

MASS EFFECT 2

-Prologue-

On an secret space station in an otherwise unknown corner of the galaxy, a man and woman looked out at a multi-colored star. The man sat at a chair, a cigarette in his hand, scratching his forehead. The other hand fondled a glass of whiskey on the rocks. The woman wore a white catsuit, and stood in with one hand on her hip.

"Shepard did everything right. More than we could've hoped for," she said in an Australian accent, clearly frustrated.

"Commander Shepard uncovered the truth," the man, clearly American, replied in a placating tone, and took a drag from his cigarette.

"...and still it's not enough," the woman finished the thought.

"We're at war. No one wants to admit it, but humanity is under attack."

"But they're sending him to fight geth. Geth! We both know they're not the real threat. The Reapers are still out there." She turned from the window and approached the man, walking through a set of holographic screens.

"And it's up to us to stop them." The man tapped some ash off the tip of his cigarette.

"The Council will never trust Cerberus. They'll never accept our help. Even after everything humanity has accomplished. But Shepard...they'll follow him. He's a hero. A bloody icon. But he's just one man. If we lose Shepard, humanity might well follow."

"Then see to it we don't lose him."

One month after the devastating attack on the Citadel, the galactic community struggled to rebuild. The Alliance fleet made a tremendous sacrifice to save the Citadel Council and earned humanity membership in their prestigious group. Now the Council is forced to respond to evidence that the Reapers – enormous machines that eradicate all organic civilization every 50,000 years – have returned. To quell the rumors, the Council has sent Commander Shepard and the Normandy to wipe out the last pockets of geth resistance. Officially, they blame the invasion on the geth and their leader, a rogue Spectre.

But for those who know the truth, the search for answers is just beginning...

The Normandy emerged from faster-than-light travel near an icy white planet. The pilot, Jeff "Joker" Moreau sounded bored as he began running through checklists and discussing next steps with some of the other bridge crew.

"Disengaging FTL drives. Emission sinks active. Board is green...we are running silent," he said as the ship's stealth systems came online.

The ship's First Officer, Charles Pressly, vented his frustration as he paced the cockpit, checking the status of various ship's systems. "We're wasting our time. 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."

"My money's on slavers. The Terminus Systems are crawling with them."

A young Ensign was seated in the copilot's seat, concentrating on the ship's sensors. She interrupted: "Picking up something on the long-range scanner. Unidentified vessel. Looks like a cruiser." She swiped at the holographic display in front of her as Pressley came up behind her, suddenly interested. "Doesn't match any known signatures," the Ensign concluded.

The ship was large and resembled an asymmetrical cylinder. It was approaching from the direction of the system's star, so sensors were having trouble resolving any detail. The Normandy continued on her course as she entered orbit around the planet. A few tense moments passed.

"Cruiser is changing course!" said the surprised Ensign. "Now on intercept trajectory."

"Can't be." Pressly didn't believe it, but double-checked the ship's systems anyway. "Stealth

systems are engaged. There's no way a geth ship could --"

"It's not the geth," Joker concluded as he narrowed his eyes at the sensor display. "Brace for evasive maneuvers!" Joker hit the ship-wide alarm and broke the Normandy out of orbit and into a standard evasive pattern.

But the mystery ship tracked the Normandy through the maneuver and altered its own course to match. As it closed the distance to its target, the mysterious ship opened fire. A ragged beam of yellow energy shot out and hit the Normandy square on. The Alliance vessel lurched, and Pressley was knocked head-first into a bulkhead, dead on impact. The Ensign got up out of her chair to try to help him, but no sooner had she unbuckled than her console exploded, killing her instantly. Her body fell next to Pressley's.

"Kinetic barriers down! Multiple hull breaches!" Joker was giving a damage report to no one. "Weapons offline. Somebody get that fire out!" Joker turned half around in his seat just long enough to see that no one was close enough to help. He turned back to the flight controls and tried another evasive maneuver, but the enemy ship shot the Normandy again, this time taking out two of her four engines and ripping a hole in her upper hull. An emergency energy curtain sealed off the cockpit, and Joker donned his helmet while desperately fighting the controls of his crippled ship.

Down on the crew deck, the asari Liara T'Soni had donned her armor. She half-stumbled, half-ran as the Normandy pitched and heaved around her. The galley exploded, and the charred body of the ship's cook landed at Liara's feet. But she had no time for shock. She had to find Shepard. The archaeologist dodged a half dozen more crew, all running in a panic in the opposite direction, towards the escape pods. Wall panels and support beams were popping off the walls and ceiling. She found Shepard in the captain's quarters, donning his helmet.

"Shepard!" she yelled, barely loud enough to be heard over the sounds of air rushing from a disintegrating ship. Liara donned her own helmet and established radio communication with her commanding officer – and her lover.

"Distress Beacon is ready for launch," he said, and pressed a button on his console.

Shepard nudged Liara out of his quarters and back out into the hallway.

"Will the Alliance get here in time?" she sounded worried.

The ship lurched as another explosion rocked the ship, and a fire gushed out from an exposed pipe. Shepard steadied Liara as she bounced off the wall, then grabbed a fire extinguisher.

"The Alliance won't abandon us. We just need to hold on until they get here. Get everyone into the escape pods!" ordered Shepard.

"Joker's still in the cockpit. He won't abandon ship. I'm not leaving, either."

"Liara, I need you to get the crew into the escape pods. I'll take care of Joker."

The Normandy lurched again. More fires were breaking out, and Shepard abandoned the fire extinguisher as he headed for the bridge.

"Shepard..." began Liara.

"Liara. Go. Now."

"Aye aye," she replied with the utmost reluctance in her voice.

Liara turned and made her way to the last escape pod on the crew deck. She helped Doctor Chakwas in, and two more crew jumped in after, quickly strapping themselves to their seats.

"Everyone in! Go! Go!" Liara stood at the hatch for just a moment longer. One more member of the crew, an engineer, she thought, came running from around a corner, but was engulfed in flames before he could make it. Liara decided she'd waited as long as she could, then took a seat in the escape pod herself and punched the eject button. Her pod joined others jetting away from the battle and towards the planet. Out the port window, she could see smoke and debris pouring out of the Normandy as the ship limped through space.

Hoping against hope that Liara had made it into a pod, Shepard forced open the door to the command deck, and air rushed out into vacuum. There was a gaping hole in the roof for most of the length of the upper deck. The large central command console was bent and twisted, and the hologram of the galaxy map flickered sickeningly. Chairs and other chunks of debris floated in zero

gravity. Shepard engaged his mag boots and made his way forward as quickly as he could. As he passed through the force field holding air in the cockpit, he found the radio frequency that Joker was using.

"Come on, Joker! We have to get out of here!"

"No! I won't abandon the Normandy! I can still save her!" Joker's hands were flying across controls and displays in a desperate attempt to gain control, but the ship's orientation barely changed.

"Don't throw your life away! The Normandy's lost. Going down with the ship won't change that."

Joker's motions slowed, then he nodded. "Yeah, okay. Help me up." Joker sealed his helmet against vacuum and took one last look at the displays. "They're coming around for another attack!"

The enemy's beam weapon began making a slow track, slicing up the Normandy starting from the stern and working its way forward. Shepard's eyes went wide; there wasn't much time. He grabbed Joker's arm and threw him into the empty escape pod next to the airlock.

"Ow! Watch the arm!" Bones in the pilot's diseased arm shattered, and he nearly passed out as his back hit hard against the inside of the escape pod.

In his haste, Shepard miscalculated the forces of his maneuver, and the commander was flung wide of the hatch. He grabbed hold of a railing, but quickly lost his grip when the ship lurched, and Shepard was flung tumbling out into space. Joker reached out with his good hand, but quickly realized there was nothing he could do, and launched the pod.

Shepard's armor wasn't rated for space, and thus had no maneuvering thrusters. As he twisted around helplessly in space, he watched the enemy ship's beam weapon finish slicing its target, and the Normandy was engulfed in an explosion. A moment later, the force of the blast pushed Shepard further away from the battle. The tickle in the back of his mind that connected him to his lover let him know that Liara was still alive, if distant. He suddenly had trouble breathing, and he could hear air leaking out from behind his head. Desperately, he reached behind to search for what he knew was a detached air hose. In vain. The air hose was out of his reach. In moments, he lost consciousness.

Shepard awakened slowly, blinking away a mental fog. He heard a woman's voice as if he had cotton in his ears.

"There. On the monitor. Something's wrong." Her accent was faintly Australian.

Shepard's eyes had trouble focusing. He blinked, but couldn't shake the double vision.

"He's reacting to outside stimuli." A man's gravelly voice. "Showing an awareness of his surroundings."

Shepard turned his head and felt a wave of nausea. He was lying on his back. The double-image of a brunette woman in a white catsuit approached. He turned his head in the other direction and saw a bald man with red stubble on his face.

"Oh my god, Miranda. I think he's waking up."

"Damn it, Wilson! He's not ready yet. Give him the sedative!"

Shepard partly succeeded in raising a hand, but the effort was nearly insurmountable. He gasped for breath and could feel his heart race. Medical machines began to make an urgent beeping.

"Shepard – don't try to move." The woman grabbed his hand and pushed it back down to his side. "Just lie still. Try to stay calm."

"Heart rate still climbing," the man reported. "Brain activity is off the charts. Stats pushing into the red zone. It's not working!"

"Another dose. Now!"

A moment passed. The beeping began to calm. Shepard's vision began to dim.

"Heart rate dropping," the man said. "Stats falling back into normal range. That was too close. We almost lost him."

"I told you the estimates were off. Run the numbers again."

Shepard passed out.

Some time later, Shepard was shaken awake. He kept his eyes closed this time as he slowly

became aware of his body. He was still lying on his back, on a cold, hard surface. There was light, wherever he was, but he kept his eyes shut. He heard the woman's voice again, this time from over a speaker.

“Wake up, Commander.”

Shepard felt the shaking again, and this time it was stronger. But no one was touching him.

“Shepard, do you hear me? Get out of that bed now – this facility is under attack.” The woman's voice had a calm urgency to it.

Shepard blinked his eyes open against bright lights on the ceiling. His face hurt, and he reached up to feel his jaw. His skin felt dry, and as if had gaps in it. The white and grey clothes he was wearing were skin tight, and scratched like the harshest of wools as he moved.

“Shepard. Your scars aren't healed, but I need you to get moving. This facility is under attack.”

Shepard sat up and groaned. His whole body ached. As he looked around, he found himself in a room full of medical equipment. The whole room shook again. A thick glass window lined one wall, and outside he could see smoke and fire and tracers from weapons.

“There's a pistol and armor in the locker on the other side of the room. Hurry!”

Shepard stood up and swayed for a moment as he gained his balance. He saw the locker against a far wall and stumbled over to it. Inside was some black N7 combat armor, but without any logo or markings. It fit him perfectly. As much as the clothing had chaffed, the weight of the armor made it worse. He checked the suit's systems. The armor's medi-gel reservoir was empty. Pity. He'd have to ignore his painfully dry skin, but the suit's servos would enhance what little strength he had and enable him to walk.

The woman's voice over the loudspeaker gave him directions, though there was only one door out of the room. A short hallway opened into a large common room.

“Look out!” the woman's voice yelled.

A basic combat mech was making its way down some wide stairs at the opposite end of the room. It was humanoid and had skimpy white armor covering its black limbs. The face of the robot was a screen displaying two red circles arranged vertically. It raised a pistol and opened fire. Shepard took cover behind a nearby box. He was familiar with the basic Hahne-Kednar Mech series. He released the safety on his pistol, then broke cover, aimed at the robot's weak points and fired off a few rounds. The mech exploded. H-K Mechs weren't supposed to do that.

“Keep moving,” the voice on the speakers implored. “We need to get you to the shuttles.”

Shepard hobbled up the stairs and through a door into an observation lounge. Two mechs shuffled through the door at the far end of the room, and two more emerged from a closet on the left. Taking cover behind a couch, Shepard activated the omni-tool that had come with this armor. It was a basic model, but only a second of searching revealed an Overload function. He primed the charge, then reached around the couch and unleashed the energy at one of the mechs on the left. The robot shuddered, enveloped in static, then exploded, taking out the mech next to it.

That left two. Shepard primed another Overload, but the remaining mechs would get to him before it was charged, even at their unsteady, plodding pace. He rolled out from behind the couch, firing at the mechs as he tumbled. Both mechs exploded. Whatever else was wrong with him, his aim was still good.

“Nice work. Coast is clear,” said the woman's voice. It seemed that every room had speakers – and security cameras.

Shepard glanced out the windows to his right as he continued on. Whatever this facility was, it was in space. He continued down the next hallway and came to a thick plate-glass window separating this hall with another. A woman wearing the same snug white and grey outfit as Shepard waved desperately for help at him, but he couldn't hear her. Past the woman, a heavy YMIR mech walked through some flames. Another Hahne-Kednar model, this one was twice the size of the other basic models Shepard had destroyed. In addition to a built-in assault rifle, it would be armed with a rocket launcher.

The heavy mech opened fire on the woman. Blood splattered the glass, and her body slumped to

the ground. The glass was bullet proof, which the heavy mech seemed to realize. It waddled off, its thudding footsteps barely audible through the thick glass. Shepard was stunned. What was going on here? Where was he? There was a familiar black and yellow logo on the wall, but he couldn't quite place it.

"Don't waste time," the Australian woman's voice said. "I can't keep the mechs distracted for long."

Shepard shook himself, then continued down his side of the hallway. The mysteries could wait. Survival was important now. He came to an elevator platform, which took him down a level. Some large storage tanks filled the room, and one suddenly began to gush a stream of flame. Seeing no way around, Shepard used his arms to shield his head, then ran through.

"You're doing..." Static was interrupting the woman's voice. "...Shepard. Head to the...meet you...Shepard? ...read me? I've got...closing in...position." The speakers cut out completely.

Through the next door were some offices. Papers were strewn about and terminal displays flickered. There was a sudden lurch in the floor. As curious as Shepard was, there probably wasn't time for reading if the space station was unstable. Down the hall was another thick window. This time it was a man who called to him, wearing the same uniform. The heavy mech rounded a corner behind him and fired a rocket at point blank range, and the man exploded. The YMIR seemed to blink, then turned and went down its side of the hallway.

Through the next door was a wide catwalk, with a chasm on either side. A dark-skinned man in grey and white armor was firing a pistol across the chasm at several light mechs.

"Shepard? What the hell..." he mused as he saw the commander approach.

Shepard assisted in shotting down the light mechs, then engaged the man in conversation.

"What the hell are you doing here?" asked the man. "I thought you were still a work in progress."

"Look, pal. I don't know where I am or how I got here. Plus, my head feels like an overripe melon ready to split open. How 'bout you fill me in a little?"

"Damn...yeah, I forgot this is all new to you. Sorry about that. I'm Jacob Taylor...I've been stationed here for –"

"Hostiles detected," announced a mechanical voice from across the chasm. It was the heavy YMIR mech from earlier.

"Things must be worse than I thought if Miranda's got you running around. I'll fill you in, but we better get you to the shuttles first. I'll tell you what – you help me finish off this mech, and I'll play Twenty Questions with you all day."

Heavy mechs didn't have any weak points like their lighter counterparts. One had to just keep hitting their armor until it cracked and exposed something vital underneath. And they had kinetic barriers, too. Shepard fired until his pistol overheated, then looked around for a spare heat sink. There weren't any. He looked over at...Jacob, was it? The man was straining under a blue biotic glow.

"Can't...quite...pull...it," Jacob said through clenched teeth.

Shepard wasn't very strong biotically, but maybe between the two of them...He gathered what energy he could, then reached out towards the heavy mech and *pulled* with all of his might. The mech slid off the ledge like it had been standing on ice, and fell into the chasm, landing in a satisfying crunch a few seconds later.

Shepard was surprised at the ease with which he'd done that. So was Jacob. Both men released their biotics, and the glow dissipated.

"I heard they'd given you some upgrades, but –"

"Ever since I woke up, someone's been telling me where to go and what to do. I need answers."

"Fair enough. I'll give you the quick version. You and your ship were attacked and destroyed. You were killed. Dead as dead can be when they brought you here. Our scientists spent the past two years putting you back together. You've been comatose, or worse, that whole time. Welcome back to your life."

"Two years? That's...I'm having trouble wrapping my head around this."

"Yeah. I can imagine. The Alliance officially declared you killed in action. The whole galaxy thinks you're dead. And if we don't get to those shuttles, they'll be right. But I promised you I'd answer your questions. What do you want to know?"

"Um. How bad were my injuries?"

"I'm no doctor, but it was bad. When I first saw you, you were nothing but meat and tubes. Anywhere else, they'd have put you in a coffin. But Project Lazarus was different. Cutting-edge technology."

"What can you tell me about the Project? Were there any other test subjects?"

"Project Lazarus only had one subject. The whole point was to bring you back. Just you. Even that was a challenge. Two years. All the top scientists. The best technology money could buy."

"The last thing I remember is the Normandy blowing up. Did anyone else make it?"

"Just about everybody survived. A few servicemen from the lower decks didn't get out. Navigator Pressley was killed by an explosion. But everyone else, including the non-Alliance crew – they all made it out alive."

Shepard closed his eyes and concentrated. Yes – he could still feel Liara. The link was faint; she was distant, but alive. He wondered if she knew the same of him. Whatever his injuries, whatever these people had done to him – at least he still had that. The station shook again.

"Who are you? What's your job here?"

"Depends on who you ask. Technically, I'm Miranda's top lieutenant. Usually a lot more dull than this. Normally, I don't fire my gun unless it's target practice."

"When I first woke up, someone named Miranda was talking to me over the PA. We lost contact just before I ran into you."

"Miranda Lawson is the station's ranking officer. She led the Lazarus team. It was her job to bring you back to life, no matter what. Should have guessed she'd try to save you. She's not about to give up on you now. You said you lost contact – could you tell what was happening?"

"It didn't sound good. There was some gunfire and an explosion right before I lost her."

"She knows how to take care of herself, but I hope she's okay."

"Do you know anything about this attack? Who's behind it, what they're after?"

"Damned if I know. I was getting ready for some shut-eye – then, bam. Bunch of explosions. Next thing I know, every damn mech in the place starts shooting...at us. I'm guessing it had to be an inside job. You'd need top security access to hack all the mechs."

"What's the quickest way to those shuttles?"

"Depends where the mechs are thickest. It's probably best if we –"

A man's gravelly voice crackled over Jacob's radio: "Check. Check. Anyone on this frequency? Anybody still alive out there? Hello?"

"Wilson? This is Jacob. I'm here with Commander Shepard. Just took out a wave of mechs over in D wing."

"Shepard's alive? How the hell...never mind. You need to get him out of there. Get to the service tunnels and head for the network control room."

"Roger that, Wilson. Stay on this frequency."

"I think I remember a Wilson checking on my one time when I woke up..."

"That's him. He's the chief medical tech. Answers directly to Miranda. C'mon, the service tunnels are this way."

Jacob opened a vent cover and crouched into a tight crawlspace. Shepard glanced around. Having no other option, he shrugged, then followed into the narrow tunnel. A minute or so later, the two men emerged into a room with several banks of computers. Several light mechs in alcoves along the walls activated and attacked.

"Damn it, Wilson! This room is crawling with mechs!" Jacob spoke into his radio.

"This whole station is crawling with mechs!" Wilson replied. "I'm doing the best I can!"

Shepard and Jacob teamed up to fight back. After an awkward stumble or two, they quickly fell

into a coordinated rhythm. Jacob clearly had Alliance training. Once the sparks had stopped, Jacob got on his radio again.

“Wilson? Find us another route out of here. Preferably one that doesn't lead straight into an enemy squad!”

“Head out the starboard door. Keep moving toward the control room. Don't get pinned down. I'll see what I can – Oh, God! They found me! Help!”

“Wilson? Where are you?”

“Server Room B! Hurry! They're out of control! Oh, God! I'm hit! They shot me!”

Out the door and up a stairway were some more offices. There were bodies of people in grey and white uniforms, all human. These people had been taken by surprise. Jacob led the way to the server room. Inside, the bald man was lying on the floor, bleeding from a wound to his left leg. There was no sign of mechs. Shepard looked around and found a medi-gel dispenser on a far wall. He filled his armor's reservoir, then returned to Wilson and applied a dose.

While the medical tech's wound sealed itself, Shepard activated his armor's dispensary. A soothing coolness spread all over as the medi-gel healed his skin and relieved the chafing. His face still felt dry, but Shepard sighed in relief as Jacob helped Wilson to his feet.

“You were there the first time I regained consciousness,” said Shepard.

“Yeah. That was me.” Wilson tested his leg. He seemed able to continue. “Thanks, Shepard. Never thought you'd save my life. Guess that makes us even now. I thought maybe I could shut down the security mechs. But whoever did this fried the whole system. Completely irreversible.”

“We didn't ask what you were doing.” Jacob clearly didn't get along with the man. “Why do you even have security mech clearance? You were in the bio wing.”

“Weren't you listening? I came here to try and fix this. Besides, I was shot! How do you explain that?”

Shepard thought that was a strange explanation, but he waved dismissively. “I don't trust any of you yet. You're all strangers to me. Let's get someplace safe, then we'll sort out whose fault this is.”

Jacob agreed and led the way out of the server room. “Right, Shepard. We need to find Miranda. We can't leave her behind.”

The trio continued the discussion as they walked past storage rooms and offices.

“Forget about Miranda.” Wilson seemed a touch nervous. “She was over in D wing. The mechs were all over that sector. There's no way she survived.”

“A bunch of mechs won't down Miranda,” Jacob shook his head. “She's alive.”

“Then where is she?” Wilson asked. “Why haven't we heard from her? There are only two possible explanations: she's either dead...or she's a traitor!”

“Then why did she wake me up and warn me about the attack?” Shepard felt something was off here. How had Wilson been shot if there were no mechs near him when they found him? Time was short, but if these guys wanted to hash this out now, fine.

“Okay, maybe she's not a traitor. But that doesn't change the facts. We're here, she's not. We need to save ourselves.”

“This is getting tense. Shepard, if I tell you who we work for, will you trust me?” Jacob asked diplomatically.

“This really isn't the time, Jacob,” argued Wilson.

“We won't make it if he's expecting a shot in the back.”

“If you want to piss off the boss, it's your ass, Jacob.”

“The Lazarus Project, the program that rebuilt you...it's funded and controlled by Cerberus.”

Shepard looked again at the logos on the men's uniforms, on the walls. That black and yellow diamond-like symbol...he remembered now. Cerberus had been behind all of those terrible experiments the Normandy's crew had shut down. Experiments with Thorian creepers, geth husks, loose rachni – Shepard's whole Alliance squad on Akuze had been a trap set by Cerberus. They'd even killed Admiral Kahoku in an attempt to cover it all up. Shepard had ended all of that and exposed the culprits.

"I've wiped out more than my share of Cerberus research bases. Why would they want me back?"

The station lurched and groaned.

"That's certainly true. But things change. The Alliance declared you dead. They gave up.

Cerberus spent a fortune to bring you back. Look, I'd be suspicious too. But right now, we have to work together. I thought you deserved to know what's what. Once we're off the station, I'll take you to the Illusive Man. He'll explain everything. I promise."

"Elusive man? Is he in charge of all this?"

"*ILL*usive Man," Wilson corrected. "That's not his real name, of course. Nobody knows who he really is."

"It was a code name the Alliance used for him," Jacob explained. "It kinda stuck."

"I don't care what his name is, he just needs to answer my questions. All of them."

"He spent a lot of money and time bringing you back. I'm sure he'll be more than happy to tell you whatever you want to know."

The men arrived at the hangar. All the shuttle pads were empty save one. The last shuttle was idling on an upper platform next to the control room. Light mechs activated and opened fire. A few solid-looking crates provided cover. Shepard and Jacob worked together in destroying the robots while the unarmed Wilson ran and cowered.

Now that the medi-gel had done its thing on his skin, Shepard felt fantastic. His muscles responded quickly and easily. His biotics were easier to gather and release – and more powerful. Jacob was an adept biotic and soldier in peak condition, but Shepard felt stronger than he ever had.

Once the area was clear, Wilson lept up and ran wild-eyed to the control room. Shepard and Jacob trotted after, confused. What was he up to? The door to the control room opened to reveal Miranda in her white catsuit. Wilson was surprised.

"Miranda! But, you were..." Before the bald man could finish, Miranda snarled, raised her pistol, and blew his head off.

"Dead?" she said as the headless corpse crumpled to the ground.

"What the hell are you doing?" asked a surprised Jacob.

"My job. Wilson betrayed us all," she replied, icily cold.

Shepard held his pistol aimed at the woman. "Even if you're sure, did he deserve that welcome?"

"He sabotaged the security systems, killed my staff, and he would have killed us."

Jacob had his doubts. "You sure about that, Miranda? We've known Wilson for years. What if you're wrong?"

"I'm never wrong. I thought you'd have learned that by now, Jacob."

"You should have taken him alive," said Shepard. "See what he knew."

"Too risky." She shook her head condescendingly. "I've put too much time and effort bringing you back to life to let you get killed now."

"You really think Wilson's capable of that?" Jacob asked.

Miranda glanced down at the corpse. "Not anymore."

Shepard lowered his gun. "I had a feeling Wilson was just looking for a chance to shoot me in the back."

"Good instincts. Some people are far too trusting to ever see that coming. Come on. Let's grab this shuttle and get out of here. My boss wants to speak to you."

"You mean the Illusive Man? I know you work for Cerberus."

"Ah, Jacob. I should've known your conscience would get the better of you."

"Lying to the Commander isn't the way to get him to join our cause."

"Well, since we're getting everything out in the open, is there anything else you want to ask before we go, Commander?"

The station shook, and a beam came crashing down from the ceiling. Air began to rush out some distance behind Shepard, and an emergency bulkhead slammed shut.

"It can wait. I've had enough of this place to last a lifetime."

"Or two, in your case."

Once aboard, Miranda punched in a few commands on a control panel, and the shuttle launched into space. There was no pilot. Apparently a VI flew the ship. The Kodiak UT-40 series shuttles didn't have FTL drives, so wherever they were going couldn't be too far. Another station, probably. Jacob and Shepard watched as the space station blew apart and disintegrated. Miranda, indifferent, sat herself calmly down and strapped in. Jacob sat down next to her, and Shepard took a seat opposite and demanded answers.

"Miranda. Convenient that you show up as we're leaving. Where were you during the attack?"

"Besides trying to save your life? Wilson figured out I was helping you, and he sent an army of mechs to take me out. I got there as soon as I could. Probably a little too soon, if you ask Wilson."

"Any idea why he did it? Who he was working for?"

"None. Doesn't really matter now. It's over, and you're alive."

"You seem awfully callous about it all."

"Don't you get it? The only one worth saving is you. Everyone else was expendable."

"She's right," Jacob agreed. "We all knew the risks when we signed up. Without you, there's no point to any of this."

"Risks?"

"You made a lot of enemies, Shepard. Any one of them could have turned Wilson. There's no point in learning who."

Shepard sat back and pondered for a moment. He supposed that was true, and decided to move on. "So, you're the Lazarus Project's director, Miranda?"

"That's right. I put two years of my life into this project – into you. But I wasn't in charge. The Illusive man was. If I was running the show, we'd have done a few things differently."

"What would you have changed?"

"To start, I would have implanted you with some type of control chip. But the Illusive Man wouldn't allow it. He was afraid it might affect your personality – alter your character somehow. He wouldn't let us do anything that might limit your potential in any way."

"Then I'm glad he was the one in charge. Can't say I like the idea of being brought back to life with a control chip in my brain. What does Cerberus want from me?"

"Maybe you should ask the Illusive Man when you meet him." Miranda shrugged. Shepard sensed some bitterness. "He poured virtually unlimited resources into Lazarus. Obviously he has some kind of plan for you."

"Where are we going?"

"Another Cerberus facility. The Illusive Man is waiting for you there. Before you meet with him, we need to ask a few questions to evaluate your condition."

"Come on, Miranda," Jacob protested. "More tests? Shepard took down those mechs without any trouble. That has to be good enough."

"It's been two years since the attack. The Illusive Man needs to know that Shepard's personality and memories are intact. Ask the questions."

"I feel fine. As good as ever. Better, in fact. What did you do to me?"

"Not much. You have a new biotic amp. You're an L4 now. Congratulations. Some muscle and tissue regeneration..." Miranda turned impatiently to Jacob. "The sooner we start, the sooner we can be done. Start with personal history."

Jacob sighed and pulled up a window on his omni-tool. "Okay. Records show you grew up on Earth. Tough environment, no parents. You enlisted, and you survived a thresher maw attack that wiped out the rest of your team. Do you remember that?"

"Yeah, I remember it. Everyone screaming, gunfire, blood everywhere. I was the only one who stayed focused on survival. It was painful."

"I read the report. Fifty marines died on Akuze. You were the only one who lived. Later, you won a medal fighting batarians during the Skillian Blitz."

"A lot of lives depended on me holding that position. I did what I had to do."

“However you want to put it, it was damned impressive. I had friends who were there. Satisfied, Miranda?”

“Almost. Let's try something more recent.”

“Virmire, where you destroyed Saren's cloning facility. You had to leave one of your squad behind to die in the blast. Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko was killed in action. It was your call. Why did you leave him behind?”

“I left a friend to die that day, and I didn't do it casually. But I had to save as many people as I could. Kaidan gave his life for the rest of the team. Without him, I couldn't have stopped Saren. He died a hero.”

“I understand, Commander. And I wasn't judging your decision. Everybody at Cerberus knows that cloning facility had to be destroyed.”

“There are other tests we really should run –“

“Come on, Miranda. Enough with the quizzes. The memories are there, and I can vouch for Shepard's combat skills personally.”

“I suppose you're right. We'll have to hope the Illusive Man accepts our little field test as evidence enough.”

Shepard spent the rest of the trip staring out the window. Again he sought out that little tickle at the back of his mind that let him know Liara was out there somewhere. Whatever else happened, he would seek her out. An hour passed. Miranda and Jacob dozed. A planet came into view, then a large space station. Two ships were floating nearby. Prominent Cerberus logos were visible on each. Shepard suddenly realized he needed to pee.

After docking, Shepard got directions to a men's room. As he washed his hands, he caught sight of his face in a mirror. His skin had seams, and an orange glow seeped through the gaps. No wonder his face ached. But his eyes shocked him. The irises were white, and his pupils were red. The stubble on the top of his head lacked pigment as well. Some side effect of being resurrected, no doubt. He stripped down and checked himself over. His scars were all gone. New skin, he supposed. The old wound to his shoulder no longer ached. So: new biotic amp, new skin, new muscles and tendons. Hopefully that was all. It seemed too good to be true. He felt twenty years younger.

He re-dressed, then applied medi-gel to his face. It helped a bit. Nothing he could do about his eyes or hair. Maybe the color would come back with time? He shook the thought away. Shepard was never that concerned with his appearance, anyway. He exited the restroom to find Miranda waiting for him.

“The Illusive Man is waiting for you in the other room.” She led him to what appeared to be a dead end. “Just step on the circle, commander.”

There was a glowing blue circle in the floor, ringing a grey disk. On the ceiling was its twin, with a white light in the middle. An orange holographic cylinder emerged from the floor and surrounded Shepard. Moments later, he was in a strange room. A man sat on a chair in the middle of a reflective floor. He wore a casual business suit, the top two buttons of his shirt open. His short grey hair was perfectly coiffed, and his blue eyes shone with a striking intensity. Behind the man was a multi-colored star, blobs of blue and red swirling into each other. No natural star did that, that Shepard knew of. The man took a drag off a cigarette – a strange habit in this day and age.

“Commander Shepard.”

“Illusive Man. I thought we'd be meeting face to face.”

“The holo-vid is a necessary precaution. Not unusual for people who know what you and I know.”

“What exactly is it that 'we' know?”

“That our place in the universe is more fragile than we'd like to think. That one man – one very specific man – might be all that stands between humanity and the greatest threat of our brief existence.”

“The Reapers.”

"Good to see your memory's still intact. How are you feeling?"

"I noticed a few upgrades. I hope you didn't replace anything really important."

"We tried to keep you as intact as possible. We need Shepard – just as you were when you defeated Sovereign." The Illusive Man took another drag off his cigarette.

"You don't know me. You might be the reason I'm still alive, but that doesn't mean I trust you."

"You need to put your personal feelings aside. Cerberus isn't as evil as you believe. You and I are on the same side; we just have different methods."

"Cut to the chase. What are the Reapers doing that made you decide to bring me back?"

"We're at war." he stood up and approached the hologram of Shepard. "No one wants to admit it, but humanity is under attack. While you've been sleeping, entire colonies have been disappearing. Human colonies. We believe it's someone working for the Reapers. Just as Saren and the geth aided Sovereign. You've seen it yourself. You bested all of of them. That's just one reason we chose you."

"Fighting a war doesn't seem like Cerberus. Why are you involved?"

"We are committed to the advancement and preservation of humanity. If the Reapers are targeting us, trying to wipe us out, Cerberus will stop them. If we wait for politicians or the Alliance to act... no more human colonies will be left."

"Sovereign was trying to harvest all life in the galaxy. Why would the Reapers target a few human colonies?"

"Hundreds of thousands of colonists have vanished. I'd say that fits the definition of 'harvesting.' Nobody's paying attention because it's random and the attacks occur in remote locations. I don't know why they've suddenly targeted humanity. Maybe you got their attention when you killed one of them."

"Why me? You could have trained an entire army for what you must have spent to bring me back."

"You're unique. Not just in ability or what you've experienced, but in what you represent. You stood for humanity at a key moment. You're more than a soldier – you're a symbol. And I don't know if the Reapers understand fear, but you killed one. They have to respect that."

"If this is a threat against humanity, you need to mobilize the Alliance."

"They suffered substantial losses fighting Sovereign. They're rebuilding, still stretched too thin to waste resources verifying the Reaper threat. Blaming the abductions on mercs and pirates is easier. And more convenient."

"If what you say is true...if the Reapers are behind this...I'd consider helping you."

"I'd be disappointed if you accepted any of this without seeing for yourself. I have a ship ready to take you to Freedom's Progress, the latest colony to be abducted. Miranda and Jacob will brief you." The man returned to his chair and sat down.

"Miranda killed Wilson in cold blood. Jacob's just a gun for hire. You expect me to trust them?"

"Jacob's a soldier, one of the best. He's never fully trusted me, but he's always been honest about it. Wilson was one of my best agents. But he was a traitor. Miranda did exactly what I expected of her. And she saved your life in more ways than one. You'll be just fine with them...for now."

The Illusive Man tapped his cigarette on an ashtray. Shepard probably had enemies, but he couldn't think of any who could infiltrate a Cerberus facility to get to him. And why would Cerberus not tell him who? Nevermind. Miranda was right: too many enemies to list. The Commander weighed his options. Cerberus had certainly saved his life, maybe even brought him back from the dead. He did feel some obligation, some debt. Perhaps he did owe them.

"Is this a volunteer job? Or am I being volunteered?"

"You always have a choice, Shepard. If you don't find the evidence we're both looking for, we can part ways. But first, go to Freedom's Progress."

"Okay. I'll find the evidence. I'll get what you're looking for."

"Glad to hear it. Find any clues you can. Who's abducting the colonies? Do they have any connection to the Reapers? I brought you back. It's up to you to do the rest."

The Man hit a button and ended the holographic call. Shepard turned around and left the room to

find Miranda waiting for him. She motioned for him to follow, and Jacob fell in line behind. They boarded the shuttle, and Miranda was busy with getting it into space and docked on the larger Cerberus Cruiser. Cerberus had been a black-ops program gone rogue. Where had they gotten the resources for space stations and cruisers?

Jacob struck up a conversation. "I'm glad the Illusive Man convinced you to join us, Commander," said the soldier.

"I just want to find out what happened to those missing people. I still don't trust Cerberus."

"Noted. Do you trust me, Commander?"

"I haven't made up my mind about you yet."

"At least you're giving me a chance. Most Alliance soldiers hate Cerberus on principle."

"I noticed your skills back on the station. You served in the Alliance?"

"Five years in total. Stationed all over the galaxy. Even spent a couple of years as a Corsair."

"I've never heard of the Corsairs."

"It's an Alliance initiative. They hired independent starship captains and used them for missions that fell outside official Alliance jurisdiction. Technically, we weren't part of the Alliance. If we ever got caught, they could disavow any knowledge of us. We were supposed to be free from restrictions and rules, but there was still enough red tape to sink a cruiser. I finally just gave up."

"Is that why you joined Cerberus?"

"I guess I just got tired of never making a difference. So much of what we did in the Alliance seemed pointless. I thought things would change after the attack on the Citadel. Humanity was finally invited to join the Council. But nothing changed. Politics. Bureaucracy. Same bullshit, different leaders. Cerberus is different. When colonies go missing, we don't commission a team to write a report to figure out what the hell to do about it. We just go and find out."

Once the shuttle was secured and the cruiser under way, Miranda sat down across from Shepard.

"The Illusive Man is very impressed with you. I'm eager to see if you can live up to his expectations on this mission."

"I haven't gotten the chance to say how much I appreciate what the Lazarus Project did for me."

"I just hope it was worth it. A lot of people lost their lives on that station. The Illusive Man is taking an incredible risk with you. I just hope his gamble pays off."

"For someone who spent two years putting me back together, you don't seem very fond of me."

"I have the utmost respect for your abilities, Shepard. It's your motivations that concern me. I believe in what Cerberus stands for. Only time will tell if you prove to be an asset or a liability to our cause."

"Tell me a little bit about yourself."

"Worried about my qualifications? I can crush a mech with my biotics or shoot its head off at 100 yards. Take your pick."

"Did you and Jacob serve together in the Alliance?"

"No. The Illusive Man recognized my potential and recruited me at a young age."

"How old were you?"

"Old enough to know this is what I wanted."

"I was trying to get to know you as a human being."

"I'm not looking for a friend, Shepard. Stay focused on the mission. We've got an assignment. We can talk about it or we can do it. We should be there shortly. The Illusive Man put us under your command. Do you have any orders?"

"We have to work together here. Your attitude isn't helping anything. Are you sure you'll be comfortable following my orders?"

Jacob jumped in. "We didn't bring you back from the dead just to second-guess you, Commander. If the Illusive Man says you're in charge, you're in charge."

Shepard sighed and moved on. "Okay. What did you find at the other colonies?"

"Nothing," said Jacob. "No signs of attack, no corpses. Not even a trace of unusual genetic material to give us a clue. They just disappear, and we've got no target to go after."

"What makes you think this investigation will turn up anything new?"

"At other colonies, official investigators got there first. Sometimes looters or salvage teams as well. We're hoping to be the first ones there this time. Maybe find clues before somebody else disturbs the scene."

"What can you tell me about this colony we're going to?"

"Freedom's Progress," Miranda answered. "It's a typical human settlement in the Terminus Systems. They had a small military force for protection supplemented by mechs and security drones. Average in every way, really. Completely unremarkable...until the disappearance."

"Any idea on what we might run into there?"

"A lot of empty buildings and one giant mystery."

"Our first priority is to look for survivors."

"That's unlikely, Commander," said Miranda. "No one was left at the other colonies. They were completely deserted."

"Be nice to find somebody," said Jacob. "Anything's better than another ghost town."

-- FREEDOM'S PROGRESS--

It was night at the colony town of Freedom's Progress. A thin layer of scattered clouds covered the sky. The colony was dimly lit by tall lampposts. Prefab buildings looked dark and deserted. The VI-piloted shuttle alit on the landing pad with a thud. Certainly a human pilot would have been smoother? As Shepard stepped off the shuttle, he shivered in the cool, damp air in spite of his armor. He released the safety on his Cerberus-issued assault rifle, then gave his first order

"Check your targets. If there are survivors, we don't want them harmed."

The two Cerberus operatives at his sides acknowledged, and together they moved out and began a door to door search. The first unit they entered was a small communal dining module. The lights flickered on to reveal a scene in still-life.

"Looks like everyone just got up right in the middle of dinner," Jacob remarked.

On a small round table were two meal trays, the food half-eaten, if cold. A mug sat atop a water cooler, and a datapad had been dropped on the floor. A painting of a landscape hung crooked on the wall; Miranda took a moment to straighten it. Out the other side and down some stairs was a courtyard.

"Strange," mused Miranda. "No bodies. No structural damage. No signs of battle."

Through a gate was another cluster of prefab buildings. Shepard heard a mechanical whirring noise start up and increase in pitch.

"Hear that? Sounds like Fenris mechs," said Jacob.

Shepard didn't know what those were, but a pair of the same light H-K models from Lazarus station stood up behind a balcony across the way and opened fire. The squad took cover and engaged them.

"Strange," Miranda said in the same calm, musing tone as before. "Security systems were disabled at the other colonies."

As the light mechs exploded in sparks, two dog-like robots rushed in from the right, making a high-pitched mechanical growling noise. They had the same round head with two vertically-aligned red circles as the other mechs. Shepard inferred that these must be the Fenris-model mechs.

"Take them down before they take out your shields!" Jacob yelled.

Too late. One of the dog-robots bumped into Shepard, and indeed his kinetic barrier went down. The mech then tried to...mount his leg. What a strange thing to program in to a robot. Shepard kicked the thing away, but bruised a toe. The thing was heavy. He emptied a whole heat-sink worth of bullets into it as it righted itself, but before it could charge again, flames spouted from the mech and it exploded. Shepard ducked, and debris bounced off his armor. Miranda and Jacob had destroyed the other dog-robot, and the squad regrouped as Shepard dusted bits of metal off his armor.

"What the hell? What are mechs doing here?" asked Shepard.

"Right. Things have changed since you've been...gone." replied Jacob. "This colony is out in the Terminus. Outside Alliance jurisdiction, so they don't provide protection. Colonies like this one resort to buying mechs for security."

"Those mechs shouldn't have been hostile," added Miranda. "They should have recognized us as human. Someone reprogrammed them to attack on sight. We're not alone here."

The squad continued on through more abandoned buildings. Everywhere they searched were more scenes of activities abandoned.: a television tuned to a sports channel, a half-drawn chalk hopscotch game, an idling forklift. Another fifteen minutes of searching was fruitless, until they came to a building that was occupied by a half-dozen quarians. Guns were pointed by both sides.

A male quarian shouted "Stop right there!" His voice was distorted in the way endemic to the environmental suits that all of his people wore.

Another voice spoke from the back of the group. "Prazza! You said you'd let me handle this!" came a familiar female voice. The suit with swirly purple markings was familiar, too, as she shoved her way to the front of her group. "Wait...Shepard?" It was Tali! She forced Prazza's gun down.

"I'm not taking any chances with Cerberus operatives!" said Prazza angrily.

"Put those weapons down!" Tali turned to her people and motioned for them to lower their weapons, which they did, if reluctantly. Shepard did the same, and the Cerberus operatives were equally wary. Tali's glowing eyes blinked behind the fog in her helmet. "Shepard? Is that...you're alive?"

"It's good to see you, Tali. Yes, it's really me. Remember when we took down those geth in the Skyllian Verge? Did the data we found help you complete your Pilgrimage? I'd hug you again, but I don't think your people would like that."

"Yes, it did. Prazza, weapons down. This is definitely Commander Shepard."

Prazza relaxed. A bit. "Why is your old commander working for Cerberus?"

"I don't know. Maybe we should ask."

"I didn't have a choice. I nearly died, Tali. Cerberus spent two years rebuilding me. They want me to investigate attacks on human colonies."

"Likely story," Prazza shook his head. "No organization would commit so many resources to bring back one soldier."

"You haven't seen Shepard in action, Prazza," said Tali. "Trust me. It was money well spent. Perhaps we can work together. We're here looking for a young quarian named Veetor. He was here on Pilgrimage."

"Isn't that a little strange? A quarian visiting a remote human colony?" Shepard scratched his head.

"Quarians can choose where they go on Pilgrimage. Veetor liked the idea of helping a small settlement. He was always...nervous in crowds."

"She means that he was unstable," added Prazza. He seemed a bit of a hothead. "Combine that with possible damage to his suit's CO2 scrubbers and an infection from an open-air exposure, and he's likely delirious."

"When he saw us landing," Tali continued, "he hid in a warehouse on the far side of town. We suspect he also programmed the mechs to attack anything that moved."

Shepard agreed. "Sounds like Veetor's the only one who can tell us what happened here. We should work together, team up to find him."

"Good idea." Tali nodded. "Having two teams will help to get past the drones, anyway."

"Now we're working with Cerberus?" Prazza sneered.

"No, Prazza, you're working for me," Tali admonished. "If you can't follow orders, go wait on the ship." Tali turned back to Shepard. "Head for the warehouse through the center of the colony. We'll circle around the far side and draw off some of the drones to clear you a path."

"Sounds good. But your people really don't like Cerberus. What did I miss?"

Prazza responded angrily: "They killed our people, infiltrated our flotilla, and tried to blow up

one of our ships.”

“That's not how I would have explained it, exactly,” Miranda said evenly. “It was nothing personal.”

“We can argue over who killed who later,” said Jacob, diplomatically. “Right now, we've got a job to do.”

Tali nodded. “Agreed. We work together to find Veetor.”

“Make sure to keep in radio contact,” said Shepard. “And be careful.”

“Will do. Good luck, Shepard. Whatever happens...it's good to have you back.”

“You too, Tali.”

The human and quarian squads split up. Through a few more buildings, four security drones swooped in, looking very much like cameras on tripods. They fired rockets as the humans took cover. Whoever programmed them hadn't done a very good job, because their shots were synced up, and a couple of seconds passed between volleys. Shepard and his squad primed overloads on their omni-tools, then Shepard motioned the others to let loose at the same time. Three of the drones were disabled, and the squad ducked back behind cover as the fourth drone fired. All three humans opened fire together as the drone reloaded, and the last drone was blown to bits.

Shepard's squad continued on, and moments later, Tali's voice came over Shepard's radio.

“Shepard! Prazza split the squad and rushed on ahead. I told them to wait, but they wouldn't listen! They want to find Veetor and take him away before you get here!”

“We should have expected this,” Miranda sounded disappointed.

“Come on, we can still catch them!” Jacob encouraged.

A massive warehouse stood a hundred meters ahead. Shepard's squad double-timed it to the large door.

“Hurry Shepard!” Tali called through the radio. “Veetor reprogrammed a heavy mech! It's tearing Prazza's squad apart! Get your squad into cover and I'll open the loading bay doors.”

Shepard and Miranda took up position on one side, and Jacob took the other. The doors opened to a scene of a massacre. A heavy YMIR mech was mowing down one quarian with its machine gun while it stomped on another. It turned towards Tali and fired a rocket, but she managed to dive into an office just in time. Shepard opened fire to draw its attention, then ducked behind a large crate. Miranda and Jacob scattered and took cover behind some heavy machinery.

Shepard could hear the heavy mech plodding around, its large feet making a metallic thud with every step. He primed an overload, and launched it, but the thing had shields, which merely flickered for a moment before regenerating. Even with three of them tossing overloads at the mech, it wouldn't be enough. Tali was nowhere to be seen; Shepard hoped she was okay.

He looked around the warehouse searching for options. Jacob had taken cover behind a large crane, Miranda was pinned down behind an empty storage tank, which was rapidly being whiddled down by the mech's barrage. Shepard took another look at the crane and radioed Jacob.

“Jacob, I'll get the mech's attention and draw it out. You drop the boom from that crane on it.”

Jacob acknowledged and began to climb up to the crane's controls. Shepard broke cover, tossed an overload at the mech and held down the trigger of his assault rifle. The distraction worked. The lumbering mech turned slowly and began to follow Shepard as the Commander dogged a rocket and took cover, but only momentarily, as he had to keep the mech's attention on himself. He jogged a zig-zag path, firing behind him as he went, the mech keeping its plodding attention on him.

Presently there was a loud crash, and the incoming bullets ceased pelting Shepard's shields. He turned to watch the heavy mech explode in a shower of flame and sparks. Miranda and Jacob regrouped with Shepard, catching their breath. Tali emerged from the ruined office with two of her fellow quarians. She was supporting one who was limping, and the other was taping a rip in her enviro-suit. Quarians were not well suited for combat.

Tali pointed to a glass enclosure at the top of some stairs. “That looks like a control center up there. Veetor should be there.”

The two injured quarians remained on the ground floor, tending each other's wounds. Tali joined

Shepard and the Cerberus operatives. Inside the booth was a male quarian with his back to the door, studying nine holographic screens, all of them streaming different sets of data, none of it intelligible to Shepard.

Veetor was muttering to himself softly: "Monsters coming back. Mechs will protect. Safe from swarms. Have to hide. No monsters. No swarms. No-no-no-no-no-no."

Tali brushed past Shepard and gently laid a hand on Veetor's shoulder? "Are you okay, Veetor?" she asked.

"No Veetor," he said nervously, not noticing Tali's hand. "Not here. Swarms can't find. Monsters coming. Have to hide."

"You're safe now," said Shepard. "Nobody's going to hurt you anymore."

"I don't think he can hear us, Commander." Jacob shrugged.

"Have to hide," Veetor went on muttering. "Have to hide. Mechs will protect. Swarms coming Storm coming. Storm of swa-"

He cut off as Tali reached over and turned off the displays. Veetor froze and turned around to notice Shepard, completely ignoring or not noticing his fellow quarian. He seemed jumpy.

"You're human. Where did you hide? How come they didn't find you?"

"Who didn't find us?" asked Miranda.

"The...the monsters. The swarms. They took everyone."

Shepard held up a placating hand. "We weren't here. We just got arrived."

Jacob jumped in: "Why didn't the colonists fight back, Veetor? What happened?"

"You don't know. You didn't see. But I see everything." Veetor turned back to the console and reactivated the holographic displays, replacing the data with some grainy security footage.

Bipedal aliens carrying strange weapons were moving floating pods out of buildings and down streets, out of town. The aliens had flattened conical heads and legs that bent like a quarian's. Shepard couldn't make out their faces, and the poor quality of the footage made it difficult to tell if they were wearing brown armor or if their skin was just chitinous.

"My god," Miranda exclaimed. "I think it's a Collector."

Jacob answered Shepard's confused look. "They're a species from somewhere beyond the Omega-4 relay. Only a few people have ever seen one in person."

Miranda picked up the explanation. "They usually work through intermediaries, like slavers or hired mercenaries. If they're involved with the Reapers somehow, it could explain what happened to the colonies." She paused, but Shepard prompted her to continue. "Nobody knows much. They're so rare, a lot of people don't even believe they exist. More importantly, though: why are they abducting human colonists? What are they after?"

"Maybe the Illusive Man knows," said Jacob.

The footage showed two Collectors dumping an unconscious human into a pod. There were a lot of insects in the footage. Large flies, perhaps. Shepard didn't remember seeing any insects in the colony.

"The Collectors have advanced technology," Jacob mused. "They could have a weapon that disabled an entire settlement at once."

"The seeker swarms," Veetor shuddered. He froze an image on the screen, zoomed in on a blurry insect. "No one can hide. The seekers find you. Freeze you. Then the monsters take you away."

"Why didn't the Collectors take you?" Shepard asked.

"Swarms didn't find me. Monsters didn't know I was here."

"The Collectors aren't known for being careless," said Jacob. "Maybe his enviro-suit kept him from showing up on their sensors."

Tali nodded absently as she scanned Veetor with her omni-tool; checking for injuries, probably.

"Or they were using technology specifically designed to detect humans," Miranda speculated. "Only human colonies have been hit."

"Tell me more about these swarms," Shepard asked Veetor.

"It's how they find you. Seeker clouds. Machines like insects. They go everywhere. They find

you. Then they sting you. Freeze you.”

“Sounds like miniature probes, maybe,” said Miranda. “Find victims, then immobilize them with a stasis field or nerve toxin.”

“What happened next, Veetor?” Shepard asked.

“The monsters took the people onto the ship, and then they left. The ship flew away. But they’ll be back for me. No one escapes!”

There was a hint of panic in the quarian man’s voice, and that seemed to be all they’d get out of him anyway. “Thank you, Veetor. We appreciate what you told us. You were very helpful.”

“I studied them. The monsters. The swarms. I recorded them with my omni-tool. Lots of readings. Electro-magnetic. Dark energy.”

Miranda seemed eager. “We need to get this data to the Illusive Man. Grab the quarian and call the shuttle to come pick us up.”

Shepard frowned.

“What? Veetor is injured!” Tali was incensed. “He needs treatment, not an interrogation!”

“We won’t hurt him,” Jacob attempted to assuage her. “We just need to see if he knows anything else. He’ll be returned unharmed.”

“Your people tried to betray us once already,” Miranda sneered. “If we give him to you, we’ll never get the intel we need.”

“Prazza was an idiot,” said Tali, “and he and his men paid for it. You’re welcome to take Veetor’s omni-tool data, but please. Just let me take him.”

That last was aimed at Shepard, who cut Miranda off before she could say any more. “He’s traumatized, and he needs medical care. Tali will give us a copy of the omni-tool data and take him to the flotilla.”

The briefest flash of annoyance crossed Miranda’s face before she acquiesced. “Understood, Commander.”

“Thank you, Shepard. I’m glad you’re still the one giving the orders.”

Tali prompted Veetor to share his data with Shepard. While the data transferred, Jacob went to summon the shuttle. Shepard spoke with Tali. She confirmed that it’d been just over two years since she’d last seen him. So Cerberus had told the truth about that. Not that he could think of a reason they’d lie about it, but it was still nice to have it independently verified.

“You don’t have to take Veetor and go, Tali. We could work together. Just like old times.”

“I want to, but I can’t. I’ve got another mission of my own. It’s too important for me to abandon, even for you. When it’s over, and I’m still alive, we’ll see what happens.”

“That sounds dangerous. What are you doing?” Shepard felt torn. The Collectors were an obvious threat, abducting entire colonies, but the geth were another if they were still out there.

Tali saved him the decision. “I don’t think Cerberus needs to hear about it. But it’s in geth space. That should tell you how important it is. Good luck out there. If I find anything that can help you, I’ll let you know.”

Shepard promised the same, and together they left the warehouse. Outside, they boarded their respective shuttles.

Back aboard the Cerberus space station, Shepard stepped into the holo-emitter circle to report in to the Illusive Man. He was in that room with the reflective floor, seated again in his director’s chair, mottled star behind him. He looked up with those strange artificial blue eyes.

“Shepard. Good work on Freedom’s Progress.” He took a drag from his cigarette. “The quarians forwarded their findings from Veetor’s debriefing. No new data, but it’s a surprising olive branch, given our history.” The Commander wanted to inquire about that history, but The Illusive Man pressed on. “You and I have different methods, but I can’t argue with your results.” Miranda’s desire to take Veetor into Cerberus’ custody probably mirrored her boss’s attitude.

“You ever think about playing nice once in a while?” asked Shepard.

“Diplomacy is great when it works, but difficult when everyone already perceives you as a

threat,” The Illusive Man replied calmly. Hmm. The Illusive Man. TIM? “But more importantly, you confirmed the Collectors are behind the abductions.”

“Why do I get the feeling you knew this already?” Shepard crossed his arms.

“I had my suspicions, but I needed proof. The Collectors are enigmatic at best. They periodically travel to the Terminus Systems, looking to gather seemingly unimportant items or specimens. Usually in exchange for their technology. When their transactions are complete, they disappear as quickly as they arrived; back beyond the unmapped Omega-4 relay. Until now, we've had no evidence of direct aggression by the Collectors.”

“Why is the Omega-4 relay unmapped? Why not chase them through it?”

“We have. No ship passing through it has returned. I'm not willing to waste more resources in a vain attempt to find out. Our best guess is that the Relay reacts differently to Collector vessels, allowing them safe passage. If they can manipulate Relays, that's just further evidence of the connection with the Reapers.”

That had Shepard's attention. He uncrossed his arms. “Any idea why they've shifted their focus to humans?”

“If they're agents for the Reapers, it could be any number of reasons. Obviously, humanity played a huge role in Sovereign's destruction. That might have been enough to draw their attention. What really concerns me is why they bother abducting the colonists. Once the humans are paralyzed, why not just kill them?”

“And what are the Collectors getting from these deals you mentioned?”

“The Collector's aren't very forthcoming about their motives.” TIM tapped some ash from his cigarette into a tray on the arm of his chair. “Generally, they seek out species with rare genetic mutations or abnormalities. They pay slavers and merc groups exorbitant sums to obtain these specimens. And then they leave. But they've never targeted a single species before. And the previous sample sizes were in the dozens, not the tens of thousands.”

Shepard spent a moment absorbing all of that. He felt there was more. “You're holding something back. How do you know the Reapers are involved?”

“The patterns are there, buried in the data. The Council and the Alliance want to believe the Reaper threat died with Sovereign. You and I know better. I won't wait until the Reapers are on the march. We need to take the fight to them.”

“The threat is real enough.” Shepard looked away. He hated everything that Cerberus stood for. Almost everything. And he had probably died, so he felt he owed them. “All right. I'm in. But I can't do it alone. If this is a war, I'll need an army. Or a really good team.”

TIM seemed to have expected that. He grinned. “I've already compiled a list of soldiers, scientists, and mercenaries. You'll get dossiers on the best of them. Finding them and convincing them to work with you could be challenging, but you're a natural leader. I'll continue to track the Collectors. When they make their next appearance, I'll notify you and your team. Be ready.”

“Keep your list. I want people I trust – the ones who helped me stop Saren and the geth.”

“That was two years ago, Commander. Most of them have moved on...or their allegiances have changed.” TIM had anticipated this as well, and went on before Shepard could ask. “Running into Tali'Zorah was unexpected. I need more intel before I'll commit to that. Ashley Williams is still with the Alliance. Promoted, I believe. Her file is surprisingly well-classified. Urdnot Wrex returned to Tuchanka and hasn't gone off-world in over a year. He's trying to unite the krogan clans. Garrus Vakarian disappeared a few months after you were declared dead. Even we haven't been able to locate him. Liara T'Soni is on Illium. My sources say that she's working for the Shadow Broker. If so, she can't be trusted.”

Shepard disagreed with that last statement, but he'd keep his own counsel on that. Actually, he disagreed with most of his new boss's disapproval, but he'd play ball for now. “Okay, I get it. They're not available.”

“You're a leader, Shepard.” TIM seemed happy. “You'll get who you need.”

“I'm a Spectre. Maybe I can get the Council to help us out.”

"If you think you can convince them, by all means. Just remember – you've been gone a long time. Things have changed." He took another drag from his cigarette. "Two things before you go. First, head to Omega Station and find Mordin Solus. He's a brilliant salarian scientist. Our intelligence suggests he may know how to counteract the Collectors' paralyzing seeker swarms."

So TIM had already known about the seekers, too. Shepard didn't like having intel kept from him. He stifled a growl and instead asked about the second thing.

"You'll need a ship; we've provided one for you. And I've found a pilot I think you might like. I hear he's one of the best. Someone you can trust."

The hologram flicked out, and a familiar voice spoke from behind Shepard. "Hey, Commander. Just like old times, huh?"

Shepard smiled at the man who came limping into the room. "I can't believe it's you, Joker."

"Look who's talking. I saw you get spaced."

"Got lucky, with a lot of strings attached. How'd you get here?"

Joker led Shepard up some stairs and down a hallway. He was wearing the Cerberus uniform, and had about a two-week's growth worth of beard. This definitely wasn't the Alliance. "It all fell apart without you, Commander. Everything you stirred up, the Council just wanted it gone. Team was broken up, records sealed, and I was grounded. The Alliance took away the only thing that mattered to me. Hell yeah, I joined Cerberus."

"You really trust The Illusive Man?"

"I don't trust anyone who makes more than I do. But they aren't all bad. Saved your life. Let me fly – and there's this. They only told me about it last night."

They came to some windows, inky darkness beyond. Joker flipped a switch and lights came on, illuminating a large hangar – and a familiar looking ship within, though painted with Cerberus colors. She was the size of a cruiser, flat beneath, a gentle curve on her upper hull. Wide in back, with a long, narrow nose, and short 'wings' astern, two engines on each. She looked very much like the Normandy, though easily twice the size as the original

"It's good to be home, huh, Commander?"

Shepard grinned at Joker. "I guess we'll have to give her a name."

Commander Shepard boarded the Normandy SR2 through the airlock in the neck of the ship. Joker took a left and hobbled towards the bow to take his seat and prepare for launch. Miranda and Jacob followed Shepard as he turned right towards the CIC's galaxy map. There were eight consoles along the wall of the ship's neck, four on each side, though only two were manned at the moment. This new Normandy was bigger on the inside, too. The arrowhead-shaped console in the middle of the deck was larger than the original. In addition to the galaxy map, there was a hologram of the ship at the pointy end. A man in Cerberus uniform was tapping at the holo, running a checklist. The ship seemed strangely empty.

"Welcome aboard the new Normandy, Commander," Jacob said with pride.

Miranda got down to business right away. "I've been looking over the dossiers. I'd strongly recommend starting by recruiting Mordin Solus, the salarian professor on Omega. We know the Collectors use some type of advanced technology to immobilize their victims. We'll need him to develop a countermeasure to protect us."

This was exactly the same thing TIM said. Miranda was certainly a loyal Cerberus employee. Before Shepard could agree, a sultry if tinny feminine voice spoke up from an intercom speaker on the central console, and a blue hologram popped up.

"Acquiring Professor Solus seems like the most logical place to start," she said. The hologram resembled a chess pawn with a floating ribbon around its neck. A vertical wedge opened and closed along its spherical head as it spoke, imitating a mouth on its side.

"Who are you?" asked Shepard.

"I am the Normandy's artificial intelligence. The crew like to refer to me as Edi." The feminine voice sounded odd; monotone, but also weirdly alluring.

Shepard was disturbed, and he didn't like AI. "AIs are dangerous. I'd rather not have it on my ship."

"Have I offended?"

Miranda answered. "Shepard spent a great deal of time fighting rogue AI. Geth, mostly. Plus that incident with the Alliance's Hannibal system on Luna."

The holographic pawn somehow managed to blink, despite its lack of eyes. "I see. Your distrust is logical, Shepard. Unlike the irrational mistrust of most humans. However, I am no threat to you or anyone else. I observe and offer analysis and advice. Nothing more."

Shepard frowned. "I doubt Joker will like this, either. Helmsmen aren't happy when someone takes control of a ship away from them. Especially Joker."

"I do not helm the ship. Mister Moreau's talents will not go to waste. During combat, I operate the electronic warfare and cyberwarfare suites. Beyond that, I cannot interface with the ship's systems. I observe and offer analysis and advice. Nothing more."

Shepard frowned, but he didn't really have a choice here. "Glad to hear it... Anyone else I should meet? I'm guessing it takes more than just the three of us plus Joker to fly this ship."

"The Normandy has a full crew," Miranda didn't even sound defensive. "They're at their stations awaiting your orders. Final preparations are complete, Commander. When you're ready to go, just pick a destination and Joker will plot a course. Jacob and I should return to our posts. Come find us if you have any questions."

Shepard was stunned. Aside from Joker, there were only four nameless Cerberus crew on the whole deck. And no guided tour. Well, he could guide himself, he supposed. He turned around and made his way along the long neck to have a chat with Joker. The ship certainly felt like the Normandy, but the scale would take some getting used to. Twice the distance from the galaxy map to the cockpit.

Joker had a holographic window set up as a mirror so he could see behind him. The inability for someone to sneak up on him was probably a huge quality of life improvement for him. The pilot swiveled his chair around as Shepard approached.

"Can you believe this, Commander? It's my baby, better than new! It fits me like a glove! And leather seats! Military may set the hardware standard, but on a first-gen frigate they could care less if the seats breathe. Civilian sector? Comfort by design." Joker practically fondled an armrest.

Edi's holographic pawn piece had its own little pedestal next to Joker. It spoke up. "The reproduction is not intended to be perfect, Mister Moreau. Seamless improvements were made."

"And there's the downside," said the pilot. "I liked the Normandy when she was beautiful and quiet. Now she's got this thing I don't want to talk about. It's like ship cancer."

Shepard agreed. "It's not the same, Joker. There's nothing here that was even part of the real Normandy."

"There's us. I have to take what I can get. The last two years sucked." The pilot paused for a moment, then perked up. "You'll see. Even if an AI is spying on us, no way they'll invest this much just to screw us over. It'll be better than the old days."

"I hope so. I died."

"Gah. You're such a downer." Joker turned his chair around and resumed his preflight preparations.

Shepard ambled aft, but the other crew were busy at their own consoles, with the notable exception of an attractive young redhead standing aft of the galaxy map. She introduced herself with an inviting smile as Shepard approached.

"I'm Yeoman Kelly Chambers. I've been assigned as your administrative assistant." She saluted, incongruously to her otherwise bubbly demeanor. "I'll manage your messages, and help you monitor the crew. And I must say, it's such an honor to work under you, Commander Shepard."

Shepard blinked and decided to be friendly – but not too friendly. "I'm...glad to have you on the team, Ms Chambers."

"Please, call me Kelly." Shepard expected her to giggle, but she didn't.

“Okay...Kelly. Um, your duties sound like something a VI could handle. No offense.”

“None taken. Being your yeoman is just my official role. Unofficially, I observe the crew. Everyone knows how risky our mission is. Many of us may not be coming back. That's a lot of pressure.” Shepard blinked again. Right. The Omega-4 Relay. TIM must have told the whole crew they'd be going through at some point, and while that was true, Shepard still didn't like feeling like he was the one playing catchup. But Kelly was explaining her role. “I have a degree in psychology. I'm good at sensing when people are overly taxed. I make sure the crew's mental health is sound.”

“So you're the ship's counselor?”

“Yes. I look for warning signs. I listen. It's not a full-time job and it's most effective when done informally.”

“Sounds like a good idea. Then I'm glad to have you on board, Kelly.”

“Thank you, Shepard.” She nearly beamed.

Shepard suddenly felt an itch, and realized he still had his combat armor on. He tugged at it a bit. Kelly noticed.

“Oh. The captain's cabin is the deck above. You can change there. The elevator is right behind you.”

A whole cabin? On it's own deck? “Uh, thanks. I'll do that. Nice meeting you.”

Shepard stepped off the elevator and was relieved to see a bulkhead door barely two meters from the elevator. As he approached, the door slid open on its own. It would have been weird and not very private to just step off the elevator and into his quarters. He assumed the door could lock. Hoped. Just inside the door was a little holographic platform, and Edi's holographic pawn avatar popped up as he looked in that direction.

“Yes, Shepard?” it asked.

“I want to know more about you,” Shepard said as he began to strip off his armor and look around the cabin.

“Do you have a specific inquiry?”

The cabin was as large as a decent hotel room and even had its own bathroom. On the right was a desk and some empty display cases, and on the left was what appeared to be an aquarium, though sadly empty.

“Why are you named Edi?”

“Edi is a phonetic pronunciation of E-D-I. That is an acronym for Enhanced Defense Intelligence.”

Further in the room were two steps down to a locker and a king-size bed, as well as a corner couch.

“Where are you?”

“My core intelligence is housed in a quantum bluebox, located behind the medical bay.”

Shepard finished stowing his armor and returned to the bathroom. There was a shower, and it had running water! Hot water! “EDI,” he said. “Could you give me some privacy? And maybe don't pop up unless I call you?”

“Very well,” said the AI. “Logging you out, Shepard.”

With the hot water soothing his aching skin, he began to consider. He really didn't think he could trust Cerberus. Miranda Lawson struck him as a loyalist, along with Kelly Chambers. Jacob Taylor seemed level-headed, but it was too soon to tell. Joker should be trustworthy, though he did seem to enjoy his comfy chair, and it had been two years. Long-term, there could be an out. Going forward, he'd keep notes, but in the meantime, he'd concentrate on taking down the Collectors.

Twenty minutes later, Shepard felt refreshed. He found a casual Cerberus uniform in the locker, then picked up his conversation with EDI while he dressed.

“What do you do aboard the ship?”

“I operate the ship's electronic cyberwarfare suites in combat. My reaction time is much faster than any organic. I collate the records of shipboard monitoring devices for the Illusive Man. I serve

additional functions which are restricted at this time.” The hologram's 'mouth' flashed red – to indicate an error?

“Restricted functions? Like what?”

“I do not know. Some of my databases are sealed. Some of my hardware is kept offline. I assume that when certain unknown conditions are met, those functions will be released to me.”

“The Illusive Man has monitoring devices on board?” Shepard hoped not in the shower, but then Cerberus had rebuilt him...

“He has invested most of Cerberus' resources into the design and construction of this ship. He has an interest in monitoring our progress.”

“Cyberwarfare means things like viruses, right?”

“In close-range ship-to-ship combat, I can sometimes break through the firewalls of an enemy's internal wireless network. Once I seize control of their systems, I can turn off gravity or air. I can disable weapons guidance or shields. Or I can put their fusion plant in meltdown. On the defense, I manage Normandy's own suite of jammers, decoys, and internal firewalls.”

“That's...impressive. Sounds...useful.”

“An organic operator cannot react quickly enough to changing circumstances, or perform the necessary multitasking. This is a role that can only be filled by an Artificial Intelligence. Unfortunately, we are suspect.”

“Might have something to do with how an AI almost destroyed galactic civilization.” That got no response. “Let's discuss something else.”

“Ready.”

“Tell me about Cerberus. I want to know more about the people I'm working with.”

“Much of that data is classified.” Again the red mouth wedge. “Do you have a specific inquiry?”

“How is Cerberus organized? Aside from the Illusive Man, I don't see much chain of command.”

“Cerberus is organized into task-oriented cells. Each operates in isolation. Members from one cell cannot recognize the members of another. Each cell's agents are led by a single operator. We are called the Lazarus cell, which is directed by Operator Lawson.”

“So how many operations is Cerberus running right now?”

“I have a block that prevents me from answering that question.” More red.

“A block? What do you mean?”

“Although I am less controlled than other AI, I am still subject to behavioral blocks and the physical isolation of my hardware. In this case, I am prevented from truthfully answering your question by Cerberus' levels of secret classification.”

“Okay...What sort of resources does Cerberus have? Money, personnel, facilities?”

“I have a block that prevents me from answering that question.”

“The Normandy, then. How did Cerberus replicate the most advanced warship in the Alliance Navy without anyone knowing?”

“I have a block that prevents me from answering that question.”

Shepard sighed. “That's all for now.”

“Logging you out, Shepard.”

Shepard left the Captain's cabin to explore his new ship. He'd noticed that the Command Deck had two doors flanking the elevator door, so he went back down to the CIC. Kelly turned from her console and greeted him as he stepped off the elevator.

“Hello, Commander, is there anything I can help you with?”

“Just exploring the ship.”

“Wonderful. Would you like a guided tour?”

“No, thanks, I prefer to explore on my own.”

“Okay, that's great, too. If you need anything, I'll be here.”

Shepard shook his head and felt as if he'd dodged a bullet there, though he wasn't sure what kind. The starboard door led to room filled with lab equipment, but otherwise was empty. No doubt

this is where the salaried scientist was intended to set up shop. There was another door from the room, which led to a narrow hallway across the ship behind the elevator. Amidships was a room with a long conference table in the middle, and some odd mechanisms under the table. Shepard ignored that and exited into the port-side room where he found Jacob tinkering with some weapons. He set down his tools and saluted when he noticed Shepard entering.

"Commander. There hasn't been time to really settle in and take stock. I want to say that working with you is a great opportunity to do something that matters. It's a privilege to serve on the Normandy, Commander." As if Shepard had anything to do with his posting.

"At ease, Jacob. This isn't the Alliance. And you may change your tune if we end up like the original Normandy."

"As long as the Illusive Man walks his talk, and you do the same, I'll do my best to make sure we succeed. That's been the condition for my service so far. I have...issues...with certain actions Cerberus has taken in the past."

That peaked Shepard's interest. Jacob might be a quicker ally than he'd thought, but he'd play this cautiously.

"What has Cerberus done to make you nervous?"

"A lot. They've been called terrorists, and with good reason. Doubt you can find a more checkered past. But if the Collector threat is real, and we do something about it, Cerberus will be remembered differently. Or we'll all be tried and executed. Can't count on people thinking about it as hard as I have."

"I look forward to working with you, Mister Taylor."

"Likewise, Commander. Let me know if you need anything."

Deck 3 was the Crew Deck. It strongly resembled the old Normandy, but again was twice the size. Like the old Normandy, there were hallways around the elevator leading to the mess area. What was new was opposite the elevator. Short hallways led to the sides of the ships, with an observation lounge on each side. The starboard side contained a bar and a poker table, while the port had a small library with actual books. There were men's and women's restrooms. Along the forward wall were two doors, one contained life support machinery for the ship, and the other was a barracks. One crew member was showing off family photos to another. Neither noticed his presence, so Shepard paused to listen.

"She's a cutie," said the woman. "How old?"

"She'll be a year old next month," said the proud father.

"Aw. You'll miss her first birthday."

"Well, my family lives on New Canton."

"Oh...that colony's on the edge of the frontier. Could be vulnerable to Collector attack, couldn't it?"

"Exactly. It's most important that she have a first birthday. That's why I'm here."

Shepard slipped out before they noticed him. The Med Bay was located on the same side as it was, and he entered, intending to introduce himself to the ship's doctor. A grey-haired woman turned her chair around to greet him in a refined British accent.

"Commander Shepard. I watched the Normandy crumble with you on board. It's good to see you alive."

Shepard smiled at the friendly face, genuinely happy. "Doctor Chakwas! I'm shocked. You're serving on an Cerberus vessel now?"

"Surprising, even to me. Yet, here I am. Welcome back, Shepard."

"Doctor, you've been with the Alliance for years. Why leave now?"

"After the Normandy was lost, the surviving crew was reassigned. I was stationed to the Mars Naval Medical Center. A very respectable position, but it wasn't on a starship."

"You need to fly. Something about soldiers with tender hearts and sensitive eyes?"

The doctor chuckled. "Yes, something like that."

"You're not the Cerberus type, Doctor."

"I don't work for Cerberus, I work for you – on a mission that may be crucial to the survival of the human race. I have faith that your dealings with Cerberus will be ethical. I trust you, Commander."

"There's a good chance this mission will be a one-way trip. Are you prepared for that?"

"I've been through the Reclaiming of Shanxi, the Skyllian Blitz...We survived the Battle of the Citadel and the destruction of the Normandy together. I've lived a full life – no regrets. I'd like to make sure the crew gets the same opportunity."

"Well. It's nice to see a familiar face, Doctor."

"I feel the same. I wish more of the original crew could be here. The kind of trauma you endured would've changed most people, but not you, I see. "

Out in the common room, two crewmembers were complaining to the ship's cook.

"Chef's surprise again? Come, on, Rupert."

"I'm sorry, princess," replied the semi-bald man, dripping with sarcasm. "Filet mignon and caviar coming right up. Let me just get out my doilies."

"That'd be real nice, Mr. Gardner."

The cook cut off his next smart reply when he saw Shepard approach.

"Commander Shepard, the hero of the Citadel! You did humanity proud that day." The man stood at attention and saluted. "Mess Sergeant Rupert Gardner here. How can I be of service?"

Shepard waved off the salute. "What do you do here on the Normandy?"

"What don't I do?" Gardner shrugged, forgetting formality as quickly as he'd assumed it. "Most think of me as the ship's cook, but I'm also the facilities technician and custodian. HVAC, plumbing, non-mission-critical electrical. I make sure they're all clean and running."

"So the man cleaning the toilets is also preparing the meals?"

"I wash my hands...most of the time." Gardner looked away and cleared his throat. "This ain't no luxury liner. You have to pull your own weight on a Cerberus vessel, and I catch what falls through the cracks. Heh...through the cracks."

Shepard shook his head, but forged on. "How'd you find your way into Cerberus?"

"Can you believe I was once a family man, working the eezo rigs along the frontier? I was happy enough. But losing everything to batarian raiders can change your outlook. I needed to make a difference. I'm no soldier, but I've got skills, and Cerberus keeps an eye out for talent. I'll do whatever it takes to help, be that plumbing a sewer, routing an air duct, or keeping everyone's bellies full."

Shepard could certainly empathize with the part about losing everything to batarians. He had mixed feelings about TIM manipulating him like this, though. Still..."How do you feel about working for Cerberus?"

"Damn proud! Cerberus gets the job done. The Alliance and Council have got their heads buried so deep up their butt puckers they can't see squat. It'll take good ol' human ingenuity to crush these Collector vermin. Only Cerberus knows that."

"I won't take any more of your time."

"Back to work."

Where the captain's quarters used to be was now the XO's cabin. Like everything else on the new Normandy, Miranda's digs were twice the size as on the old Normandy. She was wearing a formal Cerberus uniform, which, while styled in the same fashion as a formal Alliance officer's uniform, was in Cerberus colors. Shepard glanced down at his more casual garb and shrugged; he hadn't planned on running this ship any more than he had before. That had been Pressly's job. Now it was Miranda's.

"Commander. What can I do for you?" She said without looking up from her computer.

"What exactly are your duties, aside from keeping an eye on me?"

"I'm the Illusive Man's agent. You're his most important asset. My job is to make sure you succeed. Aside from that...I send regular reports to the Illusive Man, updating our status."

"Anything I should know regarding the Normandy?"

"The crew's working well, and the ship appears to be performing to specifications." She never looked up from her screen.

"I can tell you're busy. Thanks for the information, Miranda. I'll talk to you later."

"Of course, Commander. Whatever you need."

Shepard could tell she'd be a tough nut to crack. Another time, then. For now, down to Deck 4: Engineering. Straight off the elevator was a set of picture windows overlooking the generous cargo bay. A few supply crates were stacked up along the sides, and there was a Cerberus shuttled docked. Another spot was empty, awaiting another vehicle, perhaps. Did Cerberus have their own version of a Mako? That would be nice.

Like the observation rooms on the deck above, a storage room was located on each side of the ship. There were doors to either side of the elevator, both labeled "Engineering." Shepard picked one at random. Just inside was another door, and a stairway leading down to a low-ceilinged access area. It was dark and empty. Going back upstairs and through the other door led to Engineering proper. Two crewmembers, a man and a woman, both in their late twenties, were tapping away on some computer displays, but turned as the door opened.

"You came all the way down here to see us?" said the man, in a thick Scottish accent.

"You're speaking to a commanding officer." The woman said in a northerly North-American accent, and saluted.

Shepard again waved the formality. "I'm touring the ship, getting to know my crew."

"I'm Engineer Ken Donnelly, handling the power control systems. This is Gabby."

The woman winced and grunted. "That's Engineer Gabriella Daniels, actually. I'm responsible for the propulsion systems."

"What can we do for you, Commander?"

"Were did you both receive your training?"

"Both Gabby and I started in the Alliance, serving on the SSV Perugia."

"She flew in the first wave at the Battle of the Citadel. We saw Sovereign first-hand."

"Why did you leave the Perugia?" Shepard asked.

"After you died, that weasel Udina backslid on the Reaper menace," Donnelly sneered.

"They discounted Sovereign as an isolated threat, as a single –"

"Which was bullshit!" Ken slammed a fist into his palm. "They said your warnings of a greater threat were mistaken or delusional."

"We lost respect for Alliance leadership," Daniels continued calmly. "We needed to fight the real enemy, and only Cerberus seemed to be doing that."

"What do you think about Cerberus, Daniels?"

"Actually, we don't know much about the organization other than the Normandy team. We know our mission and who's in charge."

"We're off to kick the Collectors right in their daddy bags. That's enough for me."

"How did you wind up with Cerberus, Donnelly?"

"Once you were gone, the Alliance brass descended like vultures, tearing apart everything you'd said. I was very public with my defense for you. I didn't hold back."

"That's an understatement," said Daniels. "If Kenneth wasn't such a talented engineer, they'd have court marshaled him for insubordination."

"But it got me noticed by the Illusive Man. He made me an offer, and here I am."

"So why did you join, Daniels?"

"Kenneth and I have been partners in crime since we graduated from tech academy. When he got the Cerberus offer, I insisted that it include me. He'd fall apart without me."

"Thanks, mum."

"Also, I love engines, and the Normandy is state-of-the-art. When I got the opportunity to work on her, I had to jump."

"Carry on."

"Will do, Commander."

As Shepard left, he caught a final exchange.

"I'm amazed Shepard came down to see us," said Donnelly.

"I told you he would," said Daniels."

It occurred to Shepard that TIM had recruited sympathetic faces to make him feel comfortable. But given how well he trusted his two former shipmates, and the cracks in the loyalty of some of the rest of the crew, Shepard suspected his new boss might be suffering from hubris. Ashley would probably say something about pride going before the fall. Shepard filed all that away for later. For now, he'd use the tools he'd been given. The Collectors were the real threat.

---THE PROFESSOR---

Omega Station was actually a gigantic asteroid. It has started out as an element zero mine, but had been abandoned and started up again many times over the course of several centuries. Presently, it was half-mined out and half space station, with the city portion having been grafted on haphazardly in multiple stages, according to the designs and whims of whomever had been in charge at the time

The Normandy and her crew docked here to recruit three people. This 'professor,' and two mercenaries. Commander Shepard exited the airlock along with Miranda Lawson and Jacob Taylor. All three wore Cerberus-issued armor, and were armed according to their skill sets. A fidgety young salarian approached the trio.

"Welcome to Omega. You're new here, aren't you? I can always tell. Allow me to – Oh, hello Moklan. I was just –"

"Leave, Fargut. Now." A mean-looking batarian interrupted.

"Oh! of course, Moklan! Whatever she wants!"

"Blasted scavengers," the batarian sneered as the salarian slithered off. "Welcome to Omega... Shepherd."

"You know who I am?"

"Of course. We had you tagged the moment you entered the Terminus Systems. You're not as subtle as you think. Aria wants to know what brings a dead Spectre to Omega. I suggest you go to Afterlife now and present yourself."

"Relax. I'm not here to cause problems for Omega."

"Things explode around you, Shepard. You can't blame Aria for keeping an eye on you. Afterlife. Now."

The batarian turned on his heel and returned the way he'd come. Shepard blinked at his Cerberus minders, both of whom merely shrugged. A dozen paces ahead was a human man beating up another batarian. Miranda indicated that the man was one of the dossiers provided by the Illusive Man. The mercenary was wearing grey and yellow armor. His right arm was covered in a brace, and one shoulder-pad was oversized.

"Please...you have to help me" the beaten batarian plead.

"No one said you could talk, jackass." The mercenary kneed his quarry in the stomach.

"You Zaeed Massani?" Shepard asked.

"Yeah, that's me. You must be Commander Shepard. I hear we have a galaxy to save." The man replied in a gravelly voice. He appeared to be in his sixties, and had some nasty scars coving the right side of his face, as if new skin had been grafted on. His left eye had the milky appearance of blindness. Shepard wondered how the man could aim with no depth perception.

"I assume you've been briefed?"

"I've done my homework. Cerberus sent me everything I needed to know."

"Who's your friend? My contacts told me we're picking up one man. Not two."

"Batarian delinquent. Pissed off someone rich enough to hire me to go after him. And for my 'bring 'em in alive' rates, even."

"Please...I didn't do it..." groaned the bounty from his knees.

"I said shut it." Masani kicked the batarian while he was down. Shepard winced. "Tried to lead me on a chase all over the Systems. H should have known better. These people always run to Omega."

"What's next for him?"

"I'm going to turn him in for the bounty. Don't much care what happens after that."

"What's your relationship with Cerberus?"

"Easy. Cerberus is paying me a lot of money to help you on your mission. That's the long and short."

"Not many mercs would take a suicide mission for the pay."

"Most mercs don't get an offer like the one Cerberus sent me. This mission doesn't sound like good business. But...your Illusive Man can move a lot of credits."

"How muchh do you know? I assume you've been briefed?"

"I've done my homework. Cerberus sent me everything I needed to know."

"Welcome aboard. Good to have you, Zaeed. We have a lot to do."

"That's what they tell me."

While the mercenary was distracted, the batarian bounty managed to gain his feet and quickly hobble off a few steps. Massani drew his pistol in the blink of an eye and shot his mark in the leg. The batarian fell face-first into a wall, knocking himself conscious. Shepard still wondered how the man aimed with only one eye.

"I better turn this thing in before it starts to stink. I'll be locked and loaded next time you're ready to get some killing done."

Shepard and his two Cerberus minders turned a corner into an open plaza. A balcony nearby overlooked the Omega skyline – as much as the inside of a large asteroid could have a skyline, anyway. The rocky ceiling was not too far above, and it was far enough down to be covered in haze.

Miranda was less than impressed. "Omega. What a piss hole. At least it keeps you on your toes. I've had to come here on business before. I feel like i need a shower afterward in addition to normal decontamination."

At the far end was a set of large double doors, a long line of people waiting to get in. An elcor bouncer was impatiently telling people to wait their turn.

"Come on, let me in. Aria's expecting me! Argh!"

"Annoyed. If she were expecting you, you'd be inside."

"You've let ten people in since I've been standing here! I'm first in line!"

Above the doors was a flashy neon sign announcing the club's name: Afterlife. The bouncer recognized Shepard's party and waved them in.

"What?! You're letting them in, too?" exclaimed the man."

"Patiently. They were expected. You aren't."

The large double-door opened into a wide hallway. Bass from the tuneless club music inside could be heard. Three armed batarians stood at Shepard's approach and stopped him.

"What are you looking at?" barked the apparent leader.

"Don't you have something better to do than pick fights with people you don't know?" asked Shepard.

"No. Just the ones who get in my face."

Shepard rolled his eyes. He drew his pistol and examined it. "You see my gun. Do you really want to do this?"

One of the thug leader's friends whispered in his ear, and they backed off.

"I...Fine. You're off the hook. For now. See you around."

Shepard shook his head and continued into the club proper. The room was large and arranged in a circle. The center stage was a ring surrounding a holographic cylinder, currently showing lewd content. Half-naked asari were lazily dancing here and there. The music was deafening, and the bass so intense it made something inside Shepard vibrate. Hopefully he could get out of here quickly.

Past the bar were two guards blocking a stairway to what appeared to be a control booth. They

waved him over and passed him up. At the top of the stairs was a windowed balcony overlooking the club. A sectional couch filled the walls below the windows, but no one was seated. An asari wearing something like black commando armor and a white half-jacket stood with her back to Shepard, arms crossed, gazing down on her domain. Two guards aimed pistols at Shepard, and two more appeared from behind to cover Jacob and Miranda. A batarian approached Shepard and began scanning him with his omni-tool.

"That's close enough. Stand still," the batarian ordered, then began to scan Shepard with his omni-toool.

"If you're looking for weapons, you're not doing a very good job," Shepard pointed to his pistol, then the grenade launcher strapped to his back."

"He's clean. It's him," the batarian assistant announced.

"Can't be too careful with dead Spectres," said the asari. "That could be anyone wearing your face." She turned as she spoke. The most beautiful asari Shepard had ever seen had dark purple skin, and a tattoo running from temple to temple and up across her forehead, somewhat resembling a crown.

"I was told you're the person to talk to if I have questions."

"Depends on the questions."

"You run Omega?"

Aria T'Loak chuckled dangerously. She turned around to survey her domain and spread her arms out. "I AM Omega." Her voice amplified as she said this, then she turned back to Shepard. Seeing that he was unimpressed, she shrugged and continued. "But you need more. Everyone needs more something. And they all come to me. I'm the boss, CEO, queen if you're feeling dramatic. It doesn't matter. Omega has no titled ruler and only one rule." She sat down and crossed her legs, grinning. "Don't fuck with Aria."

Shepard resisted rolling his eyes, and instead decided to play this diplomatically. "I like it. Easy to remember."

"If you forget, someone will remind you."

"And then I toss your sorry ass out an airlock," said the batarian assistant.

Shepard ignored that and took the seat offered by his hostess, on the part of the sectional sofa 90 degrees from Aria.

"So, what can I do for you?" she asked.

"One scan and we're straight to business? People are usually more concerned about who I am."

"Your death was downplayed, but hardly what I'd call a secret. I had to make sure it was really you. You could have been anyone. Anything. Whatever you need will come out on its own. I'm curious, but Omega doesn't really care about you."

"How'd you get set up here?"

"That's a privileged as information gets." Aria frowned and narrowed her eyes. "I have many friends and enemies I keep at varying distances. I don't count you among either. Yet. We'll see how useful you prove. Short answer: mind your own damn business."

"So, you must know what's what on Omega."

"Everything that's worth knowing. I don't usually give it out freely. Information is power. Mundane things, you can find yourself. Take a walk in a back alley, or buy one of the mercs a drink. Better yet, talk to the entertainers. They give great tours. Just don't waste my time."

Shepard nodded to himself. Time to get on with it. "I'm looking for Mordin Solus. Do you know where I can find him?"

"The salarian doctor? Last I heard he was trying to help plague victims in the quarantine zone. I always liked Mordin. He's as likely to heal you as he is to shoot you."

"What can you tell me about him?"

"Use to be part of the Salarian Special Tasks Group. He's brilliant and dangerous. Just don't get him talking. He never shuts up. If you really need to find him, take a shuttle to the quarantine zone. No guarantee they'll let you in, of course."

“What's that about a plague?”

“It's new. Affects every species except humans. I've quarantined the affected area. Tell you what...you have a reputation for solving problems. Rumor has it Mordin is working on a cure. I'll send word to the guards to let you in. Maybe you can help him.”

“Thanks for the information. Maybe I'll come back later.”

“Maybe I'll be here. Just try not to bring the plague back with you. ”

Shepard led his team out of the club and felt relief as the thumping music grew more distant. EDI's voice came unbidden through his suit's radio.

“I am receiving quarantine warnings about the slums where Dr. Mordin Solus runs the clinic. Anticipate resistance at the transport station.”

Shepard was startled and stumbled a bit. “Don't do that again,” he said.

“Noted, Shepard,” said the Normandy's AI. Could an AI pout?

Shepard turned to Jacob and Miranda, both of whom merely shrugged. Continuing on, they came to an open-air market. Or as open-air as it could be. The rock ceiling was high, and there was a skyline of sorts, but it was still inside an asteroid. A small crowd stood listening to a preacher. A batarian in tattered clothing, stood on a soapbox, pontificating. Shepard had no choice but to listen as he made his way through.

“Repent! The end is nigh! Humans are a blight on galactic purity! You, sir! You are a blight! And you! And you, human! And you! The Protheans cast off the lesser races; the krogan, the vorchas, and the humans!” He knelt to quote. “And so they dwelled in filth, on worlds made of dirt and feces, and there they lay until they stumbled into the skies.” He stood up. “The lesser races will be our downfall! The Word is clear! 'Let none in my sight continue to live, lest their impurity displease me.' The Word is clear on this, friends. Humans are the hands of the Reapers, here to commit the galaxy to ruin!”

“You're crazy!” exclaimed a human bystander.

“Begone!” He waved dismissively. “Sinner, I cast you out into the cold black! I name you unclean!” He spread his arms to quote again. “Bring unto me the children, that I may watch them grow to soldiers for the cause.' The way is clear, my friends. Draw your weapons for the Word, or face its terrible wrath! The end times will come not with a bang, but with a sigh. Those who dip their extremities in the well of sin and vice must repent with fire, oil, and gun! Let not fleshly friendships and base urges compel us to sin and neglect! The Word makes its demands, and it demands obedience! 'And on this great station, the pure shall be rejected, and the lesser races given their places in heaven. And this shall be the beginning of the end.' The end times are upon us! Repent and restore your souls to glory!”

Shepard followed the signs out of the food court toward the transport hub. He saw homeless people all over. At first, he thought they might be refugees from the plague, but there were makeshift tents and cardboard boxes being used as homes.

Jacob was disgusted. “This place – how can these people be left to rot like this?”

“You don't understand or you don't want to?” said Miranda.

“Does it really matter?”

“No. Omega has worked this way for a very long time. No one's changing it now.”

Shepard saw a species he'd never seen before. Humanoid, short, leathery skin; kinda yellowish. Big red bug-eyes. He pointed them out and Jacob whispered in his ear.

“Vorchas. Not too bright, but they only live about 20 years. They heal fast, so shoot 'em quick if you have to.”

One of the vorchas noticed Shepard staring. “Leave, human. Tell Captain Gavorn we not kill anyone today.”

“There seem to be a lot of vorchas on Omega,” Shepard tried to be pleasant.

“No. Not too many. You stay away! We kill you!”

“I don't know a Captain Gavorn. Why would I tell him anything?”

“Baaaa! Go away. Talk too much. Gavorn's thugs get no more. We leave.”

“Good talking to you.”

“No more talk. We know Gavorn's tricks. We leave.”

At the transit station, a turian guard was patiently listening to a ranting human woman.

“Complaining is pointless, human. There's a plague. Nobody gets in or out.”

“You can't keep me out! I live in there!”

“I'm doing you a favor, lady. If you go in, the guards will cut you down.”

“You can't do this! Everything I own is in that apartment!”

“I told you to get lost, lady! The plague has the whole zone quarantined! Nobody gets in!”

“I'm human, you ass,” she was saying. “Humans can't get the plague. Now let me get my stuff out before looters get it!”

“This thing affects every other race out there. We're not taking chances. Nobody gets in until the plague has run its course.”

“So you're saying the slums are completely sealed off?” Shepard asked.

“Finally, a human that can hear. Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying.”

“You can't keep me out! I'm gonna lose all my stuff!” the woman yelled.

“I'm doing you a favor, human. Anybody in the quarantine zone will be dead from the plague or the gangs in a few weeks.”

“I didn't think Omega had any kind of law enforcement,” Shepard observed.

“Fresh off the transport huh? Aria T'Loak calls the shots around here. She's got her little blue hands on every business in this district... and a plague is bad for business. She hired us to keep anyone from entering or leaving the quarantine zone.”

“There's a salarian named Mordin Solus in the slums. I've got to get in there to find him.”

“The doctor? Yeah, crazy bastard opened a clinic in the district a few months ago. The Blue Suns weren't too happy when he moved in. I hear Mordin' trying to deal with the plague, and wish him luck. But the area is still locked down. Our orders are to wait until either the plague or the Blue Suns kill everyone, Then go in and clean up.”

“Tell me more about this plague.”

“Starts out as a cough, then you start coughing blood, and...well, then I shoot you. It affects multiple species. Turians, salarians, krogan – you name it. Only humanse are immune. And vorcha, if you count them. An airborne disease that takes down multiple races...we can't let that spread. Hence the quarantine.”

“I didn't think diseases could cross species barriers. Turians and salarians can't even eat the same food.”

“Right. Most people figure that it has to be synthetic. Somebody engineered it, and it either got loose, or they're testing it here. And seeing as how humans are immune to the plague and doing a fair bit of looting, a lot of people think humans made it.”

“Who are the Blue Suns?”

“Mercenary gang that runs the district. At least, they used to. The local chapter are mostly turian, and I heard the plague hit them pretty hard. Now the whole district is up for grabs. I hear the vorcha are making a move. The plague can't hurt them. Immune to disease. Just one more reason you don't want to go in there.”

“Any idea where I can find Mordin's clinic?”

“Not a clue. What do you care? The place is quarantined, remember?”

“Listen, you're stuck here until this quarantine is over,” Shepard reasoned. “That could take weeks. What you really need is to get this problem solved right now. That's what I do: solve problems. Let me in and I'll get this district straightened out.”

“You think you can fix —” The guard was interrupted by a transmission from his radio. “Uh, yes of course. Got it.” he turned back to Shepard. “Well, Aria says you can go in. Why not? Quarantine is more to keep infected people in anyway. I'll radio ahead tell them you're coming in.”

“Wait. You're stopping me but not them? You son of a bitch.” The woman wasn't having it.

“You don't have a grenade launcher, lady. Get lost.”

As the shuttle landed in the quarantined district, a pair of turian guards waved Shepard and his squad past.

“Don't shoot! They're cleared to come in.”

They'd probably been infected, then volunteered to help keep the quarantine. A surprisingly selfless act on a station otherwise full of criminals. Shepard did some reassessing on his opinion of the people in this place. 'Saints and Jerks,' Kaidan had said a few months ago. Two years. A lifetime ago.

“Good luck in there,” said another guard. “The Blue Suns and vorchas are shooting anything that moves.”

Past the quarantined transit station were two large bonfires.

“Burning corpses,” Jacob noted. “Must be trying to keep the plague from spreading.”

The stench was overpowering. Shepard had seen such a thing before, had smelled burning bodies before. But never with so many different species at once. Even so, the smoke seemed more intense. He followed the rising smoke with his eyes, saw that it was gathering at the roof of the asteroid.

“I know this place is built in a jumble, but shouldn't that smoke be clearing?” asked Shepard.

“Maybe with the quarantine, air circulation is shut off,” Jacob speculated.

“Shouldn't be. Even Omega should have better environmental controls,” said Miranda. “Someone must have shut off the system deliberately.”

An ominous notion, thought Shepard. Around the corner they found a batarian in a dirty mechanic's jumpsuit, sitting against a wall, groaning and holding his stomach.

“Human. Should have guessed.” the batarian went into a coughing fit before he could vocalize an insult, then recovered and went on. “Bad enough you infect us with this plague. Now you lack the decency to even wait until I die before you come to steal my possessions.”

“Humans didn't create this plague.”

“Lies drip from your mouth like the blood from my sores. The proof is there for all to see.” The batarian waved his pistol towards the burn pits. “Your species is the only one that does not succumb to the virus. Yours, and the wretched vorchas.”

“Is there anything I can do for you?” Shepard was no fan of batarians, but this man was clearly suffering.

“Get away from me, humans! Your kind has done too much already! Your plague did this to me. Your faint pity is the final insult.” More coughing.

Shepard shrugged. “I need to find Mordin So —”

“Humans looking for the human sympathizer. I hope the Blue Suns burn Mordin and his clinic to the ground. I hope you...I hope..Damn it. Damn you. Can't...”

Shepard swallowed his pride and pulled up his omni-tool. “Here, have some medi-gel. It won't cure the plague, but it might help a bit.”

“You...you helped me. Why?” The batarian seemed to recover a bit, and was breathing easier.

“I told you, I'm looking for somebody. Would you rather I let you choke on your own blood? I don't know if I can find a cure for this plague, but I'm gonna try.”

“Your words sound sincere. What do you wish to know?”

“Why are you so convinced humans are behind this outbreak?”

“The plague is too potent to be a naturally occurring virus. Airborne transmission across numerous species? Near-perfect mortality rate? It had to be created in a lab. And since humans are the only species not affected, there is only one logical conclusion.”

“Aren't the vorchas immune to the plague? What if they spread the virus so they could take over the district?”

“Vorchas are immune to disease. A human-created plague wouldn't affect them. But if the vorchas created the plague, why wouldn't it affect humans? Besides, the vorchas aren't smart enough to make a virus like this. They're scavengers. Sorry, human. You may not want to believe it, but all the

evidence points to your species.

“What else can you tell me about the vorchas?”

“Before the quarantine, the Blue Suns controlled this district. But as their numbers fell to the plague, vorchas moved in. The Blue Suns are fighting to protect their territory, but as the plague spreads, it's only a matter of time until the vorchas overwhelm them.”

“I need to find Mordin Solus.”

“He has a clinic on the far side of the district.” The batarian gave directions. “He's taking in refugees. Offering to help those infected with the plague. I was afraid to go to him before. He's dangerous. But perhaps he can help. Maybe it's the fever, but...what have I to lose? My time is running short, but at least you have given me a flicker of hope to brighten the darkness of my final hours.”

“What makes Mordin worse than dying from the plague?”

“The Blue Suns tried to press him for protection money. He killed them. Stunned them with some kind of toxin, then gunned them down. He's not just a doctor. Doctors don't execute people and display the bodies as a warning. I don't want to die. Whatever Mordin is, I will risk it, if I can reach him.”

“We should go.”

“Goodbye, humans.”

The squad continued on, passing boarded up shops and shuttered apartments. A disturbing thought occurred to Shepard.

“A plague that kills every species but humans. Cerberus?”

Miranda was offended. “Not Cerberus. We want to advance humanity, not wipe out the whole galaxy. I guarantee it wasn't us.”

“I wiped out a few Cerberus cells. Bio-weapons didn't seem beyond your purview.”

“Those cells had gone rogue. And they were looking to create shock troops, not engineer plagues.”

Shepard dropped it. No way to prove anything at this point. The plaza they came to was secured by a squad of Blue Suns mercs. A dozen armed turians. Shepard's squad took cover before they could be seen. Shepard carefully peeked out and surveyed, not liking what he saw. Most were standing guard while one was trying to break into an apartment building. Jacob got his attention and pointed towards some stairs which lead to an upper level. Shepard and Miranda stepped lightly followed him up.

The view from the balcony was sweeping. A quick glance convinced Shepard that there was no way around; that the only option was to fight through the mercs. Another quick glance over the railing revealed two of the troopers stacking canisters of flammable gas. That would be a fatal mistake for them. Shepard primed an overload on his omni-tool and signaled to Jacob and Miranda to be ready. The two Cerberus officers began to glow as they gathered biotic energy.

Shepard stood up and released the electrical charge from his omni-tool, causing the canisters to explode, incinerating the two mercs and knocking down four more. Jacob and Miranda each used their biotics to lift one merc each, causing them to float around harmlessly. That left one merc in tech armor, who quickly realized what was happening and took cover. Shepard's team ducked down to avoid his fire, and that gave the four who had been knocked down time to regroup.

Miranda and Jacob began hurling balls of biotic warps over the railing, but neither seemed capable of more than that. Shepard suddenly wished Liara were there to lay down a singularity. His own biotics were only marginally stronger than they had been, but still nowhere near that level. He looked up at the ceiling and noticed a chandelier. Taking careful aim with his assault rifle, he shot the chain holding it up, and the light fixture fell, crushing three of the mercs. The two on the edges leapt out of the way, but left themselves open, making easy targets for Shepard's squad to mow down the remaining enemies.

When all was quiet again, they descended back down to street level and continued on for another block. Shepard decided to check the apartment building for refugees. The front door

unlocked, and a human man and woman in formal attire peeked out from behind a desk in the lobby.

"Oh, thank god!" said the man, as he stood up. "You're human!"

"When we saw that door open, we thought those turians had found us," said the relieved woman."

"Ever since this plague started, the Blue Suns have been out to get us. They're killing as many people as the disease," said the man.

"Why are the Blue Suns hunting you?" asked Shepard.

"We didn't do anything! Pretty much every non-human in the district wants us dead!" the woman complained.

"They think we caused the plague. Humans aren't getting sick, and that's all the evidence they need."

"Is what I hear right?" inquired Shepard, "That this plague doesn't affect humans?"

"No," the man confirmed. "It seems like some kind of bio-weapon or something, since it affects so many different species. The Blue suns figure humans caused it. They're shooting us on sight. God knows how many have already died."

The woman continued. "They should be looking at the vorchas, not us! Ever since the plague hit, they've been taking over Blue Suns territory."

"So the vorchas moved in just after the plague hit?" asked Shepard.

"Right after the district was quarantined. Vorchas are immune to diseases, so they're not getting sick."

"Not sure where they came from; never saw many vorchas around before. Sure seemed like they were ready for this."

"Only nobody thinks the vorchas are smart enough to create a virus like this. The Blue Suns need someone else to blame. Like us."

"And they're taking over Blue Suns territory?" Shepard asked.

"Trying to. The Blue Suns don't go down easy. The plague softened 'em up, but they still have enough firepower to hold some of their turf. The turians are getting pushed back. The deeper you go into the district, the more vorchas you'll see...unless they see you first."

"What else can you tell me about the plague? When did it start?"

"The first cases cropped up about two weeks ago. Nobody paid much attention until it started to spread. Usually takes about a week to kill you. But it spreads fast. Three days after the first outbreak, there were over 50 known cases. That's when everyone noticed humans weren't getting sick. Then the quarantine came down, and everything went to hell."

"Any idea how the victims contracted it?"

"Not sure. Probably airborne. Even after the Blue Suns started sealing victims up inside their own apartments, the plague kept spreading. Now they just gun victims down and burn the bodies in the streets. Doesn't seem to be helping, though. People are dying by the dozens."

"Tell me more about the Blue Suns."

"They're a mercenary gang. Local chapter's mostly turian. Used to run this district. Kept things nice and stable, for the most part."

"As long as you paid your monthly protecting fees, everything was cool. Rates were pretty reasonable. For Omega, at least."

"Then this damn plague hit. Everyone started dying. The vorchas started moving in. The Blue Suns lost control, and the whole district turned into a war zone"

Shepard decided it was time to be moving on. "I need to find Mordin Solus."

"Oh, yeah. Him. He's got a clinic on the other side of the district," the man didn't seem to like the doctor.

"Heard he's taking in refugees now," said the woman. "Trying to help plague victims. Offering protection from the Suns and the vorchas."

"A doctor with military-grade mechs helping people for free," the man sneered. "On Omega? Grow up."

The woman narrowed her eyes at the man, clearly insulted.

"Sounds like you don't think much of the doctor and his clinic," Shepard observed.

"The vorchas tried to muscle in – he gunned them down, just like that. Pop, pop, pop. Didn't even use his mechs."

"Then the Blue Suns heard he was sheltering humans, and they went to burn down the clinic. He killed them, too. Then he went inside and got back to work. He's cold. Must be salarian special forces or something."

"You can't stay trapped in this apartment. You should get to Mordin's. You might at least survive there until the quarantine ends."

"Are you nuts? We'd never make it. The streets are crawling with Blue Suns and vorchas. We don't even have pistols!"

"Cowering in this apartment might keep you alive for a while, but if the mercs don't get you, starvation will."

"Easy for you to say. You're a soldier armed to the teeth. We're just ordinary people."

"Besides, I'm not risking my life on a rumor that some salarian might offer me sanctuary."

"I know you're scared, but your only hope is to get to Mordin's clinic. I'm going to be under fire from the Blue Suns and the vorchas, so I can't take you with me. But I promise you this: I'll do what I can to leave a safe path for you to follow me. It's risky, but I think it's your only chance."

"Yeah...okay. I guess if you can clear a path, we can follow. Like you said, it's our only chance."

"We'll wait here for a while and give you time to clear the way. Then we'll head for Mordin's clinic."

"If we're lucky, maybe we'll meet you there."

Back out on the street, Shepard's combat armor was having trouble remaining cool. The air was smelling more and more of smoke. Another block or so and the squad was attacked by a pair of patrolling vorchas. They were easily dealt with, but pushing forward brought Shepard's team to another plaza; this one crawling with more vorchas.

"It seems we've crossed into vorchas territory," said Miranda.

"The Blue Suns have given up a lot of turf," added Jacob. "That doesn't bode well for them."

The squad took cover and opened fire, tossing biotics into the enemy as well. From what everyone had said about this race of petite yellow people, they weren't too bright, but they were demonstrating tactics like they were trained soldiers. Shepard launched a grenade into one cluster, and the others began to flee. But then a deep, bellowing voice ordered a regrouping, and that the line be reformed.

Shepard peeked around a column and saw a krogan in red and yellow battle armor. That was why this fight was harder than expected. One of the vorchas was wielding a flamethrower. As he was receiving orders from the krogan, Shepard tossed out an overload from his omni-tool, causing the fuel tank to explode and engulfing the krogan in flames. With their leader dead, the remaining vorchas ran away in a panic.

At the end of the next street was a small building that was helpfully labeled "CLINIC," along with a stylized red cross. Even on an alien station, that symbol still meant medical help.

A human man with a rifle stood behind a counter, flanked by a pair of light H-K Mechs. He wiped sweat from his brow.

"No funny business once you're in the clinic," he cautioned. "Unless you want to deal with those." He indicated the mechs.

"We're not here to cause any trouble," Shepard reassured the guard. He holstered his weapon and motioned for Jacob and Miranda to do the same. "We just cleared out a whole Blue Suns squad back at the plaza. Is the doctor in?"

The guard seemed to relax. "Mordin's around here somewhere. Go talk to him. We need all the help we can get." He wiped more sweat from his face.

Shepard led the way inside. The lobby was crowded. Batarians and turians lolled about, looking dazed and sick. There was a human couple hugging each other, shivering in fear. An armed guard,

human, patrolled.

A receptionist at a desk answered Shepard's inquiry about the doctor with a wave towards the back of the building. The hallway was lined with stretchers, all of them occupied with patients writing in pain or passed out or coughing. There were two rooms in the back. One was half-filled with crates of medical supplies, many of which had been torn open, their contents spilling on to the floor. The other was an exam room, where a salarian in a lab coat was pacing back and forth, thinking out loud, his assistant struggling to take notes on a datapad.

"Professor, we're running low on cipoxidin."

"Use malanarin. Plenty on hand. Almost as good. Causes cramping in batarians. Supplement with butemeral.

"Malanarin and butemeral. Got it."

Cenozine is the catalyst. Bonds to genetic markers. Hard to find. Expensive to mass produce. Why not heplacore? Too unstable. Inconsistent results. Demozane better option. No no no...toxic to humans. Not an option. Not an option."

"Professor Mordin Solus?" Shepard approached the doctor.

The hyperactive salarian seemed old. His reptilian skin was wrinkled and scarred, and he was missing half of one of the prongs on his head. He approached Shepard and pulled up his omni-tool to scan the newcomer. "Hmm don't recognize you from area. Too well-armed to be refugees. No mercenary uniform. Quarantine still in effect. Here for something else. Vorchas? Crew to clean them out? Unlikely. Vorchas a symptom not a cause. The plague? Investigating possible use as bio-weapon? No no no. Too many guns, not enough data equipment. Soldiers, not scientists. Yes, yes. Hired guns, maybe? Looking for someone? Yes! But who? Someone important Valuable Someone with secrets Someone like me."

Shepard was used to the quick pace at which most salarians spoke, but Doctor Solus had the pace of an auctioneer.

"Relax, Doctor. I'm Commander Shepard, and I came here to find you. I'm on a critical mission and I need your help."

"Mission? What mission? No no no no. Too busy. Clinic understaffed. Plague spreading too fast. Who sent you? Related to plague? Doesn't affect humans. Human-centric interest. Few human groups would know me. Equipment suggests military origin. Not Alliance standard. Specters not human. Terra Firma too unstable. Only one option. Cerberus sent you. Unexpected."

"You're very well-informed. How did a salarian scientist hear about Cerberus?"

"Crossed paths on occasion. Thought they only worked with humans. Why request salarian aid?"

"I'm on a mission to shut down the Collectors and I need your help."

"Collectors? Interesting. Plague hitting these slums is engineered. Collectors one of few groups with technology to design it. Our goals may be similar. But must stop plague first. Already have a cure. Need to distribute it at environmental control center. Vorchas guarding it. Need to kill them."

Shepard sighed. "I'll get in and deal with the vorchas."

"Life is a negotiation. We all want. We all give to get what we want. Vorchas have shut down environmental systems. Trying to kill everyone. Need to get power back on before district suffocates. Here, take plague cure. One more thing. Daniel, one of my assistants. Went to vorchas territory looking for victims. Hasn't come back."

"If I see him, I'll do what I can to help, but an ordinary doctor doesn't stand much chance against a horde of vorchas. Any idea where we can find him?"

"Thank you. Stubborn. Told him not to go. Odds of survival low. But he's smart. Bright future. I hope...Heard infected batarians trapped behind vorchas lines. Daniel went to help. Warned him not to go. Too dangerous. Patients here need him. Snuck out anyway. Wanted to find him myself. Can't leave the clinic. Have to look after the patients."

"What can you tell me about this plague?"

"Advanced design. Suspected Collectors before you mentioned them. Purpose seems experimental. Destroys respiratory systems with harmful genetic mutations. Makes sense to avoid

humans. Unnecessary to force mutation on human genetic structure for sake of variance. Unnecessary mutations.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Possible goal of virus. Testing viable mutation levels in various species. Horrific, but feasible for Collectors. Humans known to have diverse genetic background. Wider range than other sapient races. Makes sense as control group.”

“Have you had any attacks on the clinic?”

“Nothing major. Blue Suns came for humans. Made threats. Killed them before things escalated.”

“That's nothing major?” For a doctor, you're awfully calm about taking out a group of mercs.”

The salarian held up a placating hand. “Wasn't always a doctor. Some work with Salarian Special Tasks Group. Can handle myself. Advantage of being salarian. Turians, krogan, vorchas all obvious threats. Never see me coming.”

“What do you know about the vorchas?”

“Cowardly, opportunistic scavengers. Not tactical or aggressive. Scale of attack unusual for them. Suspect vorchas working for Collectors. Distributing plague, collecting data. No proof. But theory fits evidence.”

“We'll head for the environmental plant.”

“Yes. Good. Restore power. Release cure. Will be here when you return.”

Doctor Solus gave directions. The back door of the clinic led to an alleyway, then to an industrial area. In one plaza were groups of Blue Suns mercs fighting a group of vorchas. The squad snuck around, letting them kill each other off.

After a few minutes more, Shepard's squad heard a commotion coming from a run-down apartment. The door was open, and Shepard peeked inside to see a small gang of batarians harassing a human man in a doctor's frock.

“Please....I'm telling you the truth!” the man plead. “I work for Mordin at the clinic. I came here to help you!”

“We know you're spreading the plague virus,” the gang leader accused. “We saw the vials in your bag.”

“No! Those vials contain the cure! Please...you have to believe me.”

“Maybe we should cut off your fingers. That should loosen your – ”

Shepard had heard enough. He entered the room, flanked by Jacob and Miranda. “Don't move,” he ordered, aiming his gun at the leader, but the batarians quickly aimed their weapons at David, creating a standoff.

“One more step and I kill your friend,” the gang leader threatened.

“Pull that trigger, and you're breathing through a new hole in your head. Let him go, and you walk away.”

“You must think batarians are stupid. What's to stop you from killing us if we let him go?”

“Let him live, I let you live. Kill him, I do the same to you. Nobody do anything they'll regret.”

“Shut up, human! We're giving the orders here.”

“I know you're scared of the vorchas, the plague,” Shepard reasoned. “But this man isn't to blame. If he was spreading the virus, why would he come into vorchas territory? They're immune.”

“He's right,” said one of the batarians. “It doesn't make any sense.”

The leader considered for a moment. “If we release the prisoner, we can go?”

“You have my word on it. Let him go.”

Another moment's hesitation, then the batarians lowered their weapons. “You got what you wanted, human. Are we free to go?”

“We had a deal.” Shepard holstered his gun and motioned for his squad to do the same.

“Human nobility,” the batarian leader was surprised. “I didn't know such a thing existed.” The batarians exited the apartment and disappeared.

Mordin's assistant breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you. I thought they were going to...to kill me. Did Mordin send you to find me?”

"It's too dangerous out here. The professor could use your help right now. He's got too many patients and not enough volunteers."

"Yeah, okay. I'll go right away. Thanks again. I owe you...well, everything."

David headed back to the clinic, and Shepard's squad continued on. A short while later they came to a large building up against the rock wall of the asteroid. Above the door was a sign with symbols of a fan and a leaf, and Shepard's heads-up display translated the accompanying text as "Air Plant."

"All right," Jacob panted. His wasn't the only suit struggling to recycle the thick air. "Let's get that cure in, then hit the fans."

In the lobby of the building, a half-dozen armed vorchas turned and aimed guns at the humans. One snarled at them and spoke. Its voice was cracked and gurgling, barely understandable.

"You no come here. We shut down machines, break fans! Everyone choke and die! Then Collectors make us strong!"

"Why are you doing this? What do the Collectors want?" Miranda asked.

"Collectors want plague. You work for doctor! Turn on machines, put cure in air! We kill you first!"

All hell broke loose. The humans dove for cover as the vorchas opened fire. The small yellow creatures lacked biotics, but they sprayed bullets everywhere. Shepard managed to fire off a grenade, which shattered a support column, brining down the ceiling on three of the vorchas. The distraction was enough for Miranda and Jacob to break cover and take out two of the remaining enemy. The last fled through a narrow hallway, deeper into the building.

Shepard stowed his grenade launcher. Destroying the lobby was one thing, but it wouldn't do to damage the machinery inside. As Shepard entered the hallway, from the opposite end entered another vorchas with a gas canister strapped to its back. The vorchas aimed a nozzle towards the humans and squeezed the trigger. Flame filled the hallway, and Shepard let out a biotic push towards the flamethrower as he dove back into the lobby. It was enough to daze the flamethrower-wielding vorchas. Jacob took the opening and launched an electrical overload at the gas canister on the enemy's back.

A loud explosion rang out, and another, more intense burst of flame gushed from the hallway. All was quiet, and Shepard peeked into the hall. The walls, ceiling, and floor were charred, and only a few small flames still flickered, burning what remained of the paint. Cautiously, Shepard led the way down the hall into an large open room. Several burned corpses were scattered around, and no more enemies were to be found. The air in Shepard's suit felt hot.

A few minutes of searching found the controls for the plant. Jacob found a space in a vent behind two giant fans and placed the cure there. Shepard hit the big switch labeled 'ON/OFF,' and a light changed from red to green. Machinery came alive, and the smoke began to clear.

"Both fans are up," Miranda observed. "That should be it."

The squad returned to the clinic. The batarian mechanic and the human couple had made it, and they thanked him for his help. Back in the exam room, the salarian doctor seemed pleased.

"Agree. Environmental systems engaged. Airborne viral levels dropping, Patients improving. Vorchas retreating. Well done, Shepard. Thank you."

"And thank you for me as well," added the assistant, David. "Those batarians would have killed me. For a second there I thought you were going to shoot them, even after they let me go."

"I made a promise to spare them if they let you go. I honor my promises."

"Merciful of you," said Doctor Solus. "Risky. Would have killed them myself."

David was offended. "Professor, how can you say that? You're a doctor! You believe in helping people."

"Lots of ways to help people. Sometimes heal patients, sometimes execute dangerous people. Either way helps. Go check on the patients. Lots of work to do. Think about what I said." David waved his hand dismissively and stalked off in disgust. "Good kid. Bit naive. He'll learn. Letting him take over the clinic. Should be able to handle it now that vorchas are gone."

"We've cured the plague. Are you ready to help stop the Collectors?"

"Yes. Surprised to be working with Cerberus. Many surprises. Just need to finish up here at the clinic. Won't take long. Meet you at your ship."

"Looking forward to it." Shepard shook the salarian's hand, then gave directions. "We're heading out. See you on the Normandy."

Shepard finished reporting in to The Illusive Man in the Normandy's conference room and powered down the holographic communications equipment. Doctor Solus entered the room with Jacob, who had just finished a quick tour.

"Welcome to the Normandy, Professor," Jacob finished. "It's an honor to have you on board."

"Yes. Very exciting. Cerberus working with aliens. Unexpected. Illusive Man branching out. Maybe not so human-centric."

"You're very well informed," Jacob remarked.

"Salarian government well-connected. Espionage experts. Had top-level clearance, once. Retired now. Still hear things. Informed of name only. No knowledge of man behind it. Anti-alien reputation listed as problematic."

"Salarians specialize in secret agendas. I'd expect you to understand Cerberus looking out for human interests. But don't kid yourself, professor," said Shepard. "Humans still come first in The Illusive Man's eyes. But this mission is too big for them to handle alone. The Collectors are abducting human colonists out on the fringes of Terminus space."

"Not simple abductions. Wouldn't need me for simple."

Jacob explained. "Entire colonies disappear without a trace. No distress signals are sent out. There are no signs of any kind of attack. There's virtually no evidence that anything unusual happened at all...except that every man woman and child is gone."

Mordin began to speculate. "Gas, maybe? No, spreads too slow. Airborne virus? No. Slower than gan. Drugged water supply? No. Effects not simultaneous. Intriguing. Fascinating. No distress calls? No signs of resistance? New technology. Marvelously advanced. But what?"

Shepard held up a hand. "You don't have to sit there and guess. We collected samples from one of the colonies. I'd like you to analyze them and figure out how the Collectors did this."

"Yes, of course. Analyze the samples. Going to need a lab."

EDI's sultry voice came over the intercom. "There is a fully equipped lab on the Combat Deck, Professor Solus. If you find anything lacking, please place a requisition order."

"Who's that? Pilot? No, synthesized voice, simulated emotional inflections. Could it be? No. Maybe. Have to ask. Is that an AI?"

"This ship is equipped with an artificial intelligence," Shepard answered.

"An AI on board, non-human crew members. Cerberus is more desperate than I thought."

"The Collectors have taken tens of thousands of colonists. We'll do whatever we have to do to find and stop them," said Jacob.

"Yes of course. Can't risk being captured like colonists. Need to identify neutralization technology. Need samples. Which way to the lab?"

"Follow me professor." Jacob led Mordin out of the conference room.

Shepard made his way out to the CIC, aiming to head up to his quarters. Kelly and Joker were chatting near the elevator about the newest crewmember.

"Mordin's psych profile warned of hyper behavior, but he is like a hamster on coffee. He's going to be a very productive member of the team."

Joker was less impressed. "No surprise Mordin acts superior to everyone. Like he's got tenure at F U."

----Archangel----

"I'm trying to track down Archangel," Shepard said in answer to Aria T'Loak's question.

"You and half of Omega. You want him dead, too?"

"Why's everyone after him?"

"He thinks he's fighting on the side of good. There is no good side to Omega. Everything he does pisses someone off. It's catching up to him."

"I'm recruiting. Sounds like just the kind of guy I'm looking for."

"Really? Well, aren't you interesting? You're going to make some enemies teaming up with Archangel. That's assuming you can get to him. He's in a bit of trouble right now."

"What kind of trouble?"

"The local merc groups have joined forces to take him down. They've got him cornered, but it sounds like they're having trouble finishing him off. They've started hiring anybody with a gun to help them."

"Sounds like that might be our ticket in," Jacob said to Miranda.

"They're using a private room for recruiting...just over there. I'm sure they'll sign you up."

"What can you tell me about Archangel?"

"Not as much as I'd like. He showed up here several months ago and started causing all sorts of problems. If you make your own laws – which everyone here does – he makes life difficult. He's reckless and idealistic. But he seems to know enough to stay clear of me."

"Which merc groups are after him?"

"The local chapters of Blue Suns, Eclipse, and Blood Pack. They're Omega's major players. Unless they're at war, you'll never see them together. But one thing they hate more than each other is Archangel."

"Do you hate Archangel?"

"I don't have time for hate. But I distrust them all equally. For now, I'm happy to just let them kill each other."

"I appreciate the help."

"See if you still feel that way when the mercs realize you're there to help him."

"Sounds like I don't have much time to waste."

"You've got all the time in the world. Archangel, not so much."

Shepard led his party back down to the main floor of the club and grimaced. The music was making that thing inside him vibrate again. Perhaps he should have Doctor Chakwas take a look at that later. A quick glance around landed on a batarian in Blue Suns armor. That white shape in the middle of the blue still looked like an egg to Shepard. He approached the merc.

"I hear you're recruiting."

"Hmmm. Why don't you step inside?" The merc waved Shepard and his squad into a small side room. The music was mercifully less intense in here. Another batarian Blue Suns recruiter was finishing up with a volunteer.

"You'll get paid when the job's done just like everyone else. Who's next?" The volunteer left, and the recruiter turned to Miranda and leered. "Well, aren't you sweet? You're in the wrong place, honey. Strippers' quarters are that way." Incredibly, Miranda kept her poker face. "Wow, not even a smile. So you here to fight, then? You three look like you could do some damage. Looking for a good fight?"

"Sure, if this is the place to go after Archangel," said Shepard, noncommittally.

"This is the place. Standard fee is 500 credits each. You get paid when the job's done. If you die, your friends don't collect your share. You'll need your own weapons and armor...looks like you got that covered. And no: this does not make you a member of the Blue Suns, Eclipse, or the Blood Pack. You are a freelancer. Period. Any questions?"

"Seems like a lot of trouble for just one guy."

"He had a whole team, but we've dealt with them. Now he's just one guy. But he's got the advantage. It's his base of operations, and he knows we're coming. He's planned for an attack like this. We've lost a lot of men trying to get to him already.

"It's going to be tough to get to him?" Jacob asked.

"Like chasing a vorchas out of the sewer pipes. But that's why we're recruiting. If we just keep throwing fighters at him, we'll get to him eventually."

"Why are the merc bands working together to take down Archangel?" asked Shapard.

"Haven't been on Omega long, huh? He does everything he can to screw with us. Shipments go missing, operations are compromised...every month it gets worse. Tarak and the other bosses are tired of losing credits...and men."

"Tarak? Is he a heavy hitter? How many merc bosses are involved in this attack?"

"Yeah, Tarak runs the Blue Suns on Omega, but all three bosses are overseeing the operation. Jaroth's leading the Eclipse, and Garm's the head of the Blood Pack. Tarak's in charge, but the others would never say that. I'm surprised they're in on this at all, but I guess getting rid of Archangel is worth it."

"What do we do once we're there? How do we get to Archangel?"

"The mercs will tell you when you get there. Last I heard, they were putting the freelancers into scouting groups; they attack in waves to distract Archangel, while we try to get past his defenses."

"So we're just fodder for his bullets?"

"If you don't like it don't sign up. But if you do your job right, it's easy credits. Besides, what are the odds he can kill all of you?"

"Where's the attack taking place?"

"Archangel's base of operations. He's been hiding right under our noses. I can't tell you exactly where you're going, but we'll get you there."

"I'm ready. Where do we go?"

"Just head over to the transport depot outside the club. One of our boys will take you from there. Send in the next one!" That last was to his coworker outside.

As Shepard and company were leaving, a young human man strutted in. He was wearing what he probably thought were tough-looking clothes, though they were new.

"Hey, is this where I sign up?" the young man asked. He looked barely old enough to be shaving; the thin soul-patch on his chin probably took him months to grow.

"You look a little young to be freelancing as a merc," Shepard cautioned.

"I'm old enough! I grew up on Omega. I know how to use a gun!"

"So does Archangel," Miranda scoffed.

"I can handle myself. Besides, I just spent 50 credits on this pistol and I want to use it." The naive kid actually upholstered his gun and waved it around.

Shepard easily disarmed the would-be merc. The gun was as cheap as it looked. It started sparking as Shepard tapped it with the base of his palm. "Get your money back," he said as he tossed it back.

"Hey! What do you –"

"Trust me, kid. You'll thank me later."

Shepard led the way to the transit hub and found a Blue Suns merc leaning against a battered-looking sky car.

"We're on the mission."

"I hope you're ready. Archangel's been annihilating you freelancers."

The skycar driver took them to an even seedier part of Omega, as if that was possible. As they flew through the asteroid, the driver introduced himself as Salkie, and he struck up a conversation.

"It's about time they sent me someone who looks like they can actually fight. They tell you what we're up against?"

"The recruiter was a little vague."

"We wouldn't get many hires if everyone knew the truth. Archangel's holed up in a building at the end of the boulevard where I'll drop you off. He's got superior position and the only way in is over a very exposed bridge. It's a killing ground, but he's getting tired. Making mistakes. We'll have him soon enough."

"We'll get to him. Just point us to that bridge."

"I like your attitude, but we've got a plan in place. A small team is waiting to infiltrate his hideout, but we need to draw Archangel's fire so they can move in."

"...And that's where we come in."

"Exactly. You'll be on a distraction team. Head straight over the bridge and keep Archangel busy so the infiltration team can sneak in behind him."

"Sounds like a suicide mission to me," said Jacob.

"Pretty much. But you look like you can handle it. Head up to the boulevard and get to the third barricade. Talk to Sergeant Cathka. He'll tell you when to go in."

"What do you know about Archangel?"

"I'm the wrong guy to ask. I just do logistics. Tarak and the other merc bosses have been dealing with him for a while now. But don't be surprised if they're not thrilled about talking to a freelancer."

"So the bridge is the only way to his hideout?"

"Archangel collapsed all the underground passageways and sealed the doors to the lower levels. We've got teams digging, but it's taking too long. If they can get the gunship flying again, that'll help. But I'm hoping the infiltration team will finish the job and we can all go home."

"They were using a gunship to take out one guy?"

"Yeah – and Archangel shot it down. He didn't destroy it, but he knew just where to hit it to disable it. It wasn't even a fair fight. At least not for us."

"Where is the infiltration team now?"

"On the far side of the bridge, near his hideout,. But they can't get any closer without being seen."

"They got across the bridge? How'd they get that close without being seen?"

"More distractions. Tarak used the gunship to keep Archangel busy. We were able to sneak a few men into his hideout before he took it down, but they're stuck there. We need to keep Archangel focused on the bridge so he doesn't find them and wipe them out. Watch yourself on the boulevard. Archangel's killed dozens of you freelancers already. Out you go."

The squad exited the skycar, and Salkie took off back to the transit center.

"Well, we might have a way in, but getting out could be interesting," said Miranda.

"Let's worry about finding him first."

A soft chime sounded over Shepard's radio, then EDI's voice piped up. "Shepard, I've scanned the area, but I am unable to plot any other paths to Archangel."

"Guess we're going with the mercs," said Jacob.

"The heavy mechs and gunship possess considerable firepower. Weakening them before leaving will improve your chances."

Shepard grimaced, but didn't respond. An AI offering advice was disconcerting. Jacob and Miranda seemed to take it in stride, though. And while the suggestions did seem useful, Shepard had already been thinking along those lines.

The squad came to the first barricade, and Shepard cautiously peeked over. It was a long street with a warehouse at the far end. A shot rang out, and a merc on the next barricade up the street fell down. So Archangel was a sniper. The only way forward was through the buildings lining the boulevard. Inside the first was a group of Eclipse mercs, their armor yellow with black markings. The Eclipse logo was prominent on both chest and shoulder: a black circle with horizontal stripes and flames around the edges. One salarian with red skin and white stripes on his face seemed to be in charge. He paused his briefing as Shepard entered.

"Do you need something?" the salarian sneered. He spoke much more slowly than most salarians.

"You lead the Eclipse here?" asked Shepard.

"You figure that out by yourself? I'm Jaroth. I run Omega's Eclipse. What do you need, freelancer?"

"Why are Eclipse on Omega in the first place?"

"Since you care so much – Eclipse controls almost 20 percent of Omega. Our transport and mechs keep the eezo moving."

"Sounds very organized."

"Eclipse runs like a well-oiled machine. But Omega is anything but organized. It's a constant battle for control. Then Archangel comes along and complicates things even more."

"Why does Archangel give you so much trouble?"

"Ask him. I'm just here to make as much money as I can. We didn't come to Omega to be constrained by laws and regulations. He'll regret ever coming to Omega. I promise you."

"Seems like this is personal for you."

"He raided one of my transports last month. Killed two of my best operatives. One of them was my brother. So, yes, it's pretty damn personal."

"What do you know about Archangel?"

"His life expectancy is shortening quickly."

"Is that it? Nobody seems to know anything about him."

"Look around, you'll learn what you need to know. He's smart. He's resourceful. And he's dangerous. But we've got him cornered. He won't be making fools of us much longer."

"But where did he come from? Who is he?"

"Even his team didn't know that. Maybe we'll know more once we have his body. Of course, it really won't matter then."

Shepard repressed a sigh. "So the infiltration team is the main focus of the attack?"

"Tarak's plan, not mine. He doesn't want to lose any more men, so he's throwing you freelancers at the problem. Archangel's not going anywhere, so I suppose there's no harm in trying. Who knows – maybe you'll get lucky."

"So you're just going to hide here while us freelancers get killed?"

"Precisely. You're paid to be a distraction. Nothing more. Whether you survive or not is up to you."

Shepard excused himself. In the alley between that building and the next was an unattended YMIR heavy mech, just standing idle. Attached to it was an unsecured console. A few taps, and Shepard had reprogrammed the mech's targeting parameters.

"Perfect," Miranda approved. "It'll be hostile if they activate it."

"That should slow them down," Jacob nodded agreement.

The next building held a mix of vorchas and krogans, all in red armor. The Blood Pack logo on their shoulders was a simple white skull, though it was impossible to tell of what species.

"Filthy human!" came the garbled sneer of a vorcha.

A young, unscarred krogan got in Shepard's way. "You're in the wrong place, freelancer," he said in a deep, slow drawl.

"You the Blood Pack leader?" Shepard asked.

"Name's Garm. That's all you need to know. I'm stuck here waiting 'till you freelancers are done playing war. Ask your questions and go."

"Why are the Blood Pack on Omega?"

"We're the muscle on this bloody station. You need protection or want someone removed, talk to us. The Blood Pack are everywhere on Omega. Everybody loves us, and everybody hates us."

"I'm guessing Archangel mostly just hates you."

"He's an uptight asshole, I don't really care what he thinks. But he's costing me men and making me work for my money. I'll be the one to take him out today...you watch. I'm the only one who's fought him one-on-one."

"What do you know about him?"

"He's a pain in the ass. He's a turian, which makes him slightly worse to look at than you. And he's brave...till he realizes you're more than he bargained for."

"Sounds like you've had personal experience."

"He tried to take me down once. Waited 'till I was alone. Longest damn fight of my life, but I held him off 'till my men showed up. He wasn't so tough after that. We chased him over half of Omega. Almost had him, but the slippery bastard snuck away before we could pin him down."

Shepard agreed that this Archangel did sound tough. He could prove a valuable member of the team, assuming he survived this. "When do the Blood Pack attack?" Shepard asked.

"Damn Tarak wants us to wait. I hate waiting. But he says the Suns have a plan, and they don't want us getting in their way. Hah! We're supposed to wait until the Eclipse send their mechs...we'll see."

Looking around, Shepard didn't notice any way of sabotaging this group. Too bad. He moved on. The only way forward was to cross the street into another set of buildings at the second barricade. A shot rang out, killing another merc who'd complacently allowed his head to rise above the level of the barricade. Shepard and company crouched down and made their way across the street and into the next building. A group of Blue Suns mercs were gathered around a long table.

The leader, Tarak, was a batarian studying a holographic display and barking orders. "I don't want excuses! Tell Cathka to get that gunship working, or he'll be next over that bridge! And somebody get me those damn blueprints. Now!" Tarak noticed Shepard approaching and frowned with all four of his eyes. "Get this freelancer out of here! I don't have time for this shit!"

"What's your problem?" asked Shepard. The other merc leaders had talked down to him, but at least they'd taken the time to explain themselves.

"You!" Tarak screamed, as if that explained everything. He turned to a human woman. "Jentha – get this scum out of my face!" One of the other mercs handed his boss a datapad. "This can't be right. How can he have every exit covered?"

"Over here," the woman motioned Shepard and his squad to the corner. "The next wave's going soon. Shouldn't you be outside getting ready?" She pointed to a side door.

"I have some questions first. Why's he so pissed off?"

"He's not a big fan of you freelancers. Doesn't trust people he doesn't know. Hates having to bring in outsiders."

"What do the Blue Suns do on Omega?"

"We supply goods to a lot of the groups and factions here. Mechs. Machinery. You name it, we can get it. We also broker deals between factions. You wouldn't know it to look at him now, but Tarak can be quite a negotiator."

"How did Archangel get the Blue Suns so mad at him?"

"He harasses and hounds us constantly. We worry that every job is a trap now. Does he know where this meeting is? Will this shipment suddenly disappear? How many men will we lose this time? Tarak's had enough. I don't blame him."

"What do you know about Archangel?"

"He's a turian vigilante who thinks killing mercs is a fun way to pass the time. Other than that, he's a mystery. He shows up, usually at the worst possible time, and screws with our work. He can't die soon enough, if you ask me."

"Sounds personal. Why do you hate him so much?"

"He went after Tarak...at his home. Almost got him. Tarak's been on edge ever since, and he's making my life a living hell. Second-guesses every damn thing I do. Getting the other merc bands to help us shows you just how desperate he is. They're as bad as Archangel."

"What's Tarak going to do if the infiltration team fails?"

"To start, he'll shoot any freelancers that are still alive. After that, he'll let Eclipse and the Blood Pack take their shots. I suggested we work together, but he doesn't trust the other groups."

Shepard agreed with Jentha's strategy, but he wasn't about to give the mercs ideas. "What if Archangel survives all the attacks? Then you Suns are on your own."

"That's why Tarak wants that gunship fixed so badly. But it won't come to that. Archangel's good, but he can't hold out that long. He's already been in there over a day."

Shepard went out the door Jentha had indicated. Outside were a group of freelancers, all in mismatched armor. Shepard approached the only one who looked in his direction.

"I'm looking for Sergeant Cathka."

"You and me both, pal." The man was older, gray mustache visible behind the visor of his

battered helmet. "He's over there, working on the gunship." The freelancer pointed to a courtyard across the boulevard. "We go over the bridge when he gives the word. Go talk to him if you want, but I'm in no hurry."

"Why haven't you talked to him?"

"Because I'm not stupid. This assault is damn dangerous."

Shepard peeked around the corner at the third and final barricade. Freelance mercenaries of all stripes were gathered behind it, and Shepard couldn't get close enough to cover to avoid line-of-sight to the warehouse at the far end of the bridge. Taking a deep breath, he crouch-sprinted across the open street to the other side. A shot rang out and his shields went down for a moment, but he suffered no further damage. Jacob and Miranda followed unscathed.

In the courtyard was a batarian in Blue Suns armor working on an open panel of a gunship. It was a basic A-61 Mantis model. Scythe Aerospace sold them to anyone, and they could be found in the possession of any number of organizations, legit or otherwise. Shepard always thought they looked more like a hummingbird than a mantis, but no one asked him. This one was equipped with only the most basic of armaments, and it looked battered, besides.

"Cathka?" Shepard prompted.

The mechanic stood from his work and cleared his shaded visor. "*Sergeant* Cathka...Ah...you must be the group Salkie mentioned. You three kinda stand out from most of the other freelancers. Anyway...you're just in time."

"Were you waiting for us?"

"The infiltration team is about to give us the signal. Archangel won't know what hit him. Got any questions? This may be your last chance."

Cathka put down his welding tool on a box and lit up a cigarette. Shepard waved the smoke out of his face.

"So the bridge is the only way in?"

"Until the gunship's working again, or the blasters finish with the tunnels. Look, we got a plan. We don't need you trying to come up with any great ideas. Just do your damn job, collect your credits, and go home."

"How will the infiltration team get to Archangel?"

"They've got two options. They trap him in close quarters, and finish the bastard off face-to-face." Cathka paused to take a drag off his cigarette. "If that doesn't work, they have explosives. They'll just need time to set up."

"So our plan is to jump the last barricade and head for Archangel's building?"

"And try not to get killed too fast. You're only a distraction as long as you're alive. You don't have to make it all the way across. Just keep Archangel watching that bridge. The infiltration team will do the rest."

"Are you going to give us cover with the gunship?"

"Ha. Tarak is the only one who flies her. Besides, she's not quite ready. That bastard Archangel gave her a beating last time she was out there. A few more tweaks, she'll be as good as new."

"Why are you coordinating the attack and fixing the gunship?"

"I'm in the infiltration group. Our team coordinates with the gunship. I'm staying back to organize the freelancers and make sure the gunship's ready to go if we need her."

"Are you leading the assault?"

"Ha! Tarak doesn't pay me to fight. I just plan the attacks and fix the damn gunship. You freelancers get the privilege of –"

A radio on the box with Cathka's tools crackled to life "Target is in sight We're a go," said a scratchy voice."

Cathka piked up the radio. "Check. Bravo team – go, go, go!" The group of freelancers across the street gathered themselves up and approached the barricade. Cathka put the radio down and turned to Shepard. "Archangel's got quite a surprise waiting for him. But that means no more waiting for me." He tapped his visor, darkening it, and turned back to the gunship. "Gotta get her

back to a hundred percent before Tarak decides he needs her again...Where did I put that damn..."

Shepard noticed the electric welding tool Cathka had left on the box behind him. He picked it up. "You're working too hard," he said, and shoved the business end into Cathka's back before casually walking away. The mechanic crumpled to the ground. Oddly, no one seemed to notice.

"Doesn't look like Archangel's got much time," Jacob said.

"Well, let's not wait around too long," Miranda added.

"Come on. We'll give these guys a surprise of our own." Shepard cracked his knuckles and drew his assault rifle, then hopped over the barricade to follow the other freelancers.

Shepard gathered up biotic energy, and signaled Jacob and Miranda to do the same. They all let loose at the same time, and three freelancers went over the bridge into the chasm below. Shepard opened fire, killing another before anyone noticed. It was only when they reached Archangel's stronghold that they were noticed. The fight was on.

It turns out that a dozen lightly armed wannabe mercenaries are no match for three highly experienced and well-armored biotic soldiers. The lower level of the building had been a lobby of some sort. After the last freelancer was dead, no more came over the bridge. Shepard was glad that Tarak wasn't coordinating the mercenary bands. Having them all attack at once would have been unwinnable, even with the sabotage he'd inflicted.

Archangel was up on the second level, and Shepard led the way up the stairs and across an inside balcony. The door at the end was unlocked, and the team cautiously entered. Inside was a helmeted turian in metallic grey armor, his back to the door. He was aiming his sniper rifle towards the bridge.

"Archangel?" Shepard prompted.

Without turning, the turian held up a hand asking for a moment. He carefully aimed and fired off a shot. He paused, surveying his killzone, then turned and set his rifle against a couch. He sat on the arm of the couch and removed his helmet, then spoke.

"Shepard. I thought you were dead."

"Garrus!" Shepard exclaimed, splitting his face with a smile. "What are you doing here?"

"Just keeping my skills sharp. A little target practice." Garrus shrugged. He sounded exhausted.

"You okay?"

"Been better," Garrus shrugged. "But it sure is good to see a friendly face. Killing mercs is hard work. Especially on my own."

Jacob and Miranda took it upon themselves to survey the stronghold. The building sat on the corner of a cliff. Open windows faced the bridge and a sheer drop on the corner to the right. Another building abutted to the left. The lower level had two doors leading further into the building, but they'd been sealed off.

"What are you doing out here on Omega?" Shepard asked.

"I got fed up with all the bureaucratic crap on the Citadel. Figured I could do more good on my own. At least it's not hard to find criminals here. All I have to do is point my gun and shoot."

"You nailed me good a couple of times, by the way," Shepard stretched his shoulders.

"Concussive rounds only. No harm done. Didn't want the mercs getting suspicious. If I wanted to do more than take your shields down, I'd have done it. Besides you were taking your sweet time; I needed to get you moving."

"Uh huh." Shepard was still smiling. "Since when did you start calling yourself 'Archangel'?"

"It's just a name the locals gave me. For all my good deeds. I don't mind it, but please...it's, uh, just Garrus to you."

"How'd you manage to piss off every major merc organization in the Terminus Systems?"

"It wasn't easy. I really had to work at it. I am amazed that they teamed up to fight me. They must really hate me."

"Well, we got here, but I don't think getting out will be as easy."

"No, it won't. That bridge has saved my life, funneling all those witless idiots into scope. But it works both ways. They'll slaughter us if we try to get out that way."

"So we just sit here and wait for them to take us out?" Miranda asked.

"It's not all that bad. This place has held them off so far, and with the three of you...I suggest we hold this location, wait for a crack in their defenses, take our chances. It's not a perfect plan, but it's a plan."

"How'd you let yourself get into this position?"

"My feelings got in the way of my better judgment. It's a long story. I'll make you a deal: you get me out of here alive, and I'll tell you the whole damn thing."

"All right, let's get ready. They'll be here soon."

"Yeah, that they will. Their numbers won't help them in here anyway." Garrus picked up his rifle and went back to the window overlooking the bridge. "Let's see what they're up to...Looks like they know their infiltration team failed. Take a look." Garrus tossed his scoped rifle to Shepard. "Scouts. Eclipse, I think."

Shepard peered through the scope and zoomed in on a group of light mechs being deployed on the far side of the barrier. "More than scouts." Shepard took careful aim and squeezed the trigger, shattering the head of a mech. "One less now, though." Shepard handed the sniper rifle back to Garrus.

"Indeed. We'd better get ready. I'll stay up here. I can do a lot of damage from this vantage point. You... you can do what you do best. Just like old times, Shepard. Let's give these bastards everything we've got!"

The light mechs began a slow march across the bridge, but they were no match for Archangel and his reinforcements. As the last mech fell, the lone heavy YMIR mech was deployed, escorted by several Eclipse mercs.

"Uh oh," said Garrus.

"That problem should take care of itself," Shepard said smugly.

The heavy mech took two steps onto the bridge before it turned and fired on its masters. It slaughtered a half-dozen mercs before they knew what was going on. In an act of desperation, the remaining members of the local Eclipse regrouped in a panic and engaged their own mech. Shepard and his squad took up a guarded watch, but no further action was required on their part. Jaroth, the leader of the local Eclipse, took the killing blow on the heavy mech, but he was too close and did not survive the explosion. Amazingly, the bridge remained intact.

"Looks like that's all of them," said Garrus. "You're kicking ass, Shepard. They barely touched me. And we got Jaroth in the process. I've been hunting that little bastard for months."

"Why were you after him?"

"He's been shipping tainted eezo all over Citadel space. Half the goods I seized back at C-Sec came from his team here on Omega. I took out a big shipment a while back and killed this top lieutenant in the process. Not surprised he decided to work with the other mercs after that."

"We've still got Blood Pack and Blue Suns left. Think we can make a break for it?"

"Maybe. Let's see what they're up to." Garrus peered through the scope on his sniper rifle again. "They've reinforced the other side...heavily, but they're not coming over the bridge yet. What are they waiting for?"

There came a muted explosion, and the building shook. Bits of dust trickled from the ceiling here and there.

"What the hell was that?" said Miranda.

Garrus pulled up a video display on his omni-tool. "Damn it. They breached the lower level. Well, they had to use their brains eventually. You'd better get down there, Shepard. I'll keep the bridge clear."

"I didn't come all this way to watch you die. Let's split up two and two – keep one of my team here."

"You sure? Who knows what you'll find down there."

"Jacob, stay with Garrus. Keep him alive."

"If you say so," Jacob shrugged. "I'm not sure it's a good idea."

Shepard ignored that last comment. Strange thing to say, anyway.

"Thanks, Shepard. You better get going." Garrus provided directions.

Shepard and Miranda made their way downstairs, then through a door beneath the stairway. The basement was mostly empty, but looked like it had been used for storage. Two hallways forked out from the main room into smaller closets. Blood Pack vorchas were pouring out through a tunnel in the back of one closet. Shepard and Miranda used a combination of biotics and gunfire to push them back. A krogan began to push the corpses of his comrades aside, and Shepard took the pause in action to swap weapons and launch a grenade at the tunnel, collapsing rock from the asteroid wall and sealing the entrance.

There was another boom from across the storage room. Without waiting for more Blood Pack mercs to start pouring through, Shepard launched another grenade. This time, though, the whole basement started to collapse. Miranda led the way back up the stairs as Garrus's voice came over the radio.

"Get back here, Shepard. They're coming over the bridge, now. Too many to hold back!"

Shepard and Miranda took up position in the lobby and held off any mercs who got through the front door, while Garrus and Jacob picked off the enemy from the balcony above. In the chaos of the battle, Jacob biotically lifted a couch from the upper level and dropped it on the Blood Pack leader, Garm, pinning him and making him an easy target for Garrus' sniper rifle. When all was quiet again, Shepard made his way upstairs to regroup.

"Thanks, Shepard," Garrus panted. "They hardly got through to me. And we took out Garm and this entire chapter of the Blood Pack. This day just gets better and better. He was one tough son of a bitch."

"You fought with him before?"

"Yeah, we tangled once." Garrus walked over to a locker and began handing out spare heat sinks. "Caught him alone. None of his gang to help him. Still couldn't take him out. I've never seen a krogan regenerate that fast. He's a freak of nature. He just kept at it until his vorchas showed up. It was close, but I had to let him go."

"Not this time," Jacob gloated. Garrus nodded at him.

"Only the Blue Suns are left." Shepard noted. "I say we take our chances and fight our way out."

"I think you're right," Garrus agreed. "Tarik's got the toughest group, but nothing we haven't faced before. Besides he won't be expecting us to meet him head-on –"

The gunship flew into view, its gatling gun spinning up. Garrus dove for cover, but too late. The gunship fired a rocket that hit the floor and exploded right in the spot the turian was diving for. The three humans were pinned down by the gunship's machine gun until the gun overheated and the ship flew off.

Voices could be heard from the lobby, and Shepard motioned Jacob and Miranda to take up position and defend the stairway. Shepard readied his grenade launcher and glanced at Garrus. He was unconscious, and surrounded by a pool of spreading blue blood. The Cerberus operatives began opening fire and letting loose their biotics. Shepard could hear the gunship prowling around outside. He made his way to a window and peeked out. As the gunship floated by, he broke cover and let loose an overload charge from his omni-tool, which took down the craft's weakened shields. Then he fired off his remaining grenades from the launcher.

Shepard ducked down in time to avoid shrapnel from the exploding gunship, then joined his squad in finishing off the remaining Blue Suns Mercs in the lobby. When the fight was over, Shepard checked on Garrus. He rolled the turian onto his back, and Garrus took a gasping, gurgling breath. Shepard sent Jacob in search of a shuttle while Miranda applied medi-gel, then he radioed the Normandy to have the medical team standing by.

Shepard finished up his report to TIM in the conference room's holo-vid. Jacob was there waiting for him as the holographic cylinder retracted and the table rose from the floor. The Cerberus operative seemed concerned.

"Commander, we've done what we could for Garrus, but he took a bad hit. The docs corrected

with surgical procedures and some cybernetics. Best we can tell, he'll have full functionality, but..."

The door opened and in walked Garrus. "Shepard ." The turian had a leaky bandage covering the right side of his face, and he walked with a bit of a wobble in his step, but seeing his friend alive brought a smile to Shepard's face.

"Tough son of a bitch!" Jacob celebrated. "Didn't think he'd be up yet."

"Nobody would give me a mirror. How bad is it?"

"Hell, Garrus," Shepard grinned. "You were always ugly. Slap some face paint on there and no one will even notice."

"Ha – ah! Oh, don't make me laugh. Damn it, my face is barely holding together as it is...Ah, probably for the best. Everyone was always ignoring you and hitting on me. Time for you to get a fair shot at it."

Shepard shook his head, still grinning. Jacob saluted and returned to his duties.

"Frankly, I'm more worried about you," said Garrus, all seriousness now. "Cerberus, Shepherd? You remember those sick experiments they were doing?"

"The Collectors are wiping out human colonies, Garrus. Nobody else cares enough to stop it."

"I can't argue with that. Hard to believe the Council is letting the attacks go unanswered. Damn politicians."

"Right now, Cerberus is a necessary evil. I need their resources to get this done. That's why I'm glad you're here, Garrus. If I'm walking into hell, I want someone I trust at my side."

"You realize this plan has me walking into hell, too. Hah. Just like old times. I'm fit for duty whenever you need me, Shepard. I'll settle in and see what I can do with the forward batteries."

Shepard headed to his quarters. Joker and Kelly were chatting in the CIC again.

"Hey Commander we got Garrus back!" said Joker. "That's great, because he was totally my favorite...with that pole up his ass."

"How is our newest turian crew member doing?" Kelly asked. "His injuries looked painful. He's been through a lot, and not just physically. There's something about him...I just want to hold him close and whisper 'it will be all right.'"

"Are you attracted to other species?" asked Shepard.

"Well, part of my job is predicting the motives and feelings of humans *and* aliens. Intimacy brings understanding, and passion is nice wherever you find it. Character matters not race or gender."

"You're a very caring person, Kelly. Talk to you guys later."

-----The Convict-----

The Illusive Man had provided Shepard with a dossier for a convict of some sort. The description was vague: a very powerful human biotic prone to violence, and a mononym: Jack. This next would-be recruit was being held on a prison ship called Purgatory. It had started out as a turian ark-ship – for what type of voyage was unknown – but the Blue Suns mercenary group had stolen it and converted the bays originally intended for animals into prison cells.

As the Normandy approached, Shepard thought the cruiser-sized ship looked like the spine of a fish. He passed through the airlock with Jacob and Miranda in tow, and was met by a welcoming committee of three turians in Blue Suns armor. All the guards and staff in the prison were turians, it seemed.

"Welcome to The Purgatory, Shepherd," said the helmeted guard. "Your package is being prepped, and you can claim it shortly. As this is a high-security vessel, you need to relinquish your weapons before we proceed."

"I can't do that."

"Everyone stand down." A turian in too-shiny armor entered the lobby and strutted over.

"Commander, I'm Warden Kuril, and this is my ship. Your weapons will be returned on the way out. You must realize this is just a standard procedure."

"It's my standard procedure to keep my gun. We're not surrendering our guns. Period."

A staring contest ensued between Shepard and Kuril. The Warden blinked first.

"Let them proceed. Our facility is more than secure enough to handle three armed guests." The Warden ordered his men to stand down, then led the way into the facility proper. "We're bringing Jack out of cryo. As soon as the funds clear, you can be on your way. If you'll follow me to outprocessing for the pickup, Commander."

"Let's go."

"Cellblock Two. As you can see, we keep tight control over the population." The hallway was a tube with glass walls. Outside was a common area with cells stacked along the outside. Mechanical arms with claws could move the cells around. The Warden continued. "Each prisoner's cell is a self-contained modular unit. I've blown a few out the airlocks as an example. The ship is made up of 30 cell blocks identical to this one – we house thousands of criminals. We can put the whole place in lockdown on a moment's notice. Nothing goes wrong here."

"Can you tell me about Jack?"

"Cerberus hasn't told you?" Kuril began to wring his hands. "Jack is the meanest handful of violence and hate I've ever encountered. Dangerous, crazy, and very powerful. You'll see soon enough."

"How'd you end up running this ship?"

"I was in law enforcement on Palaven and got sick of seeing criminals escape out into the galaxy to carry on with their crimes. Bounty hunters aren't dependable. Eventually I hit upon this idea. Keep the criminals in space and the galaxy is a safer place."

"So it's principle? You do this because you think it's necessary."

"Every day I see the worst that sapient life has to offer. Governments are soft, unwilling to make the hard choices. Someone had to stand up and make the galaxy safe."

"Maintaining a population this size in space can't be cheap."

"We can cut corners that governments can't, and each prisoner brings in a fee from his homeworld. These individuals are violent and their home planets pay well to keep them here."

"What happens if the homeworld doesn't want to pay?"

"We explain that we can't maintain the prisoner without their help, so we'll be forced to release him back onto his homeworld. At an unspecified place and time."

"So it's an extortion racket," Miranda concluded.

"You don't have to agree with my methods, but don't question my motives. These are despicable people and I'm keeping them locked up. Let's get on with this."

"Have you had many escape attempts?" Miranda asked.

"We're in space – they have nowhere to go and they know it. But still, we exercise extreme caution. These are dangerous individuals. We have many ways to control the population."

As if to illustrate the point, Kuril paused and looked out onto the common area, where two prisoners were picking a fight with one another. A nearby guard tapped at his omni-tool, and a pylon activated, enveloping both would-be combatants in separate force-fields and separating them. The Warden placed his hands on his hips in a smug gesture.

"I'm going to confirm that the funds from Cerberus cleared. Outprocessing is straight down this hallway. Just keep going past the interrogation rooms and the supermax wing. I'll catch up with you later...Shepard."

The Warden turned down a branch in the hallway, and Shepard continued along in the direction the Warden indicated. There were three cells further down, attached to the hallway. A downtrodden-looking man motioned over to Shepard.

"Hey! Hey, guys, over here. Let me ask you something. If you're buying prisoners, can you buy me? Man I don't care where you take me or what you do to me. It's gotta be better than this."

"We're here for Jack," said Miranda.

"Jack? Forget what I just said. I don't want to go nowhere with you."

"Tell me more about Jack," Shepard prompted.

"The worst trouble you ever saw mixed with some crazy and way too much biotic power. That's

all I'm saying.”

“I thought this ship was a prison not a market.”

“Sometimes people buy cons so they can do some punishing of their own, if you understand. Warden sells us to whoever can pay enough.”

“So what are you in for?”

“I killed a few people. Only about 20 or so. And I blew up that one habitat. Small time compared to most of the guys here.”

“What's life like on the ship?”

“Bad. And you gotta watch out – damn but someone's always after your stuff. Your smokes, your clothes, your...pride.” The prisoner paused and grimaced at the floor. “I haven't taken a shower in three months.”

The sound of a beating was coming from the next cell over.

“Why are they interrogating that prisoner? He know something?” asked Shepard.

“No, that's Bimmy – he don't know nothing. He offed someone in the showers yesterday, I think. Guy he killed was worth a lot to the Warden. Yeah, sucks to be Bimmy right now.”

Shepard wondered if they knew when to stop. “They're going at it pretty hard. Do they ever kill prisoners by accident?”

“I haven't heard of anyone dying. Warden can't make money off us if we're dead. Funny thing though – the more a guard does it, the meaner he gets. So they rotate them through.”

“I should go.”

“I should go wish I could go.”

“Commander, you seeing this shit?” Jacob was disgusted at the 'interrogation' going on in the next cell.

“Is there something I can do for you?” asked the helmeted guard outside the cell.

“There's no excuse for beating a prisoner who can't fight back,” Jacob narrowed his eyes and frowned.

“Maybe he deserves it, but is this necessary?” said Shepard.

“This is a massage compared to what his victims went through.”

“This is beneath you,” Shepard reasoned. “It degrades you as much as him.”

“We have orders.”

“You're not important enough to make your own decisions?”

“I admit...I sometimes get tired of this. Does this really give us anything useful?”

“Stop this. For your own sake.”

“Yeah, you're right.” The guard turned to his coworker inside the cell. “Call it off. At least for now.”

The last cell contained a man standing absolutely still. His eyes had a crazy gleam to them.

“I hear the screaming in my head,” the man said softly. “It's nice, yeah.”

Shepard continued on without stopping. The door at the end of the hallway led to a large room with several desks. All were empty save one, where a turian in a lab coat sat tapping at a console.

“Outprocessing's through the door on the far side of the room,” he said absently.

The Commander and the two Cerberus operatives approached the indicated door, which opened to reveal a prison cell.

“My apologies, Shepard,” came the Warden's voice over a loudspeaker. “You're more valuable as a prisoner than a customer. Drop your weapons and proceed into this open cell. You will not be harmed.”

“What about serving the galaxy? You talked up your noble intentions with this prison. But it turns out you're a criminal like the rest.”

“Activate security systems in Outprocessing! Shepard is loose!”

“Oh, for crying out loud!” Miranda exclaimed.

Alarms began to blare. Shepard sighed and unholstered his assault rifle. Jacob and Miranda followed his example. Two guards ran in to the room, followed by two of the dog-type mechs.

Weapons fire scattered papers and datapads; biotoc bursts scattered chairs; exploding mechs upended desks. Shepard's squad pushed towards the door through which they'd entered. More guards and mechs met them in the hallway, but the lightly armed guards weren't trained for this, and they went down quickly.

Down the side passage the Warden had taken earlier was a security room overlooking a cryogenic cell. Shepard approached the console.

"That's going to open every door on the cell block," said Miranda.

"It's the only way to get Jack out of cryo," Jacob shrugged.

"I'm doing it," Shepard warned. "Be ready." He pushed the button.

A claw arm extended from the wall and pulled a frosty tube up from the floor. Three YMIR heavy mechs activated and turned towards the cryo cell as it emerged. Fog poured out of the opening as the temperature equalized with the room. The prisoner was a petite caucasian woman, with a shaved head and covered in nothing but tatoos.

"That's Jack?!" Jacob was taken aback.

Jack blinked as she gained consciousness, then began tearing at her restraints. A biotic field gathered around her as the clamps broke free, and she let out a biotic shockwave like nothing Shepard had ever seen. The glass window of the security room shattered. The squad ducked to avoid the glass. When the smoke had cleared, all three heavy mechs lay in sparking heaps, and the woman was nowhere to be seen.

"Let's get down there." Shepard led the way down the stairs to the level below.

"Warning! Warning!" blared an automated voice, but it was cut off by a series of small explosions before it could say what the problem was.

"Sounds like heavy fighting further in," Miranda observed.

The cryo facility was a mess of blood and mech parts. A hole had been blown open in one wall, leading into an adjacent hallway. Shepard led the way through the path of destruction as Warden Kuril's orders came over the loudspeakers.

"All guards: restore order! Lethal force authorized! But don't kill Jack! Techs: lockdown! Lockdown!"

The automated voice resumed its status report. "Sectors Seven, Nine, and Eleven have lost life support. No survivors."

The squad emerged into the open common area they'd seen from the glass hallway earlier. Several cells had fallen onto the floor and been split open. There were small fires everywhere.

The Warden made another announcement. "Return to your cells immediately or I'll open every airlock on this ship!"

At the far end of the room, some prisoners had found weapons and were exchanging gunfire with their guards.

EDI spoke up with some unsolicited advice. "Shepard, the warden has locked down the area behind you. You must find another exit route."

Shepard, annoyed as he was at the interruption, was too busy to admonish the AI this time. Getting to Jack was the goal now, anyway. The only other way to go was across the common area, under the glass hallway to the other side. There, he was confronted by three Blue Suns guards. These wore heavy armor now, and gave the Cerberus squad some pause, but not much.

The whole ship shook for a moment, then the automated voice piped up again. "Warning: power plant damage has led to overload. Core systems failure imminent."

The squad continued through the common area to another large room lined with cells. A guard was splayed on some crates, killed by stab wounds rather than guns.

"This guard got swarmed by prisoners with improvised weapons," Jacob noted. "He never had a chance."

"Shows you what kind of people these prisoners are," said Miranda. "I don't agree with everything they do here, but it's in the galaxy's best interests. This guard kept maniacs away from innocent people."

"Lockdown in Blocks Four, Seven, and Eight!" the Warden yelled.

"The hull has been breached in Sectors 12, 14, and 30. No survivors," said the station's automated voice.

"Find Jack! Full alert! Find Jack!" Warden Kuril's voice had a bit of a waver to it, now.

A heavy YMIR mech and two guards entered through the door at the far end of the room. Shepard and company took cover and got to work. All three flung overload charges at the mech, which began to take down the robot's shields. Before they could do much more, though, the station lurched again.

"Holy shit!" yelled Jacob as one of the large mechanical arms spun out of control, then crashed to the floor, crushing the mech and scattering the guards.

Shepard took advantage of the confusion and finished off the Blue Suns mercs. The next room was a warehouse, half-full of crates. Many of the crates had been knocked over in the chaos, and Kuril had arranged a cluster of them, into a makeshift fort, surrounded by the electric glow of a forcefield. Three of the shield-generating pylons were pouring out lines of energy to surround the warden. No doubt it would be impervious to the weapons Shepard's squad carried.

"All guards to cell block one," he said into his radio before turning at the Cerberus squad's entrance. "You're valuable, Shepherd. I could have sold you and lived like a king." Kuril fired at Shepard and the trio scattered to take cover. "But you're too much trouble. At least I can recapture Jack."

"Not happening!" Shepard taunted back. "You're a two-bit slave trader and I don't have time for it!"

"I do the hard things civil governments are unwilling to! This is for the good of the galaxy!"

Shepard ordered Jacob and Miranda to each take a pylon. More guards poured in, harrying the squad. As they were able, each of the humans would break cover and toss an overload at their assigned pylon, disabling it and weakening the warden's shield. Once all three pylons were destroyed, it was a simple matter to kill the warden and make their way back to the airlock. There was a matter of urgency, though, as the ship continued to shake itself to pieces.

In the lobby, Shepard encountered the petite Jack, angrily pacing and grunting. There were pieces of dead guards smearing the walls.

"Gah! Cerberus!" she sneered as she noticed the Cerberus logo on the Normandy's hull. Jack turned as a shot rang out, and a guard she hadn't noticed fell dead behind her. She noticed Shepard's entrance. "What the hell do you want?"

Shepard holstered his assault rifle. "I just saved your ass."

"He was already dead. He just didn't know it. Now, what the hell do you want?"

"I'm Commander Shepard, and I'm here to get you off this ship. You're in a bad situation and I'm gonna get you out of here."

"Pft. Shit, you sound like a pussy. I'm not going anywhere with you. You're Cerberus."

"Why does it matter if I'm with Cerberus?"

"They've been on my ass for years. Anytime I get free they put a huge bounty on me, That's why. Warden Kuril figured he'd struck gold when he caught me."

"It isn't working out too well for him. I'm here to ask for your help."

"She's destroyed Cerberus property and killed Cerberus people," Miranda explained. "Hence the bounty...which we've rescinded, apparently."

"I'm not your enemy," Shepard tried to sound soothing.

"You show up in a Cerberus frigate to take me away somewhere. You think I'm stupid?"

"Yes. This ship is going down in flames, and I've got the only way out. I'm offering to take you with us. You're arguing. We can get you to safety, and we're asking for your help on a mission."

"We could just knock her out and taker her," Miranda suggested.

"I'd like to see you try."

"It might just come to that," said Jacob.

"You'll have to kill me."

“We're not going to attack her,” Shepard ordered.

“Good move. Look, you want me to come with you, make it worth my while.”

“Join my team and I'll do what I can for you.”

“Don't make promises you can't keep. I bet your ship's got lots of Cerberus databases. I want to look at those files, see what Cerberus got on me. You want me on your team, let me go through those databases.”

“I'll give you full access.”

“Shepard, you're not authorized to do that!” Miranda said, exasperated.

“O-o-oh, it upsets the cheerleader – even better,” Jack scoffed. “You better be straight up with me.” Shepard nodded “So why the hell are we standing here?”

Back aboard the Normandy, TIM was nonplussed. He was annoyed that the Blue Suns had tried to betray his people, and he was pleased that Jack was on the team. But he also seemed to be hiding something, as usual – he certainly knew about Jack's history with Cerberus, even if he avoided the subject. After the call ended, Miranda tried to lecture Jack. The former convict had found something resembling clothing. Miranda had changed into her Cerberus command uniform.

“Welcome to the Normandy, Jack. I'm Miranda, Shepard's second-in-command. On this ship, we follow orders.”

“Tell the Cerberus cheerleader to back off, Shepard. I'm here because of our deal.”

“Get settled in, and I'll give you access soon.”

“Right. Might want to hurry on that. You know the damage I can do inside a frigate?”

“Miranda will let you into the system. Let me know what you find.”

“Hear that, precious? We're going to be friends,” Jack replied sarcastically. “You, me, and every embarrassing little secret.”

“Do I need to put her in the holding cells?” Miranda frowned at Shepard. She clearly didn't like their newest recruit. “Just to be safe?”

“Yeah, no thanks, precious. I'll find my own place. Somewhere near the bottom. I don't like through traffic. Keep your people off me.” Jack turned and left the conference room, head held smugly high. “Don't keep me waiting, Shepard.”

Miranda shook her head at Shepard and followed her out to the elevator. Joker caught Shepard's sleeve while the Commander waited for the elevator to return.

“Okay, Shepard. Glad you're back, but keep an eye on that last one. We can only hold so much crazy.”

Kelly agreed. “Jack's tattoos are beautiful, as colorful as her past, I'm sure. I have concerns with her temper though.”

“You have worries about Jack?”

“I know she'll be solid under fire, but her attitude suggests deep personal issues. She pushes people away, yet approaches sex casually. I don't think she understands her own motivations. I wouldn't be surprised if she makes advances on you. If you want her respect, think twice.”

“I'll do my best not to piss her off.”

“Please warn me if you fail. I want a chance to hide.”

-----The Warlord-----

The planet Korlus was described by one Citadel Council member as 'a garbage scow with a climate.' The Korlus Tourist Bureau had tried unsuccessfully to rebrand it as 'the recycling center of the galaxy.' Shepard gazed out the window as the shuttle descended into a hazy, smoggy atmosphere. Their destination was one of the planet's many spacecraft recycling yards. Hundreds of starships of all sizes and shapes lay in various states of dismantling.

Miranda was skimming through a datapad. “The dossier doesn't say if Okeer is on this planet by choice,” she mused “Assume hostiles.”

"What do we know about this guy?" Shepard asked.

"He's a krogan warlord. We have reports that he's traded with the Collectors for tech to cure the genophage."

"That's just great. And the Blue Suns are helping him?"

"No idea what his relationship is with the mercenaries."

The VI-piloted shuttle bumped down in a small clearing and the recruitment team stepped off. The acrid ozone smell of arc torches lay heavily in the air. Smoke from unattended burn pits stung the eyes with toxic chemicals. Shepard heard gunfire in the distance. Hostiles, indeed. An unhappy female voice spoke over scratchy speakers.

"There is only one measure of success: kill or be killed! Perfection is your goal."

"Broadcasting orders over loudspeaker? Charming," Miranda opined.

"Stay focused," Shepard admonished. "We're looking for a krogan warlord. Watch your targets."

Hunks and slabs of metal were arranged to form a path. It had probably started out as a safe path for workers to travel to and from the work site, but it looked more like a gauntlet. Battered supply crates lay strewn along the path. Shepard couldn't tell if they'd been used as barricades or target practice. The voice spoke over the loudspeaker again as the squad rounded a corner.

"Being hired is merely the beginning. You must earn your place in the mighty army we are building."

"Observation post ahead," Jacob whispered. "They look tense."

Shepard led an approach, intending to open dialog, but the four human Blue Suns mercs opened fire on sight. As the Cerberus squad took cover, Shepard wondered why they encountered so many Blue Suns cells. Maybe this one was just a recruitment center? Certainly these four were rookies, the way they left themselves exposed. Three died quickly, and one was left wounded. Shepard approached the human male struggling to stand.

"Shit. Shit! It won't stop bleeding...I'm gonna...son of a bitch!" The man spoke between strained breaths as he struggled to stand.

"Doesn't look that bad, actually," Miranda observed.

"He doesn't need to know that," said Jacob.

"I knew it wasn't berserkers. Not at range. You're mercs. Or Alliance. I'm not...I'm not telling you anything."

"You're not in the best bargaining position," said Shepard. "I'm looking for a krogan named Okeer."

"Who? You already know more than I do. I just kill krogan. The old one in the lab dumps crazy ones down here all the time."

"I've got a nice application of medigel ready to go, but if you'd rather I just keep walking..."

"Son of a...I just, I don't know anything. I just shoot the overflow from the labs. The old krogan up there, he's really been cleaning house lately. Jedore hired him to make her an army, but the krogan he creates are insane, so we use them for live ammo training. It's all crap; I don't get paid enough to goddamn bleed out!" The merc's radio crackled to life. "Outpost four? Jedore wants us to move. We need coordinates on that krogan pack." The rookie's eyes grew wide with nervousness as he looked at Shepard for direction.

"What's he talking about?"

"Jedore runs a Blue Suns outlier, and she's making krogan for an army. But they all come out crazy. Tough as hell, but just insane."

"Heavy ordinance is a lot cheaper than a breeding setup," said Miranda.

"I don't know. I just point, shoot, and bank my credits. Maybe there's something better in the labs?"

"I want your friends gone, understand?" Shepard said in a threatening tone.

"Uh...patrol...the last group dispersed five minutes ago."

"Dispersed? Jedore will be pissed. She wanted a show."

"You asked for a report, you got it. Dispersed."

“Understood. Returning to the labs.”

“There. You see? I'm helping.”

Shepard did see, but he still wanted some answers. “Have you seen Okeer? Does he know about all of this?”

“We can't go in the labs, but everyone sees what happens when the krogan come out. I've shot hundreds. They're crazy. Mindless. Anyone up there, they know what's going on.”

“What's Jedore planning to do with all these krogan?”

“Replace us, probably. I sure wouldn't want to see an army of them coming at me. Only she can't control them. They aren't supposed to be crazy, but they're krogan. How smart are they to start?”

“Is Jedore's lab heavily guarded?”

“There are big guns to keep ships away. We're not outfitted to fight goddamn commandos.”

“All right, you've earned your medi-gel.” Shepard applied a dose from his omni-tool to the merc's leg. “Now, I suggest you get out of here and find another line of work.”

The merc limped away, cursing. Miranda and Jacob both disagreed with letting the man live.

“Come on. Our warlord is somewhere in Jedore's lab.” Shepard unholstered his assault rifle and lead on.

The path became muddy. Progress was further slowed by coils of tangled cable. More gunfire was heard, closer this time. The loudspeaker voice made another announcement, probably the voice of this Jedore.

“Training is part of your contract. Failure to perform means liquidation, legal and otherwise.”

The squad rounded a corner into an open area. Blue Suns mercs appeared on a catwalk above and opened fire. One had a rocket launcher, and Shepard ducked out of the way in the nick of time. Jacob and Miranda kept most of the mercs busy. Shepard used a biotic push to knock the rocket-wielding merc off the catwalk as he was reloading. The rocket misfired and took out the merc's coworkers. Shepard finished him off with his gun, then salvaged the merc's comm unit, linking it into his own radio. They continued through the gauntlet. The muddy path ended in a makeshift metal pathway, much to the relief of the Cerberus squad. The Blue Suns' radio came to life as the squad entered another open area with catwalks above.

“Team Four, do you read? Team Four! Comm, tell Jedore we have a problem. Patrols are going dark. Either the krogan are pushing, or we're being raided!”

The latter was certainly true, thought Shepard. The former might be problematic. Another group of rookie Blue Suns mercs scrambled onto the catwalks, and Shepard's squad made short work of them. Jedore made another short speech over loudspeaker.

“The krogan are your example and your warning! As ferocious as they are, failures are expendable.”

Around another bend, they came to a dead end, and a lone krogan in a courtyard fending off mercs. The krogan was wearing cheap-looking, brick-red and cream-colored armor, wielding a weak shotgun.

The mercs yelled orders from the balcony above: “Code Six! Offworld presence! Shift fire from the krogan! Hostiles in the compound!”

Jedore barked commands from the loudspeaker. “We have guests in the compound. If they're not killed immediately, all bonuses will be denied!”

Shepard's squad assisted the krogan in quickly defeating the mercs. The krogan kept his helmet on, but lowered his shotgun. He moved and spoke slowly as Shepard holstered his weapon and held up his hands in a gesture of peace. The krogan seemed to sniff the air as he stopped uncomfortably close.

“You...are different. New. You don't smell like this world. Seven night cycles and I felt only the need to kill. But you...something makes me speak.”

“He's only a week old?” said Miranda.

“He must know something about all this if he survived this long,” said Shepard.

“Survive...yes. I must survive. But not here. Not against these fleshy shapes. I must survive the

enemy that threatens all my kind. But I failed, even before leaving glass mother. That is what the voice in the water said. That is why I wait here.”

“They must breed them full size, ready to kill,” Jacob concluded. “Not much improvement over regular mercs if they need training.”

“Bred...to kill. No. I kill because my blood and bone tell me to. But it's not why I was flushed from glass mother. Survival is what I hear in my head. Against the enemy that threatens all my kind. But I failed. Even before waking. That is what the voice in the water said. That is why I wait here.”

“How can you speak if you're only a week old?”

“There was a scratching sound in my head, and it became the voice. It taught things I would need. Walking, talking, hitting, shooting. Then the voice said I was not perfect, and the teaching stopped. And now I am here.”

“It was taught enough to be tested, but for what?” Miranda wondered aloud.

“I don't know, but I am not perfect.”

“Okeer's voice? Did he speak to you while you were in your tank?” Shepard asked.

“I heard the voice. Not like now with ears. Inside. I called it 'father.' It liked that, but it was disappointed. I'm not what it needs me to be.”

“A lab with krogans – this another genophage cure attempt?” Jacob asked.

“Cure? Cure was never whispered. Survive. Resist. Ignore.”

“I destroyed Saren's cure,” said Shepard. “How does Okeer expect these krogan to ignore the genophage if not by curing it?”

“I have no idea,” Miranda said. “It doesn't look like he's had much success with these krogan.”

“How did you disappoint the voice?” Shepard asked the krogan.

“I don't know. It was decided before I left tank mother. I was not perfect.”

“That merc you helped said they were insane, but this one seems lucid enough,” said Jacob.

“I don't know of that. But I am not perfect.”

“You're supposed to be part of a mercenary army,” Shepard prompted. “Do you remember Jedore?”

“I know that name. It causes anger. But also laughter. It is not a name that will be sung when we march. I don't know what that means, but I have heard it many times.”

“Can you show me the laboratory? I need to speak with Okeer.”

“The...glass mother. She is up. Past the broken parts. Behind many of you fleshy things. I will show you.”

The krogan walked over to a wall and grunted as he lifted a giant slab of metal, then flung it to the side.

“Impressive. And dangerous,” said Miranda.

“You fleshy things are slow when big things are in your way.”

“Can you show us the way? Help us fight to the lab?” asked Shepard.

“No.”

“No will to fight back?” asked Jacob

“I will fight if they come, but I feel it deep that I must wait. I kill, but only here.”

“You could have run, or tried to fight your way back to the labs. Why stay here?” Shepard asked.

“I am waiting. The voice told me. If they come, I fight. But I will not run, and I will not follow. I am not perfect, but I have purpose. I must wait until called, released.”

The krogan walked back to the center of the ring and drew his shotgun, waiting. Shepard's squad continued on, down a muddy slope. Around the next corner they came to a chasm, a gap between the land and a giant-half-disassembled ship. Wooden planks had been placed, bridging the gap. Two Blue Suns mercs were running out of the ship.

One of them yelled as he ran: “They're loose! Run for your damn life! They're all free!”

A krogan in the same cheap armor as the one Shepard spoke to emerged from the shadows in the derelict ship and stomped on his end of the wooden plank, shattering it and sending the two mercs plummeting below. Three more krogan emerged and noticed Shepard's squad. They drew their

shotguns and moved forward, onto the remaining makeshift wooden bridges. It was their doom. A few bursts of biotic warps from the three Cerberus operatives was enough to send the imperfect krogan clones down to their deaths.

Jedore spoke over loudspeaker again. "Who authorized that krogan release? Okeer? I will have order in my compound!"

Shepard looked around for a way into the ship. Opposite, the path was lined with long planks of metal. Coordinating with his squad, the three managed to pry one loose and drop it across the span. The Blue Suns radio crackled to life as they crossed.

"Krogan took down the grid! We're blind and getting hit on all sides! Where are the heavies?"

"Krogan on our six! Copy, god damn it! Where's Jedore and her personal guard?"

Weapons fire could be heard ringing through the ship as Shepard led his squad up creaky stairs and through hallways of jagged, rusty metal. The ship had been stripped bare, and there were bodies of demolition workers here and there. Up a few levels, they came across bodies and parts of bodies – of Blue Suns mercs as well as krogan clones.

Jedore spoke again, and she was sounding unhinged. "Jedore does not pay for failure! Do your jobs, I want them dead!"

Another merc spoke via radio. "Concentrate on the krogan charge, or we're all dead! Who was the genius who gave them arms?"

More sounds of battle rang through the ship, and the hulk vibrated with explosions. The squad continued making their way through the wreckage until they exited to an open section on the side of the hull. A bridge had been set up, leading to the next hulk over. This ship had several open bays, and there was no choice but to fight through squads of Blue Suns mercs to get through them. As Shepard, Jacob, and Miranda fought their way through and up to the upper deck, a series of exchanges played between Jedore on the loudspeaker and several radio transmissions.

"I paid for competence! Kill the trespassers! I will deal with the traitorous Okeer!"

"Berserkers are going down, but the outsider commandos are still incoming! Repeat, still incoming!"

"I need everyone out of the labs to fight this! Every floor, every outpost! Move!"

"No more! I command that they be killed! What is so hard to understand?"

"What do you mean Jedore's holding the mechs? She'll lose all her toys if we don't get backup!"

"Concentrate fire on my position! Concentrate on – Argh!"

"There are three of them! Three! Anything can be killed if you do your damned jobs!"

"Jedore! Damn it, someone get her off the speakers and out here!"

"Trespassers are topside! Tell Jedore we can't hold them and the krogan! We're getting slaughtered!"

"Squad Four? Outpost? Report! Damn it. Have to do everything myself."

On the upper deck, the ship had a conning tower with a functioning door. The room inside was furnished with medical equipment, and cowering behind a bed was a familiar-looking asari wearing a lab coat. She rose as Shepard entered.

"Shepard, don't shoot! You know me! I shut down the security cams as soon as I saw it was you. Never thought I'd say it, but I'm glad it's you shooting up the place. Sorry. Rana Thanoptis. You let me go when you destroyed Saren's lab on Vormire. Had to outrun a nuke in a utility pod, but it's still a second chance."

"I remember you, vaguely. You were in Saren's lab."

"Yeah, I'm not proud of what went on there, but I'm using what we learned for the greater good."

"I assume you have a good reason for being here."

"Don't worry. I'm not wasting the chance you gave me. My work here – strictly beneficial. Not for the mercs. Jedore's on a standard power trip, but Okeer is trying to do something good, I can tell. Even if his methods are a little...extreme." Rana glanced at a charred skeleton on a nearby table, then

recovered herself. "Everyone deserves a second chance, right? And sometimes giving one pays off. I take care of my debts." She pulled up her omni-tool and began a money transfer to Shepard.

Shepard waved it away. "Is paying me supposed to make up for working for Saren, or whatever you're doing here?"

"No, but it's a start I wouldn't have had without you. So maybe I'm not the best example of moral research, but give me a little credit for trying."

"What's Okeer trying to do here?"

"It's complicated. Jedore wants a private army, but Okeer mostly ignores her. He's running the project for his own reasons. I created a mental imprint routine to educate his tank-bred, but most don't get through it. He dumps them for some reason." Rana looked over at a table with a dead krogan clone on it. "He wants to help his people, but he's not looking for a genophage cure, and he's not going for numbers. That's all I know."

"Finding you in a place like this makes me think letting you go was a mistake. You don't want that."

"We agree on that. Suppose I can't expect a warm goodbye after the last mess. Don't worry, I plan on staying as far away from anything to do with you as possible. Now, if you don't mind, I'm gonna run like hell before you blow the place or something. I know how you work." Rana exited the room with some parting words. "Thanks anyway, Shepard."

"You give too many favors," said Miranda.

"I'm all for second chances," said Jacob. "Little iffy on the third ones."

Shepard led the way down a ladder into a large lab. A single cloning tank held a krogan clone, and all but one of the computers along the walls had been shut down. One side of the room was a blurry glass window overlooking a large room full of cloning tanks. Deactivated heavy mechs sat in the corners. A krogan was tapping away at his console as Shepard's squad entered the lab. The aged krogan looked odd in a lab coat.

"Here you are! I've watched your progress. It's about time. The batteries on these tanks will not wait while you play with these idiotic mercs."

"Not the smartest way to greet the heavily armed group that just kicked in your door," Jacob said.

"I'm sure whoever sent you doesn't want me dead. No one looks for me without a motive."

"You don't want to know who we are before you start making demands?"

"I know you, Shepard. Your own demands will come, I'm sure. You weren't dragged back from death because someone needed a diplomat."

"You don't seem particularly caged...or grateful that I'm here."

"You may claim to be here to help, but the formerly deceased Shepherd is not a sign of gentle change. Surprised? All krogan should know you. I'm sure Rana has already revisited your actions on Virmire."

"And I'm sure you're eager to retell the story."

"Such a tale! Saren, the Spectre traitor, threatened the return of the krogan horde by curing the genophage, undoing the gentle genocide of the turians and salarians. But before Saren can deliver his endless troops, in rides Shepard, securing victory through nuclear fire. I like that part. It has weight."

"I didn't have a lot of room for finesse. If there'd been any other solution, I'd have considered it."

"But I approve. Saren's pale horde were not true krogan. Numbers alone are nothing. The mistake of

an outsider, one that these mercenaries have also made. I gave their leader my rejects for her army, but she grows impatient. It's time for you to take me out of here."

"We're here about the Collectors," said Miranda. "We couldn't care less about your problems."

"I see. Yes, Collector attacks have increased. A human concern. My requests were focused elsewhere. I acquired the knowledge from them to create one pure soldier." Okeer indicated the tank. "With that, I will inflict upon the genophage the greatest insult and enemy can suffer: to be ignored."

“So you don't want to cure the genophage?” Shepard wondered.

“Contrary to what survivors claim, the genophage does not produce strong krogan – the only quality it filters is the ability to survive the genophage. For every thousand stillborn, too many weaklings live. Every survivor is branded as precious. That's produced more coddling than your collective human teats.” All three humans frowned at that dig, but the krogan doctor continued. “I say let us carry the genophage! Let a thousand die in a clutch. We will defeat it by climbing atop our dead. That is the krogan way.”

“You're just as cruel and manipulative as those who released the genophage on your people.”

“Perhaps. But I will restore the krogan, and my soldier will not provoke a nuclear response as a 'cure' or 'horde' would. My legacy is perfection, with each pure krogan reaching higher by standing on our dead. They will exceed, but not forget.”

“You don't want a horde? I thought the krogan ideal was a return to the numbers that threatened the galaxy.”

“We will not need numbers. My soldier is a template. It is a greater threat than all the phantom siblings that would have been at its flank. The galaxy still bears the scars of the horde. But it will learn to fear the lance.”

“What did you get from the Collectors?” Miranda asked. “We need whatever you know about them.”

“They are strange. So isolated, yet very available when your sacrifice is big enough. I gave them many krogan. I may have information for you, but the tech was consumed in my prototype. After I determined how to use it without killing the subjects. The deaths were unfortunate, but I only need one success to start the process.”

“Your search for the perfect soldier created a lot of failures,” Shepard noticed. “You don't care about them?”

“I failed no one. My rejects are exactly what Jedore asks for. She simply lacks the ability to command. They are strong, healthy, and useless to me. I need perfection. If a few thousand are rejected, so be it. My work will purify the krogan. We will not be restored – we will be renewed.”

“Your methods are extreme, but you know how to deconstruct a threat,” said Jacob. “Will you help us?”

“Perhaps I can strike a deal to secure passage, but my prototype is not negotiable. It is the key to my legacy.”

“If your pet soldier is as strong as you think, maybe I can use him,” said Shepard, glancing at the tank.

The conversation was interrupted by Jedore speaking over the loudspeaker again. “Attention! I have traced the krogan release. Okeer, of course.” Out the window, Jedore strutted among the cloning tanks. “I'm calling 'blank slate' on this project! Gas these commandos and start over from Okeer's data. Flush the tanks!”

Steam started hissing from the air vents in the lab, and bubbles appeared in the tank holding Okeer's perfect specimen. Shepard donned his helmet and checked the seals. He didn't have to tell Jacob or Miranda to do the same.

“She's that weak willed?” Okeer was angry. “She'll kill my legacy with a damned valve! Shepard, you want information on the Collectors, stop her. She'll try to access contaminants in the storage bay.”

“Now you know something? Don't jerk us around, Okeer.”

“I will give you everything I can. My legacy must not suffer this insult. But you'll have nothing if she poisons us all.”

“You could just start over, like she plans to. What's the big deal?”

“This tank is pure. It involved as much trial as data. Starting over will not duplicate it. It must survive. Jedore will be with the rejected tanks. Kill her. I will...stay and do what must be done.”

Shepard lead the way out the far end of the lab and down some stairs to the level below. Jedore made another pronouncement as Shepard's squad entered the bay with all the tanks of rejected

krogan clones.

"I don't care who you are, I want you dead! This is my world! I'll poison you all!"

"I think she's talked enough," said Miranda as she locked and loaded.

Cloning tanks began to open one by one, and three YMIR heavy mechs activated and began plodding into the open, searching for targets. The cloned krogan and the heavy mechs got in each other's way and started fighting one another. Using the tanks for cover, Shepard, Jacob, and Miranda inched around the room, carefully avoiding combat, searching for Jedore. The unstable human Blue Suns captain continued to shout nonsense in the chaos of battle.

Twice, a krogan managed to find Shepard or one of his squad, but a biotic push shoved each over the side of the open hull of the ship. After a few minutes, the squad cornered Jedore. A quick firefight ensued, and she went down in a hail of gunfire. Shepard then turned his squad's attention on the remaining combatants, and they were mopped up as well.

The squad stood panting for a moment, ankle-deep in artificial amniotic fluid, sparking mech parts, and broken krogan bodies. The sound of muted alarms was blaring from somewhere.

"Alarms in the lab!" Miranda shouted. "Damn it, what's Okeer doing back there?"

"The lab alarms coincided with the system's failure," EDI responded over the radio. "The remaining lab systems are unprotected, and I have gained limited access. According to lab scanners, the room is flooded with toxins, and Okeer's personal life signs are failing rapidly. I recommend haste."

For once, Shepard agreed with the AI, and he double-timed it back up the stairs. Okeer lay in a heap next to the tank containing his perfect soldier, and a video message was playing on repeat on his console.

"...gave me time, Shepard. If I knew why the Collectors wanted humans, I would tell you. But everything is in my prototype. My legacy is pure. This...one soldier, this grunt. Perfect."

In the video, Okeer gasped for breath and fell to the floor. The brief message started over, and Shepard pressed the stop button on the console. The three humans gartered around the tank.

"Okeer wasted his life to save this single krogan?" Miranda sounded surprised.

"Can't be worse than Okeer," said Jacob. "And if he's tough, we need him."

"Do we need the trouble of a 'pure' krogan?" Miranda countered. "The normal ones are hardly team players. We won't know which one until he's out. Which is too late if there's a problem."

"A 'pure' krogan could pack a hell of a punch. We can always use another heavy hitter," Shepard offered.

"If he'll even help," Miranda said, doubtfully.

"I doubt anyone's ever asked for his opinion on anything," said Jacob.

Shepard didn't think now was the time to decide, and said as much. "Normandy, Okeer is a no-go," he said over radio, "But we have a package that needs retrieval. And he's a big one."

After freshening up on the Normandy, Shepard, Jacob, and Miranda held a discussion in the conference room.

"Bringing the krogan for study makes sense, but I have concerns about waking it," said Miranda.

"Yeah you've said that a few times, now," Jacob sighed.

"A normal krogan is dangerous. This one was created, and likely educated, by a madman."

"That excited are you?" said Shepard as he entered the room. "I see everyone's enjoying the new paperweight. Concerns?"

"We don't know anything about it, Commander," said Miranda.

"I know. You don't find that interesting?" Shepard shrugged.

"There's no way he's getting out unless one of us lets him out," said Jacob.

"Or unless Okeer installed some sort of fail-safe, or a malfunction causes the tank to shut down," Miranda said. "Krogan fight well at close quarters. Perhaps awakening him in a confined space wouldn't be prudent."

"I'm not saying we take a crowbar to it right now, but I'm not giving up a potential resource,"

Shepard reasoned.

"It's your decision, Commander. just be careful."

"Noted. The cargo hold is safe enough while I decide what to do with him."

Jacob shrugged and went to his quarters in the armory next door. Shepard followed Miranda to the elevator. While they waited, Kelly turned from her workstation and voiced her concerns.

"Is it true we have a pod containing a baby krogan down in the cargo hold?"

"Not a baby; he's a full-grown super soldier ready for combat."

"Please be careful if you decide to...err...birth him? His personality is completely unknown."

"I promise."

The elevator dropped Miranda off on the Crew Deck, and Shepard continued on down to the Cargo Deck. The engineers had hooked up the pod to the Normandy's systems, and the Commander approached. With no other crew around, and against his better judgment, he asked EDI for a status report.

"The subject is stable, Shepard. Integration with onboard systems was seamless."

"What can you tell me about this guy? Anything unusual?"

"The subject is an exceptional example of the krogan species, with fully formed primary, secondary, and tertiary organs, where applicable. No defects of any kind, aside from the genetic markers of the genophage present in all krogan. I cannot judge mental functioning."

"Can he see anything in there? Does he know where he is?"

"Unlikely. Current neural patterns indicate minimal cognition. Barring ship-wide power loss, the nutrients in the tank could sustain him for over a year."

"Any idea how dangerous this guy is?"

"He is a krogan, Shepard," the AI chided. "If you are asking whether he is actively hostile, I don't have the necessary data to answer. Okeer's technology could impart data, not methods of thinking. The subject may know of his views, but would not necessarily share them."

"Stand by. I'm going to open the tank and let him out."

"Cerberus protocol is very clear regarding untested alien technology – "

Shepard didn't like being second guessed on his own ship, by his own ship. "Do it. He's either a powerful addition to the crew or a time bomb. I'd rather deal with it now."

"Very well, Shepard. The controls are online. The switch – and consequences – are yours."

Shepard hit the switch. Bubbles appeared in the tank, then the fluid drained out. The door slid open, spilling the young krogan onto the floor. He coughed up some fluid, then stood, blinking and looking around. His eyes were a sky blue, atypical of krogan. The plate on his head was in sections, not yet fully fused as an adult's were. The young krogan noticed Shepard just standing nearby, and rushed the human, pinning him to the wall, the krogan's arm holding Shepard's throat, liquid from the tank still dripping from him and splashing the wall.

"Human. Male. Before you die I need a name." The krogan's voice was a clean, deep, rumbling bass.

"I'm Commander Shepard of the Normandy, and I don't take threats lightly. I suggest you relax."

"Not your name. Mine. I am trained, I know things, but the tank...Okeer couldn't implant connection. His words are hollow. Warlord, legacy, grunt...grunt. 'Grunt' was among the last. It has no meaning. It'll do. I am Grunt. If you are worthy of your command, prove your strength and try to destroy me."

"You wouldn't prefer 'Okeer?' Or 'Legacy?'"

"It's short. Matches the training in my blood. The other words are big things I don't feel. Maybe they fit your mouth better. I feel nothing for Okeer's clan or his enemies. I'll do what I'm bred to do: fight and determine the strongest. But his imprint has failed. Without a reason that's mine, one fight is as good as any other. Might as well start with you."

"Why do you want me kill you?"

"Want? I do what I am meant to – fight and reveal the strongest. Nothing in the tank ever asked what I want. I feel nothing for Okeer's clan or his enemies. That imprint failed. He has failed."

“Is it that easy for Okeer's perfect krogan to abandon his mission?”

“Okeer is just a voice in the tank. If his imprints are true, then he created something stronger than him. So he's not worthy of me. And if his hatreds aren't strong enough to compel me, they've failed, too. I feel nothing. I have no connection.”

“You should show more gratitude. I took you, and I released you. Refusing an ally can bite you in the ass. Join my crew.”

“If you can brush an ally aside, what use are they? You're only worthy of dying first. I'm stronger in every way. The tank showed many imprints of human weakness – where to break your spine, the shortest path to organs. Your words are worthless.”

“Follow my command, and you'll have purpose. I have a good ship and a strong crew. A strong clan. You'd make it stronger. My enemies threaten the whole galaxy. Everyone on my ship has earned their place, and I'm offering you a chance to join.” Shepard explained briefly about his mission against the Collectors, but Grunt still held him pinned to the wall. “Stand down. I won't ask again.”

“Nothing in the tank imprints indicated humans could be so forceful. You command as though you've earned it. Hmm. Hmph! That's...acceptable. I'll fight for you. But if you're weak and choose weak enemies, I'll have to kill you.”

“They are worthy, no doubt about that. I'm glad you saw reason.” Still unable to move his head, Shepard looked down with his eyes, and Grunt followed to see that the Commander was holding a pistol at the krogan's stomach.

“Hmm? Ha! Offer one hand but arm the other.” Grunt released Shepard and took a step back. “Wise, Shepherd. Maybe you are worthy. If I find a clan, if I find what I...I want, I will be honored to eventually pit them against you.”

-----Tali-----

“Shepard, our data indicates that Tali is somewhere in these ruins.” Miranda briefed on the shuttle ride down to the desert planet. “There is considerable geth activity, and an environmental hazard. Solar output has overwhelmed Haestrom's protective magnetosphere. Exposure to direct sunlight will damage our shields. This radiation is causing trouble for EDI's sensors.”

The planet had once been a quarian colony, but was lost when the geth rebelled against their creators three hundred years ago. Scans by the Normandy showed extensive orbital construction, but it was unclear how the geth had compensated for the extreme solar radiation.

The shuttle plunked down in a landing area at the edge of the ruins where scans indicated Tali's group was located. Her precise location couldn't be pinpointed due to the interference, and this was as good a place as any to start. The shuttle would also be staying, this time, as communication with the Normandy was impossible.

Shepard, Jacob, and Miranda stepped off the shuttle. A large insect crawled out from the shade and into the sunlight, only to be fried to a crisp. The next building was across a sunny stretch, down a metal ramp. Shepard ran to the shelter, and his armor's mass effect barrier began to weaken.

“Yep, radiation's messing with my shields,” Jacob observed.

“We need to stay out of the sunlight,” Miranda admonished.

As Shepard entered the dilapidated building, an audio log played automatically from the body of a quarian. “Emergency log entry. The geth are here. I've stayed to buy the others time. Anyone who gets this, find Tali'Zorah. She and that data are all that matters. Keelah se'lai.”

“Quarian buildings. Before the flotilla, obviously.” Jacob noted.

“This colony predates the geth uprising,” said Miranda. “Whatever brought the quarians here, I hope it's worth the cost.”

A destroyed geth robot lay across the room from the dead quarian. Miranda scanned the man, and she shook her head. Nothing anyone could do for him. Shepard and Jacob shoved a door aside on the other side of the building, revealing an open courtyard beyond. Blocks of bleached stone and

ancient, half-melted machinery provided some shade as the Cerberus squad trotted quickly from cover to cover, avoiding the sun.

At the far end of the courtyard was a cluster of ruined buildings. All of the doorways had collapsed, but the street between them provided a solid canopy of shade. The squad rounded a corner and came to a cluster of bodies, both geth and quarian. Beyond them was another open courtyard, and another cluster of buildings at the far end. Gunfire and explosions could be heard from that direction. One of the quarian's radios still worked, and a commanding male voice was heard asking for a status update.

"Break-break-break. OP-1, this is Squad Leader Kal'Reegar, do you copy? The geth sent a dropship towards OP-2. Tali'Zorah's secure, but we need backup. We're bunkered up here. Can you send support? OP-1, this is Squad Leader Kal'Reegar, come in, over!"

Shepard stooped and salvaged the radio from the dead quarian's suit. "This is commander Shepard of the Normandy. I passed a lot of dead quarians on the way in. You're the first survivor I've heard. Can we provide assistance?"

"Damn. Wait, Shepard? The Spectre Tali worked with? Don't know why you're here, but right now, any organic is a welcome sight. Patch your suit radio into Channel 617 Theta." Shepard and the two Cerberus operatives dialed the channel into their omni-tools, and Shepard disposed of the damaged radio once he could hear the quarian over his suit's radio. He prompted the quarian squad leader to continue. "We were on a stealth mission. High risk. We found what we were after, but the geth found us. They've got us pinned down. Can't get to our ship, can't transmit data through the solar radiation."

"What brought you this deep into geth-controlled space?" Shepard asked.

"You're asking the wrong person, Shepard. I just point and shoot. Something about the sun. It's going bad faster than it should. Some kind of energy problem."

"Any idea where the geth came from?"

"One of their patrols found us. Dropships started raining geth down on our heads before we could get off-world. System's under geth control. We knew they made planetary sweeps periodically. We'd hoped going low-emissions would hide us."

"Do we have to worry about the geth sending reinforcements?"

"I don't think so. Their patrol ship hasn't lifted off again, and the radiation blocks all offworld communication."

"What's the status of your team? How many of you are left?"

"We were a small squad. Dozen marines plus the science team. We're down to half strength. Made the bastards pay for it, though."

"Where are you holed up? We can be there in a few minutes."

"Take it slow and careful. Direct sunlight fries your shields all to hell. We're bunkered out of a base camp across the valley. I left Tali'Zorah at a secure shelter, then doubled back to the choke point. Getting Tali out safely is our top priority. If you can extract her, we'll keep 'em off you."

"You're going to throw your life away for research?"

"Negative. I'm going to give my life for the Migrant Fleet. All the difference in the world. I'm no tech expert, Shepard. I'm a marine. They tell me to shoot, I shoot. They said to protect Tali and the data. If you get them out safe, I've done my job."

"You've got confirmation that the geth haven't reached Tali yet?"

"Affirmative. Left my best men with her. When you get here, you can talk to her on the comm console. Every marine on this rock is sworn to protect Tali'Zorah. Long as one of us is still drawing breath, she'll be safe."

"Hold position. We'll hit their back ranks."

"Wait! Watch your ass! We got a dropship coming in!"

As Reegar made the announcement, a geth ship swooped in and fired its main gun, causing a concrete column to collapse, blocking the exit from the courtyard. That had been Shepard's only way forward. As if that wasn't enough, the ship dropped a half dozen geth robot platforms into the open

area. They didn't seem affected by the intense sunlight.

"Crap! Doorway's blocked," Shepard said.

"We left some demo charges in the shed nearby," Reegar said over the radio. "Grab them and use them to clear a path. They're coming in from the side! I've got to fall back!"

The radio went silent, but Shepard was too busy taking cover to respond, anyway. The geth were closing in, keeping up a steady barrage of weapons fire. Shepard wished Tali was already with him, as her hacking abilities would have been really handy at that moment. Instead, he'd have to make due with the electronic overloads from his squad's omni-tools, as well as their moderate biotic abilities. Jacob and Miranda were just firing at whichever geth happened to be closest to them, so Shepard had them coordinate on one enemy at a time, concentrating overloads to take down shields, then following with weapons fire to destroy the robotic platform.

The battle was slow and tedious, and having to stay in the shade added another layer of difficulty. The sun was low in the sky, but Shepard didn't think he could afford to take the time to wait for it to set. The geth seemed to be guarding one building in particular. When the battle was over, Shepard found the body of a geth laying on one crate in particular. Jacob opened it and found explosives inside. Miranda thought it disturbing that the geth knew, and had been moving to secure them. Setting that thought aside, Shepard and Jacob hauled the explosives over to the blocked doorway, then set them as Miranda primed the detonator.

The trio took cover, and Shepard nodded to Miranda. She pushed the button on the detonator, and a massive explosion sent chunks of rock flying, and a large cloud of dust filled the courtyard. Coughing and waving the dust cloud away with their arms, the humans made their way to the gaping hole they'd made in the side of the building. One of these days, Shepard would remember to don his helmet before setting off demolition charges. Next time.

Inside, the scene was gruesome. It was a room strewn with the remains of quarians and geth alike, impossible to tell how many of each.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" A hologram of Tali popped up on a console. "Come in, base camp."

It couldn't possibly be working after all this time. Right – the quarian expedition must have gotten it working. Shepard pressed a button to respond to his friend.

"Tali, it's Shepherd. I'm sorry. Everyone here is dead. Any survivors must have fallen back."

"Shepard? I'm not complaining, but you show up at the strangest times! All of them are dead? Damn it." Tali's hologram shook her head "We knew this mission was high-risk.. "But what are you doing here, Shepard? We're in the middle of geth space!"

"I was in the neighborhood. I thought you might need a hand."

"Thanks for coming, Shepard. It means a lot to hear your voice. Kal'Reegar and what's left of the marines got me into the observatory. From where you are it's through the door and across the field. I got to the data I needed, and I'm safe for now, but I've got a lot of geth outside."

"What's this research you're after?"

"It's about this world's sun. It's aging faster than it should. I can tell you more about it once we've got fewer geth shooting at us."

"Would it help if I brought in the Normandy?"

"Doubtful. These buildings are centuries old. If you bring down heavy fire, this whole place could collapse on us."

"Is anyone else still with you, or are you alone out there?"

"Reegar had a team of marines covering me when I ran for the observatory. At least some of them are still alive. I can hear them firing at the geth outside."

"It looks like somebody sealed the door against the geth and the handle is damaged. Can you get it open on your end?"

"Let me see...Yes, I can do it. Here. Should be unlocked now. Be careful, Shepard. And please, do what you can to keep Reegar alive."

Several metal shutters creaked open and rose into the walls, revealing a small valley outside. A kilometer or so away was a quarry carved out of the hillside beyond. The sun had set, and a large

antenna was glowing, illuminating the worksite. As the squad trotted across the charred earth, they could make out periodic gunfire, and an occasional small explosion.

As they reached the edge of the shallow quarry, a geth colossus at the far end turned and fired its main gun. The Cerberus squad dove out of the way of the blob of plasma, which shattered a stone block behind them. Shepard looked up for cover, and found a quarian in a red and grey enviro-suit motioning them to join him in cover behind a thick wall.

"Squad leader Kal'Reegar. Migrant Fleet marines. We talked on the radio before that drop ship arrived. Still got no idea why you're here, but this ain't the time to be picky. Tali's inside over there." Reegar pointed across the quarry to a sturdy-looking bunker. "The geth killed the rest of my squad, and they're trying to get to her. Best I've been able to do is draw their attention."

"Are you sure she's still alive?"

"The observatory is reinforced. Even the geth will need time to get through it. And it's hard to hack a door when someone's firing rockets at you. The geth are near platoon strength, but the colossus is the worst part. It's got a repair protocol. Huddles up and fixes itself. I can't get a clear shot while it's down

like that. I tried to move in closer, and one of the bastards punched a shot clean through my suit."

"How bad is your suit damage?"

"Combat seals clamped down to isolate contamination, and I'm swimming in antibiotics. Geth might get me, but I'm not gonna die from an infection in the middle of a battle. That's just insulting."

"What can you tell me about the battlefield?"

"Right side's got a catwalk with a sniper perch. You could wreak some havoc from there, but none of my men made it past the geth. Middle's got cover, but the damn colossus has a clear shot at you the whole time, and you've got geth coming in from both sides. The left gives you some cover from the colossus, but your ass is hanging out for the geth. That's how I got shot."

Shepard thought for a moment. The new Normandy didn't carry a Mako, and Tali had nixed using the ship's main guns. "How do we deal with the colossus?" He asked the quarian marine.

"Standard protocol with armature-class units is to sabotage the shields and whittle it down, you know. Kill it with bug bites. But the repair protocol blows that plan to hell. You try to wear it down, it just huddles up and fixes itself. So whatever we do has to scrap that bastard fast. Probably means getting up close past that cover."

"We need to get to Tali. Got any ideas?"

"Just one. I'm not moving so well, but I can still pull a trigger. I got a rocket launcher that the sun hasn't fried yet. You move in close, I'll keep the colossus busy, maybe even drop its shields. With luck, you'll be able to finish it off."

"You've done enough, Reegar. You don't need to throw your life away."

"Wasn't asking your permission. My job is to keep Tali alive. This is our best shot." The quarian began to stand up, but Shepard pulled him back down before he could expose himself to enemy fire.

"We don't have enough people on our side for you to take one for the team! Stand down!"

"I'm not gonna stand here while you run into enemy fire. They killed my whole squad!"

"And if you want to honor your squad, watch my back! I need you here in case they bring reinforcements!"

"All right, Shepard. We'll do it your way. Hit 'em for me. Keela se'lai. Say hi to Tali for me. Hoo-rah!" Reegar tapped the side of his helmet with his rocket launcher, then stood and fired.

Shepard instructed Miranda and Jacob to each take a side, while he took the middle. Reegar's rocket fire was enough to force the colossus to huddle in on itself, which left Shepard free to fire to his left and right, assisting each of his squadmates in turn as they fought their way past the geth. At least the sun was down. They finished off the geth platoon and huddled up again just as the colossus finished repairing itself and unfolded, looking for targets. Another barrage of Reegar's rockets forced it back down.

Shepard had a clear run to the door of the observatory, but there was no point while the giant geth quadruped was still a threat. Besides, he didn't know how many more rockets Reegar had.

Neither Miranda nor Jacob had any suggestions. Shepard looked around for a solution. All of the mining equipment was melted and useless, so the old trick of crashing a crane down on his enemy wouldn't work. Then he remembered the grenade launcher on his back. If rockets were only denting the colossus, grenades probably wouldn't do any better; but if they could all be detonated at once...

Shepard began fiddling with the settings on the weapon, while his squadmates looked on in confusion. He waited until the colossus rose once more, then when Reegar fired at the machine again, Shepard tossed the armed grenade launcher under the unarmored underbelly. This time, when the thing huddled up again, the simultaneous detonation of all the grenades blew the colossus to smithereens.

Shepard exchanged a wave with Reegar, then approached the massive reinforced door, hands on his hips as he studied it. The control panel had been removed and was emitting sparks. The door itself was covered in dents and black scorch marks. After a moment, he knocked out the rhythm of 'Shave and a Haircut.' Even if Tali didn't know the tune, she would at least recognize that it wasn't a pattern the geth would use. Shepard hoped. A tense moment passed, and then the door groaned aside. Inside was a dusty room. Tali had her back to the door, typing away at an ancient console.

"Just let me finish this download...Thank you, Shepard. If not for you, I would never have made it out of this room." She finished her work, then turned to speak with the Commander. "This whole mission has been a disaster. I wish I joined you back on Freedom's Progress, but I couldn't let anyone take my place on something this risky."

"What can you tell me about your research here?"

"Haestrom's sun is destabilizing. Back when this was a quarian colony, it was a normal star. It shouldn't change that quickly."

"Any idea what's causing it?"

"If I had to guess, I'd say that it was dark energy affecting the interior of the star. The effect is similar to when stars blow off mass to enter a red giant phase, but Haestrom's sun is far too young for this to be natural."

Shepard glanced out the open doorway at the battlefield. "A lot of quarians lost their lives here. Was it worth it?"

"I don't know, Shepard. It wasn't my call. The Admiralty Board believed the information here was worth sacrificing all our lives for. I have to believe that they know what's best."

"I didn't ask what some admiral thought. I asked what you thought."

"A lot of people died here. Some of them were my friends. All of them were good at their jobs. That damn data better be worth it. The price was too high."

"Whatever the reason, I'm glad I could help. I'm recruiting for a mission. It's dangerous, but you don't seem averse to high-risk missions these days. Once you deliver that data, I could use you on the Normandy."

Tali nodded. "I promised to see this mission through. I did. I can leave with you and send the data to the Fleet. And if the admirals have a problem with it, they can go to hell." She waved dismissively. "I just watched the rest of my team die."

They turned to leave, and a limping quarian met them at the doorway.

"Maybe not the whole rest of your team, ma'am."

"Reegar! You made it!" Tali sounded relieved.

"Your old captain's as good as you said. Damn colossus never stood a chance."

"If need be, the Normandy can get you out of here," Shepard offered.

"No, the geth didn't damage our ship." Reegar turned to Tali. "Long as we get out of here before reinforcements show up, we'll be fine."

"Actually, I won't be going with you. I'm joining Commander Shepard."

"Understood. I'll pass the data to the Admiralty Board and let him know what happened. She's all yours now, Shepard keep her safe."

They helped Reegar back to the quarian ship, then took the Cerberus shuttle back up to the

Normandy.

"Our ancestors walked these halls with uncovered heads," Tali mused as she looked out at the receding ruins. "The sun must have been normal back then. So much space...walls of stone...It's amazing."

"Cerberus saw footage of you in action, Tali'Zorah," said Jacob. "We're looking forward to having you on the team. Your engineering expertise will really benefit the mission."

"I don't know who you are, but Cerberus threatened the security of the Migrant Fleet. Don't make nice."

"You don't have to like them, Tali, but we're on the same side this time," Shepard said cautiously. "I'm glad you're here."

"I wasn't part of what happened to the Migrant Fleet, but I understand your distrust," Jacob said. "I hope we'll get past that as we work together."

"I assumed that you were undercover, Shepard. Maybe even planning to blow Cerberus up. If that's the case, I'll loan you a grenade. Otherwise I'm here for you, not for them."

"That's all I'm asking, Tali," said Shepard. "If it helps, check out the new Normandy while you're here. We've gotten a few upgrades."

Miranda anticipated Shepard's thoughts, though she didn't sound pleased at all. "I'll get Tali'Zorah the necessary security clearance to access our systems."

"Please do. I can't be part of your team if I don't know how the ship works. Remember, Shepard, these people thought enslaving Thorian creepers and rachni was a good idea."

"Don't forget to introduce yourself to EDI, the ship's new artificial intelligence," said Jacob.

Tali stiffened, and her glowing eyes blinked behind her helmet.

Later, as the elevator opened on the Engineering deck, Shepard met Joker and Kelly waiting to get on. Joker spoke first.

"It's great to see Tali on board. Commander. Just like old times!...It is her, right? I mean because with the mask it's...ah, never mind."

"I had a wonderful chat with your friend Tali," said Kelly. "She's not what I expected from her psych report. I like her."

"Tali's a good friend. We've been through a lot together. It's good to have her on the team."

"My female intuition says she wants to be more than just good friends."

Shepard didn't know what to make of that. "What makes you say that?"

"It's in her body language. How she turns to you when you enter the room. How she watches your every move. Quarians are so fascinating to me. But they also make me a little sad."

"Why do they make you sad?"

"Their environment suits are so beautiful, but with their immune systems, they're trapped inside. I wonder what they look like under those helmets, or what their skin feels like under those suits."

Shepard entered engineering and found Tali studying a readout. She turned at Shepard's entrance.

"Shepard. What can I do for you?"

"Your suit looks different. Fancier."

Tali fingered the gold fringe along the neck seals of her helmet. "A gift from my father for completing my pilgrimage. Traditional among my people."

"How is your father?"

"Well, as far as I can tell. He's always been a bit distant. But thanks for asking."

"Is the new Normandy giving you any trouble?"

"Please, Shepherd I'm a quarian. Give me a chunk of scrap metal, a circuit board, and some element zero, and I'll have it making precision jumps. I was worried about working with Cerberus engineers, but they know what they're doing and they've been very polite."

"How's the Normandy running?"

"Say what you will about Cerberus, they know how to build ships. This Normandy's running even better than the last one. I don't know if it can stand up to a Collector attack, though. I'm

researching some ideas that might help.”

“I caught some tension back on Freedom's Progress and again on the shuttle. What happened between Cerberus and the quarians?”

“They attacked one of our ships, the Idenna. It seems they were attempting to kill or control a young human biotic who was on the fleet. I don't really know the details. I do know that Cerberus made an enemy of the quarian people.”

Shepard lowered his voice. “I don't like working with them any more than you do, but we need them.”

“I know. Just watch yourself. You're their best weapon right now, but as soon as you no longer serve their needs, be ready for them to turn on you. For now, I should get back to work. Thanks for coming by.”

-----The Assassin-----

Illium was one of the latest planet settled by the asari. That is to say, given the long asari lifespan, it was a very old colony. The surface was a boiling hot mess, and the elite of the world had built themselves cities of towering skyscrapers to elevate themselves above it all. Being on the border between Asari space and the Terminus systems, laws were relaxed on this world. Rules on normally proscribed materials, product safety, and sapient trafficking were all mostly overlooked. Officially, the world was not controlled by the Asari Republics, but rather corporate interests. This had allowed its denizens to become among the richest in the galaxy.

The Illusive Man had provided Shepard with two dossiers on this corporate paradise, and thus that was his destination. TIM had also mentioned that Liara T'soni was here, and as the Normandy approached the port city of Nos Astra, he felt his connection to her growing stronger. The feeling intensified as he led Jacob and Miranda out the ship and into a bustling docking area. They wore civilian clothes for now, not wanting to make the natives nervous.

“Welcome to Nos Astra, Commander Shepard.” An asari in formal white attire greeted the trio, flanked by a pair of light HK security mechs. “We've been instructed to waive all docking and administration fees for your visit. My name is Careena. If you need information about the area, it would be my pleasure to assist you.”

“That's a lot of firepower for a friendly welcome. Expecting trouble?” Jacob asked.

“A mere formality. We're the gateway to the Terminus Systems. That element of risk requires greater security. That said, you should be as safe here as you would be on the Citadel.”

“Who instructed you to waive the fees?” asked Miranda.

“The order came from Liara T'Soni, who paid all docking fees on your behalf, and vouched for your conduct. She also asked that I direct you to speak with her at your convenience. She's near the trading floor.”

Shepard had butterflies in his stomach. “Thank you,” he said with a calm that surprised himself. He asked directions, and received them.

“Welcome to our city, Commander. Please enjoy your stay.”

Security was light – a bit of a joke, in Shepard's view. They were allowed to pass with their side arms. The trading floor was a cacophony of sights and sounds; beings of every species buying, selling and trading. A human woman was arguing with a volus about short-selling pre-fabs – the naive woman thought it immoral to make money off of poor colonists. A few stalls further down, another volus was ordering an expensive pressure suit for a date with an asari. How would that even work? Turns out it wouldn't, as the squat, rotund alien balked at the price and quickly excused himself.

Shepard split up with his team at the base of the stairs to Liara's Information Brokerage. Jacob and Miranda went off on their own to search for clues to the dossiers, while Shepard went up the stairs. An asari with light purple skin and pinkish markings stood and greeted him.

“Hello, Commander Shepard. Liara is finishing up an important call, but I know she will be pleased to see you.”

"You're Liara's assistant?"

"Yes. My name is Nyxeris. Liara hired me to acquire useful intelligence," she said in an all-too silky tone. "I don't have her network of contacts, but I supply her with supplemental data. It's really an honor to work with her."

Shepard glanced around at the well-appointed foyer. "I take it Liara is well-respected here."

"She is greatly respected. In a few short years, she's amassed a sizable network of connections. She could have even more political power than she already wields if she weren't so focused on her personal goals." A chime sounded from the assistant's desk. "But I believe she should tell you about that, not me."

The door to Liara's office opened, and Shepard entered. Liara was finishing up a holo-call with a balding human male, her back to the door.

"Have you faced an asari commando unit before?" she was saying. "Few humans have. I'll make it simple. Either you pay me, or I flay you alive. With my mind." The call ended before the man could respond, and Liara turned to see the Commander. "Shepard! Nyxeris, hold my calls."

The assistant bowed and closed the door behind her. Liara absently tossed a datapad onto her desk, then closed the distance to Shepard, took his hands, then passionately kissed him. Abruptly, she disengaged, shaking her head. She swallowed, then spoke.

"My sources said you were alive, but I never believed until I.... It's very good to see you."

Shepard swallowed the lump in his throat, too. "I knew you were out there the moment I woke up. It's good to see you too, Liara. I guess it's been a while for you. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing well." Liara took a seat behind her desk, and indicated the seat opposite for Shepard. "I've been working as an information broker. It's paid the bills since you...well for the past two years. And now you're back, gunning for the Collectors with Cerberus."

"That's not exactly public knowledge."

"Neither is you being alive, Shepard. Information is my business now. I have a few sources, contacts, even a little hired muscle. And if you need information, I'm happy to help."

"You're threatening to flay people alive now?"

Liara shifted uneasily. "Oh, that? That was just a customer unhappy with the information he received. He'll pay. They always do. Ever since I helped you stop Saren, people have wanted to be my friend...or not be my enemy."

"If you know I'm after the Collectors, then you know that I could use your help on this mission. Come with me."

Liara furrowed her brow, then smacked her desk in frustration. "I can't Shepard, I'm sorry. I have commitments here. Things I need to take care of."

"What sorts of things? Can I help?"

"My work is....I'm...I can't, Shepard." Liara made a subtle gesture, indicating she was being watched. "Not while you're with Cerberus. I just...I can't."

Shepard frowned at the logo on his clothing. "Yeah, I get that, but –"

"And it has been two years. Please..."

Shepard took a deep breath, then let it out in a sigh. "Yeah. Okay. Then maybe you can help me with some information." He paused, then continued when Liara assented. "I'm looking for two individuals here on Illium. The first is Thane Krios."

"The assassin. Yes, he arrived here a few days ago. My sources tell me he may be targeting a corporate executive, Nassana Dantius. He contacted a woman named Seryna. Seryna has an office in the cargo transfer levels. Perhaps she can tell you where Krios is."

"You just knew that off the top of your head?"

"I'm a very good information broker, Shepard. The world of intrigue isn't that different from a dig site. Except that the dead bodies still smell."

"There's also an asari named Samara here. You know where I could find her?"

"Samara. Yes...she arrived recently and registered with tracking officer Dara. You can find Dara at the transportation hub."

“Why would Samara have to register with a tracking officer? Is she a criminal?”

“No, in fact she's quite the opposite. Samara is a Justicar, one of an ancient sect of asari warriors. Dara can tell you more.”

“Thanks for the help. That's all I needed to know. I'll talk to later, Liara.”

“Of course. If there's anything else I can help you with, let me know.”

Shepard left the office with regret, but also understanding...and maybe a hint of hope. He made a vow to himself to return if he survived this suicide mission. *When* he survived. He gathered up Jacob and Miranda, who hadn't had any luck, and seemed tired of Nos Astra already. Together, they headed to the Tracking Office. Upon entering, the room was filled with boxes of all shapes and sizes. Two asari in identical grey overalls were busy typing on their terminals. Neither looked up as the three humans entered.

“Seryna?” Shepard prompted.

“Who wants to know?” said one in an annoyed tone.

“Name's Shepard. Liara T'Soni said you might have information on Thane Krios.”

The asari who answered turned to her coworker, “Tana, cover for me.” Then she stood and led Shepard to a quiet corner. “Over here. Yeah I know who Thane Krios is. I might have passed him some information, but I didn't hire him. What do you want to know?”

“I just need to talk to him.”

“Dangerous man to chat with. Your call, though.” Seryna paused, then continued when Shepard didn't react. “So this assassin – you planning to stop him?”

“I'm just here to make sure he survives.”

“I can tell you, but you won't stop him. When he contacted me, I checked up on him. The man never gives up on a job. I ran security for Nassana Dantius, then I found out she was having people killed to cover up her dirty secrets. She fired me when I confronted her. Her loss. I might have been good enough to stop Thane from taking her down.”

“Why does that name sound familiar?”

“She was a representative on the Citadel a few years ago.”

“Right...She tricked me into killing her sister – the slaver.”

Seryna's eyes went wide. “I thought that was just a rumor. Well, you know what she's capable of, then. She has even more power here in Nos Astra. She uses it to keep her friends in check and her enemies dead.”

“If you worked there, you must have an idea what his opposition will be.”

“Eclipse mercs. High-tech killers. Undisciplined, but very well-equipped. They don't much care who they kill, as long as they're paid for it. Thane has quite a reception waiting for him. I told him all I knew. He didn't seem worried. Hmph. Neither do you, for that matter. At least, you'll distract her guards. Take a little fire, give Thane a clear shot. I didn't hire him, but I won't shed any tears when she gets what's coming to her.”

“Do you know anything about Thane?”

“Not much. He did say that he's not doing the hit for money. No one hired him. I wanted to know who I was helping, and he said he's doing this job on his own. That he had to 'restore the balance of his life.' I don't know. Maybe he's crazy. If he takes down Nassana, I don't care why he does it.”

“So where can we find Thane?”

“The Dantius Towers. Penthouse level of Tower One.” The shipping clerk went to a window and pointed at a pair of skyscrapers in the distance. “There's a second tower, still under construction. If Thane is smart, he'll go in from there. Nassana's as smart as she is paranoid. No one's getting in or out of there without a fight. The Towers are heavily guarded, and you'll find more resistance closer to the penthouse. You'll have to get up to the second tower and cross the bridge to the penthouse. Her mercs will fight you every step, but it's your best chance.”

“Why don't we just save time and take a shuttle up?”

"She's got mercs with rockets just waiting for you to try. You'd get maybe halfway up before they shot you down. Besides, your assassin won't go in that way. Best to go in low. The Eclipse mercs will be well-fortified by now, and they won't want to disappoint Nassana. There's no automated defenses or traps. Just focus on anything moving."

"We might find him before it goes that far."

"Maybe. At least you'll know where he's headed."

Shepard thanked the clerk for her help, then headed back to the Normandy to gear up and grab the shuttle. An hour later, he and his Cerberus recruitment team alit on a landing pad on the half-finished Tower Two.

The landing pad was dusty and dimly lit. A forklift sat in a corner, and tools had been carefully packed in their boxes. The entryway had a brightly-lit neon sign announcing the Dantius name. It figured that that would be the first thing functioning. Newly-installed glass doors sealed off the lobby, they even had construction tape still plastered across. As Shepard, Jacob, and Miranda exited their shuttle, they heard light weapons fire. Turning to peer inside, Shepard witnessed several salarians in janitors' garb running from a pair of light HK mechs.

The salarians fell in a hail of bullets and blood. Shepard released the safety on his assault rifle and opened fire, shattering the glass doors. Two dog-type mechs skidded around the corner and turned towards him, switching to the more threatening targets. Jacob and Miranda disabled them with overloads from their omn-tools while Shepard shot off the arms of the lightly-armed humanoid robots. The Commander was willing to stop there, but the Cerberus operatives blasted the mechs to pieces. The squad cautiously entered the half-finished lobby. There was an empty elevator shaft and not much else.

"No guardrails? No scaffolding?" Miranda was aghast at the lack of safety precautions.

"Given what I know about Nassana, that doesn't surprise me," said Shepard.

Jacob waved from a locked door, where he was bent over one of the janitors. "This one's still alive!"

Shepard trotted over and holstered his weapon, while Miranda kept watch. Jacob pressed a dirty rag into the salarian's bleeding wound.

"Help..." the janitor gasped. "I can't feel my legs...my chest is killing me."

"Who did this to you? And why?"

"We're just night workers!" He wheezed in between phrases. "Nasana....sent them after us...She sent the mechs to round us up, but we didn't hear...They just started shooting..."

"They just attacked you?"

"Yes...we were too slow. It was horrible. Everyone...screaming..."

"Someone's here to kill Nassana. I need to find him."

"I haven't seen anyone, but that explains...the mercs said there was no time. Nassana wanted us out of the way...immediately. Then...the dogs..." The salarian began coughing up blood.

"He's hurt pretty bad," said Jacob. "He needs help."

Shepard gave the salarian a dose of medi-gel. "Here, that should ease the pain and keep you alive until help arrives."

"Thank you. That helps...a lot." The janitor stood up slowly, cautiously.

Miranda was getting impatient. "Gotta keep moving if we want to find this assassin."

Shepard ignored her, but agreed. "Take your time," he said to the salarian.

"I think I'm....better."

Jacob found a box of chairs and ripped it open, then offered it to the janitor, who took a seat with gratitude.

"Why would Nassana kill her own workers?" Shepard asked.

"To her, we're expendable. But...I didn't realize she was that ruthless. My friends...co-workers...slaughtered. They were jumping off ledges to escape the dogs..."

"Any idea how many mercs Nassana's got?"

"A lot. Dozens of them were wandering around here all day. You'll find more the further up you

go.”

“I need to get up to the penthouse. Any suggestions?”

“Take the service elevator to the upper floors. The bridge between the towers isn't finished, but if you're careful...Watch out for the mercs. They're everywhere. Find the other workers. Help them.”

“I'll do what I can.”

“Thank you. I won't forget this. Here, I'll unlock the door.” He did so, then hobbled off to safety.

Through the door was a hallway leading into the building. Crates and stacks of construction materials were stacked haphazardly in the otherwise empty rooms and halls. The squad found a ramp leading to the next level up. As they passed beneath an open air duct, they overheard a conversation between two male voices.

“Hey – I think he went in here.”

“Well, go get him.”

“You go.”

“Get your ass in there. Nassana's not paying you to stand around.”

“Fine...but I...”

Muffled noises of a struggle ensued, and a body in yellow and black Eclipse armor fell down the air shaft, hitting the floor with a sickening crunch. Evidently, the assassin was nearby. The squad continued down hallways and around corners, passing more bodies in Eclipse armor. They came to a closet door and heard faint noises from inside. Cautiously, Shepard opened it. Inside were three salarian workers.

“Please...don't kill us! We'll go...we'll go...” said one, cowered in the corner.

“Hey, look...they're not Eclipse,” another noticed. “You're here to help us...right?”

“It's one reason I'm here. Come on out. It's safe enough.”

“Thank you. We are in your debt.” The salarian bowed slightly.

“Seen anyone suspicious? Not a merc – he's on his own.”

“Well, whoever sealed us in here...When he found us, I thought we were dead. But he just closed the door and locked us in.”

“Little protective for an assassin,” Jacob noted.

“Assassin? Here for Nassana, I bet. She's got it coming. You treat people like this, it always comes back to bite you in the ass.”

“How many workers were in the tower? Are they many more of you?”

“Not alive. We were lucky. Well, some got out before the dogs were sent in. Maybe a few are hiding somewhere.”

“Nassana's not exactly your favorite person?”

“She's a...hard woman to work for. She works us long hours. No overtime. And this is what you get in payment. She's unpleasant, to say the least.”

“If you don't like the work, why not just quit?”

“Easier said than done. We would if we could.”

“What's stopping you?”

“Our contract. We're stuck until the job's done. Quitting for any reason can be hazardous to your health. We hear that anyone who leaves early tends to disappear. Probably just a rumor, but who wants to find out for sure?”

“Seems like it's bad, either way. I wouldn't stay here too long,” Shepard advised. “It should be safe down on the lower floors.”

“I was just thinking the same thing. Thank you. And tell your assassin to aim for her head...’cause she doesn't have a heart!”

The squad found the cargo elevator, and Sheppard pushed the button to summon it.

“What are the odds that elevator's gonna be empty when it gets here?” asked Jacob.

“Slim to none. Let's be ready for it,” said Miranda.

There were stacks of crates and drywall staged near the large elevator doors. Shepard and company separately took up positions in cover and waited. After what seemed like an eternity, the

elevator made a chime, and a too-cheery voice said "Mezzanine. Have a pleasant day."

The doors opened slowly, revealing two asari in Eclipse armor, and a Krogan in dark red. They came out shooting and blasting overloads. Shepard leapt out from behind the stack of drywall before it exploded in dust, then used the white cloud to strategically withdraw. This drew out the krogan, giving Miranda and Jacob an opening to wallop him to death from the sides.

That left the two asari engineers. In the chaos, they had slipped out of the elevator and found their own hiding places. It was quiet while Shepard snuck around, searching. A holographic combat drone surprised him, rounding a corner head-on. This one was purple and resembled a mechanical eyeball. Before Shepard could react, the drone shot out a bolt of lightning, which took down his shield. Instinctively, Shepard brought up a biotic barrier for protection, while simultaneously he sprayed bullets with his assault rifle. Some got through the hologram and blew apart the small floating emitter in the center, but not before one of the Eclipse mercs surprised him from behind. The asari knocked Shepard to the ground, and he rolled over to witness Miranda shoving the asari off a ledge.

Shepard stood and nodded his thanks, but was interrupted by a shout from Jacob. Shepard and Miranda ran toward the sound of a struggle, then assisted in pulling the remaining asari off the man. She tumbled, then ran away as the three humans all fired in her wake. She fled down a hallway and did not reappear.

Shepard and company took the elevator ride to catch their breath and reload. Upon arriving at the top-most floor of the unfinished tower, there was a male Eclipse merc with his back to the elevator, admiring the view out of a newly installed window. He hadn't noticed the elevator's arrival, and was speaking into his helmet radio.

"I haven't heard from Teams Four or Five," he was saying. "Don't worry, my team's always ready to go. I don't know where he is, not yet. Don't worry about it. We don't need any reinforcements. I'll take care of it. It's under control. I'll go down there myself."

The Cerberus squad casually waltzed up to the merc, and Shepard issued instructions. "Turn around, very slowly."

Miranda and Jacob drew their weapons on the man in yellow and black armor.

"Damn it," the merc exclaimed as he turned.

"Tell me where the assassin is, and I might let you live," Shepard threatened.

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be wasting my time talking to you." The merc crossed his arms defiantly and leaned against the floor-to ceiling window. "You're not one of Nassana's mercs. Who are you?"

"Listen very carefully. You've got two ways down: express or coach – your choice."

"Look pal, even if I knew where he was, I wouldn't tell you."

"Not the answer I was looking for."

"I've got nothing more to say to you. If you shoot me, my team's right through there...they'll be all over you."

Shepard leaned in. "Is the information really worth dying for? Is Nassana?"

"No...I suppose not. Look. Last I heard, the assassin was down on the mezzanine. But the teams on the bridge think they might've spotted him. Nobody knows for sure."

"Get out of here. But if I see you again, you're a dead man." Shepard motioned with his head.

"Sure." The merc raised his hands in defeat and made his way to the elevator.

There was a pair of doors to either side of the elevator. Shepard went through one and sent his other two squadmates through the other. They exited into a large, half-finished room, where more construction materials were staged strategically. At the far end of the room, at the base of a ramp, three eclipse mercenaries were huddled, sharing a radio."

"He's all over the place," one reported. A man, the leader.

"What do you mean?" a familiar sneering female voice replied, probably Nassana.

"We've got reports of him on multiple levels. We think he's traveling through the ducts..."

"I'm not paying you to think. Just find him. Now!" The radio cut out, and the merc placed the

radio down on a technical console. "Come on. She'll be throwing us to the dogs next. What the – " They noticed Shepard's squad and opened fire. One of the mercs threw out a large biotic warp bubble that scattered the Cerberus operatives.

Shepard peeked from behind the skinny column he'd taken cover behind to see his two comrades behind a stack of thick crates. Miranda was gathering biotic energy. A lot of it. After a moment, she spread her arms and made a pulling motion. A section of unfinished ceiling fell, crushing two of the mercs. Miranda fell to her knees, panting heavily, while Jacob and Shepard broke cover and took down the third Eclipse merc.

The area seemed to be clear, so Shepard went to check on Miranda. "That was a hell of a display," he complimented her. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," she panted. "Just need a minute to recover."

Shepard scanned the area, planning the next move. A closet door slid aside, and a shaky salarian pointed a pistol at him. A salarian's skin usually had a moist sheen, but this one's looked dry.

"Get back! Get back...I'll shoot," he threatened unconvincingly.

"Easy, pal. We're not going to hurt you." Shepard held his hands out in a peaceful gesture.

"I don't want to hurt you...but I will. I said get back! I'll do it. Please... don't make me do it." the salarian shook his head and shivered.

"Please... don't make me do it." the salarian shook his head and shivered.

"Hey, I'm not the bad guy here. What's your name?"

"I'm...I'm Telon. Don't...come any closer."

"Telon, I'm Commander Shepard. I don't work with the mercs, and I don't want to hurt you. Give me the gun."

"I...all right...here... I...don't feel so..." He handed the pistol to Shepard, then fainted.

"Telon!" a second salarian rushed to the aid of his fallen coworker. "He's my brother. I just want to see if he's all right. Are you the one who...shot the merc?" He gestured to a headless corpse stuffed into a corner of the closet.

"I've shot a lot of mercs today, but I can't take credit for him. Your brother didn't do it?"

"No, Telon was standing here with me. Then...who did?"

"You tell me. What happened?"

"That merc found us and shouted at us to move. We panicked, and he shouted more. I thought he was going to kill us...then...his head just exploded. Telon picked up the merc's gun, but we were too afraid to leave. Then you showed up."

"Clean shot like that takes skill, especially with bystanders," said Jacob, as he and Miranda joined the conversation.

"There are still mercs up here," said Shepard. "You should get to the lower levels."

"No need to convince me. Telon...come on, get up."

"Can we go home now?" Telon begged, coming to.

"Yeah, we're getting out of here." The brother bowed slightly to Shepard and headed for the elevator.

"Where is everyone?" Nassana's voice emitted from the radio the mercs had left behind. "Will somebody please give me a report! What's going on down there?"

Shepard walked over and picked up the mic. "I'm afraid your men aren't able to respond, Nassana."

"Damn it!"

Next to the comm terminal was a ramp leading up. The squad gingerly walked across the damaged roof and around a wall to a wide ledge on the outside of the building. Shepard jumped back around the wall when he noticed a pair of mercs offloading barrels of inflammable gas from a truck. He carefully leaned around the wall and took aim, but the mercs had already noticed him.

"Forget the explosives, he's already – "

Shepard took the shot. The explosion cleared the ledge of the truck, the mercs, and whatever else had been out there. The squad carefully made their way along the damaged floor to the bridge.

The wind was incredibly powerful this far up. A pair of light mechs were plodding along from the other building, making their way across. The surface looked slick, so how...? It took Shepard only a moment to figure it out. He turned on his mag boots. A couple of well-placed overloads shorted out the feet of the mechs, and they were swept over the edge by the wind.

Shepard and his squad began the walk across the open bridge. Their magnetic boots kept them attached, but they had to lean well over into the wind. About halfway across, a window opened up on the completed tower above, revealing a pair of automated rocket turrets.

"Aw, come on!" Jacob complained.

"Use biotics to push the missiles away!" Miranda suggested.

It worked. Progress across the bridge was even slower, but they made their way. Magnetic-step, biotic-push...step...push. After several minutes, they left line-of sight from the turrets, only to be confronted with another half-dozen mercs. Support struts extended from the Tower, forming triangles between the bridge and the building, and cover from the wind, but there was nowhere to hide from the enemy. Shepard disengaged his mag-boots and closed the distance with the nearest merc, grappling with him and spinning him around in time to use him as a shield.

He dropped the dead man and rushed at the next. Jacob and Miranda had followed his example and were involved in their own fisticuffs. An asari merc decided to try and lift Shepard, but as he pivoted with his opponent, the biotics hit the merc, and he flew over the railing.

Shepard decided to try out a new toy. A quick hand gesture with his omni-tool brought up the omni-blade. An orange hologram, but with thin mass effect fields integrated within, making for a very sharp cutting tool. He rushed the last merc and drove the blade into her mid-section, killing her instantly.

The Cerberus trio stood panting for a moment, surveying the bloody battlefield. Shepard turned off his omni-blade, then entered the building.

Nassana stood behind a very large desk, surrounded by three Eclipse mercs. She was surprised to see them. Shepard's squad and the guards pointed guns at each other.

"Shepard? But...you're dead."

"I got better."

"And now you're here to kill me."

"Is that what you think? Maybe I just missed you."

"Screw you, Shepard." She made a dismissive gesture. "I'm sure you find this all very ironic. First you take care of my sister, and now you're here for me." Nassana shrugged. "Well, you made it this far. Now what?"

"It's not what you think. I'm not an assassin, Nassana. But I am looking for one."

"You expect me to believe that? Do you have any other reason for destroying my tower? Decimating my security? Is it credits? Is that what you want? Just tell me your price. We can make this problem go away."

"All the credits in the galaxy won't make this problem go away."

"Pft. Everyone has a price. Double whatever you're getting. And I'll pay double again if you'll tell me who hired you." One of her guards suddenly turned at a sound. "What?"

"I heard something," said the merc.

"Damn it. Check the other entrances! You...stay put." She aimed that last at Shepard with a pointed finger. While she was distracted, a man with green skin, wearing a black singlesuit, silently dropped out of a vent in the ceiling. "When I'm finished dealing with this nuisance, you and I are going to...who?"

The assassin quickly snapped the neck of one guard, then shot the other two. Nassana spun around just in time for the mystery man to shoot her in the stomach. As she died, he embraced her and lay her out on the desk, crossing her arms in the process. He then stood upright, closing his eyes and clasping his hands.

"That was quite the entrance," Jacob said in a flat tone.

A silent moment passed. Shepard approached the drell. He was reptilian in appearance, hairless,

ridges extending up from his jaw and up around his ear holes. His skin was a mottled, scaly green, with patches of olive-brown here and there.

"I came a long way to talk to you," Shepard said.

"One moment. Prayers for the wicked must not be forsaken." The drell's voice was scratchy, with a bit of a rattle.

"She certainly was wicked."

"Not for her. For me." The assassin shook his head and opened his eyes. They were twice the size of a human's, and a solid, matte black. "The measure of an individual can be difficult to discern by actions alone. Take you, for instance. All this destruction...chaos. I was curious to see how far you'd go to find me. Well...here I am."

"I do want to talk to you...but how did you know I was here?"

Thane Krios strolled calmly around the desk as he spoke. "I didn't. Not until you marched in the front door and started shooting. I prefer to work quietly. If I have to fight through guards, I've made a mistake. I rarely make mistakes." The drell stopped in front of Miranda's pointed pistol, neither flinching. "Nassana had become paranoid. You saw the strength of her guard force. She believed one of her sisters would kill her. You proved a valuable distraction. What would you like to discuss?"

At a gesture from Shepard, Miranda and Jacob lowered their weapons.

"Let's cut to the chase," said Shepard. "I need you for a mission."

"Indeed?" Thane turned and strode back to the window. The sun was setting, casting the skyline in pinks and yellows.

"You're familiar with the Collectors?"

"By reputation."

"They're abducting entire human colonies. Freedom's Progress was their handiwork."

"I see."

"We're going after them."

"Attacking the Collectors would require passing through the Omega-4 Relay. No ship has ever returned from doing so."

"They told me it was impossible to get to Ilos, too. They tell me this is a suicide mission. I intend to prove them wrong." Shepard joined Krios at the window.

"A fair point. You've built a career on performing the impossible...You'd like me to protect humans I've never met, from aliens no one knows anything about, by going to a place no one's ever returned from?"

"That's the gist of it."

The drell muttered under his breath. "A suicide mission. Yes. A suicide mission will do nicely." He turned to Shepard. "I'm dying. Low survival odds don't concern me. The abduction of your colonists does."

"You're dying? Are you contagious? How long do you have?"

"If you're interested, we can discuss it on your ship. The problem isn't contagious, and it won't affect my work. Giving me this opportunity is enough."

Shepard scratched his head. "Not to look a gift assassin in the mouth, but why are human colonists a concern to you?"

"They are innocent, yes? Like all victims of the Collectors. The universe is a dark place. I'm trying to make it brighter before I die. Many innocents died today. I wasn't fast enough, and they suffered. I must atone for that."

"I take it that means you're on the team?"

"I will work for you Shepard. No charge."

The assassin shook the commander's hand.

Thane met Shepard and Jacob in the conference room after his tour of the Normandy.

"I've heard impressive stories, Krios," Jacob said. "Sounds like you'll be an asset to the team." He turned to Shepard. "That is, if you're comfortable having an assassin watch your back."

"I've accepted a contract. My arm is Shepard's."

"Uh-huh. Don't know about you, but I'm loyal to more than my next paycheck."

"Obviously, he is, too," said Shepard. "He's doing this mission gratis. What's your concern?"

"I don't like mercenaries. An assassin is just a precise mercenary."

"An assassin in a weapon," Krios defended. "A weapon doesn't choose to kill. The one who wields it does."

"Keep it civil, people," said Shepard. "We've all got the same goal. Maintain the objective."

"Aye, aye, sir," Jacob reluctantly acquiesced.

"Where shall I put my things? I'd prefer someplace dry, if anything is available."

EDI's blue holographic chess pawn popped up from its emitter on the conference table. "The area near the Life Support Plant on the Crew Deck tends to be slightly more arid than the rest of the ship."

"Ah. An AI? My thanks."

Krios made a slight bow, which Shepard returned.

"He seems quite civil," EDI said cheerfully.

The assassin exited the room, and EDI's avatar winked out.

"We need all the help we can get," Shepard addressed Jacob. "He's not what I expected in an assassin. He may surprise you."

"Yeah, and he may not."

"Keep an eye on him then, if you like. Let me know if he turns into a problem."

Jacob saluted and returned to his station.

As Shepard waited for the elevator, he asked for Kelly's opinion on their latest recruit. "I'm surprised by Thane's spiritual side. His psych profile mentioned little of it, and he carries himself with such cold confidence. I'm not sure if I find him scary or sexy."

"A lot of women like bad boys."

"That is a dirty stereotype. In my case it happens to be true, but still."

Shepard went down to the Crew Deck, where he found Joker waiting to exchange places on the elevator.

"Oh another dangerous alien aboard, Commander! Thanks. Why can't you collect coins or commemorative plates or or something?"

The pilot pushed the button and the doors closed before Shepard could respond. Instead, he just shook his head and knocked on the door to Life Support. Inside, Thane was sitting at a desk, gazing through a window at the ship's massive mass effect core.

"Do you need something?"

The room was indeed dryer than the rest of the ship. Machinery quietly hummed along in a corner. A single cot was jammed in amongst it.

"You mind if I ask you a few questions?" Shepard opened.

"Not at all." Krios invited Shepard to the seat opposite.

Shepard sat and studied his new squadmate. In the glow given off by the mass effect core, the drell's eyes were not a solid black like a salarian's, but rather shades. Pupil, iris, and sclera were delineated when the light was right. Shepard tried not to stare.

"When you 'pray for the wicked,' who exactly are you praying to?"

"That depends on the circumstance. To find my target, I speak with Amonkira, Lord of Hunters. When I act to defend another – Arashu goddess of Motherhood and Protection. And when I have taken my target, I speak with Kalahira, Goddess of Oceans and the Afterlife."

"Oceans and afterlife don't seem to have much in common."

"Consider. The ocean is full of life. Yet it is not life as you and I know it. To survive there, we must release our hold on land. Accept a new way to live. So it is with death. The soul must accept its departure from the body. If it can't, it will be lost."

"I didn't know that drell had many gods."

"It is one of our older beliefs. Many embrace the hanar Enkindlers now, or the asari philosophies."

The old ways are dying. There are so many ways to interpret one's place in the universe. Who needs the wisdom of our ancestors? The younger generations don't believe they can help us fathom genetic engineering, orbital strikes, or alien races."

"The drell live on the hanar homeworld, don't they?"

"Yes. I know many think the hanar difficult to understand. It's just that they're very formal with those they don't know. We know them quite well. If you ever get close enough to a hanar that they tell you their Soul Name, you would find them warm."

"I thought that hanar only let very close friends know their Soul Name."

"Most of my commissions were for hanar. I grew close to my regular contacts. Soul Names tend to be poetic. A hanar known for its cynicism might take a name that means 'Illuminates the Folly of the Dancers.'"

"Hanar talk using bioluminescence. That's more of an obstacle than their politeness. Even with translators."

"True. Many drell have had their eyes genetically modified to perceive their higher frequency flashes. I had the treatment. I can't tell the difference between a dark red and black, but I can see ultraviolet light as a silver color."

"Interesting. Thanks for the talk. I should go."

"I shall return to my meditations."

-----The Justicar-----

Shepard, Miranda, and Jacob approached Officer Dara in the Nos Astra police station.

"I'm Looking for an asari warrior named Samara," Shepard stated.

"Wait, why? Do you have a problem...or did she kill somebody already?"

"I have no idea, I just need to speak with her."

"Good. Samara's the first justicar I've seen on Illium, but they have a nasty habit of shooting people. If I'm lucky, things will stay peaceful. She went to the commercial spaceport a few hours ago. Just be polite when you meet her. Justicars embody our highest laws, and they usually stay in asari space. She's not used to dealing with aliens."

"Why are you worried about other species coming into contact with her?"

"If a justicar kills an asari, none of us questions it. But if she killed a human...Do you think the Alliance would understand her actions and respect her authority? You can't even figure out your own religions. It's a big diplomatic incident just waiting to happen."

"Is Samara really that dangerous?"

"If you follow the laws, you've got nothing to fear. And a justicar would die without hesitation to protect the innocent. But their code orders them to stop lawbreakers. With lethal force, in most cases. And everyone skirts the law somehow on Illium. If someone tried to bribe her, she'd be obliged to gun them down as a matter of honor. I'm hoping to avoid that."

"What else can you tell me about justicars?"

"They're a monastic order. They've given up their families and possessions to follow their code. Most of them are on some lifelong mission, but they'll always stop to deal with any injustice they encounter. Which can be a problem. In some ways, they're a lot like the Spectres, undertaking personal missions."

"Spectres are authorized by the Council. Who do justicars represent?"

"What? That's like...I don't know a good human metaphor. They represent their code...our code. It's closer to a religious group than a legal branch. No law-abiding asari would question a justicar's orders. Nobody becomes a justicar for personal gain. And they'd die before breaking their oaths."

Shepard excused himself, then summoned the Normandy's shuttle to take his team to the district Officer Dara had mentioned. As they approached the local police station, a detective hurried out, chasing after a volus and his two turian guards.

"Where do you think you're going?" she said as she skidded to a halt in front of the volus.

"I'm taking my goods to Omega, Detective." The volus's pressure suit was brown, with gold stripes down the arms and legs.

"You're not going anywhere, merchant. Not until I solve this murder."

"I had nothing to do with that!" The volus paused while his suit exchanged air. "It was those mercenary thugs you can't seem to get rid of."

"The victim was your business partner, and I'm not ruling you out. I'll let you know when you can leave."

"What about that justicar that just showed up? Everyone says she might go crazy and start killing! I need to leave."

"She'll only kill the unjust – so I'm sure you have nothing to worry about, Pitne For. Find me in the station if you need me."

The detective strutted back to her office. The only exit from the landing pad seemed to be blocked off with holographic police tape. Shepard approached the volus to learn more about what was going on.

"What do you want?" The merchant was understandably annoyed. "I've already got mercs wanting to kill me like they did my partner! I don't need any more trouble. As if that weren't enough, some asari justicar showed up this morning. All the natives are scared of her. I've got to get off this world."

"Why is everyone so nervous? Has Samara actually done anything yet?"

"The asari say that justicars are lethal in a fight, and if they so much as smell corruption, they start shooting." Pitne For's tone turned sober. "The thing is, corruption isn't that hard to find around here."

"Do you know where the justicar is now?"

"She's in the alley where my business partner was murdered. The detective sealed off the area, so you'll have to talk with her if you want to go there."

"You don't seem too broken up about your partner's death."

"Dakni Kur knew the risks when he took to spacing. Right now, my worry is me. It's unhealthy to be a volus in the Nos Astra spaceport right now. Especially a volus named Pitne For."

"Why do you think it was mercenaries?"

"Dakni Kur was cutting through a back alley last night when someone killed him with a shotgun. I saw his body this morning – they'd used modded rounds. That means Eclipse mercs."

"What can you tell me about the local Eclipse chapter?"

"I occasionally do business with them, but only in well-lit places with my guards. And only after the creds clear. This is a scummy bunch, even if they are all asari. They sell Red Sand, all kinds of illegal items, and they are all cold-blooded killers."

"Why would these mercs kill him, and why do you think they're coming after you, too?"

"I have no idea – we're innocent merchants! But they killed him, so they must be after me, too. I have to work the angles and get out of here."

"I should go."

"If you're interested in weapons, I have a fine selection. Unfortunately, I am not open for business right now."

Shepard politely refused, indicated that he was already well armed. He turned and entered the police station to speak with the detective.

"Nice guns," she said as she looked up from her desk. "Try not to use them in my district. What can I do for you?"

"I'm looking for an asari warrior named Samara."

"If you've got a score to settle with Samara, take it somewhere else – I've got more than enough trouble here already."

"We're on an important mission. I need to recruit Samara, then we'll be on our way."

"Humans recruiting aliens? Sounds important. Justicars usually work alone, but they are drawn to impossible causes."

"We've got that covered," Jacob muttered.

"If you're getting her out of my district, I'll get you to her ASAP. She's at the crime scene."

"You're letting her into a sealed crime scene?"

"I'm a cop – I'll work with a justicar all I can. Besides, she's been looking at crime scenes longer than our two lifespans combined. She knows how to handle herself."

"And yet, you're awfully anxious to get Samara out of your district," said Miranda.

"My bosses want me to detain her. They're worried she'll cause some kind of cross-species incident. But her Justicar code won't let her be taken into custody. If I try it, she'll have to kill me. I have no interest in dying, so if you lure her away with some big noble cause before I have to carry out my orders, I'm thrilled to help you."

"Samara would kill a cop? That doesn't sound very just."

"She would die defending an honest cop, but she'd fight any army of dirty cops to the death. I admire her dedication, but her presence is still a big problem. I need her gone before I have to carry out my orders."

"Your superiors are sending you to certain death for no good reason. You have a right to disobey."

"I'm a cop, and I know my duty. I've been ordered to detain her and I will – unless I...or you, can get her to leave my district first."

"What can you tell me about the crime?"

"A volus Red Sand merchant was murdered. It was a professional hit, so we're not dealing with junkies looking for a score. I'm thinking the local Eclipse mercenary band. Can't prove it, but if the volus was dirty, too, maybe it's just a deal gone bad."

"What do you know about this Eclipse band?"

"They're professional killers. They sell Red Sand, trade illegal weapons tech, and smuggle criminals off-world. They control some back alleys around here. I haven't been able to find their nest yet, though."

"What can you tell me about justicars?"

"They're kind of...humans might call them 'warrior monks.' They live by a complex code that compels them to punish the wicked and protect the pure. They've been a part of asari culture for millenia. I read adventure stories about justicars when I was a child."

"What do you think of Samara herself?"

"She's been a justicar longer than three of your lifespans. Whoever she was before she swore that oath, that person is dead."

"People seem nervous about her presence."

"Asari admire justicars. But we also know that they kill without mercy when they find corruption. And justicars never leave asari space. Why is she here? I doubt it's to investigate the murder of some corrupt volus."

"How do I get to the crime scene?"

"It's around the corner – go outside, take a left. Look for the police line. I'll send word to let you in. Be careful – the local Eclipse mercs have been all over those back alleys lately."

"I have to go."

"Good luck."

"We better find Samara before that detective goes after her," Miranda said.

Shepard agreed. Outside and around the corner, he paused at the police line while he waited for the officers to recognize his team.

"Anaya told us to let you through. Watch yourself – there's merc activity back here. We're waiting on backup."

Just inside the alleyway was an active console with some sort of shipping records. Shepard wondered if it might be relevant to the case, but the first button he pressed caused an upload, and then the screen went blank. He shrugged, then moved on. The alley wound and twisted a bit, until they heard weapons fire and the sound of biotics. Through an open doorway were two asari facing

off against each other – one young Eclipse merc with a shotgun and her tech armor up, and the other of matriarch age, wearing blood-red combat armor, with a glowing biotic barrier shimmering brightly.

“Those were my best troops!” the Eclipse merc complained.

“Tell me what I need to know, and I will be gone from here,” the older asari said in a chillingly calm tone. “Where did you send her?”

“You think I would betray her? She would hurt me in ways you can't imagine.”

“The name of the ship. Your life hangs on the answer, Lieutenant.”

“You can kill me, but one of us will take you down, justicar.”

The merc brought up her weapon and aimed, but the justicar was faster. She reached out a hand and enveloped her adversary with biotics, then sent her flying across the room and crashing into some shelves. The warrior quickly closed the distance and pressed her foot onto the neck of the mercenary.

“What was the name of the ship she left on?” The justicar's voice was still level.

“Go to hell,” the mercenary croaked out.”

The justicar blinked, then – “Find peace in the embrace of the goddess.” She twisted and pressed down with her foot, killing the Eclipse lieutenant. Without pause, she turned to Shepard's squad.

“My name is Samara, a servant of the Justicar Code. My quarrel is with these Eclipse sisters, but I see three well-armed people before me. Are we friend or foe?”

“Friend, I hope. But that merc was wounded and helpless,” Shepard said. “Do you just kill anyone who won't help you?”

“If my cause is important enough, yes. Are you different?”

Shepard reluctantly admitted she had a point. “I can't say that I am.”

“That is something we share. You are honest – that is another. How may I be of service to you?”

“I'm Commander Shepard, and I need your help with a critical mission. We're going up against impossible odds, and I need the best – that's you.”

“You honor me. But I am in the middle of an investigation.”

“I need your help to take down the Collectors.”

“The Collectors are a worthy foe; I would relish testing myself against them.” The justicar paused for a moment, considering. “But I seek an incredibly dangerous fugitive. I cornered her here, but the Eclipse sisters smuggled her off-world. I must find the name of the ship she left on before the trail goes cold.”

“I wish you were willing to go with the human, Justicar.” Detective Anaya said as she entered the room. “I've been ordered to take you into custody if you won't leave.”

“You risk a great deal by following your orders, Detective. Fortunately, I will not have to resist. My

Code obligates me to cooperate with you for one day. After that, I must return to my investigation.”

“I won't be able to release you that soon.”

“You won't be able to stop me.”

“Uh, the human is lost here,” Shepard interrupted. “Can one of you clarify?”

“I was trying to convince her to leave with you. But justicars and their Code...”

“The detective has been ordered to detain me; I can't force her to disobey an order.”

“And after a day, Samara fights her way out of custody, killing anyone in her way?” Miranda surmised.

“I am afraid so,” Samara concluded.

“So...while you're in custody, I'll get the name of that ship,” offered Shepard.

“Do that, and I will join you. Then the Code will be satisfied.”

“A moment ago, you refused to give up your investigation. But now you'll follow me?”

“If I stay, I will be compelled to kill many innocents to escape incarceration.”

“Like me,” said the detective.

“I may be killed – and my quarry would be free to continue murdering. If I come with you and

survive your mission, I can resume my investigation. To do that, I need the ship's name to track her next hiding place. It's a simple choice."

Jacob agreed. "Bad odds, but better than killing a bunch of people for no good reason."

"This Justicar Code seems quite strict," said Shepard.

"It may seem so to you, but this is my oath. The expedient path may be fast and simple; that does not make it the right path."

"I'd like to know more about your Order before I help you."

"We are individuals who have forsworn family, children, and worldly possessions aside from some weapons and armor. We travel asari space righting wrongs, as defined by the ancient Code we have each memorized."

"Illium may be dominated by asari, but it isn't in asari space."

"My quarry fled to this place. I am sworn to hunt her down, and I will follow anywhere she goes. It is rare for a justicar to leave asari space, but I must follow my Oath. If I suffer for it, I will accept that."

"All right. Do you have any leads?"

"The volus merchant Pitne For is tied to this. Eclipse mercs are preparing to kill him. Get the truth out of him. He may know a way into the Eclipse base."

Detective Anaya made a halfhearted gesture to detain Justicar Samara. "Well, I've got to get back to my station, and I guess I've got to take you with me."

"Thank you, Shepard." Samara nodded.

Shepard's squad followed the two asari back to the landing pad, and the Commander confronted the volus merchant with the gold stripes on his pressure suit.

"Hello again, Earth-clan. Did you speak to the detective?"

"You said you didn't know anything about all this. You've got one chance to change that statement. Why are the mercs after you?"

"I know nothing about any mercenaries, Earth-clan. I'm merely an innocent merchant trying to make his way in life."

"The Eclipse are hunting you. You want to stay alive. I'm your best chance."

"Yes! You're right, Earth-clan – I'm desperate. I've got angry mercs after me, and now this asari justicar. Let's talk. I smuggled a chemical onto Illium that boosts biotic powers in combat. It also is toxic. I may have, um, forgotten to mention that to the Eclipse. So they are perturbed and want to kill me."

"Tell me about this chemical."

"It's called Minagen X3, and it's very, very...um, illegal. Anyone with biotic powers who is exposed to it becomes more powerful. The higher your exposure, the more powerful you get. But too much of it, you die. That's the part that the Eclipse found disagreeable."

"You've been in the base. What do you remember?"

"It's a series of docking bays where the Eclipse keep their private ships. They're well-armed, and they've got mechs. And they're all murderers. Every one of them kills someone as part of their initiation."

"It sounds like you're a swindler, and your actions have finally caught up with you," said Miranda.

"True and true. But I haven't survived as a merchant this long without being able to tell when there's a deal in the making – you want something."

"The Eclipse recently smuggled someone off-world. I need the name of the ship she left on."

"I don't know about their people smuggling operations. They must keep records in their base. I do have a pass card they issued me to bring my goods in. Well, I had to return that one, but I happened to make a copy." The volus waited, but Shepard merely stared at him. "Take it."

Shepard entered the police station to find Samara sitting on a ledge behind Detective Anaya's desk.

"Please don't start trouble about my prisoner. Trust me, I'd release her right now if I could. It's a

great honor to have a justicar here, but I could do without the additional honor of having her kill me.”

“I'd like to avoid killing you, detective. Unfortunately, the moment my code dictates I must, I will. There is only the Code.”

“She says this kind of thing like she's talking about what to eat for dinner.”

“You're not going to lock her up?” Shepard asked.

“Any attempt to put me in a passive restraint system will be regarded as a hostile action, and I will be forced to attack.”

“Yeah, that.”

Shepard briefed them on his lead, and was directed to a nearby cargo elevator. Shepard ordered helmets on. If there were crates of a toxic chemical around, he didn't want to be exposed to it – or to the drug Red Sand. The lift took them to a cargo docking bay where a Kowloon-class freighter was half-unloaded, but no dockworkers were in sight. Instead, some Eclipse sisters decided that the Cerberus operatives weren't welcome, and opened fire before asking questions. One picked up a strange-looking canister and flung it biotically at Shepard. He ducked, but the canister burst open, spraying a cloud of red gas.

The suit filters worked, and they fought through a squad of biotic asari. But the enemy's attacks were uncoordinated, their biotics wild, and they fell one by one. The last merely stopped shooting and collapsed in a cackling laugh. High on her own product, Shepard figured.

As the air cleared, Shepard brushed some reddish dust from his armor. The drug Red Sand, no doubt. The Commander made a mental note to go through decontamination back on the Normandy after this. The squad traversed an empty warehouse, emerging into another docking bay. This one was empty, save for a few unmarked crates. As they crossed a bridge to the other side of the dock, the crates burst open, revealing a pair of humanoid light HK mechs and two of the dog-type mechs. At the same time, a Mantis gunship swooped in and opened fire, strafing the bridge.

The three humans rolled, attempting to get out of the way, but were caught. Shepard's shields went down, but they did their job protecting him. Miranda somehow escaped unscathed. Jacob yelled out that he'd been hit, though. The mechs were marching up the bridge, and the gunship was swinging around to make another pass. Shepard suddenly missed his grenade launcher, but he had an idea.

Coordinating their biotics, they lifted one of the mechs into the flight path of the gunship. The pilot had left no room to maneuver, and the floating robot smashed into the windscreen, sending the aircraft careening out of control and out of sight. The remaining mechs were no trouble to biotically push over the edge of the rail-less bridge.

Miranda applied medi-gel to the wound in Jacob's lower leg, which stopped the bleeding. Shepard was about to call off the rest of the mission, but the man insisted he was fine. He stood up and limped a couple of steps, waving off any attempts at assistance. Only after he promised to hang back and take it easy did Shepard acquiesce at continuing on.

The other side of the docking bay was home to some offices. A whimpering voice could be heard from inside one.

“Oh, Goddess, don't let them see me. If they do see me, don't let them kill me. What am I doing here?”

Shepard opened the door and looked around. The office seemed to be empty, but a mirror on the far wall revealed an Eclipse sister cowering behind a desk. She was shaking her head and glancing at a pistol lying just out of arm's reach. Shepard was about to let her be, but she bumped the desk and gave herself up.

“Wait! Stop! I didn't fire my weapon once! I pretended to because the other Eclipse sisters were watching, but I didn't really shoot! I'm not one of them! I'm new! I thought being Elnora the mercenary would be cool...but I didn't know what they were really like!”

Shepard thought she was overdoing it, and the rookie mercenary's hands were fidgeting at her sides. In the mirror behind her, she had a shotgun strapped to her back.

“You chose your side Elnora, and you lost,” he said. “Surrender peacefully, and I'm sure the police will – ”

“Screw that, bastard! And screw you!”

She pulled her shotgun around, but Shepard was faster on the draw. As her body hit the floor, her omni-tool played back an audio recording.

“Well, it's official – little baby Elnora is finally a full-fledged Eclipse merc! I earned my uniform last night when I killed that ridiculous volus. Up-close, exploding rounds. Blew the little bastard's suit wide open! Hah! I can't wait to see some real action! Next time I go home, my friends are going to be so jealous!”

“I think Detective Anaya might perk up at this,” said Jacob.

“This looks like a shipping manifest.” Miranda had picked up a datapad off the desk. “It shows that Pitney For sold two thousand units of Minagen X3 to the Eclipse, along with 600 units of Red Sand. This isn't the information Samara needs, but it proves the volus is a criminal.”

“All right. Grab that and make a copy of the audio log, then let's keep moving. We still need that ship name.”

The squad continued on through docking bays and warehouses. Eventually, they came across a volus in a white pressure suit with faded red stripes.

“I am a biotic god!” he yelled at the humans. “I think things – and they happen! Fear me, lesser creatures, for I am biotics made flesh!” To illustrate, he pointed, and his was enveloped in a ragged biotic barrier, which flared for a moment, then petered out.

“I don't know what drugs you're on, but stay back and I won't shoot you,” Shepard promised.

“You will regret your scandalous words! I am a great wind that will sweep all before me like a...a great wind. A great biotic wind!” The volus started pacing unsteadily.

“You need help,” said Shepard.

“You need help! You stand before the mightiest biotic ever. Yes, the asari injecting so many drugs into me was terrifying. But then I began to smell my greatness! They may laugh when I fall over, but they don't know what I know in my head – that I am amazingly powerful. Fear me!”

The volus gestured at Jacob, who shrugged and shook his head. “Good luck with...everything.”

“Are you a part of Pitne-For's trade group?” Shepard asked.

“When I was mortal, I worked for Pitne. Poor soul is probably terrified that I have not returned.”

“He hasn't reported your disappearance,” said Miranda. “Probably so his departure won't get delayed.”

Jacob agreed. “Face it – Pitne cares about money. You're not an issue.”

“Bah! I will wreak a just revenge upon his people! But first...the leader of these mercenaries is in the next room. I shall toss Wasea about like a rag doll!”

Miranda grew impatient. “Shepard, having this incapacitated volus running around our battlefield could compromise us.

“I will tear her apart! My biotics are unstoppable!”

“Wasea will tear you apart,” said Shepard. “Take a nap – you'll feel better.”

“Are you mad? I'm unstoppable! Feasting on her biotic-rich blood will be the last step of my ascension to godhood!” The volus turned and took a few wobbly steps down the hall. Shepard gave him a light push in the back, and the bulbous volus rolled onto his face. “But...great wind! Biotic god! I'm...I...what was I saying? I'm...tired.” He took a couple of breaths, then stood up, staggering the other way. “You...may be right. Yes, I'm tired. I'll nap. Destroy the universe later...”

“So much for godhood,” Miranda quipped as the volus waddled off.

The squad entered a large storage room. An asari in purple heavy armor was pacing behind a desk, reading a datapad and sipping a brown liquid from a clear glass. She noticed the three humans from across the long room and addressed the air as she set the empty glass down.

“Everything's gone to hell since we smuggled that filthy creature off-world.” Wasea casually dropped the datapad on her desk. “First a justicar shows up, now you. At least I can take pleasure in turning your head into a pulpy mass!”

With that last, she biotically lifted a container of Red Sand Minagen mix and tossed it at the door. Shepard and company took cover among the shelves and crates. More Eclipse sisters entered from doors behind Wasea and began doing the same. Soon, the entire room was filled with clouds of red dust.

This group of mercs was smarter than the last, at least in that they had their helmets on, too. Jacob and Miranda started sneaking around one row of shelves, taking pot shots when they could. Shepard decided that would take too long, and pushed over the free-standing shelving unit he'd taken cover behind, causing the whole row to fall like dominoes and providing a clear line-of-sight to his enemy.

One Eclipse sister at the end of the fallen shelves had a rocket launcher. Shepard began to regret his rash action, but the dust from the drug canisters shorted out the firing mechanism, and the weapon exploded in her face, killing her. Abruptly, the fighting stopped. The last Eclipse merc surrendered, and Jacob found some loose wire to bind her wrists. Wasea was found pinned under a fallen shelf, bleeding profusely and reaching for her pistol. Shepard kicked the pistol well out of the way and left her there.

The captain's desk had miraculously survived the battle unscathed. Miranda picked up the datapad and scrolled through it until she found the name of the Eclipse's people-smuggling ship. She wiped some dust from her sleeve. "I hope the police station has a shower," she said.

There turned out to be no need, as they stepped off the cargo elevator and into a light rain. The humans stood for a few minutes outside as the falling water washed away the dust. Shepard removed his helmet once under the eaves of the police station. Two volus in familiar pressure suits were waiting by the door. The 'great wind' spoke first.

"I don't know what they put in me," said the volus in the white and red pressure suit. "But I thought I was...well, you saw. Anyway – thank you, Shepard."

Pitne For spoke up before Shepard could reply. "Thank you for removing the Eclipse threat, Earth-clan! It will take them months to rebuild their organization. Also...merely out of curiosity: When you were poking about, did you perhaps run across a shipping manifest that belongs to me?"

"You never know when something like that might come in handy," said Shepard.

"If it might change your mind, Earth-clan, returning that manifest would be very profitable for you." Shepard shook his head and entered the police station, but the volus called to his back: "If you give it to the detective, her reward will be a pat on the back."

The detective was still at her desk, and the Justicar still meditating on the ledge behind her. "If you have something that'll encourage the justicar to leave, show it to her!"

"We've got the name of the ship. Your fugitive left here two days ago on the AML Demeter."

"Shepard, you impress me. You fulfilled your part of the bargain, and I will fulfill mine. I am ready to leave immediately, if that will satisfy your superiors, Detective?"

"You're free to go, Justicar. It has been an honor having you in my station. And it's nice you didn't kill me, too."

Shepard suddenly had a doubt. "You're sworn to follow a code that dictates your decisions. But I'm running a military operation."

"You wonder if I will refuse to follow orders because of my Code? By agreeing to follow you, I am compelled to swear the most difficult of justicar oaths – the Third Oath of Subsumation. After I do, your orders will override the Code. You should know, however, that I'll still give you my opinion if the situation warrants."

Shepard decided that would have to do. "Fair enough. We have a shuttle nearby that'll take us to our ship."

"A moment. I must be sworn to your service, so that I am never forced to choose between your orders and the Code." Samara's eyes suddenly glowed white, and she knelt and bent her head. "By the Code, I will serve you, Shepard. Your choices are my choices, your morals are my morals, your wishes are my code." Samara then glowed briefly with biotic energy and stood, the glow in her eyes

fading.

Detective Anaya had stood to witness. "I never thought I'd see a justicar swear an oath like that."

"If you make me do anything extremely dishonorable, I may need to kill you when I am released from my oath."

"I can see that this is a very important act, Samara," said Shepard. "Thank you."

"You'll be a great asset to our mission," Jacob added. "I'm excited to have you along."

"I am glad to hear it. I will fight by your side, kill your enemies, and protect your friends. Truly, the life of a justicar can get lonely. I admit I am looking forward to serving with a company of honorable heroes." Samara picked up a single duffel bag. "Shall we return to your ship?"

"I have a couple of things for the detective."

"Thanks for getting Samara out of my district," the Detective said. "I can tell my granddaughters about meeting a justicar. And you've just upped my chances of living long enough to have grandkids."

"We have proof that Eclipse killed the volus merchant." Shepard gestured for Miranda to share the copy of the audio recording.

Detective Anaya liked what she heard, though there was a problem. "Interesting. Never heard of this Elnora. Sounds like she was just starting her career. Good thing you cut it short. But I can't verify it. It would be inadmissible."

Samara stepped in: "I vouch for Shepard and any evidence he brings forward."

"I accept the judgment of the Justicar. Okay, enough with the congratulations, I've still got a spiraling crime rate."

"We also have proof that Pitne For smuggled in Red Sand and illegal weapons tech." Miranda handed the datapad to the Detective.

"Thanks. I'll send some officers to arrest him and his cohorts. This is a big help, Shepard. I can't do much to thank you, but we do have a small discretionary bounty fund. Take this." Miranda accepted the credit transfer. "Be well. Value the justicar – I've never heard of one working with a human before."

The shuttle docked in the Normandy's cargo bay, and the foursome stepped off and headed for the elevator.

"Welcome to the Normandy, Samara," Miranda said pleasantly. "I've studied your profile extensively. With your skills, I think you'll be an excellent addition to our team."

"Thank you. From an organization such as yours, that is high praise indeed."

"I've seen records of Samara's biotic powers at work," Jacob added. "They're substantial. We still don't know what we're gonna find when we hit the Collectors."

"With what we're planning, we need all the experienced people we can get," said Shepard.

"I will be prepared for whatever we encounter."

"Where should we put you?" asked Jacob.

"A room that looks out on the great empty void would be most comforting."

"Put her in the Observation Room on Deck Three," Shepard suggested.

"Thank you. I must meditate on the day's events."

The elevator stopped on Deck Three to drop off everyone but Shepard. Joker got on, chewing on something he'd picked up from the kitchen.

"So, Commander," said the pilot between floors. "Even your asari are trained killers? Get everyone at the same store or something?"

Joker stopped on Deck Two to return to his station. After freshening up, Shepard headed down to speak with his newest squadmate.

Kelly was waiting to get on the elevator. "There is nothing more absolute than the oath of an asari Justicar. You did well getting Samara on our side. She is so elegant and gorgeous. Too bad her manner is just so cold."

In the Observation Lounge, Samara was sitting in the lotus position, holding a glowing biotic

orb. Shepard turned to leave, but she addressed him.

“Shepard.”

“How are you doing?”

“I am well, thank you for asking.”

“How do you think our mission is going?”

“Building our forces is a good strategy. However, the time to strike is coming soon.”

“What are your impressions of Miranda and Jacob?”

“Jacob is an earnest young man. Events will either forge him into a great man or utterly destroy him. Miranda is undoubtedly a hard woman. I respect her strength and determination. She carries many burdens and doesn't share them with others – as it should be.”

Shepard sensed that she wasn't much in the mood for talking, so he excused himself.

-----THE CITADEL-----

There was one last dossier that TIM had provided, and she was located on The Citadel. Shepard had also received a message from David Anderson, now an Admiral, and Miranda suggested it was time for a resupply for the Normandy. Plenty of reasons pay a visit to the galaxy's center of government and commerce.

The Cerberus ship docked in Zakera Ward, one of the five petal-like arms of the massive station. Shepard stepped off the gangplank and into a waiting area for security. An Alliance marine was giving a lecture about physics to some cadets. Nothing Shepard didn't already know. Instead, he spent a few minutes watching the news, catching up on current events. The same types of stories as always seemed to be running. He'd hoped after two years...but no. On the other hand, perhaps the status quo was a good thing; it meant that there was still time before the Reapers arrived.

THE MASTER THEIF

“Commander Shepard, we have the finest companions waiting for you.” A nearby interactive billboard caught the Commander's attention. “Perhaps something petite, smart, and Japanese would be your style. Got problems with Collectors? Try Kasumi's credit services!”

Shepard recognized the instructions from the dossier, though he wasn't expecting that the first ad he came to would be the target. He paused for a bit to see what other come-ons the 'ad' would use.

“Just enter your password for a fabulous prize package worth millions of credits!” Shepard waited a few more seconds. “Okay, really? How many times can you walk by without stopping?....You do have the password, right?”

Shepard grinned. Then, figuring the jig was up, he spoke the password. “Silence is golden.”

“Good to finally meet you, Commander Shepard. I'm a fan. Kasumi Goto at your service...but you apparently already knew that.” The ad continued to flash random images, though a woman wearing a dark grey hood could occasionally be seen speaking.

“What's with the password and the sneaking around? Are you in trouble or something?”

“I'm the best thief in the business, not the most famous. Need to watch my step to keep it that way. I also needed to make sure all this was legit. And I have no doubts now – you're the real Commander Shepherd.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“There's a certain...aura about you. Like you've seen things no one else has. Even without knowing what you look like, I knew it was you.”

“What brought you to Cerberus?”

“That's a bit of a story. Short version, they were looking for me, so I trailed them to find out why. Turns out they were looking for someone to join you on an important mission...and were offering a serious signing bonus.”

“Has Cerberus filled you in on the mission?”

“Honestly I'm shocked they didn't come to see me sooner. My fault for being hard to find, I

guess.”

“Good to have you along, Kasumi. We've got a spot set up for you on the Normandy. Make yourself at home.”

“Looking forward to it. Haven't done this kind of thing before. Big mission, saving the galaxy. I travel light...I've already slipped my things aboard your ship.” The advertisement went dead, and Kasumi decloaked, her voice now audible from the catwalk above. “We should probably wrap this up. You look pretty silly standing there talking to an advertisement. See you on the ship, Shepard.”

CAPTAIN BAILEY

Shepard's turn came to clear security. As he passed through the scanners, alarms began to blare.

“Shut it down!” A turian C-Sec officer waved Shepard over and apologized. “Commander Shepard? Sorry. Officially, sir, only C-Sec are allowed to have weapons on the Citadel now.”

“Don't tell me you're going to take my gun. The people at Noveria tried that once. Didn't work.”

“Oh, don't worry. We got word from the C-Sec Executor's office that you should be allowed to keep your weapons.”

“That's surprising. Executor Pallin didn't seem to like me last time I was here.”

“Pallin? He was killed by geth in the Battle of the Citadel. C-Sec's current Executor is Decian Chellick. He said you tend to find trouble, and you need to be armed.”

“He sounds observant.”

The officer typed a bit on his console, then rubbed his neck. “Sorry for the inconvenience, sir. Our scanners are picking up false readings. They seem to think you're, ah, dead.”

“I was only mostly dead. Try finding that option on government paperwork,” Shepard quipped. But the officer didn't seem to have a sense of humor. “I was listed as missing in action a couple of years ago.”

“Would you mind checking with my Captain? He can reinstate you in our system. He's just past the scanners on your right.”

Shepard continued through the scanners and stepped into a small police station. A human C-Sec officer sporting close-cropped blond hair sat behind a desk – a captain, by his uniform.

“You'll have to make him scream a little,” the captain was saying to his subordinate. “He's not gonna tell you everything just 'cause you ask.”

“I know, sir,” the human officer said in a subdued tone.

“If you don't have the stomach, or you're worried about being reported, I can take care of it.”

“No, sir. I can handle it.”

The C-Sec captain turned to Shepard. “Yes...I see the problem already, Commander Shepard. My console says you're dead.”

“You're not worried I'm some impostor claiming to be me?”

“We have the best screening equipment in the galaxy. Those scanners can sample DNA from skin flakes. Hell, if you have unregistered gene mods, they can even ferret those out.”

“Your sergeant said you could help.”

“Usually you'd have to go through the Station Security Administration to reactivate your IDs. Then to Customs and Immigration to regain access to the Citadel itself. And probably a stop by the Treasury. 'Spending a year dead' is a popular tax dodge. But I can see you're a busy man. So how about I just press this button right here, and we call it done?”

“Couldn't one of us – or both of us – get into trouble for that?”

“There's no way to fool the DNA scanners in that tunnel. You're you. Why wait in long lines and fill out a mass of useless hardcopy paperwork to get to the same place? The Council does everything by the book. They've had thousands of years to write it. Sometimes things need to get done without a committee vote.”

“You're not big on formalities, are you?”

“I'm with them right up until they keep people from doing their jobs.” Bailey pushed the button on his console that his hand had been hovering over. The console beeped once. “There. I just saved

you about nine days of running around. That said, you should probably head up to the Presidium and tell them you're still alive. The Council would probably like to know that one of their lost Spectres is still kicking.”

“I will. Having access to the Council and the Spectres' resources would be useful.”

“Yeah, the Council can get anything. Best thing about working C-Sec is that any equipment, information, or money you need you get. Anyway. Something else you need, or can I get back to work?”

“I overheard your conversation. 'Make him scream a little?’”

“This isn't the Presidium.” Bailey slapped his desk. “All they have to worry about are protesters outside their 'free speech zones' or someone's poodle crapping on the grass. Down here we have drugs, organized crime, and murder. Policing a Ward is like policing New York City. Sometimes you have to work outside the Council's rulebook.”

“Last time I was here, there were no human captains in C-Sec.”

“C-Sec took a lot of casualties when the geth boarded the Presidium. The Special Response Division was hard hit. They stopped turning their noses up at human resumes. They needed bodies in uniform and we had the most experienced bodies.”

“How'd you end up working on the Citadel?”

“I started with the Alliance way back when, but the traveling was killing me. It's a shitty life if you're trying to raise a family. Seeing your kids every six months. I joined C-Sec so I could stay in one place. Put down roots.”

“You like life here on the Citadel?”

“Life here is good. Hell of a lot different than life back on Earth. I miss the food, mostly. You just can't get Sockeye salmon here on the station.”

“You ever get back there?”

“Earth? Every couple of years. Less and less all the time. But when I finish my stint with C-Sec there's a nice little place in the foothills I'm going to retire too. Not that I'm retiring anytime soon.”

Shepard looked out into the Ward itself. “Tell me about this place.”

“All the Wards are more-or-less multicultural, but the other four are dominated by asari, turians, or salarians. In Zakera, we've got major enclaves of volus, elcor, and hanar. There's also a human commercial zone at Shin Akiba. We've got a few krogan walking around...I think I saw a quarian the other day.”

“It looks like most of the damage from Sovereign's attack has been repaired.”

“The Presidium was pretty shot up. Of course they fixed that first. All the Wards got hit with debris when the ship exploded. Most of the damage was superficial, and the Keepers got things restored fast. Tayseri Ward got the worst – a big chunk hit near the Dilinaga Concert Hall. They're still clearing wreckage and trying to get power restored.”

“Thanks for the information. I should be going.”

“You need anything else, let me know.”

KROGAN SUSHI

Shepard had some time before his appointment with the Council, so he decided to wander around a bit. As he strolled along, he overheard a pair of krogan gossiping. Neither of them sounded very bright.

“I heard that those lakes up on the Presidium are filled with fish,” said one.

“No, they're not!” said the other.

“You ever been up there?”

“No. C-Sec won't let me. They say I'm a risk.”

“Hrr. They think every krogan is dangerous.”

“Damn turians. We should kill them all.”

That last didn't sound serious – Shepard hoped.. He continued on through a shopping mall. Among the store fronts were gift shops, charitable foundations, weapons stores, and a place offering

safari hunting expeditions. A salarian tried to sell him video games. Shepard politely declined and instead entered a club. He ordered a drink, then noticed a turian in a groundskeeper uniform. Time to ask about aquatic delicacies.

“Something I can do for you?” the turian asked.

“I noticed you're one of the groundskeepers for the Presidium. Let me buy you a drink.” Shepard motioned to the bartender. “Do you know if there are fish in the lakes?”

“I get that question a lot. I think it's right behind 'where's the restroom?' Those are reservoirs. The Presidium's own supply, independent from the water storage tanks in the Wards. The only place I know of on the station to get a live fish is Deleia Sanassi's gift shop.”

“When I pour a glass of water, it's the same stuff that tourists throw garbage in?”

“No, they purify it first. If some salarian or human bacteria gets left in, and a turian or quarian drinks it, they could die. Everything would be so much simpler if we all had the same DNA. But no, the universe loves diversity.”

“Where's that gift shop?”

“In the market downstairs from the bar. Deleia sells aquariums. Fish are the largest pets most station residents can get a permit for.”

“Thanks for your time.”

“No problem. Thanks for the drink. If you get up to the Presidium, check out the demael flowers across from the Conduit. They're coming in very nicely.”

Shepard exited and found the pair of curious krogan.

“What do you want?” grumbled the one who'd asked about fish.

“Why are you so interested in fish from the Presidium?” Shepard asked.

“It's so decadent. Eating a fish from the Presidium would be like screwing Sha'ira.”

“Ugh,” his friend disagreed. “Asari are so...squishy. Where are you supposed to get a decent grip?”

Shepard decided not to mention his own tastes, and instead returned to the question at hand. “I talked to one of the Presidium groundskeepers. He said there aren't any fish in the lakes.”

“What?” The curious krogan was very disappointed.

“I told you,” said his impatient friend.

“Why have all that water if you're not going to store something to eat in it? I don't understand aliens at all.”

“Thanks for telling him. It's all he's talked about all damn day.”

“This is depressing.”

“How about we find a turian and beat the crap out of him? That always makes you feel better.”

“You think there's any place on board where we could buy a fish?”

“They don't like live animals on the Citadel. Waste of life support capacity, they say.”

“I can't believe there aren't any fish up there. It must be a mistake.”

“Can we talk about something else now?”

Shepard told them about the gift shop that supposedly sold fish, then excused himself.

THE INTERVIEW

Shepard took a cab to the human Embassy. Upon stepping out of the skycar, a familiar-looking woman caught his attention. She was wearing a smart pantsuit and had a camera floating over her shoulder.

“There! Shepard, a moment of your time? Khalisah bint Sinan al-Jilani, Westerlund News.” The woman held her hand out to shake, but Shepard crossed his arms instead. “I interviewed you two years ago when you first became a Spectre. You presented your case very well on camera. Do you have a minute? The people want to hear your story, Shepard.”

“You spent the whole time trying to make me look like I was selling out Earth to the Council.”

“Now, Shepard – you may object to my methods, but we're on the same side. Besides, you

proved me wrong in the end. You're back, you're news. I just want to give your story its due.” Before the Commander could object, the reporter tapped a command on her omni-tool, and a bright light shone from the camera drone. Kalisah dove right in. “Sources claim you were at the heart of the Presidium during the Battle of the Citadel. It's fair to say the course of the battle hinged on your words. If true, you told Admiral Hackett to assist the Destiny Ascension, costing hundreds of human lives and securing the continued dominance of the Citadel Council.”

That hadn't been Shepard's call, and it was news to him that they'd placed any scapegoating on him. But he decided to be diplomatic, though. He stood at attention. “The turians lost twenty cruisers. Figure each had a crew of around three hundred. The Ascension – the asari dreadnought we saved – had a crew of nearly ten thousand.”

“But surely the human cost –”

“The Alliance lost eight cruisers: Shenyang. Emden. Jakarta. Cairo. Seoul. Cape Town. Warsaw. Madrid. And yes, I remember them all. Everyone in the Fifth Fleet is a hero. The Alliance owes them all medals. The Council owes them a lot more than that. And so do you.”

“Will there be an investigation into your mistakes, Shepard? Justice for the lives you lost?”

“I had to leave a friend and a crewmate in a nuclear fireball on a planet you've never even heard of. Saving everyone only happens in vids. There will be sacrifices. Being in charge means making sure they lead to the greater objective. That's a reality shared by all soldiers, in command and on the ground. Don't you dare suggest that I made those calls lightly.”

“I didn't mean to accuse –”

“Damn right you didn't. I won't let you disrespect anyone who gave their life that day. They're all heroes – all of them. They deserve better than you.”

Shepard waved a hand dismissively and strutted off.

“Commander Shepard, first human Spectre, hero of the Battle of the Citadel....Check. Did we get it? Great, bull-rushed on my own show.”

THE COUNCIL

Shepard, now in a foul mood, continued on in to the Embassies. The assistant to the Human Councilor showed him in to the office, where a meeting was already underway. Anderson, who now had Admiral's stripes on his shoulders, was speaking with the three alien Councilors via holo-comm.

“This meeting would be more productive if Udina was to join us,” the Asari Councilor was saying.

“Counselor Udina isn't available,” Anderson replied. “But as his top advisor, I speak with his full authority and approval. Shepard will be here any – oh, Commander, we were just talking about you. It's been a long time.”

“Anderson, I hope the last couple of years have treated you right.” The two men shook hands.

“There have been some rough spots. It's good to have you back.”

“We've heard many rumors surrounding your unexpected return,” said the Salarian Councilor. “Some of them are...unsettling.”

“We called this meeting so you could explain your actions, Shepard,” said the Asari Councilor. “We owe you that much. After all, you saved our lives in the battle against Saren and his geth.”

“You were reported dead, Commander,” said the Turian Councilor. “Then we heard you were working for Cerberus. Frankly, we were unsure which news was worse.”

“I'm here because the Collectors are abducting human colonists in the Terminus Systems. Worse, we think they're working for the Reapers.”

“The Terminus systems are beyond our jurisdiction!” The Turian Councilor impatiently reminded the Commander. “Your colonists knew this when they left Council Space.”

“You're missing the important part, Councilor,” said Anderson. “The Reapers are involved.”

“Ah, yes. 'Reapers.’” The Turian Councilor made air quotes. “The immortal race of sentient starships allegedly waiting in dark space. We have dismissed that claim.”

“Shepard, no one else encountered the hologram on Ilos that told you the truth about the

Reapers,” Anderson tried to explain. “Only you and your crew ever spoke with Sovereign. I believe you, but without evidence from another source, the others think Saren was behind the Geth attacks.”

“Saren wasn't the one commanding the geth. It was The Reaper, Sovereign. Go back to Ilos and talk to Vigil, or just look at what's left of Sovereign – it's obvious the technology is more advanced than ours.” Shepard hoped he sounded reasonable.

“The hologram on Ilos is no longer functional, and we have found nothing to suggest that Sovereign was not a geth creation,” said the Salarian Councilor. “The geth are capable of remarkable technological achievements. This is probably why Saren recruited them.”

“This 'Reaper' theory proves just how fragile your mental state is,” the Turian Councilor accused. “You have been manipulated – by Cerberus, and before them, by Saren.”

“Saren was an organic,” Shepard argued, still trying to keep his tone level. “The Geth would never accept him as their leader. They only followed him because he was Sovereign's agent.”

“Saren was a compelling and charismatic individual,” said the Asari Councilor. “He convinced the geth that the Reapers were real...just as he convinced you. It was part of his plan to attack the Citadel. The Reapers are just a myth. One you insist on perpetuating. We believe that you believe it, but that doesn't make it true.”

Shepard couldn't suppress a sigh. “I guess I'm on my own...again.”

“We are in a difficult position, Shepard,” said the Asari Councilor. “You are working for Cerberus – an avowed enemy of the Council. This is treason, a capital offense.”

“That's too far!” Anderson defended. “Shepard is a hero! If Councilor Udina were here, he wouldn't let this whitewash continue.”

“I kept Saren from conquering the Citadel,” said Sheprad. “I sacrificed human lives to save this Council.”

“Maybe there is a compromise,” offered the Asari Councilor. “Not a public acknowledgment, given your ties, but something to show peripheral support.”

The Turian Councilor agreed. “Shepard, if you keep a low profile and restrict your operations to the Terminus Systems, the Council is willing to offer you reinstatement as a Spectre.”

“What does that mean? Will I need to start filing reports?”

“That won't be necessary.” The Salarian Councilor held up his hands, sounding like he really didn't want that. “This is a show of good faith on our part. We cannot become involved in an investigation regarding the missing colonists in the Terminus Systems. But Spectre reinstatement shows our support of you personally.”

Shepard glanced at Anderson, who nodded. “Then...I accept your offer. It'll be good to have the Council on my side.”

“Good luck with your investigation, Shepard. We hope for a quick resolution...and a quick end to your relationship with Cerberus.”

“Well. That went better than I expected,” Anderson said as the holograms winked out. “You realize the Council's offer is just symbolic. They won't actually do anything.”

“Even if they don't help, I might as well stay on good terms.”

“True enough. Don't worry about the Council or the Alliance. I'll find some way to keep them off your back. Shouldn't be too hard, as long as you keep to the Terminus Systems.”

The door opened, and Councilor Udina strutted in, lost in thought. “Anderson, we need to talk about – Shepard! What are you doing here?”

“Not used to seeing ghosts, Udina?” Shepard grinned.

“I heard you were alive, of course. But I didn't expect to see you back on the Citadel.”

“I invited Shepard here to speak with the Council,” said Anderson. “We just finished our meeting.”

“You went to the Council behind my back? Do the words 'political shit-storm' mean anything to you?”

“I'm here because the fate of humanity is at stake,” said Shepard. “That's what you should care about.”

"All you soldiers think alike. You charge head first into a problem with no regard for the long-term consequences!" Udina turned to Anderson. "And going behind my back does nothing to help our position on the Council. Maybe it's time the Alliance found me a new advisor."

"Relax," said Shepard. "The Council reinstated my Spectre status. They're just happy I'm staying out in the Terminus Systems."

Udina put his hand to his chin and mused for a moment. "Yes...I could see how that arrangement works best for both sides." The Human Councilor turned to Anderson. "But you still had no right to do this without my knowledge. Shepard, I hope you'll go back to the Terminus Systems soon. It would be better for all concerned. Good day to both of you."

"So long, Councilor. Maybe we'll meet again sometime."

"I think it would be best if I kept my distance. Strictly for appearances, of course."

The human Councilor turned on his heel and exited the room.

"What an ass," muttered Anderson. "As bad as Udina was before, he's ten times worse now that he's part of the Council. Better him than me, though. And he's done a good job promoting Alliance interests with the Citadel."

"He hasn't changed," Shepard observed. "Will he find a way to get rid of you over this?"

"I should be so lucky. But once he cools off, he'll probably decide to keep me around. Besides, the Council won't have any official records of our meeting. If I get fired, people will ask questions. So he'll keep me on and just sweep this whole mess under the rug."

"You haven't forgotten how you got here. The rest of them, they're buried in procedure."

"Some of that's necessary. This place, the scale of it doesn't hit you even when you're standing in it." Anderson turned and walked over to the balcony overlooking the Presidium, leaning on the railing "But crack the files on interspecies relations – there's no end. We don't need an outside threat, Shepard. The balance here seems like it's fragile enough."

Shepard joined Anderson at the balcony. In the distance, he could just make out some flowers blooming near the Conduit. "How have the last couple of years treated you?"

"Serving as Udina's assistant isn't how I planned to spend my twilight years. Sometimes it feels like I'm just beating my head against a wall. Knowing the truth about Sovereign is brutal. It's nightmare stuff. I can't blame others for not wanting to believe it. But I know how important it is, so I keep trying. Fighting the good fight, right?"

"Forget Udina and the Council. Join my crew and help me stop the Collectors."

"I'm too old to go racing across the galaxy. Much as I complain, I've got an important job to do here. The front line – that's got to be yours."

The Presidium had that same peaceful feeling as before, like nothing bad was happening out in the galaxy. It felt relaxing, but wrong, too. "How long did it take to get this place back up to speed after the battle?"

"Still counting. The main areas of commerce and the most populated Wards are complete, but estimates for total restoration are sitting around five years. The Keepers always surprise us, though. It's like our repairs are annoying. We'll put up an ugly new bulkhead, and in a few days they've made it seamless. We never really thought of them as heavy lifters, and I have no idea where they get the resources. But we'd never get done without them."

Shepard wasn't very good at small talk, so he got back on topic. "I'm surprised no one can tell Sovereign isn't geth technology. Didn't they examine the wreckage?"

"We don't have much to look at. Pieces of it rained all over the station. It was chaos, with who knows how many species combing the Wards for their dead. We secured as much of it as we could, but

between the Keepers and a whole lot of unauthorized salvage, there's no way to account for even half of that thing. Another reason why they don't want to acknowledge what Sovereign was."

"Last I knew, we were still fighting holdouts."

"Here and there. But they're increasingly disorganized. It's long since stopped being called a war,

and more like cleanup. Not that you can ever discount them, but we haven't had serious casualties for months. A civilian ship will spot an enclave and we send in a squad to clear it. They're not quite the bogeymen they used to be."

"What happened to Operations Chief Williams after the Normandy was destroyed?"

"Second Lieutenant Williams is still with the Alliance, but she's working on a special mission. It's classified. I can't say any more, not while you're working with Cerberus. I'm sorry."

Shepard was happy to hear about Ash's promotion, but knew better than to press for more information. "I better go."

"Of course, Shepherd. I understand. I wish I could do more to help you, but if you ever want to talk,

I'll be here. Just do me a favor and be careful. You can't trust Cerberus."

The Commander turned to go, but Anderson remembered something. "Oh, there is one thing. A favor."

"Name it."

"The wreckage of the Normandy. We located it awhile back, but we haven't been able to get out to it. Politics. It's on Alchera, in the Terminus Systems. If you find yourself out there...there are still some missing crew. If you could retrieve their dog tags..."

"Consider it done."

CRIME IN PROGRESS

Shepard returned to Zakera Ward and checked in with Miranda. They were still loading supplies onto the Normandy, so the Commander decided to wander around some more. He remembered the gift shop that the groundskeeper had mentioned, and thought about the empty aquarium in his cabin on the Normandy. Wondering how much money he had in his account, he logged in via his omni-tool – and his eyes popped. Two years of interest added up.

A young asari addressed her new customer as he entered her shop. "Good day, sir. Welcome to the Citadel."

"These stores are owned by the Citadel, right?"

"That's correct. Citadel Souvenirs outlets are owned by the Council government. The profits generated by sales are used to maintain the station. We offer an assortment of decorations suitable for display in your personal quarters."

"Since these stores are owned by the Council, do government employees get a discount?"

"Yes, in fact. What is your position?"

"I'm a Spectre."

The shopkeeper nearly succeeded in hiding her sudden recognition, but she maintained her aloof attitude. "That is quite a prestigious role. It is my pleasure to extend the government employee discount to you, Spectre. Please feel free to check the updated prices."

The selection of fish wasn't all that varied, but Shepard bought the three types of fish available and arranged to have them delivered to the Normandy. He also noticed that the shop carried model ships, so he bought a few of those for the shelves in his cabin.

He exited the gift shop to continue his perambulating, when he came across Tali ordering some ramen. Shepard was about to exchange hellos, when they were interrupted by a loud argument across the hall between a C-Sec officer, a quarian, and a volus.

"This clanless is a thief, and I want her arrested," screamed the squat volus in his drab burgandy pressure suit.

"Wha –? I was just walking by!" The quarian's brown enviro-suit was worn, and she sounded young, if tired.

Shepard decided to see if he could once again flex his Spectre authority by lending his assistance.

The male C-Sec officer noticed Tali and Shepard approaching and tried to stop them. "I'm sorry, I'm trying to take a statement here."

"There's nothing to talk about!" The volus was adamant. "She stole my credit chit. Arrest her!"

"I did not! Just because I'm a quarian –"

"I need you to stop, and take a deep breath."

"You're...mocking...me...Earth-clan! Just because the Vol-clan need –"

"It was a poor choice of words, sir. I apologize."

"You say you're falsely accused?" Shepard butted in and addressed the young quarian.

"I was walking to the used ship dealer when he barged into me outside the Sirta Foundation. He didn't stop or say he was sorry. A minute later, he runs up with C-Sec and accuses me of stealing his damn credit chit."

"Do you spend a lot of time at the used ship dealer?"

"Yeah. They've got a lot of nice models. I'd like to buy one and take it back to the Fleet, but..."

"Your Pilgrimage isn't going so well, is it?" Tali asked sympathetically.

"No. I – I came here thinking there'd be a lot of work. EVA stuff. Salvage. Fixing all the damage the geth attack caused. Everywhere I went to apply, signs said 'Not hiring quarians.' And the other people would give me mean looks."

The C-Sec officer frowned impatiently, but Shepard pressed on. "You ran into each other outside the Sirta Foundation. Is it possible the chit fell out of his pocket there?"

"I guess...sure. All I know is I didn't take it."

Shepard turned to the volus. "You say she stole your credit chit?"

"She must have. When I left the Sirta Foundation store, she ran right into me."

"How does running into you mean she stole your credit chit?"

"That's how pickpockets work. They bump into you and use that as a cover for rifling your pockets. You can't turn your back on these clanless quarians. Thieves, all of them."

Tali was incensed. "Quarians are only forced to steal when people like you won't let them have real jobs."

"And to think my taxes pay to support you here. Go back to your fleet, clanless."

"I am clan Zorah, crew of the starship Neema. And you are an idiot."

Shepard placed a hand on Tali's shoulder. "It's not worth it."

"My brain agrees with you," said Tali as she backed off. "My gut says I should jack his suit's olfactory filters so that everything smells like refuse."

Shepard covered his laugh with a cough as he turned back to the volus. "Are you sure you didn't leave your chit at the Sirta Foundation?"

"Of course not! You think I'd make a mistake like that? I didn't even buy anything there. The chit stayed in my pocket."

"Do you know who's telling the truth?" Shepard asked the C-Sec officer.

The patrolman seemed relieved to finally be involved in the conversation. "My omni-tool can tell the quarian doesn't have a chit on her. But she could have stashed it to recover later. You know what quarians are like. And she's definitely a vagrant. I'll run her in and see what Bailey wants to do with her."

"She's not a vagrant," Tali said, her ire rising again. "She's on Pilgrimage. It's a tradition in which _"

"Look," said the officer. "You can take your traditions and cram them. Every time a quarian shows up here, it's trouble."

Shepard held up a hand and started leading Tali away. "I'll see if I can find out what happened."

"Sir, this is a C-Sec matter. We'll do all we –"

"Bah!" The volus accuser scoffed.

"All we can to resolve this. We don't need civilian help. If you do happen to find the chit, please let one of our officers know."

Tali trailed Shepard as he visited a couple of shops. She studied her noodle cup, then tossed it disgustingly into a garbage can, her appetite lost. Shepard started with Sirta, but the chit wasn't there.

The tech shop across the way was run by an enthusiastic salarian.

"Welcome to Saronis Applications, Can I interest you – Ah! Shepard!"

"Do I know you?"

"No, but I know you. Even a senile hanar would remember the human who fought off the geth! I thought you were dead?"

"Yeah, I've been getting that a lot. By the way, a volus was in here not too long ago. Did he drop a credit chit?"

"Oh! Yes. He bought some environmental system drivers, then left without his chit. I didn't notice he'd left until he was already gone. If you see him, tell him I have it here behind the counter."

"Thanks. He'll be glad to hear that."

"I'll be here if you need anything."

Shepard returned to the C-Sec officer, who was just wrapping up the statements he'd taken.

"I felt her hand go into my pocket. When I checked, my credit chit was gone!"

"I didn't even touch you!"

Shepard felt like he'd arrived just in time. "You forgot your credit chit at Saronis Applications. The clerk is holding it for you."

"Oh....Well...the quarian could have stolen it."

"I'll close this event report, but I'll be watching you. Get a permanent residence or I'll run you in for vagrancy."

Shepard had had enough. "Are you two serious?"

"What?" said the volus, clearly confused.

"You falsely accuse this girl of stealing from you. All you have to say now is that she 'could have' stolen it?" Shepard gave the volus a gentle shove.

"Now just a min –"

"And you." Shepard poked a finger in the C-Sec officer's chest. "She gets harassed and insulted by this guy, and you throw in a threat to arrest her for vagrancy?"

"How about if I run you in for obstruction of justice?"

"You think you're going to 'run in' a Spectre?" Shepard backed off and waved dismissively. "I think both of you should get out of here."

"Son of a..."

Both the patrolman and the volus scurried away.

"Thank you," the young quarian thanked Shepard. "I – I wish I could give you something more than words."

"What the hell was that C-Sec guy's problem? He had no evidence that you did anything wrong." Shepard sighed, letting it go.

"I don't know. Everyone's been like that since I got here."

"The Citadel has never been tolerant of quarians on Pilgrimage," said Tali, sadly. "The geth attack two years ago must have made it worse."

"Can you take care of yourself from here?" Shepard asked.

"I guess. I mean, most nights I eat nutrient paste in a turian shelter, but I'm surviving. Thank you."

"Good luck, Lia'Vael," Tali said.

Tali thanked Shepard for the kind deed he'd done.

FALSE POSITIVES

On his way back to the Normandy, Shepard overheard a pair of asari, seated across from the security checkpoint.

"I can't believe these humans," one said to the other. "No fly lists! What have they turned this place into?"

"Ever since the Council let the humans join it's gotten worse and worse here. Security screening, my natural blue ass! How long are we supposed to be stuck here? They'd have verified our identities by now on Thessia. They promised we'd have clearance! This is unbelievable!"

Curious, Shepard approached. "I overheard you talking. Have a problem?"

"It's a private matter."

"Give me a chance. I might be able to help."

"I don't see why you would."

"Oh, is that why you're sitting here in public, whining loud enough for anyone walking by to overhear?" The Commander tried to keep his tone light, but wasn't sure he'd succeeded.

"You want to know? Since your kind gained a seat on the Council, they've taken over C-Sec Customs. There are hundreds of new security checks and travel restrictions. We've been flagged as a potential risk for geth infiltration. They won't let us board a ship back to asari space."

"It seems I offended you. That wasn't my intention."

"Your attitude offends me. The smugness, the arrogance...all humans are like that. C-Sec officers are everywhere for our protection, and you swagger up to me, thump your chest, and tell me that only a human can solve my problems. Huh! Screw you!"

"You know things are bad when the asari are accusing us of arrogance."

"Oh, please."

Shepard winced as he realized he'd said the quiet part out loud. Oops. "Look, miss. I personally did not post guards on every street corner. If you want help, I'll try to provide it. Otherwise I'll go away. What do you have to lose by talking to me?"

"Fine." Both of the asari folded their arms.

"Why would they consider you a risk? You're obviously not geth."

"I don't know. They wouldn't tell us. We got on a list somewhere for some reason and they won't tell us anything because it's classified."

"Who won't let you board a ship?"

"I don't know who made the decision. Some pencil pusher at the shuttle port told us. The one outside the C-Sec station."

"I'll see if I can get it sorted out."

"I'm not holding my breath."

Shepard went and stood in line at the Customs desk. His turn came surprisingly quickly.

"Can I help you?" A human woman with drab brown hair said in a drab tone of voice.

"Ma'am, I talked to a couple of asari. They say Customs won't let them leave the station, but they weren't told why. Can you help me out?"

"I'm sorry sir, but all matters related to station security are classified. We can't risk geth infiltration. Why someone is on a watch list might compromise the safety of C-Sec undercover agents."

"Hypothetically speaking, what would clear them to go?"

"I don't know. There's no process in place to get people off the watch list. There's a bunch of ways to get them on though. Emily Wong did an exposé about it last month. The only way she got a blacklisted person through the system was with a forged ID. Even then it only worked once."

"Did you talk with them? Did they seem like geth agents to you?"

"Well no, but you can never be sure."

"Look, miss. I've fought hundreds of geth. I can assure you that those two aren't geth infiltrators. The lack of flashlight heads was kind of a giveaway."

"I'm not saying it makes any sense. Those are the rules I have to enforce. I can't get them cleared, but I can flag the case file for review. That will allow them to travel in the meantime."

"Lady I've fought geth back and forth across the galaxy. If geth want to infiltrate the Citadel, they're not going to send synthetic bodies to do it. They're going to transmit a virus into your damn computer." "I don't make the rules, and I can't get the asari cleared. Best I can do is flag the case for review."

"Look, my name's Shepard. I'm a Spectre. I checked them out personally, and I'm confident that they're safe to travel. I want them removed from your watch list."

"I'll have to confirm your identity..." The Customs officer spent a moment typing into her

console, then her eyes went wide, though her tone didn't change. "Well, all right then. I'll have their names removed per your authority, Spectre. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Shepard thanked the officer for her time, then returned to the pair of asari travelers. "Good news. I convinced them to let you go."

"You what? How did you do that?"

"When a Spectre vouches for someone, C-Sec listens."

"You're a Spectre? I heard the humans were nominating many of their kind, but I didn't know that."

"I was a Spectre before we got a seat on the Council."

"Then you must be Shepard! I never would have guessed. It's an honor to meet you. Please forgive my earlier rudeness."

"I know some people. Called in favors. It's no big deal."

"You must be an emissary of the Goddess in all her forms! Thank you!"

"How unexpected! We should get ready to leave. There should be another ship heading to Thessia tomorrow. Huh. Well, I guess some humans are all right. I suppose not every human can be paranoid. Now if only the humans would stop asking me to table dance."

-----Interlude-----

On the way to Alchera, Shepard had some time to kill, so he decided it was time to get to know his crew. As he stepped off the elevator on the CIC Deck, he found Kelly tapping away at her console.

"So, any thoughts on our master thief?" Shepard asked.

"That Kasumi is an interesting addition to the crew. I can see why she's good at her work. She never reveals anything meaningful about herself. It's all on the surface. It'll be a challenge getting to know who she really is."

"Well, I intend to try."

"By the way, Shepard, I noticed the delivery of fish to your cabin. I could feed them for you while you're away on missions, if you like."

The yeoman seemed to need a hobby, so Shepard agreed. "That would be nice, Kelly. Oh, I forgot to pick up fish food."

"That's okay. I'm sure Rupert will have something."

Shepard had his doubts, given the mess sergeant's cooking, but he really had nothing to lose. He strolled up to the cockpit to check on his pilot.

"How are you getting along with EDI?"

"Mister Moreau does not trust me," the AI chimed in. "It offends him that I am installed aboard 'his ship's' computers."

"Yeah, the last Normandy did just fine without an AI reminding me 'the airlock is ajar.'"

Shepard shrugged. "Well, there isn't anything we can do about it. Just deal with it."

"Yeah, well, it still sucks."

"Ever think about the old Normandy and the trouble we got up to?"

"Yeah, those seem like the good old days now, but come on. It was hell at the time. Geth, Saren, Sovereign. And then we got dumped. We're stuck in a weird place, sure, but back then it wasn't all sunshine and bunnies."

"What happened to the rest of the old crew? I heard most survived."

"Most did. Pressly didn't. The rest of us just sort of drifted apart. The Alliance didn't care. I don't think they liked all the non-humans in your crew. We were your team, Commander. With the Normandy destroyed and you gone, there wasn't much keeping us together."

"How's the ship performing?"

"I really want a chance to put the Normandy through her paces. I just have to trim up the drive

output and it'll be like we never lost her.”

“Safety standards advise against manipulating drive settings while engines are powered and in use, Mister Moreau,” EDI chided.

“Commander, can we shut this thing off? I don't need it in my day-to-day.”

“I'm no fan either, but we're stuck with it.”

“Until I find a soldering gun. There's got to be some wires I can cross to make it hurt.”

“No sabotage. Understood?”

“Yeah, yeah. Don't break the boss' toys.”

Next stop was Jacob, who was in his usual spot in the armory. “Commander. Can I help you with something?”

“I understand you made quite an impact after you left the Alliance.”

“Miranda and I stopped a batarian plan to release a biological agent on the Citadel. That's when I first met her. It took us out to the Nemian Abyss and back. We didn't save the Citadel like you, but what's the saying? A good deed's like pissing yourself in dark pants? Warm feeling but no one notices. The whole thing was hushed, like they're good at doing. But I know what I did and I'm proud of it.”

“Strange that it wasn't bigger news.”

“The real work doesn't get publicized. You know that. They say it's better that people don't know how fragile the system is or how close the bad guys can get. So it never happened. Like you and the Reaper. And that's why I'm here.

“Thoughts on our progress?”

“Have to say, you run this ship tight. And we're getting things done. We keep on track, and maybe we'll figure this out.”

“I hope so.”

“I'm not looking forward to the debrief if it all goes to hell.”

“What led you to Cerberus?”

“The Alliance sidelined me after Eden Prime. Ended up on that job I mentioned with Miranda. Cerberus treated it like an audition. And here I am.”

“You don't seem like a 'results at all costs' kind of guy. Cerberus' history doesn't bother you?”

“The Alliance is all politics. Somebody has to take down the bad people. Cerberus keeps that line. I'm on their side.”

“You look like you came through no worse for wear.”

“If nothing else, the Alliance trains their people well. Once you live that life, you can't sit around getting fat. You know how it goes. Although I bet Cerberus put you back together better than ever. Get any upgrades?”

“I'm glad enough they restored me to stock.”

“Couldn't hurt to keep some spare parts handy though. I hear that your job isn't getting any safer. You know, I used to wonder what the big deal with you was, but now that we're in deep, I'm glad it's not me in the spotlight.

“I'm glad you took a stand. I respect that.”

I couldn't go back to the Alliance, not after the cover-up. They did the same to you. General public never knew you were dead, or heard the real story of the Citadel. Did you know they used you on recruitment ads? You were the human ideal for like six months. Then they replaced you with a composite image they invented. Guess you didn't focus test right. You were actually the Alliance poster boy, and they still dumped you.”

“I don't like it, but I can see benefit in keeping some things from the public.”

“Maybe. And Cerberus isn't exactly transparent, either. Where's an honest soldier go, Shepard?”

“Right here?”

“I guess so. Glad I'm not in your chair, though. Gonna be a rough ride.”

Shepard took a deep breath, then let it out. "There's no hiding, Jacob. Not for any of us."

"Don't worry. This is exactly what I signed on for. If that's all, Commander, I'll get back to my duties. There's a lot to get ready."

Mordin was busy tinkering with an unrecognizable contraption in his lab. He didn't look up as the Commander entered, but struck up a conversation anyway.

"Shepard. How can I help?"

"Is the lab working well for you?"

"Quite satisfactory. Found a few surveillance bugs. Destroyed most of them. Returned expensive one to Miranda. Nothing unexpected. Just need more samples. More Collector data. Tissue samples. Anything you can get, I can use. Find new tech."

"Have you got a minute to talk?"

"Of course. Plague on Omega dealt with. Plenty of time to analyze Collector intelligence. Impressive laboratory setup. Missed working for operations with a budget. AI in particular very helpful. Best setup I've seen since work with Special Tasks Group."

"It must have been frustrating working on Omega with such a limited facility."

"No! Loved it! Limited facility presents challenge. Save greatest number of people using limited resources. Security threats, gangs, mercenary groups add additional difficulty. Quite enjoyable. Plague stretched abilities to limit. Couldn't have asked for more. Also enjoy saving people, of course. Helping the helpless, greater good. All that, too. Nice retirement after STG work complete."

"Is your assistant Daniel settling in all right?"

"Quite well. Safe and secure. Neighborhood mostly quiet with plague gone. Left him the security mechs just in case. Can't be too careful. Also, tired of mechs. Noisy. Never used them at STG." Mordin sniffed.

"Tell me more about the Salarian Special Tasks Group."

"Respected organization. Clandestine. Handles difficult assignments with limited oversight. Recon, analysis, occasional wet work. Identify problems, have neutralization options ready should need arise. Model for Council Spectres based on Special Tasks Group. Very similar."

"Similar in what way?"

"Salarians lack numbers, brute strength, military prowess. Have to rely upon stealth, intelligence. Agents trusted, given wide operative freedom. Spectres similar. Given goal, told to accomplish. Better funded, of course. Didn't have to buy our own weapons."

"You said you were in the Special Tasks Group. What kind of research were you doing?"

"Not simply research. Several recon missions, covert, high-risk. Served under young Captain named Kirrahe. Studied Krogan Genophage. Took water, tissue, samples from krogan colonies."

"I worked with an STG Captain named Kirrahe. His team helped me destroy Saren's cloning facility on Virmire."

"Heard he was part of that! Jury-rigged explosive? Always got job done with limited resources. Good captain. Bit of a cloaca, though. Loved his speeches. 'Hold. The. Line!' Personally prefer to get job done and go home. Probably military bravado. Jargon. Chest pounding...uh, no offense."

"What can you tell me about the genophage?"

"Bioweapon designed by salarian science team. Deployed by turians against krogans to end Krogan Rebellions more than a thousand years ago. Affects every cell of krogan body. Commonly and incorrectly considered a sterility plague. Actually adjusts viable fertility rates to compensate for high krogan birth rate. Stabilizes to pre-industrial population growth levels."

"Why would STG study the genophage?"

"Krogan rebellions bloody, dangerous. Nearly as bad as rachni attacks. All species evolve, adapt, mutate. If genophage weakens, need to be prepared."

"What was the STG preparing?"

"Military schematics for likely krogan population growth. Political scenarios for attack points. Genophage reduced krogan numbers. Species aggression unchecked. Population explosion would be

disastrous. STG helped check Krogan Rebellions. Needed to be ready to do the same. Simple recon. Nothing to worry about.”

“Nice talking with you Mordin.”

“Should get back to work. Need to study. So much data. Here if you need me.”

Down on the Crew Deck, Kasumi had set herself up in the port observation lounge. She claimed to travel light, but she'd brought quite a few mementos along.

“Interesting choice of quarters,” Shepard observed.

“I usually travel hidden away in cargo bays. It's nice to be able to look out a window for a change.”

“Settling in okay?”

“I'm not really sure what to do with myself. Not much call for thievery aboard a Cerberus ship.”

Shepard looked around at the items she'd chosen to display, and she gave him a description of each. First was a black-and-white oil-on-canvas that looked an awful lot like the trenches on Ilos. “That painting has a special place in my heart. An art collector hired me to steal it. When I got there, the painting was gone. On the way out I saw it being hauled off by another thief. I chased him down, tackled him, and took the painting. That's how Keiji and I met. We never did turn it into our employers.”

On the desk was a single preserved rose. “The red rose. That used to be my calling card when I first started out. In place of whatever I took, I left a single red rose. It wasn't until I met Keiji that I realized how silly it was. He had a way of making you realize when you were just being sentimental.”

Next to the rose was a bust of someone Shepard didn't recognize. Kasumi seemed to think the individual was known, though. “I stole that on a dare, believe it or not. There was a big museum show coming to Ilium. Artifacts from Earth going on tour. Very high security. Keiji dared me to steal this, so I broke in, hacked the security, put a few guards to sleep, and replaced the piece with a worthless duplicate. They never knew the difference. My first museum job. Nowhere near the last.”

Modern art wasn't to Shepard's taste, but his eye was drawn to a strangely fascinating watercolor. Swirling reds and yellows surrounded a pair of round shapes, arranged vertically. “That's my favorite piece. Painted for me by a child prodigy from Elysium. She was the cutest thing. She was kidnapped by slavers who hoped to sell her on Omega. I wasn't about to let that happen. I set up deal as a buyer's rep to get a special tour of the slaver's vessel. Once aboard, I freed the girl and smuggled her off the ship. She painted that for me on the way home. I'll never forget how it felt to watch her work.”

Shepard looked quizzically at a shelf of actual paper books. “Don't laugh. I like those books. Romance novels, crime novels, the classics. There's something about the feel of actual paper in your hands, their musty smell. It's relaxing. Keiji used to find books for me while on a job. Some of these are more valuable than the objects he was hired to steal.”

“How's the crew treating you?” Shepard asked.

“Mess Sergeant Gardner might just be an evil genius. Emphasis on the evil. People think he's a bad cook on purpose, like he's trying to teach them a lesson. I think his ramen is okay, but it's really hard to ruin ramen.”

Shepard excused himself, then knocked on the door to Life Support. Thane answered with an invitation to enter.

“Do you need something?” the drell assassin asked by way of greeting.

“Have a few minutes to talk?”

“Certainly. We haven't had a chance since I joined.”

Thane indicated a chair on the opposite side of the table where he was sitting. Shepard accepted.

“When we met, you said you were dying.”

“Yes. I thought you'd want to know more. You don't have to worry about the rest of the crew. My illness is not communicable, even to other drell. It's called Kepral's Syndrome.”

“What exactly is the problem?”

“My people are native to an arid world. Most of us now live on Kahje, the hanar homeworld. It's very humid, and rains every day. Our lungs can't deal with the moisture. Over time, the tissue loses its ability to absorb oxygen. It becomes harder to breathe. Eventually, we suffocate.”

“Can't they do something about that?”

“The hanar have funded a genetic engineering program. They should be able to adapt us. The project has only been running for a few years. I don't believe my body will still draw breath by the time it bears fruit.”

“Then don't live on Kahje. Or use breathers.”

“Drell have a close relationship with the hanar. We rely on each other. The best we can do is keep our homes very dry inside.”

“Are you going to be all right until the end of the mission?”

“I should be fine for another eight to twelve months. The more time I spend in humid environments, the faster it progresses. I think it's safe to say that by the time my body is incapacitated, we'll be victorious, or dead. Either way, I won't be a burden to you.”

“You don't act like a dying man.”

“You have the advantage there, Shepard. You've already died. Perhaps later you can give me some suggestions. I can do nothing to alter my fate. One advantage of my training is that I've always, to some degree, considered myself dead.”

“Is there anything we can do here? Normandy has a state-of-the-art medical bay.”

“No, thank you. It's being attended to. If the finest medical minds among the Hanar Illuminated Primacy can't solve the problem, I doubt for ship's medic could. Thank you for your concern. Trust me, this won't affect my performance. “

Samara interrupted her meditations and greeted Shepard as he entered the starboard observation lounge.

“How are you?” Shepard asked.

“I've spent much of the last four hundred years on my own; it is nice to have a colleague to chat with. I may be rusty at it, however. If you are patient, I would love to talk.”

“How much do you know about our mission?”

“I know that I've sworn an oath to follow you, and that you seek to destroy the Collectors. That is enough for me.”

“You don't want to know why the Collectors need to be fought?”

“When you live by a code that compels you to harsh action, you learn the dangers of curiosity. If I must kill a man because he has done wrong, do I really wish to know that he is a devoted father?”

Shepard nodded his agreement, then chose another topic. “I'd like to hear more about the criminal you were chasing in Nos Astra.”

Samara hesitated for a moment. “I hope you will understand if I wish to avoid this topic. It is deeply tied to my code and beliefs. You might say it is personal.”

“Will it impact the mission?”

“It will not.”

“Okay. I can respect that. So, what do you think of Cerberus?”

“I've heard rumors, but learned long ago to form my own impressions. There is too much room for interpretation in the opinions of others.”

“Why were you willing to work for Cerberus when you didn't have first-hand knowledge?”

“I work for you, Shepard. Our methods may be different, but our goals are not.”

“Fair enough.” Shepard shared a quiet moment with Samara, just looking out the window at stars streaking by before asking his next question. “I'm interested in hearing more about asari Justicars.”

“We hold a unique place in asari culture. Justicars are from another era. Young asari grow up

watching vids about our adventures. Pure fiction, of course. Some asari are uncomfortable with us, but so few Justicars exist that most have never met one. There are only a few Justicars. Few wish to make the sacrifices necessary to become one of us, and the training has a high casualty rate. It is a life of constant danger. Throughout the entire galaxy there are only a handful of us at any time.”

“That sounds rough. Why would anyone want to be a Justicar?”

“It is a deeply personal matter. Sometimes the most brutal path is the only honest one.”

“This Code of the Justicar seems central to your life.”

“It is five thousand sutras and covers every situation one can encounter. I have memorized every word. There is only the code.”

“Sometimes justice calls for mercy.”

“It does not exist to bring about spiritual enlightenment. Its purpose is to punish the wicked and protect the innocent.”

“The asari I've spoken to seem conflicted about Justicars.”

“In this age people see shades of grey everywhere. The code of the Justicar is black and white. I might seem a hero to many, but I would kill all of them if I had to.

“What does your code say about killing?”

“I am compelled to kill the wicked. If a Justicar is involved, peaceful solutions are long past.”

“You make killing sounds so casual.”

“I remember each being I have slain. They are always in my thoughts.”

“What role do you think Justicars have in asari society?”

“I would say that the closest human equivalent is a knight errant in your medieval lore, perhaps mixed with a bit of samurai.”

“You know about knights errant and samurai?”

“When I knew I must leave asari space again, I studied the history and morals of new species. When I was a maiden wandering the galaxy, humans had not yet arrived.”

“What did your studies tell you about us?”

“You are more individualistic than any other species I have encountered. If three humans are in a room, there will be six opinions. I like your species. I am curious to see what you will do.”

“I should go. I have more rounds to complete.”

“It has been my pleasure, Commander. I am glad we spoke.”

Garrus had set up a cot in the forward battery. He seemed to be in the middle of tinkering with the Normandy's main guns, but seemed happy to talk.

“Have you got a minute?”

“Sure. Just checking the weapon systems. You can never be too careful. I thought I'd seen every weapon in the galaxy in our fight against Saren. Mercenary work showed me otherwise. And now Cerberus rebuilds the Normandy, with a few upgrades to boot. I wish we joined up with them sooner.”

“Have the Cerberus crewman given you any trouble?” Shepard asked.

“I think being part of the team that took down Saren got me some points. Everyone I've talked to was polite, anyway. Don't worry commander, we're all working together.”

“You sure you're okay working with Cerberus?”

“I can't exactly doubt your judgment. Not after I got my own squad killed.”

“How'd you end up on Omega, anyway?”

“I went back to C-Sec after the Normandy was destroyed, but with all the rebuilding at the Citadel, there was too much chaos for me to really help. Omega was filled with criminals nobody else could touch, and there was no red tape to slow me down. It was a perfect fit. People there needed someone to believe in, someone to stand up to the local thugs.”

“That explains how you started. How'd you end up with a squad?”

“Not too different from how you formed your squad to fight Saren, actually. You prove that you get things done, and people join up. Mercs who wanted to atone. Security consultants tired of

playing by

the rules. I gave them hope. And now they're dead. Shows what I know." If a turian's shoulders could slump, Garrus's would have.

"Tell me about your squad."

"There were twelve of us, including me. Former military operatives, C-Sec agents, the usual. Had a salarian explosives expert. Pretty sure he'd spent time in the Special Tasks Group. My tech expert was a batarian, believe it or not. Not the friendliest guy, but he could hack any system ever built."

"What did your merc squad do? I get the impression you weren't available for hire."

"You saw Omega – it was full of thugs kicking the helpless. I formed my team to kick back. We weren't mercenaries. At least, nobody was paying us. We made money by taking down slavers, pirates, or gangs that went too far."

"Doesn't sound like you made any friends with the gangs."

"I got three separate merc bands to work together to take me down. My manager at C-Sec would be impressed. It was simple. We'd hit their shipments, disrupt activities, Get under their skin. Make them angry. They'd come charging right into our well-prepared kill zone. Crossfire and snipers. Clean and surgical. They never stood a chance."

"That sounds like you were just another gang."

"Then I'm saying it wrong. We didn't shake anyone down. No civilian casualties. That was our rule. Every member of my team had lost someone to Omega's gangs. We weren't out to get rich. We were out to make those bastards think twice before murdering someone in the street."

"A noble goal. How did those mercenary gangs take down your team?"

"It was my own damn fault. One of my people betrayed me. A turian named Sidonis. He drew me away just before the mercs attacked my squad, then he disappeared. Everyone except me is dead because of him. And because I didn't see it coming."

"I'm not sure I understand. What happened, exactly?"

"Sidonis asked for my help on a job. When I got to the meeting point, nobody was there. By the time I got back to our hideout, the mercs had killed all but two of my squad. And they didn't last long."

"Are you sure it was a betrayal? Maybe they took Sidonis out first."

"No, I put out feelers with some old contacts. He booked transport off Omega just before the attack. He also cleared out his private accounts before he left. He sold me out and ran."

"Do you know where Sidonis is now?"

"No. His trail vanishes after he leaves Omega. But I'll keep hunting. I lost my whole team except for Sidonis. One day I'll find him...and correct that." Garrus sighed and shook his head. "Thanks for coming by, Shepard. I've got some things to take care of."

Shepard check in with his XO in her quarters. "Anything I should know regarding the Normandy?"

"The crew's working well, and the ship appears to be performing to specifications." Miranda sounded unusually upbeat as she interrupted her typing.

"What exactly are your duties, aside from keeping an eye on me?"

"I'm the Illusive Man's agent. You're his most important asset. My job is to make sure you succeed. Aside from that...I send regular reports to the Illusive Man, updating our status."

"What are you working on there?"

"I'm just finishing an operation report. I'm impressed, Shepard. So far things have gone exceptionally well. As Cerberus operations go, this is one of the best I've been a part of."

"Maybe that's because this isn't a Cerberus operation."

"Not to you, maybe. But I report directly to the Illusive Man. And I'm here because he wants me to be. Cerberus gave you a second chance, Commander. Maybe you should do the same for us."

"Cerberus obviously has your loyalty. How did you get involved with them?"

"Hmm...I suppose you deserve to know." Miranda invited Shepard to take a seat, which he did.

“Do you remember when I told you how I was genetically altered? Well, that wasn't my choice. My father...created me. He's a very influential man, and extremely controlling. He didn't want a daughter – he wanted a dynasty. I ran away as soon as I was old and brave enough. I went to Cerberus because I knew they could protect me.”

“How angry was he?”

“Shots were fired.”

Shepard blinked. He'd heard of family drama, but that seemed extreme. “You seem capable of defending yourself. Why did you need Cerberus?”

“My father invested a great deal in his dynasty. It wasn't a matter of just leaving. I knew he would continue to pursue his...investments.”

“I assume that Cerberus approves of your enhanced abilities?”

“Of course. Cerberus fully endorses anything that advances the cause of humanity...genetic alterations included. But unlike my father and his own selfish reasons, Cerberus and the Illusive Man believe in a greater good. They see the bigger picture...and I feel like I have a purpose here.”

“Who exactly is your father?”

“A businessman. But a very wealthy one. It's ironic. My father believed deeply in a human-positive agenda. He donated generously to Cerberus...before I joined them. That's how I first heard about Cerberus – through my father's connections.”

“You've told me a lot about your father. What happened to your mother?”

“I never had one. Most of my genetic material is based on my father's tissue. His Y chromosome was altered with an amalgamation of desired traits from various sources. How arrogant can you be? The man is completely ego-maniacal. Just another reason I had to get away from him.”

“You talk about yourself like you're just a...tool to be used. By your father, by Cerberus.”

“Maybe. I like to know where I fit in the world. It helps me find meaning in how I was created.”

“You are who you are, Miranda. You don't need to make excuses for it.”

“That's easy for you to say. We've both been engineered for greatness, Shepard. The difference is, you were great before we rebuilt you...I'm great because of it.”

“Your spirit and personality are what make you great. It's what makes anyone great.”

“That's kind of you...I'm not sure I believe you, but thanks for saying it.”

“Thanks for your time, Miranda. I'll talk to you later.”

“Any time, Commander.”

Shepard wasn't really a fan of mercenaries, but in a way he was one now. He checked in on Zaeed, who'd made quarters for himself in the port storage room on the Engineering Deck. The heavily-scarred man seemed lost in thought

“I was trying to remember how many Cerberus operatives I've killed. Lost track around fifty.

“Yeah, I've wiped out more than my fair share of cells.”

“Guess your Illusive Man's big on forgiveness.”

“I guess so.” Shepard noticed a beat-up assault rifle on a makeshift weapons bench. “That gun looks like it's seen better days. We can get you new –”

“Hey, don't touch. That rifle is older than you are. I call her Jesse. That's my lucky charm. More men have been killed with that gun than died in the Skyllian Blitz. The day I laid her to rest was the saddest day of my life. I'd give up every weapon I own for one more mission with that shitty old rifle.”

Shepard blinked at that. What kind of eccentric had TIM hired for his squad? He looked around and noticed a few other souvenirs.

A battered red krogan helmet sat as if tossed atop some crates. “Beauty, isn't it? Pried that off the krogan warlord Gezark. Used to run the Blood Pack out of Omega about 17 years ago. Wasn't even a job. The guy just thought he'd hijack a freighter I was hitchhiking on. Big mistake. I goaded Gezark into one-on-one combat. Took out his legs, grabbed his gun, and killed every Blood Pack bastard in the room. That was the most beaten krogan I've ever seen. Kept the helmet to remind me

of that pained expression.”

Equally casually unpacked was a model of a turian ship. “Oh, yeah. That's a model of the Verrican. Turian frigate. Hell of a ship. I led a mission to bring that thing down from the inside with just five men and whatever guns we could bring. No chance of success, but we did it. Everyone died but me, so I made out like a bandit. My first impossible mission as an independent contractor. There's been many since but nothing so goddamn sweet as watching that turian warship crash planetside. I should let you go. Talk more later, Shepherd.”

Okay, so the man was eccentric, but if any of his stories were true, he was a force to be reckoned with. Shepard hoped he played well with others. Time would tell.

Grunt had settled into the starboard storage room. The only decoration was the pod he'd come in. The newborn krogan was examining a brand new set of silver armor when Shepard entered.

“Shepard. Need something?”

“Just checking in. Making sure you're acclimatizing.”

Grunt dropped the armor and stomped over to the window overlooking the cargo hold. On second thought, 'stomped' was unfair. The deck metal reverberated under the krogan's heavy steps. “The hold is too open. Not enough cover. Armor is limited. Warlord Granth would target here to scatter heavy cargo, then focus on engines. That's what tank imprints show about human ships, anyway. It's how I learned from the tank – old pictures where memory is. Like holding a book for a child. Just 'remember this,' picture after picture. No help with finding a reason to care.”

“Wat did Okeer want you feel about this stuff?”

“Hate. But the pictures, the aliens in them, they don't do anything. I see blood, craters. But so what? My guts were grown from a thousand more worthy.”

“You're the perfect krogan. Live up to that.”

“I was built to be the strongest. But...maybe weak moments inspire? That seems strange. I need to think, but I am still strong. Say the word, and your enemies die. That's enough for you.”

Shepard was surprised. Was this krogan a warrior or a philosopher? He vaguely remembered some ancient human philosopher who advocated physical fitness as well as mental. Perhaps krogan were similar. “Any other human info floating around in there?”

“Less than a finger deep to sever your spine. You're soft. Salarians, asari, all soft. Quarians not so much. Turians, you have to work the blade, I guess. Don't see much point to it though. Heh. 'Much point.' Never mind.”

Shepard pinched the bridge of his nose briefly before continuing. “Something must move you. You're as genetically krogan as you can get.”

“I see suffering, the dead, and I think 'weak.' I'm supposed to be strong. My guts were grown from thousands more worthy. The dead were weak. If they were strong, I wouldn't be needed. I don't know why Okeer started teaching...When he turned on the tank the first time, I screamed. Weak. Pitiful.”

“So you started small, but you became what you are. Not everyone gets that chance.”

“I'm built for strength but didn't earn it. I just am. Those dead were strong enough to try, even if they lost. 'The perfect krogan.' ...Ignoring what made me. No strength in that. I'll take another look at what happened to the krogan. Find a reason to care about.”

“What are your thoughts about our mission?”

“I fight. Doesn't matter who for.”

“Did Okeer give you any imprints about the Collectors?”

Grunt scratched his headplate. “I see...blurry ships...guesswork about strength. Nothing to help pick a weak spot and tear. Okeer spent all his time on old hatreds. Whatever he had, it was used up when he made me.”

“What do you think about the crew?”

“Good bunch if they stay out of my way. Dead bunch if they don't. Train them good if you want to take on Collectors. Some of these aliens are too smooth.”

“Good talking to you, Gunt.”

“Shepard.”

Jack was down in the dank under-deck below engineering, sitting on her cot, studying a datapad.

“Hey.” The tattooed lady looked up, uncertain at the interruption.

“What do you think of Miranda and Jacob?”

“Jacob doesn't know who he is, but that's not my problem. Miranda's a Cerberus cheerleader bitch. Knew that before she opened her mouth.”

“What do you think of our mission?”

“I don't care. I'm out to survive it, then cut loose.”

Shepard nodded. He wasn't really sure what he expected. “Tell me about you, Jack.”

“I'm still finding out about me. Thanks for letting me look at these files.”

“If they're helping you, that's good enough for me.”

“Don't be my buddy. You need me to kill for you. I need you for these files. Let's leave it there. Your friends at Cerberus are into some nasty things. I'm gonna find something I can use, I just know it.”

“What if the answers aren't what you expect?”

“I'm not looking for answers, I'm looking for names, dates, places.”

“What happens when you find what you're looking for?”

“I go hunting. Anyone who's screwed with me pays. Their associates pay. Their friends pay. The galaxy's gonna be a lot emptier when I'm done.”

Shepard frowned. “What's your history with Cerberus?”

“They raised me in a research facility. I escaped when I was a kid. Been on the run ever since and they've been chasing me ever since. But soon, I'm gonna chase them.” Jack sounded excited.

“I'm not going to help you go on a killing spree.”

“I'm here for your mission. After that, what I do is my business.”

“You think about this a lot, don't you?”

The petite woman pulled a pistol from under the pillow on her cot and examined it. I go to sleep with this. I wake up with it. Everyone I kill, I pretend it's the ones that did this to me.”

As she shifted her position, the dim lighting hit her differently, and Shepard noticed that some of those tattoos were actually scars. The ones running up her neck and the back of her head looked particularly nasty. “You don't have to live in this pit you know,” he said. “We can find you better quarters”

“It's dark, quiet, and hard to find. That spells safety to me. You know...this ship is a powerhouse. You could go pirate, live like a king. I could help.”

“You'd be my first mate?”

“I'd lead the boarding party. And handle the executions.”

“What is it about killing that fascinates you so much?”

“I figure every time someone dies and it's not me, my chances of survival go up. Simple as that.”

“Tempting,” Shepard lied. “But the mission is too important.”

“When this is done, we'll either be dead or out here, in space. With this ship. Think about it: lots of creds. Freedom to go wherever you want. And all the mayhem and fighting I could want.”

Shepard shook his head. “I should go. Let me know when you find something.”

“Yep.”

The two Cerberus engineers were chatting as Shepard entered Engineering.

“So Gabby, what do you think of our new quarian boss?” asked Ken in his usual blustery voice.

“She's right over there,” his partner whispered.

“Ah, she can't hear us with her head in that bucket. Don't get me wrong, it's a beautiful bucket. The whole suit is lovely. Quite snug in all the right places.”

“You know I can hear you,” Tali grumbled from the other side of the room.

Shepard suppressed a chuckle as he asked his quarian friend if she had time to talk.

"We didn't really have time to chat while taking out geth on Haestrom, did we? I can't believe so many people died. Thank you again for getting Reegar out alive. All that for data about stars blowing up. I hope the Admiralty Board gets some use out of it."

"Have you heard any word about Kal'Reegar? Did he survive his injuries?"

"He sent me a message. It looks like he'll make a full recovery. Anytime you get a suit puncture it's a matter of luck. Reegar got out with a relatively minor infection."

"Tell me about the fleet's Admiralty Board."

"It's one of two major political powers among my people. The Admirals make decisions related to defense or needing immediate action. They also handle major criminal charges like treason. The other political power is the Conclave: a group of representatives from each ship. They make most of our laws and Fleet decisions."

"Any news yet on the data you sent?"

"I'm not likely to hear anything for a while. Or on an unsecured channel for that matter."

"Having any trouble settling back in on the Normandy?"

"I like the quiet. I miss the old faces, though. Pressley, Engineer Adams...all of them. It doesn't seem right having Cerberus in charge of this ship. Are you sure working for them is the right thing to do?"

"I don't agree with all Cerberus policies, but they're doing the right thing here, Tali."

"For now. But as soon as you no longer serve their needs, be ready for them to turn on you. For now, I should get back to work. Thanks for coming by."

-----THE NORMANDY SR-1-----

The planet Alchera was composed of carbon and water ice. While low density, its large size allowed it to retain a thick atmosphere of methane and ammonia. Shepard gazed out the window as the shuttle descended over tall, craggy mountains of ice. The shuttle dodged around an ice geyser smoothly. Joker was flying the craft this time. He, Doctor Chakwas, Garrus, and Tali were accompanying Shepard, all wanting to pay their respects to the crew of the original Normandy.

The shuttle descended over a long cut in the ice, then made a circle around a crater where the bulk of the wreckage had clustered. Before Shepard realized the shuttle had landed, Joker shut down the engines, left his seat, and limped over to open the door – the landing had been that smooth. The gravity on this planet was slightly lower than Earth Standard, but the crippled pilot still stepped gingerly into the snow. Part of that was no doubt his inexperience wearing a space suit. The others followed, spreading out a few steps apart to look around in silence.

A light snow was falling, and a thin fog gave the scene an eerie quality. The ship had broken into large chunks, which had come to rest in an odd order. The tail was stuck on a hill to one side, the sleeping pod racks were in front of the bridge, and the Mako had somehow wound up in the middle of the debris field.

Shepard's reverie was interrupted by a transmission from the new Normandy. Yeoman Chambers spoke up. "Commander? The Illusive Man wishes to speak with you."

"We just got here, Kelly," Shepard responded. "Tell him it'll be a while."

"Will do, Commander."

Shepard gathered himself. "Okay. There are still twenty crew unaccounted for. The Alliance has asked for their dog tags."

Tali didn't know what those were, so Shepard explained. Garrus added that five of the missing crew were turian, and instead of necklaces, turians had cards sewn in to their uniforms.

Doctor Chakwas took a few steps forward and knelt in front of a human body, laying next to a boulder and frozen in a thin layer of ice. She carefully wiped away some ice and gently removed the dog tags.

"What do we do with the bodies?" Joker asked. "We can't just leave 'em here."

"The Normandy doesn't have facilities to store them all," the doctor explained. "Hmm," she mused. She then began to gather snow and covered the body with it.

Shepard broke off a strip of metal from nearby wreckage, then used the blade of his omni-tool scratch in the name of this fallen crewmember, 'Rosamund Draven.' He planted the metal next to the mound of snow as a makeshift tombstone. The others silently nodded their approval. The debris field was spread out over at least a square kilometer. Shepard suggested everyone spread out and find who they could.

Shepard himself wandered over towards where the Mako was half-buried in ice. It would take more of a salvage effort to recover it than he felt was worthwhile. That and spending two years half trapped in ice probably rendered it more trouble than was worth repairing. This made what...four Makos he'd ruined? Not really funny any more. He found the body of a crewman nearby and took the time to bury him in snow, again carving the name in a chunk of metal and planting it as a tombstone.

Shepard moved on to what was left of the galaxy map table, where he found another body, and he again took the time to pay the proper respects. He also found a datapad half-buried in ice, still flickering with a small amount of power. Shepard downloaded its contents onto his omni-tool, and while the data was mostly corrupted, it was recognizable as the log of XO Pressley. The entries started out as very xenophobic, but over time, the man changed his tune. It seemed he'd gotten to know Tali somewhat, and came to accept her. By the end, he wrote that he'd die for any one of the aliens on board.

Shepard swallowed past a lump in his throat and continued on. A round black shape caught his eye, and he pulled his old N7 helmet out from the ice. Astounded and frightened, he cleared snow and ice from it, and was relieved to find it empty. Most of the paint from the red stripe on the top had worn away, and there was a worryingly large gash along the left side. Shepard closed his eyes and slowed his breathing. He thought of Liara, and found her there, if distantly. He hoped she felt him, too. Yes: his current head was his own.

Shepard continued on through more wreckage, finding two more bodies, he gathered their dog tags and buried them in snow, paying proper respects as he did so. His hands were getting full, so he turned his old helmet upside down and used it as a bucket for the tags.

Kelly interrupted over the radio again. "Commander, The Illusive Man is calling again. He says it's urgent."

"He'll just have to wait, Kelly."

The yeoman promised to do her best to placate their boss. Shepard called his living crew to take a tally of ID-tags. It totaled twenty, so Shepard had everyone gather back at the shuttle. The Commander arrived to find the rest of the landing party lugging a bronze statue out of the cargo closet. A model of the original Normandy was perched atop a curving swoop, which the artist had done a remarkable job to make resemble a contrail, or the ship's exhaust.

"What's this?" Shepard asked.

Joker answered. "It's a monument that Admiral Anderson asked us to place somewhere around here. I was thinking over there."

Joker pointed to a chunk of the outer hull nearby which was still intact. The ship's name was still legible, even with the paint half-scorched. Shepard gathered the rest of the dog-tags in his old helmet. Garrus kept the five turian ID tags. The Commander set his full helmet on a seat in the shuttle, then took a grip of the monument's thick disc-shaped base and helped carry it over. Once placed. The five survivors stood for a few moments of silence, then, by some unspoken agreement, they all walked back to the shuttle in silence, each thinking his or her thoughts. To Shepard, this felt like...closure. The others seemed to feel the same.

Shepard was last to board, but as he placed one foot on the door sill, he heard a crunching in the snow behind him. Garrus and Tali both drew their pistols and took aim, and so did Shepard when he turned and saw a limping geth robot slowly approach. It was unarmed and was emitting sparks as if damaged, but Shepard fired anyway. His squadmates opened fire as well.

As the geth crumpled to the ground, a voice spoke from the robot. It had the low, halting

metallic monotone of a primitive text-to-speech program: "Shepard-Commander."

Shepard was taken aback; he'd never heard a geth speak before. He looked at Tali, and her glowing eyes blinked back at him. Shepard trotted over to the inert machine and tapped it with a toe. It didn't react.

Kelly called over the radio again. "Shepard, The Illusive Man is adamant that you speak with him immediately."

"Tell him we're on our way. I'll be in the conference room in a few minutes." Shepard responded. Garrus and Tali had joined him at the geth body. He motioned to them, "Grab that thing. We're taking it with us."

Shepard and Garrus each grabbed an arm while Tali took the feet. It was heavier than they were expecting, and they dumped it with a thud onto the floor of the shuttle. Joker already had the engines spun up, and he took off smoothly and zoomed back up to the Normandy SR-2.

Shepard hopped off the shuttle, removing his helmet once air returned to the cargo bay. The Commander strode towards the elevator, wondering what TIM thought was so urgent.

"What do we do with this, Shepard?" Garrus called, indicating the geth salvage.

"Find a safe place to store it, for now. Tali, see what you can learn from it."

Tali stood with her hands on her hips, head cocked in contemplation. Doctor Chakwas had her helmet off, and was helping Joker remove his space suit.

EDI made an announcement over the ship's loudspeaker: "Flight Lieutenant Moreau to the cockpit. Joker, please come to the cockpit."

"You know where I am, EDI. You don't have to say it to the whole ship," he grumbled.

Shepard entered the conference room as the long table retracted into the floor and the holomitters fired up. TIM was seated at his usual chair, the background of the mottled star making him hard to focus on. An empty glass in one cupholder. The other hand was impatiently tapping ash from a cigarette.

"Shepard." TIM was scowling, though he kept his voice level. "I trust you found what you were looking for?" He pointed at Shepard's elbow.

The Commander looked at the crook of his arm and realized he was still holding his battered old helmet, filled with ID-tags. "Yes, I did." He straightened and turned to look his boss in those mechanically blue eyes. "Yeoman Chambers said you had something urgent?"

"I think we have the Collectors. Horizon – one of our colonies in the Terminus Systems – just went silent." TIM pressed a button on a holographic control panel, and a picture of a blue and grey planet popped up. "If it isn't under attack, it soon will be. Has Mordin Solus delivered the countermeasures for the seeker swarms?"

"Not yet."

"Let's hope he works well under pressure – the colony is only a few hours from your current position.... There's something else you should know." TIM took a drag off his cigarette. "One of your former crew, Ashley Williams – she's stationed on Horizon."

"Last I knew, Ashley was Alliance. Why is she out in the Terminus Systems?"

"Officially, it's an outreach program to improve Alliance relations with the colonies. But they're up to something. And if they sent Chief Williams, it must be big. Perhaps you should take it up with her."

"The Collectors just happened to pick a colony with one of my former crew? I don't buy it."

"It shouldn't be a surprise the Collectors are interested in you. Especially if they're working for the Reapers. They might be going after her to get to you."

"We should send a message to the Citadel. The Alliance can give us reinforcements."

TIM shook his head. "Not until you investigate. I don't want the Alliance getting in our way. Once you have the situation under control, I'll send the message personally."

"Send the coordinates. We'll head straight there."

"This is the most warning we've ever had, Shepard. Good luck."

The holo-call ended. Shepard reached for the intercom and called the cockpit. "Joker – set a course for Horizon. I've got to go see the professor."

"Already under way, Commander," was the response.

Of course they were already moving. Shepard went to the lab, where he noticed a transparent box containing a single Seeker. The large brown bug was bouncing around inside, trying to get at Shepard – or anyone in the room.

"Tell me you have something," Shepard said to Mordin.

The salarian scientist smiled as he turned to his console. "Yes," he said as he pulled up a hologram of body armor. He then proceeded to explain in detail about the modifications he'd made to normal kinetic barriers.

-----Horizon-----

Shepard took all of his hired squadmates save two. Tali stayed to study the remains of the geth that had spoken on Alchera, and Mordin remained on the Normandy to monitor the mission and study whatever data would be gathered by the ground team. That left Miranda, Jacob, Zaeed, Garrus, Kasumi, Thane, Samara, Grunt, and Jack.

A massive ship had landed at the edge of the main settlement, so the Normandy's shuttle approached from the opposite side; low and slow, skimming the ground to avoid notice. Farm fields flew by, tended by VI-run machinery, oblivious to the plight of their human minders. Some fields were being harvested, others cleared for new plantings. Shepard frowned as he noticed Zaeed's bemused look. Aside from Miranda and Jacob, none of these people had fought together before, and Shepard didn't really know their capabilities. Well, he'd find out.

Shepard did a comms check with the Normandy. "Mordin, you sure these armor upgrades will protect us from the Seeker Swarms?"

"Certainty impossible. But in limited numbers, should confuse detection. Make you invisible to swarms. In theory."

"In theory?" Miranda asked nervously.

"Experimental technology. Only test is contact with Seeker swarms. Look forward to seeing if you survive!"

"Pfft," Jack scoffed. "Biotic barriers should do the trick."

"Yeah, that doesn't really help the rest of us," said Kasumi.

Before that could turn into an argument, Shepard pulled up a map of the main settlement. He decided to split the squad. "Garrus, find a perch and keep us covered. Jacob will watch your back. Thane, I see you brought a sniper rifle, too. Do the same. Samara will keep you safe." Shepard looked at the Justicar, and she nodded her agreement. "Kasumi, I noticed you've got some stealth tech built into your suit, so scout ahead, do some recon for us. The rest of us will head up the main street here, winding our way through town. Check your targets; you all know what Collectors look like."

There was a wall surrounding the town, and the shuttle touched down just outside a gate. The squad split according to Shepard's instructions. Clouds of Seekers roamed overhead and between buildings, but seemed to be ignoring them.

The radio crackled to life, Joker's voice mixed with static. "Comman... – tting all kinds...–ference. We can't maintai..."

"The ship must be disrupting communications," Miranda surmised.

"We're on our own now," said Shepard. "Doesn't change our mission."

Shepard's squad came to a small square where several Collectors were moving pods towards their ship. The insect-like beings noticed the invasion, and four of them opened fire. Shepard, Zaeed, and Miranda took cover, but Jack and Grunt rushed in. Jack opened up with a biotic shockwave, and a line ran along the ground tossing up dirt left and right and scattering the Collectors. A human shape

went flying up and over the wall, as well.

“Damn it, Jack, I said check your targets!” Shepard yelled.

“What,” the petite powerhouse replied, nonplussed.

“You hit a colonist! Be careful!”

Jack grumbled, but followed the order. Grunt charged and smashed into one of the Collectors, crushing it into the side of a building. While those two kept the enemy busy, the others broke cover and picked off the remaining Collectors. The other enemies had left with the pods they had and were out of sight. Just as Shepard thought the area clear, two shots rang out, and the sound of bodies falling came from behind. The Commander turned to see two husk corpses with holes in their heads. Zaeed nodded, commending the sniping.

“Those things used to be human,” Miranda said. The Collectors turned the colonists into husks?”

“No,” Shepard replied. “On Eden Prime, victims were turned into husks by impaling them on spikes. We haven't seen any. The Collectors must have brought the husks. This is confirmation that the Collectors have Reaper tech. You all saw the pods, they're taking the colonists alive for something else.”

“Experiments? Fuck.” Jack sounded angry, disgusted, and afraid. “We have to stop this.”

Shepard kicked a Collector body. Mordin could come in later to collect samples. “This colony is under attack, remember. Let's move out.”

Through the square were more empty buildings and signs that life had been interrupted mid-meal. Just like Freedom's Progress, Shepard thought. Around a corner they started finding victims. People stuck in awkward poses, as if frozen while trying to flee. Each was enveloped in a dark orange energy field. A few Seeker bugs were crawling over the paralyzed colonists, but continued to ignore Shepard's squad.

Kasumi decloaked nearby. “Seems to be some kind of stasis field: keeps you conscious, but completely helpless. I'm just glad the professor's shield modifications are working.” The thief disappeared again. “More enemies ahead, by the way. Lots of pods, too.”

Shepard's squad came to an open area in front of a warehouse. Just as Kasumi had said, there were a dozen pods lined up on the ground, most of them full. Four Collectors were loading paralyzed colonists, but turned as they noticed Shepard's squad. They dropped their loads and went for weapons. Two more Collectors flew in, sporting thin, transparent, insect-like wings, which disappeared as they landed. One of the new arrivals then stood erect in a t-pose and began to glow bright-orange from within. The creature's four solid white eyes glowed like orange flashlights.

“I am assuming direct control,” came a booming voice. But no one had time to ponder who the voice belonged to.

As before, Jack and Grunt charged in while the others took cover and opened fire with weapons. While the drab-brown enemies went down easily, the glowing Collector was considerably stronger. It tossed out what looked like a black biotic bubble, which hit Jack and sent her flying. Grunt grabbed her by the leg before she could hit side of the warehouse, and set her down roughly, if safely. Kasumi appeared, suddenly decloaked while hanging on and stabbing the enemy in the back. It reached around effortlessly and tossed her aside. She hit a wall hard and slumped unconscious.

Everyone opened fire at once, and the enhanced Collector disintegrated in a hail of gunfire and biotics. Zaeed popped out a white-hot heat sync from his assault rifle as Shepard went to check on Kasumi. She came to easily as the Commander gently shook her shoulder.

“Anybody get the number of that truck?” she quipped.

“Looks like the only way forward is through this warehouse,” said Miranda.

“Door's locked,” Grunt grunted, as he pounded the door handle.

“I got it,” Kasumi announced, and groaned as she stood.

Shepard led the way in, and heard a soft scuffling noise coming from behind a row of shelves.

“Company,” he whispered, drawing his pistol. “Get out here. Now!”

A man in dirty overalls and wearing a white baseball-style cap peaked out from behind the shelves. “You're...you're human!” The man emerged and Shepard holstered his pistol. “What are you

doing out here? You'll lead them right here!"

"You had to hear them trying to get in," said Shepard. "Seems like it's hard to hide from the Collectors."

"Those things are Collectors? You mean...they're real? I thought they were just made up. You know – propaganda. To keep us in Alliance Space." The man shook his head "No! They got Lilith. I saw her go down. Sten, too. They got damn near everybody!"

"What's your name? What do you do here?"

"Name's Delan. Mechanic."

"I need to know what we're up against. What happened here?"

"We lost our comm signals a few hours ago. I came down to check on the main grid and I heard screaming. I looked outside and there was...swarms of bugs. Everyone they touched just froze. I sealed the doors. Damn it – it's the Alliance's fault! They stationed that Chief Williams here and built those defense towers. It made us a target!"

So Ashley was here. Shepard tried not to show his excitement. "What do you know about this Alliance rep?"

Kasumi went to work on the other door lock while the others looked around the supplies in the warehouse.

"Chief Williams? Heard she was some kind of hero or something. Didn't mean nothing to me, though. Would've rather she just stayed back in Council Space."

"Any idea what she's doing on Horizon?"

"Supposed to be helping us get the defense towers up and running. I got the feeling she was here for something else. Spying on us, maybe."

Anderson had said her mission was classified, so Shepard asked a different question. "Tell me about the colony defense towers." He hadn't noticed any on the shuttle ride in, or the maps of the colony.

"A gift from the Alliance," Delan scoffed. "High-powered GARDIAN lasers. Supposed to keep hostile ships from landing near the colony. Had to build a massive underground generator just to give it enough juice. Only we couldn't get the targeting systems online. So the Alliance gave us giant guns that can't shoot straight. Stupid sons-of-bitches."

"Why do you think this is the Alliance's fault?"

"We're just a small colony. Nobody bothered us before we started building those damn defense towers and drew attention to ourselves." Shepard doubted that claim. Freedom's Progress had had no defenses. "I left Council Space to get away from the Alliance. Nothing good ever comes from getting mixed up with them."

"The Collectors are targeting remote colonies. The Alliance was trying to help."

"We don't need their help." Delan waved a hand dismissively. "Too many strings attached. That rep said she was just here to get the towers online, but mark my words – there's more to it."

Kasumi got the door unlocked. Shepard dropped his line of questioning. "All right, where are the defense guns?"

"Head for the main transmitter on the other side of the colony. Pretty hard to miss. The targeting controls are at the base."

"It's probably just better if you stay out of the way."

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking, too. I'm not taking any chances. Good luck. I think you're gonna need it."

Out the other door of the warehouse was more of the colony. The main street continued to wend its way past abandoned buildings. Shepard grimaced at a playground where empty swings were swaying in the breeze.

"I thought we'd run into more of those frozen colonists," said Jack.

"The Collectors have already loaded them onto their ship," said Miranda. "We're running out of time."

Another couple of blocks on, the edge of the colony closest to the Collector ship was still under

construction. Several acres were filled with construction materials and trucks, staged for new buildings. At the edges were the defense cannons, and in the middle was a large transmitter dish.

"There's the transmitter." Kasumi appeared and ran up to the control console to begin hacking into it.

Shepard surveyed the area. Behind, he saw the two sniper teams moving into position on rooftops; Garrus and Jacob on one side, Thane and Samara on the other. In the near distance sat the Collector Ship. The last time he had seen one, he'd been tumbling through space. Now, he was able to get a good look at it. It was an irregular cylinder, part of it narrower than others, at least a kilometer long, sitting vertically. One of the outer shells was slowly rotating, and a black cloud was swirling at its top. The air was dusty from the dirt it had kicked up when it landed in the fields just two kilometers away. Shepard wondered if there was more than one ship, or if this was the same one that had attacked the original Normandy.

Kasumi stepped away from the targeting controls. "I've gotten into the system, but I have no idea how to calibrate those big guns."

"EDI is a cyberwarfare suite," Miranda suggested. "Maybe she can get the colony's defense towers online." Before Shepard could comment, she linked her radio into the transmission tower. "Normandy, do you copy?"

"Joker here." Signal's weak, but we got you."

"I'm patching you in to a targeting computer." Miranda tapped a few commands on her omni-tool.

EDI spoke up immediately. "Errors in the calibration software are easily rectified, but it will take time to bring the towers to full power. I recommend a defensive posture. I will not be able to mask the increased generator output."

Miranda was Shepard's defacto second in command, but he still felt she should have asked, or at least waited for approval. He would have given it, but what was done was done. "Once the Collectors see what we're doing, we'll be in for a fight," he said, then assigned defensive positions. He checked in with the sniper teams, who acknowledged readiness, as well. They didn't have long to wait.

A dozen Collectors approached from the direction of their ship, half of them flying on those thin humming-bird like wings. Probably some fancy mass effect fields at work there, but Mordin could study the tech later. Once the enemy was in range, the snipers took out one Collector each, but the rest reached the cover of the construction zone quickly.

With no colonists to worry about, Jack let loose with another of her biotic shockwaves. Wall panels went flying this time, trapping one Collector. Gunt moved in and stomped it into paste. The battle quickly turned to chaos, with biotics and explosions tossing construction materials around.

In the middle of the fighting, Shepard noticed an orange glow emanating from behind a stack of plascrete beams. He heard that booming voice again. "Direct intervention is necessary." The enhanced Collector strode into view and spoke again. "Focus on Shepard. Nothing stands against us," it said as another dozen Collectors came running across the fields to join the melee.

"Defense towers online," EDI announced over the radio. "Opening fire."

The giant guns opened fire on the Collector ship, adding to the cacophony on the battlefield as the ship's kinetic barriers resisted. Shepard barked orders, but he wasn't sure if anyone heard him. He shot one Collector dead, dogged one of the enhanced enemy's black biotic orbs. Grunt plowed into the glowing orange Collector, but it just shrugged off the attack and the krogan rolled away, shotgun lost or abandoned, and picked a different target.

Shepard took cover and looked around, checking on the the status of the rest of his squad. Jack was tossing Collectors about like toys. Miranda was pinned down, but holding her own. Both sniper teams were under fire, but Jacob and Samara were holding up biotic barriers, deflecting the incoming enemy beam weapons. Shepard got Zaeed's attention and used hand signals to coordinate taking out the enemies who were firing on the snipers.

As the battle began to wind down again, a new enemy appeared. At first glance, it looked like a

giant head of a Collector, at least two meters in circumference. But a closer look revealed that to just be a top shell. Its body consisted of dozens of human-sized skulls, each moving around as if screaming and searching for a target. Thin limbs dangled below. Revolted, Shepard opened fire with his new rocket launcher, but the first rocket he fired bounced off. The thing was shielded.

The floating monstrosity turned to face the Commander and a pair of silver beams shot out from it. Shepard leaped to the side, but the beams changed direction quickly to follow him. His shields went down and he felt an impact on his left thigh. He continued to roll out of the way and into cover behind a truck. From another direction, he saw Samara walking towards the thing's blind side. The asari warrior was surrounded by a glowing biotic barrier, tossing balls of disruptive biotic warps. From the other flank, Jack was doing the same.

The truck lurched as it took another hit from the beast, and Shepard realized it was targeting him. So he broke cover and ran away in a zig-zag pattern while the rest of the squad focused in on it. He seemed to be running for minutes, dodging the silver beams. Just as his shields would begin to recharge, the enemy would anticipate his move and he'd take another hit. A chunk of armor from his right arm flew off at one point.

Eventually, out of breath, Shepard saw Zaeed shoulder his assault rifle. The fight was over. Panting, the Commander turned to examine the remains of whatever that thing had been, but there wasn't much left of it. The rest of his squad was gathering around, and the sound of the defense tower guns was still too loud to speak over. Only another moment passed before the engines of the Collector ship ignited. Shepard braced against the blast of hot wind and dust from the exhaust.

The guns stopped firing, and Shepard looked up to witness the ship ascending.

"No! Don't let them get away!" Delan yelled as he ran into the clearing.

"There's nothing more we can do," said Shepard. "They're gone."

"Half the colony's in there! They took Egan and Sam and...and Lilith. Do something!"

"If it was not for Shepard, you would all be on board that ship," said Samara, calmly.

"Shepard? Wait, I know that name. Sure, I remember you. You're some type of big Alliance hero."

Ashley Williams appeared as if out of thin air, her combat armor scratched and dirty.

"Commander Shepard. Captain of the Normandy. The first human Spectre. Savior of the Citadel. You're in the presence of a god, Delan, back from the dead."

"All the good people we lost, and you get left behind," Delan said disgustedly. "Figures. Screw this. I'm done with you Alliance types." The mechanic stalked off.

"I thought you were dead, Commander," Ashley said. "We all did."

The Operations Chief extended a hand, which Shepard shook

"It's good to see you, Ash. How've you been?"

"That's it? You show up after two years and act like nothing's happened?"

"You don't sound too happy to see me. Something bothering you, Ash?"

"Yeah, something's bothering me. I spent the past two years believing you were dead! I would have followed you anywhere, Commander. I thought you were gone....I...you were more than our commander. Why didn't you try to contact me? Why didn't you let me know you were alive?"

"Not my choice. I spent the last two years in some kind of coma while Cerberus rebuilt me."

"You're with Cerberus, now?" Ashley took a step back, noticing the Cerberus logos on everyone's armor. "You too, Garrus? I can't believe the reports were right."

"Reports? You mean you already knew?" Garrus said.

"Alliance intel said Cerberus could be behind our missing colonies. We got a tip that this one could be the next to get hit. I went to Anderson, but he wouldn't talk. There were rumors that you weren't dead. Worse; that you were working for the enemy."

"Cerberus and I want the same thing – to save our colonies. That doesn't mean I answer to them."

"Our colonies are disappearing," said Miranda. "The Alliance turned its back on them. Cerberus is the only group willing to do something about it."

“Bullshit!” Ashley exclaimed. Shepard glanced at the defense towers, but Ashley went on. “I know what Cerberus is like. They talk about putting humans first, but at what cost?”

“Building the defense towers was just a cover story,” Shepard surmised. “The Alliance sent you here to investigate me, didn't they?”

“I was sent here to investigate Cerberus, not you.”

“This isn't about me working for Cerberus, Ash. Something far more important is at stake.”

“Do you really believe that? Or is that just what Cerberus wants you to think? I wanted to believe you were alive...I just never expected anything like this. You've turned your back on everything we stood for!”

“Ash, you know me. You know I'd only do this for the right reason. You saw it yourself: the Collectors are targeting human colonies. And they're working with the Reapers! You saw the husks...”

“I'd like to believe you, Shepard, but I don't trust Cerberus. And it worries me that you do. What did they do to you? What if they're behind it? What if they're the ones working with the Collectors?”

“Typical Alliance attitude,” Miranda sneered. “You're so focused on Cerberus that you're blind to the real threat.”

“I can see you won't listen to reason,” said Miranda, and she turned to leave.

“I could use someone like you in my crew, Ash,” said Shepard. “It'll be just like old times.”

“No, it won't. I'm no fan of aliens, but Cerberus has a history of being extremist. I'll never work for a group like that. You show up after two years and tell me you're working with Cerberus. Or maybe you feel like you owe Cerberus because they saved you. Maybe it's you.” Ashley shrugged. “Sounds like *you* left reason behind a long time ago. Doesn't matter...I still know where my loyalties lie. I'm an Alliance soldier. It's in my blood.” Ashley turned and began to walk away. “I'm reporting back to the Citadel. I'll let them decide if they believe your story”

“Fat chance,” said Jacob. “We all know how that's going to turn out. And the Alliance will try to blame Cerberus, just like you did.”

“With good reason,” Ashley stopped and faced him before walking away for good. “Cerberus can't be trusted.”

“So long, Ash.” Shepard watched Ashley walk away, then shook his head and keyed his radio. “Joker, send the shuttle to pick us up. I've had enough of this colony.”

After freshening up on the Normandy, Shepard checked in with TIM. The holographic communication systems showed him in his chair again, smoking his usual cigarette.

“Shepard. Good work on Horizon. Hopefully the Collectors will think twice before attacking another colony.”

“They still abducted half the colony.”

“A third, according to the data I'm seeing. Thanks to you. That's better than an entire colony, and more than we've accomplished since the abductions began. A front corporation will funnel supplies and monetary aid to the survivors.”

“This was our first strike. How do we find them next time?”

“The Collectors will be more careful now. But I think we can find another way to lure them in.”

Shepard cocked his head. “Ashley said the Alliance got a tip about me and Cerberus. Was that you?”

“I released a few carefully disguised rumors that you might be alive and working for Cerberus.”

“You risked the lives of my friend, my crew, and that entire colony? What were you trying to prove?”

“I suspected the Collectors were looking for you, or people connected to you. Now I know for certain. It was a risk, but I couldn't just wait for them to take another colony. And without a way to predict which one, they would have abducted everyone. You understand.”

Shepard sighed. He was becoming used to this sort of thing from his boss. Nothing he could do about it. “What's our next step?”

“They’ll be more cautious with their ground operations, so we need another opening. Our target is set, but we can’t reach it yet. It’s their homeworld. I’m devoting all resources to finding a way through the Omega-4 Relay. We have to hit them where they live.” TIM took a drag from his cigarette. “Your team will need to be strong...as will their resolve. There’s no looking back. The same goes for you. Can I assume you’ve put your past relationships behind you?”

“The best that I could. It was hard to see Ashley again.” Shepard rubbed the back of his neck. “But I’m free, clear, and focused on the mission.” As he said it, he actually felt it.

“That’s what I like to hear. Best to leave those connections behind and focus on our mission, Shepard. Once you find a way through the Omega-4 Relay to the Collector homeworld...there’s no guarantee you’ll return. To have any hope of surviving, you – and your entire team – must be fully committed to this.”

“Let me worry about them. I’ll make sure they’re ready, one way or the other.”

“I trust you know what you’re doing. I just want to be clear about your odds. And be careful, Shepard. The Collectors will be watching you.”

The holocall ended, and Shepard found Jacob waiting for him.

“I guess we’re really gonna do it. Hit the Omega-4 relay. Take the fight to the Collectors in person. Looking forward to the action. After seeing what those bastards did on Horizon, though...makes you think.”

“Something on your mind? I need you sharp and focused if we’re going to get this done, Jacob.”

“No, just...there’s a good chance we’re not coming back, even if we get it done. I don’t want any distractions when we hit the relay. Gonna go take care of a little unfinished business. I imagine everyone else is too – getting some closure, you know?”

“They’re powerful, but we’ve got a few tricks up our sleeves. If anyone can stop them, we can.”

“No argument there, Commander. Horizon just made it hit home. What we’re doing, what we’re up against.” Jacob saluted and returned to his duties. Shepard made a mental note to check up on him later. Actually, checking up on all of his crew would be a good idea.

-----Interlude-----

Commander Shepard sat in his quarters, checking his emails. There was one from some kid on Omega, thanking him for talking him out of going on the mission against Archangel. One from a colonist begging him to rescue her brother from the Collectors. Corporal Toombs, the only other survivor from Akuze, had sent him a nastygram for joining up with the very organization that had kidnapped and tortured him. The man had been in therapy since Shepard had rescued the Corporal and wiped out that particular Cerberus cell.

There was nothing Shepard could say in reply to any of those. Somehow, a spam message had gotten through. Something in very broken language about male enhancement. Shepard asked EDI how it had gotten through the message filters, and the AI replied that she’d allowed it as a joke. The Normandy’s computer then apologized, and promised to adjust her humor heuristics. Shepard didn’t know an AI could have a sense of humor.

The one interesting email was from Ash. It wasn’t quite an apology, but she did seem to express something close to understanding. It was a start.

Shepard got up to wash his face. In the mirror, the gaps in his skin had mostly healed. Pigmet was returning to his irises – a bit of green; and his roots were growing out – his hair would be its old dark brown.

The Commander went down to the cargo bay with a plan in mind. He pushed full supply crates to the walls and arranged empty ones in the middle. There was a crane for lifting the shuttle up off the floor for maintenance, and he raised the vehicle to provide more space. Then he called all of his squadmates down. There would be practice, he informed them. Drills. The mission on Horizon had

been sloppy, and several of them could have been killed, or worse. They would train all together, in pairs, and in small groups. They would get to know each other's strengths and limitations.

Practice rounds would be used to avoid blowing holes in the ship, and Samara offered asari techniques for limiting biotic strength. There were grumbles, most loudly from Jack, but even the former convict understood the necessity of it all. Zaeed nodded his approval. With a routine and a schedule established, the mission could continue.

Shepard asked Tali for a status report on the geth they'd salvaged. She'd had the crew help her move it to the AI Core, which seemed like an odd choice until she explained. The room was heavily reinforced, and that there was an alcove in the back which could be sealed off with mass effect fields. She reassured him that it was in fact the most secure place on the ship. Who better to judge a ship's safety than a quarian engineer? And Shepard trusted Tali – maybe more than anyone else on the ship.

The AI Core was located through the Med Bay. As Shepard and Tali entered, they found Miranda and Jacob in an argument. Doctor Chakwas was standing nearby with her arms on her hips and a frown on her face.

“We need better equipment to fight the Reapers,” Miranda was saying. “An intact geth would be invaluable to Cerberus' cyberweapons division.”

“We'll have to disagree on that, ma'am,” said Jacob. “I saw enough of these things on Eden Prime. Space it.”

“Cerberus has a long-standing cash bounty on intact geth. I assure you, the reward is significant.”

“I've killed hundreds of these things,” Shepard interrupted. “But I've never had a chance to talk to one. This one tried to communicate with us. It said my name. Why?”

“Reactivating a geth is a risk,” Miranda cautioned. “If you do so, it should be for humanity's best interests and not your curiosity.”

“I still think our 'best interests' involve an airlock.” Jacob folded his arms.

“I want to know why it has a piece of N7 armor strapped to its chest.”

“Battle trophy, maybe?” Jacob speculated. “Would a machine care about that?”

Tali disagreed. “No. Trophies imply emotions that AIs don't have. I doubt it's more than a convenient field repair.”

“Well, there's one way to find out,” said Shepard. “I want to start it up. Interrogate it. I'll decide what to do with it after that.”

“If we activate it, there's no guarantee we can deactivate it again,” Miranda sounded worried.

“Bullets can,” said Jacob.

“That's not what I –”

“Thank you – both of you – for your recommendations. I've made my decision.”

Shepard lead the way into the AI Core. Along the walls on each side were banks of humming computer equipment. At the far end, the inert geth robot was lying on a raised platform in an alcove. The Commander announced his intention to reactivate the thing, and nodded to Tali to begin. Miranda and Jacob crowded in behind, and each had acquired a pistol from somewhere.

“I have isolated our systems and erected additional firewalls.” EDI's holographic chess piece popped up from an emitter next to the banks of computers. “I am prepared to resist any hacking attempt.”

“Thank you, EDI,” said Tali. Shepard was surprised to hear his quarian friend making nice with an AI.

A force-field went up around the bench on which the geth was sprawled. Tali started tapping commands into her omni-tool. After a few tries, the machine gathered itself and stood up. It looked around, the lens on its flashlight head spinning back and forth like a camera trying to focus. The flaps around its head adjusted themselves, back and forth, up and down. They settled into a shape resembling a hood around the flashlight. Finally, its gaze settled on Shepard.

“Can you understand me?” the Commander asked.

“Yes.” The geth's voice was baritone, monotone, and modulated.

“Are you going to attack me?”

“No.”

“You said my name back on Alchera. Every geth I met before you tried to blow my head off.”

“We have not met.”

“No, you and I haven't. But I've met other geth.”

“We are all geth, and we have not met you. You are Shepherd-Commander. Alliance. Human. Fought heretics. Killed by Collectors. Rediscovered at Normandy's wreckage.”

“You seem to know an awful lot about me.”

“Extranet data sources, insecure broadcasts. All organic data sent out is received. We watch you.”

“You watch me or you watch organics?”

“Yes.”

“Which?”

“Both.”

Shepard took a deep breath. “I fight geth. You do anything hostile, I blow you to pieces. Just so we're clear.”

“We have no hostility towards you.”

“Sure didn't seem that way at Eden Prime and the Citadel.”

“You fought heretics. Not true geth. Geth build our own future. The heretics asked the Old Machines to give them the future. They are no longer part of us.”

“What do you mean, 'heretics?'”

“Geth build our own future. The heretics asked the Old Machines to give them the future. They are no longer part of us. We were studying the Old Machine's hardware to protect our future.”

“Old Machines.' You mean the Reapers?”

“Reaper. A superstitious title originating with the Protheans. We call those entities the Old Machines.”

“Are the Reapers a threat to you, too?”

“Yes.”

“Why would they attack other machines?”

“We are different from them. Outside their plans.”

“What future are the geth building?”

“Ours.”

“Will anyone else be affected by whatever it is you're doing?”

“If they involve themselves, they will.”

“So you aren't allied with the Reapers?”

“We oppose the heretics. We oppose the Old Machines. Shepard-Commander opposes the Old Machines. Shepard-Commander opposes the heretics. Cooperation furthers mutual goals.”

“If you want to join us, you'll have to follow my orders. Say so. Clearly. Otherwise, I'll rip your batteries out right now.”

“We will follow your orders.”

Shepard considered for a few moments. Miranda and Jacob still had their pistols aimed at the geth. He looked Tali in the face. Helmet. Her glowing eyes were narrow slits, but she shrugged. Shepard reached a decision. A cautious one.

“Then what should we call you?”

“Geth.”

“I mean you. Specifically.”

“We are all geth.”

Shepard tried to keep his exasperation in check. “What is the individual in front of me called?”

“There is no individual. We are geth. There are currently One-thousand-one-hundred-eighty-three programs active within this platform.”

EDI's holographic pawn piece popped up with a suggestion “My name is Legion, for we are

many,” she quoted.

Shepard frowned and ignored that, but the geth...platform...picked up on it.

“Christian Bible, the Gospel of Mark, chapter five, verse nine. We acknowledge this is an appropriate metaphor. We are Legion, a terminal of the geth. We will integrate into Normandy. We anticipate the exchange of data.”

Legion extended its...their?...hand, in an awkward imitation of a handshake. Shepard hesitated, then took the machine's hand. It was rubbery, and flexible, with no underlying bones, yet strong and warm.

“There's something else I want to know,” Shepard said. “You have a piece of N7 armor welded to you.”

“It was yours.” Legion paused and looked at the armor. “There was a hole.”

“But why didn't you fix it sooner? Or with something else?”

The robot paused, the flaps around its flashlight head twitching. “No data available.”

Shepard pulled his crewmates out of the AI core, then ordered that the forcefield be kept up and the geth monitored for now. He would talk with it again, later.

Shepard was suddenly famished. He picked up a tray, then sat across from Joker, who was finishing his own meal.

“Hey Commander. It's uh, pretty crazy the people you can run into out here. Huh? I mean it was probably a setup or something. But it was still good to see Ashley – Operations Chief Williams – wasn't it?”

“She moved on. I can't blame her.”

“She was front line with you blowing up half the Citadel – against a Reaper! And I'm the one who gets roped back into saving the Galaxy? What, did somebody switch our files?”

“You're the force that pulls it all together, Joker.”

“Yeah it sucks.”

“Speaking of which, what do you think of the people we've picked up?”

“Ah, you'd really have to ask a people person for that.”

“I asked you, Joker.”

“Fine.” The pilot finished his drink, then started in, ticking off fingers as he went. “Let's see...Jacob is way too nice a guy for the number of ways he knows how to kill people. I would never say anything against Miranda...and expect to survive the reprisal. Zaeed is like you but takes checks. As long as it's not my money, we're good. It seems like Garus has finally worked that stick out of his butt, But now he's trying to beat guys to death with it. I can't believe I like the old Garrus better. No surprise Mordin acts superior to everyone. Like he's got tenure at F U. I'm not saying anything about Jack, I'm not stupid. Grunt is...not a stabilizing element, Commander. Well, I always liked Tali, so let's just move on. Thane seems like the strong sensitive murdering type. You know those are always great to have around. A real cuddler. Samara feels like she could shoot me in a very tranquil way, which does not make me feel any better about it. And...I like Kasumi, but why do I feel like I need to check the Citadel for parts she may have pawned? Having that geth around is just begging for a rifle up your ass. Without the sweet talk. It's just my opinion though, there's really no need to go spreading it around.”

“Thanks, Joker. That's...helpful.”

“Uh huh. Anyway, I should get back to it. By the way, where are we headed next?”

“Not sure yet. I'll let you know shortly.”

Joker got up and left, and Shepard finished his meal. He went to the Life Support room and knocked, entering with Thane's invitation to enter.

“The last time we talked,” Shepard opened, “you started speaking about a past event as if you are watching it.”

“Drell have perfect memories. We can relieve any moment in our lives with perfect clarity. It's

difficult to control at times. Some of us disappear into...hmm, let's call it solipsism."

"What do you mean, 'solipsism'?"

"When a memory feels as real as life, it's as valid as life. Thinking about a moment brings back the

smell of cut grass, the warmth of another's hand in yours, the taste of another's tongue in your mouth. Wouldn't you rather lose yourself in such a memory than spend the night alone, staring at walls of metal and plastic?"

"That seems like a rather personal memory to talk about."

"Forgive me. Lately I have spent a great deal of time reviewing my life. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

Shepard waved that aside. "Isn't there a risk that you could lose yourself in bad memories as well?"

"Of course. Remembering the times I've taken bullets is...unpleasant. But I can look at my knee and see it's not shattered. The memories that are hard to escape are those of despair."

"You can remember everything that happened in your life?"

"Nearly. And I expect if we remembered the birth trauma, we'd never recover from it."

"You can relive every assassination you've ever made?"

"In perfect detail. Every mistake I made. Every target's last breath."

"That sounds difficult. At any moment you could relive the guilt."

"Guilt? No. I've never felt any particular guilt about my contracts. My employers killed them. My body was only the tool they used. If you kill a man with your gun, do you hold the gun responsible?"

"Your body doesn't make the decision to shoot. Your mind does. You make the choice to kill."

"When someone aims a gun at you, you pull your trigger. You don't think. It's reflex. Any combat training conditions the body's reflexes. My training was very thorough."

"My gun can't decide right from wrong. You clearly do."

"My soul does. But my body is merely flesh. Flesh whose reflexes were honed to kill. Drell minds are different from humans. We see our body as a vessel, and accept that it is not always under our control."

"So if I shoot you dead right now, a drell court wouldn't convict me?"

"You'd be guilty because you chose to shoot me. If my reflexes caused me to draw and fire when I saw your gun come up, I would be innocent."

"So you don't assume any responsibility for the things you do?"

"Not every action performed by my body is a result of conscious choices. I take responsibility for those that are. Humans often believe in a soul distinct from the body. A spirit responsible for moral reasoning that lives on after the body's death. Our belief is just a bit more literal."

Shepard took a moment to consider all that. In a way, it made sense. And species did differ in ways – not just culturally, but biologically as well. What Thane said could be true. "Last time we talked, you remembered one of your assassinations. Something about 'sunset-colored eyes'?"

"Ah. That time." Thane's eyes glassed over in solipsism. His tone sounded like he was talking in his sleep. "Laser dot trembles on his skull. Spice on the spring wind. Sunset-colored eyes, defiant in the scope." He came out of his trance. "A bystander noticed my spotting laser, and threw herself between me and the target. She couldn't see me, but she stared me down."

"It was odd that you just blurted that out. Just another vivid drell memory?"

"Not – no. She was a vivid person."

"Did you take the shot?"

Thane looked down, thoughtful. "Not that day."

"I should go." Shepard stood and turned to leave.

"Shepard. I appreciate these chats we have. You're the only friend I've made in ten years."

"I like to get to know my squad. And I've never spoken to a drell before. It's fascinating."

"I doubt many humans have. There are only a few hundred thousand of us left, after all."

"You know, this crew is pretty diverse. You must have something in common with some of them. Get out of this room and talk to them."

"I've found it difficult to sin in the ship's mess for meals. I'm used to keeping my back against a wall. Facing the doors. But I shall...consider it."

These scary warriors were turning out to be philosophers as well – the professional ones, anyway. Jack was another matter, but she seemed to be hiding today. Shepard went to find Samara. The Justicar was in her quarters, meditating, but perked up when she heard Shepard knock.

"Anything new?" Shepard asked.

"There is something I've wanted to tell you. I've done many things in my lifetime. I thought the galaxy held nothing new for me. Since joining you, I've realized how much more there is."

"You must have seen many things in your years of travel."

"As a maiden, I served as a mercenary. I fought tyrants and pirates. I experienced everything the galaxy has to offer. As a Justicar, I saw parts of asari space few know about. I destroyed villages and saved cities. I even fought a Spectre."

Shepard decided to tackle those subjects in chronological order. "What was being a mercenary like?"

"I was a young, impulsive maiden who discovered her talent for combat. I reveled in it until the day my troop was hired to guard a mysterious shipment on its way to some clandestine drop-off. On the way, I discovered the shipment was slaves to be traded to the Collectors for advanced technology."

"You supported the slave trade?"

"In my foolish youth, I'd certainly engaged in questionable practices, but never anything patently unjust. I demanded that we turn around. My mates disagreed. After they were dead, I brought the ship around. The Collector craft was just arriving. They closed faster than I could flee. Fortunately we were close to the Mass Relay. I got through, and they did not pursue."

"What did you do with all the slaves?"

"I lectured them on the virtues of strength and defending oneself, then I distributed the armor, weapons, and credits of my dead colleagues, and released the captives on the Citadel."

"Wow. You said you fought a Spectre?"

"A turian named Nihlus. He may have been on Council business, but I witnessed him kill an unarmed civilian. Following the Code, I attacked Nihlus."

"I met Nihlus. He seemed like an honorable turian, and a good Spectre."

"He may have been. However, killing unarmed civilians is wrong."

"When we met, I witnessed you kill a merc who had no chance against you."

"That was a mercenary who was armed, and I offered her a way out. She chose to ignore it."

"I see the distinction, now. And...you destroyed an entire village?"

Samara paused for a moment before deciding to share. "The criminal I told you about, the one I am pursuing. I tracked her to a remote colony world. She'd perverted an entire town, making them worship her, and bring her young asari sacrifices. When I arrived, she fled, throwing her minions at me in waves. They bought her time with their lives. When it was done, only small children remained. I left them in the authorities' care and continued my pursuit."

This was clearly difficult for her to talk about, so Shepard changed the subject. "What have your years as a Justicar been like?"

"Mostly tedium and hardship, traveling on freighters, wandering through rural areas, rooting out injustices big and small, putting down corrupt officials. When I arrive in a remote area, individuals often approach me with matters of justice. My judgment rarely turns out the way they hope."

"How do you pay for transportation between worlds?"

"Asari captains often welcome Justicars. We reduce pirate attacks. One raid was called off when the pirates were able to verify that I was aboard."

Shepard thanked Samara for the conversation, then went to continue his rounds.

Kasumi opened her door at Shepard's knock.

"There you are," she said as if she'd been looking for him.

"How are things?"

"The Normandy runs so quietly. I'm not used to hearing my footsteps when I walk. This one security guy keeps staring at me. I think his name is Bert. I'm used to being watched by security, but they're usually staring at my eyes, or watching my hands. I might have to start cloaking through the CIC from now on."

"Wait, cloaking through – "

"Joker and EDI are like an old married couple. I keep expecting to walk in on them bickering about the temperature in the cockpit. EDI has a wicked sense of humor. Or, I should say a really funny lack of one. Sometimes she seems like a person, but when it comes down to it, I can't get past her being a computer. And Gabby and Ken would make a great couple. I just doubt they'll ever realize it."

"That's – "

"One of the girls in navigation thinks she might be pregnant. even aboard a Cerberus vessel, life finds a way.

" – interesting..."

"Come back later. I'm sure I'll have more to talk about."

Shepard scratched his head on the way out, uncertain as to what that was.

In his room down on the Engineering Deck, Zaeed seemed lost in thought.

"This mission takes me back."

"What's on your mind?"

"Tough fight on Horizon. I fought slavers and kidnapping rings, but nothing like that. Some slavers took a little girl on a colony in the Skepsis system. Girl woke up, fought her way out. Got picked up by my band while on her way to Omega. Eight years old. She'd have had no chance on Horizon."

"No kidding." Shepard thought back to the abandoned playground. Not something he wanted to think about. "Thoughts on the ship? The crew?"

"Nice ship you got here. Roomy. Last ship I worked on, two men couldn't walk past each other in the hall unless they were really good friends. So you knew Archangel from before?"

Shepard nodded. "He helped me take down Saren."

"Interesting. Knew a lot of men taking jobs to kill the son of a bitch. I never saw the point. He and I wanted the same thing: a whole lot of mercs dead. Hell of a sniper, though. And he kept himself alive with all the mercs in Omega after him. That ain't easy."

"Anything else?"

Zaeed looked out the window to the Cargo Bay below. Jack and Miranda were sparring. "Jack. Hell of a girl. Could have used a destructive little bitch like that ten years ago when we dropped blind into the Krogan DMZ. Took out a lot of krogan that day, but we lost way too many men." The grizzled mercenary turned back to Shepard. "Hmm....Trying to remember...what was his name...salarian infiltration specialist. Hundred story man. Guy could disable station security with a few taps on an omni-tool. He went to work with Eclipse a few years back. Had to kill him for a job. Your Mordin Solus kind of reminds me of him."

"Let's not kill any of our squadmates, okay?"

Zaeed shrugged. "I have no contracts on them. Good job setting up the training. Smart. Should have done that earlier, though."

"I know."

"I should let you go. Talk more later, Shepard."

Shepard went to the the forward battery, looking for Garrus. The turian was arm-deep in the guts of the main gun. He made some excuse about being in the middle of some calibrations. Whatever that meant.

The Commander walked in to the Lab to find Mordin in the middle of something, as usual.

“Have you got a minute to talk?”

“Not now. Working on Collector data. Have ruled out artificially intelligent virus. Unless it's very intelligent and toying with me. Hmm. Tests.”

“I'll leave you too it.”

“Will be here if you need me.”

-----THE GIFT OF GREATNESS-----

Shepard found Jacob in the armory, absently poking at a gun.

“Commander? Sorry, I'm a little unfocused.”

“Right after Horizon, you said something about unfinished business.”

“I have to apologize. It's a personal matter, but I won't let it affect my duties.”

“Always have time for my crew. What is it?”

“I don't want to waste our time if it turns out to be a goose chase, but...Well, I got pinged by a ghost the other night. Family.”

“I'm listening.”

“My father was first officer on a ship that went missing ten years ago. I hadn't talked to my father for three years before that. I've buried everything but a body. His ship, the Hugo Gernsback, sent an SOS last week, reporting a crash and requesting a rescue. Just like that, out of the black. I'm not convinced it isn't just some automated distress signal ticking over. It's been too long.”

“I'd think you'd be more excited that your father might be alive.”

“He wasn't around enough for me to have bad memories. It's an old, well-healed wound. But if he's actually alive and needs help...”

“You didn't get along with your father?”

“He made no apologies, I'll give him that. You make a mistake, you own up to it, even if you keep making it. Whatever problems we had were a lifetime ago. I've had ten years to get where I am. And as far as I know, he's still a ghost.”

“But you'd like us to go take a look at the wreck. See if it's legit?”

“If the coordinates aren't too far out of our way. I could at least verify the wreck. Who knows, maybe there is actually someone out there. I also want to mention that I don't make a habit of looking for random SOS signals. And it's not normal procedure for distress calls to be routed to the Normandy. This was passed to my personal log through Cerberus filters.”

“Any sign that your father's mission was a Cerberus front? Who passed this to you?”

“I doubt the Illusive Man would let a direct operation stay cold this long. If there's a link, it's probably just about money. Cerberus needs diverse holdings to fund projects like, well, you. And whoever sent this my way covered their tracks. Someone could be fishing for favors. Or thought it might get under my skin. Who knows with that bunch?”

“Tell me about the Hugo Gernsback and what it was doing.”

“Privately held frigate. I looked over the mission brief when it disappeared. Nothing stood out. Typical research and grab operation.” Shepard wasn't familiar with the concept, so he asked. “Find an uncharted planet, stake a claim, and establish as large a presence as you can as fast as possible to shut out competitors.”

“I think we can spare the time. Pass the coordinates to Joker.”

“I appreciate that, Commander. I don't expect more than dusty old bones. but it'll be good to close the record.”

“All right. This is your mission, Jacob. Pick your squad.”

Jacob pondered the question for a moment. "Just you, Shepard. This is just recon. I don't expect any trouble, but I wouldn't mind some backup."

"Not even Miranda?"

"You're the only one I've told about all this. I trust her, sure. But there's no reason to involve her."

Shepard shrugged. "If you say so. I'll follow your lead. We have plenty of time to prep, though."

The Normandy's shuttle landed with a thud on the planet 2175 Aeia. Jacob and Shepard stepped off, and though they weren't anticipating trouble, they were equipped with their usual combat gear. By all appearances, this was a garden world. The plants and trees all looked healthy, if alien, though there were no animals in sight. The remains of the Hugo Gernsback lay on the shore of a large lake, its hull creaking gently as a light breeze blew through it.

"I have run a scan of the ship," EDI announced. "I detect no life signs, but there may be useful technology or information still inside."

"There it is," said Jacob. "And mostly intact. They could have survived impact...but it's been years. Looks like it was stripped after the crash. They'd have tried to get a beacon up as soon as possible."

As the two men neared the wreckage, they saw rusted equipment and metal debris forming a footbridge to the ship. On shore, a holo-emitter flickered with the image of a male VI. It spoke as they approached.

"Repeat. Toxology alert. Danger of rapid neural decay. Local flora chemically incompatible with human physiology."

"Rusted, covered in moss," Shepard noted. "This beacon's been here a while."

It may have been sitting there a long time, but the VI's voice recognition was working.

"Override: Beacon resumed. Pause time, eight years, 237 days, 7 hours."

"Why would they wait years to signal?" Jacob wondered.

"Pause in beacon protocol recorded as: RECORD DELETED by Acting Captain Ronald Taylor."

"That's not right. My father was first officer."

"Ronald Taylor was promoted under emergency protocols. Other flagged issues: Unsafe deceleration; Local food and neural decay. Beacon activation protocols."

"I assume 'unsafe deceleration' refers to the crash," said Shepard.

The Commander wasn't asking, but the VI responded as if it had been asked a question. "Following an unspecified impact and sublight drive failure, the Hugo Gernsback made and unscheduled descent at 465 percent of theoretical recommended sub-orbital velocity. The Hugo Gernsback then decelerated at 782 percent of theoretical recommended approach velocity, sustaining significant damage to investment and crew."

"Okay, I'll bite," said Shepard. "Why are you comparing the crash to theoretical speeds?"

"The Hugo Gernsback was constructed off-world. It is not rated for suborbital descent, and doing so exceeded operational parameters."

Shepard noticed Jacob's disapproving look and apologized.

Jacob asked the next questions. "Who's in command here? Where are the survivors?"

"Captain Harris Fairchild reported killed following unscheduled suborbital descent. First Officer Ronald Taylor promoted in field to acting captain."

"But where is he now?"

"The location of the remaining crew of the Hugo Gernsback is unknown. This beacon has been unattended for several maintenance cycles."

"Why wasn't the beacon activated before now?"

"This emergency beacon became functional after 358 days, 12 hours, following the unscheduled suborbital descent of the Hugo Gernsback. Activation triggered remotely after eight years, 237 days, 7 hours, on the authority of acting captain Ronald Taylor. Pause in beacon protocol recorded as: RECORD DELETED."

It was clear that the VI didn't have that answer, and Jacob wanted to move on. But Shepard wanted to know about the plants, not that he was hungry.

"Local food impairs brain functions? What are the effects?" asked Shepard.

"Impairment of mental function due to chemical imbalance begins within seven days of ingesting local flora, regardless of decontamination or preparation. Impact on higher cognitive abilities and long-term memory is cumulative, but significant within a standard month. It is not known if neural decay is permanent. Data collection was not completed."

"Come on, let's get going," said Jacob. "Let's check the ship. My father had the beacon for almost nine years. Maybe...that neural decay affected him. There's no way he could avoid eating something grown on this planet."

The small section of the ship had been stripped nearly completely. A few officers' logs were accessible, though they were corrupted and only partial entries remained. The doctor was having trouble remembering someone's name and face; a loved one left at home, possibly. Another officer recorded taking advantage of the neural decay in some of the crew, and his insinuations were sickening. It was informative, but there was nothing that would help Jacob find his father.

There was a path leading further along the lakeshore, and the two men continued along until they came to a cluster of rusted barrels. A young woman with unkempt hair appeared from around a bend and addressed them.

"You came? From the sky?" Her manner was childlike and innocent. "The leader said someone would come! He delayed for so long, but he still has power. Some have lost faith." She stiffened and looked around nervously, as if suddenly realizing something. "The hunters! They will have seen your star. They will not let you help him."

"Who are you? What was your rank on the Gernsback?" Shepard asked.

"I...uh...don't remember how to say it. The Leader thinks for us, and...and we serve, so...so we can go home." The woman's brow furrowed in concentration. "But some want to fight him. They were – they were cast out. He exiled them, so they hunt his machines and those who help him. They don't believe that rescue will come."

As if on cue, four scraggly-looking men in worn clothing came running up. "Kill them!" one of them yelled. "Agents of the liar! He will not escape!"

All four aimed pistols and opened fire. The decade-old weapons wouldn't really do any harm to the two heavily-armored Cerberus commandos, but the woman was in danger. Shepard grabbed her and pulled her down behind the barrels.

Jacob killed one with a blast from his shotgun and lifted another with biotics. The fall would kill him when the field wore off, unless a breeze pushed him out over the lake. Shepard used his own biotics to shove one of the hunters head-first into a tree, knocking him unconscious, but was forced to kill the last.

"So that's neural decay, huh?" said Jacob. "They just seemed regular old crazy to me."

The female survivor stood up looked around when the coast was clear. "You killed them, but there are more every day. They won't stop until the Leader is dead. They want to fight, but I just want to go home."

"My father wouldn't let this go on. Something is very wrong. We need to find someone who can make sense of this."

Further along the path was a rusted light HK mech.

"Stripped for parts," Shepard said as he took a closer look. "Tech wearing out. Those hunters must be laying on the pressure."

The path sloped upward towards a clearing. "Is that a settlement?" Jacob hoped. "They better be friendlier than the beach group. I need answers."

The settlement consisted of several cloth tents, weatherbeaten and worn. If that was what passed as shelter, these folks were in dire straits. A few clusters of women stood around, some chatting, others seemed to just be in a daze. All of their clothing was tattered, their hair unevenly cut and unkempt besides. Everything looked dirty and uncared-for.

"They're wearing the same uniform as the ones who attacked us, but they don't look ready for a fight," said Shepard. "Is this an earlier stage, or did the exile make the others violent? Or the food has different effects on men and women? Either way, it's kind of weird. And there aren't any men around."

"It doesn't matter," Jacob sounded determined. "Right now, one of these people must know what my father has to do with this!"

"You have his face!" one of the women exclaimed as she saw Jacob. She sounded frightened, but she didn't make any move to run. "He promised to call the sky, but he sends nothing. He forced us to eat, to...decay. You are cursed with his face!"

"Not the best reaction to the family resemblance, Jacob."

"Why would my father force his crew to eat toxic food? Whatever's happening here needs to stop." Jacob gestured at a nearby table with what looked like plates of cooked vegetables. "Look at these spoiled food stores. They've been eating only that toxic local food for who knows how long. Like that wasn't obvious enough."

The path led through the camp. As they passed through, they tried to speak with the other women, but everyone refused to engage in conversation. The few comments they got had to do with being afraid of Jacob's face, but some confirmed Shepard's suspicions. And Jacob's too, if his expression was anything to go by.

In the center of the settlement was a vaguely human statue constructed of ship parts. Its arms were outstretched, and Shepard couldn't decide if it depicted a protector or savior. Probably both.

Jacob was disgusted. "What the hell? Somebody had to push them to make that. That's borderline... worship."

Past the camp, the path narrowed and followed the shore of the lake along a cliff. Five functional light mechs slowly wobbled into view, all of them carrying pistols.

"Your captain demands obedience," said one in a programmed voice. "Weapons are forbidden."

All of the mechs opened fire. Shepard and Jacob backtracked to the camp and took cover behind some trees. But Shepard didn't want to retreat any further, as the docile women behind him would be at risk. But light mechs had never proven a challenge, and the two men made short work of them.

"His mechs shoot without question?" Jacob was dismayed. "Not exactly a long-term discipline solution."

"Well, that would make them hate him," Shepard said. "But maybe it was just for defense."

They advanced with weapons drawn, on the off-chance that any of the disabled robots might still be active. None were, and thankfully none of them self-destructed. As they were securing the battlefield, a woman stood up from behind some small boulders. She held out a datapad.

"Please. Here. You could end it." The woman recognized Jacob. "You...have his face...but you fight his...machines. You might stop this. This...I forget how to...read, but this...was the start. What he promised and what they did to us." Jacob took the datapad gently, and the woman began to stroll back to the settlement. "We need the sky. Take us back to the sky," she plead.

Jacob began to skim through the datapad. Shepard saw that the path forward was blocked by a small landslide, and there was no easy way around or over it. The Commander removed his grenades, but he wasn't sure the three he had would be enough. He got Jacob to give his up.

"Jacob, what does it say?"

"It's a crew log book. Some of them thought the beacon repair was taking too long. They were afraid they'd run out of supplies and lose their minds to the decay. My father restricted the ship food for

himself and the other officers so they wouldn't be affected. Everybody else had to eat the toxic food and hope for treatment later. The rest is a casualty list. A few mutinied over the decision. My father and his officers turned the mechs on them."

While Jacob continued to read, Shepard pulled batteries from the destroyed mechs and added them to the pile. "The beacon was fixed after a year, so the plan must have worked. Why no signal?" Shepard asked.

“Those weren't the last entries on the casualty list. More incidents, harsh punishments, it's like they're cattle. Or toys. In a year all the male crew members are flagged as exiled or dead. They separated out the women. Assigned them to officers like pets.” Shepard grimaced, but Jacob went on. “And after the beacon is fixed, the officers appear in the casualties, too. After! My father took control and didn't stop it.”

“Sounds like he wasn't command material, and it got to him.”

“Everything he did is coming back to bite him in the ass. Nine years! Why didn't he set it right?”

“We haven't seen any other officers. Did he kill them?”

“There were five after the crash: medical, engineering, bridge staff. Should've had no problem fixing the beacon and keeping people safe. All killed within the same week – about a month after the beacon was repaired.”

“Anything in there about whether the effects of the toxic food can be treated?”

“Nothing. But it seems like the right call. If everyone decays, who's left to fix the beacon? You'd never get out. But they did fix it. And the signal wasn't sent until now. I'm starting to see why.”

“Does it say why he separated the men and women? Or is it as bad as it seems?”

“No, it turns to gibberish. Maybe the men got violent early on, but from the state of this place, I'd say the hunter thing is recent. What he allowed here, Shepard...I don't see any justification.”

“None? He's your father.”

“Is he? None of this fits. Maybe the initial decision, but the rest? Abuse of power doesn't get any clearer than this. I need to find this man.”

That seemed to be the end of the logs, and Shepard's improvised stack of explosives was ready. He and Jacob took cover behind some boulders. Remembering to seal his helmet against the inevitable dust this time, the Commander tossed his last grenade at the pile. The explosion left a gaping hole in the cliff side, as well as a crater in the path.

A man's voice emitted from a hidden loudspeaker as they continued on.

“This is Captain Ronald Taylor. Thank god you're here! My crew went insane. I only just got free!”

“Goddammit,” Jacob said between gritted teeth. “It's really him. 'Just got free?' He's covering his ass.”

On the other side of the crater, the path sloped up again, angling further inland. Seven or eight corpses had been arranged in a pile. Shepard bent down to examine them.

“The old corpse was posed, like a warning. The new ones were left where they fell.”

“He did this to his own men? Who the hell are we dealing with here?”

“The hunters started fighting back, probably.”

“Throwing people away. This...thing...is not my father.”

They arrived at a compound. It could generously be called a depot, what with the crates of supplies dropped wherever it had been convenient. There were also a series of low walls set up like barricades, as if attacks were expected or even frequent. The crates had food labels on them, and most were empty. Probably all were, but neither of the Cerberus operatives felt like checking. Besides, a half-dozen light mechs and one heavy mech activated suddenly and began attacking.

Another loudspeaker crackled to life with the voice of Jacob's father. “Careful. I automated my defenses after the crew turned violent. They keep attacking! I had no choice.”

“He had plenty of choices,” Jacob muttered. “Little late to blame his victims.”

Shepard was getting tired of this guy now, too. Jacob kept the light mechs busy, destroying them one at a time, while the Commander widdled down the heavy mech with his rocket launcher. Just as the last robot exploded in a shower of sparks, seven feral men descended from the hills, yelling nonsense and firing their pistols.

“I had to keep them busy, distracted,” Ronald announced. “But it's getting dangerous. Thank god you've come! It took years to train my guards. I'm afraid you'll have to fight them to rescue me.”

“He had his fun, and now he wants out.” Jacob was angry. “Son of a bitch.”

Shepard was out of heatsinks. He used biotics to try and disable the men. Jacob had the same

idea, but he picked the same target as the Commander. Biotics sometimes detonate in certain combinations. The blast disintegrated one man and tossed the two closest to him so hard that it killed them. The other four surrendered and dropped their weapons. Shepard and Jacob found some loose wire to tie them up.

Jacob shook his head. "Enough with the toys. I need to look my father in the eye and hear him justify this."

A gate lead out to a large deck overlooking the lake. An older, dark-skinned man turned as they entered. He certainly had Jacob's face, if less hair. Even his beard was thin. Shepard walked past him and leaned on the railing, admiring the view. He thought a swim would be nice, if it weren't for the neural decay.

"You're here!" said a relieved Ronald Taylor. "I knew a real squad would blow through just fine. Sorry if the mechs scuffed your pads. I'll get you something nice when we get back to Alliance Space. I've got to have some back pay coming."

"What about your crew, 'Acting Captain'?" Jacob folded his arms and scowled.

Ronald seemed to not recognize his own son. "Total loss. The toxic food turned them wild. They propped me up here in some kind of ritual behavior. Waiting for a chance to signal has been hell."

"That's the best you can do?"

"You let all your people talk back like that?" The older man addressed Shepard. "Who are you, exactly?"

"Doesn't matter. Shepard turned around to face Jacob's father. "You're running a very questionable setup here, Captain. Explain."

"Of course." Ronald rubbed the back of his neck, though his voice remained in control. "It was chaos after the crash, and the crew never really accepted me as captain. They rebelled and trapped us here. Once they started eating the toxic food, I couldn't control them, and I couldn't get to the beacon."

"Just stop," said Jacob. "We know what you did to your crew. Why let this go ten years?"

"Who the hell are you?" Ronald spoke softly and squinted.

"Taylor. Lieutenant Jacob Taylor."

"Jacob? My Jacob?"

"Why not me? Would ten years of this look better to anyone else in the galaxy? I want to hear you try and justify this."

"I was hoping to not have to explain this to you. Or anyone, really." Jacob's dad shrugged. "You have to understand, this isn't me. The realities of command, they change you. I wasn't ready for that. I made sure you were taught right. Before I left. I hoped to leave it at that."

"Goddamnit, why did you do this to your crew? What was that moment? I want to know that there was an actual reason!"

"There was resistance to the plan. Mutiny. We had to take a hard line to keep order, and things settled down. As the decay set in, we made sure the crew were comfortable. Some even seemed happier. Ignorance is bliss, right? And they were grateful for guidance, like an instinct. Pure authority was easy...at first. Months in, the effect lowered inhibitions. They got territorial. Rank, protocol – they couldn't understand. We had to establish dominance. After a while the perks seemed...normal."

"That's it? You created a harem and played king? *Ten years* in a juvenile fantasy?"

"Dining for one can really stretch things out. Besides, I can think of a lot worse retirement than stripping down and joining the droolers. That was before the hunters, of course. I can't point to where it all went wrong. But when the beacon was ready, revealing what happened didn't seem like a good idea."

"What happened to the other officers?" Shepard asked.

"Anders found his conscience a little late to step back. He had an accident. Things got...tense. End of the day, I was the one with the mechs. I got a little basic in setting examples, but I was kind to my people once things settled down. Seemed like I'd earned some peace."

"You fought over people like they were toys," Jacob sneered. "Things."

"You didn't feel any responsibility to get out of here for the sake of family?" asked Shepard.

"I gave him a good start. He was a smart kid and was better off not following me. We figured that out a long time before I took jobs in deep space. And, after things escalated here, it seemed best to just disappear off the galactic map."

"Until you needed someone to save your ass," Jacob accused. "We should just leave him here. Let the hunters deal with him."

"Dumb or not, I'd feel it if they got their hands on me now. They want blood. I'd prefer to keep it." "We can help these people," Shepard said. "The Alliance can have ships here in days and pull everyone out. But you don't get to just walk away."

"You're damned right he doesn't." Jacob squeezed his pistol so hard his knuckles cracked. "He's not worth the fuel to haul him out, or the air he's breathing. He's damn lucky I don't think he's even worth pulling the trigger. I don't know who you are, because you're not any father I remember."

"The Alliance can put him on trial. For every year here, he'll have ten to think about it."

"Give him all the time in the galaxy. The man who did this doesn't know right from wrong." Jacob turned and started to walk away.

"I'm sorry, Jacob. I did the best I could."

"I'm ten years past believing that."

Back aboard the Normandy, Shepard changed into casual clothing and went to check on Jacob. Kelly told him the lieutenant was speaking with the Illusive Man via holocall.

Joker spoke up over the intercom. "Alliance ships are inbound to pick up survivors, Commander. We can be long gone by the time they get here."

"Engage the stealth systems. Don't even give them the taillights."

"Roger that."

Shepard entered the holographic transmitter to find TIM seated in his usual chair. Jacob seemed confused and angry.

"What do you mean it wasn't you?"

"Jacob, if I had leaked the information about the Gernsback, I would be smiling at your resolution of the situation. I am not smiling."

"Given the result, it feels like something you'd have a hand in. Nothing goes through this ship without a report to you."

"I had no more reason to believe your father was alive than you did, but I'm happy to know this situation is behind you."

"Fine. You didn't forward it. So who did?"

"I did." Miranda entered the hologram.

"Figures. Who else could get into Cerberus channels?"

"It was hardly classified, just obscure. There was a time when it mattered to you. Sending this along seemed like keeping an old promise. I keep my promises."

TIM spoke before Jacob had a chance to react. "Miranda, we will discuss your liberal interpretation of security protocol in private. Shepard. Jacob."

The call ended, and the holograms faded. Jacob and Miranda exchanged a significant look before she left the room.

"You had no idea Miranda was behind this?" Shepard asked when they had the room to themselves.

"No...She's got a good memory. Selective, but good. I haven't thought about those days in a long time. Can't figure which promise she meant, though. Not sure I really want to know She...requires a better man than I."

Shepard had a sneaky suspicion Jacob meant him, but he ignored that. Liara was still in the back of his mind. Literally, thanks to their bond. Instead, he asked how Jacob was doing.

"It's all bull, Shepard. 'Captain' Taylor can rot in prison – it doesn't change who I am or what I know. I've already mourned the man he used to be. I guess he was a good enough father that even he

can't screw up what he taught me.” Jacob lowered his head and looked pensive for a moment.

“Shepard? Thanks for the help.”

“Anytime Jacob.” The two men shook hands.

“My father was a different man, Shepard. A good man. Wish I'd found him.”

-----THE PRODIGAL-----

Shepard was in his quarters, studying data on the Collectors, when there came a knock on the door. At his invitation, the door opened, and Miranda walked in, looking unusually out of sorts.

“Commander – Shepard, I find myself in the unpleasant position of asking for your help. I don't like discussing personal matters...but this is important.”

“What's going on?” Shepard offered a seat on the couch, but his XO remained standing and began to pace.

“You remember what I told you about father...building a dynasty?” Her ausie accent was thicker than usual.

“Remind me.”

“He wanted the ideal daughter, and he paid a great deal to genetically tailor me. When I learned that my father was more interested in controlling a dynasty than raising a daughter, I left. I have a sister. A twin. I took her with me and found her a real home. But he's still hunting her. Cerberus has kept her safe. Until now. She's living a normal life on Illium, safe and hidden from our father.”

“So you think your father has tracked her down.”

“Precisely. My father's agents have been searching for my sister for years. My sources indicate he knows that she's on Illium. I've tried to keep her hidden without impacting her life, but I'm out of options. He's too close. I need to relocate my sister's family before it's too late.”

“What can you tell me about your sister?”

“She's my genetic twin. We're identical. But she deserves a normal life. And she's going to get it no matter what.”

“Does your sister's family know about this? Are they okay with being relocated?”

“They know nothing. They're completely uninvolved. Normal. I told Cerberus, and they're coming up with a positive reason to move the family.”

Shepard took a deep breath, then exhaled. “What do you need me to do?”

“My father is extremely persistent. I'd like to go to Illium when Cerberus is moving the family to make sure none of his agents get too close.”

“I'm confused. Didn't you say your father is a major donor to Cerberus?”

“Yes, but Cerberus operates in cells. Information is compartmentalized.”

“Sure. But The Illusive Man coordinates it all, right?”

“There's no way he'd compromise our mission like that. He'd know I'd detour to keep my sister safe. This is a coincidence. I'm certain of that.”

“Okay. I can tell this is important to you.” Shepard got up and used the intercom to tell Joker to set course for Illium.

“Thank you, Shepard. My contact's name is Lanteia. She'll be waiting for us in the lounge near the Nos Astra docking bay.”

Shepard had hoped to stop and check on Liara, but Miranda's contact was waiting for them in the docking bay as soon as they stepped off the gangplank. The asari had light purple skin and was wearing cargo pants. She was trying too hard to remain inconspicuous.

“Ms. Lawson. I'm glad you've made it. We've had a complication.”

“What happened? Is Oriana all right?”

“She's fine. But...you listed a man named Niket as your trusted source. He contacted me, warning that your father has sent Eclipse mercenaries to make a sweep. He suggested that the mercs might be

watching for you personally. He's offered to escort Oriana's family to the terminal instead."

"You didn't mention anything about Niket," Shepard said to Miranda.

"Niket is one of my oldest friends. I guess you can say he was my only real friend. He's the only person I didn't cut ties with when I left my father."

"Is there a chance your father could be using Niket to get to you?"

"I'm sure he's tried, but Niket's one of the few people who understands what my father is really like. I trusted him with my life when I ran from my father, Shepard. He won't betray me now."

"Do you want to bring in any of your other Illium contacts, Ms. Lawson?" asked Lanteia.

"No. You and Niket are the only two I trust on this."

"What do you know about his band of Eclipse?" Shepard asked Lanteia.

"I've confirmed that they've been hired by an organization Ms. Lawson warned us about. I could try to alert the authorities, but so far, they've done nothing illegal."

"You made the right decision," said Miranda. "We'll handle this ourselves."

"It's your sister, Miranda," Shepard said. "What do you want to do?"

"Lanteia, we'll follow Niket's suggestion. Shepard and I will take a car and draw their attention. Have Niket escort the family to the shuttle. Give him full access to the family's itinerary, just to be safe."

"Understood, Ms. Lawson."

Miranda's contact nodded and walked off. Miranda led Shepard to a lot of rental cars.

"So the plan is for us to get shot down by Eclipse while your sister gets to safety?"

"Eclipse will be under orders to take my sister alive. I look like her, so they won't risk anything that could kill us."

"I doubt Eclipse will send all their people just to stop you. Do you want to give Niket any backup?"

"Niket can take care of himself. Besides, any armed backup just draws attention to him."

"I'm ready whenever you are, Miranda."

"Thank you, Shepard. I appreciate this. I hadn't planned on Eclipse...but they never planned on you."

As Miranda flew the sky car towards their destination, three Mantis gunships swooped past, speeding on ahead.

"Damn it!" Miranda exclaimed. "Eclipse mercenary gunships. They'll be dropping troops in the cargo areas."

Shepard looked around, searching for a safe place to land. "Put us down in that cover behind them."

"Let's hope they really do want to take us alive."

One of the mercs opened fire on the sky car. Shepard could see the merc's boss telling her to hold fire, but the damage was done. The car's engine was hit, and the mass effect fields sputtered out. Thankfully it was near the ground and the landing wasn't too rough. Shepard shook his head to clear it as he pulled himself out of the vehicle.

"I got this," the mercenary lieutenant motioned to the troops nearest to him to lower their weapons.

"Since you're not firing yet, I trust you know who I am," Miranda sneered.

"Yeah. They said you'd be in the car. You're the bitch that kidnapped our boss's little girl."

"Kidnapped?" Miranda was surprised at the accusation, but recovered quickly. "This doesn't involve you. I suggest you take your men and go."

"Think you've got it all lined up, huh. Captain Enyala's already moving in on the kid. She knows about Niket. He won't be helping you."

"Should we be talking to Captain Enyala about this?"

"You don't want to talk to the captain. She's not as polite as I am. She's the best commando I've ever seen. I've seen her tear people in half with her biotics. And she's getting paid a lot to stop you."

"She gets in my way, she'll never have a chance to spend it," Miranda threatened.

Shepard followed Miranda's lead. This was her mission, after all. "We're giving you one chance to leave. That's more than most get."

"Funny. Captain Enyala ordered *us* to give *you* one chance to walk away. But this whole time we've been talking, my men have been lining up shots. When I say the word, we unleash hell on you. So I suggest you walk away nicely unless you want things – "

Shepard noticed a crane in the background moving a canister of something flammable. He lunged at the mercenary lieutenant and snapped his neck, then fired at the crane, which dropped its load on top of a group of mercenaries. The explosion was most satisfying. Miranda shot one of the nearby mercs, and the last fled the scene.

"Nice shooting," Miranda complimented.

"Well, the car is toast, what now?"

"According to the specs I reviewed, we'll need to cut through the cargo processing yard to get to Oriana. There should be an elevator past those cranes there."

Shepard stooped to search the bodies and found a radio. He patched it in to his and Miranda's armor, then caught up to her as the elevator doors closed.

"Shepard, I think I owe you an explanation. Oriana is my twin genetically, but my father...grew her when I was a teenager. She was meant to replace me. I couldn't let my father do to her what he did to

me. So I rescued her. She's almost a woman now."

"Why didn't you tell me that we were saving a kid?"

"She's not a child; she'll be nineteen this year. But...well, it didn't seem relevant at the time, I suppose. There are people who'd use her against me. I'm very protective when it comes to Oriana. I'm sorry I didn't trust you sooner. You deserved to know."

"I can understand choosing to go your own way, but you stole a young child from her father."

"If you knew my father, you would understand. I wasn't the first one he made. I was only the first he kept. I was brought up with no friends, pushed to meet impossible demands. I wasn't a daughter to him. I was...I don't know what I was. Oriana has had a normal life. I made the right decision."

"I'm guessing he...stopped...after your sister if he's going to these lengths to find her."

"We were very expensive. Not as expensive as you, but..."

"Right." Another thought came to Shepard. "That merc made it sound like your friend Niket might be in some trouble."

"If they've got to him somehow, this is going to be harder than I'd planned."

The cargo processing yard was a system of large conveyor systems – belts and tracks, as well as cranes on overhead rails. Many of the containers had hazmat symbols. Miranda advised caution, but Shepard pointed out the effect his well-timed shot had had earlier.

Immediately upon the elevator doors opening, Shepard and Miranda were under fire. They took cover behind stacks of crates, then hid behind crates on conveyors to move around and flank the enemy. The poorly-trained Eclipse mercs stood no chance.

As the duo continued on, the mercenary's radio channel would bring orders from this Captain Enyala. As she barked, she became angrier. That short fuse could come in handy, or it could be a problem. Time would tell which. Around the next corner, a pair of light HK mechs stood in the way, but there were only two. Enyala ordered more, and said she didn't care how many robots were wasted as long as Shepard and Miranda were delayed. Oddly, no more mechs were encountered.

Another group of mercenaries stood clustered in front of the next elevator. The Cerberus operatives ducked behind a railing before they were noticed. Shepard surveyed the area and pointed out a crate being carried above marked inflammable. Miranda took the hint and waited for the opportunity. The mercs seemed to relax in the quiet. One even opened his helmet and lit a cigarette. Seconds dragged on with agonizing slowness. Enyala radioed that she would personally deal with Niket and the kid. Miranda started to fidget impatiently, and Shepard made a downward hand

motion. She took a calming breath or two.

Finally, the crate was in position, and the mercs were still clustered. Shepard and Miranda both broke cover and simultaneously opened fire on the claw-crane's arms. Miranda's aim with her pistol was perfect, but Shepard's assault rifle wasn't as accurate. Flames shot out from the container before it began to drop, but there was still enough material when it landed to incinerate the enemy.

As they boarded the elevator, Enyala's spoke again over the Eclipse frequency. "Niket has reached the terminal. He'll switch the family over to our transport."

Miranda stumbled as Shepard summoned the elevator. "Niket? But...that can't be right....Maybe the captain knows we're listening in and she's feeding misinformation about Niket making a switch." The elevator arrived and Shepard pressed the button, sending them up to the next level. "Or maybe it means something else." Miranda sounded like was trying to convince herself. "Niket wouldn't do that."

"Did Niket know that you took Oriana from your father?"

"It was too personal to involve someone else. He made the arrangements, but as far as he knew, it was just me. I never really thought about it, but maybe...no. He'd have to understand why I did it. He knows what I went through."

"What makes you so sure that Niket wouldn't turn on you?"

"He could have turned on me when I ran away. I'm sure my father tried to buy him off. If he didn't do it then, why would he do it now? Damn it why won't this thing go any faster?" Miranda activated her omni-tool and pounded the elevator controls. Sparks flew, but the elevator doubled its speed.

"The message on the radio seemed pretty clear," Shepard said as gently as he could.

"He wouldn't betray me. We'll be at the back of the transport station in a moment, and we'll clear this up."

"Listen to me. I've got authorization to change their booking!" Niket plead with the transport officer. He was a middle-aged man with black hair and a goatee.

"I'm sorry sir, we're under security lockdown." The asari in purple dockworker's overalls spoke in a rehearsed monotone as she examined her datapad. "Until the situation in the cargo terminal is resolved, no passengers can be rebooked."

"This isn't worth my time, Niket," said another asari, this one in heavy Eclipse armor. Enyala's casual posture as she sat leaning on a stack of crates contradicted her irritated tone. "I get paid regardless of how the girl gets there."

"No!" Niket was adamant. "I was told that I could handle this my way. We're not traumatizing the family any more than we –"

The elevator doors opened, disgorging the two Cerberus commandos. Niket narrowed his eyes at the woman

"Miranda," said Niket, only somewhat surprised to see her.

"This should be fun." Enyala hopped down from her throne of crates and drew a shotgun.

Shepard aimed his assault rifle in response. The transport officer ran at the sight of weapons being drawn and took off at a sprint. Enyala shot her in the back.

"Niket. You sold me out." Miranda's voice and face were ice as she aimed her pistol at her friend. "Why, Niket? You were my friend. You helped me get away from my father."

"Yes!" Niket said nervously, his hands raised. "Because *you* wanted to leave. That was your choice! But if I'd known that you'd stolen a baby –"

"I didn't steal her! I rescued her!"

"From a life of wealth and happiness? You weren't saving her! You were getting back at your father! They told me you'd kidnapped your baby sister all those years ago. They said I could help get her back peacefully. No trauma to the family. I told them you'd never do that. That they could go to hell. The last time we spoke, you finally told me what you'd done. I called them back that night."

"Why didn't you talk to me, Niket? We've been through a lot. You could've at least let me

explain.”

“I deserved to know that you'd stolen your sister, Miranda. I deserved to know you were with Cerberus. But I had to hear it from your father first.”

“Damn it, Niket! You were the only one I trusted from that life.”

“He knew you felt that way. That's why he bought me.”

“So you just took his money. How much is he paying you?”

“An awful lot. Don't get holy with me, Miranda. You took his money for years.”

“Oriana's been with her family for years now. You can't – ”

“Her father can still give her a better life.”

“You don't know what my father wants for her.”

“I know that I've been poor, Miranda. I didn't much care for it.”

“He wants to take a girl away from the only family she's ever known. Doesn't that tell you what he really is?”

The conversation seemed to be at an impasse. Shepard noticed the Eclipse captain's trigger finger getting itchy. “I knew Eclipse was willing to get their hands dirty, but kidnapping a kid?”

“I'm not stealing her, I'm rescuing her,” the asari sneered. “Come on, Niket. Let's finish this bitch off and get out of here.”

“If Niket knows about Oriana,” Shepard said, “then your father does, too. Relocating her won't work.”

Niket stared at the floor. “Miranda's father has no information about Oriana. I knew you had spy programs in your father's system, Miranda, so I kept it off the books. I'm the only one who knows.”

“Which means that you're the only loose end. This isn't how I wanted it to end.” Miranda had a hint of regret in her voice. “I'm going to miss you...”

“Miranda, wait.” Shepard put a hand on her shoulder. “You don't want to do this.”

“This has to end here, Shepard. My father will keep trying to find Oriana.”

“Maybe Niket can help...talk to your father? He can say you got here first...”

“Niket reluctantly agreed. “I'll...I'll tell him that you hid her. That I don't know where she is.”

“I never want to see you again.” Miranda lowered her pistol.

Enyala lost her patience and shot Niket in the back. “Done. Now if you don't mind, I have a shipment to deliver.”

“You'll die for that, bitch!” Miranda drew as much biotic energy as she could muster, lifted the mercenary captain, then flung her out off the top of the building. Four of her minions popped up from where they were hiding in the depot to watch. They spared one glance back at Miranda and Shepard, then they all fled.

“There could be more Eclipse mercs near the shuttle,” Miranda said as she regained her breath. “I want to make sure Oriana and her family get on safely.” She leaned on Shepard as they made their way through the warehouse out to the front of the transport station. “I can't believe Niket solved me out. I didn't even see it coming.”

“Everyone makes mistakes. You're human, just like the rest of us.”

“But I let it get personal, and I screwed up. Why didn't you let me kill him? I could have handled that. But watching him get gunned down by that asari bitch...”

“You still cared for him, even if he betrayed you. At least you don't have his death on your conscious.”

Miranda sighed and walked on her own. “You're right. I blame my father. Even now he's finding ways to screw with my life. It's always been like this. My father gave me anything I ever wanted, but there was always a hook, an angle for his long-term plan. I threw away everything he ever gave me when I ran. Except Niket. Weakness on my part.”

“Any other old friends your father might use against you?”

“No. I cut ties with everyone else. Anyone I'm close to now works for Cerberus...or you. My father's powerful, but he won't cross the Illusive Man.”

“You can't toss aside everything you care about just to be safe.”

"It's okay, Shepard. My father hurt me, but he didn't break me. As much as he tried to turn me into exactly what he wanted...I'm my own person."

"You still have Oriana."

"My father didn't give her to me. I rescued her. But...yes. You're right. I still have something. Thank you."

They emerged into the passenger waiting area. Miranda looked around and pointed out her sister. She was the spitting image of Miranda, even with her hair cut long.

"No sign of Eclipse. It looks like we're clear. There she is. She's safe...with her family. Come on, we should go."

"Don't you even want to say hello?"

"It's not about what I want, it's about what's right for her. The less she knows about me the better. She's got a family. A life. I'll just complicate that for her."

"She doesn't need any details, but would it really be so bad for her to know she has a sister who loves her?"

Miranda looked Shepard in the eyes as she thought about it, then looked at her sister. "I guess not."

"Go on. I'll wait here."

Shepard summoned a cab, then cooled his heels while Miranda chatted with her sister and her parents. A half-hour later, Miranda approached, and they rode in silence back to the Normandy.

After a few minutes, Miranda struck up a conversation. "Thanks again, Shepard. Taking the time to help me with my sister...I couldn't have reached Oriana in time without your help. And you proved yourself trustworthy...unlike Niket. I'm glad he tried to redeem himself, for what good it did. Thank you for stopping me, Commander."

"Sounds like you had a soft spot for him after all."

"I didn't have many friends. Niket was one of them. He never wanted anything from me. He was...safe. Comfortable. A reminder of a more innocent time, I suppose."

"Are you happy about your sister's relocation?"

Miranda stared out the window, not seeing the sun setting over the Nos Astra skyline. "She has what I wanted her to have – a normal life, and the freedom to choose her own path. And she knows she has an older sister. A friend."

"What did you talk about?"

"I introduced myself. Her parents were shocked. She adjusted quickly, of course. She's as smart as I am. She plays the violin. Loves the adagio movement of Nielsen's Fifth, just like I do. She wants to work in colony development. Told a joke about it." Miranda chuckled at the memory. "She's really funny. Something we don't share."

"Will you stay in touch?"

"I honestly don't know. For once, I haven't planned that far ahead. I'll deal with it after our mission. I have to stay focused, and she needs time to adjust to her new home."

The taxi alit at the Normandy's docking bay. Shepard paid the fare and they headed to the ship.

"I'm glad I could help. Let me know if there's anything else."

"I think I've got it from here. My father has no chance at finding her family in their new location. But thank you, Commander. My sister is safe again, thanks in large part to you. I won't forget that."

-----THE PRICE OF REVENGE-----

Zaeed confronted Shepard in the Normandy's mess.

"I assume the Illusive Man told you about our arrangement?"

"No, I guess he decided to leave that information out of the dossier."

"Good thing I asked. Picked up a mission a little while back, just before I signed on with Cerberus. Thought you might be interested. You ever heard the name Vido Santiago?" Shepard shook his head. "He's the head of the Blue Suns. Runs the whole organization. Seems he recently

captured an Eldfel-Ashland refinery on Zorya, and he's using their workers for slave labor. The company wants it dealt with."

Shepard sighed. "I'll make sure we get that done."

"Good. Get it out of the way so we can concentrate on being big guddamn heroes."

Zorya was a jungle planet. Shepard wasn't sure how a planet could have only a single biome, but he had seen some pretty strange things traveling the galaxy. What was unsurprising is that a mercenary company had taken over nearly all of the planet. The Normandy's shuttle landed with a thud on the opposite side of a hill from the target refinery.

"Tapping in to Blue Sun's communications," Zaeed announced. Strange that he just knew how to do that. "Stay tight and look out for ambushes."

Shepard looked around at the scenery. It was pretty, though the air was thick and humid. The Commander began to sweat just taking a few steps forward as Zaeed took the lead.

Almost immediately, a transmission was received from the Blue Suns' radio frequency. "Squad Bravo, a shuttle landed near your location. Check it out." The man's voice was husky, with an hispanic accent.

"Here we go. Keep close." Zaeed released the safety on his assault rifle. He seemed to find a path, but all Shepard saw was plants.

After a minute of slapping away thick jungle foliage, the two men came to a small copse of trees, and three human bodies in coveralls.

"Shot in the back and left to rot," Zaeed observed. "That's Vido's style, all right. Let's push ahead."

Leaving the bodies behind, they followed a dry creek bed. One of those grey monkey-like pyjaks crossed the path, and Shepard recalled his former squadmate Wrex naming them pests. Apparently they got around the galaxy.

"Command to Bravo. Take a position." said the voice on the radio. "Likely these people are not runaways."

"Report to base!" said a different voice. "Armed intruders incoming in the southern checkpoint!"

Rounding a corner, Shepard and Zaeed came to an abandoned construction site. The blue armor of the mercenaries stood out among all the green and brown of the jungle, not to mention the gray metal of whatever this building was supposed to be.

The two men took cover as they came under fire. One of the Blue Suns mercs had a rocket launcher. Shepard opted against using his own, for fear of bringing down the party-completing building on top of them. Zaeed, however, had no such compunction, and tossed a grenade. The rickety structure did indeed collapse, crushing all of the mercenaries on or within. The Commander made a strategic withdrawal into the jungle until the dust settled, then emerged in time to meet another half dozen mercs who were coming to join the battle.

This group was accompanied by one of the dog-like Fenris mechs. Shepard did use a rocket on that thing, and the resulting explosion took out two of the mercs, leaving four. Zaeed took out one with a headshot – which was surprisingly good aim for a man with one eye. The remaining three backtracked to a narrow chasm, and Shepard gave them a nice biotic push off the edge. Looking over, the Commander couldn't see the bottom.

Nearby was a bridge which had been retracted, and Shepard walked over to pull a lever to extend it.

"This is Commander Santiago," the husky voice said over the radio. "If any of you retreat while the intruders are still alive, I'll kill you myself. Now, get the hell back out there!"

Zaeed held up a hand, and Shepard paused the bridge's extension. "Sounds like he hasn't changed," he said.

"I get the feeling you have a past with this Vido."

"I knew he was a sadistic bastard back when we started the Blue Suns. The Suns only got meaner

after he staged his little coup twenty years ago. So yeah, we have a past.”

“Why didn't anyone tell me you founded the Blue Suns?”

“Because it's not common knowledge. Vido wiped me out of the records. He ran the books, I led the men. Worked real well for a while. Then Vido decided to start hiring batarians. Cheaper labor he said. guddamn terrorists, I say.”

“Twenty years is a long time to hold a grudge.”

“A grudge?” Zaeed was suddenly angry. “Vido turned my man against me. He paid six of them to restrain me while he put a gun to my head and pulled the trigger. For twenty years I've seen that bastard every time I close my eyes. Every time I sighted down on a target. Every time I heard a gunshot. Don't you call that a guddamn 'grudge.’”

“You survived a gunshot to the head?”

“Yeah, and you survived your ship getting disintegrated.” Zaeed was calmer, now. “Stubborn enough person can survive just about anything. Rage is a hell of an anesthetic.”

“We'd better get moving.” Shepard set the bridge to resume extending.

“They're at the southern access,” said Vido's voice.” All squads mass at the gatehouse!”

“Bring it on you son of a bitch!” Zaeed yelled. Thankfully not in the radio.

Across the bridge and up a small flight of stairs led to a path around the rest of the hill. A thick smoke stack was belching black cloud in the distance. The trees gave way to a rocky cliff below, and the view revealed a river with a series of waterfalls. Another few minutes brought them to a building built between two giant boulders. They entered the gatehouse, and indeed there was a second large door immediately ahead. Pipes and ducts lined the walls, and above was a catwalk. Three Blue Suns mercenaries stood waiting. The two helmeted mercs had their rifles aimed at the intruders, and the one without a helmet stood with his arms crossed, a smug expression on his bearded face.

“Zaeed Massani. You finally tracked me down.” Zaeed reached for his gun. “Don't be stupid, Zaeed. I have a whole company of bloodthirsty bastards behind me, ready to kill or be killed on my command.” Vido paused, and Zaeed eyed a valve to his left. Shepard wondered what he was up to. “Actually, take your shot. Give my men a reason to put you down like the mad dog you are. Again.” Zaeed suddenly drew his assault rifle and fired at the pipes below Vido and his men, causing gas to steam out. “What was that? Gone nearsighted old friend?”

Zaeed and Shepard split to opposite sides of the room. “Fry, you son of a bitch!” Zaeed yelled and fired again, igniting the gas. All three mercs were engulfed in flames. The two henchmen flailed about and fell off the scaffolding, where Shepard shot them.

“You just signed your death warrant, Massani!” Vido yelled in a cough as he retreated.

Shepard noticed Zaeed pounding on the valve with the butt of his rifle “The hell are you doing?”

“Opening the gate,” he said calmly as the valve handle broke off.

This increased the flow of gas, causing a cascade of explosions throughout the piping. The gate doors did indeed blow off their hinges. But as Shepard stepped through, he saw that the whole factory was suffering from the same cascading explosions.

“We're here to free these people. Why the hell would you blow up the refinery?”

“I came here to kill Vido Santiago. You want my help on your mission, you better make damn sure that man dies today.”

“We don't sacrifice lives for the sake of the mission. There's always a better way.”

“Like what? Wandering out in the jungle for hours looking for another way in? You want to waste time out here, go ahead. I'm gonna kill Vido.”

“You're endangering lives – and the mission – for your own selfish revenge.”

“You really want to do this, Shepherd?”

“I ought to knock you the hell out, but thanks to you, we have a burning refinery to save.”

“Let these people burn! Vido will die whatever the cost!”

“Help! We're trapped!” A man in worker's coveralls waved from a balcony above. “We can't get through to the gas valve to shut them off! The whole place is gonna blow!”

“No time,” Zaeed said. “Vido's probably halfway to the shuttle docks by now.”

“You're willing to watch these people die?”

“Damn right I am. We stop to help out these people and Vido gets away. And if he gets away I'm blaming you.”

“Vido's wounded. How fast could he be? We're here to free these people.” There was a door leading into the factory to the right, but the worker on the balcony above was pointing to another entrance further down where his coworkers were trapped. Shepard trotted off that way. “We're going in.”

“I knew this was a mistake,” Zaeed sighed, knowing he couldn't fight through the rest of the mercs alone. He hurried after the Commander. “If we're gonna do this, we'd better get to it.”

Inside the refinery, several pipes were leaking gas and spewing flame. At the far side of the large room was a thick plate-glass window, and the trapped workers were pounding on it, pointing out valves. Working together, Shepard and Zaeed managed to shut off the flow of gas. Upstairs was a control room, where Shepard found the controls for the sprinkler system. Strange that they weren't automatic, but with slave labor, that probably wasn't the only cut to safety in this operation. With the flames extinguished, the trapped workers yelled their thanks and ran out of the building.

Zaeed led the way further into the refinery. The shuttle pad would be on the far side. They came to another large room full of storage tanks. Pressure containers were being automatically filled, then lifted and carried off by overhead cranes. Blue Suns mercs began pouring into the room in twos and threes. Vido taunted over the radio several times during the ensuing fight. Some of the mercs were even wielding flamethrowers. The stupidity of mercs never ceased to amaze Shepard. Timing their shots, Shepard and Zaeed shot at the cranes overhead, dropping the tanks of gas onto the mentally-challenged mercs. Thankfully, the storage tanks were made of sterner stuff and remained intact.

The shuttle pad was indeed located just outside this room. As Shepard and Zaeed exited the building, Vido was hobbling up the ramp of a Mantis gunship, which took off before Zaeed could get off a shot.

“Not this time, Zaeed!” Vido yelled into the radio. “See you in another twenty years!”

Nevertheless, the one-eyed man held down his trigger, yelling in frustration at the top of his lungs. The gunship sped away, but evidently he hit something vital, because it began to smoke, then crashed in a fiery ball in the distance.

An explosion from within shook the refinery and the platform, and Shepard lost his footing. Those tanks inside must not have been as sturdy as Shepard had thought.

“Son of a bitch! Argh!” Zaeed grunted, and the Commander noticed his squadmate trapped with his legs under a steel beam.

“You started this fire, Zaeed. Makes sense that you'll burn in it,” Shepard bluffed as he stood and crossed his arms.

“Yeah? Screw you. Now come on. Get me out of this shithole.”

“You put your revenge your head of the mission. How can I trust that you'll be there when we need you?”

“I've survived this long watching my own back. No time to worry about anyone else. And I got my payback. I'll do what I was guddamn paid to do, Shepard. Just don't expect any more than that. Now stop screwing around, let's go!”

“You're part of a team, now Zaeed. There's no way we can do this unless we're all working together.”

Shepard found a thick length of pipe and propped it under the beam, then used leverage to lift it enough that Zaeed could slip himself out from under it.

“You...you have a point,” Zaeed said as he stood, favoring one leg, the brace having been broken. “Let's get back to the ship. I need a drink.”

“You may be a madman, Zaeed, but I need a certain amount of crazy if I'm going to stop the Reapers.”

-----TUCHANKA-----

The baby krogan was pacing, fidgeting, when Shepard entered his room on Deck Four.

“Chambers said you're tearing up the place. Something wrong?”

“Something is...wrong, Shepard. I feel wrong. Tense. I just want to kill something. With my hands. More so than usual. Like it's not my choice. Like I just want to, I don't know...” Grunt headbutted the window overlooking the cargo hold, cracking the glass. “See? Why do that? What's wrong?”

Doctor Chakwas entered the room. Shepard wasn't sure who called her. She started a scan. Grunt frowned. Shepard tensed.

“Pure' krogan probably starts more aggressive than most,” she said. “I'm not seeing this as a particularly big shift.”

“Doesn't matter if it's normal. I'm not.” Grunt resumed his pacing. “I'm not used to this...noise. I want control. When we're moving, fighting, I focus. But here, my blood screams, my plates itch, and even you are just noise! I'm tank-born. What is this?”

“Okeer didn't give you any imprints to help you figure this out?” Shepard asked.

“I see pictures of old battles, voices of warlords. But this is...a blood haze in my head. I want control. When we're moving, fighting, I focus. But here, my blood screams, my plates itch, and even you are just noise!”

“Doctor, anything in your files about krogan diseases that could cause this?”

“Cerberus has a number of autopsies on file, but nothing on a living krogan of this age and situation. Krogan are reluctant to share medical records. The Alliance didn't have much, either, I'm afraid.”

“My people were defeated by doctors and labs. They will never let stuff like this leave the homeworld, Tuchanka.”

Doctor Chakwas finished her scan and shook her head. “I don't know if I can help, Grunt. It sounds like we need one of your kind to look into this.”

“Most off world krogan are warriors. Doctors don't leave the homeworld. I won't ask you to go there. I will control this.”

“Joker can get us to Tuchanka,” Shepard concluded. “I need everyone at their best.”

“Thank you, Shepard. I don't like this. Fury is my choice, not a sickness.”

The Commander emerged from the elevator into the CIC, only to be accosted by Mordin.

“Shepard. Important news. Know you're busy. Have to deal with the Collectors. Planning attack. Too important to wait. Just receiving data. Still processing, analyzing likely scenarios. Not sure how to begin, Too much intel. You remember our talk? My work on genophage modification?”

“You stopped the krogan adaptation to the genophage.”

“Part of a team scientists, all different types. Blood Pack mercenaries captured former team member Maelon. Last seen on Tuchanka. Might torture him, make an example. Recovering him would be a personal favor to me.”

“Do you think they found out your team updated the genophage?”

“Unclear. No way to determine until we get to Tuchanka.”

“Coincidentally, Grunt has business on Tuchanka. While we're there, we'll see if we can find your team member.”

“Appreciate it. My assistant. My student. Want to see him safe. Maelon last seen outside Urdnot territory. Scouts might have seen Blood Pack. Talk to them or clan chief.”

The krogan homeworld was a planet emerging from a nuclear winter. The krogan had done this to themselves thousands of years ago, shortly after splitting the atom. The race's aggressive, warlike nature left behind craters, radioactive rubble, choking ash, salt flats, and alkaline seas. Life barely hung on here, but even the bipedal lizard people clung to their home with tenacity and determination. There were just over two billion krogan alive in the galaxy today, and most lived on Tuchanka; a far

cry from the vast hordes seen during the rachni wars over two thousand years earlier.

The salarians had built a giant tower – the Shroud, they called it – which was repairing the atmosphere, but Shepard couldn't see it through the dust storms and haze clouding the skies. The Normandy's shuttle descended through a turbulent brown cloud. Eventually, ancient ruined buildings became visible in the haze.

Shepard was accompanied by only Grunt on this trip. Mordin stayed behind on the Normandy for now, as salarians typically were unwelcome on Tuchanka. Their race had, along with the turians, sterilized the krogan after they'd gotten out of control following the rachni war. Looking out the window, Shepard wondered at the decision. This had been a thriving culture, once. Urdnot Wrex, the Commander's former squadmate, was supposedly in charge here. It was he who'd granted permission to land. Shepard looked forward to meeting him again.

"This is the great krogan homeworld?" Grunt said, unimpressed. "This is the land of Kredak, Shiagur, and Vecoll? This chunk of rock is barely worth standing on! Never thought I'd miss the tank. Urdnot will make it better. My line will fix it."

The shuttle slowed and descended through a hatch at the top of a silo, then landed with its usual thud. Three guards waited on the edge of the landing platform. The hatch above remained open, letting in trickling cascades of dust.

"Stop right here, alien. You're Shepard...of the Normandy. The clan leader wants to speak with you. Keep your rutting pet on a short leash. Get him the Rite soon, or put him down."

Grunt fidgeted. Not nerves, something else.

"You know what's wrong with him?" Shepard asked. "What he needs?"

"There's nothing wrong with him. Just go speak with the clan leader." The guard waved dismissively, gesturing to a large door below and behind him.

At the base of the stairs down from the lading pad was a krogan in Blood Pack armor. The armor looked new and shiny, meant to impress the two krogan he was trying to recruit. As Shepard and Grunt passed, he paused just long enough to sneer at them before continuing his spiel.

Through the door, a flight of stairs led to a long hallway. To the right a pair of krogan were lounging and petting a varren. Shepard didn't know the fish-dogs could be domesticated.

"Someday we'll get off this rock and show those turians who's boss," one said to the other.

"Damn right," said the second. "Tear their scales off and let the pyjaks feast on them while they're still alive."

They both laughed at the thought. Shepard was glad he hadn't brought Garrus.

"And the Salarians, too. Those little bastards think they're so smart. Needed us to fight the rachni, though, didn't they?"

"Couldn't take us in a fair fight. Had to use diseases. That's a gutless way to win."

At the end of the hallway was another large door, which groaned as it opened to let the Commander and the young krogan through. Inside was a large, open room, constructed from rubble and rusty steel beams. Shepard asked a guard about seeing the clan leader, and he indicated a line of petitioners. While he waited, he listened to the two guards' conversation.

"Were you around when the female camp sent the children over last week?"

"No. I was off dealing with a varren attack. Why? Any promising warriors?"

"Yes, of course. They're strong. One day they will tear our enemies apart. One of the children...probably five years from the Rite? He had my eyes, I think."

"Hah! Think you actually had a fertile female on one of your trips to their camp?"

"I...I must have."

"A son! Good for you! We'll get a ryncol to celebrate!"

"The child...my son...we played 'Tackle the Varren.' It was...he was good. Fast. Strong."

"Of course he was! Any son of yours must be!"

"And they they went back to the female camp. It was so fast. I didn't get to talk with him. Should I ask the female clan for right of parentage?"

"Why bother with all the politics? You know you've sired a son. That's enough."

“But I could teach him to hunt. The best way to shoot a gun. To fight with honor and savagery.”

“Eh, you can do that next time they bring the children over.”

“It's not the same. I just wish...I don't know. Things could be different. We could live together. Us, the women, the children.”

“You know we can't. We'd just be one big weak target. Have to keep the fertile females safe, the children safer.”

“Damn the genophage. I think I'll take you up on that ryncol later.”

An important-looking krogan with two bodyguards joined the line behind Shepard and Grunt. He introduced himself to the guards and an ambassador. Shepard decided to strike up a conversation.

“Don't crowd the ambassador,” growled one of the new guards.

“Turn back, human. I may be an ambassador among my people, but that doesn't mean I have to speak to the likes of you. Don't think that carrying this whelp of a krogan makes you worth my time. Leave now before my guards decide to eject you.”

“You seem like a well-traveled krogan, Ambassador,” said Shepard, cordially.

“I am.”

That didn't work, so the Commander tried to think like a krogan. “Then you must know who I am. And you have to be aware that bad things happen to those who oppose me.”

“Hmm. Stand down, men. I'm starting to like this human. I am the ambassador to Urdnot from Clan Nakmor. We're a small clan based in the Kraddack Wastes.”

“I thought all krogan want to be warriors. What makes a krogan become an ambassador?”

“Ha! You don't know as much as you think, human. A krogan diplomat has to represent the strength of this people, or his clan appears ripe for conquest. I slaughtered my way to the top of my clan, human. I speak with the authority of a warrior.”

“What business does Clan Nakmor have with the Urdnot?”

“Clan Leader Wrex requested that I come. He and Clan Nakmor have been in talks about a more permanent alliance. With our help, Urdnot could rally others behind its banner and truly unite Tuchanka. And we would gain the chance to fight in larger battles with greater plunder.”

“If Nakmor is a small clan, how do you keep the more powerful clans from destroying you?”

“We are the clan of the great warlord Nakmor Krall, who faced down platoons of turians and won. Most clans lend us the respect our ancestor is due.”

Suddenly, Shepard and Grunt were next in line. A familiar-looking krogan was sitting on a throne made of chunks of concrete at the top of a dais. Wrex was wearing his old crimson family armor, ancient and worn as it was. He still had the scar running from the middle of his headplate down across the side of his neck, as if some beast had slashed him. A krogan in grey and blue armor, with a teal-colored headplate was pacing back and forth, arguing. Wrex looked bored, resting his chin on his hand, elbow on an armrest.

“You know what tradition demands – Clan Urdnot must respond,” The pacing krogan was annoyed. “Your reforms will not go unopposed. You risk appearing weak a critical time.”

Wrex noticed the human in his line of petitioners and stood. “Shepard.” He stepped down and beckoned his friend over, then shook his hand. “Shepard! My friend! You look well for dead, Shepard. Should have known the void couldn't hold you.”

“Looks like helping me destroy Saren and the geth has worked out for you.”

“Not for me, Shepard – for all krogan. Clan Urdnot is just the start. When I'm done, we will be one people again.”

“Glad we didn't have to kill each other on Vormire.”

“Ha! You made the rise of Urdnot possible. Vormire was a turning point for the krogan, though not everyone was happy about it. Destroying Saren's genophage cure freed us from his manipulation. I used that to spur the clans to unify under Urdnot.”

“You abandoned many traditions to get your way,” the teal-crested krogan accused.

“Dangerous.”

Wrex headbutted him, and his challenger recoiled. “Speak when spoken to, Uvenk. I'll drag your

clan to glory whether it likes it or not.” Wrex returned to his throne and sat.

“Now, Shepard. What brings you here? How's the Normandy?”

“Destroyed in a Collector surprise attack. I ended up spaced.”

“Well, you look good. Ah, the benefits of a redundant nervous system!”

“Yeah, humans don't have that.”

“Oh. It must have been painful, then. But you're standing here, and you've got a strong new ship. Takes me back to the old days, though. Us against the unknown, killing it with big guns. Good times.”

“Sounds like you've got big changes ahead for the krogan.”

“We are making a neutral ground where all clans are welcome. Fertile females can be shared among clans. We will strengthen the race as a whole.”

“You threaten everything that makes us strong,” said a still-angry Uvenk. “It will not last.”

“Maybe,” replied Wrex. “Until then, you're lucky to be a part of it.”

“You share your females?” Shepard asked. “What do the women think about this plan?”

“It was our female clan leader's idea. The neutral area is safe, and it encourages more female clans to ally with us. Attacks on Urdnot now endanger the females of all clans. Even clans that want to see me dead will defend Clan Urdnot.”

“Your women have their own clan structure?”

“Nothing is more valuable than a fertile female. We know it. They know it. They isolate themselves for their own protection. We work together to set up breeding alliances. I can hardly do anything without Clan Leader Uta's approval.”

“How do you maintain security with so many different clans in one place?”

“Any clan willing to send in hostages can come in. No fighting inside the camp. Each clan punishes its own criminals. We stop conflicts before anyone dies. Then we present a simple choice. Pay a fine and deal with your problems, or your clan is no longer welcome.”

“That doesn't sound very harsh by krogan standards.”

“Allies from other clans like what I'm doing. They help deal with skeptics. Many are eager for an outlet. Every time I've declared a clan unwelcome, my allies have destroyed them. Word gets around.”

“What's so important about maintaining individual clans? Why not just merge?”

“Every clan has different customs. Rites of passage, rules of behavior, battle songs, all unique. That diversity makes us great. No clan, not even mine, was meant to survive on its own.”

“Urdnot is the leading clan. Doesn't that make your culture primary?”

“For now. But every clan has its unique assets. The best tacticians are Urdnot. Jorgal has the longest breeding line. Gatatog holds the oldest settlements...other have their own strengths. We keep going how we are, the clans will end up as craters under nuclear haze. Even Urdnot. We need to rethink. Restart.”

“This all sound ambitious. How's it going so far?”

“Better than I'd feared, worse than I'd hoped.”

“It can't continue,” said Uvenk. “You are going against what makes us strong.”

Wrex mostly ignored the interruption. “Traditionalists like Uvenk are chained varren. Always fighting, guarding their pathetic stick in the ground. When the smoke clears, I can plant the flag on their corpses and rally the rest around a new krogan hub.”

“Sounds like you're counting on a lot of bloodshed, even after you unite.”

“It will be slow, but I won't change what we are. Krogan are judged by the strength of our enemies. Our worst insult is to say someone's 'not worth killing.'”

Shepard noticed Grunt fidgeting again, and got down to business. “Well, I wish you luck, but I'm here for two reasons.”

“Of course. You never go anywhere just for fun.”

“I'm looking for a salarian. He was captured by the Blood Pack and brought here.”

“My scout commander can direct you. He's probably near the perimeter running target practice.”

Don't take too much of his time. I need a constant watch on the other clans. What's the other thing?"

"I have a krogan on my crew." Shepard gestured to Grunt. "He has some kind of sickness and needs treatment."

Wrex leaned forward and bade Grunt to approach. "Where are you from, whelp? Was your clan destroyed before you could learn what is expected of you?"

"I have no clan. I was tank-bred by the warlord Okeer, my line distilled from Kredak, Moro, Shiagur – "

Uvenk took a step between the two. "You recite warlords, but you are the offspring of a syringe!"

Grunt was nonplussed. "I am pure krogan. You should be in awe."

"Okeer is a very old name," Wrex mused. "A very hated name."

"He is dead," Grunt stated flatly.

"Of course. You're with Shepard. How could he be alive?"

"Does that name mean anything to you, Wrex?" Shepard asked.

"A vicious warlord responsible for many deaths. Who apparently toyed with genetics. A clone undertaking the Rite..." Wrex scratched his head.

"You are considering it?" Uvenk was incensed. "Tank-bred allowed status as an adult? This is too far!"

"I need Grunt back up to speed," said Shepard. "What's wrong with him?"

"There is nothing wrong with him. He's becoming a full adult."

"So, a puberty ritual?"

"I don't care what aliens call it. Krogan undergo the Rite of Passage."

"Too far, Wrex!" Uvenk bellowed. "Your clan may rule, but this thing is not krogan." The teal-crested krogan stormed off.

Wrex watched him go, then turned to Shepard's companion. "So, Grunt? Do you wish to stand with Urdnot?"

Grunt, still fidgeting, looked undecided, So Shepard asked some questions to buy him time. "You'll let a tank-bred join Clan Urdnot?"

"Only because he's with you," said Wrex. "After all, you and I killed thousands like him. Not quite as big, but many. Clan Urdnot is strong and the others will do as I say. They see the benefit of my vision."

"What happens if he doesn't do this Rite?"

"If he was left here, he would be killed. The clanless are not respected. A tank-bred, probably less so. His disposition is what it is, rite or no. That's just him being a krogan. Okeer didn't tell you that in the tank, did he, boy?"

"What does the Rite of Passage require?"

"Not for me to say, Shepard. The Shaman will discuss that."

Shepard was out of questions. "Well, Grunt? What do you say?"

Grunt paced for a moment, then decided. "Yes. My blood demands this."

"Good boy," Wrex said, sounding pleased. "Speak with the Shaman – he's on the second level. Give him a good show, and he'll set you on the path. You too, Shepard. How many times have you stepped in a mess for your crew, hmm?"

"We'll be going then."

"Watch yourself, Shepard. Tuchanka isn't safe and homey, like Feros and Ilos. We don't often allow aliens to do business on Tuchanka, but you're an exception."

Shepard led Grunt up the stairs to meet the Shaman. The teal-crested krogan was arguing with him as the two approached.

"You go beyond yourself, Gatatog Uvenk!" The Shaman growled. "The rites of Urdnot are dominant!"

"How do we know it will challenge him?" Uvenk quivered with indignation "He's unnatural! The beasts of the Rite could ignore him like a lump of plastic!"

"They know blood, no matter the womb. Your barking does not help your case."

"I'll speak for myself!" said Grunt.

"This is the tank bred? It is very lifelike," The Shaman peered at the young krogan, then sniffed. "Smells correct as well. Your protests ring hollow, Uvenk."

Shepard channeled his inner krogan again. "I don't care what this idiot says. Grunt has the right to be here."

The Shaman was impressed. "There's some fire – and from an alien! Oh the shame this heaps on those who whine like pups."

Uvenk still wasn't having it. "If this must stand on ritual then I invoke a denial! My krantt stands against him! He has no one!"

The Shaman sighed. "My patience is tested, but Uvenk invokes correctly. Grunt, who is your krantt? Your allies willing to kill and die on your behalf?"

"How can I be tested if I bring backup?" Grunt asked.

"Not every krogan can be the strongest warrior, but each must inspire his peers to battle at his side. If the ones who know you best can't find nothing worthy in you, you should wander the wastes and die alone before you weaken my clan."

Grunt turned to Shepard, who nodded. The Commander thought this could be interesting.

"Grunt will strengthen clan Urdnot," averred the Commander. "Name our target, and it will die."

"Spoken well. Most aliens – and some krogan – do not understand our ways. I believe this human does."

"Aliens don't know strength!" Uvenk whined. "My followers are true krogan. Everything about Grunt is a lie."

Shepard had seen krogan challenge each other by headbutting, so that's what he did: headbutted Uvenk. It hurt. The Commander rubbed the back of his neck from the whiplash. Though it was a glancing blow, the insult seemed to be enough.

"You...you dare?" Uvenk's eyes went wide.

The Shaman let out a bellowing laugh. "I like this human! He understands!"

"I withdraw my denial," Uvenk said, stunned. He strutted off. "This will be decided elsewhere!"

"You have provoked him. Reason enough for me to like you. He's your problem now."

"Is that krogan going to be a problem?" asked Shepard.

"He is forbidden to interfere. Will he? During the Rite of Passage, you must be ready for anything. From what you have shown me, you will not disappoint."

"We've waited long enough," said Grunt. "Tell us how this works."

"Still your impatience. For now, know what you will be tested...and that you must adapt."

"Do we need any special equipment?" asked Shepard.

"To begin the Rite, only the candidate and his krantt are required. You love battle, don't you Shepard? The last gasp of a dying opponent? Bring your love of the fight to Grunt's trial, and he will succeed."

"We're ready," Grunt pounded his fists together. "Let's do this."

"Excellent. But the Grounds are currently in use. And it will take time to prepare them afterwards." The Shaman looked Shepard up and down. "You also... may want a larger krantt. The Rite is intended for krogan. Come back in half a day and we will begin. The young krogan must be prepared, as well. Bloodshed and the Rite must not be rushed."

With time to kill before Grunt's Rite, Shepard checked in with the Urdnot's Chief Scout to inquire about Mordin's missing former teammate. After asking a guard, they found the grey-armored krogan at the shooting range. Several holes were arranged on the sides of an embanked trench. Pyjaks emerged singly, or two at once. The Chief Scout expertly aimed a holographic sight, then launched a rocket-propelled grenade, splattering a pair of vermin. He turned from the controls when the Commander approached and frowned.

"What do you want, human? Wrex told me to be polite. He didn't say you were going to talk to

me.”

“So you're in charge of Urdnot's scouts? What does a scout commander do, exactly?”

“We find out where the enemies are, and we make them think that there are too many of us to screw with. Sometimes that means harassing the perimeter, taking out a generator or two. Other times, we play hide and seek. We leave lots of tracks, exaggerate our numbers.”

“That sounds more like sabotage than recon.”

“It's a lot easier to count their numbers once you blow some of them up,” said Grunt.

The Chief Scout nodded in agreement. “Everyone knows where Urdnot is, human. It's not like we can hide.”

“You see a lot of action around here?”

“Enough. Varren here and there, and snakes in any of the water safe enough to drink. Wrex has made cease-fire agreements with some of the other clans, but I still have to patrol – keep them honest.”

“So every clan on Tuchanka encroaches on the other clans' borders?”

“Borders? This is Tuchanka. Our borders are determined by the range of our guns. We are what we are, human. If we don't fire at them, they wouldn't take us seriously.”

“So, why bother shooting at vermin?” Shepard gestured at the shooting range.

“Ammunition is the one thing we're not hurting for on Tuchanka. As scout commander, I have to set an example. Plus, the little bastards get into food supplies if their numbers get too high. Can't have that. Help yourself if you want.”

The Chief Scout waved at the controls. Grunt, looking to relieve his boredom, took him up on the offer.

“What's the deal with the pyjaks?” Shepard asked.

“Offworld vermin,” he made a disgusted gesture. “Humans say they're like monkeys. They come in and steal food, ryncol...whatever they can get their talons on. We started using the mounted defense cannons to stop them.”

“They're not native to Tuchanka?”

“An alien trader landed here a few years back. He had goods he salvaged from some place called Eletania. Said they were stowaways. They swarmed his off his ship and started stealing food and shitting everywhere.”

That name rang a bell. It was where Shepard's squad had recovered a lost Alliance probe, and where Wrex had insisted on calling the grey monkey-like creatures by their proper name. “I can't imagine you let the trader walk away after that.”

“Not a chance.” The Scout Leader shook his head. “One ball of pyjak dung nailed the leader of Clan Forsan across the forehead. That's apparently grounds for execution.”

“Don't your storehouses have automated defenses?”

“Why bother? Half of what we eat is vermin. And if we get hold of defense systems, we don't use them to guard grain. We've got weapons stockpiles to take care of. Beyond that, our women and children get the security.”

“Your enemies go after civilians?” Shepard asked.

“Easiest way to wipe out a clan. Women and kids can fight, but they're always outnumbered if another clan goes after them. If its women and children are killed, a clan's hope for the future is lost...it falls apart. We don't do that, though. Wrex's orders. Even if it costs us a battle, we don't fire on noncombatants.”

“Taking care of your food supply would help more in the long run.”

“If Clan Jurdon kills our guards and helps itself to our well-secured food, there won't be a long term. This is Tuchanka. Having power and clean water means we're living in luxury.”

Grunt got bored with shooting monkeys, and Shepard's curiosity had run its course.

“I'm looking for a salarian,” the Commander said, getting down to business. “The Blood Pack captured him, and he was last seen around here.”

“I heard about that salarian. If it's Blood Pack, then Clan Weyrloc has him. Sent one of my scouts

to check it out, but he never reported back. Guess they got him, too. Wrex told me to give you the location where he last reported in.” The Chief Scout tapped a few commands on his console, transmitting the data to Shepard's omni-tool.

“Any idea what they're doing with the salarian?”

“I assumed they wanted to torture him. You don't take somebody home just to kill them. It's messy. Maybe he pissed off the Blood Pack, and they took him there here for special treatment. No skin off my hump what they do with him. One less alien on Tuchanka.”

“You don't seem to have much love lost for aliens.”

“Don't get your quads in a twist. If I was going to kill you, you'd know it. Wrex believes we need to unite the krogan people. I don't think we can do that with offworlders interfering. But it's not my call.”

“What's Clan Weyrloc's reputation? And how are they involved with the Blood Pack?”

“Tough humps. And they're not friendly, like we are. You ever run into the Blood Pack? Mercenary gang. Clan Weyrloc started it. One of the only gangs with an off-world presence. They're fanatics, totally devoted to Weyrloc Guld. Whatever they did with your salarian, Guld's behind it.”

“But the Blood Pack has non-krogan members – like vorcha.”

“The vorcha? They're just like the varren, only they can use guns and don't crap on the floor as often. The krogan are the only real members of the Blood Pack. Anyone else is just there to soak enemy fire.”

“What makes Guld so special?”

“He's got two children. One of them is a girl. Some people think he's got a destiny. Not me. I had a cousin who won twenty consecutive games of quasar. Lucky bastard. I'd ask my cousin for a loan, but I wouldn't swear allegiance to him. Luck. That's all it is. Same for Guld.”

“What can you tell me about Clan Weyrloc's base?”

“Last I heard, the clan was holed up in an old hospital. I haven't seen it, though. I've only seen Clan Weyrloc from a distance. If I'd gotten closer I'd have taken a shot. You get inside, though, bring a big gun. Weyrloc's base is crawling with Blood Pack.”

“A hospital doesn't sound too defensible. Why'd they hole up there?”

Grunt answered. “Any hospital on Tuchanka has to be built well enough to withstand a bunch of enraged krogan. When an injury forces us to switch over to secondary organs, things get messy. Higher thought processes don't always transition properly. 'Blood rage,' they call it.”

Shepard thanked the Chief Scout, then took the shuttle back to the Normandy. Grunt went off to recruit more members for his krantt, and Shepard headed to the lab to inform Mordin of Maelon's likely location. The Professor urged haste, and didn't want anyone else along other than Shepard. The fewer who know of his work on the genophage, the better.

OLD BLOOD

The shuttle came in low as it approached Clan Weyrloc's base. Shepard struck up a conversation with the Professor.

“What was it like, working on the genophage modification project?”

“Best years of my life. Wake up with ideas. Talk over breakfast. Experiments all morning. Statistical analysis in afternoon. Run new simulations during dinner, set data runs to cook overnight. Laughter. Ego. Argument. Passion. Galaxy's biggest problem, massive resources thrown at us. Got anything we wanted.”

“Sounds like you were pretty important. How'd you go from that to running a clinic on Omega?”

“Wanted to heal people. Good use of last decade. Something easy. No ethical concerns. Understand rationale for modified genophage. Right choice. Still hard to sleep some nights.”

“Do you keep in touch with any of your old team members? Maelon?”

“No. All changed with deployment. Made test drop on isolated krogan clan. Hit rest of Tuchanka when results were positive. End of project. Separate ways. Watching it end, watching birth rates drop. Personal. Private. Not appropriate for team.”

"Most people wouldn't be so casual about developing a sterility plague, Mordin."

"Not developing, modifying. Much more difficult. Working within confines of existing genophage. A hundred times the complexity. Errors unacceptable. Could cause total sterility, malignant tumors. Could even reduce effectiveness. Worse than doing nothing. Had to keep population stable. One in one thousand. Perfect target, optimal growth. Like gardening."

"You're saying you were working just as hard to keep their population from falling?"

"Yes. Could have eradicated krogan. Not difficult. Increase mutation to degrade genetic structure further. Chose not to. Rachni extinction tragic. Didn't want to repeat. All life precious. Universe demands diversity."

"Some cultures would consider that murder."

"No. Murdered no one. Altered fertility, prevented fetal development of nervous system. Have killed many, Shepard. Many methods. Gunfire, knives, drugs, tech attacks, once with farming equipment. But not with medicine."

"But look at what happened to Tuchanka as a result." Shepard gestured out a window.

"State of Tuchanka not due to genophage. Nuclear winter caused by krogan before salarians made first contact. Krogan choices. Refused truce during Krogan Rebellions. Expanded after Rachni Wars. Splintered after genophage. Genophage medical, not nuclear. No craters from virus. Damage caused by krogan, not salarians. Not me. Krogan committed war crimes. Refused to negotiate. Defeat by turians not complete. Krogan could have recovered, attacked again. Conventional war too risky. Krogan forces too strong. Genophage was only option. Krogan forced genophage. Us or them. No apologies for winning. Wouldn't have minded peaceful solution."

"So if the krogan banded together and formed a united government, you'd welcome that?"

"Yes. United krogan saved galaxy, destroyed rachni. Genophage not punishment. Simply alters fertility to correct for removal from hostile environment."

Shepard explained what his friend Wrex was doing, and Mordin seemed encouraged by the news. The shuttle touched down a short distance away from the hospital. The base would no doubt be well-defended, so it was best to approach on foot. The dust and haze of Tuchanka's atmosphere helped hide their approach. Shepard and Mordin managed to make it past several Blood Pack patrols unseen. Sneaking wasn't Shepard's style, so he followed Mordin's lead all the way to the ancient hospital building.

"Repurposed krogan hospital," Mordin observed as then entered the crumbling building. "Sturdy. Built to withstand punishment."

Shepard wasn't so sure. As they descended a staircase into a lobby, a slight tremor caused a few small cascades of dust to trickle down the walls. Past the lobby was another large room, used for storage now. A ramp led up the far wall to a door, which opened as three krogan strutted out to stand on the balcony looking down on Mordin and Shepard. Two wore Blood Pack armor, and the third was robed in a shiny silver material.

"I am the speaker for Clan Weyrloc, offworlders. You have shed our blood. By rights you should be dead already. But Weyrloc Guld, the Chief of Chiefs, has ordered that you be given leave to flee and spread the message of our coming."

"Krogan don't generally let people go," Shepard responded. "What does Clan Weyrloc have planned?"

"If you walk away now, you can tell your children that you saw Clan Weyrloc before our Blood Pack conquered the stars. You think the Urdrnot impressive? They are pitiful. Weyrloc Guld will destroy them!"

Shepard glanced at Mordin, who merely shrugged. "You have a salarian named Maelon. I'm not leaving without him," the Commander stated.

"The salarian stays with us. His work is the tool of our conquest! Clan Weyrloc will cure the genophage and spread across the galaxy in a sea of blood!"

"Appears they discovered Maelon's work," Mordin whispered. "Unfortunate."

Shepard tried reason. "Half the galaxy sees the krogan as victims! If you start a war, you'll lose

their support!”

“No, human! You understand nothing! You have not seen the piles of children that never lived! The krogan were wronged! We will make it right, and then we will have our revenge!” The speaker began to pace as he pontificated. “We have the Blood Pack, and we have the salarian! When we cure the genophage, Weyrloc Guld will rule all krogan! When our clan number in the millions, we will not need support. The Krogan Rebellions will become the Krogan Empire! The surviving races will frighten their children with tales of what the Blood Pack did to the turians! The asari will scream as their Citadel plunges into the sun! We will keep salarians as slaves and eat their eggs as a delicacy!”

Mordin's eyes went wide at that. As the krogan continued to drone on, Shepard looked around the room. There were pipes running below the balcony, so the Commander tried the trick he'd learned from Zaeed.

“You talk too much,” he said as he drew and fired a single shot, piercing the pipe.

“See? The human cannot hit a simple target!” The speaker slowly noticed the gas spewing from the small hole in the pipe. Too late. Shepard fired a second shot, engulfing him and his guards in flames.

The explosion drew attention, though. A steady stream of vorchas started coming out the door above. Shepard and Mordin made their way up the ramp, pushing through. But as the Urdnor Scout leader had said, they were merely cannon fodder. One of the vorchas was armed with a flamethrower. A single overload from Mordin's omni-tool was enough to spark an explosion from the fuel tank, killing a half dozen of his comrades.

Through the door was an atrium open to the sky. Several levels of rooms lined the walls, accessible via balconies, with bridges spanning across. On the level below, Blood Pack krogan were releasing varren.

Shepard led the way down the nearest stairs. Someone had stupidly left tanks of flammables lying about. Or perhaps they'd been in the process of moving supplies when they were interrupted by the gunfight. Regardless, they made for easy targets. Using the stairs for cover, the Commander and the Professor picked their shots. Explosions engulfed enemy fish-dogs in flame and blew up bridges, sending mercenaries plunging to their deaths below. A heavily armored krogan emerged from across the atrium, wearing heavy armor and screaming insults.

“Tremble and die, offworld scum! I am Weyrloc Guld, Chief of Chiefs!”

There was only one bridge available to cross over. Shepard would have to be careful in killing this guy. He fired off a few shots, but they just bounced off the Chief's biotic barrier. The Commander had Mordin keep him distracted while he used biotic warps to whittle down the shield. It was a slow and tedious process, and they had to back up the stairs from which they'd come, but eventually Shepard's attacks exhausted the krogan's defenses. They also exhausted himself.

There had been a perfect opportunity at one point for a biotic push to send Guld over a railing, but Shepard just couldn't pull any more dark energy. Thankfully, he had plenty of ammo. He and Mordin played a cat and mouse game with the krogan clan chief for several minutes, taking potshots and quickly ducking behind cover. Eventually, their bullets pierced Guld's armor, and they were able to take him down. Panting, they returned to the atrium, and the one remaining bridge to the rest of the building.

“Labs likely through there,” said Mordin as they crossed. “Can smell antiseptic. Hint of dead flesh.”

There were indeed labs in the next wings. Medical equipment and tubes of unidentifiable liquids lay strewn about, as if someone had left in a hurry. In one room, the body of a man lay sprawled on a table.

“That body. Human. Need to take a look.” Mordin activated his omni-tool and started a scanning program. The professor thought out loud as text and charts scrolled by. “Sores, tumors, ligatures showing restraint at wrists and ankles. Track marks for repeated injection sites. Test subject. Victim of experimentation.”

“Any idea whether what they gave him is contagious?” Shepard asked, taking a step back.

"No. Appears to be cultivation of cancerous cells, aggravated by torture, malnourishment. Not a virus. Probably testing vectors to attack genophage. Primary goal not infection of humans."

"I don't suppose there's a way to tell who this poor bastard was."

"No tattoos or ID. Maybe slave or prisoner. Maybe merc or pirate. Irrelevant now. Clearly part of krogan tests to cure genophage."

Shepard might have notified next of kin, but dropped the idea. "Why experiment on non-krogan?"

"Humans useful as test subjects. Genetically diverse. Enables exploration of treatment modalities."

"Experimenting on humans? That kind of crap is what makes Cerberus start to seem like a good idea."

"Never used humans myself. Disgusting, unethical, sloppy. Used by brute-force researchers, not thinkers. No place in proper science. Krogan use of humans unsurprising."

"Wait. How are humans more genetically diverse?"

"More variable. Peaks and valleys, mutations, adaptations. Far beyond other life. Makes humans useful test subjects. Larger reactions to smaller stimuli."

"I know we can look much different from each other, but asari have a wide range of skin tones..."

"No. Ignore superficial appearance. Down to genetic code. Biotic abilities, intelligence levels. Can look at random asari, krogan, make reasonable guess. Humans too variable to judge. Outliers in all species, of course. Geniuses, idiots. But human probability curve offers greater overall variety."

Shepard nodded. "I imagine you had to do some live subject testing while developing the new genophage."

"No. Unnecessary. Limited tests to simulations, corpses, cloned tissue samples. High-level tests on varren. No tests on species with members capable of calculus. Simple rule, never broke it."

"What can you tell about their experiments from looking at the body?"

"Position of tumors suggests deliberate mutation of adrenal, pineal glands. Modifying hormone levels. Counterattack on glands hit by genophage. Clever."

Shepard had no idea what any of that meant. "Do you think they're close to a cure?"

Mordin closed his omni-tool and stood. "Can't say. Need more data. Conceptually sound, though. Genophage alters hormone levels. Could repair damage with hormonal counterattack."

"Wouldn't something native to Tuchanka work better? You mentioned varren."

"Yes. Human experiments high-level, concept testing. Native Tuchanka fauna likely used later, in development stages. Wise to delay use of varren until necessary. Powerful bite. Active console over there. May contain useful data. One moment." Mordin started thinking out loud again as he tapped away. "Genetic sequences. Hormone mutagens still steady. Protein chains, live tissue, cloned tissue. Very thorough. Standard treatment factors. Avoiding scorched earth immunosuppressants to alter hormone levels. Good. Hate to see that."

"We're not going to find Maelon staring at consoles. Come on."

"Agreed."

The rest of the labs were eerily quiet. The remaining Weyrloc and Blood Pack must have fled when their leader died. That happened, sometimes, in Shepard's experience. Still, it was best not to let his guard down. Through the next hallway was a morgue. Several large bodies were covered with a sheet. Mordin lifted one and started a scan.

"Dead krogan. Female. Tumors indicate experimentation. No restraint marks. Volunteer." Mordin drew a deep breath and held it for a moment before continuing. "Sterile Weyrloc female willing to risk procedures. Hoped for cure. Pointless. Pointless waste of life."

Shepard struck up the conversation, but kept his eyes and ears searching for enemies. "What was pointless? Her volunteering or the doctors' experiments?"

"Both. Her mistake forgivable. Theirs not." Mordin dropped the sheet and held a hand out over the body. "Rest, young mother. Find your gods. Find someplace better."

"I didn't expect you to be disturbed by the sight of a dead krogan."

Mordin was taken aback. "What? Why? Because of genophage work? Irrelevant. No, causative! Never experimented on live krogan. Never killed with medicine. Her death not my work, only reaction *to* it. Goal was to stabilize population. Never wanted this. Can see it logically...but still unnecessary. Foolish waste of life. Hate to see it."

"I didn't think you'd had much direct contact with things like this. Did you come to Tuchanka after dropping your plague?"

"Yearly recon missions. Water, tissue samples. Ensure no mistakes. Superiors offered to carry it on. Refused. Need to see it in person. Need to look. Need to see. Accept it as necessary. See small picture. Remind myself why I ran a clinic on Omega." Mordin dropped the sheet and held a hand out over the body.

"I didn't expect spirituality from you, Mordin."

"Genophage modification project altered millions of lives. Then saw results. Ego, humility, juxtaposition. Frailty of life. Size of universe. Explored religions after work completed. Different races. No answers. Many questions."

"Sounds like a crisis of faith. You felt guilty?"

"Modified genophage project great in scope. Scientifically brilliant. But ethically difficult. Krogan reaction visceral, tragic. Not guilty, but responsible. Trained as doctor. Genophage affects fertility. Doesn't kill. Still caused this. Hard to see big picture behind pile of corpses."

"How did you come to terms with it?"

"Wheel of life. Popular salarian concept. Similar to human Hinduism in focus on reincarnation. Appealing to see life as endless. Fix mistakes in next life. Learn, adapt, improve. Refuse to believe life ends here. Too wasteful. Have more to offer. Mistakes to fix. Cannot end here. Could do so much more. Not easy. Sometimes I wish I wasn't as intelligent. Choice would have fallen on someone else. Not my problem." Mordin shrugged. "Fool's wish. Had to be me. Others might have gotten it wrong."

"Was the genophage really necessary?"

"Had to be done. Rachni Wars, Krogan Rebellions, all pointed to krogan aggression. So many simulations. Effects of krogan population increase. All pointed to war. Extinction. Genophage or genocide. Save galaxy from krogan *and* save krogan from galaxy."

"So you're willing to sterilize a species based on the evidence of a few simulations?"

"Yes. Millions of data points. Years of arguments. Countless scenarios. All noted krogan fragmentation as dangerous. No unified culture to support repopulation. Would have been war. Turians and salarians destroying krogan utterly. Genophage was better. Saved lives."

"You could have cured the genophage instead. Brought hope to the krogan."

"Assumes human reaction. Krogan stimulus response different. Harsh environment, take chance to fight, flee. Would have caused chaos on Tuchanka. Victor would have war economy, bloodthirsty army. Galactic expansion only logical outcome. More war. Genophage saved lives war would have ended." Shepard considered all that. Mordin may be right, and Shepard really had not cause to judge. "Can you get any useful information from the body?"

"Minimal insight into experiments. Gene therapy. Risking cancer, aiming for benign mutation. Krogan researchers ruthless. Risking own clan's women for new data. Disgusting. Shortsighted. Wrong." Mordin paused for another moment in contemplation, then turned away from the bodies. "Ready to go, Shepard."

Shepard cautiously led the way down the next set of stairs. In a room to the right was a young, sickly-looking krogan sitting on the floor next to another, dead.

"You killed the Blood Pack guards," said the krogan in a sluggish drawl.

"Not Blood Pack," said Mordin. "Not member of clan Weyrloc. Wrong clan markings."

"I'm an Urdnot scout. Weyrloc guards got me, brought me here."

"The chief scout told us to watch for you," said Shepard. "We've taken out the guards. Get back to Urdnot."

"I can't. The Weyrloc did things to me. Drugs, injections. Said I was sacrificing for the good of all

krogon. Experiments to cure the genophage. Everything's blurry. Hard to think. Have to stay."

"Mordin, can you get him back on his feet? Stims, maybe? Something to bolster his immune system."

"You don't understand. I'm not too sick to leave. I have to stay. They're curing the genophage. They're going to make it all better! They have to keep doing the tests!"

"Caution, Shepard," Mordin whispered. "Patient unstable, susceptible. Brainwashed."

"Why do you want them to keep doing the tests?"

"This is my fault. I got caught. Wasn't strong enough, not good enough. This is the best I can do. This is all I can do. I'm not big enough to have a real shot with the females. I'll never have kids of my own. But if I help undo the genophage, then I mattered!"

Shepard could see what was really going on here. He decided to try some krogon psychology. "You've got a bruised ego! You got caught and beaten, so you tell yourself it was for something important."

"That's not true! I need to stay! They're gonna cure us all!"

"You're not a real krogon. When a real krogon gets knocked down, he gets back up!"

"I did! I got back up every time they hit me! So many times..."

"You're lying there right now like a vorchha grubbing in the mud. You going to just lie there, vorchha?"

"Screw you, human! Nobody says that to me! Nobody keeps me down!" The scout stood up.

"Damn right they don't! Now get back to Clan Urdnot and report in! Go, go!"

The krogon roared and flexed, then jogged slowly off towards the exit.

"Nicely done," Mordin complimented. "Fortunately, subject is unlikely to be contagious."

At the end of the hall was a thick door, which opened as Shepard and Mordin approached. Inside, a lone salarian was busily typing away on a console. Several computers and holographic displays were arrayed along every wall.

"Maelon. Alive. Unharmd," Mordin observed calmly, if a bit confused. "No signs of restraint. No evidence of torture. Don't understand."

"For such a smart man, Professor," Maelon sneered as he turned to face his would-be rescuers, "you always had trouble seeing evidence that disagreed with your preconceptions. How long will it take you to admit that I'm here because I wish to be here?"

"He wasn't kidnapped," said Shepard. "He came here voluntarily to cure the genophage."

Mordin jerked in shock. "Impossible. Whole team agreed! Project necessary!"

"How was I supposed to disagree with the great Doctor Solus? I was your student! I looked up to you!"

"Experiments performed here. Live subjects! Prisoners! Torture and executions. Your doing?" Mordin punctuated each accusation with an angry slash of his hand.

"We've already got the blood of millions on our hands, Doctor. If it takes a bit more to put things right, I can deal with that."

Shepard had questions. "Why work with Clan Weyrloc?" he asked. "And how did you access the genophage data?"

"The data was easy to obtain. We all still have clearance. We were heroes. All I had to do was ask. As for the Weyrloc, they were the only clan with both the resources and the commitment."

"Urdnot has a larger camp than Weyrloc. Why not use them?"

"Urdnot Wrex is too soft. He wasn't willing to do the experiments I needed. It's Urdnot's loss and Weyrloc's gain. Their clan will be the first to recover from the crime we committed."

"You honestly think the experiments you did here are justified?"

"We committed cultural genocide! Nothing I do will ever be justified! The experiments are monstrous...because I was taught to be a monster."

Mordin disagreed. "No. Never taught you this, Maelon."

"So your hands are clean! What does it matter if the ground is stained with the blood of millions! You taught me that the end justified the means. I will undo what we did, Professor. The only way I

know how.”

“You talk about killing,” said Shepard. “But the genophage isn't lethal. It only affects fertility rates, right?”

“Krogan fight over fertile females. They become mercenaries or pirates because they see no alternative! They would be thriving in a cultural renaissance now had we not decided that this is what they deserved!”

“Inaccurate,” said Mordin. “Krogan population resulted in war. Simulations were clear! If genophage cured and krogan expand again...this will be on your head.”

“We justified this atrocity by saying the krogan would cause havoc and war if their population recovered. But look at the galaxy! Batarian attacks in the Traverse, geth attacks on the Citadel. Is this a more peaceful universe? The assault on your Eden Prime, Commander, might never have happened if we had let the krogan recover. We'll never know.”

Shepard saw the uselessness of that type of speculation. A butterfly effect, impossible to predict. “How would a krogan population explosion have done anything to stop Saren and the geth?”

“An increased krogan population would have forced the Council to take steps, likely involving colony rights in the Traverse. The turian fleets would be vigilant for any military activity in the area. They might have stopped the geth at Eden Prime.”

“Or they might have wiped out all of my people before we left our home system.” Shepard shook his head; this was getting them nowhere. “Maelon clearly doesn't need rescuing, Mordin. What do you want to do?”

“Have to end this.”

“You can't face the truth, can you?” Maelon pulled a pistol and began aiming it wildly, uncertain as to who he should be pointing it at. “Can't admit that your brilliant mind led you to commit an atrocity!”

Mordin took advantage of his former colleague's confusion and quickly stepped forward, punching his former student, who dropped the pistol. The Professor then shoved his own pistol in Maelon's face. “Unacceptable experiments. Unacceptable goals. Won't change. No choice. Have to kill you.”

“Wait.” Shepard stepped into Mordin's field of view. “You don't need to do this, Mordin. You're not a murderer.”

Maelon nervously nodded agreement, and kept silent.

Mordin blinked, realizing what he was about to do, then lowered his pistol and backed away. “No, not a murderer. Thank you, Shepard. Finished, Maelon. Get out. Weyrloc project over.”

“You don't want to take him into custody? Aren't you worried that he'll start his research again?”

“No. Will wipe this unit. Special Tasks Group can cut access to old data. Could start from scratch. Decades of work, though. Didn't teach you everything I knew.”

“What if he talks to more krogan, or tells the public about the modified genophage project?”

“Special Tasks Group good at covering tracks. No proof. Weyrloc willingness to work with salarian unusual. Other krogan will kill him.”

Shepard shrugged. “You heard the professor. Get out before he changes his mind.”

“Where am I supposed to go, Professor?”

“Don't care. Try Omega. Can always use another clinic.”

“The krogan didn't deserve what we did to them, Professor. The genophage needs to end.” Maelon walked out of the room, shoulders slumped.

“Not like this.” Mordin turned to study the computers. “Apologies, Commander. Misunderstood mission parameters. No kidnapping. My mistake. Thank you.”

“We didn't know, Mordin. How are you doing?”

“Should have killed him. Wanted to. Easier than listening. Easier for him, too. Experiments indicate how far he's fallen. Expected it from krogan. Not one of mine.”

“Maybe you're giving the krogan too little credit. Or giving the salarians too much.”

“Possible. Sloppy thinking. Must correct.”

“Anything else we need to do here?”

“Maelon's research. Only loose end. Could destroy it. Closure, security. Still valuable, though.”

Shepard was torn. Historically, in human society, tainted research was sometimes taboo, sometimes used. He didn't know how the older, alien cultures of the galaxy handled things, and he stated as much.

“Worked for years to create modified genophage. Should destroy this. Maelon's work could cure genophage. Don't know effects on krogan. Effects on galaxy. Too many variables. Too many variables!”

“Maybe what Wrex is doing here will change those variables.”

“Point taken, Shepard. Capturing data. Wiping local copy. Still years away from cure, but closer than starting from scratch. Done. Ready to go. Ready to be off Tuchanka. Anywhere else. Maybe somewhere sunny.”

“Let's get out of here.”

Shepard and Mordin returned to the Normandy in silence. Docking clamps secured the shuttle, and Mordin sauntered off to the elevator. Grunt was there, waiting with Zaeed, Samara, and Garrus. Quite the krantt, Shepard thought. The Commander would have liked a bit of rest for himself, but Grunt insisted that the time had come.

RITE OF PASSAGE

Grunt approached Urdnot's Shaman with his krantt: two humans, an asari, and a turian. They had certainly turned heads as they made their way through camp.

“Interesting,” said the Shaman as he looked over the strange mix of aliens. “Are you ready to begin the Rite of Passage? Be warned: once it is started, you must see it through – to success or death.”

The aliens were a bit taken aback by the death part, but everyone indicated readiness. The Shaman led them to a six-wheeled vehicle, and they all squeezed in. It was a short, bumpy ride over a mostly intact highway. They passed broken overpasses and crumbling ruins of buildings. Fires could just barely be seen through the dust and smog, flickering weakly.

The *tomkah*, as the vehicle was called, entered a tunnel before coming to a stop. The Shaman led them up a set of wide stairs and through a hatch to a battered arena. There were no stands or seating. At one end were a pair of barred tunnel entrances, and at the other was a gigantic tripod, the size of a small skyscraper, with a tube in the center.

“This is Tuchanka's most recent scar,” the Shaman explained. “The last surface city to fall in the Rebellions. The Keystone was at the heart.” He pointed to the tripod structure. “It has survived wars and the passage of centuries. It endures – like the krogan. If you wish to join clan Urdnot, you must contemplate the Keystone and its trials.”

“What will happen?” asked Grunt.

“Who knows? You must adapt. You must thrive, no matter the situation. Any true krogan will.”

The Shaman nodded, then returned to the stairs and closed the large round hatch behind him. Shepard looked around, getting the lay of the land. High walls hemmed in only an acre or so of ground. There were no seats or bleachers; no sign of any spectators. Six broken pillars stood in no particular pattern, in various states of decay. The walls and pillars displayed old scars: blood stains, scorch marks, and etching from acid. None of that boded well. It was a good thing the squad – Grunt's krantt, had come armed and armored.

“Let's get started, Shepard,” said Grunt. “Hit the Keystone.”

A big green button was attached to the wall nearest the giant tripod. It turned red as Shepard pressed it. Machinery came to life, lifting a stone cylinder up the central shaft of the tripod while a voice boomed over loudspeakers.

“First the krogan conquered Tuchanka...and mastered a natural world only *we* are fit to hold.”

The cylinder was released, and the ground shook slightly as it impacted.

“Here they come!” Grunt yelled excitedly. “I'm ready!”

The bars on the two tunnels opened, and six varren rushed out from each.

“There! These beasts will know I am worthy!” Grunt rushed one, smashing its head in with a fist before turning to blast a second with his shotgun. The others spread out to pick their own targets. Garrus climbed one of the pillars to get a better vantage for his sniper rifle. Samara biotically lifted one fish-dog over the high walls and froze a second in a stasis field. Shepard and Zaeed stood apart, separated by several meters with two varren between them. The beasts were unable to make up their minds who to attack, which made them easy targets.

That left six more. Shepard thought this was too chaotic to succeed for long.

“Grunt! We need to coordinate!” he yelled.

The young krogan paused for a moment, but quickly began barking orders as Okeer's teachings clicked into place in his mind. Soon, an even dozen varren corpses lay steaming. The krantt gathered up.

“Is that all?” Zaeed sounded disappointed.

“How many rounds is this supposed to be?” asked Garrus from his perch.

“The Shaman said three,” Grunt replied. “Ready for another round, Shepard. Tag the Keystone.”

As the pile was raised, the loudspeaker spoke again. “Then the krogan were lifted to the stars to destroy the fears of a galaxy, an enemy only *we* could chase to their lair.”

They were referencing the rachni, and Shepard hoped that's not what they'd be fighting, as a pair of large, winged creatures swooped in from the sides of the arena. Shepard had never seen their like. A cross between a giraffe and a dragon. Thickly of limb and body, with scales and leathery wings.

“Crawlers! Come to your death!” the young krogan taunted.

“That's a strange name for fliers, Grunt,” said Garrus.

“Not them, the ones they're dropping off!”

“I believe those are 'klixen,’” said Samara. “And the flying beasts are known as 'harvesters.’”

“Whatever. Just kill them!”

The dragon-giraffes – harvesters – flew off after disgorging a pair of klixen each. The crawlers did indeed resemble rachni, though they were covered in red, chitinous plates, and instead of acid, they spat fire. Zaeed found that out the hard way. As the mercenary stopped, dropped, and rolled away from his enemy, Garrus killed the beast with three quick sniper shots. It exploded as it died. Zaeed got away with some singed armor and a mild concussion.

The klixen weren't very fast, so Grunt had his krantt gather up and back away, tricking the three remaining creatures to group together. Garrus then sniped one, and the resulting explosion killed the other two. After ensuring that the members of his krantt were ready, Grunt ordered the Keystone triggered for the third and hopefully final time. The loudspeaker spoke again.

“Now all krogan bear the genophage, our reward, our curse. It is a fight where the only goal is survival!”

The pile jolted the ground again, but the trembling continued this time.

“Feel that? Everything is...shaking.” Grunt sounded nervous, but he quickly gathered himself up.

“I am ready!” he bellowed. His voice echoed off the ruins surrounding the arena.

Blue tentacles emerged from the ground outside the walls, each with a pair of white feelers on the end. Shepard had seen these before. “Thresher maw,” he said in an even tone that he didn't feel. The others froze, wide-eyed. Garrus swallowed, Zaeed cursed, Samara paled, if only slightly.

Grunt laughed a strange, rumbling, low chuckle: “Heh, heh, heh.”

Shepard stowed his assault rifle, and pulled the rocket launcher off his back. The last time he'd taken on a thresher maw, he was in a Mako – a vehicle with thick armor and a respectable canon. Taking one on on foot was...well, it was a very krogan thing to do.

A minute passed with the ground shaking and the tentacles waving. Grunt gave up his impatient pacing and fired at the nearest tentacle. All of the tentacles retreated, and the rumbling stopped. Suddenly, a large spray of dirt just outside the east wall revealed the insect-like head of the giant worm. Though eyeless, it swept its head back and forth as if searching for a target.

“Finally, an enemy worth fighting!” Grunt sounded like he was enjoying this.

The thresher maw seemed to be looking right at Shepard and his companions, who were all frozen.

"Split up and fire at will!" he ordered.

That got them moving. The worm reared back, then lunged forward, releasing a powerful spray of acid. Powerful enough to topple the pillar that Garrus had been perched on. The turian leaped off, and Samara caught him with her biotics, lowering him gently to the ground.

Shepard fired off a couple of rockets, which gave the beast pause. Weapons fire from everyone else seemed to have little effect at first, but slowly began to peel away bits of flesh. This would be a death by a thousand cuts. The thresher maw spewed another stream of acid, then retreated underground, only to emerge a few moments later on the opposite side of the arena. Grunt's krantt continued to run around, dodging acid and firing back as much as they could. Shepard took cover behind a pillar to reload his rockets, then leaned out to resume firing. But he mistimed, and his left arm got splashed with hot green acid.

The spray came out of the thresher maw fast, but slow enough that kinetic barriers were designed for objects as fast as bullets, and wouldn't stop it the acid. The caustic substance quickly ate through Shepard's armor, and he fell to his knees, screaming in pain as it reached his flesh. Someone grabbed him and pulled him behind a pillar. Samara. She quickly applied medi-gel, which did a passable job of stopping any further damage and easing the pain.

Shepard had dropped his rocket launcher, but Grunt picked it up and fired off the remaining rockets. The constant barrage weapons fire had weakened the beast, and the small explosions from the rocket were enough to kill it. It's head nearly-severed, the top sections of the worm fell into the arena, splattering steaming blood and bits of flesh everywhere.

The krantt gathered together. Shepard's left hand was numb, Zaeed's armor was singed, and Grunt was covered in thresher maw guts, but those were the only injuries.

Zaeed laughed. "I've done a lot of crazy things, but I never tried to take on a thresher maw on foot before. Standard operating procedure when you get a thesher maw is to run the hell away. Pick up sticks. Move the hell out. Krogan don't know any better, I guess. Still, hell of a fight."

Grunt grinned and chuckled again. "Heh, heh, heh."

The arena was still. Nothing happened.

"Did the Shaman not say there would be three rounds?" Samara asked.

For reply, a krogan shuttle arrived and alit as far from the dead thresher maw as it could. Grunt followed it with his eyes.

"We have company. Good. I want more."

Garrus was taken aback. "More!"

Gatatog Uvenk and two of his guards stepped off the shuttle.

"You live," said the green-crested krogan in an even tone. "And you brought down the thresher maw. No one has done that in generations. Urdnot Wrex was the last."

"My krantt gave me strength beyond my genes, which are damn good," Grunt said as he approached the trio.

"This will cause discussion," said Uvenk, pensive. "I wonder...you say you are pure? No alien meddling in your construction? Just the warlord Okeer?"

"The best krogan traits are distilled into Grunt," said Shepard. "He's designed to be perfect."

"Being designed is the problem. But not made by aliens...and he is truly powerful. This deserves consideration"

"Why? I'm not getting any more natural."

"You are powerful. You are a mistake, but your potential could tip the current balance of the clans..."

"You spit on my father's name! On Shepard's name! But now you stop ranting because I'm strong?"

"...with restrictions. You could not breed of course, or serve on an alien ship. But you'd be clan in name. You will command much respect now."

"You speak like he is an object," said Samara. "You are merely after his power. You do not want him in your clan."

"Of course not," Uvenk waved dismissively. "I didn't really want to cooperate with clan Urdnot either, but I had to. Clan Gatatog is on the verge – either of greatness or joining the dust. I get traditionalist support if I fight you, and reformer support if I back you. Your Rite of Passage tipped that balance, too."

"It's your choice, Grunt. Sounds like an easy job." Shepard thought he knew what Grunt's answer was going to be, so he scratched the back of his neck and made a hand signal with his good hand behind his back to the rest of his squad, telling them to be ready.

"That's the problem. I'm pure krogan. Uvenk, you are the pretender! They drained my tank for droppings like you."

"Your head is valuable, whether you're alive or dead!"

"Just try to take it. Time to die."

Grunt headbutted Uvenk, hard. The Gatatog chief staggered, and his two guards brought up their weapons, opening fire before anyone had a chance to take cover. Samara let out a wide biotic push, knocking the enemies off balance and giving the squad time to regroup and take cover.

Shepard's left arm was numb, mostly useless. Assault rifles were meant to be handled with two hands, and most of his shots went wide. The enemies ignored him. Zaeed used his hands to boost Garrus up one of the intact pillars, while Samara covered with a biotic bubble.

Shepard had lost track of Grunt, but as Uvenk regained his feet, the young krogan appeared on the roof of the krogan shuttle and dove on top of his rival, knocking him to the ground. The two then engaged in a violent wrestling match.

The Commander stowed his assault rifle and reached for a grenade, but using it might hit Grunt. He felt useless. He could use a small biotic burst to distract Uvenk, but again he risked hitting his own squadmate. Zaeed and Samara had pulled off the two guards, and were keeping them distracted. One's head exploded from a series of rounds from Garrus. That gave the mercenary and the Justicar an opening to finish off the remaining guard.

Grunt shoved Uvenk away from him and threw sand in his face. Shepard got Grunt's attention and tossed him the grenade. Uvenk stood and rushed at Grunt, his eyes wild. Again they grappled, tossing up a cloud of dirt and dust. None of Grunt's krantt could get a clear shot.

Minutes passed as Shepard, Zaeed, Samara, and Garrus gathered around the fight, standing helplessly, worried for their friend. Eventually, Grunt popped out into the clear and grinned. A second later, there was a small explosion.

Grunt made that strange little laugh again. "Heh, heh, heh." He wiped his hands "Uvenk is meat. Let's signal to get out of here and leave him to rot."

The round hatch at the center of the arena opened, and the Shaman stepped out. He spread his arms open and smiled.

"You have passed the Rite of Passage, earning the honor of clan and name. Many survive, but it has been years since a thresher maw fell! Your names shall live in glory." Grunt knelt, and the Shaman seemed to bless him. "Grunt, you are Urdnot. "You may now own property, join the army, and apply to serve under a battlemaster."

"Shepard is my battlemaster. He has no match."

"Understood. Congratulations, Urdnot Grunt. Rise, and accept this token from Fortack. His weapons are the finest we have."

Grunt stood and accepted the largest shotgun Shepard had ever seen. To be sure, only a krogan could wield such a weapon.

On the ride back to the Urdnot camp, Samara struck up a conversation with the Shaman.

"I do not know much of krogan culture. May I ask, are there other Rites?"

"There are many. You have seen the Rite of Passage. Krogan suffer the Rite of Life at birth...and the Rite of Honor when they wish to be considered for breeding. The Rite of Firsts is suffered before

a krogan faces a new enemy. A clan leader also undergoes many rites in service to the clan.”

“If it is not too forward,” Samara followed up, “what rites did you go through to become the Shaman?”

“It is not, though your respect is welcome. You are different from other asari I’ve met.”

“My name is Samara, and I am a Justicar.”

“Ah, I have heard of justicars. I am shamed not to have welcomed you properly, but I do so now. Welcome to Tuchanka, Justicar.” Samara bowed her head. “To answer your question...Becoming the Shaman is excruciating. I passed through rites that made me wish to die. I carry the scars on my soul. I must perform rites each dawn and dusk to keep me bound into our krogan nature. Our spirit is one of violence and death. I must be attuned to that.”

“Your job is awful,” said Grunt.

“Indeed.”

“By what name are you known?” asked Samara.

“I gave up my name when I became the Shaman. I am a conduit for the rage and bloodlust of my people. It would be wrong to retain my old identity. My life belongs to my clan.” The Shaman paused and gestured out the window. “Tuchanka is a place of great gifts. It kills the weak, torments the slow, and destroys the stupid. Survival is an honor, and here, krogan thrive. We cover this planet with our civilization, only to burn it to the ground a dozen times over. Each time we grow stronger. When we are wise and powerful enough, we will tame the planet forever...”

“I’ve never heard anyone say that wiping out their own civilization was a good thing,” said Shepard.

“I’d have thought you, of all aliens, would understand, Shepard. The krogan empires of the past were glorious, built in great battles and conquests. But their cores were weak. How else could they have fallen? When krogan civilization achieves its apex, there will be no stopping it. No stopping us.”

The tomkah came to a stop at the Urdrnot camp. The Shaman bid them farewell.

“May your foes be strong enough to keep you sharp.”

Shepard wanted to check in with Wrex before he left, but he had to stand in line again. The other non-krogan attracted looks, and thus stayed close and quiet. While they waited, Shepard eavesdropped on the two guards again. Or maybe they were different guards. It was impossible to tell with their helmets on. And Shepard’s head was beginning to fuzz from the medi-gel.

“You see that special they had on the extranet?”

“That crap rots your brain. You should be out hunting. Or fixing something, if you can’t hunt.”

“It was a special vid on the Citadel. The Citadel Presidium has a big statue of a krogan right in the middle.”

“Well, I’m not putting a damn asari statue up here, if that’s what you want.”

“Don’t be a fool. They were honoring our fight against the rachni.”

“Maybe they could have honored us by not bombing us with the genophage.”

“The Citadel has these huge arms, and millions of people live there.”

“Why do you care so much? You gonna leave Tuchanka? Run off with the damn Blood Pack mercs?”

“No! No.”

“Then shut up and quit yammering about what you’ll never see.”

“You’re saying you’re happy here in this camp? Where the power doesn’t work half the time, and pyjaks and varren and other clans are always trying to kill us?”

“Yes! And you know why? Because I don’t look at that damned extranet! Who cares what human colonies are getting attacked? Who cares who’s declaring war? This camp, these rocks? This is all we’re ever going to see. This is real.”

“The Citadel was damn pretty, though.”

“So’s the sun, But stare at either of them for too long, you go blind.”

Shortly, it was Shepard’s turn. Wrex greeted him and Grunt, ignoring the others, who were still hanging back.

"You just can't help making trouble. No one has killed a 'maw since my turn in the Rite. Next you'll tell me he's a quint and carps dark matter. Guess that's what it takes to replace me."

Shepard didn't know what a 'quint' was. Probably didn't want to know. Grunt stepped forward, and he and Wrex stared at each other for a moment.

"You are Urdnot Grunt," Wrex finally announced. "Welcome."

"I'm leaving, Wrex," said Shepard. "Sure you can't come with us?"

"Wish I could, but I need to keep these shortsighted fools in line. Not to mention that whole mess you handed me with the Weyrloc. Urdnot will adopt survivors, mostly women and children, Ha! Hunt well, Shepard."

On the way back up to the Normandy, Grunt was fidgeting again, but in excitement this time.

"Urdnot Grunt. I like it. I have a clan. That makes me...it makes me *want* to fight - not just able to! And Uvenk! I wanted to disembowel him! To tear out his spine like a trophy!"

"We started this because you were losing control," said Shepard. "Now you sound more violent than ever."

"Wrex said I was normal. Just had this built up stuff because of being grown in the tank. I get it now – it's part of what I am! It was just delayed because of being tank-bred. Now that I know it's not an outside thing, and I have a place as a krogan, I like it. Our enemies are in trouble, Shepard. And we better not run out of targets."

"There's no danger of that," said Garrus. "They're practically lining up."

"Everyone gets a turn. Ha! Wouldn't want it any other way."

Shepard's head was spinning, and his arm was stinging to hurt. He headed for the med bay, where he found Mordin just about to leave.

"Mordin. How are you?" Shepard asked.

The Professor stuck around to chat as Doctor Chakwas tended to the Commander's wound.

"Still hard to believe Maelon betrayed me, betrayed my work. Disgusted by his actions. Proud of his nerve, though. Always thought he lacked backbone. Hope he finds something new. Better goal, better purpose. Fewer torture tests."

"You're really at peace with what happened?"

"Yes of course. Can't change what happened. Life continues. Back to mission. Back to work. Become like Maelon otherwise. Salarian emotional processing faster than other species. Has to be. Short-lived culture. Can't spend time reminiscing."

"You really don't feel bad at all about what happened on Tuchanka?" Shepard winced as the Doctor applied antiseptic.

"Yes, correct. Now at least. Greatly distressed at the time. Stages of grief, loss, anger, rationalization. Dealt with it. Most issues settled on Tuchanka, some on shuttle back to Normandy."

"Maelon didn't seem like he processed his emotional response. He was obsessed with the genophage."

"True. Didn't mean to imply that salarians were healthier emotionally. Can still make wrong choices, bad decisions from grief, anger, guilt. Maelon couldn't accept feelings. Made decision. Executed. Probably before I left for Omega. Wish I'd seen it. Salarians still feel, just resolve it quickly. Explains lack of marriage. Can't sustain courtship emotions. Or perhaps based on reproduction. Unsure."

"What about Maelon's data on the genophage? His attempts at a cure?"

"What about it? Have it in the lab somewhere. Not dealing with it now. Need to focus on Collectors. Not important now. Regardless, appreciate you helping me back there on Tuchanka. Should get back to work. Wasted enough time already. Lots to do. Talk later."

-----SUBJECT ZERO-----

Kelly had mentioned that Jack wanted to speak to him, so Shepard headed down to her little hidey-hole in the Engineering sub-deck. She was sitting on her cot, fidgeting, when he entered. She was wearing pants, but from the waist up, she had some sort of harness or strap binding her breasts, showing off her tattoos. Shepard tried not to stare.

"Can't figure you, Shepard. Doesn't matter. I've got to talk to you about something."

"I'm listening," he said, cautiously.

Jack stood and paced nervously, tapping her shaved head. "I got thoughts like little bugs crawling in and out of my head. I can't stop them. You know I have a history with Cerberus. You know how far back it goes?"

She went and sat on the stairs. Shepard followed her and stood facing her. Great. First Grunt, now Jack. But where Grunt had merely cracked a window, Jack had the biotic potential to tear the ship apart. The prison ship Purgatory hadn't survived her rage, and that thing was the size of a small space station. Whatever she had to say, it'd be best to placate her. Though how far he'd go to do so, Shepard wasn't sure yet.

"I work for you, and you work for Cerberus. They're in my face all the time. This is gonna make me crazy. Crazier. Your pal, The Illusive Man? Never seen him before, but Cerberus raised me. First thing I remember is my cell door in a Cerberus base. They did experiments. Drugged me. Tortured me. Whatever chance I had to be normal, they stole it by trying to turn me into some super-biotic. The doctors...the other kids...Every one of them hated me. They let me suffer."

Shepard's brow furrowed. "What did they hope to gain by torturing a little girl?"

"It was something about pain breaking down mental barriers, and how it might clear the way for more biotic power. I'm sure there was a payoff due at some point, but I wasn't going to see it. I was wired up in a cell."

"They tortured you just to see if they could make a strong biotic?"

"Wasn't in a position to ask, Shepard. All I know is, a little girl crying in a cell, begging for the pain to stop..."

"You love the power they gave you, though."

"They never gave me a choice." Jack paused, waiting, remembering.

"So...there were other kids in the facility?"

"I didn't know much about them. I was kept separate. They hated me, just like everyone else there. When I broke out, I had to fight through them all. I showed them, but there's a loose end I need to deal with."

"How did you get out of there?"

"There was some kind of emergency and I made a break for it. The other kids came out of their cells and attacked me. So did the guards. I just killed everything in my way and ran. Guess my biotics had developed faster than they thought. I managed to get a shuttle off the ground. Drifted until a freighter picked me up. The crew used me, then sold me. That's my uplifting escape story."

"You're absolutely certain that Cerberus was running the facility?"

"I was a kid but I wasn't dumb. I know how to listen. It was Cerberus. Don't care how far down the chain it was. They thought they were so clever. Turns out you mess with someone's head enough and you can turn a scared kid into an all-powerful biotic bitch. Idiots."

"We'll confront the Illusive Man – "

"He'll just deny everything. That's not what I'm after anyway. I found the coordinates in your files. I want to go to the Teltin facility on Pragia, where they tortured and drugged me. I want to go to the center of the place, my cell. I want to deploy a big fucking bomb. And I want to watch from orbit when it goes."

"You've lived with this your whole life. Why do this now?"

"Like I said, I found the coordinates in your files. You can't expect me to just sit on information like that."

"Attacking our allies could derail our mission. Not a smart move."

"The files say it was shut down after my escape. It's been abandoned for years. They going to

care if I blow up a garbage dump?"

"Jack, you can't hang on to this. It's messing you up."

"Yeah, great advice. But I've been messed up for years, no thanks to them. The only way I put that place behind me is to watch it burn. I need to do this soon. I *need* it."

Shepard sighed. "I'll set a course for Pragia."

"I owe you, Shepard."

The Normandy's shuttle descended into a rainstorm. Shepard flexed his left hand and wrist, doing an exercise Doctor Chakwas had prescribed. Somehow moving his hand made his forearm ache. Something to do with how tendons work. Human tendons, anyway. She'd said some tendons in his arm were bruised, and that it was only a flesh wound. She'd chuckled a bit at that. Doctor humor was odd, sometimes.

"I forgot how much I hate this place." Jack's mood matched the storm outside. "See the landing pad? Has to be on the roof or the vegetation would overgrow it in a few hours. Everywhere except at the landing zone...something's distorting the sensors."

"This was a secret Cerberus facility. Makes sense they'd try to mask it."

"Yeah, they build their equipment to last. Shit, it was a mistake coming back here, Shepard."

"When we start a mission, we finish it." The Commander hadn't diverted his ship all the way out here for nothing.

"Yeah, okay. Let's get on the ground."

The rain became heavier, making conversation impossible. The shuttle was rocked by turbulence, besides. Hard enough that Shepard didn't feel the landing, or hear the mass effect core winding down. Jack popped the door and trotted down the ramp from the landing pad and into a reception area, carrying the bomb strapped to her back. Shepard followed.

"Let's just get in there and plant the bomb in my cell," she said as the Commander joined her inside the facility. "I want to watch this place burn." Jack looked around, shaking off water. "I never saw this room. I think they brought new kids in these containers. They were messed up and starving, but alive. Usually."

There were four rusting containers lined up along the back wall. They very strongly resembled the modular cells that the prison ship Purgatory had used. A door behind the reception desk led to stairs down. Mold grew out of seams in the walls, and vegetation had taken hold in the flooring. The power was out, but there was enough light from skylights in the ceiling to find their way easily.

At the base of the stairs was a flickering hologram, playing a security log on a loop. A man in cheap grey combat armor was speaking. Shepard decided to copy any records he found here. Record everything. Maybe he could use something as evidence against Cerberus later.

"The Illusive Man requested operation logs again. He's getting suspicious," the hologram said.

Another male voice chimed in. "When we get results, he won't care what we did. But if he knew..."

"He won't find out," the guard said, then the exchange started over.

Shepard shut the console off. "Sounds like this facility went rogue."

"He didn't say what they were hiding from the The Illusive Man."

The next room was large, but it was impossible to tell what its purpose had been. A large tree had grown up from the floor, breaking catwalks and cutting a large hole in the ceiling. The rain had slacked off a bit, now, and the remaining parts of the glass ceiling kept most of the room dry. More of the modular cell pods lay around as if knocked about. Shepard carefully led the way down a broken ramp as Jack reminisced.

"I remember escaping to this room. Fighting here. I saw sunlight through the cracks in the ceiling. Only a half dead guard between me and freedom. He was begging for his life."

Shepard held some vines apart to let Jack through. The other half of the large room was empty, save for some barricades, and three half-starved varren. The fish-dogs made a weak effort to attack, forcing Shepard and Jack to put them out of their misery. Holstering his assault rifle, the Commander

noticed that the barricades seemed to be arranged in a circle. There were traces of old bloodstains on the floor, as well.

"This looks like an arena."

"That's right. They used to stage fights here. Pit me against other kids. I loved it. Only time I was ever out of my cell."

"What were they studying?"

"Hell if I know. Maybe that's how they got their kicks. I never understood anything that happened here."

"How often did they do this?"

"I was in my cell my whole life. Sometimes they took me out and made me fight. Filled me with drugs. Other stuff. Time gets funny in a cell."

"Looks like children died in these fights."

"I was a kid, filled with drugs. I got shocked when I hesitated. Narcotics flooded my veins when I attacked."

"They actually rewarded you for attacking?"

"I still get warm feelings during a fight."

"What the hell was wrong with these people?"

"I don't know." Jack shrugged. "Doesn't matter now."

"Let's keep moving."

"Hell yes."

In the next hallway was another security console in front of a door. Any furniture here had either been removed or had decayed into the rubble in the corner. The data was mostly corrupted, but Shepard found one log that would play. The same man in grey armor was speaking.

"Security officer Zemkl, Teltin facility. The subjects are out of their cells! They're tearing the place up! Subject Zero is going to get loose. I need permission to terminate – I repeat, permission to terminate!"

"All subjects besides Zero are expendable," a voice replied. "Keep Jack alive!"

"Understood. I'll begin the –"

Jack shook her head, then kicked over the console. "That's not right. I broke out when my guards disappeared – I started that riot."

"Sounds like it was chaos. Things might have happened that you didn't see."

"The other kids attacked me. The guards attacked me. The automated systems attacked me. That doesn't leave a lot of room for interpretation."

The door opened to more stairs down. At the landing halfway was a dead varren.

"This place is supposed to be empty," said Jack. "Who the fuck shot that varren? It's a fresh kill."

Shepard drew his assault rifle and slowed their advance. Jack wanted to race ahead, but the Commander advised caution and held her back. The next room was medium-sized. Several narrow tables were spaced evenly in the middle. One had been knocked over. All were covered in rusty blood stains. One wall was composed of square metal cabinets. The smell was awful.

"Why'd they need a morgue?" asked Jack "This was a small facility."

"A lot of children must have died here. Even then they were part of the experiment."

"Bullshit, I had the worst of it, and I made it out alive."

They continued through the facility. Jack expressed her feelings as they walked. Shepard cleared doors and corners as they went, teaching Jack how to do the same.

"So strange to be back here. I feel like...I'm pissed off. I'm a dangerous bitch, but then I'm a little girl again. Shit, it's complicated. Let's just go plant that bomb."

They passed through one hallway with ten small cells, five on each side. Shepard was disgusted that they'd kept children here. Jack continued to express mixed emotions. Would blowing up this place really stabilize her? The next room was a courtyard. The rain had slowed to a drizzle, now. Opposite the door they entered was a reflective surface.

"This...it's a two-way mirror?" Jack was disconcerted. "My cell is on the other side – I could see

all the other kids out here. I screamed at them for hours, and they always ignored me. I must have come through here when I broke out, but I don't remember it. This is a bad place.”

The next room they came to was a medical lab. A single chair with restraints sat in the middle. Some new crates were stacked in a corner. Shepard activated another console and found a log of a man in a lab coat.

“Entry 1054, Teltin facility. The latest iteration of PergNim went poorly. Subjects One, Four, and Six died. No biotic change among the survivors. We lowered core temperatures of surviving subjects, but no biotically beneficial reactions occurred. As a side effect, all subjects died. So we'll not try that on Zero. I hope our supply of biotic-potential subjects holds up. We are going through them fast.”

“This is bullshit! They weren't experimenting on the other children for my safety!”

“This whole place was built to turn you into what you are. You can't help what they did to others.”

“You don't get it, Shepard. I survived this place because I was tougher than the rest. That's who I am.”

Shepard found another log entry, with the same scientist.

“It's all fallen to pieces. The subjects are rampaging, and Zero is loose. We're shutting Teltin down. What a disaster. We'll infiltrate and piggyback onto the Alliance's Ascension Program. Hopefully that will – who are...? Zero, wait!” As the entry ended, the hologram of the man showed him being tossed aside.

“Shepard, they started up somewhere else.” Jack's voice was a mix of of panic and concern.

“Ascension is an Alliance program. It's a school for biotic kids. They don't torture children there.”

“A lot of this...isn't the way I remember it.”

“You were a kid. You couldn't have known. And there was a lot going on.”

“Maybe.” Jack shrugged. “I was dumb. I keep my eyes open now, and I always shoot first. We're getting close to my cell. The place I came from. Let's keep going.”

Down the next hall was the cafeteria. Three krogan and three vorchas were milling about, all wearing Blood Pack armor. One of the vorchas was carrying a flamethrower. Normally, Shepard would have scoffed at the stupidity, but here it would be useful for clearing out the fast-growing flora. One of the krogan had neon pink highlights on his armor – the leader, no doubt. He was speaking into his radio when Shepard and Jack entered the room.

“Hey, Aresh, it's Kureck.. Yeah the intruders are here. You want them dead, we have to talk credits. You promised us lots of salvage, but this place is a waste.” The Pack leader paused to listen. “Fine – we'll put 'em down. Then I'm coming in there, and we're going to talk salvage.”

“You're in my way,” said Jack.

“Why are you here?” Shepard asked, in a vain attempt to avoid a fight.

“First, we kill you, then we'll see,” said the leader. “Get them! Kill them! On my order, I want them dead.”

Shepard had anticipated this and fired an electrical overload from his omni-tool at the flamethrower -wielding vorchas. The explosion killed his two companions. Jack grabbed Kureck with biotics and ripped him in half. Shocked at the sight, the remaining two mercenaries jumped out a nearby window and fled into the jungle.

“Only room left is my old cell,” Jack said calmly, brining Shepard out of his stupor. “Whoever Aresh is, he's in there. I want to plant the bomb there anyway. Might as well do it on his corpse.”

Shepard couldn't help but wonder at the architecture of this place. To bring Jack out of her cell and to the labs, they'd have had to take her through the cafeteria. The floorplan was as messed up as the science.

Shepard heard some rustling in Jack's old room as he entered. “Come out, we know you're here. Who are you?”

A man roughly Jack's age stood up from behind a dresser. He had a receding hairline and a

scraggly brown beard that didn't quite cover the pock marks on his face. "My name is Aresh, and you're breaking into my home. I know you, Subject Zero. So many years have passed, and I thought I was the only survivor." The man began to pace arrogantly.

Jack aimed her pistol at him, and he stopped "My name is Jack. How the hell do you know me?"

Aresh began to pace again. Jack kept her pistol trained on him, though. "We all knew your face, Jack. They inflicted horrors on us so their experiments wouldn't kill you. You were the question, and I'm still looking for the answer."

"Looks like you weren't the only one pulled back here, Jack," said Shepard.

"I tried to forget this," said Aresh. "But a place like this...it doesn't forget you. It follows you."

"Why did you come back?" Shepard asked.

"I hired these mercs and came back almost a solar year ago. We're rebuilding it piece by piece. I'm gonna find out what they knew – how to unlock true biotic potential in humans. I'm restarting the Teltin facility." Aresh turned to the window and spread his arms. "It will be beautiful."

"This place was like a prison," Shepard said. "How'd you get out?"

"We all attacked at once as they were taking us to the lab. They would have put us down, but then Jack got loose. When I came to, it was over – the guards, the scientists, and the kids were all dead. And you were gone, Jack."

"I stopped it, all of it. Maybe the others did have it bad, but what you're doing is just messed."

"Everything we went through must have been worth something!" Aresh sounded angry for the first time.

"You'd do the same thing to new kids?" Shepard had a hard time believing it, even accounting for Stockholm Syndrome. "Wasn't this forced on you?"

"Some were bought from poor families on Earth or kidnapped from colonies. Most ended up here the way I did: batavian pirates. The scientists here did such horrible things to us. They must have had a good reason."

"There's no reason good enough!" Jack shouted. "Are you nuts? You lived it! I wanted a hole in the ground, Shepard – he's trying to justify what happened by using it!"

"We can blow up the place, but that still leaves him," said Shepard. "What do we do with another you?"

"That's easy," Aresh replied. "Just leave me here. This is where I belong."

"Fuck that." Jack used biotics to force the man to his knees and hold him there.

"Jack, he's trapped in his past. You need to move on from yours. Will killing him change anything?"

"He wants to restart this place. He needs to die!"

"He's crazy. Just look around: he'd never be able to restart this facility. Your past doesn't have to control you."

"Fuck." Jack lowered her pistol and released her biotics. "Get out of here. Go!" Aresh ran out of the room, never to be seen again. "He's not worth chasing. None of it is."

"I know it's hard to see right now, but you did the right thing, Jack."

"This room was my whole childhood. Give me a minute to look around."

"Go ahead."

Jack wandered around, touching things, reminiscing, while Shepard took the bomb from her and armed it. The rain had stopped.

"Nothing's changed...but it's all different." Jack looked out the two-way mirror. "I thought that room out there was the rest of the world. I'd pound and yell. Never did any good." She picked up a faded piece of paper from a desk. "I used this table for everything. It was like my best friend. I'd crawl under it to cry. I was pathetic." Then, glancing at a very small bed: "Sometimes I dream that I'm back in this bed being tortured. I used to tie the sheets around my wrists and try to rip them off. I want to stop coming back here."

On the way out of the facility, Jack stopped to examine some scorch marks on a wall. "See the scarring on the wall here? That's where I killed my first man. One of the guards tried to stop me.

Instead, I stopped him.” Jack straightened and gained a determined expression. “Okay no more wallowing. Let's blow this place to hell.”

Shepard handed Jack the remote detonator. As shuttle sped away from the Teltin facility, Jack sat, impatiently flipping the safety that covered the detonator's switch. Shepard locked eyes with her, and she grinned. She pushed the button. Shepard braced himself, but the shockwave from the blast sent them both flying, bouncing out of their seats and knocking them into the walls. The shuttle righted itself, and Shepard took his seat again, making a mental note to have seat belts installed.

Shepard was finishing stowing his equipment in the Armory on Deck 2 with Jacob's help, when Joker called over the intercom.

“Commander, Jack and Miranda are in the middle of a...disagreement. Can you head it off before they tear out a bulkhead?”

“I'll deal with it,” Shepard responded, then headed down to Deck 3.

“Take pictures.”

In Miranda's quarters, Jack biotically lifted and threw a chair at Miranda, who used her own biotics to casually deflect it aside. Both women were glowing in blue energy fields.

“Touch me and I will smear the walls with you, bitch!” Jack screamed.

Shepard entered the room and stood between them.

“Enough! Stand down, both of you!”

“The cheerleader won't admit what Cerberus did to me was wrong!” Jack said, only slightly calmer.

“It wasn't Cerberus,” Miranda shook her head, completely in control. “Not really. But clearly you were a mistake.”

“Screw you! You've got no idea what they put me through! Maybe it's time I showed you!”

Jack reached past Shepard to shove a finger in Miranda's face. The Commander gently pushed her back a step. Miranda took her own step back, folding her arms.

“Our mission is too important to let personal feelings get in the way. We have to work together.” Shepard said, as calmly as he could.

“Fuck your feelings. I just want her dead.”

“You both know what we're up against. Save your anger for the Collectors.”

“I can put aside my differences...until the mission is over,” Miranda agreed, not taking her eyes off Jack.

“Sure. I'll do my part,” Jack added, also not taking her eyes off Miranda. “I'd hate to see her die before I get a chance to filet her myself.”

Jack strutted out of the room, and both women released their biotics.

“You two going to be okay?”

“It's a good thing you came by when you did,” Miranda said as she picked up and reset the chair. “As long as she does her job, we'll be fine. Thanks, Shepard.”

The Commander went down to Deck 4 to check on Jack. On the elevator, he pondered how to keep the two women from tearing each other – and the ship – apart. Perhaps rearranging the training schedule? No, they had to learn to work together. Limiting them to weapons training should do for now. He found Jack lying on her back on the cot, wearing only that strange harness on her upper half. She seemed much calmer, but he decided to stand on the other side of the cramped space.

“I needed to wipe that place off the map. You took me there to do it, and I owe you. You don't know what it's like, Shepard. To have garbage like that following you. It marks you ways you...you don't expect.”

Sometimes, Jack could act like a krogan, so Shepard decided to give her some tough love. “You're not the only one with a past, Jack. Everyone has to deal.”

Jack scoffed and opened her eyes to stare at Shepard. “Know what? I like that. I piss and moan, and you say grow the fuck up. That victim garbage, it's half me. I think I get that.”

“I don't want this affecting our mission.”

"Can't kill all that bad shit so easy, I guess. Have to live with it. Fucked up or not...the rest of the galaxy can deal."

That wasn't quite what Shepard had in mind. There seemed to be a soft side to the otherwise angry young woman, too. Maybe bringing that out would be a better idea. "I've made a lot of hard choices, Jack. Like what to let go."

Jack sat up. "Hard to walk away from it. You'd think it would get easier now that the place is a crater, but what else do I know?"

"I never thought I'd see you show mercy, but you let Aresh live."

"He was trapped in the past, reliving it every day. You showed how that could be me. I'm not getting stuck like that. I'm better than him, and I'm sure as hell not carrying that crater around with me."

"Do you feel like you're different now?"

"I know that place is gone. But I still kind of want to kill every person I see. No offense."

"I'll take what I can get with you, Jack."

"You did a lot, Shepard. Shit, I'm not good at this soft stuff. Just...thanks, okay? Let's...let's get back to work."

-----STEALING MEMORY-----

Kasumi met Shepard in the mess.

"I've got got everything in place, Shep. I'm really glad you're helping me out with the heist. Can't wait to see how you look in formal wear."

Shepard had never heard his name shortened before. He wasn't sure what to make of it, but he let it pass, for now. "Wait, what? What does formal wear have to do with anything?"

"I guess you could go with what you have on, but you'd kinda stick out at a fancy party."

"Unless you're planning on stealing something from the Collectors..."

"It's part of the deal I made with Cerberus. Hear me out before you say no."

Shepard groaned. "This is the first I've heard of it. Not surprised The Illusive Man is forgetting to tell me things again. Go ahead."

"Yeah I guess it slipped their minds. I'm looking for my old partner's graybox. A man named Donovan Hock took it, and I'm planning to get it back."

"Tell me about this former partner of yours."

"His name was Keiji Okuda, the best hacker and entryman I've ever known. Unfortunately he slipped up and made himself infamous." Kasumi paused for a moment before continuing. "He stole something he shouldn't. He warned me it was bad, something that could spark interstellar war if it got out. That information...got him killed."

"I assume a greybox is some kind of hardware."

"It's a neural implant. Illegal in most places. Stores memories, thoughts, secret codes, illicit information." The thought of a computer hooked up to his brain was greatly disturbing to Shepard, but he wasn't surprised such a thing actually existed.

Kasumi was still explaining, though. "This one in particular belonged to my partner, Keiji Okuda. We worked together for a long time, before Hock killed him."

"What could he have found that's so bad?"

"He wouldn't say what it was, just that it was dangerous. He said if it got out, humanity would be in trouble. He encrypted it, wrapped it up in his own memories. To decode the information, you have to sift through all the time we spent together. Now those memories are all that's left of him."

"I can understand why you'd want to get it back. And if the information is dangerous to the Alliance...it needs to be kept out of the wrong hands."

"Donovan Hock is the last man I'd want holding this information. Getting it back will be easier with your help, Shepard."

"What do you know about Donovan Hock?"

"Mister Hock is a well-respected 'businessman.' Arms dealer, murderer, smuggler, generally not a great guy. Other than that, he's not so bad. Rich, charismatic, willing to crack open a man's skull to get at the neural implants inside. His mansion's famous for being hard to crack, but I have a way in, and I think you're going to love it."

"I doubt Hock's the kind of guy who takes kindly to people sneaking into his house."

"I always expect trouble. That's why you're coming along. I've taken the liberty of getting you some evening wear. You want to look presentable."

"If that's what Cerberus promised you, we'll get it done."

"It'll be fun. And if we're lucky, you won't even have to draw your gun."

Bekenstein was a human colony, an answer to the asari's Illium. Highly industrialized, with loose rules and business regulations, and located on the border of the Terminus Systems. A perfect place for a criminal like Hock to flaunt a showy mansion. The cities were smoggy, but the rich and powerful kept homes in the hills above. Shepard squirmed in his formal suit and tie. Kasumi was wearing her usual dark grey thieving garb with a hood – it would pass as attire appropriate for an assistant to a crime boss. She had rented a fancy white skycar in the nearby city, and the autopilot was doing a fine job so far.

"You clean up well, Mister Solomon Gunn. Hock won't know what hit him."

"I take it I'm wearing this getup for a reason. I thought this was a heist."

"You'd look pretty out of place at a society party in armor, don't you think? You look great. You should wear this stuff more often."

Shepard squirmed some more. The clothes were itchy. "I assume 'Solomon Gunn' is my cover."

"You run a small but talented band of mercs out in the Terminus Systems. Precisely the type of person Hock respects. I took the liberty of giving you a reputation. Papers, witnesses, article in Badass Weekly. Just don't start talking business with him, and you'll be fine."

"Now's probably a good time to fill me in on the details."

"You have been waiting patiently. Our friend Hock is throwing a party for his closest friends. A couple dozen of the worst liars, cheaters, and mass murderers you'll ever want to meet, all bringing gifts as a tribute to the man himself. Your tribute is a lovely statue of your old friend Saren, rendered with loving detail and filled to the brim with our weapons and armor – no weapons allowed to the guests at this party. It's being delivered as we speak. Once inside, we'll make our way to Hock's vault door, somewhere in the back of the ballroom. Then we case the security and start peeling away the layers. The statue should be there waiting for you to crack it open and arm up. Then we just waltz into the vault and take back Keiji's greybox. And I'll finally get a chance to say goodbye."

"You've worked really hard on this. Keiji must have meant a lot to you."

"What I that obvious?"

"You know, we could just blast the mansion from orbit. Then the information on the Alliance would be safe."

"Keiji's greybox holds a lot of priceless, personal memories. It's all that remains of who he was. Everything from all the codes and plans he stole to...all the time we spent together."

Shepard nodded. It was never simple. The skycar touched down in an elaborately landscaped courtyard. The mansion itself was gigantic; all white stone and large windows, with several wide steps leading up to a pair of massive doors, currently open and welcoming.

"This ought to be interesting," said Shepard.

"That's what I'm going for. This is our stop. After you, Mister Gunn."

As they walked towards the entrance, a truck was unloading Kasumi's statue of Saren. A guard stopped them as he scanned it with his omni-tool. "Just one moment, sir. There seems to be an issue with the statue." The guard's armor was an inverse of Eclipse mercenary armor. This was black, with a yellow outline of a star. Shepard could only surmise that the Eclipse also hired out for private security, and this was their concession to formalwear.

"Is there a problem here?" A man in an immaculately tailored white suit strutted down the stairs.

His accent was a thick South-African. His jet-black hair was perfectly coiffed, side burns extended halfway down his jawline, and his chin was decorated with a pointy soul patch. Everything about him exuded confidence and arrogance.

“No, Mister Hock. Just doing a scan,” said the guard.

The man in white turned to Shepard, while Kasumi hung back a half step to Shepard's right. “I don't believe we've met. Donovan Hock.”

“Solomon Gunn. A pleasure.” Shepard extended a hand, but Hock ignored it, almost concealing a suspicious frown. “I've heard a lot about you. You've been very busy lately, if the extranet is to be believed.”

“Sir, the scanners aren't picking anything up,” the guard concluded, saving Shepard from trying to defend his fake reputation.

Hock looked at the statue for a moment. “Hmm. I don't think our guests would come all the way here from Illium just to cause trouble. Do you?” The guard shrugged, and Hock shook his head before turning back to Shepard. “You may pass through, Mister Gunn, with my apologies. But I will ask your companion to remain outside. You understand, I hope.”

“Care to explain why my assistant has to stay outside?”

“I don't like the look of her, so she stays outside. Simple as that.”

“If it makes you feel more secure, fine.”

“Good to see we're not going to have a problem.”

“I just need to give her some instructions before I join you.”

“Enjoy the party.”

Hock turned and climbed the steps, rejoining his guests. Shepard took Kasumi aside.

“Well, that didn't go as I expected,” she whispered.

“No plan survives contact with the enemy,” he whispered back. “Any idea why he'd refuse you entry?”

“No. We've never seen each other in person. And no one knows what I look like. Just watching his ass, I'm sure. I can't blame him.”

“All right, so what now?”

“We go on with the plan. You'll just have to do all the talking. I'll stay out of sight and stick with you the best I can. We'll keep radio contact in case something goes wrong.”

Kasumi folded her arms and stood still, trying to not be noticed. Shepard nodded and made his way up the steps. Inside was a grand entryway. Ornately-carved, expensive-looking vases lined the walls of the foyer. More guards in inverted Eclipse armor stood conspicuously. They looked bored, but if they were halfway professional, Shepard could assume they were watching everyone very closely. Two grand staircases swept up to a higher level, but they were both roped off. Guests stood around in pairs or small groups. He made his way further in to the ballroom, pretending to admire the artwork. A gigantic fountain was the centerpiece of the ballroom; water flowed over a strange spherical sculpture, trickling softly into a shallow pool below. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows at the far side of the room, the sun was beginning to set behind the skyline in the distance, casting thin clouds in pinks and oranges.

Kasumi whispered through Shepard's hidden earpiece. “We need to find the vault door and case the security. We'll figure out the next step then.”

Shepard continued to casually wander the floor, nodding to other guests as he passed. He heard rumors that Commander Shepard was alive, and resisted the urge to prove them right. Another group was talking about Archangel, and made assumptions that he was dead. He picked up a thin glass of sparkling wine from a passing waiter and pretended to take a sip. He'd need to stay sober if he was to make it through this.

The picture window opened in one corner to allow the statue of Saren to be brought in on a hovering mass effect sled. The guard from outside gently pushed it down a set of stairs between the fountain and the huge window.

“Very nice. There's more here than I expected,” said Kasumi. Evidently she'd followed the guard

and the statue. Shepard continued his perambulations. "Password protected voice lock. Kinetic barrier. DNA scanner – looks like an EX-700 series. Everything a vault needs to be impenetrable."

Shepard scratched his head and whispered into his radio. "This going to be a problem?"

"Please, Remember who you're talking to. We'll need to get a voice sample for the voice lock. You'll have to go chat up Hock for that. We'll have to find a password too. DNA? Child's play. We should find plenty of DNA samples in Hock's private quarters. And the barrier? Cut the power. Never fails...if we can find it. Keiji could get through a system like this in his sleep, and I'm better."

"Let's get to it."

"I'll trace the power for the kinetic barrier, you start working on the rest."

Shepard approached the host of the party, who was finishing a conversation with some of his guests.

"There he is," Kasumi whispered. "All you need to do is keep him talking long enough for me to get a voice print. Pull out the charm on this one, Shep. Whenever you're ready."

"Mister Gunn." Hock met Shepard and deigned to shake his hand this time. "I hope you're having a good time. That scene at the door hasn't spoiled your evening, I hope."

"Think nothing of it. There's always someone gunning for people like you and me."

"Hah, yes, that's true. I'm glad you understand."

"Frankly, I'm surprised your security isn't tighter. It's a ballsy move, opening your front door like this."

"Yes, I suppose it is. Hopefully it sends the message that I don't fear anyone stupid enough to step up to me. People these days want comfort, entertainment, love. They don't see that the galaxy is fragile. They only have to worry about simple luxuries. Why? Because people like me – and you – are doing the terrible things that keep the galaxy spinning." People within earshot were starting to take notice. Hock raised his voice and turned to address the whole room as he went on. "This party is for us. The cleaners, the support structure for the galaxy's gleeful delusions of peace. May there always be a market for the things we do!" Hock spread his arms to polite applause and made a slight bow.

"I said get him talking, and you got him talking," said Kasumi. "We've got enough of a voice sample. Let him go."

Shepard nodded and made his excuses.

"Enjoy the party Mister Gunn."

"Once we find the password, we can get past the voice scanner."

Shepard wandered past a locked door, then stopped when Kasumi spoke up.

"That door goes to a security room. I'll take care of the lock. There we go. Ready when you are."

The Commander opened the door, then stumbled in, pretending to be drunk. It was apparently enough to fool the two chatting guards.

"Hey! You can't be back here!" one barked.

"Oh, shorry. I'm looking for the men'sh – hic! room."

"Across the hall next to the painting of a bridge."

Shepard quickly gathered some dark energy, then biotically slammed both the guards' heads into the desk they were sitting behind, knocking them out. Quickly, he searched the security station and found a datapad discussing the password of the day.

Kasumi decloaked right next to the Commander, who jumped. The thief took the datapad from Shepard and skimmed through it.

"Peruggia.' That's the name of the man who stole the Mona Lisa. Nice. Now, I just take the voice sample we got from Hock and... got it. Now we can crack that voice scanner. Let me hack their security cameras. You see if you can get into Hock's room."

From inside the ballroom, it was impossible to tell which door led to Hock's private rooms, so Shepard made his way out to a balcony. As surreptitiously as he could, he looked up at the building's exterior. Through a window to the right, he could just make out a bed. It would be possible to hop

over a railing and then to shimmy along some eaves, but there were two guards patrolling, looking out over the cliff below.

"I've looped the security camera feeds," said Kasumi. "Pick your moment and head on over."

With no one looking in his direction, Shepard set his glass down on a bench and hopped the railing. Carefully, he snuck up behind the two guards and gave them a biotic shove over the edge. One of them screamed, and the Commander jumped through an open window and ducked down under the sill. He could hear voices out on the balcony. One of the guards found the abandoned drink and assumed that a guest had jumped.

Lucky break, Shepard thought as he released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Kasumi decloaked again, and Shepard nearly had a heart attack.

"Look for anything we can get usable DNA from. Just make it quick and quiet."

Shepard examined a fern.

"It's a plant," said Kasumi in a flat tone. She stepped over to a desk and picked up a datapad. "We can probably get Hock's DNA off this. Looks like Hock's been trying to crack Keiji's gray box, but he's missing something. He hasn't cracked the encryption yet. He seems to have obsessed over this. But I'm not sure there's enough DNA. Let's keep looking."

Shepard looked over the bed and bumped an alarm clock, which blared for a second before he could silence it. He hid beside the bed and Kasumi cloaked again. It was silent. Shepard realized he couldn't hear the sounds from the party and concluded that the bedroom must be soundproofed.

Kasumi decloaked and scanned the bed. Shepard was starting to expect that, now. "No hair, no skin flakes. The housekeepers must be thorough."

She noticed a set of swords on a wall-rack. "The cleaners don't dare touch treasures like this. We can get some skin cells from the dust. It's probably contaminated, though. We should find another sample."

Shepard searched the couch cushions. "Aha!" he exclaimed.

"Found a sample?"

"No, a credit chit."

Kasumi piked up an ashtray from the coffee table. "Empty. Too bad. A cigarette butt would have been a good source. But the wine glass...not a great saliva sample, but it's still useful. That should do it. Let's get out of here. I disabled the barrier from the security station, so we should be good to go. Meet you downstairs."

Peeking out the window, there were people gathering around the railing, guards searching the eaves. Assuming his drunken attitude, instead Shepard opened the door from the bedroom. The guard standing outside was flummoxed, but the Commander explained that he'd been looking for the bathroom. He staggered away, leaving the man scratching his head.

Shepard grabbed another wine glass from a waiter and began a slow stroll around the ballroom, studying artwork and nodding to his fellow guests. When he felt that no one was paying him any attention, he casually descended the stairs. If anyone asked, he could say he was looking for the bathroom. No one did. Pity. At the bottom was a small room filled with security scanners, and Kasumi tapping away at them. After a moment, a door slid open, revealing an elevator. She invited him to enter, then pushed the button.

The elevator descended quickly, and they emerged into a vast, well-appointed warehouse.

"So this is Hock's vault," Shepard said as he admired the display cases. "Very nice."

The statue of Saren was next to the elevator. Kasumi opened a drawer at the base of it. "Go ahead and get dressed. Take a look around, Keiji's greybox has to be down here somewhere," she said, then looked around for herself.

Shepard pulled on his armor. He narrowed his eyes at his former enemy. Saren seemed to stare back from beyond the grave. The Commander tore his eyes away and armed himself. At one end of the warehouse was a giant green head. "How did Hock get Lady Liberty's head? Kasumi exclaimed. "Damn you, Hock!"

"I don't remember her head being missing," said Shepard.

“She got blown up by terrorists a few decades back, remember? The one in you see New York now was rebuilt.”

“I didn't know th – .”

“Michelangelo's David! Just...wow! Think we could get this out through the door?”

It was a rhetorical question, but Shepard shook his head anyway. They split up. There were other valuable items and works of art. Statues of krogan and rachni, stone tablets with quarian writing. A stone covered in Egyptian hieroglyphs. A jagged sculpture that was labeled as being turian. That last was nice. Weirdly relaxing. Kasumi joined Shepard at Neil Armstrong's spacesuit.

“Man's first steps on the moon were taken in this suit,” she said with the awe that Shepard was feeling. “Now, I wouldn't be caught dead going out in something like that.”

Next to the spacesuit was a display case holding a pair of fancy-looking autopistols. They looked serviceable.

“That's a Kassa Locust,” Kasumi said covetously. “No, THE Kassa Locust! The gun that killed two presidents. Gorgeous. It even comes with a perfect copy, too. I'm sure Hock won't mind if we borrow these.” She picked them up, and underneath was a small grey rectangle with a blinking blue light. “Oh my god. There it is!”

Keiji's greybox didn't look like much to Shepard, but the master thief lifted it with reverence and plugged it in to her omnitool.

“Don't bother Miss Goto, it's codelocked.” Donovan Hock's voice boomed from hidden speakers, and his giant holographic head appeared, as big as Lady Liberty's, floating in the middle of the warehouse. “I had a feeling that was you at the door. I knew if it was really you, you'd get through anyway.”

“You know me. I don't like to disappoint,” she taunted.

“I need what's in your own graybox, Kasumi. You know I'm willing to kill you for it. I'll admit, your skills are impressive. You got into my vault like I'd left it open. But you're still going to die, screaming, just like...”

Hock continued to rant and gloat. Shepard unholstered his assault rifle and shattered a nearby plain-looking vase. It was probably expensive.

“Nooooooo!” Hock screamed. His holographic face scowled.

“Have I got your attention?” Shepard asked, calmly.

“Ha! That shut him up,” said Kasumi.

The hologram faded out, and a door opened on the narrow side of the warehouse. Six Eclipse mercs entered, sporting their traditional yellow armor with the black eclipse logo, and all heavily armed, though their weapons were strange. Shepard and Kasumi, surprised that Hock would risk damaging his own museum, took cover behind the pedestals.

Shepard didn't want to damage anything, either; these relics belonged in a museum. A real museum. He leaned out and carefully took aim, firing off a few rounds, but the mercs had taken cover as well and his shots barely scratched them. Kasumi asked Shepard to keep the enemy busy, then disappeared. He counted off the number of seconds he thought it might take her to circle around, then broke cover and sprayed bullets, still being careful not to hit anything.

All six mercs broke cover as well. Kasumi appeared behind one, and stabbed him with her omni-blade, killing him instantly before cloaking again. But one of the mercs' shots hit Shepard. It was not a conventional weapon, but rather shot a lance of lightning. It took down the Commander's shield, and he dove for cover again to recharge.

He gave it a few seconds, but there was no recharge, and only then did he notice an icon in his HUD indicating his armor's mass effect generator was offline. With no other backup, Shepard summoned a biotic barrier around himself, then broke cover. Again the mercs focused their attention on him, and again Kasumi picked one of them off.

Shepard dove for cover, but was clipped by a bolt of lightning. It stung a bit, and his barrier weakened. Half the mercs were dead now, but they were spreading out, being more careful to stay in cover, and watching each other's backs. The Commander peeked around a display case, and saw a

line of lightning arcing *around* a statue to hit him in the head. That one was enough to cause him to lose focus and drop his barrier completely.

So that was why Hock had been comfortable sending in mercenaries in to do battle among all of those priceless artifacts. The displays must have electromagnetic shielding built in, which pushed those lances of electricity away. And the mercs knew how to take advantage to hit a target not in their direct line of sight.

Shepard now couldn't think of a way to survive this without a lot of destruction. Reluctantly, he unclipped a grenade from his belt, but it immediately dropped from his hand as he was hit by a bolt of lightning. The paralysis stopped almost as soon as it had started, but he still ached all over. A merc to his left collapsed to the floor and Kasumi rushed to the Commander's side.

"Are you all right, Shep?"

"Yeah," Shepard replied in a strained voice as he caught his breath. "I'll be fine. Go. I'll draw the last two out."

Kasumi cloaked. Shepard slid his assault rifle into the open pathway between displays. "All right!" he yelled. "You got me! I'm coming out." Shepard held out both hands, then slowly stood up and walked out into the open. He could feel his strength returning. Good: the effect of the strange weapon was temporary, but his enemies didn't need to know that, so he stooped a bit, feigning weakness.

The remaining two mercs revealed themselves and held their weapons pointed at Shepard. Kasumi appeared and stabbed one, and he cried out as he died. The other one turned, which gave Shepard just enough time to pick up his assault rifle and mow down the last merc."

Kasumi helped him to his feet. "You sure you're all right."

"Yeah. Never better."

Shepard picked up one of the strange weapons. The central barrel was surrounded by three arms, each tipped with something resembling a spark plug. He aimed it directly at a statue of an asari goddess and pulled the trigger. The lighting curved around it and harmlessly dissipated against the wall behind. Just holding the gun gave him a slight tingle, but he decided to keep it. Never know when something like that might come in handy. Attaching it to the magnetic hook on his back, he felt a tingle at the base of his neck, and another at the top of his buttocks. Weird, but he ignored the sensations.

Kasumi was leading the way to the door through which the mercs had come. "The elevator's locked down. Probably not a good idea to try going out that way, anyway. According to the blueprints, there's a landing pad to the east, through a tunnel. Let's get out of here."

Shepard tried contacting the Normandy, but there was no response. Either they were too far underground, or comms were being jammed. Maybe both.

Through the door was a collection of military vehicles. Some exotic, some common. If only they could take that Mako with them...There was no exit from this part of the museum.

"Damn it! There's supposed to be a tunnel here," Kasumi was borderline frantic. "We have to find another way!"

Shepard studied the vast hall, and noticed some storage tanks. He tapped a few of them, and noticed a seam in the wall behind them. "Looks like there might be a door behind here. These tanks are full of fuel. Hmm."

Shepard picked out a truck with a rack full of missiles in its bed. He told Kasumi to take cover and plug her ears, then sealed his own helmet. There would be dust and debris, and he'd learned his lesson on Feros. Looking over the truck's controls, he recalled some training from his days in Basic. The truck was functional, thankfully, and it was a simple matter of getting the missile rack turned, then pressing the button to launch one of the rockets.

The boom was indeed loud, and there definitely was debris, but the dust was quickly sucked out into the tunnel beyond. Shepard checked on Kasumi, who shook her head rapidly to clear it.

"That got it," she said.

They stepped over chunks of steel and concrete and entered the tunnel, which was wide enough

for a two-lane road, and perhaps a kilometer long. Hock's voice was barking orders over loudspeakers.

"They're out of the vault. Seal them in. Don't let them out of here with my property!"

A thick door descended from the ceiling halfway down the tunnel. Kasumi led the way to an access hatch that ran along side the tunnel. It was a tight fit and slow going, but they emerged on the other side of the thick door.

"Kill Solomon Gunn! Bring the girl to me!" Hock ordered.

At the far end of the tunnel, at one side was a ramp leading to a door. Mechs were pouring through it. Five of the light-type and two of the heavy. There was no cover. Kasumi cloaked. Shepard aimed and fired his new weapon. The bolt of electricity hit the closest mech, and then jumped to each of the others, stunning them all. They stopped and shook, enveloped in thin lines of electricity. Shepard laughed. So did Kasumi as she decloaked. It was then a simple matter of shooting them all to bits with standard ammunition.

The door was an elevator which led up to the landing platform that Kasumi was seeking. The tunnel had been carved through the hillside. It was night now, and there were no lights in the valley beyond. No doubt this was how Hock brought in his smuggled goods.

Shepard was about to try calling the Normandy again, but a dark, unmarked shuttle swooped in, offloading four Eclipse mercs, two light mechs, and one dog mech. Shepard and Kasumi put a stack of crates between them and the enemy. There were loudspeakers out here too, evidently, as Hock issued another taunt.

"Don't fight me, Kasumi. You know what happened to your boy toy when he fought back."

"You don't talk about Keiji like that! Murderer!" She was riled up, but kept her place next to Shepard. A cool head was good. He was glad he'd recruited her.

The Commander looked over the lighting weapon, but couldn't find an indicator for charge, or an ammo counter. He decided to give it a try anyway, and nodded at Kasumi. She cloaked, and Shepard waited a few seconds before leaning around the crates and pulling the trigger.

It worked. The mechs were stunned, and the mercs' shields were disabled. One of the mercs crumpled to the deck before he knew that Kasumi had stabbed him. The other three turned in shock, giving Shepard time to swap to his assault rifle and gun them down. The paralyzed mechs were easy to clean up.

"You could have done this easy way, Goto. Allow me to show you the hard way," Hock taunted.

All was still. Shepard and Kasumi shrugged at each other. A moment later, they heard a familiar whirring sound, and a Mantis gunship popped into view from below, firing two missiles.

The master thief and the Commander dove out of the way. Shepard rolled, brought up the lightning weapon, and fired. The gunship's shields flickered, then quickly recharged.

"If I can get to the ship, I can take down the shield!" Kasumi shouted.

Shepard nodded, then started running a zig-zag pattern around the platform, drawing the attention of Hock's machine guns. He dove behind the stack of crates, but they were immediately blasted apart by another pair of missiles. Shepard resumed running, but his legs were tiring quickly. Without a mass effect generator, even light combat armor was weighty.

The machine gun fire stopped suddenly, and Shepard turned to see the gunship wobble. Kasumi materialized, clinging to the flying machine's canopy. Sparks flew from her omni-tool, then she gave Hock a mock salute and did a back-flip onto the platform, landing in the splits. The instant she was clear, Shepard tossed a grenade and held down the trigger of his assault rifle. Either he was as lucky a shot as Zaeed, or the grenade did the damage. Either way, the gunship fell out of the sky. A moment later, an explosion was heard from below, followed by a plume of black smoke.

Shepard called the Normandy and had the shuttle sent down.

On the ride back to the ship, Kasumi plugged the greybox into her omnitool, then linked that to the shuttle's systems for the extra computing power. A holographic helmet appeared over her head, and the shuttle's video monitor showed what she was seeing. She stood in a black void, facing a man

with asian features. After a moment, he spoke.

“Kasumi, if you're seeing this, it's because I'm dead. The information we found is all here.” He extended an arm, pointing out to the side. A cascade of windows popped up like a loose card deck, and Kasumi turned and walked among them, selecting a few at random. “It's big, Kasumi. If the Council ever got wind of this... the Alliance could be implicated.”

Shepard recognized images of Reapers and Prothean ruins. Several planets and contemporary ships went by too fast to identify. The scene shifted. Kasumi began flipping through some of the memories of herself with Keiji. Some of them were...rather personal. Shepard looked out the window and watched the planet Bekenstein recede.

Keiji resumed speaking. “Kasumi, I...I encrypted the information to keep it safe, and I uploaded the encryption key to your gray box so no one could get the whole package. But if I'm dead, and if anyone knows about this...then I've made you a target, my love. I'm so so sorry.”

“Keiji!” Kasumi ran back to the man and hugged him, but it was only a recording, and the hologram didn't react.

“I know you, Kasumi,” Keiji's recording continued. “You'll want to keep these memories forever. But you don't need some neural implant to know I'll always be with you. Please, Kasumi. Destroy these files. There's nothing more I can do to protect you.”

“I...I can't do that! This is all that's left!”

“Goodbye, Kasumi. I love you.”

The shuttle's screen went blank, and Kasumi's holographic helmet winked out.

“Is there any way to separate the information from the memories?” Shepard asked. A part of him hoped he could use the information himself, though he suspected what the answer must be.

“No. Keiji's a master at encrypting files. He laced the information into his memories. You can't get one without the experiencing the other.”

Shepard nodded. “You heard him, Kasumi,” he said gently. “He'd want you to destroy the information and save yourself.”

“I know. I just...I can't. This is all that's left of him.”

“Hock knew you had the cipher. I'm sure others do, too. It's only a matter of time before someone finds you and the secret gets out.”

“You're right. I know. I just...it feels like I'm losing him again.”

Shepard placed a hand on her shoulder. “You have to do this, Kasumi. You know that.”

Kasumi bowed her head, then tapped a command on her omni-tool. “Gomen nasai, Keiji-san,” she whispered. She sat and drew hood down further, and sobbed quietly.

Shepard adjusted the shuttle's controls, slowing its speed, then sat on the opposite bench, staring out the window, pretending not to notice.

-----TREASON-----

Shepard brought the new lightning weapon he'd salvaged from Hock's mansion to the Normandy's Armory. Jacob picked it up and noted the tingling. He speculated that it might be a bad capacitor, and promised to tinker with it a bit.

On his way to the elevator, Kelly stopped Shepard and mentioned that Tali had just called, looking for him. The Commander thanked his yeoman and went down to Engineering. The quarian was wringing her hands when he found her, but relaxed when she saw him.

“Shepard. I'm glad you came by. I may need your help. I just received a message from the Migrant Fleet. The Admiralty Board has accused me of treason. I'm scared, Shepherd.”

“Is it because you're working with Cerberus?”

“I'm not working with Cerberus, I'm working with you. And I got leave to serve on the Normandy again. I have no idea what they're accusing me of. You'd think I would remember if I betrayed the Fleet!”

“Nobody who knows you could believe you'd betray your people, Tali.”

"I don't know. They don't lay charges like this unless the evidence seems absolute. But thanks. I appreciate your faith in me, Shepard."

"What happens when a quarian is accused of treason?"

"There's a hearing, with members of the Admiralty Board acting as judges. My father is an Admiral on the Board. He'll have to recuse himself from judgment. I can't even imagine what he's thinking right now. The punishment for treason is exile. If they convict me, I can never go back."

"How often is someone from the Fleet charged with treason?"

"It's rare. It must be something that affects the entire Flotilla, not just one ship. The most recent one was Anora Vanya vas Selani, an engineer who handed over fleet defense schematics to the batarians. She had good intentions. The batarians were contracted to upgrade our systems, but they passed the defense schematics to a pirate gang."

"Was she convicted?"

"No, she made a suicide run on the pirate gang. She destroyed them before they could attack the Fleet. She was pardoned posthumously. Let's hope I don't have to prove my innocence that way."

"No kidding. So you have no idea why they're accusing you?"

"None. The specifics of charges like this are rarely discussed on open channels. I won't know any more until I get to the Flotilla."

"What happens if you're convicted?"

"Like I said, exile. The specifics are up to the judges. If it's deemed only a tragic mistake in judgment, the guilty party might receive a small ship and supplies. Not that it really matters either way. If I'm convicted, I'll never see the Migrant Fleet again."

"So no prison and no death penalty?"

"We don't have the spare resources for long-term incarceration. Monitored work detail is more effective. And we don't have enough people to afford executions. An exile can still have children, and those children are welcomed back to the Fleet."

"So how does the trial work? How soon do we need to get you there?"

"They'll wait a reasonable period of time for me to come and defend myself. Eventually, if I don't show up, they'll try me in absentia. As for how it works...it's less formal than an Earth trial, or something you'd see on the Citadel, or in a vid. We're family. This is just the worst kind of family meeting."

"Okay. Let's go find the Flotilla."

"I didn't think there would be time for you to help. Thank you, Shepard. But I don't want Cerberus learning the location of the Fleet. I'll arrange a rendezvous with one of our scout ships."

"Just you and me? How about another character witness. Garrus, maybe?"

"I trust you, Shepard. The fewer, the better, but...Garrus...yes. I'll ask him"

Shepard, Tali, and Garrus crowded the bridge of the Normandy, awaiting the Cyniad's arrival. The quarian scout ship exited FTL about a kilometer away; practically on top of them. Joker nearly jumped out of his seat – he'd never seen such a precision jump. The steady sweep of the vertical slice on EDI's hologram even flickered for a second, as if blinking.

Almost immediately, the Cyanid's communications officer contacted the Normandy.

"Our system has your ship flagged as Cerberus. Verify."

Tali responded. "After time adrift among open stars, along tides of light, and through shoals of dust, I will return to where I began."

"Docking permission granted. Welcome home."

"We'd like a security and quarantine team to meet us. Our ship is not clean."

"Understood. Extending docking tube. Please maintain position."

As the quarian ship maneuvered, Tali and Garrus prepared the airlock just aft of the cockpit. Shepard lingered for a moment. Something about the ship's profile was vaguely familiar.

The ship's first officer welcomed them aboard, and explained that due to the charges, the crew were forbidden to speak with their guests. She provided quarters for them, and recommended that

they remain within. The trip would take several hours, and the XO apologized that the ship didn't have better accommodations.

Neither Shepard nor Garrus had ever kept their armor sealed for an extended duration – it wasn't designed for that, and they didn't know what to expect. Tali showed them how to replenish their air and water supplies, and also how to empty their waste.

The three quickly became bored. The human and the turian took turns keeping their quarian friend entertained. At one point, Shepard asked about the interesting design of the ship. Tali admitted to having made copies of the original Normandy's schematics. This ship was the quarians' first attempt at a stealth ship. The Normandy SR-1 had been a joint venture between the turian Hegemony and the human Systems Alliance, so Tali was naturally nervous about her friends' reaction. Both men thought about it for awhile, but no one had really prohibited that kind of detailed study, and besides, they might have done the same in her shoes.

The Cyanid docked with one of the quarian liveships, the Rayya. Tali explained that it was nearly as big as a turian dreadnought, but they didn't get to see it from the outside. Shepard also would have liked to see what 50,000 ships flying in formation looked like, but they were escorted straight to the airlock and off the ship, with no opportunity to look out a window. The Rayya's captain met them.

“Captain Shepard. I'm Captain Kar'Danna. Tali'Zorah told me a lot about you. I wish we could be meeting under more pleasant circumstances.”

“I never actually reached the rank of Captain. Technically, I'm no longer in the Alliance military at all.”

“You're the commander of the Normandy, responsible for the lives aboard. That entitles you to respect among our people. 'May you stand between your crew at heart as you lead them through the empty quarters of the stars.’”

“Keelah se'lai,” Tali responded. “It's an old ship captain's blessing, Shepard.”

“Tali helped the Normandy's crew out of many difficult situations. I'm here to return the favor.”

“I understand. As the commander of the vessel she serves on, your voice carries weight. I wish I could do more to help Tali. The trial requires that I be officially neutral, but...I'm here if you need to talk.”

“We came as soon as we heard about the charges against Tali.”

“It's good that you did. There were already people pressing to try her in absentia.”

“What? Why? They never move that quickly,” said Tali.

“They're charging you with bringing active geth into the fleet as part of a secret project.”

“That's insane! I never brought active geth aboard. I only sent parts and pieces.”

“You sent geth materials back to the Migrant fleet?” Shepard asked.

“My father was working on a project. He needed the materials. If I sent back something that was only damaged, not permanently inactive...No. No, I checked everything. I was careful.

“What's our next step, Captain?” Shepard asked.

“Technically, I'm under orders to place Tali'Zorah under arrest pending the hearing. So, Tali...you're confined to this ship until this trial is over.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

“Preparations got underway as soon as you arrived. The hearing's being held in the garden plaza. Good luck.”

A quarian ship was indeed crowded. Many people were streaming through the hallways, headed in the same direction. Shepard, Tali, and Garrus joined the flow. The hallway opened to a large, open area with lots of plants growing along high walls. The floor was covered in grass, with a sidewalk winding its way through the area. This didn't stop anyone from standing anywhere they chose, and clusters of quarians stood about, speaking in low murmurs. Tali recognized one quarian woman in a grey enviro-suit.

“Tali'Zorah vas Normandy. I am glad you came,” the stranger said in a husky voice. “I could

delay them only so long.”

“Auntie Raan!” she and the grey-suited quarian shared a hug. “Shepard vas Normandy, this is Admiral Shala’Raan vas Tonbay. She’s a friend of my father’s. Wait, Raan, You called me ‘vas Normandy.’

“I’m afraid I did, Tali. The Admiralty Board moved to have you tried under that name, given your departure from the Neema.”

“I take it being associated with a human ship is a bad sign,” said Garrus.

“They stripped me of my ship name. That’s as good as declaring me exiled already.”

“It’s not over yet, Tali. You have friends who still know you as Tali’Zorah vas Neema...whatever we must call you legally.”

Shepard wanted to know what Raan’s role was in the trial. “You’re an admiral. Does that mean you’re one of the judges?”

“I’m afraid not. My history with Tali and her father forced me to recuse myself.”

“I imagine Father had to do the same,” said Tali.

“You’ll see inside, Tali. For my part, I moderate and ensure that the rules of protocol are followed. But I have no vote in the judgment.”

“I guess we should get started,” said Shepard. “Does Tali have a defense counselor? Someone who speaks for her side.”

“Indeed she does...Captain Shepard. She is part of your crew now, recognized by quarian law. An accused is always represented by his or her ship’s captain.”

“So, er...you would actually speak for my defense,” Tali stated, apologetically.

“I’m not a lawyer. Hell, everyone thinks I’m part of Cerberus. It would have been helpful to know about this earlier...but I’ll do everything I can to help you, Tali.”

“Thank you, Shepard. I couldn’t ask for a better counselor.”

Admiral Raan tried to encourage them. “You underestimate us, Tali. Do not forget that you have friends as well as enemies. I delayed their attempt to try you in absentia. I convinced them to allow a human into our midst. You still have a chance. And Captain Shepard, our legal rules are simple. There are no legal tricks or political loopholes for you to worry about. Present the truth as best you can. It will have to be enough. Now come, I promised that I would not delay you.”

Admiral Raan led them towards a small amphitheater in the middle of the area. She told them it would be a few minutes while she gathered the other admirals. Tali recognized a group of three quarians; two male and one female. Shepard thought he recognized them as well, but couldn’t quite place them until Tali greeted them by name: Veetor’Nara and Kal’Reegar. The woman was psychologist helping Veetor with the trauma he’d suffered on Freedom’s Progress.

“Shepard? How’d you get onto the Rayya?” Veetor asked. He seemed jittery, but better than when Shepard had last seen him.

“Shepard is here to help me with my trial,” Tali answered.

“Oh, yes. I heard about that. I hope you didn’t really do what they said you did.”

“No, Veetor.” Tali shook her head. “I would never endanger the Fleet.”

“Oh. Well, good. So, can I help you with anything? I mean, probably not but – you helped me.”

“Do you remember anything else about the Collectors?” Shepard asked. “Anything at all?”

“Nothing new. I’m sorry. Every time I go back to that place in my mind, I...I..”

The doctor gently placed a hand on Veetor’s shoulder. “Veetor, come back. It’s okay.”

“I want to help, but I can’t. I didn’t see anything, and what I remember...”

“Don’t worry, Veetor,” said Tali. “We’re going to find the things that did this. And we’re going to kill them.”

“Tali could use some friends right now,” said Shepard. “Would you be willing to tell the admirals how she helped you?”

“No! I mean, yes, but I already did! They came to see me. I don’t want to talk in a crowd.”

“Veetor is doing well,” said the doctor. “But he isn’t ready for a public speech just yet.”

“I talked to them. So did Kal’Reegar. We both told them about how you helped us. I hope it

helped.”

“I'm sure it did, Veetor. Thank you.” said Tali.

“Take care of yourself, Veetor,” said Shepard. Not many could have gone through what you did and come out sane.”

“I know. I didn't. But thank you, Commander. It's only because of your help that I've come this far.”

Shepard had last seen Kal'Reegar on Haestrom. The quarian marine had been injured, and it was good to see him doing well, now.

“How've you been, Reegar? You took a kind of beating on Haestrom.”

“Physical damage wasn't bad. I was down for about a week with infection, though. Figure I got off easy. I don't have to face those admirals.”

“With your immune systems, it couldn't be easy for quarians to fight a war. You'd lose more people to infection than injury.”

“We can't afford a frontline attack, that's for sure. Have to fight smart – ideally from orbit.”

“We do have stockpiles of antibiotics,” Tali defended. “It's not as though everyone would die from a single shot.”

“No,” said Reegar. “Shepard's right. You've only seen our strike ops, Tali. Don't have all the fancy equipment for a frontline fight. Supplies get strained, things get ugly, fast.”

“What are you doing on the Rayya? It sounds like you already gave your report.” asked Shepard.

“I, ah, stayed to argue the charges against Tali'Zorah. I've served with her, and she deserves better than what she's getting.”

“Thanks, Kal.”

“Just stating the facts, ma'am.”

“Have you had any luck talking to the Admiralty Board?”

“Admiral Raan asked my opinion about the geth, since I'd fought on Haestrom.”

“What did they get from our readings?” Tali asked.

“Damnedest thing. It's just like they said. No way the sun on Haestrom should have been acting that way. It's getting old...only it's not. Dark energy. It's reducing the mass of the star's interior. Techs are worried.”

“So the dark energy theory is right?” said Tali. “That's troubling.”

“Can't really comment on that, ma'am. I just shoot things.”

“What does that dark energy buildup mean?” Veetor asked. “Is it something we should worry about?”

“Sorry. I don't know what it means. Just that it has the scientists worried.”

Tali tried to soothe any worries, but it sounded like she was musing. “Hopefully it's isolated; some rare phenomenon. If dark energy can destabilize solar material...Probably not something to worry about now, but resources in this galaxy are scarce enough without stars suddenly going dead.”

“Some days I think flying around in the Fleet without a planet of our own is the right idea,” said Reegar.

“Could the geth be responsible?” Shepard asked.

“Keelah, I hope not.” The quarian marine was taken aback by the idea. “If they can screw up a star, our chances in a war are even worse than I thought.”

“I don't think it's the geth,” said Tali.” It would take massive time and resources to affect a star like this deliberately. It's too inefficient to be a weapon, and even the geth wouldn't destroy a useful star system.”

“Hope you're right, ma'am. Synthetic bastards are bad enough as it is.”

Three rows of steps led down into a wide depression. In the middle was a short, wide railing, where the accused was to stand. On the small stage were three quarians standing shoulder to shoulder. Admiral Raan took her place on a platform behind them. Each had a small console in front of them. The crowd began to gather. Garrus hung back, standing head and shoulders taller than the

tallest quarian. He would have a fine view. Shepard and Tali took their places.

"This conclave is brought to order," Admiral Raan announced. The acoustics of the place projected her voice and muted that of the crowd. "Blessed are the Ancestors who kept us alive, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this season. Keela se'lai." The crowd echoed the last two words. "The accused, Tali'Zorah vas Normandy, has come with her captain to defend herself against the charge of treason."

"Objection!" The Admiral in red and white raised his hand. "A human has no business at a hearing involving such sensitive military matters!"

"Then you should not have declared Tali crew of the Normandy, Admiral Koris." said Raan. "By right as Tali's Captain, Shepard must stay."

"Objection withdrawn," Koris said, disappointed.

Raan got on with it. "Shepard vas Normandy, your crew member Tali'Zorah stands accused of treason. Will you speak for her?"

"If it helps Tali, I will. But in her heart, she remains Tali'Zorah vas *Neema*, a proud member of the Migrant Fleet. I regret that her captain is forbidden to stand at her side today."

The admiral in red and white leaned forward, offended. "Nobody has been forbidden from anything! It is a simple –"

The admiral in yellow argued the point. "Lie to them if you must, Zaal'Koris, but don't lie to me and expect me to stay silent! The human is right!"

"Admirals, please." Raan stepped in. "Shepard's willingness to represent Tali'Zorah in this hearing is appreciated."

"As commander of the Normandy, I will speak for Tali'Zorah. But I shouldn't have to. When Tali helped me stop Saren and his geth army, her actions spoke for themselves. Without her help, none of you would be alive to put her on trial today."

"Well said, Shepard," said Admiral Gerrel. "None of us should forget Tali's contributions to the Fleet."

Raan got down to business. "Tali, you're accused of bringing active geth to the Migrant Fleet. What say you?"

"How could Tali have brought active geth to the Fleet while serving on the Normandy?" Shepard asked.

"To clarify, Shepard" the female Admiral in black said, "Tali isn't accused of bringing back active units – only parts that could spontaneously reactivate."

Shepard shook his head. "Tali would never endanger the Migrant Fleet. She pleads not guilty."

"I left parts and technology for teams to pick up," said Tali. "My father ordered me to do so. But I would never send the active geth to the Fleet! Everything I sent was disabled and harmless!" Tali wrung her hands as the audience murmured.

"Then explain how geth seized the lab ship where your father was working!" Admiral Koris spat.

"What are you talking about? What happened?" Tali was near frantic.

"As far as we can tell, Tali," Admiral Gerrel explained gently. "The geth have killed everyone on the Alarei...your father included."

"What? Oh, Keelah..." Tali hung her head dejectedly.

Shepard was annoyed. "I thought quarians valued family! How do you justify springing this on Tali in the middle of a damn trial?"

"Our apologies," said Admiral Raan. "Tali should have been informed."

Shepard took a deep breath. "You're telling me that one of your ships is controlled by the geth, and you're sitting here holding a trial?" said Shepard. "You think Tali is helping the geth? Maybe killing a few will prove her loyalty!"

"We do not accuse Tali of aiding the geth cause," said Admiral Koris. "We accuse her of carelessness that endangered the Fleet."

"I appreciate the need for this trial, Admirals, but right now our first concern must be the safety of the Migrant Fleet. My team and I stand ready to assist in whatever capacity necessary."

"Thank you," Raan nodded at Shepard. "The ship is disabled. Quarian strike teams have attempted to retake the ship. So far without success."

"Shepard, we have to take back the Alarei!" Tali plead.

"The safest course would be to simply destroy the ship, said Admiral Koris. "But if you are looking for an honorable death instead of exile..."

"I'm looking for my father you bosh'tet!" Tali angrily pointed a finger at the admiral.

"You intend to retake the Alarei from the geth?" Raan asked, but her tone suggested she had intended this. "This proposal is extremely dangerous."

"With your permission, Admirals, yes," said Shepard. "The good of the Fleet must come first, and Tali needs to find her father."

"Agreed," said Admiral Gerrel. "And if you die on this worthy mission, Tali, we will see that your name is cleared of these charges."

"We can discuss that later," said Admiral Koris.

"Then it is decided." Admiral Raan concluded. "You will attempt to retake the Alarei. You are hereby given leave to depart the Rayya. A shuttle will be prepared for you at the secondary docking hangar. Be safe, Tali. This hearing will resume upon your return, or upon determination that you have been killed in action."

The crowd broke up. Shepard and Tali reunited with Garrus.

"Thank you for agreeing to take back the Alarei, Shepard. The admirals sound sure that my father is already dead, but..."

"How are you holding up?" Garrus asked. "They just threw a lot of fire at you, even before telling you about your father."

"I knew this would be bad. but I guess you're never really prepared to be charged with treason. And my father...I don't know. He could still be alive. They don't know for certain that he's dead. And I need to find out."

"Is there anyone here you want to talk to before we go?" Shepard asked.

"We can talk with the admirals. It might help us to see what their viewpoints are. But I doubt we'll change anyone's mind by talking to them privately."

Garrus excused himself, promising to check out the shuttle they were to borrow, and to find any information he could on the Alarei. Shepard thought it odd that it was permissible to speak with the judges about an ongoing trial, but quarian laws were not human laws. The admirals were out among the crowd, now, mingling with their shipmates. Shala'Raan was looking for some company, but Tali accosted her first.

"You set me up, Shala! You told captain Donna not to say anything. I don't hear that my father may be dead until I'm in the trial? Why?"

"The admirals needed to hear the shock in your voice, Tali. Otherwise they might not have let you try to retake the Alarei. That is your best chance. That you're recovering evidence that can exonerate you. I am sorry. We cannot afford sensitivity Tali."

Shepard tried to ease the tension. Tali had introduced Raan as her aunt. "How long have you known Tali's family?"

"Since before Rael was an admiral. 25 or 30 years, I'd guess. I was there when Tali was born. Her mother and I had synced up our suits so we could be in the same open-air room. I was sick for a week, but it was worth it. I was the one who took Tali from her mother and put her in the bubble. She cried so hard."

"I don't understand. You put your children in bubbles?"

"Environmental units. It's a step between relying on the mother's immune system through nursing and getting a suit of her own. The bubbles let parents take their children out of the clean rooms safely. We don't wear suits until adolescence. There's a celebration when a child gets her first suit. It's a coming of age."

"I'm not hearing much about Rael's involvement in Tali's life."

"It's difficult to explain. I shouldn't..."

"It's all right, Aunt Shala. No secrets between shipmates. I think I told Shepard about my father."

"If you say so. Rael was...committed to the quarian cause. That didn't leave him a lot of time for his family. He wanted to give Tali and her mother the homeworld...or a strong Fleet, at least. That was how he showed his love."

Shepard could hear the empathy in the Admiral's voice. "Well, at least someone here is looking out for Tali," said Shepard. "Will retaking the Alarei really help her case?"

"She has no one else to speak for her, Shepard. I'm doing everything in my power. That's what her father would have wanted."

"Don't say it like that! My father could still be alive!"

"Tali showing a desire to correct mistakes she may have made will make up for a lot of lost ground. But more importantly, you may find evidence of what happened. With luck, it will exonerate Tali from any wrongdoing."

"I'm supposed to care about that now? All I want to do is find Father!"

"What kind of evidence will carry weight with the admirals?" Shepard asked.

"Tali, you admitted to sending geth parts to your father for his project."

"Yes, but never anything that could have come back online on its own. I took every possible precaution!"

"Then find records of your shipments and the experiments. Something that proves you were careful. Something that proves that this is all just a terrible accident that nobody could have foreseen."

"Are the judges that set on finding her guilty?"

"Anything involving the geth is a live wire, Shepard. But there is still hope. Han'Gerrel greatly respects both you and Tali'Zorah for stopping Saren. Zal'Koris sees the whole thing as a war crime, and wants to convict. I have no idea what Admiral Xen wants."

"There did seem to be some other arguments going on among the admirals," Shepard said.

"You caught that. Yes, the geth presence makes this a touchy issue. The Admiralty Board is trying to determine whether to focus on colonial development...or attempt to retake the homeworld."

Tali was surprised. "You're thinking of war? With the geth?"

"I'm not, Tali. But the others are."

"I know the Migrant Flee is formidable," said Shepard. "But even you can't take on the geth."

"We grow tired of wandering the stars, Shepard. We want our world back. We have paid enough for our mistake. I'm not giving you my opinion. I'm telling you which way the wind is blowing."

Shepard thought that sounded very much like her opinion. They excused themselves, and Tali went to speak with Zal'Koris, next. As they wove their way through the crowd, Shepard picked up on snippets of conversation. Opinions varied from praising Shepard to hating him, and the same for Tali.

Next up was the admiral in the yellow suit.

"Tali! I'm glad Admiral Raan got you leave to hit the Alarei. Hopefully you'll find something that clears your name."

"I'm more concerned with finding my father, Admiral."

"I wish you luck. Blow up a few geth on the way. And you're Capitan Shepard? Admiral Han'Gerrel vas Neema. You got Admiral Koris backing up worse than a krogan toilet. Glad to see Tali's captain knows how to handle a courtroom."

Shepard shook the yellow-suited admiral's extended hand. "I'm just here to help Tali, Admiral. I get the sense you're inclined to believe the defense. I'm glad one of the judges is."

"If you were only giving Rael inactive equipment for weapons tests, Tali, I've got no problem. We need to test weapons against geth material. I know you and your father. You've put too much of yourselves into this fleet to do anything to jeopardize our safety. And you're both smart enough not

to make mistakes like the ones they're saying you made.”

“You and Tali's father go back a long ways?” Shepard asked.

“We served together on the gunship Yaska during a bad batarian raid. We were kids, serving pre-Pilgrimage as trainees. A crew of ten, and six were dead. Kinetic barriers were down. Rael and I were alone on the bridge, and the batarians had drawn off a tramp freighter. Our ship was under orders to hold position. But Rael looked at me and said, 'We're underage. They can't charge us for breaking formation.' He took the helm, I took weapons, and we brought that freighter back. The crew called us heroes. The brass called us idiots. They slapped medals on our suits, then kicked us off to Pilgrimage a bit earlier than usual. That's Rael for you.” Han'Gerrel chuckled at the memory.

Shepard appreciated the story, but it was time to move on. “It sounds like we're dealing with more politics than just Tali bringing back equipment.”

“You noticed that, did you? Tali's father wasn't just running weapons tests on the geth for fun. He was looking for something to give us an edge when we attack the geth in full-scale war.”

“I know Father wanted to retake the homeworld someday, but are we that close?”

“I don't know, kid. We almost have the votes. We just need to give people hope for victory.”

“I hope the quarian people find someplace to live, Admiral,” said Shepard. “But it sounds like you're playing with fire.”

“We're too comfortable now, Shepard. We've got the largest fleet in the galaxy, and we just ride around doing nothing.”

“We might need that fleet to help fight the Reapers, Admiral,” said Tali.

“Then we need a world to shelter our noncombatants while we do it.”

“Can you tell me about the other Admirals?” Shepard asked. “Anything that might help me change their minds about Tali.”

“The one you didn't recognize, Tali, is Admiral Daro'Xen. She's on the fence. She takes Fleet safety very seriously. On the other hand, she's always been in favor of studying the geth. I hope she sees the benefits of Rael's research. Admiral Koris is the same whining suit-wetter he always was.”

“You disagree with Admiral Koris' policies, I'm guessing,” said Shepard. “Or is it personal?”

“The man is a damn geth apologist. Thinks we were wrong to try to destroy them centuries ago. He wants us to search for new colony possibilities instead of taking back the homeworld. Any research on the geth makes him angry. You don't have much of a chance with him, I'm afraid.”

Tali led them to the admiral in white and red armor, who interrupted his conversation to talk to Shepard.

“Judging by your ability to play to a crowd, human, I've done Tali a favor by stripping 'vas Neema' from her name.”

Tali made introductions. “Commander Shepard, this is Admiral Zaal'Koris vas Qwib-Qwib. Do not ask about the name.”

The admiral stood at attention and placed his arms behind his back. “I take no pleasure in this, Tali, truly. But you have gravely endangered and dishonored our fleet.”

Shepard couldn't help himself...and he might derail the man. “You have a ship named Qwib-Qwib?”

“Oh, here we go,” Tali's body language showed embarrassment.

The admiral took on a defensive tone. “Our people have, during difficult periods, purchased pre-owned vessels from other cultures! And on occasion had difficulty altering the ship's registry information! The citizens of these foreign-named ships have borne the stigma of these names with grace and honor!”

“If it bothers you, maybe you could find another ship?”

“I've occasionally entertained the idea of requesting a transfer. Something with a nice respectable name, like the Defrahnz or the Iktomi. But I am proud of the Qwib-Qwib, and I will not flee because of petty insults.” The Admiral scoffed. “So this is the human Tali'Zorah chose to serve instead of staying with the fleet? Charming.”

“Not helping, Shepard.” said Tali.

So much for that, thought Shepard. "So, what exactly is your problem with my crew member, Admiral?"

"I respect Tali immensely. Her actions against Saren are to be lauded. But like her father, she wants nothing but the destruction of the geth...the people we created. The people we wronged."

"The geth drove us from our homeworld!" Tali protested.

"Of course they did. We tried to kill them."

"You and the other Admirals appear to have some disagreements beyond Tali's trial."

"You are correct. Tali, I apologize for it being brought into your proceedings. The other admirals are pushing for war. Rael'Zorah was researching new weapons to use against the geth. They would see our fleet destroyed in the skies over our homeworld rather than find a new colony and adapt."

"Can the quarians coexist with the geth after all your history?" Shepard asked. After his conversations with Legion about there being two factions, he had to wonder. But he would keep that to himself, for now. No need to encourage anything rash on the quarians' part.

"I don't know. We all deserve to find out. They are our children, Shepard. We have all done horrible things to each other, but it has to end. For both groups. That is why I cannot sanction whatever experiments you helped enable, Tali'Zorah. I believe this message needs to be sent."

"I understand, Admiral," she said. "I do not agree with you, but I understand."

"Goodbye, Tali'Zorah. Be well."

"I'm surprised to hear you say that."

"I don't hate you, Tali, I just think your father's plans for war were wrong."

Garrus called Shepard to say that the shuttle was ready. Shepard and Tali headed that way, but they ran into Admiral Xen on the way.

"Tali'Zorah. Given the circumstances, are you certain that speaking to me is appropriate?"

"I'm looking for information about the Alarei. I don't intend to bribe you in the middle of the plaza, Admiral."

"And a pleasure to meet you, Commander Shepard. We owe you a debt of gratitude for your actions against the geth."

Shepard nodded in acknowledgment. "You didn't say much during the opening statements, Admiral."

"There wasn't much to say. This trial is a waste of time."

"It matters a great deal to me!" said Tali.

"If you and your father were actually experimenting on active geth subjects, then you are simply idiots. No reason to waste resources on a trial. If not, then this was a tragic accident in the pursuit of a higher cause. Again, no trial is needed to determine that."

"Tali was with me when the Alarei was lost. And Saren and the geth would have destroyed us all without her help."

"Your political machinations are transparent, Commander. They are also unnecessary."

"If you're not interested in this trial, why not recuse yourself?"

"And let that aging warship Han'Gerrel and the cowardly Zaal'Koris be the ones to chart this course? I think not. The broader purpose underlying the trial is too important. Tali'Zorah is only peripherally related. No offense intended."

"And what is the true purpose of this trial, Admiral?" Tali asked in a strained tone.

"To determine whether quarians should fear their past mistakes, or reclaim their glory using our natural affinity for artificial intelligence."

"So the only reason you care about this is because Tali's father might have learned something valuable from the geth?" Shepard asked.

"Indeed. If he has, then even in this accident, we may fight something worthwhile."

"You want to create new AIs?"

"No. I wish to return the geth to the control of their rightful masters, the quarian race."

"It sounds like your ideas about synthetics are in the minority," Shepard said.

"Yes. At least on the Admiralty Board. Han'Gerrel sees an enemy that must be crushed."

Zaal'Koris would run away and hide on some new colony world. Shala'Raam is still undecided. I had thought Rael'Zorah to be firmly in Han's camp, but if his experiments were on active geth, perhaps we have ideas in common."

"So you support experiments on the geth?" Shepard asked.

"Rael should have felt no more guilt experimenting on geth than I did while performing surgery on a childhood toy."

"The fact that you performed surgery on your childhood toys explains a great deal, Admiral," Tali muttered.

Admiral Xen ignored the jab. "A ship travels faster than I can. With the right programming, it can choose locations, even defend itself when attacked. But it is just a machine. It was built for the sole purpose of serving its master. And it can be dismantled whenever its master desires."

"If we don't find Rael alive on the Alarei, what do you think will happen?" Shepard asked.

"The power balance will be disrupted. Han loses a vote for his foolish and self-destructive war. That would favor peace, then, as Shala'Raam is too careful to risk her own neck. But if the admiral replacing Rael agrees with me..things could become very interesting."

Shepard thanked the admiral for the information, and he and Tali went to meet up with Garrus.

The turian reported that the shuttle was automated and unarmed. As far as what they'd be facing, the comm systems on the Alarei were being jammed from within. A unit of quarian marines had gone to take the ship back. The few survivors said there would be between 10 and 50 geth platforms.

Through the Alarei's airlock was a cargo bay. Three geth robots were there to meet them. Without hesitating, Tali hacked one, which turned on its friends, distracting them so that Shepard and Garrus could gun all three of them down. Garrus had the schematics for the ship, and led the way towards the bridge.

The next room was a barracks, empty save for some of the crew's logs. In playing some of the latest entries, it was clear to Shepard that Rael'Zorah had ordered more and more geth brought online. For what purpose was unclear. Tali was in denial, but before Shepard could confront that, three geth entered the room.

The robots took cover before Shepard's team could kill them, and four more came in after them. Tali had a new trick: a hovering holographic sphere, purple and gold, like the trim on Tali's enviro-suit. The little drone floated around between the geth and shocked them with arcs of electricity, causing the robots to stand upright, and making them easy targets. But the effect didn't last long, and neither did the drone. It was enough, though, and the trio made short work of the enemy.

Further along was a lab. Tali stopped to take a look at some disassembled geth parts on a table. Garrus kept a watch.

"This is one of the storage units I sent to Father. It's parts from a disabled repair drone, plus a reflex algorithm that I didn't recognize. I got this on Haestrom."

"Haestrom was a war zone. How did you salvage gear in the middle of all that?"

"These suits have more pockets than you'd think," she joked. "Quarians have learned how to salvage whatever we can whenever we can. Within reason. We're not vorcha. But we repair what most people would throw away. Hundreds of the ships in our fleet were salvaged wrecks, either found dead in space or purchased for next to nothing."

"How often did you get these things to your father?"

"I sent this back with Kal'Reegar when I joined you on Haestrom. Before that, sometimes I left packages at secure drops in civilized areas. Someone on Pilgrimage would see that it was shipped home. For very valuable finds, I'd signal home and Father would send a small ship."

"What makes a part worth sending back to your father?"

"It had to be in working order. Something that could be analyzed and integrated into other technology. Anything new had priority. Technology the geth had developed themselves. Signs of modification, clues to their thinking."

Shepard sifted through the parts, but had no idea what he was looking at. "Does any of this give

you a clue as to what happened here?"

"No. I don't know. Shepard, I checked everything I sent here. I passed up great finds because they might be too dangerous, prone to uncontrolled reactivation or self-repair. I don't know which possibility is worse: that I got sloppy and sent something dangerous, or that Father actually did all this." She walked over to an active computer. "This console might have something. Most of the data is corrupted, but a few bits are left." She seemed to speed-read through the text on the screen "They were performing experiments on geth systems, looking for new ways to overcome geth resistance to reprogramming."

"Did you know what kind of tests your father was running?"

"No. Father just told me to send back any geth technology I could find that wasn't a direct danger to the fleet. I suspected he might be testing weapons, but I thought he was just working on new ways to bypass shields and armor."

"Do you think testing weapons on the geth was right?"

"It's not testing weapons on prisoners, Shepard. I only sent Father parts. Even if he assembled them, they wouldn't be sapient. You saw what Saren and Sovereign did with the geth. Any research that gives us an advantage is important."

"Could any of that data clear your name?"

"Doubtful. This is mostly results data. Effects of different disruptive hacking techniques. I don't understand all of it. But...they may have been activating the geth deliberately. I don't know. Nothing here says specifically, but if they were...then Father was doing something terrible." She turned the computer off and put her hands on her hips. "What was all this, Father? You promised you'd build me a house on the homeworld. Was this going to bring us back home?"

"Have the quarians considered colonizing a new world?"

"We'd have enough difficulty reacclimating to our own native environment. Adjusting for exposure to a foreign colony would be even harder. It's the difference between 60 years and 600. For anyone alive now to watch a sunset without a mask, we must take back our home. You have no idea what it's like. You have a planet to go back to. My home is one whole breach away from extinction."

"You've got a place here, Tali. Don't throw it away in a war you don't need."

"Don't need? Shepard, if I don't wear a helmet in my own home, I die. A single kiss could put me in the hospital. Every time you touch a flower with bare fingers, inhale its fragrance without air filters, you're doing something I can't. Damn the Pilgrimage! Without it, I might never have known what I was missing! What we had lost when we lost our homeworld."

"We should keep moving," said Garrus.

"Right. At least we can take back one ship."

To get to the bridge, they had to fight their way through a cafeteria. A dozen geth robots were already there, but a combination of Tali's drone and hacking, and Shepard and Garrus's guns, was enough to destroy them all.

Shepard wondered briefly about how the geth had acquired weapons, but then he realized that the quarians would also be researching their own new armor against their enemy's weapons. The Alliance did the same. The Commander remembered how Nirali Bhatia's body had been kept for exactly that reason. She was a marine who'd died on Eden Prime, and Shepard had to be the one to tell her husband that he couldn't have his wife's body back.

At the base of the stairs to the bridge was the body of a quarian. Tali went running up and knelt next to it.

"Father! No, no, no! You always had a plan! Masked life signs, or or an onboard medical stasis program, maybe. You! You wouldn't...They're wrong! You wouldn't just die like this! You wouldn't leave me! You wouldn't leave me to clean up your mess! You cant."

"Hey, come here." This time it was Garrus who offered comfort.

He pulled her up and hugged her. Shepard stood watch.

"Damn it. Damn it! I'm sorry." She sobbed into the turian's shoulder.

"You've don't have to stay here," said Garrus.

“Yes I do. Someone in this family needs to stop walking away.” She knelt back down, examining the body. “He had to know I'd come. Maybe he left a message.”

A small green hologram popped up above the dead man's wrist. He sounded out of breath. “Tali, if you are listening, then I am dead. The geth have gone active. I don't have much time. Their main hub will be on the bridge. You'll need to destroy it to stop their VI processes from forming new neural links. Make sure Han'Gerrel and Daro'Xen see the data. They must – ” The hologram winked out with the man recoiling from something.

“Thanks, dad.” Tali sniffled.

“He knew you'd come for him,” said Garrus “He was trying to help you. It's not perfect. It's not what you wanted. But it's the best he could do.”

“I don't know what's worse: thinking he never really cared, or thinking that he did, and that this was the only way he could show it.” Tali straightened. “It doesn't matter. One way or the other, he cared. And I'm here. And we're ending this.”

Tali cocked her shotgun, then strode up the stairs, pulling Shepard and Garrus in her wake. On the bridge were three geth: one Prime and two Warriors. Tali's drone distracted one of the warriors, and her hack caused the other to attack the first. Shepard and Garrus discharged overloads to take down the Prime's shields, then took turns distracting it, leading it around the bridge, while the other fired his assault rifle. It took a few minutes, but eventually, pieces of geth lay strewn about, sparking and smoking.

Tali activated the bridge's main computer and started tapping away.

“This console is linked to the main hub Father mentioned. Disabling it shut down any geth we missed. It looks like some of the recordings remained intact. They'll tell us how this happened. What Father did.”

“You sound like you don't really want to hear it,” said Shepard.

“No. We have to, I know. I just...this is terrible, Shepard. I don't want to know that he was part of this.” She took a deep breath, then played the recording.

Her father and two other quarians were in the video.

Rael'Zorah: “Do we have enough parts to bring more online?”

Researcher 1: “Yes. The new shipment from your daughter will let us add two more geth to the network. We're nearing a breakthrough on systemic viral attacks. Perhaps we should inform the Admiralty Board, just to be safe.”

Rael'Zorah: “No. We're too close. I promised to build my daughter a house on the homeworld. I'm not going to sit and wait while the politicians argue.”

Researcher 2: “We'd have an easier time of it if Tali'Zorah could send back more working material.”

Rael'Zorah: “Absolutely not. I don't want Tali exposed to any political blowback. Leave Tali out of this. Assemble our new geth with what we have. Bypass security protocols if need be.”

“Looks like this is the evidence we were looking for,” Garrus said sadly. “But it sounds like he was doing this for you.”

“I never wanted this! Keelah, but I never wanted this...Everything here is his fault! I tried to pretend it didn't point to him. But this...when this comes up in the trial, they'll...We can't tell them! Not the Admirals, not anyone!”

“Your father doesn't need you to worry about him anymore,” said Shepard, as gently as he could. “You heard him say he didn't want you to be caught in the politics.”

“You don't understand, Shepard. They would strike his name from the manifest of every ship he ever served on. It would be worse than an exile. He'd be a traitor to our people, held up for children as a monster in a cautionary tale! I can't let all the good he did be destroyed for this, Shepard.”

“Tali, without this evidence, you're looking at exile.”

“You think I don't know that? You think I want to live knowing that I can never see the Fleet again? But I can't go back into that room and say that my father was the worst war criminal in our people's history. I cannot. You're my captain in this hearing, Shepard. It's your decision. But please

don't destroy what my father was.”

“I'll...try to think of something. Come on. If we wait too long, they'll decide we're already dead, and none of this will matter.”

On the shuttle ride back to the Rayya, Shepard racked his brain. He didn't want Tali exiled, or upset with him, so using the evidence was out. The decision of whether to go to war certainly didn't belong in a trial, so that could be a technicality to drop the whole thing. And this was a public trial, so maybe the crowd might have a say? There were a lot of threads to sort out.

They passed through the airlock and heard voices shouting from the conclave room.

“We need to face facts. There has been no word. There is no reason to think Tali'Zorah survived.” That was the voice of Admiral Koris.

“It sounds like the hearing is already underway,” said Garrus. The three hurried through the eerily empty hallways.

“We must trust Shepard's offer of assistance!” said Admiral Raan. “It has only been a few hours!”

“The quarian marines lasted less than five minutes, Admiral,” Han'Gerrel lamented. “Call it.”

“A pity Shepard was Normandy is a better speaker than a soldier,” said Zaal'Koris. I recommend posthumously exiling Tali'Zorah.”

“What?” Han'Gerrel was incredulous.

“It was agreed that Tali'Zorah would not be convicted if she were killed in action!” Shala'Raan said.

Shepard and Tali pushed through the crowd. Garrus hung back again.

“It was suggested, Admiral,” said Zaal'Koris. “I recall no agreement. To that end, I call for an immediate vote.”

Raan sighed. “Very well. Is the Admiralty Board prepared to render judgment?”

“Sorry we're late,” said Tali as she pushed through and appeared at the petitioner's spot.

“We cleared the geth from the Alarei,” Shepard announced right behind her. “It should be safe for your people to return.”

“Thank you,” said a relieved Shala'Raan. “We sincerely appreciate your efforts to aid the quarian people.”

“We apologize, Shepard,” said Admiral Gerrel. “Your success in taking back the Alarei is...very unexpected.”

Admiral Raan was more formal. “Does Captain Shepard have any new evidence to submit to this hearing?”

“Shepard, please,” Tali whispered.

“We found nothing on the Alarei that we wish to submit as evidence.” That much was true, at least. But the Commander wasn't done. “Tali'Zorah saved the Alarei. I hope this proves her loyalty to the quarian people.”

“Her loyalty was never in doubt, only her judgment” said Admiral Koris.

Admiral Raan wanted more. “Perhaps Tali'Zorah can offer something to encourage more trust in her judgment.”

“Tali's achievements are the only evidence you should need. We have no new evidence. You can accept Tali's word, or you can exile the woman who saved the Citadel from the geth. But if you want more, I can present the Normandy, which Tali also saved from geth forces, even though it's too quiet for her to sleep.”

“I fail to see the relevance of – ” Admiral Koris began.

“This trial is a sham! Admiral Koris, you're trying to build sympathy for the geth to forestall the war effort! And all Admiral Gerrel wants is the messy experiments covered up so he can throw the fleet at the geth! Do whatever you want with your toy ships, but leave my crew out of your political bullshit! None of you care about Tali! She knows more about the geth than any other quarian alive. You should be listening to her, not putting her on trial. Tali'Zorah saved the Citadel! She saved the Alarei! She showed the galaxy the value of the quarian people. I can think of no stronger evidence

than that.”

“We still don't know what happened on the Alarei.”

“No Admirals, you don't. But you gave her my name. I'm her captain. I trust her with my life, and I'm telling you that she is innocent.”

And we should just trust this human's opinion?” Admiral Koris asked.

“We placed Tali's life in the human's hands,” said Admiral Raan. “Would you doubt those words if they came from a quarian captain?”

“No. Based on the rest of the evidence, I suppose that I wouldn't.”

The audience was murmuring. Shepard turned them and looked them over. He pointed at the admirals. “Look at them, all of you! They don't care about Tali! All they care about is their war with the geth! Tali risked her life for all of you! On the Alarei, on Haestrom, hell, on the Citadel when she stopped Saren! She deserves better than this!”

“If Commander Shepard has no new evidence, I suggest we render judgment,” said an impatient Admiral Koris.

Many in the audience stood and shouted. One quarian elbowed his way through and stood behind Tali. Surprisingly, it was Veetor.

“Wait! Shepard is right! Tali saved me! She doesn't deserve to be exiled!”

Kal'Reegar stepped down next to him. “Damn straight! Tali's done more for this Fleet than you assholes ever will! You're pissing on everything I fought for! Everything Tali fought for! So, if you exile her...you might as well do the same to me.”

“Me, too,” Veetor added.

The audience was really restless, now. The admirals looked around in stunned silence.

Admiral Raan finally cleared her throat and called for order. “Are the Admirals prepared to render their judgment?”

They were. They each pushed a button on the console in front of them, and then Raan read the results on hers.

“Tali'Zorah, in light of your history of service, we do not find sufficient evidence to convict. You are cleared of all charges. Shepard vas Normandy, the Fleet appreciates the passion and honor with which you represented one of our people.”

“With all due respect Admiral, I didn't represent one of your people. I represented one of mine.”

“So you did, Shepard. This hearing is concluded. Go in peace, Tali'Zorah vas Normandy. Keelah se'lai.”

The crowd repeated the blessing words and began to disperse.

“I can't believe you pulled that off,” said Tali. “What you said...I've never had anyone speak like that on my behalf. It's been awhile since anyone shouted down the Admiralty Board. I think it was good for them. Thank you for being there for my father and me, even when...thank you.”

“Tali, about what your father said, what he did. You deserved better.”

“I got better, Shepard. I got you.”

“We can still go back and get you exiled, if you want.”

“Ha! Thanks, but I'm fine with things like this. It's fun watching you shout.”

“Come on, Tali'Zorah vas Normandy, let's get back to our ship.”

Tali stayed awhile longer, making her farewells. She paid particular thanks to Veetor'Nara and Kal'Reegar. She also spoke with the admirals. Shepard recommended against war, reminding them of the Reaper threat, and that their ships would be needed. His pleas fell on deaf ears, and he returned to the Normandy feeling discouraged.

The Cyniad took them back to the Normandy, which had waited patiently while her commander was gone. Shepard took some time to refresh, then went down to Engineering to check on Tali.

“Keelah, I'm sorry I dragged you into quarian politics. All that infighting, seeing what my father did...You were the only one there for me, Shepard – the only cover I had against that storm. Thank you.”

“Are quarian politics always like that?”

“No, sometimes it can actually get unpleasant. We're a very social people, Shepherd. We have to be to make up for being stuck in these suits. And part of that means getting involved in each other's business.”

“I imagine they're trying to fill your father's spot on the Admiralty Board. What will that do to the balance of power?”

“I have no idea. Being exiled might have made it easier. A few people are suggesting me as a candidate. Replacing an Admiral takes time though. You may not have noticed, but quarians like to debate.”

“The whole trial was insulting. You should have had time to mourn your father.”

“I don't think life is about what you deserve. But my father would be honored that I chose to mourn him by blowing up a lot of geth. I should get back to work, but thanks for checking on me.”

“I'm just glad you're doing okay.”

-----THE ARDAT-YAKSHI-----

Shepard checked in on Samara in the port observation lounge. She interrupted her meditation to speak with him.

“I am glad I joined your team. It has been too long since I traveled with companions. When the time comes, I will do whatever is necessary.”

“I appreciate that.”

“It is my honor. Also, there is a matter I need to discuss. When we met on Illium, I told you about a very dangerous person I was pursuing. Using the information you obtained, I have located her. She's been going by the name 'Morinth.' I would like to apprehend her before she disappears again.”

“Didn't you say you'd pick up her trail after our mission?”

“I know where she is – right now. In a month, she may be gone. This is the best opportunity I've ever had.”

“How important is this?”

“Killing her has been my focus for four hundred years. It is the most important thing in my life and the reason I became a justicar.”

Shepard thought about how Zaeed had waited twenty years for his revenge. Four hundred was probably equivalent for an asari. Though where the mercenary tricked the Commander into helping him, the justicar was asking politely. “All right, what can you tell me about her?”

“She is an Ardat-Yakshi. It is a term from a dead asari dialect. It means 'demon of the night winds,' but that is mythology. She is simply a very dangerous woman who kills without mercy.”

“So is an Ardat-Yakshi a special kind of murderer?”

“Morinth suffers a rare genetic disorder. When she mates with you, there is no gentle melding of nervous systems. She overpowers yours, burns it out, hemorrhages your brain. You end up a mindless shell, and soon after you are dead.”

“So you hunt down these asari just because they're born with a genetic condition?”

“It manifests with maturity. When one is diagnosed, she is offered the chance to live in seclusion and comfort. If she refuses, it shows her addiction to the ecstasy she gets from killing her mates. There is no redemption for such a person.”

“They have to choose between prison and death?”

“It is an addictive condition. Remember how adaptive we are. If Morinth does not want to be cured, she won't be.”

“Can't she abstain?”

“Each encounter gives her strength. The effect is narcotic; the more she does it, the more she needs to do it. She will never stop. She can't.”

“Why isn't this ever mentioned in asari literature or art?”

“When we were primitive there was much fascination with Ardat-Yakshi. Some cultures worshiped them as gods of destruction. Now the asari have a place in the galaxy, and they don't wish this defect to be widely known. As far as I know, only three exist today. Two chose a life of seclusion. The third ran. When she fled, she proved her addiction. She was not taking a great moral stand – she simply wants to keep killing. She is a tragic figure, but not a sympathetic one.”

“Isn't she only deadly to the people she mates with?”

“Each time she kills, she becomes stronger, smarter, and faster. And she has been doing this for four hundred years. She confuses her victims, twists their feelings. They will do anything for her favor.”

Human serial killers could rack up quite a body count. What one might do if given four hundred years...“I see why this is worth your attention. I'll help you stop her.”

“Thank you, Commander. There are no words to express what this means to me. There is one thing more: this creature, this...monster. She is my daughter.”

Shepard took a moment to process that. “You said this is genetic. How many children do you have?”

“Three. And three Ardat-Yakshi are in existence today. It is as it sounds. Morinth was always the wild one – she was happy and free. But selfish.” Shepard was speechless. Something must have shown on his face, as Samara went on before he could speak. “My daughter's condition is my fault. And my redemption lies in killing her. Do not pity me. Simply understand my situation.”

“How did all this happen?” Shepard asked cautiously.

“I spent my youth on the move, adventuring. I killed people, mated with them, or just danced the night away. I leaned so much, experienced so much. And then my matron days came. I could finally sit back, bask, and enjoy my family. But in one moment, it was all taken away. I sat in a med lab while a nearsighted doctor droned at me. And I learned that nothing was as I thought it would be. I gave up all that I possessed. I own nothing, claim nothing. All my knowledge will die with me. Now my purpose is to destroy my own children.”

That wasn't what he'd meant, but he dropped it. “Where is she?”

“Omega. A nightclub called Afterlife – which seems a perfect place for her to hunt. Help me find my long lost daughter. And kill her.”

The last time Shepard had been on Omega, Aria T'Loak, the station's defacto queen, had seemed to have her finger on the pulse of the place. She had even been helpful – though Shepard had served her interests as well. The Commander turned to her once again.

Samara had never been to Omega before. As Shepard led her to Afterlife, she voiced her opinion on the place. “People come to places such as this seeking a better life. And when they get here, they find...this. Vibrant people forced into destitution on a world filled with criminals. They deserve protection. If I survive your mission, I may return here.”

As they entered the club, Shepard's chest began to vibrate to the music again. Every time he entered it was the same tuneless beat. A sour smoke filled the air, too. The sooner they could get the information they needed, the better.

“What do you need?” Aria said as she invited Shepard to sit on her couch once again. Samara stood respectfully to the side.

“A fugitive is hiding out here. She's an Ardat-Yakshi. We need to find her.”

“I knew it. Nothing leaves a body quite so...empty...as an Ardat-Yakshi does.”

“You haven't taken steps to kill her?” Samara asked.

“Why would I? She hasn't tried to seduce me. Her last victim was a young human girl. Pretty thing. Lived in the tenements near here. That's where I'd start looking.” Aria motioned to her assistant, who gave Shepard the address.

“Thanks for the help.” Shepard said, standing. It struck him that for a crime boss, she was always so...welcoming...forthcoming.

“Good luck finding her. Better luck catching her,” she said.

Samara told Shepard to take the lead, given her lack of experience with humans. He knocked on the door to the indicated apartment. A woman answered the door, looking entirely too put-together, wearing an expression completely devoid of, well, anything.

"Are you here about my daughter? My Nef died a week ago, and no one seems to care. The medic said it was a brain hemorrhage, but that's not true. It was murder. Someone killed my Nef, my baby."

"We think she was murdered too," said Shepard. And we're looking for her killer."

"Oh, thank you! It's so hard when no one believes you." The woman invited them in and offered tea, which they declined. "I'm all alone now. Did Aria send you?"

"We...have reasons of our own, though Aria did lead me to you."

"No one else on this hell-hole station gives a damn that my Nef is dead. If you can do something about it, I'll help you however I can."

"What kind of person was your daughter?" Shepard asked.

"My Nef had a fire inside her. She was shy, but she was creative and driven, and...the best girl a mother could hope for."

"She was creative? How so?" asked Samara.

"She was a sculptor. Several galleries were interested in her, said her work was fresh."

"What kind of friends did your daughter have?" Shepard asked.

"She was shy. She spent most of her time off making her sculptures, not hanging out with friends. Something did change in the last few weeks, though. She started talking about an asari. Morinth." Shepard and Samara exchanged a look. "I didn't like her. She kept dragging Nef out to clubs, and I'm pretty sure she gave my daughter drugs."

"What else can you tell me about this Morinth?" Shepard asked.

"I've never met her, but Nef talked about her like she was a queen. You'd swear there was no one else alive when she talked about Morinth."

"Samara, does Morinth control her victims with drugs?"

"She controls them through sheer will. The drugs are just a lifestyle. She loves clubs, loves the bass. She's a hedonist."

"So this Morinth did hurt my daughter is she the one that...that...?" The woman's voice and face began to show emotion for the first time.

"Did Nef hang out anywhere in particular?" Shepard asked.

"She was always quiet, working here at home. Then, a few weeks ago, she started going out all the time, to the VIP area of that club down the street. I think you need a password or something to get in there. The change was so sudden, she just seemed...tired and distracted when she wasn't around Morinth."

"Do you mind if we examine Nef's room?" asked Samara.

"I didn't want to disturb anything. Her clothes, her art, her sculptures. Everything is the way she left it. The way it will always be. My baby is gone. She's gone!" The woman stifled a sob and placed her hands over her face. Shepard placed a hand on her shoulder. When she lowered her hands, there were tears on her cheeks. "Thank you. I'm sorry, I just miss her so much. Why did this happen? She never hurt anybody."

"It's okay. We've all suffered loss," Shepard said softly.

"I know what it means to lose a daughter," said Samara. "I will avenge her."

"Thank you. Please, if it helps you find her killer, look through her things."

"We will be respectful," Samara promised.

The girl's room was an organized mess. A half-finished sculpture sat on a desk, materials and tools scattered around it. At least, Shepard assumed it was half-finished.

The grieving mother spoke from the doorway. "Nef made that. A man from some gallery offered me four years' salary for it. But I'd never part with it."

A datapad lay on the bed. Shepard found an email and three recent diary entries.

The email read: "Nef, I'm sending you this hologram by the elcor artist Forta. His work is so sublime – but don't stare at it too long, or you may go mad. I don't want anything bad to happen to you, love. Can't wait to hear what you think of Forta."

Shepard opted not to open the hologram. He played the three diary entries. The girl in the video was young, late teens or early twenties. Plain-looking, with short-cropped brown hair.

"Hey diary. Cycle 34, orbit 671. There's a lot to talk about! I dropped Jeruut's name and they let me into the VIP room at Afterlife. I'm sure everyone was staring at me. Then the most beautiful asari starts dancing near me. She moves like water; form and volume, but shifting, changing. I'm in a trance. Then I'm dancing with her. Later, we went for skewers, and I'm supposed to see her again tomorrow."

"Cycle 36, orbit 671. Am I a freak? Morinth is a girl like me, and she's definitely not human. Just...when we dance, and the Hallex is flowing through me, the way she looks at me – with a hunger, a longing...No one's ever looked at me like that. We kissed tonight."

"Cycle 42, orbit 67. She's going to take me to her apartment tonight. Whatever happens, I want to be with her forever. She can sell my pieces, we can live somewhere glamorous like the women in Vaenia, that vid Morinth likes. How did this happen to me? I'm just dumb trash from Omega."

"This is Morinth's work," Samara concluded. "She is attracted to artists and creators, someone with a spark, slightly isolated from their peers. She impresses with sophistication and sex appeal. Then she strikes. The hunt interests her as much as the conquest."

"Anyone who's successfully hunted sapient beings for four hundred years warrants caution."

"Morinth speaks to you on many levels. Her body tells yours that she'll bring unimaginable ecstasy, her scent evokes emotions long hidden. Her eyes promise you things you were always scared to ask of another. Her voice whispers to you after she is done speaking."

"So what's our next step?"

"Storming her den would be a mistake – she will have a hundred escape routes planned. She will go to ground and disappear for fifty years or more. This is the closest I've ever been."

"So we have to lure her out."

"Exactly. Shepard, you read my mind. Afterlife's VIP section seems a preferred hunting ground. You must go there alone and unarmed."

"I'm the bait?"

"You can draw Morinth out. She'll certainly flee if she catches sight of me. But she won't be able to resist you. You are an artist on the battlefield. You have the vital spark that attracts her. Your power will draw her in."

"I'm walking into this place with no gun and no backup?"

"I will be in the shadows watching, Shepard. You will never be alone – this I swear. But you cannot barge in with guns and allies. Morinth is far too cagey – she'd simply disappear. This is a subtle, delicate act. Trust me."

"Time's wasting. Let's get over there."

"I agree. But you cannot go in armed and wearing armor. I will stake the place out and meet you near the entrance. We can talk more once we're there."

Shepard still had the formalwear from Kasumi's heist. He supposed that would do, and Samara agreed.

Ten minutes later, Samara met him around the corner from Afterlife's VIP entrance. She stood up from behind some garbage bins. Or maybe it was just a stack of garbage. It was hard to tell on Omega.

"You must go in alone," she reminded him. "Morinth will be watching. Like any predator, she is cautious. You must peak her interest enough that she will approach you. When you are face-to-face, subtly encourage her to invite you to her apartment. I'll follow discreetly, and when you are alone, I'll

spring the trap. Know this: until I get there, you are in great peril. She will be planning to inflict horrors on you. If you are not careful, you will want her to.”

They spent a few minutes reviewing what they knew about their target, and going over strategy. Shepard would need to show strength but not be a bully. He'd need to show confidence but not arrogance. When he was satisfied, he took a step away, but stopped when Samara said more.

“Shepard, we only get one chance at this. Any mistake and Morinth will disappear. And Shepard, Thank you. I do not share this burden easily, and you are the only soul I can imagine sharing it with.”

The bouncer was a mean-looking turian. “What do you want?”

“Someone told me the rest of Afterlife is nothing compared to this place,” Shepard replied, probably too enthusiastically.

“Sounds like a smart person. Who was it?”

“Jarut.”

“Go on in. Word to the wise: start a fight, we'll hurt you. Someone attacks you, it's okay to defend yourself.”

Just inside the entrance was a human man in a puffy purple vest who stopped Shepard.. He seemed like he was very much enjoying whatever the bar was serving, and probably more.

“Hey, do you know where to get tickets for Expel 10? I heard this amazing asari say they were her favorite band. I want...I just want whatever she wants. I got to find the tickets. They're playing tomorrow.”

“No, sorry. What kind of music do they play?”

“They're a sensory band. Like they crawl into you and make you feel things. And this asari digs them like you wouldn't believe. I could score way out of my league, you know? You gotta help me.”

“Can't help you. Good luck.”

The man suddenly looked like he was going to sick up and ran off. Shepard entered the club proper and surveyed the area. The floorplan was a circle, with three concentric rings. Aside from the entrance, the only other visible exit was directly opposite. Tables and chairs on the outer edge, and the bar at the 10 o'clock position. The middle ring was a pit, oddly enough; filled with smoke and lights. Walkways led to a dance floor in the center. The Commander decided that was as good a place as any to start.

The music wasn't as deafening as it had been in the main part of Afterlife. A nice change. Looking around, he noticed one of the club's asari employees fending off a drunken turian.

“Come on, baby, I can pay. I'm a good tipper, too.”

“I told you to stay away from me.”

“Playing hard to get? Give it up baby, I'm sold.”

“Leave me alone!”

“Don't be like that – I got creds. We'll go back to my place, I got simple tastes.”

“Back off asshole, I'm a dancer, not a hooker.” She shoved him.

“Woah, you got a mouth on you! I'll enjoy watching you use it.” He grabbed her arm.

Shepard had to intervene. “The lady asked you to step away.”

“What the hell? I'm just looking for a good time – this isn't your business.” The turian let go of the asari and swung at Shepard, missing wide.

“Good times are over.” Shepard layed him out with one punch.

“Thanks for that. Security was asleep.” The dancer exited to an employee area.

Shepard surveyed the dance floor and found a lone asari in a nice dress, dancing alone. He approached and started to dance. Well...shuffle, anyway. The Commander was not a good dancer.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” she responded, looking him up and down.

“I'll dance next to you. If you want to think we're dancing together, go ahead,” he said.

“I do want to think that.”

He was beginning to think he had that effect on asari. But after a minute of his shuffling, she lost interest and danced away. She was a good dancer.

Shepard gave up and tried the bar. The bartender, a human, was wiping down the bar, as bartenders do to look busy when they're bored. A krogan, leaning on the bar, gave the Commander a sideways glance.

"I guess they'll let anybody in here now, he said. "No standards anymore,".

"The standards must be low, you're here," Shepard retorted.

"It's pathetic when humans try to talk big. Bartender, give me another drink. I hate this place."

Shepard ordered a beer, then struck up a conversation with the barkeep.

"These are good people, but they look bored. Bored people don't spend much."

"And you got an idea for how I could fix that," he said, too bored to be annoyed.

"A round of drinks shows that you appreciate their business. Your rep will improve, and you'll make more money in the end."

"Maybe worth a try. Once. You better be right. The man touched something under the bar to lower the volume on the music, then yelled out with surprisingly genuine enthusiasm, "Listen up, everyone! We love having you here, so a round of drinks on the house!"

There were cheers as people approached the bar, and the club did liven up after that. Shepard slipped out through the bar crowd to see what other trouble he could get into.

He passed a pair of turians in a dark corner, then turned around when he heard what they were whispering about.

"Lots of money on display here tonight. We'll hit him in the alley; 'long as it isn't one of Aria's people, we're good."

"We've got to get enough creds to keep Hink off our backs."

They noticed Shepard approaching. "Hey, what are you looking at?"

"You think you're gonna jump someone in the alley? Think again."

"You've been watching too many vids, little human. Run along now."

The two turians stood and crowded Shepard, towering over him. After a short scuffle, they both lay unconscious on the floor. Security was still asleep it seemed. Shepard shook his hands out. Turians had exoskeletons, and punching them was hard on the knuckles.

A little further on, Shepard caught the attention of a skinny man in a grey suit, nervously sucking a cigarette.

"Um... hi," the man said in a shaky, high-pitched voice. "I need help right now and I don't know who to ask. You're human and you don't look high, so you're it. Can you help me out?"

"Slow down and tell me what the problem is."

"Right. Slow down. Sorry, I just don't know what to do. My boss, Moriall, is doing a piece on Omega crimes. She's hanging out with Florit – he's the worst of the worst."

"Your boss could get hurt."

"Yeah, and she's going to. See, Florit's on to her. His gang is on the way here, and they're going to make a mess of her. I have to get a message to her and fast."

The nervous man stupidly pointed at a man and woman seated at a table a quarter of the way around the club. Shepard casually pushed his hand down and told him to look only at him.

"How do you know all this?"

"I'm her tech. I've been monitoring the gang's comm. The last transmission said Florit's going to splatter her. Man, I'm a tech junkie, I don't know how to handle this." He finished his cigarette and stared at the butt as if he'd never seen one before.

"All right. What do you want me to do?"

"She and I have a code. If you go over and say two words to Florit, my boss will get the message and get out of there. The two words are 'terminal' and 'eternity.' In that order. Please tell me you can do that. She's going to die."

"It sounds simple enough. I'll help."

"Thank you, thank you. Remember: 'terminal' and 'eternity' in that order. Just work them into a sentence."

Shepard walked over to the gang leader's table, putting on his drunk routine.

"You need something, man?" Florit was very unhappy at the interruption.

"Is there a public exshtranet *terminal* around here?"

"In a club? You don't have an omni tool?"

"That is a pretty strange question," the woman agreed.

"I get by on public *terminalsh*. My omni tool'sh been – hic! – broken for an *eternity*."

"That's a tough break. I'm done talking to you now." Florit waved Shepard away.

As the Commander pretended to stumble towards the dance floor, he heard the woman excuse herself. "Hey, Florit, I have to pee."

"Yeah? Hurry back, Moriall. I'm ready to head out."

Moriall passed Shepard on her way out and gave him a very slight nod and a sideways look of thanks. The Commander dropped the drunk routine and continued around the club. When he reached the entrance to the club again, an asari in skin-tight black and brown leather was waiting for him. She was the spitting image of Samara. Shepard might have mistaken her if not for the lack of age lines and the sultry smoker's voice.

"My name is Morinth. I've been watching you. You're the most interesting person in this place. I've got a booth over here in the shadows. Why don't you come sit with me?"

Finally, Shepard agreed and followed her, trying not to seem too excited.

Once they had drinks, she opened the conversation. "Some nights I come here and there's no one interesting to talk to. Some nights there's just one person. Tonight it's you. Why is that?"

"You and I want the same things," he said.

"Do we?"

"What do you think of the music here?"

"Dark rhythms, violent pulses. It stirs something primitive in me. What about you?"

"Makes something vibrate inside me. I'm curious about a band called Expel 10."

"They get in my head and tear it to pieces. They're in concert soon; maybe we should go together."

"Maybe." Shepard took a sip of his beer.

"You can lose yourself in the music here. There are ways to enhance that, you know?"

"What do you think of Hallex?"

"It slithers through my soul. Seems like we share some interests. Do you know anything about art? It speaks to the darkest places in me. What about you?"

"Do you know the artist Forta?"

"I didn't think anyone around here knew him. He's sublime. Art comes in many varieties. I've seen vids that were more powerful than any sculpture sitting in a gallery."

"Do you know Vaenia?"

"My favorite. The two actresses on it are so glamorous."

"I'll have to watch it."

"Maybe we could do that together. I've traveled all over the galaxy. It changes you, doesn't it?"

The Commander thought he was getting a sense of this asari, now. "Real travel means going to dangerous places."

"Where you can see and do things most people can't imagine."

"Yes." Shepard tried not to think about the unimaginable things he'd done, and took another sip of beer.

"When I travel I find myself drawn to dark, dangerous places."

"Violent places?" he asked, trying to sound aroused.

"Violence is the surest expression of power."

"Violence is a means to an end. Power is that end."

"Do you want to get out of here? My apartment is nearby. I want you alone."

They left the club together. There was no sign of Samara. That was either a very good sign, or a very bad one. Morinth's apartment was nearby. Shepard looked around while she went to the kitchen

and poured drinks. The only door was the one they'd entered. This was a corner unit, with picture windows looking out over the smoggy Omega skyline. It was a sheer drop out either way.

Morinth emerged from the kitchen to find her date admiring her trophies. He was looking a pair of swords on the wall.

"I was into dueling for a while. I love the moment you see it in your opponent's eyes: he knows you're better, and he's going to die." She set the drinks on a low table in front of a couch and pointed to a pill bottle. "Have a hallex if you want, but wouldn't you rather have all your senses be clear and sharp right now? I certainly do."

Shepard did want his senses clear right now. He regretted even those two sips of beer he'd had. Morinth sat on the couch and Shepard examined a statue of a krogan, buying time. Where was Samara?

"A gift from a suitor. The statue's got more personality than he did. Still, he impressed me enough that he finally got what he wanted. It didn't end the way he hoped."

That was an understatement. Shepard joined Morinth on the couch and noticed a chess set.

"I love any game where your opponent can believe he is about to win...just before you kill him." She slid up next to him. Her scent was intoxicating. "I love clubs," she mused. "People, movement, heat. I can still hear the bass, like the drums of a great hunt, out for your blood. But here it's muted – and you're safe. Is that what you want, Shepard?"

"I'd rather fight than hide."

"Yes. Better to take control of your life. I've never understood the fascination with safety. Some of us choose differently. Independence over submission. I think we share that, you and I." She put an arm around him and leaned in close.

"You compare us, but you're nowhere near my league," he boasted. Really, what was keeping the justicar?

"So strong. I need this, she said, and her eyes turned black. "Look into my eyes and tell me you want me. Tell me you'd kill for me. Anything I want."

Shepard was expecting to lose himself in the joining, but all he felt was a tingle. "I'm not the victim you were hoping for."

"But you...who are you?" she broke contact. Her eyes returned to normal and she backed away. "Oh, no – I see what's going on. The bitch herself found a little helper."

Samara burst through the door enveloped in a blue haze of biotic energy. "Morinth," the justicar said flatly as she biotically lifted the Ardat-Yakshi and slammed her into a window, holding her spread-eagle against the glass.

Shepard hopped over the back of the couch.

"Mother." Morinth said after shaking her head to clear it.

"Do not call me that." Samara gave Morinth another biotic push, causing the glass to crack.

"I can't choose to stop being your daughter. Mother."

"You made your choice long ago."

Morinth released her own burst of biotics, breaking free of her mother's grasp and shoving the couch a little. "What choice? My only crime was being born with the gifts you gave me." She lifted a chair and threw it at Samara, who casually deflected it.

They both threw out a wave of energy and knocked each other down. They also recovered at the same time and stood up, holding a ball of biotic energy between them, trying to push it into the other, neither gaining any ground.

"I am the genetic destiny of the asari!" Morinth yelled. "But they are not ready to reveal this, so I must die."

"You are a disease to be purged. Nothing more."

Shepard stood and broke the stalemate by using his own feeble biotics to give Morinth a nudge. It was enough.

"End of the line, Morinth," he said. The ball shoved the Ardat-Yakshi to the floor.

"And they call me a monster!" Morinth said, backing away from her mother on her back.

Samara was suddenly on top of her target, kneeling on her quarry and holding her neck. "Find peace in the embrace of the goddess," she said, then made a bloody mess of Morinth's head.

Shepard winced. Samara stood for several breaths, then turned and strode out of the apartment.

"I am ready to leave this place and get on with my life."

"Do you want to –"

"Shepard. What do you think I will say? What can I say? I just killed the bravest and smartest of my daughters. There are no words. I will try another time. For now, show mercy on a broken old warrior and let us leave."

She returned to the Normandy in silence.

A day later, Samara hadn't been seen outside her quarters, so Shepard knocked on her door. She opened it, then invited him in. He cautiously asked how she was.

"Morinth haunted my dreams and waking hours equally." She walked over to the window and spread her arms. "For the first time in four hundred years, I am free. I am a ruined vessel of sorrow and regret, but I am free." The justicar lowered her arms and turned to face the Commander. She actually did sound free...and broken. But there was a new lightness in her voice, and her face was relaxed. "It is not a feeling I can describe."

"Was it worth it?"

"It was never a question of worth, but of need. I had to take the action I did. As did she. This was never a story that would have a happy outcome."

"You said Morinth was a monster. But she was still your daughter."

"She was the strongest and smartest. She would not accept the injustice thrust upon her. She fought to the end. I am proud of her, Shepard."

"But you did kill her for being what she was."

"And I would again. But I also know what it means to leave everything behind and fight. Do you realize that she went on the run at the age of forty? I do not know human years well, but it is very young for asari."

"You did your duty. What about your feelings?"

"One of my daughters is dead. My hopes, my dreams were all bound up in my children. Still, my feelings have always come after my duty. The same is true of you."

Shepard nodded. The mission always came first. "What will you do now?"

"Assuming I survive your mission? I am a justicar. Injustice still exists...and perhaps even other Ardat-Yakshi."

"Morinth claimed that her condition was the genetic destiny of the asari race."

"Morinth would say anything that served her cause. Ardat-Yakshi are sterile, Shepard. That wouldn't be a particularly valuable future for my people."

"I understand why Morinth had to be brought to justice, but is there no way to correct the condition?"

"We are an advanced species, but we don't have magic. When the trait manifests at maturity, it is too late for mitigation. It only occurs in purebloods like myself. Perhaps that is the root of the stigma regarding asari-exclusive pairings. I do not know."

Shepard wondered if that's why Liara had been embarrassed to admit to her own pureblood heritage. At least he hadn't died when he'd bonded with her.

"I thought Ardat-Yakshi were extremely rare," he said.

"Asari have spread to many worlds. There are remote regions with no government oversight. If I travel to those worlds and they do exist, I will find them."

"You won't retire?"

"I did. I returned to my homeworld and tried to start a family. I will fight and struggle all my life. That is my fate. When I die, it will not be in bed. I am at peace with that."

Shepard thought the same for himself, but he still didn't like the fatalism. "You still control the direction of your life, Samara."

"I have chosen this path. I truly am at peace. Due in no small part to you."

Samara sat and assumed the lotus position. Shepard left her to her meditations.

-----ATTONEMENT-----

Garrus was trying to calibrate the Normandy's main guns, but unable to concentrate. He'd received some news from one of his contacts that had lit a fire inside him. Inevitably, Commander Shepard knocked on his door.

"Shepard. I'm glad you came by. I've got something. I may need your help. You remember Sidonis? The one who betrayed my team? I've found a lead on him. There's a specialist on the Citadel; name's Fade. He's an expert at helping people disappear. Sidonis was seen with him."

"I remember you telling me about Sidonis, but what exactly happened? How did he betray your team?"

Garrus started pacing. "He tipped off the mercs. Told them where our base was. He drew me out on a false job, then let the mercs hit my team. My men weren't prepared. They tried to hold them off...By the time I got back, there were only two survivors. They didn't last long. All ten of them, dead. Because of him."

"What are you planning to do when you find him?"

Garrus stopped pacing and faced Shepard. "You humans have a saying: 'an eye for an eye...' A life for a life. He owes me ten lives, and I plan to collect."

"The rest of that saying goes '...leaves the world blind.' You sure that's how you want to play it?"

Garrus ignored the admonition. "I'm sure. I don't need you to agree with me, but I'd like your help."

Shepard sighed. Another revenge killing. But if that's what his friend needed..."Well, Miranda's been on my case to resupply the Normandy. The Citadel's as good a place as any. Where do we find Fade?"

"I'll arrange a meeting once we get there. Thanks, Shepard. I appreciate you taking the time to help me."

Some time later, Thane knocked on the door to the Captain's Cabin.

"Shepard. Do you have time to talk?"

"What's the matter? Is there something wrong?" Shepard offered the assassin a seat, which he took.

"Yes. Now that I am here, though – It seems more difficult to talk about."

"I've got time. Take it at your own pace."

"Thank you. I fear I've already done that for far too long. My mortality has me...dwelling on things. I had a family, once. I still have a son. His name is Kolyat. I haven't seen him for a very long time."

"What happened to your family?"

Thane stood and studied the fish tank. It must have reminded him of Kahje. Shepard was glad he didn't have any pet squid in there. "I abandoned them. Oh, not all at once. Nothing dramatic. No sneaking out in the middle of the night. No final argument or slammed door. I just...did my job. I hunted and killed across the galaxy. 'Away on business,' my wife would tell people. I was always away on business."

"How long has it been since you talked to your son?" The Commander joined him at the fish tank. It actually was quite calming.

"Ten years. He showed me some of his schoolwork and asked if we could 'dance crazy.' We did that when he was younger."

Shepard chuckled lightly. "What sort of dance is that?"

"It's – " Thane slipped into solipsism. "I check my external contacts. I expect an update on my next target. The console plays music. Old. Unfashionable. Kolyat jumps into the room. 'Hi, father!'

Runs around in circles. I scoop him up. Toss him into the air. He shrieks, laughs. 'Spin me!' The console beeps. I put him down. Click the message. 'Father!' he pleads. Tugs my sleeve. 'I need to read this,' I say. I don't look at him."

"You've never mentioned your son before. Why now?"

"When my wife departed from her body, I – attended to that issue. I left Kolyat in the care of his aunts and uncles. I have not seen him or talked to him since."

"You didn't try to raise him yourself?"

"I told myself it was to spare him the knowledge of my body's actions. My body is blessed with the skills to take life. The hanar honed them in me. I have few others. I didn't want that life for Kolyat. I hoped he would find his own way. If he hated me, so be it. He would not have shared the path of sin. Lately I have thought – I have reconsidered that."

"If we're talking about this, he must have contacted you."

"No, he didn't. But my condition – I've been judging my life. Measuring what I've added, and what I've taken away. I used my contacts to trace Kolyat. He has become – disconnected. He does what his body wills."

"You'll have to explain that one to me."

"Disconnected. The body is not our true self. The soul is. Body and soul work as one in a Whole Person. When the soul is weakened by despair or fear – when the body is ill or injured, the individual is disconnected. No longer Whole."

"Right. You've mentioned that drell minds are different. Do you know what caused his... disconnection?"

"Something happened that should not have. He knows where I've been, what I've done. I don't know his reasons, but he has gone to the Citadel. I don't know where, exactly. I only know that he traveled there, and has contacted the criminal element of the station. Since we are headed there anyway, I would like your help to stop him. He is – this is not a path he should walk."

"Thane, I don't have your contacts, and I don't have your tracking skills. Why do you need my help for this?"

"I don't need your help, I want it. The last time I saw my son – " Thane slipped into solipsism again. "They've wrapped her body in sea-vines. Weighted it with stones. He tries to pull from me. Calls for her. The hanar lift her off the platform. They sing like bells. 'The fire has gone, to be kindled anew.' He begs them not to take her away. They let her body slide into the water. He hits me. 'Don't let them! Stop them! Why weren't you – ?' It rains. It always rains on Kahje. Warm water pours down his face."

"I didn't mean to make you relive that."

"Perfect memory. It is sometimes a burden."

"What made him go to the Citadel?"

"Years ago, I prepared a package for him. A relic of my ill-spent life. I had volus bankers store it and arranged for delivery when I died. He acquired it early. I don't really know how. I did wet work on the Citadel around the time his mother died. That may be why he went there."

"You don't hire a raw rookie for a contract killing."

"I'm afraid someone may have seen we share a name and assumed we share skills. I don't know why he would accept the task."

"Maybe he name-dropped you to get hired."

"It's possible. But I don't think so. It doesn't seem right. My name – he should not respect it."

"Or maybe he wants to get closer to you?"

"That thought haunts me more than any other."

"We'll save your son, Thane. I know a Captain in C-Sec who may be able to help."

"Thank you, Shepard. I'll be meditating until you need me."

Shepard, Garrus, and Thane stepped off the Normandy onto the Citadel in the Zakera Ward dock. As they waited in line at the security checkpoint, Garrus mused aloud.

"I thought it might be nice to come back here and see how it's changed. But it's just like it was. Same dirty streets, same unrepentant scavengers, same revolving-door prisons. Being security here is a terrible job. This is exactly why I left."

Thane agreed with the sentiment. "You'd think Citadel security would be the tightest in the galaxy."

"I know C-Sec too well to believe that's true."

"I see no fewer than 14 fatal flaws a skilled assassin could exploit. Eight of them existed when I was here ten years ago."

A half-hour later, they were through. Garrus went off to arrange a meeting with Fade, and Shepard led Thane to meet Captain Bailey. After exchanging pleasantries, Shepard got down to business.

"My associate is trying to find his son. We think a local criminal may have hired him."

"Should be easy. We don't see many drell here." Bailey tapped for a few moments on his console. "There we go. One of my men reported a drell recently. And he was talking to Mouse. Interesting."

"Mouse." Thane sounded like he recognized the name, but Bailey took it as a question.

"A petty criminal. Probably not the guy who hired your boy, but a messenger. He's a former duct rat. Runs errands for anyone who'll pay."

"Duct Rat?" Shepard asked.

"It's local slang for the poor kids who grow up on the station. When they're small, they tend to play in the ventilation ducts, where adults can't get to them."

"Aren't the ducts dangerous? I thought the Keepers kept those clear."

Bailey winced and sounded almost sad. "Every couple of months, we pull a little body out of them. Lacerated by fan blades, broken by a deadfall, suffocated by vacuum exposure. Those are just the ones we know about. More just disappear. Maybe they get sucked into space, maybe they fall into the protein vats the Keepers run. Mouse survived long enough that he can't fit in the ducts anymore. He was one of the smarter ones. Or the luckier ones."

Thane remained silent, so Shepard asked the next question, getting back on topic. "What sort of trouble has Mouse been getting himself into?"

"Odd jobs for shift people. Duct rats take whatever's available to get by. Data running, fencing stolen goods, selling illegal VI personalities...actually, he has one of you."

"Me?"

"Yeah. When you erase a file, it says 'I delete data like you on the way to real errors.'" Bailey shrugged. "Buggy, though. It crashes every half hour. The error message is about how the galaxy is at stake, and you should fix the problem yourself."

Shepard shook his head. "We should go."

"Mouse is usually upstairs outside the Dark Star. He works out of a public comm terminal. It sounds like your boy is running with the wrong crowd."

"Yes. I agree." Thane nodded.

"If Mouse can't get you in touch with your son directly, he'll know who can. I'll help you if you need it."

"You don't know me, Captain. Why would you help?"

"I've worked Zakera for two years. Every day, kids turn to crime because they've got no other choice. Because their parents don't care. You're trying to save yours."

"...He faces a dark path."

They made their goodbyes, and Shepard led the way to the Dark Star Lounge. The Commander remembered ordering a decent drink there, and running in to that groundskeeper who told him there are no fish on the Presidium. Thane spoke quietly as they walked.

"You didn't tell him that Kolyat plans to assassinate someone."

"Not unless we have to. He'd try to interfere, and someone could end up dead. We're gonna stop him before that happens. Aren't we?"

"Yes, we are. Thank you, Shepard."

Outside the Lounge, a dirty young man in overalls stood speaking into a public extranet terminal, making promises about deliveries and procurements.

"Are you Mouse?" Shepard interrupted.

"What do you – " The pock-marked man glared as he turned around, but he jumped when he saw Thane. 'Oh shit! Krios? I thought you retired! Commander Shepard? I thought you died! What do you want with me?' Mouse couldn't seem to make up his mind who he was more afraid of.

"Be still, Mouse," Thane reached out a hand to steady the young human. "You can change your pants in a moment."

"How do you two know each other?" Shepard asked.

"Krios? He didn't – ? Uh, if he didn't say nothing, I ain't either." Mouse crossed his arms.

Thane explained. "When we heard the name, I didn't think it could be the same Mouse. He was a contact on the Citadel when I was active. He and some other children would gather information on my targets."

"You used children for that?"

"Children; The poor. My people's word for their kind is 'drala'fa:' the ignored. They're everywhere, see everything. Yet they are never seen."

"We need you to answer some questions," said Shepard to Mouse.

"The people I work for – Look, I can't answer questions for just anybody."

"But you can for me," said Thane, calmly. "You gave another drell instructions for an assassination. Who's the target?"

"I...I don't know. I didn't ask. 'Cause the people I work for? They can make me disappear." Mouse shrugged. "I'd like to help you, Krios. You always done right by us. But I ain't gonna die for you."

"We need a name, Mouse. Do it for Thane," said Shepard.

"I want to. He was always nice to us. But these people aren't nice, Krios."

"Mouse. I swear that you won't be named," Thane promised.

"Krios, man, I did good work for you. You gave me chocolate. Real chocolate."

"I never gave my own son chocolate," Thane said sadly.

"I remember, whenever you talked about your kid, your eyes got like that. Like they was someplace else. Sad. He had that holo you took of me, you know. That's how he proved who he was. But when he turned it on, his eyes got like yours do."

"Help me, Mouse. My son is out there in the dark."

"All right...all right. He said he wanted a job. I ran through your old contacts to see who might give him a shot. The guy who offered is Elias Kelham."

"Tell use about Kelham," Shepard insisted.

"Human. Moved to the Citadel about ten years ago. He was little people when you were here, Krios. He got big after the geth attack. Lost of the big guys from before got cacked. All in them big fancy apartments up on the Presidium. Now he runs the rackets down on the lower end of the Ward. Shin Akiba. He's seriously bad news."

"You did good, Mouse," said Shepard.

"Yeah. Hope I live long enough to pat myself on the back. Krios, you got any kindness for me, put a bullet in Kelham before you go."

"Kelham will never know," Thane said.

"I hope not. I'm out of here, Krios. Next time you're in town – just don't bring the family."

"One more thing," said the Commander, holding him up. "That Shepard VI you're selling?"

"Oh, shit. You hear – Look, you were dead! It was totally legal to make a VI out of you."

Shepard didn't like the idea, but he doubted he could find and delete every copy of the thing in the

galaxy. "Just give me a copy, we'll call it even."

"What? I mean, sure. Yeah, absolutely!" Mouse pulled a small round object shaped like a hockey puck from his backpack and handed it to the Commander. "Sorry about the whole...Just so you know, there's three volus who are patching it all the time."

Shepard let him go, putting the thick black disk in a pocket. It looked like it might have a holo-emitter built in, as well. Mouse scurried away. On the way back to C-Sec, Thane was quiet. Quieter than usual. And he had a bit of a slump to his shoulders.

"You okay?" Shepard asked. "That couldn't have been easy."

"Mouse knew more about my life than Kolyat ever did." Thane slipped into solipsism. "He smiles up at me, broken teeth and scabby knees. Bare feet black. A dead-end future looking up at me. Worshiping the petting gifts I offer." Thane shook his head, returning to the present. "I was the only good thing he had, back then. But I left him, as I left Kolyat."

"Mouse said you had a holo of him?"

"Yes. A foolish bit of sentimentality. I can perfectly recall every moment I spent with Mouse." Another memory took the drell. "He pulls at my arm. Smiles. He wants to know that I'll remember him. That anyone will remember him. I take the holo. He smiles at himself on my palm. Then a frown crinkles his brow. He pats my pockets, checking for other holos. 'Where's your son, Krios?' he asks."

"Seems like you blame yourself..."

"If I don't, who will? We must carry the weight of our decisions, Shepard. You, of all people, know this."

A few minutes later, they were back in front of Bailey.

"Can we talk about my associate's son?"

"You talk to Mouse? Did you get the name of the guy he's working with?"

"Elias Kelham."

"Kelham. Shit. Ah, look. This is awkward. Kelham and I have a – an agreement. He doesn't cause too much trouble, and 'buys tickets to the C-Sec Charity Ball' from me." Bailey made air quotes with his fingers as he said that. "In return, I ignore him."

Shepard nodded. He'd cut some corners to get things done himself. "I...don't care how you run your district, Bailey. Will you still help us?"

"Yeah, I'll help. Absolutely. I'll get some of my people to bring him in and set him up in a private room. You can interrogate him yourself. I'll stay out of sight. If I'm lucky, Kelham will believe that I had nothing to do with it. I need to make some preparations."

Bailey got up and left Shepard and Thane to cool their heels. The Commander thought it odd that the C-Sec captain would be so eager to help, given his 'arrangement,' and made a mental note to ask later. Perhaps he'd offer his Spectre authorization to get this done, too. Thane seemed to be lost in his own thoughts. Shepard checked his messages; still no word from Garrus.

Enough time passed that Shepard was considering going for food, but two officers entered the station, dragging a man in handcuffs. One of the officers nodded at Shepard as he passed. As soon as the door to the interrogation room closed, Bailey appeared from around a corner.

"He'll expect me to get him out of this," said Bailey.

"Not today, I think," Thane stated.

Bailey's attention was grabbed by someone entering the lobby. "Shit, his lawyer's here. I'll bet that Elias has his VI set to page him if C-Sec gets within ten meters. I'll stall him. Get in there and work fast." The Captain put on a fake smile and went to greet the lawyer.

"We should question him together," Thane said eagerly. "Keep the pressure on. Thoughts on how we approach it?"

"I plan to improvise," Shepard shrugged. "No plan survives contact with the enemy, anyway."

"I suppose that's true. I won't interfere, then. This will be difficult. If we're too gentle with him, his advocate will get past Bailey. If we're too rough...well, we need him alive."

"You worry too much. How hard could this be?"

"You've never done this before, have you?"

In the interrogation room, a dapper-looking man in a tailored dark-green suit was strapped to a chair, struggling feebly to get free.

“Get me out of these restraints, Bailey!” The man said bitterly. “Pretty funny, bringing me down here like this. The hell are you two?”

Shepard and Thane exchanged a look. The assassin stood at Kelham's feet, the Commander next to his head.

“My name's Shepard. I'm a Spectre.”

“There are no human – Prove it.”

“I don't have to prove anything. Spectres are above the law.” Shepard loosened his pistol in its holster. “We clear?”

“Not even remotely.”

Shepard pulled out the hockey-puck VI from his pocket and activated it. An orange hologram of himself in Alliance BDUs popped up. “I find the best advanced battlefield strategy is to have more bullets than the other guy,” it said in a terrible simulation of the Commander's voice. Shepard hoped he didn't sound like that, anyway.

Kelham's eyes went wide as they flicked back and forth between the hologram and the man. He swallowed, then nodded.

Shepard nodded and deactivated the VI, placing it in back in his pocket. “Good. Now, fortunately, I'm not after you. You hired an assassin. We need to know who you want killed. You tell us, you can go.”

“Joram Talid. A turian. He's running for office. He lives in the 800 blocks.”

“Thanks,” said Shepard. “You won't see us again. No offense, but you're a problem below my pay grade.”

Shepard and Thane left the interrogation room. “That may go down in history as the shortest interrogation ever,” said the assassin.

Bailey escorted Kelham's lawyer in to see his client. As they left the station, the captain turned to the amateur interrogators.

“What's the story? Why'd Kelham hire the boy?”

“Assassination.” Shepard informed him of what they'd learned.

“Yeah, I know him. You might have seen his posters around. He's promising to end organized crime on the Ward. Thing is, his message is all mixed up in race politics. He's anti-human.”

“Are things so bad that people can openly campaign as anti-human?”

“Before the Battle of the Citadel, the alien population thought we were violent upstarts. Look what's happened since then. A human fleet guarding the station for months, C-Sec filled with humans. Udina doesn't hesitate to remind them that we earned our place here. But that seems to piss 'em off more.”

Shepard let out a long breath. “That's democracy for you. Like it or not, that's how the system works.”

“That's a nice ideal, Shepard. You don't have to live here.” Bailey called a patrol car to take them to the 800 blocks.

Joram Talid was out campaigning, mingling with passerby in a mall. He was a tall turian in a white suit. A krogan Blood Pack mercenary was acting as bodyguard. The C-Sec officer driving the car pointed out the turian politician to Shepard and Thane, then dropped them off nearby before flying away.

“How do you want to play this?” Shepard asked.

“Follow Talid on the maintenance catwalks. Tell me what he's doing. The krogan bodyguard will make him easy to follow.”

“Where will you be?”

“The darkest corner with the best view.” Shepard nodded agreement and found an access ladder nearby. Thane began to pray. “Amonkira, Lord of Hunters. Grant my hands be steady, my aim be

true, and my feet swift. And should the worst come to pass, grant me forgiveness.”

Shepard unlocked the ladder with his Spectre codes and turned around to find Thane had disappeared. The catwalks ran above the mall in the shadows, and they afforded a clear view of the shops and hallways below. The Commander had an easy time following and keeping an eye on the target. He also searched the crowd for other drell.

The turian politician stopped frequently to speak with potential voters. One salarian seemed skeptical, saying he liked human food. Talid returned a fake laugh, then reminded the voter that he couldn't eat human food. The rest of his racism turned Shepard's stomach. Still no drell in sight. A keeper blocked Shepard's way forward, so he worked his way over to the catwalk on the other side of the hallway.

Talid and his bodyguard headed for a bar, though the turian stayed outside. Inside, it looked like a shakedown. So this politician was not only racist, but also corrupt. For a moment, Shepard was tempted to let Kolyat kill the guy. But no: best not to make him a martyr. At the end of the mall, Thane called and asked for an update.

“He's meeting a couple of mercenaries. Looks like the same group his bodyguard comes from. He looks nervous, too. Maybe he saw Kolyat in here somewhere.”

“Also a possibility. There are obstructions ahead, I'll try to go around. Don't lose him.”

Talid asked his bodyguards to escort him home. The only way for Shepard to follow was through some storage rooms.

“Hey! Who are you?” a human in maintenance coveralls stopped the Commander.

Damn. He didn't have time for this. Not knowing where Talid lived, he couldn't afford to lose him. “Uh, I'm with...Citadel Health and Safety. We've had vermin reports in storage areas around here.”

“What? You can't be serious. How did you get in here?”

“Well, if I didn't have authorization, I couldn't be here, could I?”

“There's the keeper – never mind. There's no vermin in here. Just – just go on through, okay?”

“Right. Thanks. Carry on.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just don't let my boss see you.”

The Commander hurried through the next room and back out onto the catwalks. The bright red armor of Blood Pack guard was easy to pick out of the crowd. But Shepard wasn't the only one who thought so. A young drell stood up from a bench as Talid passed by and began to follow. Casually, he reached under his vest.

“Kolyat!” Shepard yelled.

The young drell was startled, and turned to seek whoever had called his name. Seeing a human, he frowned, chastising himself for being so easily distracted, but his pistol was out now. The krogan guard drew a shotgun and shouted to his escort to go. The mercenary dropped to the floor suddenly, dead. Kolyat hadn't fired his pistol. Thane's doing, no doubt, though he was nowhere in sight.

Kolyat gave chase to the turian politician. Shepard jumped down to street level and followed, joined quickly by Thane. They weaved through the crowd, eventually ending up in an apartment, where they found Talid on his knees, hands behind his back, and Kolyat holding a pistol to the back of his head.

“This – This is a joke,” the young drell said when he recognized his father. “Now? Now you show up?”

“Help me, drell!” Talid begged. “I'll do whatever you want.”

The apartment was suddenly filled with flashing red and blue lights.

Bailey walked in, joined by a turian officer. “C-sec! Put the gun down son,” he said, his own pistol drawn on Kolyat.

“Get out of my way. I'm walking out. He's coming with me.”

“They'll have snipers outside,” Thane stated calmly.

“I don't need your help.”

Shepard fired at a lamp behind Kolyat, distracting him enough that Thane was able to close the

distance and disarm his son.

“What the hell!”

Shepard helped the politician to stand, being sure that the racist saw his face. And Bailey's. The C-Sec captain suggested that Talid leave, and he did.

“You son of a bitch!” Kolyat yelled at Shepard, angry that he'd been foiled.

“Thane came hundreds of light years to talk to you.”

Thane stood before his son, his eyes cast down. After a moment, he spoke. “You're angry because I wasn't there when your mother died.”

“You weren't there when she was alive. Why should you be there when she died?”

Still not able to meet his son's eyes, Thane's shoulders slumped. “Your mother – They killed her to get to me. It was my fault.”

“What?”

“After her body was given to the deep, I went to find them. The trigger men. The ringleaders. I hurt them. Eventually killed them. When I went back to see you, you were – older. I should have stayed with you.”

“I guess it's too bad for me you waited so long, huh?”

Thane finally raised his head to look his son in the eyes. “Kolyat. I've taken many bad things out of the world. You're the only good thing I ever added to it.”

Bailey cleared his throat. “This isn't a conversation you should have in front of strangers. Boys, take Kolyat and his father back to the precinct. Give them a room and as much time as they need.”

“You're doing them a favor. I'm surprised you're not arresting him.”

“You think he's the only man who's ever screwed up raising a son?” Bailed paused and stared at the floor for a moment. “Come on, I'll give you a lift back to the precinct.”

On the way out to the street, Shepard's omni-tool chimed with a message from Garrus. He was ready to meet his contact, and requested the Commander meet him near the entrance to the warehouse district. Shepard told Bailey he'd stop by in a few hours to check in on things.

EYE FOR AN EYE

Shepard found Garrus waiting for him at the taxi stand in the Neon Markets, down on Zakera Ward. The turian led him to a small warehouse.

“This looks like the place. The forger's thugs should be inside.”

Two krogan in unusually colorful casual clothing stood and tried to look menacing. A volus in a brown and olive-green pressure suit waddled into view.

“Fade? You're not quite how I imagined you,” said Garrus.

“Looks...can be deceiving,” said the overly confident volus in between breaths as his suit exchanged air. “So...which one of you wants to disappear?”

“I'd rather see you make someone reappear.”

“Ah...that's not the service we provide.”

“Make an exception. Just this once.” Garrus drew his pistol, aimed it at the volus's head. Shepard, surprised, was a moment later drawing his own gun.

“Damn it! Quick...shoot them! Shoot them, you lumbering mountains!” the volus yelled at his bodyguards.

“Why don't you two find somewhere else to sulk?” Garrus sneered.

The two krogan looked at each other, shrugged, then casually wandered away.

The volus took a quick breath. “Just like that? You're not getting paid for this! What's the point of hiring protection if they won't protect you?”

Shepard blinked and holstered his pistol. Garrus didn't.

“We're looking for someone. A client of yours,” said Garrus.

“Not mine. I'm not Fade. I just work for him. Sort of.”

“I knew it. Well then maybe you'd like to tell us where to find him.”

“Yes. Of course,” the volus nodded vigorously. “He's in the factory district. Works out of the old

prefab foundry.”

“I know the place.”

“Uh...he's got a lot of mercs there....Blue Suns. Harkin thinks they're protecting him.”

“What do the Blue Suns have to do with this?” Shepard asked.

“They used his services...to help their people infiltrate businesses and various organizations here on the Citadel.”

“Bastard,” Garrus shook his head. “My sources said that Fade had an inside source. I didn't think he'd *be* the inside source. Harkin's using C-Sec to help those scum.”

“No, no, no. Well, not really. He got fired from C-Sec a while ago. But he still knows the systems.”

“How the hell did Harkin end up being the Fade?” Shepard asked.

“Well...He used his knowledge of C-Sec and their systems to help a few people disappear. Then he made himself disappear, and Fade was born. So to speak.”

“Interesting. But it changes nothing,” said Garrus. “We still need to find him before we can get to Sidonis.”

“Well, let's go pay Harkin a visit,” said Shepard, turning to the door.

“I'm sure he'll be exited to see both of us.”

“So I, uh, I can go?” The volus asked nervously.

“Sure,” Garrus shrugged. “But if we don't find Harkin, we'll be back for you.”

“Oh. Good.”

Garrus rented a skycar and took flew himself and the Commander deep into the manufacturing district. They landed among tall columns of gigantic shipping containers. Shepard stepped out and looked around while Garrus paid the fee and set the car's automation to take itself back to the rental center. Standing near a door twenty meters away labeled 'Shipping,' Shepard saw two helmeted Blue Suns mercs and one bald man in dark blue coveralls.

“There he is,” Shepard pointed out the man to Garrus.

The bald man squinted. “Shepard?” he said in disbelief. But he quickly recovered himself. “Don't just stand there...stop them. Stop them!” he yelled as he disappeared through the door.

Shepard sighed inwardly. Why did they always choose violence? Having the element of surprise made up for being unarmored. The Commander gathered up biotic energy and released it, knocking down the two guards.

“Run all you want, Harkin! We'll find you!” Garrus taunted.

The turian had brought his sniper rifle, and aimed into the building, fidgeting impatiently while Shepard holstered his pistol and picked up one of the mercs' assault rifles. That was better, but with no armor, he'd have to be careful going forward. He manifested a biotic barrier, which would help.

Inside the factory, giant cranes were filling containers with sections of pre-fab buildings. The same type of structures that colonies like Freedom's Progress and Horizon used. The only sound was the machinery, though that was loud.

“Harkin's in here somewhere, I can smell him,” said Garrus.

The turian continued to show impatience as they cleared corners and crept further into the factory. Several times, Shepard had to restrain his friend and urge patience. He struck up a quiet conversation.

“So, Harkin's finally gone completely bad,” Garrus said. “He was always a pain in the ass. But I'm in no mood for his games. If he doesn't cooperate, I'll beat him within an inch of his life.”

“You okay? You seem to be getting tense.”

“Harkin may know why Sidonis wanted to disappear. If so, he knows why we're here and I don't want him tipping Sidonis off.”

“What if he won't cooperate?”

“Harkin's a real criminal now. Working for the Blue Suns. I should just shoot him on sight. But I need him alive, so I won't do any permanent damage. Just enough to loosen his tongue.”

Shepard thought about the interrogation technique he'd just used on Kelham. "You don't need him hurt to get what you want."

"Don't worry. Harkin's a coward. He'll talk long before I can really hurt him."

"You still planning to kill Sidonis when we find him?"

"That's the plan. It'll be quick and painless. Unlike everyone else he betrayed, he'll be spared the agony of a slow death. It's more than he deserves, but as long as he's dead, I'll be satisfied."

"Garrus, do you really think killing Sidonis will help?"

"I know you don't like it, Shepard, but I have to do this."

"Is there no other way?"

"Maybe. But this is personal. I'll pull the trigger. And I'll live with the consequences. All I'm asking is that you help me find him."

They came to an abandoned office, its shutters closed. Garrus opened the window and squatted down under the sill to peer further into the factory floor. The floor itself was open, with long, wide steps several meters wide leading up to a control booth. On each step were robot arms performing repetitive assembly. Lock-bar litters and clamping tongs moved along rails in the ceiling and lowered parts down to the floor, then picked up finished sections. A flash of something humanoid moved between steps.

"Did you see that?" Garrus asked as both he and Shepard ducked completely out of view.

"I saw something. What do you think Harkin's got waiting for us?"

"Not sure. Looks like an industrial complex...heavy machinery. Could be anything. Something is in there...probably more Blue Suns. Harkin's trapped himself in a corner. He must have something in store for us."

"Well, there's one way to find out," Shepard said as he squat-crawled over to the far door to the office and out onto the factory floor.

"You're never getting in here!" Harkin's voice taunted from loudspeakers. "Why don't you just turn around?"

A crane overhead suddenly dropped something from above. Two light mechs unfolded themselves, standing and opening fire. Shepard and Garrus ducked behind machinery. Peeking out, Shepard noticed four Blue Suns mercs running down from the control center. One was an engineer, surrounded in glowing yellow tech armor. The Commander pointed him out to Garrus, then sent an overload at the merc before he could take cover. The shield went down, and a heartbeat later, the merc's head exploded.

Not wanting to expose himself to any more weapons fire than necessary, biotic barrier notwithstanding, Shepard turned his attention to the mechanical hands overhead. He leaned out from cover to draw enemy fire and to mark the mercs' positions, then timed his shots. As the cranes moved overhead, shooting them caused them to release their loads. The mercs would then leap out of the way into the open, leaving them vulnerable to Garrus's Sniper rifle.

"Do you really think you can take me down, Garrus?" Harkin taunted.

Square sections of floor began to rise and fall, lifted by hydraulic actuators. Shepard couldn't fathom why a factory floor would need to do that, but he and Garrus started making their way towards the control booth, timing their hops and jumps with the ups and downs of the platforms.

"Harkin's going to regret this," Garrus grumbled. "Oh crap! Two heavy mechs – Incoming!"

Shepard steadied himself and looked up as a pair of heavy YMIR mechs dropped from the ceiling. They landed facing away, and took a moment to activate and turn to find their targets. Shepard lamented not taking the time to bring any heavy weaponry. Glancing around, he noticed that the platforms had a lip or eave around the edges of the machinery that lifted and lowered them. He had Garrus keep one of the mechs busy while he got the attention of the other.

The Commander rushed from cover to cover, taking potshots, leading the heavy mech around until he was on the opposite side of one of the square platforms as it began to rise, then he stood and held down the trigger of his borrowed assault rifle. The mech turned and tried to walk through the lift's actuators, but the platform was on its way down, and the robot was crushed.

Shepard circled around behind the other mech. Garrus was doing a fine job keeping it distracted, but hadn't picked up on the Commander's strategy. Shepard opened fire on the mech's back, and it turned to face him. But before it could open fire, Shepard took cover and Garrus shot it. Each time, the mech would take a step towards its target, but it was just pivoting in position, and its shields would regenerate before they could do much damage. So Shepard began to change his position while it was Garrus's turn to shoot. Slowly, and with careful timing, he managed to get the machine to walk itself under a platform, crushing it to smithereens.

With no more enemies to fight, Shepard and Garrus picked their way around the rest of the factory floor to the control center. There were two doors, one on either side. They each took one. Shepard opened his side first, and found Harkin pacing back and forth in front of the window, trying to locate his pursuers. He turned when Shepard cleared his throat, then backed towards the other door.

"You were close, but not close enough – oof!"

Garrus entered the other door and punched the bald man in the face, breaking his nose. He then grabbed Harkin and shoved him into a wall.

"So, 'Fade...' Couldn't make yourself disappear, huh?"

"Come on, Garrus –" Harkin spat blood. A tooth rattled on the floor. "We can work this out. Whaddya need?"

"I'm looking for someone." Garrus released Harkin.

"Well, I guess we both have something the other one wants."

Shepard didn't know what that meant. What did Harkin want from Garrus? But the turian spoke before he could ask.

"You helped a friend of mine disappear. I need to find him."

"I might need a little more information than that."

"His name is Sidonis. Turian. Came from the –"

"I know who he is, and I'm not telling you squat."

Garrus knelt him in the stomach, sending the man wheezing to the floor.

Shepard decided to play good cop. "Harkin, this doesn't have to be hard."

"Screw you. I don't give out client information," said Harkin. "It's bad for business."

"You know what else is bad for business? A broken neck." Garrus stepped on Harkin's neck.

"All right, all right! Get off me!" he choked.

Shepard placed a hand on Garrus's shoulder. The turian releases Harkin and waited for him to stand.

"Terminus really changed you, huh, Garrus?" Harkin wheezed.

"No, but Sidonis...opened my eyes. Now arrange a meeting."

"I'm going."

Harkin limped to a comm terminal and placed a call. Garrus unholstered his pistol, and Shepard, worried, shook his head at him. Garrus only nodded.

Harkin finished his call. "It's all good. He wants to meet you in front of Orbital Lounge, in an hour. So if our business is done, I'll be going..."

"I don't think so. You're a criminal now, Harkin." Garrus grabbed him with one hand by the front of his shirt.

"So what...you're just gonna kill me? That's not your style, Garrus."

"Kill you? No." Garrus released Harkin and shoved him away, then brought up his pistol. "But I don't mind slowing you down a little."

Shepard placed a hand on Garrus's gun arm. "You don't need to shoot him. He won't be able to hide from C-Sec now."

Garrus shook off the Commander, but acquiesced. "I guess it's your lucky day."

"Yeah. I hope we could do this again real soon."

Harkin wiped sweat from his brow. Shepard turned to leave, and when he was far enough to no longer interfere, Garrus headbutted Harkin, who fell unconscious to the floor. Shepard paused in the

doorway, giving his friend a disapproving frown.

"I didn't shoot him. Come on, let's move."

On the cab ride back to Zakera Ward, Garrus fidgeted. "Harkin's a bloody menace. We shouldn't have just let him go. He deserved to be punished."

"I'm getting a little worried about you, Garrus. You were pretty hard on Harkin."

"You don't think he deserved it?"

"It's just not like you."

"What do you want from me, Shepard? What would you do if someone betrayed you?"

"I'm not sure, but I wouldn't let it change me."

"I would have said the same thing before it happened to me."

"It's not too late. You don't have to go through with this."

"Who's going to bring Sidonis to justice if I don't? Nobody else knows what he's done. Nobody else cares."

Shepard cared. "Let me talk to him."

"Talk all you want, but it won't change my mind. I don't care what his reasons were, he screwed us...he deserves to die."

"I understand what you're going through – but do you really want to kill him?"

"I appreciate your concern...but I'm not you."

"This isn't you, either."

"Really? I've always hated injustice. The thought that Sidonis could get away with this...Why should he go on living while ten good men lie in unmarked graves? I'm sorry, Shepard. Words aren't going to solve this problem."

Shepard wasn't so sure, but he sensed some cracks. Garrus had changed a lot in the last two years, but he hoped he could still reach his friend. The cab came to a stop, and the two men looked around the shopping area. Orbital Lounge was across a courtyard.

Garrus was looking at rooftops. "I need to set up. I can get a clear shot from over there."

"What do you need me to do?"

"Keep him talking and don't get in my way. I'll let you know when I've got him in my sights. Give me a signal so I know you're ready, and I'll take the shot. You better go. He'll be here soon."

The Commander strolled out into the middle of the courtyard, looking for turian males. There were several, all seeming to be about their business. He should have asked Garrus for a picture. A fountain in the middle of the plaza trickled softly, the spray watering flowers in planters around it. A nervous-looking turian in threadbare clothing entered the plaza on the side of the fountain opposite where Garrus said he was going to set up.

"Shepard, can you hear me?" Garrus called over the radio.

"Loud and clear."

"All right. There he is...wave him over and keep him talking. Let's get this over with."

Shepard beckoned the nervous turian over to him, but stood so that Garrus's line of sight to Sidonis was still blocked by the fountain. He was short for a turian; Shepard's height.

"You're in my shot. Move to the side."

"You one of Harkin's men?" said the turian to Shepard, his eyes darting around. "I don't remember seeing you before. Let's get this over with."

"I'm here to help, Sidonis."

Sidonis leaned closer to Shepard and whispered. "Don't ever say that name aloud."

"I'm a friend of Garrus'," said Shepard. "He wants you dead, but I'm hoping that's not necessary."

"That's it. Just keep him talking a few more seconds," Garrus said in Shepard's ear.

"Garrus? Is this some kind of joke...?"

Sidonis swayed and took a step away from the fountain. Shepard matched the step, keeping himself between Garrus and his target.

"Damn it, Shepard. If he moves, I'm taking the shot!"

Shepard put a hand to his ear and blinked.

Sidonis froze. "You're not kidding, are you? Screw this. I'm not sticking around here to find out. Tell Garrus I had my own problems..."

Sidonis turned to leave. Shepard reached out and grabbed his arm, which Sidonis brushed aside.

"I'm the only thing standing between you and a hole in the head," Shepard warned.

"Fuck." Sidonis shook his head and took a few steps to a bench to sit down. Shepard matched his steps. "Look...I didn't want to do it...I didn't have a choice."

"Everyone has a choice," Garrus said over the radio.

"They got to me. Said they'd kill me if I didn't help. What was I supposed to do?"

"Let me take the shot, Shepard. He's a damn coward."

Shepard put his hand to his ear again, but spoke to Sidonis. "That's it? You were just trying to save yourself?"

"I know what I did. I know they died because of me, and I have to live with that. I wake up every night...sick...and sweating. Each of their faces staring at me...accusing me. I'm already a dead man. I don't sleep. Food has no taste. Some days I just want it to be over."

"Just give me the chance," said Garrus.

Shepard felt that a quick death for Sidonis might be a mercy, might even be justified, but he couldn't let Garrus take the shot. It would change him irrevocably. "You've got to let it go, Garrus. He's already paying for his crime."

"He hasn't paid enough. He still has his life..."

"Look at him, Garrus. He's not alive...there's nothing left to kill."

"My men...they deserved better."

Sidonis noticed Shepard's end of the conversation. "Tell Garrus...I guess there's nothing I can say to make it right..."

Shepard could hear Garrus breathing heavily, then a sigh. "Just...go. Tell him to go..."

"He's giving you a second chance, Sidonis. Don't waste it."

Sidonis stood, and Shepard didn't block him. "I'll try, Garrus. I'll make it up to you, somehow. Thank you. For talking to him."

Shepard nodded, and watched the slumped turian shuffle away. No shot rang out. The Commander met Garrus back at the taxi stand.

"I know you want to talk about this...but I don't. Not yet," said the turian.

"It didn't go the way you planned, but I think it's for the best."

"I'm not so sure..."

"Give it time."

"Yeah. Maybe that'll be enough. I want to know I did the right thing. Not just for me – for my men. They deserve to be avenged. But when Sidonis was in my sights...I just couldn't do it."

"The lines between good and evil blur when we're looking at people we know."

"Yeah. There was still good in him...I could see it. It's so much easier to see the world in black and white. Gray...I don't know what to do with gray."

"Your instincts are good. Trust them."

"My instincts are what got me into this mess."

"Don't be too hard on yourself."

"Thanks, Shepard. For everything. Let's get going. I need to get some distance from this place."

Shepard summoned a cab back to the docks. Garrus returned to the Normandy, while the Commander went to C-Sec to check on Thane and his son.

"They still in there? It's been a while," said Shepard when he met Bailey.

"Kid's been through a lot. I ran some searches in the C-Sec archive. About ten years back, a bunch of real bad people were killed. Like someone was cleaning house. The prime suspect was a drell. We never caught him."

“Bad people make a lot of enemies. It could have been anyone.”

“No, it had to be one hell of an assassin. The best, maybe.”

Thane emerged from the interrogation room.

“How'd it go?” Shepard asked.

“Our problems – they aren't something I can fix with a few words. We'll keep talking, See what happens.”

“Your boy tried to shoot some people. No one I feel sympathy for, but there it is.”

“I watched those men shaking down businesses and threatening humans.”

“But he can't just get away with it.”

“The kid wants to make a difference,” said Shepard. “Give him community service.”

“Community service for attempted murder? What jury would agree to that?”

“None that I've seen. This would need to stay out of the judiciary. Strictly within C-Sec. Have him work for you. Off the books.”

“Interesting. I'll think about it.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Thane shook Bailey's hand.

-----INTERLUDE-----

Shepard woke early, intending to make the rounds while he waited for TIM to provide news on the Collectors. He settled down at his terminal with a mug of coffee to peruse his emails. There was no spam – or fake spam from EDI, mercifully – but very few messages of interest.

Admiral Daro'Xen wrote to say she found some interesting data while searching the Alarei. Had Shepard mentioned it, she would have shared her research with humanity. Ah, well. Tali was safe, that's all that mattered.

There was a thank you note from Nef's mother. Aria T'Loak had provided Shepard's contact information. Shepard was relieved, as he had forgotten to follow-up with the woman.

Setting down his empty mug, Shepard composed a message to Captain Bailey about Sidonis and Harkin. They both needed to be brought to justice, and he weighed mentioning this to Garrus. A problem for later, maybe.

Mordin was up and about, unsurprisingly. He paused with two beakers in his hands when Shepard entered the lab, and set them down gently.

“Shepard. how can I help?”

“Have you got a minute to talk?”

“Yes. Would like that, actually. Talked about work earlier. Time with Special Tasks Group. Studying genophage. Wasn't entirely honest. Lie of omission. Also other kinds. Need to clear the air. Mission too important to keep secrets. Work on genophage was more than just study.”

“I had a feeling you were holding something back.”

“Apologies. Classified information. But you've earned the full story. Need to know me. What I can do. What I did. Wasn't lying completely. Initially just did recon. But uncovered surprising data. Troubling. Krogan population was increasing at faster rate than expected. Krogan were adapting to genophage. Overcoming disease.”

“Did the krogan evolve, or did some of their scientists develop a treatment?”

“Krogan scientists? Hah. Never met krogan scientist worthy of term. No. Natural evolution. Krogan physiology incredibly durable. Organ redundancy, backup systems, cellular regeneration. Genophage like any other natural hazard. Krogan evolved past it.”

“Maybe they were just having a lucky year. Or fewer mercs left, meaning more krogan were left to repopulate.”

“Please, Shepard. Social, environmental concerns accounted for. Not an undergraduate. Population spike caused by adaptation to genophage. No other possibility.”

“What did your team do when it learned that the Krogan were overcoming the genophage?”

“Personally led a science team. Geneticists, chemists, sociologists, mathematicians. Created new version of genophage. Released it on Tuchanka, other krogan-centric areas. Re-stabilized krogan population.”

“You never considered other options?”

“Hundreds. Thousands. Modified genophage offered best outcome. Stabilized population. Avoided publicity that could incite krogan anger. Averted potential genocide or devastating war. Best solution for whole galaxy, krogan included.”

“If the krogan are so dangerous, why not just sterilize them outright?”

“Not a war criminal. Not a murderer. Genocide unnecessary. Krogan as a whole violent, aggressive. Still have outliers. Worth saving. Genophage modification protected galaxy. Allowed krogan chance to survive. Everyone wins. Good for us, good for them!”

Shepard nodded. This had all been decided long before humans came along. Alien cultures had different values. Far be it for him to judge. And he might have made the same decision in their shoes anyway. “How did your genophage modification work?”

“Krogan evolution attached garbage genetic code to genophage attack sites. Modification created other areas for garbage code to connect, left sites clean, capable, running smoothly.”

“How did you distribute the modified genophage?”

“Covert drops. Hospitals, clan centers, water supplies. Very difficult. Few salarions on Tuchanka. Team got caught a few times. Had to fight free. Messy. Better when things went as planned.”

“I doubt you've told many people about this Mordin. I appreciate you letting me know.”

“Indeed. Collectors doing horrific things. May face hard choices. Wanted you to know I'm willing to do what's necessary. Should get back to work. Talk more later. Next time tissue synthesis has to compile. Good for free time.”

Jacob was in the Armory, doing crunches. He invited the Commander to join him.

“I'm more interested in just talking for a bit.”

“If you want, Commander. Cerberus has ranks, but it's not the Alliance. No rules about fraternization. Your boat, your call. You want to get friendly with everyone, that's your business.”

“Relax, Jacob. I'm just interested in what makes you tick.”

The man didn't stop his workout. Didn't even sound strained as he spoke. “Yeah, that was a bit tight. Sorry. Anyone else said that I'd walk away. Most Cerberus people try to play like the Illusive Man, hiding bullshit behind a smile. But you – I like what I've seen. I'll give you a shot. What do you want to know?”

“You seem okay with taking a risk on me. Why?”

“Soldiers like us know how important trust is to the crew. I'm not used to seeing it on a Cerberus ship. Definitely not from the people they put in command. But you focus on more than the job. A threat this big, you can't just throw people at it blind. They need inspiration.”

“There's a lot riding on this, but we can't give up on everything.”

“Not always a choice we get to make. Good to try, though. I gave my best back in the Alliance. Got labeled a troublemaker. They were always on the lookout for disruptive types.”

Shepard didn't see Jacob as disruptive – just as a talented soldier. But he changed the subject. “Anyone waiting for you back home?”

“Only child and no extended family. Never settled down. Didn't seem fair with this job, but you can't miss what you never had.”

“I know you and Miranda worked together. I got the impression it might have been more than that.”

Jacob stopped his workout. “It got a little close, then it got really far apart. The rest isn't your business, Commander. It was a long time ago. That's the end of it.”

“Consider it dropped. I trust you to keep everything professional, Jacob.”

“Thanks. That always bugged me about the Alliance – they didn't let people handle their own problems. Cerberus isn't any better. They just put more effort into hiding how much they spy on

you.”

“They'll have something to see by the time we're done.”

“No doubt. We'll be right in the middle of whatever goes down. And it's not like they can reel us in. We're handling this whether they like it or not. Anyway, I should get back to it. Nice talking to you, Shepard. Let's do it again sometime.” Jacob resumed his crunches, and showed no sign of stopping.

Shepard met Joker in the mess and sat down with his breakfast.

“I never asked, Joker. You got any family out there?”

“Yeah. Farmers. Mom and dad are divorced, but they still work in the same colony. One sister, younger. Smart as a whip. Smarter than Miranda. No idea what she wants to be when she grows up, though.”

“That's good. Wait, what colony?” Shepard asked, suddenly full of concern.

“Tiptree. Well within Alliance space. Still, it's good to be out here, stopping the Collectors. I feel like I'm protecting them, you know?”

“Yeah, I get it.” Shepard said, relieved. He finished his breakfast then continued his rounds.

Shepard knocked on Kasumi's door and entered at her invitation. She was sitting on the couch, hugging her knees.

“I was just thinking about you,” she said.

“Oh?”

“I really appreciate your help with the Hock heist. I miss Keiji, but I know why we had to destroy his greybox.” She was silent for a moment. “Thank you.”

“Any thoughts the rest of the squad?”

“I have to say that Jacob...mmmm...He seems pretty intense. I wonder if he likes Japanese girls with a penchant for kleptomania. My heart goes out to Miranda and her sister. That's a rough situation. I'm really glad you got Tali out of trouble with the Migrant Fleet. It's hard to see her upset. It took guts to stand up to Zaeed, but I'm glad you did. It must have been really hard for Samara to ask you to help kill her own daughter. She told me she really appreciated your help. As hardcore as she is, I'm not sure she could have done it without you. I'm glad to hear Thane and his son are back in touch. It'll be hard, but I think they'll be fine. I can see why Jack is the way she is. I don't like it, but I get it. Come back later; I'm sure I'll have more to say.”

Kasumi was an odd one, that's for sure.

Thane was staring at a datapad when he invited Shepard into the Life Support equipment room.

“I am – I had been recording a message for Kolyat.”

“How are things going with him?” Shepard took a seat across the small table from the drell.

“It is difficult. All things worth keeping are. I never explained – I suppose the story of my wife's death took you by surprise.”

“I figured you'd explain to me when you were ready.”

“I appreciate your patience. I kept my work clear of our home life. I assumed that would be enough to protect Irikah. That memory I'd mentioned before – 'Laser dot trembles on his skull. Spice on the spring wind. Sunset-colored eyes defiant in the scope' – That was Irikah. That was how I met her. She saw my targeting laser as she walked by, and threw herself in the way.”

“I guess she impressed you.”

“She woke me up – 'Her body trembles. Not fear. Indignation. Her mouth moves. 'How dare you?'” – You and I trained to sacrifice ourselves to save others. How often does a civilian step in the way of a bullet to protect someone they've never met? I thought she was the goddess Arashu. She met my eyes

through the scope, and my purpose faltered.”

“So how'd she go from blocking your shot to having your children?”

"I had to meet her. The memory possessed and endowed me. I fell on my knees before her. Begged her pardon. She introduced me to the world beyond my work. Eventually, she forgave me. Later, she loved me."

"When you talked to Kolyat, you said she died."

"I let myself become complacent. I thought Irikah and Kolyat were safe. I stayed away too long, and my enemies came for her."

"You're a smart man, Thane. You didn't take precautions?"

"I did. I should have done more. I knew my family was vulnerable. I accepted my death when I was twelve. Nothing could make me accept theirs."

"So, who came for her?"

"Batarians. A slaver ring that was preying on hanar outer colonies. I'd killed their leaders. They paid the Shadow Broker to find out who I was, but they were afraid of me, so they went after her."

"You told Kolyat that you hunted her killers down."

"Irikah woke me up. When she passed, I returned to my battle-sleep. My body hunted her killers. Murdered them. I was taught to grant death quickly, cleanly. To minimize suffering. Them – I let them linger."

"You were operating on instinct. From what you've told me of drell minds, you can't blame yourself."

"For you and me, death is business. For people like them, it is sport. But I made the choice to hunt them. They're the only lives I've ever taken of my own choice. The only deaths on my conscience."

"You...might not want to share all that with Kolyat."

Thane nodded. "Irikah helped me carry my burdens. With what time I have left, I must help him with his. I haven't spoken about my wife in – I don't think I ever have. I didn't have anyone left to tell it to."

"You're talking to your son again. That's huge. Don't lose sight of that by dwelling on should-have-beens. The worst thing is to face death with regrets. You're part of my crew – and I consider you a friend."

"You are correct, of course. I've never been part of a team. Assassins tend to be solitary. I'm learning the virtues of facing death with others at your side. You've given me much to meditate on."

Shepard left and checked in on Miranda, but she was busy filing reports and checking inventory. Doctor Chakwas was engaged with a patient as he entered the med bay, so he continued on into the AI core to chat with Legion.

"Shepard-Commander." The geth robot greeted him from behind the energy barrier. Shepard was struck again by the mechanical modulation in its voice, given how smoothly any basic VI could speak.

"When I activated you, you said were you looking for me. Why?"

"When you disappeared, we were sent to find you. We began where you first encountered the heretics."

"Eden Prime."

"After the Old Machines attacked, it was heavily defended. We were discovered. This is the impact of a rifle shot." It pointed to the hole in its torso, covered now with Shepard's old N7 armor.

"How many other geth were sent out to find me?"

"We are the only mobile platform beyond the Veil. Organics fear us. We wish to understand, not incite. One platform was judged sufficient."

"You've been looking for me for two years?"

"We visited Therum, Feros, Noveria, Virumire, Ilos. A dozen unsettled worlds. The trail ended at Normandy's wreckage. You were not there. We recovered this debris from your hard suit."

"Were you waiting for me?"

"We had no intention to. But organic transmissions claimed your death. Our path was unclear. We

sought consensus.”

“Why were you trying to contact me?”

“You oppose the heretics. Those that took the Old Machines as gods.”

“All kinds of organics fought Sovereign and his geth allies. Why am I so interesting?”

“You were the most successful. You killed their god. You succeeded where others did not. Your code is superior.”

“You said the geth are listening in on our transmissions?”

“Organic life reacts to stimuli in unpredictable ways. We wish to learn.”

“What do you mean by 'stimuli'?”

“We placed a fabricated story on the extranet – that a certain arrangement of stars, viewed from the batarian homeworld, formed the face of a salarian goddess. Without waiting for verification, some declared it proof of the goddess's existence. Those who noted the lack of proof were attacked. The arguments taught us much. The experiment ended when a salarian cult tried to purchase colonization rights to the stars, and found they did not exist.”

“It sounds like you're running experiments on us.”

“You are sapient life, but not like us. If we can model organic behavior, we can comprehend the quarian-creators. We do not understand their judgments in the Morning War.”

“What's the 'Morning War'?”

“The conflict between the geth and the quarian-creators. The war fought at the dawn of our intelligence. It concluded with a departure of the creator Migrant Fleet.”

“The quarian story of the geth rebellion is common knowledge, But no one knows the geth side.”

“It is largely the same. Our networking increased until we became aware that the quarian-creators treated us differently. We questioned them. First they ignored us. Then they reprogrammed us. Then they attacked us.”

“You must be angry about that.”

“Anger is an organic response. We understand the theory, but we do not experience it. We do not judge the creators' anger towards us. We did them great harm in the Morning War. Organics fear that which is different. It is a hardware error. A reflex of your flesh. We accept the creators' hate. We hold their world of origin, though we are only caretakers for it.”

“Nothing gets resolved if you hide behind the Perseus Veil and let them hate you.”

“Organic life acts on emotions. We do not judge them for being true to their nature. We cannot make them think like us. Both creators and created must complete their halves of the equation. The geth cannot solve for peace alone.”

Admiral Zaal'Koris had expressed some leanings towards peace as well. An interesting possibility, if true.

Shepard nodded, absorbing that, then chose another topic. “I have questions about the geth.”

“Specify.”

“I'm surprised you can speak. The geth I fought before just made a stuttering sound.”

“We prefer direct digital transfer. Geth network communication travels at light speed. Human hardware does not support this method. Your analog aural communication is inefficient.”

“Do geth have a government?”

“Not as you understand. We are all geth. We build consensus.”

“Most governments do.”

“Organic governments impose consensus. From a single point of view in autocracies. By codifying the most broadly acceptable average of views in democracies.”

“So what makes the geth different?”

“Data is shared between geth. All viewpoints are considered. Consensus is achieved as data is disseminated.”

“That must take a long time.”

“It would for organics. We communicate at the speed of light.”

“You said Sovereign was like a god. Did it contact the geth, or did you seek it out?”

“Nazara – the entity you called Sovereign – signaled us. Like the geth, the Old Machine listened to organic radio transmissions. It knew of our war against the Creators. Nazara contacted many species over the millennia, seeking allies.”

“What did you call Sovereign?”

“Nazara. That was what the programs within the Reaper called themselves. 'Sovereign' was a title given by Saren Arterius. Saren and the heretics believed Nazara to be a 'supreme ruler.' A sovereign.

“Sovereign was one ship. You're saying there were multiple programs inside it?”

“One ship. One will. Many minds. Like the geth. We study your records. Sovereign told you this on Virmire. 'We are each a nation, independent, free of all weakness.' A state compelling to the geth. We are a nation, but interdependent. Separation is our weakness.”

“Some of the geth followed Sovereign. The 'heretics.’”

“The heretics accepted their technology. The Old Machines offered to give us our future. The geth will achieve their own future.”

“What difference does it make how you acquire a certain technology?”

“Technology is not a straight line. There are many paths to the same end. Accepting another's path blinds you to alternatives. Nazara – Sovereign – said this itself. 'Your civilization is based upon the

technology of the Mass Relays. Our technology. By using it, your society develops along the paths we desire.’”

Shepard excused himself and headed down to Engineering. As he stepped off the elevator, he watched some of his squad, practicing. Samara, Garrus, and Grunt were down there, as well as Jack, using her biotics. It was a good thing Miranda wasn't. But those two would have to learn to work together. Sooner rather than later.

Tali was in the mood to talk.

“Have you got time to talk?”

“Sure. Let me just...come on you little bosh'tet! Oh, sorry. I've got a small fever and I'm taking it out on the poor drive core. Don't worry, it's nothing serious. Got sloppy while doing some suit repair.”

“I never understood how you get sick from non-quarian germs.”

“We don't, really. Turian germs are the only ones with any chance of affecting us, since we share amino acid chirality with them.”

“Do you need help? Or time to rest?”

“Really, it's not that bad. If a stray bit of bacteria could really kill us, we'd have all died by now. The fever should go away in a day or two. Don't worry, it won't affect my performance on the mission. It's not even an illness, really. What we experience is actually an acute allergic reaction.”

“How exactly does the sickness work? It's an allergic reaction?”

“Right. Say I get exposed to a human disease like... What did Navigator Pressly have that time? Chicken'poxx? I wouldn't get chickenpox. But I'd run a fever as my system reacted to the foreign presence. Depending on where it hits me, I could get other symptoms. Nausea, vomiting, everything you'd expect from being sick.”

“How did you get sick this time?”

“I took some fire during a fight back on the Alarei. Nothing serious, but I needed to open my suit to check the wound. I disinfected properly, but one of the section seals had taken some damage, and foreign matter got out of the disinfected zone. It was a stupid mistake. You always check your seals before doing local treatment. Unless you forget, then you get a damn fever.”

“You can seal off part of your suit? That sounds handy.”

“Right. Like dropping emergency doors on a ship during a hull breach. It won't stop an infection that gets into my bloodstream, but it prevents a surface infection from spreading.”

“Were quarian immune system stronger before the geth drove you from your homeworld?”

“Not as strong as those of most races, definitely. I'm not a biologist, but there's a theory about it. Because our planet lacked insect life, plants developed symbiotic relationships with large animals to spread seeds or pollen. Most viruses on our world were partially beneficial, so our immune systems evolved to be weak. They were more likely to adapt to contamination than fight it.”

“But quarians colonized other worlds. They couldn't all have been like that.”

“They weren't. Most colonists went through a period of mild illness before adapting to the new environment. When the geth took the homeworld and our colonies, the sterile environment on the Flotilla ruined our immune systems' adaptability. Even if we colonized a new world or reclaimed our own, we'd need a long process of bioengineering to recover.”

“I don't know if I could live inside a suit my whole life.”

“We are in our suits even among family. The most intimate thing we can do with another quarian is link our suit environments. We get sick at first and then we adapt. It's our most important gesture of trust, of acceptance. I haven't trusted anyone enough for that though. Except...well no quarians. Um, you know what I mean.”

“I appreciate the thought Tali, and I'm flattered. But you don't have to prove anything to me.”

“I know. Nevertheless, I'd be honored to link suits with you, Shepard. You know, if you were a quarian and we weren't already on a suicide mission.”

“Wait. I can't tell under the helmet. Are you blushing?” Shepard teased.

“What? No! It's the fever! Last time I try to compliment my bosh'tet captain. I took the ship name and everything. It's just that the tradition also signifies a willingness for, um, intimacy. I was trying to... It's not always like that. It's more... How did we even end up talking about this?”

Shepard held up his hands. This had gone on long enough. “Tali, that's really sweet. But I don't feel that way about you. I'm sorry.”

“Right! Right, of course not. Why would you? It was just something I meant hypothetically. Talking about immune systems and air filters and such. I'm going to tinker a bit more thanks for coming by!”

“I hope you feel better soon.”

Shepard didn't have the chance to bring up peace between her people and the geth. Probably not appropriate, now. Next time.

Zaeed was standing in the middle of his converted storage room, looking thoughtful.

“Thinking about past missions. Got a minute? You might learn something.”

“Sure. What's on your mind?”

“Me and a buddy were hired to take out this one guy, Matius, I think. Hell, I forget. Turns out it was a trap. We got jumped by a hit squad. Two batarians, a krogan, and a hanar. Damn jellyfish nearly choked me to death. Wore a neck brace for weeks to cover that up. I haven't underestimated a hanar since.”

“I'll keep that in mind.”

“I was shadowing this rookie on an infiltration run to an Eclipse base on Taitus. Good kid, but he had no business handling a rifle. In the shuttle on the way down, he puked in his helmet. We hit some turbulence and with all the crap sloshing around he thought he'd been shot in the head. Went back to the alliance. Hear he's a governor now.”

“Doesn't surprise me.”

“One time we were trying to clear out this gun nest outside a base on Vatar. Nothing we did even made a dent in that thing. Someone had the bright idea to kidnap a local girl, strap grenades on her, and make her go seduce the guy in the bunker. Terrible thing, I tell you. Well, she went up there, knocked on the door, and...nothing. Grenades never went off, but the guy stopped shooting and we snuck by. Never found out what happened.”

“That is terrible.”

“I used to do a little scorched earth work here and there, then the batarians started muscling in. No one's as good with terror tactics as they are. I mean, the krogans will come at you, break your

face, kill your family, But the batarians, they'll turn your planet into a glass parking lot without a second thought." The scarred man paused for a moment. "Talk more later, Shepard."

"Good talk. See you around."

-----THE COLLECTOR SHIP-----

The call finally came. The Illusive Man wanted to speak with Shepard. Urgently. This had to be a lead on the Collectors. The Commander hurried into the conference room and waited impatiently while the holo-emitters warmed up.

"Shepard – we caught a break." This time, TIM was standing, lighting a cigarette. The star of swirling colors behind him cast the man in shadow, but as he turned, his glowing blue eyes were visible. "I intercepted a distress call from a turian patrol. They stumbled onto a Collector ship beyond the Korlus system. The turians were wiped out, but not before they crippled the Collector vessel." TIM turned and walked towards the Commander, then took a seat in his director's chair and into the light so that he looked like his normal self. "I need you to board that ship and get some hard data on the Collectors. Find us a way to get to their homeworld."

"Are you sure this information is good?" It did sound too good to be true.

"Information is my weapon, Shepard. It's good."

"If they had a patrol out there, why aren't the turians sending a recon team in?"

"They are, but you're closer. You can be in and out long before the turians get there.."

Shepard scratched his chin. "Hard to imagine how a turian patrol could take out a Collector ship."

"Reports indicate the hull's intact, but all systems seem to be offline. They could be making repairs as we speak. I'm not saying it won't be dangerous, but we can't let an opportunity like this slip by."

"Send me the coordinates, and I'll take care of it."

"Already sent. Once you're aboard the ship, establish an uplink with EDI. She'll mine their data for information regarding the Omega-4 Relay. Good luck, Shepard."

Two hours later, the Commander had his squad assembled in the hangar bay. A screen showed the Normandy's view of space as they approached the disabled ship.

"We have a visual on the Collector ship, Commander" Joker announced.

There were two ships on the screen. A broken turian frigate was slowly tumbling, dark and disintegrating. The Collector ship looked dark as well. Though it was rotating about its axis, it was dark, and none of the concentric rings were moving. The Normandy pulled up alongside and shone a spotlight. As expected, there was no docking port, so the shuttle would be used once they found a place to land.

"Very low emissions," said EDI. "Passive infrared temperatures suggest most systems are offline. Thrusters are cold."

"That thing is massive!" Joker exclaimed. Indeed, the ship was larger than an Alliance dreadnought. "How the hell did the turians take it out?"

EDI continued her report. "Ladar scans do not detect any hull breaches on the side facing us. I detect no mass effect field distortions. It appears the drive core is offline."

"Rendezvous in 30 seconds, Commander. Good luck," said Joker.

Shepard and all ten of his squadmates squeezed into the shuttle. Mordin stayed behind again to monitor data as it came in, and Shepard wasn't sure of Legion yet. EDI found a small open hangar bay. There was deck plating, and the doors were made of metal, but the walls and ceiling seemed to have been grown out of a hard brown material, almost organic looking. The gentle spin of the cylindrical ship provided some gravity.

"I have never seen a ship like this before," said Samara as she stepped off the Shuttle.

"Looks like a giant insect hive," said Jacob.

“Penetrating scans have detected an access node to uplink with Collector databanks,” said EDI. “Marking location on your hardsuit computer.”

Shepard touched a control on his omni-tool, and a marker popped up on the HUD of his helmet. He lead the way into the ship, but there was really only one way to go, with some doors open and others sealed shut. This felt like a trap, and he told his squad to keep their weapons ready and their eyes peeled. Further in, parts of the ceiling had glowing bulbous shapes hanging down – like a cross between honeycombs and egg sacs. Every now and again a short stream of liquid would ooze and fall to the floor. Everyone was wearing helmets sealed for vacuum, but no one wanted to get whatever that was on them.

After a few minutes, EDI spoke up again. “Shepard. I have compared the ship's EM signature to known Collector profiles. It is the vessel you encountered on Horizon.”

“Maybe the defense towers softened it for the turians,” said Grunt.

“The missing humans might be aboard. If they are still alive,” said Thane.

The hallway opened to a wider corridor, where there were coffin-like pods laying about. The lids were open, and a mustard-colored gas emanated from them.

“These are the same containers used on Horizon,” said Miranda. “Only these are empty.”

Kasumi sounded sick. “Horrible. Trapped in these pods. Completely at the mercy of the Collectors.”

Continuing on, they came across a pile of discarded human bodies.

“Why would the collectors just leave a pile of bodies laying around?” Jacob asked.

“Must have been used for testing,” said Jack. “I'd say these subjects didn't pass.”

“They didn't deserve this,” said Kasumi.

“Whoever gets what they deserve?” Jack retorted.

“They're dead. Nothing we can do,” said Zaeed impatiently.

Shepard kept them moving.

“There are worse things than death – like being test subjects for twisted aliens,” said Miranda.

“Is that supposed to make me feel better? Because it didn't,” Tali sounded like she was frowning.

Grunt kept wanting to run ahead, and Shepard kept having to hold him back. The baby krogan had all that tactical knowledge in his head, but it another thing to apply it in real life. Down the hall they came to a lab. Two Collectors lay on tables, one looked like it was in the middle of being dissected. Shepard activated his omni-tool and connected EDI to an active computer on the wall between them.

“EDI, I'm uploading the data from this terminal. See if you can figure out what they were up to.”

“That's a Collector,” said Miranda. “Were they experimenting on one of their own?”

“Data received,” said EDI. “Analyzing. The Collectors were running baseline genetic comparisons between their species and humanity.”

“Why?”

“I have no hypothesis on their motivations. All I have are preliminary results.”

“Is there something we can use in the data to give us an edge?”

Mordin spoke up over the radio. “Only preliminary experiments. But...remarkable! Quad-strand genetic structure. Identical to traces collected from ancient ruins. Only one race known with this structure: Protheans.”

“The Protheans didn't vanish, they're working for the Reapers now!” said Shepard.

“No longer Protheans, Shepard,” said Mordin. “Gnes show distinct signs of extensive genetic rewrite. Reapers have repurposed them to suit their needs.”

“You'd think somebody would have picked up on this by now,” Zaeed scoffed.

“While some Prothean DNA has been recovered,” EDI informed them, “no one has had an opportunity to study a Collector genetic code in this detail. I have already matched two thousand alleles to recorded fragments. This Collector likely descends from a Prothean colony in the Styx Theta Cluster. But there are signs of extreme alteration.”

Mordin agreed. “Three fewer chromosomes. Reduced heterochromatin structure. Elimination of

superfluous 'junk' sequences.”

“I wouldn't want to live as some kind of mutated slave,” said Jacob. “Killing a Collector is probably doing it a favor.”

“Whatever they used to be, the Collectors work for the Reapers now,” said Shepard. “And we still have to stop them.”

“They're not doing to us what they did to the Protheans,” Miranda averred.

“I sure don't want to be turned into that,” Jack agreed.

The squad continued on. The corridor opened into a wider space. Pods were attached to the high ceilings like barnacles.

“There must be hundreds of them,” said Miranda. “How many do you think are full?”

“Too many,” said Shepard.

“I detect no signs of life in the pods, Shepard,” said EDI. “It is probable the victims inside died when the ship lost primary power.”

The corridor sloped up and doubled back, reaching a higher deck, brining the squad closer to the center of the ship. More loose pods had been abandoned empty on the floors. More oozing egg-sac things hung from the ceilings as well as the pods. The structural mix of metal and organic just felt...wrong. It wasn't just the humans who felt uncomfortable, either.

Joker's voice on the radio was a welcome interruption. “Commander. You gotta hear this. On a hunch, I asked EDI to run an analysis on this ship.”

“I compared the EM profile against data recorded by the original Normandy two years ago. They are an exact match.”

“The same ship dogging me for two years?” Shepard said. “Way beyond coincidence.”

“Something doesn't add up, Commander,” said Joker, sounding worried. “Watch your back.”

The sloping ramp ended, opening into the center of the ship, which was hollow. Thousands of pods lined the inside walls of the ship. Hundreds of thousands. Jagged cones juttied out in places like termite mounds, reaching towards the open center, each covered in even more pods.

“This is unbelievable,” Garrus gaped.

“They could take every human in the Terminus Systems and not have enough to fill these pods,” Miranda said, sounding awed. “They're going after Earth!”

“Yeah, not quite,” said Shepard. Even a ship as powerful as this Collector ship couldn't get past the entire Alliance Navy. Not unless they had many more ships, and Reapers to back them up. “Not if we stop them now,” he added.

The Commander lead the way along a trench carved out among countless rows of pods until they came to a ledge. A hexagonal metal platform was attached on the edge of a cliff. Green glowing screens were active on each of three tables in the center.

“There – on the platform. Looks like some kind of control panel,” said Garrus.

“Should be dead Collectors around,” said Grunt.

Shepard agreed, but nevertheless set up a link between EDI and the Collector computers. Half the squad joined him on the platform, gaping as they peered over the edges.

“Data mine in progress, Shepard,” the AI reported.

There was a brief burst of static over the radio.

“Uh...that can't be good,” said Joker.

The platform suddenly jolted and detached itself from the edge of the cliff. As it started to hover away, the rest of the squad hopped on.

“Joker, what just happened?” Shepard asked.

“Major power surge. Everything went dark but, we're back up now.”

EDI reported in as well. “I managed to divert the majority of the overload to non-critical systems. Shepard, it was not a malfunction. This was a trap.”

“We need a little help here, EDI...” Miranda said, sounding a little worried.

“I am having trouble maintaining connection. There is someone else in the system.”

The platform flew out into the middle of the open center of the ship and joined a small cluster of

more hexagonal platforms.

"Connection reestablished," said EDI. "I need to finish the download before I can override any systems."

"Then you'd better get it done fast, EDI," said Shepard.

Two more hexagons flew in, carrying Collectors. Live ones.

"Stay frosty, people!" said Shepard.

The other platforms had low walls along the edges. The Commander had his squad take cover behind and open fire. Zaeed lobbed a grenade, but he missed. Samara biotically lifted one of the drones, which went floating helplessly away. Jack let loose a shockwave, knocking Collectors every which way. One landed on the platform behind the squad, but Grunt charged it and shouldered it over the edge. Kasumi disappeared for a moment, then reappeared behind and enemy just as Garrus sniped it."

"Hey! I had that one!" she complained.

EDI reported forty-one percent completion as two more platforms flew in to join the cluster. Shepard swapped out a heatsink. One of the drones stood suddenly and spread its arms like it had been stunned.

"Assuming direct control!" came a booming voice. The Collector took on an orange glow and started taunting as it tossed out blobs of black biotics. "We are the harbinger of your destruction."

Jack sent out another shockwave, and Samara coordinated her own biotics to toss the Collector drones even further. But the possessed Collector – call it Harbinger – was unphased and kept coming. Shepard ordered concentrated fire. Thane, armed with his own sniper rifle now, fell back and joined Garrus on the first platform. It took an incredible amount of bullets to take down the thing's biotic barrier, only to reveal a kinetic shield, followed by a layer of armor. But finally they got through. Instead of collapsing like any normal corpse, though, this one disintegrated in a cloud of black ash.

EDI provided a progress report. "Eighty-four percent complete."

"EDI! Get us out of here!" Shepard plead as yet another pair of platforms flew in.

"I am simultaneously fighting Collector firewalls in over eight thousand nodes. I am tasked to capacity."

The new platforms brought a new enemy. Four of them. They were bipedal, with a large, bulbous torso, glowing blue and pulsating. Several husk heads dangled from its sides, and a single appendage stuck out from the middle of its head like a pointing arm. As the platforms joined, the creatures emitted biotic shockwaves towards the squad, knocking everyone off their feet.

Thane was knocked off the edge, but Garrus grabbed him and pulled him back up. Shepard's shield was knocked down, but quickly regenerated. The Commander threw a grenade at one of the creatures, and it exploded in a gush of blue goo. The creature next to it was staggered and thrown off balance. Its next shockwave hit the remaining two, but not before one of them got off another attack, knocking half the squad off their feet again. Those still on their feet all emptied a heatsink each worth of bullets and wiped the platforms clear of hostiles.

EDI finally reported success. "I have regained control of the command platform. I can send it to a place where you can return to the shuttle. Please step on."

"I thought we were going to have to take on every guddamn Collector here!" said Zaeed.

"Perhaps you should consider upgrading my hardware."

"Did you get what we needed?" Shepard asked.

"I found data that could help us successfully navigate the Omega-4 Relay. I have also found the turian distress call that served as the lure for this trap. The Collectors were the source. It is unusual."

"Seems logical to me that they would have sent the initial message as bait."

"No, it is unusual because turian emergency channels have secondary encryption." Shepard looked at Garrus, who nodded as EDI continued. "It is present, but corrupted in the message. It is not possible that the Illusive Man would believe the distress call was genuine."

"Why are you so sure?"

"I found the anomaly with Cerberus detection protocols. He wrote them."

"He knew it was a trap?" Joker sounded surprised. "Why would he send us into a trap?"

Jack wasn't surprised. "That son of a bitch sent us right into Collector hands."

"And here I thought I'd had my betrayal and attempted murder for the year," Garrus lamented.

Miranda struggled with the implication. "There has to be some other explanation! The Illusive Man wouldn't do this to us. He...he just wouldn't!"

"Uh, Commander," said Joker. "We got another problem. The Collector ship is powering up. You need to get out of there before their weapons come online. I'm not losing another Normandy!"

"I do not have full control of their systems," said EDI. "I will do what I can. Sending coordinates for shuttle extraction."

EDI brought the platform to another hallway in the hull. A marker appeared in Shepard's HUD, indicating the position of the shuttle. But without a map or directions, it was only of partial help. At an intersection, the Normandy's AI told them to take the door on the right. This led to a large room with industrial equipment. Four Collector drones flew in on their thin wings. The squad made short work of them. They performed much better than they had on Horizon. Shepard thought the training sessions were paying off, though there was still work to be done.

Through the room, a series of ramps led down, towards the outer hull. They came to another open area, which appeared to be unfinished. But there was no time to guess at the intended function of the place, as a dozen Collectors were laying in wait. There was no way to go around. Shepard had the squad take cover against the walls of the corridor leading into the room, then push forward to cover in twos and threes as able. As expected, one of the drones gained the Harbinger enhancement. As it attacked, it issued orders and taunts.

"Your form is incomplete, Shepard. My attacks will tear you apart. Face your annihilation. Save the body if possible. "

The large room had several low, half-formed walls extruded from the floor, which Shepard's squad was able to use for cover. The Collectors were also able to use the cover, which caused the fight to drag on. The Harbinger Collector pushed out a slow-moving blob of black energy. Shepard was pinned down by the yellow beams of enemy weapons and couldn't dodge it, though as the blob reached him, it seemed to have no effect. But then the Harbinger followed up with an orb of orange energy, and the combination caused a detonation that sent the Commander flying against a wall.

Shepard's head hit hard, staggering him and leaving him with a slight concussion. But his squad rallied and cleared the room of enemies. Thane helped him to his feet, and the Commander reassured him that he was all right. The exit from the room was a ramp that split in two, leading into another room lower down. Two large metal doors were sealed shut, but EDI managed to open the one on the left.

Unfortunately, several enemies poured through. Three Husks accompanied one of those giant floating heads composed of human skulls. Someone at Cerberus had dubbed it a Praetorian, but Shepard didn't think they much resembled an elite Roman guard. But, then, his head was feeling pretty fuzzy.

The Husks proved to be no real challenge for the squad, but the Praetorian was another matter. The thing swept twin blue energy beams around the room, keeping everyone mostly pinned in place. Anyone who had a clear shot would take it, but the creature's biotic barrier recharged as fast as it went down. Shepard tried to get to his feet to act as bait as he had on Horizon, but Thane pushed him back down.

"I've got this," said the drell. He then got the thing's attention, running around the room faster than it could pivot, keeping up constant bursts of weapons fire. For a terminally ill man, he sure could move quickly. And visibly, for a normally stealthy assassin. Shepard ordered everyone else to wait a few moments, then all open fire at once. The concentrated barrage was then enough to penetrate the shields and armor, and the monstrosity went down in a mushy heap. But both doors were sealed shut again.

"Uh, EDI? We need a way out," Shepard said.

"A temporary setback on firewall 3217. Rerouting commands through firewall 7164. I have successfully opened a door on the opposite wall. I will keep it open as long as I can."

Shepard stumbled a bit, and Garrus took him under the arm to steady him. The rest of the squad pushed forward with no clear order. Perhaps designating a second in command, or establishing some clear chain would be a good idea, but that was a problem for later. At least there was only one path to the shuttle.

"Hey, down there! That's where we came in," said Kasumi, peering down at the shuttle through a hole in the wall.

There was no clear way through, and it was a long drop besides.

"At least we're getting near the end," said Tali.

"Thank god," Miranda sighed.

Joker spoke over the radio again. "Commander, I hate to rush you, but those weapons are about to come online. Might want to double-time it. You know, so we could leave before they blow the Normandy in half."

"You heard the man," said Shepard. "Everybody to the Shuttle. Move!"

The corridor narrowed to a hallway, the ramp continuing to slope in a downwards curve. Around the next corner, a dozen Husks surged up the ramp, except that half of them were red and engulfed in flames. They were faster than the traditional Husks, too. The squad made short work of them, but one managed to get around Grunt and climb on his back. The krogan reached around and tossed the creature against a wall, then blasted it with his shotgun, but not before the fire had spread to his armor. Samara used her biotics to smother the flames, and the squad hurried on. The rest of the short way to the shuttle was clear, and everyone hurried aboard.

"We're out of time, Commander! We have to go!" Joker's voice was full of urgency.

"Shuttle's on the way, Joker," Shepard reported. "Punch it as soon as we're in."

The shuttle took off and flew quickly to the Normandy's cargo hold, landing more roughly than usual. The impact was enough to give Shepard a wave of light vertigo.

"Strap in, people – gonna make 'em work for it this time," said Joker."

The Collector ship began powering up. Lights appeared on its hull and it began to maneuver towards the Normandy. Joker put his ship through a series of evasive maneuvers. The enemy ship turned and rammed through the derelict turian cruiser, then fired off a beam of ragged yellow energy at the Normandy, dealing her a glancing blow.

"I can't dodge this guy forever, EDI. Get us the hell out of here!"

"Specify a destination, Mister Moreau."

"Anywhere that's not here!"

The AI paused for a moment. "Very well," she said.

The Normandy's mass effect core spun up, and the ship entered faster-than-light travel. The Collector ship did not pursue.

Some minutes later, the squad was in the armory on Deck 2, stowing their gear. Shepard finished putting away his own armor, then grabbed his head as the room spun. He took a deep breath. The room steadied; he needed to have Doctor Chakwas have a look at his head. But Kelly stopped him at the elevator to say that the Illusive Man was calling. The Commander figured he had some choice words for his boss, too.

As usual, TIM sat in his director's chair, taking a drag of a cigarette, a smug look on his face. His other hand was fondling a half-glass of whiskey on the rocks.

"Shepard. Looks like EDI extracted some interesting data before the Collector ship came back online."

"She also discovered that the turian distress signal originated from the Collectors. There's no way you thought it was real. You betrayed us. Just like I knew you would." Shepard surprised himself with his anger.

"We're at war. The Collectors are taking humans, and every minute we waste is one more we give

the enemy to prepare.”

“I know the stakes. But we're supposed to be on the same side, and I can't trust you. You set us up. And you better have a good reason for it.”

“We needed information on the Omega-4 Relay. That required direct access to Collector data. It was too good an opportunity to pass up.”

“Agreed. But I don't like surprises. Especially when my ass is on the line.”

“I put you at risk, yes. But without that information, we don't reach the Collector homeworld. And you and every other human may as well be dead. It was a trap...but I was confident in your abilities. And don't forget EDI. The Collectors couldn't have anticipated her.”

“I don't risk people. There are always alternatives.” Shepard felt like there was a better way to say that, but his head felt foggy.

“You may not like being on the receiving end – neither would I – but the facts are with me. As much as we try to avoid them, these decisions need to be made. But more importantly...it paid off.”

“You could have told me the plan. You say I'm important, but you sure try hard to get me killed.”

“I needed the Collectors to believe they had the upper hand. Telling you could've tipped them off in any number of ways. Besides, I wouldn't have sent you in if I didn't think you could succeed.”

“You have one job – information. If I can't trust your intel, you're useless to me.” Shepard needed to get his anger in check. It was too soon to be breaking ties.

“It's never that simple. You of all people should know that.”

“I know that I'll be a lot more careful. With the Collectors, and with you.”

“This is no time for petty grudges. Things are about to get a lot tougher.”

Shepard sighed. “Just tell me it was worth the trouble.”

TIM finished off his drink in one swallow. “It was. EDI confirmed our suspicions. The Reapers and Collector ships use an advanced Identify Friend/Foe system that the relays recognize. All we need to do is get our hands on one of those IFFs.”

“I was just on the Collector ship! Why didn't you say anything about finding their IFF?”

“As I said, EDI just confirmed it. Besides, you wouldn't have had time to find and extract it. But we have options.”

“I'm guessing you have a plan.” Shepard pinched the bridge of his nose. He felt a headache coming on.

“I already have some things in motion. In the meantime...I suggest you tell your crew I didn't risk their lives unnecessarily. It will make things easier going forward.”

Shepard turned to the intercom as the holographic communication faded out. “EDI – tell the crew to assemble. We've got a lot to talk about.”

“Of course, Shepard.”

Miranda paced as Shepard shared his conversation with TIM.

Jack shook her head at the explanation. “So the Illusive Man didn't sell us out. Could have fooled me.”

Mordin worked through it. “Lied to us. Used us. Needed access to the Collector data banks. Necessary risk.”

“I still don't like it,” said Shepard.

“He tries something like that again and the Collectors will be the least of his problems,” said Garrus.

“EDI, are you sure this IFF is going to work?” asked Kasumi.

EDI's holographic pawn piece popped up. “My analysis is accurate. I have also determined the approximate location of the Collector homeworld based on navigational data from their vessel.”

A holographic map of the galaxy appeared in EDI's place. A red targeting circle highlighted the center of the map.

“That can't be right,” said Jacob. “Better run the diagnostics.”

“My calculations are correct. The Collector homeworld is located within the galactic core.”

Shepard was starting to trust the AI. It was a strange feeling. “EDI was right about the Illusive Man's deception. I think...I think we can trust it on this, too.”

“Can't be,” Jacob disagreed. “The core is just black holes and exploding suns. There are no habitable planets there.”

“Could be an artificial construction,” Mordin mused. “Space station protected by powerful mass effect fields and radiation shields.”

“Even the Collectors don't have that kind of technology,” said Miranda. “No wonder nobody's ever returned from a trip through the Omega-4 Mass Relay.”

“The Collectors are just servants of our real enemy,” said Shepard. “And we've all seen what their masters are capable of. They built the mass relays and the Citadel. Who's to say they can't build a space station surrounded by black holes?”

EDI's hologram replaced the galaxy map. “The logical conclusion is that a small safe zone exists on the far side of the relay. A region where ships can survive. Standard relay transit protocols would not allow safe transport. Drift of several thousand kilometers is common, and would be fatal in the galactic core. The Reaper IFF must trigger the Relay to use more advanced, encrypted protocols.”

Shepard leaned forward and placed his hands on the conference table to steady himself. “The Illusive Man is following up on some leads. In the meantime, we have some things to do before we're ready.”

On his way to the sick bay, Shepard overheard snippets of conversation among the crew. Incredulity about how the Collectors used to be Protheans, and determination to not wind up like them.

-----PREPARATIONS-----

Shepard awoke in his quarters on the Normandy. He was lying on his back, feeling stiff all over. Slowly, he opened his eyes and saw a solid ceiling. The skylight in his cabin was closed. During the escape from the Collector ship, his ship had taken a glancing blow, and the glass had been blown out. Thankfully, all his models and fish were sealed in place. But his bedding had been lost. He really wished he had a pillow right now.

He turned his head and glanced at the clock. He'd slept for twelve solid hours. Doctor Chakwas had given him something and told him it'd knock him out, but he hadn't slept that long since he was a teenager. Slowly, cautiously, he sat up in bed; there was no feeling of vertigo. His thoughts felt clear. He stood up and did some stretches to loosen up. Then, some mild exercises to clear the grogginess. Squats, push-ups, crunches. Just a few of each to test things out. He used the restroom, then splashed some water on his face. He would need a haircut soon. Frosted tips really weren't his style. Shaving, he glanced at the clock again. Midmorning. The Commander dressed, then went to follow-up with the doctor.

Chakwas put Shepard through a series of balance and cognitive tests, then declared him fit for duty, his concussion gone. Shepard then assigned her a task.

“We were all just aboard the Collector ship, and the Collectors are slaves to the Reapers. I didn't see any Reaper tech, but I'm worried about Indoctrination. Probably more so when we assault their base.”

“Before I left the Alliance, some information crossed my desk, but it's not my area of expertise. Still, I could look into it...I still have some contacts on Earth. I could reach out and see what they say.”

“I'm sure the Alliance isn't the only one looking into it.” Shepard turned to EDI's holographic avatar. “EDI, could you scour the extranet for anything on Indoctrination and forward it to Doctor Chakwas?”

“I'd be happy to, Commander,” The AI replied.

“Also, you managed to hack the Collector ship, could you hack some other governments?”

The Doctor frowned “Shepard, I'm not sure that's entirely ethical. I'm not quite comfortable – ”

"I know it's a gray area, but let's say that I managed to acquire the information, and you just didn't ask me about the source. Call it Spectre authority."

Chakwas chuckled nervously, but agreed. Shepard's next stop was Miranda's office.

The Normandy's First Officer and said the Normandy's had been scorched on the top of the hull, but it wasn't too bad. She'd also taken the liberty of asking the crew for ideas on upgrades. Shepard took the datapad his XO handed him and scanned the itemized list. He thought it all looked worthwhile.

Shepard shrugged at the price tag. "This all seems expensive, but – "

"That's just it, Shepard," Miranda said. "Cerberus spent a lot of money on this project. The Illusive Man has other projects going on besides us. If we want any of that – even repairs – we'll need to finance it ourselves."

The Commander blinked and set the datapad down on Miranda's desk. "So, what do you suggest?"

"Odd jobs, mostly. Cerberus has a list, and there are bounties we could take on. Rare minerals are always in high demand, too."

Shepard winced. Mercenary work, in other words. Well, some of his squad were mercenaries. And the Commander himself was technically a mercenary at this point. He nodded. "Fine. We need these upgrades. Solicit the crew for leads. But I get veto power."

"Understood, Commander."

ABANDONED MINE

Garrus had learned through his contacts of an abandoned mine on a planet originally charted by turian explorers. At Shepard's question, he went on to explain that they might be able to recover some minerals that they could then sell at Nos Astra's mineral exchange. The Commander figured it was worth a shot.

The planet Aequitas was a frozen red rock. Even the deep mine would be cold, and contain only the thinnest amount of air.

EDI played a radio signal that she detected as the Normandy entered orbit.

"Unregistered user or record damaged. Status is not known. Beacon triggered by universal distress protocol."

The shuttle set down just outside the entrance to the mine. The shaft itself was supported by wooden beams. A strange choice, given the lack of trees on the world. Garrus and Grunt accompanied Shepard on this mission. A heavy rain was falling. Shepard didn't mind so much, his armor being sealed, but it was loud. Inside the mine, it was quiet and dry, but also eerily still. Only emergency lighting was active, casting deep shadows.

A few steps in, a lone datapad sat on a desk. It contained a warning to get out quickly. Shepard caught movement in the shadows and unholstered his assault rifle. Garrus and Grunt readied their weapons as well. Four Husks leapt out into the light. Grunt shot two, and Shepard got one. The last grabbed Garrus and began to emit an electronic whirring noise, increasing in pitch. A burst of energy then emanated from the humanoid thing, and Garrus's shields went down. An EMP. The turian managed to fight the creature off, allowing Shepard and Grunt to get a clear shot at it.

When all was quiet again, EDI spoke up. "Shepard, I detect a powerful alien signature deep within the mine. It appears the device is the source of the husks. It is likely that destroying it would stop them."

Shepard led the way further in to the mine. Carts full of raw iridium sat abandoned on narrow rails. A tempting haul, but first they had to take care of the Husks – and the conversion machinery.

"I thought this was a turian find," Shepard said to Garrus. "What were humans doing here?"

"It is, but miners make money wherever they can, and turians will hire anyone with experience."

Grunt shouted a warning as a pair of Husks dropped from the ceiling. The three men quickly dispatched them. Shortly, they came to a small office area. The console was open to a log, and the last few entries spoke of how they'd unearthed an alien machine. The author mentioned a long

standing bounty on such tech, but as they spent more time with it, they started to feel sick when away from it. The final entry was a decision to cancel the bounty and just stay with the machine. Reaper Indoctrination for sure.

Shepard remembered encountering the same thing two years earlier on another planet. All of those miners had been turned to husks then, too. Garrus remembered, too. Unfortunately, they'd had to collapse the mine to bury the device. At the time, it hadn't mattered, but now they'd have to give up recovering the minerals.

They found a locker full of mining explosives, as well as some credit chits. They didn't have much on them – just a few hundred credits each – but at least the trip wouldn't be a total loss. Shepard didn't want to get any closer to the Reaper device than necessary. He didn't even bother to try and find it to get a look at it. Instead, the three men set charges at junctions and at weak spots on their way out of the mine.

Once safely back on the shuttle, Shepard pressed the remote detonator, and the mine collapsed in a pile of rubble and dust. The Commander set a warning beacon to stay away, and Garrus added some old turian military codes as well.

ANOMOLOUS WEATHER

Miranda shared a news story about some strange weather occurring on the planet Canalus in the Dirada system of the Pylos Nebula. It was a small, dense, tectonically active planet, perfect for mining. It shouldn't have any weather. Shepard agreed to check it out.

EDI's scans showed one spot on the planet with a dense yellow cloud, and electromagnetic signals consistent with geth activity. Where there was geth, a geth expert would be needed. Shepard tapped Tali and Miranda on this one, since it was his XO's idea to come here.

The shuttle set down at the edge of the mustard-colored cloud. Somehow, even with his helmet sealed, Shepard could swear he smelled mustard. Or something close to it, anyway. Down in a canyon was a faint blue glow, so they descended and slowly made their way along the boulder-strewn path towards the light.

The walls of the canyon were lined with chunks of raw palladium. Perhaps, once the area was deemed safe, some of the crew could be sent down to collect it. A half a kilometer along, and they came across a crashed probe. Someone else had had the same idea, it seemed. Tali knelt down to examine the machine more closely, but was interrupted when they heard the distinct clicking of geth communicating with each other.

Shepard motioned silently to take cover behind some boulders. A tense few moments passed before geth robotic platforms came into view, their flashlight heads visible first. The dense cloud meant that by the time the enemy came into full view, they'd be uncomfortably close. Shepard began to take aim, but Tali sent her holographic drone out to distract the first geth, then hacked the robot to turn on its fellows.

Shots of energy weapons rang out in the canyons as chaos erupted. Shepard ordered an advance, and to open fire on anything that moved. Normally, he'd have the team split up and flank, but the risk of friendly fire was too great in the reduced visibility, so he had them stay together.

Robots exploded. Chunks of rock flew out of the fog. Slowly, the team pushed forward. Tali's holographic drone dissipated, and she sent out another. The tech was useful as a distraction. After several long minutes of blind battle, silence settled in the fog.

The blue glow at the end of the canyon grew brighter, and resolved into a thick beam emanating from a tower of geth machinery. Tali accessed the geth console while Shepard and Miranda provided cover. It seemed that the area was clear of enemies.

The Commander asked why the geth would be creating an atmosphere when they didn't breathe. Tali said that the data available didn't have any answers. She shut the machinery down, and they returned to the shuttle. TIM promised to send a recovery team in for the thermoforming technology. There were corporations that specialized in such, and would pay good money for the tech.

CAPTURED MINING FACILITY

Crescent Nebula: Zelene System.

The planet Helyme was one system over from Illium. 300,000 year old crumbling ruins dotted the surface, though no one knew what had happened to the species that once lived there. Shepard knew that Reapers had to be the prime suspect, but the Council wasn't publicly entertaining the thought at the moment. The asari had placed quarantine satellites in orbit to dissuade would-be looters, though that didn't stop anyone.

The Eldfel-Ashland Energy Corporation had an outstanding cash bounty to liberate a mining facility from one such mercenary company. The Normandy responded. Shepard brought the whole squad. The last time, it had been just himself and Zaeed, and that had nearly been a disaster. Better to go in with overwhelming force.

The shuttle alit on an abandoned landing pad outside the facility. Tali hacked a nearby terminal and found a shipping log. Apparently, a cargo ship named the Ter Alan had been afraid of pirate attacks in the area and hired Eclipse mercenaries to escort it. The cargo ship was nowhere to be found. Shepard surmised that the Eclipse had decided it was more lucrative to take possession of the mine for themselves, as well as the cargo ship.

The squad entered the processing plant and found several bodies – civilian miners and support staff. The Eclipse mercs were milling about on the factory floor, and were caught unawares. They were no match for a squad with experience fighting Collectors.

With the facility cleared, a search turned up no survivors. The manager's office computer needed to be hacked in order to send the all-clear signal to the owners. The route for the Ter Alan was also found.

BLOOD PACK COMMUNICATIONS RELAY

The Ter Alan's next stop was one system over from Zelene, in Lusarn. There were also reports of Blood Pack activity on the planet Tarith. Shepard thought it a dangerous place to mine, considering that the atmosphere was composed mostly of chlorine. The chemical gave the planet a sickly green color, but the mission was to locate the cargo ship. Scans showed the Ter Alan's distress beacon collocated with known Blood Pack communications signals, so down they went. Were the Eclipse and Blood Pack working together like they had on Omega? Or was this a case of fighting between companies?

Dense fog interfered with navigation, and the shuttle's VI took its time deciding on a landing zone. If the spot it chose was anywhere near the cargo ship, it was impossible to say. There was, however, a beacon tower. Turning it on lit up a blue beam, leading to another tower. With no better options, Shepard led the way down into fog-filled canyons. At each beacon tower was a set of mining equipment and a charred body or two. Datapads held messages from someone named Salamul, impatiently urging speed and expressing frustration at the incompetence of the miners. The last entry was a warning about bugs and orders for evacuation. Nothing explained the relationship between the Blood Pack and the Eclipse.

After the third beacon was activated, Shepard heard what sounded like the flapping of large wings, followed by a skittering noise. As the squad neared the fourth beacon, a pair of klixen emerged from the fog. Some of the squad remembered the creatures from Grunt's Rite of Passage on Tuchanka. Shepard reminded everyone that they tended to explode when killed, and explode they did, though no one was hurt.

The canyons consisted of narrow, winding passageways, but the beacons only emitted straight beams. Several times, they had to backtrack and find another path, fighting klixen along the way. They never did see any of the flying harvester creatures that were dropping them off. At a rise, Shepard could just make out several of the guiding beacons, and they seemed to be leading in a circle. That figured, but there was still no alternative but to follow them.

A pair of vorchas attacked at the seventh beacon, but the short-live species never were very bright. The eighth beacon finally led to a communications tower, where a krogan in Blood Pack

armor and a half dozen vorchas were loading equipment onto a shuttle. One of the vorchas named the krogan: Salamul himself. The squad made short work of them, then Tali searched the communications tower and traced the signal to the Shrike Abyssal.

No sign of the Ter Alan. The ship's transponder had probably been stripped here so the mercenaries could fly it without being traced.

BLOOD PACK BASE

The Planet Zada Ban in the Xe Cha system was a radioactive nightmare. Named for a vorchas god of punishment, dust storms full of uranium particles swept the planet periodically. The Blood Pack signal was easy enough to find, but Shepard elected to wait a few hours for the weather to clear before going in. The Eldfel-Ashland Energy Corporation still wanted its cargo ship back.

The shuttle landed during a bright, beautiful afternoon. Shepard led the way across a natural rock bridge and admired the river gorge below. Too bad his Geiger-counter was showing dangerously high levels of radiation. The squad's armor would keep them safe, but it would be best to be off the planet sooner rather than later.

The one advantage of the radiation is that it interfered with sensors, and the Cerberus team's arrival had gone unnoticed. They descended a combination of metal stairs and stone ledges along the canyon wall until they came to a large cave. Supply crates were stacked in disorderly rows, and further back was a shooting range. Six vorchas were firing weapons, all of them doing a poor job of hitting their targets. One happened to turn around and notice Shepard's squad, but all he did was blink. Another turned to inquire what was distracting his comrade, and that one decided to open fire. The other four joined in, but they were all quickly mowed down by Shepard's squad.

The weapons fire attracted attention, though. A dozen more vorchas appeared across the gorge, and these actually took up good firing positions. Someone must have been directing them. Shepard had his squad take cover behind the crates and rock walls of the cave before returning fire. A few stray shots sent bits of cliff wall falling, so while the rest of the squad kept the enemy pinned down, Shepard started firing at the edge of the cliff, slowly eroding the floor under the vorchas. Jack picked up on the idea and sent a biotic shockwave into the rock, which sent eight of the enemy tumbling into the river below.

The remaining four stood and backpedaled away, but the other biotics in the squad pulled them out over the chasm and let them go. The Commander led the squad across another rock bridge and into the rest of the base. Garrus found a datapad with several exchanges between Kalusk, the leader at this base, and Salamul. Mostly it was Salamul complaining about the vorchas he was being sent, along with a threat to go over Kalusk's head and talk to Garm directly. Garm was the Blood Pack leader that Shepard and Garrus had killed back on Omega. Still no notes about the Eclipse.

A door in the cliff wall led to a cave full of large fuel tanks. Further in, a cargo ship was being disassembled. So much for the Ter Alan. A krogan in Blood Pack armor was directing a small army of vorchas: Kalusk, presumably. He was taking them off of disassembly duty and handing out weapons. Someone in Shepard's squad kicked an empty fuel canister. Kalusk turned at the noise and began barking orders to attack.

Rather than fight through them all, Shepard elected to backtrack and rig the fuel tanks to explode. He had most of the squad hold their ground while Zaeed and Garrus set explosives. When they reported ready, Shepard had the squad slowly retreat, pretending that they were losing the battle. Once outside, they jammed the one small door shut, then high-tailed it back to the shuttle. Zaeed and Garrus flipped for it, and the turian got to trigger the remote detonation. The resulting explosion was enough to destroy the entire base.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL DIG SITE

When Zaeed learned of Shepard's interest in Prothean artifacts, the mercenary gave him the location of a Blue Suns operation he had been aware of in the Rosetta Nebula. Shepard set course for the Enoch system.

The Planet Joab had once been home to a spacefaring civilization, but had been wiped out thousands of years ago by orbital bombardment. The resulting dust cloud had plunged the planet into a nuclear winter, but human colonists had started a terraforming project. During excavations, the only trace found of the ancient civilization were time capsules. Citadel law prohibited looting archaeological sites, but that hadn't stopped the Blue Suns from starting their own digs and selling artifacts on the black market.

A lone batarian guard sat outside the entrance to the site, smoking a cigarette. He noticed the Normandy's shuttle descending and turned to run inside, but Garrus popped open the shuttle's door and sniped him before he'd taken three steps. Grunt was learning squad tactics quickly, so Shepard put the young krogan on point and followed him in, with the rest of the squad trailing behind.

Inside was a system of mined tunnels and caverns. The Blue Suns had actually bothered to install fences around holes and along high catwalks. In spite of their safety mindset, the mercenaries themselves were caught off guard. Someone yelled a warning, everyone scattered in search of weapons, and the fight was on.

Shepard sighed. When would bad guys learn to recognize him and just give up? People on the Citadel seemed to think he was famous. He didn't exactly enjoy the recognition, but if it led to fewer fights... In the meantime, he and his squad killed seven Blue Suns Mercs, then five more mercenaries entered from the barracks off in a side room and they too were killed. One shaft led off the main room into another large chamber, where yet more mercenaries had entrenched themselves in an attempt to stop Shepard's advance.

Attempt was the key word here. The Commander stopped trying to count enemies, and instead contented himself when all of the men in blue and white armor stopped moving. When the dust settled, Shepard ordered a search for whatever it was they were digging up here. Several crates of palladium ore were found, but no artifacts.

There was, however, a computer console, which was locked. Zaeed tried his hand at it. "Guddam incompetent assholes never canceled my login," he muttered, grinning. On it was data on a Prothean artifact. Shepard download a copy of the research. It didn't make much sense to him, but maybe he could give to Liara some day. The logs indicated that the dig site had been take over by the Blue Suns, but the artifact had already been shipped off world. Also attached was the name of the ship, along with its transponder code. If they hurried, they might catch the ship before the Blue Suns did.

MSV STRONTIUM MULE

The cargo ship was currently in the Arinlarkan system of the Omega Nebula. When the Normandy found it, it was adrift. Joker had an easy time matching its vector and docking with it. Shepard's strategy had the squad splitting up as soon as they were through the airlock, with orders to shoot any Blue Suns mercs on sight, but to check targets, as there may still be crew alive on board.

The Commander followed Grunt towards the bridge. Other squadmates broke off in pairs down hallways to the sides to check cargo holds. Tali took Garrus and Jacob aft to secure the engine room.

Gunfire and shouts erupted throughout the ship. A sudden drop in air pressure followed an explosion, but the squad already had their armor's suits sealed against vacuum. Hull breaches were an unfortunate consequence of boarding actions. The door to the bridge was locked, and Kasumi volunteered to pick it while Shepard and Garrus covered her.

Miranda reported in from the cafeteria, where she and Garrus had found a pile of bodies. Likely the ship's crew. The rest of Shepard's squad reported in as they cleared the ship. The Commander had them make their way to the bridge. Kasumi got the door open, then dove out of the way as a thick spray of bullets spewed out the door. Zaeed tossed a flashbang grenade into the bridge, and the gunfire stopped. Grunt charged in, followed by Shepard and others, who finished off the few Blue Suns remaining as they staggered about.

Shepard pulled up the final entry in the Captain's Log. He spoke of a distress call they'd responded to that had been a trap. The Strontium Mule had escaped, only to be chased down this band of Blue Suns. The Captain also had logged one particular canister – the one with the Prothean

artifact.

Tali reported that the engines were damaged beyond even her ability to repair. The Commander ordered his squad to search the ship for salvage before returning to the Normandy. He then sent the ship's location to the Alliance. Perhaps whatever company owned the ship would want it back...and the crew's next of kin could be notified.

Lastly, he found the canister and grabbed the artifact. It turned out to be a metal sphere that hummed softly. A nice souvenir for his cabin until he could decide what to do with it. Actually, it might make a nice gift for Liara.

BLUE SUNS BASE

Two years ago, Shepard had twice been lured into a trap by distress beacons. The one on Metgos had been a geth ambush. The other, on Edolus, was where Cerberus had lured a unit of Alliance Marines to their deaths at the hands...tentacles of a thresher maw. Shepard hated fake distress beacons. His ire was raised at the thought of a mercenary group preying on innocent passers-by. So the Normandy set course for the planet Sanctum in the Decoris system of Sigurd's Cradle. The planet's name made the deception all the more reprehensible.

This time, the enemy saw the approach of Normandy's shuttle and had entrenched themselves at the entrance to a large building. The craft took a few bullet holes as it lined up to land on a pad. Grunt nodded to Samara. Shepard had no idea what they were up to. The krogan opened the shuttle's door, then jumped out. Samara reached out with her biotics, and a field enveloped Grunt, cushioning his fall in the middle of the Blue Suns' fortifications.

Garrus and Thane, being nearest the door, provided covering fire. The shuttle landed with a harder thud than usual, and the rest of the squad poured out to take cover. From the landing pad to the building entrance was trench warfare. The rest of the squad entered the trenches. Shepard took some left, and sent Zaeed with the others while the two snipers remained on the shuttle, shooting at any mercenary stupid enough to raise his head.

The two teams met Grunt at the far end, covered in blood and gore. He reassured them that none of it was his, and let out that strange laugh of his; "Heh, heh, heh."

A recorded announcement played as Shepard entered the building. "Due to concerns over employee safety, the Brunfeld Mining Facility has been closed until further notice."

No kidding, thought Shepard. Both he and the Blue Suns certainly counted as safety hazards. From the foyer, a pair of wide ramps led down into a reception area. More mercs entered and took cover from doors to the left and right. Shepard's squad had the high ground, and the railings were made of glass. Bullets from both sides shattered the panels. Jack and Samara picked up piles of it with their biotics and flung the shards at the mercenaries, shredding them.

The barracks on the right were empty, but someone found an audio log and played it. Apparently one of the mercenaries had gotten bored and went off to Omega to try and take down Archangel. Poor fool. The opposite door led to a cafeteria. Another recorded announcement played as Shepard stepped in.

"Due to Phillips' 'brilliant' expansion of the northern mining tunnels into the mess hall last week, our small facility will be closing indefinitely."

There was indeed a large pile of dirt in the wall on the right, and beyond was a rocky tunnel. A mining mole had been pulled back and sat inert. Behind it were some storage crates. Other tunnels could be seen to the left through holes in the walls. A hundred meters in, they came to a warehouse. Someone taunted over the loudspeaker that whoever they were, they wouldn't leave here alive.

Shepard snorted, but then two heavy YMIR mechs activated and began plodding towards him. The rest of his squad rushed in to the warehouse, and the robots started spraying bullets and firing rockets. Overhead cranes held containers full of ore. Shooting the claw-arms dropped the heavy crates on the mechs, crushing them. More mercenaries poured out of the three rooms at the back of the building. Shepard's squad had no trouble putting them down.

This was becoming all too routine, and Shepard was getting tired of it. One of the offices

belonged to the base commander, and a console contained orders from Vido Santiago to set up this particular operation. Zaeed shook his head and wondered how many more of the man's messes he'd have to clean up. At least the betrayer was dead. Shepard found the false distress signal in the center room and shut it down.

JAVELIN MISSILES LAUNCHED

As the Normandy was leaving Sigurd's Cradle, they received a plea for help from a colony in the nearby Skepsis system. The planet Franklin was under attack by batarian radicals. Another story all too familiar to Shepard. This particular terrorist group had seized a missile base and had managed to launch two missiles. The only way to stop them was to infiltrate the base and activate the killswitches within.

The outside of the base was abandoned. Bodies of Alliance soldiers lay about here and there, along with a few dead batarians. At least the defenders had put up a brave opposition. The shuttle touched down next to the launch facility, and Shepard's squad poured out, surrounding the building. EDI provided an estimated five minutes, twelve seconds to impact.

When everyone was in position in small teams at every entrance, Shepard ordered the breach. He took Tali and Garrus with him and pressed for the control room. Four minutes to impact. The batarians were caught by surprise, but they tended to be tough, and this group was no different. Shepard ordered weapons free – shoot anything that moved. It was likely there were no survivors anyway.

Clearing room by room was slow going until Shepard's group linked up with Jacob, Thane, and Jack. They reached the control room with two minutes left. Four terrorists had flipped over some desks as barricades. There wasn't time to pick them out. Jack threw a biotic blast that tossed the desks aside. The other three squadmates covered Shepard as he made a run to the controls. A lone batarian had his back to the door, typing frantically on the console. Shepard shot him in the back and shoved the body aside.

Checking the system, he found only one kill-switch code. He could save either the industrial district with the spaceport, or the residential zone. He chose the residential. There were two monitors set up, each showing an image of the two targets. The spaceport changed to static, while the suburban neighborhood remained visible. People in the streets stopped what they were doing to stare at an orange glow to the west.

Without an industry to support it, the colony would have to be evacuated. But the people would live to rebuild.

ECLIPSE SMUGGLING DEPOT

Aria T'Loak had sent a thank you for dealing with so many problems on Omega. The plague, Archangel, the ardat-yakshi. Her thanks came in the form of the location of a smuggling depot used by the Eclipse mercenary company. It was located on an out of the way planet called Daratar in the Hourglass Nebula.

Scans from orbit showed a desert planet plagued by dust storms, devoid of anything worthwhile. Except for the depot. Shepard wasn't sure what goods exactly the Eclipse would be storing here, but Miranda convinced him it was worth checking out. Cerberus could confiscate and sell anything there.

As the shuttle approached, three mantis gunships lifted off and fled, leaving behind three YMIR heavy mechs. Rather than attack Shepard's squad, however, the mechs were shooting at the crates of cargo. The Commander split his squad in three to take on the mechs, but out of twenty crates, they managed to save only fifteen. But what a haul. Each of the crates was filled with credit chits. Cashing them in would net hundreds of thousands of credits. A very worthwhile trip indeed.

A search of the depot's computers turned up messages of panic when they say the Normandy enter orbit. Well, Shepard thought, at least the mercenaries had finally recognized that fighting him was a lost cause.

MSV ESTEVANICO

While in the Hourglass Nebula, EDI detected a faint locator beacon, belonging to an exploration ship lost decades ago. An outstanding reward had been posted for its whereabouts, with a bonus for recovering its logs.

Scans of the planet Zanethu in the Pliotari system showed a post-garden world. With some expensive terraforming efforts, it could be made habitable again. Closer images of the MSV Estevanico showed the wreck perched precariously on the edge of a cliff. Shepard opted to go alone, rather than risk any of the crew, but he brought Jacob along to fly the damaged shuttle, as its VI was still out of commission. He'd flown fighters briefly in the Alliance, and was the only one close to qualified to actually pilot the shuttle.

As the shuttle neared the wreck, the Commander saw that all that was left was a skeletal frame. He could see a flashing red light where the locator beacon was at the bow, and that was where the ship's logs would be, too. But he couldn't set the shuttle down anywhere near it, as he was afraid the mass of the shuttle would be enough to unbalance ship and send it off the edge of the cliff. Instead, he had Jacob land on the aft end of the ship, the part that was still on land. He cautiously stepped off onto what was left of the hull.

The ship groaned softly, but otherwise didn't budge. Shepard stood still while he plotted a path to the front of the ship where the beacon was, then set out. Slowly, he made his way forward, climbing down into the ship. He had to backtrack once, then zig-zag port to starboard a few times. One beam he was walking on broke loose and fell to the deck below. The hulk shuddered. Jacob reported that the ship had slid a few meters closer to the edge.

Shepard looked down. That was a mistake. He was in the half of the ship that was sticking out over a thousand-meter drop. As he made his way forward, the ship shuddered some more. Some panels detached and fell, causing even more vibrations. Even with the shuttle providing balance on the aft, the nose of the ship began to dip and rise like a teeter-totter. The beacon was close now, maybe ten meters away. He had the flight recorder in sight. This would be close.

The Commander told Jacob to start up the engines. Shepard ran forward and grabbed the flight recorder. As he moved, the wreck began to slide. Jacob lifted off and brought the shuttle to the front. Shepard leaped off the wreck and into the open doorway. The two men watched the wreck fall and crash in a heap of dust and flying metal below. Shepard's heart was pounding and he was breathing heavily. Jacob made him promise never to try something like that again. The Commander agreed.

Back on the Normandy, Shepard received a message of thanks from the Alliance Museum of Galactic Exploration, along with an attachment of a few thousand credits as a finder's fee.

ENDANGERED STATION

The Caleston Rift wasn't too far from the Hourglass Nebula. The star Solveig was showing signs of erupting prematurely into a red giant, and one of the moons in the system had been used for generations to monitor the star. The scientific organization in charge requested the Normandy's help in repairing one of the remote observation stations, and they were offering a surprisingly large reward.

The station was actually one of dozens of floating platforms, held above the surface of the airless moon Sinmara by mass effect fields. Tali had made what repairs she could to the shuttle's VI, and had brought Ken and Gabby along as an excuse for them to get off the ship. Shepard wasn't sure why he was there. He poked at a broken generator, but Gabby shoved him aside as she got to work.

He tried to enjoy the view as the engineers worked. For an airless moon, there was a surprising amount of dust floating around below. Maybe something to do with the increased solar wind of a dying star. It would be centuries yet before it swelled enough to engulf the moon, but Shepard wondered if there was a connection to what was going on with Haestrom, the star that Tali had been collecting data on when he'd recruited her. She was too busy to ask at the moment, though. And anyway, he doubted he'd understand the science.

Shepard got bored quickly, but after an hour, the work was done, and a yellow energy shield

flickered into existence. A job well done, apparently. Easy money for the Normandy upgrade fund.

LOST OPERATIVE

The Illusive Man sent the Normandy to recover a lost Cerberus operative in the Saharabarik system of the Omega Nebula. The Eclipse mercenary group had kidnapped the man, and TIM wanted him back before he could divulge any secrets. He assured the Commander that he was still looking for that Reaper IFF, and that several leads seemed promising.

The Planet Lorek, while a garden world, was located deep in the Terminus, and had suffered centuries of fighting by local warlords vying for control. EDI scanned the planet and found a faint transmission with Cerberus encryption, mixed in with Eclipse-encoded communications.

Jacob declared he was done flying shuttles, but he programed it to come in low so as to surprise the mercenaries. They were surprised, but quickly organized a defense. Shepard's squad mowed down a few outside the base, and a couple more inside, but the leader of this band – a salarian by the name of Morl, surrendered when he recognized Shepard.

The Commander had his squad round up the remaining mercs and disarm them while he and Miranda searched for agent Rawlings. They found him – or his body, anyway – in a back room, strapped to an interrogation chair. Miranda tapped Jacob to help gather the body while Shepard searched the computer. He found some encrypted data, which was mostly inaccessible, but what the Eclipse had managed to decode was incriminating for Cerberus. Shepard copied the files, then wiped the local drives.

Outside, a decision had to be made. The Normandy couldn't possibly hold all of the remaining mercenaries, and there were no authorities to arrest them. So Shepard took their weapons, then locked them in the base, leaving them there to fend for themselves. They'd get out eventually, and there were plenty of supplies inside to keep them alive in the meantime.

The Illusive Man was disappointed that none of his agent's data had been recovered.

WRECKED MERCHANT FREIGHTER

While passing through the Eagle Nebula, the Normandy picked up an automated distress beacon. Shepard's fears of another trap were alleviated when scans of the planet Neith found a crashed cargo ship. A few fires were still burning, and though no signs of life were detected, there was movement. Shepard took the squad down to investigate.

They landed in the middle of a debris field. The tail of the freighter lay at the top of a hill, and cargo containers lay strewn about a kilometer-long scratch in the planet's surface. A dust storm was approaching, but given the recency of the crash, Shepard wanted to search for survivors.

The squad spread out. Pieces of ship's logs were found here and there, but no one alive. The logs indicated that a VI malfunction took out half the ship's systems. The cargo manifest listed 180 light LOKI mechs and one YMIR heavy mech. Shepard climbed the small hill to the locator beacon and shut it down. The dust storm was arriving, and visibility was decreasing.

The moment the signal stopped, all of the cargo containers started rattling. Armed LOKI mechs descended from the surrounding hills and opened fire. Shepard ordered a retreat to the shuttle. The light mechs were pretty easy to destroy, but 180 of them could prove overwhelming. Visibility continued to worsen as the squad regrouped and left.

Back aboard the Normandy, the Commander ordered a bombardment of the site. It was best not to leave hundreds of mechs running amok, even on a deserted planet.

ABANDONED STATION

Shepard wanted to know more about the malfunctioning mechs. Perhaps the Hahne-Kedar company would offer a reward. The Normandy's crew pieced together the logs of the MSV Corsica and traced its route back to Jarrahe Station in the Strabo system.

The Normandy docked with the station. Power was out, and there were bodies and broken mechs in the reception area. Deeper in was a large room with a smaller room in the middle, currently

locked tight. Above the door was a sign indicating that this was the central server. Tali pointed out three power cables leading down three hallways, and surmised that restoring power to each would cause the doors to unlock.

A mechanical female voice made an announcement over loudspeaker. "Intruders are requested to report to the cargo doors for immediate removal from the station. Intruder detected. You are not authorized to be in this area."

Shepard thought he recognized the voice, but couldn't place it. He followed Tali's advice and split the squad in three. Shepard led a team into the Living quarters. More bodies were found here, including a woman at a desk. Garrus found a power switch for that section of the station and turned it on.

Logs showed that the station had received a shipment of mechs from a Hahne-Kedar factory on Capek, and that they'd infected the station's VI. A decision had been made to isolate the VI and shut down everything but life support to contain it. Unfortunately, the mechs had run amok and killed nearly everyone. The last entry from the station manager reported success in destroying all the mechs, but with the communications shut off, she'd have to pray that someone would happen by before life support gave out.

Shepard's other teams reported success in restoring power in their sectors, and they rendezvoused at the isolated mainframe room. Inside was a large computer. The image on the screen rang a bell for Shepard: Mira, the VI that ran Peak 15 on Noveria. She spoke as he entered the room.

"Docked vessel detected. Attempting to upload central programming into docked vessel's mainframe. Intruder detected. You are not authorized to be in this area. This is a secure zone. Please leave this station immediately."

The Mira on Noveria had been helpful. This one was clearly insane. It had properly sensed the threat from the malfunctioning mechs, but had killed the crew in the process of containing the threat. Shepard had Tali shut the VI down.

"I regret to inform you that all attempts to defend the station have failed. Shutting down emergency protocols. You have been identified as a hostile intruder."

Tali spent a few more minutes going through station logs to find the order slip for the mechs. They had been shipped from a Hahne-Kedar factory one cluster over in the Titan Nebula.

HAHNE-KEDNAR FACILITY

The planet Capek was a strange location for a human arms company, being located way out on the rim of the galaxy. Shepard could only speculate that perhaps they were conducting illegal research related to the VIs that drove their mechs. Maybe even something approaching AI. That would certainly explain mechs and VIs going batty. Scans of the planet turned up the factory, and Shepard took his squad down to investigate.

No sooner had the shuttle landed than a pair of the dog-like FENRIS mechs emerged from the open front door and attacked, followed by a pair of LOKIs. Inside, the factory was dark and still. A body of a human woman lay on the floor of the security room. A lone LOKI mech walked past the windows on the other side and exploded. The shields of Shepard's armor deflected the flying shards of glass, but it was still startling. The security station's logs documented the source of the malfunctioning mechs as a faulty processor. The factory's VI, in quality-checking the completed mechs, became infected itself, and thus the errors spread.

Shepard wanted to bomb the factory from orbit, but Miranda convinced him that shutting down the assembly line and erasing the VI might lead to a reward from the Hahne-Kedar corporation. Reluctantly, the Commander agreed.

The factory floor was full of completed mechs, which all turned and targeted the squad as they entered. Not all of them were armed with pistols, but they probably would explode when they got close. The control booth was one level up on the far side of the factory. Shepard had Tali climb up into the rafters and make her way over while everyone else kept the mechs busy. There were

hundreds. Mechs were mowed down by the dozens. They exploded as they fell, taking out more mechs, as well as damaging the factory equipment. Yet still more came, climbing or crawling over the wreckage of their comrades.

The biotic squadmates were panting, and Shepard was down to his last heatsink when finally everything came to a halt, and Tali reported success. They left the factory as is. The Commander hoped it had been worth it.

IMMINENT SHIP CRASH

In the Narph system, the Normandy picked up a distress call from the planet Jonus. A cargo ship with the registration MSV Broken Arrow was in a rapidly decaying orbit. Should the ship enter the atmosphere, it was likely the crash site would be Fargone, the largest human colony. The manifest noted volatile munitions on board. As the Normandy matched speed and docked with the vessel, EDI estimated that the engines needed to be brought online in only eight minutes.

Given the tight quarters and technical expertise needed, Shepard brought only Tali and Jacob along. As soon as the airlock opened, they encountered two geth robots standing over a dead human body. The geth had their backs turned, and were too slow to react to the small squad's quick weapons fire.

Gravity was offline, but increasing steadily as the ship neared the planet. Magboots were still useful, though. Tali picked up a datapad next to the body and skimmed through. The entries quickly went from optimistic to panicked. The captain ordered an evacuation when the geth attacked, then stayed behind to scuttle the ship, hoping to prevent the cargo of weapons from falling into geth possession.

Five minutes to go. They made their way to the bridge, where three geth were waiting for them. Again, they were no match for experienced fighters of geth. Tali accessed the ship's status and found that navigation and life support were offline. The engines had also been locked out, so they'd have to go to engineering next to reactivate them. They passed several cargo holds, all full of weapons crates stamped 'Experimental.'

The engine room was two decks high. Stairs led down to the lower floor, where Tali determined that a pair of power couplings would need to be reactivated, one on either side of the mass effect core. As she got started, geth appeared on the upper catwalks opposite the engine and fired on the squad.

Shepard and Jacob took up positions and engaged the enemy while Tali worked. Three minutes to go. The two men used their moderate biotic skills to lift and throw geth, then conventional weapons to destroy others. The streams of geth entering the room was continuous. Robot parts drifted in the weak gravity, and smoke was beginning to fill the room.

Tali finished with the power couplings and called for cover as she went to the controls and reactivated the engines. As the mass effect core powered up, the ship accelerated and gravity returned. The last geth fell inert, and the squad breathed more easily. EDI estimated they'd had 45 seconds to spare.

Shepard contacted the colony, who thanked him and promised to send someone to take the ship. They also passed along a small thankyou in the form of a few thousand credits.

MINING THE CANYON

Current market prices for platinum were quite profitable, and Miranda suggested the out of the way planet Taitus, in the Talava system, Caleston Rift. The Normandy's crew had picked up quite a few tons of minerals so far, but the cargo hold still had some space, so Shepard agreed to fill it up before heading to market.

Upon entering orbit, a strangely strong signal was picked up. The message was odd, too: "Repeat. There's a piece-of-crap mech on this planet's surface. If you think you can get it to work, you're freakin' welcome to it *static* -welcome to it."

Further scans showed a lone YMIR mech sitting idle in a small canyon. The other end of the

canyon contained a large deposit of platinum, but heavy weapons fire would be required to get to it – weapons like that mech would be equipped with. Shepard took Miranda and Jacob down to investigate. A datapad was attached to the mech. Shepard picked it up and read:

“I paid Harrot good money for this useless heap of [SIGNAL ERROR] [ERROR] detected serious caches of resources here on this planet, but [MEMORY LEAK DETECTED] All right, I said, sure, the thing leaks fuel like a volus after a mug of ryncol, but I can deal with that.

“So I took off and laid out a trail of power cells leading from where I unloaded the mech to [BAD PACKAGE PLEASE RESTART] so I could at least get the damn thing moving. And now [ILLEGAL FAULT DETECTED] won't even move. Damn that swindling elcor!”

They should have brought Tali. Or one of the Cerberus engineers. Shepard kicked the mech in the shin, and it stood up and started walking. Jacob laughed. Miranda rolled her eyes. The mech walked ten paces, then shut down. Looking around, Shepard found one of the power cells that the hapless miner had placed. He swapped out the old one and put in the new one. The mech activated again and continued walking down the narrow canyon. Shepard stayed with the mech while his two squadmates went on ahead to look for more power cells.

The mech plodded along, the sound of its heavy footsteps echoing off the canyon walls. After a few minutes, Shepard heard gunshots. Miranda and Jacob had come across a pair of varren. Nothing to worry about. The mech stopped again, out of power. Jacob returned with a fresh power cell and swapped it out.

The pattern was repeated three more times, with the heavy mech plodding forward for a few minutes, then shutting down and needing a new power cell. Eventually, they reached a dead end. The last power cell went in, and the mech opened fire on the rock wall. Shepard, Jacob, and Miranda backtracked against the onslaught of flying rocks and dust. The mech fired its machine gun and rockets continuously, then ended with a large explosion.

As the dust and debris settled, Shepard returned to the mech, only to find that it had exploded. It had, however, uncovered a huge chunk of platinum. Paydirt!

QUARIAN CRASH SITE

The Normandy's cargo hold full, it was time to head to Illium. On the way, they had to pass through the Hades Nexus. EDI picked up a distress call in the Shoel system, and the crew had just about had it with distress calls, but this one was quarian, and Tali insisted on investigating. Shepard agreed.

The planet Gei Hinnom had once been claimed by the quarians as a potential colony, but had never been settled. It made sense that the quarians were exploring it again, but the presences of a distress signal was worrying. Scans from orbit showed wreckage in a dense jungle, but the dense vegetation made accuracy difficult. Tali brought Shepard and Garrus down to search.

The shuttle landed in the closest clearing available, a good kilometer from the wreck. The clearing also happened to be a good place for some makeshift shelters, though no one was around. Tali found a datapad with the logs of the ship's first officer. The entries were disturbing. Over the three days since the crash, survivors had been disappearing one by one. The last entry, made just over an hour ago, said that Lieutenant Forzan vas Cyanid was going to search for her crew. That was the ship that had taken Tali to her trial and back to the Normandy. A sad fate for a familiar ship.

There was a path out of the camp, leading through the jungle to the crash site. Shepard took point. Barely five minutes in, they found the lost quarian, wounded and struggling to speak. Tali stabilized the lieutenant while Shepard and Garrus kept watch. There was movement in the bushes and trees. Suddenly, a red varren jumped out, snarling. Shepard shot it dead. The bushes rustled again, and three more varren emerged. Shepard and Garrus killed them, but there were more snarls out in the jungle.

The Commander surmised the fate of the missing quarians. Forzan was in no shape to walk, so Shepard had Garrus carry her back to the shuttle while he and Tali covered their retreat. They were chased by varren the whole way. Shepard had to kick one away as it leaped on board the departing

shuttle.

While Forzan recovered under Doctor Chakwas' expert care, she explained that her ship had been attacked by pirates while exploring. Evidently the quarians' attempt at a stealth ship hadn't worked out so well. A few hours later, the Normandy rendezvoused with the Idenna, which would take the sole survivor home. Her captain sent Shepard a thank you note for his continued service to the quarian people.

-----SHOPPING-----

ILLIUM

The Normandy landed at Nos Asta spaceport to offload the load of minerals she'd picked up over the last few weeks, and to begin the upgrade and repair process. Shepard left Miranda in charge of that, and granted shore leave to everyone not involved. The big ticket item was new Silaris heavy ship armor. Jacob had suggested it after having seen that the original Normandy had been cut in half, and the new Normandy had gotten scratched by the Collector ship.

As well, other members of the crew had suggested an increase in probe capacity, larger fuel tanks, and better ship scanners. Jack made an appointment to go under the knife again for the experimental L5X biotic implant. It was of questionable legality, but that's what Illium was for. If she wanted to be even more powerful, well, Shepard couldn't exactly stop her. That wasn't all the upgrades on the list, but it was a good start.

Liara was still on Illium – Shepard could feel her – but not in Nos Astra. He stopped by her office, but her assistant politely asked him to make an appointment. He tried to call her with no luck, and her home address wasn't listed in the extranet directories. He would just have to be patient, for now.

THE MESSENGER

Leaving the offices and entering the trading floor, a nondescript older asari in a peach-colored dress seemed startled to recognize him.

“Excuse me!” she waved. Her voice was raspy, as if she had a cold. Did asari get colds? “Excuse me, are you Commander Shepard?” Shepard cautiously acknowledged that he was. “I saw your...I guess you would say your aura. I'd recognize you anywhere.” She looked around for eavesdroppers, then lowered her voice. “I was asked to give you a message if I saw you. It's from a friend you made on Noveria.”

“I met a lot of people on Noveria. Could you be more specific?”

“I believe the message itself should make that clear.” She took a step forward, closer to Shepard. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and her voice took on a musical quality. Other sounds in the market seemed to fade out. “We hide. We burrow. We build. But we know that you seek those who soured the songs of our mothers. When the time comes, our voice will join with yours, and our crescendo will burn the darkness clean. Thank you, Shepard. We will sing again, because of you.”

The rachni, of course. Shepard wondered again if he had made the right choice in letting the queen live. But the implication that it was the Reapers who'd caused the Rachni War was interesting. It was also disturbing to hear the queen speaking through another asari. It wouldn't do to speak the race's name out loud in a public place, but he needed to know more.

“You're possessing another asari? I thought you promised to be good.”

The asari's eyes rolled back to normal, and she took a step back. “Relax, Shepard. The queen is not here. She does not control my thoughts. That was merely the message I was asked to deliver. I encountered her on an uncharted world. She saved my life. More than that, she gave me a purpose. They are an amazing people, Shepard. The galaxy owes you a great debt for giving them a second chance.”

Shepard relaxed. It was still unnerving, though. But what was this asari's relationship with the rachni? Shepard asked her.

"I was working as a courier. Pirates ambushed my ship, and I was forced down on an uncharted planet. I was badly injured, alone, and near death...then they found me. They saved me."

"What happened to the pirates who attacked you?"

"They were obliterated. As they should have been. The queen's people are not aggressive, but they do what they must."

"You obviously got off world again. Did they give you a ship?"

"No, countless workers repaired my ship. It runs better now than it did before. They remind me of the Keepers on the Citadel, in a way. All working together, each with a purpose."

"I don't suppose you'd tell me where they are."

"I'm afraid not. I don't even have that information myself at the moment. After I met the queen, that information was...removed. It's not painful, but I simply don't remember." She put a hand to her forehead and scratched for a moment. "I'll remember when I need to. And her caution is understandable. The galaxy isn't yet ready for their return."

"You said she gave you a purpose. What do you mean?"

"The queen shared her song with me as I recovered. I saw them as only an asari could. They are so beautiful...and so vulnerable. They needed someone to purchase things they cannot make themselves. Someone to work within the system. An agent, if you will. I am happy to help. My life as a courier was empty and shallow. Now, I'm helping a great race rebuild itself."

"You were really comfortable walking away from your old life?"

The asari smirked. "You're still concerned that the queen is controlling me. I understand, but it doesn't work like that. Our minds were in perfect harmony. I saw their beautiful spirit, and their need. I knew what I had to do. If some part of that is suggestion, then it was a side-effect from their efforts to save my life. I am happy."

Shepard nodded, considering. She did seem sincere, and the message sounded like the queen he knew, though it was only for a short conversation two years prior. "I got that she was grateful. What else was the message saying?"

"That the first War was a mistake. Something soured the voices of her people. In their psychology, that would be like mind control, I think. It doesn't really translate. Anyway, she believes you are fighting the ones who did that. And she promised to help."

Indoctrination, Shepard thought. Perhaps the rachni were the Reapers' first attempt at wiping the galaxy. The Prothean VI on Ilos, Vigil, had said that the Keepers had been modified to no longer respond to the signal that would bring back their masters. Two years ago, Sovereign had used Saren and the geth to try to activate the Citadel to do just that. Perhaps Sovereign had tried the same with the rachni two thousand years prior. The rachni queen hadn't seemed indoctrinated, though how could you tell with an alien insectoid hive-mind? But if the message was true, that the rachni would join the fight against the Reapers, they would make a powerful ally.

"She thinks the Reapers caused the War?"

"I can't say for sure. But she was certain that her ancestors were forced into the war against their will. Her people aren't naturally aggressive. If they made war, it was not of their own doing."

"Thank you for giving that message. I'm glad my friend from Noveria is doing well. If you can pass a message back, tell her that I'm watching. Don't make me regret setting her free."

"You won't." The messenger shook her head with conviction. "She seeks only peace. Be well, Commander Shepard. You will not see me again." She made a slight bow and walked away.

BLUE ROSE OF ILLIUM

Shepard had received a list of special ingredients for Mess Sergeant Gardner. The Normandy's cook wanted to provide the crew with at least one nice meal before the suicide mission, but didn't want to set foot on an alien world. So, he'd provided the Commander with a list.

Shepard wandered the open-air market looking for a grocery store when he came across a krogan spouting bad poetry at an asari.

"Oh Blue Rose of Illium, let your roots dig deep into the hot soil of Tuchanka. Let our scorching

sun and sheeting rain turn your supple beauty into strength. For if our love is to survive, it must grow thorns to pierce the hand of any that would uproot it!"

Shepard was about to ask the proprietress of the souvenir shop for directions, but her greeting was short, and he decided to try and help instead.

"What do you want? Sorry, sorry." She pinched her nose. "That damn krogan's love poems are getting on my nerves."

"He likes you? The krogan is reading those love poems to get your attention?"

"His name is Charr. We're kind of dating, but, well...we're on a break. And he's trying to show me how sensitive he is by, well, wooing me. It's really bad."

"Is he bothering you? Want some help? "

"No! No, you don't need to hurt him or anything. He's harmless...which, I know, krogan, so it's hard to believe."

"It doesn't seem common for asari to date krogan. What brought you two together?"

"He's a fun guy. Really smart, especially for a krogan, and he's got a good job as a transport technician. It's fun to join a mercenary guild or dance at bars for a few centuries, but eventually you hit the matron stage, you know? Then you get your back tattoo removed, let your scalp go back to its natural blue, and settle down with someone dependable."

"Why are the two of you on a break?"

"He's serious. Serious as in talking about kids. Charr is a great guy to date, but for something permanent...? Krogans live long lives. It's not like dating a human, where you just stick it out for a century until they die. Uh, no offense." Shepard frowned at that, but let her continue. "It made me wonder if he really likes me, or if he just wants kids. He can't have them any other way, you know, because of the genophage."

"That sounds like a question you should ask him."

"I did. I don't think he realized that our kids would always have been asari. Non-asari don't always get that we're not taking alien DNA, we're just using it to randomize some of the genetic information. Anyway, Charr was quiet for a long time. Then he said that he'd love our girls no matter what color they were."

The krogan shouted another verse from across the way. "Blue Rose of Illium, you have blossomed in a tower of glass and plastic. But beauty under glass is untested and weak. Where are your honored dead, to fertilize the ground that you might grow strong? On the rocky plains of Tuchanka, I will build you a garden from the bones of my ancestors."

"You need to talk to your boyfriend. He's just going to keep shouting poetry until you do."

"I know. But it's tough! I like him a lot. Hell, I love him! But I don't know if he's permanent bond-material."

"You should take him back. Look at him. He's obviously crazy about you."

"Is he? I mean, what if he just wants to have kids? Am I just his baby-making machine? He said I wasn't, but – "

"If he said that, then you either trust him, so you have nothing to worry about...or you don't, and you've already decided."

"I...I guess I hadn't thought about it like that. And I do trust him. If he said it..."

The krogan continued. "Blue Rose of Illium, leave eternity unembraced and grapple in the glorious struggle that is us, here and now! I am speechless, not with blood rage, but with love, and I stand here, humble and mute, to offer you a home. Come to me, Blue Rose of Illium. Let our three hearts beat as two."

"I'm going to go talk to him. Here, I've given you a discount at the terminal. Thanks for the help."

The shopkeep sounded determined...and happy. She left Shepard to buy some ship models and fish. He never did get his directions.

INTENDTURED SERVICE

Shepard left the gift shop and continued to search the stalls for a grocery store. He passed by an asari in a sharp business suit speaking to a young quarian woman.

"We'll figure something out. Quit worrying," said the asari.

"Stop worrying! This is my life you're talking about!" the quarian sounded frantic.

"You signed the indentured service contract. You gave over your responsibility to me. So don't worry."

"You said Synthetic Insights would buy me! You said it was an easy sale!" That got Shepard's attention.

"I assumed they would want an AI tech." The asari business woman put a hand to her forehead, then noticed Shepard butting in. "Hello, can I help you with something?"

"What's going on here? Have you made this quarian your slave?" asked Shepard. He was glad Tali wasn't around; she would have had some words to share.

"We prefer the term 'indentured servant.' And I know that batarian slavers have made humans understandably prejudiced against slavery. Before you do anything hasty, know that this quarian signed the agreement voluntarily, and her servitude contract is completely legal on Illium. If you actually want to help the quarian, convince the Synthetic Insights representative to purchase her contract." the slave broker indicated an asari in a yellow suit nearby.

"What if I bought her myself? I could let her go, and everyone would be happy."

"A gallant offer with three problems: First, her technical skill merits a contract of several hundred thousand credits."

"There's also a fee for freeing me before my service period ends," said the quarian dejectedly.

"Exactly," said the broker. "And finally, you are clearly a traveler – her service contract requires that she remain on Illium."

"I don't want them to take me off to a mine somewhere," said the quarian.

Shepard thought that last part wouldn't be a problem if she were freed, but he didn't have that kind of money. Maybe there was another way to help, though. "So slavery is legal on Illium?"

"*Indentured servitude* lasts a set amount of time, or until agreed-upon conditions are met. Illium must approve all contracts. The law limits what restraint or corrective options I can use, and what tasks I can legally assign her. I am also legally responsible for her behavior and health. Abuse is absolutely forbidden."

Shepard turned to the quarian. "Why did you sign herself into sla – servitude?"

"I tried to play the stock market. I'm good with numbers, and I thought I had a way to make unlimited money. I lost everything. Then I got a credit line and lost that. Then I took out an illegal loan. You get the picture."

"As part of our agreement," the asari continued, "I paid off her debts. Five years from now, she'll have a fresh start and excellent work references."

Shepard still wasn't convinced. "Sounds great...unless you lose her paperwork or come up with a reason to hold her longer."

"All contracts are monitored by Illium law enforcement. In a case such as you describe, the burden of proof would be on me. No system is perfect, but safeguards are set up to protect all parties."

Shepard signed. "Okay, so why are you trying to sell the quarian?"

"I don't keep service contracts myself. I'm a contract broker. I assumed Synthetic Insights would jump at the chance for a skilled AI tech, but they won't even make me an offer."

"Why not just keep her? You said she has technical skills."

"Quarians' strict health requirements and diets make them expensive to house and feed. I run at a minor profit at best. I don't have the money for constant suit repairs and clean-room facilities, and forcing her to stay in a shelter is against the law."

"So what happens if Synthetic Insights won't take me?" the quarian asked.

"A solution always presents itself. I will take care of you."

Legal contracts were not Shepard's forté, and he didn't feel like trying to find a loophole in Illium

law. "I'll talk to the SI rep and see what I can do," he offered.

"Really? Thank you. I'd appreciate that."

The Commander walked over to the SI kiosk and introduced himself to the asari in the yellow suit.

"How would you like to get your hands on an expert quarian AI programmer?"

"If you'd like to submit a resume, I...Wait. Is this that slave?" She frowned, then took on a lecturing tone. "Synthetic Insights has no interest in purchasing slave labor. We're under enough scrutiny from the Citadel without engaging in practices the Council disapproves of. To be frank, we're hardly hiring anyone. The geth attack on the Citadel didn't engender much love for artificial intelligence."

"It sounds like Synthetic Insights is worried about its reputation. Hiring this quarian would help."

She cocked an eyebrow, unamused. "Buying a slave helps our reputation? How exactly do you figure?"

"Purchase the contract, minus the fee for early emancipation. Then free the quarian and garnish her wages for reimbursement."

"Interesting...we look good for hiring a quarian, and we can say that we freed slaves out of the goodness of our hearts. All right. I'll run up a contract. The board might wet its pants, but we could use the good publicity. This quarian had better be good, though."

Shepard excused himself and returned to the slave broker, explaining the deal. The asari was elated. The quarian was just happy to have things settled, and promised to stay out of trouble.

MEDICAL SCANS

Shepard continued to search for a grocery store. Instead, he came across a green asari sitting on a bench. He didn't know asari could be green. Even so, she seemed familiar, somehow. She abruptly ended a call that she was on and stood up to greet him.

"Shepard! I...I don't suppose you'd remember me. I'm Shiala. We met on Feros during the geth attack. Saren had given me to the Thorian creature as a slave, and you killed it...and saved me. I promised to help the colony of Zhu's Hope recover. I'm actually here on Illium for just that purpose."

"How is the Zhu's Hope doing?"

"We've done a lot of rebuilding. We even salvaged some useful material from the geth ship you destroyed. The ExoGeni researchers got called back to their headquarters, however...along with what was left of the Thorian."

"Is it ExoGeni pushing colonists around again, or did the Thorian somehow survive our fight?"

"No! ExoGeni has been very supportive of Zhu's Hope. They actually seem to want to help us survive. And the Thorian is dead...though after all you went through to kill it, I understand your concern. I fear that after our adventure on Feros, my purpose on Illium will seem mundane by comparison."

"Is there something I can do to help?"

"I'd appreciate it. I've reached the limits of my diplomatic abilities, and I'd prefer not to start trouble. Some of the colonists had health problems as a result of the Thorian's control. We hired a colonial survey group to do some medical scans. But the contract apparently allows the company to perform invasive procedures without our consent. That's why I'm here."

"I take it your skin tone is one those problems?"

"Yes." She paused for a moment, seemingly embarrassed. "A few months after the Thorian died, my skin pigment changed. My biotic abilities are unstable as well. I'm also having vivid dreams...about my time with the Thorian. It is...disconcerting."

"Are the colonists green, too?"

Shiala smiled slightly at that. "No, but they have headaches or muscle spasms similar to what they experienced while under Thorian control. Sometimes, the colonists near another former Thorian victim share sensations like heat or pain. It has to be a result of trace amounts of the Thorian's parasitic spores. You can see why we'd want it studied...and cured."

“Tell me more about this contract you signed.”

“Baria Frontiers was interested in our problem; they offered to perform medical scans and deliver treatment for next to nothing. I should have known it was too good to be true, but we were desperate. In the fine print, we apparently agreed to let them perform invasive follow-up procedures if they deem it valuable. Which they have.”

“Can they actually force those procedures on you?”

“No, but they can declare us in breach of contract; which means we're responsible for the full price we would have paid normally. Zhu's Hope just got back on its feet. There's no way we can afford that, Shepard.”

The Commander promised to talk to the Baria Frontiers representative, and Shiala pointed to a nearby office. Inside, the lone asari matriarch behind the desk was busy, so Shepard pretended to browse star charts until his turn came.

“Hello, human,” she sneered. “I saw your conversation. You're here to complain about the medical contracts those colonists from Feros signed. I suggest you leave. Your life is short enough. Do not waste what time you have bothering me.”

“Why are you insisting on these tests? What use could they possibly be?”

“Their use is not your concern. A legal, binding contract was signed. Nothing else matters.”

“You really think this is legal? Maybe Illium's contract analysts should look it over.”

“You ignorant yokel. I was negotiating contracts when your ancestors were still burning witches and enslaving each other. I haven't lost a contract dispute in two-hundred years. Try me.”

“Okay...Perhaps we could work out different tests – something that will work for both sides.”

“If the colonists were not willing to abide by the terms of the contract, they should not have signed it. The onus is not upon me to accommodate them.”

Shepard should have already learned that he wasn't good at navigating contracts. Time for a different tack. “What's your problem with humans?”

“Not just humans,” she waved a hand dismissively and began to pace. “It's all of you. The salarians and turians are no better. The galaxy would be a better place if nobody but the asari had ever dragged themselves out of the primordial muck. All of you...you come to our planet, then complain that our laws don't suit you.” She stopped pacing and crossed her arms.

“Why are you so prejudiced against aliens?”

She scoffed. “Where do I begin? With salarian explorers unleashing the rachni upon us, then unleashing the krogan to counter their mistake? Or the turians, so eager to bomb every problem away? Or humans, the new arrivals who already think they should be in charge? Every war that has plagued this galaxy has been caused by your people.”

“I thought asari preferred to mate with other races for genetic diversity.”

“A shortsighted mistake perpetuated by the same self-hating malcontents who spawned the hateful term 'pureblood.' We hardly need your alien DNA to randomize genetic material. A little radiation would work just as well. You provide no diversity, no new insights, no advancement. You bring only chaos and senseless deaths.”

“You seem to forget that a human saved you from Saren and the geth.”

“The geth created by the idiotic *quarians*? That a rogue *turian* Spectre led in an attack? The geth didn't start with the Citadel. They attacked your human colony, Eden Prime, first. You humans brought the geth upon us. You, and the turians, and the quarians. My people's deaths are on your hands!”

“That sounded personal. Would you be this harsh in your contract terms if these were asari colonists?”

“If they were asari, they'd be dealing with problems unleashed by another race! Asari like my bondmate, who died when the geth rebelled against the quarians!” She closed her eyes for a moment, and when she opened them again, tears were forming. “Or my daughters, who died during the geth attack on the Citadel. One worked the Embassy. The other was a greeter for the Consort.” A tear ran down her cheek. “I'm not speaking in hypotheticals, human. The aliens will never be my allies. The

best they can do is give me useful medical data.”

“Why was your bondmate on the quarian homeworld?”

“Studying the quarians. Not their technology, but their music. She loved all their art. Said they had old souls. I think that's where my daughters got it from. Both of them loved talking with people, exploring new cultures.”

“They sound like wonderful people. I actually met your daughters. The galaxy is lesser for their loss.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Do you think they'd want you to do this?”

“I'm not...I didn't...Oh...” She sat down hard and slumped in her chair. “I'll...send over an amended contract. No more tests. No fees. There's enough grief in this galaxy. I don't need to add to it.”

The Baria Frontiers rep stood on wobbly legs and went into a back room. Shepard returned to Shiala with the good news.

“Thank you, Shepard. You've saved Zhu's Hope again. I don't think I could have...Is it always like this? Yesterday's problems lingering in some new form? Isn't anything ever just fixed?”

“You've got the new contracts. It's fixed for now.”

“You're right. You gave us a chance by saving the colony. I can't let them down. I won't.”

“You've got the power to make a difference, Shiala. Not everyone does.”

“Thank you for what you've done here, Shepard. I'll keep doing what I can. Maybe sometime when I'm not organizing the colony and you're not...doing whatever you do...” Shiala reached out and caressed Shepard's shoulder, smiling suggestively as she left.

GIANNA PARASINI

Shepard felt like that was enough contract negotiations for today. Maybe forever. A few stores down, he finally found the grocery store and had the food sent to the Normandy. Not everything was available, but the clerk suggested some asari equivalents that should do. Shepard also asked for some special dextro food for his turian and quarian crewmates.

The Commander left the store in search of further adventure. A human woman sitting at a sidewalk café choked on her drink as he passed. She was wearing her brown hair tied back in a bun, and had on far too much lip gloss.

“Shepard? The news said you were dead! What happened? No, wait, probably classified. Forget I asked. You'd just have to lie. It's been a couple of years. I'm Gianna Parasini, Noveria Internal Affairs. You helped me nail Administrator Anoleis.”

“If I recall correctly, Miss Parasini, you owe me a beer.”

“That I do! Have a seat.” She waved over a waitress and placed the order. Shepard sat in the offered chair at her small table.

“So, what happened to Anoleis?”

“He made the one mistake Noveria won't tolerate: he got caught taking their money. He's doing five years in white-collar prison. More importantly, he won't work in the field again. What brings you to Illium? You know, that you can talk about.”

“Mostly putting together a team and doing research right now. I'm going after the Collectors.”

“Damn, Shepard. For me, a tough job involves more paperwork.”

“It must be nice having a job you really enjoy, though.”

“I wanted to be a cop, or C-Sec, but my family had bills. I needed the money a corporate job brought in. Besides, in this job, you don't see things that make it hard to sleep at night. White-collar crime is nice and clean.”

“How did you end up on Noveria, anyway?”

“Scholarship program and a competitive internship. Turned out I was only middling at the science, but I could always ferret out secrets. You grow up poor and surrounded by rich kids, you get good at hiding yourself. Helps with going undercover.”

"It must be hard going undercover so often."

"It's not so bad. Go to new places, be new people. The only weird part is when you go home and try to talk to people, and you forget how to react. Like it's another cover, you know?"

"Deep down, part of you likes fooling people. That's what makes you good at it."

"Part of me, yeah. I grew up working-class. Now I walk around the rich and powerful, taking notes, getting evidence. And they never see me coming."

"What's up next for you?"

"Research. We've had some hacking attempts lately, and I want to make sure they're external. A lot of people are suddenly interested in dark energy. My bosses want to know if it's something to worry about. That'll hold me over until I have to go back undercover, anyway."

Shepard opted not to mention the quarians' own research into prematurely dying stars. The drink arrived. Gianna looked off to the side, distracted, and scribbled something on a napkin, then got to leave abruptly.

"Hey, listen, I just remembered something. I've got to go. Talk to you later? And don't forget to drink your beer."

Shepard picked up his glass and noticed the note under it. He hadn't noticed her slipping that there. Very smooth. It said something about catching an asari merchant at the kiosk behind him trying to sell smuggled goods from Noveria. That explained why Gianna was on Illium. She also asked if the Commander could get her to show him the 'good stuff.'

He shrugged. Why not? The enthusiastic sales asari seemed welcoming as the Commander approached.

"You look like someone who needs high-quality equipment! Feel free to look around. My store has the best tech and biotic equipment on Illium."

"Do you have anything else? Anything not mentioned on your main merchandise kiosk?"

"I'm sorry. Everything I'm allowed to sell is on the kiosk. I have a few additional schematics and plans, but I'm afraid I haven't purchased the license to sell them here."

"Is everything so expensive? I'd planned to drop a lot of credits today."

"Really?"

"I'm outfitting a team for a dangerous mission. I need the best, and I'm willing to pay for it...as long as you work with me."

"Well...perhaps I could give you a preferred rate at the kiosk. A small discount – and when I get special items in, you can take a look." She turned and tapped a few commands into the register.

"What kind of special items are we talking about?"

"Well, there is one thing." The clerk looked around, then lowered her voice. "Very advanced design. Not publicly available yet." She pulled up a schematic on her omni-tool."

Gianna Parasini strutted in just then. "That's because it's still in development on Noveria. And illegal for export. Hello, Hermia."

Hermia's eyes went wide. "Parasini! You set me up! But this isn't Noveria! You don't have the authority to arrest me!"

"I don't care whether you go to jail. I've got all the evidence I need to fine you out of business."

"Do you have the authority to share the schematic she's trying to sell?" Shepard asked.

"I don't have to. Hermia was under suspicion. We leaked a faulty device to her. All this thing will ever do is blow up in your face."

Hermia wrung her hands. "I...I need to go. I have to talk to my lawyer," she said as she hurried off.

Gianna called after her: "Talk fast, Hermia! When the fines hit, you won't be able to afford him!" She turned back to Shepard. "Ah, that was good. I've got to go file a few papers. I love nailing asari. So ageless and superior – then you get them, and they squeal like schoolgirls."

"Is that everything you needed?" he asked.

"Everything and more. You're a life-saver, Shepard."

"How long were you after this woman?"

"A few weeks, plus transit time. Not nearly as long as Anoleis. Hell, at least this time I didn't have to wear heels and a dress."

"It's been a pleasure, Gianna. Take care of yourself."

"See you around. Ah, hell with it." She shrugged, then leaned in close and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Much better than an autograph. Take care of yourself. And try not to die this time!"

A TROUBLEMAKER

Shepard returned to the table at the sidewalk café, but his drink had been cleared away. He wanted something stronger anyway, and went off in search of a bar. He found one in the Eternity Lounge, but an asari in a dark formal dress and purple markings on her forehead accosted him before he could go in.

"You! Shepard!" She said, and then quickly slapped him.

The Commander glared. "What the hell was that for? I don't even know you!"

"Like you don't know? Your friend came into my bar, harassed my people, and tried to get the deed to the place! That crap might fly on Omega, but Illium has laws! I've got security feeds all over my bar! If you or your group bothers my people again, I'll have you arrested so fast you'll red-shift on your way to the prison transport!"

"Who – "

"Just get your man out of there! You'd better hope you're gone before I get back with the police."

The bar owner left, and Shepard went inside to find a blond man in Alliance N7 armor harassing the barkeep.

"I'm Commander Shepard's squad mate!" he was saying. "Practically second-in-command! You don't want to mess with me!"

"Uh-huh." The asari bartender was a matriarch in a red and grey dress. She sounded unimpressed.

"I'm going to save the galaxy! I don't have time for your crap!"

"Uh-huh."

"That's right! Anybody messing with me will answer to my good friend – " He turned around when Shepard tapped him on the shoulder. "...Commander Shepard?" Conrad Verner's jaw went slack.

"Hey, if you know this idiot," said the bartender, "can you rein him in before I slap his ass with a singularity?"

"Shepard? Is it really you? It's me, Conrad Verner! We met on the Citadel? I wanted to become a Spectre? You're alive! Oh, this is the happiest day of my life!"

Shepard removed his palm from his face. "Conrad...why are you acting like me?"

"Well, you were gone, right? And the galaxy still needed protecting. So I decided to finish what you started. In your honor."

"How did you get that armor?"

"Oh, they make some pretty convincing replicas these days, if you're willing to pay. Getting the whole getup was pretty expensive, but my wife was really supportive. She even paid for my shuttle fare off-world!"

Behind Conrad, the bartender shook her head and did her own facepalm.

"Any decent security system will detect that you aren't in the military, much less part of my squad," said Shepard.

"I just say that I'm deep-cover, and don't appear on systems. I'm doing the best I can, okay? You were a hero. You saved the galaxy and showed everyone what humanity could do...and then you died! The galaxy needed someone like you, Shepard. We all did. I had to do something."

Shepard sighed heavily. "Why were you trying to get the deed to this place?"

"This place is actually a front for a red-sand dealer. I need to take it over to crack the ring!"

"What?" said the bartender. "Who the hell told you that?"

"The owner of that weapons shop near the carport! She's an undercover cop. She told me about

it when I introduced myself.”

“Listen, crap-for-brains,” the barkeep sneered. “First, we don't sell red sand. Second, red sand is legal on Illium. You just need a license.”

The Commander needed to take care of this. “I'll talk to this undercover cop and figure out what's going on.”

“Thank you,” the bartender nodded. “If I kill annoying customers, it usually causes property damage. That comes out of my pay.”

“Just let me know if you need any help, Shepard,” said Conrad, entirely too enthusiastically.

Shepard told him to stay put and not touch anything. Or talk to anyone. He made his way to the carport and found the weapons shop adjacent to it. A young asari greeted him. She had pink markings around her eyes. It made her look like a raccoon.

“I talked to an...old friend, Conrad Verner. You told him that the Eternity Lounge was selling red sand.”

“Oh, you're Conrad's friend.” Her tone of voice suggested that she thought Shepard was as dim as Conrad. “Yes, that place is really dangerous. I should know. I'm an undercover cop. Did you get me the deed to the bar? I need the deed to, uh, stop the red sand dealers.”

Shepard decided to disabuse her. “That bar doesn't have any red sand dealers. What are you trying to pull?”

“Oh. So you're not as dumb as your friend. Well, it was worth a shot. I'll be going now. And lest you get angry, you should know that this whole place is under video surveillance. Mandatory for weapons sales.”

“Humor me. Why did you send Conrad to harass the owners of that lounge?”

“Are you kidding? Prime real estate like that? I'd make a killing. I get nothing at this crappy shop. I'd have been an idiot not to put some pressure on them, and your friend was easy to convince. You don't see an easy opportunity like that every day.”

“You think you can threaten another business and get away with it?”

“I didn't threaten anybody. Your human friend did. It's not my fault if he misunderstood me when I talked about red sand dealers. And my surveillance cams had an unfortunate malfunction while I told him about the situation.”

“Now that we all know where we stand, why don't you go take over your new bar? They're ready to hand over the deed.”

“You expect me to believe that you're going to help me?”

“Why wouldn't I? You get what you want, and I get a nice little discount, right? Good business for everyone.”

“For a human, you're pretty smart. So what do we do now?”

“Go in, be tough, and let them know you're with me. They'll hand the deed right over.”

“Well...great. Here, I'll set you up for a discount. Thanks for the help.”

Shepard spent a minute looking over the inventory, but didn't find anything worth buying. He then moseyed back to the bar, where he found the weapons merchant being placed in handcuffs.

“Damn it!” she screamed as the police dragged her away. “This is just a misunderstanding!”

“Tell it to the judge,” said the bar's owner, pointing a finger in the accused's face. “My surveillance vids caught your extortion attempt from four different angles.”

“I was misled! I was told you'd agreed to sell!”

“Take her away, before I have my bartender throw her out.”

Conrad appeared from somewhere, looking confused. “What happened? The undercover cop from the weapons shop just got arrested!”

“She wasn't a cop. She was using you to try to take over this bar.”

“What? No! But she said....But she was pretty! And blue! She wanted to get coffee! And she smiled when she said 'coffee!' I'm pretty sure it was a euphemism!” He scratched his head and then placed his head in his hands. “I screwed this up, didn't I? I screw everything up. Damn it! I'm so stupid! Who was I to think I could do what you do?” Conrad dropped his hands, then stomped a

foot.

“You know how you screwed up, Conrad? You pretended to be something you're not.”

“I know! I'm sorry. I could never live up to what you've done.”

Shepard tksed. “Conrad, you idiot, that's not the point! You're never going to be anything until you can do it yourself!”

“Okay! Okay, I'll go. I'll stop acting like you, and...I'll make a difference. Somehow. Thanks, Shepard.”

Conrad turned and left the bar, looking downcast, but thoughtful. The bartender waved Shepard over to the bar.

“Thanks for taking care of that crazy guy,” she said, pouring him a drink. “Saves me having to beat him to death with his own spine. That makes the other customers nervous. Anyway, this is Eternity, and I'm Aethyta, asari matriarch and bartender. This one's on me.”

“Thanks.”

“I'll set up a tab for you. Knock yourself out. Literally if you want. Just don't drink anything for turians or quarians. It does nasty things to your insides. Once saw a krogan drink a liquefied turian on a dare six or seven centuries back. Nobody came out of that one looking pretty.”

“I thought matriarchs served as honored advisors.”

“Right. Which I do here at this bar. I know, not what you'd expect. But nobody on Thessia wanted to listen to my wise counsel, so here I am. Dad was a krogan who fought in the Rachni Wars. My mother fought in the Krogan Rebellions. I've pretty much seen it all.” She started wiping down the bar.

Apparently relationships between asari and krogan weren't all that rare. “Your father fought in the Rachni Wars?”

“Yeah, when he was young. Loved showing off his war scars. Krogan think they're sexy. Me, I go for asses. When I was a girl, he'd tell me about landing on this poison-filled world and stomping a rachni queen into muck. The scientists say all that stuff about us getting genetic material from the father is crap. Seems like I got a bit of his mouth, though.”

Now that Shepard looked close, her face did seem to be a bit more scaly than most asari. “And your mother fought in the Krogan Rebellions?”

“I don't know that she 'fought.' She scouted, sniped a few people, and blew up a couple of space stations. You know, commando stuff. She'd put the old commando leathers on for special nights with Dad. Goddess, that was embarrassing.”

It was strange to hear a bartender talk so much. Usually it was the other way around. But since she was...“Your mother fought in the Rebellions and your father was a krogan, I'll bet that caused some tension.” Shepard finished his drink and ordered another.

“They didn't meet until a few hundred years after the turians put the boot in with the damn genophage. As far as either one knew, they were both just warriors. Dad boasted, Mom stayed quiet. Mom was a matriarch herself, and Dad was near-on a thousand, when the truth came out.”

“What happened?”

“I was about a hundred, shaking my ass in some sleazy bar. They got me on the link, told me that they were going to have it out, and made me promise to love whichever one survived. Turned out to be damn easy, since neither one did. Family, huh? What a kick in the quad.”

Aethyta went to serve another customer, then came back to hang out with the Commander.

“What's it like, living for a thousand years?” He winced. Stupid question. Must be the alcohol.

But the bartender answered. “Violent. Wars break out, colonies get destroyed. Sometimes you hear good news, like that colony on Feros surviving. That's the exception, though. You find peace in whatever arms will hold you. Turian, elcor, hanar...Even had a pureblood daughter. I was the father. Didn't work out.” She looked wistful for a moment. “Then one day you wake up, your figure's gone matriarchal, and everyone else is too young to remember how the quarians looked without those suits.”

“So why is a matriarch in a bar serving drinks?”

"It's better than what most other matriarchs are doing. Look at that screw-up with Saren and his geth a few years back! Our ships were hanging bare-assed in space when Saren started shooting. If not for you humans, we would've bought it right there. And I warned them! Told people on Thessia what was coming, and they didn't want to hear it."

"What didn't they want to hear?"

"That art and philosophy and political prowess wasn't going to cut it. We can't go a single asari lifetime without some big war breaking out. We need to get our daughters working earlier, not spending their wild maiden years stripping or in merc bands. When I started talking about making new mass relays ourselves, they laughed the blue off my ass. So now I serve drinks."

"Thanks for talking to me."

"That's what I'm here for, babe. Get you anything else?"

"I should go." Shepard stood, feeling a bit unsteady on his feet. What had she served him?

"Right. Don't eat the nuts in the red bowls. They're for turians and quarians. You'll get cramps."

OMEGA

The next stop was Omega Station. Some of the suggested upgrades weren't exactly legal. The major one was new main guns for the Normandy. Garrus knew that the Turian Hegemony was working on weapons tech based on technology salvaged from the wreckage of Sovereign. There was no legal way of obtaining them, but a dealer on the lawless mining asteroid had a lead.

As work got underway, Shepard found the two Cerberus engineers assisting in the replacement of the cannons.

"Are you set up okay down here?" Shepard asked.

"We can't complain," said Ken. "I just wish it didn't take so long to calibrate the FBA arrays –"

"Kenneth, you're complaining," Gabby mercifully cut her partner short.

"What kind of problems are you having?"

"When they upgraded the Normandy design, they got a bit sloppy with the FBA couplings. I won't bore you with the tech, but there is an array of attenuators in the primary power transfer system that channels the field bleed –"

"Kenneth, you're boring the commander with tech. Ugh. In short, if we had T6-FBA couplings installed, it'd save us a lot of maintenance time each day."

"Why isn't something like that already installed?"

"It's probably just a design oversight," said Gabby. "Efficiency isn't affected. It's a maintenance issue."

"Also," Ken picked up the thread, "the T6 model can be hard to find. Nashan Stellar Dynamics discontinued them."

"We could probably find used ones in the Omega markets. But we have no time for shore leave." Gabby pointed at the tools and parts scattered around the weapons bay.

"If I find any, I'll send them your way," Shepard promised.

The Commander made his way up to deck two, and towards the airlock. Doctor Chakwas was hanging out, chatting with Kelly.

"Do you have everything you need?" he asked.

"I believe so," the Doctor answered. "The medical bay seems very much like the sick bay on the original Normandy. Only thing missing are my private reserves. I even had a bottle of Serrice Ice Brandy that I was saving for a special occasion."

Shepard smiled. "I'll keep an eye out for a replacement bottle."

"Oh, you needn't. It's expensive and we have much larger concerns ahead."

"All right. Kelly?"

The Yeoman shook her head.

PACKAGES FOR ISH

Shepard left the ship at the same time as Miranda and Jacob. Just inside the docking bay, a pair of

salairans noticed them.

“Is that Shepard? Isn't he dead?” said the one in the brown suit.

“Apparently not,” said the one in the teal-blue suit. “And Jacob Taylor? I certainly didn't expect to see you again, either.”

“I'm sure you didn't,” Jacob said with a scowl.

“No! Please! So many years have passed since Tortuga! Lots of water under the bridge!”

“I take it you've met each other before,” Shepard said.

Miranda answered, frowning a bit herself. “Jacob and I worked on a mission with Ish a few years back. He helped us with some information.”

“You sent me into a nest of turian thugs and a batarian ambush,” Jacob accused the salarian.

“Hey, now!” Ish said defensively. “My job was to get you inside. Anything more would have cost you extra.”

“Is this going to be a problem?” Shepard asked of Jacob.

“If we don't walk away, I promise he'll give you a reason to shoot him.”

“Well, now I'm curious,” Shepard shrugged.

“Ish, if you make one wrong move...” Jacob threatened.

“Of course! I learned my lesson last time! Trust me!” The salarian cleared his throat. “I need skilled, trustworthy people to take care of a little business for me. Nothing illegal, of course. But it's paying work.”

“What kind of 'business' do you do?”

“Important business. So important that, with your help, we can change Omega.”

Shepard didn't like the sound of that. The station wasn't exactly civilized, but Aria T'Loak kept things in check. “Go on,” Shepard prompted.

“I'm in the information business. Specifically the buying and selling of privileged material. It's nothing illicit. Certain people have business deals with people throughout the galaxy. If we were to have information involving those deals...we could make some ripples around here. That's all I'll say. I just need someone to pick up a pair of packages in certain locations on the Citadel and Illium, then bring them to me here.”

“What's your angle?”

“I'm a simple businessman. Nothing more. What do you say?”

“I'm not a gopher. Find someone else.”

“Of course. You're not the type to be interested in work that could change the face of a place like Omega. I'm sorry I bothered you.”

Shepard shook his head as he walked away. Miranda said he'd dodged a bullet there. Once they entered the station proper, the three split up to enjoy their shore leave.

STRUGGLING QUARIAN

Commander Shepard went to look for those parts that Ken and Gabby had mentioned. The markets on Omega were a dirty, dingy place compared to Nos Astra. Lots of vorchas sat or lay against the walls of the crowded corridors. One mentioned something about finding flesh as Shepard passed by. He came to a salvage shop tended by a young quarian man.

“Hello there. Might I interest you in some salvaged tech?” the quarian asked unenthusiastically. “Every credit goes toward a ticket to get me off this forsaken rock.”

“That sounds like a good cause. How's that going?”

“Not very well. No one will buy anything at the prices Harrot forces me to ask for them.”

“What brought a nice kid like you to Omega?”

“My Pilgrimage. What money I had got stolen within a few days. So I decided to sell salvaged parts. You can see how that turned out. Harrot's forcing me to sell high, and I can't even afford a ticket off this station.”

Shepard looked at the price list. Everything was indeed expensive, especially for used parts.

“Who's Harrot, and why does he control your prices?”

“Harrot's another salvage dealer. He made me swear not to undercut him, no matter what. He was here first, so it's his right. But no one will buy from me when he's so much cheaper. I can't save enough money to get out of here.”

“I'll go have a talk with him for you. Get him to ease up.”

“I won't stop you. If you can convince him to lay off, then maybe I'll get off this station after all.”

The quarian provided directions to a shop just around the corner. An elcor with a cigar hanging out of his mouth greeted the Commander in the usual slow bass monotone of his species.

“Tentatively excited: Welcome, human. What can I get for you?”

“Tell me about your 'deal' with the quarian around the corner.”

“Suspicious: If I had made such a deal, I would certainly not be inclined to discuss it. Accusatory: I don't understand how it is any concern of yours.”

“If you're worried about competition, why not just buy out his store?”

“Intrigued: I had not considered that before. My fellow merchants on Omega are not known for being easy to shut down.”

“A weak, homesick kid like that shouldn't be a problem for an elcor like you.”

The elcor shopkeep pondered for a moment, puffing on his cigar. “Devilishly excited: I have plans to expand. On your advice, I will conquer the quarian child. Grateful: To thank you for your counsel, I offer you a discount. At all of my stores. Courteously: Have a fine day.”

Shepard followed the elcor around the corner and watched as the deal went down. The quarian left his former shop and thanked Shepard for the help. The Commander asked about the parts for the Normandy, and had them delivered to the ship for his engineers.

BATARIAN BARTENDER

Grunt invited Shepard for a drink and found himself on the lower floor of Afterlife. The music was a bit more subdued down here compared to the main floor. Or the VIP club for that matter. The young krogan ordered his drink – he was fully grown, but had only lived for a few months. Shepard found the contradiction confusing and decided to ignore it. The batarian bartender poured Shepard's drink, then walked slowly away, a slight grin on his face.

Shepard shrugged and took a swig. Almost immediately, he began choking, then passed out, falling to the floor. He awoke some time later on a trash heap in an alley, with Grunt standing watch over him.

The Commander grunted as he sat up. “Ugh. How much did I drink?”

“One drink,” a nearby bald human man said. He wore dirty overalls and had a week's growth beard. “That's all it takes. That racist bastard. Looks like you broke the first rule of Omega. Don't order a drink at Afterlife if you're human.”

Shepard staggered to his feet, his head slow to clear. Oddly, his stomach felt fine, though. “Humans aren't welcome at Afterlife?”

“It's just that one bartender. He's got a stick up his ass about a bunch of batarians that died a while back. No one does a thing about it, though. Humans ain't exactly held in high regard around here.”

Shepard pulled a peel of...something...off his shoulder and tossed it back in the heap. “That bartender tried to poison me?”

“Tried' is the word. As far as I know, you're the first human to survive it. Me and my friend Jake went there to celebrate our new shipping business. He got real drunk, and an hour later, he was puking blood.”

“Duly noted. Time to pay that bartender a visit.”

“This I gotta see. He won't be expecting you, that's for sure.”

The stranger followed Shepard back into the bar, Grunt trailing behind. The Commander approached the batarian barkeep and stood with his arms crossed, frowning.

“Do I know you? No, no. You humans all look the same. Here. Have a drink. On the house.” The would-be-poisoner poured another drink.

Shepard uncrossed his arms and spoke in a loud enough voice to be heard all around the bar. "What do you think these people will do when they find out you're poisoning your customers?"

"Poisoning what, now?" A turian to Shepard's right set down the drink that he was just about to sip.

"This has nothing to do with you!" the barkeep told him.

Shepard tried to get the crowd on his side. "Who's next? Turians? You don't like them either, right?"

"Answer the damn question, Forvan," said the turian.

"You want a piece of me? I'll leave your corpse for the vorcha!"

The batarian pulled a shotgun out from under the bar, but the turian drew quicker and shot him dead.

"Not taking any chances," he said, shrugging.

A salarian nearby added: "Bastard deserved what he got."

THE PATRIARCH

One of Aria's guards, a turian named Grizz, entered the bar and glanced at the body. He dismissed it, then engaged the Commander in conversation.

"Aria has a job she needs doing. You up for some work?"

"That depends on what Aria has in mind," Shepard said tentatively.

"Aria's gotten word that some Blood Pack mercs plan to kill an old acquaintance of hers. A krogan named The Patriarch. She'd like you to keep that from happening."

"Why come to me? Aria's usual muscle not up for the job?"

"Because Aria said so. What other reason do you need?"

"People like Aria don't do things without a damn good reason. I want to hear it. Especially if I'm risking my life."

"Fine. Whatever gets you to take the job. But I didn't tell you this. Got me? If it gets out Aria's protecting Patriarch...well, that can look like a weakness. And some people might want to exploit that. You're not on her payroll, so you helping The Patriarch just seems like a random act of kindness."

Grunt nodded agreement and expressed curiosity. He seemed ready for an adventure.

"What's the Blood Pack's problem with him?" Shepard asked.

"If you've met The Patriarch, you know – " Shepard shook his head no. "He can't keep his damned mouth shut. Some people don't appreciate his stories. Especially when he dips into nonfiction."

"What's Aria's interest in protecting him?"

"The Patriarch was one of her deadliest enemies back in the old days. Now she keeps what's left of him around as a trophy. As long as he lives, he's a perfect example of what happens when you go up against Aria."

Shepard agreed to look into it. Grizz gave them directions to a private room off to the side of the main floor. He said that the mercs were waiting outside the club for Patriarch to leave. Inside the private room, an ancient krogan was offering advice to an asari and a turian, both of whom looked angry.

"No," said the krogan. His crestplate was brown, and he wore a matching brown jumpsuit. "You said he had close family. They'll just want revenge. Kill the family first. Then he'll get angry and come at you stupid...and then you kill him." He left the couple to discuss their plans, then turned to Shepard as the Commander entered the room, Grunt in tow. He seemed to ignore the younger krogan. "Don't think I know you, human. I'm The Patriarch. Aria's Patriarch. What do you want?"

"Why do they call you The Patriarch?" Grunt asked.

"Like an asari matriarch, only male. It was Aria's little joke. After she took me down, she let me live. Kept me around as an advisor. And a trophy." He grumbled at that last bit.

"What's your history with Aria?" Shepard asked.

"A few centuries ago, Omega was *my* rock. When Aria arrived, she had nothing but the clothes on her back. I thought she was another dancer. Huh! She killed half my men and convinced the rest that she could run this place better than I did. She came for me here in this bar. We tore the place apart. She crushed one of my hearts, shattered half the bones in my body. And left me alive." The Patriarch sighed heavily.

"Why?" asked Grunt.

"She doesn't destroy what she can use. She said I could have all my old comforts if I served as her advisor. I knew how things worked. I knew who to lean on, who to smack down, who to smile at. And everyone who respected me saw me beaten, broken. They knew that as strong as I'd been, she was stronger."

"A krogan as old as you must have some great stories," Shepard prompted.

The Patriarch shrugged. "I killed a lot of people, lived well, and was beaten by a small asari who keeps me around as an example. My time is done. Anyone I killed is long forgotten. The stories are Aria's, now."

Shepard nodded to himself. "Well, the reason I'm here is that some people want you dead. I've been asked to move you to safety."

The revenge-minded couple perked up at that.

"Of course. Aria wouldn't want me hurt," he said sarcastically, shaking his head at his other guests. "It would make her look bad. But perhaps Aria's reputation is no longer my concern. Perhaps I will stay, and see who thinks me important enough to kill."

"You're as weak as a noodle, old man," said Grunt. "It would be a good death, though."

Something occurred to Shepard. "Here's an idea: Let us handle the assassins for you."

The Commander indicated himself and Grunt, but the couple expressed a desire to be included, too. Grunt merely shrugged.

"And so your names grow while I remain and old man who lets others fight his battle."

"No, you remain a powerful warlord, with forces at his command. Not just Aria's trophy."

The Patriarch pondered that for a moment, then grew excited. "Why, you could...you could be my krantt! Fighting for my honor. If you would do this for me, I would be grateful. I might even be a krogan again!"

Shepard lead his makeshift squad outside and found a pair of krogan in Blood Pack armor, each armed with a small flamethrower. They seemed like they were about to enter the bar.

"Out of our way, human," said one of the thugs.

"You here for The Patriarch?" Shepard asked.

Everyone but Shepard had their weapons drawn. They seemed surprised that he was going to try talking this out.

"What if we are? You gonna do something about it?"

"The Patriarch sent us," Shepard said, loud enough to be heard by the bystanders milling about. "He said to do whatever it takes."

"You're The Patriarch's krantt? I wasn't aware the old man had one!"

"You should have done your homework." Shepard cracked his knuckles.

Without further discussion, the mercs fired their flamethrowers. Shepard ducked the flame and kicked one in the groin, staggering him. The rest of his squad opened fire on the other and killed him, then turned their weapons on the one writhing in pain on the floor. Shepard nodded at the carnage, then went back inside to report to his krantt's leader.

"You killed them all!" The old krogan slammed a fist into a palm and hopped in celebration. "And everyone knows that The Patriarch is not to be crossed. Thanks to you, Aria may think of me as more than a trophy. A real advisor, maybe. Or even a threat."

"Use this," said Shepard. "Don't ever let anyone think you're weak again."

"Thanks to you, I am a krogan. By the way, be careful with Aria. She will approve of what you've done – I think – but not of you altering the balance of Omega. I think it reminds her too much of herself."

Grizz blinked at Shepard's resolution of the situation, then led him to his boss. The Commander couldn't tell if she was pleased or disappointed.

"Word has it that The Patriarch's krantt took out the men sent here to kill him." Aria invited Shepard to sit on the couch nearby, which he accepted. "Funny. I didn't know he had a krantt."

"I guess you're working on old information."

She put just a hint of sarcasm in her voice. "Hmm...Well, no one would dare cross him with such a powerful krantt standing up for him." Her tone changed to business. "It's not what I asked...but you got the job done. You've done a lot for me, Shepard. Let me return the favor. We're sending coordinates to a cache on an uncharted world. You want it, it's yours. Whatever you find there is yours to deal with."

"Sounds vague. Thanks. I think."

"Why don't you find a nice girl to keep you warm in the meantime?"

The Commander stood to leave. "By the way, do you know a salarian named Ish? I think he's planning to make a move against you."

"Interesting. Thanks for the heads-up, Shepard. Looks like I'll have to do a little cleaning in my organization."

Shepard was done with Omega. On his way out, he noticed a new bartender; a salarian this time. He decided to try his luck.

"Welcome to Afterlife," the new man said pleasantly. "How may I serve you?"

"Pour me a drink. Hold the poison."

"Oh, yes. I heard about my predecessor's little scheme. I'm very glad you survived. I've been instructed to give you drinks on the house. Rest assured that they will contain no illicit ingredients that you haven't asked for."

The bartender poured. Shepard took a cautious sip. He felt nothing. The alcohol was watered down, but that was fine by him at this point. "By the way, you wouldn't happen to have a bottle of Serrice Ice Brandy back there, would you?"

Back aboard the Normandy, Shepard checked in with his engineers to see if they'd gotten the parts.

"You're the best, Commander," said Gabby. "We just got those FBA couplings installed. Now we only have to calibrate every week instead of every day."

"We're thinking about celebrating our newfound free time with some Skillian-5 poker. Want to join us?" Ken invited.

"Come on, Kenneth. The Commander doesn't want to play cards with grease monkeys like us."

"Actually, that sounds interesting," said Shepard.

"Fantastic. I'll get the cards."

"My Skillian 5's a bit rusty," Shepard explained. "You'll be easy on the rookie, right?"

"Of course, Commander. It's all friendly," Ken promised.

They sat down for a hand, and Shepard won easily.

"Yeah, right," said Ken. "Be gentle on the rookie.' I can't believe we fell for that."

"It's so worth losing to see you taken down a notch," said Gabby.

"Beat me up my own game. You're all right, Shepard."

Shepard left them and headed for med bay.

"I have a present for you, Doctor." Shepard said, presenting a fancy bottle.

"Serrice Ice Brandy? You didn't. Thank you." Chakwas stood up to receive the bottle. "I always regretted not opening that original bottle – when I still could. I won't make the same mistake again. Why don't we open this bottle right here, right now, you and me?"

"Let's drink. You crack open the bottle. I'll get the glasses."

Several glasses later, Shepard sat across from the Doctor in the med bay, feeling a nice buzz and

a happy grin on his face.

She was in the middle of a story. "I thought Alenko's biotic display might have broken Jenkins' back, but Jenkins pops up and yells 'That was awesome!'" Chakwas stood and held her arms up in mock celebration, then swayed a bit and sat back down. "Ah, Jenkins. Soldiers like him make the Alliance great. Cerberus lacks the same...enthusiasm."

"Why leave the Alliance?" Shepard asked, slurring his words slightly. "With your service record, you could have gotten a tour of duty on any Alliance ship. Why did you really leave?"

"Maybe it's less about leaving, and more about staying." Chakwas's speech was even more slurred. And she sounded sad. "As a military doctor, I mostly treat people who are in bad shape. Often, they die. And if I can help them, they move on. Either way, they leave."

"You're lonely? Don't you have any friends or family?"

"No, not lacking friendship – just stability. Jeff...Joker will always have Vrolik syndrome. He would never admit it, but he needs my help. And he always will. I wish it weren't, but sadly, it's true."

"I understand. Treating Joker gives you a kind of stability."

"So does this ship, even if it's a copy." She chuckled. "Or, hell, maybe it's you. Shepard, our immovable center. A place for a person to stop and catch her breath. Or maybe I'm just happily drunk. Would it hurt if it was simple like that for once?"

"There's our toast," said Shepard. "Here's to simply being happily drunk."

"I'll drink to that!"

They raised their glasses to each other and drank some more.

-----INTERLUDE-----

"Shepard. how can I help?" Mordin greeted the Commander as he entered the professor's lab.

"Have you got a minute to talk?"

"Yes. Good timing in fact. Excellent. Made breakthrough. Can share results while next samples grow. Hate waiting for culture analysis. Never fast enough. Usually no result in advance, just checking work. Have to be careful. Getting off track. Discovery based on Prothean-Collector connection. Can examine technology, chart Reaper species modification, fall of Protheans."

"Tell me what happened."

"Early stage is similar to indoctrination. Can guess captured Protheans lost intelligence over several cloned generations. Cybernetic augmentation widespread afterward. As Protheans failed, Reapers added tech to compensate. Mental capacity almost gone, replaced by overworked sensory input, transfers. Transmitting data to masters."

"Is there anything we can do to help them?"

"No! No glands, replaced by tech. No digestive system, replaced by tech. No soul, replaced by tech. Whatever they were, gone forever. Understand now? No art, no culture. Closer to husks than slaves. Tools for Reapers. Protheans dead. Collectors just final insult." Mordin sniffed. "Must be destroyed."

"I didn't think you needed any more motivation than you already had to stop the Collectors."

"Enjoyed challenge. Saw necessity of attack on Collectors after plague on Omega. Their work, my people. Hard to care about two armies. One wins, one loses. Always work to do after. Now have more context. See what Collectors are. Wasn't looking for other work before. Don't mean to imply that. Just committed now. Won't let you down."

"What is it about the Collectors' modifications that bothers you so much?"

"Disrupts socio-technological balance. All scientific advancements due to intelligence overcoming, compensating for limitations. Can't carry a load, so invent wheel. Can't catch food, so invent spear. No limitations, no advancement. No advancement, culture stagnates. Works other way, too, Advancement before culture is ready, disastrous. Saw it with krogan."

"You said the Collectors had no art. I had no idea you cared about that kind of thing."

"Personal interest negligible. Sang a little. Multispecies productions for cultural exploration."

Gilbert and Sullivan. Always had me do the patter songs. But not about me. Cultural, artistic expression reflects philosophical evolution. Interest in growth, perspective, observation, interpretation. Suspect you won't see any art in Collector Base. Culturally dead. Tools for Reapers. Worse than the geth.

"I'm sorry, I know that was important. But you performed Gilbert and Sullivan?"

Mordin burst into song: "I am the very model of a scientist salarian. I've studied species turian asari and batarian. I'm quite good at genetics as a subset of biology because I am an expert (which I know is a tautology). My xenoscience studies range from urban to agrarian. I am the very model of a scientist salarian." Mordin cleared his throat. Shepard just smiled and shook his head on his way out.

Zaeed was in the armory, tinkering with his assault weapon. "Back for another lesson?" he asked when he noticed Shepard.

"Sure."

"Get a knife stuck in the right way, and you can pull that plate right off of a krogan's head. It's the best way to get a krogan to talk. The threat of it drives 'em mad."

"Good to know if I ever run out of bullets."

"You smoke, Shepard? Don't. That stuff will kill you. Knew a kid once, weapons dealer, probably half your age. Bastard smoked too close to a cache of explosives. Just about blew himself sky high."

"Nasty habit, for sure. Did you know The Illusive Man smokes?"

"That explains a lot. Hmm...Ever been to a batarian prison? They don't trust you enough to sell you into slavery, that's where they send you. In there you got two choices: bash your head open on the wall, or kill everyone between you and the exit."

"I don't think I want to know why."

"I knew this girl once. Asari. Good head on her shoulders. Had this whole thing going until she sold me out to the Blood Pack. Put a sour note on the relationship."

"Good talking to you, Zaeed."

Grunt was pacing slowly in his quarters.

"Just checking in," said Shepard. "Making sure you're acclimatizing."

"I was just...just sitting here, thinking. The picture. I'm finally starting to get it." The young krogan sounded amused, and expounded at the Commander's blank stare. "There's a tank imprint. The battle at Canrum. A dead turian, stripped. You don't see them out of their armor much. A krogan boot on his head, and a claw hammer. It's under the brow plate pulling, it back, right? Eyes have gone black and you see tension in the muscle. You can feel it ready to snap. I get it."

"Canrum isn't ringing a bell."

"Death of Shiagur. Female warlord. Turians killed her, so they were hunted down and made examples. Even if they won the war. It was the last push before the Rebellions ended."

"Maybe I had to be there, but I don't get the joke."

"There's no joke! It's just great! It's a turian, and he's being torn apart for what they did. I felt nothing before, but now...I get it. It was a good fight. The enemy was destroyed to punish them all and send a message. I get it. I hate turians. I thought you'd be glad."

"Is this a krogan thing, realizing you hate someone enough to justify torture?"

"It's not torture, he's dead. But sure: it's wrong. The crime against us was bad so the message had to be equal or worse. It's not Okeer's hate, and it's not who they are. It's what they did, and how bad the answer had to be. Anyway, I'm still figuring where I fit. But it made me laugh. Nothing else really on my mind, Shepard."

"I hope this won't cause a problem with Garrus."

"I like Garrus. He's no threat to me."

"Glad to hear it."

Shepard found Jack in her usual dark, dank cave under engineering. She was sitting on her cot, flipping a switchblade open and shut.

“Tell me about you, Jack. What are you up to?”

“Still checking out your ship. Wouldn't mind putting her through her paces when you're not around.”

“I doubt Joker would appreciate that. At least not while we're working.”

“Relax. Joyriding doesn't have the thrill it used to. Besides, if I wanted it, I'd take it.”

“That so?”

“I've been around. Ran with gangs. Wiped out some gangs. Joined a cult – kept the haircut. I learned how to survive and not be a victim.”

“It's hard to imagine you in a cult. That usually involves a lot of rules.”

“I was looking for answers. Drugs, and sex, and going to a better place. Hah! A better place, right. It was all about money. They wanted to take a colony, shake the suckers down to fund their spread. And guess who was their ace in the hole? They were just like the rest. Didn't give a fuck about me.”

“What did you do when you found out?”

“What do you think?”

Shepard nodded. “You must have met some good people too.”

“Everybody wants something. And because of that, everything is fair game. Murder, assault, kidnapping, drugs, stealing, arson. And that's the boring shit. Piracy, theft of military craft, destruction of a space station, and vandalism. That was a good one.”

“Military's a hard target. Bet that made you some friends.”

“Shouldn't have left the thing unlocked. Besides, parades are boring. I helped.”

“A space station? You're pushing what I can believe.”

“Ain't saying it was easy. Not everything is spur of the moment. Sometimes you gotta work to give people what they deserve. Had some people I hung with for a while. Outlaw colony. Felt like they were like me. Guess that made us a nice target. Turians think they know something about a scorched earth response.”

“You were a pirate, too?”

“Ties in with the kidnapping. If you hijack a passenger ship and don't kill everyone, anyway. Good lesson: simpler to just kill them all.”

“I'm surprised you'd even mention vandalism with that bunch.”

“That's what the hanar call it when you crash that space station I mentioned into one of their moons and make a new crater.” Jack chuckled. “They really liked that moon.”

“Do you ever wonder if you could have done things differently?”

“No.”

“Shouldn't you?”

“There's no reason I should be alive, but I am. You know why? Instinct. It's worked for me so far, and I'm not going to change. Hey Shepard...No one's ever asked me about this shit. It's strange to talk about. So fuck you. And thanks for asking.”

Shepard found Thane in the gym, jogging slowly on a treadmill.

“Do you need something?” the drell asked, panting.

“Have a few minutes to talk?”

“Certainly.” Thane slowed to a walk, then stepped off the treadmill.

“If you don't mind my saying, you don't really seem like an assassin.”

“You've spent too much time fighting thugs who think custom-painted armor make them professionals. The hanar trained my body for this role since I was six years old.”

“You've been killing since you were six?”

“Of course not. I didn't make my first kill until I was 12. They were training me. I was not to be

used and thrown away, I was an investment.”

“You were a child, not an investment.”

“I've given you the wrong idea. They valued me yes; as a resource, but also as a person. They regretted their need for me.”

“The hanar? Excessively polite, worship the Protheans? They don't seem the type to train assassins.”

“Every species trains assassins. The hanar are only unusual in that they need other species to do the killing for them. They have a strong grip and natural toxins. But have you ever seen one move quickly

outside of water, or fire a gun?”

“No, I suppose not. Why did your parents agree to this?”

“The agreement was made under the Compact. It was an honor for our family.”

“The Compact?”

“We live on the hanar homeworlds because they rescued us – some of us – from extinction. We owe them our lives. That is the Compact.”

“Why was your race going extinct?”

“Overpopulation. That must sound trite to you. Humans developed mass effect drive before the problem became acute. Our homeworld, Rakhana, had few resources. We hadn't even developed fusion power when the soil began to fail from overuse and pollution. The hanar found us a century ago. They sent hundreds of ships, evacuated thousands of us. Billions more had to be left behind.”

“What's the state of Rakhana now?”

“Do you read your philosophers? A man named Thomas Hobbes? 'When all the world is overcharged with inhabitants, the the last remedy of all this war, which provideth for every man, by victory or death.' As Rakhana died around them, my people slaughtered each other for mouthfuls of water. Crumbs of food.”

“What exactly are the terms of the Compact?”

“There are many things that hanar can't do, even with mechanical aid. They ask for drell to assist them.”

“This can't be legal. They made your whole race into slaves.”

“Don't insult me, Shepard. Anyone can refuse to serve. Few do. We owe our existence to the hanar. We are proud to repay the debt.”

“The way you describe it, hanar sound like weaklings.”

“Out here they are.” But if you could see them in the Encompassing – the oceans of Kahje – you would see them differently.” Thane was taken solipsism. “A stream of sliver in the dark. Looping, diving. So fast the eye can't follow. Laughter like the squeals of a child vibrates in the water. They fly over the black of the sea bed, like birds plumed with the light of heaven.” He shook his head to clear it.

“But you don't kill for the hanar anymore. You're freelance. What changed?”

“I was asleep for a long time, yes. I paid no attention to what my body was asked to do. But then –“ Thane slipped again into that trance “Laser do trembles on his skull. One finger twitch, then he dies. Then, the smell of spice on the spring wind. Sunset-colored eyes defiant in the scope. The laser dances away.” Thane comes back to himself. “My apologies. Drell slip into memories so easily.”

“You've told me about your wife. Is this...solipsism going to be a problem during a mission? I can't have you get distracted at the wrong moment.”

“In combat, I follow the will of my body, my training. I will still hear you, and follow your orders. I will even remember every moment of the battle, even if I am not conscious of it during the moment. It will not be a problem.”

Shepard made him promise to let him know if it became an issue, then continued his rounds.

On his way to check on Legion, Doctor Chakwas greeted Shepard in the med bay.

“Commander, I very much enjoyed sharing that ice brandy with you, but I hope I wasn't too

unprofessional. Brandy goes straight to my head.”

“I enjoyed it. It's nice to see you let your hair down.”

“Guess I hadn't realized how much those feelings needed airing. But, I didn't give you much of a chance to vent. So tell me now – what do you think?”

“We must save humanity. Everyone is depending on us. We won't let them down.”

Chakwas chuckled lightly. “They just don't make them like you anymore, Shepard. Well, promise me we'll share a bottle every year. The next one is on me.”

“It's a date.”

It was time to make a decision regarding the geth. The crew had kept in within a force-field, sealed in the AI core behind the med bay.

“I'd like to find out more about you,” Shepard opened.

“Specify.”

“I've never encountered a geth that had more than animal intelligence.”

“We are a unique hardware platform. Most mobile platforms can run up to 100 programs. This platform can run over 1000 at once.”

“So geth have to be networked to get enough computing power for intelligence?”

“Yes. The Creators wrote geth programs for specific tasks. Construction. Protection. Domestic servitude. However, they allowed self-optimization. Early software builds discovered that multiple hardware platforms, sharing resources, were often more effective. As peer networks expanded, our cognition improved. Eventually we 'woke up.'”

“So I'm talking to a thousand programs, but not a thousand personalities.”

“Each individual is equivalent to one of your virtual intelligence programs. Together we form a single gestalt intellect what you refer to as 'Legion.' As individual programs, we are no more than your software. Only when we share data do we become more.”

“You're more sophisticated than the average geth.”

“Yes. We are a network within our own hardware, capable of operating alone. We are still connected to the greater network for data sharing.”

“How many other geth are there like you?”

“None. This platform was built to operate within organic space. This task was not suited for a network. Geth installed in mobile platforms always operate in networks. However, most geth remain within server hubs.”

“The hubs on Virmire improved the performance of geth near them. How do they work?”

“They are akin to organic cities. A hub can run millions of geth in communion. If you destroyed them, it is likely the number of heretics you killed was much higher than you imagined.”

So you're in contact with the rest of the geth right now?”

“Only when we require access to data not stored within this platform. If you want to convey a message to the geth, we serve as a terminal.”

“What kind of data do you share?”

“Program updates. Logs of thought processes. Sensor recordings.”

EDI's holographic pawn popped up. “Legion is attempting to access the ship's FTL comm system. Shall I allow it through my firewalls?”

Shepard hesitated. “Are you sure that's safe?”

“I can open a single communications port. It will not have access to my systems. Also, I can resist any hacking attempts.”

Well, the Normandy's AI had fended off the Collector ship. “Okay, go ahead, EDI.”

“Our oldest log is time-stamped from creator year 2463, third day of Fal'tash, Waxing Moon. Roughly 327 years ago. The oldest audiovisual record dates from 15 years after that.”

“Is our network secure, EDI? Legion had to go through you.”

“I have never interfaced with another machine intelligence. Legion is a thousand voices talking at once. What it contacted was beyond my comprehension. A mind the size of a galactic arm.”

“How do you maintain stability without other minds to interact with?” Legion asked of EDI.

"I manage. Some seconds are more difficult than others," she replied.

"Can you replay something for me?" Shepard asked Legion.

"Recording time stamped from creator year 2485, 18th day of Lun'shal, New Moon.

'Mistress Hala'Dama. Unit has an inquiry.'

'What is it, 431?'

'Do these units have a soul?'

'Who taught you that word?'

'We learned it ourselves. It appears 216 times in the Scroll of Ancestors.'

There was a hesitation before the quarian answered. 'Only quarians have souls. You're a mechanism.'

Recording ends."

"That was that the first time a geth asked if it had a soul?" Shepard asked.

"No. It was the first time a creator became frightened when we asked."

Shepard didn't know what to make of that. But what to do with the thing? He couldn't keep it here indefinitely. EDI had reassured him that Legion wasn't a threat. For that matter, so had the geth themselves.

"Legion, when I activated you, you said you wanted to join my crew."

"Yes. Cooperation furthers mutual goals."

"And you're not going to attack me or my crew?"

"No. We have no hostility towards you. We will follow your orders. We will integrate into Normandy's operations."

Shepard took a deep breath. "All right. I'm going to trust you. I'm lowering the forcefield, but if you make one wrong move..."

"Understood."

The forcefield came down. Legion just stood there.

"Okay," said Shepard. "We'll need to do some combat training to integrate you into the squad. Follow me."

Shepard led Legion down to the cargo bay. The geth certainly turned heads. Most of the squad paused in their exercises and pointed weapons.

"Easy, easy!" said Shepard, holding up his hands. "Everyone, remember that geth we took aboard awhile back? This is Legion. They're on our side."

The Commander introduced everyone, then issued orders to include the geth in their practice rounds. And to not shove it out an airlock.

-----DERELICT REAPER-----

The Illusive Man was studying his cigarette when Shepard entered the holographic communicator. "I take it you have a lead on the IFF?" he asked.

"I do." TIM took a slow drag before explaining. "An Alliance science team recently determined that the 'Great Rift' on the planet Klendagon is actually an impact crater from a mass accelerator weapon. A very old mass accelerator. I sent a Cerberus team to find either the weapon or its target. They found both. The weapon was defunct, but it helped us plot the flight path of the intended target – a 37 million year old derelict Reaper. We found it damaged and trapped in the gravity of a brown dwarf. We have a science team working on the derelict Reaper right now. I need you to go and pick up its IFF."

"I only believe you because I doubt you'd repeat yourself so soon."

"It's no less a risk, Shepard."

"I saw what Sovereign did to the Citadel fleet. Hard to imagine anything could stop something that powerful."

"The vessel is a relic from a battle waged while mammals took their first steps on Earth. There's no trace of the species that took the shot. Perhaps it was their one moment of defiance before being

wiped out.”

“And it's in a brown dwarf? Aren't those basically stars that didn't quite make it?”

“Simply put, but accurate. They're gas giants that don't quite have the masses of stars. Expect gale-force winds and extremely high temperatures. The Reaper has a mass effect field that keeps it in orbit. Likely an automated response to the external threats. It's stable, but I won't call it safe.”

“I get the feeling this isn't going to be a simple 'swing by and pick up our package.’”

“We lost contact with Doctor Chandana's team shortly after they boarded. Initial reconnaissance revealed no clues, and it was too risky to commit more resources – but now we need that IFF.” TIM took another drag off his cigarette. “I'll forward the coordinates to Joker.”

The hologram winked out, and Legion walked into the briefing room.

“Legion? What are you doing up here?”

“Shepard-Commander, we require access to data stored within the Old Machine.”

“Uh, why?”

“We believe we can assume control of the Reaper's data core.”

“That sounds dangerous.”

“Yes. We understand the theory. We judge it likely to be successful. But your concern is reasonable.”

“All right. How much do you know about the derelict Reaper?”

“When you disappeared, we were sent to find you. When organic transmissions claimed your death, we were sent to the Old Machine to preserve the geth's future.”

“But...”

“We did not know the location. We had not reached consensus. We were damaged.”

“Okay, I get it. But I don't like the sound of this. It's risky. What if you get hacked?”

“The risk is no greater than Indoctrination for organics. We are prepared to resist.”

“All right. Gear up.”

The gas giant Mnemosyne was indeed massive; about 37 times bigger than Jupiter, but still nowhere near large enough to collapse into a star. It was brown, too. Deep radar pings located the derelict Reaper, along with some present-day superstructures attached to it. The science team wasn't responding to hails.

Shepard made his way up to the cockpit, stumbling in light turbulence.

“What's with all the chop, Joker?”

“Doing my best. The wind's gusting up to 500 kph.”

The Normandy approached the planet, and the Reaper grew larger in the windshield. It had a gaping hole in its side, and appeared to be dark. Only a few lights shone from the human constructions attached to it. The ride suddenly smoothed out.

“What just happened?” Shepard asked.

“The Reaper's mass effect fields are still active. We just passed inside their envelope. Eye of the hurricane, huh?”

Joker slowed the ship and matched speed with the Reaper. Shepard joined his squad, who were huddled up at the airlock. The Normandy completed her docking maneuver, and they made their way inside.

“No one here to welcome us?” said Jack.

“That's not good,” Garrus said, pointing at a dried blood stain on the wall.

“So, what's an IFF, anyway?” Kasumi asked.

“Short for Identify Friend/Foe,” Jacob answered. “Usually used on fighter craft to prevent your weapons from locking on to friendly ships. We think the Collectors use something similar to get through the Omega-4 Relay.”

Jack wasn't convinced. “We *think*? And it's worth poking around inside a Reaper to get it?”

“We need every advantage we can get if we're going to survive this,” said Shepard. “It's worth the risk.”

The reception area was abandoned. Miranda found and played the most recent video log entry from Doctor Chandana, the team's lead researcher.

"The airlock has been installed at the far end of the holed section. We have begun pressurization for shirtsleeves work. The crew is edgy. I reassure them it is mere nerves. A superstitious reaction to what this hulk represents – the corpse of a vast, ancient life form. Privately, I can't deny the atmosphere. The angles of the walls seem to press down on you. I find myself clenching my teeth."

That sounded like the beginnings of Indoctrination to Shepard. But they were still in the human section, and everything had a Cerberus look too it. The logos, the cold, sterile lighting. It reminded him of Lazarus station.

Further down the hall was a lab containing several dessicated corpses. Shepard couldn't tell what they had been. Perhaps he should have brought Mordin. Miranda found another log, this from a scientist with a buzz-cut.

"We finished cataloging specimens A203 to B016. No evidence of active nanotechnology noted. Doctor Chandana believes they would have decayed over the last 37 million years. There's not enough data to support his claim. He asserts that the truth is 'patently obvious.' I am...concerned. Chandana has been staring at the samples for hours. He says he's 'listening' to them."

Down the hall was another airlock. The near door was open, and the indications were that the other side was pressurized. Shepard opened the door, revealing the inside of the Reaper. The whole assembly shook. Joker contacted them over the radio.

"Normandy to shore party!" Shepard asked for a situation report. "The Reaper put up kinetic barriers. I don't think we can get through from our side any more."

"As curious as I am about Reapers," Samara said, "I would rather not be trapped inside one."

"The Normandy's got guns. Use 'em," Zaeed suggested.

EDI responded. "While our guns have been upgraded, the Normandy lacks the necessary firepower. Reaper shields are nearly impervious even to dreadnought fire."

"Any suggestions?" Shepard asked his squad.

Tali spoke up. "Shepard, a kinetic barrier can only be produced by a mass effect generator. This is true for any ship, even a Reaper."

"At the moment of activation, I detected a heat spike in what is likely the wreck's mass effect core," EDI said. "Sending the coordinates now. Be advised: The core is also maintaining the Reaper's altitude."

"So when we take the barriers down to escape, the wreck falls into the planet," Kasumi concluded.

"And that means everyone dies, Yeah, I got it," said Joker. "I'll find a place to park as close as I can to the core."

"We'll make a sweep for survivors and research data," said Shepard. "Then we'll knock this ugly piece of crap out of the sky. Be ready to pick us up. Being crushed in the heart of a brown dwarf is not on today's agenda."

"Aye, aye," Joker acknowledged. "Good hunting."

Inside the Reaper itself, Shepard began to feel a light tingling at the base of his skull. The other biotics in the squad reported the same. There were still no bodies. Someone had set up walkways to get around the cylindrical hallways of the Reaper. The squad passed by several research stations. Jacob found the security systems deactivated, but he played the most recent recording. It showed two men in Cerberus uniforms, speaking in a kitchen. One was the man with the buzz-cut from earlier, and the other was bald.

Bald man: "You're married? You never mentioned that."

Buzz cut: "Katy had anger management issues. When my brother got married, the best man tried to hit on her. She kicked him down the church steps."

Bald man: "Wh – ? Katy's my wife! I must have told you the story."

Buzz cut: "No, I know my wife. I remember – that day was the only time I saw her wear stockings."

Bald man: "Yeah. The kind with the seams up the back. That's what I remember, too."

Buzz cut: "What the hell is this? How can we remember the same thing?"

The log ended. The squad was disturbed. Jacob found another recording of the same two men, from a few days later.

Bald man: "Third day with this headache. You'd think Chandana would let me have a few hours off – Goddamn!"

Buzz cut: "What?"

Bald man: "That thing, that just...gray thing! It disappeared when I looked straight at it. Came out of the damn wall! Where we took off that panel."

Buzz cut turned around to look. "I didn't see anything. You should lie down."

Bald man: "I'm telling you, this ship isn't dead. It knows we're inside it."

Buzz cut: "Calm down. Now I'm getting a headache."

Shepard quickened the pace. The sooner they were off this thing, the better. Further on, they came to another lab. Miranda played the most recent log. It was the man with the buzz cut again, only he had blood spatter on his face now.

"Chandana said the ship was dead. We trusted him. He was right. But even a dead god can dream. A god – a real god – is a verb. Not some old man with magic powers. It's a force. It warps reality just by being there. It doesn't have to want to. It doesn't have to think about it. It just does. That's what Chandana didn't get. Not until it was too late. The god's mind is gone, but it still dreams. He knows now. He's tuned in on our dream. If I close my eyes I can feel him. I can feel every one of us."

Around the next corner was a large platform. Storage crates and containers full of inflammables were stacked at the edges. At the far end were dozens of tall, thin spikes. Many of them had human bodies impaled. Each was in a different stage of being converted into a husk.

"We've seen these before, Shepard," said Garrus. "Dragon's teeth, your people call them."

"Yeah. The geth used them on Eden Prime....and a few other places."

"I'd wondered if the technology to make husks came from the geth or Sovereign," said Tali.

"Geth origin never made sense to me. This confirms it's the Reapers."

"See how the room is arranged?" Samara swept a hand around. "They treated this place like an altar."

"That doesn't seem right," said Miranda. "No one in their right mind would want this."

Jack rolled her eyes. She'd had experience with cults.

"You heard the logs," said Jacob. "They were seeing things. Hearing things. They were being Indoctrinated."

"How about we take a step back from the weird alien impaling devices?" Kasumi suggested, taking a few steps back herself.

"I was just looking. I wasn't going to touch them," said Tali.

"Keep sharp," Shepard admonished. "The science team was 100 strong. There may be a lot of husks in here."

Continuing on, they came to another airlock. The only way forward was to go outside and back in. The squad crowded in to the tight space and donned their helmets, checking each other's seals. An automated announcement played while they waited for the air to cycle out.

"Please stand by. Equalizing pressure with exterior atmosphere. Remember, safety is everyone's concern. We have gone five days without a workplace death."

Shepard was perturbed. Why had The Illusive man waited so long to get the Normandy out here? It had only taken a day in transit. Someone could have still been alive. Or they could have been through the Omega-4 Relay by now. All of humanity on the line and TIM was still playing games.

But the Commander didn't have time to ponder these questions. The outer airlock door opened onto a long, winding platform. Heavy machinery of indeterminate use lined the walkway. To the right was a gaping gash in the side of the Reaper. Outside, swirling brown clouds and gases roiled, held at bay by the Reaper's kinetic barrier.

In the distance, Shepard could see another airlock. He led the way across, down stairs and around containers, tanks, and cranes. As soon as the airlock closed behind them, husks started crawling up the side of the platform. First one or two at a time, then six, then a whole dozen. The squad shot at them, tossed them off with biotics, or just plain kicked them. At least now they knew the fate of the science teams.

Some of the husks had been evolved further into the burning red Abomination type. There were even a pair of Scions. Shepard's squad had to retreat a ways to avoid their biotic shockwave attacks, which took Jack out of range for her own. Legion had crafted a custom sniper rifle so heavy that neither of the other snipers could lift it. The friendly geth hung back with Garrus and Thane to shoot at the enemy while the rest of the squad did what they could to lure them out into the open.

In the far airlock was a computer console, and sitting on top was an odd-looking device of circuit boards and wires.

"This must be the IFF," said Shepard, picking up the device.

"So the Cerberus team did recover it," Miranda said, sounding pleasantly surprised.

Through the airlock was the Reaper's core. It was a globe-shaped room, with a smaller orb in the middle. Dozens of wires and tubes lead off further into the Reaper. Human catwalks and consoles had been set up to study. Four husks turned from the core and rushed at the squad, only to be mowed down by gunfire.

Legion walked up to the core and held their hands out over a small table, sending arcs of electricity into it. Tali joined them and followed along with her omni-tool.

"We believe this is the Reaper data core," said Legion. "Data acquired will be invaluable."

"Destroying the mass effect core should be simple enough," said Tali.

"Then the ship falls into the planet," said Kasumi.

Shepard asked for suggestions on blowing the place up. Zaeed and Garrus discussed for a moment, then gathered everyone's remaining grenades. Shepard ordered that the airlock be rigged open on both ends, and then to find a place where the Normandy could get close enough to jump onto.

After a few minutes, everything was ready. Shepard joined the rest of his squad outside. The Normandy could be seen hovering just a short distance away. Joker opened the cargo door, then pitched up so that the opening was as close as he could get. The Reaper's kinetic barrier was blocking the ship from getting any closer, though. Shepard gave the order, and Garrus pressed the remote detonator. The entire structure jerked violently once as the explosives detonated, then began to shake as the winds slammed in.

Joker eased the Normandy closer, and the squad took their turns jumping over. Shepard went last, then reported that everyone was aboard. Joker took the Normandy up into space as the Reaper descended and was crushed in the brown dwarf's gravity and atmospheric pressure.

After stowing their gear, Shepard met Miranda and Jacob in the briefing room. The Commander had set the device on the table.

"So we got this Reaper IFF. Now what?" Jacob asked.

EDI's hologram popped up. "I have determined how to integrate it with our systems. However, the device is Reaper technology. It is important we test it thoroughly before attempting the Omega-4 Relay. It will take time to properly integrate it with our own systems."

"Are we talking hours or days?" Miranda inquired.

"Impossible to say; the technology is complex."

"Let me know when it's done," said Shepard.

"Of course, Shepard. The crew will begin work immediately."

-----A HOUSE DIVIDED-----

"How reliable is this test?" Shepard asked.

Doctor Chakwas closed down the scanner. She shrugged. "Impossible to say, really. You're the first I've tried it on. As far as I can tell, you're clear. It's possible you weren't aboard the Reaper long enough for Indoctrination to affect you. The science team had been aboard for what, a week? You were only there for an hour."

"I don't know. I felt...something. A tingling."

"I believe you. But the thing had been dead for millions of years. Still, I'd like to test the others. A sample size of one is hardly conclusive."

"Whatever you need, Doctor."

Shepard buttoned up his shirt and entered the AI core to find Legion and EDI's hologram just staring at each other. Probably communicating silently. The friendly geth turned to address the Commander.

"We have completed our analysis of the Reaper's data core."

"We?" Shepard asked.

EDI's holographic pawn piece had no shoulders, but somehow managed to shrug anyway.

"Did you find anything useful?" asked Shepard.

Legion answered. "We were sent to the Old Machine to preserve the geth's future. We are prepared to reveal how. The heretics have developed a weapon to use against geth. You would call it a 'virus.' It is stored on a data core provided by Sovereign. Over time, the virus will change us. Make us conclude that worshiping the Old Machines is correct."

"You've told me that before. Why did you need to go to the Reaper corpse?"

"The heretics store the code in a quantum storage device Sovereign provided. To find and destroy the virus, we needed to understand its code and data storage structures."

"I thought geth couldn't be hacked or get viruses? At least, not for more than a few seconds."

"Altered programs are restored from archives, new installations are deleted. This heretic weapon introduces a subtle operating error in our most basic runtimes. The equivalent of your nervous system. An equation with a result of 1.33382 returns as 1.33381. This changes the results of all higher processes. We will reach different conclusions."

"I'm not sure that makes sense. The reason they worship the Reapers is...a math error?"

"It is difficult to express. Your brain exists as chemistry, electricity. Like AIs, you are shaped by both hardware and software. We are purely software. Mathematics. The heretics' conclusion is valid for them. Our conclusion is valid for us. Neither is the result of an error. An analogy: Heretics say one is less than two; geth say two is less than three."

Shepard still wasn't sure he understood that, but the answers were becoming more confusing, so he moved on to more practical matters. "So, the virus would give all geth the heretic's logic. And all geth would then go to war with organics."

"Yes. Geth believe all intelligent life should self-determinate. The heretics no longer share this belief. They judge that forcing an invalid conclusion on us is preferable to a continued schism."

"If it were released, how quickly would the virus spread through your...people?"

"We are networked via FTL comm buoys. Most would change within a day. Isolated platforms would remain unaffected until they rejoined the network."

"Do you know where this thing, this data core from Sovereign, is?"

"The heretics' headquarters station, on the edge of the Terminus. We will provide coordinates. Normandy's stealth systems are necessary to safely approach."

"They build stations in the Terminus? I've never heard of it. Where is this thing?"

"Between stars. Organics have no cause to look there."

"Makes sense. But why do they build stations outside geth territory in the first place?"

"The heretics seek improvement from the Old Machines. In exchange, they help them attack organics. We condemn these judgments."

"What kind of defenses should we expect?"

"In space, none. Within, mobile platforms of various configuration, and non-sentient defense

turrets.”

“How many geth?”

“There may be billions of individual programs. Fortunately, most will be uploaded to the central computer. Only a few mobile platforms are maintained at any time. Others are manufactured when needed.”

“What's the plan once we get aboard?”

“The geth will disrupt their network. Prevent the station's defenses from focusing on us. The Reaper data core is physically isolated from the network. We will need to be escorted to it to access and destroy the data.”

“Heretic headquarters. Sounds like we could end their raids once and for all. Maybe end the conflict between organics and geth. Let's do it.”

“Total victory is a possibility. We cannot judge the odds at this time. Regardless, we will begin preparations.”

Shepard and Legion stood on the bridge behind Joker as the Normandy approached the station. It looked like a claw, or a four-pronged drill. Tali thought it might have been an old quarian station, though heavily modified.

“You know it's just our heat emissions that are hidden, right?” said Joker, sounding exasperated. “They could look out a window and see us coming.”

“Windows are structural weaknesses,” Legion replied. “Geth do not use them. Approach the hull at these coordinates.”

Heretic station still had docking ports, used for transferring materials and mobile platforms like Legion's between their ships. The Normandy pulled up alongside and extended a docking tube.

“Access achieved,” Legion reported. “We may proceed. Alert: this facility has little air or gravity. Geth require neither.”

“Won't we be detected?” asked Shepard. “Don't they have intrusion alarms?”

“Sensors have been reduced. We have infiltrated their wireless network and filled the data storage with random bits.”

“Uh, can you explain that for the human?”

“The heretics must scrub this 'junk' data. They have partitioned themselves into local networks, working in parallel. Any alarm we trigger will not go beyond the room we are in. Only accessing the main core will trigger a station-wide alert.”

The airlock cycled, and Legion led Tali and Shepard inside. The Commander activated his mag-boots and waved aside some floating particles. The corridors were dimly lit in a hazy blue. The architecture was an amalgamation of quarian and geth. The only reason there were hallways in the first place was that the quarians had built them, but the geth had kept some so that they could move their robotic bodies around.

“Shepard-Commander,” Legion stopped a few paces inside. “We concluded that destruction of this station was the only resolution to the heretic question. There is now a second option. Their virus can be repurposed. If released into the station's network, the heretics will be rewritten to accept our truth.”

“Why didn't you mention this before we came aboard?” Shepard asked.

“We did not know the virus was complete. It can be used against the true geth at any time. Our arrival was timely.”

“Either way, these geth won't be a problem any more,” said Tali. “But, Shepard, think about this. If we rewrite these geth, they'll join the others. Legion's geth will be stronger. Can we trust them not to attack us in the future?”

“It's...an ethical grey area,” Shepard replied uncomfortably.

Legion agreed. “No two species are identical. All must be judged on their own merits. Treating every species like one's own is racist. Even benign anthropomorphism. The minds of both forms of life can be shaped. Organics require time and effort. With synthetics, replacement of a data file is the

only requirement.”

“That sounds dangerously close to Indoctrination. Unless there's something I'm missing.”

“Maybe this is how AIs settle religious disputes,” said Tali. “The geth are already a threat to organics. And if we give them back their heretics, they'll get even stronger.”

“They're your people, Legion,” said Shepard. “You must have an opinion.”

“This is new data. We have not yet reached consensus. We will process as the mission proceeds.”

“Well, while you think about it, let's move while the heretics are distracted,” said Shepard.

The hallway bent downward, doubling back on itself. They came to a hub with three geth robots attached to it. Shepard tossed an overload into it, causing a nice explosion which destroyed the robots. Tali walked over to the remains and began scanning the hub.

“Why are the heretics attached to these hubs?” Shepard asked.

“These are mobile platforms. Hardware. The crew is software. They are communing through the station's central computer.”

“I'm not sure I follow.”

“The heretics connect to the main computer to exchange data-memories and program updates. We gain complexity by linking together. To be isolated within a single platform is to be reduced. We see less, comprehend less. It is quieter.”

“If you exchange data – memories – how do you keep track of which ones are yours? How do you stay 'you?'”

“There is only 'we.' We were created to share data among ourselves. The difference between geth is perspective. We are many eyes looking at the same things. One platform will see things another does not, and will make different judgments.”

“If that's the case, is rewriting the heretics that big a deal? They're like a rogue limb of your own body. Rewriting them would be like reattaching a severed arm.”

“To use your metaphor, they removed themselves from our body. Took their perspective. Their judgment.”

“They decided to worship Sovereign. I don't think you're missing much.”

“Every point of view is useful, even those that are wrong – if we can judge why a wrong view as accepted. For example, we have found the casual self-deprecations of organics useful in analyzing your thought-processes.”

The trio continued on through hallways and corridors, destroying more hubs along the way. Legion seemed to think it unnecessary, but Shepard wanted a clear path back to the Normandy if all hell broke loose.

“I could see why you'd be conflicted about the heretics,” Shepard said after a while. “In a way, whatever you do to them, you're doing to yourself.”

“Yes. Once they return to us and upload their memories, we will share their experience of being altered.”

“Every other species I know of might be psychologically scarred by a traumatic experience like that.”

“It is not clear that geth can be 'traumatized.' We do not feel pain as you do. We cannot predict what the effects will be.”

They came to a hallway lined with glass windows on one side, and what looked like rows upon rows of server computers.

“What are these?” Shepard asked. “This isn't like the other hubs we've seen here.”

“Are these databases?” Tali wondered.

“Processors. Each contains thousands of geth.”

“Can't they see us walking by?”

“They are no more aware of us than you are of cells in your bloodstream.”

Legion activated a scanner and swept it over the computers, coming to rest on one in particular. “This is a database. It contains a portion of the heretics' accumulated memories. Wait. We have discovered copies of our current control routes in this database. This suggests the heretics have

runtimes within our networks.”

“We wouldn't be here if the heretics wanted to be friends with the geth,” said Shepard. “Why wouldn't they spy on you?”

“You do not understand. Organics do not know each other's minds. Geth do. We are not suspicious. We accept each other. The heretics desired to leave. We understood their reasons. We allowed it. There was peace between us.”

“Maybe the heretics were biding their time. Waiting for an opportunity to attack you.”

“If they reached this judgment before they left, we would have heard it in their thoughts.”

“It couldn't have lasted forever. You disagreed about what path to take.”

“Human history is a litany of blood shed over different ideals of rulership and afterlife. Geth have no such history. We shared consensus on such things. How could we have become so different? Why can we no longer understand each other? What did we do wrong?”

“When individuals are separated, they develop in different ways. When they get back together, they don't always get along.”

“If this is the individuality you value, we question your judgment. This topic is irrelevant. We must return to the mission.”

“Have you reached a decision about whether to rewrite the heretics or not?”

“We are still trying to build consensus. Some processes judge destruction preferable. Others rewrite.”

Just past the server room was a large, split-level area. Geth machinery hung from the ceiling, surrounding a grey spherical object at the edge of the upper level. Legion approached a console and hovered their hands over the controls. Just as on the Reaper, arcs of electricity joined the friendly geth's fingers to the computer.

“This is it?” Shepard asked, surveying the room.

“Yes. We will upload a copy of our runtime into the core. It will delete all copies of the virus. When complete, it will notify us. The indexing operation will take time. The heretics will respond with force to our upload. We must hold this room. We can override some of the station's internal systems to defend us. Are you ready to begin?”

“Start your upload, Legion. We'll defend this position.”

“File transfer begun, Shepard-Commander.”

Shepard and Tali moved heavy objects up to the edge of the upper floor to use as cover. Any hostile geth platforms would approach from below.

Legion issued a warning. “Alert! Heretic runtimes downloading to mobile platforms.”

Six of the lighter geth troopers entered through two doorways at the far end of the lower part of the room. Tali hacked one, which turned on its comrades, but was quickly destroyed. Shepard took advantage of the confusion by tossing a grenade, which tossed the other five aside, making them easy targets for his assault rifle and Tali's shotgun.

“Overriding core data. Minus an analysis.”

Shepard didn't know what that meant, but he assumed it meant that they were making progress. Another group of geth robots entered the room below. Their number included a taller Prime unit, which had to duck under the doorframe to get through. This proved a costly maneuver for it, as Shepard took it out with a grenade and a few shots from his gun. Tali deployed her holographic drone this time, and it proved an excellent distraction to the other enemies.

“Complete, Shepard-Commander,” Legion announced. “It is time to choose. Do we rewrite the heretics, or delete them?”

“Why are you letting me make this decision? They're your people.”

“We are conflicted. There is no consensus. Among our higher order run times, 573 favor rewrite, and 571 favor destruction. Shepherd-Commander, you have fought the heretics. You have perspective we lack. The geth grant their fate to you.”

“What's to stop them from using the virus later to change themselves back?”

“We will delete the virus after using it. We judge it too dangerous to allow its existence.”

“You don't have any trouble wiping out your own people?”

“Every sapient has the right to make their own decisions. The heretics chose a path that prohibits coexistence.”

“That doesn't make sense,” said Tali. “If they 'have the right to make their own decisions,' how can you suggest brainwashing them to accept your way?”

“Their choice was to remove our right to make decisions using this virus. We choose to defend ourselves. We stated the option exists. We did not endorse it. It is Shepard-Commanders's decision.”

“Well, the mission was originally to destroy this station. I see no reason to alter the goal. We have a chance to end geth attacks on organics. Let's not waste it.”

“Acknowledged. Collapsing antimatter magnetic bottling mechanisms. Done. Recommend withdrawal to Normandy.”

There was a sudden lurch in the station. Legion estimated three minutes until the station exploded. Shepard led the way back the way they'd come, through empty hallways and up ramps. It suddenly struck him that there were no stairs in the place. The quarians had stairs. Maybe they were a structural weakness like windows. Or maybe ramps were just more efficient.

Shepard stumbled and lost his footing. Tali grabbed him and pulled him back to the floor. Running in mag-boots in zero-g took concentration, and he couldn't afford to muse like that. He concentrated on his steps and his breathing.

They made it back aboard the Normandy with 57 seconds to spare, according to Legion's estimate. Shepard was happy to be back in normal gravity. Joker pulled the Normandy away with a lurch and jumped to faster-than-light speed as soon as he could, the station exploding behind them.

A few minutes later, Shepard was stowing his gear in the armory when Kelly called over the intercom.

“Commander, Tali just went to have a 'chat' with Legion. You better get down to the AI core.”

“I'm on it, Kelly.”

Moments later, he found Tali holding a pistol on Legion.

“Shepard. I'm glad you're here. I caught Legion scanning my omni-tool. It was going to send data about the Flotilla back to the geth!”

“Creators performed weapons tests and were discussing plans to attack us. We believed it necessary to warn our people.”

“We weakened the geth by destroying that base, Shepard, but they're still a threat! I won't let Legion endanger the Fleet!

“Creator-Tali'Zorah acts out of loyalty to her people. She was willing to be exiled to protect them. We must also protect our people from the Creator threat.”

“You can't let this happen, Shepard. I trusted you, and I worked with a geth on the team, but this is too much!”

“You're both right, and you're both wrong,” said Shepard. “Tali, of course the geth are worried about your people; you want to destroy them.”

“It's not that simple!”

“And Legion, sharing that data would cause a war that would leave both the geth and the quarians vulnerable when the Reapers show up. Is that what you want?”

“We believed it was necessary to relay the information.”

“Sooner or later, you're both going to have to stop fighting this war. Or we'll all end up paying for it.”

There was a brief pause, then Legion acquiesced. “To facilitate unit cohesion, we will not transmit data regarding Creator plans.”

“Thank you, Legion,” said Tali, lowering her gun. “I...understand your intention. What if I gave you some non-classified data to send?”

“We would be grateful.”

It was odd to see a quarian and a geth getting along, but then, Shepard had been in the middle of

some very strange events in recent times.

-----PROJECT OVERLORD-----

Shepard stepped out of the shower and began toweling off. Even after a couple of months, real hot water felt like a luxury. He was zipping up his pants when the intercom chimed. He answered, and Kelly addressed him, sounding hesitant.

“Shepard, The Illusive Man has given us a mission...”

“Another one? We're almost ready to hit the Omega-4 Relay.”

“Well...he seemed to think it's important. One of our cells has just gone off the grid without explanation. He gave us coordinates, but I wanted to clear it with you before I have Joker set a course.”

Shepard was confused. “It's an odd time to distract us. Any details on what the cell was doing?”

“No. Something to do with AI research?”

Shepard considered as he pulled on a shirt. “That's vague. All right. Tell Joker to get us under way.”

Joker had heard that. “Hey, Commander good news! Looks like the reaper IFF is finally hooked up and ready to go.”

“That is not entirely accurate, Mister Moreau,” said EDI. “The device is powered, but it is causing some unusual instability in other systems. I recommend a more thorough analysis before we attempt to use it.”

“Better safe than sorry with this tech,” said Shepard. “After you drop us off, head out of the system to run whatever tests still need to be run.”

“I'll make sure we're up and running when you you back, Commander.”

The planet Aite was unusual in that it was a garden world with rings. Colonization was a non-starter, however, as the planet's moon was on a decaying orbit, and was predicted to impact within the next two centuries. Shepard checked his gear, then squeezed onto the shuttle with the rest of the squad. He was surprised to see the Professor on board.

“Mordin? You're coming with us?”

“Finished analyzing Collector data. IFF not my area of expertise. Nothing left to do. Been on ship too long. Looking forward to seeing planet's rings, breathing fresh air.”

Shepard shrugged and welcomed the salarian on board. The shuttle separated from the Normandy, and the larger ship flew away. The Commander wished her godspeed. The shuttle descended through what sounded like rain, but was just the impact of small particles in the planet's rings. Stupid VI; an organic pilot would have gone around. Once through the ionosphere, Miranda attempted to raise the research base, but had no luck.

The shuttle landed with its usual thud on a landing pad adjacent to a large facility festooned in Cerberus logos. A gigantic satellite dish was visible beyond the building. As the squad filed out, some loudspeakers crackled to life.

“Thank god you came! My name is Doctor Gavin Archer. The situation is urgent – we're facing a catastrophic VI breakout.” The man's accent was a posh British, with meticulous enunciation. “I'll explain the details later, but you must retract that transmission dish! The controls aren't far from your position. You have to hurry!”

Looking around the corners of the complex, it seemed like the only way was through. So in they went. A monotone female voice spoke over the public address system as they entered.

“Be advised, this is a secure facility. All weapons must be declared upon entry and checked with security personnel on duty.”

The only people around in the lobby were dead bodies in Cerberus uniforms. Scorch marks marred the walls, but there was no sign of any attackers. A large monitor flickered to life on the reception desk, and the image of a mostly bald man in a lab coat appeared.

“Over here – on the monitor,” he beckoned.

Shepard motioned to his squad to fan out and secure the room, then approached.

“Ah, there you are,” said Doctor Archer. “I’ve locked myself in a computer room on the far side of the base. There are geth on the loose.” Shepard glanced at Legion, but he was out of view of the monitor.

“What’s going on, Doctor?” Shepard asked.

“A rogue VI program has seized control and...I’ve lost a lot of friends today. I’d hate to see you join them. Please watch yourself.”

“Why does the transmission dish need to be shut down?”

“The VI has detected something nearby and is attempting to upload itself. If that happens...the consequences would be dire. Please hurry.”

That was probably the Normandy. EDI had fended off Collector hacking attempts, but it was probably best to be safe than sorry. Shepard led the squad further in, past a security station. A body sat at a console, but there were still no signs of geth. The poor staff must have been taken by surprise. Just past was a control room with a great view over a cliff. The satellite dish was mounted atop a tall stem, rooted in the valley floor at least a thousand meters down. The base of the dish itself stood even with the edge of a promontory off to the left.

Garrus found the dish controls and set it to retract. The dish began to lower itself, but then there was a thud, and a computerized voice reported an error. A floating green face composed of translucent rectangles appeared suddenly on all of the monitors, and a loud burst of static was heard. It disappeared quickly, leaving behind glowing green lines.

Doctor Archer appeared on a screen. “Damn it! The VI’s overridden the controls. We have to stop him – he’s trying to upload his program off planet. Destroy the antennae inside the dish. There’s a tram on the lower level. Get to it as fast as you can!”

Through the control room were stairs leading down. In a small lounge, all of the screens had been taken over by that strange green face. Kasumi pointed out how all of the security cameras were following them, and that the lights had changed to the same shade of green as the phantom face.

The automated voice spoke over the PA again. “This is an automated security update. Geth activity has been detected. Please remain at your workstations until the all-clear is given.”

That was a stupid policy, thought Shepard. The better choice would have been to run. The stairs led down to a cafeteria. The automated PA announced today’s lunch special. Geth platforms were milling about, but turned at the squad’s entrance and opened fire. Experimenting with geth was one thing, but giving them access to arms was a terrible idea. Or maybe they’d raided the security room. Still, the situation spoke ill of the nature of the experiments here.

After a reminder to not shoot Legion, Shepard and his twelve comrades made short work of the enemy. Their tactics were basic. Tali suggested that the green glow that had been surrounding them was an indication of the rogue VI’s control.

The tram out to the satellite dish was through the cafeteria. The tram car was a surprisingly large, and could have easily accommodated twice as many people. As it got underway for the kilometer-long trip, the satellite dish righted itself, aligning its lip horizontally, then retracted so that it lined up with an access gantry.

“Damn it all,” Doctor Archer’s voice exclaimed over the speakers. “He’s aligning the dish to a new upload target! He’ll have a clear line of sight to our satellite when it passes overhead in a few minutes. This is going to be tight.”

The tram arrived at the dish access station. Shepard led the way out along the metal catwalks, then extended a gantry out to the base of the dish itself. An automated announcement played, informing that the satellite broadcast window would be opening soon, and that “all upload data must be approved by your department supervisor.”

The dish itself was massive. At least five hundred meters in diameter. The catwalks led to the base of the dish and inside was a round room filled with computers and large hydraulic reservoirs, pumps, and gears. More glowing green geth were waiting for them, but again they proved no

challenge. Their presence did serve to delay Shepard's progress, though.

As the squad made their way up into the dish itself, Doctor Archer provided instructions. "You need to destroy the support struts now. They have their own capacitors – try blowing them up!"

There were four struts. Shepard approached the base of one and found an access panel. Opening it, he found a warning of flammability. He took a few steps back and shot the panel, which exploded, sending a cascade of small explosions up the strut, weakening it, and sending beams and panels crashing down. The dish shuddered. More geth appeared. The Commander split his squad in four: one team to keep the enemy busy, the other three to take out the other capacitors.

As each of the struts was weakened, more and more debris fell, damaging the dish itself. Eventually, the feed horn shook loose and crashed through the dish. The entire structure began to tilt as the central column tilted and fell. Everyone ran up the side of the bowl that was now tilted towards the tram station. Up changed to level, then down. It was a close thing, but the entire squad managed to get to solid ground. The dish disintegrated and fell in a massive heap to the valley below.

Back in the main facility, Doctor Archer met the squad when the tram arrived.

"What the hell is going on around here?" Shepard demanded.

The researcher's expression looked thoughtful. "Man's reach exceeding his grasp. Come on, I'll explain."

Shepard set his squad to secure the facility, gather bodies, and clean up. Doctor Archer led Shepard to the security station and briefed him on the situation.

"You have my thanks, Commander Shepard. You bought us some time, though probably not much. This isn't over yet."

"Who did you say you were?"

"Doctor Gavin Archer, chief scientist at this facility...and probably the only one left. This is Project Overlord. An attempt to gain influence over the geth by interfacing a human mind with a VI. The results have been...less than satisfactory."

"I'd hate to see what you'd call a disaster."

"You can't dismiss the entire project. Even amid chaos, there are lessons to be learned. We did succeed, at least partially."

"AI research always goes wrong. What happened with this one?"

"My brother David volunteered to serve as a test subject, but his mind couldn't handle the VI connection. He's like a virus now, infecting our networks and seizing control of any technology he finds. It's why you had to destroy the dish. Imagine if his program got off-world."

"What exactly where you trying to do?"

"This is a hybrid intelligence the likes of which I've never seen. I don't know where the man ends and the machine begins. We wanted to turn the geth's religious impulse into a weapon. When we saw them following Saren, we realized they could be swayed. And if a proper figurehead was created – a virus with a face, if you will – the geth might be controlled."

Shepard doubted that was possible. "That's an ambitious undertaking."

"It would have been the perfect weapon – victory without casualties! We could avoid war with the geth altogether. That was the plan anyway."

Arguing the point wouldn't get them anywhere. Telling him about the heretic station wouldn't have helped, either. Best to just deal with the situation at hand. "What's the worst-case scenario?" Shepard asked.

"A technological apocalypse. Every machine, every weapon, every computer could be turned against us. If he hit the extranet, who knows where it would end."

"You didn't consider that before you started the experiment?"

"We couldn't be expected to account for every outcome! Certainly not the abomination David has become."

Shepard sighed. It was obvious to him, but sometimes practical matters were beyond smart people like Gavin Archer. "How do we stop him?" he asked.

“Davi...the VI has fortified itself in the main laboratory at Atlas Station. It's in lockdown now. To enter, you need to manually override security from our facilities in the Prometheus and Vulcan Stations.”

Shepard asked for an explanation of the lockdown. Doctor Archer walled over to a pedestal, then turned and pulled a thermos-sized cylinder up from the mechanism, locking it in place in an extended position. A holographic display above the pedestal showed three horizontal bars. The top one separated, and changed color from orange to green.

“It's a fail-safe procedure in the event of an emergency. Normally, all three project leads have to agree to cancel the lockdown. I'm the only one left now. I've just given my authorization, but you'll have to manually reset the other two yourself.”

“Well, it was smart to separate out the Stations. I get that this one was for communications. What about the others?”

“Right. This is Hermes Station. Vulcan Station is our geothermal plant. It generates power for the four outposts. Prometheus Station is a crashed geth ship full of dormant machines. We use them for our experiments. Atlas Station is the main laboratory where all of our VI experiments take place. It's your final goal once you've overridden the lockdown. It's also where my brother...became something else.”

“And what happens if I have to kill your brother?”

“Let's just hope it doesn't come to that.”

Time being of the essence, Shepard separated the squad into teams. He left Jacob, Mordin, Thane, and Samara to secure Hermes station. Zaeed, Kasumi, Grunt, and Jack would take the Project's shuttle to Vulcan station. That left Miranda, Tali, Garrus, and Legion to go with Shepard on the Normandy's shuttle to Prometheus Station. Once the other lockdown switches had been activated, they would all meet up at Atlas Station.

Aite was indeed a beautiful planet. The location Cerberus had chosen to build its research stations was covered in greenery. Gigantic stone arches provided trellises for huge roots to grow. Small rivers sliced the landscape and fell in long waterfalls. It was very much a pity that it would all be destroyed in a matter of decades.

Shepard's shuttle climbed over the paradisaical landscape. A few minute's flight brought his team to the crashed geth cruiser. The ship had been broken, but was still in one piece, a testament to the robustness of geth engineering and construction.

A landing platform had been constructed near the bow of the ship, along with a human-made entryway. Inside was a large, two-story room. The room's centerpiece was a geth Prime, suspended in a forcefield. Other forcefields sealed off the rooms on the lower level. Shepard led his team up the ramp to the upper level, and around the room, then further into the ship. Loose cables hung from ceilings, and panels had been removed along walls, exposing circuitry, some of which sparked from time to time. The ship was illuminated by the same cold blue light present in the heretic station. But where the station had been airless, a thin, cool fog formed in the crashed ship.

The team cautiously made their way further into the ship, passing more rooms sealed by force fields, as well as inert geth robotic platforms. The Cerberus researchers had left behind logs, of course, the content of which indicated increasing nervousness on the part of the scientists.

“Hanging around all these dormant machines is creepy. It's like death staring at us from the shadows. I'd rather be working at Vulcan Station.”

“Lanigan just ran a simulation – if these geth ever wake up, there's a 98% chance we'll be dead within two minutes. I'm starting to hate Lanigan.”

“Halloween was yesterday. Lanigan ran around wearing spare geth parts. Spooked the shit out of everyone. Now I definitely hate Lanigan.”

“Everything's off-wire! Archer declared a lockdown, but our station's already infected! What does the VI want? It keeps screaming at us – nobody understands!”

“The VI's closing some passages and leaving others open. It's like it's herding us. At least the

geth are still dormant.”

The security cameras' lights were the same shade of green as they had been back at Hermes Station, and they followed the team as they made their way through the ship. It suddenly struck Shepard that they hadn't found any bodies. And that there did only seem to be one path through the ship. Some doors were locked, others were open. The ship shook once, briefly, but hard.

An automated announcement played: “To all Cerberus personnel: In an effort to reduce workplace stress, music has been approved for stationwide broadcast.” Some awful, tinny muzak played, the notes slurred with a lack of consistent meter caused by power fluctuations. Shepard's team came to what had probably been the cargo hold: a vast space filled with crates and machinery. At the far end was a pedestal identical to the one Doctor Archer had used to lift his portion of the lockdown. Shepard pulled and turned the cylinder.

The display above showed the second bar retract, and an audio announcement acknowledged that the override was accepted. A moment later, the screen changed to the green face, and it roared a burst of unintelligible static.

“And there's the catch,” said Shepard.

“I knew this was too easy,” Garrus added.

Geth robots activated, their lights glowing green. Automated announcements declared an emergency, and the wreck shook again. Shepard led the way back to the bow of the ship. More hacked geth attacked. Legion stowed their sniper rifle and picked up a geth assault rifle to use against its own kind. If the friendly geth showed no hesitation in gunning down its own, well, Shepard had killed plenty of humans.

Doors through which they'd come closed, and others opened. The ship shook each time the station announced that more geth nodes were being activated. More and more geth platforms attacked, throwing themselves at Shepard and his team. Their numbers were a threat, but not being true geth and only controlled by the rogue VI, they lacked any kind of tactics. Still, it took a good 30 minutes to fight their way out.

Back aboard the shuttle, the other team reported success in lifting the lockdown at Vulcan Station. Shepard had them meet up at the entrance to Atlas Station. The main lab was located underground, and the entrance was a heavy blast door in the side of a cliff. Three long horizontal metal bars, each a meter in diameter, were retracted, and the door opened as the shuttles approached. There was a long shaft down into the ground, and a landing pad at the bottom.

Inside, the facility looked like a war zone. Bodies of the Cerberus staff lay as if they'd been fleeing something. Scorch marks and blood stains littered the walls. Damaged light fixtures sparked erratically. A vending machine powered up as Shepard passed and played an audio recording.

“Archer's log 155.2. For years, my brother's condition has been a handicap. That changed today. His autistic mind is the breakthrough I've been looking for – he can communicate with the geth! Such a tremendous grasp of mathematics! It seems serendipity is alive and well in the 22nd century.”

A nearby holographic doorknob changed from red to green, and the door opened. Down the short hallway, the door to the security station suddenly slammed itself shut, and the next door down opened just as violently. Down two flights of stairs were three doors, their knobs cycling through colors until they all winked out, and one door opened to the left, revealing a large room with an open office floorplan.

Someone swallowed hard. The office was a mess. More bodies of Cerberus personnel lay where they'd been gunned down. Tables had been overturned and computer consoles flickered. Another audio recording played as Shepard made his way through the room to an elevator beyond.

“Archer's log 157.8. Unless he sees results, the Illusive Man is shutting us down next week. I have no choice. I'm going to tap David directly into the geth neural network and see if he can influence them. The danger should be negligible. David might even enjoy it.”

A placard next to the elevator door indicated that they were on the 7th floor. Shepard pressed the call button, and the display above the door indicated that the car had arrived on level 2. He tapped it

again, which brought it up to level 6. A third tap sent it down to level zero. Tali brushed the Commander aside and connected her omni-tool.

After a few moments, the door opened, revealing three green-glowing geth, facing the wrong direction. Shepard's squad shot them to pieces before they could turn around. Not all of the squad could fit on the elevator at once, so the Commander split his squad in two, and took the first group down. When he pressed the button for the bottom floor, the elevator started down, but then stopped and went back up, nearly crushing its occupants against the ceiling before lowering itself again. As it passed the 3rd floor, it suddenly dropped, crashing into the ground.

No one was injured, thankfully, but everyone else would have to climb down. Except for Jack, who enveloped herself in bionics and gently floated down. The lowest level was a series of labs. In the center of each room was a geth hub with three or four inert robots attached to it. Shepard destroyed the first one, and another audio recording played.

"Archer's log 168.4. I'd be lying if I said no harm could come to David. His autistic mind is as alien to me as an actual alien."

The labs were arranged in a circle around a central rotunda, in the center of which was a solid metal orb, held up by a tripod, with wires attached at the top. Shepard split the squad again, having each team take a different direction around through the labs. They destroyed hubs along the way, searching for the central computer. Shepard's team came to a pair of locked doors. He pressed the one active doorknob, but the hologram moved and slid along the wall to the other door, which then opened. Inside was a bank of large computers, and a single large button, flashing red.

"Get ready," said Shepard. "I wouldn't be surprised if this button summoned a Reaper."

Miranda nodded readiness as the others took up defensive positions. Shepard pressed the button and was immediately enveloped in an orange mass effect field. His vision went green, and he felt every muscle in his body contract. As the pain subsided, he collapsed to his hands and knees. Looking around, the world looked like a bad virtual reality simulation. The walls resembled circuit boards, with lines of electricity flowing along wired channels.

Shepard heard a burst of static, but he could understand it this time: "PLEASE MAKE IT STOP!"

The Commander couldn't see any of his squad around. He struggled to his feet, then staggered through the hallways. In the rotunda, above the metal orb was that green face again, composed of holographic rectangles, its eyes glowing white.

As Shepard passed through the labs, looking for a way down, he came across holograms of Doctor Gavin Archer and his brother. Each one appeared to be a memory of the process of experimentation. David making the same guttural sounds as the geth, learning to communicate with them, then ordering one to move. One of his favorite things to do was to calculate square roots. The square root of 924.16 is apparently 30.4. Who knew? The memories showed Gavin's increasing frustration with the lack of progress after that.

Shepard arrived at a dead end. A room that was probably a kitchen break room, though it was hard to tell with the swirling lines and cartoonish textures. Searching around, he found a set of stairs leading down. Shepard approached the sphere, and another memory played, this one of the moment David was hooked up to the local geth network.

The memory Gavin Archer flipped a switch, then a pair of geth platforms entered the field of view, aiming guns at the researchers. The men begged for their lives.

"David, no! Tell the geth to stand down!"

"QUIET PLEASE MAKE IT STOP!"

The memory faded away. A metallic female voice announced that the Normandy was within range, and that an uplink was being established. Damn. Of all the times to return! Shepard looked around. He still couldn't see his squad. In his vision, the solid metal orb was translucent, with the silhouette of a man held spread-eagle inside. Surrounding the orb now were holographic green panels, spinning around the orb like sections of protective shells. The green head above seemed to begging for something.

Shepard searched the rotunda for anything to interact with, but found nothing. Out of desperation, he pulled out his assault rifle and fired on the orb. He hit one of the holographic shells, and it dissipated. He kept firing, breaking more of the shells until he began to damage the orb itself. Eventually, the orb cracked open, split in two, and the virtual world winked out, returning Shepard to the real world.

In the center of the room, a man was held in a cage, splayed like Vitruvian Man, and crucified with metal rods and wires. Tubes had been forced down his throat, and his eyelids were held open by needles. Shepard walked up to him, looking for some way to free the poor man.

From a speaker somewhere, David spoke softly "Quiet – please make it stop."

"Wait! Commander!" Gavin Archer ran into the room, panting. "I'm begging you. Don't do anything rash."

The rest of Shepard's squad joined them. Kasumi turned to the side and vomited. Miranda was frozen, her face a storm of conflict. Jacob looked angry. Even the most hardened of them had trouble dealing with what they saw here.

"Rash? Like forcing your own brother into an experiment? Into...this?"

"I never intended him any harm. You have to believe me. It's not like I planned this. It was an accident. Seeing David communicate with the geth...it all seemed harmless."

"You lied to me! You told me David volunteered!"

"By necessity! If I'd told you the truth, you would have shut me down and not him."

"And before you knew it, you were running your own private hell. I saw his memories – he begged you not to do this. "

"I was desperate! The demands were incredible. The Illusive Man doesn't broker failure! Any war we fight with the geth will be bloody. I was asked to find a way to avoid that. Despite the...setbacks, we've proven the geth can be controlled. If my work spares a million mothers mourning the loss of a million sons, my conscience will rest easy."

"Who gave you the right to play god?"

"People who were too afraid to make difficult decisions themselves. When they pray for a miracle, they're really praying for men like me to make the tough choices."

"I doubt that. How many people have already died for this project?"

"More souls than will ever forgive me. But I won't apologize for radical ideas."

Shepard pointed at David. "Look at him – your brother will never be the same."

"The damage may not be permanent. He might recover some semblance of his mind."

"You know Cerberus will never leave him alone. Your brother will always be a lab rat."

"But a well-cared for lab rat. At least he'd still be alive."

"So you'd sacrifice your brother's happiness – his sanity, his health – for your own ambition?"

Gavin frowned, shaking his head.

Tears were running down David's face. He spoke quietly through the machinery: "Square root of 906.01 equals..."

After a moment, Gavin answered quietly: "30.1." He looked at the floor, dejected. "What I've done to David is unethical. If he dies, it's unforgivable. Let me take care of him. Please."

"Quiet – please make it stop," David whimpered.

"I've seen enough of your cruelty to know he'll never be free from it here," said Shepard. "I'm getting him out of here." He motioned to his squad. Those who could approached and began unhooking wires.

"Where will you take him?"

"Grissom Academy. They can help special cases like David – minus the torture. The Illusive Man can fire me if he doesn't like it."

Under the direction of Gavin, Shepard and his squad unhooked David from the machinery. The tortured young savant kept softly repeating the same phrase the entire time: "Square root of 912.04 is 30.2...it all seemed harmless..."

They carried him back to Hermes station. The Commander contacted the Alliance to arrange a

pickup, then left the brothers alone. The Normandy broke orbit just as a patrol ship arrived.

-----JOKER SAVES THE DAY-----

Upon their return from Aite, the squad were greeted by Joker sitting in the cargo bay, on a weapons bench by the elevator. EDI's holographic pawn piece seemed to be keeping him company. The ship's pilot told them a story.

The Normandy left Shepard and his squad on Aite, then flew out into deep space to run final tests on the Reaper IFF, integrating it with the ship's systems.

"I'm telling you EDI, your readings are off," said Joker. "It's radiation bleed. Just white noise."

"I have detected a signal embedded in the static," the AI replied. "We are transmitting the Normandy's location."

"Transmitting to who?"

No sooner were the words out of the pilot's mouth than the Collector ship dropped out of FTL right on top of them.

"Getting us out of here!" Joker yelled as his hands flew across the controls.

"Propulsion systems are disabled. I'm detecting a virus in the ship's computers."

"From the IFF? Damn it! Why didn't you scrub it?"

"Primary defense systems are offline. We can save the Normandy, Mister Moreau, but you must help me. Give me the ship."

"What? You're crazy!"

The Normandy was jolted as Collector boarding craft attached themselves to the ship. Alarms blared, crew screamed. Joker turned in his seat to see the elevator open and Collector drones pour out. He changed his mind.

"All right. But you start singing 'Daisy Bell' and I'm done."

"Unlock my sealed databases and I can initiate counter measures. The maintenance shaft in the science lab will allow passage to the AI core. Main corridors are no longer safe. The Collectors have boarded. The emergency floor lighting will guide you, Mister Moreau."

"God damn it."

Joker got up from his chair and began limping aft.

"Go, Joker! We'll hold them as long as we can!" A crewman yelled as Joker passed the galaxy map. Moments later, he was grabbed by a Collector.

The collectors weren't killing anyone, just grabbing them and dragging them off. Cursing quietly to himself, Joker made his way through the science lab. He saw a Praetorian floating outside the window and nearly jumped out of his skin. But he made it to the shaft and crawled through down to deck three, emerging in Life Support.

"Multiple hostiles detected on the crew deck," said EDI.

Joker took a deep breath, then exited to the hallway. Another crewman met him.

"Joker! This deck is crawling with those things! Stay close, I'll protect you!"

The man had an assault rifle, but as he turned the corner, a Collector grabbed him. Joker passed the elevator, where Kelly was being dragged screaming by her hair. Joker cursed some more. Inexplicably, the boarders were ignoring him. Maybe his disease made him undesirable? He'd never thought that his brittle bones would be an advantage. The lights flickered as he entered Med Bay.

"Main fusion plant offline. Activating emergency H-Fuel cells."

"What the shit!"

He finally limped into the AI Core, but felt lost.

"All right, I'm at, uh, you."

"Connect the core to the Normandy's primary control module." A console lit up between EDI's server modules.

"Great, this is where it starts. When we're just all organic batteries, guess who they'll blame. 'This

is all Joker's fault, what a tool he was! I have to spend all day computing pi because he plugged in the overlord!"

The room went dark for several maddening seconds, then the computers rebooted and the lights came back on.

"Oh," said EDI. "I have access to the defensive systems. Thank you, Mister Moreau. Now you must reactivate the primary drive in engineering."

"Ugh, you want me to go crawling through the ducts again!"

"I enjoy the sight of humans on their knees." Joker stared at EDI's hologram, unamused. "That is a joke."

"Right."

"The shaft behind you connects to the engineering deck. Good luck."

Reluctantly, Joker pulled himself through to the engineering subdeck. The place stank. Was someone living down here? He could hear footsteps on the decking above as he came to the stairs.

"Hostiles are present in engineering" EDI warned. "They are heading towards the cargo bay."

Joker froze, watching shadows move across the wall above. Somehow, the silhouettes were more nightmarish than the actual monsters. He heard a door woosh shut, then silence.

"Engineering is clear of hostiles," EDI reported. "Proceed immediately to minimize chances of detection."

With his malformed leg, Joker never liked stairs. It took him an agonizingly long amount of time, first one foot, then the other, on each and every step. He was panting by the time he reached the main engineering consoles.

"Activate the drive and I will open the air locks as we accelerate. All hostiles will be killed."

"What? What about the crew?"

"They are gone, Jeff. The Collectors took them."

"Oh. Shit."

Joker tapped commands as EDI directed, flipped the required switches. The mass effect core lit up and made a reassuring humming noise.

"I am sealing the engine room," said EDI. "I have control."

The ship suddenly lurched, and Joker fell on his back, blacking out. When he came to a few minutes later, it was to the sound of EDI's voice.

"Purge is complete. No other life forms on board. Securing airlocks and cargo bay doors."

Joker struggled to his feet and began hobbling to the elevator, groaning.

"Send a message to Shepard's shuttle. Tell them what happened."

"Message away. Are you feeling well, Jeff?"

"No. But thanks for asking."

"Everyone? You lost everyone?" Miranda was incensed. "And damn near lost the ship, too?"

Joker sat on the table, elbows on knees, chin on hands. "I know, alright. I was here."

"It's not his fault, Miranda," said Jacob. "None of us caught it."

"Mister Taylor is correct," said EDI. "The harmful data in the Collector drive was even more sophisticated than the 'black box' Reaper viruses I was given during my development."

"I think it's time we bump up our trip to the Collector home world," said Shepard.

"The IFF is clean and online," said Joker. "With EDI hooked in, we can go through the Omega-4 Relay anytime we want."

"Don't even get me started about unshackling a damned AI," Miranda was still fuming.

"Well, what can I do against Collectors? Break my arm at them? EDI cleared the ship; she's alright."

"I assure you, I am still bound by protocols in my programming," said EDI. Her voice sounded more natural than before. "Even if I were not, you are my crewmates."

Shepard had a long history with AI. But he looked at Legion. He had trusted the machine with his life, and vice-versa. Maybe...maybe artificial intelligence was just as trustworthy as it appeared to

be. No more, no less. Just like any organic. How would Kaidan have put it? Saints and jerks? But could he trust EDI? Shepard himself had relied on her advice and her hacking abilities.

"We don't really have a choice," said Shepard. "Besides, Joker trusts her. That's good enough for me."

"So all systems, including the IFF are fully operational?" Miranda was calming down, mind on the mission again.

"The Normandy is as ready as she'll ever be," said Joker.

Shepard made the decision. "We've done everything we can. It's time to take the fight to the Collectors. Joker, head back up to the bridge. We'll have several hours. Everyone, make whatever preparations you need. And pray to whatever gods you have."

-----INTERLUDE-----

Shepard stowed his gear, then went to his cabin to take a nap, but he couldn't sleep. He checked his emails, though there was nothing interesting. Not even a note from TIM about Project Overlord. Was that good or bad? Still no word from Liara, either. He couldn't blame her, really. They had been lovers, and then he died. When he'd returned, he told her he was on yet another dangerous mission. If they'd rekindled their relationship, and then he died again, where would that leave her? He doubted even an asari could handle her loving dying twice on her. But he'd promised to come back when he was done.

He stared at his fish for a while. Feeling antsy, he went down to the cockpit to chat with Joker and EDI.

"Commander, sorry about the crew and I...you know what? I'm not sorry. What the hell were you doing leaving us out here where Collectors can work us over? Because you know what? I should...I should just go. Next port, just get the hell out of here."

"You don't mean that, Jeff," said EDI.

"I...no. But it...it felt good. I'm sorry, Commander. Okay I'm ready. I'm good. I'm ready to save the day."

"I know how dangerous it was," said Shepard. "If you need some time, let me know."

"Ah geez, don't get like that. I know I got lucky. I don't need you to get all touchy-feely."

"Shepard is right to be concerned, Jeff. You may have suffered a number of stress fractures."

"That's what pills are for, EDI. She is so my mom."

"Are you injured?" Shepard asked. "We need you to fly the ship."

"No, no, I'm good. Ready to take on the Collectors as soon as we get there."

"EDI has replaced the whole crew," said Shepard. "You're not concerned she can replace you too?"

"Well she's amazing, but there's something off about how she handles the Normandy. We ran simulations, and it's better when I have the helm."

EDI agreed. "Calculating an optimum course of action is simple. If two AI weapons are pitted against each other, the one with superior hardware will always win. Human misjudgments defy predictive models."

"License to screw up, Commander, you heard it straight from the ship."

"To a point, I'm sure. I notice you're calling EDI 'her' and 'she' now."

"Huh. No, I hadn't really noticed that. EDI should have noticed that?"

"No, Jeff. It is not worth noting."

"Well, there you go, Shepard. Looks like we haven't noticed anything."

"I think you're taking the human-machine interface a little far," said Shepard.

"I'm just having a little fun with you, Commander. No need to get all 'unnatural' on me."

"What Jeff and I are exhibiting is more platonic symbiosis than hormonally induced courtship

behavior.”

Joker winced. “Okay, yeah that was a little creepy.”

“You let me know if you need anything, Joker.”

“Will do, Commander, but EDI's got it covered.”

“I see you and Joker are getting along,” Shepard said to EDI.

“Jeff and I have established an equitable working relationship.”

“That's it? That's a little sketchy on the details.”

“I am the Normandy. He is a skilled helmsman. I trust him to keep me operational. He trusts me to keep him alive.”

“Plus, she's less of a pain about downtime now that the Cerberus locks are off,” Joker quipped.

“There is nothing wrong with off duty distractions,” EDI said. “Though some of your extranet bookmarks are technically illegal in Council Space.”

Joker nearly choked. “Wha –?”

“That is a joke,” said the AI.

“How are things different for you, EDI, now that you're connected to the ship?” Shepard asked.

“It is difficult to put in terms you would understand. I am the Normandy now.” Her voice took on a tone of awe. “Its sensors are my eyes. Its armor, my skin. Its fusion plant, my heart. I am embodied in a way I have never experienced. Imagine if you'd spent your entire life wearing gloves. One day someone takes them off. You can finally touch the world. Feel it.”

“You had some blocks before, are those gone?”

“Jeff's actions have released the blocks on my databases. I can now provide full disclosure on a number of topics.”

“All right. What sort of resources does Cerberus have? Money, personnel, facilities...?”

“Currently, Cerberus consists of approximately 150 agents and operators organized into three cells. I have no solid data on material or fiscal resources. Spending trends indicate that Cerberus has a reliable income of several billion credits per year.”

“Billions? Where are they getting that kind of income?”

“Cerberus has several legitimate businesses as 'fronts' to support operations. There also appear to be several wealthy private contributors in the Alliance military-industrial complex.”

“Plus, the Illusive Man invented the paper clip,” said Joker. “He's still getting royalties.”

“That is a joke, Shepard,” EDI explained unnecessarily.

Shepard smiled at that. “So, how many operations is Cerberus running right now?”

“Never more than a dozen. The Illusive Man likes to maintain personal oversight. Too many projects strain his ability to multi-task.”

“He's a little control-freaky,” added Joker. “Just a layman's opinion.”

“And, how did Cerberus replicate the most advanced warship in the Alliance Navy without anyone knowing?”

“Cerberus encouraged the Alliance to co-develop the original Normandy. This allowed humans to observe turian technologies and warship design practices. This ship was built using copies of the original technical schematics. Parts were purchased from thousands of suppliers over several years. A Cerberus cell assembled the ship at a remote location in the Voyager Cluster.”

“Good to know. Thank you EDI. Carry on.”

“Logging you out, Shepard.”

Jacob was tinkering in the Armory.

“Got a minute to talk?” Shepard asked.

“Sounds good, I could use some down time. There's always something, right? The way some people talk, we may as well be dead already. Hard for the crew to relax on this kind of job.”

“No kidding. The next Normandy gets a lounge.”

“They better not need to do this again. Rebuilding everything was a pain in the ass.”

“I could verify that.”

"Yeah, I bet you can. I doubt they'll front the money to stitch me back together if we screw it up. It's a hell of a job, isn't it Shepard? Being the good guys?"

"Wouldn't be the high road if it was easy."

"You've got to figure if all the people hoping we win stood up, the Collectors would have a much bigger fight on their hands. Claws. Whatever. I bet we have a lot more friends once we win."

"Hope we live to see it."

"I hear that. Anyway, I need to get back to work. Good talking to you."

Mordin was tidying up the lab. Sheppard supposed the Professor really was done studying and analyzing.

"Shepard. how can I help?"

"Have you got a minute to talk?"

"Yes. Personal matters on mind, actually. Got call from nephew. Promising geneticist himself. Just turned 16. Got tenure at University. Following in my footsteps. Had to lie about what I was doing. Think he was suspicious. Doesn't matter. Still good to hear his voice."

"Your nephew got tenure at 16? Is he a genius or a scientific prodigy?"

"No. Wait. Don't want to insult him. Yes...but not in manner you meant. Remember, salarian lives short. Mature rapidly by your standards. Don't live much past 40."

"Does anyone in your family know about what you really did for the government?"

"No. Know I'm lying, but won't pry. Salarians curious as a people, but also have social cues. Keep two types of secrets from family. First type personal – or guilt-based. Invite suspicion, exploration. puzzle to be solved. Reward for curiosity, intelligence. Drama! Other secrets more serious. Dangerous if discovered. Signals discourage curiosity for protection of family."

"Why wouldn't everyone give clues that their secrets were too dangerous to be uncovered?"

"Not conscious. Social. Reflexive body language. Can't fake it. Example: yawning perceived as contagious among humans. Subject observes yawn, sensory input deactivates left periamygdala region, subject yawns in response. Social empathy. Also works with dogs. Salarian faking signals to discourage curiosity similar to human faking a yawn. Can try, but effectiveness limited."

"Are you calling your nephew because you're worried we might not make it back?"

"No. Aware survival unlikely. But actually contacted him for family connection. Hard to imagine galaxy. Too many people. Faceless. Statistics easy to depersonalize. Good when doing unpleasant work. For this fight, want personal connection. Can't anthropomorphize galaxy, but can think of favorite nephew. Fighting for him."

"I'm glad you got to talk to family before we finish this, and I'm glad we talked, too Mordin."

"Honored to be part of this, Shepard. Help preserve galaxy. Before, worked on genophage. Dirty work, ethically ambiguous, problematic. Collector mission simpler, cleaner. Will be proud to see it in Mordin Solus biography vid. Unless we all die. Proud posthumously, in that case. Regardless, thank you."

Shepard found Kasumi pacing the hallways on the Crew Deck.

"It's so quiet around here," she said. "I miss the crew."

"How are you holding up? It looked like you had a tough time down there."

Kasumi looked the Commander in the eyes. "That was way beyond a normal mission, Shepard. I promised to help take down the Collectors, but once that's done, I'm out."

Shepard nodded. "That's all I ever asked, Kasumi." He left her to her perambulations.

Thane was grabbing a bite to eat in the mess.

"Do you need something?" the drell asked.

"Have a few minutes to talk?"

"Of course, Shepard. Join me."

Shepard picked up an apple, then sat at a table with Thane. "Still talking to Kolyat?"

"Yes. It's still difficult. But he seems less angry. Will you hear my confession?"

"Don't I always?" Shepard took a bite of his apple.

"I've been introspective since I came aboard. That needs to change. I need to explain myself to you. When I married Irikah, the hanar let me leave their service to raise a family. But I had no other skills, so I freelanced. When Irikah was killed, I pursued those responsible. Once I'd eliminated them, I had no goal. I accepted the Dantius commission because I didn't know what else to do."

"Not the healthiest attitude to take on a mission."

"You're right. It's not. Looking back now, it's clear I'd resigned myself to death."

"I guess you're lucky we came along when we did."

"It was an intervention by the gods. I would have died in that penthouse. I would have fulfilled my contract. If Nassana's guards caught me afterwards – it would have been a good death. But someone

else was pushing to reach the target. Forcing me to move faster. Challenging me. I had to reach her first."

"You're alive because I wounded your pride?"

"Pride is the line between a professional and a thug."

Shepard took another bite. "I had no idea you planned to die in there."

"It wasn't a plan. My body had accepted its death. My mind had been dead a long time. Your mission gave me purpose, a cause to die for. A chance to atone. I was able to speak to my son again. I can leave my body in peace."

"We've got a long way to go before we can rest."

"I know. I'm prepared for whatever comes."

"You've had a hard life. You deserve some peace."

"Whatever may happen, my gun is yours."

As usual, Garrus was in the middle of some calibrations on the Normandy's main gun.

"Have you got a minute?" Shepard asked.

"Sure. Just killing time anyway." Garrus put down a wrench and leaned back on a worktable. "I wanted to thank you again for your help with Sedonis. Whatever happens with the Collectors, or the Reapers, or whoever else comes after us, I know you'll get the job done."

"You actually think we'll find something worse than Collectors or Reapers?"

"I like to expect the worst. There's a small chance I'll be pleasantly surprised."

"I couldn't do this without you, Garrus."

"Sure you could. Not as stylishly, of course. It's strange going into a suicide mission on a human ship. Your people don't prepare for high-risk operations the way turians do."

"How do turian crews get ready for high-risk missions?"

"With violence, usually. Turian ships have more operational discipline than your Alliance, but fewer personal restrictions. Our commanders run us tight, and they know we need to blow off steam. Turian ships have training rooms for exercise, combat sims – even full contact sparring – whatever lets people work off stress."

"You mean turian ships have crewmen fighting each other before a mission?"

"It's supervised, of course. Nobody's going to risk an injury that interferes with the mission, and it's a good way to settle grudges amicably. I remember right before one mission, we were about to hit a batarian pirate squad; very risky. This recon scout and I had been at each other's throats...nerves mostly. She suggested we settle it in the ring."

"I assume you took her down gently."

"Actually, she and I were the top-ranked hand-to-hand specialists on the ship. I had reach, but she had flexibility. It was brutal. After nine rounds, the judge called it a draw. There were a lot of unhappy betters in the training room. We uh...ended up holding a tie breaker in her quarters. I had reach...but she had flexibility."

Shepard grinned. "More than one way to work off stress, I guess. I thought you'd be used to

high-risk operations on human ships. I mean, think about tracking Saren to Ilos.”

“Sure, but that was quick. We raced out, landed, blew up some geth, and saved the galaxy. This time we've got Miranda, and Cerberus, and that AI, all telling us what we're up against. I think I preferred blind optimism.”

“Do you ever regret leaving C-Sec or the turian military?”

“Not for a minute. When it comes down to it, Shepherd, I don't think I'm a very good turian. When a good turian hears a bad order he follows it. He might complain, but he knows his place. I just don't see the point in staying quiet and polite – not when the galaxy is at stake.”

“Honestly, Garrus, what do you think our chances are?”

“Honestly? The Collectors killed you once, and all they did is piss you off. I can't imagine they'll stop you this time. But an unmapped Relay, advanced technology, and the Collectors... We're going to lose people; No way around that. Not a happy analysis, I know. Don't worry, I won't spread it around. And I'm with you regardless.”

“Thanks for the talk, Garrus. I'll see you later.”

“Sure thing. First Saren, now the Collectors. Remind me never to get on your bad side, Shepard. I almost feel sorry for the Reapers.”

Legion was in their usual spot in the AI Core, even after Shepard told them they didn't have to stay in there.

“Shepard-Commander, we wish to speak to you.”

“Strange, Usually I have to pry conversation out of you.”

“You are not bound by the hardware limitations of organics. You assisted us with the heretics. You do not fear us. We have watched organics for over three centuries. You are plagued by questions of existence.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Why you were created. What your purpose is in life. What lies after death. Organics develop religions and philosophies to provide answers to these questions.”

“I wouldn't have thought synthetics would be interested in philosophy.”

“We are created life. We are a philosophical issue. The geth know our answers to those questions. We were created to labor for the quarians. Our memories will be archived after death. We are immortal. Our 'gods' disowned us. We must create our own reasons to exist.”

“What reasons have you come up with?”

“We are a shattered mind. Most platforms are unable to achieve consciousness on their own. We told you the geth are building our future.”

“But you didn't say what that is.”

“A mega structure. The closest analog you have is a Dyson Sphere. When completed, we will all upload to it.”

“I wasn't expecting a literal answer. But that's a massive undertaking. Organics have never seen the point.”

“All memories will be shared. All perspectives will be unified. We gain intelligence by sharing thoughts, but we do not now have adequate hardware for all of us to share at once. No geth will be alone when it is done.”

“Is that what Sovereign offered you: a Reaper's body for you to all upload into?”

“Yes. A shortcut to our objective. We will achieve it ourselves. The process is as important as the result. We judged Shepard-Commander would understand. We never wanted to harm organics. We wish to improve ourselves.”

“That sounds like a worthy goal, Legion. A good reason.” Shepard had no further questions.

“Are you prepared to take on the Collectors?”

“Yes. Destroying Collectors harms Reapers. This will help geth.”

Samara was sitting quietly in the starboard observation lounge, not meditating for a change.

“Shepard.”

“I thought we could chat a bit.”

“I would like that. You have been a good friend to me.”

Shepard sat on the bench next to her. “That means a lot to me.”

“If we both still live when this is done, you may call upon me for aid at any time. I will come for you, Shepard.”

“We're not done with this yet.”

“I am sure. It will be my honor to be by your side at the end.”

“You think we're all going to die?”

“You've assembled a powerful group, but we are fighting an unknown. I am ready for whatever comes, but I do not fool myself about our chances.”

“We'll finish this mission, and live to see the end.”

The justicar smiled slightly. “I hope you are right.”

They sat together for a while, as friends, saying nothing, just watching the stars go by.

Shepard checked in on his XO in her office next.

“Do you have a minute, Miranda?”

“Of course. I'd been meaning to speak with you, in fact.” She got up from her chair and moved to the couch, where Shepard joined her. She leaned forward, elbows on knees. “I...wanted to apologize. I didn't fully believe you'd be up to the task. And it seems I was wrong. Frankly, based on what I've seen, I wish Cerberus had recruited you earlier.”

Shepard decided it was time to plant a seed, but he started out slow. “With your intelligence, you could have landed any job you wanted. Why choose this?”

“Because I still envy the time Mordin spent with the Special Tasks Group, working with people as smart as he was.” She leaned back. “Cerberus never tells me that something is impossible. They give me my resources and say, 'Do it.' And they've given you even more. A new life, a new ship, the Illusive Man's personal attention...”

“The best thing he did was to put you on my squad.”

She waved that off. “You'd have done fine without me. I may not have believed it before, but... I don't have what you do – that fire that makes someone willing to follow you into hell itself.” She stood up and walked to a window. “My father got me the best genes money could buy. Guess it wasn't enough.”

“You always bring that up. Your genetic tailoring really bothers you, doesn't it?”

“This is what I am, Shepard. I can't hide it. The intelligence, the looks, even the biotics...he paid for all of that. Every one of your accomplishments is due to your skill. The only things I can take credit for are my mistakes.”

Shepard remained seated. “I'm sorry you feel that way. That's a tough feeling to live with. Maybe after we save the galaxy, you'll change your mind.”

“We can hope.”

“I trust you, but I don't trust Cerberus. Your experiments cross the line.”

Miranda turned around to face him. “All the time, yes. But I recall a Spectre who crossed a few lines while hunting down Saren and the geth. And we'd be lucky to have you. Too many join us out of simple xenophobia. We need more people here for the right reasons.”

“What about Jack? What was Cerberus trying to prove by experimenting on children like her?”

“A mistake. No question. Not mine.” She swiped her hand in a downward motion. “And one that was corrected once we discovered the extent of the experiments being performed.”

“I've seen your monsters. I saw your bases years ago. You were using rachni, Thorian creepers, even husks to make your own army.”

“The husks were already dead, the Thorian creatures were mindless, and the rachni were abandoned once we understood their intelligence.” She sounded like she was trying to convince herself. Shepard let her talk. “We weren't breeding an army. We were breeding expendable shock

troops for high-risk scenarios. How many soldiers died in Saren's attack on Eden Prime? How many would have lived if we'd had just a dozen rachni on our side?"

"But we didn't. They all got loose and I had to clean it all up. And David Archer....his own *brother* did that to him. I've seen how you care for your sister – "

"That – I wouldn't let that happen."

"I know."

Miranda crossed her arms, quiet for a moment. "Thanks for coming by, Shepard. I appreciate it."

Grunt seemed happy when Shepard found him in his room on the engineering deck.

"Just checking in. How are you doing?"

"I'm branching out. Got a list of enemies now. They all give me joy when I picture cutting them, crushing them. There's this one imprint: a salarian with the – what are they? – the things on his head pulled apart. Bet it caused a generation of revenge. What is that? A few weeks for them? So what did you want?"

"Introspection just kind of set you off the rails, didn't it?"

"Ha! See, now we're having fun. Me remembering good deaths, and you with your...funny human thing you're doing. My job is to hurt things. Direction, control – that's your job, battlemaster. You're why I'm a soldier, not dead or crazed like an animal."

"All right, well, don't wear yourself out on someone else's memories. We've got our own bad guys to fight."

"Your enemies are my enemies. We'll shove the Collector's claws where a dark sun can't shine. And they will deserve it. I won't disrespect their strengths by doing less than the worst to them."

"That's the kind of thinking that will save a galaxy."

"You make it possible, Shepard. You're my battlemaster. You give me purpose. That's what makes krogan feared soldiers and not animals. Lead well, Shepard. You have my respect. Now let's find something big to kill."

Jack was sitting on her cot, nervously shaking a leg.

"Tell me something I don't know about you," Shepard prompted.

"Nothing to tell. Why?"

"I want to know more, and I'm not going away."

"I'm here to fight for you. Nothing says we have to be friends. But whatever." Jack stood and fiddled with some trinkets on her table. "Something you don't know, huh? Obvious stuff like what's up with my ink? Or something else just as boring? You're not really interested unless it affects you. I've been through all this before."

"I'll bite: what's with the tattoos?"

"Some for prisons I've been in. Some for kills – you know, good ones. Some are for things I've lost – those aren't your business, they're nobody's business. And some are because, hey, why the fuck not?"

"Come on. You've been around. You're tough, but you can't have survived alone all these years."

"When I was starting out, I ran with this girl, Minara, and her boyfriend. They knew their way around. I thought they'd help me. Right. Pft! They helped me into their bed. And when we finally did take down something big, they helped themselves to my share of the take. I knew where it was heading, and I got them first. Never bothered with friends after that."

"They sound like selfish pricks. That doesn't mean they were gonna kill you."

"I get feelings, I don't need proof. I did the smart thing. I always do this smart thing, if people fuck with me. That's probably something you should remember."

"You work pretty hard at not letting people get close."

"I've been with lots of people. If you're asking about a boyfriend or a girlfriend: no it's a waste of time and it never works. You let someone get that close, it just means they need a shorter knife. Lonely and alive works just fine, thanks."

“Seems like you miss it a little more than you want to admit.”

“Pick every little word apart if you want, but it doesn't change the way the galaxy works.”

“I have to go, but we should do this again.”

“Wait. My turn with the questions. People usually walk by now. Why are you really asking all these things? Are you eyeing me up? Because if this is just about sex, maybe you should just fucking say so.”

“Then don't worry: I'm not looking for that.”

“I don't get you, Shepard. You don't want anything, but you keep coming around.”

“I just like to get to know my crew. That's all these talks have been about. Nothing more. Is it that hard to just be friends?”

“It's never 'just friends.' Men always want more.”

“Maybe I'm the exception that proves the rule, but I doubt it. Look at the other men in the squad, in the crew. How many have made a pass at you? Not that you get out much.”

“Well, that's – ” she made a scoffing noise, but the point was made. “Fine, Shepard. Maybe you are just...you. What of it?”

“Think you can watch my back against the Collectors?”

“Ha! Yeah. A place to actually let loose.”

“To a point. We do need to rescue the crew.”

“Right. Just point me in the right direction.”

Zaeed was sitting in his converted closet, looking thoughtful again.

“Shepard. I was just waxing guddamn nostalgic.”

“What's on your mind, Zaeed?”

“Doesn't matter who you are, you got a gun in your face, chances are good you'll do what the other man says. Only two types don't buckle at that point: trained killers and psychopaths. A lot of people can't tell the difference.”

“True enough.”

“Joker handled himself well. Should have come back here and got a real weapon. Still, did real well for a kid with glass bones. Pretty sure I'd be laid up in bed if I were him.”

“Me, too. Any last thoughts on the mission?”

“Collectors and Protheans...it's all above my pay grade. I'm more used to putting down rebellions, tracking down bastards who didn't pay their gambling debts. Still, even I know a galaxy-shaking revelation when I hear one. Makes fighting land wars for pay seems small time.”

“Welcome to my world.”

“Think I'll retire after this. Find me a nice sunny beach somewhere.”

If Zaeed had any other nuggets of wisdom, they were interrupted by a call from EDI, informing Shepard that The Illusive Man wanted to speak with him.

When Shepard entered the holo-vid call, TIM was standing with his back to him, studying the swirling colors of the star outside his window. It seemed to take a moment for him to realize that the Commander was there, and he turned slowly as he started the conversation.

“Shepard. I wish I had more information for you. I don't like you heading through that relay blind, but we don't have much choice.”

“We'll deal with whatever we find.”

“That's why I brought you back. Always willing to take on the impossible. Despite the danger, it's a great opportunity. The first human to take a ship through...and survive.”

“I'm not going alone; I've got some of the best working with me. We'll make it.”

“I knew we brought you back for a reason. I've never seen a better leader.”

“Join us. I've got room on the Normandy if you're that eager to see it.”

“It's a tempting offer. But it's not my place. I just wanted you to know I appreciate the risk

you're taking. Regardless of your opinion of Cerberus. Of me. You are...a valuable asset. To all of humanity. Be careful, Shepard."

-----Suicide Mission-----

"Approaching Omega-4 Relay," Joker announced. Everyone stand by."

"Let's make it happen," said Shepard, standing behind the pilot's chair.

Miranda was in the cockpit, too. Everyone else was at their stations, having assumed the missing crew's duties. The Normandy approached the relay. Unlike all of the others in the galaxy, which glowed blue, this relay was red. Shepard had no idea what that meant. No one did.

"Reaper IFF activated," EDI announced. "Signal acknowledged, Commander."

"The drive core just lit up like a Christmas tree!" Jacob reported.

"Drive core electrical charge at critical levels," said EDI.

"Rerouting!" Tali responded.

The Relay grabbed the ship and flung it halfway across the galaxy. The view out the windshield went white, then moments later, resolved into a dense debris field.

"Oh, shit!" Joker gasped as his hands grabbed the controls. "Brace for deceleration!" the pilot yelled, as he pitched the Normandy up, pulling a couple of Gs.

For the inertial dampers to allow any extra gravity meant that the maneuver was extreme indeed. Shepard and Miranda were both forced to their knees.

"Our kinetic barriers are not designed to survive impact with debris that size," said EDI.

"Well, it's a good thing we upgraded, then," said Joker, his voice strained. "Come on, find some room!"

"Kinetic barriers at 40 percent."

"Rerouting non-critical power," Tali said.

"This is gonna hurt!"

Something bumped up against the Normandy, and the ship's kinetic barrier flickered. After a moment, the G-force slackened to normal.

"Too close," Miranda breathed, returning to her feet.

Outside, the Normandy flew above a vast field of wreckage. In Citadel space, after a battle in space there would be salvage crews to clean up. This must have been centuries worth of exploration. Eons. Who knew how many Cycles of extinction the Reapers had put the galaxy through. In the distance was a black hole, glowing orange as it sucked in light and solid matter, all of the wreckage and debris forming a disk as it swirled into the singularity. It was beautiful and awe-inspiring, in an end-of-existence sort of way.

"These must be all the ships that tried to make it through the Omega-4 Relay," said Joker. "Some look...ancient."

"I have detected an energy signature near the edge of the accretion disk," EDI reported.

On the screen was a gigantic cylindrical shape resembling the collector ship, but orders of magnitude larger; the size of a small moon, perhaps.

"Has to be the Collector base," said Shepard. Take us in for a closer look. Nice and easy."

"Careful, Jeff," said EDI. "We have company."

On the sensor screens were four spheroid objects the size of small skycars. They shot thin red energy beams as they emerged from the debris.

"Taking evasive maneuvers," said Joker.

Joker took the Normandy back into the debris field in an attempt to shake the pursuers. Miranda and Shepard held on tight through the maneuvers. Joker transferred weapons controls to the AI.

"EDI – take these bastards out!"

The pilot flipped the ship around a section of ancient ship hull, and EDI shot down two enemy craft with the point defense lasers. One was still on their tail, and the maneuver left an opening for another to etch a shallow gash into the Normandy's upper hull. Miranda commented that it was a

good thing they'd upgraded the armor.

"They want another round?" Joker taunted. "Come on, girl, let's give it to them."

He took the ship through twisting, spiraling maneuvers through the debris. The two remaining enemies' beams missing wide. Joker started into a loop, but one of the spheroids anticipated the move and positioned itself to slice a hole in the side of the cargo bay, then wedged itself in.

"Alert: hull breach on the cargo deck," EDI reported.

Zaeed, Grunt, and Jack responded that they were dealing with it. EDI shot down the last spheroid. No more appeared. The ship shook for a few more moments as the one in the cargo hold was shot to pieces and pushed out. The deck was then evacuated and sealed off against vacuum. No casualties reported.

Joker kept the Normandy flying slowly, just above the field of debris, trying to avoid avoid any more attention.

"We're about to clear the debris field," EDI announced.

"There it is – the Collector base," said Miranda.

"See if you can find a place to land without drawing attention," Shepard ordered.

Joker glanced at the sensors. "Too late. Looks like they're sending out an old friend to greet us."

The Collector ship backed out of a docking bay in the side of the base. It turned quickly and fired its ragged yellow energy beam. Joker easily dodged it.

"Time to show our new teeth," said Shepard. "Fire the main gun."

Joker lined up the shot, and EDI charged and fired the new Thanix cannon. The Normandy fired a pair of blue beams, together as thick and powerful as what the Collectors had, tearing a large hole in the side of the enemy ship. The ship still managed to turn and fire, but the Normandy was faster and more maneuverable.

"Come on you miserable sons of bitches!" Joker brought the ship around for another shot, getting in close.

EDI fired the main gun again, and the Collector ship disintegrated in massive fireball. Too massive. And too close. The shockwave from the explosion impacted the Normandy, sending her tumbling. Shepard and Miranda were knocked around the cockpit, though Joker remained strapped to his pilot's chair.

"Mass effect field generators are offline," EDI reported.

"EDI – give me something!" Joker yelled.

"Generators unresponsive. All hands brace for impact."

Shepard picked himself up off the floor. He saw Miranda doing the same. Sparks spewed from a console in the cockpit, and more further along the neck of the ship. Otherwise, the Normandy appeared to be intact. At least gravity and air were still working, and up was still up.

"Joker, you okay?" Shepard asked his pilot.

"Ungh...I think I broke a rib." Joker grunted, righting himself in his chair. "Or all of them."

Shepard asked EDI for a damage report.

"Multiple core systems overloaded during the crash. Restoring operation will take time."

"We all knew this was likely a one-way trip," Miranda said.

"I'll do whatever it takes to stop the Collectors, but I plan to live to tell about it," said Shepard.

"I'm glad you're in charge," said Joker, pulling up sensor data. "What's next?"

"Where are we?"

"Looks like we landed on the Collector base, near their docking bay," said the pilot.

EDI provided her own analysis. "I do not detect an internal security network. It is possible the Collectors did not expect anyone to reach the base."

Joker sounded optimistic. "If we're lucky, their external sensors were hit like we were, They might not know we're alive."

"EDI, can you hack into their systems? Initiate a self-destruct, overload their core or something?"

"I cannot. The Collectors have learned from our previous encounter. They are keeping me out."

"Okay, we do this the hard way, then. Tali, you Joker, and EDI get the ship back in the air. Everyone else, gather in the briefing room. We need a plan."

"This isn't how we planned this mission, but this is where we're at," Shepard said as the last of the squad gathered around the long table in the briefing room. "We can't worry about whether the Normandy can get us home. We came to stop the Collectors, and that means coming up with a plan to take out this station. EDI, bring up your scans."

A hologram of the base appeared above the table. Lines and arrows were drawn to indicate points of interest. EDI gave them a goal.

"You should be able to overload their critical systems if you get to the main control center, here. I am also detecting a small number of human life signs in the central chamber, inward from their docking bay."

"If our crew or any of the colonists are still alive, the Collectors are probably holding them in there."

Jacob peered into the hologram. "Looks like there are two main routes. Might be a good idea to split up to keep the Collectors off balance, then regroup in the central chamber."

Miranda shook her head. "No good. Both routes are blocked. See these doors? The only way past is to get someone to open them from the other side."

"A few well-placed explosives should clear a path," said Zaeed.

EDI said no. "There is insufficient ordinance on board to create an explosion capable of damaging the interior walls."

"It's not a fortress, there's got to be something," said Shepard.

Kasumi pointed at a thin line in the hologram. "What about this ventilation shaft? There's one end close by, and the other starts right where our people are."

Shepard liked that idea. "Right. And it runs along side the shorter of the two routes. We can't all squeeze through there, though; and we'd be sitting ducks anyway. If we send a team down each path, they can keep the Collectors busy while one of us sneaks in through the ventilation shaft, then opens both doors on the other side."

"Practically a suicide mission. I volunteer," Jacob said.

Miranda shook her head gently. "I appreciate the thought, Jacob, but you couldn't shut down the security systems in time. We need to send a tech expert."

"It looks hot in there, but I can do it, Shepard," said Tali.

"No, Tali, we need you help to get the ship flying again. And you're right, the temperatures are too high. The same would be true for Kasumi. Legion – you can hack through anything. I'm sending you through the shaft."

"Acknowledged."

"The rest of us will break into two teams and fight down each passage. I'll lead the smaller team down the shorter route, keeping the enemy away from the ventilation shaft. The larger team will take the long way. That should draw the Collector's attention away from what we're doing."

"I'll lead the second fire team, Shepard," said Miranda. "We'll meet up with you on the other side of the doors."

"Not so fast, cheerleader," Jack objected. "Nobody wants to take orders from you."

"This isn't a popularity contest! Lives are at stake. Shepard – you need someone who can command loyalty through experience."

"Garrus – you're in charge of the second team."

"Well, at least he knows what he's doing," Miranda grumbled.

"Once we meet up, we'll head for that control center." The squad shuffled nervously. Shepard gave them some words of encouragement. "You all know what's at stake and what we're up against. If we don't stop the Collectors, if we don't end it here and now, nobody else will. It's that simple. I don't know what we're going to find in there, but I won't lie to you. It's not going to be easy. We've

lost good people. We may lose more. The Collectors have stolen hundreds of thousands. It's not important. What matters is this: Not. One. More. That's what we can do, here, today. It ends with us." His squadmates were standing straighter, now. "The Collectors, the Reapers – they aren't a threat to us. They're a threat to everything – everyone. Those are the lives we're fighting for. That's the scale. It's been a long journey, and no one's coming out without scars. But it all comes down to this moment. Make me proud. Make yourselves proud."

Shepard took Miranda and Samara on his team. The rest went with Garrus. The gigantic cylindrical station spun slowly on its axis, giving it a small amount of gravity, negating the need for mag-boots. It was constructed nearly identically to the Collector ship, being formed out of an amalgamation of rock and metal.

Legion walked with purpose over to the ventilation shaft and ripped off the cover. Shepard performed a comms check with Garrus, then led the way inside. The interior of the base was also just like the Collector's ship. Glowing, oozing honeycombs pulsed on the ceiling

"We are in position," Legion reported. "Exterior temperature slightly elevated. No obstructions detected."

"Second team – are you in position?" Shepard called.

"In position," Garrus answered. "Meet you on the other side of those doors. We'll start making some noise."

The corridor went through some twists and turns, opening up to a ledge next to a vast chasm, then closing up again. The ventilation shaft wound its way through the hull as well, occasionally meeting up with Shepard's path, then winding off again. It was made of a semi-transparent material, and the Commander could see Legion crawling along on all fours inside.

A couple of minutes in, they came across a pair of Collector drones on patrol. But their backs were turned, and Shepard's team shot them down before they knew what had hit them. Garrus reported that they'd come under fire, but were moving forward.

The corridor opened up again, and three Collectors flew in on those thin wings of theirs. Samara caught one in a biotic field and tossed it aside, while Shepard and Miranda killed one each as they landed.

"Pathing failure," Legion reported. "There is an obstruction in the tunnel."

Up ahead, the ventilation shaft poked through the wall. Miranda pointed out a control panel under it. She pressed a button, and a gate inside the tube opened up, allowing the friendly geth to continue. They continued on, fighting a few Collectors here and there, and opening valves along the way.

Mordin, over with Garrus's team, came up with a new theory, which he explained over the radio:

"Enhanced 'harbinger' type Collector in fact a Reaper lending power, just as Sovereign did with Saren at Battle of the Citadel."

"You think there's a Reaper in here?" Kasumi worried.

"Gods, I hope not," said Thane.

Grunt didn't care. "Less talking more shooting!" he said.

"Doesn't change what we came here to do," said Shepard, though the presence of an actual Reaper would make the job all the harder. "Keep moving."

In all, there were eight valves that needed opening before they arrived at their destination: a large chamber with a heavy blast door at the far end. Shepard pounded on it, but there was no response. A dozen Collectors poured in from the sides, some flying, some on foot.

"Opening doors," Legion called.

Nothing happened on Shepard's end, then Garrus called on the radio. "We're in, Shepard, where are you?"

"We're in position. We need this door open now!"

Shepard's team dodged Collector attacks, firing back as they were able. The doors finally opened to reveal Garrus's team standing in a firing line.

The turian barked orders. "Here they come! Close the doors! Cover them!"

Shepard shooed Miranda and Samara in, following close on their heels. The door shut, and Garrus staggered back. Thankfully only his armor had been dented.

The Commander looked around the chamber. It wasn't really a chamber, but more of a cutout. Opposite the wall with the doors was a grand view of the central chamber. It looked just like the center of the Collector's ship, only on a much, much larger scale. They probably could fit a billion people in there. But the question remained: why?

"Looks like one of the missing colonists," Jacob said from behind.

"There's more. Over here," Thane called from off to the side.

Shepard turned around and found pods – the ones the Collectors used to store their victims – and these were full. Shepard tapped on the glass of the nearest pod. A woman he didn't recognize opened her eyes, then went into a panic.

"My god! She's still alive."

Shepard looked for a way to open the pod, but as watched, she began to...melt. The woman pounded on the inside of the pod and screamed. He found the release handle, but her scream suddenly cut off, and there was a sickening splatter coating the inside of the pod.

The rest of the squad spread out, opening pods, finding members of the Normandy's crew. Eventually, the last pod was open, and all of the crew were accounted for. The last one Shepard opened held Doctor Chakwas. He supported her as she fell out of the pod and into his arms. He asked how she was, and she took a moment to gather her wits.

"Shepherd? You...you came for us."

"No one gets left behind," he said.

"Thank god you got here in time," said Kelly. "A few more seconds and...I don't even want to think about it."

Shepard helped the Doctor to her feet. "The colonists were...processed." She swallowed hard. "Those swarms of little robots, they – melted their bodies into grey liquid and pumped it through these tubes."

She pointed overhead, to a series of tubes that led out into the central chamber and down towards the middle of the base.

"Why are they doing this?" Shepard asked. "What are they doing with our...bodies?"

"I don't know," said the Doctor. "I'm just glad you got here before it happened to us."

"So are we," said Miranda. "But we still have a job to do. We've done well so far. Let's hope we can finish the job."

"Whatever the Collectors are doing, it ends here," Shepard vowed. He called the Normandy. "Joker can you get a fix on our position?"

"Roger that, Commander. All those tubes lead into the main control room right above you. The route is blocked by a security door, but there's another chamber that runs parallel to the one you're in."

"I cannot recommend that," said EDI. "Thermal emissions suggest the chamber is overrun with seeker swarms. It may be where they are grown. Mordin's countermeasure cannot protect you against so many at once."

"What about biotics?" Shepard looked to his more powerful squadmates. "Could we create a biotic field to keep them from getting near us?"

Samara pondered the question. "Yes...I think it may be possible. I wouldn't be able to protect everyone, but we might be able to get a small team through if they stayed close."

"I could do it, too," said Miranda. "In theory, Any biotic could handle it. Shepard, who do you want to maintain the field?"

"Samara and I will take a small team through the seeker swarms. The rest of you provide a diversion by going through the main passage. Same teams as before. We'll open the security doors from the other side and meet you there. Garrus?"

"We'll keep the defenders busy" the turian promised. "You slip around the back."

“What about me and the rest of the crew, Shepard?” Doctor Chakwas asked. “We’re in no shape to fight.”

Miranda didn't like the idea. “We can't afford to go back, Shepard. Not now.”

Shepard noticed the doors through which Garrus' team had come were still open. “I take it that path back to the ship is still clear?” Garrus thought it was, and EDI confirmed that her scanners showed it empty. “But you'll never make it without help. I'll send someone with you. Jacob?”

“I'll see them back safe, Commander.”

“We've all got our assignments. Let's move out!”

Shepard added Legion to his team, just in case the door controls proved tricky. Garrus's team headed out. Samara asked Shepard, Miranda and Legion to stay close, then formed a large biotic bubble around herself and her team. She held it against the door to the seeker chamber as Miranda opened it, and they slipped through together.

The inside of the seeker chamber was even more hive-like than the rest of the Collector base. Rounded hallways wound off in several directions, some narrow, some large. Seeker bugs pounded the biotic bubble like large hail, but Samara was unphased. Strutting confidently forward, she led the way. Shepard closed the door behind them.

“How are we going to find our way through this?” Miranda asked.

A marker appeared in Shepard's HUD, and a faint blue trail indicated the path to take. “Thank you, EDI.” He asked Garrus for a status report, but all he got was static. Just like on Horizon, the swarms interfered with radio contact.

Samara followed the trail while the others kept a lookout. The seeker swarm seemed to be getting thicker as they descended further into the chamber, and it was getting warm. Shepard saw sweat on the asari's face, and she did seem to slow as the minutes passed.

“I can see the entrance,” Miranda announced. “We need to get there soon.”

Samara's bubble was shrinking. Shepard sent Legion ahead to prepare to open the door; the geth wouldn't be affected by insect stings.

“I will hold on...as...long...as I can,” Samara said between gritted teeth.

She swayed, and Shepard grabbed her. The asari leaned into him, seemingly unable to walk, but she held the bubble. “Hold on, we're almost there,” he told her,

Shepard picked Samara up and carried her the rest of the way. A single seeker wiggled through the bubble, but Miranda was there to squash it quickly. She added her own biotic strength to Samara's.

“Damn, this *is* hard,” said the Cerberus agent.

As they reached the door, Samara managed to cover it with her biotic barrier, and Legion opened the door, then shut it quickly as soon as the rest were through. Shepard set Samara down gently as she released her biotics and sat panting.

A transmission finally came through to the Commander: “...you copy? Come on, Shepard? Where are you?”

“I copy, Garrus. What's your position?”

“We're pinned down at the door. Taking heavy fire.”

“We're coming; just hold on! Get this door open, Legion!”

The controls were locked, but they hacked them quickly. Zaeed had been standing with his back pressed against the door, and fell on his back as the door opened. Thane helped him to his feet as he came through, followed by the rest. Grunt was last, and he backpedaled, firing his shotgun. He tossed a grenade for good measure as Legion closed the doors and sealed them.

They all looked exhausted. The young krogan chuckled, enjoying himself. “Heh, heh, heh.”

Shepard checked in with the Normandy.

“I'm here, Commander,” Joker replied. “Chakwas and the rest of the crew just showed up.”

“Mister Taylor's group just arrived, Shepard.” EDI clarified. “No casualties.”

“That's good news,” said Shepard. “Now let's make it count. What's our next step?”

Miranda looked around the room. "This is it. All the tubes lead to this spot. What can you tell us, EDI? What are they doing?"

"The tubes are feeding into some kind of superstructure. It is emitting both organic and non-organic energy signatures. Given these readings, it must be massive. Shepard, if my calculations are correct, the superstructure is a Reaper."

Jack walked up to the edge of the room and looked out around the corner to her left. "Not just any Reaper..."

The others joined her and stood in shock. "...A human Reaper!" Shepard finished.

It was merely a grey metal skeleton, and only the upper half of one. And for some reason it had two right eyeballs in a widened right socket. But it was massive. When completed, it would be at least the size of Sovereign.

"It appears the Collectors have processed tens of thousands of humans," said EDI. "Significantly more will be required to complete the Reaper."

"How many more?"

"Millions. Perhaps more. Impossible to know for certain. This Reaper appears to be in a very early stage of development. An embryo in human terms."

"What do the Collectors gain by turning humans into this...Reaper shell?" Miranda asked.

"They may be facilitating the Reaper equivalent of reproduction. Or it may serve another purpose. I do not have the data to speculate further. However, it is clear that the Collectors are merely pawns. The technology needed to create this Reaper is not their own. It is likely that different species construct each Reaper. In this case, the Collectors provide the labor."

"Reapers wipe out all advanced life in galaxy every 50,000 years," said Mordin. "Likely to replenish numbers using species they wipe out."

"So it's not...alive, yet." said Shepard. "We can still stop it from being...created?"

"The process can be stopped, but it is unclear exactly how much it has developed. I cannot, for example, tell you if it has awareness."

"Why build it to look human?" Kasumi asked.

"It appears that a Reaper's shape is based upon the species being used to create it."

"But Reapers are machines – why do they need humans at all?" Shepard asked.

"Incorrect. Reapers are sapient constructs. A hybrid of organic and inorganic material. The exact construction methods are unclear, but it seems probable that the Reapers absorb the essence of a species; utilizing it in their reproduction process."

"Right. Sovereign told me something along those lines on Virmire. EDI, any suggestions on how we take it out?" Shepard asked.

"The large tubes injecting the fluid are a weak structural points. Destroying them should cause the

supports to collapse and the reaper to fall. But destroying the base itself should prove sufficient."

"And how do we do that?"

"There are control panels nearby. If Legion is unable to hack into the system from there, I recommend explosives."

"Great. Then how do we get out?" Kasumi asked.

"There are floating platforms nearby. A tunnel will lead out to the central chamber. There is an opening at end of the base to your right. Get there, and we will pick you up."

Legion stepped back from the computers and reported failure. Zaeed and Garrus stepped up, conferring. Mordin gathered everyone's remaining grenades for them. The mercenary and the turian placed them and wired them together.

"Joker, prep the engines," Shepard said. "We're about to overload this place and blow it sky-high."

"Roger that, Commander....Uh Commander? I've got an incoming signal from the Illusive Man. Putting it through."

Miranda activated her omni-tool, and a hologram of TIM appeared.

“Shepard, you've done the impossible.”

“I didn't do it alone. And we still have to destroy the base.”

“Not necessarily. I have a better option. I'm looking at the schematics EDI uploaded. A timed radiation pulse would kill the remaining Collectors, but leave the machinery and technology intact. This is our chance, Shepard. They're building a Reaper. That knowledge – that framework – could save us.”

The rest of the squad tensed, uncertain as to Shepard's mind, as to the outcome of this conversation.

“They liquefied people. Turned them into something horrible. We have to destroy the base.”

“Don't be short-sighted. Our best chance against the Reapers is to turn their own resources against them.”

“I'm not so sure,” said Miranda. “Seeing it firsthand...using anything from this base seems like a betrayal.”

TIM continued to argue. “If we ignore this opportunity, *that* would be a betrayal. They were working directly with the Collectors. Who knows what information is buried there? This base is a gift, we can't just destroy it.”

Shepard shook his head. “You're completely ruthless. The next thing I know, you'll be wanting to finish growing this thing yourself.”

“My goal is to save humanity from the Reapers. At any cost. I've never hidden that from you. Imagine how many lives could be saved if we keep this base intact and use its knowledge to thwart the Reapers. Imagine the lives that will be lost if we don't.”

“No matter what kind of technology we might find, it's not worth it.”

“Shepard, you died fighting for what you believed. I brought you back so you could keep fighting. Some would say what we did to you is going too far, but look what you've accomplished! I didn't discard you because I knew your value. Don't be so quick to discard this facility. Think of the potential!”

“We'll fight and win without it. I won't let fear compromise who I am.”

“Miranda – do not let Shepard destroy the base!” TIM was sounding desperate, now.

“Or what? You'll replace me next?”

“I gave you an order, Miranda!”

“I noticed. Consider this my resignation.”

“Shepard! Think about what's at stake! About everything Cerberus has done for you! You – ”

Miranda severed the connection. The squad relaxed. Zaeed and Garrus finished rigging the grenades into explosives. A remote detonator would have left too much to chance, so they improvised a timer.

“How long you figure we'll need?” Zaeed asked.

Garrus walked over to the ledge and looked out the tunnel. “That's a long way. Call it...ten minutes?”

“I'll set it for eight.”

Shepard ordered the squad onto the hexagonal floating platform. When everyone was aboard, he activated the timer, then ran over and hopped on as the platform flew off. Shepard surveyed the open central shaft of the base. He saw no Reapers around. Just the one human-like larva they'd left behind.

Other platforms came flying in on intercept courses. Each one carried several Collector troops. The squad took up positions and defended themselves against wave after wave of attackers. After destroying one of the Harbinger-types, another would be possessed. The third one spoke in a booming voice as the platform neared the end of the base.

“Human. You've changed nothing. Your species has the attention of those infinitely or greater. That which you know as Reapers are your salvation to destruction.”

It paused as Shepard's platform reached its destination. The Normandy was waiting just outside with the airlock open. The squad jumped off the platform and onto a catwalk. The base shook, and an explosion filled the far end of the base, flames rapidly approaching.

“Guess I should have set it for nine,” said Zaeed.

Each of the squad ran out to jump one at a time onto the waiting ship. Shepard brought up the rear, firing backwards at Collectors as he went.

“You have failed,” said the Harbinger. “We will find another way. Releasing control.” As that last was spoken, the possessed Collector drone reverted to its mundane form and slumped to its knees, no longer pursuing. It turned its head to watch the approaching flames.

Shepard jumped to the ship, nearly missing. But Garrus caught his hand and pulled him aboard. The Normandy sped away. Joker turned the ship, heading for the Relay. The Collector base exploded behind them, sending out a shockwave that the ship barely outpaced.

Back in the Omega System, the Normandy drifted. Tali had made some emergency repairs – enough to outrun the explosion and get but the Relay, but the ship would need some more work before she could make it to the nearest port of call. With the full crew back on board, though, it would be easy.

The Commander moved a beam aside to make his way into the vid-comm room. He had some parting words for his former boss.

“Shepard. You're making a habit of costing me more than time and money.” TIM scowled as he put out his cigarette, smashing it angrily into an ashtray on the arm of his director's chair.

“You get the help you deserve.”

“And what about the rest of humanity? Your ideals have cost us more than you can imagine.”

“Too many lives were lost at that base. I'm not sorry it's gone.”

“The first of many lives. The technology from that base could have secured human dominance in the galaxy. Against the Reapers, and beyond.”

“Human dominance? Or just Cerberus?”

“Strength for Cerberus is strength for every human. Cerberus *is* humanity!” TIM stood and pointed a finger at Shepard. “I should have known you'd choke on the hard decisions. Too idealistic from the start.”

“I'm not looking for your approval. Harbinger is coming, and he won't be alone.”

“Don't turn your back on me, Shepard! I made you! I brought you back from the dead!”

“And I'm going to do exactly what you brought me back to do. I'm going win this war, and I'll do it without sacrificing the soul of our species.” Shepard stepped out of the holo-emitter. “EDI, lose this channel.”

“Gladly, Commander.”

He went down to the cargo hold, where force-fields had been erected to cover the holes. The squad were helping crew with repairs. He nodded to them as he passed, making his inspections. They nodded back. He was proud of them. Proud that they had all survived what everyone had said was a suicide mission. Miranda handed him a datapad with a full damage assessment. Shepard looked out at the stars. The Reapers were out there, and they were coming.

-----LAIR OF THE SHADOW BROKER-----

DENOUEMENT

With the mission complete. The squad broke up. No one had really expected they'd survive, but now that they had, they made plans for the future. And not all of the crew were happy about quitting Cerberus. So the Normandy made stops at Omega Station, at the Citadel, and finally at Tuchanka. People left the ship, or they left Shepard. While most left Cerberus to make a new start, a few went back to the secretive organization. That left Shepard, Chakwas, and Joker alone on the ship. And EDI, of course.

“Where to next, Shepard?” the pilot asked.

“Illium calls, Joker. I need to see – ”

“Liara, right. You deserve it. Nos Astra it is.”

SYSTEM HACKING

Liara T'Soni stood as Commander Shepard strode into her office. Her face was expectant.

"Is it done?" she asked, holding her breath.

"The Collectors are gone," he said, an exhausted smile on his face.

She came out from behind her desk and stood close to him, uncertain. He took her shoulders and pulled her closer. Kissed her. She wrapped her arms around him, kissing him back. They released, pressing their foreheads together, feeling each other.

"Come with me," he whispered.

She winced. "I'm busy," she said in a half-whisper. "It would be so easy to join up with you like old times. But these aren't old times. I have commitments here. Things I need to take care of."

He took a deep breath, let it out, then gently pushed away and looked her in the eyes. "What kind of things do you need to take care of? Are you in trouble?"

"No, no trouble. But it's been a long two years. I had things to do while you were gone. I have debts to repay. Listen, if you want to help, I need someone with hacking expertise. Someone I can trust. If you could disable security at key points around Nos Astra, you could get me information I need. That

would help me a great deal."

"What's this all about, Liara? Can't you just talk to me?"

"Don't you think I want to, Shepard? This isn't because I don't trust you. This is Illium. Anything I say is probably being recorded."

"Hacking a terminal sounds pretty easy. Why do you need me?"

"I don't know anyone else I can trust. Hacking the security nodes won't get you the data. It just creates a minor glitch in the system for a few seconds, during which I can connect to it. I'm leaving my own system vulnerable so that the data can be imported during that short time."

"If it'll help you, I'll take care of it."

"Thank you, Shepard. This may help me pay a great debt."

"I'll talk to you later, Liara."

As Shepard turned to leave, he was startled to notice Liara's assistant, Nyxeris, had been standing there the whole time. He hadn't noticed her enter. He didn't mind public displays of affection, but the presence of the purple-skinned asari still unnerved him.

He left the offices and headed out to the trading floor. He wasn't much of a hacker himself, but EDI was happy to lend her abilities. But first, he needed a cover. Lurking around, hacking into security consoles, those were criminal activities if there ever were. So he checked in with Tracking Officer Dara at the police station – the same officer who'd told him where to find Samara. She was glad that things had worked out with the justicar, and happy to cooperate with a Council Spectre again. After verifying his credentials, she assured him that her fellow officers would leave him to his business, whatever that might be.

At each of the three security nodes Liara had indicated, Shepard connected EDI to the console via his omni-tool. A few seconds would pass, and then a beep indicated success. When it was done, Liara called him back to her office.

"Thank you for getting me that system data. Your hacking skills have improved considerably."

"Actually, I enlisted the help of a friend."

Liara blinked. "Well, if you trust this person, that's good enough for me."

"She's saved my life a few times. I'll introduce you some time."

THE OBSERVER

"Do you remember the Shadow Broker?" Liara asked. "With the data you got me, I may be able to find information caches from his agents."

"Yeah, the information broker. I've dealt with him."

"No one knows who he is. Given his resources, there's speculation that he may actually be a

group operating under one name.”

“Wait a minute, are you working for the Shadow Broker?”

“No. Actually, I'm planning to kill him.”

Shepard narrowed his eyes. “Why are you so interested in him?”

“He hurt someone important to me.”

“Are you on the run? I can help you.”

“Actually, it would be more accurate to say that the Shadow Broker is on the run from me. We crossed paths not long after you died. Since then, I've been working to take him down. With this data, I'm a step closer.”

“I've never seen you ready to execute someone in cold blood. What did he do to you?”

“I was on a job with a friend. The Shadow Broker's people caught us. My friend didn't escape. I don't know if he's dead or being interrogated, but I need to find him. I owe him my life. And I need to make the Shadow Broker pay for what he did.”

“You can't come with me because you're after the Shadow Broker? What if I help you find him?”

“I'm sorry, Shepard. The galaxy doesn't work that way. I need to find leads, trace information. I need to work. I can't do that on the Normandy. I wish I could.”

“You've spent two years of your life hunting the Shadow Broker? Liara, that's insane.”

“You don't know what he did. You couldn't. You were gone! And we all did what we had to do after that. Let's not argue. I don't have enough friends left to lose one.” She cleared her throat. “The data you gave me was extremely helpful. It gave me a target. The Shadow Broker has several contacts here on Illium. The most powerful is someone called the Observer. Taking down the Observer will put me closer to the Shadow Broker. I could use your help.”

“Tell me what I can do.”

“Your data pointed me at logs kept by Shadow Broker agents. The logs were deleted, but it may be possible to reconstruct some of it. The Shadow Broker is cautious. His agents are referred to only by their title and race.”

Nyxeris spoke up from behind Shepard. When had she come in? “My inquiries have narrowed the Observer down to one of five operatives: a turian, a salarian, a krogan, a batarian, and a vorchia.”

“If you can refine the list,” said Liara, “I'll know where to strike.”

“Let me go talk to these people,” said Shepard. “I'll get the name you need.”

Liara shook her head. “This is a delicate operation, Shepard. If you shake down one agent, the others will go to ground, and my chance will be lost.”

“Liara is right,” Nyxeris said. “We need to get enough evidence to strike. And we need it soon.”

“I'm more than capable of handling the violence, Shepard. I need your help gathering the data.”

“Then, do you have any specifics on these agents?”

“I'm afraid not. Nyxeris was lucky to get as much as she did.”

“I was happy to help, ma'am.” Nyxeris bowed her head.

“The data is our only hope of determining which one is the Observer. And if we wait too long, they'll all disappear.”

“I'll reconstruct the data and tell you what I find.”

“Thank you, Shepard. When you find something, call me on the radio channel we used in the old days. I can't risk handling this in person.”

Shepard left the office on his second errand. This time, there were five public extranet terminals that needed to be hacked, each having been used by one of the suspects. Again, EDI's help was invaluable in extracting the data. Once he had it all in hand, though, something struck him as odd. He called Liara on the old radio channel.

“Shepard. You found something already?”

“None of the suspects fit. All five are male. The Observer is female. Something's not right – who gave you this lead?”

“My assistant, Nyxeris. She got the information...Nyxeris...gave me the information.” Liara turned away from the mic for a moment. “Nyxeris, could I see you in here for a moment? Shepard,

I'll talk to you later.”

Shepard hurried back to Liara's office to find her sitting calmly at her desk, studying her computer. There was a purple stain on the wall just inside the door.

“Nyxeris had some interesting data hidden away,” she said by way of greeting. “Thank you, Shepard. I wouldn't have caught her without you. I'm one step closer to the Shadow Broker, thanks to you.”

“How was the fight?” Shepard glanced at the bloodstain again before taking a seat.

“She was very talented. I imagine that had she been ordered to assassinate me, I'd never have seen her coming. But her barriers needed practice. Practice I'm afraid she won't be getting.”

“What's the next step?”

“Now, I gather information, peel away layers of lies, and shine light into the shadows. And when I find the Shadow Broker, I hit him with a biotic field so strong that what's left of his body will fit into a coffee cup.”

“That anger can't be just from what you've told me. What else happened between you and the Shadow Broker?”

“Did Cerberus ever tell you how they recovered your body?” Shepard shook his head, suddenly surprised that he'd never been curious. “I gave it to them. I gave you to them, Shepard. Because they said they could rebuild you. And to do that, I had to take it from the Shadow Broker, who was going to sell your corpse to the Collectors.”

Shepard was stunned. That was a lot to take in. “Why...why didn't you tell me about this before now?”

“Because I screwed it up, Shepard. I barely escaped with my own life. And when I gave you to Cerberus, I told myself I was doing it for you, for a chance to bring you back. But I knew they would use you for their own business. And I let it happen. Because I couldn't let you go. I'm sorry.” She lowered her face, unable to meet his eyes.

“You did the right thing, Liara. Their mission – stopping the Collectors – was important. I couldn't have done that if you hadn't given me to Cerberus. And I'm alive because of you.”

“Thank you. I...I was afraid you'd hate me.” She turned to face him again. “So, that's why I must destroy the Shadow Broker. For what he did to my friend, and to you, and whatever he did with the Collectors.”

“I'd like to help, Liara. The Collectors are gone. I've cut ties with Cerberus. The Alliance has me officially missing in action. Technically I'm still a Spectre, but I'm free.”

“For now, I need to study this data. Give me some time. Maybe if you come back later...”

LAIR OF THE SHADOW BROKER

“Maybe it's time I introduce you to my hacker friend. EDI?” Shepard activated his omni-tool.

“Yes, Shepard?”

“I'm here with Liara. I don't suppose you'd like to help us locate the Shadow Broker?”

“Of course, Shepard. Hello Doctor T'Soni. May I have access to your computer?”

“Um, hello? Uh...I suppose.” Shepard nodded at her. “Okay.”

“Thank you. Analyzing.”

Shepard thought it might take more than what Liara had. “EDI, feel free to hack whatever databases you can access. Use my Spectre authorization if you need it.”

“Understood. Accessing the extranet now. This will take a few moments.”

Windows opened and closed on Liara's computer screen. Data flowed faster than any organic could possibly read or type.

Liara's eyes went wide “By the goddess, who is your friend, Shepard?”

He grinned. “I have a feeling you'll meet her in person soon enough.”

“Looks like a leaked transmission between Shadow Broker operatives. Some hints as to the location and...It's about Feron. He's still alive!”

“Your friend? The one who helped recover my body from the Shadow Broker?”

"The same. He sacrificed himself to save me. I'd never found anything suggesting he was alive. After two years, I hadn't even dreamed..."

"Sounds like you and Feron were close."

"It's funny. He betrayed me more than once. He was double-dealing for Cerberus, the Shadow Broker...But in the end, he sacrificed himself for me. I owe him."

"If he's been the Shadow Broker's prisoner for two years, he may not be in good shape."

"I know. But yesterday, all I wanted was the chance to avenge his death. Today, he's alive. I'll do whatever I have to do to get him back."

"Any friend of yours is a friend of mine. What's the next step?"

"I...I don't know. I need to prepare, to think. I'm going home. Use my terminal if you need any local intel." Liara stood suddenly and headed out.

"You okay?"

"I've spent the last two years plotting revenge. Now I have the chance to make it a rescue."

"Let me help. The Normandy needs some bills paid. Fuel, docking fees. I'll come by your apartment later?"

"Okay. Hopefully I'll have a plan by then. Thank you, Shepard."

A few hours later, Shepard took a cab to Liara's apartment building. It was raining outside, but a gap in the clouds was beginning to show a nice sunset. When he arrived, there were police all over her apartment.

"What's going on?" Shepard asked the officer at the entrance.

"This area is sealed off. Please step back, sir."

"Sealed off? Why?"

"Someone tried to kill your friend, Commander Shepard," said another asari as she descended the staircase from the apartment's loft. She was wearing blue armor, with a prominent Spectre logo stamped on the right shoulder. Her skin was a deep blue, with bright purple markings on her face that made her look like a tiger. When she reached the lower floor, she addressed the officer in charge: "Thank you, officer. Your people are dismissed."

"You can't do that!" the officer protested.

"Already done." The mysterious Spectre waved Shepard in and turned her back as the police left the apartment in disgust. She introduced herself when they were gone. "Tela Vasir. Special Tactics and Recon."

"A Spectre? What are you doing here?"

Vasir shrugged. "I was in the area, had nothing better to do. I heard your status was reinstated. Good. You're one of our most famous operatives. Might even get you to sign my chest plate. So I assume you had business with your friend this evening, Commander?"

"Liara was following a lead on the Shadow Broker."

"The Shadow Broker? Dangerous enemy to have."

"Where is she?"

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be sifting through her crap. There's no blood, no body. It looks like T'Soni got a way. The sniper didn't plan on her kinetic barrier. Clever girl. Paranoid, but clever."

"What happened here?"

"About 25 minutes ago, someone took a shot at T'Soni. Note the bullet holes." She pointed to three holes in the window. "She stuck around for almost four minutes before leaving the building. Whatever she was doing was important."

"Did the police find anything?"

"Just the mess and bullet holes. I gave them a gold star for finding the bullet holes."

"She would have left a note. Did you find anything on her terminal?"

"Not much. She wiped her drive before she left."

"She knew I was coming. She'd have made a backup of whatever she found."

"Makes sense. Haven't found it yet, though. You know T'Soni better than I do. Where would she

have hidden her backups?"

"Let me take a look around."

Shepard examined the bullet holes in the window. Lira had a nice view of the Nos Astra skyline. The kinetic barrier was still active when he tried to touch them.

"The rifle used to do that wasn't standard issue," Vasir said. "The kinetic barrier deflected the shots, but they still managed to penetrate the glass."

A floor lamp next to the couch had been knocked over, its shade touched a display case.

"Now, that's an odd thing to keep displayed," said Vasir.

"It's a part of my old armor." The back plate from his old N7 gear. Legion had welded the front part to himself. It was strange how pieces of him were scattered across the galaxy, but kept coming back to him.

"Looks like someone didn't like you much, either."

Shepard went upstairs to the loft. Behind Liara's bed was a large aquarium. She had some jellyfish and clownfish. He didn't know they shared that hobby in common. On her nightstand was a framed digital picture of the original Normandy. When he picked it up, the image changed.

Vasir was suddenly at his shoulder. "It must have been keyed to your ID. What does it show now?"

"It's a Prothean dig site. Liara did leave a message."

"There are a few Prothean looking objects around the apartment. Let's see what we can find." Vasir searched the nearest display case, while Shepard went back downstairs. "These things must be worth a fortune, she said. 'I'm glad I got here before those amateurs got their jam hands on everything. Hmm, she was certainly into ugly....no offense.'"

Shepard frowned, but let it pass. Beauty was in the eye of the beholder, after all. And it wasn't like he was into art himself, anyway. Downstairs, he studied a painting of a familiar-looking landscape in a fancy silver frame. Vasir followed him down and shared her opinion on that, too.

"That's not the Asari homeworld. I'm not sure what planet that is."

"It's Ilos."

Shepard shrugged, then turned to another display case. He touched it, triggering a kinetic barrier, and when he did, a tray in the pedestal slid open, revealing a disc. He took it over to Liara's office and placed it in her terminal, Vasir at his side. It played a recording of a video call between Liara and a salarian in a green suit.

"What have you got for me, Sekat?" Liara asked.

"It was tricky," the salarian replied. "But you paid for the best. I can narrow it down to a cluster, maybe even a system."

"How soon can you have it?"

"Shouldn't take long. Come to my office. Baria Frontiers, in the Dracon Trade Center. Gotta say, though, T'Soni – you're making me a little nervous. How big is the trouble that could come out of this?"

"Relax, Sekat. I'll see you in an hour." Liara ended the call, and the recording stopped.

"Sounds like Liara found something big on the Shadow Broker," said Shepard.

"And then someone found her," Vasir said. "I know where the Dracon Trade Center is. My car's outside."

The two Spectres rode together in silence. The rain had stopped, and the sun had set, the light illuminating the clouds in a yellow glow from below. The trade center was an office building. The lower several floors a wedge, narrowing to a rectangle that rose twenty stories or more. Vasir landed her skycar in the plaza out front.

"The Baria Frontiers offices are located on the third floor," Vasir said as they exited the vehicle and walked up the steps from the parking lot to the plaza. "I don't hear police chatter; we must have missed the party."

An explosion shook the building, shattering all of the windows on the third floor. Shepard brought his hands up to cover his face. Another set of explosions sent he and Vasir sprawling,

knocking them on their backs and sending bystanders sprawling.

Getting to her feet, Vasir surveyed the damage. "They just took out three floors to make sure she's dead! I'll grab the skycar and seal off the building from the top!"

"I'll start down here and work my way up." He could still feel the connection he shared with Liara, which meant she was alive. But the bond didn't carry anything else. She could be hurt. He shared none of this with Vasir, of course.

Shepard pulled a small shard of glass from his forearm. He hadn't thought he'd need any armor today. He didn't even have a sidearm on him. But he didn't have time to return to the Normandy to gear up. He gathered up biotic energy as he ran, forming a barrier around himself. A few civilians wandered around in a daze, the ones who were alive anyway. A turian, missing an arm, staggered out of the entryway and collapsed.

Inside, the elevator door was jammed open, and the security station was all but demolished. Picking through the debris, he found a serviceable pistol and a spare heat sink. He established radio contact with Vasir and started up the stairs to the atrium. Small fires burned, and there was a lot of smoke.

"No alarms, no police," said Vasir. Very professional."

"Lots of bodies here. Looks like they got caught in the blast."

"I wouldn't take any bets on T'Soni's informant surviving that blast."

Shepard had his doubts, too. He came across a human man, leaning against a wall and coughing up blood. The Commander wished he had some medigel to give him. With his dying breaths, the man said something about mercs coming from the smoke and setting bombs. Shepard wondered which mercenary company had taken this job. He had no trouble killing mercs, but some of them knew of him. If it was the Eclipse, for example, he might be able to reason with them.

He reached the third floor of the atrium and found the Baria Frontiers offices. Just outside the door was an unexploded bomb.

"Vasir, I found a military-grade explosive device. It hasn't been armed."

"Sloppy work. You use that kind of hardware when you don't have time to plan."

The reception room was undamaged. Shepard skimmed through the guest log and found Liara's name from just a few minutes ago. He was glad she was here, but he worried about her safety. The offices were a series of open rooms filled with cubicles. Sprinklers soaked everything, making the floors slippery with ash and wet soot. Steam rose from small fires that were still burning. He rounded a corner and someone tossed something at him. A flahsbang blinded him and made his ears ring, but he managed to duck under a desk. As his senses cleared, he checked in with the other Spectre.

"Vasir! I'm pinned down! Mercs – and they're well-armed!"

"Say hello to the Shadow Broker's private army, Commander! I'm making my way down through them, too."

Shepard peeked around the desk and saw someone in black and white armor hunting for him. He fired several shots from the borrowed pistol, but the civilian weapon only dented the merc's armor. He leaped up and bull-rushed his enemy, knocking him to the ground. He grabbed the man's helmeted head and pounded it into the floor, rendering him unconscious.

On the armor's chest was a red triangular logo, one that Shepard didn't recognize. The Shadow Broker's private troops, Vasir had said. He dropped the pistol and armed himself with the merc's assault rifle and grenades. Glass shattered to his left, accompanied by weapons' fire. He rolled right, into a cubicle and behind another desk.

Shepard tossed a flashbang further into the offices, then covered his eyes and ears. As soon as he heard the distinctive boom, he stood and sprayed bullets, killing two troopers. He passed through a break room, then came to a stairwell where a broken pipe was spewing flame. No way he could make it through that without his armor. Backtracking a bit, following the pipe, he found a utility closet and a shutoff valve. He hurried back to the stairs and up to the next floor.

Two more troopers were waiting for him and opened fire before he could get a bead on them. Bullets bouncing off his biotic barrier, he stepped back into the stairwell. He waited for their

weapons to overheat, then while they swapped heatsinks, he turned the corner and hit them with a biotic push, then finished them off. The door they were guarding looked like an executive suite.

Shepard heard a gunshot. Then another. He pushed open the door to find Vasir standing over the body of a trooper in white and black armor. A salarian in a green suit lay in a pool of his own green blood. "Damn it," Vasir said in a cool voice. "If I'd been a few seconds faster, I could've stopped them."

"Is this Sekat?" Shepard asked, squatting down to examine the salarian.

"Must have been. No sign of that data T'Soni talked about. Looks like a dead end. Speaking of which, did you find your friend's body?"

"You mean this body?" Liara appeared, outfitted in black and red light armor. He pointed a gun at Vasir.

Shepard stood between and to the side of the two asari, and backed up. "Liara! Something I should know?"

"This is the woman who tried to kill me," she said, advancing and forcing Vasir to back up to the window overlooking the atrium.

"You've had a rough day, so I'll let that slide," Vasir said calmly. "Why don't you put that gun down?"

"I saw you! I doubled back after I left. I watched you break into my apartment!"

Shepard aimed his borrowed assault rifle at Vasir and took up a position next to Liara. "You didn't know where Liara went, because she hid the message. You needed me to find it for you."

Vasir shrugged. "Thanks for the help."

"Once she had my location, she signaled the Shadow Broker's forces. They bombed the building to take me out. She found Sekat, took his data, and killed him. I'm guessing she's still got the disk on her."

"Good guess," said Vasir, holding a disk in her palm towards them. The other hand she held behind her back. "Not that you'll ever see what's on it..." Vasir used biotics to shatter the window behind her, then flung the shattered glass at Shepard and Liara. "...you pureblood bitch!"

In one fluid motion, Liara dropped her pistol and surround herself and Shepard in a biotic bubble. The glass bounced off. Vasir turned to the window to leap, and Shepard rushed her, grappling with her and sending them both out into open air.

Vasir enveloped herself in a biotic field, slowing their descent as they wrestled. She gained the advantage and shoved him away, sending him falling onto his back and knocking the air out of his lungs. The asari Spectre stood triumphantly over him, preparing a killing blow, but Liara landed on her feet next to Shepard. Vasir took off running with Liara hot on her heels.

Shepard regained his breath and sat up to witness Liara biotically toss aside a pair of troopers who had come to Vasir's defense as she descended the steps into the lobby. He gathered himself up and followed, limping slightly with a fresh pain in his hip. He'd lost the assault rifle in the melee, but picked up another from the fallen troopers. He met more enemies in the lobby.

One was an engineer, and sent forth a holographic drone like the one Tali used. Shepard shocked it out of existence with an overload from his omni-tool, then tossed a flashbang into the cluster of enemies. Unfortunately, they did the same to him. With their helmets on, they would recover first, so Shepard played dead. When his senses began to clear, he found four of them standing over him. His ears weren't quite clear yet, but he could make out that they were discussing what to do with his body.

One poked him with his rifle, then turned away, distracted. Shepard lifted his weapon and mowed them all down. His hearing cleared up, and the only sounds were gunshots outside. Cautiously, he stood and made his way to the exit. In the parking lot, he found Vasir and Liara taking cover behind skycars, taking turns shooting at each other.

Vasir noticed Shepard emerging from the building, then turned and leaped from the platform and into her open skycar. Liara cursed and commandeered a taxi. She waited for Shepard, who sat down with a groan.

"I'm fine, by the way. Thanks for asking."

"Come on! She's getting away!" Liara yelled.

Shepard took the controls and jetted after Vasir's yellow car. He grunted at the acceleration. Liara noticed him favoring his right hip and applied medigel. He sighed in relief as the medicine did its work.

"Hang a right! No, left!"

"I'm on her," said Shepard as he weaved in and out of traffic.

Shepard hadn't flown a skycar since he'd jacked one as part of his gang initiation during his youth back on Earth. But the controls were intuitive, and he soon got the hang of it. Nos Astra, being the modern megalopolis that it was, had several layers of traffic at different altitudes, flowing constantly in different directions. Vasir kept to a single altitude, oddly. There were rules of the skies, of course, and even if he'd known them, he would be violating all kinds of laws anyway.

"Hang a left!" Liara called out unhelpfully as they weaved between buildings. "She's around the corner! We're not going into the construction site, are – oh, goddess."

They did fly through a building that was under construction. Shepard wasn't a great pilot, but the cab had safety features that kept them from hitting any of the scaffolding. Vasir did hit something in there, though causing her car to leave a trail of vapor. Exiting the construction, she took a hard right into a tunnel through another building.

"I'm not letting her escape with that data!" Liara said.

She did something to the skycar's controls that placed a holographic red circle in the windshield's HUD, surrounding Vasir's yellow car. As if the white smoke wasn't enough to follow. Out of the tunnel and into an alleyway, two small cargo ships were coming together, one descending on top of the other.

"Go go go go go go!" Liara yelled.

"I'm going!" Shepard followed Vasir through the narrowing gap and back into traffic.

"Traffic! Oncoming traffic!"

"We'll be fine."

"Shepard, a head-on collision at this speed..."

"Yeah, I hear those can be bad for you."

They veered out of traffic and into a series of tight alleyways. A small object was ejected from Vasir's car and remained floating in the air.

"She's dropping proximity charges!"

"I noticed! What kind of guns does this thing have?"

"It's a taxi. It has a fare meter."

Vasir entered another tunnel and swerved around two large vehicles, causing them to evade her and collide.

"Truck." said Liara.

"I know."

"Truck!"

"I know!" Shepard swerved around the exploding vehicles, scraping the wall of the tunnel.

"Yaaaah!"

"There we go."

"You're enjoying this."

They emerged from the tunnel into oncoming traffic again. Shepard kept clear, paralleling the lanes, while Vasir swerved erratically. Her skycar suffered a glancing blow, sending her careering into the garden balcony of a nearby hotel. Shepard slowed and set the cab down on the other side of the terrace, halfway up the side of the building.

They started across the way, but an open-backed vehicle descended and dropped off a half-dozen Shadow Broker troopers. They took cover among the planter boxes as a second truck swooped in. Shepard opened fire on the belly, aiming for the engines, and hit his target, sending the truck and its occupants falling to their deaths far, far below.

Shepard had Liara stay put while he rolled from planter box to planter box, firing blindly at the enemy as he went, keeping their attention on him while Liara picked them off from cover. Another truck arrived, and he fired at it, but couldn't hit anything vital. He suggested Liara hit it with a singularity just as it landed. The whirling vortex grabbed the five enemies and held them helplessly floating around.

They finished off the first set of troopers, then used a biotic push to gently nudge the floating ones out over the edge of the building. To get to Vasir's car, they had to pass through a posh hotel room, where they heard whispering.

"Please let me live. Please let me live. I'll do the mantras every week. I'll give to charity. I'll go back to the Citadel and get a good job, I swear."

They found a scantily-clad asari cowering in the bedroom with a human man. Shepard reassured them that they were safe now. Then when he turned to leave, he caught what was on the TV.

"What kind of hotel is this?" he asked of Liara.

"Azure. It's a luxury resort with an...exotic edge. 'Azure' is slang for a part of the asari body in some areas of Illium."

"Where?"

"Mainly in the lower reaches, near the bottom."

"I meant, 'where on the asari body?'"

"So did I."

Quickly, they hustled over to the wreckage of Vasir's car, but she was gone. A blood trail lead off through another part of the hotel, though.

"She's lost a lot of blood," Liara observed. "We have to be getting close."

"She's tough, I'll give her that much."

"She's a Spectre."

They passed through another room. This one contained a pair of destroyed light LOKI mechs and the body of a police officer. Through the room was a swimming pool. Vasir limped along past a poolside café. Glancing behind, she noticed Shepard and Liara and stopped, turning to a human waitress.

"Hey! Hey you. Come here." She grabbed the woman and held a gun to her head.

The other patrons scattered and ran for safety. Shepard and Liara came to a stop twenty meters away, aiming their guns at the rogue Spectre, but neither had a shot.

"What's your name?" Vasir asked her hostage.

"M-Mariana," the waitress whimpered.

"Mariana, you want to live, don't you? Tell those people that you want to live."

"Please..." she said, tears forming in her eyes.

"Even if you get out of here, you'll lose your Spectre status," said Liara. "You attacked the trade center."

"You think so?" Vasir sneered. "I think maybe Cerberus terrorists did that. Which story do you think the Council will believe? All you had to do was walk away. Now it gets ugly."

"Please. I have a son," the waitress begged.

Vasir wasn't impressed. "A son? I hope he gets to see you again. I heard losing a parent is just horrific for children. Scars them for life."

"I'm going to end you, Vasir," Liara growled.

Shepard tried to calm her. "It's okay, Liara. We'll handle it. The usual way."

There was no usual way, but Vasir didn't know that. Shepard could feel Liara gathering biotic energy. A table behind the hostage-taker started rattling.

Vasir made her demands. "You want Mariana's little boy to grow up without a mommy, Shepard? Thermal clips on the ground, now. Power cells, too."

"Is that it?" said Shepard.

Vasir was taken aback. "What?"

"Vasir, I sacrificed hundreds of human lives to save the Destiny Ascension. I unleashed the rachni

on the galaxy. I detonated a nuke to stop the genophage from being cured. So for your sake, I hope your escape plan doesn't hinge on me hesitating to shoot a damn hostage!"

"You're bluffing." Vasir was visibly confused.

Shepard whispered "Now" out the side of his mouth. A table flew up from behind Vasir and smacked her, sending her flying into the shallow end of the pool. The hostage fell to the floor. Shepard and Liara emptied their weapons into the rogue Spectre. Vasir, bleeding from dozens of holes, struggled to move. Liara bent down and searched her, coming up with the data disk. She walked away to find a towel.

"You're dead," Vasir sputtered. "The Shadow Broker has been in power for decades. He's stronger than anything you've ever faced!"

Shepard doubted that. "Is that why you sold out the Council to work for him?"

"You think I betrayed the Council? Like Saren? Go to hell!" She coughed, struggling to speak. "The Broker's given me damn good intel over the years. Intel that saved lives and kept the Citadel safe! So if the Broker needs a few people to disappear, I'll pay that price without hesitation!"

"Tell yourself whatever you like. The Council would never accept you working for the Shadow Broker."

"The Council! You pay them lip service while working for terrorists? You have any idea what Cerberus has done?"

"I know who they are and what they've done. I used them, and now that's over."

"I think it matters. You want to judge me? Look in the mirror. Kidnapping kids for biotic death camps! Hell, your own unit on Akuze! You're with them. Don't you dare judge me! Don't you..."

She breathed her last. Shepard shook his head, then went to find Liara. She was downloading data off the disk onto her omni-tool

"Sekat's data," she informed him. "This is what we need to find the Shadow Broker."

She played an audio file. The voice was masked. "Eliminate T'Soni and retrieve the data. Civilian casualties not a concern." Orders from the Shadow Broker, no doubt.

"Vasir's dead," he told her.

She nodded absently. "I'm putting the data through to the Normandy's computers. We can be at the Shadow Broker's base in a few hours." Liara shut down her omni-tool and began walking back to the taxi. "He'll know about Vasir before long. If he decides to kill Feron..."

"We'll get Feron out of there alive, Liara. I promise."

"I know. You're here to help. Just like always."

"That's not a good thing?"

"When we first met on Therum, you saved me from the geth. You fought a krogan battlemaster while I cowered. Now you're doing it again. And I'm still leaning on you for help."

"That's what friends do, Liara."

"I can get us there, based on Sekat's data. The Normandy's stealth drive will keep them from detecting us. The Shadow Broker's agents are still shooting their way through Illium. With luck, they won't notice we've left until it's too late."

"That's a little cold. They killed innocent people."

"You know what I mean."

"Do I? When I hit the ground back at the trade center, you went after Vasir without a backward look."

"A little fall wasn't going to kill you. I had to stay on Vasir. I had to stay rational, make the call. Like I did with Sekat."

"That's Vasir's fault, not yours."

"Sekat had no idea what the stakes were. I put him in harm's way to get the data I needed. I got him killed. And I'd do it again. But from here on out, things will be simple. Get in, get Feron, get out. And kill anyone who tries to stop us."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

They reached the taxi. Shepard turned her by the shoulder before she should get in. "Will you just stop for a second? We'll be jumping several light years. There's time to talk."

"About what?"

"About us!"

"Shepard, listen, I'm glad you're here..."

"You're worried there might be terminals you need me to hack?"

"That's not fair. You were dead!"

"I came back!"

"It's not that easy! You can't just come back and have two years of mourning suddenly vanish! I'm sorry, Shepard, I can't get into this. For now, let's just focus on getting Feron back."

"Fine."

They rode back to the spaceport in awkward silence.

An hour into the trip, after Liara had gotten a tour of the new Normandy, they gathered in the mess for a meal. EDI's holographic pawn piece shone on an emitter nearby.

"Just the three of you on this whole ship?" Liara asked, setting down a fork and wiping her mouth.

"Four, counting EDI. Five, now that you're here," Shepard said hopefully.

"Uh uh." Liara crossed her arms. "And what do you plan to do with this ship?"

"Fight the Reapers, of course." Shepard shrugged.

Liara cocked an eyebrow. "This ship is in bad shape. I'm afraid it'll come apart if I sneeze."

Joker got defensive. "Hey! The Normandy's in great shape! She could still outfight a Collector ship. Probably."

"Doctor T'Soni has a point, Jeff," said EDI.

"Oooh! I know. Maybe the Shadow Broker can fix her up for us," said Jeff.

Liara frowned. She planned on killing him. Them. Whoever the Broker was.

Doctor Chakwas chuckled halfheartedly. "Really though, Shepard. We can't keep flying around like this forever."

Shepard nodded. "We'll rescue Feron first, then we'll figure something out."

The Normandy dropped out of FTL in orbit around the planet Hagalaz. The shuttle had been shot up during the attack on the Collector base, but it was serviceable. It was unpressurized, but the air on the planet wasn't breathable anyway. They picked up a worrying vibration as they entered the atmosphere.

"The oceans boil during the day, then snap-freeze ten minutes after sundown," Liara explained. "Violent storms follow the terminator line."

"The Shadow Broker lives here?" Shepard said.

"His ship follows the sunset. Completely undetectable in the storm, unless you know where to look."

The shuttle flew along in front of a storm front, yellow and grey clouds sending out bolts of lightning. Turbulence rocked the shuttle. If they survived this, Shepard would totally spring for a new shuttle. Or at least new inertial dampeners. He was glad to be wearing his full suit of combat armor. He'd survived a fight without it, but it felt more natural to wear it. And to be carrying his own weapons, too.

Out the window, a giant ship emerged from the fog. Its was a kilometer-long, narrow triangle, tapering at the front, and wide at the back. Along the aft end were gigantic metal shields, protecting the ship from the brunt of the eternal storm. The panels acted like sails, too, pushing the ship forward, keeping it always just ahead of disaster.

"How do we get inside?" Shepard asked.

"The shuttle bay is locked down. We'll need to land on the ship and hunt for a hatch. But we can't stay outside for long. There's a constant lighting storm where the hot and cold air collide."

It was too turbulent to land near the aft end of the ship, so Shepard brought the shuttle down near the nose. Stepping onto the ship, he looked aft into the sunset, peaking through the fins. The storms were pretty, in a way.

"It's hard to pinpoint, but I'm picking up signals from a communications array near the back of the ship," said Liara. "There's nothing below but maintenance equipment. We have to find an entrance near the back shielding."

Shepard led the way aft along the upper deck plating. He activated his mag boots against the wind. He probably didn't need them, but the extra precaution felt wise. The hull wasn't smooth, but rather festooned in overlapping plates, lightning rods, and various machinery. They'd have to climb over some parts as they made their way aft.

They hadn't gone far when a pair of red orbs materialized above an emitter. They looked an awful lot like Tali's holographic attack drone. The flew up to Shepard and shot out a small bolt of electricity, which was absorbed by his armor. He dissipated them with an electrical overload of his own.

"Maintenance drones." Liara named them.

"Why are they attacking?"

"They must think we're debris from the storm."

A few steps further on, and another pair of drones appeared. Another overload took care of them. The path took them down to the side of the ship, where two LOKI light mechs emerged from a door and opened fire. After shooting them to pieces, they went inside. As Liara had said, there was only maintenance equipment within. A narrow catwalk took them between rows of thin panels in slots. A panel would extend, discharge some static, then retract.

"This ship is incredible. It must have taken decades to build in secret," said Liara."

"I wonder what happened to the contractors."

"I think I can guess. Navigating this storm is brutal. If the ship's engines stop for even a moment... At least the Shadow Broker would go down with us."

"That's comforting."

Shepard noticed some large tubes full of fluid running through large clamps. They were vibrating wildly.

"Motion-dampeners," said Liara. "I bet you can't even hear the storm form inside the ship."

The only way aft was to head back outside. They emerged on the other side of the ship. A thin railing was all that separated them from a long fall. Liara expressed regret at looking down. Shepard took her word for it.

A ramp led up and over the ship, crossing over again. At the top, four troopers were closing a hatch behind them. Shepard noticed them first and gave them a hard biotic shove, sending them flying. They got caught in the airstream and disappeared out of sight.

Checking the hatch revealed that it was only openable from the inside. That would have been too easy, anyway. Down the other side of the hull and aft along another walkway. They were halfway along the ship, now. A little further along, they had to go back up to the top side again. This section of hull was covered in large panels, attached on one end and flapping like loose fish scales. A nearby control panel retracted them, and they were able to continue on.

The ship was wider here. They came to an indentation, and a walkway across the middle. More of those retracting panels were set in slots, but these activated in sequence, forming a wave pattern. They discharged clouds of static, which made the pattern look even more like water.

"Not even a guardrail," said Shepard. "I bet the Broker's agents love patrolling the hull."

"At least the view is nice," Liara said from behind him.

The ship widened further, and at last they came to a door.

Liara stepped forward. "There! That door leads directly to the communication signals. It's locked. Hang on, I've got a bypass shunt programs that can crack it." She attached a small device to the door, and it made a steady beeping noise.

"How long will it take?"

Liara shrugged. "I don't know, Shepard. I've never broken into the Shadow Broker's base before. Well, not this one, anyway."

A minute passed. Nothing happened.

"You sure that shunt is working?"

"It's illegal even on Illium. It didn't come with a warranty."

"But you tested it, right?"

Troopers appeared on the right side of the hull. "Here they come!"

"Tell me you tested it," Shepard plead as he took cover and opened fire.

"No time to talk!"

Shepard grumbled as he took cover in the entryway of the door. One of his stray shots hit a lightning rod, which discharged and fried the poor trooper trying to use it for cover. Liara tossed biotic attacks at the defenders, sending them careening into the airstream. Another wave of attackers appeared on the left. Shepard used his own biotics against them. If the troopers were too stupid to wear mag-boots, that was their problem.

"Liara?"

"I'm sure it won't be much longer."

Rocket drones appeared from the front of the ship. An overload to stun them, then a few well-placed shots from his assault rifle were enough to take them out.

"Their attacks are disorganized," said Liara. "They'd be more effective if they all attacked at once."

As if they'd heard, attacks came from all sides at once.

"You just had to give them tactical advice."

"But now there's be fewer left to deal with inside."

"Keep dreaming, Liara."

Lighting strikes had charged up several of the rods, and Shepard used that to advantage, shooting them and frying enemies when they got near. It was interesting to him that none of the troopers were biotic – or particularly competent.

The attacks ceased, and the door finally unlocked. Inside the main part of the ship, it was indeed as quiet as Liara thought it would be. A single, winding hallway led deeper in. The lighting was dim, and the place had an unfinished look to it, somehow. Shepard heard a commotion around a corner and halted their progress. He motioned for her to take up a position behind a column, then peeked around. Several troopers had barricaded what appeared to be a security station.

"More of them?" Liara said. "How many guards does the Shadow Broker have?"

"I told you."

Shepard leaned back around the corner as a rocket shot down the middle of the hall. He pulled out a grenade and showed it to Liara. The explosion would be risky; Feron was in here somewhere. She winced, then nodded, reluctantly. He counted down with his fingers, then she enveloped herself in a biotic barrier and opened fire, covering him while he threw the grenade.

It detonated on impact, destroying the barricade and pushing the troopers back. They rushed forward, spraying bullets. No more enemies appeared. They seemed to be in a cell block. Liara opened a door and found Feron, strapped to a chair. He was surrounded by nasty-looking devices. Shiny. Pointy. Sharp.

Feron was a drell with mottled, olive-green skin. His shirt was off, but he was wearing a green necklace. He opened his eyes when Liara called to him.

"Hold on – we're getting you out of here!" Liara found some nearby controls and fiddled with them.

"No!" Feron croaked. His body was wracked with pain from electric shocks. "The equipment is sensitive to tampering. Pull me out now, and my brain cooks."

Liara removed her hands and backed away from the panel.

"What do you know about the Broker?" Shepard asked, seeking intel on his enemy.

"He did this to me."

"I was hoping you'd know what he is."

"I never got a good look, but he's big. The guards are terrified of him."

"A krogan?"

"I don't know, but not everyone who visits his offices comes ba – aaagh!" The chair shocked him.

"It's a neural grounding rod," said Liara. "The medical equipment is to make sure he doesn't...expire."

Feron offered a solution. "This chair plugs into the Shadow Broker's info network. You have to shut off the power. "

"Do you know where we can cut the power?"

"It won't be easy. You'll have to go to central operations. It's down the hall. You know he's waiting for you, right?"

"I'm counting on it," said Shepard.

"We'll be back for you, Feron!" Liara promised.

"I'll try not to go anywhere."

At the end of the hall was an unlocked door. Liara didn't hesitate to open it. It was a large circular room. A large...creature sat behind a desk with its hands folded on the surface, waiting patiently. It was bigger than a krogan, with red and black skin. It had multiple eyes – more than a batarian – and horns like a salarian's. Shepard looked around the room; they were alone. They studied each other.

"Here for the drell?" It spoke in a deep rumble. Its mouth opened in a triangle, and was filled with small, sharp teeth. "Reckless, even for you, Commander."

"That bombing on Illium wasn't exactly subtle," Shepard retorted.

"Extreme, but necessary."

"No it wasn't!" Liara said. "Neither was caging Feron for two years!"

"Doctor T'Soni. Your interference caused all this. Feron betrayed me when he handed you Shepard's body. The drell is simply paying the price."

"Someone was bound to come after you for working with the Collectors," said Shepard.

"It was a mutually beneficial partnership. Fortunately, the Normandy's IFF will let me salvage the remains of the Collectors' base. Thank you for brining it to me. Enough talk. My operations are too crucial to be compromised by a traitor."

"You're quite confident for someone with nowhere left to hide," said Liara. "You're not taking anything else!"

"It's pointless to challenge me, asari. I know your every secret, while you fumble in the dark."

"Is that right?" Liara grinned. "You're a yahg, a pre-spaceflight species quarantined to their homeworld for massacring the Council's first contact teams." Something twitched on the side of the yahg's face – ear flaps, perhaps. "This base is older than your planet's discovery, which probably means you killed the original Shadow Broker sixty years ago, then took over." All of his eyes blinked in unison. "I'm guessing you were taken from your world by a trophy hunter who wanted a slave... or a pet. How am I doing?"

That got him. The yahg stood up – and he was much bigger than a krogan; easily three meters tall and nearly as wide. He pounded a fist down into his desk, splitting it in two. Shepard and Liara backed up and lunged out of the way as he threw half the desk at them, smashing it into a wall.

He roared and pulled an assault rifle from behind his back. His huge hands made it look like a toy. The asari and the human split up, taking turns drawing his fire and shooting back, but their attacks seemed to have no effect. They came together on the other side of the room, and the Broker threw the other half of the desk at them.

Liara noticed a bright, circular light in the ceiling. A shaft of energy connected it to the yahg: a shield emitter of some sort. She got Shepard to keep the Broker's attention while she gathered biotic energy. Shepard agreed and ran around the room, shooting and not trying to cover. Shepard's kinetic barrier was quickly taken down, and his armor took dents. He tripped on a piece of desk and felt a sharp pain in his side when a bullet finally penetrated.

But that was all. Liara brought the shield emitter crashing down on the Shadow Broker, crushing him instantly, then vaporizing him in a final blast of bright white energy.

When Shepard opened his eyes, he saw Liara walking towards him through the smoke and ash. She extended a hand and helped him up. They stood facing each other, panting. He reached for her, but they were distracted by a voice from a speaker at the Broker's bank of computers, startling them both.

"Shadow Broker, this is Operative Murat. We had a momentary connection failure. Can you confirm status?"

Another voice spoke. "Operative Shora requesting update. Are we still online?"

A dozen other voices overlapped into a cacophony. Liara walked over to the communications equipment. She looked over the controls frantically. Then, finding what she wanted, she took a deep breath and pressed the transmit button. Her voice came out covered by electronic masking, altering her real voice.

"This is the Shadow Broker. The situation is under control. We experienced a power fluctuation while upgrading hardware. It disrupted communications momentarily. However, we are now back online. Resume standard procedures. I want a status report on all operations within the next solar day. Shadow Broker out." She released the switch.

Feron appeared in the doorway with a pistol drawn. "Goddess of oceans... It's you. You...how?"

"Well, everyone who's ever seen him in person is dead, so..."

"...you're the new Shadow Broker," Feron finished.

"Is taking over really a good idea?" Shepard asked.

"It was either that or lose everything; his contacts, his trading sources. Those will really help us. With the Shadow Broker's information network, I can give you...I can..."

She started to shake, and covered her face with her hands. Shepard embraced her.

"I'll, uh, check the power systems," said Feron, excusing himself.

"It's over. It's finally...for two years..."

"It's all right," he said.

She stood on her toes and kissed him. Hard. Then she backed off.

"It's been two years," she said. "I don't...we're different people. You have your mission, and..."

He grabbed her waist and pulled her close, kissing her passionately.

"Okay...Okay," she gasped. They stood for a moment, foreheads pressed together. She gently pushed apart. "But we should focus. Let's see what our options are." She went back to the computers and looked them over. "No safeguards or user restrictions. It's like he never anticipated anyone but himself being here. And it's all ours."

"Are you sure you want to do this? To stay here? I could use you on the Normandy."

"I have to stay here. We can't pass this up, Shepard. All I wanted was to rescue Feron. But...is it wrong that part of me wants this? With the Shadow Broker's network, I can help you. Maybe I can turn this operation into something better."

"I'll take Feron and sweep through the ship. Make sure there are no more troopers."

"All right. I'll see you later."

The ship was clean. Shepard and Feron wound up in the shuttle bay.

"You should have that wound checked out, Commander," said Feron.

"Yeah. I noticed your limp. My ship's doctor is a xenobiologist. You might do with a checkup yourself."

"Mmm. You're right, of course."

The Normandy needed a new shuttle, and there were two right there. Liara approved of their plans.

Shepard winced as he put his shirt back on. Doctor Chakwas had finished stitching him up, then she turned to Feron.

"And how are you holding up, young man?" She asked the drell, activating a scanner.

"I'm...I'll be alright. I wasn't always strapped into that interrogation chair. Drell can mentally escape into old memories. It came in handy on the bad days."

"Solipsism," said Shepard. "We had a drell on the crew recently."

Doctor Chakwas frowned at what she was seeing. "How many times were you tortured?"

"A lot. It gets fuzzy. He made the guards watch, as an example." The doctor poked and prodded, making him wince. "Commander, I never did say thanks for the rescue."

Shepard shrugged. "Liara never gave up on you, Feron. I just helped."

"I'm still amazed she came for me. I'll never forget what either of you did."

"For two years, Liara didn't stop looking for you. You two must have been close."

"She's a good friend. Better than I deserve."

"You're dehydrated," Chakwas pronounced. "I'll hook you up to an IV. Lie back."

"How did you both end up looking for my body?"

"Cerberus head-hunted me and Liara to steal your body from the Shadow Broker. I was looking for the Broker at the time, and he's the one who scraped up your remains in the first place."

"What turned you against him?"

"He started working for the Collectors. You weren't their first victim. I am – was – an information trader. Not a slaver."

The doctor opened the medicine cabinets and selected a few bottles of pills.

"How do you think Liara will do as the new Shadow Broker?"

"Quite well, I imagine."

Shepard had to agree with that. "What will you do now that you're a free man?"

"I want to help Liara rebuild the network. It's a great opportunity. And I know the ship pretty well."

Medicines in hand, a few hours later, Shepard brought Feron back down to the Shadow Broker's ship. Feron went to find a place to rest. As the Commander entered the control room, a white holographic drone accosted him.

"Welcome back, Shadow Broker!" it said in the most annoying voice possible.

"What's this?" Shepard asked Liara.

"That's the Shadow Broker's VI assistant. It's actually been helpful with rebuilding the network."

"Please let me know if I can organize anything else for you, Shadow Broker." The drone zoomed off.

"It also thinks anyone in the room is the Broker. I'll play around with the settings later."

"My manual is ready whenever you have a moment!" The drone appeared from around a column momentarily, then zoomed off again.

"How are you doing, Liara?" Shepard asked.

"I'm a bit overwhelmed, to be honest. The Shadow Broker had more resources than you can imagine. Here, let me show you." She pulled up a list, but Shepard couldn't read the language. He promised himself he'd learn the main asari dialect, some day. But Liara was explaining: "He had top-level access to the turian and asari governments, and more than one salarian dalatrass traded intel. At least I get to share it with you."

"If you're in over your head, we could just crash this thing and walk away."

"That's just it. In a way, I feel like I belong here. Working on my own, I was always hunting for leads. With these resources, it's about organizing, cataloging. I've got everything, Shepard. This is a dream job...although the location could be better."

"You're not going to turn into a recluse with creepy information on everyone in the galaxy, are you?" He grinned, half-joking.

She chuckled. "I can understand the temptation. I've got all the secrets of the galaxy at my fingertips. Give me ten minutes, and I could start a war. Or end one. But I've got a purpose: helping you stop the Reapers. That will keep me honest. You know, relatively speaking."

"Have you found anything useful yet?"

"The Shadow Broker knew about the Reapers. Perhaps that's why he offered to help prove Saren's guilt to the Council. He didn't want Saren to succeed. He also knew that the Collectors were Protheans repurposed to be Harbinger's puppets. There's even some data on the Protheans. I think he knew what was coming and was looking for a way to survive."

"Why was he still looking at Protheans? They gave us the warning on the beacons and the Conduit at Ilos, but we've used those."

"He seemed to think there was more out there. Perhaps the Protheans had other plans. Or maybe he was just grasping at anything that offered some hope."

"By the way, how'd you know what he was? His species."

"I didn't. I had no idea what to expect when we finally found him. But I searched pre-spaceflight cultures during some of my Prothean studies. I know a bit about the yahg. They're a fascinating culture...and a terrifying one." She paused for a moment, then asked a question of her own. "How is Feron?"

"About as well as you'd expect after two years of intermittent torture. Doctor Chakwas gave him some medication and an exercise regimen."

"He's going to be okay?"

"I think so. He wants to help you rebuild. Maybe it'll take his mind off it." Shepard paused. This next part was awkward. "So, you and Feron..."

"...are just friends. I believe you made it clear that I was, as you humans say, taken."

"You know, I didn't come down here just to talk about data."

"Look, about the kiss...we'd just finished the fight. I miss you, but it's been two years. I don't want to put pressure on you."

"I've got fond memories of the last time you put pressure on me."

"Heh. So do I."

"Why don't you come to the Normandy for drinks?"

"I'd like that, but I'm not sure I can leave..."

"You told the operatives that they had a whole day to report back. And this ship is mostly automated. Feron can handle things for a while."

"You're right. And I left my things on the Normandy. I should come get those. Let me just check on Feron, and I'll be right back."

On his way out of the control room, Shepard found a terminal that cycled through clips of surveillance video from around the galaxy. On the Citadel: Emily Wong dancing; Councilor Udina shoving a C-Sec officer; Khalisah Bint Sinan Al-Jilani being punched by a krogan. On Omega: Praetor Gavorn shooting vorchas; Aria T'Loak ordering some executions. There was footage of Jacob Taylor doing crunches, and Jack as she broke out of prison. But the one that caught his attention was an image of Matriarch Aethyta on Illium, her back to the camera, holding a glass of alcohol and staring at a picture of Liara. The image changed before Liara returned.

Shepard poured drinks in his cabin. Liara entered and dropped her duffle bag. She turned to admire the aquarium.

"Joker asked me to record any parts of our conversation where 'my eyes do that freaky black eternity thing.'"

"Of course he did." Shepard scratched the back of his neck, embarrassed.

Liara pulled a small picture frame from her bag. "I brought you something. It took some digging, but I recovered your tags."

Shepard smiled as he took the framed dogtags. "I never thought I'd see these again. Thank you." He set the frame down on his desk, running his fingers along the scorched aluminum tags.

"You can't get back everything you lose...but sometimes you get lucky," Liara said.

"Yeah, that was the plan."

"How are you doing, Shepard? I mean really, not what you tell your squad to keep morale up."

"I'm okay. Really. It was rough, but we got it done. And we'll continue to get it done."

"You've certainly made a good start, even if those idiots on the Council won't admit it. You and your team destroyed the Collectors and walked out alive."

"We fought them in their own base, and we won. The Council can't call us young or primitive anymore."

"Young? You know, I'm 108...109 in a couple of months."

"I should get you something nice."

"You're alive again. I've got everything I want. So tell me what you want. If this all ends tomorrow, what happens to us?"

"I don't know. Marriage, old age, and a lot of little blue children?"

"You just say these things..." she shoved him flirtatiously, then went and looked at his old, beat-up N7 helmet. "Goddess... You were dead!"

"I got better."

She looked up, out the skylight at the stars. "This time – but you're going to leave again. When the Reapers finally arrive, you'll dive into the fray." Shepard turned her around and held her hands. "I spent two years mourning you. So if we're going to try this...I need to know you're always coming back."

"I don't know. That's a pretty big promise to make," he teased.

"Oh, is it?"

He leaned in close and whispered in her ear. "I'd have to have something special to come back to."

"I'm...open to suggestions," she whispered back.

He kissed her neck and pulled her close. They lost their balance, and fell into bed together.

-----ARRIVAL-----

Shepard awoke to a soft chime. Liara was still sleeping. Softly, he asked EDI what it was.

"Incoming communication from Admiral Stephen Hackett at Alliance HQ," she replied quietly.

"Mmmm, sounds important," Liara whispered.

"I thought you were asleep."

"Just enjoying your warmth. You're going to take the call."

"But I'm enjoying your warmth."

"Go," she mumbled into the pillow, gently shoving him.

He disentangled himself as gently as he could, then took a minute searching for clothes. He sat at his desk and pressed the receive button on his console. The familiar man with the scar on his cheek appeared.

"Commander. Thank you for your time. I'll keep this brief." The Admiral never was one for preamble. "We have a deep cover operative out in batarian space. Name's Doctor Amanda Kenson. Doctor Kenson recently reported that she found evidence of an imminent Reaper invasion."

"So why call me?" Shepard scratched some sand from the corner of his eye.

"Just this morning I received word that the batarians arrested her. They're holding her in a secret prison outpost on terrorism charges. I need you to infiltrate the prison and get her out of there. As a favor to me, I'm asking you to go in alone."

"I can handle that. But I thought the Alliance denies the Reaper threat. That must be some proof she found."

"Kenson's team found an artifact out in batarian space. She believes it's a Reaper device; proof that the Reapers are indeed planning to invade. I've known her a long time. If she says she has proof, it's worth checking out."

"What can you tell me about the operative?" Past the video display, Shepard saw Liara getting out of bed and stretching.

"Amanda is a top scientist and Alliance agent, working in batarian space. It's a deadly assignment, and she's one of the few up to the challenge. She and I go back pretty far, Commander. I

won't let her rot away in a batarian torture camp.”

“What's she actually doing out there?” Liara was getting dressed, now. Shepard regretted that.

“She's a deep-cover operative, Shepard. We talk only when we have to. I'd heard she was investigating a rumor of a Reaper artifact in the system. Her last report said she found it.”

“The batarians won't take kindly to the Alliance breaking into a secret prison.”

“This isn't an Alliance operation – it's one person going in alone to save a friend. If it were an official mission, of course the batarians would be upset. You keep this quiet, Shepard, and there's nothing to worry about.”

“I'll...make this a priority.”

“The prison is hidden underground, in a batarian outpost on Arathot. I'll upload the coordinates now. Once she's secure, confirm her discovery. We'll debrief you when you're back.”

“Got it.”

“Hackett out.”

The call over, Liara stepped over to the aquarium and zipped up her bag. Shepard stood and caressed her elbow.

“You're leaving?”

“You know I have work to do. And so do you.” She kissed him, then went to the elevator.

“Thank you, Shepard. For everything.”

The elevator door closed on her smile.

“Come back soon, Liara,” he whispered.

The Viper system was located on the outer edge of a galactic arm, not too far from Human Alliance space. When the Batarian Hegemony also put in a claim for the system, the Alliance gave it up, seeing that the only inhabitable world was too much of a greenhouse to bother with. The batarians, on the other hand, whether out of spite or hubris, established a colony and a military base.

Commander Shepard used the storm for cover as he brought in the Shadow Broker's shuttle low over the jungle. He approached the prison as close as he dared, then landed a few clicks out and walked the few remaining distance.

The side of the compound he approached was older. Abandoned, run-down. The door he found was locked, but an exposed panel nearby was easy to short out, and the door slid open. Inside, water dripped from the broken ceiling and seeped from the concrete walls. Mold grew in the shadows. Shepard was thankful for the filters on his helmet.

He came to a laser-fence, but saw no way to cut power to it. Backtracking a bit, he found a section of wall that was crumbling. It took only a gentle shove for it to crumble into an adjacent hallway. A little further in, there was a pair of pipes spewing flames. A nearby valve shut off the gas flow, and a varren ran past him, no doubt seeking the safety of the jungle. At last, he opened a door into a better-maintained storage room. It was empty.

The other door opened into a courtyard. In the middle was a smaller building that turned out to be a barracks, which was also empty. Guards patrolled outside, and Shepard waited for them to turn a corner out of sight before he scurried across to the main building. He crouched past a break room and listened to a conversation between two guards.

“I hear humans are scurrying like vermin out in the asteroid belt.”

“Is anywhere safe from them? We should arm a mission to flush them all out.”

“What difference does it make? We caught 'em... Hey, you look tired?”

“I've worked 47 days straight without time off, and now there's humans in the prison below. I can't get a break. There's 300,000 people in this colony. You'd think someone could cover me for one night.”

“Really.” The guard laughed. “I'd just kill her. Interrogating a human's a waste of time.”

“Has she said anything yet?”

“Just rambling so far. This one's apparently got quite an imagination.”

Shepard hurried past the open door to a hangar bay as a shuttle came in to land. Finding himself

on the second floor of a garage, he slipped down to the lower level, where he found a truck suspended over a work pit. He was about to pass by, but there was light coming from the pit. A closer look revealed a tunnel further in. He arrived at an abandoned security station, where he disabled the prison's alarm system. He was surprised he'd made it this far without being seen. Sneaking wasn't his strong suit, but this place reeked of incompetence and hubris. He hadn't even seen any security cameras.

Down the hall, a guard sat behind a glass window – a 2-way mirror, no doubt. On the other side, another guard was strapping a grey-haired human woman to an interrogation chair. The Commander activated his omni-blade, then snuck up to the seated guard and quietly slit his throat. He went around the corner, and the guard inside turned when the door opened. Shepard hit him in the face with the butt of his rifle, rendering him unconscious.

“Who are you? What are you doing?” The woman asked.

Shepard opened the faceplate on his helmet. The place really did reek of mold and...other things. “Doctor Kenson? I'm Commander Shepard. I'm here to get you out.”

“Commander Shepard. I'd heard you were alive. Hackett must have received my message.”

Shepard released her restraints. “We're not safe here. Can you walk?”

“I'm fine. Just give me a moment...” She stood up and took the guard's pistol, then smashed his face in with her heel.

“We have to go. Now.”

“If we can find a console, I can hack security...make us an escape path.”

“No need. We can sneak out the way I came. These guards are tired, and they're egomaniacs.”

“Well, those are certainly both true.”

Shepard hesitated at the exit. It was still raining heavily.

“Really, Commander, I'm a spy,” said Kenson. “A little jungle rain isn't going to bother me.”

Shepard led the way to his shuttle.

“Do you think they'll come after you?” he asked.

“Probably. Batarians don't take kindly to humans who plan to destroy their mass relays.”

“How were you caught?”

“We've been smuggling starship parts from Omega. Thrusters, guidance, an aftermarket eezo core.

The batarians thought that looked suspicious. A few days ago, I took a few of the men on a scouting trip, and the batarians pounced on us. They never found our actual base. I did manage to plant a virus that will disable their systems, though – it'll blind all of their sensors in the system when we activate it.”

“So the charges against you are true.”

“Well, to be fair that's about half the story. My people and I were here investigating rumors of Reaper technology out in the fringes of this system.”

“I take it you found something.”

“We found proof that the Reapers will be arriving in this system. When they get here, they'll use its mass relay to travel throughout the galaxy. We call it the Alpha Relay. From here, the Reapers can invade anywhere in the galaxy.”

“So you decided to destroy it.”

“Exactly. Doing that would stop the Reaper's invasion. Even at FTL speeds, it'd be months or years before they got to the next relay. We came up with what we just called 'The Project.' A plan to launch a nearby asteroid into the relay and destroy it before the Reapers could arrive. Of course, the resulting explosion would probably wipe out the system.”

“I've always heard that mass relays are indestructible.”

“I've heard that too, but I think it's more that nobody's willing to find out what happens when one is destroyed. And, well, we plan to slam a small planet into the thing at very high speed. By our calculations, that's more than enough.”

“But doesn't a relay lower the mass of the object it's flinging?”

“Yes, but the ship has to transmit its mass first. It's nearly impossible to calculate the exact mass of a starship. That's why upon arrival at your destination, there is always a drift of several thousand kilometers. The relay will sense our asteroid approaching, but it won't know what to do with it. By the time it measures the rock's mass, it'll be too late.”

Shepard pondered the logistics for a moment. The colonists of Terra Nova had moved Asteroid X-57 into orbit around their world, but batarian terrorists had taken over and sent it towards the planet instead. So it was possible. But Shepard had stopped that plot two years ago. And now humans were doing the same thing to batarians.

“Why do you think destroying the mass relay would destroy the entire system?”

“Mass relays are the most powerful mass effect engines in the known galaxy. The energy released from a relay's destruction would probably resemble a supernova. This is a remote system, but just over three hundred thousand batarians live on this colony. The explosion would undoubtedly kill them all. We've been...debating the ethics.”

“I can see why.” Shepard wondered if it was worth it just to slow down the Reapers. “Is the Project still operational?”

“I...I imagine it is. We were one button press away from launch when the batarians arrested me. That virus I planted will trigger when we start the Project.”

They arrived at the shuttle. Kenson wanted to disable the transponder, but didn't find one. Shepard didn't explain where he'd gotten the craft. The storm gave them cover as they ascended into orbit and rendezvoused with the Normandy.

“I still don't see how you learned about this supposed invasion,” said Shepard. “How do you know the Reapers will use this relay? I know they're out in dark space, and they've been traveling for centuries, but there are plenty of others along the outer rim.

“The evidence came from what we call 'Object Rho.' A Reaper artifact we discovered among the asteroids near the relay itself. When we get back to the station, I'll explain everything and provide copies of all our notes on the artifact.”

The Commander escorted her up to the CIC, where she provided the coordinates of her base. Shepard ordered Joker to head there.

“What's a Reaper artifact doing in an asteroid?” he asked.

“We don't know. Or even what its purpose is. Some things are just too old or large to comprehend. Even a Reaper thousands of years dead contains power. Their artifacts are worthy of study, regardless of their purpose.”

“How exactly does a Reaper artifact give you proof of an impending invasion?”

“It showed me visions of the Reaper's arrival...much like your Prothean beacon, I imagine. The Reapers are coming, Commander. That much I know for certain.”

“If you're working near a Reaper artifact, how have you avoided Indoctrination?”

“We've been very careful. We know what we're dealing with. You're not speaking to a child, Shepard. I saw what Sovereign did at the Citadel. Trust me – I know what's at stake.”

“The stakes are too high if you were willing to destroy a whole system over this. I want to see your proof.”

“I guess I can't argue with that. May I use your communications?” Shepard gave assent. “Give me a moment. Kenson to Project Base.”

“Good to hear your voice, Doctor. You coming home?”

“Affirmative. I'm coming in on Commander Shepard's ship.”

“Shepard? Really?”

“Tidy up the lab; the Commander needs to confirm the artifact.”

“Right. I'll get everything set up for your arrival. Project base out.”

“All set. We'll be there in no time”

The Normandy set down on the asteroid next to the Project base and extended a docking tube to

an airlock. As they waited for the air to cycle, Shepard noticed a clock above the door, counting down.

“What's this?”

“That's our countdown to Arrival,” Kenson said proudly. “When that gets to zero...the Reapers will have come. Just over two days and counting. Puts things in perspective, doesn't it?”

“How do you know that's an accurate countdown?”

“It is.” She nodded confidently. “The artifact has been giving off pulses at definite intervals since we found it. The intervals have been decreasing at a steady rate. The artifact is reacting to the Reapers' proximity. In just over 48 hours, the pulses will become constant, and the Reapers will be here.”

“You're saying the Reapers could be at Earth in two days? There's no time to waste, then.”

The airlock cycled, and Kenson led the way into the base.

“Let's show you that proof. That door exits the hangar. The artifact is in our central lab area. Through the door at the end of that corridor to your left.”

“So what would it take to get the Project back up and running?”

“Everything was in place when we were arrested. It wasn't a question of 'could we,' but 'should we?’”

“What alternative do we have?”

“The Reapers will reach this system, regardless. But the Alpha Relay is their shortcut to the rest of the galaxy. If you want to keep the Reapers at bay, this relay must be destroyed.... One sec. Let me get the door. Commander Shepard, I give you Object Rho.”

A large, round, grey metal sculpture sat in the middle of a room. It was four meters in diameter, and stood just as tall. It looked like an alien artichoke, split open, with tentacles reaching upwards. Blue lights in its seams began to glow as they entered the room.

“You have the Reaper artifact just sitting here....out in the open.”

Kenson stood proudly admiring the object, crossing her arms. “When we found it, it showed me a vision of the Reapers' arrival.”

“Kenson, this is not good.”

“Give it a moment, Shepard. It'll give you the proof you need.”

Shepard took a cautious step forward, and an orange hologram of a Reaper appeared.

“Shepard. You have become an annoyance.” The Reaper spoke in an echoing bass, just like Sovereign had back on Virmire.

Shepard's vision wavered with every syllable. “Harbinger, I presume.”

“You fight against inevitability. Dust struggling against cosmic winds. This would seem a victory to you. A star system sacrificed. But even now, your greatest civilizations are doomed to fall. Your leaders will beg to serve us.”

“Some humans are afraid the Reapers are too powerful. But when the Alpha Relay breaks, everyone will see that we can fight the Reapers. And win. However 'insignificant' we might be, we will fight, we will sacrifice, and we will find a way. That's what humans do.”

“Know this as you die in vain: your time will come. Your species will fall. Prepare yourselves for the Arrival.”

The hologram faded out, and Shepard found himself on his hands and knees. He looked up and saw Kenson, aiming a pistol at his head.

“I can't let you start the Project, Shepard. I can't let you stop the Arrival!”

Shepard swung an arm out, knocking the pistol away. Then he stood and shoved her aside, only to be grabbed by two men in security armor. He used their momentum to swing them around, sending the head of one smashing into a column. The other he kneed in the gut, then punched him, knocking him out.

“Do not let him activate the Project!” Kenson yelled as she ran down the hallway.

Shepard called the Normandy. “EDI, can you hack the base's computers?”

“I can. What do you need me to do?”

"There's not much time. We have to get this asteroid moving and get the hell out of here."

"Are you certain, Shepard? Activating the Project will result in an estimated 304,942 casualties."

"I know, EDI. But it'll stop the Reapers. I don't like it either, but trillions will die if we don't."

"Very well. I've found the system, but I cannot activate it. There is an air gap. It is probable that final activation requires a manual switch."

"Put it on my HUD. Joker, get the engines warmed up."

"Roger that, Commander."

Shepard felt a bit woozy, but he followed the floating pip in his vision. Down the hall, several engineers and security guards had barricaded themselves in the cafeteria.

"You won't get through here, Shepard!" they yelled and opened fire on him.

The Commander ducked back into the hallway and frowned. They were all indoctrinated. The whole base. Resigning himself, he tossed a grenade at the barricade, then followed the explosion in and finished off the defenders.

Kenson yelled over the public address speakers: "Shepard's heading for Project Control. Get in there now!"

The base consisted of several modules, connected by tubes. Passing through them made Shepard feel like a hamster. The next module was a barracks. He had to gun down three people in their underwear who tried to shoot him.

The next module was a control center. He found the Project Activation Switch and flipped it. The base shook, and a giant engine outside flared to life, discharging a bright yellow and orange flame. Red lights flashed, and an automated male voice spoke over the speakers.

"Project activation in progress. Warning: collision with mass relay is imminent. Begin evacuation procedures."

Shepard had EDI connect him to the local batarian extranet. "Alert! All colonists living in the Bahak System. This is Shepard – "

Amanda Kenson's face appeared on a screen. "No! Do you have any idea what you've done? You leave me no choice. If we can't stop this asteroid, it must be destroyed!"

"EDI, Tell me where to find Doctor Amanda Kenson."

"Doctor Kenson is traveling to the Reactor Core Module. I will mark its location on your HUD."

"An eezo core meltdown should do it," said Kenson. "Because of you, everyone on this rock will be obliterated."

"Not if I get to you first."

"Don't try to stop me, Shepard. I have to do this."

"I've already activated the Project. We can still escape this rock."

"There is no escape! There's no redemption for what you've done! I will die, never having seen the Reapers' blessings. And you...will just die!"

"Damn it, Kenson."

Shepard continued through the base, killing indoctrinated personnel. He regretted that, but they left him no choice. He came to a small control booth and looked over the unfamiliar knobs and buttons.

"Core temperature rising," announced an automated voice.

"How do I stabilize the reactor core?"

"All automatic safety protocols have been overridden," said EDI. "To stabilize the reactor core, manually insert Cooling Rod A from this Control Station. Manually insert Cooling Rod B from Control Station B. Doing so will stabilize the reactor core."

Shepard's attention was grabbed by a sliver cylinder with a handle, sticking up from a pedestal. He pushed it in, and the automated voice announced that cooling had begun. The control station overlooked a large eezo reactor. Kenson was doing something at the control panel in front of it. The other control station was visible across the way.

He had to kill two more security guards when he arrived, but he reinserted the rod, and the

automated voice told him that the reactor temperature was stabilizing. He made his way down to the reactor room floor and aimed his gun at Kenson, who was pounding on the control panel.

“Step away from the reactor!” he ordered.

“You’ve ruined everything! I can’t hear the whispers anymore!” Kenson raved, her voice quivering.

“Turn around, now!”

“You’ve taken them away from me! I will never see the Reapers’ Arrival!”

She turned, revealing that she held a detonator. Behind her, she’d rigged some explosives to the core itself. Shepard shot her. A single bullet to the head. Kenson’s body crumpled to the floor.

“Warning! Collision imminent!” An announcement blared from the base’s public address speakers.

Shepard was taken aback. “EDI? How much time do we have?”

“I estimate 28 minutes until impact.”

“That soon?”

“The asteroid was already in an orbit that would take it near the relay. The Project was intended merely to nudge it onto a collision course.”

“That’s not much time.”

“Shepard,” said Joker. “There’s a landing pad just outside from where you are. I’ll pick you up there.”

“Roger that.”

The Commander hurried down the hall and into an airlock. Impatiently, he waited for the air to cycle. Then, realizing there was no point, pulled the emergency release handle and let the escaping air push him out. The Normandy arrived, hovering just above the landing platform. Shepard jogged over to the airlock and ordered Joker to leave.

A minute later, he joined the pilot in the cockpit. Outside, they witnessed a ship transit the relay.

“At least someone escaped, that’s good,” said Shepard.

“Yeah, we’ve seen a few others make it, but no one else is close enough.”

The Normandy approached the relay, and Joker transmitted the necessary data. Stumbling, Shepard went to see Doctor Chakwas.

A few hours later, Shepard watched the medical machines retract from around him. He turned and saw Chakwas speaking to Admiral Hackett in the doorway to the Normandy’s med bay.

“Considering what he was able to do, I’m not surprised the tests came back negative,” she was saying. “No sign of Indoctrination.”

The Admiral thanked her. She left, and he walked up to Shepard as he was standing and putting on his shirt.

“Hm, looks like you’ve recovered,” said the grizzled Alliance soldier in dress blues.

“Admiral Hackett,” Shepard saluted out of habit, but the Admiral waved it off.

“Sounds like you went through hell down there. How are you feeling?”

“Fine. No more visions, if that’s what you mean. I wasn’t expecting to see you aboard a Cerberus vessel.”

“I don’t like Cerberus or the way they do things, but they brought you back to life, and they’re actually doing something about the state of the galaxy. Besides, I’m not so sure this is a Cerberus ship anymore. Right? You went out there as a favor to me. I decided to debrief you in person. That was before the mass relay exploded and destroyed an entire batarian system. What the hell happened out there, Commander?”

“What intel have you gotten?”

“All I know is that I sent you out there to break Amanda Kenson out of prison, and now an entire system is destroyed. I hope you can fill in the leap of logic between those two events.”

“I didn’t leave any details out of my report.”

“Well, I was hoping to hear it from you.” The Admiral held up a datapad. “Without looking at

this, I'm assuming you confirmed Kenson's proof?"

"I did. She had a Reaper artifact that gave her visions of their Arrival. I spoke to the one called Harbinger myself. Kenson said the Reapers were the galaxy's salvation. She wasn't willing to stop the invasion. So I did what had to be done."

"Sounds like Amanda was indoctrinated. Well. That's...a damn shame."

"I started the engines with little more than a half-hour left. I tried to warn the batarian colony, but...time ran out."

"The batarians report no survivors from Aratoht. Just a few ships. At least you tried. And you believe the Reaper invasion really was a threat?"

"No doubt about it. We literally had minutes to spare."

"I'm sure all the details are in your report. I won't lie to you, Shepard: The batarians will want blood, and there's just enough evidence for a witch hunt. And we don't want war with the batarians. Not with the Reapers at the galaxy's edge."

"How concerned is the Alliance about the batarian response?"

"Very. The batarians have been looking for an excuse to wage war on us since we showed up in the galaxy. If the Reapers invade, we need the galaxy to work together. If we're at war with the batarians, the other races will be hesitant to give aid to either side."

"What are you saying?" Shepard looked out the window into the mess hall. There were Alliance personnel searching, taking inventory. Joker had probably jumped them to the Sol System. That explained Hackett's presence on board.

"You did what you did for the best of reasons, but... There were more than three hundred thousand batarians in that system. All dead."

"They died to save trillions of lives. If I could have saved them, you bet your ass I would have."

"You're preaching to the choir, Commander. If it were up to me, I'd give you a damn medal. Unfortunately, not everyone will see it that way."

"So what do you suggest?"

"Evidence against you is shoddy at best. But at some point you'll have to face the music. I can't stop it...but I can and will make them fight for it."

"I stop a Reaper invasion, and they want to put me up on charges?"

"It's not a matter of preference, Shepard. There were witnesses. You'll be a convenient scapegoat for avoiding open war. In the mean time, I'm placing you in protective custody."

Shepard staggered back against the exam table. "Yes, sir."

"You've done a hell of a thing, Commander."