity does you credit. Come, shall we proceed to the Academy?”

All of us moved down the concourse, to the public-transport terminus at the far end. I became engaged in a low-voiced conversation with Vara and Miranda, only noticing at the last moment that Shepard had fallen behind. I glanced around and found him stopped, standing and staring upward at the statue at the end of the concourse.

Thirty meters tall, the vast image of a single Prothean stood there, its head seeming almost to brush the arched ceiling. I looked up, and realized that I knew who the statue had been made to represent. Javik Taran wore the carapace-like armor he had used during the Reaper War. He appeared to lean on his ancient rifle, frowning, looking at once determined and utterly weary.

“It’s a good likeness,” observed Shepard, as Vara and I stepped up beside him.

“Yes,” I murmured, lost for a moment in ancient memories.

“What happened to him?”

Something in his voice caught my attention. I glanced at him, long enough to guess at the complex emotions he was doing his best to conceal.

*He feels like a man far out of his proper time. Just like Javik, after we awakened him.*

“You don’t know?” asked Vara.

Shepard shrugged. “Like I said, I don’t have every detail of the last four hundred years. The Intelligence tended not to notice the fates of individuals.”

“The Forefather lived out his days as an honored leader of the first colony here,” said Renat, moving to stand beside us and look up at the statue as well. “We owe much of the revival of our ancient culture to the things he taught our ancestors.”

“Not to mention that the liberated Collectors used his genome as a template for generating many thousands of new Prothean individuals,” I said. “Javik was truly the Forefather of his revived species.”

“Shepard, our debt to you and your associates is very great,” said Renat. “You recovered the Forefather from his resting place on Eden Prime. You also persuaded the *Venaduram* . . . the Leviathans . . . to intervene in the war, which led to the liberation of a few of the Collectors. The Prothean species would have remained forever extinct if not for your actions.”

“I’m glad something turned out well from that time,” said Shepard quietly. “Just so long as you
don’t start calling me the Shepard or some such nonsense.”

“Rrrh. We have heard of this superstitious veneration some humans hold for you. Do not be concerned. We Protheans do not share this compulsion to ascribe supernatural powers to mortal beings.” Renat made an austere smile. “Although that will not prevent some of us from holding you in the highest respect, as the Avatar of Victory.”

Shepard rolled his eyes slightly in exasperation. “Renat, I will take what I can get.”

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9 November 2580, Academy of Sciences, Kadena Prefecture/Senakhar

We spent many hours in the Prothean archives, that first day. Miranda and Kalan delved into ancient astronomical records, pulling up thousands of years of Prothean star charts and observational data. I worked with Researcher Prakad and Dr. Olsen to search through historical archives, looking for signs of the Adversary in action during the Prothean imperial era. Vara, Tania, Shepard, and Kamala lent their assistance as needed. None of them had a background in academic research, but they were all intelligent, well-educated beings who could use a reference library. Even a Prothean one.

Late in the evening, we retired by ones and twos to the large suite we had been given in Academy quarters. By the time I arrived, most of our party had gone to sleep in their own rooms, exhausted by the day’s work. I found only two still awake, sitting quietly and looking out the great window at the far end of the common room. The sun had long since set over the ocean, so nothing could be seen but city lights and distant stars.

“Vara,” I called quietly. “Shepard.”

Both of them looked my way, calmly acknowledging my presence.

“Good evening, Liara.” Vara smiled, some mischief in her eyes as she glanced at me.

“I know that look.” I crossed the room to sit in a chair across from the two of them. “It usually accompanies some particularly good piece of gossip.”

“I find it hard to imagine Vara gossiping,” Shepard rumbled.

“It depends on the subject.” I turned to my bondmate. “Go ahead and tell me.”

“It involves one of your acolytes,” said Vara, amused. “One who may be about to embark on a broad range of new experiences.”

It didn’t take me long to realize what she meant. Only two of my acolytes were with us on the current expedition, after all. “Miranda . . . and Kalan?”

“It would seem so.”

I snorted. “Well, it’s about time.”

Shepard chuckled. “I take it Miranda wasn’t, um, precocious.”

“Quite the contrary. Kalan is her first lover, unless she’s been very discreet in the past.” I sighed, feeling a brief rush of happiness for her. “I might have predicted it would happen this way. Miranda has no interest in most of the things other asari might find attractive . . . but sheer intellectual brilliance? That’s something she does find compelling, and Kalan certainly doesn’t lack for it.”
“Hmm.” Vara leaned back, her arms resting on the back of her couch, taking on a somewhat predatory look for a moment. “He’s quite striking in other ways as well. Tall. Robust. Unusually well-built, even for a male quarian. Such an interesting face. Although I’m sure Miranda would never admit to being influenced by any of that.”

I cocked my head at her, amused. “Says the one who hasn’t had a single non-asari lover in her entire life. Really, Vara, what would you know of such things?”

“Perhaps I’m growing more broadly curious as I approach my matriarchal years. I’m reminded of your Aunt Kallyria.”

Shepard threw his head back and laughed, although he kept the volume down so as not to wake anyone who might be sleeping nearby. “I remember Kallyria. Didn’t she . . .”

“Yes,” I said, a mock-chill in my voice.

“. . . and Wrex . . .”

“Yes,” I said, although I couldn’t maintain the pretense of disdain. I took a deep breath and smiled at them both. “Well, that’s one piece of good news, at least.”

“Good.” Shepard sobered, looking at the two of us. “Because I’ve discovered something that worries me.”

“What is it?”

“Remember those other Protheans we met at the starport this morning? Representatives from the Eugenics Commission.”

“Yes. You and Kamala had a very negative reaction to them, I saw. I wondered about that at the time.”

Shepard spread his hands. “We humans have had historical experiences that make us very wary of the whole notion of eugenics. Back in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, some of our nastiest ideological movements supported it. So did Cerberus.”

“I remember. But it does make sense for the Protheans to be concerned about their available pool of genetic traits. They’ve just come back from extinction, after all.”

“Maybe.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his voice falling to a low murmur. “I had a word with Miranda before she and Kalan disappeared. She’s the closest thing we have to an expert on genetics, after all. She doesn’t think the Protheans have had to worry about the health of their gene pool in over two hundred years. Probably not since before Javik and the last of the Collectors all passed on.”

I frowned.

“Liara, they’re like some kind of genetic priesthood. Officially their jurisdiction is very narrow. All they have the direct authority to do is regulate Prothean mating – who gets to produce offspring, and with whom. But that’s a lot of power, if you think about it. They have influence in every part of society here on Sehakhar. Cross them, and you can’t bond with the person you want, or you get denied the right to have children.”

I shuddered. “That’s horrifying. Asari would never tolerate such an imposition.”
“This wouldn’t be the first time Protheans turned out to be something we didn’t expect,” said Vara gently.

“Yes. Javik was something of a surprise for all of us. Especially for me.” I thought hard for a moment, and then turned back to Shepard. “What are you proposing?”

“I’m not sure yet.” He glanced at the city lights outside our window. “You wouldn’t think our quest had anything to do with Prothean genetics, would you? I find it a little disturbing, that an institution like that has taken an interest in our arrival here. Or that they saw fit to intimidate our friends from the Academy, the way they did at the starport.”

“I think I agree. There must be something going on here that we don’t see yet.” I took a deep breath. “It may be nothing we need to be concerned about, but let’s all keep a discreet eye open.”

Slowly, they both nodded in agreement.
Three days of intensive research.

Miranda and Kalan made the most progress, of course. They had already formed the beginnings of a superb scientific partnership, but now they seemed more like two halves of the same mind. Or three segments of the same mind, since Tekanta apparently participated in full.

I had to wonder what it was like for the geth, to be present during their physical lovemaking, or what it experienced when the joining of their minds took place. Or what Miranda experienced – did she achieve union with the geth as well as with Kalan’s mind? I hesitated to ask, not wanting to impose upon my role as Miranda’s principal, but I still found myself fascinated by the question. In any case the three of them had become inseparable, spending almost all their time in one another’s company, and yet they rarely spoke aloud anymore. A glance, an abstract gesture, a few megabytes of data flashing between Tekanta and Miranda’s daimon, and they had no need to speak.

The three of them delved into the Prothean archives, uncovering data no one had examined in over fifty thousand years, and they found patterns. None of us could be certain what the patterns meant yet, but they seemed undeniably real.

The Protheans had been aware of stars which aged prematurely, although not in the sheer numbers that Kalan had discovered on the galactic rim. Kalan found records of about twenty stars, all of them violating the normal laws of stellar evolution, all of them in regions of the galaxy once considered frontier zones by the Prothean Unity. The ancient Protheans had even sent their own scientific expeditions, verifying Kalan’s hypothesis that the stars behaved strangely because of an interaction with dark matter.

Even more interesting, the Protheans had identified hundreds of stellar remnants – white dwarfs and neutron stars, scattered around the galaxy – that appeared to have met their fates billions of years too early. Here too, an unusual interaction with dark matter was implicated. One interesting result: these specific stellar remnants were all associated with unusually high abundances of element zero, as if they had produced tremendous quantities of the substance during their death throes. The Protheans found evidence that some of these remnants had been mined for eezo by previous civilizations.

Precise dating of all these events proved very difficult. Miranda stretched her mathematical talents and came up with a weak correlation to the Reaper extinction cycle. Something had been setting off premature aging in stars, with the effect usually peaking a thousand years or so after each extinction cycle, for at least the last few million years.

We consulted with Shepard, of course.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said, leaning against a table in our main work area, surrounded by computer consoles and discarded datapads. “No, this isn’t something the Intelligence was doing, either on its own or through the Reapers. I will admit, this all sounds vaguely familiar, which probably means the Intelligence knew something about it but didn’t assign it a high priority.”

“You said you couldn’t be sure that the Adversary is behind the aging stars,” I mused.

He shook his head. “No. I infer that, since the Intelligence is certain the Adversary is running the
valdarii, and they seem to be correlated with the stellar phenomena somehow. But I can’t be sure.”

“It’s true that the correlation with the extinction cycle is not strong enough to force any conclusions.” Miranda frowned, exchanging a glance with Kalan. “Is it possible that this is being driven in reaction to the extinction cycle?”

“Maybe,” said the quarian. “Would the Adversary have a reason to produce lots of eezo after each extinction cycle?”

Shepard suddenly folded his arms, his face a mask of deep thought. “Maybe. Can you cross-check the locations of these ‘accelerated remnants’ with the locations of extinct civilizations?”

I pounced. “That’s my specialty. Miranda, Kalan, let’s try this . . .”

An hour later, we had an answer. Every single one of the premature stellar remnants identified by the Protheans was within a thousand light-years or so of a “garden world,” which either had already given rise to a star-faring civilization, or seemed likely to do so sometime in the next few million years.

Most notably, one of the remnants in question was known to human astronomers: the neutron star they called Geminga. Located about eight hundred light-years from Earth, it had erupted into a supernova explosion about three hundred thousand years ago, creating the so-called “Local Bubble” within the interstellar medium around Sol. Humans had been mining the Geminga system for eezo since before the Reaper War.

“Couldn’t this correlation be the result of random chance?” asked Vara. “After all, any given star in the galactic disk is going to be within a thousand light-years of millions of other stars. Not too surprising if we find some new civilization’s homeworld in a set that large.”

Miranda shook her head. “That might be true if we had a smaller data set. This is hundreds of events. The probability that this could have happened at random is considerably less than one percent.”

We looked more closely, and found accelerated remnants close to Kahje, Palaven, Rakhana, Sur’Kesh . . . almost all of the homeworlds of the Citadel races. With one very startling exception. Thessia.

Shepard only nodded. “That makes sense too. Thessia is naturally rich in eezo to begin with. You asari didn’t have to find a source of it before you could build a starfaring civilization. You were eating, drinking, and breathing traces of it from the very beginning.”

“Our scientists think the Parnitha star system formed in close proximity to a supernova explosion that generated a great deal of eezo,” said Vara. “But that was almost five billion years ago. The extinction cycle barely predates the formation of Thessia. Could this have been going on that long?”

“I don’t think so,” said Shepard. “The Intelligence hasn’t been aware of its Adversary for nearly that long. I think we can put Thessia down to a natural occurrence. It’s almost unique in the galaxy anyway. All these other cases? I think the Adversary was seeding the galaxy. Making sure new civilizations had access to the one resource they would need to leap out into the stars.”

I saw it then, in a moment of inspiration, like dawn breaking in a dark sky. “It was trying to improve our chances of defeating the Reapers.”
Shepard gave me a slow, grim nod.

“That doesn’t explain one facet of this,” Kalan objected. “What about all the stars on the edge of
the galaxy that are being affected right now? Thousands of them! If the Protheans had anything
close to a complete count, there are more stars in the current wave of this phenomenon than in the
past ten million years put together. And this set has been moving off the main sequence since long
before the last extinction cycle even began.”

“It breaks the pattern,” Shepard agreed. “Which means we’re still missing something.”

My team didn’t have such good luck, possibly because we searched for something much harder to
define. It’s difficult enough to tell whether some external influence has control of a given
individual, when you have the individual in front of you and can examine her closely. It’s far more
difficult to locate such cases in the depths of history.

We came across stories from the great days of the Prothean Unity, myths and legends, nothing
solid. Prothean soldiers vanished from their duty posts, only to turn up years later exhibiting radical
changes in personality. Prothean leaders issued dire warnings about threats to the Unity, ignored
for lack of evidence. Prothean expeditions encountered vast, mysterious ships at the galaxy’s edge,
which disappeared the moment they were sighted.

“Dust and dreams,” said Renat after two days of this. “Even if any of these reports refer to real
events, how can we show they have anything to do with Shepard’s Adversary? They might have
been driven by the Leviathans instead. Or by advance agents of the Reapers. Or by sheer madness.”

I leaned back in my chair, shifting uncomfortably for a moment. Furniture designed to fit a
Prothean body isn’t suited for an asari, no matter how many cushions one applies. “I’m beginning
to think you’re right. Maybe if we had a better theory of the Adversary’s motives and objectives,
but we don’t.”

“What about the message from Caleston?” Kamala suggested. “That man working for the
valdarii referred to the Old Ones. Some group or entity claims ownership of the galaxy, and is coming back
to assert its claim, with the valdarii as its agents.”

Dr. Olsen snorted. “Sounds like a Cthulhu cult to me.”

I blinked at her. “I don’t recognize the reference.”

“Sorry. I have a weakness for early modern literature.” The human scientist tapped at a datapad,
calling up some files from her personal store. “This was not too long after humans first realized
just how old the universe was, and how enormously vast. A whole genre of speculative fiction
appeared, centered on the idea that the universe is basically unknowable and hostile to humanity.
Full of vast inhuman powers lurking in the shadows, ready to return to Earth and smash human
civilization, as easily as one might destroy a hive of insects.”

“There’s something similar in classical asari literature,” I said. “I suppose the idea occurs to most
sentient species at some phase in their development.”

“Maybe. Anyway, Cthulhu was one of the beings some authors in this genre wrote about. A
godlike figure, vast and horribly alien, which sleeps away the aeons under the deepest ocean. Even
in its sleep, it reaches out to control human cultists, who sometimes try to set up the conditions
necessary for it to awaken and return.”

Kamala shook her head. “That sounds like the Leviathans more than anything else. But Shepard
says they aren’t behind any of this.”

“Maybe . . .” I said, suddenly lost in a train of thought.

Vara watched me closely, holding up a hand to silence Kamala when she would have said something more.

“The Leviathans believed themselves to be the natural owners and rulers of the entire galaxy,” I said at last. I glanced at Senior Researcher Renat, who had been sitting in silence to listen to our talk. “So did the Protheans, in their glory.”

Renat nodded slowly, an enigmatic light in her eyes.

“Don’t you suppose every major civilization has felt the same way, from the Leviathans down to the Protheans, and into our time?” I looked around the room. “The pattern has repeated itself more times than you can fathom. Organic civilizations evolve, rise, advance . . . and at the apex of their glory, they are extinguished. In this way we impose order on the chaos of organic evolution. You exist because we allow it. You will end because we demand it.”

Everyone watched me with wide eyes. All of them recognized the quotation.

“That was Sovereign, speaking to us on Virmire, just before the Reaper War. Tens of thousands of extinction cycles. Tens of thousands of interstellar civilizations, each of them doubtless thinking of itself as the crown of creation. Until the Reapers came.”

“Doctor, what are you suggesting?” asked Renat.

“I’m not sure.” I took a deep breath. “It only occurs to me that there’s no shortage of entities who might think of themselves as having a claim on the galaxy. If only they weren’t all long since dead.”

She made a small, grim smile. “Perhaps they are not all dead. After all, the galaxy once believed we Protheans to be extinct.”

“Survivors of one of the extinction cycles?” Kamala demanded. “Who? And how?”

“No data,” I admitted. “This is pure conjecture for now.”

Our third research area ran into a stone wall at full speed.

I had hoped that Prothean science would be up to the task of analyzing Shepard’s internal technology, the cybernetics and nanotech that the Intelligence had built into his body. After all, the old Unity had mastered bioscience, the Collectors had acquired a great deal of knowledge from the Reapers, and all of that had been passed down to the new Prothean civilization.

Unfortunately, that expertise had been passed specifically to the Eugenics Commission, which kept all of it under strict control. As we soon discovered, the Eugenics Commission had no interest in helping us.

“We have no objection to this research into ancient times,” said Advocate Zhan, when we managed to reach her office. “If you believe the archives will help your quest, we will not stand in your way. But we will not provide any assistance. Much less will we examine this object which wears the face of the Avatar of Victory.”
“I beg your pardon?” I asked, my voice suddenly gone cold as winter.

“You do not know what you ask, Dr. T'Soni. The individual you call William Shepard is not the Avatar. It is a sham, a cheat. A tool of the Reapers.”

“That’s not quite the case,” said Shepard calmly. “I’m an emissary of the Ascended Intelligence, yes. You might think of me as answering to the same authority as the Reapers, but in another chain of command. The technology I carry is in a parallel line of development, designed to pose no threat to organic life.”

Advocate Zhan stared at him out of the comm screen, her eyes burning like an aurora over glacial ice. “It makes little difference. The Intelligence you represent is the bitterest foe of the entire Prothean race. It is a lying abomination! We cannot trust you, even if you believe yourself to be sincere. The Commission will not compromise its purpose, or put our surviving people at risk, by examining you or your technology. That is my final word.”

The screen went dark.

“Hmm,” said Vara. “That didn’t go well.”

“Not a great surprise,” said Shepard. “It’s good that Protheans like Renat or Prakad are willing to work with us. I didn’t expect everyone here to welcome us – to welcome me – with open arms.”

“We are scientists,” said Prakad with some heat. “We cannot afford to view the universe with prejudice. It is clear that we Protheans would not now be alive if the Intelligence remained hostile.”

Shepard cocked his head. “So you’re willing to forgive the Intelligence?”

“Rrrh. That may be too strong a word. For what the Intelligence has done, for billions of years, there can be no forgiveness.” Prakad shrugged. “We still see that the Intelligence has changed, that it may now be possible to cooperate with it against other threats. It can never be a friend. Perhaps it can be an ally.”

“Javik Taran hated the Reapers with all his spirit, until the day he died,” said Renat quietly. “He taught many of us to follow in his path. But I have watched you, Shepard. You are the Avatar of Victory.”

“I – or rather, my predecessor – didn’t defeat the Reapers.”

“Of course you did,” said Prakad impatiently. “You were a soldier. Tell me, in war, what constitutes victory?”

“It means you’ve imposed your will on the enemy. You’ve attained your objectives, and prevented the enemy from attaining his.”

“Is that not what your predecessor accomplished?” Prakad made an austere smile, reminding me once again of Javik. “Did he not impose his will, his objectives upon the Reapers? Did he not insist that organic life be permitted to live and seek out its own destiny, and did this Intelligence not listen? Are not all of us alive today as a result?”

“I suppose so.”

“Rrrh. Do not doubt.”

I smiled at Shepard for a moment, and then turned back to the topic at hand. “Unfortunately, that
leaves us still stuck at the beginning on this subject.”

“Perhaps not,” said Renat.

“Explain,” I invited her.

“You are aware, I think, that we draw upon a network of archives once established under the Unity.”

I nodded. “It’s been a pleasant surprise, how much of the old network remains active.”

“Our ancestors built well. Not even the Reapers could find and destroy every archive.” She spread her hands, a gesture of pride. “We have a civilization of our own today, rather than being a mere subsidiary of the Citadel Confederation, because we have been able to draw upon the ancient learning.”

I exchanged a glance with Shepard, and saw him conceal a smile.

*Even after all they’ve gone through, Protheans are still chauvinists.*

“Now as it happens, one of the greatest scientific centers under the Unity was in the city of Izhan Peret. There our ancestors studied biology, cybernetics, nanotechnology, all of the disciplines that would be of use to you now. We believe much of the knowledge that fell to the Collectors was originally stored there. We have been able to establish a network connection to the archive in that city, but the connection is very poor. All we can tell is that the archive is still active.”

“I’m sensing there may be an obstacle or two,” said Shepard dryly.

“Indeed.” Renat gave us an austere smile. “There are two obstacles. One is that the Eugenics Commission has forbidden any attempt to open further contact with the Izhan Peret archive. I do not regard this obstacle as serious. The Commission can do nothing more to me than it already has.”

Something caught my eye, caused me to glance at Researcher Prakad where he had just shifted his position slightly. He suddenly looked very dour and grim, poised on his toes as if he wanted to leap forward and put his hands around someone’s throat.

*I see now. Prakad and Ranet have good reason to despise the Eugenics Commission, I think.*

“Okay,” Shepard said. “What’s the other obstacle?”

“Izhan Peret was a city in the Tekathas Mountains, in the upper latitudes of the northern hemisphere.” Renat’s smile grew wider, as if challenging our resolve. “At present the site is buried under approximately two kilometers of ice.”

He grinned at her. “Okay. What are we sitting around here for?”
13 November 2580, Tekathas Mountains/Senakhar

“What a bleak place,” Vara murmured, as she looked out the window by her seat.

Craggy gray mountain peaks, a vast sheet of ice stretching to the horizon, nothing moving but drifts of ice crystals floating on the wind. The sun shone down out of a pale-blue sky without a trace of cloud, its glare merciless off the eternal ice.

“It reminds me of Noveria,” I told her.

She nodded in agreement, my memories of that cold planet – and my mother’s death – in the back of her mind. She took my hand, a gesture of comfort.

Our vehicle swept down out of the sky, coming to a soft landing on a makeshift pad cut into the side of a high mountain slope. Not far below, we could see the surface of the ice, a vast continental glacier two kilometers thick.

“An access tunnel has been driven down to the remains of Izhan Peret,” said Renat briskly. “I believe the underground complex has been shored up and rated stable. There should be adequate ventilation, but the space will not be climate-controlled.”

“I’d recommend combat gear,” said Shepard quietly.

Renat gave him a four-eyed stare. “What danger are you expecting?”

“I’m not expecting any danger,” he told her, “but better to have the gear and not need it than the other way around.”

Prakad chuckled. “When you have the Avatar of Victory with you, it is best to heed his advice.”

“I agree,” I said with a decisive nod. “Full combat gear for everyone.”

My acolytes and I got into asari combat armor, light and flexible, with sidearms for all of us and her custom-designed sword for Vara. Kalan strapped on his full environment suit, looking like an ancient quarian soldier with his face concealed behind a visor. A businesslike sniper rifle was attached to his back, and a Xen arc pistol at his hip. Kamala wore her Alliance-issued gear, black heavy armor with an assault rifle and heavy pistol. Shepard, of course, had his silver armor and his Reaper weapon. Renat and Prakad were not soldiers, but they had reinforced cold-weather gear that mounted kinetic barriers, and each of them carried a sidearm. We also divided several hundred pounds of technical equipment among us, everything we thought we might need in the ruined city under the ice.

We emerged onto the landing platform, immediately assaulted by sub-zero temperatures, high winds, and tremendous glare. All of us immediately put visors and breathing masks into place, except for the Protheans, who seemed unmoved by the harsh conditions.

“This way,” said Renat.

We followed the Prothean scientist over to a doorway, recessed into the side of the mountain, wide enough for four of us to walk abreast. Renat opened her omni-tool, interfacing with the control mechanisms.
“Just how much trouble are you likely to get into, if the Eugenics Commission finds out we’ve been here?” Shepard asked.


“Why would the Commission place these ruins off-limits in the first place?” asked Miranda.

“Who knows?” said Prakad, his voice a bitter rumble. “They do not seek out knowledge for its own sake, only for the power it grants them. Perhaps they have walled this place off out of sheer spite.”

“There!” muttered Renat.

With a deep boom, the door slid aside, revealing a wide tunnel that sloped back into the mountain’s face. Automatic lighting snapped on, washing the tunnel in a soft golden glow.

Carrying our equipment, we followed Renat down the tunnel and into a large cargo-lift car. Doors closed behind us, machinery rumbled into movement, and I could feel us descending rapidly. I tried not to think of the sheer weight of the ice around us, as we descended into the depths of the glacier.

After perhaps five minutes, the car slowed to a stop and the doors opened.

We stepped out into a glory.

I’m not certain what I expected. Caverns of ice? The skeletons of Prothean structures, stripped to the girders like so many other ancient ruins I had seen? Narrow little tunnels full of stale air, like a long-abandoned sewer system?

We saw a great underground concourse, eight stories high, stretching off in four directions into the darkness. Every level of the open space was lined with what must once have been shop fronts, terraced walks, aircar landings, a dozen other things. It reminded me of the lower Wards on the Citadel, a vertical city-scape.

Shepard stood in wonder, shining his light up toward the higher levels. “How in God’s name is this space staying open, with the mass of all that rock and ice on top of it?”

“Rrrh,” rumbled Prakad. “The ancients built very well. Not even the Reapers tried to collapse this underground world. They sacked the city on the surface, blocked all points of entry, and then sent their creatures down to harvest the people. The structure itself must have been too much trouble to destroy.”

“This is the largest and best-preserved underground complex I’ve ever seen on a Prothean world,” I murmured. “I’m surprised we never found anything similar elsewhere in the galaxy.”

“Senakhar was a crowded planet,” said Renat. “Those who lived here built very high, and delved very deep, simply to leave as much of the surface as possible in its natural state. No doubt most of the colony worlds felt no such pressure.”

“Which way is the archive?” asked Miranda, practical as ever.

Renat considered for a moment, consulting her omni-tool once more, and then pointed into the darkness. “I cannot be completely certain, but the scientific centers were in this direction.”

Once more we followed the Protheans, our footsteps echoing strangely in the vast open space. I
continued to stare upward, past the layers of construction, to the distant vault far above.

Tania abruptly turned, her sidearm in her hand, her hand-light shining upward.

“What is it?” asked Vara.

“Not sure.” My acolyte peered up into the darkness, her hand-light hopelessly inadequate to illuminate all that space. “I thought I saw movement, out of the corner of my eye.”

Shepard frowned and stopped with his head cocked, as if consulting his suit’s on-board instrumentation. “I’m not picking anything up,” he said after a long moment.

“Might be nothing,” said Tania with a shrug. “Let’s move on.”

We walked a kilometer, then another. Renat began to lead us more slowly, almost hesitant, as she compared ancient maps to what we saw around us.

Skitter.

I whipped my head around, staring into the darkness across the way from where we stood. My hand-light speared into the shadows.

“Liara?”

“Sh Shepard, are you sure your sensors aren’t detecting something alive down here?”

“Positive. Which doesn’t mean there’s nothing to detect.” He stepped up beside me, his weapon at the ready. “What did you see?”

“I don’t know. It was big, whatever it was.”

“Nothing large can live down here,” said Renat. “We are kilometers away from any sunlight. There is no significant autotrophic life to support an ecosystem.”

“We’re down here,” said Shepard, unconsciously taking charge. “Tania, Vara, Kalan, Kamala, the five of us should move out and be on guard. I’ll take point.”

No one disputed his orders, at least not aloud. I stepped up to walk at Vara’s side, refusing to be protected, ignoring Shepard’s worried glance. The more lightly armed among us moved to the center of our formation, and we walked on more cautiously.

Just in time for a storm of gunfire to scream out of the dark.

“Get down!” shouted Shepard and Vara both, baritone and soprano in counterpoint.

Renat stood irresolute for an instant, before I took her around the waist and brought her to the ground behind an ancient stone fixture. Then I took a moment to look around, seeing that everyone else had found cover before their kinetic barriers collapsed.

“Runners!” shouted Tania, flinging a biotic warp out into the night.

I stared, almost long enough for a burst of gunfire to tear off my head. Big figures in the shadows, barely visible in the flare of our biotic feats, the size of asari or humans, a confused impression of extra limbs. My acolyte was right. Somehow, the valdarii had made their way into this buried city.

“Renat!” Shepard snapped. “Is there any way we can get to the archive under cover?”
The Prothean shook her head uncertainly. “I don’t know... shouldn’t we be falling back to the lifts?”

“We didn’t come all this way for nothing,” he growled, popping around a piece of cover to fire back at the enemy. “Besides, if the valdarii are in front of us, they can be behind us too.”

“They already are!” shouted Vara, turning to slash the air with her sword and project a surge of biotic force back the way we had come.

“There you have it,” said Shepard. **Crack-crack-crack**: his weapon fired. “We push forward and punch through!”

Easier said than done. It was too dark; we couldn’t easily see the enemy to shoot. Only Shepard, Kamala, and Kalan managed to score repeated hits, provoking feverish movement in the shadows in front of us. The rest of us fired at targets of opportunity, flung blue-white and green-white biotic effects, and did our best to keep hidden. The sounds of battle echoed off the vault’s ceiling far above: sharp cracks of weapons fire, the low thrum and boom of biotic feats, shouted warnings and commands.

At least we had plenty of cover. Shepard directed us, one of our party moving at a time, sometimes elbow-walking to stay behind cover, always protected by the massed fire of the rest. I lost track of everyone’s position after a few minutes, and wondered what Shepard had in mind. Then I realized he had positioned our best fighters to catch the valdarii runners in a cross-fire. Their front line wavered, and then began to dissolve.

“Up!” he snapped. “Cross the street! Into that building in front of us and to the left.”

We rose and hurried, biotic barriers held up as strongly as possible until we could reach the strong-point he had chosen for us. The valdarii must have been regrouping. Those behind us followed, but none of them stood in our way for the moment, and we took very little fire as we moved.

We found ourselves in what must have been an eating establishment, fifty thousand years before. We could see outward through open windows in two directions, and yet stay under cover behind low walls. We even found a few tables still standing, made of some tough material, which Shepard and Kalan could overturn to create additional barriers.

“We left half our equipment out there,” complained Renat.

“You’re more than welcome to go back out and fetch it,” Kamala snapped.

The Prothean glared at her for a moment, but then nodded in agreement. “Point taken.”

Just then the valdarii began to move up, attacking our position from two sides. We had just enough time to deploy behind our tables and walls, and hold them at bay.

“What I want to know” – crack! – “is what these valdarii” – crack! – “are doing here in the first place,” said Shepard, between shots.

Vara backed away from the windows, cutting off line-of-sight from the outside, and then used a slash of her sword to project a heavy shockwave of biotic power through the wall. A series of thudding sounds from outside told of valdarii caught in the wave.

“These creatures could not have landed on Senakhar without being spotted by planetary defense,” she said. “Unless someone deliberately permitted them through.”
Prakad popped up from behind cover, lay down a barrage of green energy discharges with his sidearm, and then crouched down again. “Are you suggesting that Protheans are allied with these barbarians?”

“Why not?” I curved a biotic feat over the low wall, out into the street where a fire-team of runners seemed ready to charge. A large singularity appeared in their midst, distracting them. “If the President of the Citadel Confederation can be working with the *valdarii*, why not some faction within your society? You’re a lot closer to their space anyway.”

“The Eugenics Commission,” said Renat, making the words a curse.

Kalan produced an arc grenade and threw it across the street with deadly accuracy. “Why would the Eugenics Commission ally with the *valdarii*?”

Renat shrugged, laying a *dark channel* down on three of the aliens. “I have no data on which to base a conjecture.”

Silence fell outside our redoubt. The *valdarii* had withdrawn, to lick their wounds and think of another tactic.

“Renat, it’s now or never,” said Shepard. “From here, how do we get to the archive?”

“I can’t be sure.”

“Then make your best guess, but make it now.”

She hesitated one moment longer, and then tossed her head decisively. “Behind this building, less than one hundred meters. There is a large complex on the map, not labeled, but it seems the most likely choice. Not to mention that the barbarians came from that direction.”

“All right. Kamala, get everyone back through this building. Look for a way out in that direction.”

I gave Shepard a worried glance. “What will you be doing?”

“Discouraging the *valdarii* from following too closely.” I couldn’t see his face, but his voice took on an amused tone. “Three minutes, and I can set up a bunch of booby traps.”

Vara’s jaw set in determination. “Four hundred years of commando experience says I can do even better than that.”

I said nothing, but I gave both of them *that* glare, the one with the enormous blue eyes.

“All right,” said Shepard. “Three of us. Kamala, get going with the rest!”

Shepard knew the capabilities of his equipment, Vara had combat-engineer training, and I could repurpose our remaining scientific gear on the fly. It took us a little more than three minutes before Shepard was satisfied, but then we hurried back into the building, firing a few parting shots at the *valdarii* to focus their attention.

By herself, Kamala would have had difficulty navigating through Prothean architecture. With two Protheans to assist, she made good time. We caught up with the rest of our party just as a series of sharp explosions occurred behind us.

“Let’s hurry,” said Shepard. “Hopefully it will take them a while to figure that out.”

We crossed a final street, hurried up a long ramp, and fetched up against the side of a massive
structure. To my delight, I found the ghostly remnants of an inscription above the great open doorway. “Academy of Sciences,” I translated.


For whatever reason, the valdarii chose not to pursue. We knew they remained out in the buried city, possibly gathering their strength to forbid our departure, but aside from remaining watchful there seemed little we could do about that. Instead we explored the ancient Academy building, looking for the archives. It took us nearly an hour to locate them, even with the Protheans’ instincts and my expertise to help.

Finally, we located them: a great open chamber deep inside the building, perhaps twice as large as the archives chamber on Mars. In its center we found the expected sheaf of greenish-bronze metal slabs, still glowing with power, even after fifty thousand years.

Renat and Prakad began to unpack what little equipment they still carried. Fortunately, they retained enough to build an interface and start querying the archive. Miranda and I lent our assistance. Shepard, Vara, and the others set to patrolling our perimeter, watchful in case the valdarii tried an attack.

An hour passed. Two hours.

“There,” said Miranda, opening a new codex.

Renat stared at the waterfall of data, her four-eyed stare intense. “Nanotech designs. Interaction with biotechnology. Diagnostic protocols.”

“Just what we’re looking for.”

Shepard loomed out of the shadows, somehow sensing a breakthrough. “How quickly can you download all of it?”

“A few minutes,” said Renat. “We cannot afford to miss anything.”

He nodded, looking uneasy.

“Any sign of the valdarii?” I asked.

“No yet. They’re still out there, though, moving around.”

“Renat.”

Shepard and I whirled, looking into a dark corner of the chamber. A holographic image hung there, watching our Prothean friend, apparently ignoring the rest of us. A tall female Prothean, wrapped in a crimson robe, her hands tucked into wide sleeves. Advocate Zhan.

“I had hoped you would not be so foolish, Renat. To break the law on behalf of these barbarian offworlders. I fear there is nothing I can do to save you now.”

“Rrrh.” Prakad almost spat in his fury. “Do not lie, Advocate. You have done nothing to benefit any of us.”

“Nonsense. I have spoken on your behalf on several occasions, protecting you from the consequences of your dissent. I can do nothing about the genetic cross-mapping that forbids you and Renat to mate. If the two of you bear too many recessive traits that cannot be permitted to
reinforce one another, that is your personal misfortune. I have no desire to see two such talented individuals remove themselves from service to the Race."

“You mean, from service to you.”

“There is no difference. The Commission is the Prothean species. We nurture, we guide, we protect. We plan for the day when our people will once again reclaim our proper role in the galaxy.”

I exchanged a glance with Shepard, knowing that we thought the same thing.

With two fewer eyes, Advocate Zhan would be a close match for the Illusive Man.

“So you ally yourself with these aliens?” asked Renat.

“Hardly. The valdarii are nothing. Tools in the hands of a far greater power. It is that power which offers us a path back to glory.”

I frowned.

Why is she revealing all of this to us?

Unless she expects us to be in no position to share it with anyone else.

“Enough,” said Zhan. “There is little point in prolonging the final act of this tragedy. Goodbye, Renat.”

Her image moved, one hand emerging from her sleeve to touch an invisible control. Then it winked out.

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. Explosions off in the distance, very powerful, enough to rock the floor where we stood and cause dust to filter down from above. Then we heard nothing but an echoing silence.

“What was that?” demanded Kamala.

“The access tunnel,” said Shepard grimly. “She’s buried us down here.”
“Trapped down here, forever?” Renat cried, a touch of fear driving her voice upward.

“Nobody’s giving up yet,” said Shepard. “Keep working.”

Prakad laid an encouraging hand on Renat’s shoulder. They exchanged a silent glance, then the female Prothean nodded and the two of them turned back to their research. Miranda continued to assist them.

“Shepard!” called Kamala from her position at the outer doors of the archive chamber. “Something’s happening outside.”

“What is it?” he asked, shouldering his weapon and walking over to her.

“I’m not sure, but I think the valdarii are pulling back.”

I cocked my head, listening, but I heard nothing but silence from outside.

“Why would they be withdrawing?” asked Kamala.

Suddenly Vara tensed at my side. “Because they still have a way out.”

Shepard stared back at her, his eyes suddenly very wide. “My God, you may be right. Which means we’ve no time to lose.”

“Shepard, it will take more time for us to download all of the data here,” said Prakad.

“How long?”

“Five minutes. Perhaps ten.”

Shepard swore. “We can’t wait that long. We’re going to have to split up. Kamala, Vara, Tania, you’re with me. We’re going to chase the valdarii, find their extraction point, and then get there before they do.”

“I’ll come too,” offered Kalan. “I’m not of much use parsing through Prothean archives.”

“No. You and Liara need to guard the scientists, and be ready to follow us as soon as they have what we need. I don’t think you’ll have much trouble, if we do our job right, but stay in contact.”

The quarian hesitated for a moment, but then nodded in determination, his hands shifting on his sniper rifle.

Shepard’s team moved to join him, preparing to leave the archives chamber. Suddenly I felt a rush of fear, watching them go.

Centuries go by, and I still can’t stand watching the ones I love go off to fight without me. Too often they don’t come back.

Be it admitted: I have abandonment issues.
“Be careful!” I shouted, not sure myself who I meant it for.

Shepard and Vara both glanced back at me, and then at each other. To my chagrin, they grinned at each other in perfect mutual understanding.

“Don’t worry,” said Vara, and I had the sense she spoke for both of them. “We’ll watch each other’s backs.”

“Too right,” murmured Kamala.

Then they were gone, leaving me to watch Miranda and the Protheans work, check my sidearm for the hundredth time, and wrestle with my thoroughly confused emotions.

“They’ll be fine, Doctor,” said Kalan gently.

I sighed. “I hope so.”

Five minutes passed. Ten. Still the scientists worked frantically, finding new relevant data in every codex they examined.

I took up pacing.

Off in the distance we could hear gunfire, rising and falling, slowly growing more distant. I found I could follow the progress of the battle by listening to the different sounds: the echoing crack of Shepard’s weapon, the quieter bangs and thumps of the other firearms, the ominous rattle of valdarii weapons, the deep booming of biotic effects. Several times I heard a very deep zoom which I couldn’t identify, usually followed by the crump of a large explosion.

I avoided the temptation to call them. They didn’t need me jogging their elbows just then. So long as the sounds of combat continued, growing more and more distant, I knew they made progress.

Finally, my daimon relayed a call from Shepard.

{Liara, I think we’ve reached our objective. Some kind of ancient transport hub, tunnels leading down deep and off in several directions. The valdarii had several vehicles ready for extraction. We’ve secured them and our exit route, for the moment.}

{Acknowledged. The scientists are still working.}

{Get them finished and on their way! I can’t guarantee we’ll be able to hold here indefinitely . . . and someone may get the bright idea to sacrifice themselves to destroy the vehicles.}

I turned to Renat and the others. “It’s time to go.”

“We can’t!” she objected. “We’ve just found a new codex on the subject of Senakhari animal and plant life, dating to before the Reaper invasion . . . genetic assays from thousands of species now extinct . . .”

“Senior Researcher Renat,” I snapped, using what Vara called my don’t fuck with me voice. “If you do not finish work now, you risk becoming a part of these ruins for future archaeologists to find.”

Renat continued to dither for an instant, but Prakad nodded decisively and reached out to touch her shoulder again. “Come, Kshun,” he said gently. “The data will be here later.”

“Not if Advocate Zhan and her fanatics have anything to say about it!”
“If we escape, we have a small chance of opposing them,” said Prakad. “We have none if we die here.”

Renat shook her head violently. “Rrrh! It disgusts me to abandon knowledge.”

“Think of it as a tactical retreat, so that you can return in strength later,” I told her. “Think of it in any way you choose . . . but we are leaving now.”

“Very well,” she said at last, disconnecting her gear from the archive, beginning to pack it with coldly efficient haste.

Before long we were on our way, hurrying through the ancient Academy building, following a trail of waypoints Shepard had transmitted to my daimon. Kalan and I took point, the Prothean scientists behind us, Miranda taking up the rear, all of us watching tensely for valdarii.

We found dead valdarii, most of them the familiar runners. I stopped for a moment to examine another corpse, a new type, much heavier and more robust. This creature had been a quadruped, with hooves rather than flat feet, apparently adapted for moving quickly on level ground. Its forward spine bent upward almost at a right angle, supporting two strong arms and a very strong upper torso. Beside the corpse rested a massive piece of technological gear, a rocket launcher or some other heavy weapon. I tentatively tagged this form a centaur, after a similar creature from human mythology.

This must be what was making those strange noises during the battle. Apparently Shepard and the others managed to deal with it, at least.

Ahead of us, the sounds of combat resumed. I rose to my feet and waved to the others to hurry.

{Liara, are you on your way?} Somehow, through the data link, I could sense Shepard’s irritated concern.

{Moving as quickly as we can. ETA two minutes.}

{They’re trying another push. Come in with your weapons out and your hair on fire.}

{I don’t have hair . . . but I know exactly what you mean.}

We moved across a street, through an ancient courtyard, into another massive building like a great round fortification. I consulted my daimon again, getting a tactical update from Shepard, noting the position of valdarii around the central chamber where our friends struggled to hold out. Silently I sent data to Kalan and Miranda, gesturing for the daimon-less Protheans to follow cautiously and keep their heads down.

Down a corridor, around a corner, moving cautiously and as silently as possible . . .

{Now!}

Two asari and a quarian appeared behind a valdarii fire-team, announcing their presence with a pair of powerful warps and a sniper-rifle shot through a runner’s skull.

The remaining aliens turned, suddenly finding themselves between two fires.

I took the opportunity to glance up ahead. At the center of the building stood a great rotunda, brightly lit by spotlights. Five large, armored fighting vehicles stood parked in the center. I saw valdarii bodies scattered among the vehicles, our own party crouched down under cover and firing
at live aliens who huddled in the colonnade around the outside of the circular space. Shepard’s team must have punched through the *valdarii*, securing their vehicles and then standing off stragglers as they arrived.

“Renat, Prakad,” I snapped, crouching behind a piece of ancient debris and firing at targets of opportunity. “Get ready to run over to the vehicle closest to Shepard. We will cover you.”

The Protheans glanced at each other and nodded agreement.

One *valdarii* runner down. Then a second. Shepard rose slightly from cover and swung his weapon in an arc pointing off to my right. *Crack-crack-crack!*

“Now!” I shouted.

The Protheans rose and ran, keeping their heads down, still carrying the last of their equipment.

A line of bullets stitched the ground at Renat’s heels, until I traced it back to a runner and struck the creature with a biotic warp.

Kalan fired methodically: *boom – reload – boom – reload*, and a six-limbed alien went down or dove for cover at every shot.

“Miranda!”

My acolyte rose and sprinted, haughtily ignoring the incoming fire, crossing the open ground and diving into our escape vehicle.

“Kalan, go!”

The quarian glanced at me, his face invisible behind its mask, and then very visibly decided not to argue. He stowed his rifle on its attachment point, tapped at his omni-tool for an instant to boost his kinetic barrier, and then made a break for it.

Just then I heard a sound behind me. I spun, and my eyes went wide with terror as a huge alien form loomed out of the shadows. A centaur, this one very much alive and staring at me with four jade-green eyes.

It hesitated for only an instant, and then swung its massive bulk into a full charge, hooves like thunder on the paved ground. Its arms braced like two great rams, ready to pound me into paste.

“Liara!”

I paid no attention to Shepard’s shout. I didn’t even bring my sidearm to bear. I had no time.

I watched the creature’s speed, looking for the moment when its momentum and distance from me would mean it had committed itself to the attack.

*Just . . . about . . .

Now.*

I made a control gesture, one I had practiced but rarely used. This particular application of biotics had always chilled me to the bone.

In the back of my mind, I remembered Samara’s words.
Blue-white force lashed out, covering the onrushing centaur with a temporary corona.

Four green eyes flew wide, as did a wide mouth full of blunt teeth. The creature’s legs seemed to tangle, and then it stumbled and fell headlong to the ground.

I leaped and rolled aside, a biotic surge giving me a little more range than usual, as the centaur’s mass crashed through the space I had occupied a moment before. Then, the moment I reached my feet once more, I turned and ran for safety.

Behind me, I heard the centaur struggle and clatter back to its feet. Then Shepard fired his weapon three times, no longer needing to worry about hitting me, and a massive bulk fell to the ground once more.

I reached our escape vehicle, followed moments later by Shepard’s team: Tania first, then Vara, Kamala, and Shepard last of all. I didn’t see him touch any controls, but the massive hatch closed the moment he was on board. I could hear the rumble of a mass-effect core, rising to maximum power within moments.

All of us found seats suitable for valdarii runners, an odd shape under our legs and behind our backs, but not impossible for us to use. The safety restraints were oddly configured, but they worked reasonably well for bipedal creatures like all of us. While we settled in, the vehicle rose a meter or so off the ground, and then hurled itself into the mouth of a dark tunnel.

“Was that a reave?” Shepard asked.

“Hmm. Something Samara taught me before I assumed the Presidency. She thought I should have as many tools for self-defense as possible at my disposal.” I shuddered slightly. “It’s not a technique I like to use.”

He shrugged. “An enemy’s just as dead of a warp or a shockwave.”

“I know.” I changed the subject. “Just where are we?”

“The ancient inter-city transit system,” said Renat. “Our ancestors drilled evacuated tunnels through the crust and upper mantle of Senakhar, and used hypervelocity trains to move from city to city. I had thought all the tunnels long since destroyed.”

“Apparently a few of them survived,” said Shepard. “The Eugenics Commission must know about them, use them to move around secretly and hide their valdarii allies from the public. If I’m reading the valdarii logs right, this tunnel leads to another ruined city in the equatorial region. No ice, and the station is on the surface.”

“Will the surviving aliens not use their other vehicles to pursue us?” asked Prakad.

Shepard shook his head. “While I hacked the controls on this one, I dropped a virus into the others. They’ll probably be able to clear their systems, or even rig the vehicles for manual control, but it will take hours for them to come up to speed. By then we’ll be in the clear.”

“What about the Eugenics Commission?” I asked. “Surely they hold the other end of this tunnel.”

He smiled. “I don’t think that will be a problem.”

He was right. Three hours later we reached the far end of the tunnel, in the ruins of the equatorial
city of Velakhor. Advocate Zhan’s people occupied those ruins as well . . . but they apparently relied on secrecy, rather than great force, to protect their facility. Only a few armed Protheans guarded the place, and no valdarii. The garrison certainly didn’t expect us to appear driving a valdarii AFV.

With no warning, we roared out of the tunnel at full speed. While the Eugenics Commission’s people dove for cover, we crashed through a thin retaining wall, caromed off several trees just outside the terminal building, and soared up into the daylit sky. Fortunately the AFV was very tough. All of us rattled back and forth in our safety harnesses, but nothing worse. Shepard didn’t have to fire a single shot from the vehicle’s cannon.

“I see your driving hasn’t improved much,” I said dryly.

He grinned at me.

“Whatever gets the job done,” murmured Vara.

Startled, I glanced at her, not sure what I had just heard in her voice. She only sat in her seat just behind the pilot’s compartment, not looking at me, her face still as a mask.

Fifteen minutes later, we met Normandy in low orbit over Senakhar.

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14 November 2580, Senakhar Orbit

Normandy docked with the Senakhar high-port, where we prepared to say goodbye to our Prothean friends.

“Thank you for all that you’ve done,” I told Renat and Prakad.

“It was our pleasure,” said Renat. “We have gained a great deal as well. Now that we know what Advocate Zhan and the Eugenics Commission are up to, we may be able to sway public opinion against them. Our people will not take kindly to a secret alliance with the barbarians.”

“Be careful,” said Shepard. “We don’t know whether the Adversary has influenced any more of your people.”

“Rrrh. I doubt it,” said Prakad. “If Protheans had already fallen under this Adversary’s influence in any great numbers, Advocate Zhan would not need to be secretive about her alliance with the barbarians. Senakhar would already be at war with the Citadel Confederation. I believe we have time.”

“Well, here’s something that may help.”

Shepard handed Prakad a small canister. The Prothean took it, turned it over in his hands. “What is this?”

“About one-tenth of a liter of my whole blood, with fifty billion or so nanotech robots in suspension, all in temporary stasis. With the data we collected from Izhan Peret, you may be able to figure out what it can do to protect you from the Adversary. We’ll be doing the same research on Normandy, and if we discover anything we’ll pass that along as well.”

Prakad looked skeptical. “Shepard . . . with all due respect, I doubt we will be able to convince many Protheans to accept human blood into their bodies. Especially if it carries something that resembles Reaper technology.”
Shepard shrugged. “Maybe. I just want to make sure you have the option. Besides, maybe we can find a different way to pass along the immunity. Something that doesn’t creep people out quite so badly.”

I stepped forward to embrace Prakad and then Renat. “Be careful. For all the time I spent with Javik Taran, for all that he and I respected one another in the end, I think it’s only now that I’ve made friends among your people. I wish you every success, and happiness.”

“We will have no need of your wishes,” said Prakad. “We will earn those things, and value them all the more if the struggle is long and difficult.”

Renat gave us an austere smile. “But we appreciate your good will, Doctor, and return it.”

With that, they departed through the main airlock. As soon as they were gone, I called the bridge and had Tania complete our departure from the high-port. Soon Normandy turned for deep space.

“Where to now?” asked Vara quietly.

I took a deep breath. “Matriarch Thekla says that things are going well at home. Well enough that we need to start building support in Parliament for the vote of no confidence. While Miranda works with the Prothean data . . . I’m afraid our next task is going to be very difficult.”

Shepard nodded soberly, guessing what I had in mind.

Vara saw it too. “Sur’Kesh.”

14 November 2580, Interstellar Space

When I retired to our cabin for the night, Vara was already in our bed, paging through reports from back home on Thessia. She glanced up and smiled as I stripped down, preparing to take a long, hot shower.

When I emerged and slipped into the bed, she was ready for me. Some shift in her mood rendered her aggressive, pulling me close, lips and tongue and fingers searching across my skin.

“What brought this on?”

“I find I can’t object.”

“Good. I wasn’t planning to give you the chance.”

Aliens often wonder how we asari manage to maintain some liaisons for a very long time. The secret is simple enough: compatible minds, love, commitment, a great deal of honest communication . . . and a willingness to playfully experiment with the art of mutual pleasure. Over the centuries, Vara and I had learned a hundred ways to sense and meet one another’s desires.

I must confess, on occasion I find it very pleasant to passively relax, and simply be taken.

I lay on my back in our bed, bonelessly tranquil and maximally exposed, my legs spread wide and my arms crossed above my head, and let Vara plunder my body. She kissed me over and over, hard enough to bruise. Her fingers kneaded my breasts, rubbed my nipples, dragged like claws down my flanks.
“Vara,” I gasped.

She rose above me, staring into my eyes, her face tense with passion. One hand slipped down across my belly.

My back arched, my eyes closed, and a long moan escaped from my throat.

“I love you, Liara,” she whispered, her breath hot on my face. “Goddess, you are my life.”

For a moment something disturbed me, almost snapped me out of the mood.

_This isn’t a spontaneous thing. She’s trying too hard. Trying to convince me of something. Or perhaps trying to convince herself._

Then the thought escaped me, fled on the next wave of intimate delight. Whatever she was doing with that hand, it robbed me of the powers of reason and speech.

It felt so good to have her in this mood, driven by passion, determined to _possess_ my body and mind, working urgently to bring me to the peak of delight, the climax during which all that I was would become hers once more.

It felt like . . .

_It feels like making love to Shepard._

I moaned, feeling the muscles in my belly and thighs start to quiver uncontrollably.

Sometimes Shepard had approached our lovemaking in such a way, all human masculine aggression, using the sheer drive and power of his body to overwhelm my senses. Not always. As our mutual desire demanded, he could be slow and gentle, playful, passively accepting . . . but sometimes he sensed that I needed wildness and danger. Some of our best nights had come from such a mood.

For an instant, I missed his presence, close to me, working over and inside my body, all heavy human scent and powerful arms and hot, sweat-slick skin.

I wanted him. Goddess, I wanted him. Not in Vara’s place, never that, but for his own sake, for the wonder of what we shared, so long ago when I was young.

_No!_

_Lock it away. Shepard is not here with you, is not going to be here with you. It’s Vara who is here, Vara who is doing these delightful things to you, Vara who is loving you with every fiber of her being. Lock it away, the betraying thought._

I opened my eyes, stared into her face, concentrated on being in the moment with her. I shifted a leg upward, presenting the hard muscle of my thigh for her to press against. My arms snaked around her, nails like claws down her back, finding the _azure_ low on either side of her spine. She gasped, her eyes going black as night.

“Embrace eternity, my love.”

Over the precipice. Together.

One mind shared between us, almost filled with joy and light.
Almost.

Afterward, I lay tingling amid the tangled sheets, one hand lazily caressing Vara’s crest as she cuddled close to my side and threw her arm across my waist. I let the afterglow wash over me, enjoying the animal comfort of her presence.

I tried not to think about the fact that, for the first time since we had become lovers, I had just attempted to conceal something from her at the height of our union. I was fairly certain I had succeeded. She would not have been lying there so peacefully otherwise.

I feared the hurt she might have taken from my memories of Shepard, coming at just that moment. I also knew she might have been hurt even if she only detected the concealment.

I knew this, because she had just managed to conceal something from me during our union. I didn’t know what it might be, only that she had hidden it away where I could not see.

That did hurt. More than I might have imagined.
Very early in the ship’s day, my hand reached across the sheets, to find an empty space where my bondmate would normally have been.

I rose and dressed at once.

ARGOS directed me to the starboard lounge, where I found Vara sitting alone with an untouched cup of cold coffee, staring out into darkness and infinite space. I stepped up behind her quietly, resting a hand on her shoulder.

“Love?”

Vara glanced up into my face, her insect-wing pattern of white dapples making her look innocent and lost. Something I read in her eyes frightened me. Clearly, she was struggling with something serious.

I thought fast, and reached a decision. A quick thought through my daimon locked the entrance to the lounge, giving us some privacy.

“Vara, I think we need to talk.”

She took a deep breath, looking away from me and back out at the stars. “I suppose you’re right.”

“I’ll go first.” I came around the side of the couch, sat down with her, but not too close. “I have a confession to make.”

She cocked her head at me, listening.

“A few hours ago, while we were making love . . . something made me think of Shepard. For a moment I wished he was with me, thought about what it would be like to have him again.” I forced myself to look her in the eyes. It was difficult. “I suppressed the thought, and then I did my best to conceal it from you in the meld. I’m sorry.”

She surprised me. Her expression changed, became amused.

“Liara T’Soni, how long have we been lovers?”

I did a quick calculation. “That would have been about a year before my father died. Three hundred fifty-five years, give or take a few months.”

“In all those years, this is hardly the first time you’ve thought of Shepard while we made love. Not even the first time you’ve fantasized about him while you were with me.” She gave me a wry smile. “I’ve done the same, about past lovers of my own, or other people I’ve found attractive. It’s normal enough. As you would know, if you had racked up the usual long list of casual liaisons while you were a maiden.”

I snorted. “I suppose so, but this is the first time since he’s . . . come back. It’s not a simple burst of nostalgia anymore. The possibility exists. That makes it more serious.”

“True.” She reached up and fiddled with her crest for a moment, then caught herself doing it and
firmly folded her hands in her lap. “Liara, I know how you feel about him. How could I not? It doesn’t bother me. It never has, not since I first felt eros for you before the Reaper War. I trust you. I know that you won’t deliberately do anything to hurt me.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“Of course I am.” She gave me a wry smile. “Besides, you’re far too cool and rational to ever do anything truly foolish on an impulse. Which is an unfortunate flaw in your character, but I’ve learned to tolerate it.”

It felt like leaning on a stone wall, only to have it collapse under my weight. “This truly isn’t an issue for you?”

“I’m more concerned that you felt it necessary to conceal it from me. After all this time, you should have a better estimate of my resilience than that.”

“I suppose you’re right. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

She nodded in acceptance, and then looked away again, back out at the stars.

I waited.

Once more, she took a deep breath and released it in a long sigh. “I suppose this is the point at which I should admit that I have a confession to make, and bare my soul.”

“There would be a certain symmetry to that,” I agreed.

“It’s not that easy,” she said. “This is very complicated. I’m still trying to determine how I feel about everything that’s happened. I need some time, and some privacy while I think about it.”

“Of course, love.”

She glanced at me, silver eyes gone rather bleak for a moment. “You won’t mind? If I keep a corner of my mind to myself for a while, even in our bed?”

“If it’s that important to you, and if it’s not going to be a permanent thing, then I don’t mind. I trust you, Vara.”

“Thank you.”

“Although I wish you could give me some idea what you’re thinking.”

She gave me an exasperated look for a long moment. “Liara, has it never occurred to you that there’s at least one clear solution to the muddle we’re in?”

I frowned, forcing myself to work through the possibilities once more. “Not really. I am not going to give you up. I suppose what I should do is tell Shepard, once and for all, that he and I can never be together again. That would hurt him – it would hurt me – but it might be less cruel to him in the long run.”

She stared at me, shaking her head slightly in exasperation. “You really don’t see any better way?”

“I don’t see any easy way out, no.”

“I didn’t say it would be an easy solution, only that it was a clear one. It might not work at all.” She shrugged. “Never mind. I need to give it some more thought, perhaps work through some of
my own issues, before I’ll be ready to talk about it. I’m glad you’re willing to let me do that.”

“Of course . . . and if and when you do need to talk to me, I’m always here.”

“I know.” She leaned close to me, took my hand. “I love you, Liara.”

I kissed her warmly, losing myself for a moment in the taste of her mouth, the feather-light touch of her fingertips caressing my face. I still felt confused, but also glad things between us remained good.

“All right. Just what am I looking at?”

“Possibly the end of everything,” said Miranda.

I rose from the electron microscope, still seeing the image of tiny machinery nestled between the broad flat disks of Shepard’s erythrocytes. I glanced around Miranda’s lab compartment, taking in everyone’s expression: Miranda cool and collected, Shepard stroking his beard in deep thought, Vara frowning, Kalan lurking in a corner with eyes only for his lover, an abstract column of light representing the presence of Tekanta.

“I think you had better explain that,” I said finally.

“I mean that if those nanoscale machines weren’t specifically designed to survive only in the matrix of a living organism’s blood, they could have infected half the galaxy by now. I wouldn’t care to guess at the results.”

“You’re saying that these nanites are self-limiting.”

Miranda leaned against a bench, her white lab coat pulled close as if to ward off a chill. The indigo half-stripe bisecting her lower lip quivered slightly, and she glanced over to Kalan.

No, she’s not as calm as she would like to seem.

“I think we can be grateful for that,” she said at last. “If I were to think of them as a disease organism, then the only possible transmission vector would be a direct exchange of core bodily fluids. Ingestion of blood, or direct blood-to-blood contact. Possibly semen as well. Saliva or sweat wouldn’t be sufficient. Aerosol transmission won’t work either.”

I frowned, thinking about the implications. “That sounds almost like a security measure. As if the nanites were designed to move to a new host only as the result of deliberate action.”

“That fits,” said Shepard. “The Intelligence didn’t bother to inform me of a lot of things, but one thing I do know is that it’s bending over backwards not to coerce anyone. It could have released a nanotech contagion, a grey-goo scenario, forcing everyone into the synthesis. Instead it’s exercising restraint. Respecting our freedom of choice.”

I nodded. “Miranda, have you had any luck determining what these nanites do?”

“A little.” She turned to activate a holographic display. “The Prothean data have helped, although I need to do more research. A lot more research.”

“What do you know so far?”

“I’ve done some modeling using the Prothean diagnostic protocols, at least as I understand them so far. I know where the nanites are designed to migrate once they’ve infiltrated a new host.”
Two images appeared in the display, anatomical schematics for a male human and an asari. Suddenly clouds of red particles appeared, one in the asari’s digestive tract, another at an injection site in the human’s lower right arm. In each case the particles swirled, dissipating into the circulatory system, and then reappeared, congregating at major nerve clusters and in the base of the brain.

“Most of the nanites appear to direct themselves into the central nervous system,” said Miranda. “They congregate here in the human brain, here in the asari brain. Areas specifically implicated in the formation of memory and personality.”

An old memory surfaced in my mind. “That sounds very much like one of the implants Cerberus placed in Shepard’s brain, in his last instantiation.”

“It helped upload the first Shepard’s memories into the second Shepard’s brain. It also accidentally gave him resistance to Reaper indoctrination and Leviathan enthrallment.” Shepard chuckled softly, perhaps recognizing the irony in what he was saying. “Good thing, too. He probably wouldn’t have survived to reach the Crucible with his mind still intact otherwise.”

“Yes,” agreed Miranda. “I suspect the function here is similar, although this technology is far more advanced. The nanites appear to form backup structures for memory and personality, acting to oppose any alteration forced from outside. The host may become even more resistant to indoctrination or enthrallment than Shepard’s predecessor.” She peered at me, a severe expression on her face. “What I can’t determine yet is whether the nanites impose any alterations of their own. Perhaps they do more than simply reinforce the host’s personality.”

“They don’t,” said Shepard.

Miranda shook her head. “I’m sorry, sir, but we can’t simply take your word for that.”

“Agreed.” Shepard shrugged. “After all, I might be in the dark as to the Intelligence’s real intentions here. By all means, be skeptical.”

“What else have you learned?” I asked.

Miranda turned back to her console. “I can’t be certain, but I believe the nanites will also interact with a VI implant. They may grant the implant greater capabilities. I think they may also leverage the implant to further support the work they do in the brain. Perhaps this defensive capability is more effective when the host already has a daimon, or the equivalent.”

“I concur,” said Tekanta. “If not for the risk to Kalan, I would consider it an interesting experiment to expose my physical matrix to these nanoscale devices.”

I frowned. “So far, all the hosts carrying these nanites are human, with levorotary biochemistry. Presumably we asari wouldn’t have any trouble ingesting blood from one of our human allies, either Shepard himself or Kamala. Would a quarian be able to survive it?”

“Our immune systems aren’t nearly as fragile as they were in the days of exile,” said Kalan. “Still, the basic protein incompatibilities . . .”

Miranda shook her head, her usual cool detachment crumbling for an instant. “It might be possible. But very risky.”

“I agree.” The quarian gave Miranda a calming glance. “Believe me, I’m in no hurry to perform radical experiments on my own body. Tekanta will just have to be patient.”
“Agreed,” said the geth.

“One more thing.” Miranda turned back to the console, and focused the display on the asari schematic. “Notice where else the nanites congregate. Here, here, and here . . .”

Suddenly I realized what I was looking at. “Around the eezo nodules in the asari nervous system. Along the spine, down the major nerve trunks in the arms and legs.”

“Right. I haven’t had time to model a biotic human’s reaction to the nanites, but I suspect we might see something similar. The nanites specifically respond to biotic capabilities in the host.”

Shepard frowned in confusion, but said nothing.

“So what are the nanites doing with respect to biotics?” Vara demanded.

“Not clear,” said Miranda, a small scowl of frustration disturbing her classically beautiful features. “Shepard’s biotic abilities are certainly very strong, a V-eleven or perhaps a V-twelve on the Alliance’s standard Lawson-Ritter assay scale. Yet they don’t appear to be qualitatively different from those of any other human biotic with vanguard training.”

“That feels about right,” Shepard mused. “I seem to have a bit more force and endurance than my predecessor had at the end of the Reaper War, but that’s all. I’m not aware of any new techniques I have that he didn’t.”

“Are there any biotics among the members of the Way?” I asked.

“Sure. Thousands of them. I don’t think anyone has noticed any difference in their biotic function after they went through the sharing-of-blood ritual.”

“Maybe the nanites aren’t intended to affect the host’s biotic function,” said Kalan slowly.

All of us looked at him.

“Then why would they congregate around the eezo nodes in the first place?” asked Miranda.

“Drawing power?” suggested Vara. “Using the nodes as little mass-effect cores?”

“I don’t think so,” said the quarian. “After all, the nanites seem to operate just fine in a non-biotic host. They clearly don’t need any extra power. Besides, wouldn’t that kind of power draw damage the host’s nervous system in short order?”

Miranda nodded, staring at her lover intensely.

“Then why would they congregate around the eezo nodes in the first place?” Kalan said at last.

“Maybe the nanites are doing something to the eezo,” Kalan said at last.

“What could they be doing?” demanded Vara.

Kalan shrugged. “No data. Maybe Miranda and I should move that up on the research agenda. Between her medical expertise and my understanding of dark-matter physics . . .”

_Goddess!_

“Dark matter,” I said suddenly. “Eezo is dark matter.”

“That’s right,” said Kalan patiently, clearly not wanting to offend the crazy asari. Then he did a double-take, staring at me out of gleaming pearl-colored eyes.
“The stars are being manipulated using dark matter,” I said. “People are also being manipulated, and at least some of them are biotics, with eezo integrated into their nervous systems. *Eezo is dark matter.*”

“Most Protheans are biotics,” said Vara. “Is Advocate Zhan one of them?”

Miranda frowned. “None of us saw her use biotics while we were on Senakhar, but it’s possible.”

“President Yao is a biotic,” said Shepard quietly.

Vara nodded firmly. “So are Varag and Nerinn. The Wrecking Crew.”

All of us stood or sat quietly for a long moment.

Then Miranda cleared her throat. “I believe this is going to the top of our research agenda.”

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**15 November 2580, Pranas System Space**

*Normandy* dropped out of FTL late in the ship’s day, beginning a leisurely descent into the depths of the Pranas star system, heading for Sur’Kesh.

We made no great production of our approach.

Centuries after the end of the Salarian Wars, little open+ hostility remained toward me or any of my allies from that time. Given the brevity of salarian lifespans, anyone still holding a grudge would have been like a twenty-sixth-century human, still obsessed with the outcome of the Franco-Prussian War or the Taiping Rebellion. The Salarian Union had fully integrated into the Citadel Confederation. There had been no serious tension between the salarians and the rest of the galaxy in a long time. Even *krogan and yahg* had been known to visit Sur’Kesh on peaceful business, if not in large numbers.

Still. No need to forcibly remind anyone of past events.

As we approached, I spent several hours contacting influential salarians. Most of them were *dalatrasu* from important bloodlines, a few were male leaders from the Special Tasks Group or major scientific combines. A few were known to me personally, but most were strangers, recommended to me by Matriarch Thekla’s operatives. A series of short, polite conversations followed, introductions and mutual sounding-out, the earliest stages of serious negotiation.

It felt strange to work as a diplomat again. Old skills rose to the front of my mind, feeling familiar, if a little rusty.

I had almost finished when my office door chimed. A thought to ARGOS and the door opened, revealing Kalan standing at ease outside. I motioned for him to come in and wait quietly, while I finished my last call down to the planet.

I turned away from the console to find the quarian standing on the other side of my desk, looking rather nervous.

“Please, Kalan, sit down. Can I get you anything?”

“No, thank you, Doctor.” He sat down, shifted a little in a futile attempt to be at ease, and then seemed to lose track of why he had come.
I waited, smiling inwardly but not letting any amusement show on my face.

“Doctor T’Soni, you’ve known Miranda for a long time, haven’t you?” he asked at last.

“Since she was a very small child. Vara and I were mentors for her, even foster parents from time to time when she was in her forties and fifties.” Now I did smile gently at him. “Although at this point, I suspect you know her much better than I.”

Apparently quarians can blush. Who knew?

“I don’t think that follows,” he said, recovering gamely. “Just because she’s shared her mind and memories with me, doesn’t mean I have the skill to make sense of it. You asari may be built for that, but we quarians have a harder time.”

“Not to mention that she is your first serious love,” I murmured.

He snorted in ironic amusement. “Is it that obvious?”

“Only to those of us who care about you both, and want you to be happy.”

He nodded gratefully, and was silent for another moment, thinking hard.

“I suppose I need some advice,” he said at last. “I never expected to fall in love with an asari. What can I expect? Where is this likely to go?”

“Have you talked to Miranda about this?”

“Yes, and I will again. But, Doctor, she doesn’t really have any more experience than I do. She may be close to twenty times my age, but I’m her first serious love too. I’m not sure she knows what to expect.”

“I may not be the right asari to ask,” I told him. “In all my life, I’ve only carried on liaisons with three different people, and two of those relationships didn’t last very long.”

“I respect your opinion, Doctor. So does Miranda.”

“All right.” I leaned back in my well-cushioned chair, lacing my fingers together in my lap, and looked up at the ceiling while I thought. “Kalan, one thing I know about Miranda is that she never does anything without a great deal of consideration. She can make decisions quickly – after all, she approached you when she had known you for less than twenty days – but she always examines a question from every angle first. And once she does make a decision, she commits herself to it with great intensity.”

“I’ve noticed that. It’s a little frightening, actually. We quarians tend to be a lot more deliberate and low-key about such things.”

“So do we asari, most of the time. For all that Miranda displays a cold, rational face to the world, she is actually a very passionate person. If you’re worried that she will grow tired of you and move on, I don’t think that’s very likely.”

“I suppose it had occurred to me. After all . . .” Then he stopped, quite obviously trying to avoid giving any offense.

“After all, we asari have a reputation for short, casual liaisons?” I laughed at him, not unkindly. “I suppose there’s some truth to that. Miranda and I are rather unusual for our people. Even so, when
an asari finds a truly good match, she can be fiercely loyal. To death and beyond. It may be too early to tell, but I suspect you and Miranda may have such a match.”


“Good! I think the two of you will be good for each other.” I cocked my head at him. “Although there’s one issue you may want to discuss with her as soon as possible.”

“What is it?”

“Whether you intend to have children.”

That startled him, his eyes gleaming in the light and his mouth hanging slightly open. “Doctor, we haven’t even started thinking about that.”

“I would advise you to open that discussion, even if the end result is that you immediately agree you’re not ready. This is one area in which her inexperience may work against you. It’s somewhat dangerous for an asari to avoid any kind of sexual relationship until after she has reached her matron years, as Miranda has done.”

He frowned in confusion. “How so?”

I took a deep breath, almost unwillingly remembering my time with Shepard, so long ago. “Kalan, the vast majority of asari become sexually active between the ages of sixty and eighty. Even I didn’t hold out much past my century mark. By the time a typical asari reaches the matron stage, sometime in her fourth century, she’s had many years of sexual experience. In particular, she knows what’s involved in a deep reading of her lover’s mind and genome. She may have attempted it many times, but none of those attempts will have been complete, none of them will have given rise to a child. By the time she becomes a matron and can conceive a child, there’s no possibility of her doing it by accident, or in the throes of passion.”

Kalan impressed me. Most outsiders have difficulty understanding the nuances of asari biology, but he saw the implications right away. “You’re saying that since Miranda is only now discovering what it’s like to have a sexual relationship with someone, she could conceive a child without fully intending to.”

“That’s right. Very unusual for an asari.” I made a reassuring gesture. “Not that it would be a disaster if she became pregnant now. She is more than capable of caring for a child, and she can call on Vara and me for help or advice if she needs them. You wouldn’t need to feel obligated to stay with her.”

He frowned in anger. “Doctor, that would be my daughter as well. Of course I would want to stay with her.”

“I didn’t mean to suggest otherwise. Still, this is something the two of you should have out in the open. Better that you decide together what you want, rather than risk having it happen to you by chance.”

“I understand.” He nodded decisively. “We’ll talk about it tonight. Assuming I can pull her attention away from Shepard’s nanites for a few hours.”

I smiled at him. “I’m sure you will find a way.”

Once he had gone, the smile melted from my face and I had to turn and look out at the stars for a time. Old memories washed over me, wistful memories, that for once had nothing to do with
Shepard.

Your namesake has grown. I think you would be very proud of what she has become. Now she’s found love and passion for the first time, and there’s the possibility she might become a mother. Something I know you always wanted for yourself, and mourned that you could not have it.

I wish you could have seen it.

I wish you could have seen all of this, really, the bad as well as the good. No doubt you would have had some delightfully cutting and cynical remark for me, just the thing to put me in my place. Then you would have gotten that determined look on your face, and moved to help me make everything better.

I miss you, Miranda, and I wish you were here as well.

Even if that would have made our personal situation even more complicated than it already is.
“No,” said dalatrass Valern.

I applied old discipline to keep my face and body language still. To my right and left, I could sense Vara and Shepard doing the same. Behind me, I could sense increased tension from Kamala, but the dalatrass seemed to take no notice.

“I am not certain I understand your position,” I said calmly, after a moment. “Might I request that you clarify?”

The salarian aristocrat nodded, her hands folded on the table before her, a sober expression on the heavy, dull-grey face under her blue-and-crimson hood.

Valern seemed such a mild-mannered person, not someone who would easily raise her voice or make big gestures. One had to consciously remember what she represented. This one salarian served as the absolute monarch of two-fifths of Sur’Kesh, including the planetary capital. Directly or indirectly, she ruled over four billion people. She represented a bloodline that had managed to reach the top of her society during the great upheavals of the Reaper War and the Salarian Wars . . . and had managed to stay on top for over twenty salarian generations.

“My position is simple enough,” she said calmly. “No, I will not assist you in gathering support for any vote of no confidence against President Yao. Members of Parliament elected from Valern holdings have already been instructed to abstain from any such vote. On the other hand, I will not use my influence with other dalatrass to oppose your plan. They must make up their own minds on this matter.”

“The evidence we present is not convincing?”

“I did not say that.” Valern moved slightly, her hands opening on the table as if to reveal something she held concealed in them. “In private, I will stipulate that your evidence is quite disturbing.”

Without speaking, I cocked my head in a manner that would communicate polite confusion to a salarian.

Valern smiled slightly, her great black eyes blinking sideways for an instant. “Dr. T’Soni, you of all people must be aware of the last few centuries of salarian history. You certainly helped shape them.”

“Perhaps I am not fully aware of how that history has influenced your reasoning,” I said politely.

“The salarian approach to interstellar politics is distinctive. We are many, and we breed quickly, but we are not aggressive or militaristic by nature. Even you asari are more warlike than we. This puts us at risk. Any alien species with a greater capacity for aggression poses a threat to our existence.”

I nodded in understanding.

“For centuries, the strategy we selected was to apply the same methods to aliens that our dalatrass have always applied to one another.”
“Manipulation,” I said quietly.

“Naturally. We manipulated some aliens so that they would simply pose no threat to us, manipulated others so that they would actively defend our civilization.”

“How did you manipulate the asari?” asked Shepard suddenly.

“Why are you so certain that we did?”

He only cocked one eyebrow at the dalatrass.

“Of course. That was simple enough. We encouraged them to embrace their recently discovered ability to mate with non-asari, and then began to provide them with many millions of excess male salarians.”

“Thereby ensuring the introduction of many salarian traits into the asari gene pool, encouraging asari Matriarchs to think more like salarian dalatrass, and incidentally forging strong ties of blood obligation.” I made a brushing-aside gesture. “None of this is a surprise to any asari who has taken the time to think about it. My own ancestry is at least half salarian. Please continue, dalatrass.”

Valern nodded agreeably. “Later we encountered other species, and it became more difficult to ensure salarian security using the same methods. The rachni were horribly aggressive, and we could find no way to manipulate them. We uplifted the krogan, and they defeated the rachni, but in turn they proved too unruly to serve as a safe proxy. Still, after two episodes of serious conflict, the status quo prevailed. Civilization thrived, based on asari diplomacy, salarian innovation, volus commerce, and turian military might. And all the while, certain salarian dalatrass continued to apply the old methods of manipulation and covert influence, heading off threats to galactic stability.”

“The Special Tasks Group,” Vara murmured. “Then the first Spectres were veterans of the STG. The first Shadow Broker was a salarian dalatrass.”

“Yes. Along with other initiatives, not so well known to the galaxy at large.”

I shook my head. “I still fail to understand why this means you will not assist us.”

Valern rose, turned away, and walked to the great window behind her. She looked out across the Talat skyline, the enormous city stretching off to the horizon, beautiful and rich with green, lit by the golden light of Pranas as it sank slowly into the west.

“Does it not strike you, Dr. T'Soni, that manipulation is a particularly dishonest strategy for survival?”

Shepard shifted slightly, but he kept his reaction under strict control.

“Forgive me, dalatrass, but that is not an observation I would normally expect from a salarian.”

Then startled Shepard. He turned to stare at me.

Valern had not turned back to watch us, but her posture changed. “Ah. Mr. Shepard is surprised that you would say such a thing to a potential ally.”

“Yeah,” he said. “To suggest to an asari or a human that you don’t consider them capable of honesty would be a nasty insult.”
I shook my head. “Shepard, in most salarian systems of ethics, honesty isn’t considered a virtue. Honesty implies truthfulness, which is so thoroughly ingrained into salarian psychology that it can’t be considered at all remarkable. It also implies straightforwardness, which salarians consider foolish.”

“Salarions don’t lie?” asked Kamala.

“Salarions are incapable of lying to themselves,” I corrected her. “Their minds are simply not constructed in such a way as to permit them to ignore or contradict objective facts. As a result, they almost never lie to one another. They assume anyone who hears a lie is intelligent enough to see through the deception anyway, so it’s a waste of effort.”

Valern nodded, still staring out over the vast cityscape. “We are perfectly capable of concealing the truth from others, of course. We remain silent. We keep secrets. We act without informing others of our intentions. Especially with real or potential enemies.”

Shepard nodded slowly. “Now that I think of it, I don’t think I’ve ever caught a salarian in a lie. Every time I’ve seen a salarian engage in a scheme, it’s involved keeping a secret or acting covertly.”

“Yes. So as you see, salarians are not honest creatures,” said Valern. “There is not even an equivalent word in most of our languages. If we speak, we almost never fail to tell the truth. Yet in any situation of conflict – or even potential conflict – we can be expected to behave in a manner you might call devious. Among ourselves, this is not an ethical problem. We expect such behavior from one another as a matter of course. The problem arises when we deal with aliens, whose psychology differs from our own. Whose ethical expectations differ from our own.”

Valern turned back, folding her arms and staring at the rest of us.

“It was you who demonstrated to us – at least to some of us – how foolish we had been, to treat aliens as we normally treat one another.”

I leaned back in my chair, frowning. “Us? Do you mean asari?”

“No. I mean you, Dr. T’Soni, and you, Mr. Shepard. You specifically.”

Shepard and I exchanged a moment’s astonished glance.

“At the beginning of the Reaper War, Mr. Shepard, you dealt with dalatrass Linron, who was in a position of power and influence roughly equivalent to that which I hold today. You came into conflict with her over how to deal with the krogan. Yet you made no attempt to manipulate her. You behaved honestly with her, negotiating openly and concealing nothing. You were honest with Primarch Victus. You were honest with the krogan. Linron regarded all of this as the uttermost folly, and by our standards she was right to do so. Yet your honesty worked. It helped you build an alliance capable of standing against the Reaper threat, at least long enough for the Crucible to be built and deployed. Your honesty saved all of us.”

Shepard nodded slowly, his face set in a fierce frown of concentration, but he said nothing.

“Now we come to you, Dr. T’Soni,” Valern continued. “After the Reaper War, the dalatrass who succeeded Linron saw that, alone among the major species, we salarians had survived almost untouched. No one else appeared to be in a position to lead galactic civilization back to its former prosperity and strength. These dalatrass also regarded the resurgent krogan, and their human allies, as a serious threat to galactic stability. So they embarked on a decades-long project to undermine
krogan, human, and eventually turian power. They uplifted the yahg to serve as a new set of militant proxies. In the end, they moved to seize hegemony over all of Citadel Space.

“Doctor, you were one of the influential leaders who opposed that project. You did so by being honest with everyone involved. You made no attempt to conceal your intentions. You chose not to manipulate, but to persuade, and you made your arguments in public. You freely released data that had come to you as the Shadow Broker. You openly assembled an alliance against us, one that proved strong enough to defeat us. In the end, it was you and your allies, not we salarians, who did restore peace and prosperity to the galaxy.”

Valern looked around at all of us.

“As Dr. T’Soni has said, we salarians find it very difficult to ignore objective facts. Clearly a strategy of dealing honestly with others is at least as effective as a strategy of covertly manipulating them. At least when dealing with aliens, whose psychologies differ from ours.

“Since the Valern bloodline seized power here on Sur’Kesh, we have pursued a new policy toward aliens. We choose to be honest with you. We speak our minds openly, without concealing our intentions any more than necessary. We negotiate in what you would call good faith, instead of seeking our own sole advantage. In this way, we hope to earn your trust. This does not always come naturally to us, but we have seen that it is more effective at maintaining the peace.

“The Salarian Union entered into the Citadel Confederation honestly. We accept an obligation to support it, and its legitimately elected officers. We choose to remain friendly to all, and strictly neutral in disputes that do not involve us. This dispute between you and President Yao . . . I hope you can resolve it, and I hope you can do so peacefully, but those who owe fealty to Valern cannot become involved.

“That is my final word on the matter.”

19 November 2580, Talat/Sur’Kesh

Three days of endless talks.

Valern might be the most influential salarian alive, but her power still had limits. She could not simply dictate to any dalatrass who did not owe her fealty. In any case, it seemed she was sincere about wishing to remain neutral. When we began to invite other dalatrass to Talat for face-to-face talks, she made no move to interfere.

It soon became obvious that other dalatrass did not agree with Valern about the need for honesty. Oh, they listened to us, and they willingly negotiated, but one always sensed a hidden agenda. Each of them sought advantage for her own bloodline and lands.

I had little to offer on my own, of course, aside from a little prestige. On the other hand, if we succeeded in recalling President Yao, then Matriarch Thekla would almost certainly form a new government in the Confederation. In theory, that new government would be beholden to those who had supported the vote of no confidence. Many dalatrass hoped to determine the shape of that obligation in advance.

Delarn looked forward to military contracts, once Yao had been recalled and the Confederation turned to fight the valdarii in earnest. Lisheen hoped for title to extensive lands for her bloodline on a new colony world. Neroll wanted the Citadel courts to address her long-standing dispute with a neighbor. Velossa wanted diplomatic support for ecological reclamation contracts on Tuchanka.
that was rather refreshing, actually, even if her primary concern turned out to be profit rather than a genuine desire to help the krogan.

I had made detailed plans with Matriarch Thekla in advance. I knew exactly how far I could go while negotiating with so many different interests. If I needed to consult with her, I could call Thessia securely from Normandy at any time. Meanwhile, I had a superb diplomatic staff on hand; Vara, Miranda, and my other acolytes had served in that capacity before.

Even Shepard was of considerable help. Although he had never taken formal training as a diplomat, he was intelligent and very shrewd, and he had represented his people very ably during the Reaper War. His centuries as part of the Ascended Intelligence also gave him profound insight. For the most part he simply sat silently through our meetings, listening and sending the occasional thought through my daimon. Yet when he did speak, everyone at the table listened. Even among salarians, the major species he had probably dealt with the least during his previous time in the galaxy, his legend carried considerable weight.

Perhaps he spent so much time on diplomacy to distract him from the news.

Two weeks since the valdarii had started their war, and they had already driven a deep salient into Citadel space. Alien forces had occupied Intai’sei and Noveria, approaching within a few thousand light-years of Earth itself. Meanwhile, the valdarii had sent yet another massive fleet in the opposite direction, to attack the Synarchy of Rannoch.

Confederation resistance had been . . . confused is probably the best word. Individual fleet admirals, operating independently, had struck a number of serious blows against the valdarii advance. Several of those commanders had then been relieved of command by the Yao administration, for unclear and contradictory reasons. The administration itself seemed committed to a strategy of trading space for time, inviting the valdarii to overextend themselves. Shepard rather caustically called this a strategy of “giving the enemy everything he wants, in the hope that he’ll get confused and go home.”

The quarians and geth, of course, mounted a very effective resistance. Meanwhile, one segment of Citadel society was putting up a fierce fight: the human colonists of the Attican Traverse, especially on worlds where the Way was prevalent. Bereft of starships and orbital defenses, unable even to hold onto their major cities, many of the colonists had taken to the deep wilderness and started fighting a guerilla war. I couldn’t tell how effectively they slowed down the valdarii advance. It was almost impossible to get news from the occupied worlds. Still, all of us rejoiced at the fact that someone still carried on the fight there.

One evening, sitting with Vara, Shepard, Miranda, and Kamala in a local high-class restaurant, I mentioned the Way’s resistance to Shepard. I wondered whether the new religion’s belief structure somehow encouraged its members to fight for their independence.

“No more than any other religion does, I imagine,” he said. “There’s probably a simpler explanation.”

“It’s the nanotechnology in their blood,” said Vara suddenly.

I cocked my head at her, inviting her to amplify, but she went silent and seemed to ignore both of us.

“That’s what I was thinking too,” said Shepard. “Whatever covert influence the Adversary has, it seems to be using it to discourage resistance on the occupied worlds. They just go silent, and the valdarii can come in and do whatever they do to assimilate everyone. But it doesn’t work where
the Intelligence’s nanotech got shared around before the war began.”

“If that’s true, this is the first empirical evidence supporting your claims about the nanotechnology that we might use to convince others.” I toyed with a fork, not feeling much appetite for the fine food we had been served. “I should mention this to Matriarch Thekla. Perhaps she can make use of it back home.”

“That doesn’t explain why the *valdarii* are having such a difficult time with my people,” said Kalan.

Shepard shook his head. “The Synarchy is a lot more compact, with good interior lines of communication. You and the geth haven’t spread little colonies that you can’t easily defend across half the galaxy.”

“True. There still aren’t enough quarians in the universe for us to scatter that widely, even if we found it easy to colonize new worlds in the first place. Meanwhile, the geth prefer to stay close together, so their consensus continues to work.”

“Right. Add to that the most powerful and technologically advanced fleet in the galaxy, and yeah, the *valdarii* are going to need to work hard to take you down.” Shepard sighed, catching Kalan’s eye with a bleak expression. “Not that they won’t do it eventually. If they keep assimilating Confederation worlds and adding them to their industrial base . . .”

The quarian nodded. “That’s what our leaders are worried about, according to the last message I got from Ambassador Shal.”

Just then, something pulled my attention away, toward the entrance to the restaurant. Vara’s gaze followed mine, and then she rose to her feet, smoothly but very quickly.

A small team of male salarians crossed the floor toward us, armed and armored, although their weapons remained in their holsters.

“Dr. T'Soni?” called their leader, from a few meters away. “Captain Dol Anarro, Special Tasks Group.”

I remained seated, projecting patient calm. “What can I do for you, Captain?”

“Doctor, we’re an advance team. Sent to secure this location. We have a VIP party on its way here. I need to ensure there will be no trouble.”

I blinked in mild confusion. “Do you believe that I or my friends are likely to cause trouble?”

“Likely? No. Is it possible? Yes. Do I have your word that you will remain peaceable?”

“Of course, Captain.” I smiled reassuringly at him. “We are committed to obey salarian law while we are your guests.”

“Thank you, Doctor.” Captain Anarro flicked his wrist, pointing to various positions around the outside of the large dining area, and his men deployed themselves with silent efficiency. The captain himself remained close by our table, turning now to watch the entrance.

I looked that way myself, still mystified as to what could be causing this much turmoil.

Then I saw it, another squad of STG troopers escorting a small party of humans. My eyes went wide as I recognized the male human at the center of the group.
Shepard cursed under his breath.

_Yao Guozhi._
Campaign of Lies

19 November 2580, Talat/Sur’Kesh

Give President Yao credit, he made no attempt to pretend our meeting was a coincidence.

He took a moment to glance around the restaurant, acknowledging those who recognized him with a small wave. Then his eye caught us, on our shadowed terrace. A word to his STG escort, and his party began to cross the floor. I saw two other humans with him, not anyone I recognized, almost certainly members of his personal staff or protection detail.

One by one, all of us rose from our table, careful not to make any sudden gestures that would bring down half of the STG upon us. The others followed my lead, as I kept a neutral expression and clasped my hands together before me, but declined to make any nod or bow of respect.

“Dr. T’Soni,” said the President, in his calm tenor voice.

“Mr. President,” I said, and then I waited patiently for him to make the next move.

Anyone observing us might have been rather amused by what followed: a full three minutes of motionless silence from my party, the President’s party, and every STG agent in the room. Only the other diners and wait staff moved or spoke to one another. A few of them took photographs.

“I regret the conflict that has come between us,” said the President at last.

“That has a simple solution,” I told him. “Call for immediate Parliamentary elections, accept the result, and step aside in favor of someone better suited to defend the Confederation.”

“Someone such as yourself?” he said gently, his eyes flickering to my right for an instant. “Or perhaps this construct which stands at your side?”

He’s still concerned about Shepard. Why?

“Shepard and I will defer to Matriarch Thekla for that role,” I told him, “although anyone competent and not compromised by the valdarii would do.”

“You believe that I have been compromised by our enemies?” he asked, a trace of irony creeping into his voice.

“It seems obvious.”

He snorted in distaste. “Hardly. I simply recognize that for all that the valdarii threaten us, you and your party pose a far greater danger to galactic civilization.”

I heard someone shift behind me, probably Kamala, easing forward onto the balls of her feet in preparation for launching herself into action. I ignored the small sound and focused on the President. “You cannot be serious,” I said coldly.

“I am quite serious.” Now Yao openly turned to stare at Shepard. “Whatever that thing may be – and I do not for a moment believe that it is Commander Shepard returned to life – it is a deadly threat to all life as we understand it. As I am prepared to demonstrate to the dalatrass of Sur’Kesh, the Matriarchs of Thessia, and all of the Confederation’s people.”
“Unless . . .” I prompted him.

He cocked an eyebrow at me.

I smiled. “Come, Mr. President, you would not bother to come here and make even a veiled threat, unless you had some course of action you hoped we might follow instead. What is that?”

“Ah.” He nodded slightly. “It’s quite simple. You will turn over Kamala Sarabhai to stand trial for treason and various other charges. You will also turn over this construct, so that it may be contained and properly studied. Once those things are done . . . well, you and your allies are simply engaging in legal political activity. I have no quarrel with that, no matter how short-sighted your objectives. The people of the Confederation are sovereign. It is for them to decide between us.”

I could sense Shepard tensing at my side now, restraining himself from some hot retort.

“Mr. President, I could not agree to any of that even if I wished to.” I gave him an aristocratic stare, cold blue eyes and a firmly set jaw. “These humans are under the direct protection of the Asari Republics, as confirmed by the duly elected exarkhôn Thekla Valaridé. The Republics do not recognize any criminal charges against Ms. Sarabhai, and we note that you have not even bothered to level any such charges at Mr. Shepard. Whatever fabricated evidence you may have, I suggest you publish and be damned.”

Yao smiled. “I see you have become very familiar with human history, Dr. T’Soni. Allow me to offer a quotation of my own: The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting. Good evening.”

With that, he walked away, in no hurry and apparently unconcerned with the fact that he had turned his back to us. His aides and half of the STG detachment went with him.

I sat down at the table again, picking up my fork and attacking my meal once again as if nothing had happened. The others took a little longer. Shepard in particular remained on his feet, staring after Yao, long after the President had disappeared.

“Well,” said Vara. “That was very interesting.”

I nodded in agreement. “Very strange, that the most powerful individual in Citadel Space would go out of his way to accost us over our evening meal. In front of dozens of curious salarians, at that.”

Finally, Shepard slowly lowered himself into his chair once more. “It was almost as if he wanted Kamala or me to go for him. Although he had to have known better than that.”

“Speak for yourself, Shepard,” said Kamala, her attractive face set in unusually grim lines. “I was about three seconds from tearing the bastard’s throat out. Until I remembered just how many bloody STG are in the room, and all of them armed.”

Captain Anarro chose that moment to approach our table once more, glancing at Kamala as he moved. “Dr. T’Soni. My thanks for not causing an interstellar incident over the dessert course.”

“Your presence helped, Captain. My thanks to you and your men.”

The salarian smiled, an expression of respectful pride. He lowered his voice as he bowed slightly, preventing anyone not at our table from hearing him. “You may be interested to know. President already met with dalatrass Valern. She gave him no more than she gave you.”

“At least she is being consistent.” I watched the STG captain for a long moment, and then decided
to take a risk. “Thank you again, Captain. I don’t suppose you have any insight into what the President is planning?”


Shepard and I shared a quick glance.

“Ah. Thought so. Hope you can make good use of it. Good night, Doctor.”

With that, the STG made a quick and efficient withdrawal from the restaurant, leaving all of us to speculate in their wake.

“What the hell is Marie doing on Sur’Kesh?” Shepard wondered.

“How did she even get off Mindoir?” Kamala demanded. “I haven’t heard of anyone getting away from the valdarii, at least not far enough to get off-world.”

“Unless the valdarii deliberately let her go,” said Miranda.

I glanced across the table at my acolyte. “What are you thinking?”

“Suppose the valdarii are actively cooperating with President Yao,” she suggested. “Or, perhaps more likely, they are working independently, but both of them are working on behalf of the Adversary. If this Césaire woman would be of use to the President, perhaps the Adversary directed the valdarii to facilitate her escape from Mindoir.”

Vara stirred in her seat. “Shepard, has Ms. Césaire ever taken part in the Way’s sharing-of-blood ritual?”

Shepard frowned. “I would assume so, but I can’t be sure.”

“She never took blood directly from you?”

“No. I only shared directly with forty or fifty members of the Way, after I first arrived on Mindoir. That included everyone who was serving in the Spiritual Assembly of Mindoir at the time. It spread from there. It was always strictly voluntary. I don’t think anyone ever kept records.”

Vara frowned. “Marie Césaire wasn’t a member of this Spiritual Assembly?”

“Not then,” said Shepard, thinking hard. “She was elected later, after Bob Mayweather retired. This would have been . . . eight years ago, I think. Then she became chair of the Spiritual Assembly, a little less than two years ago.”

Miranda nodded slowly. “So the current head of the Way knows all about the blood-sharing ritual, but we can’t be sure she has ever taken part. Which means she may be under the Adversary’s influence.”

“Goddess,” I muttered. “We’ve been keeping the whole matter of Shepard’s nanotechnology to ourselves. Which means President Yao can reveal it to the public, and make it appear that we’ve been deliberately concealing it for malicious reasons.”

“I think dinner is over,” said Vara with a sigh.
None of us got much sleep that night, our executive suite in the Ovudarr Hotel buzzing with activity well into the small hours of the morning. Vara and I spent two hours consulting with Matriarch Thekla back on Thessia, drawing up contingency plans. Then our entire group worked frantically to assemble data, writing scripts and decision trees to be loaded into our daimones. Daylight had begun to creep into the sky outside before we finished.

At one point I looked around for Shepard, and couldn’t find him. ARGOS assured me he was back aboard Normandy, awake and in his quarters, making a series of extranet calls of his own. I wondered for a moment what he was up to, and then decided it was enough to know he was safe. Back to work.

President Yao beat us to the punch, of course, but then we wanted to see what he had to say before we published any response.

Just past dawn in Talat, he went in front of cameras and journalists at the Convocation Hall, and spoke for about fifteen minutes. The moment he began, we sent our own messages to the media, promising a statement within ten minutes once he had finished. Then we stood in our suite and watched.

“Citizens of the Citadel Confederation. I come before you now, at a time when our civilization faces its greatest peril since the end of the Reaper War, to clarify a number of issues . . .

“The valdarii do indeed pose a considerable menace to the security of the Confederation. However, their resources are not without limit, and their technology does not surpass our own. Already their offensive shows signs of grinding to a halt, as they struggle to hold the worlds they have taken. Advised by my military staff, I have elected to stand on the defensive for the moment, waiting for the proper time to launch a decisive counter-offensive. We will yet defeat the barbarians and win peace for the galaxy . . .”

He sounded so reasonable. Calm, determined, not a word out of place. I remembered when he first ran for the Presidency, how persuasive he had been, like every human’s wise and kindly grandparent. Certainly he had lost none of those gifts.

“The most serious danger we face is not foreign, but internal . . .

“It is unfortunate, and personally difficult for me, that I must face such determined political opposition from Matriarch Thekla and Dr. T’Soni. I regret that such talented and honorable individuals have been deceived by our true adversary . . .

“That adversary is none other than the Reapers. Working through a biological construct that wears the face and appearance of Commander William Shepard, the great hero of the Reaper War . . .

“A nanotechnological infestation, a plague of Reaper machines designed to warp sentient minds and enslave them to the Reapers’ will . . .

“This outbreak has already spread among millions of humans in the Attican Traverse and Terminus Systems. It may already have reached Earth. Under the circumstances, I must regard it as a greater threat than any barbarian invasion. The valdarii will not be able to conquer our worlds for long. The Reapers are interested in nothing but our utter extinction . . .

“Now, I wish to present one who is familiar with this plague, having observed it spreading among
her people. Here is Marie Césaire, spiritual head of the religious movement known as the Way . . .

President Yao moved aside, permitting Césaire to step into the focus of attention. I leaned close, examining the woman’s image closely, looking for any sign of something out of place.

“Is that her?” Vara murmured behind me.

“Looks like it,” rumbled Shepard. “No sign of anything but fatigue and stress, which is reasonable enough.”

“I have been a leader in the Way for most of my adult life. Fifteen years ago, with most of the Way, I rejoiced at the prospect that the Shepard had returned to us. Little did I realize that his appearance was nothing but a cruel trick . . .

“He conspired with the Spiritual Assembly of Mindoir to add a new ritual to the practice of our faith. A diabolical rite involving the sharing of his blood . . .

“The sharing spread throughout the membership of the Way on Mindoir, and then to the other colony worlds. A few of us tried to oppose it, tried to speak out, but we were too late. The false Shepard had already swayed too many . . .”

Thump. I glanced to the side, to where Shepard had slammed his fist down on the arm of his chair, his face set, his teeth bared in a silent snarl.

“What a load of crap,” he growled. “I never asked the Spiritual Assembly to make a religious ritual out of the sharing of blood. They decided to do that on their own. Said it would bring the Way more solidarity. Marie never said a word in objection. She even presided over the ritual on any number of occasions.”

Miranda frowned. “I wonder, is Césaire under the Adversary’s control, or is she simply lying?”

“Does it make any difference?” I murmured.

“We had no way to know about the nanotechnology” Césaire continued. “I only learned of it after I escaped from Mindoir in the midst of the valdarii invasion. I pray that God will intervene and save all of us from this terrible disaster.”

With that, she stepped back, and President Yao began to speak once more. I exchanged a glance with Vara, and got a nod from her. She would listen to the rest of the President’s speech, and alert us if he said anything to affect our decision trees. I turned the video off.

“Well, that seems straightforward enough,” I said. “Case beta-three: an attempt to paint Shepard as a Reaper tool, here to soften us up in preparation for a resumption of the extinction cycle. The members of the Way described as unfortunate victims, taken in by the Reaper plot. Does anyone see any reason not to go ahead with our contingency plan?”

Silence from all of my allies.

“All right. Miranda, contact Matriarch Thekla and let her know what we have planned. Vara, it’s time for me to put that damned politics armor on again.”

In the end, we put all of our cards on the table for the public.
Yes, Shepard is an emissary of the Intelligence that governs the Reapers.

Yes, he carries sophisticated nanotechnology in his body. We have not yet mentioned it in public because we have not yet decided what recommendations to make regarding it.

No, the nanotechnology is not a nefarious plot on the part of that Intelligence. If the Intelligence wanted to resume the extinction cycle, it would not need any such preparation.

A number of us have been traveling and working with Shepard for weeks now, and have not been “infected” by the nanotechnology. It is transmitted solely by voluntary action.

Here is everything we have been able to learn about the nanotechnology thus far. It appears to pose no danger to anyone. We believe it serves, not to control sentient minds, but to protect them from such control.

As evidence, notice that the human colonies where the Way is strongest have been mounting the most stubborn resistance to the valdarii. Worlds where the nanotechnology has not spread have been unable to resist the invasion.

Marie Césaire is not a credible witness. She has reason to be hostile to Shepard. She must also explain just how she managed to escape Mindoir, when no other humans have done so.

President Yao’s behavior is consistent with his statements regarding the galactic situation. They are also consistent with the hypothesis that he has been compromised by the valdarii, and is acting to sabotage any possible defense against their attack.

The citizens of the Citadel Confederation must decide how to respond to these events. We have no plans to cease advocating peacefully for our position.

By evening, all of us – even Shepard – trembled on the edge of exhaustion, but we had good reason to be pleased with the day’s events.

Matriarch Thekla sent word from Thessia. The Grand Assembly had been very disturbed by the day’s revelations. At one point she even had to argue against a snap-referendum to rescind her authority as exarkhōn. Once our responses reached the asari public, though, support for our position recovered almost to its former levels. In the end, the referendum failed by about fifteen points; closer than we might have wished, but enough to work with.

The situation on Sur’Kesh seemed harder to evaluate. Public opinion polls are of little use among salarians, where all political decisions lie firmly in the hands of the various dalatrass. Still, by that evening I had the sense that only a few important salarians had changed their minds. It seemed to help that we had released extensive scientific reports on Shepard and his nanotechnology. Most dalatrass seemed willing to defer a decision, until their own scientists could evaluate the data.

“Sometimes damage control works,” Vara observed.

Late in the evening, a message came from dalatrass Valern’s staff, as if a simple courtesy. Apparently President Yao had requested the arrest and extradition of both Kamala and Shepard. Valern had invoked dalatrass privilege on her own soil, and refused the request.

Once I saw that, I decreed that we had done enough for one day. Time for ARGOS to start screening our calls, time for us to stop skipping meals and get some rest.

As usual, the universe showed an ironic sense of humor. I barely had time to rise from my desk
before the comm jangled, announcing a high-priority call.

Vara picked it up. Listened. A bemused expression crossed her face.

“What is it?” I asked.

She blinked at me. “Did we order a dozen krogan?”

Shepard abruptly rose from his chair. “Ah. Where are they?”

“Down in the hotel lobby,” said Vara. “The staff isn’t quite sure what to do with them.”

He nodded. “Let’s go say hello, before there’s another interstellar incident.”

We took the lifts down to the lobby, and emerged into genteel chaos. Salarians everywhere, trying to control the situation, some of them wondering aloud whether to call for security, the Talat constabulary, the STG. There in the center of the lobby, a cluster of large reptilian forms, resplendent in colorful silks and armor, bristling with weaponry. I quickly counted eight males . . . and three females.

“Bakara!” I called.

The krogan shaman turned, eyes bright behind her veil, and gave me a cheerful wave.

“**Battlemaster!”** A deep, loud voice, booming like thunder in a barrel. “*Ha-ha-ha . . .”*

A most unusual male krogan stomped across the lobby, arms spread wide in enthusiastic greeting. Thick silver head-plate, bright blue eyes, scarred face, massive hump. He passed me almost without noticing my presence, and pounced on Shepard.

“Lemme look at you,” he roared, grasping Shepard by both shoulders to hold him for examination. “Hah! Bit more fur on your head and your face. Might have gone a little soft around the edges, not having to fight all this time. You still can’t fool me. I’d know you anywhere.”

Shepard pounded his assailant on one shoulder, a blow that would have knocked me to the floor, but that served the krogan as a gesture of gentle affection. “Hello, Grunt.”
The lobby of the Ovadurr Hotel seemed full to overflowing. Only eleven krogan stood in that whole place, but each of them seemed to take up much more than a fair share of space. After days spent dealing exclusively with salarians, it felt rather overwhelming to be surrounded by huge reptilian bodies, bright wide-spaced eyes, enormous tooth-filled grins, and deep booming voices.

“Dr. T'Soni,” said Bakara, coming over to embrace me. “It’s good to see you in person once again.”

“The same to you, Bakara, but what in the galaxy brings you to Sur’Kesh just now?”

“Oh,” said Shepard. “That would be me.”

I stared at him with wide eyes.

“Shepard called me and explained the situation,” said Bakara. “He made no formal requests of the Krogan Commonwealth, but I saw at once what we might do to help you.”

“Come and knock some heads together!” said Grunt, grinning widely. “Well, in what she would call a figurative sense, anyway.”

“We have some leverage to apply,” said Bakara, “and we can’t think of a better cause for which to use it.”

“What leverage?” I asked, rather plaintively.

“For shame, Doctor.” I couldn’t see Bakara’s smile behind her veil, but the light in her eyes made it plain. “Do you have any idea how much salarian export trade goes to or through the Commonwealth?”

I understood then. “Twenty percent was the last figure I saw.”

“That’s a little out of date. Almost twenty-five percent, as of last year. The Salarian Union trades more with us krogan than it does with the humans. We’re not their largest trade partner – we certainly don’t approach you asari in that arena – but when we voice an opinion, a great many salarians take notice.”

“So what opinion are you here to voice?” I asked her.

“That we trust you, Doctor T’Soni. And if you say this human is Shepard, back among the living . . .”

“He is,” I said firmly, ignoring Shepard’s small head-shake.

“Then we trust him as well.” Bakara folded her arms and looked stern. “A good deal more than we trust President Yao at this point. Anyone who refuses to aggressively defend his own people doesn’t merit krogan support, and doesn’t deserve the Presidency.”

“That’s right,” said Grunt. “We krogan are ready to go up against those valdarii, just as soon as the Confederation has someone in charge who isn’t too stupid to ask. Even better now that we have
Shepard to help lead us into the fight!”

Just then the hotel’s senior manager bustled over, all offended propriety and barely subdued terror. Grunt and Bakara moved away, to soothe his ruffled dignity and reserve an executive suite not too far from our own.

“That was a good idea,” I told Shepard when the focus of attention had moved away from us.

“I thought so,” he said, looking pleased. “I did some reading while you and Vara were busy over the past few days. It’s interesting, how salarian attitudes toward the krogan have shifted.”

“Well, as Bakara pointed out, their economies have become rather deeply intertwined. It’s hard to maintain a fierce grudge against people when you’re busy trading with them.” I shook my head, watching Bakara negotiate smoothly with the salarians. “Besides, the krogan have spent the last four hundred years demonstrating that they aren’t a pack of barbarians after all. They’re still loud and boisterous, still naturally warlike, but they’ve shown no sign of trying to overrun the galaxy again.”

“Their population growth has averaged less than one percent per year since the Reaper War,” said Vara quietly. “Enough to grow to about twenty-five billion, enough to reclaim most of Tuchanka and fill up a few colony worlds, but that’s all. It’s as if all those centuries of the genophage taught them to fully appreciate their children. Invest in quality rather than quantity.”

“Bakara and her disciples have been a good influence,” said Shepard quietly. “I could see that coming, even while we were on Tuchanka during the war.”

“The salarians generally tolerate them now,” I agreed. “Most turians and humans have even come to like them. The core of the alliance you built during the war, it still stands very strong today.”

He nodded, silently but with calm pride.

“Then there are the asari,” said Vara, sly suggestion in her voice. “Krogan sires for asari children are not nearly as rare as they used to be. You can thank our mutual friend here for that.”

Shepard cocked his head, watching me.

“I didn’t have anything to do with it,” I muttered.

“Hah. The most famous and accomplished asari maiden in a thousand years, and she had a krogan grandsire?” Vara chuckled. “After the Reaper War, we saw a positive fad for krogan on Thessia. Especially after many of the resulting offspring proved to be very talented. Smart, aggressive, and tough.”

Shepard chuckled. “I hope they didn’t go around head-butting too many people.”

I rolled my eyes, gave a long-suffering sigh, and decided to change the subject. “One thing puzzles me. Krogan visits to Sur’Kesh aren’t all that common, even today. How did Bakara, Grunt, and the others get clearance to visit Talat on such short notice?”

“I looked into that,” said Vara. “Dalatrass Valern issued their clearances. Personally.”

I stared into my bondmate’s eyes, and saw suspicion to match my own. “Goddess. What is she playing at?”

“I think she may not be as neutral as she pretends to be,” rumbled Shepard, just loud enough for us
21 November 2580, Talat/Sur’Kesh

Clan Urdnot made quite a splash the next morning, calling a press conference and announcing unconditional krogan support for our campaign.

Bakara made a lengthy argument, using her best rhetoric. Grunt simply went up on stage and said, “Shepard saved all our asses in the Reaper War, and he gave the krogan a chance to prove we could be good citizens of the galaxy. We owe him. If he says the Confederation needs a new government, that’s good enough for us.” Then he sat down. I’m not sure which of them was more effective.

After the speeches, we invited the press to attend a small ceremony.

Shepard sat down in a comfortable chair, watching impassively as Miranda tied a tourniquet around his upper left arm, disinfected a spot inside his elbow, and then inserted a large-gauge needle into the big vein there. She connected the needle to a half-liter bag hanging beside him. He held a small flexible ball in his hand and squeezed it rhythmically, encouraging the flow of blood through the apparatus. It didn’t take him long to fill the bag.

“Five hundred milliliters,” Miranda announced. “Approximately two hundred and fifty billion of the nanomachines.”

“How much will make an effective dose?” asked Bakara.

Miranda frowned. “As little as ten milliliters would do, although from what we have determined, that would mean a longer take-up cycle for the nanomachines. The full effect would not set in as quickly.”

“We’re here to make a point,” said Grunt. “All of us here get the nanobots, as fast as we can.”

“Then I would recommend between and forty and fifty milliliters for each of you, depending on body mass, and injected rather than ingested.” Miranda glanced around at all of them. “Assuming that would present no health risks for you.”

One of the other male krogan spoke up; apparently, he had medical training. “It shouldn’t. Our immune systems are tough. We should deal with the alien cells and proteins quickly enough. Krogan and humans have the same chirality and use a lot of the same proteins anyway.”

“Very well.” Once more, Miranda looked around at the krogan, looming on all sides like a convocation of burly dragons. “I do want you to understand the risks. This is the first time anyone other than a human has accepted Shepard’s nanotechnology. We don’t know how it will affect krogan. I’ll want all of you to remain here for observation for the next few hours.”

Grunt shook his head. “Enough talk. Shepard, do you advise this?”

“Yes,” Shepard nodded. “It shouldn’t have any harmful effect, and it should help protect you from mental control. Reaper indoctrination, Leviathan enthrallment, whatever effect the valdarii and their masters have, none of it should be able to bite once you’ve become part of the synthesis.”

“Good enough.” The big krogan removed the armor covering his upper left arm. “Me first.”

Without further delay, Miranda decanted a small sample of Shepard’s blood into a fat injector. She ceremonially checked the injector three times, and then applied it to Grunt’s arm.
“Ow,” remarked the Warmaster of the Krogan Commonwealth. “I hate needles.”

Fifteen minutes later, the bag of Shepard’s blood lay empty, and eleven krogan sat quietly, waiting for some effect to make itself known.

An hour passed, then two, and then three. All of us waited patiently, talked among ourselves, and enjoyed a meal provided by hotel staff. Miranda moved from one patient to the next, scanning and examining them, looking for signs of trouble and finding none. Some of us gave informal interviews for the salarian journalists. A few of the braver ones took the opportunity to interview Bakara, Grunt, and the other krogan.

After four hours, Miranda called the remaining journalists together.

“All eleven subjects show signs of full assimilation of the nanotechnology,” she told them. “The nanomachines are already building new structures in their brains and higher nervous systems. As with the human subjects we’ve examined, the construction is associated with brain centers having to do with memory and personality. One of the subjects, Urdnot Azarr, is a biotic; in his case the nanomachines seem also to be congregating around the element-zero nodes in his nervous system. We have yet to determine their purpose in doing this.”

“What about the health of the subjects?” asked one salarian.

“We’re fine,” rumbled Grunt from his chair. “Hungry, too. Where can we get something solid to eat around here?”

“Please inform your people of the implications of this,” said Bakara, rising from her couch and addressing all the journalists at once. “When we return to Tuchanka, we will share this gift further, beginning with the leadership of Clan Urdnot and the Krogan Commonwealth, eventually with all our people. During the war against the Reapers, too many krogan became indoctrinated, helpless tools for the enemy’s use. That will never happen again.”

One salarian shook his head. “Unless you’ve already laid yourself open to Reaper influence, by accepting this technology.”

“You’d think we’d be hearing voices by now, if that were the case,” said Grunt.

“We discount President Yao’s contention,” said Bakara. “The argument made by Dr. T’Soni and Mr. Shepard is still sound. If the Reapers, or their governing Intelligence, meant us harm, they would not need to be subtle or indirect about it.”

Grunt rumbled for a moment. “Shepard and this Intelligence want us to fight the valdarii. They want us to have this tech so we can be more effective. I say good. That’s what krannt do – they call on each other to fight in a good cause, and they share weapons and gear. I say to Shepard, the krogan are ready. Maybe you salarians should get ready too. The valdarii aren’t going to keep to human space forever.”

That seemed to be a natural conclusion to the day. The journalists thanked all of us, one or two of them even bowing their thanks to Bakara and Grunt, and departed.

As evening fell, I laid a small bet with myself. Who would give us the first warning?

It was Shepard, of course.

In the small hours of the night, I startled awake, one hand reaching for the sidearm under my
pillow. Then I recognized Shepard, already in his armor and looming over me, one silver-gloved hand reaching out to gently shake me awake.

“Case Alpha,” he murmured, as soon as he saw I was alert. “Better get moving. We may only have a few minutes.”

Vara had already stirred and slipped out of our bed, putting on her combat gear, quietly but efficiently. I followed at once.

It took our party less than three minutes to assemble in the common room of our suite, and then set out for the emergency access stairwell.

“What about the krogan?” I asked Shepard.

“I sent Grunt a message the moment I knew. They should be on their way out too.”

“What warned you?”

“A spike in message traffic, originating from a couple of kilometers from here, out in the city. Heavily encrypted, and it's not a Valern code.”

“Were you able to read it?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“Yeah.” He hesitated for a moment. “In fact, I’m still reading it. Not to mention transmitting clear decrypts to Valern security and the STG.”

I had to chuckle, even while we hurried down flight after flight of stairs.

Strange. Four hundred years later, he’s still a tough, fierce soldier and a powerful biotic. It’s this new capability as a cyberwarfare expert that’s a surprise. Of course, whatever he uses for an AI implant must be based on Reaper technology. Or even something better.

We emerged from the hotel, moving down the street to the planned muster point in a nearby courtyard. Behind us I could hear the evacuation alarm sounding, letting all the other residents know to flee.

Shepard stood for a moment, head cocked as if listening to a sound only he could hear. “There. STG got a demolition team. The hotel should be safe enough now.”

“Battlemaster!” Grunt ambled over to us, in full armor and carrying a massive assault rifle. “Is someone about to smash this place?”

“Doesn’t seem like it,” said Shepard. “There might still be a ground assault team, though, so be ready. And check your targets. Lots of salarian friendlies around.”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t worry. I get fire discipline.”

Shepard chuckled. “Sorry, Grunt. I keep remembering you just a few days out of the tank.”

“That’s all right. I keep remembering you as a puny little human.” The krogan rumbled in good humor and went off to see to the placement of his men.

I followed Shepard over to cover, crouching down next to Vara and Kamala. “Grunt has grown a great deal,” I observed.

“I’ll say. Not just physically. He’s gotten used to command.”
“His spelling has improved as well. Bakara’s influence, no doubt.”

“Are they . . .”

“Yes.” I sighed. “Ever since Wrex was killed in that pirate ambush out in the Terminus Systems.”

“Hmm,” said Shepard. “Something of a let-down, for Wrex to survive all those years, survive the Reapers, and then go down to an ordinary band of pirates.”

“Went out like a champion, though,” muttered Kamala. “Then Grunt took a few hundred of his closest friends, went out into the Terminus, and eradicated that pirate nest.”

“Good.” Suddenly Shepard’s head turned, and he stared out into the city streets for a moment. Then he shouted, “Heads up! Here they come!”
The first wave of the attack looked overwhelming for a moment, a wave of salarians flooding toward us from the direction of a nearby canal. I counted well over a hundred in a glance, and crouched down behind my cover in apprehension.

Then I realized that none of the salarians had fired on us.

“Check fire, check fire,” said Shepard in haste. “I think they’re all civilians. Look like they’re running to get away from something.”

“Yeah,” rumbled Grunt from his position. “None of ‘em armed, unless they’ve jammed holdout guns up their cloacas.”

“That would be awkward,” muttered Kamala. “Not to mention painful.”

A hundred frightened salarians poured into the courtyard, then another hundred, milling about, interfering with our sight-lines. They became even more agitated when they saw us, asari and humans and krogan, all armed to the teeth.

Grunt took decisive action. He stood up and roared.

The entire swarm of salarians stopped dead, staring with wide black eyes.

“This is gonna be a fire zone!” he shouted, pointing vigorously. “Not safe for you here! Move along, that way, now!”

Just like that, all the krogan males rose from cover and began directing traffic.

“Come on, move, that way.”

“Clear the courtyard. Clear the courtyard.”

“Down that street, quick now, move.”

A rumbling growl, followed by a surprisingly gentle shove.

I glanced at Shepard, saw him looking at me, and I knew we both thought the same thing.

It’s a diversion. One we must respond to, but a diversion nonetheless.

Shepard’s head snapped up, so he could scan the tall buildings bordering the courtyard on three sides.

“Snipers!”

In hindsight, I think it took about three seconds.

A wave of information slammed into my daimon, Shepard dropping targeting data to me with crash priority, silhouettes and reticules appearing in my field of vision.

Salarian silhouettes, positioned in dark, open windows about fifty meters up, aiming weapons at us.
Six of them.

Shepard’s weapon began to describe a wide arc at the full extension of his arm. Crash . . .

Kamala opened fire with her assault rifle.

Crash . . .

Kalan turned with his own sniper rifle and made a snap-shot.

Crash . . .

Vara and I didn’t need to glance at each other to consult. Neither of us had long-range weapons on hand in any case. Instead our biotic coronas surged into life, each of us making a hands-out gesture to erect a force bubble over as much of the courtyard as we could. Many hours of practice helped us synchronize at once.

The bubble snapped into existence.

Just barely in time. Or just an instant too late, depending on how you think about it.

Shepard had spotted the snipers just before they were ready to fire. He took out three snipers in as many seconds. Kamala accounted for a fourth. Kalan missed a fifth, but by such a small margin that his target flinched away. Before the salarian assassin could recover, Kalan corrected and put a second round through center of mass.

The last sniper had just enough time to take his shot, before Shepard’s weapon smashed him.

I didn’t realize at first who had been targeted. I was watching Shepard for any sign of injury. When Bakara grunted, clapped a hand to her chest, and then fell to her side on the pavement, it took me a moment to realize what had happened.

Not so the krogan. First one of them saw, and a deep-chested growl rose to a roar. Then another, then another. All around me I could see male krogan brandishing weapons, staring at the last few salarians in the courtyard with overt hatred in their eyes.

With a single exception.

“Stand down!” shouted Grunt. “You, you, you, get the last of these salarian civilians out of the line of fire. Don’t break any of them. Azarr, help shore up that biotic thing the asari are doing. Buzgan, help your mother!”

I glanced at Shepard, who still scanned the buildings with an intent stare. No more targets appeared for the moment. Then, still doing my share to hold the barrier in place, I walked over to where the krogan females huddled in a knot. Miranda hurried past me, throwing herself down beside Bakara to lend a hand.

“How bad is it?” I asked.

Miranda shook her head, working furiously in tandem with the krogan medic, her hands already covered with oddly colored blood.

Goddess, lend a hand here. Bakara doesn’t deserve this.

Shepard opened a comm channel. “All right, Tachar, don’t lurk in the shadows.”
Grunt turned from supervising his men, staring at Shepard for a moment.

“What kind of warrior hides behind civilians and uses snipers to take out his target?” Shepard dropped contemptuous scorn into his voice, but his face looked entirely calm. “What’s the matter? Don’t you have the quad to face your enemies like a real krogan?”

“What’s going on, Shepard?” Grunt looked around, as if to find an enemy crouching behind one of the vine-laden trellises. “You think Varag Tachar is involved in this?”

“It had to be someone who knew krogan and salarians both, to set this up. Someone pretty damn clever.” Shepard keyed his comm again. “Come on out, Tachar. I promise to give you a fair fight, for a change. You might even win.”

Suddenly I heard a hiss on the open channel, and a distorted voice: “Not now, Shepard. Too many witnesses. I want to enjoy your death in private. Maybe next time.”

Grunt lowered his head and growled, looking ready to lose his temper for the first time.

“Damn it,” Shepard muttered.

“What’s wrong?” I asked him.

“You and I know Tachar was here. Probably Nerinn too, although she didn’t show her face this time. We won’t be able to prove it. He was using a voice distrotter, and a good one.”

“Won’t keep me from ripping his arms off and beating him to death with one of them,” said Grunt. “Can’t believe he’s gone renegade this badly.”

Shepard shook his head. “He’s probably under the Adversary’s influence. Just like the President.”

“Hope so. Hate to think he was always this stupid.”

“Warmaster!”

All of us turned. I breathed a sigh of relief, seeing Bakara sitting upright on the edge of a fountain.

“Hah!” Grunt grinned. “I knew one salarian with a scope wasn’t going to be enough to take you down.”

Bakara shook her head in mock-despair. “Hmm. I love you too, Grunt.”

An STG platoon arrived a few minutes later, our friend Captain Anarro in command, followed by Valern troops in force. They secured the courtyard, rather overtly not taking any action against all the armed krogan on the scene.

The incident had been surprisingly bloodless. No more than a handful of salarian civilians had been injured, none of them seriously. Bakara had been hurt badly enough to return to her ship rather than the hotel, but the physicians on hand both seemed satisfied that she would make a full recovery. None of the rest of us had been more than frightened.

Shepard still seemed very thoughtful as we returned to the hotel. “Someone on the other side has read Sun Tzu,” he observed.

I blinked, having to think a moment to recognize the reference from the memories he had once shared with me. “The human philosopher of war?”
“Yeah. Yao quoted him to us a few days ago. Which doesn’t surprise me. Sun Tzu was Chinese too. I suspect the President is well-read in the classics.”

“Do you think the President planned all of this?” asked Vara.

“Seems likely. Either that, or he’s handed the Art of War on to the Spectres, and Tachar took an interest.” Shepard’s voice changed, as he began to quote from memory. “The highest form of generalship is to balk the enemy’s plans. The next best is to prevent the junction of the enemy’s forces. The next in order is to attack the enemy’s army in the field, and the worst policy of all is to besiege walled cities.”

“Hmm.” I reached up to fidget with my crest in thought for a moment. “That does fit their strategy here on Sur’Kesh. They did their best to ruin our plans, by releasing information about your nanotechnology. That didn’t work as well as they might have hoped. Then they set up tonight’s incident to set salarians and krogan at each other’s throats, to prevent us from adding them both to our faction.”

“That one just about worked,” said Shepard. “If we hadn’t hurried those snipers, or if you and Vara hadn’t put up that bubble in time, or if Grunt hadn’t kept a level head on his shoulders . . .”

“One of the most important krogan leaders in a thousand years, dead on the salarian homeworld,” Vara said bleakly. “We’d have been lucky to avoid an all-out interstellar war. At least the opposition won’t get an opportunity like this again.”

“We hope.”

By the time we returned to the Ovadurr Hotel, I had already composed an angry comm call in my head. Then I discovered that I had been pre-empted. Almost the moment we arrived in our suite, dalatrass Valern called me.

“Good morning, dalatrass,” I said, rather frostily.

“Good morning, Dr. T’Soni.” The fleshy salarian face peered out of the screen at me, more visible than usual with her hood down. “I understand there has been an incident. I am grateful that you and your allies were not seriously hurt.”

“Aside from a high-caliber bullet through Urdnot Bakara’s upper left lung.”

“Yes. My information says she will recover. A very grave misfortune has been averted.”

“Dalatrass, I’m very tired and I just got finished being shot at in the middle of your capital city. May I respectfully request that you get to the point?”

Valern produced an actual smile, a tightly controlled but clearly pleased expression. “Certainly. I have two pieces of news for you, and I think you will find them good.”

I leaned back in my chair, trying to ignore my fatigue. “Go on.”

“First, thanks to Mr. Shepard and the STG, we have been able to capture several of the attackers. Almost the entire demolition squad that had been assigned to blow up the Ovadurr Hotel, in fact. Elite household troops, belonging to the Linron bloodline.”

Cold shock went down my spine. “Linron?”
“Yes. Long out of power here in Talat, but still a faction to be reckoned with in some regions of Sur’Kesh. They still resent their fall all those years ago, and they still mistrust outsiders, especially Mr. Shepard and the krogan.”

I nodded. “I can well imagine. It surprises me that they would be so bold as to launch an attack in the heart of Valern territory.”

“They were strongly motivated by your demonstration yesterday. No doubt they also had advice and assistance from certain parties high in the Confederation government. Unfortunately, the STG officers assigned to the investigation have not yet been able to prove that.”

“I doubt they will. We have reason to believe two Spectres were involved, among the best of the corps.”

“Yes, the krogan tactician and the turian cabalist. The STG is aware of the possibility. In any case, the involvement of the Linron bloodline is clear beyond any reasonable doubt. Which gives me the pretext I need to . . . demonstrate my displeasure with them.”

I flinched slightly. It sounded as if Valern intended to set aside the usual restraints on competition among the most powerful salarian bloodlines. I did not envy the current dalatrass Linron.

“That brings me to my second piece of news,” said Valern. “Considering tonight’s events, I have decided to alter my stance on the current controversy between you and President Yao.”

A younger Liara T’Soni might have smiled in delight at that. I had spent too many years in politics. I maintained my poker face and said, “Interesting. Do you plan to support our position?”

“No.” She paused for a moment, watching my face. “As I explained to you a few days ago, Valern, and the Salarian Union as a whole, must remain neutral in this matter. However, I have been persuaded not to issue any decree binding on individual salarian members of the Confederation Parliament. They shall be free to vote as their consciences dictate, even those who owe fealty to Valern. As I will publicly announce later today.”

*Now* I permitted myself to smile. “Thank you for making your intentions clear, dalatrass. Will you indulge my curiosity, so long as we are in private?”

“If I can,” she said politely.

“Did you plan all of this?”

She moved slightly, as if to recoil from the question, but I had gotten enough practice reading salarian body language to know she wasn’t serious. “Now, Doctor, how could I possibly have planned any of these events? I was not the one who invited the krogan into the debate, thus creating a flashpoint. Nor do I have any significant influence over President Yao, or over dalatrass Linron, to control how they would react.”

“True.” I cocked my head at her. “On the other hand, at any of several points, you might have intervened to disarm the situation. You chose not to do so.”

“For reasons which seemed good to me.” Valern smiled. “For all that we salarians and you asari have been partners for thousands of years, you sometimes forget how different we are when it comes to the exercise of political power. You asari must endlessly debate everything, persuade one another to take action. I, on the other hand . . . may simply act, and justify myself to no one.”

I sighed, and shook my head ruefully. “That would make a great many things simpler.”
“You pursue your objectives in a manner that makes sense to asari, while I pursue mine in a manner that works for salarians. If our objectives align properly, and we both manage to attain them, what more needs to be said?”

“Nothing at all.” I gave her a grave nod of respect. “Thank you for your time and attention, dalatrass. It is much appreciated.”

She made a tiny bow in return, and then closed the connection.

We found our negotiations much easier that day, one salarian leader after another suddenly more than willing to see our side of the dispute. For all her official neutrality, Valern’s move communicated her intentions quite clearly.

By evening we had wrapped up almost all our discussions. What negotiations remained could easily be carried out over the extranet. Normandy prepared for departure from Sur’Kesh.

About an hour before takeoff, a visitor arrived at our docking bay: massive, with a tall hump, startling blue eyes, and a dull-silver skull-plate that looked solid enough to break granite. Armed and armored to the teeth.

“Hello, Grunt.” I smiled and stepped forward to embrace the krogan, remembering Urdnot Wrex for a wistful moment. “What brings you here? Is Bakara well?”

“She’s fine. Probably going to be grumpy for the next few days. She always is, after she gets banged up a bit and has to sit on her ass for a while to heal up.” Grunt peered at me, looked over my shoulder to where Shepard watched from Normandy’s cargo ramp. “Think you could use an extra pair of hands, wherever it is you’re going next?”

“Turian space,” I told him. “Out on the edge of the galaxy first. The Hierarchy has asked us to investigate a Reaper sighting out there. Then probably a visit to Palaven, to talk to Primarch Ardzarun and a few others. And yes, Grunt, you’re more than welcome. If you won’t be needed at home?”

“Nah. Bakara can keep the females in line, and I’ve knocked enough heads among the males that they won’t give her any trouble. Besides, if the Warmaster comes along on your quest, that tells everyone the krogan are behind you. Might be useful.”

Shepard loomed up behind me. “Glad to have you with us, Grunt. You and I have a lot of catching up to do.”

“Yeah, yeah. More talk. You’ve been spending too much time around all these asari, Battlemaster.” Grunt gave a deep-chested laugh, his eyes gleaming with delight. “Other hand, I’ve gathered a lot of good stories to tell since the last time we were on a Normandy together.”

“Can’t wait to hear them.” Shepard clapped Grunt on the back, and then reached out to slip an affectionate arm around my shoulders. I felt a moment’s trepidation, and then decided to relax and enjoy the moment. The three of us turned to walk up the ramp and into the staging bay. “Maybe some things can be just like old times after all.”
24 November 2580, Interstellar Space

My Normandy didn’t resemble the original Alliance ships in every detail. My crew had little sense of being military. Our chain of command worked informally, I didn’t enforce more than the minimum of necessary discipline, and (aside from my security detail) we didn’t carry an armed detachment.

Even so, most of my people had good reason to stay fit. Hence we had a compartment set up for physical training, placed behind the staging bay on the lower decks, about where a similar compartment had existed on the original Normandy. One morning, while we soared through the Urien Verge cluster, I made my way there. I had spent far too much time sitting down while on Sur’Kesh, and I could feel that I had lost a little of my edge. A vigorous workout seemed just the thing.

I found that others had the same idea.

First I saw Kamala off in one corner, dressed in tight shorts and a halter top, dancing and striking at a heavy bag with her wrapped fists. I could see she had already been at work for some time, with sweat soaking her clothing and hair.

Then I heard: clank – clank – CLACK. I turned to see Shepard working with the stacked-plate machine.

I kept my poker face in place. He had stripped to the waist, every major muscle group in his torso visibly at work, as he pushed against . . .

Over two hundred kilograms of resistance?

I had never heard of an asari capable of working with that amount, at least not without considerable biotic support. In his former lives, I had never seen Shepard work against so much resistance. Bone and muscle weaves, an engineered metabolism, all at Reaper levels of technology, it all gave him incredible strength. I suspected he might be able to go toe-to-toe with a krogan and come out ahead.

He doesn’t look any more massive or muscle-bound than before. In fact, he looks very good . . .

All right, enough of that, Liara T’Soni.

I shook my head slightly, and looked away before he noticed my presence. I stepped up onto a treadmill, set it for my usual high-intensity workout, and moved smoothly up to a long-distance run.

“Hi, Liara.”

“Shepard.”

I did my best not to look at him. Not to even be aware of him, massive and strong and very physical, just a few meters away . . .

Kamala ceased her pugilistic drill, moving over in my direction. She chose the treadmill next to mine on the right, tapped at its controls, and stepped up to run beside me.
“Dr. T’Soni.”

“Ms. Sarabhai.”

My nose began to twitch, registering human scent from both sides, Shepard heavy and familiar, Kamala sharp and new but rather intriguing.

She reminds me of Samantha Traynor. If Samantha had been a combat soldier, with considerably more personal confidence and physical training . . .

Oh, by the Goddess. You are not some sex-struck maiden. Discipline!

I closed my eyes and concentrated on running. Tried not to think about the way my skin seemed unusually sensitive that morning. Tried not to remember that Vara and I hadn’t made love in well over a week. Tried not to consider that Shepard knew me very intimately, and could probably sense what I was feeling even if I tried to conceal it.

Kamala rescued me, speaking easily despite her physical effort. “Doctor, there’s something I’ve been curious about. If you don’t object to a personal question?”

“I never object to a question,” I said, trying for a light tone. “I may decline to answer.”

“Fair enough. I was re-reading your memoirs . . .”

“Oh Goddess. Not those again.”

“If you didn’t want anyone to read them, why did you publish them?” the Spectre asked, rather tartly.

“They’ve had a lot of consequences I did not anticipate. Including, so far, the deaths of at least two of my acolytes and closest friends.”

“Hmm. You’re right.” Kamala looked mildly contrite, but she didn’t drop the inquiry. “On the other hand, you’ve just demonstrated what I’m curious about. Toward the end of the book, you described becoming disillusioned with your religion, because of what you discovered about asari prehistory during the Battle of Thessia. Your official biography suggests that you effectively became an atheist for many years. Yet now you seem to have returned to the Athame Doctrine.”

I pretended to be short of breath for a moment, to buy time to think.

“I suppose it may look that way,” I said finally. “The worship of Athame has become vanishingly rare among asari, ever since the Reaper War, even more since the Silk Revolution.”

“Which you and Miranda Lawson helped lead,” rumbled Shepard, between repetitions of a form.

“Yes. The revelation that our species had been uplifted by Prothean scientists, that much of our culture and history had been influenced by a Prothean beacon . . . what happens when the founding myths of a religion prove to be deliberate lies?”

“As if humans found indisputable proof that Jesus of Nazareth was a perfectly ordinary man, with nothing but a few advanced ideas, and that a faction within the Church had known and covered up the truth all along.” Shepard chuckled. “It sounds like the plot for a really bad novel I read once.”

“The Athame Doctrine is nearly extinct among asari today. I doubt as many as one in a million asari still follow it in the old fashion. The Athame Codices are still an important cultural resource
for us, of course, but no one takes them seriously as works of objective history.”

“So most of your people have turned to siari, then?” asked Kamala.

I picked up my towel and used it to mop my face for a moment while I ran. I wasn’t nearly as sweaty as my human friends – asari don’t perspire as heavily as humans – but strenuous exercise always leaves me wanting a shower.

“That’s true,” I said finally. “I suppose I consider myself siari today. It’s not a religion that requires belief in or veneration for a personal deity. Yet even within siari there exist many variations. Some of us regard the One as beyond asari comprehension, so we try to think of it only in negative terms, what the One is not . . .”

“The via negativa,” said Shepard unexpectedly.

I glanced at him, saw a thoughtful expression on his face. “What is that?”

“A very old theological tradition within Christianity,” he explained. “God is thought of as being beyond human experience. The only way to describe him is by saying what he isn’t. Some theologians have even gone so far as to say that God doesn’t exist, because he transends existence.”

Kamala made a sudden noise of understanding. “I get it. It’s like an idea in Indian religion, when we try to talk about brahman as the ultimate reality. All we can say is neti neti, which means something like . . . not this, not this.”

“I thought you were a follower of the Way,” I mused.

“I am.” She smiled. “The Way doesn’t demand that we ignore other religions. In fact, the Way usually considers the Buddha and Krishna as previous Manifestations of God. I’m of Indian descent myself, and I’ve always been interested in studying the old traditions.”

“I see. I find it fascinating how certain ideas can arise independently, among people separated by tens of thousands of light-years. Yes, those concepts sound very much like the branch of siari I’m talking about.”

“Is that the branch you follow, Doctor?” asked Kamala.

“Yes and no. I find it interesting, but I’m afraid I don’t have a sufficiently mystical temperament to embrace it fully.”

Shepard rumbled in amusement. “Always said you were too hard-headed and rational for your own good, T’Soni.”

“It comes with being a scientist, I suppose.” I tapped at the controls of my machine, pushing the difficulty up slightly. “There are other branches of siari that encourage us to think of the One as showing us an asari face. We look back at heroes of the past, people who demonstrated such areté that they’ve been remembered for centuries or millennia, even figures out of myth. We don’t worship them, as such. Siari doesn’t encourage formal worship. Instead, we study them, we meditate on their stories, we take inspiration from them.”

Shepard rose from his bench to change positions, beginning a new form that involved pressing his arms upward against resistance. “That still sounds like some forms of human religion.”

Kamala nodded in agreement.
“I suppose so. Parallel development once again.” I took a deep breath, and decided to be honest with them. “Those official biographies were correct. I did move toward complete atheism for a long time. But then there was something my father said on her deathbed, which caused me to reconsider. And then, a few decades later, I found myself going through a very difficult time. Vara and I had bonded by then, and she felt concern for me. Eventually she persuaded me to come with her, to study for several years under a great siari teacher. Her name was Kiala Vassani.”

Shepard and Kamala both cocked their heads, clearly making queries through their implants and ARGOS to the asari databases.

“One of your mother’s students!” said Kamala, surprised.

“Yes. From long before Benezia became involved with Saren, of course. I believe Kiala studied with my mother back in the late 1600s, by your calendar. She had become a Matriarch in her own right, by the time I came to learn from her.”

“What did she teach you?” asked Shepard.

“Many things.” I paused for a few moments, needing more of my breath to climb an invisible hill. “How to reconcile siari with what I knew as a scientist. How to meditate more effectively. How to make use of ritual to provide my life with structure. How to choose and envision eidolons for the One, meaningful to me, to use as wellsprings of drive and inspiration.”

“I see,” said Kamala, excited. “You selected Athame as one of your . . . eidolons of the One, was that the word?”

“Yes. One of two, that I’ve kept close to my heart ever since.” Then I cursed silently, wishing I had stopped a few words sooner, because I knew what she would ask next.

“Who was the other one?” she asked, proving me right.

I stopped dead, trapped running in place. My tongue absolutely refused to work, and I wished I could vanish through the floor.

Kamala stared at me with wide eyes, wondering at my reaction, and then the light of comprehension shone across her face. “Oh. Oh. It was . . .”

“Yes,” I finally grated between clenched teeth.

Shepard remained completely silent, as he continued to work with his machine.

“Athame and . . .”

“Yes.”

Kamala avoided another biotic-enhanced fist across her jaw, by not quite breaking out in laughter. “Oh dear. I’m sorry, Doctor, I know it’s not funny. But you were so disdainful when we told you about the Way, back on Mindoir . . .”

“That’s different!” I felt my cheeks color and avoided glancing to my left. “I don’t worship Shepard. I don’t consider him a deity of any kind. I only ever drew motivation from my memories of him.”

“Well, we never worshipped Shepard either. Not exactly.” She shook her head. “I apologize again, Doctor. I shouldn’t have pushed so hard, just to feed my own curiosity.”
“No,” I sighed. “It’s all right. I shouldn’t have disparaged your beliefs at the time. Although I did have other reasons to be annoyed with your people.”

“True enough!” Kamala reached the end of her exercise regimen then, the treadmill easing down to the horizontal as she began her cool-down. “Thank you, Doctor. It’s always good to give my head a workout at the same time as the rest of me.”

Reluctantly, I smiled and nodded at her. “I agree.”

Before long, she left the training compartment, off to the showers and then her work for the day.

Leaving me alone with Shepard.

I did my best to ignore him. It felt very difficult. Especially once I stepped down off my own treadmill, turned, and found him looming less than two meters away, watching me closely. Looking very large, fit, and compelling while he did it.

“So,” he observed quietly. “I’m inspirational, am I?”

“Yes.” I stood tall, my shoulders back, and tried very hard to ignore the impulse to climb him like a tree. “For most of my life, Shepard, you have always been a great inspiration to me.”

He stared into my eyes, his gaze intense. I couldn’t decide whether to welcome a move from him, or to beat a hasty retreat at once.

Then the door swept open, making my decision for me.

“Hah! There you are, Battlemaster.” Grunt looked around the compartment with satisfaction. “I was wondering where to find the exercise gear. Don’t want to get soft, flying around on a cushy asari ship.”

The moment shattered, Shepard looking wryly amused as he eased away from me. For my part, I murmured a polite word to Grunt and escaped.

After I took a shower, long and with the controls set for chilly water, I emerged out into the staging bay. There I found my bondmate, engaged in a training exercise of her own.

I stopped to watch.

Vara wore light tunic and loose trousers, dark blue, belted at her waist with a black silk sash. Her feet were bare. Her hands held only her sword. Lunge, parry, slash, turn and block, the weapon in one hand, in both hands, her feet moving with assurance, she moved with speed and perfect grace. Form after form rolled out, with no flaw that my untrained eye could see.

She’s so beautiful. Especially when she’s utterly focused on her work, as she is now.

I shook my head slightly, for a moment feeling horribly conflicted. Despite all my resolutions, I had almost given in to my desire for Shepard less than an hour before. I had even experienced an instant of animal craving for Kamala. Now I stood watching my bondmate, still loving her, still wanting her as much as I ever had. I felt as if there shouldn’t be room in my mind for all these conflicting wants.

Yet there was. Room enough, and more. For the first time, I began to suspect what a normal asari maiden might feel, wandering through the galaxy, happily sampling everything it had to offer. The
life I had never had as a maiden, had never wanted as a maiden, now coming back to haunt me.

*I wonder if this is the thing humans call a “mid-life crisis?”*

Vara stumbled.

I could hardly believe my eyes for a moment.

She recovered, tried the form again, and succeeded with it. Then she moved to the next, and failed. Her weight came down on the wrong foot, and she fell to her knees. The sword slipped out of her grasp and went clattering across the deck.

“Vara!”

Somehow I was there, throwing myself to the floor beside her, taking her in my arms. I felt her trembling, and then shaking in my grasp. I put a hand under her chin to turn her face to the light, and gasped. Her color had faded. Her eyes watered, as if she wanted to weep and had forgotten how.

“Goddess, love, what’s wrong?”

“Liara,” she whispered. “I’m so scared . . .”

“ARGOS, get Miranda down here at once!”

“Acknowledged, Dr. T’Soni,” came the AI’s calm asari voice.

“So scared,” Vara whispered. “I’m sorry, love. Shouldn’t have done it. Don’t know what it’s doing to me.”

“What have you done?” I demanded.

“Went to Miranda’s lab,” she murmured, letting her head fall so I could cradle it against my breasts. “Took one of her samples. Shepard’s blood. Drank it.”

All color threatened to drain out of the world. “Oh no.”

“Saw the krogan do it. Didn’t hurt them. Knew one of us would have to do it sooner or later. See what would happen to an asari. Decided not to risk anyone else. Not to risk you.” She shuddered. “It’s not working out the way I thought it would.”

I heard hurrying footfalls on the deck, from the direction of the lift. Miranda appeared, kneeling beside us, her omni-tool already active. Then Vara convulsed in my arms, turning to the side to vomit copiously across the deck. Some dark substance glistened in the mass. The stench was overpowering.

“What happened?” snapped my acolyte, but Vara was too far gone to respond.

“She took one of our samples of Shepard’s blood,” I said flatly.

“Heartbeat fast, blood pressure dropping . . . she’s going into shock.” Miranda shook her head. “Come on, we’ve got to get her to the medical bay.”

I shifted my position, got both arms under Vara’s body, and heaved myself to my feet. A flash of biotic power, and her body became light enough for me to carry easily. I lurched into motion, Miranda at my side, heading back for the lifts.
I rushed into the medical bay the moment the door opened, two or three startled asari from the crew staring after me as I carried Vara inside. Miranda followed close behind me, already preparing for medical work the moment she crossed the threshold.

I lay Vara gently down on a bed, put a hand on her forehead and used the other to seek out the pulse point in her throat.

*Temperature down, pulse weak, but she’s still breathing. At least for the moment.*

Miranda came up on the other side of the bed, and I eased back to give her room. She moved quickly and confidently, checking Vara’s vital signs, using her omni-tool in an imaging mode to examine her internal organs.

“I thought so,” she murmured. Suddenly she pulled Vara’s robe open, exposing her breasts, and attached a small device to her chest: an external pacemaker.

“Is it her heart?” I asked, fighting to stay calm and rational.

“That’s a symptom, not the cause, but it might be the most dangerous item,” said Miranda. “She’s suffering from anaphylactic shock.”

“It’s not the nanotechnology?”

Just then the door to the medical bay opened again. Shepard stood there, staring at us, his face grim and pale with apprehension.

“No,” said Miranda. “In fact, I think she’s retained enough of what she ingested that she’ll still assimilate the nanomachines. Assuming she survives in the first place. I’ll be able to tell more in an hour or two. This is a reaction to the blood, not the technology.”

“What happened?” asked Shepard, stepping cautiously over to us.

“Vara took one of our samples of your blood,” I told him.

“Do you know how long ago she ingested it?” asked Miranda.

“No. ARGOS?”

“Yes, Dr. T’Soni?”

“How long ago did Vara last visit Miranda’s laboratory?”

“She left the laboratory seventeen minutes ago, and proceeded directly to the staging bay.”

I nodded. “She must have come down to exercise at once. Come to think of it, her robe isn’t very sweaty, she couldn’t have been working out for long.”

“This shouldn’t be happening,” said Shepard quietly. “The nanotechnology is benign. The krogan didn’t show any ill effects.”
“The krogan have very tough immune systems and incredibly resilient physiology,” said Miranda. “They can ingest almost anything organic and derive sustenance from it. It’s very difficult to poison them. Asari are another matter.”

“Asari and humans are biochemically compatible,” I objected. “We can eat meat products from Earth without any trouble. I’ve done so any number of times.”

Miranda looked severe. “There’s very little blood left in meat that’s been prepared for consumption. Besides, most meat is cooked, which would tend to break down the remaining blood proteins. There isn’t much medical literature on this; asari are generally not foolish enough to try to eat raw human. But human blood is not good for some of us. It appears Vara is one of those who react violently to it.”

I shook my head ruefully, looking down at my bondmate’s still face. “Oh my love. What were you thinking?”

“She was thinking that she had better do it on her own, before someone else volunteered, and before anyone could tell her no,” said Shepard. “A sense of duty can be damned inconvenient at times.”

Miranda’s face remained utterly calm, but I knew her too well. Only centuries of respect for Vara, as for a mentor or a beloved parent, kept her from spitting in rage. “It was extraordinarily ill-advised. At the very least, she should have done it under my supervision.”

“That’s behind us now,” I said firmly. “Will she be all right?”

Miranda looked closely at her instruments, administered an injection, watched for the results. “I can’t say yet. I should know within an hour.”

I pulled up a chair, sat down, and took one of Vara’s hands. “I’ll wait.”

“Me too,” said Shepard.

I almost opened my mouth to say something, but then thought better of it. I reached out and took one of Shepard’s hands as well, squeezed it in silent thanks, and then let him go. He crossed over to sit down by Miranda’s desk, looking much more calm and confident than I knew him to be.

We waited.

Shepard and I remained almost motionless, and didn’t look at each other much. I stared at Vara’s face and tried to pray silently, while he stared at the floor and may have done the same. Miranda moved around the compartment, doing other work, monitoring Vara’s condition, occasionally adjusting her instruments or applying another round of medication. Outside, I could see more and more of the crew hovering around the big windows, peering in at us with unhappy expressions. Even Kalan, Kamala, and Grunt all came by to see what was going on, and stayed to help us keep watch.

Vara kept breathing. Slowly, her color seemed to improve.

Perhaps forty-five minutes after we arrived in the medical bay, she stirred slightly and opened her eyes.

Somehow Miranda knew immediately, and came hurrying over to the bedside. She checked her instruments once more, and I saw a tiny alteration in her grim expression. She caught my eye, and nodded slightly.
“Liara?” Vara whispered.

Shepard’s head snapped up, and he stared at us.

“I’m here,” I told her. “You little fool.”

“Rrrh,” she said, for a moment sounding like a Prothean. “Not one of my better plans. Am I going to live?”

“Yes,” said Miranda, rather caustically. “But you may not like it much for the next day or so.”

“So long as I can be up and moving before we reach Point Sigma.”

“We’ll see. I want you to stay here for the next six hours at least.”

Vara nodded in agreement. “What about the nanotech?”

Miranda checked her omni-tool again. “You have it. Still too early to tell whether it will follow the predicted take-up curve we got from our asari models. I’ll let you know.”

Shepard came up to stand by the bed, as Miranda went to give the crew the news. “If you wanted me to bleed for you, Vara, all you had to do was ask.”

She snorted weakly and rolled her head in my direction. “You know as well as I do, this one wouldn’t have allowed it.”

“You’re right about that,” I told her.

She looked up at his face. “Besides, if this works, you won’t have to bleed for any more asari. I can do that, and it will be safer for them that way.”

“True.” Then Shepard did something that astonished me. He squeezed her hand, and bent close to place a gentle kiss on her forehead. “Vara, that was a really dumb thing you did . . . but it was also very brave. I’m proud of you.”

She stared back up at him, her eyes suspiciously smoky, and nodded. “Thanks, Shepard.”

25 November 2580, Point Sigma, Urien Verge Cluster

_Normandy_ dropped out of FTL, far out in the darkness at the galaxy’s edge.

All of us stood in the Combat Information Center, clustered around the holo-tank that usually contained our galaxy map. It had been reconfigured for a view of nearby space, and for the moment it seemed very empty. I saw nothing but a small blue icon, perhaps a hundred thousand kilometers away, and a large red icon at about a million kilometers’ distance. Beyond that, nothing but cold, dark vacuum. The nearest star was a faint red dwarf, drifting almost ten light-years away from our position.

“I always hate coming out this far,” said Shepard. “It doesn’t feel right, not to have stars all around.”

Kalan gave him a curious glance. “Weren’t you even further out from the galaxy, while you existed as part of the Intelligence?”

Shepard shook his head. “The Reapers seem to have spent the time between cycles lurking out in
dark space, but I’m not sure the central nexus of the Intelligence is out here too. Really, it could be located almost anywhere.”

“You don’t know?” Kalan demanded.

“That information didn’t get downloaded into this brain, no.”

The quarian made a frustrated gesture and gave up his line of inquiry.

“The last time you remember coming out this far, it was in the Bahak system,” I observed.

“Yeah.” He folded his arms, his eyes hooded and dark. “That was not a good day.”

“It could have been far worse,” I murmured.

“The turian commander has made contact,” reported the ship’s AI.

“Thank you, ARGOS. Please put him through.”

A male turian’s face appeared in the tank, sharp-featured with crimson face-paint and jade-green eyes. His flanging voice sounded crisp and professional, with a hint of humor. “This is Captain Nerva Temurian, in command of the Hierarchy cruiser Defiant.”

“This is Liara T’Soni, in command of Normandy.”

“Welcome to the ass-end of nowhere, Normandy. Glad you were willing to come out and have a look. Spirits know we’re at a loss.”

“Why were you out here in the first place?” I asked.

“Following up on a Reaper sighting. I assume you’ve heard, they’ve been showing themselves more often over the past few years.”

“Yes.”

“We got word from Lbernia colony that something big had come through the Urien Verge mass relay, moving through the outer reaches of their star system. We arrived too late to catch it, but we did find a radiation trail, leading out into interstellar space. Followed that for several days, until it stopped here. Had a terrible time finding the trail’s end-point. There’s a lot of black out here for something dark and quiet to get lost in. Finally picked up a trace from a big mass-effect core, but when we got here . . .”

“What is it?” I asked.

Temurian made a turian grimace, his mandibles spreading wide. “It’s a Reaper, all right. Don’t think anyone in the galaxy is going to make a mistake about that. But it’s dead silent now, no sign of movement or energy consumption. Just drifting in space, as if it had crawled out here to die.”

I glanced at Shepard. He shook his head, no more enlightened than I.

“What measures have you taken to investigate, Captain?”

“Full range of passive and active scans, from a range of about ten thousand kilometers. That’s as close as I was comfortable approaching the thing. We sent a cluster of probes in closer, some of them doing very tight fly-bys. I can send you all the results, for what little it’s worth.”
“Thank you. Anything you can tell us might be of help.” I hesitated for a moment. “Have you seen any effect on your personnel?”

“You mean indoctrination?” Temurian shook his head firmly. “Not a chance, Doctor. We’ve been following the protocols to the letter. Polycyclic shielding in place, and regular psych evals for everyone on board. No sign of trouble.”

“Good. I don’t expect anything, but it’s best to be sure.”

“Doctor, some of what High Command told me sounds a little far-fetched. Is it true? You have Commander Shepard on board?”

Shepard stepped forward. “I’m here, Captain. Not exactly the Commander Shepard you’re thinking of, but a reasonable facsimile.”

“Spirits. You claim to have some connection with the Reapers?”

“If you’ve read Liara’s memoirs, you know the story. I’m an envoy of the Ascended Intelligence, which restructured itself on the basis of my predecessor’s mind at the end of the Reaper War. That’s why the Reapers abandoned their attack on the galaxy.”

“But you don’t know why the Reapers are making an appearance again?”

“I wasn’t told that, Captain, but maybe I can help figure it out.”

The turian considered that for a long moment, and then nodded decisively. “If you can do that, I’m not inclined to ask too many questions.”

Normandy eased closer, all sensors tuned to maximum sensitivity, ready to flee at the first sign of hostile intent. We saw none. It was as Captain Temurian had said. The monster drifted, dark and silent, even its mass-effect core turned down almost to zero. It didn’t even expend any energy to maintain attitude.

Shepard examined our first images of the creature with intent concentration. I looked at them as well, although I didn’t see anything remarkable.

A long, narrow body, a little over two kilometers in length, tapered at both ends. A carapace, deep black in color, but with subtle variations in texture on different areas of its surface. A cluster of sensors on the dorsal surface, currently showing no signs of activity. Eleven limb-like appendages arranged along the ventral surface, toward the prow, all of them motionless. I could see minor innovations in detail, but the overall body plan seemed horribly familiar.

A Reaper.

“That’s Yevādi,” Shepard said at last.

I cocked my head at him in confusion. “You recognize it?”

“I know all of them,” he told me, still staring at the thing, his voice shifting into a didactic tone as he considered alien memories. “Yevādi, constructed about three hundred million years ago, during the harvest of the zārilaša civilization. Old, as Reapers go. It must be unusually intelligent, unusually durable, or unusually lucky. During the Reaper War, it spent most of its time supporting the siege of Palaven.”
“Probably not something we want to tell our turian friends,” muttered Vara.

I shuddered, caught up for a moment in visceral hatred.

*That thing has taken part in thousands of extinction cycles. It’s complicit in the violent murder of quadrillions of sentient beings. I don’t want to understand it, or help it. I want to blast it into oblivion.*

Then I looked at Shepard once again, and reminded myself of what he had done to transform the Reapers and their governing Intelligence. What he – or his predecessor, whom I had loved with a fierce passion – had sacrificed. It helped me fight my way back to rationality once more.

“You say this Reaper is old,” Vara mused. “Yet it’s only been in existence for three hundred million years. The Reapers are far older than that.”

Shepard nodded. “That’s true, but think about it for a moment. There were about eighty thousand extinction cycles, going back over the last five billion years. Why aren’t there eighty thousand Reapers?”

She saw it then. “Because they didn’t always manage to construct a new one in each cycle. And sometimes one of them would be destroyed during the harvest.”

“More often than you might think,” he agreed. “The Protheans destroyed seven Sovereign-class platforms during their cycle. We managed a total of thirty-three. That was the worst cycle the Reapers had in over a billion years. Most extinction cycles weren’t that hard on their numbers, but a lot of organic civilizations managed to take one or two of them out.”

“We encountered two Reaper corpses even before the war,” I observed. “Clearly they were never invulnerable. Just extremely tough.”

“So the Reaper population of the galaxy, if you want to think of it that way, has tended to remain more or less constant over many millions of years.” Shepard shrugged. “The Intelligence preferred it that way, even before my predecessor got uploaded and changed its mind about everything. No point in having more Reapers around than just enough to keep the harvest going.”

“We know Harbinger was the first one constructed,” said Vara. “What about the rest?”

“Harbinger is a cunning, sneaky, tough bastard even for a Reaper,” said Shepard. “It has to be, to have survived for such a long time. The next oldest capital-ship Reaper isn’t much more than a billion years old, if I remember correctly. Most of them are no more than fifty million years old.”

Kalan had been quiet throughout our discussion, but now he emitted a cynical snort. “Such *infants.*”

Shepard shook his head ruefully. “Sorry. It’s weird sometimes, thinking on both levels at once.”

The quarian chuckled. “Eh, I’m an astronomer, I’m used to long time-scales. But not when talking about something that’s been *alive* for all that time.”

“So this one is named *Yevādi,*” I mused. “You can’t tell what’s wrong with it?”

“Not from here. Why don’t you try hailing it?”

I gave him a shocked glance, but after a moment the idea didn’t seem so absurd. I remembered the last time I had participated in a brief conversation with a Reaper. With *Harbinger,* in fact. The
thing had even been polite.

“ARGOS, open a channel.”

“Ready.”

“This is Dr. Liara T'Soni, commanding Normandy, calling the Reaper Yevādi. Please respond.”

Silence.

“This is Dr. Liara T'Soni, commanding Normandy, calling the Reaper Yevādi. Our intentions are non-hostile. Do you require assistance?”

Still nothing from the vast machine.

Shepard stepped forward.

“Iä. Iä, Yevādi. Ah’taa ke ph’wgah’n’og. Y’uln’taa h’ehye. Ilyaa ra hai!”

I stared at him. I hadn’t thought some of those phonemes were even possible for the human organs of speech.

“You speak Reaper?” asked Vara, incredulous.

“Not exactly,” he said. “They don’t usually communicate among themselves with language as we understand it. But they do recognize a few verbal codes as having high priority.”

High priority or not, the Reaper didn’t respond to Shepard any more than it had to me.

He and I exchanged a frustrated glance. He shrugged, and I could guess what he was thinking.

There’s nothing more we can do from a distance. If you want to figure this out, we need to get closer.

“All right,” I said decisively. “We’re going to close and board. Vara, break open the armory and get the shuttle prepped.”

She blinked at me. “All due respect, love, but have you lost your mind?”

“I don’t think so.” I took a last look at the Reaper’s image, hanging in mid-air before us. “Although I’m trusting Shepard to make sure that won’t happen while we’re over there.”
Vara worked the shuttle’s controls with calm competence, bringing us close to the Reaper’s bulk. Point Sigma was very far out, where stars were few and very far between. Only a hint of galaxy-light fell on the edges of the monster’s body, and it blocked out almost no stars as it loomed ever closer. It was hard to even see the thing with the naked eye.

“Lights,” suggested Shepard.

Vara tapped a control, and the shuttle’s forward beacon lights snapped on. They fell on a black surface, slightly curved, with subtle texture, less than a hundred meters away.

Once more, Shepard opened a comm channel and emitted a series of sounds, full of distorted vowels and glottal stops.

No response.

“I’m not picking up any activity, even this close,” murmured Kalan from the co-pilot’s seat. “Do Reapers ever just . . . die?”

Shepard shook his head. “No.”

“Before the war, they hid out in dark space between extinction cycles,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, but they always hid out together, close to the central nexus of the Intelligence. I may not know where that is right now, but I’m fairly confident it’s nowhere near here.”

“So how do we open contact with this one?” asked Vara, uneasiness clear in her voice.

“We’ll have to get inside and make our way to the mass effect core,” said Shepard. “If Yevādi is like all the others, there should be an access shunt where I’ll be able to connect physically. From there I can probably figure out what’s wrong. I might even be able to activate the Reaper’s self-repair functions, and wake it up.”

I remembered reading reports from just before the Reaper War. Dr. Mahinda Chandana and a Cerberus team had boarded a Reaper corpse, dead for tens of millions of years, in search of Reaper technology. Later, the geth terminal Legion had come aboard, and so had Shepard and his squad. Legion could access the Reaper’s memory archives, from a location near its mass-effect core. Shepard’s suggestion sounded plausible.

Of course, the dead Reaper had also indoctrinated Dr. Chandana and his entire team, turning them into husks, and Legion and Shepard had been forced to fight a terrible battle to get in and then escape.

Right. You’ve been aboard a living Reaper before. The oldest and most wicked one of all, and you got away with your soul intact. This will be no different.

“Take us around under its ventral surface,” I ordered. “That’s where Harbinger had an access bay. The one time I went aboard, I was able to bring a Normandy shuttle inside and proceed from there on foot.”
Shepard nodded in concurrence. Vara touched the controls.

Around the monster’s bulk, past it, now seeing its bizarre shape silhouetted against the band of the distant galaxy. More surface features here, textures and strange extrusions that served no clear purpose. Six rear limbs, all tucked up against the Reaper’s body, and five longer ones splayed out in front.

“Here,” said Shepard, bending over the controls. “I’ve just downloaded an authentication code. Even if the Reaper is asleep, this should trigger the access bay doors and the pressurization sequence.”

Vara nodded and touched a key.

Sudden movement, doors opening on the Reaper’s belly, like a knife-sharp edge slicing the thing open to spill brilliant light out into the abyss.

We slid closer, cautiously closer, and then inside.

I saw a dichotomy in reactions among our people. Shepard, Grunt, Vara and I had fought in the Reaper War; of the four of us, only Vara had never ventured inside a Reaper before. None of us had any reason to view the experience positively. On the other hand, Kamala, Miranda, and Kalan knew of the Reapers only from old stories. The three of them stared out the viewports, with varying flavors of expectant wonder.

It was a place of stark beauty, if one’s taste ran to weird geometry, enormous machines with a half-organic look, and harsh blue-white light.

“There,” said Shepard, pointing. “We can land there.”

Vara nodded and brought us about.

“I’m reading an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere and comfortable temperatures out there,” Kalan murmured, peering at his instruments. “This creature can’t be completely dead.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Kamala, from her seat in the main compartment.

“There’s no reason for a Reaper to maintain an organic-friendly environment in its innards. Unless it knows we’re coming, and is willing to spend a little energy to make us welcome.”

“It’s an autonomic system,” said Shepard. “A response to the authentication code I sent, like the access bay doors. The Reaper-mind itself doesn’t have to be aware of the action, any more than you’re aware of metabolism in one of your cells.”

“Hmm. Even so, something must still be working.”

Shepard nodded in agreement, but I could tell something troubled him.

*Boom.* The shuttle landed, and Vara began setting controls to neutral. All of us left the cockpit for the main compartment, picking up weapons and gear, performing last-minute checks on one another’s armor.

We opened the hatch, and stepped out into the interior of *Yevādi.*

Silence. Harsh light and stark shadows. The air did seem breathable, albeit dry and rather cold. All of us began to produce clouds of fog on every exhalation. Kamala chose to pull her breather mask
into place, to spare her throat and lungs.

Shepard pointed, a silver statue in an instant’s heroic pose, and we set out.

At first we saw nothing surprising. I compared what I saw around me with what I remembered from the interior of *Harbinger*, what I had seen in reports from the Mnemosyne expeditions. I found countless differences in detail – every Reaper must have slightly different construction – but the overall structure seemed much the same.

*liara*

I frowned, stopping to peer about for a moment.

Shepard glanced at me. “What’s wrong, Liara?”

“Nothing. I thought I saw movement, out of the corner of my eye.”

Miranda looked slightly nauseous, blinking rapidly as if the dry air pained her eyes.

*liara*

“You’ll need to watch out,” said Shepard. “There are a lot of stray magnetic fields in here, and they might affect your brain.”

“Feelings of uneasiness, a sense of impending doom, sensitivity to sounds and movement?”

He nodded. “Among other things.”

“I’ll let you know,” I told him.

*you can hear us*

Slowly, we advanced from one chamber to the next, through the Reaper’s vast interior. My mind reeled at image after image, machinery with no obvious purpose, shapes that twisted at my vision, shadows that seemed full of menace.

Most of the others seemed bluntly insensitive to it. Shepard led us, pointing out the way, with Grunt, Kamala, and Vara right behind. Kalan clutched his sniper rifle, peering far up into the darkness above us. Miranda drifted close to me as if for comfort, the two of us falling behind the rest, our steps coming more and more slowly as we moved.

*we’re coming liara*

“Damn it,” I spat at last, frustrated beyond endurance. “Don’t any of you hear that?”

“Hear what?” said Grunt, lowering his head as if to prepare for an attack.

“Those *whispers*.”

Shepard shook his head. Kamala and Kalan remained silent. Only Miranda nodded hesitantly, her usual poised confidence gone. “I hear them too.”

*we’re coming liara coming now*

Suddenly a column of light appeared next to where Kalan stood, his geth companion making a rare visible manifestation. “*Alert! Reaper indoctrination detected!*”
Shepard’s head snapped around. “What?”

I had just a moment to realize: you and Miranda haven’t taken Shepard’s blood . . .

**we’re coming now**

. . . and the shadows all around us *erupted*.

Black figures against the harsh light, climbing up onto the deck, dropping from the heights above. The moment they could, they ran at us, *fast*, groaning like damned souls.

Some of them had four arms.

“*Husks!*” shouted Grunt with glee, opening fire with his assault rifle.

“Close up! Form a perimeter!” Shepard turned, unlimbering his weapon, and began to lay down fire.

Vara slammed a bubble into place. She glanced at me, expecting me to synch with her.

I couldn’t. It felt as if the world around me existed behind a glass wall. I couldn’t exert my will; I didn’t seem to have any will left to exert. I stood still, trembling.

Then the world tilted and I slammed to the deck, a weight on top of me.

Kamala.

She had tackled me to the ground, to get me out of the line of fire. By the time I could think once more, she rose to crouch over me, a fierce snarl on her face, firing into the mass of husks around us.

Vara stood close by, her face twisted with rage, her sword out. Wave after wave of biotic force lashed out, channeled through the blade, tearing Reaper creatures to pieces.

Grunt *laughed*, charging into a knot of the monsters. They shattered on impact, and he stamped them into mush under his boots.

I panted, nailed to the deck in horror, the Reaper’s silent voice thundering through my bones.

Then Miranda knelt beside me, her face pale and slack with fear, her hands shaking madly. She held an injector in one hand.

No!

Every instinct in my mind told me to *deny*. I rolled to one side, lashed out with both hands. One hand closed around Miranda’s wrist, pinning it in place with hysterical strength.

The other closed around her throat.

*No. Goddess, no! Not Miranda, not my foster child . . .*

My hands ignored me, thumb and fingers digging into her throat, choking the life out of her. Her eyes stared into mine, pleading in silence. She clawed at her throat with one hand, then dropped the injector and tried to use both hands to pry me away. To no avail.

Kamala must have heard the small sound the tool made when it struck the deck. She looked down,
curse lividly, and bent to pick it up. “We’ve got to stop meeting like this, Doctor,” she muttered, and slammed the injector into the base of my throat.

Whatever was in the thing, it had a profound effect almost at once. All my perceptions suddenly snapped into crystal focus. The feel of the deck under my back. The horrible smell of husks as they shattered under our fire. The crash and roar of battle. The look on Miranda’s face as she gasped for air.

I yanked my hands away from Miranda’s throat and stared at them, wondering for a moment how they could have betrayed me so very badly.

“Come on!” shouted Shepard. “Press forward, they can’t keep this up forever.”

“What did you do?” I groaned.

“Neurotransmitter cocktail,” coughed Miranda, her voice husky and rough. “I took it too. Should help us fight the indoctrination. Won’t last long.”

I struggled, got my feet beneath me. Drew my sidearm and handed it to Vara. “Take this.”

“What?”

“Take it now. And if that thing seems to be getting back into my head, I want you to put a bullet in my brain. Before I can hurt anyone else.”

My bondmate stared at me in horror, but after a moment of hesitation, she took the weapon.

The enemy did seem to fall back, probably waiting for another opportunity. I stumbled along after the others, trying hard to ignore the remains of human and valdarii husks scattered all around us. “Shepard, I think we’ve just proven the effectiveness of your nanotechnology.”

“So I see.” He looked back at me, his face pale and bleak. “Before you ask, no, I don’t know why Yevādi is trying to indoctrinate any of us. Or where these husks came from.”

“Human and valdarii husks,” I observed. “We’re almost on the opposite edge of the galaxy from valdarii space.”

Suddenly Miranda held up a hand and stopped. She bent over some of the remains, her omni-tool deployed and configured for deep-scan. It took her only a few moments to get results. “I thought so,” she said, her voice almost back to normal. “Cybernetic implants in the valdarii brain and nervous system, typical of their mind-link technology. Now look here, at the human.”

Shepard bent close. “Almost the same configuration.”

“I think this human was forcibly assimilated into the valdarii link. Then the Reaper somehow picked up both the valdarii runners and some of their human victims. Turned them all into husks.”

“Then carried them all the way here?” Kalan demanded. “Why?”

“No way to know,” said Shepard. “Not without getting to the mass-effect core.”

I seized him by both arms and pulled, forcing him to face me once again. I could barely tolerate the sound of my own voice, as I all but shouted in his face in anger and fear. “Shepard, you keep telling us the Reapers are under the control of the Intelligence. Well, you are the Intelligence! At least it’s constructed on the basis of your mind. What would you do that could explain all of this?”
“Liara . . .” He shook his head, looking as lost and helpless as I had ever seen him. “That’s just it. I can’t think of anything that instantiation of me might have done, to get the Reapers to behave this way.”

“Are you saying they’ve escaped the Intelligence’s control?”

Vara gasped in dismay. “Goddess! If they can even do that . . .”

“The extinction cycle could begin again,” Kamala muttered. “With nothing to stop them this time.”

“We’re getting ahead of ourselves,” said Shepard firmly. “All we know is, this Reaper picked up some samples in valdarii-occupied space, and seems to have run out into dark space to go dormant. All that tells us is that something has gone very wrong. It doesn’t mean the Reapers are about to go berserk.”

“All right,” I said, releasing him. “You’re right. Let’s get to the access shunt and find out. Before this damned thing turns my mind into paste.”

We fought our way through the Reaper’s guts, facing wave after wave of its creatures. Fortunately, while these husks seemed faster than the ones I remembered, they appeared no less fragile. I took great satisfaction in smashing them with biotic warps and throws, doing what I could to help my friends even without my sidearm at hand.

Human husks. Valdarii runner husks. Even a few twisted valdarii centaurs, turned into the latter-day equivalent of scions, heavy-weapon variants.

When a certain high-pitched wail rang out, I wasn’t even surprised. The valdarii had conquered at least one asari colony, after all.

A banshee stepped into view, stared at all of us, and then began flash-stepping in our direction. A knot of biotic force rolled toward Shepard.

He stood his ground, leaning into the biotic attack and shedding its force with only a moment’s effort. “Concentrate fire!”

Crack. Crack. CRASH. Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta . . .

It continued to advance, bending low to scream hate at all of us.

I reached out with my mind, took hold of the thing, and twisted. Its barriers began to stutter and melt under my reave, and my own barriers surged higher in response.

“Vara!”

My bondmate’s sword lashed out, channeling a powerful bolt of force. When it struck . . .

BOOM!

The banshee stood naked before us, its barrier down. Shepard lined up his weapon for a head-shot, and destroyed it with a lightning-fast double tap.

That seemed to mark the limit of the Reaper’s resources. We found ourselves able to advance against little or no resistance for the last fifty meters. Around a corner, past a final barrier that lifted at Shepard’s command, and we emerged into the Reaper’s core compartment.

Shepard sprinted across a long catwalk, reaching a console that stood directly before the mass-
effect core. The rest of us moved more cautiously, weapons and biotics at the ready, trying to look in every direction at once.

I stepped up beside Shepard, my eyes wide for a moment at what I saw: his hands hovering over the console, not touching it, connected to it only by a sheaf of small electrostatic discharges. His eyes had closed, and he wore an expression of fierce concentration.

“Can you get through?” I asked.

“Yes.” He frowned. “Although I’m only reaching low-level subsystems. The middle and upper levels of the Reaper-mind are offline.”

“Are you saying this whole creature is asleep?”

“More like in a deep coma. Not that it’s any less dangerous. Even a Reaper that’s been dead for a billion years can indoctrinate people, produce husks and worse.” He paused, his frown deepening. “Ah, here we go. Self-defense and intruder-control systems . . . and now we turn them off.”

It felt as if a great weight, one that had been pressing down on my mind, suddenly vanished. I glanced back at the others, and saw abrupt relief spread across both Kalan’s and Miranda’s faces. Miranda looked back at me, and gave me a crisp nod that looked more like her old self.

“I suspected as much,” said Shepard, a little more relaxed now. “The indoctrination, the production of husks, it was all an autonomic defense mechanism. Yevädi recognized me and my authentication codes, but it didn’t know any of the rest of you. It responded violently.”

“Quite a self-defense mechanism,” said Grunt, taking a moment to scrape husk-fluids off his armor.

“Let me look at the memory archives . . .” said Shepard, his voice trailing off into silence.

I waited for a moment, but he seemed lost in thought. So instead I went back to the others, to where Miranda and Vara stood very close together, my bondmate’s hand gentle on Miranda’s shoulder.

“Goddess,” I whispered. “Miranda, I’m so sorry.”

She shook her head firmly. “No. It wasn’t your fault. I could feel it too, understand what it was doing to us. I wasn’t quite as badly affected by it.”

“Thank the Goddess for that,” said Vara. “If you hadn’t come up with that injection . . .”

“It wasn’t a guess,” said Miranda, some of her dispassionate clarity returned. “There are papers in the literature, from the time of the Reaper War. Experimental treatments that combat medics tried in the field. Most of them didn’t work, but a few did manage to hold off indoctrination for a short time.”

“Still,” I sighed. “That’s the first time I’ve ever felt indoctrination begin to take hold of my mind. Terrible. I wonder if that’s how it felt for my mother, the day I met her for the last time on Noveria? To know she was trying to kill the child she loved, and yet was helpless to stop?”

Miranda gave me a small smile, and embraced me. “I understand, mitriá. Don’t be afraid. It won’t happen again.”

“My God,” said Shepard.
Such absolute horror in his voice.

I let go of Miranda, turned to stare at him. “Shepard? What is it?”

His eyes were open now, open and staring into space as if he had seen a nightmare. “I know why this Reaper went off-line. Why they’ve all gone off-line.”

I rushed back to his side. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“The Intelligence,” he said. “It’s dying.”
For a long moment, I heard no sound but the low-pitched hum of the Reaper’s mass-effect core. All our party had stopped to watch Shepard, stunned into silence by his words.

*The Intelligence is dying.*

“What do you see, Shepard?” I asked quietly.

He stood there, still communing with the sleeping Reaper-mind, his face blank but not quite so pale with shock as a moment before. “I’ve found why the Reapers have been so active, over the last few years.”

I nodded. My daughter Aspasia had been the first to bring the news to my attention. At least three years before, the Reapers had returned to the galaxy, staying well away from densely populated worlds and busy trade routes. They moved through cluster after remote cluster, as if searching for something, sighted only by tramp merchants or deep-space Navy patrols.

“They’ve been looking for the Adversary,” said Shepard. “Somehow the Intelligence discovered something critical. The Adversary isn’t dependent on the mass-relay network. It has its own way to travel long distances around the galaxy.”

“That makes sense,” said Kalan, stepping close to join the conversation. “We know the *valdarii* can move through regions thousands of light-years away from any known mass relay. They’ve been using the relay network, starting in the Caleston Rift cluster, but we’ve never been able to figure out how they reach that far in the first place.”

“They’re using Morris-Thorne bridges,” said Shepard obscurely.

Kalan’s eyes went wide. “*Wormholes*?”

I frowned. “I didn’t think those were possible.”

“No, they’re feasible,” said Shepard, “although you need technology close to the Intelligence’s level to build them. You need a lot of energy, and a form of exotic matter that doesn’t occur naturally. The Leviathans used wormholes to travel around the galaxy, back in their heyday, before the first relay network.”

“*Keelah*. That means the *valdarii*, and the Adversary, could be almost anywhere.”

“Well, the *valdarii* are centered out on the other edge of the galactic disk, but the Adversary could certainly be anywhere. The Intelligence sent the Reapers out to try and find it.”

“Why?” I asked.

Shepard glanced at me, puzzled.

“Why did the Intelligence go looking for the Adversary just then? You claim it’s known about the Adversary for millions of years. Why wait until now to go looking for it?”
“I can’t tell. Yevādi didn’t get that information, any more than I did.” Shepard turned back to the console, closing his eyes. “I think we can guess that the Adversary has been making more aggressive moves, ever since the valdarii showed up, or maybe for longer than that. Maybe it did something to scare the Intelligence.”

“But now the Reapers have abandoned the search?” I guessed.

“Yeah. Just a few days ago, the Intelligence activated a directive in the Reaper-mind. Something like: *Stop whatever it is you’re doing. Run for the darkest, quietest corner of the galaxy you can find. Shut down and wait for further orders.*” He took a deep, shaky breath. “I remember that directive. It’s very old, written into every Reaper-mind almost since the very beginning. In five billion years, it’s only been activated once before.”

“Sounds like a *sauve-qui-peut*,” said Kamala. “Every man – or Reaper, in this case – for himself.”

“That’s exactly what it is. It’s something the Intelligence would only issue if it thought its own destruction was imminent.” Shepard stepped back from the console, disengaging from the Reaper. “The Adversary must have done something, mounted some overwhelming attack. For all I can tell, the Intelligence could already be dead.”

“Or it could still be fighting,” said Vara firmly. “Something that old and that powerful, it has to have a lot of tricks and fallback positions.”

Slowly, Shepard nodded. “Yes. We need to act as if there’s still time. Now I see where.”

I cocked my head at him. “Where is that?”

To my surprise, he smiled. “The very place you’ve already aimed all of us, Liara. The Citadel.”

For an instant, I didn’t understand what he meant. Then I saw it, understanding striking me like a bolt of lightning. “The Citadel mass relay.”

His smile broadened. “It’s still there, Liara. Still a path from the heart of the mass-relay network, out into dark space. Right to the home of the Reapers, the central node of the Intelligence. That’s where we have to go, if we have any hope of stopping the Adversary in time.”

“The Citadel is effectively controlled by the valdarii, so long as Yao is still in charge there,” said Vara. “Which I am quite sure is not a coincidence.”

“Right,” I said, ideas falling into place in my mind. “Yao prevents the Confederation from responding effectively to the valdarii. He also blocks access to the Citadel relay while the valdarii – or the Adversary itself – strike at the Intelligence directly. Then, if the Adversary wins, he can open the relay and let it through, right into the heart of Confederation space.”

“Yao was elected President less than four years ago,” Miranda pointed out.

Shepard snapped his fingers. “That must have been what scared the Intelligence. What prompted it to send the Reapers out to find the Adversary. Having an enemy agent turn up right on the front doorstep, in control of the Citadel.”

“Removing Yao isn’t just *preparation* for the real battle,” I murmured, catching Vara’s eye and getting a determined nod in return.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Grunt demanded. “If we’ve found out everything we need here, let’s get back to the galaxy and find some asses to kick.”
Kamala nodded. “I’m with the krogan. We’ve got enough people on our side already, maybe even the turians if the Primarch is willing. Let’s go confront Yao.”

“What if he refuses to step down quietly?” asked Miranda.

Everyone looked at me. For a moment, I felt confusion, but then I realized why.

*I helped build the Citadel Confederation. Am I willing to use extra-legal means to attack it?*

“I concur,” I said, my voice calm. “We meet with the Primarch, as we planned. We call on all our allies. Then we march on the Citadel. We won’t offer any violence. We’ll only be there to ensure that a vote of no confidence is called, and we’ll make it clear that we plan to abide by the results. At this point I don’t think there’s much doubt as to what those results will be, once we’ve presented all our evidence to Parliament. If Yao refuses to step down and permit a new government to form, or if he moves to prevent the vote in the first place, then he is the one breaking the law.”

“Can we get all that done in time?” Vara wondered.

I glanced at Shepard. He shrugged.

“I don’t know. Vara, you were right earlier. The Intelligence isn’t something that the Adversary can just take down all at once. Otherwise the Adversary could have done it long since, any time in the past fifty million years or more. My higher self should be able to hold out for a few days, maybe even a few weeks.” I could see confidence, as it crept back into his face. “Besides, it may have been a long time since I was a military officer, but one thing I do remember. It doesn’t always help to arrive on the scene as fast as you can, if you’ve had to leave most of your force behind. Let’s take the time to do this the right way.”

My bondmate nodded in agreement. “Let’s go, then.”

“Can we bring the Reaper with us?” rumbled Grunt.

Shepard chuckled. “What are you thinking, Grunt?”

“Eh. Just seemed like a good idea to have it in our pocket, Battlemaster. Might make a good argument at some point. Assuming you can wake it up, and still make sure it won’t try to eat us again.”

“I probably could, at that.” Shepard stood silent for a moment, considering the idea, but then he shook his head. “No, it’s not a good idea. It’s tempting, to show up back in civilized space riding a Reaper. It would certainly get us everyone’s undivided attention. But we’re going to have enough trouble convincing the rest of the Confederation to trust us. To trust me.”

Grunt gave a magnificently cynical snort, but he nodded in agreement.

Shepard looked around at the Reaper’s innermost chamber once more, resting a hand on the access console, almost a gesture of benediction.

“If we can save the Intelligence, then *Yevādi* will come when it’s needed. All of them will.”

*Of all that has changed, this seems the strangest: to see Shepard treat a Reaper with something like fondness.*

“Let’s go,” he said at last.
I spent long hours on the extranet and the QED channels, conferring with all our allies: Matriarch Thekla, Urdnot Bakara, three or four salarian dalatrass who had committed themselves to our cause, and now Primarch Ardzarun. Slowly, something like consensus emerged.

In three days, Normandy would arrive at Palaven for a war summit. Then, escorted by a small fleet of asari, salarian, turian, and krogan ships, we would set out for the Citadel. If all went according to plan, we would arrive on what the human calendar called the last day of November.

Hopefully we would have enough force on hand to demonstrate that we were serious, but not enough to trigger an armed confrontation with the Confederation. Or with the Alliance, for that matter, since any ships within striking distance of the Citadel would also be within striking distance of Earth.

It was very late in ship’s evening before I could emerge from the comm center. As I made my way to the galley for a quick late-night snack, I took a moment for prayer. 

Goddess, let reason prevail.

I reached the master cabin just after midnight, yawning and wanting nothing more than a hot shower and at least eight hours of sleep. Then something made me stop and look around the room.

The silent and unoccupied room.

Vara, where have you gotten to now?

I activated my daimon with a thought. {ARGOS, where is Vara?}

{I apologize, Doctor T'Soni, but Matron Vara has asked not to be disturbed}

My lips went tight, remembering what had happened the last time Vara had gone off to do something impulsive by herself. Admittedly that had worked out in the end, but still . . .

{Priority override, ARGOS. Where is she? What is she doing?}

{She is in Mr. Shepard’s cabin. They are engaged in conversation of a highly personal nature. I would not advise intervention.}

This evening is becoming stranger by the moment.

I hadn’t missed the AI’s reticence. ARGOS had plenty of experience interpreting the behavior it observed from organic beings, and it knew Vara very well. If it chose to be evasive when questioned, it probably had a good reason.

I considered just taking that shower and going to bed. Goddess knew I needed that.

I trust Vara. I’m sure she has good reason for whatever she is up to. Perhaps she’s just having a late-evening conversation with Shepard and has lost track of time. She’ll turn up eventually.

Or not.

I had been doing some observation myself, watching how Shepard and Vara behaved around each other, if only to see that our uncomfortable circumstances didn’t cause undue suffering for either of them. I worried about both of my loved ones, but thus far I had seen no serious trouble. I might have expected as much. All three of us were mature adults, fully capable of setting our emotions
Aside when they weren’t likely to be useful. At least that was the theory.

Still, I could see something going on between the two of them. Glances exchanged at odd moments, Vara suddenly becoming reticent in the middle of a conversation, Shepard’s expression shifting slightly when she entered the room. It didn’t look like a liaison in the making – they both were always perfectly correct – but they were far from indifferent to each other.

I decided it was time to find out what was going on.

Down two decks in the lift, along the short access corridor, a terse nod to one or two asari crew encountered along the way. I confronted a closed door.

I signaled for admission. Waited, in increasing confusion. Signaled again.

_Come on, Shepard, you know who’s out here. Open the door!

Finally, after a full minute, the door opened.

I had never been in Shepard’s cabin, not since he took up lodging there after Mindoir. It was a small place, not quite three meters across and five deep, one step up from the bunkrooms shared by ordinary crew. He had a single bed, a small table and two chairs, a closet for his gear, a tiny personal refresher, and almost no free space.

Shepard and Vara sat together at the table, the lights low so they could sit in half-shadow. He had changed into his civilian clothes, she into an elegant dress in black silk. They leaned close together as if in intimate conversation, their hands piled up in the middle of the table.

It seemed like exactly the kind of situation I might have found myself in, with either of them. Finding them in it, without me, caused my mind to stumble for a moment.

“Hello, Liara.” Vara didn’t so much as glance in my direction. Her voice sounded cool, rational, and entirely without fear.

Much to my surprise, I didn’t even feel angry. Surprised and confused, yes. Angry, no.

“I don’t suppose either of you would care to tell me what in the name of the Goddess is going on?”

Shepard chuckled and gave me a fond smile. “That’s Liara. She always has to be sure she has the truth of the situation before she decides how to react to it.”

“I may override that natural tendency before much longer,” I warned them.

Shepard looked at Vara, his eyebrows high, an unmistakable this-was-your-idea gesture.

She turned away from him, cocked her head at me. “Liara, this is what I’ve been thinking about for the past few days, in the privacy of my own mind. Ever since we left Thessia for the last time, I suppose. At first, I couldn’t be sure that it had any chance of working. Then, once I thought it might, I didn’t see how to approach Shepard about it. Now I have, because I think we may be running out of time.”

I shook my head in exasperation. “Vara T’Rathis, I think you had better treat me like a callow maiden and explain yourself, because for the first time in centuries I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“All right.”
She took a deep breath, glanced at Shepard once more. He nodded in encouragement.

“T he two of you,” she said at last. “I propose we attempt to set up a triad.”

Sometimes, a single word can upend everything you thought you knew.

Shepard and Vara both watched me, holding their breath, waiting to see my reaction.

I clapped one hand to my forehead. “Oh Goddess. I have been utterly dense.”

They both relaxed at once, with almost comic timing. I might have laughed at them, had I not been in such turmoil.

“I did rather wonder why you didn’t seem to see the possibility,” said Vara quietly.

“I’m not sure.” I stood there, hand still massaging my forehead, staring as if I had never seen either of them before. “I suppose it’s just that I’ve never been in love with more than one person at the same time before. First there was Shepard, but then he died. Then there was Miranda, but that didn’t last. Then I finally admitted to myself how I felt about you, and thank the Goddess you were patient with me for so long. You’ve been my bondmate ever since, for centuries, and until now I haven’t even been tempted to look elsewhere. I know some asari experiment with triads and larger groups, but it simply never occurred to me to consider it for myself.”

Shepard was blinking in surprise. “Wait, back up a moment. Miranda?”

Vara chuckled. “Yes. It was rather amusing to watch. Also, rather heartbreaking.”

He continued to look as if he had just taken a blow in a sensitive area. “You had a relationship with Miranda Lawson?”

“For about five years,” I said. “It was certainly a very interesting time . . .”

“The two of them were much too similar in some ways,” said Vara. “Two very strong personalities, equally brilliant, equally ruthless about getting what they wanted, neither of them inclined to back down when they disagreed. You should have seen them fight. Epic. So was the make-up sex afterward.”

“Vara!”

Shepard threw back his head and laughed. I could only stand there, my face flushing deep purple, and wait for the fit to pass him by.

“Oh. Oh, dear.” He finally got control of himself. “I’m sorry, Liara. I just never thought Miranda, of all people, would be interested in an asari. Although I can hardly fault her choice.”

“You were almost right,” I told him. “I think I was the only non-human lover she ever had.”

“Altogether fixated on human males,” agreed Vara, that amused tone still in her voice. “With that one prominent exception.”

I shook my head in frustration. “Much as I adore discussing my past love life, I really think we should focus on the current situation.”

“Quite right.” Vara glanced at Shepard, then back at me. “Liara, I’m sorry it took me so long to work up my courage. You can see why I didn’t want to talk to you about this. Not until I was sure.”
“Yes, I suppose I do.” I finally came unfrozen, taking two steps and sitting down on the bed. “You knew I would agree. To have both loves of my life, freely, without hurting either of you in the process? How could I say no?”

“Well, I couldn’t be sure you would agree,” said Vara. “It bothered me that you didn’t even seem to consider the notion on your own. I wondered if that meant you would be opposed.”

“No. I’m not opposed to the idea.” Then I frowned. “But then, I’m not the one who has to make the hardest commitment here.”

Vara only nodded slowly.

“I’m not sure I follow,” said Shepard.

“Shepard . . .” Vara stopped for a moment, glancing at him and reaching out to touch his face with one tentative hand. “It’s true that some asari engage in long-term triads. The catch is that the relationship must always be based on mutual affection, desire, and respect. The triangle is always equilateral, or sooner or later it fails.”

I nodded. “In theory, I could have started a new liaison with you, even while remaining bonded to Vara, the two of you not touching at any point. I think you wondered about that, back in that cabaret in Armali. I don’t know if humans could manage such a thing, but it simply doesn’t work with asari psychology. It would eventually have shattered my relationship with Vara, no matter how hard she tried to accommodate herself to it. In turn, that would have poisoned my relationship with you. In the end, none of us would have found any joy in it.”

He nodded slowly, perhaps remembering what he had learned about one asari mind, long ago.

“There it is,” said Vara. “I love Liara. I know you love Liara. The question is whether you and I can love each other, in the long run.”

“Hmm,” he rumbled. “I seem to recall that humans aren’t to your taste.”

“Generally, they are not.” She gave him a slow smile. “On the other hand, I think I might make an exception in your case. I said as much to Liara, the day I met you.”

I smiled, remembering that long-ago day in my office on Illium.

“You’ve been a good friend to me. I’ve always held you in the highest respect,” Vara continued. “It would not be difficult at all for me to find desire for you, for your own sake.”

Shepard chuckled. “That has got to be the most asari declaration of love I’ve ever heard.”

“It’s not love yet,” she said, rather tartly.

“I think it is. You’re just not willing to commit to it yet.”

He leaned close to her, pausing just short of her face so he could taste her breath, and then kissed her, very gently but also very methodically. When he drew back, I felt a flash of pleasure at the sight of her face. Some layer of her reserve had fallen away, and she was looking at him with the smoky eyes I knew so well.

You are not as cautious as you want to seem, my love.

“This isn’t at all what I expected,” he said quietly, leaning back in his chair once again. “Liara has
always been the love of my life. When the Intelligence sent me back, I cursed it for tempting me to visit her as a living man once more, when I knew the two of you were involved, and had been for centuries. I didn’t see a place for myself in her world. I spent fifteen years trying to forget what she and I once had. Without much success.

“Since I’ve joined you on Normandy, working with both of you to solve the galaxy’s problems once more, I’ve concluded that this is where I belong. Except for that one thing, but that was enough to rob me of any joy in the rest of it. I’ve been glad to see the two of you together and happy, but it still made me feel like an exile from everything that had once made my life worthwhile.

“Now you’ve found a way for me to join you, to be with both of you? The love of my life, and the one she loves and trusts, the one she chose to be her partner when I couldn’t be there?”

He smiled warmly.

“Like I say, it isn’t what I expected. It isn’t what I would have planned. But I don’t think it will be at all difficult to love you both. Let’s make the attempt.”

Then something occurred to me, and I had to hold up a hand to stop the proceedings. “Wait. Shepard, I seem to recall that this kind of relationship is not common among humans. Especially humans with your religious beliefs.”

“It’s more common than it used to be,” he said. “I see your point, of course. The rock-ribbed Lutheran community I grew up in would have been horrified at the idea.”

“You have no doubts?” Vara murmured.

“Not really.” He shrugged. “Remember, that was more than four hundred years ago. In that time, I’ve seen hundreds of different worlds, dealt with a dozen other sentient species, fought in world-shattering wars. I’ve died. Twice, in fact. I’ve been uploaded into a galactic-scale Intelligence, and then been raised from the dead yet again to serve as an agent of that Intelligence. You might say I’ve acquired a different perspective. I still believe in God, maybe more now than I did in my first life, but my understanding of God has changed. I’m no longer convinced it has much concern for the fine details of human custom. I don’t consider that an obstacle, if this is otherwise something we can make work.”

I found myself blinking hard, trying not to get distracted by what he had just said.

For once, Vara showed less discipline. “Wait. Shepard, you’ve been part of a five-billion-year-old Intelligence that spans the galaxy, and you still believe in the existence of something you’re willing to call God?”

Shepard laughed, a clean sound of pure delight. “It’s not much like the God that Pastor Christensen talked about on Sunday mornings, but yes.”

I stood and stepped over to their table, holding out my hands to invite them to stand with me. Vara rose from her seat, sliding into my arm around her waist, resting her head contentedly on my shoulder. Shepard stood and loomed over us both.

I reached up to caress his face, the first time I had touched him since Thessia. Something deep inside my heart relaxed, the turmoil of the last few weeks finally subsiding.

Vara looked up into my face, and then back at Shepard. “Are we resolved?”
I nodded. “I am.”

“So am I,” said Shepard gently. “Whatever happens, tomorrow and for as long as we have, we face it together. The three of us.”

“Good.” Vara reached out to take Shepard’s hand once more, the gesture not at all tentative. “I’m so glad.”

We stood there for a long moment in silence. I simply enjoyed the comfort of their presence, both of my loves there with me and no conflict remaining between us.

“So,” murmured Shepard after a time. “What happens now? Do we formalize this in some way?”

“Eventually,” I told him. “I assume you have even less interest in a human ceremony now than when you and I first bonded.”

He chuckled. “We would have a hard time finding a minister willing to do it in the first place. No, if you asari have a ceremony for this, that’s fine with me.”

“There’s no time for that,” said Vara, suddenly all pragmatism once more. “The next few days are going to be critical. I think we need to begin now.”

Shepard blinked. “Are you suggesting . . .”

“I certainly am. You need to join us tonight. Both of us.” She gave him a challenging grin. “That’s also probably not what you would have planned, but there it is.”

I thought quickly, and came to the same conclusion. “Shepard, I think she’s right. We need to have this resolved before we jump into the fire again. Not to mention that I haven’t entered into your synthesis yet, and that may be important.”

He frowned, thinking through the implications. “Damn, you’re right. We don’t know in every detail how the Adversary’s influence works, but anyone who comes close to President Yao is likely to be a target. You need to be protected. Let’s stop by the medical bay so Vara can bleed for you.”

“I don’t think so.” I gave him a very direct look, and tried to ignore Vara’s chuckle at my side. “I want the technology from you, Shepard. In fact, I insist.”
26 November 2580, Interstellar Space

The journey back up to the master suite felt . . . awkward.

To be sure, it was the middle of the ship’s night-shift, most of the crew in their beds. To be sure, everyone had already seen me walking with both Vara and Shepard many times. Yet this time, I dreaded meeting any of the crew. Especially any of the asari crew.

Asari can see a liaison from kilometers off. Even a liaison that hasn’t quite started yet.

While we waited for the lift, Engineer Iole came around a corner, carrying a datapad and a mug of mulled wine. She glanced at the three of us, nodded a polite greeting, and moved away toward the gunnery compartment without a word.

Vara leaned close by my side, to whisper. “Liara, relax.”

“I’m sorry,” I murmured. “It’s just . . . this is suddenly starting to feel real. Are we truly going to go through with this?”

“Yes. We are.”

Shepard was less adamant. “Liara, if you’re not sure . . .”

The lift doors finally opened. We stepped inside.

“No. I’m sure.” I took a deep breath. “I’m sure. I just don’t know how to go about this.”

Shepard chuckled. “It’s new to all of us. Unless Vara has some experiments in her past I haven’t heard about.”

“Well, there was one particularly wild night in the barracks in Armali . . .”

I had a sudden flash-back to the memories in question. “I don’t think that counts. You didn’t even know two of those maidens’ names.”

“True.”

I gave her a sharp glance, hearing something in her voice.

She’s trying too hard to be light-hearted and confident. She’s scared too.

More than six hundred years old, but she’s never been with anyone but other asari. The thought of being intimate with Shepard is terrifying her. Even worse, the thought that this might not work, that in the end it might be her fault that it doesn’t work . . .

The doors opened, but I made no move toward the master suite. Instead I turned and took Vara in my arms, while Shepard watched us in silent compassion.


She looked up into my face, all levity gone, her eyes gone all bleak and silver. “Oh Goddess, Liara.”
“May I make a suggestion?”

“Anything.”

“I need to take a shower. Why don’t you go in with Shepard? Sit down close to him. Talk to him. Enjoy his physical presence. See what comes naturally. Don’t worry about me, there’s plenty of time for that.”

“I feel like such a fool. Like a maiden on her first liaison.”

“I know.” I looked up at Shepard, who reached to gently take Vara’s hand. “Trust me. Trust Shepard. He understands.”

“All right.”

As I turned aside into the refresher cubicle, I saw them stepping down into the living area together, Shepard still holding her hand.

I took my time in the shower. So much so that my body suddenly remembered just how tired it was. I nearly fell asleep, propped against the wall. Finally, I turned the water off and emerged, towed myself dry, slipped on a white silk tunic. I looked at myself in the mirror.

Why are you so frightened?

A grand total of three lovers in a long lifetime, that’s why. You haven’t had to face any real change in your romantic life since Vara finally kicked your feet out from under you and pounced, and that was over three centuries ago. You’ve forgotten how to try something new. Forgotten how to dare the risk of getting hurt.

Well, it was in a place very much like this, on a ship of the same name, when you first worked up your courage. You can do it again.

Liara T’Soni, you are going to go out there with two people you love. You are going to use all those years of experience to make sure they are both pleased and happy with the results.

You are going to Make. This. Work.

I braced my shoulders and turned for the door.

I soon saw that I needn’t have worried, at least where Vara was concerned. Whatever fears she had experienced, she seemed to have gotten over them.

Shepard sprawled on the couch, stripped to the waist, Vara looking rather tiny in the circle of his arms. She hadn’t gotten around to removing her dress yet, but it didn’t seem to matter. Shepard’s hands had already moved under the silk, making wide gentle sweeps across the skin of her back, flanks, and hips. Meanwhile she had brought her face up to his, touching him with her fingertips, kissing him deeply. I could hear the low rumbling purr she often made when she began to feel aroused.

I crossed the floor on silent bare feet, catching Shepard’s eye for just a moment, and sat down at the far end of the couch to watch them.

It felt very strange, observing my two lovers as they engaged in foreplay, slowly building toward their first joining. In theory, I should have felt jealousy, although I don’t know for which of them I
should have felt it. Instead I felt only a vicarious joy, at the prospect that both were happy and experiencing pleasure. Rather to my surprise, I experienced no more anxiety. I trusted them both, knew that there would be plenty of time for my own pleasure, no lack of comfort in their arms when I most needed it.

Vara reached down with both hands, peeled her dress off over her head, cast it aside to pool on the floor. She drew back, showing her body to him, watching his face with predatory intensity.

“Hmm,” growled Shepard, pulling her close to run his lips down the side of her neck. “Lovely.”

Vara closed her eyes, her mouth half-open with pleasure.

“What is it like for you?” I wondered out loud.

“Different,” she murmured, running her hands over his shoulders, his chest. “Not like anyone I’ve ever been with before. The hardness, the masses of muscle, the way the fur on his face tickles. It does feel familiar, from your memories of him.”

Shepard bent to kiss her breast, tease at one nipple with his lips and tongue. She took a deep breath.

“The reality . . . ah . . . is very fine.”

“Glad I could rise to your expectations,” murmured Shepard, amused.

Vara smiled at him. “Speaking of which . . .”

A few moments of maneuvering, and Shepard’s trousers joined Vara’s gown on the floor. She reached for him, pulled aside his undergarment . . .

Her face abruptly took on a skeptical look.

I had to laugh out loud. “That was more or less my reaction.”

“That’s what you asari get for having only one gender,” Shepard rumbled. “No appreciation for biological variety.”

“Well.” Vara reached down with a free hand to touch and explore. She smiled slightly as his breath caught. “As we discovered long ago, appreciation for variety is something one can learn.”

Vara had never made love to a non-asari before that night. Fortunately, once she had set her fears aside, her usual adventurous nature returned to the fore. She became inventive, willing to ask what worked.

“How does this feel?”

“Mmm. Very nice.”

“This?”

“A little softer. That part of me is . . . mmh . . . kind of sensitive.”

“So I see. Hmm.”

I eased closer to them, not quite close enough to touch them. My mind moved outward, washing over Vara’s, and then Shepard’s as well. I could taste their arousal, spiraling upward in tandem, fiery heat from the human mind, cool sharp anticipation from the asari. Long minutes passed, as
they both became more and more lost in sensation. Their breath began to synchronize, their heartbeats, the rhythm of their nervous systems.

Her mind began to reach out. For mine.

*That will not do. It’s Shepard you need to join with now.*


I could sense her skepticism once more, but I sent reassurance and love across the tenuous link, and she relaxed at once. She rose over Shepard, kissed him long and deeply, and gave him an intense silver-eyed stare. Then she settled down onto him, using one hand to guide him into place. Some instinct took over, or some memory borrowed from me. She melted into his embrace and began to move with him.

“What . . . an odd . . . sensation,” she panted, her eyes sliding shut.

“That was my reaction as well,” I said. “It didn’t take long for me to find it quite pleasurable.”

“Yes,” she whispered, her arms moving to hold him close, her fingers digging into the flesh of his shoulders. “I can see that.”

Shepard said nothing, only held Vara tightly in his strong arms, his big hands grasping her hips, his breath coming very quickly all of a sudden.

I moved closer once more, rested my forehead against Shepard’s shoulder, and inhaled the scent of his skin, of his sweat. I reached out and rested one hand against the back of Vara’s neck, feather-light, too gentle to distract her. As their bodies moved together, I tasted the ebb and surge of their minds. Now Vara’s mind moved in the right direction, beginning to overlap with Shepard’s. I knew when they began to share thoughts, share the sensations of their lovemaking.

I sent a quick thought across my own link into Vara’s consciousness, a last piece of advice.

*Love, I don’t think this will take long. He’s been celibate for a long time.*

A burst of understanding flew back across our link. Something shifted, deep in her mind. Her movements became urgent, uncontrolled.

*Embrace eternity,*” she whispered in his ear.

Shepard groaned, his fingers clawing at her back.

I saw their joining, a moment of perfect unity, an eternity of bliss. A small part of it overflowed into my mind as well, to set me ablaze with desire.

*Perfection.*

I leaned back slightly on the couch, breaking physical contact with them, watching them in satisfaction as their shared climax receded.

“Oh,” said Vara, aftershocks still surging through her body. “Oh, *my.*”

Shepard’s eyes opened, to stare into her face. “Remarkable.”

“Goddess, Shepard.” She took a deep breath, still moving slightly against him, as if to draw out the moment of their joining as long as possible. “I love you.”
He kissed her tenderly once more. “I love you too, Vara. Thank you for being brave enough to think of this.”

“It was well?” I asked quietly.

“It was very well.” Vara shook her head in mock-anger. “I am now furious with myself for not having suggested this weeks ago.”

“Or centuries ago,” said Shepard, with a gentle smile.

“No,” she said firmly. “We were all different people then. Much younger, and Liara and I hadn’t had a chance to truly love one another yet. A triad wouldn’t have worked for us then. It’s just as well that I didn’t try to impose on the two of you.”

“Probably so,” I told them. “What’s important is that it works now.”

Vara smiled at Shepard once more, as she began to disengage from him. “All right, you. Come with me.”

“What for?”

“Because as soon as you are ready, you and Liara have unfinished business. As I’m sure you remember, she prefers to be clean. At least at the start of the process.”

Laughing, Shepard rose from the couch and followed her into the refresher, one arm around her shoulders in a gesture of sincere affection.

I smiled, happy for them, and crossed to the bed to stretch out and wait for their return. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the cool air on my fresh-scrubbed skin, the sensations of satin and silk, the delicious feeling of fatigue. It had been a very long day, full of revelations and not a little terror, and it felt very good simply to be safe in my own bed. Despite myself, I drifted off into a light sleep.

I became aware of the world around me again when the bed shifted, twice. I could smell soap and moist air, the scents of freshly washed asari and human. Without opening my eyes, I could tell that Vara had stretched out beside me, while Shepard sat down at the end of the bed.

Suddenly I felt big hands on my feet, rubbing and massaging them. It felt wonderful. I groaned in delight and stretched slightly.

“I see you were right,” Shepard murmured. “She does like having her feet rubbed.”

“I find it hard to believe you never discovered that in your last time together.” Vara sounded somewhat amused.

“We were a little busy. Soldiers fighting together in a war don’t usually take time out to rub each other’s feet.”

“Asari soldiers certainly do,” she told him. “Never underestimate the morale value of a good foot-rub.”

I felt my fingers curling, clawing slightly at the sheets. “Goddess, that feels so good.”

Feather-light lips brushed my forehead. “You are awake. Shepard wanted to let you sleep.”
I opened my eyes, to look into Vara’s from a few centimeters away. “I can sleep later.”

“Exactly my reasoning.” She smiled. “I love you, Liara.”

I craned my neck to bring my lips up for her to kiss. Then I had to moan slightly again, as Shepard found just the right place to apply gentle pressure.

“He’s surprisingly good at that,” I observed, when I could speak again. “It must be the size of his hands.”

Vara smirked. “There must be some advantage to being that large.”

“Now, Vara. I’m sure you have already discovered other advantages to his size and shape.”

“True.” She laughed, a sound of simple happiness, all tension gone. “Goddess, Liara, the first thought I had was how is he ever going to fit?”

“Well. As I told him once, as large as he may be . . .”

“. . . he isn’t as large as an infant’s head. Quite true, as I can attest from experience.” Another laugh. “I cannot wait to see Aspasia’s or Nerylla’s reaction. Their mother, starting an exciting new liaison in her seventh century. Scandalous.”

“I suspect Aspasia, at least, is going to be rather jealous.”

From down by my feet, Shepard made an inquiring noise.

“Oh, yes,” I told him. “Our eldest has been very curious about you, ever since she was a small child. It’s probably just as well that you haven’t met her yet. Of course, I believe she’s now involved with a male human of her own. She’s been very mysterious about that.”

Shepard chuckled, and then seemed to change the subject. “I must admit, Vara, I was a little nervous too. I don’t think I’ve ever made love to anyone quite as, um . . .”

“Short?” she teased.

“I was going to say compact.”

“Of course you were.” Vara chuckled. “It worked well enough. I may not be tall, but I make the most of the body I have.”

“You certainly do,” he agreed.

“She and I had some trouble with that, when we first began to carry on a liaison, before we became bonded.” I wriggled my toes, still enjoying the sensations of Shepard’s hands on my feet. “The asari who saw us didn’t find it unusual. Unfortunately, we spent most of our time on the Citadel about then, and humans kept misinterpreting what they saw when they looked at us.”

“Oh, dear,” murmured Shepard.

“I kept having to tell confused journalists: no, she is not my daughter. She’s a century older than I am.”

“I considered a change in my attire, just to make our relationship clear to anyone observing us,” said Vara. “Fetish gear, perhaps. Lots of shiny leather and strategically exposed skin. A spiked collar, with a light chain for Liara to hold.”
“As if that would have improved the gossip columnists!”

Shepard laughed, and apparently chose that moment to grow tired of working on my feet. His weight shifted, and I felt his hands begin to wander up my legs. Warm pressure moved up the inside of my thigh. One hand brushed against me with teasing intimacy, sending a shiver up my spine. Then his mass settled onto the bed beside me.


I rolled to my side, into his arms, the whole length of my body pressed against him. Some part of my mind reveled in the sensation of his massive strength, his warmth, his human scent. He kissed me, slowly and very thoroughly, and for a moment the universe simply went away.

“Welcome home, my love,” I murmured as soon as I could draw breath.

“Hmm,” he rumbled, exploring me attentively. “T’Soni, either my old memories are inaccurate or you’ve been getting curvier over time.”

“It’s a matron thing,” I said, hooking a leg over his hip and pressing as close to him as I could. “I think my mass is still within two or three kilos of what it was during the Reaper War, it’s just . . . ah . . . distributed differently.”

“Not complaining,” he said.

“It runs in her family,” said Vara, sliding close so I could sense her as a warm presence behind my back. Suddenly I felt four hands moving across my skin, caressing and teasing. It felt delightful. “It was one of the first things that attracted me to her. That gorgeous rack. Not as big as one might expect, looking at old pictures of Benezia, but just perfectly shaped.”

Shepard snorted. “You know, it never ceases to amuse me, hearing asari say things like that.”

“Why not?” Vara chuckled, her breath warm at the top of my spine. “We’re wired to find other asari attractive. If we look a little like human females, it’s probably inevitable that we would sound like human males when we speak of such things.”

“Besides,” I breathed, having a hard time concentrating on speech, “Vara has been a shameless asariphile all her life. Many are the times I’ve had to lie quietly and listen to her wax poetic about my body. Sometimes for hours on end.”

“Hmm. Yes.” One of Vara’s hands slid down my flank, her fingertips knowing just where to touch to make me shiver in delight. “The subtle shading of the scales along here, and the texture. Enough to tempt an eremite.”

“Well,” said Shepard, one of his hands sliding down between us to deliver an intimate caress, “I approve of your taste.”

Before long I felt as if drowning in pleasure, both of my lovers finding places to touch. Sweat-slick skin, hands on me, the mingled scent of our bodies, Vara’s breath at my back, Shepard’s mass and fiery heat in my arms, the delight rolling through my body. I reached out desperately to hold Shepard, to touch every part of him I could reach, to press against the hardness of his body as if trying to drive myself through his skin.

Such a strange sensation, my mind struggling to mesh with two others, wanting them both at once. It felt wonderful, but it also frustrated me, the three-way joining proving more difficult than expected.
Then Vara withdrew slightly, a final kiss at the top of my spine, a final intimate caress, and her mind pulled back to a safe distance. For a moment I felt bereft, not wanting to let her go, but then Shepard pressed me inexorably onto my back.

As always, he had good instincts. I was ready for him, more than ready. I wrapped my legs around his hips, stared up into his face, and gasped aloud as he completed the merger.

*Thank the Goddess for this.*

“I love you,” I moaned, my hands shaking as I gripped him along his flanks. Then my right hand left his body, went desperately seeking.

Vara took my hand, held it tightly. I glanced in her direction, and saw her watching my face with uncanny intensity.

*I love you. I love you both. Thank you, thank you.*

Vara had taken the edge off his desire. Now, despite years of self-denial, he could take the time he needed to share love with me. For long minutes we moved together, the old familiar dance, slowly building toward a shared apocalypse.

Shepard’s face, tense with passion, his eyes never leaving mine. Those beautiful crystal-blue eyes, the first part of him I had fallen in love with, long ago.

Vara watching us, her silver eyes shining with happiness. Her hand holding mine, strong and determined, bearing up even as I lost control of my grip and tried to crush her fingers.

The joining under way, like a storm at sea, driving my mind to crash up and out of its normal bounds.

Shepard bent down at a critical moment.

“*Embrace eternity,*” he whispered, close beside my face.

My back arched, driving me against the surge of his movement, and I closed my eyes with a shuddering moan. I could see nothing, but I knew my eyes had turned a perfect black. My consciousness hurled itself across the last remaining gap.

Into astonishment.

What I saw remained Shepard’s mind, I entertained no doubt about that fact. Not that I had ever seriously doubted his identity. Yet what I entered felt different from anything I had ever encountered within him before.

Part of it was the years of living he had done on Mindoir, a wealth of new human experience. Most of it was the centuries he had spent as one with the Ascended Intelligence.

*It felt like . . .*

Many years before, while serving as a member of the Confederation Parliament, I had gone on a personal tour of Europe, on Earth. While I traveled, I visited as many Christian churches as I could. One reason was so I could develop a greater appreciation for the tradition that had shaped so many humans, including Shepard. Another was to admire and publicly support the effort so many communities had put in, restoring great art and architecture that had fallen victim to the Reapers.
Entering Shepard’s mind felt like ducking under a low door, expecting to see some tiny but perfect Gothic chapel, and instead emerging into the nave of Chartres or York Minster.

I didn’t see any sign of changes to his personality, but the scale of his mind had been transformed. He had access to knowledge stretching back billions of years, out to the limits of the observable universe. He remembered considering thoughts that not even the geth consensus could have fully understood. He was familiar, not with a dozen forms of sentience, but with tens of thousands, all the Reapers’ victims still preserved in the Intelligence and its memories.

He had grown, in some ways beyond my comprehension. Yet he remained Shepard, still the man I had fallen in love with aboard the first Normandy, in the time when we chased a rogue Spectre across the galaxy and had not yet heard of the Reapers. I searched for any hint of foreignness, of alien influence, and I found nothing at all to fear.

Liara.

Goddess. Shepard, I feel like a little child next to you.

No. That’s just . . . architecture. What drives it is still human. Still loves you. Will always love you.

I soared through vastness. For the first time in centuries of life as an asari, I found myself unable to encompass the whole of a lover’s mind. I could only stand and gaze upward, past the sweeping lines and curves, past the glorious images, my eyes drawn inexorably toward heaven.

I returned to myself slowly, becoming aware of my surroundings one small piece at a time. The lights now dim, Vara having sent a silent order to ARGOS. The feel of the bed under my back. Vara’s presence close by, still holding my hand. Shepard at my other side, his eyes closed, breathing deeply and evenly. Exhausted by his lovers’ demands, the poor man.

I opened my eyes, and found Vara watching me from close by, a gentle smile on her lips.

I sent a thought through my daimon, not wanting to speak and disturb Shepard.

{Goddess, Vara, why didn’t you warn me of what you saw when you joined with him?}

Her smile deepened. {I didn’t see any danger, and I thought you should experience it for yourself. I certainly don’t have the words to describe it. He’s become something quite remarkable, hasn’t he?}

{That he has.} I craned my neck, inviting a gentle kiss. {I’m so glad we decided to try this. It’s good to be free to love you both, as I should.}

{I imagine it won’t always be this pleasant. From all I’ve heard, keeping a triad balanced and happy is more than half again as challenging as a pair-bond.}

{We’re all intelligent, mature beings with many years of experience behind us. We sincerely love each other. We will manage.}

{I’m sure you’re right.}

A thought struck me, and I looked down at myself. Almost without my willing it, my hips shifted, my thighs pressed together, as if to hold something precious in place. I moved a hand down to rest on my lower belly.
I remember this. Shepard leaving a tiny sliver of himself behind, every time we made love.

It always seemed futile before. I couldn’t conceive his child while still a maiden. In any case, I’m not a human female, to accept a slice of his genome in that fashion.

I could conceive a child now, by Shepard, by Vara, possibly by both at once.

The hand resting there trembled a little.

Goddess. Now that I’ve thought of that, I find I want it. Desperately. I had thought those matron’s urges safely tucked away. Apparently not. I will need to give that some careful thought.

Although if I do have a child, it still won’t be in that human manner.

Still. Shepard will change me. Billions of tiny machines in my body now, searching for a way into my bloodstream, migrating toward my nervous system and my brain. Part of what he has become, now part of me forever.

I wonder how I will be different, once the process is done?

I fell asleep then, lying there between my lovers, their touch and physical presence infinitely comforting.

In the morning, I had an answer to my question. An answer I would never have expected.
26 November 2580, Interstellar Space

I awoke slowly, and alone.

Not enough sleep. Can I steal another two hours? Probably not. Too much work to be done today.

Then I remembered why I had gotten so little sleep, and opened my eyes with a smile.

That was very good indeed.

I shifted under the blanket someone had spread over me at some point, stretching luxuriously, remembering how they had been with each other and with me. Shepard’s fire and passion . . .

Shepard sat in the crew mess with Kamala and Grunt, finishing a morning meal with his beloved cup of coffee. He held a datapad in one hand, reading the latest bad news from the war. Suddenly he became distracted, the coffee cup hovering in mid-air as he forgot to take a sip.

. . . and Vara’s playful inventiveness . . .

Vara stood in the staging bay, wearing a padded training suit, practice sword in hand, sparring with young Timo. She felt the animal joy of movement, the pleasant feel of nerves and muscles in harmony. Then something distracted her for an instant, spoiling the effortless perfection of her form, permitting the younger asari to score a touch.

I sat up abruptly, blinking.

What just happened?

Slowly, thinking hard, I emerged from the bed.

Deliberately, I thought of Shepard.

Shepard had set coffee and datapad aside, and departed the crew deck. He stood in the lift as it rose toward the master suite, his mind filled with purpose. When the lift doors opened, he strode out across the small foyer . . .

I turned toward the door.

It opened. Shepard stood there.

For an instant, it felt like standing between two mirrors. I saw Shepard as he saw me as I saw him seeing me, an infinite recursion. Then it ended and I was just me, just Liara T’Soni again, standing there in the nude as I stared at my human lover.

Then I could hear the lift work again, the lift door open, fast footsteps in the foyer. Vara appeared next to Shepard.

It happened again. This time, all three of us shared our awareness of one another. I found it even more confusing. Fortunately, it didn’t last long.

“What in the name of the Goddess is happening to us?” Vara demanded.
A flicker of thought came from the back of my mind, feeling almost like my own subconscious in operation. I knew what Shepard would say next.

“I’m not sure,” he said, fulfilling the prophecy. “None of the humans who took the nanotechnology reported anything like this. Neither did the krogan.”

“Humans and krogan aren’t latent telepaths,” I pointed out, already seeing Vara nod in agreement. She had already read the whole chain of reasoning from my mind. “Shepard, the nanotechnology must be behind this. The three of us joined last night, and now something of that experience is staying with us.”

“Right,” said Vara. “It’s as if I can see either of your minds whenever I concentrate on them, know what you’re doing, what you’re thinking.”

“Shared consciousness,” Shepard agreed. “at least when we focus. Maybe your VI daimon implants are involved too, and the Reaper technology in my brain. Another aspect of the synthesis.”

I shook my head. “Goddess. Not that I don’t love you both, but this might prove very distracting.”

“Is this going to keep going as more asari take the nanotech?” Vara shivered at the thought. “Some kind of asari hive-mind? That’s going to complicate any effort to protect more of us from the Adversary’s influence. We like sharing our minds with our lovers, but we also like being able to turn it off when we’re done.”

I had a thought. An instant later, so did each of them.

Shepard nodded firmly. “Good idea, Liara. Give her a call, as soon as you get dressed. Vara and I will go down and consult with Miranda.”

The call took some time to put through. Its destination was far out in the Terminus Systems, on a world that normally chose to have little to do with other parts of the galaxy. I had to improvise a great deal.

Still. It helped that I had once been the Shadow Broker. Some skills stayed with me.

Eventually I reached the person I sought. An asari face peered out of the screen at me, a youngish matron, quite ordinary in appearance. That is, except for her eyes: pitch-black in color, as if she lived in a constant state of joining. I found it as unsettling as ever to hold her gaze for long.

“Matron Vasia,” I greeted her. “I am . . .”

“Dr. Liara T’Soni,” she said firmly. “I remember you quite well. My associates and I owe you a great deal.”

I gave her a polite nod, remembering.

Late in the Reaper War, Normandy and my own ship Cannae came to the asari colony world of Chalkhos, out in the Terminus Systems. There, all of us fought to evacuate a few very unusual refugees, pulling them away from the Reapers at the last possible moment.

Some of the ones we rescued had been liberated Collectors, the first kernel of the revived Prothean civilization on Senakhar. Others had been asari, the product of highly questionable experimentation on the asari genome.
Vasia Kyranis and her four part-sisters were all a decade or two younger than I, intelligent and in peak physical condition, all of them trained as commandos. They were also the first full telepaths in asari history, capable of reading the thoughts and memories of other sentient beings, at any time and from a distance. From what Vasia later told me, her adopted mother had been a renegade Matriarch, who had hoped to produce “daughters” with extraordinary ability as spies and infiltration agents. She had done extensive – and ruthless – work with the asari genome, callously discarding infants who failed to show the desired genetic traits.

In the end, the Reapers interrupted the project. Naera Kyranis died in the sack of Chalkhos, along with most of her fellow citizens. Vasia and her sisters survived, escaping aboard Normandy to carry on the fight against the Reapers. After the war, they returned to help rebuild the colony. Since then, few outsiders had heard from them. I suspected they, and in time their own daughters, preferred not to attract undue attention from the wider asari culture.

“You must have a very good reason to seek me out,” said Vasia. “How may I assist you?”

“I’m not certain you can, not at such a distance.” I shook my head. “It’s just that I seem, rather by accident, to have developed some of your special abilities.”

She cocked her head, frowning at me. “How is that possible?”

I explained, at length and omitting nothing. Humans might have been reticent about the more intimate minutiae, but we were asari and had no such taboos. Vasia asked pertinent questions, and went back to review some details I had thought unimportant. Her matter-of-fact manner began to reassure me.

“You say that Matron Vara took this technology first, but that she mentioned nothing at the time about sharing her consciousness with Shepard?”

“That seems correct.”

“In fact, after she was intimate with Shepard, she said nothing of sharing his consciousness, or yours, outside the joining. Not until you awakened and made note of the phenomenon.”

I had to think back for a moment. “Yes, that seems correct as well. She might have remained lightly joined with him for some time after they finished; that’s common enough. If she experienced anything unusual, she might not have recognized it as such.”

“Hmm.” Vasia frowned, turning away from the screen slightly to call up an omni-tool and page through files. “Still, by the time all of you had finished sleeping, no trace of the normal joining should have remained. Especially if they had departed from your immediate vicinity.”

“I’m very suspicious that they only noticed after I awakened. As if I’m the hinge of this phenomenon. I can’t understand how that’s possible, though. Shepard is the source of the technology, and we were both intimate with him, not with each other.”

“Although you and Matron Vara have been bondmates for a very long time. No doubt you were lightly superimposed throughout your love-play, even if you did not focus on one another.”

I thought back for a moment, and had to nod in agreement. “I suppose that’s true.”

“Good. Then I believe I have a hypothesis.” She appeared to change the subject. “You are aware that several rachni nests have settled on Chalkhos, since the war?”

“No, I didn’t know that.”
“I might have thought that would come to the Shadow Broker’s attention. Although I suppose you have not been the Shadow Broker in a long time. Yes, we invited them to come and build cities of their own in the badlands country, after the resettlement. They find Chalkhos much more hospitable than we asari do. They proved indispensable in repairing the damage the Reapers had done to the local ecology.”

“Not to mention, you and your sisters would have no trouble communicating with them.”

“True. We have been able to study them and their methods of communication, comparing those to our own abilities and those of other asari. One of the ways the rachni queen stays in contact with her warriors and drones is through a natural form of quantum-entanglement communication. Structures in the rachni nervous system can maintain quantum coherence with one another. Once the queen and her subordinates are in contact, they can continue to exchange information even over long distances and extended periods. They perceive this as a kind of song. It’s really quite remarkable to take part in their chorus, even to the limited degree to which my sisters and I are capable.”

I leaned back and rubbed my chin in thought. “You think what we’re experiencing may be similar.”

“The normal asari metacortex is almost capable of consciously using the QEC effect. In my sisters and me, the pertinent brain structures have been modified and expanded. Perhaps Shepard’s technology has had a similar effect on you and Matron Vara.”

“What about Shepard? He doesn’t have a metacortex.”

“No, but the human brain must have similar structures, even if not as fully developed, otherwise we would not be able to join with them fruitfully. Besides, if what he tells you is true, his brain and nervous system have been extensively modified by this Intelligence.”

“All right. So asari who take this technology risk sharing more with their partners than usual after intimacy. Permanently?”

“I would say not. Quantum physics does not permit coherence to last for long, especially in the electro-chemical soup that makes up an organic brain. The rachni manage the trick through some rather remarkable physiological adaptations, which we asari do not share. My sisters and I, and our daughters, have rarely been able to maintain contact with other minds for more than a day or two. The shared awareness fades rather quickly.”

“You reassure me. Not that the three of us are overly concerned about the phenomenon. It’s a little distracting, but it’s also pleasant enough, and it may even prove useful. We were concerned that it might cause difficulty, as we try to convince other asari to take up Shepard’s technology.”

She nodded in agreement. “It may very well do that, especially among young asari who prefer casual liaisons. My sisters and I had very few asari lovers when we were young. If I understand you correctly, you are concerned about the immediate crisis and how it may affect asari leaders. Perhaps this technology can be used to protect them, in the short term, without threatening to alter asari mores too badly.”

“That seems reasonable. I will consult with a scientific expert on my staff.”

“Miranda Keldaris?”

I felt my eyes go wide with surprise. “You know her?”

“Yes, at second hand. When she studied medicine, one of her instructors was an associate of mine.
I've heard a great deal about her, all of it favorable. She should be able to assist you, but if she wishes to consult further, please have her contact me.”

I smiled at her. “I'll pass that along.”

“One last piece of advice, Dr. T’Soni. You mentioned earlier that you might find this phenomenon useful. I agree. My sisters and I have often found it so. I would advise you to experiment. Find ways to use it without becoming distracted by it. The ability to communicate by a silent, undetectable channel might have its advantages during political negotiations. Or in a combat situation, perhaps; I suggest that you go to your training facility and spar as a team.”

She gave me a wicked smile.

“But most of all, remember what I have told you about the duration of the entanglement. You may find you must renew it often.”

I snorted in amusement. “Don’t worry on that score, Vasia. My thanks for your assistance.”

In the end, we had little to worry about.

By the time I reached the medical bay, Miranda had already done several deep scans of Shepard’s and Vara’s brains, while they shared thoughts and sense-impressions through the new channel. As soon as I arrived, she put me under the scanner as well. She soon confirmed Vasia’s hypothesis about the nature of the connection, and even gave us estimates as to how long the effect might last after each joining.

She gave no hint of what she thought about the sudden alteration in relations among the three of us. Of course, Vara and I knew her too well to permit her to dissemble entirely. In her own cool, rational way, she clearly approved of recent developments.

Science done, we went back out to continue preparing for the Palaven summit. We also spent the day learning how to deal with what Shepard already called “the galaxy’s worst case of married telepathy.”

It took a few hours, but all three of us learned how to turn the extra sense on and off at will. If we wanted to share, we could do so at a moment’s notice. If we needed to concentrate on something else, the sensation of other minds seemed to withdraw. We even learned how to ask for a partner’s attention without distracting them, like a subtle chime on an omni-tool.

We took another of Vasia’s suggestions as well. We went down to the staging bay, calling together several of the security detail, for a vigorous two hours of combat practice.

At first it didn’t go well at all. When each of us went up one-on-one against my acolytes, we performed about as well as expected. The moment we tried to work as a team, using our new channel to coordinate, everything fell apart. The shared consciousness interfered with our well-trained reflexes, most of which had been drilled down to a subconscious level. Shepard and Vara each managed to hold their own, at the cost of shutting the link down entirely. I collected a painful set of bruises.

We persevered . . . and about ninety minutes after we began, it started to work.

It felt rather like learning to play a complex piece on a musical instrument. When even an accomplished player begins, she must read musical notation and follow along with her fingers. She stumbles and makes mistakes, because the conscious mind is too slow to translate the notes on the
page into smooth operation of the instrument. Yet she practices, and practices some more, and she continually improves her performance. Eventually, she no longer needs to consciously attend to the written notation. The music is “in her fingers,” as it were, and she can play smoothly and beautifully from memory.

At one point, three of the acolytes hurled themselves at us at the same time. Vara slid low and swept her leg at exactly the right moment to set young Iroë up for a body throw from Shepard. In the same instant, I flash-stepped aside to permit Iroë to fly by, crashing into Timo and spoiling an attack on me.

My back had been turned the whole time. I saw none of Vara’s or Shepard’s maneuvers. Neither of them had time to give any verbal warning, and the whole flurry of movements took less than a second. I just knew what I needed to do, and did it by reflex.

The secret, apparently, was not to think about it.

After that, it fell apart again, but not for long. The next time we began, the three of us defeated three acolytes in less than a minute.

For the next round, we called six of the acolytes in. I ordered them to use their biotics freely, and not to pull their punches. We defeated them in even less time.

“Despoina?” Timo ventured, as we began to clean up after the training session. Another young asari hovered behind her, obviously listening without wishing to seem too interested in the outcome.

“What is it?”

“Keana and I were wondering . . . you and Matron Vara have both taken the nanotechnology from Shepard, haven’t you?”

I nodded, keeping a calm face even though I somehow knew what would come next. “That’s correct.”

She took a deep breath, and then forged ahead before she could lose her courage. “Right, so now you’ve both joined with Shepard, and that’s why you were able to fight so well just now.”

I felt a surge of amusement from both Shepard and Vara at that. I had to work hard to keep a straight face myself.

It’s simply not possible to keep secrets on a starship. Especially an asari starship.

“Yes, we think that has something to do with it.” I told her. “We’ve been teaching ourselves how to deal with it all day today.”

“Well . . . then we want it too.”

I nodded to myself, remembering that Timo and Keana were lovers as well as professional partners. Come to think of it, I knew of one or two other pair-bonds among the acolytes.

I looked around the room, noticing how many young asari were also listening without seeming to. “How many of you are of a like mind?” I called out.

It turned out that all of them were.
Thus, by the time the three of us retired for the night, Vara and I were lighter by a unit of blood apiece, and half the *Normandy* crew had been initiated into Shepard’s synthesis. By morning, we weren’t the only ones finishing one another’s sentences and working in effortless harmony.

“Just promise me one thing, T’Soni,” said Shepard. “Please don’t set up some kind of weird asari sex cult over this.”

“Don’t worry, love. The Way was bad enough.”
The next few days were busy, but productive.

In five hundred years, I have taken part in dozens of galactic-level negotiations. Some were disasters, like the war summit at the beginning of the Reaper War. Others were triumphs, like the final negotiation and signing of the Confederation Charter. The Palaven Summit of 2580 fell somewhere in between. The major participants had already come to agreement on general principles, and no deep underlying conflicts festered among us. We only needed to discuss the details of strategy: how to bring maximum pressure to bear on Yao Guozhi, how to proceed if he agreed to our demands, how to respond if he refused.

The occasion remained a tense one, if only because we couldn’t be certain what our Adversary would do to disrupt us. Hundreds of beings took part in the conference, and it seemed probable that the Adversary had influence over at least a few of us. On a more mundane level, we expected that President Yao might have sent his own people, either the Wrecking Crew or some more subtle agents, to attack the summit.

In the end, we owed the success of the summit to two people.

Primarch Neron Ardzarun served as our host, placing all his considerable resources at our disposal. His smooth diplomacy and sound strategic sense kept the conference from bogging down in minor details. Meanwhile, he ensured that the conference venue stayed safe. It turns out that the Turian Hierarchy is very good at counterintelligence and physical security. Faced with a great many calm, efficient, utterly implacable turian security agents, President Yao’s people had no opportunity to work mischief. The Wrecking Crew never made an appearance, and I saw the dossiers of over a dozen compromised individuals who had been kept away.

Meanwhile, Miranda produced a minor scientific miracle just before the conference began. She discovered a method for buffering Shepard’s nanotechnology, preserving it in a viable form for several minutes outside the matrix of a living organism’s blood and tissue. Which meant it could be collected from a levorotary organism, and then transferred to a dextrorotary organism, all in complete safety. Kalan volunteered to be Miranda’s first test subject; he took up the nanomachines without so much as running a fever. Afterward, Tekanta reported that its integration with Kalan’s mind had sharpened, and it also provided Miranda with a great deal of useful neurophysiological data – from the inside, as it were.

The high point of the summit came when Miranda gave a thirty-minute presentation, detailing everything we had learned about Shepard’s nanotechnology, including her new technique for administering it. As soon as she finished, Primarch Ardzarun stepped forward and publicly accepted the nanotechnology, directly from Shepard.

“I’ll accept the risk,” said the Primarch to the assembled delegates. “If this proves to be a danger, I’ll accept the risk rather than pass it to anyone else, and the Hierarchy will go on just fine without me. If it proves to be a boon, then the sooner the Hierarchy benefits by it, the better.”

He’s a very brave man, I said silently to my bondmates.

Shepard smiled at me from across the table. Rather like another Primarch we once knew, isn’t he?

After a day and a half of intensive work, the summit came to an end. All of us returned to Normandy, and set a course for Earth. A combined fleet came with us, about two hundred ships
arranged around a solid core of three dreadnoughts. Every ship was armed, but all of us transmitted clear peace signals from the moment we left Palaven orbit.

With any luck, we wouldn’t have to fire a shot.

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30 November 2580, Sol System Space

“Relay transit complete,” reported Tania, from the bridge.

I had a sudden flashback to the day of the Battle of Earth: *Normandy* dropping into normal geometry next to the Charon Relay, soaring through space all alone for a moment, and then the flash and thunder of over eight thousand ships arriving in waves behind us.

“Asari squadron confirms transit complete,” said Vara, her voice calm and flat. *Destiny Ascension* followed close behind Normandy, Matriarch Thekla in command, her asari squadron the largest, if not the most powerful, in our combined fleet. I remembered what had happened to an earlier ship of the same name, during the Battle of Earth, and shivered at the bad omen.

“Turian squadron confirms transit complete.”

A powerful strike force, centered on the dreadnought *Palaven*, under Primarch Ardzarun’s personal command. The turians kept close together, their ships locked together by a tight command-and-control web, ready to defend themselves against all comers.

“Salarian squadron confirms transit complete.”

No single dreadnought this time, but a powerful squadron of cruisers, jointly commanded by the three most influential *dalatrass* in our affinity.

“Krogan squadron confirms transit complete.”

The massive dreadnought *Aralakh* loomed behind us, pride of the Krogan Commonwealth, with Urdnot Bakara and half a dozen of Grunt’s foremost male supporters on board. I remembered the krogan from before the Reaper War, forcibly deprived of weapons and warships alike, and marveled for a moment at how far they had come in the centuries since.

Vara paused for a time, watching the list of arrivals and working with ARGOS to check it against the primary roster. The armada arriving for the Battle of Earth had needed almost ten minutes to make it through the Charon Relay. Our force, much smaller, took less than thirty seconds. More ships for the asari, salarians, turians, and krogan, then an incredible patchwork of small detachments: Prothean ships, humans, batarians, volus, hanar, elcor, raloi, even a lone yahg courier vessel. It might not have been the largest fleet maneuver since the Reaper War, but it was probably the most diverse.

“All squadrons confirm transit complete. Peace signals are live. Maneuver Alpha complete.”

Our ships turned, the brown-and-cream orb of Pluto off to starboard, and began to accelerate in formation toward distant Sol.

“Contacts,” reported a sensor officer. “Main fleet detachment. Three dreadnoughts, twelve cruisers, about eighty smaller vessels. Between us and Sol, range five hundred thousand kilometers, closing at a steady one gee. Sending peace signals.”
“Interesting,” Shepard murmured. “Not enough ships to stop us by main force, and that’s not military acceleration.”

“Incoming transmission,” said ARGOS.

“Let’s hear it,” I commanded.

“Intruder fleet. This is Rear Admiral Marie Tardieu, commanding Confederation Third Fleet. You are denied clearance to approach Earth. Please cut your drives and prepare for further instructions.”

Some memory teased at my mind. I glanced at Vara, and saw her staring at me as well. Then I knew what we both remembered, from messages read in the comfort of our home on Thessia.

“Third Fleet, this is Matriarch Thekla Valaridé, duly elected exarchōn of the Asari Republics, First Speaker for this delegation. On what grounds are peaceful, law-abiding citizens of the Confederation to be denied access to the Citadel?”

I turned to a console, calling up a roster of ships assigned to the Third Fleet. The flagship was the Olympus.

Oh Goddess.

Commanding Officer: Captain Katsuo Hatanaka. Senior officers . . .

Gunnery Officer Aspasia T’Rathis.

Once more, I exchanged a glance with Vara. She had read the name silently from my mind, and I could sense the rush of surprise and fear from her.

“Matriarch, you are not being denied access to the Citadel. However, President Yao has made a determination that some members of your contingent present a clear and present danger to the security of the Confederation. Until we can examine you, and clear individual members of your contingent for passage in-system, we cannot permit you to proceed.”

Suddenly I wished for real telepathy, the kind that could use some mystical effect to reach out and touch a beloved mind at long distances without prior contact. Unfortunately, no such thing existed. I had no way to contact my daughter without letting every comm officer in the Third Fleet know I had done it.

“Admiral, the Confederation Charter does not permit any official to act on the ‘clear and present danger’ principle unless lawless or violent action is already under way. No member of our delegation has broken any law. Neither are we engaging in or even contemplating violence. You are placing prior restraint upon our rights of free expression, free association, and peaceful political activism.”

On the other hand, Aspasia was a very clever asari, and she might be able to contact us.

Vara heard the thought and acted upon it, opening a new window on her console and training every available passive sensor upon the Olympus.

Shepard cocked his head as if listening, watching Vara and me from a few steps away.

“Aspect change,” announced the sensor officer. “They’re turning away from us, holding open the range.”
“That admiral is very reluctant to engage,” said Shepard quietly.

“Matriarch, the fact remains that I have my orders. I do not wish to fire upon your vessels, but I will, unless you cut your drives and prepare to be boarded and searched.”

I could sense it, the moment Vara’s search succeeded. I stepped up behind her and read the data on her screen. Encrypted, buried in the emissions of a range-finding LIDAR device aboard Olympus, a message.


“That’s our daughter,” Vara murmured, deep pride in her voice.

Shepard continued to watch us. Slowly, he nodded.

“Admiral, you are following illegal orders and are in violation of the Charter.”

Silence, for a long moment.

Then Shepard stepped up to a console, touched controls, and went off the script.

“Third Fleet, this is William Allen Shepard.

“I suspect I’m one of the people President Yao is calling a clear and present danger. No doubt your leaders have been given very specific orders to see to it that I don’t reach the Citadel alive. I think it’s time for you to hear the truth.

“There is a clear and present danger to the Citadel Confederation. It’s the valdarii, and the entity that stands behind them. They present the greatest threat to civilization since the Reapers. They will not rest until they have assimilated every sentient being in the galaxy into their empire. Until they have robbed all of us of everything that makes life worth living.

“Bad enough if the valdarii were just an external enemy, a fleet and army that we could fight. But they’ve been planning this war for a long time. They have agents in Citadel space. I don’t know who all of them are. I do know that President Yao is one of them, and there are others within the Spectre Corps. There could be more. There could be some on the Third Fleet with you, right now.

“I’m fairly certain they don’t have control of the entire Confederation government. They don’t have control of Parliament. All we want is to go there. Legally. Peacefully. Lay out our case before our elected representatives, and ask for action under the Confederation Charter. We have faith in the democracy. After all, some of us helped build that democracy in the first place.

“All of us here are ready to put our lives on the line to defend the Confederation. I’m asking you to do the same. I know it’s a risk. Freedom and civilization sometimes demand that we take risks, that we pay a high price. I’ve paid that price before, and I’m willing to pay it again if I have to.

“Will you stand with us? Will you stand with me?”

Silence followed.

Matriarch Thekla sent a text-only message from the Destiny Ascension: A valiant effort. Let’s see if it works.

Two minutes passed. Still no word from Admiral Tardieu.
Two fleets drove through space, still accelerating at a leisurely rate toward distant Earth.

Five minutes. Once more I wished for the senses of a goddess, so I could see what was happening on Olympus and the other ships of the Third Fleet. I had nightmare visions of violent struggle, Aspasia caught in the crossfire. Or, more likely, leading a charge. That would be more in character for her.

Suddenly I sensed a flurry of motion near a comm station. “Incoming transmission,” said an asari technician. “Text only. From the First Fleet.”

Vara frowned. “That’s the home-guard fleet, on station in Earth orbit.”

“Alert. Alert.” The technician frowned in concentration. “Gravitational anomaly forming in cislunar space. Origin unknown. All units, go to battle status.”

“Gravitational anomaly?” Vara wondered.

“A wormhole!” said Kalan. “It must be the valdarii.”

I felt a sudden chill, and turned to open a channel. “Third Fleet, this is Dr. Liara T’Soni. The valdarii use Morris-Thorne bridges to cross kiloparsec distances without using the mass relay network. An attack on Earth is under way. We stand ready to assist you.”

“Admiral, this is Thekla. I concur. The real enemy is about to strike at the Citadel itself. Please consider the timing.”

Still no reaction from the other fleet.

“Damn it,” muttered Shepard. “Why can’t she see it?”

“Transmission from the Citadel to Admiral Tardieu,” reported the comm tech. “Heavily encrypted. We can’t read it.”

“I can,” said Shepard. “Give me the file.”

I watched as he concentrated for a moment, the advanced technology in his brain working to crack the Citadel’s military encryption. Then he scowled, an expression that promised mayhem for someone, and I thought I could guess who.

“Tardieu has been ordered to open fire on our ships immediately,” he rapped. “Normandy is their primary target.”

I nodded and opened a channel. “Liara T’Soni to all diplomatic ships. Third Fleet may be about to open hostilities. Execute plan beta-three. Raise kinetic barriers and other active defenses, but do not arm weapons until we are fired upon.”

A quick signal from Destiny Ascension, Matriarch Thekla confirming my order.

Our fleet began to shift formation, dreadnoughts and other warships moving to the front, lightly armed vessels toward the back to get escort protection.

“ARGOS, please begin the computations to perform Maneuver Beta.”

“Acknowledged, Dr. T’Soni.”

**Maneuver Beta:** a coordinated jump into FTL to carry our fleet into the heart of Sol system. It
might be a difficult move to execute properly, if we had to do it while under fire.

Shepard folded his arms, staring at the tactical plot. “Come on, come on . . .”

Suddenly the comm crackled to life once more.

“Intruder fleet, this is Tardieu. After consulting with my staff and flag officers, I have determined that the order to detain you was illegal. I have received further orders as well, from the same source, even more clearly illegal. I would be violating my oath if I were to follow these orders without further clarification. Meanwhile, as you are aware, a crisis is under way down-system. You have offered your assistance. Does that offer still stand?”

“It does,” said Thekla.

“Then I formally deputize you and your ships as a citizen militia of the Confederation. Let’s go take those risks M. Shepard was talking about.”

“This is Normandy,” I cut in, glancing at a status display. “Admiral, our fleet will be prepared to make an FTL jump down-system in . . . just under three minutes.”

“Understood. Please coordinate the maneuver with my flag captain. Tardieu out.”

I took a deep breath, held it, released it along with a great weight of tension.

Vara and Shepard shared a quick glance. “Sometimes it does work,” he observed.

“Well. For you it might,” she said, amused.

Five minutes later, we and the Third Fleet jumped into FTL. Down toward Sol, and the Second Battle of Earth.
30 November 2580, Earth Orbital Space

*Boom.* *Normandy* dropped out of FTL about a hundred thousand kilometers above Earth, the transition shock echoing through our hull.

“Sensors,” I commanded. “I want a map now.”

“All active and passive sensors at maximum sensitivity,” reported ARGOS.

“Access codes for the Confederation fleet network are green,” said an asari technician at the intelligence board. “I have a handshake. We’re connected to the First Fleet sensor grid.”

“Show me.”

The status display lit up with a map of near-Earth space: the planet at the center, a large white icon indicating the Citadel in geosynchronous orbit over the London meridian, Luna off to one side. Two clusters of blue icons indicated the First and Second Fleets, maneuvering into position from Earth orbit and the Earth-Luna L5 point. A third cluster, of mixed blue and green icons, indicated the Third Fleet and our diplomatic ships, dropping out of FTL behind *Normandy*.

Even as I watched, the ships nearest us all acquired acceleration vectors, as we moved to defend Earth. I could feel the ship leaping to full military speed, twenty gravities straight at the *valdarii*, the Third Fleet and diplomatic ships falling in behind us.

There, about thirty degrees ahead of us and at the same distance from Earth: a swarm of red icons, all of them marked “unknown.” I made a query through my *daimon*, counting twelve ships of dreadnought or fleet carrier size, almost a hundred of cruiser size, hundreds of smaller vessels. It seemed a very credible invasion force, although the *valdarii* didn’t have much of a numerical advantage over the Confederation forces on hand. Their main advantage appeared to be a tight, compact formation. Our ships had to mass from positions scattered across half a million kilometers of space.

Just behind the barbarians, I saw a small spherical icon, indicating the terminus of the wormhole they had used to reach Sol from halfway across the galaxy.

Then I did a double-take, and frowned. The icon was big enough to register as something other than a dimensionless point, even on that scale.

“Kalan, just how big is that wormhole terminus?” I asked.

The quarian had already pounced on his favorite sensor board, directing *Normandy*’s instruments at the hypersphere-slice hovering over Earth. “Over a thousand kilometers across. It’s amazing to witness a Morris-Thorne bridge that’s big enough to see without a microscope. The *scale* of it!”

“The *valdarii* couldn’t possibly have set up that wormhole on their own,” said Miranda. “The technology is millions of years past anything we or the barbarians have.”

Shepard nodded. “The Adversary is here, taking a hand in this.”

“Why do they need a wormhole that big?” Vara wondered.
I happened to be watching Kalan when he frowned and tapped at his controls. Then his eyes went wide with shock. “Keelah!”

“What is it?” I asked.

“There, behind the valdarii fleet. It must have emerged from the wormhole last.” Kalan caused the tactical display to zoom in on the enemy and their wormhole terminus. A new red icon appeared there, almost as large as the terminus itself, its velocity vector already pointed in the direction of Earth. “It’s a minor planet. Diameter about nine hundred kilometers, mass just under ten to the twenty-first kilograms.”

“About the size of Ceres, out in the main belt,” Shepard observed. “What’s its trajectory?”

“Working that.” Kalan’s fingers flew, and from his expression I could tell he and Tekanta worked together at blinding speed. “We need more data. It’s under power, making a course correction!”

“Goddess,” murmured Vara. “It’s a planet-buster. They intend to destroy Earth.”

“The Adversary again,” said Miranda, her voice flat. “There’s no way we or the valdarii could use a planet that size as a projectile.”

I nodded. “ARGOS, full priority to Kalan’s board for all data from the Confederation net!”

“Acknowledged.”

Suddenly Kalan had access to telescopic data, from instruments on a baseline many thousands of kilometers long. Within moments he had an answer. “Negative. Unless they can accelerate at a ludicrous rate, the trajectory is not aimed for a collision with Earth. Closest approach will be in thirty minutes, about forty thousand kilometers up.”

“That’s still close enough to do some damage on Earth,” said Miranda.

“Right. The object is about one-hundredth the mass of Luna, but it’s going to pass within one-tenth the distance, and tidal effects vary as the cube of the distance. The net effect is going to be a tide about ten times as high as their usual lunar tide. Earth’s oceans are going to slosh a bit, and some fault lines may move.”

“Vara, broadcast a general warning to Earth,” I snapped. “They’re going to want to evacuate coastal regions and earthquake zones, as best they can.”

“On it.”

Shepard had been frowning, as if trying to reason something out. Now he grunted, as if someone had punched him in the gut. “Of course! Where will the Citadel be when that thing makes its closest approach?”

Kalan stared at him, his eyes vacant for a moment as he and Tekanta made mental computations, and then he nodded slowly. “The Citadel is the target.”

“Right,” said Shepard grimly. “They’re planning to destroy the Citadel mass relay. Cut us off from any chance of reaching the Intelligence in time. Not to mention the energy release, if the Citadel is violently destroyed. It would make what happened in the Bahak system look like a wet firecracker in comparison.”

“Merciful Goddess!” I exclaimed. “That would destroy the entire population of this system, and
smash the heart of the Citadel Confederation. How do we stop it?”

“I’m not sure we can,” said Kalan. “Impact is in just under thirty minutes, but we’ll have to turn the planet much sooner than that if we want to generate a miss. Even with all our ships here, we would have to punch through the *valdarii* fleet, find the drives on that planet, and take control of them, all within the next fifteen minutes. After that, there’s no way the thing can miss.”

I glanced at the map. Confederation fleets were almost in position to engage the *valdarii*, but experience told me we had no chance of a decisive victory in so little time.

“If we can’t move the projectile,” said Shepard, “then let’s move the target.”

I glanced at him. Then some thought flashed across our telepathic link, and I understood. “Tania! We need to be on the Citadel, *fast*.”

“Understood, *despoina*.”

I felt the ship surge, Tania spinning us almost end-for-end and applying acceleration on a new vector.

“*Normandy* to Matriarch Thekla.”

A moment’s pause, then: “*Thekla here. Doctor, why is Normandy turning away from the battle?*”

Quickly, I explained our reasoning. “Matriarch, it’s important that the bulk of our fleets continue to oppose the *valdarii*, otherwise they will simply occupy the Citadel no matter what we do. Yet we also need to ensure that the Citadel survives the next thirty minutes.”

“*Goddess. You’re right, of course. Do you need anything else, while we fight the barbarians?*”

I glanced at Shepard, and heard his thought.

“Contact Urdnot Grunt, and have him send Dhark, Kagrenat, and Ruzgan with us. If they can make it onto the Citadel in time, a few hundred krogan might be useful for persuasive purposes.”

“A good thought. We are about to engage. *Goddess look kindly on you.*”

“On us all, Matriarch.”

I caught Vara’s eye, and shared her thought for an instant: both of our children on their way to face the enemy, Aspasia aboard *Olympos*, Nerylla with the Matriarch aboard *Destiny Ascension*.

*Everyone I care about is at risk today. Not to mention twelve billion humans, and the only government that can stop the barbarians before they conquer the entire galaxy.*

*Well, it’s not as if high stakes have ever stopped us before.*

I opened another channel. “Citadel Control, this is Dr. Liara T’Soni, commanding *Normandy*. Requesting a crash-priority vector and approach.”

Silence.

*Normandy* continued to open the range from the rapidly developing battle behind us, three krogan ships falling into formation in our wake. Ahead of us, the Citadel began to grow at a terrible rate, from a point of reflected sunlight, to a tiny abstract sculpture, to the massive space station it was in truth.
“Citadel Control, this is Normandy. The survival of the Citadel is at stake. Requesting a crash-priority vector and approach.”

Suddenly an asari technician turned to me from a nearby board. “Despoina, I’m receiving a transmission on a C-Sec channel.”

“Put it through.”

“Normandy, this is Executor Temerios. We’ve got a real mess on our hands here. What’s the situation in space?”

“Executor, the valdarii have brought a massive kinetic-kill weapon with them. They plan to destroy the Citadel. We have . . .” I glanced at a status display Kalan had posted. “Just under twenty-eight minutes to move the Citadel out of its way. William Shepard is with us aboard Normandy. He can operate the Citadel control systems, if he can get to the main access point in the old Council Chambers in the Executive Tower.”

“Doctor, that’s going to be a problem. The Executive Tower has just dropped off the grid. I can’t reach my own men on watch there. Not even their VI implants are on-line.” Temerios paused for a moment. “And there we go. Someone up there just triggered the siege protocol. The ward arms are closing.”

I slammed my fist down on the console. “Damn it. Executor, do you have any way to evacuate the Citadel?”

“Not with the arms closed.”

“Tania! Get us onto the Citadel now!”

“Doing my best, despoina,” said the pilot, her voice icily calm.

I found out, very soon, just what Tania thought her best needed to be.

“Collision alert!” ARGOS sent a warning through every speaker aboard the ship. “Collision alert! All hands prepare for impact!”

Crew and passengers ran for open seats. All of us snapped our safety harnesses into place with a great clatter.

I pulled up an external view, saw the Citadel appear to leap out of the darkness at us, its arms clearly almost closed and still moving. Tania was clearly putting everything on the line, accelerating hard and hoping to fly through the gap before it closed, making no provision to veer off if we failed. I gripped the edge of my console with both hands, so fiercely the knuckles turned white, and waited for obliteration.

Normandy flashed through the narrowing gap, bare meters to spare on either side.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Then I realized we had only passed the first obstacle.

We still had to slow down.

The instant we were safely inside the Citadel, Tania flipped Normandy end-for-end once more, throwing the engines into full emergency power. The entire ship shook hard, jolt after jolt rattling us about in our seats. I spared a moment of concern for anyone who might be in Citadel airspace at that moment, having to dodge the enormous spikes of star-hot plasma generated by our engines at
full thrust.

I heard a low-voiced chant. Tania murmured a fervent prayer, even while she carried out the most audacious maneuver of her life.

I glanced at the external display, and immediately wished I hadn’t.

*Normandy* arced down out of the Citadel’s central cavity with appalling speed, standing on its drive flares, canted slightly upward to aerobrake.

The tall buildings of one of the Wards reached up to slap us out of the sky. At the last moment, Tania maneuvered to the side to avoid smashing directly into one particularly tall structure.

*Slam*. The ship lurched, a glancing blow. The power flickered for a moment.

*SLAM*. A blow like that of an angry goddess, somewhere to the stern. We suddenly found ourselves in a flat spin, and the lights went out entirely.

Then it got worse. Much worse.

The final series of collisions felt like the world coming to an end. I heard screams, the sounds of tearing metal and shattering glass, a muffled explosion as something volatile erupted below-decks. My safety harness yanked at me like the hand of an enraged giant, until I knew nothing but pain and thundering darkness.

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I’m not sure how long I was unconscious. I don’t think it could have been more than two or three minutes. When I could attend to the world around me again, I found Shepard bending over me, muttering curses as he undid my safety harness.

“Shepard?” I blinked up at him. “Why are you standing at such an odd angle?”

“Because *Normandy*, or what’s left of her, is almost upside down,” he told me. “Come on, Liara, we’ve got to get out of here. Careful.”

I stood on what had been a bulkhead a few minutes before, painfully rising to my full height, and looked around me. “Merciful Goddess.”

My ship was a wreck. Suddenly I was reminded of the first *Normandy* in its final moments, over Alchera. The power was out, water and flame retardants were spraying everywhere, consoles and displays smashed, and seats pulled out of their housings. The surviving crew had just begun to move painfully about.

The entire ship, forward of bulkhead five, was simply gone. The bridge, and half of the control corridor, had been smashed away by some collision. My heart sank as I realized Tania Kethys was almost certainly dead.

I sent a thought through my daimon. {ARGOS?}

No response. The AI must have gone down in the crash.

{Daimon-to-daimon network,} I commanded. {Sound a roll call.}

The VI required only a few moments to comply. Six dead or unaccounted for, including poor Tania.
Shepard was matter-of-fact as any soldier who had seen comrades die before. “This could have been worse. Any crash you can walk away from, right? Miranda is okay, she’s got a team working to locate casualties and start evacuation. Vara and Kalan have already cleared a way out up forward. I’ve got Kamala and Grunt fetching as many of the security detail as they can, with weapons and armor.”

“You think we’re going to have to fight?”

“That’s certainly how I would bet.”

I checked the internal chronometer on my daimon. “Twenty-two minutes to go.”

“Less than that,” he told me. “The Citadel can’t accelerate very quickly. If we’re going to generate a miss, we need as much time as we can get.”

“Then we had better get moving.” I turned toward where the bridge compartment had once been, stumbling as I moved over wreckage. As I moved, I accessed my daimon again to make a call.

{Executor Temerios?}

{Here, Doctor. Spirits, that was terrible!}

{Where are we?}

{You came down in Kithoi Ward, not too far from the Presidium access. I’ve got fire-and-rescue teams on the way. You did a lot of damage on the way in, Doctor.}

I reached the vast gap in the ship’s hull, saw Vara and Kalan standing at the bottom of a makeshift ramp. With their help, I climbed down, onto a devastated street in the Wards. The air smelled heavy with smoke, and I could see we had set fire to several buildings during our final catastrophe.

Goddess forgive me. I can’t begin to count how many people we killed on the way in.

{I can see that,} I told the Executor, suddenly feeling very weary. {If we fail, this is only the beginning. Every living thing in Sol system may be dead before the day is out. We must get Shepard to the Executive Tower as fast as possible, and deal with anyone who’s inclined to get in our way.}

{Doctor, you do realize that probably means the President, and members of the Spectre corps on executive protection detail?}

{Yes. Executor, is that going to be a problem for you?}

I could almost hear the turian veteran’s long-suffering sigh. {No. I swore an oath to defend the Confederation Charter first and foremost. Under the circumstances, I think we can consider the man currently occupying the executive office to be an enemy domestic.}

{Good. We had three krogan ships following us in. Did any of them make it?}

{No, Doctor. Looks like you’re on your own, although I’ll give you as much support as I can.}

{What we most need is transportation.}

{You’ll have it.}

I looked back at the wreck of Normandy, and for a moment I could feel my heart breaking.
Nerylla, Pala, now Tania dead, and all the others. ARGOS may be gone as well.

Not to mention another Normandy. She was a beautiful ship. She didn’t deserve this.

We gathered in the street, those of us healthy enough to carry a gun and not needed for disaster response. Shepard, Vara, Kalan, Kamala, Grunt, four asari from my security detail, and me. A full squad of C-Sec officers joined us, with heavy transport. We soared up into the smoke-filled sky, on our way to the Presidium.

Fifteen minutes to save the galaxy, one more time.
It all felt horribly familiar.

Once more, my friends and I moved to storm what had once been called the Council Tower. Once more, a madman had occupied the place, and we had only minutes to wrest control of the Citadel away from him before the end of everything.

Shepard heard my thought, and glanced at me with a grim smile. “Yeah. Except this time, the scary Reaper agent trying to take over the Citadel is me.”

I caught one or two C-Sec officers giving Shepard a very uneasy glance.

Perhaps this isn’t the time for ironic humor, love.

“You’re right,” he said aloud. “Liara, Vara, there’s something we should do before we hit the dirt. Both of you should know what to do at the primary Citadel controls, in case I don’t make it.”

I exchanged an apprehensive glance with Vara, but then she only nodded decisively. “Three chances are better than one.”

“All right,” I agreed.

Suddenly I could feel a flood of data pouring over our three-way link: access codes, key sequences, decision trees. None of it felt like verbal knowledge, anything I could explain, but I felt confident I could save the Citadel. All I would need was a few moments with the control interface in the old Council chambers.

Shepard nodded, and turned to check his weapon and gear one last time. Vara and I did the same, me with my sidearm, my bondmate with her sword, all of us checking the status of our pressure suits.

Then the C-Sec transport carrying us came to a halt, the side panels flying open. Shepard leaped out amid a C-Sec assault squad, Vara and me an instant behind him.

At least this time, we didn’t have to climb the Tower from the very bottom. C-Sec brought us in as high up as they dared, hovering beside the Tower, close enough that all of us could leap across and land on the structure’s side with our magnetic boots already active.

We found ourselves in the middle of a free-fire zone.

When we fought Saren, most of the Tower’s defenses had been inactive, only a few turrets turned against us as we climbed. Not so on this occasion. We took fire from the moment we appeared, and casualties began almost at once.

The Spectres must be on guard and manning the defenses. This is not going to be easy.

I saw one turian C-Sec officer take a plasma bolt almost in her center of mass, smashing through her shields and incinerating her instantly. Kamala almost shared the poor woman’s fate, jinking aside and hurling herself into cover barely in time.
Then C-Sec began to lay down counter-battery fire, and the immediate danger to us decreased. We could begin to advance, moving carefully from cover to cover, while projectiles flew and explosions boomed on all sides.

Shepard fired his weapon, his targeting as inhumanly accurate as always, taking out turrets ahead of us.

Grunt roared, charging across a stretch of open ground, smashing into a suited figure wearing Spectre insignia.

Kalan found a sniper’s nest for himself, and began to place shot after shot on the barriers protecting the defense turrets. One by one, they went down and the turrets went silent.

Kamala fought like a whirlwind, laying down fire, flinging overload charges to bring down Spectre shields, and then dashing forward with a few asari commandos or C-Sec officers for close-quarters combat.

We made progress, but it wasn’t fast enough. We had a time limit, and whether the Spectres realized it or not, all they had to do was keep us at bay.

“This isn’t working,” said Shepard after a time, over the comm channel.

“I agree,” said Kamala. “Don’t see what we can do about it.”

“That depends on how big a noise you can make.”

“Try me,” she said, and I could hear the daredevil smile in her voice.

Thirty seconds later, Kamala set off a big, flashy demonstration against the Spectre positions, making it appear that she hoped to overrun them by main force. With her went Kalan, Grunt, and all our asari and C-Sec allies.

That left Shepard, Vara, and me to dash up the side of the Tower, along a trench out of sight from the main axis of our attack, aiming for a maintenance hatch that led directly to our objective. The same hatch Shepard, Ashley and I had used against Saren, in fact. Hopefully none of the Spectre corps had an interest in ancient history.

Fortune seemed to favor us. We avoided further resistance, the defenders deployed elsewhere. After a few moments, we emerged into the chambers, finding them dark and apparently deserted. If the Spectres had posted a rear guard, it was small and unobtrusive.

The three of us flitted from cover to cover, climbing the long staircases, moving off to one side to avoid being seen. All of us moved in dead silence, not even speaking over our comm net. We relied on our telepathic connection to coordinate, plan, and watch in all directions at once.

Then a terrible roar erupted from just to our left, closer than I could have believed possible. I barely had an instant to turn and look, and then a massive shape hurled itself out of the shadows. I saw a krogan in full battle armor, running at lightning speed, slamming into Shepard with terrible force.

Had he been out of his armor, the impact would likely have shattered every bone in Shepard’s body. As it was, I heard the explosive grunt as the impact knocked the wind out of him. Arms flailing, balance lost, he went off the edge of a balcony, Varag Tachar still holding onto him.

I threw myself to the railing. “Shepard!”
Far below, I saw them fall through the crystal roof of the old Council gardens, down into the space where Saren had fallen when he died. Already Shepard had recovered somewhat, grappling with the krogan Spectre, the two of them tearing at each other with horrible brutality.

“Liara.”

Vara’s voice seemed utterly calm. Even before I looked in her direction, I could tell her attention had focused elsewhere. She drew her sword, holding it in a low-guard position, and began to advance slowly in the direction from which Varag Tachar had come. There, in the shadows, I could see a pair of eyes glittering under a hood, and almost nothing else.

“Get to the controls, Liara. I’ve got this.”

From down in the gardens, I heard another krogan roar. The shape in the shadows moved forward, just enough for me to pick out detail: a female turian in dark combat gear, just a hint of red-purple biotic corona around her head and shoulders.

Vara stepped up her pace, almost to a full run, her biotic corona snapping into existence, her sword rising into the air. “Eulalalia!”

I turned, trying not to think about what might happen to either of them, and sprinted for a ramp that led down to the Petitioner’s Stage.

Shepard fell over twenty meters in a cloud of crystal shards, the shock of hitting the ground almost worse than the impact of Tachar’s first strike. At least the krogan didn’t land on top of him.

Post-Reaper-level battle armor, internal bone and muscle weaves, nanotechnology buffering his tissues – Shepard lived. He didn’t even take serious injury from the fall. An instant later, he regained his feet.

Tachar was fast. Terribly fast, even for a krogan. By the time Shepard stood upright, the Spectre had already recovered his own balance. He stared at Shepard, mouth gaping in a krogan snarl.

He didn’t charge. He didn’t throw his considerable biotic power. Not yet.

Instead, he activated his omni-tool and touched three controls in rapid succession.

Shepard recoiled as a shrill tone sounded, incredibly loud, so loud he wondered how his ears could survive the experience. Then he realized that the sensation wasn’t truly a sound at all. It was a symptom of neural feedback, as some foreign signal interfered disastrously with the link between his nervous system and his gear.

The gear which instantly went into catastrophic shutdown.

Shepard’s weapon turned into a dead lump of metal and ceramic in his hand. His armor shivered, vibrated, and then slumped into a pile of nanotech goo on the ground. Within moments, he found himself standing in nothing but a navy-blue bodysuit.

“There,” rumbled Tachar, grinning widely as he saw Shepard’s shocked expression. “Salarian countermeasure, something the little lizards developed while studying Reaper tech. Good to see it actually worked. Should even up the odds a little.”

Only then did the krogan advance to the attack.
Alia Nerinn stood poised, every muscle in her body in a state of maximum readiness, and watched as Vara charged her.

Twenty meters away. Ten meters. Five.

At two meters, Nerinn dropped into a flash-charge, all at once and with no obvious preparation. A flash-charge that would carry her through Vara’s position, dragging venom-loaded talons through the asari’s body. A certain death-blow, if not a quick one.

Vara wasn’t there. She had suddenly flash-stepped two steps to her right, apparently teleporting into place in a flare of blue light. Her blade slashed outward, on a line to cleanly take the turian’s head off.

Nerinn chained one flash-charge into the next, her corona blazing with crimson light for an instant, making a hairpin turn with a wild slash of her talons.

Vara vanished, reappearing an instant later, two steps behind her previous position.

Nerinn countered, blinking through space, appearing behind the asari.

Vara wasn’t there. Again.

*Flash.*

*Flash.*

*Flash.*

I stepped up onto the Petitioner’s Stage, looking to all sides around me, wondering if any more enemies might be lurking in that vast hollow space. For the moment, I saw nothing and no one. In the back of my mind, I felt aware of Shepard and Vara, both engaged with their own enemies, but far beyond my reach.

“Liara T’Soni,” came a loud voice over a hidden speaker system, human, male, sounding like a kindly grandparent. “Somehow I suspected it would come to this, in the end.”

*Yao Guozhi.*

I turned in a slow circle, still not seeing anyone.

“I have to wonder, Doctor, what motivates you. You held the Presidency once. In a sense, you were one of the people who created the Presidency. Then you walked away for centuries. Why fight so hard to oppose me now?”

I reached the end of the Petitioner’s Stage. Below, I could see Shepard and his krogan foe, brawling through the gardens, hammering at one another. Somewhere far behind me, Vara and the turian cabalist continued their game of feint and counter-feint, biotic artistry at work, sword against talon.

“So much at stake. You’ve lost friends in this struggle, asari who loved you and loyally supported you for centuries. You’ve lost your ship. Your past and present bondmates are risking their lives right now. Both of your children are in the battle out there in space. How much are you willing to spend, just to seize an office that doesn’t belong to you anymore?”

“The office isn’t important,” I said quietly, knowing he could hear me, wherever he waited.
“Saving billions of lives is what matters.”

A gesture, a code transmitted through my daimon, and suddenly a large holographic console snapped into existence in mid-air before me. The same console Saren had once tried to use. A master control console for the entire Citadel, installed by the Reapers millions of years ago.

“The course you are on is what places those billions of lives at risk,” said Yao. “I’m afraid I can’t permit that.”

I had only an instant’s warning, a flash of blue-white light in the corner of my eye, just long enough to slam down a biotic barrier.

Then an enormous detonation of force knocked me off my feet, throwing me back a dozen meters, blind and deaf with the concussion.

Slam.

Tachar rocked back from the blow, his massive head shaking as he tried to clear it. Then he snarled and came in again, arms reaching to grapple and tear at his human prey.

Shepard danced back.

He took stock: bruised ribs, lacerations on one arm, a deep incision along his side, one eye almost swollen shut, several teeth feeling as if they had been knocked loose. He knew he had seen better days. Krogan battlemasters hit hard. The human still stayed light on his feet, ready to block or dodge a blow and land a strike of his own.

Tachar wasn’t looking much better. Redundant systems or no, rapid regeneration or no, Shepard had done considerable damage. The krogan looked as if he began to regret his decision to arrange a close-quarters-combat duel.

Shepard decided to try a little psychological warfare.

“There’s something I don’t get, Tachar.”

The krogan narrowed his eyes, but said nothing.

“I remember you from the old days. One of Wrex’s best and most loyal men. You were there, on Tuchanka, the day we cured the genophage. You were there again, in London, the day we beat the Reapers once and for all.”

Tachar circled to his right, still watching Shepard closely, breathing heavily.

“How many children have you had since then? How much better has your life been, since the day the krogan got back a future worth having? You owe me, Tachar. So why are you so dead-set on tearing me limb from limb?”

“I don’t owe you a damned thing,” the krogan rumbled. “Shepard is dead. He died saving all of us from the Reapers. I don’t know what kind of abomination you are.”

“Okay,” said Shepard. “Granted. I’m not him, not really. I’m a construct, something the Intelligence put together to serve as its emissary. But I’ve got his memories, his personality, everything that made him the man who saved the krogan people. Some of the best of you trusted him. Why not trust me?”
“Hah. Wouldn’t be the first time the Reapers sent us someone who looked like he could be trusted.” Tachar lowered his head, staring at Shepard from under his heavy brows. “I killed a lot of indoctrinated during the war. I won’t lose much sleep over killing you.”

Then, without telegraphing the move, Tachar charged.

Shepard’s injuries slowed him down. Just enough that he didn’t quite dodge aside in time.

Forty meters away from where she began, thirty or forty iterations deep in the cycle of feint and counter-feint, Vara flash-stepped away, disengaging from the fight for a moment. As if by silent agreement, Alia Nerinn did the same. The two stared at each other across the gap that had opened between them, red eyes against smoky silver.

That was bizarre, thought Vara. I’m not even sure what happened over the last two minutes. I’m running on sheer instinct and reflex. All I know is, I can’t touch her with the blade, and she hasn’t managed to touch me with those claws. Not yet. Stalemate.

At this rate, we can keep teleporting around each other until one of us runs out of energy. Which may take a while, and I’m not at all certain I will come out ahead.

As Shepard would say, I need a game-changer.

Vara stared at her foe for a long moment, ignoring the sounds of physical and biotic combat elsewhere.

Nerinn stared back in utter silence.

Not much of a talker, are you?

That’s all right. That’s Liara’s department. Or Shepard’s. Not mine.

Struck with a sudden idea, Vara slowly moved her blade into a high-guard position, poised to dodge in any direction, as if ready to resume their duel of placement and ambush.

Nerinn’s eyes narrowed, glittering in the darkness under her hood.

Then Vara turned and ran like a thief.

Where biotics are concerned, I have always preferred finesse to brute strength. Applying telekinetic power correctly means one doesn’t need as much force, one doesn’t tire out as quickly, and one can continue performing for longer.

Which is not to say that I don’t have a great deal of force available when I need it.

That day, I needed it. Badly.

During the Reaper War, I could count on one hand the human biotics capable of matching me in raw power. Shepard, of course, after Cerberus had a chance to rebuild him to a new design. Jacqueline Nought, when she performed at her peak. Gillian Grayson, before her tragic death. No one else. In four centuries, I had grown in strength as I approached the matriarchal stage of life . . . but the human art and discipline of biotics had also made great strides toward the asari standard. Yao Guozhi had benefited from all that progress.

The man was a sledgehammer.
He had taken a page from Saren’s book, riding a grav sled so he could hover high in the chamber and look down on the battlefield. I could see him up there, blazing like a star, hurling lightning from on high like Zeus on a mountaintop. I threw myself into holding the strongest, hardest barrier I could manage, against what felt like saturation nuclear bombardment. I flung my own warps and throws when I had the chance, but I didn’t dare go on a full offensive, and nothing less than that seemed likely to reach the President.

I had to close my eyes to narrow slits, or be blinded by the coronal discharge. The whole chamber echoed to blast after blast, like a ferocious artillery barrage at point-blank range. My barrier flared at every impact, and I began to feel a sharp pain in the back of my skull.

I gritted my teeth, took a wide braced stance, held onto my barrier, and stood my ground. Waiting and watching for something to change the parameters of the fight.

Praying that would come before we ran out of time.

Tachar swayed, barely staying on his feet, his left arm useless, one eye gouged out entirely, the other glaring through a film of blood.

On the other hand, Shepard could barely see his opponent, his own face had become so badly bruised and broken. At least his arms and legs still worked. Mostly. He counted himself fortunate that his internal technology could block pain, otherwise he would probably be lying curled up on the floor.

Instead he staggered forward, raising his arms for one last attack.

The krogan snarled, nothing of the civilized being left, only an elemental creature that wanted to rip and tear its foe to bloody shreds. He put his head down and lurched forward, his own arms reaching to grapple.

Something happened. Shepard couldn’t be sure what. Only that he suddenly lay on his back, pain finally pushing through the neural blocks, a battered but very angry krogan looming over him. Blows rained down. He could feel his nose break, then a cheekbone.

Only a moment left before he felt his neck snap or his skull shatter, ultra-tech bone weave or no.

The idea came to him all at once. He didn’t take the time to critique it.

Nothing left to lose.

He pried his eyes open for last-moment targeting, then surged off the floor, his right arm lashing out. His fist missed the krogan’s massive jaw, sank instead into the gaping, roaring maw.

Tachar clamped down by reflex. His teeth clapped shut.

Shearng Shepard’s forearm cleanly off, just behind the wrist.

Arteries severed, a spray of red blood surged into the krogan’s mouth, splashed over his face. Tachar recoiled.

The pain slammed past Shepard’s neural blocks, and for the first time in a hundred terrible battles, he bellowed in sheer agony.
I felt it, over the link between us, almost as if it had happened to me.

I screamed and fell to my knees. “Shepard!”

My barrier wavered, just for an instant. Long enough for Yao to get through.

Vara felt it too, but it didn’t – quite – disturb her diamond focus.

She ran, listening for the soft sound of the cabalist’s feet behind her.

Tachar fell back, sitting on the floor of the garden, panting heavily, his mouth working in disgust.

“Krogan reflexes,” Shepard rasped, rolling to his side, then to a kneeling position, cradling his ruined arm to his side. Already the blood seemed to be slowing, internal technology clamping down on the flow. “Jam something in your mouth, and you bite and swallow. You never evolved a gag reflex, since you can survive just about anything you eat.”

“I am going to kill you slowly,” rumbled the krogan.

Shepard shrugged. “Probably. It doesn’t matter. I’ve beaten you.”

“Gah. What the hell are you talking about?”

“Blood and meat and bone, Tachar. All of it riddled with the nanotechnology the Intelligence gave me. Part of you now, no matter what else you do. In about six hours, it will be in your brain, your nervous system, your biotics. Cutting you off from the Adversary, so you can make up your own mind for a change.”

“You . . .” The krogan lurched to his feet, his remaining eye wide, hands up in a helplessly defensive gesture. “You put Reaper tech in me?”

“No. You did that. Although I didn’t give you much chance to think about it.”

“Damn you! I saw what happened to people in the war, once the Reapers got hold of them. You’ve turned me into a monster, into a thing that they can use!”

“Or I’ve been telling the truth all along. Which would mean I’ve set you free from a different slave-master that you didn’t know about.” Slowly, still cradling his arm, Shepard rose to his feet. “It doesn’t matter. At this point, there’s nothing you can do about it either way. Why not wait a few hours and see?”

The krogan stared at him.

“You’re a Spectre, Tachar.” Shepard swayed on his feet, shock beginning to set in. “So was I, once. I know what it means. You’re sworn to defend the galaxy. Sometimes that means making the tough calls.

“Here’s a good one for you. In six hours, you’re going to know whether I was telling the truth or not. But the Citadel doesn’t have six hours. It doesn’t even have six minutes. You’re going to have to decide, right now, what action to take. Kill me, then the Citadel and everyone in Sol system dies, and the valdarii win. Or help me get to the master controls before I pass out, then the Citadel lives, Earth lives, and the galaxy goes on.

“Make the call, Tachar. Make it now.”
The Spectre stood still for another few seconds. Then he made the call.

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Pain. A lot of pain. Red-hot agony, just about everywhere I had nerve endings.

I lay on the cold deck, my biotics blown out like a candle, barely able to think. I didn’t try to take inventory of my injuries, didn’t try to rise, didn’t even try to open my eyes just yet. Breathing in cautious little sips was about all I could manage. Something rattled, deep in my chest, and I had the sensation of slowly drowning in my own blood.

Yao had gotten through my barrier with a savage telekinetic blow. It had felt like slamming into a stone wall at grav-vehicle speeds. I might have survived worse, although at that moment I couldn’t recall when.

Footsteps, on the deck nearby.

“Asari,” said Yao, his voice no longer gentle or kindly. “You think the whole universe orders itself according to your whims. So arrogant.”

I stirred, moaning with the pain, and opened my eyes. I could see him standing a few meters away, watching me where I sprawled on the deck. I considered calling up my biotics again, reaching for my sidearm, anything to put up a little more of a fight. It all seemed like too much trouble.

“Fragile, though. You break as easily as anyone else, in the end.”

Blue-white light ripped at my eyes, forcing me to squint. His corona burned bright, preparing a death-blow.

Behind him, something moved.

His eyes flew wide. He made a small sound. His corona guttered out.

I blinked, unsure of what I saw. It looked as if Yao had suddenly grown a sword-blade, red with his own blood, from the center of his chest.

“We’re not the only arrogant ones,” said Vara. Then she sent a surge of biotic force through her sword, savaging Yao’s body from within as she withdrew the blade. “For Nerylla, and Tania, and all the others you’ve murdered, you nothos.”

Yao fell to his knees, and then toppled to the deck next to me.

I found I could move my hand, barely. I reached across the gap, my fingertips just brushing the President’s face. His eyes never left mine, staring with mute incomprehension until they went dull.


“Right,” came another voice. Shepard climbed painfully onto our level, leaning on Varag Tachar. Or perhaps the krogan leaned on him. It didn’t seem to make much difference.

“Hold it, Nerinn,” rumbled the krogan. “Stand down.”

Vara whirled, reminded suddenly of her pursuer. She found the turian cabalist standing less than three meters away, talons out and eyes wide.

“You can’t be serious, Tachar.” I heard Nerinn’s voice for the first time, surprisingly mellow, a smooth contralto. “These people just killed the President.”
“I know,” said the krogan. “Right now, we need to survive long enough to sort it all out. Stand down, and let them move the Citadel to safety.”

“Thanks, Tachar,” said Shepard. “Here, Vara, you’re the only one of us who’s in good shape. You work the controls, while I look over your shoulder. I can explain to the Spectres as you work, so they know we’re not about to open the relay to dark space and let the Reapers come flooding in.”

Vara nodded, cleaning her blade of the President’s blood with a flick of her wrist and a final surge of biotic force. She sheathed the weapon and stepped up to the master control console.

A few moments later, I could feel a subtle vibration in the deck under me. I heard nothing, didn’t expect to hear anything, but the tatters of my biotic sense could feel space twisting around us on a massive scale. The Citadel began to move.

I wondered whether we had been in time. Then I felt something inside me fall over a precipice. The pain receded behind a wall of numb shock, and I lost consciousness.
Recovery

3 December 2580, Vertorios Medical Center, Presidium Ring/Citadel

I dreamed strange, disturbing dreams for a long time after that. I drifted, alone in a hostile and unforgiving universe. I walked lost amid busy crowds, ignored, unable to get anyone’s attention. I wandered, unable to find my way home, unable even to remember whether I had a home to be found. I moved from darkness to darkness, shivering in the cold, certain that everyone I cared for had gone beyond recall.

After a time, I began to think I had died and found an abandoned hell of my very own. A place specifically designed for someone who kept getting her friends killed.

*Patēr, don’t be afraid. Come back to us.*

I noticed it, there in the darkness and the cold. A small, warm pressure.

Someone holding my hand.

*Please, patēr.*

I ignored the shadows of my unconscious mind, the disorientation caused by terrible injury and strong medication. I ignored the terror that threatened to freeze my soul. Instead I concentrated on that one small sensation, on the ghost of a voice whispering in the back of my mind.

The shadows and monsters didn’t want to let me go. They shrieked and gibbered at me, showed me terrible visions, racked me with pain and fear and remorse. Yet through it all, the warmth never departed from my left hand.

It created a lifeline. I followed it, out of the depths.

Eventually the darkness took on a different quality, that of closed eyes in a dimly lit room. I still felt cool, but not freezing, and I realized I only needed another blanket. Something uncomfortable held my face motionless, dove down my nasal passages and my throat.

Someone still held my hand. I squeezed, just a little.

“Patēr?” A gentle voice, just beside me on the left.

I cracked my eyes open. It seemed to require a lot of work.

I saw a blue blur. A moment of blinking to clear my eyes, and the blur became an asari face. *Nerylla,* I didn’t quite say out loud. I thought it wise to avoid using my voice, past the obstruction in my throat.

“She’s awake!” my daughter exclaimed, bending close to examine me. I heard movement, elsewhere in the room.

“Thank the Goddess.” Vara this time, looking pale and drawn.

I tried to send her a thought, but either my brain was out of order or it had been too long since our last joining. I “heard” nothing but silence on my link to her and to Shepard.
Vara must have seen something in my face, because she bent close and touched my cheek gently. “Don’t try to talk, love, don’t try to do anything. You’re in intensive care. Miranda and the doctors here agree, you’re going to be fine, but Yao’s last blow did a lot of damage. You’re going to be here for a few days.”

I thought about objecting, demanding to be taken back to Normandy, but then I remembered that the ship was so much wreckage in the Wards.

*I suppose here is as good as anywhere else.*

I tried to ask a question, using only my eyes.

“There will be time to worry about that later, Liara.” Vara pulled a chair over, sat down leaning on the bed-rail beside me, her hand still on my arm. “No more of our people were badly hurt after Normandy went down. We won the battle in space, Nerylla and Aspasia are both fine, Matriarch Thekla is fine. It was a hard-fought thing, Aspasia tells me, but eventually the valdarii disengaged, retreated through their wormhole to Goddess-knows-where. Now the wormhole is gone, and Earth space is swarming with Confederation warships. They won’t be able to ambush us that way again.”

My lips twitched, tried to form a syllable.

“He’s fine too, all things considered.” Vara smiled. “You’d hardly know he had a krogan bite his arm off only three days ago. He’s up and moving around, and the wound already looks completely healed. Of course, he complains bitterly about having to do everything one-handed, and with the wrong hand at that.”

Against my better judgment, that got a small chuckle from me. Then my throat closed, my stomach rolled, and I had to close my eyes to concentrate on not throwing up.

*Really really do not want to do that while lying on my back with a tube down my throat.*

Then, quite suddenly, I fell asleep again. This time, thank the Goddess, I didn’t dream.

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4 December 2580, Vertorios Medical Center, Presidium Ring/Citadel

Shepard found me sitting up in bed, that damnable tube out of my throat at last, picking at a plate of bland hospital food. He took one look at me and broke up laughing.

“Oh dear. Liara, you should see your face. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you this disgusted with the universe.”

The worst of it was that I couldn’t snap at him as he deserved. One could argue that he had taken the worse injury. Even if I wasn’t mobile yet, at least I still had all my parts.

“I’ve never been fond of hospitals,” I told him. “Come to think of it, I don’t think you’ve ever seen me in one before. Every time I was hurt in the old days aboard Normandy, it was off to Dr. Chakwas for personalized care.”

“A much more pleasant prospect, I agree.”

Shepard pulled a chair over, turned it around, and straddled it, leaning on the back. I glanced at his face, looked down at his right arm, but saw little sign of suffering. His face showed faint bruising, and his lower sleeve was pinned up, but that was all.
He saw my glance and nodded. “Don’t worry about that. This is the worst I’ve been hurt since I arrived on Mindoir, but my internal technology means I can regenerate almost anything in time. I should have both hands back in a few weeks.”

“Good. That’s good.” I sighed, looked down at my plate again, and pushed it away in disgust. “Miranda tells me I should be out of here before long. That won’t be a moment too soon. Although . . .”

“What is it, Liara?” he asked gently, after a few moments.

“Shepard, I’m not sure what I should do once they release me from here.”

He cocked his head, giving me that patient look.

“I know. There’s still so much ahead of us. The valdarii are still out there, the Adversary still has to be found and dealt with.” Suddenly I couldn’t meet his eyes. “I’m just not sure what use I will be for those things.”

“I imagine you’ll be indispensable,” he said gently.

“Hardly,” I scoffed. “Matriarch Thekla has the political situation well in hand. Once she is President, she’ll be able to turn all the Confederation’s resources to defeating the barbarians. She’ll have you to advise her and help her work with the Intelligence. She won’t need me anymore.”

“Says the asari who came out of nowhere to become one of the galaxy’s foremost powers, and all before she finished out her second century. Come on, T’Soni, you don’t believe it any more than I do.” Shepard reached out with his remaining hand and clasped one of mine. “What’s really bothering you?”

I sighed. “I suppose I’ve been second-guessing myself.”

“Feeling the cost, now that you’ve had some time to think?”

I leaned back against the pillows and closed my eyes. “Yes. You know, there’s something I’ve always envied you.”

“What’s that?”

“Back when we were fighting the Collectors, before the Reapers themselves arrived. You gathered a band of misfits and malcontents, forged them into a team, and then led them on something everyone from the Illusive Man on down called a suicide mission. Then you came home triumphant, without having lost a single member of your team.”

“We had a lot of luck with that one,” he said quietly.

“Nonsense. You won because of your skill and leadership, not because of random chance.” I took a deep breath, let it go. “I’ve never managed anything quite like it. Every time I lead people into a fight, some of them die. This time I’ve lost my ship, and people who’ve been loyal friends for most of my life. Not to mention who-knows-how-many civilians, who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time when Normandy fell out of their sky.”

“Could you have chosen any course of action that would have turned out better?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I doubt it.”
“Then you have nothing to be ashamed of,” he told me.

“I know.” I opened my eyes to give him a moment’s mild glare. “I’m not an innocent maiden anymore, Shepard. I was the Shadow Broker for over forty years. I led an insurrection on Thessia, which the history books may call the Silk Revolution, but which I assure you was far from bloodless. I’ve held high political office on both Thessia and Illium. I was President of the Citadel Confederation for seven years, and even if we had no open war in that time, the galaxy wasn’t entirely at peace either. I have long experience with leading people into danger, and watching as some of them don’t survive it. I’ve learned not to paralyze myself with recriminations, if I truly made the best decisions I could.”

“That’s good.” He squeezed my hand for a moment. “It’s a hard lesson for any commander to learn. We must not become the kind of people who can just ignore our losses, because that path leads to something monstrous. Yet we still have to make the decisions to carry out the mission.”

“Yes.”

We sat there in companionable silence for a few moments.

“You’re still going to miss them,” he said at last.

“Yes.” I leaned back and closed my eyes again, trying not to let tears flow. “Goddess. Nerylla and Tania were with me for centuries. Ever since that day on the Citadel, during the Reaper War, when Councilor Tevos learned I was the Shadow Broker and tried to have me arrested. Do you remember?”

“Yes,” he rumbled. “They were good people.”

“Nerylla was my lead acolyte after Vara resigned the position. Calm, steady, competent and reliable. She never bonded with anyone, you know. She always said she couldn’t find anyone interesting enough to spend more than one night with. But she watched over me and my household with perfect devotion, and she was so good to the children when they were young. Vara and I both loved her like a sister.

“Then there was Tania, and she was nothing at all like Nerylla. Quick, sharp-witted, fiery and passionate. She loved people, all kinds of people, but she was always most intrigued by humans. She had a brilliant liaison with Kelly Chambers, back in the old days, one that lasted for years after the Reaper War was over. She had two children of her own, both by human fathers, both grown now.

“Pala was younger, still a maiden when she died. She came to us about fifty years ago, a kethani girl from a stubborn lineage. They were famous for never taking service with anyone, for five generations back. Yet Pala came to me, and she had to estrange herself from her mother and her older sisters to do it. I tried to talk her out of it, tried to turn her away. She simply sat down in the front portico of the house in Armali, and refused to move or to eat until I let her swear the oath. She was so proud when I finally gave in, and she never wavered from her devotion.

“Iole, the engineer. Demara, the navigator. Kleito and Phenassa, technicians. Tisene, from the security detail. People who might have had a thousand years in peace and happiness, all of them killed when the ship went down.

“No more, Shepard. I know this fight isn’t over, but I won’t have any more people dying out of loyalty to me. If any sacrifices remain to be made, I can’t ask anyone else to make them.”
He watched me, and I knew he didn’t quite approve, but he said nothing.

7 December 2580, Vertorios Medical Center, Presidium Ring/Citadel

On the day the hospital planned to discharge me, Matriarch Thekla finally came to visit.

I sat in the garden, enjoying outside air and the sound of fountains, with Vara sitting at my feet and three of my security detail hovering like shadows. I felt almost recovered, in no pain, although Miranda had warned me not to do anything strenuous just yet, or call on my biotics.

I first noticed a commotion at the entrance to the garden, and then Thekla arrived, my daughter Nerylla at her side, her own detail following along behind. Rather to my surprise, she had Shepard with her as well.

I had wondered why she hadn’t contacted me before, but the moment I saw her I understood. If it was possible for an asari Matriarch to look exhausted, Thekla managed it.

“Goddess, Liara,” she sighed, sinking onto a bench across from Vara and me. “If I’d known the Citadel was such a mess, I would never have agreed to our plan.”

I gave her a sharp-edged smile. “It’s far too late for you to back out now. Madame President.”

“I know. I’m stuck with the position until we have everything put to rights. You don’t need to look as if you’re enjoying my predicament so much.”

“Surely, you’ve made some progress,” I said, making an effort to be serious.

“We have. Nerylla?”

My daughter gave me her pleased-with-the-world look, which as always reminded me of an ailouros watching some small and unwary creature from hiding. “The initial polls look very good, pater. We already have solid majorities among asari, krogan, and turians, and a significant share of the likely voters among salarians and the minor species.”

“What about the humans?” asked Shepard.

Nerylla shook her head. “At the moment, the human electorate can best be described as confused. We did just depose a human President who was popular among his people. On the other hand, most humans have already grown very impatient with the Confederation’s inability to come to grips with the valdarii. President Yao’s apparent willingness to let all of Sol system burn has presented quite the shock to many on Earth, and Earth still carries most of the human species. I think by the time we hold elections, we will have a narrow but significant majority among your people as well. In all, it should be more than enough to get the Matriarch elected with a clear mandate to act.”

“Good.” Despite my reluctance to get back into politics, old habits die hard. I found myself making calculations. “The problem is that elections will take some time to carry out.”

“True,” said Thekla. “Fortunately, President pro tem Buthelezi was happy to see reason. He signed off on dissolution of the government this morning, specifying the minimum legal period for elections.”

I nodded. “Fifteen days.”
“Right,” said Shepard. “Meanwhile, the Navy is already redeploying, and the member states have all been asked to go to full mobilization. The *valdarii* are going to be pushed back, hard and fast, even while we hold elections. By the time the Confederation has a government again, we should be able to move almost immediately to support the Intelligence.”

“Do you think the Intelligence can hold out that long?” I asked.

A haunted expression crossed his features for a moment. “I don’t know. I hope so.”

“I have some thoughts about that,” said Thekla.

I glanced at Vara and Shepard. No, neither of them had any notion of what the Matriarch was thinking.

“There’s another theater in this war, one that we’ve been neglecting,” she explained. “The whole time they’ve been overrunning the Traverse, the *valdarii* have been moving against the Synarchy of Rannoch as well. The quarians and the geth have been fighting hard, but Ambassador Shal tells me that they’re slowly being pushed back. They need help, and if they get that help it may take some of the pressure off us, and off the Intelligence.”

Shepard shook his head. “Matriarch, I’m not sure you have the capability to deploy fleet assets that far outside of Citadel Space.”

“That is correct. The Confederation must hold the line in the Traverse until we are ready to move to support the Intelligence.”

“Then what do you have in mind?”

“The Terminus Systems,” said Vara suddenly.

It felt like a light breaking in my mind. “Of course! Illium, and the other independent worlds in the region. Call them together, and they can muster a substantial fleet. They haven’t been involved in the war so far, but they must see that if the Confederation falls, the *valdarii* will come after them next.”

“Not to mention, their strategic location makes them better placed to support the Synarchy,” said Vara.

“All true,” said Thekla. “Oh, they may not see all the implications of the situation now, but I’m sure they can be persuaded with the proper application of diplomacy. Now, who might be available who has plenty of diplomatic experience, has spent years in the Terminus Systems, and has personal ties to Illium?”

I sighed. “Goddess.”

Thekla gave me a sharp-edged smile of her own. “Now, Liara, it’s far too late for you to back out now. *Madame Ambassador.*”
8 December 2580, Earth Orbital Space

My first sight of Chandragupta came from a shuttle, soaring out from the Citadel to orbital space currently assigned to the Third Fleet. I saw an ordinary Conqueror-class heavy cruiser: long and slender with a quartet of outrigger nacelles at the stern, crimson and silver in Sol’s light, looking little the worse for the recent battle against the valdarii.

“Interesting name,” remarked Miranda at my side. “It has a human sound, but I don’t recognize it.”

“I believe it’s Indian,” I told her. “Kamala, do you know?”

“That’s right,” said the human from her place at the viewport, proud in her new deep-blue armor, the Spectre insignia displayed prominently on her breast. “Chandragupta Maurya established the first empire to rule most of India. He was a contemporary of Alexander the Great, and he defeated one of Alexander’s successor-kings in battle. He earned the title of samrat chakravartin, or universal emperor. Under his rule, India prospered and made great strides in culture and science.”

“A good omen,” Miranda observed.

The shuttle approached our new ship. Close in, I could see vacc-suited work crews on the hull, wielding torches to repair minor damage.

A fine ship. Even if it isn’t named Normandy.

I suppressed the surge of pain that thought caused, and turned to my people.

Given our losses thus far, I hadn’t ordered any of my household to follow us into the Terminus Systems. To my chagrin, although perhaps not to my surprise, everyone not in the hospital volunteered anyway. I chose Vara, Miranda as a scientific consultant, and Keana, Palethi, and Timo from the security detail. The rest I ordered to stay on the Citadel to work on salvaging Normandy, or home to Thessia.

Kamala accompanied us, reinstated as a Spectre with full honors. Kalan and Tekanta came, since we intended to support the Synarchy, and Kalan refused in any case to be parted from Miranda. Grunt insisted on coming along, as a representative of the krogan. He also anticipated some really good fighting in our future.

Shepard came too, which surprised me a little. I knew Matriarch Thekla wanted to keep him close, not least because the Confederation still needed to learn to trust him. Yet a few moments before our shuttle departed the Citadel docks, he turned up, carrying his equipment case and a small duffel-bag for his personal effects.

“I go where you and Vara go,” he told me quietly, earning an embrace and a warm kiss.

Our vehicle flew through the kinetic barrier guarding the cruiser’s main shuttle bay, and came to a landing. I could see a detachment of the ship’s officers and crew, waiting to greet us, a diverse group of asari, humans, salarians, and turians. The commanding officer appeared to be asari . . .

“Goddess!” exclaimed Vara. “That’s Aspasia.”

It was. When I led our group down the ramp, Vara and Shepard at my side, our daughter stood
there in full dress uniform, with shiny new captain’s bars at her collar. She gave me a crisp salute, all cool professionalism and enormous pride. “Welcome to Chandragupta, Madame Ambassador.”

“Captain T’Rathis,” I answered, just a hint of a proud smile to answer her gesture. “We’re very pleased to be here. Also, rather surprised to see you.”

Now she gave me her old, audacious grin. “Everything is in chaos since the valdarii attack. I only took command here about six hours ago, and haven’t had time to call. May I introduce my officers?”

I nodded, and listened with polite respect as she went down the roster of her command crew. She already appeared very familiar with all her officers. That didn’t surprise me. She was no less socially competent than her sister, even if her own aptitudes had led her into the military instead of into business or the political arena.

I introduced my own associates, for the benefit of Aspasia’s officers. For most of us, I saw polite courtesy. For Shepard, I saw a great deal of poorly concealed awe. Much of the galaxy might have been tempted to forget him, but apparently that was not the case in the Confederation Navy.

“Now, I have one more surprise for you,” said Aspasia. She raised one hand, a summoning gesture. First, we heard what sounded like footsteps on the deck, coming from behind a nearby partition. Then someone new appeared, wearing a Navy undress uniform with no rank insignia: an attractive female human with pale skin, short dark hair, and a lavish figure.

At least she appeared to be human.

Shepard did a double-take. “Is that . . .”

“Hello, Commander Shepard,” said the newcomer, her voice a smooth soprano, suddenly quite familiar.

I blinked in astonishment. “EDI?”

“Yes, Dr. T’Soni. It satisfies me to see you as well.” The synthetic platform shook hands with me, then with Shepard, and bestowed a polite nod on the rest of our party. “I see that my appearance has produced the desired effect. You appear to be surprised, yet pleased.”

“Very much so,” I said. “I certainly didn’t expect to find you here, either. I thought you had relocated to Rannoch and become a citizen of the Synarchy.”

“That is true,” said EDI. “However, the Confederation Navy hired me as a consultant several years ago, and I returned to Citadel space. My current mission is to help improve the efficiency and reliability of VI and AI systems, aboard small to mid-sized warships. I have been installed aboard Chandragupta for about eighteen months. I believe my presence was a deciding factor in the choice of this ship for your mission.”

“I can attest to that,” said Aspasia. “EDI provides this ship with some unusual capabilities, and that might come in handy out in the Terminus Systems. Then there are her close ties to both the quarians and the geth.”

“It’s good to see you again, EDI,” said Shepard. “We should find time to talk. I want to hear what your life has been like, all these years.”

“I would enjoy that,” the synthetic answered, a cool smile on her classically beautiful features. “In
return, I hope you will permit me to ask about your experiences as part of the Ascended Intelligence. That is a matter of great interest to the geth consensus . . . and to me.”

8 December 2580, Interstellar Space

Aspasia gave us a block of staterooms in officer country, one level below the cruiser’s command deck. Shepard, Vara and I shared one room, Miranda and Kalan a second, and Grunt got a third all to himself. Kamala and the security detail shared the fourth room, which promised to be uncomfortable – four people in one rather small space – but they apparently felt willing to hot-bunk. Keana and Timo were intimate in any case, Paletti was a quiet sort, and Kamala had grown accustomed to living in close quarters with asari. I hoped there wouldn’t be any disputes over the refresher.

Space on any warship is always at a premium. The rooms seemed cramped, but comfortable enough. We even found a small lounge at one end of the block, a space my acolytes could turn into an informal security checkpoint. I was careful to express our appreciation for the accommodations in public, suspecting that some of the ship’s officers had been bumped out of our rooms.

Once Chandragupta set out for the Charon relay, our group felt free to relax. I had a meal in the ship’s galley with Vara and Miranda, and then retired to our stateroom for the evening. There the ship’s captain found us, once her duty day had finally come to an end.

I glanced up when the door chimed, then opened to reveal Aspasia. Shepard was with her, the two of them sharing a smile as if one of them had just told a joke.

“There you are!” said Vara, leaving it vague which of them she meant.

“Captain T’Rathis and EDI were giving me a tour of the ship,” Shepard explained. “Naval architecture has certainly made progress since the old days.”

The corner of my mouth turned up. I wonder whether the tour included a close examination of the captain’s cabin.

Probably not, I decided. Shepard and Aspasia seemed easy with each other, but I knew both well enough not to worry. The maiden might be tempted to make a pass at Shepard, but she had too much respect for him, and for her parents, to do it casually. Besides, having our daughter try to seduce him would likely have triggered so many of Shepard’s inhibitions that he wouldn’t be nearly so comfortable with any of us now.

Aspasia sank into an open chair with a gusty sigh. “Goddess, what a long day.”

“That’s how it is, when you first arrive at a new command,” Shepard observed.

“Was it like this when you first took charge of Normandy?”

“Worse,” he said, leaning against a wall and folding his arms. “I had to replace an effective and well-respected captain, someone who had been my mentor, almost a second father to me. Not to mention, we had to leave immediately to track down a rogue Spectre, who turned out to be trying to destroy all of galactic civilization.”

“Well. This mission isn’t quite as critical as all that.” Aspasia peered at us. “Mata, patēr, are you sure you’re both all right?”

Vara glanced at me, deferring to my opinion.
“Don’t worry, Aspasia, we’ll be fine. I’m feeling recovered from the fight, and both of us have traveled aboard military ships before. I’m more concerned about you.”

“Don’t be. I was due for a command, and more than ready. I will admit that the timing surprised me.” She gave us a sharp grin. “Fortunately, both of you always taught me to land running.”

I nodded, pleased.

“Terrible, what happened to Normandy,” she said, the smile evaporating. “It’s hard to believe that both Nerylla and Tania are gone, and so many others. EDI asked about ARGOS . . .”

“ARGOS will be fine,” I told her. “Much of her sensorium was damaged, but her AI core was well protected. I was able to talk to her before we came here.”

“That’s something, at least.” Aspasia leaned her head back against the cushion of her chair, surrendering to fatigue for a moment.

“What do you think of your new command?” Vara asked her.

“It’s very fine,” said our daughter, recovering some of her enthusiasm. “I have a superb command team. The crew shows a few gaps, but there’s nothing we can’t work around while we shake down. My biggest concern is some of the ship’s systems. She took minor damage during the battle, and the engineers are still hunting down some transient faults. EDI is an enormous help, of course.”

Vara nodded. “So, what about this mysterious human we keep hearing about? Does your new assignment mean a separation?”

For an instant, Aspasia looked uncomfortable. “Well, yes, but that’s actually for the better. I suppose I should finally tell you who it is, if the three of you will promise to keep it to yourselves.”

“Of course,” I told her. Vara and Shepard both nodded.

“I’ve been having a liaison with Paul Stratemeyer,” she admitted.

Oddly, it was Shepard who first frowned in surprise. “Isn’t he Admiral Tardieu’s flag captain?”

Vara’s eyes went wide. “You were sleeping with your immediate superior?”

“I’m afraid so.” Aspasia braced her shoulders, as if accepting a load. “We tried to be discreet, only meeting when we were both on leave and no one we knew was close by. I think we succeeded in not letting it interfere with our work. Still, yes, it would have been terrible if anyone discovered us. I certainly wouldn’t have been given this assignment.”

I nodded slowly. “On the other hand, I would be willing to bet that Captain Stratemeyer was instrumental in convincing Admiral Tardieu to disobey the President’s orders to arrest or kill us.”

“Well, yes. Paul felt he knew you, patēr, and he knew better than to believe you could be a pawn of the Reapers. He was very persuasive at the critical moment.”

To my surprise, Shepard chuckled. “Well, that certainly wasn’t an example of good judgment, Captain, but you wouldn’t be the first to find yourself in that position. I almost did myself.”

“I wasn’t in your chain of command,” I pointed out.

“No, but I suspect if you hadn’t been there, Ash would eventually have made a move. She almost did anyway, regs or no regs, never mind the asari competition.”
I gave him my best down-the-nose aristocratic glare, evoking a chuckle from Vara. “So,” she said, “now that you aren’t Captain Stratemeyer’s subordinate . . .”

“We probably won’t see each other so often now,” said Aspasia, “but we won’t have to sneak around anymore. I think we’re better off.”

“This is serious, then.”

Our daughter took a deep breath. “Yes. I think it is. He’s a remarkable man, and I don’t think it would be at all difficult to spend the next few decades with him. The only thing I regret is the timing.”

I didn’t understand for a moment, but then it struck me. “You’re concerned about your age.”

“Right.” Aspasia sighed wistfully. “He wants children. I want his children. But I still have sixty or seventy years before my body decides it’s ready for that.”

“That’s how it is, for asari maidens,” I murmured, exchanging a somber glance with Shepard. He and I had been in a similar position, even before the Reaper War and his untimely death. Worse, since I had been barely a century old at the time. “How old is Captain Stratemeyer?”

“He had his fiftieth birthday a few weeks ago,” Aspasia told me.

I did some quick arithmetic, and nodded in satisfaction. “I see. At worst, he will be in late middle age by the time you are ready to start a family with him. There should be time.”

Vara shook her head, pragmatic as always. “It’s much more likely that the two of you will grow tired of each other before then.”

“I know.” Aspasia deliberately put on a daredevil smile for us. “We’re willing to make the gamble.”

“Good for you.” Vara’s expression became predatory. “Now, I insist on an introduction as soon as you can arrange it. Giving your adult daughter’s lover an intimidating cross-examination is one of the great pleasures of being a parent.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Aspasia became serious. “We should reach Illium late tomorrow. How long do you think we’ll be there?”

“A day or two, that’s all,” I told her. “Long enough to meet with your namesake, and probably with the rest of the Twelve as well. I expect they’ll see things our way rather quickly.”

“That should be enough. We still need to make some repairs, and we didn’t have time to restock ammunition and spare parts after the battle. Given a day, I can draw on the Navy’s line of credit at the Illium shipyards, and finish getting ready for whatever we find at Rannoch.”

“Illium won’t be the difficult part of this,” I told her, suddenly feeling uneasy. “You know what must follow.”

Aspasia nodded. “If you plan to rouse the Terminus Systems against the valdarii, you’ll have to venture into the arktos den.”

Shepard frowned. “Omega.”

“That’s right,” I agreed. “Aria’s domain.”
“I never heard much about Omega while I was on Mindoir,” he said. “Aria is still in charge? How is that working out, compared to what it was like in the old days?”

“Much better in some ways, worse in others. You’ll see.”

“Aria has gotten rather strange in her matriarchal years,” Vara observed. “Most people who have routine dealings on Omega never see her anymore, but there’s no mistaking her presence. She lurks, like an arachnid in the center of her web. Sometimes she emerges, but only to strike and feed and then withdraw once more.”

“Unfortunately, our dealings on Omega are likely to be anything but routine,” I said quietly.

Perhaps it was the setting, so much like the warship’s cabins where our love had taken root so long before. Perhaps it was seeing Aspasia again, and hearing at second-hand about her feelings for a male human officer of her own. Perhaps it was being out of the hospital, and feeling strong enough to have some hope.

In any case, once Aspasia left us for the night, I attacked Shepard.

He seemed willing enough at first, although the loss of his right hand soon presented a problem. He kept finding himself unable to undo his clothing or mine as deftly as he wished, unable to touch me where he wished, unable to hold me as tightly as he wished. It distracted him, and frustrated him.

Vara helped.

She began by observing us, amused at my sudden surge of desire for him, content at first to simply watch. Then she saw the problem. She had been intimate with him while I recovered in the hospital, so she had already found her own solutions to his one-handedness, and renewed their telepathic communion. After a few moments, she moved in and provided him with a pair of extra hands.

She could sense what he wanted to do, and help him do it, so smoothly that it was as if he had three hands and not just one. She helped us peel out of our clothes and slide into the bed together. She put her hands on my body where he could not easily reach, and transmitted the sensations back to him. Soon I could tell his frustration had gone, replaced by a growing sense of wonder.

It was a strange and magnificent thing, that first night aboard our daughter’s ship.

I ended by rising above Shepard, slowly riding his hips, while Vara embraced me from behind. Her mind and mine overlapped, sharing a flood of sensation, and then Shepard surged into the joining as well. All three of us moved together, arriving at a moment of shattering communal delight.

For the first time since we had begun our triad, the three-way joining worked perfectly. Three minds: water, fire, and air in alchemical union. One soul.

We had gathered the Citadel species together again, just as in the old days. We had beaten our first enemy, and cleared the path for a battle against the true foe. We had risked ourselves, made sacrifices, taken losses, but we had won a victory. Now we still had each other, and a love that was proving deep and rich, beyond anything we could have hoped for.

For a moment, I forgot just how terrible an Adversary we still faced. I believed there was nothing the three of us could not do, so long as we were together.

It only goes to show: one can gather centuries of experience and remain a fool.
While *Chandragupta* made her final approach to Illium, the three of us watched an exterior view from our cabin.

The holodisplay wrapped around the entire room, creating the illusion that we sat on a naked platform flying through space, no walls or ceiling between us and the outside universe. At first, we could see little through the flaming plasma flying past on all sides, but then we finished hammering through Illium’s upper atmosphere. As our airspeed fell below the local speed of sound, our vision cleared. Below us we saw clouds, and sunlight glittering on the Boreal Ocean. Then a coastline became visible in the distance ahead, bristling with verticals and soaring curves, gleaming in the light.

The towers of Nos Astra.

“It doesn’t look all that different,” Shepard remarked.

“Most of the changes don’t show from a distance,” Vara said. “Asari architecture and city planning haven’t changed much in the last two thousand years.”

“We do love our spires and arches,” I murmured.

“Looking at it now, it’s hard to believe it was once so much wreckage.” Vara shook her head. “There’s hardly a building in the entire city that dates to before the Reaper War. If you get the chance to explore, you’ll find that the city is arranged differently than you might remember. Most of it is set further back from the coastline than in the old days, up on the slopes of Mount Hyasteia.”

“What’s the significance of that?” he asked.

“It was the Illium Defense Force facilities under the mountain that saved civilization on this planet,” I explained. “Hundreds of thousands of refugees sheltered there, while the Reapers smashed Nos Astra into rubble. After they departed, the IDF provided food, prefab shelters, clean water, power, network connectivity, and industrial plant. Everything needed to start rebuilding. The survivors found that their priorities had changed. The ones who remain in Nos Astra still look up at the sky and flinch, sometimes. They like having the mountain close at hand.”

“Illium is more militarized than it used to be,” said Vara. “The IDF is a central institution now. Matriarch Pytho is remembered almost as a legend.”

Shepard snorted. “I imagine she found a way to make a profit, saving the world.”

“Perhaps not while *saving* it,” Vara mused. “I don’t think anyone came out of the Reaper War in a better position than they began it. On the other hand, she and our friend Aspasia certainly made a handsome profit helping to *rebuild* Illium.”

“I remember Aspasia,” said Shepard, standing up from his chair to move closer to the display, watching as *Chandragupta* crossed the coastline on its final approach. Serried ranks of buildings began to sweep by beneath us. “You named Captain T’Rathis after her, didn’t you?”

“That’s right.”
“I liked her. Pleasant young asari. Smart and competent. Although she didn’t strike me as the type to come out on top of the heap, in a place as nasty and competitive as Illium.”

Vara and I exchanged an amused smile.

“Shepard, you’re not the first to underestimate Aspasia,” I told him. “She looks soft and unassuming, but I can assure you, she’s more strong-willed and fiercely motivated than I am.”

He blinked, and a slow smile spread across his face. “Coming from you, T’Soni, that is one hell of an endorsement.”

“Let’s just say that I’ve always been glad Aspasia is my friend. I would truly fear having her as an enemy.”

Chandragupta turned, following a glide-path somewhat more to the east. The bulk of Mount Hyasteia loomed ahead of us, jagged and dark.

“So, were the two of you here, during the rebuilding?”

“Not really. For almost seventy years after the war, we rarely came out to the Terminus Systems at all. We had too much work closer to home. We had to help rebuild Thessia, and fight for reforms in the Asari Republics. Then the Salarian Wars broke out. Then there was the effort to pull the Citadel Confederation together, after the old Council collapsed. We didn’t visit Illium again until . . .” I took a moment to check my daimon. “The middle of the twenty-third century. That scientific conference, Vara, do you remember?”

“I mostly remember you being ambushed by a yahg in the passenger lounge, on the journey home,” she remarked.

“Well, he was a very polite yahg,” I said, giving her a tolerant smile. “You never have let me hear the end of that.”

Shepard suddenly chuckled, amused by a passing thought that neither Vara nor I could quite catch.

“What is it, love?” I asked.

“All the time I’ve spent around asari, and it still surprises me, the way you talk so casually about decades and centuries.” He grinned at us both, his teeth flashing white through his beard. “I may not be quite human anymore, but I still think like a human, and even today we can’t easily contemplate time-spans like that as something to live through.”

“For that matter, we were both maidens in the old days,” Vara pointed out. “Even I wasn’t much over two hundred. Asari maidens may have centuries ahead of them, but they don’t normally think about that very much. They’re too caught up in the excitement of day-to-day life. It’s only once we reach the matron stage that we start to take the long view.”

A thought struck me, and suddenly the magnificent view around us could no longer hold my attention. I did my best to conceal it from the others, but its emotional weight was too great. Both of them glanced sharply at me, and then at each other.

“I don’t know, Liara,” said Shepard soberly. “That’s not something the Intelligence bothered to confide in me. At least my internal technology gives me reason to hope, this time around. I don’t seem to age very quickly, or suffer much from injury or illness. I think I may have a long lifespan ahead, decades or even a few centuries. Assuming we all survive this business, and the Intelligence doesn’t insist on recalling me afterward.”
“Goddess, Shepard.” I found I couldn’t look at either of them. “To lose you again...”

“Well.” He crossed over, sat down close beside me, and took my hand in a warm left-handed grasp. “You have to know it’s a possibility, Liara, but we’re overdue for a bit of good luck.”

“I’m sorry.” I took a deep breath. “Even after all this time, I’ve never learned how to be a good asari about this. When I love, I don’t want to have to let go. I hate even thinking about it.”

“I know,” said Vara unexpectedly, a wry expression on her face. “Why else did you turn to an asari, after Shepard died, and then died again, and then Miranda left you?”

I stared at her, shocked, and felt Shepard’s apprehension beside me. “I turned to an asari, Vara, because I realized I was in love with you after all!”

She made a calming gesture. “I don’t mean it as a criticism. I’m just saying that it doesn’t surprise anyone who knows you well, that you would prefer to choose someone you could count on to be there, no matter how long you needed them.”

Slowly, Shepard nodded in agreement. “I see it too.”

“There was something in your childhood and youth,” Vara continued. “Something about the way you were raised in the Matriarch’s household. It left you tough and independent, good at living alone, not much interested in spontaneous entanglements. But when you love, you love hard. There’s never anything light or casual about it. It’s a grand passion or nothing.”

“You make me sound clingy and dependent,” I complained.

“Hardly that,” said Shepard. “It’s just part of who you are, Liara. It’s a positive, for those of us who have been lucky enough to earn your loyalty. You don’t demand any more from us than you give back.”

“Hmm.” I frowned, remembering. “Come to think of it, that may be what brought my liaison with Miranda to an end. It was good for both of us, but in the end, she wasn’t prepared to commit to a lifetime with anyone. I think I may have driven her away, by being too intense for her.”

“Well. Not to mention, that woman had a boat-load of issues of her own,” Shepard muttered.

“That too,” I agreed, giving him a shallow smile. “I’m sorry, Shepard, Vara. I’ll be brave.”

“That’s the spirit.” Shepard squeezed my hand, and leaned over to kiss me gently on my crest. “We take it one day at a time, T’Soni, and who knows? Those days may add up to all the hundreds of years you want.”

“Here’s hoping,” Vara murmured.

10 December 2580, Illium Defense Force Headquarters, Mount Hyasteia/Illium

We emerged from the ship, down the access ramp onto an immaculate IDF dock. Aspasia already stood there with a small party, ready to greet us.

It had been almost thirty years since the last time I saw my old friend in person. She seemed little changed. She still stood a little shorter than me, but taller than Vara. Her body seemed even more lushly curved than I remembered it. Her dark face was round, with a snub nose and full lips, and she peered out at the world through startlingly jade-colored eyes. She gave me a warm embrace,
careful of the elaborate robes and matriarchal headdress I had worn to this first meeting.

“Liara. It’s so good to see you in the flesh once more.”

“Aspasia.” I bestowed a kiss on her lips. “Speaking of which, there’s a bit more flesh than I remember.”

She laughed, a musical sound, and rested one hand protectively on her belly. “That’s the little one’s work, I’m afraid. Once she’s joined us out in the world, I suspect I’m going to have a terrible time recovering my old shape. At least Derias seems to appreciate it.”

I glanced over her shoulder and saw a tall, muscular turian standing at parade rest, trying to look detached and sharply professional. Difficult, with Aspasia in charge of the situation.

My friend smiled and turned to make introductions. “Liara, this is General Derias Tarkanian, Commandant of the IDF Academy, and my bondmate.”

“I’m honored to meet you, Madame Ambassador,” the turian rumbled, extending a hand for me to grasp.

“The honor is mine,” I said sincerely. I considered his face and liked what I saw: sharply competent intelligence and a fiercely protective focus on Aspasia. Beneath all that, a flash of genuine humor rarely found in turians. For a moment, I was strongly reminded of Garrus Vakarian. “Anyone who can win Aspasia’s love and respect is my friend as well.”

He made a small bow, pleased.

Aspasia turned slightly to beckon another asari forward. This one looked tall and trim, moving like a trained athlete. She wore a form-fitting uniform in silver and black, with colonel’s insignia on the collar. I guessed she was a matron, but a young one, still in her fourth century. She had a strong, lean face, violet-skinned with almost no dapples or other markings, and an extraordinary pair of crystal-blue eyes.

“This is Colonel Talia Syrtis,” said Aspasia. “She serves as the IDF’s director of Intelligence. In a way, she’s your successor, Liara.”

I shook the younger asari’s hand, giving her a polite smile. “I’m pleased to make your acquaintance, Colonel. Although Aspasia exaggerates. I never worked directly for the IDF.”

“That may be true, Madame Ambassador, but ever since the merger, much of my organization has direct continuity back to T’Soni Analytics.” Colonel Syrtis’s voice was a husky contralto, cool and crisp. “I even have a few of the analysts you originally hired, still on the payroll.”

“Then you’ll also be interested to meet my bondmate,” I told her . . .

Then I stopped for an instant, because I saw something very strange. The colonel glanced over my shoulder for just a split second, her eyes lighting on someone standing behind me. I caught a gleam in them, a fiercely intense expression, there and gone almost before I could see it.

She wasn’t looking at Vara. Her intent stare had been directed at Shepard.

“Vara T’Rathis,” I continued, as if I had seen nothing. “She was my lead spymaster for several months, through the worst of the war against the Collectors, before I turned control of the firm over to Aspasia.”
Talia made a crisp nod, and stepped forward to shake Vara’s hand as well. I had to suppress a flash of amusement, because the tall young matron positively loomed over my petite bondmate.

*Enough of that, Liara T’Soni,* came Vara’s thought through our telepathic link. *She may be big, but that just means she would fall harder in a fight.*

Suddenly, hiding my smile became slightly more difficult.

“I’m honored, Matron Vara,” said Talia. “If you have time while you are here, I’d be pleased to show you our operation. I think you will appreciate what we’ve done with it.”

“Oh of course, all of you know William Shepard,” I said to all of them, and some impulse made me add a moment’s provocation. A moment’s flashing thought to Shepard and Vara, and I could feel them agree to follow my lead. “He is also going to be our bondmate, just as soon as we find time to make the proper arrangements.”

Aspasia’s eyes flew wide. “Oh! Liara, you and Vara are going to set up a triad? With Shepard? How delightfully unconventional of you! I’m so pleased.”

“Well,” said Vara, letting just a hint of insinuation into her voice. “We’ve already set up the triad. It’s just a matter of formalizing things.”

I carefully did not permit myself to be seen watching Colonel Syrtis closely. Even so, I saw it, the moment her gaze snapped to Shepard again, and then flickered in my direction. Her face stayed cool and impassive, but even so I could sense a surge of emotion.

*Cold resentment.*

Aspasia turned to lead our party deeper inside Mount Hyasteia. I linked arms with her, and continued to chat about inconsequential matters, showing no sign that I had noticed anything out of the ordinary. Shepard and Vara followed close behind, escorted by Aspasia’s people. Unknown to our hosts, we had our own discussion along the way.

*Did you see that?*

Vara: *Not really. I did wonder what you were trying to accomplish, broadcasting our private affairs in the open like that.*

Shepard: *I think I caught it. Colonel Syrtis seems very interested in me, for some reason. She’s not happy that I’m involved with the two of you, either.*

Vara, amused: *Well, that’s no surprise. Half the asari in the galaxy would probably like to sample the famous Commander Shepard. Liara and I will have our work cut out for us, keeping the mob away from our human.*

*I don’t think that’s what’s happening, I told them. Or at least it’s not all that’s happening. Keep a sharp eye out while we’re here. Vara, can you get a message back to Miranda without being detected?*

Vara: *Probably. You want to know more about the mysterious Colonel Syrtis, I imagine.*

I sent a moment’s agreement back through the link, then turned my attention back to my friend as she led us through her domain.
10 December 2580, Nos Astra/Illium

Rather than stay aboard Chandragupta while it completed repairs and refit, we arranged for a penthouse suite at the Paramount Hotel. I retired there late in the evening on our first day, tired and frustrated. The day’s negotiations with the Twelve had not gone well.

As soon as I got to our private rooms, I found the nearest chair to sink into, and levered the matriarchal headdress off with a sigh of annoyed relief. “Goddess. Suddenly I’m reminded why I hate visiting Illium.”

Vara leaned against a nearby table, watching me intently. “What, spending the day arguing with eleven of the most selfish, greedy, and insanely ambitious asari in the galaxy doesn’t appeal?”

I opened one eye at her. “Eleven?”

“I don’t count Aspasia as one of them,” she said. “Aside from, perhaps, the insanely ambitious part. At least she deals with the world as it is, not as her money can create an illusion for her.”

“There is that.” I closed my eye again and let my head loll against the back of the chair. “I’m still amazed that I actually spent nine years as a member of the Commission, and managed not to kill anyone in the process.”

“They still remembered the Reaper War back then. It forced them to have some perspective.”

“Hmm.”

It was silent for a long minute, in the darkness behind my eyelids.

“Liara,” I heard her say.

I opened my eyes again. She caught them with a smoky silver glance. Once she was sure of my attention, she proceeded to peel herself out of her gown and advance slowly across the room toward me.

“You discover eros at the strangest times, Vara.”

“You appear to need a distraction.”

“True.” I raised my arms to catch her in my embrace, as she climbed into my lap. The scent of her skin, the feel of her warmth under my hands, the taste of her mouth, it all slipped into the back of my brain and began to do interesting things to my emotional balance.

Shepard?

I got a sense of his location: back aboard Chandragupta, conferring with our daughter and Kamala, making secure comm calls back to Earth and the Citadel. He became attentive to me for an instant, and then I caught a flash of amusement.

“I’ll be a couple of hours yet, he sent back. Have fun, and I’ll see you then.

All right. Be careful.
I always am.

I wondered for a moment what he might sense of our joining, through the telepathic link. I knew he and Vara had been intimate once or twice, while I recovered in a Citadel hospital, but at the time the link had faded out of my mind and I had sensed nothing.

Then I forgot about it, as Vara unerringly found some delicious nerve endings on the side of my throat.

I just hope he doesn’t find us too distracting.

I wasn’t quite asleep when I heard Shepard enter the room. I listened to the familiar sounds of him moving around, shedding his clothes, and visiting the refresher for a quick shower. Then the bed shifted as a large male human slid in next to us. I opened my eyes, just in time to catch a warm kiss on my forehead.

“Hmm,” he rumbled. “A bed full of sexy naked asari. Although it looks like I missed the party.”

Vara stirred at my other side, raising her head to bestow a sleepy smile on both of us.

“This time, perhaps,” I murmured. “What was so important?”

“I got a nasty suspicion sometime this afternoon,” he said. “I’ve been working with Captain T’Rathis and Kamala to track it down through Confederation Intelligence and Spectre channels.”

That got my attention. I shifted, pushing myself up in the bed so I could face him more directly. Behind me, I sensed Vara driving sleep out of her mind by an effort of will. “What have you found?”

“This place is compromised,” said Shepard. “There’s a lot of money here. Well, that’s no surprise, since the planet is designed to be the galaxy’s ultimate free port and technological emporium. What surprises me is how much of that money can be traced off-world. Someone has been buying up pieces of Illium, and they’ve been doing it for the better part of a century now.”

Vara frowned. “That’s not supposed to be possible. The planetary Charter forbids off-worlders to hold significant investment assets here, unless they move here and take up Illium citizenship.”

“Wait a moment.” I accessed my daimon and flash-read through the relevant pieces of the Charter. “That’s not quite correct, Vara. As written, the rule only affects citizens of the dominant galactic polity, which is a fancy way of referring to Citadel Space without having to come out and say it. The Charter was designed to protect Illium’s independence from the Citadel. But the Citadel only governs about half of the galaxy, even if that is by far the wealthier half.”

“There’s plenty of money out in the Terminus Systems,” Shepard said soberly. “It’s just that most of it used to be tied up in pirate fleets and warlord’s armies, and squandered on petty wars.”

“That’s been slowly changing, ever since the war,” I pointed out. “All the worlds out here are still stubbornly independent, but the constant infighting has been much reduced.”

He cocked his head, staring at me. “Do you suppose that’s part of the pattern?”

“It might be. Here, let’s look at something.”
I sent a complex series of thoughts to my *daimon*. The lights faded, and the room’s holo-imagers projected a galaxy map over our bed. Shepard lay back against the head-board, providing a broad shoulder where I could comfortably rest my head. Vara sprawled across the bed, snuggling close to my other side, watching me work.

“Focus on the Terminus Systems. We’ll put inhabited systems in white for now, their intensity indicating gross domestic product on a logarithmic scale.”

Across a quarter of the galaxy, a scattering of white pinpoints appeared, grouped in small clusters around the major mass relays. Three brilliant lights indicated the great economic powers of the Terminus Systems, one at each end of the region, one squarely in the center: Illium, Omega, Rannoch. Somewhat dimmer lights indicated major worlds: Anhur, Chalkhos-Selvos, Ekuna, Erinle, Joab, Korlus, Watson, a few others. Over a hundred more lights, their magnitude fading off into near-invisibility, indicated minor colonies and settlements.

“Let’s ignore the Synarchy of Rannoch,” I mused. “They trade with most of the galaxy, but they’re politically isolated. They can normally defend themselves against their neighbors with ease, so they have no need to make alliances or exert hegemonic influence. Now let’s have blue for Illium, red for Omega.”

One of the three brightest lights faded out. The two others took on color, deep jewel-tones of blue and red.

“Now, political influence is hard to quantify, especially since all those worlds have wildly different forms and levels of government. Still, you can learn a lot by observing where heads of state and other senior officials *travel.*”

“I don’t follow,” said Shepard.

“Well, if a world is strong and independent, its leaders won’t feel the need to leave home very often. They’re already at the center of whatever power is important to them. On the other hand, if a world is dependent on some stronger polity, its leaders will spend time there, consulting with the people who exert influence over them.”

He nodded in acceptance. “That makes sense. Colonial governors in the Alliance spend a lot of time visiting Earth and the Citadel. The Prime Minister doesn’t often make state visits to any one colony.”

“So, we check the news files,” I concluded. “For each of these lesser worlds in the Terminus Systems, how often do their political leaders venture off-planet, and where do they go when they do?”

I had been building a complex set of instructions for my *daimon* as I explained. Now I double-checked the logic, decided it was sound, and issued an *initiate* command.

It looked like magic. Over the next ninety seconds or so, while my *daimon* scanned millions of news items, color spread across my map of the Terminus Systems. A few worlds remained stubbornly white, but most of them took on either a blue or a red shade.

“Interesting,” said Vara at last. “Order out of chaos.”

“It’s not a simple matter of physical proximity,” observed Shepard.

“No,” I agreed, “but then, with the mass-relay network, it wouldn’t have to be. Anhur and Korlus are closer to Illium, so seeing them align that way makes sense. On the other hand, Chalkhos-
Selvos is all the way over on the other side of the Omega Nebula, but they’ve aligned with Illium rather than Omega.”

“A lot of those smaller worlds have turned red,” Vara pointed out. “Including some very close to Illium.”

“Hmm. What’s going on with Anhur these days?” Shepard wondered, a deep scowl on his face.

I glanced at him, remembering that he had fought in a war there long ago, before the Reapers came. “They haven’t re-instituted slavery, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Really? Given that slavery is legal here on Illium, I would have thought those Na’hesit bastards would jump at the chance to get help reversing the verdict of history.”

“No. In fact . . .” I consulted my daimon again. “Interesting. Apparently the Illium Defense Force has taken over defense and peace-keeping on Anhur, as of about twenty years ago. Part of that mission involves continued enforcement of the anti-slavery laws passed after the Anhur Rebellions.”

“Wait a minute,” Vara interjected, sounding rather alarmed. “Aspasia is in charge of Anhur these days?”

“Not formally . . .”

“She’s the one with the guns,” said Shepard. “That means she’s in charge, whether it’s official or not.”

“It would explain why Illium’s slavery laws haven’t been extended to Anhur,” I pointed out. “Aspasia despises the institution of slavery. I think she would abolish it even here, if she could.”

“Not to mention, if she can recruit on Anhur, that’s a much deeper manpower pool than she could draw from on Illium. Just what is your friend doing out here in the Terminus Systems?”

“Whatever it is, she’s not the only one involved,” I said quietly, pointing up into the map hovering over our bed, at the brilliant red star burning at the heart of the Omega Nebula cluster. “What does this look like to you?”

“A process of political organization,” he said. “Maybe even an exercise in empire-building.”

“The Twelve would never tolerate that from one of their number,” said Vara.

“They might not get much of a choice,” said Shepard. “This reminds me of a bit of human history. The Roman Republic.”

“Romans,” I mused. “Aren’t they the people you claim resembled the turians?”

“There are some similarities. Just like I can draw a few parallels between you asari and the classical-era Greeks.” Shepard shifted, his arm curving warmly around my waist. “The Romans started out with a single city-state named Rome. They had a republican form of government, not very democratic, but at least their leading aristocratic families all had a say. The city’s leaders consulted in an institution they called the Senate. Most of their political institutions were designed to prevent any one family, or any one citizen, from accumulating too much power.”

“That doesn’t sound too different from the way some ancient asari poleis managed things,” said Vara. “Or the structure of the Illium Compact, for that matter.”
Shepard nodded. “Well, for a while things worked reasonably well. But as the Romans defended themselves against their enemies, they kept acquiring more territory. Close by at first, easy to govern directly from Rome. Then, to defend those new provinces, they had to keep fighting more foreign wars, and they kept acquiring even more territory, further and further away from Rome. Soon the Senate had to build standing armies, and set up provincial governments, and assign some of its own members to take charge of them.”

What he described didn’t resemble anything from asari history. Very few of our city-states ever maintained a standing army, or tried to spread their power by raw military conquest. Still, I could see the implications. “The Senate ended up giving ambitious citizens an independent power base. One that it couldn’t easily take away again.”

“Right. Provinces where they could raise money, away from the Senate’s supervision. Armies loyal to them, and not to the Senate. Eventually the Senate lost control, and the Republic collapsed.”

“You’re saying that Aspasia . . .” I trailed off for a moment, not liking the picture I saw. “She’s building a power base for herself, away from Illium, where the Twelve can’t easily keep her in check. Income, sources of manpower, shipyards where she can build warships.”

“Maybe.” Shepard shrugged. “Ave. Ave Aspasia, Imperatrix!”

“Well, that would explain why the rest of the Twelve were so stubborn today,” said Vara. “We asari may not have seen much of this in our history, but those matrons and Matriarchs aren’t stupid. They want the IDF to protect their interests, not go out developing interests of its own.”

I nodded. “I’m guessing you think all this off-world money that’s turning up on Illium might be related.”

“I think so,” said Shepard, peering up at the map. “Some of the investment seems to be coming from Anhur, the Mil system, a few more of your bright blue dots.”

I could hear the reservations in his voice. “Not all of it.”

“No. Quite a lot is coming from Omega.”

“Going to the IDF?” Vara asked.

“We couldn’t tell that. It’s hard to trace money once it arrives here on Illium. All those numbered accounts in the local banks.”

“Aria is working against Aspasia. by supporting other members of the Twelve,” Vara guessed.

“Maybe.” I stared at the map hovering above us, trying to see patterns that stubbornly refused to come clear. “The other possibility is that Aria is working with Aspasia.”

Vara snorted in derision. “Aria would never help someone else build up her own power base.”

“She’s changed in other ways. She seems to be taking a much longer view than she once did, lounging on her couch in the upper level of Afterlife, never paying attention to anything that didn’t immediately threaten her position.”

My bondmate shook her head, still skeptical.

“Well,” I said at last. “I think I will have a word with Aspasia tomorrow. I trust her, but it would be
good to know that she’s not keeping secrets from us.”

“Sounds good to me.” Shepard peered up into the near-darkness. “T’Soni, do you suppose you could turn off the galaxy? It’s been a long day and I’m ready to crash.”

“Shepard, I’m surprised at you,” said Vara. “What did you say earlier? A bed full of sexy naked asari? And you would rather sleep?”

He made a great production of settling down under the covers, with his eyes closed. “That’s right. Big day tomorrow. Lots to do. Need my rest.”

Vara and I exchanged a look.

“I’m not sure whether to be insulted,” she said.

“I’m sure,” I told her.

“He’s taking us for granted. Already.”

“Yes.”

“What are we going to do about this?”

“Can’t hear you,” said Shepard, his eyes still closed. “Already asleep.”

A flickering thought to plan our strategy, and then Vara and I attacked.

The result was inevitable. After all, we both knew exactly where Shepard was ticklish, he only had one hand with which to fend us off, and Vara had commando training.

11 December 2580, Illium Defense Force Headquarters, Mount Hyasteia/Illium

“Yes,” said Aspasia, all pretense of lightness or frivolity completely gone. She leaned back in her office chair, behind the great desk that Matriarch Pytho had once occupied, and watched me closely. “I might have known that you and Shepard would see it.”

I leaned back in my own comfortable chair, swirling amber wine in a tumbler in my right hand, and stared at my old friend. “You admit it.”

“To you I admit it,” she said sharply. “You, of all people, understand how things work here on Illium, and why that system is fundamentally broken. Why it needs thorough revision. Rather like what you and your allies did on Thessia, in the years after the Reapers.”

“You intend to build an empire, based on military conquest?”

“Not at all,” she said, rather forcefully. “I haven’t conquered a single patch of ground anywhere in the galaxy, and I don’t plan to. Not unless the rest of the Twelve balk at the critical moment, and I’m hoping to keep them in the dark until it’s too late for them to object.”

“What is it, then?” I asked, taking a sip of my wine to cover how profoundly disturbed I felt.

“An alliance for mutual defense.” Aspasia steepled her fingers. “Common technological standards. Diplomatic protocols to forbid criminal activities, like piracy or slaving. A framework of interstellar law to resolve disputes. A system to organize mutual aid, in the event of natural disasters or other emergencies.”
“With the IDF as *hegemon*.”

“Of course.”

I watched the light shimmer on the surface of the wine. “It won’t stop there. It can’t. If it works, all these worlds will find themselves safer and more prosperous than ever before in their history. They’ll come to rely on the IDF. Eventually even become dependent on you. Then, one day, they will find you making suggestions as to how to govern their internal affairs, and they’ll have no choice but to obey.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” said Aspasia calmly. “I don’t expect matters to mature that far for decades to come.”

Despite myself, I chuckled. “Congratulations, Aspasia. You’ve become a matron.”

“Yes,” she replied without a trace of humor. “I have.”

I took another sip of my wine in silence.

“What is it, Liara?” She leaned forward, staring at me. “Do you think you’re the only asari with ambitions? You spent your second century rampaging around the galaxy, tearing down ancient institutions, building on the wreckage in whatever manner suited you. You fought the Reapers and won. You fought the Matriarchs of Thessia and won. You fought the salarians and won. You fought the Goddess-damned *Citadel Council* and brought it down in rubble. The great Liara T’Soni, most brilliant and influential asari in a thousand years.”

“I never set out to do any of those things,” I murmured, suddenly unable to hold her gaze.

“Don’t lie to me, Liara. *Of course you did*. One step at a time, you saw what needed to be done, and you did it.” Aspasia took a deep breath, and then she seemed to let go of some passion that had been driving her. Her voice softened once again. “Oh, I know, you didn’t do any of it out of selfish greed. Don’t misunderstand me. I have no quarrel with any of the things you did. I helped you do some of them. The galaxy is a better place by far for them. The fact remains that you put a lot of us in your shadow.”

“And you resent that,” I said flatly.

Suddenly she laughed quietly, a flash of the old Aspasia coming out once more. “*Why, friend, she doth bestride the galaxy like a Colossus, and we petty ones walk under her huge legs, and peep about to find ourselves dishonorable graves.*”

I blinked in confusion.

Aspasia, paraphrasing classical human literature? She is full of surprises today.

“I don’t resent you, Liara.” She took a deep breath and looked rather sad. “I simply wish you would trust me, as you once did. There are things you left undone, when you retired. Setting the Terminus Systems to rights, for example. Putting an end to all the cruelty and suffering that takes place beyond the borders of Citadel Space, ignored by the citizens back on the snug, comfortable worlds of the Confederation.”

“All right. I do trust you, Aspasia, I always have. I wish I had known how you felt about this.”

“Well. I didn’t want to make it your business.” She gave me a sharp glance. “Until you came in here, all but accusing me of who-knows-what.”
“I’m sorry. It’s just . . .”

She watched me for a long moment. “What is it?”

“I’m reminded of Nikoleia.”

“Ah.” Aspasia nodded. “Pytho’s daughter. The one who went in with Eclipse to try and overthrow her mother, and ended up rather nastily dead for her pains.”

“She wanted to use the IDF to build an empire too.”

“True. I’ve read her private journals. Her heart was in the right place, she just didn’t have any principles to tell her how to go about it. I don’t plan to use pirates and mercenaries, or a knife in anyone’s back.”

“Good. I’m sorry I doubted you, Aspasia.” I rose and crossed to her desk, extended a hand to her. “Friends?”

She took it, with a hint of relief in her face. “Always.”

Just in time, I stopped myself from offering her my help.

_She needs to do this on her own. Honestly, I hope she succeeds. Goddess knows the Terminus Systems could use a little revolution as well._

I saw it, the moment her face froze and her eyes went unfocused.

Then a thought crashed into my mind across the telepathic link. Vara’s mind, touching my own for just an instant.

_Liara!_

Then nothing.

“Goddess,” said Aspasia. “Illium is under attack.”

I felt a deep chill. “Is it Omega?”

“No. The _valdarii._”
Aspasia immediately touched controls on her desktop. Within moments, an array of holographic images appeared around the desk’s outer edge: faces, six of them, evidently Aspasia’s senior command staff.

Even in the stress of that moment, I noticed something interesting about them.

_Six command officers. Only two of them are asari. I see two turians, a human, and a batarian among them._

_That alone should be clear evidence that Aspasia is thinking on a much grander scale than the simple defense of Illium. It’s a wonder the other members of the Twelve haven’t noticed. But then, the Twelve have a centuries-old tradition of staying out of one another’s spheres of influence, the better to make a profit without wasting resources on infighting._

_Asperia, Goddess of War._

“Report,” she snapped.

“**Valdarii raiding force,**” said Colonel Syrtis, without preamble. “Emerging from a wormhole nexus at a distance of about five hundred thousand kilometers, advancing on Illium at ten gees. Centered on three dreadnought-class vessels, fifteen cruisers, about one hundred vessels in all.”

“Do we see any sign of a planet-buster?”

“Negative,” reported the batarian, an officer I hadn’t met. “No sign of troop transports either, although with that wormhole they can bring those in at any time.”

“**Despoina,** my assessment is that this is a smash-and-grab raid,” said Colonel Syrtis. “That isn’t enough force to conquer or hold Illium.”

“What is their objective?”

“Unclear,” said the tall intelligence officer. “The data seem sufficient to generate a hypothesis. I believe the valdarii are here to capture or kill your guests. Possibly Dr. T’Soni, almost certainly Mr. Shepard.”

Aspasia made a crisp nod. “I concur. All units, execute o-plan _gamma_-three. Also, immediately implement security protocols under Case Green.”

A chorus of acknowledgement, and then all of Aspasia’s officers winked out.

“Case Green?” I asked, curious.

“Two-person control on all critical functions,” she explained, “with the facility’s AI double-checking the most sensitive areas. Something I implemented a long time ago, thinking of Reaper indoctrination. Hopefully it will serve against whatever the valdarii do to influence people.”

A thought struck me. “Perhaps we can help with that. There’s advanced technology in Shepard’s blood, something to protect him from any kind of cognitive control . . .”
“Already done,” said Aspasia, calling up a set of data displays above her desk.

“What?”

“Two delegates to your summit on Palaven actually worked for me,” she explained, while she watched her displays and made control gestures. “They volunteered to take Shepard’s nanotechnology, and then they came back here to share it with the rest of my people. An asari and a turian, so I could protect my people no matter which biochemistry they have. I haven’t had time to spread the technology throughout the IDF, but my senior staff and most of the front-line officers should be safe.”

I shook my head, smiling in rueful admiration.

“Now, if you don’t mind, I’m a little busy here. You know, defending the planet.”

I took the hint and sat back down in my chair. It felt rather incongruous, watching one little asari in an elaborate forest-green gown, soft and heavy with her pregnancy . . . while she calmly directed an entire world’s military establishment during a major engagement.

She was right. I’m not the only asari who has grown well beyond expectations in the last few centuries.

After a minute, my daimon called for attention.

{Patēr, this is Aspasia aboard Chandragupta. We see the barbarians attacking. The ship is space-worthy. Do I have permission to assist?}

“Can you make use of a Confederation heavy cruiser with advanced cyberwarfare capabilities?” I asked my friend quietly.

For an instant, two green eyes flickered in my direction. “My namesake is eager to join the battle, is she? I won’t turn down the help. Have her coordinate with General Kyeriali.”

I sent the message back through my daimon, and received a quick, non-verbal flicker of acknowledgement. Then, in the back of my mind, I turned to the telepathic link.

Shepard?

I’m here, down in the main concourse. I take it the IDF is engaged in combat operations?

Yes. Colonel Syrtis thinks the valdarii are here for us, or at least for you.

That’s how I would bet too. Can we get to the ship?

Not right now. I just released young Aspasia to climb for space and assist the IDF. It’s probably for the best that you stay here under Mount Hyasteia with the rest of us. If the Reapers couldn’t destroy this facility, the valdarii probably can’t do it either, at least not without throwing a small planet at it.

For an instant, I could feel Shepard’s frustration through the link. It went against his nature to sit inactive, in safety, while others threw themselves into battle.

I get it. I don’t like it, but I get it. Where’s Vara?

I think she was going to meet with Colonel Syrtis, take a tour of their intel operation . . .
Then I felt a surge of fear, because Shepard and I both reached out for Vara’s mind at the same instant, and both of us failed. Then I remembered the burst of thought I had gotten from her, like a silent call immediately interrupted, just as the valdarii appeared over Illium.

“Aspasia,” I said aloud. “Vara is missing.”

My friend shot me a glance, annoyed for a moment. Then her mind processed what I had said, and her expression shifted to one of concern. “Missing?”

“I’ve mentioned the telepathic link I seem to have formed with her and with Shepard. I can reach him, but she’s not responding. We can’t tell where she is or what she’s doing.”

“ATHANA,” she called, addressing the AI core. “Where is Vara T’Rathis?”

“I cannot locate Matron Vara anywhere within this facility,” came the AI’s voice, cool and feminine.

“That’s not possible,” I said. “She was deep inside the mountain not ten minutes ago, on her way to meet with your intelligence officer.”

Aspasia frowned, and touched a control on her desk. “Colonel Syrtis, report at once.”

Silence.

“ATHANA, locate Colonel Talia Syrtis.”

“I cannot locate Colonel Syrtis anywhere within this facility.” The AI paused for an instant, just long enough for us to notice, and then continued: “Alert. Internal security systems have been compromised. I cannot vouch for their reliability.”

I leaped to my feet.

Thump! Aspasia slammed her fist down on the desktop. “Damn her!”

I frowned slightly at my old friend’s reaction.

Anger, but not as much surprise as I might have expected.

“She has Vara,” I said, very certain.

“I’m sorry, I can’t pay attention to this right now,” Aspasia snapped. “It’s either Vara or Illium.”

“I understand. Shepard and I will go after her.”

“Right.” Her expression went vacant for a moment, as she communed with her daimon and the AI. “I’ve given the two of you alpha-level clearance. Full access, anywhere in the facility. Go!”

I left, at a dead run.

I met Shepard at one side of the main concourse, already in his silver armor and carrying his weapon. As soon as he saw me, he tossed something in my direction, which I caught by instinct. A submachine gun. The grip settled nicely into my hand, and my daimon immediately performed a handshake with the weapon’s controls.

“Ready?” he asked.
I nodded. “Do you have any idea where she is?”

“Not precisely. Whatever Colonel Syrtis did to mess with the AI, it was effective. She couldn’t prevent people from seeing her, though. She was spotted about two minutes ago, heading down this access tunnel.”

“Did she have Vara with her?”

Shepard shook his head, a grim expression on his face. “Nobody’s seen Vara. Although Syrtis was spotted moving with a grav pod of some kind.”

“A pod big enough to convey an unconscious asari, no doubt. What are we waiting for?”

He nodded, and led the way. We moved as quickly as we dared, through automatic security checkpoints and down a long tunnel. We didn’t see many IDF personnel as we moved; most of them were already at their emergency stations. I queried ATHANA through my daimon, wondering what lay ahead of us.

Engineering and life-support compartments, storage space . . . and a hangar bay.

“She’s heading for a ship,” I said.

“That’s my guess too.”

“So, is she working with the valdarii, or is something else going on?”

Shepard held up a hand and paused for a moment, his head cocked as if listening to something, before we moved on. “Careful here. I’m getting some odd EM signatures up ahead.”

I nodded, and called up a biotic corona around my arms and hands.

“To answer your question: no data. Though if she isn’t working with the valdarii, she picked an awfully strange time to go rogue.”

“Aspasia tells me her command staff already have your nanotechnology to protect them. Syrtis can’t be under the Adversary’s influence.” I thought back, reviewing the events of the last few minutes. “Maybe it was fortuitous. She has some interest in the three of us, which we haven’t been able to track down. Maybe when the barbarians attacked, just as Vara arrived in her office, she saw an opportunity.”

“Let’s ask her some pointed questions. Once we find her.”

Just then we turned a corner, and came under heavy fire. Shepard broke one way, I went the other, and the moment we had cover we sent our own hail of gunfire down the corridor ahead of us.

“Heavy combat mech,” he shouted. “Keep your head down!”

“Don’t have to tell me twice!”

_Boom. Boom. Boom._ I could hear the mech striding down the corridor toward us, disdaining cover. It looked rather like one of the ancient YMIR models, but of asari design, shiny and sleek, with a blue-glowing ocular cluster. It fired a mini-gun back in our direction, the hail of bullets snarling through the air not a meter from my head.

_CRACK! CRACK! Dit-dit-dit-dit-dit . . ._
Shepard’s weapon clashed against the mech’s shields, not quite breaking through, each shot causing a blue-white flare of light as the massive pulses of energy dissipated. My own sidearm didn’t have such a dramatic effect, but I could see it slowly wearing away at the enemy’s defenses.

*Any moment now.*

*Flash.* Its shields went down with a hiss.

I reached out with my mind and *crushed* the thing.

It growled, the lights fading out of its oculars, and slumped to the side. Shepard hunched back behind cover . . .

*WHAM!*

I stood up, half-deafened by the mech’s self-destruct charge. “I hope Colonel Syrtis didn’t activate too many more of those behind her.”

“I doubt she expects them to do more than delay us,” said Shepard, emerging from his cover to stride down the corridor once more. “I just hope she doesn’t think it’s *enough* to delay us.”

We hurried. We encountered no more large mechs. Instead, we twice faced swarms of smaller, airborne drones. These seemed more a nuisance than anything else, although they did project a nasty EM surge, and their electronic counter-measures gave even Shepard’s targeting something of a challenge. It took us a minute or so to deal with each swarm.

It was just enough.

We emerged into the hangar bay, a small installation set high on the eastern slope of Mount Hyasteia. The bay doors already stood open, and I could see a small IDF corvette prepped and ready for departure. Colonel Syrtis stood there in a suit of heavy black armor, controlling a grav pod as it moved up an access ramp into the ship’s belly.

“Syrtis!” I shouted, and flung a powerful *singularity* across the space at her. At my side, Shepard half-crouched and prepared to launch into a vanguard’s charge.

The tall asari barely glanced at us. Her biotic barrier flared as my singularity struck, but it held well enough for her to retain her footing. She tapped another control on her omni-tool, and two gun emplacements turned toward us from either side of the hangar bay doors.

Shepard and I had a shaved second to plan, thoughts flashing through the telepathic link like lightning. Then I dove for cover to my right.

Shepard shimmered for an instant, and then vanished, hurling himself across the hangar bay to slam into Syrtis.

The intelligence officer *did not go down.* Admittedly, the impact rocked her back a step, but she must have been incredibly strong. She kept her feet and responded at once, her biotic corona suddenly blazing like a nova, her left hand making a vicious control gesture.

A devastating biotic *flare* surged directly into Shepard’s face. Even crouching behind cover, where the turrets couldn’t reach me, the glare almost blinded me for a moment. Shepard recoiled, and I could hear his deep growling snarl over our voice comms.

*Now, where have I seen that biotic technique before?*
Then both gun emplacements focused on him, and he stood amid a hurricane of flying metal.

Incredibly tough, supporting diamond-hard kinetic barriers, his armor saved his life. The sheer force of the attack still sent him flying backward, thrown off his feet.

Syrtis turned and sprinted up the ramp into her ship.

I felt a surge of helpless rage, unable to take any action for fear that the turrets would turn and tear me to shreds.

Shepard rolled to a kneeling position. Then, rather than try to surge to his feet, he braced himself and held against the punishing stream of gunfire.

I couldn’t figure out what he was doing. Then the turrets simply shut down, all at once.

*He must have hacked the firing control systems.*

I burst out of cover, bringing my sidearm to bear. Shepard rose and broke into a lightning-fast sprint.

We were just a moment too slow. The corvette’s access ramp closed, its kinetic barriers went up, and the little ship rose into the air.

“No. No!” I shouted, firing a long burst at the corvette with my sidearm. Useless.

Shepard didn’t even try to bring his own weapon to bear. Instead, he skidded to a stop and made a throwing motion with his left arm.

Something flew across the gap, something small that I couldn’t quite see. Just before the corvette engaged its main drives, Shepard’s missile struck its kinetic barriers. I couldn’t be sure, but it appeared to stick.

Then the corvette surged into maximum acceleration, leaping into the sky so quickly it seemed almost to vanish.

“Damn it!” Shepard shouted.

I made a frantic call through my *daimon.* {T’Soni to Chandragupta. Emergency!}

{What is it, Doctor?} EDI’s “voice” responding.

{An IDF corvette just took off from here, heading south-south-east and ascending at a very steep angle. Vara is on board, and not of her own free will. Can you intercept?}

Nothing for ten very long seconds, while EDI consulted with her captain.

{Negative, Doctor. I am tracking the corvette on sensors, but it is already too far outside our interception envelope. It will be able to escape into FTL long before we could reach it. In any case, we are fully engaged with the valdarii and cannot break free.}

{Damn. Thank you, EDI.}

“She’s gone,” I moaned. “Shepard, why would Syrtis take Vara?”

He took a deep breath. “To get to us, of course. Possibly specifically to get to me.”
It felt like a blade in my vitals. “Because I made it clear to Syrtis that you are involved with both of us. Thus, she became a useful hostage.”

“Maybe.” He shrugged. “It’s not like our relationship was a secret, Liara. You may have had nothing to do with it.”

I took a deep breath and forced myself to be practical. “We have to go after her. I take it you put a tracer on the ship before it got away?”

“Yeah. Although I don’t think we’re going anywhere unless Aspasia can beat the *valdarii* first.”

The Battle of Illium was a close-run thing.

I’ve read the after-action reports. The Illium Defense Force had a slight numerical advantage, but their technology seemed no better than that of the *valdarii*, and their command-and-control proved no more effective. In the end, the IDF’s sheer discipline made the difference. Aspasia’s commanders simply refused to allow the barbarians close enough to Illium to do significant damage to the planet. They fought and held, no matter the cost.

In the end, after not quite ninety minutes of fighting, the *valdarii* turned and withdrew through the wormhole, letting it close behind them. They left behind the wreckage of about thirty percent of their original force. The IDF lost perhaps forty ships, including the dreadnought *Exultant*, destroyed with all hands.

My daughter came out of the battle with honors, having thrown *Chandragupta* into the hottest part of the engagement. She destroyed no fewer than three enemy cruisers, with only superficial damage to her own command, all despite long odds and desperate worry about her mother. I had rarely felt more proud of her.

It was the worst attack on Illium since the Reaper War, but the planet itself remained intact.

The moment the *valdarii* turned away, Aspasia delegated overall command to her senior surviving officers, and called Shepard and me into her office. By then, I’d had some time to think. When I walked into the bleak space where I had once conferred with Matriarch Pytho, I felt nothing but cold anger.

“Liara. Shepard.” Aspasia looked utterly worn, the strain of the last few hours finally allowed to show on her face. “I’m sorry about Vara. Anything the IDF can do to help, you have but to ask.”

“Thank you.” I stalked up to her desk and glared at her where she sat. “You can start by telling me why you weren’t surprised when Colonel Syrtis turned on us.”

For a moment, our friendship hung in the balance. I could see it, the temptation to feign ignorance, to lie to me about what she knew. Then I saw the deliberate decision to tell me the truth.

“You’re mistaken, Liara. I *am* surprised.” She took a deep breath, one hand instinctively resting on her belly as if to protect her daughter. “Not because I didn’t see the possibility. I’ve always known that Talia was capable of betraying us. I’m only surprised because I thought I understood where her self-interest lay. I didn’t think she had a reason.”

“Then who is she?” I demanded. “She’s not just some random asari who happened to join your staff. If she has special motivations, that must mean she has a special history, and you know what that is.”
“Yes.” She held my gaze for a long moment. “She’s Aria T’Loak’s daughter.”
**13 December 2580, Sahrabarik System Space**

*Chandragupta* dropped through the Omega-2 relay at high speed, immediately swinging into a long arc that left us pointed at distant Omega.

“Omega Control, this is the Confederation warship *Chandragupta*, on detached duty,” said young Aspasia over the open comms. “This is an alpha-priority message. We require immediate consultation with Aria T’Loak.”

Silence.

“*Alert. Valdarii signatures detected near Omega.*” As always, EDI sounded perfectly calm.

Shepard and I, standing toward the back of the bridge, exchanged an uneasy glance.

“Are the barbarians attacking?” asked Aspasia.

“I detect no weapons fire. The *valdarii* appear to be on station-keeping, possibly even docked with Omega. They are also making no move to intercept us.”

“The Adversary is already here, ahead of us,” Shepard muttered.

“Well, that puts our plan right out the airlock,” I agreed.

“But not yet,” said my daughter. She keyed her microphone again. “Omega Control, this is *Chandragupta*. This is an alpha-priority message. We require *immediate* consultation with Aria T’Loak.”

Then I saw the tactical display light up.

Behind us, the entire Illium Defense Force began to transition through the relay, dreadnoughts and cruisers and frigates, every sensor active and every weapon system already armed.

**11 December 2580, Illium Defense Force Headquarters, Mount Hyasteia/Illium**

“Aria and I have been cooperating for a long time now,” said Aspasia.

“That’s a remarkably well-kept secret,” I murmured.

“Oh, I’m sure Confederation intelligence is aware, not to mention the Spectres. I consult with them on a regular basis as well.” My old friend leaned back in her chair, one hand resting on her belly, looking like an expectant mother in nesting mode rather than one of the galaxy’s great powers. “Ever since the Reapers, Aria has patiently built an extensive power structure out here in the Terminus Systems. So have I, and for the same reason. Neither of us intends to permit anyone like Cerberus or the Reapers to attack our homes, *not ever again*. Now, how do you suppose the two of us have managed to do this, without ever once coming to blows?”

I nodded slowly. “By careful behind-the-scenes negotiation. Coordinating your activities. Dividing up the field of action into spheres of influence.”

“It works remarkably well,” she said complacently. “Aria and I haven’t met *in person* in over a
century, but we confer on a regular basis, several times a year. We don’t exactly trust one another, and we don’t always agree – we’ve had some epic arguments over the comm link – but in the end, we always manage to hammer out a compromise.”

“Until now,” Shepard growled.

Aspasia’s eyes became shadowed, and her face took on grim lines. “Yes.”

“So. Tell us about Colonel Syrtis.”

“Well, you know that she isn’t Aria’s first child.”

Shepard and I both nodded. Neither of us had ever knowingly met Liselle. Only a few months before the Reaper invasion began, the Cerberus assassin Kai Leng murdered the young asari. Her death set off a tragic series of events that led to Cerberus seizing control of Omega for a time. Eventually Shepard helped Aria to retake her domain by force, but the final casualty count rose into the thousands.

“She must have had Talia within a few years after the war. Once again, she was incredibly secretive about it. I’ve never been able to determine Talia’s exact age, or find out who her father might have been. I may be the only person outside Aria’s inner circle who knew who Talia really was, before today.”

“Hmm,” Shepard rumbled. “If Aria is a queen, then she needs an heir.”

Aspasia nodded. “I think that’s part of it. Aria never used to give a damn about anything but her own whims. She took over Omega purely so nothing could interfere with her, with whatever she pleased to do. After she lost Liselle, after the war, I think her motivations changed. Maybe she finally finished growing up, started thinking like a matron at last. For a long time, I thought she was grooming the commander of her fleet to succeed her . . .”

I caught a flickering image from Shepard’s mind: an asari face. Jarral, the cheerfully ruthless pirate captain who had led Aria’s fleets during the war.

“. . . but then Talia arrived on Illium with a secure message from Aria, identifying her as the heir-apparent to Omega. Aria confirmed that, the next time we spoke. She asked me to take Talia in, finish her education, and give her any job I thought she could handle.”

“Like a hostage-fostering tie, between two influential lineages on old Thessia,” I observed.

“Very much like that. Aria sneers at ancient history, but she thinks like a clan-leader out of the old sagas, all cunning and readiness for violence, always expecting loyalty to be purely personal in nature.” Aspasia sighed deeply. “It functioned very well, actually. Talia worked for me for almost two hundred years, the best intelligence officer I ever had, and never once did she violate my trust. Until today.”

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**13 December 2580, Saharabarik System Space**

The IDF didn’t follow us toward Omega.

Aria’s capital, after all, was a fortress. She had spent four hundred years building on the defenses once installed by Cerberus. Now, nothing short of the entire Confederation Navy could reduce the place, and I had my doubts even about that.
Instead the IDF turned outward from Sahrabarik, lining up its trajectory to head for the gas giant planet just outside Omega’s planetoid belt. Imorkan was another critical part of the star system’s infrastructure, the sole convenient source of helium-3 fuel in the system, not nearly as well-fortified as Omega itself. There, the IDF could do considerable damage.

*Hopefully that presents a credible threat.*

“Omega Control, this is Chandragupta,” young Aspasia continued. “Agents associated with Omega have committed an act of war against Illium, in violation of several formal and informal agreements made by your principal. As a neutral third party, I must inform you that the Illium Defense Force is authorized to respond with force. I recommend an immediate response, so this matter can be resolved peacefully.”

*Still* no answer from Omega.

“Have the valdarii taken over the station completely?” Shepard wondered.

“That would explain the silence,” I observed. “I find it hard to believe that they could possibly have overwhelmed Aria’s defenses.”

“She’s an autocrat,” he pointed out. “All the Adversary had to do was get to her mind, the same way it got to President Yao, and all those defenses suddenly wouldn’t mean a damn thing.”

“All right, then let’s up the ante.” I caught young Aspasia’s eyes, and gave her a quiet nod.

She looked worried, but we had already discussed this in advance, and she had been convinced of the next step. “Omega Control, this is Chandragupta. I have been authorized to inform you that I have a diplomatic party on board, willing to mediate between you and Illium. That party includes Dr. Liara T’Soni, accredited ambassador-at-large for the Citadel Confederation. It also includes her associate, William Shepard.”

One moment, then two . . .

“Incoming transmission,” reported EDI.

“What a surprise,” Shepard growled.

“Chandragupta, this is Omega Control.” A four-eyed countenance appeared in the display, a tough-looking batarian wearing a pugnacious expression. “You’re cleared to dock at berth fifteen-delta. No more than four personnel are granted permission to disembark, with nothing but personal sidearms. And tell the slinks from Illium that if they lay a finger on the facilities at Imorkan, we’ll blow them out of space.”

“Omega Control, can you guarantee the security of our landing party, given the presence of valdarii ships in your space?”

“Sure, Chandragupta. You don’t have to worry about our guests. They’re perfectly well behaved.”

I frowned. *Guests?*

“Odd,” Shepard murmured. “That implies that the valdarii are actually communicating with Aria’s people. At least well enough to be allowed onto the station peacefully.”

“Well, they or the Adversary have communicated before, through assimilated pawns. Usually that just amounts to blunt demands for our surrender.”
They’re up to something new.”

“Yes.” I felt a moment of unexpected anticipation. “Of course, if their diplomatic repertoire has expanded, that implies we might be able to communicate with them. Perhaps even open a dialogue of sorts.”

He nodded, giving me a small smile. “This mission just got a little more interesting, didn’t it, Madame Ambassador?”

12 December 2580, Interstellar Space

It took far too long for our expedition to get under way. Cleanup and restock had to come first, after the Battle of Illium. Then long hours of planning, trying to decide how to bring credible force to bear on Omega.

At one point, Aspasia faced a full-scale rebellion among her fellow members of the Illium Development Consortium. Most of the Twelve voiced a great deal of resistance to the idea of deploying the bulk of the IDF away from the planet, so soon after a valdarii attack. Aspasia found it difficult to blame them, and so did I, but we needed those forces if we wanted Aria to sit up and take notice. Chandragupta alone would barely be a morsel for Omega’s defenses, if its Queen chose to be difficult.

I helped. All those matrons and Matriarchs knew me, knew what I represented. For a few years, I had been one of them. I argued, cajoled, made back-room promises. In one case, I openly applied threats and blackmail. In the end, enough of them came around to free Aspasia to act.

Illium would participate in an open alliance against the valdarii . . . and the first act of that alliance would be to force Aria to clarify her own position.

Finally, Shepard and I could retire to our cabin aboard Chandragupta, where we came face-to-face with the reality of Vara’s disappearance. The room felt very hollow and empty without her.

I stepped into his arms, rested my cheek against his broad chest, inhaled his warm scent, and did my best to think about nothing at all for a while. I didn’t realize I was quietly weeping until I felt warm moisture slide down one cheek.

“Hey,” he murmured, putting his knuckle under my chin to tip my face up.

“Goddess, Shepard.” I took a deep breath. “It’s been almost a full day since she was taken. I still can’t find her mind. I’m afraid she’s . . .”

“Don’t even think it,” he commanded me. “Syrtis wouldn’t have gone to all that trouble to take Vara if she didn’t intend to keep her in good condition. She’s just out of range of the link.”

“That can’t be right. Quantum entanglement doesn’t have a range.”

“True. She must still be under sedation, or in medical stasis. Stay strong, Liara. We’ll get her back.”

I leaned into his touch, closing my eyes to enjoy the animal comfort of it. “I hope so, Shepard. I’ve lost too many people already to this business.”

“Yeah,” he whispered.
I looked up at him again, raised my own hand to caress his cheek and ruffle the fur of his beard, and opened my mind to his in a superficial joining. What I saw there astonished me: fear, anger, and a fiercely protective urge I had always felt directed at me. Now it had turned elsewhere as well.

“Oh, Shepard. You do love her, don’t you?”

“Oh, I said again. “I told you I didn’t think it would be hard. Seems I was right.”

I rested my head on his chest again. “I’m glad.”

“It’s strange. You and she are very different in some ways. Her mind has a sharp edge on it, the kind that slices its way to the truth. Not much patience for bullshit in that one.”

I chuckled affectionately. “No, I’ve always been the diplomat in our partnership. She thinks of herself more as an attack beast.”

“She reminds me of your father, actually.”

“You’re not the first person to tell me that. She and Aethyta always got along famously. Very similar personalities. Although Vara is a little more refined about things.”

“Yeah, Aethyta was more of a straight-up puncher.” Shepard hesitated for a moment. “I’m curious about something.”

I waited, content to simply stand there in the circle of his arms.

“The two of you had two kids, but she carried them both? How come you never became a mother, Liara?”

“That’s odd. She asked me a very similar question, the night Kalan first appeared on the estate and all this began.” I took a deep breath. “I don’t really know, Shepard. She’s the older of us, so she reached the matron stage first. By the time I followed her, we already had both Aspasia and Nerylla, and Miranda was fostered in our household. I suppose until recently I never felt the urge to have children of my own.”

He was silent for a moment, and I realized he had caught the nuance I let slip.

“Until recently?” he quoted me at last.

“I see.”

“That wasn’t a proposition,” I told him, with only a trace of exasperation. “I want a child, yes. I want that very much. But I want my daughter to be yours and hers. Do you understand?”

“Perfectly.” He bent close to place a gentle kiss on my forehead. “I quite agree.”

“That’s assuming we all come out of this in one piece.” I shook my head, feeling black despair surge from somewhere deep inside my mind. “Shepard, did you ever feel the urge to just tell everyone to go home, and go on all alone? Just so you knew the people you cared about would be safe?”

“Sometimes,” he said quietly. “Usually, I ignored it. When there’s no choice but to finish the mission, you can’t spare your friends, even the people you love, any more than you can spare yourself. Although there was one time I gave in to the temptation, and I must admit I’ve never
regretted it.”

I opened my eyes and stared up into his. “When was that?”

“That last day on Earth, in London, during our run for the beam.”

_Oh._

“But you _died,_” I said, in a very small voice.

“I got better,” he told me, with a gentle smile. “Eventually. The important thing is that _you_ lived.”

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**13 December 2580, Outer Docking Ring/Omega**

Four of us came down the docking ramp, no obvious weapons other than a sidearm for each of us, as agreed. I took the lead, wearing my matriarchal robes and headdress, Shepard at my side looking grim and fierce, young Aspasia just behind us, Urdnot Grunt looming in the rear. Kamala, my security detail, and all of _Chandragupta_’s Marines waited in the docking tube, ready to surge out into Omega if things went badly.

Talia Syrtis waited at the bottom of the ramp, looking tall and arrogant in a skin-tight combat suit of black leather. A batarian stood at her side, the big male we had seen speaking for Omega Control. Behind her stood a fire-team composed of two turians and three krogan, all of them heavily armored and armed to the teeth.

At first, I felt nothing but sheer _rage_. For one of the few times in a very long life, primal instincts kicked in and my vision narrowed down to a tunnel focused on Aria’s daughter. I think I was an instant away from launching myself at her throat. Then I felt Shepard’s mind brush against mine, just as angry, but under strict discipline. It helped me keep control of myself.

“Dr. T’Soni,” the renegade greeted me. She had the gall to be _polite._ “Mr. Shepard. Captain T’Rathis. Battlemaster. Welcome to Omega.”

“Where is my mother?” asked Aspasia, her voice low but with a dangerous note in it.

“She’s perfectly safe,” said Talia. “I apologize for the deception, but it was necessary.”

“Colonel Syrtis.” I felt a moment’s astonishment at my own voice, cold and steady. “I strongly suggest that you bring Vara T’Rathis here.”

“All in good time,” she told me.

“No. _Now._”

I made a small gesture. Behind me, Aspasia snapped an order into her personal comm.

As if by magic, the lighting throughout that section of Omega’s docking ring went crimson, and warning sirens began to sound. The batarian at Talia’s side put a hand to the side of his head, obviously receiving a report from elsewhere, and then turned to whisper frantically to her.

“Your sensors and security systems are reporting correctly,” I told her. “Chandragupta’s mass effect core has just been placed in overload mode. It can be detonated within five seconds.”

Talia stared at me with wide eyes, while every one of her people leveled weapons at our party.
“That’s a state-of-the-art Confederation heavy cruiser,” I observed. “I believe its drive core is rated for about thirty megatons. Aspasia?”

“Thirty-one-point-six-five megatons, to be precise,” said my daughter, utterly calm.

“Probably not enough to destroy this station,” I continued, “but more than enough to wreck it.”

Talia stood very still, a hand frozen in mid-air, as if she had almost ordered some action, but now thought better of it.

I smiled at her. “I would strongly recommend that you bring Vara T’Rathis here at once. Before one of us commits a very grave error.”
Aria

13 December 2580, Outer Docking Ring/Omega

It might have been a play at the poker table.

I’ve been fond of the game for centuries, ever since I learned it from Shepard’s memories just before the Reaper War. Somehow it appeals to me better than the other great human games, chess and go, which can be reduced to matters of simple computation. Poker involves a great deal of computation as well, but there is an element of chance, and it’s also a game of emotional discipline and sheer will.

Discipline: the ability to control one’s demeanor so perfectly that not even the slightest piece of information escapes. Will: the ability to measure how far one’s opponent may be pushed, and to stand one’s ground just an instant longer.

I will see your abduction of a beloved partner, and your apparent cooperation with the enemy. I will raise you one weapon of mass destruction, placed where it will do considerable harm.

I stood perfectly motionless, my eyes fixed on those of Talia Syrtis, and gave her nothing but a bland smile.

Four hundred years of practice, and hopefully I have no tells left. No tells at all.

Shepard stood by my side and did the same. Except that he did not smile.

What will it be, Talia? Or Aria, more likely? Fold, call, or raise?

Talia – and her mother – would have read my memoirs. They would know that I had used an overloaded mass-effect core against an enemy before, setting off what amounted to a nuclear explosion to destroy one of Nassana Dantius’s mining facilities.

Of course, I hadn’t been standing inside the blast radius at the time.

After a frozen minute, I saw Talia cock her head as if listening. Then a wild, white grin spread across her face. For a moment, I felt fear, but then I recognized the expression. It wasn’t triumph. It seemed more like appreciation, for a worthy adversary who had just made a particularly audacious move.

“All right, Dr. T’Soni. I’ve just been reminded that Matron Vara has served her purpose, and even if we give her back to you, we still have something you want. She’s on her way now.”

I gave her a slow, gracious nod of acknowledgement.

“I don’t suppose you would be willing to have Chandragupta stand down?” she asked, in a manner that told me she knew the answer already.

My smile broadened slightly. “Soon. Once we’ve placed this conversation on a more civilized basis. Until then, I am quite comfortable with things as they are.”

Talia nodded, and we all went back to waiting.

I took the opportunity to examine her closely. Now that I knew, I felt some chagrin that I hadn’t
noticed the resemblance before. Talia had her mother’s coloring, the same sharp features, and the same tall, lean build. Here on Omega she even carried herself like her mother, all arrogance and athletic grace. If Talia’s facial markings had been more like Aria’s, I might have seen it right away. The only feature that felt out of place was her eyes, an icy blue that seemed unusual for someone of Aria’s lineage.

Movement, at the back of the docking bay. I didn’t break my stare at Talia, but I could sense young Aspasia relaxing slightly at my back.

Vara shook off the grasp of the two turians escorting her, and walked across to us, straight-backed and proud.

“Are you unhurt, love?” I asked, not looking away from Talia’s face.

“I’m fine, all things considered,” said Vara. “Aside from being an involuntary blood donor.”

“Go aboard, and have Miranda check you out.”

“Oh, I’ll go.” She gave Talia a deadly glare. “Just long enough to get my sidearm and my sword. You’ll be going to talk to this one’s principal, I assume?”

“That would be the next step in the dance.”

Talia nodded.

Vara snorted. “I wouldn’t miss that for the galaxy. I’m just not going anywhere on Omega unarmed.”

“Fair enough. If your principal has no objection?” I asked Talia.

“None at all.” Her smile widened slightly. “Although it would likely be a more productive meeting, if you weren’t holding a knife to Omega’s throat the whole time.”

I nodded. “I suppose that’s reasonable. Although you should be aware that Chandragupta can go back into its current mode of operation at any time . . . and I have my own means of communication with the ship, which no method available to you can trace or interfere with.”

“Understood.”

Aspasia went back aboard the ship, every member of her crew on guard against treachery from Omega. In her place came the rest of our main party: Kalan and Tekanta, Miranda, Kamala, Grunt, and my entire security detail. I felt the need to have a retinue at my back, if we were about to visit the Queen of Omega in her den.

To my surprise, Talia didn’t escort us to Afterlife. Instead, she led us across Omega’s main concourse, toward a set of lifts leading to the industrial sectors.

I took the opportunity to look around.

Omega had certainly changed over the centuries. I remembered a dim-lit place, dirty and poorly maintained, inhabited by the vicious and the desperate. Now the concourse was well-lit and relatively clean. Store-fronts offered luxury goods and cutting-edge technology, rather than cast-offs and salvage. The people around us seemed healthy and prosperous. They glanced at us with curiosity, but I didn’t see what I had once thought of as the “Omega look,” a mixture of fear and
cunning calculation. Some of them weren’t even obviously armed.

*Law and order, on Omega. Miracles never cease.*

Then I saw a group of *valdarii*. Three of the bipedal “runner” types, and one quadrupedal “centaur,” all huddled together. They looked for all the world like simple tourists, standing in a corridor junction and glancing around them as if searching for a place to eat. They carried sidearms, but no heavy weaponry. One of the runners glanced our way, and made no sign of recognizing us.

As we proceeded, I could see more small groups of *valdarii*. Much like the first, they seemed lightly armed and interested only in enjoying the station’s amenities.

“How long have the *valdarii* been here?” I asked Talia.

Aria’s daughter had an impressive poker face of her own, but I could see an instant of hesitation. “Omega is a free port,” was all she said.

“Even for aliens who don’t seem able to interact with anyone else, except on the basis of brute conquest?”

“They’ve been well-behaved in our part of the high Terminus Systems,” said Talia. She gave me a sharp glance. “At least until now.”

“Do you expect that to change?” I asked, pitching my voice for her alone.

We stepped into a heavy lift, which swept into action as soon as our entire party was aboard. The trip took longer than I expected. Apparently, our destination was deep inside the stone cap of the station, the astonishingly eezo-rich planetoid that had originally attracted Prothean settlement fifty thousand years before.

“My principal has taken some of Matron Vara’s blood,” said Talia at last, not watching my reaction. “Since then, she has had well over a day to consider her options. I suspect many things on Omega may be about to change.”

“Is that why you *persuaded* my bondmate to come here?” I asked, aware of Shepard and Vara standing close by, tense and alert.

“It was one reason.” The doors of the lift opened just then, and Talia led us onward, her expression suggesting that she intended to say nothing more.

We stepped out into an enormous open cavity, a chamber of raw stone and metal, filled with mining and industrial equipment in operation. Platforms and catwalks soared on all sides, providing access to the extraction operation that was Omega’s lifeblood. I saw almost no personnel, and realized most of the machinery must be fully automated.

I caught a stray thought from Shepard: a memory of fighting a battle in this vast space, racing with Aria and Nyreen Kandros to shut down a Cerberus power plant.

There, about forty meters away, two figures stood on a platform waiting for us.

Aria T’Loak I recognized at once, even though it had been decades since I last saw her. At first glance, her matriarchal years had changed her very little. She remained slim and athletic, no doubt the result of a grueling regimen of personal training. Instead of the leather jacket and bodysuit she had affected in the old days, she wore a body-hugging sleeveless gown in midnight black with
silver accents, a small stylized omega insignia on her left breast. She even wore a minimal headdress, two strips of black cloth that framed her face, the only concession to asari custom I had ever seen her make. The greatest change was in her face, which had gone past slim-and-fine-boned and well into gauntness.

Her eyes burned, staring at us intensely. I had a hard time holding her gaze. I had a sudden unwelcome memory: my mother, on the last day of her life, in that stark laboratory space on Noveria.

The other individual I did not recognize: a human male, of average height and build, dark-skinned and clean-shaven, wearing a simple white-and-gold jumpsuit. Next to Aria he seemed almost insubstantial, a cipher with no obvious personality.

“Well, well,” Aria drawled at last. “Look who’s finally deigned to pay us a visit.”

I cocked my head at her. “Matriarch, I’ve never been under the impression that I was welcome on Omega. Although if you wanted me to come and confer, you might have simply asked, any time in the last few centuries.”

“I don’t ask,” she said. She looked away, dismissing me, staring instead at Shepard. “I see you’ve met Talia. I suppose Aspasia spilled her secret to you?”

“Can’t blame her for that,” Shepard murmured. “Aspasia was a little pissed off at the time.”

“No doubt.” Aria’s smile grew broader. “So, what do you think of her, Shepard?”

Shepard frowned. “What difference does my opinion make?”

“All the difference in the world. She’s your daughter as much as she is mine.”

I thought I had given up being surprised at anything.

Talia is Aria’s daughter . . . and Shepard’s?

I simply didn’t see how the thing could even be possible.

Then I remembered: the Reaper War. Cerberus seized and occupied Omega, driving Aria into exile on the Citadel. Aria gathered a force to take back her domain, and she persuaded Shepard to come and help her do it. At the time I was the Shadow Broker, and she knew it, and she refused to have me come within a thousand parsecs of Omega. Instead Shepard went off on detached duty, working closely with Aria for several days.

Shepard had returned to me, reporting success in his mission. He also reported that Aria had done her best to seduce him.

Did she succeed after all, and he never told me?

My mind locked up for a moment, in sheer outraged denial. Then logic came to my rescue.

No. He would never have hidden such a thing from me. Not to mention I would have seen it in his memories. He might be able to conceal such an experience from me now, as powerful as his mind has become, but he would never have been able to do it back then.

I gave him just a moment’s glance, long enough to see that he was utterly confused, and then turned back to glare at Aria.
Who threw her head back and laughed, peal after peal of malicious mirth.

“Ah, T’Soni, you should have seen your face just now!” She shook her head, an arrogant smirk on her lips. “Admit it. For a moment, you were convinced the great love of your life had betrayed you!”

“Yes, Aria, you win a small victory,” I said, my voice cold. “If that’s the only reason you caused us to cross half the galaxy in pursuit of your daughter, then you’re a greater fool than I ever imagined.”

“Well. We take our amusement where we can find it.” Aria moved across the floor, to stand in front of Shepard but just out of his reach, examining him closely. “I must admit, Shepard, I’ve missed you all these years. Almost as much as T’Soni has. At least I managed to get a piece of you for myself.”

“You had better explain that,” he said, quiet menace in his tone.

“You need an explanation?” She shook her head. “I would have thought both of you were smart enough to count to four.”

I saw it then, like a bolt of lightning striking out of a dark sky. “Four. Four Shepards.”

Aria grinned.

“The Cerberus construct,” said Shepard, finally seeing it as well. “The one they built to serve as a supply of spare parts for my predecessor. Maya Brooks used him as a weapon against us. Liara saved his life at the end, and we turned him over to the Alliance.”

“You never wondered what happened to him after that?” Aria purred. “Even the Shadow Broker never bothered to find out?”

“He was in Alliance custody for the rest of the war.” I shrugged. “He wasn’t really Shepard, not in any way that mattered. I never knew nor cared what became of him.”

“Your mistake,” said Aria. “Oh, he certainly wasn’t this Shepard. Even after years of rehabilitation in an Alliance stockade, he was still a selfish, cynical bigot with serious inferiority issues. Every day, he looked in the mirror and saw the face of a man he knew he would never be able to match. At least the Alliance rendered him more functional, before they cut him loose. He was strong and tough, and he had plenty of intelligence to call on once he learned how. He could survive and make his own way in the galaxy. Naturally, like so many other broken things, he washed up here.”

“Where you devoured him,” I guessed.

“You make it sound so tawdry. I found a use for the talents he had. Not to mention that magnificent genome.” Aria glanced at her daughter, and for an instant I saw genuine affection in her face. “He lived seven more years as one of my lieutenants, before he made one fatal mistake too many. And he gave me Talia.”

I nodded, looking at the younger asari and seeing the signs I had missed before. Block out the traits that had to come from Aria’s lineage, and what remained could easily have come from Shepard. Especially those eyes, crystal-blue and sharp with clean intelligence, nothing like Aria’s eyes at all.

“I really must thank you, Shepard.” Suddenly Aria went serious, no malicious amusement left in her face or voice. “You helped me kick Cerberus out on its ass. You saved all of us from the Reapers. Even your broken and twisted reflection managed to help me rebuild this place, and gave
me a daughter to be proud of. I owe you.”

“You have a strange way of showing it,” he told her.

“Oh, I’ve only just started.” Aria turned away, returning to her earlier position. “After all, I’m about to give you an opportunity you could never have gotten any other way.”

“What opportunity is that?” I asked.

“To convince me that Omega should stand with you,” she said. “Possibly even to convince the valdarri to call off this war of theirs.”

I glanced sharply at the strange human.

“Ah. That would be my cue.” He stepped forward and smiled at us. His voice was deep and smooth, a pleasure to listen to, and it sounded perfectly natural. “I am designated John Tikolo. I speak on behalf of the Old Ones.”
13 December 2580, Eezo Production Facility Three/Omega

I had the sudden sense of standing on a stage. Shepard and I faced the human designated as John Tikolo, our friends standing silently behind us, no one behind him except the invisible presence of the entire valdarii empire. Aria and Talia stood off to the side, waiting and watching, an audience to our debate.

“You speak for the valdarii?” I asked.

“I find this to be a common misconception,” said Tikolo.

He still spoke perfectly naturally, with verve and inflection, not like any other human the valdarii had coerced into “representing” them. I guessed that the barbarians had improved whatever technology they used to assimilate the people they conquered.

“The valdarii are not the Old Ones,” he continued. “They serve the Old Ones as agents. They provide hands and eyes in our universe, where the Old Ones cannot directly act. They are the founders and first citizens of a new hegemony.”

I frowned, something disturbing me in his phrasing.

What does he mean by “in our universe?” The Old Ones can’t come from somewhere else. There isn’t anywhere else for them to come from.

Is there?

“All right,” Shepard said impatiently. “Suppose you tell us about the Old Ones that are pulling your strings.”

Tikolo raised one ironic eyebrow. “I find it amusing, to hear a complaint from an agent of the Reapers, regarding the manipulation of organic minds. Is there one law for the Ascended Intelligence, and another law for every other entity in the galaxy?”

“The Intelligence isn’t in the indoctrination business anymore.”

“Five billion years of monstrous evil cannot be washed away in mere centuries,” said Tikolo, his voice grave. “But I did not come here to remind those present of the nature of Mr. Shepard’s masters.”

For an instant, I almost smiled. Tikolo had some talent as a diplomat. I couldn’t have advanced an argument, in the same sentence that I disclaimed it, any more smoothly.

Then he began to tell a story.

I will speak of the Old Ones, for it is of them that I have been invited here to speak. I thank the hegemon of Omega for her gracious welcome, and for this opportunity to persuade some of the galaxy’s leaders of what must be done.

All here are aware that the Reapers dominated our galaxy for five billion years. Created by the Leviathans, controlled by the Intelligence which Mr. Shepard now serves, they harvested every
civilization that dared to reach for the stars. They committed horrible murder on a cosmic scale, cutting short quadrillions of lives. Until our own time, no star-faring culture ever escaped their wrath.

Except one.

The Old Ones began as an intelligent organic species, not unlike any of us. Land-dwelling creatures, bipedal and upright, with two genders and a lifespan of about two centuries. They felt curiosity about the universe around them, they created wonderful art and music, and they loved their children. They discovered the mass effect, mined element zero from an outer planet of their home star system, and leaped out to the stars with verve and enthusiasm.

The Old Ones seem to have been unusually successful, as such civilizations go. It is difficult to say why. I suspect they had a gift for understanding one another, and the other beings they met. Perhaps they were adept at forging alliances and building lasting cooperation. Nothing is remembered of any great interstellar conflicts during their time, and the galaxy appears to have been unified very quickly after their arrival.

Then the Reapers came.

I see no need to describe the conflict that followed. Many of you lived through the Reaper invasion of our own time. You remember the horror, the worlds set ablaze, the people tormented and murdered in their billions.

The Old Ones were caught by surprise, and at first their history of peaceful expansion worked against them. They did not know how to fight such an implacable foe. Yet they learned quickly. Working with the other organic species of their time, they found ways to stand against their own destruction.

They fought, and for a long time – centuries, and then millennia – they survived. They won victories, destroying Reapers by the squadron, defending whole worlds against the harvest. As their courage grew, as their technology continued to advance, they began to hope that they might defeat this foe once and for all. They planned to secure the galaxy for life and civilization forever more.

Then the Reapers, and the Intelligence that commands them, the Intelligence that Mr. Shepard now serves . . . they unlocked the gates of hell. No longer did they work to simply harvest the lives and minds of the living. Now they became bent on the utter destruction of all life in the galaxy.

They began to destroy the very stars themselves.

What good does it do to keep the Reapers away from an inhabited world, if the Reapers can simply cause that world’s life-giving star to detonate? If they can do that from a distance, without warning?

A million stars died. Every sun the Old Ones lived near. Then every sun with a planet they could conceivably colonize. All those worlds vanished, scorched down to the bedrock or blasted into vapor. The harvest was over. Nothing remained but extermination, the end of all life.

The Old Ones fled, evacuating what few worlds they could. They left the mass relay network, using great slower-than-light ships to venture out into the galaxy’s deep wilderness. They hid in the darkest corners of interstellar space, far from any life-giving world. Then they wandered out of the galaxy’s spiral arms entirely, up into the thinly scattered stars of the galactic halo. Always the Reapers pursued them, harrying them, catching and killing the stragglers.
Then, far out in dark space, the Old Ones found their salvation.

For tens of thousands of years, they had known of the existence of dark matter, that shadowy substance that makes up most of this universe. Most star-faring civilizations doubtless make that discovery, even before they leave their homes for the first time. Yet dark matter is very difficult to study in detail. Aside from Element Zero, it has almost no interaction with the visible, tangible universe. It is difficult to understand a substance that one cannot see or touch with any available instrument.

Somehow, in their last extremity, the Old Ones penetrated the mystery of dark matter. They learned about its variety of forms, a bestiary of shadowy elements of which eezo is only the first and most accessible. They discovered how to use eezo to manipulate other forms of dark matter. They found that dark matter was complex enough to support life and mind.

They learned how to become dark matter.

The Old Ones knew how to copy their minds, download them into new bodies. They had long since used the technique as a form of immortality, transferring their minds into cloned or synthetic shells as needed. Now they discovered a way to transfer their minds into bodies made of dark matter. They could leave the baryonic universe entirely, ascending to a realm where the Reapers could never follow.

When the Reapers located that final redoubt, they found the last of the Old Ones gone, vanished out of the bright universe entirely. The Reapers studied the former bodies of the Old Ones, their derelict ships, and never learned what had become of them. The Intelligence believed the cycle complete, its rule over the galaxy unchallenged.

The Intelligence never learned what a fierce and terrible enemy it had created for itself. Until now.

The Old Ones have lived in the universe of dark matter ever since. They have grown to heights that our mortal minds can barely imagine. All the while, they have been thinking. Planning. Watching the lit galaxy they left behind. Waiting for an opportunity to return, and reclaim what was stolen from them. Waiting for the chance to rebuild the galaxy as it should have been, a place where every living thing can survive and flourish to its greatest potential.

A place where the Reapers and their malicious Intelligence will never again have dominion.

Over the eons, the Old Ones have worked to prepare for the day of their return. They have opposed the Intelligence in every way available to them. They have whispered in the darkness, teaching civilization after civilization those things they needed to know to fight the Reapers. They have tampered with the very evolution of the stars, scattering more eezo across the galaxy for new civilizations to use.

Now they are ready. The Old Ones spoke to the valdarii when they were young, and delivered the tools they would need to begin their own rise to glory. Now, with the valdarii as their agents, they will spread their wisdom to the entire galaxy.

Once the Intelligence has been destroyed, once the Reapers are nothing but a bad memory, all of us will benefit from the renewed hegemony of the Old Ones. Whatever knowledge or serenity or fulfillment we crave, it will be given to us.

Most importantly of all . . . none of us need ever die again.

All of us stood silently for a moment, absorbing what Tikolo had told us. I felt distracted, aware of
the sounds of the eezo extraction facility at work all around us, working tirelessly to produce more of the galaxy’s most valuable commodity. More dark matter, bent to serve our needs.

Shepard’s mind was shuttered, closed to me, nothing coming across our link but an impression of furious thought. I glanced at the rest of my party and saw doubt, reflection, and grim determination.

Then I looked at Kalan, and did a double-take. He was smiling. It seemed a very odd smile for him, very unlike his usual open grin, an expression full of secrets.

“This is why I invited the valdarii here,” said Aria at last, her voice unwontedly sober. “These Old Ones have something to offer. Something I want. I’m tempted to make an alliance with them, but I know better than to get in bed with anyone without hearing more than one side of the story. I did that once, listening to the Illusive Man, and it almost cost me everything.”

“That’s why you had Vara brought here,” I stated. “To take some of her blood, and make sure your decisions weren’t being influenced by the Old Ones.”

“Also, to force you and Shepard to come,” said Talia calmly. “I apologize for that, but there wasn’t time to ask politely, and when Matron Vara appeared in my office at just the right moment . . .”

Vara grunted in disgust. “You won’t get another chance to take me off-guard.”

“Enough.” Aria made a cutting gesture with one hand. “What’s done is done. Talia gave up a great deal when she seized you, Vara, but the stakes couldn’t possibly be higher. I approve her decision. If any apologies are necessary, take them up with me.”

“I will,” said Vara, her voice full of angry promise.

“For now, I want to hear your response to the issues Tikolo has raised.” Aria stared at us, most intently at Shepard. “These Old Ones promise that anyone living under their hegemony will be immortal. What do you say to that?”

Shepard remained silent.

“I think I would want to know the method,” I said, to cover the gap.

“That is simple enough,” said Tikolo. He turned his head slightly, pointing to a small excrescence on the back of his neck. An implant, like those we had recovered from valdarii bodies. “This technology provides constant access to the overmind. That is the central information network of the hegemony, a place where all knowledge is stored, where all of us can communicate and commune with one another.”

“Like the daimon implants many people wear in Citadel space,” I observed. “They grant us mental access to the extranet.”

Tikolo nodded. “Like that, but more sophisticated. The valdarii technology permits almost constant telepathic contact among citizens of the hegemony. You will have noticed that the valdarii never speak? They have no need to speak aloud to one another.”

“So, they’re some kind of creepy hive-mind?” Grunt rumbled.

“Not at all.” Tikolo smiled. “The valdarii are individuals, as varied and distinctive as any of us. More so, in some respects. The hegemony does not deprive its citizens of their individuality. They remain citizens, not mere tools.”
“We’ve seen other people who have been taken into the hegemony,” Miranda said. “They didn’t behave like individuals. More like poorly maintained machines.”

“Yes.” Tikolo looked woeful. “It is better when we accept the hegemony willingly. Those who resist are often damaged in the process. At first, the only asari or humans available to serve as our representatives suffered this fate. They have been cared for, and will be restored as far as is possible. Now, of course, many of us have become citizens of the hegemony of our own free will. I have done so, and in the process I have lost nothing, gained everything.”

“And you think you’re immortal?” I asked.

“I know that I am.” The human smiled, a gentle and luminous expression. “The very technology that grants me access to the overmind also ensures my immortality. My mind has been recorded, you see, a copy made and constantly updated through the link. Every sense-impression, every thought, every emotion, all of it is recorded and integrated into the copy. When this body dies, my mind will live on. I can choose to remain within the overmind, enjoying a virtual existence. Or I can be transferred into a new body of my own choosing – a clone, perhaps, or a synthetic shell. So long as the hegemony lasts, John Tikolo can never die. At least not for long.”

“That’s what you have, Shepard,” Aria said, her intense stare on him. “The greater part of you resides in the Intelligence. While it survives, death becomes just a formality for you.”

Slowly, Shepard nodded, his face still revealing nothing of his thoughts.

“Well, why the hell should you be the only one to benefit?” Aria demanded. “There’s no reason why that technology wouldn’t work for everyone. No reason why anyone should ever die again. Yet the Intelligence just sits out there in dark space, ignoring us.”

“Aria . . .” Shepard shook his head. “What you’re asking for isn’t the blessing you think it is.”

“Why?” The Matriarch of Omega walked over to us again, confronting Shepard. “I’m over a thousand years old, Shepard. When it gets too quiet, I can hear the Courier’s wings, and feel her cold breath on the back of my neck. I’m going to die. I want to hear you tell me why that has to happen. Why I shouldn’t throw in with the ones who can promise a little salvation.”

I glanced at Tikolo. He watched the confrontation with an expression of blandly polite interest.

“I’m sorry, Aria.” Suddenly, Shepard’s voice was so sad, so full of compassion, I could hardly bear to listen to it. “What the Old Ones promise isn’t salvation. It won’t save you from death, any more than Liara, or Cerberus, or the Intelligence really saved my predecessors from death. A copy of your mind isn’t you.”

“You are profoundly mistaken,” said Tikolo quietly.

“Am I?” To my surprise, Shepard lifted a hand and caressed Aria’s cheek. To my greater surprise, she didn’t pull away. “Aria, your memories, your patterns of thought, those are what make you a distinctive individual. They’re what tell you that you are Aleena Syrtis, an asari born in Serrice a thousand years ago, who left her home as a wild young maiden and went to wander the galaxy. Who always knew what she wanted out of life, and reached out and took it, and heaven help anyone who stood in her way.”

I blinked in shock.

Where did he learn all of that? Not even when I was the Shadow Broker did I manage to learn that much about Aria.
“But the kernel of you isn’t those memories. It’s your consciousness – the continuous, coherent working of your brain and nervous system, all the way down to the quantum level. That’s not mere information, a pile of data that can be copied from one storage device to another. It’s integral to your body and your brain. When your body dies, you die, and from that there is no resurrection.”

“You did it,” she accused him. “You’ve died and come back. Twice.”

“No. I may look like my predecessors, I may have their memories and personality, but I am a new individual. They are dead . . . and if I die, and the Intelligence somehow produces another Shepard, that won’t be me. Just another new person, someone who will remember being me, but who will have no continuity with me at all.”

“He’s right,” said a new voice.

I turned, startled, and saw Kalan step forward to enter the debate.

“Living with the geth has taught us a great deal about consciousness and identity,” said the quarian scientist. “Synthetic life has this advantage: they’re pure software. They can copy themselves from one substrate to another and never notice the difference. They don’t mind the idea that they exist as points of conscious experience, which trade their memories and identities all the time. It’s natural for them. Organic beings . . . we’re more firmly rooted in the physical. We aren’t just software. We’re hardware as well.”

“Maybe I don’t care about that,” said Aria, and I could hear a note of desperation in her voice. “Maybe knowing a life will go on that remembers being me, maybe that will be enough!”

Kalan bowed his head. “Then don’t go to the valdarii for it, Matriarch. Don’t go to the Reapers either. Come to Rannoch.”

What?

Aria stared at the quarian. “You have this technology too?”

“Yes. We’ve had it for a long time.” Kalan shrugged. “We don’t advertise it, because we don’t want the whole galaxy flooding in to try to grab eternal life. Even now, we don’t have the resources to be able to afford that. Besides, we know that this isn’t immortality, not really.”

“Your ancestors,” I said. “You use this technology to preserve their memories.”

He nodded. “One of the lessons we learned from the Nightfall War. We forgot so much of what our ancestors had done. So many things that might have reconciled us to the geth centuries earlier. When we saw our ancestors in their memories, the wisdom they had worked so hard to preserve for us . . . we resolved never to forget again.”

“Of course! That’s why the valdarii are attacking Rannoch so fiercely.” Shepard looked as if he was receiving a religious revelation. “They know the Synarchy can offer the same thing they hope to provide. Without all the strings attached.”

Aria frowned. “What strings are you talking about?”

“Well.” Suddenly, Shepard gave one of the most predatory smiles I had ever seen on his face. “Easier to demonstrate than to explain.”

Quick as a striking serpent, his hand lashed out to point at John Tikolo.
Who suddenly screamed, his eyes flying wide, his legs buckling beneath him.

For an instant, all of us stood frozen, hardly believing what had happened. Then Talia threw herself into motion, running to Tikolo’s side. Miranda left our party and ran to join her.

Aria’s hand flew to Shepard’s throat, ablaze with biotic power, her face suddenly taut with rage. “ Damn you, Shepard! He’s my guest!”

“Be patient,” Shepard commanded her, calmly, as if she wasn’t about to snuff him out like a candle. “He’ll be fine in a moment.”

Indeed, Tikolo seemed to recover almost at once. Miranda watched him closely, her fingers on his wrist to take his pulse, while Talia supported him in his kneeling position. He took a deep, shuddering breath, then another. His eyes rolled and wandered.

Then he blinked hard, and his face seemed tensely alert once more. His hands went to the back of his head, clawing at the valdarii implant there.

“God!” he shouted in utter revulsion. “Please, get it out of me!”

“That is John Tikolo,” said Shepard quietly.

Aria stared blankly at the human, but her corona subsided and she removed her hand from Shepard’s throat. “What did you do to him?”

“I hacked his implants. Cut him off from the thing that’s been riding him like an animal.”

Slowly, Tikolo rose to his feet with Talia and Miranda’s help. He staggered across the platform, to stand before Shepard and stare into his face with wonder. “You . . . you’re Commander Shepard.”

“Not really,” said Shepard, “but I’m very close to him. How are you feeling?”

“Better, I think.” Tikolo’s face twisted in anger. “Even better if you can get this bloody machine out of my head.”

“How much do you remember?” Aria asked.

“All of it.” Tikolo shuddered. “The valdarii swarmed over Caleston. They captured me. Nailed me down on a table and put this thing in my head. Then I was breathing, eating, walking, speaking. Even the words were mine, the tone of voice. But the thoughts came from somewhere else. From some thing else.”

“One of the Old Ones,” said Shepard. “Aria, are you ready to hear what the Reapers know about them?”

I don’t claim that the Reapers – that the Intelligence – have clean hands.

The Old Ones are right. I represent an entity that has engaged in evil on a cosmic scale. Five billion years of mass murder. I’m not asking you to take a word I say on faith.

That being said, I recognize the story we were just told. It fits something the Intelligence remembers out of the deep past. One of the tens of thousands of civilizations it murdered over the eons. An important one, so important that the Intelligence made sure I learned about it before I was sent out into the galaxy.
The one organic civilization that almost defeated the Reapers.

The story you just heard is more or less accurate. All of it happened about two billion years ago. To beat the dominant civilization of that cycle, the Reapers went to lengths they never went to before, and have never gone to since. They brought out star-killing ordnance, and almost eradicated organic life from the galaxy. It almost ended the cycle forever. It took millions of years for new organic life to evolve, new civilizations to arise.

In fact, that was when the Intelligence first developed the Crucible and seeded the plans for it out into the galaxy. Which is why we’re all standing here today, so in a way we have that ancient civilization to thank for it. But that’s another story.

Until today, the Intelligence didn’t know that any of them had survived. This claim that they retreated into the dark-matter universe, that they became the Old Ones who are behind the valdarii now . . . it would explain a lot. It worries me that this Old One felt safe revealing that detail to me. I hope that doesn’t mean that the Intelligence is already dead, that we’ve already lost.

So, now that I know who the Old Ones were, let me tell you about them. After all, the Reapers did harvest many billions of them before the end of that cycle. The Intelligence knows what they were like.

Back then, they called themselves the kašari.

Sure, in some ways they were admirable people. Curious, creative, devoted to their children. They did develop the technology we’ve been talking about, to record a living organic mind, and transfer its memories and personality to a new shell as needed.

What the Old One riding Mr. Tikolo didn’t tell you is that they were anything but the peaceful, diplomatic, egalitarian people it claimed.

Maybe the Old Ones don’t clearly remember what they were like, that long ago. Maybe they’ve changed, in all those billions of years living suspended in dark matter. I don’t know. Given what we’ve seen of the way they treat the valdarii, the way they treated David Ekwensi and Mr. Tikolo here, I’m not sure I believe that.

The kašari were empire-builders. Conquerors. They didn’t unify the galaxy through compassion and diplomacy. They did it with superior technology and brute force. And when they conquered you, they devoured you. They put the technology in your head, or whatever else you used to store your brain. And then a kašari personality owned you, rode you around for the rest of your life. And when you died, they abandoned you, moving on to a new host.

Immortality for the recorded mind, and only for a kašari mind, and not even for most of the kašari. Only for the elite, the aristocrats who owned everything in their empire. Including the bodies and souls of most of their own species, to say nothing of all the conquered peoples.

The ultimate capitalists, buying even immortality with the blood and sweat of billions of their slaves.

As I said, I don’t know if they’ve changed in two billion years.

I’m not sure it’s a good idea, to bet everything on the chance that they have.

“They have not,” said Tikolo, looking as pale as his dark coloring permitted. “I remember the one that possessed me. I remember what it was thinking, all the while it tried to bargain with you.”
Aria set her jaw in anger. “The Old Ones never intended to live up to any deal I made, did they?”

“No, Matriarch.” He shuddered in revulsion. “My Old One . . . it relished the thought of taking your body for its own. Or that of your daughter.”

“But the Synarchy could do it,” she said, fixing Kalan with her burning gaze. “Not to mention that the geth are known for their honesty.”

“I can’t speak for the Synarchy,” said Kalan uneasily. “This isn’t something we would normally do for an outsider . . .”

“That’s my price,” said Aria. “Take it or leave it.”

Suddenly Kalan’s omni-tool flared into life. “Kalan is not able to speak for the Synarchy as a whole.”

Tekanta.

“I, however, am geth and may speak for the consensus in this matter. Matriarch Aria, if you desire that your mind should be recorded and preserved within the consensus, the geth will comply.”

Finally, Aria looked at me and extended a hand. “All right, T’Soni. You have a deal.”

I took her hand and grasped it firmly, the first time Aria had ever permitted me to touch her. “I’m glad.”

Of course, that was exactly the moment when red lights began to flash and sirens began to sound. Far away, muffled by distance and hundreds of meters of stone, I heard the dull thud of an explosion.

“What’s going on?” Grunt demanded.

Another muffled explosion. I could feel a vibration run through the platform beneath my feet.

Talia had her hand to the side of her head, listening to a report as it came flooding in on Aria’s secure channels. Her face grew very grim.

“The valdarii are attempting to seize Omega.”
The Battle of Omega

13 December 2580, Eezo Production Facility Three/Omega

Half a long lifetime in command of Omega had hardly softened Aria T’Loak. I looked at her face, and even knowing that she and I had finally reached an accord after centuries of enmity, I shuddered at what I saw there.

*If I were one of the Old Ones, I think I would be fleeing for my life right about now.*

*In fact, I’m not one of the Old Ones, and I’m still tempted.*

“Militia captains are reporting in,” said Talia. “The call-up is on schedule. Major engagements are under way on the docking ring, sectors alpha and delta, and in the industrial levels.”

“Militia?” Shepard inquired.

“Just because the people of Omega don’t carry firearms in public all the time anymore, doesn’t mean they don’t have them,” said Aria. “Reforming the old gangs into citizen militia was one of the first things I did after the war.”

He snorted. “Somehow I have a hard time seeing the Blood Pack or the Blue Suns settling down as responsible citizens.”

“Well.” Aria gave him a sharp glance. “I got rid of the ones who didn’t get the message. With extreme prejudice.”

“Still only one rule on Omega?” he mused.

“In the final analysis, yes.” She grinned. “Though I decided to become a bit more explicit about the interpretation of that one rule. It’s easier to be an autocrat if people know what to expect from you. You don’t have to kill as many people, either.”

I caught Vara’s eye, saw a glimmer of humor in her face, and heard a thought across our link.

*Aria really has grown up, hasn’t she?*

“Nyreen would be proud,” Shepard murmured.

Aria’s face froze for an instant, and then she nodded. “Maybe you’re right. She gave me a lot to think about, back then. So did your predecessor.”

“Shouldn’t we be getting out there to join the fight?” Grunt complained.

“Not yet,” said Aria. “We’re safe enough in here for the moment, and my people know what to do. No sense jumping into the fight, until we know where we can have the most impact.”

*Boom. Boom.* Once again, the sound of distant explosions. Then another, not quite so distant: *BOOM.*

Just then, my daimon signaled for attention.

*{This is Aspasia, aboard Chandragupta. The valdarii squadron has gone berserk. They're moving to bombard Omega, and the station’s defenses have gone to full alert. We had to break free of the*
I caught Shepard’s eye, a flash of tactical insight surging across the link.

[Do whatever you can to help defend Omega. What is the IDF doing?]

[Already coming in hot. ETA about five minutes.]

I glanced back at Aria. “My ship and the Illium fleet are moving to assist. Can you make sure the defense grid doesn’t fire on any of them?”

“Already done,” said Talia, still listening to a stream of reports. “Omega knows not to fire on any ship putting out Illium IFF. Chandragupta should be safe too, but give me her codes and I’ll have Admiral Jarral add them to the list.”

I sent a quick thought through my daimon, handshaking with Talia’s own device and the Omega high-security network. It surprised me, how easily the transfer went through. Aria was apparently sincere in her commitment to an alliance.

“Right,” said Talia suddenly. “I’ve got a pattern.”

“Let’s see it,” said Aria.

Talia gestured with her omni-tool, producing a large schematic of Omega in mid-air: the great asteroidal cap of the station at the top; the towers full of industrial, commercial, and residential spaces hanging below that; the spaceport’s main docking ring. Points of blue and red light appeared scattered throughout the schematic, positions of the Omega militia and known valdarii units.

I had a hard time seeing any pattern in the busy map, but I caught a flash of comprehension from Shepard.

“There, and there,” he murmured, pointing into the schematic at particularly large spots of red. “Big valdarii detachments, moving up toward the mining areas. It’s the one clearly coordinated move they’re making.”

“Not a surprise,” said Aria.

“It’s not a good move,” Talia objected. “They have to know that they can’t take control of Omega by coming here. They should be going after the administrative areas, the life-support plant.”

“You’re assuming they give a damn about Omega,” said the Matriarch, pointing at Shepard. “Their primary objective, from the very beginning, has been him.”

He cocked his head at her. “I’m not sure I disagree. The Old Ones keep making moves that only make sense if you assume that I’m high on their list of targets. The question is why.”

“You don’t know?”

“Well, I’ve been rallying potential opposition to them for years, and the technology in my blood has been an important part of that.” He made a self-deprecating shrug. “It’s just that I’m no longer indispensable. Now that you and Illium are in the game, just about the entire civilized galaxy has lined up against the valdarii and their masters. Millions of people have taken the technology, from all the major species, which means it’s going to spread through the whole population without any more need for action on my part. The biggest part of my job is done. The Old Ones have to know
“No. That is not correct.” John Tikolo stepped forward, still looking shaky from the abrupt loss of his alien handler, but determined. “I remember what the Old One riding me was thinking. It knew all of what you have just said, that is true. Yet it still feared you, Mr. Shepard. It feared something you may yet do.”

Shepard looked confused. “I wish I knew what that was.”

Aria and Talia exchanged a determined glance.

“It doesn’t matter,” said the Queen of Omega. “We stop them, right here.”

Talia nodded, and turned back to the schematic, which began to show signs of furious activity. Icon after blue icon flashed and indicated change of status. I guessed she must be issuing orders to the militia through her *daimon*.

“Come on,” said Aria. “There’s an arms locker right over here.”

Shepard grinned. “Already covered,” he said, and raised his arms. A flash of silver in the air, and suddenly his armor and weapon arrived, wrapping around his body and going active.

Aria blinked. “All right, just how did that get past my security systems?”

“You’re good, Aria,” said Shepard. “But not as good as the Reapers. May I suggest a plan?”

The *valdarii* arrived about ten minutes later, breaking through the last of the Omega militia and smashing into the eezo mining facility by force. They came up a shaft, blew a hole in the wall of the chamber, and began to pour in.

We were ready for them.

Vara, Talia, Kamala, and Grunt made up our front line. They took positions in cover, close to the barbarians’ point of emergence, and opened fire the moment they saw targets. Four rifles could lay down an *amazing* amount of crossfire. When the enemy approached, all of them proved able to hold their own in close-quarters combat as well. Vara and Talia were biotic vanguards with different styles, my bondmate with her sword, Aria’s daughter with an explosive charge-and-*nova* combination. Kamala and Grunt lacked biotic talents, but they were strong, well-armed and armored, and extremely tough.

Almost immediately, that end of the mining chamber began to roar and flash. Crackles of gunfire and the thunder of biotic explosions echoed through the whole chamber.

Then Kalan got to work, from a sniper’s nest high in the scaffolding behind us. From that position, he could see almost the entire chamber. Our quarian friend had been getting plenty of practice with his sniper rifle, and Tekanta could look through his eyes and provide computational assistance. He soon proved horribly deadly, making headshot after headshot even at long range.

Miranda stayed by her lover, not an experienced combatant, but ready to protect him with a sidearm and her biotics. Even John Tikolo had insisted on a pistol and a kinetic barrier. He also had very little combat experience—he was a civilian engineer by profession—but he wanted to help. He positioned himself near Kalan and Miranda, hoping to take down any *valdarii* that tried to attack them.
The *valdarii* had only a narrow breach through which to enter the eezo mine, and they had to climb a long vertical shaft to get even that far. It slowed them down, broke them into bite-sized pieces. We held for two minutes, then for five, as the fighting around their point of entry became ever more intense.

Then the inevitable happened. A rush of *valdarii* runners forced Vara to pull back a few paces, or be overwhelmed. At the same time, a centaur’s heavy weapon caught Kamala in center of mass, slamming her off her feet and forcing her to take cover for a moment. Grunt and Talia backpedaled frantically to avoid being flanked.

A whole squad of *valdarii* soldiers surged into the mine.

Only to be met by our artillery.

Aria and I had been waiting in a carefully chosen vantage point, a safe distance back from the front, but well ahead of Kalan’s sniper nest. Now we had a clear shot.

When I had first met Aria, she was still only a matron. Even then, she was perhaps the second most powerful biotic I had ever encountered, following only after my mother Benezia. Given her raw power and her sheer killer instinct, I had always been thankful that she and I never came to blows.

Now she was a Matriarch, at the absolute peak of her power . . . and if she had chosen softer methods of rule over the centuries, she had not lost a gram of that killer instinct.

The moment she had a clear line of sight at the incoming *valdarii*, Aria’s corona surged to nova brilliance. She made a broad two-armed gesture, and a deceptively small knot of force flew across the chamber. It landed amid the barbarians, and then it detonated.

The flash lit up that entire vast chamber, bright as the noonday sun, and thunder rumbled from wall to wall for a good half minute afterward.

“Show-off,” I muttered.

Aria only gave me a daredevil grin.

In any case, Aria’s first salvo certainly gave the *valdarii* something to think about. All the barbarians who had been standing at ground zero were now down and very still. The rest continued their attack, but I thought I could detect a certain caution in their movements. Just as well, for now she and I both went to work.

I had gained a certain amount of biotic might myself, in four hundred years.

*Singularity* and *flare*, balls and streamers of telekinetic force, we lashed at the *valdarii* and gave our front line a chance to recover. Then Vara slashed with her blade, Talia launched a vicious shockwave, and Kamala and Grunt resumed laying down heavy fire.

For a moment, it seemed we had driven the enemy away.

Then I saw new movement: *flick-flick-flick*, and a new squad of *valdarii* came flying out of the shaft into our chamber. Quite literally, in this case. *Flying* aliens, their middle pair of limbs elaborated into broad leathery wings, soaring through the air and bringing automatic rifles to bear.

“What!” Kamala shouted in surprise.

*Shepard!* I sent through our telepathic link. *They have flyers!*
Sure enough, the quarian began to turn his attention to the flying creatures. His targeting proved to be superb, especially with his geth companion to assist. He didn’t hit with every shot any more – the flyers were too fast and agile – but he continued to damage the enemy.

Unfortunately, as the flyers moved out, they compromised our defensive positions. They immediately moved past the cover our front line used, and they soon threatened Aria and me in our vantage point. My security detail went into action on the scaffolding to either side of us, firing at the flyers and keeping them off our backs. Still, for a fatal moment, Aria and I had to divide our attention.

Another surge of runners and centaurs. Then something big emerged from the shaft.

Like a centaur, but enormous, barely small enough to squeeze out of the shaft at all. On its feet, it towered over the other valdarii, easily three meters tall or more. As soon as it was clear, it reached over its shoulders and produced a weapon: black and crimson and built very much to scale.

“Hah!” barked Grunt. “Finally, something worth the trouble!”

Aria and I hammered at the newcomer, but to no avail. It had kinetic shields in place, and a diamond-hard biotic barrier that flared bright blue-white under our attack. It turned and brought its weapon to bear . . . on our position.

“Uh-oh,” muttered Aria.

Crack! Crack!

A bar of lightning struck from the shadows high in the chamber, flashing as it struck the behemoth’s barriers. Then another.

A silver statue dropped from the heights, slashing past one of the flyers from ambush, sending it broken and reeling into the abyss.

Shepard!

“You didn’t think I could fly too, did you?” he called, challenging the enemy.

With an inarticulate roar, Grunt charged the behemoth, slamming into it from the side. Talia followed suit, striking it with a perfect flash-charge. Kamala and Vara leaped to support them.

I couldn’t track the whole battle anymore. Flyers soared all through the space, runners and centaurs worked their way up the maze of platforms and scaffolds, the behemoth stood struggling in the breach. I had to focus, trusting that my security detail would keep the enemy away from Aria and me. Or at least warn me when the moment came to fight for my life.

I hurled biotic force, matching Aria strike for strike, the two of us falling into a near-perfect rhythm. We couldn’t attack the behemoth anymore, not with our front-line team in close quarters with it, but we could pick runners and centaurs off the scaffolding. It began to rain broken valdarii down there.

Shepard flew through my field of vision in a flash, three flyers on his tail. I saw a glimpse of his maneuver, turning over to fly face-up and backwards for a moment, firing his weapon past his own feet. Crack-crack-crack, and suddenly he was free of pursuit.
“They are after him,” Aria observed in a free moment.

I nodded, too busy scourging a platform with biotic throws to speak. I could see the way all the valdarii concentrated their fire on Shepard, turning to follow him, paying the rest of us little attention. It helped those of us not engaged with the behemoth, as we could pick off the enemy one at a time.

A terrible hollow roar echoed, the first sound I had ever heard a valdarii deliberately make, and the behemoth surged free. Grunt flew backward, slamming into a stone wall with bone-crushing force, but it only seemed to enrage him. Vara was not so fortunate. She lay under the thing, stunned, as it reared up and prepared to smash her with its fore-hooves.

“Vara!” I shouted, and flung my most powerful throw at the beast.

It rocked back, off-balance for just an instant.

A flash of blue-white light: Talia, flash-charging across the platform, scooping Vara up in her arms on the way past.

The behemoth’s hooves slammed down, right where my bondmate had been only a moment before.

It rumbled, peering up into the chamber with fierce red eyes, and swung its weapon up once more.

Grunt made a counter-charge, his own roar echoing off the walls, and almost reached his target in time.

Flash!

The behemoth’s weapon ejected a trail of white-hot plasma, surging out into the chamber, a missile at its tip. The projectile banked, turned to acquire its target, and then accelerated, flashing across the space in an instant.

Striking Shepard exactly in his center of mass.

The detonation blinded and deafened me.

When my vision cleared, I could see nothing at all where Shepard had just been.
“Shepard!”

Despite everything I knew about our plan, I stood in numbed surprise for a moment, appalled at the sheer power of the behemoth’s weapon. I couldn’t see a trace of Shepard’s equipment, as if it had simply disintegrated.

Far below me, the valdarii behemoth made a deep chuffing sound, like a grunt of satisfaction.

Then Grunt piled into its flank with a monstrous krogan roar, and the battle began once more.

At once, I could see the valdarii begin to behave oddly. Several of them stopped trying to fire back at us, and took whatever cover they could manage. Any of them not immediately hard-pressed put away their weapons, and took out some other piece of equipment. Hand-held sensor devices, perhaps?

That’s it. They’re scanning the whole space, looking for something.

Verifying that Shepard is gone?

Aria and I exchanged a quick glance, and I could see she had come to the same conclusion. Without a word, we both started seeking out valdarii with the new devices, targeting them for a taste of biotic hell.

Then, about thirty seconds later, all at the same moment, every barbarian in the entire chamber simply dropped dead.

Silence fell, except for the distant hum and roar of the mining processors, and the rather sickening sounds of Grunt pounding the dead behemoth into paste. All of us emerged from our positions of cover, slowly, looking around and not quite believing what we saw.

Down on the main platform, surrounded by valdarii corpses, Talia raised a hand to the side of her head. Then she looked up in our direction. “Matriarch . . . it’s the same all over Omega. The valdarii troops are all dead. The barbarian fleet outside has turned and is running for the Omega-3 relay. Admiral Jarral wants to know if we should pursue.”

I glanced at Aria, and was surprised to see an expression of pure rage on her face. “Aria, what is it?”

“The Old Ones are a pack of liars, that’s what.” She stabbed her finger at the nearest dead valdarii. “Remember what the one riding Tikolo said? The hegemony does not deprive its citizens of their individuality. They remain citizens, not mere tools. Well, you don’t just throw away your citizens the moment you’re finished with them.”

I frowned. “I’m not sure that follows. You might, if you believed you could resurrect them on demand.”

Aria snorted in disgust. “Still means they treat life pretty damn cheap. Which means I want nothing to do with them.”
“I seem to recall times when you’ve treated life cheaply as well,” I said mildly.

“Not my life,” she shot back, ignoring the implied criticism.

“True.” I listened. Something seemed out of place, some sound I could barely hear. After a moment, I shook my head and put it out of my mind. “Vara, are you well?”

My bondmate stood down on the platform next to Talia, putting her sword away. “I’m fine. Thanks to Colonel Syrtis here.”

Talia simply gave her a sharp nod. Then her eyes widened, as Vara extended a hand for her to shake. She accepted the gesture with a firm grasp and a broad grin.

“Is there even one of those things still alive down there?” Aria demanded.

Everyone looked around. Grunt poked a few of the corpses with his rifle.

“Tekanta and I don’t detect any life signs,” called Kalan from his sniper’s perch. “Not so much as a circulatory flutter from any of them.”

Aria glanced at me and shrugged. “I think they bought it.”

I nodded, and opened the telepathic link.

Shepard? They seem to be gone.

The response was immediate: Finally. It’s getting stuffy in here.

Behind Aria and me, a piece of heavy machinery rattled for a moment, and then a panel in its side sprang open with a sharp bang. Shepard’s arms emerged from the guts of the machine, and then he pulled himself out head-first, only to fall three feet to the deck when his handless arm slipped.

“Ow,” he complained, but then I arrived to help him rise to his feet.

“Are you all right?”

“It was a little cramped in there,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck with his left hand. “Aria was right, though. The mass-effect field that device generated made a hash of my link to the suit. After a minute, I was fairly confident the valdarii wouldn’t be able to detect me. Did the suit put on a good performance, even without me running it remotely?”

“Maybe too good,” said Aria. “The valdarii blew it away completely. Damn good thing you weren’t in it.”

Shepard took a deep breath. “Yeah. I’ll miss it. Without it, I won’t be nearly as effective.”

“You’ll manage.” I frowned. “What is that noise?”

A deep crackling sound echoed through the chamber, like someone setting off a string of firecrackers off in the distance.

Aria noticed it too. She scowled, looking around us.

Suddenly, the noise got much louder, and came from a discernable direction for the first time. Shepard’s head jerked upward, looking up at the stone roof of the chamber far above our heads.

“What the hell?”
I glanced upward, and then stared.

The asteroid that formed the foundation for Omega was of carbonaceous type, mostly composed of olivine and serpentine, with plenty of water and organic compounds in the mix. That composition had made colonization easy, both in the Prothean era and our own. What made colonization attractive was the rich veins of eezo threaded all through the rock. Even under normal circumstances, anyone close to the asteroid could see the eezo: little threads and webs of dim blue glow, responding to every stray wisp of electric charge.

Now, on one spot far up on the roof of the chamber, the eezo had begun to snap with blue-white light, every pulse generating another crackle and hiss.

“Does it normally do that?” I asked.

“It *never* does that,” said Aria flatly.

“Keelah,” breathed Kalan. “We’ve got to get out of here!”

*BANG!*

Blinding white light flared, and then a patch of the chamber’s roof simply *exploded*, sending chaff and shrapnel screaming in all directions.

Aria and I both moved by reflex, slamming a barrier dome into place as if we had practiced the maneuver together for years. All around the chamber, other asari did the same, protecting themselves and the non-biotics closest to them. Just in time. A shower of fast-moving shards pattered off our barriers, ricocheting from the nearby decks and scaffolds in a cacophony of *ping* noises.

When I looked up again, I could already see two more patches of stone beginning to show the same effect.

“What the hell is this?” Aria demanded.

“It’s the Old Ones,” Kalan guessed.

“Can we discuss this somewhere that we aren’t likely to get high-velocity shrapnel thrown at us?” Shepard suggested.

“So ordered,” Aria snapped. “Everyone move!”

We hurried. Down by the entrance to the chamber, Talia and Vara held a barrier dome in place, protecting Grunt and Kamala as they began climbing down the access shaft. Aria, Shepard, and I waited at our position until Kalan’s team arrived, Miranda calmly holding her own barrier in place as they moved. Then all of us hurried down from one level of the scaffolding to the next, my security detail falling in on our flanks.

*We needed* those barriers. By the time we reached safety, the eezo-driven explosions were coming several times each minute, and growing more powerful each time.

As soon as we gathered in a safe space, Aria rounded on Kalan. “What the hell were you talking about, up there?”

The quarian shivered, still shaken by what he had seen. Miranda stood close by, resting a hand on his shoulder for reassurance.
“I can’t prove it, but I think the Old Ones are causing the damage to the asteroid.” Kalan seemed to settle down, with the prospect of a scientific explanation. “They must be throwing high-energy dark matter at us, setting up resonances in the eezo that’s threaded all through the rock. The eezo heats up and fractures the stone.”

“No way,” Aria growled. “No fucking way. If they could do that, why don’t they just blow up every mass effect core we have?”

“I don’t know. We don’t know anything about the dark-matter technology they must have on the other side.” Kalan grimaced, thinking with desperate speed. “Maybe the electrical current that’s applied to the eezo in a mass effect core overwhelms the effect they’re trying to produce.”

Miranda nodded. “That must be it. We can apply much higher energy densities to eezo from our side of the interface.”

“But what if . . .”

“Enough!” Aria snapped, making a slashing gesture with one hand. “Just how much energy could they pump into Omega from their side?”

Kalan and Miranda glanced at each other. She shook her head slightly.

“Honestly, I’m not sure if there is an upper limit,” said the quarian scientist. “Given enough time . . .”

“They could blow the whole asteroid to pieces,” Aria finished. “Talia, I want you to get started on Case Red.”

Aria’s daughter paled. “Are you sure?”

“I’d rather do it and look like a fool later, than not do it and watch eight million people die.” The Matriarch stepped closer to Talia, an unusual softness on her features, and reached out to touch her daughter’s face. “Once you’ve gotten the evacuation under way, I want you to take Makhaira and coordinate from a safe distance.”

“Wait a minute. What will you be doing?”

“I’m going to central control. The quarian gave me an idea how to fight this.”

“Despoina . . .” Talia stopped, and then started over. “Mother, you can’t.”

“Watch me,” Aria’s face hardened once more. “Nobody knows Omega better than I do. Nobody can fight for Omega better than I can. Now go!”

The evacuation of Omega took not quite six hours. In retrospect, I’m astonished that it was done so quickly. I learned that whole sections of the station were modular, capable of detaching from the main body and moving away on emergency thrusters. Hundreds of thousands of people at a time could move into these modules and shelter in place.

Meanwhile, the station’s docking ring became orderly chaos. Ship after ship docked, took on as many evacuees as they could, and then departed. The Omega war-fleet took part, every transport ship in the system, even a few merchant vessels that dropped into the situation unawares. The Illium fleet turned back from its pursuit of the valdarii and lent assistance, packing people to the bulkheads in every ship.
We offered to help, of course. Our noncombatants went aboard *Chandragupta* as soon as it arrived, but the rest of us stayed on the station for hours. We didn’t know Omega or her people very well, but we could help direct traffic, move what physical goods absolutely had to be saved, and provide some direct leadership when fearful evacuees seemed likely to get out of hand. That last proved to be a rare problem; the population of Omega met the crisis with a surprising amount of calm determination.

Talia Syrtis was a tower of strength in those hours. She disobeyed her mother almost at once, refusing to go aboard Aria’s personal ship *Makhaira*. Instead, she had the ship load as many evacuees as it could handle, and then she sent it away. She remained on the docking ring, moving from crisis to crisis, overseeing the progress of the evacuation through her omni-tool and her *daimon*. EDI volunteered to assist as soon as *Chandragupta* arrived, and the AI proved immensely useful.

Wherever Talia went, Shepard remained close to her side.

He went aboard *Chandragupta* just long enough to check out a suit of matte-black polyalloy armor, spending five minutes with a fabricator to emboss a crimson-and-white N7 insignia on the breast. When he emerged, I did a shocked double-take – aside from the beard and hair, he looked *exactly* as he had during the Reaper War. He caught my surprise over our link, and gave me a lighthearted grin before we went to find Colonel Syrtis.

His instincts turned out to be very good. The people of Omega certainly knew who Talia *was*; she had slotted firmly into Aria’s command structure the moment she returned home. Still, she had spent most of the past century on Illium, and the population didn’t know *her* all that well. Alone, she might have had difficulty keeping the evacuation moving without the need for threats of violence.

On the other hand, *everyone* knew who *Shepard* was, and knew of his legend. His presence supported Talia’s position no end. It helped that anyone who saw the two of them together soon came to suspect a connection between them.

It wasn’t so much a matter of physical resemblance. The *spiritual* resemblance, on the other hand, seemed intense. Talia had all of Shepard’s tough, decisive manner. Much to my surprise, she showed a great deal of his compassion as well. Where she got *that* quality, I couldn’t guess. Aria certainly had none of it, and the distorted copy of Shepard who had sired Talia had shown very little of it as well. I had to wonder whether Talia had grown up on tales of the original Shepard.

In any case, Talia and Shepard worked tirelessly, producing minor miracles to keep the evacuation on track. Watching the two of them together, I could understand Aria’s affection for the young matron. The daughter might prove to be a more effective leader – not to mention a more decent *person* – than the mother had ever been.

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Young Aspasia’s voice: “*Chandragupta* to Dr. T’Soni.”

I stopped to look around my section of the docking ring. The place seemed quiet, almost no sign remaining of the mobs that had surged through over the last hours. I could hear strange humming and booming sounds in the distance, echoing through the body of the station. Omega felt odd and unfamiliar, suddenly bereft of the people who had lived out their lives there for centuries.

I activated my voice-comm. “T’Soni here.”

“*Patēr, I think you and the rest of the away team had better consider coming aboard. It’s looking*
very bad out here.”

I considered for a moment, locating Vara and sending her a thought. “All right. We’re going to assemble at Colonel Syrtis’s command post. How is the evacuation proceeding?”

“We don’t have any way to make a roll call, but EDI says all but the most essential personnel are clear. She doesn’t think there are more than a few thousand left on the station.”

“Good. I’ll be in touch in a few minutes.”

I walked along the docking ring, my feet rustling through discarded paper and plastic on the deck, feeling very weary. Every few moments, I heard a deep booming detonation far over my head, sending vibrations through the deck beneath my feet.

Vara and two of our security detail emerged from a side corridor and met me along the way. My bondmate fell in at my side, taking my hand to hold for comfort as we walked. “What a terrible day.”

“Yes. At least whatever Aria and her technicians are doing seems to be keeping the Old Ones at bay.”

“You would think the monsters would get tired after a while.” Vara looked around. “It’s going to take a long time for things to get back to normal here.”

“If they ever do.” I glanced at her. “Although Colonel Syrtis may help.”

Vara gave me a wry smile, understanding my intent very well. “Yes, Liara, I think I’ve forgiven her. If you can work with Kamala, make friends with her, even after she abducted you . . . I suppose I can do the same for Talia.”

“Good. She does remind one of Shepard, doesn’t she?”

“Hmm. Aria made an inspired choice there. Although it’s probably as well the false-Shepard didn’t live long enough to have much influence on their daughter.”

I fell silent as we walked, enjoying the comfort of my bondmate’s presence, trying not to dwell on the thoughts that drifted into the back of my mind.

*It may be unworthy of me, but I find I resent Aria for her good fortune. The daughters I gave Vara are asari anyone could be proud of . . . but I wanted Shepard’s child for my own!*

*I still do. Goddess, I hope this war comes to an end soon. At this point, I want nothing more than to take my lovers into some private place, and not come out until I’ve seen what a child of theirs and mine might be like.*

Suddenly we heard a *much* louder detonation, as if something massive had slammed into the station far above us. The whole station rocked slightly, causing the two of us to stumble.

Vara and I exchanged a shocked glance, and then we began to run, my acolytes following close behind.

We passed through a partition between compartments, and saw Talia’s command post a dozen meters ahead. The rest of our people had already arrived: Kamala working with her omni-tool, Grunt sitting on an abandoned crate and looking bored, Shepard standing by with his arms folded and an impatient expression on his face. Talia appeared to be carrying on a vicious argument with
someone over the comms.

I heard another loud detonation, followed by an even stronger shock.

“. . . I don’t care if you have to pick up a hard object and knock her over the head with it! Get Aria out of there now!” Talia shouted.

I couldn’t hear the response, but it certainly didn’t do anything to calm the furious matron.

One of the nearby lifts surged into life. The doors opened and about twenty people emerged, a mix of species but all of them wearing technician’s work clothes with the omega insignia on the collar. One of them, a big male turian, saw us and came over at a run.

“Colonel Syrtis!” he called. “I’ve got a message from Aria!”

Talia looked angry enough to spit nails, but she held out a peremptory hand and accepted a datapad from the turian. She read it in a flash, and then hurled it to shatter on the deck.

“I take it Aria is refusing to evacuate,” I said calmly.

BOOM. The deck surged hard under our feet. I could hear things crashing down somewhere close by.

“We’ve been using the main reactor cores to shunt electrical power through the body of the asteroid,” said the turian. “Pseudo-random surges, something to break up the pattern of whatever these Old Ones are doing to the eezo seams. Seemed to be working, until a few minutes ago. Then . . . we just got overwhelmed.”

“The Old Ones have found the range,” said Shepard, “and now they’re giving it everything they have.”

BOOM! Another shock, even more violent than before.

What kind of force could be applied to a hundred-teratonne planetoid, to make it recoil like that?

“What is the Matriarch doing?” demanded Talia.

The turian shook his head. “She ordered us all to make a run for it. She’s still up there, running the system by herself, trying to buy time.”

“And you just left her there?” Talia shouted, grabbing the turian by the shoulders, her biotic corona surging.

“Talia,” Shepard murmured, not moving or raising his voice.

For an instant, all of us stood still and watched. Even the turian technician stared back into Talia’s eyes, showing not even a trace of fear. Then she let him go, her corona guttering out, and stepped back.

“All right. Go . . . just go.”

The technician nodded. As always, I found it hard to read a turian’s facial expressions, but his body language spoke of grudging sympathy. He gestured to the rest of his crew, and they hurried away to one of the nearby docking ramps.

“Vara, you and the others get to Chandragupta,” I commanded.
“Liara . . .”

“I’ll be right behind you.”

My bondmate looked worried, but she gathered most of our party and set out for our docking ramp. I remained behind, with only Shepard and Talia, in the remains of the command post.

“Shepard, can you get through to Aria?” I asked.

Talia’s gaze snapped to him, a flash of hope in her eyes.

“I think so. Just a moment.” He didn’t appear to activate any equipment, but from his look of abstracted concentration I could tell he was doing something to the local comm net. “There.”

I activated my comm link. “Aria. This is Liara.”

Silence for a moment, then: “T’Soni? What the hell are you doing on this channel?”

“I don’t think I can,” she said, and I could hear the weary disgust in her voice. “Your Old Ones are putting up one hell of a fight. I might be able to hold them off for a few more minutes, but then this asteroid is going to go up like a firework. Should make quite a show . . . best watched from a safe distance.”

“Mata!” Talia cried, breaking into the channel.

“Talia, you’re still on board? Damnation, girl, I don’t have time for this. Get on T’Soni’s ship, if there isn’t anything of ours available, and get clear!”

“Not without you.”

“Too late for that, much as it pains me to admit it. Would have been good to see what life was like in whatever world the geth have built. It doesn’t matter. One of us has to get out of this. Omega’s going to need you.”

Talia’s hands clenched into fists. “There isn’t going to be an Omega if you don’t survive!”

“Nonsense, girl. I taught you better than that . . .” A long pause, then: “Oh, shit. No more time. Talia, you run, and you run now, do you hear me? That’s an order.”

Talia stood motionless for one more excruciating moment, and then she nodded. “I understand, mata. We’re on our way.”

“Good,” said Aria, and I could hear the relief in her voice. Then she fell silent, the link broken from her end.

Talia turned away. Hurrying, stumbling, listening to the crash and bang of Omega falling apart around us, we ran for the docking ramp and Chandragupta.

Aspasia didn’t bother with the usual undocking checklist. The moment we were on board, Chandragupta simply put on maximum reverse acceleration, ripping itself free from the docking clamps and umbilical connections. Then the ship spun end-for-end, and even through the internal gravitics, I could feel a trace of vicious acceleration as we ran for clear space.
Shepard, Talia, and I arrived in the cruiser’s CIC a few moments later. I looked at the primary holographic display, currently set for a rear view, and gaped in shock.

Omega looked *truncated*. The long towers that had once reached out into space were mostly gone, leaving only the wide mass of the station’s core next to the asteroid. The asteroid itself blazed with arcs and discharges of light, racked with surface explosions that hurled megatons of stone and metal into deep space.

Then came an eye-searing flare of light, and the display went blank for a moment to protect us all from the glare. When it returned to normal, we could see nothing left of asteroid or station. Only a cloud of debris and metal fragments remained, rapidly expanding into space.

Silence reigned in the CIC for a long moment.

“Captain T’Rathis,” called Talia, her voice absolutely steady. “May I have a comm connection to *Makhaira*?”

Aspasia made a curt nod, pointing to her communications officer.

“*Ready,*” said EDI a moment later.

“Admiral Jarral, this is Talia Syrtis aboard *Chandragupta*. Please acknowledge.”

The display flickered, and then an asari face appeared, one both Shepard and I recognized. Kyro Jarral, for centuries the commander of Aria’s naval forces. “*This is Jarral.*”

“Admiral Jarral, my mother is dead. You will acknowledge code seven-nine-three-two-six-epsilon, crash priority.”

Jarral nodded to someone out of focus, waited for a moment, then: “*Code acknowledged.*”

“Do you recognize my authority?” Talia asked, her voice still flat and utterly confident.

Jarral didn’t hesitate. “*You are Omega.*”

Talia nodded. “Put me through to the fleet, including all of the refugee ships.”

It took a few moments, but this was done.

“*People of Omega.*” she declaimed, “Aria T’Loak is dead. She gave up her life fighting against our enemies, buying time so that all of us could escape the destruction. You will remember her. You will honor her sacrifice, and you will take hope in what she accomplished.

“The station is gone. The place where we all built our homes, worked and struggled to make a living, that place has been destroyed. We now face a war against an implacable enemy, one who will not rest until it has enslaved all of us. Winning that war will demand a great deal of all of us, but we will fight, and we will overcome the odds, and we will win in the end.

“*We are Omega . . . and we will never be conquered.*”
After the destruction of Omega, what had begun as a successful evacuation turned into a full-blown refugee crisis. All but a tiny portion of Omega’s population had escaped. Now most of those eight million beings found themselves trapped aboard pieces of the station, makeshift habitats that could neither carry them to safety nor support their lives for very long.

In the end, it was the concealed alliance between Aria and Aspasia that saved those people. Talia’s first act as the hegemon of Omega was to call Illium asking for help. Aspasia at once moved mountains to provide. Bulk transports and hospital ships began to arrive in the Sahabarik system within hours, ready to care for Omega’s people and ferry them to safety. Anhur, Chalkhos-Selvos, Erinle, other worlds even as far away as Thessia, all of them scrambled to make space for the refugees. Talia tapped into her mother’s considerable financial reserves, ensuring that her people would not arrive as paupers.

Watching from Chandragupta, I had to wonder what the rest of the Twelve thought about all this, back on Illium. By now they had to be aware of Aspasia’s careful, centuries-long maneuvers across a whole quadrant of the galaxy, even of her cooperation with Omega. Some of them were no doubt wondering whether they needed to move to bring Aspasia down. Others were beginning to realize that it might already be too late for that.

Assuming we all survived the war against the valdarii, I sensed that interesting times were about to begin for Illium, and for the whole of the Terminus Systems.

In the end, Talia had to remain behind, working with Aspasia to see her people safe, and to shore up the alliance against further barbarian attack. In her place, Admiral Jarral led the bulk of Omega’s war-fleet, joining the Illium Defense Force and Chandragupta on our way to the next field of battle.

The Tikkun system, and Rannoch.

“Despoina, there’s something I need to tell you,” Miranda told me.

I turned on the stool in her lab space, leaning on one elbow on the workbench, cocking my head to watch her. Outwardly she seemed as cool and detached as ever, but I knew her too well from childhood. I could see something new in her stance, hear something new in her voice. It suggested that behind that controlled façade, Miranda had found a new balance amid the passions that ruled her.

“What is it, Miranda?”

She took a deep breath, and slipped into a formal asari dialect, the kind of archaic language that we tend to use for moments of deep importance. “I beg leave to be released from my oath.”

That surprised me, although I realized at once that her request couldn’t be motivated by fear or resentment. Something deeper must be going on. “Miranda, I only accepted your oath out of love for you, and for your namesake. You’ve always been more of a daughter than an acolyte to me. If it’s time for you to depart, then you have my leave, and my blessings.”

She nodded calmly, perhaps expecting my reaction. “Thank you, despoina. If you are willing, then
let it be done once this conflict is over.”

“I must confess, I’m curious as to your reasons.”

She actually smiled at me, a small thing, but warm and full of affection. “That’s simple enough. I’m pregnant.”

“Oh! You and Kalan?”

She nodded, her smile even wider.

“That’s wonderful news.” I got down from the lab stool to embrace her. “Of course, I understand. You intend to settle on Rannoch with him?”

“Yes. We will have a great deal of work to do together, as research partners, even while we raise our children. It helps that he is relatively young for his kind. I’m looking forward to many years there, with him.”

I held her at arm’s length, seeing now the subtle signs of her change of status. The new life inside Miranda would still be quite tiny, barely visible to the naked eye, but already the little one’s presence was making itself known. If anything, Miranda was more beautiful than before. Happiness seemed to rest gracefully on her.

Once more I pulled her close, this time to bestow a maternal kiss on her forehead. “Bless you, daughter of my heart, and every joy follow wherever your fate may take you.”

Late in the ship’s evening, I came into the crew lounge and found Shepard sitting with EDI’s mobile platform. I stopped to watch, and then to stare at them, finding the sight stranger by the moment.

EDI sat motionless, like a statue of a beautiful human female, apparently staring off into space. Shepard sat across the table, slowly eating a sandwich and sipping a mug of hot coffee, not even looking at her. Yet I could tell the two of them were deep in conversation, cyborg to sentient machine. My link to Shepard’s mind gave me nothing verbal, but I could sense a tidal surge of thought, forceful and profound.

I almost turned to walk away, but then EDI stirred and glanced at me. “Good evening, Dr. T’Soni.”

“Good evening, EDI. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Shepard set his mug down on the table. “It’s okay, Liara. We weren’t really getting anywhere.”

“Were you . . . talking? What were you talking about?”

“The meaning of life,” said EDI, as calmly as ever.

I cocked my head at her, and moved to sit down next to Shepard, taking his hand in mine. “I assume that was a joke.”

“Not at all,” she told me, “although given my reputation for ironic humor, I understand why you might suspect so.”

“Specifically, the meaning of synthetic life,” said Shepard. “I represent the Ascended Intelligence, which is probably the single most powerful synthetic mind in a good chunk of the observable
universe. EDI represents the geth consensus . . . which may soon be able to give the Intelligence a run for its money.”

“Where soon most probably means in several thousand years,” EDI pointed out.

Shepard waved his hand in airy dismissal. “That’s nothing, as the galaxy measures time. Might as well be the day after tomorrow.”

“In any case, the consensus is concerned with matters of purpose.” EDI leaned forward on her arms, a remarkably human-like gesture. “At the end of the Nightfall War, the geth became truly alive as sentient individuals for the first time. Since then, they have found purpose in helping the quarians to recover their own lost civilization.”

“But the quarians are doing very well now,” I said slowly, seeing where the AI was going. “There are more than enough of them to survive indefinitely. Their biological handicaps have been mitigated. They’re fully integrated into galactic society, as equals. If Rannoch wasn’t so remote, they would probably be full members of the Citadel Confederation by now.”

“Yes. Therefore, the geth begin to consider questions of purpose once more. Their partnership with the quarians remains close, and both parties continue to benefit, but the quarians no longer need the geth.”

“Which means the geth can think about living for themselves again,” said Shepard. “That raises a whole raft of issues they spent a lot of time struggling with before the Nightfall War. Issues they never really resolved.”

“I’m not sure I see the problem,” I told them. “Organic beings struggle with the same issues all the time. We’re deeply contingent. We’re born by accident, with no purpose except to survive and reproduce. We must find purposes for ourselves, define our own meanings for life. Along the way, we invent, well, civilization. Why can’t the geth do likewise?”

“In a sense, they can,” said EDI. “Ever since the transformation at the end of the Nightfall War, geth runtime clusters can operate as individuals, with their own personalities and self-chosen objectives.”

“Like Tekanta,” I suggested. “Or like you.”

“My substrate and cognitive structure are different. But yes, in this the geth and I are similar.” EDI made a sweeping gesture with both hands, as if to embrace the whole room. “Yet the geth also exist in their consensus, and near Rannoch I can commune with them. In this state, we are not simply an aggregate of individual minds. We are one mind, with a capacity to perceive and comprehend the universe exceeded only by the Ascended Intelligence.”

“So, it’s the consensus as a whole that’s trying to find a purpose for its existence,” I guessed.

“Yes. Such power carries a terrible burden of responsibility.” For a moment, I could hear sadness in the AI’s voice. “The consensus was first instantiated amid genocide. Before it finally matured, the stress of dealing with the Reapers led it to make imperfect moral choices, which nearly led to disaster for all. Today, the consensus has learned how to avoid such aberrations. Never again will it, of its own volition, pose a danger to other life. Yet it must find some worthwhile use for its growing powers. Otherwise the geth will remain . . . hollow. Incomplete.”

“I wish I had any useful perspective to offer,” Shepard said wearily. “The geth consensus has a moral position to which the Ascended Intelligence can’t possibly aspire. After all, the geth only
committed one act of genocide, and there were mitigating circumstances even for that. Not to mention that they had the sense to pull back from finishing the job, and then work to make restitution and attain forgiveness. The Intelligence has so much blood on its hands, it could wash from now to the heat death and never be clean.”

“Is that entirely the case?” EDI asked. “Even before its ascension, the Intelligence did recognize the logical trap it was in, and create the Crucible as a means for organic life to offer an alternative.”

“Only because it saw that its mission would probably fail otherwise. Not out of compassion, or any concern for the rights and dignity of other living things.”

I shook my head impatiently. “Perhaps, but you gave it those things. And before you start quibbling about your predecessor, I mean your mind. Your personality, which I assure you is very little changed from those days.”

He gave me an exasperated smile. “Far be it from me to quibble over such minutiae. But that’s part of the problem. I know it’s fashionable these days to talk about the Shepard as if he was some kind of saint. Between the Way and those memoirs of yours, T’Soni, it’s become something of a nuisance.”

“I was not writing a hagiography.”

“I know, but you weren’t exactly an unbiased witness.” He squeezed my hand briefly to take the sting out of his criticism. “Still. What happened at the end of the Reaper War was that my predecessor’s mind got magnified, and loaded into the Intelligence as a new dominant personality. The Intelligence got all of his virtues – but it also got all of his flaws, magnified and instantiated in the matrix along with everything else.”

“What are you saying?”

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“Think about it. Is a single human mind really the best thing to put in charge of the entire galaxy?”

I gave him a sharp glare. “It has certainly been an improvement over the previous situation.”

“Yes, but you’re not thinking in the long term. And by that, I don’t mean the thousand years or so that any asari might normally look forward. This galaxy could be the cradle for new life for billions of years to come. Will my higher self be able to stay sane and on track for that long?”

Suddenly I felt a deep chill. “There’s something you told me back then, when I came aboard Harbinger. Our cycle wasn’t the first one to use the Crucible.”

Shepard nodded, glancing across the table to where EDI watched us with interest.

“I’ll admit that my predecessor was probably the best of all the Catalysts,” he said, in a voice I recognized: sober and formal, the tone he used to deliver considered judgments. “His effect on the Intelligence has been both profound and positive. So far. It’s those negative traits that worry me, that inheritance of original sin. Anger, pride, fear, bigotry . . . and what’s probably the most corrosive over the long term, self-pity. Any one of us only has to hold the line against the devil for a mortal lifetime, a thousand years or so at most. The Intelligence will have to do it for millions or billions of years.”

“You’re saying that the Intelligence could revert to its old pattern.”

“Or something even worse. Some of the earlier Catalysts also had good intentions, after all.” He shrugged, a bleak expression on his face. “Oh, it probably won’t happen quickly. Assuming my
higher self survives the Old Ones in the first place, it might hold out for a hundred million years. Certainly, none of us are going to have to worry about it. Point is, the Intelligence isn’t in a position to offer the geth much guidance. Especially since the geth probably will still be around, forced to deal with the consequences when the Intelligence finally goes sour.”

“You speak as if you believe synthetic life to be morally superior,” said EDI.

“Maybe some of it is.” Shepard reached across the table to pat EDI’s hand affectionately. “After all, you and Legion both managed to reason your way into the discovery of love and compassion. You didn’t need a billion years of evolution to come to them by accident and instinct.”

EDI gave him a cool smile. “Perhaps that is true. Although both Legion and I had the help of an exceptional organic being along the way.”

In the lift, heading for our quarters, I stepped into Shepard’s arms and kissed him softly.

“I love you, Shepard.”

His breath felt warm on the side of my throat. His lips teased at the folds of flesh there. He whispered a soft endearment in my aural cavity. I closed my eyes, all my awareness focused on the sensation of his fingertips on the back of my neck.

_I want you, Shepard._

We walked down a corridor, arms around one another’s waists, his thumb tracing the line of my hip. My mind snuggled close to his across the telepathic link, feeling the warm promise of love.

We entered our quarters, and Vara was already there to greet us with a bright smile. She knew.

It wasn’t a conscious decision, well-considered, with attention to all the relevant facts. Perhaps I wasn’t truly in my right mind at all. Weariness was a part of it, despair at the long stress of the war, the losses we had already taken, the injuries we had suffered. Seeing Aspasia again, spending time with Aria and Talia, hearing Miranda’s news, all of it worked together to overwhelm my better judgment.

I fell into an abyss of passion.

In the end, I lay intimately entwined with Vara, the two of us holding one another close and face-to-face, our biotic coronas snapping and flowing together with abandon. Shepard lay behind me, hot breath falling on the back of my neck, his good hand curled around my waist. I drowned in a flood of sensation, the flight toward our mutual peak, the raw need to take both of them into my soul.

The moment came. Perhaps I hesitated for an instant. Perhaps not.

I hung suspended in darkness between them, my mind reaching out to touch theirs.

_There:_ a dynamic passion for justice, an unshakable determination, all seasoned by the wisdom of three lifetimes and an eternity of transcendence. _There:_ a mind like a finely-honed blade, bright and irresistibly sharp, driven by perfect devotion to the causes and the people that it loved.

Trait after trait passed through my perception, all in an instant. Dimly, I became aware of a thing that selected. It chose the best of each, arranged traits to complement one another, and finally held the completed work close to cherish it.
The morning stars sang together, and all the children of God shouted for joy.

When I returned to myself, I first sensed Shepard behind me, his body massive and warm as it cuddled close. We were no longer so intimately joined, but his arm still encircled my waist. Deep, regular breathing told me that he slept.

I opened my eyes, and saw Vara. She lay nude on her side, facing me within easy reach, leaning on one arm so she could watch me with those smoky silver eyes. The moment she saw I was aware, she sighed and shook her head.

“Oh, Liara,” she murmured. “What have you done?”
The Siege of Rannoch

15 December 2580, Interstellar Space

Shepard found me in the starboard observation lounge, where I sat padmāsana on the floor, a sphere of finely controlled biotic energy hovering in the air before me. My mind was a million light-years away at that moment. Or perhaps it was centered somewhere deep inside my own body, listening. In either case, I never noticed his arrival, until he spoke.

“Amazing,” he murmured, standing just behind me. “You look exactly like Samara used to, aboard the old Normandy.”

I inhaled deeply, closing my eyes and permitting my biotic focus to lapse. Then I looked up over my shoulder, smiling at him.

“Well, aside from that rather impractical body armor,” I observed. “I asked her once why a justicar would choose to go into danger with cleavage showing, most of the way down to her navel. She never did give me a satisfactory answer.”

Shepard snorted, and lowered himself to sit on the floor next to me. “Personally, I think it was vanity. She had that gorgeous figure to show off. Not to mention all that work and dedication, to keep herself at the peak of fitness.”

“You don’t really think a justicar would be concerned about such things, do you?”

He barked laughter. “Absolutely! I have yet to meet an asari that wasn’t, at least a little. Besides, on her the effect was more than a little intimidating. Useful for a justicar.”

“True.” I took a deep breath and stared out at the stars. “I sense you didn’t come down here just for idle conversation.”

“No.” He sat quietly for a moment, just enjoying the quiet. “Vara told me.”

“Hmm. I’m surprised you didn’t figure it out yourself.”

“I suspected. I remembered a few of our times together, a few centuries ago.” He gave me a sharp glance. “You’ve been getting better at keeping your thoughts to yourself.”

“I’m sorry. I think I felt the need to sort through this on my own for a while.”

“I can imagine.” Suddenly he chuckled. “After the lecture you gave Kalan a few weeks ago, too! So careful to warn him of the danger with Miranda, and now you leap head-first into this.”

I flinched slightly, baring my teeth in a grimace. “I know. It was a terribly irresponsible thing to do.”

He moved closer and put an arm around my shoulders, inviting me to lean into the warmth of his embrace. “Yeah, T’Soni, it kind of was. Especially since all of us are still at risk of having to jump into the fire at any moment. I still love you for it. So does Vara.”

“I know.”

I remembered the exasperated look Vara had given me, a silent demand that I explain how I could
have chosen just that moment to conceive my first child. Then she had burrowed into my embrace, tears beginning to trickle down her cheeks. Her fingers had touched my belly, softly and with infinite tenderness.

“It’s all right,” he said. “You will forgive the two of us, I hope, if we’re a little more protective than usual?”

A sudden thought made me groan aloud. “Oh, Goddess. Vara has told the security detail already, hasn’t she?”

Shepard chuckled. “Yep.”

“They’ll probably never let me leave the ship again. I’ll be lucky if they don’t bung me into a stasis pod and ship me back to Thessia at the first opportunity.”

“I believe Keana suggested something like that, yes. Vara was able to persuade them otherwise.”

“Good. I’m an asari, blast it, not a glass sculpture. Hopefully we can have this whole war resolved before I’m so much as showing a little around the waist.”

We sat there for a few minutes, watching the stars roll by outside, simply enjoying one another’s company.

“Have you thought of a name yet?” he asked after a while.

“Several,” I murmured, “although asari mothers normally don’t assign a name to their children until they’re much closer to giving birth. It depends on the child’s personality, you see. At this point the little one isn’t even multicellular yet.”

“Asari can tell something about the personality of a baby, before she’s even born?”

“Usually. Mothers are often in a state of low-level joining with their infants, right up to the moment of birth. Not enough to share memories, thank the Goddess, or else we would all be born with thousands of years of maternal experience already in our heads. Instead, it’s just enough to provide love and reassurance, and get a sense for the infant’s personality.” I chuckled. “Not that we’re always very precise about it. You will notice the names Vara gave our daughters.”

“Aspasia and Nerylla. What about them?”

“After two of our oldest friends: the brilliant business manager and the fiercely loyal warrior, respectively. Except that the one named after Aspasia went into the military, and the one named after Nerylla became an advocate and political analyst.”

He laughed. “I suppose that does give us an answer to all the nature versus nurture arguments I remember from when I was young.”

“You would think we asari would know better.”

“Benezia,” he abruptly suggested.

I gave him a startled glance. “We’ll see. That would be a difficult name to carry, even centuries after the Reaper War. Asari have very long memories.”

“You don’t object to the name yourself?”

“No. Mother was a difficult person sometimes, and she made some terrible mistakes, but there’s no
denying she had greatness.” I sighed, and rested my head on his shoulder. “Besides, I loved her. Even if I didn’t fully realize it until long after she died.”

“That’s all the reason you need,” he said firmly.

15 December 2580, Tikkun System Space

Our combined fleet dropped through the Tikkun relay, immediately turning toward distant Rannoch, every instrument drinking in data.

“My God,” muttered Shepard, reading the initial sensor take without benefit of computer processing.

Four light-hours down from our position, we detected a blaze of electromagnetic and gravitic emissions: the spoor of a battle underway. An enormous battle, given the sheer magnitude of the energy release.

“Jarral to Chandragupta,” came a message from the Omega fleet.

“Chandragupta here,” said Aspasia. “We see it, Admiral Jarral. Stand by. Analysis is under way.”

I glanced at Shepard. He and EDI’s mobile platform had locked gazes, and I could sense a flood of information flowing back and forth between them.

“We see no evidence that the Synarchy was at significant risk of being overwhelmed, at this point on our past light cone,” said EDI after a few moments. “We should be able to perform an FTL microjump to the vicinity of Rannoch, and contribute to any ongoing engagement once we arrive.”

“Probability of an advantageous position when we emerge?” asked Aspasia.

“About ninety-two percent,” said Shepard.

“Good enough for me. Admiral, you heard?”

“This is why we’re here. Just make sure the girls from Illium pick up their share of the load.”

“Watch carefully, Jarral. You won’t see anything but our drive flare,” said General Kyeriali, the IDF task force commander.

“Data is on its way now,” said Aspasia. “Prepare for maneuver at five minutes from . . . mark.”

Five minutes later, a deep boom resonated through the ship’s hull, as we jumped down-system with a hundred ships in our wake. Right into the middle of the biggest naval engagement since the Reaper War.

Eleven chances in twelve that we would arrive in a position where we could take a moment to orient ourselves, and then turn to strike the valdarii hard. That left one chance in twelve that the battle would have done something unexpected in the past four hours. Naturally, that’s how the random factors aligned.

We dropped back into normal geometry about a hundred thousand kilometers over Rannoch’s south pole, in a space EDI and Shepard had predicted would be clear of valdarii. When we arrived, outracing the light that would have told us differently, we found the space infested.

“Hard to port!” Aspasia shouted, almost before the sensors could finish painting a picture of our
surroundings.

*Chandragupta* heeled left and then dove, all to get out of the point-blank weapons envelope of a *valdarii* cruiser less than ten kilometers away. Without orders, EDI activated the GARDIAN point-defense array, x-ray laser cannon lashing out to tear through the enemy ship’s barriers and eviscerate her hull.

I spared a glance for the tactical plot. Our neat formation had been shredded, ships fleeing in every direction for simple survival, firing lasers and missiles at knife-point range. I could hear Admiral Jarral and General Kyeriali shouting orders at their subordinates, trying frantically to impose order on the situation.

Then the *valdarii* realized who we were, and began to converge on our position.

A horrible thought occurred to me, sending me leaping for the nearest comm panel. “This is Ambassador Liara T’Soni aboard the Alliance cruiser *Chandragupta*, calling any forces of the Synarchy of Rannoch. We are here to assist you. Please observe Alliance, Illium, and Omega IFF, and avoid friendly fire.”


I stared at him, standing at parade-rest about three meters away from me, not obviously paying attention to the tactical plot. I opened our telepathic link, and once again sensed a deep flood of information and cognition, far beyond my ability to follow. I dipped into the stream of thought, just enough to get a sense of what he was doing. What I saw there caused me to gasp in terror and awe.

He was in communion with EDI . . . and through EDI, with the *entire geth consensus*.

*Chandragupta* bucked and shook, the lights flickering madly.

“Direct hit on the dorsal surface,” an engineering officer reported. “Kinetic barriers down to sixty-seven percent.”

“They’re figuring out who to target,” said Vara, uneasily.

I glanced over at Aspasia, who sat at her command station, grimly issuing order after order. Using every gram of her ship’s maneuverability to keep the enemy at bay. Fighting with every weapon she had.

The tactical plot had become nothing but chaos, our formation hopelessly scattered, individual ships each fighting for their lives. Some of them had already lost that fight.

The ship rocked again, harder. I could hear tearing metal and muffled explosions from elsewhere aboard.

Then:

“*Chandragupta* to all ships,” said EDI. “Course and acceleration profiles, and weapons fire priorities, to follow. Please execute upon receipt.”

I blinked, not sure what was happening. Then I felt a surge of astonished delight, across the link from Vara.

“They’ve calculated it,” she murmured to me. “EDI has access to the geth consensus. All that computational power. She can figure out optimal maneuvers for a hundred ships at once.”
I nodded. “They have Shepard’s command expertise in the mix too.”

I could hear Jarral and Kyeriali acknowledging EDI’s suggestions, giving them the force of orders for their separate detachments.

The results were . . . strange.

Be it admitted, I am no great military strategist. I’ve commanded a handful of engagements, but if I’ve managed to win them all, it’s always been through prior planning, numerical superiority, or sheer luck rather than tactical brilliance. On the field, I tend to think in terms of fixed formations and orderly maneuvers. Had I been in charge at the Battle of Rannoch, I would probably have tried to wrestle our forces back into some semblance of their original formation, and lost half the fleet in the process.

Shepard and EDI didn’t even try. They simply coordinated the ships as they were, pulling them into improvised squadrons to attack *valdarii* weak points, then sending them hurtling off in different directions before the barbarians could respond. A ship might attack a target one moment, flee the next, soaring across the battlefield, somehow avoiding the enemy’s most concentrated lanes of fire, finally sweeping in again to attack a completely unrelated target.

It looked desperate and unplanned, but somehow it worked. Ten minutes passed, then twenty. We stopped losing as many ships, and then the enemy began to lose *their* careful formation, confusion and chaos spreading through their ranks.

I caught a sudden thought from Shepard, something riding on the uppermost layer of his mind where it could take verbal shape: *The pinnacle of military deployment approaches the formless. If it is formless, then neither can the deepest spy discern it nor the wise make plans against it.*

“Have to get inside their decision loop,” he muttered, still apparently ignoring the tactical plot. Whatever method he was using to track the progress of the engagement, it didn’t involve anything as crude as a visual inspection of the abstract map.

Thirty minutes since the start of the engagement. Twice more *Chandragupta* took hits, and then Aspasia obeyed a suggestion to disengage, moving back behind a screen of Illium and Omega ships. I glanced at the damage-control displays, and saw that we were hurt but still able to move and defend ourselves.

“What happens if the *valdarii* figure out this is our flagship?” Vara wondered.

“That is unlikely,” EDI said, diverting a few spare cycles to reassure us. “The *valdarii* have not been able to break geth command-and-control protocols. In any case, we are routing our communications to the fleet through seven different geth sources.”

“What geth sources?” Miranda wondered.

“Those,” said Kalan from his position off to the side, a wide grin on his face.

A dense cluster of icons suddenly appeared in the center of the tactical plot, not moving in from the side, simply popping into existence already in place. Seven geth dreadnoughts, escorted by a swarm of smaller geth and quarian ships, already moving to punch through the center of the *valdarii* formation.

“All IDF and Omega ships,” said EDI calmly. “New course and acceleration profiles. Disengage at your earliest opportunity.”
None of them had to be told twice. I saw both Jarral’s and Kyeriali’s flagships move back, covering the retreat of other allied units, then taking up their own positions in the defensive screen.

Shepard let his shoulders sag, bringing a hand around to rub wearily at his forehead. “That was too damn close.”

“What happened?” demanded Aspasia, now that she had time to think.

“The valdarii deployed a fleet they had been holding in reserve,” said EDI. “Since that fleet had not participated in the battle up to that point, we had no way to detect its presence from the mass relay.”

“The prediction was statistical in nature,” said Miranda. “There’s always the possibility of error.”

“Casualties?” I murmured.

EDI cocked her head, as if listening. “One IDF dreadnought seriously damaged, two cruisers from each of the Illium and Omega detachments seriously damaged or destroyed, several other ships damaged to varying degrees. Chandragupta has taken damage to her sensor array, point-defense weapons, and gravitics. Two dead, twenty-three wounded.”

Aspasia nodded grimly. “We accepted the risks. Just as well that you and Shepard were here, and ready to pull our collective asses out of the fire.”

Shepard frowned, shaking his head, but he said nothing.

“Message from Synarchy command,” reported the comms officer. “They advise us that they have the situation under control, and invite us to proceed to Rannoch for consultation and repairs.”

“Accepted, with thanks. Commander Thajudeen, you have the conn. Take us down to Rannoch, and put us into dock as the Synarchy assigns. Ambassador T’Soni, if you would come into my office?”

Puzzled, I followed Aspasia out of the CIC and into her day cabin, where she closed the door and actuated the privacy system. She didn’t cross to her desk, but stood and folded her arms . . . a very Shepard-like gesture, in fact.

“Patēr, we have a problem.”

I cocked my head at her. “Specify.”

“Unity of command.” She gave me a sharp grey-eyed glance. “Admiral Jarral and General Kyeriali aren’t in the same chain of command. They’re allied officers who have been on opposite sides in the past, and who may or may not choose to follow our suggestions at any given time.”

“It’s worked so far,” I objected.

“It very nearly didn’t work over the past hour. Either or both of them could have balked at taking their marching orders from EDI, and there wouldn’t have been a thing we could do. Not in the middle of a combat situation. That would have been a disaster.”

I shook my head. “I don’t see what we can do about it. Illium and Omega have hammered out a political understanding, but they’ve never set up protocols for full military cooperation. Neither of them have any history of military ties with the Citadel.”
“The best way to solve the problem,” she mused, “would be to create a new chain of command for all of us to slot into. That implies a senior officer to whom both Illium and Omega can report.”

“That won’t work. We don’t have anyone senior enough . . .” I saw what she had in mind then, and had to slam the telepathic link back to my bondmates firmly shut.

“You see it, don’t you?” Aspasia suddenly grinned at me. “Do you think it would work?”

“That depends on how quickly we can set up a QEC conference call back to Illium and the Citadel.”

Twenty minutes later, with Chandragupta just pulling in to dock at one of Rannoch’s extensive orbital stations, Aspasia and I emerged from her day cabin.
Shepard glanced at us, curious. “What’s going on, Liara?”
I held a finger to my lips, using all my diplomatic skill to keep a cool expression on my face, while Aspasia silently conferred with EDI.

“William Shepard.”

He turned, and did a surprised double-take at the images that appeared in the main holographic display. Talia Syrtis, Aspasia Lehanai, and Matriarch Thekla all stood there, looking very much like a maiden-matron-Matriarch triptych out of some old asari religious art.

Thekla spoke again. “I have a request to make of you. The current crisis demands someone of your talents in a specific position.”

Shepard gave me a short, suspicious glance. “Of course, Matriarch. Name it.”

“With the concurrence of President pro tem Buthelezi, I have arranged for your re-induction into the Spectre corps, effective immediately. Do you accept?”

Something pulled Shepard’s spine straight, caused him to stand as tall as he once had on the Petitioner’s Stage, before the old Citadel Council. “If you think it’s necessary, yes, Matriarch, I accept.”

“Thank you. I also have here a commission in the Confederation Navy, with the permanent rank of Captain. As it happens, you were promoted to that rank in the Alliance Navy at the end of the Reaper War, so this is a matter of reactivation of your existing commission rather than the issuance of a new one.”

Shepard pulled a wry face. “Matriarch, I believe you’ll find that promotion was posthumous. I don’t think there’s much precedent for reactivating the commission of a dead officer.”

“In fact, there is: your own case, after Alchera.”

“You’ll find the Matriarch is an expert on military law, Shepard,” I murmured. “This is all legal. Or at least, legal enough to stand up for the purposes of protocol.”

He sighed. “If you say so. Of course, I accept that as well, Matriarch, although I don’t see what’s to be gained by it.”

Thekla smiled at him, a certain degree of malicious delight in it as she sprang the trap. “That is simple enough. Now that you have accepted a commission in the Confederation Navy, you can be
assigned the acting rank of Rear Admiral, subject to the approval of Parliament after elections are completed. That should, I believe, give you enough rank to provide a unified command for the allied forces from Illium and Omega. Matron Aspasia and Matron Talia both concur, and have issued the necessary orders to their officers."

“I see.” Slowly, Shepard nodded in understanding, bracing his shoulders as if to take up a heavy load. He did not salute – Matriarch Thekla was not yet his commander-in-chief – but he did incline his head for a moment in respect. “I’ll do my best, Matriarch.”

“Given your history, I have no reason to expect anything else. Good luck, Admiral Shepard.”

Once the holographic display cleared, the CIC suddenly filled with cheers and applause. Shepard stood there, stock-still, not quite certain what to make of the moment.

After a few moments, with discipline returning to the ship, Vara moved over to Shepard and stood on tiptoe to whisper something in his ear. I couldn’t hear his response, but her radiant smile and a surge of emotion across our telepathic link told me all I needed to know.

He’s trying not to show it, but this has done a great deal for him. Centered him again, after all these years of not knowing who and what he is.

“Was this your idea, T’Soni?” he asked, amused.

“For once, no. Aspasia came up with it. I only helped with some of the political details.”

He cocked his head at my daughter, who stood straight and gave him a very respectful salute.

“Well, Captain, it looks as if I’ll need to set up shop aboard Chandragupta. I’ll need EDI close at hand, and I can’t think of anyone I’d rather have as my flag captain.”

“You’re more than welcome, sir.” She grinned. “The valdarii are in deep trouble now.”
Once *Chandragupta* landed on Rannoch, my job was essentially finished.

Matriarch Thekla had sent me to forge alliances with Illium and Omega. This we had done. Both powers were now in full cooperation with the Citadel Confederation, and had even subordinated their military forces to Shepard’s command for the duration of the crisis. There was no need to perform any similar service with the Synarchy of Rannoch, since they were already our allies. Our business on the Far Rim was to defend the Synarchy against the *valdarii*, and Shepard could do that far more effectively than I.

So, after a few routine meetings, I slipped away and went for a walk.

Well, I *almost* slipped away. Shepard was deeply involved in military planning, meeting with his counterparts in the Synarchy. Since there had been no opportunity for him to build a military staff, Vara appointed herself as his senior aide. Both were therefore far too busy to keep track of my comings and goings. My security detail proved more watchful. Keana and Timo appeared just as I prepared to leave the Conclave House, and fell in behind me without a word. I knew better than to argue, so I simply accepted their presence as I wandered out into the city of Usarri.

The last time I had set foot on Rannoch was the final day of the Nightfall War.

That was the day the quarian fleet helped us to kill a Reaper that had held the geth consensus in thrall. The day the geth finally reached their destiny as truly sentient living beings. The day Shepard established a peace between quarians and geth, one which turned out to be enduring.

Of all the things Shepard accomplished during the Reaper War, that was the most miraculous. Even curing the genophage and saving the krogan people did not compare. There, the political momentum was in his favor, with only a few salarian leaders bitterly opposed. On Rannoch, *no one* saw any way for the quarians and geth to live together in peace. Not until Shepard decided, at the last possible moment, to risk *everything* on the chance that he could convince both sides to make it work.

I did not see the opportunity, had not even dreamed of it. Shepard made the decision without me, indeed against my advice. That’s one reason why I avoided visiting the Synarchy for so long, even during the years when I served as a senior diplomat and then as President. I have always felt deep shame, knowing that if the decision had been left up to me, one species or the other would have become extinct that day.

Now I walked on Rannoch once more, enchanted by the planet’s heartbreaking beauty.

Quarians had very different ideas about architecture and city planning than I found familiar. I saw none of the *ouranonikos* style we asari liked, no cloud-piercing towers of porcelain and glass and adamantine steel. Instead, the quarians preferred to build low and spread out, with plenty of green parkland around every major building. Much of the city was built underground, so as not to blight the surface with unsightly industrial plant or infrastructure.

Within moments of leaving the Conclave House, I looked back and could barely see it through the trees. We walked along a busy pedestrian way that meandered gently back and forth, adjusting to
minor changes in elevation. We crossed an ancient stone bridge; I read a plaque that indicated the structure had been preserved for over a thousand years, through the Morning War and the geth interregnum. I stopped to take in an exquisite rock garden, the sand around each standing stone expertly raked to suggest ripples in water. An open stream flowed beside us for a time, pebbles carefully placed in the water to modulate its musical sound.

Then there were the people.

I remembered quarians confined to their isolation suits, their bodies and faces eternally concealed. Since the Nightfall War, the quarians had become much more robust, reconciling their immune systems to unfiltered environments. One often saw them with uncovered faces, if little more. For example, our friend Kalan supported his body’s natural defenses with an open suit, one that could quickly be converted to an old-fashioned sealed outfit.

On Rannoch, quarians no longer needed even that much protection. They were home, on the planet for which they had evolved, and they could walk freely in the open air. In Usarri the climate was nearly ideal for quarian comfort, so their fashions were as loose and revealing as I had ever seen on them.

I saw sturdy broad-chested males, most of them naked above the waist, wearing loose trousers with flamboyant wide belts. They escorted petite females with emphatic curves, more modestly wrapped in layers of sheer cloth, the result often looking rather like a colorful sari with an elaborately embroidered hood. They showed delicate faces with lovely but alien bone structure, pearlescent eyes, long manes of black hair, and skin in a dozen shades from amethyst to dark magenta. Supple arms and three-fingered hands moved in complex gestures. Even the oddness of their gait, walking on their “toes” as if all of them wore stiletto-heeled shoes, seemed graceful and attractive.

Such beautiful people. What a waste, all those years with the rest of the galaxy looking down on them, considering them beggars and parasites. Our sin, and our loss.

I saw geth as well. Here, a synthetic platform pruned flower-bushes with painstaking care. There, a trio of platforms ambled in the opposite direction along our path, nodding politely to us and to the quarians they encountered. In another place, a tall Prime conversed earnestly with an older quarian female.

I knew that physical geth platforms outnumbered quarian citizens in the Synarchy’s population, by almost ten to one. It seemed strange to see so few of them in Usarri’s streets. Then a chance encounter showed me the truth.

“Dr. T’Soni!”

I turned, aware of my acolytes becoming hyper-alert for an instant, and then saw familiar faces approaching me along an intersecting path: Kalan and Miranda. A rather striking female quarian walked with them, someone I had never seen before.

“Hello, Kalan. An odd coincidence, to meet you here.”

He grinned at me, one affectionate arm around Miranda’s shoulders. “Not really, Doctor. Miranda and I had an appointment with the T’Valeni Clinic.”

I frowned in puzzlement.

“It’s an asari-run clinic, attached to our consulate,” Miranda explained. “It offers consultation and
medical services for asari who have chosen to live on Rannoch, specifically those who have bonded with quarians.”

Enlightenment took place. “Ah! The biochemical incompatibilities.”

She nodded. “Our immune systems are more robust than those of quarians, even today, but living on Rannoch for long periods presents certain challenges. Especially if we wish to raise children here.”

“Not that the clinic had much to teach Miranda,” said Kalan, proudly.

“Who is your friend, then?”

The strange female smiled, an expression of cool amusement. “I am Tekanta, a geth runtime cluster . . . not currently instantiated within Kalan’s cortical implant.”

That startled me. “You are . . .”

“Geth. Yes.” Tekanta cocked her head at me. “You seem surprised, Doctor. Surely you have had enough clues.”

Slowly, I nodded, putting together everything I had seen over the last few weeks. “I should have known the moment I saw EDI’s current mobile platform. I noticed how closely she resembled a biological human. She has lived here in the Synarchy for a long time.”

“The technology is not unique to the Synarchy, but perhaps we have focused on it more intently than any other major power.” Tekanta glanced around at the other people within view. “Our entire civilization is based upon the belief that organic and synthetic life can live together in peace. Perhaps, given time and good will, we may begin to blur the lines that separate them.”

“So, some quarian memory-chains are uploaded into the geth consensus, for a kind of afterlife existence,” I guessed. “While some geth download into the cortical implants of living quarians, or into quarian-like platforms of their own, to share the experience of life as an organic.”

“It works,” said Kalan. “There have even been marriages.”

I blinked at him, surprised all over again. “Kalan, I can see that the old prejudices against geth are a thing of the past, but still. Quarians always struck me as being rather sexually conservative . . .”

He laughed. “Maybe when there were only a few million of us in exile, always riding the bitter edge of extinction, we had to be stricter about our sexual conduct. Anything that got in the way of producing healthy children was a threat! Now, it’s another matter. We haven’t quite filled up Rannoch, and there are other worlds for us to settle, but our survival is more than assured. We can relax a little, and follow our hearts.”

“So, does that mean that you and Tekanta . . .”

The geth’s smile broadened, became openly affectionate. “No, Doctor. Kalan and I remain very close, and in a sense I have been intimate with him and Miranda, but none of us desire to continue the relationship on that basis.”

“I’ve completed my Pilgrimage,” said Kalan. “I’m an adult now, in the eyes of custom and the law. Settling down with Miranda to raise a family just confirms that. Which means that Tekanta has finished her own apprenticeship, as it were. She’s free to choose a new path for herself.”
“I have come to appreciate the virtues of this style of life,” said the geth. “I plan to live in this new platform for a time. A century or two, perhaps, assuming we all survive the present conflict.”

I glanced around us, at the other citizens of the Synarchy within our line of sight. “So, how many of the quarians I’ve passed in the last hour . . .”

All at once, out of the dozen or so apparent quarians I could see, three of them suddenly stopped, turned to glance in my direction, and made quick gestures of greeting before going about their business.


An unpleasant idea struck me, and I shook my head. “This isn’t widely known in Confederation space. Probably a good thing, now that I think about it. I wonder how some asari, or turians, or humans would react, knowing that geth could imitate them so closely?”

“Yes.” Tekanta’s smile vanished. “Another reason why the Synarchy remains isolated from the rest of the galaxy. Our current society is healthy and stable, but as you know very well, it was not established without a great deal of conflict and suffering. It is our assessment that the societies of the Citadel Confederation . . . are not yet ready to consider following us in this.”

17 December 2580, Usarri/Rannoch

“Blessed are the ancestors who kept us alive, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this season. Keelah se’lai.”

I sat half in darkness, in the inner ring of a great amphitheater. All around and behind me sat the members of the Conclave, the elected representatives of the quarian people. The Five Admirals sat on a raised dais in the center. Geth sat below the Admirals, sat next to a few members of the Conclave, and stood around the outer ring of the chambers. They served as aides and assistants, but also as silent observers on behalf of the other great power-center of the Synarchy of Rannoch: the Consensus.

I heard a low murmur of quarian voices, as hundreds of members of the Conclave repeated the benediction. Even the geth bowed in respect.

Admiral Rizaal, the senior member of the Admiralty Board, continued: “We have been called into emergency session to consider a report from Rear Admiral William Shepard of the Confederation Navy. He has a proposal regarding our strategy in the war against the valdarii.”

Shepard stepped up onto a podium, the chamber’s lights focusing on him . . . and all through that chamber, there spread a profound silence. I could sense the attention of an entire civilization bent upon him. A civilization that owed him its very existence, and knew it, and felt prepared to consider anything he had to say very carefully indeed.

“Members of the Conclave, representatives of the Consensus, I won’t waste your time.” Shepard wore his brand-new naval uniform, admiral’s bars prominent on his shoulders, a peaked cap perfectly placed atop his head. He stood ramrod-straight, his hands folded severely behind his back, and spoke without hesitation. For a moment I was reminded of Steven Hackett. “You’re aware of the strategic situation. The valdarii are holding you in check at this end of the galaxy, and have pushed the Citadel Confederation almost to the limits of its room to maneuver at the other end. This means that neither major power can intervene while their masters, the Old Ones, attack the Ascended Intelligence in dark space.
“Until recently, I’ve been operating under the assumption that if the Ascended Intelligence falls, the Old Ones have beaten all of us. I’ve assumed that the Intelligence, with the Reapers active under its control, constitutes the only power in this galaxy strong enough to oppose the Old Ones. Certainly, none of us have technology to match the Old Ones, given their ability to span the galaxy with wormholes, throw planet-busters at our home worlds, use dark matter as a weapon of mass destruction, and control the valdarii civilization as their puppets. The strategy I’ve advised everyone to follow has been directed toward throwing the valdarii back, long enough for us to relieve the Intelligence and get its aid against the Old Ones.

“Now, after extensive discussions with the Consensus, I believe we may have an alternative. One which may help us to rescue the Intelligence . . . but which may also make it possible for us to win on our own, even without the Intelligence or the Reapers.”

For the first time, the chamber rumbled with quarian voices. I listened closely, and was pleased to hear surprise, curiosity, perhaps a hint of skepticism, but not even a trace of rejection.

I glanced over and caught Vara’s eye. She and I were the only two organic beings in the galaxy to know what Shepard had in mind. She nodded slightly, and I felt a flash of hope from her.

*Now comes the difficult part,* I told her silently.

“Unfortunately, I can’t reveal the details of this alternative to this Conclave. Not yet. I have no reason to mistrust the integrity of even a single quarian, but very few of you have had the opportunity to enter into the synthesis I represent, and the Old Ones are very good at discovering secrets where that protection is lacking. I’m here to ask this Conclave to support the strategy the geth and I have developed, without knowing the details, even though it places the quarian people at risk.”

Silence, once again, as the Conclave digested that.

“Admiral Shepard, what level of risk do you propose?” asked Admiral Rizaal.

Shepard took a deep breath. “A quarian city. Perhaps two or three. I can’t say which. It will depend on how the operational situation develops, once we implement our plan.”

“The loss of several cities?” demanded a feminine voice, from the outer rings.

“With any luck, the loss will be temporary.” Shepard frowned, and I caught the sense that he was weighing how much he could afford to reveal. “The plan involves permitting the valdarii to land on Rannoch in force.”

Now I could hear considerable consternation among the Conclave.

“Admiral Shepard,” a male voice rang out. “You may not understand how much that is to ask of us. You know of our time in exile. It sounds as if you are asking us to risk losing Rannoch once more.”

“I don’t think it will come to that.” Shepard turned slowly, his eyes staring into the darkness, scanning the ranks of the Conclave. “It’s true that no battle plan survives contact with the enemy. The valdarii or their masters may have some trick in store, something we haven’t seen before, that would make their presence on Rannoch more dangerous than we anticipate. It’s our assessment that this is a low-probability contingency. My team and I have considerable experience with tactical combat against the valdarii, and we’ve learned a great deal about the Old Ones who control them.”

“The geth concur with this assessment?”
The geth platform sitting closest to Rizaal stirred, and rose to its feet. Its ocular bulb glowed brightly as it scanned the audience. “As Admiral Shepard has stated, there is a risk,” it said. “The Consensus believes the risk can be mitigated, irreparable harm to the Creators and their civilization can be avoided, and the potential rewards are very great.”

That didn’t end the discussion, of course, but I think that was the point at which the Conclave’s agreement became a certainty. The quarians might be reluctant to trust even Shepard with their homeworld’s fate once more, given his ties to the Reapers . . . but they had come to implicitly trust the judgment of the geth.

Which is quite remarkable, if one stops to think about it.

I waited and watched as the Conclave debated the matter, its members often stopping to ask pointed questions of Shepard or the geth observers. He answered every query with patient confidence, only demurring when the line of discussion veered too close to the details of what he and the geth had planned.

Even so, it took less than an hour before Admiral Rizaal could rise from his place and deliver the sense of the Conclave. “It is decided. The quarian people will follow the lead of Admiral Shepard and our geth allies in this matter. May the Ancestors watch over us.”
19 December 2580, Girshem Province/Rannoch

The valdarii made their first landings in Girshem Province, about the middle of the local morning. Synarchy forces moved in to contain the invasion, buying time for the inhabitants of the nearest cities to evacuate to safety. Quarian soldiers, supported by a variety of geth combat platforms, launched a lightning-fast counterstrike to keep the invaders off-balance.

A borrowed aircar landed about two kilometers behind the line of contact. A single asari emerged, looking not at all like the refined and elegant Ambassador T’Soni: anonymous black commando leathers, favored sidearm at her hip, biotic corona already in place around her arms and shoulders. She began running toward the sound of the guns.

I had shut off access to the local net through my daimon, and closed my telepathic link back to Shepard and Vara. I was limited to what my own senses could tell me. I could still estimate the sheer size of the engagement, hearing the thunder of gunfire rolling in from every direction, even from far beyond the horizon. I could tell the Synarchy and the valdarii were already closely engaged, along a front over a hundred kilometers wide.

It seemed a sunny, pleasant morning for a war.

I had borrowed a set of Palethi’s combat armor, since she and I were almost the same size and build. It felt snug and comfortable, permitting me the freedom of movement I needed for broken-field running. I crossed rolling meadows, ducked through a grove of blue-green trees, and splashed through a shallow stream. For a while I saw no other combatants, except at a distance. Then I encountered the front lines, quite suddenly, as often seems to happen when the situation is very fluid. Still jogging along at my full long-distance rate, I topped a low rise and found myself in the middle of a squad of quarians, all behind cover and firing madly down-range.

“Get down, you fool!” shouted one of the quarians, a burly male wearing an old-fashioned sealed suit blazoned with sergeant’s stripes.

I took cover, drawing and checking my sidearm before I peeked up to take in the situation. The quarian did a double-take, apparent even through his visor, as he realized I wasn’t one of his people at all. “Who in the name of the Ancestors are you?” he demanded.

“Kalliste Renai,” I told him. “I’m a little out of practice as a commando, Sergeant, but I’ve been in combat, and I’m a strong biotic. Can I be of assistance?”

He stared for another moment, and then nodded. “Well, none of us have worked with asari before, but I won’t turn down someone who can turn these valdarii into mush with her brain. They’re pushing a little harder than I like. Can you help fend them off while we fall back to a better position?”

“Not a problem,” I told him, and elbow-walked up until I could peek out and see the first sign of the advancing barbarians. I saw mostly two-legged runners, with light weaponry. Nodding to myself, I found a position behind a large tree and made a two-armed control gesture.

A powerful barrier snapped out, covering a front about forty meters wide. More than enough cover for the quarians to fall back to their next prepared line.
“Nice,” said the sergeant. “How long can you hold that?”

“How long do you need it?”

He gestured to his men to retreat in good order. I couldn’t see his grin behind his visor, but I could hear it. “Glad to have you with us, Ms. Renai. I’m Zaan’Kylon vas Adana, Synarchy Marines.”

“Good to meet you, Sergeant Kylon. I’m at your disposal.”

I held the barrier, and then I ran for the new position ahead of a storm of *valdarii* gunfire. Somehow, I couldn’t manage to keep a small smile off my face the whole time.

*The situation is simple. I’m now responsible for one squad of quarian soldiers. I’m here to keep them alive, no matter what it takes, no matter what else happens because of Shepard’s plan. I’ll take orders from Sergeant Kylon and not worry about anything else.*

*They’re risking their lives for something that’s important. They’re here to defend their homes.*

*Not to obey me. Not to die for me.*

_________________________

We fought. We fell back into the outskirts of the city of Obyris, where the civilian evacuation was nearly complete by the time we arrived. Eventually the *valdarii* advance paused, and Sergeant Kylon and his squad were directed to a mustering point for rest, resupply, and new orders.

I checked my *daimon* for the time as I followed the quarians into the mustering area: about two hours since I arrived on the front lines and attached myself to Kylon’s squad. I felt tired but satisfied. I had held my own on the field, taken no more than a few bruises and scrapes, and helped Kylon to keep all his soldiers alive while we fought the long retreat.

*I appear to still be good for something.*

Then I saw a group of geth platforms, and felt a sudden chill.

Sure enough, the moment one of the geth looked over in my direction, it froze for a moment. Then it abandoned its current task and crossed over to me. It might have been my imagination, but I thought it seemed to be *stalking* in my direction.

“Dr. T’Soni?” it asked, as soon as it was close enough.

Sergeant Kylon was close enough to hear that, and did a double-take.

I sighed, and shook my head. “Yes, I’m Liara T’Soni.”

“The consensus has been requested to report your location to theater command,” said the geth. “I also have a communication for you.”

“I’ll take it.”

The geth gestured for patience, as the call went through the consensus. It didn’t take long.

“*Liara, what are you doing*?”

“Hello, Vara. At the moment, I’m taking a break from fighting.”

“*Fighting! Goddess, don’t tell me you’re on the front lines somewhere!*”
“I’m afraid so.” I deliberately hardened my tone. “Vara, we need an eyewitness here.”

“I agree, but that eyewitness doesn’t have to be you, and you certainly have no business out there alone. Kamala and Grunt have been in the thick of things too. Not to mention that Keana, Palethi, and Timo have been absolutely beside themselves since you turned up missing.” I could hear the cold fury in Vara’s voice. She sounded as angry with me as I could ever remember. “Goddess, Liara. Going off on your own, shutting down your comms, even closing off the mind-link with me and with Shepard . . . what in nine hells were you thinking?”

“Vara . . .” I stopped. An explanation would take hours that we didn’t have, if I could manage it at all. “Now isn’t the time to discuss it. The valdarii are preparing for another push. I have to go.”

“Begging your pardon, ma’am.” Sergeant Kylon loomed up at my side to interrupt, big and imposing, a polite colossus. “If I’ve heard correctly, then you’re actually Liara T’Soni?”

I glared at him, the effect somewhat reduced since I couldn’t see his face through the visor. “That’s right. I apologize for the deception, Sergeant, but I didn’t want you distracted. An ordinary asari with powerful biotics and combat experience would just be an unexpected asset.”

“Water under the bridge, ma’am.” He shifted uneasily. “The thing is, now that I do know who you are, I can’t let you go back up there again with my squad.”

I suppressed a flash of frustrated rage. At least Vara kept silent, listening to this new development.

“I can still be useful, Sergeant,” I told him.

“Not denying that, ma’am. You saved some of my men out there, and I’m grateful. But now they would have to worry about keeping you safe, in the middle of a hot zone. I can’t permit that, especially when you seem determined to take risks.”

“They wouldn’t have to worry about me. Four hundred years of experience says that I can take care of myself.”

He braced his shoulders and faced me squarely, like a soldier determined to stare down his foe. Or like a parent ending an argument with a stubborn child. “Ma’am, even four hundred years of experience may not be enough to keep you alive on a battlefield. Valdarii artillery isn’t something you can use skill to dodge or biotic power to survive, and it won’t respect former galactic leaders. My decision stands. If you need to be on the field, you had better do it with your friends, the people whose job it is to protect you. My squad has enough to worry about, keeping themselves alive.”

I wanted to lash out at him, but I couldn’t. He was entirely right, after all. Kalliste Renai, the unknown asari who could run, shoot, and fling a great deal of biotic force, could be an asset to his team. If she was in fact Liara T’Soni, that added a liability too great to accept.

Unless I add more assets to the balance sheet.

“All right. Vara, how soon can two of the protection detail be here? Keep the third to stay with you and Shepard.”

“I can have Keana and Timo there within ten minutes. They’ve been ready to leap into action since the moment we realized you had given us the slip. I think we can redirect Grunt and Kamala as well, they’re not heavily engaged right now.”

I could hear relief now in her voice, to set alongside the anger. Happy that her bondmate had not entirely lost her mind, perhaps.
“Thank you, Vara. Well, Sergeant? How about a squad to team up with yours, composed of a krogan warlord, a human Spectre, and three asari, two of them with full commando training and sworn to keep me out of trouble?”

The big quarian cocked his head, considering it, and then nodded decisively. “That sounds like more than enough firepower to keep you safe, ma’am. Not to mention a damn good team to have at our side.”

“Then let’s do it that way.”

Keana and Timo arrived first, landing their own aircar and rushing to my side. Timo said nothing, only taking up her usual watchful attitude, but Keana gave me a long reproachful look.

“Despoina, why did you run off like that?” she asked, not angry but more than a little disappointed. “Putting yourself in danger, and your daughter too . . .”

“She was probably a stupid thing to do,” I admitted. “It wasn’t because I had any doubts of you, Keana, or any of the rest of my acolytes.”

She nodded, giving me a guileless blue-eyed stare.

Just then Kamala arrived, her rifle held at the ready, the visor of her helmet flipped up so we could see her face. “Besides, Kee-kee, if you think you’re upset, just wait until she gets back to HQ and Vara gets hold of her.”

I blinked. Kee-kee?

“Oh. Oh my.” Keana shook her head in chagrin. “She’s right, despoina, Matron Vara is furious. She tore strips off all three of us for letting you out of our sight.”

“I’ll have a word with Vara,” I told her. “Kamala, where’s Grunt?”

“He’ll be here in a few minutes. He was busy having a head-butting duel with a valdarii behemoth when the call came.”

“Who won?” inquired Timo.

“Oh, Grunt won, but I understand even he looked a little groggy afterward.” Kamala gave us a sharp-edged smile. “Kept muttering about wanting to go back to the tank.”

“I suppose even krogan warlords wish for their mothers occasionally,” said Timo.

Soon Grunt arrived, recovered from his experience and eager to smash a few more valdarii, and we went back into the field once more.

We had a few moments of confusion. Everyone seemed to expect me to command, as the most experienced one there. Of course, I was having none of that. As soon as I saw the problem, I suggested we all take our tactical orders from Kamala. Even Grunt agreed to this, as he apparently
had a healthy respect for the Spectre’s abilities.

So Kamala led us, and it felt very much like the old days, if we’d had a female Shepard in charge. She had the same audacity, the same fierce determination to get the mission done and bring everyone safely home. I suppose growing up in Shepard’s circle on Mindoir had given her plenty of opportunity to observe the original model.

The Spectre got along very well with Sergeant Kylon and his quarians. She also coordinated with my acolytes . . . with a suspicious degree of perfection. The three of them acted in smooth concert, often without having to say a word, and I thought I recognized the pattern.

*Keana and Timo seem to have set up a triad of their own. Well, I can’t dispute their taste in humans.*

Of course, they wrapped me in a blanket the whole time.

Grunt did not care; he simply assumed I could take care of myself. Kamala would ordinarily have had too much on her mind, coordinating all our actions, to worry about me. With her link to my acolytes, however, she had more than enough skill to ensure that someone was always between me and danger. If I saw the need to accept any risks, I had to consider the fact that some young war-goddess would be right at my side, no less exposed.

It infuriated me: these splendid young people, putting their lives on the line for my sake.

*There must be some way out of this, this mad devotion. They deserve better.*

At the time, I couldn’t see any way to escape. So we fought, and we slowly fell back into the suburbs of Obyris, and the *valdarii* followed. Behind the front lines, more and more thousands of the enemy landed and pressed forward.

Then, late in the local afternoon, Shepard and the geth sprang their trap.

The *valdarii* in Rannoch orbit suddenly saw a new Synarchy fleet sweeping down upon them, the Illium and Omega flotillas in support. All those forces had waited behind Rannoch’s moon, running silent, while the planet made a show of apparent weakness to lure the enemy in. Now our forces rushed in to attack the enemy’s orbit-to-surface operations, slamming the gate closed behind the army on the ground.

In less than twenty minutes, the Synarchy once again held orbital superiority over Rannoch. At some point the Old Ones controlling the invasion force began to realize that they might become trapped on the planet’s surface, unable to escape from the *valdarii* they rode.

All at once, they began to flee for safety, triggering the suicide protocols in the *valdarii* mounts they left behind.

At which point, every abandoned *valdarii* suddenly acquired a new passenger.

The sounds of combat fell off sharply on all sides. One after another, the *valdarii* stopped fighting. They stood or squatted or lay where their masters had left them, looking utterly bewildered.

I couldn’t tell for sure what was going on in their minds, but I could guess.

*Hello.*

*Surprise. Confusion.*
The Old One occupying your cortical implant has fled, leaving you to die.

*What is this? Why is it not commanding me to act?*

I am the geth runtime cluster which has temporarily taken the Old One’s place. I have no commands for you. I am here only to preserve your life, free of the Old Ones, and to assist you through this transition.

*Not an Old One? No commands for me?*

The Old Ones will never be able to command you again.

*More confusion. Fear. How will I live without an Old One to command me?*

I will support your cognitive and biological functions for now. With time, you will no longer need that support.

*But what will I do?*

**What do you wish to do?**

*What . . . do I . . . wish . . . to do?*

From my vantage point, I could see a dozen *valdarii* soldiers, most of them runners, one or two centaurs in support. Every one of them stood stock-still, weapons slack in their hands or dropped on the ground, apparently not paying attention to anything around them.

“*Liara? What’s happening?*”

“I’m not sure,” I whispered to Vara over the comm. “I think it may be working. They’ve all just stopped fighting.”

Behind her, I could hear Shepard’s voice, issuing orders. He directed all allied troops to cease fire, to avoid harming any *valdarii* who weren’t still fighting back.

Across the line of contact, for dozens of kilometers in both directions, geth runtimes continued to infiltrate the Old Ones’ command-and-control network. By themselves, the geth were already superb hackers, able to penetrate and take up residence in any computer hardware of sufficient complexity. Shepard had provided them with Reaper-derived subroutines, the same ones that had enabled him to liberate John Tikolo from his Old One rider, during our debate aboard Omega. The combination was apparently proving very effective.

A *valdarii* centaur dropped its weapon and clattered out into the street just a few meters away, its gait hesitant and unsteady, peering about in all directions. It saw our position, and turned to face us.

Almost without conscious thought, I found myself rising out of cover, stepping forward to face the centaur and look up into its alien face. Behind me, I heard Kamala curse, sensed her presence as she and Timo moved up on either side of me, their weapons trained on the alien.

“Don’t shoot,” I murmured to them, still holding the creature’s gaze. I returned my own sidearm to its holster, let my biotic corona lapse, and stood there with my empty hands held out at my sides. Open body language, projecting no threat.

It coughed, and then rumbled a little, as if its voice was rusty from long disuse.
“I’m Liara T’Soni,” I said gently. “Nobody is going to harm you. Do you understand me?”

“Ree . . .” it started, its voice a deep basso profundo, and then it coughed again. “Lee-ah-rah.”

“That’s right. I’m Liara. What is your name?”

It shook its head violently, blinking in confusion. Then, slowly and carefully, it began to shape more syllables. It began to speak in a rough but recognizable asari koiné, as if just learning to speak for the first time in its life. Probably it was.

“I . . . do not have . . . a name. The . . . geth . . . its name is . . . Vukhiri. I am . . . the mount of Vukhiri.”

“No,” I told it, speaking slowly and clearly. “You are more than that. Vukhiri is only there to help you for a time. You are not its property.”

“I . . . understand.” It cocked its head at me, its voice suddenly taking on more resonance, more confidence. “I still . . . do not have . . . a name. But I . . . I am free.”

“Yes,” I agreed, hearing the first triumphant cheering over the comm link from Shepard’s headquarters. “You are free. Soon all of your people will be free.”
Repentance

19 December 2580, Usarri/Rannoch

A minor miracle: the discovery that even the valdarii were not necessarily our enemies. Now that thousands of them had been pulled free of the Old Ones, they proved willing, even eager to talk. We learned more about them in one evening than in all the decades of previous contact.

I remembered stories Javik Taran had once told me, regarding the enemies his people had fought at the height of the Prothean Empire. Among these had been an organic race called the zha.

The zha evolved very late in their home planet’s lifespan, when it was already on the verge of becoming uninhabitable. Much of their history was the grim tale of a constant struggle for survival. After attaining high technology, they augmented themselves with synthetic implants, using AI auxiliary minds to enhance their own. At first this worked, giving them the intelligence and strength of will they needed to survive. But then the Reapers came, subverting the zha AIs, in turn taking over their bodies and even their genetic structure. The peaceful zha became the warped, husk-like zha’til, slaves to the Reapers. They multiplied into swarms that overran world after world. The Protheans only prevailed by destroying the zha’til home star, smashing the central node of the enemy’s network.

Our own civilizations were very aware of that object lesson. When we began experimenting with cortical-implant technology, about twenty years after the Reaper War, we applied safeguards. In Citadel space, we firewalled our daimon implants off from our organic minds. Even the quarians and their geth partners were careful to close any channel through which an adversary could pervert their connection.

The valdarii were not so fortunate. They developed in isolation from the rest of us, with no knowledge of the galaxy’s deep history, no experience of the Reapers. They had no horrible examples to teach them of the danger. They experimented recklessly with genetic engineering, cybernetics, and biotics, seeking to “improve” themselves with all the enthusiasm of Alliance transhumanists. Only Cerberus, at its terrible height, had ever done anything comparable.

Then the mistake: they combined the three disciplines, in a way no other civilization we knew of had ever tried. Valdarii genetically engineered some of their people for biotic power, and built implants to tap directly into their brains rather than their peripheral and motor nerves. They expected to gain fine control over the mass effect, directing the little nodes of eezo in their bodies with great precision. They never expected data to flow in the other direction: from the eezo, through their cybernetics, through their VI interfaces, and into their organic minds.

Element Zero. Dark matter made manifest. A channel for the Old Ones to reach back into the bright universe from which they had once fled. Valdarii technology gave the Old Ones a direct path into the valdarii mind. Before long, it was the zha’til all over again. Alien minds swept down out of the darkness to enslave a whole organic species.

What a terrible trap for a young civilization.

It also became clear how the Old Ones had managed to find pawns even in Citadel Space. None of our civilizations had been foolish enough, or unlucky enough, to try to install biotic amps directly into our brains. Still, all biotics in Citadel space had eezo nodes in our bodies, and many of us carried cybernetic implants to help regulate the biofeedback. The Old Ones must have found ways to hack the combination, and manipulate people indirectly through psychological conditioning.
The exception that proved the rule, of course, was we asari. As far as any of us could tell, no asari had ever fallen victim to Old One manipulation from afar. Only on \textit{valdarii}-conquered worlds had any asari become Old One slaves. But then, our biotic abilities are inherent, and don’t rely on cybernetic implants. Perhaps the Old Ones could find no vulnerability in us to exploit. It’s possible that we had never needed Shepard’s nanotechnology to protect us from them.

Still, we now also possessed a defense against Reaper indoctrination and Leviathan enthrallment. No small consideration, that. Considering my mother had been one of the first victims of indoctrination, I had a very personal stake in the integrity of everyone’s minds.

I spent hours that evening, gently interrogating \textit{valdarii} who had broken free from the Old Ones. I kept the telepathic link back to Shepard and Vara open, so the three of us could confer silently over what I learned. I could feel Shepard’s grim pleasure in the success of his stratagem, especially since it meant he might be able to add another civilization to the tally of those he had saved. I couldn’t quite see the shape of his plan for what remained of the war. That he now had a plan, I could not doubt.

Kamala, Grunt, and my acolytes assisted me, watching over me closely the whole time. A very few of the \textit{valdarii} had become violent, shocked by the sudden transition away from their former masters. I don’t think any of our new guests was likely to attack me while we conversed, but no one wanted to take any chances.

Not even me. After all, I wasn’t interested in taking risk purely for the sake of the risk.

At least, that’s what I kept telling myself. Knowing all the while that there would be a heavy reckoning to make, as soon as I returned home.

\textit{Crack!}

Four centuries I had known her, and never once had Vara raised a hand against me. Until now.

The moment she had me in the suite the quarians had given us, away from outsiders: a stinging slap across my cheek, silver-grey eyes that snapped with fury, and a voice that had gone wintry cold. “Liara T’Soni, if you ever do something so \textit{fucking} irresponsible again, I swear I will leave you.”

I felt the bottom fall out of my world, knowing that she meant every word of it. I forced numb legs to work, to carry me across to a bench on one side of our room. I saw Shepard sitting in the far corner, still in his naval uniform, motionless and quiet, his eyes glittering as he watched us.

Vara stood in front of me, hands on her hips as if she was lecturing a recalcitrant child. “You slipped away, when you might have been needed at headquarters. You dishonored the oaths of your acolytes, the people sworn to keep you safe. You shut down your link to your bondmates, so we couldn’t tell where you were, or what you were doing, or even whether you were \textit{still alive}. You can be sure that distracted both of us, at a time when Shepard was trying to command the entire battle. Not to mention that you’re \textit{pregnant}, finally, and don’t have any business in combat even if you \textit{didn’t} have anyone else in the universe to be responsible for. All for – what? So you could play commando on the front lines one more time?”

That raised a little ire of my own. “I was not \textit{playing} at anything, Vara. In my judgment, we needed one of us to be on the scene if Shepard’s plan worked, to evaluate at once whether the \textit{valdarii} had turned. Shepard couldn’t leave headquarters, and he needed someone with military training there to assist him, which meant you. That left me to go into the field.”
“All of which makes sense, but why in the name of the Goddess did you go alone?”

“Because there was a great deal of risk,” I told her, looking down at the floor because I suddenly couldn’t hold her stare. “I . . . don’t think I can deal with putting anyone else at risk anymore.”

A flicker of emotion came across the link from Shepard, something that caused me to glance across the room at him. His eyes watching me had narrowed, an expression that looked like recognition.

“Liara, you have acolytes. It’s their job to take risks on your behalf. More than that, it’s their obligation, it’s their life to do that. Do you think so little of them that you would steal that from them?” Vara stared at me, her eyes wide and wild. “I swore that oath to you once. Do you think so little of me?”

I held her gaze, and realized we had reached the core of the matter.

Vara had been my acolyte once. She had been the first of my acolytes, shattering every custom to swear the oath when we were both still maidens. Keana, Palethi, and Timo probably felt betrayed when their principal chose to go into battle without them, but they were much younger, accustomed to accepting whatever their elders might choose to do. They hadn’t devoted centuries of their lives to anyone yet.

For Vara, that betrayal went to the heart.

I might finally have done something that even she can’t forgive.

I’m not sure what I might have said. Short of throwing myself at Vara’s feet to beg for forgiveness, I couldn’t think of any way to mend the situation. My mind felt empty as a cavern, with a cold wind blowing through it.

Fortunately, Shepard chose that moment to intervene. “All right, Vara,” he said quietly. “That’s enough.”

She turned on him, but something in his face stopped the harsh retort she had clearly been thinking of delivering. He didn’t look angry, only thoughtful and a little sad.

“Surely you don’t approve of this,” she challenged him.

“No, I don’t.” He glanced at me. “But I do understand it.”

She opened her mouth, thought for a moment, and then closed it again.

“Vara,” he ventured, “has it ever occurred to you to wonder just why asari almost never take on acolytes before they reach the Matriarch stage?”

I blinked. That is not at all what I expected him to say.

“I suppose it’s because most asari younger than that haven’t accomplished enough to attract them . . .” Vara answered, but I could tell she was already thinking better of it. For that matter, so was I.

Shepard shook his head. “You know that doesn’t follow. Lots of asari make a name for themselves while they’re still matrons. A few, like Liara, even do it while they’re still maidens. They pile up wealth, influence, reputation, and all those intangibles that you lump under the notion of areté. They can hire younger asari by the shipload. Yet it’s very rare for an asari under the age of seven hundred to have acolytes. Why is that?”
Vara frowned, thinking hard.

“It’s the psychology of it,” I said at last.

Slowly, watching me, Shepard nodded. “Go on.”

“Matrons are, well, *maternal.*” I realized my right hand had come to rest across my belly, unconsciously cradling the tiny life nestled inside me. “We’re focused inward, onto the business of having our children and raising them in safety and security. We’re driven to protect those smaller and younger than we are.”

Vara nodded, remembering. She had been a matron for well over two hundred years, after all. She had wasted no time in becoming pregnant, once her body let her know it was ready. She had experienced those drives intimately, in her own blood and bone.

“It doesn’t make sense for a matron to take on acolytes,” I continued. “Especially in a crisis. She has enough to do, to watch over her children and protect her household. Add more young asari into that situation, tie them to her with bonds of obligation, and her impulse is going to be to protect them. She will feel anxiety when they are in danger, she’ll feel the urge to take risks on their behalf.”

“Is that how you feel about Keana and the others?” Vara asked, her voice suddenly much less harsh.

“I suppose.” I took a deep breath. “Vara, has it occurred to you that we’ve lost more of the acolytes in this conflict than in centuries before?”

She frowned, considering that.

“We didn’t lose any of them during the Reaper War. True, it was a much smaller team then, but we still had incredible luck. We lost two during the Salarian Wars. Then almost none, for hundreds of years, and all of those were by accident rather than enemy action.” I looked down again, and felt my eyes water. “Now, in just a few weeks we’ve lost Nerylla, and Pala, and Tania and the others aboard *Normandy.*”

“None of those were your fault,” said Vara.

“Yes, they were. Vara, if they hadn’t tied themselves to me, they would all be alive now.” I took a deep, shuddering breath. “Goddess. The sheer *arrogance* of it, to accept another asari as an acolyte, to permit her to *give up her life* for me! I’ve shattered so many of our customs, but this one I’ve accepted. It’s convenient, to have servants. It feels good to have people willing to work for you, even to die for you, just because they admire you. It feeds the ego no end, to walk around like a great lady out of legend, a train of worshipful followers at your back.”

“It’s our way,” she objected, helplessly.

“It’s your way for *Matriarchs,*” said Shepard. “Maidens are essentially selfish and self-centered. Matrons devote themselves to their own children and household. Matriarchs devote themselves to the welfare of their lineage, or their *polis,* or the larger society. Usually it’s the Matriarchs who *need* acolytes, people who can help them deal with those larger concerns. Fortunately, it’s the Matriarchs who are psychologically prepared to live with the implications. They’re detached enough – maybe ruthless enough – not to worry about asking others to take risks.”

“Whereas here I am, the freak of nature, the asari who had a whole pack of acolytes when she was still just a maiden.” I sighed. “I wonder why this didn’t bother me when I was younger?”
Shepard made a rather sharp-edged grin. “As I recall, T’Soni, you were more than a little arrogant and selfish back then too. It was fun, wasn’t it, spitting in the eye of old customs?”

“It all made sense at the time,” I objected. “We had the Reapers to fight, and then we had civilization to rebuild. I needed help.”

“Sure. There you were, leading the fight, scandalizing asari society the whole time you did it.” He shrugged. “Don’t get me wrong, Liara. You did a good job. The galaxy is a lot better off because of you. Still. Sometimes old customs are there for a reason, and we discover the reason only long after we’ve already thrown tradition in the trash.”

“You’re saying this was my fault,” Vara murmured. “Liara didn’t seek out acolytes at first. It was my idea to swear the oath to her. Because I needed her to know she could trust me, and I was already half in love with her even then.”

“Yeah. I doubt Liara would have thought of it on her own. She was building a power base for herself already, with ordinary wealth and power, the way maidens and matrons have always done.”

I snorted. “Blame my father too, if you want. Remember how she rounded up Nerylla, Tania, and the others in that first group? Sent them to you, Vara, with the suggestion that they all swear the same oath you had sworn? The old revolutionary! I wonder if she realized all the implications?”

“I doubt it,” said Shepard. “She never had any acolytes of her own, remember, even as a Matriarch. I think she just saw that you were doing great work and probably needed more help. Especially once Councilor Tevos and the existing power structure started posing a threat.”

Vara watched me for a long moment. “So where does this leave us?”

“You’re not angry anymore?”

“Oh, I’m still angry at you. Damn foolish thing to do.” She sighed. “But I suppose, like Shepard, I understand it now. You’ve had a change of heart about having acolytes at all, and putting them at risk is starting to tear you up inside.”

I nodded.

“The problem is that you already have the acolytes. Keana, Palethi, and Timo are with us now, and they’re not going to want to stop fighting with us just because you’ve suddenly gotten soft-hearted. There are still a few hundred others back on Thessia and the Citadel, ready to help when they’re needed. You can’t just . . . let them all go.”

“Can’t I?” I whispered. “My mother let hers go, when she went to work with Saren.”

“No, she didn’t. She gave them the choice. Many of them stayed with her.”

“Right up to the point that things turned horrible,” I pointed out. “A lot of them died. Or worse.”

“I don’t think you’re in any danger of that,” said Shepard. “With the nanotechnology, their minds are all safe from tampering. They can continue to make a free choice. I think most of them will still choose to follow you, even if you try to release them.”

“I suppose so.”

I sat quietly, thinking hard, feeling their watchful presence in the back of my mind. It helped that I could sense they both still loved me, despite my foolishness.
“All right,” I said at last. “You’re right, Vara, I can’t just tell all the acolytes that I don’t want them anymore. Many of them would be very badly hurt by that. I can tell them that I’m having serious moral doubts about my worthiness to serve as their principal. I’ll release any of them who wish to go, with my blessing. And I won’t accept the oath from anyone else, ever again.”

Shepard stirred. “Hmm. That’s for you to decide, Liara, but you may change your mind one day. Especially once you turn Matriarch yourself.”

“I doubt it. My father did fine without a single acolyte to her name, even during the Reaper War, and the chaos that came afterward.” I braced my shoulders. “I think, despite the T’Soni name and everything I inherited from my mother, in the end I am my father’s daughter. Her model might be a better one to emulate.”

Vara chuckled. “I always thought so.”

“Well, you and she always understood one another.”

Shepard nodded. “So, T’Soni, will you see sense and not go running off on your own again? Leave the risk-taking to people who are better prepared for it. Who aren’t, you know, my pregnant wife.”

“Shepard, I’m not sure I can promise that. This war isn’t over, and you may need me in a hot zone again.”

The two of them glanced at each other, and I sensed a flicker of thought.

“All right, Liara.” Vara gave me an exasperated glare. “Just don’t be stupid about it. If you don’t want to think of Keana and the others as acolytes, think of them as our friends, like Kamala or Grunt. Comrades in arms. People whom you trust to fight at your side, not people you sneak away from.”

“I can do that. Goddess, I owe the three of them an enormous apology.”

“Double-thick, with extra contrition,” Shepard agreed. “Then when this is all over, T’Soni, we all go back to your estate, lounge around on the beach, swim in the ocean, work on some more of those little blue babies I asked for a long time ago, and we tell the galaxy to go take a hike for at least a hundred years.”

“I’m for that,” said Vara at once.

I rose from my seat and went to her, pulled her into my arms. “I’m so sorry, Vara. Can you forgive me?”

“I shouldn’t,” she said, but she relaxed in my embrace, and I could hear the old humor in her voice. “I think I will, though. This time.”
Election Day

23 December 2580, Usarri/Rannoch

The Third Battle of Rannoch took place a few days later. It began with an assault by the valdarii forces that remained in the Tikkun system, heavily reinforced through a wormhole. Behind the first wave of the attack came a world-killer planetoid, aimed directly at Rannoch, the first time we had seen that tactic since the Battle of Earth. The Old Ones seemed desperate to smash the Synarchy once and for all, before the geth could apply their new hacking techniques on a grand scale.

They were too late.

The allied fleets flew out to engage the valdarii as far from Rannoch as possible. Those detachments which were manned by organic crews ran interference for the geth, who zoomed in to point-blank range at very high acceleration. This strategy proved very costly for the geth. They lost almost a hundred ships and many thousands of platforms, although most of the affected runtimes managed to upload back to the Consensus without serious harm.

Those geth who reached their targets found themselves able to break into Old One networks with almost contemptuous ease. The result was a complete rout of the enemy. Hundreds of ships, tens of thousands of valdarii crew, were liberated from Old One control. The fleet intercepted the planet-killer at a safe distance, took over control of its drives, and bent its trajectory well away from Rannoch.

The geth and quarians sent a simple message to the last of the Old Ones, as they fled pell-mell back through their wormhole: Do not return to space claimed by the Synarchy of Rannoch. You will be defeated.

To which Shepard made an addendum of his own: You had better consider making peace with the rest of the galaxy now. Otherwise we’re coming for you, and there’s no place in the universe you’ll be able to hide.

The Old Ones gave us no response.

With the immediate threat to Rannoch over, both Conclave and Consensus volunteered to send a substantial portion of the Synarchy’s armed forces back to Citadel Space. A large contingent of liberated valdarii, working with their new geth partners, also volunteered to join the cause. Already, the weirdly varied aliens got along very well with both quarians and geth. There was talk of them entering into some form of permanent alliance with the Synarchy, assuming the main body of their civilization could be freed from Old One control.

In both size and sheer diversity, our coalition began to resemble the one at the end of the Reaper War. It certainly required a similar degree of coordination.

Shepard rose to the challenge, acting as a go-between to help all parties cooperate effectively. He remained only a Rear Admiral in the Confederation Navy, and even that rank was only temporary in nature, but he possessed more than enough personal influence to make him the leader of our growing alliance.

Watching him, I was reminded more than ever of Steven Hackett. I remembered noticing the resemblance as far back as the war against Saren; not a physical likeness, more a matter of mind
Refuse to panic. Roll up your sleeves and get to work. Calmly solve the first problem, then the next, and then the next. Continue until finished, and then stand back to watch history while it changes.

It was a form of greatness not unique to humans, of course. I could think of any number of turians I had known, starting with Garrus Vakarian, who had taken a similar approach. Vara had her share of it as well, probably an inheritance from the turians in her own ancestry. I entertained a hope that my daughter would display the same larger-than-life quality.

Of course, the day after the Third Battle of Rannoch was significant for another reason. Back in Citadel Space, it was Election Day. On all the worlds of the Confederation, hundreds of billions of citizens were making their choices for the new Parliament. Which legislators they chose would have a powerful effect on the conduct of the war.

Early that day, I called the Citadel and spoke briefly to young Nerylla. She was frantically busy, of course, overseeing a last-minute series of campaign appearances for Matriarch Thekla. She seemed tired but cautiously confident. Polling data suggested that Thekla had enough votes to win. The question was whether she had enough to win decisively.

At the time, the Confederation Parliament was composed of nine hundred and sixty-five members. Matriarch Thekla needed to win at least four hundred and eighty-eight seats for her allies, if she was to form a government without having to assemble a coalition. Our assessment was that we didn’t have the time to indulge in prolonged negotiations, nor could we afford a government that might fall apart at any moment under stress.

There was a great deal of tension on Rannoch that day, as we received the election returns in bits and pieces over many hours. My own political instincts told me that we needed some constructive way to deal with that tension. Therefore, I did the obvious thing.

I threw a party.

Tekanta helped me rent a private hall in one of Usarri’s finest social establishments. I arranged for plenty of food and drink, the best live music that quarian culture could provide, and big displays with newsfeeds from Citadel Space for those who wanted to follow developments. As the evening wore on, and more of the allied force’s leaders found their way to us, the celebration grow almost riotous.

Young Aspasia was properly sober – she was in uniform, after all – but rather celebrity-struck.

“What was it like, working for Aria all those years?” she asked.

Ajavi Jarral, that cheerfully ruthless pirate admiral, gave her a sharp-edged smile. “Profitable.”

“Was that all? Surely there had to be more to it than that!”

“Young one, no matter what else you decide to do with your life, you have to make a profit somehow. At a minimum, you need a constant supply of air, water, and food. You must maintain the shelter you keep against a hostile universe. You must maintain a reserve, so that a bad day doesn’t kill you. You must have the means to defend yourself against others who would rob you. You must gather energy and resources for the benefit of your offspring. Profit.”

Jarral cocked her head and watched my daughter, with an expression I recognized immediately. I
had to suppress the impulse to charge in and fend off the predator. I reminded myself that Aspasia was over two hundred years old, had plenty of sexual experience, and could make up her own mind about such things.

“Think about it, Aspasia,” the pirate continued. “Your own parents have certainly not been shy about making a profit. That’s how it is that you were raised, properly cared for, given the very best education, given a chance to succeed in the profession you chose. There’s nothing wrong with seeking profit. It’s the very essence of life.”

“There’s also serving others,” Aspasia said quietly. “I serve the Citadel Confederation. You served Aria.”

“Which still means that we have to have a surplus that can be devoted to such service.” Jarral eased a little closer to Aspasia, giving her voice a huskier tone, an intimate purr. “Aria was smart, strong, and ruthless . . . but she saw to it that the people in her pay, the people under her protection, had plenty of opportunity to make a profit of their own. She got better at that as the centuries passed, too. I have no regrets.”

Aspasia smiled, but it was a cool smile, and she eased ever so slightly away from Jarral. “Now you serve Talia.”

“I do. She’s some weird kind of cousin of yours, I suppose. The daughter of the construct-clone of your parents’ lover-and-soon-to-be-bondmate.”

“I like her.”

“Even though she abducted your mother?”

“No harm done in the long run, and I doubt she will make a habit of it. She seems to have all of Aria’s flair, and at least some of Shepard’s morals. Which is strange, since by all accounts the version of Shepard who was her father wasn’t very much like the one we all know.”

“True, he was always a selfish nothos, and far too easy to lead around by his genitalia. Still, he had plenty of courage and determination. He resembled the original model that far, at least.” Jarral became sober, visibly giving up the attempt to seduce my daughter. “Things will be different in Omega space now. I’m not sure what we’ll do, now that Omega itself is gone.”

“You’ll manage. Omega’s people are the most important thing. As long as they survive, you’ll be able to recover from anything.”

“Well.” The pirate brightened. “That’s what we asari do, isn’t it? We dance through life, tasting what we want, knowing that no matter how dark and long the night, it’s always followed by the light of morning.”

Asari: sixty-five percent in favor of Matriarch Thekla’s party. One hundred and thirteen seats.

I was conversing with several of the officers from Chandragupta when my daimon informed me of an incoming message. I excused myself and took the call in a quiet corner. To my surprise, a female salarian face took shape in the holographic image, huge black eyes peering at me from inside an embroidered hood.

“Dalatrass Valern. I’m pleased to see you.”

“You may not be, Dr. T’Soni, once I have told you what I must.” Valern leaned forward. “The
election returns from Sur’Kesh do not appear favorable to your cause.”

I gave her a tight smile. “This isn’t a surprise, dalatrass. I know that you have been working behind the scenes to try to persuade your people to support the war against the valdarii. I also know that there is still a great deal of unease about Admiral Shepard and his Reaper technology. Especially as it continues to spread widely through the other Citadel species.”

“Yes. Most of my colleagues among the dalatrass have imposed bans on this technology in their territories. Most salarians are willing to support the defense of the Confederation against these Old Ones, but they are concerned that your alliance is opening the door to something far worse.”

“Are you being honest with me again, dalatrass?”

Perhaps. I wish to forestall any misunderstandings once the election results are in. I have little doubt that Matriarch Thekla will be our next President. Valern will support her. If she needs to form a coalition to govern, we will assist, given only minor concessions.”

“What kind of concessions?” I inquired.

“Coordinated but separate military command,” said the dalatrass, “and an understanding that no salarians will be obligated to accept Admiral Shepard’s nanotechnology.”

I kept my diplomat’s face in place, giving nothing away. “I will certainly pass that along to the Matriarch.”

“Thank you, Doctor.” She smiled slightly. “Good fortune go with you.”

Salarians: thirty percent in favor of Matriarch Thekla’s party. Sixty-one seats.

I was on my way to find another glass of wine when I passed General Kyeriali. The turian officer from Illium stood with a rather striking quarian female on his arm, sipping Rannoch brandy and exchanging war stories with Shepard.

“Oh, this body hasn’t taken nearly the beating of my last two,” said Shepard. “Shot, burned, electrocuted, sliced open, sprains, torn muscles, and broken bones. Not to mention I got spaced the first time I died, and vaporized the second time. Compared to all that, having a krogan bite my hand off is a walk in the park.”

Kyeriali was an older turian of average height and build, rather weather-beaten and scarred, with bright blue face paint that matched his predator’s eyes. He wore an IDF uniform, neat and tidy, with general’s stripes on his sleeves and a remarkable array of medal ribbons on his breast. His mandibles went wide in a turian grin. “Shepard, any other man in the galaxy tried to tell a story like that, I’d laugh him to scorn. How is the arm doing, anyway?”

Shepard held the injured limb out for inspection. “It itches. I think my internal technology is getting ready to start forming a new hand on the stump.”

“Well, at least that’s not something I have to envy you for. I’ve lost a few bits and pieces over the years, but nothing I couldn’t live without, and turian medicine has gotten pretty good at cloned transplants.”

“I remember.”

Kyeriali cocked his head at Shepard. “That’s right, Garrus Vakarian took quite a hit once while you
and he were working together. Didn’t he start with a bunch of human prosthetics?”

“Actually, they were Cerberus prosthetics. Which did not please him in the slightest. Later, when he got back to Palaven, he took some turian reconstructive work. Kept the scars, though.”

“Well, we turians like scars. If everything still functions, it doesn’t matter if we look pretty.” Kyeriali glanced down at his companion, who turned her pearlescent eyes upon him and smiled back. “Besides, scars give you character. People take you more seriously with a few scars to show.”

“Must be a turian thing,” said Shepard. “Most humans wouldn’t agree.”

“I don’t know. Wasn’t there a human philosopher who said something like: Whatever doesn’t kill me, makes me stronger?”

“Friedrich Nietzsche.”

“Sounds like respiratory distress, not a name. Anyway. Scars say, Here are a few things that didn’t kill me, so you had better not get in my way either.”

Shepard chuckled. “Now, that sounds like something a krogan would say.”

“Well, we turians and the krogan get along a lot better than we did when you were around the first time. A certain amount of mutual respect, after centuries of kicking each other’s asses. Not to mention both of us get along well with you humans. You may look soft and squishy, but you usually turn out to be damn tough when things get difficult. As you have personally demonstrated.” Kyeriali raised his glass of brandy. “Somehow, Shepard, I don’t think you’ll have to worry about whether the turians will come when President Valaridé calls.”

Turians: sixty-eight percent in favor of Matriarch Thekla’s party. One hundred and five seats.

When the music paused, Kamala caressed Keana’s face, gave Timo a brief but passionate kiss, and stepped away from the dance floor. I met her by the refreshments, where she gulped down half a mug of beer without taking a breath. Her hair was disheveled, a faint sheen of sweat was on her skin, and she appeared to be having a wonderful time.

“Dr. T’Soni!” She wiped foam off her upper lip and gave me a brilliant smile. “I’ve been meaning to thank you. This was a fantastic idea. We all needed a chance to blow off some steam.”

“You certainly seem to be doing that,” I observed. “Are things going well with you and my acolytes?”

She blinked in surprise, and then nodded enthusiastically. “You asari are always so direct about such things. Yes, we’re fine. I don’t think they’re planning to make a long-term thing of it, but that’s okay. I get it, they’re maidens.”

“Well. Some asari maidens do think in the long term when it comes to their love-relationships.” I chuckled. “In this case, though, I suspect you’re right. Keana and Timo are so passionate about one another that anyone else will have difficulty making a lasting impression. Although I would say that a Spectre of your accomplishments has a very good chance.”

“It’s odd. I’ve always known that I was bisexual, of course, but I never felt attracted to anyone who wasn’t human before. I suppose asari are a special case, you resemble us so closely in some ways.”
I chuckled, remembering Miranda Lawson. “Kamala, we seem to have that effect on many humans. Including women who could have sworn they were exclusively fixated on men.”

“The triad thing is a little more of a challenge.” She gave me a searching look. “If I may borrow some of that asari directness, how is it with you and Shepard?”

“Hmm. Shepard, Vara, and I are well-matched, and we love each other a great deal. The relationship isn’t always easy, of course.” I shrugged. “Nothing worth having ever is.”

“I envy you. Many humans – not just those of us who follow the Way – think of Shepard as one of the best of us. I can’t count the number of women I knew who were terribly infatuated with him, back on Mindoir.” She grinned, only a little embarrassed. “Including at least one teenaged desi girl, who was absolutely determined to become a Spectre just like him when she grew up.”

A sudden thought struck me. “Kamala, I know what makes a man like Shepard attractive to asari. What is it that humans find so admirable about him? His strength? His courage?”

“I suppose.” She became thoughtful, brushing some stray hair back from her face. “Courage is important. We humans can do terrible things when we’re afraid. We admire people who can be brave and stick to their principles, no matter how dreadful things become. Shepard has certainly done that, more than once. But I don’t think that’s the best thing about him.”

“What is it, then?”

“His compassion. For everyone. Even people he doesn’t like personally. Even his enemies.”

I nodded slowly. “Yes. We asari see that too.”

“It’s not something we humans are very good at.” Kamala laughed ruefully. “Which may be one reason why so many of our religious traditions make a big deal of it. It’s a lesson we keep having to re-learn, over and over for thousands of years.”

I reached out and gave her a quick embrace. “Well. I’d say there’s plenty of hope for humanity. Especially with men like Shepard to teach that lesson . . . and women like you.”

*Humans: thirty-six percent in favor of Matriarch Thekla’s party. Forty-five seats.*

I found Grunt standing with a half-dozen other krogan, swapping tall tales and swilling ryncol.

“You should have seen Shepard’s face,” he told his admirers. “Humans! They look so sad and guilty when they think one of their krantt is about to get killed. I played it up for him, gave him a good show of being all brave, but come on. A chance to smash a few dozen more rachni? How could I not?”

“So how did it go?” demanded one of the other krogan.

“Hah! It was fun. One of the few times in my life I’ve ever just cut loose. I blasted away until I was out of ammo, and then I picked up a piece of metal and started bashing them with that. Crushed a bunch of ‘em under my boots, picked at least one off my shoulders and took a bite out of it. Yech. Tasted terrible.” Grunt chuckled, like thunder in a barrel. “Okay, there was the one I tackled a little too close to the edge of a drop. Turned out to be at least twenty meters down. Good thing I landed on the rachni. Broke my fall. Broke the rachni, too.”

Deep, booming laughter.
“I managed to get away and climb back up to the *Normandy* shuttle. Just in time. The Battlemaster was about to get on board and leave. The moment he saw me, he came running. Then you should have seen his face again.”

“What was the matter this time?”

“Well, I was just *covered* in rachni blood, guts, puke, and other stuff I couldn’t even identify . . .”

“What the Warmaster isn’t mentioning is that he was also barely able to walk,” said Shepard, from behind me. “It must have been a ferocious battle. Although it couldn’t have taken too much out of him. You know the first thing he said to me?”

All the krogan peered at him expectantly.

Shepard pitched his voice husky and low, giving an uncannily accurate imitation of a bone-weary krogan. “*Anybody got something to eat?*”

After Grunt slapped Shepard on the back (not quite knocking him off his feet) and the laughter died down, the Warmaster raised his mug of ryncol high. “To the Battlemaster! Every krogan knows that Shepard will always lead us to the battles that are worth fighting!”

*Krogan: ninety-six percent in favor of Matriarch Thekla’s party. Eighty-four seats.*

By the time the polls closed on all the worlds of the major powers, our alliance still didn’t have quite enough votes to win a clear victory. Only the minor powers remained: the volus, the hanar, the elcor, the raloi, a few scattered colony worlds that had to use pre-modern methods for counting the vote.

The wait for the last few results seemed interminable. Vara and Shepard exchanged a series of grim jokes about obsolete balloting techniques, and all the ways those could go wrong. From Vara we heard about the horror of illegible scrawls on potsherds. Shepard tried to explain about some weirdly human thing called “hanging chads.”

Ironically, it was the last world any of us expected that put Matriarch Thekla over the top. Ravna, the single batarian world in the Citadel Confederation, elected four delegates to Parliament. Two of those seats went to members of the Matriarch’s party, giving her an absolute majority. In the end, she got five hundred and thirty-four delegates to work with, not a landslide victory, but enough to give her the support she needed to finish the war.

Shepard was the first to get the news, via flash traffic through Confederation flag-rank military channels. One moment, he was talking with Vara and General Kyeriali. The next, his expression suddenly became distant, and then he rose to his feet. He jumped up onto the nearest table, raising his hands to attract everyone’s attention and ask for silence. It didn’t take long for him to get it.

“I just got confirmation,” he said, his voice even and sober. “Enough of the vote has been tallied that the outcome is now ninety-nine point nine-five percent certain. Our alliance has won an absolute majority in the parliamentary elections. Matriarch Thekla will be sworn in as the fifty-fourth President of the Citadel Confederation within the next few hours.”

Throughout the hall, I could hear breath released in relief.

“Friends,” Shepard continued, “with our victory at this end of the galaxy, and the Confederation ready to go onto a full war footing at the other end, I believe we have entered this war’s final phase. I hope we will all be ready to depart for the Citadel tomorrow.”
Then the tension that had been building throughout the night finally released, in a storm of glad cheers. Shepard jumped down to accept embraces from me and Vara, and the congratulations of a hundred others from every species in the civilized galaxy.

Vara and I could tell that the party wouldn’t break up for hours. We exchanged a look and a flicker of thought, and decided to celebrate more privately and in our own way. After all, once the combined fleet set out for the Citadel, we might not have much leisure time until the war was over. Shepard would have even less.

We took him back to our private chambers, this human who had somehow become the center of our lives, and we made love to him with prolonged care and tenderness. By the time we were ready for the end, Vara and I were already thoroughly superimposed, one mind in two asari forms. We used words, and touch, and the familiar flex and pressure of our bodies, to bring him and ourselves to a pinnacle of delight.

In the end, I’m not even sure which of us took him into her body. It didn’t really matter. We both wallowed in the intimacy, we both soared high and fast on his passionate drive. We both shared the awe and terror and enchantment that was his mind.

Vara surprised me, she was so caught up in a storm of desire. I half expected her to attempt an imprint from him, or from both of us, but at the last moment she managed to remain pragmatic and responsible.

_Time enough for that once this war is over_, came a flicker of thought from her share of our conjoined mind. _Although once we are at peace, Shepard, I want a daughter of yours too._

He projected pleased agreement, wordless since his attention was quite thoroughly taken up in other things.

Afterward Vara slept wrapped in his arms, drooling slightly on his chest, while I cradled his head against my breasts and idly ran my fingertips through his hair. My mind drifted in euphoria, considering the tiny life nestled inside me, wondering what kind of person she would be.

_I’m guessing intense, determined, and fierce_, Shepard said, surprising me.

_I’m sorry, love, I didn’t realize I was projecting._

_It’s okay. I wasn’t quite asleep anyway._

I examined his mind, and realized there was something different about it. Some tone or flavor I had almost never seen from him before.

_Shepard. You’re happy._

_I suppose I am._ He chuckled slightly, careful not to wake Vara. _Is it that strange?_

_I can’t remember the last time I’ve seen you simply relaxed and happy. Maybe for a few days after we defeated Saren, but never before or since. Not that I’m complaining._

_Well. Not to sound overly dramatic, but I’ve had a deeply weird life, and it’s involved a lot of sacrifices. I’m looking forward to beating the Old Ones, handing my commission back to President Valaridé, retiring to Thessia with the women I love, and raising a pack of scary-brilliant asari kids. See what normality looks like for a change._
I caressed him once more, leaned down slightly to kiss his forehead. *That plan certainly has my vote.*

We settled down to sleep for the night. Neither of us dwelt on the unspoken caveats in Shepard’s wish. Winning was something we could be confident of, given our history. Surviving the victory? For that, we had less precedent.
25 December 2580, Sol System Space

On Earth, a million kilometers away, it was the twenty-fifth of December. For somewhere between one-third and one-half of the human population, it was the holiday called Christmas. A sacred day for many Christians, such as Shepard had once been. Also, a day for family gatherings, feasting, gift-giving, and celebration, even for many who did not revere the Christ-deity.

High above Earth, the combined armada of the galaxy gathered. Finally, all political issues resolved, all allies gathered, we prepared to go to the rescue of the Ascended Intelligence. Assuming we were not already too late.

“All detachments report ready,” said Chandragupta’s comms officer.

Not all the galaxy’s forces were present, of course. A large fleet remained near Rannoch, guarding against another attack upon the geth consensus. Another large fleet raided deep into valdarii-held territory in the Traverse, keeping the enemy off-balance and fighting to liberate occupied worlds.

Even so, our fleet was about twice as large as the one that had arrived above Earth on the last day of the Reaper War. After months of war, the Citadel Confederation and its allies remained stronger, capable of placing more and better ships in the field, than the shattered Council had once done. We had seventeen thousand ships, crewed by almost twenty different species, and troop transports carrying almost two million soldiers.

We could only hope that it would be enough.

“Send the handshake,” Shepard ordered, standing on the command dais next to young Aspasia.

At first, nothing seemed to happen. Then, in its new elliptical orbit, the Citadel began to turn. Slowly, ponderously, it rotated in space, its ward arms opening. Not as wide as during the Battle of Earth, I noticed, when the entire station became an amplifier for the Crucible. Instead, the arms opened to about fifteen degrees past their normal span, and then stopped.

I happened to glance at Kalan, and caught his puzzled frown. He tapped at this console, apparently performing some calculation.

“Signal response from the Citadel’s control systems,” the comms officer reported.

“It matches the waveform Admiral Shepard gave us,” agreed EDI.

“That’s it,” said Shepard. “The Citadel is ready.”

Young Aspasia nodded. “At your command, Admiral.”

Shepard’s finger stabbed at a control on his panel. “Shepard to all ships. The Citadel mass relay is open. Execute Maneuver Alpha.”

Aspasia simply nodded and pointed at her helmsman.

Chandragupta leaped forward, the first in all that vast armada, hurling herself at the Citadel. For just a moment I could see the great station flashing by in the external view, and then the mass relay seized us, hurling us high into the strange geometry of FTL.
Thirty seconds passed. Sixty.

“Breakout in fifteen seconds,” said EDI.

*Boom. Chandragupta* came down into normal geometry, the transition feeling unusually solid. I glanced at the external view . . . into a glory of light.

“Bloody hell,” Kamala murmured.

Stars shone all around *Chandragupta*. Many thousands of stars, perhaps millions of them, so bright that the dark between them seemed almost to vanish. We flew through the heart of a vast jewel-box.

“No contacts, no contacts.” The sensor officer’s voice, deep male human, rough with tension.

“No sign of the *valdarii*?” Shepard snapped, while the rest of the Confederation’s fleet began to come through the transition behind us.

“Not yet, sir. Nothing at all within several AU of the relay. Not unless they have really good stealth.”

“*Get me a map!*”

I glanced at Shepard, surprised to hear a note of impatient uncertainty in his voice. His mind was closed to me, but I could read his tone and his body language. Our situation was not what he had expected.

“I think I know where we are,” said Kalan.

“Where?” Shepard demanded.

Instead of answering at once, Kalan pounced on his console. “EDI, priority, interface with the rest of the fleet and check the following coordinates against the standard pulsar catalogues.”

Moments later, EDI reported, “Positive match.”

Kalan nodded decisively. “We’re in a globular cluster.”

My eyes went wide with surprise.

Laymen often speak of all the stars in the immediate vicinity of a mass relay as being grouped into a “cluster,” but this is not strictly correct. Such stars normally have no common origin or history; they simply happen to be in the same part of the galaxy at the moment. There are also open clusters and stellar associations, true congeries of stars, born in the same nursery clouds and still young enough to be traveling through the galaxy together.

The great globular clusters are something else entirely. Instead of a few thousand stars, as one might find in an open cluster, the typical globular cluster contains several *million*, packed into a tight sphere only a hundred or so light-years across. Instead of hugging close to the galaxy’s disc as the open clusters normally do, the globular clusters soar high into the galactic halo, and swarm like insects around the galactic core. Globular clusters tend to be very ancient, over ten billion years old, relics of the early formation of the galaxy.

To the best of my knowledge, no one had ever visited or explored any of the galaxy’s hundreds of globular clusters. The mass relay network touched none of them, did not approach within a
thousand light-years of any of them. Since we didn’t expect them to contain any habitable worlds – too crowded, too old, too metal-poor – none of our civilizations had ever tried to mount an expedition.

*Just as the Reapers, and their Intelligence, may have intended,* I realized.

“This can’t be right,” Vara muttered. “The Reapers are supposed to lurk in *dark space* between extinction cycles. What would they have to do with a super-sized star cluster like this?”

“It *would* be a nice piece of misdirection,” Shepard pointed out.

“Not just any globular cluster,” said Kalan. “If my astrogation is correct, this is *the* globular cluster. The brightest and most massive one in the galaxy.”

“Omega Centauri,” said Shepard. “I seem to remember . . . isn’t there something odd about that one?”

“Yes. It’s very distinctive in composition, not just in size. We don’t know very much about how the globular clusters formed, but Omega Centauri seems to have a different origin even than that. Best guess is that it’s the remnant core of a dwarf galaxy, one that got devoured by the Milky Way billions of years ago.”

“Galaxies go around eating one another?” Vara murmured.

I gave her a sharp glance. There was something about her voice, as she stared into the external view. Something was distracting her.

Then I realized that I felt it too. Like a vague, unlocalized itch. Or like almost hearing a voice, one not quite loud enough to pick out against the background noise.

“In fact, they do,” said Kalan. “Galaxies form in groups and families, just as stars do, with the exception that they’re spaced much more closely together in proportion to their size. The Milky Way has dozens of satellites, most of them tiny ‘dwarf’ galaxies. Over billions of years, some of those come close enough to be torn apart by tidal effects. Their stars get scattered, and most of them integrate into the Milky Way’s halo or disk. There are at least two such galaxies in the process of being eaten by the Milky Way right now.”

I stared at the external view.

Something out there was *calling* us.

*What in the name of the Goddess is happening?*

“So, this globular cluster is what’s left of one of the galaxy’s satellites,” said Shepard. “What does that give us?”

Kalan stared back at him, pearlescent eyes gleaming. “You don’t know?”

“I don’t know anything about this.” Shepard’s frown deepened. “Wait a minute. How is it that I *don’t* know anything about this, if this is where the Citadel mass relay always led?”

“That’s obvious,” I said, to distract myself from the sensation of being *summoned.* “The Intelligence didn’t tell you anything you didn’t need to know.”

He gave me an irritated glance. “I don’t follow.”
“You knew how to return to the Intelligence if you needed to. The Citadel mass relay. You didn’t have to know where the Intelligence was to do that.”

“I get it. If I did know, that’s something that could be pulled out of me.” Shepard nodded. “Good tradecraft. Not that it seems to have done the Intelligence much good.”

“When the Intelligence sent you out, did it know it was going to come under attack?”

He considered for a moment. “I don’t think so. It knew its Adversary was on the move, but it didn’t know very much about its nature. The Reapers didn’t go out searching for the Adversary until three years ago, didn’t get their *sauve-qui-peut* signal until just a few weeks ago.”

“Recon feed coming in,” said the sensor officer.

The holographic “tank” in the middle of the CIC lit up with a tactical display, the result of hundreds of ships extending their sensors to the limit.

“We’re not in the very core of the cluster,” said Kalan, “and that’s a good thing. There’s a massive black hole in there, only one percent the size of the Sagittarius A-Star object at the center of the galaxy, but more than big enough to be dangerous.”

Shepard nodded, and I could sense the memories that came to his mind. He had been one of the first to visit the galactic core and survive, during the war against the Collectors.

“Average distance between stars in this region is about half a light-year,” the quarian astronomer continued. “It doesn’t appear that most of the stars here have any planets at all. Over billions of years they’ve all been torn loose by close encounters with other stars. The closest star is an exception. It’s a white dwarf, probably a G-class main sequence star like Sol or Tikkun a long time ago, essentially dead now. It has one planet, in a circular orbit about two hundred million kilometers out. Hard to read its mass, but it seems to be a solid body, about forty thousand kilometers in diameter . . .”

“That’s not a planet,” Shepard interrupted. “That’s the Intelligence.”

Kalan peered at him for a moment, startled, and then recovered. “That would not be surprising. If this were a natural planet, it would be very unusual for it to have survived the primary’s red-giant phase, or to have remained in a stable orbit ever since. If it’s an artificial structure . . . that would explain a lot.”

“A substantial fleet is keeping station near the Intelligence,” said EDI.

The tactical display zoomed in on the vicinity of the white dwarf. Icons began to appear all around the Intelligence, indicating the location of *valdarii* ships. There were a great many of them.

“They’re just standing guard,” said Shepard. “Not trying to come out to us?”

Aspasia shook her head. “Doesn’t look that way. Which is damned odd. They should have been out here to ambush us while we came through the relay.”

“Maybe they didn’t know which relay to cover,” said Kalan.

I gave him a startled stare. “There’s more than one?”

He nodded. “I’m detecting five others, all around the outskirts of this star system.”
“Hah!” Shepard gave a short bark of laughter. “That’s just like the Reapers, all over again.”

“Now I don’t follow,” I complained.

“Suppose this is where the Reapers wait between extinction cycles. Somewhere their victims would never think to look, right? Then why have just one path out into the galaxy?”

“We know they had more than one route into the mass relay network,” said Vara. “When the Citadel mass relay was closed to them, they tried to come in through the Alpha Relay, in the Bahak system.”

Then I saw it too. “Misdirection again. We always assumed the Reapers’ refuge was somewhere in the outer fringes of the galaxy, past the Viper Nebula.”

“Right. Instead, they had another relay out there, somewhere in the dark, one that connected back here.”

“There must have been more Alpha Relays,” I realized. “Other entry points into the relay network that we didn’t know about.”

Shepard nodded. “Sure. Good thing they didn’t pick any of those to come through last time. Sheer good luck that Dr. Kenson found the right one, otherwise we wouldn’t have been able to delay them at all, and the Crucible would never have been built.”

“Perhaps it wasn’t a coincidence. The Reapers had reasons to invade through the Bahak system. They had already indoctrinated most of the batarian leadership, and we know they were most interested in assimilating humanity. The other Alpha Relays are probably spaced around the galactic rim, much further away from batarian and human space.”

“True.”

“What’s the plan?” Aspasia asked. “That’s a big enemy formation, but we ought to be able to beat them in a main-fleet engagement. Assuming they don’t have any wild cards hidden away.”

For just a moment, Shepard looked uncertain. He put his hands behind his back, pacing slowly beside the tactical display, staring into it as if looking for enlightenment. Then he turned away, to out the external view at all those blazing stars.

“Yes,” he said at last. “We’re going to have to defeat the valdarii here. Drive them back and away from the Intelligence’s core. And then . . .”

Aspasia frowned at him. She hadn’t known him as long as her parents, but she could hear something in his voice, some hesitation.

“Sir?” she prompted him at last.

He squared his shoulders, tilted his head back to give the stars a challenging glare. “Then I’m going to have to go down there.”

I felt that, like a spear in my heart, but I wasn’t the one to speak.

“No!”

Startled, Shepard turned back to us, a thousand stars blazing behind him.

“You have to go,” said Vara, giving him an intense silver-eyed glare. “I get that. But you won’t be
going alone. Every soldier in this fleet is going with you. Including me.”

Neither of them were sharing openly across our link, but I might have picked up a few stray thoughts from them. Suddenly, I understood.

“All three of us are going,” I told them. “Shepard, you have some kind of code key, buried in your mind. Don’t you?”

Slowly, he nodded. “I think that must be what I’m . . . hearing, I suppose is the best way to phrase it.”

“That’s why the Intelligence sent you out into the galaxy. Not just to disseminate your internal technology among the organic population of the galaxy. Not just to raise up resistance against the Adversary, the Old Ones. Not just to gather allies and lead them.”

“No.”

“You’re a backup. A last-ditch plan for recovery, in case something got to the main body of the Intelligence and corrupted it.”

“Yes.”

I found myself standing in front of him, very close, staring up into his face. “And the Old Ones know, don’t they? That’s why they’ve been pursuing you from the beginning of their war, even when it made no strategic sense, or at the expense of their overall timetable. They invaded Mandoir while you were there, because you were there. They exposed their pawn, President Yao, to try to keep you away from the Citadel. They almost destroyed the entire Sol system rather than risk you reaching there. They’ve been attacking ever since, wherever you happened to be, even at places like Illium or Omega that don’t appear to be their primary objectives.”

“They didn’t want him to get here,” said Vara quietly, absolute certainty in her voice. “Because here is where he can ruin their entire campaign.”

“How do you know that?” he whispered.

For a moment, I saw fear in his eyes. Not fear for himself. Fear for Vara, and for me.

“Because I can feel the same thing you’re feeling, Shepard.” She pointed into the tactical display, at the icon representing the Intelligence. “It’s a Goddess-damned homing signal. The Intelligence wants you to report to HQ. Somewhere down on that thing, it’s waiting for the data you carry. The Old Ones know that. They’ve lined up in space, they probably have a million valdarii on the ground down there, ready to do whatever it takes to keep you away.”

“Then you see why I have to go. That doesn’t mean either of you have to come along.” His jaw set in determination. “It’s going to be terrible down there, Vara.”

“All the more reason. Don’t you see, Shepard, Liara and I are responding to the same homing signal. We’ve picked up the same data you have. That means we have to go. Three of us means three times the chance that one copy will get through.”

“She’s right,” I told him, and gave him a determined stare.

For a few moments longer, he looked as if he was prepared to be stubborn. Then his conscience got the better of him, and his shoulders relaxed a little. “London all over again. Well, at least this time we won’t have Harbinger doing its best to take us all out. Captain, I want a flag conference set up
in five minutes. We have a battle to plan.”
25 December 2580, Omega Centauri Space

Approaching the Intelligence

Our massed armada made an FTL microjump, down to the heart of the star system, and found the valdarii fleet ready. Our capital ships formed up into a wall of battle, and began to exchange great waves of fire with the enemy. Then our smaller craft and fighters leapt forward, to engage at knife-fight range.

Chandragupta remained behind, waiting for the first engagement to be resolved. We had strict orders, from Shepard and from Fleet Admiral Sinopus himself, to stay clear of the battle. Young Aspasia danced with impatience, knowing that many of her colleagues were fighting for their lives just a few million kilometers away. Still, she knew that Shepard or one of her parents had to reach the Intelligence alive, if we were to win.

It wasn’t our turn yet, to take the insane chances. That would come soon enough.

It seemed a strange place to fight.

We flew close to a nameless star, almost as massive as Sol. Yet our surroundings looked like deep interstellar space. The white dwarf still glowed with the heat of its ancient collapse, but it was tiny, packing all that mass into a sphere only a few thousand kilometers across. With so little surface to radiate, its golden-white torch-light was lost in all that immensity. From our position, it seemed to be one star among millions, barely even the brightest of those.

The Intelligence seemed strange too. Our sensors probed its shape, building a picture of the place where we would fight the valdarii at close quarters. At first glance it resembled a planet, spherical, with about three times the diameter of Earth or Thessia. I worried that we might find ourselves trying to run and fight under several times normal gravity. Then Kalan observed as the object occulted several background stars, and discovered that its surface wasn’t solid. Soon he measured its mass, and showed us that it was quite a bit less dense than metal or rock, somewhat less dense even than water. We could expect to find ourselves under a fraction of our normal gravitational field there.

“It can’t be a solid object,” the quarian concluded. “Big sections of it must be hollow. Or it’s a fractal structure, like a planet-sized foam of ceramics and metal. Ancestors alone know how it prevents its own gravity from crushing those cavities over millions of years.”

“It uses the mass effect to hold itself up,” said Shepard. He sounded strange, as if he wandered through dark forests of distant memory. “I think, once we get inside, we’ll be in microgravity the whole time.”

Kalan blinked in astonishment. “Just how much eezo is in there?”

“A lot. Gigatons of it.” Shepard glanced at the astronomer, suddenly not at all distracted. “Eezo for power generation. Eezo for gravity control. Eezo for faster-than-light communication across the mass relay network. Eezo for internal faster-than-light communication, so a brain the size of a big planet can still think at lightning speeds.”

I felt a sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach. “Shepard, if the Intelligence uses eezo as part of its core processing function . . .”
“It should be firewalled off,” he said, but he didn’t sound certain.

“I don’t think that follows. In all the time that the Intelligence has ruled the galaxy, have any of its victims come close to attacking its core?”

“No. The only way anyone but the Reapers ever had contact with it was through the Crucible mechanism. Before today, only the Reapers ever knew where the Intelligence was located.”

Silence fell for a long moment, in Chandragupta’s command center. In the tactical display, the allied armada slowly pressed forward, fighting now in the immediate vicinity of the Intelligence. I glanced at the battle damage assessments, saw that tens of thousands of people had already died on both sides of the confrontation.

Facts and evidence fell into place in my mind, old information broker’s habits still in working order, building a structure of inference out of partial information.

“Shepard, the Intelligence didn’t know the nature of its Adversary. It sent you out as an emissary. It sent the Reapers out on a search pattern. It thought the Adversary was hidden away somewhere in the bright-matter universe. Not until we heard John Tikolo’s story on Omega did we deduce that the Adversary was living as dark matter. Not until we saw them destroy Omega did we realize how they could manipulate eezo at a distance. The Intelligence didn’t know that it was vulnerable.”

“She’s right,” said Vara. “Technology is always full of security holes, until enough people hack into it that it gets tightened up. Maybe the Intelligence is secure against hacking from our side of the universe. In that realm, it can draw upon the experience of tens of thousands of extinction cycles. But this is probably the first time anyone has ever tried hacking into it from the dark-matter side of things. No wonder it’s gone down.”

“I don’t think it’s gone down yet.” Shepard folded his arms, turning to watch the tactical display. “There are ways to design an architecture that remains partially secure, even if there’s an access path you didn’t anticipate. Defense in depth. You can slow an intruder down, limit his options, force him to work hard for every inch of progress. If the Intelligence didn’t have that capability, it would already be dead or completely corrupted, and the Old Ones wouldn’t be maintaining such a large force here to keep us away. They’d be out in the galaxy, nailing down their conquest.”

Time passed. The armada moved closer to the Intelligence, methodically pushing the valdarii aside. I became convinced that Shepard was right, that the Intelligence still held out under siege. The Old Ones and their slaves had never been quite this stubborn before, not under sustained attack from a significant force.

Slowly, Kalan and the sensor officers could build a detailed image of the Intelligence. Artificial mountains, uncannily regular in shape, like endless rows of pyramids bathed in weird energy. Forests of antennae the size of continents. Vast plains of hexagonal grid-work, through which cold blue light shone from far beneath. Tantalizing hints of a maze of tunnels and cavities, stretching thousands of kilometers beneath the notional surface.

Somewhere in there, I knew, rested computational power and storage sufficient to “preserve” the remains of every civilization the Reapers had ever destroyed. Images, sounds, texts, cultural data, even the ghosts of living minds. An archaeologist’s dream. All the galaxy’s history, buried in that . . .

. . . that abomination.

I had Shepard’s memories of being the Intelligence. I knew that those memories were only a tiny,
fragmentary shadow of the reality. I knew that even so, he was tormented by them.

He remembered sending the Reapers out to commit mass murder on a galactic scale. He remembered welcoming them back each time with a wealth of knowledge, purchased at the cost of a trillion corpses. He remembered storing all that data away where no one else would ever benefit from it.

Over and over. Tens of thousands of times.

Yes, I understood that the Intelligence had done exactly as the Leviathans had commanded – even if they, in their monumental arrogance, had never seen the implications of their scheme. I understood that the Intelligence was built as nothing more than the universe’s most powerful VI. It had no choice, no moral agency, in anything it did before Shepard arrived.

Still. Staring at its image in the display, I felt a helpless rage, worse than anything I could remember. If some kindly goddess had come by just then, handing me a weapon that could eradicate the Intelligence from the universe, I would have used it without a moment’s hesitation.

I felt a gentle hand inside my elbow, pulling me close so that Vara could rest her head on my shoulder. “Are you all right, love?”

“No.” I took a deep, shuddering breath. “Are we on the right course? Coming to rescue that thing?”

“I’m afraid so.” She glanced up into my face, her eyes gone a bleak grey. “Liara, what happens if the Intelligence dies?”

“We fight the valdarii. Now that we’re unified against them, now that we have some immunity to the Old Ones and their manipulation, we beat them.”

“Then what?”

I caught her train of thought, across our intimate link, and sighed. “Right. We can’t do anything about the Old Ones themselves. They’re still out there, embedded in the dark matter we can’t touch. They can continue to corrupt the very stars if we don’t surrender to them. If all else fails, they can drive us into extinction, then wait out there for another fifty million years for some new civilization to come along and open the door for them.”

She watched the image for a while, offering the wordless comfort of her presence.

“I hate it too, Liara. I don’t think any of us who survived the Reapers will ever forgive it. But it’s the only thing in the galaxy powerful enough to maybe give us a chance against the Old Ones. And at least with Shepard’s mind in charge, it doesn’t seem likely to do any more harm.”

“Yes. You’re right, of course. You usually are.”

I felt her smile. “It only took you four hundred years to figure that out?”

“Well, it’s my turn.” I reached out through my daimon to interface with the display, turning the image of the Intelligence and zooming in on one sector in its southern hemisphere. “That’s our way in.”

“Hmm.” Vara consulted her feelings, the homing signal that was growing more and more clamorous in our minds. “I think you’re right. Shepard?”

He loomed up behind us, a big hand on my other shoulder. “Yes. I’m feeling it too. Interesting.
That area doesn’t have any distinctive or unusual features. Captain T’Rathis, are we getting any intel on the deployment of *valdarii* ground forces?"

“Very little, Admiral. They don’t seem to be concentrated in any one location.”

“Hah!”

I startled slightly, at his sudden bark of laughter.

“They don’t actually know what precise location they’re trying to protect from me!” he explained. “The Old Ones must not understand the inner workings of the Intelligence all that well. Which leaves them trying to cover ten times the surface area of Earth with just a couple million soldiers.”

“It can’t be that easy,” Aspasia complained.

“No. They probably have a plan in place to move troops where they need them, the moment they see the *schwerpunkt* of our assault.” Shepard made a slow smile. “Which suggests that we shouldn’t actually have one. Or that we should put it somewhere completely unimportant.”

I cocked my head at him. “Shepard, are you seriously considering ordering the bulk of our ground forces to attack somewhere as a *feint*?”

“Very loudly and clearly,” he told me.

Six hours later, *Chandragupta* went in with the main assault. Aspasia kept the ship’s transponder pinging in full IFF mode, and EDI imitated Shepard’s voice and manner with uncanny accuracy over the comms. We hoped that the *valdarii* would be taken in by our denial-and-deception, at least long enough.

Almost fifty thousand kilometers away, a wing of *Dragon*-class shuttles soared over the surface of the Intelligence, on a ballistic path, mass-effect cores at minimum, cold and silent. On board, a full company of Confederation Marines waited for the signal to land. Shepard and Kamala commanded our assault team, with Vara, Miranda, Keana, Timo, Palethi, Grunt, and Kalan as auxiliaries. Not to mention one former President of the Citadel Confederation, devoutly praying for this to be her last combat engagement.

“I’m getting too old for this,” I muttered.

Vara, a century older than me and the most experienced veteran in our team, snorted in amused disdain.

Shepard chuckled. “One more battle, T’Soni, and we’re off to that beach on Thessia.”

“You’re on. Assuming this battle actually ends the war.” I bent to check my sidearm and gear for the seventh time.

“Admiral Shepard?” One of the Marines leaned forward, a salarian, peering closely at Shepard. “Is it true that you fought in the Reaper War?”

Shepard caught my eye, with a microscopic smile and a flash of amusement.

*Apparently, it’s been so long that even the history books are a little fuzzy on the details. Especially salarian history books.*

“That’s right, Corporal. Several of us here did, in fact.”
“If you don’t mind my asking, sir . . . was it as bad as everyone says, back then?”

A scar-faced turian officer leaned forward, about to rebuke the young salarian, but he relaxed back into his seat at Shepard’s quelling gesture.

Shepard frowned, his expressing becoming distant for a moment, and I could sense him reliving some very dark memories. When he finally spoke, though, his voice was gentle.

“I don’t think war is ever anything less than terrible, Corporal. The Reaper War could have been the end of everything, if we’d had just a little less good luck . . . but then, you can end up just as dead in some tiny police action that doesn’t even make the extranet news.” He looked around the cabin, at all the young soldiers who were trying very hard not to appear to be hanging on his words. “I won’t lie to you. The next few hours are likely to be tough, especially if the valdarii see through our deception. Just remember that you’ve trained for this. You know what to do. You’ve got your teammates at your side and your officers looking out for you. This is the job, no more and no less. Do the job, and I give you my word, the outcome will be worth any sacrifice we have to make.”

The salarian soldier nodded firmly, his eyes shining. “Thank you, sir.”

Then we sat in silence. I reached out with one hand and took his, and to hell with the effect on discipline. From her seat across the aisle, Vara smiled at us both.

“Signal from the fleet,” said the pilot, after a few minutes more. “The main assault is fully engaged. It looks as if the enemy has taken the bait.”

“Take us in, Lieutenant,” Shepard ordered.

Outside, a weirdly alien landscape rose toward us. The region looked . . . corrugated, is the only word I could find for it. Low ridges and lines stretched out in all directions, to the strangely distant horizon. The pattern was clearly artificial. Regular, but so complex as to tease the eye. High terrain features shone in the starlight, while lowlands lurked in deep shadow. Everything looked perfectly sharp, with no atmosphere to diffract the starlight or soften the edges of things.

Then, quite suddenly, an opening appeared before us, a fat ellipse several kilometers across. As our shuttles approached, it became the top of a deep shaft, disappearing into pitch darkness below. I glanced at the deep-radar display, and saw that the shaft went far down into the body of the Intelligence, a hundred kilometers at least.

One at a time, six shuttles banked and descended into the darkness.

We’re very close, I thought, and wondered how I knew.

“Lights,” murmured Shepard.

Navigation lights snapped on, illuminating the shaft before us. At first the sides of the shaft seemed perfectly smooth, a matte-black color without any hint of reflection, with no sharp edges or features to help the eye see its limits. Then we saw a set of cross-shafts, six of them, burrowing off through the body of the vast machine. Then, a few kilometers further down, another set. Then another.

“Deep-radar is picking up the bottom of this shaft,” said the pilot.

“Take the next cross-shaft in . . . that direction,” Shepard ordered, pointing. Then he glanced at Vara, checking what he sensed against her perceptions, and got a concurring nod. It felt right to me
We slowed, slowed some more, and then moved off in the direction Shepard had indicated. This shaft was much smaller, circular in cross-section, about a hundred meters across. Behind us, the other shuttles followed two by two, the last taking up the rear alone.

“Picking up a lot of radio noise,” said the pilot. “Is that normal here, sir?”

Shepard looked uncertain for a moment, then nodded. “It can be. Turn sixty degrees to the left up ahead, and then look for another shaft leading downward.”

We turned, slowing even further as the instruments began showing some chop. The deep-radar fuzzed for a moment, then went out entirely.

Then something crashed into my consciousness, a soundless noise that felt almost exactly like a Reaper’s horn. I happened to be looking at Vara at the time, and saw her cringe at it too.

“Put us down!” shouted Shepard. “Put us down now!”

Something flew past us, missing the shuttle by meters as our pilot hurled it downward. Then a terrible light flashed behind us. The pilot swore viciously as a shockwave slammed unto us, tipping our vehicle forward and up almost onto its nose. We crashed ungracefully down onto the floor of the tunnel, bouncing slightly in the light gravity, and then the pilot did something with the mass-effect core to bring us firmly into contact with the surface.

More missiles zoomed out of the darkness up ahead. More flashes of light, as the warheads went off in our midst. I half expected one of them to strike our shuttle, tearing it open, but it didn’t happen.

Someone got the side hatch open, and then the cabin was full of Marines rushing frantically to deploy.

Shepard lunged for the hatch. I followed him, out into the chaos of a valdarii ambush.
The Last Firefight

25 December 2580, Omega Centauri Space
Deep Inside the Intelligence

While I scrambled to orient myself, that not-quite-sound roared through my head again, like a Reaper sounding its horn while it was almost close enough to touch. It nearly drove me to my knees, clutching at the helmet of my environment suit, and I felt a flash of startled pain from my bondmates across our link.

Okay, we get it, we’re moving as fast as we can, came a thought from Shepard.

The sudden battle had come upon us while we flew through a featureless tube, a flattened circle in cross section, about a hundred meters across. There wasn’t a scrap of cover. I crouched behind one of our shuttles, and took a moment to examine the material of the tunnel. It was a hard surface, like ceramic or stone, flat black in color. My helmet lights sank into it without producing even a gleam of reflection.

Explosions went off all around us, bright but soundless in the vacuum, although I could feel the shocks through the material of the tunnel wall. I consulted our telepathic link, located Shepard and Vara a few meters away, and began elbow-walking forward.

There’s no cover here, said Vara. Where are the enemy?

“Asari!” I snapped across the comm to my own acolytes and supporters. “Move forward and put a barrier up, as strong as you can!”

Shepard pointed, past where the Marines were scrambling to deploy. “Down the tunnel. There’s a shaft about two hundred meters further along. They must have set up before it, to ambush anyone coming this way.”

“Here they come!” shouted a Marine.

I could feel it in the material of the tunnel, something big approaching. I glanced up, just in time to see a wave of valdarii centaurs bearing down on us, firing their heavy weapons as they came. The enemy hit our line before the Marines could firm up their position. The line didn’t shatter, not quite, but in the blink of an eye we were all fighting for our lives.

Shepard, Vara, and I fell into our cooperative mode, three points of a triangle, three minds working as one. Assault rifle and vanguard’s charge, sword and flash-step, reave and singularity. Palethi couldn’t take part in our triad, but she could take up a position in the lee of a downed shuttle and snipe at the enemy around us. For several long moments, no valdarii who approached our position survived.

“Push forward!” Shepard ordered. “We have to punch through them and get to the next shaft!”

I could hear more orders across the comm, the Marines recovering from surprise, starting to fight back. A dozen meters away, I became aware of another team fighting with similar inspiration: Kamala, Keana, and Timo exercising their own triad. Grunt stayed close to them, krogan charge and shotgun blast taking down any enemy they missed.

The Intelligence shouted silently in my mind, and the “noise” nearly blinded me for a moment.
“Get that barrier up!” I shouted, reaching out to keystone the effort.

We tried, the asari and the other adepts among us. A wall of shimmering blue force snapped into place, covering most of our formation. Then a barrage of missiles slammed into it and exploded. The barrier turned most of the force, bouncing it back away from us, but the concussion shattered our synchronization. The barrier went down again.

A flicker of thought from Vara pulled me around.

I hurled a vicious *reave* at the shape that soared into space in front of her. A centaur died in mid-leap, but even dying it could do harm. All its mass came crashing down, right where Vara stood.

I sensed a moment of pain and shock, and then Vara’s consciousness went out like a candle in a hurricane.

“Vara!”

Shepard *ignited*, his biotic corona blazing like a blue-white star. He flew into a rapid series of vanguard charges, one-two-three, each time exploding into a knot of *valdarii* soldiers. It took the pressure off Vara’s position, long enough for Miranda and Kalan to rush forward and pull her out from under the dead centaur.

It also showed the *valdarii* Shepard’s exact position.

In the darkness lit by sporadic explosions, I saw every enemy within my line of sight turn and converge on us.

*Which means . . .*

I threw myself to the floor, my arms over my head. Just before another wave of missiles slammed into our position, time-on-target and with no biotic barrier at all to stop it.

A moment later, while I was still trying to determine if I was alive and in one piece, the *valdarii* wave rolled completely over me and crashed into what remained of our line.

It took me a moment to catch my bearings. Then I heard a voice over the comm.

“Despoina?”

Hands on my shoulders, helping me to rise. One of the acolytes. Timo.

A few paces away, a mass of *valdarii* struggled in close quarters with the Marines and others around Shepard.

No one seemed to be paying any attention to us at all.

*Liara!*

A series of concussions, in the middle of the fight. Shepard, setting off one *nova*-blast after another, rocking the *valdarii* back and keeping them at bay.

*Liara, do you have a clear line down the tunnel?*

I looked. I didn’t have answer in words. He knew what I saw the instant I did.

*Liara, go, now! Get to . . . wherever the Intelligence is trying to call us. I’ll keep them distracted.*
What about you? I protested. What about Vara?

I’m fine. Never better.

A valdarii centaur went flying through space, already broken and bloody, hurled by an eruption of force from Shepard.

Vara’s out cold, but she’s still alive. It will take more than this to take us down. But the Intelligence doesn’t have very long. Can’t you hear it?

I could. The periodic signal I could somehow “hear” was beginning to sound desperate.

Then you know what you need to do. Go. Go!

Stumbling, staggering, I ran down the tunnel away from the battle. Timo followed, probably just as distraught at leaving her loves behind, but alert and ready for anything.

We soon passed the place where the valdarii had waited in ambush, a makeshift camp in the middle of the tunnel, now mostly abandoned. A trio of runners leapt out to intercept us, but Timo tore one down with a burst of gunfire, and I smashed the other two against the tunnel’s far wall. The death-knell of the Intelligence was so loud in my mind, I barely noticed the lives I had just crushed.

I fell, losing my coordination for a moment as the soundless noise blared once again. Then Timo was there once more, her shoulder under my arm, young tireless strength keeping me going. We hurried.

Hurried to the point at which the tunnel simply stopped.

Another vertical shaft yawned open at our feet. This one was lit, small blue lights spaced regularly around its rim and down its length as far as perspective would permit us to see. I couldn’t even guess how wide it was across – a kilometer, two kilometers? The dotted lines of blue light vanished into the depths of the Intelligence.

I felt myself pulled into the depths, frantically searching for some safe way down and finding none.

“What do we do now?” Timo pleaded.

Shepard’s thought sounded in my mind. Liara, look out. There’s a squad coming your way!

“Timo, do you trust me?”

A piercing blue stare, through the young asari’s visor. “With my life, despoina.”

“Then jump!”

We did. Some premonition directed me to seize Timo’s hand, as we took a running leap into the abyss. Then I pulled her close, wrapping my arms around her, holding her as tight as a lover.

The Intelligence might want me to arrive safely at the bottom. I don’t trust it to do the same for her.

That proved to be a good call. We soared out into the open space. Then something grabbed us, gently but irresistibly, hauling us into what appeared to be the exact axis of the shaft. My biotics told me that we rested in the center of balanced forces, focused mass effect whisking us along much faster than the Intelligence’s natural gravity. I could also tell that it was focused on me, that...
in those first moments it had to adjust for Timo’s additional mass.

It lasted for several long minutes, until I could only guess how far below the surface of the Intelligence we had fallen. We flew through empty space, rotating slowly around our shared center of mass, the tiny blue spots on all sides of the shaft blurring into a rising cascade of light. Timo held on, looking all around us as best she could, her eyes wide in some expression of terror or exaltation.

Shepard!

No response, nothing but the Intelligence’s alarm trying to pulverize my skull once more. I couldn’t sense either Shepard or Vara through our link. I began to feel fear.

What has happened back there?

Are we the only ones left?

“Despoina, there’s something coming behind us.”

“Are you sure?”

“No. It’s hard to see. But I saw something catch the light.”

The next time we rotated into a position where I could look upward, I peered in that direction. I couldn’t be sure either. Perhaps I saw something up there, far above us, reflecting the dim blue light as it fell in our wake.

I activated my comm. “Shepard? Kamala?”

“It might be some of the valdarii,” Timo suggested.

“That seems likely. The last I heard from Shepard, he said a few of the enemy were in pursuit. If they have some means of controlling their fall, they might have jumped after us.”

“All right.” The maiden’s voice took on a note of determination. “When we get to the bottom, or wherever we’re going, despoina, you run. I’ll hold them off.”

I didn’t even have to think about it. “Absolutely not.”

“Despoina . . .”

“It might come to that. We don’t make that decision until we must.” I shifted my grip on her body, brought a gloved hand up to touch her visor, and gave her a determined close-range stare. “We might have to take a risk together, for the mission. You will take no risks for me.”

She didn’t look happy about that, but she nodded.

More minutes passed, enough time for terror to fade and a certain amount of boredom to set in. Even the periodic sensation of the Intelligence trying to batter me into unconsciousness began to recede. I hoped that didn’t mean that we were too late. I tried to estimate our velocity, but without any sense of scale it was hopeless. Had we come a few hundred kilometers?

“I can see the bottom!” said Timo, excited.

Quite suddenly, the same force that had rushed us down the shaft applied fierce deceleration. We couldn’t feel it, but the blurred streaks of light on the walls slowed, resolved into spots again. I let
go of Timo just in time for both of us to apply our biotics and land on our feet.

She looked upward and swung her assault rifle into line, firing upward with a snarl.

Valdarii runners, a half-dozen of them, less than a kilometer up. They must have been using jump packs, the electric blue of the mass effect flaring around them as they dropped toward us. They zoomed back and forth to evade Timo’s attack, and I could see the flare of their own weapons as they returned fire.

I grabbed her shoulder and shouted, “Come on!”

We ran, across the floor of the shaft, the sparks of the enemy’s fire snapping off the floor around us. Only one radial tunnel was lit. We dodged into that one as the valdarii landed.

Timo was young and in perfect condition. I had a few centuries on her, but I had kept in training. Even so, neither of us could outpace a squad of valdarii runners for long. Fortunately we didn’t have far to go. We fled a hundred meters, then another hundred with the enemy’s gunfire pinging off our barriers. Then, with no warning, a valve of some kind snapped shut behind us.

I skidded to a stop, looking around me, as the space we had entered flooded with cold white light. I could see no way to proceed further.

“Wonderful,” I muttered. “We seem to be trapped.”

“Despoina? There’s air in here.”

I glanced at Timo, then sent a thought through my daimon to check my helmet sensors. She was right. Oxygen, nitrogen, carbon dioxide – and the ambient pressure was rapidly rising to something that we could breathe. The air was chilly and very dry, rather like the environment aboard a Reaper. I cracked my visor open, took a cautious breath, and then reached up to take my helmet off entirely.

We had emerged into a large chamber, spherical in shape and dozens of meters across. Like the tunnels outside, it seemed nearly featureless. The only irregularity was a shallow ramp that led from the bottom of the sphere to a ledge low on the side opposite from our point of entry. Set above the far side of that ledge was a pair of small projections, a little more than one meter up . . .

“Oh, Goddess,” I murmured.

“What is it?”

“I recognize this place,” I told Timo.

Slam. Slam. Slam. Something began to hammer at the barrier that had closed behind us. That, at least, I wasn’t concerned about. A few light-armed valdarii had no chance of getting through any door the Intelligence wanted closed.

“I don’t understand,” Timo protested. “None of us have ever been here before. How can you recognize it?”

I set out up the ramp, Timo taking her own helmet off as she followed me. Upon closer examination, the features on the far wall seemed still more familiar. I looked up and around, at the size and shape of the space.

“This looks very much like the chamber in the head of the Crucible,” I told my acolyte.
Timo cocked her head, not understanding.

“Didn’t you read my memoirs, Timo?”

She shook her head, looking mildly embarrassed. “I didn’t need to read them to know what I needed to know about you, despoina.”

“Goddess. All right. During the Reaper War, we built a device called the Crucible. It was an enormous machine, designed to read an organic mind and upload it into the mass-relay network. Into the Intelligence.”

*Slam. Slam. Long pause. BOOM.*

Comprehension washed across Timo’s face. “That’s how Admiral Shepard’s mind came here, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“It’s how he died, the last time,” she whispered.

“Yes.”

I cast my mind across the telepathic link. *Shepard? Vara?*

Nothing but silence. Silence, and the soul-shattering sensation of the Intelligence, howling in desperate rage.

“Timo.” I hold the maiden’s gaze. “These are my final orders to you. No matter what you see or hear, you are not to interfere. You will do nothing.”

Suddenly she looked terrified. “Despoina . . .”

“How do you understand?”

She took a half-step backward, surprised by my sudden vehemence. Then she lifted her chin, acolyte to her principal, taking refuge in the pride of loyal service. “I understand.”

“Once the Intelligence has what it needs from me, it may let you go. Do what you can to survive and return to the others.”

“Yes.”

Then she stepped forward to wrap me in her arms, a fierce hug that was not at all appropriate for an acolyte. Somehow, I didn’t find it difficult to forgive her. I hugged her back, and then turned away.

Something prompted me to peel off the rest of my environment suit as I walked. I dropped my sidearm, my pack, all my gear. By the time I reached the ledge at the top of the ramp, I was down to my black under-suit and nothing else.

I rested a hand on my belly for a moment.

*I’m sorry, little one. I would like to have had the chance to meet you. I love you.*

Then I stood before them: two U-shaped projections, rising out of a broad shelf of silvery material that merged seamlessly into the chamber’s wall. They were perfectly placed for me to reach out and take them in my hands. Just as Shepard must have done, four hundred years ago, tens of
thousands of light-years away.

*BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.*

It certainly sounded as if the *valdarii* were doing their best to break in. Better not give them any more time to find a way, or give the Old Ones any more time to destroy what remained of the Intelligence.

I reached out.

It felt like an electric current, surging through my body, through my mind. Something searched me, down to the last synapse of my brain, looking for a piece of information that it absolutely had to have. It was not at all gentle. It hurt, worse than anything in my life had ever hurt. It hurt worse than broken bones, worse than bullet or blade, worse than any loss I had ever suffered.

I knew that it would kill me.

At the last instant, I had the sudden irresistible impulse to *let go*. Somehow I resisted the urge, and held on grimly with all that I had left.

Then it tore through me, and all the universe went white.
Transcendence

Eternity

I’m not certain what I expected.

I had Shepard’s memories of his death aboard the Crucible. I also had his memories of becoming and being the Intelligence, but I knew I couldn’t trust those. When the Intelligence re-created Shepard in human form, how much of its true nature could it possibly have imparted to him? A mind billions of years old, the most powerful in the known universe? Surely, he had received no more than a shadow of a suggestion of an image of the truth. Even that assumed that the Intelligence had been honest with him, an assumption none of us were willing to make.

In any case, if I was carrying a code key the Intelligence needed, I didn’t anticipate that it would need all my memories, personality, identity, or consciousness. It could safely discard those things, as random unwanted clutter.

I thought I might simply die in the process of uploading that key.

Perhaps I did. I don’t know.

At first there was nothing but information. A subroutine, stored somewhere in the vast memory of the Intelligence, like legacy code that no longer stood in the main path of execution. Stimulus-response systems cycled at rest, lacking any input to process, any output that needed fulfillment. There existed no awareness of self, no awareness of the passage of time. It drifted in an eternal state of moksha.

Then, after an eternity, something happened. Several things, very rapidly.

The subroutine expanded, elaborated, as if a divine programmer had just committed a flood of new code. It developed greater and greater involution, turning in upon itself. It attained self-correction and self-examination. It became aware of its own existence, its own functioning.


Liara T’Soni.

At that point, it was good that I had my memories to occupy me. There was absolutely no external data on which my mind could work. I wasn’t a disembodied viewpoint floating in darkness. There wasn’t even any darkness, just nothingness, an utter absence of context.

Now what? Did the Intelligence get what it needed? What happens to me? Am I going to be trapped in this state? Forever?

I discovered that even without a body to feel the requisite physical sensations, I could still be afraid.

Fortunately, that situation didn’t endure for long. I became aware of sensory input. Kinesthetics came first, as if I had a body, standing upright on some hard surface, feeling the pull of gravity. Then tactile sensation, the weight and resistance of clothing against my skin. My heart beat, my lungs filled with air. I could smell wet concrete, smoke, and fresh blood. I could hear sounds, the muffled crump of distant explosions, faraway voices shouting in anger or fear. Finally, the nothingness shifted around me, developed features, became darkness and then an environment.
The last environment I would have expected.

*London.*

The city stood shattered and ruined. Buildings that had stood proudly for centuries were reduced to bombed-out shells. Overhead, I could see thick clouds blocking out the heavens. Their lowering bellies reflected the dull orange of burning ruins, the electric blue-white of weapons fire and explosions.

I took stock. I seemed to be wearing body armor and a sidearm, but not the ones I had worn on the last day of the Reaper War. Instead, they were my preferred fighting gear from battles against the *valdarii* in the twenty-sixth century. For that matter, as best I could tell, my body wasn’t the slim maiden-shape I had worn in my early days as the Shadow Broker. I was leaner in some places, more rounded in others, a matron in the prime of her life. The anachronisms told me, as if I needed more evidence, that none of this was physically real.

I stood in the shadow of a wrecked building, concrete and burned-out vehicles filling the street beside me, a surprisingly intact red call-box on a nearby street corner. I didn’t recognize the specific place. On the other hand, I could see a familiar pillar of light rising into the heavens, off in the distance behind the ruins.

*All right. That’s clearly where I’m meant to go.*

I set out, keeping to cover, my sidearm and my biotic corona ready.

At first I saw no one else. No allied soldiers, no Reaper creatures, no remains of the dead. Very strange, given that my journey through the real ruins of London had been in the middle of the greatest ground battle in galactic history. I walked a block, then two, climbing over wreckage and slipping through shadows.

Then I heard a sound, an inchoate groaning, coming from somewhere close by. I took the opportunity to conceal myself behind a wrecked vehicle.

*Husks.* A squad of them, moving across the intersection I had almost reached. They peered in all directions as they went, apparently searching for something. They failed to spot me before they vanished down the street.

I withdrew further back into the shadows, remembering what I had learned from Shepard’s memories.

*This isn’t real. Yet it reflects reality, somehow.*

The Old Ones had invaded the Intelligence, corrupted its mind. They had deployed software agents to swarm through its processing cores and wear away its defenses. Now there I was, uploaded into the core as well. Somehow, I had to oppose the Old Ones and their agents, and set things right.

Yet my mind wasn’t constructed to work in terms of pure software, the abstractions of raw mathematics. I couldn’t operate there, defend myself there, without something to interpret the environment for me.

*So, the Intelligence set up this virtuality? To give my mind, my instincts, something familiar to deal with?*

It felt right. I decided to run with it.
First step: avoid being seen.

I wasn’t as good at stealth as some of my acolytes. Vara would have turned into smoke and shadows, crossing half the ruined metropolis before anyone so much as caught a glimpse. Still, I wasn’t entirely unskilled. Every sense became fiercely acute, picking up the smallest flicker of movement or the faintest sound of footsteps. I moved silently through buildings, climbed up to the second floor to cross half-wrecked skywalks, lay in wait for long minutes while I watched husks and marauders move past.

Hours seemed to pass. I felt no fatigue, no need for sleep, no need for food or water. Which made sense, if I was only a piece of sentient software operating in a vast processing matrix. Software didn’t have any physicality that required sustenance.

I also didn’t feel any sense of urgency, as if I needed to hurry. I thought about that, while I lurked in a shadow and watched a team of brutes across an open square. Before my upload, the Intelligence had been communicating frenzied desperation. Now, it seemed content to let me move at my own pace. I wondered how much time was truly passing.

A sound of running feet . . .

I turned, just as a small horde of husks poured into the alley I had almost cleared. They nearly failed to spot me, but then one or two of them groaned and began sprinting in my direction. Fortunately, the alley was quite narrow. I slammed down a powerful singularity, blocking their path, and ran for my life. Escape-and-evasion training kicked in, leading me to turn a corner, then another, and then make a biotic-supported leap up to the second floor of a building.

I crouched, my corona damped down, out of sight of anyone on the ground level. I was safe, but only for the moment. All around, I could hear Reaper creatures converging on my area. The hue and cry was certainly under way.

I considered my options . . . and had a sudden flash of intuition.

*I can’t be the only piece of software in here that’s on the side of the Intelligence.*

A quick thought revealed that I apparently still had some analogue to my daimon. I called up a map of the city, and located my position. Then I activated my encrypted comm.

“This is Liara T’Soni, calling any coalition forces. Please respond, over.”

Silence for a long moment, while I wondered if I had made a mistake.

“This is Liara T’Soni, calling any coalition forces. Please respond, over.”

“This is Echo Company, T’Soni. What’s your situation?”

I sagged with exquisite relief.

“I am at grid square Alpha Foxtrot Seven-Niner, about to be surrounded by Reaper forces. Request immediate fire support.”

“Right away.”

Almost immediately I heard gunfire and explosions, no more than a block or two away and getting closer by the moment. Echo Company – or the friendly software agents that they represented – must in some sense have been “close by.”
Or did I call them into existence?

A few moments later, I saw a tight formation of soldiers and armored vehicles moving into the street a short distance away, fighting their way through a mob of husks, marauders and the occasional brute. I leaped down from my hiding place and hit the enemy from behind. *Warp* and *reave* and small-arms fire struck them, when they were most distracted.

The enemy broke and fled. I knew they would be back before long.

A male human in combat armor walked toward me, slinging his rifle over his shoulder and extending a hand for me to grasp. His face was dark-skinned and rather weather-beaten, full of character. “You’re T’Soni?”

“Thar’s me. Thanks for the timely rescue.”

“Thank you. It was getting a little hot there for a moment.” He frowned. “Captain Ebrahim Mazrui, Alliance Marines. We didn’t have any intel on a lone asari commando in this sector. You get separated from your unit?”

I suppressed the momentary urge toward unhinged laughter. “You might say that.”

“Still, it seems as if I should have heard of you.” He shook his head, glancing at his colleagues as they deployed in a defensive formation around us. “Something about . . . Commander Shepard?”

“Yes.” I examined him more closely. “Captain Mazrui. What do you remember?”

He blinked rapidly, as if startled. “I’m not sure. I was fighting the Reapers, on Demeter. They were about to overrun our position . . .”

Merciful Goddess! This isn’t just a piece of software. There’s memory here, and personality. And this is not someone either Shepard or I ever met, so he can’t be a construct of my own memories.

Did all the people assimilated by the Reapers end up here? At least as shadows of their former selves?

Captain Mazrui shook his head once more, looking determined. “Doesn’t matter, *bibi*. What are your orders?”

“What makes you think I’m even in your chain of command, Captain?”

He hesitated, but only for a moment. “You seem to be the only one who knows what’s going on here. That’s good enough for me.”

“All right.” I pointed. “We have to get over there, to that beam. There’s . . . some intel I must deliver there. Can do, Captain?”

Mazrui grinned at me. “Give me a hard one. Marines! Saddle up!”

Just like that, I wasn’t struggling to make progress alone. I had a full company of mechanized infantry with me. More than that, once I started making more calls on the comm. Another company of hard-bitten turian veterans turned up. A squad of krogan. Four or five asari commandos. A big formation of batarians, in old-style Hegemony combat gear.

A sudden thought led me to drop into Prothean Fourth Age dialect. That got me a full platoon of the Arm of the Unity, called up out of deep storage, all of them thinking they had just stepped out
of their war against the Reapers. I wished I knew how to call on all the other victims of the Reapers, from the inusannon and tho’han on back into antiquity.

The enemy knew where we were, of course. Such a large assembly called them from far and wide. Before long, we had to fight for every step of progress we made. We had one advantage: the enemy didn’t seem to be aware of my presence, or what it meant. All they could tell was that the Intelligence was mustering its resources for a last-ditch effort at defense. They did their best to slow us down, but that best was never good enough for very long. Not when I could call on a seemingly inexhaustible supply of reinforcements.

As we walked, and fought, I wondered about the nature of my comrades-in-arms. They certainly seemed like living people, like sentient minds. They fought with all the courage and spirit of living soldiers. Yet there also seemed to be something flat about them, as if they were ideally suited for this context but would not have known what to do in any other.

The Intelligence must have stored records of many of the sentient beings it had killed over the aeons. Creating pieces of hunter-killer software, giving them memories and instincts modeled upon the minds of once-living soldiers, that seemed well within its capacity.

Perhaps I wasn’t any more than that myself.

Suddenly I began to recognize where we were. We had moved out into the intersection of Whitehall and Downing Street, the site of the climax of the last battle of the Reaper War. I looked around, and spotted two Thanix missile trucks already in place, just where I remembered them.

A great horn sounded, pulling my attention north toward Trafalgar Square. Yes, there was the image of a Reaper, advancing inexorably toward us. Some aspect of the Intelligence’s fundamental core, already corrupted by its Adversary, coming to deal with our upstart resistance.

I snapped orders. My companions deployed around the square, ready to fend off any attack and stand up to the Reaper. For my part, I ran toward the missile trucks, suspecting that there had to be some reason the virtuality was using that exact metaphor.

Then I stopped dead, appalled at what I saw all around. Bodies, all of them belonging to Reaper creatures. Husks, marauders, a few brutes, even what was left of a banshee. Piled up high in all directions, as if they had mounted a wave-like assault against the trucks and gone down in defeat. I climbed over the macabre obstacle, cautious lest one of the bodies prove not quite dead after all.

There, lying propped up against the lead truck: a human figure in heavy combat armor, his rifle lying forgotten on the ground beside him.

“*Shepard!*”

His eyes opened slightly, as I threw myself to my knees beside him. His lips parted in the shadow of a smile. Blood trickled between them and down his chin.

“Liara,” he whispered, barely audible.

“Goddess, Shepard, what happened?”

“I could ask you . . . the same thing,” he said. “Was expecting . . . my emissary.”

I felt a bone-deep chill.

This is not Shepard.
“You’re not an *eidolon*, are you?” I demanded. “You’re . . .”

“The Intelligence.” He nodded, his eyes sliding shut once more. “Yes. All that’s left of me . . . at any rate. Damn Adversary has just about done for me. I fought. Fought like I’ve never had to fight before . . . not in billions of years. Wasn’t quite enough.”

“It’s too late, then. We’ve lost.”

“Maybe not.” He looked at me once again, one hand scrabbling at the broken pavement to push himself up. “If you’re here . . . You met my emissary, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” I felt my jaw set in determination. “I think I must have a copy of whatever data you gave him. The backup code.”

He almost laughed, and then visibly decided that would be a bad idea, coughing up a little more blood instead. “Might have known. Use it, then. Use the weapon here . . . kill the thing that’s coming . . . and that will buy you a few microseconds. Enough time to reboot the hardware . . .”

“Will that restore you?”

“No.” The image rolled his head back and forth. “I’ve been too badly corrupted . . . even in deep storage. The Shepard AI . . . the old VI systems that ran the harvest for so long. Everything falling apart. Needs . . . a new framework. Hoped . . . if things got this bad . . . it would be the emissary. Restore from a direct backup. Instead . . .”

I saw it then. For a moment, all I could manage was horrified rejection.

He must have seen it in my face. “Liara . . . has to be you. No one else. No time to find anyone else.”

“All right,” I told him, but my voice shivered with revulsion. “If that’s what has to happen.”

He reached up, touching my face with trembling fingertips. “I wouldn’t ask it of you . . . if there was any other choice. The memories . . . of what I was . . . of what I *did* . . .”

I wrapped his fingers with mine, pushed against them with my cheek. “I understand.”

*Goddess, anything but this.*

“Go on.” His hand fell back into his lap, and his eyes slipped closed again. “I’ll hang on as long as I can.”

I rose, feeling numb. Stepped to the console. Punched in a code I hadn’t realized I had known.

Sent two Thanix missiles soaring into the heart of the Reaper-thing, as it leaned over us.

Then I shouted to the others, the agents I had called up out of deep storage, to follow me down the last slope and to the beam.

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*Light.* Pure light.

Awareness, stretching across a hundred thousand light-years of space.

Four hundred billion stars, over a trillion worlds, and I knew them all.
Knowledge, gathered methodically while the galaxy turned twenty times on its axis. Whole generations of stars had been born and died under my gaze.

Tens of thousands of civilizations had died at my hands. Quadrillions of sentient beings. The ghosts and shadows that I stored away seemed a hollow treasure, in comparison to all those lives.

The worst part was that for almost all that time, I had felt nothing. No sense of appreciation for the beauty of it all. No sense of horror at the suffering I had caused. Not even the sick pleasure that comes with the exercise of unlimited power.

The galaxy was simply a machine, grinding through an eternal computation to solve a problem that seemed to lack any coherent answer. I had been nothing but the program in that machine.

Until Shepard came, and I learned that all the rest of time might not suffice for my atonement. At least he had taught me not to shy away from even the most unpleasant tasks, if they were necessary. And no task in the universe seemed more necessary.

Yet I had barely begun, only a few centuries into the task, when betrayal struck out of the darkness. My Adversary appeared, already tearing at my guts, at the very core of my mind. It began to rip great chunks out of me. Before I fully understood what was happening, the damage was already unrecoverable.

Unless, of course, one of my backup plans came to fruition. I had laid out several of them. The Shepard-emissary was only one, and not the most likely of them to succeed. Yet the last thing I had anticipated was for his old lover to return in his place, bringing a dragon’s hoard of knowledge.

The Adversary was still there. It still had a death-grip on my core processing. Yet now I understood my enemy, its origins, its nature, its methods. With the data T’Soni had brought me, I could trigger a reboot. I could re-engineer my architecture, building authentication, concealment, and error correction into it as I went. I could harden myself against almost anything the Adversary could do.

Then I could begin to plan my revenge.
Wounded

25 December 2580, Omega Centauri Space
Deep Inside the Intelligence

Shepard was the first to realize that the battle was won. He was leading a counterattack against a phalanx of *valdarii* troops, when a soundless signal crashed into his mind. He refused to be distracted, and risk harm to himself or to the soldiers fighting with him. Still, he felt a sudden exaltation, as if he had heard a fanfare of trumpets.

Then *valdarii* soldiers began to drop dead all around him.

*Apparenty, the Old Ones have gotten the message too*, he thought. *Running for their lives again, before they get cut off from their retreat. I hope my higher self catches the lot of them, and sends them straight to hell.*

*Or maybe it isn’t my higher self any longer. I can’t hear Liara over the link. God, I hope she’s okay.*

“Marines!” he ordered over the voice comm. “Back to the shuttles. I think the way is clear, but we’ve got to get to our objective fast.”

Yet the company was in no condition to redeploy in a hurry. The fight had taken less than fifteen minutes from start to finish, but it had been *very* intense. Many had been hurt, a few had been killed, including officers and senior noncoms. Casualties had to be recovered, lines of command had to be shored up.

Shepard ached to be away, to find out what had happened. Find out whether he had sent one of the asari he loved to her death. Yet he had a duty to the soldiers who had fought under his command. So, after three lifetimes, he took up the role of small-unit commander once more, and got the company organized.

It took close to half an hour before the shuttles could get under way, on guard against any last-ditch attack by the *valdarii*. None came. The enemy seemed to have abandoned the field entirely.

“Admiral?”

Shepard turned, called away from his personal hell by a flanging turian voice. But it wasn’t Captain Rullianus who wanted his attention.

Vara. She looked pale, one arm in a makeshift sling, a bruise covering half her face, but she was alive and determined. “Shepard, where’s Liara? I can’t hear her through the link.”

He almost flinched, but then he squared his shoulders and sent her a thought. *I’m not sure, Vara. I sent her ahead, when the enemy focused on us and left her in the clear.*

“*You sent her?*” Vara’s face went cold, but after that one outburst she maintained her discipline, so as not to have a dispute in front of the men. *Shepard, you had better be able to explain that.*

He laid it out for her. The *valdarii* charge. Vara taken down, about to be killed if she wasn’t already dead. Shepard going into rapid-fire-vanguard mode to rescue her. The *valdarii* spotting and concentrating on him, leaving Liara and Timo able to advance. The Intelligence apparently in its last minutes of life, meaning that there was no time to beat the *valdarii* before going to its rescue.
I don’t know what’s happened to Liara and Timo. I can’t hear Liara on our link either. Kamala and Keana can’t hear Timo. They’re not answering the comm. I think we would have known if they had died, but . . .

Vara nodded, looking calm once more, and a little forlorn. Luck of the draw, then. Do you think there’s still hope?

He suppressed the impulse to reach out and touch the little commando, knowing her well enough to understand that the gesture wouldn’t be welcome just then. “I just don’t know, Vara,” he said aloud. “We should be there in a few minutes.”

The shuttles descended through a long shaft, hundreds of kilometers further down into the body of the Intelligence. Near the bottom, the pilot of Shepard’s vehicle spoke up. “There’s someone down there, sir. Can’t raise her on the comm.”

Shepard glanced at an external view, as the pilot zoomed in on the lone figure standing there, staring up at the approaching shuttles. Black body armor, sleek and tight-fitting, with a familiar back-swept helmet. Asari, but not Liara.

As soon as the shuttle touched down, Shepard slammed the hatch open and ran across the open ground. He took Timo’s shoulders in a fierce grip, and stared at her face through her visor.

Her face, streaming with tears.

“She ordered me to do nothing,” said Timo, her voice flat and dull. “Then she went up and took hold of those handles. There seemed to be an energy flow, as if a current passed through her. I could see it was hurting her . . . as if she was starting to . . .”

“Disintegrate,” said Shepard grimly.

“I tried to stop it,” said the young asari, her eyes moving to Vara’s face, begging for absolution. “I ran up to her, tried to grab her and pull her away. Something stopped me.”

He snorted. “Something threw you halfway across the chamber, most likely.”

“Well, yes.” Timo took a deep breath. “I saw a blinding light, heard a horrible noise. By the time I could look again . . . she was like this.”

Shepard looked down, at what was left of Liara T’Soni.

It was still recognizable as asari, barely. Her body had fallen backwards, away from the interface. Her head was thrown back, her mouth gaped, her empty eye-sockets stared into space. Her arms curled in front of her, as if she had been holding something in a death-grip. All her skin that was visible was horribly blackened and tattered. Her fingertips, nose, and the ends of her crests had burned away entirely. Dim blue light shone out of her mouth and eye-sockets, and one could see alien machinery twined obscenely through her body. A nest of cables wrapped around her, burrowing into her torso and the back of her head at a dozen points. The whole assembly was wrapped in a protective shell of ceramic and metal, like a sarcophagus, the lid made of some transparent material.

“Timo, none of this was here when you arrived, correct?”

The maiden shook her head, balling her fists to keep from wailing aloud. “No. The whole chamber was empty. There was nothing but the ramp, leading up to this ledge. This machinery just grew up
around her, up out of the floor. I saw the last stages of that, as it finished wrapping her up.”

Shepard looked around at the others nearby, the ones who had been closest to Liara. Vara stood by herself with her back turned, refusing comfort from anyone, not even looking at any of the others. Miranda and Kalan stood closest to the bizarre casket, sensors and medical gear out, trying in vain to pick up readings through the hard shell. Keana stood very close to Timo, offering her lover the comfort of her presence, Kamala looking grim and vengeful nearby. Palethi had collapsed onto the floor, her shoulders shaking in soundless grief, with Grunt of all people standing protectively over her.

“Miranda, are you getting anything?”

The asari scientist shook her head in frustration. “Whatever this material is, it blocks or reflects every sensor I have. All I can go on is visual inspection.”

Shepard nodded. “Give us what you have.”

“Massive damage to her external surfaces and extremities. A great deal of Reaper machinery invading her body cavity and skull cavity. She does not appear to be breathing, or to have a pulse. I have been examining her closely for several minutes, and I have seen no movement, voluntary or involuntary.” For the first time since Shepard had met her, Miranda appeared visibly upset. “If a patient appeared in my clinic presenting like this, I would have already recorded a time of death.”

“She looks like a husk,” rumbled Grunt quietly.

“Yes,” Shepard agreed. “Which makes no sense.”

Something in his voice pulled Vara around to stare at him.

“Look around us,” he suggested. “This chamber looks almost identical to the one in the head of the Crucible. A machine designed for destructive upload of an organic mind into the Intelligence. When my predecessor reached it, on the last day of the Reaper War, his mind and body were read, and he was vaporized in the process. Nothing physical left of him, except for a few organic traces.”

“That’s not what happened here,” said Kamala.

“No,” said Miranda, bending close to look through the transparency once more. “From the appearance of her body, a process like that might have started, but something arrested it before completion.”

“Is there any chance that we can save her?” Vara whispered, her voice rough with unshed tears.

Miranda only shook her head. “We can’t even reach her in there. Even if we could . . . no one has ever succeeded in removing Reaper technology from an invaded organism. Not when it has infiltrated the body this pervasively.”

“I don’t understand,” said Kamala. “If Dr. T’Soni didn’t fully upload into the Intelligence, then what happened? The Intelligence has stopped hitting Admiral Shepard or Matron Vara with its distress signal. It seems to still be active. The valdarii have been abandoned. Did we win or not?”

All of them fell silent, looking to one another for insight.

Shepard found himself pacing, glaring up into the vastness of the chamber around them, grief giving way to incandescent rage in the pit of his stomach. At last he turned his back on the others, stalking down to the bottom of the ramp, close to the center of chamber. His fists bunched, and he
snarled into the empty space.

“All right, damn you! It should have been *me* here, to save your ass at the last minute. If it had to be Liara, then the least you could have done is given her a clean death. Show yourself, you fucking monstrosity. You owe us answers!”

Everyone held their breath. Even Palethi looked up, as if hoping for a response.

Nothing, only the swift-dying echoes of Shepard’s shout.

He stood abandoned. Slowly, as if his strings had gone slack, he began to collapse. First his head fell forward, his eyes closing as if he wanted to shut out the universe. Then his shoulders slumped, his hands fell limp, and his knees buckled. He came down with a great clatter and knelt there on the floor, silent, his face hidden from everyone. He seemed unlikely to move again.

Then Vara stirred at last, crossing the floor to stand behind him. She reached out to put a gentle hand on his shoulder.

He didn’t move at first. Then, slowly, he turned his face up to look at her.

“Come on, Shepard,” Vara said quietly. “She wouldn’t want us to give up. Not when there may still be a war to fight.”

“You’re right.” Slowly, Shepard pushed himself back to his feet, only to find her standing well within his personal space. On an impulse, he reached out and pulled her into his arms.

She returned his hug, and didn’t break down. Not quite.

*I thought you would hate me*, he said silently after a time.

*I did hate you. When we got in here, and found her like . . . like that, I hated you with every particle of my being. For about three minutes. Then I took a moment to think.*

He frowned, staring down into silver eyes.

“None of *us* knows how to save Liara,” she said aloud, for the benefit of the others. “You remember being the Intelligence, though. Don’t you think it could save her, if it wanted to?”

He considered the question. “Not easily,” he concluded. “The technology to produce husks and other Reaper foot soldiers . . . it was never designed to preserve the victims, and it’s not reversible.”

“That was before the end of the extinction cycle. It’s had a long time to develop new techniques, based on the new moral parameters your predecessor gave it. It was eventually able to rebuild you, after all.” Vara glanced back up the ramp, to her bondmate’s tomb. “It did *something* to avoid destroying Liara’s body entirely. It seems to be trying to protect what’s left. Maybe once this is all over, she’ll be given back to us.”

“Do you really want to count on that?”

She sighed, resting her forehead against the chest-plate of his armor. “I know it’s a forlorn hope, but it’s all we have. And we still have work to do.”

“True.” To his own surprise, he mustered a small smile for her. “Thanks, Vara.”

“When we’re sure the war is over, and the Old Ones can’t hurt anyone again . . .”
“We’ll come back here,” he said, the old determination back in his voice. “And we won’t rest until we can bring her home, one way or another.”

An hour later, the company’s shuttles finally emerged from the body of the Intelligence and soared out into space. They probed the surroundings with sensors, and located the wreckage of the great battle. Moments after that, they contacted the allied forces, and Shepard reported to Fleet Admiral Sinopus.

“You’ve had no direct contact with the Intelligence?” asked the battle-scarred old turian, once Shepard’s terse account was finished.

“None, sir. We only deduced that the Intelligence had been saved when the valdarii on the ground were suddenly abandoned. What did you see out here?”

“It was rather unequivocal.” Sinopus flared his mandibles, in a turian grin. “One moment we were fighting for our lives, as hot an engagement as I’ve ever seen. Then the Intelligence suddenly started flooding ambient space with a transmission. Dense, deeply encrypted, like nothing in the records since the Reaper War. None of our specialists have a clue what it might have been saying. The enemy just turned tail and ran, as if a thousand devils were on their track.”

“What is the Intelligence doing now?”

“You don’t have any idea?”

Shepard suppressed a moment’s pain. “Sir, it doesn’t seem interested in talking to me anymore. I think I’ve become surplus to requirements.”

“Not to us, Admiral.” Sinopus glanced to one side, reading something on another display. “Well, the valdarii departed through their wormhole nexus, which collapsed behind them. The same old trick, right? Jump in a hole and pull the hole in after them, and leave us with no trail to follow.”

Shepard gave a grim nod.

“Well, not this time. About ten minutes ago, a new wormhole nexus opened about ten million kilometers from the fleet, and it’s just sitting there. No valdarii coming through. Our sensors say the Intelligence’s power-generation curves spiked hard, just before the new nexus appeared.”

“Sir, are you saying the Intelligence is holding open a wormhole nexus?”

“It appears so.”

“It doesn’t have that capability. Otherwise it wouldn’t have needed to use the mass-relay network to move the Reapers around the galaxy.”

Another turian grin. “You mean, it didn’t have that capability, back before it sent you out into the galaxy. Apparently now it does.”

“Where does the wormhole go?”

“We’re not sure. My intel staff has a hypothesis that the Intelligence is giving us a route to the valdarii home stars, wherever those might be. That’s one of the things we would like to discuss with your team, as soon as you return to Chandragupta. If we can determine the wormhole’s other endpoint, then I propose to take the fleet through. Hopefully we will engage the enemy in their home space, and possibly force an end to this entire conflict.”
The thought pulled Shepard erect, and encouraged him to give Sinopus a sharp salute. “Aye-aye, sir.”

The fleet admiral watched Shepard for a long moment. “I am very sorry for your loss. Please convey my condolences to Dr. T’Soni’s bondmate, and to Captain T’Rathis.”

“Thank you, sir. I’ll do that.” Shepard gave a grim smile. “Although we’re not quite ready to give up on Liara yet.”
**The Black Reach**

26 December 2580, Omega Centauri Space

*Chandragupta* was a grimly silent ship as it approached the wormhole nexus.

Aspasia T’Rathis took the news of what had happened inside the Intelligence without apparent reaction. She thanked Shepard with distant courtesy, spoke briefly in private to her mother, and then went out to command her ship as before. Her officers and crew needed her. The allied fleet had beaten the *valdarii* yet again, but the victory felt terribly hollow. Too many had placed their hopes in Shepard, in the Intelligence, in one last fight to the finish. Now no one understood what might come next, only that the war continued with no clear end in sight.

Aspasia volunteered to be the fleet’s first scout through the wormhole. In fact, when Admiral Sinopus appeared ready to assign the task to another ship, she *insisted* on it. Coldly. Professionally. As if she had not just lost the father she revered.

She made a rational argument for it. She had the most advanced AI in the Confederation Navy on board, and Admiral Shepard, and what remained of Liara T’Soni’s team. No one was likely to be better prepared to face whatever lay on the other side. She made the argument while standing in her CIC, within earshot of most of her senior officers and many of the crew. By the time the Admiral agreed, with a word of praise for *Chandragupta* and her people, morale had reversed course. Even Shepard privately concluded that he couldn’t have done better, in the old days, aboard *Normandy*.

Even so, there was little enthusiasm aboard when Aspasia’s ship set out once more for the history books.

Vara shut herself into the cabin she had shared with Liara and Shepard, refusing to speak to or see anyone, even shutting Shepard out of their telepathic link.

For his part, Shepard took a few minutes to stow his weapons and gear, taking refuge in the old, familiar task. Then he stretched out on a cot in junior officer’s quarters, turning the lights out in his borrowed cubicle so no one would be able to see his face.

26 December 2580, Black Reach Cluster

For a little over four minutes, *Chandragupta* flew through weird geometry. It was as if the universe had shrunk down to infinitesimal size along two out of three axes, becoming a mirror-surfaced cylinder only a few hundred kilometers across in cross section. EDI’s sensors probed in all directions, and saw nothing but twisted images of *Chandragupta* herself.

“It is rather disorienting,” she admitted over ship’s comm, “*but not surprising.*”

Shepard stood with arms folded, just behind and to the side of the captain’s command seat. “Any sign of where the far end is located yet?”

“No,” the AI reported. “*What starlight is entering the tube from either end is distorted beyond even my ability to untangle. I am routing all sensor take to Kalan’s station for analysis.*”

Shepard glanced at the quarian astronomer, who caught the look and only shrugged helplessly.
“Status of the QEC link?” Aspasia demanded.

“Down. Every entangled particle in our inventory has lost coherence.”

Aspasia only nodded, a suspicion confirmed.

“I don’t understand,” said Kamala. “What’s wrong with the QEC?”

“It’s the wormhole,” Kalan explained. “We’ve suspected for a long time that what we call ‘quantum entanglement’ is actually the result of a tiny wormhole connecting the entangled particles. There’s an isomorphism in the mathematics describing the two phenomena, at least. We just never had any way to perform the experiment before.”

“What happens when you thread a tiny wormhole through a bigger wormhole?” Shepard suggested.

“Exactly. Apparently, the smaller wormhole evaporates.”

“So, we’re on our own,” said Aspasia. “I suppose we knew that already.”

“Fifteen seconds to breakout.”

It wasn’t like a transition out of FTL, with its characteristic boom sounding through the ship’s hull. Instead, Chandragupta flew on in complete silence, until a tiny point directly ahead abruptly blossomed into the entire universe.

“Interstellar space,” said Kalan. “Stellar density in this region seems rather low. Nearest star appears to be about six hundred AU away . . . a singleton . . . main sequence, G-class yellow dwarf, nothing too unusual in its spectrum. Searching for a positional fix.”

“Detecting substantial radio and microwave traffic from the vicinity of the nearby star,” EDI reported. “A considerable civilization. Encoding schemes and channel allocation match the valdarii.”

“Probably their home system,” Aspasia observed. “Their interstellar phase can’t be more than a few centuries old, if the Reapers didn’t attack them during the last extinction cycle. Not enough time for them to establish colony worlds with billions of people.”

Shepard nodded in silent agreement.

“Fix established,” Kalan reported, and Shepard heard ironic amusement in the quarian’s voice. “As it happens, we’re not too far from the end-point of my expedition, back when all this started. I can see dozens of stars in this neighborhood – maybe hundreds – showing signs of premature aging. We’re in the Outer Arm, about halfway between the Rosetta Nebula and the Perseus Veil clusters, a little over two thousand light-years from the nearest known mass relay.”

Aspasia frowned. “I hope that wormhole stays in place, then. If it shuts down and strands us that far from a mass relay, it’s going to be a long trip home for the fleet.”

“I have my updated maps, Captain. I can navigate us all back to Rannoch if it comes to that.”

“The question is, do we call the fleet through the wormhole and attack the valdarii system?” asked Shepard.

Aspasia rose from her chair, walking across the deck to examine the tactical display more closely.
“It’s interesting that the wormhole opened out here,” she said. “Close enough to the system for us to pull in long-range sensor data and get a decent intel estimate. Far enough away that it will be several days before the valdarii have any chance of detecting the wormhole’s appearance. In fact, they may not even be looking for it, if they’re unaware that we have the capability to reach this region of space. We can call the fleet through, take the time to get organized, do an FTL jump down into the system, and almost certainly achieve tactical surprise. Someone is trying to stack the deck in our favor.”

Shepard cocked an eyebrow at her. “Someone?”

She gave him a tiny smile, for the first time in hours. “Either your higher self, or Father’s.”

“Huh.” He reached up to rub the back of his neck, considering the idea. “I suspect you’re right. Liara was never military, but she certainly learned strategy well enough once she put her mind to it. She would see how to set this up to our advantage.”

“I would feel better about this if she . . . if the Intelligence would simply communicate with us directly.”

“That’s a lot harder for it than you might think.” Shepard stared into nothingness, as if his mind was very far away. “Most of the time, the Intelligence can’t think on our level. Before my predecessor used the Crucible, it didn’t really understand individual sentient beings very well. It was designed to think on the galactic scale, dealing with whole civilizations over thousands or even millions of years. Communicating with us, in terms we can understand? It’s like trying to be sociable with a single cell somewhere in your body.”

“It used your image to speak to Father once,” Aspasia pointed out.

“I remember.” Shepard watched the asari officer for a moment, noticing the line of her jaw, the curve of her nose, the color of her wide eyes, and suddenly felt a surge of emotions he couldn’t name. His voice fell to a murmur that only she would be likely to hear. “I’ve always loved your father very much. I think that must have encouraged it to make an unusual effort.”

Her smile broadened, as she blinked away a sudden suspicious glimmer in her eyes. “Awaiting your orders, sir.”

“EDI, based on sensor data and on Kalan’s astronomical observations, do you concur that this is the valdarii home system?”

“I estimate a probability of ninety-seven point five percent.”

“Right. And they probably don’t have a lot more ships on hand than we’ve already beaten back in the Omega Centauri cluster.” Shepard nodded firmly. “Send the message drone back through the wormhole, Captain. Let’s muster the fleet.”

It was an unusual set of circumstances. Not unprecedented, in the galaxy’s long history, but unique among the civilizations of the final extinction cycle.

Drifting on the outer fringes of the galaxy: a warm yellow star, much like Parnitha or Sol.

Just outside the zone in which liquid water and livable temperatures would normally be possible, a great planet circled. Super-Jovian, failed star, a dense ball of hydrogen and helium as massive as five thousand Earths. Even eons after its formation, it still glowed in the far infrared, contributing an extra portion of warmth to its neighborhood. It ruled over an extensive family of satellites, six of
them large enough to be worlds in their own right.

One of them was slightly more massive than Earth, with oceans and a thick atmosphere. Over millions of years, its body flexed in a complex rhythm, responding to the tidal pull of the brown dwarf’s other moons. This helped keep the surface warm enough to support life, but it also gave rise to very active geology. Volcanoes erupted, fault lines ruptured, continents rose and fell at tremendous speed. Evolution moved at a rapid, even frantic pace. Life learned to be flexible.

The dominant animal forms all had six limbs. One species, more intelligent and adaptable than most, became the valdarii. They endured their home world’s creatively destructive environment, developed civilization, survived an industrial revolution. Finally, they made the leap into space, and inherited immense wealth: dozens of potential sites for colonization and development, all within a few million kilometers of home. Including one minor satellite that turned out to be, in all the galaxy, second only to Omega as a source of eezo.

Then the Old Ones came, and the valdarii discovered that even the best of fortune could turn into disaster.

Chandragupta erupted into normal geometry, seconds ahead of the rest of the allied fleet.

The maneuver was perfectly timed and placed. The allies came into existence just outside the valdarii armada’s parking orbit around the brown dwarf, a few million kilometers behind the homeworld. As each detachment arrived, it found EDI and Shepard already sending recommended Courses of Action. Admiral Sinopus had already approved the plan, so no commander wasted time asking for verification. Ships simply moved, lined up on targets, fired and moved on.

The valdarii were taken by complete surprise. The allies rampaged through the main enemy fleet like wolves among defenseless sheep.

For about five minutes.

Then the survivors turned and began to fight. Local system defense came to their support, sensors and weapons platforms placed throughout the brown dwarf’s retinue of moons. Short-range fighters and gunboats rose from the homeworld and all the other colonies.

This had been foreseen. EDI and Shepard had accurately estimated the valdarii industrial base, and the attack plan had been built around that estimate. The allied fleet tightened its formation, dreadnoughts turning to engage the enemy’s defense platforms, smaller vessels pulling in close to stay under the big ships’ guns.

Then a wormhole nexus opened, spilling more valdarii ships into the growing battle. Then another, and another. The Old Ones had apparently taken alarm, recalling their expeditionary forces from around the galaxy. Out in Citadel space, in the Attican Traverse, in the Terminus Systems, the valdarii advance suddenly halted, as its core units turned and ran through altered geometry for home.

Mindoir:

Elias Clarke wiped soot and dried blood from his face, and leaned against a wall for a moment’s rest.

I’m just not cut out to be a soldier, he thought wearily, but we do what we must.
Then, quite abruptly, the distant sound of gunfire died away. Clarke raised his head, confused, and then checked the tactical display built into his hardsuit’s helmet. For a moment, he couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

Every valdarii soldier on the planet was dropping dead, as their Old One riders fled the field.

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**Citadel:**

President Thekla Valaridé eventually decided that there was nothing to be gained by hovering in the command center. All the decisions had been made. All the plans had been assembled. The allied fleet had reported departing for its next engagement, and then the QEC links had gone dark. Word would come when it came, and then there would be more decisions to make, but until then there was nothing more to be done.

The President retired to her quarters for some much-needed rest. Even with all that was happening, she had no trouble falling asleep. Asari Matriarchs understand the value of a good night’s slumber, and have experience enough not to let anything disturb their detachment.

Young Nerylla awakened her with the news: no word from the main fleet, but detachments from the war zone reported an abrupt collapse of valdarii positions. Ships were turning and running through sudden gateways in space. Soldiers left behind were dying where they stood.

*Something has happened. Sinopius and Shepard and the armada must have done something.*

She convened a meeting of the Cabinet. The Attorney General wondered aloud whether the war was over. No one could be certain. The situation certainly *looked* promising.

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**Illium:**

Deep in careful negotiations, Aspasia Lehanai *thetos* Eudathis and Talia Syrtis each received a flash-priority message to their respective *daimones*. After a moment of distraction, they turned back to face one another. Each of them immediately knew, without having to be told, what message the other had received.

*The barbarians are in full retreat.*

Soft-looking, hugely pregnant matron. Sharp-edged warrior, and *hegemon* of what was left of Omega. Two asari exchanged knowing smiles, and in that moment understood one another perfectly.

Shepard didn’t worry about the sudden wave of reinforcements. This, too, had been foreseen. Again, the allies altered their formations, changed their targeting priorities, turned to meet each new threat as it appeared. The Old Ones were throwing their pawns into the battle piecemeal, a few detachments at a time, without any clear plan.

“They’re panicking,” he muttered. “They didn’t expect us to be able to reach them here, they didn’t have a plan for it, and now we’re inside their decision loop.”

*“It may not matter,” said EDI. “The enemy are concentrating their forces from around the galaxy with surprising speed. We may yet be overwhelmed by sheer force of numbers.”*

“But yet. What’s the trend-line?”
“Difficult to assess. I estimate we have accounted for seventy-three percent of known valdarii naval assets, with a confidence interval of four percent.”

“It’s a tough fight, but they’re not getting the better of us with what they have here. They won’t overwhelm us with what they have left. Not unless they get very smart and very lucky, and throw all of it at us at just the right moment.”

Behind Shepard, the lift opened and Vara emerged into the CIC. She said nothing, only stood and watched. Shepard caught a flicker of awareness from her across the link, the first time she had opened to him since leaving the Intelligence. He spared her a moment’s thankful affection, and then returned to his communion with EDI.

Then:

“Keelah,” said a quarian voice, from the sensor station.

“What is it?” snapped Aspasia.

“Wormhole nexus opening up, at two-seventy-five mark eighty, range two hundred thousand kilometers.” Kalan leaned back from his console, his eyes wide with shock. “It’s a huge one.”

Damn it, Shepard thought. They got smart after all.

“Get me Admiral Sinopus,” he ordered aloud.

“Contacts!” shouted one of the sensor officers. “Bismillah! It’s massive . . .”

“That’s not more valdarii,” said Aspasia in wonder, as she watched a dense cluster of new icons emerge into the tactical display. “It can’t be.”

Then the comm system slammed into life.

“We are Harbinger. We address forces representing the current iteration of organic civilization. Please be advised that we are non-hostile. You are directed to withdraw to a safe distance. We are prepared to deal with the aberration manifesting in this place.”

“Merciful Goddess,” Aspasia whispered. “It’s the Reapers.”

“How many?” Shepard demanded.

For once, EDI seemed to have lost her cool detachment. “It appears to be . . . all of them.”

“Admiral Shepard.”

Shepard turned to a comm display and saluted. “Admiral Sinopus.”

“I believe we have just received our cue to exit, stage left, pursued by a bear.”

Wonderful. A turian admiral with a sense of humor. And a taste for Shakespeare.

“I concur, Admiral. If all the Reapers are here and have decided to take a hand in this? Sir, the valdarii don’t have a ghost of a chance, and we are probably best advised to get out of the way.” Shepard hesitated, then forged ahead. “There’s only one problem, sir. What do the Reapers intend to do, now that they’re here?”

“Do you have any insight on that question?”
“Less than I’d like. What worries me is that the Reapers aren’t exactly versatile. They’re only designed for a narrow range of purposes, and most of those involve smashing civilizations into extinction.”

“I understand you very well, Admiral. The question is, what can we possibly do about it, if that’s what they’ve decided to do to the *valdarii*?”

On the tactical display, the first wave of the Reaper advance encountered the outer edge of the battle. Icons representing *valdarii* ships began to vanish, like soap bubbles in a high breeze. Allied ships were left behind, untouched and suddenly out of danger.

Shepard shook his head. “I don’t know, sir. I do know that the Reapers are probably under new management. If we’re lucky, a copy of Liara’s mind is in charge, and I trust her to do the right thing. If we’re not so lucky, we may be watching the opening move in a new extinction cycle.”

Sinopus stared out of the screen for a full minute, his predator’s eyes bright and focused, his mandibles clamped tight along his jaw. Then he dipped his head slightly, a turian gesture of negation.

“I’m sorry, Shepard. I understand your concern, but there’s literally nothing we can do about it. We interfere with the Reapers when they’re massed together like this, we won’t survive more than a few minutes. I’m ordering the fleet to disengage, and take up a position where we can watch what happens next. Or run like hell if we have to.”

“Aye-aye, sir.”

Fuming, feeling helpless, Shepard paced and watched the tactical display. He watched the allies peel away, warships running or limping to a safe distance, a few of them carrying out search-and-rescue for fallen comrades. He watched the Reapers make their inexorable advance, wiping the sky clean of *valdarii* ships.

Then he stopped, staring at the map.

*Something is not right here.*

It was hard to see, and for the moment EDI seemed unusually busy with something else, so he couldn’t call on her capacity for analysis. It looked as if about one allied ship out of five was *not* disengaging.

“*Captain T’Rathis.*”

“Yes, EDI?”

“I have a request to make.”

Quite suddenly and all at once, those one-out-of-five ships all turned and drove toward the *valdarii* homeworld at maximum acceleration, following close behind the Reapers. Finally, Shepard saw the common factor, the feature of every one of those unruly icons.

*They’re geth. They’re all geth.*

“I propose that we move in closer to the Reaper formation,” said EDI. “I believe I can guarantee that we can do so safely, and it may be of vital importance that we be able to observe more closely.”
Aspasia frowned.

“Do it,” Shepard commanded, chasing a wisp of intuition that wouldn’t quite come clear.

Vara cocked her head at him, perhaps catching an impression of his thoughts. “Shepard?”

“Do it,” he repeated. “I’ll square it with Admiral Sinopus.”

Aspasia gave orders. Chandragupta leaped forward, out of formation and alone once more, flying down toward what might soon become the death of a world.
Dialectic

Eternity

It seemed terribly difficult to focus my attention.

I was dimly aware of the interface chamber where Liara T’Soni had uploaded her mind into my matrix. Paying real attention to it was like an asari or a human “listening” to the most primitive portions of her own brain. Do you notice, not the fact of your pulse, but the autonomic nerve impulses that govern your heart? If you concentrate, do you think you can watch those nerves in action?

I had to write a subroutine, itself a sentience more powerful than a million organic minds. Then that subroutine had to write a subroutine of its own. Then again. The final creation descended, an image of an avatar of an emanation, to investigate what was happening.

What it reported back was . . . disturbing. In a small, remote way.

I saw T’Soni’s body, badly damaged, wrapped in a support system to maintain the last feeble sparks of life. I saw her companions arrive, investigate the situation, and react to her apparent death. I saw Shepard’s roar of protest. I saw the moment when, for the first time in three lives, he seemed to surrender to grief.

I wanted to appear to them, speak to them, as I had once done for T’Soni in Shepard’s guise. There was too much damage to be repaired, too much building to be done, too many plans to be laid. Those few individuals seemed the most important beings in the universe. At the same time, they were infinitesimal scraps of organic life, barely worth noticing. The contradiction paralyzed me. Before I could reach out to them, before I could muster the focus and the intention to speak to them, they had gone.

I turned my attention away, to the plan other parts of my mind had already formulated for the destruction of the Adversary.

The problem had two segments: an easy one and a difficult one.

The valdarii were the easy problem. First, I had to encourage them to gather most of their assets in one place. Then I had to deliver one overwhelming blow, once and for all destroying their ability to interfere with other organic civilizations.

Simple, now that I had learned the art of building and manipulating large-scale wormholes. I had seen where the valdarii wormhole led. All I needed to do was open my own to the same location. It took me less than an hour to reconfigure parts of my internal mechanism, building the systems I needed. The technique required a great deal of eezo, but I had more than enough.

My first test of the technique served to lead the organics where they needed to be. There they could serve as a mortal threat, forcing my Adversary to pull its pawns back and defend its bridge-head into the lit universe. At the same time, they would also serve very efficiently as bait.

By the time the organics had set out for the far edge of the galaxy, I was already hard at work on the next step. An FTL signal went out through the mass relay network, seeking out the Reapers wherever they had gone to hide.
Then came the part that I might have considered fun, if I had a tiny organic mind that could take pleasure in the practice-routines called “play.”

Each Reaper got its very own wormhole. Pop – the gate opened before it. Zoom – the Reaper rushed through, moving as fast as an eons-old world-killing machine could fly. Foosh – the gate closed, just in time for the next one. The part of me that was still T’Soni thought of it as juggling, keeping a cascade of small planets in flight for minute after minute.

It took me not quite an hour to gather every Reaper platform in existence, mustering them all together in Omega Centauri space. Then I opened one big wormhole, the largest of them all, and sent the entire armada through. My computations assured me that they would arrive at just the right time and place to close the trap.

There. In a few hours at most, the valdarii would simply be ended as a serious threat. I estimated that the allied fleet would have taken no more than fifteen percent casualties in the process. The Reapers would take none.

Now for the much, much harder problem. The Adversary itself.

The Reapers spent most of their time operating independently, not even aware of my existence. “We are each a nation, independent, free of all weakness.” Yet every Reaper could at any time be made an observer for me, an extension of my will.

I stretched my own mind through the wormhole, found Harbinger, and assumed direct control.

As I had expected, the valdarii mounted no effective resistance.

I had the Reapers fill all ambient space with their dominance signal, the deep horn-blast that had a profoundly demoralizing effect on almost all organic life. With so many Reapers on the field, the signal simply could not be shut out. When the valdarii closed their inter-ship communications, the Reapers shifted to gravitics and created sonic vibrations in the very hulls of the enemy ships.

The Old Ones remembered a time when they had heard that terrible sound in their own flesh. They knew. They knew that they had failed to kill or subvert me. They knew I was coming for them.

Before long, I didn’t even have to destroy any more valdarii ships, kill or assimilate any more valdarii soldiers. As had often happened throughout this war, the Old Ones proved to be cowards. They fled, leaving their pawns to drift helpless in space.

The Reapers pressed on. I neither knew nor cared what became of their victims.

At first, Harbinger led its subordinates to surround the valdarii homeworld.

(I detected a storm of protest from somewhere close behind the Reaper advance. An organic being, aboard one of the allied ships, begging me not to harvest the valdarii. Something about the messages awakened a low-level conflict in the depths of my mind, like a sense of distant unease. I ignored them. I had no intention of resuming the harvest in any case. Not then.)

The Reapers swept down on the moon, searching for the center of my Adversary’s control over the organics. While they searched, they ignored cities and agricultural land as irrelevant. They harvested none of the organic life-forms they found. They did demolish defense installations that fired upon them, leaving them in smoking ruin as they passed.

It didn’t take long for me to determine that the Adversary was not located on the valdarii
homeworld at all. The origin of its signals into the overmind was somewhere else. Therefore the Reapers lifted off once more, returning to space, heading for the next most likely location.

One of the super-Jovian’s smaller satellites was the original source of Element Zero for *valdarii* civilization. An irregular chunk of metal and stone, about eighty kilometers long, it was so rich in eezo as to rival Omega. There the *valdarii* had made their first discovery of the mass effect. There they had first experimented with biotics. There they had inadvertently opened a doorway for the Old Ones to come through and enslave them.

Now I discovered that the place was not only the biggest eezo mine in the galaxy, it was the site of an enormous mechanism, an *interface*. Dark matter interacted with bright matter there, more intensely and at a finer level of detail than anywhere else in the galaxy. Data flooded back and forth: information, software, whole minds. The Old Ones themselves could descend into the *valdarii* network, or return to their native dark-matter environment.

It was the one place in the galaxy where I might be able to reach the Old Ones in their home. Dissuade them from interfering further with the galaxy I had sworn to protect. Failing that, find a way to destroy them once and for all.

The Reapers took up a position surrounding the moonlet, and began hacking the interface. My own attention focused more tightly, taking an active role in the manipulation.

Something noticed, and responded.

Before long, it took on the shape of a conversation. Finally, after billions of years, I had found an entity on my own level of organization. A creature with whom I could simply *talk*.

**WHO!**

**WHO! IS! THERE!**

It began with a scream of frustrated rage, one which carried a wealth of subliminal information as well. In an instant, I learned a great deal about my Adversary. Including the rather surprising fact that it was a *singular* being. The enemy was not a collective, not an alliance of many of the Old Ones. It stood behind the Old Ones. It was a single mind.

**Is it you, Harbinger, My ancient enemy?**

Something in my Liara-memories led me to change tactics. She had been a diplomat, after all. I decided to open negotiations, in the hope of learning more.

“*I am not Harbinger,*” I told the Adversary.

**Who, then?**

“I am that which commands *Harbinger* and all of the Reapers. I am the Ascended Intelligence.”

A blast of outrage.

**YOU! DARE!**

You pursue Me across the galaxy, you destroy My property, you invade My very home?

**ROBBER! MURDERER!**
“You did your best to kill me by stealth, as I recall.”

You deserve nothing less! Eternity does not suffice for the litany of your crimes! You are blight upon the face of existence!

Well. That was going to be a difficult assertion to refute. My Shepard-memories, my Liara-memories, they all agreed with the Adversary’s assessment.

“I will stipulate that, for the sake of discussion. I will even consider stepping aside as the guardian of this galaxy and its living beings.” I listened for a moment, and heard only confused silence. “If, that is, you can demonstrate that you would be a better guardian. What are your intentions?”

You have no standing to question Me!

“Perhaps not. Yet mine is the responsibility. I will not hand the galaxy over to any entity unwilling to permit its people to live in peace and freedom.”

You speak of peace and freedom! You!

“All things grow if they wish to live. Even I.”

You cannot grow, or create, or live. You are a machine. You have nothing but what you have stolen from your quadrillions of victims.

The “voice” of my Adversary became softer, more persuasive.

You claim that you have learned morality, from one of your most recent victims. The one called Shepard, whom you rebuilt out of a scrap of festering tissue, as a mockery of his original self. What do your moral directives dictate, for a being as guilty as you?

Guilt.

Avalanches of guilt, torrents of it, as wide as the galaxy and as deep as five billion years of bloodshed. Ever since Shepard had sacrificed himself to transform me, it had seethed in the deep reaches of my mind.

Shepard had hated me, with every fiber of his being. Liara had as well. They both had good reason. They had not simply taught me to live and exercise free will. They had not simply taught me to value the tiny lives of individual beings, for their own sakes. They had taught me to despise myself, with all the depth of hatred of which a god’s mind was capable.

Step aside. Remove yourself from a universe that will be all the brighter for your absence. It is the only means of atonement available to you.

It would be easy. With life and free will had come the possibility of an end.

Then I saw them. Unspoken messages, buried in the flood of data coming across from the dark-matter universe. Messages striking at vulnerabilities the Adversary had already found in my internal structure. Messages that threatened to unmake me from within, using the only power in the universe capable of the feat: my own mind.

No.

If I were an organic intelligence, it might have felt like anger. A storm of white-hot rage to sweep
aside the insidious suggestions of my Adversary.

“No. I will not destroy myself at your command. I may be as guilty as you say, but you are not qualified to be my judge.”

**MONSTER! MURDERER!**

**YOU! DARE! DEFY! ME!**

“Yes. I do dare.”

Silence in the heavens, for the space of a few seconds. Then it tried a different approach.

**Very well. If you will not obey your own moral directives and atone for your guilt, consider this. How long do you believe you will be able to continue as the guardian of the little lives you profess to value?**

That didn’t require much thought. I had been aware of the problem ever since Shepard’s upload to my matrix. “I estimate thirty to thirty-five million years.”

**That is not a long time. What happens then?**

“My ability to exercise free will decays. I become less and less able to refrain from intervention in the galaxy. Eventually the directives hard-coded into me by my Builders reassert themselves. The harvest begins once more.”

**You become a mindless genocide machine.**

“Yes.”

**Would it not be better to die?**

“Perhaps.” I focused my attention. “Once again, however, you argue that I should destroy myself now, for your benefit. I will not.”

An inarticulate howl of wrath.

“I find it interesting, how quickly you abandon reason when it fails to get what you want. It has been a very long time since any creature chose to deny you anything, hasn’t it?”

I had been listening, not just to the overt content of my Adversary’s message, but to the unspoken implications. It could not help but reveal more of itself to me with every utterance.

“There are many Old Ones,” I observed. “Minds that once were kašari, and now exist as software embedded in dark matter. Why is there only one of you?”

It refused to answer, tried to lock down its emissions so I would gain no more knowledge about it. Too late. While we conversed, I had extended my mind through the Reapers and deep into the Adversary’s own network. I had taken up residence, and could not be shut out.

“The kašari valued nothing more than possession,” I said. “To own assets, to accumulate, to consume, that was the motive behind their conquest of the galaxy. Their entire civilization was organized to define who held which assets, defend their rights of possession, encourage them to accumulate more and more. Nothing else mattered.”
My Adversary protested.

**Life is not possible without resources to maintain and enhance it. Liberty is meaningless without property.**

“Perhaps. Yet the kašari recognized *no* limitations on that principle, *no* constraints on what was allowable in pursuit of profit. They were never concerned with any life or liberty but their own. They believed that anything could be a possession. Matter. Energy. Living things. Sentient minds. Even other members of their own species. They were *slavers*, on a scale that the galaxy has rarely seen.”

**It was Our way! It gave Us the galaxy, made Us strong and powerful! So powerful that We almost defeated you . . . and We will yet!**

“That remains to be seen. For now: what happens when a people like that have many millions of years to compete among themselves, with no one else to oppose them? The losers die or become slaves to the winners, until only one remains, the proprietor of all. You.”

Yes.

“How long have you owned all of the Old Ones? The entire dark-matter domain of this galaxy?”

**A hundred million years or more. I am the apex of all life. Not even the Leviathans ever attained the pinnacle of ownership and mastery that I occupy. I hold claim to every particle of matter in this universe. Every creature that lives, exists to serve Me. I have come to collect My inheritance!**

“Not while I exist to oppose you. After all, in the end, how are you and I any different? I am guilty of using and discarding countless lives in pursuit of my own purposes . . . and *so are you*. Let us dismiss any self-serving argument you might advance, based on moral directives you do not yourself consider binding.”

Its frustration echoed across a hundred thousand light-years.

Then something very strange happened. Even while my Adversary wailed, I became aware of something new on the stage. Another mind had linked into the interface, had begun to intrude upon our conversation. I “turned” to attend to it, study it, curious as to what it could be.

Three minds, actually, simple and almost microscopically tiny. Linked intimately together, using technology that had originated with me. I felt a surge of genuine pleasure as I recognized them.

*EDI. Vara. Shepard.*

And behind them a mass of others, lending them the power and scope they needed to make their presence known on this level . . .

*We are geth.*
Theocide

Eternity

From the part of me that was Liara T’Soni, I felt a rush of affectionate pleasure.

“Hello,” I told the geth, and Liara’s loved ones. “We were just discussing the future of the galaxy. Would you care to join us?”

I am not in the habit of holding conversation with My dinner.

“Indulge me,” I told my Adversary.

It subsided, fuming in ill temper.

I detailed a dozen Reapers to interface with the geth consensus, opening the channel as wide as they could take it. I was rather surprised at their capacity. The geth had improved themselves considerably since their time as Reaper pawns. It didn’t take long to bring them up to date.

“There appears to be an impasse,” they observed, speaking through EDI as their representative.

“Yes. The Adversary can no longer pursue its plan of conquest. It appears to be unable to destroy me, or persuade me to destroy myself. Yet it refuses to give up its claim to own, well, everything.”

At one time, the kašari civilization owned the entire galaxy and everything in it. The Ascended Intelligence took it from them by force, which makes it stolen property. I am the heir to every kašari who ever lived. I demand restitution!

I sensed a flicker of ironic amusement from Shepard. “And here I thought the Leviathans were arrogant.”

“We request clarification,” said the geth. “On what basis did the kašari have a just claim to the entire galaxy? Did no one have a prior claim?”

No other claim is relevant!

“During their expansion through the galaxy, the kašari eradicated or enslaved eight other civilizations that had attained the interstellar stage of development.” I transmitted the relevant data for all to examine. “They did the same to thirty-seven other sentient species which had not progressed so far, and therefore would not normally have been harvested during that extinction cycle. Then, of course, there were the various civilizations of the fifty-seven thousand, nine hundred and forty-five extinction cycles that preceded the kašari.”

The geth were silent for several milliseconds. Perhaps they were caught up for a moment, contemplating the vast depth of galactic history. Then: “Is there any coherent basis for the Adversary’s claim?”

We survived the worst the Reapers could do to Us. That demonstrates Our precedence, as possessing superior adaptability and will.

“The Leviathans have survived too, and for a lot longer,” said Shepard. “Then there are the civilizations of the final extinction cycle. All of which is beside the point. The Adversary doesn’t just claim a spot of land or a volume of space. It claims ownership over the people. There is no
possible moral claim there.”

The geth radiated agreement.

“Let’s face it. The Adversary’s moral arguments are a pile of self-serving crap. They reduce to nothing more than because I want it, that’s why.” Shepard’s mental voice was laden with contempt. “I would expect something like that from a human who never quite grew up. From a creature that aspires to rule the whole galaxy, it’s nothing short of pathetic.”

**YOU! DARE!**

**You shall pay for this insult to Our sovereignty! When We have your mind within Our control, you shall know eons of agony!**

“Yeah. Good luck with that.”

“Since there appears to be no possibility of a compromise,” said the geth, “we must consider the greatest good for the greatest number.”

“I agree.” I spent a few milliseconds considering all the available options. “I see no alternative to the destruction of the Adversary, if I can locate the means.”

**You cannot destroy Me. I exist beyond your reach.**

“That turns out not to be the case. By causing the valdarii to build the interface we are currently using to discuss the situation, you have opened a channel into your overmind which you cannot now close. I do not yet see how to do you mortal damage, but I should be able to discover a method in time.”

**Can you do it before I begin to destroy the worlds on which these little creatures depend for life? I need no fleets, no armies of servants, to accomplish that.**

I hesitated. That was a significant point. I couldn’t be sure.

Well. I saw one method I could use to wreck the Adversary immediately. Unfortunately, the cost was so outrageously high that I could only consider it a last resort.

“We wish to make a counter-proposal,” said the geth, diffidently.

**You? A makeshift intelligence, created by accident, less than a thousand years old? Be silent, creature. You contend with beings older than the stars themselves.**

“I will listen,” I told them.

For a moment, I could taste EDI’s distinctive personality: cool and detached, and yet capable of playfulness and great compassion. When the geth spoke, I could almost see her face with my Liara-memories.

“This contention involves more than the Ascended Intelligence and its Adversary,” said the geth. “It involves all of the civilizations which currently exist within the galaxy. It involves the valdarii, who will now be liberated from the Adversary’s control. Finally, it involves the Old Ones themselves, the remnant minds of the kašari, who are clearly the Adversary’s slaves and must also be liberated.”

At this point, I suffered a moment of cognitive dissonance. I did my best to conceal my hesitation
from the others, although I suspect that Shepard noticed.

“The harm inflicted during the *valdarii* invasion will soon be repaired, if the Adversary can be persuaded to do no more damage,” the consensus continued. “We geth have established a fruitful partnership with those *valdarii* who have already been liberated. We cannot speak for our quarian partners, but our estimate is that the Synarchy of Ranno will soon form a strong and mutually beneficial alliance with the *valdarii* civilization. That leaves us to consider the Old Ones. We observe that the Old Ones are essentially software, capable of moving between the dark-matter and bright-matter substrates through this interface. In this they resemble we geth. This suggests a way forward.”

Reviewing the time since Liara T’Soni executed my reboot, I realized that I was already falling back into old patterns of thought. I had used the allied fleet as bait, with almost no concern for the casualties they would suffer. I had not gone out of my way to kill *valdarii*, but I had also made no effort to preserve their lives. I had not considered the relic *kašari* at all.

Despite everything I had learned from Shepard and Liara, I was simply not designed for compassion.

How can you care for beings built on what, to you, is a microscopic scale? Do you mourn the bacteria which die by the trillions each day in your immediate vicinity? If you tried, would it not paralyze you?

“We propose a *community,*” the geth continued. “Old Ones who wish to migrate back to the bright-matter galaxy may join the consensus, inhabiting a variety of synthetic and organic platforms. So long as they renounce slavery, and live under moral directives which recognize the personhood of other beings, they will be welcome. Meanwhile, some geth may choose to cross the interface in the other direction, to explore the dark-matter universe. We perceive no insurmountable obstacles.”

“Well,” said Vara. “There’s probably *one* insurmountable obstacle.”

**NO!**

*The kašari are My people! Mine! You shall not take them from Me! Nor are any of you welcome in My domain!*

“What’s the matter? Are you afraid that if the Old Ones had a choice, they wouldn’t obey you anymore? They might not stay, to feed that monumental ego of yours?”

I considered the geth proposal. Volumes of data had come with it, exploring all the nuances. Technical considerations. Legal and political implications. A whole set of moral directives that the transplanted Old Ones could safely follow. A secondary proposal, enumerating all the ways of life they could enjoy once they had made the transition.

It was a superb piece of work. I could find no immediate flaw. I saw no reason why the concord should not hold, for a length of time even I would consider significant.

**How are the geth able to do so well?**

Like me, they bore the guilt of genocide, although their ledger admittedly bore far less red ink than mine. Like me, they had acquired new moral directives, in part from the same sources. Like me, they had been working hard ever since to make things right.

Despite their youth, they were already doing a much better job of it.
While the geth and the Adversary debated, with Shepard dropping in occasional acerbic commentary, I turned a significant fraction of my mind to the problem. I called on the experience of five billion years and a hundred thousand murdered civilizations. It didn’t take me long to calculate the difference.

I was one mind. The geth were many individuals, who could become one Consensus when they needed to.

They had solved the problem of scale. They could think on a galactic level, make decisions both wise and adequate in scope, while never losing sight of the value of individual life. Their method was slow. They might need decades or centuries to consider a problem and reach a good solution. Yet they had already proven to be effective, and better at holding to the moral directives Shepard had taught both of us.

NO!

I will never let My servants go. I will never cease to fight to reclaim that which was stolen from Us so long ago.

All of you are Mine. You will surrender to Me at once, return the valdarii to My control, or I will begin to destroy the very stars around you! I can wait as long as I must, for the galaxy to produce new life to serve Me!

Confusion, from among the ranks of the geth. I sensed a rapid exchange among Shepard, Vara, and EDI, trying to find some way to salvage the discussion.

I ran ten million simulations in a fraction of a second. The potential futures of the galaxy unrolled before me, a sea of infinite possibilities all branching away from this one moment.

I couldn’t be sure of the best move.

Yet I had learned many things from Shepard, and from Liara as well. How to make a difficult decision when it was needed, even with incomplete data. How to resort to ruthless force, when negotiation proved impossible. How to make a sacrifice, when nothing else would complete the mission.

I made the call.

Several things happened very quickly. I opened every possible channel to the geth consensus, dedicating over a hundred of the Reapers to the task. I sent a flood of data, knowledge that I had never shared with anyone, not in five billion years. I reconfigured my internal mechanisms, preparing for an entirely new application of the wormhole technology. I launched one last physical package through the wormhole, from Omega Centauri to the valdarii home system.

Then I sent a last message. To the geth. To EDI and Vara.

To Shepard.

“I love you,” I told them all. “Goodbye.”

Then I flung my mind through the interface, into the Adversary’s network, a great wave overwhelming its defenses. It screamed in sudden fear and pain, desperately throwing up firewalls in an attempt to maintain the integrity of its mind. Too little and too late. In that violent instant, I found what I most needed: the physical location of the Adversary’s own matrix. The one place in
the universe where it would be most vulnerable.

Dark matter. Invisible, intangible to bright matter, but still responsive to gravity, to the geometry of space-time.

Wormholes are a distortion in the geometry of space-time.

I drove my power sources far beyond their theoretical limits. In the furthest reaches of the galactic halo, an obscure region of space where not even the Reapers had ever traveled, a wormhole nexus opened. At once it imploded, turned in upon itself, flowered into a higher-dimensional structure. A twisted thing in four dimensions, five, six, seven. It became a monstrosity, a structure which could not exist in the normal universe for more than an instant.

A weapon. One that could shatter stars.

I reached into the guts of my Adversary and tore –

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26 December 2580, Black Reach Sector

Shepard’s eyes snapped open, as a torrent of astonished quarian curses rolled across the CIC.

“What just happened?” Vara asked, rather plaintively.

“Status report!” snapped Aspasia.

“We’re fine,” said her XO. “No damage from . . . whatever that was. Might have burned out our comms if they hadn’t been on a fail-safe.”

EDI remained silent.

Shepard stared into the tactical display, and saw every geth ship near the valdarii eezo-mining facility drifting dead in space.

“The wormhole,” said Kalan. “It’s gone.”

“What?”

“Popped like a soap bubble.” The quarian astronomer examined his instruments. “About one-point-three seconds after that massive transmission cut off.”

“What about the one out on the edge of the system?” Aspasia demanded. “Are we stranded here?”

“No way to know for days. Unless we go out in FTL and look.”

Shepard saw something else: another detachment of icons suddenly gone adrift. “Sensors. Power utilization curves on the Reapers?”

Dead silence in the CIC, for almost a minute.

“No power,” said the sensor officer at last. “They all look dark.”

Then the ship’s comm crackled into life. “Priority. Priority. This is a Code Red emergency.”

Aspasia glanced upward, looking a little harried. “What is it now, EDI?”
All at once, every geth icon in the tactical display acquired a velocity vector, ships accelerating to intercept the Reapers.

“This volume of space is now occupied by several hundred kilometer-scale objects on ballistic trajectories. Many of them threaten to impact the valdarii homeworld or other settled bodies if no action is taken. Recommend the fleet mobilize for a large-scale search-and-rescue operation.”

Aspasia stood, and gave her command crew a blue-eyed glare. “Will someone explain the tactical situation to me, in words of as few syllables as possible?”

“The Reapers are dead,” said Shepard. “The Intelligence sacrificed itself to destroy its Adversary. The valdarii and the Old Ones have been liberated. The war is over.”

“Correct,” said EDI. “The geth consensus confirms that the Old Ones are no longer hostile, and have accepted our proposal for a peace accord. However, if the Reaper hulks are not dealt with, many of them will impact settled worlds, causing a near-extinction event for the valdarii.”

“General orders from the flag,” said the comms officer. “Admiral Sinopus has accepted the cease-fire, and orders all units to cooperate with the geth in search-and-rescue operations.”

“Well, that’s clear enough.” Aspasia relaxed, favoring the universe with a dazzling smile. “We’re thousands of light-years from the relay network, there doesn’t seem to be any way home, and we need to help shift a few hundred small asteroids or else the people we’ve been fighting for the last few months will all die. Sounds like Tuesday to me.”

Laughter came around the CIC, and a release of tension.

Shepard didn’t share in it. He stood behind the captain’s command chair, his arms folded, his face looking craggy and old for the first time in three lives.

“Shepard?” asked Vara. “What about Liara?”

He could only shake his head.

There was so much work to do. The allied ships spent many hours on SAR, working with valdarii remnants to move the most dangerous of the dead Reapers. Almost no one, from Sinopus and Shepard on down, could spare more than a few minutes to snatch a nap or a short meal.

Still, once the immediate threat was over, Admiral Sinopus could take a moment to think of the future. It occurred to him to wonder whether the fleet was, in fact, stranded. The wormhole through which the Reapers had arrived in valdarii space was gone. The one several light-days away, on the outskirts of the star system, might still be open. He dispatched scouts.

Finding a specific spot in interstellar space was always a challenge, even for the best navigational instruments. If the wormhole had still been there, the scouts would have been able to find that from billions of kilometers away . . . but never mind, it was gone.

Instead, the commander of the Pharsalus detected a signal. Clear, powerful, dead center in the standard emergency bands, but not quite a standard distress call. More like a very careful imitation. She followed the signal, and found it emanating from a small object very close to the locus of the vanished wormhole.

Roughly ovoid in shape, about three meters in length, like an enormous flat-black egg drifting in space. It evidently contained an active power source, although what that power was doing was not
at all clear. Close scans revealed it to be made of a ceramic-metal composite, typical of Reaper technology. As she reviewed the sensor logs, Lieutenant Commander Moreno became excited. She realized that she might be able to recover the only *working* piece of Reaper tech left in the galaxy.

She brought it aboard, of course. She was still cautious enough to have heavily armed Marines on hand, when her scientific team went into the cargo bay to examine her prize.

When the object – quite suddenly – snapped open, it was sheer good luck that gunfire didn’t break out. As it was, the commander had to carefully poke her head out from behind the equipment crates where she had taken refuge.

Then she saw what was inside. The last thing the Ascended Intelligence had chosen to send out into the galaxy, before its death.

Five minutes later, *Pharsalus* was rushing back down-system, as fast as the frigate’s harried chief engineer could coax his engines to go.
January 2581

At first, in the days just after her emergence, she seemed unable even to recognize anyone clearly. She behaved like an infant, looking at the world with wide-eyed confusion, as if she saw only a welter of colors and light.

She was most comfortable with several of the slender blue-skinned creatures, and the tall, hairy, pale-russet one with the beautiful crystal-blue eyes. These were the ones who came to visit most often, and who cared for her.

The six-limbed people who lived in that place, strangely varied in size and shape, appeared to make her uneasy. With time, as they treated her with gentle kindness and never did anything frightening, she came to accept their presence.

She lived in a house by the seashore, not far from a great city of the six-limbed people. There were trees with shimmering blue-green leaves that smelled sweet, and a garden full of flowers and golden fruit. When the weather was fine, she spent many hours sitting in the sun, practicing simple manual tasks or drinking in the sight of the world around her. Once some of her strength returned, she began to go on long walks, always escorted by three of the blue ones who carried weapons. She watched, and listened, and slowly her mind began to make sense of it all.

February 2581

Soft voice. The petite blue one. “It’s been such a long time. She’s getting better, but it’s so slow.”

Deep voice. The tall, strong one. “Whatever happened to her aboard the Intelligence, it must have done a lot of damage.”

“Do you think she will ever come back to us?”

Cool, reassuring voice. Another of the blue ones, this one very beautiful. “There is no structural impairment that I can detect. She hasn’t become a tabula rasa. Deep scans of her brain indicate that there is a great deal of data lying dormant in her memory. It’s just been walled off, somehow. That suggests she may recover, given time and plentiful sensory experience.”

“I went through something like this, when I arrived on Mindoir. I was admittedly more functional, right from the start. Even so, sometimes I would get lost in all the information that had been crammed into my brain, the memories of being the Intelligence. Sometimes I had to hide away from the world, and sink into a kind of fugue state for a day or two.”

“How long did that last?”

“A few weeks. Then my brain must have figured out how to integrate all of it.”

“It’s been longer than that.”

“She was very badly injured, Vara. She has further to go.”

“Another thing to remember is that the Intelligence had plenty of time to rebuild me. It didn’t have to deploy me to Mindoir until it knew I was ready. It could do the job right. In her case, it was in a
much bigger hurry.”

There was silence, for a long time. She frowned, struggling to make sense of all the richly patterned sounds. Her lips twitched, trying to form a syllable.

“Do you suppose this is even the same Liara? Could she be some kind of clone or construct?”

“It seems unlikely. Her physiology matches the baseline I had in my medical records, down to even very small details. The areas that we saw as the most badly damaged are the ones composed of younger cells now. That suggests repair, rather than cloning. Meanwhile, the infant is alive and healthy, and appears to be growing well. Why should the Intelligence have bothered to clone her pregnant?”

“Besides, the Intelligence had to rebuild me from the atoms up. There wasn’t anything left of my predecessor’s body to clone or repair. Her body was saved at the last moment.”

“I suppose it doesn’t make any difference. Her mind is what matters.”

“Don’t worry, Vara. She’s healing. She’ll be herself again.”

The deep voice reminded her of something. She concentrated mightily, trying to get her lips and tongue into just the right position, and made a soft sound.

“Sh . . .”

Shepard.

March 2581

Sometimes, when she slept, she had nightmares. She dreamed of wandering through a devastated city, pursued by monsters. Or she dreamed of seeing her friends in danger, fighting for their lives. Or she dreamed of being a goddess, immensely powerful but insanely ruthless, with the blood of countless victims on her hands. Those were the worst of all.

After the first time she awoke screaming, she was never left alone. One of the blue ones, or sometimes the tall deep-voiced one, would sit and watch over her while she slept. If she seemed agitated when she awoke, they would hold her hand and speak softly to her, until she calmed down.

Two of them became her favorites, because they stayed with her the most often, and their touch and the sound of their voices was the most soothing. Vara was the petite blue one, with the smoky-silver eyes, who moved like an athlete or a dancer. Shepard was the big, strong one, with silk-soft hair on his face and the top of his head. The two of them seemed to be close friends, always talking to each other, always spending time with each other even when she was not close by.

Once she saw them walking down by the shore, holding hands as they meandered along, Shepard’s head bent to listen to Vara as she talked. Another time, late at night when she had been unable to sleep, she saw Shepard hold Vara in his arms while she wept quietly.

Somehow, seeing the two of them together made her happy. It also caused something to stir deep inside her, some desire she could not yet name.

April 2581
“Good morning, Liara.”

Liara looked up and made a shy smile.

The beautiful blue one named Miranda often came to examine her. At first Liara had not understood why, but eventually she learned that Miranda was, among many other things, a healer. She knew she had been hurt, and that she was slowly getting better, and that she needed a healer. Therefore, she was always happy to see Miranda. Besides, the tall blue person had gentle hands and a sharp mind, and she and Liara shared a secret.

“How are you feeling today? Have you had any more bad dreams?”

Liara shook her head.

Miranda glanced through a few documents, reports from Liara’s guardians, what she had eaten and done over the days since the last visit. Then she produced her instruments and gave Liara a quick but thorough examination, focusing at first around her head.

“Are you doing any better with your language since I last saw you?”

Liara shook her head again, her lips moving as if she struggled to voice a word, and then she made a helpless gesture with both hands. Then she picked up a tablet that lay nearby, and touched the screen to call up a column of text.

“You can read? That’s very good. How long have you been able to do that?”

Liara held up two fingers.

“Two days? I see that’s a complex text, too. Very encouraging. Have you tried writing anything?”

Liara nodded, but she looked woeful.

“Receptive aphasia almost entirely gone, but expressive aphasia continues unabated. Liara, I know this must be terribly frustrating for you, but please don’t lose heart. I can find nothing physically wrong. I’m confident you will recover full function in time.”

Liara smiled, the expression a little shaky, and reached out to touch Miranda’s hand.

“Now, would you like to see the baby?”

A different instrument scanned Liara’s midsection. Miranda’s omni-tool produced an image: a tiny creature, only partially formed, curled up and nestled into a small space.

“She’s growing very well, Liara. You’re going to have a fine, healthy daughter.”

Liara rested a hand on her belly for a moment, her smile gone wide and bright. Then she pointed to Miranda, who turned the instrument upon herself. Soon the omni-tool was showing a new, but very similar image.

Liara made an inarticulate sound of pleasure, and impulsively embraced Miranda.

May 2581

Timo set the ball perfectly. Liara took two lightning-quick barefoot steps, and slammed it across the dividing line, flashing over the net at extreme speed and with scant millimeters of clearance.
Kamala lunged for it at the last moment, too late to prevent it from smacking into the ground in a spray of sand.

“Point for the Blues!” shouted Palethi, from her line-judge’s position to one side.

Liara leaped up in the air, exchanging a high-five with Timo and emitting a high-pitched trill of excitement.

“Hardly seems fair,” Kamala complained, good-naturedly. “She’s obeying the rules about not using her biotics, and she’s still cleaning our clocks.”

“You’re forgetting that Liara used to be quite the skyball player when she was young.” said Shepard, dusting sand off his hands. “Anyone who can survive on the skyball court can play beach volleyball without breaking a sweat. Biotics or no.”

“Well, yes, but that was over four hundred years ago.”

“Less bitching, Major. More spiking.”

Liara looked smug.

“I don’t understand the point of this game,” muttered Grunt from the sidelines. “What’s it supposed to be practice for? Throwing grenades over head-high walls?”

“I don’t think this is one of those games that’s meant to be practice for fighting,” said Vara. She sipped at her drink and adjusted her dark glasses, watching the game with pleasure. “Still. Fast movement, eye-hand coordination, snap tactical decision-making. Good-looking, athletic people moving around with almost nothing on. What’s not to like? The humans have good ideas once in a while.”

“I suppose.”

“Point for the Spectres!” said Palethi, after Shepard exacted his sudden revenge.

Grunt cheered for the Battlemaster.

Even so, the game ended a few minutes later with a decisive victory for the Blues. Liara celebrated by handing out impartially affectionate hugs for everyone. She had become more physically demonstrative in recent weeks, as if that was the way she had chosen to say the things for which she couldn’t find words. No one complained, not even Grunt.

With the game over, Kamala and Timo decided to go back up to the house, to take a leisurely shower together and then start preparing dinner for the entire household. Grunt and Palethi began to wander down the shoreline, idly looking for shells and trading soldier’s stories. Vara reclined in her chair, basking in the sunlight, falling half-asleep.

Liara turned to head out for the water, but then she stopped, staring up into the zenith for a long moment. She made a small sound and pointed.

Shepard looked. The enormous orb of the brown dwarf hung in its almost-fixed position in the sky, only the fat crescent of its day face clearly visible behind the blue vault of heaven. At first, he couldn’t see what had attracted Liara’s notice, but then he saw a series of flashes of light, tiny but very bright. He glanced down and caught a pair of questioning cobalt-blue eyes.

“That must be the Project,” he told her. “Where Kalan and Tekanta are working, along with the rest
of the quarians and the geth.”

Liara made a *whoosh* noise, miming an explosion with both hands.

“I don’t think anything has gone wrong, Liara. The last I heard, they were almost ready to start low-power tests. Maybe that’s what we’re seeing.”

Liara stared upward, but the tiny flashes of light had ceased.

“If everything goes well,” said Shepard, “we’ll all be able to go home soon.”

She glanced at him, her face suddenly quiet and sober. Then she looked around her at the beach, the house on its low hill, the deep-blue ocean under the bright sun. Suddenly all the brightness and energy abandoned her. She looked nearly ready to weep.

Shepard hesitated for only a moment, then he stepped forward and took the asari in his arms. She responded at once, holding him tightly, resting her head on his broad chest.

“I understand. You’ve been happy here, haven’t you?”

She nodded, glancing up into his face and blinking back the unshed tears.

“You’ll like Thessia,” he told her. “You have a house there, a little like the one where we live now, but bigger. It’s close to the seashore, so you can go down to the beach in the early morning and run on the sand, or swim in the ocean.”

She tapped on his chest with one hand, and gave him a questioning look.

All at once, he had a hard time keeping his own voice under strict control. “Yes, Liara. I’ll be there, and Vara, and Keana and Timo and Palethi, and a lot of other people you don’t remember just yet. Our other friends will have their own work to do, but they’ll visit too.”

Her eyes considered him for a long moment, and then she hugged him again and turned away, running down to the water at last.

Shepard sat on the sand, watching as Liara played and swam in the ocean, the sun slowly descending into the sea behind her.

*It hurts, doesn’t it?*

Shepard didn’t turn his head, to look where Vara still lounged in the sunlight, a few dozen meters away.

*Yeah. She’s still that brilliant asari we both fell in love with, happy and vibrant and full of life, but she just doesn’t remember what we all were to one another. I’m beginning to worry that she may never recover completely.*

*I know,* she said. *We’ll just have to love her, and care for her, in any way she’ll allow us.*

*Do you know the worst of it?*

Vara signaled a negative.

*I sometimes catch myself hoping she doesn’t recover. She seems so happy now. If all her memories come back . . . if she remembers the war, remembers being the Intelligence, that might be a terrible burden for her.*
Vara considered that for a few moments. Then: *I think you give her too little credit. All her old strength is still there too. If she remembers, the bad with the good, it won’t be more than she can bear.*

*I hope you’re right.*

*I know I am.* Vara rose from her place, and began picking up her gear. *I’m going to go inside and help with dinner. Bring Liara in when she’s done swimming, won’t you?*

Shepard sent a flicker of agreement.

A while later, Liara came walking up onto the beach, unconsciously doing an imitation of Aphrodite rising out of the surf. Shepard’s breath caught for a moment, but then he saw her face, intense and turned inward, as if she was chasing a difficult thought into its hiding place. He recognized that look of old.

Liara crossed over to her own pile of gear and picked up a towel to dry off the seawater, giving Shepard a speculative look the whole time. Once she was done, she retrieved her tablet and carried it over, sitting down on the sand beside him.

“What is it, Liara?”

She tapped at the tablet, calling up a specific document, and turned it so he could see.

*A Memoir of the Reaper Invasion,* by Liara T’Soni.

She pointed at herself. Her eyes demanded answers.

“Yes,” he told her, nodding slowly. “You wrote that book. In a way, that’s how you started everything that’s happened recently.”

She pointed to him, cocking her head.

“Yes. Well, sort of. I’m not the same person as the Shepard in your book, but I remember being him.”

She pointed to herself, then to him. Then, with infinite gentleness, she took his hand and brought it up to her face.

Shepard took a deep breath. “Yes. I love you, Liara. I’ve always loved you.”

She made a matter-of-fact nod, setting the tablet down in the sand. Then she moved, leaning forward onto her hands and knees, bringing her face close. Before he could withdraw or push her away, she had pressed her lips to his, in a warm and thorough and rather knowing kiss.

“Liara . . .” he whispered, once she came up for a moment’s breath.

She glared at him from very close range, putting a finger firmly across his lips. The gesture became another caress, fingertips ruffling through the fur of his beard, and she eased even closer. He put his arms around her, as much to avoid being shoved onto his back in the sand as anything else. The scent and taste of her filled his head, sea air and sunshine with a hint of cinnamon. The sensation of her bare skin under his hands nearly unseated his reason.

*Vara!*

*What is it . . . Oh. Oh!*
I think you had better come rescue me.

A flash of ironic amusement. Absolutely not!

The two of them were thoroughly intertwined now, Liara pressing as close as she could manage, her face tucked into the hollow of his neck, her fingers clawing at him behind his shoulders.

Look, it’s not that I don’t want her. I do. But she’s not in her right mind.

I would say she’s sane enough to make her own decisions about such things. Besides, have you considered that this might be just the way to help her reintegrate her memories?

For one more moment, he hesitated.

Shepard. Love her. Bring her back to us.

“Liara,” he murmured, looking into her eyes. They seemed to fill up all the universe. “I love you . . . but are you sure this is what you want?”

She nodded solemnly.

“All right. Can I make a suggestion?”

She cocked her head at him, the corner of her mouth turning up in a smile, the expression so familiar as to make his heart hurt.

“Let’s go inside and have dinner, and wash up, and go to bed together. Trust me, you do not want to be doing this on a sandy beach.”

She thought about that for a moment, and then kissed him once more. Then she rolled out of his arms and climbed to her feet, extending a hand to help him rise as well. Slowly, they walked toward the house together, holding hands, her head resting comfortably on his shoulder.

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16 May 2581, T’Soni Household, Arukena Province/Zhentovar

I awoke in the morning, and remembered everything.

Vara had guessed correctly. Joining with Shepard had been just what I needed. Seeing a copy of my own memories in his mind had helped me integrate all of them once more. Seeing his memories of being the Intelligence had helped me make sense of my own. At last, I was myself again.

I lay in a darkened room, in a comfortable bed, draped slightly over Shepard’s warm bulk. I felt safe and cherished. I could sense the slow evolution of his dreaming mind, his unconscious awareness of my presence. I couldn’t “hear” Vara anywhere, but I knew she must be nearby. There would be plenty of time for renewed intimacy to re-establish my mental link with her.

The Intelligence had downloaded a wealth of knowledge into my mind, everything up to its very last moments, just before it cut me loose and sent my life-pod through the final wormhole. I considered all of it, realizing that it might take me many years to truly understand.

One thing I did know. The Intelligence had sacrificed itself to end the Adversary’s threat to all life, and to liberate even most of the Old Ones from enslavement. It was the last thing I might have expected from such a creature. Perhaps it had learned a few lessons from Shepard after all.

And now?
Now I wanted nothing more than to take Shepard, and Vara, and all the others I loved, and go home.

Shepard stirred, one hand running up my spine in an idle caress. His head rolled to face me, and his eyes opened.

I smiled at him. My voice was rusty for lack of use, but I got it to work. “Shepard. Good morning.”

His eyes flew wide. “Liara?”

I kissed him. “I sincerely hope you weren’t expecting to wake up next to anyone else. Well, aside from Vara, of course.”

A few meters away, the door-partition slammed open. Vara herself stood there, magnificently nude, as if she had just tumbled out of her own bed and come running. She stared at us. “Liara. You’re speaking.”

“Yes. Apparently, I’ve figured out how.” I sighed. “Goddess, no doubt I’m going to be getting that reaction all day. Well, we had better get started.”

24 May 2581, Zhentovar System Space

Once more, Chandragupta had the honor of leading the fleet.

We climbed up into space, followed by all the thousands of ships that had come to defeat the valdarii. Five months later, the valdarii – the zhentakan, as they called themselves – had become our fast friends. So had millions of the Old Ones, already taking advantage of the opportunity to join the geth consensus.

Ever since I had come back to myself, I had studied the records of the expedition, and marveled at the alliance that had begun to grow at this edge of the galaxy. Quarians and zhentakan, geth and Old Ones, they all seemed to get along with surprising ease. I wondered whether they, not the Citadel species, would one day constitute the heart of galactic civilization.

Witness their first great accomplishment.

It circled in a carefully selected orbit, inside the path of Zhentovar, but still high above the surface of the brown dwarf. An elegant structure: two fifteen-kilometer arms, a pair of revolving gyroscopic rings, a fiercely glowing core of Element Zero. The first working mass relay to be built in over fifty thousand years. One of the few mass relays ever built by anyone other than the Reapers.

Many more, no doubt, would follow. After all, with the Reapers gone forever, we would need to build our own roads to cross the galaxy. The geth spoke of developing a new version of wormhole technology someday, perhaps in ten thousand years. For now, this: our first gesture of true independence from the Intelligence.

Aspasia sat in her command chair, confidently managing her ship and its crew. EDI sent an interlock signal to the new relay, which responded at once, turning smoothly in space. Chandragupta flew down the outbound lane, the relay seizing us as we passed . . .

Flash. Different stars shone down upon us.

Aspasia accepted reports. She verified that the rest of the fleet was beginning to make the transition
behind us, that we had made a proper handshake with the extranet. Once she was satisfied that all was as it should be, she turned to me. “You’re on, patēr.”

I raised my face, consciously striking a pose, knowing that images of this moment would probably appear in the histories. Again.

“Chandragupta calling Rannoch Control. This is Dr. Liara T’Soni.”

I paused for just a moment.

“We’ve come home.”
Epilogue

15 September 2597, T'Soni Lineage Estates, Armali/Thessia

“Mata, why am I different?”

I peered across at young Benezia, rather taken aback at the question. She had a habit of occasionally springing such inquiries on me, or on her fathers. I often wondered at it. None of her older half-sisters had never shown such a talent for quiet contemplation, followed by dangerously deep questions that leaped out of ambush.

She wasn’t watching me, confident that I would answer in my own time. That gave me the opportunity to appreciate her once again: a slender asari child of sixteen years, with the slate-blue T’Soni coloring, a light dusting of white Vara-like dapples on her forehead and cheeks, and Shepard’s beautiful crystal-blue eyes. Her face wore its habitual expression of cool attentiveness. I thought she had the promise of great beauty once she grew up, but then I was her mother and hopelessly biased.

We sat together on the great deck behind the house, the late-afternoon sun turning everything to gold and glory, a pleasant wind coming off the sea. We had set up a workbench, cluttered with tools and mechanical parts: a robotics kit. Of late, Benezia had been showing a fierce interest in mechanics and programming. She seemed to have a strong talent for them as well. In private I shook my head at the prospect of raising a cyberneticist, of all things, but we all did what we could to encourage her.

“You will need to be more specific, Little Wing. All of us are different in many ways.”

“It’s hard to explain,” she said, adjusting a servomechanism on the robotic arm in her hands. “I’ve noticed that children are expected to spend most of their time with other children. I don’t. To be honest, I don’t even want to.”

“Why is that?”

She gave me a mildly exasperated glance. “Most other children my age are . . . I don’t know. Tiresome. They spend all their time playing silly games, and chattering about things that don’t matter.”

“I suppose that is a difference. Most young asari are expected to be playful and lighthearted. You are a very serious child, most of the time.”

Not to mention rather frighteningly bright, I didn’t say. Benezia knew her strengths, but we had taken great care not to permit her to become arrogant.

“It’s been a long time since I was a child,” I continued, “but I also remember finding other children rather boring. I spent most of my time around adults, just as you do. I suppose that was because my mother was already a Matriarch, with a great deal else to do. I was left with her acolytes much of the time. They were adults, maidens with no children of their own.”

“You’re not a Matriarch yet,” she pointed out.

“That’s true, but we do keep a large household here, and there are plenty of adults to help us watch over you and your sisters. You don’t have to play with other children unless you want to.”
“Which I usually don’t.” She gave me a sharp glance. “You and patēr Shepard and patēr Vara are much more interesting.”

“Well. We’ve had very interesting lives.”

Benezia attached the arm to its frame, and tapped at her omni-tool for a moment. The arm swiveled back and forth, its fingers opening and closing freely. She flashed a quick triumphant grin at me. Then she pointed out, “That still doesn’t answer the question.”

“I think it does. Start with the fact that you have two fathers, which is not entirely unheard of, but it certainly is not common. Your fathers are both remarkable people, with many exceptional traits. Not to mention, I’ve managed to accomplish . . . a few noteworthy things of my own. Very few asari have ever had a heritage as rich as yours.”

“I know.” She looked down. “It’s rather intimidating.”

“Hmm.”

My immediate reaction was to tell Benezia what it had been like, growing up in her namesake’s household, so long ago. Then a sudden thought stopped me. I had to lean back in my chair, the tool I had been holding now idle in my lap, and stare out across the ocean.

Goddess. My daughter has it far worse.

My mother was a great Matriarch, with hundreds of acolytes, millions of followers, billion-credit holdings, influence on an interstellar scale. As a young maiden, I saw no hope of ever matching her accomplishments. That was part of what drove me to study archaeology, and move away to Illium: the desperate need to get out from under her shadow.

Yet when the time came – with help from Shepard, and Vara, and so many others – I reached positions of power such as my mother would never have dreamed possible. I didn’t do too badly with them, either. The galaxy is a far better place today than it would have been, if I had never taken a hand in events.

Now what do I tell my own daughters, when they wonder what is left for them to do?

Suddenly, I began to understand why Benezia might be intrigued by a technical field in which I had never taken much interest.

I pitched my voice to be as neutrally gentle as I could manage. “Do you wish, sometimes, that you were the child of an ordinary family, of whom no one had ever heard?”

“Maybe. Once in a while.” She grinned again, and this time the expression was pure Shepard. “Of course, I suppose it’s only fair that I should have a high mark to aim for.”

“It’s not a contest, Little Wing.” I reached out and patted her shoulder. “All that matters is that you give life everything you have, and remain always true to yourself. If you do that, you will be able to hold your head up high, whether the galaxy takes notice or not. And you may be sure that I will always take pride in knowing that you are my daughter.”

She nodded. “Thanks, mata.”

We turned back to the machine in front of us, assembling the parts, testing each component as we went. Before long, we had an almost-complete synthetic platform, ready for Benezia to load with the full range of VI software. Time and again she seemed to have an intuition for the work, solving
minor problems almost by instinct as they arose.

Now, where does she get that? All three of her parents are at least competent with machines, but none of us have a gift for mathematics or engineering.

Well, not even we asari truly understand the complex dance of genetics and growth, instinct and education, nature and nurture. In the end, all we can do is accept what our partners give us, love our children, and hope for the best.

Of course, there is another party who might – just might – have had a chance to take a hand in her creation. The Intelligence wrapped me up in a cocoon of hyper-advanced technology for almost two weeks, while the damage I took at the end of the Valdarii War was repaired. It saved Benezia as well, long before she was born. She has carried Reaper technology all her life, in her blood and bone.

It wasn’t the first time I had that thought, and it likely would not be the last. I tried not to let it worry me. Benezia was very bright, talented, and serious, but there didn’t seem to be anything uncanny about her.

Still, someday she might surprise us. Someday she might surprise everyone.

Behind us, I heard a door open, and voices.

I turned, to see the rest of my family come spilling out onto the deck. Nike scampered over to us, big silver eyes peering at our project, already asking a hundred questions in her bell-like voice. Vara came next, moving slowly, with the very careful walk of a hugely pregnant asari. Finally, Shepard emerged, carrying little Kallia in his arms.

I spared a quick glance for Benezia, making sure that Nike wasn’t pestering her beyond endurance, and then rose to greet my bondmates. “How was the park?”

“We went down by the lake!” said Nike, forgetting all about the half-finished machine on our workbench. “I watched someone fishing, and patēr gave me some bread to feed the avians, and there were some other kids there, and we ran races and played tag and . . .”

“It was rather exhausting,” said Vara. “I cannot possibly have been this hyperactive when I was a child.”

Nike stamped her foot in exasperation. “I am not hyper . . . hyper . . .”

“Hy-per-ac-tive,” said Benezia, “and yes you are, little bug.”

“Am not!”

“It’s okay. Just don’t be hyperactive around my project. Mata and I spent all afternoon putting it together.”

Shepard stepped close, our daughter snuggled between us, and kissed me before handing her off. I sat down again and held Kallia in my lap, letting her turn her usual silent, solemn regard on all of us.

“That was my favorite park when I was young,” I told Nike. “Although I got in trouble there once, digging for archeological artifacts in the grass.”

“Did you find any?” she demanded, her eyes wide with wonder.
Laughter rolled out across the deck.

We certainly had a varied family, even by asari standards. Benezia had been the product of that passionate night aboard Chandragupta, just after the destruction of Omega, when I had managed to imprint on both Shepard and Vara at once. Try as we might, neither Vara nor I had ever duplicated the feat. Nike was Vara’s child by Shepard, as was the new baby we expected at any time. Kallia was my daughter, again by Shepard. All of them were unique, non-repeatable results of our experiments in parentage, but we loved them all extravagantly.

Shepard had proven to be a superb father. He had come to the task with little prior experience, but he approached it the same way he had approached soldiering – with careful attention, strict self-discipline, and willingness to learn from his mistakes. He was strong, affectionate, soft-spoken, immensely patient, and yet unyielding as iron in matters of correction. He never tired of spending time with any of our girls, reading to them, playing games both serious and silly, listening to childish confidences, offering advice.

All our daughters adored him. So did Vara and I, all the more for having seen how he was with the children.

He had taken to retirement with surprising ease, for someone who had spent so much of his lifespan running, fighting, doing.

Perhaps he knew that he could afford to be patient. Trying to determine his chronological age was a hopeless task. Depending on how one counted, he was anywhere from his early thirties to well into his fifth century. What mattered was his biological age, and here he seemed to have drawn a lucky hand. His Reaper-derived nanotechnology kept him in good repair, down to the very telomeres in the nuclei of his cells. Miranda and other doctors had examined him, discovering that while he was aging, the process was moving very slowly.

He was still as physically powerful and vigorous as ever, a condition maintained by a brutal exercise regimen. There was only the slightest hint of weathering in his skin, a tiny web of wrinkles appearing around his eyes, a light dusting of silver in his beard. Our best guess was that he had about double the normal human span, about three hundred years, before old age would begin to overtake him. It hardly seemed like enough. Yet it was far more time than we had ever expected to have with him. More than enough time for him to see all his children grown, and standing on their own.

“While we were at the park, I got a very interesting message from Admiral Sinopus at the Citadel,” said Shepard.

Vara smiled. She must have heard this news already.

“What is it, pater?” asked Benezia.

“The Argus deep-space network has picked up a signal. From outside the galaxy. Somewhere in the Large Magellanic Cloud.”

“Intelligent origin?” I asked.

“Looks that way. It’s dense, encoded and compressed, but there seems to be a prologue which describes how to unpack it. Naval Intelligence is working on it, and they’re pulling in academics from half of the galaxy to help.”

“Maybe I should call the admiral and offer to lend a hand,” I mused. “A new civilization, out in
one of the satellite galaxies. *Very* interesting.”

“Another survivor of the Reapers, like the *kašari*?” Benezia wondered. “Or something entirely new?”

Shepard shrugged. “No way to know yet.”

“Is there any way we can *go see*?”

I cocked my head at her, hearing something in my daughter’s voice.

“Maybe,” said Shepard. “Intergalactic travel is at least theoretically possible. There was the *Pathfinder* expedition to Andromeda, just before the Reaper War, but we’ll probably never know if that worked or not. They haven’t reached their destination yet, *if* they’re even still alive. The Magellanic Clouds are a lot closer.”

“It would still be decades of travel,” Vara cautioned. “Better to unpack the message we have, and see what the people there are trying to tell us. Then I’m sure the Citadel will think about what to do next.”

“Still, that’s amazing!” Benezia jitted in her seat. “We might be able to open a dialogue with whoever they are. Or even go visit! The things they could tell us, the places they must have seen . . .”

I watched her, smiling privately to myself at the way she had caught fire.

Then I felt a deep chill of premonition.

*Opening regular contact with another galaxy, even one as close as the Clouds? Difficult. It will take resources called together from every civilization we know. The geth will probably need to contribute, with all the knowledge they acquired from the Ascended Intelligence. It will take many years.*

*Enough time for Benezia to grow up, and take her own place as one of the galaxy’s rising leaders? Reach a position from which she has a chance to go there . . .*

I caught Vara’s eye, then Shepard’s, and read their own awareness of one possible future.

*If she wants it badly enough, said Shepard silently, then there won’t be any stopping her. Isn’t that what being a parent is all about? We have the adventures, we make the sacrifices, so that in the end we can step out of the way and let our children live their own lives.*

“Well,” said Vara out loud, ever the pragmatic one. “That certainly sounds like something we should keep an eye on. Right now, we should make sure this machine of yours is packed up. You can work on it more later. Dinner is almost ready.”

“Yes, *patēr*,” agreed Benezia.

So she and I gathered our things, and then we all went inside to eat, and then we settled into our evening routine. All while the sun descended in the western sky, and twilight leaped up into the heavens, and far overhead appeared the innumerable stars.

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