

Ashley: "So, Liara, you've spent fifty years studying Prothean ruins and artifacts?"

Liara: "Our travels are now somewhat different from my normal excavations. I would prefer lengthier studies...and fewer explosions."

Ashley: "I think you've spoken for scientists everywhere, Liara."

BESIEGED BASE

While passing through the Cacus System in the Hades Gamma Cluster, a transmission came in from the Alliance 5th Fleet. I took the call in the vidcomm room. Admiral Hackett appeared in hologram form, looking and sounding no less scraggly than usual.

"Commander, I'm glad you're in the area. We've got an emergency situation and you're the only one I can trust to get the job done."

"How can I help, Admiral?"

"Biotic fanatics have hit a medical research station with a psychotropic drug. The drugs have temporarily driven researchers crazy, and the biotics are effectively using them as human shields."

"So if I shoot everything that moves, a lot of researchers are going to die."

"Exactly. A normal team could handle the biotics, but a lot of innocent researchers would die during the operation. That's why I contacted you. I'm hoping you can keep the casualties to a minimum."

"I'll do everything within my power to bring those researchers back safely, Admiral."

"I know you will, Commander. I'm sending you the station coordinates now. Fifth Fleet out."

Joker dropped us in the Mako on the planet Chohe, a few kilometers from the research base. With nearly no atmosphere, the stars are visible even on the day side.

The facility was a standard underground pre-fab. The only above-ground structure is a disk-shaped building with an airlock, then stairs that lead down to a lobby. A short hallway connects to an open atrium area used for storage and other common activities.

The first person we met was a man in a lab coat, looking dazed.

"They're in my head! All of them! With knives!" he said, incoherently.

"I will destroy you!" came a wild cry, and then my squad and I came under fire. The terrorists had no armor, but they did put up some weak biotic barriers. They were armed only with pistols, and their biotic powers were fairly weak – as weak as mine, really. But they weren't trained, and we made short work of them. None surrendered. Thankfully, the scientists had just enough wherewithal to duck during the battle. Injuries to the researchers were limited to a few grazing gunshot wounds and a twisted ankle or two.

Back on the Normandy, I reported in to Admiral Hackett.

"I didn't think it could be done, Commander. You managed to secure the base and neutralize the biotics

without a single civilian casualty."

"Just doing my job, Admiral. I couldn't let innocent lives be lost."

"I wish every soldier had your definition of 'just doing your job.' You're a credit to the uniform, Shepard. We're in your debt. Fifth Fleet out."

Wrex: "You quarians messed up the whole galaxy when you let the geth break free. Do your people ever talk about it?"

Tali: "Do the krogan talk about starting a foolish war that resulted in the turians sterilizing your people?"

Wrex: "All the time."

DISTRESS CALL / UNUSUAL READINGS

While passing through the Hydra System in the Argos Rho Cluster, we picked up a distress signal originating on the planet Metgos. The message was broken and filled with static, but Pressley managed to clean it up a bit.

"...general distress call...Sacred Angel medical transport...critical system failure...losing power...emergency landing...-gos Rho...repeat...Argos...Communications failing...life support...emergency transponder...won't last...please hurry."

The closest Joker could get us was a couple of kilometers from the signal's origin. We dropped in the Mako, and Williams kept the Mako at max speed, given that the surface was barely cooled lava.

Over a small hill, we saw the wreckage of a standard Kwoon-class cargo ship. There wasn't much left of it, and we detected no movement in the area. With little hope of finding any survivors, I ordered a cautious approach.

"All right, this planet is hot, and our suits' cooling systems won't be able to keep up. So let's spread out and search as much as we can as quickly as possible. Be back in --"

An explosion suddenly rocked the Mako.

"What the -- a land mine?" Williams struggled to control the vehicle.

"Geth! It's a trap!" yelled Garrus.

Three armatures, a pair of rocket drones, and four rifle-wielding robots popped up out of the ground. The rest of us had to hold on tight as Williams dodged incoming fire and Garrus used the Mako's turret to destroy all of the enemies in the area. The poor Mako was hobbled, but still drivable when Joker brought the Normandy in to pick us up.

"Well, that was unexpected," said Liara.

"I guess not all of the geth were destroyed at the Citadel with Saren," Tali observed.

"Maybe they just hadn't gotten the message, yet," said Wrex.

"They could be looking for another Reaper," said Garrus, "but the fact that they ambushed us means that they lured us specifically."

"Whatever the case, we now know that there are still geth out beyond the Veil," I cautioned. "We'll need to be on guard."

Ashley: "I haven't spent much time with any krogan before you, Wrex. I have to say, you're not what I expected."

Wrex: "Right. Because you humans have a wide range of cultures and attitudes, but krogan all think and act exactly alike."

Ashley: "Look, I didn't mean – Just forget I said anything."

Wrex: "Done."

LOST FREIGHTER

While passing through the Hercules System in the Gemini Sigma Cluster, Pressly happened to pick up a drifting ship on sensors.

"The MSV Worthington...Kowloon Class modular conveyor of human design, configured for mixed freight and passenger hauling. The ship appears to be in shut down state; the main thrusters are cold, and it is adrift off the orbit of Antiproperus...Registered to The Morrison Company, out of Shanxi."

Looking out the window, the ship's engines appeared to have exploded, and there was a hole in one of the cargo sections.

"Looks like the docking port is intact. Have Joker bring us in to dock," I ordered. "I'll take the squad over and have a look."

There was air inside, but given the state of the ship, I ordered keeping our helmets on. Only emergency lighting was on, making for deep shadows and an eerie atmosphere. Once through the docking port, Tali connected her omni-tool to a nearby console.

"Most of the systems seem to be disabled. Only basic life support appears to be functioning."

I drew my weapon as a precaution; there was no telling what we'd find on board. We made our way into the main cargo hold to find it in disarray. Crates were lying about in no apparent order. Some had been broken open and their contents scattered. It was slow going as we made our way to the bridge.

"Did you hear that?" whispered Garrus. "Sounded like footsteps."

"Hold," said Wrex, calmly.

Everyone froze. I looked over at the krogan to see him staring down at his foot. He was standing on a chord, which was connected to a small fusion containment cell. I exhaled a long sigh. Kaidan was our demolitions expert, and he was gone.

"Somebody set this trap. This whole place could be wired." Williams stated the obvious.

"All right," I said. "We've all had some bomb training. We'll just --"

"No need," Wrex grumbled. "My armor can handle a puny thing like that. Just get clear."

"Are you insane?" Garrus asked.

"It's fine. Just take cover over there, or something."

As soon as we were out of sight, we heard a loud pop and a mild hissing.

"All clear," Wrex said, non-nonchalantly.

We came across three more small fusion-cell traps, and shot them from a safe distance.

In the starboard room, we found two bodies, and a console with an open audio log. A manic woman's voice played.

"They say Jacob's gone. They say his brain isn't functioning anymore and they want to shut off his machines. But Jacob's the only thing in the world that matters to me. I don't know how to help him and it's tearing me up inside! I just feel so helpless. So damn angry! Doctor Smith gave me some meds to calm down, but I didn't take them." The woman's voice was becoming unhinged. "I can't. Not until I figure out a way to help Jacob. I won't give up on him. I won't!"

There was a body on the bridge, and the console had an active audio-log recording. I stopped the recording and started playback from the beginning. A man's voice played, probably the dead man on the floor.

"Jacob is showing no signs of brain activity. There's nothing more we can do for him. He wouldn't want to be kept alive by machines, so we're going to disconnect the life support. Doctor Smith is worried about Julia's reaction, though. She can't seem to let Jacob go. The stress is making her implants flare up, causing intense migraines. It'll probably be easier if we don't tell her until after we shut the life support down. Give her a chance to – Julia! What are you doing here? Why are you – argh!"

The recording ended in a gunshot.

The port-side room was a med-bay. A man lay unconscious but alive on one of the beds. Jacob, apparently. At a desk was the body of a man in a doctor's frock. The console had his audio log active, so I hit the playback button.

"Jacob's not going to make it. His brain was deprived of oxygen for too long. There's nothing any of us can do for him now except let him die with dignity. It's what he would want. I'm more worried about Julia now. She's showing signs of severe depression. I gave her some meds that should help, but I better warn the captain."

"Looks like this machine is keeping him alive," said Garrus, looking at the unconscious form of Jacob. "I don't see any brain activity on the readouts. He's dead. This body is just an empty shell."

"Maybe we should shut the machine off," said Williams. "It's the merciful thing to do."

"It's your decision, Shepard," said Liara.

Sometimes, I hate being in charge. Before I could make a decision, though, a woman attacked us. Her biotic barrier was up; she opened fire with her pistol, and opened a singularity in the middle of the med bay before any of us could react. Tali was caught in the gravity well and began to float helplessly. Liara went to help her by grabbing her arm and using her own biotic ability to dissipate the vortex. The rest of us all opened fire at once. There wasn't much left of Julia.

I decided to forward the coordinates of the derelict ship to the Alliance. Let them deal with the patient. Maybe he had a next of kin.

Wrex: "So tell me, who'd win in a fight between you and Shepard?"

Ashley: "What? Shepard is my commanding officer. I can't imagine us ever having to fight."

Wrex: "You can't? That's why Shepard's your superior officer. And that's why Shepard would win."

LOST MODULE

We were passing through the Hercules System in the Attican Beta Cluster when Admiral Hackett contacted me.

"Normandy, this is Alliance Command. We're detecting your presence in the Attican Beta Cluster. One of our surveillance probes was gathering intel on geth activities in the region when it was spotted and shot down. You need to go groundside and recover the probe's data module before the geth find it."

"You can count on me, Admiral."

The Mako was out of commission, so I had Joker land us near the crashed probe. The planet had an atmosphere, but toxic organisms made it unbreathable. Normandy's cargo bay was sealed off from the rest of the ship before we opened it, and the ramp would have to remain open as we left the planet and returned to space in order to ventilate out the alien life.

The probe was largely intact, but was broken open. It had crashed into a nest of some monkey-like creatures. There were small bodies littered about; small, grey, and with a long snout and striped tail. The data module was nowhere to be found.

"Maybe one of those monkeys made off with the data module?"

"Pyjaks," Wrex named them. "They're vermin. Pests on a lot of planets. Tuchanka, too."

"This will be difficult," sighed Garrus.

I looked around and saw several more nests in the distance. The spongy ground cover didn't hold tracks, either. I ordered everyone to spread out and search the other nests.

"Shepard," said Liara. "I think I see some ruins over there."

"Go ahead," I said, smiling. "This will probably take a while."

Thirty minutes later, I'd searched three nests without luck. None of my squad were in sight, having wandered far in their own searches.

Williams used our common radio channel: "Commander, I've found what looks like an abandoned mine over here. Looks like there's more of those monkey things inside."

"Pyjacks," said Wrex."

"Right," I acknowledged. "Williams, stay put. The rest of us will join you shortly."

"Shepard, these ruins are Prothean!" Liara spoke up. "I'd like to stay and study them."

"That's fine. Knock yourself out. Holler if you need us."

"Thank you. I will be in touch."

Ten minutes later, the rest of us had joined up with Williams. She hadn't found the module outside the mineshaft, so we headed in to continue our search. It was dark, and using only our flashlights made for a slow search. That, and the monkeys – pyjaks – were jumpy little critters. The mine itself was abandoned. Whoever had dug the tunnels had even left their moles behind.

As we searched, I felt Liara in my mind. Not her thoughts or anything, just her presence. The fact that she existed. It was a strange sensation, but I didn't have time to explore it further.

"Hey! That monkey has the data module!" Williams yelled excitedly.

"Pyjak," said Wrex.

"Whatever. He's headed towards you, Commander. Slippery little bastard."

I spread my arms out wide to catch the thief, but the pyjak wasn't looking and ran right in to me. He dropped the data module and scampered off. I picked up the device and shook some mud off it.

Tali joined me. "It's a miracle the data module is still intact. Pressly should be able to relay this info to your superiors."

Liara contacted me as we exited the mine. "Shepard, will you join me, please? I think you will want to see this."

I handed the data module to Williams. She and the others returned to the Normandy, and I took a leisurely stroll to the ruins. It was a pretty planet, even if the atmosphere was unbreathable for us. Very green. Toxic organisms floated in the air like dandelion seeds. Evidently the pyjaks didn't seem to mind.

The ruins looked a lot like the small amphitheater area on Eden Prime where the beacon had been dug up. Memories of the chase after Saren surfaced. A lot had happened since then. In the middle of these

ruins, instead of a beacon, was a very strange sight: a smooth silver sphere was floating and making a humming sound.

"Incredible, is it not?" Liara was practically bouncing.

"Do you hear that hum? Is that just me?"

Liara stopped bouncing. "I do not hear any hum."

I walked slowly around the sphere until I came to a small pedestal. In the top was an indentation of a familiar-looking shape. The Asari Consort on the Citadel had once given me a strange object in exchange for helping her with a problem, and I'd carried around the token ever since. I pulled it out of my pocket now, and turned it over in my hands. I explained to Liara where I'd gotten it, and she had no idea what it was, either, but agreed that the shape looked like it would fit.

I placed the trinket into the slot. Ripples made their way around the surface of the sphere, and the hum increased in pitch. The ball exploded in a brilliant flash of white light, momentarily blinding and disorienting me.

Slowly my senses returned as I woke from a deep sleep. I was alone in the forest, though I was not far from the caves I shared with the others of my tribe. There was a pain and a small lump in the back of my skull, as if a chip of flint had been forced under the surface of the skin.

Leaning on my bone-tipped spear for support, I rose to my feet. A sound drew my attention upwards, where a strange creature hovered high above me. It was unlike the birds I hunt by the lake's edge - it had no head and no wings yet somehow it flew. It was a beast of shining silver; hanging motionless in the sky like a cloud. I sensed it was watching me, studying me.

Raising a hairy fist, I shook my spear at it in anger and the creature rose up quickly until it disappeared from view. With a satisfied grunt I made my way back to my caves and the rest of the tribe.

I fell into the familiar patterns of life - the hunt for food, the struggle to claim and keep a mate, the battles against other tribes that would claim my territory. Days rolled into nights and back into days. Each time I rose from sleep there was the sensation that I was not alone; that some "other" was with me sharing all I see, hear, and feel. At these times my hand went to the strange lump at the back of my skull and I remembered the silver creature in the sky.

The air grew colder, winter fell. I needed to range farther for food, clutching the furs tight against me to ward off the chill. It is on one of these long hunts that the strange bird returned. I heard it before I saw it, its call a deafening roar as it descended from above, swooping down on me. A single great eye opened on the underbelly, a glowing red orb. I tried to run, but a finger of red light extended from the eye and engulfed me, and all went black again.

I woke an instant later to find myself on Eletania, lying on my back, the Prothean sphere looming above me undamaged, and Liara standing over me. She helped me to my feet, puzzled. "There was a flash of light and you just sort of toppled over," she explains. "Are you okay, Shepard?"

I didn't answer right away, wondering at the implications of what I had seen: the memories of a Cro-Magnon hunter, captured by an implanted Prothean data recorder. How long did they study the primitive humans, observing them and analyzing the results at their base on Mars? And what, if

anything, did they learn from us?

"I'm fine," I finally replied. I shared my experience with Liara as we walked back to the Normandy, arm in arm.

Wrex: "You handle yourself well, Williams. It's surprising. Krogan women have to stay home and try to reproduce."

Ashley: "Sorry to disappoint, Wrex. I'm not the stay-at-home kind."

Wrex: "Didn't say I was disappointed. I could get used to killing with women around. Gives the fight a different flavor."

MAJOR KYLE, STRANGE TRANSMISSION

DIPLOMATIC ADVISORY WARNING

The following message was transmitted from an untraceable account to multiple recipients across the extranet. Further monitoring of the situation is warranted.

"My fellow biotic: You have been selected to receive this transmission because of our shared plight.

Few understand us, fewer tolerate us. We must stand together. We must build our own new world.

Come. Join us in the Hawking Eta cluster. Only as one body can we right the wrongs done to our kind."

We were passing through the Century System in the Hawking Eta Cluster when Admiral Hackett contacted me.

"We've got a mission for you. Major Kyle, your commanding officer at Torfan, has set up a small compound in the Hawking Eta cluster. He's attracted a number of biotic followers. He's become an outspoken critic of the Alliance, and we believe he's mentally unstable. This could be trouble, Shepard."

The Skyllian Blitz was a campaign to rid the Skyllian Verge of barbarian slavers. During the final battle on Torfan, I was part of a squad into the slaver's base of operations. Three-quarters of my squad died, but the sector was freed. Many other Alliance soldiers died that day, too.

"What kind of proof do you have that the major is dangerous?"

"Three days ago, we sent two Alliance representatives to meet with him at his compound. They have disappeared. We believe Kyle and his followers killed them. That compound's a cult, Shepard. They call him 'Father Kyle' now. He's set himself up as some kind of religious leader."

"You said his followers are biotics?"

"Yes. Major Kyle never showed any biotic tendencies himself, though. I think he's just attached onto a group he identifies with. Many biotics feel marginalized or ostracized by society. Kyle probably sees them as victims who need his protection. And they see him as someone who will fight for them. Unfortunately, he's convinced them that the Alliance is somehow responsible for all of their problems. We can't let him go on like this."

"What were those Alliance representatives going to talk to Major Kyle about?"

"They wanted to bring him back to an Alliance facility for treatment. Major Kyle served us faithfully for many years. We weren't going to abandon him. Given his state of mind, however, he probably saw them as a threat. We're almost certain he had his followers kill them."

"What else can you tell me about Major Kyle?"

"He's not the same man you served under. He feels responsible for all the Alliance soldiers who died at Torfan. His psych evaluations showed he couldn't handle the stress of command any more. He was given an honorable discharge and early retirement. We'd hoped he would get better in time, but we underestimated how far gone he was. Now it looks like it's too late."

"I might be able to end this without violence," I offered.

"You served with him; he might listen to you. And you've dealt with biotic extremists before. But he's already killed two Alliance representatives. I'll trust you to use your judgment. I'm sending a cruiser to back you up, but you're going in first. Hackett out."

The Normandy touched down on Presrop, a respectful distance from the compound. I went alone, armed and armored, and had the rest of the squad standing by in case things got ugly. I prayed that they wouldn't. There were two buildings, one larger warehouse and a smaller prefab underground bunker. I approached the warehouse first and pushed the doorbell.

"This is a private sanctuary," came an uninviting male voice over the intercom. "Outsiders are not welcome here."

"I'm here to talk to the man in charge. It's important."

"Father Kyle wants nothing more to do with the Alliance."

"My name is Commander Shepard. Major Kyle knows me. I have to speak to him. I want to this to end peacefully. If he doesn't see me, people could get hurt."

"We won't let you take Father Kyle away! He protects us. We need him!"

"The Alliance wants someone to pay for those murders. Let me speak to Major Kyle and maybe I can find some way to help you all get out of this alive."

"Wait..." There was a long pause, then: "Father Kyle will speak with you. Head to the building at the far end of the compound. He'll meet you there."

Inside the bunker, there were armed people wandering around, eying me suspiciously, but they let me pass. Kyle was in a back room, dressed like a stereotypical cult leader.

"I am Major Kyle," he stood as I entered. His voice was unnaturally calm, like he was trying too hard to be soothing. "I know you. The Butcher of Torfan. Why have you come here, Shepard? Why can't you just leave us alone?"

"You killed two Alliance officers. You had to know this would end. You must face the consequences of

your actions."

"They wanted to take me away from here! They wanted me to abandon this place. Turn my back on my family. They spoke blasphemy! I did what I could to make their end quick and painless. I had no other choice. It was necessary to protect my children. Only I can keep them safe."

"Do you really want your children to suffer for your sins, too?"

"No! This...this was my fault. My children are innocent. Pure. Please...I never meant for this to happen. I'm...I'm sorry."

"Come with me, Major, it's over."

"Wait. If my children see you taking me away, they won't understand. They will attack and you will be forced to kill them all. You have shown me the error of my ways, Commander. Now you must give me time to explain it to them. It is the only way they will understand. Please, give me an hour. After that, I will meet the Alliance authorities at the gates of my compound and surrender without violence. I give you my word."

"I'm going to trust you. If you betray that trust, you and all your children will suffer."

"I will not betray you, Commander. Thank you for this."

I returned to the Normandy and cooled my heels on the cargo ramp with the rest of my squad. An Alliance shuttle landed and I briefed them on the situation. Exactly one hour from the time I'd spoken with Major Kyle, he exited his compound arms raised, and surrendered to the MPs. More negotiators entered the compound to talk to his "children."

Back on the Normandy, I received a message from Admiral Hackett.

"Admiral Hackett here, Commander. I've received your report on Major Kyle. We sent in a team as you instructed. Kyle's followers have disbanded, and the major surrendered to us without incident. We'll make sure he gets the help he needs. To be honest, Shepard, I thought this was going to end in a bloodbath. I don't know how you did it, but you saved a lot of lives. Congratulations."

Garrus: "I'm surprised to see you on the front lines, Chief Williams. Most women I've observed in your Alliance military serve in support roles."

Ashley: "It's becoming more common, but it took a long time to prove that 'ladies' could handle an assault rifle or a shotgun."

Garrus: "I doubt anyone who saw your skill under fire could remain skeptical."

MISSING SURVEY TEAM

I'd gotten word about an ExoGeni survey team that'd gone missing in the Anteaus System, Hades Gamma Cluster. The Alliance doesn't normally concern itself with corporate mining operations, but this one had made the news, so the Normandy was sent to investigate.

From orbit around Trebin, Pressly found a GPS jammer on the surface. The Mako had been mostly repaired, so we dropped in the vehicle and drove to the source of the signal. There, we found several satellites crashed around a transmitter tower. We shut down the transmission and re-established contact with the Normandy.

Pressly informed us that there was a camp nearby, so we headed over some gently rolling hills to a cluster of prefab shelters next to a mine entrance. Williams complained about how the Mako was driving, and Garrus said he couldn't get the guns to aim properly. I made a mental note to requisition yet another vehicle.

The ExoGeni logo was prominent on all of the buildings and equipment. No one responded to our hails over standard emergency frequencies, and we found the camp to be abandoned. One console had been left open, and the logs indicated that they'd dug up some alien technology in the mine.

"I've heard of this," said Williams. "Machine cultists. They unearth some kind of alien technology, and it turns them into mindless fanatics."

"Let's try not to shoot any civilians," I ordered as we entered the mine.

They weren't just mindless fanatics, as it turns out, they were husks. No sooner had we cycled the airlock than a dozen of the geth-ified zombies attacked us. There were two side-branches in the mine, and both were filled with dragon's teeth spikes, all of them empty. Well, now we knew what happened to the survey team.

In the central chamber of the mine was the alien device. It very strongly resembled an opened artichoke. The 'heart' of the object was a glowing orb. It was disturbingly alluring.

"This doesn't look like geth technology," said Tali, in a woozy voice.

"Or Prothean," added Tali, also sounding a bit woozy.

I shook my head in a vain attempt to clear it. "It's Reaper indoctrination tech! Everyone out! Now!"

That sobered everyone up, and we ran back out to the Mako. Once back aboard the Normandy, I ordered the mine destroyed. The Normandy's weapons probably didn't destroy the Reaper device, but my report would recommend quarantining the area indefinitely; at least until indoctrination could be counteracted. It seemed obvious now that the technology to turn people into husks came from the Reapers, not the geth.

Garrus: "I'd love to see what the Normandy can do in a fight."

Ashley: "The Normandy isn't built for a stand-up fight. I'd rather rely on the IES than the shields."

Garrus: "But the stealth drives adds a new tactical level to space combat as we know it. Surprise attacks, undetected flanking maneuvers..."

Ashley: "I don't know, Garrus. I'd rather not be the first one up the ladder when it comes to new tactics."

HOSTILE TAKEOVER – PERSON OF INTEREST

I'd ordered the Normandy back to the Citadel for resupply and to requisition a new Mako. While roaming the Citadel, I met a woman emerging from C-Sec Headquarters. She glanced around, then approached me.

"Got a moment, Spectre?" She had grey hair and hard eyes. She spoke in a husky smoker's voice. "I have a proposition for you."

"Depends. Who are you and what were you doing in C-Sec?"

"My name is Helena Blake. I'm a businesswoman. I'm acquainted with a pair of powerful crime bosses." She waved dismissively. "C-Sec thinks I'm involved with them – which I am most definitely not. They're hiding on remote worlds, and I have the coordinates. You could do the galaxy a favor."

"And what do you get out of this?"

"We share interests in certain cooperative ventures. But their business practices have forced me to terminate our relationship. Once they are dead, I will manage our organization in a more...tasteful manner."

"What crimes did these men commit?"

"They're red sand dealers who make victims out of their customers. Those who can no longer pay are sold to batarians as slaves. They're loathsome, hurting innocent people. They must be ended."

"You're obviously with them. Why don't I just arrest you instead?"

"Arrested for what? You and I are simply having a conversation. I have excellent legal representation. Arresting me would be a waste of your time."

"So I eliminate them, and then you take over and try to eliminate me. How stupid do I look?"

"While I appreciate your estimation of my bravado, I have no intention of attempting to murder you. You are the first human Spectre, and you are doing important work for humanity. I have no interest in red sand or slavery. Anyone who does deserves to die. Our needs are aligned. Can you really let these men live, knowing that you can stop them?"

I decided that ridding the galaxy of crime lords was something worthy of a Spectre's time, but I had no intention of leaving this woman in charge of two criminal gangs. I'd deal with that later, though. "If they're as bad as you say they are, they need to be dealt with. What kind of defenses would these two have?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," she said in a tone of feigned innocence. "But they're certain to be armed. Their partnership soured, and each believes that the other means to kill him. They will be well-prepared. Here are the coordinates. When these men are dead, I will wait for you at a third set of coordinates." Ms Blake pulled up her omni-tool and transmitted the data to mine. "Goodbye, Commander. It has been a pleasure to meet you."

She made a slight bow, then we went our separate ways. The two crime bosses were set up in compounds on different planets, in different systems in the Horse Head Nebula. It struck me as strange

that I visited so many worlds, and only explored a few square kilometers on each. And that these compounds were the only places of significance on entire planets. Yes, these places were out of the way, but they made no effort to hide themselves otherwise. The Normandy's scanners had no trouble finding them once we were in orbit.

Both bases were guarded by automated turrets, and the gangs inside were well armed. But none were any match for my well-seasoned squad.

By the time we reached Amaranthine, where Helena Blake told me to meet her, I'd formulated a strategy for dealing with her. I had Joker land the Normandy near her hideout, and brought my whole squad, armed to the teeth. We entered the building unmolested, and Ms Blake greeted us in the foyer, herself well armed.

"Hello again, Commander Shepard. I owe you a debt of gratitude. With my former partners dead, this syndicate is now mine. I could not have done it without you."

"I killed them because they attacked me before I could offer them a chance to surrender. But I have no intention of allowing this organization to continue. Now, I'm placing you under arrest."

"Surely you don't think that necessary! I hope that you can see that I am, by far, a lesser evil than those men. Under my leadership, this organization will restrict itself to gambling and smuggling illegal technologies. These crimes are hardly worth your time. There will be no drugs and no slave-taking for the batarians. Those days are over. If you press the issue, my assistants are very well-equipped to deal with you."

"So am I, ma'am. This is the team that took down Saren. If you won't come peacefully, I'll have no choice --"

"I would die before going to prison! I would most certainly kill before going to prison!" Her words were full of bravado, but she seemed nervous as she looked over my squad.

I saw an opening. "I'm giving you one chance to live through this. Shut this gang down. Walk away."

"I cannot believe you place such a high priority on stopping such petty, victimless crimes!" She shifted her weight from foot to foot as she thought it over. "Perhaps you're right. Perhaps this organization has been so tainted by those two idiots that it cannot be redeemed. If I disband the gang, I walk away freely. I have not come so far to be arrested. Now, do we have a deal?"

I really didn't want to confine everyone to the Normandy, or to wait until an Alliance ship could come pick up her entire gang. And C-Sec already had her on a watch list... "You're free to go. I don't ever want to see this gang again. If I do --"

"You won't. I am not so foolish as to break my word to a Spectre." She really did seem nervous. "Now, if you'll excuse me, my men become nervous in the presence of law enforcement agents. Goodbye, Shepard."

Tali: "Is it common for human women to be front-rank fighters, Chief Williams? I know that salarian women do not serve in the military."

Ashley: "It's becoming more common, but it took a long time to prove that 'ladies' could handle an assault rifle or a shotgun."

Tali: "On the flotilla, we don't have the luxury of sexism. We need the best hands for every available job."

Ashley: "Sounds nice, but I don't think I could get used to the uniform."

DOCTOR MICHEL

Garrus called me up to say he was going to stop in at Doctor Michel's clinic to see how she was doing, and he invited me along.

As we entered, the doctor was speaking to someone on her terminal.

"I need those supplies for my clinic," she said in a desperate tone. "I can't!"

"You can and you will. Or your story won't stay secret for long," an electronically disguised voice replied. "Don't disappoint me, Doctor."

The call disconnected, and the doctor turned a startled look on us.

"Oh, I didn't see you come in. Do you need something?" she asked.

"Every time I come in here, I see someone threatening you. Who was that?" I asked.

"Someone from my past. I can take care of it."

"Maybe we can help you, Chloe. Just tell us what's going on," said Garrus.

"I was fired from my previous employer for giving out free medical supplies to clinics like this. They never filed any charges. They just wanted me to leave without any fuss. But somebody must have found out. Now they're blackmailing me. I have to give them what they want. If the Board finds out about my past, I could lose my license. They'll shut my clinic down."

"I'm a Spectre," I said. "I can help get you out of this. Tell me what they want."

"I have to give some of my medical supplies to a merchant in the markets. They expect delivery today."

"Give me your contact's name. I'll deal with this guy, whoever he is."

"Deal with him? But, won't they expose my past?"

"I'll make sure they don't tell anyone."

"I don't think I want to know what you mean. But okay. I was told to speak with a merchant named Morlan down in the markets." I really appreciate this, Commander. Thank you."

Garrus said he knew the place she was talking about and led us to a kiosk manned by a grey-skinned

salarian.

"Welcome to Morlan's famous shop. You want many good supplies, yes?" he said in the fast-paced speech typical of his species.

"You were expecting delivery of medical supplies," I opened.

"But I was told the doctor would be bringing them."

"Change of plans," said Garrus.

"A change? But...the doctor...I don't...This is not right, human."

An angry krogan approached. He was unarmed and unarmored, but that didn't mean much when you're talking about a krogan.

"Shut up, Morlan," he said. "I told Banes you'd screw this up!" He turned to me and Garrus. "What the hell's going on here? Who are you?"

"Leave the doctor alone," said Garrus, trying to sound intimidating.

"We can end this if you just bring me those supplies. Otherwise, I'll start telling people about the doctor's little secret."

"Maybe there's a way to make both sides happy here," I said, trying to be diplomatic. But the attempt failed.

"Only if you're willing to die happy," said the blackmailer as he drew a shotgun.

I drew up a weak biotic barrier just in time to deflect his shot. Everyone in the market ducked for cover. The firefight was protracted, given that krogan have redundant organs, but the blackmailer wasn't a warrior. He stupidly took cover next to a gas canister, and a well-placed shot from Garrus caused an explosion which enveloped our enemy in flames, killing him.

As calm returned to the marketplace, customers and shopkeepers began to emerge from their hiding places. Garrus flashed his C-Sec credentials and calmed folks down. I confronted Morlan.

"Well, that will certainly change things around here," he said. "For the better. He was a brute. A bully."

"He mentioned the name 'Banes.' What do you know about him?" I asked.

"I have never met him, human. I only worked with the one who spoke with the doctor."

"Okay, fine. But you understand that this business with Doctor Michel is over, right?" I swapped out the heat sink from my pistol.

"Yes yes. Of course. All right then. Good tidings to you, human."

I gathered up Garrus and we returned to the clinic. The doctor seemed relieved to see us.

"Commander. Garrus. How did things go?"

"He won't be bothering you any more," I said with vague finality.

"Really? I don't think I want to know what that means. But it's a great relief. Thank you both. I can't pay you for your help, but I can give you a discount on any medical supplies here."

"Appreciated. That thug said he worked for a man named Banes. Does that sound familiar?"

"Banes? I wonder if he means Armistan Banes? We worked together a long time ago. Last I heard, the Alliance Military was contracting him for some research in the Traverse. Um, actually, that's probably classified. But Captain David Anderson was involved. I believe you know him? Maybe he can share that information with you."

"I do indeed know Anderson. I'll ask him. Thank you, doctor."

Garrus opted to stay a while, and I went off to find Anderson, whom I found in the human embassy. After exchanging greetings, I asked him what he knew about Banes.

"Where did you hear that name? Never mind. I don't want to know. Banes is dead. Has been for quite some time."

"Are you sure? The people I spoke with seemed to think he was still alive."

"His death's not common knowledge. Military's keeping it under wraps. Banes was doing some high level work for the Alliance. Stuff even I wasn't aware of. One day, he turns up dead on a drifting scout ship. Everyone suspects it was foul play, but it was never officially investigated. I don't know any more than that. You should talk to Admiral Kahoku. One of his crews discovered Banes' body. Last I heard, he was up in the Tower trying to get the Council to investigate Banes' death."

Next stop, the Tower.

MISSING MARINES

There was only one Alliance Admiral in the Presidium Tower. He was clad in his dress blues, displaying all of his medals, and he was even wearing his hat. His face and voice were a mask of control as he spoke into a public extranet terminal.

"No. I'm waiting to speak with one of the Councilor's assistants." He sighed as he was placed on hold once again.

The Admiral noticed me out of the corner of his eye and turned to address me. "Congratulations on becoming the first human Spectre, Commander. I'm certain you'll be up to the challenge."

I began to salute, but he shook my hand instead. "I appreciate that."

"My name is Rear Admiral Kahoku. I'm a senior officer with the Alliance. I knew about your candidacy

before the Normandy was sent to Eden Prime. It's about time the Alliance got one of our own in with the Spectres. We need people like you to deal with our...problems. Is there something I can do for you, Commander?"

"Captain Anderson said you had information on someone named Banes."

"Not as much as I'd like to. One of my crews found him frozen stiff on board a derelict vessel. They were scouting the system where we found Banes's ship." The admiral paused and glanced at the terminal. "Maybe you can help me. We lost contact yesterday. Now I can't get clearance to check it out – suddenly it's a restricted area. But that doesn't apply to you, Shepard. Spectres can go anywhere they want. You could find out why my team dropped out of contact."

"I'll find them, Admiral."

"I appreciate that, Commander. I was running out of options. I'm going to stay here and see if I can find anything out through official channels. Won't hold my breath, though. I'll upload the info on where my team was last seen to your ship. Maybe you can get some answers."

I set the Normandy's destination as the Sparta System, Aretemis Tau cluster. No sooner had we entered the system than Pressley picked up an automated distress beacon coming from the planet Edolus. Joker dropped my squad in our fresh Mako close to the signal. Williams brought us to an open plain, and in the center was a wrecked M29 Grizzly tank. There were bodies of Marines laying about, but before we could approach, a thresher maw erupted from under ground.

The giant worm stuck its head up about thirty meters, then began to spit acid at the Mako. The atmosphere on Edolus is quite thin, but we could hear its roar from inside the vehicle. Garrus didn't wait to open up with the Mako's cannon, and Williams dodged and weaved around the creature's tentacles, which came up out of the ground as feelers for the blind beast.

Once the worm was dead, we examined the site. There were no survivors. I scanned one of the bodies with my omni-tool and the dog tag matched the name of one of Kahoku's men. I ordered the beacon shut down. Back on the Normandy, I contacted the Admiral.

"Commander. Any word on my missing men?"

"I found them. What was left of them. They ran into a thresher maw."

"A... a thresher maw? That's not...my men wouldn't just stumble into a thresher maw nest! Not the entire unit!"

"Somebody lured them there with an Alliance distress beacon. Placed it perfectly so they'd land right beside the thresher nest."

"Damn it! I had a bad feeling about this ever since my team disappeared. An Alliance beacon used as bait, my unit wiped out...and nobody seems to know anything about it! Commander, I appreciate what you did. Now I need to do my part. The families of those marines deserve to know why they died."

"Anything you need from me?"

"Not right now, Shepard. But I'll let you know as soon as I find something out."

Ashley: "Hey, Tali, I heard a rumor that under those environmental suits, you quarians are partially synthetic."

Tali: "No. Living in the clean environment of the flotilla has weakened our immune systems. The environmental suits protect against diseases."

Ashley: "It still makes you look a little like a geth, though. I'm just saying."

CERBERUS

Some time later, I received a message from Admiral Kahoku. He sounded out of breath.

"Shepard, I found out who set that trap for my men. The ones killed by the thresher maw. Damn, I hope you get this message. It was a group called Cerberus. An Alliance back ops organization. Top secret, highest-level security clearance. They vanished a few months ago. Dropped right off the grid. Nobody knew where they went or what they were up to. They've gone completely rogue, Shepard. They're conducting illegal genetic experiments, trying to create some kind of super soldier. I don't have any proof, but I found the coordinates for one of their research worlds. I'm uploading them with this message. They're completely out of control. Somebody needs to stop them. I've done my part. Now, it's up to you. This is...this is probably the last time you'll hear from me. Cerberus is after me now. I need to disappear before they find me."

The Voyager cluster is way out on the edge of the galaxy. A good place for a secret organization to perform illegal experiments. On the planet Binthu, Pressly's scans found three underground compounds. All were defended by Alliance turrets outside, and human commandos inside. These folks were wearing unmarked armor, and were well trained, but not well enough for my squad.

Each compound had a large containment cell in the middle. The first contained thorian creepers; the plant-like zombies we'd found on Feros. The second bunker held the smaller green rachni workers. The last bunker we checked contained a pair of the larger rachni warriors...and the body of Admiral Kahoku. His uniform was in tatters, and there were needle marks on his arm. A search of the facility yielded the location of another Cerberus base.

HADES' DOGS

One system over from Yangtzee is the Columbia System. Nephron is a barren, volcanic world; another good place to hide. But Cerberus couldn't hide from the crew of the Normandy.

There was another underground bunker with the same standard layout. There were no experiments being conducted here, just a bunch of commandos in unmarked armor, wielding unmarked weapons, and wearing no identification. They attacked us as soon as we entered, and we made short work of them.

In the back of the bunker was a large computer. I began tapping a few buttons to see what I could find, but an alarm chimed. The optical database began to flash itself. Tali stepped in. Quickly, she copied as many files as she could find before the computer shut itself down. The files were encrypted, so for now,

this was a dead end.

Back aboard the Normandy, I uploaded the files to Alliance Command. I allowed Tali to keep her copy, reasoning that if this group was as human-centric as they claimed, they'd be a threat to quarians. And besides, perhaps her people's technical expertise could help decrypt them.

A few hours later, I received a mysterious communication request.

"Greetings, Commander Shepard," said a slimy male voice. "I represent a party interested in obtaining information on Cerberus activities."

I was surprised some random person would be able to contact me, but if they knew that I'd been dealing with Cerberus, then they had to have some high-placed contacts. "Who are you? And who do you represent?"

"Who I am is of no consequence. Suffice to say, I am an agent for the Shadow Broker. You see, Admiral Kahoku contacted my employer looking for information on the location of any Cerberus facilities. We provided that information on the promise that he would turn over copies of all files gathered from the Cerberus systems to us."

"Did you have anything to do with Admiral Kahoku turning up dead?"

"We had no reason to harm him. He was going to provide us with information about Cerberus. Information that is now in your possession."

"You must have some connection to Cerberus. How else could you tell Kahoku where to find them?"

"Information is our business, Commander. Through our contacts, we were able to determine that the Cerberus group was active in the Voyager Cluster. Unfortunately, that was all we were able to find out. That is why we are so interested in acquiring copies of the files from you."

"Your deal died with Kahoku. Besides, these are classified Alliance files. I'm not handing them over to you."

"Be reasonable, Commander. Cerberus was operating outside Alliance jurisdiction. You don't owe them any loyalty. The Alliance is just going to file this information away in some archive. But no secret stays hidden forever. Eventually, someone somewhere will deliver it into our hands. It might as well be you. Transmit the files to us and you will be well compensated."

"What are you going to do with this information?"

"Information is a commodity. It can be bought, sold, or traded. Why my employer desires this information is not my concern. I am only the buyer."

I considered for a moment, then changed my mind. Having the Shadow broker owe me might prove useful in the future. "I'll transmit the files," I said. "But in exchange, I'll want some information in the future."

"I knew you were a reasonable man, Commander. My employer will remember this the next time you

need something from us."

Wrex: "So tell me, who'd win in a fight between you and Shepard?"

Liara: "Do krogan size up everyone in a fight, even friends and allies?"

Wrex: "Yes."

THE NEGOTIATION

Admiral Hackett contacted me via holo-communicator.

"I have a difficult assignment, Commander. You're the only one I trust to get it done. There's a criminal leader named Darius in the Skyllian Verge who controls most of the raider activity in that area. I'd like you to negotiate a cease-fire with him."

"Wouldn't an Alliance negotiator be better suited for this assignment?"

"Darius won't respect an Alliance negotiator. He built his empire by killing his rivals. But with your very public achievements, you present a strong image that Darius has to respect. Show him that the Alliance won't back down. Show him he'd do better to make peace while he can."

"I still think this is a mistake, Admiral."

"You're not under my command, but we need you for this job. You're the only one who can get it done right. The meeting will take place on a remote barren planet. I'm transmitting the coordinates now. I'm also transmitting the background for this negotiation. Fifth Fleet out."

Enroute to Nonuel, I looked through the files Hackett had sent over. This Darius guy was a real piece of work. That Admiral Hackett would want to make friends with him rubbed me the wrong way. But I decided to meet with the pirate so I could judge for myself. Given his criminal background, I brought the full squad with me.

Darius's compound was a prefab warehouse, decorated to look like a medieval castle. It was a poor job, and looked ugly as sin. Inside, the man himself stood on a balcony, dressed in silly robes, wearing a crown, and flanked by two guards in heavy armor. He sneered as he greeted me.

"I'd hoped the Alliance would take this meeting seriously. Instead, they insult me by sending a military grunt to show me how tough they are. Your file says you couldn't save the rest of your squad on Akuze. You got everyone killed."

"I'm not here to put up with your crap, Darius. Shall we talk?"

"You can't speak to me that way! You and your Alliance owe me, Shepard! You see this gun? This is your gun. Your military set me up here! Now it wants to pretend it doesn't know me! But I know the truth! The Alliance needed me here! So treat me with the respect I deserve!"

"You said we set you up. Did the Alliance give you weapons?"

"After the batarians were driven out of the Verge, the Alliance wanted to stabilize the region. I had the strongest syndicate in the area. They gave me the weapons and money I needed to take over. So do not pretend we are so different, soldier. I deserve your Alliance's gratitude, not these attacks!"

"I apologize. Now, let's get back to business."

"If you're prepared to treat me as a powerful and respected ally of the Alliance, certainly. Actually, given my rank, I'd prefer that you call me 'Lord Darius.' Or, 'your lordship,' if my name is too difficult for you."

This guy was a real piece of work.

"Of course...Lord Darius," I said sarcastically and curtsied. "Now, what will it take for these raids to stop?"

"These are not simply criminal raids! This was a legal military action to address Alliance trespasses! Alliance miners were illegally extracting element zero from an asteroid in my territory! Punitive attacks were the only appropriate response, and I demand an Apology from the Alliance!"

So that's what this was about. It was a tale as old as time: the Alliance wanted resources, and someone declared himself emperor of the domain. I sighed. "The Alliance offers its apologies. We did not realize that you'd claimed that asteroid."

"I'm pleased that the Alliance is willing to admit its responsibility for this situation. Now that clear boundaries have been established, I believe we can find a solution that benefits both sides. The miners are welcome to mine element zero on my asteroid, in exchange for certain considerations."

"We're willing to discuss that. What kind of considerations did you have in mind?"

"The miners pay a reasonable fee for the right to extract and export element zero from my territory. In addition, they will give a monthly quantity of element zero, as well as refining equipment to produce red sand."

"You want us to pay you and help you make drugs? You're deluded, Darius."

"You think you can take me down! I've killed worse than you!"

The 'Lord' dropped his robes to reveal armor beneath, then he and his men opened fire. Several more guards appeared from cover and joined in. My squad was surrounded, but they all must have been on drugs, because they were terrible shots, and we made short work of them. The day ended with one less crackpot, self-proclaimed lord out on the frontier. 'Millions for defense, not one cent for tribute,' as the saying goes.

I reported in to Admiral Hackett when I got back to the Normandy. His voice was dripping with subtle political sarcasm.

"I'm sorry that you were unable to negotiate with Darius peacefully. His death is regrettable. Nevertheless, the resulting chaos will create a power vacuum that makes further raids upon our miners unlikely."

I grinned. "You put Darius in power, but he was getting greedy. You wanted me to kill him."

"The Alliance does not condone assassination. We would never give that order. Killing Darius was your decision alone. And because you're a Spectre, we couldn't reprimand you if we wanted to. Thank you for your assistance in this matter, Commander. Fifth Fleet out."

Wrex: "Being in the city must feel good after digging through rocks at that Prothean ruin."

Liara: "No. Cities and stations were always my mother's area of comfort. I actually enjoy the solitude of dig sites."

Wrex: "I'm surprised. I've never met an asari who didn't prefer clean clothes and a hot bath."

PRIVATEERS / MISSING PERSON

In the Citadel's Presidium Tower, I met a man named Garoth, who looked worried, and was pacing back and forth. Having nothing better to do, I decided to see if he had a quest for me.

"I'm on a break," he said, dismissively. "Talk to someone else if you need anything. I've got a lot on my mind."

"Are you sure? Maybe I can help. I'm not just some soldier. I'm a Spectre."

"A Spectre? I heard they were thinking about letting someone into the ranks. About time." He seemed to change his mind. "Hmmm...maybe you can. You're a soldier, right? You ever head out into the Traverse?"

"More often than I like. The Traverse is a rough place. I'm out there quite a bit."

"My brother's the captain of a ship called the Majesty. It was crossing the Traverse a few days ago when it disappeared. Just dropped right off the grid. That usually means one of two things: they had massive mechanical failure, or they were attacked."

"Those are both bad. Any idea why someone would attack them?"

"Privateers. Slavers. Mercs looking for an easy score. There's a lot of nasty sorts out in the Traverse. I won't give up on my brother. Not yet."

"Isn't anyone else looking into this?"

"My brother's just a small independent trader, ships like his disappear in the Traverse all the time."

"What kind of ship is it?"

"Don't let the name fool you. The Majesty's just a small trading vessel. Only a handful of crew. But my brother kept it in good condition. I don't think mechanical failure is too likely. But they don't have any real weapons or shields. If anyone did come after them, the Majesty'd be a sitting duck."

"If your brother's still alive, I'll find him. Give me the coordinates.

"I've got the coordinates from the last transmission he sent. Here. Please let me know as soon as you find him."

Back at the Normandy, I gave the location to XO Pressly. We had to scan the Strennus system pretty thoroughly before we found a derelict ship, adrift around the planet Xawin. It was pretty beat up, and its escape pods were missing. A faint trail of radioactive particles led down to the planet.

"I've found the escape pods on scanners, but it's strange that we're not picking up any distress beacon from them," said Pressly.

"I agree. Could be a trap. We'll deploy in the Mako. Have Joker find a landing zone nearby, and we'll go in cautiously."

When we found the pods, they looked like they'd been dragged. It was very hard to see, but covered in snow nearby was the entrance to an underground bunker. We'd never have found it if not for the escape pods. Inside, a group of pirates were playing a game of poker. They were surprised to see us, but rather than talk, they reached for their guns and attacked us. None of them survived. Idiots.

Searching the compound, we came to a locked door in the back. Inside was a body, which matched the description of Willem, Garoth's brother. Garrus surmised that the pirates were going to try and ransom him, but something must have gone wrong. There were no obvious wounds on the body. A heart attack, perhaps?

Once back on the Normandy, I called Garoth to break the news.

"Any news? Did you find my brother yet?"

"I found your brother's body. His ship was attacked by privateers."

"Willem's...dead? I guess I should have expected this. When his ship dropped out of contact, I just knew. But I kept hoping he might still be alive."

"I figured you'd want to know the truth, no matter how painful."

"You're right. Thank you for finding him. It's better to know one way or the other. That's what they say, anyway. Please excuse me. I need to go make arrangements for his funeral."

Liara: "Considering the diminished numbers of the krogan, Wrex. I'm surprised that you are willing to fight and kill them."

Wrex: "Anyone who fights us is either stupid or on Saren's payroll. Killing the latter is business. Killing the former is a favor to the universe."

ROGUE VI

An urgent message came through from Alliance Command.

"Shepard, we've got a situation here, and you're the only one who can handle it."

"What do you need, Admiral?"

"There's an Alliance training ground where we test weapons and technology in live-fire simulations. One of the VIs we use to simulate enemy tactics in the drills is no longer responding to our override commands. It's gone rogue."

"It's gone rogue? Are you telling me this computer is thinking on its own?"

"We're not stupid, Shepard. This is a virtual intelligence, not a true AI. It's not self-aware, and it can't access any external systems. We didn't do anything illegal here. VI support is critical to our military success. They process thousands of status reports and react in nanoseconds. No human can do that. But as advanced as this thing is at military strategy, it's still just a VI. It's not self-aware, and it's completely disengaged from any networks."

How many casualties so far?"

"Seventeen Marines were killed in the simulation exercises before we realized what had happened. That's when we contacted you. That's where you come in. We need you to fight your way through the training ground to the VI core, and manually disable it."

"Can't you disable it remotely?"

"Our failsafes aren't responding. The VI operates on a closed network. It can't affect any external systems, but we don't have any direct access to its processes. We could bomb it from orbit, but the danger to the facility would be catastrophic. We'd prefer to have someone shut down the core. Someone like you. I know Spectres answer to the Citadel, but you're still human. You're still part of the Alliance military, and right now we need you. The VI controls all of the facility's weapons, drones, and automated defenses. You're the only one who can pull this off, Shepard. Good luck."

I'd done some training on the moon, but that base I was on the far side from Earth; a way to feel far from home. When we landed in the Mako this time, the Earth was a pale blue dot in the sky.

"Wow," said Garrus. "Your moon is really far away. Do you even have tides?"

"Uh, yeah," I replied. "I take it Palaven's moon is closer?"

"Actually, Palaven has two moons: Menae and Nanus. And they're a lot closer. Not as much ocean on Palaven as Earth, though, so maybe it balances out."

"Focus, guys. We're coming up on the base," said Williams from the driver seat.

There were three bunkers, each topped with two automated rocket turrets. The rockets weren't seekers, though, and just fired in a straight line. Williams was able to just rock the Mako back and forth while Garrus lined up easy shots to take them out. Tali was looking a little queasy.

"You all right, Tali?" I asked.

"All this talk of tides and oceans, and then the rocking back and forth...ugh."

"It's ok, we're clear now," Williams announced. "Which bunker do you want to hit first, skipper?"

"Doesn't matter," I said. "The closest one, I suppose."

The first bunker was eerily quiet, until we reached the core conduits. Then, a dozen Alliance assault drones powered up and attached us. They bounced around on their tripod legs, shooting at us with their assault rifle heads. Tali's hacking program came in handy here. Once the drones were down, it was time to destroy the cores. There were eight. As soon as the first was a sparking heap of slag, there came a hissing sound from the air vents.

"Gas!" announced Liara.

"Damn, this VI learns quick. Check your seals, people."

The second bunker was ready for us. Assault drones were already powered up, and there was a green fog of toxic gas hanging in the air. This time, when we destroyed a core, kinetic barriers appeared around the remaining cores, as well as at each doorway. All that did was slow us down.

The final bunker contained toxic gas, kinetic barriers, and twice as many drones, including some rocket drones. It was a slog of a fight, but the VI was no match for our organic improvisation. As the final core melted down, a burst of white noise flooded our radios, nearly deafening us, and a display of ones and zeros popped up in my suit's heads-up-display. I had no idea what it could mean, and later inquiries to Alliance Intelligence only got me apologies for not having any more information.

As I emerged out onto the Lunar surface, I looked up at Earth. "Anyone up for some shore leave?" I asked.

Wrex: "So you've spent your entire adult life just studying old Prothean junk?"

Liara: "Our travels are now somewhat different from my normal excavations. I would prefer lengthier studies...and fewer explosions."

Wrex: "It's good for you. A nice explosion every now and then keeps the mind sharp."

ASARI DIPLOMACY

I received a message from an asari diplomat:

"Commander Shepard, my name is Nassana Dantius. I have a job for you. I can't say any more in an unsecured communication. If you're interested in hearing my offer, meet me on the Citadel so we can talk in person. I'll be waiting in the diplomat's lounge on the Presidium."

Always willing to forge good relations with other races, I decided to meet with her. There were lots of asari in the diplomat's lounge; thankfully, she recognized me and introduced herself.

"Commander Shepard, I am Nassana Dantius. I see you got my message."

"Are you in trouble? It sounded like you needed some help."

"I do. My sister Dahlia is a crewman on a cargo vessel operating out beyond the fringes of the Traverse. Her ship was attacked by privateers. There were no reported survivors."

"I'm sorry for your loss. But if you want me to hunt down her killers, revenge isn't really my thing."

"This is where it gets complicated. Last week, I received a message with her voice on it. Dahlia is alive! The rest of the crew was killed, but she was taken prisoner. The slavers demanded a huge ransom from me in exchange for returning her unharmed."

"Why didn't the raiders kill Dahlia along with everyone else?"

"My sister probably told them what she was. My family is very wealthy, Shepard. They must have realized she was worth more to them alive."

"Do you want me to deliver the ransom?"

"I've already transferred the funds to the account they specified. Only, they never released her. They haven't contacted me since. I've made a terrible mistake, Shepard. I am a diplomatic emissary! By law, I am required to report any attempted extortion to C-Sec immediately. But I was afraid for Dahlia, so I just paid the ransom. Now she is still missing, and if anyone finds out what I did I could end up in jail!"

"That's a stupid law! Why would they put you in jail? You're the victim here!"

"Government employees on the Citadel are not allowed to negotiate with terrorists. It is too dangerous. Paying a ransom would only encourage more kidnappings. I support the law in theory, but when I got the message, all I could think about was Dahlia's safety. I doubt they would actually send me to prison for what I did. But they would strip me of my post, and Dahlia would still be in the hands of slavers."

"You want me to find her and bring her back."

"You only need to bring her back. I have already found her for you. I tracked the ransom payment through several accounts. Eventually, it lead to a small mercenary band operating out of the Artemis Tau cluster. I need you to go to the merc base, take them out, and bring my sister back. You shall be well rewarded."

"Can't you hire someone else to do this?"

"I do not want to take chances with my sister's life. I need a Spectre. Besides, you operate outside official channels. My superiors cannot find out I never reported the ransom in the first place."

"How'd you find out who was behind the ransom?"

"I have resources. Contacts and credits can go a long way, especially if you are willing to bend the rules. I already broke the law when I paid the ransom. This couldn't make things any worse."

"Anything you can tell me about the mercs who have your sister?"

"Pretty much what you'd expect: rough, dangerous, and well-armed. Nothing a Spectre cannot handle, though."

"Keep your reward. I'll bring your sister back. I promise."

"Thank you, Shepard. I knew you were the right man for the job. Come back and see me when the job is done."

We dropped on the planet Sharjila a few clicks from the mercenary base. I had intended to negotiate – mercs usually work for the highest bidder – but they shot first before asking any questions. Their mistake.

Once all of the mercs were dead, we searched the entire compound and found no sign of any hostages. One computer did have some interesting information on it, though. Apparently, the leader of this mercenary company was actually Dahlia herself. And there were a few asari among the bodies. Nassana had some explaining to do.

Back on the Citadel, I found the diplomat in the lounge, sipping a fruity cocktail, with a smug look on her face.

"I ran into your sister, Dahlia. It didn't end well for her."

"What? Are you saying she's..." she said in a wholly unconvincing tone of grief.

"Dahlia's dead, Nassana. And I know she was blackmailing you."

"Hm. And I was all set to try to manipulate you into hunting her down for me. But I guess that won't be necessary now, will it?"

"You wanted your sister dead?"

"If people find out my sister was a criminal, I'd be considered a security risk. They'd revoke my clearance, or place me on administrative leave until she was apprehended. I shall transfer a little something into your account as a token of my appreciation. I'm sure you will find the amount satisfactory."

"I don't want your blood money."

"I do not like being in anyone's debt. Consider it a fee for doing your civic duty, if it makes you feel any better. Or give it away to some charity. I care not. The funds are already on their way. They are your problem now."

"Do your own dirty work next time."

"Understood, Shepard. I will not bother you again."

Later, Liara commiserated with me. "I am sorry, Shepard. Not all asari are good people."

"I know, Liara. Kaidan once told me something; that not all aliens are superior – they're saints and jerks, just like us."

Liara chuckled. "Hm, yes. That does sound like Kaidan. He was a good person."

Liara: "Now that you have experienced a Spectre's life firsthand, Garrus, do you regret leaving your security position?"

Garrus: "Fighting a rogue Spectre with countless lives at stake and no regulations to get in the way? I'd say that beats C-Sec."

Liara: "I am unsure how the imminent destruction of all organic life 'beats' anything, but your enthusiasm is comforting nonetheless."

COLONY OF THE DEAD – INVESTIGATE SAMPLES

An anonymous email appeared in my inbox one day. With no sender listed, I could only assume that this must be a favor from the Shadow Broker.

“PRIVATE LOG OF DR. GAMORLE

"I don't trust this Cerberus group. They may pay us well, but if this gets out before we've developed an antidote... it's just not smart. They won't tell us what they want the samples for or why they wanted them delivered to the Matano system. My records show nothing of interest there."

I wasn't sure what samples the message referred to, but if Cerberus was involved, it couldn't be anything good. The attached coordinates were for the planet Chasca, where Pressly found three structures. No one responded to our hails, and we dropped in the Mako. The area was deserted.

"Where is everybody?" wondered Tali.

"I have a bad feeling about this," said Liara.

As we approached the first building, three husks could be seen just standing around. It wasn't until Garrus opened fire on them that they turned and ran towards the Mako. The converted humans were tough, but clearly not very smart.

"Oh, God. The entire colony must have been...transformed," said Williams.

Inside the building were more husks, but no clue as to what they were doing there. Ditto for the second building. A third bunker was located at the top of a nearby hill, and here we found dozens of dragons teeth outside, and more husks inside. A search of this last building turned up nothing useful. What was the goal here? Again I had to wonder why a supposedly human-centric group would do this to humans.

A colonial pioneer team rarely consists of more than a few dozen specialists. It was clear that none of them survived. The Cerberus group had a lot to answer for here.

Liara: "Tali, are the quarians concerned that the return of the geth will lead to more anger against your people?"

Tali: "The geth killed billions and forced us from our homeworld. Most quarians believe we have paid properly for our mistake."

Liara: "I hope the other races view matters in the same light."

EXO-GENI FACILITY – INVESTIGATE FACILITY

I received another anonymous email:

"CONFIDENTIAL

The test samples were due to arrive three days ago, but we haven't heard anything from the colony or the cargo vessel. We suspect the samples became volatile and recommend cutting off all further contact with the Nodacrux colony. Even if the colony is discovered, no one should be able to trace the events there back to us."

Again, some mysterious samples. I hoped it wasn't more husks, but if it was, they'd need to be taken care of. The attached coordinates led to the planet Nodacrux. Pressly briefed me as we entered orbit.

"Looks like we've got an active distress beacon on the planet below, Commander. No message, just a locator signal. I'm seeing movement near a bunker, but no one is responding to our hails."

We dropped in the Mako a couple of clicks away. The buildings had ExoGeni logos stamped prominently on their sides. This was the company that had funded the colony on Feros, where we'd killed the thorian. The samples referred to in the email could only mean more Thorian creeper zombies. So not Cerberus, but a greedy corporation instead.

Three creepers were milling about outside the compound, and a dozen more were waiting inside. We didn't have any more of that gas that Doctor Baynam had concocted back on Feros, but incendiary ammo did the trick against the plant monsters. In one of the back rooms, we found a group of scientists and mercenaries holed up. They were happy to see us.

"Rescuers? Thank God!" said a relieved woman wearing a lab coat. She seemed to be the person in charge, and spoke for the group. "See? I told you somebody would come investigate that signal. My name is Doctor Ross. Chief ExoGeni researcher at this facility. We've been trapped in this room for days. We're almost out of food and water. You got here just in time!"

"I need to know what's going on. Why is this place crawling with Thorian creepers?"

"How do you know about the Thorian?"

"I know what ExoGeni was up to. I saw what they let the Thorian do to those colonists. So I destroyed it."

"Our secret's out, then. No point in my lying. You already know the worst. The creepers here were created using altered samples from the specimens on Feros. We discovered a way to turn them into docile, obedient servants. Everything was going fine until a few days ago. Then all the creepers suddenly went berserk. Only a handful of us made it back into the safety of this room."

"Why didn't you send a clear message asking for help? All we had was that signal from the emergency beacon."

"This is a closed communications base. ExoGeni was worried about someone on the project selling secrets to a rival firm, or reporting our work to the authorities. We have no direct communication with the outside. Only the emergency beacon. It sends a general distress signal to the ExoGeni site on Feros. They're supposed to send a team to respond inside of 24 hours, but it sounds like they had problems of their own."

"Any chance some of the other people at the base might still be alive?"

"I doubt it. Too many creepers out there. They never stood a chance. We're the only ones left."

"Any idea why they turned on you?"

"Maybe there was still some kind of link between the creepers and the Thorian back on Feros. The Thorian was unlike any other life-form we've ever studied. I can't explain how, but maybe when it died, it somehow set off the creepers here."

"What did you expect? You couldn't really believe those things were safe."

"We knew there were risks. But I thought we'd taken all the necessary precautions. Look...I know what we did here was wrong. I'll admit that. But it's over now. There's no sense reporting this to the authorities, right?"

"You were in charge of this project. The safety of the staff was your responsibility. They trusted you, and you betrayed that trust!"

"Be reasonable. I didn't mean for this to happen. Besides, how does it help anyone if I end up in jail? Normally ExoGeni would have my back, but it sounds like they're going to have their hands full cleaning up the mess on Feros. But I've got money. A nice little emergency fund I set up. It's yours if you let us go."

A bribe? Really? I resisted the urge to scoff. "The victims here deserve justice. I have to take you in."

"Uh, that's not going to happen."

She pulled out a pistol, and the mercs joined her in attacking my squad. Stupid. ExoGeni's second-rate mercs proved no match for my seasoned squad. With the last of the science crew dead, there was no reason to linger.

Once back outside, I radioed the Normandy and explained what we'd found to Pressly.

"There may be more creepers down here. Are you reading any more movement?"

"Let me check...Yes, Commander, I show two more spots. Sending the coordinates now."

Once all the creepers were dead – at least all the ones we could find – Joker brought the Normandy

down to pick us up.

Tali: "You must welcome civilization after so long a time in the Prothean ruins."

Liara: "No. Cities and stations were always my mother's area of comfort. I actually enjoy the solitude of dig sites."

Tali: "The ship I grew up on was always full of noise and people. The solitude of a dig site would drive me crazy."

DERELICT FREIGHTER

We were passing through the Caspian System in the Maroon Sea Cluster, when Pressly detected a ship adrift in the asteroid belt. The Kowloon class freighter was seriously damaged, and not broadcasting any distress call. Cautiously, I ordered Joker to dock us with it, and I took my squad over to investigate.

The atmosphere had vented, and only emergency lighting was on. The cargo all appeared intact, but the hold was filled with husks. Once they were dealt with, we searched the ship for clues. Aside from the expected dragon's teeth, the only thing we found were the captain's logs.

Liara summarized. "This ship was exploring near the Perseus Veil. They found some kind of alien artifact, which they brought on board."

"Anyone see an artifact on board?" I asked. No one had.

Liara continued. "And then they plotted a course straight into the Perseus Veil. Like they wanted the geth to find them."

"Sounds like indoctrination," I surmised. "That artifact must have done it to them. Why else would someone fly into geth space?"

"The entries don't make a lot of sense after that. It is like the captain's mind was falling apart. It does not say anything about how they got back into our territory."

Tali had a guess: "The geth turned them into husks and left the ship where someone would find it. Trying to show us what happens to organics dumb enough to enter the Veil."

That all seemed reasonable to me. I forwarded the ship's location to Alliance Command. Hopefully they could clean up the ship and auction off the salvaged cargo.

Liara: "I could not help but notice that you are attracting some unfriendly stares, Tali."

Tali: "Many think less of quarians for traveling in the flotilla, and for creating the geth. They see us as scavengers, little better than thieves."

Liara: "That is an ignorant opinion. Quarian explorers have uncovered more mass relays than any other race!"

Tali: "I am glad that some still remember the contributions my people have made."

ESPIONAGE PROBE

Admiral Hackett contacted me via vidcomm.

"Commander Shepard. Something uncomfortable has just come up. In the First Contact War, we fired a lot of espionage probes into turian space. We've just received a 'mission complete' burst from one of them."

"That's quite a delay. Where's it been in the mean time?"

"No idea. Lost in transit. These probes were built in a hurry after first contact."

"Straightforward enough. So what makes this 'uncomfortable?'"

"When these probes were launched, we didn't have any idea who we were fighting. We didn't want to risk aliens examining our technology. The probe has a demo nuke built in. A 20-kiloton tactical fusion warhead. About equal to the bomb dropped on Hiroshima back in the 20th. If somebody finds that probe, tampers with it – you don't need me to finish, Commander."

"I understand this must be handled. Shouldn't a bomb disposal unit be sent for this? We don't have anyone trained to deal with this sort of thing, sir."

"I know. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important. These probes have been classified for 26 years. The Council would call fusion-bomb traps 'dangerous and irresponsible.' The Alliance would face censure if they find this probe. I'm asking you because the Normandy can get on-site quickly and quietly. It's in the Voyager Cluster."

"It's in the Voyager Cluster? That's the opposite side of the Alliance from turian space. How did it get there?"

"I don't know. It's possible someone recovered it safely and brought it there. It's also possible it got very badly lost. It could have been wandering the relay network since the war."

"We'll get on it immediately, Admiral. And we'll be discreet."

"I appreciate that, Commander. Good luck. Fifth Fleet out."

The tricky part now was deciding who to take with me on this mission. This was an internal Alliance matter, and as much as I trusted my alien crew, some of them might still use this secret in the future. Bringing Chief Williams was a no-brainer. Garrus was former C-Sec, and still had that by-the-book mentality; surely he'd want to report this. And being a turian...well, best not to involve him. The krogan weren't a part of Council space, but Wrex had political ambitions. Tali? It's hard to tell with quarians. I trusted her, but I knew virtually nothing about the Migrant Fleet, so I couldn't really trade secrets. I trusted Liara implicitly, and she really didn't care about politics, but then why bring her and not the others?

So that was my squad on this mission: just me and Williams. I told the others that we had an internal,

classified Alliance matter to handle. It felt wrong to exclude most of my squad, but I didn't think I had a choice. Even Pressly was in the dark as to what exactly we were doing, but I'm sure he suspected. I downloaded schematics for the probe; hopefully the two of us could figure out how to disarm the device. We dropped in the Mako, some distance from the probe's homing beacon.

As we got closer, I pinned down the probe's location. "That can't be right. The signal is coming from under ground."

"There's a mine entrance up ahead," Williams pointed out the Mako's windshield. "I don't like this. This smells like an ambush."

"I should have brought the rest of the squad."

"No, you were right to leave them behind. If the aliens found out..."

"Yeah... Maybe these people don't know what they have. Let's find it before they set it off."

The mine was dark, and seemingly abandoned. It was slow going, searching every corner for the probe. We came to a fork in the tunnel. The shaft to the right led back to the surface, so we backtracked and went left. At the end was the probe. As we approached, we heard an explosion, and the ground shook, dropping dirt and small rocks on us.

"What the hell? I knew this was a trap!" said Williams.

A hologram of a turian pirate appeared next to the probe. I motioned Williams to get started on disarming it, out of sight of the hologram's camera.

"Shepard. At last," the pirate said in a triumphant sneer.

"You have me at a disadvantage," I replied. "What's the meaning of this?"

"You don't remember me. No matter. I remember you. I never forget anyone I've fought. My name is Elanos Haliat. I doubt you know it. Who do you think runs the Terminus Clans, Shepard? Hm? Thousands of pirates, slavers, criminals of every stripe?"

"I don't study the internal politics of pirate bands."

"The strongest leads. The one who kills the most men. Seizes the most ships. Pillages the most colonies. Three years ago, I was the strongest. I used my influence to assemble a fleet. We would drive you out of the Verge."

"The Skyllian Blitz. You're the one behind the attack on Elysium!"

"I was the motivator. The instigator. The one who promised glory and riches for sacking the largest human colony in the cluster. Failed because of you. Your damnable holding action. I was ruined when your kind held against the Blitz. What better way to recover my reputation than by finally eliminating you?"

I tapped at my omni-tool; a message to the Normandy. "My crew will come for me," I said.

"Let them. We'll be ready. An Alliance warship would make a fine prize. Oh, and if you hadn't noticed, the ores here are laced with heavy metals. I'm afraid your suit radios aren't powerful enough to transmit out."

"We'll find a way out of here."

"Empty words from a dead man. Goodbye, Shepard." The hologram flickered out.

"What now, Commander?" asked Williams.

"Let's get this bomb disarmed, then we'll look for a way out. Somebody up there needs my boot up his ass."

Williams had the casing off the probe, and a timer was counting down. She had the schematics pulled up on her omni-tool, and we followed the disarming instructions. Neither of us knew much about bombs, but if the vids were anything to go off of, we didn't encounter any booby traps. Maybe Haliat hadn't had time to rig anything. Also unlike in vids, we had plenty of time left by the time we'd powered down and disabled the device.

We backtracked to the fork in the tunnel. The way we'd come had caved in, but the other fork, the one to the back entrance to the mine, was still open. There was unexploded ordinance along the walls; either sloppy work or duds. Either way, lucky for Williams and I, as we emerged on the far side of the mountain.

In the valley below us was a camp. There were a lot of pirates packing up supplies. That explained the long timer on the bomb. Through my suit helmet's magnification, I could make out several turians. One stood out from the rest, and seemed to be giving orders. It had to be Haliat himself. But there were too many pirates for just myself and Williams to handle. Now that we were outside, I called the Normandy and had them bomb the whole camp, then pick us up with the Mako after Williams and I hoofed it over the mountain.

I sent a crew of humans into the mine to box up the probe and bring it on board. We'd hand it over to Alliance Intelligence the next time we got the chance.

Tali: "With all this exploration of Prothean culture, this must be like a survey for you, Liara."

Liara: "Our travels are now somewhat different from my normal excavations. I would prefer lengthier studies...and fewer explosions."

Tali: "Yes. Most of the technology I had hoped to bring back to the flotilla has subsequently attempted to kill us."

DEAD SCIENTISTS – DOCTOR AT RISK

Admiral Hackett contacted me with another mission.

"I've received some information I thought you'd want to see, Commander. Someone is killing Alliance

scientists. There have been four deaths in the past month."

"Former scientists? Sounds like someone has a project they'd like to keep secret."

"We've found a connection between the scientists...and you. They all worked on a classified project several years ago. On Akuze."

"Akuze. I lost my whole unit there. You're saying that our scientists were involved?"

"I can't get any information on what they were working on. The project records are sealed. Those thresher maws killed dozens of soldiers. If this was more than just an accident, we need to know, Shepard. What you do with this is up to you. I just thought you'd want to know. There was one other scientist on the project. Doctor Wayne. I'm transmitting his last known location. Good luck. Fifth fleet out."

There were several scientific bases on Ontarom, studying the unique electrical storms caused by its too-close moon. Hackett's information included exactly which building Doctor Wayne was working in. There was no indication of threat in the area, so I went in alone, hoping to talk to the scientist myself. Unfortunately, there was a commotion as I entered his office. A man in white mercenary armor was pointing a gun at the doctor.

"Stay back! I've got no grief with you! All I want is this bastard!" warned the merc.

"Please! He's a madman!" plead the scientist. "Mister Toombs, you're insane! You need help!"

"Shut up! You don't get to lie! You don't..." Tombs was manic, but then he recognized me. "Shepard? My god, Shepard, is that you?" He pulled back the visor on his helmet, and I knew him.

"Corporal Toombs? But...I saw you die on Akuze! How did you get here?"

"They took me, Shepard. The scientists."

"You can't prove any of this! This man is delusional!" said the panicked scientist. Toombs still had his gun on the man.

"See, they were running tests on thresher maws. They let those things hit us just to watch and study. I woke up in a holding cell. The scientists were delighted I'd survived. Now they had someone to run tests on."

"Toombs, I – I didn't see anybody. If I'd seen you, I'd have come back for you, I swear...What did they do to you?"

"You can't believe Toombs! He doesn't have any proof! I demand a fair trial!"

"He was there, you bastard! He knows the truth!" said Toombs. "They treated me like an animal. I only escaped because somebody destroyed Cerberus, their big organization. This man deserves to die, Shepard. For you, for me, for everyone else in the unit. Are you with me?"

"I can arrest him. He'll answer for his crimes in court."

"Weren't you listening? He was part of a secret organization! I don't know what Cerberus is, but they'll never let their operation become public! This is the only way! Are you helping me, or are you killing me?"

"Mister Toombs...please...we had no choice!" The scientist begged for his life.

"You're better than this, Toombs. You're not like them."

"Don't tell me who I am! You got away with a few scratches and a scary reputation! The rest of the unit died, and I was tortured for years, Shepard! You can't judge me. You don't have the right."

"Toombs, if I could have helped you on Akuze, I would have. If I had known you were alive, I would have found you. All I can do is help now. Let me. We swore an oath when we put on the uniform! Would our unit want revenge or justice?"

"Hadn't thought of it like that." Toombs considered for a long moment, then lowered his gun. "Okay. Just as long as he goes to trial. Maybe the screaming will stop now. I don't know."

"I do. It doesn't. All you can do is keep going." I called the local garrison and arranged to have the Corporal and the Doctor picked up.

Toombs stared morosely at the floor, lost in his memories. I gave the scientist a shove towards the door. My mission was complete. The Alliance could take it from here. Back aboard the Normandy, I reported in to Admiral Hackett.

"I'm glad you were able to take Doctor Wayne in alive. Now we can put him on trial and get some answers. Corporal Toombs seems to have found some closure. Hopefully, with therapy, he'll be able to testify. I hope this helps you find some peace, Commander. Thank you. Fifth Fleet out."

Liara: "I am curious about the helmet you always wear, Tali. Does it contain technical augmentation systems?"

Tali: "No. Living in the clean environment of the flotilla has weakened our immune systems. The environmental suits protect against diseases."

Liara: "I suppose that makes it more likely you will return from your Pilgrimage, then. You are only truly safe on your Flotilla."

NOVERIA REVISITED

The Normandy was in desperate need of resupply. Noveria was the nearest port of call, and while not exactly safe, it would do. I granted the crew some limited shore leave, and took some time myself.

Immediately upon exiting the Normandy, a mean-looking krogan confronted me. Without even waiting to speak, he opened fire. Lucky for me, my whole squad was walking down the gangplank at the same time. Liara brought up a biotic bubble the likes of which I'd never seen. The bubble protected me from harm. Wrex charged the krogan and knocked him over, giving the rest of the squad time to draw their

sidearms and fill my attacker full of lead.

Captain Matuso was on duty, and came charging up with a couple of guards. "Joudan daro. Shepard-san. I should have known. Every time there's gunfire in my port, you are involved."

"Honestly, Capitan, I have no idea who that was."

"He was a bounty hunter named Inamorda. He was always causing trouble, but this..."

"Ah. I think he was expecting me to smuggle a package for him."

"I take it you did not."

"No. Gave it to the Administrator."

"That is good." The guard captain made a slight bow. "But I wish you had told me, so I could have arrested the bounty hunter. Now I have this to clean up."

"Sorry." I shrugged and continued into the port. The rest of my squad went their separate ways.

ESPIONAGE

Opold's bar was still closed, but the hotel had a bar. No sooner had I entered than an asari in a yellow dress stopped me. She wore a scowl and had her arms folded. Without so much as a greeting, she launched right in to her problem.

"The male human standing the table over there; the one with his back to us. He is a sales rep for Binary Helix. His name is Rafael Vargas. I need you to speak with him."

"Do you know who I am?" I said, not at all in the mood.

"Everyone here knows who you are, dull stone. That makes you ideal for my job. You are a known quantity. Or so Vargas will think. He will assume you are here to investigate his company's dirty laundry. That will distract him from your – my – real intentions."

I was sorely tempted to tell her where to stick her intentions, but I decided to have a little fun instead. "He's right there. Why not talk to him yourself?"

"I wish I could. I already bungled this myself. He realized I was not a real buyer."

"I don't know anything about Binary Helix." It was a partial lie. Last time I was here I'd sunk their hot labs into the ice. "What would I talk to Vargas about?"

"I represent the Armali City Council on Thessia. Our town is known for its biotic amp crafters."

"What's your interest in Binary Helix? They do genetics work."

"Much of BH's work relates to biotics. There are rumors that the Noveria branch has flown in asari biotics. Powerful ones. Commandos, to be specific. We want to assess any potential risk to asari

copyrights. You will present yourself as a buyer. On behalf of the Spectres or the Alliance. Discuss their military enhancement programs. Your real objective will be to distract him. I will give you a device that will crack into his personal wireless network. It will upload a variety of monitoring viruses. They will infiltrate Binary Helix when he logs into their intranet."

"What's in it for me?" I asked, having no intention of collecting.

"Money, of course. I would be well paid for this. So you would you. Five hundred credits."

"Interesting plan. I'm in."

"Excellent. Here is the cracking device. You will know it is done when it beeps. I have assembled a dossier on Vargas. If you like, I could brief you on his behavior patterns."

Getting her to waste more time on this plan was going to make this prank even sweeter. "Tell me what you know about Vargas." I suppressed a grin.

"He is impatient with those who waste his time. I tried to get him distracted and off-topic. He concluded I was not interested in his company's services. I noticed he has a 'tell.' When a topic makes him nervous or uncomfortable, he has a tendency to rub the back of his neck. If you see that, press him on the subject. It may distract him enough to keep him talking."

"I'll go see him now."

I walked the few steps over to Vargas's standing table and entered his line of sight.

"Can I help you?" he asked. He sounded preoccupied.

"Mister Vargas? Commander Shepard, Systems Alliance Military. I understand you work for Binary Helix?"

He perked up at that. "That's correct. Rafael Vargas. Sales. Were you interested in our services?"

"Actually, I wanted to warn you. An agent of the Aramali Council hired me to break into your network. She gave me this device."

He took the device and turned it over in his hand. "A cracking device. I appreciate your forthrightness, Shepard. Now that we know what to look for, our IT people can have a little fun with the asari. We'll isolate their viruses and feed them false data. If you'll excuse me."

Vargas left the bar, and I returned to the Aramali rep. She cocked an eyebrow, clearly surprised that I was back so soon.

"Any results?" she asked.

"I told Vargas what you put me up to."

"I see," she said, calmly. "May I ask why?"

"You're both irritating. One corrupt corporation is as good another to me. Next time take your little games elsewhere."

"I shall do so directly, Spectre. You have a unique perspective. Devious, one might say. I believe I should get offworld now. Quickly. Good day, Spectre."

LORIK QUI'IN

"That was nicely handled, Shepard." Gianna Parasini greeted me from a table. "Let me buy you a drink."

"Sure," I said, and took a seat. My drink arrived swiftly. "So, taking a break from administrative duties?"

Ms Parasini frowned, then leaned in. "Actually, I'm Internal Affairs. Administrator Anoleis is embezzling, but I don't have proof."

"You want me to bludgeon through some bureaucracy for you?" I smiled.

"Kind of." She grinned. "See that turian in the business suit over there? His name is Lorik Qu'in. He has the evidence I need, but he won't cooperate. I've been undercover for six months. And the Administrator is on to him. Closed down his offices."

Ah, a damsel in distress. My one weakness. "Let me see what I can do."

I moseyed on over to the turian's table and introduced myself.

"Afternoon. Sit down, have a drink. What can I do for you?" His speech was a bit slurred, but I accepted his offer.

"I heard you might be able to help me."

"What could an old turian like me possibly help you with?"

"I'm trying to find a way into the garage. I have places to go." I lied. I had found another way the last time I was here, but getting a garage pass had been a problem. Given how restricted the place was, it sounded like a good excuse.

"You need a pass. How fortuitous. I'm the manager of the local Synthetic Insights office. For the moment, at least. Mister Anoleis closed my office. He claims to be investigating reports of my corruption. The administrator is an interesting man. He has become quite wealthy since he took direct control of rents."

"An intriguing coincidence. I sense a connection there."

"Indeed. I acquired evidence of Anoleis' actions. His hired goons are ransacking my office to find it. I suspect your goal lies outside this port. Mister Anoleis would be disinclined to let you wander. If you recover the evidence from my office, I will give you my garage pass, as well as a sum of credits."

"You have a plan?"

"I do. However, there is one other – what is that charming human expression? 'Fly in the lotion?' Violence against Mister Anoleis' thugs may be necessary. He has members of port security searching my offices. He is paying them under the table. Ms Matsuo is unaware of their outside employment."

"I'll figure something out."

"Excellent. Here is my keycard into our offices. It will activate the elevator. The evidence is on my office computer. Here is the encryption key to access it. Slide it into the drive, and it will auto-execute. And do try to keep blood stains off the carpets, would you?"

I left the bar and followed the signs to the Synthetic Insights office. The company had a very strange-looking logo. It in no way made me think of artificial intelligence. Oh well. Upon exiting the elevator, I recognized the guard who'd tried to stop me as the gruff blond lieutenant of Captain Matsuo's. Kira Starling, I think her name was.

"Freeze! Port security. This office is sealed. Oh. It's you. I don't think you're supposed to be in here, Shepard."

"Lorik Qui'in gave me a pass in."

"Qui'in? Are you working for him? He's under investigation."

"What a load of crap. You're off-duty, breaking the law for bribe money. I'm a Spectre, and you're dirty cops."

"Hey, I'm not the one who wants Qui'in. Anoleis has a varren up his ass about this guy. How about this? You pretend you didn't see us, we'll pretend we didn't see you."

For all her bluster, Kira Starling was a coward in the end. And with that, she and her cronies cleared out, leaving me to search the office. Qui'in's office was the large fancy one on the upper floor, and his encryption key worked like a charm. A program ran itself, and the computer spat out a disc.

I left and returned to the hotel bar. Ms Parasini was there waiting for me. "Commander. There've been reports of noise in the Synthetic Insights office. Would you know anything about it?"

"It was probably Anoleis' thugs ripping the place apart."

"Smartass, hm? That's fine. I can work with that. I want you to convince Qui'in to testify before the Executive Board. With his evidence, this planet can run profitably again. Do this for me, and I'll owe you a huge favor."

"All right. I'll talk to Qui'in and see if I can convince him."

"Thank you. You know where I work. Come talk to me once you know if he'll play ball."

I sat down at the turian's table. "Always a pleasure, Spectre. Any news on that matter I asked you to look into?"

"I finished the job. But an Internal Affairs investigator contacted me. She wants you to testify against Anoleis."

"Now that you have my property, you want to dictate how I use it? I have no interest in a public spectacle."

"Everyone on this station is chafing under Anoleis' extortion. You might end up a hero."

"My employers rely on the goodwill of the Executive Board to work here."

"The Board is who's investigating Anoleis. They'll be more angry at him than you."

"All right! It is obvious that I cannot dissuade you. Very well. I will testify. Make whatever arrangements you need with your contact. I will wait here."

I went over to the Administrator's office to give Ms Parasini the evidence and the good news.

"Spectre. What can I do for you?"

"It took some persuasion, but Qui'in has agreed to testify." I handed her the disc.

She let out a relieved sigh. "That's a world of stress off my back. I'll take the evidence for safe transport. I didn't think you'd help me. Being a Spectre and all. I guess some of you can be all right."

"Doesn't this help you? You don't seem particularly happy."

"I'm ecstatic. But right now, I just feel like a long day of work is ending. I have an arrest to make. Wish I had time to change into something easy to move in. I hate skirts."

She disappeared into Anoleis' office, then emerged moments later pushing the handcuffed salarian out of the offices.

"This is an outrage! I'll see that you never work in this sector again!" He shouted impotently.

"Yeah, yeah. Get a move on," said Parasini.

"You! Shepard! I demand that you place this bitch under arrest!"

"You have the right to remain silent. I wish to God you'd use exercise it." She winked at me as she left. "See you around the galaxy, Commander. I owe you a beer."

Wrex: "So tell me, who'd win in a fight between you and Shepard?"

Garrus: "That question smacks of impertinence. Commander Shepard is a Spectre with a distinguished service record."

Wrex: "So was Saren. Think about it."

LISTENING POST ALPHA

While passing through the Styx Theta Cluster, Pressly informed me of a distress call that we'd picked up.

"Mayday, mayday, mayday. This is Lieutenant Marie Durand, 3-14th Infantry, Alliance 10th Frontier Division. The listening post has been overrun by unidentified hostile life forms. Request immediate extraction."

"That's it?" I asked.

"That's it, Commander," said Pressly. "I have the coordinates, if you want to check it out."

"Absolutely, set course."

Nepmos is a volatile planet, with a thin crust, meaning lava is close to the surface and erupts quite frequently. This makes it easy but dangerous to mine there, and there are always wildcat miners willing to take the risk. The Alliance maintained a post there to keep an eye on things, and to rescue miners when they got into trouble.

Joker dopped my squad in the Mako, then returned to orbit to keep an eye on us. The listening post wasn't very far. When we arrived, we found a squad of soldiers behind barricades, fending off an attack from dozens of rachni. Yes, rachni. Had the queen from Noveria reneged on her word?

I had Williams and Garrus stay in the Mako, while the rest of my squad joined me on the barricades in assisting the Alliance marine squad. Dozens of bugs were bursting forth from holes in the ground. Acid from their spit was corroding the metal barricades, but we managed to hold them off.

When the area seemed clear, I approached the soldier with the lieutenant's stripes on her uniform. She gave me hand signals for the radio channel her squad was using, and I tuned in.

"First Lieutenant Durand, sir." I returned her salute. "Third Brigade, 14th Infantry Regiment. And am I dammed glad to see you."

"We heard you needed some backup."

"Actually, we need to get the hell out of here. But I guess your ship couldn't carry us all."

I looked around the camp and counted only ten soldiers. "Actually, I think we can squeeze you on. Prep your team, and I'll call my ship." I did so, and Joker gave me an ETA of eight minutes.

"Really? Thank you!"

"In the mean time, Lieutenant, tell me what's been going on."

"They dropped us here a few months back. We get supplies every couple weeks. We didn't see anything local that was more dangerous than lichen. Yesterday, these animals started coming out of the ground. No idea where they're from. This is what's left out of 90 men. I'm the ranking officer."

"They're not animals. They're a sentient species. You study history? They're called rachni."

"Told you it was a mistake," Wrex muttered.

Either the lieutenant didn't hear him, or she chose to ignore him. "Never heard of them. Can't say I care. What we just fought was a probe. Our seismic sensors are picking up a crapload more on their way up from underground. We've got five minutes, tops. We might be able to hold them off if we were at peak. But you can see the fighting's busted this place up."

"We do have a ship. We could bombard them."

"Wouldn't do much good. They're moving around deep underground. The only time they come near the surface, and they're right on our position."

"Why are you out here in such force the first place?"

"There's been a lot of pirate activity in this cluster. We set up a chain of listening posts in the local systems, in case they have a staging base."

"Do what you can to secure your position. You and me are going to hold this worthless rock. Look to your people. We'll see if we can get some of your defenses operational."

"Aye, aye, Commander! Everybody pool magazines and grenades. Take a leak and a drink while you can."

There were two turrets at the post, but neither had power. One turret was damaged beyond repair. Tali suggested hooking up the Mako and using that to power up the remaining turret, but I decided the Mako was better mobile. I ordered Williams and Garrus to flank the nests, while the rest of us joined Lieutenant Duran's people on the barricades.

Nearly to the second of Durand's prediction, rachni began streaming out of the ground. Dozens, maybe hundreds of the creatures came at us. I thought that the corpses would eventually clog the holes, but they just kept coming. The Normandy approached just as the ground stopped shaking, and no more bugs came up.

"Wow," said Durand as the Normandy touched down. "I didn't think a ship that big could land on a planet."

"The Normandy's special," I said, and didn't elaborate.

"I guess so. Well, talk about a near-run thing. You all right?"

"Just getting warmed up. Are you all right?"

"Still on my feet. But we've been fighting for almost 26 hours straight. None of us will be standing for long. There's one other thing I should mention. One of our other listening posts went offline three days ago. I don't know if it's coincidence, a pirate raid, or what. But if you want to check in on them...."

"We'll check on them. I don't know why there are rachni loose out here, but I intend to find out."

A private, one of Durand's squad, approached and reported in: "Ma'am? We're getting a signal from one of the ground-scan UAVs. A big hollow space about five hundred meters under the surface."

"Right, that must be it," said Durand. "That must be where they're coming from. My people aren't in any condition for a clearing operation, though."

"Get your people on board, Lieutenant," I ordered. "We'll take care of it. Just point us in the right direction."

"You saved our asses, Commander. Thanks."

The coordinates led to a mine, of course. No doubt the drilling had attracted the rachni. Inside, there was abandoned mining equipment, but no bodies. I didn't want to think about what the bugs ate. In the corners of a large chamber were rachni nets, which spewed out more rachni. Soldiers and workers, mostly, but there was a new, larger type among them, which we would later call a brood warrior. It glowed blue and had some biotic ability. Scary, but the dust eventually settled, the ground eventually stopped shaking, and the mine seemed like it was clear.

"Think that's all of them?" Tali wondered.

"I don't know. I hope so," I said. "Let's get back to the ship. I'll have Joker bomb the area anyway."

Back in space, we contacted Alliance HQ and coordinated the transfer of the marines of the 14th.

LISTENING POST THETA

The next missing group of marines were stationed on a planet called Altahe. It's actually one of two worlds orbiting so close to each other that they share the same atmosphere. I have no idea how that's possible, but it made for quite a sight as the Normandy approached.

The coordinates for Listening Post Theta led us to a bunker, which was surrounded by rachni nests. Williams kept the Mako moving while Garrus picked off the bugs as they emerged. Inside the bunker, we found the bodies of the soldiers who were garrisoned there, as well as several rachni soldiers and workers. After exterminating the rachni, Tali hacked in to a terminal in an office.

"Shepard, you see this?" she pointed at the display. "They just received a supply run two days ago. The rachni worked fast."

"Tell me about that supply ship. This planet is supposed to be uninhabited. The rachni didn't come from nowhere."

"Hang on. Seems these things are drones, dispatched at irregular intervals from different depots. To reduce the likelihood of tracking...Got it. It came from Argo Rho."

"That's where we're going. There's probably more rachni there, and somebody who needs an ass-kicking. Let's get to the bottom of this."

DEPOT SIGMA-23

The space station appeared to have been assembled from used off-the-shelf civilian ship modules of diverse origins. There were no obvious hull markings, and it wasn't broadcasting any ID signal. Joker expertly docked the Normandy, and my squad boarded cautiously.

The station was powered down, and the emergency lights were flickering. The main cargo hold was filled with rachni. I could have just ordered the whole station obliterated, but I needed to know how the rachni had gotten there, and why.

We had our suits sealed against vacuum, so I didn't mind blowing holes in the hull with grenades if it meant killing all the rachni on board. Once the ship was quiet, I found a terminal that had been left open, and I brought up the last three logs from the personal data recorder for Major Elena Flores.

"Sigma-23 is almost fully operational. The barracks and storage lockers are complete, and we've begun stocking the munitions. It's highly unlikely the Alliance will patrol in the nebula. I expect our only risk will be from pirates. And who'll believe them? Looks like we'll have space for two reinforced platoons of Cerberus commandos."

"Of course it had to be Cerberus. Should have guessed," Williams grumbled.

"The package arrived today for field testing. I'm told they're fundamentally similar to the units being developed on Noveria. They promise this batch will be stable. Something about them developing in proximity to the master control unit. We detected some pirates setting up an anchorage in a neighboring system. I think we'll try deploying them there first."

Wrex shook his head at me.

"They've escaped containment. Clever bastards. We treated them like animals; we should've treated them like P.O.W.'s. They're spreading. Boarding supply ships and sending them to random destinations. They'll be all over the cluster in a week. General Petrovsky, if you recover this message, my advice is: screw the rachni. They're too smart. Use one of the other projects. Flores, signing off... for the final time."

"Another batch of experimental rachni get loose. These things need warning labels," said Williams.

"I'm seeing some scuttle charges, Shepard," said Garrus. "I say we arm them and evacuate."

"Good idea," I agreed. "Let's download the station's logs and get the hell out of here. We can track down the the rest of those supply drones."

There were only three other supply drones out there. Pressly managed to track them all down, and Joker destroyed them with the Normandy's guns.

Ashley: "I've heard some humans are angry at the quarians after the attack on Eden Prime. After all, you created the geth."

Tali: "The geth killed billions and forced us from our homeworld. Most quarians believe we have paid properly for our mistake."

Ashley: "Hopefully having you with us fighting Saren will change people's minds."

From the Codex:

A race of four-eyed bipeds native to the world of Khar'shan, the batarians are a disreputable species that chose to isolate itself from the rest of the galaxy. The Terminus Systems are infested with batarian pirate gangs and slaving rings, fueling the stereotype of the batarian thug. It should be noted that these criminals do not represent average citizens, who are forbidden to leave batarian space by their ubiquitous and paranoid government.

Despite several disagreements with the Citadel and simmering hostility toward humans, most batarians prefer profitable pursuits such as drug running and slave grabs to out-and-out warfare. They have a reputation for being shrewd businessmen and merchants, though in more lawless regions of the galaxy like Omega, negotiations with a batarian are likely to be conducted at gunpoint.

BRING DOWN THE SKY

"Sensors show three fusion torches propelling Asteroid X57," Pressly briefed the squad. "At its current rate of acceleration, the asteroid will collide with Terra Nova in approximately four hours. The torches must be disabled to cease the acceleration. Here's the distress call we picked up:"

"Hello? Hello?" The recording was full of static and distortion. "I heard your transmission. Can you hear me? They haven't found me yet, but I can't talk long. Please. Shut down the fusion torches or we're all going to die. God, I hope you're hearing this."

"We don't know who 'they' are, but automated turrets have been set up around each torch, so the Normandy can't get close," Pressly added.

"We'll drop in the Mako, take out the turrets from a distance, then enter each torch's control building and shut them down from inside," I said.

"Why not just shoot them from a distance with the Normandy's weapons?" asked Liara.

Pressly explained. "The asteroid's not that big. The explosions would cause it tumble unpredictably. It could send it straight at the planet. Just shutting off the torches will cause the asteroid to miss entirely. Blowing up the asteroid would just make lots of little asteroids, which would be bad, too."

"We expect resistance in each of the torch's control facility, as well as in the main compound. So after the turrets are destroyed, we'll need to clear them out so we can get to the controls." I concluded the briefing, and we headed down to the cargo bay.

Minutes later, Joker dropped us in the Mako, just out of range of the turrets that surrounded the first torch. Williams and Garrus did their usual thing, dodging rockets and sniping the turrets with the vehicle's main gun.

"You're headed in the right direction," a female voice whispered over the radio. We couldn't respond, as

the radio was just a single channel, and apparently she kept her push-to-talk button pressed. "I don't know who you are, but I'm – Damn it! Got to go." The radio squeaked off.

The torch itself was massive; a fusion rocket motor at least as big as the Normandy. The flame extended out about a kilometer into space. I led my squad into the first building, weapons primed and kinetic barriers up. The facility had air, but I didn't want to take chances. Three individuals and a varren 'fish dog' turned at my entrance. The men had four eyes, two pairs, stacked vertically. Their skin was leathery, and their teeth were thin and sharp.

"Batarians," I sneered.

In this part of space, I would expect a slave raid, but hijacking a planet-killing asteroid was new. One of the batarians barked some orders in his language. More varren appeared from around a corner and charged at us, while the batarians took cover and opened fire. We did the same. Liara threw out a biotic push to keep the varren at bay. Wrex rushed the nearest batarian. Tali and Garrus kept the others pinned down with a barrage of gunfire.

I saw a fuel tank on the far wall and tossed a grenade. The explosion killed the two batarians nearest, and blew a hole in the wall, venting the atmosphere and suffocating all the other enemies. We found the torch controls in a back room, and shutting down the fusion reaction was as simple as pressing the big button labeled 'off.'

The same female voice from earlier came over the radio. "I'm reading that the torch is offline. Was that you? Can you hear me?" This time she let go of the transmit button.

"Who are you? What's going on?" I asked.

"My name's Kate Bowman. I'm an engineer. I was part of the team assigned to bring this asteroid to Terra Nova. We were attacked by batarian extremists. I've been hiding since they arrived. I think they know the torch went out."

"Why are they doing this?"

"I don't know. But if this asteroid isn't slowed, millions of people on Terra Nova are going to die. If I find out anything I'll – I've got to go. Good luck."

The transmission cut out. As we neared the exit, a man with short-cropped grey hair took a shot at me, causing my kinetic barrier to flicker.

"Oh, God! I didn't mean to...are you hurt?" He lowered his pistol and held up his hands in a placating gesture.

"Takes more than one shot to take me down. But just for future reference: two eyes good, four eyes bad."

"I didn't even realize you were human until...well. Guess I'm not much of a soldier."

"I know you're scared. But I'm here to help. Commander Shepard, with the Alliance."

"The hero of the Citadel? Wow. Simon Atwell. I'm the chief engineer on this rock. Listen – we don't have much time. The batarians fired up the fusion torches. You've got to shut them down before we hit Terra Nova! There are four million people down there, Shepard. I – my family. They live in Aronas. My kids and grandkids. Nice community. Good schools..."

"I don't have time to do the math in my head. What happens if we don't stop this rock?"

"X57 is 22 kilometers long. Twice the size of the asteroid that wiped out Earth's dinosaurs. It would be like millions of fusion bombs striking at once. Millions. The heat of the blast...a thousand kilometers away, clothes will ignite. There'll be global wildfires. Air shock will flatten everything for hundreds of kilometers. Terra Nova will die, Shepard. Not just our colony – the planet. There'll be a climate shift. Mass extinctions. The ecosystem won't recover for thousands of years. Millions, maybe."

"Is there any chance it'll land in the ocean?"

"That would be even worse! Tsunamis would sweep inland at hundreds of kilometers per hour. Millions of tons of water would be vaporized at the point of impact. Global cloud coverage. The plants would all die. And if they go, the whole ecosystem rolls over. I – I'd have to run the numbers, but take my word for it: it'd be bad."

"Give me a worst case scenario. We can't stop the asteroid. Could the colony be evacuated?"

"Evacu --? Shepard, it took 30 years for the population to grow that large. I'm sure they're moving people to remote areas, but they'd never be able to get more than a few thousand off-world. We just don't have enough ship. No one does. Well, maybe the quarians. But I don't see them suddenly showing up and offering us a ride."

Tali shook her head.

"Why were you moving this thing in the first place?"

"The idea was to drag it into Terra Nova's orbit, mine it out, and in the end you'd have a basic structure for an orbital station. It's a lot cheaper than getting everything up into orbit from the planet's surface. The minerals we extract almost cover the costs."

"This doesn't make any sense. Batarians run criminal gangs. Unethical, but profitable. They don't destroy worlds. What does this gain them?"

"I've heard all the stories. Slave rings ranching people like animals. Pirate bands burning colonies to the ground. But this is...Council Conventions forbid asteroid drops. I never thought the batarians would go this far."

"You were on the ground when this happened. How many batarians have you seen, and where?"

"They landed at the main facility. It's locked down now; they changed the pass codes. No idea what's going on inside. I did see groups head out to each of the torch stations. Couldn't say how many, though. Enough to give you a fight."

"Any idea who's behind this? Who's leading them? That might provide a clue."

"I heard a couple of them talking, they mentioned a 'Balak.' It sounded like he's the one in charge. They didn't seem convinced this was a good idea, but they were scared of the guy. Scared enough to do what he wanted."

"Most batarians aren't genocidal madmen. But these ones are terrorists."

"Yeah, I know. It's just – this isn't how I expected the world to be when I rolled out of bed this morning."

"Batarians everywhere, and I need to shut down two more torches. Anything else I should know?"

"The next nearest torch is surrounded by blasting caps. We were set up to excavate when we arrived at Terra Nova. I rigged them with proximity detectors. That tank of yours will set them off, so you'll have to go in on foot. Even then, they'll explode if you get too close. Just go slow and easy and you should be fine."

"You set them up. Can you disable them?"

"Not from here, no. There are manual controls by the entrance to the torch facility, inside the blast zone. You can disarm the caps there. One last thing: I had a crew working off-site when the attack hit. I'm worried about them. These batarians are ruthless. I saw them smash the faceplates of guys working vacuum. And those varren...I don't think they always wait for a corpse before feeding."

"I'll keep an eye out for them. But the torches have to be my priority."

"Yeah, you're right. Saving Terra Nova's more important than my team. There were a bunch of engineers over at the main facility, but they're probably all dead. That, or being held hostage by the batarians."

"A woman named Kate Bowman contacted me. The batarians haven't found her yet."

"Katie's alive? She's one of my best engineers. She signed on with her brother. Aaron, I think his name is. He's part of the security detail. I hope they're okay."

"What can you tell me about Kate?"

"Smart as a whip and bold as they come. I hope she keeps hidden. If they find her...Ah, Kate. Don't do anything stupid."

"You'd better find a good place to hide. If the batarians come back and find you..."

"Yeah, I think I'll make myself scarce. Good luck, Shepard."

We continued on to the next torch. Tali rigged up a metal detector, and while Williams and Garrus kept the turrets busy, I led the rest of the squad through the minefield. Ms Bowman's voice crackled over the radio, distracting me at an inopportune time. I paused while she spoke.

"Can you hear me? I'm getting all kinds of interference. Damn this thing. Sorry, there's a lot of

feedback. I'll see if i can fix it. In the meantime, just keep doing what you're doing."

I looked up at the planet. It seemed to be getting closer. After several agonizing minutes, we reached the second torch building. Wrex tapped a console, which presumably shut down the mines. I radioed Williams.

"Mines should be disabled, Chief. Bring the Mako in closer when you're able."

"Aye, aye, Commander," she replied. Her voice sounded strained with the stress of dodging rockets.

Inside the second building was another squad of batarians. No large fuel tank this time, but there were small fusion containment cells stacked among crates and equipment. I directed our fire to trick the batarians into taking cover near the cells, then shot the canisters. The resulting explosions would then engulf the enemy in flames. These batarians were used to slave raids on civilians; they were no match for a seasoned squad of veterans.

Again, the torch was simple to shut down, and again, Kate Bowman contacted me over the radio.

"Are you there? You've got to hurry. You've really pissed them off. Their leader's setting charges everywhere. I think he's going to blow this whole facility."

"Get away from there," came a rumbling batarian voice in the background of the radio.

"Don't shoot. Please," Kate begged whoever had spoken.

"Who's shutting down the torches?" the angry batarian asked. There was a short pause. "I won't ask you again." This time, there was a longer pause, followed by a gunshot. "Find this problem and deal with it! Get her out of here!"

The radio went silent. Back outside, the Mako was waiting for us, and Williams drove us to the last torch. Terra Nova was definitely bigger in the sky. Again, Williams and Garrus dealt with the turrets, then dropped the rest of us off to clear the building. I pushed the button in the back room. Terra Nova was safe. I breathed a sigh of relief, then turned to leave.

Blocking the exit was a small team of batarians with a pair of varren. Three were wearing grey armor, one was in red. We all pointed weapons at each other.

"Don't come any closer," the one in the red armor ordered. "We can do this the hard way...or we can end this peacefully."

"I didn't think you batarians knew the meaning of the word," I challenged. It was strange that they weren't just attacking us. I sensed an opportunity and decided to feel things out, rather than attacking right away myself.

"Look, I'm just doing my job here. Hijacking this rock wasn't my idea. I signed on to make a little profit. A quick slave grab. Nothing more."

"This isn't just a slave grab anymore. Millions of people could have died."

"Don't you think I know that? I'm just following orders here. If it were up to me, we'd have already left."

"It *is* up to you. It's not too late. You can still leave."

"I don't think so. Balak would skin me alive and sell my hide out of spite. Crazy bastard. This whole mission's gone to hell and I'm gonna pay for it."

"So why do you listen to him?"

"Good question. I had a bad feeling about this from the moment we landed. Now Balak wants you dead. And what Balak wants, Balak gets. I can't change that."

"Do you always want to be second in command? Help me take him out, then you can start giving the orders."

"An, uh, interesting proposal. It certainly has benefits over the current situation. I hope you're as quick with a gun as you are with your promises. For both our sakes."

"Quicker. Balak will get what's coming to him."

"Balak's holed up in the main facility. You'll need this to get in." The batarian handed me a keycard. "Don't underestimate him. He's a mean bastard. We'll head in through the back and join in once the fighting starts."

"Can you shut down the remaining turrets for us?...uh"

"My name is Charn. That would just make Balak suspicious. Put him on guard. No, it's best if you handle those yourself. Looks like you haven't had any problems so far, anyway."

"Fine." I sighed then boarded the Mako for the next leg of the mission. I actually closed my eyes and rested a bit while Williams and Garrus handled the last of the turrets around the main facility. No more radio transmissions from Kate came in, which was worrying. I reminded my squadmates to check their lines of fire – we didn't want to hit any hostages.

The entrance to the main facility was a small reception area. There was the body of a young man sprawled in pool of blood in the middle of the floor. Someone had kindly left a box of grenades behind the desk. Past the entrance, the building opened up into a large atrium. There were trees surrounding a large central column. The outer walls were terraced, with staircases between levels. We entered at the middle level, and there was one level above and below.

With plenty of cover, I spread the squad out, and on my signal, we all opened fire at once. The batarian terrorists were taken by surprise, but they recovered quickly and deployed some drones. The drones hovered through the air and harassed us from above. Tali managed to hack one, and it turned on its masters. Liara lifted one of the batarians all the way to the ceiling with her biotics, and the fall was not survivable.

Charn's team was nowhere in sight. Bastard. I should have known he'd betray us. When the building was clear, I found a dead batarian wearing fancy gold armor. I nudged it with a foot to be certain he

was dead.

"That's Balak, all right. Thank you for killing him for me." Charn was standing at the top of the stairs on the level above, holding a remote detonator in his hand. "You humans. You're almost more trouble than you're worth."

"Let the hostages go, and maybe you'll live long enough to explain yourself to the Council."

"I don't answer to the Council! Or to you. I'm leaving this asteroid. If you try to stop me, I'll detonate these charges and your helper and her friends are all going to die." Charn pointed out bombs in three places around the atrium. There was even one in the room where the hostages were locked.

"I can't just let you go, Charn. Not after what happened here."

"This is nothing. You humans have done far worse to the batarians. We've been forced into exile. Forced to survive on what we can scrounge up. It's been like that for decades."

"Why take it out on these people? They didn't do anything to you or the batarians."

"Didn't do anything? Aside from colonizing a world that could have been ours? Aside from using resources that should have been ours? We were left to fend for ourselves. But the humans were stronger than us. We knew that. The Council knew that. But it didn't matter. It was you. You and your kind are the only reason we're in this position."

"How does killing innocent people make up for that?"

"We had no other options. Sometimes you need to get someone's attention before they'll listen."

"Is that what Elysium was? A way to get our attention? Well, you got it. And when we responded you ran like cowards. Now you want to start it all over again."

"Enough! You couldn't possibly understand...Actually, you just don't want to understand. And I'm done wasting my breath. Now, if you want your friends to live, I suggest you step aside."

The detonator in Charn's hand was either a button or a dead-man's switch. Either way, if I'd killed Charn then, he'd have triggered the bombs.

"You can go. But this isn't over. I'll find you eventually. And if I ever catch you in human territory again... "

"Maybe. But I made sure you won't follow me today. Those charges are still on a timer. Better hurry if you want to save your friends." Charn and his team turned and left.

"Spread out!" I ordered. "Find those bombs and disarm them!"

I had no idea how long the timers would be, but it had to be long enough for the remaining batarians to get clear. None of my squad had any real demolitions training. Williams and I had disarmed that one on Agebinium, sure, but we'd had the schematics and instructions then.

"Heh, this thing just has an off switch," Wrex announced from across the atrium.

"You're right," agreed Tali from the other side of the chamber. "And my scans don't show any kind of booby traps or secondary triggers."

"That is...strange," said Lira.

I kicked in the door to the room where the hostages were being held. Five people filed out of the room. The bomb was already disarmed. A young woman with dirty blond hair stood up from the device and introduced herself.

"I'm Kate, the one who talked to you on the radio? I can't believe you let them go...to save us. I half expected you to just let us die. Sacrifice the few for the many."

"Then I'd be no better than the terrorists. Besides, Charn won't get away with this. I know who he is now. He can't run forever."

"Huh. You sound like my brother. He was always so stubborn. But always willing to do the right thing...no matter what." A tear ran down her cheek.

"Your brother was the one Balak killed?"

"Yes. Aaron." Kate sniffled. "He was the one who convinced me to join the team here. Said it would be an adventure. I – I don't mean to sound ungrateful, but I should see to Aaron."

"I understand. You've been through enough today. I'll get out of your way."

"Thank you – huh. I don't even know your name."

"Commander Shepard. With the Alliance."

"Thank you, Commander Shepard. You're not exactly what I expected, but thank you."

Simon came running up. "Kate! Thank god you're okay. I saw Aaron. I'm so sorry."

"I know, thank you. I need to – I need to go. Excuse me."

Kate walked off. Simon looked around at the bodies of the batarians.

"He left? Is that – is that all right?" he sounded unsure.

"Letting him go was better than the alternative."

"Letting a terrorist go to save innocent lives. I – I'm glad that's not a choice I had to make. Is that – will you get in trouble for that? I mean, he could do the same thing somewhere else, couldn't he?"

"Yeah, he could. Charn seemed like a practical man. Practical, but callous. I'm sure if he'd been in my place, Ms Bowman would be dead now, along with all the terrorists. But I'm not going to sacrifice people who happen to be between me and my target."

"So what happens now? The bad guys get away?"

"Charn gets away today. But we'll still be after him tomorrow, and the day after that. Me, my crew, and every other crew in the Alliance. He'll run, and he'll hide. But eventually he'll slip up, and we'll get him. Bad guys never get away, Simon. Not unless the good guys give up."

"Well. I wouldn't want you after me. Shepard? Thank you. For my grandchildren's lives. I don't think I'll stick around, though. Not with the team gone. Too many ghosts. It's time for me to get back and spend some time with my family. But before I go...I'd like to offer you something...maybe you'll have more use --"

I held up my hand. "Just hug your kids and grandkids. Live. Take care of yourself. That's thanks enough."

"You're a true hero, Shepard. Be well. We owe you."

I gathered up my squad, and together we returned to the Normandy. Pressly showed me the current projected path of the asteroid: it was well clear of the planet. All in a day's work for a Spectre, I suppose.

Wrex: "Your biotics are pretty strong. Are all asari that strong?"

Liara: "While the asari have natural biotic abilities, not all have the desire nor the skill to use their abilities effectively."

Wrex: "All that power, and some asari don't use it? You could've conquered the galaxy if you'd wanted to."

Liara: "Evidently, we do not want to."

PINNACLE STATION

I was in the mood for something different. Something lighter. I'd received an invitation from one Admiral Ahern, inviting me to try out a new training station. It was a new initiative inviting all the races in Council Space to make use of state-of-the-art training facilities in the Phoenix System. How could I resist?

The Normandy docked, and I made my way through the airlock. Immediately upon entering, two turian guards greeted me.

One whispered to the other: "Isn't that Commander Shepard? The human Spectre?"

"Whatever," said the other, the one with the white skull painted on his face. "Spectre or no, it's always fun to see humans get pummeled in the simulator."

I pretended not to notice this exchange, but I thought to myself 'Oh, it's on!'

The second, gruffer guard waved me through the next door. "Go pester Ahern, human. I'm on duty."

I entered a massive control center. The room very strongly resembled the bridge of a large starship. The large picture window framed a spectacular view of the ringed planet that the station was orbiting. A ginger-bearded human man with short-cropped hair and wearing admiral's stripes greeted me.

"Ah, Commander Shepard. Welcome to Pinnacle Station. I'm Admiral Tadius Ahern." His voice sounded damaged, but still carried an air of absolute command. No doubt his high collar covered some serious scars.

I began to salute, but he shook my hand, instead. "Good to meet you, Admiral. I'm glad I got the invite. Where do we begin?"

"You'll be training in the combat simulator. After each round, you'll see how you fared against your competitors."

"So you run the station and the training here?"

"Last I checked. It's better than a desk job, and a hell of a lot better than retirement. The facility is magnificent. It has all the technological marvels a commander needs to train the perfect soldier. The turians give their advice. Every so often, I listen to them."

"How does the simulator work?"

"Talk to Tech Specialist Ochren if you want the technical explanation. Basically, it creates combat scenarios that allow operatives to build their skills in a safe, but realistic, environment."

"How do I try out a combat scenario?"

"Go talk to Ochren over in the staging area. He'll set you up and let you choose a scenario."

"Who will I be competing against?"

"The best of the best. Alliance operatives and soldiers from other militaries travel here from all over Council Space to try their hand at the simulator. The scores are tallied, and the winners appear on these monitors for all to see. Get your name on there, and the entire Alliance will know about it."

"Thanks for the info."

"Carry on."

I passed further into the station. A sergeant caught my eye and tried to reassure me: "Don't worry, Commander. Ahern's tough to impress." I grinned and winked back.

I entered a break room. There were more turians, some asari, salarians, and even a volus. A hanar was checking out the scoreboard. I didn't know what the numbers meant yet.

A krogan emerged from a hallway. "Get me back in that simulator," he growled. "Nothing makes my day like stomping synthetics!"

Further in, I met a salarian wearing the Tech Specialist insignia. Beyond him was a very large, empty, cube-shaped room. There were thin, shimmering lines marking out squares on all sides. He was typing away furiously at his console, and didn't pause as he spoke with me.

"So, you must be the famous Commander Shepard." He spoke at the rapid pace common among his species. "I'm tech specialist Alud Ochren, lead programmer on the combat simulator. Do you need something? I'm sure I have a few minutes before someone forgets their password and comes crying to me for help."

"So how does this work?"

"It's a combination of holographic images and kinetic barriers. Holographic images help you see the objects, and the kinetic barriers keep you from walking through them." Ochren spoke impatiently, as if reciting a lectured he'd given far too many times, to beings far less intelligent than he.

"I assume the enemies are also holographic?"

"No – our operatives train in a simulator by killing real, actual people," he said sarcastically. "They're simulated. But I hear the kinetic slugs hurt just the same."

"What am I supposed to be doing in these simulations?"

"That depends on the combat mode. We have Time Trial, Capture, Hunt, and Survival modes." Ochren then went on in great detail about each mode. They're pretty much self-descriptive. Kill a certain number of enemies as quickly as possible, capture three points as quickly as possible, kill as many enemies as possible in a limited time, and survive as long as possible. He explained all this in the same condescending manner.

"What's with the attitude?" I asked.

"I'm a technical genius on a station full of soldiers who only respect battlefield prowess. It's more than a little frustrating."

"Your work is important. They'll thank you some day."

"Really? Thank me? Well, I guess I'll redouble my efforts," he said sarcastically.

"All right, set me up with a simulation."

"New competitors are restricted to low-impact missions 'till they learn the ropes. The infirmary was starting to complain. Which combat mode?"

"I'll try capture."

"You have your choice between Volcanic or Tropical courses."

"Tropical sounds nice."

"Fine. We give you some dummy grenades and medi-gel. If you try to use a real grenade, I will turn off

every safety measure this simulator has."

I entered the prep area and picked a weapon, then stretched while the simulator warmed up. The doors slid open to reveal a paradise that very strongly resembled Virimire. There were even some elevated walkways in the same style that I'd seen at Saren's compound. That was a tough mission. I had to fight off a twinge of regret. Was this coincidence or psychology? Did they know?

I didn't have time to ponder, as some simulated geth materialized and started shooting at me. A holographic slug hit me in the chest, and it actually hurt. I started up my mass effect kinetic barrier generator and returned fire. The holograms fizzled out as I hit them. Not far away, there was a one-meter tall hologram that strongly resembled an upside down exclamation point. That must be the objective I needed to capture.

I shot holograms on my way over to it, and when I got within a meter of the point, a holographic ribbon began to circle around me, and a short countdown timer started. When it reached zero, the color of the point changed from yellow to blue. Another upside-down exclamation point appeared further on, and I repeated the process until I'd captured three points, then the simulation shut down.

Upon exiting the simulator, the turian with the skull tattoo on his face was arguing with a human.

"Back off, Vidinos! I haven't done anything wrong," said the man.

"If you've tampered with government equipment, Bryant. I'll have you thrown in the stockade."

"What seems to be the problem?" Intervening was my specialty.

"Get lost Shepard – this doesn't concern you." Vidinos waved his hand dismissively at me.

"Vidinos is just mad because a human beat his record," explained Ochren.

"Shut your mouth, holo-jockey. Bryant says he scored highest in missions from multiple combat modes. No human's ever done that. He clearly cheated."

"I can beat any of those scores," I'd had an easy time in my first go, so I was confident I could beat the other scenarios. "Without cheating."

"Ha. I'm sure it'll be entertaining to watch you try," said the turian guard. "Tell you what, Shepard: you beat my records, and Bryant won't spend the rest of the competition in the stockade. Hell, if you even come close, I'll give you one of my weapons."

"Consider that record as good as broken," I bragged.

"I'd wish you luck, but I don't think that will be enough. I hope Bryant has something to read. He'll be in the stockade for a long time." Vidinos strutted off, making a rude gesture as he went.

"Thanks, Commander," said Bryant. "That's just Vidinos blowing off steam. You really don't have to --"

"Don't worry. I've got this." I smiled and patted his shoulder, then went to Ochren to arrange more simulations.

There were seven more of the low-impact scenarios, and I breezed through those. Then there were four more at a harder level, and I actually broke a sweat getting all the high scores for those. Aside from the tropical environment, there were also volcanic, subterranean, and warehouse. These, too reminded me of places where where'd I'd been on missions.

Once I had all twelve high scores, Vidinos met me as I exited the simulator.

"Well, that's all of them," Ochren congratulated me. "You took the top spot everywhere you could. No one's even surprised any more."

"Ochren must have changed it! Or...there's a bug in the simulator...You got lucky, human."

"That wasn't luck. It was skill."

"Skill at cheating the system, maybe. I'll get to the bottom of this soon enough."

"You were watching me the whole time. Is there any way I could have cheated?"

"Bah! Bryant is clear. Keep your smug grin to yourself. I'm out of here."

"Aren't you forgetting something? I'll take that assault rifle of yours."

Vidinos actually growled. "Fine. Take it. Thing's a piece of garbage, anyway. Enjoy the burn when it blows up in your hands. But I expect remuneration when I expose your fraudulent 'win' for what it was." The turian stormed off, throwing another dismissively rude gesture at me.

Bryant was standing by to witness the scene. "Now I see why they made you a Spectre, Shepard."

I nodded, then went out to the command center to speak with Ahern.

"That's odd, Shepard. I've never seen the holograms cry like that before," he said. "Impressive work in there."

"Got anything else for me to do?"

"There's a special scenario I don't get to offer to many operatives. I want you to give it a shot. Look, kid – you've done well. But I've been through a lot worse. And it wasn't a simulation. But I could make it one...if you're interested."

"I've seen some shit, too, Admiral. What's the scenario?"

"It's a reenactment of one of my missions. We held off an ambush of turian assault troops, back during the First Contact War. Just me and a small squad. I haven't finished programming it yet, but it's close enough. You can try it if you like."

"I'd be the first one to try it?"

"Technically. Though I did it first...in the real world. The rules are simple: survive until you're picked

up. If you can. You'll be ridiculously outnumbered. No real cover to speak of. It's the ultimate worst case scenario. Of course, it'll only be a simulation."

"Then up the difficulty. I don't want it easy."

"You've got balls, Shepard. But it's still just a simulation. Even our best VI's aren't as good as the real thing."

"Then turn off the safeties."

"No safeties? Highest level of difficulty? You'll never do it. And then I'll have to explain how a Spectre died on my station."

"What do you want to bet?"

"A wager, huh? Yeah...okay. I've got a nice little retirement place on Intai'sei. I never go there and I don't plan on retiring any time soon. It's yours, if you can beat it. And what are you wagering?"

"My life."

"Right. So, you really want the safeties off? If you die, it's getting logged as user error. I'm not losing my job over this. What do you say?"

The simulations had been easy enough so far. How hard could this new one be? "Set it up."

"Talk to Ochren. I'll make sure he gets the new settings. I'd say good luck, but you'll need a lot more than that."

"What do you need?" Ochren asked as I approached.

"Let's try a new simulation. I understand Ahern set up a special simulation."

"For the record, I'm against turning the safeties off."

"I'll be fine."

"What about my simulator? I'll be making repairs for weeks."

"Fire it up. This should be good."

"I don't say this very often, but good luck."

The simulator booted up. I was in an open area, a military compound of some sort. A disabled Grizzly tank sat in the center. My first goal was to eliminate the turians guarding it, then retrieve a data bank. Lastly, I'd have to hold out for five minutes while endless waves of enemies attacked me.

As soon as I walked into the arena, one of the holograms fired a rocket at me. I ducked, but the rocket exploded next to me, and my barrier collapsed. This was going to be harder than I thought. I tossed a dummy grenade at two of the other holograms, and they dissipated, then I broke cover while the

grenadier was reloading and shot it out of existence. The area was clear for the moment, so I picked up the disc sitting on the tank's windshield.

A timer popped up in my HUD, and enemies began to pour through doors at the north and south sides of the arena. I noticed there were inactive turrets on the east and west sides, so I ran for the west side and took cover behind the turret's tower. I found the on switch, and the turret began firing, but it wasn't nearly enough to stop the onslaught of enemies. I tossed grenades left and right and fired blindly as I ran to the other turret. I flipped that one on, and it helped, but enemies were attacking the other turret.

Four minutes left. I suddenly wished I'd invited the rest of my squad along on this one. I tossed out grenades and fired at everything that moved. Some of the holograms managed get close enough to me to rifle-butt me. I ran out of grenades with three minutes to go.

A thought occurred to me: could I close one of the doors? I ran to the north door and found a switch to close it. That halved the amount of holograms I had to fight, but the door began to reopen after thirty seconds. I'd have to stay near it to keep hitting the switch. At two minutes, I ran out of heat sinks for my weapon. I didn't have a knife on me. I looked around for a solution, but the holograms weren't dropping anything when they dissipated. The enemies were getting closer, and fast. One of the automated turrets was overwhelmed and stopped firing.

At the last moment, I spotted a crate that had broken open and spilled its contents: grenades and heat sinks. I hit the door close button, then ran to the crate. I had to give one of the holograms a biotic push to keep it away, and I had just enough time to reload my weapon and shoot it down before it was on me. My barrier generator shorted out with one minute left to go. I was panting hard now, but managed a weak biotic barrier, and got back to the north door just as it was opening again.

The minute expired, and any remaining holograms dissipated. The simulation ended, revealing holes in the real walls. Out of breath, bruised and beaten, I limped to the exit. Ahern stood there with a worried frown.

"I never thought I'd see the day. Good work, Shepard. Really good work."

"It was a great challenge." I wiped sweat from my brow. I noticed some blood on my sleeve. "Thanks for setting it up."

"Makes me wish we'd had you during the First Contact War. Could've saved a lot of human lives. And, since I'm a man of my word, my retirement home is yours. Too bad. Now that I've seen you beat my scenario, I almost feel like I could retire."

"Are you serious?"

"Hell no. The day I retire is the day I die. Enjoy that place, Shepard – you earned it."

"What's this place like?"

"It's quiet. Remote. You've practically got the whole planet to yourself. I got a brochure from ExoGeni and they dropped a prefab down on Intai'sei for me, here in the Phoenix system. The weather is terrible, but they tell me it's a 'red paradise,' whatever that means."

"Thanks, Admiral. I'll head down and check it out."

"Feel free to come back and run through the simulations again. It's a good way to keep yourself sharp, and the recruits will get a kick out of watching Commander Shepard run through the tests."

I stretched out a bruise in my shoulder and stifled a groan. "We'll see. It's been a pleasure working with you, Admiral."

"Likewise. And call me Ahern. You've earned that, too."

I walked back through the break room, trying not to limp. A dozen soldiers stood and applauded as I left. I saluted them. As I hit the airlock, Vidinos was on guard duty again, and he made a point of ignoring me.

I gave Joker the coordinates to Ahern's apartment – my apartment. It was a decent place. The sun was setting over a dusty plain. The apartment was decently furnished, if a bit utilitarian, and there was a hot tub. I invited Liara down for the night.

Garrus: "Your choice in armor is awfully limited, Tali. Couldn't you wear something without a helmet?"

Tali: "No. Living in the clean environment of the flotilla has weakened our immune systems. The environmental suits protect against diseases."

Garrus: "So your people are forever wandering, and now they couldn't settle if they want to. I'm sorry."

GETH INCURSIONS – TALI AND THE GETH

The Council contacted me. It had been a while, so I was curious to learn what they wanted.

"Commander Shepard. We're getting reports warning of a marked increase in geth activity in the Skyllian Verge. Given your interest in the geth, we wanted to pass along the information."

"Thank you, Councilor. Geth out past the Veil again? What can you tell me?"

"Surveillance drones have identified geth outposts on four different planets in the Armstrong Cluster. We need someone to take them out."

"We have any idea what they're after?"

"Hard to say. They might just be gathering intel on us. Or maybe they're setting up staging grounds for hit and run attacks on human colonies."

"Or worse. I'm on it."

"You've got experience fighting the geth. You're the logical choice to take out these outposts. We're transmitting the locations of all known geth outposts in the Armstrong Cluster to the Normandy now. Good luck, Commander Shepard."

As usual, they hung up without signing off. Maybe that wasn't an alien thing. Whatever. I passed the

coordinates on to Pressley, and we set off for the closest outpost, on the planet Maji in the Vamshi system.

The first outpost was at the top of a mountain, and it was protected by anti-air turrets. Luckily there was a series of switchbacks carved out of one side of the mountain, and the Mako had no trouble driving up to the compound at the peak. There was a ring of barricades and guard towers manned by geth snipers and rocket troopers. The formation was eerily similar to an ancient castle back on Earth, but with a geth aesthetic.

In the center of the compound was a colossus. The Mako's main cannon was making dents in it, but it was taking a long time. I ordered Williams and Garrus to do what they do best, while the rest of us got out on foot to do what we could. Tali tried and failed to hack the thing, claiming that too many geth programs were running inside the thing for her hack to get through. No matter. With all of our firepower concentrated on it, we made short work of it. One down, three to go.

"Huh," muttered Tali. "I managed to pick up a short burst of data just now. It's incomplete, though. I can't read it. Maybe I can get something from the other outposts.

The other outposts were on the planets Antibaar, Raryingiri, and Casbin, in the systems Tereshkova, Gagarin, and Hong, respectively. They were all were arranged identically to the first, with that uncannily familiar castle setup. Tali got more bursts of data from each. After the last outpost was down, she had a eureka moment.

"Aha! If I put all of the data packets together, I get a set of coordinates. There's a fifth base!"

The bonus outpost was a bunker on the planet Solcrum in the Grissom System. It was guarded on the outside by three armatures and two turrets. A tough fight for the Chief and the C-Sec officer. I let them rest in the Mako while the rest of us headed inside.

The facility was a prefab of human design, and was infested with husks. There were no clues as to whom it had belonged, but the geth had set up some large computer banks in a back room. Tali accessed the computer and downloaded some data onto a disc, which she handed to me.

"This is encrypted, but maybe with time, your people can crack it."

"I think the quarians are more likely to do that first, but thank you."

Back outside, the Mako was engaged with a geth drop ship. Williams and Garrus had their hands full, so the rest of us engaged with the robots that it was dropping. There were no turrets here to hack, and this ship wouldn't just drift off when it was sufficiently damaged, like the one at the Citadel Tower when Saren had attacked. Our comms were jammed, so I couldn't call for backup. This would be a battle of attrition.

Fifteen minutes of hard fighting passed. We'd destroyed a dozen geth robots and drones. The dropship's kinetic barriers were down, but so were the Mako's and both vehicle's hulls were dented if not penetrated. Still, the geth ship dropped more robots. We were out of grenades, and we were running low on heatsinks. Things were looking dire when the Normandy swooped in and saved the day. Joker opened up with our ship's main guns, and the explosion as the geth ship disintegrated knocked us to the ground.

My suit's speakers erupted in cheers from my squad. Cries of joy, hoots of triumph, thanks be to Joker. Our savior brought the Normandy down to land, and we boarded, tired and relieved.

Later, I was writing up my report for the Spectre office, when Tali knocked on my door.

"Shepard, I need to talk to you," she said shyly. "It's important."

"Of course. Is something wrong?"

"You know the data we took from geth control nodes? The information you uploaded to Alliance Control? I want a copy of it."

"You want to bring this data back to the Migrant Fleet."

"Those files have information that could be vital to our efforts to understand the geth. It could be the key to retaking Rannoch – our homeworld."

"You think you can use this information to destroy your enemy."

"Not right away. We will need to study it. It could take years. But it will give us new insight into how the geth have changed and evolved over the past centuries."

"Go ahead. Make a copy. I'm surprised you hadn't already."

"I didn't want to go against your authority here. My people – I owe you a great debt. One I can never repay."

"You've already helped me more than you can know. You have been an invaluable member of this team."

"Thank you, Shepard."

"So, I'm guessing this data will complete your Pilgrimage. You'll want to return to your people now?"

"I – yes. I do."

I swallowed a lump in my throat. "I understand. Give Pressly the coordinates for the Migrant Fleet, and we'll take you there."

"I can't do that. I trust you, Shepard. But only you. This is an Alliance ship, and there are representatives of other Council races on board. I can't risk them knowing the location of my people. That has to remain a secret. You understand, right?" Tali wrung her hands.

"Yeah, that makes sense. So what's the plan? Do you want us to drop you off? Name the place, and the Normandy will get you there."

"I can contact one of our scout ships and arrange a meeting. They can get me back to the fleet."

"Okay. Make the arrangements. I'll tell Pressly to stand by for your orders."

"Thank you, Shepard. This means a lot. Everything."

Tali left my quarters, her head a bit low. This parting would be bittersweet. I had some plans to make.

An hour before the rendezvous, Tali had packed her bag and ascended the elevator up to the crew deck, on her way to the airlock. I leaned out from around the corner, and beckoned her into the mess area.

"SURPRISE!" The whole squad and many of the crew had gathered to say goodbye to our favorite quarian. We had even baked her a dextro cake. And put a candle on top.

"What's this?" Tali asked. Her voice was pleasantly surprised, even if her face was a literal mask.

"Pretty sure it's a human thing," said Wrex evenly, though he had a smile as wide as his wide face.

"Maybe," said Williams. "We just wanted to throw a little going-away party for you."

"We'll miss you," said Garrus, sounding a bit choked up.

The party was short but sweet. Jokes were exchanged and laughter filled the ship for the first time since...well, there hadn't been a party on the Normandy ever, as far as I knew. Tali couldn't risk opening up her enviro suit to eat a forkful of cake, so we put it in a blender, and she sucked it through a straw. She commented that there was too much sugar, but enjoyed it nonetheless.

A chime sounded from the intercom, and Pressly answered it.

"I hate to break up the party, folks, but Tali's ride is here," he announced.

There was disappointment all around. I walked Tali up to the command deck to see her off. She stepped into the airlock, and hung her head. Then she dropped her bag, turned around, and hugged me. I'm not normally a hugger, but I hugged her back. We released, and she entered the airlock again.

"Goodbye, Shepard nar Mindoir. I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too, Tali'Zorah nar Rayya ." I said, and I meant it. I felt like I had just said goodbye to a little sister.

I closed the airlock door on my side, the air cycled, and she stepped into the quarian ship.