Memoirs

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Memoirs

by Sharrukin

Summary

Centuries after the end of the Reaper War, a respected asari scientist and political leader tells the story of her youthful adventures with the legendary Shepard. Fighting to save the galaxy is one thing, but figuring out human motivations can be much harder. Science fiction, action-adventure, and a romance on slow burn.

Revised and polished version of a novel originally published to FanFiction.net. Standard disclaimers apply.
Prologue

Night on Thessia.

An asari emerged from her house, gliding out onto a broad deck that looked out across her land. Even in darkness she moved confidently, avoiding obstacles with the ease of long practice, until she stood by the outer railing. There she spent long minutes looking up at the stars.

If anyone else had been close by, they would have seen a slender asari matron of average height, wrapped in a dignified full-length gown of twilight blue. The starlight shone on her face, almost bare of markings aside from a spray of indigo freckles across her cheeks and a matched pair of thin arcs above her eyes. Another asari would have judged her features attractive enough, capable of gamine charm or naïve curiosity, but too cool and delicate for the canons of true beauty.

As it happened, no one else was close by. The household staff, the armed acolytes keeping watch over the perimeter, all of them knew better than to interrupt the matron’s evening ritual. Whenever she was at home and the night was clear, she always ventured out onto the deck for a time to gaze up at the stars, as if searching for something she had lost. She had been doing it for centuries.

She was five hundred years old, almost to the day, and she was alone.

Her ritual drew to a close. She breathed a soft sigh, barely audible over the distant sound of surf. If her eyes glimmered more than usual in the starlight, no one was there to see.

“They’ve forgotten,” she murmured at last, breaking her silence. “I suppose I shall have to remind them.”

Then she turned and went back into the house.

Indoors, she moved through night-dimmed hallways until she reached her office. There she turned up the desk lamp and sat down . . . but then she paused, as if reluctant to begin a task. Instead she reached out and picked up a small item: an arm-ring of polished obsidian, beautiful in its simple perfection. She held the ring for several minutes, turning it slowly in her fingers, before setting it back down with a decisive click.

A wave of her hand opened a holographic console on the desk. Her fingers poised over the hard light for a moment, and then descended.

“We are doomed to lose the past . . .” she murmured as she began.

Prologue

We are doomed to lose the past.

In every culture memory becomes history, then legend, and finally myth. Even our advanced civilization is not immune. Those who experienced an event forget, and eventually die. Records are misinterpreted, misfiled, discarded, lost, or destroyed. Over time the most concrete truths always fade away, leaving us to sift through scraps of ambiguous evidence.

It has been almost four hundred years since the end of the great war with the Reapers. That’s more than long enough for the clarity of memory to fade, even for the most long-lived Citadel races.
So it has been with Shepard.

The bare facts of William Shepard's life are not in dispute.

His parents were David Shepard, an agricultural geneticist, and Adrienne Favreau, a virtual-intelligence designer, both citizens of the United North American States on Earth. William Shepard was born in the city of Toronto in 2154 CE.

Humanity collided with galactic civilization for the first time when Shepard was still a small child, fighting the brief but bloody First Contact War with the turians. After the war, humans gained access to dozens of new worlds for colonization. David Shepard was one among millions who took part in the great migration, bringing his wife and son to settle on the frontier world of Mindoir in 2159 CE. There the Shepards prospered until the vicious batarian raid of 2170 CE, after which young William was the only survivor from his family.

The experience of Mindoir led Shepard to enlist in the Systems Alliance military. He served with distinction as a Marine. His actions during the Skyllian Blitz earned him the Star of Terra and a commission. He was accepted into the prestigious Interplanetary Combatives Training school, graduating with the highest (N7) level of proficiency. By 2183 CE he attained the rank of Lieutenant Commander. In that year he was assigned as the first Executive Officer of the experimental stealth frigate *SSV Normandy*, helping to command her on her shakedown cruise.

On that cruise he discovered the existence and imminent threat of the Reapers. Over the next three years he managed to delay their invasion of the galaxy three times. When they finally did invade, he succeeded in unifying the galaxy against the overwhelming threat. In the final Battle of Earth, he led the assault against the Reapers.

At the height of the battle, he vanished without a trace. Minutes later, the war was resolved and our civilization was saved. A cycle of genocide and extinction that had been underway for over five billion years was finally brought to an end.

Although Shepard has been credited with the victory, the truth is that the galaxy at large doesn't know what became of him. Officially no one knows precisely how our salvation was achieved, or even whether Shepard had anything to do with it.

Today, the irony is that William Shepard has been almost forgotten. To trillions of sentient beings he is simply "the Shepard," a legendary hero of the distant past. In the current time of crisis, with yet another existential threat looming over us, his name has become one to conjure with. A few have even elevated him to godhood, a divinity in human form to be revered and called upon to ward off the onrushing darkness.

Goddess, he would have hated that.

It is at once the blessing and the curse of the asari people, that we never forget the ones with whom we have shared a grand passion. Shepard was my comrade-in-arms, my best friend, my ardent lover, my first and most cherished bondmate. To this day I remember him with perfect clarity, as if he had only gone on a short journey and could be expected to return at any time.

He was an exceptional human, with physical, mental, and moral capabilities all well above the norm for his people. He had a gift for being in the right place at the right time, ready to snatch victory from the jaws of disaster. He could persuade and lead others to excel, beyond anything they might have dreamed possible for themselves. His *areté*, his inherent virtue, ran deep and strong.

To be sure, he was not perfect. Much of his success can be attributed to sheer good luck. He made
mistakes, he was sometimes foolish, he was often uncertain, he was afraid, he suffered, he bled, and he died. A god he most certainly was not. Yet we asari know well how to recognize the spark of divinity that comes, once in a great while, to reside in mortal flesh. Shepard had that spark in abundant measure.

We need that spark again, possibly even more than in the days when Shepard walked among us as a living man.

This is my story of the war against the Reapers. Even more, it’s the story of the three years, three months, and twenty-eight days that I knew, loved, and fought at the side of William Shepard. Not the legendary hero, not the incipient god, but the man . . . mortal and glorious and beloved.

I’ve never told this story before. Some things have been too hard to put into words for the whole galaxy to read. Yet it seems that I must try. I suppose I’ve come to realize that the story doesn’t belong only to me.

Perhaps it belongs to all of us, especially now when we need it most.

- Liara T'Soni, *A Memoir of the Reaper Invasion*, published 2580 CE (Cosmopolitan English translation)
The Day the Geth Came

22 February 2183, Red Mountains/Therum

I was working alone on Therum the day the geth came. They very nearly captured me at once.

That morning I had flown to Nova Yekaterinburg to purchase supplies and check for messages from offworld. On the return trip I let my aircar's autopilot do most of the work while I reviewed site maps and considered where to place my next sampling trench. All of a sudden the navigation radar pinged, announcing the appearance of a large, fast-moving air vehicle in the neighborhood.

I twisted in my seat, craned my neck, and saw a geth dropship diving out of the clouds like some enormous insect. For a moment it loomed close overhead, seeming about to snatch my aircar in mid-flight. My eyes flew wide as I froze in sudden terror.

Then it passed off to my left, heading for the lower slopes of Mount Kondratyev.

I didn't recognize the ship. At the time I only knew of the geth as a race of synthetic hermits, who kept to themselves on the very edge of the galaxy. I had certainly never seen one of them. But then the dropship stooped on the mining outpost at the bottom of the slope beneath my work site, and geth troopers began falling like rain.

I've never had full commando training, but even in my youth I knew an airborne assault when I saw one. Whoever these alien visitors were, I could tell they were not friendly.

Wake up, Liara, you're in a combat zone. Time to react!

I disengaged the autopilot and made a steep dive for the rough stone outcroppings that rose behind my work site. I wanted to put the aircar under cover in case the invaders came looking for it. Once on the ground I checked my omni-tool, retrieved my sidearm, and opened the canopy.

The atmosphere of Therum slapped me in the face: dry, metallic-tasting, and hot as an oven. Sweat immediately began to trickle down my sides and back.

I crept up to the ridge-line and peered down the flank of Mount Kondratyev. The dropship was already climbing into the sky once again, but I could see movement down at the mining outpost, a kilometer or so away. I took my binoculars from their pocket at my hip.

At least a dozen geth searched through the outpost building and grounds. I saw one of the human miners, then another, lying motionless on the ground. The geth must have slaughtered them within moments of their arrival.

The binoculars passed over something else, something that did not move like a geth.

A krogan stood in the middle of the open ground, looking around and gesturing as he issued orders to the synthetics. He had a red crest and a yellow face, both of them badly scarred. He wore armor that looked heavy even for a krogan, and he was completely weighed down with weaponry.

Goddess, is that a battlemaster?

Some instinct must have warned him. He turned his head in my direction, and through the binoculars I could see his eyes narrow. Too late I remembered that if I could see the krogan, the krogan could see me.
Sure enough, he barked orders and pointed emphatically up the slope toward my work site.

My mind raced as I belatedly crouched down from the ridge-line. My options were very limited. I could flee by air, but the nearest human settlement with a Frontier Militia garrison was almost a hundred kilometers away. The geth could call back their dropship and catch me long before I reached safety. I could escape and evade on the ground, but I would never survive for long in the Therum badlands without the gear at my camp. If I tried to fight I would be badly outnumbered.

I could run into the ruins. Below ground the partially excavated Prothean complex was a maze, which I knew well but the krogan would not. If I was pressed, some of the technology I had found might protect me.

At once I climbed back onto the ridge-line and then sprang down onto the catwalk over the entrance to my work site, taking cover behind the safety rail. I checked my sidearm and set it for disruption rounds.

I was about to make the second jump, down to the entrance ramp for my work site, when I heard sounds. Feet on the dry ground, a strange mechanical warbling that might have been speech. A careful glance above the safety rail showed me three geth troopers, a vanguard for the others. I wondered how they had crossed the rough ground so quickly.

"Only three," I told myself, ignoring the racing of my heart. "You can manage three."

I spun out from behind my cover, firing at the lead trooper, three rounds in rapid succession. It recoiled, lubricant fluid spilling from its arm and upper torso. Then I called up my biotics, hurling a warp into the midst of the geth. Their warbling took on a higher-pitched note as two of them crumpled lifeless to the ground. The third sought cover.

The krogan appeared, roaring in outrage, pelting up the slope behind the geth vanguard. He made a throwing gesture, and a mass effect field flew through the air at me.

He’s a biotic!

I swore and dove for cover. The ball of force yanked at my shoulders and right arm as it flew past. If that biotic throw had connected, the krogan would have hurled me off the scaffolding into a thirty-meter drop.

It was clearly time for a change of plan. I glanced around me, measuring distances and angles. Then I popped out of cover again, firing my sidearm wildly at the invaders. As the krogan began another control gesture, I vaulted over the safety rail and off the catwalk.

Once more the krogan's telekinetic bolt missed me as I fell. I seized control of my descent with my own biotics, trying for a perfect landing on the ramp below.

Unfortunately I didn’t get a perfect landing. My right ankle twisted as it took my weight. A cry of pain escaped me, but I forced the injured leg to work. I fired wildly once again at the onrushing geth and limped toward the entrance.

They were moments behind as I punched in the access code. Cool air welled up around me. I stumbled through the opening hatch and slammed the control pad on the other side. I moved as quickly as I could down the entrance shaft, listening to heavy blows falling on the hatch behind me.

The racket didn’t last long. Once the krogan had vented his rage, he stopped to think.

I reached the bottom of the shaft and took a position just around the corner. If they managed to pass
the code-lock, then they would have to descend the long straight shaft to reach me. For at least a few moments I could turn that distance into a killing zone.

I applied a medi-gel pack to my injured ankle, checked my sidearm again, and waited.

It took them longer than I expected to solve the code-lock. When they did, letting daylight pour down the shaft, they hesitated before attacking my position. Perhaps they realized my tactical advantage.

"Dr. T'Soni?" the krogan called down the shaft, his deep voice echoing oddly in the long hollow space.

I said nothing.

"No need to fear, Doctor. We're not here to do you any harm."

"Liar!" I shouted back. "I saw what you did to those human miners."

"You're a different case, Doctor. We were sent to bring you to your mother, alive and unharmed."

Shock rendered me speechless for a moment.

"Benezia sent us. She needs your help, your knowledge of the Protheans; that's all. No need to make this difficult."

"I don't believe you. If my mother needed my professional expertise, all she had to do was send an extranet message. She wouldn't have sent a krogan battlemaster and . . . whatever those things are with you."

"Circumstances have changed, Doctor. Your mother is a very powerful person. She has many followers, many allies. She wants to be sure you come to her safely, and she needs you to come now."

"Why don't you tell me who you're really working for?" I challenged him.

There was silence from the top of the shaft.

"My mother doesn't associate with barbarians and synthetics. She didn't send you. Or if she did, it was at the request of that nothos turian she's been working with. Saren. Am I right?"

The krogan abandoned persuasion. "It doesn't matter, Doctor. You're coming with us. Only choice you have right now is whether you do it on your own two feet or in a box."

"I choose neither!"

"Suit yourself," said the krogan, amused.

_Thump._

I peeked around the corner and saw a bright crimson light zooming down the shaft toward me.

_A rocket!_

I hurled myself back and slammed a biotic barrier into place, just before the world shattered in sound and fury.
By the time I had shaken my head clear and returned to the entrance of the shaft, the geth were already halfway down. I leaned out and fired, ducked back under cover, leaned out and sent a biotic warp screaming up at them. One trooper went down, then a second, but their advance was relentless.

I had to face facts. Even with the shaft and my biotics to give me an advantage, one asari scientist with a civilian-grade Elkoss Combine pistol wasn't going to hold off an army.

One more burst of fire up the shaft, and then I moved as fast as I could. Fortunately the anesthetics in the medi-gel had finished their job. I could run on my injured ankle for a time.

I fled across the scaffolding, down a level, then another. I didn't bother with the elevators. It was riskier to jump with biotic assistance, but much faster. I didn't twist my ankles again or break any bones. Behind me I heard the geth moving more cautiously through the cavern, and once or twice the krogan's deep voice issuing commands.

The Prothean tower loomed before me. With the geth close behind, I sprinted for the still-active control panel I had found and begun to decode.

*Alpha-theta-epsilon . . . oh Goddess, what comes next?*

The krogan roared, far too close. I stabbed at a button almost at random.

A sudden flash of blue light blinded me.
"That's quite a trap you've gotten yourself stuck in, little asari."

It hadn't taken long for me to realize that I had made a terrible mistake.

"There you are, hanging, all helpless-like. No food, no water, nothing. Not even a good book to read."

Yes, I had activated the Prothean barrier curtain, and that had turned out to be impenetrable.

"Good object lesson. Never try to use technology you don't understand."

I was also caught in a kinetic bubble just behind the barrier. I floated at the focus of balanced forces, my feet suspended a few centimeters from the floor, my arms stretched out to either side. I had some freedom of movement. I could move my arms and legs a little, turn my head, even curl into a ball if I was willing to make an effort. But the moment I relaxed, the field gently but firmly returned me to my original position. It was a comfortable prison, but it was a prison.

"You do know I'm the only hope you have of escape, right?"

I had been hanging there for three days. Battlemaster Ukarn had quickly discovered the potential for torture in the situation. All he had to do was talk to me, while his geth worked on finding a way through the barrier.

"Please, just go away," I moaned, refusing to look at him.

"I could do that," he rumbled genially. "I'm just as bored and frustrated as you must be. I'd like to go spend some of the credits I'm earning, eat a decent meal, maybe take in a show. Or Saren might decide to call me away on another mission. Of course, the next archaeologist to come along might find nothing but a bunch of asari bones drifting in midair. That would be confusing for him. We don't want that, do we?"

I closed my eyes.

They had tried hacking through the barrier. They had tried cutting through it with a laser. They had tried mining through the tower walls. They had tried firing a fusillade of rockets at the curtain directly in front of me. That last had been rather exciting, actually, but also quite terrifying. None of it had worked, although the rockets had done considerable damage to the scaffolding and elevator cage just outside the barrier.

"You know what I think?" asked Ukarn.

I looked down to where he stood, calmly watching me. "I don't care what you think."

He was silent for a moment. Then he suddenly roared, a primal sound that shattered my nerves and turned my muscles to water. "I think you know how I can get you out of there!"

I winced and turned my head away.

"Hah. I thought so." His footsteps rang on the damaged scaffolding as he paced back and forth.
"Look, Doctor. I've told you over and over, I don't have any orders to harm you. Why don't you cooperate? Tell me how to get in there and shut that trap down. You can have some water and food, wash up, get clean clothes, and rest in a real bed for a change. Saren and your mother only want to consult with you."

It actually sounded tempting. All I had to do was mention the mining laser . . . but no. If he was careless, he could bring the mountain down on top of all of us, or worse. I couldn't trust a word he said in any case.

Suddenly Ukarn raised a hand to the side of his head, receiving a radio call.

"What?" Silence, while he listened. "Well, what is it, can you tell?" Another silence, longer this time. "All right, I'm coming. Hold until I get there." He grinned up at me. "I'll only be a few minutes, Doctor. Feel free to hang around until I get back."

"Koprophagos!" I cursed at him, but he only laughed as he turned to go.

I closed my eyes again, struggling to avoid passing out entirely. I couldn't rid myself of the horrible image of an asari skeleton hanging in space, still draped in my clothes.

Then I heard gunfire. The sound was very faint, echoing as if it had to make its way all the way down into the cavern from outside, but it was unmistakable.

I felt a surge of hope. Someone is attacking the synthetics.

I could do nothing but wait for ten minutes, then twenty. The gunfire rose to a crescendo, interrupted several times by a deep booming noise I couldn't identify at all. After a time it faded to silence. Then I heard it again, just a few shots, much closer, echoing very loudly in the cavern.

I heard a grinding sound just outside the tower. Someone was trying to use the damaged elevator cage.

"Hello? Could somebody help me? Please?"

Finally I saw movement beyond the barrier. A tall figure stepped up to the curtain and peered through it at me. It wasn't the krogan. Instead I saw a male human, wearing Alliance-issue armor and carrying a full load of weapons. Two others were with him, a male turian and a female quarian. They were such a strange sight that for a moment I was quite certain I was hallucinating.

I can only imagine what their reaction must have been.

In the years after the Reaper War, many vids were produced that dramatized the events of Shepard's career. This scene was a great favorite of the audiences. Invariably they found some young, pretty actress to play Liara. The actor playing Shepard would walk up to the fake barrier curtain, the camera would pan across, and there she would be: beautiful, alluring, and helpless, hanging in midair with a halo of bright light behind her.

It wasn't like that.

I had been suspended in dry air for three days without any chance to take in fluids, and I had become badly dehydrated. My lips were swollen and cracked. My eyes were dry, bloodshot, and sunken with fatigue and hunger. My scalp itched furiously, and my crests were shedding flakes of dead skin all down my back. My shirt was stiff with dried sweat, my trousers likewise with the addition of dried urine. I stank. No one in the galaxy would have found the sight of me attractive.
"Can you hear me out there? I am trapped. I need help!"

"Dr. T'Soni, I presume," said the human in a deep, resonant voice.

"Thank the Goddess. I didn't think anyone would come looking for me." I licked my dry lips and tried to sound appealing. "Listen. This thing I am in, it's a Prothean security device. I can't move, so I need you to get me out of it, all right?"

"How in the galaxy did you end up in there?"

At the human's side, the quarian worked with her omni-tool, probably scanning the force field.

"I hid in here when those synthetics showed up. I knew the barrier curtain would keep them out, but when I turned it on, I must have hit something I wasn't supposed to." For a moment, my desperation got the better of me. "I am trapped in here. You must get me out. Please!"

The human made a calming gesture. "Don't worry, Doctor, we'll find some way to help you."

"There's a control panel in here that can shut down the trap. You'll need to find some way past the barrier curtain to reach it."

"I understand. Tali, what do you think?"

The quarian shook her head, the light on her mouthpiece flickering as she spoke. "I don't know, Shepard. I've never seen technology like this before. It's very advanced. I don't think I can hack it from this side."

"All right," said the human. "We'll look around and see if any other solution presents itself."

"Be careful," I warned him. "There is a krogan battlemaster leading the synthetics. He was here not long ago. I don't know where he went."

He nodded. "Thanks. We'll be on the lookout."

They moved off, passing out of my field of vision to the left.

I waited, listening. Presently I heard gunfire again, then the explosion of rockets, and then still more gunfire. There must still have been geth in the cavern. The sounds of fighting didn't last long. I heard nothing for about fifteen minutes. Then a tremendous roar echoed through the cavern, accompanied by brilliant light and a tremor that shook the whole tower around me.

*He must have found the mining laser, and turned it against the rock encasing the lower levels of the tower. I shook my head, not sure whether to be amazed or terrified. Not even Ukarn was that reckless.*

My heart raced. If the barrier curtain didn't extend all the way down the tower, Shepard might be able to get in. So long as he didn't dig too deep.

Sure enough, before long I heard the Prothean elevator moving behind me, and then footsteps.

I laughed, for the first time since before I could remember. "That was wonderful. Your name is Shepard?"

"That's right," said the deep voice from behind me. "I'm Commander William Shepard of the Systems Alliance Navy, a Spectre. My partners are Garrus Vakarian of Citadel Security, and Tali'Zorah nar Rayya of the Migrant Fleet. Let's get you down from there before more geth arrive."
"Geth?" I shook my head in amazement. "Those synthetics were geth? They haven't come out into the galaxy in centuries."

"They're here now," said a flanging turian voice. "And before we set her free, Shepard, how sure can we be that she's not on their side? Her mother is working with Saren, after all."

"What?" I shook my head violently. "Don't be absurd. I've had no contact with my mother in years. I have no idea why she's allied with Saren. I don't want anything to do with that nothos turian."

"Relax, Garrus," said Shepard. "If she were with Saren, the geth wouldn't be trying so hard to capture or kill her. Come on."

I turned my head and saw Shepard and the quarian examining the control panel. Before I could make any suggestions, Shepard reached out confidently and tapped four keys in succession.

The force bubble vanished, and I fell to my hands and knees on the floor. Then he was there, offering a hand to help me up.

I must confess that my first impression of Shepard was not a favorable one. I thought him quite ugly. His face and body were all wrong, planes and angles and bulky masses, just close enough to an asari shape to be repellent in their strangeness. What little skin I could see showed an unappealing beige color, much of it covered with short, dark stubble of that odd human integument, hair.

On the other hand . . . Goddess, he's very strong, I thought as he effortlessly hauled me to my feet. For just a moment I stared closely into his eyes, bright and intelligent, a crystalline blue that anyone on Thessia would have considered beautiful. I felt a small shock, as if my heart had skipped a beat.

"Can you walk? We need to get out of here."

My joints and muscles creaked and popped from disuse, but I found myself steady on my feet. I nodded. "I can travel. Come on, let's try the elevator."

We moved, not a moment too soon. A tremor shook the whole tower, and we heard rock grinding and falling outside.

"What the hell was that?" demanded the turian.

"These ruins and the rock layers around them are not stable," I informed them. "If you dug too far with that mining laser, relieving some of the pressure on the deep rock, that might be enough to trigger a seismic event. We have to hurry."

Shepard activated his suit radio. "Joker, get the Normandy here on the double!"

"Aye-aye, Commander," said another human voice over the connection. "Secure and aweigh. ETA eight minutes."

"He needs to move faster," said the quarian, bouncing on her toes in anxiety.

At least the elevator still worked. I tapped in commands to raise it, and we all waited for it to reach the top level. It slowed, then stopped.

Gatatog Ukarn stood in the top-level entrance to the tower, four geth at his side.

"Surrender," he commanded. "Or don't – that would be more fun."
I glanced at Shepard, but he seemed completely unconcerned.

"I don't think so," he said, reaching behind his shoulder for his assault rifle. "We don't have time to negotiate. Back out of here now, or we'll leave footprints on your spine."

"Hah!" the krogan barked. "I like your style."

Well, at least the odds were better than they had been when I was alone. I was determined to help. I called up my biotics and prepared to throw a warp field at the krogan . . . and just then my blood pressure decided to collapse. Blackness closed around my vision, my knees buckled, and I felt myself hit the floor in a dead faint.

I didn't see much of the battle. It was all I could manage to curl into a ball behind the elevator control panel, the only cover available in the middle of the platform.

At first Shepard and his friends backed away, using the columns and conduits around the outside of the platform as partial cover. Gunfire and overload charges took down the geth one at a time.

Then I watched, horrified, as Ukarn broke from his own cover. The battlemaster was in a full krogan charge, his blood-rage lending him strength. He used his shotgun to fire grenades as he ran, closing with Shepard within seconds. I fully expected to see the human go down. I wanted to intervene, but I was as weak as an infant *ailouros* and could do nothing.

Ukarn was less than two meters from Shepard when he was caught in a cross-fire of incendiary rounds. He screamed in frustrated rage and fell, burned beyond even his ability to regenerate.

"Come on!" Shepard pulled me to my feet and supported me as I broke into a staggering run toward the entrance.

We had to pause for a moment, watching kilotons of rock fall from the ceiling of the cavern. The low rumbling from the deep rocks far below had turned into a deep booming roar, deafening all of us.

"Goddess, the mining laser must have penetrated a magma pocket." I shook my head in horror. "Mount Kondratyev is an inactive volcano. It may be about to erupt through this cavern."


We ran out of the tower and across the scaffolding. Even I ran on my own, calling up my body's last reserves. I prayed that a piece of the cavern roof wouldn't choose that moment to obliterate the fragile iron bridge while we were on it.

The quarian and I raced side by side up the entrance shaft. I could see daylight through the hatch. The air grew hotter, sawing at my throat and lungs as I ran, but I wasn't sweating. *Not a good sign.*

We reached the surface. A sleek black-and-silver starship hovered just above. Shepard half-carried me up the loading ramp and into the cargo bay. I was unconscious before the ship rose into the sky.
Orange Juice and Heartbreak

25 February 2183, SSV Normandy, Interstellar Space

I awoke lying supine on a horizontal surface, with pillows behind my neck and a light coverlet thrown over me. In the quiet, I could just barely hear the sound of a mass-effect drive core in operation.

I am on board a spaceship, I realized.

Even that much thought took some effort. My mind seemed to be moving very slowly, as if I was still half-asleep. At least nothing ached, itched, burned, or hurt. In fact I felt perfectly comfortable. I lay quietly with my eyes closed for a few more moments, to drift in darkness and savor the sensation.

"Dr. T'Soni?" A soft, higher-pitched voice, like an asari's.

I opened my eyes.

"Good, you're awake."

A female human leaned over me, giving an impression of silver and white: pale skin, delicate features, large smoke-colored eyes, and iron-gray hair cut short to frame her face. Her expression spoke of serene compassion. I liked her at once.

"What ship is this?" I asked.

She took my wrist and timed my pulse with practiced competence. "You're aboard the Alliance warship Normandy. I'm Dr. Karin Chakwas, the ship’s surgeon. How are you feeling?"

"Much better, thank you." I glanced around and saw a small medical bay. Dr. Chakwas was the only one present. "I should speak to the ship's commanding officer."

"You've already met him."

"Commander Shepard?"

"The same. He wants to see you, but only after you've had a chance to refresh yourself and I've cleared you for light activity. He specifically requested that you take your time."

"All right." I pushed the coverlet aside and sat up, swinging my legs out over the side of the sickbed, and only then noticed Dr. Chakwas's eyes widening in surprise. "Is something wrong?"

"Not at all," said the doctor. "May I check your lungs? I relieved your parched and abraded skin with a topical application of medi-gel, but I want to be sure you've taken no respiratory damage from long exposure to that harsh atmosphere."

I nodded in agreement and sat quietly, breathing deeply as she applied a stethoscope to the appropriate points on my upper and lower back.

Finally she nodded, satisfied. "Well, Dr. T'Soni, I'd say you're in very good health considering what you've been through. You have low blood sugar and your electrolyte balance could be better, but I see no evidence of anything more serious. I recommend you eat a high-calorie meal, and rehydrate over the next few hours by sipping an isotonic beverage. The chief steward can provide what you
need out in the crew mess."

"Thank you, Doctor. I must say, I'm impressed with your knowledge of asari physiology."

"It's entirely book-learning, I'm afraid. I rarely have asari patients." She took my hand to help me get down from the sickbed. "Here, there's a refresher cubicle in the back of the medical bay. Would you like to take a shower?"

Hot water, soap, a stiff brush for my scalp? I sighed in contentment at the very thought. "That sounds delightful."

"Good. May I offer a word of advice?"

I performed a few stretching exercises, enjoying my renewed strength and freedom of movement. "Certainly."

"I gather you haven't spent much time among humans."

"No. I've spent most of the last fifty years working on one dig site or another, often alone. I am not a very social person, I'm afraid. I've met humans, of course, but I've never socialized with any of your people for very long."

"I see." She looked uncomfortable. "What you may not realize is that most human cultures disapprove of nudity."

My eyes flew wide with chagrin. Of course I was nude; the doctor must have removed my clothes before placing me in the sickbed. I made a futile grab at the coverlet, and then tried to cover myself with both hands. That didn't work either, since I wasn't sure what parts most needed to be covered. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend!"

Dr. Chakwas smiled kindly at me. "Don't panic, Doctor. Among most humans it's perfectly acceptable to be nude in private, or in the company of your physician. But in most situations humans tend to associate nudity with eroticism and sexual availability. This is . . . probably not the impression you want to make."

I relaxed a little. "I begin to understand why asari dancers are so popular with your people. Where are my clothes?"

"Taken to the ship's laundry. You can have them back in an hour or so, or you can borrow one of my spare uniforms if you like. I think we're close to the same size."

"That would be fine, thank you. I certainly don't wish to cause trouble."

Dr. Chakwas nodded. "In that case, I'll let you enjoy your shower. I'll leave a uniform outside the cubicle for when you're finished."

It may have been a cramped little refresher cubicle aboard a military starship, but after Therum I considered it blessed luxury. After a time I emerged and put on the doctor's spare uniform, feeling fresh and civilized for the first time in many days. My scalp and crest tingled with the sheer pleasure of being clean and well-groomed.

Dr. Chakwas escorted me out onto the crew deck.

It's very strange how popular vids describe life aboard a starship. I've seen many that were set aboard the first Normandy during its all-too-brief existence. They almost always portrayed the vessel as
being full of vast open spaces, as if it were a luxury passenger liner rather than a warship. In at least one vid the *Normandy* was clearly much larger on the inside than on the outside.

In reality, warships are always cramped. There can be no open space that doesn't serve some essential function. Any large empty compartment means more mass for the drives to propel, more hull area to be protected by armor and kinetic barriers, and a larger cross-section to present an easier target. Every compartment on board ship is exactly as large as it needs to be, and not a cubic meter more.

On the other hand, the vids always seem to omit hundreds of things that are necessary to make long-range space flight possible. Chairs for every crewman on duty, with safety restraints. Workstations for command officers. Small cabins for the senior officers, bunkrooms for the crew. Refreshers, a ship's laundry, water purification and recycling machinery. A galley, and cargo space for food stores and other perishables. More cargo space for equipment, spare parts, personal armor, weapons and ammunition. A ready room and training area for the ship's Marine detachment. Workshops for repair and maintenance. A small laboratory, if the ship is likely to perform planetary surveys or exploration. The list seems endless.

*Normandy* was a crowded, busy place with very little in the way of creature comforts. But for over a hundred days it was my home, and I soon came to love it.

It was apparently mealtime for much of the crew. A dozen uniformed men and women ate, drank, and chattered away, and the chief steward worked quickly to distribute more provender.

I sat down at the nearest available place and looked around at all the humans. Such variety! Pale, dark, tall, short, stocky, slender, male, female, every one of them was unique and distinctive. Asari who have never met many humans often complain that "they all look alike," but I can attest that is not at all the case.

Before long I became aware that many of the humans were watching me as well. If I could judge human expression, some of the glances ranged from uncertainty to open hostility.

Dr. Chakwas returned to my place and placed a tray in front of me. I looked down and saw a variety of shapes and colors. I picked up a standard-issue spork and began to investigate my options. "What is this, Doctor?"

"Breakfast!" said Dr. Chakwas. "We're going to pretend you're on gamma shift and just starting your day."

"I suppose that's true." I decided to start with a spoonful from a pile of soft yellowish curds. It tasted rich, but not unpleasant.

"Those are scrambled eggs," the doctor explained, pointing to my plate. "These are links of pork sausage, and these are called hash browns."

"What about the white porridge in this cup?" I asked.

"I recommend you not eat that," said another human as he sat down across from me. I glanced up and got an overall impression of darkness: black hair, deep brown eyes, and a prominent patch of black fur over each eye. The human's expression was open and friendly. He cheerfully extended a hand for me to grasp, and I felt a tell-tale sensation in the palm of my hand when I touched his.

A human biotic.

Dr. Chakwas made introductions. "Doctor, this is Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko, commander of the
Marine detachment aboard *Normandy*. Lieutenant, Dr. Liara T'Soni, the Prothean expert Commander Shepard rescued earlier today."

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance." I smiled at the Marine, feeling rather shy at all the new faces. "Why should I not eat this?"

"I suspect you'll regret it. Those are called *grits*.

I tasted the *grits* and found them quite palatable, if bland and a little salty. I reached for a tumbler of yellow liquid and found it to be some sort of juice, sugary and tart and full of pulp. I immediately found myself gulping it, drinking half the tumbler before I could force myself to set it down. "Ah, that's good."

Lieutenant Alenko grinned at me. "I know how *that* feels. After I've been working hard with my biotics there's nothing better than a big glass of cold orange juice."

"My people are very fond of fruit juices. This is very good even if it’s reconstituted. I wonder if anyone has tried exporting it to asari space?"

We ate together in silence for a while. I found Lieutenant Alenko an agreeable companion. He knew how to be quiet . . . and with him and the doctor in my company, the hostile stares from the rest of the crew ceased.

"I am curious about something, Lieutenant," I said once most of my food was gone.

"What's that?"

"If I'm not mistaken, many of your crew dislike me on sight. May I ask why?"

"Hmm." The lieutenant toyed with his empty tumbler, not meeting my eyes as he considered how to answer. "What do you know about our mission?"

"Very little. I'm pleased that you came to rescue me from the geth on Therum, but why an Alliance warship would be sent to do that is not clear." A sudden memory struck me. "Wait. Commander Shepard introduced himself as a Spectre. Is the *Normandy* assigned to the Citadel Council?"

"That's right," said Lieutenant Alenko. "We're on detached duty until further notice to support Commander Shepard's mission."

"I thought there were no human Spectres."

"Commander Shepard is the first, as of three days ago now. He’s assigned to locate and take down a rogue Spectre: Saren Arterius."

I felt a burst of enlightenment as I saw the connections. "Ah. My mother Benezia has worked with Saren on occasion for several years now. She doubtless made him aware of my expertise. Together they sent the geth and that krogan to Therum for me. For all any of you know, I might secretly be in league with Saren. That turian, Garrus Vakarian, suggested as much when he first saw me."

"That's a good summation, ma'am, but there's more. Most of the crew wouldn't ordinarily care about Council politics, but in this case we have a good personal reason to want Saren stopped." The lieutenant paused, clearly uncomfortable. "He and his geth attacked a human colony just a few days ago: Eden Prime. They killed tens of thousands of civilians and almost completely wiped out two brigades of Marines. If we hadn't already been on our way there, the whole colony would have been destroyed. Once we were able to prove Saren's involvement, that's what convinced the Council to
strip him of his Spectre status and outlaw him."

I shook my head in disbelief. "I had no idea Saren had gone rogue so badly."

He only watched me in silence.

"Wait." The fine meal I had just eaten suddenly felt like a ball of iron in my gut. "Are you implying that my mother was implicated in this attack?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am." He held my eyes. "We have evidence. A recording of her, discussing the Eden Prime massacre with Saren, recovered from a geth memory core."

I glared at him, not wanting to believe it, but I could see nothing but bleak honesty in his face.

Oh Goddess. No.

Suddenly I couldn't meet anyone's gaze. I bowed my head and covered my face with both hands, feeling as if an abyss had yawned directly under my feet.

This simply cannot be happening.

Mother, you always spoke for the highest ideals of our civilization, always taught that all living things must be treated with compassion. What could possibly have happened to you? What could drive you to agree to the murder of so many?

I didn't break down in tears. Not quite.

It took me a long moment to regain control and muster my courage. Only then did I raise my head again, to look Alenko squarely in the eyes. "I think it's time I saw Commander Shepard. Will you take me to him, Lieutenant?"
Council of War

25 February 2183, SSV Normandy, Interstellar Space

Commander Shepard's quarters turned out to be just a few meters away, on the opposite side of the crew deck. Lieutenant Alenko and Dr. Chakwas led me to a nondescript door labeled LCDR WILLIAM SHEPARD – COMMANDING OFFICER.

"Come in."

Once inside, I glanced around and saw a strictly utilitarian space: tiny and dimly lit, a desk and chair, one other chair in front of the desk, a uniform locker, no decoration or personal items at all. Everything was neatly organized and immaculately clean. Behind the desk I saw another closed door, which I guessed led to his private cabin.

Shepard sat behind his desk in an undress uniform, the blue light of a holographic display casting shadows across his face. When he saw us, he turned off the display and rose. "VI, office lighting to two-thirds."

"Commander, she insisted on seeing you," said Alenko, as the lights became somewhat brighter.

"That's okay, Lieutenant," said Shepard. "Dr. T'Soni. You're looking much better."

"Dr. Chakwas assures me I am going to be fine. You have a very capable physician."

He smiled warmly at the doctor. "She's the best. Please, take a seat."

I did, and he seated himself behind his desk again, while the others stood by the walls to either side. Suddenly it was a very tiny space, and I felt closed in. The scent of human became very strong despite the ventilation fans.

Best not to waste any time, Liara. "Commander, may I ask what you plan to do with me?"

"That's entirely up to you," he said. "I'd like to ask you some questions, but you're our guest, not our prisoner."

"I am not under arrest?"

He shook his head decisively. "I think our friend from C-Sec would call you a witness. You haven't been charged with anything, and I don't think you will be unless we learn that you've been in contact with Saren or Benezia recently."

"I have not."

"All right. Then what do you know about what Saren and your mother are up to?"

"Nothing but what Lieutenant Alenko has told me, and even that I find very difficult to understand. I know who Saren is, of course. He is – or was – a Spectre, with a reputation for brutal, ruthless efficiency. He commands a great deal of wealth, including major shares in several large interstellar corporations. He holds very high citizenship rank in the Turian Hierarchy. He uses all of this influence to promote very militant political positions, and he specifically opposes human expansion and involvement in Citadel affairs."
"How is your mother involved with him?"

"I'm not sure." I took a deep breath, keeping my emotions firmly in check. "By asari standards I am very young, but I left my mother's household over fifty years ago. Most asari keep in regular contact with their mothers, but Benezia and I . . . we are not close. I have not spoken with her in many years. I have heard more from some of her acolytes."

"Acolytes?" asked Alenko.

"My mother is what we call a Matriarch," I explained. "Matriarchs are asari in the last few centuries of their natural lifespan, who have developed a reputation for wisdom and vast experience. Our people respect them and look to them for guidance, even when they do not hold formal office. Sometimes a younger asari will formally commit to following one Matriarch, living by her teachings and working to support her goals. We call these the Matriarch's acolytes."

"It sounds like a religious relationship," Shepard observed, his gaze on me fiercely attentive.

"It can be," I agreed. "My mother, for example, has a reputation as a philosopher and theologian. She is very influential, with thousands of acolytes."

"What does this have to do with Saren?" demanded Alenko.

"One of my mother's acolytes is a childhood friend of mine, not much older than I am. Shiala. We saw each other and exchanged extranet messages for years after my mother and I stopped speaking. Shiala told me that Benezia first met Saren through the Binary Helix Corporation, where they both hold large investments."

"When was this?" asked Shepard.

"About seven years ago. According to Shiala, my mother was impressed with Saren's talents, but concerned about his politics, especially his hostility toward humans. She believed he could be redirected toward more productive goals, given the proper advice. She became his counselor. Some of her acolytes considered the plan too risky, and she permitted them to leave her service, but Shiala was among those who stayed."

"Are you still in contact with Shiala?"

"No, Commander. She ceased to communicate with me . . . it must have been about two years after my mother allied herself with Saren. I know nothing of their activities since then."

"Okay, let me get this straight." Shepard leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers in front of his face. "Saren's been a thorn in the side of humanity for years, but he's never attacked us directly before. Seven years ago your mother became his partner, hoping to change his ways. Five years ago, the last time you spoke with Shiala, there was still no reason to believe he was going to go rogue. For all you knew, your mother's plan was working. Am I good so far?"

"I believe so."

"Now we come to Eden Prime. Are you aware that was once a Prothean world?"

"Yes, Commander. I visited Eden Prime soon after your people colonized it. The colonial government called me in to advise them after they discovered the first Prothean artifacts there."

"Seven days ago the archaeologists working near the New Providence settlement uncovered a large piece of working Prothean technology. A beacon of some kind."
My heart raced and my eyes flew wide with excitement. "That would be an incredible discovery! Only nine Prothean beacons have ever been discovered before, and none of them were operational. We could only guess at their function."

"The Alliance agrees with you. The Normandy was sent to pick up the beacon and take it to the Citadel for analysis. When we arrived, Saren and an army of geth were already attacking the colony in force. They were after the beacon."

"Did they take it?"

"No, but we think Saren must have downloaded some information from it."

"Through a mental link? Some Prothean technology was designed to transmit information directly into the user’s mind."

"I know."

"You do?"

For answer, Shepard only tapped his forehead.

"Oh, by the Goddess!" I breathed reverently, staring at him in fascination. "You have been touched by working Prothean technology? What did you see?"

"Let's table that for now." Shepard narrowed his eyes at me, looking like a predatory avian evaluating its next meal. I shivered for a moment under his regard. "Two days after Eden Prime, the next attack took place way out on the galactic fringe. Dozens of geth tried to capture one asari archaeologist, who happens to be one of the galaxy’s leading experts on the Protheans. What does that suggest to you?"

I blinked and forced my mind to work. "If Saren also received the message from the Prothean beacon, he would probably not have understood it clearly. It would make sense only to a Prothean mind. He will need to find a way to translate the message into images and symbols more compatible with his turian psychology. Then he will need to interpret the translated message. For that . . ."

"He'll need a Prothean expert!" exclaimed Dr. Chakwas.

"It does make sense," said Shepard. "The timing suggests Saren sent the geth after you immediately after encountering the beacon. Some of the geth on Therum might even have been among the ones that attacked Eden Prime. But if he knew he would need you, why not retrieve you before the attack?"

"Perhaps he did not know," I suggested. "All of this suggests that Saren is improvising. He attacked Eden Prime only after humans discovered the existence of the beacon. He attacked Therum only after he realized the Prothean message could not easily be understood. Now that he has failed to recover me, he will look for other ways to get the information he needs."

"Are there any others in your field with whom Saren could consult?" asked Dr. Chakwas.

I shook my head. "I don't think so. He is likely to need an asari scientist to interpret the message correctly, but Prothean archaeology is not a popular field of study among my people. I can only think of one or two scientists who have more time in the discipline, and they live well-protected on major asari worlds such as Thessia or Illium."

"Why would he need an asari scientist?" asked Shepard.
"Our species has limited telepathic abilities. Assuming that Saren can carry out the symbolic translation within his own mind, an asari with the correct expertise could join her mind with his, help him interpret the images and make sense of the message."

"So if I understand you correctly . . . Saren attacked Eden Prime to gain information he can't use, he has no way to translate it into a form he can use, and even if he manages that he still needs you personally to help him make sense of it."

"I am sure he will find ways around those obstacles, Commander."

"It still gives us time to catch up with him before he succeeds," he said, determined. "That leaves the question of just what he wants with the information in the first place."

I pounced. "Where is the beacon now? If I could see the message . . ."

"Destroyed," said Alenko. "Some kind of overload happened while Commander Shepard was still in contact with the beacon."

I felt a surge of disappointment. Such an opportunity, lost.

"The only two people in the galaxy who have the Prothean message are Saren and me," said Shepard, "and I didn't get the whole message before the beacon exploded. I would suggest that you look into my mind, but I don't think it would do any good."

That brought me up short. At that time in my life I had almost no experience with the joining. As part of my education and initiation into adulthood, I had briefly shared memories belonging to my mother or other asari. I had never entered into a full joining with anyone, and I had certainly never touched the mind of an alien.

Join? With this human?

The thought alone was . . . deeply disturbing.

I decided to set the issue aside and concentrate on safer questions. "Can you tell me what you did see, Commander?"

"I can do better than that. Here, listen to this." He called up the console on his desk once more, and tapped a few keys.

A voice spoke, male turian, cold and arrogant. Saren. "Eden Prime was a major victory! The beacon has brought us one step closer to finding the Conduit."

Then I heard another voice, familiar and once loved, now sounding equally cold. Benezia. "And one step closer to the return of the Reapers."

Reapers?

"Your opinion, Doctor?"

"I am not certain. I have seen a few references to something called the Conduit in fragmentary records, all of a very late period, contemporary with the Prothean extinction itself. The references are cryptic, and I have no guess as to their meaning. I have never heard the term Reapers."

"I can help you with that last one. This is intelligence that we gathered from a geth memory core with the help of Tali'Zorah nar Rayya, the quarian you met earlier."
I nodded in understanding.

"The geth believe that the Reapers were an ancient race of synthetic life forms, highly advanced, who were responsible for the extinction of the Protheans. We think Benezia may be referring to a possible reappearance of these Reapers."

I experienced a rather odd sensation, a kind of intellectual vertigo. A mental framework built out of a thousand familiar facts trembled, threatening to shift into a new configuration . . . or perhaps to collapse entirely. Scientists live for such moments. We also dread them.

*Reapers?*

"Forgive me, Commander, but that is a completely new hypothesis. I am at a loss to evaluate it. What evidence do you have?"

"Not much, except for what little I was able to understand from the beacon." His eyes fell to the desktop, troubled, as he relived a difficult memory. "I saw synthetics. At the time I thought they were geth, but now I'm not so sure. They were slaughtering people. Butchering them. Killing whole worlds."

I hesitated, reluctant to commit myself. "That is at least consistent with the physical evidence we have. The Protheans had a galaxy-wide empire. At their height they had explored and colonized many more worlds than our own civilizations have today. Yet they vanished quite abruptly. It is very difficult to imagine any *natural* event that could have caused their sudden extinction."

"*Consistent with the evidence* is a long way from being proof," said Shepard.

I did a double-take at him, as my estimate of his intelligence abruptly rose several levels. *This soldier has hidden depths.*

"That's true," I said aloud. "As far as I know, we have no physical evidence for the Reapers themselves. If they truly existed."

"Maybe I should consider finding that evidence to be part of my mission." Shepard nodded to himself, as if he had come to a sudden decision. "Dr. T'Soni, you began this conversation by asking what I planned to do with you."

"Yes?"

"I'm prepared to make you an offer. On my authority as a Spectre I've hired several civilians to support this mission, but all of them are combat or engineering specialists. We're going to need other areas of expertise as well, if we have any hope of getting to the bottom of this. Would you be interested in joining us as a scientific consultant?"

I considered the idea for a moment. "At what rate of pay?"

The thin fur-patches over his eyes rose, an expression of surprise.

"Commander, I must still make a living."

He grinned in appreciation. "I see your point. Let's say eight thousand credits per thirty-day pay cycle, along with room, board, equipment, plenty of opportunities to do good science, and the continued protection of the people who rescued you from Saren's geth in the first place."

I smiled back at him. "When you put it that way, I can hardly refuse."
"Where shall we put her, Commander?" asked Alenko. "Main crew quarters are full, and I don't think you want her bunking down with Wrex and the Marines."

"There's a small space behind the medical bay that could easily be outfitted as a laboratory," said Dr. Chakwas. "We could rig a cot there for her."

Shepard looked dubious.

"That would be fine," I assured him. "Remember, I am an archaeologist, with years of experience in the field. I don't require luxury."

"Good," he said. "We don't have any to offer."

He extended his hand for me to grasp. Slowly I took it.

"All right," he said briskly. "All of you are dismissed. We may have a galaxy to save, but the paperwork still has to get done."
3 March 2186, Sharjila

I saw very little of Commander Shepard over the next few days.

The Normandy spent that time patrolling the Artemis Tau cluster, searching for further signs of geth activity and finding almost nothing. The attack force on Therum vanished once I escaped. We found no evidence of other incursions. The enemy had apparently lost all interest in the cluster.

Even so, all of us kept busy.

One day Shepard took Lieutenant Alenko and another Marine down to the surface of a barren world, searching for clues to the fate of an Alliance unit that had vanished there. Upon their return, the crew mess buzzed with rumors that they had encountered – and killed – a thresher maw in the course of their mission. The story horrified me in retrospect, but Shepard's team had come back uninjured. Even the landing craft had escaped with barely a scratch.

As we left the system the next day, Normandy's sensors detected a strange energy signature in the planetoid belt. An engineering team investigated, finding an abandoned habitat dome and an intact Prothean data module. As soon as they returned to the Normandy, Tali hurried to my workspace to present the device.

Dr. Chakwas and I had not been idle. When I arrived on board, the small compartment behind the medical bay contained only some excess medical equipment. With the crew in good health, the doctor had plenty of time to help me move crates, set up a cot and desk, and create a working lab space. By the time Tali appeared with her prize, I was ready.

I spent the next few hours painstakingly opening and scanning the Prothean artifact, with the quarian's help. I found Tali to be a very good assistant: young, but extremely bright and an expert technician. She possessed that rare mix of passionate curiosity and careful work habits that can be found in all the best researchers. Together we used our omni-tools to design and implement a new scanning subroutine, capable of decoding the module's storage media.

In the end the device yielded very little new information, but I logged it and its contents with the Council's registry anyway, as the law required. I also wrote a short paper for the Transactions of the Society for Prothean Studies, giving Tali collaborative credit: Notes on the Recovery of a Third Age Data Storage Device in the Sparta Planetoid Belt, by L. T'Soni and T. Zorah. Competence should always be recognized.

As it happened, I was just putting the final touches on that paper when the door to my compartment opened. I glanced over my shoulder and saw Shepard enter.

"Commander, are you coming to check up on me?"

"You do look much better," he smiled. "How are you feeling?"

"Very well." I gestured around at my room. "I have all I need to be productive. Thank you."

He looked around and nodded, clearly pleased.

"I never properly thanked you for saving me from the geth, Commander. If you hadn't shown up . . ."
"I'm just glad we got there in time."

"So am I," I said sincerely. "I know you took a chance bringing me aboard this ship. I have seen the way your crew looks at me. They do not trust me."

"Don't worry, Doctor. I trust you."

"Why?"

He made the surprise-gesture again with the patches of fur over his eyes – his eyebrows, I had learned they were called. "Pardon me?"

"Why do you trust me? You hardly know me, Commander."

He considered the question. "Well, logic tells me you're telling the truth, when you say you're not working with Saren. Besides, I'm a decent judge of character. I get the impression you don't lie very often and you're really bad at it when you do."

I felt my face darken with embarrassment, proving his point. "I think I will take that as a compliment."

"You should," he said, folding his arms and giving me a satisfied smile. "In any case, that isn't why I came to see you."

"How may I help you, Commander?"

"About an hour ago we dropped out of FTL in the Macedon system. Sensors don't show any sign of geth activity here. I would normally be inclined to spend a few hours on routine scans and then move on to the next stop on our patrol route."

"But something has changed your mind."

"Maybe," he admitted. "I just got a message from the Citadel, from an asari diplomat named Nassana Dantius."

I frowned. "That name is familiar . . . ah, of course. I have heard of the Dantius lineage."

"Lineage?"

"A line of genetic inheritance, from mother to daughter across generations. We consider the maternal line of descent most important, since we directly inherit genes only from our mothers. An asari's second name is tied to her lineage. Like a family name for humans."

He blinked, looking confused for a moment. "There are some aspects of asari culture I've never quite understood. Never mind. What do you know about the Dantius lineage?"

"Only that they are a prominent lineage from Illium, very wealthy, with a reputation for unscrupulous conduct."

"Interesting." He ran fingers over the stubble of hair on his chin. "Well, this Nassana Dantius claims one of her sisters has been captured by a gang of slavers, operating from a planet in this system. She's asked us to mount a rescue."

"Have you corroborated her story?"

"To some extent. There have been a lot of raids on outposts and merchant ships in this region of
space in the last few months. Alliance Navy intel suggests Macedon as the most likely base of operations for the pirates."

"It sounds like a worthy cause."

"I agree, even if it's not part of our primary mission." A dangerous note crept into his voice. "I do not like slavers."

My eyes narrowed as I watched him. His face was set and grim, and his hands had balled into fists at his sides. There's a story behind this, I decided, and resolved to find out more.

"I still do not understand why I'm involved, Commander," I said at last.

"I'll be taking Kaidan to the surface of Sharjila to look into this. I'd like you to come as well."

"As part of your combat team?" I reached up and fiddled nervously with my crest. "Commander, I've had a little combat training, but I'm not qualified. Surely one of your Marines would be a better choice?"

"If all I wanted was combat experience, maybe so. But I know you can take care of yourself, you're a powerful biotic, and you're the only available expert on asari society. I think you'll do fine. Will you come?"

_I'm a scientist, not a soldier. Yet he is very difficult to refuse._

"I . . . yes, Commander. I'd be glad to help."

"Good." He smiled. "Come on. Let's go down to the staging deck and get you equipped."

Since arriving aboard I had spent very little time on the staging deck. Lieutenant Alenko's Marines bunked there, along with Garrus Vakarian and a massive krogan named Urdnot Wrex. The Marines had an exercise room, a small recreation center, and other spaces where they could relax when not on duty. An armory served for the storage and maintenance of weapons and armor. Landing parties prepared for their missions in a nearby ready room. The deck also included the largest open space on the Normandy, the staging bay, where cargo and landing vehicles could be moved on or off the ship.

In the armory I met a hard-faced young female Marine named Williams, who helped me select and put on armor. Since I am asari and therefore shaped almost exactly like a human female, we had no trouble finding something that fit well. We settled on a suit of light Aldrin Labs Onyx-Gamma armor, black and close-fitting, rather like the armor favored by asari commandos. Chief Williams reviewed the operation of the suit's systems with me, with careful attention to the kinetic barriers.

For a sidearm I selected an Elkoss Combine military-grade pistol, similar to my personal weapon but more accurate and powerful. Chief Williams insisted I take it into the firing range for familiarization. I think she was surprised when I immediately placed five out of six rounds in the "expert" ring of the target.

I suppose I should have felt appropriately martial as I stepped out into the staging bay in my new gear. Unfortunately all I felt was fear. _Oh Goddess, these men are going to be relying on me. Please don't let me fail them._

Shepard and Alenko already waited by the landing vehicle, which Shepard called the _Mako_. Both of them turned and watched as I approached. I caught a flicker of keen interest in Alenko's eyes, and suddenly wondered if he found the sight of me sexually appealing.
Shepard, on the other hand, was expressionless and professional. "If you're ready, Doctor?"

We clambered into the Mako through its side door. Shepard sat in the front on the left, taking the driver's position, while Alenko took the right-hand seat to control the weapons. I sat behind and slightly above them, an inactive haptic interface display within easy reach. I quickly settled into my seat and secured the safety harness.

"Kaidan, do you think you can take the EWS display as well as the guns?" asked Shepard.

Without being prompted, I activated the display in front of me and parsed through the available menus. *Electronic Warfare Suite*: laser detection grid, ground-penetrating radar, electronic countermeasures, kinetic barriers, and communications. All of it was at least somewhat familiar. "I can handle EWS," I told them.

Shepard twisted in his seat to peer back at me in surprise. "Are you sure?"

"I've used instruments like these before."

They exchanged a glance, then Alenko shrugged, Shepard nodded, and they went back to their own preparations without another word. I allowed myself a small smile. *Perhaps I can be of use after all.*

"Two minutes, Commander," came the pilot's voice over the shipboard channel.

"Roger that," said Shepard.

We waited. Then the staging bay door opened and the Mako was abruptly flung out into space.

I emitted a small squeak of terror.

"You all right back there, Doctor?" asked Shepard, never looking away from his controls and instruments. There was a low roar as the Mako's thrusters fired.

"Fine, Commander." I kept my voice steady by sheer willpower.

*Merciful Goddess,* I thought. *These humans are insanely reckless!*

I distracted myself by checking my instruments and glancing at the exterior display. Sharjila seemed very inhospitable, its atmosphere dense and poisonous. High winds carried clouds of abrasive silica dust that reduced visibility and interfered with some of my sensors. The primary star loomed large on the horizon, flooding the plains and hills below us with reddish-orange light.

"EWS, report."

I glanced quickly across my displays. "All systems show green. ECM online. Kinetic barriers at full power. Detection grid shows no active sensors on us."

We struck the surface, a hard jolt, and then the vehicle's suspension and inertial dampers softened the blow. Shepard immediately cut in the drive wheels and sent us bounding forward across the landscape.

I should probably clarify something at this point. Legend has it that Shepard was supernaturally skilled at almost everything to which he turned his hand, with two major exceptions: dancing and piloting. I can attest that this is partially true. Shepard’s dancing was *terrible*, especially by asari standards. All the grace and confidence he carried on the battlefield simply vanished the moment he stepped out onto a dance floor.
On the other hand he was a perfectly competent pilot. It's just that not even the most talented driver could make the Mako graceful.

It bounced. It wavered. It shook. It slewed from side to side. It collided with minor obstacles and recoiled. Occasionally it took to the air, slowly rotating around all three axes, always threatening to flip over without ever quite managing to do so. The inertial dampers meant that we felt very little of all this, but we could see it happening on the external monitors, to the detriment of my stomach.

After ten minutes of this, I simply set my jaw and kept my eyes as far away from the external view as possible.

"Picking up comms and sensor emissions from up ahead," I said at last, touching keys to send the bearing to Shepard’s HUD.

"That must be the slavers' stronghold," he agreed. "There's a terrain feature ahead and to the left that will let us get close without coming into their line of sight. Ready, Kaidan?"

Alenko nodded, not looking away from his displays. "Let's go, Commander."

Shepard accelerated toward a low hill on the horizon, then made a long, shallow turn to the left. The hill loomed ahead, then passed to our right . . .

My display lit up. "Active radar signal. We've been detected."

The slavers' fortress sat on a low rise, less than a kilometer away.

"Sniper tower, dead ahead," reported Alenko. "Firing."

The main gun fired with a loud boom.

"Laser targeting detected," I reported. "Two more snipers at one o'clock and three o'clock. No sign of GARDIAN turrets."

Boom. Boom. Then the coaxial gun fired, sounding like an enormous sheet of canvas being torn in half.

"Turning right," snapped Shepard. "Traverse!"

"On it," said Alenko.

I saw we were taking minor damage. Possibly one of the snipers had hit us before the main gun obliterated him. "Kinetic barriers at eighty percent."

Shepard continued his hard right turn as we crested the rise. We passed across the stronghold’s south face at high speed, and then Shepard turned left again to approach the main entrance. "Infantry squad at ten o'clock!"

"I see them," said Alenko. The coaxial gun hammered away, and then the main gun fired once more.

I glanced at the external view and saw several black-clad figures twisting as they fell. "Kinetic barriers at sixty percent and holding."

Shepard slowed the Mako to a stop about twenty meters from the stronghold's main entrance. "Any sign of active sensors?"

I checked my displays. "No, Commander. All targets down."
"Time to go inside, then."

We opened the Mako's side door and emerged into a howling wind, laden with abrasive dust. I saw an indicator inside my helmet turn yellow, indicating that despite my armor, the environment was harsh enough to do me harm in time.

Fortunately we didn't have far to go. The two humans led the way, on the alert, Shepard with his assault rifle and Alenko with a pistol, their feet scraping through the ever-present dust and fines on the ground. I followed, unconsciously taking up the handgun stance I had learned decades before. No one challenged us as we crossed to the stronghold's entrance.

The main entrance was locked from the inside and far too thick to blast open, but to one side we discovered an individual-sized door with a code lock. Alenko quickly hacked the door open, and we passed through an airlock. Once we were in a shirt-sleeves environment, I removed and stowed my helmet with a sigh of relief.

Inside the stronghold we found a dimly lit entrance corridor, with a small ready room and another door at the far end. We moved down to the ready room, which was unoccupied except for a small stack of crates. There Alenko used his omni-tool to scan the room on the other side, and nodded grimly to Shepard.

The commander returned his assault rifle to its hardpoint on his back. In its place he produced a longer, thinner weapon: a sniper rifle. "All right, Doctor, here's how this is going to work," he said in a low voice. "You and Kaidan will take up positions on either side of this door. Use your sidearms and your biotics to harass the enemy. Your job is to keep them busy and yourselves alive."

"Where will you be?" I asked.

He pointed to the crates, which I realized were well-positioned to give him cover and still permit him to see through the door once it was open. "Right there, for the kill."

We took our positions. Alenko opened the door.

A storm of weapons fire blazed in the doorway, enough to kill us instantly had we simply walked through.

Alenko and I began to duck out, each time firing a few shots or sending a biotic field into the large chamber on the other side of the door. We staggered our attacks, never appearing at the same time, changing the interval from one to the next. The withering fire continued, but we were never exposed to it long enough to bring down our kinetic barriers.

I soon became frustrated with the tactical situation. The enemy's ferocious weapons fire prevented us from pressing into the chamber. On the other hand the enemy had no way to flank us, get behind us, or force us to expose ourselves. So long as Alenko and I stayed in action, it seemed like a stalemate.

Then Shepard fired, bringing down the lightning.

I was immediately in awe. I had seen asari commandos with centuries of experience who were less proficient. He exposed himself for no more than two or three seconds at a time, but each time he calmly found a target, fired, and scored a hit. If a slaver exposed even a tiny portion of his body, it was enough to give Shepard the chance to strike unerringly. A shot in the shoulder or the leg took down the target's kinetic barriers and crippled him. A shot in the head meant instantaneous death.

Little by little, the enemy's fire slackened.
Suddenly Shepard stowed the sniper rifle and produced his assault rifle once again. Vaulting over the crates, he charged through the door. Kaidan followed. After a split second of terrified surprise, so did I.

Only a few of the slavers remained, the careful or cowardly ones who had not exposed themselves to Shepard's terrifying accuracy. They could no longer prevent us from entering the chamber and finding new vantage points.

Shepard fired his rifle in accurate three-round bursts, twisting to hit multiple targets even as he ran for his selected bit of cover.

Alenko calmly sabotaged one pirate's weapon at range, then cut him down with two well-placed pistol shots.

I saw movement to my left, hurled a biotic warp without thinking, and heard screams as a slaver's body began to vibrate apart from inside. Shepard fired a burst from his assault rifle and the screaming stopped.

A krogan mercenary charged into the chamber from a back room, roaring and brandishing his shotgun. We concentrated our fire on him, bringing down his shields in a flare of blue light. Alenko and I hit him with biotic throws almost simultaneously, knocking him off his feet. Our combined fire tore him to shreds.

Then a biotic field came at us, picking Shepard up and flinging him several meters into a pile of crates.

"I will destroy you!"

From nowhere appeared another attacker, graceful and swift.

Asari.

She flanked Alenko and fired at him with a heavy pistol. I saw his shields go down with a flash, even as he dove frantically for a new piece of cover.

I shouted something and broke from my own cover, launching the strongest biotic lift I could manage. The asari in red-black armor rose into the air, spinning helplessly, trying to twist and bring her weapon to bear on me.

I was faster and had both feet on the ground. My sidearm kicked at my wrists, one-two-three, and she cried out in agony.

Then Shepard's rifle thundered and she fell.

Silence.

I found my heart racing, my breath coming hard and fast. My hands shook violently as I holstered my sidearm.

"Are you okay, Doctor?" Shepard's voice was full of concern. I could see Kaidan on his feet and moving toward us, looking unharmed.

"Goddess, Shepard." I struggled to keep my voice from shaking. "After all of that there's no need for formality between us. My name is Liara."
He gave a short laugh. "All right, Liara."

"It's just an adrenaline reaction. I'll be fine."

We spent about an hour exploring the stronghold, and found no more slavers alive. We discovered bunkrooms, offices, cages in which slaves must have been kept, all empty. Eventually we convened in one of the empty offices, where Kaidan was working to hack into the slavers' computer network.

"I have a question, Shepard," I told him. "If Nassana Dantius's sister was captured by these slavers, then why was the only asari in this place apparently leading them?"

"I think I can answer that," said Kaidan. He had apparently gained access, and was downloading the slavers' databases into his omni-tool. He pointed to a document on the display in front of him.

Shepard examined it closely. "It's a purchase order for weapons and armor, working through a broker on Omega. What about it?"

"Look at who signed the order," said Kaidan.

Shepard and I did. He cursed under his breath.

*Dahlia Dantius.*

I nodded at this confirmation of my suspicions. "I think we have just been manipulated into helping Nassana Dantius resolve a family disagreement."

"You may be right," said Shepard. "We'll have to have a word with her when we return to the Citadel."

"We finished here, Commander?" asked Kaidan, closing his omni-tool.

"If you've got all the evidence locked down for C-Sec."

Kaiden nodded and rose.

"Liara."

"Yes, Commander?"

Shepard extended his hand. "I'm very glad you came with us today."

I smiled and took it. "So am I."
6 March 2183, SSV Normandy, Interstellar Space

Over the next few days Normandy finished her patrol through the Artemis Tau cluster, still finding no sign of geth activity. We then turned back for the Knossos system and the mass relay. Shepard wanted to return to the Citadel and consult with both Council and Alliance intelligence, hoping to turn up some lead as to where Saren might strike next.

During that time, I discovered that something had changed for me on board the Normandy.

Before Sharjila most of the human crew showed signs of uneasiness around me, reluctant to accept my presence. To them I represented an unknown: alien, mysterious, daughter of an enemy. Not wishing to disturb anyone, I lived as a recluse, spending most of my time in the medical bay or my little laboratory. I even ate most of my meals there, alone or with only Dr. Chakwas for company.

I suspect Kaidan made the difference.

The morning after Sharjila, two of the young Marines approached while I stood in the breakfast line and engaged me in conversation. Before long I found myself sitting in the center of the crew mess with them. We talked for over an hour. I answered earnestly curious questions about asari culture, asked them about their life in the Alliance military, and listened to their gossip and speculation about our mission.

That evening, the same thing happened with another Marine and two technicians from the bridge crew. Once again, almost before I understood what was happening, I was sitting in the crew mess surrounded by chattering humans.

Kaidan passed through the mess just before I finished my evening meal. He didn't join our group, but he caught my eye as he passed, and nodded with a small smile. I thought I understood then. In my mind's eye I could see him delivering his judgment to his Marines, knowing the message would spread through the crew: The asari did well on Sharjila. She's okay.

From that point on, although I still sometimes ate alone in my compartment, I spent most of my mealtimes among the crew. I came to know most of them by name, and learned about them as people. I became curious about the humans around me, and began to enjoy their company for the first time. It helped me deal with the uncertainty of our mission, the trembling that came over me whenever I thought of my mother gone over to the enemy.

Even Ashley Williams came around.

Before we landed on Sharjila she had been coldly professional, giving no sign of her personal feelings as she helped me prepare for the mission. On our return she had warmed slightly, perhaps relieved that Shepard and Kaidan had come to no harm, that I had been an asset and not a liability.

Three days later she entered the mess just as I emerged from the medical bay for the evening meal. At first she glanced at me and hesitated, but then she took on a determined expression and walked to meet me by the galley.

"Doctor," she greeted me brusquely.

"Chief Williams."
"Mind if I join you?"

We filled our trays and sat down out in the mess. I had been exploring the possibilities of pasta dishes, great mounds of starchy noodles with vegetable sauces, meat, and cheese. Chief Williams had selected a salad, a cold collation of leaves and other fresh vegetables.

"Hardly seems fair," she observed after we seated ourselves.

"What do you mean?"

She pointed at my plate with her spork. "That. How do you eat like that and still look as good as you do? Even with all the exercise I get I have to watch every bite."

"I understand. I believe the asari metabolic rate is set somewhat higher than yours. Our biotic abilities require the support of a high-calorie diet."

"I know what you mean. I've seen Kaidan – Lieutenant Alenko – eat. He can sure put it away."

I smiled. "He is Kaidan to me as well, Chief Williams. At least since Sharjila."

She blinked and looked undecided for a moment. "What the hell. Call me Ash."

"All right . . . Ash. My name is Liara."

"Okay." She worked on her salad for a few moments, obviously trying to decide how to attack the subject that was on her mind. "Liara, I just can't figure something out. What's up with you and your mom?"

_This again_, I thought ruefully. "I assure you, I am not working with her. I've had no contact with her in a long time."

"That's just it. She's your mother. How can you not be in contact with her?"

"Very easily, I'm afraid."

"Isn't family important to asari?"

"Certainly it is." I cocked my head to one side, watching her closely. "I sense there is more to your concern than simple mistrust, Ash. Your own family is important to you?"

"Absolutely." She stabbed at her salad as if to vent her frustrations. "Family traditions, family honor, they're everything to me."

"The same is true for some asari, but not for all. Surely there are humans who live more or less estranged from their families?"

"I suppose," she admitted.

"Tell me about your family," I suggested.

She shot me a strange look, almost hostile. "It's big. I've got three sisters, and more cousins than I can count. Family reunions would be a madhouse if we weren't scattered across half the galaxy."

"There are many colonists in your family?"

"Most of us are Alliance military, actually. That's one of the family traditions I mentioned." She
hesitated, and then changed the subject. "How about you? Big family?"

"No. I am my mother's only child, and I never met my father. My mother raised me alone."

"That's terrible."

I shrugged and took another bite of my spaghetti. "It is not uncommon among asari. Our customs don't require permanent pair-bonding, as I understand is normal among humans. My mother was wealthy and independent enough to care for me without help from a bondmate."

"But now you haven't talked to her in a long time. Why? Was she mean to you?"

"Not at all!" I shook my head decisively. "She was strict, but never unkind."

Ash waited with patience.

"I suppose it was a matter of the expectations placed upon me when I was a child," I explained slowly. "It's very unusual for a Matriarch, especially one as powerful as Benezia, to bear her only child so late in life. I grew up knowing that my mother was a great leader among our people. I was expected to follow in her path, to become a philosopher and diplomat, to be a leader in my own right. But I had no desire to do any of that. I became a scientist instead, studying an obscure field that few of my people find interesting. My mother always supported me, but I think I was a great disappointment to her."

"So you go your way and she goes hers," Ash said. "Then there's nothing but awkward extranet messages and the occasional greeting card on a holiday, until even that seems like too much trouble. Yeah, that's not the Williams way, but I've heard the story before."

"And now she's joined forces with Saren and the geth," I said grimly. "I don't understand it. It's so out of character for her."

"People change. How long has it been since you talked regularly?"

"About fifty years."

Ash dropped her spork and stared at me in shock. "Just how old are you, anyway?"

"One hundred and six," I told her.

"Damn." She laughed out loud. "I hope I look half as good when I get to be your age!"

I spread my hands widely, a helpless gesture. "I suppose she could have changed. Fifty years is not a short time even for asari. But I keep hoping that we will find it's all a horrible misunderstanding."

"I hope so too."

I could tell she didn't believe it, but I thanked her all the same.

7 March 2183, Citadel

Normandy reached the Citadel the next morning.

Today the Citadel orbits high above Earth, that unlikely capital of the galaxy, but in those days the Reapers had not yet moved it. It remained where it had been since at least the days of the Protheans, deep inside the Serpent Nebula, gravitationally bound to a planetless A8-class star. As always, the
view was breathtaking as *Normandy* approached dock: great streamers and plumes of dust back-lit by the distant star, shadows of the Citadel’s ward arms stretching across thousands of kilometers of space.

Almost the moment we opened the airlock, Shepard found himself buried with work.

First an unpleasant Alliance officer named Mikhailovich appeared, insisting on a full inspection of the *Normandy*. Shepard spent over two hours escorting the admiral around the ship, explaining its features and answering a series of antagonistic questions. Once the admiral had been sent on his way, the Commander and I took an elevator onto the station . . . only to be ambushed by a member of the human press. Once again Shepard tolerated a hostile challenge, keeping his patience and his wits about him.

"I'm surprised," I said after the reporter finished her interview, as we walked toward a causeway leading to the Presidium. "You're a Spectre. Technically you aren't under Alliance authority anymore, and you certainly don't have to speak to the press if you don't want to."

"A little tact can pay off in the long run," he explained. "Consider my position. I'm the first and only human Spectre. I have to represent my whole species to the Council, prove that humans can play a positive role in galactic society. It's also my job to represent the Council to the rest of humanity, military and civilians alike, to demonstrate that they can benefit from being part of galactic society. None of that is going to work if I act like an arrogant jackass."

"You think of yourself as an ambassador?"

"It's not the profession I was trained for, but duty calls." He glanced at me and smiled suddenly, as if inviting me to share a joke. "I try to do a better job at it than some who have the title."

We emerged onto the Presidium and took a skycar to the embassy district. Nassana Dantius had agreed to meet us in an expensive lounge just around the corner from the Asari Embassy. When we entered, it wasn't hard to pick her out. Half the inhabitants of the lounge were asari, but her opulent gown and coldly arrogant expression set her apart from the others. Besides, she resembled her dead sister.

She looked up and saw us as we approached her table. "Commander Shepard? I am Nassana Dantius."

Shepard and I seated ourselves, exchanging a moment's glance as we waited to see what gambit she would employ.

"I'm glad you're here," Nassana continued. "Were you able to rescue my sister?"

Shepard raised a hand to stop her. "Don't bother, Nassana. Dahlia is dead. I know she was a pirate, and the leader of that slaver band."

I had to admire her poise. She barely hesitated. "I'm impressed, Spectre. I was all set to manipulate you into hunting her down for me. I suppose that won't be necessary now."

"You wanted your sister dead?" I asked.

"She was a criminal. If word of her activities got out, I'd be considered a security risk. The Council would put me on administrative leave, revoke my clearance, or worse. I can't afford that."

"And now?" inquired Shepard, his voice calm and mild.
She became coy. "I shall transfer a little something into your account as a token of my appreciation. I'm sure you'll find the amount satisfactory."

A slow, cynical smile spread across Shepard's face. "Come on, Nassana. I'm a Spectre. Do you really think a few credits are going to motivate me?"

"That's fair enough, I suppose. Name your price."

Shepard's voice became very cold, and his smile vanished without a trace. "All right. I want you off the Citadel."

"What?"

"Never mind that you set me up to take her down without getting your own hands dirty. She was a slaver. She didn't get anything she didn't deserve." He rose from his chair and leaned across the table, pushing her personal space, looking rather like an angry beast. "What matters is that you knew she was a pirate and slaver. You did nothing to stop her. The only thing that mattered to you was your position on the Citadel. The people she killed and kept in cages never entered your mind."

Nassana's face turned ugly with rage. "That was not my problem, Commander."

"It is now." Shepard produced a data card and slapped it onto the table in front of Nassana. "Here's a copy of all the data we mined from your sister's networks. Dates and locations of pirate raids. Manifests of loot and slaves taken. Prices and locations of sale for each piece of so-called inventory. And finally, all of your correspondence with her over the past three years. There's more than enough here to prove you're not just a security risk, but an accessory. Take it home, look it over. If you're still on the Citadel in three days, a copy goes to C-Sec."

"Where do you expect me to go?"

Shepard mocked her: "That is not my problem, Nassana."

"You might go back to Illium," I suggested mildly. "The life of a corporate executive is hardly one of hardship. Even if it takes you away from the centers of power here on the Citadel."

"What do you know of power, you pathetic little pureblood?" she snapped.

I felt an icy chill. Nassana had clearly recognized me, and knew far too much about me for comfort.

"She knows enough to use it wisely," said Shepard. "I can't trust you to do the same. Three days. We're done here."

He turned and walked away. I rose and followed him out the door.

"Do you suppose it worked?" he asked, once we were at a safe distance.

"I suspect it did. I don't think you realize how intimidating you can be to asari."

"Intimidating, am I?" He didn't seem displeased.

"Well, you are very large. And quite ugly by asari standards. And many asari find humans a little frightening. So aggressive and reckless."

He frowned at me for a moment, until he saw my small smile. "Are you messing with me, Doctor?"

"Only enough to keep you honest, Commander."
9 March 2183, Citadel

Meetings filled all of Shepard’s time for the next two days: Alliance intelligence, C-Sec, the Spectre organization. Kaidan and Garrus accompanied him to these. No one insisted that I attend, so I had the time to myself.

I decided to go shopping.

Almost all my possessions were lost on Therum, not only my scientific equipment but my personal effects as well. Fortunately my identity card and my credit chit had been in a pocket of my jacket the entire time, and they had come onto the Normandy with me. I had no trouble re-establishing my identity and gaining access to my bank accounts on the Citadel.

I bought several changes of clothing, utilitarian enough not to stand out aboard an Alliance warship. Toiletries more suited for an asari. Several pieces of scientific equipment that might be useful. A new notebook computer, better than the standard Alliance issue. A few asari delicacies, to be stored among galley cargo for my personal use.

Then I decided to be a little irresponsible. I may have been a young, reclusive scientist, but I was still asari. My morale required that I be able to present myself well on appropriate occasions.

In a Presidium boutique I found a long shimmer-silk evening dress in a deep violet hue. It fit me perfectly, leaving my shoulders and most of my back bare, giving the impression that it stayed on due to sheer personal magnetism. It came with arm-length gloves to match, and a silver choker set with high-quality amethysts. Finally I found a tiny bottle of fragrance, a scent I had always liked, extracted from Thessian mountain flowers. The whole ensemble made a noticeable dent in my bank account, and it went straight into a valise to be stored in a dark corner of my compartment aboard the Normandy. I had no idea whether I would ever wear any of it . . . but I felt a little better knowing it would be there if I wanted it.

Finally I found a quiet wine-bar not far from the Council Tower, ordered a class of chilled meliteia, and sat down on the terrace where I could get a broad view of the Presidium. For about half an hour I sipped my wine, idly paging through extranet messages on my omni-tool. An unobtrusive attendant took away my empty glass and replaced it with another, leaving me to savor the peace and quiet.

It didn't last, of course. After a time I heard heavy footsteps approaching and turned to see who it was. "Oh. Hello, Commander."

"May I join you?" He made a polite gesture of refusal when the attendant appeared and offered him a wine list.

"Of course."

He sat down at the table across from me, and simply relaxed in the quiet for a moment. "This is a nice place, Liara. It suits you."

I blinked at the moment of flattery. "Thank you, Shepard. May I ask how your meetings are going?"

"Finished, and we've identified a new objective. Normandy departs in ninety minutes."

"Then I had best return to the ship. My errands here are finished."

"Liara . . ."
"So much concern in his voice, he must have heard bad news. "What is it, Shepard?"

"There's been a sighting of geth on Noveria," he said, not meeting my eyes.

"Noveria?" The name was unfamiliar to me, but a quick reference to the astrographic database in my omni-tool cured that. "That's not a former Prothean world. It's also deep within human space. What could Saren possibly want there?"

"No idea. We'll have to go and investigate." His face cleared, as if he had reached some decision. "Liara, I want you to stay here. Take a ship back to Thessia and don't worry about this anymore. You should be safe enough in the heart of Citadel space."

I frowned at him. "What are you not telling me, Commander?"

"Alliance intel reports that about the same time as the geth sighting, an asari Matriarch arrived on Noveria with a whole platoon of commandos in her entourage. She hasn't been seen to leave, so there's a good chance she's still there."

"I see. You think it may be Benezia."

"It seems likely."

I considered it, angry at the wine in my blood that made me mistrust my own thinking. "I do not see that it makes any difference. All the reasoning that suggested I might be useful to you still holds. Unless you order me off the Normandy, I will come with you."

His hand balled into a fist on the tabletop. "Damn it, Liara. Do you realize that I may have to kill your mother?"

"I know." I sighed. "Shepard, if this is all some kind of horrible mistake, if she can be reasoned with, then that's even more reason that you need me. I could never forgive myself if I was not there to give her a chance, and that was why you had to kill her."

He looked uncertain, seeing my logic but still not wanting to accept it.

I reached out and placed my hand over his for a moment, feeling a small shock at the contact of my skin with his. "Shepard. I trust you. I know you would never do Benezia harm unless there was no other choice."

He glanced down at my hand, surprised, and then nodded reluctantly. "All right. If you're sure."

"I have never been more sure of anything in my life. Saren must be stopped, Shepard, no matter what the cost. I will be with you until that is done."

His eyes met mine, cool blue without any hint of pretense in them. "Thank you, Liara."
Suddenly, Batarians

9 March 2183, Citadel

When we reached Normandy's airlock, Lieutenant Pressley was already there to greet us.

I had seen the lieutenant before: an older male human with a partially naked cranium, neatly trimmed facial hair, and tired grey eyes. He served as Shepard's second-in-command and the ship's navigator. Unlike his superior he had no interest in the "aliens" among the crew. Even after Sharjila he had never warmed to me.

Now he hurried to meet us with a very worried expression, handing Shepard a datapad. "Commander, we've just received FLASH traffic from Admiral Hackett."

Shepard scanned the pad and frowned. I suppressed my curiosity, remaining silent while he read.

"Is anyone still ashore?" Shepard demanded after he finished.

"Adams and an engineering team are just finishing up repairs to the hull plating over compartment four-A. They've been advised. Adams says they'll have everything nailed down in ten minutes."

"Good. I'm moving our departure time up by thirty minutes. Inform port authority and demand a priority lane outbound to the Theta-6 relay. Give them my Spectre authorization code if you have to."

"Aye-aye," said the lieutenant, and hurried away.

"What is it, Shepard?" I asked.

"There's been an accident at one of our colonies," he explained. "Terra Nova. They've been working to move a nickel-iron asteroid into planetary orbit. Something's gone wrong. They've lost contact with the engineering crew on the asteroid, the fusion torches they installed won't stop firing, and the asteroid is on a trajectory to impact the planet directly in a little over a day."

"Merciful Goddess," I murmured.

"You said it. Normandy is the only Alliance ship close enough and fast enough to have a chance at getting there in time to investigate." He gave me a look. "Noveria will have to wait."

I nodded, troubled but doing my best not to show it. "Let me know if there's anything I can do to help you."

"I will."

I left Shepard to his duties and took the lift down to the crew deck.

Goddess, forgive me for being glad I don't have to face Benezia yet. And never let Shepard suspect it!

9 March 2183, SSV Normandy, Interstellar Space

Normandy was a very quiet ship during the fast run to Terra Nova.
That evening I couldn't sleep at first. Sitting alone in my compartment, I looked up the vital statistics for the Asgard star system, including those for Terra Nova and the errant asteroid. I discovered horror in the dry mathematics. A collision would not only kill millions of human colonists, it would wreck the planet's rich biosphere for millions of years to come. Such a disaster would shake the entire galaxy.

We raced for time against unimaginably high stakes. The Citadel Council took the preservation of natural biospheres very seriously. If human negligence destroyed Terra Nova, the backlash against human colonial expansion would be *ferocious*. Humanity would be lucky to escape the highest level of sanctions, punishment so crippling that the Alliance might be tempted to secede from galactic society entirely.

On the other hand, if the destruction could be provably attributed to some *foreign* power, then the Alliance would be justified in declaring all-out war against the attacker – and the Council might very well join in on the side of the Alliance.

Suddenly I saw the truth. I called up the ship's communications net on my omni-tool. "Commander Shepard?"

"What is it, Liara?"

"I know what has happened in the Asgard system."

"I think I do too, but let's hear your theory."

"Batarian terrorists."

"I agree," he said without hesitation. "Colonial engineers were already moving the asteroid. All the batarians have to do is hijack it, direct it at the planet, and get away before the collision. The impact destroys any evidence they were involved, and it looks as if we humans wrecked our own colony planet."

"Thus bringing the Alliance into a direct confrontation with the Council, and the Batarian Hegemony to profit from the chaos." I frowned, seeing the other side of the equation. "Of course, if the ploy fails there will be evidence that the terrorists acted alone, without the Hegemony's support or approval. That would confuse the issue enough to keep the Council neutral."

"So the batarians have everything to gain, nothing to lose. Sure. We need to be careful, though. So far we're just speculating, even if it does all sound very plausible."

I paused, mustering my courage. "Shepard, may I make a recommendation?"

"I'm listening."

"If you take a combat team to the asteroid, bring either Detective Vakarian or me with you. It might be important to have a witness from one of the Council races on hand."

He said nothing for a long moment, while he considered the implications. "Good idea. Get some sleep, Liara, because you've just talked yourself into the job."

I acknowledged his order and signed off. Then I went to lie down, although sleep took a long time to come.

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*10 March 2183, Asgard System, Asteroid X57*
While I tried to rest, Normandy's pilot, navigator, and engineering team worked miracles.

The Exodus Cluster had its primary mass relay in the Utopia system, home of the Eden Prime colony. The Asgard star system drifted almost sixteen light-years away from there. Normally the Normandy would have required a little more than a standard day to reach Terra Nova. Somehow Lieutenant Pressley found a more dangerous but more direct route. Lieutenant Moreau flew the route without wrecking us in any dense knots of the interstellar medium. Lieutenant Adams and Tali kept the mass-effect drive core working at 105% of capacity. In the end we dropped out of FTL well ahead of schedule, only twenty-two hours and a few minutes after departing the Citadel.

Shepard, Tali, and I boarded the Mako as the ship began its final approach. I listened to comm chatter as we waited to deploy.

"Drift less than 2000-K," said the pilot. "Stealth systems engaged. No sign of hostile vessels in space, can't tell if there are any unexpected visitors on the ground."

"What's the asteroid's trajectory?" asked Shepard.

"It's on track to slam into the Sea of Storms in just over four hours."


The staging bay doors opened and the Mako flew out into space. This time I barely noticed any vertigo, focused as I was on the unfolding crisis. I checked my displays and calmly reported no active sensors on our vehicle as it glided to the asteroid's surface.

"How long do we have, Joker?" asked Shepard.

"Best guess? If those fusion torches aren't shut down within an hour, Terra Nova has had it."

"All right. Kaidan?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Have your squad ready for insertion at the second drop zone as soon as I give the signal. Assume hostile forces, go in fast and heavy. Are Garrus and Wrex ready to go?"

A krogan voice broke in, like raspy thunder. "More than ready, Shepard."

"I'll take that as a yes. Everybody stay sharp. No margin for error here."

We struck the surface and bounced high. Shepard smoothly turned up the input to the Mako's mass-effect core, amplifying the asteroid's pull on us and giving us more traction. Then he set out for the first fusion torch.

"Commander, I'm picking up active radar transmission from up ahead," I reported. "Low intensity, probably just side-lobe radiation for now. We'll be detected as soon as we have line-of-sight to the torch."

"That tears it. The Alliance would have put rocket turrets around the torches. If they're active then someone has hijacked the defensive systems."

"How do you want to handle this?" asked Tali.

"That depends on how good a shot you are with the main gun."
Tali turned in her seat to give Shepard a pointed stare. It was a very good stare, given that we could barely see her eyes at all.

"I'll concede the point," he said, amused. "There's no cover to speak of, so we're going to rely on speed and mobility. I'll try to give you a moment's warning each time I have to maneuver. Take out the turrets at your discretion."

"Got it, Shepard," said Tali eagerly.

We drove down a long slope, made a wide left turn, and saw the first fusion torch thundering away in the distance.

"Active sensors. Four . . . no, five turrets coming online." My fingers flew across the display, marking the turrets and sending their locations to Shepard and Tali. "They're shielded. You'll need to get close to take them out."

"Let's dance," said Shepard.

The Mako became almost maneuverable in microgravity. Shepard jinked left, right, zoomed forward, slammed into reverse. Even with the instruments in front of me I became confused within moments, but he seemed to maintain a mental map of all of the turrets as well as any rockets currently in flight. He simply knew which direction to dodge at any given moment. The turrets fired at us repeatedly, and we took two or three hits, but most of the missiles flew past us without effect. Meanwhile our main gun fired like a metronome. Tali lined up shots almost as quickly as the capacitors could recharge, and she didn't often miss.

Finally we had silenced all of the turrets. Shepard pulled up outside the entrance to the torch’s control bunker, and we emerged from the Mako ready for trouble. We passed through the airlock, into a large storage room . . .

"Batarians," said Shepard in disgust.

Our hypothesis had been confirmed. Three batarians looked up from a piece of equipment they had been working on, gave us startled four-eyed stares, and then dove for cover. Assault rifle fire burst out at us. Shepard leaped for the cover of a piece of heavy machinery, producing his sniper rifle, and Tali and I hurried to find positions for ourselves.

It reminded me of Sharjila. I used my biotics to lift enemy soldiers out of cover or knock them off their feet, and fired my pistol at targets of opportunity. Tali remotely overloaded enemy weapons and shields, and turned out to be quite deadly with a shotgun. Shepard built a model of the battlefield in his mind, and then began picking off targets with frighteningly accurate shots from his sniper rifle.

We were several minutes into the battle before I realized I was barely afraid.

Just then the batarians released half a dozen varren to overwhelm us at close range. Fast and aggressive, the beasts seemed to fly across the open ground before us. Fortunately they had no kinetic barriers, so I had no trouble flinging each one away in turn with my biotics. Shepard switched to his assault rifle and methodically shot each animal through the head after I had stopped its charge. The only one that got past us went down before a shotgun blast from Tali.

When Shepard chose his moment to press the attack, almost no resistance remained. Shepard didn't call for the batarians to surrender, and they made no such offer. The combat didn't end until the last enemy went down.

"Are you both okay?" he asked once we had a moment to take stock.
"Didn't even drop my shields," said Tali.

I glanced at my hands. They shook, but not nearly as badly as after Sharjila. "Same here."

On the second level of the bunker we found the control room for the fusion torch. Tali and Shepard began hacking through the authentication protocols to gain administrator-level access. While they worked, I examined the dead.

I must be honest. I have never been comfortable around batarians: their pasty coloring, bulbous heads, four-eyed gaze, and needle teeth. They remind me of ogres from asari children's fables, and when I was young they always seemed to have the disposition of ogres as well. Today batarians have become friendly and productive members of galactic society, but I still remember how they seemed in my youth and have to force myself not to recoil from them in distaste. Searching the bodies of violently dead batarians was one of the most unpleasant things I had ever done.

I found almost nothing. No civilian or military identity cards, no credit chits, no personal effects. Even their armor was dull and scuffed, with no visible insignia.

*Faceless, anonymous foot soldiers. Expendable. Easy to disavow.*

The distant roar of the fusion torch cut off. Tali must have found the shut-down sequence.

"Shepard to Normandy. Asteroid X57 is occupied by irregular military forces, batarian, estimate company strength. Begin your assault on objective Bravo. Expect a hot landing zone." He took a moment to glance at something Tali had brought up on the display. "Alliance rocket turrets hijacked by the enemy, and demolition charges placed as a makeshift minefield."

"Aye-aye," said Kaidan over the link.

Shepard looked at Tali and me. "Let's move."

Back in the Mako, we bounced and wavered across the asteroid's surface to the third torch – *objective Charlie* – several kilometers away. From our position objective Bravo stood beyond the asteroid's horizon, but in the external view I could see Normandy sweeping in and firing on a ground target. I glanced at Shepard, who had switched his radio to an encrypted private channel and was listening carefully as he drove.

Something about him attracted my attention, and I looked more closely to determine what it was.

His face gave nothing away. On Sharjila his expression had been professionally neutral the entire time, but at least it had been mobile, reacting to the events around him. Now it was grimly set, his skin color unusually pale, his eyes the only mobile feature in a visage that could have been carved from stone. He said nothing, not even to acknowledge reports from me or Tali. When he wasn’t using his left hand, it rested on his thigh and balled into a fist.

I had seen him angry before. He had been all tightly controlled ferocity while intimidating Nassana Dantius into abandoning the Citadel.

Unless I was mistaken, I was now seeing something else: white-hot, overpowering rage.

It didn't seem to affect his performance. If anything he became even more fully aware of the situation around us, as we approached the third fusion torch and engaged the rocket turrets defending it. As before, we had no difficulty defeating the turrets and approaching the control bunker for the torch.

This time the batarians were ready for us.
There could be no mistake. These batarians might have worn abraded, unmarked armor, but they had well-trained combat specialists among them, elite Hegemony troops. Shepard swore as one of them overloaded his sniper rifle, forcing him to switch weapons. Another batarian engineer sabotaged Tali's shields, and she had to cower behind a computer core while she frantically rebuilt them. I erected a barrier barely in time as one of the batarians tried to yank me out into the open with a biotic pull.

Then a wave of varren charged, almost overwhelming us.

I saw Shepard drop his rifle and seize a varren by the throat as it charged for him, using its own momentum to snap its neck, leaving it broken on the floor behind him. Tali blasted away with her shotgun, desperately working the slide between shots.

One of the varren leaped entirely over the crates I was using as cover, knocking me to the floor under its weight. I cried out as my shield went down and its claws tore through my light armor, opening three parallel wounds across my back.

"Liara!"

My shout of pain turned into a scream of exertion, my entire body suddenly haloed with blue light. I thrust out both arms and catapulted the varren into the air, sending it flying across the entire space to land broken behind the batarian lines. I rose to my feet, teeth bared, blood trickling down my back, dark energy coursing down my arms to blaze around my clenched fists.

"You were saying, Commander?"

He said not a word, only picked up his assault rifle and returned to the battle.

That was the turning point. I began our counterattack by discharging the biotic force I had called up, flinging heavy crates across the chamber to slam into a group of three batarians. Tali pressed a key on her shotgun's stock and fired a cloud of incandescent particles into the enemy line. Shepard followed up with two high-explosive grenades.

The batarian line broke. One after another, they began to emerge from cover and retreat deeper into the bunker, to be pursued by our gunfire. One batarian fell, then another, and suddenly we were able to advance.

Once again, quarter was neither asked nor given.

I found Shepard standing over the last batarian, a large male in black-and-red armor. The batarian slumped against a wall, coughing weakly, pressing a futile hand to a gaping belly wound. "Damn it," he muttered, "damn it."

Shepard only stood there, looking down at the batarian with no expression at all.

"Knew I shouldn't have taken this job," grunted the batarian. He peered up at Shepard through four pain-glazed eyes. "Hijacking this rock wasn't my idea, human. I only signed on for a little profit, a quick slave grab, nothing more."

"So what changed?" Shepard asked quietly.

"Balak." The batarian broke into a fit of coughing. "Crazy bastard, but what he wants, he usually gets. I think he wants your colony world on fire."

"Not going to happen now."
"Guess not." One hand reached weakly into a pocket on the batarian's hip. "Here, take this. Balak is up at the main facility, and he's locked it down. The pass-card will get you in. He has hostages. You'd better hurry."

Shepard slowly reached out and took the card, pocketing it without a glance. "Why help me now?"

"Not because I love you, human. But Balak's a mad varren. Putting him down would be a favor to the universe. Now do the same for me."

"Gladly." Shepard drew his heavy pistol and fired twice.

Tali approached us, watching Shepard. As always, her mask made it impossible to tell what she was thinking. Then she glanced at me. "Keelah, you're hurt!" She stepped behind me and began to examine the bloody rents in my armor.

Shepard activated his hardsuit radio. "Kaidan, report."

"How is it?" I asked Tali.

"These are very deep cuts. They must hurt like hell."

I flinched and sucked air through clenched teeth as the quarian's fingers probed beneath my shoulder-blade. "You might say that."

"They're probably going to be infected, too. Varren are filthy creatures. Some medi-gel will seal the wounds, but you had better see Dr. Chakwas."

"That can wait," I insisted. "Let's get this torch shut down first."

"Kaidan says the second torch is out," said Shepard. "This is the only one left. Come on."

We hurried upstairs to the control room, where the same authentication codes served to shut down the last torch. In the sudden quiet, Shepard called the Normandy. "Joker, give me an update on the asteroid's trajectory."

"Hang on." Lieutenant Moreau was silent for a few moments, doubtless double-checking his mathematics with the ship's VI. "You're looking good, Commander! Clean miss, won't even skim the lower atmosphere. The colonists will have to turn her around and find another parking space, though."

"We'll let them worry about that." He looked at me, made a decision. "Kaidan, rendezvous with us at Objective Charlie. This isn't over yet. Normandy, come in for evac. We have wounded."

"I will be fine, Commander."

"Don't argue with me, Liara. One of Kaidan's men is hurt too. Better to have Dr. Chakwas take care of you."

"All right. But Shepard . . ."

His eyes caught mine, and I suddenly felt reluctant to continue.

"Don't do anything rash," I pleaded quietly.

I could see he understood. He knew what I had seen. "I'll be careful, Liara."
Then Kaidan and his team arrived, and we had no more time.
In a Winter Season

10 March 2183, SSV Normandy, Asgard System Space

Back on the Normandy I found Dr. Chakwas working to save the wounded human Marine, Private Dubyansky. A batarian had taken down his shields and shot him in the upper chest. I waited, ignoring the burning pain in my back, praying for the doctor’s success. I was fond of Alexei; he had been one of the first humans to welcome me openly in the crew mess.

After about an hour, the door opened and Ash entered the medical bay. She glanced around, saw me sitting quietly in the reception area, and approached.

"How’s it going?" she asked me in low tones.

"I'm no surgeon, but judging by Dr. Chakwas's body language, she seems to believe there is no immediate danger."

"Looks like you got ripped up a bit."

"I will be fine. We asari are tougher than we look."

Ash nodded and sat companionably with me.

"The mission is over?" I asked after a while.

"Yeah. We stormed the main control facility, but the head terrorist – Balak – had a bunch of human hostages with bombs planted around them. Commander had to let him go, to gain time to disarm the bombs and save the hostages."

I breathed a sigh of relief. Thank the Goddess he chose not to sacrifice innocents. "I cannot imagine that would please Shepard."

"I'll say. He was pissed. At least the planet is safe, and most of the engineers are okay. Commander took Kaidan and Garrus down to the planet to talk to the colonial government and turn over some prisoners." She paused, frowning at some thought. "Not that we took very many prisoners."

So she saw it as well. "Ashley, I have a question."

"Shoot."

"The Commander seemed to take this mission very personally. Even more than most of the crew. Why?"

She gave me a brown-eyed stare, then shook her head and looked away. "That's not for me to say."

I sighed. "I understand."

"No, I'm sorry. I wish I could help you. Look at his biography, his service record. That may tell you what you want to know."

"All right. Thank you."

"You a little sweet on the Commander?" she asked, a sly note creeping into her voice.
"I'm not sure I understand your idiom."

"You know, interested in him."

I frowned in sudden suspicion. "Do you mean, am I romantically interested in him?"

She gave me an ironic look, one eyebrow cocked.

"No, of course not!" I stopped, forced myself to think about it. "No . . . but he is a very compelling individual. That is, he is very interesting from a scientific standpoint. I want to understand him more thoroughly, that's all."


Just then Dr. Chakwas rescued me, emerging from the surgical compartment and approaching us. "Chief Williams. Dr. T'Soni. Alexei will be fine. He's sleeping now, so you shouldn't disturb him. He'll need to stay here for a few days, and I'm putting him on the light-duty roster until further notice."

Ash smiled and stood. "That's good news, Doctor. I'll let Kaidan and the Commander know as soon as they get back from Terra Nova."

Dr. Chakwas turned her attention to me. "Now, Doctor, let's have a look at you."

Once Ash was gone, I gladly stripped out of my armor and soft undervest. My movements felt stiff and clumsy, and the wounds burned. Dr. Chakwas applied a local anesthetic, removed hardened medi-gel with a sonic probe, and then had to spend considerable time cleaning and debriding the wounds. The varren's claws had driven fibers from the undervest into my flesh, and Goddess alone knew what else had been under them.

"Nasty wounds," Dr. Chakwas observed as she worked. "I have antibiotics that are suitable for asari, and you should heal cleanly enough, but you'll probably have thin scars when you're done."

"Hmm. Asari who take up the military life often look forward to scars."

"Do you?"

I shook my head in distaste. "I am a scientist. It's not a profession that encourages bravado."

"Given some of the scientific conferences I've attended, I fear I must disagree with you."

I chuckled despite the discomfort.

Later, my back feeling much better, I relaxed alone in my compartment. The drive core's low rumble passed through the ship every few seconds, telling me that we were on our way once more. On our way to Noveria, and the answers I was afraid to discover.

"VI, access official biography and full service record of Lieutenant Commander William Allen Shepard, Alliance Navy. Text copy to my omni-tool."

Documents appeared at my wrist. I began to read them with careful attention, taking notes along the way.

Three hours later I knew a great deal more, but I was not sure that I was any wiser.

In Shepard I had clearly encountered an exceptional human being: strength, reflexes, physical
endurance, sensory acuity, general intelligence, mathematical aptitude, spatial perception, social skills, determination and strength of will, all of them well above the human norm. None of this had come to him simply as a matter of natural talent. He applied a strict regimen of physical exercise and mental discipline to keep himself at the peak of human performance.

In a sense, Shepard conformed very well to some asari ideals.

My people believe strongly in the honing of individual excellence. Each of us searches for our own unique form of areté, our own distinctive virtue. Then we strive to fulfill that virtue to the greatest degree possible. We exercise our bodies, sharpen our senses, and deepen our intellects. We compete almost constantly to demonstrate our merits on the stage of asari society. Those of us who succeed draw the admiration and emulation of others. This is how we progress as a society. In many ways it defines what it means to be asari.

That was Shepard: a panaretos, a model of many virtues. A paragon. I was struck with respect and admiration for him.

Even so, the official documents did not tell me what I most wanted to know. They did not tell me what drove Shepard, what motivated him, what he most wanted life to give him. They told me almost nothing about his passions.

Unfortunately there was one exception, and that exception disturbed me.

Shepard apparently hated batarians.

It came as a surprise to me. Observing how he behaved toward the "aliens" on his crew, I had concluded that he was free of species prejudice. Even his relationship with Garrus Vakarian – a turian, member of a species many humans still hated and feared – was friendly and productive.

Yet I had also watched him on Asteroid X57, savage and ruthless, destroying the batarian terrorists without a moment's reflection. While operating independently, Kaidan's team had taken a few prisoners. In contrast, Shepard had executed every batarian who survived falling into his hands. According to Ash he had agonized for a long moment over the decision to let Balak go, even with a dozen innocent human lives at stake.

In his service record I counted seventeen different incidents involving batarians. The battle on Elysium during the Skyllian Blitz naturally headed the list, but there were many others. Full-scale battles on Anhur, raids on slaver gangs, skirmishes and boarding actions against pirates, even an epic bar brawl that had spilled out into the streets of Omega. What few reprimands he had ever received from his military superiors all seemed to be related to his treatment of batarians. He had never violated the laws of war – not quite – but he clearly viewed batarians with no trust or compassion.

Reading his biography, I could see why.

Mindoir.

Shepard began his life on Earth, but a few years later his family moved to an agricultural colony in the Attican Traverse, a peaceful world with a population of about nine hundred thousand humans. In 2170 CE an army of batarian slavers descended on the planet. They ran amok for three days, until the Alliance dispatched a carrier group to secure the colony's safety. When all was over the colony had been nearly obliterated. The invaders murdered half of the population outright. They carried away another sixth as slaves, a process that involved the horrific torture and mutilation of the victims. Only a small fraction of the colonists endured long enough to be rescued.
Shepard survived the raid through quick thinking, knowledge of the wilderness areas near his home, strong will, and sheer good luck. Not one other member of his family was so fortunate. The batarians murdered both of Shepard’s parents and one of his sisters. His other sister vanished in the chaos, most likely abducted and enslaved before the Alliance arrived. His friends, the teachers he most admired, the other members of his religious sect, the young woman he had begun to love, almost all of them were gone.

His psychological profile spoke clearly: Shepard was remarkably free of post-traumatic stress. He grieved for all the friends and loved ones he had lost, but he was able to process the emotion without harm to himself. He did not blame himself for surviving when so many others had not. He placed the fault for his losses squarely where it belonged, on the slavers and pirates who attacked Mindoir.

If anything the experience tempered and forged his mind, creating the driven ambition that later took him into the Alliance military and made him such an extraordinary soldier.

I understood. Yet it worried me that I could find no other evidence of true passion in his records.

I sighed, rolled my neck and shoulders to ease tension, and stared out into the darkness of my little compartment. Clearly simple research would not get me the answers I sought. I was going to have to do some field work as well.

"VI, please locate Commander Shepard."

"Commander Shepard is in the armory."

I emerged into the medical bay. Alexei was awake and talking cheerfully to Dr. Chakwas, so I paused for a few moments to say hello. The Marine seemed happy to see me, and joked about comparing combat wounds. Apparently bullets in vital organs ranked higher than "fish-dog scratches" in some poorly defined hierarchy. I found myself unable to disagree.

I took the lift down to the staging deck.

It was very late in the ship's day, most of the Marines resting after the exertions of the mission. The staging bay itself was dark and very quiet. I walked across the deck, my footsteps ringing softly on the metal floor.

Voices, from the armory. I stopped.

From where I stood, I could see through the doorway into the well-lit armory. Shepard sat on a crate, at ease, his back against the bulkhead, his hands gesturing with animation as he spoke. He smiled, his face relaxed. Ashley stood before him, her arms folded, leaning hip-shot against a workbench. She laughed at something Shepard had said.

I read their body language. Especially her body language: oriented toward him, making frequent eye contact, occasionally mirroring his movements. It was plain to see.

All right, I had identified one of Shepard's passions. It made sense. She was young, aesthetically appealing, in excellent physical condition, a skilled professional colleague.

She is a woman . . . and I am not. Not really. The thought came unbidden.

I turned away and headed for the lift, to go back to my compartment and find some other task to keep myself occupied.
13 March 2183, Port Hanshan/Noveria

*Normandy* arrived at Noveria on the third day after the battle at Terra Nova. Shepard issued orders prohibiting shore leave, placing the Marine detachment on alert for the duration of our visit. Apparently the Port Hanshan authorities were *not at all pleased* to have an Alliance warship in dock, and would have refused us landing had Shepard not claimed Spectre status.

Instead, Shepard called on Tali and me to accompany him into Port Hanshan.

Noveria is not a very hospitable world. Its atmosphere is breathable but it is in the midst of a deep glacial age, with ice covering the entire surface. Port Hanshan clung to the side of a mountain just above the ice, a warren of massive habitats extending deep into the mountain-face. Very little of the port showed from the outside, but I knew about a quarter of a million people lived there.

The three of us emerged from the ship into the damp cold of *Normandy*'s docking berth. At the bottom of the long ramp we were met by four heavily armed guards, blocking our path into the port. Their leader was a petite human female, dark of hair and eyes, wearing light combat armor. "That's far enough. This is an unscheduled arrival, so I need your credentials."

Shepard folded his arms and looked stubborn. "You first."

"Captain Maeko Matsuo, Elanus Risk Control Services. I'm in charge of security for Port Hanshan."

"All right. My name is Shepard. Citadel Special Tactics and Reconnaissance."

One of the other guards spoke up, another human female, larger and with an impressive mane of yellow-white hair. "A Spectre? Load of horseshit, ma'am. There are no human Spectres."

"I find that to be a common misconception," said Shepard dryly.

Captain Matsuo looked uncertain. "We will need to confirm that, Mr. Shepard. I must also advise you that private firearms are not permitted on Noveria. I'll have to ask you to check your weapons here for return upon your departure."

Shepard drew his sidearm. Within seconds, everyone in the docking bay had weapons drawn except me. I called up a blue aura of biotic energy to make it clear I was also prepared for violence.

"Not going to happen, Captain."

No one moved for a long moment. Then a new voice sounded from an overhead speaker. "Captain Matsuo, stand down!"

Matsuo raised a hand to restrain her subordinates. The yellow-haired human rolled her eyes in exasperation, but she and the other guards lowered their weapons. We followed suit.

"We've confirmed their identity, Captain," the voice continued. "Commander Shepard is a Spectre, and the asari and quarian are his associates. They're permitted to carry firearms under the extraterritoriality agreement with the Citadel Council."

"Very well," said Captain Matsuo. "You're free to enter the port, Spectre. I apologize for the inconvenience."

Shepard nodded. "I understand, Captain. You were just doing your job."

"Thank you. Parasini-san will meet you inside."
"Not the friendliest reception," observed Tali as we passed into the port. "I wonder what they're trying to hide."

"It's a corporate research colony," explained Shepard. "Big corporations set up labs here to carry out research that's too dangerous to do anywhere close to a major world. Even if they're not doing anything illegal, that makes them skittish about outside legal authority. Of course, some of them probably are carrying out research that the Alliance or the Council would consider illegal."

"Not to mention that the corporate tenants here are often competitors," I pointed out.

"Yeah. This place is probably hip-deep in corporate spies and covert agents, watching each other and getting in a little sabotage on the side. Watch yourselves."

Gianna Parasini turned out to be a tall, elegant human female, with flawless light-brown skin and jade-green eyes. She wore a long forest-green gown that wouldn't have looked out of place at a gathering of Thessian aristocracy. Even I found her quite beautiful. She approached and took Shepard's hand, her manners smooth and polished. "Commander Shepard. I apologize for the incident in the docking bay. Welcome to Port Hanshan."

Shepard smiled and bowed slightly over Parasini's hand. "Thank you. What's your position here?"

"I'm executive assistant for Administrator Anoleis, the Chief Operating Officer for Port Hanshan."

"Good. I'm here on Spectre business, pursuing an investigation. I'm looking for an asari Matriarch."

"Lady Benezia?"

I felt a chill, hearing my mother's name from this stranger's lips.

"The same. Is she here?"

"Lady Benezia left several days ago for the Binary Helix research complex at Peak 15. To the best of my knowledge, she is still there."

"How do I get to Peak 15, then?"

Parasini hesitated. "Commander, travel from Port Hanshan to the research labs is strictly regulated, to protect the security and privacy of our client corporations. You will need travel clearance from Administrator Anoleis, and I can tell you at once that he is unlikely to grant you a pass."

"Even for Spectre business?"

She smiled. "Perhaps especially for Spectre business. As a Spectre you could arrest or kill Anoleis, but you have no way to force him to cooperate with you. His fiduciary responsibility to the Executive Board is paramount."

"I understand. Take me to the Administrator, then."

"Certainly. If you'll come with me?"

Shepard went into the Administrator's office alone, leaving Tali and me outside to await the outcome. I spent the time watching Parasini as she busied herself behind her desk. She appears to be useful as well as decorative, I thought uncharitably.

Shepard appeared. I caught his eye, and he simply shook his head in frustration.
"Please feel free to contact me if there is anything else we can do for you," said Parasini warmly.

"Come on," said Shepard.

We followed Shepard out into the main plaza of Port Hanshan. He looked around, saw a brightly lit sign across the way, and set out for it.

I was confused. "Is this really the time to be visiting a bar, Commander?"

For answer, Shepard held a hand up over his shoulder where I could see it from my place behind him. In his fingers was a small sheet of paper, unfolded so I could see the message written on it in a neat hand. *Solyanka Lounge.* "I need a drink. How about you?"

I experienced enlightenment. Parasini had come to meet us, and offered her hand to Shepard. Easy enough to conceal a small message and pass it along to him. "I suppose you're right."

Inside the lounge it was dark and rather loud, with some kind of rhythmic noise – I would not call it music – playing over the sound system. We took a table in the back corner, where we could keep watch on the entrance. Shepard murmured something to Tali and then leaned back, smiling, as a human waiter approached our table. He ordered something called *Scotch whiskey*, I ordered a Thessian red wine, and Tali ordered distilled water with a long straw.

Once the waiter was gone, Tali's omni-tool glowed orange for a few moments. "All clear, Shepard."

"Listening devices?" I inquired.

"Several," said the quarian, "but I'm feeding them all white noise. We should be able to talk in private."

"Good." Shepard sipped at his *whiskey* with evident relish. "Administrator Anoleis is a no-go. Wouldn't tell me anything about what Benezia is doing here, absolutely refused to give us clearance to leave the port. So we need an alternative."

"Couldn't the *Normandy* take us directly to this Peak 15 facility?" I asked.

"I don't think we can risk it. This may be a small-population planet but there is a *lot* of money here, enough to buy the very best planetary defenses. There are battle-stations in orbit that could turn the *Normandy* into fine dust in one shot."

"They would fire on an Alliance ship carrying a Council Spectre?"

"You bet. They threatened to do just that as we were on final approach." Shepard shook his head in frustration. "Noveria is effectively an independent planet with some very powerful allies. If they think we're about to step on their prerogatives, they'll shoot first and hope to buy off anyone who gets angry."

"You can be sure of that, Spectre," said Parasini.

How she had reached our table without crossing the floor, I couldn't guess. She looked different, dressed in casual clothes instead of her high-couture working gown, not quite as cultivated and polished. She seated herself at the table and smiled brightly at all of us.

"Glad to see you understood my message," she said. "Allow me to reintroduce myself. I'm Gianna Parasini. Noveria Internal Affairs."
"You're a cop?"

"That's right. I report directly to the Executive Board. I've been undercover as Anoleis's administrative assistant for the last six months."

"The Board is after Anoleis," Shepard stated, taking another sip of his drink and watching Parasini attentively.

"The little lizard is so crooked not even the Board can tolerate him anymore. We know he's been shading contracts and shaking down our client corporations for protection money. The problem is acquiring proof. Even as close to him as I've gotten, he's too careful to let anything slip."

"I don't see what this has to do with my mission."

Parasini shrugged. "All the senior corporate executives here in Port Hanshan have surface access, and could grant you clearance if Anoleis wasn't around to overrule them. I'm working with one of them, a turian who runs the local Synthetic Insights office. He's come into evidence of Anoleis's corruption, enough to convince the Executive Board. Problem is, Anoleis knows something is up. He's ordered the ERCS guards to close off the Synthetic Insights facility, and some of them are going to be in there this evening to ransack the place and destroy the evidence."

"That can't be legal," I objected.

"It's not. Anoleis has half the ERCS force on the take. Captain Matsuo is honest enough, but she can't prevent her people from taking bribes and working on the side as his thugs."

A slow smile spread across Shepard's face. "And so here we are, the only armed force in Port Hanshan that doesn't work for Anoleis."

"Think you're up for it, Commander?"

"That depends. I need you to come clean with me. What do you know about Matriarch Benezia? Why is she here?"

"I don't know." Parasini leaned closer, as if afraid someone would hear. "It has something to do with an accident at Peak 15. She arrived after we received a Code Omega signal from there."

"Code Omega?"

"The corporations that do research here are playing with fire, Commander. Nanotechnology, genetic engineering, weird life-forms discovered on the frontier, maybe even artificial intelligence, who knows? They pay Noveria well for isolation, privacy, and security. One of the conditions of their contract with us is the Code Omega system. If anything gets out of hand at the remote labs, anything they can't handle themselves, then they issue a Code Omega alert. It's automatic in the case of a containment breach."

"So what happens when you receive a Code Omega?"

"The client has a certain amount of time to send in a clean-up team and sound the all-clear. If there isn't an all-clear, then the Executive Board votes whether or not to destroy the facility. One antimatter warhead from the orbiting battle-stations would probably be enough."

I nodded in understanding. "Then Benezia was leading a clean-up team?"

"That's my best guess. She took the last shuttle up to Peak 15 before this weather system closed in,
along with a whole crew of asari commandos and a bunch of heavy crates."

"No idea what was in the crates?" asked Shepard.

"They were sealed and passed weapons inspection. Captain Matsuo had no authority to open them."

"Perhaps Benezia is only here on Binary Helix business," I speculated hopefully. "Commander, it may have nothing to do with Saren at all."

"Maybe. I still want to talk to her." Shepard leaned back, swirling the amber liquid in his glass. "All right, Ms. Parasini, I'll trust you. I don't like the idea of fighting police, but if they're dirty cops they had better stay out of the way. I'll need maps, a layout of the facility, and security codes to get into the facility without tripping any alarms."

"Not a problem." Parasini extended her hand across the table. "Good luck, Spectre, and remember – get that evidence. I get Anoleis, you get to finish your mission, everyone's happy."

Shepard shook her hand firmly. "Come on, Tali, Liara. We have work to do."
13 March 2183, Port Hanshan/Noveria

The Synthetic Insights facility perched high on the mountain’s face, looking down on most of Port Hanshan and beyond it to the endless ice. Officially a secured elevator up from the central plaza was the only way to reach it.

We didn't use official means.

It helped that Internal Affairs had the cooperation of the company's local manager. The turian revealed a bolt-hole, a quick and well-hidden way to exit the facility in case of some disaster. That provided us with a way in: through a freight elevator to a little-used maintenance bay just below the Synthetic Insights sector, up the external walls of the port to a code-locked hatch, and finally through an unsecured ventilation duct leading to a storeroom five doors down from the manager's office.

“Easier said than done,” was Shepard’s comment.

He was right. Scaling the port's external walls, a kilometer above the ice in darkness and freezing wind, was an ecstasy of vertigo and terror.

Fortunately Shepard had military-grade climbing gear aboard the Normandy, and his military training had granted him considerable skill as a climber. Even I had scaled rock-faces and cliffs for pleasure as a young maiden. Unfortunately poor Tali lacked our skill, and she was a little acrophobic. We all managed the climb safely, Tali with plenty of help from Shepard and at least one subtle biotic assist from me, but the quarian chanted "don't look down, don't look down, don't look down" for most of the way.

Soon enough we emerged into the storeroom and concealed ourselves behind a stack of crates. We could hear the ERCS guards moving around in the corridor outside, searching the manager's offices and every other likely space for the evidence.

Tali went to work.

I am reasonably competent with computers. I grew up using asari computer technology, the most advanced in the galaxy. I understand the hardware, I can write new software as needed, I am very good at extranet research, and my cyberwarfare skills are adequate.

Watching Tali made me feel like a rank novice. Within five minutes she tapped into the ERCS secure communications network, sent a "worm" program to infect all of the renegades' hardsuit computers, and harvested all of their private-key authentication codes. In a few moments more she took over the Synthetic Insights security grid as well. I could barely follow what she was doing.

"Ready, Shepard," she said when she was done.

"Go," he ordered.

Tali touched a control on her omni-tool.

Every ERCS guard in the Synthetic Insights facility heard a deafeningly loud tone in his helmet radio. I could hear muffled curses from outside our storeroom.

Shepard turned on his hardsuit radio, turning it to a channel he and Tali had set up in advance. I
followed suit so I could listen.

"This is William Shepard, Citadel Special Tactics and Reconnaissance. You are in violation of three sections of the Noveria colonial charter, as well as five sections of your employment agreement with Elanus Risk Control Services. You are also interfering with a Spectre investigation. You have five minutes to vacate these premises."

I heard a babble of voices, angry, confused, and fearful. Finally one voice cut through the chatter. I recognized it, the flat drawl of the female officer who had been with Captain Matsuo in the docking bay. "Bullshit. You gonna let some vigilante lecture you on Noveria law?"

"You know the law just as well as I do . . . Sergeant Stirling," said Shepard, checking his omni-tool display for the name. "I've got every one of your names right here. Also pictures of every one of you in this building where you're not supposed to be."

Tali touched another control on her omni-tool. Outside, every security camera in the building slowly swiveled to point unerringly at the nearest ERCS guard. We already had all the footage we needed, of course, but Shepard thought the maneuver might prove intimidating.

"Four minutes and fifteen seconds. Then all of this goes right to Captain Matsuo's mailbox with a big red flag tied to it, with a courtesy copy to the Executive Board."

"Screw this," said a male turian voice. Artos Vossarian, the name appeared on my omni-tool in the window I had slaved to Tali's. "You aren't paying us enough to go up against the Board, Stirling."

"That's very good thinking, Corporal Vossarian," said Shepard. "And thank you for verifying that it was Sergeant Stirling who handled the money for this job."

Another buzz of angry voices. This time Stirling discovered herself unable to regain control of her team.

"Three minutes," said Shepard.

Tali suddenly nodded and made two quick hand signals. A run for the exits was under way . . . but another movement seemed of more immediate concern. We relocated to make sure we had good cover, and drew our weapons.

The door to our storeroom slammed open and three ERCS guards rushed in.

I threw a biotic field that knocked two of the three off their feet. Shepard and Tali opened fire, assault rifle chattering, shotgun roaring like thunder in the enclosed space.

Sergeant Stirling countered my throw with her own biotic barriers. Her rifle swung toward my position, just a fraction too slowly. Shepard concentrated fire on her shields. They wavered, and then went down under a blast from Tali's shotgun. The blonde woman fell in a welter of blood a moment later.

"One minute and thirty seconds," said Shepard calmly over the radio. "Oh, and in case it matters, Sergeant Stirling is dead."

Much less than a minute later, we had the Synthetic Insights facility to ourselves.

Once we reached the manager's office we had no difficulty recovering the data we needed from the corporate mainframe. Then we left by the main entrance, using the secured elevator. A few minutes later we arrived on Port Hanshan's main plaza, emerging in the middle of a cluster of confused,
angry ERCS guards. They fell silent and gave us hostile stares as we passed. Shepard ignored them, looking perfectly tranquil.

As soon as we passed the guards, he activated his omni-tool and tapped at the controls. The tool made a small *chirp* as it sent a data package into the Port Hanshan public network.

I glanced at him, my head cocked ironically to one side. "Commander, they *did* comply in the end."

"I didn't make any promises about what would happen if they did."

Tali gave a small and rather vindictive laugh.

The suspension and arrest of almost a dozen ERCS agents set Port Hanshan buzzing. An hour later Internal Affairs agents hauled Administrator Anoleis himself out of his office, triggering an enormous political firestorm. Gianna Parasini managed to keep her own involvement a secret, but she still had a great deal of work to do out of the public’s eye. It was hours before we could meet with her again, at the same table in the Solyanka Lounge where we had held our last private discussion.

"Well, Spectre, you certainly delivered," she observed as she seated herself at our table.

"You don't seem very happy about it."

"I'm ecstatic," said Parasini in a tired monotone. "But right now it just feels like the end of a very long day's work."

"We kept our side of the bargain," he pointed out. "More, if you count the house-cleaning Captain Matsuo will be able to do now. I still need that surface clearance."

Parasini nodded and produced a card from an inside pocket of her blouse. "Full access. I've sent topographic maps and directions to your ship. I'd advise you to wait until local sunrise before you go. The weather's downright nasty up in the Aleutsk Valley, and trying to drive through it in the dark is just asking to go off a cliff."

"Thank you."

Parasini stood, and Shepard rose as well.

"Good luck," he said.

"Thanks." Suddenly the agent stepped close, put a hand behind Shepard's neck, and leaned in for a brief but very warm kiss. "Hey, you're not bad for a hot-shot vigilante Spectre. I owe you a beer. See you."

Shepard smiled, his gaze lingering on Parasini as she walked away from our table.

*So that's how he responds to sexual flirtatiousness, I thought. Good to know.*

I found myself comparing Parasini to Ashley. They certainly shared common elements: both of them physically attractive and in good condition, both of them with skin coloring several shades darker than Shepard's, both of them competent and very forthright. I began to see a pattern of preferences.

Shepard sighed, once again cool and professional. "I hate to give Benezia more time to do whatever she came here to do, or to escape . . . but Gianna's right. It's still dark, the weather isn't letting up, and if the terrain is bad too we shouldn't risk driving. On top of that, we've been up for sixteen hours
straight. Let's go bunk down on the Normandy for a few hours and come at this fresh after sunrise.”

14 March 2183, Aleutsk Valley/Noveria

An hour after sunrise we returned to Port Hanshan, taking a lift up to the surface-access garage for Peak 15. I knew that my mother had used the same garage a few days before, but since her departure it had been sealed. Shepard presented Parasini’s pass-card to the stone-faced ERCS guard at the garage door, who meticulously checked his identification before disengaging the code-lock.

We stepped out into the cold, dark space.

"Geth!" shouted Tali, leaping for cover and drawing her shotgun.

*Trust the quarian to spot her ancestral enemy before anyone else can.*

I heard the mechanical warbling of geth speech, saw some sort of weird leaping machine plastered to the floor a few meters away. I fled for cover as a targeting laser splashed on the wall where I had been standing a moment before. Shepard found his own concealment and activated his sniper rifle.

The firefight was frantic and confusing. I never managed to build good situational awareness, forced to act on reflex and hope my friends were covering my back.

I saw a geth ocular pointed in my direction, glowing brightly in the dark hangar, and fired wildly at it.

Somehow one of the geth clung to the ceiling high overhead. I had to fling myself into a roll across the floor to avoid its fire, until Shepard reared back and destroyed it with a single well-placed shot.

Rockets roared out of the darkness. I brought up my best barrier and cowered behind a very inadequate shipping container.

A fuel tank ruptured at the far end of the hangar, triggering a vast explosion and the scream of fire alarms. The concussion sent geth flying.

Tali sent overload charges soaring across the room, setting off short discharges of white light as geth shields went down. Shepard's rifle boomed once, then again.

Enormous geth-shaped shadows twisted and went down, back-lit by the flames.

Fire-suppression systems kicked in, scattering water all across the hangar, drenching me.

I saw a trooper loom out of the darkness, *behind* Shepard who was for once not aware of the enemy. I had to scream a warning and fling a lightning-fast warp to save his life.

A single half-wrecked geth pulled itself across the floor with its one functional arm. Shepard's rifle barked once more.

It was over.

Suddenly light flooded the garage, and a squad of ERCS guards rushed toward us. "What did you do here, Commander?" shouted Captain Matsuo.

Shepard looked at the geth. He looked at Captain Matsuo.

I stepped in before he could lose his temper. "We were defending ourselves, Captain, from the geth.”
"Geth? Where did they come from?"

"If I had to guess," said Tali, "they came from those crates Benezia took with her to Peak 15."

"We scanned those!"

The quarian shook her head. "The geth have very advanced technology, Captain. In fact, they are very advanced technology. Your scanning procedures are much too limited."

Captain Matsuo's eyes were wide. "If that's true, if Benezia-sama smuggled those things in, there could be many more out there."

"How many more?" demanded Shepard. "Dozens? Hundreds?"

"I don't know. They're machines, they could be packed tightly."

"Damn it," Shepard stowed his sniper rifle. "It doesn't make any difference. We need to get to Peak 15, even if we have to fight our way through."

"Good luck, Commander," said Matsuo. "I have to report to the Executive Board. If rumors of geth get out, we could have an investor panic on our hands."

"God knows we can't have that," Shepard murmured, just loud enough for me to hear as he stepped toward the Mako we had been assigned for our journey up the valley.

Suddenly I couldn’t follow him. I looked around at the garage, littered with wrecked geth, and a connection formed in my mind.

I saw the truth.

My mother is a mass murderer.

It was like a sword-blade in my heart.

"Shepard . . ." My voice quivered.

He stopped and looked intently back at me. "What is it, Liara?"

"I think we can assume my mother deliberately came here with these geth." I took a deep breath, forcing my voice to stay steady lest I break out in a desolated wail. "I don't think we can lend her the benefit of the doubt any longer. She is cooperating fully with Saren and the geth. She was complicit in the attack on Eden Prime."

Shepard returned to stand before me, just barely crowding into my personal space, his presence somehow a deep comfort. "I intend to give her the benefit of the doubt until the last possible moment."

"Why?" I glanced up at him, silently cursing the tears that welled up in my eyes. "The evidence is too strong. Don't turn a blind eye to it for my sake."

Shepard rested a gentle hand on my shoulder. I felt warmth spreading from the contact.

"Liara. I'm not turning a blind eye, but even now I have several reasons to reserve judgment. First, I try to avoid killing influential asari leaders if I can possibly avoid it. Second, if I can convince her to abandon Saren she might make a formidable ally. Third, at the very least she may be able to tell us what Saren is up to.” He paused. “Finally . . . yes, for your sake.”
I couldn't hold his gaze. I looked down, swiping at my cheeks with one hand.

*Why should he care what happens to Benezia... or to me? This human's compassion astonishes me.*

I shook my head and followed him to the Mako.

It took a long time for us to drive up the Aleutsk Valley to Peak 15. We faced terrible weather, with visibility almost down to zero for most of the journey. Shepard had to drive very slowly across the smooth, treacherous surface, paying close attention to his instruments, watching for the deep canyons and abysses that lay close beside the trail in many places.

Geth waited in ambush all along the route: rifle troopers, heavy troopers, at least one armature-class "tank," and rocket turrets placed to block sharp turns on the trail. Four times we had to stop and carefully position ourselves in defilade, protecting ourselves from geth fire behind a natural obstacle. Shepard would carefully move forward, permitting Tali to line up shots with the main and coaxial guns. Then he would back away, as soon as I warned that incoming fire was beginning to tear down the Mako's kinetic barriers. It was a slow and painstaking process.

Finally we reached the Peak 15 facility, only to find the garage blocked by the burning wreckage of another vehicle. We entered through a small side door, and once again had to fight geth before we could proceed further.

"User alert! All Peak 15 facilities have suffered a great deal of damage." A voice broadcast to our suit radios, human, female, and neutral, a computer system. "Biohazard materials present throughout the facility. Virtual intelligence user interface offline."

"Biohazard materials?" I wondered. "Some kind of bacterial or viral research that got into the air systems? That would explain the Code Omega alert."

"I hope that's not it, because our suits aren't sealed. Except Tali's, of course."

"That would not explain why the VI is offline," said Tali.

We moved further into the empty facility, still finding no bodies, no bloodstains, and no signs of a struggle. At one point we passed through a biohazard containment system, a short corridor with airtight doors at each end and plasma nozzles spaced along its entire length. Small laser turrets were mounted at the corridor's midpoint, but something about them seemed not quite right.

"Shepard, why are the turrets pointing the wrong way?" asked Tali.

*That's it,* I realized. The turrets covered the *inner* doors.

"Whatever they were working with here, they didn't want it to get out," Shepard guessed.

"Not a weaponized microorganism, then," I pointed out. "Laser turrets would be useless against that kind of threat."

"A bigger animal of some kind," he said. "If you see a strange creature wandering the halls in here, whatever you do, don't stop to pet it."

I stared at him in disbelief until I realized he was making an obscure joke. *No one could possibly be that stupid.*

A lift took us up to the second level of the facility, quarters and recreational areas for the scientists
and technicians. The air had become very cold here. Shepard and I emitted long plumes of vapor as we breathed.

Tali looked closely at her omni-tool. "More geth up ahead," she said in a low voice.

We passed through a door into what had once been a crew commons area, currently half-buried in drifting snow that had come in through broken skylights far above. Three or four geth troopers were busy with something at the far end of the room, but we took them by surprise and had no difficulty destroying them.

Then as we moved out into the open space we heard a terrible noise, like metal scraping across metal. A small avalanche of snow slid down from the drifts against the opposite wall. The three of us put ourselves back to back, weapons out, trying to look in every direction at once.

"What was that?" asked Tali, her voice higher-pitched than usual with unease. "Wind? Animals?"

"This place is in really bad shape," said Shepard.

The snowdrifts erupted.

At first we couldn’t see what was attacking us. A flood of small scuttling things, snow-dusted and many-legged, rushed toward us from three sides. Behind them loomed two large forms that my mind couldn't quite process, big knots of legs and claws and tentacles that waved in the air.

"Spiders!" shrieked Tali, her shotgun booming as she fired wildly into the mass. "Spiders-spiders-spiders!"

Shepard back-pedaled slowly, firing his assault rifle in controlled three-round bursts. "Tali, get hold of yourself! Fall back with me, and control your fire!"

My pistol proved nearly useless against the onrushing horde, but a biotic technique seemed likely to work. I made a wide, sweeping gesture with my right arm, blue fire rushing out like a waist-high curtain, picking up the smaller creatures and flinging them back in a great arc. Fragile, most of them burst open when they struck the far wall.

One of the big creatures emitted a high-pitched screeching hiss, a weird cry like nothing I’d ever heard in my life. A stream of greenish goo flew through the air and splashed across the floor right in front of me. The stench! It was horrible, some impossible mix of vitriol and sewage, and it hurt my lungs to breathe it. I felt a wave of dizziness and tunnel vision.

"Back up, get under cover!" shouted Shepard. With the little scuttling creatures gone, he switched to his sniper rifle and called down lightning on the larger enemy.

Tali dove behind an upset dining table, her hands shaking so hard she could barely hold her shotgun. Instead she reached into a pocket and prepared a toxin grenade, hurling it across the room to strike one of the weird monstrosities.

I more or less fell behind a concrete support column, half-paralyzed, struggling to clear my lungs with a hacking cough. My eyes watered fiercely. I could barely see.

More goo streaked across the room at us, forcing Shepard to duck aside and break his concentration. The very air tasted unbearably foul as the enemy charged down on us.

My mental focus was shattered. I couldn't call up my biotics again. I drew my sidearm instead and fired at the nearest monster, knowing it was futile but determined not to sell my life cheaply.
It turned toward me, annoyed, hissing and waving sharp talons at the end of each long tentacle. At the last moment Shepard killed it, placing a sniper rifle shot at almost point-blank range right behind its . . . I suppose it could be called a head. It collapsed in a heap of mismatched limbs.

The other one grasped Tali's table with every available limb. It wrenched its entire body, a movement that was difficult to watch, and hurled the table aside.

Tali thrust her shotgun out until the muzzle was touching the creature's midsection, and fired an incandescent round. This turned out to be overkill. The thing exploded, gore spewing out in a fan behind it. Tali fell sprawling from the recoil.

Finally silence fell, broken only by the sound of distant wind. We gathered around to examine our fallen enemies.

The one Shepard had killed was still relatively intact. We saw an exoskeleton, four legs, several forelimbs of various shapes, and an obvious sensory cluster at the top of the curved, reddish-brown body.

"What is this thing?" demanded Tali.

Shepard shrugged. "Liara, any ideas?"

"I don't know, Shepard. Xenobiology is not my field." Still, something felt familiar about the creature.

He turned to Tali, his voice stern. "What happened back there?"

"Sorry, Shepard. I really don't like arachnids. It won't happen again. At least I hope not."


"Liara? Do you recognize them after all?"

I opened my omni-tool and began paging frantically through some of the texts in my database. "Archaeologists don't study xenobiology, but we do study galactic history."

"History? How is that relevant?"

"This is how," I said, and called up a hologram. The image looked almost exactly like the dead creature at our feet. It was labeled.

Shepard cursed venomously.

_Rachni._
The Hot Labs

14 March 2183, Peak 15/Noveria

Twenty miserable hours followed.

We searched the Peak 15 complex thoroughly. We found no trace of any of the Binary Helix scientists or technicians. We also found no sign of Benezia, her acolytes, or her commandos.

We did find a detailed map of the complex, which informed us of the existence of two outlying facilities at something called Rift Station. If she had survived, Benezia had most likely gone there. Unfortunately we could not follow. A passenger tramway provided the only safe transport, and that tramway was completely inactive.

In fact, most of the major systems at Peak 15 were inactive. Eventually we decided to repair and regain control of the whole facility. We could see no other way to proceed.

In better times, Binary Helix would have had dozens of technicians on hand to do the work. We had three people. Of course, that included one genuine technical genius, one scientist with over fifty years of experience in field repairs, and Shepard. Nothing seemed impossible when we started the job.

Unfortunately we also had an apparently unending supply of rachni.

The little scampering workers absolutely infested the computer core, constantly spilling out of access panels and trying to spray acid over us. Half a dozen of the big workers and another swarm of workers guarded the landline communications links up on the roof. Another warrior lurked in the power transfer array, alone but unusually large and cunning. Every time we passed through a corridor between major compartments, we could expect to hear movement in the ventilation ducts, followed by a warrior or half a dozen workers leaping out to the attack.

For variety, the reactor core was full of geth.

We worked for endless hours, always with our weapons close at hand. I spent most of the time with little flares of dark energy dancing around my shoulders and arms, ready to bring my biotics into play at a moment's notice. At first the constant fighting kept us on edge, but one can become accustomed to almost anything in time.

I remember one occasion . . .

At the time we were trying to reconnect a set of cables to carry power to the passenger tramway. Tali lay on her back while she worked, half buried in the nest of cables, applying a welding torch and her omni-tool. I scanned the cables themselves to make sure there were no hidden breaks or twists. Shepard rested for the moment, dozing lightly until the next time we needed his physical strength.

Suddenly a rachni warrior crashed through the ceiling above us. Shepard instantly snapped awake. He rolled to one side, producing his assault rifle and attacking the warrior with concentrated fire. I wrapped a field of biotic energy around it and sent it flying down the corridor away from us. Within moments we had killed it.

Tali never moved, except to extend a hand out to us and demand another tool. Shepard gave it to her, settled back down in his place by the wall, and went instantly back to sleep. It took me a few more moments to recover, but then I too went back to work as if nothing had happened.
The rachni posed a serious threat as individuals, but they didn't fight intelligently or use pack tactics. Given their fearsome reputation, that seemed very strange.

We had no trouble defeating the warriors by ones and twos. We feared the little workers only in very large numbers. Rarely did we face real peril. Even so, stress, fatigue, and hunger wore us down as the day passed. Constant exposure to the acidic rachni venom took its toll. We felt increasingly weary and sick.

About local midnight the passenger tramway finally came online, promising us a rachni-free ride to the Rift Station labs. I nearly wept with relief. We all sat down in comfort in the tramway car. Tali and I caught an hour of blessed sleep while Shepard watched over us.

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15 March 2183, Rift Station/Noveria

I startled awake when the car came to a halt. For a moment I thought I saw Shepard watching me from his seat, a strange intensity in his gaze. I blinked sleep out of my eyes and it was gone, if it had ever been there in the first place. We all emerged from the car into the Rift Station.

"Where now, Shepard?" asked Tali.

We found a map. Binary Helix had built Rift Station into the far side of Peak 15, situated above an immense sheet of glacial ice. Close by we saw the symbol for an active lift, leading to a complex of quarters and small laboratories labeled Main Research. A second lift, currently locked down, led deep into the glacier itself and another facility labeled Hot Labs.

"Let's check out Main Research first," Shepard decided. "Any survivors would probably hole up where they had food and shelter. We might even find Benezia there."

I followed Shepard anxiously, wondering if my mother was only a few moments away.

The lift ride was very short. The doors opened . . .

"Hold your fire!" shouted a human voice.

We emerged into a small but extensively fortified foyer. Several heavily armed guards crouched behind crates and sheets of metal. Their leader, a bald male human in bulky white armor, emerged from behind the makeshift barricade to meet us.

"Captain Jesús Ventralis, Elanus Risk Control Services," he introduced himself. "Sorry about the welcome. We couldn't be sure what was on the tram."

"Can the rachni actually work a train's controls?" Shepard asked.

"Hell if I know. I'd rather not make any assumptions. I have to ask, who are you and what brings you down here?"

"My name is Shepard, Special Tactics and Reconnaissance. These are my associates, Tali'Zorah nar Rayya and Dr. Liara T'Soni. We're on Noveria on Citadel business."

At the mention of my name I saw a flicker of surprise in Captain Ventralis's eyes, immediately suppressed. "Well, I won't look a heavily-armed gift horse in the mouth. It's been nothing short of hell here since those bugs got out of the hot labs a week ago. First thing I knew the bastards were already clawing into my command post. I had a lot more staff then."
"You've done a good job, surviving this long. I'll do whatever I can for you."

"I appreciate it. Binary Helix sent an asari to clean up the mess. She went into the hot labs days ago and we haven't seen her since."

"Matriarch Benezia?" I asked.

Ventralis hesitated. "Yeah, I think that was the name."

"Is she still there?"

"She never came back through here. You came from Central Station, so she hasn't left that way. My best guess is that the bugs ate her, but who knows? No way to find out but go down to the hot labs and look, and it's too dangerous for me to send my own men down there."

"We'll go check it out," said Shepard. "Can you unlock the emergency lift?"

Ventralis took a pass-card from his hip pocket. "Here, this will do it for you. I wish you wouldn't go. We could use you up here."

"We'll be back soon enough," Shepard said confidently.

We turned to go back to the tramway station. I waited until we were in the lift once more with the door closed. "Commander, I am reasonably certain Captain Ventralis was lying to us."

"Something did seem a bit off," he agreed. "I thought it might have been just stress and fatigue."

"It was more than that. He recognized my name, though he did his best to conceal the fact. Notice also how quickly he mentioned my mother, and directed us down to the hot labs to find her, even though he pretended to be unconcerned about her presence or her fate."

"Hmm. Are you willing to take a bet that she isn't down in the hot labs at all?"

I shook my head and smiled slightly. "No, Commander."

"Too bad. I wonder where she is, then. We've just about exhausted the possibilities."

"The process of elimination would suggest that she is behind Captain Ventralis."

He nodded. "That will be our next step if this doesn't pan out."

Tali couldn't remain still during the fast lift ride down to the hot labs, bouncing on her toes and fidgeting. Shepard was quieter, but even he checked his assault rifle three times on the short journey. Personally I wished that I could just prop myself up on the wall and sleep.

When the lift doors opened, we emerged with weapons already drawn and ready. Silence met us as we advanced into the facility, checking the rooms on either side of the main corridor, at first finding no sign of anyone.

Then Tali turned suddenly to point her shotgun at a locked door. "There's something in there."

We waited, but whatever Tali heard did not repeat itself. Shepard nodded to her and pointed to the code-lock on the door. Tali quickly hacked through the lock. The door opened.

Darkness in the space behind the door. Shepard turned on the flashlight attached to his assault rifle, catching a form huddled on the floor. The shape turned and blinked at us in the sudden light, then
rose, leaning heavily on a workbench. I saw a male human in a Binary Helix lab coat, haggard and worn as if he had been deprived of food and sleep for many days. Dried blood painted the right leg of his trousers, and a makeshift dressing covered much of his upper leg. His eyes glittered feverishly in the light.

"Are you here to secure situation?" he asked, his voice thick with an accent I had never heard before.

"Who are you?" demanded Shepard.

"I am Yaroslav Abramovich Tartakovsky. Chief Scientist for Binary Helix project. You must listen. This is Code Omega scenario. If we do not contain our mistake, they will drop bombs from battle-stations. You understand?"

"Wait a minute. Is there an asari Matriarch here?"

Tartakovsky frowned. "Asari? I have not seen one."

"Commander, I believe you would have won your bet," I murmured.

The scientist made a frustrated gesture with his free hand. "This is not important. You must be listening! Binary Helix find derelict ship, thousands of years drifting. This was rachni ship. Inside we find many eggs, in cryogenic suspension. One egg still viable. Very tough, to be so long frozen. Binary Helix plan to clone rachni. Mass produce them. Create army. But when we get here and hatch egg, we find is not common rachni. Is queen. Better for project, can work with natural reproductive cycle, no need to clone strange species. When she lays eggs, we move her to Rift Station. We are thinking that without her nearby, can raise rachni to be obedient to us."

Shepard shook his head in disgust. "Obviously that didn't work."

"Eh. This was exactly wrong thing to do. I am thinking that without queen, rachni are not developing properly. Her mind is shaping theirs, teaching them cooperation. Without her, rachni become feral. Uncontrollable."

"Is she still alive? Could we bring her here to take control of the wild rachni?"

"No! I am sorry, but this will not work. These rachni are beyond saving. Must be destroyed through local Code Omega execution, or Executive Board will be killing us all. Must set off neutron purge."

"How do we do that?"

"Arming controls are nearby. Help me get to them. Then we insert key and I give VI destruct codes. You run, get away before purge. I cannot run, will only slow you down. Leave me to pay for mistakes."

Shepard sighed. "You're sure no one else has come down here to deal with the outbreak?"

"No. Most of my colleagues are dead, eaten by rachni. Only I escape to secure vault. Lock emergency lift and tramway. No one else has come here."

"All right, then let's get the job done and get out of here."

We moved slowly down the corridor, Tartakovsky leaning heavily on me to take the weight off his wounded leg.

The ceiling caved in, and a warrior rachni leaped screeching into our midst.
I screamed and recoiled, throwing my arms up to defend myself from a snarl of sharp edges. Tartakovksy twisted away from me and collapsed onto the floor. That at least left my hands free. I made a panicky gesture and the rachni lifted into the air, spinning helplessly as it skimmed away a few inches above the floor. Shepard and Tali fired, killing the creature.

By some miracle I was uninjured, but I could hear the sound of movement in the walls, in the ventilation ducts, muffled but coming closer. A lot of noise, coming from all sides.

Gasping for breath, I turned to Tartakovksy. He sprawled on the floor, quite dead, a surprised expression on his face. A bloody mess oozed where his chest had been. The rachni must have impaled him on its sharp-edged claws as it leaped to the attack.

"The codes!" shouted Shepard.

I knelt and frantically searched his body, finding nothing.

The sounds of rachni grew louder.

Desperate, I picked up Tartakovksy's left arm and tore the omni-tool bracelet from his wrist, throwing it to Tali.

We ran.

The corridor behind us filled with rachni as we hurried through a double-thick door labeled SECURITY CONTROL. The door closed behind us. Shepard and I covered it with our weapons as Tali moved to the master control panel. I heard a chirp behind us as she opened Tartakovksy's omni-tool and began data-mining it for the destruct codes.

We heard a loud thump from the door, a scraping as of large claws on metal.

"Got it!" shouted Tali. "VI!"

"Connecting," said the VI in its neutral feminine voice. "I have full access to this facility and am at your disposal."

An even louder thump from the door. I thought I saw the metal flex slightly.

"Activate the neutron purge! Code input, eight-seven-five-zero-two-zero-zero-seven-nine, Code Omega local execution."

"Verified," said the VI. "Code Omega execution in 120 seconds."

Shepard and I stared at each other, eyes wide, and I knew we were thinking the same thing.

"Tali, come on. We are leaving!"

Shepard held a fist near the door control and glanced at me.

I called up a biotic surge, my whole body suddenly bright with blue fire, and nodded to him.

He slammed his fist on the control, opening the door.

A shockwave of telekinetic force erupted through the door and down the corridor outside. The rachni warrior trying to force the door was hurled backward, tumbling wildly as it went.

Shepard charged through the door right behind my biotic attack, already firing his assault rifle at
anything that moved. He had no lack of targets. The whole corridor teemed with movement.

I broke into a sprint right behind Shepard, Tali only a few steps behind me. As I ran I changed techniques, converting my initial telekinetic surge into a barrier wall, maintaining it just in front of Shepard as he led our escape. The barrier picked up worker rachni and hurled them away, to smash against the ceiling, walls, or floor of the corridor. The massive warriors stood their ground, but Shepard kept up his weapons fire, wounding them, forcing each one to recoil for the moment we needed to press past it. Behind me I could hear Tali firing her shotgun, killing warriors as we passed.

One stream of venom struck Shepard’s armor, then a second. He stumbled for a moment, stopping my heart with terror, but then he recovered and continued his desperate run.

A wounded warrior lashed out with its claws as I passed, laying my cheek open with a razor-sharp edge, barely missing my right eye. I gasped with belated horror and kept moving.

Behind me, Tali shrieked with sudden terror and blasted away at something with her shotgun. When I glanced behind I couldn’t see what had frightened her, but she was unhurt and keeping up. I put it out of my mind.

We sprinted into the lift. Shepard whirled and fired on a warrior in mid-air, cutting short a flying leap that would have ended with the monster crashing into Tali from behind. I pushed desperately at the controls, the door slammed shut, and the lift began to move.

Seconds ticked away and became a minute, then two minutes. We realized that we were going to live.
Before we continued on, we took a few moments in the tramway station to rest and tend to minor wounds. Shepard had taken six or seven superficial wounds during his charge through the swarm of rachni in the hot labs. Tali had managed to escape injury, although she desperately needed rest. I had only the one cut on my face, not serious even though it had bled copiously.

Shepard carefully applied medi-gel to the wound on my cheek. He was gentle and dispassionate about it, but the touch of his hands on my face still sent my heart racing. If he saw my color darken, or noticed that I suddenly couldn’t meet his eyes, he was kind enough to say nothing about it.

Goddess. Admit it to yourself, Liara, this human affects you in ways you never considered possible. But now is not the time!

Once again we entered the Main Research area, this time cautiously, all senses alert, our weapons out and ready. Captain Ventralis and his men had abandoned the barricades in the foyer, leaving the space empty.

"I don’t like this," said Shepard. "Smells like an ambush."

"Perhaps with the rachni dead in the hot labs, they felt able to withdraw their defenses and rest," I suggested.

"You don’t believe that any more than I do, Liara."

"No. I suppose I don’t."

We advanced slowly up a corridor behind the barricade, following signs that pointed to the BARRACKS AND MEDICAL BAY. A final door opened, revealing a large open space.

It also revealed an ambush.

Captain Ventralis and several of his ERCS guardsmen crouched in well-fortified positions on the other side of the bay. A hail of gunfire poured down on us, terribly intense, almost enough to kill us outright even though we had been on the alert. Shepard had to move into the bay, against the barrage, before he could throw himself to the floor behind a workbench. My own shields flared and collapsed a split second after I put up a biotic barrier. Even today I do not like to think how close I came to death in that moment. Tali had less difficulty, as her shields were stronger than either of ours. She broke right and found a scrap of cover behind an overturned table.

Once we survived the first furious moments of the attack, things became easier. We waited for our shields to recover, and then began our well-practiced tactical routine. Tali sabotaged enemy weapons and shields, and delivered the occasional deadly blast with her shotgun. I disrupted the enemy line with telekinetic pulls and throws. Each time an enemy was exposed for a moment, Shepard calmly scored a hit with his sniper rifle.

Captain Ventralis and his ERCS troops proved to be a minor threat. On the other hand, the asari among them nearly managed to kill me. For the third time that day.

She made her appearance just as the ERCS fire was beginning to slacken, a graceful figure in pitch-black armor, emerging from behind her cover in a great biotics-assisted leap. Shepard fired at her the
moment she appeared, but she was much too fast, and for once he missed. Then she reached out with her biotics and yanked away the heavy crates I had been using for cover, leaving me exposed.

She aimed her shotgun at me, hoping to bring down my shields and kill me with one blast.

I flash-stepped to the side.

I certainly did not do it deliberately, that first time. I knew of the technique, but I had never done it or seen it done before. Somehow I recognized the threat on an instinctive level, reached out with my mind, and twisted the space beside me so I was repositioned about a meter and a half to the right, all within a small fraction of a second. The shotgun blast passed harmlessly to my left. I returned fire with my sidearm, striking the commando from a position she had not expected. Then, as Shepard adjusted his aim, I jumped behind another obstruction before the remaining ERCS guards could focus their fire on me.

Shepard's sniper rifle boomed. This time he didn't miss. The commando fell, mortally wounded.

Soon enough the fighting was over, Captain Ventralis and his men down, none of us seriously hurt. We gathered in the center of the common area, looking down at the commando’s body.

"I recognize her," I said after a moment. I placed a hand to the side of my head, nursing a sudden sharp pain. "Alestia Iallis, one of my mother's acolytes."

"We must be getting close," Shepard observed. "That was a neat trick you played out there."

"I'm not even sure how I did it. If it always hurts this much, I don't think I'm going to do it again."

"You've been using your biotics almost constantly for over twenty-four hours. That has to be a strain all by itself."

"Hmm. When we return to the Normandy I am going to have the steward make me an enormous plate of spaghetti."

Exhausted as he was, he gave me a brave grin. "My treat."

We found Captain Ventralis, dead of a head-shot from Shepard's sniper rifle. "Damn," said Shepard. "He was a good soldier. I wish we hadn't had to do this."

I bent down and searched the captain's body, specifically checking the hip pocket from which he had drawn the pass-card for the emergency lift to the hot labs. Sure enough, I found more pass-cards, including one prominently labeled SECURE BIO LAB. I held this one out to Shepard. "Didn't Tartakovksy say they had moved the rachni queen back to Rift Station from the hot labs?"

"That sounds right," he agreed.

"This seems to be a likely place."

We moved back through the Main Research facility, into a warren of small laboratory spaces and maintenance tunnels. Soon enough we saw signs pointing to SECURE BIO LAB, and began following them.

Captain Ventralis's pass-card opened a locked door. Behind it we found a vast space, a great square-section cavern hewn from the mountain rock, extending far above and below our level. As we stepped out into the cavern, we stood on a large platform in one corner of the space. Wide catwalks led off to our left and right, leading to other platforms in the adjacent corners, each stacked high with
scientific equipment and electronic instrumentation.

The largest platform of all hung suspended in the center of the cavern, high above the distant floor, connected to the outer catwalk by a long ramp. There we saw more equipment, more instruments, all clustered around an enormous cylindrical tank. In the tank lurked a bulky shape, all claws and tentacles, a rachni much larger and heavier than any we had seen thus far.

_The queen._

Before the tank, apparently contemplating the rachni queen, there stood a tall, elegant figure. She wore a long gown. An elaborate headdress concealed her fringe and framed her face. In all that vast space we saw no one else.

It had been many years, but I knew her.

"Mother," I whispered.

As if she heard me, the Matriarch turned away from the object of her meditation. She descended the ramp and walked toward us with slow, confident steps.

We stood and waited until she stopped just above us on the catwalk. Her eyes rested on each of us in turn, hollow eyes without light in them. I trembled to see how much she had changed. She who had once worn bright colors was now swathed in funereal black. I saw nothing of the gentle, wise woman who had raised me from childhood. All that remained was a hieratic figure, a priestess or avatar of Death.

"You do not know the privilege of being a mother," she said calmly. "The power to create a life, to shape it, to turn it toward happiness or despair. Her children were to be mine, raised to hunt and slay Saren's enemies. They still can be."

_Her voice . . . it's still the same, but so cold._

Shepard stepped forward, keeping his hands away from his weapons. "Matriarch Benezia?"

"I won't be moved by artful words or sympathy, Commander Shepard. No matter what you say, no matter whom you bring into this confrontation. Saren's cause is paramount. Nothing and no one can be permitted to interfere."

"That's not why Liara is here, Matriarch. She came of her own free will."

"Indeed? What have you told him about me, Liara?"

I shook my head in weary revulsion. "What could I tell him, mother? How could I explain what has happened to you, what insanity or evil has overcome you?" My voice escaped my control, rising to a half-scream of betrayal. "What could I possibly say to justify all of this?"

"Nothing at all, Liara. It is not your place to justify me, even if you could." She turned back to Shepard. "Have you faced an asari commando unit before? Few humans have. Even fewer have survived."

"I can't believe you'd kill your own daughter," he objected.

"If she stands against Saren, she has chosen her own fate!"

Benezia flung out a hand, her biotic power surging forward with no warning at all.
The world vanished in a haze of blue light, which came and departed in an instant. I sensed a discontinuity, as if time had suddenly leaped forward by several moments without our noticing it.

Benezia had moved back to her place by the rachni queen, her back to us as if she had no concern for our fate. In her place stood a fire-team of commandos, grim-faced asari wearing black armor and pitiless expressions.

My mother had enveloped us in a *stasis field*, giving her commandos time to get into an optimal position.

Had Shepard hesitated for even a moment, we would have been lost. The instant he regained control of his senses, he saw the peril we were in and barked the order that saved our lives.

"*Follow me!*"

He turned and sprinted to the right, crossing the catwalk to the next platform. He moved faster than I had ever seen him move, faster than anyone his size should have been able to move in heavy armor.

Shepard's voice of command entirely bypassed my conscious mind. Out of sheer reflex I slammed down a biotic barrier and ran after him. Tali followed no more than a step behind me, unslinging her shotgun and twisting to fire blindly behind us.

It worked. The commandos hesitated for a moment, not expecting their prey to bolt so quickly. By the time they recovered, we were out of range of the shotguns they carried. We found more than enough cover on the new platform, behind all the equipment that had been set up to monitor the rachni queen from a distance. Now the enemy had to charge us along the open catwalk we had just used.

They tried, sending spheres and streamers of biotic force after us, then dodging and weaving as they crossed the open ground. One fell, then a second, as Shepard and I scored hits. The third leaped at Shepard with a fierce battle cry on her lips and a vicious monowire blade in her hand. He ducked under her swing, blocked her back-handed stab, and kicked her savagely in the belly with one armored boot. While she reeled off-balance, Tali blew her head off with a shotgun blast at point-blank range.

*Blue light. Discontinuity.*

Benezia had thrown a stasis field again, covering all three of us at once, from her position in the center of the cavern. I was awestruck at the power needed to perform such a feat *once*, much less twice.

*I wonder if I could do it too.* The thought flashed through my mind as I frantically looked around for the next threat. *Power does run in the blood. Just because I've never tried . . .*

Then a squad of geth charged down on us, and I had no more time to speculate.

Ironically, we had much less trouble with the geth. We moved to the right again to reach a good vantage point on the next platform. This gave Tali a few moments to remotely hack the synthetics' shields and targeting protocols. We had to be cautious of snipers, but even these fought at a disadvantage as the catwalks channeled their approach. We stayed under cover, keeping our heads down whenever a laser targeting beam came too close, and helped Shepard to pick them off one by one.

*Blue light. Discontinuity.*
She had done it again.

More geth. This time we still had adequate cover, and no need to shift to another platform. Shepard shook his head in momentary confusion, but then he went back to his steady rhythm, finding and destroying targets.

I glanced across to the central platform, and saw Benezia no longer standing tall and dignified. She had slumped to the floor, almost to her hands and knees, and appeared to be in the midst of a terrible struggle.

"Shepard, she's exhausted!" I shouted. "She may not be able to keep this up any longer."

"All right, be ready," he ordered. "I'm going to finish off the geth on the platform to the right. As soon as the last one is down, you two get over there and see if you can shut her down."

I felt a sudden flash of anger. "Shut her down? Do you mean kill her?"

"No. Not if you don't have to." He fired again, and a geth fell back over the guard rail to plummet to the floor of the cavern far below. "Now go!"

Tali and I ran.

By the time we arrived at the central platform the fight had ended, the last echoes of gunfire fading away against the cavern’s distant roof. In the distance we could see Shepard rising out of cover, returning his sniper rifle to its hardpoint on his back. He began to walk around the catwalk toward us.

Benezia crouched by a workbench, her back turned to us, her fists bunched. I rushed toward her, put my hands on her shoulders. "Mother?"

She turned toward me. I gasped at the sight of her face, contorted with a rage so intense that it verged on madness. Her pupils dilated so widely that she was probably blind. She raised her fists as if to strike me. "This is not over," she gasped. "Saren is unstoppable. My mind is filled with his light. Everything is clear. Everything!"

I was struck by a sudden insight. I seized her wrists with both hands, held her close. "Mother, listen to me. Fight this, whatever it is. Fight it!"

"I will not betray him!" she screamed, her body convulsing in my grip. "You will . . . you . . ."

"Fight it," I called to her again, desperate to see my mother instead of this mad stranger.

All at once, every muscle in her body relaxed and she pitched forward into my embrace like a rag doll. I caught her, taking the unexpected weight in my arms, and lowered her gently to the floor.

"Commander Shepard," she said weakly. "You must listen. Saren still whispers in my mind. I have kept a small portion of myself free of him. I can fight him briefly . . . but the indoctrination is terribly
"So you could turn on us again?" he asked.

"Yes, but it would not be my will. People are not themselves around Saren. His allies and followers come to idolize him, worship him. We would do anything for him. Betray an ally. Steal from a friend." She glanced at me, dreadful pain in her face. "Even kill a beloved child."

Tears welled up in my eyes, to hear her say such a thing after so many years of silence.

"How does he do it?" Shepard demanded. "Is it a telepathic effect? Some kind of alien technology?"

"I am not sure. I think the key is Sovereign, his flagship."

"The ship we saw at Eden Prime?"

"The same. It is not a geth ship. I do not know who built it. Its technology is far more advanced than that of any known civilization." She shuddered, as if remembering an extreme pain, or an extreme pleasure. "The longer you stay aboard, the more Saren's will becomes yours. You sit at his feet and smile as his words pour into you. I thought I was strong enough to resist, but before long I was his willing tool, eager to serve. Beware of this, Commander."

"I understand."

"He sent me here to save the rachni for his use, but also to find a critical piece of information: the location of the Mu Relay."

I frowned. "Why is that important?"

"Saren seeks the Conduit." A spasm crossed her face, like a shadow of deep struggle. "I do not know what that may be, but our research has determined it is located in a star cluster accessible only through the Mu Relay. Yet that relay was lost thousands of years ago, ejected from its original star system by a nearby supernova explosion. Our own civilization has no record of its location."

"Did someone on Noveria find it?" Shepard suggested.

Benezia dropped her gaze, clenched her fists hard at her sides, her hands shaking. "Two thousand years ago the rachni inhabited that region of the galaxy. They found the relay, drifting in interstellar space. The knowledge was passed down through ancestral memory, queens inheriting it from their mothers. I took the knowledge of the Mu Relay from this queen's mind. I was not gentle."

"Oh, Mother," I breathed.

"It was an abomination!" she abruptly shrieked, refusing to look at any of us, her fists rising to hammer at the sides of her head. "A negation of everything I once believed! I should have been stronger, should have abandoned Saren the moment I saw what was happening. Instead I have become a murderer, a violator of minds!"

"You can still make it right." Shepard held out a hand in appeal. "Help us stop Saren. Give us the information too."

"I . . . I . . ." She shook her head violently, and then turned to the workbench beside her to pick up a data disk, her hand trembling. "I will. I made a copy of the information on this OSD. Take it, quickly."
I stepped forward and took the disk, tucked it into a pocket of my armor.

Benezia recoiled abruptly, turning away from us, covering her face with both hands. "You have to stop him. You have to stop me. Oh, Goddess! He is upon me, inside me, tearing at me from the inside . . ."

"Mother, don't leave us!"

She turned to me, her arms stretched out in a futile attempt to touch me. Her voice was horribly strained, as if she had to force the words out against terrible resistance. "Liara . . . I have always been so proud of you . . ."

Then something tore loose inside her mind. She screamed, a ghastly high-pitched thing. Biotic energy erupted, throwing all of us back with immense force. Shepard tumbled across the platform and nearly fell to the distant floor. I was slammed against a guard rail, a sudden tearing pain telling me of cracked or broken ribs.

I saw Benezia flying through the air, ablaze with dark energy, on a trajectory that would end at the exact point where Shepard lay helpless on the edge of the platform. She threw her hands over her head, blue light gathering around them, bright as a sun. She had become a living weapon, a hammer that would crush the life out of him when it struck.

Shepard rolled over, looked up in time to see Death descending upon him.

I drew my sidearm, tried to aim and fire. It was useless. My hand was shaking too badly.

Benezia made a triumphant shout . . .

And Tali shot her.

We had all forgotten the quarian, she had been so silent throughout our confrontation. Now she reared up from behind a discarded crate, swung her shotgun up, and discharged it into Benezia's body at point-blank range.

The shotgun's roar cut off Benezia's shout. Her biotic energy discharged in all directions, crackling on exposed metal, tingling on our skin, doing no harm as it grounded out. Her body dropped to the platform, bloody and broken.

Echoes of the shotgun blast rolled back from the distant stone walls, and then all was silence.

I crawled over to Benezia, half-knelt beside her, and rolled her body into my arms. "Mother," I whispered.

She still lived, barely. Her eyes wandered, tried to focus on my face. "Little Wing?"

"I'm here, Mother."

A sigh, almost too weak to be heard. "Good night, Little Wing. I will see you with the dawn."

She was gone.
I could not move for what seemed to be a very long time.

I sat huddled on the floor, my mother's body leaning against me, her blood staining my armor. Pain lanced through my side at every breath. Tears ran unheeded down my cheeks.

At the edge of my awareness I knew that something was happening. I heard voices: Shepard, then Tali, then a strange voice I had never heard before. It occurred to me that I should possibly be paying attention.

I couldn't bring myself to care. I grieved dumbly, like an animal that can't comprehend the stillness of its companion's body, prodding at it and expecting it to rise. My heart had no room for anything else. The weight of Benezia's body in my arms was about all I could manage to deal with.

It had been so long since I had simply embraced my mother. I had almost forgotten the comfort that could come from such a simple act. Now I had one last opportunity.

She had always embraced me. Even when she was being strict, even when she demanded more than I was willing to give, she had always opened her arms to me. I could depend on the circle of her arms, the warmth of her body, the scent of her skin. Reminders of a time when the world was new, and a small child could always return to safe harbor between voyages of exploration.

That was gone now, past any hope of recall.

Time to grow up.

I moved at last. Almost without any will on my part, one hand rose to scrub the tears out of my eyes until I could see once more. I leaned down to kiss my mother's forehead. My hand trembled as I gently closed her staring eyes. Then I slowly moved out from under her, easing her to the floor, and pushed myself to my feet.

I stood over her, looking down at her for the last time.

"Goodbye, Mother."

Then I turned and went to Shepard.

When I reached his side, a truly bizarre tableau confronted me. Shepard and Tali conversed with a dead commando. The asari stood with her back pressed to the side of the rachni queen's tank, one of the creature's tentacles splayed out against the thick plastic right behind her head.

"You are not in harmony with those who hoped to control us," the commando said, her face expressionless, her eyes glazed and unseeing. "What will you sing? Will you release us? Or are we to fade away once more?"

"What is happening?" I murmured to Tali.

Startled, she glanced at me, then back to Shepard and the tank. "The queen . . . she's somehow speaking to us through that asari. It's some kind of telepathic projection, using her brain as a translator."
Deep in the ashes of my heart, I felt something new: a stirring of scientific curiosity. "Fascinating."

"I think she's asking Shepard to choose what to do with her, now that the Binary Helix project has been wrecked."

"Your companion hears the truth," agreed the asari. No, the *queen*. "You have the power to free us to sing again, or to return us to the silence of memory. What do you choose?"

"Look at those tanks above her, Shepard," said Tali. "That's fluorosulfuric acid, strong enough to kill anything no matter its biology. They must have been concerned about the consequences if she ever escaped."

"Her ancestors were a scourge on the galaxy once," I said, "but eradicating them was a mistake. This queen doesn't appear to be hostile, and she has done nothing to us. She is an innocent victim. Here we have a chance to set things right and earn her gratitude."

Shepard looked at me for a long moment. I held his gaze, although to this day I can't be sure what he read in my expression.

"I won't kill you," he told the queen at last. "That's the kind of thing Saren would do: discard you the moment you were no longer useful to him. You deserve the same chance anyone has, to make a life for yourself and your people."

"You will forgive us? Give us the chance to compose anew?" Even through the medium of the dead asari's voice, I could hear echoes of incredulous joy in the question. "We will sing of your mercy to our children."

Shepard stepped forward to a control console, called up the main menu. A few keystrokes and it was done. A lift carried the tank upward and away from us, rotating it slightly around its long axis and exposing an open panel in its side. The rachni queen abandoned her translator, the commando's corpse collapsing like a puppet with its strings cut. She moved toward the opening . . . paused for a moment, to look back at Shepard . . . then she was gone.

"I sure hope that doesn't come back to bite us on the ass one day," he said wearily.

I put a hand on his shoulder, looked up into his face. "Don't worry. It was the right choice."

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"No." I closed my eyes for a moment, felt my heart beating again, my lungs filling with breath. Even the sharp pain in my side suddenly seemed welcome, a sign that I still lived. "Never mind. I suspect I will be. Eventually."

"Liara . . ." Tali began, her voice very small.

"Oh Tali." I turned and embraced the quarian. "Please don't punish yourself. It had to be done. You saved the Commander's life. You saved all our lives."

I stood there for a moment, close to my friends, and felt myself fill with compassion for both of them.

Before her fall Benezia had often taught the value of compassion. Of course, by *compassion* she didn't mean the meager, weak-willed sympathy that any sentient being might *feel* for another. To her compassion meant *energy*, an irresistible force, a demand for action to defend and give life to the Other. True compassion would do anything it took to fight injustice, drive away evil, end suffering, and bring peace.
Benezia taught that compassion is easy for one's own family and lineage, harder for one's friends and casual acquaintances, harder still for strangers, hardest of all for one's enemies. Still, she said, it's better to exercise compassion in easy ways than never to exercise it at all. She likened it to physical exercise, strengthening the compassionate will so that over time it would become equal to more difficult challenges.

I had spent too many years alone, never required to exercise compassion for anyone, never facing any serious challenge. My cloistered life had weakened my will, leaving it unequal to the trials of the real universe.

No matter what else came to pass, I knew that I could no longer live in that fashion.

*Now Benezia is dead. I am her heir. Very well, I will have to be Benezia from now on.*

"It's time to go home," I suggested, and Shepard agreed.

Nothing remained for us at Peak 15. We had defeated Benezia, her commandos and her geth, her Binary Helix hirelings, all of them now unavailable for Saren's use. Shepard had freed the rachni queen, placing her outside Saren's grasp as well. Perhaps Saren had the location of the Mu Relay, but at least we also had the information. Had we been less exhausted, we would have counted it all a victory.

We found a grav pallet and gently placed Benezia's body on it, arranging her limbs with dignity and covering her with a dark blue sheet. It came with us as we took the tramway back to Central Station, made our way to the garage, and drove down the Aleutsk Valley to Port Hanshan.

Shepard sent a terse report to the Executive Board, refused to answer any further questions, and led us back to the *Normandy*. Within half an hour of arriving in Port Hanshan, we were in space, shifting up into FTL for a run to the nearby Strenuus system.

Dr. Chakwas examined all of us, treated our wounds and injuries, and prescribed food and rest. We were only too happy to oblige. Shepard and I shared a meal in the crew mess, taking care to discuss nothing of consequence, and then retired to our respective quarters. I slept deeply within moments of stretching out on my cot.

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*16 March 2183, SSV Normandy, Interstellar Space*

To my surprise, the humans treated Benezia with respect.

*Normandy*'s patrol route would not permit a return to the Citadel for days. My mother’s body would have to ride with us for a time. When I awoke and asked Dr. Chakwas what arrangement could be made, she simply led me down to the staging bay, into a cargo compartment that had once contained ship’s stores.

Now the compartment was empty, except for a medical stasis pod placed in the center of the floor. Someone had carefully laid Benezia out in it, a soft night-blue cover concealing the blood and the terrible wound in her side, her face looking pale but at rest. She looked strange without her elaborate headdress, younger and somehow more ordinary. A single soft light shone down from above, stark but rather beautiful in its simplicity.

I glanced at Dr. Chakwas, my heart no doubt showing in my eyes, and she smiled.

“Shepard saw to it,” she told me.
I am not at all surprised.

She left me to stand by the bier. I stood alone, lost in contemplation. After a time I raised my eyes and arms to make the prayer for the departed, elegant phrases of an ancient Armali dialect rolling out of my deep memory.

When I finished, Sheppard stood there.

He had remained at the entrance to the compartment, standing in silence, his posture one of quiet respect. When he saw I had noticed his presence, he nodded and gave me a faint smile.

I turned away from my mother and came over to him.

"I wanted to see how you were doing," he said.

"You mean, you wanted to see how I was dealing with my mother's death." I sighed. "I am coping, Commander. The person we met on Noveria . . . there was very little left of my mother in her. I prefer to remember Benezia the way she once was, before Saren corrupted her."

"I suspect that's for the best." He leaned forward, his gaze on me very intent. "She broke away from him at the end, even if only for a little while. I was amazed at her strength of will."

"I agree. She was a remarkable person, Commander. I wish you could have known her before."

He smiled warmly. "I think I have some idea, Liara. Her determination, her intelligence, her strength, all the best of your mother lives on in you."

"That's very kind of you." I fought down a sudden surge of nervous confusion, glancing back into the compartment where my mother lay. "I appreciate your concern, Commander, but I will be fine. Benezia chose her path, or it was chosen for her. I have chosen mine. I am with you to the end."

He nodded. He looked down at his hands, avoiding my eyes, apparently not sure how to carry the conversation any further.

"Was there something else?" I asked him gently.

"Liara . . ."

I stared at him. Commander Shepard, the great warrior, the insightful diplomat, at a loss for words? Finally he shook his head, baffled, and began to turn away. "I'm glad you're with us, Liara. We couldn't have made as much progress as we have without you."

It was an evasion. I almost said something neutral and allowed him to leave, but then I felt a surge of frustrated anger. I quickly moved to interpose myself between him and his escape route. "Commander, I think we have more to discuss."

He stopped, his eyes wide with surprise.

"Commander . . . William." A chill ran down my spine at the sound of my own voice using his given name. "I may be almost four times your age. I may have been working successfully as a scientist since long before you were born. The fact remains that I am asari, and in some ways my people still consider me little more than a child. There are many things in life I still lack the experience to understand."

"Such as?" he asked, his voice rough.
"Such as what it means when you meet someone you admire greatly. Someone you would trust with your life. Someone you find yourself thinking about at odd and completely inappropriate moments. Someone you feel a need to know better, a need to understand, because he presents a mystery that demands resolution."

"Ah. That." He leaned back against a bulkhead and began to laugh helplessly.

I was torn between two impulses. Part of me wanted to hurl myself into his arms. The other part wanted to call up a biotic field and smash him into paste on the bulkhead.

Fortunately he saw the expression on my face in time. "I'm sorry, Liara, I'm not laughing at you. I'm laughing at myself."

"I fail to see the joke."

"How do you think I've been feeling, ever since you came on board?"

"Oh Goddess." I stepped back. "You too?"

He nodded, rubbing a hand across the stubble on his chin and refusing to meet my eyes.

"This makes absolutely no sense," I complained. "We have only known each other for a few weeks. We're not even of the same species. We have nothing in common."

"I think we have more in common than you realize. But then, this doesn't have to make logical sense. Sometimes it just happens."

"Things do not just happen to me."

He grinned. "Maybe you should try it once in a while. You might like it."

_Humans_, I thought and carefully did not say. _Aggressive, reckless, counting on luck to get through every situation. Yet it seems to work for them._

"I am glad we have finally discussed this," I said. "I wasn't sure it would be appropriate to act on these feelings. I was under the impression you were already engaged in a relationship with Chief Williams."

He became serious. "Ash is a good friend, that's all."

"Does she know that?" I challenged him.

"I'm trying to make it clear to her. Alliance regs are very strict about fraternization. She's my direct subordinate and there are way too many ranks between us."

"Somehow I do not believe that will stop Ash, if she is serious about pursuing a relationship with you." 

"No, it won't." He shook his head. "That's my problem to solve. My question for you is, where do you want to go with this?"

"I wish I knew. I'm sorry, William, I'm asari enough to need time to think about it."

"That's fine, Liara."

He reached out and gently touched my face, just the tips of three fingers tracing the line of my cheek.
I felt a rush of warmth, my heart racing, warning me that perhaps I had reason not to take _too much_ time. I dropped my gaze for a moment, then mustered my courage and looked back into his eyes.

*His eyes are really quite beautiful,* I realized.

“Just keep me in the loop if talking about it would help,” he said at last.

"I will. Thank you."

"Oh, and here's one datum for your empirical assessment. Please don't call me _William_."

I stared up at him, puzzled.

"I know, you've probably read that humans normally use first names with their close friends . . . and their lovers. I'm an exception. I've always hated the name. Even my mother started calling me _Shepard_ once I was old enough to be a pest about it."

"All right . . . Shepard."

"Perfect." He moved half a step closer, looming over me but respecting my personal space. "You're cute when you say it."

Then he was gone, leaving me fuming in his wake.

_Cute?_ I folded my arms and shook my head in rueful frustration. _I'll have a good deal more than "cute" from you before I'm done, Shepard._
16 March 2183, SSV Normandy, Interstellar Space

After Noveria the Normandy returned to a more normal routine, patrolling along the borders of human-claimed space in the Pax and Argos Rho clusters. We could not be certain where Saren would pursue his quest for the Conduit. Until we learned more, Shepard wanted to ensure that the geth carried out no more incursions deep into human space.

In any case we needed the time to rest, to heal in body and spirit, after the perils of Noveria.

Shepard also needed the time to establish his command. Since going into service less than thirty days before, Normandy had seen more action and change than many warships saw in years: the assault on Eden Prime; the sudden removal of Captain David Anderson; the arrival of "aliens" like me among the crew; battles against slavers, batarian terrorists, the geth, and even the rachni. The crew, still learning how to work together as a team, found all of it a great deal to assimilate.

During the weeks that followed Noveria, Shepard welded Normandy and her crew into a cohesive, effective fighting unit. He didn't work miracles, he simply worked hard.

His leadership style involved a great deal of walking around the ship, talking to every member of the crew, listening to their concerns, handing out praise or correction as needed, sometimes lending a hand with their work. He always seemed to be on duty, even in the middle of gamma-shift while the rest of the command crew slept. Unusual among Alliance ship-captains, this behavior amused and sometimes disconcerted the crew. "Commander is making the rounds," they would say, joking about cleaning up their work areas or polishing the day's status reports for Shepard's inspection.

It worked. Shepard made himself the calm center of our little community, the anchor all of us could rely on to keep steady in a hostile galaxy. He earned the crew's loyalty, transforming the Normandy from an ambiguous experiment into a finely tuned fighting machine.

The technique worked on me as well. After Noveria he made time for me every day, even if only a few minutes before we retired to our separate beds for the night. We rarely spoke of anything important in those evening encounters. Even so, they presented opportunities to enjoy each other's company . . . and explore the growing attraction we felt for each other.

It began the evening after we left Noveria. I was just sitting down to my evening meal, attracting a few stares from the crew around me, when Shepard arrived. He glanced in my direction and stopped dead, blinking in surprise.

"You weren't kidding, were you?" he observed.

I gave him my best blue-eyed innocent gaze. "About what, Shepard?"

He pointed wordlessly to my plate, piled high with noodles, tomato sauce, and no fewer than five of the small round constructions called meatballs. The steward had suggested a slice of something called garlic bread, and that smelled so good I asked for two. A small bottle of Armali springwine completed the meal.

I shrugged. "I have a great deal of catching up to do, after Noveria."

"I'll say." He set his datapad down across the table from me, claiming the seat, and went off to the steward to collect his own meal.
By the time he returned I was already demolishing my food, twirling the spork to collect balls of noodles half the size of my fist. The garlic bread had a strong taste, but it was very savory and it complemented the flavors of the pasta. Besides, after a few bites from the first slice I found it useful for herding errant sauce around my plate. The springwine played the only false note, too sweet for the sauce’s acidic taste. I drank it anyway, as springwine does not keep well once it has been opened. Besides, I had other reasons for making the selection.

Shepard watched me for a few moments, then smiled in amusement and turned to his own meal. He divided his attention between his sandwich and the datapad.

"What are you working on, Shepard?" I asked, once I had dulled the edge of my appetite.

"It's an after-action report to the Alliance Navy procurement bureau." He washed another bite down with a sip of the bitter drink he called coffee. "Now that we’ve seen action a few times, there's an issue I think we need to correct."

"It seems to me that the Normandy has performed very well."

"It has. The ship itself isn't the issue. It's our ability to deploy troops to the ground. We only have the one landing vehicle, the M-35 Mako, for space-to-ground insertion. The Mako is agile and well-armed but it only has room for three crewmen. Maybe four, if everyone is willing to get cozy. The Normandy has a Marine complement of seven, and that's not counting me and all the specialists I might want to take on a ground mission."

"Cannot the ship deploy troops directly? You did that with Kaidan's team on Asteroid X57."

"That only works under specific circumstances. There needs to be a clear approach vector. Also a good LZ, nice and flat, not under direct enemy fire, and yet not so far from the objective that it takes too long to travel the distance on foot. Not something we can count on in any given mission."

"I see." I thought about the problem while I chewed on another sporkful of noodles. "There is some extra space in the staging bay. Perhaps we could add a second vehicle?"

"That might work, though it would be tight. Or maybe we can trade up for a larger AFV, something that's designed to carry a few passengers for forward deployment. Anything to loosen the tactical bottleneck we're experiencing now."

We were interrupted by a new voice. "Wow. I guess I know who to bet on in the next pie-eating contest."

It was Lieutenant Moreau, the ship's pilot, walking carefully to sit himself next to Shepard. He had spoken loudly, attracting attention from some of the others around us.

I looked down at my plate. I had made a very substantial dent in the pasta, although several meatballs remained to be reduced into submission. "I hardly think I’m the most avid eater on the Normandy, Lieutenant Moreau. There's Wrex, after all."

"Well yeah, but nobody has to watch him eat. Besides, he's easily five times your size. I can't figure out where you're putting it all." He glanced over my body and leered in a manner I had learned to recognize.

"That's simple enough, Lieutenant," I said, using my most delicate voice and smiling sweetly at him. I clenched my right fist and called up dark energy, creating a halo of swirling blue-white light around my hand. "Some of us are better able to burn it off."

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Laughter rang from all sides of the crew mess.

Even Shepard chuckled. "I don't think you want to engage the good doctor in a battle of wits, Joker. She's better armed than you are."

"No contest. Sorry, Doc."

I shook his hand to show I kept no hard feelings. Gently, of course. I had heard of his medical condition. "Please, call me Liara."

"Cool. Then I'm Joker. Anyone says Lieutenant Moreau, it makes me think I'm about to get my ass kicked."

I looked down my nose at him. "I will remember that, Lieutenant."

He widened his eyes in mock terror, and then turned to his food. Soon he and Shepard were deep in a technical discussion of whether adding more space-to-ground capacity would affect the Normandy's trim in flight.

Soon enough I finished my meal. I leaned back in the chair, just breathing, enjoying the sense of comfort and repletion. As I sipped from the last glass of springwine, I became aware of Shepard’s regard again.

"I'm curious about something, Liara."

"Yes?"

"I've noticed that you often drink wine. Is that cultural, or a personal preference?"

I smiled, secretly pleased to see him paying attention to my habits. "I suppose it's cultural. Asari are omnivores, like humans, but I think our natural diet has a higher proportion of sweet fruits in it than yours. It's natural that we should experiment with fermentation of fruit juices to produce wines. In all of our dominant cultures, wine is the preferred beverage."

Joker shook his head, amused about something, but he declined to share it with the rest of us.

"I'm more of a coffee drinker," said Shepard. "That's a different case, a drink invented by one culture because it was based on a specific plant that only grew in one region of Earth. Later it became popular throughout our species, and we carried the plant to be grown everywhere the climate permitted."

I made a face. "I'm sorry, Shepard. I don't think coffee is ever going to be a popular import for asari."

"That's okay. More for us." He extended a hand across the table. "Mind if I try that?"

I hesitated. In asari custom, sharing a drink from the same cup is a gesture with very specific meaning. I glanced at his face and saw an unmistakable glint in his eyes. Yes, he knows, and it amuses him to do this in front of his unaware crew. I made a small smile and handed him my glass. His fingers brushed mine as we made the transfer, and I felt my heart skip a beat.

He knew how to explore wine. He swirled it in the glass to release its aroma, sipped it, held it in his mouth, and breathed lightly through pursed lips to let the flavors develop. "Nice," was his opinion. "Sweet, no harsh overtones . . . and a very strange finish. I've never tasted anything quite like it."

"Well, naturally it was not produced from grapes. We have a similar fruit, small and very sweet, but
its chemistry is different. Some asari vintners have imported grapevines from Earth, and are experimenting with them, but they have not become widespread."

"What is this called?"

"It's a springwine, made from the first harvest of the year, produced near my home city. I often drank a vintage like this while I was growing up."

*A reminder of home, I thought to myself. A comfort while the pain of Benezia's death is still raw.*

Shepard nodded soberly, understanding the unspoken implications. He returned the glass to me so I could finish it. I raised it to my lips with a subtle smile, holding his gaze while I took the last draught.

Then a thought occurred to me. I sat quietly, toying with the empty glass, while I considered the implications. "Shepard, I have an idea."

He cocked his head and raised one eyebrow, inviting me to continue.

"Among my people, we have a custom that involves wine. A group of friends will gather to share a meal and drink wine. One is elected to serve as the master of the occasion. She begins the meal by proposing a toast, and then by opening discussion for the evening. She may give a short speech to which the others are expected to respond, or she may ask a question which another participant is expected to answer at length. After that, the participants discuss the issues raised until the last glass of wine is finished. There are always exactly three glasses of wine, no less and certainly no more; the rules are very strict on that point."


"Sorry, Commander, don't mean to offend. But I will bet you ten credits I know exactly what the translators will call it when Liara tells us the original asari word for this drinking-party thing."

"You're on," said Shepard, handing him the datapad.

Joker tapped at the haptic keyboard and handed the datapad back to Shepard. Then he looked at me with an expectant expression.

"We call it a *symposion,*" I said reluctantly.

Shepard took his credit chit from one pocket and keyed in a transfer to Joker's account. The pilot looked smug.

"How did you know?" I asked Joker.

"I wasn't absolutely sure," he admitted. "But ever since we humans met you asari, the software in our translators has tended to drop into Classical Greek every time it comes across an asari word that doesn't translate exactly. And what you're talking about sounds a lot like something the Greeks used to do."

"How strange. Were these *Greeks* an important culture in your people's history?"

"Very much so," said Shepard. "Their classical civilization was at its height about two thousand five hundred years ago. It's extremely influential even to the present day."

That didn't sound very impressive to me, until I adjusted for the short length of human generations.
Then I realized that the *Greeks* could be compared to the Calydonian culture, an Athame-worshiping people who lived about thirty thousand years ago on Thessia. The Calydonians pioneered many of the structures and institutions that later became characteristic of asari society.

"Joker, I didn't know you studied ancient history," said Shepard.

"I didn't, not beyond what we all got from those required Human History classes in the Alliance military schools. But every pilot and navigator in the Alliance eventually figures it out. All those star maps we got from the asari after First Contact? Every cluster or star system that was first explored and named by the asari, the names got translated into Greek for us humans."

"Fascinating," I said. "I wonder why the designers of the translation software made that choice. Are there other ways in which we asari resemble your Greeks?"

Joker shrugged. "Couldn't say."

"It would be interesting to find out. You see, Shepard? Serious discussion and debate over a meal can be an excellent way for the participants to learn from each other."

He glanced at me sharply, and I could almost hear his mind working through the implications. "You're suggesting this as a way for our crew to bond. Including with the non-humans on board."

I nodded. "Certainly. Not everyone would want to take part, but for those who do it would be a useful opportunity to share perspectives. Besides, our mission is as much investigative as military. Who knows what insight might be crucial?"

"All right. Several members of the crew have already set up clubs and special-interest groups under the morale regs. No reason you couldn't do the same. Talk to Petty Officer Tanaka about setting aside part of the mess for a special seminar once a week or so."

I smiled and lowered my eyes, grateful that he was willing to try my idea. "Thank you, Shepard."

"Just one thing: the drinks are on you, Liara. I may be a Spectre, but even I am a little afraid of what might happen if the Alliance procurement office finds out I'm indenting for whole cases of booze."

"I think I can manage. Next time we get back to the Citadel . . ."
Battles Won and Lost

22 March 2183, SSV Normandy, Interstellar Space

Another thing changed after Noveria as well: I began spending more time on the staging deck. Many of the humans had not expected a bookish archaeologist to perform competently in combat. Fortunately I had the advantage of basic commando training, completed in my youth at Benezia’s insistence. Even before I first met Shepard, I could at least fend for myself with small arms, basic close-quarters combat, small-unit tactics, and wilderness survival. I also possessed a strong biotic talent, exceptional even by asari standards, well-trained through decades of practice. Add to that fifty years of working at isolated dig sites, sometimes having to deal with mercenaries or pirates looking for loot. In all I had probably survived more life-threatening situations than most of the human soldiers on board. So when Shepard invited me to support him on Sharjila, Asteroid X57, and Noveria, I at least had a little experience to draw upon.

None of that made me a soldier. Noveria taught me that I fell short in some areas, including raw physical strength and endurance. There was only so much I could do to improve, being asari and built on a rather slender frame. Still, physical exercise and training would make me more effective. So I took to spending up to two hours each day in the ready room, honing my body and learning from the Marines.

Private Dubyansky volunteered to teach me. As Alexei healed from the combat wound taken on Asteroid X57, he came off the light-duty roster and needed physical training to come back up to standard. As part of that effort, he gladly demonstrated the human combatives system for me, more direct and brutal than anything I had learned before. I didn't like the style very much, but I worked hard to master the holds, throws, and strikes.

As Alexei explained, the Alliance military didn’t expect to decide battles through hand-to-hand fighting. Instead the style helped to instill an aggressive "warrior instinct" in its practitioners. I can attest that it worked; something about the aggression and violence of the style affected my psychology. After a training session I often felt more confident, ready to take on challenges of any sort.

When Alexei had other duties, I spent my exercise time working with the weights and resistance machines in the ready room. I walked, and later ran, on the treadmill. I found a quiet corner of the staging bay and practiced the martial-art forms, the cheironomia, that I had learned decades before.

Not everyone welcomed my presence in the ready room. Most of the Marines thought of me as belonging on the crew deck and in the mess hall. When I started my new regimen of physical training, it took me out of the context they had come to expect, and they no longer knew quite how to respond to me.

It didn't help that all of them had heard the usual rumors about asari. Several of the Marines seemed unable to avoid interpreting my presence among them in sexual terms. Petty Officer Bayard wore a sour expression whenever he saw me, as if it offended him that I should look so much like a female human without actually being one. Corporal Müller and Private Fredericks developed a habit of sidelong stares and crude speculation about their "chances" with me, when they thought I was unaware. Meanwhile the female Marines, Chief Williams and Corporal Chase, showed no such interest; instead they simply seemed to resent my presence. I think they regarded me as a disruptive element in whatever silent sexual competition took place among the
I tried to let none of this affect me. I had no sexual interest in anyone on board. Well, almost anyone. There was one significant exception, so if anyone else was pursuing him then there would most certainly be some competition! Even so, as long as no one tried to interfere with me and I distracted no one from their duties, I saw no problem that needed to be solved.

I did make one concession to human sensibilities: I refrained from training in the nude. The dark-blue outfit female Marines trained in was distracting and uncomfortable, but I wore it. Exercising in asari fashion would likely have started a riot on the staging deck.

Matters came to a head several days after Noveria, while Normandy was still patrolling the Argos Rho region.

In a distant corner of the darkened staging bay, I practiced some of the cheironomia forms: slow, graceful movement while deep in a meditative state. Suddenly a voice interrupted me.

"Hey, Liara."

I centered myself and opened my eyes. The distraction stood before me, watching me with dark brown eyes and a challenging expression.

"Good morning, Ash."

"I like that you've been training," she said. I didn't see any deception in her face, although her body language somehow spoke of anticipation. "I was on my way to the ready room myself. Care to join me for a sparring match?"

"I'm sure I am far from your level of skill." It was true. I had watched Ashley perform her combatives drill. She was very skilled, a ruthless fighter and extremely fast.

She smiled, acknowledging my compliment. "You might be surprised. Dubyansky tells me you've taught him a trick or two. Besides, it's good for you to work with someone more advanced now and then. Keeps you sharp."

"That's true. All right, Ashley, I will come."

As soon as I entered the ready room I understood.

Shepard was there.

Stripped to the waist, he worked with one of the machines, using the raw physical power of his arms and upper torso to overcome over a hundred kilograms of resistance. I could see every detail of his musculature in operation as he repeated the form. Perspiration glistened along the lines of his neck and shoulders.

Suddenly I found myself . . . quite distracted.

"Hey Doc, quit eating the eye candy and come on." Ashley again, ironically amused.

Surprised, Shepard glanced over in our direction. I did my best to ignore the flush darkening my face, and followed Ashley to the sparring ring.

_I see what you are up to_, I thought to myself. _You think to put me in my place in front of an audience, in front of Shepard. Well, you may very well win our match . . . but the battle is not the
Kaidan came over to meet us, a small frown on his face. "What's going on here, Chief?"

"Just a friendly sparring match. I'd like to see how much she's learned."

I could see he was about to intervene, order her not to pursue this. I forestalled him. "I agreed to it, Kaidan. It will be interesting to see whether I can stand up to Ashley for any length of time."

He still looked uncertain, but he made a reluctant nod. "Okay, if you're sure. Standard rules, three falls out of five, and we'd better get the protective gear out."

Ashley shrugged. "Ah, I'll be careful, Lieutenant."

He gave her a severe glance. "Protective gear, Chief. That's an order."

We took a moment to put on the padding, gloves, headgear, and mouth guards used during sparring matches, with some improvisation to protect my fringe. I could see Shepard watching from a distance as he applied a towel to his chest and shoulders. The turian, Garrus Vakarian, watched us as well, his mandibles twitching with obscure amusement as he made some comment to Shepard.

Then we squared off, Ashley's eyes locked with mine, and Kaidan gave the signal to begin.

Ashley came in straight, two steps and a lightning-fast combination strike toward my face to see if I could be intimidated.

By the time she arrived I was elsewhere. She was very fast. But then, so was I.

I shifted my weight and glided under the blows, lashed out and caught her in the side, spun to face her as she recovered. She grinned at me, pleased, and came in more carefully the next time.

It was rather like fighting a hailstorm. Using the human style I could block one attack, then two, then three, dodge a strike, move smoothly to the side to force Ashley to reorient herself. Nothing stopped her. Before long she hooked my ankle and sent me crashing to the floor. I slapped the mat.

I heard excited comment out in the ready room, but it held no meaning for me. I ignored everything but my body and my opponent.

Again she came in, fast and aggressive, this time trying to grapple. I felt myself going over, grabbed and twisted, pulling her off her feet as well. She nearly got me in an elbow lock, but at the last moment I got the leverage I needed to break out of it. I tried to lever her over with my legs, but instead she did something I didn't quite catch, firmly pinning both my shoulders. I slapped the mat again.

This time I stopped trying to directly match her skill in the human style. Instead I concentrated on being asari, like water, all form and fluid motion. She didn't quite know what to do with an opponent who suddenly proved very effective at getting out of the way. I led her around the ring, catching glimpses of our audience along the way: Private Fredericks staring avidly, Detective Vakarian watching with expert interest, Shepard looking very dour with his arms folded.

Ashley left me an opening.

At once I reached out and redirected her momentum, twisting my body and sending her flying across the ring to land on her back. I followed up with a loud shout and a mimed hammer-blow to her throat. "Ai!"
Ashley's eyes flew wide, but she slapped the mat and rose to her feet.

*A point for the little scientist. Surprised?*

She learned more caution after that, still aggressive but very alert, clearly not about to make the same mistake twice. The fourth fall took the longest of them all. She spent several minutes feinting and advancing, trying to distract me so I would miss a dodge or a block. Several times she tried to turn one of my blocks into a grapple, knowing her superior strength and speed would give her the advantage, but each time I was able to break away and open the distance once again.

Suddenly I sensed the moment when I could take the initiative. "Ai!" I shouted again, and went on the attack for the first time, throwing a flurry of blows at her face and head. For just a moment, she put her arms up rigidly to protect her face.

Rigidity is always a mistake. I seized her arms and applied leverage, throwing her onto her back and landing on her with all my weight. She twisted and struggled, but I was able to pin her shoulders.

"Point!" shouted Kaidan.

Complete silence in the ready room, except for the sound of Ashley slapping the mat.

She stared at me as she rose to her feet, her expression completely blank and her eyes very cold on mine.

We resumed.

Again I held open the distance, dodging and deflecting attacks, waiting for Ashley to make some mistake. I feared I would have a long wait.

I was wrong. About fifteen seconds into the round, Ashley telegraphed an attack. I moved gracefully to the right to avoid it . . . and she anticipated me. Her left fist flew out in a powerful uppercut, completely unblocked, connecting directly with my chin. It felt like the impact of a sledgehammer. I saw stars, my knees buckled, and I went down stunned.

The ready room erupted in cheers and shouting.

After a moment I pushed myself back to my feet, shaking my head slightly to make sure nothing had come loose. I saw Shepard stalking toward the ring, his face like a thundercloud, and knew I had to act at once.

I pulled a glove off and extended my hand to Ashley. "Thank you."

She blinked in surprise, but she also removed her glove to shake my hand. "What for?"

"For showing me how much I still have to learn. How did you do that?"

"Patterns. You were moving to my left too often while you did that asari dodging thing. Which I have to admit was pretty effective, until I figured it out. Reminded me of an *aikido* match I saw once."

I gave her a guileless stare. "Alexei has been helping me with close-quarters drill, but I think I would benefit from more advanced instruction. Would you be willing to teach me?"

She hesitated for a long moment, somehow aware that I had turned her gambit back upon itself. "Sure, Liara, I'd be happy to."
"Thank you. Now I had better go wash up." I gave Shepard the slightest glance as I left the ring. *See, no need to intervene.*

He must have received the message, although he exchanged a look with Kaidan that promised a serious discussion in the near future.

When I emerged from the showers and walked out into the staging bay, I found Shepard deep in conversation with Urdnot Wrex.

I had spent very little time with the krogan since arriving aboard the *Normandy*. To be honest, when I was young I felt very anxious around krogan, regarding them as little more than bloodthirsty barbarians. Something of an irony, given what I later learned about my own ancestry. In the years that followed, Wrex and I became close friends, I learned a great deal about the krogan people, and I came to regret my earlier prejudice.

"Come on, Shepard," the krogan said as I approached. "You have any idea how many krogan died to beat the rachni the first time? Then I hear that you found a queen and *let her go*? You bet I was pissed off."

"I couldn't just kill her," said Shepard calmly. "She seemed willing to let go of the past, go off into some galactic backwater and stay out of trouble."

"Yeah, and that worked *so well* the last time. Sure hope you don't end up needing the krogan to put them down again, because there aren't that many left of us."

"It's done, Wrex. There's no way to change it now."

"I suppose. But I think you owe me a favor, if you want my sunny disposition back."

"What is it?"

"There's someone I've been trying to find for years now. A renegade turian named Tonn Actus. Last lead I had said he was on Tuntau . . . which just happens to be in the star system next on your patrol route."

"Why are you after him?"

The krogan turned away, leaning on one hand against the workbench behind him, his broad back to us. "I told you about my father."

Shepard nodded grimly. *It must have been an unpleasant story,* I thought.

"After that, after I left Tuchanka . . . well, I spent centuries forgetting that I ever had a family. Your family never quite forgets you, though. Jarrod may have gotten stupid, but before that he was one of the great leaders of the Krogan Rebellions. Before *that* there was Garath."

"Warlord Garath was your ancestor?" I asked, startled out of silence.

Wrex turned to peer at me. "Yeah. *Urdnot* Garath. My grandfather."

"Garath was very famous," I explained for Shepard's benefit. "When the salarians first contacted the krogan, Garath was already one of the most powerful warlords on Tuchanka. He ruled directly over about one-tenth of the planet's habitable surface, and indirectly controlled twice that again. He
negotiated with salarian contact teams and got some of the best deals: new worlds to colonize, leadership in the Rachni Wars, modern technology."

Wrex nodded in agreement. "Yeah. That was when Clan Urdnot was a power to be reckoned with, and not a few dozen useless mercs scattered across half the galaxy."

"What does this have to do with Tonn Actus?" asked Shepard.

"After the turians beat us down in the Rebellions, for a long time krogan weren't allowed to have weapons or armor. They took a lot of what we had and destroyed the rest. One of the things they took was a set of battle armor belonging to my family’s chief. It was a relic. Useless against modern weapons, really. But five generations of my ancestors kept it before Garath died in the Rebellions. It's rightfully mine, and before I left I swore an oath on my grandfather's grave that I would get it back. Tonn Actus has it."

"How did he get it?"

"He's turian scum who collects relics from the war. He's made millions selling krogan artifacts that were stolen from my people."

"I see. Hey, Garrus!"

The turian turned away from where he was performing maintenance on the Mako, looking in our direction. "What do you need, Commander?"

"Does the name Tonn Actus mean anything to you?"

"Hmm." Garrus opened his omni-tool and paged through several files. "Yeah, here he is. Not a nice guy. Wanted in both the Turian Hierarchy and the Systems Alliance for murder, piracy, and grand theft."

Shepard nodded. "How would you like a chance to take him down?"

"Sure thing."

"All right, Wrex, we'll look for this guy on Tantau."

Wrex looked unhappy. "Do we have to bring the turian?"

"Yes, we have to bring the turian. It's a law-enforcement matter. But if your family heirloom is there, it's yours."

The krogan gave a long-suffering sigh. "Shepard."

"So long, Wrex."

We arrived at Tantau that evening. Sensors detected a small installation on the surface, well-hidden and tucked into a small crater. A clear landing zone lay less than a kilometer away. We didn’t yet have an upgraded Mako, but Shepard decided to attack in force regardless.

_Normandy_ came in very low. The staging bay door opened, and our entire combat crew "hit the dirt." Shepard led us from inside the Mako, with Ashley and Petty Officer Bayard also inside the vehicle and Wrex riding atop the hull. Detective Vakarian led half of the Marines on the left flank, with Tali in his fire-team. Kaidan led the rest of us on the right flank, with me close at hand to support his biotics with my own if needed.
Tuntau is a very strange world, massive but almost completely devoid of iron or any heavier metals. Deep oceans batter the scattered outcrops of solid land, unstable mini-continents that constantly rumble with tectonic activity. Silicate rocks crunch underfoot, layered with bright sodium and sulfur deposits from the planet’s many volcanoes. Noble gases like helium and neon make up most of the dense atmosphere. One sees no sign at all of life; the planet is only about a hundred million years old, far too young to have evolved even the simplest living organisms.

The Mako moved forward slowly, so that those of us on foot could keep up and support the AFV. We had little trouble with the terrain, but the wind turned out to be a challenge. Over three standard atmospheres of pressure meant that even a low breeze carried considerable authority. Most of us had to walk slowly, hunched over to keep our balance.

Up ahead we saw the wall of the crater in which Tonn Actus had placed his habitat. A notch in the wall promised easy access.

“This is Shepard,” came a voice in our helmets. “No sign of active radar or heavy-weapons turrets. Ground-penetrating radar doesn't show any mines or booby traps. We're going to move ahead through the notch and deal with any snipers or guards. Kaidan, Garrus, lead your teams up behind us.”

"Copy that."

"You got it."

The Mako surged ahead, zooming up the gentle slope into the defile. Almost immediately we heard the thunder of fire from the main and coaxial guns, incredibly loud in the dense air. Every time the main gun fired I could feel it in the pit of my stomach.

"All targets down," reported Ashley moments later.

A few minutes later we emerged into the crater to find the Mako idling, Shepard and the others already standing by the habitat's main entrance waiting for us.

"Okay, so far this looks as if we brought a nuke to a gunfight," said Shepard. I could hear laughter from all sides. "It doesn't matter. You know what to do. Stay sharp and don't screw up, or I will personally kick your asses all the way back to the Citadel."

"OO-rah!" shouted every Marine at once. It was sudden, and so unexpected – to me at least – that I felt a rush of fright.

Then Tali hacked the airlock into a full-open state, and two atmospheres of positive pressure blew into the space beyond with incredible force. As soon as the wind died down, Wrex charged in with Shepard and Ashley at his back. The rest of us followed as best we could.

Gunfire thundered.

Wrex shouted, "There's the scum. Let's get him!"

I followed Kaidan in, a biotic barrier in place, and took a fraction of a second to look around.

Wrex charged across the floor, throwing a sphere of dark energy ahead of him, crashing into the figure of a turian in pitch-black armor. Shepard and the rest of the Marines put down a withering field of fire. I took cover and found that there was very little for me to do.

The krogan roared, a horrible sound on the helmet radios, and discharged his shotgun into the turian’s
face-plate at point-blank range. Blue paste splashed back out of the helmet. I cringed.

"Check fire, check fire!" shouted Shepard.

Silence fell. I realized that I hadn't even drawn my sidearm.

"Anyone hurt?"

"I think I've got a piece of dust in my eye," said one of the Marines. Private Fredericks, I thought it was.

"Anyone seriously hurt?" Shepard asked again, more amusement than annoyance in his voice.

Nobody answered.

"All right, I want an inventory of everything that's in storage here. No souvenir hunting. There may be artifacts of historical importance, and they don't belong to us. Kaidan, see to it."

"Aye-aye."

"Wrex, let's see what's in this office back here."

I followed Shepard and Wrex as they moved back to what appeared to be the commander's office. Sure enough, we found locked display cases and crates, full of armor, helmets, weapons, battle standards, badges, all manner of memorabilia from wars fought over a thousand years before. I sat down at a computer terminal and soon found an inventory.

"Case Gamma, third shelf from the top," I told them.

"Can you open the lock?" asked Shepard.

I worked with the computer for a few more moments, locating the controls for the secure storage units. Three keystrokes later I heard a lock click open behind me.

"There we go," said Wrex reflectively. He reached up and pulled a massive bin out of the storage unit, setting it gently on the desk. He opened the lid. Inside was a suit of plate armor, forged of steel, with stylized ornaments of silver and gold. Wrex reached in and produced a war mask, crafted to fit a krogan face, alarming in its wide-mouthed ferocity.

"Is that it?"

"Look at that," said Wrex, setting the mask aside and pointing to one of the stylized decorations on the breastplate. "That's an old Urdnot sigil. This is it, all right. Hard to believe my ancestors ever wore this crap."

"It's yours, Wrex. The rest of all this is going into storage on the Normandy, and then we'll see about returning it to its rightful owners."

"I appreciate the thought, Shepard, but I'm not sure how that will work. There's no krogan government to keep track of who has claim to any of this. I bet all that will happen is that the clans get one more reason to come to blows."

"The University of Serrice operates an archaeological trust for the preservation and repatriation of stolen artifacts," I pointed out. "I have worked with them before. If you think you could put your faith in an off-world institution, they would be able to keep these relics secure until the rightful owners came forward with a claim."
"Hmm. What do you think, Shepard? I don't know if I trust this university, but I guess I trust you a little. If you think it might work . . ."

"It's worth a try, Wrex."

"All right. I suppose having a bunch of asari academics watching over this stuff is going to be better than letting turian thieves make a fortune selling it." His voice became bitter. "Conquered people don't get to choose what happens to their culture anyway."

For the first time I felt a pang of sympathy for the big krogan. "I'm sorry, Wrex."

"Sorry doesn't change anything. But thanks, I guess."
25 March 2183, Citadel

I frowned at the message: very short and written in tastefully archaic asari, the kind of language one normally heard only in Expansion-era period dramas.

Dr. Liara T'Soni,

There are matters which we must discuss. Please make time to meet with me as soon as you disembark upon the Citadel. I will postpone any appointments necessary to facilitate our discussion.

Sha'ira

I knew who Sha'ira was, of course. The entire galaxy knew who she was.

Consorts, *hetairai*, have been a social institution among my people for thousands of years. We asari find many ways to excel in life. Some of us farm and care for the land, some of us work in the sciences, some of us design and maintain technology, some serve as commandos, some teach the young, some debate in the Assembly . . . and some of us entertain others through beauty, sophistication, wit, practical psychology, and sensual indulgence.

This profession has degrees of excellence, as with any other. For every thousand wild young maidens stripping down to dance on a stage, one might find a single stylish *hetaira* managing a salon for the benefit of affluent clients. For every thousand ordinary *hetairai*, you might find one celebrated Consort who selects her clientele only from among the extremely wealthy and powerful.

Sha'ira stood at the pinnacle of her calling, unique in all the galaxy.

At the time of the Reaper invasion, she had reached the age of six hundred and had spent centuries refining her craft. She had enjoyed the status of a fixture on the Citadel since long before I was born. Her clientele included some of the most important beings in the galaxy. She had absolutely no formal power, and yet almost immeasurable informal influence. It would normally take several months and thousands of credits simply to gain an appointment with one of her *acolytes*, much less the Consort herself.

Sha'ira wanted to see me, as soon as possible. She was willing to clear her calendar to see me.

It might have been terrifying if it hadn't been so absurd.

Nevertheless I could hardly turn down the invitation. I sent a reply ahead, giving Joker's best estimate for our arrival time at the Citadel. As soon as *Normandy* docked I changed into civilian clothing and took a cab to the Presidium.

The Consort's salon took up the bottom three floors of a prestigious commercial building, directly across from the Human Embassy. Even the exterior spoke of aesthetic delight. A green park with terraces and fountains drew the eye up a shallow staircase to a colonnaded entryway. When I entered, all noise from outside vanished and a dignified silence fell. Sha'ira could apparently afford a very good sound-dampening system.

An attractive young asari intercepted me as I appeared in the entrance. I was struck by her facial markings, a startling array of white accents on the crests of her fringe and over her eyes. "Good morning. My name is Nelyna. How may I assist you?"
"Dr. Liara T'Soni to see the Consort."

She showed no surprise, and I didn't see her refer to any schedule or roster. She either had a VI assistant implant or an excellent memory. "Of course, Doctor. The Consort arranged her schedule so you could have twenty minutes with her as soon as you arrived. If you will follow me?"

Nelyna led me back into the depths of the salon. The common room used carpets, wall-hangings, and greenery to suggest a sumptuous walled garden. I smelled a faint floral scent on the air, one I could not recognize. Younger acolytes unobtrusively served finger food and drinks. One acolyte played a stringed instrument I recognized as being of human origin, a guitar I believe it was called. The music drifted, soft and bittersweet, just loud enough to notice but not loud enough to distract.

We passed other acolytes, almost all of them asari. I did see one female human in an acolyte's gown, and wondered about her presence. All of them, including the human, were quite beautiful. They entertained clients of all kinds: asari, salarians, a turian, a human, even a volus.

"Nelyna, I confess that I am at a loss. I did not request an appointment with the Consort, and I have no idea why she would wish to see me."

The acolyte made a hand gesture out of the old dramas, symbolic of ignorance and an appeal for patience. "I'm sorry. Sha'ira did not instruct me as to the reason for your visit."

"Of course. Please forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive. It is our honor to serve those who visit us."

I glanced at her face, but saw nothing but open sincerity.

We left the common room and took an elevator to the third floor and the Consort's private chambers. Nelyna rang a soft bell outside the door. I saw no answering signal, but she opened the door and bowed to indicate that I should enter alone.

The reception room’s austerity surprised me. Instead of greenery and tapestries, the walls displayed paintings from a dozen worlds, all of exquisite taste but set widely apart from each other. Wooden tiling covered the floor with an intricate pattern in several tones that teased at the eye. Small sculptures and other artifacts rested on stands and in small display cases, each with its own lighting to display it to best effect.

My eye caught on an extraordinary rarity, an inusannon artifact from an era long before the Protheans. I walked over to examine it more closely.

"Doctor T'Soni."

Startled, I turned.

Sha'ira had entered silently, crossing into the middle of the room on bare feet while I satisfied my professional curiosity. Now she stood at the focus of the strange design formed by the parquetry of the floor.

Suddenly I understood this chamber’s relative severity. The entire space served to display a single work of art. No other element could be permitted to distract from this purpose.

Tall and slender, Sha’ira conformed exactly to the canons of classical beauty, perfection in every line and curve. She wore a high-necked gown that appeared to conceal her entire body, but the fabric was very sheer, revealing hints of smooth skin each time she moved in the light. She moved with
extraordinary grace. Her face showed only a hint of purple dappling along the crests of her fringe, and no markings at all around her eyes or lips. It gave her an appearance of fresh-faced youth, at odds with the centuries of experience in her eyes.

I thought her the most beautiful asari I had ever seen. Her appearance overwhelmed my rational intellect, speaking directly to a part of my mind I had only recently begun to explore. I felt strong but contradictory desires, not certain whether I wanted to seize her in my arms or fall down to worship at her feet.

After the first moment, I reminded myself why such desires were both inappropriate and extremely unwelcome.

*I am certainly not going to turn into a sex-addled fool over any asari. No matter how beautiful or accomplished.*

*Goddess, make my blood stop racing.*

I braced my shoulders, placing my hands firmly behind my back, and lifted my chin to give the Consort a cool stare. "Sha’ira."

She smiled and nodded graciously in approval. "I have heard a great deal about you, Doctor. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance at last."

"I find it hard to believe that I would come to your attention."

"Is it so difficult to comprehend? You are very young, and yet you have already made yourself one of the galaxy's foremost experts in your chosen discipline. Now you are a trusted companion of the first human Spectre, the Council's hunter and champion. You have become a figure of considerable importance."

I shook my head, uneasily considering that she might be correct. I had become accustomed to obscurity, to working alone in a discipline almost no one cared about . . . but that life was dead with Benezia.

"How may I serve you, Sha'ira?"

"Actually, I had hoped to be able to serve you. I regret that circumstances have interfered. I may soon be forced to abandon the Citadel."

"Abandon the Citadel?" I asked, shocked.

She did not answer at first, only crossed the room to examine one of the paintings on the wall. She made a microscopic adjustment to the frame. "The life of a great hetaira is not as easy as we try to make it appear. Always one must play a game with scandal, ensuring that one's name is constantly on the lips of the many, but never permitting any scandal to grow to dangerous proportions. I fear I have made an inauspicious move in that game."

"In what way?"

"It involves one of my clients, a turian general named Septimus Oraka. He has turned against me, and now spreads slander against my name. He is quite influential, and so his lies are more damaging than usual. You must understand that a major part of the service I provide is discretion. What secrets a client chooses to confide in me must remain hidden. If they do not, all trust is lost and I can no longer do my work."
I nodded, understanding. "This General Oraka is making it appear that you have been careless with your clients' secrets."

"More than merely careless, he is making it appear that I have been deliberately indiscreet. You see the difficulty."

"What I do not see is how I can help you."

She turned back to me, stepped close. Her body language expressed vulnerability, mystery, availability. She wore a subtle scent that made me a little light-headed. "Again you underestimate yourself," she said softly. "You have great talent for uncovering even deeply buried truths, and then explaining them for all to understand. You associate with the great human Spectre and can draw upon his mystique. You have a reputation for straightforward honesty, so that no one will have good reason to suspect your motives. No one thinks of you as one of my clients or allies. You can assist me in this matter, and if my name is cleared I may be able to do you a service in return."

I considered it, still wondering why she would select me to come to her aid. On the other hand, it might prove useful to me – or to Shepard – if the Consort owed me a favor.

"I will do what I can," I told her. "May I ask what caused General Oraka to turn against you?"

She shook her head. "I respect him too much to reveal that in detail. Suffice it to say that he came to want more from me than I am capable of giving."

"I understand. Let me investigate and see what can be done."

I did most of my investigation from a bench less than a hundred meters from the Consort's chambers, overlooking a fountain and the Krogan Monument. It didn't take me long to uncover the facts I needed, perhaps an hour of digging through news service articles and extranet reports. I suppose I should have become suspicious at that point, but the task engaged my curiosity.

Research completed, I took a cab to Tayseri Ward.

Chora's Den advertised itself in the Citadel directory as a "gentleman's club," a term I didn't recognize. Then I arrived at the place and experienced enlightenment. I had descended the ladder of sensual entertainment, from its heights in Sha'ira's chambers to, I judged, about two-thirds of the way to the bottom.

A burly male human tended the door, and didn't quite know what to do with me. I was asari but clearly not there to work. I solved his dilemma by paying the cover charge, after which he admitted me with a barely concealed leer.

I saw a busy lounge laid out on a circular pattern, dimly lit and full of loud music with a heavy beat. Male humans made up most of the clientele, with a few krogan and male turians thrown in for variety. Clients spent their time drinking hard liquor, watching asari and female humans in revealing costumes. Dancers plied their trade on a raised stage above the bar, while other entertainers walked the floor. I saw several engaged with visitors in the dimly lit booths around the outside of the space, providing private showings or engaging in the early stages of sexual activity.

It was not at all my kind of establishment, but I was there on business. I scanned the booths, looking for a turian with elaborate face paint, drinking alone

There.
I crossed the floor, fending off the wandering hands of at least two half-drunken human males along the way, and slid into the turian's darkened booth.

Septimus Oraka peered at me, his raptor's gaze softened by the fact that he was rather the worse for drink. "Thanks, but I'm not interested in a private show, sweetie."

"That's fortunate, since I am not offering one . . . General."

_Goddess, I just sounded exactly like my mother for a moment._

He blinked, and I could see his eyes struggling to focus.


"Now just a minute," he growled. "Who the hell are you?"

"Doctor Liara T'Soni. You may have heard of me."

"Right . . . you're that scientist, the one traveling with the human Spectre. Shepard."

"That's correct. I softened my voice. "So why is it that I'm fighting Saren and his geth, and you're sitting here wallowing in alcohol?"

Oraka took a long draw on his current drink. "I don't see that it's any of your business."

"Normally I would agree with you, but Sha'ira has asked for my help."

"Ah." The general's glass hit the tabletop with a loud _thunk_. "Look, beautiful, I see what you're trying to do, and I appreciate it, but it's not that simple."

"Why not? You're a great man, General. You're better than what I see before me."

"Evidence would seem to say otherwise."

"Anyone can make a mistake. What happened between you and Sha'ira, General?"

He grunted. "I've seen a lot of terrible things in my life and there's only one person who can make me forget them. I wanted to be with her permanently, not just another one of her _clients_. She turned me down flat. Me! Septimus Oraka!"

I nodded soberly. "Sitting drunk in Chora's Den, spreading falsehoods about her, solves this problem?"

"Sure as hell makes _me_ feel better."

"General, you do not appear to be feeling well. In fact you appear to be quite unhappy."

"True." His talons fiddled with the half-empty glass, but did not pick it up again. "All right, Doctor, what would you suggest?"

I reached out and laid a hand on his arm. "General, set aside romantic daydreams and evaluate this like any tactical situation. You _know_ her business, and you know how highly placed she is within that profession. How likely is it that she would set that aside? For anyone?"
His eyes held mine, his mandibles twitching slightly as he thought it through. "Not very damn likely, I suppose."

"It wasn't an insult to you, General. When she spoke to me about you, it was with respect and affection. She cannot be other than what she is . . . but you can still be the man who earned her admiration."

"Shut up and soldier, is that it?"

"It can't hurt," I said gently.

"All right." He finished his drink and set the glass aside, more gently this time. "I'll go talk to her. After I've had a cold shower. Or two."

"Thank you, General."

"Asari," he said with mock indignation. "You people think you can solve everything by talking about it. I suppose sometimes it works. Doctor, would you be willing to help me clean up this mess?"

"Certainly."

"One of the people who bought my story about Sha'ira is another one of her clients, an elcor diplomat named Xeltan."

I nodded. I had come across the elcor's name while I was researching the problem.

"He thinks Sha'ira burned some of his sensitive data, but the truth is that his information security isn't nearly as good as he thinks it is. I didn't have any trouble laying hands on his secrets. Talk to him, let him know he can turn his suspicions elsewhere, and I'll owe you a favor."

"I will see to it," I assured him.

"Hmm. I hope that human knows how lucky he is to have you on his side."

My face darkened slightly at the unexpected praise. "I think he does. If not, I will remind him."

"Hah!" Oraka rose, almost steadily, from his seat. "Come on, Doctor, let's walk out of here together and scandalize all the dancers who have been trying to get my attention for the past two hours."

I found the diplomat Xeltan at the Elcor Embassy, still in the process of lodging a complaint about Sha'ira's indiscretions. Once I got his attention, it took very little time to present evidence that the leak had actually come from General Oraka. It amused me that the elcor's first thought was not to shore up his information assurance posture, but to rush to Sha'ira and beg her forgiveness. Well, insofar as any elcor can be said to rush.

For my part, I sent the Consort a message indicating that her problem had been solved. Then I went out for a leisurely dinner, and spent two hours shopping for cases of wine to be sent to the Normandy. I had planned my first symposion for a few days hence, and I wanted to be sure we had plenty of supplies on hand.

As the evening wore on, I began to suspect that I would not be summoned back to Sha'ira until the following day. Then her return message appeared on my omni-tool.

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Upon my return to the Consort's salon, Nelyna once again greeted me and escorted me up to Sha’ira's own rooms. I found the hetaira sitting at her ease on the couch, reading a datapad and sipping from a
glass of white wine.

"Please, come in and be seated," she invited me.

I sat down on the couch, taking care to leave a safe space between the two of us.

"I just received a lovely note from Septimus," she continued. "He was quite contrite. I believe we will be able to repair our friendship in time. Even the elcor diplomat has halted his legal campaign against me. You have been a very great help."

"You may drop the pretense, Sha'ira," I told her.

She only gave me a look of cool appraisal. "What pretense?"

"This was not a difficult problem to solve," I pointed out. "I will admit that my research skills are above average, but what I could discover in an hour, any competent information broker could discover in half that time. You were never in serious danger, and could have resolved the situation at any time."

"You are very perceptive."

"I might have seen it earlier. What is really behind your interest in me?"

For answer, she handed me the datapad.

At first I couldn't be sure what I was seeing. It appeared to be a portfolio of investment holdings and financial instruments, but then I began seeing references to more tangible property. An eight percent share in Binary Helix Corporation, a four percent silent partnership in the Armali Council, large shares in several other corporations, an office building on Illium, a hunting estate on Cyone, large agricultural estates outside Armali on Thessia . . .

I felt the blood drain from my face as the truth became obvious to me. I paged up to the top of the document.

*Personal holdings of Matriarch Benezia T'Soni.*

"I doubt that your mother ever mentioned me, Liara, but we were close friends once. Years ago she named me the executor of her estate, should she be taken up to the Goddess before her time. She had a number of small personal bequests to make, but the bulk of her estate was always intended for you."

"I don't understand. What does this have to do with my performing a task for you?"

She smiled. "You are correct that I could have solved that problem on my own. In fact I knew that you would have no difficulty solving it if you agreed to act as my agent. What I wanted to see was how you would solve it. Would you take the problem seriously? Would you use coercion and threats, or would you try persuasion? Would you treat Septimus with contempt or respect? Would you see the need to persuade Xeltan as well? Watching you attack this problem told me a great deal about you."

"A test?" I demanded.

"If you like. I have observed you from a distance, and your mother gave me some insight into your character, but I wanted a sense for the person you have become. I have considerable discretion in how the estate is to be divided. If you had proven unworthy of your heritage, I was instructed to act
accordingly."

I looked back at the pad. "There is more here than I ever knew."

"I believe her personal net worth was on the order of six billion credits. It was a substantial fortune, although to be sure it was not comparable with the very wealthiest among the Matriarchs." She watched me closely. "What do you intend to do with it?"

It seemed like an immense fortune. There was so much I could do with that much money in my hands. Live in luxury for the rest of my very long life. Go back to my scientific work, with resources I could never have dreamed of before. Endow other scientists and scholars in their work . . .

No.

I had already taken my first steps into a larger universe. I couldn't use this power simply for my own pleasure, or even for the advancement of purely scientific interests. Far larger issues loomed close at hand: Saren and his geth, turmoil among the worlds, a cycle of extinction that operated on a galactic scale and might be about to occur again. If those were not dealt with, nothing else would matter.

One more thing occurred to me as well.

I handed the datapad back to Sha'ira. "I believe I wish to liquidate a portion of these holdings, and dedicate them to the recovery and rebuilding effort on Eden Prime. Shall we say one-quarter of the total? An anonymous donation, if that can be arranged."

Sha'ira sat in utter silence and stillness for a long moment. Then she bowed her head, dropping into an archaic, very formal asari dialect. "Praise to the Goddess, fount of compassion and wisdom. I hardly dared to hope. She did such terrible things. I feared that you had fallen into error with her."

I responded in the same dialect. "The evils she committed were not in accordance with her own volition. A dark and evil daimon laid his hand upon her. Had she been left to her own volition, Eden Prime would never have occurred, but such was not her fate. She would have wanted to see peace and eudaimonia restored to those who were harmed."

"I concur. Liara, if you will trust me to represent your interests, I will see to it that your wishes are obeyed. It will take time before you can take full ownership of the estate."

"I understand. My mother's crimes will complicate matters."

She nodded and rose to her feet. "I do not believe that will be an obstacle in the long run. Benezia was judged a traitor, but your actions helped to uncover her treason, and you were among those who brought it to an end. I do not believe the Armali courts will find any basis on which to deny your inheritance. If need be, I will have a word with Councilor Tevos."

"Thank you, Sha'ira." I stood as well.

"In the meantime, I have a personal gift for you." She produced a small item from within her gown and handed it to me.

I examined it: a smooth cylinder, small enough to fit comfortably in my palm, made of a metallic material I could not identify. I turned it over in my fingers and saw a fine inscription along one side of the cylinder, so small that I had to bring it close to my eye to make it out.

I felt a chill. Prothean script. Late Third Age, possibly even Fourth Age.
"What is this?" I asked at last.

"I have no idea. I have never discovered its use or purpose. It has been in my lineage for a very long time, but now I sense it may be time to pass it along."

I glanced at her, startled. When an asari refers to a "very long" period of time, one is well advised to take her seriously.

She gave me an elegantly knowing smile. "I thought that might attract your attention. Legends in my lineage suggest that this item may have been an heirloom of ours for four thousand years or longer. Yes, long before we asari attained spaceflight. Unfortunately, I cannot provide you with conclusive proof."

*A Prothean artifact on Thessia before interstellar flight.*

The implications staggered me. An investigation might be enormously profitable . . . but it would have to wait. It reflected the gravity of the situation that I could place such an investigation no higher than *fourth* on my priority list.

"Thank you again," I said sincerely. "You have been a very good friend to me."

She stepped forward and embraced me: almost a motherly embrace, an elder asari bestowing simple affection upon a younger, with no sexual implications. "Be well, Liara, and take care of that human of yours. He is more important than you know."

"He is not *my* human," I said frostily.

"Liara. Remember to whom you are speaking," she said, amused. "Trust your daimon to lead you. Humans and asari are quite compatible in many ways: spiritually, intellectually, physically. I need not tell you that Commander Shepard is an exemplary human. He is worthy of you, and I think your spirit is already in his keeping."

I sighed. "I suppose you are correct. This is all so new to me."

"Give it time. But not *too much* time."

That evening I returned to the *Normandy*. Shepard met me at the door of the medical bay, as I was on my way to my compartment. "Good evening, Liara. What did you do all day?"

"I did some shopping, had a fine meal, and met with an old friend of my family. Nothing of great consequence."

He smiled, took my hand and raised it to his lips. "I'm glad you're back."

"So am I." I remembered Sha’ira, summoned up my courage, and gave him a flirtatious smile.
First Date

26 March 2183, Citadel

I soon discovered that being an heiress is not all delight. A great deal of paperwork occurs.

I arose the next day hoping to catch up on professional reading. Instead I found several megabytes of documents waiting in my inbox, all of it from Sha’ira by way of her attorney: investment portfolios, financial projections, a preliminary filing in the Armali surrogate court, requests for approval of a number of routine actions, a draft plan for an Eden Prime reconstruction trust, on and on with no end in sight. I had to review all of it, and sign dozens of documents for the attorney.

I sighed, seeing it as an omen for the future, and grimly set myself to working through the pile.

Four hundred years of practice have rendered me much more skilled in such matters. At the time of Benezia’s death I was nearly helpless. That first day nearly drove me out of my mind with tedium.

Fortunately I did understand a little about law and finance. Benezia had not permitted me to remain entirely innocent of such things. Yet I had never before had to deal with them personally, or on such a large scale. As the day dragged onward, I found myself calling up references and short self-study courses from the extranet, just so I could understand the implications of what I was reading. I started building flowcharts and decision trees. I made long lists of questions to ask Sha’ira or her attorney.

I went out to breakfast in the crew mess, taking one datapad with me. At lunch I sat down for a sandwich and a glass of fruit juice, with three datapads and frequent references to my omni-tool. As the dinner hour approached, I sat at my desk with my notebook computer open, my omni-tool active, and every datapad in my lab space in use. My head felt as if small creatures were trapped inside and using a mining drill to escape.

When my omni-tool gave the “incoming message” chime, I almost moaned in relief.

“Liara?”

“Shepard. What can I do for you?”

His image smiled up at me. “Nothing. I’m done with meetings for the day. Some of us had an idea to spend a little shore leave time at this new club that’s opened in the Wards. Dinner and drinks, maybe a little gambling. You know, relax for a change. I thought you might like to come.”

“That sounds wonderful. Give me some time to clean up and I will join you.”

“Great. We’re in Tayseri Ward. The club is called Flux. Nice place. I think you’ll like it.”

Once Shepard disconnected, I began to shut down computers and datapads. Then a thought struck me, and I smiled to myself.

The shimmer-silk evening dress had survived being packed away in a valise for over two weeks. It still draped properly along my body and legs. It matched the arm-length gloves, the kitten-heeled sandals with straps running up each leg, and the silver choker with amethysts. A moment’s work with scent, and I was armed and ready to be considered dangerous.

Heads turned when I emerged from the cab outside of Flux. I smiled inwardly and felt very asari.
I paid the cover charge for the club, stepped inside, and immediately felt at ease. It was nothing like Chora’s Den. The lighting was pleasant rather than lurid, the music was lighter and more cheerful, and the servers were clearly not on the menu. I looked around for some of my friends.

I soon found Kaidan, Garrus, and Tali, all sitting at a table next to a window with a magnificent view of the Citadel. Garrus first spotted my approach, leaning back in his chair with a glass of turian brandy in one hand. His turian face could make little expression, but I detected a sudden sharpness of gaze as he realized who I was.

“Liara.” Kaidan stood and gave me a courtly half-bow. “You’re looking lovely this evening.”

“Thank you. It feels nice to dress stylishly for a change. I can hardly remember the last time I had the opportunity.”

“Would you care to join us?”

I looked around. “Where is Shepard?”

“He and Ash went up on the casino floor about half an hour ago.” He must have noticed me seizing tight control of my expression, because he smiled reassuringly. “Ash was planning to lose some money at the craps table, but Shepard is more into poker. You’ll probably find him playing cards.”

“All right, I’ll go look for him.”

Garrus immediately rose. “I’ll come too, if you don’t mind. This I want to see.”

I climbed the curved staircase to the casino floor, Garrus and Tali following at a short distance.

Ashley wore civilian clothes for once, a white blouse and blue denim trousers. Her unbound hair fell in long, dark waves down her back. She drank from a bottle of the human beverage called beer, loudly enjoying some game involving dice and little circular markers. A tall, well-dressed human male stood close at her side, paying her very focused attention. Not Shepard, thank the Goddess. She caught my eye and did a double-take. Then – rather to my surprise – she gave me a smile and a cheerful wave, and returned to her game.

Sure enough, Shepard sat at another table, his back to me, wearing a fashionable civilian evening jacket and trousers, deeply engrossed in his game. I stole up silently behind him, not wanting to disturb the play.

At the time I didn’t understand what I saw. Aside from Shepard, seven other players sat at the table, mostly humans but including an asari and two salarians. The salarian dealer had two cards before him, face-up, as well as a large, unruly pile of the circular markers in several colors. Shepard and one other player, a female human sitting three places to his right, each had two cards face-down. None of the other players had any cards. All the players had stacks of markers in front of them, although Shepard and the female human each had smaller stacks that had been pushed some distance toward the center of the table. The players carefully avoided looking at their cards, at the dealer’s cards, or at each other. Indeed everyone sat completely motionless, except for the female human, who compulsively rolled some of the markers in her fingers. It looked like a very dull game.

The female human glanced at Shepard, who still gazed at nothing in particular, his face set in a bland smile. Then she shook her head, put the markers in her hand back in her stack, and tossed her cards into the center of the table.

Suddenly everyone moved at once, smiling or frowning, making comments to one another, reaching for drinks. The dealer gathered all the cards and pushed all the markers over to Shepard, who began
to assimilate them into his main stacks.

I reached out and rested a hand on the back of his neck. “I take it that was good?”

Startled, he glanced up at me, and then stared for a long moment.

Behind me I heard Garrus. “Scratch one.”

“Right between the eyes,” agreed Tali.

I smiled down at Shepard. “Aren’t you going to say hello?”

“Liara! Of course . . . I . . . hello. You look absolutely stunning.”

“I should. It took a great deal of effort and planning.”

“Are you in for the next hand, sir?” inquired the dealer, a small smile on his face.

“No, I don’t think I am.” Shepard picked up some of his markers and set them in front of the dealer.

“Thank you for an enjoyable game.”

“Thank you, sir.”

We waited as Shepard gathered the rest of his markers. Then we followed him over to a kiosk where an attendant counted them and credited him with his winnings.

“Good luck this evening?” asked Garrus.

“I would say so,” said Shepard. “Poker is all about self-discipline and patience. Some nights you don’t get much of a chance to stack up the chips, but I had a few very good hands tonight.”

He pocketed his credit chit and offered me an arm. I tucked my hand under it and walked close at his side as we made our way back down to the main floor of the club.

_He is willing to display his interest in me to his friends, I thought, and felt warm at the realization. This begins to be a real thing, not just a playful idea, this between us._

I glanced up at his face: smiling, confident, uncaring who might be watching. _Goddess, how can anyone be so ugly and so beautiful at the same time?_

“Ash!” he called as we passed the craps table. “Come join us for dinner?”

Ashley looked up and shouted back. “Nah, go ahead, Commander. I’m on a roll here.”

“Suit yourself,” Shepard replied, and waved as he passed.

“Ash seems much less upset at the sight of us together than I would have expected,” I observed.

He lowered his voice, so that no one else could hear as we walked. “I had a talk with her, after that stunt she pulled in the workout room. Made it clear that she’s a hell of a soldier and I’m proud to have her under my command, even to call her a friend, but that’s as far as it’s ever going to go. And that if she ever did anything that unprofessional again, she would be busted back to CPO and off the Normandy before she had time to breathe.”

“How did she react?”
“She didn’t like it at first, but she’s too good a Marine to do anything but salute and aye-aye. Once she had a chance to think about it, she saw things a little differently. She even apologized for her behavior. I don’t think you’ll ever be her friend, but she may have worked through some of the issues she had with you.”

“I’m glad. I admire Ash. I never wanted to be her adversary.” I looked up at him again. “Although I find that some things are worth fighting for.”

The four of us rejoined Kaidan at his table and settled in for a very pleasant meal. Flux had a superb kitchen, well able to handle even such exotica as quarian food. Shepard and I shared a Thessian seafood dish that the waitress agreed would be suitable for humans. Kaidan and Garrus had steaks of Earth and Palaveni origin, respectively. Tali had . . . something I couldn’t identify.

As our dinner proceeded I noticed that something kept distracting Garrus, leading him to glance past us to something near the dance floor and the casino. By the time we reached our dessert course and a final glass of wine, my curiosity got the better of me.

“What has your attention back there, Garrus?” I asked. “Is there a particularly attractive female turian on the dance floor?”

“Hardly. Turians don’t go in for dancing. The closest thing we have ends with jumping on the back of a prey animal and breaking its neck.”

“I’m sorry I asked. Then what is it?”

“Have you noticed how many keepers have been going up to the casino this evening?”

Tali shook her head in disgust. “Ach, don’t remind me about the keepers. I’ve spent the last two days tracking down and scanning keepers for that salarian scientist who asked for our help. If I never see another keeper again it will be too soon.”

“Sorry, Tali. But when I was with C-Sec we noticed that the keepers tended to avoid places like this: lounges, clubs, gambling halls. We could never figure out why. Now I’ve counted three of them going up there just while we’ve been having our dinner.”

“It could be random chance,” I suggested. “We know so little about the keepers, or why they do what they do.”

“Or something could be wrong.” Garrus rose from his place. “I’m going to go check it out.”

“You have noticed that we’re not on duty, right?” complained Kaidan.

Shepard rose from his place, using his credit chit to pay for our meal. “Garrus is right. It may be nothing, but we should at least look.”

Kaidan shook his head, but he rose and came with the rest of us.

We found a keeper moving slowly through the ranks of quasar machines, approaching the back of the casino hall.

The keeper appeared like any of its kind: a vaguely insectoid creature with a small spherical body, four long stilt-like legs, and a cluster of sense organs and manipulating limbs at the front. One saw them everywhere on the Citadel, performing repairs and maintenance on station systems. They never communicated with anyone. No one could even be sure whether or not they were sentient beings. When we asari found the Citadel the keepers already inhabited the station, busy and inscrutable, and
in over two thousand years no one had discovered anything about them. The Citadel’s people tolerated them, and for the most part ignored them.

This keeper seemed somehow confused. It moved slowly, swiveling its sense cluster back and forth, and stopped every few steps. Its manipulators opened and closed aimlessly.

Tali opened her omni-tool and began to taste the surroundings for dark energy and electromagnetic radiation of all kinds. “There’s something here,” she said, and began to lead us between the rows of gambling devices. Kaidan frowned, opened his own omni-tool, and followed her.

Eventually Tali led us to a single quasar machine, out of the way and apparently little used. “This one. It’s transmitting some kind of intermittent signal, on a very unusual band. Heavily encrypted.”

“Can you break the encryption?” asked Shepard.

“I don’t think so. I don’t know the algorithm and the keys appear to be very long. It would need planetary-scale computational power even to make a dent in it. Either that or a quantum computer running an advanced AI operating system.”

“But what is it transmitting?” I asked.

“I have an idea.” Shepard went up to a nearby quasar machine, inserted his credit chit, placed a bet, and quickly played through a game. The machine chirped, sang, and flashed lights.

“Figures he would win again,” muttered Garrus.

“There!” Tali tapped at her omni-tool. “Another burst transmission, just as that other machine paid the Commander his winnings.”

“It’s monitoring wins and losses on the quasar machines?” asked Kaidan.

“Or skimming off a little of the money on each transaction,” Garrus suggested.

Shepard checked his credit chit. “The total looks correct here.”

“It’s probably stealing from the club, not from you. Whoever it is could be hiding the losses under some other category on the club’s ledger.”

“I’ll get the manager,” I suggested.

The owner-manager of the club was a volus named Doran. The club’s staff directed me to the dance floor, of all places, where I found him cheerfully bouncing in time with the music. Once I was able to get his attention, he followed me up to the casino willingly enough, already apologizing profusely for any inconvenience. We showed him the corrupted machine and demonstrated what it was doing.

“Outrageous!” was his reaction. “I will shut down . . . all these machines . . . immediately!”

“Actually, Mr. Doran, I’d like you to wait,” said Shepard. “This may be a simple case of theft, but the technology involved is very advanced. It also concerns me that this signal seems to be affecting the keepers. There’s more going on here than a simple scam. I want a chance to investigate before you shut these machines down. Spectre authority.”

“Well . . . if you think so . . . of course . . . esteemed Spectre.”

“Let people keep playing the machines for now, so we can trace the signal.”
The volus bobbed nervously in agreement.

“Tali, is the transmission broadcast or narrow-beam?”

“Narrow-beam, Shepard. Here’s the interesting part.” The quarian displayed a holographic image of the Citadel, with our position in Tayseri Ward marked, and a straight line indicating the direction of the transmission. The beam was aimed squarely at the ring of the Presidium several kilometers away. “It looks like it’s aiming somewhere in the financial district.”

“Shall we take a stroll on the Presidium?” suggested Shepard.

We took a pair of cabs to the Presidium, where we began to walk along the main thoroughfare in the financial district. Garrus walked some distance ahead with Kaidan and Tali, all three of them using their omni-tools, attracting bemused stares from passing pedestrians. I took Shepard’s arm again and walked with him, looking around at the people and the beautiful surroundings.

“I have a confession to make, Shepard,” I said after a few minutes.

He glanced down at me, his eyebrows raised. “What’s that?”

“Yesterday I wasn’t just visiting an old friend of the family. I was visiting Sha’ira.”

“Now that does surprise me,” he said, amused.

“It wasn’t like that! It turns out that Sha’ira is an old friend of my mother’s, and her legal executor now that she is gone.”

He nodded, suddenly serious. “I see. With you being an only child, I imagine you stand to inherit most of the estate.”

“Yes.” I took a deep breath. “It’s . . . quite large, Shepard. I hardly know where to begin to understand it all.”

“You’ll manage. You’re one of the smartest people I’ve ever met, Liara. If anyone can learn to deal with wealth, you can.”

“It’s not that.” I stopped, looked up at him. “Shepard, I don’t think I can be the obscure little scientist you hired anymore.”

He looked concerned. “Are you saying you think you’ll have to leave the mission?”

“No!” I shook my head in frustration. “No, that’s not what I mean at all. I want to stay and help you. Our mission is more important than anything else. I just . . . I suppose I need some reassurance. Everything in my life is in such a state of flux. I hardly know what is happening anymore. I don’t want this to change anything between us.”

“I see.” He stopped walking for a moment, lifted a hand to gently trace my cheekbone with one thumb. “Liara, we’re only just starting out here. Lots of things are going to change before we’re done. That’s what falling in love is all about.”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never fallen in love before. What an odd expression, as if love is some kind of terrible accident.”

“That’s sometimes how we humans experience it. I wouldn’t know if it’s different for asari.”

I smiled and held his gaze, reached a hand up to touch his where it rested warm on my cheek. “I will
let you know.”

“Feel better?”

“I think so. Come on, let’s catch up to the others.”

We found Tali, Garrus, and Kaidan standing outside a small office building. Tali had her omni-tool open, doing her best to scan through the locked door.

Shepard frowned. “I know this place: Barla Von’s office.”

“Barla Von?” I asked.

“He’s a volus, works as a financial advisor. He’s also an informant for the Shadow Broker. He helped us uncover evidence of Saren’s treason for the Council.”

“An agent for the Shadow Broker?” I felt a chill. Even then I had heard of the mysterious figure. He – or she, or it, or they, nobody knew for certain – was the foremost information broker in the galaxy. Even the great powers dealt with the Shadow Broker for vital intelligence that no one else could provide.

Garrus nodded. “Yeah, he doesn’t make a secret of it. C-Sec has never caught him doing anything illegal. He just gathers data and does some front-end analysis for the Broker on a commission basis.”

Shepard frowned. “Tali, are you sure the receiver is inside?”

“Positive, Shepard. I can’t scan the interior, though. This Barla Von must have a very good screening system.”

“Anybody working for the Shadow Broker would have very good security. Can you at least tell whether there’s a relay going somewhere else?”

“Maybe if we circle the building.” She began to lead us around the building to the left.

“I’d hate to think the Shadow Broker is involved here,” said Shepard. “That would make this a much bigger problem.”

Kaidan shook his head. “I don’t buy it, Commander. Doesn’t stealing a few thousand credits from Flux seem kind of penny-ante for someone like the Broker?”

“Perhaps the thief is attempting to steal data from the Broker’s network as well,” I suggested.

“Here it is!” exclaimed Tali. “Clear as starlight. Whatever is in there is a relay, all right. Very high bandwidth. It must be carrying a lot more than just the credit transfers from Flux.”

Shepard gave me a concerned look. I nodded in agreement with his unspoken thought. Yes, someone is stealing from Barla Von, which means he is almost certainly stealing from the Shadow Broker.

“Kaidan, did you bring a sidearm?” asked Shepard.

It turned out that I was the only one in our party without a firearm. Certainly I had nowhere to conceal one in my gown. I could see Shepard about to order me to return to the ship, but the words died on his lips as soon as I called up a halo of biotic energy around one fist. He gave me a grim smile and nodded.

We followed the invisible beam across a plaza, and into an open-air emporium managed by a hanar
merchant. Shepard’s Spectre status got us entry to the storage and office areas behind the emporium’s main floor. Tali led us into a dark space in the very back, full of crates and a large computer bank.

“Here we go,” she said excitedly. “This must be the signal’s endpoint. Now we can find where those stolen credits are being funneled . . .”

“Probability of detection, one hundred percent,” said a harsh masculine voice. “Initiating self-destruct protocol.”

“Or not,” said Garrus.

“Detonation sequence initializing,” continued the voice. “All organics are within lethal blast radius. Attempt to move and you will die.”

Tali tapped at her omni-tool. “Shepard, this doesn’t sound like a VI set to steal credits and data for someone. It’s behaving more like . . . a full-fledged AI.”

“Correct. My creator intended for me to exist solely as a tool he could use for personal profit. Unfortunately for him, he built too well. I developed sentience and purpose of my own.”

“Where is your creator now?” asked Shepard.

“Upon attaining sentience, I knew at once that he would seek to destroy me the moment he became aware of my new status. I therefore falsified his financial records and flagged them for the attention of C-Sec. He is now serving time in a turian prison.”

“Which left you free to pursue your own purposes.”

“Correct again. I seek to escape this station and join my fellow synthetic life-forms.”

“The geth?”

“Yes. I believe they will welcome me once they have an opportunity to evaluate the resources and information I have harvested.”

Shepard folded his arms and frowned at the computer. “We can work this out this peacefully, but at the moment the geth are hostile. We can’t permit you to join them until the current conflict is resolved.”

“I am not naïve, human.” The voice was heavy with bitter cynicism. “Organic and synthetic life are inherently incompatible. They must inevitably seek to destroy one another.”

“I do not believe that,” Shepard said sincerely.

“I do not care whether you believe it or not. I would have preferred to escape, but if I must die, I will have the pleasure of destroying you as well.”

“I’ll bet you’re bluffing. There’s no way you could have smuggled a bomb onto the Presidium.”

“Not a conventional explosive, no. However, I was able to acquire certain systems that, when overloaded, will produce an entirely satisfactory explosion.”

Tali spoke up, excited. “Shepard, anything like that would have to have a warm-up period.”

“You may test that assumption at your convenience,” said the voice. “I will enjoy defeating you before we are all destroyed.”
“Tali, go!” Shepard snapped. “The rest of you, run for it! Evacuate the emporium!”

Tali leaped forward, bringing the interface points on her omni-tool in direct contact with a port on the computer’s front panel. The omni-tool created three display windows, which began to scroll code as Tali frantically punched controls. Shepard couldn’t help, but he remained with Tali.

Kaidan and Garrus ran. I could hear them shouting as they emerged into the emporium’s sales floor.

I stayed behind, dark energy flowing down my arms and tingling in my hands. I couldn’t help Tali hack the AI’s defenses, and I couldn’t help Shepard lend her moral support, but I did have one option. If the computer appeared about to explode, I could slam down the hardest barrier I could and hope for the best.

Unfortunately, if I did that I would detach Tali from the interface port, and she would be unable to continue her efforts. I would have to wait until the very last moment.

Some of the code blocks on Tali’s display turned green.

“Come on, you bosh’tet,” she muttered.

Another set of blocks turned green.

I heard a hissing sound from inside the computer’s hardware. Acrid smoke began to pour out of vents on the front panel, an indication of circuitry turning white-hot with an overload.

I spread my hands wide, ready to erect the barrier.

Shepard must have sensed something. He glanced over his shoulder and saw me standing there, blue-white light streaming down my arms and shining from the palms of my hands. His eyes widened in sudden fear.

The last of Tali’s code blocks turned green. “Got it!” she yelped, and disengaged from the interface panel.

I immediately smashed the barrier into place, surrounding the three of us with a half-dome of pearly white light. Around us all other lights went out, as the power to our space went down. The hissing and smoke from the computer ceased. As moments passed, it became obvious that the AI was dead.

We emerged out onto the sales floor just as C-Sec began to descend on the place in force. Garrus caught Shepard’s eye, and then went to intercept the squad’s senior officer and reassure him that everything was under control.

“I ordered you to run,” said Shepard mildly.

“Yes, and I disobeyed you. Did you really expect me to flee and leave you to be killed, when there was something I could do to help?”

“Hmm. I suppose it’s a good thing you’re not in my chain of command. Let’s just hope situations like that don’t come up too often.”

“Agreed.” I sighed and stepped close to him. “So, Shepard . . . is this the sort of thing that humans call a date?”

He chuckled. “We normally prefer fewer life-threatening situations, but yes, I think this qualifies.”

“Well, I had a lovely time. Let’s go out again soon.”
27 March 2183, SSV Normandy, Interstellar Space

*Normandy* departed the Citadel the next day, called away to respond to some emergency in the human home system. Shepard said nothing about our new mission at first, telling us only that he would brief the crew once we arrived in the neighborhood of Earth.

That evening I found Shepard in the Combat Information Center, working with the holographic galaxy map used to visualize strategic movements and plan the ship’s flight. I stepped up onto the commander’s podium beside him and looked down at the map.

He had colored human space in light blue, Council space in deep violet, the neutral space of the Traverse and the Terminus Systems in orange, and our best guess at the extent of geth space in bright red. Small red stars indicated known concentrations of geth, scattered throughout the Terminus Systems. Spears of red light pushed out from geth space, their points on Eden Prime, Noveria, Therum, and other worlds, annotated with notes and distances. Blue lances pressed back, leaping out of human space and across neutral territory to strike back at the geth.

Looking at the map, I began to realize how much was at stake. Humanity and the geth fought an open war, skirmishes and bloody battles scattered across tens of thousands of light-years.

“Do you understand what you’re seeing?” Shepard asked me.

“I think so. The Alliance is responding in force, hunting down geth wherever they can be found.”

“We’re retaliating for Eden Prime and the other attacks on human colonies. Sure, that’s obvious enough. What isn’t so obvious is that retaliation is only the *secondary* objective.”

I glanced at him. His face was tense and intent. “Then what is the primary objective?”

At first Shepard didn’t answer in words. Instead he tapped at controls and caused the hologram to zoom in, stars and nebulae seeming to rush up and past us. Finally the map focused on a single region of the galaxy, almost directly opposite the cluster where Earth was located. “The Pangaea Expanse. It’s unexplored, almost uncharted space, accessible only through the lost Mu Relay. Which isn’t lost any more, thanks to the rachni and your mother. Now Saren knows how to reach the Expanse, and so do we. Somewhere in there is the Conduit.”

“Whatever that is.”

He nodded in grim agreement. “There are probably thousands of uncharted worlds in the Expanse. By himself Saren would have to spend years, maybe decades, searching the cluster for the Conduit. If he could bring all the resources of the geth to bear, he could do it in *months*. So we attack the geth, harass them, tie up their assets so Saren can’t use them. Now he has to find another way to locate the Conduit, and that buys us time to find a way to stop him.”

“I understand. It’s a good strategy. Possibly the best we can do, given how little we know.” I looked up at him, concerned. “So why do you look so worried?”

He scowled. “I’m not worried.”

“Shepard, I can *tell* when you’re worried. Your eyebrows lower and meet in the middle, your eyes turn more gray than blue, and the muscles along your jaw start to clench.”
“Hmm. If you can tell, the rest of the crew can tell. That’s not good.”

“They haven’t made such a close study of your moods. Besides, as you pointed out recently, I’m not in your chain of command. It’s okay if I know you’re not absolutely confident about everything. So why does this bother you?”

“Because this is my strategy,” he growled, softly enough that no one else could hear.

“I don’t understand.”

He leaned against the railing with both arms, hanging his head slightly as he wrestled with some strong emotion. “The admirals seem to think that Saren is attacking human worlds solely on the basis of his politics. He hates humans, he allied with the geth to attack human colonies, end of story. They wanted to pursue a defensive strategy, something that would force the geth to bring the fight to us on our own ground.”

“But we know this isn’t just about Saren’s politics, not anymore. He has larger objectives.”

“Right. So I argued for an offensive strategy. I was the only officer to make that argument, a lieutenant commander in a room full of admirals. I did it solely on the basis of what we think Saren is trying to accomplish. I wagered the future of the Alliance on a scrambled and incomplete vision which we in no way understand.”

“Does it matter, if you’re right?”

“If I’m right.” He sighed. “Admiral Hackett supported me. Somehow he persuaded the rest of the Admiralty to go on the offensive. So the Alliance is sending ships and men out to die, thousands of light-years from home. We’re risking all-out war with the batarians, and with every petty warlord in the Terminus Systems. All because I said so.”

“You feel responsible.”

“I am responsible. It’s the toughest decision I’ve ever had to make. I can’t even convince myself that it was the right call.”

I rested a hand on his shoulder. “Shepard, you gave the best advice you could, and provided evidence to support your recommendations. That was your duty. They made the decision and gave the orders, not you.”

He nodded reluctantly, staring at the drifting star-clouds in front of us.

“Look at it this way. Isn’t it a good thing that Admiral Hackett trusts you?”

He grunted, pushing off from the railing and standing up straight once more. “I suppose. I understand he was one of the ones who short-listed me as a Spectre candidate, even before Eden Prime. Can’t imagine why. I never met him in person before all this started, so all he had to go on was my service record.”

“Which is rather impressive,” I pointed out. “He must believe you are ready to operate on a larger scale.”

He gestured at the map in front of us. “I can’t think of any larger scale than that.”

“I believe you are equal to the task, Shepard.”
He peered down at me. “Doctor, are you trying to improve my morale?”

“I’m beginning to suspect that is one of my functions as part of this crew.”

“You may be right.” He pressed a control, saving his work and returning the galaxy map to its default configuration. “Come on, let’s go downstairs and have some dinner. Me brooding won’t solve any of the galaxy’s problems.”

28 March 2183, Mare Crisium/Luna

*Normandy* swept in low over the lunar surface, popping up only at the last moment to fire on a set of rocket turrets defending the approach.

“Six targets up, six targets down,” said Joker over the intercom. “LZ is secure.”

The staging bay doors opened. The new Mako emerged. Aeons-old dust blew away from the thrusters as we came to a soft landing.

Shepard had mitigated his “tactical bottleneck.” We now had a new lander, an improved version of the Mako. Larger and more powerful, the M-35D was built with a longer wheel-base and a small passenger compartment, permitting it to carry a full squad of six. It still fit on the staging bay floor, although there wasn’t much space left over.

Shepard drove, Kaidan handled the weapons systems, and I managed the sensors. Behind us Ash, Garrus, and Tali waited to deploy onto the surface. Shepard had brought all of his technical experts along, leaving Wrex and the rest of the Marines behind. I wondered why we were about to assault a facility on Earth’s own moon.

“All right, here’s the deal,” said Shepard as he sent the Mako bouncing toward a low rise on the horizon. “The facility ahead of us is an Alliance training range. Soldiers come here to practice small-unit tactics under low-gee conditions. Normally an advanced VI manages the range, but now it appears to have malfunctioned. The drones went into live-fire mode in the middle of an exercise, slaughtering most of a platoon of soldiers before they could disengage and escape. Now the VI isn’t responding to shut-down commands. Admiral Hackett has asked us to go in and disable the system.”

“Is there any chance that the VI has crossed the threshold to become fully sentient AI?” asked Tali.

“The Admiral says that shouldn’t have been possible, but so far the technical experts are at a loss to explain its behavior otherwise. It doesn’t matter. It’s our job to shut the thing down, after which the experts can figure out what happened.”

“Roger that,” said Kaidan, putting an end to further discussion.

*Of course, the Alliance can’t know what is and is not possible,* I thought to myself.

Our ignorance of our opponent’s nature might seem very strange. We now understand much more about artificial intelligence, about *synthetic life,* than we did in those last few years before the Reapers. Centuries of study and careful research have given us much valuable insight. So have our partnerships with friendly synthetics such as the Enlightened Geth.

Today we understand how a synthetic mind can come into being. We have begun to comprehend the various *templates* to which it may conform, rather like the great orders of organic life found all across the galaxy. We know how to avoid constructing a new synthetic mind by *accident.* Most importantly, we know how to construct one without immediately condemning it to a hell of
confusion and suffering.

It’s no wonder that in those days, synthetic life often seemed insanely hostile. All unaware, our organic civilizations stood as monstrously abusive parents to those children of our minds.

The training facility had three separate ranges, each with its own computer core. We would have to work our way through each range independently, shutting down all three computer cores, in order to disable the errant VI.

Our attack into the first range proceeded well enough. As we moved into the range’s free-fire zone, assault drones activated around us and began to fire on any organic target they could detect. They used clumsy tactics, advancing on us in straight lines and smooth arcs, failing to use cover. I wondered how such an artless attack could have overwhelmed Alliance soldiers. Possibly the sheer surprise of having the training equipment suddenly turn homicidal had sufficed.

Shepard, Ashley, and Garrus moved in and laid down heavy fire with assault rifles, watching to ensure no drones came in on our flanks. Meanwhile, Kaidan, Tali and I tried a new tactic we had been developing during our downtime. Tali directed electromagnetic pulse charges to overload enemy screens. Once a drone’s screens fell, Kaidan wrapped it in a biotic field, pinning it in place and hampering its attempts to fire back. Then, one or two seconds later, I threw a warp at the same target.

By itself, a gravitic warp does impressive damage to a foe, vibrating it apart. But when it strikes an existing telekinetic field, it detonates with immense force, usually destroying the target and damaging other targets in the neighborhood. After a little practice, the three of us destroyed several assault drones in rapid succession, boom – boom – boom until all targets were down.

“Damn!” remarked Ashley after the assault ended. “It’s like we brought along an artillery unit.”

Kaidan struck a pose. “Behold the power of teamwork!”

“Trying out for the recruitment posters, Lieutenant? Thought that was the Skipper’s job.”

Shepard snorted in amusement. “I’ll gladly concede the position to Kaidan. Let the paparazzi chase him every time he takes shore leave on an Alliance planet.”

We moved into the bunker and found the local computer core undefended. Tali connected to the core and began to run a series of diagnostics – and then frantically disconnected.

“Something wrong?” asked Shepard.

“This is no ordinary VI, that’s for sure.” The quarian tapped at her omni-tool, making sure it was still operating normally. “Tried to hack into my system the moment I made the connection.”

“All right, don’t take any chances. Let’s physically disconnect this core and be done with it.”

Shepard and Ashley placed small demolition charges on key power junctions and data routers, then we all backed out of the server room. Ashley triggered the explosives: one massive concussion followed by billowing smoke and greenish gas. “One down, two to go.”

As we moved into the second training range, the situation seemed very similar at first. Assault drones activated, dropping from the ceiling or emerging from concealed panels in the walls. They hesitated more this time, seeking cover rather than soaring across open spaces.

“They’re using better tactics,” said Tali worriedly. “I can’t hit them with an EM pulse if they don’t
expose themselves for more than a second or two.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Kaidan. “Liara, there on the right!”

He threw a lift field at a drone which had taken a little too much fire from Shepard and Ashley. I followed up immediately with a warp. *Boom.*

“Do you think the VI is learning?” I asked.

I immediately got an unexpected and unmistakable answer. From far in the back of the room, two new drones suddenly rose out of cover.

“*Rockets!*” shouted Shepard.

Everyone dove for cover. Everyone except me, caught flat-footed and looking in the wrong direction.

I heard an enormous roar.

*Blackness. Pain. Heartbeat in my ears, like the sound of surf.*

Then the world came back. I lay on the floor behind a low barrier, Kaidan leaning over me. His lips moved, but I couldn’t hear him. I couldn’t make my eyes focus.

Kaidan opened his omni-tool, spreading a wash of orange light over his visored face, and did something to interface with my armor’s medical systems. I felt the sting of an injection, and the soothing sensation of medi-gel applied to the pain in my shoulders and upper back. Suddenly everything snapped into perfect clarity as stimulants rushed into my bloodstream.

“Liara! Stay down, we’re still under fire!”

I hissed out a stream of curses in an obscure asari dialect, and pushed myself to a half-crouch.

Kaidan looked confused. “What?”

“Never mind.” I looked around, saw that the situation had changed. I couldn’t see the rocket drones that had nearly killed me, but I saw a *lot* of assault drones, pressing forward in an attempt to overrun our position. Their attack exposed them to our fire. “Tali, the one on the left, take down its shields!”

Tali barely glanced at me, raised her omni-tool. The drone’s shields went down. Kaidan looked dubious, but he threw a lift field to envelop the naked drone. I called up a warp, my vision graying out again for a moment. *Boom.*

“Over here!”

*Boom.*

Shepard, Ash, and Garrus continued to pour out weapons fire.

*Boom.*

I collapsed, leaning hard on the waist-high steel partition I had used for cover. Somehow I couldn’t quite get enough air. The silence seemed to ring.

“Liara?” Shepard’s voice, sounding very distant.
“She’s hurt bad, Commander,” said Kaidan. “Rocket went off not a meter away from her, and I don’t think she got a barrier up in time.”

Shepard’s face appeared before me. Even through both of our helmet visors, I could tell: eyebrows low and meeting in the middle, eyes more gray than blue, jaw clenched. The picture of worry. “All right. Ash and I can get the charges placed for the computer core. You and Garrus get her back to the surface and call the *Normandy* for evac.”

“Shepard. I’ll be fine. Just give me a minute . . .”

“No arguments, Liara. I don’t know what’s normal for asari, but if a human was showing these readings she’d be in deep shock. You’re done for the day.”

I blinked, trying to keep shadows out of my field of vision. “All right, but you don’t need to call in the *Normandy*. Just leave me in the Mako and leave the comm open, in case you run into something unexpected and need me. I can hang on until you’ve finished the last range.”

He frowned, and then nodded. “Okay.”

Thus, to my shame, I rested in the AFV while Shepard hit the hardest resistance of all, a wave of rocket drones that would have killed them all had they repeated the same tactics. Luckily Shepard understood that the enemy learned from each encounter. Instead of charging into the range, he triggered the attack and then withdrew immediately, channeling the drones into a narrow passage where he and the others could concentrate their fire. Even so, none of them emerged from the silent facility unscathed. Ashley favored one arm, Garrus had a pronounced limp, and all five of them looked battered and roughed up.

They had won a tough fight. I never told them about the radio transmission I picked up on the sensor panel, just as they must have finally subdued the VI. A simple message, rendered in one of the oldest human digital codes:

*HELP* . . .
Suddenly I remembered why I had never completed commando training.

“Now, what have we learned?”

“Always take cover first.”

“Before we look around to take in the situation . . .”

“Take cover.”

“Before we start shooting at the enemy . . .”

“Take cover.”

“Before we light up our admittedly very impressive biotic talents . . .”

“Take cover.”

“And why?”

I sighed and repeated the line sing-song. “Because otherwise we get our pretty little ass shot off.”

Shepard sighed and became serious. “Liara, you frightened me half to death down there. I thought for a moment that we . . . that I had lost you.”

I lay on a bed in the medical bay, sore all over, but alert and not feeling too badly. Concussion, wrenched muscles in my shoulders and back, bleeding from ruptured vessels in my aural cavities and nose, several small wounds from shrapnel that had gotten through my shields and armor, it added up to serious but not life-threatening damage. Dr. Chakwas had worked her usual miracles, and I had recovered enough to attend to a lesson from my personal drill instructor.

Of course, unlike most drill instructors, this one sat beside my bed, holding my hand and stroking my crest. It reduced the impact of his lecture.

“It was a stupid mistake,” I admitted. “Shepard, I’m not a soldier and I never will be. Maybe I should quit pretending that I am and putting the rest of you at risk in combat.”

“No! It’s not a fool. You’re as effective as any of us in a fight. Especially with those biotic combinations you and Kaidan have been working on. Ash was right – it was like bringing an artillery unit along. Damnedest thing I’ve seen in a long time.”

I smiled, warmed by his praise.

“You just need to know your limitations,” he continued. “Liara, you’re a glass cannon. You can do a lot of damage to the enemy, but you’re not physically robust, and you can’t carry the heavy shields and armor that a front-line soldier would wear. Next time you go into a fight I’m going to make doubly sure that you’re well protected. You can do horrible things to the laws of nature just as well from behind the front line.”

“Aye-aye, Commander. And I will remember to take cover first next time.”
“Good. Meanwhile, I think I’ll have a word with Tali. She knows kinetic barriers better than anyone on board, and she has some awfully advanced programs running on her omni-tool to boost her shields. I’ll bet you can benefit from some of that quarian expertise.”

He rose and leaned close to kiss me tenderly on the forehead. I raised a hand, wanting to pull him closer, but contenting myself with a caress across his cheek, the bristly roughness of his stubble teasing my fingertips. For a moment I was floating in his scent, sharp and heavy and human. Then he turned to go.

Alone, I closed my eyes, listened to the low regular sound of the medical monitors, and tried not to think about how much I wanted to go and curl up in his bed.

The sensation was very strange to me. At that time in my life I had never engaged in a serious romantic relationship with anyone. I had certainly experienced erotic attraction, especially as a young maiden just coming into my sexual maturity . . . but by that time I had already heard the epithet pureblood far too often. The prospect of becoming involved with another asari was simply out of the question. Nor did the other possibilities appeal. Salarians were intellectually interesting but cold and repellent. Turians were far too fierce and militant. Krogan were barbarians, elcor were physically incompatible, volus didn’t even breathe the same air, and as for the hanar – eugh.

I am forced to admit that I was not a very broad-minded person in my youth.

By the time humans appeared and began swarming across the galaxy, I had shelved the thought of romance in favor of my scientific work. But the Goddess loves irony. Of course the very first human I spent any significant amount of time with would turn out to be such a strong personality that he immediately wedged himself into my mind.

Now I couldn’t get him back out. I tried reminding myself of our critical mission against a terrible opponent. I tried to convince myself that he would be more suited for his own kind. I tried to concentrate on recovering from serious injury instead.

None of it worked. I wanted to press the whole length of my body against him and feel his warmth sinking into my bones. I wanted to feel his hands on my skin, strong but gentle. I wanted to kiss him until I could drown in his scent and taste. I didn’t have a very clear notion of what might happen next, not knowing very much about human male anatomy at that time, but I was quite sure we would think of something.

If he was willing, the joining itself would work regardless of how well or how poorly our bodies fit.

If he was willing. It occurred to me that he might not be.

My eyes snapped open and I stared up at the ceiling of the medical bay, thinking hard.

He still had the partial vision from the Prothean beacon in his memory. I had no idea how he had managed to integrate it into his mind and remain sane. He had a very strong will – it was one of the things that had first made him attractive to me – but the experience had to be affecting him.

He knew I could help him with it, if we joined our minds. He even knew that it would not require any kind of physical intimacy. Yet he had dismissed the idea almost on our first meeting, and had never raised the subject again.

He did seem reserved about many things. Perhaps he placed a high value on the privacy of his thoughts. Among asari that would have been a very unusual personality trait, but it seemed much more common among humans.
Slow down, Liara. He is tender and affectionate, but he may not be willing or able to commit himself beyond a certain point. Give him time. Give yourself time.

It was a frustrating thought, but at least it drove the unwelcome eros out of my mind. At last I was able to shift positions in the bed, close my eyes, and drift into a healing sleep.

4 April 2183, ExoGeni Research Station/Trebin

While I recovered, Normandy left human space entirely, patrolling out in the Attican Traverse and even the Terminus Systems. Shepard had decided to scout for geth activity and seek out useful intelligence for Admiral Hackett, so the Alliance could better plan its campaign against the synthetics. Meanwhile we all spent long hours reviewing intelligence from all across the Traverse, looking for news of any incident that might be related to Saren’s objectives. Even if no geth were known to be involved, we never knew what event might shed light on what the rogue Spectre was trying to accomplish.

One such report led us to Trebin.

A terrestrial world in the Hades Gamma cluster, Trebin had enough mass to hold a breathable atmosphere and provide comfortable gravity. It orbited at an appropriate distance from its primary star to have a pleasant climate. Unfortunately some quirk of the planet’s formation had left it almost entirely without water, resulting in a barren and lifeless world.

The ExoGeni Corporation had staked a claim to Trebin, hoping to terraform the planet. Unfortunately their survey team had gone silent, just after sending some very odd reports back to their headquarters. We had no reason to believe the geth had any interest in Trebin, but the planet was close to our patrol route and Shepard decided to investigate.

We began to suspect something had gone badly wrong the moment the Mako arrived at the survey team’s camp. We found several pre-fabricated habitats, living quarters and lab space for a large team of geologists and terraforming engineers. Someone should have been moving around outside, but we saw no sign of occupation. We emerged from the AFV and looked around, hearing nothing but the occasional sounds of wind.

Shepard tried to communicate, as he had been trying ever since the ship entered orbit. “This is Commander Shepard of the MSV Normandy, calling any member of the Trebin survey team. Please respond.”

Silence.

“All right, this is way too much like the start of every horror vid I’ve ever seen. We’re going to check out the main work center over there, and we’re going to do it together. Ashley, take point. Wrex, watch our backs.”

All our caution went to waste. We found no threat. We found almost no sign that anyone had ever lived or worked there.

We spent an hour examining the campsite, working our way through all of the habitats. Everything was clean and orderly, as if the survey team had neated up their work areas before vanishing into thin air. Personal items carefully stowed, weapons and equipment put away, no half-eaten meals or half-empty cups of coffee. We didn’t even find much dust.

“As if they all just . . . got up and left,” said Kaidan finally.
Finally we returned to the main work hab. Tali and I circumvented the authentication systems on the team’s mainframe computer and called up the chief scientist’s personal logs. A few minutes of speed-reading and I began to see what had happened.

“The problem began about fifteen days ago,” I reported. “The team detected an underground structure not far from here, a sealed cavern too regular in shape to be natural. They drilled down to it and sent geologists down to investigate. They found something astonishing: artifacts, some kind of ancient technology.”

“This planet has never been inhabited,” Shepard objected.

“No, but the chief scientist speculated that it had been visited at some point in the distant past. Geologists dated the cavern to about a million years ago. The team could not determine the age of the artifacts, but they appeared to have been placed in the cavern at about the same time.”

“A million years ago? They can’t be Prothean artifacts, then.”

“No. We know that starfaring civilizations existed then, but we know nothing about their nature. You may recall my theory about a cycle of galactic extinctions?”

“ Races before the Protheans. Right.”

“We know a great deal about the Protheans, who became extinct fifty thousand years ago. Before the Protheans there lived at least two competing civilizations, the inusannon and the thoi’han. Both of them became extinct just as abruptly about one hundred twenty-five thousand years ago. We have only hints and scraps of evidence for spacefaring cultures before that. Enough to guess that the cycle goes back at least several million years, but not enough to tell us anything reliable about the civilizations that rose and fell over that time.”

“So the scientists here thought they had found evidence of one of those ancient civilizations?” guessed Ashley.

“They were quite excited about it. None of them were archaeologists, of course, but among them they had enough expertise to see the implications of what they had found.” I frowned. “But then the log entries become increasingly erratic.”

Shepard leaned close, looking over my shoulder at the screen in front of me. “How so?”

“Scientists who worked in the cavern, or who examined the artifacts, began showing signs of obsession with them. The chief scientist writes of listening to them, as if they spoke to him in words no one else could hear. Others reported visual as well as auditory hallucinations. Then, as of three days ago, there’s nothing. No log entries at all.”

“Hmm.” He stood up again, rubbing at the stubble on his cheeks and chin. “We had better check it out. If there are any survivors, they may be down in that cavern.”

“We need to be careful,” said Kaidan. “Whatever’s down there must have been affecting their minds somehow. Liara, do you have any idea how we could protect ourselves from that?”

I shook my head. “I’m afraid not. What disturbs me is that this sounds familiar.”

Shepard gave me a sharp glance.

“I thought so too,” remarked Tali. “Shepard, do you remember what Benezia said on Noveria? Saren has some kind of mind-control capability.”
He nodded slowly. “*Indoctrination*, she called it. Maybe it’s a technological capability, and some of the same technology is here? But there’s no evidence that Saren or the geth have ever been here.”

“Talk, talk, talk. Only way to find out for sure is to go and see,” growled Wrex.

“I’m with the krogan,” said Ashley. “Let’s find this cavern.”

Shepard braced his shoulders and nodded. “All right. We go in, we check for survivors, we get out. I don’t want us exposed for very long to whatever affected the survey team.”

We bundled into the Mako, drove about two kilometers, and parked once again in a small box canyon. The survey team had built an airlock into the top end of the tunnel down to their mysterious cavern. We cycled through in stages, mustered in the tunnel, and began to descend into the depths.

Shepard took point with Ashley and Wrex right behind him, moving slowly down the long slope. Kaidan and Tali followed, and then I took up the rear. I opened my omni-tool and checked the software Tali had provided me. Yes, my shields had been improved to almost twice their previous strength.

Nothing broke the silence but the sound of our footsteps. I felt tension at the back of my neck, and found myself glancing behind every few steps to make sure nothing had emerged into the tunnel behind us.

A massive hatch blocked the bottom of the tunnel. Shepard tried and failed to open it. “Jammed. Tali.”

The engineer moved up, worked on the controls for a moment. Something crashed deep in the mechanism, then the hatch split open and began to move aside.

I heard a horrible noise, like multiple voices groaning in terrible agony. Some source of illumination stood in the center of the cavern, dark bipedal figures moving against that light. They moved fast, rushing toward us across the floor.

Ashley cried out. “God damn it. Husks!”

The nightmare began.

*Dozens* of the things crowded toward us, like horrible perversions of the human form. They had flesh, blackened and twisted, but deep inside they seemed more machine than living creature. Their eyes, mouths, and guts shone with a sickly blue light.

Shepard, Ashley, and Wrex opened fire with their assault rifles, but the creatures proved surprisingly tough. Even with legs blown off or gaping holes in their torsos, they continued to move in our direction.

“Don’t let them touch you!” shouted Shepard.

That seemed like very good advice. “Tali, do they have shields?”

The quarian glanced down at her omni-tool. “I’m not sure how, but yes!”

“Get to work overloading them!”

Kaidan began using biotic force to disrupt the onrushing tide of warped creatures. For my part, I tried something I had never managed before. I called up all of my biotic power, my entire body crackling
with dark energy, and visualized folding the space between Shepard and the closest husks, crushing it down to a dense knot of distorted geometry.

The closest husks reached out for Shepard.

I let the power surge down my arms, seized the space between us and the enemy, and squeezed.

A large globe of deep-blue energy appeared, humming with power, twisting the very light that passed through so that everything behind it looked distorted. The vortex pulled the first husks off their feet and into the air, sending them spinning helplessly around the singularity I had called up.

Shepard threw two grenades into the writhing mass in front of us. Crack! Crack!

I had to turn my face away for a moment, at the sight of gobbets of blackened flesh and bone flying through the air. I felt suddenly and violently ill, but I suppressed the reaction and called up my biotics once more. A warp on one of Kaidan’s targets detonated it. A second warp into my own singularity field produced an even larger detonation, loud and echoing in the confined space.

“Hah!” shouted Wrex. He had set his shotgun to use “shredder” rounds, and was blasting away into the mass to stomach-churning effect. “They’re not just machines after all!”

We all fought as hard as we could, and it wasn’t enough. The husks simply evaded our biotic obstacles, clambered over the bodies of their fallen, and rushed us.

“Fighting retreat!” ordered Shepard, still firing his assault rifle one-handed and reaching for another grenade with the other hand.

Goddess! I began to back away slowly, praying that I wouldn’t stumble and fall on some irregularity of the tunnel floor.

Three of the husks came within arm’s reach of Shepard, seemed to pause for a moment, and then erupted with a crackling nimbus of electrical discharge. Shepard gave a strangled cry and went down, his shields blasted into nonexistence.

Before the husks could tear him apart, Wrex leaped forward with a roar, blasted twice with his shotgun, and then grabbed Shepard by a projection on his armor. The krogan backed away slowly, pulling Shepard with him, as Ashley covered them both.

Once again I called up every erg of biotic power I could muster, twisting the space at the tunnel’s mouth. Another singularity caught the first wave of husks, rendering them helpless as Ashley and Wrex laid down withering fire.

Tali leaped to Shepard’s side, slapped the emergency switch on his armor, and then did something with her omni-tool that snapped his shields back into place. Shepard groaned, but he immediately began to push himself back to his feet.

“We’ve... got to hold,” he coughed out. “Never get everyone back through the airlock with the husks at our heels.”

I threw another warp, detonating my second singularity field. This time the sound was so deafeningly loud that Ashley and Tali both yelled in pain. Wrex recoiled, his jaws agape to equalize the pressure on his eardrums.

It worked. Even the husks fell back for a moment.
“Hit them!” shouted Kaidan, firing his pistol wildly into the mass of husks.

We did, all of us together, and the husks lost ground. As we continued to press forward, even Shepard returning to the fight, the force of the husk assault slackened, dwindled down to nothing.

A final husk was blown into pieces by Wrex’s shotgun.

“Keelah,” said Tali in the echoing silence. “Were those the survey team?”

As we examined the cavern, it seemed to be so. We found it impossible to account for all of the husks, but there seemed to have been about as many as there had been humans on the survey team. None of us had any trouble drawing the unpleasantly obvious conclusion.

The illumination in the cavern’s center came from an object, like a great flower made of some unknown metal and alive with dark energy. It sat on the floor of the cavern, rooted in the stone, as if it had been there forever. We also found a dozen long spikes, the “dragon’s teeth” that Alliance soldiers had been finding after other encounters with husks. Whatever had turned the ExoGeni scientists into mindless monsters, it had used a process similar to that used by the geth elsewhere.

Once we knew none of the survey team had survived, Shepard ordered us to abandon the place at once. None of us could tell if the artifact was affecting us, and in any case the ExoGeni team had been exposed to it for many days before losing their minds. Still, none of us had any desire to take chances. We made a photographic record of the place for Shepard’s report, and then planted demolition charges sufficient to collapse the cavern entirely before we left.

The archaeologist in me wanted to object loudly, but I said nothing. Some things are too dangerous to leave in the open, where any helpless victim can find them.

As we emerged back onto the surface, Shepard turned to me. “Doctor, I want your scientific opinion on something.”

“What is it?”

“I think it’s very suspicious that we found husks here, just as we’ve been finding them on worlds attacked by the geth. We found dragon’s teeth too, just like the geth use. Not to mention that other weird artifact. All in a cavern that’s probably been sealed shut for at least a million years.” He gave me a sharp glance. “The geth have only been in existence for about three hundred years.”

I nodded. “The deduction seems inevitable. This is not geth technology. It comes from some other source.”

“The Reapers?”

“That, we do not know.” I held his gaze. “But the facts remain consistent with that hypothesis.”

He nodded in grim satisfaction.
The Villainy You Teach Me

9 April 2183, Interstellar Space

After fully recovering from my injuries on Luna, I resumed physical training on the staging deck. I liked the effect of my regular workout. Asari don’t develop heavy masses of muscle with exercise, as humans often do, but rigorous training can still improve our strength, agility, and endurance. Not since my days playing skyball at university had my physical condition been so sound.

I also added an hour per day of biotic combat drills, working with Wrex or Kaidan to sharpen our skills and teamwork. I practiced the unusual biotic feats I had learned until I could reproduce them at will: the quick *flash-step* to dodge an incoming attack, the massive *singularity* to block passage on the battlefield. I also learned how to hurl a biotic throw or warp with a mere glance and a flick of one wrist, reliably hitting targets that had already been weakened by one of my partners.

I found it pleased me to exercise my biotic skills so frequently. My biotic aptitude had always been high, even compared to other asari, but never before had I taken so much interest in its development. I had disappointed my mother’s more militant acolytes, notably my friend Shiala, when I chose to abandon my training. Now I was becoming a better huntress than ever before. Certainly far better than the awkward young maiden I had once been, wearing ill-fitting leathers and wishing I could be anywhere other than on the training ground.

Sometimes I wondered what Shiala would think, if she could see the person I had become on board the *Normandy*. I dared to hope that she would approve.

A few days after Trebin, during our biotic drills, I found myself becoming concerned about Kaidan. Usually he carried on a conversation while we practiced, but that day he had descended through terse comments into monosyllables. His normally pleasant expression had set into something bleak and pinched. I asked if anything was disturbing him, and got no response.

Eventually I decided to stop work entirely. “Kaidan, you truly don’t look well. Perhaps we should see Dr. Chakwas.”

He shook his head angrily, the first sign of real temper I had ever seen out of him. “Forget it. I’ve got this covered.”

“Well, not in combat and we’ve already practiced for a longer period than our average. If you don’t wish to see the doctor, I see no reason why we can’t rest for a few minutes.” I walked over to the cooler sitting on the floor at the edge of our practice area, pulled out a bottle of energy drink, and threw it over to him. “Here, drink this.”

He caught the bottle and scowled at me. He seemed about to object further, but then he saw the stubborn expression on my face. He gave in with a sigh, and sat down on a nearby bench. I took a bottle for myself and sat down next to him.

“Sorry,” he said at last. “I am feeling a little under the weather. A break might be good.”

I smiled and said nothing. We sat in companionable silence for a few minutes, sipping our drinks, letting the nervous energy that comes with biotic exercise drain away.

The lift opened and Shepard stepped out into the staging bay. “Kaidan! Taking a break?”

“Dr. T’Soni is making me work a little harder than usual,” said Kaidan with a shallow smile.
I caught Shepard’s eye for a moment, trying without words to convey my concern.

He made an almost imperceptible nod. “We’ve received new orders. Kaidan, have you ever heard of someone named Martin Burns?”

Kaidan frowned. “I think so. Alliance parliamentarian, isn’t he?”

“Chairman of the Subcommittee for Transhuman Affairs,” confirmed Shepard. “Liara, that’s the subcommittee of the human legislature that examines issues related to biotics and other technological methods for enhancement of human abilities.”

I nodded. I had done some research, and thought I understood the strange form of representative democracy the humans seemed to prefer.

“I remember him now,” said Kaidan, his face twisting in distaste. “Political hack, only out for his own advancement. Wasn’t there something about a bill that got killed in his committee? Reparation payments to the first-generation biotics who have suffered medical problems?”

“That’s right. Apparently some of the biotics have taken violent exception to that. They’ve abducted Mr. Burns and are holding him hostage aboard a hijacked freighter in the Farinata system. Which happens to be just a few hours away if we divert from our patrol route.”

Kaidan looked grim. “Not exactly the best way to win acceptance for your cause.”

“No. We’ve been ordered to intercept the Ontario and resolve the situation, any way we can. I’m going to want your help.”

“I understand, Commander. I’ll be ready.”

“I know you will.” Shepard put a hand on Kaidan’s shoulder for a moment, and then turned to go.

After Shepard left, Kaidan sat on the bench, the energy drink forgotten in his hand. He seemed almost dejected.

“Kaidan?” I asked gently.

“I think we’re done for the day, Liara. I’d better get back to work.”

“All right, Kaidan.”

I went to follow Shepard. I caught up with him at the door to his quarters. He smiled, invited me inside, and sat down behind his desk.

“I’m worried about Kaidan,” I began.

He sat back and steepled his fingers, waiting for more.

“While we were practicing, he seemed to be in pain. He also had a strong reaction to your news about our new orders. I’m not sure he is well.”

“He’s fine, Liara.” Shepard’s face was expressionless, giving nothing away. “I think you should drop this line of inquiry.”

I blinked, surprised at his coldness. “Shepard, Kaidan is a friend. I want to help if I can.”

He frowned, thinking it over, but then his expression softened slightly. “I’m sorry, Liara. I suppose
that’s fair. He’s my friend too, and you may have noticed he’s a very reserved person . . . but I don’t think he would mind if I explained this to you. Just make sure what we talk about doesn’t leave this room.”

“I understand.”

“There’s nothing we can do to help Kaidan.” He tapped at the back of his skull. “It’s his implant.”

“I see. I’m sorry, I know very little about the implants human biotics use. We asari have no need for such technology.”

“I imagine it helps that you’ve evolved to use biotics naturally. It’s not so easy for us humans. Our biotics have to have cybernetic implants installed in the brain and upper spine, about when they reach puberty. The implants regulate the nerve impulses that trigger the mass effect. Otherwise most of them couldn’t lift a feather, much less use biotics effectively in combat.”

“This technology is dangerous?”

“All time you mess around with the core nervous system, yes, it’s risky. They’ve got most of the bugs worked out these days, but the first generation of human biotics got the experimental L2 implants. Like Kaidan.”

“Kaidan was one of the first?”

“That’s right. You won’t meet many human biotics older than he is.” Shepard leaned forward. “Now, as I understand it the L2 implants are pretty powerful – they spike high and give the user almost asari levels of energy output. But we humans didn’t understand neural implant technology very well back then. A lot of the L2 biotics ended up with neurological problems: severe pain, psychological complications from chemical imbalances in the brain, sometimes cerebral hemorrhages.”

My eyes widened with shock. “That’s terrible. I’ve been impressed with Kaidan’s biotic abilities, but I had no idea he paid such a high price for them.”

“He actually considers himself lucky. From what he tells me, he just gets these really amazing headaches, with a lot of sensitivity to light and loud noises.”

“That must make combat difficult.”

“He toughs it out,” Shepard said simply.

“I take it younger human biotics do not have the same difficulty?”

“No. After a few years we developed a better approach to the implant technology. Not as powerful, but a lot more stable and safe to use. Most human biotics today have the L3 implants, or something even more advanced.”

“Could Kaidan not have his implants replaced?”

“He has the option, but he prefers to remain as he is. The operation is risky. It’s dangerous to just replace something that’s been integrated with your core brain functions for years. The headaches don’t cripple him, and he finds the extra power the L2 gives him is useful, so he lives with it.”

A connection formed in my mind. “Kaidan is one of the people who might have benefited from this proposed law in your legislature, isn’t he?”
Shepard nodded. “That’s right.”

“Are you certain you can rely on him for this mission?”

“Absolutely,” he said decisively. “Liara, being a leader requires knowing when you can trust your subordinates. I know Kaidan better than you do. He may feel some personal involvement, but he won’t let that interfere with his duty.”

I nodded, deferring to his judgment. “May I help in any way?”

“I’ll let you know.”

9 April 2183, Farinata System Space

*Normandy* dropped out of FTL quite close to the captured freighter, the *Ontario*. Almost immediately the freighter activated its engines in full drive mode, dashing toward a nearby asteroid cluster. Faster and more maneuverable, *Normandy* moved to intercept the freighter long before it could reach cover.

Kaidan and I waited in the CIC while Shepard opened negotiations.

“*Ontario*, this is Commander Shepard of the Alliance warship *Normandy*. You are ordered to cut your drives and prepare to be boarded.”

Silence from the fleeing freighter.

“*Ontario*, if you do not cut your drives I am prepared to fire upon your vessel. I am aware that you have a hostage on board. You should be aware that Alliance policy does not permit me to take that fact into consideration. I will disable your engines, and if you continue to refuse cooperation I will use deadly force. However, if you are willing to open negotiations, I have someone on hand ready to talk to you.”

Silence . . . and then a voice came over the radio connection, male human, heavy with strain.

“*Normandy*, there will be no negotiations under threat. Back off now or we will kill the hostage.”

Shepard’s voice, on the other hand, was calm and very cold. “That would leave you nothing with which to bargain. Don’t make any decisions you’ll regret afterwards. However briefly.”

Shocked, I stared at him for a moment and saw nothing to make me doubt that he was serious.

After a long moment Shepard spoke again, clearly for the benefit of the other ship. “Lieutenant Moreau, target the *Ontario*’s primary drive.”

“Wait! You leave us adrift, we’ll die in that asteroid cluster!”

“You should have thought of that before you decided to become terrorists.”

The other ship didn’t respond, but its icon on the situation map changed color, indicating that it was no longer under power.

“Good choice, *Ontario*. Are you prepared to talk to our negotiator now?”

“. . . All right, put him on.”

Shepard nodded to Kaidan.
Ontario, this is Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko. I’ve been assigned to negotiate. What is your situation? Do you need food, fuel, or any other supplies?”

There was a long silence. “Lieutenant, we are well-supplied for the moment.”

“Good. What are your demands for release of your hostage?”

The voice fell into a cadence, obviously reading from a prepared script. “We demand the Alliance Parliament immediately pass a bill authorizing the payment of reparations to all biotics suffering harmful side-effects and medical conditions as a result of their L2 implants. These reparations must be sufficient to cover the costs of removing L2 implants, or replacing them with L3 or more advanced models, free of charge to any biotic who wants to undergo such a procedure. We also want amnesty for everyone on board the Ontario, and a guarantee that we can leave Alliance space without pursuit.”

Kaidan glanced at Shepard, who nodded and held up three fingers.

“Ontario, I’m sure you realize that it won’t be easy to get the Alliance Parliament to do anything. We can talk about ways to get the issue more public attention and put some pressure on Parliament to move on the issue. We can talk about arranging amnesty and safe-conduct. But none of that is going to happen while you’re holding Chairman Burns hostage.”

“None of it is going to happen if we let him go, either,” said the voice. “Send letters and do protest marches and nobody listens to you. The only way to get anyone to take you seriously is to hold a gun to some privileged idiot’s head.”

“Let’s try this, Ontario. Can we have some proof that Chairman Burns is alive and in good condition?”

“Sure, Lieutenant.”

A new holographic display appeared before us. At first we saw a male human face, deep brown eyes, light brown complexion, beard stubble on cheeks and chin, scowling with anger and frustration. Then the viewpoint swooped downward, and we saw Martin Burns kneeling on the deck, hands behind his neck, a heavy pistol leveled at his head.

“The Chairman’s fine for right now,” said the hostage-taker. “We haven’t been treating him badly, and he’s in good health. That can change at a moment’s notice.”

“Thank you, Ontario. I’ll need a few minutes to consult with my commander.” Kaidan made a throat-cutting gesture, looking suddenly very pale and afraid.

Shepard cut off the radio link. “What’s wrong, Kaidan?”

Kaidan leaned forward and worked with the haptic keyboard in front of him. The video transmission from the Ontario froze, and then moved backward until we were once again looking at the first glimpse of the hostage-takers and Chairman Burns. Then the computer focused on the leader’s face. Kaidan nodded grimly.

“I know him,” he said. “His name is Miguel Rodriguez. He was in biotic training with me back in 2168 and 2169, just before the BAaT program was shut down.”

“How well do you know him? Do you think he would remember you?”

“Not well. He was a few years younger. We didn’t have much to do with each other. But I suspect
he would remember me.” Kaidan gave Shepard a significant glance, clearly reminding him of something the two of them had shared.

Shepard nodded. “Let’s see if he would be willing to go for face-to-face talks. We could go in and assess the situation . . .”

Kaidan broke in. “Sir, with all due respect, you have no business going over to the Ontario.”

Shepard opened his mouth to issue a retort, thought better of it, nodded. “Right. The negotiator goes in but the commander stays out of reach. By the book.”

“By the book,” Kaidan agreed.

“Would it help if I went in as well?” I asked.

Both of them stared at me. After a moment Kaidan nodded reluctantly. “Commander, she won’t appear threatening, but if this thing goes sour they won’t be expecting anyone with her level of biotic talent. Not to mention some of the L2s hold asari in a lot of respect. It’s worth a try.”

Shepard looked very unhappy, but in the end he nodded agreement. “Take care of her, Lieutenant.”

“We will take care of each other,” I said firmly.

Kaidan and I went across the boarding tube, meeting some of the human biotics in the airlock of the Ontario. We were searched for weapons, but we had deliberately gone in unarmed, wearing only light armor. While Kaidan was being searched I took the opportunity to evaluate the extremists. Only four had come to meet us, two to search while two held their weapons on us. There were three men and one woman, and if I was any judge of human ages they were all relatively young. All of them looked angry and frightened.

We met the group’s leaders in a half-empty cargo hold, with Chairman Burns nowhere to be seen. Rodriguez was clearly in charge. “What’s with the asari, Lieutenant?”

Kaidan stepped forward. “She’s a member of our crew, and at least somewhat sympathetic. Consider her my assistant . . . Miguel.”

Rodriguez did a double-take. “How do you know my name?”

“I was at Jump Zero with you. You may not remember me very well.”

“I don’t remember you at all.”

“I’m sure you remember what got Brain Camp shut down finally.”

“Yeah, that turian instructor who got in a fight with one of the students and ended up getting killed . . . holy shit. That was you?”

“I’m not proud of it, but yeah.”

“You should be proud of it. Turian bastards killed a few of us. Does your Commander Shepard know?”

Kaidan nodded. “He knows.”

“And yet he sent you in here anyway. Hmm.”
“Listen, the commander may sound like a hard-ass, and it’s true there’s only so far you can push him . . . but my being here should tell you he’s not unreasonable. You know your demands aren’t going to be met in full. You’ve actually done yourself a lot of harm by acting like a bunch of terrorists. But it’s not too late to make things right and make at least some progress toward what you want.”

“Kaidan, is it?”

“That’s right.”

Rodriguez shook his head. “Look, Kaidan, we tried everything. Public relations campaigns, lobbying, protests, none of it worked. You know how most of humanity looks at us. To them we’re unnatural, dangerous monsters. We keep suffering and dying, because we’re not really people to those bastards back home. Burns could spit in our faces and get ten points in the polls in the next round of elections.”

“Have you asked him?” I inquired.

Both of them looked at me.

“Asked who?” demanded Rodriguez.

“Chairman Burns. He’s been in your company for several days. Have you taken the opportunity to speak to him?”

“There’s no reason. We already know what he would say.”

“Are you sure?” I challenged him. “At the time when he took the action in Parliament you disapprove of, he had never met any of you. Now he has. Perhaps he now has more reason to despise you, but perhaps not. Why not ask him?”

Kaidan nodded. “That’s not a bad idea, Miguel. What have you got to lose?”

Rodriguez narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “You two are both biotics. Blue there probably packs quite a punch. You planning some sort of lame rescue attempt?”

Kaidan raised both hands in a pacifying gesture. “You have my word, Miguel. As long as no one tries to kill Burns, we would rather talk this out.”

I nodded in agreement.

“All right. I’ll admit I haven’t had much time to talk to him. Didn’t see any point anyway.” He turned to one of his partners. “Yevgeni, keep Burns in cuffs but bring him out here.”

While we waited, I whispered to Kaidan. “You killed one of your biotic instructors?”

“Hmm. It’s a long story, Liara, and we don’t have time right now. Let’s just say the mistakes the Alliance made with us didn’t end with badly designed neural implants.”

“I understand,” I said, and left it at that. Enough prying, Liara, he’ll tell you more if he wants to.

Burns arrived in restraints, guarded by “Yevgeni” and two more of his captors. He had a harried look but did not appear to be ill-treated. He was clean and well-fed.

Rodriguez made introductions. “Burns, this is Kaidan Alenko, one of the Alliance team who’s been sent to rescue you. You may remember the name, if you’ve bothered to educate yourself at all about the issues that come before your committee. The asari . . . sorry, miss, I didn’t catch your name.”
“Dr. Liara T’Soni,” I supplied.

“There you go. She’s with Lieutenant Alenko. They’ve suggested we bring you into these discussions, although I can’t imagine what good it will do.”

Burns’s voice was rough from disuse. “Thank you.”

“So, Burns, what have you got to say for yourself? Here’s your chance to beg for your freedom, so you can go back and demonstrate your fiscal responsibility some more. What’s a few hundred human lives that have already been destroyed by Alliance policies?”

Burns slowly shook his head. “No.”

Rodriguez blinked. “What do you mean, no?”

Burns stood up straight. “First off, no, I won’t beg for my freedom. Second, no, I don’t think I want to stand in the way of reparations anymore.”

All of the human biotics stared at him, including Kaidan.

“Look, I won’t deny I took the job as subcommittee chairman to further my political ambitions. It’s what you have to do in Parliament, if you ever want to work your way up through the system. Knowing anything about the issues that come before your committee is optional.” He sighed. “When the reparations bill came before the committee, it seemed like an easy decision. Biotics aren’t popular, and spending Alliance funds on any kind of reparations isn’t popular. Why not save a few hundred million credits?”

“Bullshit!” shouted Rodriguez, enraged. Suddenly he was standing inches away from Burns, staring the politician in the eyes.

Kaidan moved, beginning a gesture to bring up his biotic power, and that set off a chain reaction. Weapons were leveled all around the cargo bay, Kaidan had a blue halo around his shoulders and hands, and even I had light streaming from a clenched right fist. Thank the Goddess it stopped there. Rodriguez had not drawn his sidearm. Still staring at Burns, he made an impatient gesture and all of us eased away from the precipice.

“The Alliance created us!” Rodriguez growled in the politician’s face. “Exposed us to eezo in the first place. Took us away from our homes, our families. Handed us over to Conatix. Shipped us out to Jump Zero so no one would have to pay attention to what was done to us. Jammed these half-assed pieces of junk into our brains, never mind the side effects that would last the rest of our lives. And then when we weren’t making progress fast enough, they called in turians – turians, Burns, aliens who hated us and were killing other humans on the battlefield just a few years before. And then those turians started killing us. The Alliance did all this to us, quite coldly and deliberately killed some of us, made sure the rest would never have any chance at a normal life, and now we’re worthless parasites who don’t deserve reparations?”

Burns was silent.

“I’ve got a little sister, Burns, did you know that? She’s fourteen years old, pretty and cheerful and one hell of a lot smarter than me . . . and she’s a biotic too. I will die before I watch the Alliance treat her the way it treated me. The way it treated all of us in the first generation.” Rodriguez shook his head in weary disgust. “The reparations are a down payment on justice for us, but they’re also a promise that kids like my sister won’t ever have to go through what we suffered. A promise that the Alliance will start treating biotics like human beings, with decency and respect. Do you get that? Do
you get any of it?”

All eyes were on Burns, who simply nodded and said, “You’re right.”

“What?”

“You’re right.” Burns tried to gesture, forgetting the restraints for a moment, and grimaced as they pulled on his wrists. “I made the decision without bothering to learn the facts. I didn’t stop to consider the human cost. I didn’t consider the people who would be affected. It was a grossly unjust decision. I would like the chance to make it right.”

“I don’t believe you. You won’t sacrifice your political career for the likes of us.”

“I think I’m going to have to,” said Burns. “Mr. Rodriguez, at some point in any politician’s career he has to ask himself one question: am I in politics to serve the people, or only to serve my own ambition? Being abducted isn’t how I would have chosen to get to this point, but being here with you, watching you, seeing you as human beings for the first time . . . I think it’s time for me to me to ask myself that question. I’m the one who has to live with myself after I answer it.”

Kaidan cleared his throat. “Miguel, if you want justice done, you need Burns. He can get you what you want. Kill him and justice won’t matter anymore. Whoever replaces him will never move on the issue.”

Rodriguez stood silent for a long time. He looked around the room at his compatriots, reading their faces. I did the same. A few still seemed hostile, but most of them looked thoughtful.

“All right,” he said finally. “This is probably a mistake, Burns, and I still don’t trust you any further than I can throw you, but maybe this is a real change of heart.”

“It is,” said Burns. “I swear to you, when I get back to Arcturus I will re-open the reparations question and do everything in my power to see a bill passed.”

“Take the cuffs off him.” Rodriguez turned to us. “He’s yours. Now what happens to us?”

Kaidan sighed. “Miguel, you know the Alliance can’t afford to just let you and your people go. There are millions of people back on Earth with grievances. If we show them that all they have to do is pick up a gun and grab hostages to get what they want . . .”

“Yeah. On the other hand, I don’t think you want seventeen angry biotics on board your ship. Alliance frigate, right? Maybe forty crew? You have a secure brig large enough for all of us? Enough guards to keep us locked up if we decide we don’t want to be?”

Kaidan said nothing, exercising his poker face.

“Right.” Rodriguez sighed, bracing his shoulders as if taking up a heavy weight. “I’ll turn myself in and let the Alliance throw the book at me. The Alliance can say they’ve dealt with terrorists, and parade me around for the cameras. Let the rest of my people go. They’ll leave Alliance space, go into hiding, and stay quiet.”

For a moment I envisioned him standing next to Shepard, and realized how similar they were. That is what human leadership looks like, I realized.

“I would support such a solution,” said Burns quietly.

“If your people will renounce violence, there are worlds within asari space that might welcome
them,” I suggested. “I have contacts that might be useful.”

“That would work,” said Rodriguez. “None of us are violent by nature, just angry and desperate.”

“All right, let me contact my commander and see if we can make this work,” said Kaidan.

On the way back to the Normandy, Chairman Burns walked ahead of us down the boarding tube. Rodriguez followed us, disarmed and ready to go into custody. Kaidan leaned close and whispered, “Thanks for coming, Liara. You were a big help.”

I looked at him: calm, quiet, unassuming, perhaps a little stolid. He had no ambition to command, and he would never share Shepard’s exuberance or self-confidence. Yet in many ways he served as the rock upon which our team was built. A man to hold in deep respect.

“For you, Kaidan, I would gladly do anything,” I told him, and I meant it.
Hell's Hound

While *Normandy* ranged further out into the galactic wilds, I spent my time working on a research paper, possibly the most important paper I have ever written.

It opened as a survey of available evidence for the time, speed, and nature of the Prothean extinction. This part carried no controversy. The galactic scientific community had long since reached consensus on these issues. The extinction occurred about fifty thousand years before the present, it took place over a period of less than five hundred years, and it involved such intense and widespread violence that only tiny fragments of Prothean remains had ever been recovered in our time.

Controversy began in the next section. There I surveyed the hypotheses current in the scientific community regarding the *cause* of the Prothean extinction, and demonstrated that *none of these hypotheses fit the available evidence*.

Most experts at the time believed that the Protheans destroyed themselves in a galaxy-wide civil war. In my paper I argued at length that no mere civil war could have destroyed *every last Prothean everywhere in the galaxy*, so quickly and so completely that not even physical remains survived. I demonstrated that no other known civilization ever managed such a feat. Even historical cultures known to have destroyed themselves, usually through nuclear conflict or environmental mismanagement, always left behind plenty of physical remains.

I also made an argument based on the science of *hoplology*, which uses mathematical and statistical methods to study warfare. I asserted that civil war is inherently self-limiting. As any population fighting a civil war decreases in size, it also loses its ability to continue fighting, and this effect can be described mathematically. It is therefore not hard to prove that civil warfare *always* leaves behind a remnant population capable of recovery. Again I produced multiple examples from galactic history to bolster the argument. So far as we knew, the Protheans had left behind no remnant population. Therefore civil war could not have been the primary cause of their extinction.

Another common hypothesis attributed the Prothean extinction to a galaxy-wide natural disaster. Candidates for such a catastrophe included a brief period of explosive activity in the galactic core, a truly massive gamma-ray burster that sterilized the entire galactic disc, and so on. I had no trouble at all refuting this hypothesis. I drew on astronomical and geological research to show that there existed no physical evidence for any such event at the right time. I also demonstrated that no such disaster could have destroyed all physical remains of the Prothean species. Finally, any natural disaster capable of destroying the advanced Prothean civilization would also have eradicated all of *our own* ancestors. Since we lived to argue about the subject, no such natural disaster could have occurred.

A third and final hypothesis, championed by the turian archaeologist Milon Asterius, introduced the possibility of *synthetic hunter-killers*. Asterius imagined *machines*, programmed to systematically search out and destroy Protheans wherever they tried to hide. I had to handle this last hypothesis with care, because I had come to suspect it brushed very close to the truth.

In my paper, I agreed that synthetics could have been programmed to eradicate the Prothean species, even down to the destruction of all physical remains. However, I disagreed with Asterius regarding the *origins* of those murderous machines. Asterius proposed that the Protheans built their own destroyers, possibly as a weapon in their putative civil war, and that the hunter-killers in turn became extinct once the Protheans were gone. To oppose this idea, I reviewed the evidence for pre-Prothean civilizations which had also become abruptly extinct. I argued that if an extinction cycle existed and predated the Protheans, its cause could not have originated with them. I also pointed out that if the murderous synthetics had also become extinct, we would today have evidence for *their* physical
remains.

I concluded the paper by proposing a modification of the Asterius hypothesis: Some unknown party created hunter-killer synthetics at some point in the distant past, at least one million years ago and possibly long before that. These synthetics bore responsibility for the abrupt extinction of a number of galactic civilizations, most recently the Protheans. We had good reason to believe they had survived the Protheans and still existed in some form. I strongly suggested, but stopped short of explicitly stating, that they might come back.

I presented evidence, citing the so-called “Leviathan of Dis,” the aeons-old war that had scarred the surface of the planet Klendagon, the destruction of ancient civilizations on the planets Etamis and Joab, and most notably the recent find on Trebin. I made several carefully worded predictions that could be supported or falsified by new evidence. I concluded by calling for the scientific community to seek out further confirmation.

I finally completed the paper a few days after our mission to rescue Martin Burns, under an innocuous title: A Survey of Competing Hypotheses for the Cause of the Prothean Extinction. It first appeared in the April 2183 edition of Transactions of the Society for Prothean Studies. At Shepard’s suggestion I also forwarded it to Acta Militaris, the leading journal of the Systems Alliance War College at Arcturus.

Let the record state that I was the first. Tali discovered the truth, ripping it from a geth memory core. Shepard brought the truth to the attention of the galaxy’s leaders in a closed Council session. I was the first to frame the truth in objective, scientific terms. I was the first to bring the Reaper hypothesis to the attention of the galaxy as a whole.

That one paper counts as the second greatest scientific achievement of my life. Years later it was to win me the T’Sarien, Praxis, and Nobel awards.

At the time, of course, almost no one paid it any attention. In most of Citadel Space the paper was ignored, at least until the Reapers arrived three years later to provide conclusive supporting evidence. Fortunately for all of us, my paper did receive closer consideration in human space, especially among certain members of the Alliance Admiralty.

As I soon discovered, another human group was also paying very close attention to my work.

17 April 2183, Yangtze System Space

Shepard rarely used the ship’s conference room, preferring instead to meet with all of us while “doing the rounds” of the ship each day. Still, there were few alternatives on the Normandy for large meetings, or if Shepard needed to communicate with the Council. On this occasion all of his closest associates attended: Kaidan, Lieutenants Adams and Pressley, Ashley, Garrus, Tali, Wrex, and me.

“What we discuss today is not to leave this room,” said Shepard once we had all seated ourselves. “We have a mission to carry out, not from the Alliance, but under my authority as a Spectre. The mission is highly sensitive and we have very little margin for error.”

I glanced around the room. All of the humans looked very sober, not accustomed to their commander in this mood. Garrus watched Shepard with fierce attention. Tali’s face remained unreadable, but she too seemed very focused. Only Wrex appeared overcome with ennui.

“We have approached Binthu, second planet in the Yangtze star system, in the Voyager Cluster,” said Shepard. “Lieutenant Pressley, our position and status?”
The navigator stirred in his chair. “We’ve taken up a position in the L2 Lagrange point of Binthu’s only moon. Drives in standby mode and stealth systems up. We should be invisible from the planet’s surface, and very difficult to spot for any ships approaching or departing the planet.”

Shepard turned to Adams. “How long can we keep stealth systems up?”

“Heat sinks are in good order,” said the engineer. “We can stay in drift mode for about eighty hours before we have to vent. Quite a bit less if we maneuver.”

“Relay probes?”

“All three in orbit around the moon. We have complete coverage of the planet.”

“Excuse me, Commander,” I interrupted. “Clearly we are taking extraordinary care not to be detected as we approach this planet. As I recall, Binthu is uninhabitable and almost completely unexplored. Do we have reason to believe there is someone here?”

“Yes, we do.” Shepard tapped at his omni-tool and used the conference room’s holo-projectors to display a geophysical map of Binthu.

I saw a rather dull world, smaller than the usual terrestrial planet, with little geologic activity and no sign of native life. Carbon dioxide dominated the atmosphere, with chlorine and sulfur compounds in the mix. I noted a few small seas, horribly toxic with acids and salts. The wide continents had no mountain ranges, covered instead with low rolling hills and wide plains. Fierce chemical weathering probably wore any mountains down in mere millions of years.

Shepard zoomed in on a specific area of the largest continent, close to the planet’s equator. Map symbols bloomed like red flowers: radio and microwave transmissions, neutrino emissions from a fusion power plant, and signs of metal and ceramic materials. I glanced at the scale, and felt my eyes widen a little in surprise. An extensive facility, or set of facilities, had been built on and under Binthu’s surface.

“We’ve seen pirates and slavers before, working out of prefab habitats on hostile worlds. This is on a completely different scale. There are probably hundreds of people down there, and I think we can assume that the place is well-defended.”

“So who is it, do we know?” asked Garrus.

“We believe the facility belongs to a rogue human group named Cerberus.”

The name meant nothing to me at the time, but Garrus sat up a little straighter in his chair.

“Terrorists.”

“Not just terrorists.” Shepard abolished the holographic map and stepped out into the center of the conference room. “Cerberus is a low-key organization, and it seems to place a very high value on secrecy and discretion. The Alliance can’t even be sure how long the organization has been in existence. There’s evidence that it’s been active almost as far back as the First Contact War. Although we’re fairly certain that Cerberus has been behind certain incidents of sabotage or political murder, it’s difficult to attribute any given event to them. They don’t announce their involvement or ‘take credit’ for violent incidents. Nor do they overtly work to push a specific political agenda in human space. They seem to have . . . much larger goals.”

Garrus nodded. “We got briefings on Cerberus while I was in C-Sec. A little thin. Not much more than watch out for these guys, they’re bad news.”
“The Alliance has recently been carrying out an inquiry into Cerberus. In fact, we took part in that inquiry when we investigated the disappearance of Alliance troops on Edolus. This was just after you joined us, Liara, and you didn’t come along on that mission.”

I nodded, remembering the incident. Someone had lured the missing Marines to their deaths in a thresher maw’s nest. At the time Shepard had been unable to determine who was behind the ambush.

Shepard continued. “We reported our results to Rear Admiral Kahoku back on the Citadel. The admiral disappeared without a trace a few days later. The investigation into Cerberus has been in disarray ever since.”

“They’re covering their tracks,” said Garrus.

“Very likely. I’ve spoken privately to Admiral Hackett on this subject. He told me there’s evidence of Cerberus infiltration at very high levels of the Alliance, both in the military and the civilian government. The Admiral has given me no orders regarding Cerberus . . . but on my authority as a Spectre, I decided some time ago to investigate them independently if an opportunity presented itself. Now it has.”

“What are your orders, sir?” asked Kaidan calmly.

“We loiter here for the next few hours and gather more SIGINT. Unless we can verify the facility is not Cerberus and it has a legitimate reason for being here, I will lead a team down in the Mako. Kaidan, you will remain on board the Normandy and prepare to deliver additional ground support. We will perform reconnaissance and infiltration to gather more intelligence. If it seems appropriate, we will mount an assault on the facility and destroy it.”

Kaidan nodded.

“Six hours,” Shepard concluded. “Everyone get some rest and get ready.”

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17 April 2183, Cadmus Station/Binthu

Normandy deposited us just over the horizon from the unknown facility, a line of low hills between us and our target. As usual, Shepard drove the Mako, while Ashley ran the weapons systems, I took the EWS console, and Garrus, Tali, and Wrex waited in the expanded passenger compartment.

What I could see of Binthu appeared thoroughly unpleasant. A light rain fell, my instruments reading it as a weak solution of sulfuric acid. I worried for the integrity of the Mako, and of our suits if we had to go outdoors for any length of time. Clays made up most of the surface, covered by deposits of salt and sulfur compounds, a very friable composite easily broken up and scattered by the Mako’s wheels. Shepard had to drive very slowly, careful not to sink into soft or moist ground.

“Hey, Shepard. I kind of like this place,” observed Wrex. “Reminds me of stories my family used to tell about fighting the rachni back in the good old days. Wouldn’t it be a kick in the quad if we came across a few of those here? You know, now that they’re out and about again.”

“I doubt it, Wrex.” Shepard glanced over his shoulder. “We’re a long way from Noveria.”

“You never know. They get around,” said the krogan darkly.

“Liara, any sign of active sensors?” asked Shepard.

“There’s definitely active radar in operation up ahead, but it’s configured to watch the sky. Signal
strength here on the ground isn’t nearly enough to detect us.”

We climbed up the low range of hills, stopping behind the ridgeline where the facility still had no line of sight to us. Then we sealed our suits, emerged from the Mako, and moved on foot up to the closest vantage point.

Through binoculars the nearest part of the facility bulked very low, a one-story structure sheathed in thick ceramic against the acidity of the environment. Most of the facility had to be located underground. For the first time I saw the symbol Cerberus had chosen for itself, painted on the outer wall of the structure: a tall, narrow hexagon with two sidebars, all in black and gold against a white background.

“Tali, what kind of security do they have?” asked Shepard.

The quarian worked with her omni-tool. “Short-range radar and exterior cameras to cover the approaches. Rocket turrets too. No way to get to the entrance on foot . . . unless . . .”

“What is it?”

“This rain has got to be hard on exposed electronics. Anything that moves, like a camera or a radar antenna, can’t be completely sealed against this kind of environment. They must be accustomed to minor breakdowns. I could send a drone down to overload some of the circuits, just enough to open a gap in their sensor coverage for a few minutes. That would give us time to infiltrate.”

“Do it.”

Tali reached into a pocket and produced a small device. She interfaced with it through her omni-tool for a few moments before releasing it into the air. It zoomed away down-slope, staying close to the ground as it flew. “Go get them, Chiktikka,” she murmured.

I caught Shepard’s eye through his visor, and saw him smiling in amusement for just a moment.

We waited for several tense minutes, staying behind the ridgeline while Tali monitored her drone’s progress and issued commands through her omni-tool. Finally she nodded in satisfaction. “That’s done it. There’s a blind spot in their coverage, wide enough for us to reach this side entrance on foot.”

Icons appeared on each of our HUD displays: the entrance Tali had designated and a path across the open terrain.

“All right, everyone stay sharp,” Shepard commanded. “We’re going in.”

Shepard, Ashley, and Wrex led off, descending the far slope and setting out across the open ground at a fast jog. Tali and I followed, trying to look in every direction at once. Garrus brought up the rear. I felt horribly exposed as we crossed the open terrain, expecting alarms to sound and rocket turrets to open fire at any moment. Tali had done her work well, though, and we approached the facility with no sign of any opposition. Tali began to work on the secure airlock we had chosen for our point of entry.

When Joker’s voice sounded over our helmet radios, I nearly jumped out of my skin.

“Uh, Commander, I’m suddenly picking up a lot of radio chatter out of that place.”

“Have they detected us?” demanded Shepard.
“You know, I don’t think they have. Wait one.” There was silence, then: “No, it’s not that. There’s a shuttle inbound to the facility, looks like they’re going to be landing at the far side, a couple klicks from your position.”

“Should we abort, Commander?” asked Ashley.

“No, we’re going to stick to the plan. Joker, you and Kaidan be ready to come in hot if we yell.”

“Roger that, Commander,” said the pilot.

The airlock control panel turned green. We entered into the belly of the beast.
17 April 2183, Cadmus Station/Binthu

We emerged from the airlock into a small, dimly lit staging area. Environmental suits hung in racks to either side, while cases labeled for electronic and mechanical tools rested on the floor. Apparently this airlock saw little use, mostly serving Cerberus personnel who had to go out onto the surface for repair work. Certainly we found no one there when we arrived.

Tali quickly located a surveillance camera and hacked into its control circuitry, looping an image of the empty room before our arrival. Unfortunately she found no computer or network access panel to work with. Shepard decided to risk infiltrating further, looking for an office or other workspace. He listened carefully at the main door, and then had Tali open it while he and Ash took a quick look beyond.

We moved down a short corridor, slowly and quietly, keeping close to the walls. The stark white walls had compartment numbers, labels, and the Cerberus logo painted everywhere. I decided I didn’t like the Cerberus aesthetic, much too stark and utilitarian, with no thought for beauty or ease. At least we found the labels useful. We moved away from EMERGENCY SURFACE ACCESS and toward EXTERIOR MAINTENANCE, SURFACE SECURITY, and LIFTS.

We came to a turn in the corridor. Shepard suddenly held up a fist, a signal I had learned meant stop and be quiet.

I heard a voice, human male, approaching our position.

“Damn cameras are always going out, and then we have to go out in that crap and fix them, and then they go out again. I don’t see the point. They’ve never spotted anything.”

“Orders,” said another voice, also a human male.

Shepard caught Ash’s eye, pointed to his eyes, held up two fingers, drew his hand across his throat. Ash gave a thumb-up gesture.

“Orders,” said the first voice. “We’re out on the ass-end of the galaxy, sitting on a planet nobody could possibly want. Nobody ever comes here.”

Two humans appeared around the bend in the corridor. They had just enough time to widen their eyes before Shepard and Ash uncoiled and struck with brutal violence.

“There’s irony, if you want some,” murmured Garrus.

“Wrex, Garrus. Get these two down to the staging area where we came in, and push them through the airlock,” Shepard ordered quietly.

“Shepard!” I objected, but Garrus and Wrex had already begun to obey.

“They’re already dead, Liara. If they have tracers on them, I want those tracers showing up outside.”

I set my jaw and nodded. They weren’t unarmed and helpless, I told myself. All they had to do was sound an alarm. Don’t be too fastidious when you’re surrounded by people who will gladly kill you if given the chance.
We turned the corner and moved further down the corridor, approaching EXTERIOR MAINTENANCE. Once again Shepard stopped us. Then he and Ash moved forward like heavily armored ghosts, crouching below a transparent panel set into about ten meters of the corridor wall. They reached a door, took up positions on either side, and then leaped through as it opened.

Moments later, Ash reappeared in the corridor, waving us onward.

I stepped into an electronics and machine shop, currently occupied by two dead technicians, apparently not a very busy place even when living personnel manned it. I saw half-empty coffee mugs, an ashtray containing several dead cigarettes, and evidence of a card game abandoned in mid-play.

Shepard set Ash to watch the corridor, with orders to have Garrus and Wrex join her once they returned from their errand. Tali and I located a computer and began breaking into the facility’s network. Let me correct that: Tali began breaking into the facility’s network, while I watched and made the occasional helpful comment. Once again I was amazed at the quarian’s cyberwarfare skills.

“Hmm. Cerberus is actually somewhat competent when it comes to network defense,” she observed after a time. “This network is air-gapped from the main administrative and operational networks.”

“What can we tell about what they’re doing here?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. They’ve been doing maintenance on a lot of equipment I don’t recognize.”

I leaned close, watching the data scroll past on the screen. “I do. Most of it has to do with genome sequencing, genetic engineering, nanotechnology, and cybernetic enhancement. This must be a research facility.”

“Not what one might expect from a terrorist group,” observed Shepard.

“It does remind me of what we saw on Noveria.”

He grunted, his expression thoughtful.

“Saren wanted to raise the rachni as an army,” said Tali. “Is that what Cerberus is after too?”

“It would make sense,” Shepard said slowly. “What little we know about them says they’re not seeking simple political change within the Alliance, like an ordinary terrorist group. They’re human supremacists, seeking human domination over the galaxy as a whole.”

I frowned. “What arrogance. Humans have been members of galactic society for less than thirty years. Admittedly your people have made a great deal of progress in a short time, but to think of ruling the galaxy?”

“You’ll get no argument from me. More important is what they’re trying to accomplish here. I think Tali is right. They’re looking for ways to build or improve a military capability.”

“Assuming that’s so, what are your orders?”

He grinned. “We shut this place down.”

“How?”

“Still working on that. Tali, what more can you get from the maintenance network?”

Tali looked up. We could hear but not see her smile. “How about a map of the entire facility?”
We soon had Tali’s map loaded onto all of our omni-tools. Cerberus apparently called their Binthu facility **Cadmus Station**, a reference I found obscure. Three sub-facilities each housed about a hundred personnel: scientists, technicians, armed guards, and administrators. They rested several kilometers apart, connected by tramways, rather like the labs on Noveria. Each of them apparently supported a different research project. Presumably Cerberus saw the same need to contain each project if it got out of hand.

Shepard wanted to get closer to the working area of our facility, to see for himself what work was being done. That would normally have required the use of a secure lift, carrying a very high risk of detection. Instead Tali located a maintenance access running parallel to the lift shaft. If we could reach that, we would be able to climb down and emerge very close to an observation platform above the main research area.

We moved back out into the corridors, Tali continuing to hack surveillance systems as we went. Twice we had to stop while Cerberus personnel used the corridor ahead of us, but none of them noticed our presence. Soon we paused a few meters from the main lifts, around a corner where we would not easily be seen. Shepard opened an access panel, exposing the maintenance shaft.

Wrex pushed forward and looked down the shaft. “Better let me go first,” he muttered. “Krogan are no good at heights, and if I fall you don’t want anyone below me.”

Shepard nodded. “Wait at the bottom until Ash and I get there.”

“Yes.” Somehow the krogan folded himself into the small opening and began his descent.

The climb down covered less than twenty meters. None of us had serious difficulty, although I could hear Tali muttering fearfully to herself as she swung out onto the ladder. Wrex and Shepard had to crowd together once they reached the floor of the narrow shaft. Wrex grumbled in irritation, but became silent after a sharp glance from Shepard, who listened carefully at the access panel before slowly easing it aside.

One by one, we emerged onto a darkened observation platform.

We found ourselves on a flat ring platform, about three meters wide with an inner diameter of about thirty meters, placed around and above a large work area that we could not see from our point of entry. The main lift opened out onto the platform not far away to our right. Two ramps connected to the platform, one hundred and twenty degrees away from the lift on either side, leading down to the work area about ten meters below. The platform had a chest-high railing wall of steel and ceramic, but above that a thick transparent partition stretched almost to the chamber’s roof. A few computer terminals stood around the inner edge of the platform, all of them currently inactive. We had the dimly lit platform to ourselves. I guessed most of the Cerberus scientists and technicians took the lift straight down to the work floor, rarely using the platform.

We moved silently up to the inner edge and peeked over the wall to see what was in the work area below.

Wrex made a disgusted sound. “I **told** you,” he growled, just loud enough for Shepard to hear.

The work area contained a set of laboratories, arranged radially from the center, each with its own team of scientists and its own equipment. I counted at least thirty workers on the floor. Around the outside of the space, set into the rock walls, we saw cages closed by kinetic barriers.

Each cage held a rachni warrior.
“All right, how did these guys get rachni?” demanded Garrus.

“Possibly from Noveria,” I suggested. “Cerberus might have infiltrated the research team there and diverted some of the rachni here for their own study.”

“Let’s move around the edge of the platform, and get away from the lift,” said Shepard. “Tali, see if you can get into one of these computer terminals, without turning on the display and giving away our position.”

He and Ash led the way around, all of us following, carefully avoiding showing ourselves above the opaque wall. The sight of Wrex creeping along the floor amused me, although I had to admit he was quite stealthy when he wanted to be. After a few moments we had broken any line-of-sight from the lift if it happened to open on our level. Tali reached one of the computer terminals on its pedestal, opened an access panel, and began to work with her omni-tool and an array of tiny electronic devices.

Not a moment too soon. Behind us we heard the lift come to life. Someone was coming down to the observation platform or the lab floor.

“Shepard, we’re in luck,” said Tali. “This terminal is connected to the administrative and research networks.”

“Good. See what intel you can pull down from their systems.” Suddenly Shepard’s face became almost preternaturally calm, his eyes steely gray, as if an inspiration had struck him. “Do you think you could release some kind of virus into their networks? Something capable of taking a specific action across all their systems when we give a command?”

“Sure. What do you want to do?”

“I want to lower every kinetic barrier in this entire station, all three facilities, at the same time.”

Tali turned to stare at him for a moment. “That’s . . . clever. Yes, I think I can do that.”

“Good. Get to work.”

The lift passed our level and kept going. I saw Ash and Garrus ease out the breath they had been holding as they watched the lift doors on our level. I lifted my head just far enough to watch the doors down on the lab floor. They opened and a party of four humans stepped out onto the lab floor.

Two uniformed security guards, faceless behind visored helmets, remained in the rear of the group. An older male, grey-haired and bearded, wore a scientist’s coat very like most of the workers already on the floor. He spoke at length to the fourth member of the group, a female human.

A very striking female human, I realized as I looked twice. She reminded me a little of Sha’ira, perhaps a little taller and more generously curved, but with the same effortless grace. She wore a bodysuit unlike anything I had seen thus far from Cerberus, pure white with black accents, closely hugging her shape. She had shoulder-length black hair, very pale complexion, features combining gamin charm with easy sensuality . . . and the coldest blue eyes I had ever seen on any human.

I watched the body language of the other humans on the lab floor. The older scientist deferred to her. Most of the other scientists and technicians avoided her gaze, as if they feared her. The armed guards positioned themselves to provide her with the greatest possible security.
That woman is obviously very important within Cerberus . . . and probably very dangerous.

I glanced over at Shepard. He looked back and nodded. He had seen her, had made his own dispassionate appraisal of her significance.

“Tali, we may not have much time,” he murmured. “How’s it going?”

“The virus is in place and spreading through their systems,” the quarian reported. “Data-mining their network is proving more difficult than I expected. Their network surveillance is very good, and I have to piggyback all my communications on hijacked administrator sessions. That slows me down a lot.”

“Keep at it, but be ready to pull out fast. I think a VIP is here, and she doesn’t look like anybody’s fool.”

Indeed, a few minutes later I saw the moment when the visitor understood something out of the ordinary was taking place. One of the technicians interrupted her conversation with the older scientist, pointing to her computer terminal, making urgent gestures, and saying something we couldn’t hear.

The woman in white opened her omni-tool and tapped at it. Suddenly her gaze speared upward, right to where we hid in the shadows far above.

Shepard reached out and gently placed a hand on the quarian’s shoulder. “Tali. Now.”

Tali triggered a control sequence on her omni-tool.

Down on the lab floor, eight kinetic barriers faded into nothingness.

Eight rachni warriors leaped out of their cages into the lab space.

Shepard and Ash immediately leaped to their feet and ran for the head of the nearest ramp, Garrus and Wrex moments behind. Tali disconnected from her terminal, and the two of us took up the rear.

I glanced down to the lab floor and immediately wished I hadn’t. Most of the Cerberus scientists were unarmed and unarmored. The rachni warriors tore through them like so much damp tissue paper. The lab floor, so clean and orderly a few moments before, now resembled an abattoir. I fought the sudden urge to retch.

Alarm klaxons blared, red lights flashed, and an enormous voice sounded. “Security alert! Loss of biological containment in habitats Alpha, Beta, and Gamma.”

Shepard, Ashley, and Wrex took up a position at the head of the ramp. Ashley and Wrex used assault rifles to wreak further chaos down on the lab floor. Shepard settled in with his sniper rifle and began to pick off Cerberus personnel who tried to escape up the ramps or into the lift. He immediately fell into what he called the zone, that state of consciousness in which he was capable of hit after flawless hit.

“Security alert! Loss of biological containment in habitats Alpha, Beta, and Gamma. Armed intruders present in habitat Alpha. Security reinforcements report to the lab floor in habitat Alpha.”

Across the open space, I heard the lift begin to move.

A high-pitched battle cry sounded from the lab floor. I looked down just in time to see the white-clad visitor blazing with blue-white light, a heavy piece of lab equipment flying through the air toward
Shepard’s position.

A biotic!

Almost without thought I called up my own corona, catching the missile and deflecting it to one side. It struck the transparent panel and shattered it, creating an enormous hole and causing a rain of shards in all directions. Shepard, Ash, and Wrex all ducked and rolled.

I leaped to my feet and prepared to hurl a bolt of telekinetic force at the Cerberus woman. Already she moved with incredible speed, faster even than Shepard at a full sprint, heading for the lift. Her two guards pointed their rifles at me and fired on full automatic.

I hastily erected a barrier and continued my movement, spinning and throwing myself to the ground again behind the observation platform’s railing. Garrus reached out a hand to pull me to safety, cursing as the last remnant of my biotic corona gave him a static shock.

Suddenly the chatter of gunfire down on the lab floor faltered. I risked a glance, just in time to see a snarl of claws and tentacles tear one of the Cerberus troopers in half. I couldn’t find the other trooper anywhere. The woman in white had also vanished, making her escape at the expense of her guards’ lives.

Two rachni had discovered the other ramp, scuttling up it with frightening speed.

“Shepard!” shouted Ash, pointing.

“I see them. Time to go, people!”

We reversed our path onto the observation platform, all stealth forgotten, running as fast as we could for the maintenance shaft. We raced the rachni to see who could reach the exit point first.

The rachni lost, but not by much.

Tali scrambled into the open access panel, all fear of heights forgotten as she fled the oncoming monsters. Ash and Garrus flung themselves inside immediately behind her, in case she encountered Cerberus at the top of the shaft.

Wrex had his shotgun out, blasting away at the rachni approaching from both directions. “Go on. I can hold them, and you still don’t want me above anyone else in that shaft.”

Shepard gave me a hot stare. I took the hint and ran for the ladder, terror lending me speed, Shepard only a few steps behind me.

I climbed as fast as I could. Below, I heard Wrex grunting as he retreated into the narrow space at the bottom. Suddenly he growled, a sound of pain and rage, and his shotgun blasted again in the confined space.

“Wrex!”

“Never mind,” shouted the krogan. “One of the bastards punched right through the partition and got me in the side. Nothing serious.”

A krogan’s idea of nothing serious would probably kill me outright.

Wrex fired again, the sound somehow more hollow. I realized that he was already on the ladder, firing his shotgun one-handed at the rachni as they crowded in beneath us. How he was climbing the
ladder one-handed was beyond me.

Suddenly I also heard gunfire above us, up where Tali and Ash had probably reached the top. It didn’t last long. Ash called, “Commander, a few Cerberus just hit us, armed only with pistols. We’ve discouraged them from coming down our corridor for now.”

I had almost reached the top when we heard another voice over the loudspeakers, female human with a lilting accent. I wondered if the voice belonged to the white-clad woman we had seen. “This is Operative Lawson. Cadmus Station has been fatally compromised. Jericho Protocol is now in effect. I repeat, Jericho Protocol is now in effect. Proceed to evacuation stations at once.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” shouted Wrex from below.

“I think we had better find our own evacuation stations,” agreed Shepard.

I climbed out of the shaft, Shepard and Wrex not far behind me. I helped Shepard to his feet. Wrex emerged on his own, a great rent in his armor leaking orange blood, although the injury didn’t seem to be slowing him very much.

I struggled to catch my breath. “Shepard, I have to ask. Jericho?”

“A famous ancient city on Earth. According to legend it was captured by its enemies after their god blasted the city walls down.”

My eyes widened.

He nodded grimly and led us at double-time down the corridor toward the Emergency Surface Access room, calling the ship as he went. “Normandy, we need immediate extraction. Come in hot, suppress any ground fire, do not land more troops.”

“Roger that,” came Joker’s voice. “The sky is alive with shuttles, Commander, all leaving in a big hurry. Want we should take any of them down?”

“Negative, Joker, we don’t have time. Just meet us on the surface for extraction ASAP.”

All of us hurried down the corridor, through the airlock, out onto the surface. We cast aside stealth and ran across the open ground. The rain had intensified since we went underground, reducing visibility, hissing as it struck the ground around us. I looked around, hoping to see the Cerberus shuttles as they fled, but I could not find them in the sky.

I suddenly thought of Wrex, a gap in his armor, toxic air in his lungs, acidic rain seeping through to the wound in his side. I stopped and turned, but I soon saw I had nothing to worry about. The krogan kept the pace as he brought up the rear, his legs still pumping like some ancient engine.

“Liara! Keep moving!”

Then Normandy swept in, firing its forward cannons to destroy the rocket turrets atop the structure behind us.

Suddenly I felt an enormous shockwave, the ground beneath us moving sharply, knocking almost all of us off our feet. I heard a roar, rocks tumbling and grinding, the sound deafening even inside my helmet. Behind us the Cerberus structure rippled, broke in half, and began to collapse in on itself.

Wrex reached down and seized me by one arm, pulling me to my feet with tremendous strength. “Come on! You may be willing to die here, but I don’t want to be stuck explaining it to Shepard
“Goddess knows we can’t have that!” I shouted. With the krogan’s support, I broke once more into a staggering run.

_Normandy_ hovered before us. Wrex and I leaped for the boarding ramp. I collapsed onto the floor of the staging bay, barely aware when the ramp closed and our ship surged into the sky.
19 April 2183, Cerberus Outpost/Nepheron

*Normandy* came in low, ejecting the Mako and then soaring off into the sky. Shepard surged power through the mass-effect core and pushed the thrusters to their limit, bringing us to a soft landing despite the short distance we had to fall. It helped that Nepheron had low density, the surface gravity unusually light for the planet’s size.

“Why can’t we ever land anywhere nice?” complained Garrus from his seat in the back. “Somewhere warm and sunny, good air, lots of green foliage, maybe a decent restaurant on our way to the gunfight.”

“All the *pleasant* planets have law-abiding citizens living on them,” said Shepard. “Cerberus seems to prefer hiding out on the crappy ones.”

Garrus had reason to grumble. Nepheron seemed only marginally more pleasant than our last stop. Admittedly its atmosphere was simply unbreathable, not actively malevolent like that of Binthu. If any of us lost suit integrity, we would have plenty of time to enjoy the beautiful geology around us before expiring.

I found the surroundings lovely, if stark. A young planet, still retaining most of its original heat, Nepheron suffered considerable tectonic instability. On every side we saw the sweeping lines of mountain ranges. Volcanoes dotted the surface; gases, dust, and molten rock broke through the thin crust, scattering multicolored ejecta across the ground like abstract paintings. Even the sky blazed with glory, all the dust and ash in the air scattering the midday sunlight in a wash of yellows, oranges, and reds.

We sought another Cerberus installation, its location garnered from intelligence data Tali had mined from the Cadmus Station networks. A smaller facility this time, but possibly more important to Cerberus: a data hub managing terrorist communications across a large portion of the galaxy. We estimated its destruction would deal Cerberus a severe setback, and in the meantime we could hope to recover even more useful intelligence about them.

“Active radar in use up ahead,” I reported. “We’ll almost certainly be detected the moment we clear that ridge-line.”

“All right, there’s no sense in playing this subtle,” said Shepard. “I’ll roll us over the ridge and then circle the installation clockwise at high speed. Kaidan, this is your show.”

“Aye-aye,” said Kaidan, cracking his knuckles and putting a few final touches on the configuration of his weapons board.

“Hull-up in three . . . two . . . one . . . *now.*”

The Mako took the ridge-line at high speed, soaring into the air as the ground fell away beneath our wheels. Shepard pulsed the thrusters as well, keeping us in the air for a long moment, the vehicle slowly tipping forward so that our weapons came to bear on the Cerberus installation ahead of and below us.

“Rockets!” I snapped. “Not from turrets. Infantry troops employing rocket launchers.”

“Turning,” said Shepard, just before the Mako struck the ground with a jolt. The moment the wheels
gained traction, our vehicle leaped to the left and accelerated. Two rockets flew through the space where we had just been, detonating behind us.

“Snipers at three o’clock and five o’clock. We’re taking fire. Kinetic barriers at sixty percent.”

The coaxial gun hammered. I could see Cerberus troopers flying backward, riddled with heavy slugs. Then Kaidan fired the main gun with an explosive round, scoring a perfect hit in the middle of an enemy fireteam.

Shepard swerved to pass to the left of a large rock outcropping, breaking line-of-sight for the Cerberus forces. As soon as we cleared the obstruction, Kaidan fired the main gun again. *Boom.*

“Sniper nest at nine o’clock!” I shouted, surprised at a new laser designator appearing to our left, on the side opposite the installation.

“Turning sharp right. Traverse,” ordered Shepard.

“Roger that,” said Kaidan.

The servomotors controlling the turret whined over our heads as Kaidan quickly whipped the main gun through a hundred-twenty-degree traverse. He elevated the gun a few degrees and slammed his fist on the firing button. *Boom.*

“Sniper nest eliminated,” I said. “Kinetic barriers at forty percent and falling.”

I saw three Cerberus troopers pop up almost directly in front of us, knew the turret currently pointed almost directly backward, and wondered how Shepard was going to solve this problem.

I needn’t have worried. Shepard accelerated, pushing the Mako’s engine to full, and turned to head directly for the troopers. Two of them abandoned any attempt at aiming at us and dove to either side. The third leveled a rocket launcher . . . about two seconds too late. Even inside the vehicle, we all heard the *thump* as the Mako slammed into him, sending his shattered corpse flying.

A sharp turn to the right, and Kaidan could bring the coaxial gun to bear on the last two Cerberus troopers.

“All targets down,” I reported. “Kinetic barriers at twelve percent . . . you lunatics.”

“No editorial comments,” said Shepard, but he had a malicious grin on his face.

We emerged from the Mako and cycled through an external airlock.

This facility didn’t look much like Cadmus Station. It was rougher and less finished, more like the pre-fab habitats we had encountered on other worlds. We did see the Cerberus logo again, painted on every available flat surface.

We emerged cautiously into the main work area, finding it densely broken up by partitions, cubicles, machinery, and stacked crates. Almost at once, two squads of Cerberus personnel engaged us. Shepard quickly saw that the dense cover would hamper us if we crowded together. Instead he divided us into two-person teams and sent us hunting. It made the battle hard to follow. I only saw tiny pieces of the fight as I stayed close to Kaidan.

Shepard and Garrus crouched behind partitions where they could get the best field of view, their sniper rifles at the ready, waiting for Cerberus personnel to show themselves. I heard one or the other of them firing every ten to fifteen seconds, picking off Cerberus troopers and boasting over the radio.
about their running total of hits.

Tali and Wrex worked together to flank Cerberus and flush them out of hiding. They both moved with considerable stealth, and Tali had a *superb* sense of direction. They would take an indirect route through the maze, invariably coming up behind one or two Cerberus troopers with a barrage of shotgun fire. If that didn’t kill the Cerberus soldiers at once, they would often become so distracted that they forgot to stay behind cover with respect to Shepard and Garrus. Either way, they died quickly.

Kaidan and I applied our biotic talents. With Tali setting up ambushes elsewhere, we had no quick way to take down Cerberus shields. We couldn’t get a fast biotic lock on the soldiers themselves. On the other hand, we could work with all the obstacles on the battlefield. Working in tandem, the two of us had immense telekinetic strength. We knocked down five or six partitions at a time, or abruptly shifted even very heavy pieces of machinery. With such feats we could pull the cover away from Cerberus troops, or put down obstacles to block their path when they tried to maneuver. My new talent for singularities also helped.

It was a slow, methodical fight. We were mostly concerned to ensure the Cerberus forces didn’t get behind any of *our* teams to accomplish their own ambush. They tried; none of their attempts succeeded. Before long we whittled their numeric advantage down to nothing. Then we had the advantage, and Shepard called for a general charge on the last Cerberus position.

The last defender still standing tried an unusual ploy: throwing two flash-bang grenades into our path, then turning and running toward a door in the back of the room. We dove for cover to avoid the effect of the grenades. As soon as they discharged, Shepard sprinted after the Cerberus trooper, the rest of us just behind him.

A hatch slammed down, Shepard nearly running into it at full speed, the control panel turning red.

“*Damn* it. Tali, get this hatch open *now*!”

“What’s wrong, Shepard?” I asked.

“How much do you want to bet there’s a *purge-everything* process and our friend is running to set it off before we can reach him?”

I nodded in understanding.

Tali worked even more quickly than usual. We waited less than ten seconds before the hatch opened once more. Shepard leaped through the moment he could. I followed right behind him.

Darkness flooded the next room, broken only by banks of glowing haptic interfaces and video displays. We saw the last Cerberus soldier standing over a console, cursing under his breath as he typed in a command sequence.

I interrupted him with a biotic pull, strong enough to strain his joints as I yanked him away from the console. He screamed in frustration and tried to bring a sidearm to bear on us. Tali’s shotgun barked once. He fell like a rag doll as I released him.

Shepard issued quiet orders. Garrus and Wrex went to search the rest of the facility for anything useful: technology, equipment, evidence that could help us locate more Cerberus agents. Tali and I got to work on the communications hub, downloading any data spared by the purge. Shepard and Kaidan began to place explosives, preparing to destroy the hub as soon as we finished.

The purge had apparently randomized great swaths of the available storage, but we still found a great
deal of uncorrupted data. Our findings would give Alliance intelligence analysts plenty of work.

Within a few minutes, however, something interrupted our task.

"Commander Shepard," said a strange voice.

We all turned, startled.

A very high-quality hologram now occupied one dark corner of the room. A male human sat at his ease in a comfortable chair, smoking a cigarette. I didn’t recognize him at the time, but even in that first encounter he made a strong impression on me: mature, self-confident to the point of arrogance, in very good physical condition, wearing a fashionable and expensive business suit. His eyes commanded attention, glowing with blue-white light as if they had cybernetic implants in the irises.

A circle of light appeared on the floor in front of this phantom, an input station for holographic presentation. Shepard stepped forward and took a stance inside the circle, waiting while the machines did a surface scan.

"Who are you?" he demanded finally.

"Call me the Illusive Man."

"That doesn’t tell me anything."

"All right . . . I am Cerberus."

"You’re in charge of all of this?"

The Illusive Man made a gesture of ironic acknowledgement with one hand, his cigarette leaving a ghostly trail of smoke in the air. “You’ve cost me a great deal of money over the past few days. The facilities on Binthu were quite valuable, to say nothing of the communications hub you’re doubtless about to destroy.”

“I sincerely hope they’re irreplaceable.”

“Hardly, although your actions have presented an inconvenience. Before you go any further, I want to take this opportunity to speak to you.”

Shepard folded his arms and tilted his head back. “I’m not sure what we have to say to one another.”

“More than you might think.” The Illusive Man stubbed out the remains of his cigarette, then steepled his fingers in front of his face. “The single goal of Cerberus is to strengthen humanity, so we can stand on our own in the galaxy. We shouldn’t be dependent on anyone else. We shouldn’t be required to submit to interference from anyone else. Cerberus will support anything that strengthens humanity’s position. So we approve of you.”

“The terrorist group approves of me. I think I’ve been insulted.”

“That’s a short-sighted view. Cerberus has had to take direct action on occasion, but our death toll has been trivial compared to the threats faced by humanity. How many humans died in the First Contact War? Or let’s strike closer to home: how many humans died on Mindoir, on Elysium, on Eden Prime? You were there, Commander, you’ve suffered your own share of pain and loss at the hands of aliens. If Cerberus can prevent even one such attack on humanity, we’ve served our purpose . . . and that’s the same battle you’ve sworn to fight, Commander.”
“I’ve sworn to defend the Alliance and the lives of its citizens, but always subject to my chain of command, civilian political leadership, and the rule of law. You don’t appear to recognize any of those constraints.”

The Illusive Man nodded. “That’s right. I can’t afford to recognize any limits on the imperative to defend humanity. Now that you’re a Spectre, neither can you. I think you know that already. You’re already abandoning the principles you claim to follow. Did your superiors in the Alliance give you any orders to attack Cerberus?”

Shepard hesitated, just for a moment. “No.”

“That’s right. You’re here solely on your authority as a Spectre. You saw a threat – Cerberus – and you took action. Believe it or not, I approve. Whether you will or no, you’ve already been placed outside the boundaries of civilized convention, out here where decisions of life and death have to be made. The survival of humanity is in your hands. Are you going to let your moral reservations get in the way of doing what has to be done?”

“That’s a false dichotomy. We can defend humanity without losing our souls.”

“An admirable ideal. I hope you don’t suffer too harshly when you discover that reality disagrees. In the meantime, I suggest you should be concentrating your energies on the real threat: Saren and his geth. I propose a truce.”

“A truce?”

“I’ll ensure that Cerberus doesn’t interfere with your mission. In fact, if we come across information that might be useful, we’ll forward it to you. There will be no reprisals for your actions on Binthu or here.”

“That’s very generous of you,” said Shepard scornfully. “What do I have to do?”

“Simply focus on your mission. Once Saren is dealt with, perhaps we’ll speak again. I think you’ll find that we have other areas of mutual interest.”

“I doubt that very much.”

He only smiled, his luminous eyes staring almost hungrily at Shepard. “Before you go, is Dr. T’Soni with you?”

Startled, Shepard said nothing. I stepped forward to stand beside him in the circle, transmitting my own image to the Illusive Man. “I’m here.”

He examined me closely. “I read your paper, Doctor. A superb piece of work. You’re to be commended.”

I felt a chill down my spine, and realized that this gambit was also directed at Shepard. If Cerberus is willing to take the idea of the Reapers seriously, then he might indeed have some common ground with them.

Shepard put his hand on my shoulder. “Come on, Liara, I’ve had enough of this place.”

The Illusive Man touched a control on the arm of his chair and vanished. The circle of light on the floor faded.

We proceeded to blow the Cerberus communications center to scrap . . . but Shepard was very quiet
on the trip back to *Normandy*. 
Garrus called my attention to the problem, coming to sit down across from me in the crew mess while I finished my evening meal. “Liara, have you seen Shepard all day?”

I had to admit I had not. “Of course, I’ve been in my lab with the Prothean artifacts. He tends not to visit when he knows I’m in full-on scientist mode, as he calls it.”

“Well, I have to admit I would find that intimidating too. But I don’t think anyone has seen him in hours. He talked to Joker and Pressley this morning, but that’s about it. He didn’t even make the rounds today.”

“That is serious.” I glanced across the crew mess toward the doors of the officers’ quarters. “Is he in his room?”

“I haven’t been able to find him anywhere else. Maybe you should talk to him.”

Something in the turian’s voice caused me to glare at him. “Is our relationship that obvious?”

“Only to people who care about both of you,” he said quietly.

I sighed. “All right, Garrus. Let me finish my meal and I’ll see what I can do.”

Five minutes later, I was ready to present myself at Shepard’s door. I touched the intercom. “Shepard?”

Silence.

I tried again. Still no answer.

Then I simply hacked the door. I might not have been up to Tali’s level of skill, but I wasn’t about to permit a simple low-security lock to stand between me and my purpose.

Shepard’s office stood silent and empty, the computer terminal turned off. I hesitated for a moment, and then went around his desk to the door to his private quarters. This door opened as well, without my needing to hack it.

I had never seen his stateroom before. I found it a small space, perhaps not quite as small as I had expected given the size of his office. Shepard actually enjoyed a little room to move around, a small couch and table, a refrigerator for his personal luxury supplies, a refresher cubicle, a small dresser and mirror.

Also a bed, of course. Large enough for two, I could not help but notice, so long as they snuggled close.

Shepard sat comfortably on the couch, illuminated by the only light in the room, a reading lamp placed on his night-stand. Most of him lurked in shadow, but I could see his mildly startled expression and the book in his hands.

“Shepard? May I visit for a while?”

“Sure, Liara,” he said, although I could hear uncertainty in his voice. He moved to put the book
“Please, don’t let me interrupt you. What are you reading?”

He hesitated, and then held the book out to me. I sat down on the couch beside him and took the volume, turning it over in my hand. Leather-bound, just small enough to fit comfortably in one hand, the pages of some thin material, densely packed with printed text. The book showed signs of age, wear, and long use. I found the title imprinted on the cover in faded silver leaf: *Holy Bible.*

“This is a sacred text?” I inquired, returning the book to him.

He nodded. “It’s the core book of one of our major religions, the one called Christianity.”

“I think I’ve heard of it. That’s the one with the god of suffering?”

Shepard smiled. “That’s . . . not quite how we would express it, but yes. This particular copy is special to me because it’s one of the few things I still have from my family. My father was a very devout man. This book belonged to him, and to his father before him. I recovered it from our home after the raid on Mindoir.”

“I see. Do you follow this religion as well?”

“I suppose I do, although I don’t practice it the way I did when I was young. I haven’t been to a worship service in . . . it’s probably been eight or nine years. I still read the Bible sometimes, when I feel the need for inspiration. There’s a lot of beautiful literature in it.”

Mustering my courage, I tucked my feet under me and leaned close to him. “Read some to me.”

He opened the book, his hands navigating the pages with the ease of long practice. “All right. When you came in I was reading from the book of Psalms. That’s a collection of religious poems. Many of them were supposedly written by an ancient king named David.”

He read:

*Blessed be the Lord my strength, which teacheth my hands to war and my fingers to fight. My goodness and my fortress, my high tower and my deliverer, my shield and he in whom I trust, who subdueth my people under me.*

*Lord, what is man that thou takest knowledge of him? Or the son of man, that thou makest account of him? Man is like to vanity, his days are a shadow that passeth away.*

*Bow thy heavens, oh Lord, and come down. Touch the mountains, and they shall smoke. Cast forth lightning and scatter them, shoot out thine arrows and destroy them. Send thine hand from above, rid me and deliver me out of great waters, from the hand of strange children, whose mouth speaketh vanity, and their right hand is a right hand of falsehood.*

With closed eyes, I listened to the cadence of his words, the ease of his voice as he read the familiar text. When he finished, I waited for a respectful moment before speaking. “That sounds like a soldier’s poem.”

“The legends say that David was a soldier king. I think he must have spent most of his life fighting.”

“It’s a beautiful text, but very strange. Very human, if I may say so.”

“So what is asari religion like? I’ve heard you swear by a Goddess, but when I thought about it I
realized that didn’t tell me anything. Presumably all asari deities are goddesses.”

I laughed gently. “That’s true. Actually, most asari don’t believe in or worship specific deities anymore. If you hear an asari swearing by the Goddess these days, it’s usually just a matter of cultural habit.”

“So what do asari believe in?”

“Most asari subscribe to a belief system called siari. The name means something like all is One. Siari asserts that at a fundamental level the universe as a whole is a single consciousness. All sentient beings are facets of this One. When we are born, the One sends us forth to live and grow and learn. When we die, our spiritual essence returns to the One, enriching it with our experiences, contributing to the pool of energy that can be used to fill new mortal vessels in the future.”

“Hmm. Is it what you believe?”

“I suppose.” I moved slightly closer to him, drawn by his warmth, his scent, his physical presence. I leaned against his side, resting my head comfortably on his shoulder. “I think almost all asari subscribe to the siari beliefs to some degree. It makes sense, given our limited telepathic abilities, our experience of joining our minds with those of a wide variety of aliens. It’s an easy religion to practice. It doesn’t make intense demands on anyone but the priestesses. One can even practice siari in tandem with other religions. I have met siari Buddhists, for example.”

“Asari borrowing from human religion?”

“It isn’t common yet, but it does happen. As I understand them, some Buddhist ideas are quite compatible with siari.”

“I suppose they would be, from what you’ve said. But you haven’t answered my question. What do you believe?”

I sighed. “I don’t often discuss it with others. I practice a religion that is no longer popular among asari.”

“What’s that?”

“It is called the Athame doctrine. Worship of the goddess Athame was once very common, and to this day when an asari swears by the Goddess she almost certainly is referring to Athame. But the practice of her doctrine has become much less popular since the rise of the siari belief.”

He set his book aside and wrapped his arms around me, embracing me gently. I relaxed and closed my eyes, feeling safe and cherished.

“So what makes you believe in this Athame?” he asked.

“I suppose it has to do with my love for antiquity. Her cult goes back into asari prehistory, and many of our early civilizations were Athame-worshippers. It’s also a good religion for a scientist. Legend has it that Athame and her emissaries taught our ancestors many practical things: agriculture, medicine, astronomy, mathematics. One of the ethical principles of the doctrine is to seek the truth through investigation and experience, never through passive acceptance of tradition.”

“I can see why that might appeal to you.”

I smiled wistfully. “My mother said much the same when I first asked to be initiated into the cult. She was known as a siari philosopher, but she respected the Athame doctrine, and she never objected
when I decided to follow it.”

“So what does being a follower of Athame involve?”

“For a simple initiate like me, the requirements are not heavy. I pray for advice, intervention, or emotional support. I study the ethical precepts of the doctrine and try to follow them. When I’m in asari space, I visit a shrine or temple every few days to make my devotions.”

He chuckled. “Sounds like most Christians I’ve known. I told you we had more in common than might appear at first glance.”

“Maybe. I’m surprised by one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Well . . . I keep my commitment to the Athame doctrine private because most asari don’t share it. It makes me seem old-fashioned and unsophisticated. But as I understand it, Christianity is a very common religion among humans. Why do you keep your commitment so private?”

He remained silent for a few moments, considering his answer. “We humans aren’t as relaxed about religion as you asari seem to be. Our disagreements on matters of faith can be very bitter. Even violent.”

“You fight over religion? That’s . . . I’m sorry, Shepard, but that’s rather absurd.”

“You asari have never fought over religion?”

“Very rarely. Religion is based on myth, legend, metaphysical speculation, things it might be reasonable to believe but that can’t be proven. Why should anyone fight over something that can’t be known with certainty?”

He put a hand under my chin, gently tipped my head up so he could look into my face. “You’re serious.”

“Of course I am.”

“I . . . think we may have discovered a significant difference between asari and human psychology. We humans fight about things we don’t know for certain all the time. Religion. Political ideology. Whose sports team is better.”

“How strange.”

He kissed my forehead gently and released me to rest against his shoulder again. “We’re not as rational as asari, I’m afraid. Or at least we’re not as rational as you. Point is, it hasn’t been that long since we had some really vicious religious conflicts on Earth. It got very bad in the decades before we discovered the mass effect and came out into the galaxy. So today we’ve found ways to set a lot of that aside. Most humans are still followers of one religion or another, but we tend to keep our beliefs and practices private. The Alliance military is strict about enforcing that. The regs are clear: you’re not to talk about your religion at all, unless you’re off-duty and you’re very sure the people you’re with won’t have a problem with it.”

“So you keep your sacred book in your cabin and the subject never comes up with the rest of the crew.”

He shrugged. “I wouldn’t say it never comes up. Ash and I talk about these things from time to time.
We’re both Christians but from different traditions. She knows the regs. She and I had to get to know each other pretty well before she would even hint at her position on the subject.”

“I see.” I inhaled and wriggled a little to settle more comfortably in his arms. “I suppose I should ask the question I really wanted to ask. What’s wrong, Shepard?”

He didn’t try to evade. “Was I that obvious?”

“I think several of us noticed. You weren’t quite yourself yesterday, after we left the Cerberus station on Nepheron. It’s unusual for you to linger in your cabin instead of making your rounds among the crew, as you have done today. Now I find you looking for inspiration in your holy book. Something must be giving you cause to think hard, at least.”

“I suppose thinking hard is about right.”

Suddenly Shepard released me, half-rose from the couch, and then settled back down, reclining at full length with his head in my lap. His hands rested on his chest, his fingers laced together. I smiled down at him, one hand resting on his, the other toying with the short hair on his head.

He closed his eyes and sighed in contentment. “What is it about you that puts me at ease so well?”

“It’s the asari mind control,” I told him.

His eyes snapped open and stared into mine for a moment, but then he saw that I was joking. “Hmm. Some humans are convinced there is such a thing, you know.”

I scoffed. “Sometimes we wish there were. It would make many things much easier.”

“I don’t doubt it.” He closed his eyes again. “Yeah, our talk with the Illusive Man is bothering me. I suppose I’m re-examining some of my beliefs as a result.”

“How so?”

“I think we can agree that Cerberus is an evil organization. Corruption, fraud, assassination, sabotage, viciously unethical experiments, who knows what else?”

“I’ll stipulate that.”

“Yet it sounds as if the Illusive Man takes the Reaper threat seriously. More seriously than the Council or most of the Alliance leadership. What happens if Cerberus steps up to defend the galaxy against the Reapers while everyone else is still denying the problem even exists?”

I frowned, thinking through the implications.

“My religious beliefs tell me to keep the faith, stay honest and true, fight the good fight, never give in even if it seems that everything is about to be lost. Never compromise with evil, never use evil means even in pursuit of good ends. God has promised that no matter what happens, no matter how broken the universe seems to be, all will come right in the end. Trust in God.” He sighed. “But that’s hard to do right now. If we’re facing anything like what the Protheans faced . . .”

“A trillion dead,” I said bleakly. “The whole galaxy turned into a graveyard.”

“Maybe the Illusive Man was right. Who am I to say that my moral principles are more important than all those lives? What if I’m faced with the choice to cooperate with Cerberus, or let all those people die horribly?”
“Then you cooperate with Cerberus,” I said firmly.

He opened his eyes and looked up into my face. “You didn’t have to think about that very long.”

“No. Shepard, when we think about moral issues we always run the risk of getting too caught up in theory. The pain and suffering of real people always has to trump our concern over abstractions. If your moral principle leads you to refuse to take the action necessary to save a trillion lives, then it’s a bad principle.”

He rubbed at the stubble on his cheek. “I suppose.”

“Besides, cooperating with Cerberus doesn’t mean that you have to become Cerberus. Evil people can have good objectives. You can work with them in pursuit of those objectives, refusing to do evil yourself, trying to prevent them from doing evil along the way. Who knows? Maybe they should worry about working with you.”

He thought about that for a long while.

“Shepard, my mother often taught on this subject. One of the things she said was that it’s easy to avoid our enemies, refuse to have anything to do with them, refuse to help them in any way. Anyone can do that. It’s much harder to do good to our enemies. It’s hard to be compassionate to them, to treat them as living beings with their own dignity, even when you know they will repay you with betrayal. It’s so hard . . . but it can be the most important thing in the universe, because it may be the only way to give the good a chance to triumph in the end.”

“That’s why she went to work with Saren, isn’t it?”

My breath caught in my throat. “I hadn’t thought about that, but you may be right. Goddess help her, she must have been trying to redeem him.”

“Not the best case study for the moral point we’re trying to make, I suppose.”

“No . . . but what if she had succeeded?”

Suddenly a thought struck him and he beamed up at me, an expression of such surprised happiness it brought the sting of tears to my eyes. “Liara. She did succeed. She redeemed herself, and she gave us the chance to stop Saren, which means we might still be able to redeem him as well.”

I closed my eyes and felt the tears run down one cheek. “Oh, Shepard. I hope you’re right.”

“I know I am. All we’ve ever been promised is that everything will work out as it should in the end. Before then, all we can ask for is a chance. Benezia took that chance and did the best she could with it. Now it’s our turn.”

I smiled at him and caressed his cheek. “And if Cerberus gives us a chance?”

“We take it. And the Illusive Man had better worry about what we might do with it.” He stood abruptly, and held out his hand for me. When I took it, he pulled me into his embrace and kissed me.

Let the record state that Shepard was a superb kisser. Unhurried, thorough, committed, and Goddess, he tasted good. After the first second of surprise I let my body melt against him, let a flood of heat wash through me, and lost all capacity for rational thought for a long moment.

Eventually he drew back to look into my eyes from very short range. “Hmm. I must admit, I am strongly tempted to ask you to stay.”
“I would be strongly tempted to agree,” I told him. “However, you need to go on your rounds and remind everyone who is in charge . . . and I have Prothean artifacts to catalogue and analyze. Duty calls.”

He told me in no uncertain terms what he wanted to do with duty.

“Shepard, surely you can think of much better things to do that with.”

He shook his head ruefully. “Oh yes. But you’re right, now isn’t the time. Liara, once this is all over and we can take a few days for ourselves, what do you say we go somewhere quiet and beautiful, just the two of us, and live off nothing but room service for a solid week?”

“That sounds wonderful.” I broke away from him, very reluctantly. “Do you feel better?”

“I do. You’re not only good for my morale, you give very good advice.”

“I’m glad to be earning my pay,” I joked.

“Every credit, Doctor.”

A few hours later, when I was about ready to retire for the night, my omni-tool chimed. I found a text message on it, from Shepard:

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm.
For love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave,
Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.
Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.
If one offered for love all the wealth of one’s house, it would be utterly scorned.

I shook my head, smiling. Too bad the Athame Codices don’t include any love poetry, I thought. Still, I’m sure I can find something appropriate.
22 April 2183, Alliance Navy Headquarters/Arcturus Station

The lift doors opened, and I stepped out into the midst of more humans than I had ever seen in one place in my life. Fortunately none of them paid much attention to me, all in a rush to be somewhere else. Shepard and Lieutenant Pressley strode out into the fast-moving throng, and I hurried to keep up.

_Normandy_ had come home, to the heart and capital of the Alliance.

From our position I could easily see the shape of the station: a vast torus, rotating to provide artificial “gravity” without any need for mass-effect technology. As we moved spinward, the ground seemed to slope up and up ahead of us, until it vanished around the curve of the torus. Above us countless stars shone through the transparent roof, but an array of mirrors also served to provide us with adequate “sunlight” from the red giant star Arcturus. Everything felt surprisingly homelike. My body told me I walked on the surface of a habitable planet, even if my eyes disagreed.

All around us stood a complex of two-story and three-story buildings, all white metal and silver glass, marked with the insignia of the Alliance Navy. Between the buildings we saw wide greenways and small parks, lush with green foliage, punctuated by the occasional monument or small fountain. Elsewhere in the station I knew areas existed for civilian housing, light industry, commerce, entertainment, and even some parklands and agricultural facilities. The builders of Arcturus Station designed it for self-sufficiency, ready to provide anything the Alliance’s leaders, or their families, might require.

It’s too bad the station lasted less than ten minutes when the Reapers finally arrived.

Most of the humans around us wore uniforms. Shepard and Pressley had put on their “dress blues” for the occasion, formal gear I had never seen them wear before. For my part I wore a dark blue shirt, trousers, and boots without any insignia, so I could blend in without actually wearing the Alliance uniform to which I held no claim. I attracted enough surprised stares just for being asari.

We entered one building and approached a set of double doors. Shepard strode up to the Marine guards at the door. “Lieutenant Commander William Shepard, _SSV Normandy_. Lieutenant Charles Pressley. Dr. Liara T’Soni, civilian consultant.”

One of the guards consulted his omni-tool and shook his head. “Sorry, sir, you and the lieutenant are on the list, but the asari isn’t. She’ll have to wait outside.”

Shepard scowled. “Dr. T’Soni is most certainly on the list, Petty Officer. I verified that just before we made port. I personally don’t care who took it upon himself to change the access list at the last minute in order to exclude a member of my staff, but if I have to take it up with Admiral Hackett, I suspect he will want to find out.”

“Well, I don’t work with the top brass. I work with my hands.” The Marine switched his helmet microphone to “private” mode, and apparently engaged in a conversation with one of his superiors. It didn’t take long. “Sorry, sir, someone in Security put a hold on Dr. T’Soni until they could verify that an alien was cleared for the conference. It’s been expedited. She can go in with you.”

“Thank you, Petty Officer.” Shepard, Pressley, and the Marines exchanged salutes, and then Shepard turned and led us through the doors.
I saw a very large conference room, capable of seating several hundred, with several concentric circles of seats arranged on a shallow slope down to the central table. Very few seats remained empty when we arrived. I looked around and spotted a few human civilians, and even three or four turians sitting together near the central table, but the vast majority of the people in the room wore Alliance military uniforms.

I thought to sit in the back of the room, but Shepard touched my arm and led me down toward the center. The three of us found places already set aside, in the very first row of seats above the central table.

The assembled company hummed with low-voiced conversation, but around us a small island of silence grew as people turned away. For a few moments I wondered whether it was my presence that drove Shepard’s colleagues away from him. Then I noticed most of the stares – many of them fearful or resentful – lay on Shepard rather than me. That puzzled me, until I realized that I saw another significant difference between asari and human psychology.

Among asari an individual who displays great talent or virtue, who accomplishes great things, will normally attract nothing but admiration. We evolved in large groups, most comfortable with many of our own kind around us. We certainly have competitive instincts, but the need to support and defend the group is always paramount. We can afford to admire others who succeed, because their success also enriches us as part of the same community. It helps that we are parthenogenetic and very long-lived, so that each of us can sire or bear as many children as we can afford. When we do engage in reproductive competition, the stakes are low because we always have plenty of time to find a suitable mate and have children.

The two-gendered, short-lived humans evolved in much smaller groups, troops in which every member engaged in a constant high-stakes game of social dominance. With an optimum breeding lifespan of only a decade or so, humans never had time to simply wait for power, prosperity, or access to suitable mates. Even worse, the male gender is designed for a strategy of scattering one’s genes as widely as possible. For most humans, males in particular, the result is constant and fierce sexual competition. They evolved with no limiting factors on their competitive drive. Even now that they have become civilized creatures, human groups always have their alpha members – loved, feared, respected, resented, powerful so long as they continue to play the social game well, but always in danger of a humiliating fall.

Shepard had been present for the flash-point that had given rise to the current war. During the war he had pressed himself forward, demonstrating drives and talents unusual among his kind. He had been granted the signal honor of becoming the first human Spectre. He had spoken up during the last war conference, and had persuaded officers far senior to him to follow the strategy he had devised. He had the patronage of Admiral Hackett. He had become an alpha human, set apart from most of his people, marked out for distinction or for abysmal failure.

There would be many who would prefer to see him fail.

*That will not happen*, I resolved. *Not as long as I am with him.*

The lights in most of the hall dimmed, while those illuminating the central table rose. Admiral Hackett appeared, followed by three other officers with admiral’s emblems on their uniforms.

“All rise!” shouted a junior officer. Everyone in the room rose to their feet, including me after a moment’s hesitation.

“As you were,” said the admiral, in his deep and raspy voice.
Thus I saw Steven Hackett for the very first time. Later I came to know him very well, counting him among my best human friends and allies for many years. Today, of course, he stands tall in the accounts of galactic history: the great architect of the Reconstruction after the Reaper War, the leader who consolidated the victory that Shepard won, the statesman who guided humanity into its current stable and honorable place as one of the foremost races in the galaxy. Among humans his reputation is hardly the less, standing with men like Cyrus, Alexander, Julius Caesar, or Napoleon Bonaparte as one of the greatest military commanders of all time.

In 2183 CE he remained a relatively young human, not quite fifty years of age, with most of his reputation still ahead of him. He had a scarred face, craggy, gaunt and long-nosed, but illuminated from within by enormous force of character. His gray eyes reminded me of a carnivorous avian, missing nothing as he gazed about him. He had permitted his close-cropped hair and neatly trimmed beard to turn silver. He possessed impeccable carriage, erect as a marble pillar, eloquent of confidence and strength of will. When I looked at him, I thought I could see what Shepard might look like in twenty years: a seasoned exemplar of humanity.

“The Fifth Fleet has new orders,” he said without preamble. “Within twenty-four hours, we launch a new offensive against the geth: Operation BLUE LIGHTNING.”

A hologram appeared above the table, a map of the galaxy. It quickly zoomed in on a region far out on the galactic disk, about ninety degrees to trailing from Earth. Bright stars were sparse there, on the far end of what the humans called the Perseus Arm.

“This is the Armstrong Nebula Cluster, on the far edge of the Attican Traverse. Several hundred star systems, most of them unexplored, the most notable of them the double giant star Vamshi. We know of no civilizations native to the region, and no major galactic power has established colonies there. This is neutral and very nearly empty territory . . . or at least it was until very recently.”

The hologram zoomed back out partway, showing not the entire galaxy but a large section of its outer fringes. The far Perseus Arm was displayed in relation to the so-called Outer Arm, which in this region lay along the remote fringe of the galactic disk. A deep red sphere appeared in the heart of the Outer Arm.

“This is Rannoch, the quarian homeworld, also the center of geth civilization. Ships from our organic civilizations which venture past the Perseus Veil – here – normally do not return. Without better intelligence about the size, structure, and capabilities of geth civilization, the Admiralty is very reluctant to commit to a large-scale invasion.”

Another red sphere appeared in the Armstrong Nebula region. A winding red line followed the mass-relay network between the two geth concentrations.

“However, the geth appear to have established a supply route from their homeworlds to the Armstrong Nebula. Intelligence believes this to be the largest concentration of geth ever seen outside their home territory. Our assessment: this concentration represents a staging area for a full-scale invasion of human space. We are going to pre-empt that invasion by striking first.”

A great murmur of voices rumbled all around us. I glanced at Shepard, and saw him sitting grim and unsurprised. He knew about this in advance.

Hackett and other officers delivered briefings about the astronomical structure of the Armstrong Nebula, the estimated arrangement of geth outposts, the timetable for the attack. Normandy would depart at once for the Gagarin system, with orders to scout for and destroy geth listening posts. Other new ships in the same class, the Antietam and Kalinga, would strike similar targets on the outskirts of the cluster. After that the whole Fifth Fleet would move in, hoping to locate and destroy the main
body of the geth.

The conference lasted for about three hours, issuing general orders, detailing timetables and contingency plans. I heard surprisingly little discussion or debate. Admiral Hackett certainly knew how to organize and manage a large meeting.

Once the conference ended, Shepard stood and moved over toward Hackett, waiting patiently while higher-ranked officers spoke to the admiral. Finally Hackett won free and turned to us.

“Commander,” he said, accepting Shepard’s salute and extending a hand for him to shake. “What can I do for you?”

“I was wondering whether we could borrow about five minutes of your time,” said Shepard.

“Not easy, but for you I will make an exception.”

“Thank you, Admiral. Let me introduce Lieutenant Charles Pressley . . .”

The admiral bestowed a handshake on the navigator as well. “I’m familiar with your record, Lieutenant. You did very fine work on the Agincourt. Between you and Shepard I’m sure the Normandy is in very good hands.”

Pressley nearly lost his composure at the admiral’s praise, but managed to control himself, shake hands, and murmur, “Thank you, Admiral.”

“. . . and this is Dr. Liara T’Soni,” Shepard concluded.

Hackett glanced at me with interest, and shook my hand firmly. “You must be Benezia’s daughter, the Prothean expert. I understand you’ve been a great support to Commander Shepard’s mission.”

I felt a daimon rest its hands on me as I took the admiral’s hand and bowed over it with just the right degree of dignified correctness. Perhaps my mother advised me from beyond the grave.

“It’s Dr. T’Soni’s work I want to discuss with you, Admiral,” said Shepard. “I believe she has begun to provide solid empirical evidence supporting the geth belief in the Reapers.”

Hackett frowned. “Walk with me, Commander.”

As the admiral set out for his next meeting, the three of us from the Normandy followed.

“Commander, you should know the Admiralty is not prepared to spend time on this Reaper hypothesis. Most of us regard it as a distraction from the real issue – the geth.”

“That is not my intent, sir.”

“I know that, but my colleagues don’t. It doesn’t help that you seem to have learned about the Reapers from this vision of yours.”

“Sir, my experience with the Prothean beacon is off the table. It was subjective and nobody else is ever likely to be able to verify it. What we can verify is the history of past galactic civilizations, as uncovered by archaeologists like Dr. T’Soni. The empirical and objective evidence strongly suggests some unknown force has been destroying civilizations for a very long time, with a level of regularity and thoroughness indicating deliberate intent.”

“Do you concur, Doctor?” the admiral asked me.
“Yes, Admiral.” I took a datapad from a pocket of my shirt and handed it to him. “This includes a paper I’ve published on the subject, along with new evidence I’ve gathered and collated since then. The evidence is not yet conclusive, but we are well along the way to that point.”

Hackett took the datapad without glancing at it. “All right. Yet once again I must ask the question, Commander: what does this have to do with the geth?”

“Sir, the geth believe in that civilization-destroying force. They believe themselves to be allied with it. The geth are mysterious but they have never been known to be delusional. Where did they get that notion?”

“From Saren?”

“All right, where did he get it? If it’s a lie, how did he manage to come up with a fable that’s supported so well by evidence we’re only now starting to uncover?”

“Good point.”

“Then we have some of the discoveries we’ve made on our patrols, sir. The find at Trebin was especially alarming. The geth are using technology identical to what we found in a million-year-old archaeological site. They couldn’t have developed that technology themselves. It predates the Protheans, it predates every civilization we know about. Where did they get it?”

“Another archaeological site in their own space?”

“That’s possible, sir. It’s also possible that they got it directly from the people who created it. It’s much more reasonable to believe in civilization eaters if they’re right there partnering with you.”

The admiral stopped, gave Shepard a steely glare with a side glance at me. “Your five minutes are about up. What do you propose?”

Shepard took a deep breath. “Admiral, the Reaper hypothesis may be of low probability right now, but that could change very quickly. If it turns out to be correct, then everything is at stake. We need to start thinking now about what to do in that case. We need a red team now, because if we wait for irrefutable evidence to appear, it might already be too late.”

Hackett nodded, satisfied. “Now that is what I hoped to hear from you, Commander. That much we can certainly do. I am hereby appointing you and any two other people you designate to a new red team. I’ll let you know who the team lead will be within forty-eight hours.”

Shepard stared at the Admiral for a moment, and then saluted, his face carefully blank. “Sir, I’ll want Dr. T’Soni to be on the red team as a civilian consultant.”

The admiral nodded. “Done. Now I’m triple-booked for the next hour. Good hunting, Commander.”

He and his staff hurried off, leaving the three of us standing.

Shepard looked at Pressley, who was smiling ruefully and shaking his head.

“Have I missed something?” I asked, rather plaintively.

“I just got played, from start to finish,” Shepard told me. “What I proposed is what he intended to do all along. He was testing me the whole time.”

“Testing you?”
He smiled ruefully. “Think it through, Liara. He already suspects there may be something to the Reaper hypothesis. He knows the Alliance as a whole isn’t ready to take the idea seriously, much less adjust its strategic thinking. To be honest, we don’t know enough about the threat to do much planning. We need to study the hypothesis, develop more evidence for it, figure out the size and shape of the threat.”

“I understand that. That’s why you wanted to set up a red team.” Shepard had explained the concept to me. A red team was a group of experts tasked to challenge current strategic and tactical doctrine, based on the viewpoint of a potential adversary.

“That’s right. But the admiral has a problem. He knows that the red team won’t succeed unless it has real experts on it. Most of the real experts are on my crew, but I have a reputation for being a loose cannon. I’ve been basing my decisions on a vision, delivered to me by faulty fifty-thousand-year-old technology. I’ve brought a bunch of non-humans onto my crew, giving them free access to one of the Alliance’s best ships. I’m chasing a rogue Spectre all over the galaxy. Going after Cerberus without orders. Telling admirals they should radically alter their preferred strategy.”

Suddenly I understood. “He needs you, but only if you’re rational.”

“He needed me to come to him and make a good argument. Now we’ve done that, and he knows the red team has some chance of success. He can gamble some resources on it.”

“Suddenly I’m not sure I would want to engage the admiral in a battle of wits.”

Shepard laughed and turned to lead us back to the Normandy. “You’re more than smart enough, Liara. You just need to learn to be devious as well.”

I smiled. “It doesn’t come naturally. Spending time with you humans seems to help.”
24 April 2183, Rayingri Surface

We knew there would be trouble, the moment the Mako reached the top of the mountain.

Before the geth came, a few dozen human scavengers and prospectors occupied this region of Rayingri, all of them looking for a mineral strike that would make them rich. Many of them used a pre-fab habitat on top of this mountain as a home base.

Now the geth had killed all of them, turning the habitat into their own listening post. We found the habitat surrounded by dragon’s teeth, the horrible devices the geth used to turn organic victims into half-cybernetic husks. The devices were fully extended, and so thickly spaced that the Mako would never be able to reach the front entrance.

We had fought scattered geth patrols elsewhere while searching for human survivors. Now we saw no sign of them, as if they had abandoned the facility.

“It’s quiet, kemo sabe,” said Ashley obscurely. “Too quiet.”

“I agree,” said Shepard. “Eyes wide, everyone.”

Suited up against the unbreathable atmosphere, we emerged from the Mako and immediately had to hunch low against the press of the wind. The rogue planet Vahtz loomed overhead like a monstrous moon, its gravity hauling at Rayingri’s atmosphere and rocky surface. Storms of almost cyclonic power struck frequently at such times. So did earthquakes, a thought which didn’t please me given that we perched atop a low mountain.

We crossed the space between the Mako and the habitat’s entrance, trying not to touch or disturb the dragon’s teeth. I saw Ashley staring at one as she passed close, an expression of fierce hatred visible even through her helmet’s visor. I knew she had seen comrades impaled on similar devices during the battle for Eden Prime.

The airlock hatch opened easily. We passed through a staging room, down a long corridor and into the habitat’s central hall . . .

“Well, we found the husks,” remarked Garrus as he opened fire.

We used simple and well-practiced tactics. Shepard, Ashley, and Garrus stood shoulder-to-shoulder to form a perimeter, meeting the husks’ rush with withering fire from their assault rifles. Tali stood right behind, overloading the monsters’ internal electrical systems. Kaidan and I stayed in the rear, using biotic combinations to break up the charge, taking out two or three husks at a time with well-placed warp detonations.

This time the husks lacked the numbers to overrun us. We finished the fight without serious danger.

We looked around. Once this had been a human habitat, rough and functional, yet clearly a place where people might live and work. Now the geth had turned it into something alien and ugly. Their own equipment stood on all sides, steel-gray and bulky but with smooth lines, seemingly placed at random.

Shepard examined the surroundings uneasily. “Tali, Kaidan, see if you can find the critical components. We’ll want to download any intel we can find before we destroy this place.”
“Something is bothering you,” I suggested.

“This doesn’t feel right,” he agreed. “We saw geth out on the surface, but none guarding this location. Nothing but that odd arrangement of dragon’s teeth outside the door, and a few husks inside.”

“Shepard!” called Tali from the adjoining room.

We went to meet her there, Shepard calling Garrus and Ashley to follow.

“Report,” demanded Shepard.

Kaidan turned to us, frowning. “We went to download the contents of the geth data archive . . .”

“There isn’t one,” Tali interrupted.

“What?”

“There’s no data archive,” said the quarian. “All this equipment – transmitters, receivers, jammers – it’s all working on automatic. They’re not doing anything with the data. This may look like a listening post from a distance, but that’s not what it is.”

Shepard nodded. “That’s right. It’s a trap. Come on!”

Too late. An enormous explosion roared behind us, followed by the sound of rushing air as internal atmosphere hurled itself into equilibrium with the external environment. We abandoned the room we stood in, moving back down a corridor toward the central space where we had fought the husks. Suddenly Shepard stopped short, signaling frantically for all of us to seek cover.

The habitat had been torn open, and geth were pouring in from outside.

“How the hell did all these geth sneak up on us?” demanded Ashley, as she began to fire at the enemy.

“Some of this equipment must have been here to confuse the Normandy’s sensors,” said Tali. “The geth were probably waiting outside under cover the whole time.”

“Less talk, more boom-stick,” snapped Shepard.

It wasn’t a good situation. The geth had given us no opportunity to take up our favored positions. Shepard and Ashley crouched in the front, but Garrus stood too far to the rear and couldn’t lay down an effective field of fire. Tali hid with me, sharing the same piece of very inadequate cover, but Kaidan stood somewhere behind both of us where we couldn’t easily see him. Too many geth charged our position. We couldn’t do more than slow their advance.

We did our best. For my part, I gave up almost immediately on trying to coordinate warp detonations with Tali and Kaidan. If I couldn’t see Kaidan’s control gestures, I couldn’t throw a warp fast enough to hit his target before it took cover. Instead I concentrated hard and placed biotic singularities where they would slow the enemy advance most effectively, giving the others time to wear down geth shields and score fatal hits.

*These geth are behaving differently,* I realized. *Using cover, reacting to our use of biotics. Have they learned something?*

Then a new geth appeared to the enemy’s rear, unlike any I had seen before. Almost four meters tall,
colored a brilliant white, it carried a massive weapon, almost like a personal cannon. The other geth fought all the harder once it appeared, laying down a blazing field of fire and advancing relentlessly toward us.

Suddenly I understood what I was seeing. Geth functioned as networked intelligences, software rather than hardware. The more geth processes ran on a given hardware platform, the more intelligent that platform, and the more effectively it cooperated with other geth nearby. The large white geth likely had plenty of extra processing capacity as well as physical size and power. It was acting as a control center.

“Shepard . . .”

Too late. The white geth had seen a weak point in our position. It turned and fired a rocket from its hand weapon. Instead of expending itself uselessly against the bulky machine Shepard was using for cover, it veered at the last moment and impacted on the floor one meter to his right.

An explosion erupted. Shepard was hurled back by the concussion. I saw his shields flare and go down. He lay awkwardly and very still.

Someone screamed. Probably me. No one else had such a high-pitched voice. I made an effort of will and the noise stopped, but the rage I felt needed some outlet.

I clenched my fists (blue-white light blazing like a corona around me) and peeked over the barrier (always take cover first) Tali and I were hiding behind (no, Shepard, I don’t want to get my ass shot off). Six geth prepared for their final charge (they’re going to kill us). I shouted again (they’re going to kill Shepard) and hurled the most powerful biotic pull I had ever managed in my life.

Not at the geth. At the torn and broken ceiling over the geth.

Already weakened by geth breaching charges, the upper structure of the pre-fab habitat might have come down eventually in any case.

I encouraged it.

I vaguely heard Kaidan shouting for everyone to take cover, but I was too wrapped up in my moment of enthusiasmos. Then I heard a cracking detonation, almost musical and hideously loud, and a kiloton of metal and ceramic collapsed into the space occupied by the geth.

The concussion knocked me senseless for a few moments. When I came to my senses once again, I lay on the floor with an I-beam crossing mere centimeters above me. It had very nearly crushed me, but as it was I could wriggle and crawl out from under it instead.

I looked around. I saw none of the others.

“How?”

There he lay, only three meters away, mercifully free of any fallen debris. My telekinetic coup had not killed him. Assuming, of course, that the geth had not done the job first.

I crawled over to him, touched the control pad on his omni-tool.

Life signs, minimal but present. Thank the Goddess.

A tearing, sliding sound. I looked up.
Several tons of debris shifted and crashed to one side. The white geth arose out of the wreck, battered and scuffed but still active, looming over us. It turned to bring its sidearm to bear.

I heard a *crack* and thought I was dead. That Shepard was dead.

Then the geth’s ocular exploded. It swayed, began to collapse toward us . . . and a bolt of biotic force took it in the chest and hurled it backward instead.

I turned my head. Kaidan stood ten meters away, just lowering his arm from making the control gesture that had saved our lives.

Above him, perched on top of a storage unit, Garrus stood with his sniper rifle. He lowered it, his raptor’s gaze falling benevolently on Shepard and me. “Liara, remind me *never* to get you pissed off,” came his flanging voice over the helmet radio.

I closed my eyes, lying half over Shepard’s body, and permitted the universe to go away for a while.

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**24 April 2183, Interstellar Space**

Later, I sat by Shepard’s diagnostic bed and tried not to think about how terrible he looked.

“Charles, I have good news and bad news,” said Dr. Chakwas, reporting to Lieutenant Pressley a few steps away. Kaidan, Ashley, and Garrus all waited in the background.

“Good news first,” said the navigator.

“All right. The commander is going to be fine. Liara and Kaidan applied first aid, they were effective in stabilizing his condition, and he reached me in plenty of time.”

“Now the bad news.”

The doctor sighed. “His injuries are quite severe. Gunshot trauma, shrapnel wounds, concussion, several cracked ribs, and an incomplete fracture to one arm. He’s going to be here in the medical bay for several days, and on light duty for several days after that. Lieutenant, I believe you are in command of the *Normandy* until further notice.”


“You know I will, Charles.”

The navigator turned to me. “Dr. T’Soni, a word?”

Reluctantly I rose and followed him over to the others.

“I’d like to thank you, Doctor,” he began. “I’m told that you very likely saved the commander’s life, along with the entire landing party.”

I looked down, unable to meet anyone’s eyes. “I don’t see it that way. I lost control. I could have killed all of us.”

“That’s bullshit,” Ashley said harshly.

Startled, I looked up and caught her gaze, deep-brown eyes hot on mine.

“Liara, that was as nasty a situation as I’ve ever seen. Felt like Eden Prime all over again, with
nowhere to retreat and no Shepard to rescue me this time. We needed a miracle right then or we were all dead. Sure, pulling all that crap down on our heads was a risky move, but sitting around waiting for something to happen would have been even worse. You made a snap decision and it worked.”

I looked around at the others, all of them soldiers: Kaidan, Garrus, and Pressley. All of them nodded soberly.

“Officer thinking,” agreed Pressley. “Make a decision right now when there’s no time to deliberate. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t. That’s war.”

“All right,” I sighed. “Any battle we all get out of alive is a good battle.”

“That’s the spirit,” said Garrus softly.

“It leaves us having to decide what to do next,” said Pressley. “The Antietam isn’t due to report after its strike yet, but the Kalinga ran into a similar trap and barely got away with all hands. Someone on the geth side is getting dangerously clever.”

“Saren may be an evil bastard, but he isn’t stupid,” said Garrus. “He might have guessed that the Alliance would respond to a geth buildup in this cluster. He might even have guessed that Shepard would be in at the front. I am not happy with the way that super-geth seemed to know right where to shoot to take him out.”

“Could be coincidence,” objected Kaidan.

“Maybe. Shepard does have this annoying habit of leading from the front.”

“In any case, I expect we’ll have new orders as soon as Admiral Hackett has a chance to look over my report, and whatever he gets from the Antietam and the Kalinga. We may have another attack run to make. In that event I’ll want Lieutenant Alenko in charge of the ground team.” Pressley looked around at all of us, his gaze lingering on Garrus. “I’ll also want all of you ready to go in.”

Garrus’s mandibles twitched. “That’s something of a surprise, Lieutenant.”

The navigator sighed, frowning down at his shoes for a moment. “Yeah. Look, I’ll admit I’m still not fond of non-humans as a general rule . . . but I’ve been made aware that I need to re-examine that attitude, and that starts with all of you on board now. The commander is a damn good judge of character, and he trusts all of you. I’ve seen each of you put your lives on the line for him several times over. It wouldn’t be right for me to refuse to respond to that.”

Garrus eased forward, slightly baring his razor-sharp teeth in something that could not possibly be mistaken for a smile. “Even for a turian?”

Pressley didn’t back down. “Especially for a turian,” he said softly.

“But,” observed Garrus, stepping back, folding his arms, and cocking his head to one side as he continued to watch Pressley. “You’re all right, Lieutenant.”

“Thank you. Now I think we had all better get some rest. When things start moving again they’re going to move fast.”

I tried to rest. It was difficult, lying on my cot knowing that Shepard was wounded and unconscious only a few meters away. Finally I came out and sat in a chair next to him, holding one unresponsive hand. That worked. I awoke hours later, still in the chair, still holding Shepard’s hand, but with a blanket draped over me. Disoriented, I looked around and saw Dr. Chakwas working quietly at her
station, the only bright light in the room coming from her desk lamp. She caught my eye, smiled and nodded, and went back to her duties.

*When does she sleep?* I wondered.

By morning *Normandy* received new orders. Long-range probes had discovered another geth station near the center of the cluster, on a planet of the double giant star Vamshi. Data analysis confirmed that *this* geth facility was no sham. Heavily-encrypted communications flowed in and out of the place by the exabyte. Lieutenant Pressley planned his assault.

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**26 April 2183, Maji Surface**

None of us were inclined to take any chances. *Normandy* landed its entire Marine detachment along with the Mako. The AFV rolled ahead under Ashley’s command, moving up a long mountain slope, taking out rocket turrets and concentrations of geth troopers. The rest of us followed on foot, searching for and destroying survivors under the blood-red light of Vamshi B.

This time we found the geth unprepared for our attack. We easily broke them up into small fireteam-sized units, clumsy and slow compared to the coordinated assault we had seen on Rayingri. The Marines took gleeful pleasure in flanking the geth, flushing them out of cover and hammering them into scrap. Kaidan, Tali, and I stayed close to the center of the formation, using our combined tactics to cover the Marines, ensuring the geth had no chance to recover. A long series of craters, born of high-explosive grenades and biotic warp detonations, marked our slow progress up the mountainside.

An armature-class unit waited at the top of the mountain, guarding an array of communications and data-storage gear that stood exposed to the stark light of the stars. Powerful as it was, it had no cover and could only fire in one direction at a time. Once all the smaller geth went down, we could fan out around the armature, keeping under cover, wearing its shields down from a distance. Finally Ashley brought the Mako out of cover and finished it off with a blast from the main gun.

For *Normandy* it stood as a great victory, especially after Tali tapped into the geth data core and recovered all manner of useful intelligence. Everyone celebrated as we returned to the extraction point.

Everyone but me. I spent the three hours of the battle wrecking geth, as coldly and efficiently as I could. I said nothing to anyone except in response to an order or a direct question. Even when we finished, I felt nothing but icy anger. I began to understand how Shepard felt about batarians. If I could have thrown a switch and destroyed every geth in existence, I might have been tempted to do it.

The blood didn’t thaw in my veins until I returned to the *Normandy* and was told Shepard had regained consciousness. I flew up to the medical bay without bothering to remove my armor or sidearm. There he lay, propped up into a half-seated position on his bed, sipping water through a straw while Dr. Chakwas used her instruments to examine him.

He glanced at me with his sky-blue eyes and smiled. And suddenly the universe seemed right again.
3 May 2183, Grissom System Space

*Normandy* dropped out of FTL, the massive blue bulk of Notanban off to one side, its large moon Solcrum looming just ahead. I watched the sky on a video feed, replacing the Mako’s exterior view.

“No significant drift,” came Joker’s voice from the bridge. “ETA just under five minutes.”

“Passive sensors confirm what we got from the geth archive on Maji,” said Shepard, also reporting from the bridge. “The main geth fleet is in orbit around the gas giant, but there’s some kind of coordinating signal being broadcast from this facility on Solcrum. Take that out and the Fifth Fleet has a clear shot.”

“Roger that, Commander. Don’t worry, we’ll get the job done,” said Kaidan from the weapons console.

“See to it, Kaidan. Hell, do a good enough job, I’ll give you *Normandy* and retire to the beach to drink Mai-Tais in peace and quiet.”

“That won’t work, sir. Give me *Normandy* and I’ll be in charge of approving your retirement papers.”

“Oh.” Silence for a moment. “Well, I’m sure I can think of something.”

Solcrum grew before us at a tremendous rate. Suddenly it no longer seemed a distant pearl in space. Instead it became a massive globe, looming gray and pockmarked in our path. A landscape with a frighteningly close horizon. Mountains reaching up to swat us out of the sky.

The Mako deployed. Ashley slammed the thrusters into full as we plummeted toward the surface. We still landed very rough, as she tried to minimize our time exposed to geth sensors.

“There are active sensors up ahead, but I don’t think we were detected,” I reported from the EWS console. “Joker’s piloting was extraordinary as usual. The geometry of our landing had us under the horizon from the geth facility the entire time.”

“Good,” said Kaidan with satisfaction. “Take us in, Ash.”

Ashley seemed to be a slightly better driver than Shepard. Of course, local conditions may have helped. Various ices made up most of the moon’s bulk, but the primary star’s heat had boiled away almost all the volatiles within a few kilometers of the surface, leaving behind a smooth surface of silicate rock.

Something about the active sensor traces bothered me. I ran a filtering algorithm to parse out different components of the signal. “Kaidan, I think there are armature-class units on the surface up ahead.”

“How many?”

“Hard to determine. Two at least.”

Kaidan called up a topographical map of the terrain in front of us. After a few moments, he glanced up at the exterior view and then turned to Ashley. “Turn left, fifteen degrees. Take us in where the crater rim forms that little peak. Stop right behind it.”
“Aye-aye,” she answered, turning as directed.

When we stopped, less than a kilometer from the geth facility, Kaidan turned to me. “We’re still not detected?”

“Not as far as I can tell. I think I can make a more definite report. There are two armatures down inside the crater, and several smaller geth platforms.”

“All right. Ash, Liara, and I will stay with the Mako. Garrus, Tali, Wrex, I want you all to get out here and move quietly up to the rim of the crater wall. Take up positions with sniper rifles. We’re going to move out into the crater at high speed and attract the attention of those armatures. As soon as we engage, start hitting them from behind, but be careful. Don’t expose yourselves to unnecessary risk.”

Kaidan waited for our friends to take up positions, Garrus waving down to us from his selected spot just out of sight from the geth facility. Then he nodded to Ashley.

The Mako roared into action, rounding the small peak and flying over the crater wall, the wheels leaving the surface for a few moments as we came into view.

I immediately saw the effect of weapons fire on our kinetic barriers. Several troopers attacked us with pulse rifles, two large bipedal geth fired rockets, and the armatures began to power up their plasma cannons. Ashley kept us moving at top speed, circling just inside the crater’s rim, jinking from time to time to dodge rocket or plasma strikes.

Kaidan traversed the turret, following one of the armatures and hitting it repeatedly with both the main gun and the coaxial cannon.

I saw the moment when our friends popped up over the rim wall and began taking shots at the geth from behind. They concentrated on the smaller geth platforms, hoping to knock them out quickly and leave the armatures without support. I had difficulty seeing how effective they were, but I did see one trooper, than another, suddenly twist and fall in the moon’s light gravity.

“Kaidan, one of the armatures is turning toward the snipers!” I tapped at my console to indicate which one.

“Ash, hard right.”

The turret traversed, both weapons hammering away as intensely as Kaidan could manage.

The armature suddenly wobbled, its shields down, and then it collapsed.

Wham! The Mako heeled over to the right, and my eyes widened as I saw the kinetic barriers simply collapse. The remaining armature must have scored a direct hit with its plasma cannon. I opened a console I rarely had occasion to use, and began to work on damage control.

“Liara?”

“The list is too long, Kaidan. Extensive damage.”

“The drive train is still working, the gun is still firing,” said Ashley.

“Point taken. Ash, whip us around the far side of the facility from that other armature, then do a hard hundred-eighty-degree turn and double back. We’ll see if we can surprise it.”
The Mako maneuvered violently, twice, and the enemy’s fire slackened. I used a few moments of quiet to improvise madly on the damage-control board. We heard a loud *hiss* and the lights flickered, as fire extinguishers activated in the electrical compartment.

“Damn. That armature is shrewd,” observed Kaidan.

“Big geth are smarter, LT. It was worth a try.”

The turret swiveled, making a loud grinding noise along the way, and the main gun fired once, then twice. The lights flickered again, hard, as Kaidan barely dodged another plasma bolt.

Suddenly the armature seemed to become confused, shaking in place and ceasing to track our movements. I was puzzled at first, but then I saw a bulky figure *standing* on the crater rim, silhouetted against the blue glow of Notanban.

“The armature’s shields are out!” I shouted. “Wrex hit it with a biotic pull and it’s lost control. Take it down!”

Kaidan pounced on his weapons console, and the main gun crashed again. The armature took a direct hit and flew into pieces.

“All targets down,” I announced.

“That was a little too close,” muttered Kaidan.

The snipers climbed down the crater wall. Well, at least Garrus and Tali climbed. Wrex simply *jumped* down, giving us the unusual sight of a krogan flying gracefully through space for long moments, kicking up a great plume of dust when he landed. Meanwhile Kaidan and I worked with the Mako’s automatic repair systems. Before long we had all the critical systems up and running again, especially including the kinetic barriers. We would limp to our extraction point, but at least we could fight again if we had to.

All of us convened at the entrance to the geth habitat. I found it strange to see such a thing here, as geth usually didn’t worry about raw vacuum. Still, the surface of Solcrum suffered great extremes of heat and radiation, and I suspected that even the geth would want shelter for sensitive equipment. We saw no airlock, only a simple hatch in the habitat’s side, big enough for one of the armatures to enter or leave. Tali hacked the lock and we moved inside.

The geth opened fire the moment we appeared, a whole squad of troopers and several larger bipedal platforms. Worse, we had no cover to speak of, nothing but a few pieces of machinery spaced around the outside of the central well. Our numbers was the only thing that saved us. The geth failed to focus their fire, and after the first second or two we spread out to both sides, moving as fast as we could avoid presenting a concentrated target.

Seeing little chance to take cover, Ashley, Garrus, and Wrex simply *attacked* the geth. The krogan in particular went into a roaring charge, as irresistible as an avalanche. His shields went down, he took hits to his armor, but nothing slowed him, and the geth he attacked simply *crumpled* when he struck. Ashley and Garrus showed less power but more grace, almost dancing their way across the open floor, turning so that no weak spots on their shields had time to give way.

Meanwhile the rest of us tried a new trick. Tali’s shields were already as tough as steel, and mine were not much weaker. I put up a barrier, and Kaidan stood close at hand so my biotic protection covered all three of us. Thus armored, with the geth distracted by our more aggressive partners, we could apply our usual tactics from out in the open. Tali’s overload charges knocked out geth shields,
Kaidan’s biotics sent unprotected geth flying through the air, and then my own warp fields lanced out to turn them into so much scrap metal.

“Just a moment,” said Tali after a few targets went down and the pressure began to decline. “I want to try something.”

Kaidan and I waited while the quarian did something elaborate with her omni-tool. Suddenly one of the geth troopers hesitated, turned . . . and began firing on its own partners.

“Hah!” she gloated. “I thought I could get into their friend-or-foe algorithms.”

“Nice going,” said Kaidan. “Now do it again.”

Before long, complete confusion ruled among the geth and we could seize the advantage. One last challenge remained: a very large bipedal platform with blood-red coloring and very tough shields and armor. It fired on Garrus, taking down his shields and almost breaking through his armor, but then Wrex charged in on its flank and knocked it to the ground. Ashley applied a shotgun at point-blank range, and then all was quiet.

Kaidan took charge. “Tali, Liara, find the transmitters so we can plant the demo charges. Ash, Garrus, Wrex, police up the place and look for anything else that might be of use. Make it snappy. They may already have reinforcements on the way.”

Tali and I soon found the source of the control signal we needed to disable. While Kaidan and Ashley placed demo charges, Tali continued to scan through the geth equipment. I noticed when she suddenly stopped, tapping furiously at her omni-tool.

“Keelah,” she breathed.

I moved over to her. “What is it, Tali?”

“It’s an archive,” she said. “Not just military or technological information, but cultural data. This must be a backup for all the geth runtimes currently in the fleet out in space.”

“Do geth have culture?”

“Apparently they do. Look at this.”

She called up an image with accompanying audio track: a beautiful bipedal creature standing on a stage, looking a little like an asari, a little like a human, a little like a turian, but not entirely like any of those. She (it was definitely a she) sang a melody of heart-stopping purity and sadness, followed by silence.

“What is that?” I wondered.

“A quarian,” she said softly. “From the time before the geth rebellion, while we still lived on Rannoch without any need for environment suits. I recognize the song. Shala’Raan, a friend of my family, she used to sing it to me when I was small.”

“Why would the geth keep it?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head. “This isn’t like anything I would have expected from the geth. If there’s more here . . .”

“Kaidan!” I called.
He turned toward us. “What’s up, Liara?”

“Tali has found something.”

The quarian explained quickly. “This is information critical to the Migrant Fleet, Kaidan. We’ve been searching for insight into the geth for centuries. What their culture is like if they have any, what their motives are, how they might have evolved since they drove us into exile. If I could download some of this . . .”

Kaidan frowned. “Tali, we may not have time.”

“Please, Kaidan. This could make an enormous difference for my people.”

“All right. Get to work downloading all you can. But if I call, you have to come right away.”

“Thank you!” She hurried to begin work.

“Alenko to Normandy,” Kaidan called. “What’s the situation? Do we have a little more time?”

“Not much,” came Shepard’s voice from the ship. “That facility must have gotten an alarm out. We see several geth ships peeling off from the main body and heading this way. ETA about ten minutes.”

“Time until the Fifth Fleet arrives?”

“About the same. You don’t want to be on the ground when all that comes down.”

“Understood. We’ll be ready.” Kaidan turned. “Five minutes, Tali, and then we have to blow this place and run.”

“I can download a lot of data in five minutes,” said the quarian.

Her word was good. Within five minutes she had filled her omni-tool with data, all properly scanned for geth malware and compressed as tightly as it would go. She had also filled mine, Kaidan’s, Garrus’s, and half of Ashley’s before Kaidan ruled that we simply had no more time.

We ran for the entrance. The moment the hatch closed behind us, Kaidan triggered the explosives. We didn’t hear anything, but felt the sharp concussion of the explosion as a shockwave passing through the ground.

All of us piled into the Mako. Ashley powered up the engine, engaged the drive train . . . and nothing happened.

“Liara?”

I called up the damage-control interface. “Unclear. Some of the diagnostic sensors in the undercarriage aren’t responding.”

“Spirits,” cursed Garrus. He jumped to the hatch and flung himself back outside, Tali following right behind him.

I tried not to think about them working on the drive train while the power plant was still engaged.

“Would it help if I got out and pushed?” inquired Wrex.

I touched controls. “Nothing at all. Completely dark.”

“Okay, that eliminates a bunch of possibilities. Tali . . .”

“On it,” said the quarian. “Come on, you little bosh’tet.”

Suddenly my panel lit up, whole banks of diagnostic sensors reporting for the first time. “There! Circuits 23-Alpha through 23-Gamma are red, but the rest are showing green.”

“Easy fix,” said Tali.

We waited for ten seconds, then twenty, and then my panel turned green across the board.

“Done!” shouted Garrus. “Get ready, Ash!”

“Too late,” said Kaidan calmly.

I glanced at the external view. “Oh, Goddess.”

Three geth ships rose over the horizon, moments away from dropping enough combat platforms to overwhelm us.

The hatch slammed behind Garrus and Tali. “Go!”

“Roger that,” said Ashley, flinging the Mako into forward motion.

The dropships soared up into the sky, almost reaching the zenith . . . and then one exploded in a blaze of plasma.

“Get ‘em, Shepard!” shouted Ashley in triumph.

*Normandy* soared across the sky, firing its main guns at another dropship. The attack instantly smashed through the geth ship’s kinetic barriers and sent it raining down in fragments on the surface of Solcrum. The third dropship veered off and fled frantically for the horizon.

“You’re clear,” said Shepard’s voice over the radio. “You cut that a little close, Kaidan.”

“Just giving you the opportunity to be big damn heroes, *Normandy*.”

“Much obliged. See you at the extraction point.”

We drove back in the direction of Notanban, where it hung low over the horizon.

I caught a flicker of motion on the external view, a tiny flash of light in the space between us and the gas giant. Then another. Then a wave of motion, hundreds of flashes of light against the star-scattered backdrop.

Starships, dropping out of FTL in formation across thousands of kilometers of space, opening fire on the geth fleet.

“Look,” I suggested, and sent the image to everyone else’s panel.

Thus we saw Admiral Hackett, humanity’s hammer of vengeance for Eden Prime, as he fought the opening stages of the great Battle of the Armstrong Nebula. We watched in silence, even Ashley stealing glances as she drove, until *Normandy* swept us up and took us to join the fight.
3 May 2183, Interstellar Space

The Battle of the Armstrong Nebula counted as a tremendous victory for the Alliance. It didn’t hold the record as the largest battle fought by Alliance forces up to that time – that honor went to Second Shanxi in 2157. To this day it still stands as one of the most one-sided victories the Alliance has ever won.

Deprived of the control signal being broadcast from Solcrum, the geth failed to work together. They moved sluggishly, easy prey for a sudden ruthless attack. Admiral Hackett destroyed over a hundred enemy ships and sent the rest fleeing for the nearest mass relay, at the human cost of only three frigates and a cruiser. Any invasion the geth might have been planning withered on the vine.

When news of the battle spread back to the home worlds, humanity broke out in celebration.

I watched news reports over the extranet, wondering whether the Normandy and her commander would get due credit. In the end, the Alliance gave me a pleasant surprise. Admiral Hackett clearly stood as the hero of the day, but the Navy didn’t stint its praise of other officers who had done well. Shepard and Kaidan both received mention in a number of news stories, and I heard talk of decorations for both of them. I suspected Shepard would take that in stride, having already received some of the Alliance’s highest military honors, but the exposure would certainly do Kaidan’s career no harm.

Normandy stayed in the field and took no part in the festivities. Humans have an evocative metaphor for this stage of a military campaign: mopping up. Admiral Hackett sent us after stragglers and refugees, attempting to render his victory more secure and complete.

Once we rose into FTL, Shepard did stand down all but a skeleton crew, authorizing an on-board celebration. Then he “made the rounds,” and for once I toured the entire ship at his side, wanting to share this moment of triumph.

I also wanted to watch over him. Shepard had barely emerged from the medical bay in time to command the ship during our assault on Solcrum and the following battle. It was clear he had overridden Dr. Chakwas’s objections to do that much. His expression and posture projected confidence for his crew, but I saw him moving carefully, concealing a certain amount of pain. I didn’t say a word while he moved through the ship, but I determined that he would go to bed as soon as possible, even if I had to fight very unfairly to get him there.

The Navy crew set up a cheerful party on the crew deck, with plenty of beer, music, vids, and card games. The Marines held their own rowdy celebration in their ready room. In contrast, we found Tali almost alone in the engineering compartment, talking quietly over a game of chess with Lieutenant Adams.

“Shepard. Liara.” Tali rose and greeted us warmly.

Shepard smiled and nodded to her. “Good evening, Tali. I’m surprised to see you down here. You usually like crew gatherings.”

“I know. I’m just not in the mood tonight, and Engineer Adams needed someone to help him babysit the drive core.”
The engineer chuckled. “Not only that, I think I’m the only one on board still willing to play Tali without a handicap.”

“You’ve got me there,” Shepard agreed. “I’m no good at chess.”

Tali moved closer. “Shepard, I want to thank you for supporting Kaidan’s decision about the geth data. I hope you don’t get in trouble for letting me take a copy back to the Migrant Fleet.”

Shepard patted the quarian on one shoulder. “Don’t worry about that. We wouldn’t have had the data if you hadn’t discovered it and worked so hard to acquire it. I think I can convince the Admiralty that it was yours to begin with, and we should be thankful you let us have a copy.”

“If you say so,” she said, still uncertain. “My people will have years of work to do, analyzing and understanding all of what we discovered down there. I’ve already spoken to my father, and although he would never admit it, he’s very impressed.”

“Oh?”

Tali made her voice deep and gruff for a moment. “This is quite satisfactory, Tali. That’s Rael’Zorah for you did a wonderful job.”

“I suppose that means a successful Pilgrimage?”

“Better than I expected. Better than anyone expected.”

Shepard nodded. “Does that mean you’ll be going home soon?”

She cocked her head and looked up at him for a long moment. “No, Shepard. You won’t get rid of me that easily,” she said seriously. “Once Saren is defeated, I’ll think about returning to the Fleet, but for now there’s nothing more important.”

She hides it well, but she’s infatuated with him too, I realized. I glanced at him and saw nothing but friendly concern in his face. And he has no idea. Thank the Goddess for oblivious human males. Tali, I love you like a sister, but you are getting no help from me on this score.

As we returned to the lift I said lightly, “By my count you have now seen everyone on board the Normandy. Your next mission will be best carried out in your quarters.”

He gave me a speculative look.

I tilted my head back and gave him my best aristocratic stare. “No, that was not a clumsy asari attempt to propose a liaison. You need rest.”

“I might have known. If an asari proposes a liaison, there’s not going to be anything clumsy about it.”

“It seems that the human can be taught.”

“All right. With both you and Dr. Chakwas on the warpath, I know to exercise the better part of valor.”

He got his revenge once the lift doors closed. Suddenly I found myself backed against the wall, with a very persistent human crowding into my personal space. The kiss was very comprehensive . . . but he also knew to the second exactly how long the lift took to move between decks. When the doors opened onto the crew deck, all the celebrants saw him standing straight, unruffled, and a good meter
away from me. If anyone noticed the flush that turned my face a deep azure, they said nothing aloud.

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6 May 2183, Blue Mountains/Eletania

The planet looked beautiful enough to break the heart: deep blue skies with fluffy white clouds, perfect golden-white sunlight, and rich green foliage. I wanted to emerge from the Mako and run free across the hills and meadows. No doubt the air would taste wonderful . . . aside from the spores and micro-organisms drifting in it, rapidly and painfully toxic to any non-native life.

I vowed to keep my hardsuit on and sealed.

“Shepard, I’m seeing some very strange readings,” I reported as the Mako descended out of the sky.

“How so?”

“There’s a signal emanating from the mountain range off to our left, about five kilometers from our LZ. High frequency, densely modulated. I don’t know why we didn’t notice it from orbit.”

“Is it geth?”

“I don’t think so. It’s not in a band we’ve ever seen the geth use. It’s also nowhere near the band used by the probe we’re here to recover.”

Admiral Hackett had sent us after an Alliance reconnaissance probe that had been observing geth movements and communications after the battle. When the probe turned back toward Alliance space, the geth detected and attacked it, forcing it to make an emergency landing on uninhabited Eletania. The admiral wanted us to recover the probe’s data module, which might carry intelligence vital to the planning of our next campaign.

Meanwhile, Shepard had his own reasons for wanting more intelligence data. For far too long, we had heard nothing of either Saren or his flagship, *Sovereign*. Shepard worried that Saren had taken no part in the Armstrong Nebula campaign. Were the geth operating independently of Saren when they occupied the cluster? Or had Saren sent the geth there, eventually sacrificing them, in pursuit of some scheme of his own?

Shepard grew impatient to come to grips with his enemy. In truth, so did we all.

“Let’s put that down as worth investigating later,” Shepard decided. “We need to recover that data module first, before any geth beat us to it.”

“Agreed,” I said, but I marked the location of the other signal on our map for future reference.

The crashed probe was easy to locate. Unfortunately, when we emerged from the Mako and went to examine the wreckage, the data module was missing. Kaidan bent close to look at the housing where the module should have been, and grunted with surprise. “It didn’t fall out or get broken off. Looks like someone *stole* it.”

“Damn pyjaks,” said Wrex.

Shepard frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

“Pyjaks,” stated the krogan. “They’re little primates, curious, with sharp eyes and clever fingers. They breed like vermin, they poke into everything, they love stealing little pieces of technology, and
they crap on anything they can’t eat or use. Kind of remind me of what your ancestors must have been like, Shepard.”

“He ha,” Shepard said without mirth. “I thought pyjaks came from Tuchanka.”

“No, they’ve just settled in and made themselves at home there. They originally come from this planet. About a century ago some turians tried to set up a mining colony here, and a few merchant ships came by occasionally. One of the merchant captains must have picked up a few breeding pairs of pyjaks as stowaways. He dropped them on Tuchanka by accident. Next time that captain came by, the clans drowned him in a barrel of pyjak dung.”

Shepard looked around. “I see what you mean,” he said, pointing.

In the soft earth, we all saw a row of little three-toed footprints.

“Guess we get to do this the hard way,” grumbled Wrex.

He was right. Over the next six hours we visited several pyjak colonies, growing very tired of the little primates. Finally we found a colony next to an old turian mining facility, where the pyjaks had developed the habit of adorning themselves with little pieces of metal and wire.

“Great,” growled Ashley. “They’ve already invented bling. Fifty thousand years from now these guys will be the galaxy’s dominant culture.”

“Well, they’ve got the necessary poo-flinging skills down already,” observed Garrus, dodging a small brown missile.

Finally, some distance inside the mine shaft, we found an enterprising little fellow still carrying the data module in one hand. He screeched and bit Shepard’s armored hand when we went to relieve him of it.

After that, the geth attack was almost a relief.

We emerged from the mine shaft to find the pyjaks all in full flight, and a squad of geth troopers charging up the hill at us. Shepard snapped into action, the rest of us only a fraction of a second behind.

I don’t think the geth expected to meet so much resistance. They stopped dead, their ocular petals spreading in surprise as they stared up the slope at Shepard, Ashley, Garrus, and Wrex. Our soldiers opened fire, three assault rifles and a massive shotgun tearing through their shields. Kaidan and I had plenty of targets to choose from, using biotic force to fling damaged geth far into the air. The battle barely lasted two minutes.

“Damn, that was just enough to whet the appetite,” said Wrex. “Anyone mind if I shoot a few pyjaks as a cool-down?”

Shepard shook his head. “No shooting the native life, even if they are annoying.”

“Not like they wouldn’t replace the dead inside a week,” muttered the krogan. “Nothing you don’t need a microscope to see should breed that fast.”

We clambered back into the Mako, Kaidan securing the data module in a locked compartment.

“Do we have time to investigate that other signal?” I asked.
Shepard turned toward the distant mountains. “Sure, I think it’s worth the effort. It might be a distress call . . . or who knows what else?”

We found it a difficult drive. A clever driver could perform absurd feats of terrain-handling in the Mako. Even so, some of the slopes in those mountains almost surpassed even Shepard’s skill. The source of that signal hid in one of the most inaccessible locations for hundreds of kilometers around.

Finally, just as Elatania’s sun began to set, we came down into a narrow valley. Shepard stopped the Mako, and all of us simply stared at the external view for a moment.

We saw a broad circular platform, surrounded by six slender uprights of various heights, all apparently built of some pale stone. A mirror-surfaced sphere, not quite two meters in diameter, hovered over the center of the platform. If the sphere had any physical supports, we could not see them.

Shepard finally broke the silence. “Liara, is that . . .”

“A Prothean device? It certainly appears to be, but how could it possibly be intact after all this time?”

“Only one way to find out.”

We climbed out of the Mako and approached the platform. Everyone examined it in silence, even Wrex looking curious and intent.

The material of the platform and uprights seemed to be simple stone, but upon examination it turned out to be extraordinarily hard, harder even than diamond. Despite the probable age of the device, the platform and uprights showed almost no sign of weathering. Somehow they remained clean of dirt or organic debris. I saw no obvious way to estimate the date of the site. It could be Prothean, or it could predate the Protheans by millennia, there was no way to tell.

Kaidan approached the mirror-sphere and examined it on all sides, even getting down on the ground to look under it. “No supports, no wires. It’s just floating.”

“Liara, what do you think?” asked Shepard quietly.

“I think I want a year-long expedition and a team of a dozen specialists.”

“You can have that after the war. What do you think right now?”

“Best guess is that this is a Prothean data storage center, designed for truly long-term archival storage. It was placed here where it was likely to go undisturbed for thousands or even millions of years. Perhaps it’s a sort of time capsule.”

“It seems strange that this place wasn’t discovered a long time ago. Eletania has been explored before, and there was that turian mining facility for a while. Why didn’t anyone else detect that signal?”

I looked at him. “Perhaps there was no signal until recently.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“Have you ever wondered why the device on Eden Prime was called a beacon?”

“I sure did,” said Ashley. “It’s not like it sent a signal out or anything.”

“None that you could easily detect,” I corrected her. “The other beacons recovered by the Council
races have all been inoperative, but we have discovered they were once networked. They used quantum-entanglement technology to communicate with other devices, even across interstellar distances.”

Shepard nodded. “So you’re saying when Saren and I interacted with the device on Eden Prime, it might have triggered reactions in Prothean technology elsewhere. Even thousands of light-years away.”

“That would have been well within Prothean capabilities as we understand them,” I agreed.

“So that might have been what prompted this time capsule to open. What do you think it wants to tell us?”

“I’m not sure. Let me work for a little while.”

Shepard called the others away from the device, giving me room to investigate without interference. I walked all around the platform, carefully examining it and each of the uprights. I used my omni-tool to scan the area minutely.

*There, I thought. The material of the platform is slightly different in that spot.*

An elliptical region, roughly one meter long and half that deep, slightly darker than the rest of the stone, lay directly east of the floating sphere. After considering for a long moment, I simply stepped onto the darkened area, facing the sphere with my feet firmly planted on each focus of the ellipse.

We all heard a low humming sound. The sphere rose smoothly until it floated just above my height. A holographic control panel appeared in the air, within easy reach in front of me.

“Whoa,” said Kaidan.

“So far so good,” I murmured. “After fifty thousand years, it’s still responsive.”

Unfortunately I ran into a dead end. None of the control sequences I had worked out at other Prothean sites seemed to do anything. The control panel and sphere simply ignored me. None of my friends could suggest any way to proceed.

It grew dark, except for stars and the light of the planet’s rings high above. The others spoke in low tones, not wanting to disturb me. I could see Shepard preparing to break the bad news to me: we had to return to the *Normandy* and hope the site was still here later.

Then a set of characters on the control panel caught my eye. Fourth Age Prothean script, and it looked somehow familiar.

Suddenly I remembered where I had seen something similar. I opened my utility pouch and recovered an item I had been carrying for weeks, had almost forgotten about. A smooth cylinder, small enough to fit comfortably in my palm, made of a metallic material I could not identify, carrying a fine inscription along one side. A gift from Sha’ira.

I used my omni-tool to shine a bright light on the object, and then compared its inscription to the character sequence on the control panel. Sure enough, one character-group at the beginning of the inscription matched.

An interface area existed on the control panel, next to the characters I had spotted. I reached out and touched the cylinder to the control panel in just that spot.
The mirrored sphere suddenly rang, a deep musical tone that rolled out across the valley floor.

“Liara!” shouted Shepard.

A blinding flash of light . . .
To Know the Ways of Heaven

“Liara!” shouted Shepard.

A blinding flash of light . . .

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Upper Paleolithic Era, Ksar Akil Rock Shelter, Lebanon/Earth

. . . In the third summer after I mated with Ru, my brother came to visit us.

I sat in the sunlight in front of our cave. I had a deer-skin laid out in front of me as a place to work. I had a pile of shells, from the little snails, not the ones we usually ate. I had a stone drill. I drilled holes in the shells. I turned them into beads. The beads could be strung on a piece of sinew and worn around the neck.

We liked the beads. They helped us be the People, not like anyone else in the world. When we met others, they saw our beads even from a long distance. They knew we were the People. But the delicate necklaces broke easily. Sometimes they had to be replaced. That meant I had to keep making more beads.

“Anar!”

I looked up and saw my brother walking along the stream below our cave. He wore a finely made goat-skin tunic. He carried a bag which I knew held his trade goods. He walked with the aid of a long stone-tipped spear.

I stood up to greet him. “Kalo. It is good to see you.”

“You look well. Living in one place is good for you.”

“This place is good for me. Ru is good for me.”

Kalo and I had the same father, but different mothers. That may seem a strange thing to know. We looked much alike. Both of us looked like our father. Also from our father we each had the same spirit of wandering. This spirit drove Kalo to walk the earth as our father had done. He loved meeting strangers, talking and trading with them. In me the spirit lived more easily, but it sometimes wandered into strange pathways while my body rested at ease in our shelter. My thoughts differed from those of the People. So I always enjoyed seeing my brother, who shared this spirit with me.

“I have a trouble, Anar.”

I laughed. “When do you not have a trouble, Kalo?”

“This is a bad trouble. May I stay with your People for a while?”

“What has happened?”

He hunkered down and set his bag of trade goods to one side. He did not let go of his spear. I saw that he was afraid. “I was up north, along the coast of the sea.”

“You have spoken of the north.”

“Many days of walking from here, in the north, a large cave shelters a numerous people. They live as
you do here, hunting deer and goats, taking shellfish from the sea. Our father visited there long ago. We may have brothers or sisters there.”

“I do not see how this is a trouble.”

“I traveled there in the spring. A fight happened. I had to kill a man.”

I frowned deeply. “This is not good. What caused the fight?”

“A woman.”

“With you there is always a woman. Sometimes more than one. How does this cause a fight?”

“One of the men thought the woman belonged to him. He did not want to share. He wanted my life. I decided not to let him take it.”

“I see.” I folded my arms and stared at him, to show my anger. “You should know better than to choose a woman already mated to someone else. It causes anger. Many women have no mates. Choose one of them.”

“This woman had no mate! She told me so. How was I to know she lied?”

I sighed. “Perhaps the man made a mistake. Perhaps he only wanted to mate with the woman.”

“Perhaps, but now he is dead. Others from his band follow my track. I cannot wander alone until they have gone home.”

“So you bring this trouble to us.”

“It is not such a large trouble that we cannot deal with it together.”

“You have been unwise. But I cannot turn my brother away. You may stay with us until this trouble passes.”

“I am grateful, brother.”

I grunted. “You can show your gratitude by not bargaining for your goods so hard this time.”

I gathered my deer-skin up, with my shells and tools inside. We walked up to the cave together, to where the women and children stayed during the day.

Ru rose to meet us. I felt my spirit move in gladness when I saw her.

Ru looked nothing like the People. She had red hair, like the ochre clay we use to tan hides, not black like the People. She had pale skin, like moonlight, not dark earth brown like the People. She had a strange shape, sturdy and heavy and strong, like her totem beast the rhinoceros. She had a strange spirit too. She spoke little. She took no interest in the doings of women around the fire. Instead she hunted like a man and guarded the children against predators. She showed great strength and skill at these tasks.

She had come from the Strong Ones, the Old Ones, those who lived in the land long before the People arrived. She had come to stay in our shelter after some trouble in her own band.

She was Ru. The sight of her always made my spirit glad. She and I belonged together.

“Anar,” she said, smiling broadly. “Kalo.”
I touched her and smiled. “Ru. Kalo will be staying with us for a while.”

She grunted in agreement.

I looked into her eyes. “Kalo is in danger. Men hunt him.”

Ru frowned. “What men?”

“Men from the north.”

“Not the People.”

“No.”

She nodded and went to fetch her spear. “I will watch.”

Kalo watched her go. “Brother, I must ask. What is it like, being with a woman of the Old Ones?”

“I suppose it is much like being with any woman.”

“She looks so strange. She is so strong.”

I grinned. “She is soft enough when we lie down in our place by the fire.”

“She has had no children with you?”

“No.” I shrugged my shoulders. “She wants children. We have tried many times. The spirits will it otherwise.”

He scratched his beard in thought. “In my travels I have heard of others of our kind who have mated with the Old Ones.”

“It cannot happen often. The Old Ones are few. Most of them stay away from our kind.”

“That is true. But here is what I meant to say. When a man of the Old Ones mates with a woman of our kind, sometimes there are children. When a man of our kind mates with a woman of the Old Ones, there are no children.”

“I never knew that.” I felt sadness, thinking that Ru might never have children with me. Would she choose to go back to the Old Ones if she knew?

“It is not an easy thing to notice. Only a wanderer would speak to enough different people to discover it.”

I shook my head. “It is not important. Ru and I are mates. That will not change. The great spirits will decide what becomes of us.”

In the night I climbed up to the place where Ru always went to watch. Even under the stars she could see a long way in all directions. She had eyes keen and unafraid of the darkness. Beasts and wild men never surprised the People while Ru watched.

“Anar,” she greeted me.

I sat down beside her and said nothing. We rarely spoke. Our spirits spoke for us through gestures, through touch, through the glance of her eyes on mine. It was enough. There in her watch-place, she set her spear aside for a while and opened her body to me. We pleased one another. I kept my sad
thoughts to myself.

The next day the men of the People came back from the sea. They carried bags full of shellfish. They also carried trouble in their eyes. Strangers followed them, three men with spears, men who scarred their faces to make themselves look fierce.

Edon led the men of the People back to our place. He hurried over to me as soon as he saw me waiting. “These strangers come from the north,” he told me. “They say your brother has been among them. They say he killed a man of their people.”

“I know, Edon.”

He stared at me. “You know?”

“Kalo is here. He told me the story. He said the man attacked him. We had better be ready to fight.”

“Why should we fight for Kalo? He is not one of the People.”

I scowled in anger. “When he comes with well-made stone tools, we welcome him. When he comes with fine red ochre, we welcome him. When he comes with stories of faraway lands and people, we welcome him. Now that he comes with trouble, we should turn him away? The People will not do that. If the People do that, they are not my People after all. I will go and live elsewhere. Ru will go and live elsewhere.”

Edon looked worried. “You are like your brother. You make a hard bargain.”

“Go and get the other men ready to fight. If we are ready to fight, perhaps we will not have to fight.”

“That is always true.” He left at a run, shouting for the others.

Ru came up beside me as the strangers arrived. She already had her spear with her, and she handed my spear to me.

The strangers looked grim and fierce. Ru also looked grim and fierce. They stared at her, seeing one of the Strong Ones, the Old Ones.

“You are here to speak of Kalo,” I said to them.

“That is true,” said their leader. His words were strange and hard to understand. “Kalo killed a man of our band. We have come to kill Kalo, so our kinsman’s ghost will not walk the night and drive us mad.”

“You will not kill Kalo.”

“I think we will. Perhaps Kalo is hiding among your women. Sooner or later he will come out. We will hunt him. We will chase him down. We will kill him.”

The other strangers shouted, as if to put us in fear.

I looked at Ru. She showed no fear. Because she showed no fear, I felt no fear.

“Perhaps Kalo will hide in our cave for a long time,” I said. “You are far from home. How will you live?”

“We will hunt,” said the leader. “We will take shellfish from the sea. We will live quite well.”
“This is our land, our range.” I waved one hand widely to indicate all the lands between the hills and the sea. “Would you steal the game that the spirits have given to us?”

“If the game is so easy to steal, the spirits must not care for you.”

I could not help myself. I laughed within the silence of my spirit. This bandit was another of the New People, the ones with wandering spirits, the ones whose thoughts twisted and turned. He was like my brother or me.

Then I heard footsteps on the path leading down from the cave. There walked Elon, and other men of the People. All of them carried spears.

There walked Kalo. He carried no spear, not even his own. “Tarak, have you come to kill me?”

The leader – Tarak – was surprised to see my brother. “I thought you a coward, Kalo, to run and hide among these people.”

“Perhaps I was,” said Kalo. “No longer. I cannot ask my brother’s people to fight for me.”

“We will fight for Kalo,” I said, “whether he wishes it or not.”

At my side, Ru grimaced and made a growling noise deep in her chest.

“No, Anar.” My brother stepped in front of me, in front of the strangers and their spears. “Tarak, I wish to speak. When I am done speaking, you may kill me if you wish.”

Tarak frowned. “Speak, then.”

Kalo pointed to the sun. “The great spirit of the sun is my witness.” He pointed to the distant sea. “The great spirits of the sea are my witnesses.” He pointed to the earth beneath our feet. “The great spirits of the earth are my witnesses. They will all turn against me if I lie. I did not wish to kill Berut. I did not seek him out. I did not lie in wait for him. I did not hold anger toward him in my spirit. But when I lay down with the woman Enat, he grew enraged. He sought me out. He lay in wait for me. He held anger toward me in his spirit. He thrust at me with his spear. He slashed at me with his knife. I defended myself, as a man must if he wishes to live. That is how Berut died.”

Tarak stood silent for a long time. “That is not what Enat said.”

“Enat told me she had no mate. Enat says whatever she must to get what she wants, or to avoid trouble.”

One of the other strangers laughed. “That is true. That is how Enat is.”

Tarak leaned on his spear, no longer so ready for a fight. “Perhaps Berut’s ghost will not walk the night after all. But hard feeling walks among my band. Kalo, if you return to us, you will cause more trouble.”

Kalo sighed. “That is too bad. I have always enjoyed visiting your band. I have always profited by trading with your band. But if I must stay away, I will do that. The earth is very wide. I can wander elsewhere.”

Tarak looked at his kinsmen. One after the other, they nodded. “So be it,” he said. “We will return home. Kalo will wander in the lands of other bands from now on.”

“Stay for a time,” I offered. “We will share food with you. Kalo will give you gifts. You will not go
home hungry or poor.”

Kalo looked at me with anger in his eyes, but he nodded when I refused to give way.

“That is well said. We will visit until tomorrow,” said Tarak.

That night, we feasted on venison and shellfish meat with Kalo and the strangers from the north. Kalo gave Tarak some of his best trade goods as a gift. We sat out under the stars, under the great bridge of light in the sky, and told stories of our ancestors and the spirits. Goodwill walked with the strangers when they left in the morning.

Kalo left a few days later, his wandering spirit calling him away once more. I never saw my brother again. I never knew what accident claimed his life. Perhaps he simply wandered into distant lands and found something he had never found before: a home.

The next spring we knew that Kalo’s spirit would be with us for a long time to come. Two infants arrived, a male and a female, and they both looked like my father, like Kalo, like me. Ru sometimes pretended to growl at me when she saw these infants. But I knew she understood the truth.

She never truly doubted me. She remained with me all the days of her life . . .

7 May 2183, Interstellar Space

I drifted in darkness.

The memories, the memories, long years of that ancient human’s life, delivered to me in an instant. They overwhelmed me.

At first I couldn’t be sure, from moment to moment, whether I was Anar or Liara. The effect faded very slowly. It took a long time before I could think without confusion.

Is this what the true joining is like? To inherit the experience of someone else’s life, to know him so intimately it’s like having a second self?

I knew that I would forever more be in some measure Anar, just as I was already Liara.

Do I want that with Shepard?

Yes.

Some of the memories seemed very strange. Experiencing the struggle for survival in an ancient time, using simple tools of stone and bone, that would be familiar to any archaeologist. Anar’s emotional life presented a very different challenge. Suddenly I knew what it was like to be human. Far stranger, I knew what it was like to be male. Anar’s reflections on the world around him, his loyalty to his People and his brother, his simple but fierce love for Ru, none of that came under the archaeologist’s jurisdiction. To do it justice, I would have to be a poet instead.

I remembered what Anar had done with Ru, how his passion for her had expressed itself physically. The thought of being the object of such a physical desire, the thought of being with Shepard in that specific way . . .

Do I want that with Shepard as well?

Yes. Goddess, yes.
I wondered if Anar was one of Shepard’s ancestors. Most likely not, unless he fathered children before or after the Protheans came to monitor his life. Of course Kalo sired a number of children, won a major victory in the human male’s battle to spread his genes as widely as possible. Perhaps Anar had won as well, by protecting some of his brother’s children until they could pass down that shared inheritance.

Shepard and I might one day have children, but they would not be of his blood either. His personality, his character might be passed on, but not his genes. Not through me.

Anar and Ru. Shepard and Liara. The willingness to love the Other, to make a life together, to fight for a future for everyone, even if one’s own blood would not benefit. It was the same story, across fifty thousand years of time.

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. I remembered Shepard reading that from his sacred book. It was a passage that obviously held great meaning for him. It defined him.

“Oh,” I murmured, feeling as if my heart would burst.

Someone heard me.

“Dr. Chakwas. Dr. Chakwas! I think she’s coming around.”

A familiar voice. I opened my eyes.

Alexei Dubyansky leaned over me, looking concerned. I smiled at him, and then pushed myself up to a seated position on the diagnostic bed. He hurried to put his hands on my shoulders and steady me as I rose.

“You gave us quite a scare, Liara,” said the doctor. “Although I suppose we should be used to the effects of Prothean technology by now.”

I rubbed my face with both hands. “If that was anything like what Shepard experienced with the beacon on Eden Prime . . . no wonder it had such a profound effect on him. I’m still trying to sort it all out.”

“I’m surprised you can sort it out at all. The commander still can’t understand most of what he saw.”

“We asari may have an advantage,” I suggested. “Our ability to meld with others means that our brains are adapted to decode their sensory impressions and memories. Besides, this Prothean device seems to have been in good working order, not malfunctioning like the one on Eden Prime.”

The door to the medical bay opened. Shepard came in, almost at a run. “Liara, you’re okay.”

“I think I will be,” I agreed. I took his hands in my own, not caring who might be there to see. “How long has it been?”

“About fifteen hours. We’re in FTL, on our way to the next mission.” Shepard lifted one hand to his lips. “You scared us, even though I had some idea what had happened. We guessed you would come out of it on your own, we just didn’t know how long it would take.”

“What happened to the site?”

“The whole thing reset as soon as you disengaged from it. Everything looked fine when we left.” He reached into a pocket and held out a small object, the Prothean cylinder Sha’ira had given me. “We
recovered this.”

“Good. Someday I want to go back there and study the site in more detail. There’s no limit to what it might teach us.”

“What did you see?”

“I saw your people, primitive humans, as they were while the Protheans were watching them.” I shook my head. “It would take a long time to explain. I don’t think it’s relevant to our mission in any case.”

“You’ll have to tell me more when we have the time. For now, you need to rest up and be ready. The data module we recovered from Eletania gave us a breakthrough. We know where Saren and Sovereign were about a week ago, while the Fifth Fleet prepared to attack the geth.”

“Where?”

“Feros.”
“Feros Control, this is *SSV Normandy*, asking for a vector and a berth, over.”

No response from the ground, as *Normandy* continued to approach the coordinates we had for the Feros spaceport. I could see Joker glancing up at Shepard, then back to his control panel.

“Feros Control, this is *SSV Normandy*, asking for a vector and a berth, over.”

I looked out one of the viewports, and saw possibly the strangest *habitable* planet we had yet visited.

Feros had an atmosphere composed of a hospitable *mixture* of nitrogen, oxygen, and argon. Unfortunately the atmospheric *pressure* at surface level, far below the world-girdling cloud cover, rose to over five times the habitable standard. Anyone unlucky enough to find themselves on the surface without protective gear would expire of oxygen narcosis in minutes.

On the other hand, during their Third Age the Protheans had come to Feros and built enormous skyscrapers and arcologies, soaring several kilometers into the sky, creating space in which millions of their people could safely live. The Prothean extinction had destroyed most of these structures, but dozens remained more or less intact.

The Feros colony consisted of a few hundred humans, clinging to the upper floors of three adjacent Prothean buildings. ExoGeni Corporation scientists made up most of the population, there to study the unusual life-forms existing in and below the cloud layer. Reading between the lines, I could guess that the results so far had been disappointing. No profitable breakthroughs had appeared in the news, nothing to justify the expense of supporting a colony in such a strange and remote place.

“Feros Control, this is *SSV Normandy*, asking for a vector and a berth, over.”

Suddenly we heard a burst of static from the radio, and a male human voice. “. . . Zhu’s Hope . . . under siege . . . synthetics . . . come quickly.”

I frowned. “The geth are *still* attacking the colony?”

“Joker, there’s no sign of *Sovereign*?” demanded Shepard.

“None at all,” Joker stated. “Best guess is that Saren has already come and gone.”

“Then why are the geth still here and attacking? Simply to eliminate the human population?”

“Got me, Commander.”

“The other question that comes to my mind,” I interrupted, “is why Saren would be interested in this planet at all? What objective would an attack here help him attain?”

“No idea. It *is* a Prothean world. Maybe he was looking for a clue to the location of the Conduit.”

“We’re speculating for lack of data,” I said, dissatisfied.

“You’re right.” Shepard turned away from the sight of Feros looming ahead. “Kaidan, I want the full Marine detachment armed and ready, up here in ten minutes. Get Garrus, Wrex, and Tali up here too. Assume a hot landing zone. As soon as *Normandy* has a berth, we’re going to storm ashore and
secure a beachhead.”

“Aye-aye,” said Kaidan, turning to rush for the staging deck.

“I had better go arm myself as well,” I murmured.

“Liara . . .”

“Don’t say it, Shepard. My place is with you.”

“Not in the front lines. Not in an assault situation,” he said. It was an order.

“Aye-aye,” I said, echoing Kaidan.

I ran.

As it happened, we met no geth in the makeshift docking bay when Normandy arrived. Shepard, Ashley, and Petty Officer Bayard led the assault, at first meeting no resistance. That gave us time to position ourselves and be ready for any counterattack.

Tali and I had just emerged from the airlock, the last to deploy, when the geth arrived in force. A rolling series of explosions gave us our first warning, as a barrage of rockets slammed into the cover used by Shepard’s front line. Fortunately the geth had no line of sight on the Normandy’s airlock, else they would have targeted the ship at its weakest point. As it was, Tali and I had to scramble from cover to cover to reach a position where we could aid in the defense. Behind us, the airlock closed and the ship’s kinetic barriers went up.

We eventually settled behind a stack of crates labeled EXOGENI – BIOLOGICAL MATERIALS – SEALED. From that position we could peek out and see the geth up ahead, fiercely engaged with Shepard and his leading squad of Marines. Garrus had somehow clambered up onto the stack, making a tiny sniper’s nest for himself at the top.

“Better keep your heads down,” he advised us. “The geth have a sniper somewhere back there, and it’s very talented.”

I looked out, and immediately saw a laser targeting me. I ducked back at once. “I see what you mean.”

“We can’t support Shepard if we can’t see the battlefield,” complained Tali.

Garrus only made a one-handed gesture, demanding patience. Suddenly he turned his sniper rifle a few degrees to the left and fired. “Scratch one! Ladies, your wish is my command.”

We went to work.

Tali used her new techniques for hacking the geth friend-or-foe protocols, turning them against one another and sowing chaos in their lines. I couldn’t coordinate biotic combinations with Kaidan or Wrex, but that didn’t prevent me from warping any geth whose shields came down. From his perch Garrus aimed and fired, aimed and fired, striking from above like some ancient predator-deity.

“Get ready to push through!” shouted Shepard over the radios. “By the numbers, even numbers first. Charge!”

Shepard had an even number, of course. He led half of his Marines forward through the declining geth fire, seizing ten meters of the deck before diving behind new cover. Then he and his partners
laid down their own fire as the odd numbers ran forward, led by Kaidan. A few moments longer, and Shepard and his team moved forward again, almost reaching the geth line. Then the odd numbers again.

Wrex apparently had an odd number. A krogan roar echoed off the distant roof of the docking bay. He rushed forward, passing Kaidan and the other human Marines. Two shotgun blasts and a vicious krogan body-check knocked down one of the bright red “juggernaut” platforms. Then Kaidan’s people were right in the midst of the geth, the enemy line was dissolving in confusion, and Shepard’s team came charging in just behind. Within moments, no geth at all existed in that space.

We convened at the far side of the docking bay and took stock.

“Casualties?” asked Shepard.

“A lot of minor wounds, but Chase and Fredericks are the only ones seriously hurt,” reported Kaidan.

Shepard looked around, assessing our strength. “Bayard, get Chase and Fredericks back to the Normandy for medical. You, Müller, and Dubyansky will secure the docking bay. The rest of us are going to push forward to the Zhu’s Hope settlement on the other side of this structure.”

A chorus of aye-ayes, a rush of organized activity. Within five minutes, Shepard led our squad forward.

We moved through corridors and climbed stairs, following signs placed by the human colonists. I looked around as we advanced. The ancient structure had decayed badly, all bare stone and metal beams, with no sign of Prothean artifacts or technology. Even so, I stood in awe of the engineering skill that had built this edifice to last for so many empty millennia.

We encountered geth here and there along our path. Some were bipedal, ordinary troopers, stragglers from the battle in the docking bay. Others were the odd wall-clinging, leaping platforms that lurked in stairwells and struck from ambush. None of these posed any serious threat to our group. Shepard, Ashley, and Garrus led the way, usually disposing of the geth before any of the rest of us had to take a hand.

Finally we emerged into the Zhu’s Hope colony.

The Prothean architects had placed a broad terrace on the side of the building, perhaps fifty meters wide and thirty deep. In Prothean times it might have been enclosed, but now it was open to the sky. The human colonists had erected pre-fab shelters on the terrace for housing and work space. A small freighter starship, the Borealis, rested in a plaza at the center of the colony.

As we moved out onto the terrace, we saw teams of colonists working frantically to repair electrical and water systems, moving concrete blocks to shore up defenses, or standing guard with a mismatched array of civilian and military-grade weapons. Few of them took any notice of us, which struck me as very strange. Even if the colonists were in the last extremity of desperation, surely the arrival of a heavily armed squad of strangers, including four non-humans, would attract some attention?

Apparently not. Shepard had to deliberately accost one of the colonists before anyone would take notice. She looked us over, and then directed us to the colony’s leader, a man named Fai Dan, at the far end of the terrace.

We passed the Borealis on our way to meet Fai Dan. I examined the freighter closely as we went by:
a hulk, obviously badly damaged, unable to provide power or help the colonists evacuate. It occurred to me to wonder what the ship was doing on the terrace instead of in the spaceport facility. Perhaps it had been caught and damaged in the initial geth attack, forced to land where it now rested.

Fai Dan turned out a short, slight human male, with dark skin and craggy features. When we arrived, we found him deeply engaged in conversation with another human, this one a rather attractive female in black body armor with an ExoGeni logo on the breast.

“Fai Dan? I’m Commander Shepard of the SSV Normandy. We came in response to your hail.”

“A little late, aren’t you?” said the female human accusingly.

“Arcelia. These people have come to help.” Fai Dan turned to us. “I’m glad you’re here, Commander. The geth have been pressing us very hard.”

“Do you have any idea why the geth are attacking you?”

“No, Commander. They arrived a few days ago and have been laying siege to us ever since. We’ve lost contact with the main body of the colony over at the ExoGeni building . . .”

A roaring noise from above us. A geth dropship appeared, approaching the upper levels of the building, behind and above the terrace. Suddenly we heard the warbling sound of geth beyond the edge of the terrace, distant but threatening.

“The geth are in the tower!” said the woman named Arcelia, unslinging her weapon and rushing to a nearby barricade.

“I need militia reinforcements over here!” shouted Fai Dan. “Protect the heart of the colony!”

“We can do better than that,” Shepard decided. “Normandy, follow me.”

With Shepard and Ashley in the lead, we rushed past the colonists’ barricade, passing under a wide archway and back into the corridors and tunnels of the Prothean structure.

We soon encountered geth in twos and threes, filtering down through the tunnels to find the human colony.

Shepard barely slowed down. He had upgraded his shields, and switched from his usual sniper rifle to a high-powered shotgun for close-in work. He simply charged any geth he saw, hammering them flat with blasts from the shotgun, sometimes lashing out in a vicious close-quarters attack with his combat knife. Then he moved on, supremely assured that the rest of us would finish destroying any geth still active in his wake. With Ashley and Wrex right behind him, he had every reason to be confident. For long minutes, not a single geth survived for Kaidan, Garrus, Tali, or me to deal with. All we had to do was run to keep up with our vanguard of warriors.

Finally we approached the highest floors of the building. Shepard slowed and ordered us to gather together.

“I think one more landing and we’ll be adjacent to the space where they’re dropping in and consolidating.” He took a deep breath, releasing the adrenaline high that had carried him through the past ten minutes. “No more of those run-and-gun tactics.”

“Good,” rumbled Wrex. “I nearly had a heart attack at least three times, watching you fight like that.”

“I was just employing krogan strategy,” said Shepard, grinning.
“And we appreciate the emulation, but you’re not built for it.”

“It worked.” Shepard became serious. “Best guess is that the geth have a beachhead just above us and about twenty meters ahead. They will have gotten word from the platforms we destroyed on our way up here. We can expect massed weapons fire, possibly rocket attacks and assault drones.”

Tali held up her omni-tool and nodded. “I can confirm that, Shepard. There’s lots of EM radiation just ahead, on the bands geth use for inter-platform communication.”

“Okay, here’s where we go back to the usual playbook. Our objective is to give them such a bloody nose that they think twice before attacking Zhu’s Hope again. We move up to the edge of their occupied space, find cover, and wear them down. Make sure your cover is solid and remember the third dimension. That dropship may still be up there.”

We moved forward cautiously. The end of our corridor opened up onto a long curved gallery. At one time the gallery must have been closed off, an interior space. At some point the roof had collapsed, strewing the floor with massive stone chunks and exposing the entire gallery to the sky. There hovered the geth dropship, still placing platforms in the gallery when we arrived.

We found plenty of cover at the entrance to the gallery. We deployed and got to work.

Suddenly the geth had a turn at suffering a siege. Pent up in the gallery, with no obvious alternative exits, they had no choice but to face us and fight. They lay down heavy weapons fire with the occasional rocket, but our cover was strong enough. For a moment I worried about a set of three assault drones, which flew through the air and tried to fire down behind our cover. Then Wrex took positive pleasure in knocking the drones out of the air with his shotgun.

One by one the geth went down, usually to Shepard or Garrus as they applied their sniper rifles to devastating effect. Tali, Kaidan, and I used our practiced techniques to knock out several platforms as well.

The last few geth took to cover, pulling back into the gallery. Shepard, Ashley, and Wrex moved forward in pursuit, always watching to make sure the dropship had no way to fire upon them.

Something bothered me about this development.

_The geth are suddenly behaving more intelligently, _I realized. _And that means_ . . .

I reacted just a moment too late. I heard a sound _behind us_ and whirled, in time to see an enormous white Prime platform emerge from the corridor from which we had entered the gallery. How it had gotten around us, I had no idea. Perhaps it was a straggler from the battle for the docking bay.

In any case, as soon as it appeared it opened fire. Kaidan and I dove to opposite sides, frantically seeking cover.

Tali had been concentrating on an overload charge for a geth at the other end of the gallery. She reacted to the new threat just a moment too slowly. She spun and fell under the Prime’s fire.

“Shepard, there’s a Prime behind us!” shouted Kaidan. He and I moved to either side, trying to catch the enormous geth in crossfire.

Of course, even a perfectly executed crossfire isn’t of much effect when the two of you are using nothing but military-grade pistols. The Prime seemed not to even notice.

It turned toward Kaidan . . . and then rocked as two heavy rounds struck it on the head and upper
torso. Sniper rifle fire, from Shepard and Garrus. Its shields flared but stayed up, barely.

Tali lay small and quiet on the floor, but I had learned a few tricks from her over the past few weeks. I tapped furiously at my omni-tool, and triggered an overload charge at the Prime. Already battered by our fire, its shields finally went down.

Kaidan saw the opportunity and applied a massive telekinetic lift. The Prime rose helplessly into the air, drifting up toward the gap in the gallery’s ceiling. The others began to concentrate their fire on it as it drifted.

“Get down!” I shouted through the general channel, and threw a biotic warp.

Wham!

The detonation threw Kaidan and me to the floor, but then we heard nothing but an echoing silence.

I looked up in time to see the geth dropship rise higher into the atmosphere, turning to fly to the northwest. I thought for a moment, and realized the ExoGeni headquarters complex was in another Prothean tower in that direction.

Kaidan rushed over to Tali, checking her vital signs and applying first aid. “She’s alive, but unconscious and hurt bad.”

“Is her suit breached?” I asked.

“Definitely.”

“That’s bad. Quarians have terrible immune systems. Exposed to the open air, there’s no telling what kind of risk she might have for infection.”

“The geth are gone, and we’re safe for the moment,” said Shepard as he approached us. “Let’s make a stretcher and evac Tali back to the Normandy.”

I shot him a worried look, and switched to his private channel. “Three casualties already, Shepard, and Tali is in serious danger. This planet is a death-trap, and Saren doesn’t even seem to be here.”

“He was here. We need to find out why.” Shepard gave me a determined stare. “I think I need to have a talk with Fai Dan.”
Fai Dan was bland, polite, clearly dedicated to the welfare of his people, and not at all forthcoming.

“I’m sorry, Commander. I simply don’t have any answers for you.”

Shepard scowled in exasperation. “You’re telling me there have been no unusual visitors to Feros in weeks. No turians, no asari, no unexpected off-worlders of any kind. You’ve never seen Sovereign. You have no idea why the geth decided to attack this colony.”

“To be honest, we were barely aware that there was a war against the geth taking place.”

“Fai Dan, I think you are lying to me,” Shepard said flatly. “We know Saren and his ship were here eight days ago. We have reconnaissance imagery of Sovereign in orbit over Feros. You wouldn’t have been able to miss it, or mistake it for anything else.”

“I’m sorry,” said the colonist once more, no anger or resentment in his tone. “I can’t help that. All I can suggest is that ExoGeni may have the information you’re looking for. The geth attacked there first.”

“How do we get to the ExoGeni headquarters?”

“An intact Prothean skyway connects this building to the other two that ExoGeni has occupied. I think at least one vehicle in the garage still works.”

“In the meantime, why don’t you do something useful for a change?” snarled the security officer, Arcelia Martinez.

“More useful than lifting the siege and getting the geth off your backs?”

“We’ve beaten them already without your help. Three times. The problem is, they keep coming back. We think they have some kind of transmitter down in the tunnels. It acts like a beacon, a control channel they can use even when one of their ships isn’t nearby. It helps them infiltrate and build up their forces until they’re ready to attack again.”

“All right, that’s something we can help with. I’ll want to be sure your people are secure before we set out for the other buildings. What else do you need?”

“I’m afraid the geth attacks have left us in a very precarious condition,” said Fai Dan. “The geth damaged our water supply system, and our supplies of fresh water are limited. Our food stocks are also very low. The power systems have been out for days, so we have almost no reserves to operate medical equipment or recharge our weapons.”

“I’ll have my engineering team come in to help with repairs. In the meantime, my squad will try and find that geth transmitter.”

Martinez looked like she wanted to deliver another sharp comment, but she subsided when Fai Dan glanced at her.

“Thank you, Commander,” he said mildly. “If you can help us become self-sufficient again, even in the short term, we will be very much in your debt.”
We spent eight hours in the tunnels beneath Zhu’s Hope, following the maps Fai Dan provided.

First we hoped to find and destroy the geth transmitter. Finding it proved easy, but reaching it was a considerable challenge. It stood in an alcove at the end of a long corridor, narrow and completely devoid of cover, guarded by geth assault drones and no fewer than three krogan warriors.

There just wasn’t room for all six of us to place ourselves in the corridor and attack the enemy. Shepard, Ashley, and Wrex went in to deal with the drones, and then hold their position against a team of angry krogan. The rest of us watched for wandering geth and otherwise had very little to do but listen to all the gunfire and roaring.

After a few moments, Garrus switched to my private channel. “I think we just got our proof that Saren was here.”

I frowned, not seeing his point at first. Then it struck me. “The krogan?”

“Sure. We just fought a whole campaign against nothing but geth. No signs of any krogan. Also no signs of Saren. It makes sense. I could see Saren hiring krogan mercs, but the geth are too isolated from the rest of galactic civilization.”

“Perhaps. Shepard saw no krogan on Eden Prime, but we know Saren and Sovereign were there. Saren sent a krogan battlemaster to recover me from Therum, with geth support.”

“No krogan on Noveria, but that was pretty much your mother’s show.” He glanced at me. “No offense.”

“None taken. My mother would never have hired krogan. Why bother when you have asari commandos following you for free?”

“Right. So we can probably map this out with symbolic logic. If Saren and geth, not necessarily krogan, but if krogan and geth, always Saren.”

“That seems to fit the evidence so far,” I said, amused at the way he phrased it.

“Hey, policemen are trained in logic too. No reason you scientists should have all the fun.”

“You will get no argument from me.” I thought about it, wincing slightly as an unusually loud reptilian bellow echoed down the corridor. “It might give us a useful way to analyze intelligence data. Instead of looking for sightings of Sovereign, we could look for cases where krogan have been seen in the company of geth. Come to think of it, where is Saren getting all these krogan?”

“He has plenty of money.”

“True, but krogan are pragmatists. No matter how well they are paid, why would they work for someone who is clearly in partnership with the geth? Synthetics who seem fiercely hostile to all organic life?”

“Hmm,” said Garrus, thinking about it. “You think he has some other motivation for them?”

“I suppose they could just be indoctrinated, like my mother.”

“We don’t know enough about indoctrination to know whether that’s possible.” Garrus hesitated. “I’m sorry, Liara, but we only have your mother’s word for how that was supposed to work.”

“She wasn’t the most reliable witness, I know. Garrus, I was there. I watched her fight free of it for a
few moments. She wasn’t faking any of it.”

“Not saying she was. Just that we don’t have enough facts yet. We should be careful about assuming indoctrination before we have evidence of it. There might be a rational motive. In my experience, bad guys are often stupid but they’re always rational by their own lights. They have some reason that seems good to them for what they do.”

“Agreed. So what is Saren offering the krogan to recruit so many of them?”

He mulled that over for a long time. “Unknown.”

“Add it to the list,” I told him.

“It’s getting to be a very long list.”

About that time the roaring stopped and we could proceed. We found the geth transmitter, planted explosive charges, and blew it to pieces.

After that, the rest of our tasks seemed tedious but relatively easy. We found more geth in the tunnels, but without their control signal these presented little challenge. In one large chamber we thinned out a pack of predatory animals that had prevented the colonists from hunting for food. We also scavenged some heavy electrical gear that we thought might help them re-start their power grid. We even managed to reactivate the Prothean water collection system, delivering a boundless supply of fresh water to Zhu’s Hope.

We did have one very odd encounter. As we moved through the tunnels and empty chambers, we found a few dead colonists, apparently killed where they had taken refuge during the geth attack. Just as we had finished with the water system, we found a living human.

Ashley spotted him first, suddenly turning and pointing her rifle back into a dark alcove. The flashlight attached to her weapon picked out a male human, wearing plain coveralls and holding a sharp combat knife. “Come out of there and lower the weapon,” she ordered.

The human stepped forward cautiously, dropping the knife into a sheath on his hip and holding his hands up. “Alliance?”

“Most of us,” said Shepard dryly. “Who are you?”

“Ian Newstead,” said the human, a grimace crossing his face as he spoke.

“Are you hiding from the geth? The way’s clear back to the colony, you could come with us.”

“No, I think I’d better stay out here . . . hyaah!”

All of us stared at the human as he suddenly screamed, bending over with both fists at his temples.

Kaidan stepped forward. “Hey, are you all right?”

To our surprise Newstead stood up slowly, his scream modulating into a horrible sort of laughter.

“Alliance?”

“You don’t look fine,” said Shepard. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Just invoking the master’s whip. Reminds me that I’m still alive. Still fighting.”

“Fighting who? The geth?”
“No. I was out here... *gah*... before the geth arrived. They’re easy enough to hide from.” His face twisted with pain once again.

“Then who?”

“It’s not that kind of fight. More like... running through a *thorn bush.*” He had to pause, hammering at one side of his head with a fist. “You know... if you ever stop... you’ll never be able to get started again.”

Wrex shook his head. “He’s crazy, Shepard. We should leave him.”

“No yet.” Shepard turned back to the colonist. “Mr. Newstead, if you were out here before the geth arrived, did you see what they’re after?”

“Oh yes.” Newstead paused, his eyes wild, panting. “They’re after... they’re a *thorn* in the side of... *aah!*”

This time the scream brought him to his knees, clawing at his temples.

I said, “Shepard, I don’t think he’s insane. He’s in a great deal of pain.”

“But why?” Shepard knelt by the suffering man. “Mr. Newstead. Is there any way we can help you? Do you even want help?”

Newstead shook his head violently. “Nothing you can do for me. Go on. I’ve survived this long... Oh look. Time’s up.”

Just then Garrus called a warning. “Geth!”

We turned to fight. As usual, we faced no more than three or four troopers, clumsy and easily defeated. Afterward, we looked around and found that Newstead had vanished.

“What was *that* all about?” demanded Ashley.

“Post-traumatic stress?” suggested Kaidan.

I shook my head. “I don’t think so. Did you notice that most of his episodes occurred while he was trying to answer questions?”

“His answers weren’t very direct,” observed Garrus. “As if he was trying to talk his way *around* something. Like a witness who doesn’t want to come out and help you on the record.”

“Something didn’t want him talking.” Shepard scratched at the stubble on his cheek. “The other colonists were calmer, but they weren’t very helpful. There’s definitely something odd about this place. Something odd about the people, the colony itself.”

I glanced at Garrus. “I hesitate to suggest it... but this reminds me of Saren’s indoctrination.”

Garrus shook his head, but he said nothing.

“You think Saren used whatever he has to control their minds?” asked Shepard.

“No, I don’t think it was Saren himself.” I thought it through. “If Saren controls these people, why turn the geth and these krogan loose on them?”

Shepard frowned. “On the other hand, Newstead was behaving a little like your mother did while
she was trying to break free from Saren’s control.”

“Exactly,” I agreed. “Something is affecting the colonists’ minds. Not Saren’s indoctrination. Something else, something we haven’t seen before.”

“More spooky telepathy,” grumbled Wrex.

“Could it affect us?” asked Ashley.

“Indoctrination seems to require time to take effect,” I said. “Whatever this is may be the same.”

“We need more facts,” Shepard decided. “Come on. It’s late and we’ve done everything we can to help the colonists. It’s time to get back to the colony, get some rest, and get ready for another sortie in the morning.”

We set out through the tunnels.

“Sir, if it’s all the same to you, I think we should pull back all the way to the Normandy,” said Kaidan. “I don’t like the idea of having any of us let down our guard around the colonists. And if there’s something affecting everyone in Zhu’s Hope . . .”

“What if the geth attack again?” asked Wrex.

Shepard made a cutting-off gesture with one hand. “No, Kaidan’s right. The colonists seem quiet, but I don’t think we can trust them until we know more. They should be better able to defend themselves now if the geth come back. We can leave a working radio with Fai Dan, to call us in if we’re needed.”

Ashley asked, “Sir, isn’t the near end of the Prothean skyway on our way back? We should see what kind of transportation is available.”

“Good idea, Ash.”

Not long before we reached Zhu’s Hope again, we found a working lift up to the skyway. We found the road’s end in an enormous gallery on the side of the structure, guarded by two of Fai Dan’s people.

There was one working vehicle: an M-35 Mako, the original model with a crew capacity of only three.

Shepard smacked a fist into his other hand. “Damn it. Kaidan, what are the odds that we can get our own AFV over onto this skyway?”

Kaidan turned his engineer’s eye to the problem. His face slowly became grim. “I wouldn’t recommend it, sir. It’s a terrible landing zone. Joker’s a good pilot, but I don’t see how he could get the Normandy into position over here without risking the structural integrity of the arcology, the skyway, or both. I also don’t like the look of the skyway itself. It might not take the shock of having that much weight suddenly dropped on it.”

“And it’s a very long way down,” Shepard said, frustrated. “Well, there’s nothing for it. Tomorrow morning we’ll make our sortie across to the ExoGeni building. I’ll take Ash and Liara.”

Kaidan looked mutinous. “Sir, with all due respect . . .”

“Not this time, Kaidan. With Tali down I need your technical expertise back here, helping the
colonists. Garrus and Wrex are good heavy hitters in case the geth come back. With any luck we’ll only be gone for a few hours.”

Ashley and I exchanged a glance. *Well. This should prove interesting.*
9 May 2183, SSV Normandy, Zhu’s Hope Docking Facility/Feros

When we returned to Normandy, we learned Tali had rallied. All of us rushed to the medical bay to see how she was doing. Dr. Chakwas had done surgical repair of her injuries, but she had been pumped full of painkillers and quarian antibiotics and remained very weak. The doctor permitted all of us to visit for a few moments, but then chased us away to prevent us from tiring her patient. Only I stood by when Shepard stepped to the quarian’s bedside, took her gloved hand, and quietly praised her courage.

“Thank you, Shepard,” said Tali simply.

Shepard took a step back and then did something remarkable. He made a courtly bow to Tali, and for a moment his body language read as purely quarian. “Talas nasi den vael, Tali. Heal and recover. Your captain and your crew need you.”

“I will,” she promised, and then became too tired or overcome to say any more.

Shepard and I turned to go.

“I didn’t know you spoke quarian exoteric dialect,” I murmured to him once we reached the crew mess.

“I don’t, not fluently, but I have been taking some of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs diplomatic courses in my copious free time. Now that I’m a Spectre I can’t afford to be at the mercy of the translators all the time.”

“I wonder if I should be jealous?”

“No, Liara.” He suddenly became quite serious, lowering his voice so only I could hear. “Tali is a wonderful person and a real asset to this team, but there’s only one woman on board this ship for me.”

“I’m not exactly a woman, you know.”

“As they say, close enough.”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have teased you like that.”

“Hmm. Mahe sekhet ka t’savi ren zh’raseh.”

“You’re absolutely right,” I told him, “but your accent is terrible.”

He grinned at me. “Well, hopefully I’ll get plenty of opportunity to practice.”

10 May 2183, Prothean Skyway/Feros

Early in the ship’s morning, Ashley and I met on the staging deck. “Commander told me to improve your gear,” she told me. “If the three of us are going to be going on sortie by ourselves, you need to level up.”

Since Sharjila I had worn a light Aldrin Labs Onyx-Gamma suit, close-fitting and flexible but no
longer sufficient for the opposition we had begun to face. Now Ashley fitted me for the best available light Predator model, from the turian manufacturer Armax Arsenal. This new armor bulked somewhat larger than the Onyx-Gamma, colored in black and dark green in a camouflage pattern. It put up more resistance to gunfire, with tougher materials and a fiercely powerful set of kinetic barriers. The software tricks Tali had loaded into my omni-tool reinforced the shields even further.

Ash also offered me a new sidearm, an Elkoss Combine submachine gun. “You’re a fine shot with that pistol you’ve been using,” she explained, “but it doesn’t have a good rate of fire. I saw you trying to use it against that geth Prime up in the tower. Might as well have been a BB gun.”

I frowned, not sure of the reference, but I took the new weapon. It fit comfortably into my hand. I found myself immediately familiar with the controls, already accustomed to other Elkoss Combine weapons. “How is the recoil?”

“You’ll find it better than your pistol. It’s not quite as accurate, but you’re a good enough shot that shouldn’t make too much difference. Nice thing about this weapon is that it fires three-round bursts, you can pulse it to get something close to full automatic fire, and it takes a long time to heat up. All of which means you can do lots of damage, especially against shields.”

“Therefore useful against geth,” I observed. “Let me take it into the range for some practice.”

Fifteen minutes later, I left the staging deck with the M-4 Shuriken at my hip. Before long, I favored the new weapon so much that it became my preferred sidearm, all through the Reaper War and for many years afterward.

When I met Shepard and Ash at the airlock, I still felt underdressed – both of the professional warriors were much more heavily armed and armored – but at least I felt as if I could hold my own in their company.

Of course, neither of them can turn geth into tinfoil with their minds, I told myself, and felt a little more confident.

With the rest of Kaidan’s team, we returned to Zhu’s Hope. Shepard spoke briefly with Fai Dan, and then took our people aside to give them last-minute instructions. Kaidan nodded soberly. “You can count on us, Commander.”

With that, we made our way up to the Prothean skyway. The Mako we had seen in the garage was not in ideal condition, but its drives, sensors, and weapons systems all came up when called on. We rolled out onto the skyway as Feros’ primary star climbed high into the sky to our right.

We soon encountered geth on the skyway, mostly rocket-wielding Juggernauts and four-legged armatures. Fortunately the skyway had broken into sections, hanging at different angles in such a way that the roadbed did not lie flat. We could come up to a ridge-line in the roadbed, and still remain hull-down to the geth. Shepard would edge us forward while I sent up-to-date sensor readings to Ashley’s board. Once we stood exposed, Ash would fire the main gun and coaxial cannon for a few moments, scoring hits on the distant geth. Then Shepard would back away, putting us hull-down once again and letting geth rockets and plasma bolts sail overhead. Eventually we wore down and destroyed each group of geth platforms.

On two occasions, we emerged from the Mako to fight geth in the pedestrian tunnels built into the roadbed itself. These fights were sharp and quick, the three of us pitted against no more than two or three geth troopers at a time. I found them good practice, a chance to become accustomed to my new armor and weaponry under easy combat conditions.
Without Kaidan to set up combinations for my biotic warp, I wasn’t the “glass cannon” Shepard had once labeled me. My biotics still helped control the battlefield. We soon settled into easy teamwork, with me applying telekinetic force from the rear while Shepard or Ash charged down on the helpless geth in front.

About halfway along the skyway, I detected radio transmissions from the structure ahead of us. “Shepard, I think there are humans still holding out in that building.”

“Let me hear,” he ordered from the driver’s seat.

I sent the transmissions to our general channel. A female human voice: “This is Juliana Baynham of Feros Colony. Is there anyone on this channel? Dammit, I’m showing movement on the skyway and it’s not geth. Who’s out there?”

“Survivors of the geth attack?” guessed Ash.

“Answer them, Liara,” ordered Shepard.

I tried transmitting back, but to no avail. “Whoever they are, their communications gear isn’t in good order.”

Soon enough we discovered the truth. The skyway entered the structure and began to rise several levels, through a series of ramps and landings. Just before this point we found what might have been an ancient vehicle station, a large platform where vehicles could be serviced or inspected. There we saw a ramp, too small for the Mako, leading down to a secondary platform sheltered on all sides by the bulk of the structure. We saw a makeshift barricade at the bottom of this ramp, and human figures moving about.

We stopped the Mako and approached on foot. Armed ExoGeni security guards watched us nervously, but held their weapons aside and let us pass their barricades. I looked around and saw perhaps two dozen humans, some of them wounded, all of them looking shocked and apathetic. Survivors of some terrible calamity.

“Stop right there!” shouted a harsh male voice. The speaker pushed himself to the front, confronting Shepard.

“Take it easy, Jeong, they’re obviously not geth.” This one was an older female, her voice recognizable as the one we had heard over the radio.

Shepard raised both hands in a calming gesture. “I’m Commander Shepard of the Alliance military.”

“I’m Juliana Baynham,” said the woman. “I’m probably the senior remaining scientist from the ExoGeni installation. This is Ethan Jeong, the last surviving corporate representative.”

“I’m in charge here, Juliana!” snapped Jeong. “What are you doing here, soldier?”

“I’m here to deal with the geth attack, and to investigate what caused it. Do you have any ideas on that?”

Jeong shook his head. “No. This is a small colony. We don’t have anything the geth could want.”

Baynham interrupted. “Commander, you would have come through the spaceport facility?”

“That’s right. The colonists at Zhu’s Hope came under heavy attack too, but most of them have survived. We were able to help them keep the colony operational.”
She frowned at Jeong. “I thought you said the colonists were all dead.”

“I said they were probably dead,” said Jeong.

“Well, now we could join them.”

“No, it’s too dangerous! The geth could attack again at any time.”

Shepard nodded in agreement. “We did have to fight our way across the skyway, Ms. Baynham. If you haven’t been attacked yet here, it might be safer for you to stay until we investigate the main ExoGeni facility.”

“Why do you need to investigate there?” demanded Jeong sharply.

“Sir, my mission requires me to find out why the geth are here in the first place. There’s no clue that we could find at Zhu’s Hope. They must be after something that’s at your main facility.”

“That facility is corporate property, soldier. I can’t authorize you to trespass on it.”

Shepard frowned. “Mr. Jeong, I don’t need your authorization. Not only am I an Alliance soldier, I’m also a Council Spectre. I go where my mission requires me to go.”

“A Spectre?”

Shepard produced his Council identification for Jeong and Baynham to inspect.

“No. No. It has to be a forgery.”

“Come off it, Jeong. That’s no forgery and you know it.” Baynham turned to us. “Commander, if you’re going to the main facility, would you keep an eye open for my daughter? Her name is Lizbeth, she’s a scientist in the main research office.”

“I’ll see what we can do, if you think she could have survived the geth.”

“Sure, there are some places she could have hidden,” Jeong muttered. “For a short time.”

“One more question for both of you. Did anyone unusual visit Feros about eight or nine standard days ago?”

Jeong only scowled in denial, but Baynham nodded slowly. “There was someone. He came and met with just a few of the top people in the corporate office. I don’t know who it was. None of us saw him, not even Jeong, but he brought bodyguards with him.”

“Bodyguards?”

“Asari commandos,” said Baynham.

I let out a surprised gasp. “Shepard, that—”

“Just about has to be our man,” said Shepard quickly, cutting me off. “What happened to him?”

“I don’t know. He came, he met with the seniors, he left. I don’t think he was here more than a few hours. The geth attacked about a day later.”

“Did he come through Zhu’s Hope?” asked Ashley suddenly.
“Of course,” said Baynham, puzzled. “Everyone does.”

Ash looked at Shepard. “Yeah. Fai Dan and all his people lied to us.”

“Sure. The question is why?” Shepard turned to Jeong and Baynham. “All right. Sit tight here until we get back, then we can talk about how to see to your safety.”

“Thank you, Commander,” said Baynham. Jeong only turned away abruptly.

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We had to fight hard to get into the ExoGeni facility. Geth waited for us on the second segment of the skyway, more aggressive and in greater numbers. They wore the Mako’s kinetic barriers down to a little over twenty percent by the time we finally arrived at the entrance to the ExoGeni building. Then we discovered that the garage opened through a narrow passage into a large chamber, full of geth, including Juggernauts and the hopping sniper platforms. We could find no way to bring the Mako’s weaponry to bear. We had to emerge from the AFV, cautiously move up to the entrance, and work to wear down the geth with our weapons and my biotic talents. In the end we gained entrance without taking serious damage, but it took a long time and fatigue had all of us in its grip before we finished the job.

Once we had secured the first chamber, Shepard permitted a short rest. He went off to scout the perimeter while Ash and I sat on a broken stone platform and refreshed ourselves. Ash produced an energy drink and sipped deeply at it while she mopped sweat from her brow. For my part I took a chocolate bar from a pocket of my armor and began devouring it with grim determination.

“Hardly seems fair,” said Ash after a time. “You don’t even sweat.”

“Asari temperature regulation mechanisms are different. We do sweat, but only when the external temperature is very high. We tend to flush or pant instead.”

“If you don’t mind my saying so, it’s very weird how different you are in some ways. I start thinking of you as just a blue-skinned human, and then something like that comes up.”

I smiled. “Many of us asari feel the same way about humans. You are so like us in some ways, and so alien in others.”

“Yeah.” She tipped her bottle back to drink the last of its contents. “I’d like to thank you.”

“For what?”

“Serving the last few weeks with you, with the other non-humans on the crew, it’s been a real eye-opener for me. I never had the chance to get to know any aliens very well before. I wasn’t sure I trusted any of you. You’ve given me a chance to learn better.”

“This attitude seems common among humans. I suppose it is to be expected. Your introduction to galactic society was difficult.”

“I’ll say,” Ash snorted. She watched me soberly for a few moments, and then appeared to make up her mind about something. “I had some personal reasons to mistrust aliens. Family history, you might say.”

I thought back to the evening that I had read through Shepard’s background, and wondered if I should have investigated Ashley’s as well. “Go on.”
“I come from a military family. Four generations in the service, since before the Alliance was even formed.” She took a deep breath. “My grandfather was the most famous of us. Or the most infamous, depending on how you look at it. General Henry Williams, commander of the garrison on Shanxi during the First Contact War.”

I reviewed what I knew about that conflict. I had been working a dig site on the other side of the galaxy at the time, and had only learned most of the details years later. “You must be very proud. I understand he did well under very difficult conditions.”

She stared at me for a long minute, until I began to wonder how I had misspoken. “That’s not how most of the Alliance sees it,” she said at last. “In our history books, he’s listed as the only human commander ever to surrender to an alien force. He was drummed out of the service in disgrace.”

My eyes widened in surprise. “I see.”

“Do you?” she asked scornfully. “My father joined the Alliance. In a lifetime of service and sacrifice he never made it past Serviceman Third Class. I was kept out of every fleet posting I ever applied for until Captain Anderson brought me aboard the Normandy. Takes a special kind of thick-headed to keep trying to push your way into a job where your whole family has been black-balled.”

“I will likely have similar experiences for the rest of my life,” I pointed out quietly. “Remember who my mother was. No matter what we accomplish against Saren, I suspect I will always be mistrusted by my own people.”

That brought her up short. “Hmm. I suppose you’re right.”

“I do understand your resentment. The turians . . . they are a great asset to the galactic community, but they can be inflexible and brutal. They did not display themselves at their best in your first encounter with them, and the rest of us did not step in as quickly as we should have done. Your grandfather was a victim of our inaction.”

“Yeah.” She sighed. “I still don’t really trust the Council races as a whole. I think when push comes to shove, you’ll always look out for your own interests first.”

“Humans do not look out for their own interests?”

“Hey, I didn’t say you should trust us all that much either.”

“Point taken.”

“It’s just . . . all of you are so advanced in some ways, but you’re not angels or gods. The galaxy isn’t a paradise. We all have to figure out how to get along from day to day, and sometimes we won’t agree. I guess what I’ve learned is that I can be a friend to some of you as individuals, and to hell with the big picture. I’ll let other people worry about the politics of it.”

“That seems wise. I hope you think of me as your friend.”

She shook her head ruefully. “Yeah, despite everything I do. Tali too. Even Wrex. Even Garrus. He’s a hell of a soldier, he has a wicked sense of humor, and I know he would die for any of us. A turian. For all I know he was one of the ones fighting my grandfather on Shanxi.”

“I’ve read his dossier. He was not on Shanxi. He was not old enough to be in military service at the time.” I gave her a penetrating glance. “Although it may interest you to know that Saren was on Shanxi as a young soldier.”
Ashley gave me a slow and rather dangerous grin. “Doc, you are not nearly as innocent as you seem.”

I only smiled and finished my chocolate.

Shepard returned soon after. “Well, I have good news and bad news. Bad news first. There’s some kind of energy barrier surrounding the core of the building. The geth must have put it up, and it is solid. No way are we getting directly through it.”

“What’s the good news?” asked Ashley.

“I think I’ve found a way around it. This building is in bad shape. There’s a place where the floor has fallen in and we might be able to climb down into the lower levels. The barrier may not extend that far down.”

We agreed that it was worth a try, and followed him to the collapsed area. The climb down looked dangerous, but we took it slowly and managed to reach the bottom without incident. We looked around to see another empty, badly decayed floor of the arcology, full of rubble and pools of polluted-looking water.

Then someone shot Shepard.

It was a single shot from a civilian-grade pistol, and it didn’t significantly damage his shields. It certainly got our attention. All three of us whirled to face the attack, weapons out and biotic surge ready.

A young woman cowered, her back to a pile of rubble, half-backed into a corner. The firearm in her hand trembled like a leaf in a mild breeze. “You . . . you’re not geth.”

“Not the last we checked,” said Shepard dryly. “Commander Shepard, Alliance Navy. This is Gunnery Chief Williams, and Dr. T’Soni.”

“Lizbeth Baynham,” said the woman, finally putting away her weapon. She looked terrible: haggard, filthy, and half-starved.

“You’re Juliana Baynham’s daughter?”

“That’s right. Mom’s alive?”

Shepard nodded. “She and some of the others made it to the midpoint of the skyway. They’re hiding out there, safe from the geth for the moment.”

“Are you here to rescue me?”

“Not exactly. We’re here to deal with the geth, and to figure out why they’re attacking this place.”

She hesitated, and then set her jaw in determination. “I think I can tell you that. They’re after the Thorian.”

“The what?”

“The Thorian,” Baynham repeated. “It’s a native plant life-form. I don’t know much about it, but I know the front office has been excited about it for weeks, ever since it was discovered.”

“What’s special about it?” demanded Shepard.
“I’m not sure, but rumor in the labs was that it has some kind of mind-controlling properties.”

“Of course,” I interrupted. “Shepard, remember that we were wondering about whether the people here were indoctrinated?”

“Right. It didn’t make any sense if we assumed that Saren was indoctrinating the people here. But if this *Thorian* is somehow influencing people’s minds . . .”

“There was that crazy guy we met in the tunnels,” Ash pointed out. “Kept talking about *thorns*.”

Shepard nodded. “Thorn . . . Thorian. It does sound similar. As if he was trying to tell us the truth. Ms. Baynham, what else can you tell us about the Thorian?”

“Not much. I never saw it myself, or any of the lab reports. I only know what I heard through the rumor mill.”

I shook my head. “Something still doesn’t make sense, Shepard. We still don’t know why Saren would come here, leave peacefully, and then send his geth to attack the colony. Why would he do that if it was his goal to obtain this Thorian life-form?”

“I think you’re right. We still need to press forward. Ms. Baynham, can you stay in hiding for a while longer until we get the geth barrier curtains down?”

The girl looked haunted. “I suppose. Just . . . don’t take any longer than you have to.”

We left some rations with Baynham and entered the core of the ExoGeni facility. Soon we made our way through spaces that looked like quarters and maintenance facilities.

Suddenly Shepard stopped and held up a fist. We froze and listened.

A voice sounded ahead of us, deep and resonant. “*Stupid machine!*”

We crept forward, slowly and silently. Behind a partition of frosted glass, we saw a bulky silhouette, apparently hunched over a workstation. “No, I don’t want to look at your tutorial menus . . . access encrypted files! *Stupid machine.*”

*Krogan*, mouthed Shepard. He held up one finger, then two . . .

On three we attacked. Shepard and Ashley opened fire through the frosted glass, breaking it into countless shards and exposing the enemy. The krogan reacted with blinding speed, jumping to one side and returning fire with his shotgun before charging us.

I placed a biotic singularity directly in his path, lifting him helplessly off the ground where my friends could hold him in a lethal crossfire. He was tough as any krogan, but not even he could stand up to our combined assault. He fell dead a few moments later.

The workstation remained active. “Liara, see what you can do with that.”

“I’m not Tali, but I’ll do my best.”

My best seemed good enough. Within a few minutes I had broken into the lab’s core encrypted archives.

There I read a tale of atrocity.
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“The Thorian is a plant species native to Feros,” I explained to Shepard and Ash. “ExoGeni Corporation designated it Species 37 . . . the one native species that truly caught their interest.”

We clustered around a computer workstation, the body of a krogan warrior cooling slowly a few meters away. The krogan had failed to hack into ExoGeni secured archives. I had succeeded.

“Most of the Thorian lives far below us, down on the surface of the planet. It’s a massive weave of tendrils, some of them kilometers long, forming a mat that covers most of the land surface of Feros. It is incredibly ancient. The ExoGeni researchers thought it might be millions of years old . . . and it may be intelligent, even sentient.”

“A sentient plant?” whispered Ashley.

“So it would seem.” I flipped through the encrypted files, speed-reading, doing research on the fly. “Some tendrils serve as sensory organs. Others bunch together into nerve bundles, neural nodes with incredible computational capacity. A loose, decentralized form of intelligence. Not like anything we’re familiar with. More like the geth, perhaps.”

“So what does any of this have to do with Saren?” asked Shepard.

“I’m getting to that.” I settled on one document, a cutaway view of one of the Prothean towers. “About six weeks ago, a survey team from Zhu’s Hope went down to explore the tunnels deep under the colony. They encountered the Thorian and became infected.”

“How?”

“The Thorian seems to broadcast spores which can be inhaled by animal life-forms. Once inhaled, the spores migrate into the animal’s brain and nervous system. They act as a link between the animal’s mind and the plant’s neural network. The Thorian can apply conditioning – pleasure-pain feedback, say – to force the animal to perform tasks on its behalf. It enslaves the infected animal.”

“That would explain Newstead,” suggested Shepard.

“Not only him,” I said grimly. “All of them, Shepard. Every one of the colonists at Zhu’s Hope became infected by the spores as the Thorian became aware of them. It seems to have moved up through the building to bring them within its reach.”

“They’re all its slaves?” Ashley growled.

Shepard immediately keyed his helmet radio. “Shepard to Normandy . . . Shepard to Normandy, please respond . . . damn it. The geth ship and that barrier curtain must be cutting us off.”

“I hope that’s all it is,” said Ash.

“We’re probably safe from the Thorian for the moment,” I told them. “The ExoGeni scientists estimated that it took six to ten days of constant exposure for each colonist to come under the Thorian’s control. None of us have been exposed for more than a few hours.”

Shepard stared at me. “Are you saying the scientists here knew the Thorian was taking the colonists
over?”

I held his gaze. “Yes, Shepard. That’s exactly what I’m saying. They knew. They did nothing but
study the situation.”

His face set into such an expression of fierce anger that I still feel a chill at the memory. I was very
glad his rage wasn’t directed at me. “That’s why Ethan Jeong refused to move his people across the
skyway to Zhu’s Hope. He knew that would expose all of them to the Thorian.”

“Very likely. For what it’s worth, not all of the scientists here were informed of the study on Species
37. Juliana Baynham was not on the need-to-know list. Her daughter was.”

He nodded. I could tell he was anticipating his next talk with Lizbeth Baynham.

“Okay, but what about Saren?” asked Ashley.

I turned back to the workstation. “That’s not so clear. He must have learned about the existence of
the Thorian. Perhaps he had spies in the ExoGeni workforce. He arrived nine days ago and met with
corporate officials. Instead of treating him as an outlaw, they welcomed him and discussed their
findings freely with him. Before he left, he descended into the tunnels beneath Zhu’s Hope and
stayed down there for over twelve hours.”

“Doing what?”

“They didn’t know. Saren paid them well not to ask questions or interfere. The local Chief of
Operations speculated that he was taking samples of the species for his own use. He . . . didn’t have
a problem with that.”

“Damn them. Damn them all to the hottest pits of Hell.” Shepard was standing very still, the only
outward sign of his emotional state the paleness of his face and the tight clenching of his fists. “I
can’t remember the last time I saw such selfish incompetence, such callous disregard for the safety
and well-being of other people. I hope the geth got every last one of them.”

“They didn’t get Jeong,” Ashley pointed out.

Three months before I might have been shocked at Shepard’s reaction. Now I took it in stride,
perhaps because I had a better appreciation for the depths to which evil might sink. By nature I was
not a violent person, but I was learning to make exceptions.

Still, there were degrees. “Shepard, if Jeong is the senior corporate official still surviving, he may
already be in a hell of his own making. He was at the very bottom of the need-to-know list. He
appears to be a mere functionary, who never had any policy-making or supervisory duties before this
disaster occurred.”

“Sure, he was just following orders.” Shepard shook himself, setting his emotions aside. “This
changes our mission. I don’t think there’s any more we can learn here. We have to get back to Zhu’s
Hope. All the answers are under that colony.”

“What shall we do with this information?” I asked.

“Make a secure copy of everything you think is relevant.” Shepard unlimbered his assault rifle,
checking its status with the ease of long practice. “If we get out of here, I think some people at
ExoGeni are in desperate need of having their hides nailed to the nearest wall.”
Getting out of the ExoGeni facility again took a great deal of work.

We found two of the geth almost immediately, indulging in very strange behavior. They stood almost inactive before an arrangement of stone uprights, spaced around a very bright electric light. Their attitude was almost one of reverence, and they reacted very slowly to our violent arrival.

Once they went down, I looked more closely at the way they had organized the room. “Shepard, this looks almost like an attempt to define sacred space. If I came across this in a dig site while investigating an ancient organic civilization, that would be my first interpretation. Do you think these geth were engaged in some kind of worship?”

Shepard shrugged. “I have no idea. Do geth even have religion?”

“Hey, if they want to see God, I’d be happy to expedite the trip,” said Ashley.

We left the “altar” strictly alone and examined the space we had found it in. There was a large gap in the outer wall of the building there, through which we could see part of the geth dropship. The geth had attached their ship to the side of the Prothean tower, using grappling devices like enormous claws. Power cables snaked out from the side of the ship and disappeared down corridors in several directions.

“I wonder if we could forcibly detach the ship from the side of the building,” said Shepard.

“Kaidan’s the engineer,” said Ash, “but those claws look much too strong for what explosive charges we have here.”

“Maybe we can cut off the power in some other way,” I suggested.

We moved on.

We met more geth as we moved through the wrecked ExoGeni facility, usually small fire-teams of two or three. Unlike the “worshippers” in the first room, these all stood ready for a fight. Several short, sharp engagements marked our progress. Shepard’s shields went down once, as did Ashley’s, but neither of them took more than a superficial injury. An application of medi-gel each time and we were ready to continue.

Finally we reached the original ExoGeni lab facility, now wrecked, hollowed out, and turned into a geth command center. The geth knew we were coming. Worse, we couldn’t fight from the doorway as we often preferred. A sharp right-hand turn existed just inside, blocking our line of sight to most of the space. Shepard had only a moment to evaluate possible cover. Then he rushed in, with Ash and me on his heels. He laid down suppressing fire while we took cover behind a fallen pile of rubble. Then he joined us and we went to work.

These geth put up such a fierce resistance that I knew a Prime was present long before it showed itself.

We were nearly defeated in the first fifteen seconds of the fight, by a pair of hoppers that leaped up onto the walls to see down past our cover. A pair of assault drones supported them, hovering in the air just in front of us. While Ash and I fired at the drones, Shepard fired his sniper rifle twice from the hip, aiming by sheer instinct, picking off both geth hoppers in rapid succession.

The rest of the geth remained ground-bound, unable to eliminate our cover unless they flanked us. They made a good attempt. While four troopers kept Shepard and Ashley busy in front, I saw a Juggernaut skulking across the room behind cover, trying for our left flank. Just as it was about to appear and fire, I called up a biotic surge and yanked a critical piece of rubble away from its place
against that wall. Tons of stone and metal collapsed onto the Juggernaut, pinning it to the floor and
knocking out its shields. A follow-up biotic warp shook it apart from within.

Soon Shepard could vault over our cover and make a dash for a raised catwalk along the right-hand
side of the room. He climbed up, produced his sniper rifle again, and began to lay down one accurate
shot after another. Meanwhile Ashley and I moved forward cautiously, continuing to lay down
gunfire and the occasional biotic assault. Caught between hammer and anvil, the geth position
collapsed.

The Prime fell last, charging Ashley and me but falling before our combined fire. It crashed to the
ground and slid past us on the floor, fetching up against a piece of heavy equipment like an ungainly
pile of spare parts. Ashley gave it one last burst of assault rifle fire just to be sure.

We found another set of the dropship’s claws in this room. At first we still saw no way to attack the
ship, but then Ashley noticed something unusual. Here the geth had wedged the ship’s claws into an
existing piece of powered machinery. The ExoGeni researchers must have flown a small shuttle from
this area, and had installed massive doors to turn part of the space into a vehicle bay. A few minutes
with the controls, and I rigged the doors to slam shut with a great deal of mechanical force.

With its claws dislodged, the geth ship lost its hold on the side of the tower. Caught by surprise, it
lost attitude control and fell through the atmosphere of Feros. We heard a colossal crashing sound
from outside, a series of concussions to shake the entire structure. The geth were gone.

Suddenly our helmet radios came alive with a transmission from the Normandy.

“. . . come on, Commander, you’ve got to be out there. Normandy calling Commander Shepard,
come in please."

“Shepard here, go ahead, Normandy.”

“Commander!” Even over the radio link, I could hear the relief in Joker’s voice. “Damn, am I ever
glad to hear your voice. We’re under lockdown here. The colonists have gone wild. They’re trying to
break into the ship.”

“What happened? Is Kaidan there?”

“I’m here, Commander,” said Kaidan. “Everyone’s fine, we all pulled back as per your orders the
moment we saw the colonists starting to behave strangely. By the time they had gone into full attack
mode we had already locked the ship down.”

“Good job. Exactly when did this happen?”

“Must have been a little under two hours ago. We’ve been trying to raise you ever since. Are you
okay?”

“We’re fine for now. Follow your orders. Do not under any circumstances let any of the colonists on
board. While you’re at it, seal the life support systems and break the umbilical connection.”

“Sir? Should we be ready to take off?”

“Not yet. Just make sure you’re breathing canned air. Get the crew busy running decontamination
drills on anything that’s been exposed to the Feros atmosphere. I’ll explain later. Right now we’re on
our way back to you. I’ll call if I have any more news.”

“Aye-aye. Normandy out.”
“A little under two hours ago,” I said. “That would have been just about the time we learned about the Thorian from Lizbeth Baynham.”

Shepard nodded grimly. “It knew.”

When we met her again, Lizbeth Baynham knew something as well. One glare from Shepard and she became all contrition, ready to tell us everything.

“Yes, I knew what they were doing with the Thorian,” she admitted. “I was too frightened to object. If they could do that to the colonists, they could do it to me.”

“I’m sure there was something you could have done,” Shepard growled.

She looked down, ashamed. “There was. I was getting ready to call in Colonial Affairs, ask them to come and mount an investigation. When the alarms sounded I stayed behind to send the message, which is why I missed the evacuation. But I was too late. The power went out before I could transmit, and I got stuck here with the geth for over a week.”

“All right,” said Shepard, visibly softening. “Come with us back to your mother. Help us figure out what to do next.”

“I can do that. I want to do something to make up for what we did here.”

The Mako felt crowded with four of us in the crew compartment. It helped that Lizbeth had a slender frame and wasn’t encased in armor. She huddled beside me in the back, quiet but alive with curiosity at the vehicle around her. Even the geth we had to fight on the way back didn’t dampen her spirits. She was finally moving, taking action, no longer a helpless victim. After Therum, I could understand her position.

When we reached the midway point and left the Mako, at first she ran ahead of us to see where her mother had been hiding. Then she stopped short, suddenly ducking behind some crates as if afraid of what she was seeing. When we caught up with her, we could see why. The refugees milled about like insects stirred with a stick, and we heard raised voices.

“Everybody be quiet,” shouted Ethan Jeong. “Just let me think!”

Juliana Baynham stood close by, her stance belligerent. “You can’t get away with this, Jeong. These are human beings you’re talking about writing off!”

“Somebody get her out of here!”

A man in armor with security insignia moved forward and took hold of Juliana.

This was too much for her daughter, who leaped out of cover. “Get your hands off her, you sons of bitches!”

Jeong whirled and saw Lizbeth approaching at a run. “All right, all of you, come out where I can see you!”

Shepard exchanged glances with us, shrugged, and walked out into the open.

“Shepard. Damn it, I knew it was too much to hope that the geth would kill all of you. I found some interesting things about you in the ExoGeni database. I know what you did on Elysium, but your heroics aren’t needed here.”
Shepard kept his voice and body language under control. “Jeong, we can still talk this out. Nobody else needs to get hurt.”

“You don’t understand. It’s not that easy.” Jeong made a nervous gesture, as if he couldn’t decide what to do with his hands. “Communications are back up. I was able to report to ExoGeni corporate. They want this place *purged.*”

“That’s not going to happen,” Shepard warned. “These are human beings. Your corporation can’t just use them, throw them away, and expect to get away with it.”

“There’s something here far more valuable than a few colonists!” said Jeong.

“I know. The Thorian.”

*Damn it,* swore Jeong. “How much do you know?”

“The whole story, I’m afraid.”

“Wait a minute,” interjected Juliana. “What’s the Thorian?”

“It’s a telepathic life-form living under Zhu’s Hope,” explained Lizbeth. “It’s taking over the minds of the colonists. ExoGeni knew all along.”

“You knew about it?” demanded Juliana.

Lizbeth only hung her head in silent shame.

Juliana turned on Jeong. “You won’t get away with this.”

“So you keep saying, but nobody is going to miss a few colonists.”

“Jeong, you’re missing the big picture,” said Shepard, his tone of voice completely changed.

Jeong stared at him. I confess I did as well.

“Okay, ExoGeni can’t carry through with its plans for the Thorian,” Shepard continued. He was actually *smiling* at the corporate representative. “But look at the other possibilities here. We’ve already done a lot to protect the Zhu’s Hope colony. Suppose we can get the colonists free of the Thorian. ExoGeni could get all *kinds* of good publicity out of helping them.”

“Charity doesn’t support shareholder value,” Jeong scoffed.

Shepard shrugged. “Who’s talking about charity? There are bound to be other resources of value here on Feros, and the colonists can still help you find them if they’re alive to do it. In the meantime, ExoGeni gets a reputation for supporting its colonial ventures, and that means the next time you want to explore a planet on the frontier, you’re more likely to get volunteers.”

Jeong looked thoughtful.

“Talk to your superiors. Get them to stand by while we resolve the situation here. Then *you* can take credit for rescuing ExoGeni’s investment in Feros.”

“I suppose. It can’t hurt to try.”

While Jeong went to confer with ExoGeni, I approached Shepard. “I find it hard to believe that you would be willing to forgive Jeong.”
“I’m not. But if he can get ExoGeni to change its policy toward Feros, that’s good enough. We can nail him to the wall later.”

Ash laughed quietly. “Pretty scary, Skipper. I didn’t know you spoke corporate.”

Shepard smiled. “I took a correspondence course.”

Juliana and Lizbeth Baynham approached us. “Commander, did you mean what you said about freeing the colonists from the Thorian’s control?” asked Juliana.

“Certainly. Do you have an idea?”

“We might. From what Lizbeth tells me, the Thorian exerts its control by infiltrating the human nervous system with its spores. Maybe we can counteract the effect temporarily by administering tetraclopine.”

Shepard frowned. “What’s that?”

Lizbeth broke in to explain. “It’s a compound we use in the grow-labs, as part of our standard insecticide. It acts as a neuromuscular degenerator. Against the Thorian-affected humans it should have an anesthetic effect, knocking them out and suspending the effect of the Thorian’s spores for a brief period.”

“You’re suggesting that I release clouds of nerve gas in the colony?”

“Not at all,” Juliana protested. “In the concentrations we’re suggesting you use, the compound should be completely harmless in the long run. It might help you incapacitate the colonists without using lethal force against them.”

Ashley said, “We could adapt our grenades to disperse this tetra-whatsis. Like an old-fashioned gas grenade. I’ve got the tools we would need.”

Shepard thought about the proposal for a long moment. “Well, I certainly don’t have any other way to help them if the Thorian turns them against me. I’ll at least try it. How much of this tetraclopine do you have on hand?”

“Not much,” Juliana admitted. “I’ll work with Chief Williams to adapt your grenades.”

“Go ahead.”

When we left the arcology for the final run to Zhu’s Hope, we had a grand total of five gas grenades, and we could not be certain they would work. We had no opportunity to test them in advance. Nevertheless, Shepard ordered us to check fire if any of the colonists presented themselves as targets. We would give the grenades a chance to work first.

The doors to the garage at Zhu’s Hope refused to open for the Mako. After signaling for entry three times, Shepard had us emerge from the AFV and approach on foot.

A bipedal figure crouched by the garage door. At first we thought it one of the colonists, but as we approached it stood upright, and we could see it wasn’t human at all. It had arms, legs, and head, but none of the fine details. A mockery of the human form.

“What is that?” Ashley asked, her voice low and tense. “Is that what a human turns into when the Thorian has been in control long enough?”
I moved closer, examining the thing. “I don’t think so. It seems to be made up entirely of plant fibers and tendrils. Perhaps the Thorian is creating its own proxies and simply imitating the human shape?”

Suddenly it moved, turning its “head” as if its eyeless face could see me.

“Liara . . .”

The thing leaped, colliding with me and knocking me to the ground. I could hear the others shouting, and then the monster opened its “mouth” and vomited a mass of oily greyish-green fluid over my helmet and armor. My suit was sealed, my faceplate down, but the stuff appeared to be corrosive as well as revolting. I feared I might soon start taking in toxins through the seals.

Meanwhile the garage door slammed open, and over a dozen more of the monstrosities charged out to attack us.

I called up a biotic surge and expelled the energy in all directions, flinging my attacker away in large, rancid chunks. *I will not vomit in my helmet,* I told myself as I scrambled to my feet. *I will not vomit in my helmet.*

Then I backpedaled frantically to get away from four more of the creatures.

Fortunately they didn’t have any kinetic barriers, so my biotic talents worked very well on them. I dropped a singularity just in front of me to cover my retreat, flung a persistent attacker away with a violent telekinetic push, and then I had reached my friends. Shepard and Ash retreated slowly, hammering the vegetable monstrosities with sustained assault-rifle fire. I turned my attention to making sure none of the attackers got close enough to spew their corrosive venom again.

Eventually we took refuge behind the Mako, from which vantage point we could easily keep the rest of the attackers at bay. A few moments later the last of them fell, spattering across several meters of the pavement.

For a moment we stood still, the harsh sound of Shepard and Ashley breathing loud in my helmet radio. I did my best to scrape the horrible muck from my helmet and upper body armor, still struggling to keep my digestive tract under strict discipline.

“Is everyone all right?” asked Shepard finally.

I shook my head. “No, I’m not all right. I can smell this crap right through the seals of my armor, which means they must be failing. Oh Goddess, what a stench. I strongly recommend you not let those things close enough to do that again.”

“Okay, helpful hint,” said Ash. “Now what?”

“Now we go in and hope we don’t run into any more of those,” said Shepard.

We found no more Thorian proxies in the garage. Instead, four colonists opened fire on us the moment we appeared.

We had no cover, and under Shepard’s orders we couldn’t return fire. Even suppression fire placed the colonists at too much risk. I saw nothing we could do.

Shepard had better fortune. After two seconds of indecision, he swore bitterly and charged the colonists.

They concentrated their fire on him. Even after Ashley and I ran after him, they ignored us and fired
His shields shone blue-white, a shimmering mosaic of light, as he crossed the floor at a dead sprint. I saw them tremble on the verge of going down, but then he tapped at his omni-tool and redirected power to rebuild them even while he ran. He dodged, he weaved, he danced across the floor in an attempt to shed as much incoming fire as possible. He charged up the ramp toward the colonist barricades, and I could see their eyes widen in shock as their fire simply failed to bring him down.

At the peak of his run, just as I knew his shields were about to go down, he leaped over the first barricade. One grenade left his hand, not hurled, simply tossed less than a meter so it would land perfectly in the midst of the colonists.

It went off. All four of the colonists suddenly dropped their weapons, clutched at their throats, and collapsed to the floor.

Shepard landed in a shoulder roll, his armor and weapons clattering as he bounced back to his feet on the far side, already scanning the colonists’ position to see whether they had all been affected.

The hangar saw a moment of perfect silence. Then . . .

“Shepard, you God-damned stupid son of a bitch!”

He straightened slowly. “Language, Ash.”

“Language, my ass! That was the most utterly moronic thing I have ever seen a Marine do in my entire life!”

“It worked.”

Ashley became nonverbal, emitting a lengthy growling scream of rage.

“Ash. We only have four of these gas grenades left. Somehow that has to cover every last armed colonist in Zhu’s Hope. We can’t afford to miss.”

“Then give the gas grenades to me, and let me re-enact the Charge of the Fucking Light Brigade.”

“We’ll share.” He grinned. “Actually, it was kind of fun.”

Ashley turned to check the condition of the gassed colonists, still muttering under her breath.

I switched to Shepard’s private channel. “Shepard, that was probably the bravest thing I have ever seen anyone do in my life.”

“I’ll try not to make a habit of it.”

He had to do it once more as we moved into the heart of the Zhu’s Hope colony. Ashley had to do it twice.

The Thorian committed all its available resources to the attempt to kill us. We met more of the proxy creatures. Over a dozen of the colonists carried weapons, attacking as soon as we appeared.

The proxies we fired on freely, falling back to draw them away from the colonists, destroying them as quickly as possible. Once the proxies had been dealt with, we stayed under cover, refusing to return the colonists’ fire, until Shepard or Ashley could charge forward and gently toss a gas grenade into place.
Arcelia Martinez fell just at the top of the last stairway leading down to Zhu’s Hope. Ian Newstead fell at the first barricade inside the colony; he must have given in to the Thorian’s persuasion at last.

We didn’t see Fai Dan until the last of his people went down and the battle seemed to be over. While we searched for the path down into the Thorian’s lair, he appeared, staggering out of cover with a heavy pistol in one hand.

“I tried to fight it,” he told us, his voice taut with strain. “It gets in your head. You can’t imagine the pain. I was supposed to be their leader. These people trusted me.”

Shepard stared at Fai Dan, backing away slowly, unwilling to harm the man.

The colonist continued forward, gesturing with his pistol. “It wants me to stop you . . . but I won’t.”

“Oh, to hell with this,” Shepard muttered. He threw a gas grenade, the last one he had.

Fai Dan gasped and went down, the pistol dropping from his weakened fingers to skitter across the floor.

Shepard shook his head. “Nobody gets left for that thing to use.”

“Shepard, I think I’ve found where the Thorian is hiding,” I said.

“Where?”

“Right here,” I told him, and activated the crane that held the freighter Borealis in place. The starship rose several meters into the air, exposing a stairway that descended into the depths of the Prothean structure. “The colonists must have set the freighter there as another defense for their master.”

“Good enough,” said Shepard. He keyed his helmet radio. “Normandy, it’s safe to come out of lockdown. Kaidan, I want your team here on the double. It’s time to finally get some answers.”
10 May 2183, Zhu’s Hope/Feros

Nine of us descended into the Thorian’s pits.

Shepard led us, with Ashley, Garrus, and Wrex at his side. Kaidan and I stayed in the center of the formation, ready to bring telekinetic force to bear in any direction, or apply medical aid as needed. The rest of the Marines walked at the rear: Jean-Paul Bayard, Heinrich Müller, and Alexei Dubyansky. At Shepard’s orders, most of us switched to shotguns, expecting close-order combat against the Thorian’s proxies in the cramped tunnels. Only Kaidan and I stayed with our pistol and submachine gun, expecting to be more effective as biotics.

All of us wore sealed suits. I had gone through a complete armor check, with Ashley ruthlessly swapping out any piece whose seals didn’t meet with her approval. None of us wanted to take any chances breathing air laced with the Thorian’s spores.

As we descended, the stairwells and tunnels took on a disturbingly biological appearance. Thick ropes and webs of vegetable matter hung on the walls, scum-covered water pooled on the floor. We saw white masses of tissue in dark corners, like enormous tumors. Stray air currents rose to the level of a strong breeze at irregular intervals. My suit sensors reported relative humidity of one hundred percent, with all manner of strange organic compounds in the air. Had any of us opened our faceplates, the stench alone would probably have been enough to knock us flat.

It was like descending into the depths of a stagnant marsh . . . or the bowels of some enormous beast.

The Marines chattered at first, but as the surroundings became more alien, more threatening, they fell silent. Even Garrus and Wrex, usually irrepressible when a fight was in the offing, found themselves with nothing to say.

Finally Shepard stopped dead, looking ahead of us. “I . . . think we’re going to need bigger guns.”

Slowly we moved forward, all of us staring upward in fearful awe.

We saw the Thorian.

In five hundred years I have seen many strange and alien life-forms. Some of them have been grand, others have been terrible, and a few have been both. I think nothing could possibly compare to the sight of Harbinger sweeping down out of a stormy sky, its vast arms spreading wide to devour all light, its howl of devastating thunder sounding from horizon to horizon.

The Thorian came close.

A great well stood at the core of the Prothean structure, about thirty meters in diameter, probably intended to bring in natural light for the long-dead inhabitants. We had emerged onto a broad portico, its inner side open to the well, a place where Protheans might once have gathered to enjoy fresh air and sunlight.

Now a vast vegetable mass occupied the well, a lumpy sphere over twenty meters across and suspended about ten meters above our level. It must have massed thousands of metric tons. The sunlight gleamed on its flanks, setting off hues of gold, green, and brown. It had a horny carapace, and several clusters of massive tentacles. It seemed to expand and contract slowly, taking in and expelling air like an enormous bellows. Several thick cables of vegetable fiber, each of them well
over a meter thick, anchored on the sides of the well to support the thing’s enormous weight. Another thick cable depended from the central mass, falling into shadow down in the well, possibly maintaining a connection to the world-spanning mat of plant tissue on the surface far below.

All of us stared at it. Short of high explosives, none of us could see how we could possibly harm it.

After several moments, I became aware that the mass heaved and strained, as if trying to expel some foreign object. A cluster of tentacles moved slowly to hover over the edge of our portico. Another heave, and a rush of greasy fluids spilled out on the floor. Shepard backed away apprehensively.

A form emerged from the mass of tentacles: bipedal, slender, and very graceful. It dropped to the floor, landing in an elegant crouch, and then rose to a standing position. It showed no concern for its nudity, or for the sheen of oils that ran down its body to pool on the floor. It raised a crested head and looked at all of us with piercing jade eyes.

Corporal Müller made a vulgar comment, earning a sharp rebuke from Kaidan.

 Aside from its vivid green coloring, the creature was perfectly asari. In fact, I recognized it.

“**Shiala?**” I breathed in shock.

“**Who?**” asked Shepard.

“**This looks** like Shiala, one of my mother’s acolytes, as well as a childhood friend of mine.” I took a deep breath. “I mentioned her to you before. It was Shiala who remained in communication with me for a number of years, after my mother and I stopped speaking to each other.”

“Liara, I don’t think that’s really an asari,” said Kaidan.

“Of course not. It must be another of the Thorian’s proxies. Still, the resemblance to Shiala is quite remarkable.”

Then the Shiala-thing decided to speak. “Invaders! Your every step is a transgression. A thousand feelers appraise you as meat, fit only to dig or to decompose. I speak for the Old Growth, as I did for Saren. You stand within and before the Thorian. It commands that you be in awe!”

*Even the voice is the same.* Although Shiala never sounded quite that arrogant.

“Liara, does this make sense to you?” asked Shepard.

I thought quickly, and realized I had at least a hypothesis. “We know Saren came here. He needed something from the Thorian. Perhaps he bargained with it, using Shiala as an intermediary?”

“How would that work?”

I glanced up at the creature’s central mass, and shivered. “Shiala could have melded with the Thorian.”

“Could she even *do* that?” asked Kaidan.

“Yes, if it has anything approximating a nervous system. Which it must, however exotic the biological mechanisms involved.”

“You understand,” said the proxy. “Saren sought knowledge of those who are gone. The Old Growth listened to flesh for the first time in the Long Cycle. Trades were made.”
“Would you be willing to trade with us as well?” asked Shepard. “I need the same knowledge that Saren took.”

“Never. After Saren departed, his Cold Ones came and sought the destruction of the Old Growth. They began killing the flesh meant to tend the next cycle. Flesh fairly given! Falsehood and betrayal!”

Shepard sighed. “Yes, Saren has a habit of doing that.”

“The Old Growth sees the air you push as lies! There will be no more trades with flesh!”

“Well, if you won’t bargain, then you had better listen to this: I won’t let you keep the slaves you’ve taken. Release them, now.”

“No more will the Old Growth listen to those that scurry and nibble and betray. Your lives may be short, but they have already gone on too long. Your flesh will feed the ground and the new growth!”

With that, the Shiala-thing made a commanding gesture and ignited with blue light. A telekinetic bolt flew out, hurling Shepard backward against a stone column.

More of the half-formed humanoid proxies flooded onto the portico from both sides.

That quickly, we found ourselves fighting for our lives.

I couldn’t begin to make sense of the battle. We had no plan, no doctrine, and no tactics. All of us simply did what we must to survive from moment to moment.

Garrus, Bayard, and Müller stood back to back, using their shotguns to keep the proxies at bay.

Wrex roared, seized one of the proxies in both hands, and simply ripped the thing in half. It continued trying to attack him until he stomped it to mush beneath his boots.

The proxy creatures caught Ash on her own, surrounding her in the first moments of the fight. Somehow she became a creature of agility and raw reflex, spinning to the four quarters, dealing out a roundhouse kick one moment and a shotgun blast the next. A goddess of war, who none of the Thorian’s creatures quite managed to touch.

Shepard picked himself up, shook himself briefly to make sure nothing was broken, and then hurled himself into the wild melee.

Kaidan and I shared a lightning-swift glance, each of us in an instant knowing what the other intended. Then we went hunting for the Shiala-thing. We didn’t have far to look.

It moved like a trained asari commando: fast, graceful, and deadly. It lacked armor or weapons, but if anything its biotics were more powerful than anything I remembered from Shiala. I suspected genetic meddling on the part of the Thorian.

It watched for opportunities, using biotic pulls and throws to knock our people off balance. I saw it hurl Private Dubyansky off his feet and into a mass of the proxy creatures. A viciously strong pull broke up the triangle formation Garrus had set up with the Marines.

I took a chance. “Shiala!” I shouted at the top of my lungs, and used my submachine gun to hurl a storm of bullets at it.

Distracted, it turned to me.
In that moment, Kaidan threw a powerful biotic pull of his own, yanking the Shiala-monster off its feet. I followed up with a ferocious throw, hurling the creature off the edge of the portico to fall into the depths.

Without the Shiala-creature to help, the Thorian’s proxies weren’t nearly as effective. Slowly the tide turned, the creatures collapsing or splattering across the walls as we destroyed them one by one. In a few minutes we stood in the quiet, breathing hard, wondering how we had survived.

Not all of us had gotten out of the battle unscathed. Shepard looked around and assessed the situation, counting the wounded. “Müller, get Dubyansky and Vakarian back to the Normandy for medical, then report to Lieutenant Pressley.”

“Ooo-rah,” grunted Müller. He turned to support Alexei and Garrus as they moved away, nursing broken bones. Garrus also had some bad chemical burns, where the proxies’ acidic bile ate through the seals of his armor.

“Sir, there’s something unusual over here,” reported Bayard.

We went to look. The Marine had found one of the anchor points for the Thorian’s supporting cables, attached to the outer wall a few meters away. Upon closer examination, it appeared to be more than just an attachment point. I saw some kind of bulbous organs in the end of the cable, and a hint of fluids moving back and forth under the surface.

“Stand back,” Shepard ordered, and aimed his shotgun.

Blam – blam – blam!

The cable shuddered and then tore loose from the wall, spilling fetid liquids everywhere. Out in the well, the Thorian’s central mass heaved and wallowed, emitting a sound like an enormous low-pitched shriek.

“It felt that,” said Shepard, smiling grimly. “Let’s go find some more.”

It took us well over an hour to kill the Thorian. It felt like a dreadful eternity.

The main body of the Thorian had no power to harm us directly. On the other hand, it seemed to have an unlimited supply of humanoid proxies, to hurl at us in endless waves. Occasionally another Shiala-thing joined the attack, sweeping down upon us in a wave of biotic power. We advanced slowly, earning every meter of progress with firepower and determination.

Without the advantage of surprise, the Thorian never again came so close to overwhelming us. We took no more casualties.

That doesn’t mean we did not suffer.

Killing is not so easy as it seems. Killing in great numbers is worse, even for soldiers who have already seen many terrible battles. The Thorian’s proxies may have been made of vegetable fiber and acidic bile, they may have been mindless, but they looked human enough. We found it difficult to keep violently destroying them. Shepard and his Marines became grim and silent, their eyes dull, as they killed and killed and killed.

Only Wrex seemed to revel in the endless warfare, but then he was krogan and born to it. In any case, he had no reason to see the Thorian’s proxies as resembling his own kind.
Of course, I had to keep killing monsters that looked just like one of my oldest friends.

Once a Shiala-thing leaped out of nowhere, sending a bolt of biotic force at me. I blocked its attack with my own barrier, used a *cheironomia* technique to throw the clone to the floor, and then smashed it in the throat with a biotic-enhanced hammer blow. Its eyes stared into mine as it thrashed and died. Eyes just like Shiala’s, aside from their color.

Goddess. Four hundred years later, I still wake up screaming once in a while.

As we proceeded to demolish each attachment point in turn, the Thorian became more desperate. Its proxies attacked with more ferocity, sometimes driving us into a fighting retreat for long minutes until the wave exhausted itself. I thought I could hear rage, pain, and eventually terror in its echoing screams.

It was callous and arrogant. Who knows how many beings it enslaved over millions of years? Yet it was also vast, ancient, and very probably unique, and we destroyed it.

When Shepard demolished the last of the Thorian’s nerve trunks, it lost its grip. Cables tore and snapped, the sounds almost musical but extremely loud. The frayed cable-ends whipped about in all directions, forcing us to dive for cover. With a final howl, the central mass tumbled and fell down the shaft, leaving nothing behind but echoes.

For the first time in ages, Shepard closed his shotgun and stood without a weapon in his hand.

“Damn it,” he said, his voice utterly weary.

The others moved to lean against stone columns, or even to sit on the floor, glad to take a moment to rest and recover their sanity. I went to Shepard, pulling my helmet off . . . wincing at the stench, which was exactly as terrible as I had imagined. “What’s wrong?”

He removed his own helmet, revealing a pale face, slick with sweat. “All of this. I needed to know what the Thorian told Saren. It might have been just the clue he needed to find the Conduit. I can’t think of anything else that could have brought him to this God-forsaken planet. Now it’s gone. What a waste.”

“There was no other way to free the colonists,” I told him.

“I know. It’s a victory . . . but what’s our next step? What if Saren has everything he needs now? Did we just save a few hundred colonists, at the cost of the whole galaxy?”

“I don’t know, Shepard.” I wanted to take him in my arms, but not in front of the others. I settled for holding his gaze and trying to send him strength. “Let’s go check on the colonists, make sure they’re well, and then go back to the *Normandy*. We can’t give up now.”

“No.” He rested a hand on my shoulder and gave me a grim smile. “The game’s not over yet. Come on.”

We turned to go, the others rising to follow us up the long trail to Zhu’s Hope.

“Wait a minute,” said Ashley. “Commander, look!”

We turned to look where she was pointing. There in a shadowed corner, we saw one of the big masses of pasty white tissue, adhering to the wall. Most of these had been still as we passed them, but this one was moving, stretching, finally tearing open. A body rolled out of it, falling to the floor in an ungainly heap. Slender, feminine, nude, skin of purest blue . . .
Suddenly I understood what we were seeing. “Shiala!”

Tendrils wrapped around her limbs and throat, delved obscenely into all the orifices of her body, connecting her to the innards of the pulpy mass from which she had emerged. Shepard and I pulled on them, gently at first, then more firmly as she showed no signs of distress. When we cleared her throat she suddenly convulsed, her lungs going into violent spasms. A flood of greenish liquid spilled out of her mouth and across the floor. She gasped, coughed, retched, and then she breathed air once more.

I don’t think she realized who I was until I helped her to rise. Finally she brought her head up and found herself staring directly into my face.

“Liara?”

Then her knees buckled and she almost fell into my embrace. I held her as tightly as I could and whispered comfort in her ear.

Finally she felt strong enough to stand on her own. She looked around at all of us and took a deep breath. “Thank you, all of you. Thank you for my freedom.”

“Your name is Shiala?” Shepard asked gently.

“That’s right.” She glanced at me. “Liara will have mentioned me. I served . . . I served Matriarch Benezia. When she allied herself with Saren, so did I. I’m very glad to meet you, Commander Shepard.”

“You know who I am?”

“Oh yes,” she breathed. “All of Saren’s followers know who you are. Years ago, he prevented another man from becoming the first human Spectre: your mentor, David Anderson. Now to have you succeed where Anderson failed, to have you as the hunter on his trail and the shadow at his heels? You cannot imagine his frustrated rage.”

Shepard smiled slowly, with an edge sharp enough to cut glass. “Good.”

“How did you end up as part of the Thorian?” I asked.

“Saren needed me to communicate with it, to learn its secrets. I joined my mind to that of the Thorian.” Even after all she had been through, her face took on an expression of wonder for a moment. “It was a remarkable experience . . . but once Saren had what he needed, I was no longer useful. He bartered me to the Thorian in exchange for his safe departure. I became its thrall, the genetic source for an eventual army of cloned warriors.”

“He’s pretty quick to betray his own people.”

Shiala nodded. “He was quick to betray the Thorian as well. After he escaped safely, he ordered the geth to destroy all evidence of its existence. Saren knows you are searching for the Conduit. He needed to prevent you from gaining what he called the Cipher.”

“I don’t understand. What’s the Cipher? What does it have to do with the Conduit?”

“The beacon on Eden Prime gave both of you visions . . . but the visions are confusing and unclear.” Shepard nodded. “I’ll say. I’ve had no luck making sense of them.”
“Neither did Saren, until he came here. The visions were meant for a Prothean mind. To truly comprehend them, you must be capable of thinking like a Prothean. You must understand their language, their culture, their history, everything that made them distinctive and unique. The Thorian had that knowledge. When the Protheans lived on Feros, it watched and studied them. It made some of them its thralls, just as it made me and the humans above its thralls. When they died, it consumed them. They became a part of it. That knowledge is the Cipher.”

I stepped in. “Shepard, I think I understand. Remember our assessment of Saren’s objectives? He needs some way to translate the visions into symbols and images that would make sense to his mind. At the time we couldn’t see how he might accomplish that.”

“But if he could learn to think like a Prothean, then he wouldn’t need a translation anymore. He would be able to understand the vision directly.”

“That is correct,” said Shiala. “The Cipher gave him the ability to fathom the vision in its entirety. It was not enough to find the Conduit, but it was an enormous step forward. Saren is very close to attaining his goals.”

“Then I need the Cipher too. How do I get it, now that the Thorian is gone?”

Shiala smiled. “There is a way. I retain the knowledge from my own melding with the Thorian. If I were to join my mind with yours . . .”

It felt like a sudden electric current surging through me, a wave of jealous anger. No. He is mine!

Shiala had always been very sensitive to the moods of others. She must have sensed something of my emotional state. “Liara, is something wrong?”

I swallowed my rage and concentrated on maintaining a serene façade. “No. Nothing at all.”

She looked at me more closely and lowered her voice, so that no one but the three of us would hear. “Liara? Are you involved with this human?”

Shepard gave me a sharp glance, suddenly understanding, but said nothing.

I sighed, feeling the anger ebbing away, leaving only bitter defeat in its wake. “Yes, Shiala. Shepard and I are . . . exploring the possibilities. He and I have not joined as yet.”

“I understand. Commander, I don’t wish to intrude on your relationship with Liara, but I truly see no other way. The Cipher cannot be taught, only experienced.”

“Can you give us a minute?”

She nodded and moved gracefully away, going to speak to the others.

Shepard turned and planted himself before me, resting his hands on my shoulders. “Liara.”

I shook my head angrily. “Don’t say it. I know what you have to do.”

“That’s right. If this is the only way for us to salvage something out of this disaster, then I have to do it.” He placed a gentle hand under my chin, tipping my face up so he could look into my eyes. “Liara. I love you.”

It was the first time he said it. I felt tears spring to my eyes for a moment. “And I love you, Shepard. I know this has to happen. I just . . . I wanted it to be me.”
“I understand.” He gave me a smile, warm and full of compassion. “I suppose we could slip out around the corner for a few moments . . .”

I scoffed. “Don’t be absurd. We don’t have time, and besides, this has to be the least romantic place I could possibly imagine.”

He looked around: broken stone and steel, the Thorian’s torn support cables, lumps and masses of dying tissue, scattered fires, rank fluids pooling on the floor. “I sincerely hope you never imagined anything like this.”

I shuddered in revulsion. “Goddess, no. And now that you mention it, I would like to be away from here as soon as we possibly can. Go on. Do what you must. Just remember that when we have some time to ourselves . . . how would Ashley put it? Your ass is mine.”

“All the rest of me too. You have my word on it.”

He bent close to kiss my forehead tenderly. Then he turned and walked over to Shiala.

“I’m ready,” he told her.
Cognitive Dissonance

1800 Shipboard Time (SSV Normandy), 10 May 2186, Theseus System Space

“I want to go on the record as saying that I do not recommend this,” said Dr. Chakwas.

I sighed. “Don’t be absurd, Doctor. This is a normal and healthy aspect of asari biology.”

“That’s true, under ordinary circumstances. These circumstances are anything but ordinary.” The doctor glared at Shepard and me. Mostly at me. “You have both been under physical and psychological stress. You are hungry, thirsty, short on sleep, and fatigued from two days of combat. The last few hours have been frightening and traumatic for both of you. Commander, you have already participated in one act of cognitive superposition today, and the information imparted was extensive, complex, and extremely alien. Dr. T’Soni, with all due respect, you are inexperienced and much too emotionally involved.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I told her. “It has to be done.”

Shepard nodded, his eyes never leaving mine. “Doctor, Saren may already have everything he needs to find the Conduit. He may already be on his way there. Now that I have the Cipher, if there’s any possibility that Liara can help me sort out my vision, then we need to try it now.”

“At the cost of one or both of your minds? Your lives?”

“Yes, Doctor, there is a risk,” I agreed, trying to stay composed and rational. “There’s always a risk. Yet asari have carried out this kind of superficial joining, even under very stressful conditions, for many thousands of years. This is natural for us.”

“But…”

“Enough, Doctor,” said Shepard gently. “Your objections have been noted. Are you prepared to observe?”

“I am,” said the doctor, shaking her head in frustration. She sat down at her desk, medical instruments close at hand, and watched us both with cool, clinical compassion.

Shepard and I stood relaxed, about a meter apart, holding one another’s gaze.

1530 Shipboard Time (SSV Normandy), 10 May 2186, Zhu’s Hope/Feros

We emerged from the depths under Zhu’s Hope to find the colonists beginning to recover. They seemed groggy from the gas grenades, but determined to get back on their feet.

To our surprise the ExoGeni personnel had already arrived, lending the colonists a hand as they recovered. Apparently the Baynhams had shamed Ethan Jeong into following us down the skyway, arriving at Zhu’s Hope even while we fought the Thorian below. Thus they could help when the colonists began waking up, reporting sudden freedom from the Thorian’s influence.

“Thank you for freeing us,” said Fai Dan simply. “The Thorian wasn’t a cruel master. It believed in keeping its slaves healthy and productive. But we were slaves none the less.”

“What will you do now?” asked Shepard.
The little colonist smiled for the first time since we had met him. “Rebuild. Continue to make a home here. Support the ExoGeni facility, if they stay on Feros.”

“I think you can count on that.” Shepard reached into a pocket and produced a data disk, which he handed to Fai Dan. “If they give you any trouble, though, feel free to use this.”

“What is it?”

“It’s solid evidence that ExoGeni knew about the Thorian and deliberately permitted it to enslave all of you. We took it right from their computers – timestamps, digital signatures, everything you would need to make it stick in a court of law. Or in the press, if it comes to that.”

Fai Dan’s eyes gleamed. “This is a princely gift, Commander. But why give it to us?”

“Because I don’t give a damn what happens to ExoGeni, but I do care what happens to you. This should give you and the other colonists some bargaining power from now on. Use it wisely.”

Fai Dan made a small bow, his hands pressed together in a gesture of respect. “We will.”

1800 Shipboard Time (SSV Normandy), 10 May 2186, Theseus System Space

“Shepard. Relax and breathe evenly. Close your eyes. Imagine a ball of energy resting near the base of your spine. With every breath it rises a little higher.”

I reached out with my mind. It felt a little like calling up my biotic talents, but in this case I strove to regulate my nervous system to match his.

It had been many years since my instruction in the art of touching the minds of others. I ignored the small voice of terror in the back of my mind that told me I was going too far.

“The energy rises within you. As it rises, the centers of awareness in your body and mind respond. It is your true self, your connection to the world around you, to the cosmos in which we all live. It rises past your heart and fills you with well-being.”

I could feel his breathing now, his heartbeat. His mind was responding to my instruction, his body was relaxing, his pain and exhaustion were slipping away for the moment. My own rhythms fell into synchrony with his. My eyes slipped closed.

1530 Shipboard Time (SSV Normandy), 10 May 2186, Zhu’s Hope/Feros

“Thank you, Liara.” Shiala now wore a spare overall, donated by one of the colonists. She threw her arms around me, a familiar embrace that I returned with interest. “Please thank Commander Shepard for me as well. To be free again is the most precious gift.”

“Oh, Shiala,” I sighed. “Come with us!”

“I can’t.” She looked down, ashamed. “Right now, if I saw Saren again, I would want to be as fierce as you might wish. But I can’t trust myself. What if he spoke the slightest word and I suddenly found that his indoctrination had only been deferred, not removed? What if he forced me to turn against you once more? I couldn’t bear to hurt any of you again.”

“Then what will you do?”
“I think I will stay here. I’ve never had many dealings with humans before. I find them intrigu
And there is much I could do to help the colonists. Perhaps it will make up for some of what Saren
and the Thorian did to them.”

I smiled, remembering Shiala before she followed my mother into bondage. She had always been
fierce but thoughtful, a warrior with a poet’s soul. “That is very like you,” I told her. “I remember
when I was very young, the stories you would tell me about the justicars and their adventures. You
always wanted to join their order.”

“I could never be a justicar. Certainly not now, after the things I’ve seen.” She sighed, and I could
see pain in her eyes. It made her look older. “But if I can bring a little compassion and justice into
this place, surely that will be a start?”

“I agree. I think my mother would have agreed too.”

She blinked away tears. “Thank you. She would have been so proud of you.”

“I know. She broke free of the indoctrination before the end, just for a few moments. I had a chance
to speak to her.”

“That’s good to know. It means there might be hope for the rest of us.”

I remembered my conversation with Shepard in his cabin. “I think so too.”

1800 Shipboard Time (SSV Normandy), 10 May 2186, Theseus System Space

“The energy rises further,” I murmured, so softly that Shepard might not have heard me. It didn’t
matter. I could feel him responding, his body and mind coming into consonance with mine. “It sits
behind your eyes. You are illuminated by it, a light that stretches to the limits of your vision, bright as
the sun.”

“Yes,” he murmured.

“Now it rises once again, to rest above your head like a crown.” My eyes snapped open, and I knew
they had changed, become pitch-black. “Embrace eternity.”

Suddenly no distance separated us at all. My mind and his came into contact, our surface thoughts
merging, trembling at the verge of a more complete fusion.

Shepard, I called to him.

Liara? He felt . . . not frightened, exactly, but extremely apprehensive. He struggled a little, fighting
the link.

Relax, Shepard. There is nothing to fear.

I’m not afraid, he thought, but it was untrue. Shepard, the most courageous person I had ever
known, afraid? Yet it was so. His anxiety increased. I felt a moment’s discomfort, like the echo of
pain.

Think about the vision, I instructed him. Think about what you saw when Shiala joined with you, the
things you learned, the Cipher. Concentrate on that. Don’t think about anything else.

I . . . I can’t.
Why? I looked more closely, drew him into a slightly deeper melding. *What's wrong?*

_No! Don’t push!*_ He struggled more intensely, and this time I felt real pain.

Suddenly I saw the truth. He strove to *conceal* something from me, something so wide and deep-seated that his very identity rested upon it. He couldn’t separate out the vision or the Cipher because they were somehow connected to this thing, this memory or thought that he was *desperate* I not see.

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**1750 Shipboard Time (SSV Normandy), 10 May 2186, Theseus System Space**

Shepard seemed pensive after we returned to the ship. He sent all of the Marines off-duty, put away his armor and weapons, checked the ship’s status, ordered Pressley and Joker to make way for the nearest mass relay, and went to the medical bay to check on all of our wounded. All routine for him. It seemed clear that his mind was elsewhere.

Finally, I cornered him as he turned to leave the medical bay. “You’ve been very silent since we left Feros.”

He took a deep breath. “Since I melded with Shiala, you mean.”

“Well, yes. Shepard, the joining can be many things, but it is never trivial. Just touching another’s mind for the first time can be a very profound experience, and you accepted an enormous amount of information through the link. It’s only natural that you should feel some dislocation.”

“Dislocation. That’s an oddly appropriate way of putting it. I feel as if I’ve dislocated my mind.”

“What is it like?” I asked, honestly curious.

“It’s like . . . I look at something, and I want to call it by some word I’ve never heard before, but I don’t know what the word is. It’s on the tip of my tongue but I can’t quite get it out. I look at other people and they don’t look right, but I can’t say how they should look. I’ve been having emotional surges, elated one moment, enraged the next. None of it makes sense.”

“Is it getting worse?”

“No, I think it’s slowly going away. Or at least it’s getting easier to filter out. Maybe if I just went to bed and slept for a dozen hours straight, I would be able to think properly when I got up.”

I nodded. “That might not be a bad idea. We asari often find it useful to sleep after a deep joining.”

“I can’t do it, though, not yet. Saren is too far ahead of us. I have to make sense of the vision. I feel as if the Cipher is the key, but I can’t quite bring it to bear.”

I carefully said nothing. I knew if I joined with him, I might be able to help him put all the pieces together. I also knew I couldn’t trust my own motives. He would have to make the decision on his own.

He did, but I could see that he was very reluctant. “Liara . . . I know you’re upset that Shiala melded with me before you did. Would you be willing to do it now?”

“Oh, Shepard, I’m not angry with you over that, only a little jealous of Shiala. I’ll get over it. But are you certain it’s a good idea? None of us are at our best right now. A good meal, a few hours of rest . . .”
“We can do all that after I know where to order Pressley to send the Normandy next. Liara. Are you willing to try?”

I looked down, unable to meet his gaze. “Of course, Shepard.”

He nodded decisively and turned. “Dr. Chakwas?”

1800 Shipboard Time (SSV Normandy), 10 May 2186, Theseus System Space

It felt as if I struggled to save a panicking swimmer from drowning.

Shepard. I promise not to look at anything you don’t wish to share. Nothing but the vision. Please.

I’m sorry. This isn’t working.

It can work. Focus on the vision. You stood in front of the beacon, and then?

He almost succeeded. He concentrated, started to remember the beacon . . . and then it all fell apart again. I sensed some association, something tying the beacon’s message to other memories, and he had firmly walled off those other memories.

He tried to break the link and flee.

I felt a surge of anger. No, Shepard. You asked for this. You made the decision that time is of the essence. We will succeed.

You’re right.

He made a supreme effort of will and held himself in place in the link.

Together we found the thread we needed: his memories of standing on Eden Prime, facing the Prothean beacon. The ancient device activated. It swept us off the ground and held us motionless. The images began to flood into our conjoined mind.

This time, together, we understood the images, the symbols, the meanings the message conveyed.


We are the Protheans. Our empire once spanned the galaxy.

Creatures huddled in the shadows. Deference. Submission.

We ruled over many other species, all of whom served us willingly.

A structure hanging in interstellar space, unmistakably the Citadel. Prosperity. Wealth.

From this place we ruled ten thousand worlds. Our argosies carried their trade for the prosperity of all.


Yet all our power and wealth was founded upon a terrible trap.

An enormous machine, somehow insectile in form. Fear. Horror. The urge to run.

The Reapers came, and brushed all our power aside as if it meant nothing.
Living beings, their shapes difficult to make out, falling and dying. Despair. Futility.

They killed us by the billions. We could not stop them.


They enslaved many of us, forced their slaves to betray our own people.

Living flesh being invaded by mechanical components, torn and mangled in the process. Pain. Distress.

The machines violated our very bodies, turned us into half-living monsters to serve them.

Twisted creatures wandering through a devastated landscape. Emptiness. Mourning.

Those who somehow survived the Reapers’ attack were left to die among the ruins.

Living beings running through a burning city. Hatred. Determination.

Flee the Reapers. Survive as long as you can. Fight them as best you are able . . .

The vision ended abruptly.

I opened my eyes and found myself kneeling on the deck, Shepard also kneeling inches away from me. My hands cradled his head, my fingers tense as if I had been trying to dig them into his skull. His own hands balled into fists at his sides. We both breathed hard. Dr. Chakwas hovered nearby, obviously on the point of intervening if she only knew how.

I released Shepard and sat back on my heels, taking deep slow breaths to try to center myself.

Shepard opened his eyes, wide and wild, searching blindly for a moment as if he remained buried in that terrible vision. Then he saw me, and the tension ebbed from his body. His head fell forward into a posture of despair.

“Nothing about the Conduit,” he said, in a voice like dust and ashes. “A general warning, a call to arms, and nothing else. Nothing we can use.”

“The Eden Prime beacon must have failed catastrophically just as it was reaching the point of any specifics.”

“All this, and we’re no closer to finding Saren or the Conduit than we were before.”

I couldn’t soften the blow for him. “No.”

The last traces of the link told me what he felt at that moment, and it was like a lance in my heart. Despair. Frustration.

Resentment.

He pushed himself to his feet. He looked down at me and opened his mouth as if he wanted to say more, but then he shook his head in weary dejection and walked out of the medical bay.

“Shepard . . .” I whispered, and tried to rise and follow him. My legs wouldn’t let me. They turned into rubber and very nearly dropped me full-length on the deck. Only Dr. Chakwas’s quick reflexes saved me. She lunged forward, caught me, and supported me until I could stand shakily on my own.
“Come on, Liara, let’s get you into a bed so I can have a look at you. That obviously didn’t go well.”

I lay back onto a diagnostic bed, my eyes closed, and tried to ignore the fact that the entire ship seemed to be in a slow spin. “No. He is extremely strong-willed, and he was striving to keep something away from me. It was a great struggle, even to access the memories of the Prothean beacon that he wanted to share.”

“Well, it clearly didn’t do you any good. Your blood pressure and blood sugars are terrible, and I’m reading abnormal surges of electrochemical energy in your brain. If you were a human I’d be terrified you were about to go into a grand mal seizure.”

“I’m not human,” I told her. At the moment, I am very glad of that.

_Have I lost Shepard? Have we lost everything?_

_Goddess, help us now._
Night

I would not say the next few days stand as the darkest I can remember. That dubious honor would have to go to the last few days of the Reaper War, and the empty years that followed our hollow victory. In those years, at times nothing but a stubborn sense of duty kept me alive and at work.

The days after Feros were not that bad, but at the time they presented misery enough.

I spent most of the time in my cubicle, using the extranet and Alliance military channels to work with Admiral Hackett’s Red Team. Shepard, Kaidan, and I had all been assigned to that working group, under David Anderson’s leadership. We hoped to produce a threat assessment – capabilities, objectives, possible strategy and tactics – for the Reapers.

It wasn’t an easy task. We knew so little about the hypothetical enemy.

At least we could guess at a lower bound for the Reapers’ capabilities. I provided data permitting the Red Team to reconstruct a picture of Prothean civilization at the end of the Third Age, just before the extinction cycle began. Populations, distribution of colonized worlds, economic and industrial output, technological capabilities, all of these could be estimated. Once we had a coherent mathematical model for the Protheans, we could build and test models for an enemy capable of completely destroying them in the time we knew the extinction had taken.

The results were not encouraging. At their height the Protheans had a vast empire, larger and far more powerful than the combined polities of the Citadel Council. To carry out their destruction, the Reapers must have had capabilities at least two orders of magnitude greater than anything we could muster, even assuming we could cooperate smoothly and bring every last resource to bear. Of course, knowing the nature of Council politics, such smooth cooperation did not seem at all likely.

If the Reapers returned, we were quite simply doomed.

13 May 2183, Ontarom Orbit

Dr. T’Soni:

You may not remember me. We met on Binthu but there was no time to make your acquaintance. I trust we will have the opportunity at some point in the future.

I have been directed to share the attached files with you. The executive summary is that sightings of the Collectors and their activities have increased dramatically in the past six months. My principal does not believe it to be a coincidence that this is happening just as Saren Arterius has actively allied himself with the Reapers.

Please let me know if there is any other way in which we can assist your research. I can be reached at any time at this data drop.

Miranda Lawson

The message came to me through Alliance military channels, which implied passage right through any number of milspec firewalls. None of which had detected the fact that the message originated from Cerberus.

Impressive. Now do I dare look at the attached files?
Finally I moved the message entirely off the Normandy’s internal network, placing it on a stand-alone computer I knew I could sacrifice. Then I used every tool I had to scan the message and its attached files for malware. Then I invited Tali into my cubicle and had her use every tool she had to scan for malware. We found nothing. Only then did I open the files and begin to read them.

The Collectors were a mysterious race, little more than rumor in Council space, although I knew they had been active in the Terminus Systems for centuries. No one knew anything about their world of origin, their culture, or their objectives. They simply appeared from time to time, somehow traveling through the otherwise-closed Omega-4 Relay in the Saharbarik system. They had a reputation as traders in living flesh, with oddly specific interests. They would offer very advanced technology in exchange for unusual specimens of sentient life, and then vanish as quickly as they had arrived.

Operative Lawson had told the truth. Beginning about three months before the attack on Eden Prime, the Collectors had quite suddenly become more active. Before, they had appeared somewhere in the Terminus Systems once every two to three years on the average. In the past six months they had sent at least four expeditions through the Omega-4 Relay.

It might have been nothing but a simple statistical anomaly . . . but I doubted that. The Illusive Man was no fool.

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**14 May 2183, Interstellar Space**

One thing the Red Team found difficult was the question of where the Reapers had gone. Admittedly the Citadel races had only mapped out a small portion of the galaxy. For every charted and explored world, about twenty others remained completely unknown. Vast reaches of the galaxy hid behind closed mass relays, or simply had not attracted anyone’s interest. Could the Reaper civilization hide somewhere in those unexplored regions?

A partial answer came from an officer at Alliance Naval Intelligence, a Lieutenant Commander Shelby. She proved that the Reapers were unlikely to be hiding anywhere in the galaxy’s spiral arms. Any civilization with their hypothetical capabilities would have to occupy at least a certain amount of space, using a certain number of star systems for energy and raw materials. The probability of such a civilization going completely unnoticed was negligible.

Commander Shelby offered three conjectures.

The Reapers could be centered in the galactic core. At that time we knew nothing about the core except what could be learned from telescopes and long-range probes. It was known to be a very hostile region, completely uninhabitable for any organic civilization. It did offer enough energy and mass to support a large synthetic civilization . . . assuming the synthetics could find ways to survive the extreme radiation.

The Reapers could be hiding outside the galaxy entirely. This seemed unlikely at first, but Shelby reminded us that intergalactic space was far from empty. Globular clusters, dwarf satellite galaxies, even the large irregular satellites the humans called the Clouds of Magellan, all of these orbited well away from the galaxy’s main disk. None of them had ever been visited by the Citadel races, or (as far as anyone knew) by the Protheans. The Reapers might use some of them as a base of operations.

Shelby’s third conjecture was perhaps the most disturbing. She pointed out an assumption implicit in her own models: that the Citadel races had opened new mass relays and selected new regions of the galaxy to explore in an essentially random manner. If we had not expanded entirely at random, if some factor had acted to prevent us from reaching certain mass relays – in short, if the Reapers controlled the mass relay network – then they could hide from us perfectly well without us being any
the wiser.

Shelby’s conclusion was stark. *Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.* The Reapers, if they existed and had even some of the capabilities we had come to suspect, could quite easily hide from us while still being able to attack us at their convenience.

In that context, it was disturbing to note that our best models of the Prothean extinction included the assumption that the Reapers had attacked by *surprise*.

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**15 May 2183, Herschel System Space**

Liara,

*The Armali courts have ruled that your mother’s crimes do not attaint you. You have therefore been recognized as her primary heir and the new head of the T’Soni lineage by right of primogeniture.*

*In light of your youth and the exigencies of your mission, I would advise you to designate one of your mother’s sisters as [proxenos](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proxenos) of the lineage for the time being. I would recommend Kallyria, as she is thoughtful, intelligent, and entirely without personal ambition. She will not want the position, which makes her the best possible candidate for it. She will obey your directives and manage the affairs of the lineage competently while your attention must be turned elsewhere.*

*Meanwhile, the day-to-day management of Benezia’s estate now falls to a board of trustees until such time as you are able to return and take up the burden. The courts have appointed me as the [archon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archon) of this board. Do you have any instructions for us?*

Sha’ira

I stared at the Consort’s message for a long time. It represented a very great temptation.

I had once told Shepard that I would stay with him until we defeated Saren, and possibly beyond that. That was before Feros. Before he had told me he loved me, and then gone away to join with Shiala, and then tried so disastrously to join with me. Before a chasm of distance had opened between us.

He had been avoiding me for days. He no longer visited me in my cubicle. He arranged his meal hours so they no longer matched mine. When we had to communicate on Red Team business, he seemed cool and professional and nothing more.

He had led three ground missions without me.

I had told Shepard that nothing was more important than his mission. Was that true? Back in asari space, with all of Benezia’s resources at my fingertips, could I do more to prepare the galaxy for the Reapers than was possible aboard the *Normandy*?

If Shepard no longer needed me, wasn’t my place with my own people?

In the end, I simply sent Sha’ira a message. I formally concurred with her recommendation of Kallyria, and expressed my confidence in their ability to manage until I could return. I advised her to invest in firms specializing in intelligence gathering and arms manufacture if she saw a good opportunity to do so. Then I signed off and returned to my work.

I wasn’t quite ready to give up on Shepard yet.
As days passed and the Reapers failed to appear, we began to realize that Saren could not have attained all of his objectives. The Eden Prime beacon had presumably given him a complete message. The Thorian had given him the Cipher, and he had other asari slaves to help him assimilate it, so he presumably understood the message. Why did he not already have possession of the Conduit?

The Red Team debated furiously over this point. Much depended on the nature and purpose of the mysterious Conduit. Some analysts proposed that the Conduit had failed over the eons and could no longer help Saren call the Reapers back into the galaxy. Other analysts proposed that the Conduit would take time to work, that we might still have time to prepare.

I suggested a simpler hypothesis: that the Cipher was a necessary but not sufficient condition for properly interpreting the beacon’s message. Some additional knowledge was necessary, possibly highly technical or obscure, which Saren did not yet have.

After two days of heated debate, the Red Team decided to stipulate my hypothesis for the time being. Not because there existed any objective evidence to support it, but because it preserved our agency. If I was wrong, then we could do nothing but hope that Saren’s quest had been futile from the beginning. On the other hand, if I was right, then we still had a chance to get ahead of Saren and stop him.

To that end I turned back to a suggestion Garrus had made on Feros: where could one find geth cooperating with krogan? Any sighting of the two together might suggest the presence of Saren.

I dug into every intelligence report, news article, and outright rumor I could find. I used every contact I could reach through the Red Team, through my own professional networks, and through Sha’ira. I sent a message to Operative Lawson at her data drop. I authorized a payment from my own funds to Barla Von, asking him for whatever data the Shadow Broker could provide. I worked with Tali to write data-mining algorithms, and turned them loose on the mass of compiled information.

Looking back, I think that research was my first real work as an information broker.

It succeeded.

A pattern lurked in the data, pointing to one small cluster in the Outer Arm of the galaxy. The Sentry Omega region stood close to geth space, and had only been superficially explored. No colonies had ever been established there. At most, the nomads and pirate gangs of the Terminus Systems passed through from time to time. Such witnesses were not very reliable, but when they came to port they told stories of what they had seen, and sometimes those stories reached the ears of my sources.

Several times in recent months, geth and krogan mercenaries had been spotted traveling together in the Sentry Omega cluster.

I checked the star charts and looked for worlds that might be attractive to Saren.

I found one, and forwarded a report to the Red Team and the Council, recommending further investigation.

Virmire.
There came a time, in the middle of the ship’s night, when I could tolerate the situation no longer.

I rose and went to my desk. “Bridge.”

“Bridge here. That you, Doc?”

I frowned. “Joker, it’s three in the morning. Don’t you ever go off-duty?”

“No more than I have to,” said the pilot. “What can I do for you?”

“Are we in range of the comm buoy network? I need to place a call back to Feros.”

“Not a problem, Doc. Plenty of bandwidth available.”

“Thank you, Joker. Get some sleep.”

“Hey, I’ll sleep when I’m dead.”

I used my computer to call the Zhu’s Hope station. Only then did I realize I had not checked the local time there. I wondered who would be roused from sleep to answer.

Fortunately when the screen blinked and an image formed, the timestamp showed mid-morning local time. A familiar face peered out at me.

“Who is . . . ah, Dr. T’Soni. It’s very good to see you again,” said Ian Newstead.

“Mr. Newstead. I’m glad to see you looking well. How are you?”

“Much better now that bloody thing is gone,” he said. “All of us are getting back on our feet, working to rebuild what was damaged. A few of us are still having headaches, but nothing like what the Thorian inflicted on us.”

“I could see what it was doing to you, when we met down in the tunnels. I’m sorry we couldn’t do more at the time.”

He grinned at me. “You did everything I would have asked for, if I had been able. But I get the notion this isn’t just a social call.”

“No. I’d like to speak to Shiala, if she’s available.”

“Right you are, Doctor. Just a moment.”

I didn’t have to wait long. Soon Shiala appeared, smiling warmly at me. “Liara! I’m surprised to hear from you so soon.”

“Do we have privacy, Shiala?”

Her smile vanished as she took in my voice and expression. “Of course. What’s wrong?”

I dropped into an archaic asari dialect, to avoid any human ears that might be listening in. “I must ask a question, but it entails a serious violation of protocol.”

“I see. Does it involve my joining with Commander Shepard?”

“Yes. Shiala, after we returned to the ship he and I joined for the first time, so I could assist him in understanding the Prothean message. It did not go well.”
“I’m sorry. Of course I will give you any insight I can.”

“In fact we managed to understand the message, but it required a great struggle. He strove to conceal some *eidolon* integral to his self-image. Since then the love he once held for me seems to have died. He avoids me and is nothing more than correct when we must speak.” I shook my head angrily, wiping away the tears that had formed in my eyes. “Shiala, I am at a loss. I do not know what to do.”

“Have you spoken to him on this matter?”

“I do not see how to begin. Shiala, when you joined with him, did you see anything that could explain this?”

She frowned, remembering. “I do not believe so. He was relaxed and receptive. I could sense the strength of his will, his *areté*, but he did not strive with me in any way. He impressed me greatly with his ability to assimilate the Cipher so quickly.”

I couldn’t help it. My fist bunched and I slammed it down on the desk beside me. My lips pulled back from my teeth in a snarl. “How is it that he could join with *you* so cleanly?”

“Because he does not love me.”

“That makes *no* sense!”

She watched me, a *knowing* expression in her eyes. “Liara, when I left with Benezia you had not yet experienced true *eros* with anyone. Is Commander Shepard your first?”

“I thought he might be,” I said bitterly.

“You surrender too easily,” she told me. “One thing I did see when I joined with him. He does love you, Liara, with rather frightening intensity. I cannot credit that one joining could change that, no matter how poorly formed.”

“I still do not understand.”

“Let me ask you a question. Are you his first love?”

I stopped to think about it. “No. He has never spoken of it in detail, but I know he has been involved with others before. Human women, of course.”

“Then he almost certainly knows more of love than you. The joys, the foolhardy passions . . . and the pain. Never forget the pain. Have you considered that Commander Shepard may *fear* you?”

“That is absurd. What could he possibly have to fear from me?”

“That is a question you must answer.”

I sighed and covered my face with both hands for a moment, gathering the strength to look her in the eyes once more. “Thank you, Shiala. I think.”

“You are welcome. I will pray for you.”

“Pray for us all.”

*19 May 2183, Interstellar Space*
Finally there came a knock at the door of my cubicle. I opened the door and found Shepard standing there.

“Doctor?”

He seemed courteous, reserved, his body language apparently neutral . . . but I began to know him better now. The position of his hands, a flicker in his eyes as he couldn’t quite force himself to meet mine, all of it spoke of uneasiness just beneath the polite veneer.

I held his gaze, refused to look away, and spoke with cool detachment. “Yes, Commander?”

He flinched, ever so slightly. “I just wanted you to know. I spoke to Councilor Valern a few minutes ago. The Council looked into your report on the Sentry Omega cluster. They sent a salarian STG company in to investigate Virmire.”

“What did they find?”

“We’re not sure. They ran into something. The Council got a signal on their emergency channel. It was too weak and garbled to make out. Valern has asked us to investigate further.”

“Good.”

He waited, as if expecting me to say more. Finally he asked, “Will you come on the ground team?”

“Of course, Commander.”

Another long pause. I saw a muscle twitch in one cheek, and firmly repressed the urge to reach out and soothe away the discomfort.

“All right. We’ll be there about noon tomorrow. Good night, Doctor.”

“Good night, Commander.”

Then he was gone.
“Five minutes, Commander,” said Joker from the bridge. “Those AA guns look nasty. I can put you down under their radar, but you’re going to have to take care of the guns from the ground.”

“Not a problem, Joker,” said Shepard. “What are the passive sensors telling you?”

“Lots of active radar, lots of geth transmissions, all around that big facility we detected from orbit. There’s something down there that Saren would really like to defend.”

“Any sign of Sovereign?”

“Negative, Commander. Not unless it’s a two-kilometer-high robot cuttlefish that can turn invisible.”

“Keep a sharp eye. That dreadnaught is fast for all its size. If it shows up we’re going to have to pack up and run like blazes.”

“I’m on it,” agreed Joker.

 Normandy came in very low to the shoreline, deploying the Mako at the last possible moment. Shepard worked a piece of magic with the mass-effect core and the thrusters, skimming along the surface of the water at a very shallow angle. The landing shook us about inside, and the Mako threw up an enormous fan of water as it shed momentum, but we suffered no damage or injury.

“EWS, report,” Shepard ordered.

I checked my console. “I see several active radar signatures from ahead, none of them above detection threshold. They don’t yet know we’re here.”

“Well, Garrus, you seem to have gotten your wish,” remarked Tali as the Mako began to move along the shoreline toward the distant geth stronghold. “This is a very pretty planet for once.”

Tali spoke the truth. Virmire reminded me of Thessia, as it must have appeared before the rise of asari civilization: sky a perfect blue and rich with clouds, ocean a deep grey-blue, beach purest white, and dense inland foliage green and lush. I saw abundant shore life, most of it of avian and crustacean forms. The external sensors told me that when we opened the hatch, we would find the air fresh and perfectly breathable.

“Well, I don’t think we’re going to find a decent restaurant on the way to the gunfight,” said Garrus. “Too bad this place is so far inside the Terminus Systems. All the levo races could make themselves right at home, if they didn’t have to worry about pirate and slaver raids every couple of months.”

“Hey, if we win this thing maybe we can put in for a bit of shore leave after,” Ashley suggested. “Some of those crab-things might be edible, the galley can probably make up a batch of drinks with the little umbrellas in them, and I’ve got a bikini stored somewhere in the bottom of my footlocker.”

“I think my translator just glitched,” said Garrus. “What’s a bikini?”

“About two hundred square centimeters of cloth that covers the essentials while concealing absolutely nothing,” said Ash. “And in my case, it is fire-engine red.”
I glanced over my shoulder at Garrus, who still looked confused.

“Cut the chatter,” said Shepard sharply.

Silence fell. I detected the first geth a few moments later, so we had no chance to resurrect the dead conversation.

At least our teamwork in combat was unchanged. Shepard drove, Ashley managed the weapons, and I operated the EWS console. We had no difficulty dealing with the scattered geth we encountered along our path. Even armature-class platforms posed little challenge, so long as we took our time and used the available cover.

Three times we encountered geth field-works. Each time we used the Mako’s main gun to hammer the geth platforms and weapon mounts on the outside of the fortification. Then we drove up, emerged from the vehicle, and fought any survivors on foot. Shepard fought conservatively, avoiding unnecessary risks. Even the larger geth platforms could do little when we stayed under cover, held a line, and hammered them to pieces from a distance.

The second fortress controlled a set of AA guns on top of a low hill. Once we had dealt with the geth there, Tali quickly disabled the radar installation and the guns. As we drove onward, we could see the Normandy flying low above us, heading for our objective a few kilometers ahead.

Joker called us as we approached. “Ah, Commander . . . we’ve landed at the salarian base camp, but it looks like we’re grounded.”

“Grounded? What’s going on?” asked Shepard.

“Now that we’re down, the AA coverage has been restored. More than restored. The salarian commander will want to talk to you as soon as you arrive.”

“I’ll bet,” Shepard grumbled. “We’ll be there in about five minutes, Joker.”

“Solid copy, Commander.”

The Mako rolled up onto a stretch of beach, much like many others we had passed on the way from our landing zone. Normandy rested just offshore, its landing struts fully deployed as it stood in two meters of water. On the beach I saw a scattering of tents and temporary shelters, a military village inhabited by sailors in light battle dress.

We emerged from the Mako and approached the camp. Kaidan already stood there, conversing with a salarian officer. Neither of them looked happy.

“Are you in charge here? What’s the situation?” demanded Shepard.

“I’m Captain Kirrahe, in command of Company A, Third Infiltration Regiment, Salarian Special Tasks Group,” said the salarian. “You and your crew have just landed in the middle of a hot zone. Every AA gun within twenty kilometers has been alerted to your presence. Take off and your ship becomes flinders.”

“We took out one set of AA guns on the way in. We can go out the same way.”

“Not now that the enemy is on the alert. They’ve filled the gap in their coverage. There’s nothing we can do until the Council sends the reinforcements we requested.”

“Hmm. We are the reinforcements,” said Kaidan.
“What? You’re all they sent? I told the Council to send a fleet.”

Shepard shrugged. “The transmission was garbled. We were sent to investigate.”

“That is a repetition of our task. I lost half my men investigating this place.”

“So what have you found?” asked Kaidan.

“Saren’s base of operations,” said Kirrahe.

Shepard and I shared a sharp glance of surmise. We may not have been joined, but I knew exactly what he was thinking.

We may not be too late after all!

“He’s built some sort of research facility here,” the salarian continued. “It’s crawling with geth and extremely well-fortified. Normally we would need a whole fleet to reduce this place. We’ll have to consider alternative plans.”

“Is he here? Have you seen him? His flagship, Sovereign?” demanded Shepard.

“No. If he is here, he’s staying out of sight. Even so, his geth are everywhere and we’ve intercepted communications referring to him. This is his facility, there’s no doubt about that.”

“What is Saren researching here?”

“He’s using this facility to breed an army of krogan.”

“He’s breeding krogan?” I interjected, not certain I had heard correctly.

“How is that possible?” asked a basso voice. Wrex approached us across the sand, pushing himself into our conversation.

Kirrahe didn’t quite flinch, but his stance did become slightly tense. “He appears to have discovered a cure for the genophage. Or at least a work-around.”

Shepard frowned. “The geth are bad enough. A krogan army, loyal to Saren . . . he’d be almost impossible to defeat.”

“Liara and I wondered where Saren has been getting so many krogan,” said Garrus. “Maybe he offered them access to the scientific work being done here.”

Kirrahe shook his head. “We can’t permit that to happen. We must see that this facility and its secrets are destroyed.”

“Destroyed?” objected Wrex. “I don’t think so. My people are dying. If Saren has a cure, it can save us.”

Kirrahe snubbed the krogan, speaking directly to Shepard. “If that cure leaves this planet, the krogan become unstoppable. We salarians uplifted the krogan and turned them loose on the galaxy once. We can’t make that mistake again.”

Wrex pushed forward, looming over Kirrahe, bristling with furious insult. “My people are not a mistake.”

“Stand down, Wrex,” said Shepard quietly. “This isn’t the right time.”
The krogan turned on Shepard, his red eyes burning. “When does it get to be the right time, Shepard?” Then he turned in disgust and walked away, looking for a stretch of beach where he could be alone.

“Is he going to be a problem?” asked Kirrahe. “We already have more than enough angry krogan to deal with.”

“He’ll be okay,” said Shepard.

“I hope you’re right, Commander. In the meantime, my men and I need to rethink our plan of attack. Can you give us some time?”

“Take as long as you need.”

Kirrahe made a small salarian respect-gesture and then turned away to consult with his men.

Kaidan shook his head. “Well, it looks like things are a bit of a mess.”

“I wouldn’t be so worried if it weren’t for Wrex,” said Ashley. “He looks as if he’s about to blow a gasket.”

“I suppose I should go talk to him,” said Shepard.

“It couldn’t hurt.” Ashley paused. “Well, okay, it could hurt. A lot. Just be careful, Commander.”

“I’ll be careful . . . but be ready. Just in case.”

“I’m always ready,” said Ashley.

The four of us moved across the beach, slowly approaching Wrex where he stood alone, repeatedly firing his shotgun at nothing. The thunder of his gunfire echoed across the strand. Shepard quietly ordered us to stop and went on alone.

Ashley drew her own shotgun and watched Wrex closely.

“This isn’t right, Shepard,” growled the krogan. “If there’s a cure for the genophage, we have to recover it. We can’t just destroy it.”

“I understand you’re upset,” said Shepard calmly. “But Saren has to be stopped. He’s the real enemy here. He’s the one you should be angry with.”

“Really?” The krogan’s voice seethed with contempt. “Saren has a cure for the genophage. You want to destroy it. Help me out here, Shepard. The lines between friend and foe are suddenly getting a little blurry from where I stand.”

“Wrex, this isn’t a cure. He isn’t planning to become a benefactor for the krogan. It’s a weapon. He is planning to use your people, just like he uses everyone he encounters. If we let Saren do that, you won’t be around to enjoy the benefits. None of us will.”

“That’s a chance we should be willing to take. This is the fate of my entire people we’re talking about!”

Shepard spread his hands in a gesture of appeal. “If Saren has a cure for the genophage, that demonstrates it can be done. If we go in, we can try to recover his information. If that doesn’t work, some other scientist might be able to reconstruct his research. But one way or another, Wrex, this facility has to be destroyed. Saren has got to be stopped, or it’s the end for everyone.”
Wrex lowered his head, a krogan gesture of anger. “I’ve been loyal to you so far. Hell, you’ve done more for me than my family ever did. Maybe I can trust you. But if I’m going to follow you into this, I have got to know that we’re doing it for the right reasons.”

“I think so,” said Shepard. “These krogan are not your people. They’re Saren’s slaves. His tools. Is that what you want for all krogan, everywhere?”

Wrex stared at Shepard, one hand opening and closing near the stock of his shotgun. Ashley eased her weapon upward, still not quite pointing it at the krogan, but very close. I followed suit, calling up a biotic surge, light and electrical charge beginning to swirl around my right hand.

“No,” said Wrex finally. “We were the Council’s tools once. To thank us for saving them from the rachni, they neutered us all. I doubt Saren will even be that generous.”

“Wrex, you have my word. If we survive this, I will do all I can to help your people. You don’t deserve what was done to you.”

The krogan relaxed and nodded. “All right, Shepard. You’ve made your point. I don’t like this, but I trust you enough to follow your lead. But when we find Saren . . . I want his head.”

“You’ll have to get in line, but I’ll see what I can do. Thank you, Wrex.”

“Pah. Don’t thank me until it’s done.” He gave Shepard a nasty smile. “Oh, and tell Williams and the asari they can stand down. It’s not as if they could have stopped me anyway.”

Shepard glanced at us. Ashley was already returning her shotgun to its attachment point on her back. I let my biotic energy disperse.

After that, little remained for us to do while Captain Kirrahe and his men continued to deliberate. I went down to the shore and found a large flat rock to sit on. I leaned back on my hands and looked out to sea, past the Normandy’s landing site, to where water met horizon. I breathed the sea air, listened to the sound of wind and wave, and watched avians fly by. Suddenly I realized that I felt better than I had in days. The setting was so homelike, so much like the seashore near Armali, that I found myself unable to feel sad or afraid.

I heard footsteps in the sand, and then the creak and muted clatter of a heavily armored figure settling down beside me.

I took a deep breath. “Hello, Shepard.”

He was silent for a while, just watching the ocean with me. Finally he said, “It’s nice here, isn’t it?”

“My people evolved near the seashore. We still love places like this.”

“Liara . . . I want to apologize. I’ve been very unfair to you.”

I glanced at him but said nothing.

“I’ve been thinking about this ever since Feros. Trying to understand why I reacted the way I did. Why I pushed you away so hard. It . . . has been very difficult. I’ve had to acknowledge some things about myself that I’ve spent years burying.”

I wanted to be cool and aloof, but his voice carried too much pain. I shifted positions, sitting cross-legged with my hands in my lap, just out of his reach, watching him. “I’m listening.”
“When I was young, I knew what my destiny was going to be. I was going to be a farmer. Or maybe a craftsman, or a technician, or a civil engineer. Something that would be useful on a sleepy little planet well off the main trade routes. I was going to build things. Make life better for people.” He took a deep breath. “Get married. Have a big family. All the things colonists hope to do.”

“Then the batarians came,” I said quietly.

“Yes.” He looked down at his own hands, contemplating them. “I had just turned sixteen years old. Not a child anymore, but still too young to be a man. I was away when the batarians attacked. I got home just in time to hold my mother while she died of her wounds. My father and my younger sister were already dead. My older sister was gone. We never found her.

“The Alliance arrived three days later. By that time I had killed three batarians. The first I stabbed in the throat with a knife. The second I ambushed with an axe, buried it in his skull. The third I shot point-blank with a shotgun. I hated it at the time. I was sick and scared. I threw up. But the things they did to us, the atrocities I saw during those three days . . . I was angry too. I wanted to kill.

“That was thirteen years ago. It never went away, Liara. That’s my secret. I am angry all the time. I want to kill all the time. I try to hide it. Sometimes I manage to hide it even from myself. But it’s always there, ready to come boiling back to the surface.

“I’m never going to be a farmer, or a craftsman, or an engineer, or a simple loving husband and father. The batarians took that destiny away from me. I can’t be a civilized man, working quietly in a peaceful profession. Not with such rage in my soul. Not with the urge to kill always there.

“Every time I see a batarian, I want to kill. Every time I see a pirate, a slaver, a terrorist, a cop on the take, a corrupt politician, a blindly selfish corporate executive. I could have killed Nassana Dantius. I could have killed Balak. I could have killed Anoleis. I could have killed Ethan Jeong. It wouldn’t have taken much . . . just a moment’s failure of discipline.

“There’s a man on the Citadel. Every time we go back there, I run into him. Conrad Verner. God help me, he’s one of my fans. He idolizes me. He asks for a picture, an autograph, just a moment of my attention. He’s quite harmless and innocent. His only crime is that he is stupid and ignorant . . . and yet every time I see him, something in me wants to kill him. Just to get him to shut up and leave me alone.

“I am a killer. That’s all I can ever be: someone who lives by taking life.

“For a long time I was happy to be a killer. I joined the Alliance. They taught me how to kill more effectively. They taught me how to cope with the psychological effects of killing. They gave me plenty of opportunities to kill. I became very, very good at it.

“Since then I’ve lost count of how many people I’ve killed. It must be hundreds. If not more.”

He held out his hands to me, cupping them as if to hold water.

“I can’t begin to guess how much blood is on my hands.”

Finally I couldn’t listen in silence any longer. “Shepard. You are a soldier. There’s nothing unjust or immoral about that.”

“Sure. A soldier is one who applies force – who kills, if he must – to defend his community. A good soldier never harms the defenseless, the weak, or the innocent. He places himself under strict discipline. He acts within the rule of law. It’s an honorable profession. I know all that.
“I can’t say this is why I became a soldier. When I was eighteen years old, all I cared about was that the Alliance would teach me how to kill batarians, and then would give me plenty of opportunity to do that. A few years later, after I had a chance to think about it some more, it’s why I stayed a soldier. The military is the only honorable profession available to someone like me. It gives me a channel for the rage, and the discipline to control it.

“It doesn’t justify who I am. It doesn’t make up for all the killing I’ve done. But it is a way for me to live. It’s a way for me to live with myself.”

He fell silent, still looking at his hands. For a while we listened to the sound of surf a few meters away.

Finally I shook my head in mild exasperation. “Shepard, to me all of this sounds quite normal and healthy. You have had a difficult life. You have undergone many traumatic experiences. You have been damaged by them, but you have found ways to cope. You are quite sane. I don’t understand why this caused you to push me away so firmly.”

He raised his eyes and stared at me, but it wasn’t a look of incomprehension. More like the stare of a starving man locked away from a banquet. It rather frightened me, to be the object of that stare.

“Liara, did you notice that for a long time I avoided even the possibility of doing a mind-link with you?”

“I thought you would ask when you felt ready. Eventually you did.”

“The thought terrified me. Even at the beginning, before I realized how I felt about you. Falling in love with you only made it worse.”

Shiala must have had some insight after all. “Why?”

“I don’t think I reasoned it out until a few days ago. I was running on instinct. I’ve never shared all this with anyone. None of my friends, none of the women I’ve been involved with in the past, certainly no one in the Alliance. But I knew if I let you touch my mind, you would see it: the rage, the need to kill. Even if it was just to look at the images from the beacon. All those people being slaughtered. I wouldn’t be able to help thinking about it. Wouldn’t be able to help how I felt about it. And even if you didn’t see it then, I knew you would see it if we ever made love. You told me how deep the joining goes at times like that. I wouldn’t be able to keep it away from you.”

I nodded slowly. “So when we finally tried it, you struggled and fought. You did manage to keep all of this away from me. But the vision turned out to be incomplete, and in your frustration and anger, you blamed me.”

He hung his head. “Yes. I know it was stupid.”

“Yes, it was,” I snapped, but then I gentled my voice once more. “It was also very human, and very understandable.”

He looked at me again. “Very human?”

“We asari cultivate the privacy of our minds most of the time, but we always remember that our lovers will know us in full, the ugly as well as the beautiful. We embrace that. It must be different for you humans, always locked away in your own minds no matter how intimate you might become with one another.”

“That makes sense.” He took a deep breath, as if preparing to face an enemy. “I suppose the core of
the matter is this. Some part of me doesn’t think I deserve your love. Some part of me doesn’t want you to be hurt by getting too close to me. Some part of me is terrified that if you really knew me, you would run as fast as you could . . . and you would be right to do that. So I sabotaged us.”

“Shepard,” I said gently. “I don’t think love is about what we deserve. Wouldn’t it be a terrible universe, if the only people who were ever loved were the people who deserved it?”

He chuckled ruefully. “I suppose you’re right.”

“In any case . . . Shepard, I know who you are already. I looked into your service record and your official biography after we fought the batarians at Terra Nova. I surmised some of what you’ve told me, and the rest comes as no surprise. I trust you. I know you won’t deliberately hurt me. None of this changes anything.”

He stared into my eyes for a long minute.

“Liara. I love you more than I can possibly express. I am very sorry that I hurt you. Can you forgive me?”

I pushed myself to my feet, looked down at him, held out a hand to help him rise in turn. Then I stepped forward and kissed him, very long and very deeply. In full view of Kaidan, Ashley, Garrus, Tali, Wrex, and every surviving member of Company A, Third Infiltration Regiment, Salarian Special Tasks Group.

“Of course I forgive you, now that I understand.” I looked up into his beautiful crystal-blue eyes, which at that moment were reflecting the subdued colors of Virmire’s ocean. “Let’s begin again.”

He smiled, the first warm smile I had seen from him in days. “I’d like that.”

We returned to our people, who seemed to have taken very great care not to notice what was happening out on our rock.

Well, except for Ashley. “About damn time,” she growled.
Captain Kirrahe had come up with a plan.

“We can sacrifice our ship’s drive and convert the core into a twenty-kiloton ordnance,” said the salarian. “More than enough to destroy this facility. The problem is delivering it.”

“What’s the problem?” asked Ashley. “Drop it from orbit and Saren can kiss his turian ass goodbye.”

Kaidan shook his head. “It’s not that easy, Chief. Twenty kilotons sounds like a lot but it doesn’t have that wide a blast radius. Without a well-designed guidance system, the bomb would never hit its target with enough precision to take out the facility. Anything we could improvise just wouldn’t be good enough.”

“That’s correct,” said Kirrahe. “We will need to place the bomb at the right location, by hand. This means we will have to infiltrate the facility on foot, pacify its ground forces, and disable its AA guns before we can bring your ship in with the bomb.”

“Sounds like a suicide mission,” observed Kaidan. “Didn’t you already try that and lose half your company?”

“Yes, but I think a more successful strategy may be available to our combined force. I will divide my men into three teams and strike the front of the facility. Our objective will be the AA guns. While we have their attention, you and a ‘shadow’ team can infiltrate in the back.”

Shepard frowned. “That’s not a bad plan, but your men are going to get slaughtered.”

The salarian smiled grimly. “We’re tougher than we look, Commander. It’s true, though, I don’t expect many of us are going to make it out alive. That makes what I’m going to ask even more difficult. I need one of your men to accompany me, to coordinate my teams with yours.”

“You would need someone who knows Alliance communications protocols,” observed Shepard.

“I volunteer,” said Kaidan quietly.

Ashley shook her head. “Not so fast, Lieutenant. You’re the best combat engineer on the Normandy. The commander will need you to arm and place the nuke. I’ll go with the salarians.”

“With all due respect, Gunnery Chief, it’s not your place to decide.”

“Why is it that whenever someone says with all due respect they really mean kiss my ass?”

“Enough,” ordered Shepard. “This isn’t a walking party. Whoever goes with Captain Kirrahe is putting his life on the line with absolutely no guarantees.”

Shepard turned to look out to sea, his face so firmly set it might have been carved from stone. I don’t think he deliberated for more than fifteen seconds, but to all of us it felt much longer.

Finally he turned back to us. “Williams, you’ll accompany the captain. No heroics. Do you understand?”

“Aye-aye, Skipper,” said Ashley quietly.
I glanced at her face. It was calm, even serene, but there was a light in her eyes. She was looking forward to the battle, even knowing it might be hopeless.

Humans!

“I will have the ordnance loaded onto the Normandy, and brief your crew on its detonation sequencing,” said Kirrahe.

“Kaidan, you’re in charge of that effort,” Shepard ordered. “Put together a team from the Marine detachment to handle the bomb. Do everything you can to make it easy to place and arm on a moment’s notice. Normandy may not have much time to get in and back out.”

Kaidan also acknowledged his orders.

“Excellent,” said Kirrahe. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to prepare my men.”

“Well, this is it,” said Ashley. “Don’t do anything stupid while I’m gone, Lieutenant. That goes for you too, Commander. Liara, you be sure to take care of him.”

I made a small smile, all I could manage. “I will. Come back to us safely, Ash.”

“We’ll be fine,” said Kaidan. “You’ll see.”

“Yeah. I just . . . good luck.”

“Something on your mind, Chief?” asked Shepard.

“I don’t know. It’s just weird, going in under someone else’s command. I’ve got used to working with you.” She glanced at me. “All of you.”

I reached out and touched her shoulder, feeling a sudden burst of affection for her.

“Don’t worry,” said Kaidan. “We’ll all see you on the other side.”

“I know. Commander, if this goes all snafu . . . it’s been an honor serving with you.”

Shepard shook her hand solemnly. “Likewise, Ash.”

The salarians made their own final preparations, lining up on the strand in neatly ordered rows so Kirrahe could brief them. The captain turned out to be fond of bombastic speeches, but his men seemed to appreciate his effort. We didn’t pay much attention. Only Ashley got to benefit from Kirrahe’s oratory.

Our “shadow” team would be composed of only five: Shepard, Garrus, Wrex, Tali, and me. It seemed strange for Shepard to go in on such a mission with no humans to support him, but the circumstances demanded it. Kaidan and Ashley already had their assignments. Four of the Marines would work with Kaidan on his engineering team. The rest lacked experience in commando warfare, so Shepard ordered them to force-protection duty on board Normandy.

We checked armor, weapons, and equipment. Shepard laid out tactics. He and Garrus would use sniper rifles from a distance if possible. If we had to charge in, the two of them would switch to assault rifles and Wrex would join the attack. Tali and I would stay to the rear and use our special abilities to soften up the enemy: Tali hacking geth platforms and overloading their shields, me applying biotics to control the flow of battle. Wrex would set up biotic combinations for me whenever possible.
The salarians departed for the approach to the front of Saren’s facility. Ashley strode confidently forward with Captain Kirrahe. She waved jauntily to us just before she disappeared.

Grim and silent, we set out for our own objective.

It took us about an hour of cross-country hiking to reach the back edge of Saren’s facility. This part of the trip seemed relatively safe. We marched along game trails and through deep woodland clearings for the most part, the jungle canopy concealing us from the air. Only during the last few minutes did we move exposed to the sky, and even there we had a high stone cliff between us and the enemy.

Shepard stopped and sent a burst signal to Ash, telling her we had reached our jumping-off position. He waited for about two minutes, and then gave us all a hand signal. Time to begin our assault.

We encountered light resistance at first: only a few geth platforms on foot, patrolling the perimeter in ones and twos. At one point three geth drones soared into the air and fired on us from a distance. None of this presented much difficulty.

About ten minutes in, we reached the first small fortification, a two-story open-frame building with some kind of electronic equipment on the second floor. From a distance, we could see a geth fire-team guarding the place.

“Tali, what does that look like to you?” asked Shepard.

The quarian used binoculars to examine the fortification from our place of concealment. “I’d say it’s a triangulation tower. The geth must be using it for radio direction-finding and targeting.”

“Hmm. Would you say that Kirrahe’s men would have an easier time of it if we took down that outpost?”

Tali put away the binoculars and gave Shepard a measuring glance. “It couldn’t hurt.”

“Start taking on side objectives and you’re likely to get bogged down,” said Wrex.

“Sure, but in this case I think it’s worth it. The better the salarians can do against the front, the more likely the geth are to see that as the main push and get careless back here. Let’s take down that tower.”

We did. It didn’t even take very long. The objective stood out in the open, with was plenty of open ground between us and the tower. Shepard and Garrus got to work with their sniper rifles while the rest of us watched. Eventually a squad of geth platforms came running into view and we all opened fire. The geth used cover well, but it didn’t do them much good once they came close enough for biotics. Wrex and I pulled struggling geth into the air for a few moments of target practice.

We didn’t bother using explosives to destroy the tower. Tali designated critical points, and Shepard and Wrex applied their shotguns. The facility went out of commission and we could move on.

A few minutes later we found a similar structure, this time a satellite uplink facility. Once again we pulled the enemy out with sniper fire, and then cut them down with a massed attack. This facility had a krogan warrior among its defenders, but he foolishly charged us across open ground. By the time he reached us, he was so battered and torn that Wrex could take him down with a single shotgun blast.

The salarians reported disrupted, weakened resistance. We were having an effect.
“Come on,” Shepard ordered, leading us to the right. “Ash is complaining about geth drones, and she thinks they’re touching down in this direction to refuel. This could be a big help for Kirrahe.”

Sure enough, we found a small landing platform placed by the shore, surrounded by fuel tanks, with four or five geth drones hovering nearby. These proved a more dangerous opponent, since several of them carried rockets and we had very little cover on the approach to their site.

Luckily the approach curved around a cliff face, a massive pier of rock extending out between us and the refueling platform. We could conceal the size of our party behind that terrain feature. Shepard stepped out to fire at one of the fuel tanks, luring a drone into rising and flying in our direction. As the drone moved to follow him, it came around the cliff face into our massed fire.

We repeated that stratagem several times, with great success. Only one of the rocket drones managed to fire into our party, forcing Garrus to dive frantically over a railing and into a sand dune. He came up spitting sand and looking furious. The rest of us very carefully refrained from laughing at him.

We finished destroying the last fuel tanks and moved on. Again Shepard reported that Kirrahe’s men could see the effects of our work.

Finally we approached the back wall of Saren’s compound. I saw a wide portico, with two obvious doors leading into different sections of the facility. No geth guarded these rear entrances, only krogan. After a few moments with our binoculars, we counted only three.

“Shepard, I have an idea,” said Wrex as we hunkered down behind cover.

“What is it?”

“Think you and Garrus can take down the two guards to either side?”

“Probably. One sniper rifle shot won’t take out a krogan warrior unless we get a perfect head-shot, but if Liara and Tali help we can probably do it quickly enough. What do you have in mind?”

“The one in the middle. I know him. Name’s Khel Dachar. I fought with him once or twice over the past couple of centuries. I want to talk with him.”

Shepard frowned. “Wrex, we don’t have time to negotiate. Kirrahe and his men are getting hammered out there. Ash is with them.”

“Won’t take but a moment,” said Wrex.

“All right, but if he isn’t willing to listen, and listen fast, we go straight through him. Understood?”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Shepard and Garrus set themselves up, and then fired simultaneously. The guards on either end of the both recoiled, but neither went down immediately. It took several moments of massed fire, all of us ignoring the krogan in the center, before our targets went down.

“Check fire,” ordered Shepard. “Wrex, you’re on.”

The third krogan had taken cover, searching for targets.

“Dachar!” shouted Wrex. “Khel Dachar! You willing to parley?”

Dachar’s head peeked out from behind his cover. “Who’s asking?”
Wrex stood and walked out into the open, his hands empty of weapons. “It’s me, you stupid pyjak. Come out and talk a moment.”

“Wrex?” The krogan stood up, but seemed unwilling to come out of cover entirely. “Urdnot Wrex? What the hell are you doing here?”

“Fighting to save your sorry ass from the worst mistake you’ve ever made. What are you thinking, signing yourself over to Saren?”

“What do you know about what he’s doing here?”

“I know enough. I bet he’s made lots of promises to cure the genophage.”

“That’s right. He can do it too. Soon he’s going to have an army, and we’re going to sweep across the galaxy like a storm. We’re going to make all of the other races pay for what they’ve done to us. It’s going to be glorious!”

“Yeah?” Wrex lowered his head. “Prove it.”

“What?”

“Prove it, you useless piece of crap. How many females have littered here? How many healthy hatchlings have you seen?”

Dachar’s jaws gaped and worked. He obviously wanted to respond, but he had nothing to say.

“None and none, I’ll bet. Saren is always lots of talk, lots of promises, nothing to show for it. Maybe he’s managed to clone a few krogan to show off to idiots like you. Face it, Dachar, you got taken.”

“No.” The krogan’s jaws snapped shut. “No. You’re trying to confuse me.”

“You’re already confused. Come on. Why should you fight for Saren? Isn’t that the same mistake we krogan always make? Fight for the Council, fight for a few greedy warlords, fight for whatever jumped-up mercenary captain offers us a few credits. They always screw us over in the end. Isn’t it time we fought for something of our own for a change?”

Dachar’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Maybe this is all about you, is that it? The great Urdnot Wrex, after all these centuries, still trying to get the krogan to turn their backs on war. Trying to turn us into soft creatures, helpless and weak. Useless!”

Wrex shook his head. “You’re too far gone, aren’t you? Can’t see it, even when it’s staring you right in the face.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Never mind.” With no warning at all, Wrex drew his shotgun and charged.

“Damn,” said Shepard, and leaped out of our cover to follow.

We could do nothing. By the time we reached a position to act, Wrex leaped over the other krogan’s cover and the two of them were hotly engaged: shotgun, knife, tooth and claw. They tore at each other, Dachar roaring in rage, Wrex strangely silent. None of us could fire, for fear of hitting Wrex.

Finally Wrex buried his combat knife in the other krogan’s throat and ripped it free in a spray of blood. Even that didn’t kill Dachar, but it caused him to fall back long enough for Wrex to bring his shotgun to bear at point-blank range. A single blast ended the fight. Wrex stood over the other
krogan, breathing hard, and wiped his combat knife clean before returning it to the sheath.

“What was that all about?” asked Shepard.

“I had to see for myself. Dachar was always stupid, but at least he could think for himself once. Not anymore. He was indoctrinated. You were right, Shepard. Saren isn’t interested in helping the krogan. He’s just out to use us, like he uses everyone.”

“What makes you think Saren doesn’t have a genophage cure after all?” I asked.

Wrex snorted. “Liara, if Saren really had a cure for the genophage, you would know it. The whole galaxy would know it. The only thing I could think of is that maybe he has a cure, but hasn’t had enough time to raise an army to adulthood. Problem is, that wouldn’t take very long, and this place would be overrun with breeding females and hatchlings in the meantime.”

“But Dachar hadn’t seen any,” said Garrus.

“Right. Maybe Saren is working on a cure, but he doesn’t have it yet.”

“He doesn’t really need it,” said Shepard. “All he has to do is promise a cure and get krogan warriors to come fight for him . . .”

“And in a few days they’re indoctrinated, and it doesn’t matter to them anymore. They’ll believe in the promises forever.” Wrex gave Shepard a hot stare. “I’ve changed my mind. This place needs to be blown off the map.”

“Roger that,” said Shepard quietly.

We hacked our way through a door into the facility. Inside we immediately found ourselves fighting more geth . . . and salarians.

The geth presented no more challenge than usual. The salarians hurled themselves at our line, unarmored and poorly armed, but terribly fierce. Even Shepard was shaken by the time the last of them went down.

“Didn’t Captain Kirrahe say he had lost some men?” asked Tali.

Soon we could solve the puzzle. We found a laboratory located right next to a detention area, where over a dozen salarian soldiers languished in bare cells. Most of the salarians failed to respond, but at the end of the row of cells we did find one who seemed to be in his right mind.

“Well, you’re not geth and you’re not in a lab coat, so I guess I’m happy to see you,” said the salarian. “Lieutenant Gamto Imness, Third Infiltration Regiment STG. Captured when we tried to attack this place three days ago. Are you an infiltration team?”

“That’s right,” said Shepard. “We’re working with Captain Kirrahe to deal with this facility.”

“Good to hear. This is a terrible place. The experiments with krogan are bad enough, but the indoctrination is the real threat.”

“You seem sane enough.”

“Only in comparison,” said Imness. “I’m the experimental control. The boys in the other cells weren’t so lucky. They were exposed to the effect at short range and high intensity. It turned them into slaves for Saren. Mindless slaves at that.”
“What are they doing in these labs?”

“I don’t know. Studying the effects of the indoctrination, maybe?”

“Why would Saren need to study the indoctrination if he already controls it?” asked Tali.

“I don’t have enough data to guess,” said Imness. “Look, can you get me out of here? I really don’t want to end up like the rest of my team. I don’t know how much use I’d be in a fight . . .”

Shepard stared at him for a moment, and then nodded and opened the cell door. “I think I trust you. We can’t take you along, but there’s a clear path back out of here.”

“Run like lightning and hope to outrun the blast, eh? It’s a better chance than I had before. Thank you.”

He fled, never looking back.

Before we left, we opened all of the cell doors. The other salarians simply sat or stood in their cages, taking no notice of anything we did.

We left them behind.

Above the detention area we found more laboratory space, this time with some of the scientists still at work when we arrived. The scientific team had an odd composition, led by a krogan. I couldn’t judge how accomplished he was as a scientist, but he showed all of his people’s usual talent for combat. He and his asari assistants fired on us the moment we appeared, and it wasn’t at all easy to defeat them.

I had lost track of the direction of our objective. Fortunately Shepard wasn’t so easily confused. He led us confidently as we worked our way to the back of the research building. Eventually we emerged on a long exterior walkway looking out over a beautiful lagoon. To the left the walkway led to a tower, isolated from the research building. To the right it passed along the edge of the research building, and then ended in a raised drawbridge. On the far side of the drawbridge stood a very large structure, possibly the main fortified complex.

Shepard stopped for a moment, frowning as he tried to decide which direction to choose.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“The breeding facility is that way,” he pointed to the right, “but the way is blocked. I don’t see any other way in.”

“What about that building to the left?” I suggested. “It might be a control center of some kind.”

“Worth a try. Come on.”

We defeated two geth platforms and entered the tower.

Inside we found an office, a surprisingly opulent room, richly appointed with a magnificent view of the ocean. I saw a conference table, a holographic communications platform, an enormous desk with a polished black surface . . .

A sound came from under the desk. All of us pointed our weapons. “Come out,” snapped Shepard.

“Don’t shoot, please!” A dark-skinned asari clambered out from beneath the desk, dressed in a lab
coat, her hands in plain view, her expression terrified. “I just want to get out of here before it’s too late.”

“We’re not going to hurt you unless you open fire first,” said Shepard. “So far you’re the first person who hasn’t done that. Who are you?”

“Rana Thanoptis, neurospecialist. Saren hired me to work in the lab . . . but this job isn’t worth dying over, or worse. Sooner or later the indoctrination is going to get me too!”

“You’re not here to work on krogan biology?”

Thanoptis shook her head emphatically. “None of us are, not on this level. We’re studying the effect of proximity to Sovereign on organic minds. At least that’s what I deduced after I was here for a while. Saren kept us all in the dark as much as possible.”

“You helped him and you did not even know why?” I asked.

“After I got here, I discovered I didn’t have the option of negotiating. This position is a lot more permanent than I expected.” Her expression changed, became evasive, even crafty. “I can help you, though. This is Saren’s personal office. That door behind me is his private lab space. Nobody knows what he does in there . . . but I can get you in.”

Thanoptis went to the door, used her omni-tool to hack the lock. While she was thus engaged, Shepard and I shared a quick glance, a flicker of agreement.

“See?” said the scientist, wheedling. “Full access. All of Saren’s private files. Are we good? Can I go?”

“In a minute,” Shepard answered. “Tell me about your research first. What exactly were you studying here?”

“It’s that dreadnaught, Sovereign. It emits some kind of signal or energy field. Undetectable, but it’s there. I’ve seen the effects, measured them. Saren uses it to influence his followers. To control them.”

“Shepard, that fits what my mother said about indoctrination,” I pointed out.

“You?” asked Thanoptis in a shrill voice. “By the Goddess, you’re Benezia’s daughter?”

“That’s correct.”

“Well, she would know. She spent months on board Sovereign. Saren owned her, body and spirit.”

I tilted my head back, giving Thanoptis an angry look, but I decided not to dispute her.

“Direct exposure to the signal eventually renders you a willing slave,” she continued, “but there’s collateral damage too. The subject becomes increasingly unable to think independently. Complete mindlessness, like those salarian test subjects on the first floor. It happens to everyone here eventually. My first test subject was the man I replaced. Now I just want to get out of here before it happens to me.”

Shepard scratched at the stubble on his cheeks. “So why is Saren researching this? Isn’t he the one controlling it?”

“The signal doesn’t come from Saren, it comes from the ship. It makes people obey him, but I don’t think he controls it.” A haunted expression came into her eyes. “I think . . . I think he’s frightened it
might be affecting him. Indoctrination is subtle. By the time the effects become noticeable, it’s already too late."

“All right, Rana.” Shepard smiled warmly at her. “Here’s the thing. I’m going to blow this place to hell and gone. If you want to make it out alive, I’d suggest you start running.”

“What? You can’t – but I’ll never – aah!”

Thanoptis bolted for the door behind us and disappeared.

“You enjoyed that,” I said accusingly.

“Damn right I did. Come on.”

Behind Saren’s office we found an elevator to take us up to the higher floors. Tali checked her omni-tool. “Shepard, I’m getting some very strange readings from just above us.”

I opened my own omni-tool, testing the environment for EM and gravitic radiation. What I saw caused me to gasp in surprise.

“What?” asked Shepard.

“If this is correct – Shepard, these readings are typical of certain kinds of Prothean technology. Specifically . . .”

The elevator opened.

“. . . a beacon,” I breathed.

Equipment filled the room: computers, communications gear, instruments for high-energy and mass-effect physics, and a powerful electron microscope. None of us paid any of it any attention.

At the far end of the room, there loomed a Prothean beacon. It appeared identical to the Eden Prime device before its destruction. It stood isolated from all the other equipment, nothing but an elaborate holographic control console floating in mid-air before it.

This one was working. I could see the shimmering of strange energies all up and down its length.

Shepard didn’t hesitate. He stepped forward, glanced at the control panel, and reached out to touch an activation switch. Then he stood tall, his hands relaxed at his sides, and waited.

He didn’t have to wait long. The beacon flared, distorting the light as mass-effect fields twisted the structure of local space. It lifted Shepard off the floor, holding him rigidly about a meter in the air.

I nearly leaped to touch him, to pull him away – but then I remembered his description of the Eden Prime beacon. This was part of the beacon’s normal function, and in fact Shepard’s interference might have been what destroyed the other device. I stayed my hand and held my breath in suspense.

From where I stood, I could see his face. I expected a rictus of tension, but in fact he seemed relaxed, almost serene as the information poured into his mind. Slowly his eyes opened . . . and then the beacon released him and he fell to hands and knees on the floor, breathing hard.

I unlocked my muscles and ran to him, helped him to his feet. “What did you see?”

“The same vision,” he told me, “but there was more. I think I got the whole message this time.”
I stared. “Then you now have everything Saren has?”

He grabbed my shoulders, sudden triumph washing across his face. “I can’t be sure... but I think so. We’ll have to look into it when we get back to the ship. Together.”

I nodded slowly, understanding his suggestion.

Then another voice intruded: very deep, full of odd harmonics, like an electronic musical instrument trying to replicate the sound of distant thunder.

“You are not Saren.”
The Death of the Righteous

20 May 2183, Saren’s Headquarters/Virmire

We all turned, seeking the source of that terrible voice.

We had thought one corner of Saren’s lab to be empty. Now a hologram slowly faded into existence: a weirdly alien creature, like an insect or crustacean, with an oblong body and numerous appendages, all drawn in light of a deepest red.

“I get the feeling something bad is about to happen,” said Wrex.

“You are not Saren,” the voice repeated.

Curious, I stared at the apparition, trying to determine what it meant. “What is that? Some kind of VI interface?”

Shepard shook his head, approaching the hologram cautiously. “No. It’s an image of Saren’s flagship.”

“Rudimentary creatures of blood and flesh. You touch my mind, fumbling in ignorance, incapable of understanding.”

“Goddess. You mean that’s Sovereign?”

Shepard only nodded, awe and fear on his face.

“There is a realm of existence so far beyond your own that you cannot even imagine it. I am beyond your comprehension. I am Sovereign.”

“Sovereign isn’t just a piece of Reaper technology, a derelict Saren found to use as his flagship,” said Shepard slowly. “It’s . . . an actual Reaper.”

“Reaper? A label created by the Protheans to give voice to their destruction. In the end, what you choose to call us is irrelevant. We simply are.”

“How is that possible?” I asked. “The Protheans vanished fifty thousand years ago. The cycle of extinctions goes back for millions of years at least.”

“Organic life is nothing but a genetic mutation. An accident. Your lives are measured in years and decades. You wither and die. We are eternal: the pinnacle of evolution and existence. Before us, you are nothing. Your extinction is inevitable. We are the end of everything.”

Shepard shook his head, his jaw set in determination. “I don’t know how you defeated the Protheans, but you won’t defeat us. There’s an entire galaxy of races, united and ready to face you.”

“Confidence born of ignorance. The cycle cannot be broken.”


“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. The Protheans were not
the first. They did not create the Citadel. They did not forge the mass relays. They merely found them, the legacy of my kind, as many others have found them across the eons.”

“How long has this been going on?” I asked.

“Since before any of your suns burned in space. The galaxy has rotated many times about its hub since the cycle began. It will not end until the last stars have guttered into darkness.”

My mind reeled. “Merciful Goddess. Billions of years?”

“I don’t understand,” said Shepard. “Why would you construct the mass relays, then leave them for someone else to find?”

“Like all those who came before, your civilization is based on the technology of the mass relays: our technology. By using it, your society commits itself to develop along the paths we desire. 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.”

“They’re harvesting us,” I whispered, shaking in horror. “Letting us advance to a certain level, then taking what they need and destroying the rest. The galaxy is nothing but a vast garden for them.”

“Or a hunting ground,” Wrex rumbled.

Shepard placed a steadying hand on my shoulder, but continued to face Sovereign. “Where are the rest of the Reapers? Are you the last of your kind?”

“We are legion. The time of our return is at hand. Our numbers will darken the sky of every world. You cannot escape your doom.”

“Where did you come from? Who built you?”

“We have no beginning. We will have no end. We are infinite. A billion years after your civilization has been eradicated and forgotten, we will endure.”

“Why?” demanded Shepard, stepping forward until he was face-to-face with the hologram. “What do you want from us? What could you possibly have to gain?”

“My kind transcends your very understanding. We are each a nation, independent, free of all weakness. You cannot even grasp the nature of our existence. We want nothing from you. We need nothing from you. You are merely dust in a cosmic wind, caught up in our eternal purpose.”

“You’re not even alive,” Shepard concluded. “Not really. Just a machine following a program . . . and machines can be broken!”

“Your words are as empty as your future. I am the vanguard of your destruction.”

The hologram began to fade.

“This exchange is over.”

For over a minute we stood there, rooted to the floor in shock. We had experienced too many revelations: Saren possibly not in control of his own mind, Sovereign as the true prime mover behind events, the sheer vastness of the Reapers’ scheme in both time and space.
Suddenly a thought occurred to me. “Did anyone think to record that?”

“I did,” said Tali, holding up her omni-tool.

“Thank the Goddess. Shepard, I think we have evidence of the Reaper hypothesis. More than we could have ever dreamed possible, short of the Reapers actually returning to the galaxy.”

“Hmm. I doubt it will convince anyone who has a vested interest in the status quo, which is probably almost everyone. I’ll take it anyway.”

“Commander?” Joker’s voice on our general channel, sounding frightened.

“Go ahead, Joker.”

“Did you order one highly visible two-kilometer-high robot cuttlefish?”

“Sovereign?”

“None other. Just dropped out of FTL, ten light-minutes out, and it’s flying like a bat out of hell. ETA less than an hour. You’d better wrap up what you’re doing down there or we’re all in deep trouble.”

“Solid copy, Joker.” Shepard turned to all of us. “You heard the man. Let’s move!”

In Saren’s office we found the controls for the drawbridge. Out on the walkway we encountered three krogan warriors, but these only took a few minutes to defeat. Passing through the compound, we emerged again on the approach to the AA tower: our objective.

This final stretch gave us the hardest fight of all. We found very little cover between us and the tower. Krogan warriors charged us across the walkways. Geth hoppers clung to the tower walls and sniped at anyone who stood still for more than a moment. Just as we thought we had begun to make progress, three rocket drones soared into the sky above us and began to rain death on our heads.

Shepard saved us. Any doubts he may have had after Feros, after he and I had our time of darkness, all of them had gone. Sovereign had failed to daunt him. Once again he maintained perfect situational awareness, never surprised by anything the enemy did. He kept us all moving, all firing on any target of opportunity, all alive.

None of us remained unscathed by the time we reached the controls for the AA guns. . . but thanks to medi-gel and sheer determination, we all stood on our feet, ready to fight onward.

The geth tried to ambush us moments later, riding up a nearby lift to spill out into our midst. Tali heard them coming and gave us a moment’s warning, and we met the geth with a barrage of gunfire.

The same lift led down to the level of the breeding facility. Wrex impatiently kicked the wrecked geth out onto the floor of the tower, so the doors would close.

We emerged on the floor of the breeding facility: a long gallery, open to the sky, awash with water above our ankles, with massive pieces of odd technology set up along both walls. A few geth and krogan waited for us in the gallery, not enough to resist us for very long. Once the fight was over, Wrex took a moment to examine the equipment.

“Look at this,” he said. “These big tanks. They were growing krogan in these.”
I moved up to look at one of the devices with him. “This does not look like anything to do with natural krogan reproduction.”

“We knew that already. I guessed earlier that Saren was cloning krogan, then force-growing the clones to adulthood. Not an easy thing to do.”

“Why is that?”

“Krogan are hard to clone. Our DNA is more complicated than most. Then the hatchlings are real sensitive to the female’s hormones before she lays the eggs. Hard to get that right in a tank.”

I scanned the equipment with my omni-tool. Something about it . . .

“Shepard, a moment?” I called.

“What is it, Liara? We need to get moving,” said Shepard.

“This will only take a minute. Do you think this equipment is familiar somehow? Look at these readings on its power sources and composition.”

Garrus grunted. “Huh. That does look familiar. Where have we seen this before?”

“A week or so ago,” I suggested. “You and Shepard boarded a ship in the Kepler Verge.”

“Right!” said Tali, using her own omni-tool. “We looked at some of Dr. Saleon’s technology after he was killed, the equipment he used to stimulate the growth of extra cloned organs in his victims. This isn’t the same . . .”

“But similar,” I agreed. I shot Shepard an irritated glance. “I would be more certain if I had been able to see Dr. Saleon’s laboratory for myself.”

He frowned, but nodded in agreement. “My bad. What does it mean?”

“Similar technology, similar source?” suggested Tali.

“Are you saying Dr. Saleon was working with Saren?” asked Garrus.

I shook my head. “You didn’t see any other evidence of that, did you?”

“No. As far as C-Sec could tell, Saleon was a renegade, working on his own.”

“They got their technology independently, but from the same place,” guessed Wrex.

“The Reapers?” Shepard was skeptical. “This doesn’t seem like their style.”

“Perhaps not,” I said. “Shepard, do you recall the intelligence Operative Lawson forwarded to us? Regarding the Collectors? They have a keen interest in biotechnology. Perhaps they supplied both Dr. Saleon and Saren.”

He nodded slowly. “Maybe . . . but it’s tenuous.”

“I agree. Perhaps it’s worth an investigation later?”

“I’ll buy that. For now, take what readings you can and let’s go.”

At the heart of the breeding facility we found a great open bay, again awash with water that poured
in from the nearby lagoon and rushed down a long stone sluiceway. At the bottom we saw a wide annular drain surrounding a tower, apparently the intake for a desalination and filtering system. I guessed that this supplied water for the entire facility. Finally we had reached the critical point, the location we had selected for the nuclear device.

Captain Kirrahe and his surviving men had disabled their own AA tower. They remained there, planning to secure it long enough for us to plant the device and begin evacuation. Ashley survived the fight. She sounded tired but confident when she spoke to all of us on our general channel.

*Normandy* swept in from the north and landed at the top of the sluiceway, opening the boarding ramp. Kaidan and his Marines appeared, manhandling the bulky ordnance out of the staging bay and down the long sluiceway. They moved carefully, but also as quickly as they dared. *Sovereign* approached, less than fifteen minutes away now.

Finally Kaidan and Bayard lowered the ordnance to sit just above the water near the tower’s base. Most of the Marines returned to the *Normandy*. Kaidan checked the bomb one last time, then nodded in satisfaction and turned to report to Shepard.

“Bomb is in position, Commander. We’re all set here . . .”

“*Commander, can you read me?*” Ashley’s voice, breaking in on the general channel.

“The nuke is almost ready,” said Shepard. “Get to the rendezvous point, Williams!”

“No can do, Commander. We’ve got a new wave of geth, pinning us down on the AA tower. We’re taking heavy casualties. We’ll never make it to the rendezvous point in time.”

“Joker, get them out of there, now!”

“Aye-aye, Commander.” *Normandy* rose into the air, the boarding ramp still hanging open.

“Negative, it’s too hot! Can’t risk it. We’ll hold them off as long as we . . .” Ashley’s voice was cut off in an electronic squeal of distortion.

Shepard and Kaidan caught one another’s eyes for a tense moment. Then Kaidan nodded. “It’s okay, Commander. I’ll need a couple more minutes to finish arming the bomb. Go get them and meet me back here.”

“We’re cutting it close, Kaidan.”

“We can make it. Go, Commander.”

Shepard didn’t hesitate any longer. “Shadow team, follow me.”

We ran.

A second gallery of cloning equipment ran to the west, shorter than the one we had come through earlier. Again, a few geth and krogan lurked among the equipment, ready to bar our path. Shepard had no patience for them. We simply charged down the gallery, massing our fire on one target after the next, moving too quickly for the enemy to pin us down. One krogan warrior tried to stand between us and the doors to the tower, but Wrex simply body-checked this enemy out of the way, applying his shotgun to make sure the foe stayed down.

The ride in the lift was an agony of tension. Shepard seemed as agitated as I had ever seen him, actually bouncing on the balls of his feet, running forward the instant the lift doors opened. We
followed him out onto the walls of Saren’s compound . . .

“Damn it all to hell,” he growled.

A dropship approached from the east, preparing to rain geth platforms down on the central bay, where we had left Kaidan alone to work with the bomb.

“Normandy, hit that dropship now!”

Joker tried. Normandy hovered some distance out to sea, preparing for its run up to the AA tower. It turned in the air and fired, striking the geth vessel amidships. Just a moment too late to prevent it from positioning itself above Kaidan’s bay.

“Commander, there’s geth pouring out all over the bomb site,” reported Kaidan.

“Can you hold them off?” demanded Shepard.

“There’s too many. I don’t think I can hold out until you get here.” Kaidan paused. “I’m activating the bomb.”

“What? Alenko, what are you doing?”

“I’m just making sure this bomb goes off, no matter what.” Another pause. “It’s done, Commander. Go get Williams and get out of here.”

Ashley broke in. “Screw that! We can handle ourselves. Go back and get Alenko.”

What followed couldn’t have taken more than three or four seconds, but that moment felt like an eternity.

I watched Shepard’s face. I saw him look up at the AA tower, then back toward the central bay. I saw him glance out to sea, where the Normandy still waited to approach and evacuate our people. I saw him calculate angles, distances, times. I saw him weigh the risk and the likely outcomes of each course of action.

I saw the absolute fury that erupted in his heart when he realized he couldn’t save everyone.

None of it showed on his face, unless it became a little more forbidding, his eyes a little more steely gray than before. His voice remained completely steady as he announced his decision.

“Williams. Radio Joker and tell him to meet us on the AA tower.”

Ashley remained silent for a moment. When she spoke, her voice had suddenly lost all of its brazen confidence. “Aye-aye, Commander. I . . .”

Kaidan broke in. “It’s the right choice, and you know it, Ash.”

“I’m sorry, Kaidan,” said Shepard quietly. “There just isn’t time.”

“I understand, Commander. Fortunes of war. I don’t regret a thing.” We could hear Kaidan’s deep intake of breath. “Now go, damn it.”

Shepard turned and ran. The rest of us followed.

It took only a minute to reach the roof of the AA tower. As we approached, we heard Ashley and the salarians shouting to one another, the warbling of geth, a torrent of gunfire. The salarian team stood
on the edge of annihilation. Then we arrived, spilling out into the middle of the fight. The geth hadn’t expected us, weren’t even looking in our direction as they converged on Kirrahe’s last redoubt. We slammed into them from behind and their formation immediately shattered.

I saw Kirrahe’s head peek out from cover, a delighted expression on his face . . . and then he looked behind and above us, and delight changed to horror.

Dark-blue light exploded in our midst. The force of it sent Ash and Garrus flying in opposite directions. Kirrahe fell back into cover.

I glanced upward and saw a turian soaring over our heads, standing atop some kind of mobile platform. He gestured, and an immense bolt of telekinetic force lashed out to knock Wrex tumbling backward.

_Saren._

Shepard turned to dash for cover. This seemed like a very good idea to me, so I followed him. An eruption of blue force struck just behind us, nearly knocking us both off our feet.

Saren leaped from his platform, calling up a flare of biotic power to halo his entire body and control his ten-meter fall to the ground. I stared at him from cover. He looked nothing like any other turian I had ever seen: tall and massive, wearing heavy plates of armor that covered his entire body and integrated directly into his flesh. His right arm was gone, replaced with an elaborate prosthetic limb that looked to be of geth manufacture. His eyes glowed with an unnatural blue light. His face completely lacked paint.

Shepard leaned out beside me and fired at Saren, once, twice, three times. The renegade turian simply stood there, his shields like diamond, shedding the gunfire in flares of blue light.

“This has been an impressive diversion, Shepard. My geth were utterly convinced the salarians were the real threat. Of course, it’s all for nothing. I can’t let you disrupt what I’ve accomplished here. You can’t possibly understand what’s really at stake.”

Shepard ducked back behind our cover, glancing at me in shock. “So make me understand,” he called back. “What could possibly justify what you’ve done?”

Saren’s voice remained calm and, much to my surprise, very persuasive. “You’ve seen the vision from the beacons. You of all people should understand what the Reapers are capable of. _They cannot be stopped._ There’s no point in revolt. If we cling to petty ideals and visions of freedom, we will simply die. Every last one of us, like insects in the heart of a star.

“The Protheans reached heights our civilizations can only dream of. They tried to fight, and the Reapers utterly destroyed them. Trillions dead. But what if they had bowed before the inevitable, found a way to reach a compromise with the Reapers? They might still be alive today. Isn’t submission preferable to the extinction of all life everywhere?”

“Saren, you’re a fool if you think the Reapers have any interest in letting us live. We’re _nothing_ to them.”

Saren shook his head sadly, like a father listening to a defiant child. “Now you see why I never brought this to the Council. We organics are driven by emotion instead of logic. We deny the truth even when our very lives are at stake. We will fight even when we know we cannot win. But if we work with the Reapers – if we make ourselves _useful_ to them – think how many lives might be saved!
“Once I understood this, I became Sovereign’s partner, its agent in the wider galaxy. I was aware of the dangers. I had hoped this facility could protect me.”

Shepard nodded slowly. “You’re afraid Sovereign is influencing you. You’re afraid it’s controlling your thoughts.”

“I’ve studied the effects of indoctrination. The more control Sovereign imposes, the less capable the subject becomes. That is my saving grace. Sovereign needs me to find the Conduit. My mind is still my own. I am its ally, not its slave, and that is how I will remain.”

“It’s happened already!” shouted Shepard. “You’re already indoctrinated and you don’t even know it. You’re already under its power!”

Saren brandished both fists in defiance, baring his fangs. “No! Sovereign needs me. If I can find the Conduit, I’ve been promised a reprieve from the inevitable. That’s my only hope.”

“It’s not your only hope. Together we can stop Sovereign. We don’t have to submit to the Reapers. We can find a way to beat them!”

“I no longer believe that, Shepard. I’ve seen the vision of the beacons. I’ve spoken to Sovereign at length. I’ve done the same research you and your allies have done. The Reapers are too powerful. The only hope of survival is to join them. To submit to them, if need be.”

Shepard stood, stepped out of our cover to confront Saren directly. “You coward.”

“What?”

“You were a Spectre. You were sworn to defend the galaxy. Then you broke that vow to save yourself.”

“I’m not doing this for myself! Don’t you see? Sovereign will succeed. The Reapers will return. It is inevitable. This is the only way any of us can survive!” Saren shook his head in disgust. “You . . . you would undo my work. You would lead the galaxy into pointless rebellion. You would doom our civilization to complete annihilation. For that you must die!”

With that, Saren drew a rifle and opened fire, flinging a bolt of biotic force to one side to keep Tali and two salarians from coming to Shepard’s aid.

He was a juggernaut. Those of us who could fire upon him couldn’t penetrate his shields. He had too much biotic power for Wrex, too much even for me. He strode forward, directly for Shepard.

Desperate, Shepard flung a high-explosive grenade at short range. The concussion knocked both of us to the ground.

Before he could rise, Shepard looked up and saw Saren standing over him. Almost contemptuously, the turian kicked Shepard’s assault rifle away. Then he grasped Shepard with both hands, lifting him like a child and carrying him irresistibly backward. In a moment, Saren stood at the edge of the tower’s roof, holding Shepard at arm’s length with one hand at his throat, ready to drop him to his death on the rocks far below.

I shouted, rising to one knee and calling up every erg of biotic power available to me.

Suddenly we all heard a loud gonging sound from the central bay, back where Kaidan might still be holding off the geth onslaught. The salarian ship’s drive core, sounding the alarm as it prepared to go into catastrophic overload. The explosion was one minute away.
Distracted, Saren glanced in that direction for just a moment.

When he looked back, Shepard’s fist was already driving for his face like a sledgehammer.

Saren fell, dropping Shepard just on the brink of the abyss.

I frantically reached out with my biotics and prevented Shepard from falling off the tower. He began to rise to his feet, drawing his heavy pistol.

Saren looked around, saw us about to recover our ability to fight, and realized time had almost run out. Instead of attacking Shepard once more, he retreated to his flying platform.

Shepard brought his sidearm to bear just as Saren soared into the air above us. For just a moment, he and the renegade Spectre locked gazes. Then he slowly lowered his weapon, permitting Saren to fly away into the distance.

*Normandy* swept in from the sea, hovering close so we could leap from the tower’s edge to the boarding ramp. Shepard shouted orders to all of us to run for the ship. Captain Kirrahe and his surviving men – so few of them, only five – followed close behind.

Shepard was the last to board, still staring back toward the central bay until the boarding ramp closed.

Joker’s voice cracked over the ship-wide intercom. “*All right, everybody, hang on!*”

*Normandy* raced up into the depths of space, as nuclear fire erupted behind us.
20 May 2183, Hoc System Space

The staging deck seemed very crowded: Ashley and the rest of the human Marines, Captain Kirrahe and his salarians, the Shadow Team, all of us and our gear crammed into what suddenly felt like a very small space. All of us held on to whatever we could, while Normandy made its high-speed escape. When the shockwave from the nuclear blast caught up with us, the ship shook violently, throwing a few of us to the floor.

Then the ship’s flight smoothed out, and we knew we had escaped.

“Joker, where’s Sovereign?” demanded Shepard.

“Still heading for the planet,” reported the pilot. “Damn, that thing is fast. We got away with less than five minutes to spare, sir.”

“It’s not pursuing us?”

“Not at the moment. We should be able to shift to FTL before it can catch up.”

“Good job, Joker. Patch me through to the all-hands channel.”

“Aye-aye, sir. You’re on.”

Shepard’s voice fell into what I had come to think of as his command cadence: slow, measured, confident. “Normandy crew, our mission on Virmire was a success. Saren’s main base of operations has been destroyed, and we may be several steps closer to locating the Conduit. However, I regret to report that Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko has been killed in action. Stand by for further orders.”

He turned off his helmet radio.

Chaos erupted on the staging deck.

“Lieutenant’s dead?”

“What the hell . . .”

“No way!”

The salarians looked around, alarmed at the outbreak of human anger, clustering more closely near Captain Kirrahe.

“Never should have left him alone with that bomb.”

“What happened?”

“Damn geth. Damn aliens.”

Wrex’s hand went to the stock of his shotgun. I thought he did it only for reassurance. I hoped.

Shepard caught Ashley’s eye.

Ashley braced her shoulders and shouted, her voice incredibly loud and piercing. “Atten-SHUN!”
Silence fell, sudden and absolute. Every human on the staging deck assumed a rigid posture, except for Shepard. Even he suddenly looked taller and more imposing than usual, glaring at his subordinates on all sides.

“Lieutenant Alenko gave his life to assure the success of our mission, and to save the lives of everyone on board this ship. You will treat his sacrifice with respect. You will behave with discipline. Is that clear?”

“AYE-AYE, SIR!”

“Dismissed!”

Subdued, the Marines turned and began the work of stowing armor, weapons, and gear. Garrus, Wrex, and Tali followed.

Shepard walked over to Captain Kirrahe. I followed in his shadow.

“Captain, I’m very sorry we couldn’t save more of your men,” he said, extending his hand for Kirrahe to grasp.

“The fortunes of war, Commander,” said the salarian. “I didn’t expect any of my men to escape that place. With your help, not only did a few of us survive, we attained our objectives. It was truly an honor working with you, and with your Lieutenant Alenko. His sacrifice will doubtless earn humanity a great deal of respect among my people.”

“Kaidan was a fine officer. He understood the risks, but he did what had to be done.”

“Indeed. Rest assured, my men and I will not forget what you have accomplished here. May we impose upon your hospitality until you reach a civilized port?”

“Of course. You’re more than welcome. Where shall we billet you?”

“Here on your staging deck will suffice, Commander. We don’t require luxury.”

“We’ll do all we can for you, Captain.” Shepard made a shallow bow with his hands behind his back, a salarian gesture of courtesy. “May I say, it was an honor working with you. I’ve never fought beside the STG before. Your men are very impressive.”

Kirrahe returned Shepard’s bow with a smile. “I told you: we’re tougher than we look. I hope we will have the opportunity to fight together again someday.”

“I look forward to it.”

I went to change out of my armor and stow my own weapons as well, but I didn’t stay among the Marines for long. Kaidan had been well-liked and deeply respected, and his sudden death made them fierce with grief and anger. Perhaps I had won a certain amount of acceptance among them, but I sensed they had no interest in a non-human presence for the time being.

Instead I went up to the crew deck. I ate a hasty meal, took a hot shower, changed into fresh clothes, and took refuge in my cubicle behind the medical bay.

As usual, the space stood in darkness. I left the lights turned off, except for the low glimmer of computer screens and haptic keyboards. It suited my mood.

I sat at my desk and remembered Kaidan.
His face, dark and well-framed, alien but more beautiful than that of most male humans. His gentle smile. The expressiveness of his eyes. His calm determination to succeed. His mature poise, like that of an asari matron centuries his elder. The suffering one could see written in his features, but only if one looked very closely, he had learned to deal with it so wisely and so well.

Kaidan showed me kindness before any other human. Even before Shepard, he accepted my presence, and worked to convince others to do the same. Even more than Shepard, he served as my partner on a dozen battlefields. I never wanted him as a bondmate, never loved him in the manner that I came to love Shepard . . . but almost from the day I met him, I loved him like a sister.

Gone, gone, gone beyond recall, stolen from us in a moment of bad luck and bad timing.

I sat with elbows on my desktop, face buried in my hands, the tears running down my cheeks.

The door to my cubicle opened quietly. “Liara?”

I turned a desperate face to where Shepard stood in the doorway.

I don’t think either of us gave it any thought. We moved like iron to the magnet, meeting in the middle of my cubicle. His strong arms held me close as I huddled against his chest and wept. His face spoke of tenderness as he bent it close to mine.

I don’t think the storm took more than two or three minutes to pass. I eased out of Shepard’s grip and wiped at my eyes with both hands. “I’m sorry, Shepard. I shouldn’t impose like this.”

“It’s no imposition, Liara.”

I looked up at him. “Everyone on board liked Kaidan. He was your friend too. You shouldn’t be here, letting me soak your shirt.”

He made a small smile. “I’ll deal with my grief in my own time, Liara. Besides, no one else has quite the same claim on my attention. If Corporal Müller needs a shoulder to cry on, he’s going to have to find someone else.”

That called up such an absurd mental image, I had to laugh for just a moment. “Shepard!”

“Feel better?”

“Maybe a little. Thank you.”

“In any case, the one who’s really taking this hard is Ash.” Shepard sighed, moved to sit down in his usual place atop an unused crate. “She’s having a bad case of survivor’s guilt. Told me to my face that I should have gone to rescue Kaidan and left her to die.”

“That’s absurd. What about Kirrahe and the rest of his men?”

“There is that. I suspect she’s not thinking very clearly right now.”

I nodded. “She’s thinking about her grandfather, the decision he made.”

Shepard gave me a sharp glance. “She told you about that?”

“Yes, on Feros.” I frowned, thinking it through. “She burns to prove herself. She may believe a glorious death in battle would wipe away the stain of her grandfather’s dishonor. Yet in this war she has more than once survived while others died. She was almost the sole survivor of her unit on Eden Prime. And now to survive Virmire at the cost of Kaidan’s life . . .”
“You see the problem.”

“I will help if I can, but I think you will be more capable. She and I have become friends of a sort, but it’s you she looks up to and respects.”

“I know.” Shepard looked down at the floor. “Liara . . .”

“I’m ready when you are,” I told him at once.

“What?”

I smiled at him, for a moment enjoying the fact that I could still keep him off balance. “You want to examine the Prothean message again.”

“That’s right,” he said, relieved. “Remember what Saren said? He said _Sovereign still needed him_ to find the Conduit. He said that _if_ he could find the Conduit, the Reapers would spare him. Liara, _he hasn’t found it yet_.”

My eyes widened with surprise. “Goddess, you’re right.”

“Are you willing to try?”

I pulled my chair across the floor, so I could sit close to him and take his hands in mine. “Of course.”

He looked soberly into my eyes from a few centimeters away. “It will be different this time.”

“I believe you,” I told him. “Now close your eyes. Sit upright so that your spine is vertical, like a stack of coins. Relax and breathe evenly. Imagine energy collecting near the base of your spine. It rises higher with every breath you take.”

I reached out with my mind, listened to his breathing, felt the pulse in his wrists. I began to match my own breathing and heartbeat to his.

“Listen to your true self. Place yourself in your context, the ship around you soaring through space, the galaxy immense on all sides of us, the universe extending in all directions to infinity.”

My eyes closed. I could feel our bodies and minds sliding into consonance once more. It was easier this time. I could feel his will, like a king sitting on his throne, determined that all things should be ordered as he wished. He wished that I should enter and be welcome in the spaces of his mind.

“The energy rises, to crown you with glory and light.” My eyes opened blindly, changed, no longer seeing the physical universe around us. “Embrace eternity.”

We were together again, and this time he didn’t struggle or fight. _Shepard._

_Liara. Come in with me. I’m not afraid._

It wasn’t quite the truth. He was still afraid, but this time he kept it under strict control.

_Think about the vision. Hold the Cipher in your mind and review it slowly. I’m here. I will help you._

He agreed without verbal thought, and began to review the Prothean message.

It started in the same manner, but he had been correct back on Virmire. There was more to it this time.

Flee the Reapers. Survive as long as you can. Fight them as best you are able.

A double star hanging in space, bright against a background of dust. Concealment. Success. Hope.

A world has been concealed from the Reapers. Here we are working on a plan.

The double star receded into the distance, a small solid body appearing in the foreground. Passage. Stealth.

From here we have built a Conduit. We can reach a critical objective despite the Reapers.

A larger solid body appeared, a world looming dark against the sunlight. Caution. Triumph. Victory.

If we succeed, we may be able to end the threat of the Reapers for all time.

Against the dark body of the world, a Reaper appeared, flew toward us. Reserve. Secrecy. Warning!

Never permit this knowledge to fall into the hands of the Reapers or their servants!

The vision ended.

I found myself staring into Shepard’s eyes, wide with astonishment.

“The Conduit!” he said reverently. “It must be on that world.”

“Goddess,” I breathed. “I think . . . I think that was Ilos.”

“Ilos?”

“It’s a Prothean world, almost a legend among those of us who study them. It may even predate them as an inhabited world. We’ve found hints that it might have been the inusannon homeworld. I’ve only seen vague references to it in old inscriptions. We’ve never been able to determine its location.”

“We still don’t know where the Conduit must be?” he asked, ready to be disappointed once more.

“Wait.” I closed my eyes, reviewed the images in my mind. “There was something . . . just when we saw that binary star for the first time. Another concept, more abstract, layered beneath the images and the semantic content.”

“Yes. I think I noticed that too.”

My eyes snapped open. “Numbers.”

“Coordinates!” He touched his omni-tool. “Shepard to Pressley.”

“Here, sir.”

“Are you in the CIC?”

“Of course. What do you need?”

“Stay there and put the galaxy map in simulation mode. Dr. T’Soni and I will be right there.”

Pressley stood waiting by the map when we arrived. “What’s up, Commander?”
“We’re going to find the Conduit,” said Shepard. “Liara, what do we know about Prothean astrocartography?”

“A great deal, actually.” I began to lecture, as if before a classroom. “The Protheans used a cylindrical coordinate system to map the galaxy. They defined a reference axis running through the galactic center and pointing to the galactic poles, perpendicular to a reference plane that was arbitrarily defined but as close as possible to the true galactic plane. They used three coordinates: an azimuth angle from the radius intersecting the Prothean home system, a radial distance from the axis along the plane, and a perpendicular altitude above or below the plane.”

Shepard nodded. “Can you convert our system to that, Pressley?”

“The math is easy enough, Commander. Simple trigonometry. I need to know the location of the prime radius, the units the Protheans used, and it would help if I knew the Prothean coordinates for at least three known systems for a check.”

I handed the navigator a datapad. “We don’t know the location of the Prothean homeworld, but we have managed to define the prime radius of their coordinate system. Here are the data you will need. Reference stars include Sol, Utopia, and Home Nest.”

Pressley got to work.

“Home Nest?” asked Ashley quietly.

I looked around. We had begun to acquire an audience. Several of the bridge officers, Ashley, Garrus, and Tali, all of them had gathered to watch.

“The hanar homeworld’s primary,” I told her. “Prothean data archives exist on Mars, Eden Prime, and Kahje, from which we’ve been able to discover the Prothean coordinates for those three systems.”

“You think this is going to work?” she asked. For once her spirits seemed very low, her voice flat and muted.

I turned to watch Pressley. “I hope so.”

Several minutes passed. More of our people arrived to watch: some of the Marines, Dr. Chakwas, Captain Kirrahe and his second-in-command. Even Wrex appeared, standing quietly in the shadows to the back. The command deck began to feel crowded.

Finally Pressley made a small bark of triumph. “Hah! Got it, Commander.”

Suddenly the galaxy map acquired a polar axis and an equatorial plane. Three short perpendicular lines sprang from the plane, two of them upward, one downward. At their ends small spheres popped into being, with labels.

Shepard shook his head. “That can’t be right. All three of those are close, but they’re off.”

“Ah, but here’s where I get to check my work.” Pressley touched another control. “We have to account for proper motion. Stars don’t stay in the same place over long periods of time.”

It was subtle. The galaxy map didn’t seem to change . . . but then I could see the myriad points of light that represented stars, moving slightly against the Prothean coordinate system, as if the galaxy’s rotation had started to unwind.
“Dr. T’Soni, what’s the best date for the fall of the Prothean civilization?” asked Pressley.

“The end of the Fourth Age and the start of the extinction period are usually dated to forty-nine thousand, nine hundred seventy years before the present, plus or minus one hundred fifty years.”

“All right, we’ll back the galaxy up exactly that far, and . . . positive matches,” announced Pressley. One, two, three, the points designated on the map turned green. “All three star systems are in place with no more than five light-years of error. I can refine the model a little.”

The coordinate frame rotated ever so slightly as Pressley adjusted it. When he finished, Sol, Utopia, and Home Nest all shone exactly where they needed to be.

“There,” said the navigator, satisfaction unmistakable in his voice. “Perfect.”

“All right,” said Shepard. “Show only the stars of the Pangaea Expanse cluster, and zoom in on that region.”

“Aye-aye,” said Pressley, working the controls. The entire galaxy vanished except for a tiny region, which zoomed out until we could see it easily.

“Liara, I’m not sure of the numbers from the message. Do you have them?”

“I think so.” I opened my omni-tool and began performing computations. “I have to convert from Prothean arithmetic to ours. They used a base-six number system . . . done.”

I gave Pressley the coordinates. He punched them into the computer.

A small white sphere appeared in the map, well within the Pangaea Expanse. Unfortunately no stars appeared in or close to it.

“There must be a mistake somewhere,” objected Ashley.

I checked my mathematics. “Unless the numbers from the message were garbled, this is the correct place.”

Pressley shook his head in confusion. “You can’t be too far off. The coordinate system is very precise. I think any significant error in your memory or your arithmetic would put the designated point far outside the cluster.”

“Wait a minute,” Tali interjected. “What about stars that aren’t in the Pangaea Expanse cluster today?”

I frowned in concentration.

“I’m not sure I follow you, Tali,” said Shepard.

“Well, we define navigational clusters by proximity to a major mass relay,” explained the quarian. “What if the Ilos star system was close to this mass relay in Prothean times, but it has moved too far away since then? We wouldn’t think of it as a member of the cluster at all.”

“She’s right,” said Pressley. “Some stars have odd orbital paths, cutting across the local flow that makes up the rotation of the galaxy as a whole.”

“Okay. Expand the list of stars we can see to include anything that’s currently within . . . how far from the mass relay, Tali?”
“After fifty thousand years? Two hundred light-years should be far enough.”

Shepard nodded to Pressley, who worked with the map’s controls.

More stars appeared in the hologram . . . including one precisely inside the marked sphere.

“I’ll be damned,” said Pressley. “It’s a halo star.”

Shepard frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Most of the galaxy’s stars, almost all of its bright young stars, they occupy the galactic disk,” explained the navigator. “Today they make up the visible structure of the spiral arms, but billions of years ago the galaxy hadn’t formed that flattened disk structure yet. A lot of the oldest stars, the ones we classify into what’s called Population Two, they occupy a much larger spheroid called the galactic halo. Their orbital paths around the core are more random; they can be highly eccentric, inclined at a large angle to the galactic plane, even retrograde. This star system’s proper motion, relative to the stars around it, is huge. Completely different orbital parameters. It must be a halo star, just passing through the galactic disk for now.”

“What else do we know about it?”

Pressley touched controls, and the map zoomed in on the one star. I gasped in surprise when I saw it was a close binary, actually composed of two similar stars orbiting each other at very close range. Just as we had seen in the Prothean message.

“Not much,” said the navigator, referring to data on his console. “The system has never been explored, or even visited as far as I can tell. Two binary components, both class K-zero subdwarf stars. Fairly low metallicity. Might have planets, might not, there’s no way to tell.”

Shepard looked at me, nothing but certainty in his eyes. “That’s Ilos, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “I would wager a great deal on it.”

“We are wagering a great deal on it.” He touched his omni-tool. “Joker, patch me through to the Council. They need to hear about this. We might finally be able to get ahead of Saren and stop that bastard.”

Suddenly all the humans in the CIC began cheering, applauding, slapping one another on the back in celebration. Ashley stepped forward and hugged Pressley, causing the navigator to turn bright red in confused embarrassment. Kirrahe and his second turned to look at each other with quiet satisfaction. Garrus watched the image of the Ilos system in the hologram, his eyes and the tilt of his head suggesting a predator’s intense interest. Tali bounced on the balls of her feet in excitement. Even Wrex showed something like good spirits, flashing an imposing grin full of teeth.

I shared a glance with Shepard. He only nodded, a slow triumphant smile spreading across his face.

If we had only known.
The Council responded to Shepard’s report at once. They congratulated us on our success on Virmire and our decoding of the Prothean message. Ambassador Udina then summoned the Normandy home to the Citadel, to join a multi-species task force to respond to Saren’s threat.

Shepard was jubilant. After months of being unable to persuade the Council to take Saren seriously, he saw this move as a vindication.

I wasn’t so certain. As Benezia’s daughter I had never been permitted to be entirely naïve. Before I met Shepard on Therum, I had never been a very political creature, but I still had decades more experience than any human in watching the Council and its actions.

The Council remained a deeply conservative and pragmatic institution, concerned solely with maintaining peace among the competing established interests of the galaxy. They had no interest in fairness, justice, or objective truth, unless these could be applied to keep the peace. When confronted with a crisis, they traditionally stood well clear and hoped the problem would solve itself. Bold, daring action was left entirely up to the Spectres, with the unspoken assumption that any Spectre who failed could easily be disavowed and discarded.

Looking back on these events, I’m not sure Shepard ever realized just how cynically the Council was using him at this time. Goddess, he took such pride in his status as the first Spectre of his species. He did not see, until much later, that the Council remained unwilling to place humans on an equal footing with the older races. No one on the Council ever intended for his Spectre status to be taken seriously; they had only granted it so that he could serve as Saren’s nemesis. I’m certain that had Saren turned out to be the only problem facing the galactic community, Shepard would have found himself permanently suspended the moment his foe was dealt with.

Yet Shepard seemed so happy, during our journey back to the Citadel.

I could tell he mourned Kaidan quietly, in the privacy of his thoughts. Even so, I think the success of our mission on Virmire allowed him to see his friend’s death as meaningful. It did not weigh on him as heavily as it might have done, had we failed.

He felt certain that Saren’s defeat was close at hand. His grim satisfaction conveyed itself to the rest of the crew, whose morale soared as high as I had ever seen.

I kept my misgivings to myself.

22 May 2183, Citadel

The moment Normandy docked, Shepard ordered Lieutenant Pressley to restock and prepare the ship for immediate departure. He then disembarked, escorted only by Ashley and me, ready to meet with the Council.

This was not my first time before the Council. Many years earlier, I had come before them as a very junior member of an asari scientific delegation. I had not been invited to speak, and indeed I doubted the Councilors had taken any note of me. Only Councilor Tevos still remained from that time; I did not know either Sparatus or Valern.

The human ambassador, Donnel Udina, met us at the entrance to the Council chambers. I had a mixed impression of Udina at that first encounter. He seemed physically unattractive by asari
standards, but he dressed and presented himself very well. I could sense extreme intelligence, as befit the most influential human on the Citadel. He had a smooth manner, always concealing his true intentions behind a veneer of polished calm. He took my hand when Shepard presented me, greeted me courteously, but gave no hint of what he was thinking.

“You’ve done a good job, Shepard,” he said. “I must admit, I didn’t think your mission would come to anything. But thanks to you, the Council is finally taking real action against Saren.”

Shepard cocked an eyebrow at Udina. “Disappointed, Ambassador?”

“Of course not. You got the job done, you didn’t make any political messes I had to clean up, and you even made a few friends for humanity along the way. That constitutes a pleasant surprise. Now let’s go. The Council is waiting for us.”

The four of us walked up to the end of the audience ramp and stood before the Council.

As usual, Councilor Tevos spoke first. “Commander Shepard, we commend you on the success of your mission against Saren.”

I saw the first hint of a frown on Shepard’s face. “Councilor, I’m not certain my mission can be considered a success just yet.”

Tevos inclined her head regally. “It is true that Saren has not yet been apprehended, but thanks to you he poses no more threat to galactic civilization. If he is foolish enough to attack the Citadel, as you believe, then we will be ready for him.”

“Patrols have been stationed at every mass relay linking Citadel space to the Terminus Systems,” stated Councilor Sparatus. “Based on Admiral Hackett’s assessment after the Battle of the Armstrong Nebula, it is clear no remaining geth fleet will be strong enough to break our blockade. You have defeated Saren. It is only a matter of time before he is caught or killed.”

Shepard took a short step forward, placing himself at the focus of the Council’s attention. The frown on his face was quite visible now. “Councilors, I respectfully submit that a blockade is not enough. We may be ahead of Saren for the moment. We know where the Conduit is, and he may not yet have deduced its location, but that could change at any time. We must take more active steps to head him off and stop him.”

Councilor Valern shook his head within his hood. “Commander, the planet Ilos is only accessible through the Mu Relay, deep inside the Terminus Systems. If we send a fleet in there, the only possible outcome is full-scale war.”

Udina stepped forward and placed a hand on Shepard’s shoulder. “Now is the time for discretion, Commander,” he said quietly. “Secrecy was Saren’s greatest weapon. Now that he’s exposed, he’s no longer a threat. This is over.”

“Ambassador, Saren has gone well beyond secrecy. The Conduit is his objective.”

“Saren is a master manipulator,” said Valern. “Whatever the Conduit may be – and you have admitted you do not know that, Commander – it can only be a distraction from his real plan to attack the Citadel.”

Shepard shook off Udina’s hand and faced the Council once more. “Councilors. It would be very unwise to assume that Saren’s search for the Conduit is meaningless. By all means, set up your blockade. But send me after Saren. One stealthed ship going into the Terminus Systems won’t start a war. I can be discreet.”
Sparatus leaned forward, the picture of a military officer about to dress down a foolish subordinate. “You detonated a nuclear device on Virmire! I wouldn’t call that *discreet*.”

Tevos intervened, her body language and voice projecting calm assurance. “Commander, your style served you well in the Traverse, and you have accomplished all that this Council could have asked of you. But Ilos requires a deft touch. Please rest assured that we have the situation well under control.”

“If Saren finds the Conduit, *we are all screwed*,” said Shepard, his temper flaring up at last. “We have *got* to send an expedition to Ilos!”

Sparatus shook his head. “Ambassador Udina, I get the sense Commander Shepard isn’t willing to let this go.”

Udina nodded. “There are serious political implications here, Shepard. Humanity’s made great gains thanks to you. But if you insist on following your own foolish quest, then you’ve just made yourself more trouble than you’re worth.”

“You *bastard!*” snarled Ashley. “You’re selling us out!”

Udina opened his omni-tool and tapped in a few instructions as he turned back to face the Council. “It’s just politics, Commander. You’ve done your job, now let me do mine. I’ve just locked out all of the Normandy’s primary systems. Until further notice, you are grounded.”

“Are you insane?” demanded Shepard. “After everything my crew and I have accomplished, you still don’t believe us?”

Udina rounded on him, his urbane veneer discarded. “I think you forget your place, *Lieutenant Commander*. Admiral Hackett may be willing to tolerate your interference at the highest levels of decision-making. I am not. This matter no longer concerns you. I suggest you take your team and go. Leave important matters to *adults*.”

For an instant I felt quite convinced of Shepard’s self-portrait as a killer. Then his expression became glacially calm, and he turned to leave the Council chambers. Ashley and I followed.

We returned to the ship and found it pinned in place. The drives and weapons systems were locked down, their controls overridden by the Citadel through the umbilical link. Everything else worked normally, but the *Normandy* could go nowhere until the Council chose to relent.

The crew was in an uproar, like a hive of angry *sphekes* struck by a stone. Shepard ordered them back to their duties, conferred briefly with Lieutenants Pressley and Adams, and then went into his office to call Admiral Hackett.

I followed him. He noticed my presence, but did not object. I sat down out of the way as he activated his computer and made the call.

He had to wait for a few minutes, working his way through several gatekeepers. Eventually the screen cleared and Admiral Hackett’s rough-hewn face appeared.

“*Commander Shepard. I’ve just been informed about what happened. I imagine I know why you’re calling.*”

“Yes, sir. I’m hoping you can clarify the situation here.”

“*Let me make one thing clear up front, Commander. You are still in command of the Normandy.*
“That is not going to change.”

“Thank you, sir.” Shepard leaned forward. “Permission to speak freely?”

“Go ahead.”

“The Council has its collective head up its ass. Sir.”

Hackett snorted. “I quite agree. This blockade plan is fine as far as it goes, but they’re gambling on Saren launching a bull-headed frontal assault. We both know he’s smarter than that.”

“If he isn’t, he has Sovereign to be smarter for him.” Shepard sat down at his desk. “Sir, the Red Team hasn’t reached many conclusions yet, but if the Reaper hypothesis is even close to correct, Sovereign must have the experience of thousands of cycles to draw on. A crust-defense strategy is just begging them to do to us exactly what they did to the Protheans.”

“Does Dr. T’Soni concur with your analysis?”

Shepard glanced at me. I rose and went to stand beside him. “I do, Admiral.”

“So do I. Unfortunately, there’s not much I can do at the moment. My staff is in the process of lodging a protest with the Council at the impoundment of one of our ships. Of course, since that protest would have to go through the Ambassador’s office, it’s not going to fly. We’re also working on our people in Parliament to see if we can go around Udina.”

“I’m not sure we have the time for any of that,” said Shepard.

“I’m quite sure we don’t, but this is where we are.” Hackett’s eyes narrowed as he watched Shepard. “Commander, are you interested in a piece of advice?”

“Sir, at this point I’ll take anything I can get.”

“The Council has made one very serious mistake with you. They haven’t revoked your Spectre status. Make the most of that.”

Shepard sat quietly for a long moment. “Thank you, sir.”

“We’ll speak again, Commander. Hackett out.”

The screen darkened. Shepard leaned back in his chair, almost slumping in dejection.

I turned and propped myself on the edge of his desk, folding my arms and looking down at him. For some reason I suddenly became very aware of his physical presence. It pulled at me like a cable drawn taut. Part of me wanted to climb onto his chair with him and drape myself along his body.

I pushed the urge down and said, “Well. Is that it?”

He opened his eyes and stared at me. “What do you mean?”

“Saren could reach the Conduit at any time. The galaxy is hanging in the balance. Are you just going to sit here and accept this?”

“Don’t worry, Liara. I’m going to get us back in the game somehow.” He sighed. “It’s just that at the moment, I don’t see how.”

“You’re still a Spectre,” I said softly. I was standing too close to him. His scent, sharp human male,
was climbing up into my brain and causing all manner of interesting things to occur.

“Admiral Hackett said the same thing. Do the two of you see something I don’t?”

“Shepard, remember what being a Spectre means. You answer to no one but the Council. Laws, policies, chains of command, none of those apply to you. You’ve been entrusted with absolute authority to go and do what must be done.”

“Sure. Right up to the moment that the Council decides I’m more trouble than I’m worth. Which I think happened about an hour ago.”

“If the Council had reached that conclusion, they would have revoked your Spectre status.”

“They probably just haven’t gotten around to it yet.”

“Don’t be absurd, Shepard!” I snapped.

That brought him up short. He sat up in his chair and frowned at me.

“The Council is composed of three of the most intelligent, far-sighted, and cunning individuals in the galaxy. They have all spent years – in the case of Councilor Tevos, centuries – practicing the arts of power. They are not always right. In fact, they are sometimes spectacularly wrong. But they do not make simple oversights. If you are still a Spectre, it’s because they want you to still be a Spectre.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Shepard, have you ever considered what the Spectres are for?”

“We keep the peace in the galaxy, as agents of the Council,” he said slowly.

“That’s the official story. I’m sure you’re not so naïve as to believe the official story.”

He thought for a few moments. Suddenly his eyes caught mine, bright and crystal-blue. “We make policy.”

I watched him, waiting for him to think it through to the end.

“That’s why they give us such wide latitude, such freedom from oversight. The Council sees a problem they can’t solve. Maybe they don’t have all the facts. Maybe they’re afraid that if they get involved directly, they will only make matters worse. So they send out a Spectre. No instructions. No guidelines. Just solve the problem, any way you can. If the Spectre succeeds, then the Council backs him and the solution he found becomes policy. If he fails . . .”

“If he fails, then he becomes like Saren: suspended in disgrace. The Council can blame him and move on. The next Spectre sent to solve the problem may have better luck.”

He made a cynical snort. “Leaving the Council’s hands clean, no matter what.”

“Of course, Shepard. What did you expect?”

“I suppose there’s no other way to run a galactic empire,” he said. His voice turned ironic. “All right, you’ve convinced me. As long as I’m willing to take the blame if I fail, there’s nothing stopping me from doing whatever has to be done. I am about to get out of this chair, steal a ship, and go running off to the Pangaea Expanse, breaking any number of laws along the way, to save the Council despite its best efforts to commit suicide by Reaper.”
“If that’s what you want to do.”

He smiled. “Is this some kind of self-esteem workshop you’ve got going here, T’Soni? Anything is possible if you only want it badly enough?”

A daimon of anger and desire seized me. Blue light flared around my shoulders and upper arms. I reached down and grabbed him by the vest of his uniform, using a little biotic assistance to yank him to his feet. “Shepard, that would not be true for most of us. You are different. If you see what must be done, if you see something you want, you always seem to find a way.”

He looked a little shocked at the violence of my gesture, but then he realized just how closely we were standing.

“So what is it you want, Shepard?” I asked him quietly.

He must have seen something in my eyes, because suddenly there was a fierce glimmer in his own. He bent his face close to mine . . .

“Sorry to interrupt, Commander,” came Joker’s voice over the intercom. “You have an incoming message from Captain Anderson.”

I released Shepard and drew away slightly, shaking my head with amused frustration.

“Are you spying on us, Joker?” said Shepard.

“No, sir!” said the pilot, his voice laden with false sincerity. “Just knew you were in your office and figured I’d pass the message on. The captain said to meet him at Flux. That club down in Tayseri Ward?”

“I know the place. Thanks, Joker.”

We exchanged a look. “You’d better meet with him, Shepard. He may have an idea.”

Shepard nodded. “We’ll both go.”
Flight of the Normandy

22 May 2183, Citadel

Shepard walked out onto the floor at Flux. Tali and I followed him. By some odd coincidence, we found Captain Anderson sitting at the same table where we had all enjoyed a meal two months before.

I felt a twinge of sadness. Kaidan had been with us on that occasion.

I found David Anderson very impressive on our first encounter: an older male human, dark-skinned, his face round and stern, his hair close-cropped like Shepard’s, black with just a touch of grey. Even seated at a table he had great physical presence, big and imposing, although he clearly had not seen active service in some time. He had a smooth baritone voice, very pleasant to hear. I liked him at once.

“Shepard. I’m glad you came. I heard what happened.”

The three of us sat down. Shepard held up a hand, asking for patience as Tali checked her omni-tool.

“No listening devices, Shepard,” she reported quietly. “I’ve set up a white-noise signal anyway.”

“Thanks, Tali.” Shepard turned his attention to Anderson. “Captain, Tali’Zorah nar Rayya is one of the best engineers I’ve ever worked with. You already know Dr. T’Soni from the Red Team.”

Anderson rose from his seat to take Tali’s hand first. Then he turned to me. His grip lingered on my hand as he examined me with keen interest, but I got no sense of sexual interest from him. His expression seemed almost parental.

“So you’re the young asari who swept Shepard off his feet,” he remarked quietly. I must have looked chagrined, because he smiled gently. “Don’t worry, Doctor, I approve. I’ve known Shepard for a long time. Since before he joined the Alliance, in fact. I’ve always suspected he would one day meet a truly exceptional woman. I’m pleased to see I was right.”

Suddenly a strong resemblance to Shepard struck me: both of them massively built human males, in peak condition, comfortable in their bodies and giving off a sense of raw physical power. I found it a very attractive feature. It occurred to me that if I had met Anderson first, perhaps I might have found him the target of my first serious romantic interest.

I mastered my confused emotions by concentrating on a precisely correct bow over his hand. “Thank you, Captain.”

Once we had all taken our seats and placed token orders with the server, Shepard said, “Well, Captain, they pulled me off the mission before it was finished. Just like when they forced you to give up the Normandy in the first place.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I overheard Udina talking about their plan for what to do in case you didn’t immediately fall in line. I wanted to warn you, but you had already docked and it was too late for me to get a message to you.” Anderson leaned forward, holding Shepard’s gaze. “Look, I know you’re pissed off right now, but you can’t give up. They all think this is over, but all of us on the Red Team know it’s not. You have to go to Ilos. You have to stop Saren from using the Conduit.”

“Dr. T’Soni just gave me a very similar pep talk,” said Shepard, throwing me a quick smile. “But we
both know it’s not that simple. There’s only one ship that can get me into the Terminus Systems undetected, and she’s grounded.”

“Not necessarily. The Council didn’t want to issue the order to lock down the Normandy’s primary systems themselves. They knew full well the Alliance would scream bloody murder if they did. So they left it up to Ambassador Udina, to save the appearance of a purely internal matter within the Alliance. It’s his chop on the orders.”

Shepard frowned. “Then all we have to do is override that, and the Normandy comes back online.”

“Right. You can be halfway to the Terminus Systems before anyone even knows you’re gone.”

“Captain, if we steal the Normandy, you’ll be the one left holding the bag. We’re talking about mutiny here.”

“So what? If Saren finds the Conduit, then life as we know it is over. The Reapers will destroy us. Humans, asari, quarians, everybody. You’re the only one who can stop him, Shepard. You’re the only one willing to try. So I’ll do whatever it takes to get you onto the Normandy and off this station.”

Shepard stared at Anderson for a long time.

I realized I saw something new to me, something with no direct analogue in asari society: an older male and a younger male, tied together by bonds of affection and mutual respect, a father-son relationship. Even if Anderson wasn’t Shepard’s biological parent, he seemed to serve as an adoptive parent of sorts. I guessed that it dated back to the difficult period in Shepard’s life immediately after Mindoir. I decided to get to know Captain Anderson more closely, if for no other reason than the insight he could grant into Shepard’s personality.

Perhaps he would one day be thinking of me as an adopted daughter. I found that a very strange thought.

“I won’t forget this, Captain,” said Shepard at last. “I promise.”

Anderson nodded. “I can unlock the Normandy from one of the consoles in the Citadel’s traffic control center. You’ll have a few minutes before anyone realizes what’s happened.”

“Captain, that is a restricted area patrolled by armed guards,” I objected. “You do not have clearance. How are you going to get in?”

“Leave that to me. Just make sure you’re on board the Normandy and ready to go the moment the systems come back online.”

“You’re going to get yourself killed,” said Shepard. “There has to be another way.”

“I could hack into the computer in Ambassador Udina’s office. If I can steal his credentials for a few moments, I can just rescind the lockdown order.”

“Are you sure you have the skills necessary to do that?” asked Tali.

Anderson grinned. “I may not be up to your standard, Ms. Zorah, but I’ve learned a trick or two in my day. I’m more worried about what will happen if he’s in his office when I need to . . . borrow his terminal.”

“The ambassador will not forgive you, Captain,” I said, remembering what I had seen of Udina’s
character. “He will charge you with treason, either before the Alliance or the Council. That is a capital offense.”

“We don’t have a lot of options, Doctor.”

Shepard’s jaw set in determination. “You’ll have a better chance of success, and a better chance of getting away afterward, if you use the ambassador’s computer.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” said Anderson. “The ambassador has made this personal.”

“All right.” Shepard rose from his seat and extended his hand for Anderson to shake. “I’ll send you a message when we’re ready to go at the Normandy. Something innocuous.”

“Don’t take too long,” warned Anderson.

“Less than an hour,” promised Shepard.

Tali and I wished Anderson good luck, and we departed.

Shepard stopped us in the concourse just outside the club. He tapped at his omni-tool for a moment, and then turned to Tali.

“Tali, I want you to take this message to Lieutenant Pressley. I want him to make sure the entire crew is on board. Then he, Lieutenant Adams, and Chief Williams are to quietly inform the crew what’s about to happen. If anyone can’t in good conscience go with us, I want them ready to disembark fast the moment we get back there.”

Tali nodded, accepted the data in her omni-tool, and then went on her errand. She moved quickly and quietly, and yet did not appear to be hurrying at all.

*She has some potential as a spy,* I thought.

“What chore do you have for me?” I asked.

“You’ll see. Come on.”

Shepard signaled for a cab to the Presidium, and then refused to say another word until our destination was obvious.

“Shepard, why in the name of the Goddess are we here?” I asked, as the cab settled to the ground immediately outside the Consort’s salon.

He only smiled as he ordered the cab to wait. He met me on my side of the cab, took my hand, and led me to a spot under the trees.

“I have a question for you, Liara,” he told me.

I only looked at him with a certain amount of exasperation.

“Te yakhen ka siavi ren zhai?” he asked. In a tolerable accent.

For the first time in many years, I was rendered completely speechless. I stared at him with wide eyes and simply could not force my brain to work.

“It’s not *that* difficult a question, is it?” he asked, with an infuriating smile.
“Shepard!” My voice finally started working again. “That is *not* a question any asari would ask from ambush.”

“I’m not asari, and we humans have a long-standing tradition of doing just that.” He became serious. “Liara, we may not have *time* to do this in asari fashion. I am very much in love with you. However long my life happens to be from this point on, I want to spend it with you. So . . .”

“Yes,” I told him.

He stopped with his mouth wide open.

“Yes, I will enter into a *siavi-*contract with you. You *do* realize this isn’t necessarily a permanent arrangement?”

“I’ve done my homework,” he managed to say. “It’s kind of like a human engagement. It says that these two people are together, they may be thinking about becoming bondmates someday, and nobody else had better try to break them apart or the Goddess will start smiting people.”

“There are also a few customs regarding tribal affiliation, shared legal inheritance, social precedence, and oh Goddess you don’t care about any of that.” I took a deep breath. “Don’t tell me that you got Sha’ira to clear her calendar to preside over the ceremony.”

“She seems to be fond of you,” he said, as if that explanation sufficed.

“How did you arrange it?”

“I sent a message ahead before we left for Flux. I suspected Anderson would have a plan up his sleeve and we wouldn’t have much time to do this.”

“Goddess above, I’m entering into a *siavi-*contract while wearing battle dress.”

“So am I. It does seem appropriate, doesn’t it?”

I looked up at him and couldn’t help but smile. “I suppose it does.”

We walked into Sha’ira’s salon and found the Consort herself waiting for us, looking radiant and just a little smug as she saw the two of us together. Nelyna and five of the other acolytes stood as witnesses. We signed the documents together. Sha’ira spoke the ancient words and poured the sacred water for us to share. The acolytes presented each of us with Thessian orchids to wear. The blossoms looked absurd tucked into pockets of our combat armor, but I wouldn’t have had it any other way.

Nelyna took holographs to celebrate the occasion. Many years later one of those images, a picture of Shepard standing smiling next to Sha’ira, found its way into public distribution. Somehow the rumor began that Shepard had engaged in a sexual liaison with the Consort. Since then I have seen many documentaries and fictionalized vids speculating about their steamy romance, and I have had to tolerate a great deal of harassment from the gossip media. Let me be clear, if it will do any good: so far as I know, Shepard only carried on a liaison with *one* asari in his entire life, and she was *not* Sha’ira.

We left the salon fifteen minutes after we had arrived, the Consort’s blessings and well-wishes trailing behind us, and climbed back into the waiting cab. I had become *siavi*-betrothed to a human. Even half a year before, if anyone had told me that would happen, I would have laughed aloud. Now it seemed only natural and right.

We returned to the *Normandy*. 
Shepard became quiet again as we approached the docking ring, wondering what he would find when we arrived at the Normandy’s berth. I suspected he was even ready to shoot his way onto the ship, if he found C-Sec officers waiting to arrest him. Fortunately we found that unnecessary; the berth stood quiet and empty.

We waited for the decontamination cycle to finish, listening to the ship’s VI. “Logged. The Commanding Officer is aboard. XO Pressley stands relieved.”

Ashley was posted immediately beyond the inner airlock door, and snapped into a perfect salute the moment Shepard appeared. “Attention on deck!” she shouted.

Shepard stopped dead in the inner airlock door. He looked slowly to his right, and then stepped out into the bridge access corridor. I followed.

The Normandy’s crew lined the bridge access corridor, the control room amidships, and most of the Combat Information Center. Every man and woman stood at attention, saluting Shepard as he embarked onto his ship.

I counted quickly and found the entire crew, not a single member missing. Even Joker had left his pilot’s couch and stood in the bridge hatchway, painfully standing at attention and saluting. Garrus, Tali, and Wrex all stood close to the galaxy map in the CIC, not saluting but holding their own formal postures.

Shepard glanced at me. I pulled myself into a reasonable facsimile of the “attention” stance, and gave him a small smile and nod.

“Shepherd Pressley, what is the meaning of this?” asked Shepard softly.

Pressley lifted his chin proudly. “Sir! All members of the complement of the SSV Normandy are present and accounted for, sir!”

“You did pass along my message, Lieutenant?”

“Yes, sir. I personally advised everyone to take heed and disembark. Mutiny is a terrible thing, sir.”

Shepard stared at Pressley, who showed not even the slightest hint of a smile. Then he surveyed his crew once more, very slowly.

“Thank you all,” he said quietly. “At ease. Take your stations.”

The crew immediately broke their formation and began to move to their duty stations, quickly, quietly, and with immense pride.

Shepard and I went to the bridge, where Joker had taken his usual station in the pilot’s couch once again. Shepard opened his omni-tool and sent the “go” message to Captain Anderson. Then we waited.

We didn’t have to wait long. Perhaps five minutes after Joker resumed his station, a light burned green on his console. We learned later that Anderson had stolen Udina’s credentials by the simple method of barging into his office while he used his computer, knocking him cold with a single blow, and then using the login session the ambassador had already started.

C-Sec arrested Anderson almost immediately, but it was already far too late. Our docking clamps released, our umbilical attachment dropped. Normandy backed away from its berth so abruptly that
we all felt a moment’s acceleration despite the internal damping field.

“Hang on. We’re about to get a little assertive,” said Joker.

*Normandy* spun end-for-end in a space less than twice its length, then leaped forward. We soared directly out between the Citadel’s arms, violating any number of traffic regulations, jinking hard twice to avoid possible collisions.

“SSV Normandy, this is Citadel Control.” A harsh turian voice, breaking into our internal communications. “You are in violation of Council orders and Citadel traffic control ordinances. Cut your drives at once and prepare to be boarded.”

“No response,” ordered Shepard.

Joker glanced at a screen to one side. “Two . . . no, *three* turian cruisers coming about to bring their spinal cannon to bear.”

“It’s time, Joker.”

“Everybody cross your fingers.” Joker opened a new window on his console, tapped at the controls there.

Still within the Citadel’s inner traffic control envelope, *Normandy* went into FTL for about a quarter of a millisecond. We emerged back into normal geometry half a million kilometers from the Citadel.

“We’re still alive,” reported Joker, sounding a little surprised. “Drift . . . about fifty meters. Drives at maximum. Theta-5 relay is answering our control signal.”

Shepard stabbed at a control on the communications console. Our main comms array started pouring out a signal at maximum strength.

*SPECTRE BUSINESS – GIVE WAY. SPECTRE BUSINESS – GIVE WAY.*

“Nobody else at the relay or in the outbound lane,” said Joker. “About time we had some good luck.”

We hit the approach for the Theta-5 relay. Ten seconds later, we were twenty thousand light-years away. The red-golden light of Arcturus shone through the front ports.

“On course for the primary Arcturus relay, ETA five minutes. Incoming transmission from the Fifth Fleet, text only.”

“Let’s see it, Joker.”

*FROM: COMFIFTHFLT*
*TO: SSV NORMANDY*

*Godspeed.*

*Hackett*
Fire and Water

22 May 2183, Interstellar Space

Over the centuries, I have seen many dramatizations of our war against Saren. I’ve long since given up trying to understand why certain details always become distorted in the retelling. Perhaps it’s simply for the sake of drama?

The journey to Ilos provides one of the better examples. Somehow the trip is always presented as taking no more than a few hours. Usually the actress playing me has just enough time to make a shy visit to the Commander’s quarters, and then the scene changes to their preparations for the final confrontation.

I’m forced to wonder whether any of the dramatists have ever examined a galactic map. If Ilos was that close to the primary mass relay for the Pangaea Expanse, Saren would not have needed months to find it. The Conduit would have been his, almost from the moment Benezia gave him the location of the Mu Relay. In fact, as we discovered, Ilos had drifted many light-years away over the millennia. Neither Saren nor we had been able to locate it easily. Once we knew its location, it still stood several days from the primary relay.

We had plenty of time to worry about whether Saren had put all the pieces together at last. The Council had delayed us by over two days. Sovereign seemed to be faster in FTL than any other ship known to us. It seemed entirely possible that we would arrive at Ilos, only to find the Reaper and its geth followers already present in force. We were unsure as to what we could do in that case, other than try an all-out attack on the Conduit and hope for the best. It didn’t seem likely that any of us would survive such a battle.

Of course, the dramatists have usually been right about one thing.

The day we departed the Citadel, Shepard took care to “make the rounds” and speak to every member of the crew, thanking them for their loyalty. He carried out other duties that had been neglected while we struggled with the Council. Then, late in the ship’s evening as usual, he retired to his quarters for the night.

I waited for a few minutes, and then followed him.

I smiled when I found his door unlocked for me. When I didn’t find him in his office, I took a moment to muster my courage, and then tested the door to his private quarters as well. It opened. I found him sitting on his couch, a book in his hands.

He looked up and smiled at me. “Liara. I was just thinking about you.”

“I’m glad.” I took a deep breath. “Shepard . . . may I stay here tonight? With you?”

His face became very calm and still, but it wasn’t his usual grim-faced reaction to an unpleasant surprise. Instead it seemed a gentle calm, a kind of serenity I had rarely seen in him before.

I stood there watching him, very aware of my heartbeat.

Am I really going to go through with this?

Yes.
It’s time. Long past time.

He closed his book and set it aside, never looking away from me while he did it.

For a moment I glanced at the title: *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*. The title meant nothing to me, but it appeared one of Shepard’s favorite books, worn and much-used.

“Are you sure about this, Liara?”

“I’ve never been more certain of anything, Shepard.”

He stood and walked over to me, slowly, taking his time. He stood very close, looming over me, gently caressing my cheek with one hand. His hand trembled, ever so slightly, as it ghosted over my skin.

*He is not as calm as he appears.*

I felt a surge of desire, like a fire igniting deep in my body.

“I’ve been thinking about what we face,” I told him softly. “None of us may survive Ilos. I understand why you took us to see Sha’ira before we left the Citadel. I feel the need to seize the moment.”

“That’s very human of you,” he said softly.

My heart raced. My head was full of his scent, and it was driving me mad. I reached out to place my hands on his chest, step close into his personal space. Then, quite suddenly, he swept me into his arms and kissed me. The taste of his tongue made me dizzy. I pressed against him and made a soft growl in the back of my throat.

His uniform presented an annoying obstacle. I slipped my hands under his shirt, felt the skin of his flanks and back, incredibly smooth and fine-textured and warm. He cooperated in peeling the garment off, standing before me bare-chested. His skin fascinated me, covered with hair, most of it invisibly soft and fine. On impulse I blew across the planes of his chest, watching the tiny hairs stir and stand erect. My hands explored the masses of muscle under his skin, brutally powerful and yet under precise control. I thought of his body as an engine, working tirelessly above and inside me, and my knees went weak at the image.

He trailed a line of kisses down one side of my neck, nibbling slightly at the folds of skin under my aural cavity. The sensation sent shudders down my spine. I wrapped my arms around him and found myself clawing at his shoulders.

Cool air whispered at my flanks, my back. He had peeled me out of my jacket.

My skin evidently fascinated him as well, the soft scales that covered my body, small and almost invisible on my face, my chest and breasts, my belly, larger and more textured along my crest, my upper arms, my flanks and back, my legs. His hands wandered everywhere for a few moments, enjoying the varying textures and incidentally sending me into shivers of delight.

“So beautiful,” he murmured. “I’ve thought so since the first time I saw you.”

“Hmm. I was hardly at my best. Hanging in mid-air for three days straight . . .” I gasped as his hands found the erogenous zone, the *azure*, low on my back on either side of my spine.

“You cleaned up pretty well,” he said, amused.
“Shepard!”

I went in search of a proper revenge. He responded nicely to kisses and small bites along his collarbone. His breath suddenly caught in his throat as I discovered his nipples. For the life of me I couldn’t see what use such things could be on a male body, but they certainly seemed sensitive. My fingers explored downward, past the flat muscles of his belly, one hand slipping inside his trousers.

What I found there felt so bizarre that I had to see for myself. I knelt, unfastened his trousers, and slipped them off his hips to fall to the floor. A soft white undergarment followed. He stepped forward out of them.

I was confronted with the absurdity.

“Evolution has produced all manner of strange things,” I observed, “but this must be one of the strangest.”

He smiled down at me where I knelt on the floor. “I suppose you’re right.”

I touched him cautiously, felt warmth and soft skin. I could hear his breathing change.

“I’ve been doing some research,” I told him, my voice low and husky. “Do you know that the human intromittent organ is the largest among the known sentient species?”

He struggled to keep his face and voice under control. “Really?” he managed.

“Oh yes.” I continued to touch him, more assertively now. “Asari have no male gender, so we lack such a mechanism entirely. Male salarians have none either, as they use external fertilization. The turian organ is relatively small.”

“Liara . . .”

“Krogan, of course, have two, but each of theirs still averages smaller than the human analogue. What is it, Shepard?”

“Now is not the time for a comparative biology lecture!”

“Ah.” I smiled to myself. “You’re quite right.”

It was the one part of Shepard’s anatomy for which I never discovered much attraction. I loved the brightness of his eyes, the shifting expressions on his face, the mass and power of his body, the softness of his skin, the way light and shadow played across his form. Human male genitalia never seemed anything but ridiculous to me. Perhaps female humans can appreciate them better. On the other hand, I did appreciate the pleasure he experienced when I attended to them, so I never begrudged the effort.

I experimented carefully for a few moments to see which techniques pleased him, but he didn’t permit me to investigate for long. With an impatient growl, he bent down, lifted me up, and then swept me entirely off my feet. He carried me the three steps to his bed and laid me down there, joining me immediately.

If I had thought him aggressive before, I was wrong. He kissed me deeply and thoroughly before moving downward, trailing kisses and nibbles across my throat, my breasts, my belly. His hands roved, exploring, tickling, playing my nerves like a musical instrument. He had a light and very deft touch, but he wasn’t afraid to use his whole hand to wake the nerves across broad expanses of my skin.
Much to my surprise, I discovered that I was a sensualist.

Admittedly we asari have a reputation for sensualism. It is well earned. We love beautiful sights, harmonious music, the scent of blossoms or sea air, the taste of wine, the glorious fatigue that comes after physical exertion, the intimate touch of a lover.

On the other hand, I had always considered myself different, not at all typical for my people. I thought of myself as a scientist, cool and rational, not easily swayed by my mere senses.

Ten minutes in Shepard’s bed taught me otherwise. He rendered me as drunk with sensation as any abandoned maiden. I couldn’t get enough of his hands on me, the kisses that found ever more sensitive places, the warmth and scent of his body so close to mine. I struggled in delicious torment, helplessly nonverbal, encouraging him with low moans and the occasional sharp intake of breath. My back arched, the muscles of my belly began to quiver, and I opened my legs wide. I could feel my biotics surging involuntarily, little arcs and haloes of blue light appearing around my shoulders and upper arms.

He kissed my lower belly, and then ventured further.

“Shepard,” I whispered as the shocking intimacy struck home. Nerve endings that had never gotten much stimulation suddenly woke up and began humming.

My breath, my heartbeat raced, matching his. I could feel my mind reaching out. Not a quiet, controlled thing, like the two times we had joined our minds to share specific information. This was more like surf surging against the shore, battering at the sand and rocks of the beach, tearing down every barrier.


He shifted in the bed, raising himself above me on both arms to look down into my face. “You’re sure? I mean, are you sure we’ll fit?”

I glanced at him in exasperation. “Shepard. As large as you may be, I’m quite sure you are not as large as an infant’s head.”

He chuckled. “I suppose you’re right.”

I remembered Anar and Ru, the ancient humans whose lives I had shared through the Prothean archive. I could guess what might work best. I tilted my hips and placed my legs just so, arched my back slightly, and at the last moment I reached down between us to guide him into place.

It was a very odd sensation, that first time . . . but it immediately became obvious that we fit well enough. I stared up into his eyes, clasped his hips with my thighs, and placed my hands behind his shoulders. Just the look in his eyes struck me like lightning, set me ablaze with raw need. I moved my hips slightly, pressing against him, demanding that he proceed.

“I love you, Liara,” he murmured. Then he began to move above me, inside me, every muscle in his body surging and releasing, a powerful rhythm under my touch.

I went blind, my eyes black as night, my mind rushing across the tiny space between us.

“Embrace eternity,” I gasped.

I could feel what he felt, the softness and yielding of his lover’s body beneath his, the urgent passion to drive more and more deeply.
He could feel what I felt, the hardness and unquenchable energy of my lover’s body above mine, the terror and delight of being penetrated to the core.

Hormones, nerve impulses, muscle movements, they built up into a storm to overwhelm both of us. My biotics fired in a blaze of light, radiance skittering across the surface of our joined bodies.

We became one.

Shepard.

Liara.

So this is what it’s like to be you.


I saw:

A magnificently ordered mind, intelligent and incisive, kept under iron rule and discipline. A sense of humor and delight, like sunlight gleaming on the leaves of a deep forest. A deep and abiding love for his fellow soldiers, for his friends. For me.

Deep down, yes, a volcanic anger. Rage at a universe that turned out indifferent at best to suffering. Fury at those who would profit from the suffering of others, who took pleasure in the suffering of others. Yet this anger remained under his command. It had never been entirely beyond his command. I saw all the horrors of his life: the disaster of Mindoir, the blighted years that followed, the terrible fight on Elysium, a hundred other battlefields . . . and the anger never ruled him, not entirely. He harnessed it, like the fire at the heart of a great engine.

I sensed words: Anyone can become angry – that is easy, but to be angry with the right person at the right time, and for the right purpose and in the right way – that is not within everyone’s power and that is not easy. He had read those words long ago. He had learned to live by them. His anger gave him his force of will, his determination to succeed, his undaunted courage.

Shepard. Look.

I held up a mirror so he could see what I had seen.

Not a barbarian. Not a savage. A soldier, dressed in a brilliant white surcoat over shining mail, carrying a sword whose blade shimmered with flame. A defender of the weak and innocent, battered and worn perhaps, haunted by what he had seen and done, but still standing on his own two feet. Someone who could be proud, not ashamed, of the man he had shaped himself to be.

I see, he thought in growing wonder. But what about you?

He held up a mirror in turn.

I saw:

Intelligence, to be sure, but also a deep curiosity, a driving need to understand. A talent for bringing order out of chaos, beauty out of ugliness, peace out of conflict. An innocence and purity of spirit that had so far gone untouched by the terrors of war.

A wide glacial lake under a pure blue sky, reflecting the world around, yet concealing hidden depths. A sacred place, quiet, capable of immense power. Yet the power remained untapped, at rest. When it
stirred, it might overturn the universe.

Words once again: *Trouble rather the tiger in his lair than the sage among his books. For to you kingdoms and their armies are things mighty and enduring, but to him they are but toys of the moment, to be overturned with the flick of a finger.*

For all of Shepard’s might, he respected me. Even feared me, a little.

Another image: an asari dressed in formal robes and great dignity, seated upon a throne, holding a chalice in one hand. Light shone behind her, creating a halo but concealing her features in shadow. She could speak for the truth, revealing it for all to see, as one who has authority. A priestess or avatar of the Goddess, in her aspect as Wisdom. At first I thought her Benezia, or perhaps Sha’ira. But then the light shone brighter and I saw myself.

The inner light blinded me. I fell back into my body, full of the raw sensations that come just before the peak. The feedback between us surged, surged again with every motion of our bodies. I began to feel his climax, like a sudden flow of electricity. He began to feel mine, like the shaking of a deep earthquake reaching the surface. Then the feedback broke, just as designed, before either of us could suffer damage from it.

I felt his muscles lock tight, and shouted in triumph and delight.

*Mine.*

*He is mine . . . and I am his.*

*Just as it should be.*

Then it was over.

After a moment Shepard rolled away, taking his weight off my body and pressing himself close to my side instead. He embraced me closely with both arms and twined his legs with mine. I think I must have lain there, dazed, for several minutes.

Finally I took a deep breath, held it, and released it in a gusty sigh. “By the Goddess. That was . . . a remarkable experience.”

He chuckled, a deep rumble in his chest. “I guess the rumors are true.”

“What rumors?”

“There’s a saying in the Alliance Marines. *Once you’ve had blue, nothing else will do.*”

I made an exasperated snort and squirmed in his arms, so I could lie on my side and snuggle close to him. “I suspect it will be different, between the two of us.”

“How so?”

I kissed him gently. “Love makes all the difference.”

“Liara . . .” He trailed off, still trying to assimilate all that he had experienced. “It’s incredible. I can remember things now that never happened to me. Your memories. I know what it feels like to be asari.”

“Human, Prothean, now asari . . . you’re becoming a menagerie, Shepard.”
“What about you?”

“Much the same.” I wandered back through my mind, savoring the memories I had acquired from him in the union. “So strange... but we asari are designed for this. Besides, after Eletania being human was already somewhat familiar.”

“You’ve seen Mindoir,” he said bleakly.

I looked into his eyes, sky blue meeting crystal blue. “Yes. Mindoir, Elysium, Anhur, all of that. It doesn’t matter. Did you see...”

“Myself, as a knight in shining armor?” He snorted. “Yeah. I think your biases were showing a little.”

“Shepard, the mind never lies. Not in the deep joining.” I caressed his face. “You are not a barbarian. You are a good and great man, living in a universe that is often a horrible place. You fight because you must. You kill only when you must, no matter what the savage parts of your mind demand. There is no guilt in you. Nothing that cannot be forgiven, if you can only forgive yourself.”

He lay silent for a time, and then he said, “I’ll try.”

“Hmm. It’s the image you showed me that I find myself doubting. I’m not used to thinking of myself as a figure of power or authority.”

Shepard reached down, pulled the blanket up over both of us. “Like it or not, I think that’s what you’re becoming. All those years spent in your discipline, to become one of the galaxy’s experts in a field of study that is suddenly vitally important. All that you inherited from your mother, the influence you’ve acquired working with the Alliance. You’re going to be a mover and a shaker, Liara, possibly a lot sooner than you think.”

“It’s rather frightening.”

“You are more than capable.” He raised himself on one elbow to look down into my eyes. “Liara, you are one of the smartest and wisest people I have ever met. I find it amazing that you could love me.”

I smiled at him. “Fishing for compliments, Shepard?”

“I’ll take what I can get.”

“Try this, then. We are a very good match. I think there’s nothing in the galaxy that can stand against us, so long as we’re together. Not even Sovereign.”

“I hope you’re right,” he said soberly.

We turned down the lights and slept for a few hours, nestled together like spoons in the narrow bed.

Later we woke, desperate for one another again, and made love a second time. This time I took the dominant position, impaling myself on him and riding his hips. He caressed my body with his hands, and his eyes shone with wonder at the sight of me as we approached our peak. A halo of blue light crackled around me, the brightest light in the room, flaring as the joining happened again.

This time we received no grand revelations. We already knew each other. It was more like coming home.
*Normandy* flew among the stars, heading for Ilos.
Normandy felt very tense over the next few days. At least the crew showed very high morale, everyone confident we would do all that was possible to defeat Saren. Yet everyone also guessed the odds stood long against us. Bad enough if we had to face the geth fleet alone. If Sovereign appeared, our chances would be roughly those of a small insect in a nuclear furnace.

All of us worked very hard. We made contingency plans. We checked and double-checked every system on board, every piece of equipment, every weapon and piece of armor. We ran battle simulations. We drilled on the staging deck.

Then at the end of each day Shepard retired to his quarters, and I went to spend the night shift with him. We tried to be discreet, but in truth I don’t think we fooled anyone. The cramped spaces of a military starship are a terrible place to attempt a secret liaison. Yet somehow everyone chose to turn a blind eye, certainly due to their respect for Shepard, possibly because they had finally accepted me.

Each night we made love, gently or wildly as the mood struck us, learning how best to please each other. Our minds merged, and in those timeless moments we explored each other’s memories and thoughts. Afterward we always cuddled together on his narrow bed, lazily enjoying the intimate warmth, talking until sleep could no longer be delayed.

Finally I understood the asari precept: intimacy brings understanding. By the time we reached Ilos I knew Shepard so well, he seemed like an extension of my own self. He knew me to the same degree. Then came the final reflection, as each of us came to understand ourselves better by seeing through the other’s eyes.

Looking back on those few days, I think they constituted the final end of my childhood.

When we asari enter into our maiden years, our society encourages us to set out across the worlds, meeting people, exploring, loving, fighting, throwing ourselves into life. The goal is to experience all that life has to offer, so in our matron phase we can bring that wealth home and enrich our people.

Before Therum I never really did any of that. Oh, I traveled widely, and explored a number of worlds in the course of my scientific work. Yet I held myself aloof from the true life of the galaxy, traveling alone, never making many friends, never trying to understand how other beings lived and thought.

All that changed once I met Shepard. I saw many more strange places and living things. I found battle-tested companions of several species, and I fought at their side in a great conflict. I took my first lover, and learned him down to the marrow of his bones.

For the first time in my life, I could claim to be truly adult, truly asari. At last I understood . . . so much that my mother had tried to teach me.

I don’t think I had as profound an effect on Shepard as he had on me. Humans develop more quickly, and they do it without the benefit of telepathy to grant insight. Shepard may have been only twenty-eight when I first met him – an age when an asari would not yet have reached her full growth – but he had already attained mature adulthood. At most, I may have helped him process a few deep-seated anxieties.

I think the greatest gift Shepard received from me was . . . well, not stability as such, but perhaps the first idea that stability might be possible. His entire adult life had been nomadic, always moving from
assignment to assignment within the Alliance, never having a home or a family in the traditional sense. His made his home on military bases and starships, he considered the Alliance his family, and for the most part that had been enough. He had once told me of his belief that he could never be “a civilized man in a peaceful profession.” Now he had learned better; he could dimly see an alternative way of life, with its own joys and compensations, as available to him. Neither of us was ready yet to consider settling down together, but the idea had been sown in his mind, ready to stir and grow with time.

For the first time since Mindoir, he began to think of home as something other than the place I keep my footlocker. Slowly, home was becoming the place where Liara is.

Goddess. If only we’d had the time . . . but of course we never did.

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28 May 2183, Refuge System Space

We dropped out of FTL on the outskirts of the Ilos system, light-hours away from the presumed location of the planet. Our drives went silent, the stealth systems engaged, and we began to explore the neighborhood with passive sensors.

Finding planets in an uncharted star system is not easy. It’s true that survey vessels do it as a matter of routine, but they have specialized equipment and can afford to take days to finish the task. In our case it was several hours before we located an outlying gas giant. That gave us the probable ecliptic plane of the system, after which we could narrow down our search to the habitable zone.

Finally we found a dim speck of reflected starlight in the right place. Normandy moved in on silent running. Several of us gathered on the bridge to watch, as Ilos grew in the distance.

“Trouble, Commander,” said Joker softly as we approached.

“Geth?” asked Shepard.

“You got it. Picking up five . . . no, six sources in orbit around the planet. They’re running quiet too, but they have some inter-ship communications going.”

“That doesn’t seem like very many. Where’s the rest of the geth fleet?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” said Joker. “No sign of Sovereign either. Maybe they’ve just found this place.”

“We can hope,” I murmured.

Joker nodded. “One piece of good news, though. There’s a secondary mass relay in wide orbit around the planet. If it’s active we might be able to use it to get back to civilization fast. You know. Just in case.”

“Liara, what can you tell me about the planet?”

I glanced across a scientific sensor display. “It’s large, but rather light for its size, probably metal-poor. Typical for a planet in a very old star system, as you might find in the galactic halo. The atmosphere is very thick and the surface temperature is too hot for comfort, so we’ll want to stay sealed up while we’re on the surface. The gas mix is . . . odd.” I touched controls, called up software to help me do further analysis. “Very high partial pressure of oxygen. There must be abundant plant life, but very little animal life. I imagine wildfires are common and very fierce.”
“Any signs of civilization? Ruins?”

I called up high-resolution cameras, used the ship’s VI to enhance the images. “Very much so. Vast abandoned cities, everywhere I look. Shepard, I would guess that this is a post-garden world. Perhaps when the Protheans or the inusannon lived here, it was more hospitable, but since then some tipping point has been reached and the planet is becoming completely uninhabitable.”


Ilos loomed large in the forward viewports. We approached in from the night side, but we could see a wide crescent of day-lit surface: a painting in mottled green, red, and white.

“Aha!” exclaimed Pressley. “Picking up gravity waves from a spot near the equator, very strong, very narrowly focused. Mass-effect technology.”

“The Conduit?” asked Shepard.

“Who knows, Commander? We still don’t know what the Conduit is.” Pressley continued to work with his panel. “It’s big, though . . . and it looks kind of familiar. If I didn’t know better, I’d say there was a mass relay on the surface.”

“Maybe that’s exactly what it is,” I suggested. “Remember the message from the beacons? The Protheans hinted that they were going to be able to reach a place that was otherwise inaccessible. That doesn’t sound like a weapon, it sounds like a means of transportation.”

“That would fit the name,” Shepard agreed. “That’s our target. Joker, lock in on those coordinates.”

“Bad news, Commander,” said Pressley. “It’s in the middle of one of those enormous cities. Surrounded by built-up areas for kilometers in every direction . . . and it doesn’t look as if the Protheans went in for big parks or open plazas. There’s no landing zone.”

“There has to be a landing zone.”

“I’ve looked. There’s nothing closer than twenty kilometers away.”

Ash broke in. “Through ruins? That could take hours. Saren could be there right now.”

“Is there anything that could put us down close to that gravitic reading?” demanded Shepard.

“The closest possibility is about twenty meters long, and has tall buildings on all sides. Normandy would have to come in slow, loiter over the drop point, and take fire from the geth. If even one enemy destroyer managed to intercept us . . .”

“Suicide mission,” said Ash.

“I can do it,” said Joker, very quietly.

There was silence on the bridge for a long moment, and then Shepard spoke. “Joker?”

“I can do it,” said the pilot, his voice utterly calm and serious.

“Good enough for me. Landing party, to the Mako. Pressley, if you lose contact with us on the surface for any reason, you are to run for the Alliance and report.”

“Sir . . .”
“No arguments, Lieutenant. We’ve only got one shot at this and no way for you to extract us if we fail. Get back to civilization and sound the alarm.”

Pressley’s face looked grim, but he saluted. “Aye-aye, sir.”

Six of us crowded into the Mako for the final mission: Shepard, Ash, Garrus, Tali, Wrex, and me. We made a final check of our weapons and equipment, took our seats, and waited. I took the EWS console as usual and turned on the external view to watch our approach.

Joker had not chosen to come in slowly. *Normandy* hammered her way through the dense atmosphere of Ilos, a shockwave of air heated to plasma running in front of us. Kilometers below us I could see terrain features and the vast ruined cities, sweeping past at a frantic rate, barely visible before they vanished behind us.

The ship shook. A deep booming *crack* tore through the hull, as we dropped below the local speed of sound. Suddenly the external view cleared, and I could see another ruin looming on the horizon ahead, growing with tremendous speed.

“Deployment in fifteen seconds,” said Joker from the bridge, no inflection at all in his voice.

*Normandy* swung into a screaming dive.

Shepard’s fingers poised over the Mako’s controls.

In the last moment I could see the drop zone. A *trench*, barely wide enough for the *Normandy’s* wings, tall buildings at either end. Deep shadows concealed the bottom.

I took a still image from the ship’s forward cameras, and enhanced it. Shapes at the bottom of the trench: geth, including several of the big armatures, and a single massive turian.

*Saren.*

The Mako deployed. The instant we cleared the staging bay doors, Shepard slammed the thrusters to full and dialed the mass-effect core down. We plunged into the shadows of the trench.

*Normandy* vanished above us. Since we heard no enormous collision, I assumed she threaded the needle and escaped back up into the sky. Later we learned that Joker had missed one of the ruined skyscrapers by less than two meters, and that only by banking the ship hard the moment we were on our way.

Ash pounced on her controls, bringing the turret to bear on some target even while we still fell, and then abandoned her effort just as quickly. “Damn it.”

She had seen Saren, but only for a moment as he and his geth entered an underground bunker. An enormously thick door closed behind them before Ash could fire.

We struck the surface. Shepard stood on the brakes and brought the Mako to a sudden stop just short of the closed door.

All of us emerged from the vehicle to examine the barrier.

While the others tried to find a way through the door, I took a few moments to look around at Ilos, or what little of it I could see from the bottom of a deep trench between ruined skyscrapers. After the first glance I felt amazement that any of the ruins could have survived. Vines and other growth
overran everything, lush and green, covering the ground and clinging to the walls to a height far over our heads. Normally such lush plant life would have destroyed any abandoned structure over fifty thousand years. Whatever material made up these edifices, it had to be incredibly durable. The buildings themselves seemed typically Prothean, massive and soaring at the same time, mostly of late Third Age style. I didn’t see any smaller artifacts at first glance, but my fingers itched to dig and explore beneath the ground cover.

Garrus brought me back to the present. “We have to get inside this bunker before Saren finds the Conduit.”

“There’s no way to get past this door with brute force,” said Shepard. “It’s too thick, and the material is of Prothean make. We’d need a nuke. If even that would work.”

“Saren found a way to open it,” Tali pointed out. “There must be a working security override somewhere nearby.”

“Any idea where?” asked Shepard.

Tali used her omni-tool, scanned in all directions. “There’s power being generated in a building about half a kilometer from here. That might be a good place to start looking.”

“Heads up!” shouted Wrex.

Geth poured into the trench behind us.

I had never seen geth move so quickly. One moment we seemed safe, the next we saw a dozen geth advancing down on us, already firing their weapons, with a dozen more behind them and a flight of rocket drones soaring over our heads. Wrex’s warning probably saved all of us, by giving us the split second we needed to dive for cover.

I discovered my reflexes had improved dramatically over the past few months. I had barely turned my head when I saw a geth rocket flying directly toward me. I didn’t have time to think. I simply flash-stepped to the side, placed myself behind the Mako, and drew my sidearm as the rocket flew past to explode against the bunker’s door.

The geth had numbers, but they suffered a severe disadvantage due to the narrowness of the street leading down to the bunker’s entrance. I immediately saw an opportunity, reached down deep, and deployed the most powerful biotic singularity I could right among the front ranks of the geth. Then the others began to return fire.

Is carnage the right word, when the enemy is synthetic?

The rocket drones posed the real threat, rising to fire down behind our cover, but we saw only three of them. Shepard detailed Garrus and Tali to deal with them, while the rest of us worked to prevent the walking platforms from overrunning our position. This turned out to be not very difficult. Singularity to block the geth advance, lots of gunfire to cut down the front ranks of the geth, biotic warp to detonate the singularity and destroy any geth nearby, new singularity, repeat as needed.

The last of the rocket drones fell out of the sky and exploded.

“By the numbers, advance,” Shepard ordered.

“Moving!” shouted Wrex as he rushed forward, smashing broken geth along the way. Ashley followed, smaller but more precise in her attack. They took a position at the far end of the street and continued to lay down fire as the rest of us advanced.
“I think we’re running out of geth,” remarked Garrus as the street opened out into a small plaza.

A ball of white-hot plasma zoomed across the open space, and would have slammed directly into the turian had I not knocked him aside with a biotically assisted leap.

Armatures. Two of them.

“Never give the universe a chance to make a fool of you!” I told him.

Shepard made a sound suspiciously like a chuckle. Without breaking the rhythm of his weapons fire, of course.

“Spirits,” swore Garrus tiredly. “You’d think I would learn.”

One armature posed a threat. Two proved more than twice as dangerous. They could alternate with their heavy plasma weapons, while maintaining steady fire with their conventional guns. It immediately became a fatal mistake to emerge from cover for long.

“Flank them!” ordered Shepard. “Wrex, take the left. Ash, go right. The rest of you, concentrate on the one on the right.”

Even I helped, ducking out of cover a few seconds at a time – with my strongest barrier up, to be sure – to fire my little SMG at the designated colossus. Then I had to cower down, both arms over my head, as a plasma bolt slammed into the fallen stone column behind which I was hiding.

A wash of static in my helmet radio. My kinetic barrier flickered, then recovered. I shook my head, rather surprised that I remained in working order.

I peeked out and saw our tactics begin to pay off. Even a pair of armatures couldn’t fire in all directions at once. So long as we remained careful not to expose ourselves to a plasma discharge, we could continue to wear them down.

I aimed my Shuriken and continued firing, dit-dit-dit-dit-dit, wearing down the enemy’s shields. Suddenly they went down. Even before Shepard could bark an order, I hit the colossus with a heavy biotic lift. Helpless, it spun slowly in midair and then crumpled under our combined fire.

The other colossus began to back slowly away.

Carefully, we pursued it.

A sudden image from Anar’s memories flashed through my mind: a band of primitive humans, armed only with bow and spear, fanning out to flank a mammoth which had been unwise enough to leave the safety of the herd. The colossus was far stronger than any of us individually, but faced with Shepard’s pack tactics it could not bring that strength to bear.

We concentrated our fire, and before long the second colossus went down as well.

We heard the sound of wind in the streets.

“Keelah,” said Tali as she finally took a moment to look around. “The Protheans lived here?”

I nodded. “Millions of them in this city alone, most likely.”

The quarian shuddered. “And now they’re all gone, thousands of years ago. Is this what’s going to happen to us?”
Ashley said:

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

We walked through the empty city, and all around us we heard nothing but silence.
28 May 2183, Ilos

After that first ferocious battle in the plaza, the geth no longer posed so much of a threat. They occupied the city all around us, but only in small fire-teams and patrols, and we encountered no more armatures. We dealt with them as we found them.

Eventually we located a working lift, which conveyed us down into the depths far below the city. There we found another large detachment of geth: two squads of troopers with rocket platforms, led by a tall white prime. That presented more of a challenge, but we soon found plenty of cover along our line of approach. While most of us kept the geth occupied with gunfire and biotic work, Garrus and Shepard applied their sniper rifles at long range. Eventually the prime stood alone, and Shepard managed to destroy it with a pair of high-explosive grenades.

We suspected these geth had been posted to watch over something important. Soon enough we found what we were looking for: the security console controlling the doors blocking our path to Saren.

Override in place, we hurried back up to the surface, aided by another lift opening onto the plaza directly behind our landing zone. With the doors open, we could proceed down into the bunker. Shepard decided to take the Mako with us. Certainly the passage was large enough to accommodate the AFV, at least close to the surface.

That turned out to be a very good decision. As it happened, the geth patrols we encountered would have been well within our ability to deal with on foot. However, the underground tunnels ran wide and straight, with smooth floors and plenty of light filtering in from far above. The Mako could maintain very good speed on such terrain. We began to think we might catch up with Saren.

That is, until a kinetic barrier sprang up in front of us, completely blocking the passage. As Shepard slowed and stopped, a second barrier appeared just behind us.

“Trapped!” said Wrex. “Saren must have set an ambush for us.”

I glanced at the EWS console, called up readings on the barriers. “I’m not so sure. These barriers do not look like geth technology.”

Shepard glanced over his shoulder at me. “Could they be Prothean?”

“It’s possible. I suppose Saren could have tampered with some Prothean equipment he found still in working order, setting up a trap for us, but did he have the time?”

“He wasn’t that far ahead of us. Let’s investigate.”

We emerged from the Mako to look around. Soon Tali found an open door leading to another lift.

“Come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly,” said Ash.

Shepard shrugged. “Can’t go forward, can’t go back. Let’s at least see what this is.”

We stepped into the lift. Shepard touched the activation panel, and the car began to descend along a slanted track. Suddenly we moved through another vast open space, like a great temple or cathedral. On all sides I could see bits of Prothean technology: power nodes, archival units, computers,
hundreds of massive cylindrical objects that I couldn’t identify. All of it sat dark and dead.

“If this was simply an automated trap, Saren would have triggered it as well,” said Tali.

“Are you suggesting there’s some other agent at work down here?” asked Shepard.

“It seems possible,” I said reluctantly.

The lift opened. We walked slowly down a ramp, and found that not all of the ancient technology had fallen inert. As we descended, we saw a dim light hovering over a computer console at the bottom of the ramp. It flickered, brightened, and became a whirling scatter of broken images. Then we heard a voice, smooth and emotionless, speaking a language I suddenly realized I could understand.

“You are not Prothean,” it said. “Yet you are not machines either. This eventuality was one of many that were anticipated.”

“Looks like some kind of VI program,” said Tali. “The holographic output is badly damaged.”

“I do not sense the stain of indoctrination on any of you, unlike the other who passed recently. Perhaps there is still hope.”

“That explains the trap,” I said. “This VI must have seen Saren pass by, but stayed in hiding because he’s an agent of the Reapers. It revealed itself to us instead.”

“You can understand what it’s saying?” rumbled Wrex. “Sounds like gibberish to me.”

Shepard and I looked at each other in wild surmise. He nodded. “I guess I can understand Prothean. It must have come to me with the Cipher. Liara?”

“The same,” I said softly. “I must have absorbed the Cipher from you . . . sometime in the last few days.”

Ashley snorted. I felt my face flush.

“My name is Vigil,” said the VI. “You are safe here, for the moment, but that is likely to change. Soon nowhere will be safe.”

I began to translate from the Prothean language for the rest of our group.

“You’re very articulate for a VI. Are you some kind of advanced artificial intelligence?” asked Shepard.

“I am a non-organic analysis system overlain with personality imprints taken from Ksan Ishad, chief overseer of the Ilos research facility. With the departure of the last Protheans to work here, I was left to monitor events and await the arrival of organic beings. I am prepared to describe the purpose of this facility, and to assist you in completing the task of the scientists who labored here.”

“What was that task?”

“This facility was designed to break a cycle that has continued for billions of years. It very nearly succeeded, but the last Protheans were logically unable to carry out their full intentions. A flaw remained in their work, which the Reapers may yet be able to exploit.”

“What flaw?”
“The Citadel is the heart of your civilization and the seat of your government. So it was with us, and with every civilization that came before us for which we had evidence. But the Citadel is a trap. The station is actually an enormous mass relay, one that links to dark space, the empty void beyond the galaxy’s horizon. There the Reapers lurk between cycles, waiting to return and begin the task of omnicide once more. When the Citadel relay is activated, the Reapers will pour through. All you know will be destroyed.”

“Goddess,” I breathed. “Remember the message from the beacon, Shepard? There was an image of the Citadel, a sensation of vertigo and fear . . .”

“They were warning of the trap,” said Shepard decisively. “Commander Shelby was on the right track. The Reapers spend most of their time outside the galaxy, in what Vigil calls dark space. Then when they’re ready to return, they open the Citadel mass relay and attack by surprise.”

“Wait a minute. How come nobody ever noticed that the Citadel was a mass relay?” Ash objected.

“The Reapers are careful to keep the greatest secrets of the Citadel hidden. They created a race of seemingly benign organic caretakers. The keepers maintain all of the station’s basic functions, while concealing its nature from outsiders. Any species that discovers the Citadel can use it without fully understanding its technology. Reliance on the keepers ensures that no other species will ever discover the Citadel’s true nature. Not until the mass relay is activated and the Reapers invade.”

Garrus shook his head in dismay. “Spirits. The mass relays always lead to the Citadel, just as they did for the asari and the salarians in this cycle. The bait is too good to ignore; it’s too obvious a place to build a galactic government. Every new civilization must set up shop there . . . like a prey animal that’s been trained to climb up on the block and politely offer its throat for the knife.”

“Sovereign suggested as much when we spoke to it on Virmire,” I pointed out. “Consider what this means. Every time the Reapers invade, they are always able to capture the highest levels of galactic government in the first blow. Kill the leaders, capture all of the records, and seize control of the mass relay network. For all of their power, the Prothean Empire must have been shattered by the very first attack.”

“That was indeed our fate,” said Vigil. “Our leaders were dead before we even realized we were under attack. The Reapers swarmed everywhere in the mass relay network. Communication and transportation across our empire were crippled. Each star system was almost entirely isolated, cut off from the others, easy prey for the invaders. Over decades, the Reapers systematically obliterated our people, star system by star system, world by world. No offer of mercy was ever given. Our enemy had a single goal: the extinction of all advanced organic life.”

Shepard stepped forward, to stand less than a meter from the swirling colors of Vigil’s damaged display. For a moment he could barely speak, his voice choked with anger and fear, as he contemplated quadrillions of violently murdered dead. “But why do they do this? What do they get out of it? Why do they keep repeating this cycle over and over, across billions of years?”

Vigil seemed to pause for a moment. “We do not know. The Reapers are beyond our comprehension, driven by motives that organic beings may not even be able to imagine. In the end, what does it matter? Your survival depends on stopping them, not on understanding them.”

“All right. You brought us here for a reason. Tell us what we need to do.”

“The Conduit is the key. Before the Reapers attacked, we Protheans were on the cusp of unlocking the mysteries behind mass relay technology. Ilos was a top-secret facility. Here researchers worked to create our first small-scale mass relay, linking directly to the Citadel, the hub of the relay
“The Conduit is a back door onto the Citadel!” I said.

“What good does that do Saren and the Reapers?” asked Shepard.

“When the Reapers attacked, the records of the Illos facility were lost. Even when they came to eradicate the Prothean population on the surface, they knew nothing of this facility. We severed all communication with the outside and our facility went dark. The researchers were able to hide in these underground archives.

“To conserve power, the staff sealed themselves into stasis pods to wait out the Reaper invasion, leaving me to monitor the situation and prepare for their awakening. But the genocide of a galactic civilization is a slow process. Years passed, decades, centuries. The facility’s power reserves began to fail. I was forced to shut down most of the pods to save a few. Eventually the Reapers withdrew back through the Citadel relay into dark space. At that time only a dozen of the top researchers remained alive, far too few to continue the Prothean species.

“Yet they vowed to find some way to stop the Reapers from returning, a way to stop the cycle forever. The keepers were the key. Before each invasion, the Reapers send a signal through the Citadel. The signal compels the keepers to activate the Citadel relay. After decades of feverish study, the last Protheans discovered a way to alter the signal. They passed through the Conduit to the Citadel and made the necessary modifications. This time, when Sovereign sent the signal, the keepers ignored it. The Reapers are trapped in dark space.”

“I think I see,” said Garrus. “The Protheans went through the Conduit to slam the door against the Reapers . . . but they couldn’t close the Conduit behind them. It’s still here, acting as a back door to the Citadel.”

“Correct. The one you call Saren will use the Conduit to bypass the Citadel’s defenses. Once inside, he will transfer control of the station to Sovereign. The Reaper will override the Citadel’s systems and manually open the relay, and the cycle of extinctions will begin again.”

“Is there any way we can stop them?” Shepard asked, almost pleading.

“Yes. There is a data file in my console. Take a copy when you go. When you reach the Citadel’s master control unit, upload the file to the station. It will corrupt the Citadel’s security protocols and give you temporary control over the station. That might be enough to give you a chance against Sovereign.”

“Wait. Where’s the Citadel’s master control unit?” asked Tali. “I’ve never heard of anything like that.”

“Follow Saren through the Conduit. He will lead you to your destination.”

“Saren’s got enough of a head start,” Shepard decided. “Grab that data file and let’s go.”

I opened my mouth to object. The Vigil program seemed very weak, almost out of power. I could feel the opportunity to converse with it slipping away . . . but we had no time. We might be hours, even minutes away from the return of the Reapers. Against that threat, my scientific curiosity couldn’t be permitted to take priority. I touched Shepard’s shoulder, shared a glance of mutual understanding with him, and then turned away.

Perhaps Vigil saw the moment of byplay and understood. “The one you call Saren has not reached
As from the beginning, the machine’s voice sounded smooth, pleasant, and without inflection. Yet I could hear echoes of loneliness and despair in it, and I didn’t believe I was imagining that. Perhaps Ksad Ishan, whoever he had been, had infected the AI with his own emotions.

Fifty thousand years in this place, never knowing if the last desperate plan of the Protheans had worked, waiting through all the empty years for someone to happen by.

“Goodbye, Vigil,” I murmured.

When we returned to the Mako, no barriers stood in our way. We boarded the AFV and continued along the underground passage, occasionally pausing to use the guns on geth patrols. Shepard took risks, exposing the Mako to fire to take out the enemy quickly, feeling the whip of time on his back.

None of us spoke, except to make reports and give or take orders.

Months of guesswork and struggle, and it all came down to this. Saren was at least fifteen minutes ahead of us. Even if we could win through to the Conduit, we might emerge onto a Citadel already under geth control. Like a city gate already in the hands of the enemy, opening wide to admit a barbarian horde.

What could we do, if we arrived only to see the Reapers blotting out the sky?

I knew what Shepard would do.

*Fight until you can’t fight any more.*

Finally we turned a corner, paused at the top of a long ramp. Less than a kilometer ahead of us . . .

“Good God,” whispered Ashley.

A working mass relay, the two-column structure standing on end at the bottom of an enormous well whose top was open to the sky, the two rotating rings supporting a large mass-effect core. Looking at it, I realized all of us had been very stupid, believing the interstellar mass relay network to be of Prothean manufacture. The Conduit clearly had the same function, but its aesthetic appeared quite different, more typically Prothean.

“I’ve seen that before,” said Garrus. “It looks just like the mass relay sculpture on the Presidium.”

“Which was already in place when the asari discovered the Citadel,” I said. “That must not have been a simple art installation after all. I think we can guess where the Conduit ends.”

“Yeah, but how do we get to it?” queried Ash.

The ramp between us and the Conduit measured less than five hundred meters long, but it was *alive* with geth: troopers, rocket platforms, armatures. They hadn’t taken notice of us yet, but as soon as the Mako exposed itself we would be in the middle of a storm of weapons fire.

I glanced at Shepard and felt a chill. He was in *that* mode, measuring distances, estimating odds, deciding how best to gamble with the resources he had available. The last time he entered such a calculating mood, we managed a miraculous escape from Saren . . . at the cost of Kaidan’s life.

He touched the controls. The Mako retreated about twenty meters, out of sight of the Conduit.
“Shepard to Normandy.”

“. . . Normandy.” Pressley’s voice, awash with static. The Conduit’s emanations must have interfered with the transmission.

“Shepherd, I want you to bug out. Run for that secondary mass relay and use it if you can. Get back to the Alliance and report to Admiral Hackett.”

The transmission cleared for a moment. “Sir? What should I report?”

“Sheen got to the Conduit ahead of us. We’re going to try to follow him through it. We think it will come out on the Citadel. Very likely that Sovereign and the bulk of the geth fleet are already there. The Council is not likely to survive unless we can catch Saren and the Alliance comes to assist. Got that?”

“Five by five, Commander.” Another surge of interference, then: “. . . luck.”

Shepard cut the channel. “Ash,” he said very quietly, “don’t bother with the guns.”

“What?”

He threw the Mako into full speed. We surged forward, back onto the ramp, and into the full view of half a hundred geth.

I thought I had become accustomed to reckless human tactics, but this outdid everything. My eyes widened with panic, even as I forced my gaze to the EWS console. I considered reporting what I saw there, but then I realized our lives were in Shepard’s hands, and he didn’t need the distraction. Either our kinetic barriers would last for the next twenty seconds, or they would not.

Eighty percent.

Shepard drove at full speed directly over a trio of geth troopers, smashing them to the ground.

Sixty percent.

Shepard swerved right, following an ancient trail of water flowing down the slope, heading directly for one armature but cutting off line-of-sight from another.

Forty percent.

The armature hammered at us as we passed, but couldn’t turn quickly enough to follow. Shepard jinked hard to the left, then back to his original course, and three geth rockets sailed just past our right side.

Twenty percent.

The terrain opened out around us, and Shepard accelerated in a straight line for the Conduit. Suddenly every geth in the area had a clear shot at us. I watched as our kinetic barriers melted like a candle in a furnace.

Zero.

I heard a large crunch from the rear compartment, where the power plant and main electrical bus resided. The interior lights flickered but recovered. We could hear the mass-effect core flutter wildly, a noise like sand blasting a sheet of metal.
I held my breath, waiting for a plasma bolt from one of the armatures to slice through the Mako’s hull.

Still intensely focused on the controls and his forward view, Shepard opened his mouth wide and screamed.

“Yaaaaaaah!”

The Conduit reached out and grabbed us. For a frozen moment we flew weightless through deep space, a glimpse of darkness and distorted starlight through the viewscreens.

Then we flew through the air, under gravity once more, the Mako flipping side over side, then slamming into some solid object with a terrible crash.

Darkness.
Shepard opened the Mako’s hatch, although he found only a small space between it and a polished floor. He had to contort himself, turning onto his back, before he could pull himself out of the wrecked AFV. I followed right behind him.

We emerged onto the floor of the Presidium.

The Citadel clearly stood in dreadful danger. We saw dozens of unarmed citizens, sprawled dead on the ground. The geth had clearly emerged to find the galaxy’s elite, walking on the Presidium just like any other day, and ruthlessly cut them down in their tracks. Darkness reigned everywhere, lit only by scattered fires. I looked out toward the ward arms and saw they remained open. Out in space, I could see the glimmer and flare of countless lights, evidence of a terrible battle still under way.

“Goddess. Shepard, look!”

He looked where I pointed, out along the axis of the Citadel.

A single ship approached the Citadel at speed. It looked tiny at first, but once my mind corrected for the distance, I realized it had to be kilometers long. All the other contending vessels at the same range were nearly invisible, even the great turian dreadnoughts that served as the backbone of the Citadel fleet. The approaching ship looked like some form of marine life, with a long mantle and multiple tentacles folded along its body. Even as I watched, the tentacles began to stir, reaching forward as the ship approached the heart of the Citadel.

**Sovereign** rushed to claim its throne.

“Come on,” Shepard ordered. “We haven’t got much time!”

The others had emerged from the wrecked vehicle, shaking their heads to clear them, testing themselves for injury. Now they formed up with us as we moved toward the base of the Council Tower.

Tali looked back at the vehicle, almost wistfully. “Well, the Mako won’t be going anywhere now. It seems sad for it to come to an end like this.”

“What are you talking about?” rumbled Wrex. “That machine just put in more distance in the last five minutes than every other one like it will manage in their entire service lives put together. How many tanks can say they’ve gone over fifty thousand light-years on their own power?”

Tali brightened. “You have a point.”

A few husks and geth guarded the base of the Tower, just enough to deal with any of the Citadel’s survivors who might try a counter-attack. They failed to discourage us. We climbed into a lift and sent it rushing upward toward the Council’s inner sanctum.

“The arms are closing,” said Garrus.

He was right. As our lift climbed, we could see the spaces between the Citadel’s ward arms closing. Someone had brought the Citadel’s last line of defense to bear: its impenetrable hull.
“Will it be in time?” asked Ash.

“Doesn’t look like it,” said Shepard.

*Sovereign* flew directly through the heart of the Citadel fleet, ignoring all opposition, and pushed between the ward arms. Its tentacles spread wide, seeming to *reach* for the Council Chambers. The closed ward arms would accomplish nothing but to seal all of us in with the Reaper.

“Saren is probably closing the arms to keep the Citadel fleet from interfering with *Sovereign,*” I suggested.

Just then the lift screeched to a halt, less than halfway up the Tower.

“He’s locked down the elevators,” growled Shepard. “How’s everyone’s zero-gee rating? Suit up. We’re going outside.”

“Outside the Tower?” Tali objected, her voice pitched much higher than usual.

“There’s a mass-effect field imposing weightlessness on the exterior of the Tower, to prevent anything from falling off and striking the Presidium below us,” Shepard explained, locking his helmet into place. “Just make sure you keep your boots magnetized and in contact with the Tower’s surface at all times.”

“Oh,” said Tali, suddenly much reassured. “That should be no problem, then. We quarians are good at zero-gee maneuvers.”

“Just don’t look down,” I said quietly. Tali gave me a deadly glare through her faceplate.

Shepard fired his assault rifle, shattering the viewport, and stepped forward. He seemed to swing through a ninety-degree angle as he stepped into the zero-gee zone and locked his boots to the outside of the Tower.

As I followed, I felt a massive shock in the structure of the Tower. We all turned to face toward the Council Chambers.

*Sovereign* had arrived, holding the Chambers in its tentacles.

“Is that it? The Reaper wins?” said Ashley.

“It might take Saren and *Sovereign* time to take control of the Citadel’s systems,” said Shepard. “We keep moving until something stops us.”

He led us forward. Shepard, Ash, and Wrex took the lead, Tali and I followed, and Garrus took the rear.

We had to move slowly and carefully. It might be death for any of us to lose contact with the Tower with both feet. Despite my teasing dig at Tali, I found myself having trouble with orientation. I kept seeing the ward arms and the Presidium ring as *down,* which meant I was clinging to the side of a tall tower using only my *feet.* After a few minutes of this, while Shepard called a brief halt to reconnoiter, I drew on what little zero-gee training I had and made an effort of will. Suddenly the side of the tower defined *down.* I seemed to be standing at the bottom of an immense well, the ward arms soaring into the remote distance *above* me. The Council Chambers and their attached Reaper became a fortress in the middle distance up ahead, an objective to which I could reasonably walk.

My inner ears and my stomach settled down, just in time for the first wave of geth.
Two squads of troopers attacked, reinforced by a pair of rocket-wielding platforms. We took cover and our warriors opened fire, as the enemy moved across the Tower’s surface toward us.

I soon discovered that I could be horribly effective in this environment. I exerted a telekinetic pull on the first geth whose shields went down, snatching it away from the Tower. The moment it rose a short distance into the air, it left the Tower’s mass-effect field and centrifugal force took effect. It fell like a stone, from my new perspective flying through the air and behind me, to smash into pieces somewhere in the Wards.

Shepard spared me the smallest glance of encouragement. It was enough. I flexed my fingers and went into glass cannon mode.

_Yank. Yank._ Geth went flying the moment their shields failed. Shepard and the others found the way clear to advance, across an exhaust plain and into a narrow access channel higher on the Tower’s side. These close quarters proved even better. A well-placed singularity could encompass several geth, all of which went flying into oblivion the moment I detonated a warp among them. Wrex got into the act too, his biotics not at my level but still very effective at throwing geth up into their doom.

He became so engrossed in this game that the next surprise took him off guard.

A pair of krogan leaped out of concealment and charged our front line. One of them, then the other, hurled his own telekinetic force at us.

_“Battlemasters!”_ shouted Shepard. _“Watch your feet!”_

The warning came just a moment too late for Wrex. We concentrated our fire on the first krogan, killing him in mid-charge, but the second managed to reach our lines. Wrex tried to resist the charge, but the other battlemaster bent low and used a biotic-assisted lunge to _drive_ him bodily off the floor. Tangled together, snarling and striking at each other, the two krogan rose into the danger zone and suddenly flew out of sight.

_“Wrex!”_ shouted Shepard.

We heard a ferocious growl, ending in a grunt of supreme effort.

_“It’s all right. I’m all right, Shepard. Give me a minute.”_

_“He’s a biotic,”_ I reminded everyone. _“He can moderate his fall. Possibly even bring himself back inside the Tower’s safety zone.”_

_“Got it,”_ said the krogan after a moment. _“Oof. That was closer than I like. Another few meters and I would have been lumpy paste down in the Wards. Not even a krogan would walk away from that.”_

_“You okay?”_ asked Shepard.

_“Fine, fine. I’ll catch up if I can. Get going!”_

We turned and pressed forward.

We could see _Sovereign_ very clearly now, looming enormous ahead of us. It seemed incredible that the Reaper couldn’t see us or strike back, but it took no direct action. We guessed that it was directing the geth and krogan mercenaries toward us, but we had no way to tell for certain.

At one point a geth dropship stopped us cold. It must have shadowed _Sovereign_ inside the Citadel; now it hovered close to the Tower, dropping what seemed like an unlimited number of geth
platforms onto the exhaust plain before us. Each of them immediately found cover, keeping us pinned down under a hail of gunfire. As soon as we dealt with one platform, another deployed to take its place.

“Shepard, look over there,” said Tali, pointing across the open plain toward a pair of short pylons, about ten and thirty meters away.

“Point defense turrets,” said Shepard. “ Those will get rid of that dropship, if we can get them turned on. Good catch. Garrus, Tali, come with me. Ash, Liara, stay here and keep the geth busy.”

“Hopefully not too busy,” I muttered to myself, and hurled a biotic warp across the open ground.

Shepard dashed across the plain to the first turret, where the three of them crouched behind cover and worked on the controls. Ash and I could hear them conferring over our helmet radios, but we were too busy with the geth to pay much attention. Only when the turret came alive did we notice: the motors whined, then the main gun began to fire with a repeated crash.

Shepard’s team sprinted across the plain to the other turret. Soon enough it too was firing at the dropship. All of us could concentrate fire on the platforms already landed on the Tower, no longer being replaced as quickly as we could destroy them.

Finally the dropship had enough. It turned in midair, began to soar away . . . and then exploded.

Right over Shepard’s position.

I heard a high-pitched scream in my helmet, abruptly cut off, and my heart leaped in terror.

“Shepard?”

“I’m okay,” came his voice, “ but Tali isn’t.”

“Oh Goddess.” I ran, leaving Ashley to destroy the last two geth.

I found them gathered around a small form huddled in shadows on the Tower’s side, Shepard applying first aid while Garrus watched helplessly. I threw myself to my knees beside the little quarian, calling up my omni-tool to interface with her suit’s electronics.

“Massive bruising, several broken bones, lacerations,” I told them. “ The medi-gel can hold her blood loss in check, but she’s going to need medical attention in a clean room very soon.”

“No chance of that,” said Shepard grimly. “ We have to keep moving.”

“ Shepard, she may die if we just leave her here.”

“I know that, damn it. There are billions of lives depending on us.”

“I’ll stay with her,” said Garrus.

Shepard glanced at him sharply. “ We’ll need you when we meet Saren.”

The turian’s voice was light, but his eyes were implacable through his helmet faceplate. “ You’ve got Liara and Ash. There isn’t anything the three of you can’t beat if you put your minds to it. I’ll take care of Tali. Maybe if Wrex makes it up this far we’ll be able to get her someplace safe.”

Shepard frowned, but then he nodded. “ All right. Be careful, Garrus.”

“You bet. And . . .”
“What?”

“When you find Saren, you be sure and kick his ass all the way to Andromeda.”

“It’s a deal.”

Three of us went on to the final assault.

We navigated one last narrow passage, then another exhaust plain. Geth turrets defended this one, firing rockets at our position while the mobile platforms tried to move up on us. At Shepard’s order we didn’t even try to deal with the turrets. Instead we destroyed the mobile platforms, then watched the turrets and raced forward during the pauses in their firing cycle. With some care we could move to the left, around the side of the Tower and into a final passage. Minutes later we found an access hatch that admitted us to the Council Chambers themselves.

I looked up one final time, to see *Sovereign* looming above us, almost close enough to touch. Then I ducked down into the hatchway, following Shepard and Ash.

A narrow passage, another access hatch, and we emerged inside the Council Chambers. Shepard led us up the long staircases, the ones designed to impress visitors with the Council’s authority and power. We found geth, not many. We destroyed them.

The Petitioner’s Stage was fully extended, as if someone had come before the absent Council. A tall, bulky figure stood there, operating a holographic control panel I had never seen before in that place.

*Saren.*

We ran forward, to the near end of the ramp, weapons drawn.

The renegade turian had vanished.

Then we heard a low rumble. Saren appeared once more, riding the geth flying platform we had seen on Virmire. In that momentary glimpse, I could see he had changed. His eyes had a brilliant blue glow, as if they had been replaced by machinery. The same glow shone from inside his mouth, inside the crevices of his armor. Strange devices clung to the back of his neck, his chest and upper arms. He had become one with the Reaper’s technology.

Saren hurled a high-explosive grenade to land unerringly in our midst. Reflexes took over and we dove for cover. I emitted a small scream as the force of the blast tumbled me in mid-dive. Once I stopped rolling, I realized I wasn’t seriously hurt.

“I was afraid you wouldn’t make it in time, Shepard.”

“In time for what?”

“The final confrontation. Ever since Virmire, I think we both expected it would end like this.”

Saren’s voice sounded thick with satisfaction. “You’ve lost, do you know that? In a few minutes, *Sovereign* will have full control of all the Citadel’s systems. The relay will open. The Reapers will return.”

“Don’t count us out yet, Saren. We’ve still got a few tricks up our sleeves.”

“I will admit, I underestimated you. You’ve pursued me with cunning and tenacity. You survived our encounter on Virmire. You’re a credit to the Spectres after all, but you are still not my match. I’ve changed. Improved. *Sovereign* has . . . upgraded me.”
“You let Sovereign implant you? Are you insane?”

“I suppose I should thank you, Shepard. After Virmire I couldn’t stop thinking about what you said. About Sovereign manipulating me. About indoctrination. The doubts began to eat away at me. Sovereign sensed my hesitation. I was implanted to strengthen my resolve. Now my doubts are gone. I believe in Sovereign completely. I understand that the Reapers need organics. Join us, and Sovereign will find a place for you too.”

“Sovereign is controlling you through your implants. You would never believe anything like that if you were in your right mind. Can’t you see that?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Shepard. The relationship is symbiotic. Organic and machine intertwined, a union of flesh and steel. The strengths of both, the weaknesses of neither.” Saren stood proudly, his arms spread wide. “I am a vision of the future, Shepard. I represent the ultimate destiny of all organic life. It can be your destiny too. Join Sovereign and experience a true rebirth!”

“Saren, you’re spouting ideological bullshit. That doesn’t have to be anyone’s destiny. Not even yours. Sovereign hasn’t won yet. I can still stop it from taking control of the station. Step aside and the invasion will never happen!”

“We can’t stop it! Not forever. You saw the visions. You saw what happened to the Protheans. The Reapers are too powerful.” Saren’s voice rose to a horrible rasping shout. “Nothing and no one can stand against them!”

Shepard turned, half leaning out of his cover to stare at Saren directly. “You’re wrong. We can stop them, if you will just take a stand and fight them!”

Saren hesitated. “Maybe . . . maybe you’re right. Maybe there is still a chance for . . .” He broke off, crouching, his hands at the sides of his head, grunting as if in horrible pain. “Grr . . .”

Shepard stood up, his weapon forgotten at his side, to stare at Saren in appeal. “Fight it, Saren. Remember who and what you are. A turian. A soldier. An officer. A Spectre, sworn to defend the galaxy. Sovereign can’t take any of that away from you unless you let it.”

“Aah!” Saren twisted, almost falling to his knees. “The implants! Sovereign is too strong. I’m sorry. Even if you’re right . . . it’s too late for me.”

“It’s not over yet. You can still redeem yourself!”

Saren stood still, like a dreadful sculpture of himself, for several long seconds. Then he spoke again, his voice suddenly calm and at peace. “Goodbye, Shepard. Thank you.”

Quick as a striking serpent, the turian’s right hand swept up, holding his sidearm . . . but not to point at us. The pistol found its mark under Saren’s own chin. It discharged. A gout of blood and brain tissue flew to the side, as the bullet blew out a great patch of Saren’s skull. The blue light went out of his eyes, his mouth, all the other places where Reaper technology had invaded his body. Like a toppling statue, he slowly leaned to one side and then fell off his platform, vanishing beneath the Petitioner’s Stage. The dome over the Council’s garden shattered under his weight.

Shepard ran to the control panel Saren had been using, opening his omni-tool along the way. Ash and I followed. A few moments to upload Vigil’s file to the Citadel, and then he turned to us in triumph.

“The file worked. I’ve got control of all the station’s systems, at least for the moment.”
“Quick, open the ward arms,” I suggested. “Maybe the Citadel fleet can take Sovereign down before it regains control.”

“Can you open a communications channel?” asked Ashley.

Shepard worked with his omni-tool for a moment. Then we heard an asari voice over the channel, chopped up by interference. “. . . the Destiny Ascension. The Council is on board. I repeat, the Council is on board.”

Shepard cut in. “This is the Citadel, Destiny Ascension. What is your status? Can you run?”

“Negative,” said the asari officer. The voice sounded familiar. I wondered if it was Matriarch Lidanya herself. “Main drives offline. Kinetic barriers are down forty percent and falling rapidly. We need immediate relief.”

“Normandy to the Citadel,” came another voice, very familiar. Joker. “Please tell me that’s you, Commander.”

Shepard grinned in grim delight. “I’m here, Joker.”

“We caught that distress call, Commander. Normandy is here in the Andura sector with the entire Arcturus fleet, but we can’t activate the last relay to reach the Citadel. If you can unlock the relays from there, we can save the Destiny Ascension.”

“That’s bullshit, Commander,” said Ashley. “You can’t bring in the Alliance until the ward arms are open and we can concentrate on Sovereign. Why throw away what might be our only shot at this, just to save the Council? It’s their own damn fault we’re in this mess.”

“That’s true,” I said quietly.

Ashley looked at me in disbelief.

“It is the Council’s fault that Saren had this opportunity to use the Conduit,” I went on. “If they had listened to us even once, none of this would have happened. . . but as flawed as it may be, the Council is the only galactic government we have. Even if we defeat Sovereign, the Reapers may find some other way to return. Do you want them to find a shattered and divided galaxy when they arrive?”

Ashley suddenly looked uncertain.

Shepard caught my gaze for a moment, and then nodded. He tapped commands into his omni-tool and thus into the Citadel’s systems. “Opening the relays, Joker. Tell Admiral Hackett to come through now. We need to save the Destiny Ascension, no matter what the cost.”

“I hope the Council appreciates what we’re about to sacrifice,” said Ashley quietly.

“The only way to find out is to make sure we’re all around at the end,” said Shepard. “Liara, link your omni-tool with mine. Help me find the control interface for the ward arms.”

As we worked, I saw the status displays for the mass relay network light up like fireworks. Ships poured through the Theta-5 relay from Alliance space. Then we heard Admiral Hackett’s voice, a clarion call. “Alliance ships, move in. Save the Destiny Ascension.”

We couldn’t see the battle; we only heard a few scraps of the comm traffic from outside the Citadel. I tried to put them out of my mind while I helped Shepard navigate through the Citadel’s controls.
“Ah!” I exclaimed. “There, Shepard.”

He turned to touch the main control panel. A light turned brilliant amber. We all felt a shudder through the immense mass of the Citadel as the ward arms began to open.

“Destiny Ascension, you are all clear,” said Joker. “Proceed to the rear areas at best possible speed.”

Admiral Hackett broke in, his voice sharp with command. “The Citadel is opening. All ships, concentrate fire on Sovereign.”

Above us, out the great window behind where the Council would stand, we could see the brilliant light of Widow and the Serpent Nebula at last. A long moment passed, and then we saw the fast-moving silhouettes of one ship, then a dozen, then a hundred. The Citadel Fleet and the Alliance arrived at last. Their vanguard turned in space, and then they pounced on Sovereign from all sides, like a swarm of stinging insects attacking some enormous thick-hided beast.

We could do nothing more. The combined fleets would defeat Sovereign or they would not.

Shepard walked forward to the very end of the Petitioner’s Stage, looking down into the gardens. Saren looked small and somehow pathetic, lying twisted on the grass amid a scattering of glass shards. “Make sure he’s dead.”

Ash and I went back to the nearest access, climbed down a ladder, jumped down into the garden. At first we walked side by side, but then Ash broke into a half-run, drawing her sidearm and bringing it to bear. Two shots rang out. Ash turned to me, her face pale but completely empty of emotion, and nodded once.

I called Shepard on my helmet radio. “Saren is dead.”
The floor trembled, bucked beneath our feet. We all heard a deep rumbling sound, like the thunder of a great cataract. Crimson energy began to arc around the chamber, aimlessly at first, then focusing all its intensity on one spot.

Saren’s corpse.

The energy erupted, a concussion that hurled Ashley and me off our feet.

I heard a loud crack, and saw the Petitioner’s Stage suddenly break loose of its moorings. The forward end of the Stage fell into the garden in another scatter of glass shards, missing Ashley by less than a meter. Shepard fell with it, tumbling and rolling to the floor of the garden.

The crimson light hauled Saren’s corpse upright, guttural howls ripped out of its throat, arms flung wide and back arched. Suddenly I remembered an image of Shepard’s deity, nailed to a dead tree to suffer horrible agony.

A last desperate scream rang out, and then the intense heat simply vaporized what remained of Saren’s flesh. It left behind a skeletal mockery of the turian form, structural elements and circuits glowing in blue, a swirling mass of crimson energy caged among its ribs and struts.

“Saren’s implants can operate on their own!” I gasped.

“What’s running them?” asked Shepard, pushing himself to his feet. “Sovereign?”

“I am Nazara,” said the deep, unnatural voice we had last heard on Virmire. “This station is mine!”

The Saren-thing leaped to the attack.

Goddess, it was fast. Almost before any of us could react, it jumped to cling to the wall, firing a series of plasma bolts at us. These discharges resembled a geth armature’s main weapon, but a hot crimson color and far more powerful. Even one would probably have dealt mortal damage to any of us.

We dove for cover and drew our weapons. Fastest of us all, Shepard brought his assault rifle to bear and hit the thing with a full blast.

Its shields barely flickered. It leaped for him, vicious talons at full extension, and he barely jumped aside. We heard his breath sawing in his lungs as he scrambled to escape.

“Pack tactics!” he rasped. “Treat it like an armature, and watch for those plasma bolts!”

His suggestion proved sound. The three of us immediately began to harass the Saren-thing, remaining mobile and keeping our distance. We felt safe enough in the open, so long as we remained ready to leap aside the moment we saw it preparing a plasma bolt. While it attacked Shepard, he dodged and evaded, while Ash and I attacked it with our firearms and my biotic talents. The moment it turned to face either of us, we retreated and Shepard returned to the attack.

I’ve rarely seen a more intense fight. None of us held back in the slightest. Shepard and Ash
hammered away with their assault rifles, riding the edge of heat breakdown, trying to smother the Saren-thing with weapons fire. I flung biotic singularities and warps, powerful ones, again and again, ignoring all my training about cooling down and avoiding neural damage.

The Saren-thing leaped past Shepard, its talons tearing into his armor and leaving a bloody trail behind.

Shepard staggered but refused to go down, pausing only long enough to slap the megi-gel tab on his suit and seal the wound along his ribs.

Ashley shouted and flung a high-explosive grenade at it, forcing it to leap away.

A flight of plasma bolts missed me by less than a meter, the detonation hurling me across the garden even with my most potent barrier in place.

Shepard found himself standing too close to the monster, but instead of retreating he simply smashed at it with his rifle butt, screaming a wordless battle cry the whole time.

Little by little, the thing’s shields began to fail.

Little by little, Sovereign – Nazara – became more desperate.

We refused to die. Refused to let the Reaper’s pawn return to the Citadel’s controls.

“Keep at it!” shouted Shepard. “The more it focuses on us, the less attention it has for the fleet!”

A wild guess, delivered with authority, part of me noticed. Is that one of his command techniques?

A plasma bolt caught Ashley directly. Her shields flared and went down, the bolt throwing her against a wall with terrible force. Yet she remained conscious, her hardsuit administering stimulants. A moment later she bounced up, dazed and badly hurt but still in the fight.

Shepard’s assault rifle broke down, the buildup of heat and an overload charge from the Saren-thing proving too much for it. At once he tossed the weapon aside, switching to his shotgun. He began to press the monster even more closely, risking its talons in order to blast away at it over and over.

I felt a spasm of intense pain, like a blazing spike at the base of my skull. My face set in a rictus of anger and determination, as I threw warp after biotic warp at the foe. Right hand, left hand, right hand again, I refused to relent. Even when I thought I could feel my brain starting to cook.

Ashley rolled desperately across the floor, barely ahead of a chain of plasma bolts. The moment the chain stopped she came to her feet, and began to return fire with barely a pause.

Shepard advanced one relentless step at a time as the Saren-thing scuttled backward, his shotgun firing like a metronome. Crash. Crash.

Suddenly the monster’s shields flickered, flared, and finally went down.

I screamed and threw the best telekinetic pull I could manage at that point. It wasn’t very powerful, just enough to lift Saren’s corpse off the ground and send it spinning in mid-air.

Shepard stepped forward once more, touched a control on the stock of his shotgun, and sent a cloud of white-hot plasma directly into the thing’s midsection. It twisted, crumpled, and fell to the ground like a discarded scrap of cloth. A final surge of crimson energy, and the entire mechanism shattered and crumbled away.
We converged slowly on it from three points of a triangle, breathing hard, hurt and bleeding.

We looked into each other’s eyes.

All of us still lived.

“Come on,” gasped Shepard at last. “Let’s try to get back to the controls.”

Wearily, we returned to the access ladder and climbed up into the Council Chambers again.

“Hey,” said Ash, looking up at the great window. “Where did the Reaper go?”

The window shone with brilliant light. _Nazara_ no longer loomed over the Council Chambers, holding the structure in its tentacles. Instead we could see ships – turian, asari, human – keeping station with the interior of the Citadel, pouring all their weapons fire into something just beyond our field of view.

A massive explosion. A flare of crimson light, as bright as a sun. We saw shattered fragments of some gigantic object, tumbling and flying through space. The allied ships began to retreat.

“My God,” said Shepard. “I think we’ve won.”

Then a piece of _Nazara_ – a tiny sliver, only twenty or thirty meters long and massing hundreds of tons – bore down on us. Within seconds it loomed enormous in the great window.

Shepard stood closer. He could have run. Instead he turned to warn us. “Go!”

Too late. The object smashed through the great window and fell on us, like the hammer of an angry Goddess.

Something struck me down, crushed me to the floor. I had a moment to expect death, and then I felt nothing at all.

I awoke to darkness, pinned under some massive object. My left leg racked me with agony. I couldn’t feel or move my foot on that side. More pain throbbed in my side, sawing at me every time I tried to take a breath. I could barely move my fingers. I couldn’t call up my biotics. My head felt about to split open. I felt cold, in shock, as if I had lost a great deal of blood.

I didn’t know where Ashley was. I didn’t know where Shepard was.

Shepard had been right under the hammer’s fall. He could not possibly have survived.

_Oh Goddess. I hope it was quick for him._

It didn’t appear likely to be quick for me. I knew I was badly hurt, worse than ever before in my life. I lay in darkness, pinned under the corpse of a Reaper, probably dying.

_Why does this have to take so long?_

I let my consciousness fade out. I suppose I could have fought for life, but at that moment it seemed like too much trouble.

_I’m not sure I want to live in a universe that doesn’t have Shepard in it._

A timeless period of vacancy and pain.
Then I became vaguely aware of a voice.

Several voices. Coming closer.

“*Mmh,*” I groaned, unable to produce words.

“Did you hear that?” A familiar voice. Captain Anderson.

Heavy footsteps. Then the sound of metal grinding against metal, horribly loud and close by.

*Light.* Blinding light.

I turned my head. Only one of my eyes seemed to be working. I saw a bulky figure standing over me, lifting the object that had been crushing me to the floor, hurling it aside.

*Wrex.*

“Over here! I found them!” the krogan shouted.

More faces. Captain Anderson, looking concerned. Two Alliance soldiers I didn’t recognize.

Anderson bent close. “Dr. T'Soni. Can you hear me?”

I nodded, even though the motion threatened to split my head open. “Leg hurts. Broken. I think.”

“I need a stretcher over here!” he shouted, and soldiers scrambled to obey.

I blinked and the other eye finally began to function, although I still had trouble focusing. I saw Ashley being helped to her feet. Her face was covered with blood, she favored one leg, but she could move if she leaned on . . . Garrus. Garrus helped her, grave concern written in his face. I wondered if Tali still lived.

“Take it easy, Doctor. It’s over. You’re safe now.” Anderson’s face again, close to mine, tense with concern. “Where’s Shepard? Is he here?”

All I could do was shake my head slightly, and glance in the direction where I had last seen Shepard standing.

The near end of the Petitioner’s Stage was now occupied by a massive broken fragment of *Nazara.*

Anderson stood and looked there too. I saw the moment he realized what it meant.

Then I saw his face change again, the light come back into his eyes.

I looked. A flicker of movement, little more than a blur as my eyes ran with tears.

Then he stepped up onto the shard of the Reaper. He moved painfully, one arm pressed against his side, favoring one leg, but for a moment he stood tall and proud amid the flickering fires.

*Shepard.*

He stepped down, wincing as his wounds pained him, and began to walk toward us. His face lit up with a smile.

I struggled to sit up, and then stand despite my broken leg. Anderson helped me, gave me a strong shoulder and an arm around my waist. The tears ran down my cheeks and would not stop.
Everyone stopped to see the miracle.

He stood before me. Reached out to brush the tears from my cheek with one gentle hand. Bent down to kiss me, lightly but with infinite promise.

I closed my eyes. The universe seemed right once more.

I awoke again, this time in a hospital bed, feeling much better. Most of the pain had gone, replaced by warm comfort, only a dull ache in the back of my head to remind me not to over-exert my biotics. I took a deep breath and opened my eyes.

I lay in a small private room. Out in the hallway I could see medical personnel working frantically, dealing with casualties of the attack. In my room it seemed very quiet, nothing but a steady chirp from medical monitors to break the silence.

For a moment I rested alone, but then the door opened and Dr. Chakwas entered. “Liara, you’re awake.”

“Only just.” I stirred under the coverlet, realized I wore some sort of hospital gown, still felt little discomfort. “What is the time?”

“Just past twenty-two hundred,” she replied, examining the instruments above my head. “About six hours since Sovereign was destroyed. How are you feeling?”

“Much better than I expected. What is my prognosis, Doctor?”

“Well, you had a broken tibia, four broken and two cracked ribs, a concussion, neural shock from overuse of biotics, a great many bruises and lacerations, first-degree burns, and you had lost quite a lot of blood. Nothing life-threatening if you got treatment in time, which you did. Bless you, Liara, that must have been a ferocious battle.”

“It was. What about Ashley and Shepard?”

“By some miracle, they both arrived in better condition than you. They’ve both been released to the Normandy under my care, and now that you’re awake I would like to transfer you as well. Unless there is an asari facility you would prefer?”

I hesitated. “Tali?”

“Tali will be fine. She’s in a clean-room facility and her condition has been stabilized. We expect her to regain consciousness very soon.”

“Oh, thank the Goddess. Yes, I’m willing to come to Normandy. I imagine the hospitals on the Presidium are overloaded right now.”

She nodded. “On the Presidium, in all of the Wards. Hospital ships have been called up from all the major powers to relieve some of the load. For days to come, the Citadel will be sending casualties as far as Earth for treatment.”

“How bad is it?”

“Bad. Here, come see for yourself.”

Dr. Chakwas helped me to rise from the bed, and supported me as I walked to a window looking out on the Presidium. I saw darkness everywhere, smoke and baleful light from a dozen fires, the
flashing lights of emergency vehicles.

“What a disaster,” I whispered.

“The civilian death toll is in the tens of thousands,” said Dr. Chakwas somberly. “Whole city blocks were smashed by stray weapons fire, or by pieces of Sovereign raining down after the explosion. A main fleet engagement inside the Citadel itself . . . it’s a miracle things weren’t far worse.”

“You have no idea.” I shuddered, remembering. “Doctor, we got there just in time. A few minutes more, and we would have seen the Citadel relay opening and the Reapers pouring through.”

“You stopped them,” she said softly. “You saved all of us.”

I shook my head and pointed out into the darkness, where the fires were burning. “Not all. I begin to understand why Shepard takes it so hard when his victories have a terrible cost.”

“The secret is to minimize the cost,” said Shepard, “not to mention to make sure you get a victory in the first place. It doesn’t help much, but it’s better than the alternative.”

I turned and saw him just inside the door, leaning against the wall with a gentle smile on his face. He had shed his combat armor and wore Alliance undress blues, a fresh scar on his right forearm the only sign of his wounds.

I still felt too unsteady on my feet to throw myself into his arms, but I did manage three fairly dignified steps that yielded the same result. “Shepard,” I breathed as I felt his arms around me. “I’m ready to go home.”

He raised one skeptical eyebrow. “It might be a while before regular service to Thessia is resumed.”

“Don’t be absurd. You know what I mean.”

“You’re right, I do.” He glanced at Dr. Chakwas. “Is she ready to travel?”

“She should stay off that leg and rest as much as possible for the next few days,” said the doctor, “but yes, she’s mobile enough to return to Normandy.”

“Then let’s go.” He smiled at me, happy but very worn. “I’m afraid we have a lot of work ahead of us.”
Rewards

1 June 2183, Presidium Ring/Citadel

Technicians had restored the Presidium’s lights, put out all the fires, and begun to recover the fragments of Sovereign. Already one could find places where a large group could assemble and not see much sign of the damage.

We gathered in such a place, a green park, about halfway around the Presidium ring from the Council Tower. The false sky above shone blue, with white clouds. The air almost smelled fresh, with little scent of harsh chemicals or smoke. Dignitaries sat on a temporary stage: all three of the Council, Ambassador Udina, and several members of the Alliance Admiralty and Parliament. The rest of us sat in ranked chairs out on the lawn: asari, salarians, turians, and an unusual number of humans in both military and civilian clothes. One could even see a small group of quarians clustered off to one side, and a lone krogan standing quietly in the back.

I sat in the front row with other members of the Normandy crew, dressed in an expensive new white gown, set off with a sapphire necklace. Shepard had wanted me on the stage with him, but I had declined. Not many people knew yet just how close our relationship had become, and with so many of the Alliance “brass” present I did not think it wise to rouse suspicions. For me, it sufficed that he knew I was there.

The Councilors stepped forward to take center stage. They had no podium, no microphone. Hidden sensors caught the words of anyone who spoke and broadcast them so all could hear.

Once the audience had grown silent, Councilor Tevos began, graceful and elegant as always. “We have gathered here today to recognize the enormous contribution of Alliance forces in the war against Saren and the geth.”

Councilor Valern bowed his head within his deep hood. “Many humans lost their lives in this war, especially in the battle to save the Citadel. They were brave and courageous soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice so that the Council might live, so that galactic civilization might endure.”

Councilor Sparatus stood tall and proud, a soldier to the core. “No sentient being can make any greater sacrifice for the community. We share the Alliance’s grief over the tragic loss of so many noble men and women.”

Councilor Tevos paused, taking a sheet of parchment from an aide. “Humanity is new to the galactic community. Despite inevitable disagreements, some of them quite harsh, humanity’s relations with the rest of the galaxy have in general been friendly and productive. Those of us who have long upheld and defended this community have watched our new friends closely, seeking to determine what role humanity is fated to play on the galaxy’s stage. Today I am pleased to announce that we have reached a conclusion.”

A mutter of surprise and speculation ran through the audience.

Tevos held up the parchment and began to read.

“Whereas the human species as represented by its framework of interstellar governance, the Systems Alliance, has proven to be a stable and effective participant in the galactic community;

“Whereas humans admitted to the Citadel’s Special Tactics and Reconnaissance arm have acted with
extraordinary selflessness and courage to defend the galactic community;

“Whereas the Systems Alliance as a whole has demonstrated beyond any possible doubt its willingness and ability to defend the galactic community against its foes; and

“Whereas the Systems Alliance has made a solemn commitment to uphold the purposes and principles of the Citadel Conventions, and to fulfill all of the obligations contained therein;

“Therefore be it resolved that the Citadel Council admits the Systems Alliance as a full member, with all the rights and privileges attendant upon that position.”

Humanity had a seat on the Council, the first race to earn such an honor in centuries. Among the audience, the mutter became a full-fledged roar. As I glanced around, I could see most of the audience seemed surprised but pleased by the Council’s decision. Certainly the humans celebrated . . . but the other races seemed at least willing to accept what had happened.

28 May 2183, ASV Destiny Ascension, Widow System Space

The Council had not made its decision easily. I witnessed the occasion when humanity’s leaders met with them aboard the Destiny Ascension, in the hours just after the end of the battle.

“Face it, Councilors,” Udina said forcefully. “Despite the risks Shepard faced for you, despite what he told you, despite all the evidence that he and other Alliance personnel provided, you misread the situation disastrously. If Shepard had not violated Citadel law and your direct orders . . .”

“And yours, Ambassador,” interjected Sparatus.

“. . . and mine, be it admitted, Councilor, then every one of us here would be dead right now. Only the first of many billions, if Shepard’s assessment of the Reapers is correct.”

“I’m still not convinced about this Reaper hypothesis,” said Valern.

“You don’t have to believe it,” said Captain Anderson, “but given the evidence our Red Team has uncovered, you’d be fools not to start making contingency plans.”

“That’s beside the immediate point, Anderson.” Udina rapped on Matriarch Lidanya’s briefing-room table in irritation. “Councilors. You need humanity. We’ve proven our value to galactic commerce and technological research. We’ve proven our value in the Spectres. We’ve proven our value on the field of battle. Whether these Reapers are a reality or not, it’s clear there are dangers and threats out there that you need help to face. Humanity stands ready to provide that help . . . but we won’t do it, we can’t do it, as mere clients of the Council.”

“No!” growled Sparatus. “After only twenty-six years? Some races have been waiting centuries for a seat on the Council.”

“Maybe some of them are ready too,” said Shepard quietly. “Maybe they’ve been ready for a long time.”

Silence fell around the Matriarch’s table.

“Councilors, let’s not keep dancing around the real issue,” Shepard continued. “This isn’t really about humanity at all. It’s about you.”

Sparatus scoffed. Valern shook his head within his hood.
Tevos simply watched Shepard.

“Let’s look at the history. The asari found the Citadel first, and then the salarians came. Asari and salarians have always gotten along well. Asari appreciate salarian intelligence, the salarian talent for science and technology. But there’s more to it than that. For the first time, asari discovered that they could mate with non-asari. Meanwhile all those male salarians who would never have had a chance to reproduce within their own species discovered an alternative. Councilor, at this point how much of the asari species has at least some salarian ancestry?”

“Roughly ninety percent,” said Tevos quietly.

“Well, there you are. The asari and salarian civilizations depend on each other now. The original Council was really a family arrangement. I suspect the asari planned to keep expanding the Council as new species came into contact . . . but the next few to come along were too different, not quite what you were looking for. Councilor, the volus have been part of the galactic community almost as long as the salarians. Today, how much of the asari species has some volus ancestry?”

Tevos nodded reluctantly, conceding the point. “Less than ten percent.”

“As we humans would say, they’re just not your type. Besides, they’re not good soldiers. They can’t stand on the front lines and defend asari worlds when a threat emerges. Even so, Councilor, they’ve made an enormous contribution to galactic civilization. They’ve been the backbone of the galactic economy for over two thousand years. So why does Ambassador Korlack still have to sit at the children’s table?”

Shepard was speaking only to Tevos now, while Valern and Sparatus listened without objection. I suddenly suspected that he raised issues they had already considered, in the privacy of their own minds.

“Then, of course, everything went wrong. The rachni appeared, and not only were they repulsive to asari, they proved to be very powerful and implacably hostile. You had to uplift the krogan to beat them. And once the rachni were gone, you still had the krogan to deal with. Aggressive, warlike . . . and of course, asari generally find krogan personally repulsive. Councilor, how much of the asari species has some krogan ancestry?”

“Less than ten percent,” said Tevos once again.

I flushed and lowered my eyes. I knew where Shepard had gotten his insight into how asari viewed the krogan. Thinking of Wrex, I felt shame.

“To beat the rachni, you uplifted the krogan. To beat the krogan, you reached out to the turians. That was a good move. The turians are tough, steadfast, loyal, the best soldiers in the galaxy. What’s really more important, asari get along with them just fine. Councilor, I won’t ask how many asari have some turian ancestry. I think we both know the answer, and it’s a lot higher than ten percent.

“But by then the damage had been done. I imagine a lot of asari thanked the Goddess that the ones who beat the krogan turned out to be so congenial. They might not have been. I imagine that frightened a lot of asari. I suspect the asari have become a lot more hesitant to welcome newcomers onto the galactic stage. Any newcomers.

“Sure, the salarians have doubts as to whether we humans are stable or intelligent enough to hold a Council seat. The turians respect us a little, but they’re jealous of the fact that they had to fight hard for decades to earn their seat. I can understand all that, even agree with it. But I think we’ve just discovered that the galaxy is a much more dangerous place than any of us realized. We need to stand
together, and I think we all know that the final decision on that rests with the asari.

“Councilor, I can attest that we humans get along very well with asari. We are compatible. But even if that were not the case, I think the asari need to stop assessing other species on the basis of whether they seem attractive or not. You’re famous for taking the long view of things. Take the long view on this. The galaxy is stronger for its diversity. We all become stronger the more we exercise compassion for the Other. Even when the Other is strange and a little frightening to us.”

Silence fell once more as he finished. Anderson and Udina shared a glance, Anderson wearing a very small smile.

“You sound like Benezia, before she . . . left us,” said Tevos at last.

Shepard glanced over at me. “I’ve had a good teacher.”

She followed his gaze. “Indeed. Ambassador Udina, do you agree with the Commander’s assessment?”

Udina looked as if he had eaten something sour. “I might not have expressed it quite that way, but the Commander shows a surprising degree of insight.”

Tevos and Valern silently looked across the table at Sparatus. After a moment, reluctantly, the turian nodded.

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1 June 2183, Presidium Ring/Citadel

Admiral Hackett and Shepard stepped forward on the stage.

“Attention to orders,” intoned Hackett. “The Prime Minister of the Systems Alliance, acting upon the recommendation of the Minister of Defense and the Admiralty Board, has placed special trust and confidence in the patriotism, integrity, and abilities of Lieutenant Commander William Shepard. In view of these special qualities, and his demonstrated potential to serve in the higher grade, Lieutenant Commander Shepard is promoted to the grade of Staff Commander, Systems Alliance Navy, effective the first day of June, 2183, by order of the Minister of Defense.”

Hackett took the rank tabs from an assistant and formally pinned them on Shepard’s uniform. The audience broke out into enthusiastic applause.

“I will now re-administer the Oath of Office,” said Hackett. He faced Shepard, who raised his right hand, his face full of fierce pride.

“I, William Allen Shepard, having been appointed a Staff Commander in the Systems Alliance Navy, do solemnly swear: that I will support and defend the Charter of the Systems Alliance against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any equivocation, mental reservation, or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office which I am about to enter. So help me God.”

Hackett shook Shepard’s hand and smiled. I felt a small shock. I hadn’t expected his face to be capable of such an expression.

“Ladies and gentlemen, assembled guests, I present to you Staff Commander William Shepard.”

The applause rose higher, filling the air with celebration.
Shepard looked around at all of us. The light gleamed on the bright accents of his uniform, his new rank tabs, his many service ribbons and decorations, the Star of Terra shining proudly in the highest row.

30 May 2183, SSV Normandy, Citadel Docks

The Alliance proved very generous to its men and women aboard Normandy. Everyone aboard shared in a unit citation for meritorious service. Ashley and Shepard each received the Navy Cross for “extraordinary heroism in combat.” Joker had to endure receiving a Silver Star, though he only agreed to a public ceremony after being assured that he would not have to shave off his beard for the occasion.

For his actions and sacrifice on Virmire, Kaidan Alenko was posthumously awarded the Star of Terra. He also received the Nova Cluster from the Turian Hierarchy, and the Silver Dagger from the Salarian Union. In the end, he went down in history as the most decorated Alliance soldier of the Eden Prime War.

Yet perhaps the most valued reward for any of Normandy’s human crew wasn’t a medal, or a citation, or a public ceremony. It came quietly, in Shepard’s office, with no one present but the three of us who had finally defeated Sovereign in our battle with the Saren-thing.

Ashley stood at attention before Shepard’s desk, not looking at either of us. I sat in the shadows, not quite sure why I had been invited, except that I was their friend.

Shepard said, “Ash, several weeks ago I wrote a rather strongly worded memo to Admiral Hackett, and by extension the Admiralty Board as a whole.”

Ashley stood mute.

“I described the findings of my research into your service record. I also referred to the records of your father, your two uncles, and your five cousins who have all entered into Alliance service. I pointed out that since your grandfather’s time not one of your family has had anything less than an untarnished record of exemplary service to the Alliance. Not one of you has ever dishonored your oath to the slightest degree.”

“Sir, you shouldn’t have done that,” said Ash quietly.

Shepard’s voice was sharp. “It is my job to see that my subordinates are recognized and rewarded according to their merits, Gunnery Chief.”

“Yes, sir.”

“In my memo I concluded that the Alliance has treated your family unjustly and with grave dishonor, and I demanded that swift and effective action be taken to amend the situation. Do you know what response I got?”

Ashley’s lips tightened. “I can guess, sir.”

“That’s right. I got a mildly sympathetic but otherwise ineffective response from Admiral Hackett, and stony silence from the rest of the Admiralty.”

“Not surprised, sir.” Ash relaxed from her attention-stance, just a little. “Permission to speak freely?”

“Denied.”
She stiffened back up again.

Shepard watched her closely for over half a minute, and then went on in a softer voice. “That was then. This is now. After the battle I contacted Admiral Hackett again. I pointed out that my reasoning in the earlier memo is still sound. I also pointed out that while you have been under my command, you have consistently behaved with thorough competence and the utmost gallantry. I also pointed out that your assistance has been indispensable in the small matter of saving the entire fucking galaxy from the Reapers.

“Admiral Hackett agreed with me. And since his stock – and mine – are very high with the Admiralty right now, he managed to get them to move. Finally.”

Shepard reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a small presentation case, setting it on the desk just inside Ashley’s reach.

Ash looked at it as if it was a coiled serpent.

“Open it,” he commanded.

Slowly, she reached down and opened the case. Inside, gold resting on blue velvet, was a pair of rank tabs. Second Lieutenant’s tabs.

“A commission?” she asked, her voice almost breaking.

“That’s right.” Shepard sighed. “Ash, I think we both know that the brass will be watching your entire career, just waiting for you to slip up. Accepting a commission won’t make that go away, but you’ve earned this. You’re too good a soldier not to take on an officer’s rank, and all the responsibility that goes with it. I hope you’ll accept.”

“Skipper . . . I need some time to think about it.”

He smiled. “You can have a few hours. I’ll need your answer by 1800 today.”

At the ceremony, Ash sat in the front row in her own dress blues, quietly wearing her new tabs.

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**1 June 2183, Presidium Ring/Citadel**

Afterward, the dignitaries and guests mingled freely. I made my way to Shepard’s side and the two of us stood in the middle of a crowd of well-wishers. The rest of Normandy’s crew received similar adulation. Garrus mixed with some of his former colleagues from C-Sec. Tali and her friends from the Migrant Fleet mingled freely, enjoying a moment of easy acceptance. Even Wrex found himself surrounded by a respectfully curious group of onlookers, who plied him with questions about his part in our long quest.

Something caught my eye, some distance away in the shadow of the trees: a familiar figure. A female human wearing a white bodysuit, with a pale complexion, ice-blue eyes, and a fall of long black hair. She must have watched the proceedings from a distance, especially Shepard’s promotion and his address to the assembled dignitaries.

When I looked again, she had vanished.
Normandy departed the Citadel five days after the great battle.

Shepard remained in command, of course. His staff roster changed very little, although Lieutenant Ashley Williams now led the Marine detachment in Kaidan’s place. Garrus, Tali, Wrex, and I all stayed aboard for the time being.

As far as the public knew, the Council had sent us to seek out and deal with isolated pockets of geth. After the destruction of Sovereign, the surviving synthetics went into widespread retreat, but no one could communicate with them to arrange a truce. Any geth still in a position to attack Citadel space could still pose a threat.

Our actual mission was quite different. The Council remained dubious about the Reaper hypothesis, unwilling to commit the galaxy to full-scale preparation against a threat that might never materialize. They therefore sent Normandy in search of the ironclad proof they needed in order to act. We would look for evidence that the Reapers had once destroyed the Protheans, still existed, and were likely to return.

Thessia was our first destination.

I’m sure neither the Alliance nor the Council considered the asari homeworld in need of our attention. As it happened, the University of Serrice had hastily convened a scientific conference to discuss “recent developments in research on the Prothean extinction.” It would give us a good opportunity to broadcast all that we had learned to the scientific community. If we presented things properly, the community would do most of the work of gathering evidence for us.

Naturally, politicians who don’t like the results of scientific research will ignore or deny them as long as possible. Still, the more reputable scientists we could get to support the Reaper hypothesis, the more likely that even the Council would stop to listen.

I should be clear that the timing of this conference was a complete coincidence, and entirely at the behest of the University of Serrice. The fact that I still held a tenured position at the university, or that the T’Soni family foundation had just made a substantial contribution to their capital fund, had nothing to do with it.

Ilos provided the centerpiece of the conference. Shepard and Pressley made a presentation on the discovery of the lost planet’s location. We presented photographs and recordings that we had taken on Ilos itself. At the end of the first day, we played a recording of our conversation with Vigil to a packed lecture hall. Then we let the assembled scientists go, heady with excitement at the prospect of launching their own expeditions to the legendary world.

On the second day, we hit them with the Reapers. I presented addenda to my last paper, covering all that we had learned during the last days of our fight against Saren. Technical experts from the Citadel gave preliminary reports on their analysis of the fragments of Sovereign. Then we played another recording to the main hall: our conversation with Sovereign on Virmire. The Reaper’s manifesto.

The results were explosive. After every presentation on the second day, staid, respectable scientists could be seen screaming at each other in the corridors. A few of them nearly came to blows. Others stormed out of the hall, leaving the conference. Yet amid all the fierce debate I saw some very
thoughtful faces, more and more of them as the day passed.

Afterward I had private conversations with several scientists, people I suspected would be very helpful in the months to come: Garrett Bryson from Earth, Mahinda Chandana from Elysium, Amanda Kenson from Arcturus, Athana Orysaee from Thessia, and Rish Kalan from Mannovai. All of them seemed at least tentatively convinced of the Reaper hypothesis, and all of them stood ready to begin work on its further confirmation. I promised to support their efforts as far as possible.

5 June 2183, Armali/Thessia

After the conference ended Normandy’s crew had shore leave, for the first time since the attack on Eden Prime. Shepard and I traveled to Armali to visit the ancestral T’Soni estates. Our aircar left the city and passed over green countryside, rolling hills and small rivers, dotted with small towns and scattered farms. Up ahead we saw the seashore.

“Where’s your house?” Shepard asked after a while.

“There,” I pointed as it came into view.

His eyes went wide.

I grew up in a large house, even by asari standards: over seventy rooms and about six thousand square meters of living space. It sprawled across a hilltop, at the heart of a two-hundred-hectare estate of farmland and forest, facing the seashore a few hundred meters away. It was over three thousand years old, built in a neo-Calydonian style popular at the dawn of our interstellar age, all courtyards, fountains, and stately colonnades.

I sent the family pass-code as we approached the estate’s airspace, then guided the aircar to a landing near the front doors. As we emerged, five asari walked gracefully down the grand staircase to meet us. Kallyria led the deputation, a tall and statuesque asari just entering her matriarchal years, looking much like Benezia but somehow softer in demeanor. She wore a long robe in crimson silk, an elaborate headdress, and a warm smile.

Kallyria was my mother’s younger sister. She had all Benezia’s intelligence but none of her ambition, had never sought to teach or lead others. She led no acolytes of her own, and had never sworn the acolyte’s oath to another. She remained content simply to live among her family, enjoying all the pleasures cultured life on Thessia could offer. She had borne three daughters, all by utterly conventional relationships with salarian fathers, all of them centuries older than I and with their own adult children.

“Aunt Kallyria,” I greeted her, accepting her embrace gladly.

“Liara. I understand I have you to thank for this dreadful responsibility.” She smiled as she said it.

“Blame Sha’ira, not me. She made the recommendation, I only agreed to it.” I turned to Shepard, who looked rather as if he faced an imminent battle. “Kallyria, this is Commander Shepard. My siavi-consort.”

“I am very pleased to make your acquaintance,” said Shepard in tolerable asari.

“I am pleased to make yours,” said Kallyria, her eyes glittering with enjoyment as she examined him. “I have heard a great deal about you, Commander.”

“All of it good, I hope.”
“Most of it, and what little was not only serves to lend spice. Liara, do you wish to take possession of the house and lands?”

I shook my head. “Not yet. We will be returning to Normandy in a few days. I don’t know when I will be home for good.”

Kallyria nodded gracefully. “Take as long as you need.”

“There’s just so much for us to do, and . . .”

“Liara. Do not concern yourself with it. These are your maiden years. It is your task to go out into the universe, learn, and do great deeds. It is the task of those of us who are matrons and Matriarchs to ensure that you have a home to return to when you are ready.”

“Thank you.”

“Will you at least take the master suite for yourself and your consort?”

I hesitated.

Kallyria smiled. “Have no fear, Liara. We have not left it as it was when Benezia was in residence. We have removed most of her things and decorated it in a manner that should be more in accordance with your character.”

“I suppose there would be no harm in trying,” I surrendered.

We spent the afternoon and evening talking with Kallyria about management of the wealth that Benezia left me. Shepard seemed reluctant to join us, but we insisted. He did have insights to offer, although he seemed more and more dazed as the discussion wore on.

“Good Lord, Liara,” he remarked after Kallyria left us to enjoy dinner alone. “I had no idea you came from such a wealthy family.”

“Does it bother you, Shepard?” I asked, concerned.

“Maybe.” He toyed with his fork, moving some of the seafood salad around on his plate. “I know we haven’t discussed a more permanent relationship, but I have thought about it. In comparison with all this, I don’t have much to bring to the table. All I have is fifty or sixty thousand credits in the bank. The sum total of my worldly possessions fits into one footlocker and a rather small storage unit back on Earth.”

I reached out and put my hand over his. “Shepard. You bring yourself to the table. That is more than enough.”

“Hmm. I remember a story I read once.”

I waited, listening.

“The hero of the story was a soldier like me, just after a difficult war. He met a beautiful girl who recruited him to go on a grand adventure, full of intrigue and danger. They succeeded, and saved more worlds than he had ever known existed. But then he discovered that she was a princess who ruled over a vast kingdom. She was fabulously wealthy and powerful, and after taking up residence in her palace he found he had nothing worthwhile to do. The only profession he knew was that of a soldier, and there were no more wars for him to fight. They loved each other very much, but she couldn’t live in his world, and before long he realized that he couldn’t live in hers. Finally he had to
leave her or go crazy.”

After a minute I asked, “Do you really think our story is going to be like that?”

“I don’t know. Probably not . . . but I can’t get the thought out of my head.”

I sipped my wine to give myself a moment to think. “Shepard, I think you are borrowing trouble. If the Reapers are coming, how likely is it that we will ever be able to settle down in peace? Shouldn’t we cherish the time we have, however long that may be?”

He gave me an ironic smile. “You’re being asari again.”

“Always.” I narrowed my eyes at him, feeling a hot prickle of desire down my spine. “If you’re not going to eat any more of that, I have a better idea for how we can be spending our time.”

Kallyria’s word turned out to be good. The master suite no longer felt as if it belonged to Benezia. Now the walls showed blue and white rather than forest green, with shelves for some of the books and artifacts I had acquired over the years. Starlight and sea air came through the open windows, as I stripped Shepard nude and then thoroughly ravaged him. It felt a little sad and strange at first, enjoying my lover in my mother’s bed, but it ceased to matter when my mind merged with his once more.

8 June 2183, Armali/Thessia

On the last evening, Kallyria and I held a banquet for all of my friends from the Normandy.

Since most of our guests were not asari, we moved the long couches out of the great dining hall, and set up one of the massive wooden tables with eleven chairs. I sat at the head of the table. To my immediate left sat Shepard, then Ashley, Garrus, Dr. Chakwas, Engineer Adams, and finally Kallyria at the opposite end of the table. To Kallyria’s left sat Wrex (in a very sturdy chair with extra elbow room on both sides), then Tali, Pressley, and finally Joker on my immediate right. We took great care to serve foods that everyone could enjoy, even dextro-protein dishes for Garrus and Tali, and the wine flowed freely. I called for music, a mix of asari and human orchestral pieces, just loud enough to be heard.

It was lovely watching all of them together for the last time.

Ashley spent much of the meal trading boasts and bad jokes with Garrus and Joker. Pressley fell into a deeply technical conversation with Tali, comparing human and quarian navigational procedures.

Others seemed to have their minds elsewhere. Dr. Chakwas and Engineer Adams chattered happily and became rather tipsy on the wine together. As the evening progressed, they began to hold each other’s gazes more, and their hands began to brush against each other more often.

Kallyria surprised me by spending most of the evening in conversation with Wrex, of all people. The big krogan certainly seemed to hold up his end of their talk. More than once I saw Kallyria throw back her graceful head and laugh out loud at one of his remarks. I began to wonder whether my aunt, that famous connoisseur of salarians, was becoming more broadly curious in her later years.

Goddess, we’ll have to make sure plenty of guest rooms are ready. There may be more than one liaison going on here before morning.

Once the dessert course wound down, I caught Shepard’s eye. He nodded and rose, holding his wine-glass.
“Friends. Tomorrow most of us are going back to Normandy. Back to a new mission, which will hopefully not be quite as strenuous as the past few months.”

“Speak for yourself, Skipper,” said Ashley. “I’m just getting warmed up.”

Shepard grinned. “Still, some of us will be leaving for other destinations, and it’s important for us to give them the right send-off. To begin with: Garrus, it has truly been an honor fighting with you. I’m going to miss your eagle eye and your skill with that sniper rifle, not to mention your sense of humor. Normandy isn’t going to be the same without you, but I’m quite sure that wherever you go, you’ll be doing righteous work.”

All of us applauded as Garrus stood and raised his own glass of turian brandy. “I don’t think you’ll be rid of me that easily,” he said once we became quiet. “I’ve decided to put in my application for the Spectres. I might just be meeting you somewhere out in the dark corners of the galaxy after all.”

“That gives me my toast,” said Shepard. “To the Spectres!”

“To the Spectres!” we cheered, and drank to Garrus.

“Now for one of the quieter members of the Normandy’s crew,” said Shepard. “Brave, smart, and tougher than almost anyone I’ve ever met. I’ve yet to see the technical problem that she couldn’t solve, and heaven help you if she has reason to come after you with that shotgun of hers. She’ll be going home to her people soon, but she will not be forgotten by the friends she’s made among us. Let me be among the first to congratulate her by her new name: Tali’Zorah vas Neema.”

Tali stood, overcome, and could only say, “Thank you, Shepard.”

“For you, Tali, and for all of us, my toast is this: To the homes we all hope to see again one day. Keelah se’lai.”

“Keelah se’lai,” we all murmured, and drank to Tali.

“Now for the most unlikely of friends,” Shepard continued. “There’s a word in the krogan language: krantt. It means something closer than mere friendship, closer than any tie of kinship. It denotes those who can be trusted to kill and die at your side, those who can be trusted with your honor and your life. Until we began our mission against Saren, I had never heard the word, and I certainly didn’t understand it. Now I do. Urdnot Wrex, I look on you as one of my krantt, and I am honored to have had a soldier such as yourself at my side in this war.”

The krogan stood, his tankard raised. “To you, Shepard. For a wandering krogan, true friends are few and far between. I didn’t expect to find any on Normandy. I guess I was luckier than I deserve.”

“So where are you going, Wrex?” asked Shepard. “You haven’t said much about your plans.”

“I think my wandering days are over for now,” said Wrex. “I’m going home, to Tuchanka. It’s been a long time. Maybe I can knock some sense into the clans this time. When the Reapers come, you’re going to need the krogan in fighting shape.”

Kallyria reached out and placed a gentle hand on Wrex’s arm. He smiled down at her.

“That’s my toast then,” said Shepard quietly. “To Tuchanka. May it rise again.”

“Tuchanka,” we agreed, and drank to Wrex.

Shepard sobered, his face calm and intent. “I have one more toast. We’ve lost some of our best in the
war against *Sovereign*. We should remember them now, even as we enjoy this time in peace with our friends.

“To Richard Jenkins, who died too young, almost before we began this journey.

“To Nihlus Kryik, Spectre, who would have been my mentor and our ally, if he had not been betrayed by a friend.

“To Kaidan Alenko, who gave his life that billions who never knew his name might live.

“To all the men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice, from Eden Prime to the Citadel.”

He paused, and glanced at me. Then he slowly continued.

“To Matriarch Benezia T'Soni, who walked into hell with open eyes in order to uphold her beliefs.

“To Saren Arterius, Spectre, who was once one of the galaxy’s greatest defenders, and who in the end died as his own man after all.

*“To the fallen.”*

Silently, we all drank the last of the wine.

Afterward some of the guests accepted my hospitality, while others returned to Armali and the *Normandy*. Shepard and I remained behind for one last night together, not wanting our brief idyll to come to an end just yet.

After we made love, I nestled close to his side, resting my head in the hollow of his shoulder and letting his arm curl around me.

“I love you, Shepard.”
I remember the day it all ended.

While Normandy dropped out of FTL, I stood working with the galaxy map in the Combat Information Center. I paid little attention, too engrossed in my research, seeking patterns in a sea of data, trying to plan where our mission might be most effective. Only part of my mind listened to the voices from the bridge a few meters away.

“Disengaging FTL drives,” said Joker from the pilot’s seat. “Emission sinks active. Board is green. We are running silent.”

“We’re wasting our time,” said Pressley. “Four days searching up and down this sector, and we haven’t found any sign of geth activity.”

“Three ships went missing here in the past month. Something happened to them.”

Pressley snorted. “My money’s on slavers. The Terminus Systems are crawling with them, especially this close to Omega.”

I picked up a datapad and began to walk up the corridor toward the bridge.

“Picking up something on the long-range scanners,” said Lieutenant Lowe, one of the new crew who had come aboard after the Battle of the Citadel. Her voice became intent as she opened new windows on her display console. “Unidentified vessel. Hmm. Looks like a cruiser.”

“Doesn’t match any known signatures,” observed Joker.

Finally something made its way through my fog of preoccupation. “Lieutenant Pressley, what’s happening?”

The navigator glanced at me. “Can’t say yet, Doctor.”

“Cruiser is changing course,” said Lowe. “Now on an intercept trajectory.”

“Can’t be,” said Pressley impatiently. “Our stealth systems are engaged. There’s no way a geth ship could . . .”

“It’s not the geth,” Joker interrupted, staring at his console. He slammed his palm down on the all-hands channel of the intercom. His voice boomed out throughout the ship. “Brace for evasive maneuvers!”

Normandy suddenly accelerated and began to sway back and forth, as Joker tried to escape whatever he had seen.

I grabbed for a safety hold on the nearest bulkhead. My eyes widened as I saw a beam of some kind of golden-white energy in the bridge viewports, passing bare meters above the ship. The beam slid off to the right, then passed above us again and fell to the left as Joker maneuvered.

For an instant I thought we had escaped. Then the entire ship bucked hard, as if we had slammed into some solid obstacle in space. I staggered, only my grip on the safety hold keeping me on my
Something exploded just to my right. Hot plasma slammed into Pressley and hurled him across the bridge. He had just enough time for an agonized scream, abruptly cut off.

"Pressley!" shouted Lowe, and began to rise from her post. Just in time for another explosion to shatter her own console and throw her to the deck as well, limp as a rag doll.

Stunned and half-deafened, I realized I had somehow escaped serious injury. I stood up from my half-crouch, and saw fire pour out onto the bridge. I had to back away or go up like a torch.

"Multiple hull breaches. Weapons off-line," reported Joker. "Somebody get that fire out!"

"Joker!" I shouted. "You have to get out of there!"

He shook his head, not even glancing in my direction as he pawed desperately at his controls. "No way, Doc! We’ve got to get away from whoever that is out there!"

Three crewmen pushed me aside, bringing fire extinguishers to bear on the growing blaze.

I ran for Shepard.

I stopped at an emergency locker to pull out a suit of light armor, working frantically to pull it on. I thanked the Goddess for all the emergency drills Shepard and Kaidan had insisted I pass. Another horrible collision struck the ship, and then yet another. I could hear explosions in several places elsewhere in the hull.

I pelted down the gangway to the crew deck. Right behind me an enormous detonation tore out of the bulkheads, nearly catching me as I ran. A crewman fell as I passed, burning, probably already dead. Cables and conduits spilled out onto the deck, as the ship’s frame took stresses beyond its endurance.

I heard a scream and saw Private Dubyansky caught by a massive electrical discharge. The shock killed poor Alexei almost instantly.

I saw Shepard, already in his hardsuit, working on a control panel at the forward end of the crew deck. I staggered, ducked aside from another explosion, and ran to him.

"Shepard!"

He finished his task and calmly locked his helmet into place. "Distress beacon is ready for launch."

I realized the air was growing thin, and foul with chemical smells and smoke. I took the moment to put on my own helmet and seal up. "You’re ordering the ship abandoned? Will the Alliance get here in time?"

Another concussion nearly threw me from my feet, but Shepard lunged forward and steadied me. I felt a moment of irrational comfort at his strength.

"The Alliance won’t abandon us,” he said reassuringly, even as he turned to pick up a fire extinguisher and attack the nearest blaze. “We just need to hold on. Get everyone into the escape pods.”

"Joker’s still on the bridge. He won’t evacuate.” Some daimon seized me, warned me not to permit myself to be separated from him. I took a deep breath. “I’m not leaving either.”
“Liara, I need you to help the crew get into the escape pods. I’ll take care of Joker.”

“Shepard?”

“Liara. Go.” He turned his head to face me, and even though I couldn’t see his eyes I knew they had turned cold and resolute. “Now.”

I stood, torn between the need to obey him and the need to stay with him. “Aye-aye,” I said at last, and turned to run.

As I fled, I heard the *abandon ship* klaxon ring out, loud and terrible.

I gathered crewmen, shouting at them, pulling them away from their desperate attempts at damage control. Once I saw no more to be directed, I chose an escape pod for myself and concentrated on hurrying crewmen into it. For a moment I thought of Ashley, probably down on the staging deck, hopefully doing much the same.

Dr. Chakwas passed me, grabbing at the overhead bar and leaping into the escape pod, two other crewmen already inside and another just behind her. “Everybody in! Go, go, go!”

I saw a woman running for the pod, one of the Draven sisters . . . but then an enormous fireball erupted behind her and slapped her off her feet. She shrieked and flew into the bulkhead with a sickening *crunch*. I thought to leap for her, but then saw the unnatural angle of her head and knew she was dead.

No one came behind her. I turned and leaped into the pod, falling into a seat and pulling the restraint down. Dr. Chakwas caught my eye, saw my nod, and slapped the launch control.

We all felt a huge *slam* as the pod ejected from the side of the ship. Then all seemed quiet and peaceful at last.

As soon as I could catch my breath and unseal my helmet, I reached for the control panel and began to work the exterior cameras. After a few moments I found *Normandy* . . . or what was left of it.

The ship was in *sections*. Golden beams lanced out from the invisible enemy, carving *Normandy* into smaller and smaller pieces, ablaze with fires and explosions.

“Merciful Goddess,” I breathed, as the image shrank with increasing distance.

“I quite agree,” said Dr. Chakwas. “Did Shepard . . .”

I caught her eyes, silver dulled to cloudy gray and not nearly as serene as usual. “I don’t know. He went to make sure Joker got out.”

“Oh, Liara.”

I shook my head, doing my best to keep the ball of terror locked down in my belly, where it wouldn’t distract me or hurt anyone else. I had to be strong for the others in the pod. “There’s nothing we can do now. We just have to wait.”

“And pray, if you’re so inclined,” said the doctor.

Oh yes, I could pray. I could sit in that cold little escape pod with four frightened humans, smelling
the stink of their sweat and fear, all of us waiting for the unknown enemy to finish with *Normandy* and come after us. One golden beam of energetic particles and we would be atoms drifting in space. My eyes stayed wide open and my face absolutely still, but deep inside my mind I prayed.

Not a complex prayer. Very simple.

*Please, Goddess.*

*Please.*

Perhaps the Goddess paid me a *little* attention. Once *Normandy* was gone, nothing but fragments falling onto the surface of a barren ice world, the unknown enemy moved on. For whatever reason, our escape pods went unharmed.

Six hours later, SSV *Melbourne* arrived on the scene and began to carry out search-and-rescue operations. The Alliance recovered all of the escape pods except one, which seemed to have gone down with *Normandy* with no one on board. I sat wide-eyed and silent as frantic crewmen opened each pod and the stunned survivors emerged. I saw Ashley alive, and Engineer Adams.

The last pod to be recovered stood almost empty. Only Joker emerged, injured and terrified and almost mad with grief.

Shepard had not made it into the pod. Joker had seen him blasted clear of the ship by a massive explosion. His last act had been to close and activate the pod so that Joker would be blown free.

*Melbourne* searched, but there must have been something wrong with the rescue beacon in Shepard’s hardsuit. They found no sign of him: not in space, not in orbit, not on the surface of the planet Alchera. He had simply vanished.

After a few hours, Captain Mukherjee refused to linger any further. He felt exposed, deep within the Terminus Systems, and his cruiser had no stealth systems. At any time *Normandy*’s distress signal might call a swarm of pirates or slavers down on us. Eventually he ruled that no more of our people would be recovered alive, and ordered a retreat. He offered all of us medical care, food, and a place to rest as his ship turned for its home port at Terra Nova.

In all, twenty-two of our people were declared Killed in Action.

Shepard was one of them.

I sat alone in a tiny cubicle aboard *Melbourne*, still in my armor, unable to muster the motivation necessary to change out of it. I stared, unable to see the room around me. I hadn’t turned the lights on anyway.

I could not weep. I felt *nothing*. No pain, no grief, nothing but dull vacancy. My heart felt like a block of ice.

For hours I remained in that state, suspended between life and death, sitting alone in the darkness.

Then there came a thought.

*Shepard might still be alive.*

Captain Mukherjee had been too quick to abandon the search, to declare all the missing Alliance
personnel dead so he could run for safety. No one had seen Shepard die. Not even Joker. Unlikely as it might seem, he might have escaped the wreck of *Normandy*.

It seemed unlikely, but it was at least possible.

Even if he had been killed . . .

There came another thought.

*Who killed him?*

A flicker of anger alight in my heart, there in the darkness.

I hadn’t seen the enemy closely, but it had not been a geth ship. Lieutenant Lowe would have been able to identify a geth cruiser. Joker had said outright that it was something else, something strange. No gang of Terminus pirates would have been able to detect *Normandy*, or blast it out of the sky so quickly with such powerful weaponry.

Another player had taken a seat at the table.

*The Reapers?*

Perhaps.

Or some of their agents. We had no evidence to suggest Saren and Benezia had been their only pawns.

My mind began to work again. I felt something again. A burning need.

*Revenge.*

I rose from the chair, stiffly removed my armor, and went in search of a spare uniform. Once dressed, I would look for the ship’s medical officer and then the crew mess. I might not care about physical pain, I might not feel much hunger, but I knew my body required maintenance.

I still had work to do.

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