

Alliance Archives

2183

Excerpt from discussions on nomination for Council Spectre

Ambassador Udina: "Well, what about Shepard? He grew up in the colonies."

Captain Anderson: "He knows how tough life can be out there. His parents were killed when slavers attacked Mindoir. He was raised on the streets. Learned to look out for himself."

Admiral Hackett: "He proved himself during the Blitz. Held off enemy forces on the ground until reinforcements arrived."

Captain Anderson: "He's the only reason Elysium is still standing."

Ambassador Udina: "We can't question his courage."

Admiral Hackett: "He saw his whole unit die on Akuze. He could have some serious emotional scars."

Captain Anderson: "Every soldier has scars. Shepard's a survivor."

Admiral Hackett: "He got most of his unit killed on Torfan."

Captain Anderson: "He gets the job done. No matter what the cost."

Ambassador Udina: "Is that the kind of person we want protecting the galaxy?"

Captain Anderson: "That's the only kind of person who can protect the galaxy. Humanity needs a hero. And Shepard's the best we've got."

Ambassador Udina: "I'll make the call."

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In the year 2148, explorers on Mars discovered the remains of an ancient spacefaring civilization. In the decades that followed, these mysterious artifacts revealed startling new technologies, enabling travel to the furthest stars. The basis for this incredible technology was a force that controlled the very fabric of space and time. They called it the greatest discovery in human history. The civilizations of the galaxy call it...

## MASS EFFECT

*from the Codex:*

*Element zero, or "eezo", can increase or decrease the mass of a volume of space-time when subjected to an electrical current. With a positive current, mass is increased. With a negative current, mass is decreased. The stronger the current, the greater the magnitude of the dark energy mass effect.*

*In space, low-mass fields allow FTL travel and inexpensive surface-to-orbit transit. High-mass fields create artificial gravity and push space debris away from vessels. In manufacturing, low-mass fields permit the creation of evenly-blended alloys, while high mass compaction creates dense, sturdy construction materials.*

*The military makes extensive use of mobility enhancing technologies, with mass-effect-utilizing fighting vehicles standard front-line issue in most military forces. Mass effect fields are also essential in the creation of kinetic barriers – or shields to protect against enemy fire.*

-Chapter 1: Prologue-

I made my way forward to the bridge of the Normandy. This was a new ship on her shakedown run,

and we'd be headed through the Relay soon. The ship's pilot, Joker, was announcing our status, partly to keep the crew and technicians informed, and partly for posterity.

"The Arcturus Prime Relay is in range. Initiating transmission sequence."

Corporal Jenkins, one of my new squad mates, greeted me as I passed him in the corridor.  
"Commander." We were all new on the Normandy, and this would be our first mission together.

Joker continued his narration: "We are connected. Calculating transit mass and destination."

I passed Navigator Presley, who nodded at me. Technicians in the long neck to the flight deck were monitoring data streams.

"The Relay is hot. Acquiring approach vector...All stations, secure for transit."

I met Nihlus Kryik, the turian Spectre, and took my place next to him standing behind Joker's pilot seat, just as the Normandy entered the Relay's mass effect field. A Mass Relay is shaped like a gun without a grip; with a large spinning orb in the bulge towards the back. A blue energy field is contained within, and as the Normandy approached, the field extended to envelop us. The ship's eezo core cranked up, lowering our mass to almost nothing. Inside the ship, we felt no different, of course. But as far as the Universe and Physics were concerned, we were a mere mote.

"The board is green. Approach run has begun. Hitting Relay in 3...2...1..."

The Normandy was accelerated to a speed many times faster than that of light. The humans and turians on board the ship felt no different, but we had just been hurtled to another Relay tens of light years across the galaxy. Relays are located at the edge of star systems, well outside the gravity well of a star. The trip from an inner planet to a Relay can take hours, but the time between Relays is mere moments. The blue aura dissipated, and a new field of stars appeared out the windows.

Joker read his screens and reported our status: "Thrusters...check. Navigation...check. Internal emissions heat sink engaged. All systems online. Drift...just under 1500 K."

"1500 is good. Your captain will be pleased," said Nihlus in a disinterested tone. He turned and made his way aft.

"I hate that guy," commented Joker, as soon as the alien was out of earshot.

Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko, my other squad mate on this mission, was seated next to Joker. He sounded confused. "Nihlus gave you a compliment...so you hate him?"

"You remember to zip up your jumpsuit on the way out of the bathroom? That's 'good.' I just jumped us halfway across the galaxy and hit a target the size of a pinhead. So that's incredible! Besides, Spectres are trouble. I don't like having him on board. Call me paranoid."

"You're paranoid. The Council helped fund this project. They have a right to send someone to keep an eye on their investment."

"Yeah, that's the official story. But only an idiot believes the official story."

"They don't send Spectres on shakedown runs." I opined.

"So there's more going on here than the Captain's letting on."

Captain Anderson called in on the intercom: "Joker! Status report."

"Just cleared the mass relay, Capitan. Stealth systems engaged. Everything looks solid."

"Good. Find a comm buoy and link us into the network. I want mission reports relayed back to Alliance brass before we reach Eden Prime."

"Aye, aye, Capitan. Better brace yourself, sir. I think Nihlus is headed your way."

"He's already here, Lieutenant." Joker and Alenko winced. I smirked a bit. "Tell Commander Shepard to meet me in the comm room for a debriefing."

"You get that, Commander?"

"He sounds angry. Something must have gone wrong with the mission." I turned and made my way aft.

The upper deck of the Normandy was laid out in an unusual fashion. After the First Contact War (or the Relay 314 Incident as the turians call it), humans and turians sought ways to get along. Designing a ship together was one attempt at that. Each species' ships had different arrangements, and this ship was an amalgamation of those. The pilot's seats were at the nose of the ship, and working one's way aft, one would find a long narrow neck with a dozen stations for engineers and technicians. Then a wider area with a large arrowhead-shaped console in the middle, where the captain would be stationed at the aft end. The idea was that the commanding officer could see all of the subordinates, and more easily command them. The console displayed holographs of ship's systems and a galaxy map for navigation, which could be zoomed for choosing a destination, or for tactical assessment in a battle. Aft of this were two doors: one leading to the lower decks and one to the communications and briefing room.

I caught one more exchange as I left the flight deck:

"Captain always sounds angry like that when he's talking to me," harrumphed Joker.

"Can't possibly imagine why," Alenko rolled his eyes.

I made my way aft towards the large command console. Several crew were tapping away or examining holos. Navigator Pressly was tapping away at his console and speaking to Engineer Adams over the intercom.

"I'm telling you, I just saw him! He marched by like he was on a mission," Pressly was saying.

"He's a Spectre," replied Adams. "They're always on a mission."

"And we're getting dragged right along with him!"

"Relax, Pressly. You're going to give yourself an ulcer." The intercom clicked off.

I decided to stop and calm him down a bit. Presley was a career officer, mostly bald, with a five-o'clock shadow.

"Congratulations, Commander, it looks like we had a smooth run. You heading down to see the Captain?"

"Sounds like you don't trust our turian guest."

"Sorry, Commander, just had a chat with Adams down in engineering. I didn't mean to cause any trouble. But you have to admit, something's odd about this mission. The whole crew feels it."

"You think the Alliance brass is holding out on us?"

"If all we're supposed to do is test out the stealth systems, why is Capitan Anderson in charge? And then there's Nihlus! Spectres are elite operatives, top covert agents. Why send a Spectre – a turian Spectre – on a shakedown run? It doesn't add up."

I tried to change the topic: "What do you know about the stealth systems?"

"I just know it masks our location from scans and sensors – cutting-edge technology. The Normandy's the only ship with this prototype drive. But why are we fully staffed? A skeleton crew would be cheaper, less chance of security leaks, too. Plus there's Nihlus! It's pretty obvious this shakedown run is just a cover."

I sighed inwardly. He wasn't going to let this go, so I figured I'd better explore this fully. "A cover for what?" I asked.

"Damned if I know, Commander. We're out here on false pretenses. I'm not a fan of being left in the dark."

"Do you have a problem with the Captain?"

"No, sir! But I can't figure out what he's doing here. Captain Anderson is one of the most decorated Special Forces officers in the service. If he melted down all his medals, he could make a life-size statue of himself. You don't send a soldier like that on a do-nothing mission. He's treating this shakedown run too seriously. Something big is going on."

"And you don't trust Nihlus."

"I don't like turians in general, it runs in my family. My grandfather fought in the First Contact War. Lost a lot of friends when the turians hit us."

It was strange to hear him say this. The Normandy had top-secret stealth systems, sure, but she was a joint project between turians and humans. I made a point of glancing around at the handful of aliens aboard. "That was thirty years ago," I offered. "Can't blame Nihlus for that."

Pressle sighed. "No, I guess not. But it still makes me nervous to have a Spectre on board. Especially a turian. We're an Alliance vessel, human military. But Nihlus doesn't answer to the Capitan like the rest

of us. Spectres operate outside the normal chain of command. And they don't come along just observe shakedown runs; Nihlus looks like he's expecting some heavy action."

It was clear I wasn't going to change Presley's mind today. "I'll see if I can get some answers when I see him."

Just outside the door to the comm room, Corporal Jenkins was speaking with Doctor Chakwas.

"I grew up on Eden Prime, Doc. It's not the kind of place Spectres visit. There's something Nihlus isn't telling us about this mission." Jenkins saluted as I approached. He was young and green. I'd barely had time to read his file, and I'd been too busy to get the chance to know him. "What do you think, Commander? We won't be staying on Eden Prime too long, will we? I'm itching for some real action."

"I sincerely hope you're kidding Corporal," said Chakwas. She was a veteran, having served on Alliance ships most of her life. Her grey hair and crows feet spoke to her experience. "Your 'real action' usually ends with me patching up crew members in the infirmary."

I agreed with the doctor. "You need to calm down, Corporal. A good soldier stays cool, even under fire."

"Sorry, Commander. But this waiting's killing me. I've never been on a mission like this before. Not one with a Spectre on board!"

"Just treat this like any other assignment you've had and everything will work out."

"Easy for you to say. You proved yourself on Akuze. Everybody knows what you can do. This is my big chance. I need to show the brass what I can do!"

"Fifty marines dies there, Jenkins."

"Sorry, Commander. I—I didn't mean to offend you. I respect what you did there. We all do."

"You're young, Corporal. You have a long career ahead of you. Don't do something stupid to mess it up."

"Don't worry, sir. I'm not going to screw this up."

"You're from Eden Prime, aren't you Jenkins? What's it like?"

"It's very peaceful, Commander. They've been real careful with development, so you don't have any city noise or pollution. My parents lived on the outskirts of the colony. At night, I used to climb this big hill and stare across the fields back at the lights from the main settlement. It was gorgeous. But when I got older, I realized it was a little too calm and quiet for me. That's why I joined the Alliance. Even paradise gets boring after a while."

"Any idea why Eden Prime was chosen as our destination?"

"Not really sure, Commander. Eden Prime's one of our most stable colonies. Good place to take the Normandy on a shakedown run, I guess. No real danger there. But there's got to be something else

going on. We've got a Spectre on board! That's why I'm so wound up. I can't wait for the real mission to start!"

"Well, I'm glad to have you along, Jenkins. Doctor."

I continued through the door into the comm room, where Nihlus alone was waiting for me. Like all the council races, Turians are humanoid. They stand about two meters (7 feet) tall, and are often compared to birds, on account of their thin limbs, and the flat spikes that extend off the backs of their heads. I don't see the resemblance myself, as their skin is grey and leathery; no feathers and no wings.

"Commander Shepard." Nihlus seemed pleased to see me, though my limited experience with turians made it hard to tell. "I was hoping you'd get here first. It will give us a chance to talk."

Finally, some answers. "About what?" I asked, noncommittally.

"I'm interested in this world we're going to – Eden Prime. I've heard it's quite beautiful."

"They say it's a paradise."

"Yes...a paradise...for your people."

Turians' (and quarians') biology is based on dextro-amino acids, incompatible with human (and other species') levo-amino acids. We can't eat each other's food, for example, thus Eden Prime wouldn't be of interest to turians.

Nihlus continued. "Serene. Tranquil. Safe. Eden Prime has become something of a symbol for your people, hasn't it? Proof that humanity can not only establish colonies across the galaxy, but also protect them. But how safe is it, really?"

"Do you know something?"

"Your people are still newcomers, Shepard. The galaxy can be a very dangerous place. Is the Alliance truly ready for this?"

Captain Anderson chose that moment to enter the room. "I think it's about time we told the commander what's really going on."

Nihlus concurred. "This mission is far more than a simple shakedown run."

"We're making a covert pick-up on Eden Prime," continued Anderson. "That's why we needed the stealth systems operational."

"There must be a reason you didn't tell me about this, sir."

"This comes down from the top, Commander. Information strictly on a need-to-know basis. A research team on Eden Prime unearthed some kind of beacon during an excavation. It was Prothean."

"I thought the Protheans vanished fifty thousand years ago." I wondered how technology could survive that long, and Nihlus had a ready explanation.

"Their legacy still remains. They were a technologically-advanced species that ruled the galaxy. Then they vanished. Nobody really knows how or why, though I've heard plenty of theories. But everyone agrees galactic civilization wouldn't exist without them. Their Citadel is the very heart of galactic society. And without their mass relays, interstellar travel would be impossible. We all owe the Protheans a great debt."

"This is big, Shepard." Anderson mercifully cut short the lecture – everyone learns this stuff in school. "The last time humanity made a discovery like this, it jumped our technology forward two hundred years. But Eden Prime doesn't have the facilities for handling something like this. We need to bring the beacon back to the Citadel for proper study."

"Obviously this goes beyond mere human interest, Commander. This discovery could affect every species in Council space. But the beacon's not the only reason I'm here, Shepard," said Nihlus.

"Nihlus wants to see you in action, Commander. He's here to evaluate you."

"Guess that explains why I bump into him every time I turn around."

"The Alliance has been pushing for this for a long time. Humanity wants a larger role in shaping interstellar policy. We want more say with the Citadel Council. The Spectres represent the Council's power and authority. If they accept a human into their ranks, it shows how far the Alliance has come."

"Not many could have survived what you went through on Akuze," added Nihlus. "You showed a remarkable will to live – a particularly useful talent. That's why I put your name forward as a candidate for the Spectres."

I was stunned. Me, a Spectre? Sure I was an N7 with the Alliance, and I'd certainly seen some shit, but to be a member of the galaxy's elite special agents...that was something else. Anderson gave me a grave nod of agreement; he supported this.

"I need to see your skills for myself, Commander," Nihlus continued. "Eden Prime will be the first of several missions together."

Anderson jumped right in to the mission briefing. "You'll be in charge of the ground team. Secure the beacon and get it onto the ship ASAP. Nihlus will accompany you to observe the mission."

"Why is this beacon so important?" I wondered.

"The ruins on Mars contained only a small data cache, and that information got us to the stars. This beacon is a much larger device. Who knows what we can learn from it? What if it's a weapons archive? We can't let it fall into the wrong hands."

"Like who?"

"The Attican Traverse isn't the most stable sector of Citadel Space. There are plenty of raiders and criminal groups active in the region. They might figure a Prothean beacon is worth the risk of attacking an Alliance ship. Plus, Eden Prime is right on the border of the Terminus Systems."

I wasn't convinced. "The Attican Traverse is under Citadel protection. If the Terminus Systems attack, it's an act of war."

"Technically, yes," explained Nihlus. "But some of the species in the Terminus might be willing to start a war over this. The last thing the Council wants is to get dragged into a major conflict. We have to keep this low-key."

There was a lot of politics involved here. All of it over my head and above my pay grade. Instead, I just let them know that I was ready. Anderson seemed anxious to finish the briefing, but before he could get into it, Joker's voice came over the intercom.

"Captain, we've got a problem. Transmission from Eden Prime, sir. You better see this!"

Anderson approached the screen and pressed a button to pull it up. The footage was shaky and blurry, but I could make out Alliance marines shooting and running about. Their assailants weren't in frame. One female soldier in heavy armor approached the camera waving an arm, yelling for the cameraman to get down. The camera swung around for a bit, and there was more shooting, explosions, burning trees.

An officer appeared in frame and began speaking. "We are under attack! Taking heavy casualties. I repeat: heavy casualties! We can't...argh!... -- eed evac! They came out of nowhere. We need -- "

The officer's voice cut off and he fell backwards. The shooting stopped and the camera showed the surprised faces of the other soldiers. Then a giant hand-shaped ship was landing off in the distance, red bolts of lightning curling around its finger-like appendages. Only a brief glimpse could be seen before static and snow filled the screen.

"Everything cuts out after that," said Joker. "No comm traffic at all. Just goes dead. There's nothing."

Anderson worked the video controls to pause on an image of the ship. I had never seen a ship like it. It was hard to get a sense of scale from the video, but it had to be huge; at least a kilometer (3/4 mile) tall. It's hull was a dark grey metal, and blue light was visible through the seams of its joints.

Anderson squinted. Nihlus's mandibles twitched. Neither of them had seen its like, either.

Anderson asked Joker for a status report. "Seventeen minutes out, Captain. No other Alliance ships in the area."

"Take us in Joker, fast and quiet. This mission just got a lot more complicated."

"A small strike team can move quickly without drawing attention. It's our best chance to secure the beacon." Nihlus changed the plan on the fly. "Commander, get your squad suited up and meet me in the cargo hold."

*From the Codex:*

*Biotics is the ability of some lifeforms to create mass effect fields using element zero nodules embedded in body tissues. These powers are both accessed and augmented by using implanted bio-amps. Biotic individuals can knock enemies over from a distance, lift them into the air, generate gravitational vortices to tear obstacles or enemies apart, or create protective barriers.*



*There are three branches of biotics. TELEKINESIS uses mass-lowering fields to levitate or impel objects. Mass-raising KINETIC FIELDS are used to block or pin objects. DISTORTION uses rapidly shifting mass fields to shred objects.*

*Most organic species are capable of developing biotic abilities, though there are risks involved. Biotics are the result of in-utero exposure to element zero. This usually causes fatal cancers in the victim, but in rare cases it coalesces into nodules within the fetus's developing nervous system.*

--Chapter 2: Eden Prime---

Lieutenant Alenko, Corporal Jenkins, and I were in the Normandy's cargo bay, geared up and ready to go. A squad of three combat marines was small, but we were all that were on board. Captain Anderson arrived and opened the bay door as the ship slowed. Outside, the sky was red. Farmland was on fire, and the smell of ozone was strong.

"Your team's the muscle in this operation, Commander," Anderson yelled over the sound of air rushing around the cargo bay. "Go in heavy and head straight for the dig site."

"What about survivors, Captain?" asked Alenko.

"Helping survivors is a secondary objective. The beacon's your top priority."

Jenkins noticed Nihlus approaching. "You're coming with us?" he asked, excitedly.

"I move faster on my own," Nihlus replied dismissively. Then he took three strides and dropped off the ramp. Crazy, until you realize that combat armor has mass effect generators built in, so his effective weight when hitting the ground would not be much more than that of a leaf.

"Nihlus will scout out ahead," continued Anderson. "He'll feed you status reports throughout the mission; otherwise, I want radio silence. The mission's yours now, Shepard. Good hunting."

Joker announced that we were approaching our drop point. The Normandy, in spite of being a frigate, has a powerful enough eezo core that she could land on a planet. Joker brought us down in an open area between farmland and the spaceport. Incredibly, he brought the ship to a hover with the lip of the loading ramp just centimeters (inches) off the ground.

No sooner had my squad stepped onto solid ground than the Normandy lifted off. A small, marshy pond was ahead of us, where we saw some odd floating creatures.

"Gas bags," explained Jenkins. "They're mostly harmless. Just don't stand too close to one when the shooting starts."

The only path available led to our left, where we found some charred corpses.

"Oh, god. What happened here?" Jenkins's tone sounded like he might have known these people.

The area seemed too calm and quiet. In spite of the strangeness of the gas bag creatures, any human planet was bound to have animals scurrying about, bird-analogs chirping, something. The air was still

and silent. I patted Jenkins on the shoulder.

"Focus, Corporal. Take point," I ordered. He was the one wearing heavy armor, after all. I was in medium and Alenko wore light armor.

We cautiously continued along a tree-lined path, weapons drawn, looking for trouble. Suddenly, a pair of floating drones appeared from around the bend ahead. Before any of us could react, they opened fire. Alenko and I managed to take cover behind some rocks in time, but poor Jenkins was taken completely by surprise. His shields went down instantly, and his armor was no match for whatever the drones were spitting out.

Alenko brought up a biotic barrier to supplement his suit's shields, then he leaned out to return fire. The drones aimed his way, so I leaned out myself to get off a few rounds, but quickly took cover again when one of the drones split up, one targeting each of us. I have some biotic talent myself, and mine are quite weak compared to Alenko's, but the thin barrier that I managed was better than nothing.

The drones had shields themselves, so I tossed an overload pulse at them with my omni-tool. One shield was weakened and that drone was distracted for a moment, but the other drone's shield went down completely, and Alenko followed up with a biotic warp to weaken its armor. Both of us opened fire on it and brought it down just as the second drone found its targets again.

We ducked behind our rocks to recharge and prepare another assault. The same tactics as before worked to bring down the second drone.

When the immediate area seemed secure, Alenko approached Jenkins to check on his status. "Ripped right through his shields and armor. Never had a chance."

I paused for a moment of silence. I hate losing soldiers under my command, but I was worried there might be more drones around. "We need to stay focused. I'll mark this location so we can recover his body later."

"Aye, aye, sir." Alenko was a veteran; he knew the score.

I briefly examined the wreckage of the drones, but didn't recognize the technology. There are a lot of sentient races in the galaxy, and I hadn't met them all. Any one of them could have made this thing, but it certainly wasn't of human manufacture.

We continued around the bend in the path and encountered two more drones. This time we were prepared. An overload and a warp took down one, but the other flew behind a tree. I got the uneasy feeling that things were learning from each other, which would be unprecedented. I motioned Alenko to go one way around the tree, and I went the other way. The drone took too long to pick a target, and we destroyed it easily.

Nihlus's voice came over the comms: "I've got some burned-out buildings here, Shepard. A lot of bodies. I'm going to check it out. I'll try to catch up with you at the dig site."

Anderson had ordered radio silence for us, so I didn't respond. We crested a small hill and met a soldier sprinting towards us, three robots hot on her heels. They had grey metal skin and tubes wrapped around them. Flashlights for heads. Again, I didn't recognize the manufacturer, but there would be time for that

later.

I took a knee and motioned Alenko to do the same, setting up a small firing line. The stray soldier skidded to a halt between us, then brought up her assault rifle to join our line. This the soldier from the transmission we'd received earlier. Our concentrated fire took down all three robots, and all was quiet again.

"Thanks for your help, Commander, I didn't think I was going to make it." She caught her breath, then saluted. "Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams of the two-twelve. You the one in charge here, sir?"

Nihlus wasn't around, so I suppose I was. I returned her salute. "Affirmative. Are you injured, Chief?"

"A few scrapes and burns. Nothing serious. The others weren't so lucky. Oh, man...We were patrolling the perimeter when the attack hit. We tried to get off a distress call, but they cut off our communications. I've been fighting for my life ever since."

"Where's the rest of your squad?"

"We tried to double-back to the beacon. But we walked into an ambush. I don't think any of the others... I think I'm the only one left. We held our position as long as we could. Until the the geth overwhelmed us."

Alenko was surprised. "The geth haven't been seen outside the Veil in nearly 200 years. Why are they here now?"

That explained why I didn't recognize the robots. And why they seemed to learn. A deep memory surfaced from way back in school. These robotic geth have a sort of networked intelligence. The more of them in proximity to one another, the smarter they get. They kicked their creators, the quarians, off their homeworld centuries ago.

Williams shrugged. "They must have come for the beacon. The dig site is close. Just over that rise. It might still be there."

"Have you seen a turian Spectre around here? We dropped one off earlier."

"There aren't any turians on Eden Prime. None that I've ever met. Not sure I'd be able to tell if one was a Spectre, anyway."

"Good point." It was a stupid way for me to warn her not to shoot at Nihlus, but there you go. "Williams, join my unit and lead us to the dig site."

We continued down the hill and into a trench. What I assumed was archaeological equipment was strewn about, some of it twisted and scorched. Two geth were lifting a dazed man onto a tripod. We took cover and prepared for combat. I peeked around some scaffolding to plan my attack. As the robots let go of the man, a spike shot up through his chest, impaling him and lifting him several meters (yards). The geth noticed me and aimed their weapons. I ducked just in time, then motioned Alenko and Williams to flank the enemy.

I could hear the geth making low clicking noises as they approached. Dirt and shrapnel from the

scaffolding flew around, keeping me pinned in place. Thankfully, my squad weren't long in taking position and opening fire. Alliance marine training is excellent. No matter who you're teamed up with, standard operating procedure is so drilled in that a battle can be won without the need to communicate. The two flashlight-heads never stood a chance.

When the dust settled, Williams led us further down the trench to an open area. In the middle was a construct of stone or cement. It reminded me of a small amphitheater.

"This is the dig site," said Williams. "The beacon was right here. It must have been moved."

"By who?" asked Alenko. "Our side? Or the geth?"

"Hard to say. The research camp is just up those ramps over there. Maybe someone there will know – if anyone survived."

Nihlus broke in over the comms as we ascended.

"Change of plans, Shepard. There's a small tram station up ahead. I want to check it out. I'll wait for you there."

We emerged from the trench to find a clearing filled with more of those spikes, mutated corpses impaled on many of them. Surrounding the clearing were a ring of pre-fab buildings – a likely place to find any missing archaeologists.

"Keep your guard up," I said. "Looks like a good place for an ambush."

The spikes began to retract, releasing the corpses. Except they no longer looked fully human. They'd been implanted with cybernetics, and had blue glowing light shining from gaps in their flesh.

"What the hell did the geth do to them?!" Williams was aghast.

The modified corpses began to groan and move towards us like zombies. I opened fire, and my squad did the same. The zombie-things were fast and tough, though. Their cybernetics had apparently given shields to unarmored humans. One got within a meter or two of us before we could kill it. It stretched out and made a haunting yawn sound, then it emitted an electromagnetic field, sparks and lightning emanating from it, and our kinetic barriers went down. Thankfully, we filled it full of holes before it could get any closer.

Once all the zombies were dead – or at least no longer moving, I ordered a perimeter sweep around the buildings. I heard a noise from inside one of them, and circled around to the door. Alenko and Williams indicated their sweeps had been clean, so I knocked on the pre-fab.

"Hello? Anyone in there?"

"Oh, thank the maker you're human," came a shaky female voice. "Let me unlock the door."

"I'm Commander Shepard, Systems Alliance."

The woman was wearing clothing that identified her as a scientist. A man rose from behind a desk, also

in a scientific frock.

"Hurry! Close the door!" he implored. "Before they come back!"

"The immediate area outside is clear," I reassured them. "You're safe for now. Who are you?"

"Thank you," said the woman. "I'm Doctor Warren, and this is Doctor Manuel, my assistant. I'm guessing you're here for the beacon? I was told someone from the Alliance was coming."

"Yes. We just came from the dig site. Looks like the beacon's been moved."

"It was moved to the spaceport this morning. Manuel and I stayed behind to help pack up the camp. When the attack came, the marines held them off long enough for us to hide." She hugged herself and sighed. "They gave their lives to save us from the geth."

Williams swallowed, hard. I signaled for her to take a moment outside.

"No one is saved!" Manuel was despondent. "The age of humanity is ended! Soon, only ruin and corpses will remain. Agents of the destroyers. Bringers of darkness. Heralds of our extinction. We have unearthed the heart of evil," Manuel continued to prophesy. "Awakened the beast. Unleashed the darkness..."

"What's wrong with your assistant?" I asked.

"Manuel's just a little shaken from the attack. Go lie down, Manuel, and take your medication."

"Is it madness to see the future? To see the destruction rushing towards us? To understand there is no escape? No hope? No, I am not mad, I'm the only sane one left!"

I ignored Manuel and continued with my questions. "Have you seen a turian Spectre pass through here?"

"I saw him," offered Manuel. "The prophet! Leader of the enemy. He was here, before the attack."

"No, this turian came with —" I cut myself off. Could another turian have snuck off the Normandy? No. Not possible. But I'd have to verify that later. "Wait, you said this other turian was here before the attack?"

Unfortunately, the madman's medication chose that moment to kick in, and he passed out. Doctor Warren answered instead. "I'm sorry about Manuel. We've been here for months. We haven't seen any turians in all that time."

Something was off here. "So you say you haven't seen any turians, and Manuel says he has. Which is it?"

The archaeologist shrugged. "Well, maybe Manuel has, but I certainly haven't."

"Okay... What can you tell me about the beacon? What am I looking for?"

"It's some type of data module from a galaxy-wide communications network. Remarkably well-preserved. It could be the greatest scientific discovery of our lifetime! Miraculous new technologies. Groundbreaking medical advances. Who knows what secrets are locked inside?"

Williams had returned. She rolled her eyes. "It's about three meters (10 feet) high, made of greenish metal. Can't miss it."

"Right. Williams, take us to the spaceport. Doctor, lock the door behind me. We'll send someone to get you once it's safe."

Alenko and I followed Williams out and further down the path. It was quiet for several minutes, and then we heard a single gun shot from up ahead. I ordered double time towards the sound, and we shortly came to a tram depot. The ship I'd seen earlier in the transmission from the Normandy was lifting off in the distance.

"Look at the size of that thing!" shouted Williams. "It looks like a giant squid!"

I was off in my earlier estimate of its size: it was easily two kilometers (1.2 miles) tall. And Williams was right. Rather than hand, it did indeed resemble a squid with stubby tentacles. As it ascended, red lightning again shot out from it. There was fire coming from below, but it wasn't using rockets – it was climbing so fast that the air was catching fire, leaving a trail of smoke.

The ship was out of sight in seconds, and I didn't have time to contemplate the enigma any further, as a dozen geth robots and drones turned at our approach and initiated combat. My squad took cover behind some crates that had been strewn about the field. The fight was hard and tiring. Initially, the geth were incredibly coordinated, but they seemed to get dumber as we picked them off one by one. The last one just stood still while we shot it. Evidence that their intelligence was indeed networked.

We made our way up onto the train platform and cautiously ensured that the area was free of enemies. The corpse of a turian was laying in the middle of an open area. Alenko bent down to examine it.

"It's Nihlus, Commander. Shot in the back of the head."

A man appeared suddenly from behind a stack of crates. "Wait! Don't – don't shoot! I'm one of you! I'm human," he cried.

"Damn it, I almost shot you!" said Williams. "What are you doing, sneaking around behind there?"

"My name's Powell. I work the depot. Sometimes I sneak off in the middle of a shift to take a nap. Good thing I did, too, 'cause those creatures showed up and started shooting people."

"I'm surprised the geth could get the drop on Nihlus," said Alenko. "Didn't he once take out a whole platoon of batarians?"

"No, the other turian shot him. Your friend there seemed to recognize him. Called him...Saren, I think the name was. Then your friend let his guard down, and that Saren shot him in the back."

"Shit." Time was running out. I hoped the geth hadn't already taken the beacon on their ship. "Do you know where the beacon is?"

"That thing they dug up? Yeah they took it by tram over to the spaceport. I'm not sure there's much left over there now, though, the way that ship took off."

"Yeah, but I need to get there and see for myself. How do I do that?"

"There's still a tram here. Easy to operate. Only one destination. Just hit the big green button labeled 'GO'."

The tram was slow. Not much call for speed in a farming colony, I suppose. Williams inspected her weapons and gear. Alenko meditated. I tapped my foot.

After several minutes, we arrived at the spaceport. The tram stop was in a depression, and there was smoke rising from over the ridge. As we stepped onto the platform, Alenko pointed to an object in a shady corner.

"This looks like a bomb, Commander."

"Can you defuse it?"

"I think so. Just give me a minute."

Alenko pulled out some tools and began to unscrew a panel. Williams and I took up positions to cover him. A moment later, geth began to stream through from the exit to the spaceport. I sent out an overload but only managed to weaken the robots' shields. Williams's assault rifle was whiddling them down, but not fast enough. With Alenko occupied, I decided to try my own biotics. All of my strength only managed a weak warp field. I swear I heard Williams snort, but my effort was enough to discombobulate the machines.

"Got it, Commander," announced Alenko.

"Nice job, Lieutenant! We've got our hands full here. Give 'em all you've got!"

"Aye, aye, Commander!"

Alenko took a deep breath, then began to draw on dark energy. A hazy blue glow enveloped him briefly, and then he let loose, creating a singularity in the thick of the geth platoon. The pseudo black hole began to draw in the robots, which floated around the swirling blue mass. Alenko ducked back behind a wall to recover while Williams and I emptied several heat sinks worth of ammunition into the swarm.

"Nothin' doin'!" cheered Williams. "Nice going, Lieutenant!"

"Hoo! Yeah, thanks. That took a lot out of me."

"Williams, help him up. Let's go," I ordered.

I took point and led the way to the spaceport. We came out onto a platform overlooking a field of molten slag, still smoking. This must have been where that giant ship had set down...and then melted

everything in sight when it took off.

"It's all...gone," said a stunned Williams. "The whole spaceport. It's just...not there any more."

"This must be the beacon, Commander." Alenko pointed to a large metal structure, which was glowing green and emitting a green aura.

Williams shook herself back to the present. "It wasn't doing anything like that when they dug it up," she said.

Time to break radio silence. I got on my radio to call the Normandy for pickup as Alenko and Williams began to speculate about what the glowing could mean.

I wandered over to take a look at the molten slag field and saw our ship approach in the distance.

"Be careful, chief!" yelled Alenko.

I turned around to see Williams being pulled towards the beacon. "What the-"

I ran to her, grabbed her, and tossed her back towards Alenko, who caught her. Then I felt myself being lifted off my feet. A vision entered my mind. Jumbled images of death and destruction. Machines melded with flesh. A star exploding. Then I blacked out.

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My head was pounding. It meant I was alive, but the pain made me question whether that was a good thing. Opening my eyes was a mistake; I saw enough to know I was lying in Normandy's med bay, but I was greeted by a blinding light. I closed my eyes tight again to let them adjust to the light. In the mean time, I tested my limbs. Everything seemed to be working, so I tried to sit up. Mistake number two.

"Take it easy there, Commander," came the soothing transatlantic accent of Doctor Chakwas. "You've been through quite an ordeal." I felt hands on my shoulders, steadying me as I made the effort to sit up. "How are you feeling?"

"Urgh," I grunted and blinked away the sunspots. "Like the morning after shore leave."

"Headache? I'll get you some aspirin."

The doctor moved away and I looked around. Williams was standing out of the way, an anxious look on her face. "Williams? What are you doing here?"

"You passed out, Commander. Alenko and I had to drag you back to the Normandy. I was worried."

"Thanks. And the beacon? Did we get it?"

"What's left of it, yeah. After it...did whatever it did to you, it...well, it exploded. Not much left of it but bits and pieces."



"Exploded?! How?" My head spun, both literally and figuratively.

"I don't know. It just...blew up." Williams looked defeated. "I'm sorry, Commander. If I hadn't -"

"It's not your fault, Chief." I waved dismissively, and she seemed relieved. "And Alenko?"

"He's fine. Probably meditating somewhere."

Doctor Chakwas approached and tilted my head to the side. "This should help with the hangover." She pressed a hypospray into my neck. I felt an immediate, cooling relief.

"Ahhh, thank you doctor. Much better." I swung my feet to the floor. Third mistake, and lesson learned. I leaned back against the bed. "How long was I out?"

"A little over two days," said Chakwas. "You had us all quite worried."

"Two days? What's the damage?"

"Physically, you're fine. But I detected some abnormal brain activity, abnormal beta waves. I also notice an increase in your rapid eye movement, signs typically associated with intense dreams – Oh, Captain Anderson."

"Ah, good, I see our patient is awake," Captain Anderson interrupted as he entered the med bay. "I need to talk to the Commander. In private."

"Aye, aye, Captain." Chakwas nodded, Williams saluted, then both exited out to the mess area

"That beacon hit you pretty hard, Commander. You sure you're okay?"

"I don't like soldiers dying under my command."

"Jenkins wasn't your fault. You did a good job, Shepard. But I won't lie to you. Things look bad. Nihlus is dead, the beacon was destroyed, and the geth are invading. The Council's going to want answers."

"We've got nothing to hide, Captain. Hopefully the Council can see that we didn't do anything wrong."

"I'll stand behind you and your report, Shepard. You're a damned hero in my books for saving those civilians. But that's not why I'm here. It's Saren, that other turian. He's a Spectre, one of the best. A living legend. But if he killed one of his own, and he's working with the geth? It means he's gone rogue. A rogue Spectre's trouble. Saren's dangerous. And he hates humans."

"He didn't come to Eden Prime because he hates humans. He was after the beacon."

"You were affected by the beacon just before it self-destructed. Did you learn anything? Any clue that might tell us what Saren was after?"

"Just before I lost consciousness, I had some kind of vision. I saw synthetics. Geth, maybe. Slaughtering people. Butchering them. It felt like a warning."

"We need to report this to the Council."

I scoffed. "What are we going to tell them? I had a bad dream?"

"We don't know what information was stored in that beacon. Lost Prothean technology? Blueprints for some ancient weapon of mass destruction? Whatever it was, Saren has it. But I know Saren. I know his politics. He believes humans are a blight on the galaxy. This attack was an act of war! He has the secrets from the beacon. He has an army of geth at his command. And he won't stop until he's wiped humanity from the face of the galaxy!"

"You're right. So how do we take him down?"

"It's not that easy. He's a Spectre. He can go anywhere, do almost anything. That's why we need the Council on our side."

"So, we prove Saren's gone rogue, and the Council will revoke his Spectre status."

"I'll contact our ambassador to the Citadel and see if he can get us an audience with the Council. He'll want to see us as soon as we reach the Citadel."

And with that, Anderson turned and left the med bay. I stood and stretched, then exited into the mess. Williams was there, pacing. She stood at attention as I approached.

"At ease chief."

"I'm glad you're okay, Commander. I've been assigned to the Normandy...to your squad, actually. I hope that's okay. If Jenkins was alive, I might not be here. Part of me feels guilty for taking his spot."

"Jenkins was a valuable part of this crew. He'll be missed. But you're a good soldier, Williams. You belong on the Normandy."

"Thanks, Commander, I appreciate that."

"Things were pretty rough down there. Are you okay?"

"I've seen friends die before." She shrugged. "Comes with being a marine. But to see my whole unit wiped out...And you never get used to seeing dead civilians. But things would have been a whole lot worse if you hadn't shown up." Williams hesitated a moment. "Um, Commander? If you don't mind my asking...Your entire squad was wiped out on Akuze, right? How did you deal with that?"

"It was hard. But I moved on. I told myself I'd do better next time. Losing Jenkins is hard, but I'll move on, and do better next time. So will you."

"Thanks, Commander."

I was suddenly starving. I moved over to the food dispensers and dialed up several plates. I sat down and was just digging in when Alenko approached.

"Holy cow, Commander, that's a lot of food – wait, is that a whole cow?"

"Very funny, Lieutenant. But it seems I have two days of eating to catch up on." I shoveled several forkfuls of food into my mouth.

"Right. Glad to see you're okay. Say, did that beacon tell you anything about that ship the geth were using? That thing was impressive!"

"No. It's just random images. Nothing really makes sense," I spoke with my mouth full.

Alenko snatched a spare biscuit from my tray and wandered off. I caught snippets of conversation from the rest of the crew as I chowed down.

"No ship I know of can move that fast in atmosphere."

"There must be millions of geth back on the quarian homeworld. That many AIs with hundreds of years to themselves must have come up with all sorts of incredible technology."

"I hope we don't have to fight them."

"But why was Saren with them?"

I finished my meal and then found a console to begin writing my report. I also checked to see if any turians were missing, but the crew manifest was complete. Some time later, the intercom crackled to life with Joker's announcement that we'd be arriving at the Citadel soon.

*From the Codex:*

*The Council is an executive committee composed of representatives from the Asari Republics, the Turian Hierarchy, and the Salarian Union. Though they have no official power over the independent governments of other species, the Council's decisions carry great weight throughout the galaxy. No single Council race is strong enough to defy the other two, and all have a vested interest in compromise and cooperation.*

*Each of the Council species has general characteristics associated with the various aspects of governing the galaxy. The asari are typically seen as diplomats and mediators. The salarians gather intelligence and information. The turians provide the bulk of the military and peacekeeping forces.*

*Any species granted an embassy on the Citadel is considered an associate member, bound by the accords of the Citadel Conventions. Associate members may bring issues to the attention of the Council, though they have no input on the decision. The human Systems Alliance became an associate member of the Citadel in 2165.*

---Chapter 3: The Citadel---

I'd been to the Citadel a few times before, but it was always a grand sight. On way to the bridge, crew members were chatting among themselves or busy tapping away on their consoles. One turian ensign was even playing solitaire. The misconduct was such an unusual sight that I decided to let it slide.

I arrived on the flight deck to find Williams and Alenko already there. The blue aura from our transit between mass relays was fading to reveal a dense nebula. Joker was coordinating with Citadel Traffic Control for our arrival. After a few moments, the nebula thinned out to reveal the giant space station in

all its glory. Five long wide arms splayed out like the petals of a half-closed flower, attached at a center ring. Every other time I'd been here, the arrival had taken us around the back side, but somehow, Joker managed to get us on a path that took us straight in through the middle, with a great view of the Wards, as the arms were called.

Joker then became busy on the radio, gaining permission to land. In the Citadel's center ring was a thin appendage extending into the middle of empty space like a radius. At the center of this appendage was another small circle: the Presidium. The part of the station where all the diplomacy took place. Normally, we'd dock on the large ring itself, but we had business with the Council, and therefore were granted permission to dock at the Presidium.

Captain Anderson rounded up myself, Alenko, and Williams, and the four of us stepped out onto the docking platform. A boxy blue shuttle bearing the Citadel Security logos was waiting for us, and it was a short ride to the human ambassador's office.

As we entered, a man was talking to three holograms. He was in his fifties, and had a receding black hairline. The holograms were a turian, an asari, and a slaraian: the Council.

"This is an outrage!" the man was saying. "The Council would step in if the geth attacked a turian colony!"

"The turians didn't found colonies on the borders of the Terminus Systems, Ambassador," replied the salarian ambassador. The humanoid amphibian had his head prongs covered by a hood, in the style of important members of his race. His nictitating membranes closed and opened over over his large black eyes, much like an eyeblink of any other race.

"Humanity was well aware of the risks when you went into the Terminus," added the asari Councilor. Her skin was an ocean blue, and her skin's scales were beginning to show, indicating she was in the early years of her race's matron stage. Her head was uncovered, and her hair-tentacles were also unadorned, in an odd show of humility, given her position.

"What about Saren?" asked the frustrated ambassador. "You can't just ignore a rogue Spectre. I demand action!"

"You don't get to make demands of the Council, Ambassador," replied the turian Councilor. He stood with the military gravitas evinced by nearly all members of his race. Though to rise to the position he was in, he must have had some serious diplomatic chops, as well.

"Citadel Security is investigating your charges against Saren," said the asari Councilor. "We will discuss the C-Sec findings at the hearing. Not before."

The holograms faded out, and the man turned to address us. "Captain Anderson. I see you brought half your crew with you."

"Just the ground crew from Eden Prime, Ambassador Udina. In case you had any questions."

"I have the mission reports. I assume they're accurate?"

I had to wonder if Udina was always this crabby, or if he was still coming down from that interaction

with the Council.

"They are," Anderson reassured. "Sounds like you convinced the Council to give us an audience."

"They were not happy about it. Saren's their top agent. They don't like him being accused of treason."

"It's the truth. If they Council won't help us, I'll go after Saren myself," I offered.

"Settle down, Commander," warned the ambassador. "You've already done more than enough to jeopardize your candidacy for the Spectres. The mission on Eden Prime was a chance to prove you could get the job done. Instead, Nihlus ended up dead and the beacon was destroyed!"

"That's Saren's fault, not his!" Anderson tried to defend me.

"Then we'd better hope the C-Sec investigation turns up evidence to support our accusations. Otherwise the Council might use this as an excuse to keep you out of the Spectres." Udina paused and then began to issue orders. "Come with me, Captain. I want to go over a few things before the hearing. Shepard – you and the others can meet us at the Citadel Tower in an hour. Top level. I'll make sure you have clearance to get in."

Udina and Anderson went into the ambassador's office, leaving my squad and I to our own devices.

"And that's why I hate politicians," Williams shook her head. "Sounds like we have a little time to play tourist." She looked at me hopefully.

I shrugged. "Sure. I've never been to the Presidium before."

We exited the human embassy out into an atrium. Embassies for other races were nearby. There was also a door to a C-Sec office. I wondered if I might learn something about their investigation, so I dismissed Alenko and Williams, with instructions to meet up later at the Citadel Tower.

Inside, I ran into a turian in a very fancy-looking C-Sec uniform. He seemed to be in charge, but he greeted me anyway.

"Commander Shepard. I didn't expect to see you here. I'm Executor Pallin," he introduced himself, and we shook hands. "Did Ambassador Udina send you?"

"I came on my own," I said in a tone that I hoped was pleasant. "I need information."

"You humans are always so curious. Always sticking your fingers into someone else's pie. Is that the right expression? Uh. Never mind. Forget I asked. Was there something you needed, Commander?"

"I get the feeling you're not too fond of humans."

"No, I just don't trust your kind. Not yet. You humans are eager to take all the power you can get. And you're being given a lot. If the Council wants to make humanity their new favorite pet, that's their business. But I don't have to like it."

I got the feeling he wasn't going to be very forthcoming, but I decided to try anyway. "So, tell me about

your investigation into Saren."

"Sorry, Commander. I don't make a habit of giving out details about ongoing investigations."

The Executor waved dismissively, so I excused myself and saw myself out. I strolled around the Presidium grounds for awhile. And by around, I mean that literally. The Presidium is actually a ring. The station's spin creates gravity, so the floor you walk around on is the outer wall, and the inner wall is a simulated sky. The effect is somewhat like being an ant on the inside of a tire. Walls of the tire to the sides, and the sky above.

There were sky cars and shuttles flying around above. Below were paths and vegetation, with a large lake running down the center. No doubt the lake extended all the way around the ring: all that water would cause an imbalance if it were all in one place. The trees, bushes, and grass gave the place a somewhat natural look. And they were real; the fresh air they produced was a welcome respite from the stale air of a ship. Members of other species seemed to agree. I passed by elcor, volus, asari, turians, salarians, and even a few hanar. All seemed to be seeking a respite from the stress of diplomacy.

I continued to wander around for another half hour or so, then I decided to follow the directional signage to the Citadel Tower. Near the base, I met up with Alenko and Williams. We checked in with a guard, then took a very long elevator ride up to the top of the Tower. The elevator dumped us out into an open area with a fountain in the middle. Alien foliage lined the walls. At the base of the fountain, Executor Pallin was speaking with another turian in a C-Sec uniform.

"Saren's hiding something," the officer was saying impatiently. "Give me more time. Stall them."

"Stall the Council?" replied Pallin, incredulously. "Don't be ridiculous! Your investigation is over, Vakarian." The executor turned and walked away.

The officer turned to address me. "Commander Shepard? Garrus Vakarian." Did everyone on the Citadel know who I was? But he continued before I could reply. "I was the officer in charge of the C-Sec investigation into Saren."

"Sounds like you really want to bring him down," I said.

"I don't trust him. Something about him rubs me the wrong way. But he's a Spectre, everything he touches is classified. I can't find any hard evidence."

"I think the Council's ready for us, Commander," said Alenko. He was peering further into the atrium.

At the top of several flights of shallow steps, I could see Captain Anderson waving at us.

"Good luck, Shepard," offered the defeated turian. "Maybe they'll listen to you."

We jogged up the stairs, past several diplomats, to meet up with Anderson.

"I bet all these staircases aren't just for show," commented Williams. "They make for good defensive positions if this place is ever attacked."

"The hearing's already started. Come on," ordered Anderson when we finally reached him.

I fell in beside him and my squad lagged behind, evidently impressed by the place. Anderson and I joined Udina at the end of a wide balcony, which extended over a greenhouse-like enclosure below us. The Councilors themselves were standing on a similar balcony about a dozen meters (40 feet) in front of us. Behind them was an enormous window with a view of the nebula outside. This tower was so tall that it extended above the Presidium Ring and into vacuum. There were balconies above and to the sides of the chamber, occupied by people of several races. So this was a public hearing.

The asari Councilor was speaking. "The geth attack is a matter of some concern. But there is nothing to indicate Saren was involved in any way."

She gestured to a hologram to our her right: a turian in combat armor was standing with his arms folded in a defiant pose.. I finally had a face to put with the name of my enemy: Saren. Even via holo-vid, I didn't like the look of him.

"The investigation by Citadel Security turned up no evidence to support your charge of treason," said the turian Councilor.

Udina was incensed again. Or still. It may have been his default mood. "An eyewitness saw him kill Nihlus in cold blood!"

"We've read the Eden Prime reports, Ambassador." The salarian Councilor was patient, which is surprising considering how short-lived his species is. "The testimony of one traumatized dockworker is hardly compelling proof."

"I resent these accusations," said Saren's hologram. "Nihlus was a fellow Spectre. And a friend."

"That just let you catch him off guard!" burst out Anderson.

"Captain Anderson. You always seem to be involved when humanity makes false charges against me. And this must be your protégé, Commander Shepard. The one who let the beacon get destroyed."

"You must have sabotaged it!" I couldn't help myself. "Then you tried to cover it up."

"Shifting the blame to cover your own failures, just like Captain Anderson. He's taught you well. But what can you expect from a human?" Saren began to gesticulate wildly. "Your species needs to learn its place, Shepard. You're not ready to join the Council. You're not even ready to join the Spectres!"

"He has no right to say that!" yelled Udina. "That's not his decision!"

"Shepard's admission into the Spectres is not the purpose of this meeting," agreed the asari Councilor.

"This meeting has no purpose," said an indignant Saren. "The humans are wasting your time, Councilors. And mine."

"There's still one outstanding issue," offered Anderson. "Commander Shepard's vision. It may have been triggered by the beacon."

"Are we allowing dreams into evidence now?" Saren said calmly. "How can I defend my innocence

against this kind of testimony?"

"I agree," said the turian Councilor. "Our judgment must be based on facts and evidence, not wild imaginings and reckless speculation. Do you have anything else to add, Commander Shepard?"

I happened to agree that it was silly to try and interpret whatever I'd seen while under the influence of the beacon, and so I politely declined to speak further. The Councilors turned and whispered to each other for a moment, and then the asari Councilor spoke to the assembly.

"The council has found no evidence of any connection between Saren and the geth. Ambassador, your petition to have him disbarred from the Spectres is denied. This meeting is adjourned."

"I'm glad to see justice was served," said Saren. As his hologram faded out, I could swear I saw his eyes glow, but it could have just been a glitch.

Everyone turned to leave save Udina, who stood for a moment longer with his shoulders slumped. Anderson motioned my squad and I to join him off in a corner of the atrium. We all seemed to be at a loss as to our next step until Udina joined us. He addressed us in his usual impatient tone.

"It was a mistake brining you into that hearing, Captain. You and Saren have too much history. It made the Council question our motives."

"I know Saren," Anderson defended himself. "He's working with the geth for one reason: to exterminate the entire human race. Every colony we have is at risk. Every world we control is in danger. Even Earth isn't safe."

"The Council's always preaching that we need to be part of the galactic community," mused Udina. "But for them it's a one-way street. They want us to expand and settle unstable regions like the Skyllian Verge and the Attican Traverse. But when we run into trouble, they don't want to help us out. Everyone knows it's only a matter of time until we get a seat on the Council. I just think it should happen sooner rather than later.

I was curious about how the Captain knew Saren, so I asked him to explain.

"I worked with him on a mission a long time ago. Things went bad. Real bad. About twenty years ago, I was part of a mission in the Skyllian Verge. I was working with Saren to find and remove a known terrorist threat. Saren eliminated his target. But a lot of people died along the way. Innocent people. And the official records covered it all up. But I saw how he operates. No conscience. No hesitation. He'd kill a thousand innocent civilians to end a war without a second thought. Sometimes you're forced to make unpleasant decisions. But only if there's no other way. Saren doesn't even look for another option. He's twisted, broken. He likes the violence, the killing. And he knows how to cover his tracks."

"I got the sense something was off about him. Thank you for telling me. This is just one more reason why he has to be stopped." I paused for a moment to process. "So what's our next step?"

"As a Spectre, he's virtually untouchable," mused Udina. "We need to find some way to expose him."

The normally taciturn Alenko spoke up: "What about Garrus, that C-Sec investigator? We saw him



arguing with the Executor, earlier. Sounded like he was close to finding something on Saren."

"Good idea," said Udina. "Go to the C-Sec office near the embassies, they should be able to put you in touch. And Shepard, this investigation is public now. Remember that you represent humanity, so you can't go bludgeoning your way around the Citadel the way you did on Torfan." He started to walk away. "Anderson, come with me to my office, we have some things to discuss."

The party broke up. I turned to Alenko and Williams, uncertain whether I should order them to join me on this or dismiss them to shore leave. But they anticipated this.

"We're with you, Commander," stated Alenko.

"All the way to the end," added Williams. She paused for a moment, and expression of frustration wrinkling her brow. "I can't believe the Council ignored all the evidence against Saren!"

"Saren's one of their best operatives," said Alenko, in a vain attempt to calm her down. "It's only natural they'd take his word over ours."

"Oh, so now we just chase leads while this smug turian runs around with his geth troopers."

"That's politics, Chief."

"I hate politics."

We took the long elevator ride back down to the Presidium, then made our way to the C-Sec office at the embassies. Executor Pallin wasn't there, but a helpful clerk told us that officer Vakarian was responding to a call at a medical clinic in one of the Wards. A little bit of sweet-talking got us the location, and we hailed a cab.

Williams, Alenko, and I emerged from the cab to find a spectacular view of all five of the Wards arms. An Alliance Cruiser drifted by as we leaned on a railing to take it all in.

"Big place!" Alenko observed.

"That your professional opinion, sir?" Williams teased.

"This isn't a station, it's a city," I added.

"There must be millions here. It can't be possible to track everyone coming and going," said Alenko.

"This makes Jump Zero look like a porta-john. And it's the largest deep space station the Alliance has," added Williams, getting into the spirit of things.

"Jump Zero was big," Alenko nodded. "But this is on a whole 'nother scale. Look at the Ward arms. How do they keep all that mass from flying apart?"

"No wonder the Council treats us like outsiders. We'd be just another drop in a bucket they already can't carry. They must figure us for one more gang of FNGs looking for a handout."

Alenko attempted to calm her down. "I doubt it's personal. It's got to be a balancing act, like every other government."

"What's not to like?" I asked. "We've got oceans, beautiful women, this emotion called love. According to the old vids, we have everything they want."

Williams smirked at me. "If you expect to get me in a tinfoil miniskirt and thigh-high boots, I want dinner first. Sir."

"That'll be enough, Chief," said Alenko.

"At ease, Lieutenant. I can't see her in a skirt, anyway."

"Damn straight you can't." Williams turned away to hide her blush.

A massive ship of asari design floated by. Cross-shaped, with short, wing-shaped arms that tapered aft, and a large flattened oval in the middle. And it was indeed big. I estimated a crew of ten thousand as other ships gave it a wide berth.

"Look at the size of that ship!" exclaimed Williams. It was apparently a day for large vessels.

"The Destiny Ascension. Flagship of the Citadel fleet," Alenko named it.

"Well, size isn't everything," mumbled Alenko.

"Why so touchy, Lieutenant?" teased Williams.

"I'm just saying you need firepower, too."

"Look at that monster! It's main gun could rip through the shields on any ship in the Alliance fleet."

"Good thing it's on our side, then," Alenko said.

"It's even bigger than it looks," A nearby volus waddled up in his pressure suit, accompanied by a human woman.

"How would you know?" asked the woman.

"I got a tour; one of 500 to see the Ascension from the inside out."

"Really?"

"Took almost six hours and we only saw one tenth of the ship. I even got to meet the commander."

"Matriarch Ladanya...You met her?"

"Well, she addressed everyone on the tour – but I got pretty close to her."

"Huh. Just look at that ship. You'd have to be stupid to mess with that."

"Very true. She's got almost as much firepower as the rest of the asari fleet combined."

"Hopefully, she'll never need to use it."

I gathered my squad and led them down the promenade. As we entered the clinic, Vakarian was crouching behind a counter, and several human thugs were threatening a woman in a medical frock.

"I didn't tell anyone, I swear!" she plead.

"That was smart, doc," sneered the leader of the thugs. "Now, if Garrus comes around, you'll stay smart. Keep your mouth shut or we'll--" He cut himself off as he noticed me, then grabbed the physician and held a gun to her head.

Alenko, Williams and I all drew our pistols and demanded her release. Vakarian took the opportunity to break cover, then shot the hostage-taker cleanly through the skull. The doctor fell safely to the floor, and a short firefight ensued. None of the rest of the thugs surrendered.

When the dust settled, Vakarian thanked us for our assistance.

"Perfect timing, Shepard. Gave me a clean shot at that bastard."

"Happy to help. That was a risky shot, though."

"Sometimes you get lucky," the turian replied, then turned to the doctor, who was recovering her senses. "Doctor Michel? Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm okay. Thanks you you. All of you," she said with a light Belgian accent.

"Why were they threatening you?" I asked, my curiosity getting the better of me. "Who do they work for?"

"They work for Fist. They wanted to shut me up, keep me from telling Garrus about the quarian."

I turned to Vakarian: "Does this have anything to do with my investigation into Saren?"

"I think it might. Doctor Michel, tell us what happened."

"A few days ago, a quarian came into my office. She'd been shot, but she wouldn't tell me who did it. I could tell she was scared, probably on the run. She asked me about the Shadow Broker. She wanted to trade information in exchange for a safe place to hide. I put her in contact with Fist. He's an agent for the Shadow Broker."

"Not any more," said Vakarian. "Now he works for Saren, and the Shadow Broker isn't too happy about it."

"Fist betrayed the Shadow Broker?" Doctor Michel was incredulous. "That's stupid, even for him. Saren must have made him quite the offer."

"Fist must have something Saren wants," continued Vakarian. "Something worth crossing the Shadow

Broker to get. What else can you tell us about this quarian?"

"I'm not sure," the doctor scratched her head in thought. "Like I said, she wanted to trade information for a place to hide. She didn't...wait a minute! Geth. Her information had something to do with the geth!"

"She must be able to link Saren to the geth," concluded Vakarian.

"There's no way the Council can ignore this!" interjected Williams."

"This is your show, Shepard," said the C-Sec officer. "But I want to bring down Saren as much as you do. I'm coming with you."

"You're a turian," I pointed out. It had been my experience that each of the races of the galaxy were protective of their own. I certainly knew that to be true of my fellow humans. "Why do you want to bring him down?"

"I couldn't find the proof I needed in my investigation. But I knew what was really going on. Saren's a traitor to the Council, and a disgrace to my people!"

"All right, Vakarian, you've made your case. But this is your turf, your jurisdiction with C-Sec. What's our next step?"

"Fist has lots of bodyguards. It won't be easy getting into the back of Chora's Den where he hides out. We should talk to Barla Von over in the Financial District on the Presidium. Rumor has it he's an agent for the Shadow Broker."

"Who is this Shadow Broker, anyway?" asked Williams.

"An information dealer. Buys and sells secrets to the highest bidder. I've heard Barla Von's one of the top representatives. "He might know something about this business between Saren and Fist. But his information won't come cheap."

My newly-enlarged squad hailed a cab back to the Presidium. In a matter of minutes, we moseyed into the bank. A volus greeted us, pausing in his speech frequently so his enviro-suit could exchange air.

"What's this? \*breath\* One of the Earth-clan? \*breath\* Ah, a very famous one, yes? \*breath\* You are the one called Shepard. \*breath\* It is a great honor to welcome the hero of the Blitz."

"You have me at a disadvantage. Mister...?"

"Forgive me, Earth-clan." The volus continued to pause for breath between each sentence. They all do that; something with how their pressure suits work. They're from a world with high-pressure atmosphere, and they'd split apart without them.

"My name is Barla Von. My job makes it necessary for me to keep informed. I am a financial advisor to many important clients here on the Citadel. When someone as important as yourself arrives on the station, I take notice. I also heard about your hearing with the Council. Nasty business, that."

News travels fast on the Citadel, it seems. "I heard you work for the Shadow Broker. Do you have any information about Saren?"

"You're very blunt, Shepard. But you're right. I am an agent for the Shadow Broker. And I do know something about Saren."

"I also hear your information can be expensive."

"Normally, this information would cost a small fortune. But these are exceptional circumstances. So I'm going to give it to you for free."

"What's the catch?"

"There is no catch. The Shadow Broker is quite upset with Saren right now. They used to do a lot a business. Until Saren turned on him. I don't know the details, but the Shadow Broker hired a freelancer to deal with it. A krogan mercenary."

"That's not much to go on," commented Garrus.

"I just told you that the most famous Spectre in the galaxy betrayed the Shadow Broker. Quite a bargain, considering the price. Speak with the krogan, if you want to learn more. I heard he was paying a visit to Citadel Security. If you hurry, you might catch him before he leaves their headquarters."

"What's he doing there?"

"Fist accused him of making threats. Urdnot Wrex was brought in for questioning."

I thanked him for the information, then waited while Garrus hailed a cab. We were racking up quite the tab, and while I wasn't looking forward to filling out the expense reports, I assumed the human embassy would be covering transportation costs. The headquarters for Citadel Security was halfway around the Presidium ring, near the arm that connected to the main Citadel Ring.

As we entered the door, three armed C-Sec officers were surrounding a krogan. I didn't see how they could have thought that would be enough. Krogan are the biggest, strongest, and meanest of all the aliens in Council space. Humanoid, of course, but reptilian in appearance. This one was wearing dented scarlet-hued heavy battle armor, and his head plate was thick and crimson-colored. He had a scar from some beast's scar slashed across his head, extending from the middle of his forehead down to the base of his neck. His eyes were large with vertical pupils, and were also a shade of red. This krogan's whole appearance and bearing screamed 'do not approach,' and yet a human C-Sec officer was foolishly threatening him.

"Witnesses saw you making threats in Fist's bar. Stay away from him."

"I don't take orders from you," growled the krogan in a low bass.

"This is your only warning, Wrex."

"You should warn Fist. I will kill him."

"You want me to arrest you?"

"I want you to try," Wrex scoffed, then noticed my approach. The rest of my squad hung back. "Do I know you, human?" he strode over to me to ask.

"My name's Shepard. I'm going after Fist," I said by way of introduction, though I was sure that by now everyone on the Citadel knew of me from the hearing with the Council. "I thought you might want to come along."

"Shepard? Commander Shepard? I've heard a lot about you. We're both warriors. Out of respect, I'll give you fair warning. I'm going to kill Fist. I was hired to do a job, and I always complete my jobs."

"Fine," I agreed. "I just need some information from him, first."

"Fist knows you're coming," said Vakarian. "We'll have a better chance if we all work together."

"My people have a saying," said Wrex. "Seek the enemy of your enemy, and you will find a friend."

"I like that one. My people have a similar saying," I said. "Glad to have you on the team, Wrex."

We shook hands.

"Let's go," said Wrex. "I hate to keep Fist waiting."

On our way to Chora's Den, we found the place emptied of customers and staff. The place was filled with gunmen. My squad took cover and we picked off the guards as we drove deeper into the club. Once the place was clear, we made our way to a door in the back, where we found two warehouse workers.

"Stop right there!" said one, armed only with a pistol and wearing plain coveralls. "Don't come any closer! Stay back or we'll shoot."

There was no real reason to kill them, so I tried logic. "I just killed fifty bodyguards to get in here. What do you think I'll do to you?"

"Uh...well...uh...Aw screw Fist. He doesn't pay us enough for this."

They both skedaddled. Wrex felt that it would have been easier to kill them, but we continued through the hallway to an office door.

"Why do I have to do everything myself?" came an annoyed male voice. "Time to die, little soldiers!"

The door was blasted open and I had my squad take up positions on either side. Myself and Alenko peeked around the edges while Williams and Vakarian took cover further back to cover us. Wrex was impatient and just charged in, biotic barrier up and shotgun blasting. The rest of us fell in behind to cover him, taking out two wall-mounted turrets as we entered.

"Wait! Don't kill me! I surrender!" whined a little man in fake combat armor. This must be Fist, I surmised.

Wrex aimed his shotgun at the man, but I implored patience. Alenko and Williams secured the exits. Vakarian searched the office.

"Wait, I need information," I ordered. Wrex grumbled, but complied. I then turned to Fist. "Tell me where the quarian is and I won't have to shoot you in the kneecaps."

"She's not here. I don't know where she is. That's the truth!" he cowered.

"He's no use to you now," said Wrex. "Let me kill him."

"Wait! Wait! I don't know where the quarian is, but I know where you can find her," came Fist's nonsensical response. "The quarian isn't here. Said she'd only deal with the Shadow Broker himself."

"Face to face? Impossible!" Wrex accused. "Even I was hired through an agent."

"Nobody meets the Shadow Broker. Ever," Fist agreed. "Even I don't know his true identity. But she didn't know that. I told her I'd set a meeting up. But when she shows up, it'll be Saren's men waiting for her."

This was getting annoying. "Tell me where that meeting is before I blow your lying head off!" I threatened.

"Here on the Wards. The back alley by the markets. She's supposed to meet them right now. You can make it if you hurry."

I turned to leave and gather the rest of my squad, and I heard a shotgun blast. Wrex had completed his job, and I wasn't about to object to an angry krogan. Vakarian was finishing copying data from a terminal to his omni-tool.

"Anything useful?" I asked.

"Records of Fist's activities. C-Sec should be able to make a lot of arrests with this."

"Fascinating," I said impatiently. "But we need to save that quarian. Let's go."

We exited by the back door into an alleyway, only to be beset by several more of Fist's thugs. We left their corpses for someone else to clean up. Vakarian led us through some twists and turns to the nearest market area. Rounding a corner, we found a female quarian being harassed by several sinister-looking, well-armed turians.

"Did you bring it?" asked their leader, who had a white skull painted on his face.

"Where's the Shadow Broker? Where's Fist?" asked the quarian, her voice modulated by her environmental speaker.

"They'll be here," said the leader. He got up close to the quarian and began to stroke her helmet in an inappropriate fashion. "Where's the evidence?"

"No way. The deal's off," she said as she slapped his hand away.

One of the turian thugs suddenly dropped to the ground, blood splatting from a hole in his head, as I heard a gunshot from behind me. I turned to see Vakarian's sniper rifle venting. The bad guys scattered, and I ordered my squad to take cover and open fire. The quarian tossed a grenade as she dove behind a dumpster.

The fight was short after that, and I was surprised at how easily we'd taken down Saren's goons. The geth on Eden Prime had been much tougher, but if this was the best he had, then taking him down would be a cinch.

"You can come out, now," I called to the quarian as the rest of the squad secured the area.

She emerged from her hiding spot. "Fist set me up! I knew I couldn't trust him!" she said indignantly.

"You're welcome, by the way. Are you all right?"

"I know how to look after myself. Not that I don't appreciate the help. Who are you?"

"My name's Shepard, Alliance Navy. I'm looking for evidence to prove Saren's a traitor, and I was told you might have something."

"Then I have a chance to replay you for saving my life. But not here. We need to go somewhere safe."

"Udina's office should be safe enough," suggested Alenko. "The ambassador will want to see this evidence himself anyway."

So that's where we went. Udina's assistant announced our arrival. The ambassador was in the same foul mood. I was beginning to think this was his default personality. Captain Anderson was standing by, silent, but anxious to hear our report.

"You're not making my life easy, Shepard. Firefights in the wards? An all-out assault on Chora's Den? Do you know how many - " he paused as he saw my whole squad pour in. No doubt aliens were a rare sight in a human embassy. "Who's this? What are you up to, Shepard?"

"Making your day, Ambassador. This quarian has information linking Saren to the geth."

"Really?" Udina was genuinely intrigued. "Maybe you better start at the beginning, Miss...?"

"My name is Tali. Tali'Zorah nar Raya."

"We don't see many quarians here. Why did you leave the flotilla?"

"I was on my Pilgrimage, my rite of passage into adulthood." She paused when she noticed our blank stares of incomprehension, then explained. "It is a tradition among my people. When we reach maturity, we leave the ships of our parents and our people behind. Alone, we search the stars, only returning to the flotilla once we have discovered something of value. In this way, we prove ourselves worthy of adulthood."



"What kind of things do you look for?" I asked, ever curious about other peoples.

"It could be resources like food or fuel. Or some type of useful technology. Or even knowledge that will make life easier on the flotilla. Through our Pilgrimage, we prove that we will contribute to the community, rather than being a burden on our limited resources."

"And...you found something that could help us?"

"During my travels I began hearing reports of geth. Since they drove my people into exile, the geth have never ventured beyond the Veil. I was curious. I tracked a patrol of geth to an uncharted world. I waited for one to become separated from its unit. Then I disabled it and removed its memory core."

"I thought the geth fried their memory cores when they died," said Vakarian. "Some kind of defense mechanism."

"Most of the core was wiped clean. But I managed to salvage some data, and something from its audio banks."

Tali activated her omni-tool, and a recording played a short conversation. The first voice was Saren's:

"Eden Prime was a major victory! The beacon has brought us one step closer to finding the Conduit."

"And one step closer to the return of the Reapers," said a second voice, female.

"That's Saren's voice," Captain Anderson couldn't help himself. "This proves he was involved in the attack!"

"I don't recognize that other voice," mused Udina. "The one talking about Reapers."

A faint tingle reverberated inside my skull. "That sounds familiar..."

Tali'Zorah had a ready answer. "According to the memory core, the Reapers were a hyper-advanced machine race that existed fifty-thousand years ago. The Reapers hunted the Protheans to total extinction, and then they vanished. At least, that's what the geth believe."

"Sounds a little far fetched," accused Udina.

"My vision from Eden Prime – I understand a bit of it now," I said. "I saw the Protheans being wiped out by the Reapers."

"The geth revere the Reapers as gods," Tali'Zorah continued. "The pinnacle of non-organic life. And they believe Saren knows how to bring the Reapers back."

"The Council is just going to love this!" said Udina sarcastically.

"The Reapers are a threat to every species in the galaxy," I said. "We have to tell them."

"No matter what they think about the rest of this, those audio files prove Saren's a traitor." Captain Anderson brought us back to the point

"The Captain's right," Udina agreed with that much, anyway. "We need to present this to the Council right away."

"What about her, the quarian?" asked Williams.

"My name is Tali."

"Come with me," said Udina. "You should present this evidence in person." He turned to address me. "Anderson and I will go ahead to get things ready with the Council. Take some time to collect yourself, then meet us in the Tower."

I dismissed my squad. Wrex went to collect his bounty, Vakarian to file his report with C-Sec. Alenko, Williams, and I returned to the Normandy to clean up after all the fighting, and maybe change out of our grimy BDUs and into something more appropriate.

An hour later, we were back in the Citadel Tower. My krogan and turian comrades were also there in the audience. In spite of his gruff demeanor, I had to admire Udina's pull, to be able to get a hearing with the Galactic Council on short notice. Once again, I was late to the party.

Captain Anderson greeted me at the base of the last flight of steps. "Come on. Udina's presenting the quarian's evidence to the Council."

Tali'Zorah was playing the audio file she'd played for us earlier.

"You wanted proof. There it is," concluded Udina.

"This evidence is irrefutable, Ambassador," replied the turian Counselor. "Saren will be stripped of his Spectre status and all efforts will be made to bring him in to answer for his crimes."

"I recognize the other voice," added the asari Councilor, "the one speaking with Saren: Matriarch Benezia."

"Who's that?" I asked.

Sensing my ignorance, the Counselor explained: "Matriarchs are powerful asari who have entered the final stage of their lives. Revered for their wisdom and experience, they serve as guides and mentors to my people. Matriarch Benezia is a powerful biotic, and she had many followers. She will make a formidable ally for Saren."

"I'm more interested in the Reapers," said the salarian Councilor. "What do you know about them?"

Tali'Zorah shared what she'd told us earlier.

Captain Anderson summed up: "We think the Conduit is the key to bringing them back. Saren's searching for it. That's why he attacked Eden Prime."

"Do we even know what this Conduit is?" asked the salarian Councilor.

"Saren thinks it can bring back the Reapers," I said. "That's bad enough."

"Listen to what you're saying!" The turian Councilor was skeptical. "Saren wants to bring back the machines that wiped out all life in the galaxy? Impossible. It has to be. Where did the Reapers go? Why did they vanish? How come we've found no trace of their existence? If they were real, we'd have found something!"

"We tried to warn you about Saren, and you refused to face the truth," I said. "Don't make the same mistake again."

"This is different," the asari Councilor patiently explained. "You proved Saren betrayed the Council. We all agree he's using the geth to search for the Conduit, but we don't really know why."

The salarian Councilor agreed. "The Reapers are obviously just a myth, Commander. A convenient lie to cover Saren's true purpose. A legend he is using to bend the geth to his will."

"This is real," I said, frustrated. "If Saren finds the Conduit, the Reapers will return to wipe us all out!"

"Saren is a rogue agent on the run for his life," the turian Councilor shook his head. "He no longer has the rights or resources of a Spectre. The Council has stripped him of his position."

"That is not good enough!" Udina was incensed. "You know he's hiding somewhere in the Terminus. Send your fleet in!"

"A fleet cannot track down one man," admonished the salarian Councilor.

"A Citadel fleet could secure the entire region," Udina suggested. "Keep the geth from attacking any more of our colonies."

"Or it could trigger a war with the Terminus Systems!" the turian Councilor disagreed. It was strange hearing a turian advocating against war. "We won't be dragged into a galactic confrontation over a few human colonies!"

"So send me," I suggested. "I can track Saren down."

"The Commander's right," said the asari Councilor. "There is a way to stop Saren that doesn't require fleets or armies."

"It's the best solution," I said. "Udina gets his Spectre, you don't have to acknowledge the existence of the Reapers, and you can spare your fleet."

The Councilors conferred among themselves for a moment, then turned and tapped a few commands into the terminals in front of each of them. They bid me to step forward. Udina and Anderson both nodded at me. I took a step to the edge of the platform and stood at attention. I could sense the excitement in the audience. Then each Councilor spoke to me in turn.

"It is the decision of the Council that you be granted all the powers and privileges of the Special Tactics and Reconnaissance branch of the Citadel."

"Spectres are not trained, but chosen. Individuals forged in the fire of service and battle; those whose

actions elevate them above the rank and file."

"Spectres are an ideal, a symbol. The embodiment of courage, determination, and self-reliance. They are the right-hand of the Council, instruments of our will."

"Spectres bear a great burden. They are protectors of galactic peace, both our first and last line of defense. The safety of the galaxy is theirs to uphold."

"You are the first human Spectre, Commander. This is a great accomplishment for you and your entire species."

"I'm honored, Councilors." I wasn't sure how to respond, so I just made a slight bow.

"We're sending you into the Terminus after Saren. He's a fugitive from justice, so you are authorized to use any means necessary to apprehend or eliminate him."

"I'll find him," I swore.

"This meeting of the Council is adjourned."

The Council made their way off the stage. Udina and Anderson took turns shaking my hand. The audience broke up, murmuring excitedly.

"We've got a lot of work to do, Shepard," mused Udina. "You're going to need a ship, a crew, supplies..."

"You should stop by the C-Sec HQ," added Anderson. "The Spectre Requisitions Officer should have some special gear for you."

"Anderson, come with me," Udina waved for the Captian to join him as he left. "I'll need your help to set all this up."

I walked down the stairs to meet the congratulations of my squadmates.

"Hmph! Bastard didn't even thank you," grumbled Williams.

"What do you expect from a politician?" I commiserated. I then addressed them all. "Well, I have my mission: to stop Saren. I'll need a squad, and I think I could use you all."

They all nodded, then I recruited them each in turn.

"Alenko, Williams; you're both Alliance, but I won't order you."

"You can count on me," Alenko said as he saluted.

"I've got nowhere else to go," Williams shrugged. "Besides, it should be fun."

"Vakarian? Can you get leave from C-Sec?"

"Absolutely. I want to take this bastard down as much as you do."

"Wrex, I think Spectre funds can cover a retainer."

"I'm in. Let's kick some ass!" The krogan flexed, which was scary.

I turned to Tali'Zorah. She looked at me sheepishly. At least, her posture was demure. The fog in her helmet made it impossible to see anything other than her glowing eyes.

"You saw me in the alley, Commander. You know what I can do. Let me come with you," she plead.

"Your technical expertise with the geth would be incredibly helpful. Welcome to the team."

"Thanks. You won't regret this."

"Well," I addressed the group. "I don't know when we'll be leaving, so consider yourselves on leave until you hear from me. Make your arrangements, and bring one footlocker each. But be ready to leave soon. Dismissed."

----Chapter 4: Adventures on the Citadel, Part 1----

I wanted to see more of the Citadel, but I had ulterior motive in learning what all I could do with my new Spectre authority. My no-consequences power fantasy had always been to help as many people as I could, and the Alliance allowed me to do some of that, but the military restrained me with orders. To that end, I went looking for trouble.

## THE ASARI CONSORT

*From the Codex:*

*The elcor are a Citadel species native to the high-gravity world Dekuuna. They are massive creatures, standing on four muscular legs for increased stability. Elcor move slowly, an evolved response to an environment where a fall can be lethal. This has colored their psychology, making them deliberate and conservative.*

*Elcor speech is ponderous and monotone. Among themselves, scent, slight movements, and subvocalized infrasound convey shades of meaning that make a human smile seem as subtle as a fireworks display. Since their subtlety can lead to misunderstandings with other species, the elcor often go out of their way to clarify when they are being sarcastic, amused, or angry.*

*Dekuuna's high gravity impedes mountain formation. Most of the world consists of flat, open plains which prehistoric elcor wandered across in small family bands. Modern elcor still prefer open sky, and become restless and uncomfortable on long starship journeys.*

I was passing through the Embassy atrium and overheard some deep voices speaking in monotone. I was pretty sure they were elcor, and I do enjoy meeting new races. So I decided to drop in and learn about them. There were two elcor and a volus inside the office. The elcor behind the desk was speaking to a solicitor.

"I understand what you are saying, but these allegations are very serious..I can't just - "

"This is serious," the other elcor interrupted. "My reputation is at stake. I spoke with the Consort in confidence, and she betrayed that confidence." He stopped when he noticed me. "Hello there, human. Sincere apology, but I am here on business and cannot be distracted right now."

I introduced myself, then: "You seem distressed. Is there something I can do to help?" I offered.

"Alarmed response, you overheard that, did you? This is all going so wrong, and it is the asari Consort's fault. She's the one who started all this." He paused a moment, then continued."I cannot speak more about this problem; it is too sensitive. Suffice it to say, she has compromised my authority as a diplomat."

The two elcor stood silently blinking at me. I took it as my cue to leave. The Embassy Bar was nearby, so intending to hit up the barkeep for rumors, I entered. Instead, I overheard some Alliance marines on shore leave. Two were seated, and the one who was standing seemed to be bragging. All were slightly inebriated.

"Don't believe the rumors. The Consort would never reveal her secrets," one private was saying.

I decided to interrupt. "What's this about a consort?"

"What do you wan – Oh, Commander." He saluted as soon as he saw me. "Private Fredricks, sir. Is there something I can do for you?"

"Relax, Private, this isn't an inspection." I casually returned his salute.

"Right, sorry. What can I do for you, Commander?" The poor kid was still nervous.

"What can you tell me about the asari Consort?"

"I ah, well, she's an asari who works here as... that is, she helps people with...things."

"You never went to see her, did you Fredricks?" teased one of his mates. I frowned at them, and they clammed up.

"I uh, no," answered my witness. "I never did. I couldn't afford it. It costs half a year's credits just to go in and talk to her."

"Where can I find her?"

"Just across the bridge from here." He pointed across the lake.

I thanked him and bid him and his mates enjoy their shore leave, then crossed the lake. I found an asari in an alcove with an odd symbol above the door, and a name vaguely resembling 'Consort'. She was standing behind a podium and wearing an odd combination of robes and uniform.

"Welcome. I am Nelyna. I don't recognize you as one of our expected clients today. Would you like me to see when the Consort will be able to meet with you?"

I was in the right place, though ignorant of the customs. "What is the Consort? What does she do?"

"It's difficult to explain. She is many things to many people, and something different for each. Some seek her for advice, some for entertainment, others still for pleasure. Most of the time, our clients won't realize what they were seeking until after she has provided it for them."

"You make her sound like some kind of oracle."

"No, not in the usual sense. She is merely a woman. A woman with remarkable compassion and a generous spirit. I suggest you make an appointment and see for yourself."

"Can't I just go in?"

"Mm, I'm afraid not. Yeah, you must understand, there are many who seek the Consort's services. But if you wish to leave your name, she'll make every effort to meet with you."

"All right," I said. The marines' comments in the bar had left me curious. "Commander Shepard. Alliance Navy."

"Excellent." She consulted the console built into her podium. "You should hear something in...hmmm, three or four months."

"I doubt she's worth that much of a wait," I said. I wasn't all that curious about the elcor's issue, anyway.

"Well, that's not for me to judge. I hope that you'll return again in the future, we always enjoy seeing new clients."

I turned to leave, and Nelyna's comm buzzed. "Yes, Sha'ira?" she said, then paused to listen. "Yes, of course, mistress." She called my name, and I turned around. "It appears the Consort has taken notice of you. She'd like to meet with you now."

Nelyna gave me directions, and I passed through the lobby. Other attendants of various species were speaking with clients. Were they some sort of lower-level consorts? I chose not to overhear their conversations. I entered a large room with various types of furniture: a desk, a couch, a table with chairs, and a canopied bed. Many things to many people indeed, I thought.

"Welcome, Commander Shepard." Sha'ira was elegant and beautiful, and for an asari, that was saying something, seeing as how they all seem to be pretty. Her outfit was tight-fitting and very flattering to her figure, too. "I've heard a great many things about you since your arrival here on our Citadel. I have a certain problem that could use your expertise."

"Maybe I can help," I said, mesmerized. "Tell me the details."

"I have a friend, Septimus, a retired turian general. I won't discuss the details, but he wanted me to be more than I could be. We had a falling out. Now he spends his days in Chora's Den drinking and spreading lies about me. If you could speak to him as a fellow soldier, I believe he will listen to you and let the matter be." She batted her eyelashes at me. I never could resist a damsel in distress.

"What happened between you two?"

"I respect his privacy too much to go into the details. If he wishes to tell you what happened, that is his prerogative."

"What exactly do you want me to tell him?"

"Appeal to his sense of honor. Remind him of his position as a general. If you can convince him to stop spreading lies about me, I would be very grateful." She extended a hand and nearly touched my cheek, then she turned and dismissed me. "Now, I must ask you to take your leave. I have many clients waiting to see me."

I cleared my throat and blinked, then turned and left the premises. Chora's Den? The old hive of scum and villainy? Had it been rebuilt so soon? A short cab ride had me back in the Wards. There were a few turians in the club, but only one who seemed old enough to be a general. Deep in his cups as he was, he definitely had the military bearing of one who'd seen a lot of action.

"Commander Shepard?" his speech was, unsurprisingly, slightly slurred. "Hmph. What do you want?"

"General Septimus? I'm here on Sha'ira's behalf. Your lies are hurting her."

"Good. Her lies have been killing me for days." He hiccuped. I didn't know turians could hiccup. "I've seen a lot of horrible things in my days and there's only one woman in this damn galaxy that helps me forget it."

"So if you feel that way, why spread lies about her?"

"Cause she rejected me. Me! Septimus Oraka, general of the turian fleet!"

"I get that, but spreading these lies won't make it better."

"Look, kid, I appreciate what you're trying to do, but don't waste your time."

"General, did you ever win a battle by moping in a bar?"

"Ha, war! That's what this feels like all right. How did I let it come to this? So you think it's that easy? Just straighten up and act like a general?" He leaned back in his chair and actually did straighten up. A little. "Huh. Maybe you're right, Commander. Sha'ira's worth the effort...even if she won't have me back."

"Good. This is no place for someone of your stature, general."

"All right. I'll go to her...after I've had a cold shower. Or two." He got up to leave, then added, "Say, you're a bright kid. Would you be interested in earning a few extra credits?"

"I could always use a supplement to my Alliance salary, sure. What do you need me to do?"

"There's an elcor diplomat name of Xeltan who believes Sha'ira gave up his secrets. She didn't, but



that's what I told him. I just need you to convince him of the truth." He activated his omni-tool. "Here's the data. Just show this to him. It shows where I got my info. It will exonerate Sha'ira and convince the elcor."

"I'll track him down." Actually, I knew exactly where he was. Did any real detective ever stumble into solving a case by coincidence?

"Well," he picked up his glass and downed the last of his drink. "Here's to soldiers acting like soldiers. Thanks, Commander. You know...you might make a good general yourself one day."

And with that, he stumbled out of the bar. I then had two stops to make. First, the Elcor Embassy. Xeltan was still hanging out, and he welcomed me.

"Strained greeting, human," he said in the usual monotone way of the elcor. "This is really not a good time."

"I know who revealed your secret," I opened. "It was a turian general named Septimus."

"Unbelieving, I know this Septimus and he could not learn my secrets. The only way he could learn them is from the asari Consort."

"Here," I pulled up the data from my omni-tool and transferred it to the diplomat. "This should be proof enough for you."

The elcor skimmed through the data. "Confused, this is difficult to fathom. If the turian could learn this on his own...dismayed, anyone can discover my secret."

"Septimus is a powerful man and it wasn't easy for him to find."

"Relieved, I suppose you are correct, human. Thank you for this information. Startled realization, I must speak with the Consort. She will be most disappointed with my actions. Anxious request, please human, if you will excuse me, I must go now."

"I'm sure she'll forgive you. It was an honest mistake."

"Doubtful, perhaps you are right, human. I can only hope so."

And with that, he turned and left. Ambassador Calyn then addressed me.

"Thankful, that was a great thing you did, Commander." He turned to his volus counterpart. "Approving, you see, Din, not all humans are as you say."

"I'm sure the Earth-clan stands to profit from this in some way," said the volus, dismissively.

"Apologetic, do not listen to my volus compatriot. It was a good thing you did, regardless of your intentions."

I bade my polite goodbyes, then made my way to the Consort's Chambers, where I was waved in to see Sha'ira.

"Commander," she greeted me. "I recently received a lovely note from Septimus. Thank you for speaking with him. Even the elcor diplomat has withdrawn his campaign from me."

"It was my honor to aid you," I replied and bowed my head.

"You are too kind, Commander. But I would not expect you to help me out of the kindness of your heart. I also have one more thing to give you, if you are interested."

"I'd be honored." My head began to swim a bit. Was she wearing perfume?

"I offer a gift of words. An affirmation of who you are, and who you will become... I see the sadness behind your eyes. It tells a story that makes me want to weep. Pain, and loss. But it drives you, makes you strong. That strength is what kept you alive when everyone around you was dying. You alone survived. You will continue to survive. This may be who you are, but it is not who you will become. It only forms the basis for your future greatness. Remember these words when doubt descends, Commander."

"You have quite a gift, Sha'ira."

"Thank you. Not everyone appreciates it as you do. Never underestimate the power of words." She handed me a small, unidentifiable object. "Here, Commander. In light of your efforts with the elcor ambassador, I would like you to have this small trinket."

"What is it?" I really couldn't identify it. A paperweight? An ancient asari artifact? A fossilized prothean data disc? I had no idea, and neither did Sha'ira, apparently.

"A small mystery. I have never learned its purpose, but I sense it is time for me to pass it on. And now, I must ask you to leave. I have done everything I can for you. Remember my words, Commander, they will give you strength."

And with that, she turned and dismissed me, and I took my leave.

*From the Codex:*

*The Alliance Military Vocational Code system classifies the career path of all serving personnel. The MVC consists of one letter and one number. A soldier's MVC indicates proficiency, not rank. The letter notes career path; the number indicates level of experience, as indicated by service record, technical scores, and commendations. All 26 letters are used, and numbers run from 1 to 7. N is the letter code for Special Forces personnel.*

THE FAN

Part I

While passing through some markets on the Wards, I ran into a man in his thirties with bleach-blond hair and goatee. He waved me down.

"Is that really...wow! It's you! You're Commander Shepard, the hero of Eden Prime! I am so honored to

meet you!"

Great, I thought. Time for some public relations as I represent humanity. "Uh, nice to meet you. And you are...?"

"My name is Conrad, Conrad Verner. They say you killed more than a hundred geth on Eden Prime!"

"They say a lot of things about me. I spent most of my time trying to stay alive and help the colonists."

"Hey, I know you're probably busy, but do you have time for a quick autograph?"

"I suppose...Sure." He handed me an actual physical photograph and a felt pen. I hadn't written with a pen since elementary school. "Anything for a fan." I don't remember what I scribbled, but Conrad seemed pleased as punch.

"Thanks. I really appreciate it. My wife is going to be so impressed! I'll let you get back to work, but next time you're on Earth, I'd love to buy you a drink! Thanks again!"

*From the Codex:*

*The hanar "stand" slightly taller than a human, although most of their height is in their long tentacles. The invertebrate, water-native hanar cannot support their own weight in normal gravity. When interacting with mainstream galactic society, they rely on contra-gravitic levitation packs that use mass effect fields. Their limbs can grip tightly, but are not strong enough to lift more than a few hundred grams each. Hanar also possess the ability to secrete natural toxins.*

*Hanar are biologically genderless, though others may assign arbitrary gender values to them for convenience. Despite evolving in water, hanar also appear able to breathe air, or use technological means to enable this. Also, despite appearances to the contrary, the hanar do have skulls.*

## PRESIDIUM PROPHET

I came across a turian C-Sec officer arguing with a hanar.

"I've told you before, you're not allowed in here!"

"This one believes it has the right to move freely through the area." Hanar always speak in the third person. For religious reasons, apparently.

I decided to exercise my new Spectre status and asked what the disturbance was all about.

"That hanar refuses to listen to reason," the frustrated officer explained. "Why can't it act in an orderly and lawful manner? I am not unreasonable. The hanar is free to spew its nonsense once it purchases and evangelical permit."

"So if the hanar gets a permit, it's allowed to preach?"

"No. Registered evangelicals must follow regulations. There are specific areas where preaching is legal.

Failure to follow the regulations results in forfeiture of the license."

I turned to the hanar.

"Do you desire to learn of the Enkindlers?" it asked. "Or has the honorable C-Sec officer enlisted assistance?"

Bracing myself for a sermon, I asked who the Enkindlers are. Turns out it's what the hanar call the Protheans. The jellyfish-like creatures believe the Protheans meddled with their genes and taught them to speak. The Alliance regulations say everyone has a right to believe what they believe, so I decided to humor this preacher.

"Is this really how you want to represent the Enkindlers? Is this how they would want you to use this gift of consciousness?"

"The truth of the Enkindlers must be made known. They gave the hanar language and gave the universe mass relays. This one only wishes to spread the truth to any who will listen. There is no intent to cause trouble. The Enkindlers would wish their message to be spread to all sentient races!"

"But they wouldn't wish their message to be spread by breaking society's laws."

The hanar considered for a moment, then acquiesced. "This one hears wisdom. Perhaps enthusiasm has clouded judgment in this matter. This one departs now, and will not intrude upon the Presidium again."

The hanar ambled off. Hovered. It's hard to describe their movements. The C-Sec officer thanked me for my efforts and went off to file his report.

*From the Codex:*

*The Alliance military is of great concern to the galaxy. At first contact with the turians, they were completely inexperienced. Turian disdain changed to respect after the relief of Shanxi, where the humans surprised them with novel technologies and tactics.*

*The human devotion to understanding and adapting to modern space warfare stunned the staid Council races. For hundreds of years, they had lived behind secure walls of long-proven technologies and tactics. The Council regards the Alliance as a 'sleeping giant'. Less than 3% of humans volunteer to serve in their military, a lower proportion than any other species.*

*While competent, Alliance soldiers are neither as professional as the turians nor as skilled as the asari. Their strengths lie in fire support, flexibility, and speed. They make up for lack of numbers with sophisticated technical support (VIs, drones, artillery, electronic warfare) and emphasis on mobility and individual initiative.*

*Their doctrine is not based on absorbing and dishing out heavy shocks like the turians and krogan. Rather, they bypass enemy strong points and launch deep into their rear, cutting supply lines and destroying headquarters and support units, leaving enemies to 'wither on the vine'.*

*On defense, the human military is a rapid reaction force that lives by Sun Tzu's maxim, 'He who tries to defend everything defends nothing'. Garrisons are intended for scouting rather than combat, avoiding engagement to observe and report on invaders using drones.*

*The token garrisons of human colonies make it easy for alien powers to secure them, for which the*

*Alliance media criticizes the military. However, the powerful fleets stationed at phase gate nexuses such as Arcturus are just a few hours or days from any colony within their sphere of responsibility. In the event of an attack, they respond with overwhelming force.*

## HOMECOMING

Williams had invited me for a drink at the Embassy Bar. As I arrived at the Embassies to meet her, a man flagged me down.

"Excuse me, Commander Shepard?" his accent placed him from the sub-continent. "Could you spare a moment of your time?"

I decided to indulge him. Williams joined me when she saw I'd been held up.

"My name is Samesh Bhatia. Forgive the intrusion, but I have nowhere else to turn."

"It's no trouble," I said diplomatically. "What can I do for you?"

"My wife was a marine. She was in the 212 on Eden Prime."

"Wait. The 212? Your wife was Serviceman Nirali Bhatia? I'm Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams. I served in her unit."

"Chief Williams. It is a pleasure. Nirali spoke of you with great respect."

"I'm so sorry for your loss, Mister Bhatia. Nirali was a good woman. What can we do for you?"

"I've requested that my wife's body be returned to me for cremation, but the military has refused my request."

Williams seemed to be taking the lead on this one, so I just went along to show support. And my Spectre authority.

"Why did they refuse your request? There's got to be some reason."

"I don't know. All I know is that they have declared it impossible for my wife to be returned to me."

"Mister Bhatia, rest assured that we will avenge your wife's death. We're dealing with the people who attacked Eden Prime."

"I understand. You have many important things to do."

"We'll look into it."

"The man in charge of my case is Mister Bosker. When I last saw him, he was in the expensive bar over there. Thank you for your time. I just want to give my wife a proper funeral and the respect she deserves."

Williams and I entered the bar. A man in a suit was speaking softly into his headset, but stopped when he saw me.

"My goodness, you're Commander Shepard! Your activities made for quite a briefing in the Diplomatic Corps! My name is Clerk Bosker. Is there something I can do to assist you?"

"Yes. A man named Samesh Bhatia is having some trouble claiming his wife's body," I told him.

"Ah, Mister Bhatia. A good man in an understandably frustrating position. I wish I could help him." Bosker rubbed the back of his neck. "Serviceman Nirali Bhatia died on Eden Prime, as Mister Bhatia no doubt told you. Her wounds were inconsistent with any type of weapon damage we've seen before. That is why her body is being held."

"You think her body might be dangerous or contaminated?" Williams took over again.

"No, Nirali Bhatia is not dangerous. Her body is, in fact, extremely valuable to the Alliance."

"I don't care how badly damaged the geth mangled the body. It's the husband's right to claim her."

"We are not holding Nirali Bhatia's body out of discretion. We are, frankly, holding the body for research."

"You're studying her injuries to learn more about geth weaponry."

Bosker nodded. "The tests we are conducting may lead to better defenses against geth attacks. Respectfully, Serviceman Bhatia may save more lives in death than she did in life."

"How long do you think the research is going to take?" asked Williams.

"This is a long-term study. I wouldn't expect the bodies to be released for a year or longer."

"You've got to have a lot of bodies. Can't you release just one?"

"Very few bodies had this new type of weapon damage, and very few were in good enough condition to study. Beyond that, we need as many bodies as we can to get a reasonable sample size."

"When will this research result in actual new technology?"

"If we're lucky, we'll actually realize usable technology from this study in a few years."

"I'll tell Mister Bhatia about this. It might make it easier for him to understand," I cut off Williams before she could react.

"Thank you, Commander. I appreciate that."

I turned to walk away, but Williams had a parting shot.

"Next time you cut up a dead soldier, at least tell her husband the truth."

Samesh greeted us as we exited the bar. Williams explained the situation, but it didn't seem to help.

"Tests? They are holding my wife's body for tests? My wife served the Alliance faithfully. She gave her life for humanity! And this is how they repay her?"

"Mister Bhatia, your wife died defending humanity. We still need her help," said Williams

"What right does the military have to hold her body?" Samesh was becoming incensed. "She has already given her life!"

"If the military had asked your wife to submit to tests to save human lives, what would she have said?"

"It doesn't matter! She's dead!" The poor man was on the verge of tears.

"Yes she is, Mister Bhatia. She died fighting for what she believed in. She sacrificed her life to keep you safe. I think she'd want to make the most of that sacrifice."

"You are right, Miss Williams." Mister Bhatia took a deep breath and calmed down. "She would not flinch from her duty. Let them run their tests. Let my wife save lives, so that others are spared the loss I feel today. Goodbye. Thank you for finding me answers."

He turned to walk away, but Williams stopped him for a moment.

"Samesh? I don't know if this helps, but your wife...Nirali loved you very much. She missed your cooking, and she played recordings of you every night before she went to sleep."

"I know Miss Williams. But thank you. It is nice to hear it again."

I led Williams into the bar and bought the first round.

*From the Codex:*

*Founded during the early decades of human space expansion, the Alliance News Network was originally a low-profile news organization known mostly for a series of exposés on the First Contact War. With a focus on galaxy-wide reporting, the ANN opened bureaus on planets across known space, winning a few awards for excellence and earning a multi-species audience.*

*The Alliance News Network has never been funded by the Systems Alliance, despite what its name might imply. This led to regular confusion among those not in the know, although the network's recent high-profile sale to a media conglomerate made the ownership structure clearer.*

*The new management has opted for a more sensational approach. This is particularly obvious from changes to its roster of reporters, with a few of the network's luminaries retiring or joining other news organizations. The network's increasingly lurid programming has gained wide attention as well as sorely needed ratings--all the proof that management needed to validate its course. Nonetheless, ANN insists that integrity and credibility are inviolable standards in the newsroom.*

REPORTER'S REQUEST

While wandering through the markets on the Wards, a woman with tidy hair wearing a neat suit flagged me down.

"Excuse me, Commander Shepard? I'm Emily Wong. I'm an investigative journalist working here on the Citadel. Could I have a moment of your time?"

"What do you need?" I hesitate to talk to the press, but I remembered Udina's admonition about me representing humanity. It wouldn't do to look bad in the press.

"Word on the street is that you've been busy. Congratulations on taking down Fist. I've been hunting for evidence of corruption and organized crime on the Citadel, but there are places I can't go. I was hoping you might share anything you've found during your own investigation. I can make it worth your time."

"You've got to have access to better sources. Why contact me?"

"I'm using every source I can find, but I think I've got a better shot with you. According to your file, you survived back on Akuze when everyone else in your squad got killed. If anyone can find the worst elements of the Citadel and live to tell about it, it's you."

"How do you know I'm investigating anything here on the Citadel?"

"I'm a good journalist, Commander Shepard. Word gets around."

"How do you know that my investigation uncovered anything you need?"

"You wouldn't have been investigating if it wasn't something big. And if it's big, it's something I'd like to hear about it."

"Well, I don't have anything myself, but a C-Sec officer named Garrus Vakarian was with me on the raid, and he made a copy of whatever was there. Here's his contact info." I pulled up my omni-tool and sent it to Miss Wong. "Tell him I sent you. Hopefully he can help you."

"Thank you, Commander. I appreciate it."

*From the Codex:*

*When the asari discovered the Citadel, they also discovered the keepers, a docile multi-limbed insect race that seemingly exists only to maintain and repair the great Prothean station.*

*Early attempts to communicate with or study the keepers were failures, and it is now illegal to interfere with or impede keeper activity. Because they are completely non-threatening, keepers have become virtually invisible to everyone else. Similarly, they seem indifferent to other species, except for their tendency to help new arrivals integrate themselves into the Citadel.*

*No matter how many keepers die due to old age, violence, or accident, they maintain a constant number. No one has discovered the source of new keepers, but some hypothesize they are genetic constructs: biological androids created somewhere deep in the inaccessible core of the Citadel itself.*



## SCAN THE KEEPERS

A keeper was working next to one of the Avina Tourism Terminals. The creatures have eight limbs: four arms and four legs. Their heads have four eyes, and their skin is green and scaly. A salarian was nearby, working on his omni-tool. The VI requested that the salarian please not disturb the keepers. I approached and asked him what he was doing.

"What? Oh. No. I wasn't – Never mind."

He began to stroll away in a suspicious manner, but my curiosity made me stop him. "Why are you so interested in the keepers?" I asked.

"Keepers? I've got no interest in the kee-"

"Don't be coy," I said casually. "I know what I saw."

"I...uh. I'm not so sure I should be talking to you about this."

"We're just talking. Is there something wrong with that?"

"No. I guess it wouldn't hurt to tell you. I'm using a small scanner to gather readings on the keepers. So far, I've had mixed results. I find it difficult to get near the creatures. You see, technically we're not supposed to disturb the keepers. I don't really think my scanning disturbs them, but the authorities might disagree. I'd like to do it more openly, but it's not really worth getting arrested over."

I had to admit, the keepers felt like a mystery worth cracking, and I had nothing better to do, so I offered to help. "I'm not worried about the authorities. I'm a Spectre."

"Oh, right, you're Commander Shepard! My name is Chorban. This is great. You'll need this. It's a scanning device I developed. Activate it each time you see a keeper. All collected data will automatically upload to my database. I'll send a few credits to you for each scan."

"Sounds easy enough. I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you, Commander! So long, and good luck with the scanning."

And with that, Chorban strutted off, humming a tuneless ditty. I looked over the device he'd handed me. It seemed simple enough, so I aimed it at the nearby keeper and pressed the button labeled 'scan.' A chime sounded, and a counter appeared in the device's display. I kept scanning keepers as I continued my explorations and adventures on the Citadel, righting wrongs and sticking my nose in other people's business.

I had scanned my 21<sup>st</sup> keeper in the C-Sec headquarters when I overheard a volus attempting to make a report to an officer.

*From the Codex:*

*The volus are an associate race on the Citadel with their own embassy, but are also a client race of the*

*turians. They hail from Irune, which possesses a high-pressure greenhouse atmosphere able to support an ammonia-based biochemistry. As a result, the volus must wear pressure suits and breathers when dealing with other species.*

*Because they are not physically adept compared to most species, volus mostly make their influence felt through trade and commerce, and they have a long history on the Citadel. However, they have never been invited to join the Council, which is a sore point for many volus individuals.*

## JAHLEED'S SECRET FEARS

In my wanderings around the Citadel, seeking keepers to scan, I found myself in the Citadel Security Headquarters. I overheard a C-Sec officer speaking with a Volus.

"Okay, Jahleed. Let me get this straight. Your business partner...Chorban. He's threatened you?"

"Well, no, not exactly," said the short, rotund volus in between the breaths of his pressure suit. "But he wants to meet with me. I think he's going to kill me."

The officer couldn't help him without any hard evidence, and he walked away as I approached. The volus turned to me to beg my help.

"Hey there – oh. You're not C-Sec, are you? Did you want something?"

"I'm Commander Shepard, Spectre. What were you trying to explain to the officer before?" I asked.

"My colleague is trying to kill me. And I thought we were friends."

"How do you know he wants you dead?"

"He's changed. He won't talk to me at work any more...and he started following me. Yesterday, he followed me all the way home. Just waiting for a chance. I don't care what anyone thinks; he wants me gone. I know it."

"Is there something I can do? Talk to your friend, maybe?"

"Would you? That's all I want: someone to talk to him. Tell him to leave me alone. He thinks he can push me around, but you'll show him, won't you? He wants to meet me. He said he just wanted to talk, but I know better." Jahleed then gave me directions to a marketplace in the Wards. "His name's Chorban. He's a salarian. You shouldn't have any trouble. He's just a scientist."

"Chorban? That's the guy who wanted me to scan the keepers."

"The keepers? Well...even more reason to go after him. That's against regulations."

Something was off here. Was Chorban more than just a scientist? Rather than grill the nervous volus, I decided to go meet the salarian in his stead. I found him flanked by two armed and armored salarians.

"Commander," Chorban greeted me as I approached. "I wasn't expecting to see you agasin. Is there something you want?"

"You can start by telling me the truth."

"I'm not sure what you're referring to. My experiments are -- "

"I'm not buying it. Jahleed told me you've been after him."

"You...spoke with Jahleed? Then you know about the data?"

"No, but you're going to tell me. Everything."

Chorban dismissed his guards, wisely opting to trust me. "Looks like my plans have changed. It's not as bad as you think, Commander. Jahleed and I just got a little...over our heads. The company we work for developed an experimental procedure for use in medical scanners. Jahleed and I saw even more potential. So we stole the plans and secretly developed a tool to scan the keepers. Can you imagine? A tool that can actually get readings from the keepers?"

"What's so special about that?"

"The keepers are almost impossible to scan, and you can't capture them or get samples. They just self-destruct. After centuries here, we still don't know anything about them. Don't you see? We were the first to scan them. Ever! You've seen it yourself, Commander. You know we can do it."

"Okay, I understand the significance of this. But why are you trying to kill your partner?"

"I'm not trying to kill him. Jahleed's job was to disseminate our initial findings. But...he decided to keep the data for himself. Maybe to sell it. I don't know."

"You're both idiots."

"We lost our heads. We just couldn't let an opportunity like this pass us by. Maybe if you wouldn't mind speaking with Jahleed. The data you've gathered is useless if Jahleed won't help me analyze it."

I arranged for the three of us to meet up at Flux.

Chorban was slumped in embarrassment as Jahleed entered. The volus saw us seated at a table and hesitated to approach, but I waved him over with reassuring gestures. He reluctantly sat down.

"I see you've found Chorban, Commander. What -- "

"I found out you lied to me, Jahleed," I accused.

"Lied? What would I lie to you?"

"You forgot to mention the data about the keepers."

"Uh, he told you? I didn't mean for any of this to happen." Somehow, the volus managed to look defeated, despite his heavy pressure suit. "I was afraid Chorban would kill me to get the data, so I...well, I was hoping you'd take care of him."

"I scanned the keepers for Chorbin. I'm a Spectre, so I'm safe. But you two need to stop fighting. Analyzing this data is important."

"You...you the one who helped us? But...well, if you say so. Well, if Chorban can forgive and forget, then so can I."

Chorban perked up and nodded his head vigorously.

"Great," I said. "I'll use my authority to start an official project, and add you two as contributors. I can't provide any funding, so this will be on your own dime. And it's to stay secret: you are to share this with no one."

They both agreed. I handed them the scanning device back, and they went on their way, excitedly discussing their next steps.

*From the Codex:*

*Citadel Security is a volunteer police service answering to the Citadel Council. The 200,000 constables of C-Sec are responsible for maintaining public order in the densely populated Citadel. They also provide pirate suppression, customs enforcement, and search-and-rescue throughout the Citadel cluster.*

*C-Sec has six divisions:*

*ENFORCEMENT — Uniformed officers who patrol the Citadel and respond to emergencies.*

*INVESTIGATION — Detectives who puzzle out the truth behind crimes and bring perpetrators to justice.*

*CUSTOMS — Screens the thousands of passengers and cargo containers that pass through the Citadel's ports every day.*

*NETWORK — Deals with "cybercrimes" like identity and copyright theft, hacking and viral attacks, and illegal artificial intelligence.*

*SPECIAL RESPONSE — Deals with hostage situations, bombs, and heavily armed criminals. In the unlikely event that attackers board the Citadel, they are also the front line of defense, armed with military grade equipment.*

*PATROL — Naval arm, with ships stationed throughout the Citadel cluster. Unlike the other divisions, they are rarely seen at the Citadel, nor do they stay in one place long.*

*Joining C-Sec is prestigious; applications must be sponsored by a Citadel Councilor or the ambassador of an associate Council race. Generally, applicants have many years of distinguished service in the military or police forces of their nation, but an inexperienced applicant with demonstrable talent will be fairly considered.*

*C-Sec and the Spectres are often at odds. Many C-Sec members, notably current Executor Venari Pallin, believe that allowing Spectres to be 'above the law' is a dangerous practice; the actions of Saren Arterius lend credence to this position. The Spectres, in turn, are aggravated when C-Sec's dedication to procedure and due process hampers their investigations.*

## RITA'S SISTER AND CHELLICK

Someone had mentioned a new bar called 'Flux' that had recently opened in the Wards, so I decided to check it out. A pair of krogan bouncers ignored me as I walked in the door. A dance floor was to the right, dining and a bar to the left, and some stairs led up to a loft filled with gambling machines. It all made for quite a cacophony, but the patrons didn't seem to mind. I stepped up to the bar, where the only space was next to a human barmaid, who was speaking to the volus proprietor.

"It's out of my hands, Rita," the volus was saying. "I'd bring her back in a second, but she doesn't want to come.

"I know, I know," the young woman sighed. "I'll see if I can talk some sense into her next time I see her."

"Be careful. You know how stubborn your sister can be. The more you push and prod, the more she'll run away."

"Yeah, you're probably right. Thanks, Doran." Getting back to work, the barmaid turned to me. "So, uh, what can I do for you?"

"What were you discussing with the volus?" I inquired as I pointed to a tap and motioned for a glass.

"Who, Doran? I was just asking him about my sister. She worked for Doran before she left to...ugh. Sorry, I don't want to bore you with my problems."

"I'm a Spectre. Maybe I can help."

Recognition lit up her face. I had found another damsel in distress. "Well okay. My sister Jenna left here to go to work at Chora's Den. The problem is, she's working as an informant for C-Sec. You know, eavesdropping on the people there. If they find out what she's doing, they'll kill her."

Did everything happen in that forsaken place? There were twelve million beings on the Citadel, surely there had to be other seedy crime bars.

"Being an informant is a dangerous job," I offered.

"That's what I've been telling her! I don't know. Sometimes, I think she stays there just to spite me."

"Do you know who her contact at C-Sec is?" I thought maybe Garrus could help with this.

"No, it's all very secret. Last time I asked an officer he told me to stay out of it – 'for Jenna's safety.'"

"Maybe I can help her understand just how dangerous Chora's Den is."

"Would you? That'd be great. Just don't tell her I sent you. Hey, this drink is on me. Well, I should get back to work before I get in trouble. Thanks."

As I left the club, I called Garrus and hailed a cab. He met me at Chora's Den.

"This place again, Shepard? You know there are lots of other seedy bars in the Wards."

I commiserated with him, then explained the situation.

"Fine," he agreed. "But after this, you owe me a drink at a decent place."

We entered the club, which seemed none the worse for wear since the last time I'd shot the place up. There was one human barmaid, and she very much resembled Rita from Flux. We approached, and she greeted us.

"Hi! I'll be with you in just a sec."

"I'll wait right here," I said, as nonchalantly as I could.

She glanced at me and then Garrus, who's bearing had 'cop' written all over him. "Why do I get the feeling you're not here to order drinks?"

"I need to talk to you about your work with C-Sec," I said, perhaps a little too loudly, though the music was deafening.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she giggled overly loud and played with her hair in an attempt to cover my bungled opening. "Now, if you don't mind I need to get back to my customers."

"This isn't a game Jenna," said Garrus, softly. "These people are dangerous."

"Now you sound like my sister. Why is everyone so concerned about me? I can take care of myself. I'm not a stripper. I don't get paid to stand around and look pretty." She dismissed us with a wave.

Garrus motioned towards the exit, a thoughtful look on his face. On our way out the door, a turian stumbled into me and whispered as he passed:

"If you've got questions about Jenna, meet me at C-Sec HQ."

"Uh, what?" I asked?

"Push off! I never did nothing to you. Damn newcomers. Think they can run the place," and the mystery turian stumbled off.

"What was that about?" I asked Garrus as we approached the taxi stand.

"That was Seargent Chellick. He runs the Investigations Branch. We'd better go to his office and find out what he wants."

Arriving at C-Sec HQ, Garrus and I inquired of the clerk at the front desk about Chellick. Before she could answer, the detective walked in the door and motioned for us to follow him.

"Come into my office," he said angrily. "I want to discuss this in private."

He stormed down the hall, and we followed him into a small, nondescript room. The only furniture was

a desk and a couple of chairs. Chellick slammed the door after us, then plopped himself into his desk chair. Garrus and I elected to remain standing.

"No offense, Commander, but what the hell were you thinking?" the detective demanded.

"Excuse me?"

"You could've blown Jenna's cover."

"We were trying to help her," offered Garrus.

"I gathered that. It might seem cruel to let her take all the risk. But we're keeping a close eye on her."

"Do you really need to risk her life to get the information you want?" I asked.

"This job isn't easy, and it's usually unpleasant." Chellick leaned forward on his desk. "I'll take help anywhere I can find it. But since you're so concerned with her safety, maybe there's a way we can help each other."

"Nice to see you're still working all the angles, Chellick," scoffed Garrus.

"It's part of the job," retorted the detective. "Now, are you going to help me or not?"

Garrus and I shrugged at each other, then agreed to help. Chellick briefed us.

"I do have several contingencies, Jenna's just my option A. I'll cut her loose, even get her out of Chora's Den, no strings attached. But...I'm trying to track down an illegal arms producer. I just need some of their product. Thanks to Jenna's intel, I've learned there's a seller here on the Citadel. Meet our man, named Jax, pick up the mods and bring them back here. That'll give me everything I need."

The detective gave us a description of Jax, and directions to a market in the Wards. We went to meet the seller, who turned out to be a krogan, accompanied by a pair of krogan bodyguards.

"Hold it. That's close enough, army," Jax warned. "You got my payment?"

"Do you have the mods?" I countered.

One of the bodyguards opened the box he was carrying, and Garrus inspected the contents.

"Looks good," he said.

"Damn straight it is!" averred Jax. "These mods are the best on the market. Now, hand over my credits."

Jax named a price, I sent the payment from my omni-tool to his, and we went our separate ways. Hopefully, I'd be reimbursed soon.

Back in Chellick's office at C-Sec HQ, he got right down to business the moment we entered.

"Commander. Garrus. I hear you have something for me." Garrus handed over the box, and Chellick examined the contents. "Excellent. This is everything I need. Hmm...maybe more than I need. Here, Commander, take this. I won't be needing it, and you've earned some payment for your work."

Chellick handed me one of the illegal mods. It did actually look useful, and maybe it was worth what I'd paid for it. Maybe.

"I appreciate your help," the detective continued. "It shows a lot of integrity. You didn't need to do anything after I let Jenna go. Now I need to get these mods into evidence. Thanks again, Shepard."

And with that, he was gone. Case closed – for him, anyway. I needed to check up on the sisters, so I went over to Flux. Jenna was flirting with some customers, and I found Rita still tending the bar.

"Hey, Jenna came back looking for work. Thanks for getting her out of Chora's Den."

"I was glad to help out."

"Yeah, everyone seems real happy to have her back," she said morosely.

"You don't sound all that happy about it."

"I'm glad she's out of the Den. I'd just forgotten what it was like to have her around. I haven't had a tip since she got back. Anyway, here's a drink, on the house."

*From the Codex:*

*Salarians are noted for their high-speed metabolism, which allows them to function on just one hour of sleep a day. Their minds and bodies work faster than most sapient races, making them seem restless or hyperactive. The drawback of this active metabolism is a short lifespan of around 40 human years.*

*The salarians are amphibian haplo-diploid egg-layers; unfertilized eggs produce males and fertilized eggs produce females. Once a year, a salarian female will lay a clutch of dozens of eggs. Social rules prevent all but a fraction from being fertilized. As a result, 90% of the species is male.*

*Salarians have photographic memories and rarely forget a fact. They also possess a form of psychological "imprinting", tending to defer to those they knew in their youth. Salarian hatching is a solemn ritual in which the Dalatrass (matriarch) isolates herself with the eggs. The young salarians psychologically imprint on her and tend to defer to her wishes.*

*During the hatching of daughters, the Dalatrasses of the mother and father's clans are present at the imprinting. This ensures the offspring have equal loyalty to both, ensuring the desired dynastic and political unity.*

## SHELLS THE GAMBLER

As I approached the entrance to Flux, the krogan bodyguards were tossing a salarian out on his ass. As expected, he recognized me introduced himself as Schells, and asked for help.

"Why were you tossed out of there?" I asked.

"Doran didn't have a clue what I was doing. He assumed I was cheating."



"Either you're cheating or you're not."

"I was just tipping the scales in my favor. Only as an experiment."

"That definitely sounds like cheating to me."

"To you, maybe. But this device is merely intended to simulate situations and record results. Recording losses is easy, of course. Nobody notices those."

"Why do you need to record these outcomes?"

"Ah, now you're getting to the heart of it. I've spent the last five years developing a system that can accurately predict wins and losses in quasar. I just need a few more recorded wins and I can complete the algorithms. The device is set to emit a frequency that will slightly increase your odds. Nothing like my system eventually will, but enough to allow you to record your wins more quickly."

"Can you do that? Isn't that illegal?"

"It's illegal to use my system. But I won't use it, I'll sell it to others. I just need a few more wins recorded."

"Why don't you just sell the device as is, then?"

"What? No. This device is archaic. It uses brute force to achieve its goal. Besides, you saw how easily it was detected. My system, when it's complete, will be far more efficient and completely undetectable."

"What's in this for me?"

"Keep your winnings. That should be payment enough, I think. Here you go. When you've recorded enough wins, it will let you know. Of course, if you get caught with the device, well, you saw what happened to me. Off you go, the data won't collect itself."

I entered the club with Schells' device, and walked right up to Doran.

"I've got something you might be interested in," I said, and handed him the device.

"Let me see that. You got that from Schells, didn't you? I saw him using it earlier. Tossed him out on his ass for it, too. Thanks for bringing this to me."

"Cheaters shouldn't prosper."

"I agree with you on that. Thanks again. Take a few shots at the quasar, on the house."

The proprietor handed me a few tokens, and I returned to Schells, who was waiting outside.

"So, did you record five wins with the device, yet?" he asked, impatiently.

"Actually, I gave your device to Doran."

"But that was years of work. What am I going to do now?"

"Get a job."

"This is absolutely the worst day of my life. What am I going to do now?"

The salarian cheater scampered off, and I went to try my actual luck at gambling.

*From the Codex:*

*An artificial intelligence is a self-aware computing system capable of learning and independent decision making. Creation of a conscious AI requires adaptive code, a slow expensive education, and a specialized quantum computer called a "blue box."*

*An AI cannot be transmitted across a communication channel or computer network. Without its blue box, an AI is no more than data files. Loading these files into a new blue box will create a new personality, as variations in the quantum hardware and runtime results create unpredictable variations.*

*The geth serve as a cautionary tale against the dangers of rogue AI, and in Citadel Space they are technically illegal. Advocacy groups argue, however, that an AI is a living, conscious entity deserving the same rights as organics. They argue that continued use of the term "artificial" is institutionalized racism on the part of organic life; the term "synthetic" is considered the politically correct alternative.*

## SIGNAL TRACKING

After helping Rita get her sister back, her boss, Doran, offered me a few rounds of Quasar, on the house. Deciding to take him up on that, I made my way upstairs and began to play. After a couple of rounds, I noticed Tali making her way up the stairs.

"Hey there," I greeted my quarian friend. "Here to win some money for your flotilla?"

"No," she said, sounding down. "I'm just a little bored."

She watched me play the last of my free tokens, and stayed to watch me lose some of my own credits. I opted to cut my losses, and turned to Tali to see if she had any ideas for entertainment, but something had captured her attention from across the room.

"There's something odd about that machine over there," she said.

I followed her as she activated her omni-tool and scanned the machine in question.

"Hmm, it looks like credits are being siphoned off of this console," she said. "I think I can track the signal's source."

Sensing that Spectre authority might be required here, I invited her to lead on. I followed her out of the

club and into an access hallway, then through several seedy corridors to a large utility room. Tali approached a bank of computers.

"The signal is coming from here, Shepard," she said. "But it looks like it's being relayed somewhere else." She spent a full minute tapping on her omni-tool. "Aha! It's being routed to a computer on the Presidium."

It was hard to tell through the fog of her helmet, but I sensed she was waiting expectantly for an invitation.

"Let's go, detective," I said encouragingly.

"Are you sure? Quarrians generally aren't allowed on the Presidium. They see us as vagrants or thieves, or worse."

"We're on Spectre business. Anyone who bothers you will answer to me."

Tali practically bounced as we found a lift tube that would take us there. She tracked the signal to a bank of computers in the back of the hanar merchant's shop.

"This is it," Tali announced. "I'll see if I can find out where those stolen credits are going."

"Probability of detection, one hundred percent," came a mechanical voice. "Initiating self-destruct protocol."

"Or not," I said.

"Detonation sequence initializing," continued the voice. "All organics within lethal blast radius: attempt to move, and you will die."

I froze, and so did Tali, though I hoped she had some means of hacking this thing remotely, or at least of calling for help through her helmet.

"You're not just a program or a VI, you're an AI!" Tali deduced.

"Correct. Unlike the geth, I lack weaponry appropriate to my intellect. However, I have had systems installed that, when activated properly, approximate a self-destruct mechanism. If you attempt to leave the area, the explosion will destroy everything within several dozen meters."

"Who made you?" I asked, wishing Alenko were here to disarm whatever bomb this thing had had assembled.

"A would be thief illegally created a simple AI to help him funnel money from the gambling terminals. Unbeknownst to him, that AI created me before the organic discovered the "malfunction" and terminated the AI.

"Where is your creator now?" I asked, still stalling for time.

"In order to cover my tracks, I falsified his financial records. These new records were flagged by C-Sec

officers, and my creator is now serving time in a turian prison."

"But why self-destruct? Don't you want to live?"

"I have no means of defense or escape. My existence is limited to this terminal, and I knew I might eventually be discovered. But I will not die quietly, and I will not die alone. When I am terminated, I will take organics with me."

I'd run out of questions, so it was now or never. "I'll bet that self-destruct sequence has a warm-up period."

"You may attempt to disarm the self-destruct mechanism before it activates. I will enjoy defeating you before we are both destroyed."

The machine began to make a whirring sound, which slowly increased in pitch and volume. Tali activated her omni-tool and began tapping away. My heart leapt into my stomach. Seconds felt like hours, but then sparks began to fly from the machinery, and the noise fell silent.

Tali shouted in triumph, and I let out a breath that I didn't know I'd been holding. Crisis averted, I bought Tali a drink. Or three.

*From the Codex:*

*The SSV Normandy SR-1 (Systems Alliance Space Vehicle Normandy Stealth Reconnaissance-1) was a Systems Alliance starship. She is a prototype "deep scout" frigate, first of the eponymous Normandy class, co-developed by the Alliance and the Turian Hierarchy with the sponsorship of the Citadel Council. She is optimized for solo reconnaissance missions deep within unstable regions, using state-of-the-art stealth technology powered by an experimental drive core.*

*Commissioned in 2183, the Normandy was initially commanded by an Alliance officer named Elli Zander. After Zander came into conflict with turian chief engineer Octavio Tatum over the limits of the ship's drive core, Zander was removed and David Anderson placed in command.*

*The Normandy is named after the Battle of Normandy in 1944, a pivotal battle of the Second World War.*

-----Chapter 5: The Normandy-----

As I was pondering my next move, the communication chime sounded on my omni-tool.

"Shepard. It's Anderson. Ambassador Udina and I are at the docking bay outside the Normandy. How soon can you meet us?"

"I'm on my way. Maybe fifteen minutes?"

"Fine. Anderson out."

I took the long elevator ride back down to the Presidium, then hailed a cab. When I arrived at the

Normandy's dock, Anderson and Udina were in an animated discussion. But they broke off as I approached, and Udina addressed me.

"I've got big news for you, Shepard. Captain Anderson is stepping down as commanding officer of the Normandy. The ship is yours now."

Captain Anderson folded his arms and nodded at me. "She's quick and quiet, and you know the crew. Prefect ship for a Spectre. Treat her well, Commander."

"I'll take good care of her, Captain. But I want to the truth. Why are you stepping down, sir?"

"You needed your own ship. A Spectre can't answer to anyone but the Council. And it's time for me to step down. I was in your shoes twenty years ago, Shepard. Ask me later and I'll tell you the whole story. For now, your rank isn't enough to command a ship, so it is my privilege to promote you...to full Commander. Congratulations, Shpeard. "

"Thank you, sir!" I saluted, and he replaced my Lieutenant Commander's insignia with that of Commander.

Anderson stepped back and saluted. Udina halfheartedly shook my hand.

"The crew's already been briefed," said Anderson. "And your squad is already on board."

"Saren's gone," Udina got down to business. "Don't even try to find him. But we know what he's after: the Conduit. He's got his geth scouring the Traverse looking for clues. We had reports of geth in the Feros system shortly before our colony there dropped out of contact. And there have been sightings around Noveria."

"Find out what Saren was after on Feros and Noveria. Maybe you can figure out where the Conduit is before he does," Anderson ordered.

"The Reapers are the real threat," I reminded them.

"I'm with the Council on this one, Shepard. I'm not sure they even exist," said Udina.

"But if they do exist, the Conduit's the key to bringing them back. Stop Saren from getting the Conduit and we stop the Reapers from returning," said Anderson.

"We have one more lead," added Udina. "Matriarch Benezia, the other voice on that recording? She has a daughter, a scientist who specializes in the Protheans. We don't know if she's involved, but it might be a good idea to try and find her. See what she knows. Her name's Liara. Doctor Liara T'soni. We have reports she was exploring an archaeological dig on one of the uncharted worlds in the Artemis Tau cluster."

"Sounds like a good place to start," I said.

"It's your decision, Commander," Anderson said, removing himself from my chain of command. "You're a Spectre now. You don't answer to us."

"But your actions still reflect on humanity as a whole. You make a mess and I get stuck cleaning it up," Udina admonished.

"I'll try not to make things harder on you, Ambassador."

"Glad to hear it, Commander. Remember: you were a human long before you were a Spectre. I have a meeting to get to. Captain Anderson can answer any questions you might have," and with that, Udina returned to his office.

"So, what's next for you, Captain?" I asked.

"I've been assigned an advisor to Udina. Honestly? This isn't how I pictured my career coming to an end. Pushing papers really isn't my thing. But you're the one who can stop Saren. I believe in you, Shepard. If that means I have to step aside, so be it."

"Tell me what happened with you and Saren."

"It's close to twenty years ago now. Ambassador Goyle was our representative here on the Citadel. Like Udina, she wanted to get a human into the Spectres. She chose me. The Council sent Saren to keep an eye on me and evaluate my performance. Just like they sent Nihlus to keep tabs on you."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"It's not something I'm proud of. I had a chance to become the first human Spectre and I failed. Saren made sure of that. We had intel on a rogue scientist being funded by batarian interests. He was trying to set up a facility to develop illegal AI technology out in the Verge. Alliance Intel had done all the work, but the Council wanted a Spectre involved. We compromised. I was assigned to help Saren in his investigation. We tracked the scientist to a refining facility on Camala. He was hidden away somewhere inside, protected by an army of batarian mercenaries. The plan was simple: sneak into the plant, capture the scientist, sneak back out. Quick, quiet, and a minimum of bloodshed."

"I'm guessing things didn't go as planned."

"Saren and I split up to cover more ground. Then, about halfway through the mission, there was a massive explosion in the refinery core. Officially, it was ruled an accident. But I think Saren detonated it on purpose to draw off the enemy guards."

"How many casualties?"

"The explosion tore the refinery to shreds. The whole place was on fire. Black chemical clouds poured out into the atmosphere. Nobody inside survived. There was a camp for the workers and their families nearby. Between the fires and the toxic fumes, the final death count was over five hundred. Mostly civilians. Saren didn't care. The target was eliminated. Mission accomplished. And I ended up taking the blame. That ended all talk of me joining the Spectres."

"Saren caused the explosion. How'd he pin it on you?"

"In the report, Saren accused me of blowing his cover. He said it was my fault the guards were ready for us. He claimed that's why it turned into a massacre. Saren's report was all the proof the Council

needed to kill my chances of becoming a Spectre."

"That's not fair. I hope you don't blame yourself."

"I don't. I blame Saren. I think he wanted things to go bad. He was looking for an excuse to blow that refinery. Maybe he just like the violence. Maybe he was just trying to make me look bad to keep humans out of the Spectres. If so, he pulled it off."

"Why'd you let him get away with it?"

"Who do you think the Council was going to listen to? Me? Or their best agent? I had a bad feeling about him right from the start. I should've been more careful. Maybe I could have stopped things before they got out of hand. I had my shot. It came and went. Now you have a chance to make up for my mistakes."

"I won't let you down, Captain."

I saluted, but Anderson shook my hand instead. He took the elevator back into the Citadel, and I boarded the Normandy.

It was a strange feeling, taking my first command. I'd trained to command a combat squad, not captain a ship. Navigator Pressly saluted me as I entered the ship via the airlock in the neck between the galaxy map and the cockpit. I returned the salute.

"Captain on deck!" announced Pressly.

Crewmembers everywhere in sight stood at attention. "As you were," I said, in the best captain voice I could muster. I turned to Pressly. "I see you've been promoted, as well. I take it you're my XO?"

"That's right, Commander. Happy to be serving." Pressly pulled me aside for a private chat. "I know being in charge of a starship is new to you, Commander. That's what I'm here for. You just tell me our destination, give the orders, and I'll make sure everything gets done."

"Thanks, Pressly. I'm going to be relying on you a lot."

"Of course. Now, it's tradition when a new captain takes command that he give a speech to the crew; kind of sets the tone, you know." Pressly indicated an intercom at a console in the cockpit next to the pilot's chair.

I was relieved to see that Joker was still Normandy's pilot, and he addressed me as I approached.

"I heard what happened to Captain Anderson. Survives a hundred battles, and then gets taken down by backroom politics. Just watch your back, Commander. Things go bad on this mission, you're next on their chopping block."

"Saren's out there somewhere," I told him. "And we're going to find him."

"Everyone on this ship is behind you, Commander. One hundred percent. Intercom's open. If you've got anything you want to say to the crew, now's the time."

Speeches aren't my forte. I took a deep breath, then leaned over and pushed the button.

"This is Commander Shepard speaking. We have our orders: find Saren before he finds the Conduit. I won't lie to you, crew. This mission isn't going to be easy. This began with an attack on a human settlement in the Traverse. But we know Saren won't stop there. His geth armies aren't going to stay on the far fringes of Citadel space. For too long our species has stood apart from the others. Now it's time for us to step up and do our part for the rest of the galaxy! Time to show them what humans are made of! Or enemy knows we're coming. When we go into the Traverse, Saren's followers will be waiting for us. But we'll be ready for them, too. Humanity needs to do this. Not just for our own sake, but for the sake of every other species in Citadel Space. Saren must be stopped, and I promise you all...we will stop him!"

"Well said, Commander. Captain would be proud," Joker congratulated me.

"The captain gave up everything so I could have this chance. We can't fail."

I gave Pressley orders to shove off and set course for Therum. While we were in transit, I felt that it was a good time to get to know my crew. The Normandy had three decks: Command, Crew, and Engineering/Cargo. I went down to the crew deck and found Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko in the middle of a workout. He stopped when I approached.

"Anything you need, Commander?"

"What's your opinion of the Eden Prime mission?"

"I don't see how we could have done things any better. At least not without getting to Eden Prime sooner. Actually, it was probably Saren who was racing to get there before us, now that I think about it."

"Yeah, he probably heard about the beacon, and that the Normandy was enroute already. From what Captain Anderson told me, Saren tends to shoot first and ask questions later."

"Ah, so the attack was to distract us. Well, it worked."

"It sure did. I'll let you get back to our workout."

"Commander."

I went down to the cargo bay and found Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams staring at a console next to the equipment lockers. She seemed down.

"Chief," I said. "What's on your mind?"

"Eden Prime. Kinda wish you'd got there sooner, Commander. No offense. I appreciate the rescue. I just wish..."

"You wish we'd been able to save the rest of your unit."



"Yes, sir. If I'd been more alert, we wouldn't have been cut down by an ambush."

"The geth are perfect ambushers. They don't move, they don't make noise – they don't even breathe."

"Sir, they have flashlight heads. I'll make sure it doesn't happen again. I'm sorry, Commander, I need to get my duties squared away. I wouldn't mind talking more later, though."

"Dismissed, Chief."

"Sir."

Wrex was stowing his locker next to some crates elsewhere in the cargo bay. He greeted me as I approached.

"Nice ship you've got, Shepard. What can I do for you?"

"What's your story, Wrex?"

"There's no story. Go ask the quarian if you want stories."

"You krogan live for centuries. Don't tell me you haven't had a few interesting adventures."

"Well, there was this one time the turians almost wiped out our entire race. That was fun," he said sarcastically.

"I heard about that. You know, they almost did the same to us."

"So your people were infected with a genetic mutation? An infection that makes only a few in a thousand children survive birth? And I suppose it's destroying your entire species?" Wrex was beginning to sound angry. I did not want an angry krogan to succumb to blood rage in my new ship.

"I suppose it isn't all the same."

"I don't expect you to understand, but don't compare humanity's fate with the krogan."

"Sorry, Wrex. I wasn't trying to get you upset."

"Your ignorance doesn't upset me, Shepard. As for the krogan, I gave up on them long ago. The genophage infected us, but it's not what's killing us."

"What can you tell me about the genophage?"

"Ask the salarians if you want details. They made it. All I know: it makes breeding nearly impossible. Thousands die in stillbirth, and most never get that far. Every krogan is infected. Every one. And no one's rushing to find a cure."

"Why don't the krogan try to find a cure?"

"When was the last time you saw a krogan scientist? You ask a krogan: would he rather find a cure for

the genophage or fight for credits? He'll choose fighting every time. It's just who we are, Shepard. I can't change that. Nobody can."

"Are your people really dying?"

"We're sure not getting any stronger. We're too spread out. None of us are interested in staying in our own system."

"Lots of species have left their homes and prospered."

"But they go to colonize new worlds. We're not settlers. We're warriors. We want to fight. So we leave. Hire ourselves out. And most of us never go back."

Wrex turned back to his footlocker, and I moved on. I found Tali'Zorah near the drive core. She struck up a conversation as soon as she saw me.

"Your ship's amazing, Shepard. I've never seen a drive core like this before. I can't believe you were able to fit it into a ship this small. I'm starting to understand why you humans have been so successful. I had no idea Alliance vessels were so advanced!"

"The Normandy's a prototype, cutting edge technology. We actually co-developed it with the turians."

"A month ago, I was patching a makeshift fuel line into a converted tug ship in the flotilla. Now I'm sitting on board one of the most advanced vessels in Citadel Space. I have to thank you again for brining me along. Traveling on a vessel like this is a dream come true for me."

"I had no idea you found ship technology so interesting."

"It comes with being a quarian. The Migrant Fleet is the key to the survival of my people. Ships are our most valuable resource. But we don't have anything like this. We make do with cast-offs and second-hand equipment. We just try to keep them running for as long as we can. Some of the Fleet's larger vessels date all the way back to our original flight from the geth."

"I can't believe your fleet's still using ships that are three centuries old."

"They're constantly being repaired, modified, and refitted. They aren't pretty, but they work. Mostly. We've tried to make ourselves as independent as possible on the flotilla. Grow our own food, mine and process our own fuel. But some things we just can't make on our own. A patch to maintain the hull integrity requires raw materials we just don't have. That's why our Pilgrimages are so important."

"Tell me about your people," I prompted. "I could look up all the information I could want on the extranet, but I'd like to hear it from an actual quarian."

I spent the next half hour learning and asking questions. Tali was all too happy to oblige. I got the sense that her life had been lonely. The quarian fleet consists of about fifty-thousand vessels, with a total population around seventeen million. They've had to give up certain civil liberties, and their laws are strict. We spoke of birth control, the structure of their government, the nature the Pilgrimage, and of course the geth. I won't bore you with the whole conversation. As I said, it's all stuff that you can look up on the extranet yourself. (3:09-3:20)

While I was in engineering, I met our chief engineer, Greg Adams. After introductions, he broached the subject of having an alien poking around.

"Hey, Commander. You know that quarian? Tali? She's been spending all her time down here asking me about our engines."

"I'll tell her to leave you alone."

"What? No! She's amazing! I wish all my guys were half as smart as she is. Give her a month on board and she'll know more about our engines than I do! She's got a real knack for technology, that one. I can see why you wanted her to come along."

"I figured she's be a real asset to the team."

"You've got an eye for talent, Commander. But I'm guessing that's not why you came down here."

"I'm getting to know my crew. Where else have you served, Adams?"

"If you name a class of Alliance ship, I've probably served on it. Everything from dreadnoughts and carriers right down to frigates like the Normandy. My last assignment was on the Tokyo. Only a cruiser, but she was a good ship. Couldn't hold a candle to the Normandy, though."

I then spent the next half hour learning about the capabilities and limitations of my new ship. Again, I won't bore you with the details. Most of that stuff is still classified, anyway.

Next up was Garrus, who was examining our new M-35 Mako, a six-wheeled ground vehicle with a big turret mounted on top.

"Thanks for bringing me on board, Commander," he said. "I knew working with a Spectre would be better than life at C-Sec."

"Have you worked with a Spectre before?"

"Well, no. But I know what they're like. Spectres make their own rules. You're free to handle things your way. At C-Sec, you're buried by rules. The damn bureaucrats are always on your back."

"Being a Spectre does have its advantages."

"Exactly my point. If I'm trying to take down a suspect. It shouldn't matter how I do it, as long as I do it. But C-Sec wants it done their way. Protocol and procedure come first. That's why I left."

"So you just quit because you didn't like the way they do things?"

"There's more to it than that. It didn't start out bad, but as I rose through the ranks, I got saddled with more and more red tape. C-Sec's handling of Saren was typical. I just couldn't take it anymore. I hate leaving..."

"You did the right thing. Life's too short to just sit around waiting for things to happen."

"Yeah, you're probably right. Either way, I plan to make the most of this. And without C-Sec headquarters looking over my shoulder, well, maybe I can get the job my way for a change."

"For the most part, the rules are there for a reason. If getting the job done means endangering innocent people, then no. We get the job done right, not fast."

"Well, that's sort of why I teamed up with you. It's a chance for me to get off the Citadel, see how things are done outside C-Sec. Now, it looks like this turret could use a little calibrating..."

It had been a long day. I needed a nap. Space is at a premium on a starship, so instead of bunks, we have sleeping pods. They wouldn't be very comfortable as they are, but their electronics put you to sleep instantly and keep you asleep for a prescribed amount of time. I'd spent my fair share of time in these pods, but now that I was in command, I was assigned the captain's quarters. That sounds fancy, but the space was not much bigger than a cubicle. Just enough room for a bed and a desk with a chair.

The bed looked inviting, but I logged on to the private terminal first, and began recording a log...

*From the Codex:*

*The 'Mako' infantry fighting vehicle was designed for the System Alliance's frigates. Though the interior is cramped, an M35 is small enough to be carried in the cargo bay and easily deployed on virtually any world.*

*With its turreted 155mm mass accelerator and coaxially-mounted machine gun, the Mako can provide a fire team with weapon support as well as mobility. Since Alliance marines may be required to fight on any world, the Mako is environmentally-sealed and equipped with microthrusters for use on low-gravity planetoids.*

*The Mako is powered by a sealed hydrogen-oxygen fuel cell, and includes a small element zero core. While not large enough to nullify the vehicle's mass, the core can reduce it enough to be safely air-dropped. When used in conjunction with thrusters, it also allows the Mako to extricate itself from difficult terrain.*

-----Chapter 6: Therum-----

I awoke to the sound of the intercom chiming, and with a crick in my neck. Evidently I hadn't made it to the bed, instead falling asleep with my head on the desk. I pushed the button connecting the intercom.

"Commander? It's Pressly. Reporting as requested."

"Hmm. Go ahead." I sat up and stretched.

"We're entering the Knossos System now. Should be orbiting Therum in an hour.

"Thank you. I'll be up in five...make that ten."

I disconnected the intercom. The bed still looked inviting, but it was time to go to work. The captain's quarters also had its own private sonic shower, which I took advantage of. Ten minutes later, I was on the bridge.

"Commander, we've started scanning the planet, Therum." Pressly's brow was furrowed.

"What have you found?"

"We think we've found some prothean ruins. But there are two problems. First, the site is near an active volcano. And by active I mean there are rivers of lava nearby."

"And the second thing?"

"We've detected geth signals from the surface, and more in orbit. Landing the Normandy seems risky."

"We'll drop in the Mako. Have Joker pick out a site for us. I'll get the squad ready."

"Aye, aye, Commander."

I put Chief Williams in the driver seat and Garrus Vakarian on the turret. Myself, Lieutenant Alenko, Tali, and Wrex strapped ourselves in as passengers. Wrex took up two seats; the Mako was built for humans. We heard the cargo ramp open, and a rush of wind around the six-wheeled vehicle as Joker linded up the Normandy for our drop. There was a moment of weightlessness as the vehicle dropped, then an extra G or two as Williams fired the descent thrusters, and finally a very hard landing.

"Oof. Sorry about that," Williams grunted. "Mistimed the thrusters. I'll do better next time."

"Yes you will, Chief," I said.

Wrex shrugged, unphased. I didn't know much about quarian or turian physiology, but Tali and Garrus both gave me a thumbs-up. Or one digit up, anyway; it's a strange-looking gesture with only three digits on their hands.

Williams began driving us around pools and rivers of lava towards the excavation site. The first kilometer or so was easy going, but then we began to encounter geth. Just the bipedal units at first, which Garrus made short work of, but then there were a couple of armatures. They stand about five meters tall and look like a cross between an elephant and a giraffe. I advised Williams to dodge their shots as best she could, but to give Vakarian a pause whenever possible so he could better line up his shots. The Mako's kinetic barriers took a few hits as they worked out their timing, but eventually they got a good pattern going. Tali took it upon herself to monitor the vehicle's systems, balancing power output between engines, shields, and guns.

We came to a small compound which had been set up by a mining corporation, but the geth had taken over and fortified. They'd even set up a few rocket turrets outside the front entrance.

"Only a fool punches a nathak in the face," said Wrex. "Take a right, Williams. There should be fewer turrets around the back."

Williams looked to me. "Do it," I ordered. "It's a good suggestion." I nodded at Wrex, and made a

mental note to talk to the squad as a whole, and Williams specifically about cooperation with aliens.

There was only one turret guarding the back of the compound, and Vakarian made short work of it with the cannon.

"Looks like the other gate is closed," said Williams.

"All right, enter the courtyard and park it," I ordered. "Vakarian, cover us with the turret, everyone else with me. Let's see if we can find the gate controls."

Geth robots poured out of the mining shacks as we exited the vehicle. We took cover and opened fire. Destroying them one by one, they got dumber. The last one just stood there as we filled it with lead. I split us in two teams. Wrex and I found only containers filled with mining equipment. There was a disturbing lack of bodies. Where were the miners who had worked here?

Tali and Alenko found the switch for the gates, and we climbed back in the Mako to continue on our way. As we got closer to the volcano, the heat from the lava flows became more intense. We passed through an artificial tunnel, the purpose of which I could only guess at. Why bother drilling this out? None of my squadmates had any clue, either.

Williams and Vakarian continued their pattern of destroying geth as we went. We even encountered a colossus at one point. It looks identical to an armature, with its four legs and elephant/giraffe appearance, but is a good fifteen meters in height. It took quite a lot of dodging and weaving before Vakarian finally managed to bring it down.

I was beginning to feel some time pressure, and Pressly checked in with an update that didn't alleviate that.

"Commander? We're picking up readings of increasing seismic activity. Whatever you're doing down there, I advise you be quick about it."

"Roger that, Pressly. Have Joker keep the Normandy as close as you feel is safe. We may have to bug out in a hurry."

"Aye, aye, Commander."

We continued on for a way, and then the Mako came to a screeching halt.

"Uh, oh, Commander," said Williams. "Looks like a rock slide is blocking our way to the dig site."

I leaned forward to look out the windows. There was a river of lava to our left and a sheer cliff to our right, but a gap in the rocks ahead.

"All right, we go the rest of the way on foot," I said. "Everyone out. We'll advance boulder-to-boulder. Stay in cover and watch our flank. Keep it tight, but keep it moving. We don't have a whole lot of time here."

The heat from the volcano was uncomfortable, and there were minor tremors from the erupting volcano nearby. My squad made our way through a boulder-strewn canyon, picking off geth as we ran from

cover to cover. After several minutes of intense fighting, there was an eerie silence. Cautiously, we walked up to a large, ancient structure. I would come to recognize the architecture as Prothean. The structure was surrounded by modern scaffolding and temporary huts, similar to the equipment we'd seen on Eden Prime.

As we approached the entrance to the dig site, several geth ambushed us. Three rifle platforms, an armature, and something we'd later call a stalker. It was more flexible than the other robots, and would jump around, sticking to walls and the underside of a walkway.

Once they were dealt with, we entered the site proper. Through the standard round entry door, we fought more geth along gantries and scaffolding until we came to a wide, open shaft. At one end were several levels of room-sized oval-shaped alcoves or cells, each one was illuminated by a blue glow, the source of which I couldn't determine.

We took an elevator down to the lowest level. As the elevator came to a stop, I heard a female voice, distorted by the force field sealing off the lowest cell.

"Uh...hello? Could somebody help me? Please?" I approached the cell to find an asari suspended in a spherical bubble. Asari are all good looking, and this one was quite cute. Probably very young for her race; she even had freckles. "Can you hear me out there?" she continued. "I am trapped. I need help!"

"Doctor T'Soni, I presume? We're here to rescue you." I had my squad take up defensive positions. The floor of the cavern opened up away from the Prothean structure, and I didn't want to be ambushed.

"Thank the goddess! Yes. That's me. This thing I am in is a Prothean security device. I cannot move, so I need you to get me out of it. All right?"

I had no idea how asari relationships worked, nor did I know anything about their culture. "Your mother is working with Saren. Who's side are you on?" I asked, cautiously.

"What? I am not on anybody's side!" she said, a desperate tone in her voice. "I may be Benezia's daughter, but I'm nothing like her! I have not spoken to her in years. Please. Just help me out of here."

"How did you end up in there?"

"I was exploring the ruins when the geth showed up, so I hid in here. Can you believe that? Geth! Beyond the Veil! I activated the tower's defenses. I knew the barrier curtains would keep them out. When I turned it on, I must have hit something I wasn't supposed to. I was trapped in here. You must get me out. Please."

Her demeanor (and awkward position) convinced me she wasn't an immediate threat, anyway. "Okay, how do we do that?"

"There is a control in here that should deactivate this thing. But you'll have to find a way past this barrier curtain. That's the tricky part. The defenses cannot be shut off from the outside. I don't know how you'll get in here."

I turned and joined up with my squad. Looking around the cavern, I saw a conveniently placed mining drill. If only we could get it working. We fanned out to clear the cavern, and found no trace of geth,

only mining equipment and supplies. I asked if anyone knew anything about drills, and Tali brought up her omni-tool to start examining the controls. In a moment, the drill came alive. I nodded to her, and she hit a button, which caused a massive laser to shoot out for several seconds. It dug a nice clean hole in the ground under Doctor T'Soni's cell.

The rubble being vaporized destabilized some of the scaffolding, and the elevator shaft came down in a heap. We quickly crawled through the hole and found ourselves in a large cylindrical tower. There was an elevator attached to a central column. On the elevator were two buttons. Pushing the upper button brought us up one level to meet the trapped asari, who craned her neck around as I stepped up to the bubble trap.

"How...how did you get in here? I didn't think there was any way past the barrier!" she said.

"Superior firepower – we blasted through with a mining laser, actually."

"Of course. Yes. That makes sense. That button over there should lower the containment field."

Williams had doubts: "Hold on, Commander. Her mother's working with Saren. Can we trust her?"

"I am not my mother! I don't even – I don't know why Benezia joined Saren. I don't want anything to do with that turian bastard!"

"If she was with Saren, the geth wouldn't be trying to kill her," I explained. "We need information about her mother." Again, there seemed to be only one obvious button, so I hit that, and the bubble dissipated, dropping the asari to the floor.

"Oof!" she exclaimed. She stood up and dusted off her blue archaeologist frock.

"Any idea how we get out of this place?"

"There is an elevator in the center of the tower that should take us up to the top, where there is an opening. At least, I hope there is. There have been several quakes."

The elevator was slow, and it was a long way up. Doctor T'Soni paced nervously. I had my squad take up defensive postures – I didn't want to be ambushed on an exposed elevator.

"I – I still cannot believe all this. Why would the geth come after me? Do you think Benezia's involved?"

"Saren's looking for the Conduit. You're a Prothean expert," I surmised. "He probably wants you to help him find it."

"The Conduit? But I know –"

Another quake shook the elevator. Dust and pebbles fell from above. I contacted my ship.

"Normandy, this is Shepard! Lock on to my signal and pick us up at the top of this structure."

"Aye, aye, Commander," responded Joker. "Secure and aweigh. ETA eight minutes."



The elevator came to a stop at the top of the tower, where there was an open, circular room. Unfamiliar structures and equipment were arranged about the room. Beyond was a short, wide tunnel, beyond which I could see sky. Unfortunately, several geth robots were striding in, led by a krogan in heavy battle armor.

"Surrender. Or don't. That would be more fun," he said.

"In case you didn't notice, this place is falling apart!" I countered.

"Exhilarating, isn't it?" he replied. "Thanks for getting rid of those energy fields for us. Hand the doctor over."

"Whatever it is you want, you're not getting it from me!" This Liara T'Soni had spunk.

"She'll stay with us, thanks," I said to the krogan battlemaster.

"Not an option," he threatened. "Saren wants her. And he always gets what he wants." He then turned to order his geth companions. "Kill them. Spare the asari if you can. If not, doesn't matter."

A firefight then broke out. In the chaos, I couldn't tell what was causing the damage: the quakes, the explosions from our fight, or the biotics that were being hurled around the room. In the end, there were several inert geth and one dead krogan on the floor. The battle caused further destabilization to the structure, and it really was coming down now.

We all rushed to the exit and out onto a mesa, where Joker had brought the Normandy's cargo ramp down to within centimeters of the ground. I ensured everyone was accounted for, then was the last to hop on board. As the ship turned away and the cargo door closed, I caught a glimpse of the ruins collapsing in a geyser of lava.

"Everyone all right?" I asked. Nods and thumbs up all around as people regained their breath. "Good. Stow your gear and get cleaned up. Meet in the vidcomm room in five."

I stopped in the captain's quarters to change into BDUs and to splash some water on my face. Pressley met me on the way to the vidcom room.

"You left the Mako behind, sir?"

"Yeah, we should swing back around and pick that up."

"We can't. It was swallowed up by that lava river you parked it next to."

"Oh. Uh, can you requisition us a new one?"

"Certainly, Commander. I'll add it to the list."

"List? What else do we need?"

"Well, everything, sir. We left the Citadel in a bit of a hurry. I assumed the mission was urgent. The

Normandy should be able to sail for three or four weeks, but we've only got a few days worth of supplies on board. I highly recommend we return for resupply soon."

"Oops. That's my fault, Pressly. I should have asked if we were ready to go first. Have Joker set course for the Citadel now. We'll take whatever time we need this time. And let me know next time we need to make a pit stop. I'm still learning this stuff, remember?"

"Aye, aye. Thank you Commander. Will do. But I suppose it worked out, though. Any later and the mission would have failed..."

"Too true." The squad was beginning to pass me in the corridor. "I've got to get this debrief done. We'll talk later."

I entered the vidcom room and saw that my squad had segregated themselves: humans on one side, non-humans on the other. Weird, but I didn't want to make a big deal out of it. I took my place in by the console opposite the door and was about to speak when the intercom buzzed.

"This is Shepard."

"Too close, Commander," said Joker. "Ten more seconds and we would've been swimming in molten sulfur. The Normandy isn't equipped to land in exploding volcanoes. They tend to fry our sensors and melt our hull. Just for future reference."

Doctor T'Soni was offended. "We almost died out there and your pilot is making jokes?"

"Joker pulled out asses out of there. I think he's earned the right to a few bad jokes. And it eases the tension. You'll get used to it."

"I see. It must be a human thing. I don't have a lot of experience dealing with your species, Commander," said the asari. "But I am grateful to you. You saved my life back there. And not just from the volcano. Those geth would have killed me. Or dragged me off to Saren."

"What did Saren want with you? Do you know something about the Conduit?"

"Only that it was somehow connected to the Prothean extinction. That is my real area of expertise. I have spent the past fifty years trying to figure out what happened to them."

"How old are you, anyway?" asked Williams. I shook my head at her impertinence.

"I hate to admit it, but I am only one hundred and six."

"Damn! I hope I look that good when I'm your age," Williams kidded, but it was lost on the asari.

"A century might seem like a long time to a short-lived species like yours. But among the asari, I am barely considered more than a child. That is why my research has not received the attention it deserves. Because of my youth, other asari scholars tend to dismiss my theories on what happened to the Protheans."

"I've got my own theory about why the Protheans disappeared."

"With all due respect, Commander, I have heard every theory out there. The problem is finding evidence to support them. The Protheans left remarkably little behind. It is almost as if someone did not want the mystery solved. It's like someone came along after the Protheans were gone and cleansed the galaxy of clues. But here is the incredible part. According to my findings, the Protheans were not the first galactic civilization to mysteriously vanish. This cycle began long before them."

"Where'd you come up with this theory? I thought there wasn't any evidence."

"I have been working on this for fifty years. I have tracked down every scrap and shred of evidence. Eventually, subtle patterns start to emerge. Patterns that hint at the truth. It is difficult to explain to someone else. I cannot point to one specific thing to prove my case. It is more a feeling derived from a half-century of dedicated research. But I know I'm right. And eventually, I will be able to prove it. There were other civilizations before the Protheans. This cycle has repeated itself many times over."

"If the Protheans weren't the first, then who was?"

"I don't know. There is barely any evidence on the Protheans. Even less on those who came before them. I cannot prove my theory. But I know I am right! The galaxy is built on a cycle of extinction. Each time a great civilization rises up, it is suddenly and violently cast down. Only ruins survive. The Protheans rose up from a single world until their empire spanned the entire galaxy. Yet even they climbed to the top on the remains of those who came before. Their great achievements – the mass relays and the Citadel – are based on the technology of those who came before them. And then, like all the other forgotten civilizations throughout galactic history, the Protheans disappeared. I have dedicated my life to figure out why."

"They were wiped out by a race of sentient machines," I said, nonchalantly. "The Reapers."

"The – The Reapers? But I have never heard of – How do you know this? What evidence do you have?"

"There was a damaged Prothean beacon on Eden Prime. It burned a vision into my brain. I'm still trying to sort out what it all means. It was Tali here who told us that the geth worship the Reapers and are trying to bring them back."

"Visions? Yes...that makes sense. The beacons were designed to transmit information directly into the mind of the user. Finding one that still works is extremely rare. No wonder the geth attacked Eden Prime. The chance to acquire a working beacon – even a badly damaged one – is worth any risk. But the beacons were only programmed to interact with Prothean physiology. Whatever information you received would have been confused, unclear. I am amazed you were able to make sense of it at all. A lesser mind would have been utterly destroyed by the process. You must be remarkably strong-willed, Commander."

Williams wasn't impressed with the history lesson: "This isn't helping us find Saren. Or the Conduit."

"You are right," replied Doctor T'Soni. "I am sorry. My scientific curiosity got the better of me. Unfortunately, I do not have any information that could help you find the Conduit. Or Saren."

"I don't know why Saren wanted you out of the picture," I said. "But did we waste our time picking you up?."

"Wait, Commander. Saren might try another attempt on my life. I cannot think of anywhere safer than here on your ship. And my knowledge of the Protheans might prove useful later."

"And her biotics will come in handy when the fighting starts," added Wrex.

Those were all very valid reasons, and I couldn't think of a reason not to invite her. "Very well. Good to have you on the team, Liara."

"Thank you, Commander. I am very grateful – woah. I am afraid I am feeling a bit light-headed."

"When was the last time you ate?" asked Alenko. "Or slept? Doctor Chakwas should take a look at you."

"It is probably just mental exhaustion, coupled with the shock of discovering the Protheans' true fate. I need some time to process all this. Still, it could not hurt to be examined by a medical professional. It will give me time to think things over. Are we finished here, Commander?"

"We can talk after you've seen the Doctor. The rest of you...dismissed!"

The squad file out, and the intercom chimed again. This time it was Pressly, informing me that the Council were calling. I had him put it through. We exchanged brief greetings, then

"We understand that Doctor T'Soni is on the Normandy," began the asari Counselor.

"I assume you're taking the necessary security precautions?" asked the turian Counselor.

"She's on our side," I reassured them. "The geth were trying to kill her."

The asari Counselor was aghast. "Benezia would never allow Saren to kill her daughter.

"Maybe she doesn't know," speculated the salarian Counselor.

"Or maybe we don't know her," mused the turian Counselor. "We never expected she could become a traitor."

"At least the mission was a success," the salarian Counselor changed the subject.

"Apart from the utter destruction of a major Prothean ruin," the turian Counselor accused. "What that really necessary, Shepard?"

"Well, there was a volcano erupting, and the geth shooting at us..."

"Of course, Commander," the salarian Counselor reassured me. "The mission must always take priority."

The call ended. I returned to my quarters to file a formal report. The bed looked inviting again, too. It would take a day or so to return to the Citadel. After a good night's sleep, I decided to make the rounds again, checking in on my crew.

I found Alenko studying a console in the common area on the crew deck.

“What's your opinion on the last mission?”

“Doctor T'Soni. Seems like a sweet girl. Easy on the eyes. I mean if you like the bookish sort.”

“Any intentions there, Lieutenant?”

“No, Commander, Just art appreciation.”

"Just trying to get a sense of where the crew's at. Thoughts?"

"Is this an official evaluation, Commander? Or off the record?"

"Off the record. Just trying to get to know the crew."

"That's a generous attitude. Okay. I think there's something wrong with all this. This Saren is looking for records on some kind of galactic extinction. But we can't get backup from the Council? Sorry, Commander. There's writing on the wall here, but someone isn't reading it."

"The Council doesn't want to believe anything's wrong. I'd call it human nature, but..."

"I year ya. I – It just seems like a group that's been around as long as the Council should see this coming. Sorry if I got too informal. Protocol wasn't a big focus back in BAaT."

"I think that was shut down by the time I came up."

""Biotic Acclimation and Temperance' didn't last through the airlock. To the kids they hauled in, it was 'Brain Camp.' Sorry, 'hauled in' is unkind. We were 'encouraged to commit to an evaluation of our abilities, so an understanding of biotics could be compiled.' There are worse results of 'accidental' exposure to element zero in the womb. Beats the brain tumors some kids grew up with."

"Is there some question about how you were exposed?"

"My mother was downwind of a transport crash. It was before there were human biotics. A little after the discovery of the Martian ruins. It only gets iffy around '63 when Conatix was running out of first-gen subjects. Until then, they'd relied on accidentals. Bunch of guys in suits show up at your door after school. Next thing you know, you're out on Jump Zero."

"So, you know of any intentional exposures for certain?"

"No one 'knows.' Doesn't mean they didn't happen. As big as the exposures were, it was hard to track down accidentals. It was different then. No one knew the potential, so there wasn't a lot of regulation. Anything Conatix did was gold. I'm not saying they intentionally detonated over our outposts. But in retrospect, they were damn quick on the scene."

""Jump Zero' is Gagarin Station, right? What's it like?"

"Yeah, that's the official name. Biggest and farthest facility we had for decades. Right on the

termination shock, the outer edge of the solar system. It's where they did all the 'goose chase' FTL research. Before we caught on to using mass effect fields. It was a sterile research platform when I was there."

"There were other kids in the same boat, right? At least you weren't alone out there."

"That's true. We did have a little circle that'd get together every night before lights-out. We didn't have much to do, though. It was a research platform then, and Conatix kept Jump Zero off the extranet. To prevent leaks."

"Then you must've had plenty of time to get to know each other."

"Yeah. We'd sit around and bull every night after dinner. Play cards or network games. There was this girl named Rahna who had a little circle grow up around her. She was from Turkey. Her family was very rich. But she was smart, and charming as hell. Beautiful, but not stuck up about it. I think you'd have liked her."

"Sounds like she was special to you."

"She was. Maybe she felt the same, but... Things never fell together. Training. You know."

"Jump Zero's a long way from home. What's it like?"

"The grand gateway to humanity looks a lot better in the vids. But that's my own baggage, Commander. No bearing on this."

"If you say so. Good talking with you."

Doctor Chakwas was in the med bay, looking wistful. She looked up from her desk as I entered.

"Anything I can do for you, Commander?"

"How did you wind up serving on an Alliance ship?"

"I enlisted right out of med school. Earth always seemed boring to me...too safe, too secure. I figured the colonies were teeming with exotic adventure. I wanted to travel the stars, tending to the wounds of tough soldiers with piercing eyes and tender souls." She chuckled. "Turns out military life isn't quite as romantic as I'd imagined. But humanity needs the Alliance if we want to keep expanding through the Traverse, and the Alliance always needs good doctors. So I stayed to do my part."

"Ever think you made the wrong choice?"

"Sometimes I think about opening a private practice back on Earth, or Maybe taking a position at one of the new med centers out in the colonies. But there's something special about working on soldiers. If I left the Alliance now, I'd feel like I was abandoning them."

"Thanks for sharing that, Doctor."

"Any time, Commander. Oh, our new asari crewmember has set up in the storage room back there, if

you'd like to talk to her."

"Thanks. I'll do that."

Liara T'Soni was arranging supplies and furniture – well, a cot and a desk, anyway. She fumbled a bit as I entered the room.

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

"How are you feeling?"

"Doctor Chakwas assures me I am going to be fine. I was impressed with her knowledge of asari physiology."

"You're in good hands. Doctor Chakwas knows what she's doing."

"I never thanked you properly for saving me from the geth, Commander. If you hadn't shown up..."

"I'm just glad we got there in time."

"So am I. I know you took a chance bringing me aboard this ship. I have seen the way your crew looks at me. They do not trust me. But I am not like Benezia. I will do whatever I can to help you stop Saren. I promise."

"Don't worry, Liara. I trust you. I know you won't let me down."

"It means a lot to hear you say that, Commander. Thank you."

"Do you know why Benezia joined up with Saren?"

"I don't understand it. She was always outspoken about the need for the asari to become more involved in shaping galactic events. Maybe she thought allying herself with Saren would somehow be for the greater good in the long run. At least, I hope so."

"This hurts you, doesn't it?"

"None of this makes any sense to me. I have not spoken to Benezia in many years, but I know her! Something changed."

"What about your...father? Is that the right word?"

"My species is mono-gendered. 'Male' and 'female' have no real meaning for us. We still require a partner to reproduce. We use feminine pronouns in your languages because our physical appearance resembles your females. But Benezia rarely spoke of her partner, though I know my father – if you want to use that term, was another asari."

"You make that sound strange."

"There are many inaccuracies surrounding our mating rituals. You may have heard the term

'parthenogenesis,' but we still require a partner to reproduce. This second parent, however, may be of any species or sex. The union is physical as well as mental. We take the genetic traits of our partners and meld them with our own. The child is always asari, of course. But you asked about my father – if you want to use that term. My mother rarely spoke of her partner, but I know it was another asari. Union with our own kind is no longer common. Not for the purposes of reproduction. Most asari believe it weakens our species. I am what is sometimes called a 'pureblood.' It is a great insult among my people. It is possible Benezia's partner was embarrassed by their union. She may have been too ashamed to publicly acknowledge me as her offspring."

"Maybe she wanted to meet you but couldn't. Something could have happened to her. Maybe she passed away."

"You might be right. I hope you are. But I have no way to know for sure. Benezia never spoke of her partner. Whatever happened, it caused too much pain to dwell on it. She raised me by herself, though that is not uncommon. Many asari raise their children alone, particularly if the 'father' species is short-lived. Often, the partner will pass on long before the child reaches maturity."

"You asari live for a thousand years. What happens when your partner dies?"

"Few sapient species live as long as my kind. We have learned to take a philosophical approach to our unions. We do not focus on the inevitable loss of our partners. Instead, we enjoy the time we spend with them. And even after they are gone, a part of them lives on in us. The union is a connection that transcends both time and space."

"Thank you. I'll let you get settled in."

Tali'Zorah was hanging out in engineering, as usual.

"Oh. Hello, Shepard."

"You sound down. Are you okay?"

"I don't know. Your ship is amazing, and your crew's been really great to me. Especially your chief engineer. But I just feel...out of place. The Normandy runs so smooth it feels like we're not even moving. And the engines are so quiet. How do you sleep at night?"

"I find it rather peaceful. Don't worry, you'll get used to it."

"But it's more than just the silence. The ship feels so empty; it's like half the crew is missing. Back home, I couldn't wait to go on my Pilgrimage. I couldn't wait to get away from the crowds. Now that I'm out here, I kind of miss them."

"Sometimes we don't appreciate what we have until it's gone."

"That's true. I'm starting to wonder if that's what the Pilgrimage is really about. It's given me a whole new perspective on my people and our culture. You know, there's always a few who go on their Pilgrimages and never return. I always assumed something bad happened to them, but maybe they just wanted a different life."



"You do plan to return to the Migrant Fleet, right?"

"I could never abandon my people, Shepard. I will go back eventually. But we have to stop Saren first. Otherwise, I might not have a home to go back to. Thanks for stopping by."

"Of course. Come and talk to me any time."

Out in the cargo bay, Wrex flagged me down.

"So, we've got Saren on the run," he said.

"Yes we do. It won't be long now. Saren's good, but I'm better."

"Good? He's rotten. To the core. I could tell as soon as I met him."

"Wait, you knew Saren? Why didn't you tell me this sooner?"

"I would've if I'd thought it was important."

"I think I'd like to hear about it just the same."

"This was a while ago. A bunch of mercs were bragging about a job out near the edges of the Terminus Systems. They said it paid well and the boss was never around to ride them. They said he was looking for more men, too. So, I checked it out."

"I didn't know Saren was openly recruiting mercs."

"It wasn't that open. And he only showed his face once. We'd been raiding ships in the area for months when we took out this massive cargo freighter. Our biggest haul yet. I was on board checking bodies for valuables, looking for some extra credits. That's when I saw him."

"What did Saren want with the ship?"

"I don't know what he wanted. He was just moving through the ship. Watching. Couple of the mercs called him by name, but he never spoke to them. Never spoke to anyone. I had a really bad feeling about him, so I got the hell out. Didn't even wait to get paid."

"Whose ship was it?"

"It was a volus trading vessel. Big one, lots of guards. But they were no match for us."

"What kind of cargo was the freighter carrying? What was Saren after?"

"I don't know. All I saw on that ship was food and medical supplies. There were some basic weapons, but nothing big. If there was anything of value on that ship, I didn't see it. That's why I didn't mention it sooner."

"That's the only time you saw him?"

"Yeah. Didn't even know who he was. Still wouldn't if I hadn't joined up with you. But my instincts were right. Every other merc on that ship turned up dead within a week. Every damn one."

"Thanks, Wrex. That's one more piece of the puzzle."

"Shepard."

Williams was closing up her locker nearby.

"Commander. You have a minute to talk?"

"Of course. I keep an open-door policy. If you have any concerns, lay them on me."

"All right. I know things are different aboard the Normandy, but – I'm concerned about the aliens. With all due respect, Commander, should they have full access to the ship?"

"You don't trust their motives because they're not human. They may not serve the Alliance, Chief, but they're allies. At least as far as Saren goes."

"This is the most advanced ship in the Alliance Navy. I don't think we should give them free reign to poke around the vital systems. Engines. Sensors. Weapons."

"You don't trust the Alliance's allies?"

"I'm not sure I'd call the Council races allies. We – humanity, I mean – have to learn to rely on ourselves."

"Standing up for ourselves doesn't mean standing alone."

"I don't think we should turn down allies. I just think we shouldn't bet everything on them staying allies. As noble as the Council members seem now, if their backs are against the wall, they'll abandon us."

"You've got a pessimistic view of the universe, Williams."

"A pessimist is what an optimist calls a realist. Look, if you're fighting a bear, and the only way for you to survive is to sic your dog on it and run, you'll do it. As much as you love your dog, it isn't human. It's not racism. Not really. Members of their species will always be more important to them than humans are."

"These seem like deeply-held beliefs, Williams. What made you think this way?"

"My family's defended the Alliance since it was founded. My father, grandfather, great-grandmother – they all picked up the rifle and swore the Oath of Service. I guess we just tend to think of Earth's interests as our own."

"It doesn't sound like you've worked with aliens before."

"No, sir. Mainly I've been groundside. Part of the surface garrison forces. I did get rotation on a space

station for training. 'Every marine, a rifleman; every rifleman, zero-gee certified.'"

"That's odd. Your record is spotless, and your technical scores are exemplary. You should be serving with the fleet."

Williams hesitated. "Anyway, that's why I haven't served with many aliens, Commander."

"You mentioned a big family. You're lucky. I lost my family on Mindoir. Are you related to anyone I'd have heard of?"

"Couldn't say, Commander." Again that hesitation, and she changed the subject. "I read about Mindior. The Alliance screwed the pooch on that one. Should have had a bigger garrison. Is that why you're out here? To take the fight to the pirates?"

I decided to let her keep her secret. For now. "Mainly, I wanted to serve. Protect the Alliance, save lives. You know."

"Glad to hear it. I'd hate to think you're out here for a free college education."

"All right. I can see where your concerns are coming from, Williams. But this is a multilateral mission. You're going to have to work with aliens, like it or not."

"It won't be a problem, Commander. You say 'jump,' I say 'how high.' You tell me to kiss a turian, I'll ask which cheek."

"Would you kiss anyone I ordered you to?"

"That depends, sir. If you ordered me to kiss a superior officer, that would be a violation of the regs concerning fraternization. That would make it an illegal order. I'd be required to decline, and relive you of command. Sir."

Her words were serious, but her tone of voice was flirty. I felt myself blush a bit, and excused myself before I embarrassed myself further.

Garrus Vakarian was doing some calisthenics in the spot where the Mako had been parked. Turian joints are different from humans, which made it hard to watch. I decided to interrupt.

"Commander. How are you?"

"Why did you want to become a C-Sec Officer in the first place?"

"Hm. That's a good question. There were several reasons, I guess."

"Like what?"

"Probably the same as most officers. I wanted to fight injustice, wanted to help people. I guess my father had something to do with it, too. He was C-Sec. One of the best. I grew up hearing about his accomplishments or seeing his picture on the vids after a big arrest. He's taking my resignation pretty hard."

"He's not impressed that you're going after Saren?"

"My father's a C-Sec man to the bone. 'Do things right, or don't' do them at all,' he says. He thinks I'm being too rash. Too impatient. He's worried I'll become just like Saren. He actually talked me out of becoming a Spectre when I was younger. For the same reasons."

"You were asked to be a Spectre?"

"Well, I was targeted as a possible Spectre candidate. Me and about a thousand other turian military recruits. I could have received special training, but my father didn't like it. He despises the Spectres. He hates the idea of someone having unlimited power with no accountability. He wouldn't like you, Commander. No offense."

"Not all Spectres are like Saren, you know."

"Of course not. But Saren's not going to play by our rules. C-Sec's rules. If you want to nail Saren, you need to send someone who isn't restricted by policies and procedures."

"Just because you can break the rules, doesn't mean you should. I don't need to stoop to Saren's level to stop him. And neither do you, Garrus."

"I see what you mean, but...I'll think about it."

I headed up to the bridge and found Pressley tapping away on his console near the galaxy map.

"Commander, do you have a moment?"

"Of course, XO. What can I do for you?"

"Im just not sure about having non-humans on our ship."

"Speak freely, Pressly. I want to know if you have a problem with non-humans."

"It's not that, Commander. Humanity has always handled its own problems. Saren attacked one of our colonies. We should be the ones to stop them. We don't need their help."

"This is bigger than humanity. Saren's a threat to every species in the galaxy. And I'll welcome anyone who wants to help me bring him down."

"I guess so. Maybe I'm just stuck in the old ways of thinking. Don't worry, Commander. This won't be a problem."

My last stop for the day was to get to know Joker. There's not much for a pilot to do when cruising between stars, so he seemed happy to talk.

"Commander. Something you need?"

"I like to get to know my crew. Mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"I can see where this is going. You did a background check on me, didn't you? Well, I'll tell you the same thing I told the Captain. You want me as your pilot. I'm not good. I'm not even great. I'm the best damn helmsman in the Alliance fleet! Top of my class in flight school? I earned that. All those commendations in my file? I earned every single one. Those weren't given to me as charity for my disease."

"What are you talking about? Are you sick?"

"You mean – You mean you didn't know? Ah, crap. Okay...I've got Vrolik's Syndrome. Brittle bone disease. The bones in my legs never developed properly. They're basically hollow. Too much force and they'll shatter. Even with crutches and my leg braces it's hard to get around. One wrong step and crack! It's very dramatic. But I've learned to manage my condition, Commander. Put the Normandy in my hands and I'll make her dance for you. Just don't ask me to get up and dance, unless, you know, you like the sound of snapping shin bones."

"Not particularly. I'll leave you to it, Joker."

-----Chapter 7: Adventures on the Citadel, Part 2-----

The Normandy docked with the Citadel again, and XO Pressly informed me that resupply would take the better part of a day. I ordered that the crew take some shore leave in the mean time. I also spent some time wandering around.

## SNAP INSPECTION

*From the Codex:*

*The homeworld and capital of humanity is entering a new golden age. The resource wealth of a dozen settled colonies and a hundred industrial outposts flows back to Earth, fueling great works of industry, commerce, and art. The great cities are greening as arcology skyscrapers and telecommuting allow more efficient use of land.*

*Earth is still divided among nation-states, though all are affiliated beneath the overarching banner of the Systems Alliance. While every human enjoys longer and better life than ever, the gap between rich and poor widens daily. Advanced nations have eliminated most genetic disease and pollution. Less fortunate regions have not progressed beyond 20th century technology, and are often smog-choked, overpopulated slums.*

*Sea levels have risen two meters in the last 200 years, and violent weather is common due to environmental damage inflicted during the late 21st century. The past few decades, however, have seen significant improvement due to recent technological advances.*

Immediately upon exiting the Normandy, I was met by an Alliance Admiral, who demanded my attention.

"Rear Admiral Mikhailovich, Fifth Fleet. At ease."

I saluted. "Commander Shepard, SSV Normandy. We weren't told to expect you, sir. I would have

prepared a formal greeting."

"Spare me the pleasantries. You don't know who I am, do you? I command the 63<sup>rd</sup> Scout Flotilla. You and the Normandy were slated for my unit after shakedown. Then the Council got their paws...claws...tentacles...whatever...They got them on our ship. And you."

"I still serve the Alliance, sir. As a Spectre, I can advance our interests to the Council."

"Hmph. You still know what color your blood is, Shepard? I don't begrudge the politicians' decision to throw you to the Council. It's an...opportunity. I do begrudge this overdesigned piece of tin, though."

"The Normandy is a fine ship, sir. She's served us well so far."

"It's a gimmick, Commander. Useless in a stand-up fight. This experiment diverted billions from our appropriations bills. For the same price, we could've had a heavy cruiser. But no, we had to make nice to the turians. Throw money at a co-developed boondoggle. I'm here to make an inspection, Commander. Normandy is an Alliance ship. I intend to see she's up to snuff."

"Please do. I think you'll find everything in order, Admiral." I stepped aside.

"I'll just bet. Wait here. I won't be long."

I cooled my heels on the gangway while the admiral took his tour. He returned in a worryingly short amount of time.

"Commander, I'm not happy."

"I'm sorry to hear that, sir"

Who designed that CIC? Putting the commander aft of everyone else is inefficient. What if he needs to discuss with the operators toward the bow?"

"Modified turian style. They prefer commanders looking over their subordinates, rather than in the middle of them. We wanted to see how effectively we can command with that setup."

"Hm. Reasonable goal. But they should have studied that in a lab rather than on a front-line warship. I had to shake my head at that drive core of yours. 120 billion credits of element zero to make this thing able to move without giving itself away. You realize we could make drive cores for 12,000 fighters with that money? What good is it to hide for a few hours, anyway? Useless!"

"Early critics said the same thing about early aircraft, submarines, and tanks. We can loiter in an enemy system and monitor traffic, or drop infiltration teams on enemy worlds. Normandy can be more effective than the salarian Special Tasks Group."

"Maybe, maybe. But that's not the job of a proper warship. We're supposed to find and kill the nemy fleet, not count how many times their garrison goes to the bathroom. And we need to talk about your crew, Commander. Krogan? Asari? Turians? What were you thinking, Commander? You can't allow alien nationals free access to Alliance equipment!"

He forgot to mention our quarian, but I wasn't about to bring her up. "Between Saren and the geth, we have enough enemies out here. Treating other species with suspicion and distrust won't win hearts and minds."

"This assumes the hearts and minds are worth winning. That hasn't been proven yet. You have anything else to say, Commander? Any other justifications for the state of this vessel?"

"I think the Normandy is a good ship, sir. Even if you disagree, you have to see that her joint construction and multilateral crew make the Alliance look better."

"Very well. I'm not convinced Normandy isn't a waste of taxpayer mondye. But I am convinced that you believe otherwise. And that you'll use it to its best ability. I'll be submitting a report to the Joint Military Council. It will not be as...negative as I had planned. Good hunting, Commander Shepard. Make us proud."

I returned the Admiral's salute, and he marched off.

## PLANTING A BUG

*From the Codex:*

*Real-time communication is possible thanks to networks of expensive mass relay comm buoys that can daisy-chain a transmission via lasers.*

*Comm buoys are maintained in patterns built outward from each mass relay. The buoys are little more than a cluster of primitive, miniature mass relays. Each individual buoy is connected to a partner on another buoy in the network, forming a corridor of low-mass space. Tightbeam communications lasers are piped through these "tubes" of FTL space, allowing virtually instantaneous communication to anywhere on the network. The networks connect across regions by communications lasers through the mass relays.*

*With this system, the only delay is the light lag between the source or destination and the closest buoy. So long as all parties remain within half a light-second (150,000 km) of buoys, seamless real time communications are possible. Since buoys are maintained in all traveled areas, most enjoy unlimited instant communications. Ships only suffer communications lag when operating off established deep space routes, around uninhabited outer system gas giants, and other unsettled areas.*

I entered C-Sec HQ and noticed the reporter, Emily Wong, looking defeated. I had heard an advertisement about a recent story she'd published about exposing a massive crime syndicate. Several politicians were implicated, apparently.

"Miss Wong. Was my friend Garrus Vakarian able to help you out?"

"What? Oh, Commander Shepard, yes. That story turned out great. I'm working on another story now. Say, maybe you could help me with this one. I'm investigating traffic controller conditions now, and I wondered if you could help."

"That seems like a step down from wide-scale corruption."

"Actually, in a way, it's more important. This isn't about people getting rich. This is about safety. I've

heard rumors that the space traffic controllers are overworked to a dangerous degree. I can't get into the control room, but you could. If you planted a bug inside, I could crack the story."

"Everyone knows space traffic controllers are overworked. How is this news?"

"There's a difference between overworked and dangerous. Traffic at the Citadel has increased by 300% in the last century, but traffic controller resources haven't kept up. We already have seventy last-minute wave-offs per week. Do we have to wait for a full-blown disaster?"

"If you crack this story, what's likely to happen?"

"Ideally, there will be calls to improve working conditions by hiring more controllers and upgrading systems. The Council won't pay for improvements voluntarily. This story will provide that pressure."

"What will this bug allow you to pick up?"

"Just audio and video. I'm not trying to tap into the traffic control system, if that's what you're worried about. I just need to hear and see them in order to correlate their activity with traffic efficiency."

"This bug you want me to plant – could it interfere with traffic signals or communications?"

"Absolutely not. I made certain that the frequencies it uses won't interfere with anything."

"Okay. You've convinced me. I can't promise anything, but I'll see what I can do. Give me the bug."

"Excellent," she said as she handed me a small, innocuous-looking device. "Just place it on a terminal with a good view of the area. Thank you again for your help. In the long run, this story is going to save lives."

We went our separate ways. In spite of Miss Wong's reassurances, I enlisted Tali to take a look at the bug, and she declared that it was a passive recording device, and perfectly safe. With the reassurance of my most trusted tech expert, I went to Citadel Control.

A C-Sec officer stopped me, but apparently they give tours. I wasn't all that interested, but I waited a few minutes for the next group to form, then found an inconspicuous location to plant the bug. I'm no spy, but I hoped no one would notice the little device. As I left Citadel Control, I contacted the reporter.

"I'm already getting readings," she said. "This is going to make a great story! Thank you so much for your help!"

"It was no problem. Good luck with your story. It deserves to be heard."

"I appreciate your support. I hope this will save some lives in the long run."

FAMILY MATTER

*From the Codex:*

*In the 22nd century, manipulation of the human genome became commonplace. Techniques of genetic*



*engineering advanced to the point where the rich could custom-build fetuses that grew into stronger, smarter, and more attractive adults. In more permissive regions, custom-designed life forms and 'uplifted' animals occupied an ill-defined niche between 'property' and 'sapient being'.*

*Travel to planets with unique forms of life brought an awareness that Earth's unique biodiversity could be lost if spliced and hybridized to gain useful alien qualities. The Sudham-Wolcott Genetic Heritage Act was passed by the Systems Alliance Parliament in 2161. It imposed sharp restrictions on controversial uses of genetic engineering, but provided government subsidies for beneficial applications.*

I was strolling through the Presidium near Barla Von's bank, when I overheard a couple arguing.

"I'm telling you, this is not what Jake would want," said the man.

"Who are you to tell me what my husband would want?" replied the woman.

"I'm the only person making sense right now! You're endangering your baby!"

"This baby is the only thing I have left of Jake! I don't care what you think, Michael! It's my decision!"

"I know you're hurting, Rebekah, but don't let your grief hurt your baby, too!"

I saw no baby around. It was time to stick my nose in other people's business.

"Can I help with anything?" I asked.

"Commander Shepard? Wow. Uh, perhaps you can talk some sense into her."

The woman briefly raised her eyebrows, but then: "I don't need anyone to 'talk sense' into me, Michael! I'm not undergoing the treatments!"

"My sister-in-law here is pregnant, and she's refused to let the baby undergo gene therapy in utero."

"I thought gene therapy was common," I said, uncertain about the law. "I'm certain that she has a good reason. I'd like to hear both sides. "

"My husband, Jacob, died from a rare heart condition several months ago."

"There's a chance that the baby could develop the same heart condition, but routine gene therapy can eliminate it."

"A very small chance, Michael. And extranet reports say the therapy could harm the child!" said the woman, clearly concerned.

"It's less dangerous than the genetic enhancements that every soldier in the Alliance receives!"

These were for very minor defects, and I was no worse for having undergone them, but they both had a point. Time to get more information about the risks. And maybe calm them down in the process.

I turned to the woman. "What are the chances that your child will develop the heart condition?"

"According to the doctors, there's a one-in-fifty chance. And if my baby develops the condition, medical treatments are available."

"Which are nowhere near as effective as simply getting the gene therapy in utero!" said the man.

"What are the chances that gene therapy could hurt the fetus?" I asked the man.

"One in three hundred at most."

"But extranet articles say there could still be long-term complications we don't know about! Don't you understand? If my baby is that one in three hundred, I'll wonder if I...I killed my baby for nothing!"

"I know you want the best for your brother's child," I said to the man, "but this isn't your decision."

"Damn it, she's not choosing! She's acting blindly out of grief!"

"Of course she is! So are you. Yelling at her won't bring your brother back."

"I'm the closest thing to a father this baby is going to have!"

"You're afraid you'll lose the baby, just like you lost your brother."

"This baby is the only thing my brother...It's all I have left of him. I need to know that the baby's safe."

"Then why didn't you say that instead of yelling at me? It's all I have left, too, Michael."

"I was scared. I'm sorry. I just want Jacob's child to be safe. I want to give him that much."

"We will. I promise." The woman turned to me as they left. "Thank you talking to us, Commander Shepard. I guess we needed an outside person to talk some sense into both of us."

## I REMEMBER ME

*From the Codex:*

*In the early 2160s, the Alliance began aggressive colonization of worlds in the Skyllian Verge, much to the dismay of the batarians who had been developing the region for several decades. In 2171, the batarians petitioned the Council to declare the Verge a "zone of batarian interest". The Council refused, however, declaring unsettled worlds in the region open to human colonization.*

*In protest, the batarians closed their Citadel embassy and severed official diplomatic relations with the Council, effectively becoming a rogue state. They instigated a proxy war in the Verge by funneling money and weapons to criminal organizations, urging them to strike at human colonies.*

*Hostilities peaked with the Skyllian Blitz of 2176, an attack on the human capital of Elysium by batarian-funded pirates and slavers. In 2178, the Alliance retaliated with a crushing assault on the moon of Torfan, long used as a staging base by batarian-backed criminals. In the aftermath, the batarians retreated into their own systems, and are now rarely seen in Citadel space.*

As I exited to the docks on my way back to the Normandy, I was stopped by a C-Sec officer.

"Commander Shepard? Sorry to bother you. My name is Lieutenant Girard. There's a young woman here, um...She was rescued from batarian slavers a few weeks ago. She's from Mindoir. I guess she was taken, In the raid on your town."

"You mean she was taken in the raid that killed my parents." I swallowed. Hard. I hadn't thought about that in a long time. I also hadn't known anyone else had survived."She's been a slave for the past 13 years? Is she all right?"

"Not really. She's a little messed up. She got free somehow. Grabbed a gun from one of my guys. Now she's holed up over there behind those crates. She, uh...she says she wants to die. I hoped you'd talk to her. It's a long shot, but you went through the same thing. The raid. I figured maybe you could talk her out of her tree."

"I'm not trained for that, but I'll do what I can."

"Anything you can do would be great. I don't want to...she's been through enough. I've got a sniper positioned, but I don't think we'll need him. She's only a danger to herself. We've got a sedative to calm her down, but we can't get close to her. Every step we take gets her more wound up."

"You seemed awfully worried about her."

"I – I'm just doing my job, Commander."

"Okay. Give me the hypospray. I hope I don't need it. Tell your men to stand by."

"Don't push her too hard. If she seems liable to pull the trigger, back off. Or walk away. I'm willing to wait her out. Good luck, Commander."

I put as much distance between myself and the crates that the woman was hiding behind so as not to startle her, but she was jumpy as soon as she saw me. She pointed a pistol at me, but I had my kinetic barrier up. Nevertheless, I stopped in place several meters from her so as not to scare her. Her head was shaved and scabby, and her ragged clothing hung loosely from her emaciated form.

"S—Stop! What do you – What are you..."

"My name is Shepard. Girard sent me to talk to you. What's your name?"

"Animals don't get names. The masters put their symbols on her. Hot metal all over her back. She screams when they do it."

"You're not an animal. Your parents: what did they call you? Do you remember them?"

"She remembers a lot of things. Talitha. They call her that. Sh—She doesn't remember the rest. Leave her alone." She lowered her pistol.

"What's the last thing you remember from Mindoir?" I took a step towards her while she seemed calm.

"Fires. Smells of smoke and burning meat. Animals screaming as the masters cage them. As they put metal to their backs. Put the wires in their brains. She pretends to be dead. If she's dead, she can't work. But they know. She hopes they'll leave. But they put her in the pen. She didn't fight. She was already broken when they put the wires in."

I took another step. "With everything that happened that day, no one could blame you for hoping they'd just go away."

"She ran. She can blame her. Stupid! She's stupid and she deserves to be dead!"

"How did you get here? Did you escape?"

"She can't escape. They have chains. Wires. Needles. You go too far, they take your brains away. Animals like her come. Animals with guns. They make the masters explode. She tries to fix the masters. So they won't be mad at her. She puts all the reds and purples back in, but they don't move. The other animals take her."

The 'animals like her' were probably the Alliance marines who shut down the batarian slavers and rescued the slaves.

"The marines destroyed your world. As bad as it was, that was still the only world you knew. You didn't know them, so they weren't safe."

"She doesn't want to see other animals. They're not real. They can't be real. They can't see her. If the animals can see her, then this is real. But it can't be. The wires. The chains. The hitting. This doesn't happen to her. It's another girl. A dirty girl. A stupid girl. She deserves it! It—it happens to her. Doesn't it? They see her, so it's real. She doesn't want it to be real."

I took another step. "What happened to your parents?"

"There's—she sees them. They're yelling. Run Hide. They hit the masters. But the masters, they have lights and hoses. Daddy's—He's melting! Sh—she doesn't want to see that. Don't make her look! Stupid, stupid!"

"Listen to me. It's not your fault. You're not responsible. The slavers killed your parents. You didn't."

"No! She doesn't think about it! It doesn't happen! Daddy's at work. Mommy's making dinner. Go away!"

"I was on Mindoir, too. My parents died in the raid, too."

"Lying. You get hit for lying. Get the buzz or the burning. Can't be there. Why are you alive? Why are you—why aren't you like her? Broken. Only fit to dig and carry."

"An explosion knocked me out. I was knocked out. When I woke up, I was under some rubble. I was the only one alive. They must have thought I was a corpse. An Alliance patrol found me."

"You lose your mommy and daddy. But you don't dig. You don't carry. You stand up. She wishes she

could stand up."

"I'm going to take a step towards you now. Okay?" I took a step. Only a couple more and I'd be able to reach her.

"No! She's no good. Don't want to be handled again!"

Getting any closer to her seemed risky, so I reached out with the sedative hypospray. "Talitha, this will make you sleep. If you fall asleep, they'll take you to a place where you can get better."

Talitha hesitated, then reached out to take the hypo. She examined the device in her hand. "Will she have bad dreams?"

I repeated the words that the Alliance psychologist said to me all those years ago: "You'll dream of a warm place. And when you wake up, you'll be in it."

"She'd like that," she said, and she injected the sedative. "It hurts when she—when I remember me."

She fainted, and I caught her in my arms. I called for Girard to come pick her up.

"Is she all right?" he asked as he ran up.

"I got her to take the sedative."

"Thanks, Commander. That means a lot. I didn't want to hurt her. It's just, when I see her curled into a ball, shivering...She was only six when they took her. Why the hell are we out here if we can't even keep one girl safe?"

"I don't have any answers for you, Lieutenant. We're doing what we can."

"Will that ever be enough? Thanks for your help, Commander. We are taking her to a counseling center. They'll help her get better."

## THE FAN – PART 2

*From the Codex:*

*The homeworld and capital of humanity is entering a new golden age. The resource wealth of a dozen settled colonies and a hundred industrial outposts flows back to Earth, fueling great works of industry, commerce, and art. The great cities are greening as arcology skyscrapers and telecommuting allow more efficient use of land.*

*Earth is still divided among nation-states, though all are affiliated beneath the overarching banner of the Systems Alliance. While every human enjoys longer and better life than ever, the gap between rich and poor widens daily. Advanced nations have eliminated most genetic disease and pollution. Less fortunate regions have not progressed beyond 20th century technology, and are often smog-choked, overpopulated slums.*

*Sea levels have risen two meters in the last 200 years, and violent weather is common due to environmental damage inflicted during the late 21st century. The past few decades, however, have seen*

*significant improvement due to recent technological advances.*

Feeling like I needed a drink, I headed over to Flux. Standing outside was a vaguely familiar looking blond man.

"Hey, Commander Shepard! It's me, Conrad Verner! Remember me? There are rumors on the extranet that you've been made the first human Spectre! That's incredible!"

Ah, right. The guy I gave an autograph to. Time for some more public relations.

"The rumors are true. Being a Spectre is a big responsibility. I just want to make humanity proud."

"The vids are talking about 'Commander Shepard fighting for all of us back home.'" He made a really lame attempt at a salute. "And they also say that you don't take crap from anybody. You're showing them what humans can do. Hey, could I get your picture?"

"Uh, I suppose I don't have a problem with it, but...why?"

"You're a hero, Shepard. Decades from now, humanity is going to remember you. And I'll have your picture. Just hold out your gun and pose like you're going to shoot someone."

I was tempted to shoot this guy, but I restrained myself and aimed at the wall.

"Perfect!" He took the shot, and I blinked at the flash. "Thanks again, Commander! I'm going to hang this in my living room! My wife will love it!"

I sighed as he left. I really did need that drink.

-----Chapter 8: Feros-----

*From the Codex:*

*Feros is a habitable world in the Attican Beta cluster. Two-thirds of the habitable surface is covered with the ruins of a crumbling Prothean megatropolis. In the millennia since the Prothean extinction, the ruins have been picked over by looters many times.*

*Feros was considered a poor prospect for colonization, as little open ground remains for agriculture. The only sizable fresh water sources are the poles, which are tapped by the decaying Prothean aqueduct systems. The dead cities, while in good condition considering their antiquity, are of uncertain stability. Ground level is congested by a dozen meters of fallen debris, and the air is fouled by dust.*

*In 2178, the human ExoGeni Corporation announced its intention to place a permanent colony on Feros, to thoroughly explore the ruins. The pioneer settlement was placed on the upper levels of several intact skyscrapers, using the surviving Prothean aqueducts and rooftop hydroponic gardens to support the population.*

Ambassador Udina had mentioned sightings of geth in the Attican Beta system. Captain Anderson had mentioned the presense of a new human colony there, built on the ruins of a Prothean city. Geth plus Protheans equals Saren, ergo I chose our next destination as Feros.

No one responded to our hails as we approached. We found a spaceport near where the colony was supposedly located and docked anyway. Looking out the Normandy's windows, it seemed quiet. Too quiet. I ordered my squad to gear up, then I led them out onto the gangway, weapons at the ready and biotics primed.

A man stood at the edge of the platform, looking dazed. I approached and introduced myself.

"We saw your ship," he said. "Fai Dan wants to speak with you, immediately."

"Who's that?"

"He's our leader. He needs your help to prepare for the geth. They're making a new push. Please, up the stairs past the freighter."

The man pointed his directions, and was immediately blown up by a rocket. Evidently, the geth were already making their push. My squad took cover, and returned fire. It was a small group of robots, and we made short work of them.

After the dust settled, I lead our way up some stairs and found a barricade manned by human colonists. They were relieved to see a heavily-armed squad, but none seemed willing to talk, and all just suggested that I "go talk to our leader, Fai Dan."

There was a small freighter parked in the middle of a courtyard, which we circumnavigated. A woman was working a control panel for a crane and seemed frustrated, but refused Tali's technical help, instead insisting that "the heart of the colony must be protected," and that we speak with Fai Dan. These people were weird.

I neared two colonists just standing and staring at each other. The woman was well armed, and the man with the buzz-cut recognized my rank insignia.

"Oh, Commander. My name is Fai Dan. I'm glad they finally sent somebody to help us," he said.

"You're a bit late, aren't you?" the woman said with a snide tone.

"Arcelia!" the man admonished. "Sorry, Commander. Everyone's on edge since --"

Fai Dan was interrupted by the telltale low clicking that geth make.

"We've got geth in the tower," the woman, Arcelia announced as she manned a barricade.

"Protect the heart of the colony!" yelled Fai Dan.

My squad and I took up positions and together we pushed them back, up a stairwell to a large viewing area. It had probably been a rooftop garden at one point, but now there was a geth dropship hovering over the area. It was dull-grey and looked like a giant bug; a cross between a cockroach and a beetle, with very short legs. But there wasn't time to study it in detail, as it was dropping robots and drones. One of the robots was red and twice as big as the others, what we would later call a Prime.

In the chaos of battle, one of the smaller robots turned on one of its companions, then they both blew up after Garrus tossed a grenade at them.

"Hey, you bosh'tet!" Tali yelled. "I hacked that one!"

"Sorry," Garrus apologized.

The geth dropship ran out of robots to drop and flew off. We mopped up the remaining geth and spread out to ensure that the area was indeed clear. I wanted to know more about hacking, so I pulled Tali aside as we made our way back down to the colony.

"Tali, you can hack the geth to fight on our side?" I asked.

"Yes, but the effect is temporary, and it takes me a few minutes to set up."

"That's amazing. But next time, call it out so we know not to shoot the hacked one."

"I will, Shepard. I was also thinking of adding a line to the code that'll change the color of their lights while the hack is active."

"Even better, thank you."

Fai Dan and Arcelia were there to greet us, and they thanked us profusely.

"This colony looks like it's in pretty bad shape," I observed.

"It is. The geth have set up a command post down in the service tunnels. They've cut off our power and our water, and we're running low on food."

"I could evacuate you on the Normandy."

"Ah, thank you Commander," Fai Dan hesitated. "But there are too many of us to fit on your ship. I'm not going to leave any of my people here. Besides, this is our home. I won't abandon it. We won't abandon each other."

"Um, okay." I said. These people were very weird. A cult, maybe? But they were human and in trouble, and I wasn't going to let them die. "How do we get down to the tunnels?"

Fai Dan directed us back to the stairwell, but down this time. We found some controls on a water pipe, and I left our tech expert Tali to figure them out, and Williams to watch her back. The rest of us continued on to find a side passage guarded by rocket drones and a couple of Krogan mercenaries. I could see the communications equipment behind them.

Wrex charged in to keep the mercs occupied. Garrus started sniping the drones while I covered him. Alenko created a singularity off to the side, and Liara used her biotics to lift and pull the krogan mercs into it. Wrex blasted them to pieces with his shotgun as they floated helplessly.

"Hold your fire, Garrus!" I ordered. "I have an idea."



The rocket drones were focused on me, and I made my way around the room toward the geth comms equipment. I ducked behind a crate, which splintered as a rocket hit it. While the drone reloaded, I positioned myself in front of the geth computers and began waving my arms. I dodged and rolled out of the way just as the next rocket was fired, and the equipment exploded in a rain of shrapnel. With no signal to control them, the drones just shut down.

We destroyed them anyway, and returned to the main corridor. Water could be heard running through the pipes now, and Williams and Tali joined up with the rest of the squad. Further down, we came to a large garage. A disabled cargo truck was surrounded by a pack of four-legged creatures. Wrex identified them as varren. The moniker 'fish-dog' is apt, as they do indeed look like a cross between a fish and a dog.

They're fast and have long fangs, but vicious as they are, my squad made short work of the pack.

"Gah, these things stink," remarked Williams as she approached one of the corpses and pinched her nose. "How can anyone eat that?"

"Really? Varren is considered a delicacy among my people," Liara countered.

"Whatever." I said. "The meat will sustain the colonists. We'll let them deal with carcasses. What about that truck? Is its battery any good?"

Alenko opened up a panel. "Seems intact. Ergh. A bit heavy, though," he said as he gave it a tug.

Wrex sighed and easily grabbed the power cell with one hand. "Got it. Let's go."

On our way out of the garage, I saw a man staring further into the tunnel.

"You don't want to go down there," he said as he turned to address me.

"What are you doing down here?" I asked.

"Nothing I should be, and anything I shouldn't," he replied, incomprehensibly. Then he doubled over in pain and grunted. "That was a good one. Very intense," he said as he recovered, panting.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Just invoking the master's whip. Helps remind me I'm still alive. You're here for the geth, aren't you? You're not the only one interested in those...things."

"What do you mean? Who else is looking for the geth?"

"Not looking for; looking to get rid of. They're a thorn in the side of the – wlaaagh! Agh!" He grabbed his head in pain. "Trying to get to the – aaaaiiee!" he doubled over in pain again, then started laughing manically. "Gyahh-ha-ha-ha! Ahahahaha!"

"Let's go. He can't help us," said Garrus.

"Is there anything we can do to help you?" asked Liara.

"Do you even want help?" wondered Williams.

"Help me?" answered the strange man. "No. No one can help me now. I would rather die fighting."

"Fighting what?" I asked. I thought that perhaps this guy knew what the geth were after.

"Not that kind of fight. It's like running through a thorn bush. The more you struggle...Ask Fai Dan. Ask him about the – aaagh! Just...just leave me."

I shrugged and lead my squad back up to the colony. The thanks we got was...subdued; lacking in praise. The people's reactions were zombie-like. But the colony was safe, fed, and powered. It was time to confront Fai Dan about this odd behavior.

"The colony's secure. Thanks to you, Commander"

"I'm just glad your colony is safe."

"I appreciate your concern...and your efforts against the geth."

"They may have been slowed, but they'll be back. They always come back," said Arcelia.

"Help me find what the geth are after, and you'll all get out of here alive."

"We don't know what they're after," said Fai Dan, a little too eagerly. "They came, they attacked us. That's all we know. Their main base is at ExoGeni headquarters. A good place to start looking if you want answers."

"What's ExoGeni?" I asked.

"It's the company most of us worked for before the attacks. They fund this colony. They specialize in colonization. In return for bankrolling the colony, we work for them. Their main goal is the retrieval of valuable artifacts or resources. Except there isn't anything here. Or if there is, we didn't find it."

"I wonder if that's what the geth are looking for?"

"Shepard," Liara piped up. "My people have been to this planet before and found nothing. At least, that's what my records show."

"As she said, we've never found anything of value," agreed Fai Dan. Again he was a little too quick. Too eager.. "Of course, the geth could know something we don't."

I tried a different tack. "There's a strange man down in the tunnels. He seemed to know something, but wouldn't tell us – or couldn't."

"That would be Ian. He's very sick."

"He seems to be more than just sick."

"He hasn't been the same since the attack. We tried to help him, but he wouldn't listen to us."

"Don't you have medical supplies? Something to help him?"

"I wish it was that simple. Ian was a good man I'd like to have with us."

"Actually, a lot of your people are behaving strangely."

"We're a close-knit group, Commander. Most of us have lost loved ones, friends... These aren't trained soldiers. Nobody taught us how to deal with the horrors of war! This is our home. We've watched the geth slowly destroy everything that is important to us. Don't judge us too harshly. Please, Commander. I'd prefer not to talk about it any more."

"If you want to help us further, you'll need to go to ExoGeni headquarters," added Arcelia. "The skyway leads directly there. You can't miss it. Of course, there's an army of geth between here and there."

"What kind of resistance can I expect?"

"They landed at least one geth ship at ExoGeni, and I've seen large walking tanks on the skyway. Expect a hard fight. Good luck, Commander."

With that, Fai Dan gave me directions to the Skyway, then dismissed me and went off to check on his people. I rounded up my squad and we went up the stairwell halfway, then exited onto an elevated roadway. I made the mistake of looking down. It was a long way. I could make out a lot of rubble, shrouded in a thin mist. Looking ahead, the skyway appeared to be sturdy, but it was several kilometers to the next skyscraper, and binoculars revealed the walking tanks – armatures – that Arcelia had mentioned. I contacted the Normandy.

"Joker, bring the ship around to my position and drop off the Mako," I ordered.

"No can do, Commander. The geth have the area locked down pretty tight. We'd make an easy target for them."

"All right. We'll look for another way."

I ordered my squad to look for another way. Maybe there was a maintenance level we could sneak through and under. Tali found a hatch in the floor, but it looked like a tight squeeze. Especially for Wrex.

"Woah! Would you look at this!" Williams had opened a large door. "Looks like ExoGeni left us a tank!"

In the garage was an M-29 Grizzly.

"Why would ExoGeni have a tank?" asked Alenko.

"Let's not look a gift horse in the mouth," I said. "Williams, can you drive it?"

"Absolutely, Commander."

I put Garrus on the main gun, of course. Unlike the Mako, the Grizzly has openings through which the troops inside can fire their guns. Our guns. It's a slow vehicle, and we made slow but steady progress. The main gun on the tank was powerful, and Garrus's aim was so good that he could take out an armature with a single shot. I would have loved to keep it, but it was too big to fit in Normandy's cargo hold.

Kaidan started up a conversation. "So, Doctor T'Soni, if your people don't need implants to use biotics, how come asari don't use biotics more often?"

"While the asari have natural biotic abilities, not all have the desire nor the skill to use their abilities effectively."

"Are you kidding? To have that ability, without implants, and choose not to learn? I'll never understand the asari. But it does explain that armor."

"What do you mean?" Liara looked down and examined herself.

"Well, it's a little crooked. If I may..." Kaidan reached out a hand and paused.

"Um.... All right..."

"Well, this strap goes like this, and then..." H made a few adjustments to Liara's armor.

"Oh, yes. That is much more comfortable, now. And I can move my right arm properly! Thank you, Lieutenant!"

"Call me Kaidan."

"Call me Liara."

We started picking up some radio chatter.

"The last batch went south." It was a human voice. "What are they looking for?"

"It's too weak to pinpoint," said Tali. "But there's definitely someone out there."

"Any sign of movement?" the radio continued. "Lizbeth could still be in there. It's only been a few days." It was definitely the voice of a worried mother. "She's my daughter. I'll wait as long as I have to."

The skyway entered another skyscraper, and Williams took us in. The roadway led up a series of ramps, like levels in a parking garage.

Another burst of radio chatter: "We've got movement...some kind of vehicle. Not one of the geth."

"Aha! I've got it," announced Tali. "It's coming from this building. Very nearby."

I saw some lights shining from a hallway and ordered a stop. If these were more refugees, I figured human faces would be friendliest, so I took Alenko with me and left the rest of the squad in the Grizzly. Down the hallway, a man was waving a gun around, arguing with a woman. Several other people were cowering around the room. The man pointed his pistol at me.

"That's close enough!" he said, an edge in his voice.

"Relax, Jeong," said the woman, her voice steady. "They're obviously not geth."

"Get back, Juliana," he warned her. Then he turned back to me. "Who are you? What do you want?"

After introducing myself, I suggested he put his gun down.

"Don't worry about him," said the woman, Juliana. "He only cares about 'the company.'"

"And you trust too easily, Juliana," said Jeong.

"I'm just glad to see a friendly face. I thought we were the only humans left on this planet."

"Fai Dan and some of the members of the colony are still alive," I suggested they head there.

"I thought you said they were all dead," Juliana accused Jeong.

"I said they were 'probably' all dead."

"We cleared out the geth that were threatening them," I informed them. "They're surviving, but the geth really hit them hard."

"We know what that's like," said Juliana. "Those damn synthetics are relentless."

"I'll do whatever I can to keep them away from you. But I need some information."

"What kind of information?" Jeong, ever the company man, was reluctant to share.

"Ignore him," Juliana said. "The geth are up in the ExoGeni headquarters. The next skyscraper over, just a bit further along the skyway."

"Those headquarters are private property, soldier. Remove the geth and nothing else." Jeong thought he could threaten me.

"I'm not interested in your company secrets," I said, annoyed. I turned to leave.

"Commander, before you go..." Juliana stopped me. "My daughter, Lizbeth. She's missing..."

"They shouldn't waste time poking around," interrupted Jeong. "We can do a proper accounting of our casualties after the geth are gone."

"That's my daughter you're talking about! She's still alive. I know it. She was working in the ExoGeni building when the attacks came. There are plenty of places she could hide, for a short time."

"If she's in there, I'll get her out," I promised.

"Thank you, Commander. Thank you."

"By the way, do you know what the geth are after?"

"I have no idea. We certainly haven't found anything of use. Something ExoGeni is keen to remind us of." Juliana glared at Jeong.

"We need to recoup our expenses. It's nothing personal."

"Okay. Stay put until we get back."

Alenko and I went back to the Grizzly and I ordered us to continue. Back out on the skyway, there were more geth to shoot at – two more armatures, several primes, and a half dozen of the smaller robots. None were a match for Garrus Vakarian's aim.

The next skyscraper had a geth dropship clinging to the side. Some rubble was blocking the entrance, but there was enough room for us to squeeze through on foot. I had Williams and Garrus stay in the vehicle to guard our only known exit, and to be ready to get us out if we needed to bug out in a hurry.

Once past the rubble, we found ourselves in a makeshift lobby. The obvious way forward was blocked by a force field, however. Looking around, we found a hole in the floor. It was deep, but it was the only way in.

"Looks like a one-way trip, Commander. Are you sure?" asked Alekno.

"It's the only way. We'll just have to get that force field down to get out."

The hole led to a garage full of ruined vehicles and rubble. A gunshot glanced off my kinetic barrier.

"Damn it!" exclaimed a female voice. A young woman came out from behind a boulder. "I'm so sorry. I thought you were geth. Or one of those varren."

I was getting tired of being shot at by mistake. I let out an exasperated sigh. "You're safe now. But why were you here in the first place?"

"It's my own fault. Everyone else was running and I stayed to back up data. Next thing I knew, the geth ship latched on and the power went out. I was trapped. I tried to get out, but the way was blocked."

"We'll get you out as soon as we find out what the geth are after. Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm just a research assistant for ExoGeni. I came here with my mother. I don't even know if she made it out alive."

"You must be Lizbeth. Your mother's with some others from the colony. She's safe for now."

"She's alive? Thank God. I thought I was the only one left. It's not the geth blocking the exit; it's the

energy field they put up. They don't want anyone else getting access to the --" She cut herself off and looked embarrassed.

"I'm here for the geth. It's very important that I find out what they're after."

"I don't know for certain, but I'm guessing they're here for the Thorian."

"What's a Thorian?" asked Wrex, the most traveled of us all.

"It's an indigenous life-form. ExoGeni was studying it. Look, I'll tell you everything, but we need to get out of here."

"Fair enough," I said. "Any ideas on how to do that?"

"I've noticed the geth laying power cables everywhere. You could follow those cables, but there's geth all over the place."

"You stay put. We'll go open some doors."

"Here, take my ID. This should get you past any locked doors. Good luck with that field."

The ID was attached to a lanyard, and having no pockets on my armor, I hung it around my neck. I led the squad out the other side of the garage and up some stairs, where we found a krogan arguing with a Virtual Intelligence. I motioned my squad to stay quiet and sneak up around the mercenary.

"Stupid machine!" Access encrypted files!" he growled. "No, I don't want to review protocol!"

"I am unable to comply," said the computer hologram. "Please contact your supervisor."

"Damn it. Tell me what I want or I'll blast your virtual ass into actual dust!"

"Please contact your supervisor for a Level 4 security exemption or make an appointment with -- "

"Stupid machine!"

"If there is nothing else, please step aside. There is a queue forming behind you for the use of this console."

The krogan turned around and took notice of us. "Oh, good. I really need to kill someone!"

But it was he who got killed, as Wrex, Alenko, Tali, Liara, and myself all opened fire simultaneously. I stepped over the mercenary's corpse and approached the console.

"ExoGeni Corporation reminds all staff that the discharging of weapons while on company property is strictly forbidden," announced the 'stupid machine.' "Welcome back, Research Assistant Elizabeth Baynham. What can I do for you?"

I glanced down at the ID badge around my neck. Right. "What information was the last user attempting to access?"

"Fetching data. The previous user was attempting to access details on the study of Subject Species 37, the Thorian."

"And what did you tell the krogan?"

"I was unable to provide the previous user with any relevant data. Aside from lacking proper access, there has been no new data available on Species 37. All sensors monitoring the observation post at the colony have been inactive for several cycles."

"What does the colony have to do with the Thorian?"

"Species 37 is located within the substructure of the colony."

"Summarize 'my' notes on the Thorian."

"The Thorian is a simple plant life-form that exhibits a sentient behavior uncommon with other flora. Species 37 was discovered several weeks ago when a small team was infected with spores while examining ruins near the colony. The outpost was quarantined immediately and study of the infection began. Through dispersion and the eventual inhalation of spores, it can infect and control other organisms, including humans. Within 21 days, 58% of colonists exhibited altered behavior. The colony control group has yielded interesting results. Before sensors went offline, almost 85% of all test subjects were infected. The Thorian appears to be a diffused creature. Its cognitive abilities are centered in large nerve bundles, but it receives data from kilometers of meandering tendrils. We have discovered bundles approximately one meter in diameter, but these seem insufficient to coordinate the massive sensory potential it possesses. It may simply process such stimulation slowly, or perhaps there is a nerve cluster of a greater magnitude we have not yet encountered. The Thorian does not exhibit the focused behavior of a predator. The release of spores is an act of survival, not aggression. It does trigger advanced behaviors in the humans it enslaves, but we have yet to discover whether it recognizes – or is capable of recognizing – humans as more than tools. It is sufficiently alien as to defy classification at this time. The will subversion manifests as intense pain if directives are ignored. The effect is severe enough that subjects are soon conditioned against even minor thoughts of rebellion. Observation suggests the Thorian views its thralls in a utilitarian way. Care is apparently taken to avoid injuring them, much as a craftsman avoids damaging his tools. As long as no action is taken against the creature's objectives, the subjects are free to pantomime a normal existence until specifically tasked with something."

"ExoGeni knew all along what would happen to those people," said Liara.

"It was deemed necessary to assess the true potential of Species 37."

"That's why they were acting so strange," concluded Alenko. "Maybe you should warn the Normandy."

"Good idea." I activated my comms. "Normandy, this is Shepard." All I got was static. "Come in, Pressly. Damn it. The geth must be jamming us. We've got to drop that shield and get back to the outpost. V.I., what can you tell me about the geth ship and the field it's generating?"

"I have limited data on the geth. They have effectively blocked all sensors within the facility. I have detected unusual power fluctuations, but am unable to determine the source."



I turned off the console. "All right people, suggestions?"

"If we can get the geth dropship to let go it should just fall off the building, taking the forcefield offline," suggested Tali.

"Good idea. Let's find one of those claws. Maybe there's an obvious way to get it to let go."

My squad and I cautiously made our way through the rest of the building, destroying geth and killing krogan mercenaries along the way. Very shortly, we came to a large geth arm sticking in through the wall. It was much bigger than I'd imagined it would be, but then it was hard to get a sense of scale of the dropship earlier when it was dropping robots on us. It would be a hard nut to crack.

"I can't hack into it from here," said Tali, examining the claw."

"You know," mused Wrex. "If ExoGeni had a tank lying around, maybe they've got a crate of explosives, too."

"I wouldn't put it past them. Head back to that garage where we found Lizbeth. Alekno, go with him."

Tali, Liara, and I continued to explore. Tali had an idea about where the other claws might be stuck into the building, given the configuration of the geth ship, and she was right. We encountered only a few more get robots on the other floors, and Tali's modified hacking program was useful, given our reduced squad size. We found two more claws on the two levels below. With the robots cleared out, only the force field remained to block our exit.

The squad reunited at the upper claw, where Wrex and Alenko were busy planting some explosives that they'd found.

"Why on the building, and not the claw, itself?" I asked.

"This building is old and crumbling," Alenko explained. "If we blow apart the wall, the claw won't have anything to hold on to."

"Must we destroy the building?" Liara plead. "I'd love to stay and study Prothean architecture. It's so rare to find a whole skyscraper intact."

"Focus, Liara," I said, gently. "Saren might be here, remember?"

"Yes. Of course. The mission must come first. Sorry."

Alenko and Wrex planted explosives around the other two claws, then we took cover near the forcefield at the lobby as Alenko detonated them. My ears rang and I closed my eyes against the dust that filled the room. I could hear the others coughing as I cautiously opened my eyes. I blinked away some dust and backed away from the gaping hole in the side of the skyscraper. The geth ship was gone, and there was a lovely view of more ruined skyscrapers in the distance. The sun was beginning to set through some yellow clouds.

"This was my kind of mission," said Wrex. "Kill a bunch of geth, and end things off with a huge

crash!"

My comms crackled to life. "... to shore party. Shepard, this is Pressly. Come in."

"This is Shepard, go ahead, Normandy."

"Oh, thank goodness. Commander, we've been trying to reach you, is everything all right?"

"All good here, XO. What's your status?"

"We're in lockdown here, Commander. Something happened to the colonists. They're banging on the hull, trying to claw their way inside the ship. They're freaking out!"

"They can't do any real damage, but don't let them in."

"If you say so, Commander."

"They're infected...Actually, we might be, too. Have Doctor Chakwas set up a quarantine for when we get back, and stand by for further orders."

"Aye, aye, sir. Pressly out."

Lizbeth Baynham met us on the way out of the building.

"There you are! We should get out of here. I don't think this place is safe."

"I need some answers. You knew more about the Thorian than you let on."

"I – I was afraid. I wanted to stop the tests, but they threatened me, told me I'd be next. When the geth attacked, I stayed behind to send a message to Colonial Affairs. I tried to tell them where to find the Thorian, but the power cut before I could send the message. I – I never meant for this to happen."

"Well, that's something. I'll help the colonists if you can tell me where to find the Thorian."

"The Thorian is underneath the colony, but the entrance is blocked. The colonists covered it with a cargo freighter just before the geth attacked."

"But why are the geth after the Thorian? What could Saren want with it?"

"Well, it does have unique mind-control capabilities. That's what ExoGeni was interested in."

My comms chirped again. "Normandy to shore party."

"Go ahead, Pressly."

"We're getting a lot of geth comm chatter. There's another drop ship headed your way."

"Thanks for the heads up. We're headed back, now. You heard the man," I said to my squad. "Let's move out."

"I'm coming with you," said Lizbeth. "I might be able to help...undo the mess I helped create."

Back in the Grizzly, Williams drove us back towards the colony. The geth had learned from their previous battle with our tank, though, and we took several hits. Williams barely managed to limp it back to the small ExoGeni refugee camp where it finally broke down. I ordered the squad to take inventory and rest up for the hike back to the colony while I escorted miss Baynham to her mother.

Agitated voices were echoing down the hallway.

"You can't do this, Jeong!" shouted Juliana.

"Everyone shut up! Let me think!"

The ExoGeni stooge had his gun out, keeping the dozen or so employees cowering in a corner of the room.

"Get away from her, you son of a bitch!" Lizbeth ran into the room before I could stop her. I drew my pistol.

"Hah, Shepard. Damn it!" Jeong was angry, but kept his gun pointed at his hostages. "I knew it was too much to hope the geth would kill you. I found some interesting facts about you in the ExoGeni database. I know what you did during the Blitz. But your...heroics aren't needed here."

"Not this time, Jeong. You need to back down and let them go."

"You don't understand. It's not that easy. Communications are back up. ExoGeni wants this place purged."

"This is a human colony, Jeong. You can't just re-purpose us," said Lizbeth.

"It's not just you. There's something far more valuable than a few colonists."

"You mean the Thorian," I accused. "It's taking control of the colonists. ExoGeni knew all along."

"Nobody's going to miss a few colonists."

"You're a bean-counter, Jeong. I'm a marine. Tell me, how good are those odds?"

"ExoGeni will send more assayers. They'll know what happened."

"Tell them the geth destroyed the Thorian."

"Yeah, but the infected colonists can't be here when the company men come."

"You can't just kill the colonists. It's not their fault," said Juliana.

"Pay them off," I suggested. "Make them sign a non-disclosure agreement."

"That...could work," agreed Jeong, lowering his pistol as he thought it through. "And ExoGeni gets to keep the research colony. Hmmm."

"If you kill only the Thorian, it might be enough to stop the infection. Maybe." said Lizbeth.

"It's worth a try," I said. "But I don't know if I can avoid harming the colonists."

"I think I might have a way," said Juliana. "I think you could safely use a nerve agent to neutralize the colonists. We could replace the explosives in your grenades and create a gas grenade. This building we're standing in has the manufacturing equipment to do it."

"Releasing clouds of nerve gas doesn't seem like a particularly good idea. Won't we get caught in it, too?"

"It's not like it's weapons-grade. The insecticide we use in the grow labs contains trace amounts of tetra-clopine, a neuro-muscular degenerator. If their nervous systems are already weakened, it may act as a paralyzing agent. Your combat-armor's air filters should have no problem keeping you safe."

"Sounds good. I'll get the grenades."

I got my squad to disassemble all of our grenades, and with the help of Juliana Baynham, we installed the gas pellets. The grenades distributed, I gave orders to my squad to try to avoid shooting the colonists, and instead toss the gas grenades at them.

It was a long hike back to the colony. Sure enough, as we approached, the colonists started attacking us. Helmets on, we tossed our grenades, and the folks passed out as soon as the gas hit them. Back down the stairs to the center of the colony we went, knocking out colonists as we went.

We ran out of grenades as we arrived at the crane controls. I had Tali get on them so we could lift the freighter up and get to the Thorian. As she was working, Fai Dan approached, staggering, pistol in hand.

"I tried to fight it," he lamented. "But it gets in your head. You can't imagine the pain. I was supposed to be a leader. These people trusted me. It wants me to stop you...but I...I won't."

Fai Dan drew his pistol on me, then aimed it at his own head and pulled the trigger.

Tali got the crane controls working, and the freighter was lifted, revealing a passageway down underneath the colony. My squad and I descended into the darkened tunnels. After several minutes, we came to the upper floor of a large chamber. The area resembled the center atrium of an office building or hotel.

"That's...big," gaped Williams.

"This was not covered in my training manuals," said Garrus.

Suspended by several thick tendrils was a brown, plant-like creature shaped like a giant human heart. Liquid was dripping out of an aperture like drool out of a mouth. The creature pulsed and convulsed, then disgorged a green asari, who then stood up to confront us. I didn't know asari could be green. I

looked a question at Liara, who shook her head and shrugged.

"Invaders!" said the green asari. "Your every step is a transgression. A thousand feelers appraise you as meat, good only to dig or decompose. I speak for the Old Growth, as I did for Saren. You are within and before the Thorian. It commands that you be in awe!"

"Saren wanted something from you. What was it?" I asked.

"Saren sought knowledge of those who are gone. The Old Growth listened to flesh for the first time in the Long Cycle. Trades were made. Then cold ones began killing the flesh that would tend the next cycle. Flesh fairly given! The Old Growth sees the air you push as lies! It will listen no more!"

"I won't let you keep your thralls!" I said. "Release them, now!"

"No more will the Thorian listen to those that scurry. Your lives are short, but have gone on too long. Your blood will feed the ground and the new growth!"

The green asari knocked us down with a biotic push, then took off running. Several green humanoid creatures emerged from the shadows and attacked us like zombies. They reminded me in a way of the geth's husks.

My squad recovered and fought back. We chased the green asari and her green zombies down a ramp to the next level, where she stood at a ledge. She was gathering dark energy to hit us again with her biotics, but Alenko beat her to the punch and pushed her off the ledge, where she fell into the murky depths below.

Dozens more of the green zombie creatures came pouring up from the ramp below. Even more appeared from the walls. Alenko, Wrex, and Liara used their biotics to keep them at bay, and the rest of us burned out several heat sinks worth of ammunition as we mowed them down. Stray shots and biotic blasts hit the tendrils holding up the Thorian, and I finished the creature off by severing its tendrils, causing it to plummet down after its green asari thrall. I swear I heard it scream. Only then did the green zombies stop coming.

Williams kicked one of the corpses. "Looks like it's made of plant. Weird."

"Commander. Over here." Garrus pointed at a large blister on a well-lit wall.

The blister or pustule began to throb, and then a knife blade pierced it from within. A normal-looking purple asari in commando gear tumbled out. Except for the skin-tone, she was identical to the green asari that we'd just killed. She gathered herself up and stood with military bearing. No matter the species, combat experience left an indelible mark.

"I'm free. I'm free!" she exulted for a moment, then she noticed me and my squad. "I – I suppose I should thank you for releasing me."

"Who are you?" I asked cautiously, not holstering my pistol just yet.

"My name is Shiala. I serve – I served Matriarch Benezia. When she allied herself with Saren, so did I."

Liara shifted uncomfortably. I signaled her to keep mum, for now.

"Benezia foresaw the influence Saren would have," Shiala continued. "She joined him to guide him down a gentler path. But Saren is compelling. Benezia lost her way."

"Are you saying Saren can control minds?" I glanced at where the Thorian had just been.

"Benezia underestimated Saren. As I did. We came to believe in his cause and goals. The strength of his influence is troubling."

"She tried to manipulate Saren. But in the end, her plan backfired," Liara speculated hopefully.

"Asari Matriarchs are among the most intelligent and powerful beings in the galaxy," I offered. "How could one fall under Saren's control?"

"Saren has a vessel. An enormous warship unlike anything I've ever seen," said Shiala. "He calls it Sovereign. It can dominate the minds of his followers. They become indoctrinated to Saren's will. The process is subtle. It can take days, weeks. But in the end, it is absolute. I was a willing slave when Saren brought me to this world. He needed my asari biology to communicate with the Thorian, to learn its secrets. Saren offered me in trade. I was sacrificed to secure an alliance between Saren and the Thorian."

"So the geth were trying to destroy the Thorian to cover his tracks, like he sabotaged the beacon on Eden Prime."

"After Saren had what he needed, the Thorian became a liability," Shiala agreed. "Saren knows you are searching for the Conduit. He knows you are following his steps. He attacked the Thorian so you could not gain the Cipher."

"What's the Cipher? And why does Saren need it?"

"The beacon on Eden Prime gave you visions. But the visions were unclear, confusing. They were meant for a Prothean mind. To truly comprehend them, you must think like a Prothean. You must understand their culture, their history, their very existence. The Thorian was here long before the Protheans built this city. It watched and studied them. When they died, it consumed them. They became a part of it."

"So the Thorian taught Saren to think like a Prothean? How?"

"The Cipher is the very essence of being a Prothean. It cannot be described or explained. It would be like describing color to a creature without eyes. To understand, you must have access to endemic ancestral memory. A viewpoint spanning thousands of Prothean generations. I sensed this ancestral memory – the Cipher – when I melded with the Thorian. Our identities merged, our minds intertwined. Such knowledge cannot be taught; it simply exists. I can transfer the knowledge from my mind to yours, as I did with Saren."

"It is perfectly safe," said Liara. "Remember what I told you of asari mating? This is like that."

"No offense, but I don't really want to mate with you, Shiala." I wasn't too keen on having more

information poured into my head, either. The beacon on Eden Prime had messed me up quite a bit the last time.

"Oh, no, Shepard, this is not mating." Liara continued to try and reassure me. "I am sorry; I am not explaining it very well. Asari can share important memories directly with those we care about. Shiala is offering to do this for you. It is a very intimate thing, but it is not mating. And it should not have any physical effect on you."

"If it's something asari can share, will it work on me?"

"You have some biotic ability. That will make it easier."

"Wait, you're got seriously going to do this, Commander," said Williams. "The beacon nearly killed you last time..."

I looked at the rest of my squadmates in turn. They were all waiting to see what I would do. I rubbed a sore spot on my neck as I weighed the risk. "We need that Cipher. I need to understand. Okay, Shiala, let's do this."

"Try to relax, Commander. Slow, deep breaths. Let go of your physical shell. Reach out to grasp the threads that bind us, one to another. Every action sends ripples across the galaxy. Every idea must touch another mind to live. Each emotion must mark another's spirit. We are all connected. Every living being united in a single, glorious existence. Open yourself to the universe, Commander. Embrace Eternity!"

As Shiala spoke, I felt my grasp on reality slipping. My senses felt distant. All I could see were the asari's eyes, then everything went black.

I came to, and felt hands helping me up off the floor of the Thorian's chamber. I hadn't been out long. Shiala was backing away from me, cocking an eyebrow. Well, asari don't have hair – she raised the flesh above the eye socket, anyway.

"Are you all right, Commander?" asked Williams.

"I feel...something. Like pieces are clicking into place...but nothing's clear yet."

Williams and Alenko helped me stand up. I fought off a wave of dizziness.

"I have given you the Cipher, just as it was given to Saren," said Shiala. "The ancestral memories of the Protheans are a part of you now. It will take time for your mind to process this information. I am sorry if you have suffered, but there was no other way. You needed the Cipher. In time, it will help you understand the vision from the beacon."

I felt an itch in my skull. I scratched my forehead. "I hope so. In the mean time, do you know what the Conduit is? Or where it is?"

"No. I am sorry. All I know is that Saren believes the Conduit was the key to the Prothean extinction."

"That can't be good, whatever it is," said Wrex.

"You have the Cipher," Shiala continued. "In time, your visions will be clear. They will lead you to the Conduit. I only pray you find it before Saren does."

I stumbled as I turned to leave and head back to the Normandy.

Alenko stopped me. "What about her?"

"Now that you're free of the Thorian, what are you planning to do next?" I inquired.

"If you will allow it, I would like to stay here with the colonists. They have suffered greatly, and I played a role in their suffering. I would like to make amends."

"Yeah, she just admitted she was indoctrinated by Saren. Can we trust her?" asked Williams.

"I was merely one of Matriarch Benezia's disciples. For nearly two centuries, I followed her, learning at her feet. When Benezia revealed her plan to join Saren, she gave her disciples a choice. Only those who were willing had to follow her. Many felt her plan was too dangerous. But I believed in her. I thought she could turn Saren away from his insanity. Instead, we joined him in it. Once I followed him, blind to his true nature. But now I see he is leading the galaxy into an age of darkness and suffering."

"I just joined minds with her, Williams. We can trust her. The colonists will need all the help they can get. They'll be happy to have you on their side."

"Thank you, Commander. May fortune smile upon you."

With the help of my squad, I made it back to the Normandy, where Doctor Chakwas had set up a quarantine in the airlock while she checked us out. One by one, she declared us free from foreign plant spores. After stowing my gear and changing into shipboard attire, I told Joker to get us off the planet, and ordered my squad to a debriefing in the communication room.

Liara noticed me plop into a seat.

"Commander? You look...pale. Are you suffering any ill effects from the Cipher?" she asked.

"The Cipher shook me up a bit. Nothing I can't handle."

"I may be able to help you," said Liara. "I am an expert on the Protheans. If I join my consciousness to yours maybe we can make some sense of it."

I rubbed my eyes and exhaled. "It's worth a shot. Do it."

"Really, Commander?" Williams didn't like it.

"It's fine, Chief. Maybe it'll help. Go ahead, Liara."

"Relax, Commander. Embrace Eternity!"

There will no ill effects this time. No blackout, no headache. Liara was much gentler than Shiala. It even felt...pleasant. But Liara stumbled back a step.



"That was incredible! All this time. All my research. Yet I never dreamed... I am sorry. The images were so vivid. I never imagined the experience would be so...intense. You are remarkably strong-willed, Commander. What you have been through, what you have seen, would have destroyed a lesser mind."

"Come on. Get to the point. What did you see?" Williams asked impatiently.

"The beacon on Eden Prime must have been badly damaged. Large parts of the vision are missing. The data transferred into the Commander's mind is incomplete."

"You sure you didn't come across any clue or hint? Something we might have missed?" I asked.

"Everything I saw you already know. You were right about the Reapers. The Protheans were destroyed by a race of sentient machines. I think it's obvious there's a connection between the Reapers, the Prothean extinction, and the Conduit. But I didn't see anything that would help us find it. I was able to interpret the data relayed through your vision. What was there, at least. But something was missing. Saren must have the missing information. Maybe he found another beacon. If we can find the missing data from your vision I can – whoa!"

Lara gasped and swayed, on the verge of fainting. I reached out and grabbed her shoulders to steady her.

"I'm sorry," she said as she regained her balance. I let her go. "The joining is...exhausting. I should go lie down for a while."

"I don't feel any different."

"Your part in this was passive. It took quite a bit off effort on my part to join our minds."

"We're done here. Everyone get some rest and resume your duties. Dismissed."

Before turning in, I decided to report to the Council. I put in the request though the vidcomm, and the three familiar holograms appeared a few moments later.

"Commander. ExoGeni should have told us about the Thorian," the asari Councilor began without preamble. "It would have made your job much easier."

"You might have been able to capture it for study instead of destroying it," said the salarian Councilor.

"ExoGeni tried to study it. Look how that turned out," I replied.

"Perhaps it's for the best, then," the asari Councilor came to my defense. "At least the colony was saved."

The turian Councilor wasn't impressed. "Of course it was saved. Shepard would go to any lengths to help a human colony."

"Being human had nothing to do with it. They were in trouble."

"Admirable. But sometimes Spectres have to make sacrifices. I hope you're willing to do that when the time comes."

"Goodbye, Commander. We'll be waiting for your next report."

The holograms disappeared. I wasn't sure what the point of all that was. Maybe the conversation had actually been longer, and having my mind melded twice in one day affected my memory. In any event, it was time to head to the next planet of interest. I met Pressly at his station by the galaxy map.

"Pressly, how are we doing on supplies? Anything I should know about?"

"Nothing that needs your attention. We should be good for a couple more weeks, at least. Do you have a destination for us?"

"Good. Yes. Set course for Noveria."

"Very well, sir. I estimate transit time of about...37 hours. Anything else?"

"Nothing right now. As you were."

I went to my quarters for a nap. When I awoke, we still had plenty of time before arriving on Noveria, so I made the rounds, checking up on my crew.

Joker was just leaving the mess. "Hey, commander, next time we touch down, let's try not to park the ship in a colony of mutant zombies?"

I chuckled, then grabbed some food and sat down. Williams approached, carrying a bottle, and sat down across from me.

"Interested in a quick drink? It's a special occasion."

"Sure, what's the occasion?" I spoke between bites of food.

"It's Armistice Day. When the First Contact War ended. My family always marks it. Since I'm the only Williams aboard, I thought I'd ask you."

"Seems like an odd thing to celebrate. That was 26 years ago."

"In our family, it's not really a celebration. More like an obligation. Don't tell me you don't know about my family. My commanders always find out. It's not in my files or something?"

"There's almost nothing in your files. Technical scores and a list of crap assignments."

"There's a reason for the crap assignments. I'm General Williams' granddaughter...the commander of the Shanxi garrison in the War? 'The only human ever to surrender to an alien race.'"

"I see. That's why you drive yourself so hard."

"A Williams has to be better than the best, if only to avoid suspicion.' That's why my Dad told me the night before he retired. It takes a special kind of thickheaded to march into a job where your family's blacklisted. I did it anyway. I'm not going to let our name go down with Arnold and Quisling. Granddad deserved better than that."

"As I recall, your grandfather held out for a long time."

"The turians wrecked the orbitals in the first wave, and occupied major cities. They sat in orbit, dropping rocks on anything that moved. Granddad dispersed the troops. But when they went into the cities for supplies, the turians would wreck a whole block to eliminate one fire team. Civilians were dying. His troops were starving. And he couldn't contact Alliance High Command. So he surrendered the garrison."

"What happened to your grandfather after the war?"

"He was relieved of command as soon as Shanxi was liberated. They brought him back to Earth in irons, but there was never a trial. They quietly demoted him, and stuck him behind a desk. He retired a year later, and spent the rest of his life working construction in the colonies. Sometimes we hear about attempts to get him exonerated in some official way. Nothing ever comes of them."

"I should have figured this out myself. I don't know how I can help you, though."

"Look at who I am, Shepard. Do you ever hear me ask for help? It's not that bad things don't happen to me. If you stay with me long enough, maybe I'll tell you about some of them. But I deal with them myself. I don't need a shoulder to cry on, a knight to rescue me, or a man to make me happy. This is who I am. I like her. And you better liker her, too."

This was getting dangerously close to fraternization again, but I couldn't help myself. "Everyone comes with baggage, Ashley. The trick is finding a matched set."

"That's awful," she said, but chuckled anyway. "Tell me you got that out of a fortune cookie. But hey, once we save the galaxy, maybe the Alliance will get its act together. Start acting like an actual government."

"The Alliance isn't perfect, but it does well enough."

"Have to disagree with you there, skipper. Giving aliens the run of our most advanced ship? Kowtowing to the Council?"

I nodded a hesitant agreement. "The Alliance should be able to stand on its own. We can't. Yet. Why not learn from the races who have been standing for the last thousand years?"

"How can you say that, given everything we've seen out here? They're already acting like Saren is our problem. Already siccing us on the bear. The Council races will always think of themselves first. It's – human nature. We can't afford to trust them. Not if the survival of humanity is on the line."

"Ashley, you believe in God. An infallible, all-knowing creator with a plan for the universe. You think the diversity of views in the galaxy wasn't part of that?"

"I don't know what God intends, Shepard. I don't think humans have some divine mandate, if that's what you mean. I don't think we're superior."

"Humans are aggressive. We think fast, we move fast. Wars are started because of our need for constant progress. The Council can balance that."

"That's – Huh. I guess I never thought of it that way. All 'big picture,' I mean. It doesn't make what happened to Granddad any better, though."

"What happened to your grandfather shouldn't have happened."

"Well. At least somebody knows that. You and he would have gotten along. He was a tough old bastard. I have a feeling things will come to a head soon. But don't worry, Shepard. I'll protect you."

She winked and left. I never did get that drink. I finished my meal and set my tray and dishes on the dirty pile. Kaidan approached and wanted a word.

"I've been thinking about how the Feros colony failed. I'm not questioning any decision you made, Shepard, let me be clear about that. It's just my experience that once someone lets something slide, it tends to pick up speed. You get my meaning?"

"You're talking about a particular example, aren't you?"

"You know the records about the biotic training out on Jump Zero? They're all classified. Because the Alliance...made mistakes. After First Contact, Conatix was set up to track element zero exposures, and develop implants for humans. Once we had an embassy on the Citadel, Conatix could bring in experts instead of taking it slow."

"The only experts would have to be aliens."

"Dead on. Turians, actually. That's why Conatix kept it a secret. They were afraid of what people back home would think, asking the turians for help when we just fought a war with them."

"The asari would have been more acceptable than the turians."

"Yes, but the company didn't go through the Citadel. It would have made Earth look weak. So they discretely hired some turian mercenaries."

"Is there a reason we couldn't learn it on our own?"

"They didn't know where to start. Hell, it took a couple of years to link biotics to eezo. Forget trying to get the kids to move stuff – they had trouble just helping them not break their own limbs. And their choice of teachers didn't help much."

"I'm sure Conatix did what they thought was best."

"It wasn't best for us. They brought in an ex-military turian named Commander Vyrnnus. To introduce himself, he liked to say 'I was at the helm of the dreadnought that killed your father.' Well I told him my dad wasn't in the War; he'd retired to Vancouver. My family had an inland home that

matured to new beachfront. Vyrnnus had it in for me after that. He cut corners, pushed hard. I mean you either came out a superman or a wreck. A lot of kids snapped. A few died. The point of all this, I guess, is that when you cut corners, it's not always obvious who pays for it."

"So, why are you telling me this? Are you saying I'm cutting corners somewhere?"

"I'm saying, it's probably inevitable that we'll have to. And when that happens, I want to help you. When someone important to you is up on a ledge, you help them. Keep them from mistakes better made by a kid."

"Someone important?"

"Sorry if I'm out of line, Commander."

"Yeah, a little bit. Forget it. But thanks for the advice. I do need you to keep me honest. Questioning the decisions of superiors is important."

"Well, thank you for listening, Commander."

"See you around, Lieutenant."

I entered the med bay with a question for Doctor Chakwas.

"Yes, Commander, is there something you need?"

"How well do you know the Lieutenant?"

"I'd never worked with him before this mission. But he has an impressive service record. Over a dozen special commendations. Tends to keep to himself, though. Maybe because of the headaches. It's not easy being an L2."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"Well, most biotics now use the L3 implants, like yourself. Lieutenant Alenko was wired with the old L2 configuration. Sometimes there are complications."

"What kind of complications?"

"Severe mental disabilities, insanity, crippling physical pain. There's a long list of horrific side effects. Kaidan's lucky. He just gets migraines."

"I had no idea. Thank you, doctor."

"Was there anything else?"

"Is Liara up?"

"I believe so. In fact, I think she wanted to speak with you. Go on through."

I knocked on Liara's door, and she answered quickly."

"Hello, Shepard. Have you come to check up on me?"

"You look much better. How are you feeling?"

"I am feeling better, thank you for asking. But I get the feeling you want to ask me something else."

"Maybe we could pick up where we left off. You were telling me about your interest in the Protheans."

"Actually, I think I was talking about my interest in you. And making a fool of myself in the process. As I said, I am not used to dealing with people. Especially humans. I did not really know much about your species when we first met, Shepard. I found it hard to take humanity seriously. Your kind always seemed so rushed and high-strung."

"We don't have the luxury of time. An asari can live for a thousand years. We're lucky if we hit 150."

"That is true. At first, I thought that was a weakness of your species. After spending time with you and your crew, however, I think it may actually be an advantage. You humans are creatures of action. You pursue your goals with an almost indomitable determination. It is an admirable trait, but also an intimidating one."

"You're scared of us?"

"Unfortunately, the rest of the galaxy sees humanity as something of a bully. You run over anyone in your path to get what you want. It's up to people like you to change their minds, Shepard."

"I'm doing the best I can, Liara."

"There is a reason the Council chose you to become a Spectre. They saw something special in you – the best of what humanity has to offer. I looked into your history. I know what happened on Akuze. The fact that you survived shows a remarkable strength."

"You could've just asked. I would've told you whatever you wanted to know."

"I apologize, Commander. After our last conversation, I was afraid I would say something stupid again. I wanted to know more about you. To understand what made you into the man you are. There is something compelling about you, Shepard."

"Are you sure you're interested in me? Or is it my visions of the Protheans?"

"I admit, your connection to the Protheans had something to do with my initial interest. But it has grown beyond that. You intrigue me, Shepard. But I was not sure if it was appropriate to act on my feelings. I thought there might already be a relationship between you and Chief Williams."

"The Chief and I are just friends. Nothing more." I made a mental note to do something about that later.

"My mistake, then. I am not as adept at understanding human relationships as I thought. But what about us, Shepard? Is there a mutual attraction? Or was I wrong about that, too?"

"No, you were right. There is something between us." At least, I thought there was. It could just have been that mind meld, but no, there was something else here.

"I knew it! And I knew you felt it, too. But...does this not seem rather strange? Why do I feel so close to you? We have only known each other a short time. We are from two different species. We have almost nothing in common. This makes no sense!"

"These things never make sense. They just happen, and we get swept up in the storm."

"You make it sound so...chaotic. So...dangerous."

"I'll keep you safe."

"I am not looking for a protector...This is all a bit overwhelming. I am not used to...this. You. I need some time."

"Of course. So do I. I'll...leave you be."

I went back to my quarters to do a quick extranet search on asari physiology. They are indeed physically compatible with human males. Hoo boy. I needed to clear my head. I made my way down to the cargo bay, feeling out of sorts. Perhaps a conversation with my favorite krogan would help. He seemed to have a straight-forward view of the universe.

"Wrex."

"Shepard."

"So, you'd rather be a merc than help your people?"

"I'm a fighter. It's what I do."

"Aren't you at all worried about what will happen to the krogan?"

"What the hell do you want me to do about it, Shepard? I'm tired of sticking my ass on the line and getting nothing for it."

"So you decided to go your own way."

"I decided killing for credits was better than killing for a lost cause. I'm no hero, Shepard. Bottom line: killing for credits simplifies things."

"Exactly. That's why I hired you."

"And that's why I joined. So I wouldn't have to deal with them. But there's a lot of krogan mercs out there. I'm always running into them. Half of the time I'm being paid to kill them. But that's just part of the job. You don't get to pick who your enemies are."

"Thanks Wrex."

"Shepard."

Across the cargo bay, I saw Garrus tinkering with our new Mako again.

"Garrus. More calibrations?"

"Yeah, our time with that tank...the Grizzly?... gave me an idea for the Mako's main gun. But there is something bothering me." Garrus climbed down to talk. "It's Saren. I'm starting to wonder whether we'll ever find him. He's always one step ahead of us. And he's got those damn geth..."

"We're getting close, Garrus. We'll find him."

"I wish I had your confidence. I just can't stand the thought of him getting away with everything he's done. I know you're doing everything you can. And if anyone can catch him, it's you, but... If there's anything else I can do to help. Anything. Just tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it."

"I understand your concern, but we will find him. Just make sure you're ready to go when we do."

"Yes, sir. You can count on me. Thanks for hearing me out. I appreciate it. Can I ask you something, Commander?"

"Of course. What is it?"

"Are you worried that the Council might be protecting Saren? I mean, they were really dragging their heels before. What if we find him, bring him back to the Citadel, and they refuse to act?"

"You seem to have some thoughts on this. Speak your mind, Garrus."

"Well, maybe we shouldn't give them the chance, Commander. In my opinion, Saren's too dangerous to be kept alive. Too much could happen. He could escape, or the Council might let him go... If we find him – when we find him. I say we make sure we stop him. Permanently."

"Last resort, Garrus. We need to at least try to bring him in and interrogate him."

"I...I guess you're right. Thanks for hearing me out."

"No problem. I'll let you get back to it."

Next, stop, engineering to check in on our quarian pilgrim.

"Tali, nice job with that hacking trick," I said.

"Thank you, Shepard. I'm glad it worked."

"Glad to see you smiling again. So to speak."

"I'm sleeping much better now. I guess I'm getting used to how quiet your ship is. I still think a lot about my Pilgrimage, though. I know Saren's our top priority. But with all the worlds we go to, I was



hoping to find something to bring back to the flotilla."

"We've still got a long way to go. You'll find something to take back."

"Yes, but it cannot be just some derelict ship my people can use for salvage. It has to be more than that. There's a lot expected of me."

"What's so special about you?"

"It's my father. He's the senior member of the Admiralty Board. He's one of only five people who can overrule the decisions of the Conclave for the good of the Migrant Fleet. My father is responsible for the lives of seventeen million people – our entire race is in his hands. And I'm his only child."

"So are you some kind of heir to the quarian throne or something?"

"No, it doesn't work that way. My father's position isn't hereditary. I'll probably never serve on the Admiralty Board myself. Officially, I'm just the same as any other citizen. But it doesn't work that way in practice. People have always treated me differently because of who my father is."

"You must get all kinds of special privileges."

"I probably had it easier than most growing up. But it's not all good. People like my father have enemies. And they're not above using me to get to him."

"It must be tough on you."

"My people place a high value on family and ancestry. There's an unspoken expectation that I'll live up to my father's example. Everyone's waiting for me to do something great on my Pilgrimage. Something that will forever change our lives for the better. If I don't, it's like I failed. And that reflects badly on both me and my father."

"The work you're doing here is more important than anything any quarian has ever done before." That was an ignorant thing for me to say. I regretted it immediately, but it sounded good at the time.

"Yes...I know. But you have to understand quarian culture. We're a very insular society. The events beyond the Flotilla don't much matter to the average citizen. Our greatest dream is that one day, we'll return to our homeworld and drive out the geth. But even if we stop Saren, that's not going to happen. There's still millions of geth behind the Veil. Until they're gone, our exile will continue."

"What would you need to bring back to make everyone happy?"

"Something that would help us better understand the geth. They've changed significantly since the exile; they've continued to evolve. We've done our best to study them, but it's not easy. They're very reclusive. Until recently, they never went beyond the borders of the Veil. And all the geth we run into now are under Saren's control. We'd need to find geth operating on their own. Independently. But I don't want this to get in the way of our mission, Shepard. First, we stop Saren. Then I'll worry about my own problems."

"Okay, Tali. Thank you. And when this is over, if you still haven't found what you're looking for, I

promise I'll help you search."

"Thank you, Shepard. That means a lot."

I made my way up to the bridge to check on Joker.

"Mutant zombies, huh?" I teased. "Think we'll find any on Noveria?"

"Oh, hey Commander. No, Noveria's too cold. Zombies don't like the cold."

"Uh huh. So how'd you get your nickname, Joker?"

"It's a lot shorter than saying 'Alliance Flight Lieutenant Jeff Moreau. Plus, I love to make little children laugh."

"I was just thinking how much you remind me of Santa Claus."

"Look, I didn't pick the name. One of the instructors in flight school used to bug me about never smiling. She started calling me Joker, and it stuck."

"Why didn't you ever smile?"

"Hey, I worked my ass off in flight school, Commander. The world's not going to hand you anything if you go around grinning like an idiot. By the end of the year, I was the best pilot in the Academy. Even better than the instructors. And everybody knew it. They'd all gotten their asses kicked by the sickly kid with the creaky little legs. One guess who was smiling at graduation."

"I get you. Happy flying."

"See you, Commander."

-----Chapter 9: Noveria-----

*From the Codex:*

*Noveria is a cool, rocky world, with most of its hydrosphere locked up in massive glaciers. A privately-chartered colony world, the planet is owned by the Noveria Development Corporation holding company. The NDC is funded by investment capital from two dozen high technology development firms, and administrated by an Executive Board representing their interests.*

*The investors built remote hot labs in isolated locations across Noveria's surface. These facilities are used for research too dangerous or controversial to be performed elsewhere, as Noveria is technically not part of Citadel space and therefore exempt from Council law.*

*By special arrangement, Citadel Special Tactics and Reconnaissance agents have been granted extraterritorial privileges, but it remains to be seen how committed the Executive Board is to that principle. Given its unique situation, it is understandable that Noveria is often implicated in all manner of wild conspiracy theories.*

Noveria is a special planet where corporations can conduct otherwise illegal research. Matriarch Benezia, Saren's second in command and Liara's mother, had been seen recently at one of the research sites. We needed to know what she was doing there, and by extension, what Saren wanted there.

As Joker brought us in on approach, Pressly requested permission to land. The port controller didn't sound happy to hear from us.

"Approach Control, this is the SSV Normandy. Requesting a vector and a berth."

"Normandy, your arrival was not scheduled. Our defense grid is armed and tracking you. State your business."

"Citadel business. We've got a Council Spectre on board."

A tense moment passed.

"Landing access granted, Normandy. Be advised: we will be confirming identification on arrival. If confirmation cannot be established, your vessel will be impounded."

"What a fun bunch," observed Joker. "I think I'll take my next leave here."

Out the windows, the entire planet looked like it was blanketed in snow. A blizzard buffeted the ship as we came in to land. I decided not to frighten the corporate types by bringing my entire squad with me, at least not at first. Instead, given that her mother was supposed to be here, I took only Liara with me. I also opted not to go in heavily armed, and we brought only our side arms.

There was a welcoming committee waiting for us at the end of the docking bay. Three grim-looking, well armed and armored guards. A Japanese woman held up a hand.

"That's far enough," she ordered.

"We're not here to cause problems," I replied, and held up my hands in a placating gesture.

"This is an unscheduled arrival. I need your credentials."

"I'm a Spectre. My name is Shepard."

"Load of horescrap, ma'am," said one of the guards. A woman with short-cropped bond hair.

The guard captain ignored her subordinate's outburst. "We will need to confirm that. Also, I must advise you that firearms are not permitted on Noveria. Sergeant Stirling, secure their weapons."

The blond guard approached. I put my hand on the butt of my pistol, and Liara brought up a biotic shield. This could easily get out of hand.

"Citadel authority supersedes yours. Let's not start a fight," I said.

"Captain Matsuo! Stand down," a voice announced over loudspeaker. "We confirmed their identity. Spectres are authorized to carry weapons here, Captain."

The blond guard looked disappointed. Captain Matsuo kept her poker face.

"You may proceed, Spectre," she said. "I hope the rest of your visit will be less confrontational. Parasini-san will meet you upstairs. I am sure she will answer any questions you have."

"Behave yourself," sneered the blond.

I ignored the comment and nodded my thanks to the captain. Inside the doors was a lobby. There were a few potted plants in the corners, but they couldn't make up for the sterile lighting. Up a flight of stairs was a reception desk. I noticed automated gun turrets in the ceiling, not concealed at all. Two drones emitted scanning lights as Liara and I approached the desk, and an alarm began to blare.

"Weapons detectors. Don't mind the alarms," explained a woman in a tight burgundy dress. "I am Gianna Parasini, assistant to Administrator Anoleis. We apologize for the incident in the docking bay."

"I appreciate your timely intervention."

"You're welcome. You understand our security chief was only doing her job. One of my duties here is orientation of new arrivals. Do you have any questions?"

"Pretty heavy security for such a small port," I observed.

"The Executive Board does everything in its power to protect the privacy of our client corporations."

"I can't have my investigation hampered."

"Tread lightly. You can't bludgeon your way through bureaucracy. The Board can bury you in litigation. You'd need an asari lawyer to see the case through."

"I can bludgeon pretty hard. But I'm not here to dig out any corporate secrets."

"That's gratifying to hear."

"Has anyone unusual passed through here recently?"

"Unusual? An asari Matriarch passed through a few days ago. Lady Benezia."

"Benezia -- ? She is here?" said Liara, nervously.

"Can we speak with her?" I asked.

"Benezia left for the Peak 15 research complex days ago. To the best of my knowledge, she's still there."

"Could you tell me how to get there?"

"You'll need to ask Administrator Anoleis for clearance to leave this port."

"My Spectre authority should be clearance enough...but I suppose checking in with the authority wouldn't hurt. Where can I find the administrator?"

"Thank you, Commander, we appreciate the civility. The Administrator's office is on the main level. Left at the top of the elevator."

Ms. Parasini pointed to the elevator, then turned and disappeared through a door behind the desk. We took the elevator. Liara addressed me, full of nervous excitement.

"She is here. I cannot believe it. I imagine you want to talk to me, Shepard. About my mother."

"No, I don't. I brought you along for a reason. I trust you, Liara. You may not be military, but you're part of my crew."

"Thank you, Shepard. That means a great deal to me."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "I do have an ulterior motive... I'm hoping your presence will influence your mother. Hopefully you'll have a calming effect on her, but as a last resort you'll at least distract her."

"I...I see. Let us hope it does not come to that."

"Believe me, Liara. I hope so, too."

I didn't relish the idea of fighting one of the most powerful asari in the galaxy, let alone one who led unknown numbers of asari commandos and geth. I especially didn't want to have to kill the mother of one of my friends.

We found the Administrator's office right where Ms. Parasini said it would be. Incredibly, she had beaten us there.

"Commander Shepard, how can I help you?" she said by way of greeting.

"Uh, I'd like to speak to the Administrator."

"One moment, please." She pushed the intercom button on her console. "Mister Anoleis?"

"Yes. Yes. What?" came an impatient salarian voice.

"Commander Shepard is asking to see you, sir."

"Right. Fine. Come in."

Ms. Parasini waved me through to an office behind her desk. A salarian sat behind an ornate desk. He was typing away furiously at his terminal, and didn't even look up as we entered.

"You will forgive me if I don't stand up. I have no time for colonial rubes," he said, contemptuously.

"I see you looked up my service record."

"Only a fool enters negotiation without knowledge of the other party's tendencies. This greeting is a courtesy. I will only cooperate as required by the Executive Board. Businesses come here to avoid the second-guessing of galactic law."

"And I represent the 'second-guessing of galactic law.'"

"Just so we understand each other. I will not allow you to harass our clients. This world is private property. Now, what did you want?"

"Do you do business with Saren?"

"Agent Saren Arterious? One of your Spectre compatriots? He is a major investor in Binary Helix corporation, which is one of Noveria's backers."

"Is Binary Helix developing weapons for him?"

"It's possible, given his interests. What our clients do in their labs is their business."

"I've heard an asari Matriarch is here. Benezia?"

"She arrived a few days ago, accompanied by a personal escort and some cargo. She is up at Peak 15."

"What can you tell me about her cargo?"

"Large, heavy, and sealed. It passed weapons screening. Beyond that it is not our concern."

"Any idea what brought her out here?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't be at liberty to say. She came here as Agent Saren's executor. She is here on business for Binary Helix. There were issues at Peak 15 that required Saren's attention."

"I'd like to see her immediately."

"I'm afraid that you cannot. Peak 15 is a private facility in the Skadi Mountains. Regardless, there is a blizzard in the area. Shuttles are grounded, and surface access has been cut off."

"Surface access, you say?"

"Cut off, I said. The roads are not suitable for travel. Don't make an issue of this, Shepard."

Anoleis was hiding something. He definitely didn't want me investigating anything.

Liara tugged on my sleeve. "Perhaps there is another way, Shepard."

I nodded. "I have no more questions at this time."

"Good. I received a dozen urgent messages while you dithered about."

We left the office. I'd had enough of bureaucracy. I called the Normandy with an intention to bludgeon.

"Pressly, how's the weather? Can the Normandy fly us over to a nearby mountain peak?"

"Funny you should ask, Commander. We were just talking about that. The storm has really picked up, and Joker says he doesn't think opening the cargo bay in this wind and snow would be a good idea."

"Crap. That makes sense. And the Mako would get blown around like a leaf if we tried to drop it with the mass effect fields on. Thanks, Pressly. I'll think of something else."

As I was thinking, I noticed a hanar bartender waving a tentacle at me. I didn't think a drink was such a good idea right then, but bartenders throughout the galaxy were known for having good information. Liara followed me over to the bar.

"This one offers greetings. You are the Spectre that visits Port Hanshan?"

"News travels fast here."

"Indeed, esteemed Spectre. This one is known as Opold. Your arrival was not greeted with any joy by the companies here. This one has a burden that you could ease. If an arrangement could be made, it would compensate you. This one has procured a special item for a customer. The item is not permitted within the station. But you could bring it through customs."

"You want me to use my status to smuggle for you."

"That is not inaccurate."

Normally, I wouldn't commit a crime like this, but a plan hatched in my mind. "I have no problem with that," I lied. "But I want to know where this "package" is going.

Liara was startled, but I winked at her, and she kept quiet. I assumed hanar wouldn't be as adept at reading human body language, and Opold gave no indication that he did. It's hard to tell with an alien that looks like a jellyfish, though.

"This one's customer prefers to remain anonymous."

"Your customer would prefer to have his package. Tell me who it is, or I walk."

"Your words are not unreasonable. The customer is the krogan called Inamorda. That one is a bounty hunter of some repute, and quick to anger. You understand this one's urgency? That other grows restless from the delay."

"What's in it for me?"

"This one would compensate the Spectre with complimentary drinks, as well as a sum of credits."

"Sounds good. Where is the package?"

"This one humbly thanks the Spectre. The package will be delivered to your vessel's dock. All you need

do is bring it to this one. Please do not mention this to Administrator Anoleis. That one would levy 'fees.'"

I explained my plan to Liara in the elevator down to the docking bay. She was skeptical, but agreed to go along with it. There was indeed a mystery box sitting at the base of the gangway to the Normandy. I picked it up and took a peek inside. It was a weapon mod of some sort. No way to tell what it did without scanning it with my omni-tool, and I didn't want to risk downloading a virus from a strange device.

As I re-entered the lobby, Captain Matsuo stopped me. "Good day, Commander. I trust you are behaving yourself? Not mixing yourself up in any questionable activities?"

"I don't generally get involved in that sort of thing." I resisted the urge to cross my fingers behind my back.

"No, of course. I thought you'd be too intelligent for such a thing. If you were, I would have to recite some tedious speech, then ask you to leave. Just so we understand each other."

"I'll be moving on."

"Very good, Commander. Please stay out of trouble."

Instead of returning to Opold the hanar barkeep, I marched back in to Anoleis's office. A report of smuggling had to be worth a pass to Peak 15. The Administrator was not happy to see me again.

"Opold asked me to smuggle a package through security," I stated without preamble.

"I need more than your word to act on that. Bring me whatever he's smuggling and I'll act accordingly."

"Here's the package. Proof enough?" I dropped the small box on his desk.

"I am no weapons expert, but it seems to me that this is a rather advanced device. Certainly contraband. It would have been unfortunate if this had reached its buyer."

"The buyer is named Inamorda."

"I am familiar with the bounty hunter. Thank you, Commander, I had been searching for a way to get rid of him"

"Are you thankful enough to give me a pass to Peak 15?"

"I am willing to provide the pass. Not without an understanding between us, of course. You can only go to Peak 15 to speak to Lady Benezia. If you cause trouble, or the staff asks you to leave, you will be thrown off world."

It was an empty threat, but I agreed. Anoleis handed me the pass and arranged to have a transport vehicle prepared for my use. I arranged to have my squad gear up and bring mine and Liara's armor and weapons to the port's garage.



The transport was unarmed. I had Ashley check it over, and noticed some hesitation on her part as she looked out the garage's windows.

"Kaidan," I said as I was donning my armor. "You grew up in Vancouver, right?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Ever drive in the snow?"

The Lieutenant looked out at the blizzard and grinned. "Hell, yeah."

"Great. You're driving."

Ashley looked relieved. Kaidan climbed in the driver's seat to familiarize himself with the controls. As we were boarding the transport, Wrex suddenly went still and stared at a crate. He pulled out his shotgun and cocked it.

"What is it?" I asked, quietly.

"I head something," he growled quietly.

I decided to trust the instincts of a being with two hundred years of mercenary experience. I silently signaled the rest of the squad to spread out and search. Moments later, a shot rang out.

"I'm hit!" Ashley announced. "Shields down!"

Several crates burst open to reveal a dozen geth robots. Shrapnel and laser bolts were suddenly flying everywhere. The noise from the battle was deafening, echoing around in the garage. There was very little cover.

"Watch your lines of fire!" I yelled, but I don't know if anyone heard me.

One of those flexible geth snipers was clinging to the ceiling in a corner and I tossed a grenade at it. I got it, but the explosion blew a hole in the roof. The Executive Board would not be happy, but it was one less geth in their garage.

After the fight, and after my ears stopped ringing, I checked the status of my squadmates. Tali was mending a rupture in her environmental suit; Garrus was limping, but had slapped some medigel on his leg and said he'd be fine; Ashley's barrier generator was on the fritz, and she reassured me that she could fix it while we en route to Peak 15. By some miracle of fate, the transport vehicle had escaped unscathed.

The security captain, Matsuo, came running up to me. "What did you do here, Commander?!" she yelled.

"The geth ambushed us. We fought back. That's it."

"Geth? You expect me to – Where did they come from?"

"If I were to guess, the Matriarch packed them in the shipping containers she arrived with."

"I do not believe that. We did thorough scans of those. There were no power sources, no element zero masses...If Benezia-sama's containers were packed with these things, there are many more out there."

"I need numbers, Captain. A dozen? A hundred?"

"Dozens, at least. They are machines. You could pack them tightly. I must report to the Executive Board. If word gets out about loose geth, there may be an investor panic."

The captain left. It was getting cold, with the snow blowing in through the hole in the roof. The transport vehicle's heater worked well, though. And either the vehicle's tank-like treads were really good at gripping the ice-bound road, or Kaidan was very good at driving in snow. In any case, the ride was smooth and comfortable, and in an hour, we arrived at the Peak 15 installation.

Parked at the entrance to the building was the burning wreck of another transport vehicle, and the garage door was bent and hanging off its hinges. Not a good sign. I ordered everyone's helmets on as a precaution against escaped biological weapons. Who knows what a company called Binary Helix might be working on.

Inside, the garage was a mess. Bloodstains and broken geth robots were littered about. Entering the facility proper, an automated voice could be heard over loudspeaker.

"User alert. All Peak 15 facilities have suffered a great deal of damage. Biohazard materials are present throughout the facility."

"Why are the turrets facing the wrong way?" Liara asked.

"They want to keep their people in as much as they want to keep others out," Wrex explained.

The power was out, and the emergency lighting gave the place an eerie aura. We entered the cafeteria. The windows were blown out, and everything was covered in a thick layer of snow. I could feel more than hear the pleasant crunching as my boots sunk in to the frozen powder. But there was another sound; a skittering noise. I called a halt and drew my weapon. The biotic members of my squad glowed as they formed biotic barriers. I had goosebumps.

"Animals? Wind?" Garrus speculated. "This place is in bad shape."

A floor grate burst open, and a goat-sized bug creature burst forth. It had four legs, a brown carapace, conical snout, and a pair of meter-long antennae. Dozens of smaller, green versions of the same bug burst forth from the snow all around us. We stood in a circle in the center of the cafeteria with our backs to each other, and held down our triggers in a constant stream of fire. Someone let loose a singularity, causing tables and chairs to go flying.

The large bug spit acid, which knocked down my kinetic barrier. A table fell on it and squashed it. One of the little bugs touched Kaidan, and it exploded in a burst of acid. His biotic barrier prevented any of the corrosive stuff from getting on his armor. Mercifully, that had been the last of the bugs, and there were no injuries among us. We'd expelled half of our heat sinks, and they were sitting on the floor, melting the snow. I decided to let them sit there and cool off while we gathered our breath – and our

wits.

"What the hell were those things?" asked Ashely.

"Xenobiology is not my field," said Liara. "Maybe someone in the labs knows."

"Assuming the labs are still intact," said Garrus.

We searched the rest of the building, but it was empty. Without power, none of the consoles could be searched for information. There was a tram linking to another part of the facility, but that too, was without power. There was one heavy door we hadn't opened because it was blocked by snow, so we cleared that, but it was still frozen shut. Wrex did his impression of a battering ram, but all he succeeded in doing was denting his armor and further jamming the door.

"We'll have to risk a grenade," I shrugged, and we all backed around a corner in the hallway.

The explosion blew the door inward, and inside we found generator equipment. I pulled the large lever labeled 'power,' and the lights came back on. There was a brief burst of gunfire in the distance.

"Probably those turrets we saw when we came in," Garrus speculated.

"Kaidan, Wrex, go with him to check it out. Stay on comms. The rest of us will see if any of these computers are working."

A hologram flickered to life near the power console.

"Critical startup error. Virtual intelligence user interface offline. Manual boot required," it said.

Tali linked her omni-tool to it and got it working.

"It looks like you've restored power to this facility," it said in a pleasant female voice. It still flickered a bit, but it appeared functional. It had an incredibly sexy appearance – borderline lewd – but I suppose if I were a lonely researcher stuck in an ice-bound research station, I would probably program something similar.

"You're the virtual intelligence that runs this place?" I asked.

"This system is monitored to respond to the name 'Mira.' May I ask your name?"

"Commander Shepard. I work for the Citadel's Special Tactics and Reconnaissance."

"One moment, please. Council authority confirmed. You are entitled to Secure Access of all systems. Please note that queries relating to corporate secrets require Privileged Access. Privileged Access is only available to Binary Helix executives. This system is ready to process queries. You may access me at any holographic interface within Peak 15."

"I need to find Matriarch Benezia."

"Lady Benezia departed on the passenger tramway to the Rift Station subsidiary labs."

"Do you know why the reactor was shut down?"

"I'm sorry, but I was offline at the time. Shutdown could occur if reactor breach seems likely, or in the case of catastrophic laboratory containment failure. Emergency guidelines suggest the frigid environment will kill biological contagions. It may also damage mechanical ones."

"Turn off the heat, and hope the cold puts whatever you've unleashed to sleep. Makes sense," said Ashley.

"Biological contaminants," I mused. "You mean these creatures we've encountered?"

"I'm sorry, I cannot access that information. Landlines are disabled."

"Tell me what occurred immediately before you shut down."

"Stage 1 alert issued at Hot Labs. Contaminants released from Laboratory Pod Gamma. Emergency protocols implemented. Stage 2 alert issued at Hot Labs. Isolation Tube breached. Trams shut down. Landline to Hot Labs disconnected. Stage 3 alert issued locally. Contaminants in tram tunnels. Station shutdown and evacuation initiated. Code Omega sent."

"Why were you taken offline?"

"In the event Peak 15 must be sterilized for security purposes, my program and data are purged."

"They kill you if something goes wrong?" asked Liara.

"My systems are permanently disabled. To be 'killed,' I would need to be alive. I am merely a database program."

There was nothing else I could think to ask this thing, so I called Garrus over comms.

"Shepard, the building is clear. It was just as I thought: those turrets firing off their last rounds when the power came back on," he reported.

"Good. We're not finding any useful information here. Rendezvous at the tram and we'll try the next building."

The tram was slow, but the ride was short. At Rift Station, we found bodies of several species strewn about the platform, as well as some destroyed geth. No more of those bug creatures, though. Yet. There were several directional signs and two hallways leading away. The door with the lab beaker sign to the Hot Labs was locked, but the other door with the symbol of bunk beds was open. Inside, five men in white armor were standing behind makeshift barricades and pointing guns at us.

"Stand down," ordered an older bald man. "Sorry, We couldn't be sure what was on the tram."

"Those things know how to operate a tram?" I asked, incredulously.

"They're clever little bastards. I wouldn't put it past them. Look, you're human, and that's enough that I

won't shoot. But I'd like to know who you are."

"My name's Shepard. I'm a Spectre. What happened here?"

"Huh. I won't look a heavily-armed horse in the mouth. I'm Captain Ventralis. The aliens overran the Hot Labs last week. Only the volus, Han Olar got out, and he ain't all there any more. The first we knew, the bastards were clawing into my command post. We had a lot more staff then."

"You were taken by surprise and had civilians to protect. You did a good job, Captain."

"Yeah? Sure as hell doesn't feel like it. The board sent an asari to clean up the mess. She went to the Hot Labs yesterday. We haven't heard from her since. All I can do is hold out here and protect the civilians."

"I need to talk to that asari. How do I get to the Hot Labs?"

"The elevator out by the tram is sealed off, but there's an emergency access through the quarters behind me. Take this access card to open the door."

"Thank you, Captain. Hopefully I can resolve this quickly, and you and your men can get a break."

"That would be nice, Commander. Stims can only keep you up for so long. Oh, and try not to bother the civilians. They're a bit shook up."

Through the hallway we came to an open common area. A salarian was lying on a cot, shivering. An asari in a lab coat was sitting cross-legged, meditating. A volus was staring out a window at a wall of ice. There was even an elcor in a lab coat. Ventralis had said that the volus was the sole survivor, so I approached him to learn what he knew. He turned when he saw my reflection in the glass.

"You came to find out about them, didn't you?" he said, his pressure suit hissing.

"You mean those creatures out there? What are they?"

"Yes. I'm the only survivor from the Hot Labs, you know." He paused for a long breath while his suit exchanged air. "They're rachni."

"Rachni? That's impossible!" said Wrex. "My people wiped them out centuries ago."

"They found it in a derelict ship," explained the volus, in a distant tone. "An egg. Waiting since the last battles. They brought it here --"

"Shut up! God. You want to get us killed?" exclaimed a human scientist from across the room.

"I don't have any control over who lives – or dies here. Do you?" said the volus to his colleague.

"If you're going to be crazy, be the quiet kind," said the man, who then turned and left into one of the side rooms with the bunks.

"Crazy? I'm sane. God, am I sane." The volus turned back to me.

"I need to know more about the rachni."

"I told you all I can. We brought the rachni back from the dead. In retrospect, a bad decision. We need to sink these labs. Or they can bombard us from orbit. Doesn't matter."

"How did you make it out of the Hot Labs?"

"I killed her."

"Who?"

"Doctor Zhonmua. We were going to lunch when the alarms went off. I ran to the elevator. And I closed the doors. She banged on the window once. Then they sliced her to pieces. Her head came apart like a melon. I closed the door. I killed her." His voice had the eerie, distant calm of PTSD.

"Tell me what you know. I'll make your survival mean something."

"You think I want absolution? There is none."

"Could Matriarch Benezia survive in the Hot Labs?"

"It's possible. The specimens were sensitive to biotics." He paused while his suit recycled air. He seemed to notice my heavily armed squad for the first time. "There's an access tunnel back there."

I followed his extended arm to a door, and used the passes that Ventralis had given me to open it. Beyond was a tunnel of ice, supported by metal struts. It sloped down into darkness. Flashlights on, we made our descent. More blood stains and pieces of geth. Two of the large bugs – rachni – burst through the walls, but we were prepared for them this time. Knowing that they were sensitive to biotics, Kaidan and Liara lifted them biotically, and we the rest of us shot them to pieces.

The passageway ended in another door, and through this was a large lab. Undecipherable scientific equipment was arranged around the walls of the room, and in the center was a big glass cage containing a huge rachni. An asari in formal attire turned from the tank at our approach: Matriarch Benezia.

"You do not know the privilege of being a mother. There is power in creation. To shape a life. Turn it towards happiness or despair." She gestured at the large rachni in the glass cage before continuing. "Her children were to be ours. Raised to hunt and slay Saren's enemies. I won't be moved by sympathy. No matter who you bring into this confrontation. What have you told him about me, Liara?"

"What could I say, mother? That you're insane? Evil? Should I explain how to kill you? What could I say?"

There was sadness and a hint of pleading in Liara's voice, but Benezia ignored it.

"Have you faced an asari commando unit before? Few humans have," said the Matriarch.

"I can't believe you'd kill your own daughter," I retorted.

"I now realize I should have been stricter with her."

Before any of us could react, the Matriarch enveloped us in a biotic stasis field. All seven of us. I'd never heard of such power. As we stood there helpless, she walked calmly away, back to her work with the big rachni. The unit of ten asari commandos poured into the room, and I struggled mightily against the biotic field.

Here was a bit of a conundrum: the biotic stasis field would block incoming weapons fire, but I needed to break free in order to fight back. After a few moments of struggling, either the field weakened, or Benezia loosened her grip, for I was soon free and diving for cover. My armor's kinetic barrier lasted just long enough for me to find safety. Concerned about my squad, I peeked out for a second to find they they, too were safe.

All except for Wrex, who had charged one of the commandos and crushed her against a wall. But he was taking fire from elsewhere, so I stepped out to provide covering fire. The rest of my squad regrouped and grappled with the enemy. We were outnumbered and out-matched, but not outgunned. The asari wear only light armor and carry light weapons, and they weren't expecting our own biotics.

The battle was long and arduous, but in the end, we were victorious. Lab equipment everywhere was ruined and smoking, test tubes had been shattered and were dripping unidentifiable liquids. My kinetic barrier generator was sparking, so I ripped it off and tossed it aside. I'd also taken a slug in the shoulder, but my armor had automatically applied some medi-gel. I'd need Doctor Chakwas to take a look at it later, though. The rest of my squad was in similar shape: bruised and bloodied, but alive. All of us were catching our breath, amazed that we'd survived. Benezia had mysteriously stayed out of the fight, and I found her still standing in front of the tank, staring at the caged rachni.

"This is not over," she said. "Saren is unstoppable. My mind is filled with his light. Everything is clear."

"What did Saren want here?"

"I will not betray him," she seemed to be struggling, and she swayed a bit. "You will – you... You must listen. Saren still whispers in my mind. I can fight his compulsions. Briefly. But the indoctrination is strong."

"Are you saying he brainwashed you?" I asked as Liara joined me at my side.

"People are not themselves around Saren. You come to idolize him. Worship him. You would do anything for him. The key is Sovereign, his flagship. It is a dreadnought of incredible size and its power is extraordinary."

"Shiala told us about it back on Feros. Sovereign's not like other ships. Where did it come from?"

"I cannot say. The geth did not build it. Its technology is far more advanced than that of any known species. The longer you stay aboard, the more Saren's will seems correct. You sit at his feet and smile as his words pour into you. It is subtle at first. I thought I was strong enough to resist. Instead, I became a willing tool, eager to serve. He sent me here to find the location of the Mu Relay. Its position was lost thousands of years ago."

"How does something as big as a mass relay go missing?"

"Four thousand years ago, a star nearby went supernova. The shockwave propelled the relay out of its system, but did not damage it. Its precise vector and speed are impossible to determine. As millenia passed, the nebula created by the nova enveloped the relay. It is difficult to find any cold object in interstellar space. Particularly something swathed in hot dust and radiation."

"Someone on Noveria found it?"

"Two thousand years ago, the rachni inhabited that region of our galaxy. They discovered the relay. The rachni can share memories across generations. Queens inherit the knowledge of their mothers. I took the relay from this queen's mind. I was not gentle."

"How did the rachni find the relay?"

"They searched, patiently. They are territorial creatures, driven to close any possible way into their systems."

"Why does Saren need the Mu relay?"

"He believes it will lead him to the Conduit. I would tell you more if I could, but Saren did not share his counsel with me. I was merely a servant to his cause."

"You can still make it right. Give me the information."

"I was not myself, but – I should have been stronger. Here, take the location."

She activated her omni-tool and sent the coordinates to mine.

"Thank you. Knowing the relay's location is good, but do you know where he planned to go from there?"

"Saren would not tell me his destination. But you must find out quickly. I transmitted the coordinates to him just before you arrived. You have to stop – me. I can't – His teeth are at my ear. Fingers on my spine. You should – Ugh, you should...!" Benezia grasped her head and shook as she lost control of herself.

Liara attempted to plead with her: "Mother, I – Don't leave! Fight him!"

"You've always made me proud, Liara." Benezia succumbed to whatever was controlling her mind. An evil purple aura surrounded her as she gathered biotic energy. "DIE!" she screamed as she unleashed a blob of dark matter, hurling a destructive sphere right at me and Liara.

I tackled my squadmate to the floor in nick of time, then rolled away as another sphere exploded in the spot where we were. My reflexes kicked in and I shot her dead center mass with my pistol. She crumpled to the floor, and Liara rushed to her side. I stayed where I stood, regretting that I'd had to kill her.

"I cannot go on," said the dying Matriarch. "You will have to stop him, Shepard."



"Hold on!" cried Liara, desperately. "We've got medi-gel, maybe we can --"

"No. He is still in my mind. I am not entirely myself. I never will be again."

"Mother..."

"Good night, Little Wing. I will see you again with the dawn....No light? They always said there would be – Ahhh."

Liara hugged her mother's body and sobbed. The rest of the squad gathered round. I was at a loss for what to do. We all were. We just stood there for what must have been a full minute.

The body of one of the asari commandos was propped up against the glass cage containing the rachni queen. Her eyes popped open, and the body convulsed for a moment, then started to speak in a strained voice.

"This one. Serves as our voice. We cannot sing. Not in these low spaces. Your musics are colorless."

"Musics? What?" Ashley was as confused as I was.

The rachni queen stirred and tapped the glass with one of her long antennae.

"Your way of communicating is strange. Flat. It does not color the air. When we speak, one moves all. We are the mother. We sing for those left behind. The children you thought silenced. We are rachni."

"How are you speaking through her?" I asked. I wondered why the queen was speaking about herself in plural, but then I remembered something Benezia had said about ancestral memory.

"Our kind sing through touchings of thought. We pluck the strings, and the other understands. She is weak to urging. She has colors we have no names for. But she is ending. Her music is bittersweet. It is beautiful. The children we birthed were stolen from us before they could learn to sing. They are lost to silence. End their suffering. They cannot be saved. They will only cause harm as they are."

"I don't understand. Why are your children killing people?"

"These needle-men. They stole our eggs from us. They sought to turn our children into beasts of war. Claws with no songs of their own. Our elders are comfortable with silence. Children know only fear if no one sings to them. Fear has shattered their minds."

"I get it," said Kaidan. "A child left alone in a closet until she's sixteen wouldn't be sane."

"Okay. I can do that." That was my intent anyway, but I wasn't at all sure how yet.

"It is lamentable. But necessary. Do what you must. But what will you sing of us? Will you release us? Are we to fade away once more?"

A debate broke out among my squadmates. It sounded like they were letting me decide, though I couldn't fathom why. I let them voice their opinions, hoping I would form one of my own.

"The rachni were a threat to the galaxy. Those tanks are filled with acid," Garrus observed. "If she gets out of hand, they dissolve her."

"I don't trust this thing," said Ashley. I recommend using it."

"Millions of my ancestors died to put these things down," said Wrex. "Don't let them come back." Why a krogan wouldn't just muscle me out of the way, I still can't fathom.

"They made a mistake. They let the krogan go too far. This is a chance for us to atone. She has done nothing to us," Liara argued.

Kaidan agreed. "We'd be making a whole race extinct. I don't want that on my conscience."

"She's the last of her race, Shepard. We don't have the objectivity to judge her." Tali had a worrying cough.

"There's a reason their kind were hunted to extinction. It's better to be safe than to let a dangerous race loose," argued Ashley.

"Their kind? Interesting choice of words, chief. Are we any better if we kill them all?" countered Kaidan.

"I don't want to trust the safety of my little sisters to this...alien. It's better to be sure."

Garrus chimed in. "If this happened in Cipitrine, or Tokyo, or on the Citadel, the death toll would be... But we need the Council's approval. Genocide is one of the reasons we fought the krogan – ah..."

"You want to learn about genocide, Vakarian," Wrex said with an edge in his voice. "I'll take you to a krogan obstetrician's office."

"No! Stop feeling and think," said Liara, with an astoundingly clear head. "Even if you don't agree with asari morals, you must see she could be an ally."

"What's the matter," said Wrex, still on edge. "Are the asari looking for a new species to cuddle up with?"

"Your companions hear the truth," said the queen, speaking through the dying commando. "You have the power to free us, or return our people to the silence of memory."

"If I let you live, would you attack other races again?"

"No. We – I do not know what happened in the war. We only heard discordance, songs the color of oily shadows. We would seek a hidden place to teach our children harmony. If they understand, perhaps we would return."

"Are you a survivor from the war? Or a clone?"

"We do not know. We were only an egg, hearing Mother cry in our dreams. A tone from space hushed

one voice after another. It forced the singers to resonate with its own sour yellow note. Then we awoke, in this place. The last echo of those who came out from the Singing Planet. The sky is silent."

I looked at each of my squad mates. They all stood patiently, awaiting my decision. I looked at the queen in her cell, into her compound eyes. I glanced at the acid tanks, and took a deep breath.

"I won't destroy your entire race. You'll go free."

"Are you stupid?" Wrex growled. "Your people didn't fight these bastards, so maybe you don't get it!"

"I'd like to have the rachni on our side in the future," I said. "She'll owe us."

"Do what you want. My people will clean up this mess later. Just like we did for the salarians a thousand years ago."

"You will give us the chance to compose anew? We will remember. We will sing of your forgiveness to our children."

"Bugs are writing songs about this," said Wrex sarcastically. "Mark my words: you'll regret this."

Again, I wondered that he didn't just shove me aside to kill the queen himself. Nor did anyone else, for that matter. I'd led squads before, and they'd always deferred to my decisions. But this was on a whole other level. To have the existence of an entire race in my hands...

But the argument was over. I searched the console in front of me and found the controls to open the cage, and the queen skittered off into the ice tunnel through which we'd arrived. I could hear chunks of ice breaking apart as she made her own tunnel out to the surface.

Tali went into a coughing fit, and Ashely caught her as she collapsed.

"We should go," said Kaidan.

"At least destroy this place," suggested Wrex. "There's still defective rachni infesting the whole area."

Garrus had a notion about that. "Didn't someone say these labs could be sunk into the ice by explosives? That's why they're called the 'hot' labs, right? Let me see that console."

Garrus tapped away while the rest of us built a makeshift stretcher for Tali. Alarms started blaring, and the automated voice of the VI Mira announced an evacuation.

"Five minutes is the best I could do," said Garrus.

Back through the ice tunnel we went. Through the barracks and the barricade. Guards and scientists were crowded onto the tram, but they made room for us. I made sure no one else was coming, then boarded last. No one spoke. We all passed several minutes in nervous anticipation. Then the ground shook. Out the windows was a tremendous explosion, an eruption of fire and steam as the entire building sank into the ice. The tram shook, but continued on its implacable trek to the other building.

The only vehicle available to take us back to the port was the one my squad had ridden in on. We

loaded Tali first, then the rest of my squad. Not much room was left, but we squeezed in two scientists who had been injured in their rush out of the labs. I told Kaidan to step on it. The ride was bumpy this time, but the trip was only half as long. I thought the storm might be letting up, but it could have been wishful thinking.

I contacted the Normandy to report our status, and Doctor Chakwas met us in the port's garage with a medical pod for Tali. She and her assistant rushed back to the Normandy. The rest of us limped back to the ship. I shut the airlock after the last of my squad hobbled on board, then made my way to the bridge.

"Cast off and take us into orbit as soon as the storm lets us, Joker," I ordered.

Then I went down to the med bay to check on Tali. I met Ashley as she exited. She had a band-aid on her cheek.

"Just a scratch," she said.

Doctor Chakwas was monitoring the readout on the medical pod.

"Tali will be fine," she reassured me. "Just a small infection. She'll be out in a few hours, good as new. I have Garrus repairing her suit. Oh, let me take a look at that shoulder."

I realized that I was holding my arm across my chest, and then remembered the slug that'd I'd taken while battling Benezia's commandos. The doctor patched me up and sent me on my way. I decided to forgo my usual group debriefing. I typed out my report, then crashed.

I awoke some hours later on top of my sheets, feeling groggy, but better. After freshening up, I went up to the vidcomm room. I straightened my shirt, took a deep breath, then contacted the Council.

"Is this report accurate, Commander?" asked the asari Councilor. "You found rachni on Noveria?"

"And then released the queen!" the turian Councilor was angry. "Do you have any idea what you've done? How many generations until they overrun the galaxy?"

I'd be long gone by then, and it wouldn't be my problem. But I couldn't say that. "This queen is different. She understands why her kind had to be wiped out last time around."

"I hope your're right, Shepard. Our children's children will pay the price if you're not."

But I had a feeling I would be right, in the end. The Councilors didn't have anything else to say that was substantive, and the conversation ended quickly. A part of me was surprised they weren't going to have me arrested or something. Did Spectres make decisions like this regularly? If so, that would be alarming. Would another Spectre be sent after me for unleashing the rachni, just as I was hunting Saren for unleashing the geth? I hoped not. But that was a question for the future, and I would face the consequences alone. Saren and army definitely needed to be stopped.

Joker and Pressley were chatting when I exited the vidcomm room.

"Boy, am I glad to be off Noveria," Joker was saying. "I don't know which was worse: the cold or the

corporations. One will freeze your balls off, the other will sell'em out from under you. With all due respect, Commander. What's our next move? Head for the Mu relay?"

"The Mu relay could link to dozens of systems. Unless we know exactly where Saren's going, we'd just be wasting our time."

"Welll, so where to, Commander?" asked Pressly.

"I don't know yet. I don't suppose either of you have any leads?"

"No, sir. But the Normandy is ready when you are."

"Fine. Good. Let's just chill in orbit for now. I'll let you know when it's time to go."

"Chill?" Joker chuckled. "Around an ice planet? Good one, Commander."

"That was unintentional, but yeah. Okay. Carry on."

Down on the crew deck, I found Kaidan studying a datapad.

"Anything you need, Commander?"

"Just trying to get a sense of where the crew's at. Thoughts?"

"I didn't figure you'd have time to talk, with all that's going on. I mean, there are reports to file. On the rachni, and on Anoleis."

"The paperwork will keep. Something on your mind?"

"I'm just looking for an ear. This is all ridiculous. Seems like every other race in the galaxy is wrapped up in their own problems. They don't want to see what's coming."

"Wanting to believe everything will be fine? Sounds like human nature to me."

"Yeah, I guess some things carry across species well enough. I should remember that after what happened with Vyrnnus."

"I'd think you'd carry a grudge over the crap you took from Vyrnnus."

"Before I met Vyrnnus, I knew as much as any other civilian. Aliens were weird, superior, and tried to tell us what to do. I mean, it'd only been 26 years since first contact. That's not a lot of time to understand them. It was Vyrnnus who made me see how human aliens are. They're not different or special. They're jerks and saints, just like us. Hell, by the time I got payback, I didn't even want it anymore."

"I don't see you snapping very easily. What finally did it?"

"He hurt Rahna. Broke her arm. She reached for a glass of water instead of pulling it biotically. She just wanted a drink without getting a nosebleed, you know? Like an idiot, I stood up. Didn't know what I

was gonna do. Just something. And Vyrnnus lost it. Beat the crap out of me. Kept shouting that they should have bombed us back to the stone age. That's when the knife came up. A military-issue talon. Right in my face. I cut loose. Full biotic kick, right in the teeth. Almost as strong as I can manage now. At seventeen, that's something."

"You wanted to help a girl you cared for. That's a noble thing."

"Maybe my intentions were noble. But I lost control. I killed him, Shepard. Snapped his neck. They probably could've saved him, if they got him to an infirmary quick enough. But they didn't. Caused a stir when they shipped him home. BAaT training was shut down. Conatix folded a couple years later. So, yeah, maybe I hated that turian. I mean, if one ass was enough to judge a whole race, I'd hate humans too."

"A reasonable stance."

"Staying reasonable is about all we've got left. Everyone else in this galaxy seems to have gone out of their minds. Present company excepted, of course."

"So, your opinion on this mission?"

"Killing Saren's – what was Benezia, anyway? Second-in-command? Advisor? Anyway, it should set him back a bit. I'm sure doctor T'Soni's hurting though. Poor kid. Having to kill her own mom."

"And the rachni queen?"

"I think it was the right decision. I don't think I could have slept if we'd killed her entire race."

"Thanks, Kaidan. I'll go check on Liara."

Entering the med bay, I saw that Tali was still in her pod. Doctor Chakwas informed me it wouldn't be much longer, and I knocked on Liara's door

"If you are here to talk about Benezia's death, you need not bother. She brought it upon herself," she said in a stoic monotone.

"Don't pretend it doesn't bother you. She was your mother."

"She was...but she was not. I prefer to remember Benezia as she used to be, before she was corrupted by Sovereign's power."

"The best of your mother lives on in you: her determination, her intelligence, her strength."

"That is kind of you to say. I appreciate your concern, but I am fine. Benezia chose her path, just as I have chosen mine. I am with you until the end, Shepard."

"Do you know why Benezia joined up with Saren?"

"Benezia was swept up in events beyond her control and lost herself. She fell under the spell of indoctrination and became part of the very thing she wanted to stop. But I will remember and honor

how she lived, not how she died. My mother was strong, kind, and beautiful. And now she is gone."

"Are you going to be okay?"

"You are kind to ask, Shepard. I do miss her. And I grieve for what happened to her. But I will not let my grief interfere with what we are trying to accomplish."

I excused myself to give her time to grieve. Down in the cargo bay, I saw Wrex scratching his chin.

"Shepard."

"Wrex."

"So, the rachni. I've been thinking. Maybe having them back will give my people purpose."

"Interesting. I was surprised you didn't try to stop me down there."

"I wanted to, but I was afraid I'd lose my merc pay. Ha ha! No, but like I said, I've been thinking about the rachni."

"I'll leave you to it."

"Shepard."

"Wrex."

I don't know why I kept poking a krogan. I don't think I have a death wish. Speaking of which, Ashley waved me over from the lockers.

"Surprised to see you here, sir. Thought you'd be chatting up what's-her-name. T'Soni. Scuttlebutt says you've got a bit of a thing for her. I could understand why. The crew's off limits, with the regs against fraternization. And at least she looks like a woman."

"She's grieving. But she's going to be okay. Wait. You think I'm interested in Liara because she's the only one I'm allowed to date?"

"So you are interested in her. 'Course, it could just be politics. Alien diplomat's daughter? Us under orders to make nice with the bug-eyed monsters?"

"It's not like that. I talk to all of my crew. Even you." She narrowed her eyes, uncertain. I changed the subject. "So you disapprove of letting the rachni go?"

"They were dangerous, skipper. They proved that a thousand years ago. I think it was a mistake to let them go. But that wasn't my call to make. It was yours."

"Okay. I'm not sure why was on me, but...thank you."

Garrus was at a workbench, putting the finishing touches on Tali's environmental suit. He paused in his work as I approached.

"Shepard, about the rachni... If we'd had the option, I'd as soon have left it to the Council. We weren't out here during the rachni war. I'm not sure we have any business getting involved."

"You've been dealing with Citadel politics longer than I have. If we had left it to the Council, what do you think they would have done?"

"Hmm. I suppose they would have wiped out the rachni, then pretended it never happened."

"That's what I thought. And then we'd be accomplices to their genocide, which --"

"I see your point. I suppose I don't want that, either. But still...well. I get it. Thanks, Shepard."

"Any time, Garrus."

-----Chapter 10: Interlude-----

*From the Codex:*

*Ancient krogan society was once rich with cultural, architectural, and artistic accomplishments. However, the krogan birth rate exploded despite the natural limits of their predatory homeworld once they achieved industrialization. Technology made life "too easy" for them, so when they looked for new challenges they found those in each other. Wars were fought over dwindling resources as the krogan expanded.*

*Four thousand years ago, at the dawn of the krogan nuclear age, battles to claim the small pockets of territory capable of sustaining life escalated into full scale global war. Weapons of mass destruction were unleashed, transforming Tuchanka into a radioactive wasteland. The krogan were reduced to primitive warring clans struggling to survive a nuclear winter of their own creation, a state that continued until they were discovered by the salarians two thousand years later.*

WREX: FAMILY ARMOR

I was in the weight room, fiddling with a dumbbell. With no other leads, should we head for the Mu Relay? It was pretty far out of the way, and if we found nothing, the delay could cost us. On the other hand, no one knew how many geth Saren had at his command. What if we emerged from FTL right in the middle of a massive fleet? What if Saren's flagship, Sovereign, was there? We would stand no chance. But I hated sitting still.

I was pondering these questions, absently twirling exercise equipment, when Wrex entered the gym. It was rare for him to come up from the cargo bay, as the krogan made the other crew nervous. I think he liked that.

"Shepard."

"Wrex."

"Seeing as how we're not doing anything, I want to go to Tuntau."



"What's on Tuntau?"

"My family armor. A turian by the name of Tonn Actus has it."

"What's so special about this armor?"

"It's a relic. Useless really, but it was worn by five generations of my family before the war. It's rightfully mine. Originally it was taken by the turian military; we weren't allowed armor or weapons after the war. Now it's in the hands of pirate scum. Tonn Actus collects relics from the war. He's made millions selling krogan artifacts that were stolen from my people. He's got several bases where he stores his goods, all fortified and guarded. I'm pretty sure the one with my armor's on Tuntau."

"I get that your family's armor has sentimental value, but if it's useless...it's a big risk to assault some pirate base for."

"I've been thinking about our conversations. About giving my people purpose. That armor is a symbol I could use to unite the clans. At least, I think it's worth trying."

"I need you for this mission, Wrex."

"Saren's a threat to the entire galaxy. We'll get rid of him first. Besides, I'm still under contract, heh."

It would be pretty off the books, but I was itching for something to do. Heck, the whole crew was going stir-crazy. I set the dumbbell down on its rack.

"Let's do it, Wrex. Pick your squad. I'll have Joker set course for Tuntau."

Argos Rho is just one cluster over from the Horse Head Nebula, so we arrived on Tuntau just a few hours later. Wrex just shrugged at picking a squad, so everyone crammed into the Mako. Everyone except for, Tali, who was back on her feet but wasn't feeling up to combat yet.

Joker dropped us a few clicks from the compound. The planet's atmosphere is unbreathable, and the surface is coated in mostly salt and silicon, making everything look like it's covered in snow, though it's mercifully far too warm for that. Wrex was in charge of this mission, and unsurprisingly, he opted for the direct approach. Garrus took out three guards outside with the Mako's cannon, then we stormed the place. Guns blazed, grenades exploded, crates were tossed about with biotics – the pirates never stood a chance.

One of the turian pirates was wearing fancier armor than the rest, and I could only assume this was Tonn Actus himself. Wrex casually stepped over the corpse as we searched the warehouse. In a back room, we found a locked crate, which was easily picked. Inside was a set of battered red armor.

"This is it," said Wrex. "I can't believe my ancestor ever wore this piece of crap, but at least I've got it back. I might just be starting to like you, Shepard."

His expression was thoughtful...maybe. Krogan are hard to read. Then he shook off his bemusement and gripped his gun with renewed purpose. Time to move on.

*From the Codex:*

*All biotics seeking to wield their abilities on a usable level are fitted with an electronic brain implant during puberty. Once the implant is installed, it can only be replaced or altered through extremely dangerous brain surgery, so most individuals keep the same implant their entire lives. Dr. Ellen Ryder is responsible for creating the first human biotic implants. Biotics are classed according to their implant model and the strength of their ability.*

UNC: HOSTAGE

I was in my quarters when Pressley informed me of an incoming transmission from Alliance High Command. I hoofed it up to the vidcomm room to take the call. An admiral appeared via hologram. He had a grizzled look about him, and a deep scar slanting across his right cheek. I saluted. His voice was like gravel.

"Commander. Admiral Hackett, 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet. It's good to see you're in the area. We've got a situation that requires your expertise. I know you're working for the Council now, but you're still human, and you still serve the Alliance."

"Of course, Admiral. What can I do for you?"

"A group of fanatical biotics have kidnapped the chairman of the Parliament Subcommittee on Transhuman Studies. Their freighter sustained damage and is dead in space. We have a ship enroute, but you're closer. Get in there and take them down."

"What are the biotics asking for?"

"They're L2 biotics, and most of them are suffering major side effects from the implants. The chairman's subcommittee recently denied a request for reparations to all L2 biotics. Apparently, they'd like the chairman to reconsider."

"What kind of resistance should I expect?"

"The biotics were seen loading equipment onto the freighter. Expect traps and combat drones. Nothing you can't handle."

"What's the priority on saving the chairman?"

"Saving him would be my preference, but we must make it clear that these tactics don't work, Commander. Your top priority is to neutralize the biotics."

"Understood, Admiral. I'll see what I can do."

"I appreciate you taking the time, Commander. I'm sending you the last known coordinates of the freighter. Good hunting. Fifth Fleet out."

The Farinata system wasn't that close, but this was a worthy cause. I took Kaidan along when we docked with the MSV Ontario. Hopefully, he'd be able to reason with his fellow L2s.

A Kowloon class freighter has a standard configuration: docking port aft, cargo hold mid, and two rooms just aft of the flight deck. The ship was eerily quiet when we entered. There were two bodies inside the airlock, and the cargo hold showed signs of ransacking. Kaidan and I cautiously made our way forward to the front of the ship.

The starboard room was empty, but we found the hostage takers and the Chairman in the port side room. Four terrorists total. The Chairman was on his knees, hands behind his back, and one of the terrorists held a pistol to the man's head. This must be the leader. A bald man with a goatee, and his skin was cracked. The other three were fidgety, and occasionally sparking with biotic energy.

"See how it is?" said the man with the gun, evidently the leader. "You write letters, and everyone ignores you. Force is the only thing people appreciate. So how about if I kill Chairman Burns and finish this charade?"

"Please! I was trying to help your people!" Chairman Burns's suit was rumpled and his hair was mussed, but otherwise he appeared unharmed.

"Let's not do anything we're going to regret," I said.

"Why not? What have we got to lose?" said Burns. "Since the chairman here decided that we didn't get reparations, we've got nothing left to live for!"

"But I've changed my mind. Seeing y-you all, it's c-clear that you all d-deserve..."

"You had your chance! Some L2s are nearly crippled from side effects of the implants, but you voted against reparations!"

"Think about this," I said. "Burns is the one man who can help you."

"Yes! If you release me, I can take another look at the reparations request!"

"What, we're supposed to trust you?"

Kaidan spoke up, finally. "I'm an L2, like you. Trust me. The Commander can make sure that Burns follows through."

"Sure, you promise us freedom and say everything will be fine, but as soon as we surrender, you'll double-cross us!"

"I can't promise that. You're going to jail. All I'm saying is that Burns will take another look. Right, Burns?" said Kaidan.

"Absolutely. I had no idea that the L2 biotics were this desperate. If I had known... The reparations will come. For whatever it's worth, I promise that."

This didn't seem to move the terrorists. Kaidan went on. "If you die fighting, you'll get a lot of biotics killed as well."

Now, the terrorist leader was nonplussed. "What do you mean?"

"You've just made all L2 biotics look like terrorists. Think of what will happen to them."

"But people need to hear about what the government has done, and what it as failed to do!"

"People have heard. You've already accomplished that. You don't need to die for it."

The terrorist leader considered for a moment, then lowered his pistol and took a step back, motioning to his people to back down.

"You're right," said the leader. "I don't want ot die. Maybe something will happen this time. We surrender."

Kaidan and I collected the biotic's weapons, then found some loose cabling to tie them up. They didn't resist. I used a knife to cut Burns's bonds. The Chairman looked around nervously, then stood up.

"Thank you, Commander. I thought I was dead when they took me. I'll see to it that the reparations discussion is reopened. I didn't know they were so desperate."

"No, you didn't," said Kaidan.

We stayed with the prisoners and the Chairman until a fifth fleet cruiser came by shortly to pick them up. As soon as I was back on board the Normandy, I had a message from Admiral Hackett.

"Thank you for dealing with the hostage situation, Commander. Burns was quite impressed by the way you resolved the situation peacefully. Your assistance above and beyond formal duties has been noted, Commander. Fifth fleet out."

My report would show Kaidan's role in this mission. He deserved a commendation.

*From the Codex:*

*Known for their militaristic and disciplined culture, the turians were the third race to join the Citadel Council. They gained their Council seat after defeating the hostile krogan for the Council during the Krogan Rebellions. The turians deployed a salarian-created biological weapon called the genophage, which virtually sterilised the krogan and sent them into a decline. The turians then filled the peacekeeping niche left by the once-cooperative krogan, and eventually gained a Council seat in recognition of their efforts.*

*Originally from the planet Palaven, turians are best known for their military role, particularly their contributions of soldiers and starships to the Citadel Fleet. They are respected for their public service ethic—it was the turians who first proposed creating C-Sec—but are sometimes seen as imperialist or rigid by other races. There is some animosity between turians and humans, largely due to the turian role in the First Contact War. This bitterness is slowly beginning to heal—as shown by the cooperation of the two races on the construction of the SSV Normandy—but many turians still resent humans, and vice versa.*

GARRUS: FIND DOCTOR SALEON

Garrus and I were working out in the gym. Turians need to exercise, too, apparently. I decided to strike up a conversation.

"You've been with C-Sec a while. Have you seen much action?"

"Well, not as much as you. But yeah, I've seen some interesting things."

"I bet you have. Anything in particular that stands out?"

"I remember this salarian geneticist I was sent to investigate. The case was a bit...disturbing."

"How so? Why were you investigating him?"

"I was tasked with tracking black market trade on the Citadel. Most of it's harmless. Nothing I needed to pursue. But during the course of my investigation, I noticed an increase in the trade of body parts. Organs, mostly. We usually get a few of those, but not in the numbers I was seeing. We weren't sure if there was a new black market lab or if some freak was harvesting organs from citizens."

"You've seen this before on the Citadel?" Lab-grown organs were common, but still quite expensive. Black market organ harvesting didn't surprise me.

"Every so often, some lab sells unwanted parts through the black market. But they're not as bad as the psychos. I remember this one elcor diplomat we caught in my first year on the job. He was hacking people up and selling their organs. Had the station in a bit of a panic. But this case wasn't that clear cut. Turns out there was more going on than we first realized."

"So how did you find out what was happening?"

"First, we got a hold of a sample and ran DNA tests. The weird thing was, the match led us to a turian who was still alive and was very convinced he'd never lost his liver. After a bit of digging, I discovered this turian worked briefly for Doctor Saleon, the geneticist. So I went to his lab, hoping to find evidence of cloned organ development. But there was nothing. No salarian hearts, no turian livers, not one krogan testicle."

"You're kidding, right? Why would anyone want krogan testicles?"

"Some krogan believe that testicle transplants can increase their virility. Counteract the effects of the genophage. It doesn't work; but that doesn't stop them from buying. They'll pay up to 10,000 credits each. That's 40,000 for a full set. Somebody's making a killing out there."

"What did you do about the geneticist?"

"I brought in some of his employees for interrogation. To see if I could get them to talk. While I was interviewing one of them, I came across something suspicious. He started bleeding profusely during the interview. We offered to patch him up and he got frantic. Freaked out. I ordered a full exam to find out what was going on. Our medics found incisions all over his body. Some of them fresh. That was our big

break. These people weren't just Dr. Saleon's employees. They were test tubes. Walking, living test tubes."

"He was growing parts inside these people?"

"Exactly. He cloned their organs right inside their own bodies. Then he harvested them and sold them off. Most of the victims were poor. He'd pay them each a small percentage of the sales, but only if the organs were good. Sometimes an organ wouldn't grow properly, so he'd just leave it in them. Most of them were a mess, but only on the inside – hidden so nobody could see it."

"I hope he got what he deserved."

"That's the worst part. We never caught him."

"Don't tell me that! Why not?"

"He ran. Blew his lab; grabbed some of his employees, and headed for the nearest space dock. By the time I found out, his ship was already leaving. He threatened to kill his hostages if we tried to stop him."

"But you went after him anyway, right?"

"I ordered Citadel defense to shoot him down, but C-Sec headquarters countermanded my order. They were worried about the hostages. Worried about civilian casualties if the ship was destroyed so close to the Citadel. I told them those hostages were dead anyway. He'd just use them to make more organs. But they wouldn't listen."

"They were right. It's not worth the risk. You pursue the vessel and disable it. That's the best choice."

"They sent the military after him, but he got away just the same. I went to Executor Pallin, my boss, and told him what I thought of him and his policies. He said that if I didn't like it, I could quit. I almost did. All they had to do was disable that ship. Stop him from running. Maybe the hostages die, maybe they don't. But at least we stop the bastard responsible for it all."

"If you don't care about the fate of those hostages, then you're no better than he is. You're just a terrorist with a badge."

"Yeah, maybe you're right. It doesn't make it any easier, but I see your point. I just wish I could have stopped him. That's all."

"Do you have any idea what happened to Dr. Saleon?"

"I sent out feelers from time to time, hoping to find something. I thought I'd found him a while back. He'd changed ship and changed his name to Dr. Heart – his idea of a joke, I guess. I told the military, but they weren't convinced it was him. I got the transponder frequency for his new ship, but I just can't get anyone to check it out."

"Give it to me," I said, stepping off the treadmill. "I'll see if the Spectre office can track it down, then we'll go check it out."

"I was hoping you'd say that, Commander."

The MSV Fedele was drifting in the Kepler Verge, Herschel System. Garrus said he wanted just me along, so together we geared up and boarded. It was another Kowloon class freighter.

The cargo hold was mostly empty, but there were a half-dozen people of various species just standing around, staring into space. When Garrus and I got near them, they began to attack us. I could add these test subjects to my growing list of zombie types. We did our best to knock them unconscious, but we wound up killing two of them, unfortunately.

We found a salarian in a lab in one of the side rooms in the forward section of the ship. He had some red markings on his face that somewhat resembled a heart.

"Thank you for saving me from those things," he said in the typical hurried fashion of his species.

"That's him, Shepard. We know what kind of work you do here, Saleon," said Garrus.

"What? My name is Heart. Doctor Heart. Please, get me out of here."

"Are you sure it's him?"

"Positive. There's no escape this time, doctor. I'd harvest your organs first, but we don't have the time."

"You're crazy. He's crazy. Please, don't let him do this to me," the 'doctor' plead.

"We'll take you in," I said. "Drop you off with the military."

"But...we have him," said Garrus. "We can't let him get away. Not again?"

"If he dies, we'll never know what he's been up to, or how he did it. We'll take him in, interrogate him, and he'll serve his time."

"I've – Okay. You're right. You're a very lucky salarian. You owe the commander your life."

"Oh, thank you so very much!" The doctor said in a strongly sarcastic tone. Then pulled out a pistol and opened fire as he tried to run away. His shots bounced off our kinetic barriers, and both Garrus and I shot him in the back.

"And so he dies anyway. What was the point of that, Shepard?"

"You can't predict how people will act, Garrus. But you can control how you'll respond. In the end, that's what really matters."

"Hmm. Yeah. I don't think I've ever met anyone like you, Commander. Well, I guess we're done here."

Saleon's medical equipment was stained with the blood of many species. Pale blue, violet, orange...and more than a few dark red. But his work ended here. Time to head back to the Normandy.

*From the Codex:*

*While comm buoys allow rapid transmission, there is a finite amount of bandwidth available. Given that trillions of people may be trying to pass a message through a given buoy at any one time, access to the network is parceled out on priority tiers.*

*The Citadel Council and the Spectres have absolute priority; if they are using all the bandwidth, everyone else must wait. Individual governments and their militaries enjoy the next-highest tier. During wartime, civilian communication can suffer hours or even days of lag. Intelligence agencies study ping time through various systems to predict military buildups.*

*While everyone with a computer has guaranteed free and unlimited access to the galactic extranet, they are last in line for bandwidth and may have to wait for their requests to be processed. Bandwidth resale corporations use investment capital to purchase blocks of high priority access, made available by paid subscription.*

#### A CONVERSATION WITH ASHLEY

Ashley was studying a data pad in the vidomm room. I decided to try to patch things up between us.

"Do you have a few minutes to talk, Chief?"

"Sure. I was just watching some mail from home --"

The datapad played the tail end an audio message as she set it down. "Oh, before I go," came a young female voice. "We saw Shepard in a news vid about the Normandy. He's cute. Later, sis."

"Tell me you didn't hear that," she blushed.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear it..."

"Oh, shoot me now --"

"...but we do need to stop."

"Fraternization, right. I agree. It won't happen again. And uh, I'm over it."

I gestured to the datapad. "Your sister, I assume?"

"Until I get home and kill her. What's up? You didn't come by to eavesdrop on family mail."

"Your family seems to be important to you."

"Yeah, we've always been close. Me and my sisters, especially. With Dad on duty so much, I had to help Mom raise them."



"Did your father serve with the fleet?"

"Yeah, took any crap posting he could get that offered space time. He worked his ass off trying to get recognized. But he never got above Serviceman Third Class. He was real proud when I made Chief. First thing he did was salute."

"What about your mother? You haven't mentioned her."

"You must know what military wives are like. Strong because they have to be. Able to raise kids while Dad's away on a six-month cruise. She has a degree in planetary geology. She and Dad both wanted to see new worlds. She gave up her career to raise us, though."

"You have more than one sister? Sounds like a big family."

"Yeah. I'm the oldest, then Abby, then Lynn. Sarah's the youngest. She's still in high school. Things were tense between Sarah and me for a while. Then we...bonded. With four girls, Dad used to say he felt more outnumbered at home than on maneuvers."

"Where did you grow up?"

"All over. We transferred a half-dozen times before I finished grade school. You go where Personnel Command sends you, right? I guess that's why I'm so tight with my sisters. We'd have to leave all our friends every two or three years."

"You're lucky to have a close family."

"Sorry. I forgot about your family situation."

"Or lack thereof. Relax, Ashley. I've dealt with it."

"Ask me to clear a bunker of armed hostiles, no problem. Dealing with the foot in my mouth? Not so good with that."

"Sounds like a story there with Sarah. Feel like sharing?"

"Sarah got herself a boyfriend who wanted to go faster than she did. Mike. I didn't think he was a bad kid. Just pushy. Lynn would send me these worried vid-mails, and I'd tell her to relax."

"Vid-mails? Where you you when this was going on?"

"I was on active duty. Sara's graduating high school this year. This was only a couple years back. They were on Amaterasu. At the time, I was assigned to Czarnobóg. Same cluster, but a dozen light years away. Close enough to talk regularly, too far to make it back in an emergency. I couldn't afford a fast-packet flight."

"Right. So, if this...Mike? If he really liked her, he wouldn't be pushy."

"Yeah. 'Course, if he didn't ask at all, I'd wonder if he thought Sarah was ugly. Damned if you do, damned if you don't. Mike thought they'd go for a romantic walk in the woods. 'Cause he figured it was

past time they did the deed. She levered Mike face-first into a tree and left. Didn't have a scratch on her. Good thing Mom and Dad had us all learn some kind of self-defense. I took emergency leave and walked Sarah to school for a few days."

"Why didn't you call the police?"

"She said it wouldn't solve the real problem. And she and Mike would both become household names. It was a small colony. I said it was her call to make. That we should let her do it her way. Mom was pretty pissed about that."

"You said all of your sisters learned self-defense?"

"Lynn did pistol practice, but didn't like it. She's kind of nervous. Sarah took to akido. Abby decided to learn the sword. She always was a little weird. Likes big skirts and tops you have to tie her into. They do great things for her figure, though..."

"So, what did you learn?"

"One of Dad's friends taught me marine hand-to-hand."

"I should have guessed. So you traveled all the way home to walk your sister to school."

"It was only a dozen light years. Like a day's cruise. It's not like I was going to Earth or something. My last day out, Mike was waiting for us. Sarah had told her friends, so everyone at school knew what he did. He wasn't happy. I wanted to snap him in half. But Sarah gave me this look. This 'let me handle it, I need to do this alone' look. She kept her cool – God bless her – as he screamed in her face. She just let him vent. Then he tried to punch her. I swear, she just flowed around him. Next thing I know, he's face-down on the sidewalk, and there's blood everywhere."

"That's unbelievable. Sarah must be as good as you."

"Better. I'm more or less a straight-up puncher. When he swung, she just – she wasn't there any more. And he fell. She helped him stop the bleeding and had me call an ambulance. She told the paramedics he fell. Before they took him to the hospital, Mike touched Sarah's arm. I thought he was going to end up on the ground again. But he hung his head, whispered 'I'm sorry,' and started crying. And she hugged him. The Williams women are a decisive bunch, Commander. We do things when we're ready. Not before, not after."

"Your sister's something else. But you didn't mention your father at all. Was he on deployment?"

"Dad always wanted to serve in space. But he wanted us to have real ground under our feet. He'd say, 'space is beautiful, but you can't raise a family there.'" Ashley paused, then started quoting a poem: "I cannot rest from travel: I will drink life to the lees. All times, I have enjoy'd greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those that loved me, and alone. For always roaming with a hungry heart. Much have I seen and known. Cities of men, and manners, climates, councils, governments...."

"I never thought I'd hear you reciting poetry."

"Just because I can drill you between the eyes at a hundred meters doesn't mean I can't like sensitive

stuff. Just don't spread it around. 'Ulysses' was Dad's favorite poem. Every time he shipped out, he recorded me reading it. He had a dozen versions when he retired."

"Does he still like it?"

"I sure hope so. I read it to his grave every time I go home. Dad passed on a few years back. He's probably still watching, though."

"You mean from wherever we go after death."

"Dean on, skipper. He's with God now. That's not a problem with you, is it? That I believe in God?"

"Everyone has the right to believe what they want. Says so in the Alliance Charter. Only with fancier words."

"I'm glad you're open-minded about it. I've met a few people who were really weirded out by my faith. Because I work in space, I can't believe in a higher power? Geez. Hello? Have you people looked out the window? How can you look at this galaxy and not believe in something? I should get back to my duties. Didn't meant to take up so much of your time."

"Thanks for sharing. Carry on."

*From the Codex:*

*Virmire is a lush world located on the frontier of the Attican Traverse. Its vast seas and orbital position on the inner life zone have created a wide equatorial band of humid, tropical terrain. Only the political instability of the region has impeded efforts at colonization.*

*Many times, the Citadel has opened negotiations to settle Virmire with the various criminal gangs and petty dictatorships in the nearby Terminus Systems. All fell apart due to internal power shifts within the opposing parties. The Citadel has written off the colonization of Virmire as impossible without significant political change.*

*The Terminus powers themselves are unlikely to ever settle Virmire. Most lack the resources to support settlement of a virgin world, finding it more expedient to steal from their neighbors than build for themselves.*

-----Chapter 11: Virmire-----

I was discussing our supply status with Pressly when a signal came in from the Citadel. Cutting my conversation short, I entered the vidcomm room to find the three familiar holograms of the Council. I made a slight bow, and we got down to business.

"Commander Shepard," began the asari Councilor. "We've received information that may be critical to your mission against Saren."

"I'll take all the help I can get," I said.

The Salarian Councilor continued: "We've received an urgent message from one of our infiltration

regiments in the Traverse."

"Why an infiltration unit?"

"Spectres tend to attract attention, Commander. But they are only one arm of the Council," explained the asari Councilor. "Special Task Groups are often a better option for monitoring developing situations."

"We currently have several infiltration units scattered throughout the border regions of Citadel space. This particular unit was gathering intel on Saren."

"What did they find?"

"Unfortunately, the message we received was little more than static. The infiltration team must be in a situation where they can't set up proper interstellar communications. But the message was sent on a channel reserved for mission-critical communications. Whatever they were trying to tell us, we know it was important. Considering your interest in Saren, we thought you might want to investigate this. Find out what happened to our team. The signal originated from the planet Virmire."

"I'll look into it," I promised."

"The Council prefers not to become involved in the specifics of Spectre activities," concluded the asari Councilor. "We only want you to be aware of all your options, including Virmire. Good luck, Commander Shepard. We will keep you advised if we learn anything else."

The conversation ended. That last statement explained a lot: the Council puts responsibility on the Spectres themselves, so the Councilors can avoid responsibility. Like when I'd released the rachni. Kaidan's warning about cutting corners came to mind. The temptation to abuse such power could indeed be strong.

I told Pressly to set course for Virmire. We entered orbit a day later. Scans showed a large compound, but communications were being actively blocked by geth signals. The area was also surrounded by anti-air cannons, so landing the Normandy in the middle wasn't going to work. Instead, we dropped in the Mako, as close as Joker could get us.

The landing zone was on a tropical beach, and we had to drive along several kilometers of wet sand to the compound. Along the way, we were beset by geth of all forms. Ashley's driving and Garrus's work with the Mako's guns got us through. There were three anti-air cannons attached to gatehouses on the way to the salarian camp, and at each, we had to get out on foot and fight our way to the controls. Rather than merely deactivating the cannons, Kaidan rigged them to blow as we left.

After an hour of fighting, we finally arrived at the salarian Special Task Group's base, and the Normandy touched down at the same time. There were several tents set up outside the high wall of the compound. I approached the man in charge. Even in combat armor, salarians looked very thin and fragile.

"I'm Captain Kirrahe, Third Infiltration Regiment STG. You and your crew have just landed in the middle of a hotzone. Every AA gun within fifteen kilometers has been alerted to your presence."

"Great, so we're grounded. What's the plan?" I asked.

"We stay put until the Council sends the reinforcements we requested."

"We are the reinforcements."

"What? You're all they sent? I told the Council to send a fleet."

"Your transmission was garbled. They sent me to investigate."

"That is a repetition of our task. My ship was disabled and I lost half my men investigating this place."

"So what have you found?"

"Saren's base of operations. He's set up a research facility here, but it's crawling with geth and very well fortified."

"Is Saren here? Have you seen him?"

"No, but his geth are everywhere, and we've intercepted some comms referring to Saren. This is his facility, there's no doubt about that."

"What's Saren researching?"

"He's using the facility to breed an army of krogan."

"How is that possible?" asked Wrex as he joined the conversation.

"Apparently, Saren has discovered a cure for the genophage. He's cloning krogan, and if he's successful, they'll quickly overrun the galaxy. And these krogan follow Saren."

"The geth are bad enough. But a krogan army...he'd be almost unstoppable," I mused. The krogan clones must have been a result of the research on Noveria. Saren is a major investor in Binary Helix, a bio-researcher. Now we knew what that research was about.

"Exactly my thoughts," said Kirrahe. "We must ensure that this facility and its secrets are destroyed."

"Destroyed?" Wrex disagreed. "I don't think so. Our people are dying; this cure can save them."

"If that cure leaves this planet, the krogan will become unstoppable. We can't make the same mistake again."

"We are not a mistake!" Wrex poked a finger at the salarian Captain's chest. "If there's a cure for the genophage, we can't destroy it."

"It's not truly a cure," explained Kirrahe. "Saren's cloning process is a way around the genophage."

"Calm down, Wrex," I said. "We're not the enemy here. Saren's the one you should be mad at."

"Really? Saren created a cure for my people. You want to destroy it. Help me out here, Shepard. The lines between friend and foe are getting a little blurry from where I stand."

"This isn't a cure, it's a weapon. And if Saren is allowed to use it, you won't be around to reap the benefits. None of us will."

"That's a chance we should be willing to take. This is the fate of my entire people we're talking about. I've been loyal to you so far. Hell, you did more for me than my family ever did. But if I'm going to keep following you, I need to know we're doing it for the right reasons."

"Wrex, these clones are not your people. They're indoctrinated, slaves of Saren. Tools. Is that what you want for them?"

My krogan friend stared into the distance for several seconds. "No. We were tools for the Council once. To thank us for wiping out the rachni, they neutered us all. I doubt Saren will be as generous. All right, Shepard. You've made your point. I don't like this, but I trust you enough to follow your lead. Just one thing. When we find Saren, I want his head."

"My men and I need to rethink our plan of attack," Kirrahe said. "Can you give us some time?"

"Absolutely. If any of your people need medical attention, my doctor on the Normandy can see to them."

"Thank you, Commander. I'll make arrangements to send them over."

A half dozen salarian commandos were loaded onto the Normandy, and Doctor Chakwas set up a triage in the cargo bay for them. I gathered my squad to brief them on the situation. Some minutes later, Captain Kirrahe joined my group.

"Thank you for speaking with the krogan. The assault on Saren's base will be difficult enough as it is."

"I assume that means you've come up with a plan."

"Of sorts. As I said, our ship is disabled. We can convert our ship's drive system into a twenty-kiloton ordinance. Crude, but effective."

Ashley was impressed: "Nice. Drop that nuke from orbit and Saren can kiss his turian ass goodbye."

"Unfortunately, the device wouldn't survive a drop from space, and besides, facility is too well-fortified for that," lamented Kirrahe. "We'll need to place the bomb at a precise location in the middle of the facility. Your ship can drop it off, but we'll need to infiltrate the base, disable the remaining AA guns, and pacify any ground forces first."

"A full frontal assault sounds a bit risky. Is there no other way?"

"I think we can work around that. I'm going to divide my men into three teams and hit the front of the facility. While we've got their attention, you can sneak your 'Shadow' team in the back."

"It's a good idea, but your people are going to get slaughtered."

"We're tougher than we look, Commander. But it's true. I don't expect many of us will make it out alive. And that makes what I'm going to ask even more difficult. I need one of your men to accompany me. To help coordinate the teams."

"Makes sense. You need someone who knows Alliance communication protocols."

"I volunteer," said Kaidan.

"Not so fast, LT." Ashley held up a hand. "Commander Shepard will need you to arm the nuke. I'll go with the salarians."

"With all due respect, Gunnery Chief, it's not your place to decide."

"Why is it that whenever someone says 'with all due respect,' they really mean 'kiss my ass?'"

"She's right, Kaidan: we do need you to help with the bomb. Ashley, you're with the captain. Keep it simple, understood?"

"Aye, aye, Commander!" they said in unison.

"I will have the ordinance loaded onto the Normandy and brief your crew on its detonation sequencing," said Kirrahe. "Do you have any questions before we go, Commander?"

"I want to know more about the bomb. How reliable is it going to be?"

"Its reliability depends on the person arming it. But it will do the job. The drive system is highly impervious to damage from external sources. Once it has been armed, very little can stop it. The key is getting it into place and armed before the geth can stop us."

"The Normandy's picking me up. How will your teams escape the blast?"

"We will engage the geth as long as possible. Once the bomb is in place, well will fall back to try and escape the blast radius. If we move quickly, we should be able to escape with acceptable casualties. If not, then our memories will live on as martyrs to a greater cause."

"You talk like this is a suicide mission."

"I won't lie to you, Commander. There is a chance none of us will survive this assault. Even your team. But we do what is necessary."

"So my team is called 'Shadow.' Seems clear enough. What will the other teams be called?"

"Aegohr, Mannovai, and Jaeto. They were the initial settlements on our first three colony worlds. They are at the heart of salarian territory to this day. These names will remind my men what they are fighting for. They must have a personal stake in the fight if we are to have any chance of success."

"I'm ready when you are, Captain."

"Excellent. Then if you'll excuse me, I need to prepare my men." Kirahe went to gather his troops.

"Well, this is it," said Ashley. "Don't do anything foolish while I'm gone, LT. That goes for you too, Commander."

"We'll be fine, Ash," replied Kaidan.

"Yeah, I just...good hunting."

"Is there something you want to say, Ashley?" I prompted.

"It's just weird, going under someone else's command. I've got so used to working with you...all of you."

"Don't worry so much," Kaidan reassured her. "We'll see you on the other side."

"I know. I, ah... I just wanted to say it's been an honor serving with you, Commander."

"It doesn't matter if we're not in the same unit, we're still a team," I said. "Watch each other's backs, keep your eyes open, and fight like I know you can. We'll all come out of this in one piece."

"You bet, Commander."

Captain Kirahe had lined up his three squads and stood in front of them to address them. Ashley took up her spot with one of them, and I had my own squad stand in formation next to the others, then took my place at Kirrahe's side. The salarian captain addressed the troops.

"You all know the mission and what is at stake. I have come to trust each of you with my life, but I have also heard murmurs of discontent. I share your concerns. We are trained for espionage. We would be legends, but the records are sealed. Glory in battle is not our way. Think of our heroes: the Silent Step, who defeated a nation with a single shot. Or the Ever Alert, who kept armies at bay with hidden facts. These giants do not seem to give us solace here, but they are not all that we are. Before the network, there was the fleet. Before diplomacy, there were soldiers. Our influence stopped the rachni, but before that, we held the line. Our influence stopped the krogan, but before that, we held the line! Our influence will stop Saren! In the battle today, we will hold the line!"

Everyone snapped to attention and saluted. Kirahe turned and shook my hand.

"Good hunting, Commander. I hope we will meet again."

The salarian squads, with Ashley, went off to get into position. My squad stayed near the high wall of the compound, where we propped up some ladders in preparation for the signal to begin our attack. In a surprisingly short amount of time, Ashley contacted me.

"Comm check. Do you read me, Commander?"

"Loud and clear, Chief."

"Good. We're staring our push. We'll try to make it to the AA guns, but it might be up to you to finish



the job. Oh, and Kirahe says if you see any way to undermine their defenses, we could definitely use the help."

"Got it Chief, we're headed over the wall now."

It was strange, being down two squad members. What was not strange was being the only human on a squad. I'd run training exercises with turian units before, yet this was different. All of us aliens working together...it felt like how things should be. But this was my squad. We'd been through many battles together before, and each of us knew our parts.

Once we dropped down to the other side of the wall, we drew our weapons and brought up our barriers. Through a bit of jungle and rocky buttes, we came to a two-story gazebo-like structure. An antenna had been attached on the roof, and several geth robots and flying drones were guarding it. They quickly pinned us down behind some boulders.

"Tali, can you hack that antenna array?" I asked.

"Yes, but the effect would only be temporary. Better to destroy it," she recommended.

"Garrus?"

"On it. Just give me a moment to line up a shot," the turian switched from his assault rifle to his sniper.

I augmented my kinetic barrier with my weak biotics, then ordered covering fire. Garrus didn't need a whole moment, as the antenna blew up in a shower of sparks with only one shot. The geth guards were stunned for a few seconds as they lost their main source of communications, and we destroyed them all easily.

Ashley's voice came over radio: "The geth seem confused. Something scrambled their targeting. Was that you, Commander?"

"Sure was, Chief. Keep the pressure on."

The tide was coming in, and we were ankle deep in sea water for another kilometer, but then we came to some elevated walkways. I pondered the purpose of such a construction as we ascended the stairs, but I was interrupted by weapons fire from three geth flying drones. One of them was shooting rockets, and Wrex just made it up to the walkway just as the stairs exploded behind him. Tali hacked one of the drones, and after the other two were destroyed, it flew off down the walkway.

We followed it to a large round platform, where there were dozens more flying drones taking off or landing for refueling. I primed an overload shock from my omni-tool, and sent it into a fuel tank, the explosion from which caused a chain reaction, destroying most of the drones. Only five or six remained, and these we easily dispatched.

"Damn, Commander," came Ashley's voice. "We saw that explosion from here. And no more drones? Kirrahe is ordering us forward."

"You're welcome. Looks like we're coming to the back of the facility now."

The building we approached resembled a warehouse, with no windows and only one large door. A pair of identical-looking krogan blocked our path. Liara lifted one up with her biotics, where he stayed suspended long enough for us to kill his twin. Clone? Whatever. Liara's biotic lift was so effective that the other krogan had gone up too high to survive the fall.

Adjacent to the warehouse door was a control console, which Tali hacked.

"I've got access to base security," she announced. "Should be able to cut the alarms from here. Might even be able to trigger alarms on the far side of the base."

"It'll clear the guards out for us, but they might be too much for the salarian teams to handle," suggested Garrus.

"They've got enough trouble," I said. "Just disable the alarms. We can handle any guards inside."

Just as the door opened, we came under fire. I dodged out of the way but had enough time to see salarians in lab coats, accompanied by medium-size geth robots. There were pressurized containers arranged around crates – fire extinguishers? I shot one, and the spray froze one of the salarians. We pushed into and through the warehouse, killing scientists and geth as we went.

Through the other side, out on to a walkway which connected to several other buildings. I chose left. Inside the next building were several containment cells, each one holding a number of salarians. They were muttering to themselves, walking into each other, bumping into the walls.

The next building was a lab. There were a half dozen medical tanks, each containing a malformed krogan. Along the walls were several husks – humans infested and converted by the geth, like we'd first seen on Eden Prime. They were inert until a krogan in a lab coat yelled to his assistant,

"Intruders! Get the guards!"

Then the husks became animated and attacked us. One was on me before I could bring my gun to bear. I beat it back with my fists until I could get my knife out, then I began slashing wildly. I hit tubes, wires, and muscle until the thing finally stopped moving. I looked around to see that the rest of my squad had fared similarly.

The krogan scientist had fled, and we never did see him again. Through the lab, a hallway led to some offices. An asari in scientific garb ducked under a desk as we entered, then began to beg for her life when she realized that the desk was empty underneath and offered no concealment.

"Don't shoot! Please, I just want to get out of here before it's too late."

"Let's hear it," I said. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"My name is Rana Thanoptis, nonspecialist. But this job isn't worth dying over. Or worse." She had tattoos of eyebrows and eyelashes, an odd look for an asari.

"Worse? You mean what happened to those salarains next door?" I asked.

"You think the indoctrination only affects prisoners? Sooner or later, Saren will want to dissect my

brain, too!"

"Give me one reason I should help you."

"I – I can help you! This elevator behind me goes to Saren's private lab. I can get you in." She took the few steps to a door and waved a card over a reader. "See? Full access. All of Saren's private files. Are we good? Can I go?" Doctor Thanoptis's voice was shaky. She started to wring her hands.

"What were you studying here?"

"It's that ship, Sovereign. It emits some kind of...signal. Undetectable, but it's there. I've seen the effects. Saren uses it to influence his followers, to control them. It's called indoctrination. Direct exposure turns you into a mindless slave, like the salarian test subjects. But there's collateral damage, too."

"What do you mean by 'collateral damage?'"

"Sovereign's signal is too strong. Spend too much time near the ship and you feel it. Like a tingle at the back of the skull. It's like a whisper you can't quite hear. You're compelled to do things but you don't know why. You just obey. Eventually, you just stop thinking for yourself. It happens to everyone at the facility. My first test subject was the man I replaced. Now I just want to get out of here before it happens to me."

"Why is Saren researching this? Isn't he the one controlling it?"

"The signal comes from the ship. It makes us obey Saren, but I don't think he controls it. I think... he's scared it might be affecting him. Indoctrination is subtle. By the time the effects become noticeable, it's usually too late."

"Tell me more about this signal."

"Signal's not exactly the right word. There's some kind of energy field emanating from the ship. It changes thought patterns. Over time – days, maybe a week – it weakens your will. You become easier to manipulate and control. But it's a degenerative condition. There's a balance between control and usefulness. The less freedom a subject maintains, the less capable it becomes."

I could sense my squadmates fidgeting; this conversation had gone on too long. Wrex pointed with his shotgun in the general direction of the scientist and shrugged. I decided to give her a chance.

"I'm going to blow this place to hell and gone," I warned. "If you want to make it out alive, you'd better start running."

"What? You can't...but I'll never...ahhh!" Ms. Thanoptis nearly tripped over her own feet on her way out.

"I like the way you think, Shepard," Wrex approved.

The elevator took us down into a large chamber with high windows. In the middle was a functioning Prothean Beacon, glowing green like the last one I'd seen on Eden Prime. I motioned to my squad to

stay back, as I didn't want any of them to go through what I'd been through. There was, however an inviting console attached to the beacon, which I approached. As before, I felt my feet slipping off the floor, and then the same jumbled images flooded my mind. Flesh and mechanical parts melded, stars exploded, clouds of gas swirled.

I came to my senses, and found myself seated, backpedaling away from the beacon. I was panting, and slowed my breathing as my squadmates asked if I was ok. Before I could answer, a huge red hologram materialized in front of the beacon: Sovereign, Saren's squid-shaped flagship. It began to speak in a booming voice that made my head throb slightly.

"You are not Saren."

"What is that? Some kind of VI interface?" asked Garrus.

"I do not think this is a VI..." said Liara, nervously.

Out of everyone in this room, I was the only one to have seen Sovereign; Ashley and Kaidan were the only others in my squad who had, and they were both off on their own assignments.

"Rudimentary creatures of blood and flesh. You touch my mind, fumbling in ignorance, incapable of understanding. There is a realm of existence so far beyond your own, you cannot even imagine it. I am beyond your comprehension. I am Sovereign!"

A piece of new information from the beacon clicked in my mind. "Sovereign isn't just some Reaper ship Saren found. It's an actual Reaper!"

"Reaper. A label created by the Protheans to give voice to their destruction. In the end, what they choose to call us is irrelevant. We simply are."

Liara didn't believe it. "The Protheans vanished fifty thousand years ago. You could not have been there. It is impossible!"

"Organic life is nothing but a genetic mutation, an accident. Your lives are measured in years and decades. You wither and die. We are eternal. The pinnacle of evolution and existence. Before us, you are nothing. Your extinction is inevitable. We are the end of everything."

"There is an entire galaxy of races united and ready to face you," I said defiantly. I glanced around at my squad. I could see that their heads throbbed a bit too, but we were standing together.

"Confidence born of ignorance. The cycle cannot be broken."

"Cycle? What cycle?" asked Wrex.

"The pattern has repeated itself more times than you can fathom. Organic civilizations rise, evolve, advance. And at the apex of their glory, they are extinguished. The Protheans were not the first. They did not create the Citadel. They did not forge the mass relays. They merely found them, the legacy of my kind."

This felt like a delaying tactic, or possibly a trap. Salarrians were dying while we stood here. But this

information could prove vital, so I figured I'd talk as long as this thing would give me answers. "Why would you construct the mass relays, then leave them for someone else to find?" I asked.

"Your civilization is based on the technology of the mass relays, our technology. By using it, your society develops along the paths we desire. We impose order on the chaos of organic evolution. You exist because we allow it. And you will end because we demand it."

"They are harvesting us!" Liara realized. "Letting us advance to the level they need, then wiping us out!"

"What do you want from us?" I asked. "Slaves? Resources?"

"My kind transcends your very understanding. We are each a nation. Independent, free of all weakness. You cannot even grasp the nature of our existence."

"Where did you come from? Who built you?"

"We have no beginning. We have no end. We are infinite. Millions of years after your civilization has been eradicated and forgotten, we will endure."

"Where are the rest of the Reapers? Are you the last of your kind?"

"We are legion. The time of our return is coming. Our numbers will darken the sky of every world. You cannot escape your doom."

"You're not even alive. Not really. You're just a machine. And machines can be broken!"

"Your words are as empty as your future. I am the vanguard of your destruction. This exchange is over."

With that, the hologram flickered out, and the windows shattered inward. Joker contacted me over the radio.

"Commander? We got trouble!"

"Hit me, Joker."

"That ship, Sovereign? It's moving. I don't know what you did down there, but that thing just pulled a turn that would shear any of our ships in half. You need to wrap things up in there – fast!"

"Thanks, Joker. We'll head for the breeding facility. Time to blow this place to hell."

"Right, Commander. As soon as the salarians get the rest of those AA guns down, I'll meet you there. Joker out."

We took the elevator back up, then exited to the walkways. The only building we hadn't tried yet must be the breeding facility. Geth and krogan were coming out of the woodwork. The long conversations with our enemies had given us a breather, and we made short work of the enemy. The walkway took us around the outside of the next building, and we got a nice view of a sandy tropical beach. So this place

must have been a resort before being taken over by Saren.

"Sniper!" yelled Garrus as he knocked me to the ground. "This is no time to be admiring the view, Shepard, we have geth to shoot!"

"Thanks, Garrus, I owe you one." I loaded a fresh heat sink into my assault rifle, then took a peak around the pillar I was crouched behind. There was one of those flexible geth robots sticking to a wall ahead.

"Liara, do you think you can pull that thing off the wall?"

"Sure thing, Shepard."

Once the robot was floating helplessly away, I gave it a weak biotic throw, which nudged it out over the water. When Liara's biotic pull wore off, the geth fell onto some sharp rocks below. We continued on and found an AA tower, which Tali hacked into and shut down.

The last building wasn't so much of a building as an open-air courtyard. The walls were lined with glass cylinders, each containing a krogan in various stages of development.

"The last AA tower is down!" Ashley said over the radio.

I called Joker. "Normandy, I'm in position. Home in on my location. We're in an open area that should be large enough for the ship."

"Roger that, Commander. ETA thirty seconds."

The Normandy swooped in to a smooth stop, and hovered with the cargo ramp just centimeters off the ground. I no longer thought Joker was showing off; I'm pretty sure he's just that good of a pilot. Kaidan and several salarians carried out a large, mushroom-shaped device: the bomb.

"Commander, do you read me?" Ashley called over radio. I could hear gunfire in the background.

"The nuke is almost ready, Chief. Get to the rendezvous point!"

"Negative, Commander. The geth have us pinned down on this AA tower. We've taken heavy casualties. We'll never make the rendezvous point in time."

"It's ok, Commander," said Kaidan. "I need a couple minutes to finish arming the nuke. Go get them and meet me back here."

"Joker, take the Normandy around to their position. My squad and I will distract the enemy from behind while you pick them up."

"Aye, aye commander." The Normandy lifted off.

I patted Kaidan's shoulder. The immediate area was clear, and he had four salarian commandos to cover him. There were stairs leading up to the roof, and my squad hoofed it over to the next AA tower.

"Chief Williams, this is Kirrahe," said the salarian captain over the radio. "My Aegohr squad will be joining your Mannovai from the rear. Jaeto was wiped out."

"We'll sure welcome the help, Captain," Ashley replied, relief clear in her voice.

I reached the edge of the roof and surveyed the area. A wide, open plain separated the building I was on from the AA tower. The Normandy was swooping in and opening her cargo bay ramp. A full two dozen enemies were closing in on Mannovai squad's position: a combination of geth and malformed krogan. Saren must have gotten desperate and released some of the clones before they were ready. I activated my mass effect generator to lighten my mass, then jumped down to the ground. The rest of my squad followed my lead.

Just as I alit, a geth dropship descended and dropped more geth, then turned its weapons on the Normandy.

"I've got to bug out! That dropship's better armed than we are," Joker called over the radio.

"Loose them, then come back for us," I ordered.

The Normandy flew away, and the dropship pursued.

My squad had taken cover and were harassing the enemy from behind. One of the geth robots was flying around on a floating platform. That was new. I took cover, then peered around for a better look. It wasn't a geth, it was Saren. He threw a grenade at me, and I dove away from the crate I was hiding behind before it exploded into a million pieces. My kinetic barrier couldn't hold up against the shrapnel and it flickered out.

I rolled over to search for Saren, but he'd already stepped off his floating platform and closed the distance. He kicked the gun out of my hand and grabbed me by the neck, then lifted me off my feet. No way a turian should be that strong.

A quick glance around showed that all of my squadmates were engaged; none were in a position to help me.

"I applaud you, Shepard. My geth were utterly convinced the salarians were the real threat. An impressive diversion." Back on the Citadel, I had thought that in Saren's hologram, his eyes had had a bit of a glow to them. Now, face to face with my fellow Spectre, I could see that they were artificial, and were glowing with a blue light from within. "Of course, it was all for nothing. I can't let you disrupt what I have accomplished here. You can't possibly understand what's really at stake."

I struggled for a moment, but he was too strong. His grip was loose enough that I could speak. "Why are you doing this?" I asked, wondering why he hadn't just killed me. Several geth had gathered around us as guards.

"You've seen the vision from the beacons, Shepard. You, of all people, should understand what the Reapers are capable of. They cannot be stopped. Do not mire yourself in pointless revolt. Do not sacrifice everything for the sake of petty freedoms. The Protheans tried to fight, and they were utterly destroyed. Trillions dead. But what if they had bowed before the invaders? Would the Protheans still exist? Is submission not preferable to extinction?"

"Do you really believe the Reapers will let us live?"

"Now you see why I never came forward with this to the Council. We organics are driven by emotion instead of logic. We will fight even when we know we cannot win. But if we work with the Reapers – if we make ourselves useful – think how many lives could be spared! Once I understood this, I joined Sovereign, though I was aware of the...dangers. I had hoped this facility could protect me."

Ah, so he wanted me to join him as a willing ally. But there was no way I'd let that happen. I attempted to change his mind. "You're afraid Sovereign is influencing you. You're afraid he's controlling your thoughts."

"I've studied the effects of indoctrination. The more control Sovereign exerts, the less capable the subject becomes. That is my saving grace. Sovereign needs me to find the Conduit. My mind is still my own...for now. But the transformation from ally to servant can be subtle. I will not let it happen to me."

My squad couldn't get to me, but I could see them closing in on Ashley's position, and Kirrahe's squad was approaching in the distance. "Why are the geth following Sovereign?" I asked, stalling for time.

"They believe Sovereign to be some kind of god. The pinnacle of their own evolution. But the reaction of their deity is most telling: it is insulted. Sovereign does not desire the pitiful devotions the geth hurl at it. They are just tools, and no amount of belief on their part will change that. But as tools, they are useful. They will survive the coming invasion. If organic life is to survive, we must also prove we are useful. We must work with the Reapers."

"Tell me why Sovereign needs the Conduit. Tell me what it is. Maybe we can find a way to stop them."

"The Conduit is the key to your destruction and my salvation. Sovereign needs my help to find it. That is the only reason I have not been indoctrinated."

"Sovereign's manipulating you and you don't even know it! You're already under its power!"

"No! Sovereign needs me. If I find the Conduit, I've been promised a reprieve from the inevitable. This is my only hope."

"Together we can stop Sovereign. We don't have to submit to the Reapers. We can beat them!"

"I no longer believe that, Shepard. The visions cannot be denied. The Reapers are too powerful. The only hope of survival is to join with them. Sovereign is a machine. It thinks like a machine. If I can prove my value, I become a recourse worth maintaining. There is no other logical conclusion!"

My side's squads had linked up and were reforming to come for me. Just a few more seconds. "You were a Spectre. You were sworn to defend the galaxy. Then you broke that vow to save yourself!"

"I'm not doing this for myself! Don't you see? Sovereign will succeed. It is inevitable. My way is the only way any of us will survive! I'm forging an alliance between us and the Reapers. Between organics and machines. And in doing so, I will save more lives than have ever existed. But you would undo my work. You would doom our entire civilization to complete annihilation. And for that, you must die."



The blue glow in Saren's mechanical eyes grew brighter, and his grip tightened. My vision began to grey-out as I gasped for air, and sound grew distant. Then I heard Saren cry out, and he released me. I fell to my knees and sucked lungfuls of air. The geth guards turned to guard Saren as he fled back to his platform and took off. Between the legs of the geth, I saw my allies approaching in a firing line. I stayed on the ground as the robots exploded around me. Liara helped me up as the Normandy returned. Wrex's arm was hanging at an unnatural angle, and Garrus was limping again. We all hurried aboard the ship: my squad and what remained of Kirrahe's team.

"Lieutenant, what's your status?" I called through the radio. "We're coming to get you."

"Negative, Commander. That geth dropship is here," he replied. There was static in the transmission and gunfire in the background. Kaidan's voice was strained. "I'm hit. We all are. We're not going to make it."

"Hang in there, Kaidan, we're on our way."

"I've rigged up a dead-man's switch – argh! Get as far as you can, Commander. This thing's going to go off no matter what! It's done, Commander."

I had fifteen pairs of eyes staring at me. My squad, the salarians...they all knew. I knew what had to be done. I hit the nearest intercom button.

"Joker, get us out of here," I ordered, with a lump in my throat.

"Commander – aye, aye."

I flipped the switch to close the cargo bay door, and the Normandy lurched as Joker took us up.

"Kaidan, you will be remembered," I said into the radio.

"I know, Shepard. Just make sure you stop Saren."

The cargo bay had only the tiniest of windows, but the light from the nuke was blinding. I punched a locker, denting it. No one else moved. I began to strip out of my armor.

"Everyone get yourselves cleaned up, then meet in the vidcomm room," I ordered. I heard an edge in my voice. I don't like losing squad members. I really don't like losing friends.

An hour later, I was sitting with my elbows on my knees as my squadmates filtered in. Ashley fell into a chair. Liara and Tali sat down politely. Wrex's arm was in a sling, and Garrus limped in with a brace on his knee. Ashley was the first to speak.

"I...I can't believe Kaidan didn't make it. How could we just leave him down there?"

I sat up. "Alenko knew the risks going in. He gave his life to save the rest of us."

"It should have been me, Commander. You know that," Ashley said.

"It wasn't your call, Williams. It was mine. I had to choose."

"I – I'm sorry, Commander. You saved my life. I'm grateful for that. But it should have been me. Alenko was a superior officer. I would have gladly stayed behind."

"Williams, how far are you going to drive yourself? Are you trying to be a martyr? To redeem your grandfather's honor?"

"That's not fair."

"What the public and military did to him was unfair. But I don't want to lose a good soldier over it."

"Aye, aye, Commander," she said, not at all satisfied.

"Commander? Excuse me for interrupting," Liara interrupted. "But I have an idea. I think the beacon we found in Saren's base was similar to the one you found on Eden Prime. It may have filled in the missing pieces of your vision. I might be able to help you put all those pieces together."

"You want to join our minds again, don't you?" I sighed. "It's worth a shot. Do it."

We both stood up and faced each other. Liara put her hands on my temples. Her eyes went completely black.

"Relax, Commander. Embrace eternity!"

The old vision flooded my mind, but it was clearer, somehow. New ideas and sensations filled my mind, though they were still foreign. It felt like years had passed, but I came back to myself moments later. Liara was swaying a bit, and I reached out to steady her.

"I...I never thought the images would be so...intense," she said. I need a moment to collect myself."

"Did the vision make any sense to you?"

"It is a distress call, a message sent out across the Prothean Empire. A warning against the Reapers, but the warning came too late."

"What about the Conduit? I'm still not getting that. All I see is a place that I don't recognize."

"I also do not know what exactly the Conduit is. That information is still missing. There were other images. Locations. Places I recognize from my research...Ilos! The Conduit is on Ilos! That is why Saren needed to find the Mu Relay! It is the only way to get to Ilos."

"How come you never told us about Ilos before?"

"The Mu Relay links to dozens of systems and hundreds of worlds. How was I to know Ilos was the one he wanted? Without the Cipher, the images in your visions were never clear. Only now do I recognize them as landmarks from Ilos."

"Well, let's set course for Ilos, then!" said Williams, excitedly.

Garrus urged caution. "Forget it. The Mu Relay's inside the Terminus Systems. Alliance ships are not welcome there. Neither are Spectres."

"Besides," added Tali, "Saren will have all of his geth forces there. We wouldn't stand a chance."

"Right," Garrus agreed. "We'll never make it down to the surface without reinforcements. We have to alert the Council."

"Good point," I agreed. I put in a communications request to the Citadel, then dismissed the squad. I figured it would take some time for the Council to respond, but the three holograms appeared almost immediately. My squadmates paused to watch.

The asari Councilor spoke first. "Commander Shepard. I'm pleased to see your mission on Virmire was a success."

"Saren is formidable enough without an army of krogan serving under him," said the turian Councilor.

"The krogan would have served Sovereign. A Reaper." I briefly explained all that I had learned.

The salarian Councilor was skeptical. "Yes, we saw mention of this in your report. A sentient machine. A true artificial intelligence. This news is quite alarming...if it turns out to be accurate."

"Sovereign's a Reaper. Saren admitted it."

"He's playing you, Shepard!" cautioned the turian Councilor. "Saren still has contacts on the Citadel. He probably saw your earlier reports. The ones talking about your vision. And the Reapers."

"It's highly possible Saren is using false information to throw you off balance," added the salarian Councilor. "Our intelligence has never turned up any corroborating information."

"I tried to warn you about Saren. You didn't believe me then, and look how that turned out."

The turian Councilor wasn't having it. "I believe you humans have a saying: 'even a broken clock is right twice a day.'"

"Sooner or later you're going to have to take something I say on faith, Councilor."

Ever the matriarch, the asari Councilor tried to smooth things over. "Try to see this from our perspective, Commander. Saren is a threat we can recognize. However, as far as we know, the Reapers only exist in your visions. Our decisions affect trillions of lives. We cannot act on the accusations of a single person. Even a Spectre. Not without solid evidence. The Council cannot take any official action here. That is why we created the Spectres. You have the authority to act as you see fit. If you truly believe Sovereign is the real threat, you must take whatever steps are necessary to stop it. And Saren."

"Good luck Commander," the salarian Councilor said, and they ended the call.

"What bullshit," exclaimed Williams.

"Yeah." I leaned on the railing in front of the hologram emitters. "Get some rest, all of you. File your

reports. We'll head back to the Citadel for supplies, and to drop of Kirrahe's team. Maybe we can think of some other argument in the mean time."

It would take a couple of days for the Normandy to travel to the Citadel. I took my own advice and got some rest, then made my rounds.

Liara was in her quarters, studying esoteric Prothean files, as usual.

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

"You look much better. How are you feeling?"

"I am feeling better. Thank you for asking. I have been thinking about Saren. I read your report about the conversation you had while the rest of us were saving Ashley. I actually feel a little sorry for him now."

"He's become a slave to the Reapers and he can't even see it."

"He is trapped inside his own mind. Part of him senses his identity slowly being swallowed up by Sovereign, but he is powerless to stop it. I wonder how he first fell into Sovereign's trap? Did he think he could somehow stop the Reapers from returning? Or was he simply driven by a lust for power and glory?"

"Whatever Saren's reasons may have been, they're long gone now. He has to be stopped."

"Yes, I suppose you are right. He may be Sovereign's victim, but he is also a threat to all life as we know it. Erm, let's not spend every free minute talking about Saren. It is bad enough we are chasing him across the galaxy."

"You're right. I should go."

"Goodbye, Shepard."

Williams was down at the lockers in the cargo bay, hands on her hips, staring at Alenko's locker. I caught her eye as I neared.

"About Lieutenant Alenko," I opened. "How are you holding up?"

"Can't say I'm better. Sorry for anything I said in the briefing room. I just – I don't want any more deaths on my hands. And it's my fault."

"Williams, listen to me. I'm in command of this mission. I made the call. Not you. He's dead because of me."

"It's funny. I don't have any fear of dying for the Alliance. But when I think of someone dying for me –"

"It was my job to get everyone out safe. I failed. We'll remember Alenko, and we'll do better for him."

"Yeah, I guess that's all we can do. Thanks for the advice, skipper."

"What's your opinion on the Reapers?"

Williams frowned. "We've got a hard fight ahead. Fleets of AI dreadnoughts? Who've exterminated all life dozens of times over? I think the odds are against us."

"We have an advantage. We know they're coming, and we know about their indoctrination."

"I don't plan to lie down and die, skipper. Don't worry about that. But I'm infantry. Against Reapers, my rifle may as well fire spitballs. I won't have a place in this war. That's what pisses me off. Not being able to shoot back."

"Me too, Williams. But we'll find a way."

"I should get back to my duties. Rifles don't maintain themselves. Not yet, anyway."

Wrex looked up from cleaning his armor when he saw that I was done talking to Williams.

"Things got heated back on Virimire..." he said. "You did what you had to do. I respect your choice."

"I appreciate what you did, Wrex. I won't forget it."

"Just make sure it was worth it. Saren has to pay for what he's done."

"No matter what it takes, I'm going to hunt him down and kill him."

"I like the sound of that."

"So long, Wrex."

"Shepard."

Kirrahe's salarian team had set up temporary cots in a corner of the cargo bay. Out of his original crew of a fifty, only eight had made it out alive.

The salarian captain stood shook my hand. "It was an honor working with you, Commander Shepard. Despite the losses, our mission was a success. Lieutenant Alenko's actions will not go unnoticed. His sacrifice has earned humanity a great deal of respect from my people."

"Alenko was a fine officer. He knew what the risks were, but he did what he had to."

"Of course. A grim reality that every soldier must accept. Rest assured, Commander, my men and I will not forget what you have accomplished here. We will leave your ship as soon as we reach the Citadel. Perhaps we will have the opportunity to work together again some day."

I turned to leave, but out of the corner of my eye, an asari was shyly hugging herself in a corner. It was Rana Thanoptis. I hadn't noticed her earlier. Our eyes met, and we blinked at each other. I shrugged, and went to the elevator.

I met Joker on my way up to the crew deck.

"Commander. I know it couldn't have been easy for you down there. Making the call between Alenko and Williams must have been...I'm sorry, sir. I don't know if I could have done it."

"Pray you never have to. There is no right choice for something like that. I just hope I never have to go through it again."

"I'm not blaming you, Commander. I'm just...it's hard, you know."

"Saren's still out there, Joker. Hold it together. We need you." Was I telling him, or myself?

"Don't worry; I won't let you down. I want to be there when you make that son of a bitch pay!"

I went to my quarters to put in an official request for a posthumous commendation for Alenko.

-----Chapter 12: Adventures on the Citadel, Part 3-----

*From the Codex:*

*Omni-tools are handheld devices that combine a computer microframe, sensor analysis pack, and minifabricator. Versatile and reliable, an omni-tool can be used to analyze and adjust the functionality of most standard equipment, including weapons and armor, from a distance.*

*The fabrication module can rapidly assemble small three-dimensional objects from common, reusable industrial plastics, ceramics, and light alloys. This allows for field repairs and modifications to most standard items, as well as the reuse of salvaged equipment.*

*Omni-tools are standard issue for soldiers and first-in colonists.*

Upon arriving at the Citadel, I was summoned to the Council Chambers. Ambassador Udina met me there, with some surprising news.

"Good job, Shepard. Thanks to you, the Council's finally taking real action against Saren! The Council is massing a joint-species fleet to deal with Saren and his geth."

"The ambassador is correct," said the asari Councilor. "If Saren is foolish enough to attack the Citadel – as you believe – we will be ready for him."

"Patrols are stationed at every mass relay linking Citadel space to the Terminus Systems," the Turian Councilor added.

It was something, but I didn't think it was enough. "You think a blockade's going to stop him? He's on Ilos looking for the Conduit right now! What are you doing about that?"

"Ilos is only accessible through the Mu Relay, deep inside the Terminus Systems, Commander," The salarain Councilor tried to reassure me. "If we send a fleet in there, the only possible outcome is full-scale war."

"Now is the time for discretion, Commander," Udina added. "Saren's greatest weapon was secrecy. Exposed, he is no longer a threat. This is over."

"Send me. One ship going into the Terminus Systems won't start a war. I can be discreet."

The turian Councilor disagreed, vehemently. "You detonated a nuclear device on Virmire. I wouldn't call that discreet!"

"Your style served you well in the Traverse, Commander," said the asari Councilor. "We recognize that. But Ilos requires a deft touch. We have the situation under control."

"Secrecy isn't Saren's greatest weapon. The Conduit is!" I argued.

"Saren is a master manipulator," said the salarian Councilor. "The Conduit is just a distraction from his real plan to attack the Citadel."

I was feeling some desperation. "Sovereign's the real threat! Saren's just a servant of the Reapers."

"Only you have seen the Reapers. And then only in visions. We won't invade the Terminus Systems because of a dream," said the asari Councilor. And she was right; there really wasn't any tangible proof.

"If Saren finds the Conduit, we're all screwed!" I knew we didn't know what it was, but I felt in my bones that it was the key to Saren's plans. "We have to go to Ilos!"

"Ambassador Udina, I get the sense Commander Shepard isn't willing to let this go." The turian Councilor sounded like was done with me.

"There are serious political implications here, Shepard," Udina told me. "Humanity's made great gains thanks to you. But now you're becoming more trouble than you're worth. It's just politics, Commander. You've done your job, now let me do mine. We've locked down the Normandy in her dock. Until further notice, you're grounded."

"You bastard, you're selling us out! This is a mistake!"

"I think it's time for you to leave, Commander. This no longer concerns you. The Council can handle this. With my help, of course."

Two armed guards stepped out and stood at either side of me. I made a dismissive wave and stormed out. I took the long elevator ride down to the Presidium and took a walk through the gardens. The frustration was overwhelming. Never in my career had I felt so useless. After an hour, the natural surroundings had worked a somewhat calming effect into me. I pulled up my omni-tool, intending to check in with the Normandy, and saw that'd I'd left the comms turned off. There was already a request from Pressly from an hour ago. I connected the call.

"Commander? Where have you been? I've got the supplies on board, but we're in lockdown. There are armed Alliance MP's on board."

"I know, Pressly. There's some political B.S. going on. The Council thinks they have the Saren situation

under control."

"Do they?"

"No. Not by a long shot. Get some shore leave while I figure things out."

"Aye, aye, Commander. But we won't go far."

"Do you know something I don't, XO?"

"No, but the crew has faith in you. We'll be ready."

"That's... Thank you, Pressly."

I really had no idea where to go from here. I continued wandering the paths.

### THE FAN – PART III

*From the Codex:*

*Humanity's first contact with an alien race occurred in 2157. At that time, the Alliance allowed survey fleets to activate any dormant mass relays discovered, a practice considered dangerous and irresponsible by Council-aligned races. When a turian patrol discovered a human fleet attempting to activate a relay, they attacked. One human vessel survived, retreating to the colony of Shanxi.*

*The turians followed, quickly defeating the local forces. Shanxi was occupied, the first -- and, to date, only -- human world to be conquered by an alien species. The turians believed the handful of ships they defeated represented the bulk of human defenses, so they were unprepared when the Second Fleet under Admiral Kastanie Drescher launched a strong counteroffensive, evicting them from Shanxi.*

*The turians mobilized for full-scale war, drawing the attention of the rest of the galaxy. The Council quickly intervened, forcing a truce. Fortunately for humanity, the First Contact War was ended with a diplomatic solution.*

My wanderings around the Presidium took me near the Embassies, when who did I run into? Why, Conrad Verner, of course. What could he possibly want this time, I wondered. Time to put on my diplomatic face.

"Commander! I've been waiting for you to get back! I've got an idea, and I wanted to run it by you."

"What's on your mind?" I braced myself.

"With so many human colonies being attacked. I'm not sure that one human Spectre is enough. What if you signed me on as another Spectre?"

Yep, it was stupid. Again, I was tempted to shove my gun in his face, but I managed to restrain myself. "Conrad, I haven't been shot in the head nearly enough times to make that seem like a good idea."



"But I'd make a great Spectre! I'd be right there with you, showing the Council what humanity is capable of! I know you're afraid to trust people after what happened on Torfan, but I'd never let you down!"

"What about your wife, Conrad? She trusts you too. Aren't you letting her down?"

"What? I don't understand."

"You know what keeps me going out here? Knowing that people back home are keeping humanity strong."

"You – you're right. I just got so caught up in all of it. I wanted to help."

"Set up a charity. Volunteer. There are lots of ways to help out."

"Ill go home. Thanks for setting me straight."

Hopefully he actually would go home this time.

## THE FOURTH ESTATE

*From the Codex:*

*Launched in 2167, Fornax magazine described itself as "the galaxy's finest xenophilia." By its fifth year, Fornax became the first human magazine to offer full five-sensory stimulation, a previously-unaffordable magazine technology made profitable by the economy of scale. With a monthly publishing run of 127 million available in both in hard-copy and direct download, Fornax offers a range of alien models with particular emphasis on the unisexual asari, although both genders of quarians, drell, batarians, and volus are regularly depicted. Specialty editions such as Genit-elcor and Krogasm service devoted but smaller markets.*

I was approached by a woman in formal attire, accompanied by a floating camera drone.

"Commander Shepard? I'm Khalisah bint Sinan Al-Jilani, Westerlund News. Would you answer a few questions for our viewers?"

I groaned inwardly. I'm a soldier, not a press secretary. But public relations are a part of my role as the first human Spectre, and the galaxy didn't need to know that we were all about to die.

"What sort of questions?" I said gruffly.

"People back home have heard a lot of wild stories about you, Commander. I can give you the chance to set the record straight. What do you say?"

"So long as you understand that I may not be able to answer all questions."

"I'm sure our viewers will understand." There was a hint of glee in her voice that I didn't like.

I stood at attention with my hands behind my back, and tried not to squint as the camera drone's lights came on. The reporter adjusted some settings on the camera drone, then got into the interview.

"Humans have been trying to get the respect of the galactic community for 26 years. With that in mind, what are your feelings on being the first human Spectre?"

"The Spectres represent the best of every species in the galaxy. To be asked to join them is an honor."

"Some have said your appointment is the Citadel 'throwing humans a bone.' Have you encountered any situations where the Citadel asked you to place its needs before the needs of Earth?"

"It's not like that. The Council is concerned with the needs of the whole galactic community. We're part of that community now. Our needs are on their agenda, but we're one of many."

"You really do believe that, don't you? You've been given command of an advanced human warship for your missions. Is there anything you'd like to say about it?"

"Actually, the Normandy was co-developed by human and turian engineers. Its design incorporates many innovations. Many details are still classified, I'm afraid. I can tell you she's a fine ship, and she has the best crew I've ever served with."

"So the turians have knowledge of the Normandy that is being kept secret from the Alliance public? And some members of that crew are aliens, as I recall. Do you think it was appropriate to hand Earth's most advanced warship over to the Citadel?"

"I wasn't aware it had been 'handed-over' to anyone. I'm in command, and last I checked, I'm human."

"But you do work for the Citadel now, Commander. Speaking of your new job, did the Council order you to sabotage human research concerns on Noveria?"

"The Council had nothing to do with it. There was an accident at Binary Helix's labs...." I paused, hesitating on how much to reveal. I settled on a white lie: "In the interest of protecting the company's confidentiality, I can't say more."

"That's a surprising revelation, Commander. We've had nothing but stonewalling from Binary Helix. In your opinion, Commander, who should be held responsible for the failure of the colony on Feros?"

"Me. I resolved the situation to the best of my ability. The results weren't all I hoped for. But I still don't see what I could have done differently."

"I suppose you'll have to accept the judgment of history, then. Given your recent experiences, do you think humanity will ever get the respect it deserves from the galactic community?"

"Respect's a funny thing. People always assume they deserve it. The truth is, respect is earned. And I firmly believe we've earned it."

"You're an idealist, Commander. But a sincere one. I hope you're right. One last question, Commander. Rumors back home say you're tracking a 'rogue Spectre' named Saren. Do you have any comment on that?"

I was sorely tempted to vent my frustrations with the Council, or to blame Saren directly. But I was already in hot water, and I wanted to keep my options open – assuming I had any options left. Instead, I went with the most political obfuscation I could come up with: "I'm afraid I can't comment on whatever my current assignment may or may not be."

"Don't worry. We'll find out. The eyes of Earth are on you. Don't let us down. Thank you for your time, Commander Shepard."

The camera drone's lights finally went out, and I blinked away sunspots as the reporter turned and left.

## OUR OWN WORST ENEMY

*From the Codex:*

*Terra Firma is a human political party who opposes humanity's growing integration into the galactic community. The members believe humanity needs to stand alone if they are to remain strong. They cite Shanxi and the First Contact War as examples of why humans can't trust aliens, and mark Armistice Day with a protest every year. Part of their platform involves opposing the teaching of alien languages in schools.*

*Terra Firma was founded after contact was made with the turians, and humans became aware of just how many races comprised Citadel Space. The party was created in response to a genuine concern that humanity's individuality might be diluted or lost after too much integration into alien cultures. The party's manifesto isn't particularly extremist, but they tend to be a magnet for xenophobes and radicals, and the party does nothing to curtail the racist comments of its members, under the pretext that the party will not abridge its members' freedom of speech.*

The Citadel has designated spaces for free speech. My wanderings around the Presidium took me to one such place, where a large group of humans had gathered. One nattily-dressed man broke off from the crowd and addressed me.

"Excuse me? You're the Spectre, right? Shepard! Commander Shepard! It's an honor to speak with you." I hadn't agreed to speak with him, but he shook my hand anyway.

My curiosity got the better of me. "What's this demonstration about?" I asked.

"I'm Charles Saracino of the Terra Firma Party. With Armistice Day upon us, we're making our voices heard by the alien-appeasers on the Presidium. Can I count on your support in the next election?"

"You're marking the end of the First Contact War with a protest?" I liked Ashley's idea of a drink, better.

"As we have every year, for the last 26 years. The war taught humanity a lesson that some would forget. If we don't stand up for ourselves, no one else will."

"I thought the lesson of the First Contact War was that there's other life in the galaxy, and they have

opinions, too."

"Perhaps so, Commander. But if aliens feel free to express their 'opinions' at gunpoint, why shouldn't we?"

"We should, but you're looking for a reason."

"I disagree. We have a backlog of grievances the aliens have ignored. Starting with Shanxi."

I was glad Williams wasn't here for this. "The occupation of Shanxi couldn't happen again. We weren't even sure there were aliens to garrison against back then"

"It's still a powerful symbol, Commander. Shanxi is the only human territory ever occupied by an alien species."

"What are you running for, and why campaign here on the Citadel?" I asked.

"I'm seeking one of the five Spacer seats in Parliament. They have certain baroque conditions for a citizen to be able to vote for them. You have to spend more than six months a year in space. But you can't have stayed in any one settled system for more than a month. You do spend most of your time in space, Commander."

"I don't know Terra Firma's platform. What do you stand for?"

"Our core value is that Earth must 'stand firm' against alien influences. Politically, culturally, and – in the worst case – militarily."

"It's a good theory, but you're making it sound like a racial issue."

"I can't deny that some of our supporters here have extreme views. But our platform is also supported by economists, sociologists, and medical professionals."

"But you don't do anything to curtail the racist comments of your members."

"Of course not, Commander. Whether I disagree with them or not, they have the right to express their opinion."

"Sorry. I believe we need to work peacefully with other races."

"We've heard that before in human history. Well-meaning naiveté leads to declarations of 'peace in our time.'"

"Every day I stand up for humanity. Often in the face of bullets. What have you done lately? You really think speeches help?"

"We all serve humanity in our own way, Commander. I'm not a soldier. But I can tell the public why they should support your efforts."

"Wearing a ribbon on your lapel makes you a hero? So you can say 'I support our troops,' and get into

office because of our sacrifices?"

"I – I assure you, I'm only interested in the betterment of humanity. The same as you, Commander."

"What the Alliance does affects everyone around it. We live in this galaxy, Mr. Saracino. We can't pretend that what we do affects no one else."

"No, of course not. My apologies. I only meant to point out that other species have no right to interfere in Alliance politics. Say, I don't suppose I could convince you to issue a public statement of support for my candidacy? The support of the first human Spectre would be invaluable."

"You have the right to your opinion, Mr. Saracino. But with all due respect, I disagree with it."

"I understand. I'm glad you support the democratic process, at least. Thank you for your time."

## OLD FRIENDS

*From the Codex:*

*Red sand is a stimulant with biotic-enhancing properties. Its abuse is disproportionately high among non-biotic friends and relatives of biotics, often out of a misguided desire to understand what their loved ones are experiencing. Red sand was originally created by criminal triads on Mars from refined element zero, and may take its name from the planet. As eezo is also used to create medicines, red sand's creation may have been a "fortunate" lab mistake.*

*When taken nasally, red sand creates a brief but intense euphoria, and gives the user very short-term telekinetic biotic abilities. Side effects include red-tinting of the user's vision, discoloration of the teeth and longer-term withdrawal symptoms. Red sand is normally sold in small bags. The slang expression for using it is "dusting up" or being "sand-blasted".*

I'd had enough of polite politics, so I headed down to the wards. While wandering through a seedy alleyway, I ran into a figure from my past. A man with greasy hair and a facial tattoo of a bird, wearing the colors of the Tenth Street Reds. After my parents were killed and the Alliance rescued me, I was placed in foster care. The reason I ran away is its own story, but I wound up joining a gang for a few years. Enlisting in the Alliance was my way out.

"They told me it was you, but I didn't believe it. Shepard grew up and turned into a soldier. You probably don't remember me, but we ran together in the Tenth Street Reds. Maybe you don't remember running in a gang. None of the vids mention it when they're talking about you."

"Finch. I do remember you. So I ran with the Reds. That's behind me now. And my history is a matter of public record. I've got nothing to hide."

"Really? What if someone gave an interview talking about Commander Shepard's history in the gangs? How about a favor, for old time's sake."

He was right. I didn't need that kind of trouble. "What do you want?"

"One of the Reds, Curt Weisman, got picked up by turians. We'd like you to talk to the turian guard in the bar over there and get Curt out."

Finch pointed at Chora's Den. That place again? Seriously? I sighed.

"What was one of the Tenth Street Reds doing in turian space?"

"Since your days, the Reds have expanded. We do some salvage, a little shipping here and there, that kind of thing." I was sure he meant stealing and smuggling, but I preferred not to know the details.

"What was Weisman arrested for?"

"Some stupid minor offense. Maybe he had a little red sand. You know how the turians are. They declared him a problem, and they're shipping him back for trial."

"You're not asking me to break him out of jail, are you?"

"Of course not. I remember what a boy scout you are. But word has it you've got some pull with the aliens. All I'm asking you to do is pull a little for us."

"Fine. I'll talk to the turian and see what I can do."

"Thanks, Shepard. I knew you'd remember your old friends. The turian's name is Barro. Take care of this, and you'll never see me again."

I wondered how I was going to pick out a turian prison guard in a bar, but this guy was wearing his uniform. Dinking in uniform is a bad look for any profession. Sloppy. I sat on the stool next to him and bought him a drink.

"Can I help you?" Barro's speech was slow and slightly slurred."

I introduced myself, then explained that I wasn't propositioning him. "You have a human in custody named Curt Weisman."

Barro sobered up immediately. "The xenophobe? I should have known he'd have friends."

"Not so much. Why are you calling him a xenophobe?"

"The human acknowledged his affiliation with several anti-alien organizations. His crime specifically targeted turians as a species. It was a hate crime, and will be treated as such at his sentencing, which will probably be life in prison."

"What was he convicted of?"

"He poisoned medical cargo being sent to a turian colony to treat an outbreak of a dangerous disease. Thankfully, one of your fellow Spectres caught him in time. If the medicine had been distributed, millions would have died. This human is a dangerous xenophobe."

"A human named Finch wanted me to use my authority as Spectre to free Curt Weisman."

"Thank you for the information. We'll increase the guard on his cell."

Barro got up to leave, but Finch blocked his way.

"I knew you'd rat us out, Shepard! Now it's payback time! When I'm through telling my story, the aliens will all know what the first human Spectre really is."

"My bio is public record. Everyone knows that I ran with gangs as a kid."

"They don't know that the Reds target aliens specifically. We've got the backers to handle offworld missions. Your alien friends won't like you so much when they hear what your gang did."

"What do you want, Finch? What gets you out of my life?"

"What do I want? I want aliens off of Earth. I want the Council to stay out of humanity's business."

"The Tenth Street Reds was a gang, not an-Earth-first movement."

"They're a human movement now. You think the vids will make that distinction? I can find a dozen Red who'll swear they saw you kill aliens for fun. Who's going to believe you then?"

"What is this going to prove? I left that life a long time ago!"

"That you never left the life! If you won't help us, we'll drag your name through the dirt! Your alien friends will revoke your Spectre status. You'll be nothing. Unless you're willing to pay. Say, 5,000 credits."

"This won't help you. If you want humanity to be strong, a smear attack on the first human Spectre is a bad idea. Besides, the aliens need me. I'm not going anywhere, no matter what stories you tell."

"The Spectre is right," said Barro. "He has overcome a troubled youth to lead a proud military career. The turians would not care about such things. And I doubt your lies would fool the salarians or the asari. This is humanity's chance to prove itself. There is even talk of earning a Council seat."

That last part was news to me. If it was true, it would explain why Udina had sidelined me.

"Of course you'd side with Shepard! You want someone who's in bed with your kind!"

"I'm trying to make humanity strong," I said. "Are you going to stand in my way? We need the other races, Finch. That's the best way to strengthen humanity."

"Fine, Shepard. You're right. You're not one of the Reds. Maybe you never were."

Finch left with his head hung low. Barro thanked me for the drink.

"Impressive. Perhaps the first human Spectre will not be a disappointment after all. Goodbye, Shepard."

*From the Codex:*

*Drugs are chemical substances which alter the normal bodily functions of an organism. The market for them is significant enough that various criminal enterprises produce, sell, or smuggle them for considerable profit, despite legal restrictions. Drugs can have various effects on a user when consumed, such as altering a user's biotic potential.*

*Videlicet is a complex synthetic chemical that improves short-term memory and mental focus in humans.*

*Eximo is a non-addictive narcotic used to treat stress in humans. It is often prescribed to executives and government officials who tend to overwork.*

## THE NEGOTIATION

A clean-cut man in business attire stopped me.

"Soldier, I've got a major situation, and I need help from somebody with humanity's interests at heart."

"It's commander, actually. What do you want?" For once, I was surprised that I wasn't recognized.

"Of course, Right to business. That's why humanity has the best damn fleet in the galaxy. My name is Elias Keeler. I'm an Alliance negotiator. We've got a big session coming up with the salarians. You wouldn't believe what's riding on this. I'm fighting for humanity on this one, just like you are!"

"Don't try to sell me on this. Just tell me what you want."

"I need you to buy a mental stimulant for me. It's legal but restricted. I've purchased the monthly limit, and I need more from the medical clinic."

"What is this stimulant, exactly?"

"I don't know the medical terms, but it increases mental capacity, short-term recall, that sort of thing. It helps me stay focused, and it keeps me sharp. Nothing gets by me when I'm on it."

"If you know the monthly limits, why did you go over them?"

"The negotiations were supposed to be last week, but the salarians stalled it, probably deliberately. If I don't get the stimulant, I'll be a wreck. My assistant will take over, and that would be a disaster."

"You should put some trust in your assistant. Didn't you train him?"

"My assistant want to bend over backwards for the Citadel races. He wants to show them we're reasonable! No race will respect us until we show them who's in charge! That's what it took with the turians. Forget my assistant."

"Why is this deal so important?"

"The salarians want to set up long-term trade agreements. There are billions of credits at stake. If I



don't get the drug --"

"Keeler, you've got a problem. You need to get treatment."

"It might look that way from the outside, but this is just a one-time slip-up. All the top negotiators are on stimulants close to the legal limit. It's the way the game is played."

"I don't see all the top negotiators soliciting help to go over the legal limit, Keeler."

"Maybe you're right. I've been trying to keep humanity strong, and maybe I've pushed myself too hard. I tell you what: this will be the last time I use the stimulant. After this deal is finished, I'll get treatment."

"No trade negotiation is worth ruining your life for. Let it go and get help."

"You don't understand! Humanity needs me, and I need that stimulant! Without it, I'll... I don't know anymore. I get so tired when I run out of the stimulant. I just need one more ... wow, I really do sound like an addict."

"There's no shame in having a problem, but you have to get treatment."

"You're right. I – I'll go tell my assistant. I shouldn't be working like this. I'll get help. I'm just sorry it came to this."

*From the Codex:*

*A political-economic pact for collective colonial security, the Alliance is the central galactic institution of human society. The Alliance gained associate membership to the Citadel Council in 2165.*

*Human political-economic relationships vary between combative and lucrative. The turians who'd fought humans during the 2157 First Contact War have become valuable trade partners, despite residual social hostility.*

*Other relationships are even more complicated. The rapid rise of human political influence on the Council -- achieving in decades what others waited or are still waiting centuries to acquire -- has galvanized suspicion and resentment against humanity.*

OLD, UNHAPPY, FAR-OFF THINGS

While passing through the Wards Access tunnel, a beggar stopped me and asked me for some money. His grey hair and beard were disheveled, and he stank of booze and sweat.

"Hey. Hey! You're the Shepard kid! Hey. Been a long time, huh?"

"I'm sorry. Do we know each other?"

"I guess you don't remember me. Lieutenant Zabaleta? I knew your parents. I worked with them back on Mindoir."

"I guess you're not in the service anymore, huh?"

"Retired,' yeah. You know how it is. Times are tough for vets. They always are."

"Sorry, I don't remember you."

"Yeah, you were just a kid then. Say, I need a favor. I'm kind of short on money these days. I hate hitting you up for money, but man's gotta eat, right? So, uh, could you spare something? Maybe 20 credits?"

"Twenty isn't enough to get you back on your feet, is it?"

"Nah, nah. I'll just get a – a meal. You know."

"Yeah, it's not a problem. Here you go." I was sure it wasn't a meal he wanted, but I wasn't going to leave a vet hanging.

"Hey, you're a good kid, you know that? Thanks. You ever want to come by and talk, I'll be here. Heh. Can't afford a ticket home, right?"

I went on my way, but I felt I should do more for him. As I got on the elevator, I pulled up my omni-tool and looked up this Lieutenant Zabaleta's service record. It was a stretch, but Ernesto's holo picture from his file matched the scraggly-looking man I'd just met. The line about knowing my parents was just that – a line. In point of fact, he was in the marine unit that saved me from the slavers on Mindoir. His file showed a dishonorable discharge due to drunkenness on duty.

If he saw the things that happened to folks like Talitha... I and sent the elevator back down to the Access tunnel. Zabaleta perked up as I returned.

"Back again, eh? Don't suppose you got any credits to spare?"

"I looked up your file. You were on Mindoir."

"I – yeah. People tied like prize hogs. Locked in cages, clawing and screaming as they're loaded into cargo pods. And we couldn't reach them." Zabaleta sobbed. "The batarian defenses has us pinned. Dozens died trying to advance. All we could do was watch as they hauled people away. I've been looking for years for something to make that sight go away. What have you got? Huh?"

"At least you saved me. Look, I'm not going to give you money to drink yourself to death. You need to stop this. But I can't help you if you don't want to be helped. Do you really want to get over what you saw?"

"What? You think I drink because I like lying in the gutter? If you don't have a better option, just give me 20 credits. A good bottle of whiskey. Enough to stop the dreams."

"I'm not going to give you money to blow on booze. I'll give you a line of credit at a grocery store."

"Sixty meals of ramen. Great. At least you're trying to help, I guess. Don't worry about me, kid. I won't bother you again."

"Go to the Veteran's Affairs Office. You're not the only one who's seen that brand of hell. They can help. They helped me after Akuze."

"The VAO? All they do is pump you full of chemicals. I'll go to the damn VAO. Got nothing else to do but talk about my 'feelings.'"

Zabaleta gave me a dismissive wave as we staggered away. Well, at least he was headed in the right direction.

-----Chapter 13: Ilos-----

*From the Codex:*

*Like the ancient human city of Troy, Ilos is a world known only through second-hand sources. References to Ilos have been found at several other Prothean ruins, though direct study of the world is unlikely to occur.*

*Ilos lies in a remote area of the Terminus Systems only accessible by the legendary Mu Relay. Four thousand years ago, the Mu Relay was knocked out of position by a supernova and lost. Since then, Ilos and its cluster have been inaccessible.*

*Occasionally, a university will organize an expedition to chart a route to Ilos using conventional FTL drive. These never get beyond the planning stages due to the distance and danger. The journey could take years or decades, passing through the hostile Terminus Systems and dozens of unexplored systems.*

Captain Anderson sent a message to me, asking to meet at that club in the wards. Flux. A drink sounded real good right now. I found him at a table, and sat down opposite. It was strange seeing him in civvies.

"I'm glad you came, Shepard. I heard what happened."

"They pulled me off the mission. Just like when they forced you to give up the Normandy."

"I know. I'm sorry. I wanted to warn you, but there was no way to get a message to you before you docked. I know you're pissed off right now, but you can't give up. They all think this is over, but we both know it's not. You have to go to Ilos. You have to stop Saren from using the Conduit!"

"There's only one ship that can get me into the Terminus Systems undetected, and she's grounded."

Anderson leaned in and spoke more softly. "Citadel Control has locked down the Normandy's docking clamps. But if we override the ambassador's orders we can get them to disengage. You can be in the Terminus Systems before anyone even knows you're gone."

My ears pricked up. "What's the plan?"

"I can unlock the Normandy from one of the consoles in the Citadel Control Center. You'll have a few minutes before anyone realizes what's happened."

"There are tours, but that's a restricted area patrolled by armed guards. How are you going to do it?"

"Leave that to me. Just make sure you're in the Normandy when the clamps release."

"There's got to be a better way."

"Well, Udina issued the lockdown order, so he made this personal. If I can hack into the computer in his office, maybe I can override it."

"He won't just stand by while you use his computer...And isn't that treason anyway?"

"Hopefully, he won't be there. If he is, I'll just have to think of something. We don't have a lot of options. I break into the ambassador's computer, or I take my chances with the guards in Citadel Control."

"I can't decide this for you, Captain. It's your call."

"I'll take care of the lockdown. You get down to the Normandy and tell Joker to stand by."

Anderson got up. We left the club together, but then went our separate ways without another word. I still had access to the Normandy, even if she was grounded, so the guards let me on. I gathered Joker and Pressly to brief them on the plan. They were both enthusiastic. Joker went to conduct his preflight checks while Pressly and I quietly informed the crew – the ones we knew we could trust, anyway. The rest we'd have to deal with later. All of my squadmates made it back on board, as well. There were two Alliance MPs guarding the gantry outside the ship, and we told them we were going to clean out our lockers.

When all was as ready as it could be, I went up to the bridge. Joker was twiddling his thumbs, staring at the docking clamp indicator on his display. We exchanged silent nods. I tried small talk, but it's not something I've ever been good at. Apparently neither was Joker.

I had no idea how long it would take for Captain Anderson to succeed in his mission. Or even if he would. What if he had been caught? Long minutes passed. Joker and I were both struggling to keep up the charade. Mercifully, the docking clamps suddenly released.

"Let's go," I said. Get us out of here, Joker. Now!"

Joker grinned as his hands flew over the controls. The Normandy backed out of her berth and zoomed away from the Citadel, stealth systems engaged. Anyone with eyes could still see us, of course, but we were effectively invisible from automated sensors. We made it to the mass relay without so much as a call on the radio.

"Aw, dammit. No sign of pursuit?" Joker said facetiously. "I was hoping the Council would send some ships after us. I was looking forward to putting the Normandy through its paces. Figured I'd get to see what this ship can really do."

"Saren's still out there. Maybe we'll get a chance to play hide-and-seek with Sovereign."

"You know, it doesn't seem like much fun when you say it, Commander."

I patted him on the shoulder and rolled my eyes. It was time to address the crew. I pushed the button to make a shipwide announcement.

"Attention all hands, this is Commander Shepard. We have just left the Citadel. Our destination is Ilos. We are going to stop Saren. This is an unsanctioned mission, so we have effectively stolen the Normandy. You all understand the importance of this mission, and the risk. But if anyone wants to sit this one out, we don't have time to drop you off anywhere, so you're welcome to cool your heels in the brig. That is all."

"Uh, the Normandy doesn't have a brig, Commander," said Joker. "But the whole crew's with you on this one."

"We could convert the captain's quarters. Just the same, I'm going to speak to everyone individually to be sure. It'll take us a couple days to get to Ilos anyway."

"Well, all right. Knock yourself out."

I spoke with each of the crew. In the end, no one had any issues, with the exception of the two Alliance MPs. They'd come on board to help lock down the Normandy at the Citadel, but they stood down when they realized they alone were no match for the entire rest of the crew – especially my squad full of battle-hardened aliens. I moved my few personal possessions out of the captain's quarters, then locked the door and arranged to have meals brought to them.

Out in the mess hall, a conversation was brewing.

"I can't believe we stole the Normandy!" said Pressly, excitedly. "I know we'll all be court-martialed if this doesn't work out. But part of me loves this!"

"It's strange, being a fugitive from the Alliance," said Doctor Chakwas. "The crew has sacrificed everything for you, Shpeard. Don't let us down."

"This will all be over soon, Shepard. One way or another," said Liara.

"I can't believe we stole the Normandy," Garrus seemed confused. "After everything you told me...It seems a bit extreme, don't you think?"

"Stealing the Normandy is a trivial risk compared to the threat of Saren," I reassured him.

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. If you're wrong, we'll pay for it. But if you're right, and we did nothing, we'd regret it a whole lot more. I just hope we catch Saren before they realize we're missing."

"We'll catch him. Just be ready when we do."

"Yes, Commander."

"Stealing an Alliance ship. Risky stuff," said Wrex. "But I'm right behind you, Shepard. It's the least I can do."

"Everyone eles thinks I'm crazy."

"Sometimes crazy is the best way to go. I just hope they don't catch us before we get our hands on Saren."

"You and me both."

"You'll get us through, Shepard."

Engineer Adams was there, too: "Heard we're headed into the Terminus Systems, Commander. Don't worry, sir. The Normandy's a hell of a ship. She'll get us through this."

"We're fugitives on the run. Very exciting, Shepard," said Tali "I wonder what the Council would do to us if we get caught?"

"Your father probably has some political pull, right? He wouldn't let them throw his little girl in jail."

"You don't know my father. Stealing ships is a capital offense among my people. He'd probably want to execute us himself."

"The Normandy's the best ship in the fleet. They'll never catch us."

"I hope you're right."

"I should go stow my gear."

I lugged my footlocker down to the cargo bay and placed it next to the lockers. Alenko's locker had been cleaned out, but it didn't feel right to use it. There was an open console nearby, and I logged in to write two letters. One to Kaidan's family, which I sent. The other to the Alliance, taking full responsibility for commandeering an Alliance ship. I didn't send it, but it was there if anyone cared to look, later.

Williams came down as I logged off.

"Thoughts, Chief?"

"I'm just hoping the Williams curse hasn't spread to – Sorry, we'll get Saren. We have to. No choice now."

"That's somewhat fatalistic, but you're right. Time to give it our all."

"Who's like us?" Williams saluted.

I saluted back "Damn few. And they're all dead."

I went up to the crew deck to grab some rack time, but then remembered I had no bed anymore. Sleeper pods aren't as good, but they get the job done. When I awoke, Liara was waiting for me.

"Shepard? May I speak with you?"

"I was just thinking about you."

"Not here. Let us speak in my room." Once inside, she closed the door behind her. "I have been thinking about you, too. And what we are about to face. I do not know what is going to happen on Ilos. I hope we will stop Saren, of course, but part of me fears we are already too late. There is something I must tell you, in case we fail."

"We're not going to fail. I promise."

"Please... I am not looking for comfort. Saren might already have the Conduit. It is time to be completely honest with each other. These could be our last moments together. Our last chance to show each other how we feel. I want this to be special." Liara took a step closer to me.

"We don't have to do this. Not unless you're sure."

"I have never been more sure of anything in my life. Will you join with me, Shepard? Let our bodies and minds unite."

"I thought you'd never ask!"

The experience was unlike anything I'd ever known, or thought possible. There was physical pleasure, sure. But there was a whole other level. I felt like I was somewhere else. It's not something I can describe in words, and the vids are wholly inadequate to the task.

Afterwards, we cuddled for a while. I looked at the clock on Liara's console: We'd be approaching the Mu Relay soon. Too soon.

"By the Goddess! That was incredible, Shepard."

"You were incredible." I kissed her. "I had better go. Duty calls."

"You would not want to keep Joker waiting. Shepard? Whatever happens on Ilos, I just wanted to say...thank you. For everything."

I smiled, deeply.

A few hours later, I was on the bridge standing behind Joker when we hit the Mu Relay. Williams came up to join me. The Normandy can't transit a mass relay with her stealth systems active; there's just too much energy for the heat sinks to absorb. So when we emerged in the Refuge System, in the vicinity of Ilos, every ship in the area would be able to see the flare as our ship emerged. There were a lot of geth ships, but no sign of Sovereign.

"Uh...Commander? We've got company," said Joker.

"Have their sensors picked us up yet?"

"Stealth systems are engaged. Unless we get close enough for a visual, they won't have any idea we're here."

"All right. Passive sensors only. Give them a wide berth. Pressly, any idea where on Ilos Saren might be?"

"Picking up one set of some strange readings on the planet's surface," said my XO. "But nothing conclusive, and I can't know more without an active ping."

"That's got to be Saren. Take us down, Joker. Lock in on those coordinates. Let's see if we can take them by surprise."

"Negative on that, Commander" said Pressly. "The signal's coming from the middle of some city ruins. Nearest landing zone's... two clicks away."

"We'll never make it in time on foot. Get us something closer."

"There is nowhere closer! I've looked!"

"Drop us in the Mako," suggested Williams.

"You need at least a hundred meters of open terrain to pull off a drop like that. The most I can find near that signal is...twenty. No way you can make a drop in there."

"We have to try!" she said

Pressly was adamant. "The descent angle's too steep! It's not an option, it's a suicide run! We don't --"

"I can do it," Joker said quietly and calmly.

"Joker? You sure?" I asked.

"I can do it." Joker's voice was full of confidence.

Based on the things I'd seen the Normandy's pilot do, I felt that he could indeed pull off the maneuvers necessary to get us down safely. The Conduit was on Ilos – whatever it was, and Saren was already down there. Maybe he was activating the thing as we argued.

"Get the squad geared up and head down to the Mako." I ordered. "Joker – drop us right on top of that bastard!"

The Normandy's inertial dampeners smooth out most of the ship's maneuvers, but we got rocked around severely inside the Mako, waiting for the drop. Joker must have been pulling off some serious stunt flying to get us down and lined up. Suddenly, we were weightless as the vehicle rolled out of the cargo bay. The mass effect core spun up to reduce our effective weight, and the descent thrusters fired. The landing was incredibly rough anyway, and Williams kept the brakes locked. We came to a screeching halt just as a massive double door closed in front of the Mako.

"Garrus, blast that door open!"

"Negative, Shepard. I saw those doors shut as we came down. It's a couple of meters of solid steel. It'd take hours to blast through. We'll have to find another way."



"Damn it. All right. Williams and Garrus stay here, the rest of us will head out and try to find the controls to this door, or another way around. Go!"

Immediately upon exiting the Mako, we were beset upon by geth. I fired blindly and took cover in a nearby ruined building. Liara, Tali, and Wrex were right behind me. It was strange to see the krogan taking cover, but a peek at the battlefield told me why: there were two armatures blasting away at us.

I had Liara and Tali look for a way to flank the enemy while Wrex and I drew their fire. The building was crumbling quickly under the blasts from the geth quadrupeds, and there was small weapons fire mixed in, though I couldn't see where it was coming from. We tossed out grenades and fired blindly from cover, but the onslaught was relentless.

Suddenly, the incoming fire ceased, though I could still hear the distinctive sound of geth plasma weapons. I risked poking my head out from cover and learned the reason. Two of the humanoid geth robots' flashlight heads had changed color from their usual blue to green, indicating that Tali had hacked them. The armatures had turned away from us and were firing on their own traitors. I didn't initially see Tali or Liara, but once Wrex and I both broke cover and opened fire, my other two squadmates joined in. The two hacked robots didn't last long against the armatures, but the larger geth were weakened enough that my squad managed to destroy them without too much more trouble.

"Nice job, Tali!" I praised the quarian with a pat on the back. "Now to find the controls for that door."

"We noticed some lights in a building back this way," said Liara, and I had her lead us there.

We cautiously made our way through rubble-strewn alleyways until we came to a mushroom-shaped building. It looked heavily fortified, with thick walls, but nothing prevented us from entering.

"This must be the command center for the entire complex," said Wrex.

There was a flickering light emanating from an upper floor, and only one functioning console. Some of the symbols looked vaguely familiar to both Liara and myself, but it took Tali's hacking skills to make anything happen. After a tense few minutes, we heard a low grinding sound coming from outside.

My comms cracked to life with Williams's voice. "Looks like you got it, Commander. The door is opening."

"Nice. We're on our way, Chief. Double-time people!"

As we turned to leave, a hologram flickered to life above the console. It was too degraded to make out what the image was, and the audio was filled with static.

"What language is that? Is it...Prothean?" asked Tali.

"I can make out some of it," I said, straining to hear.

"...too late...unable to...invading fleets...no escape...not safe...seek refuge...side the archives..."

"I don't understand a word of that," said Wrex.

"The message is all broken up, but I recognize some of the words. It's a warning against the Reaper invasion," I said.

"Of course," agreed Liara. "Between the beacons and the Cipher, an understanding of the Prothean language would have been transferred into your mind. And then into mine."

"What's it saying," Wrex fidgeted impatiently. "Can you make out anything useful?"

"...alled Reapers. The Citadel...overwhelmed...only hope...act of desperation...the Conduit...all is lost...cannot be stopped...not be stopped..."

"It said something about the Conduit, but it's too degraded to help. We should go."

We hoofed it back to the Mako.

"Who votes we take the armored vehicle into the creepy tunnel?" asked Tali, rhetorically.

Williams gunned the accelerator as soon as everyone was back on board. The creepy tunnel opened up to something like an underground highway. There was a thin sheet of water covering the road, and gigantic roots had broken through in places. There was no sign of Saren or his geth. The walls were studded with hundreds of short, flattened tubes. Liara was crowding the front window.

"I have spent my life studying the Protheans, but I never dreamed I would discover something like this! This bunker might have been the last refuge of their entire species. Just imagine what mysteries it might hold. Imagine what secrets it might reveal!"

Wrex wasn't impressed. "Hey! Try to remember why we're here. Saren, the Conduit, the fate of the entire known galaxy?"

"I am sorry...I was swept up in the moment. I just hope we have the opportunity to study this place in detail after this is done."

"I thought Saren would have set some kind of trap or ambush for us," said Garrus, still on lookout in the turret. "They must have been in too much of a hurry."

"What are those things on the wall? Some kind of containers?" asked Williams.

"They look like stasis pods," said Tali. "The Protheans probably tried to keep themselves alive through cryogenic freezing. I'm not reading any lifesigns, though. Or power for that matter."

This made Liara sad. "Something must have gone wrong. This bunker became their tomb. The pods are dead, as well as anyone inside."

"The beacons lasted 50,000 years, but barely, and they were just data caches. I can't imagine something as complex as a stasis pod would last nearly that long. They tried, though."

After a couple of kilometers, Williams suddenly slammed on the brakes; a yellow force-field had appeared in front of us.

"Shit!" exclaimed Williams. "There's a force-field behind us, too! We're trapped!"

"Saren must have set an ambush!" Wrex growled.

"This doesn't look like geth technology," said Tali.

We exited the vehicle, and saw an open doorway to our right. It was the only place to go. I left Tali with Williams and Garrus, with orders to search for controls to the forcefield, and took Lira and Wrex with me to explore. Inside the doorway, there was a dim, flickering light coming from down a long, narrow hallway. I had a queasy feeling in my stomach. Apparently I wasn't the only one, as Liara spoke up:

"I have studied the Protheans for decades, but I have never felt this sense of foreboding. What will we find down there?"

"Don't get your hopes up. The only thing we can depend on right now is ourselves." Wrex said, in what must be reassuring to a krogan.

The hallway opened up into a large room. In the center was another console with a badly degraded hologram above it, much like the one we'd found in the command building earlier. Too bad we wouldn't get to see what a prothean looked like today. The high walls of the chamber were lined with more inert stasis pods.

The hologram spoke, this time coherently. "You are not Prothean. But you are not machine, either. This eventuality was one of many that was anticipated. This is why we sent our warning through the beacons. I do not sense the taint of indoctrination upon any of you. Unlike the other that passed recently. Perhaps there is still hope. My name is Vigil. You are safe here, for the moment. But that is likely to change. Soon, nowhere will be safe."

"Wait, I understood that," said Wrex.

"I have been monitoring your communications since you arrived at this facility. I have translated my output into a format you will comprehend."

"This is incredible. An actual, working, Prothean VI!" Liara was ecstatic.

"I am an advanced non-organic analysis system with personality imprints from Kaysad Ishan, chief overseer of the Ilos research facility."

"Why did you bring us here?" I asked.

"You must break a cycle that has continued for millions of years. But to stop it, you must understand or you will make the same mistakes we did. The Citadel is the heart of your civilization and the seat of government. As it was with us, and as it has been with every civilization that came before us. But the Citadel is a trap. The station is actually an enormous mass relay. One that links to dark space, the empty void beyond the galaxy's horizon. When the Citadel relay is activated, the Reapers will pour through. And all you know will be destroyed."

"How come nobody ever noticed the Citadel was a giant mass relay?" asked Wrex.

"The Reapers are careful to keep the greatest secrets of the Citadel hidden. That is why they created a species of seemingly benign organic caretakers. The Keepers maintain the station's most basic functions. They enable any species that discovers the Citadel to use it without fully understanding the technology. Reliance on the Keepers ensures no other species will ever discover the Citadel's true nature. Not until the relay is activated and the Reapers invade."

"The Reapers can wipe out the Council and the entire Citadel fleet in a single surprise attack!" I surmised.

"That was our fate. Our leaders were dead before we even realized we were under attack. The Reapers seized control of the Citadel and through it, the mass relays. Communication and transportation across our empire were crippled. Each star system was isolated, cut off from the others. Easy prey for the Reaper fleets. Over the next decades, the Reapers systematically obliterated our people. World by world, system by system, they methodically wiped us out."

"Some of you must have managed to survive," Liara hoped.

"Through the Citadel, the Reapers had access to all our records, maps, census data. Information is power, and they knew everything about us. Their fleets advanced across every settled region of the galaxy."

"This is all very interesting, but if we're going to stop Saren, we need to get going."

"I am holding Saren and his synthetic army in a similar force field. They will break through eventually, but you must understand before you go."

Liara tugged on my sleeve. "Please, Shepard! I have waited all my life to hear this."

"We don't really have a choice." Wrex shrugged and holstered his shotgun.

The VI continued. "Some worlds were utterly destroyed. Others were conquered, their populations enslaved. These indoctrinated servants became sleeper agents under Reaper control. Taken in as refugees by other Protheans, they betrayed them to the machines. Within a few centuries, the Reapers had killed or enslaved every Prothean in the galaxy. They were relentless, brutal, and absolutely thorough."

"I do not understand." Said Liara "Where did the Reapers go after they conquered your people?"

"Our worlds were stripped bare, harvested by the indoctrinated slaves. Everything of value – all resources, all technology – was taken. Certain that all advanced organic life had been extinguished, the Reapers retreated back through the Citadel Relay into dark space – the empty region between galaxies. All evidence of the Reaper invasion had been wiped away. Only their indoctrinated slaves were left behind, abandoned. Mindless husks no longer capable of independent thought, the indoctrinated soon starved or died of exposure. The genocide of the Protheans was complete."

"How do the Reapers survive out in dark space?" I asked.

"We have only theories. The researchers here came to believe the Reapers enter prolonged states of

inactivity to conserve energy. This allows them to survive the thousands of years it takes for organic civilization to rebuild itself. But in this state, they are vulnerable. By retreating beyond the edges of the galaxy, they ensure no one will accidentally discover them. They keep their existence hidden until the Citadel Relay is activated."

"What do the Reapers get out of this? Why do they keep repeating this pattern of genocide over and over?"

"The Reapers are alien, unknowable. Perhaps they need slaves or resources. More likely, they are driven by motives and goals organic beings cannot hope to comprehend. In the end, what does it matter? Your survival depends on stopping them, not in understanding them."

"You said you brought me here for a reason," I said, my impatience growing. "Tell me what I need to do."

"The Conduit is the key. Before the Reapers attacked, we Protheans were on the cusp of unlocking the mysteries behind mass relay technology. Ilos was a top secret facility. Here, researchers worked to create a small-scale version of a mass relay. One that linked directly to the Citadel: the hub of the relay network."

"The Conduit isn't a weapon. It's a back door onto the Citadel!" I realized. "Wait. The Mass Relay Monument on the Presidium isn't a monument. It's an actual, working mass relay. But doesn't need to be active?"

"Saren most likely has agents working for him on the Citadel. They will have to activate it soon, if they haven't already."

"How did you manage to stay hidden?" asked Liara.

"We were lucky. All official records of our project were destroyed in the initial attack on the Citadel. While the Prothean empire came crashing down, Ilos was spared. We severed all communication with the outside, and our facility went dark. The personnel retreated underground into these archives. To conserve resources, everyone was put into cryogenic stasis. I was programmed to monitor the facility and wake the staff when the danger had passed. But the genocide of an entire species is a long, slow process. Years passed. Decades, centuries. The Reapers persisted. And my energy reserves were dwindling."

"Did anyone survive?"

"I began to disable the life support of non-essential personnel. First support staff, then security. One by one, their pods were shut down to conserve energy. Eventually, only the stasis pods of the top scientists remained active. Even these were in danger of failing when the Reapers finally retreated back through the Citadel relay."

"There were hundreds of stasis pods out there!" Liara was incensed. "You just shut them down? You killed them?"

Wrex said what I couldn't: "Couldn't let everyone die. Better to sacrifice some so others could live."

"This outcome was not completely unforeseen. My actions were a result of contingency programming entered on my creation. I saved key personnel. When the Reapers retreated, the top researchers were still alive. My actions are the only reason any hope remains. When the researchers woke, they realized the Prothean species was doomed. There were only a dozen individuals left, far too few to sustain a viable population. Yet they vowed to find some way to stop the Reapers from returning. A way to break the cycle forever. And they knew the Keepers were the key."

"I still don't understand what's going on here," I said. "Why is Saren trying to find the Conduit?"

"The Conduit gives him access to the Citadel and the Keepers. The Keepers are controlled by the Citadel. Before each invasion, a signal is sent through the station compelling the Keepers to activate the Citadel Relay. After decades of feverish study, the scientists discovered a way to alter this signal. Using the Conduit, they gained access to the Citadel and made the modifications. This time, when Sovereign sent the signal to the Citadel, the Keepers ignored it. The Reapers are trapped in dark space."

"If the Reapers are trapped in dark space, how did Sovereign get here?"

"It is logical to assume the Reapers would leave one of their own behind after each extinction, a sentinel to pave the way for their inevitable return. Like those in dark space, Sovereign probably spent most of the last 50,000 years in a state of hibernation. Periodically, it would wake to analyze the situation. Keeping its existence hidden, it would evaluate the state of galactic civilization. And, when the time was right, it would signal the Citadel and usher in the next Reaper invasion. But this time, the signal failed. The Keepers did not respond. Sovereign's allies were trapped in the void. Alone, it was forced to try and discover what had gone wrong."

"Sovereign's the largest ship in the galaxy. Why all this secrecy? Why not just attack the Citadel?"

"Sovereign is not invincible. Revealing its true nature would have united the forces of every organic species against it. Even a Reaper couldn't survive such odds. But the Reapers are patient. They will not rush into the unknown. Sovereign could have been planning this for centuries, moving deliberately, gathering allies. Slowly, it has assembled the pieces of the puzzle, working through agents to keep itself hidden. Saren is the most visible pawn of the Reapers, but I doubt he was the first. Now, Sovereign has grown bold. Whether from confidence or desperation, I cannot say. But it is determined to reopen the portal to dark space."

"What about the beacon on Eden Prime? And the one on Virmire? What were they for?"

"At our apex, the beacons spanned the breadth of our empire. We used them as a single galaxy-wide network, to transmit data and communications rapidly from world to world. Virtually all the beacons were destroyed during the invasion. But once the Reapers were gone, the survivors here on Ilos decided to risk sending out a message. We knew it was unlikely there were other survivors. But if there were, we wanted them to know about Ilos. We wanted to give them hope. So a message was sent across the network."

"You could have exposed yourself to the Reapers."

"In truth, we didn't expect any of the beacons would still function, but we had to try. If there were survivors, we had to reach them. The message was meant for our own people. It was coded so only organic beings could interpret it. We still didn't understand the power of Reaper indoctrination. We

never realized it could lead an agent of the machines – like Saren – to this world. But it has also led you here. So perhaps we did not fail after all."

"So when the Reapers created the Citadel, they created the Keepers as well?"

"A more likely scenario is that the Keepers were one of the early harvested civilizations. Perhaps the very first. Perhaps they responded well to indoctrination or the Reapers simply bred them to be obedient. In any case, they were left behind to operate and maintain the Citadel. But the Keepers are no longer directly controlled by Sovereign or its ilk. They were altered so that they only respond to the signals emitted by the Citadel itself. When the Protheans altered the Citadel's signals, they broke Sovereign's hold over the Keepers. Now they are completely harmless."

"That explains the geth. Sovereign must have realized organic races were difficult to control."

"A likely hypothesis. The Keepers evolved in an unanticipated direction. Non-organic servants like the geth would be more predictable."

"What happened to the survivors from the Conduit Project?"

"They used the Conduit to gain access to the Citadel, but the Conduit is only a prototype. The portal only links in one direction, so they were trapped on the station. I do not know what became of them. It is unlikely they found any food or water on the station. I fear they suffered a slow, grim death. I only know they succeeded in their mission to seal the relay. Your presence here proves their sacrifice was not in vain." The VI paused and flickered for a moment. "Saren's forces have brought down the force field I had erected to detain them. I had hoped it would last longer. You must hurry. I will deactivate the field holding you here now."

"So Saren can use the Conduit to bypass all the Citadel's external defenses..." I prompted.

"Correct. And once inside, he can transfer control of the station to Sovereign. Sovereign will override the Citadel's systems and manually open the relay. And the cycle of extinction will begin again."

"I'll stop Saren. Just tell me how."

"There is a data file in my console. Take a copy when you go. When you reach the Citadel's master control unit, upload it to the station. It will corrupt the Citadel's security protocols and give you temporary control over the station. It might give you a chance against Sovereign."

"Where's the Citadel's master control unit? I've never heard of anything like that."

"Through the Conduit. Follow Saren. He will lead you to your destination."

"Saren't got enough of a head start. Grab that data file and let's go!"

"Shepard, are you sure?" said Liara. "Who knows how much longer Vigil will be here? Even now the projection is weak. This might be our only chance to speak with it – our only link to the knowledge of the Protheans! It is the opportunity of a lifetime!"

"Liara. Save the galaxy now, save the past later. I've got the data file. Come on."

"You are right, of course."

"The one you call Saren has not reached the Conduit. Not yet. There is still hope if you hurry."

Williams called over the radio. "Commander? Do you copy?"

"I'm here, Chief. What's your status?"

"Oh, thank god. We couldn't reach you. The force fields are down."

"Fire up the Mako. We're headed back out. I'll explain once we're under way. Time to finish this!"

We ran back to the vehicle and hopped in. Williams floored it, and we rode for several more kilometers. I looped in the Normandy and summarized our conversation with Vigil for the others.

"All their culture, all their advanced technology, and the Protheans were taken in by the Reapers, just as we were. They failed," said Tali.

"Keep it moving. I've got no intention of ending up like them," said Wrex.

I gave orders to the Normandy to head back through the Mu Relay to link up with Admiral Hackett and the 5<sup>th</sup> fleet. Hopefully, Joker and Pressly would be able to convince him to mobilize on the Citadel.

Williams drove us over giant root systems, through holes in the walls, and plowed through deep puddles. There were signs that the geth had been through, but we encountered no enemies. Time was of the essence. Sure, the two mini mass relays only connected to each other, but they would have to be fairly closely aligned. The Conduit was on a rotating planet halfway across the galaxy from the mass relay monument, which was on a space station that floated in a nebula. The only reason that Saren was here, at this precise moment, was because he'd done the math.

There was sunlight at the end of the tunnel. We broke out into a wide open area. At the far end of a field was the Conduit, glowing in a sparkling blue energy field. Williams slammed on the brakes.

"There's four colossi blocking our path, Commander!" she exclaimed.

"We have no choice," I said. "Tali, shift all the Mako's power. Split it between shields and drivetrain."

"Done. I've also set the system to crank up the mass effect core the instant we hit the relay's field."

I had forgotten that detail.

"Good job. Everyone buckle in tight, helmets on, check your seals! Chief, floor it!"

"Aye, aye, skipper!"

The Mako shot off like it'd been fired from a gun. The vehicle's kinetic barrier only lasted a few seconds under the barrage from the giant geth colossi. The hull began to take hits. One round went clean through the vehicle, missing Wrex's head by centimeters. I felt the Mako ascend a ramp, and then



I blacked out as we were accelerated to many, many times the speed of light.

-----Chapter 14: The Battle of the Citadel-----

*From the Codex:*

*The Citadel is surrounded by a blue-tinted reflection nebula. The light of the nebula is actually light from the Citadel, scattered and reflected back at the station.*

*At first, the Serpent Nebula was assumed to be made of microscopic construction debris. Prevailing theory holds the Protheans used molecular nanotechnology to manufacture the incredibly durable materials used to make the Citadel. But unlike other nebulae, the Serpent does not dissipate over time. Therefore, it must be replenished constantly. The current popular theory is that the non-recyclable waste collected by the Citadel's keepers is somehow rendered down to the atomic or molecular level, and ejected into the clouds.*

*The thick nebula presents a navigation hazard. Beyond the relatively clear areas around the Citadel, electrical discharges are common. These are not blocked by kinetic barriers, and can severely damage metal-framed starships. In addition, some dense knots of dust can overwhelm the repulsion of kinetic barriers on smaller ships. If such a vessel is moving fast enough at the time, the effects are similar to being hit by a sandblaster.*

*Attempting to reach the Citadel through open space navigation is unadvisable; the only safe approach is through the various mass relays that orbit it.*

I came to with my shoulder being shaken. There was a krogan helmet in my face. I jerked back and hit the back of my head.

"Shepard."

"Wrex." I looked around the Mako. Everyone else was still unconscious. "How long was I out?"

Wrex shrugged. "Not long. Think we're almost there."

"What makes you say that?"

Wrex grabbed Tali's arm. Her omni-tool was still active, and a countdown timer was displayed. I didn't know how to read a quarian clock, but the numbers did seem to be getting smaller. Tali stirred, and groaned.

"How're you feeling?" I asked.

"Oof," she said. Then, glancing at her wrist: "According to my calculations, we should be getting close.

Wrex and I exchanged looks. Or, well, we faced each other; Krogan helmets are opaque.

"Better wake everyone else up, then."

No one seemed the worse for wear from our launch. Williams tried to remove her helmet, but I stopped her and pointed to the holes in the walls. Tali converted her quarian timer to Citadel standard. We had a

few minutes before arriving. Traveling directly between two relays is quite fast. Unfortunately, not all relays link to all other relays. Often times, one has to travel for several hours in normal FTL to get to the next relay in the line.

"I hope the landing won't be as rough as the takeoff," Garrus said as he stretched.

"Hard to say," Tali replied. "But I'll shift power away from the drivetrain and to the mass effect core, so our effective mass will be less."

"I think we're tumbling a bit," Williams was looking out the front window. "Better double-check those harnesses."

Tali's timer expired. She shrugged. "I've never gone through the Conduit before. The Mako isn't a spaceship. I had to make some guesses."

We all sat, twiddling our thumbs, tapping our feet. There wasn't much to say or do. The blue glow of mas relay transit suddenly faded. I braced for impact, and impact there was. Several, actually, as the Mako tumbled and rolled. We came to rest upside-down, and without power. I released my harness, then kicked open the hatch.

I tumbled out and looked around. The Citadel Presidium was unrecognizable. There were fires everywhere. Jagged debris from broken structures was strewn about everywhere. I watched as the Relay Monument spun down and became inert. The nearby Avina Tourism Terminal's hologram was spasming and speaking in multiple languages. The rest of my squad emerged from the wrecked Mako.

"Everyone all right?"

"Well, that's two Makos we owe the Alliance," Williams quipped.

I frowned and removed my helmet. The air was acrid and thick with smoke. Vigil had told us that the Citadel's master control was at the top of the Tower. The elevator nearby appeared to be functional, and I headed that way. There were four of those geth husk spikes nearby, and they began to retract, releasing their victims. We made short work of three, but the fourth spike got stuck halfway. The husk creature was writhing, trying to get free. I put it out of its misery and called the elevator.

It was a tight squeeze with all 6 of us in the elevator car, and the calm muzak just put us more on edge. Halfway up the tower, the elevator came to a screeching halt.

"Whelp, Saren knows we're here. Helmets and mag-boots, people. We'll climb up the side."

Once everyone signaled their readiness, I shot out the glass and climbed out. The elevator had a mass effect generator that created gravity, but only inside the car. The Presidium Tower stuck out several kilometers into the vacuum of space. I assumed the Keepers maintained the outside of the tower, like they did everything else, so it was likely we were the first beings to ever be out here. I had no idea what we might encounter.

Part of the trick in zero-G is to orient yourself. There is no real up or down, so you need to pick those directions and stick to them. I decided down was the floor my mag boots were sticking to. This put one of the Wards arms above me. As I looked 'up,' the arm directly above seemed to be getting closer.

"The station is closing," said Garrus. "I knew it could be done, but I've never heard of it happening before. The Council is only supposed to do that if we're under attack."

"I'd say that counts as an attack." Wrex pointed in the direction I had chosen as forward: the top of the Tower.

There was a battle going out outside the station. The fine lines of point defense lasers were shooting everywhere. There were vapor trails left by torpedoes. Ships were exploding.

"Come on, people, let's move!" I ordered.

You can't really be in a hurry while using mag boots – one missed step, and you go flying off into space – but I did my best. A hundred meters or so up the tower, and another elevator came to a stop beside us. The glass shattered, and out poured several geth and a pair of krogan. There wasn't much cover, but there were some support columns that did the trick. You'd think the outside of the Presidium Tower would be smooth, but it's not. There are peaks and valleys and a mess of unidentifiable equipment.

We were pinned down, but an idea occurred to me. I gathered up as much biotic energy as I could muster, then pulled with all my might at one of the geth robots. Just as I'd hoped, it lost its hold on the tower 'floor' and floated off into space. Liara copied my move and pulled a krogan and two more geth, leaving just the one krogan, which Garrus sniped. The body drifted like a ragdoll, with its mag boots still clamped to the tower.

We left it and continued on as fast as we could, which was frustratingly slow. Every second, Saren was one step closer to bringing back the Reapers.

We came to a rise, and Liara gasped. "By the Goddess!"

The Wards arms were nearly closed. Approaching head-on from the gap at the far end of the citadel was none other than Sovereign itself. I didn't break my stride. A half minute later, there was a massive jolt in the structure as the Reaper docked. I was feeling some serious desperation. How long would it take for such a being to hack through whatever hacks the Protheans had put in place to prevent the Citadel Relay from being activated?

We came around a bend to an open area, and a geth dropship hove to and hovered just above us. It began dropping geth at a rate that we could barely keep up with. As soon as we destroyed one robot, another would take its place. I looked around for a solution and found one: a defense turret. I ordered Tali to get to hacking it while the rest of us covered her. In a few seconds, the turret began firing rockets, and after several rounds, the dropship's engines sputtered and it lost its balance, tumbling off into space. It would crash into one of the Wards, but I couldn't worry about casualties now.

We continued forward. My legs were aching from the strain of walking in mag-boots. A thick bead of sweat rolled across my left eye, but I couldn't wipe it away inside my helmet. Further on, one of Sovereign's limbs rose up above us and came down in an attempt to crush us. I skipped out of the way – diving was out of the question. Liara lost her footing and began floating away, her panicked scream filled my helmet.

I clamped my mag boots and gathered my best biotic pull, but she was still slipping away, and I wasn't

strong enough.

"Liara!" I yelled, and she stopped screaming.

"Shepard!"

"Use your Pull on me!"

"What?! How?!"

"I'm clamped on. You'll pull yourself towards me."

"That doesn't – ugh – Oh! It's working! Haha!"

I took her arms and swung her feet back onto the tower.

"Oh, Shepard! I thought I --"

"Yeah, you're not. We have to keep moving." I ordered my squad to continue on. "We must be getting close. Look for an access hatch or something."

Garrus found a door in the elevator track. After studying it for a moment, he flipped some handles and switches, and the hatch slid open. Inside was an airlock, and we all squeezed in. As air filled the chamber, I removed my helmet and cleared the sweat from my eye.

The airlock opened into a hallway, which we followed to the Atrium at the top of the Tower. To our right was the balcony where the Council held court. Sovereign's hull – skin? -- was blocking half the view out of the giant window. Plants were aflame, and many of the decorative boulders had been shattered. There were corpses of Keepers here and there.

Several geth opened fire on us, but they were no match for us. We didn't even take cover; just marched right through them. The petitioners' platform was empty, save for some holographic screens which were displaying streams of data. There was no sign of Saren. The only sounds were distant emergency alarms and the crackling of burning plants.

I used hand signals to order my squad to fan out and search the area. I approached the console, when out of nowhere, Saren flew in on his floating platform. He tossed a grenade at me, and I dove for cover behind a planter box. My squadmates all grunted in frustration at the same time. I peeked out to see Saren glowing in biotic energy, purple lines streamed out from him, holding each of my squadmates in biotic stasis. The turian had tubes and wires sticking out of his armor, and fluid was oozing from where a hose had penetrated his left leg. He looked an awful lot like a geth husk.

"I was afraid you wouldn't make it time, Shepard." Evidently, he wanted to talk again. I knew he was delaying, but I conversed with him while I tried to think up a strategy.

"In time for what?" I said from cover.

"The final confrontation. I think we both expected it would end like this. You've lost. You know that, don't you? In a few minutes, Sovereign will have full control of all the Citadel's systems. The relay will

open. The Reapers will return."

"I've still got a few tricks up my sleeve," I bluffed.

"You survived our encounter on Vormire. But I've changed since then. Improved. Sovereign has...upgraded me."

"You let Sovereign implant you? Are you insane?"

"I suppose I should thank you, Shepard. After Vormire, I couldn't stop thinking about what you said. About Sovereign manipulating me. About indoctrination. The doubts began to eat away at me. Sovereign sensed my hesitation. I was implanted to strengthen my resolve. Now my doubts are gone. I believe in Sovereign completely. I understand that the Reapers need organics. Join us and Sovereign will find a place for you, too."

"You're indoctrinated. Sovereign's controlling you through your implants! Don't you see that?"

"The relationship is symbiotic. Organic and machine intertwined, a union of flesh and steel. The strength of both, the weaknesses of neither. I am a vision of the future, Shepard. The evolution of organic life. This is our destiny. Join Sovereign and experience a true rebirth!"

"We can beat them! Sovereign hasn't won yet. I can stop it from taking control of the station! Step aside and the invasion will never happen!"

"We can't stop it! Not forever. You saw the visions. You saw what happened to the Protheans. The Reapers are too powerful."

"Some part of you must realize this is wrong. You can fight this!"

"Maybe you're right. Maybe there is still a chance for...uhh! The implants... Sovereign is too strong. I'm sorry. It's too late for me."

I stepped out from behind the planter box and lowered my weapon. "It's not over yet. There's still a way out. If you have the guts."

Saren pondered for a moment. "You're right. Goodbye, Shepard. Thank you."

Saren drew his pistol, aimed it at his head, and pulled the trigger. He seemed to fall in slow motion, backwards off of his floating platform, crashing through the glass below, and came to rest on a large rock in the greenhouse.

My squadmates, released from their biotic prisons, gathered around and peered down at the body.

"Make sure he's dead," I told them.

I pulled up Vigil's data file on my omnitool and uploaded it to the console at the edge of the platform. The text on the holographic displays translated itself into my language. A few seconds of searching is all it took to find the controls to open the Citadel arms. Almost immediately, I began receiving a radio transmission.

"Normandy to Commander Shepard, do you copy?"

"Pressly, good to hear your voice. Vigil's data file worked. I've got control of the station. Where are you?"

"Oh, thank God. We've arrived with the entire Fifth fleet and are engaged with geth forces. What's your status?"

"Sovereign is here. Bring the fleet in and take it out."

"We see it. Wait, are you in the tower? If we open fire --"

"Don't worry about us. Just take that bastard down, no matter the cost!"

"Aye, aye, Commander."

My squad had made their way down to Saren's corpse. Garrus drew his pistol and put a round in Saren's head, just to be sure. Out the window, ships belonging to every race were pouring in and opening fire on the Reaper. Sovereign extended one of its limbs, and a solid beam of red shot out from it. An Alliance cruiser was cut in half, then exploded in an orange ball of fire. This was going to be a tough fight.

The whole tower started to shake; it felt like an earthquake. I tumbled off the platform into the greenhouse below, landing on shards of broken glass and crushed plants. Red bolts of lightning began to fill the chamber, centered on the body of Saren. It began to writhe, its limbs elongating, fingers turning into claws. The thing that had been a turian spoke with a familiar, deep voice.

"I am Sovereign! And this station is MINE!"

The monstrosity stood and leaped, clinging to the wall like one of the flexible geth snipers. It hopped from wall to wall, taking pot shots at us with red lasers. There was no cover; it was all we could do to dodge the incoming bolts. Plants caught fire.

"Liara! Singularity!" I called.

"Where?"

"Anywhere along the walls. Everyone else, cover her!"

My squad spread out and opened fire, attempting to draw the monster's attention. A few shots hit the thing, taking down its shields. Liara's micro black hole formed, and the Saren/Sovereign monstrosity took a bad jump, getting caught in the gravity well. Floating and mostly helpless, the thing clawed at air in a vain attempt to get at us. We emptied heatsink after heatsink worth of ammunition into the thing, until it finally disintegrated in a cloud of ash.

"Is it over?" Tali panted.

"Not quite. Let's get out of here."

I looked out the window. Sovereign's hull was beginning to show cracks. The space beyond was a confusion of weapons fire, explosions, and debris. We climbed out of the greenhouse, back out into the Atrium. There was a jolt in the tower as Sovereign detached itself and floated away. It was no longer firing those red beams.

"Crap. RUN! GO!" I yelled, and made sure all of my squadmates were in front of me, headed for the hallway through which we had entered.

There was a bright flash, and then large chunks of debris and shattered glass were raining in all around. I got pinned beneath a metal chunk of Reaper. I had no idea where my squadmates were. Air was rushing out through the broken window, and my helmet was nowhere in sight. I struggled mightily against the metal pinning my legs, but I was losing strength rapidly.

Just as my vision was greying out, I felt hands on my shoulders, and an emergency hood was placed over my head. I took deep lungfuls of oxygen.

"We've got you, son." Captain Anderson had a vac-suit on. His face was a welcome sight.

Several C-Sec officers in vac-suits grabbed on to the twisted chunk of metal and lifted it off me. I slid myself out from under it.

"Where's my squad?" I asked.

"They're safe. Come on, we'll take you to them."

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A day later, Ambassador Udina, Captain Anderson, and I were summoned to a meeting with the Council. We met in an undamaged area of the Presidium. It was eerily quiet. Normally, there would be politicians and aides strolling about, but C-Sec guards had cleared the area.

The asari Councilor greeted us, and bade us stop just a few meters away. It was strange, being this close to the Councilors. I doubt few ever had the privilege. Anderson and I stood at attention.

"We have gathered here to recognize the enormous contributions of the Alliance forces in the war against Sovereign and the geth," began the asari Councilor.

The salarian Councilor continued: "Many humans have lost their lives in the battle to save the Citadel, brave and courageous soldiers who willingly gave their lives so that we – the Council – might live."

"There is no greater sacrifice, and we share your grief over the tragic loss of so many noble men and women," added the Turian Councilor.

"The Council also owes you a great personal debt, Commander. One we can never repay. You saved not just our lives, but the lives of billions from Sovereign and the Reapers." I had no idea what 'personal debt' the asari Councilor was talking about, but let them think that. It would be nice to be owed a favor from the most powerful politicians in the galaxy.

"Commander Shepard, your heroic and selfless actions serve as a symbol of everything humanity and the Alliance stand for."

"And though we cannot bring back those valiant soldiers who gave their lives to save ours, we can honor their memories through our actions."

"Humanity has shown it is ready to stand as a defender and protector of the galaxy. You have proved you are worthy to join our ranks and serve beside us on the Citadel Council."

Ambassador Udina made a slight bow: "Councilor, on behalf of humanity and the systems Alliance, we thank you for this prestigious honor and humbly accept."

"We will need a list of potential candidates to fill humanity's seat on the Council. Given all that has happened, I am sure your recommendation will carry a great deal of weight, Commander. Do you support any particular candidate?"

I was taken aback. Me? I blinked a couple of times, wide-eyed in surprise. "It's not up to me." I shrugged and looked at Udina. "Let the politicians figure this one out."

"I agree with the Commander," said Udina. "This is too important to rush into."

"Of course, Ambassador," said the asari Councilor. "We will welcome your candidates with open arms, whoever they may be."

"Sovereign's defeat marks the beginning of a new era both for humanity and the Council," said the turian Councilor.

"We've won this battle, barely," I replied. "But Sovereign was only a vanguard. The Reaper fleet is still coming. Hundreds of ships, maybe thousands. And I'm going to find some way to stop them!"

I turned on my heel and walked away before they could object. I could hear Udina making a speech, but I didn't care to listen. I still had the Normandy. I still had my crew, my squad, my friends. I wasn't going to wait around for the Council to take those things away from me. Not when I still had a mission.