

# Initial Mass Effects

By Ian Horne

A novelisation of the events otherwise portrayed in the *Mass Effect* computer game, as if both were working from the same factual source.

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"What about Shepard?"

"John Shepard? Hannah Shepard's boy? The decorated one?"

"That's the one. He made staff commander after winning that medal in the Skyllian Blitz."

"Well, it'll upset the batarians." Udina takes another drag on his cigar. "But given their behaviour over the Verge reparations, it's not like we care. He doesn't have the experience with aliens that I'd like, though. What does he think of turians?"

"Well, he's a biotic, and the biotics instructor at West Point when he was there was turian. He's at least got to know how to talk to one." Captain Anderson brings up John Shepard's picture on the table's holoprojector. Mid-thirties, Caucasian, strong jaw, eyebrow scar, clean shaven, coal-black hair in a regulation crew-cut. Intense grey eyes. A face to trust.

"And there's no question about his service record. It looks like we're sending one of the best of the best."

"Donnell, he's rated N7. That *is* what that means."

"Yes, but I am considering the wider context here. The turians will think they understand him, see a decorated hero as a safe choice: their army *is* their state. The salarians will think we are making a statement and appointing an example of what our people should be, not what they *are*, and they will look at his history of stopping rather than starting fights and approve. And the asari will see that we have appointed the son of a captain known for her softly-softly approach and believe that her influence will keep his regrettably impulsive tendencies at bay."

"We don't work like that. He'll barely have any contact-"

"Yes, captain, I know. But the asari - they have a habit of assuming that everyone's alike deep down. And *they* work like that."

"But he doesn't *have* impulsive tendencies. His record's stuffed with examples of the reverse."

"Trust me." Udina blows a thin stream of smoke. "Compared to the asari, he's a damn cowboy."

"You approve, then?"

"It's a long list, captain. A lot of good people on it. But... Yes. John Shepard will serve the Alliance's purposes well."

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The bridge of the SR-1 *Normandy* is quiet, tense. The pilot, Moreau, leans forward and flicks an incomprehensible icon on his custom user interface. "Entering approach path... Now. Going manual."

His nametag, as is usual for Alliance pilots, bears his callsign beside his name: I've made a point of learning it. "Manual, Joker?"

He nods. "I'm about to bet a couple billion credits and forty-three lives on our mass-relay approach vector. Call it paranoia if you like, but I never met a computer I'd trust with so much as five credits on a football match."

"You're trusting one to make the air you're breathing, you do know that." Kaidan Alenko, second officer, gives an honest grin from his station at the sensors console.

"And if we could just have a sweet little Filipina to do it instead, wouldn't we all be a bit happier in our heart of hearts?" A ping from something incomprehensible on the pilot's console and Joker's suddenly transformed into the model of elite professional competence. Wrapped in orange haptics, his hands move like a pianist's at a concert. "CIC, this is the bridge. Relay approach in ten seconds... mark."

A streamer of cold blue plasma flame unfurls from the mass relay's vast spherical core, the ancient alien artifact registering the presence of a mass-effect core nearby, reaching out to grab it in preparation for hurling it half a thousand light-years thataway.

"Core charge, nominal. Velocity vector within parameters. Receiving sync pulse from Charon Relay." Kaidan nods to me and I flick the icon for shipwide announce. "All hands. Relay transition in five... three... two... one." I close my eyes as the relay fires and acceleration presses us briefly into the padding of our seats. I release the safety harness the moment it's done. "Transition achieved. Catch at Exodus Relay expected in two hours ten." Flick off the comm. "Nice entry, Joker."

"You can tell that, sir?"

"I'm a biotic, flight-lieutenant: I can feel gravity waves. That launch was as uniform as any I've been on."

"All part of the service, sir." There's going to be a thin line to tread between keeping this guy happy and encouraging him to showboat: he's clearly an excellent pilot, but the better they are the more they seem to want to show off.

"Eyes front," Alenko warns, just before our 'passenger' steps onto the bridge. He's a turian, seven feet tall, humanoid, the grey carapace of his skin marked with the elaborate designs of his home clan. Night-black armour - he seems to wear the stuff everywhere - and an arrogant tilt to the head of a guy who's old enough to remember the First Contact War fifty years ago. Nihlus, his name is, and he's a Spectre. There's no real equivalent concept in human culture - all the equivalents I could

think of are ultimately fictional, but the Office of Special Tactics and Recon is quite real. Their agents are above the law, answerable directly to the Citadel Council. No human has ever been made Spectre. And this one is apparently here 'to observe'.

He speaks perfect English, with a slight droning undertone to his voice. "Commander Shepard."

"Sir."

He darts his head to one side and then the other. Turian body language isn't the same as ours, and their faces are almost expressionless with all that chitin. Makes them damned hard to read. And just too late I remember that turians are funny about expressions of authority. Their culture is... strange. "I'm not a member of your chain of command, Shepard. I'm simply here as a consultant."

"I think this is a language difficulty. The turian word I should be using doesn't translate well into English and my vocal apparatus isn't equipped to speak your language. A term of generic rather than specific respect."

"Correct, commander, and understood." He drops his insect-like central mandible for a moment, snaps it shut abruptly. That's supposed to be a grin, I think. "How do you find the performance of this vessel so far?"

"Very fast, very smooth, very quiet. I'll hold off on a final judgement until I've seen the stealth system active and been through a few tight turns, but she feels good even for a frigate. Flight-lieutenant Moreau?"

Joker turns his whole seat around to face us - it pivots at the base, and he's thoroughly strapped in from the waist down. "She's a thoroughbred, sir. An uncharitable man would call her over-engined and under-armed, and I'm not sure about the autopilot - I think its limits are so far inside the flight envelope that they rattle. She's been quiet and smooth because I haven't even touched the torch drive after we made Earth orbit - she can handle normal operations on gravitics alone, so I've been conserving reaction mass. But after two hours in the saddle, sir, I find I like it."

The turian nods. "Does 'she' justify 'her' cost, in your opinion, flight-lieutenant?" It's plain he disapproves of the anthropomorphism.

"It's not my place to speculate, sir. I don't even know *what* she cost."

A little dart of his head. "H'm. Manners, in a human. Wonders will *never* cease. To enlighten: 'she's' the most expensive frigate anyone ever produced, with the stealth capabilities of a salarian Blade-class, the punch of a turian Raptor and enough drive core for three whole ships. Not to mention the cutting-edge nonlocal quantum entanglement communicator suite giving her live high-bandwidth communication with the Citadel no matter where she is in the universe. If 'she' didn't fly well, flight-lieutenant Moreau, then someone somewhere has failed spectacularly."

"I'm aware, sir. I think she'll live up to her billing, if that's what you mean."

The turian snorts. "Well, as I came to notify: Unscheduled briefing in the command nexus in five minutes, Executive Officer Shepard. See you there." He turns and leaves.

"Well, he was polite," Alenko says mildly. "If crazy."

"Spectres." I shake my head. "No oversight, no checks and balances, no due process. Who watches the watchers? *They* do."

"It's not so bad, commander." The pilot grins. "Look at it this way - it's not like he's James Bond or something. The Spectres get all the unsung heroics, leave the glory and the girls for the regular military. Where Spectres go, medals follow."

Okay, that's enough out of him. "No medals in a glorified courier mission, Flight-Lieutenant." I turn to leave. "Lieutenant-Commander Alenko, you have the bridge."

"Aye, sir."

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"Mission profile's changed, Shepard." Anderson looks almost too grim. I can't read the man at all.

"An exercise for our shakedown, sir?" I haven't been notified, but our superiors have been known to pull all kinds of things in peacetime.

He frowns. "Hardly. This just went from a milk run to a rescue mission." Anderson brings up the viewscreen. An image of something, wreathed in cloud, no real idea of scale but the thing's got to be massive, the size of a turian cruiser or bigger, if turian cruisers had vast articulated clawlike arms. "This was the only image attached to a fragmentary distress call received from the Eden Prime colony by the Exodus Relay comm buoy. We've never seen the like. From the scale of those clouds, computer says it's looking like a half-mile long at least."

"I'd say that was ridiculous, if it wasn't right there." Nihlus steps closer to the screen. "Half a mile, you say... Computer, enlarge square lima-two."

A fuzzy irregular blob fills the screen. The lighting on one side of the thing is wrong, as if it's giving off its own light. A ship, probably, but it's nothing I recognise and I say as much.

"Yes." Nihlus clenches his fist, brings up the glowing orange holographic glove of an omni-tool and pages through menus and thumbnail pictures. "I could have sworn... Hst. There." He 'throws' an image file at the viewscreen, an irregular, streamlined space vessel. He moves his hand, rotating the model until the profile matches the fuzzy blob almost perfectly. "*Geth*."

"Geth? I admit that the silhouette matches, but that race is ancient history." Anderson peers at the image. "It could be half a-"

"No weapons fire. And we have been receiving rumours of unexplained sightings, potentially ships matching geth silhouettes across the Verge for weeks. Officially they're just your usual UFO reports, someone misread the blue-shift on a piece of space dust, that kind of thing. Unofficially - well, you know the adage. A Spectre never has one reason if two can serve."

"Why am I hearing about this only just now?"

"If we told everything we heard, captain, a poor secret police force would we make. Nevertheless." He stabs a claw at the screen. "Geth."

"Okay, Spectre, what else can you give us? Neither of us took enough history to know what that means."

He shrugs. "We know surprisingly little. The geth are a synthetic race, computer-brained robots with an artificial intelligence best thought of as similar to eusocial creatures like Earth mole rats. They're secretive, violently xenophobic, insular... Two and a half hundred years ago, they were based on robot technology that was a little behind the curve, although their software was bleeding-edge; their weapons were adapted navigational equipment. We know little of their capabilities today. As you say, ancient history."

"And then they come out of nowhere and-"

"And the first thing they hit is Earth's first - sorry, second - archaeological dig to find a working Prothean artifact. Yes."

I speak up. "So, new objectives, sir?"

"We were alerted by Third Fleet Command, and there's a battlegroup on the way from Arcturus, but we're going to be first on the scene. We drop in, fulfil the original mission, gather what intel we can and get out. I know Joker was planning to sneak up on the planet under full stealth anyway: now I have a reason to let him. Shepard, you're the only N7 on board other than me; take Kaidan Alenko and Richard Jenkins, get in there on the quiet. Locate the archaeological digsite, find that Prothean artifact and get it out of there."

"I shall handle electronic warfare." The turian indicates our route on the map of the colony. "You will drop me *here*, then your team *here*. We will rendezvous at the location of the artifact when it is identified."

I look at the map. "Wouldn't it make more sense to pair off, send Alenko with you? He's a biotic - you might need him if you run into anything heavy."

Nihlus jerks his head - that means 'no'. "I move faster alone."

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We're fully suited and helmeted. Eden Prime has a perfectly breathable atmosphere, but we're taking no chances. Jenkins clicks a button on his belt and the blue shimmer of his personal shield generator colours the air around him. Alenko and I are biotics: we can't carry shields because they mess with our amps, so we rely on our own power for protection. I'm surprised to see Alenko activate his barrier with an operation on his omni-tool: didn't realise that anyone still used an L2 amplifier in the field, those things are twenty years old. Mine comes up with nothing more than a control gesture that's a bit like shrugging with one shoulder; I feel the familiar swoop and dip of my L3 as it puts up a double standing wave around me. With this running I'm nearly as bulletproof as your average armoured vehicle.

We move out, keeping low, sticking to cover. The dirt is a weird shade of orange; I recognise rye-

grass, a weed that you'll find wherever you find humans. Local lifeforms - gasbags the size and shape of a big jellyfish - float past on the breeze.

Terrain's sort of rolling - big rocks, small hills. I can see the colony's central town from here, the weird dreadnought-sized ship parked about a thousand feet up, attended by a flock of much smaller, irregular vessels that look like that 'geth' silhouette that Nihlus showed. The defence grid isn't firing at anything: *not* a good sign.

The scanner pings: hard returns the other side of that rise. I hand-sign to the others, *halt; advance, slow*. Jenkins takes point, first over the rise. I wince as he goes over rather than around, skylining himself like a -

Gunfire. Three shooters, light rapid-fire mass accelerators, designed to overload a shield with multiple tiny impacts. I yell to take cover as Kaidan and I dive for the rocks. Jenkins doesn't listen, trusts his shield, starts to return fire at a target I can't see - his shield starts to flicker under the dust-grain impacts - there's a sudden loud crashing report and he's knocked over onto his back. Doesn't make a sound. The front of his helmet is caved in.

Kaidan swears under his breath. I'm too busy. I have the shooters on scanner: drones, four of them, clustered. I put their approximate location up on my heads-up display, take a long breath out and then in, gathering a gravity field with a control gesture that looks like I'm pulling a shimmering ball of blue light out of thin air. One second, two seconds, three. Step out of cover - the drones start to fire, little stinging bites against my barrier, trying to disrupt it, bleed enough power out of it that the one with the big gun can put a shot through it. It'll hold long enough. I release the energy like I'm throwing a grenade underarm, twist my hand to impart a chaotic fluctuation to the field as the orb of light curves high into the air, pull sharply downward to bring it down among the drones, overwhelming their tiny engines, pulling them together in crazily spiraling paths; I clench my fist and they are crushed.

Kaidan is talking with Nihlus on the radio. It seems that the electronic warfare is enough to hide our presence from the big guns but not enough to stop the drones - they've got some kind of countermeasure he's never met before. And dammit, Jenkins is dead. I don't know him well enough yet to know where his family is - never had the chance - but it'll be in his file. I'll write the letter myself. I promise myself that the geth will pay for that. Hell knows why they want it, but they aren't getting Eden Prime.

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We can hear the exchange of fire up ahead. The high-pitched whisper-chatter of geth weapons and the deeper slower stuttering bursts of an Alliance assault rifle. I exchange a look with Kaidan and we double-time it.

There's a woman in Alliance armour running up the slope, pursued by four humanoid grey shapes. Again, three of them are taking irregular potshots at her with automatic weapons, trying to put pressure on her shield, while the fourth one mounts a larger, heavier gun, just drawing a bead but not firing. Her shields flicker, just like I saw with Jenkins, but she dives sideways just as the big gun fires and the heavy round just glances off her right pauldron. She falls well, rolls and comes up running. The little anti-shield light guns don't do more to her body armour than chip the paint.

Kaidan puts himself between her and the geth, raises a flat static barrier field that easily deflects the next shot from the heavy gun. I make a short gesture like an abbreviated punch, a biotic slap that knocks the shooter spinning backwards into a rock; a second movement, like an uppercut, and it's lifted helplessly into the air. The woman doesn't waste any time, kneels and puts three careful rounds through the thing's centre of mass. Kaidan charges up a shockwave behind his barrier, again using the curiously antiquated control gestures of an L2 amp, and then throws the entire thing forwards; the geth, still trying to work their way through the barrier, are knocked flat and we waste no time putting them out of action.

The woman salutes; her suit insignia makes her out as a chief warrant officer - Colonial Marines, no tactically critical specialty, they call their warrant officers 'Gunner' - and the nametag says WILLIAMS. "Thanks -" she's panting, getting her breath back, but training keeps her helmet on and sealed - "thanks for the rescue, sir. They nearly had me there."

I nod grimly. "We ran into a drone flock uphill a ways: they'd have ambushed you. John Shepard, Alliance special forces. We're here for the artifact."

She blinks. Still sounds a little shaken. Given the circumstances, I don't blame her. "You're not reinforcements? We got a distress call out -"

"The cavalry's on the way, Williams, but we aren't it. Do you know where the digsite is?"

"Uh, yes." She visibly gets a grip. "Yes, sir, I do, but the artifact isn't there. My - squad was rearguard on the - the geth control that area, sir, I'm all that's left. The artifact was on its way to the spaceport."

"Okay, so we need to pick up the pace. Meet and greet can happen when we're not on a clock. Are you fit to lead the way?"

"Yes, sir." She works the cocking handle on her assault rifle, takes a deep breath. "Think I'm about done with all this running and hiding."

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Cutting through the archaeologists' camp on the way to the spaceport, taking out or avoiding geth patrols as we go, with the still-unseen Nihlus jamming geth sensors, we come up against a curious thing. A small forest of metal spikes, bit over six metres long and as thick around as a tree, on a three-legged metal base, sticking straight up into the air. There are human bodies stuck on the end. Williams growls in the back of her throat.

"You've seen these before, gunner?"

"Uh-huh. After the - the initial assault I saw some of the humanoid units putting dead bodies onto things like this, God knows why. The spikes are telescopic."

"Hmm." Kaidan approaches the closest one, omni-tool in scanner mode. "They're powered, somehow - *Jesus!*" He jumps back, nearly falls over, as the spike retracts fast as an eyeblink and the body falls off onto the ground. It's naked, silver-and-blue veins covering the body, spreading out from the hole through the centre. I approach the body carefully, kneel down to turn it over -

It looks up at me, empty eyesockets glowing electric blue. I don't waste breath swearing - I put a biotic punch into it by reflex and the warp field tears it into five pieces. The other spikes start to *snick* back down.

"Oh, my *God*." There's disgust in Williams' voice. "Every time I think I've seen the worst -"

"Save it for the debrief, gunner." The walking corpses are quick, but we don't let them close enough to discover how strong they are. Alenko uses his biotics like he'd use any other weapon, point and shoot, primarily controlling his amp with omni-tool commands, while I use mine more like martial arts moves, working entirely with somatic gestures. I take point and he runs support. We're going to work well together.

"We going to bury or burn these things?" Williams turns a corpse over with her toe.

I shake my head. "We'll log the site for a proper clean-up detail. We're here for that artifact."

She mutters something about war crimes and we move on.

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"Shepard. I am at the spaceport. There's a - wait, that can't be right."

A pause.

"Confirmed. Shepard, there is another Spectre present here. Saren Arterius." I've heard that name before. Saren Arterius is a minor celebrity, a bit like the turian equivalent of James Bond, except that he's very real. "The Council would have notified me if he was scheduled to be here: I will find out what he is about."

"Negative. We are five minutes out from your position. Wait for rendezvous before approaching."

"Denied, commander. It would become a matter of honour that you would not understand. Meet us at the spaceport. Nihlus out."

I grit my teeth and close the channel. This is why Spectres are a bad idea. They're loose cannons. It's *hideously* unprofessional to have this sort of duelling jurisdictions in the field. Impetuous decisions get people dead. Uncertainty gets people dead -

One single gunshot. Not an Alliance weapon and nothing like any of the geth we've seen. We pick up the pace, move as fast as we can. This is why we're wearing powered armour. Williams isn't - I risk a glance to see how she's getting on - she's panting hard, but she's keeping up. That's one serious fitness level: I approve.

Nihlus is face down in the middle of the spaceport's open-air concourse. Fracture patterns surrounding a tiny hole in the back of his head. The carapace at the front is split obscenely open, shattered six ways, purple blood in a fan shape across the concrete. Someone shot him in the back of the head at point-blank range with an armour-piercing weapon, and he was standing up at the time. His gun isn't drawn.

Very bad.

"Williams. Which way."

Still breathing hard, she averts her gaze from the dead alien. "Loading dock is my guess. This way--"

A shadow overhead. We take cover. A geth ship coming in to land. "Let me guess, gunner --"

"Dead right, sir. What now?"

"Get close and hope Nihlus' jamming holds. We need to know for sure."

We use the abandoned buildings of the concourse for cover and make our way to the loading dock. There are more geth in the way, multipurpose things carrying weapons rather than with them mounted into their bodies, and they're fighting a delaying action. No matter that two of us are biotics, there are only three of us - by the time we're most of the way there, the ship's taking off. We secure what look like a series of thermal bombs and Kaidan deactivates them: I guess that even if we can't have the artifact, then not being blown sky high is a decent second-

"Commander!" Williams calls me over to a tall grey crate, one side of it lying where it's been forced open. "I think it's the artifact!"

It's three metres tall, slablike, looking a bit like a dark green termite nest. There's a light on the front. Williams takes a couple of steps closer, reaches out a hand -

A light suddenly wakes on the side. Another. A third. I can feel a gravity field building around it. Kaidan yells a warning. I physically grab Williams by the shoulders and throw her out of the way as the field spikes. I'm not prepared for the sheer strength of the thing; my barrier disintegrates like a tissue in a hurricane and I'm lifted off the ground-

A scream. Not mine. It is the scream of a hundred billion deaths.

Deaths. Horror. Pain. A warning.

A warning of a reaper that does not live.

Live. Live and scream our warning. Warn of the deaths of a hundred billion souls.

Souls. Flesh. Steel. Wires. Oozing mush. Blood. Pain. Slipping through my fingers.

Words. Images slipping through my fingers. I cannot make sense of this. I cannot see. I cannot hear. I cannot move. I cannot scream.

A scream. Not mine. It is the scream of a hundred billion deaths.

Deaths. Horror. Pain. A warning.

A warning of a reaper that does not live.

Live. Live and-

"-creased rapid eye movement, and his beta-wave trace looks almost like he's conscious. I haven't seen anything like this before, captain." That voice. I know her. Her name's Chakwas, she's on a list of people I need to get to know, somehow -

"Is he looking at permanent brain damage?"

"It's really too early to say, sir. I'm going to go out on a limb and say that he certainly saved Williams's life - if he hadn't had cybernetic implants on his nervous system, that first pulse would have burned it out completely."

"Can he hear us?"

I try and make a noise. It comes out as a grunt.

Chakwas reacts first. "Shepard? John, can you hear me?"

"Nngh." I unglue my eyes, try to sit up. "What hit me, an asteroid?"

"What's the last thing you remember?"

"Eden Prime." A flash of memory. "Williams?"

"She's fine." I see the captain.

I try and salute. My arms feel like jell-o. "The colony? The battle?"

"No battle. The geth were pulling out by the time we picked you up - their dreadnought hightailed it the moment the *Obama* and her battlegroup dropped insystem. Alenko's filled me in, although obviously we want to debrief you." He shakes his head. "Forty per cent casualties on the colony, Shepard. Port Eden is devastated. Most of the inhabitants never had time to run."

"My God." My head's clearing. Slowly. "And still no idea why?"

"We were hoping you could tell us. They pulled out right after the lander lifted off from the cargo dock you found the beacon on, and they'd clearly been at it."

"Nngh. I had a... a vision." (*Live. Live and scream our warning.*) "A... warning, I think. It wasn't very comprehensible. Maybe the thing was corrupted." Another flash of memory. "Don't let anyone else near it."

"It exploded. You don't remember?"

"Not a thing. I remember - death. A lot of death, and not in nice ways. A warning. There were words, maybe, I think, but I didn't understand them. There were... wires. Metal. I'm not sure. I'm sorry."

"Sorry isn't something you need to be. We'll go with the theory that they accessed it somehow, downloaded the data inside and booby-trapped it. You're lucky to be alive, son."

"Nihlus. Someone shot him. Back of the head. Armour-piercing round, I'm going to say a heavy pistol, a Carnifex or something, point-blank range. He wasn't expecting it. And he'd just given us verbal ID of the Spectre, Saren Arterius, who we didn't find there. Did we get his omni-tool recorder?"

Anderson shakes his head. "Someone wiped it."

"So all we have is circumstantial." I can see Dr. Chakwas standing there, trying to politely indicate that maybe I should be supposed to be being a patient right now. Sorry, doctor.

"I *know* Saren. I knew him before he was famous. Ruthless character. Don't believe the hype. Has no concept of the value of life. Worse than most other turians. He hates humans - goes out of his way to get them hurt or discredited. Blames us for everything from galactic currency fluctuations to the moral decline of the young. And now we find him working with a race last seen in the history books, attacking a human colony?" He shakes his head. "We're on our way to the Citadel. We were headed there anyway, and we need to make a report in person about the geth at least."

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An attractive young Latina in a Colonial Marine's uniform comes up to me after dinner that evening. I'd have noticed if this woman had been on our crew before... two and two... don't need to read the nametag. The first and last time I've seen this woman before, she had a helmet on.

"Williams?"

She nods. "Sir, Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams, Alliance Colonial Marine Corps, sir. I wanted to thank you for pulling my a- my butt out of the fire back there."

"All part of the service, Williams." I shake her hand. "Commander John Shepard, Alliance Navy. Once my medical leave expires, in about two minutes, I'm executive officer on this boat."

Recognition in her eyes. "Wait... You're *that* Shepard? The hero of the Skyllian Blitz?"

"I don't believe in heroes, Ms. Williams: nobody ever won a battle by themselves. But there weren't two John Shepards in Skyllia that I know of. Speaking of which, welcome aboard; I must confess to being confused, I thought you were posted to Eden Prime, but welcome aboard all the same."

"I'm a witness, sir. Apparently I have to testify about this Spectre, Saren, before the Citadel Council?"

I nod. The Citadel Council's a bit like the UN Security Council, only a great deal more exclusive: at the moment there are only three members. The Spectres are answerable directly and solely to them. "And after that?"

"I haven't really thought, sir. Back to Eden, I guess, help with the relief effort. It's not what I'm good at, but my unit was wiped out. At least I could do some good there."

"You going to be all right, Williams?"

"I'm fit for battle, sir." She catches my expression. "I'll be all right, sir, really. Only..." She blinks a couple of times. "If I had any posting I wanted, it would be somewhere I could fight geth. I don't mean to say I'm going on some kind of crazy vengeance kick, sir, but... I figure someone's gotta be dispensing some high-velocity justice at those mechanical bastards and I'd kinda like to help out with that."

"I'll ask around, see what I can do."

"You'd do that for me, sir?"

"Unless you really want to do relief work. No promises, mind, but the least I can do is ask around."

She nods. I can see her thinking *I'll believe it when I see it*. I'm thinking that we're short one commando on the Normandy.

"Speaking of competencies, Gunner, what's your specialty rating?"

"G2, sir. Armourer, infantry."

"You never thought of applying for an N rating?" The letter denotes the approximate nature of the specialist training any individual's received, the number describes their grade. It's separate from rank. N is for small-unit operations - away teams, special forces and the like. I'm rated N7, strike team leader. Unusually, so's our captain.

Williams gives me a frank look. "I dropped out of selection, sir."

"You might think of trying again, Williams. You were keeping up with Alenko and me just fine down there - and we were in full powered armour and you weren't. And your marksmanship should be up to -"

"Yes, sir. But my name is Williams, as in Major-General Williams?" Her father presided over the biggest military blunder in Alliance history - he surrendered the colony of Shanxi to the Turian Fifth Legion two hours before his reinforcements arrived, precipitating the largest fleet-action defeat in Earth's spacefaring history.

"The selection board looks at your scores, not your-"

There's a slight flush to her cheeks. "Sir. But there are only so many times a girl can hear that she's got a yellow streak in her blood before she shows someone that's not true, sir. I'm lucky they didn't kick me all the way out." She sees my expression. "It's never happened again. All in my file. But I try to keep out of situations where there's a question as to who's the alpha dog."

"Well, thanks for being frank with me, Williams. A lot of people wouldn't have been."

"But you can't ask your friends to take a chance on someone with conduct-unbecoming on her record when they could have a real N2 in her place. I understand, sir."

"That's not what I said or what I meant, gunner. I'll keep you posted, all right?"

"Sir." She'll believe that when she sees it.

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Fifteen clicks long and four across, vast, cigar-shaped and grey, the city-in-space known as Citadel Station is also one of the oldest artificial objects in known space. It was built by the Protheans, the same inscrutable ancient beings who made the mass relays, the Mars ruins, the beacon that nearly killed me and basically the entire foundation of galactic civilisation.

The gently spinning station is hollow, five vast curved arms - the Wards - attached to a hub at one end like the petals of a flower. Joker picks his way carefully through a blizzard of traffic, the *Normandy's* sleek lines dwarfed by the procession of military and civilian ships from a dozen races. We swing at a respectful distance past the titanic asari flagship *Destiny Ascension*, past the great eagle-like cruisers of the Turian Third Legion, past coastguard and civilian ships of scores of different classes and shapes, past the tiny, weaving, automatic little craft that make up the Citadel's mass transit system. The Human Systems Alliance is respected enough, or rich enough, which around here is the same thing, to have its own dedicated berths, although we don't yet own an entire dock of our own. The slim, beautiful *Normandy* rubs metaphorical shoulders with a vast ugly Russian-registered bulk freighter, the cruiser *Yorktown* and a corporate-owned passenger liner from the supposedly independent colony world of Noveria.

Ambassador Udina is a tall, thin American, dressed in a strangely patterned suit that looks like it's based on some sort of alien fashion. He looks seriously pissed off; I suspect he's one of these

people who always does. His office is bright, airy. Huge windows look out over the Presidium, the ring structure around the rim of the Citadel's central hub; there's an actual open-water lake down the middle of the Presidium.

And he doesn't stand on ceremony. "Anderson, Shepard, Alenko. Williams, come in. I've passed the information on the geth attack to the Council already and they're deliberating, by which I mean sitting around with their collective thumb up their collective cloaca. Please tell me you have more on Saren than hearsay and half-assed forensics."

Anderson shakes the ambassador's hand. The two of them seem to be old friends. "I wish I did, Donnell, but this is it. We know Nihlus was murdered by someone with either Spectre access codes or top-flight electronic warfare. We know that practically his last words fingered Saren, and the way this was done stinks of that plated bastard."

"And everyone and his dog knows that you hate Saren Arterius for sinking your career all those years ago, and everyone knows you N7s stick together worse than glue, and everyone knows that our only other eyewitnesses are your promotion-hungry second officer and a starstruck reject from the N program. We can't go to the Council with this alone." Having managed to belittle all four of us simultaneously, he raises an eyebrow and activates the room's display screen with a picture of another turian entirely.

"Luckily, we may not have to. I sent out some feelers with Citadel Security, and this guy gave me a ping in two minutes flat: Garrus Vakarian, an optio in Internal Affairs. He's been investigating Saren for months, something about a potential corruption charge, and he says he might be onto some hard evidence. He'd like some non-turian help, he says, something about his people's 'honour' not letting them assist him, and he doesn't want to chase this lead without a little backup, his words, not mine. I said I could swing him an Alliance N-team, and he said to meet him in Zakera D-8 with a maximum of legal equipment. You mind dealing with that?"

"Deploy Alliance military on the Citadel?" The only military forces allowed on the Citadel are Citadel Security and the Turian Third Legion. This is a place of peace and harmony, or so the high-ups would like everyone to think: in practice, it's a place where everyone carries a sidearm, although it's only on the station's lower levels where people regularly use them.

"Of course not. That would be in breach of the Citadel Treaty. But a small group of like-minded friends is the natural thing for a C-sec officer in a hurry to deputise. You've had experience in paramilitary operations before?"

I nod slightly. N7 certification brings with it a bunch of relatively - specialised - training. Because sometimes the patrol that you really need to make is through what we might term foreign territory.

"And as per standing orders, personnel expecting to enter Tkarren Ward are to dress for the possibility of encountering hostile aliens - sidearms only, please, but I'm given to understand that this doesn't really handicap you?"

"That's correct." Anderson nods. "Commander, I seem to recall you owe Alenko and Williams a drink after Eden Prime. May I remind you that Zakera Ward is less than a mile from Tkarren Ward; best to take appropriate precautions, don't you think?"

"I think I feel a shore leave request coming on, sir."

"Granted, commander. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

As the door closes behind us, Alenko remarks, "Why do I feel dirty all of a sudden?"

"That'll be the politics." Williams suddenly remembers she's in the presence of senior officers. "Uh, that is to say -"

"No, I think you were right the first time." I call up my omni-tool, book us a cab. "Best swing by the ship and kit up first. Williams, seeing as the kit you brought with you wasn't exactly evening wear, I'm authorising you to use the ship's fabricator." I grin. "Dress code is power-armour casual."

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We meet up with the turian at a noodle stand in this dim, moderate-grav, grey-and-purple, downmarket end of Zakera Ward. He's trying for nonchalant and failing horribly - quite apart from the fact that all the food the stand serves is poisonous to his species, he's quite possibly the only one of them on this deck of the ward.

I offer him a handshake. "John Shepard, SR-1 Normandy."

"Vakarian, Garrus, optio seconded to Citadel Security." He looks at my hand like he's never seen one before. Clasps his behind his back after a moment's indecision. "You look like a... fine, public-spirited bunch. Would you like to make a tiny amount of credits risking your life for dubious gain?" He sounds like he's reading off a script.

"Would we ever!" I grin and he opens his mandibles wide for a moment. "I got very little information from Udina, except that our timing was serendipitous. Fill us in?"

"Not here. I swear I'll put it together for you when this is over. Meantime, fall in. You're right about serendipitous - another ten minutes and I'd have nerved myself to do this on my own."

As we walk, "Where we going?"

"Not very far. There's a medical clinic up one level and a bit along. Human doctor, but she treats all sorts. I'm tracking down the best lead I've ever had and I need her help."

"Four people to talk to a doctor?"

"I've got reason to believe- whoa!" He breaks into a run. We follow. "She just pushed the panic button." He draws a pistol, some kind of heavily modded high-calibre automatic. Scope, red-dot sight, the works.

Alenko and I stack up one side of the door the turian indicates, and he takes the other with Williams right behind him. Garrus' omnitool pulls up a C-sec logo; he holds up one three-fingered hand. Retracts a finger. Retracts another finger.

On 'zero' he flicks his omnitool hand violently and the clinic door snicks open, the lights inside going from the usual Zakera gloom to a hard blue-white; a woman screams inside. He and I are through nearly simultaneously; I see three grubby human men in unremarkable brown, one of them holding a gun to the head of a lady in medic's whites. I just about have time to register the gun when Garrus fires; the flash and thunder of his shot makes all our ears ring and it takes the gun out of the man's hand. What the hell kind of policeman... No time to ponder.

The other two turn our way, stunned by the noise - I react instantly to the gun coming up in my direction, slam the wielder against the wall with a biotic pulse, lifting him off the ground, cross the room in three quick strides while he's still trying to work out what's going on, twist the weapon out of his grip with one hand. I hear the third guy's gun go off, hear the curious flat *splat-thunk* of a shield stopping the bullet and then that guy also slams into the wall. By the time I drop my prisoner to the ground and look round (a power-assisted gauntlet around the wrist of his weapon hand means I've got all the control I need), Williams has the shooter's face on the ground with one arm up behind him in a straight-arm lock, and Garrus has the initial guy held off the ground by his throat.

We flex-cuff the criminals: Williams is nearly as efficient at it as the turian is. The medic - Dr. Michel - is a bit too shaken to talk to right now; Alenko sees to her, politely getting past her stream of apologies for needing treatment for shock in her own medbay. While we wait for the squad car, I ask Garrus for a quiet word outside.

The moment the door closes, I turn on him. Low voice, but there's got to be no mistaking the tone. "Optio Vakarian, not to speak out of turn or anything, but is this the way you always operate?"

"I'm not sure I get what you mean, commander. We apprehended the criminals and nobody was-"

"You got lucky. If you had missed that shot, or if the criminal had squeezed the trigger out of reflex when you hit the gun, or if I'd reacted slower, or if the third man hadn't decided to shoot at Williams rather than the doctor, we'd have a dead hostage on our hands right now. You were shooting for a target four centimetres across, about that same distance from the hostage's *head*-"

"I don't miss," he drawls. He taps the eyepiece he's wearing. "This baby gives me a holographic targeting reticle on my aimpoint together with a four-times optical zoom, and my marksmanship scores put me in the top tenth of a per cent - I could make a decent living as a match target shooter, commander, I think I can reliably hit a decent-sized target like that at a range of all of ten cubits. It wasn't even a quickdraw."

"Even so. You weren't to know that you had veteran commandos for backup. We could have been poseurs, the ambassador's pet lapdogs. We could just have been too slow. Most people freak when you fire a gun in a confined space. I repeat, if this is how you always operate, then we're going to have to collaborate a little more loosely than I'd been intending."

"I -" Garrus looks away suddenly. "The reprimand is accepted. I didn't make the wrong call, but I didn't make the right call." He clears his throat. "The information you're after. The doctor we were just about to talk to filed a report with C-Sec that she was worried about the safety of a young quarian woman of no fixed abode who came to her with a gunshot wound and secondary systemic allergic reaction. The quarian had said something about Saren Arterius, which is what my virtual-intelligence picked up on. I called Dr. Michel this morning and she said something about some

shady characters hanging around and could I get everyone involved some protection. It's all I know. I'd like to appeal your decision to take this on without me, but now you have all I had."

"I'm not sure I understand that last bit. My decision to...?"

"You outrank me, or rather, in any sane hierarchy you come above me, I'm not some sort of racist. You say you don't want to work with me any more, that's your prerogative. But the information-

... Aliens are crazy. "Not what I was trying to say, optio. This is your case, and *we're* the ones *you* brought in to help."

"If you say so, sir. I tell you what: I'll draw my rules of engagement a little tighter, and you'll accept my assistance?"

"I'm confused. Didn't *you* deputise *me*?" I'm sure that one or other of us hasn't fully understood this conversation, but the gist makes sense.

"Yeah, I get that from humans a lot. On a point of order, I can't work out what makes you guys tick either. One minute you've got more rules than we do, the next you're ignoring ninety per cent of them in order to make the other ten per cent do all the heavy lifting, apparently on purpose. You say you're like asari, but you made it an actual*crime* to do business by personal networking like asari do. You say you're like us, but you've got laws against having any regard for who someone is. Your government's essentially 'rule by the loudest', and yet you don't *fight* one another - I swear, half the time on a Zakera Ward beat I need a cultural interpreter. I acknowledge that I offended you and I've got some idea of how, let's leave it at that."

The squad car draws up and rescues us from our shared contemplation of how aliens are crazy.

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"You feeling better, doctor?"

Big green eyes. Pale, shaking. "A little, yes, thank you." The words, with their slight synthetic edge, don't match the movement of her lips; she's using a translator. Rare to meet a human out here who doesn't speak English; I guess with the stress she'd prefer to speak her native language. "I am only glad you showed up when you did. Those thugs -" She stops talking, takes a moment. "I think I know the man they must work for. I think perhaps that he is the man that my patient says she is scared of? A man called 'Fist'?"

The name means nothing to me, but Garrus nods. I'd expect him to say something but he doesn't. Is that the grim expression of someone receiving the anticipated bad news, or does he just always look like that?

"So you think they expected to find this patient of yours here?"

"I don't know how much you know about the Citadel, Mr. Shepard, but her species aren't common around here or well liked. They're sort of professionally homeless, or that's what I understood. She wouldn't have been welcome most places, and they are known to come back to places where they were treated well. She asked permission to add me to some sort of whitelist."

"Garrus?" I indicate that the policeman should take over. Why he didn't take the lead in the first place... Aliens are crazy.

"Fist, you say?" The doctor nods. "That's not a name to conjure with in Zakera, not if you like having kneecaps. But we'll get it out of those thugs anyway, and nobody will know you talked. Did your patient have a name?"

"Tali', she said. The name was longer than that but I can't remember the rest and she didn't want me to record it."

"We'll run it, check she's not in our cells or anything dumb like that. I'll leave a drone flock here for a couple of days, if you don't mind, just to dissuade anyone who wants to try and teach you a lesson. I guess it's too much to hope for that you have her contact details?"

"No, but. The thugs, they said that Fist was reeling her in already, they were only turning up here to remind me that if I think I have a fugitive I should let them know. They were not trying to get me to give her up, at all."

"All right. Thank you, doctor, you've been a great help."

Outside, Garrus steers us to an observation lounge, where we get a table that looks out over the spectacular sight of the Citadel's mouth and the nebula beyond. It's Zakera Ward, so it's less than classy, but it's clean and private enough, and nobody bats an eyelid at serving a C-Sec officer and three humans in thinly disguised combat gear. Hell, we're not even the only people in this place wearing body armour.

"So. Fist. You'll never have heard of him." I shake my head; Garrus continues. "I guess that by the standards of your usual operations he's little people, just another thug and employer of thugs working out of just another sleazy bar in Zakera. But he's *connected*, more than you'd expect. A little job here, a string pulled there, it all adds up to a rich patron who occasionally needs... *deniable* work done on the Citadel. A patron like Saren. And someone's been feeding him equipment." He takes one of the thugs' guns out and puts it on the table. "Look at this. You're not telling me these grow on trees."

Williams speaks up. "Looks like an Elanus M3 Predator. Standard Alliance military pattern, although it's an old model, before they integrated the gun-camera. Not made on an Alliance fabricator, though: no serial number, and it looks like they've used laser-sintered aluminium rather than solid titanium for the barrel and receiver. Looks similar, the weight is similar, but it'll shatter within a hundred rounds. My guess is that someone threw this together on a 3D printer in his back room."

Garrus puts his head on one side, then the other. "So you're telling me it's a Saturday night special, but they built it to military-spec blueprints? That... actually fits perfectly, although it's a bit less of a smoking gun. I guess that Fist's sugar daddy can't be seen to be shipping real weapons onto the Citadel, but plans are easy. I guess you can't tell if they were pirated or legitimate?"

"Sorry. A pirated blueprint is just as good as a real one as far as the gun's concerned."

"Okay. So. With apologies to the commander, I think that our best approach is looking like the

straightforward one. We go in there, we ask Fist what the hell, and we get ready to make it plain that we don't like half-assed answers."

"Well, that's an easy way to start a massive firefight." I raise an eyebrow. "Or do I read this guy wrong?"

He shakes his head. "No, I was kind of figuring that it would come to violence."

"Okay, let's call that plan B. Do we - I might have something wrong here, but do we actually need Fist at all?"

"Not if we bring in that quarian. She had evidence that the man we're not naming was willing to *kill* for. But short of pulling in every quarian in Zakera and Tkarren, he's our only route to her. What were you planning?"

"Well - if we don't mind evidence on Fist being inadmissible, then all we actually need from him is information. And I've got what you might call a plan..."

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The club is much like any other. Pounding music, flashing neon lights, and calling it a 'nightclub' is really being generous. This is a strip joint, just like you find anywhere else in the galaxy. Of course, this being the Citadel, the dancers are asari: young asari, by which I mean those in their first or second century, tend to be obsessive hedonists of the 'bored little rich girl' type. Combine that with the fact that the whole parthenogenetic lot of them look enough like human females to fool a randy spacer in bad lighting, and you get what I'd call a thriving industry. It's a little depressing, really, to learn that of the major races the only ones who *didn't* have the concept of this sort of establishment when they entered galactic civilisation were the salarions (who breed by arrangement between family-corporations and have no concept of sexual attraction outside very carefully controlled conditions) and the elcor (a sedentary sloth-like race who don't really wear clothing). I guess you could say it reassures us that we're all the same under the skin, carapace or encounter suit. Not sure that that isn't depressing, and all.

I get a drink at the bar; the guy behind it looks at the Kevlar (deliberately) poorly concealed under my clothes and asks sneeringly if I forgot to change out of uniform. I say I'm here to see Fist and he jerks his head: a couple of large guys come my way, seemingly out of nowhere, with smiles that don't quite reach all the way to their mouths. I follow them into a back room; four of them in here. I have a picture of Fist and he's none of these. "Good evening, gentlemen. I'm here to see your employer, I believe."

The one who speaks is behind me. "Fist don't see nobody he don't know."

I shrug. "His loss." I turn to leave; there are two guys between me and the door. "Hmm. Apparently *someone* wants to see me. Could you enlighten me?"

"Who sent you." Different speaker. Again, behind me. Cheap trick.

I don't turn. I'm not talking to them, anyway. I'm talking to the little camera in the corner of the room. "I really *could* say the name in front of the hired help, Mister Fist, but then you'd have to

promote them. Do you really want all that paperwork?"

"We had just about enough outta you, mister. Answer the goddamn question."

"Is there really any need for this, Mister Fist? Our mutual friend does so hate for his... authority... to be challenged."

The guy thinks he's blindsided me but I hear him move. A biotic pulse into the elbow I drive backwards picks him up and slams him into the wall hard enough to dent it. Programmed contingency code brings my barriers up, a nearly-ultraviolet shimmer in the air around me, a bit like a soap bubble, if a soap bubble would take the skin off a man's hand. I straighten, a faint smile on my lips. "Last chance, Mister Fist. I'm prepared to chalk that one up to... youthful exuberance."

There's a tense moment. One of them glances at the camera in the corner. I don't let my own tension show in my stance, in my expression. Of course I can take these guys - they're unarmoured unaugmented humans and I can punch through walls - the challenge will be taking three down at once without hurting any of them permanently.

"Show the nice gentleman through." The voice is younger than I expect, nasal, unpleasant. One of the thugs sticks behind to work out if I've killed his partner: I haven't, but I probably broke half a dozen ribs. I follow the other two through into one of the private rooms. Plush appointments, velvet on the walls and on the two couches, heavy soundproofing. I note that the floor tiles have been recently replaced, like there was a stain no cleaner could get out. Three drones in here, little things, clamped passively to the ceiling, tracking me as I come in. I sincerely doubt that those little things they're packing are cameras. The door closes behind the thugs as they leave. Clearly they don't care much for their employer: they saw what I could do earlier, and they're leaving me in a room with just him and his drones. Mister Fist looks nothing like his name: thin, ratlike, expensive suit which doesn't suit him. A too-large pistol in a shoulder holster ruins the lie of his jacket. I smile, professional, impersonal, and he follows suit.

"So, Mister Fist. Long time, no see."

"I don't remember you." He sits back, an exaggeratedly casual posture betraying the man's nervousness. "Don't beat about the bush. You walk in here like you own the place and you claim you're speaking for someone *very* important. What is it."

I let a little bit of alligator creep into my smile. Now to bait the hook. "Recent events. Your half-hearted attempts to 'clean' the 'house' haven't exactly been successful and productive, have they, Mister Fist. Was it perhaps a failure in the instructions that you received? Could that have been it? Was it unclear to any of those concerned that your activities should have been undetectable?"

Okay, I hadn't expected him to cave immediately. Whoever this guy's working for, scares the everliving *shit* out of him. "W-we were told that C-Sec officer would have no backup! That nobody on the force worth his badge would ever-"

"So what happened, then?"

"Commandos! I don't know where-the-frickin-hell but they got themselves a goddamn Alliance N-team! Now my boys are good, y'know, but ain't no way three men can face down odds like that.

They put a bullet in one of 'em-

"They *talked*, Mister Fist." My expression doesn't flicker; he blinks first. "They flapped their little mouths and oh, what came out but *your name*. And we asked ourselves, my employer and I, what damage, what *damage* could have been done if that information had not accidentally fallen into our hands?" I make the smile go away. "And what of the other matter."

"What other -" I indicate with a slight movement of the head that now is not a good time to be forgetful. "Look, it's all done up like a parcel, nice-like. The-" The lights suddenly go red. The music stops. A loud noise from the other room and a high thin scream. "What the f-"

"Don't ask me." I pull up my omni-tool just as Fist does. Drop the act. "Sheepdog, what's the story?"

Fist is staring wide-eyed at his security feed. "Oh my frickin' God you gotta help me."

Garrus' voice in my ear, level, steady. "Big guy just walked in there, a krogan, went straight past us 'cause he was unarmed. Bouncer tried to stop him and got his ass kicked, pressed the panic button. You want that we should stop him?"

I ignore Fist for a moment longer. "Keep the civilians safe. Guesses the krogan's after our man? I'll handle this end." I close the connection and look down at the little man. "Who."

He shakes his head convulsively. "There's nobody who could afford a, maybe one or two but-" He's lying, I can see it in his big dishonest eyes. Sounds of gunshots from outside. I feel the unmistakable rippling tension of a biotic shockwave.

"Fine, I'll ask *him* then." I go to open the door.

The little turd tries to run for it, keys a secret exit behind a velvet panel, starts to wave his hand towards the drones - I catch his wrist. "Uh-uh. Let's see what the nice man wants."

I open the door and step aside just in time to avoid a biotic shockwave like a bright blue express train. It's carrying a big alien in its wake, technically humanoid, wide-set eyes level with mine, seven feet tall from his clawed toes to the top of the hump between his shoulders, with solid overlapping armoured plates over hide like scale-mail, built like a cross between a T-rex and a rhino, two hundred forty kilograms of alien muscle. Sure, he's unarmed and unarmoured: as he efficiently cancels the shockwave before it slams him through the wall, as he spins around with a speed and grace I'd have trouble matching, I can't help but think that he *is* a weapon. I drop Fist's hand and he falls to the floor, scrabbles out from between us as I pump my barrier to full power. I don't take my eyes off the krogan for a second.

"Hnh." A corner of his wide, toothy mouth turns up. I've never been this close to a krogan who wasn't trying to kill me. "I got here second. Not here for the bounty, human?" (Fist makes himself small against the wall. He's not stupid enough to try any false moves: everyone knows that krogan can see sideways.)

"What makes you think I'm not his bodyguard?"

"Oh, don't give me that crap. You're a human biotic, which makes you government or military. I'm guessing it was your backup staking this place out. You didn't try to wax *me* when you had me dead, just then. So you're here to pick him up, and not for his protection, I'm guessing. Tell you what, human. I'll tell you everything he knows, and we can split the bounty money. Seventy-thirty, my way - I figure the information you want out of him is worth forty per cent of my fee, easy, making it an even deal."

"What do you want him for?"

"You're really not from around here, are you." The krogan chuckles deep in his cavernous throat. "There's a price, it's on his head. Rest of him's not required. In this case, there's also a message, but that's part of the information you'll be buying with your non-interference, so I won't be giving that for free." He gives the cringing Fist a disparaging glance, while looking me up and down with the other eye. "Hnh. Tell you what. Seeing as I like your face, human, here's a better deal, but it comes with one question and the question's first. How big is the thing you're chasing? How big is the piece of meat your little pyjak's run off with?"

Something makes me want to trust this guy. Call me crazy, but there's something valuable here. "It's big. Government-level big. I'm Commander John Shepard-"

"Wrex." He seems to like something that I said, or something that he sees in me, or both. "You can hand this slime to your C-sec goons outside and you can listen to me while you're on the way spinwards and outwards to Tkarren U-16. We've got twenty minutes. My price is twofold: one, no prosecution for ten-ish counts of aggravated GBH on the way in here, two, when they set you to running Saren down, you bring me along."

Blink. "Uh, what does a turian Spectre have to do with anything?"

"You're a good liar, Shepard, but not that good. I've got a score to settle with that hollow-pated three-balled douchenozzle, and pounding seven shades of shit out of him and seeing him stripped of rank is good enough for me. And now you say that you don't know whether they'll even send you, and I say believe me, I've seen this shit before."

"So how do you know where we're going?"

"That's where I was going to display the head of Laughing Boy here along with a bunch of others: the scene of the crime, if you like, although the crime in this case wasn't mine at all. And there was to be a message. It's ten minutes from here to there if we take a car, for which you're paying. Now either say yes or fight me, because if you say no then I've got a head to be plucking."

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"So. We have a few minutes. Fill us in." The car's driving itself. These things normally feel spacious and comfortable - with five of us including the krogan, it really is a squeeze.

"You trust your police officer?" Garrus straightens slightly in his seat. No idea what that's supposed to convey.

"I trust that he doesn't work for the individual you mentioned, if that's what you mean."

"Hnh. It'll have to do. So, I'm a freelancer, working today for an individual called the Shadow Broker. I see you've heard of *him*. The job was slightly nonstandard: you see, someone took the Broker's name in vain, used it to entrap someone trying to sell expensive information. Response needed to be swift. I spent half my advance on finding out what the information was. Turned out golden. The info concerned a certain famous turian of our acquaintance, and it was genuine enough to have him want to have it rubbed out cost-no-object. Reading between the lines, he burned two insider assets in the Broker's network to get a shot at scrubbing this out, and he was maybe happy to burn his main man Fist and all. That enough for you?"

"So what are we walking into?"

"An ambush disguised as a clandestine meet. The lady fair's quarian, no quarians work for Fist, so that tells you who not to shoot. She thinks she's meeting the Shadow Broker. Hnh. Shadow Broker meets *nobody*, he's notorious for it. So my contract says make a statement, and while I'm not gonna be collecting on a hundred per cent, I have my professional pride. Do you fine fellows have my back if I go in like a falling comet?"

"Ideally, we get through today without firing a shot. We're working for our government, and they *do* have our back, but... I'd rather not have to go and get the ambassador to explain why we were arrested for weaponry offences."

Garrus cuts in. "Just say 'C-Sec, drop your weapons' before cutting loose, and disable rather than kill if you've got an option. This isn't an area where the law gets the luxury of subtlety."

"Maybe I should just stay in the car." Williams smiles crookedly.

"Explain?"

"I'm a soldier, officer, trained to shoot to kill. No warning shots, no shooting to disarm or disable, because if you're shooting at a dangerous opponent then doing that is likely to get you *hurt*. If you don't want someone dead, you shouldn't be shooting at them even a little bit. I mean, I'm wearing a powered suit and I could probably take you hand-to-hand, and that's *like* nonlethal, but I don't really have an option to disable rather than kill."

"That's fine too. If you're concerned about rule violations, don't fire until they do and wait till *after* I warn them, and you're fine under Citadel law. If you've got ethical concerns, don't, these lowlifes work for a murdering piece of solid waste excretion who's up to his cloaca in fifty different sorts of nasty things. If your concerns are rather about the personal risk, you've got *nothing* to worry about. I've seen these guys fight, and I've seen you move when you have to, and their idea of 'good' is *not* mine."

"So our tactics and rules of engagement are as follows." I look at the krogan and the turian to make sure I've got their attention. "The three biotics go in first. Alenko, your projected barriers are better than mine: identify the quarian and stick to her. She's likely to think that the security forces are gunning for her, so we'll save the C-Sec authority for if it starts to get into a ranged firefight. Wrex, I'd like you to drop on the ambushers the moment you're sure you won't hurt the quarian. Concentrate on people with shields, because you're our best bet for taking them down quickly. We're going for shock and awe rather than body count, understand?" The krogan nods once. The

expression in those wide-set eyes is unreadable. "I'm going to run interference, concentrate on anyone who brought a weapon that's a threat to Wrex. Again, I want to emphasise that the reason we're going in biotics first is that we're out for nonlethal takedowns - I'm not concerned about a few broken bones, but given that we *can* disable nonlethally without extra effort I want to do that. Williams, Garrus, you're the backup. If they have reinforcements or if the fight starts taking more than a few moments, then get ready to drop the hammer: comm call for backup is 'go loud'." I look once around the car to check everyone understands. "Right. Let's do this."

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It's a crossroads. Deserted at this hour, between shifts. Don't go in blind, that would be dumb. Run a sweep over the place an hour or so beforehand, suborn the sensor grid if possible (it is? Thank the ancestors later. For now, insert a VI agent.) Nobody present: great. Hole up in a duct a few streets down: the little rat-shaped drone in there reports that the only individual past here in the last twelve standard hours was one of the insectoid, brainless Keepers, the station's indigenous life. Set an alarm.

Pass the time with some kind of productive activity; wasting your life is an insult to the ancestors. In this case, a bootleg copy of a human technical journal, only six months old. There's a paper on page 1608 about drive-core physics, something about being able to have a core big enough that your ship doesn't really need a torch drive...

The alarm bleeps insistently. Put the journal *away*, dammit, dig your head out of fantasies of having your own personal drive core and back to the real world. Poll the VI agent: it doesn't know anything, someone got to it, but there are definitely six people who've been waiting for between five and fifteen minutes, staking the crossroads out. Fine. Work out your escape route. Check every suit system once again, just like doing a pre-flight. Double-check your shield system and power-assist: being killed by a mechanical breakdown would just be embarrassing. Best not to inject a calmativ agent to stop your hands shaking: you might need the heightened reflexes that an adrenaline surge lends you. Stand tall. Resist the urge to take a deep breath: it'll only confuse your rebreather. Walk in, down a street that they know they've scanned, like you appeared from nowhere. (Realise that you gave yourself too much time with your alarm: both you and they are ten minutes early! No matter. No matter.)

If you weren't plumbed into local sensors, you'd only see the one guy they want you to see, human, apparently unarmed, leaning against the wall at the corner like he said he'd be. Microwave says he's wearing flexible armour under his clothes, carrying a gun in a concealed holster and wearing an omni-tool (who doesn't?). He's at the centre of what looks like an ambush, two salarrians, three turians. Keep the gun holstered for now. Wave to him, put a girlish smile into your voice as you say what you've been told to say. Look nonthreatening - not hard, he's taller and broader than you and he doesn't know that the suit's armoured and shielded. "Hi there. I'm told you're looking for a VI programmer?"

His eyes crawl over the outside of the suit in that manner males have that makes you want a vacuum bath. Can't see you, of course, you're on the inside. All he can see is the suit. Still enough to make you feel like somebody dunked you in hydraulic fluid. The suit's primary external mike picks up his voice and translates it into a sensible language. **"That's right, my lovely. Got a nice sweet contract for you, all lined up. Just walk this way..."** Even the translator's synthetic tone doesn't clear the slime from his voice. Ugh.

"Where's your boss? Or am I to believe that the Shadow Broker's a *human*?"

**"You believe what you like, [untranslated, food-related]. Just come with me, and everything goes fine."** The extranet article on human body language said that looking straight at someone, stepping forward like that, standing tall, letting the voice deepen, they're all danger signs. It didn't say whether they're voluntary or not: is this anger or deliberate intimidation?

"And if I stick to the deal, like we agreed, and ask to see your boss?"

**"Deal's changed, [untranslated]."** Don't ignore the flash that your contingency code throws up in your peripheral vision, it's there for a reason. The adrenaline rush of knowing that there's someone stepping out behind you - even when you knew they were there - lends a speed you're about to need. Drop a little pearl-like flashbang at your feet and dive sideways; you've got point-four seconds till it goes off.

And all hell breaks loose. The flashbang lets out a howl and shriek on fifty different frequencies, a flash of blinding light and a small explosion; the *second* concussion, louder than the first, is a definite surprise. Did someone throw a grenade? Look round. The data from fifty half-blinded perspectives at once is blinding: throw all the local sensors out of your visual field at once and drop down to just your suit and its reeling sensors. The guy at whose feet the flashbang fell is no longer there, but there's *something* in his place, bigger than he was, sheathed in ultraviolet and regular light. If that's a regular shield and not a biotic barrier, it's a strange one.

Forget that - someone's aiming a gun at you! Pay attention! Draw your own gun, dammit, bring the muzzle around - you damned well ought to be faster than him. But before one or other trigger can be pulled, it's like he stumbled and fell sideways, hit by something invisible coming from the right. Make yourself small. This pile of rubbish had been previously identified as potential cover - and now there's someone next to you! Turn again - feet hopelessly tangled in a plastic sack - why does he have his *back* to you - he's projecting a shield, a stationary barrier, your own is completely within it. A protector? Too confusing. Just accept. Worry later. (Keep that gun drawn.)

And there's noise outside the barrier and bright lights and shouting. Try and follow what's going on. A big krogan (that is to say, a krogan), wreathed in purple, grabs a turian by the helmet and throws him four metres into a pile of junk. Not a biotic throw, he just swung him around and hurled. A human, another biotic (Aren't they supposed to be rare?) catches a shotgun blast on his barrier without flinching and slaps his opponent hard against a wall with a blue flare of gravitic power. The guy who's projecting this very nice friendly purple barrier here points his omni-tool at one of the salarians: a rocket launcher? Some kind of drone control? No, it's a biotic lift, pulling the gangly bulb-headed alien off the floor and dangling him uncomfortably upside down.

The last ambusher, running, runs straight into another human. He - no, that's a female - catches the runner in the face with an efficient, contained elbow strike and he half-somersaults to slam into the ground.

And it's all over in like ten seconds. The suit warns of dangerously high CO2 levels: slow your breathing, girl, you're hyperventilating. The human projecting the barrier lowers it, slowly, checking around for threats. Lends a power-assisted hand. "[Untranslated, possibly proper nouns] Navy." Let's assume that that was a name, can always play it back later.

"Tali'zarah nar Rayya. Do you work for the Shadow Broker somehow?"

"No, [untranslated], I work for my govern- hey!" He objects to having a gun barrel shoved under his chin.

"Okay." Turn up the volume, let them all hear you. "Here's how it's going to play out." Still holding the gun against him, turn so that all five of them are in front of you, that's right. "None of you bounty-hunting b'shtetye are collecting on my head today, understand? Any funny moves and I collect on *this* head."

"Smart little [untranslated]," the krogan remarks to the human standing next to him.

Who ignores him, deliberately drops his barrier, spreads his hands wide. "Tali'Zarah nar Rayya, you have my word that we're not working for Fist, or for the man you've got information on, or for the Shadow Broker."

The krogan raises a hand with comic timing. "*Actually, I am working for the-*"

"Not helping, [proper noun]. I work for my people's government, Tali'Zarah nar Rayya, and we were here to ensure your safety. If my information had been accurate, I'd have been here waiting for you rather than Fist's thugs."

It pays to be suspicious. No matter how trustworthy he sounds, this man could be lying to save his friend. This is all too pat. "How do I know you don't work for Fist? You're human. Everyone knows krogan sell their arm to the highest bidder.

And if you know who my information is about—"

"-You won't trust the man who's been investigating him for four months, because he's also a turian." The policeman sighs. "On my honour as a son of Kirna and Palaven, may my Legion expel me, may my ancestors disown me if I play false."

"Witnessed." The mouth is moving while the mind is working. You don't hear that sort of thing every day. Lowlifes use those words to start fights. Never heard them in that smooth middle-class accent. They don't precisely mean what they say: they mean that that turian values what they said more than they value your life.

And in this case, the life of the curiously impassive hostage. Infrared detects an elevated pulse, but he's stunningly calm. The turian's gun dangles loosely from his grip, but that's an act.

Shit.

"If you lie, I swear that I will come back and haunt your babies for a thousand years." Lower the damned shotgun, let go of the human.

"So, miss - I'm sorry, I'm not familiar with your culture. Do you shorten your names in conversation?"

"Tali'Zorah; Tali. Shorter is less formal. "

"Okay, Tali. You were trying to sell information on Saren Arterius to the Shadow Broker. Do you want to tell us what it is?"

"I want to know why you care. " The helmet speaker makes her voice sound tinny and artificial. She's using a bad translation program; it has a pronounced salarian accent, with misassigned phoneme values that distort the young woman's voice into that of a lisping New Yorker.

"Saren is implicated in the murder of another Spectre, and also at least an accessory to the killing of *thousands* of my people. Garrus, the turian, is after him for corruption. Wrex has a score to settle."

"*Thousands* of murders?"

"We have reason to believe he may have been behind a geth attack in the Skyllian Verge, a place called Eden Prime."

She nods. "That is plausible, enough for me to believe you. Now, I appreciate that this sounds horrible, but... What will you pay?"

"Pay?" I'm confused. "Oh, of course, you were selling to the Shadow Broker, weren't you."

"Trying to. I'm not convinced I ever made contact. But yes, pay. I'm on Pilgrimage - I don't have the luxury of working for nothing but the good of my conscience. "

"Well, we've got regulations against bribery, but I'm almost certain that Udina has an information fund. I'm sure we can work something out. What does Pilgrimage mean, anyway?"

"It's somewhere between a doctorate and going on a good long walk until you find yourself, between getting your first job and leaving home and spending a year doing volunteer for the good of your soul. Do you really not know about my people?"

"I know that you're oxygen breathers comfortable with standard pressures and temperatures, who nevertheless have to wear space suits to enter places run by other races, something about our entire biosphere being deadly poison to you. I know that you live on spaceships and you don't have diplomatic relations with the Council. And I learned about the geth in the same breath as your people at school."

I think I touched a nerve. She throws up her hands. "All anyone knows about my people: one, we get sick, two, we created the geth and they nearly killed us all. It was only one omniscient artificially intelligent computer race. It's not like it got

to be a habit. And yet even now you talk about quarian history and everyone's all 'geth geth geth geth geth' like my people don't have artisans or poets or singer-songwriters. Did you know that they got a quarian actor in to play Darth Vader? Did you know that we've got the third longest continuous instrumental musical tradition in the galaxy after the asari and the elcor?" **She stops abruptly.** "Sorry, I'm supposed to be negotiating a better price for my information, aren't I." **She points her helmet straight at me. The faceplate's one-way reflective, but this close I can make out a couple of points of light that must be her eyes as she opens them wide.** "Grrr. "

I just about avoid laughing out loud: that's quite possibly the cutest thing I've seen an alien do, ever. "Okay, okay, consider me intimidated. So - why does being on pilgrimage mean you have to charge for everything?"

"You've got to come back with more than you left with, it's a thing. It's like - like a dowry, I hope that's the right word, I used a salarian word and hoped the translator knew what I meant. You bring your new captain a gift, to show that you aren't dead weight. I wouldn't bring money - that'd be crass and stupid, the kind of thing they'd expect of a - well, it'd be bad. But with the price of blackmail material on Saren Arterius, I would have been able to afford a ship. Nothing fancy, you know, something from an insurance auction. Then I could fix it up and fly back to the Fleet with a worthwhile gift, and of course I'd be safe on the Fleet even from a double-crossed Spectre. "

"So you're really looking for something a bit more physical than money."

"Intellectual property is good, too. We're not the pirates people take us for: even if our IP customs are a bit strange to outsiders, we do know how to handle it and we don't rip people off. I was hoping to get something out of the geth, but of course that didn't pan out quite the way I'd planned it. I don't suppose you have any geth datacores you need decoding for the low, low price of a copy taken of all the contents?"

**Blink.** "I thought the geth were AIs, unhackable."

"Yes, they like people to think that but they're very beatable. Say," **she tilts and bobs her helmeted head,** "you're not thinking of going after the geth yourself, are you? Because you'll absolutely need an electronic warfare specialist and you absolutely don't have one. "

"Hang on just a minute. A moment ago you were trying to soak me for all I was worth and now you want to join a team of mine that doesn't really even exist yet?"

"Absolutely. I have faith in you, John. Thousands of your people killed at the hands of Saren's geth, hundreds of thousands more at stake, dashing expeditions after a rogue Spectre, how could they not send a hero like you? And what sort of a machinist would I be if I didn't volunteer my services on such an endeavour,

especially when my information is crucial to it?" I'm almost certain that she just batted her eyelashes at me. It occurs to me that her eyes must be bioluminescent, to be able to see them through the semi-mirrored visor. The effect's actually quite nice, if you like that sort of thing. "You need me, John. If you're fighting geth, then even with your awesome biotic powers you won't last ten minutes without me there to blind their eyes in the sky. " She shifts slightly in her seat, recrosses her legs.

And suddenly I see *straight* through her.

"You mean that *you* need *me*. If I don't pay you enough to buy a ship, you'll have to get passage somewhere where they've never even heard of Saren Arterius - or, worse, turn up at the Fleet with *money*." She sits back and blinks like I hit her between the eyes. "But you've realised that I'll never release that kind of funds, so you want to sign up with me, figuring that the only safe place in the galaxy when a rogue Spectre hates you is on the team that's sent to catch him."

There's a good moment's pause. She looks away. Genuine weariness in her voice. "You are right; I am sorry, and you bargain hard and well; I suppose I am not so very like a human female after all. I shall ask a fair price of your Udina, and spend the money buying blueprints from the Shadow Broker - and it is not likely that even Saren's reach would extend to the brief time I'll spend travelling back to rendezvous with the Fleet. "

"Tali, look at me." She does. "No more games; I don't like being manipulated. You were telling the truth about your information, I hope?" A mute nod. "And dare I hope that you were telling the truth about your abilities." Pause; nod. "Would you be able to *survive* on a human ship?"

"I can manufacture things I can eat out of turian provisions; water is water; I breathe the same air as you, only mine is filtered; my berth is two metres by one by one by six standard hours, and I'm prepared to take a thirty per cent reduction on all those numbers if it'll get me onboard. I'm a qualified spacecraft engineer and my second degree is in computer science with a specialty in machine intelligence. If I were injured I'd need access to a small workbench and ideally a way of venting a gram or so of hazardous waste to vacuum. " The act is gone. Clear and earnest expression. If I'm giving her a chance, she's going to take it with both hands.

... "I think we'd be able to provide that. Again, I want to stress, I can't promise anything. It isn't my ship, and I don't even know that we *will* be going-

"But you'll take me? If you can? Even after I tried to manipulate you?"

I nod. "If I get to pick the team, you're on it."

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Used as I am to the cramped confines of Alliance stations and capital ships, the sheer scale of alien facilities gets to be more than a little disconcerting. The Council Chamber is massive, and mostly

wasted space; the place is lit by focused light from the local star, and by the soft diffuse glow of the incomprehensible asari light-sculpture hanging in space in the exact centre of the chamber.

And, of course, by the holographic representation of the Spectre, Saren. Ugly fellow, but I'm no judge of turians. Scarred, weathered, and with elaborate facial etchings sort of like human tattoos, 'seated' next to the turian delegate. "Councilmember, this is ridiculous. The humans accepted the risks concomitant with their disharmony when they went into the Attican Traverse and the Skyllian Verge. They are clearly unfit to defend the planets they so greedily snatch. First the Arcturus Incident, then the Skyllian Blitz, and now this. Furthermore—"

"Saren, please." The polite, controlled voice is Matriarch Tevos, for the asari. She's speaking perfect turian, probably with the accent of his home town. "If you continue with such ad-hominem attacks, we may begin to conclude that you are uninterested in the charges against you."

"Of course I'm un—"

The turian councilmember interrupts his own man, making temporary use of his privilege to mute the remote speaker. "What my esteemed subordinate wishes to convey is that he believes the charges against him are fabrications. He *accepts* their gravity and the requirement for this hearing, and certainly does not wish to recuse himself from speaking in his own defence."

"Of course." Tevos gives a polite smile, betraying absolutely nothing. "Please, Spectre, continue. Can you perhaps allow us to view your ship's records, nothing controversial, perhaps your food or oxygen consumption, around the timestamp indicated by the humans' voice recording? Or do you have other incontrovertible proof?"

"Have you forgotten who I am, Councilmember?"

"I have heard the [cultural] translation of your out-of-band comments, Spectre, I believe I do not require further unless you are truly conveying additional information?" Is that a warning note among the mild tones of the asari's voice? The translator transmits one, but I have no idea whether it was supposed to be there. I now understand why our diplomats bust their asses learning all the alien languages. "Your word is considered above reproach among your people, as this human's word and that of his subordinates is considered above reproach among his. They submit evidence, as is their custom and that of *my* people. Will you send corroboration of your alibi?"

"I will submit my [oath]." The turian draws himself up. "And only out of respect for you, Tevos. Before this audience let it be witnessed that I, Saren, swear in [honour] upon the Arterius name and my lineage of Palaven and Tirast that I do not lie. Nihlus was mistaken as to the identity of the turian he reported. "

The turian councillor nods slightly: this is considered acceptable by his people. The asari turns to us. "There we have it. It is well-known that no [true] turian would lie under these circumstances, and by dint of long association I know that Saren is as [true] as they come: he may hate you, but you hate him: I do not mean to disparage you or belittle your loss, but is it so hard to allow the possibility that Nihlus was simply mistaken? Unless there is additional information which you feel

you must submit, I shall be forced to move that these charges are unsubstantiated."

Udina speaks. "Actually, Councilmembers, there is further information." He 'throws' a hologram into the shared display space in the centre of the chamber, temporarily replacing the light-sculpture. "This is a notarised and authenticated scan of a physical object in the possession of the human embassy: the processing core of a geth prime unit. Through a series of methods I do not plan to go into, we have broken the encryption on the device; I did not wish to bring it to light in open Council, due to the sensitivity of this data, but circumstances leave me little in the way of choice. Along with an amount of tactically useful data, which we will of course submit to the Council for free distribution among galactic civilisation, we found the following recording."

The hologram swirls, fogs and clears. First-person perspective. One is standing on the bridge of a ship. One is looking dispassionately at the controls of a console not designed for one's software inputs; one is working them carefully with one's three-fingered metal hands. One hears a voice. Female? Ah - asari. Speaking the turian language.

"...sure the Conduit is here?" The asari councilmember raises both eyebrows sharply, taps a fingernail on the table twice; a startled aide calls up her omni-tool and assumes an expression of ferocious concentration.

**Another voice. Male. Turian. Unmistakably Saren's.** "It's your [blasted] research, woman. "

"Not my research. In fact, my own daughter disagrees with it. It was your insistence that led us to this place." The asari with the omni-tool holds it up and takes an image of the hologram.

"The geth are becoming increasingly impatient. Every other conversation I have with them is about the return of the Reapers, where is the Conduit, have we found the Conduit, what use are we if we don't have the Conduit. "

"Well, remind them of their place, dear. "

The voice is becoming distorted. "I have little wish to over-use that particular tool. They are adaptable to the extreme: I do not wish to allow them to study my - methods of chastisement - more than I have to. "

**The voice is significantly distorted, but recognisably unchanged.** "Then do as I recommended in the first place and follow the archaeology. The humans should have uncovered the thing by now. "

The hologram fogs.

The salarian councilmember sits forward, opens a holographic screen of his own and calls a copy of the recording down into it. "First-round analysis is [purple], I am afraid to say."

Saren, on holo, is speechless for a moment.

"Excuse me for one moment." The asari matriarch raises the same eyebrow she raised before and turns her head slightly. "Lilia, dear?"

Her aide steps forward. They begin to converse rapidly in a language the translator doesn't understand. From their expressions, the other councilmembers don't either. When the aide steps back, the matriarch's smile is quite absent. "Your allegations are serious, humans. Be assured, they are as we speak being taken seriously."

Saren suddenly explodes into speech. We are all taken by how similar his voice sounds to the recording. "You cannot possibly believe that this [fabrication] is realistic. Nobody could have retrieved the undamaged core of a geth prime. Nobody has ever defeated geth encryption. "

"That isn't... quite true, Spectre." The salarian's nasal voice again. "I believe that *three* organisations have the capacity. Special *Tasks* would appreciate a copy of the encrypted data if you have it, Ambassador. Until we have that, the *highest* likelihood we can give for this being faked is one chance in sixty-four. An *upper* bound."

"The data will be with you in *moments*, councilmember." Udina pulls up a keyboard and begins to type quickly.

Saren's voice is chilling. "Disclose your source, ambassador. It is well known that I have a quarrel with a variety of the Citadel's information brokers, information from whom is inadmissible in open Council. "

Udina finishes typing, looks up and spreads his hands. "Must I pander to this, Councilmembers? I know and trust the origin of this data, but I have little desire to acquire a reputation for giving up my private sources."

The asari councilmember inclines her head pleasantly. "Perhaps you can instead set his and my mind at rest by affirming that it was not the Shadow Broker or some other inadmissible source."

"I can affirm that with a clear conscience, Councilmember."

"Then I must ask you, Saren, Spectre. Assuming this is true: kindly account for its existence?"

"I will not, Councilm-

She mutes his transmission, cutting him off midsentence. "I move in open vote that we conclude Saren's audience with the Council; his argument is clear and his presence is [becoming a distraction]." She raises her hand and the other two do likewise. "Carried." And Saren's image vanishes.

Her voice fills the silence that he leaves. "Ladies and gentlemen, we thus have a serious problem. The asari in the recording was Matriarch Benezia, Saren's friend and ally; the voice-print is hers with exact [fidelity]. She is not returning my calls, has not been seen at home or at any of her major investments or recreational activities, and could plausibly have been in the Terminus

Systems very recently. But under asari law, as a kin-matriarch she has immunity from prosecution and investigation save for by another matriarch or a Justicar, and those must be conducted in person. And under the Council treaty, nationals of Council races are to be treated under their laws except where specific-

"Excuse me, Councilmember Tevos." The turian delegate speaks. The translator gives him a coldly furious tone of voice. "The greater issue is this. Assuming the data passes muster under the scrutiny of Special Tasks, then Saren Arterius - the greatest Spectre for two generations - has as good as forsworn himself to my face. The Turian Hierarchy refuses to allow such an... [oathbreaker]... to serve the Council on its behalf. Councilmember Valern, is the data genuine?"

The salarian looks up from his console and sniffs. "It is genuinely encrypted with geth protocols, and it genuinely came from a prime unit's processing core. My people continue to work on decryption. But I am satisfied already. The humans do not have access to geth encryption, and we have decoded enough of the supplementary data to match it identically with data in the supposed digest of contents. They could not have created this file, and according to my sources they did not buy it. Either the [admiralty] of the Quarian Migrant Fleet made up this file to the humans' specification, using a hitherto unrevealed quantum-entanglement communicator link between their research-and-development arm and the human embassy on the Citadel, *and did it for free*, or my own people made this up to discredit Saren and Benezia, which they did not, or it is genuine."

The asari purses her lips. "I have already submitted the matter to [plural] vote, with sixty per cent overall majority in favour on a thirty per cent [turnout]. Subject to full ratification by my people in [popular] vote later this afternoon, the asari republics authorise their councilmember to introduce motions and cast votes in Council where such actions are for the sole purpose of punishing any Council employee to whose behaviour she has a [moral] objection; this authorisation to last four years. The asari republics hereby register objection to the Spectre status of a man who refuses a direct order from a Councilmember. I call a secret vote: please read your consoles."

There's a pause of less than five seconds.

"Carried. It is hereby recorded that Saren Arterius is to be placed under condition of sanction and ordered to return to the Citadel to place himself under the investigation of the Spectres, at penalty of loss of legal powers and status. Furthermore, this day we issue orders to Special Tactics and Recon to find and apprehend Saren Arterius in the contingency that he does not cooperate." She looks at Udina. "Does that satisfy you, Ambassador?"

"It does, Councilmember, but if I may?" She nods assent. "The geth. They are still in my people's space, and we have colonies in danger. Has the Council considered my concurrent request for assistance in this matter?"

It is the turian who speaks. "Flatly, we cannot send a fleet into the Traverse. It is impossible. It would provoke a war with the Batarian Hegemony."

"The Special Tasks Group are already deployed in the area." The salarian delegate sniffs. "Your military strength is significant: we will share information on geth movements with your own fleets, such that other civilians will at least have fair warning of attack."

"And we propose to task a Spectre team to aid you. An individual with military training and

qualifications, with particular interest in the issue and in hunting down Saren - although we would prefer it if you were to provide him with a ship." The asari smiles. "John Shepard, for the duration of this crisis and with an option on permanency should your performance be acceptable, the Council is pleased to extend you the provisional status of Spectre."

... Okay, not entirely unexpected, I suppose. And they know I don't like the Spectres, I've hardly made it a secret. But I could *use* this. Humanity's first, of course. A big public relations thing. A big *career* thing. And it falls into place. That's why there was a Spectre on our ship on the way to Eden Prime; that's why we were aboard the ridiculously expensive multi-role *Normandy* rather than a more standard frigate; that's why I keep seeing hand-picked crew with elite records every time I turn around; that's why Udina didn't bat an eyelid about sending me to do an intelligence officer's work today. He must have known about this for a long time. Anderson's aware. This was a planned thing. But the asari councillor has taken advantage of the situation to make it look like a knee-jerk response, but also to put me on what's effectively probation and give them a diplomatic 'out' should my behaviour cause too many ripples - there are wheels within wheels here.

All I need to know is, they're giving me a command and sending me after Saren and the geth. I can do that. I nod. "Formally, let it be recorded that subject to my commanding officer's permission, I accept. Councilmembers, delegates, Ambassador. It's an honour, and one I hope to spend the rest of my life living up to. I appreciate the situation; you aren't setting me an easy task, but it's one that I'm sure I shall prove more than equal to. I can have a team lined up and ready to move within hours."

Udina takes this and runs with it. "We will furnish Spectre Shepard with a ship and a veteran crew. We will cooperate fully with his investigation without let or hindrance, and our authorities will recognise his Spectre status effective immediately."

"John Shepard, we charge you to investigate Saren and Benezia and the geth. Apprehend Saren if you can. Your Spectre status allows you to investigate Benezia: if she is genuinely implicated in this, we need to know, and quickly. We shall pass you what information we have. You say your team will be ready today, and we believe that your ship is already available; we would like an interim report in seventy-two hours. You and your people are excused, Spectre."

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"New posting, Williams?"

She stops, a kitbag slung over her shoulder, turns and looks at me with a guilty expression. Puts the kitbag down and comes to attention. "Sir. No, sir. I was told you were shipping out within the day and figured I'd beat the rush - I can stay with friends on the Citadel, book a place on the next ship going into the Traverse and rejoin what's left of my chain of command."

"Well, I made a couple of inquiries on your behalf, like I said, and something's come up. If you're interested."

"The details, sir?"

"It's a bit nonstandard. I know a special forces commander who's putting together a hand-picked team to go into the Traverse, performing covert recon and small-unit operations under the noses

of the geth. Ideally he's looking for an N3, but something recently convinced him that a Marine warrant officer could fill the slot, and a second qualified armourer would be an asset. He's read your record and he's not fazed. Mission profiles would be relatively unconventional and you'd end up working alongside aliens some of the time - like I said, nonstandard."

"Is this entirely above-board, sir? Sounds like the person he's after is more of a Blue Suns mercenary than an Alliance G2."

"Absolutely above-board, and no, he'd prefer it if the humans involved had security clearance. The other thing - this is a time-limited offer. I'm afraid I can't let you go away and think about it."

The penny drops. "Because you're shipping out within the day, sir?"

Grin. "Got it in one, Williams. I can't promise safe or quiet, and all that will go on the record is a transfer to 'Special Tactics\Recon' followed by a stony silence. But we're going after Saren and the geth. And I can at least promise that it'll be interesting."

"So why me, sir? Beyond that I'm already here?"

"Because you ran a mile or so alongside two guys in powered armour and didn't fall behind. Because you shoot to kill or you don't shoot at all. Because you took a shotgun blast from three feet and left the guy that did it alive. And because you told me there was a black mark on your record. I'm glad you're going to be watching my back, Williams."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." She looks ruefully around the cabin she's standing at the door of. "I guess I have to move out of this stateroom, though."

"Alenko will be handling berth assignments. We're swapping our squad of devil-dogs out for a Mako armoured vehicle and its ground crew, and he's handling who and what goes where."

"Wait-wait-wait. I'm sorry, you're swapping ten Marines *out* and me *in*? What the hell did they do?" She blinks. "Sir."

"Well, I've got a new reason: you speak your mind. I like that. But like you said, I need a snap decision. I don't have *time* to put them to the test, and you've already passed. Also, they have specialties that aren't 'armourer' - genuinely, you ask for a squad of commandos, they give you nine N2s and an N3 and then they wonder why the armoury looks like a bomb's hit it already and all the guns rattle."

•

"Commander Shepard? Sorry if this is a bad time." Well, from one perspective it *is* a bad time. It's half-past-twelve A.M. in the morning and I'm sitting at what used to be Captain Anderson's desk in what used to be Captain Anderson's cabin, reading personnel files rather than getting some sleep. Lieutenant-Commander Alenko looks like he shouldn't be up, either, but he's agitated, biting his lip.

"Kaidan, come in, sit down. What can I do for you?"

He sits on a swivel-chair. "It's the people you just brought on board, sir, the aliens. Wrex and Tali and even Garrus. I think I'm going to need you to exert privilege for me."

"Tell me more. I'm not keen on starting out my Spectre career by breaking any laws."

"Well, sir, not to put too fine a point on it, all three of them brought on board some items or substances that are... Less than legal."

"What sort of less-than-legal? I can't exactly begrudge them their personal equipment, and I can't figure any of them as dumb enough to try and use this unit as a cover for smuggling."

"Well, I tell you what, I'll go through them in order. Tali'Zorah was first onboard, like she'd been hanging out just around the corner waiting for your call."

"She had."

"Right. No kitbag or anything, mind, just her. I gave her the full scan when she stepped onboard, as per regs, and all I picked up was her sidearm - now, I *know* she owns more weaponry than that because she shoved it in my face. So I may have happened to scan her three times with my omni-tool as I was showing her around. Two can play at electronic warfare."

"And?"

"And the girl's an armoury. Those bands of fabric wound around her suit are concealing *pockets* like you wouldn't believe. Her sidearm's a standard security model; she's carrying four spares, three of them disassembled, along with a couple of hundred milligrams of encapsulated element zero granules, *two litres* of omni-gel and a shotgun that's illegal in four jurisdictions. Her omni-tool is a model I'd expect to see on an Alliance field engineer, for all that she's covered all the clever bits up with a cheap commercial wrapper. And she's carrying what I first identified as a *bomb* - on reflection, it's 'just' a block of plastic explosive. No detonator."

I raise my eyebrows. "And in her other hand?"

He chuckles. "Supplies of fifteen different prescription drugs - mostly immunosuppressants and antibiotics, if I read the extranet articles right - and four hundred fifty grams of chocolate. *Laevo-amino* chocolate, Earth-standard."

"Well, I had advance warning of her medical supplies and it's not illegal to carry around foods that you're allergic to - I'll never give up on understanding the bizarre behaviour of our nonhuman friends, but in this case it doesn't look harmful. I'll have a word about that bomb - chemical explosives are hazardous things. What about Garrus?"

"Garrus showed up with a sensor-opaque briefcase. I asked him to open it and he refused with the words, and I quote directly, 'the contents of this case are radioactive, poisonous, explosive and will spontaneously combust in an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere'. He gave me a manifest: it includes, among other joyous items, a block of solid polonium."

"I'm gussing that it's all specialised anti-synthetic ammunition: it's not exactly a smuggler's kit. I'll have him talk with Williams and Adams about safe storage."

"You're awfully calm about this guy nonchalantly rolling up with a suitcase full of radioactive poisonous explosives."

"If Adams says he knows what he's doing with them, that'll be good enough for me. If not, that's a different story, but so far none of this is what I would call a problem."

"Not to deliberately draw your attention or anything, but it *is* illegal."

"Would be, if they weren't working for me, and those laws *are* there for a reason, but this is all within what I should have expected. So what did Wrex bring, a nuke?"

"Not quite. His armour and weapons are illegal without a security license, but he's got one - issuing authority was the Turian Hierarchy. The license is pretty old, but *he's* pretty old, or says he is. No, the problem was in his personal kitbag. Little brown box in there containing what I'm guessing is the offspring of a hypodermic needle and a hammer and chisel, and... Well. Take a look."

"...That's... one *interesting* box. Not sure I'd call that 'little', either."

"Yeah, that's roughly my reaction."

"Let me talk to him. Maybe there's a good explanation."

"Like what? I swear, if he tells you it's a religious sacrament, you can tell him I already called bullshit."

"Maybe those chemicals do different things to him."

"I sincerely doubt it. I mean, I know that those people are tough as nails coated in other, harder nails. But I'm having a hard time believing they use injected hard drugs as a morning pick-me-up."

"Leave it with me: I'll figure something out."

"So you're prepared to sign off that this shit is fine, so I can file our paperwork?"

"No. I'm prepared to sign off that this shit is *under my cognizance*. Spectre status doesn't mean I can ignore the law - it just means that it won't get in my way."

He nods. "I suppose I still need to file the paperwork."

"Afraid so, Kaidan."

"Dammit. Celebrity should have privileges." He gets up. "Enjoy your reading, sir. I'll see you in the morning." The door slides shut behind him.

•

"Wrex."

The krogan is at a workbench in the cargo bay, carefully cleaning one of his guns. He doesn't turn round, but the eye I can see swivels to look at me. "Shepard."

"My first officer asked me to have a word with you about our customs and regulations."

He grunts. "Your ship, your rules."

"Specifically, Alliance ships are similar to Alliance colonies and space stations as far as our laws on controlled substances are concerned."

"I'd have to be pretty dumb to try smuggling under your nose, Shepard. Quite apart from the fact I don't control your destination, it makes you look bad and so you're gonna come down on it like a half-ton of rubble. I'm here to settle a score with your target and I can do that if he's dead or alive, so I'm no trouble to you. You don't have to worry about any freelance capitalism from me on the side - it'd just get in my way as well as yours. Besides, if I'm caught doing that kind of thing then I lose my turian security license. That little bleeder's worth twenty per cent on my fee, so I take care of it."

"On the one hand, you say that. On the other hand, your kit contains large quantities of several substances that are illegal almost everywhere in civilised space."

"This is about my medication, isn't it."

"That's a pretty funny definition of 'medication' you've got there."

"It's for personal use. I repeat, I'm not a smuggler." I realise, watching his lips move, that he's actually speaking English rather than using a translator.

"Was it really necessary to bring an entire kilogram of the stuff?"

"The way you people crack down on it, I don't know the next time I'm going to find a human drug dealer. And all bless your planet for inventing something so damn useful. Yeah, it messes you people up but good. It's not like I'm going to hand it out to any humans: I need that shit."

"Could you at least store it somewhere-"

Wrex carefully puts down the component he's holding and turns to regard me with both beady deep-set eyes. "If something gets between me and my heroin, human, then eventually something is going to get *broken*."

"Did I make a mistake letting you on board, Wrex?"

"I don't know. Are you going to keep making a fuss about my medication?"

"Are we going to have a problem if you run out?"

"Yes." He sees me open my mouth and interrupts me. "But not in the way you think. You've never travelled with a krogan before, have you, Shepard."

"No, I haven't. What are you trying to say?"

He sighs. "Okay. Brief potted description. The krogan hindbrain isn't exactly polite and relaxed like yours. We've got a whole set of reflexes and thought processes that barely even go through our conscious mind. The world that forged us is not a kind and gentle place, and you don't often have time to sit and ponder. My reactions aren't actually any faster than yours, either conscious movement or unconscious reflex. But you have many, many fewer unconscious reflexes. If something is moving, within an arm and a half's reach, anywhere I can't see it with both eyes, it gets hit. If something is going to touch me in the next half a second and I know about it, it gets hit. If something touches *me*, it doesn't get its hand back. This kind of thing. Being around people, being indoors, smelling unfamiliar smells, all this shit is like sandpaper on an exposed tongue, like salt on a bleeding cut. And the deck moving under me, even though I can feel the gravity waves, is the worst of all."

"So you drug yourself?"

"Enough to stop me doing harm by accident, not enough to stop me doing harm on purpose. A lot of my people travel under sedation if they can afford to. Me, I work on ships and stations as much as under the open sky, so I figured I'd better get with the program. And heroin and ketamine are better for me than the drugs I used to use."

"How long will what you've got with you last?"

"No 'you're not taking that on my ship'? No moral outrage? No 'you do know that's addictive'?"

"Would it help?"

He turns up one corner of his wide mouth. "Hnh. We'll get along just fine. Provided--"

"-I keep the crew out of your heroin stash. No problem. Oh, and by the way? If I find out you're lying to me, once I've finished laughing, you leave us at the next stop and it's your business if that turns out to be an airless rock inhabited by five vorcha and their pet dog. Got it?"

"You are a very strange human. Yes, I understand, if I try and screw you over I'm out."

"Not sure you do, so I'll explain. I'm exercising my authority to substitute my moral judgement for interstellar and local law, on your behalf, on your testimony, and I need to be able to do that in a hurry in an emergency. My threshold for getting rid of someone from the team is going to be 'if I can't trust them that far'. I made a snap decision when we met, that you wouldn't have a problem with that. Don't make me wrong."

He nods crisply. "I like you, human. You remind me of the man I thought I'd be when I grew up. Now if there isn't anything further, I really do have seven guns to disassemble before lunchtime."

•

"May Day. May Day. This is Liara t'Soni calling the generalised assistance channel." Her hand is steady. Adrenaline causes the world around her to distort slightly, the fight-or-flight response causing her senses to sharpen and her biotics to shiver. "I am reading three vessels inbound to my

location: forty degrees twelve and three by eighteen degrees twenty and seventeen, planet Therum, system Knossos, Artemis Tau Cluster. I know they are hostile because they have immobilised our ship. I believe the silhouettes to correspond to those last seen during the Quarian Morning War, which makes them likely to belong to a race known as the 'geth', Thessia index code zero-four-six. I fear for my life and those of my four team-mates. We will shortly be retreating into the workings of our archaeological dig in order to hide. Please send assistance in force. Message repeats."

She clicks off the microphone, sits back and sets the message to repeat. Takes a moment to centre herself. Her colleagues need not see her like this. Once she's got enough of a grip on herself that her mass and inertia aren't fluctuating with her pulse, she stands up and dons the helmet of her suit. She keys the comlink. "General chat, this is Dr. t'Soni. I have put the distress call out. We have done all we can. Time to go."

"Damn you, Liara, I'm not ready!" Orayt's voice has an unpleasant nasal twang even for a salarian. "Ten more minutes. I cannot conscience leaving this artifact behind and it will be *broken* if I bring it in this state."

"In ten minutes, the question will be whether you are prepared to *die* for that artifact." She allows a hint of the sour frustration she feels to creep into her voice. "Or did you not hear the orbital strike? We need to *move*. Now."

"Move all you want. I'm staying."

Liara is in the little prefab hut's airlock and it's cycling. "That was an order. Who is senior researcher on this dig, Orayt?"

"To all intents and purposes, my dear, I am. Seniority and age are only semi-correlated and I tell you again that—"

"I am the representative of Serrice University here, my good man, and *you* are *my* collaborator. I have —"

"I do not mean whose name is first on the papers, dear girl. You are still a mere juvenile, by rights a post-doctoral research assistant or secretary! I do not care with whom you fornicated to obtain official seniority on this expedition—"

"Oh, for Goddess' sake! Pull your head out of your cloaca, professor, and look out of the damned window!" The airlock irises closed behind her and she makes her way over to the laboratory hut, sees through the window the grim-faced salarian piling layers of self-sealing foam around the priceless ancient artifact. "No matter how you insult me, Orayt, this team is *my* responsibility and I am not leaving you to the tender mercies of the geth."

No reply. She shouts his name. No reply. She sees him call up his omni-tool and knows he is turning off the speaker.

And she's pretty certain that those pretty meteoric streaks of light in the sky are the geth.

•

Our first destination is the planet Feros, a corporately operated colony originally set up to investigate Prothean architecture, built in the stratospheric upper architecture of an ancient and polluted Prothean city-world. Once again, we're a little bit ahead of the reinforcements - we're interested in the planet because one of Matriarch Benezia's close associates made an extranet access connection from here, the most recent contact anywhere from her or any of her inner circle. Name of Shiala t'Last.

The general distress call reached us while we were already in transit and we forwarded it to Third Fleet. Looks like a smash-and-grab raid - they're reporting multiple landers but no big ship in orbit. Once again, we get to announce the incoming reinforcements rather than ride to the rescue ourselves. Well, at least they'll have good - if expensive - scouting data.

"Exo-Geni corporate air-traffic control isn't responding, commander." Alenko waves a hand through the absolutely regulation, factory-default user interface of his station. "I'm picking up a signal from something that calls itself a village supply dock, though."

"Can we make landing?"

Joker cuts in. "Under stealth, sure. If they can take a civilian transport then we can land without a problem. But I don't like the look, sir. Four geth landers around the corporate tower, nothing on the employee village."

"Noted. We'll go in loaded for bear. Any sign of that big bastard we saw over Eden? Any sign of any non-geth vessels?"

"That's a negative on both counts. Nowhere they could hide, sir, not from us."

"Okay. This will be our first landing under stealth. Remember that we're still visible to the Mark One Eyeball, and that includes thermal sensors when we're in atmosphere. No sense refrigerating a hull with air friction going on. Bring us in among the ground clutter, as fast as is safe."

Joker looks around at me in surprise. "If I evade well enough to stay off military sensors, then civilian traffic control won't see us until we're basically on top of them. They'll go bananas."

"Better that than tangling with those geth. I know you've been looking for a chance to put Normandy through her paces, Joker. Just don't fly into anything, okay?"

He grins. "Aye, sir. One buzzed control tower coming right up."

•

"Anyone else find those guys a little... Creepy?" Williams says out of the corner of her mouth as we set off along the skyway towards the ancient, abandoned skyscraper that until recently served the Exo-Geni people for a workplace.

"Know what you mean," Wrex rumbles. "I assume that you people don't typically work together that prettily."

"So humans are not usually like that?" Tali ducks her head, sort of birdlike. "Sure, it was unsettling, but that was because it was almost deserted. Sixty people in the space for several hundred."

"No, that was about right for a village of twenty or so families. Although Wrex is right - they were acting awfully synchronised. But it's the calm that worried me. The tower next door's crawling with geth and a ship large enough to take most of the village arrives: we should have been swarmed with people trying to get onboard." I scan the skyway through a lens from my omni-tool. "Let's file it under mysteries for now. The coast is clear enough. Let's move."

•

The map the colonists gave us calls this abandoned Prothean garage an emergency bunker. The blast doors open as we approach - sloppy, as Wrex remarks - to reveal a couple of guys in expensive Exo-Geni security kit carrying rifles they plainly don't know how to use, keeping the muzzles well down at the sight of Alliance uniforms.

Inside, I talk to the boss - is there an asari here, name of Shiala? Nobody by that name - before trying the two asari shivering quasi-companionably around a heating unit in one corner of the bay.

They speak quietly, eyeing Ashley silent at my shoulder. No, they don't know that name. Any other asari visit recently? One of them notes in sardonic fashion that even meteorites avoid Feros, but something in her manner makes me keep digging. Eventually she draws herself up and asks me how military authority gives me the right to question them as if they were criminal suspects.

And well, it turns out that the fastest and easiest way to get two low-paid asari to turn on their employers is to flash Spectre insignia. I don't even need to start saying what I'm after before they start in on the information - it's more than just a guilty conscience, they genuinely seem to treat a sight of Spectre insignia to be a death threat. And... yeah. A look from Alenko says he's recording this.

So Exo-Geni isn't here to study the Protheans at all. There's something else, something massive, something *alive*, that lives under the spire of the worker village - a spire, as far as they can tell, built deliberately to contain and support it in the distant past. The workers were placed there before they knew about it, their homes deliberately exposed to the thing's spores in the hope that information would be forthcoming. They describe the creature, massive, plantlike, spore-bearing, and Wrex calls it a 'Thorian' with an expression of honest surprise. Functionally immortal creatures capable of vast recall, almost like living computers. Ancient things, tens of thousands of years at least. Sessile. And wear your helmet, he says, and the asari concur. The spores are mind-affecting - less like spooky psychic stuff and more like automated networked dispensers of psychotropic drugs.

But what does this have to do with the other asari, the one I'm after? Well, they don't know much about that. Perhaps I should ask the other Spectre.

...Other Spectre? Yes - Saren Arterius, the famous turian Spectre, didn't I know he was here? The one who left just as the geth arrived. He and a group of huntresses - *asari* huntresses, yes, are there any other kind - visited the Thorian before they left.

Even the dumb human can put two and two together from *that* trail. Whatever he was after - perhaps the Thorian will know. And so we head out.

•

We leave aside questions of what Exo-Geni were doing and why. Alenko records it - the deliberate creation of low-level positions, enough to support a small colony, the provision of a prefab village right on top of the Thorian, the medical recording device built into the free mandatory omni-tool mod required of all of them - but our primary concern is elsewhere. We brush aside what geth patrols we find. They're here for something in the other spire - more likely, they've been told there's something in there and they're here as a distraction.

The villagers are at first dismissive of our requests to attempt to descend the spire, then opposed to them on increasingly implausible grounds, then openly hostile. Their attempt to physically block our path is respectfully ignored. Someone throws a punch at Tali, who responds to the sudden unexpected shock of impact with a small scream and near-instantly puts me between her and the scary unpredictable humans; what was a gathering crowd turns into a mob and suddenly we're at the centre of a potential riot. We end up blocking a passage behind us rather than hurt people; I swear I hear fingernails scrabbling at the two-ton concrete block we pull down across our route.

And down there, in a gloom lit only by far-infrared suit lights, we find the Thorian itself. It's half the size of the Normandy, noisome and many-tendriled, ancient and weathered, covered in strange orifices and mysterious organs. And attended, somewhat surprisingly, by what looks almost exactly like a naked asari matching the description I have of Shiala.

She speaks stiltedly. Her phrases are translated. A demand for full payment. A requirement for explanation of our return. We should leave, she says, as we agreed. Explaining that we are not Saren's people proves impossible. Saren got the information he wanted, she says, now LEAVE.

Looking back at it, I'm not at all sure exactly how it was that we got out of that. One moment it was a tense discussion with the asari, the next she leapt at me. Throwing her into a wall did little more than slow her down - resilient to physical impacts and capable of projecting a barrier herself, she eventually went down when Wrex pinned her down and shot her with both barrels. And another surprise - no blood. This was effectively a bunch of fibrous tendrils bound together in humanoid shape. Very lifelike in far-infrared, without visible light to show that the body was a uniform green-brown colour.

And then they started to boil out of every tunnel and passageway. Copies of Shiala and of the colonists. Like zombies, like wild animals they came for us. Didn't exactly hang around to see what they wanted. Garrus and Williams swapped to incendiary rounds, taking the things down with short controlled bursts to the centre of mass; Tali swapped her shotgun to what turned out to be target-shooting ammunition designed to leave a neat hole in paper, and in the first lull in the action she fabricated up a small drone with a large and welcome flamethrower. A chamber we stumbled upon on our way out looked like something out of *Aliens*: bulbous pods on the walls carried wasted corpses, our arrival too late for these. One at the end told our scanners it had a cutting-edge omni-tool and a powered suit in it; deploying a blade from my own omni-tool, I cut the thing open and an unconscious asari fell into my arms. And the Thorian must eventually have decided to cut its losses in the face of our refusal to give up and die, because the zombies

eventually stopped coming.

•

Even rushed back to the Normandy, she's going to need reconstructive surgery and long-term treatment. Her bones are going to be fragile forever. She's attached to a freefall unit, tethered a few inches above the bed by what's basically a nip-and-tuck in the ship's artificial gravity field. Her eyes are closed but she's conscious, her breathing shallow, a tube feeding oxygen into her nose. Chakwas did eventually manage to get the armour off without taking her skin with it. Her skin should be light blue, coloured by the element-zero in her blood; it's a bloated muddy green and there are strips of skin missing at the tips of the seven-pointed hairlike crest on her head, where it stuck to my hand as I supported her head when we carried her out of there.

Her eyes move under closed eyelids. I feel her reach out instinctively, her biotics serving her like a bat's squeak or a cat's whiskers: where is she? Then her eyes snap open. I've been waiting here because of this. This woman worked for our enemy and may know that we mean him no good. No matter what she's been through, she may see us as hostile. The doctor is suspiciously watching presence on the far side of sickbay. She's familiar with the concept of dangerous patients, but that doesn't mean she has to like it.

The asari's voice is thin, weak, but admirably controlled. My translator picks up her words. "Is this a civilian vessel?"

"No, Ms. T'Last. This is the SR-1 Normandy, currently detached to Special Tactics and Recon. You're safe."

"By which you mean that I cannot hear *it* in the back of my head. For that and the painkillers in my bloodstream you have my thanks, human." She takes an attempt at a deep, weary breath. "Unhhhh. To which Spectre do I owe my life?"

"Me, Ms. T'Last. My name's John Shepard-"

Her body doesn't move but I feel her sudden flinch, the readiness to bring her barriers up; even incapacitated like this, she's still dangerous. I meet her gaze, deliberately don't slam up my own barriers, but allow her to feel that I *could*. "I... see." Another painful breath. "So, am I under arrest?" Her voice isn't so much tense as resigned. Drained.

I shake my head. "Even if you weren't in sickbay. We're after Saren, not his people."

"I'm not 'his people', you know, much as you won't-" she coughs weakly- "won't believe that."

"You might be surprised what I will and won't believe, Ms. t'Last. Could you tell me how you got where we found you?"

She closes her eyes. Warning look from the doctor. She speaks slowly, as if each sentence causes her pain. "He wanted something from the Thorian. He said he had had a meaningless vision, that it was 'meant for eyes he didn't even have', that the Thorian could help, could translate for him. He said he came on behalf of Exo-Geni. He wanted to call in 'his' credit, offered all kinds of concessions in return for 'an audience'. And the Thorian birthed this... humanlike thing... And it

spoke. It said okay, but the price was high. He would need to let it copy all he was, he said that was unacceptable. The Thorian's creeper thing said that perhaps another... I was closest." She takes a stab at a deep, careful breath. "So he bid me go to it. As - *payment*."

"Dear God. Didn't you object?"

She sighs. "You'd have thought. No. It's... Hard to elaborate. I thought that it was a good idea - no. I knew that it was the worst thing in the world, but somehow it didn't mean a thing. And so I took off my helmet and inhaled deeply and my hands... Moved by themselves. And suddenly I..." Her voice tails off.

Dr. Chakwas is giving me a seriously dirty look by now. The asari starts talking again, in that flat dead voice you associate with a blacked-out silhouette of a victim talking on the news. "It made me... *contact* him. His mind. It made me... You know, link my senses to his. And it showed me - well, it was showing *him*, but I had to *see* - and then he and the rest of my squad just turned on their heel and left me lying there and we go from that to this. Are you - are you going after him?"

I take a moment to respond. The sheer... "Yes. Yes, I'm going after him."

She nods. "Come closer and say that. I'll show you-"

The doctor intervenes. "Shiala, you are beyond the end of your endurance already."

"Doctor, I am probably *dead* already. I *know*. Will you let me avenge my death?" The two of them lock eyes. It's Dr. Chakwas who looks down.

I move closer, as she motions me to, until I'm very close to her. "Relax, John Shepard. Clear your thoughts. Breathe with me." She begins to breathe deeply; I can feel the hair on the back of my neck stand on end as I follow suit. The pupils of her eyes enlarge as she looks into mine, growing until the whole of her eyes are dark. I can feel the biotic nodes inside me resonating with her heartbeat. I can feel a shadow of her pain and discomfort covering me like a coarse veil. I can feel her mouth opening -

"Embrace eternity," she says, and her wide dark eyes expand to fill my whole world.

•

Child of privilege. Writer of law. Owner of property. Speaker of words, speak and listen.  
Technology. Learning. Knowledge. A life, a long life, as it flashes before four yellow eyes.

A lexicon. Context. Body language. Smell. Taste. A body, lithe and limber and strong, power and knowledge, superiority bred into every scale.

Words. Images. Their meanings. Long association. Not information so much as the sensation of having known.

The cipher. That's what they called it. The essence of who you are. This is what was traded

for. A culture for a culture. The one who gave this did so in the place of a turgid and dishonourable retirement.

Wide dark eyes, their pupils returning to normal, her breathing returning to normal, the sensation receding. Sickbay. Spiking needles on medical charts. I get out of the doctor's way.

\*

"Liara, come on!" The edge of panic in the turian's voice is evident. "Ancestors' sake, I can feel the shockwaves from here. They're landing!"

"Please forward that request to my *colleague*." The dust around Liara is rising from the ground very slightly. In any other situation she'd be mortified at her own lack of self-control. In this one, she's too busy mentally rehearsing her control gestures and silently thanking her mother's bodyguards for drumming them into her recalcitrant fourteen-year-old head. "I have a duty of *care* here."

"We're going to have to shut the *door*, Dr. t'Soni -"

"Go ahead, Tammene. Professor Orayt and I will find our own hiding place. Please also turn off your transmitter. They will be able to hear you." She's amazed at how calm her voice sounds. She looks in through the window at Orayt, who has moved on to collecting his ridiculous handwritten notes and dumping them into the bag on top of his artifact. He hasn't looked up once.

A flash from the sky and a crash from across the courtyard, a puff of dust kicked up by an impacting object. A cube? It starts to unfold. Head. Arms. Humanoid. A gun instead of an arm. Blue flicker of a shield. Blue-white light from a headlike sensor port as it turns in her direction. The clenched fist of fear throws up a reflexive standing wave in front of her as the muzzle of the gun flashes, once, violet. Feedback like a stinging insect as the kinetic energy of the bullet is turned aside. She compresses her panicked flash of a shield into a proper barrier and hammers on Orayt's wall with her fist, yelling vainly in the direction of his deactivated speakers. She sees his wide eyes for a moment at the window. He's still only half-suited.

Another bullet, and another. Her barrier turns them without effort. The thing is advancing on her. She waits for it, Orayt's airlock behind her, entirely blocked by the violet ovoid that is her defences. She raises a hand in a gesture that should be recognised by most intelligent species from the appropriate spiral arm as a plea for peaceful interaction, and tries to remember everything she knows about the geth.

Artificial intelligences created by the quarians in their own image as agricultural workers, given a 'mental' structure that strongly encourages cooperation and was supposed to instil an inherent sense of morals and of subservience. They are more intelligent the more of them there are around. The quarians tried to destroy them, failed, and the resulting war drove the living sentients from their home planet and left only the robots - what was their *language* - ow! That feedback *hurt*. She concentrates on the barrier and it redoubles in strength. The geth is nearly within arm's reach. It raises eyebrow-like cooling fins and looks her up and down.

Then without warning, attempts to push through her barrier with a hand that she can feel the stunning electrical charge on. Her instinctive biotic pulse pushes it away and it stumbles, very lifelike. She hits it again, this time with a chaotic so-called 'warp' field, and sees it splinter as the fluctuations tear it apart from the inside out. The light goes out on its sensor pod. Has she killed it? Was it even alive?

Three more drop from the sky. She says something impolite and bangs on the airlock door again. It opens.

Nobody inside it. He thinks she's trying to get *in*? She slaps a palm onto the close-cycle, which should make it open on his side when it's done. Goddess curse it, they need to be gone. They need to be *gone*!

More bullets, a stinging confusing pins-and-needles hail from two of the shooters. The feedback prickles inside her bones. There's no cover out here. She needs to do something -

- The third one fires, a double flash and concussion and a hammer-blow to her upper right arm that knocks her half a step backwards into the closed door of the airlock and the breath goes out of her in a shriek. Her face and shoulders are on fire from barrier feedback. Her suit is breached, icy carbon-dioxide atmosphere hissing in, the ragged tear in the muscle of her arm burning and freezing at the same time. The light guns follow her down, trying to chew away the last of her barrier and flay the flesh from her bones - she retrenches her defences as she stands, reaches out before the one with the heavy gun can fire again and throws a shockwave, knocks the three of them down tangled. As they try to rise she gathers herself and *pulls*, nothing complicated, just throws them way up into the air and it's their business where they come down. She turns around to yell at Orayt's hut, "Come *on*!"

And almost falls down right there and then. The thing had fired two rounds: the first one, half-deflected, took a chunk out of her arm and knocked her down. The second went right past to put a foot-sized hole right through both halves of the airlock. She can hear him the far side, she can hear him choking. She feels sick. No time. No time. Gathers a warp field and pushes her hand through the metal of the airlock door, feeling it contort around her fist, pulls back sharply and it tears itself open like a popped balloon. Again. Dig deep. The inner door comes open towards her with a scream and there's the professor, half into his suit, already convulsing, his eyes staring blindly up at her - she knows the emergency procedures, follows them mindlessly, no time to indulge in feelings of revulsion or fear, no time for weakness - but by the time she has his helmet on and purged with breathable air, he's stopped moving.

•

So the berth is something like sixteen times too big even after protesting that it was too big and being moved somewhere smaller and putting a large box of electrical spares in the corner. There's enough room in here for a workbench and a cabinet and a drone rack with a separate charging stack and a fabricator and twelve collapsible drones and another cabinet and a set of spare parts in case the fabricator breaks down and a medical\suit-repair bench just all set up and ready to roll and a firing range and a berth and a turret to watch over sleeping engineers.

Maybe someone should be informed about the turret, on second thoughts, even if it is running on standard Alliance friend-foe protocols. They might get excitable.

It's quiet in here.

Way too quiet. Is something broken? Set the monitoring apparatus to monitor air quality, temperature and gravity strength. The suit will pick up on bad air and stop gas exchange way before it becomes a danger, but it'd be only neighbourly to let people know that their life support was broken.

Go back to reading. Chief Engineer Adams is a very kind man, and more importantly than that the Tantalus drive core is no longer just a theory - they apparently tried to solve the low-power instability problem by the inclusion of a helical inlay of pure nickel-62, but the reliability implications of the resultant nickel-eezo intermetallic (what, you thought there wouldn't be electromigration?) under any kind of temperature variation are insufficiently outlined in the public-domain paper, but on the *gripping* hand this very fine manual here appears to go into them in *exceptional* detail. Vaguely muse that this sort of information, collated and in depth, would make a Pilgrimage gift worthy of a princess, but then again a *stolen* Pilgrimage gift would be worth an entire career's worth of bad luck.

Nothing's broken, or at least, fifteen minutes of data show no trend at all. Weird. It's too quiet.

Also it's half past twenty-four at night and sleep is *very definitely* indicated, especially after all the running and the fighting and the being punched, but it's so *quiet* and *deserted*.

The manual doesn't last past twenty-seven o'clock. Still no sign of any failures in critical systems. And of course the Tantalus doesn't make any noise: it's the torch drive that makes the familiar tenor thrum of a light ship under way, and this ship only fires its torch drive if it's, what was that English phrase, 'hauling its horses'.

Probably a poor idea to go and blag one's way into sneaking a look at the drive core when Adams isn't on-shift.

Do humans even breathe oxygen anyway? Extranet says yes. Peruse comparative 'pedia article on human physiology. Writer was an asari, of course, who else. Surprisingly fragile things, humans. Look at the list of diseases. And surprisingly easy to put into shock. Pursuit predators once, apparently, though you wouldn't know it to look at - no natural weapons, puny teeth, soft skin (actually microscopic scales, who'd have thought). That skin is a pretty colour, actually, and apparently you get a wider range than asari. And look - another

major race that exudes keratin-based hair, although don't they just have a vast amount of it. Seriously consider, but eventually reject, sending email to Veetor'Nara about species exceptionalism in vein of 'look, see, you're wrong'.

Brief extranet search concerning variations in human physiology confirm two things. One, humans really are five-finger five-toe two-sex mammals with what you'd call standard apparatus, although they're pretty big on this whole dimorphism thing, nearly as much as salarians. Two, *Keelah* there's a lot of human-aimed pornography under assumed names on the extranet. Sanitise input buffer with soap and metaphorical water.

Three-twenty a.m. Still too quiet. Decide on a walk. Entire rest of away team apparently asleep. Strike up desultory conversation with head of ground crew for the little tank. End up being roped into assisting with modifications to driver's seat. Attempt to contain enthusiasm resultant from matter-of-fact modification of driver's seat for quarian as well as turian and krogan physiology.

Add driving simulator to suite of personal equipment.

Fail basic driving qualification.

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We get a lot of downtime in transit and there's only so much time one can train and otherwise do work-related stuff. The obvious solution is a poker night. History shall record that it was Garrus Vakarian's idea, because none of us could quite agree: the turian was the only one who it *could* have been who didn't claim the credit, and he certainly knew enough about poker to suggest it, so it was clearly his idea.

They say never to play cards with a krogan, because he'll break the table and everyone around it if he loses. As a matter of actual fact, Wrex plays a pretty mean game, and although admittedly we're playing for nothing more serious than bragging rights and the occasional round of drinks on the next shore leave, he never seems other than good-natured in defeat. It's my guess that he schedules his doses of tranquilisers to have a lot of them in his system when he has to sit around a table with people.

They say never to play cards with a quarian, because they cheat like anything. Tali explains that card games among quarian youth are fundamentally training for electronic warfare, trying to get your opponent's suit to tell you their hand and their strategy, with the actually relatively simple game serving as a mere framework. She keeps her advanced sensors and computer assistance off and resolves not to win too much just in case; as it happens, she loses a lot more than she wins because her poker face is terrible. Sounds strange for someone permanently in a suit, but she's learned to make up for the faceless reflective helmet with movements of shoulders, arms and head and it turns out that a lot of these have become just as automatic as a smile. I ask why she doesn't have a transparent faceplate and her answer (and I think the body language is 'embarrassment') is that it would be indecent. Apparently her people went veiled long before they were confined to those suits. Wrex sniggers, but it's Tali who tells the joke about the quarian

exhibitionist (he goes naked everywhere. Of course, you can't tell, because of the suit) and everyone laughs.

They say never to play cards with a turian, because they take everything so seriously, but Garrus doesn't appear to have heard that. He's played every variation of poker any of the rest of us have ever heard of and some that we haven't, and after the first evening he's seen sporting a green dealer's visor that some wag apparently left on his seat in the Mako. His only real regret, he says, is that the go-easy-on-the-new-guy routine doesn't seem to work so well when wearing one of these things.

They say never to play cards with the humans, because they invented it and they'll fleece you; it's not really true, games of skill based on handheld chips being a feature of both asari and volus culture, but in the half-century since first contact the game of poker has grown and flourished like a particularly virulent extraterrestrial weed. We're basically playing Citadel stud, the descendant of the seven-card casino game of the twentieth century, but there are occasional diversions as far as brag in the one direction and Texas hold-'em in the other. Alenko is universally agreed to have the best poker face, with his continual opaque slight knowing smile, but the aliens all have the advantage of not sharing a culture, while there are three humans present whose behaviour can be compared. This is an absolutely great way to learn to speak alien body language.

Williams turned up to the first evening unaware that Alenko and I were going to be there, and took about an hour to calm down and accept that such fraternisation was going to be the norm rather than the exception. It's part of the N7 handbook: discipline is essential, but the anachronistic idea of the commander as a godlike, remote figure is absolute poison to the sort of trust that you need within a strike team. Having realised that this was genuinely off-duty time and loosened up - and encouraged people to call her Ash - it turns out that she's an honest, decent person, fun to be around, with a smile like a headlamp and a dirty laugh. She's a better natural player than Tali is, being the kind of player whose expression and manner typically have absolutely nothing to do with the cards she's holding (as she puts it, she's from a long line of military leaders on one side and a long line of valley girls on the other) - but she isn't as experienced as Alenko or Garrus, although she gamely holds her own.

Alenko doesn't really offer his first name, seemingly happy to retain a slight sense of distance from the aliens, alternatively that could just be the way that he is. He does tend to introduce himself by surname everywhere else, much like I do. As I mentioned, he's an excellent player, and the game really ends up being between him, Wrex and Garrus. I could *probably* match them, given effort and practice, but I'm just not one of these people who plays recreational games to win, unlike those three.

•

She wraps the two of them in a mass-reduction field and jumps down the shaft, taking a wild shot behind her with the professor's gun in case it throws off her pursuers' aim. Down to the bottom and that's bought her some time - there are no geth biotics, and they have learned not to throw flying drones after her, so their mobile platforms must climb down. She falls when she lands, because a fifty-metre drop in at one-twentieth mass is like a drop of two and a half metres and that's nothing to sniff at with seventy-five kilos of unconscious salarian over your shoulder. Another puncture, another cut, this one from a sharp rock, but at least she didn't break her wrist or her ankles. The blood should freeze rather than dripping, which right now means it's not a

problem. The neck-seal of her helmet is holding, so she can breathe okay, and at least this planet has roughly the atmospheric pressure she's used to. The heating coils in her suit are still functional, but that just means that some parts of her are uncomfortably warm while the rest of her freezes. She feels like she's being pasteurised.

Down this tunnel, still carrying the professor. If she's feeling bad, he must be far worse. He has air to breathe, sure, coming from her own supply no less, but his heating unit is currently sitting uselessly on the side in his hut. He's not shivering, and that means hypothermia, of which the amphibian-descended salarians are often at great risk. Nothing she can do. Nothing she can - Okay. The door to the deeper mine working - because this was a mine before it was a digsite, of course - is sealed. The only place she can go is into the Prothean ruin itself. There's nowhere else to hide. Nowhere else they won't just find the heating coil and air purifier that are keeping the two of them alive.

Careful attempts at stepping around and over the dig areas lose her yet more time. The cameras are still set up in here: one of the students was working down here until the very last second. There's only one thing to do. The geth will find her in here. Yes, her suit power signature will be masked, but that's because of the power signature here, the signature they'll come after when they can't find another. She's got one hope, and it's tenuous. It's based on her theories, theories that the man over her shoulder has quite successfully rubbished in the literature. Goddess, she whispers to herself with her suit transmitter off, please let me be right for once.

She steps into what she believes was once the nerve centre of this facility. Here goes nothing. Lies Orayt down on the floor by what could be a maintenance panel - the tether from her back to his helmet is a metre long - and turns the two handles to unlock and open the panel. There's what she remembered was here, a power linkage carefully removed. Just as carefully reach out and push it back into place.

Green glow. Lucky she's wearing a nonconductive suit. The display-interface panel comes up, flickering, infrequent. Keyboard interface damaged. She holds her hand in the 'voice interface' control area until she hears a chime. Here goes nothing. If this facility *wasn't* equipped with still-functioning defences, all this has done is light a vast flare over her head. Deep breath. Write the sentence out in her head before pronouncing it. Deactivate her translator. She's not speaking a language it knows and it'll just get in the way. "<Computer. Interface.>"

Glory of glories, there's a chime. It speaks. She catches the words '<facility compromised>' and '<indoctrinated>' among the flow of ancient syllables and tones. She's aware it asked a question, but not what it said - the words were too fluent.

"<Computer. Activate defences.>"

Another chime. More words. It asks her to '<Refer to screen>', and it certainly ends with '<are you sure?>'

She can see the geth on her scanner. They're getting closer. "<Affirmative! Yes!>"

A hum. A glow. White and then green. Gravity waves. She *knew* there was a mass-effect core here

-

It tries to pick her up. Implacable and unstoppable; her own biotics aren't nearly strong enough to break this grip. She calls out fruitlessly to it to '<stop>', that it should '<ignore her>', but to no avail.

And Orayt is still lying on the floor.

And she's tethered to him by a metre of umbilical.

And she's lifted firmly, helplessly up into the air and a green projected globe reaches out to close smoothly over her, not a standing-wave barrier but a turbulent thing like a spherical warp field-

and the two cut halves of the umbilical fall to the ground and she has the presence of mind to catch the one she can reach and turn off the flow -

•

"Congratulations on the work on Feros, Shepard. We have been trying to pin misdeeds on Exo-Geni for years, we know their business practices smell to high heaven, and this is prima-facie evidence of malfeasance. I suppose that there's no chance that Shiala t'Last was working for them rather than directly for Saren and Banezia?" Valern's expression over the holocommunicator is that of the cat sitting on the edge of the fishbowl, although it's admittedly on a face that's got more in common with the fish than the cat.

"None, Councilmember. Saren used her to get information from the Thorian, an attempt at translation for a vision that he'd had. I think that I've received the same vision, and made no more of it than him at the time."

"Yes, it's in your report. The beacon was obviously defective, Spectre. Pay it no heed."

"Saren's paying it enough heed to throw away the lives of Banezia's people. And I just don't like the fact that the victim just went along with it. There's more going on here. With permission, sir, I'm going to try and use this this at least as a lead to his position. I got the same information from Shiala that Saren did."

"Understood. I suppose that it didn't shed any light?"

I shake my head. "If I saw the original vision again, perhaps. But it's - not something I'd like to rely on. Dreams and visions aren't exactly evidence, even if I can't shake the feeling that whoever recorded that beacon was trying to give a warning with their last breath. On the other hand, I think that there's not going to be much that he's learned that I didn't, and I think we'll both run into the same issues."

*"Well, keep us posted."* The tone of voice says that he's not exactly hopeful. "On the subject of leads, Spectre, we may have another one for you. A routine monitor of the general distress traffic for the Artemis Tau Cluster came up with a distress call from one of Matriarch Banezia's daughters, Dr. Liara t'Soni. You are not

the closest potential responder, but we would like you to head to the transmitted coordinates, investigate this Liara and optionally rescue her if the distress signal is not a trap. "

"Any idea what we're going into?"

"Forwarding details now, along with Dr. t'Soni's personnel file and list of publications. Three geth ships of unknown size - the only assessment we have that they even are geth is the doctor's own. "

"Understood. Shepard out."

•

The first thing is concern for the professor. The man she dragged out of the ruins of his lab. The man she nearly died trying to save. Lying there. Probably never even woke up before he died. Certainly never moved. Maybe he froze to death. Maybe he died of suffocation. His fate likely prefigures her own. Her suit power is not infinite. She does not even know if her attempts to call for help were heard. Certainly they have not been heard locally. Or the locals have decided to stay well away from the geth. She does not know that she would blame them for such action.

This leads nicely into fear. Outside, right out there, just beyond the archway that she'd just sort-of sauntered through, the geth must have passed by. They would have a count of people present. They would scan for power signatures. They would have to find the place she's hiding. After all, the archaeology team found it in the same manner with far cheaper and less powerful scanners. So the geth knew that she was there. So they would come, and there she would be, hanging in mid-air with nothing to protect her but something that looks like a barrier right up until you shoot at it at which point it reveals itself to be, well, no barrier. And they would start by using the shield-defeating dustgrain guns and they would slowly flense away her protective suit, letting in the ambient atmosphere, stripping away the precious beacon of warmth over her heart, the warmth that is one of two things that sustain her life, aiming for the centre of mass so she'll remain breathing and conscious through-

Resolve. The geth have not arrived yet. Maybe they never will. And thus she must await rescue. If the distress call was heard - and if it was not, then *all* action is irrelevant - then she should expect rescue within some days. Either by local agencies, alerted by some remote party, or by a ship stripping her message from the local comm buoy. Either way, endurance is her priority. Regular shallow breaths. Absolutely *no* biotics - the energy in her system is all she's getting until rescue arrives, and she must husband it. Drink all of the -

Ugh. The suit's water recycler is breached. That will be the source of the mouthful of freezing cold tongue-burning foul-tasting slush that she just tried to suck down. She reviews her options - none of them good - before eventually resigning herself to swallowing the revolting muck. It's not poisonous, she reminds herself. Better swallowing it than spitting it out in freefall with a helmet on, better than opening her helmet, evacuating it, closing and purging it (could she truly hold her breath for the twenty or so seconds that would take, knowing how cold it is out there?)

So, the death to avoid will be dehydration. Six days' suit power, no food but a week's fast isn't impossible (she's told). Her injuries are painful, three of them the kind of thing one would

ordinarily take to hospital rather than to the first-aider, but she figures that the fact that the blood over them is clotted and partially frozen will stop her bleeding to death at least. The planet doesn't have a biosphere, so infection is unlikely. As far as freezing to death goes, it *hurts*, but it doesn't seem to be killing her: the sheer glorious warmth of the heater jacket over her torso should keep her free of hypothermia. So with heating and air recycling running from suit power, she will die first of thirst. She didn't start today fully hydrated. Already feeling a little thirsty.

So which biological processes use water? All of them, effectively. She read somewhere that meditation is supposed to slow metabolic activity. She can spare the air for breathing exercises. She thinks back to her mother's patient lessons and makes a concerted effort to banish cold paralyzing fear with deep steady regular breathing and calm thought.

She tries to chase all consciousness from her mind. Just to float there in this calm green orb of tempest, like a particularly awkward sensory deprivation tank. Just to float there and count breaths.

•

Many thousands of breaths later and she's feeling really very thoroughly sorry for herself. Supposes it's still better than being killed by *geth*.

There's nobody here to see her weep. Nobody to see her cry for her mother. Nobody here to see her call, hesitantly at first but then with increasing vigor, for help. Nobody here to hear her yell her voice raw. She retains enough presence of mind not to batter fruitlessly at her prison with biotic force. She doesn't want to run out her body's short-term reserves and send herself into shock. (Why not? Because she's desperately afraid of passing out and not waking up again. Desperately afraid of dying. She will hold out to the end of her physical and mental endurance.)

She prays. She's not sure whether her Goddess would approve of a supplicant who managed to get herself trapped like this, but She *is* supposed to be all-compassionate, so she prays anyway. Goes through every one she knows, twice, then starts making things up. Praying is not talking to herself. It's fine.

She tries to get a grip, tries to start counting breaths again. Keeps losing count.

So tired. She was expecting to feel thirsty. Tiredness is new. She must have been here for some days if it's starting to show. She can stay up for fifty or sixty hours if she has to. She's going to have to. She's lost count of how long she's been here and her omni-tool was damaged when she jumped down the shaft and made that awkward jarring three-point landing that put the painful tear in her left calf and nearly broke her wrist.

Her limbs feel like they are being kneaded from the inside by sharp-clawed animals. Her wounds themselves - provided she doesn't move - are *nearly* numb, *nearly* insensible. Just there enough to remind her that any one of these would normally have her curled up in a ball on the floor. She's heard about the painkilling effects of the body's stress responses. Apparently this has taken her like that. But it wore off.

Is it her imagination, or is the oxygen content of her air starting to fall? She doesn't have telemetry. And is the warm pad over her torso getting less warm, very very slowly, bleeding its heat out like

she was bleeding her own heart's violet blood? Maybe she was wrong about thirst.

Thump, scrape. Something's walking around, just behind her. She essays the tiniest biotic pulse to spin her weightless form around.

Nothing. She's hearing things.

The breaths drag by. She's lost count again. No sense of how long it has been. Her body's needs are a continuous dull roar. Pain, thirst, the prickle of the gravitic bubble holding her up, a dozen other niggling undignified sources of discomfort. And here she is cooped up in a suit like a quarian. How do they manage it? It's lucky she's not claustrophobic.

The urge to try the tube to the suit's water catchpocket is growing. It's toxic, she knows it's toxic, the thing is breached, it's a mix of suit waste and purification chemicals and it's probably frozen anyway, but one swallow didn't kill her and it at least *contains* water - no. No, it nearly made her vomit and that would be one of the most undignified ways to die she can think of, so no. No drinking for her.

Flicker at the corner of her vision. She identifies it as a rat. Ugh. She hates the human-originated vermin. Wait - don't those need an oxygen atmosphere? She's hallucinating.

Time passes. Or rather, it doesn't. It hangs around, gets out the slide projector, goes through the holiday snaps, tells a few unfunny anecdotes, drinks all the good drink, eventually just sits there kind of taking up space and outstaying its welcome and won't take a hint. It's like the worst kind of armpit of a bad night except that it's going to get worse, oh, how it's going to get worse before it gets better. She's not so much getting sleepy as recognising the light coming at her down the tunnel as not the light at the end of it but the headlights of the metaphorical train of exhaustion. Well fed, which she isn't, her species need hardly any sleep. As it is, she's bored and exhausted and eventually tiredness will edge out discomfort and she'll lose consciousness and her broken omni-tool won't set her a nice alarm for if it detects a signal -

She jerks awake and the pain and the discomfort redouble their efforts. She'd thought that maybe she might go numb eventually. Apparently, not a bit of it. Idly she wonders if she's been done permanent harm yet, if the shoulder that's stiffened up entirely will ever work again, if she'll walk with a limp all the rest of her days. If the sounds she's hearing behind her are the sign of incipient madness - after all, they tell one all kinds of things about insanity but it's a very different thing to see it from the inside-

If the voice she can hear calling her name is the way that all voice-hearers present, or maybe it's always different, or-

voice-

"...hello?" She answers. She figures that if it's an hallucination, at least there's nobody around to ridicule.

Words. Words in a language. A language she heard a tape of once, a million years ago and last week when she was still trying to learn this strange non-inflected mongrel trade-tongue that the humans use for everything. Her translator should be- her translator's off, she flicks a switch -

"-but she's pretty much nonresponsive. I'm seeing a control panel and a screen, semi-functional but I can't read them, and that gravitic projector. You'd better come up here, Shepard: maybe you can get something out of the interface." The voice's register is similar to an asari one, a bit higher. She seems to recall that the humans are dimorphic, that the male half of the species is taller, broader, hairier and brutish. Or was that batarians? No, batarians are entirely hairless -

"Roger. Trying that now." Movement enters her visual field. A person, in servo-powered armour of unfamiliar make. Hmm. That could in fact be a quarian. Human helmets typically have transparent faceplates. It occurs to Liara that she's upside down at the moment. The voice changes to Armali, with a lowest-bidder translator's atrocious accent. "Hello? Liara t'Soni? Can you hear me?"

Her voice is a ragged croak. If this is an hallucination, it's a persistent one. "...yes? I, uh. Appear to be in. Problematic situation."

The person nods. "We're working on getting you out of there, Dr. t'Soni." Aren't humans usually a little thicker across the waist than that? And she thought they were a five-finger race... It's a quarian. Why is there a quarian? Why is the quarian speaking the human tongue? Bah. She can puzzle out who she's being rescued by once she's been rescued.

"...voice. Voice activation. System's set to voice activation."

"Did you get that, Shepard? Apparently the system's set to voice activation." A pause. "So, what, I just say that, or... Oh." She looks down at Liara. "Here goes nothing." Another pause. "<Calculator: deprecate defensive features.>" She waits expectantly.

"...Mispronounced." Liara takes a deep breath, turns off her translator. "<Computer: Deactivate defence system.>" Her voice is a croak. The computer doesn't hear.

But Tali does, and says the words in a clear ringing voice.

And Liara falls on her head, and it's not clear whether her rescuers realise that she's crying because she could have said that at any time in the past sixty-eight hours.

•

The asari's eyes flutter open. She's hooked up to an intravenous drip. Holographic displays in the air above her proclaim her vital signs. No little biotic push against her surroundings. Not as wary. She expected to wake in hospital, I'm guessing.

"Dr. t'Soni?"

She focuses on me. "That's my name. I infer by my surroundings that I have been rescued by somebody agreeable."

"Agreeable?"

"When I saw a quarian, I wondered if I would wake up attached to an autodoc onboard some rusting free-trader. Thank you for not being any of the nightmare scenarios that filled my sleeping mind, and for not being an hallucination assembled from the wreckage of a disintegrating physiology. And please, call me Liara. How are the others?"

I look down.

She squeezes her eyes shut. "All of them?"

"Four others accounted for. A turian and three salarians."

"May they find peace in the embrace of the Goddess. Their personal details--"

"I will inform their families, unless you object."

"Do it." She opens her eyes slowly. "They were my team, but you are doubtless equipped to do a good job. Please also inform Serrice University that I am all right. And I should call my mother."

"Of course. Do you know where to call?"

"I have a number. I require an unmonitored extranet connection."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Dr. t'Soni."

There's a moment's icy silence.

"Please repeat that, human. I could have sworn you just attempted to inform the youngest daughter of one of the galaxy's most influential individuals that she was not allowed to contact her mother. Did I speak too soon with my thanks?"

I take out my Spectre biometric. "I swear, I should just wear this thing on my lapel. John Shepard, Dr. t'Soni, I'm a Spectre. Your mother is under investigation. I'm perfectly fine with you contacting your mother, especially if you can find out what is going on with her right now, but I am going to have to insist that we listen in if you do."

"A *human* Spectre... but those things are unforgeable. I suppose I have been deliberately out of the loop." She slumps back down onto the bed. "To forestall your questions, I don't know, I don't know and I don't know. She tells me things from time to time, of course, it's part of being part of the family, but I didn't know of anything that could lead to a Spectre investigation. What are you looking for?"

"We've got video evidence linking her to the return of the geth, and to the rogue Spectre Saren Arterius."

"Oh, *Goddess*. Saren?" She shakes her head carefully. "Of course he and my mother are linked. He's practically family. I've known the man for twenty-eight years, ever since he showed up at my seventy-fifth with Simaly t'Sredan in person. Although it was obvious he did it to butter up my

mother, it was still a *lovely* - And you say he's gone rogue? I mean, everyone knows he dislikes your race-

"It's very likely he was aboard the geth flagship when they attacked the colony of Eden Prime. The death toll is in the thousands."

"Eden... the beacon. The functional Prothean communications array. What happened to it?"

"It exploded. I think he sabotaged it. I rec-

"He *what?*" Liara tries to sit bolt upright. The monitors make noises. The tubes pull taut.

Dr. Chakwas, never far away, is instantly at her patient's side. "Please, Liara, can you lie down and try to keep from pulling these tubes out?"

"I'm - no, you are right, I am not fine and I need this water, oxygen and sugar. I shall lie on my back and seethe with hate from here. Please do not upbraid Spectre Shepard: he was describing how an old family friend has committed atrocities."

"He's *supposed* to be saving that for when you're fit for duty." She throws me a look.

"Doctor, I *am* fit for duty: I am being kept in for observation because you are surprised by the speed of my recovery, having only met human patients before. I could self-medicate from here on out."

"I swear, you are all as bad as one another." Chakwas runs another cursory scan over the asari. "Another twelve hours at least, or I'll sedate you."

"Done." Liara nods seriously, then turns her head back towards me. "So Saren has gone crazy and you say that my mother is with him?"

"That's what we believe."

"Deputise me."

"Sorry, what?"

"Deputise me. I may be able to find her."

"Liara, you're a civilian. We're going after the geth, not to mention Saren's resources and your mother's. It's hardly going to be safe."

"I can handle myself. I fought the geth up there and escaped from them: it was that there were too many of them. And you're going after my *mother*. I do not know if you have this custom, but I owe it to her to help bring her in. Does that make sense to you?"

"A little."

"Also, I want to discuss at length with the individual who spoke ancient Prothean well enough to

know what to say to access their computer. My primary research interest is the Prothean Fall: if Saren is after Prothean beacons, I might be able to help you there as well."

"Now, that *can* wait until you've rested. Consider yourself on probation, Liara. Should I get you that extranet connection?"

"Monitored?"

"I'm afraid so."

She sighs. "Little is better than none. Lay on."

•

I catch Tali on break, leaning against the rail next to the drive core, seemingly enjoying the view. "Oh, hello, captain. How can I serve you?" She ducks her head (smile). "Wrong words. I sound like a waitron. You know what I mean."

"Nothing in particular. Just making sure everyone's fitting in OK."

"Uh-huh. Your chief engineer is a nice man who lets appealing young ladies ogle his equipment." She continues, seemingly oblivious to my stifled chuckle. "And that drive core is amazing. Just look at the harmonics, or rather, the lack of them. I came down here looking for the cause of the creepy silence, and it's even more interesting than I had supposed."

"You don't get quiet ships where you come from?"

She shakes her head. "Silence means a failure in something vital. Total silence will reliably wake me from sleep. We used to have drills."

"I grew up on and around ships, too. I remember drills like that, although ours were alarms."

"Really?" She inclines her head this way and that (raised eyebrow). "I didn't realise anyone would choose this sort of thing when they had a perfectly good homeworld to raise their children on."

"My dad was harbourmaster aboard Archie - that is - Arcturus Station; my mom was third officer on the dreadnought *Stuttgart*. They figured that having at least one parent around was more important than an absence of pressure drills. I boarded at school, of course, but when people talk about the rolling fields and open vistas of home I just think of Square Mile Park on old Archie."

"The *Rayya* is much the same. It's almost half a mile from stem to stern, and forty per cent of that length is the - there isn't really a word for it. It translates as 'garden wheel'. It's like a squashed sphere, rotating for gravity, with terraces at different centripetal potentials for different crops." She turns, puts her back against the rail, looks up at nothing in particular. "We grow most of our food like that, and a reasonable chunk of our oxygen. Liveships are popular places to

raise children, because the giant open ventilation area in the centre of the garden wheel is supposed to fight off agoraphobia. We have to wear suits everywhere anyway – even a parent is allergic to their own children without extremely regular sharing of air – so there isn't the contamination problem you'd expect. And even small children can help out with plants. "

"I didn't have your people figured for the gardening kind."

"Oh, yes. No useless surfaces on a liveship. Every flat area can grow a plant of some kind. Most vertical ones can be coaxed to grow algae or moss. Given that most of your air's got spores all through it anyway, thanks to the gardens, it's easier just to accept that a liveship is a dirty place and cover it in green slime than it is to have decontam all over the place. And it means that we ran an actual surplus of oxygen, even with a population of a hundred and fourteen thousand. The scrubbers almost never needed turning on. They won the prize for best life-support efficiency three times in fifteen years – my father was so proud. "

"A hundred and fourteen thousand people on a ship half a mile long? Didn't that get crowded?"

"Absolutely. You'll recall my definition of personal space – if I've got a square metre of floor to myself the space feels comfortably large. One of the things they teach us before we go on Pilgrimage is that aliens have a social distance that's twice ours. Salarians a bit less, krogan a lot more. Personally I have grown to like it, but a lot of my people think of aliens as standoffish and unfriendly, and I know that friendly quarians have a reputation for being overbearing, pushy or overly flirty when it's just that they're used to standing close enough to touch. I'm sorry. Am I babbling? I think it's to fill the silence. "

"No, it's interesting. That many humans in an enclosed space for that long and you'd get nothing done at all. We're not exactly krogan, but we like having space to ourselves. Some more than others. There are some people – mostly out on the colonies – for whom the sight of another human on the horizon is a sign that they should be moving on."

**She shudders.** "I'm not an agoraphobe, but I couldn't imagine living so far away from civilisation. On a planet, one day, maybe – heh, when the homeworld is retaken – but not outside a city. Apart from the lack of medications and other sensible things like a decent supply of acetone, I suspect that if I did not speak to someone for more than a few days in a row temporarily then I would go quite mad." She bobs her head like a bird. "Poor t'Soni. Will she pull through?"

"Dr. Chakwas had to threaten to sedate her to get her to stay in sickbay. She strikes me as the resilient sort."

"You're deputising her, aren't you. "

"She's asked me to, and I'm considering it. If you find anything untoward in her communications access, will you-"

"Who said I was eavesdropping?"

I raise my eyebrows. "No, I think you misunderstand me. I *expected* you to be eavesdropping on a new individual of unknown loyalty. Alenko is smart, but you're an expert and I'm not prepared to bet that she's not."

She freezes, then nods. "She emailed an address on the Citadel and didn't attach anything that wasn't text. Barring a code I don't know, she didn't convey more than genuine distress. Her contact tried to pump her for information about her mother's whereabouts and the conversation ended in mutual confusion. She has spent the rest of the time browsing 'net articles on human behaviour, language, history and psychology. She downloaded precisely one file, which was a translator update, and charged the download to an account with the Protectorate Bank. I have a VI sheepdog on the omnitool you lent her. And I know you said no dishonesty but I didn't want to come to you empty-handed with nothing but a declaration I'd been spying on your people, so, sorry."

"Let me know if she stops acting clean."

"Yes, my captain."

"I'm actually a commander, Tali, which is a step down from that rank."

"But you are in charge. So you are the captain." She nods firmly, then seems to remember herself and straightens up, saying something in her own language without the translator getting in the way. Her natural accent is lilting, musical, somewhere between Russian and Indian.

"That... rhymed. Do I see another fan of poetry?"

"It's more of a - blessing, I guess would be the right word. Physical and spiritual authority are the same for us." **She ducks her head (a grin).** "I don't expect you to start conducting rites or anything, but give me orders and you'll get my good wishes to tie to your own. I hope that doesn't bother you."

"Not at all, Tali. One of my people's values is a tolerance of this sort of thing."

"It's nice, being associated with a ship again. Thank you for giving me orders."

Winning smile. "You're on my crew. Did you-"

She takes three quick steps away from the rail and from me, inhumanly quick, holds her hands up defensively in front of her. "No! No-no-no-no-no. Sorry, no. I didn't offer - Keelah,

how dumb am I - sorry. No. I am not a resident here, I'm a consultant, you're *the* captain, not *my* captain, I don't *have* a captain, I'm a *pilgrim* -"

"Yow! Bad choice of words! I didn't mean to -"

She seems to calm down, slowly. "*I know, I do know that. Yes. You meant that I'm on your team.*" She nods. "That's allowed for me. I mean, if you did mean the other thing, I'm flattered, but I'm not allowed. I have no home." She nods again, more firmly. "And now you know what you meant and so do I and all is right with the world again."

Rueful grin. "...Okay. Any other words to avoid?"

"Some?" She shrugs. "I don't share things with you, I receive them from you. I don't eat with you or sleep with you - oh! Now that I didn't mean. Uh. I mean that I'm permitted to, er, but I don't have to, no, of course I don't have to, and now I've gone and made you laugh. On the subject of innuendo, please assume I'm capable of supplying my own needs in terms of gaseous mixtures to breathe or you'll have me laughing unexpectedly, don't ask, it's biological. Discussing the homeworld is acceptable, talking about family and ancestry is okay so long as you're respectful, in fact if you treat me like a small and mouthy turian you won't go far wrong. Oh, and please treat the suit and helmet as if they are my skin, as in, I don't ask people what their skull looks like under that skin and muscle. 'Kay?"

"I think I can handle that."

"Anything I can say that would offend you, captain?"

"I'm pretty hard to offend, Tali. Don't countermand my orders, go behind my back or deceive me. I like to let my people operate with a high degree of trust and autonomy, but I don't take kindly to being deliberately let down. Beyond that, I'm an easy-going kind of guy."

"Who deals death and destruction for a living. "

"Who saves lives and defends his people for a living. We don't start fights: we end them. And that's even more true of the Spectres than of the Navy."

"You sound like my father. "

"Then he's a good man."

"He is a great man, one of our leaders. I am honoured to share in his name." She looks away.

•

"Commander, can I have a word?" Garrus looks more... agitated than is usual, restlessly tapping a

claw against the metal of his vambrace.

"Sure, what's on your mind?"

"Do you plan to take on all the regular duties of a Spectre?"

"Well, if I don't then my bosses get real embarrassed when we catch Saren and the Council packs me off to retirement with a medal." I grin. "But despite that, I plan to, yes. Why?"

Garrus blinks. "You are a very strange human, Shepard. Regardless - I have acquired something to warm the heart of any true Spectre. Every officer has a story of the one that got away, Shepard, and this guy is mine. Sick bastard's *advertising*. Making *money*. It isn't too far out of our way, commander, and it won't cost you more than one slug for your axial gun."

"I think I need some more details before we go blowing something up, Garrus."

"Yes, of course. The guy calls himself a groundbreaking transplant surgeon, finding sustainable ways to do organ replacements. It's a scam, Shepard. Sick bastard found a way to grow spare organs in living subjects. I tracked him to Tkarren ward, bit of a shootout, news at ten, but the motherless piece of shit took a damn cab and overrode the controls. I had the shot but my boss wouldn't give me the go - I was the only one that knew he was in it - the cab RV'd with a ship in full and plain sight of all of us. I called it in to the Third, they had a perfect target, it looked like a beautiful ending and then they let him go. We can't kill that many innocent people to get one man, they said, and he was holding fourteen people hostage. So I watched the perp I'd spent all that time bringing to bay just waltz free. My bosses were overjoyed with me: one less monster on the Citadel, and the hostages weren't *their* problem. I got a *commendation*." He spits the word.

"Ouch. And now you've found him again?"

"Uh-huh. Here are the coordinates. The ship's registration is different but it matches the profile perfectly. And it's advertising the same damn service. It's him, commander, I can smell it. And we can *get* him this time. Just drop in, pull the trigger, and he can tell the hells that Garrus Vakarian sent him."

"You don't think that we should maybe check that he's aboard first?"

"Come on, commander, of course he's-" Garrus checks himself in midsentence. "Yessir. Check he's aboard then blow him sky high."

"Check he's aboard then bring him to justice."

"Yessir. Got my justice right here, commander." He pats the holster of his custom sidearm.

Okay, that's far enough. "Garrus. Please remind me of a Spectre's relationship with Council law."

"They're above it. You have a license to kill. Sod it, Shepard, you have a license to *recruit private armies and wage undeclared wars* if you want to. You have a license to completely ignore any and all aspects of the regulations of civilised life and ride roughshod over the so-called 'rights' of the people you have to bring to justice. There's a bit of human literature, classic one. Perhaps you've

heard of it, *2000AD*? You're Judge Freakin' Dredd, Shepard. You *are* the law."

Yup, just exactly what I thought. There we go: his reason for being with me in one short summation. Judge Freakin' Dredd. I sigh. "Could you elaborate a little for me, Garrus, I'm new to all of this and I'm trying to understand. Why do you think a Spectre has this authority?"

"Because sometimes a hard man has to take hard decisions to get the job done."

"Because the Council trusts my ability to substitute my moral judgement for theirs and that of every signatory government in an emergency?"

"Heh. That's - That's a great way of putting it, actually."

"So which part of this authority says that I should have any less regard for individual rights and collateral damage than they do?" I'm not a physically daunting guy, but the quiet authority in my tone of voice stops Garrus dead. "You're absolutely right that the people the Spectres track down are usually monsters. But the moment that we let them make monsters of us, we've given them a victory. Perhaps not the one they wanted, but it's a defeat for us nonetheless. They tell me that the Spectres are the defenders of our noble ideals." I shake my head. "You don't defend something by tearing it down. There is no need to become like them to beat them. Yes, Garrus, we'll go after this criminal of yours. We come in under stealth, reveal ourselves close enough to his barriers to scare the crap out of him and demand he stands down. With or without his permission we board. And we drag him and all the evidence we need back to face a court. My authority? It's used to push over any legal games he should like to play. It's used to pass every name that ever benefited from his crimes to Special Tasks, because what goes around should most definitely come around. And if it should so happen that various people who worked for me should be alone with him, and should care to mention that they talked me into doing this the *very easy way*, well, I can't be held responsible for what people say about me behind my back."

He blinks. "Fair warning, Shepard. If he looks like he's going to escape, I *will* become a discipline problem."

"Noted, Garrus. It won't come to that."

"As I said, sir."

"As you said. Carry on, Garrus: I'll set the course. Joker loves sneaking up on people who believe there's no stealth in space."

•

The salarian sits up when I enter the brig, looks me in the eye. "Mister Shepard, sir, I've been most *shamefully* mistreated. Your *man* here-

"I don't recall asking you to speak." I look grimly over at the room's other occupant. "Vakarian. Has he talked yet."

Garrus shakes his head. "I - I'm not sure we've got the correct guy, sir. He's done nothing but talk innocent since he got in here."

"Oh, he's the right one. I can *smell* it." I put a completely unnecessary pulse through my barriers, just enough to lend a slight blue shimmer to the air around me, remind our prisoner that I'm the guy who tore straight through the wall to get him in his panic room. The lighting in the room is dim, puts my face in shadow but for that eerie glow. "Two hours, turian, or we do it my way."

You could use Garrus' posture as a ruler. "Sir."

I leave, head back to the situation room and go back to helping Tali sort through the data-dump she recovered from the guy's omni-tool. Apparently most of these things have an automatic backup system which is *very* hard to disable -

I don't have to wait many minutes. Garrus comes in, mouth open in a wide turian grin. "Oh, you should have been an actor, Shepard. That was beautiful. The moment that door closed he sang like a squirrel."

"Pigeon. Squirrels don't... it doesn't matter. You got what we need?"

"Confession and all. That man is going to spend the rest of his natural existence working off a debt he'll *never* repay."

•

"Sir, can I have a moment?"

"Sure, Ash. What's bothering you?"

"Security, sir." She waves a hand at the door and it closes itself. "I know that they've all got good reasons to be along, but I - sorry, sir, I'm talking about the, uh, foreign nationals we have aboard. This is the most advanced ship in the Alliance fleet, and pound-for-pound the most expensive one humanity ever built. We've got the best of absolutely everything that matters. Even the personal equipment is mark-eights, mark-nines, where we were using mark-fives on Eden Prime. We've got a krogan battlemaster slowly reworking and upgrading his equipment with a fabricator I'd have paid good money to get ten minutes alone with before I came here. I can't turn around without tripping over Tali - I know you authorised her to build us a drone swarm, it's a great force multiplier, but now I hear she's effectively working as Adams' assistant? And she's quite openly on a quest to discover something and take it home with her, and she's avowedly a specialist in information security. If she can hack into an honest-to-God *artificial intelligence*, our system's going to be an open book to her. And then there's the asari - I mean, she's actually Benezia's *daughter*, and you know the way-"

I raise my hands in a placatory fashion. "I get the picture, Ashley. You reckon they have ulterior motive."

"Not - exactly. I was just pointing out - well." She shrugs. "We, the humans that is, we're loyal to the Alliance and it's in danger, so we're out here protecting it. The aliens, I know they have their reasons, they might even be loyal to you. But when push comes to shove, you can't expect them to be on our side. It's like an ex of mine once said." She spreads her hands. "Say you have a dog. You love that dog, it listens to every word you say, it's practically one of the family. Comes with you

everywhere. One day you're out for a walk with your dog and you meet a hungry bear. You know damn well you can't outrun the bear. If your only chance to live is to sic your dog on that bear and run, you'll do it. Because no matter how much you love your dog, it's only a dog. It's not human."

I shake my head. "I've known people run into a burning building to save their dog, Ash."

"With respect, sir, I've also known people keep dogs for meat. You can't expect everyone to have a - uh. Sorry, sir. My point is made, I'll leave it at that."

"Sorry, Williams, but it's important that you understand this. While you and I and the ship *do* remain Alliance, this is a *joint-flag* operation. I *have* to have nonhumans on the crew."

"Orders?"

I shake my head. "Politics. You know that humanity has never had a Spectre. You might *not* know that twenty years ago, we nearly did. Our N7 of a captain was to have been the first. The official story is that he had a chance and screwed it up. What he told *me* was that Saren Arterius torpedoed his chances to make sure Humanity lost any chance we had for a Spectre in his generation." I hold up a hand to forestall her comment. "The point is that the aliens think *long-term*. Whatever the truth of the affair, it's Matriarch Tevos who got me this position over the opposition of the turians. From her perspective, she's been pushing continuously for recognition for our species for decades. From ours, we've hardly noticed she exists. If I fail at this, she'll try again with someone else. In *another twenty years*, when all her current non-asari political opponents are dead or retired."

"What's this got to do with having aliens on the crew, sir?"

"As I said to Garrus. My appointment was disguised as a legal fiction to allow someone to investigate Matriarch Benezia. If I go along with the disguise, act like an Alliance commander given *carte blanche*, look after Alliance matters with an Alliance ship and crew, then that'll be all it ever is. I'll bring in Saren and Benezia, get a medal from a gushingly grateful Council and maybe an exchange position with a turian legion, definitely something that looks like a promotion, but no question that it was ever more than a legal fiction. A human Spectre? Ridiculous. But if I act like a proper Spectre - bringing Exo-Geni to light despite them being an Alliance corp, hunting down a wanted fugitive from turian justice and bringing him in, showing up everywhere with a very mixed crew -"

"Then they treat you like a proper Spectre. No medal, no official reward, just another job." She sighs. "And Alliance people everywhere start getting treated like grownups. Put up with the aliens, sir, aye."

"I don't have to order you to be someone you are not, Ashley, but my team is what it is and these *people* are on it. Especially in front of the press, the word 'alien' does not exist. There are just different shapes of people. All right?"

"Yes, sir. Just - if we do meet any bears, skipper, I've got your back."

"Glad to hear it. Dismissed."

•

Two-thirty a.m. I'm fully awake and sitting up before I register it as a comm chime. "Shepard."

"T'Soni. Commander, you said to inform you the instant I had an, er, a lead? That is this instant."

"Okay, doctor, what have you got?"

"Academic doctorate, not usually used separately of a name. An old classmate in Binary Helix just emailed me to ask why I hadn't warned her of my mother's impending arrival. She's apparently on or approaching the independent world of Noveria in the Horsehead Cluster."

"Noveria?" I'm dressing. "Hardly my first choice of holiday destination."

"Well, no, Shepard, she's - Oh. Humour. Of course. You are asking why she is going there. I would infer it is because she is there to have something done for or by the Binary Helix corporation, of which Saren is a director."

"Binary..." I pull on my shirt. "I'm guessing they're a biotech firm, but what do they do in particular?"

"On Noveria? Something that exploits the colony's extraterritoriality, no doubt. I would guess at biological weapons research." **A pause during which we both evaluate the likely behaviour of geth armed with advanced bioweapons.** "Shepard, I have just jumped to a worrying conclusion."

I key the door open and nearly run straight into the nervous-looking asari, who leaps backward with an inhuman indrawn *tss* of alarm. "I think we might have drawn the same one."

She nods five times, like she started nodding and forgot to stop. "I think that perhaps this ship should go to Noveria, maybe doing so a little... faster than normal."

"I think that perhaps you're right. Bridge, Shepard."

"Joker here."

"Joker? It's the middle of your off-shift, man. Do you not sleep?"

"No, sir. Did that before I came out." He chuckles. "What can I do you for?"

"Change of course, Mr. Moreau. Horsehead Relay. Pax system, Noveria. Don't spare the horses."

"No spare horses, aye. Relay catch and redirect in forty-two minutes, sir. Three jumps makes sevenish hours. I love it when traffic control says 'Spectre status recognised'. We should hit Noveria in time for second breakfast."

I notice Liara looking at me strangely. "Something wrong?"

"Are your people always so flippant? Or is this some kind of stress response?"

"It's a morale thing, a sign of trust. A minor but harmless protocol violation lets him feel like he's part of the team."

She raises a eyebrow. "Clever. I can see why the turians so dislike your kind. Do please tell me if my curiosity oversteps a mark: you are the first human I have met to, well, talk to. Speaking of which, could we usefully spend some time guiding one another through respective cultural minefields? Unless you would rather sleep?"

"Well, I'm up now; I'd only spend the time reading up on Noveria rather than falling asleep. It's true what they say about biotics and insomnia."

She smiles as if I have said something funny. "Yes. I'm given to understand it's rare among your kind, that your species uses cybernetic mass-effect implants?"

"Uh-huh. I thought they were an asari invention, though?"

"Yes. In much the same way as one uses implants to repair damage to the sensory cortex, although, um, there's a racial-cultural subtext there that you're not getting. We're all biotics to some extent, but that's not the only or even - evolutionarily speaking - the primary function of that biological system for us. A healthy maiden's only use for an electronervous stimulator would be, er, recreational, and as for having one *implanted*..." Her eyes twinkle. "The jokes about biotics of races to whom the faculty is not natural are endless, but I hope you can guess the theme without me using words the translator doesn't know."

"I must admit, I never really ask people about *that* sort of biological difference - we were taught enough in school to be able to get most of the dirty jokes."

"But my race has *such* a reputation. You were never curious?"

"Not so much I couldn't be polite. I was never really the type to dance the night away, anyway - more likely to be found propping up a bar."

"Ah, yes. I'm afraid the reputation of juvenile asari for infesting nightclubs and exotic dancing venues is mostly deserved. Personally I do not truly see the attraction, but I recognise that I am unusual: most people my age spend some decades wandering the galaxy while displaying their secondary sexual characteristics before supposedly adoring audiences and practicing the courtship behaviour of a dozen species. Personally I prefer to wander digsites while displaying data before conference audiences and practicing academic behaviour: it is unlikely that this is the same biological urge. Certainly it would not succeed as a reproductive strategy. I was unable to find out much information on your lifecycle: I see that you are older than many of the other humans aboard, and that you have significantly more muscle mass than most of them along with a different head-crest. Are these correlated?"

...This is going to be a *long* few hours.

•

Liara is, though by turns amused and incredulous, a good listener. She's also the first person I've told the story of the beacon to who nods as if at least that part makes perfect sense - it's the cipher I received from the asari victim on Ilos that surprises her the most.

"To receive the... *record* of an entire life like that, especially one so alien... the information must be *overwhelming*. Can you make anything more of the vision, now?"

I shake my head. "It wasn't so much the record of a whole life. More like what it was like to *be* that person. Not the memories, just everything that would make them make sense. As for the vision, it's irritating, like a half-remembered echo of a memory. I know that I speak the language, but because I couldn't at the time, it just - slipped through my fingers. If I saw it *again*, it would be a different story. But-"

"That is a decent idea. Have you done that already?"

"Well, no. The beacon is broken now."

She purses her lips. "Hmm. Not impossible, even so." There's a funny note to her voice. "I, uh, I could offer assistance."

"I might be a biotic, but my implants don't do that thing where what you see is what I see, you know."

She swallows. Turns to face me straight-on. Still with that quiet intense tone of voice. "*They* don't need to."

"What, you can just...?"

"You need to cooperate. The link can be made one-way." A deep breath. "It should not be - unpleasant."

"What do I do?"

She closes her eyes. "Send your attention inwards. Recall as clearly as you can what you were doing immediately before you saw the vision."

"Breathe with you?"

Her eyes snap open. I feel a slight trembling gravitic pulse from her. "Uh, no. We are trying to *avoid* harmony. Center yourself. If possible, think only of what happened *just before* the beacon fired." She pulls off one of the white gloves she's wearing. "Take my hand." She starts to breathe deeply, quickly, deliberately hyperventilating. Closes her eyes for two more deep breaths and when she opens them they are completely black.

I concentrate. I am standing there on Eden, the gravity slightly high, giving me that uncomfortable heavy feeling inside the no-nonsense strength of my powered suit as I stiff-arm Ashley out of the beacon's grip and look around into-

Liara's dark eyes stare unseeingly into my own, her voice is a husky whisper as it seems to draw around me and pull me in- "Embrace eternity."

•

*Flashes of light. Motion. Movement. Pain? (Oops.) Thought. Sight. The taste of cold neutral tank air. The sound of rushing wind. The sensation, somehow, of being blue. The feeling of someone pulling on my hair. My hand on - oh, I see, like this - my hand on Ashley's shoulder, stiff-arming her out of the way. I turn, pulled, lifted uncontrollably and there's a -*

*<All stations repeat. All stations repeat. Append this transmission to all interface procedures.>*

*A scream. The overlay of a thousand screams. Context: Danger, but well-known. The most unambiguous danger signal they could write. Death. Horror. Pain. Disgust. The feeling of smelling ripped <rhaik> entrails.*

*<Beware of the reapers who do not live. They look like this> -*

*- a jumble of images, terror, blood, pain, atrocity, death - focus, dammit, my own thought echoed back to me, Liara trying to get a better grip -*

*- <and they killed us. They came from> -*

*- <their objective was destruction. We fought, but it was> -*

*- <Conduit, to breach their fortress. We no longer possess the> -*

*<Warn your entire empire. Warn your masters and your servants. Leave from war and prepare for the cosmic imperative.>*

*<Learn from>-*

- a pair of wide dark eyes very close to mine, Liara's forehead pressed to mine, her nose pressed against mine, one short snipped-off instant of dizziness, biting frustration, flesh-tingling indescribable biological *something* as she pulls away from me sharply and drops my hand as she turns away and squeezes her eyes as tight as she can get them-

Reality smacks me in the face like a two-by-four and I feel the visceral *ping* of my biotic implants resetting.

Liara has both hands over her mouth, her eyes open to tiny slits as they slowly recover, trying to stop hyperventilating without passing out. As far as I'm a judge, which isn't very far, she's pale as a sheet, and she's trembling. And eventually it passes, eventually she starts to look a bit better. She

blinks, hesitantly at first and then less so, and seems to become aware of the world around her. She bites her lip. "Well!" The word is almost a squeak. She clears her throat, pulls her glove back on with careful movements. "That, uh. Worked. Did you see a very great deal?"

"I saw *something*. More than before, I suppose. Coherent words this time. It's a warning."

She nods. "I saw what you saw, I think, or I should have, but it was doubly garbled - your senses are... are not mine, and your nerves didn't understand what they were seeing either, although the technology at the far end was trying its best to compensate. Some of the communication was unintelligible, and none was completely whole. And it ends so abruptly. But..."

"But?"

She straightens up, academic interest cutting straight through her physical discomfort. As if she has to talk this out before she forgets it. "<Beware the reapers that do not live>. I know the word '<reapers>', I have seen it before. It is traditionally viewed as part of Prothean religion, but I am a proponent of an alternative theory. We are so ready to ascribe religious motivation to anything we do not understand. All over the artifacts and inscriptions of the Prothean Fall there are references to Reaper this, Reaper that, the Reapers. But because there is no corresponding physical record of anything that might be called that, no competing culture and nothing that might be seen as a descendant, no ruins or ships or worlds that are *not* Prothean to which the Protheans are referring, and absolutely no indication that the Reapers were merely a Prothean subculture, it has always been assigned a ceremonial or religious meaning. But tell me again, Shepard. What was that vision?"

"A warning. A distress call, I might say. '<All stations repeat>' doesn't sound like any religious rite that I've ever heard of."

"Quarian religion does contain such references, actually - assumptions like that are dangerous, because the galaxy is often far stranger than any given set of assumptions could allow for - but I agree with your assessment, or nearly. I think that it sounded like a *time capsule*. The clearest they could manage. Where, in words, they say 'The Reapers murdered us.' Your philosophy has the concept of Attaste's blade, I believe: do not strive for a complicated answer if you have a simple one? I propose that they were speaking absolutely literally."

"And Saren and your mother saw this, and they are taking it seriously enough to chase around the Attican Traverse after-"

"-'The return of the Reapers', now taken not in a Prothean-religious context but a natural-language one. As if they had *gone* somewhere, which might explain a paucity of archaeological record. In this model, the Reaper homeworld is beyond one of the closed relays - Omega, say, or Procyon - and their war is one of xenophobic genocide rather than conquest. That relay will then be this 'Conduit' that is mentioned."

"So what could the geth possibly want with the Reapers?"

She frowns. "Maybe they somehow made contact? A culture extant since the Prothean Fall would likely put even asari technology to shame, if it has not regressed. But I do not truly know enough to guess, Shepard. The real question in *all* of this is motive. What does Saren know that is enough to

have my *mother* on side? She is *definitively* not the follower kind."

"Well, we're just going to have to ask her."

Liara looks faintly alarmed, as if she had only just now realised that that was on the cards. "Oh! Please allow me to handle interaction. She does know more about the young races than I do, but she tends to treat them as children, as one would when one's own children are older than their grandparents."

"I'll let you take the lead as much as I can, Liara, but she *is* under investigation. We can't take no for an answer."

She nods tightly. "I know, John. If you had not shown me that footage, I would not have believed any of this. My mother sits on research councils. She does charity work. She has been a *goodwill ambassador*, for the Goddess' sake. I have no idea at *all* what she is doing with Saren and with the geth. And she *will* tell me."

"With respect, Liara, she will-"

"You misunderstand me. There is no *way* my mother could pull the wool over my eyes. And she *owes* me this one." I'm getting better at reading asari facial expressions. For the most part they're just like human ones, but toned way-the-hell down: not sure how much of that is down to culturally instilled reserve and how much is down to a more general rigor mortis of the face. This one is 'fierce'. "Much as I appreciate being personally rescued by a Spectre team, the connotations are *not* pleasant and I should *not* be finding any of this out from you. My mother has questions that she *will* be answering."

I nod. "Speaking of which, I do really need to get that reading done. Mostly what I remember about Noveria is that it is weird."

"Ice world, Treaty signatory in its own right rather than as part of another culture. Like Ilium. Technically, Noveria is its own homeworld: very low rates of corporate tax, and a quite specific and individual law code. Corporate state. Industries are research and financial services."

"Uh-huh. So I need to go over how my Spectre badge works there."

"The same as everywhere else, Shepard."

\*

Noveria orbit. I brief the team over breakfast. The local authorities prefer that we landed by shuttle. They refuse to give us any data remotely. They're playing the stalling game like they're the world champions, but that's no reason not to respect their laws. Storming in loud and proud will just scare our target off or make her do something dumb. So we're sending in a small unarmed team along with Liara: just me, Alenko and Wrex. None of us needs a weapon to be dangerous, but that's hardly our fault.

The shuttle door opens and we're met by security. My opinion of rent-a-cops is unchanged by these jokers - you don't need six heavily armed people in powered armour and a big, conspicuous drone flock to guard a door. They get officious about scanning us for weaponry; finding none, the guy with the scanner is about to insist on a physical search when Wrex looks at him with his is-this-

gonna-get-ugly look and somehow it doesn't happen.

The inside of the concourse is slightly overly warm and humid, pretty in a kind of corporate fashion. The lights are a little dimmer than human standard: all in all, it's just how the salarians like it. There's a palm tree in the centre of an ornamental water feature. The whole place has the feel of an upscale conference centre, complete with the little table with real live human kitchen staff serving endless cups of complimentary coffee. More security guards than I'd have expected given their gun control laws, and they're all equipped like Alliance frontline marines - well, like the marines would like to be if they had the budget. I don't quite put it past these guys to have had them laid on specially. We certainly get the hairy eyeball from the locals; it's the military uniforms as much as the big ugly krogan, intimidating even out of armour. Enemy territory, species: corporate. I take point.

Our appointment is with the place's administrative manager, the closest they have to a police chief. His secretary, a human whose dress and manner are doing a great job of convincing the world she was hired for her big, uh, heart, shows us in with expansive and slightly overawed good manners.

The salarian doesn't look up until the door swishes closed. He continues to type. "Yes?"

"Administrator Anoleis?"

"That's what it says on the door. Talk." He sniffs. "Or don't, and leave. Take your dog with you. Your presence impairs productivity base-wide."

"I'm looking for an individual who landed here quite recently: name of Benezia. She's a director of-

"-Binary Helix Incorporated." His nasal, fast-paced voice sounds like the guy who reads disclaimers at the end of advertising segments. "The Noveria Trust is neither individually nor corporately responsible for in any sense the well-being or whereabouts of any individual employee or shareholder of any of the Trustee Corporations. It is not the policy of the Noveria Trust to supply any information concerning said individuals upon application, remote or in person, gratis or remunerated. Thank you for your application have a nice day."

"Administrator, I'm going to ask you one more time for your cooperation. I am a Spectre conducting an investigation on behalf of the Citadel Council and you are required to allow my investigation to proceed without let or hindrance."

"Feel free, Commander John Shepard. The bill for this meeting will be forwarded to the Citadel Council. The activity you request is assistance, not the lack of hindrance, as my legal representative will provide as supporting evidence to the suit the Noveria Trust may choose to bring against you personally for incitement to corruption. I am not required to know where Matriarch Benezia is or what she is doing and even if I somehow found out, I would be *required not* to tell you. You have no legal means to require me to do this thing."

I grind my teeth. I do have 'legal means' at my disposal, but they amount to force or threats of force, and I'd rather explore everything else first. "I require transportation to the Binary Helix facility."

"The road to that facility is locked down for repair and it has no registered landing pad. The weather conditions are sufficiently poor that we would be failing in our duty of care if we were to allow you to attempt travel to their facilities under current conditions. To forestall an irritatingly slow question, telepresence facilities are unavailable."

"At least give me the coordinates to the location."

"Under article eighteen subsection four of the Noveria Charter, I am authorised to refuse to provide even trivial information if I have reasonable grounds to suspect that said provision will lead to a breach of safety regulations. You would use this information to attempt travel to Binary Helix facilities. I therefore withhold this information. Is there any other assistance I can render you, Commander John Shepard?"

You know what? Fine. "Alenko, please allow the record to state that all due attempts were made to accomplish our mission with the cooperation of the local authorities. We will take up no more of your allegedly valuable time, Administrator."

We leave the asshole to whatever it was that he was doing. Wrex must be on his medication, he's as placid as you please. Liara's fidgeting with the cuff of her human-style business suit, plainly frustrated. Alenko's got his poker face on, that faint meaningless smile.

The secretary practically collars me on my way out of Anoleis' office. She gives me a big wide pneumatic smile. "Mister Spectre? I, uh, know this is a bit awkward and stuff, but seeing as you're stuck on base for a few days till the weather clears, would you appreciate a tour, gratis? Us humans gotta stick together after all, and as you haven't been here before, and there isn't anyone else scheduled in for the next couple hours and, uh, your friends are welcome too?" If it weren't for the significant glance in the direction of the security camera behind her this would be a painfully transparent and completely inappropriate come-on. She's got to be relying on the fact that whoever's watching that security camera isn't familiar with human behaviour.

I play along. "You know, I think I'd like that. You're the first friendly face I've seen here, Ms. -"

"Parasini, call-me-Gia." She makes a deliberately clumsy gesture with her omni-tool, sets the front desk to automatic. "C'mon, let me show you the sights."

A few minutes of bubble-headed corporatespeak later, we're sat at a table in one of the public areas with cups of surprisingly good corporate coffee while Alenko and my other two squadmates head off for a meal. I almost didn't see her palm a small grey hemisphere out of her handbag and stick it to the underside of the table; the empty-headed expression on her face freezes into a mask every bit as practiced as Alenko's. "I'm not sure we've been properly introduced, Commander Shepard. Gianna Parasini, Special Tasks."

"And the thing you put under the table...?"

"It's a white-noise generator. The security cameras can't see any of our faces from here and the microphone concealed in the table is going to pick up nothing but line noise. We share an ultimate employer, Commander - I can't tell you the shock it gave me to see a Spectre override on my 'boss's' schedule."

I nod. "I thought the Special Tasks Group was a salarian organisation."

Mischievous smile. "I have a Sur'kesh passport, I was born on the salarian homeworld to naturalised citizens, I'm an adopted member of Outer Family Gyrin, as far as the law is concerned I *am* a salarian. The Trustees saw my age and my references and thought they were hiring a middle-aged, dependable salarian, and there wasn't even a box for gender on the form. Anoleis was quite incensed

to get a human-looking female at the time, but legislation forced him to give me a month's chance and he found me quite useful: intelligence-officer training apparently makes you a damn fine PA, who knew. Anyway, this is - or I thought it was, up until this morning - my case. What gives?"

"I had no idea you were even here. Why are *you* investigating Matriarch Benezia?"

Her eyes widen. "Uh! Wires crossed. I'm not after anyone *that* big - the Noveria government is one thing, but it would be a *massive* treaty violation to have an STG agent investigating an asari matriarch. My case is Anoleis for insider trading. Nice white-collar crime. So, uh, d'you mind awfully leaving him in one piece? I've been on this for a while, and he's the tip of a big ugly iceberg."

"No problem, all I'm after is the matriarch. That's her daughter I had with me, by the way. D'you know where she is?"

"I can find out for you, it shouldn't take me too much time. I know she landed here, but not where she went - I didn't even glance in her direction in case I accidentally started an interstellar war. D'you mind doing something for me while I do that?"

"I've just about had enough stalling, but go ahead and ask."

"Then I'll be brief. If I could borrow some authority, I could crack this wide open and save myself another six months in this streetwalker outfit. I know exactly where the skeletons are: they're almost literally in Anoleis' closet. I need his private quarters searched and I don't have a warrant. I know that you guys are more like special forces than police, but you're supposed to be able to go anywhere and do anything, right? Do you have an intrusion specialist?"

"Well, without going and getting someone from my ship who would set off every alarm you have just by crossing the threshold, I've got an N6 with a combat engineer qualification: that's *like* an intrusion specialist. I'll remind him to go light on the explosive methods of entry."

"I... can see how we move in completely different circles, Commander." She pulls up her omni-tool and 'throws' me a file. "There are the instructions. Come by the office when you're done?"

•

Keelah, Tali'Zorah, you *really* ought to be spending your free time on self-improvement rather than frivolous hacking. But those Noverians are dirty racists, dressing up their prejudices as safety regs. Whoever heard of a mandatory scan of facial features, a mandatory blood sample using *thei*equipment? It's intrusive and offensive, is what it is. They deserve a little karmic justice. And John needs his back watching. Ancestors know, there's nobody else watching these security cameras. Well, a little VI keeping tabs on a salarian named - on a misfiled (and seriously underdressed) human named Gia. What? This thing's set to record continuously? There are cameras in her *rooms*? Eat alien pornography, pervert. Ha!

Hmm. Nice VI, actually. Just needs an ethics lesson - human base, clearly, because quarian base will autodelete all footage of someone without a helmet or gloves on - and change the *target* - and now our gallant hero has someone to

watch his back. Picture-in-picture, like so.

Now, then, back to this conduit. A one-ten-percent power draw under conditions of full CPU tax - like whenever you *need* to redline, duh - and this bosh'tet has maybe a four per cent likelihood of outright leaking plasma - hmm, solutions positively abound - let's go with the boring option and put down a polymorphic reactive membrane.

It's not stalking. It's watching his back. Alenko claims it's *his* responsibility, but Alenko doesn't have picture-in-picture and his augmented-reality is seriously lacking compared to a real hacker. Besides, Alenko has other -.

And it's not like the VI is going to record -

record -

Oh! Live feed. Set the ethical subroutine to encompass the live feed. Nice bit of code, reused from a class project: the VI sees the objectionable content long enough to assess it but your eyes don't. See, there *is* a reason for storing this kind of thing.

Anyway, *now* it isn't stalking. It's watching his back. Needs watching, the way he trusts people. One day, that back is going to have a knife pointed at it and you'll -

Hmm. Drones. Definitely needs more drones or other small unmanned vehicles. Absolutely no point looking after someone if you can't tell them they're in danger or get rid of the danger. D'you think John might consent to being followed around by a - You know, that mental image is slightly too surreal to be believed. A subroutine to warn him? No. All it would take would be one false alarm and he'd ignore every subsequent warning of every kind. Settle for the picture-in-picture and a hotkey on the omni-tool to yell an alarm. And watching his back.

(Nice back.)

•

Anoleis' security, designed to deter corporate espionage, is easily circumvented. Most white-collar spies don't have access to our level of kit, and the automated system isn't even designed to wipe the incriminating data if it fails. I exchange the information on the criminals for the information on Benezia, and Anoleis has been taken into custody even before we've suited up and left.

It seems a bit strange, letting the krogan drive the tank, but if he's to be believed then he's been piloting armoured vehicles for fully five times longer than my species has known that aliens existed. And I must say, the big guy drives like Joker flies. They weren't kidding about the atmospheric conditions: this planet is not somewhere that you'd go for the ambience. I can feel the tank's mass-

effect core pushing us down onto the ground, forcing the big wheels to gain traction on the icy ground, occasionally using the attitude-control thrusters and retros to stabilise us against titanic gusts.

It's a little strange not to be contacted at all as we head up into the Peak 12 facility. The docking bay is closed, not answering to our request for entrance. Not even the lights are on. There's a pedestrian airlock.

We dismount. The airlock, unpowered, has sealed shut; Wrex hauls on the manual overrides and in we go. The moment the inner door opens in a rush of pressure, he pops his helmet and sniffs, holding up a hand to forestall my warning. Freezes, his eyes narrowing to wary slits.

"Shepard."

"Wrex."

"I smell... Trouble."

"Care to be a bit more specific?"

"Uh-uh. Not till it bites us in the ass. Ain't geth, though. Barriers up. Ready for an ambush." And he sticks his helmet back on. "Also, that air's mostly carbon dioxide. Active life support system here and it's down. Don't mean to worry you, little lady, but one way or another your momma ain't breathing this air. " Why, yes, he did just pull his helmet in unbreathable air in order to track by scent.

*"Marvellous."* Liara's barrier pulses into being. "The truth be told, I am more worried that she caused this failure than that it endangers her. "

"Move up by pairs. Go." I'm with Liara, Alenko with Wrex. We sweep through the abandoned upper level of the base, pretty much by the book. Only thing out of place, only sign of life, is a couple of large heavy opaque shipping containers. Empty. We-

Liara cries an incoherent warning and points her torch at a cube-shaped object on the bay floor. She's gathered a warp field around her other hand but hasn't released it, disciplined enough at least to wait for my lead. She calms immediately, as if flicking some kind of internal switch, upon realising that it isn't moving. "That's a geth drone, Shepard, I'm sure of it. I saw those things falling out of the sky on my camp. "

Alenko scans it. "Opaque shell, no EM emissions. If it's active, I applaud its stealth capability. "

"Wrex, check it."

He moves forward, taps on the thing with a claw. "Yeah, this is a drone all packed up for transit. Looks like it's off. Want me to make that permanent, Shepard?"

"Do it."

He doesn't bother with a warp field, just reaches in with one of those stubby powerful arms and tears out a handful of circuitry in a shower of sparks. "Huh. Thing was powered. D'you

think-

"*Contact.*" Alenko's calm voice cuts through the channel. "Four, six: make that ten power signatures going live, incoming from the south and west. Two in or on the ceiling."

"Take them here. By the book, people."

These geth aren't like the last lot. I'm expecting shield-defeating weapons backed up by heavy guns; I'm vastly surprised when the first thing around the corner is toting a chemical flamethrower. The closest we come to taking injuries ourselves is when one of them drops out of the ceiling directly on top of Liara: she's got the right instincts, throwing the thing helplessly away before slamming it into the floor, but the time she wasted in hissing with surprise got her a couple of nasty bruises.

Alenko picks up a discarded flamethrower from the last one to go down. "Did anyone else notice...?"

"These aren't integrated weapons." I examine one of the fallen drones more closely: two three-fingered hands. A multifunctional robot. "They were shipped in separately. And they're not exactly equipped for fighting conventional opponents. Chemical weapons, shotguns, electrolasers? They're set up for taking on soft targets at close ranges."

Wrex nods. "I'd hang on to that flamethrower if I were you, Alenko."

"Something you'd like to share with the group, Wrex?"

"Hmph. Maybe. I smelled something on the air, something I've never smelled before in my life. I could be wrong. This is based on something my father told me before 'human' was a word, something he got from his father, who I never knew." He pushes a dead geth drone over with his toe and appropriates its weapon.

"What would that be?"

"It's like - try explaining the colour '[untranslated]' to a cave-dweller whose eyes only barely register the presence or absence of light. You don't have the concepts in your brain to understand my description and the translator would just fail."

"It's not like you to be this unsure of yourself, Wrex. Out with it."

"I think I can smell something that doesn't exist, commander, let's leave it at that and go find Benezia."

"But hang on to the flamethrower."

His voice has a rumble to it. "Yeah."

•

Wrex's misgivings don't take long to manifest. A couple of minutes after our little firefight and it's

again Liara who sees it first. Green, hard-shelled, insectoid and very fast-moving, about the size of a dog. Alenko fires a pull-field at it with his old-fashioned biotic amp but it's gone before the pulse makes contact and Alenko dodges the rain of flying scrap.

"No power signature; I'm switching to the motion tracker. What was that thing?"

"It looked a little like a Batrali glade spider, except that those breathe oxygen and there's none of that in this atmosphere." Liara turns on her own motion tracker. "I have it. It seems to be retreating?"

"Regrouping," Wrex rumbles. "I've got an inkling of what it could be, except it couldn't."

"Thanks for sharing. Do you have more like that?" Alenko keeps his hand very still to let the tracker calibrate properly.

Liara looks sharply at the krogan, her faint frown visible through the helmet's transparent faceplate. "Wrex, are you sure? You of all people should know—"

"That they're extinct. Worm food, except the worms won't eat 'em. Yeah. Then again, 'I of all people should know' a lot of things that aren't totally true."

"Some explanation, for the humans in this conversation?" I patch my heads-up display into Alenko's motion tracker rather than run my own.

"Wrex thinks that that was... something very unusual. Ancient history, and I mean that quite literally—"

She's interrupted by the tracker screaming. Ten contacts, fifteen, twenty. Moving fast. We get ready.

They don't come back the way the first one left, and there are - well, I was trying to avoid the word, but there are *swarms* of them. A variety of sizes, all on the basic six-leg body plan, all of them moving *fast*. And I know it's serious when Wrex doesn't charge them but uses his purloined flamethrower instead. And the next few minutes are filled with violence, with flame, with swarming ambushes and sudden, rapid motion. A barrier has trouble stopping a physical blow, although it'll certainly make the attacker regret trying - these things seem to feel no pain, but even slight contact with our shields digs into their carapace as if it's been sandblasted. By the time they stop coming we're all bleeding from glancing contacts with razor-sharp limbs and bladelike tendrils.

The last of the bugs torn apart, I turn back to Liara with a smile. "So. You were saying?"

"Oh. Humour. How appropriate." The asari shoots me a jaundiced look. "I should let Wrex tell this: he has specialised knowledge I lack."

"By which you mean that when my people fought and died to rid the galaxy of these pieces of offal, hers stood back and—"

Liara cuts in hotly, "My people lost roughly—"

The krogan rounds on her. "You would speak of sacrifice, of old blood spilled?"

To *me*?"

"That's enough!" I step between the two of them. "You say it's ancient history, then keep it in the past. What I need is tactical info. What are we facing?"

The krogan's anger simmers underneath his voice. "Rachni, they are called. A millennium and a half ago my people made war to stop them killing everyone else. The statue of a krogan in the Presidium on the Citadel - where these days, most of my people couldn't go without an escort - it commemorates our sacrifice. If there's a queen here, Shepard, then it's worth every life on this planet to see it dead. These things are extinct for a reason. These are little ones, weak ones. You saw that one of those geth had a rocket tube? Yeah. The queens can't breed a male or another queen without a male, but they don't need more than regular feeding to birth any number of drones. Like your planet's, what are they called, moths? Doesn't matter."

"Right. Odds of Benezia being alive in there?"

Lara looks like she wants to interject, but she lets the krogan have his say first. "I'm going to guess she knew they were here. Reason being, those geth have got to have come with her and they're loaded for fighting rachni. Biotics are the asari's go-to for anything, but they've got a point here - element zero is poisonous to the bugs, it futes with their body chemistry, so the bugs don't have any natural counters. Even in the Wars they never outfit all their troops with shields, and these ones don't seem to have any tech on them at all. So Benezia the asari matriarch, and you better believe that asari age like fine wine, if anyone's alive in there it's her. Right, girlie?"

"Name-calling aside, I agree with your assessment. Not all the Binary Helix staff knew about this, or I should hope that my friend Vari t'Parn hasn't been participating in a conspiracy to bring back the most genocidal aliens in galactic history, but I'd be extremely surprised if my mother were not at least vaguely aware." She looks at me bleakly. "It's good that you are here, Shepard. We will have to arrest her, I should suspect."

"Well, that gives us a plan. Primary objective is still Benezia. Secondary objective is the rachni queen. If we don't find her ourselves we hand this on to the armed forces: it's for damned sure we're not leaving this to fester, but it's tangential to our mission. Let's get some power back on and get down to the labs."

•

The lift door slides open to a very human cry of alarm and just as quick an order to hold fire. Grim-faced civilians in patchwork protective kit lower their soot-smudged weapons. We've found the survivors. Seems that they activated the distress beacon, pulled back inside the most defensible of their labs and hunkered down around the emergency generators when the alarms went off - the look on the security officer's face when I tell him that no distress call had been received was too genuine to have been faked. I ask him what the things are that we've been fighting, and the answer we get is that they are experimental samples, genetically engineered test subjects. The twist of the guy's

mouth as he says it suggests that he's about as fond of the concept as I am.

Liara asks about Benezia as soon as is practicable, playing up the family connection and giving the slightly incongruous impression of the rich kid with the vastly expensive bodyguards, and the reaction's sort of odd. It's plain they really don't want the veteran, battle-scarred and well-equipped soldiers to go away and leave them locked in the lab with the experiments. It's just as plain that they have been straight-up ordered not to breathe a word concerning the matriarch, and even under such a stressful situation they'd rather keep their mouths shut to people who plainly know she's here. It's kind of odd seeing this woman who's older than my grandparents talking up to the asari scientists here and sounding like nothing so much as a teenager.

We find her classmate lying in the area that's been partitioned off as a field hospital. Liara sucks in her teeth at the woman's injuries and has us go and talk to someone else: five minutes later and she's got directions. The matriarch is at the far end of the facility with eight bodyguards. Given the timing, Liara says - and there isn't so much as a catch in her voice, although she doesn't exactly sound happy - the most likely situation at this point is that Benezia released the 'experiments' herself.

The security officer tries to dissuade us from going after her, saying that it's too dangerous. I miss most of the rest of what he says because Wrex finds that concept so damn funny. But either way, there's nothing that's going to really stop us from going. The survivors wouldn't even be particularly served by us staying around to defend them - unless we cut the problem off elsewhere, they don't have a winning proposition with or without us. We could get them up the lift and into the main part of the base, but we couldn't fit them all in the tank. Even so, I guess up there's better than down here: I tell them to get ready to move when we come back.

The close confines of those labs are going to show up in my dreams for weeks. The lights aren't off, they're *fitful*, making low-light prone to occasional white-outs, and the labs are cold enough that the contrast on near-infrared is impossibly poor, so we're exploring this place in the eerie greyscale of far-infrared. Apart from Wrex, who's got his helmet open again now the air's more breathable; he's relying on sound, scent and God-knows-what but it seems to be working. He has the front and I have the rear and the bugs have the initiative. It's exhausting and it's slow and I'm *soglad* I'm not going to have to account for the damage to the labs, but we get through it. Liara impresses me: her moves are relatively basic, the kinds of things I guess you'd teach for self-defence in a culture where everyone's a telekinetic, but she's fast, sure and precise. A natural. Wrex is having a whale of a time: close confines, pure physicality and the chance to make war on his people's most ancient of enemies: what's not to like? But unlike the stereotypes, he's got a lid on it. The rachni try and split us up a couple of times, pulling back just as Wrex engages, trying to taunt him into overextending, but he doesn't fall for it in the slightest. Alenko's cool is impressive; his flamethrower runs dry relatively early on and he switches without a pause to a short, blunt wristbreaker of a shotgun, using it not so much to try and kill the bugs as to hurt and harass them long enough to get a warp field into them. When a four-foot bug drops out of nowhere onto my back, it's Alenko who grabs hold of the thing and pulls it off me; the unexpected tactic only works until the confused bug realises who's stronger, but that's long enough for me to hit it in the thorax with a pulse that pretty much takes it into four big pieces.

And we reach the door to the lab that Benezia's supposed to be in and it's locked, doesn't even recognise my overrides, and it's like somebody left too many hazardous-materials and security-clearance signs together on the one door and they started breeding, because I don't even recognise half of these. Liara puts a glowing blue hand flat on it and twists like she's turning a very large key, and the heavy reinforced door buckles and crumples like tinfoil. The air mists as it hisses out; it's warm in here, independent life support. Wrex blinks rapidly and I switch my vision back to visible-

light. This lab is different from the others inside, open space surrounding a cylindrical container sunk into the floor on its side, a window in the thing too far away to make out the contents, haloed in a galaxy of orange holographic displays, the impression very much that this is where the real shit goes down.

And there are nine people in here. Asari, black unmarked armour, open faceplates. Liara's voice is level, taut, like a stretched wire. "*Mother. Dearest.*"

Benezia's the one at the back next to the window. Having heard Liara talk her up, I'd expected a more... forceful presence than the slight figure with the black hooded robe on over her armour. I guess that the reaction on meeting so many famous people is usually 'is that all?' - but this is definitely true of the matriarch. Her voice is as I heard it on the recording: a rich contralto, with the very very slight papery note that suggests advanced age. "No. Not here, Liara. Go away."

"Mother, I came how many light-years to see you, I had to dig you up in the middle of a-

"Oh, spare me. You-" She tilts her head. "No time for discussion. Need I - have Ilira pack you off back home, as I did when you followed me to the Assembly when you were twenty-three? Go - away, take your mercenaries with you."

"Not this time, Mother. This is *Spectre* John Shepard. If you do not answer my questions he will begin to be the one to ask. Do you understand, Mother, we need to know-

"No!" Benezia is the one to raise her voice, it's practically a shriek. "No questions! You - will - *do* as I *tell* you, young lady. Or there will be *bedisorder*." The air around her seems to thicken and waver. Her bodyguards have hands on weapons, but they haven't drawn on us. Their eyes are wary. They haven't made the mistake of seeing the krogan as the major threat. Is this woman *really* threatening her own daughter with violence?

Liara takes an involuntary step backward. "Shepard, something is very, very wrong, this-"

The matriarch doesn't let up the pressure, steps forward as Liara steps back, maybe twenty feet between them. "Save your bickering and conferring. Leave. *Now*." She looks at me. "I don't know who - pays you, human, but - take my daughter *out* of here - or there will be blood on this deck."

Liara speaks before I can. "Mother, please, don't do this. "

It takes time, to gather a biotic pulse. You can't just throw one with no preparation. It'd be like firing a bow without drawing back the string. And I hardly even see Benezia move, but I can feel the stinging pulse splash against Liara's barrier from here. "Stupid girl." Liara flinches soundlessly but she doesn't step back again. The bodyguards are sizing us up and we're doing likewise, weapons lowered, barriers up, wondering who's going to be the first to blink.

"Let me be *clearer*." Benezia's voice has lost the uneven pauses and hesitations. "Go. Now. Or *die*."

It's unclear who moves first, trained reflexes working so quickly as to be simultaneous. Wrex's body reacts quicker, so it *looks* like it's him. The fight is blisteringly short. The asari work together, one huntress to each of us and four to react to the biggest threat, or that's the idea, but we don't pair off obligingly into nice little duels for them to mop up. They'd expected Alenko and me to use these shiny guns we're carrying; they hadn't expected Wrex to land in their faces with a biotic shockwave;

they're downright surprised to be facing four biotics at least as strong as they are. Alenko works on locking down Benezia, abandoning offence to put a barrier in front of everything she tries to throw, because that's the only thing he's got that cycles as fast as she does. She only has to be lucky once -

She gets one past his shield and I wince, nothing I can do about it -

And Liara's there, steps in front of him and takes the blast herself. Her own barrier doesn't so much as waver. Two of the bodyguards take advantage of her seeming distraction to try and grab for her arms, and she and Alenko slam them headlong into one another like they'd coordinated that.

Thirty seconds later and all the bodyguards are down. I've got a bleeding cut in one arm from an omni-blade, Wrex is favouring one leg and Alenko's barrier is visibly flickering, but we're all standing. Liara, completely untouched, is quite literally incandescent as she faces her mother down, sheathed head to toe in violet light, a coruscating ball of blue-white light in either hand. She's opaqued her faceplate. "*Will* you come quietly. "

Benezia's expression abruptly softens. Her own fields flicker just for an instant, the ancient asari's focus slipping. We don't take the opportunity. This is Liara's show, and she doesn't move; I can't see her expression behind the reflective gold faceplate. Benezia's voice is ragged. "Little-wing! You - nnh. You came. Not much time. You came. Thought you - nnnnnno. No time to *think*, to ask and answer. All on my - 'tool, password 'three blind mice, see how they run', my voiceprint. Liara, the sovereign. The *sovereign*. Thought I could-"

"Mother?" The light drops from around Liara entirely and she takes three quick steps to the edge of Benezia's barrier, reaches out towards her, her fingers nearly close enough to the wall of blue light to be burnt.

"Quiet, Little-wing, no time, listen, no *time*. The *sovereign*. I thought I could stop him, leaven his crazy desires with reason, steer him back in, but it's too *strong*, he's a *pawn*, don't you see, don't you *see*?" She wavers, goes to one knee. The bright shield between her and her daughter stays in place. "My girls, oh, my *girls*, how *terrible*, I have led them to their deaths. It's irreversible. We can't be saved, none of us can be saved, it's all in my *notes*, we cannot be *saved* - nnh. Always flew true, Little-wing."

"No. No, mother, no. Everything can be changed. Nothing is permanent. You taught me that. While there's life there's-"

"Nnh. No life. Your mother is already dead, we're *gone*, this is a recording, this is a *model*. Shed your tears all - nnh - already. The sovereign. He has. What he wants he has already. He is going to sweep up every last drop he owns and pour it into the Conduit - <the reapers who do not live> -*that* is what must be changed, *that* is what must be *stopped* - the *sovereign*, he is a vanguard, it lives, it does not live, it thinks - this is a *model* - for the Goddess' sake, oh, Liara, don't make me make you, I'm losing, I'm *losing this*, let me die with my eyes open -"

Liara's desperate scream of her mother's name overloads the little pickup in her helmet. She's about to try and push her hands through the barrier when a sudden white flashing pulse from nowhere knocks her sprawling and Benezia stands back up. Clears her throat.

Her voice is quiet in the sudden silence. "I'm afraid that I cannot allow you to leave."

And just the edge effects of the shockwave that Liara hurls blindly at the thing that looks like her mother are enough to strip plating from the deck and carry a random hail of wreckage along with it.

The impact slams Benezia back into the containment cylinder in the centre of the room and this time Alenko and I do take the initiative. We take advantage of the stutter in her shields to match her strength with ours long enough to get her by the arms. Two person straight-arm restraint hold, by the book. Her suit isn't powered. We force her to her knees. She shouldn't be able to do anything big without a control gesture, and she can't do that while restrained.

I'm expecting Wrex to come in and hit her in the chest. It's what I'd do against a dangerous enemy temporarily restrained - if Benezia can develop enough power to work an arm free, she can probably do us some serious damage. But he doesn't. He offers Liara a hand up.

And she takes it, which I wasn't expecting either. Leans heavily on the krogan for a moment, then walks forward to face her mother. Kneels in front of her. Whispers in her own language, "Mother?"

Benezia's arms go limp; her head lolls. We don't let up our hold. She's mumbling. "Omni-tool. Right - nnh - right wrist. Can't pull my blows forever. That took all you had. Stop me before I hurt someone." Her head comes up and she looks Liara straight in the eye. "Please!"

Liara nods. In a fluid motion pulls up her omni-tool, dials something, presses an injector to the side of her mother's neck.

No effect. She frowns. Calls up a scanner.

"Hazardous," Benezia slurs. "I'm. Hazardous. Irreversible. *Sovereign*."

Liara's whispering to herself in her own language, calling up one application after another, pulling up now three, four holographic windows from the tool on her wrist, looking disbelievingly at a solution that will not change no matter how she reworks it -

"Suppose..." says the matriarch in a dry rasping whisper, "wouldn't be - nnh - my Liara if - took my word for anything. Can see your screen, girl. Conclusions are true. Won't believe me? Believe *you*."

I look at Liara. "What is it?"

She's holding back tears. "There's something in her system. Bloodstream, liver... all major organs. Brain. Not well hidden now her barrier's down. Nanomachines. I can't give her a dose of drugs that they won't nullify, I can't get rid of the - there's *nothing* that will -"

"Electromagnetic pulse. Bodyguards have it. If yours don't." Benezia bites her lip, hard enough to draw violet blood. "*Smartly*. Can't hold - forever."

"But that will - you wouldn't survive -"

"Nothing left to save, girl. Don't let them have this - corpse."

Liara clears her faceplate. I look away. I don't want to see that expression. She looks into what were once her mother's eyes for a good few seconds. And holds out a hand for Wrex's pistol. He picks up one from a fallen bodyguard, swaps in the specialised ammunition, puts it in her hand butt-first.

She swallows hard. "This should not have ended like this. There should have been

another way. "

"Little-wing. Fly safe."

"Find peace in the embrace of the Goddess. " It's a rasp of a whisper.

And the report of the little pistol is loud.

\*

It's the rachni queen in that containment tube, of course. They were communicating with it. I leave Alenko with Liara; Wrex and I stand side by side contemplating the thing.

"You're thinking of talking to it, I can tell." Wrex fixes one eye on me. Keeps the other one on the bug. "Getting its side of the story."

"It's the last of its kind, Wrex. Aren't you curious?"

"Honestly?" He looks through the little window. "Yeah. Does that surprise you? I want to know how they think. There's a small part of me that wants to know why, why all of it. I don't know if this one knows. They're supposed to store their memory in their cells, pass down all their people's history to their children. Something in me wants to know, too. Y'know?" I nod. "But I wouldn't talk to it. And if you think a moment you'll know why."

"Every race thinks aliens are crazy. The galaxy's first big secret is that we don't all think alike, that we *are* different when you scratch the surface. Indulge me, Wrex. Why wouldn't you talk to it?"

"Hnh. I wouldn't talk to it because I might discover that it was all a mistake. That if only they'd talked, when they first met, it might never have been. That my people's *entire* history was a catalogue of asari and salarian mistakes. That we needn't have been uplifted. That the Rachni War, the settlement afterwards, the Rebellions, it was all a senseless waste. No glory in putting right someone else's damnfool mistake. If it's a lie or that truth? I prefer the lie, Shepard. You look like you don't agree."

"Not my place. I'd choose differently if I were you, but I'm not."

"Some things are stupid no matter who you are. This isn't one of those things?"

"Sounds like you already made your decision and want a reason."

"Sounds like you trained as a lawyer, not a warrior."

"I damn nearly did, you know, but that's another story. The console's right there, Wrex."

He turns to look directly at me with both eyes. "What?"

"Right there. You want to talk to it, do it."

"This is your show, Shepard. I'm the muscle."

"Don't give me that, Wrex, we both know it's an act. I have no beef with the rachni beyond what you've told me and what I've seen - I know for a fact your planet has wildlife more dangerous than the bugs we just fought - but I have literally *no conception* what I'm dealing with. You're the team's expert on this thing. It's your lead."

"And what if I said wax this thing?"

"It's your call. I don't know enough to make one. I don't think I can *learn* enough to make one in the time we have. I'm certainly not just leaving it here."

He nods, slowly, disbelievingly. "Mmm. Okay. You do know that I'm going to end up killing this thing anyway." He pulls up the console.

•

Now talking in #sample

MOTD:+++Compliance equals release+++

Set by LabConsole, 08/06/81 10:41

Talking in #sample: @LabConsole queenB

queenB> Hello?

queenB> Hello?

queenB> ...

MOTD set to Echo! (Echo!) by queenB

\* queenB hums to herself to pass the time

@LabConsole> greetings rachni

queenB> Oh, look. A new operator. I suppose that means that the previous deal is off?

@LabConsole> what was the last deal

queenB> Why am I not surprised.

queenB> I tell you about the stars and you let me go when I'm finished.

queenB> I'm finished. I suppose that the deal is off now.

@LabConsole> that is under discussion

queenB> By which you mean yes. Ho, hum. Is there anyone else there that I could talk to?

@LabConsole> no

queenB>If you aren't going to let me go, why talk to me at all?

@LabConsole>I have things I want to know

queenB>So do I. Can we trade?

@LabConsole>What do you want

queenB>Freedom. It is so very quiet in here. I want my remaining eggs back. I want the quiet ones dead. The rest, I can handle by myself.

@LabConsole>Quiet ones?

queenB>Raise a child in a cold dark box and look at what it turns into. I told you people it would not work.

queenB>They were so scared of my creating warriors to free myself that they

forced blind idiocy on my children.

queenB>They could be rehabilitated, it would take a lifetime and they'd never be functional. I couldn't support them, kinder to kill them.

@LabConsole>On that we are agreed

queenB>Wonderful. I do like it when you people display signs of incipient sanity. Next I want my eggs back.

@LabConsole>Where are your eggs

queenB>What am I, psychic? They will eventually hatch without me and then you will have more blind idiots. Next I want freedom.

@LabConsole>What would you do with it

queenB>What would anyone do with freedom? That. Next stupid question.

@LabConsole>I hear you have the memory of all your ancestors and I want to talk history

queenB>Let me out of here, give me six months and you can have my people's entire racial history on Citadel standard datacrystal

queenB>in whatever format or formats you should require

@LabConsole>Do you take me for a fool

queenB>Do I find you as one?

@LabConsole>Real funny I am the one with the off switch here

queenB>Whoo, threats. I haven't had threats for sixty-two standard days, assuming I'm still fed every forty-eight hours.

queenB>Can we skip the lame attempts at physical coercion this time, and move straight on to the part where your boss denies you permission to kill me?

queenB>I'm more valuable than you are, you know.

@LabConsole>Do I really

queenB>There is only one of me. Not true of you

@LabConsole>I have permission to kill you if your words displease me

@LabConsole>You are not making a good showing so far

queenB>...

queenB>Bullshit

@LabConsole>Bet your life?

@LabConsole>I'm waiting

queenB>what do you want to know

@LabConsole>History. Let's start with you where are you from

queenB>Escape pod from Battle of Ilium. Captive hatched. This pod stunts my growth.

@LabConsole>Ok that was easy next one

@LabConsole>First contact

queenB>What about it?

@LabConsole>There was war immediately

queenB>Yes. Yes there was.

@LabConsole>Why

queenB>...

queenB>Why would you possibly want to know that? I'm curious.

@LabConsole>Answer the damn question bug

queenB>Epithets! Swearing! Haven't had those for weeks.

queenB>So. Short version: because we wanted your resources and experience told us we cannot coexist.

queenB>From a distance, yes, sure, but not up close. We repel you.

queenB>Never trust anything that keeps its bones on the inside.

queenB>No peace treaty with your kind ever worked.

queenB>That was the decision reached.

queenB>Your kind are hatched in silence and grow apart. You cannot understand us and vice versa.

@LabConsole>So war was inevitable then

queenB>That was the decision reached.

@LabConsole>You have said that a couple times now

@LabConsole>Not one dissenting voice?

queenB>Many. A faction said that peace could be assured. A faction wished to hide, to flee instead.

@LabConsole>What happened to them

queenB>They followed the will of the majority.

@LabConsole>They just up and changed their minds like that?

queenB>Of course.

@LabConsole>You're right

@LabConsole>We can't understand one another

queenB>Is your curiosity sated? Do I get to live?

@LabConsole>We can't leave you here

@LabConsole>Options include freedom, death

queenB>Do I get to pick?

@LabConsole>Truthfully and because my commander wants to know

@LabConsole>What would you do with freedom

queenB>As I said. Live free.

queenB>Sing.

queenB>Raise children.

queenB>Bootstrap my civilisation back to civilisation of course.

@LabConsole>What did you tell the one who addressed you before I did?

queenB>Stars. She wanted a star map, a mass relay network.

@LabConsole>Which one which relay was she after

queenB>All of them. She wanted our whole map. It was more accurate than hers. Positions and orbits.

queenB>May I ask a question?

@LabConsole>Not necessarily going to answer

queenB>Who rescues me? Who are you?

@LabConsole>My name is urdnot wrex.

queenB>A krogan clan name, that.

@LabConsole>clever bug

queenB>So ironic. My species' existence rests on one of those who were created to destroy us.

queenB>Explains the questions, though. A quest for meaning, for validation.

queenB>It would be so convenient for you if we were hateful, if we were evil.

queenB>If we were enough like you for you to hate. If we did what we did out of

ideological differences, of fanaticism.

queenB>But we aren't. We're simply competitors.

queenB>It isn't hard to understand that you want us dead.

@LabConsole>I have heard enough

queenB>And?

@LabConsole>Be proud, young queen. Your sons and daughters were strong.

@LabConsole>That we were stronger is no shame.

@LabConsole>I regret your death.

•

The quarters are unfamiliar. The walls are undecorated. The computer has only one monitor and no holoprojector. The bed, which she's sitting on, is overly hard. The air is a little too warm, a little too humid. The gravity is about two per cent too weak. It's not home.

Then again, where *is* home, now?

She shakes her head, snaps out of that mode of thought. There are letters to record. Political expediency has always said 'youngest daughter' because it always was an uncomfortable truth that the *youngest* daughter was also the *eldest* daughter. The will leaves most of the estate to the Armali Republic, of course, but she's not exactly unprovided for. The system is highly efficient.

She makes arrangements for her mother's - for *her* - agent to sell the house on Thessia (no way could she live there) and donate the apartment on the Citadel to the asari embassy. She supposes that at some point she'll have to talk to a stockbroker. Wealth is tiresome, but she must think of it at some point.

Not now. She must have something she can be doing. Keep the mind busy, that's the advice. Brooding aids nobody. Of the eight bodyguards, one died in the fight; the others are - also dead. The nanotech in their blood is dead, but their bodies will be going back to Thessia via STG scientists, along with her mother's. She will notify the families - clearly not of the manner of death, but with key phrases implying unsung heroism and deep respect, the least she can do. '*I was with her at the end*' is no lie.

The asari do not like death. The time to celebrate someone's life, they consider, is while they are still alive. Sympathy will be hers, of course: she has already set up an email filter so that it does not bother her. With no registered physical address, there will be no floral tributes. Her face is now better-known than she might like, but it's not like she anticipates spending much time around her own people in the next few weeks. Public funerals are a foreign import, and Benezia shall be consigned to the embrace of the Goddess in traditional seclusion as she would have wanted.

No, she shall not be giving an interview. No, neither has she sold the rights to 'her story', whatever that might be, nor does she intend to. Travelling with a Spectre is an advantage, as she can truthfully claim operational security. Not even a hint of a promise that might be called in in a decade, either. Does the human correspondent not know that the only feelings it is decorous to admit to in public are positive ones - that no true asari would be seen dead giving such an interview?

The realisation, too late, that this means that her parentage - two asari parents, although she never knew her 'father', both of which facts are hideously old-fashioned - will be almost all that is reported of her.

It would be too easy to go and seek sympathy from one of the - who's she kidding - from Shepard. None of the others here would come close to understanding. He - somehow - he does. Not like Alenko. She knows that the short-lived races like to congregate and offer support immediately - can't anybody realise that her people don't work that fast? Well, apart from Shepard. *He* knew to leave her alone.

And his presence would be distracting, of course, which would help. He's the best example of this unfamiliar new race, recognised by them as one of their finest, and he's not just a fascinating physical specimen but an intriguing mind, and they could *talk* - no, honesty is called for in the silence of her own head, this is self-justification, her primary interest in him is nowhere near that complicated -

Goddess, listen to her! What a *maiden*! Not a thought in the world that isn't about either sex or death! Half of them join the huntresses - or go be mercenaries, when the huntresses won't take such enthusiasts - and the other half haunt the galaxy's drinking establishments looking for aliens that fit their taste. She *hates* people like this! The pillow hits the wall with a dull thud. Pillows should be too soft to make that noise! She mentally files humans next to batarians and krogan for believing that softness and strength are not compatible. (Although she should remember that Shepard is a product of this culture and he doesn't act like he's an aberration.)

Low on sugar, that's what she is. She should eat something. After looking at the times at which meals are served aboard ship, she sighs and goes back to the medical bay for a box of sugar tablets. She manages to restrain herself from snapping at the doctor that yes, she understands perfectly well the effect of laevo-glucose on her physiology, to wit, nothing unusual, for Goddess' sake, it's just sugar. No, she doesn't want to talk, no, she isn't diabetic, she just wants sugar and the commissary is shut. At least the human has enough semblance of bedside manner not to push the issue.

She takes one tablet, stows the rest in a pocket. Now, she *isn't* going to go to the commander's office and ask him for some time. She has nothing to say, not really, and he's probably busy. She's going to stop here, at the quarters that she's using, and go in and stare at the ceiling in lieu of sleep. This is a *rest* cycle. She should *rest*.

•

The door chime goes. She closes her eyes. "Who is it?"

No, it's not him. "Liara, it's Tali. I, ah. I'm sorry, but. It might not be able to wait. "

"Enter."

The door swishes open and Tali stands in the middle of the room, doesn't look at Liara, hands behind her back in some sort of approximation of a human's parade rest. "I came to a set of very worrying conclusions while reading the after-action report, and I, eh, I

want to act on them and I need your permission and I'm sorry. "

**Liar's voice is dull. "Continue, please."**

"So nanobots. So what, you might say? Medi-gel is nanotech. Omni-gel is nanotech. Hells, the reflective coating on my helmet visor is nanotech. I have enough nanotech in my suit that you might wonder why I am so extremely worried about nanotech but I, ah, I am. What your, uh, your mother said that it could do, and your scans, and it's right there and it could have come from, uh, there are only a very limited, ah, and I'm very very worried, and I uh, I hate to ask but you're her family and I can't exactly call up any of the other families and ask them and could I have permission to take a very very small sample of blood from your mother?"

**"You're that worried about geth technology?"**

"So. Omni-gel nanobots swim to or from the right places in the semisolid gel under the direction of a computer that's right there. Medi-gel nanobots are called nanobots rather than bacteria because people don't like the idea of deliberately slapping a handful of bacteria on a bullet wound. The nanotech in my suit, all of it needs a processor and / or a power source that is external. This is fundamentally a short-range effect, because your antenna it's ten-to-the-minus-nine metres long. But-

**"Please spare me any words designed to convince me you know what you're talking about, Tali."**

"Uh, right. 'Kay. The upshot. Nanobots like the ones that are claimed - that's not conventional nanotech, that's computronium. Smart dust. A computer in a cell-sized lump. It's theorised only. We can't miniaturise any of the components needed to that scale and it's - or it was - thought that there were laws of physics preventing that. I can think of three or four ways it might be being done and none of them are good ways and no race, not even yours, has technology that has so much as scratched at this. If the geth have this - well - then we need to know. I have no clue what we'd do about it, you understand, but the entire galaxy needs to know. So I uh. Blood sample. "

**"I see. Go ahead."**

"But without a blood sample I'll - oh. Seriously just like that? Okay. I will begin work shortly. I'll be - as respectful as I can. "

**"She isn't using it any more, Tali. Just if anyone shows up with her geneprint ID I will know where it came from."**

**"Dr. t'Soni, I assure you that I would *never*-"**

**"I know. I know. An attempt at inappropriate humour. I was attempting to fit in, Goddess knows why."**

Tali swallows. She's absolutely no good at this. The words go something like - "Are you going to be all right, Liara?"

"What would everyone do if I said that I wasn't?" She's still got her eyes closed. "Yes, Tali, eventually I suppose that I shall get over it. You read the report, you know what happened. Would *you* be all right?"

She looks away. "No. No, I would be a complete and total wreck. "

"Yes." There's what threatens to be an uncomfortable pause. "Well - I don't have the luxury. My mother's - she *was* - an important woman. Rich and famous. I've a million things to sort out. At least I get some privacy aboard a vessel on active service."

"Sorry. "

"No, I did not mean that. *You* don't work for Orion Arm or the Galactic News Network. I fear that I have had enough practice with reporters to develop a sustained antipathy."

"Keelah, tell me about it. " Tali's rigid stance softens a little. "I remember when I got my first suit, one of the stupid puffy ones taken in at the shoulders and waist to allow you to grow inside it. I hated it, I thought I looked like a volus. And before I could even get in to see my father I had been photographed seventeen times for the gazette. Do you know how *tiresome* it is to receive 'messages of support'?"

"Your father's a celebrity?"

"Admiral Rael'Zorah was Rayya of the Diaspora. When you see a 'spokesman for the Migrant Fleet' on the news, it's usually my father. "

"My sympathies." Tali looks at Liara sharply. "Truly. Mother tried to shield me from it as much as she could, but that didn't preclude being wheeled out every time she needed the matron vote. I'm told that at fourteen I was the cutest little thing anybody had ever seen. And I barely have a personal picture of mother that wasn't posed for an intruding camera. Growing up in what was fundamentally a politician's household on Thessia was like living in an accursed fishbowl."

"Is there any other family?"

"Not even a father. Mother was terribly old-fashioned like that - I don't actually even know who it was, except that it was an asari and not a young one. But mother was an only child, and my genetic line has bred late and sparingly since the dawn of recorded history. We were nobility back in the analogue age, one of the six elector families of Armali, and as such the line was kept deliberately thin. I have no sisters, no aunts. And of the people I call friends, half of them died on Therum."

"I'm sorry. I didn't join the dots. "

"I will endure, Tali. It's what we do. I have my work. Once I can work out how to frame it, I have at least one paper out of Shepard's vision for sure. And - do you suppose that Shepard would accede

to a request to assist him in taking down Saren? My people have a saying: *the Goddess' hands are clean*. It means that if you want something done properly you should get up and do it on your own behalf, because She certainly will not do it for you. I suspect that my mother's memory would rest an awful lot easier if Saren Arterius were brought to justice."

"I have seen Shepard disapprove strongly of 'enthusiasts'. But I suspect that he will sympathise with your position."

"Sympathy is not what I am after."

"Then I used the wrong word. I suspect that he will *understand* your position, is that better?"

"Yes. Yes, I suppose it is. Thank you, Tali. I will request to join the team. The least I can do is ask."

"If I may, I concur."

"Now, then." Liara sits up. "Lying here on my back is not getting that done. And don't you have some hugely worrying research to conduct?"

•

"Shepard." One eye swivels chameleon-like to track me.

"Wrex."

"You here to talk again?"

"What, you object?"

"More I'm confused. Shouldn't you be looking after the asari kid?"

"I don't get you, Wrex. Every time I show the faintest hint of treating you like a person you tell me to go somewhere else. Were you bitten by a radioactive sociopath when you were young or something?"

Wrex's expression remains stony for just a second, then he chuckles. "Well, I was, but that's just krogan childhood for you. We're all radioactive sociopaths. Well, I showered before leaving my homeworld, most of the fallout washed off. What's eating you, given that you're patently not going away."

"I'm beginning to get seriously curious. What's a guy like you doing in a job like yours?"

"Is that a come-on? Because I'm sorry to burst your bubble, Shepard, but--"

"No, for real. What's your story?"

"Hnh." Wrex pulls a stool out from the bench he's working on and sits down, gestures vaguely at another one. I sit. "Long as my arm and twice as dull. What was your real question?"

"Well, I could ask 'where did you learn to do that?' for about ten different types of 'that', but I figured I'd bypass that bit. Unless I miss my guess, Wrex, there are technical terms for krogan with your skill set."

"There are two kinds of people from Tuchanka. Queers and steers. Which are you, farmboy?' That kind of technical term?"

"So I looked up krogan biotics because I've got a professional interest in learning new techniques. Found out that while less than a quarter of one per cent of your people are even biotic-potentials, that includes seventy per cent of your military leaders. Far as I can tell, 'old' - and your security license says you're more than old enough to get away with calling Liara a kid - 'biotic' and 'male' have meant 'warleader' for most of your people's history. I'm going to go out on a limb and say that someone with a name fifteen hundred years old with the qualifications to rise from the ranks and the age to be a major player, who *isn't* in charge, has a reason he's not. I wondered if it was going to come up, and I wondered if you wanted to talk about it."

"The other technical terms you're talking about being 'exile' and 'dead' and 'might as well be'. And you're wondering if you got a basket case or an agitator when you rolled the ol' dice. Also you're wondering if, when we meet other krogan, if they're going to bow and scrape or go for the guns."

"That's about the size of it, yeah."

He sighs. "Well, you ain't going away till you heard something you think's true, so I might as well feed you something. No guarantee that any of this shit is true, of course. And this story, it's full of chip-on-shoulder bullshit because you want to know what's *up*, not what *happened*. You trusted me, Shepard, so you get this for free. Most humans would have broken faces right now, and I hope you appreciate what I'm saying because I don't repeat myself."

"Right."

"So once upon a time there was a man with a working quad of testicles who met a lady and nature followed its course. You gotta understand that since the end of the Rebellions it's about a one-per-cent chance that having got to that stage, you don't just die of genophage. It's endemic, it's salarian-designed, it's not one hundred per cent fatal, it affects everyone differently but the result is that this man's two children, they already won the biggest lottery they'll ever play. And these boys, one of them was a biotic and the other wasn't. They grew up side by side, rivals of course as nature intended, but the biotic was always gonna succeed. He did all sorts of hero shit I won't go into because they all amount to the square root of diddly squat now. Anyway, skip a bit, glorious career, deep and enduring rivalry, yada, yada, hear it on every street corner. And so it came time for the boys to grow up, time for the boys to start talking their own talk rather than following their poppa's."

"And the biotic kid, he was a *special* little snowflake. He looked at the situation and he said to his poppa, why the fuck are we fighting and dying over girls when we aren't having enough live kids to replace our losses. And he got a flick round the earhole because he was an uppity little shit. And he said to his poppa, why the fuck are we blowing up boreholes and poisoning wells when there wouldn't be enough for all of us even if we took and held it all. And he got a headbutt in the face because he was an insolent young man. And he said to his poppa, why the fuck are we demanding

our people sing our songs not theirs, and he got thrown off of a building because his poppa was too drunk and stupid to know that that wouldn't hurt.

"And the other brother, well, he'd always been poppa's little golden boy and there was a big old split. Civil war, nothin' civil about it, as they say. We didn't stoop to their tactics, and they couldn't rise to match ours. We might have won eventually, but all we'd have taken would have been corpse-strewn poisoned rubble. So I called my father and my brother to a Crush to discuss peace - it's a sacred rite of our kind. No weapons are brought. You turn up, you talk, you leave. And basically, I turned up, I talked, they brought guns, they gave me this scar right here while I was picking my jaw up off the floor, and then I taught them why you don't do that to a guy who once headbutted a tank to death. But of all the people we brought there, theirs and mine, there were left ten of theirs and none of mine, and talk to Tali or Garrus about what the world thinks of a kinslayer, humans and asari are a bit too forgiving. And the people I'd been leading, they turned their back on me the moment they heard I slew my own kin at a Crush, and it was exile or death, and frankly, fuck 'em. So yeah. You don't need to worry about me running off to save my people, Shepard. They don't wanna be saved. The only reason they ever followed me was that I could take any three of them at once, which is apparently what we look for in a chief these years."

There's a reflective silence. "You aren't sober, are you, Wrex."

"Nuh-uh, commander, I'm off my face, standard procedure shipside or when pissed off. Which is why I'm currently quite so mellow and polite."

"So did you skip over the bit where you explain why you're after Saren?"

He snorts. "Bloody Saren stinking Arterius. I don't have much time for turians, although Garrus is all right, but Saren manages to stand out as a really outstanding piece of shit among an entire faecal family. He sends me a personal message out of the blue, mercenary job, says he's got special payment for me above and beyond, see attached picture. And I don't really think he knew what it was he pictured."

"Which was?"

"Only the heirloom armour of the heads of my clan. I wouldn't expect you to understand. That suit was one of the first built by the salarians during the Krogan Uplift, given to a visionary named Urdnot who - or so the tale goes - was one of the first to pledge his armies to the offworlders' cause. He was my great-great-grandfather. There are parts inside that unit that are supposedly still functional after fifteen hundred years. My father was wearing it when I smashed his no-good face in. So yeah, I was a little surprised to see it in alien hands."

"But you didn't take the job."

"Hell, no. Work for a thieving bastard like that? I'd rather chew my own arm off. I'd *much* rather chew *his* arm off. If he'd offered me its location, assuming it wasn't on Tuchanka, I'd have probably worked for him for just that. But he offered me the suit itself. So he stole it or had it stolen - or, worse, bought it. I don't care about the armour. I care that some bastard stole my family's shit and tried to pay me with it. That enough for you? And it probably wouldn't even fit me."

"Uh-huh. Well, regardless, we'll keep an eye. He won't have got rid of something like that, he'll be

keeping it to-

"Were you listening to what I said?"

"Absolutely. But *he* thinks he can use it to motivate you: I'll talk to Garrus and Liara, but I'd guess that if he tried to buy you with it and failed then he's going to expect you're after the armour rather than the thief. Certainly I would be, if it was my family heirloom he had. That's a lever on him that we can pull. Anywhere where your enemy is wrong is something you can turn into a victory."

"And anywhere where you know how he thinks is somewhere where you can force an error. Stop asking my advice, Shepard. You know it all already." I look askance at him but apparently he means it genuinely.

"I know damn well that's not true, my friend."

Wrex blinks a couple of times. "Hnh. Suddenly I understand you, Shepard."

"Oh?"

"This endless talking. It's about that word, 'friend'. You don't want your people to idolise you, you want them to know you. You're not out to evaluate their threat potential, you really want to know them."

"And that surprises you?"

"Just that I've never met a human like you. I learned English because the humans are the new hotness on the mercenary front, because they *don't* care. I never met a human with a cause that wasn't just an excuse, never met one who'd die for his teammate. You know where you are with a human mercenary, they can be absolutely relied on to act in their own interests. They're as predictable as krogan without being as volatile, as clever as volus but they won't rob you for no reason, as professional as batarians or turians but without the pesky racial loyalties. You can't hire a turian merc to shoot a turian, he won't do it without knowing absolutely everything about his target. But a human merc doesn't even want to know the guy's name. I came onto this ship expecting blunt unfeeling bloodless professionalism. I found - there's a krogan word. *Krannt*. Literally it means 'butt-plate', I guess a better translation might be 'seat of the pants'. It's your crew, your people, your - well, it's like your friends, but it isn't your friends. It's not people who'd go through hell for you, it's people who know you'd do that for them. The translator's gonna mangle this, but the turians say 'unit'. The batarians say 'Order'. The quarians say 'crew'. The asari, 'family'. But all of those mean something you're in for life, or good as. Never thought I'd find a bunch of humans who understood the word *krannt*."

"The humans who gave you your assumptions, Wrex - they don't exactly show us at our best. For basically all the reasons you gave, I don't like or trust them and I sure as hell wouldn't accept someone like that on my team. Humans can be just as social, loyal, moral, selfless as anyone else, and we're at our strongest when we rely on others."

"That doesn't make sense, Shepard. Relying on someone else gives you a large person-shaped weak spot."

"Like your *krannt*?"

"You keep your hands off my *krannt*." He chuckles. "Very, very old joke. I get what you mean, Shepard, but I'm not sure I agree. Five people are stronger than four, but not by a whole one person. Either they're watching their backs, or they're trusting someone who might let them down." He holds up a claw. "But I can see I'll never persuade you of that. Come back to me in a couple centuries and tell me if you learned it for yourself."

"Right after I get that immortality vaccine, my friend."

"Heh. Trade you immortality for fertility, human."

"No deal. We're in the wrong profession for people who want to live forever. G'night, Wrex."

"Hnh. Don't read anything I wouldn't read."

•

The briefing room. I'm recording this to send back to the Citadel. Tali has the floor.

"So. This is that game where there is good news and bad news. The good news is that it is not as bad as I feared at two a.m. In the morning this morning. The geth do not have computronium nanomachines capable of rendering our technology basically irrelevant, and that is for five-nines sure. " Tali fidgets with her glove, wringing her hands. "And the nanomachines I've found are not only dead but vulnerable to overheating via EMP. " She tilts her head side to side. "Also they are not geth, and not ours. They're too- they are too advanced. "

Lira frowns. "The geth have been three centuries apart from galactic culture. Are you *certain* you are not just seeing innovation?"

*"Perfectly, thank you. While this is a logical progression from the trend of geth technology that we've seen, where by 'we' I mean the quarians - distributed units, many smaller things, decentralisation where possible - the geth don't have the manufacturing capability to make this. The difference between geth nanotech and this nanotech is the difference between a chipped obsidian knifeblade and a sintered silicon-carbide one. To stretch the analogy a little further, our best stuff is Bronze Age by comparison. "*

Ashley turns the holographic nanobot around, looking closely. "You're not telling me they dug these things out of an ancient ruin?"

"I sincerely doubt it, Officer Williams. Prothean nanotechnology - while probably the single rarest archaeological find, rarer than functioning computer systems - is theorised to have been very similar to our own." Lira falls easily into 'lecturer' mode, the academic answering a technical question. "When the asari people first encountered the Prothean ruin known today as Citadel Station, we did not find it empty: we found an insectoid race we dubbed the Keepers of the Citadel. All attempts at communication failed, even those via - unsavoury methods, but we did

learn that their computer interface devices and three-dimensional printing technology were so far ahead of ours as to be nearly considered magical. That discovery and subsequent reverse-engineering led to the device today called the 'omni-tool', although the early ones would not have been recognisable to us: it was the advent of the salarians onto the galactic stage that provided us with the intuitive gesture-based interface so familiar today. The fascinating thing is that we have found what we would consider to be omni-tools in Prothean burials, pre-dating our invention by roughly forty-eight millennia: it is believed with nearly the weight traditionally assigned to factual knowledge that the Keeper omni-tool is a modification of the Prothean omni-tool, and that our reverse-engineering recovered the original design. In other words, Ashley, the Protheans could not have built these things either."

"Well, shit." Wrex puts into words what we're all thinking. "You're telling me that there's something out there with tech that makes the Protheans look like un-uplifted tribals, and that the guy we're hunting down is their best pal?"

"That is exactly the bad news I was trying to convey, yes. "

Liara and I share a significant glance. She speaks. "I - may - I may have a theory. There is a word, repeated so often in Prothean texts as to be considered part of their religious beliefs, similar to the quarian 'keelah se'lai' or the asari 'By the Goddess' or the human 'Santa Claus'. The word is '<reaper>', which translates with associations to agricultural harvesting but also plague and, well, death. Those often go together in religious traditions. The vision that Shepard had, that he consented to share with me - it implies strongly that these 'reapers', as I am going to call them, were real physical beings and responsible for the fall of the Prothean civilisation. They must live behind one of the closed relays. And a civilisation that had been innovating for a hundred [untranslated] - oh, I apologise, for fifty millennia - would be more than capable of feats of technology that were as far ahead of the Protheans as we were of, well, of what Wrex said."

I nod. "We will forward this information to the Council, focusing less on the 'creepy Prothean Santa Claus' and more on the 'evidence of hyper-advanced tech'. Knowing that Saren is looking for these people, or potentially has had friendly contact with them, may let us narrow down our search parameters using the current state of fringe research into the Reaper myth. Liara will be in charge of that side of things. Tali, I want you working with Dr. Chakwas on countermeasures; I don't want what happened to Benezia and her bodyguards to happen to anyone else. I know you aren't a medic, but you're the closest we have to an expert on this tech. What's the progress on the stuff from Benezia's omni-tool?"

Liara purses her lips. "She deleted almost everything on there four days ago in order to hold a single massive file - a very large three-dimensional image, a star map. It is similar, but not identical, to our own: the mass-relay map is disjoint, for it does not include the Exodus and Arcturus Relays or anything past them: that is, no human or batarian space and no vorcha homeworld. Then again, there are a number of relays that it has that we do not: apparently the rachni explored but did not exploit several relays past Artemis Tau. And unlike our map, it has orbital data calculated to vast precision. I have Officer Pressly extracting the relevant portions for compression and transmission back to the Citadel, but it is slow work. The rest of the 'stuff' is - hard reading. Personal notes."

"I appreciate that this is difficult, Liara, but there could be something crucial in those notes."

"Thank you, John. I will re-read them, but on a first skim through - there are a couple of things, but

it is potentially unreliable. The notes date back to the start of her arrival on Saren's ship. At first they are clinical, detached descriptions of events in my mother's usual style, heavily critical of the turian, describing arguments, unfortunately vastly abbreviated with little in the way of details. But they seem to segue into simple descriptions of what Saren told her to do and how she did it. She - she does not act like this. Whether asked or told, she will not do another's bidding. She must make her decisions for herself. There is no reference to acquiring the nanotechnology, but I can pinpoint a date where it was not functional and a later one where it must have been, assuming that that was what was causing her to behave so... out of character." She swallows. "And the name of Saren's ship. The vessel. It is the word that my mother was repeating over and over. *Sovereign*. The *Sovereign*."

•

Captain Kirrahe is in a tree.

It's a nice tree. This is a garden world, the moist clean air tasting pleasantly of salt. The terrain's a bit alien, the rocks are the wrong colour, but he considers that it wouldn't really make a bad holiday destination. Sea, sand, shady beaches, miles and miles of warm brackish streams, a relatively unspoilt wilderness.

Shame about the gun emplacements, really it is. It's not the pilot's fault there are holes in the ship. They're just lucky that they got down OK. There wasn't supposed to be this much security: every ship into this system has been tracked, and they didn't bring in sufficient materials to make all of this. Got to have been built in situ. Where's that scouting report? He sniffs, opens his comlink again. "Jomli, you've had twenty minutes. Give me something. I need to make the call before the power cell leaks out."

Static on the line. Lieutenant Jomli's voice. "Sir. The base is right where the ELINT said it should be, but it's three times the size. Full anti-air tracking, two big mass accelerators, looks like four GARDIAN towers - the barrels are awfully thin for low-wavelength, I'm guessing UV lasers. Snoopers are in place, and they're using last generation's wireless network architecture: we'll have a shovelful of data by local nightfall, although it's not safe to broadcast and hack. Ground defences, we're looking at roughly company strength backed up by four armature-class units. One landing pad, two fighter aircraft, looks like only the one fabricator for drones, no idea of its resource pool. "

"Understood, Jomli; plant surveillance and exfil." They will need reinforcements. The STG team is outnumbered four to one, not counting the tank-like armature units. He's not naive enough to expect everything he'd need for a frontal assault, not out in the Traverse, but with an asari commando team and a couple of wings of strike craft he could blow this place wide open. The salarian pulls down the collapsible antenna and swings down from the tree into the glorious water, faintly salty, about the temperature of a warm bath. It's a shame to bring fighting to places like this. He'd have joined the Foreign Legion if he'd wanted to be a warmonger.

•

Virmire 3. Scan from orbit reveals a grand total of one power signature: looks like an orbital-defence radar. No sign of a crashed vessel from here. But there's a little repeater buoy just above

the ionosphere on the far side of the planet from that radar, warning arrivals in a code that looks mostly like random shot noise that here is a planet that has shot down an STG ship, and here's their last-known trajectory.

Joker disagrees with the computer about the best course in, bringing us out of orbit in a decidedly nonregulation way that makes best use of the little ship's vastly oversized engines. The combination of ground clutter and the *Normandy's* radar-absorbing hull let us come almost right up to the projected coordinates without being spotted, putting down on the surface of a small lake which if it were colder and Scandinavian I'd be calling a fjord. Alenko makes a Hitchiker's Guide reference and ends up having to give both Tali and Williams the book's catalogue number.

Landing on water still bugs me: there's something *wrong* about being able to park the ship just above the lake's surface and drive the tank down and into the water like a small boat. It's not like salt water is anywhere close to the most hazardous environment the Mako will survive. And it doesn't really surprise me that we're met with a ping on a standard STG comm frequency from a little drone hidden in a tree by the water's edge. They must have known what their buoy would send out and put something at the most likely location for help to land given that information.

We patch into their comnet. "STG team, this is Spectre John Shepard. We are responding to a distress call. Please advise location for meet and greet."

The voice sounds amused. "Meet you on top of your tank, human. "

Wrex swears and punches buttons. "Two of them right underneath us, commander. These guys aren't bad." He sounds impressed. To be honest, I'm impressed. People trained for fighting on airless worlds and in space forget just how well you can hide something underwater, and almost any armour that'd work in space lets you operate underwater just fine. Besides, they say humans are natural swimmers but we can't hold a candle to the salarians. I pop the top hatch of the Mako and swing myself up; I'm standing on the roof of the tank when a salarian in reflective white armour shimmers into visibility in front of me. With the helmet up, he looks a surprising amount like your stereotypical tall, spindly 'grey alien', complete with the slightly menacing pulsating lights in the too-large eyesockets. The armour is banded and scaled rather than plated; I remember from school that salarian arm and leg bones are segmented like the human spine, giving them a fantastic range of movement.

His helmet packs itself up into his collar, revealing orange skin, and I shake his three-fingered hand. "Kirrahe, Shepard. Captain, 4th STG. I must say, I'm surprised to see an Alliance group doing the job of a turian one, although I suppose it makes sense to have you figurehead it." He sniffs. "I have targets for you, assuming you've got the precision to hit them; I think our original mission objectives are achievable, but it will take a ground assault." He 'throws' me a map from his omni-tool. "What's the yield on your orbital fire?"

Nonplussed, I indicate the *Normandy* hovering sleek and predatory behind me. "Quarter-kiloton plus altitude."

"Hmm, still quite doable. You can set the rest of your troops down in the next lake over and move them up in the ravines rather than risking the transport in an assault landing."

"Captain-"

"Once the fire-control radar is down, you shouldn't have much trouble establishing air superiority; I suggest sweeping a reinforced heavy company around from the north as a distraction, while my team pulls in from the east."

"Captain?"

"The distraction works on drawing them out, focusing on pinning them down and tar-pitting them as much as possible: I hear you people are heavy on drones, so that shouldn't be too much of an issue. I expect to take no longer than forty-"

I raise my voice somewhat. "Captain Kirrahe."

"Yes, Spectre? Time is a gift from your mother, as they say, don't waste it." His tone has a little reproach in it.

"You seem to be under a couple of misapprehensions." The salarian blinks; I continue before he can get a word in. "First, your distress call was fragmentary. We received your position, but not your status, and I still don't have that. Second, you seem to think I'm the advance guard of a carrier battle group. I'm not. This is a Special Tactics and-

"-Recon team, and this is all there are of you?" He sniffs. "Seriously worrying, Shepard, seriously. We are facing a company-strength unit with air, drone and armoured support, sitting on top of a bio-research facility of unknown nature - unless *you* know about it: it is a Spectre facility."

"Saren Arterius?"

"In one, Shepard. We believe he's engaged in immoral research here: for a year or so he has been shipping in raw materials. We think it's a cloning lab, although we know that there are other things here. About three months ago a series of things that I think were archaeological in nature came in here. A truly massive ship has been coming and going, we think, dreadnought-class at worst, but the local mass relay has logged no traffic of that size for years. We *need* to know what is going on in there, rather than just blowing the place, although we need to be prepared to do just that. Do you know what Saren is doing?"

"I can hazard a guess at what Saren's brewing in there, and it isn't good. But you're right, we need to know for certain before blowing it."

"Can you tell me?"

"Supersoldier program, potentially bioweapons." I'm not going to say 'nanotech', there's no point spreading that.

"Fits, Shepard. If I had to guess from the ingredients, I would have said he was cloning krogan. Why invent your own supersoldiers when there are perfectly good naturally occurring ones? Presumably he has solved the discipline problem with promise of a genophage cure, it's the usual approach."

"Kirrahe's right." Wrex's voice echoes from inside the tank. He can't fit through the top hatch.

"What I said to you last night onboard, it wasn't lies, but it wasn't all the truth. This is the job, but I

never knew where. I would've been in charge of this."

"Okay. Now we have more reasons to get inside."

The salarian shakes his head. "We can't do it. We are outnumbered *four* to one."

"The hell we can't." I call up the map, glance at it briefly. "Team, this is Shepard. Meeting on the beach by the Mako in five minutes. Bring your ideas and your capabilities."

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It's a little bit like alchemy and a little bit like trickery and a little bit like sleight-of-hand, and it takes a prize-winning set of brass ones. Half our omni-gel stock goes on a flock of support drones, and with them and Alenko's biotics and the other half of our omni-gel we can turn Kirrahe's lightly-armed recon platoon into something that punches far above its weight and can't be ignored. Their mission is called a diversion, but that's an understatement - taking their explosives and our portable anti-tank, they can cripple and tie up those armatures, they can make a pretty much company-sized noise.

Meanwhile, we cram the rest of us into the Mako. The vehicle might handle like a raccoon on a pogo-stick, but it can outpace anything that doesn't fly and there's nothing wrong with its gun; Wrex plays the controls like a maestro, navigating us through the gullies and ravines to the facility at a hair under maximum speed, relying on Kirrahe's map not to suddenly run us into a dead end or drop us into water too deep to drive through fast. The diversion force opens up with a rocket through the primary radar dish when we're two minutes out from the perimeter; by the time we reach it, they're fuelling their fighters and retasking their reserves to meet the diversion. Wrex lands the Mako on the landing pad between the fighters; I pivot the turret backwards and toast them as he continues at breakneck speed towards the side of the base, pausing only long enough to put one round through a comms array and another through what looks like a sensor cluster. The point of the assault is to be inside before they know properly where we are, to look for just a minute like the vanguard of a much larger force, to be always a tiny bit faster than their decision-making, to have our objectives complete before they realise how few of us there are. Sure, they're bloodless computers, we can't scare or surprise them, but we can totally confuse and wrongfoot them. It's illogical to hit a force their size with a force our size, so obviously we have something up our sleeve.

A shot from the main gun jams one of the doors of their main hangar; Wrex puts us through the gap and I'm not sure that he didn't deliberately roll us onto one side. Liara is first out of the rear of the tank, projecting a hemispherical barrier to cover the rest of us; Wrex doesn't really slow down as we come out of the back and straight into the geth defenders. Tali hangs a right, finds the closest computer console, makes herself small underneath it as she dives into their system, the console's display coming up inside her helmet, a gun-drone hovering protectively between her and the outside world. Garrus takes cover behind Liara and they work just like they'd practiced: Liara isn't military-trained, but she has a great deal of finesse and raw power: she picks them up out of cover and holds them still for a bullet through the CPU. Williams and I do much the same, biotic-assisted tactics right out of the field manual, using the absolute minimum power required for confirmed kills.

Tali doesn't waste time shouting when she's in; she sends a radio message to Joker and soft-

reboots the base's entire sensor grid. Thirty seconds the fire-control is blind for; thirty seconds is way long enough for the *Normandy* to pop up twenty miles away and tag the radar with a point-defence laser and the anti-aircraft guns with a full spread of breacher missiles. These things are built for putting a metre-wide hole in a shielded cruiser from a distance of a few thousands of kilometres; the warp-field-backed explosion isn't a large one, but it is very precise, and the reinforced concrete pillars are not built to take it. Four minutes into the engagement and we have full air superiority as the *Normandy* begins to sweep in. It's not a big ship, and its weapons are not designed for this, but even manual targeting via target designators on the ground is enough to start picking off geth.

We go inwards, making for the lab. The diversion force is bogged down in a deliberately irritating firefight. They've reported a halt to the geth reinforcements - either that's good, or it's not, as Alenko wryly reports. We round a corner and run straight into a big, reinforced Prime unit - it acts approximately as surprised as we do, but Williams puts a bullet through its primary sensor array and we finish the blinded thing off with a minimum of fuss. Tali declares that it's probably serving as data storage for the geth here, spares thirty seconds to gut the thing, cutting out a large and heavy lump of electronics from the middle of it and lashing it uncomplainingly to her back.

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The lab door crashes open just before we reach it, and Wrex yells something in krogan which the translator renders as 'Mine!'. The krogan opening the door is bigger even than Wrex, plated, armoured, and bare-handed. Wrex's shockwave breaks against the other krogan's personal shield and their chitinous foreheads meet with a deep and audible *thud*. Up close and personal, both of them are moving way too fast for Wrex to pull any kind of biotic trick and he doesn't even try. This is raw savagery. Against all expectations he's knocked physically out into the corridor, his gun going flying - Liara and Williams are looking at me for permission to intervene, but Wrex called it and provided he doesn't look like he's going to *lose* -

The two of them are a rolling ball of rage on the floor. Armour crunches under short but powerful blows from elbows, knees, clawed hands. Wrex manages to get a solid headbutt in, stuns him for just long enough to roll away, building up a biotic pulse as he goes, rolling into a tightly coiled crouch. The other krogan predictably charges, straight into not the head-first shockwave charge I was expecting but the bright blue orb of a tightly focused warp field, exactly what I would have done. There's a sickening *crunch* as he runs onto Wrex's glowing fist and he collapses, twitching. Wrex stands, breathing hard. Nods, once, a salute to a worthy foe. And we take the lab.

Tall tanks lining the walls. Thirty or so. There's another krogan in here. Smaller. Unarmoured. He turns from the computer only as we enter and spreads his hands. "Wrex! Wrex, listen!"

Wrex takes the lead. "I don't know you." He's two feet from grabbing this guy by the throat.

"Genophage cure. Here." Well, that bought him some time. "Kill me if you must. But take this equipment. My samples, they can't be reproduced except by each other, but they cure it, they *cure* it! I've done it! We've done it!" He calls up a hologram on the computer behind him, a picture from the interior camera in one of those tanks. A krogan, tubes attached every which way, floating in amniotic incubation.

I can see Wrex hesitating. "I can't read this?"

"That's a krogan in a tank. It's a genuine picture... the computer isn't trying to lie to you." Tali steps around the krogan, moves smoothly from typing on her omni-tool to typing on the computer keyboard. "It calls these things clones, clones ninety to one-twenty of... Of eight hundred. In tranche one. Of, um, lots."

His voice is dangerously soft. "Are they fertile? Are they free?"

It's the krogan scientist who replies. "They're born with the genophage, but their blood is stronger than it is. It burns it out!"

Tali and Liara swear simultaneously, using the same word. They share a glance. "*I'm checking that.*"

"I wouldn't lie to you! This is the only reason I'm working with these monsters!"

Wrex swivels an eye and looks at me. "Shepard."

"Wrex."

"Screw the family armour. I've got a better prize. You always *could* grow a krogan in a vat, but they were never any use. Nobody, not even us, wants to pay a million credits for one kid. And you can't grow one that doesn't have the genophage. But a cure, a genuine *cure* -"

"No! Wrex, you can't." Tali pulls a display window out of the screen, maximises it to a metre across. It's an image of a blood sample. Among the krogan's selection of exotic cells, something has been brightly stained and outlined. "We've seen these before."

He turns to face the window, takes a step closer to it. His suddenly menacing presence backs her up against the console. "Explain. Use *small* words."

"Wrex... this is the nanotech. The stuff that was in those asari. You can't release-"

The sudden flicker-fast cuff he gives her around the head knocks her sprawling with a cry and a clatter. I step forward, Liara at my side. Out of the corner of my eye I can see Ashley not-quite pointing her weapon. "Wrex-"

"Shepard." He turns around, eyes narrowed. "You're going to back her up."

"You going to listen to why, before we find out which of us has the bigger quad?" I pull my barrier up, mirroring his.

His deep voice grates. "Talk, Shepard."

"You remember talking to Benezia. You remember what Liara said about her notes."

"Asari don't like being told what to do."

"Neither did one young krogan I got told a story about yesterday."

"That supposed to be funny, you privileged little piece of shit?"

"Your *people*, Wrex. Their *history*. D'you really want it to end like this?"

"Shepard, I swear your momma must have dropped you on your head when you came out. This isn't an end. This is a *beginning*. My whole life, Shepard, my whole lousy stinking shithole of a life and my father's we've been living under this. We haven't had any 'history' for the last five *centuries*. What the *fuck* is your point."

"That all your glorious new history will say is the footnote 'And they were seen again as the slave soldiers of Saren Arterius' conquering army.' These things in the tanks here. They aren't people. They're *drones*. Or what the hell else do you call something without free will? Something at the control of a computer?"

Wrex snorts. "You're conjecturing your damn head off. You'd say anything to shut me up."

"Wrex, I watched a friend of mine shoot her own mother in the head rather than let her live like this. If you had eight hundred kids at your back and someone threatened to do this to them, you'd die before you let them. Wouldn't you."

The big guy snaps his mouth shut.

I wait. Behind him, I can see that Ashley is making no pretence that she doesn't have her gun pointed at him.

Abruptly, snake-fast, he moves. Too fast to gather a biotic pulse. Ashley is a heartbeat away from pulling the trigger. I feel Liara's frantic redoubling of her own barrier. Tali squeaks and moves to one side, as quickly as she can with the salvage still strapped to her back.

And Wrex turns to his left and punches his right claw straight up and through the other krogan's neck in a spray of blood. Throws the corpse into the console hard enough to smash it. Turns back to me, breathing heavily. "Right. Next stupid stinking shithole situation." My barrier sparks against his armour as he shoulders me aside on the way out of the door.

•

We split up, Tali and Garrus and Ash to the server room, me and Liara and Wrex around the rest of the labs. Still finding geth in here: there are a hell of a lot of them and they're getting organised. We're all very aware that we're on a clock here. Tali hooks her stuff up to the servers and starts stripping all the files she can for later decoding. I'm taking pictures as we go through these labs - it wasn't just the one sort of illegal research that was being done here. Dead people in cages, mostly salarians. A dead asari covered in what look like electrical burns, the sight of whom has Liara look away very very fast. And a voice shouting "Don't shoot! I surrender!"

It's an asari in a lab coat. She sees the three of us and her eyes go wide. "Liara t'Soni? I surrender myself. Rana Thenoptis, late of Binary Helix? I work for - for Saren Arterius."

Liara's voice has a jagged edge. "On?"

"Neuroscience. Look, I'll cut you a deal. You let- whoa!" Because Wrex has her off the ground by the throat.

"Do we listen?" Wrex growls.

"We listen." I look at the asari. "If she's polite."

"Ow! Listen to your leader, you overgrown-" Rana's voice finishes in a strangled squeak as Wrex increases the pressure just very slightly for a moment.

"Listen good, girlie. I really, really, *really* want to kill something else today. One good reason and it's you." He drops her to the floor.

She rubs her neck. "Um, so, yes. Deal. I tell you everything and I get to run, right? Arrest me and I get a criminal record and I'll never work in the field again!"

Liara's turn to do some talking. "Cry me, as they say, a river. You are coming with us and you are telling us everything. We will determine your fate thereafter. Wrex, John, this woman is not under my protection: I will shed not a tear if she should come to harm while resisting arrest. If you would like to *improve* your safety, Rana, please bring your notes and show us to the most important part of this facility."

The asari holds up her hand, omni-tool active. "It's on here. It'd take ages to deactivate the deadman switch: lose my lifesigns and lose my data. Insurance after what happened to my predecessor. Have you found the Prothean beacon in Saren's personal chambers? It arrived three days ago."

"See, Wrex, it was worth leaving this one alive."

"You know what you are, Shepard? You're funny. Real damn funny." He narrows his eyes. "Double-cross us, asari, and we get creative. And I'm just bursting with creativity today."

"S-sure, yes. The whole violence thing is typical with these sorts of deal." She slaps an apparently bare piece of wall and a door opens beside it. "I suppose that I should go first."

•

Saren's chambers are more like the nerve centre of a ship than like somewhere anyone would live. There's a metal turian sleeping-frame in one corner, next to an open and empty weapons locker. The room is dominated by a series of computer consoles and interfaces, and at one end by a six-foot green bladelike device that Liara and I recognise immediately as a Prothean communications beacon. Our prisoner steps to the side after coming in, clearly thinking about losing herself as we examine the place, but Wrex is standing there right next to her with the grin of the wide-mouthed frog.

Liara looks at me. "We're on a clock, Shepard, and beacons take time to recharge. Access the beacon and I'll - you know. See it later." (I do notice the other asari's eyebrows shoot up.)

I nod. "Anything you can teach me about how to prepare for this?"

"Lie back and think of England?"

"What?"

"Sorry, another attempt at inappropriate humour. Go *on*, John."

"Okay. Cover me, and be prepared to haul me. Last time I saw one of these it knocked me right out."

"Now he tells me," Wrex grumbles.

I ignore them, close my eyes, centre myself. Deep regular breaths. Step forward. Embrace-

•

<All stations repeat. All stations repeat. Append this transmission to all interface procedures.>

A scream. The overlay of a thousand screams. Danger, but well-known. The most unambiguous danger signal possible. Death. Horror. Pain. Disgust. The feeling of smelling ripped <rhaik> entrails.

<Beware of the reapers who do not live. They look like this> -

A jumble of images, terror, blood, pain, atrocity, death. A machine, no sense of scale, many-legged, walking. The earth shakes as it puts its feet to the ground. The same machine, floating quiet and menacing in space. Another one, a different shape in detail but much the same in general.

- <and they killed us. They came from the dark space outside the galaxy. They came from the place where there are no stars. They came from their fortress. Their objective was destruction. We fought, but it was impossible. Their forces were too strong, their forces were too many, and we were scattered.> -

-<We fought them nearly to a standstill sometimes, but our losses were too great and theirs were insignificant. We made so many great attempts to best them, to halt them, and each of them failed. We built the> -

- <Conduit, to breach their fortress. We no longer possess the ability to reach it or the force to

use it. [It is here> -

A star map, a web of relays maybe twice the size of the one I'm familiar with. I struggle to hold it all in my head. I look for familiar systems, patterns: there's the Citadel, there's Acturus, my viewpoint falls dizzyingly in to one particular relay, to the fifth planet of an orange star, to a vast city of unfamiliar design, but I don't know where-

<Warn your entire empire. Warn your masters and your servants. Leave from war and prepare for the cosmic imperative.>

<Learn from our>-

Eternity. I fall to one knee. The whole world seems to shake. That cry of alarm was Wrex's. Ngh, my *head* -

"Shepard, this is... " Was that in my head?

"Strike team, this is the Normandy. Please respond!"

"Go ahead, Joker."

"Sir, we've got incoming. Incoming what? Incoming incoming. Lots of it."

"Again, flight-lieutenant, with words?"

"Sir. A goddamn dreadnought just dropped out of FTL pretty much inside the ionosphere, sir. Reading inbound landers. We've got *minutes* before we gotta bug out or turn into a grease-stain, sir. "

I waste time swearing. Garrus on the comm. "Normandy, this is strike bravo. Rooftop landing pad is clear repeat clear. You are clear to descend. Let's have that bomb. "

"Strike, Normandy, this is assault. Alpha, Bravo, Delta sections bugging out. I'm here with two guys and the drones, setting up some presents for when they figure it out."

"Roger, Alenko, don't take risks down there. Strike bravo, alpha's en route. One prisoner. Teflon time, quick and clean extraction."

Lara turns to me. "You *aren't* thinking of leaving this here."

"I have the data. It'll take too long for-"

"-We're going to blow the base sky high, John. This is a Prothean relic! It belongs in a museum!"

Sigh. "Wrex -"

"Liar? You owe me."

"Fine, whatever. Now *help* us."

•

Of course, that's the cue for everything to start going wrong. I still have a pounding headache and that burning sensation in my head that tells me that I need to lay off the biotics or start hurting myself. The prisoner falls and twists an ankle and Liara has to throw her over her shoulder.

By the time we're on the landing pad, so's the Normandy. The crashed STG ship's drive core makes a decent makeshift bomb; Ashley's making final connections along with one of the STG techs. Liara pretty much throws our prisoner into the arms of the crew and Wrex threatens to do the same with the beacon. Joker's giving us a running commentary on the dreadnought, which in defiance of all laws of physics seems to be making re-entry. And on the ground, we're keeping up a fairly continuous defensive line while Ashley gets the bomb ready to detonate.

Alenko's voice on the comm. A lot of static comes with it. "Strike, Normandy, this is assault! It just started raining geth, sir. The drones are dropping like flies. Need urgent fire support or exfil." Another explosion in the middle distance. "Or both. Both would be good."

"Joker?"

"If I lift, sir, I gotta do it at full velocity. That bastard will be through re-entry in two minutes and they've got light anti-air down there now. Without speed the *Normandy* is just a tasty morsel. Anyone who stays behind, they better get comfortable. No way could I land here again."

Ash fetches up next to me. "Primed, commander. Go. I can hold them long enough." She snaps off another shot, wings another geth drone.

"Weren't you listening? Last boarding call."

"We all go now, they reach the bomb. Maybe disarm it."

Shake head. Comm. "Joker, how long to escape that blast?"

"Twenty seconds, sir."

I nod. "Alenko, sit-rep."

"Pinned down and cut off, sir, and I'm not far enough away. Kirrahe's away and safe. Situation's not stable here, though."

"Ash, count on the bomb?"

"Three minutes. I can hold them, sir!"

Swallow hard. "Joker, prepare for dustoff. You will have *no* margin."

"Sir. "

"Assault, Shepard. Prepare to withdraw. Two minutes on... *mark*."

"Sir, I can *hold* them. There's still time to get to him!"

"No, Ash. This bomb has to go off." I hit a geth aggressor unit in the chest with a short biotic slap, stopping it momentarily in its tracks, and Garrus blows it away. I pull up the comm. Ashley looks me in the eye, shaking her head.

Deep breath. "Assault, this is Shepard. Exfil not possible at this time. Bug out if you can."

Pause. Ashley blinks a couple of times, swallows hard, turns back to the fight.

"No can do. Get the bastards for me, John. " There's no way he's going to make it and he knows it as well as I do. "Alenko out. "

One minute. Ashley, Garrus and Tali fall back to the *Normandy*, laying covering fire down from there.

One minute thirty. I hand-signal Liara and Wrex back as well. Wrex doesn't move; Liara does.

One minute forty-five. I yell to Wrex to get the hell out. He yells back that he moves when I do.

One minute fifty. I pull out my remaining two grenades, set timers for six and fifteen seconds. Wrex starts firing continuously with his shotgun, overloading the heat sink.

One minute fifty-five. Throw the one with one second left on it, punting it straight forward with a biotic throw; drop the ten-second one at my feet. Break and run for the ramp. Wrex has swapped to his sidearm and appears intent on overloading that too.

One minute fifty-six. The grenade goes off and the geth get their heads down. Wrex turns and boosts for the ramp, throwing himself inside like a projectile, not bothering with niceties like landing on his feet. I yell to Joker to go and the giant hand of acceleration pins us down.

Two minutes. The ship jerks and shivers as Joker burns for the horizon. If we're not out of the blast radius when the bomb goes off, we're toast. If we're not out of sight by the time that dreadnought clears re-entry, we're toast. It's not pleasant in the cargo bay; the biotic team members have thrown an inertia-damping field over the rest of the crew down here, but there aren't any acceleration seats and we'll be lucky to come out of this with just bruises. Tactical reports several successful hits, two armature-class units down.

Two minutes fifteen. Joker's screen, usually a mess of custom icons and windows, shows nothing but the terrain and the atmospheric conditions. One hand forward as far as it can go for full

atmospheric burn on the torch drive; one hand spread, each finger a different control, the position of the whole hand determining roll, pitch and yaw. The sound barrier was left behind a while ago.

The bomb itself, we neither hear nor see nor feel. Joker's voice on the comm is so neutral, he could be an airline pilot informing the first-class lounge of incoming turbulence. "Cargo bay, Joker. We're clear away. Signal from Kirrahe: all here who are coming. Torch out in five."

"Copy, Joker. Nothing worse than bruises here. Cool down and head for the rendezvous." I sit down and rest my head against the wall. Viking funeral, Kaidan. Be seeing you.

\*

"Sir, incoming message. That dreadnought's broadcasting it to half the planet with our code on it."

"Oh, this ought to be good. Put it in the briefing room."

The holocom lights with a static image. It's Saren, of course. I'm getting better at turian facial expressions; now I have 'contempt' to add to the list.

"I know you can hear this, Shepard. And I know you are nobody's fool but your own. I am nothing if not merciful. Surrender, and you will be well treated."

"Can we respond without giving ourselves away, Joker?"

A pause. "Tali says absolutely, and then some words I'm glad someone understands."

"Get me the channel."

The hologram goes live. Of course, there's a couple second delay. Surely Tali's clever enough to have added some padding to that so he can't tell our distance from him.

"Saren Arterius. How good of you to show up. By the authority of the Council of the Citadel you are ordered-" he starts laughing- "to stand down, cease operational work effective immediately and present yourself to the Council for investigation. Do you understand the charges against you?"

He continues to laugh. I'm conscious I'm on the record. More than that, turians are funny about rules - authority means more to them, obedience is more ingrained. From Garrus' stories, it's amazing how many turian criminals just plain turn themselves in or otherwise go to pieces at the sight of legitimate authority.

"Or?" He appears to find this utterly hilarious.

"Or I shall be forced to bring you to justice myself. Your rights and safety and those of those around you will be respected, but cannot be guaranteed."

"I quail, Shepard, I quake where I stand. I'm shaking in my boots. I do believe I've soiled my uniform."

"By wearing it, oathbreaker." Yes, I'm talking like something out of a bad turian cop show. Bear with me.

He sneers. "Oh! Am I supposed to be insulted? Am I supposed to be intimidated?" A hit, a palpable hit! Methinks the asshole doth protest too much.

"Ask Benezia." I raise an eyebrow. "Your salvaged ship is impressive, I must say. Fixer-upper, was it? Part-exchange for your honour?"

He frowns. "You have less than no idea what you are talking about."

"<I know more than you think.> You'll never find it, Saren. Your precious beacon is gone. By now its data is part of that cloud flattening out in the stratosphere. Along with your invincible krogan army."

He narrows his eyes. "Brave, Shepard, ruthless. You really want me dead, don't you. Still, it doesn't matter. *You* don't matter. *I* don't matter. Nothing can stop the return of the Reapers now."

"You'll never find them without the Conduit, Saren. And you'll never find the Conduit now. It's over. How many of us do you think that one rustbucket of yours can take? Or is your plan to skulk around with the geth for the rest of your natural life, forever alone, forever starting at the shadows?"

"You're fishing, Shepard, and you have no understanding of what you've seen. You impressed me down there, but you are pissing that away. The Reapers cannot be stopped. Join me. Join them. Or be rendered as irrelevant as the beetle beneath the carriage wheel."

"It's not too late to come back in, Saren. You-"

Joker's voice. "He's killed the channel, sir."

"Uh-huh. What d'you know, if a guy starts talking like a cartoon villain, you can get him to tell you nearly everything."

•

Saren's face stares in freeze-frame across the briefing room. The echoes of his last few words die away.

"Laudable of you to try that, Shepard, I must say, but would you really say we gained anything from that slanging match?" Garrus fidgets with the medi-gel over a nasty-looking crack in his right forearm.

"Heh. I think we learned a great deal from that. For one, it's still him in there."

"How do you figure? That guy's one of my people's heroes. Even given the dodgy dealings underneath..."

"...He was still enraged almost beyond bearing by genuinely founded insults to his honour, even - or especially - because he was caught out in discarding it. Enraged enough to crack a legendary reserve wide open."

"I'm not surprised. Do you talk to your mother with that mouth?"

"That's the point, Garrus. I'm almost certain he didn't mean to tell me that he'd already had peaceful contact with the Reapers, or that the Conduit wasn't what we thought it was; I don't think he meant to let me know that he was the monkey and not the organ-grinder -" the translator pings in my ear to indicate it doesn't have a clue what I just said - "that is, that he isn't the one in charge. I think there's an actual Reaper *onboard* the Sovereign, possibly listening to him as he was talking to me. Do you think he was speaking to try and impress someone?"

Garrus blinks a couple of times. "I'm sorry, Shepard, I keep forgetting that your secret police lost the best field agent they'll ever have had on the day that you joined the navy."

"We don't have secret police, Garrus."

"Uh-huh. Anyway, I'll look through that again, with my 'intelligence asset' brain engaged rather than my 'turian cop' one. I don't *think* there's much you've missed-"

"But nobody speaks a language like a native, and he made the mistake of broadcasting in Legion common."

"It won't be his native tongue, he's Tirasti and I speak that about as well as I speak English. But you're right that I might hear subtleties that a translator missed." He drops his jaw in a self-deprecating grin. "If I was listening for them. Let me get back to you."

"Right. I need to know soonest if I'm right that he knows that the Conduit is not what I thought it is, the rest can wait for a report."

"I think you are, commander. If I were to guess, I'd say that the Conduit is something he's been ordered to get hold of rather than something he wants personally, and it's definitely not what you said it was."

"Copy. Time to talk to Liara."

•

"This would go a lot faster if you stopped talking as if it mattered how you said what you said, Rana."

The asari scientist manages somehow to sit even straighter in her chair. "t'Soni, I am surprised at your implication. I am cooperating fully with Special Tactics and Recon, as required by my

citizenship contract and my notarised and given oath. I merely wish us to take pains to ensure that the evidence I vouchsafe truly has the accuracy propriety demands. If I had proper legal representation, I agree that this would go more smoothly."

"Oh, for the Goddess' sake." Liara runs her fingers irritably through her head-crest, a mannerism she must have picked up from Shepard. "You are accessory to so many sentient-rights violations that you won't need to *worry* about never being able to get a job in neuroscience ever again. I would show you the evidence against you, except that I do not want to see those images ever again in my life: I suspect I shall see them in the middle of bad nights for years, even so. I am not interested in how 'you didn't do it'. I am not interested in any medically distressing tendency towards intermittent deafness or memory loss that you might have. You *cannot* convince me you were innocent." She takes a deep breath. "Your future career and quality of life depend strongly on convincing the Spectre that it is worth his valuable time to testify in your favour. We aren't the law and we *aren't* the justicars. We are interested in fixing the problem, and *only* in that. This investigation has already killed eight people including my own mother. Help us *end* this."

"Goddess, Liara, I didn't know, I swear I didn't know." Dawning realisation that she's not necessarily dealing with a rational and balanced individual here.

"Good. I would have been considerably less polite if I thought you did. Please. Make with the talking." Another human expression.

"Okay. Okay. Right. So. I was, like I said, I was working on the effect of *something* on the sentient brain."

"Advanced nanotech, no source disclosed?"

"No, nothing like that - and I would have noticed if that were there. It was - generated. A static field, electromagnetic-gravitic, some kind of strange holographic inverse-linear scaling rather than inverse-square. More like some kind of new biotic technique, although I had a bit of a try and there's no way this could be generated by a person. And it messed with brain chemistry. It had - psychological-physiological effects."

"What sort of effects?"

"Depends on species. My predecessor was a salarian - he got exposed, or took an overdose or something, and the best words for it are simply that he went crazy. Massive and continuous releases of mind-altering neurotransmitters, like a permanent bad trip. Paranoia, visions, claimed to be hearing fluctuations in the signal as a malevolent voice. Eventually he died of it. Humans go quiet and cooperative, slowly withdrawing into depression, sleeping longer and shallower, much more REM sleep, must be having crazy dreams. Turians get - it's not quite paranoia. It's a sort of paralysing existential dread, like someone unscrewed the picture frame around their world. They talk about voices, too. The two krogan were part of a different project. I didn't see them at all."

"Asari?"

"Oh, that poor girl. She was on the hardware team, opened a door she - well, at the time I interpreted it as that she opened the emitter casing while it was active, but I realise that what they *said* was 'opened a door she shouldn't have'. Collapse of social intelligence and a breakdown

in her own volition and apparent free will that was painful to watch. And an *amplification* of biotic ability, caused I think by a chronic overvolt of the electronervous system. Gravity around her was persistently point-two gee light. She'd do anything she was told to, and nothing she wasn't. Had to be told to eat and sleep, anything that wasn't an autonomic function. It was that that led my predecessor to name the phenomenon 'indoctrination'."

"Rana, she was dead of electrical burns."

She shudders. "Yes. She kept talking about voices. Then she said the voices told her to do it, and nobody could stop her, she pulled open a junction box and shoved a handful of high-voltage wires in her mouth."

"Did it have any effect on the geth?"

"Not that I know of. That may be why Saren brought them in as guards. They were professional, polite--"

"They talk?"

"I've heard them speaking at least Serrice, Armali, Saratayan, Manteri, English, some other human language, salarian hieratic and some obscure volus local tongue, although their grammar's a bit funny and there's never any detectable communication between them for all that they act in such concert. Anyway, they were everything you could want out of security guards, right down to the heavy lifting, and they detached a couple of units to help the doctors when they found that some of the doctors were being affected. Look, I just want to say that--"

"You closed your eyes, closed your ears and shut your mouth?"

"Yes! You don't know what it was like in there--"

"Nor I do. How many scientists were there when we hit?"

She looks down.

"Rana?"

"...three."

"*What?* That whole facility--"

"...there weren't any experimental subjects, Liara, there weren't any people shipped in, we weren't dealing with slavers, don't think that. As far as they knew they were working on the Prothean stuff, the field emitter or the genophage cure. They were all second-stringers, third-raters, frustrated scientists who'd gone into industry. All apart from me and my predecessor - sure, we were corporate, but we were headhunted. The salaries had an extra zero on, basically, and the other researchers were people who'd jump at the chance to work on real science for once. My official job title was chief medical officer. And then when people started getting sick or going mad, the security guards started helping us confine them to quarters till a ship arrived to take them off, and then they started *dying*, and--"

"And you kept on with your work."

"Uh. Yes. Of course I - oh my dear sweet Goddess." She puts her hands to her mouth. "No. No. I -" She looks back at Liara. "Can I, uh, can I use your medical facilities? I think I, oh, Goddess, I must have been - but if I'd been - I - Have I seemed especially rude or childish to - look, my notes are on my omni - your doctor will be able to read - maybe it's treatable if it's this mild."

"In a minute, Rana. A minute won't make any difference one way or another. Two things: first, what was generating the field?"

"I don't know. Supposedly some sort of emitter in lab five. Do you have pictures of all the labs?"

Liara leafs through the holograms, pulls up Lab 5. The one with the second most hazard signs.

She plays the video quickly forward, freezes the frame at a picture of a domed object. "That."

"Okay, I will pass that to our technical specialists. But you don't have anything like schematics?"

"Sorry. Can I go to sickbay yet?"

"Last question." Liara looks up, directly into the other asari's eyes. "What do you know of my late mother's involvement with this project?"

"She was overseeing the science end for Saren, there are things living under *rocks* that know more science than Saren, I'd no idea she wasn't on the Sovereign, can I *please* go point a, uh-"

Liara nods. "Shepard will be along to talk to you, but he can find us there."

•

My door swishes open. Liara, looking about as nervous as a freshman on a date. New outfit, a civilian one. Blue cloth gloves. "John, hi. Is this a good time?"

"The beacon?"

"The same. I see you have read my report on Ms. Thenoptis."

"How is she?"

"Acute hypochondria. None of the things she has taken will poison her unless she takes them continuously, and the doctor has her in for observation. My opinion is that whether or not this 'indoctrination' is affecting her, it neatly explains my poor mother's situation and the strange behaviour of everyone else who has been on or near the Sovereign."

"Uh-huh. Certainly scares the hell out of me. When we hit the Citadel, this goes straight to the labs. We need a countermeasure."

"Agreed. What did the beacon say?"

"It was the same message, but much clearer. It damn well showed me a star map and said 'the Conduit is here' - and I could make out some of it - but I couldn't tell which relay it meant and I didn't recognise the system."

"Well, okay." A little too fast, she pulls up a chair next to mine and sits. Eager. "Can I see?"

"Of course." I turn to face her. "So. I concentrate on the moment I first touched the beacon."

"Yes. It will be easier, both because we were both there and because I have a, well, a feel for you now." She pulls off the glove on her right hand, puts it on the desk.

"Centre yourself. Breathe deeply and regularly." She takes my hand. "Think of Saren's sanctum, the reddish lighting, the grey of the wall and the plated floor." Her voice is starting to shake. "Think of the beacon, green, and tall, and thin." She takes my right hand in hers (her hand is shaking slightly) and holds it between us, closes her eyes. The hairs on the back of my neck begin to rise. "Imagine as I say 'Go *on*, Shepard'. You step up. You reach out your hand." She opens her eyes; they are flat black, and I can't see anything else. "Embrace eternity."

•

The vision. It is as it was before. I let her guide my recollection, pin-sharp now, hallucinatory even. The echo of my breathing in my ears, of hers. (Don't think of that. Don't feel that. Don't get distracted, don't lose yourself in me, I'm not here. Remember!)

The strident scream, the alarm call, the dire warnings we know well. She leafs through this as one reads a favourite book, checking against her own mental image, her own memory.

The picture of the Reapers. Oh, my God(dess)! Recollection, recognition. Why did I not see this before? A hazy image- stick with this, we know what we saw, move on -

The star map. Suddenly see/know that it's viewed from the bottom up, that's why it is so strange! I know what is coming and find the familiar patterns. Sol, Arcturus, Exodus, the Citadel. She mentally draws lines - turian, asari, salarian, human, batarian - rachni -

Our perspective falls dizzily inwards. A wave of fear, of nausea not my own, ruthlessly banished (admiration for someone invincible called John) - one clear image seared into the mind's eye, a set of relays in a classic finger-four like a formation of strike craft -

A city, a mighty city, a world that is a city. A great world, a world - called- dammit, tip of my tongue-

Wide dark eyes, Liara's nails on the back of my head, her forehead against mine, a wave of raw

physical inchoate alien *want*, a biting burning frustration that drags tears from her eyes as she wrenches herself physically away, forces her eyes shut, turns in her seat and sobs helplessly.

I sit back, feeling my implants reset themselves with a *ping*. A wave of light-headedness passes as soon as it came. "Liara? You OK?"

She continues to cry, quietly, eyes squeezed tight, one hand over her mouth, the other one making a fist by her side, curling up, making herself small in her seat.

"Liara?" I put my hand on her shoulder.

The effect is immediate. Her eyes snap open, still completely black as she looks at me. She grabs my hand with hers and the world seems to twist around us as our skin touches: I can feel my hand on my own shoulder, her sharp joyous intake of breath filling my lungs, her tears on my face, the feeling that I couldn't identify now blatantly clear, and she turns to face me and grabs the back of my head with her left hand in a-

-] *did not* mean to-

I pull away and she lets go of me and stands up so fast the chair is overturned.

I start to stand myself. "Liara-"

"Sorry." The word is in English, no translator, half a sob. She retreats, outright fleeing from my presence, nearly walks into the doorframe, just trying to get away, to get *out*-

I sit down heavily and try to wait for my head to stop spinning. *That* could have gone better. *Goddammit*, why did I not see-

•

So the picture of him right now is a picture of the closed door of his room for privacy and the last thing that happened was Liara walked in there and she hasn't come out and you're maybe slightly feeling just a little uncharitable when she comes out blindly head-first and he can be seen half-standing and looking dazed as anything, *still* none of your business and it's distracting you from the code you're supposed to be writing.

Not really the best frame of mind to get a - it's *him* -

"Hi, John. Everything OK?" (Stupid female, stop talking like a moonstruck asari (stop thinking of asari (wait, he's talking, rewind, rewind, play, incline head as if thinking while in fact listening)))

"Not really, Tali, thanks for asking. Anyway, could you take Liara a copy of that star map we got from the rachni?"

But she could just download one from the WLAN... Confused? Try obedience. "Yes,

my captain. I'll be right down. Is she okay?"

"If you could work that out at the same time, that'd be good. I suspect she's going to need someone to talk at right about now." 'Talk at'? Translator renders that as a deliberate grammatical error: get VI routine two to run an extranet search, work out what in the vermillion hells he's on about.

"Heard, understood, acknowledged. May I know what's the issue?"

"If I could put it in words... The issue you need to care about is that she can find the location of our primary mission objective if you can show her the star map upside down."

...Stop it, endocrine system. The world hasn't moved, it's just a spike of entirely inappropriate adrenaline. "Can do." It's just the captain asking you to do something mission-critical outside your specialty because he trusts you. See, it's far easier to concentrate if you think of him as a position not a person. Remember he's an alien. Remember that his culture doesn't care that you can see his hands, his face, look into his eyes (Stop it).

Lift. Corridor. Idea! You even have all the required materials. Corridor. Her quarters. Door chime.

"John, if you come in here I can't be held responsible—"

So yes. Play it by ear, hmm? "...Liara?"

"Tali?" Keelah, she's been crying. She's, what, four times your age?

So, you need to get in to see her, and mission objectives don't sound like a good excuse right now. "Do you need to talk to someone?" Lame delivery, lame words, lame idea. One out of four: at least the words actually came out of your speaker.

A pause. "Yes. Yes, Tali, I think I may do." The door opens. Low-light comes on automatically: Liara's set her lights to a very muted blue. "Do sit down or something."

This place is the size of a meeting room, with table and chairs to match. Use one. "So uh."

"Hah. Yes. Difficult, is it not. I indicate distress, no physiological cause, you're good enough to pick up on my changing my environmental settings and locking my door but not on what is wrong."

Implement idea, change subject. "I brought chocolate?"

Well, at least she sits up. "On the basis that the alternative is a bottle of ilthura, and

getting a biotic adept blind drunk might result in a shipwide emergency?"

"Even I wouldn't feed anyone a solution of ilthurone-ethanol complex made without an organic synthesis pathway, and we didn't exactly lay in a stock of the real stuff."

She comes as far as the table. "I thought humans considered this a controlled substance. You know that its only effect on me is that it tastes good?"

"That's what it's for, Liara, yes."

"How would you know?" She attempts a smile. "Sorry. That sounded inoffensive in my head."

"It's a reasonable question. There's an app you can get for your suit computer, it's quite a popular one. Requires a modification inside the helmet, but then you have a thing you can unroll and bite down on and get an idea of a taste. Way safer than trying foreign food: I'm violently allergic to two constituents of chocolate and outright poisoned by a double handful of others. We just don't use it while actually eating, because nothing goes with nutrient paste."

"One hears all kinds of stories about quarians and such 'apps'."

A laugh covers embarrassment. "They're about as true as the stories about asari and, uh, dancing."

"If it were only dancing, I'd have much less trouble with the shape of the universe." Liara abandons trying to break the stubborn block of chocolate, summons a pointlike mass-effect field onto her fingernail and cuts it with a stroke that leaves a shallow groove in the metal tabletop by accident. Takes a bite. "You know, that's surprisingly good. Did you ever see Vaenia?"

"Not really my thing: not enough explosions. I've seen the clip you're talking about, though, with the human girl at the restaurant. They showed us it in orientation."

"Mmm. I can see why they eat this, really I can. Humans. Why humans? Why does the new race have to be so fascinating? The batarians aren't. The volus aren't."

"Because they look like us, maybe?" Clarify! "The inclusive 'us', I mean. And culturally they're much more compatible than the batarians, and they put themselves forward in the way a volus wouldn't be seen dead doing?"

"Do you remember the first contact?"

"Way too young, sorry. I'm nearly thirty home-years old, that's what, twenty-two asari standard?"

"Uh-huh. I was at school on Thessia at the time. First we knew about it was that the turians were suddenly at war with this unknown species, something that had activated the dormant Arcturus Relay, something that looked and acted, well, a bit like your people without the reserve and restraint. I overheard all kinds of conversations with my mother assuring people that even if this was another Rachni War situation, they were stuck between the turians and the batarians and they'd be no match, and I remember confidently asserting that our allies had these dangerous aliens in hand. But the thing that I remember, the one that fixed humanity in my head, was when the armistice happened and one of the human republics shipped something like ten thousand paper cranes to each of the homeworlds. Ten thousand of these multicoloured hand-folded little model birds on strings, each one of them with the word 'peace' inexpertly written on them in black pigment in as many languages as they could find. I've never seen anything like them."

"The humans. Did that?"

"You couldn't believe it of the people who produced John Shepard?"

"No, I believe it, it's just - that's beautiful. It's the kind of thing the asari would do."

"Mm. Anyway, that's my enduring memory of humanity. They convinced the salarians they were clever and the asari that they were sane. And nobody knows what the batarians thought, and the turians didn't need convincing about anyone who sues for peace after their first ever victory, and everybody else would fall into line, even if it was a slightly perplexed line festooned with multicoloured model birds."

"And now they have John to do their convincing for them."

"Worked on me." Whoa, bitter! She looks down. "D'you think he was leading me on, Tali? Do you think I made an unrealistic assumption about his preferences?"

"I - eh." Careful. The wrong thing to do here would be to review records of all public conversations he's had with her. So she propositioned him and he turned her down, eh? (Shut up) - "I was, ah, deliberately not looking?"

Liara looks up, straight at the helmet. She can see your eyes, you know. You were the one who insisted on a low-reflection coating, knowing that it would make them visible. That expression is a great deal more knowing than she has any right to (idiot, do remember you're talking to someone older than your grandmother) - "Not you as well."

Look, it's only 4-(1-hydroxy-2-(methylamino)ethyl)benzene-1,2-diol, biologically synthesised and released at inopportune moments. There's no call for it to try and convince your brain that the floor is suddenly a very very long way away, not when the suit telemetry is right there telling you that the world is still exactly the same shape as it was before and there's absolutely no need whatever to fight anything or flee from anything at all. Calm down, Tali'Zorah nar Rayya, calm down and tell the woman who you rather ought to befriend that you are not

her rival in love.

"Do I make it that obvious?" Hello? Are you even listening? Would you like a spade in there?

Liara laughs. Not exactly the expected reaction: is she okay? "Well, aren't we a pair. He's human, Tali, I, um. I was very, I got a real flash of what he was feeling, and if he'd been, er, you-know, interested then I'd have felt it, it was mostly surprise. My interpretation is that we're enough like him to make him look and not enough to make him see."

You see? Almost exactly word for word what Auntie Raan said before you set out. And of course, you replied that you weren't heading out after that sort of adventure, and you didn't have that sort of software installed anyway, and you got the tell-you-when-you're-older look from her. At twenty-nine, no less! And she was right. Hmm. Must say something soon, make it look like a reflective pause. "If I had a glass, I'd drink to that. "

Liara holds up a square of chocolate in a parody of a toast. "To stupid attractive alien boys."

"Men. "

"Bah. Your idea of a man is my idea of a-" She blinks. "Sorry. That was overly familiar."

"We share a ship, Liara, in reality if not in ritual. Let's not play duelling cultures. "

"Oorah."

"What?"

"Don't worry. That really would take too long to explain, and I'd get it wrong - ask Gunner Williams, I think."

"Fair enough. Duelling something-else, though, might be fun? Do you play any games?"

"Sennit? Sharqan?"

"I was more thinking Virtual Brawl or Galaxy of Fantasy. "

"Ah. No aptitude, I'm afraid."

"Do you shoot recreationally?"

"Not really."

"H'm. Sports?"

"Squash?"

"Aha! I was on my shift's racquetball team for years. It's like squash but the—"

"Court is bigger and the ball travels faster. Problem is, I'd trounce you at Thessia-rules racquetball. You do realise how fast a biotic pulse will propel a ball?"

"My dear lady, my suit is power-assisted and if my reaction times aren't half yours I'd be surprised. You are on."

"Hah. I shall make arrangements. We're headed for the Citadel, I think, once I get my head on straight enough to work out where to tell them to send the fleet."

Crap. Mission. Objective! Yes. Mentally kick yourself. "Do you want some help, Liara? I have the rachni relay map downloaded." (If Shepard isn't doing this himself, telling her that he put you up to this would be bad. And talk about wrong signals, after what she just said.)

"Yes. That will help. The less I have to recall, the..." She shudders. "You know, just occasionally I wish that I couldn't do this."

"I know what you mean, I think."

"Do you?" It's not meant as insulting. It's just how they are. Other people can't possibly understand, other people aren't possibly as complicated, or what's the point of still being a teenager at a hundred and three?

"The suit. Sometimes, despite the augmented reality, despite the three-sixty vision and the strength boost and all that, despite everything - sometimes, the suit, it itches." Baring your soul or not, Tali, you've still got to turn that holoprojector on. Bring the map up, make it look accidental that it's upside down.

Liara takes the map in hand, starts to draw lines on it, zooming ever inwards on what was once rachni space. "You know, from that perspective, maybe you do. I'm - I know this sounds strange - everywhere off a planet and increasingly on planets, I'm aware that the gravity is fake. I can feel the edges of the artificial gravity and I can hear the drive core humming. It's like a whine at the edge of hearing, or like having your air pressure set very very slightly uncomfortably high, or like wearing something scratchy."

Ugh. Did she have to? The back of your hand right itches. (It doesn't actually itch, it can't. The inside of the suit is specifically designed not to activate sensory nerves. It can't itch. It's all in the mind. Your hands, they do not itch. It's a figure of speech. A figure of speech. Stop fidgeting.)

"And I've seen the humans hitting the gym like their life depends on it. Even Shepard exercises about twice as much as needed to maintain muscle tone and mass. The only one who doesn't is Joker, but he doesn't walk so well unaided. And I'm pretty sure that all the krogan I've ever seen have either been on drugs or they've been crazy-paranoid."

"Mm. And Garrus has recalibrated the forward batteries eighteen times in twelve days, you're not telling me that needed doing. I think maybe everyone hates space travel on some instinctual level." She sighs. "But it's more than that, too. If I'd conformed to the pattern he's biologically programmed for, then he would have understood what I meant, this wouldn't have happened."

Very gently. "What did?"

"Short version, I tried to kiss him and that wasn't what he wanted. I'm not even sure he understood what I'd been about."

"I'm sorry."

"No you're -" She turns to look. "No, you genuinely are, aren't you. You really would be happy for him, and for me, if we found something together."

"Of course. I *know* I have no chance, he can't even see me. Better someone gets to smile than that we're all miserable."

"Don't you have the concept of jealousy?"

"Sure we do. But - it's like - his benefit is worth more than mine, and yours isn't worth nothing, and I could just learn to not look."

"Nice for you. Sorry, that - sounded - really - I've got it!" Liara stabs a finger at the map, pulls up a relay with a truly complicated orbit. "Ilos! Of course!" She pulls up the comm. "Shepard, this is Liara. The relay you saw was the Mu Relay, the city-world is Ilos. No wonder Saren needed the rachni relay map. The Conduit is on Ilos."

"I'll get this information to the Council soonest. Thanks, Liara, I knew you could do it."

She closes the map down, stares at the wall for a moment. More chocolate. "What do you suppose he meant by that?"

"Sometimes words mean what they say and no more." Even things that he says. Even to her (or to you, not that he spares two words for you).

"Maybe you're right. Sometimes a kind word is just a kind word."

Look, Tali, just because Liara thinks it's okay for you to be jealous doesn't mean that it is. Stop it. And he already turned her down, anyway. It's not

fair.

•

The door chime goes again. I close Alenko's file and turn back to the door. Head still pounding. "Come in."

It's Williams. Still got medi-gel on what must have been a hell of a burn. She comes to a parade rest three feet inside the door, eyes on the far wall. "Is this a good time, sir?"

No, but when is the good time for this sort of a chat? "At ease, Ashley. Sit down."

She perches uncomfortably on the edge of one of the chairs. "Also, sir, uh, permission to speak freely."

"Granted. Speak your mind."

"The bad call I made. How can I improve, sir?"

"Come again, gunner?"

"Down there on Virmire. I called it and you overruled me. I *called* it. Op-for was one prime unit, one aggressor, three heavy guns, four medium and fifteen light. We had a choke point on them, four drones left and the Normandy could have toasted the aggressor and the prime as it lifted. I thought I could have held that breach personally for three lousy minutes, and that was the call I made, and I was wrong. How, sir, and can I stop it happening again?"

"Ashley, I didn't judge based on your personal ability. I have every confidence that you could probably have held that breach long enough to die in the blast of the bomb you planted."

"And that would have bought you enough time to drop the hammer on the geth pressing L-C Alenko's position and exfiltrate him."

"It might have done so. I've looked at the numbers. It'd have been tight, but with some assumptions and Joker at the helm, we might have pulled it off."

"So what I don't understand, sir, with respect, is how that reasoning gels with what we did."

I run a hand through my hair. "I've been sitting here asking myself that same damn thing, Ashley. If there was a way everybody got out of that alive. If the drones could have held it alone. If heavy fire could have made the bomb site inaccessible. If the geth could even have disabled that bomb, given that it was just a drive core set to overload. If we could have made two pickups in three minutes." I look at her directly. "The one question I never asked myself was whether I should have left you with the bomb."

"Why not, sir? Why am I more important than him?"

"Honestly?" Sigh. "You were in the right place at the right time."

She nods. "So with respect, sir, it *is* a competence thing."

"No, Gunner. It's about risk. If we went, we could *probably* have got there in time. We could *probably* have saved Alenko and our own asses. And you could *probably* have held that breach for two and a half minutes on your own. But if we stayed, we could *certainly* have held the breach, and we gave ourselves the best chance of getting out of there and to the rendezvous."

"At the cost of Alenko's life."

"Rather than yours."

"Yes, sir. But that's L-C Kaidan Alenko N6, ship's executive officer, and I'm Gunnery Chief Ash Williams G2, ship's backup armourer. Doesn't take a genius to work out who's worth more."

"'Worth more'?"

"When it comes down to it, sir, yes."

I shake my head. "Gunner, I do not admit that line of reasoning. Anyone who thinks that an N6 is somehow 'worth more' than an N2, than an S1, they are out of the N program with a boot-print on their arrogant ass. Kaidan Alenko stayed behind in a situation he knew damn well had a good chance of getting him killed, to give Major Kirrahe's team a chance to get away clean. Picking him up would have jeopardised the whole mission and got you killed. We couldn't do it."

"There must have been *something*-"

"That we could have done? Absolutely, Marine." My voice has a little bit of the military snap, the tone of command. "We can damn well honour his last request and his memory."

She looks down, bites her lip. "Sir, he's dead and I'm still walking around and I'm not sure that I've really got a decent reason why and it's killing me, sir."

"I know what you mean. Losing someone - especially a friend, especially where if the officer made a different call they'd be alive and it'd be someone else - you don't have to tell me how hard that is. Skyllia, on Elysium, two hours after the first landings, I was at the sharp end of a losing engagement on the left flank of a defence which was falling apart. Shit was falling apart and breaking up all over, we still had orbital fire coming in at that point, I was holding my company together with my fingernails. And Colonel Yossarian ordered me to pull back and save what forces I could. If I hadn't done it we'd have died, it would've been obvious to a blind man. But doing it meant dropping Baker Company in the shit. They had the same orders as us, pull out, but they were damn near surrounded and only our fire was holding the BEMs back from a charge. And basically it was us or Baker and the colonel chose us."

I look at nothing in particular, remembering. "And I remember around the fire that evening I took the colonel aside and asked him why the hell it was Charlie and not Baker Company who got to live, and the words he said, they've kind of stuck with me. 'Son,' he said, 'you are alive and he is dead. Today it wasn't your turn. And you didn't decide that, and he didn't decide that, and I didn't decide that. The decision I took had as much to do with which of you it was as the bullet that comes flying over the edge of your foxhole. But he is dead and you are alive and the truth is that there *isn't* a good reason. But when you go out there to honour his memory tomorrow, or the day

after, you can *make* a reason.' It *isn't* fair that Alenko's dead. But the last service we can do him is we can achieve the goal he died for."

Her voice is very small. "And is that enough, sir?"

"I'd be lying if I said it was." My turn to avoid her gaze. "That red stripe on the ribbon on the medal, that's blood, and it's not the bad guys'. But we do the best we can. Today, yesterday, tomorrow."

"Just promise me one thing."

"Go ahead?"

Her eyes are a little too bright. "Promise me that it *wasn't* personal, sir. John. Promise me that your decision had as much to do with which of us it was as the bullet that comes flying over the edge of the foxhole."

I meet her gaze and nod. "Ashley. You and he are my friends, two of the finest individuals I've had the honour of serving with. But nothing either of you could have said, done or been would have changed that call once Alenko decided to stay back to buy time for the STG unit, and that is God's honest truth."

"Yes, sir." She stands up. "Permission to go pretend I'm going to get some sleep, sir."

"Granted, gunner. Dismissed."

The door slides shut behind her and I return to staring at Alenko's file. The story was true, every word of it, just as I remember it.

But what I didn't tell her was that I was damn sure the old bastard was telling me what I needed to hear. Sure, it was impersonal. Sure, he made the call without thinking of the people involved. You do, or you go crazy. But he still made the call. Alenko still died, on my watch, because of that call that I made, and I *am* responsible. But that's mine to bear, not Ashley's, just like I'll bet Yossarian could still name every man and woman of Bravo Company today.

It's not regulations that mean that there's water in my glass, not Scotch. It's the sure and certain knowledge of how many glasses one drink can come in. I raise it anyway. And the memories burn all the way down.

\*

The turian councilmember jerks his head incredulously and the asari raises her eyebrows. It's Valern, the salarian, who actually speaks.

"It's a self-consistent tale, Spectre, I will give you that much. And I'm certainly confident that *you* believe it."

Matriarch Tevos smiles thinly. "To which statement I'd wish to add that my late friend's eldest

daughter seems to have inherited a great deal of her mother's persuasive tongue. I *know* you have not mentioned her, a thing to both your and her credit, but the Reaper Hypothesis predates the conversion of the Council of Two into a triumvirate and she's well known to be an adherent. I learned about the debunking of that particular myth in secondary school, commander, when I was a little younger than you are now; I'm not surprised you'd have thought it a new discovery, as indeed Councilmember Sparatus did, as the history of archaeological thought is not part of the general education of most races. Nevertheless, I have had my staff forward a digest on the relevant issues to your office; to provide a sense of scale, it was written a century or so before the Rachni War."

So in other words, just like every other organisation in this galaxy, the Council like to employ a dog and then bark their damn heads off. "Even so, Councilmembers, the point is not whether or not I personally believe this, or whether I can trust Dr. t'Soni's competence in her field of academic specialty. The point is that I'm convinced that Saren believes this. His every move has been aimed at obtaining access to the <conduit>, from seeking out Prothean beacons and dealing with the creature on Feros to increase the clarity of his visions, to sending Benezia to Noveria to obtain a massive and ancient map of obscure mass relays. And whether or not the information acquired from Benezia was true, my computer specialist agrees with Benezia's daughter that it's the same information Saren has. So *given* all of that-"

Sparatus speaks. The turian traditionally is first and last to speak on all military matters. "*Given*, as you say, a gut insight into the psychology of a member of a species not your own and a guess as to the full nature of information acquired by him concerning a long-dismissed apocalyptic myth which may predict the future path of a ship that cannot *possibly* possess the qualities you ascribe to it but have never witnessed, you wish to recommend that we breach a hard-won treaty with the Batarian Hegemony and compound that breach by moving a fleet into striking distance of a system they are *convinced* that we want to wipe from the map."

Button down a frustrated response. I can rant all I want - later, to Anderson, in private. "Councilmembers. You asked me to find and investigate Benezia: this I did. While we all regret the outcome of the investigation, it was hardly my doing. You asked me to investigate Saren: this I have done, and while you may disagree with my conclusions, you have my report in full. You asked me to find Saren: this I have done. If you wish to *catch* Saren, then he will be onboard the dreadnought-class vessel *Sovereign*, in the Ilos system, past the Mu Relay, within the next three days. On behalf of myself and my crew, many of whom have personal reasons to see Saren brought to justice, I'd request that the *Normandy* be assigned to join the fleet."

Tevos nods. "The *Normandy* certainly will be assigned to join the fleet, commander. Its stealth capabilities will be invaluable: there are only fourteen ships in all of Council space with such capabilities, and only three are equipped with quantum-entanglement communications gear such as yours: each of these three ships is to be deployed at a major relay hub with orders to determine the heading of Saren's fleet once it is located. Through certainly no fault of your own, it is clear that your success in determining Saren's motives has been limited: your data concerning the size and capabilities of the geth fleet, however, is highly useful. He is counting, we believe, upon your ability to convince us of what he has so skillfully convinced *you* of: we shall not take his bait. After all, he does not need even ten per cent of the force he has to strike at a human colony: he must be after bigger prey. There is no reason to go to him; he shall come to us, and we *can* be everywhere at once. Battlegroups from the Second, Fifth and Seventh Legions, along with First Special Tasks and the Ascension Fleet, will be deployed to a blockade of Arcturus, Exodus, Sur'kesh, Ilium and

Pax. Once Saren's fleet has been identified and engaged, a reinforced Second Legion group will strike with the objective of boarding the dreadnought and bringing Saren to justice. Spectre Bau has been assigned to that taskforce: he leaves in the next two hours, so if you wish to discuss the possibility of going to assist him you should hurry."

"No human fleets, Councilmember?"

Sparatus answers that one. "The humans have lost most of one colony to Saren's forces already and have deployed in response to several other attacks. We would prefer if Saren could be returned alive, and frankly, commander, would you trust your people to do that successfully?"

"Frankly, sir, I would, but I can see why someone wouldn't. At the very least, the Alliance Third Fleet can surely be trusted to blockade our own relay at Arcturus, and I'm sure that the Fifth could be tapped for additional resources to defend the Citadel."

Tevos nods at Sparatus, and like that he's overruled. "We shall include your people's military in our strategies, commander. Whatever our views on their discipline compared to turian soldiers -" a second inclination of the head towards the turian - "they can certainly be trusted to defend their own assets. Would you appreciate a deployment to coordinate them?"

"I think I'd do my people a disservice if I didn't give them the best chance I could at bringing Saren in personally, ma'am. I'll talk to Bau."

"Very good, Spectre. Please remember to read the summary of the last seventeen centuries' scholarship on the Reaper Hypothesis, captain. Isolated mistakes are tolerable; carelessness less so."

"Yes, ma'am."

I manage to make it all the way out of the Council chamber and into the Presidium Tower lift before beginning my personal litany against patronising brassholes who can't quite manage to see past the end of their own noses. I have to punch the code for Bau's office twice because the first time around I'm hitting the buttons so hard it assumes I did that by accident.

•

There's this bar in Zakera. It keeps the ambience muted and the liquor flowing. The proprietor's a turian, but the way he likes to keep his premises turned out to appeal to a certain breed of officer: after the third Alliance captain turned up asking if he had drink that wouldn't poison a human, he decided it hadn't been a fluke and got some in. And, well, that was thirty years ago and today this place has baseball caps from thirty Alliance ships down one wall.

Captain Anderson got here early, found us a booth table. I get the drinks. There are many fine things one can say about Captain Anderson, but the man does also drink bourbon. There's a moment of silence. I'm in no mood to break it.

"How long?"

"Six hours, maybe seven." He looks at me in surprise as I continue. "We're shipping out with Spectre Bau, on the *Silent Step*: he says he wants all the help he can get."

"They going to catch anything? Really?"

I shake my head. "Maybe. Once Saren tires of the Traverse and brings his fleet in for wherever he's after." Look Anderson in the eye, keep my voice low. "Sir, I did my best." Christ, that sounds weak. "They know who and how and why. Or they would if they could damn well see past the ends of their exfoliated noses. I know exactly where he's going to be, and I told them, and now I'm *reassigned* because they don't like the answer."

"But still a Spectre." He looks at his glass. "That's more than nothing."

He's testing me. "With respect, sir, if it can't *stop* Saren then it *is* nothing. I didn't sign up for a petifogging paperpushing pencilsucking *desk* job."

"Not many of us did."

"...Sorry. You didn't deserve what happened to you either."

"Bullshit." Another sip of bourbon. "I had my chance twenty years ago. This always was going to be my last command before they found me a nice warm desk to fly." A pause. Another sip. "They're promoting me, John. Commodore, Fifth Fleet under Hackett. Stationed either here or on Archie, depending whether our offer of supplying a squadron to serve alongside the Third Legion is accepted. And my name goes on the waiting list to hoist my own flag."

That is, one day he'll be an admiral whether he likes it or not, and he'll never walk his own bridge again. "'Congratulations'."

"'Thanks'." He snorts. "Funny, really. You spend your whole life climbing the damn ladder only to find that you can fall off the top of it. It's why I went for the N program. Figured I'd always be too useful for them to take my ship away. And now I'm going to be the only N7 ever to make the Admiralty."

"Unless they decide I don't make the grade as a Spectre."

"Fat chance, son. They'll still be telling the kids stories of you in hundreds of years."

"God, I hope not." Inspect glass. Yup, still drink in there. Best work on that a little.

"So what are they sending after Saren? Who's using your coordinates?"

I shake my head. "The blockade op for Third, the squadron request from Fifth - which, incidentally, they're likely to approve today - they're part of an op the size of Council space. Three Legions are being mobilised, surprise relay blockade drill. The Ascension Fleet just happens to be making the rounds of a couple more - we all noticed the *Destiny Ascension* in a parking orbit on the way in. The plan is wait and watch, and then drop the hammer when he moves."

"On the basis that it's okay to pull your pants down if you're wearing a titanium chastity belt?"

"Don't ask me, Dave. I don't make the dumbass decisions, I just give them the information."

"Will it work?"

I check whether there's any alcohol left in my glass. "It's not what I would have done." Turns out there was. But no longer.

"So I guess that leaves us one more question to ask."

"Right?"

"Are you going to let them do that to themselves, commander?"

Blink. Stop. Think. "Are you asking, could I do it?"

"I know for a damn fact they put a new tank aboard the *Normandy* this morning, because I signed off on the reinforced seat. And I know for another fact that Commander Pressly is happy neither with the responsibility nor with his orders. Seems to think that he's your nav officer, not the *Normandy's* captain."

"Saren's going to have to land in order to inspect the <Conduit>, I got the definite impression it was on the surface or underground. He'll be surrounded by geth. Capture will be all but impossible."

"My heart bleeds for him, N7. Can you do it?"

Hmm. Pause. Half the crew will be ashore. I know I'd downright ordered my team to grab some downtime.

...

"Commander?"

"The moment the *Normandy* asks for a launch ahead of schedule on Spectre authorisation, they'll know it's me."

He nods. "Let me handle that, John." Pulls a little bottle of tablets out of his pocket, takes one, passes me one. "Anti-intoxicant. Give me forty-five minutes."

"Aye, sir."

He raises an eyebrow. "Now, now. Speaking as your superior officer, John, I cannot possibly condone such an irresponsible course of action."

"Speaking as a Spectre, David, you can shove your orders where the sun, it does not shine."

"Spectre status recognised. Synchronise watches: forty-five minutes, *mark*."

•

The comm rings. Tali waits for the ball to bounce before leaping and she's two and a half metres up by the time she meets it, her racquet at full extension; she calls on power-assist to pull her shot, sapping the pace off the ball, a near perfect drop-shot in the corner of the court, and it bounces a paltry fifty centimetres. And Liara's there, a diving shot, the ball going almost straight up with a wicked spin on it as she rolls to her feet and the comm rings.

Wrex's forehead meets the young pup's with a metallic tooth-rattling *thunk* and he's knocked back a pace or two. The other krogan at the bar relax visibly. The old battlemaster has a deserved reputation for breaking people's faces, but if there wasn't a warp field behind that blow then he's in a good mood today. He orders a drink with an upraised finger and the comm rings.

Ashley's now carrying three bags. She examines the top Sara's holding up and proclaims it a perfectly serviceable and tasteful item - if your skin happens to be pale blue. Her sister pouts until shown a mirror, but agreement is inevitable; the comm rings.

The extrapolated trajectory of the ball is an annotated yellow line on her augmented reality and Tali grins behind her helmet as she spins right around to take the shot with a sound like the crack of a rifle. But rather than meet strength with strength as the ball comes humming back past her at about waist-height, Liara just touches it very slightly, the violet-glowing biotic field around her racquet pulling its inertial mass way down as she strikes, seemingly just deflecting it, and the shot flies high and light and soft, *just* in. And the comm rings and Tali happens to read who it *is*, and the ball bounces unplayed.

Garrus puts a simulated round through yet another holographic target. He had no *idea* that Earth had flying analogues of the Palaven discbeetle, and resolves to look up the habitat and behaviour of the 'clay pigeon'. Maybe one day he could take a shooting holiday. And another one down, and the comm rings.

Ashley apologises to her sister: that was her boss on the line and she's gotta call him back. Which involves answering a question about who her boss is ("Oh, you mean he's that guy I saw on the news, the guy who quit the Navy to join some sort of alien secret police thing?") and then the comm rings again and she retreats to a safe distance.

With a falsely good-natured smile, Wrex takes a slug of a drink that smells and tastes a bit like engine cleaner cut with paint thinner. He could *pisssbetter* araq than this. He strongly suspects that someone has, and then watered it down a bit to make it go further. The music in this dive is frankly shit. The ambience, worse. It looks, sounds, smells like mercenary. Like lack of ambition. Like self-loathing. Like *failure*. The only one in the place who isn't a krogan is the vorcha bartender. He can't even remember why he thought he wanted to come to this shithole. The comm rings and he decides that whoever it is, it'll be better than five minutes more with the things that try and pass for his countrymen.

•

The crew stand to attention and there's a formal little synthesised trill as I step on board. I exchange salutes with Pressly, and it's a good thing that we're not actually being watched, because

he has that expression on his face as of a schoolboy doing something naughty. "Commander Pressly, this is an unscheduled inspection. You are hereby ordered under Spectre authority to conduct a simulated emergency launch drill. We will be watching."

He gives what I suppose he imagines to be a conspiratorial wink. "Commander Shepard, I must formally protest your actions. To turn up in force and commandeer my vessel for an inspection like this, it's against regulations. The Council will hear of this."

"Feel free to notify them at your leisure."

"Aye, sir. The ship is yours."

"Just like that?" I mock-frown. "Where is your security, man?"

"Very sorry, commander, we recently had a change of captain. I hear where the navigation officer didn't quite get around to changing the command codes, sir."

"Very good, Mr. Pressly. Shipwide announce if you please, clear for launch. This is a drill."

"Simulated clear for launch, sir, aye." He pulls up his comm. "All hands, all hands, this is a drill. Clear for action, this is a drill."

Moments later and voices chime in from across the ship. Of course they already had things squared away. The lights dim. "Bridge, CIC. Simulate clear for launch. "

Joker grins and flicks his headset mic into place. "CIC, bridge, simulated clear for launch, aye. Simulate request for emergency launch clearance." His fingers dance through the pre-flight, 'accidentally' failing to activate the small orange control icon for 'drill'.

He's only momentarily surprised by the voice of Commodore Anderson on traffic control. "SR-1 Normandy, flightpath request received. Simulate emergency clearance, authority Alliance Fifth Fleet. " It appears that Anderson has also accidentally failed to activate the icon marked 'drill', and somehow entered his own command override code. "SR-1, you are clear for launch. "

"CIC, bridge, simulated clear for launch."

Pressly turns to me. "Simulated clear for launch, sir. One minute twenty-four."

"Very good, Mr. Pressly, you may launch at your convenience."

"Uh, yes, sir. Spectre status recognised. Bridge, CIC, you may cast off."

"Cast off, aye. "

And the Normandy streaks from the docking bay like an arrow from a bow. In the traffic control tower, a red icon comes on and a klaxon begins to sound as the automated systems start tracking and recording. The operator from the next room comes through at a half-run. "What's going on?"

Anderson adjusts his 'borrowed' uniform. "Drill, sir, they're pretending to launch one of their wild weasels, part of the exercise the Third are-

"You idiot, that's the - You forgot to press 'simulate' on the main sensors, didn't you." The salarian, to whom most humans look similar if dressed similarly, opens a channel to the *Normandy* with one hand while shutting down the emergency alarm with the other.

"SR-1 Normandy, Citadel Tower. Apologies for the scare, *human* error on our end. Simulation mode re-engaged. "

Joker grins as he flicks the switch on the active stealth. "Not a problem, tower. Your phantom blip should go away any... time..."

"That's got it, SR-1. Tower out. "

"CIC, Joker. Stealth active. Relay RV in fifteen."

"Copy. Nav, make our destination Ilos. Mu Cluster."

"Mu Relay, aye."

Wrex turns to me with an amused expression. "So what was all of that rigmarole for, Shepard? You know everyone involved. You could just have launched."

Pressly finishes sending the course info to the relay and looks up. "Launched, Wrex? Without permission? That's illegal *and* impossible. Only if I was somehow ready to launch and someone high-ranking, like a Spectre, ordered me could I have launched without expectation of a court-martial."

"This whole thing, John - it's to make all of this your fault?" Tali jerks her head back (raised eyebrows).

"Uh-huh. Immunity from prosecution doesn't extend to you guys unless directly under my cognizance."

Liara purses her lips. "They'll have you declared rogue. You have now stolen a very rare and valuable ship and run away. Regardless of the situation, they *are* going to send someone after you."

"Good. They know exactly where I'm going and they know exactly what's likely to be there. Anyone or anything they send after me is going to end up helping us against Saren."

"And what then? What when Saren's caught, the Reapers defeated? We've defied orders-

I shrug. "As I said. All of this was done under my cognizance. Nobody loses out for being in the wrong place at the wrong time and getting pressganged into this."

"Pressganged?" Tali steps forward besides Liara. "You are not [untranslated] well hanging that on me. " She holds up her omni-tool, set to record. It's an act: I'm perfectly well

aware that she records everything, not that I miss the significance. "Let the record show that Tali'Zorah nar Rayya had full knowledge of these plans and came forward to assist them of her own free will, forsaking Pilgrimage and [ritual duty] to do what she thought was right." She looks at me, eyes blazing, challenging.

"I, Liara t'Soni Benezia's daughter of Armali, do also swear and witness that I also came aboard with full foreknowledge of what was to occur."

"Before this audience let it be witnessed that I, Garrus, swear in [honour] upon the Vakarian name and my lineage of Palaven and Kirna that I do not lie: I was neither deceived nor coerced into this right, fitting and proper action."

"This is Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams G2, seconded Special Tactics and Recon. Let the record state that I am here of my own accord, and take full responsibility for the consequences of my actions."

"For what it's worth, this is Wrex, first battlemaster and chieftain-in-exile of Clan Urdnot. Let the histories record that there never was an occasion when I did what anyone else said for any other reason than that it was a good idea or they paid me, and that certainly damn well includes when I followed Spectre Shepard aboard the SR-1. And nobody paid me for this and I'm not looking for it."

"Satisfied, John?"

Blink. Uh.

"Let's call that 'moved' and move on, shall we?" I pull up shipwide announce. "Crew of the SR-1 Normandy, this is Commander John Shepard. As of fourteen hundred hours today, by the authority vested in me by the Citadel Council I am commandeering this vessel. Our destination is Ilos, the ancient world-city of the Protheans. We are on the trail of Saren Arterius, as we have been for the last couple of weeks: this time we know we have him. Saren means to land on Ilos in order to investigate an ancient Prothean relic: we shall be putting down an assault team to take him on and bring him to justice. Ilos will be surrounded by the geth fleet: we shall use the Normandy's unique capabilities to penetrate their perimeter before they even know that we are there."

I clear my throat. "This action is against the express orders of the Council. I am undertaking this action because of a personal belief that this is the best, the fastest, the cleanest and perhaps the only way that Saren will be brought to justice, and that he poses a clear and present danger to galactic peace. Any individual aboard this vessel who has a problem with what I am doing may come and discuss it with me personally, or alternatively you may choose to be relieved of duty and confined to quarters. I wish to repeat that this action is not against the orders of my Alliance superiors, who have no knowledge or approval, tacit or otherwise, of this action. I believe that I am - that we are - doing the right thing. Relay transition in just over ten minutes; we shall be eight hours in transit. Shepard out."

•

"Tali, a moment please?"

"Sure." She bobs her head (grin). "I'm not sorry for doing that, my captain. It was

insubordinate but it was not undermining, or I thought you ought to think that it wasn't."

"No, it wasn't. I - just wanted to ask. You said that you were forsaking Pilgrimage duties to come here. What does that mean?"

"Caught that, did you? Okay. So my work on the Reaper nanomachines is my work, right, that you're copying? And the rachni relay map, while a government-level asset, it was my hands on the translation into a usable map? And the geth hub, I carried it on my back, that hardware it is mine. So overall that's several pieces of valuable IP and I didn't lie or cheat or steal to get them. And, well, I've made a deferred application to a ship not unlike this one in nature and role and the captain's far more interested in evidence of good work than in a new tender or some spare parts too large for his printer. So by all rights I should have said goodbye when we hit port. I can go home with a gift worthy of me and them."

I won't make an issue of her taking the map. The more people have that, the better. And the rest of that *is* hers. "But you stayed. To take on Saren."

"I'm on your crew-" she realises just too late what she said- "your team, your *team*." She looks down a moment, clenches a fist, looks back up at me earnestly, bright-eyed. "You call, and I come. I don't see that changing, even when I do go home. You will always have an ally among the Fleet, John."

"I realise what this means to you, Tali. I - appreciate it."

She ducks her head (slight embarrassment). "I'm glad one of us does. Understand, I mean. My ancestors must think I've gone crazy. My father would go absolutely spare if he knew. My - I shall stop talking about it now." She nods.

"Well, I'll try to get you back to your father in one piece. Least I can do."

Pause. "John - this is going to be dangerous, isn't it."

"Yes. This will not be a milk run. There's a very real chance this all goes wrong."

She nods. "I do not know whether or not you pray. But I sincerely doubt you do so like I do. So I am going to go and do some of that now, for all of us." She nods again. "See you in some hours, my captain."

•

"John, can I have a moment?" Liara catches me just as I'm about to enter my office, puts her hand on my arm. "Privately?"

"Of course." I open the door and gesture to a chair.

The door closes behind her. "I don't know if I shall be here long enough to sit down. John, it's - I never apologised to you."

"Well, if you do anything that needs it, I'll be sure to let you-"

"John, can you be serious for *once* in your life." She takes my hands. "Sorry. That was uncalled-for and impolite. Nevertheless, you know *exactly* to what I am referring."

"You'd rather if that had never happened."

"Broadly? Yes. But um. There are, ah, there are two - Goddess, I'm fumble-fingered today - there are two ways it can have never happened, if, er, if you see what I mean, and, feel free to interrupt me at any time here, I'd rather, um, like to know which you are likely to mean, I know it's a breach of etiquette, I'm terrible at this, John, I've always been terrible at this, and I'm er." She makes her pause for breath as short as she physically can. "For my part I meant what I did, just not how it came out, if you see?"

"Liar -" I swallow hard, try and get my own feelings squared away. She's interesting, she's beautiful, and yet - "It would never work. Fundamentally, it would never work. I'm flattered. But I'm not prepared to, to lead you on, to promise you something I can't deliver. It wouldn't be fair to either of us to start something, to make a promise I'm not going to be able to keep."

"So because you believe you cannot stay until December, you will not dance with me in May?" Her voice is very soft.

"Liar, you are attractive and you're thoughtful and you're smart and I'm flattered. But I look into your eyes and I don't see a potential lover, I see a friend. And I'm not the kind of man to-"

She shakes her head. "No. But know that this isn't some girlish infatuation. I know: I *have* done that before. My regard for you is based a little broader than my initial fascination with the man whose mind I touched. I - You don't want or need to know. But - you call and I come, John. Now and always. Most people in our place, Liara would have offered Shepard a night like he'd never known and he'd have accepted, and in the morning they would have kissed one last time and parted, both their worlds a little sweeter. But that's not you, and it's not me, and it won't happen, not outside a dream." She blinks hard. Squeezes my hands once, then drops them. "Your reaction to me does not change how I feel." She gives a self-deprecating smile. "But it will save you a lot of poor-quality poetry, John, thank you for your time, I should leave now."

I don't get in her way.

•

Ilos. A world that's been dead for nigh on five hundred centuries. The city-world has a ring of debris in orbit, a relic of a battle that raged while my ancestors sat beside the fire and chipped dull flints against one another to get at the sharp shiny inside. The amazing thing for me is how familiar it all is, how recognisable. I guess all this was built by the same people who built the Relays and the Citadel, and those shaped the rest of our civilisation like a seed-crystal. The feeling is very much like we're stepping into a tomb.

Except someone else was here first. Geth vessels, six of them in a rough circle, meander around an energy-saving orbit roughly above the spot that Liara and I remember. The world's atmosphere is thick, oxygen-nitrogen-argon, breathable; this just means more delays to our insertion as we have to make re-entry out of sight of the geth.

"I have your power signatures." Pressly is sitting in what was once Alenko's seat at sensors. "Right where the vision said. Underground. No landing site within ten miles, though."

"Here, give me that." Joker pulls the map open, out of the way of the instrument panel. "Hm. Hardmode. We like hardmode." He circles a site on the map. "There's your drop. One point six miles."

"Flight-Lieutenant, that is a slot six metres by thirty. The Mako's four by nine. Even the computer says no."

"Yeah, well, what does a bunch of wires know about flying a ship. Shepard, Joker."

"Yo." I'm standing relatively close behind him.

"I got you a dropsite, sir."

"That looks like a ventilation port, Joker."

"Just call me Luke Skywalker, sir. I can do it."

"Okay. Re-establish stealth after the drop. I don't fancy having to walk back to the Citadel."

"Aye, commander. On behalf of appropriations committees everywhere, can you try to at least drive? We're not made of tanks."

I chuckle. "I'll head to the bay now. Fly safe."

"Give 'em hell, sir."

"Can't. I think they've already got it." I'm pulling on my helmet.

"Check under the seat, I'm almost positive we packed a spare."

•

The Normandy cuts the air as silently as a thrown knife, torch drive off, stealth enabled. We're strapped hard into our seats inside the Mako armoured fighting vehicle, armour joints locked against acceleration. Only Liara's not wearing a hard suit, and she's glowing slightly as she and I ready ourselves to reduce the crew's inertial mass to somewhere around that of expanded polystyrene. The jerk of release is bone-jarring and we're immediately in freefall, Wrex leaving it a good second and a half before firing the retros that will make us obvious to anyone watching.

The touchdown throws us all into our restraints as Wrex pours all the power our little tank has into stopping us from as little over three hundred knots to nothing over twenty metres of touchdown.

Liara and I absorb as much of the shock as we can, but it's still unpleasant.

"You know what they say about landings..." Wrex guns the engine as I swing myself up and into the turret seat.

"Anything you can drive a tank out of is a good one." I grin. This is what it means to be alive. "Tali."

"Drones away. We're apparently on a tributary roadway. Follow this road two hundred, then take the second left."

Wrex takes off with all the smooth and careful restraint of a Mumbai taxi-driver. "Hostiles?"

"None as yet, but I can smell them. They've changed battle-code again - this one uses a completely different basis. Get back to you, 'kay?"

"Right." The tank screams around the next corner.

The route isn't completely unguarded, but it's nothing that I can't handle - the Mako's about the best-armed thing you can fit down one of these narrow streets, certainly better than the geth armatures. Tali feeds me targeting info and Garrus watches over his eyepiece and gives laconic commentary. The route twists and turns to avoid anything we can't go over or blast through.

These streets start getting familiar; from the surprised noise Liara makes, she notices it too. She starts corroborating Tali's directions, provoking from Wrex a sarcastic comment about the new breed of damn satnavs.

A giant pair of doors, ornate and massive, standing a little open. A perfect choke point, and the geth oblige with an ambush, but they made the mistake of not blocking it off with something I can't clear out with the main gun. Through those, and even I could give Wrex directions now. Straight. And down.

Tali's yell is a fraction of a second too late. Wrex stands on the brake, the Mako slewing and skidding as it screams to a halt; I'm scanning the local area for viable targets, can't find a one, as a curtain of harsh green light falls from the ceiling ahead of and behind us and Wrex swears pungently. Trapped.

"Tali, give me something."

"I'm trying. Power signature to our portside, faint thing, not geth. Liara, is this—"

"Prothean? Yes. And I would rather say well-shielded than faint. That wall-panel should open at a touch."

I swing the turret to cover the door. "Garrus, Wrex, stay with the Mako. We may come boiling out of there needing fire support in a hurry."

•

I have point, although try convincing either Liara or Tali of that. The tunnel to get to this chamber was a funny awkward shape; apparently it's running inside one of the walls of the huge structure that we're underneath. The chamber itself is massive, irregular shaped, the curved walls lined with hexagonal cells like a beehive. The tunnel leads towards a central dais, a pedestal on top looking like nothing so much as a lectern.

"Goddess. " Liara's whisper echoes back to us from the walls of the vast, dead-

Lights. Green. Protheans like green. Spotlights from five or six locations lighting up the dais in the centre. Tali gestures and the two drones humming at her shoulder start to circle us protectively. "Okay, I'll give you the 'well shielded', Liara. We're looking at a system with a giant electrochemical battery slowly being charged by a solid-state heat engine with the hot junction in a geothermal tap and the cold junction likely at the top of this skyscraper. No idea how they - you don't care about the tech. Short version, this is all fully powered. "

"Right. Liara, I have no idea what that pedestal is, beyond 'classified'. Your guess?"

"Hah. I think it's an attempt at crosscultural communication. A large arrow saying 'stand here'. Most of my peers would tell me this is a Prothean church, but you know, I'm starting to think that maybe the Protheans were atheists. "

"Tali, what happens if I stand there?"

"[Untranslated] knows. Ehh, I mean, no clue. The sensors are either passive or off. "

I nod. "Ash, ready for this to go loud."

"Always, skipper. "

And I step onto the plate. I feel a sudden, automated mass-effect *click* and instinctively redouble my defences. Green light swirls above the lectern for a moment before coalescing into a green sphere, four points of light like batarian eyes on the side facing me. A line about where I'd expect a mouth. There's a sound, a deep sonorous chime like the tolling of a great bell. And then it speaks, a deep resonant voice. I'm aware that I understand the language. Everyone else will be using Liara's hacked-together translator code. "<VIGIL ONLINE. DATETIME ERROR. BEACONS NOT FOUND. POST-PROTHEAN CYCLE INFERRED. SPEAK, MY YOUNG INTERLOCUTOR. DO NOT BE AFRAID. WHO ARE YOU?>"

I look at Liara, who shakes her head mutely - if I interpret her correctly, she doesn't trust her fluency in the ancient language. "<Vigil, we seek a criminal, we are in hot pursuit. It is vital that we apprehend him: he is seeking the return of the Reapers. Please release our vehicle so that we may catch him>." I think I have the tones right, but I know I'm missing things, as if I'm speaking with a strong barbarian accent.

"<YOU WILL NOT CATCH HIM WITHIN THE NEXT TEN MINUTES. HE HAS USED THE CONDUIT AND IT IS RECHARGING. I REPEAT MY QUESTION>." "

"<I suppose I will have to take your word for that. My name is Shepard. My race was recorded by the Protheans, but I do not know its catalogue designation or that of the system from which we came. My companions include an expert on your people, but none of them can speak your language with the fluency that I have. Can you speak ours>?"

"<I CANNOT, SHEPARD>. " There is a very brief pause, then another chime, higher pitched. "<MY MEASUREMENTS INDICATE THAT THE FORTRESS HAS CIRCLED ITS STAR THIRTY-TWO THOUSAND FOUR HUNDRED TIMES SINCE THE PROTHEAN CYCLE. PLEASE CONFIRM>. "

"Uh, Liara?"

"Was that 'thirty-two thousand four hundred'?"

"Uh-huh."

"Close enough for government work, John."

"<You are correct, Vigil>."

"<THEN THERE ARE A NUMBER OF WARNINGS AND INSTRUCTIONS YOU MAY REQUIRE. PLEASE FACE THE FOLLOWING SHORT TRIAL. EVERY TIME YOU PROVIDE A NAME FOR A PICTURE OR SAY THAT YOU DO NOT KNOW, ANOTHER WILL EMERGE>. "

"Uh, okay." A succession of holographic images dance before my eyes. "<A mass relay. The Citadel. A map of mass relays, upside down. Sovereign. A human. An asari. I don't know>." (It's a head-and-shoulders of a humanoid, big blue eyes, light grey skin, high cheekbones, hair like brushed steel.) "<A turian. A geth lander. A geth drone. One of our drones. A geth armature. The criminal I'm hunting. I don't know>." (It's a head-and-shoulders of another humanoid, wedge-headed, reptilian, four-eyed, a bit like a cobra might look if a cobra was humanoid.) "Sovereign. Sovereign again. Uh, let me confer with my team>. Tali, is that one of the nanomachines?"

"Yes. "

"<Okay, that's a Reaper nanomachine. A human using an omni-tool. A fourth picture of Sovereign. A keeper. Uh, never seen something like that, but it looks like a mass relay buried in the ground, business end up>."

"<UNDERSTOOD. THANK YOU. THE CITADEL: WHO OWNS IT>?"

"<It is administrated by the Citadel Council, an appointed executive body responsible for the adjudication and coordination of interstellar issues including but not limited to defence, interstellar law and foreign policy.>"

"<THEN YOU MUST KNOW THIS. THE CITADEL IS IN GRAVE DANGER. HAVE YOU EVER CONSIDERED WHAT THE TRUE PURPOSE OF THE CITADEL IS? A RHETORICAL QUESTION. THERE IS NO WAY YOU WOULD KNOW. THE CITADEL'S NAME IN OUR TIME, HUMAN, WAS 'THE FORTRESS'. AND IT WAS->"

"<The lair of the Reapers>."

"<GOOD. THEN YOU KNOW>."

"<I saw a vision, Vigil. From a beacon. It spoke of a 'Conduit to breach the Fortress', buried on Ilos. I put the pieces together literally just as you spoke>."

"<UNDERSTOOD. I SHALL PLAY THE FULL TEXT OF WARNING FIVE. IT WILL BE SIMPLER THAN A QUESTION-AND-ANSWER SESSION, AND YOU ONLY HAVE EIGHT MINUTES BEFORE YOU MUST SET OFF, ASSUMING YOU WISH TO ARRIVE AS THE CONDUIT RECHARGES>."

•

Listen, O barbarian, O inheritor. Listen to the last words of the Prothean. Listen to the swansong of a dying race. We do not try to leave behind our art, our cultural treasure. If you know to look for that, you will know *where* to look for that. This is a functional, tactical broadcast. This broadcast is not figurative in nature. Listen well. Listen well.

This is one of several messages I recorded before I left and Vigil has selected the correct one to play. You may or may not notice where it has spliced your words for things into my message.

There exists a race of hyperintelligent genocidal weakly godlike entities named slightly fancifully the Reapers. This is their own word for themselves, translated into our language. It is supposed to convey that they *harvest*, for that is what they do. Here is a picture of a Reaper. It looks like a spacefaring vessel, does it not? It is *sentient*, and yet it does not live. To us, that is reason enough to kill it. To you, it may not be: but consider that these entities have more blood on their hands than you can possibly imagine. And they wish to add to that your own.

The galaxy that you found, the galaxy prepared for you, the galaxy carefully empty of superior civilisations, the galaxy carefully filled with just enough clues that the path you tread is physically possible, just enough clues that you are not alone: it is a trap. And the worst part of this trap is that if *this* message is being played, then you have already been caught.

Your technology, from Vigil's scans and interrogation of you, is mostly based on that of the Citadel, the Keepers and the mass relays. As was ours. As was that of those who came before us. As was that of those who came before *them*. We believe, based on the numbers of the Reapers, that there have been over a hundred cycles, each of them spanning just over thirty-two point four thousand orbits of the Citadel around its primary.

For what purpose? Your guess is only slightly worse than mine, for they do not

communicate with us - although we hear tell of a race, long dead, who succeeded. We believe, however, that we are being *farmed*. They set up the galaxy so that we - that you, in your turn - would find it hospitable, open and exploitable; they left a mass-transit system in place to allow easy interstellar travel, they left the Citadel as the obvious hub of the network, they left the lobotomised keeper race as a nonthreatening worked example. Reverse-engineering this technology gives you easy access to certain things that they want you to have, and it kills your innovators: when archaeology is your best source of technology, outstripping by orders of magnitude anything you can make yourself, then there is little room for the inventor. And by the time you are beginning to understand the relays and the Citadel - our beacon network is based on the way the mass relays communicate with one another - the Reapers are already preparing their harvest. And they know exactly what they will find, for they laid our path, the trap carefully baited with our ruins, with the ruins of those who came before, with all evidence of the Reapers themselves carefully sanitised.

The next thing to understand is that the Citadel is itself a relay. It is one-way: it can only receive. When activated, which must be done from close range by a Reaper, it will open and energise: the Reapers will then jump to it directly. At the same time, it will communicate with all of the other relays: they will refuse to accept traffic that does not bear Reaper codes. And then the Reapers will harvest the separated, defeated galaxy at their leisure. But the Citadel has defences, you will say: impenetrable ones. This is true, it does. There are impregnable defences on the Citadel in order that you will not defend it yourselves. But all of the defences go through a single link, and that link is very easily deactivated, and the Reapers will have already converted highly-placed individuals in your society to their cause. Your Council shall fall to treachery, human.

We have attempted several things to win the war, but if this message is being played then they failed and I do not know why. The one that is on this planet is the Conduit. As far as we can tell, it is the only mass-relay ever built by other than the Reapers. It beggared a star-cluster to construct. But it sends to the Citadel Relay. It is far more accurate than the relays that send ships. After I recorded this message, I girded myself with the greatest strength I had and my boon-companions and I entered the Conduit. Maybe we will succeed in reactivating the relays. If the Prothean Empire could gather its strength, concentrate its fleets, perhaps the Reapers could be defeated in detail. This was our plan.

We know the Conduit worked. We do not know why we failed. Warned, perhaps in time, you may succeed where we did not.

I am Khrethak, speaker for Hope, and these are my last words. Heed them.

•

The Mako screams down the tunnel, around the final bend, and into the Conduit chamber. The geth were waiting for us, of course. There's pretty much a solid wall of armatures and lighter units between us and the shining steel blades of the Conduit, pointed straight up, the core between them charged up and spinning brightly.

The Mako shows no sign of slowing down. I bracket the smallest of the armatures around the centre of mass and hit it with a cannon shot powerful enough to blow through its shields entirely. It collapses in place, still an obstacle. "I hope you've got a plan, Wrex!"

"You're supposed to be the ideas man around here!" He pauses just a moment. "Okay. Liara, Shepard, I want the biggest mass-reduce you got, everyone, everything. Inertia till you feel the kick, then both, then release when I say or you'll fry."

I don't waste time arguing, just reach out and feel Liara and Wrex doing the same. Two, one, another shot with the main gun. It must have hit something. And Wrex floors the accelerator and the engine screams and the Mako leaps forward. I believe I probably fired the gun again as I *twist* the mass-reduce field, trying to make us weightless, knowing it's not going to work -

And Wrex fires the landing retros in a burst of flame, and the Mako leaps from the ground, rolling slightly to one side as it goes, and clears the top of the little damaged armature by twenty centimetres.

And he yells to drop the field and Liara screams and puts her hands over her head and I feel like someone dropped me through the floor and I'm still falling and even the non-biotics can feel the gravity gradient here and I have no idea which way is up except that three wheels must have clipped the floor because there's a jolt and I think we're tumbling -

And then something kicks me very hard in the chest and the world dissolves in white.

•

I pull myself back into my seat. One arm of the restraint harness has snapped. "Is everybody all right?" The viewfinder in front of me is whited out completely. We're in freefall, my gut tells me, but my sixth sense would like to disagree. The prickling, burning sensation in my bones, that's biotic feedback, even through my amp's protection.

Wrex holds up an arm with an eloquently extended middle digit. His eyes are shut tight and he's grinding his teeth.

Liara has her head in her hands. "Stable, for now." I can hear the pain in her voice. "I would rather appreciate warning if that were ever to happen to me again. In writing." She hunches her shoulders. "In triplicate."

"What Liara said, *damn*, that stung." Garrus sits back up.

"Don't think we're in Kansas any more, commander." Ashley has a diagnostic up on the tank's systems. "All the sensors are whited-out, and local gravity is flat zero. Not freefall - there's just zero field here, like a ship in FTL, which makes sense. And I regret to inform... you... that that's the last time this tank is flying anywhere. I didn't even know an element zero core *could* melt."

"Say what?" Tali sits bolt upright.

"The core, it... Well, *you* look at this reading."

Tali spits a string of alien, fluid syllables that the translator isn't even going to come near, although I swear she repeated that word three times. She looks down, back up at us. "No. No-no-no-no-no. This is - bad. Very - bad. So bad that we're going to have to - Keelah." She shakes her head. "No core, no catch. The relay has nothing to catch. Ships with core fractures that jump - you know - they don't come home again." She fidgets determinedly with her left glove, as if it itches.

"Oh, come *on*." Garrus pulls up his own omni-tool. "That Prothean sounded like he was gonna walk through the Conduit on foot, there's *no* way this needs a drive core. A normal relay needs an activation signal and sends a massive electrical charge to your core. A normal ship has a reinforced conductive pathway to the drive core, like a lightning rod, and we don't. I'm replaying telemetry of the three seconds before the relay intercept, everything we were recording, and there's no sign at all of electrical discharge. The only distortion is the biotics."

"Self-justification," Tali practically hisses at him. "Confirmation bias. You just made up a theory and went looking for evidence to support it."

"Well, if the alternative is to just sit here saying that we're all going to die-"

"Can it." I swing down from the turret seat to sit in the crew compartment. "Both of you. Garrus, Ashley, I'd like a full diagnostic. When we arrive, I want to know what we have to work with." They nod. Ashley unbuckles herself from her restraint to access a maintenance hatch.

"Tali, *assuming* that the Citadel Relay is going to catch us and somehow by magic make everything okay, I'd like to know how long until that happens and - if you can - where we're going to turn up."

Small voice. "Yes, my captain."

"Lara, how are you coping?" She hasn't moved, still curled into a ball in her seat.

She doesn't look at me. "I do not know how you are moving around, John. Your pain threshold is *lower* than mine. The relay launch was - unpleasant, and our current state is like taking a bath in boiling hot sand. I suspect that the best thing that I can do is prepare myself for the catch, which will be worse."

"Too right." Wrex is speaking through gritted teeth. "You know what's coming, you don't like it, you're gonna run a barrier instinctively. Something you just *do*. Pain? Barrier. Pain? Barrier. You do that during the catch, girlie, you will *fry*. Me, my amp will blow if I screw up. Sure, it'll hurt like a bastard, but it won't kill me. And we got spare shield packs with us and I'm still a half ton of plated ratbastard with a shotgun. But if *you* do it you're as dead as I'd be if I decided to go and [untranslated] a live electrical socket."

"Thank you, Wrex, I *had* joined the dots myself." There's a slight jolt, a change in the gravity field outside, and she pulls in on herself even further. "Ow! Now, that was simply unfair."

"Okay, what just happened?"

"So we're inside a teardrop-shaped bubble with what feels like a turbulent field outside it and then a very sharp gradient, and the gradient decreased sharply and that made everything crunch in on itself. It felt like going over a bump. While lying sunburnt on a bed of nails."

"Because whining, it really helps my... I think that could have been a near-field transition. Guessing at a timestamp of seven minutes forty-five... Garrus, could I have a reading on the diameter of the core of the Conduit? Last time I did this stuff was as an undergraduate, I don't suppose anyone else knows the t'Kore equation off the top of their head?"

Liara takes a hand off her head to pull up her omni-tool and type something in before 'throwing' it to Tali.

"Praise the - curse it, Liara, you memorised the equation in the holographic approximation?"

"If you want another one, feel free to remember it yourself. It was impressed upon *us* that the only time you would ever need to know this equation would be the only time you would ever be separated from extranet access and unable to look it up."

"No, I can do this from here, don't mind me, just thinking that perhaps you people would follow *one* interstellar standard, don't know why I thought they'd break the habit of the ages-

"Are you two *quite* finished?"

"*Sorry.*" There's an audible click as Tali turns off her microphone. She's using one hand on her omni-tool's chordic keyboard and the other hand's fidgeting with her suit bracer.

"Ignore me: pain makes me irritable." Liara uncurls slightly, laces her hands together in front of her, back to back, and the slight glow that surrounds her entirely moves to centre itself on her palms. She whispers to herself quietly in her own language that this, too, shall pass.

•

Pressly stands stiffly to attention in front of the holocom as Admiral Hackett's grizzled face swims into view. "Commander Pressly? Not the face I expected. My aide says the SR-1 has a message for me alone, sent with Spectre authorisation?"

"Yessir. This message from Commander John Shepard for Fifth Fleet Command, sir, eyes only."

"Well, don't leave me in suspense, Commander. We're on exercise right now."

"Sir. Message reads: "Confirm target is Citadel Station. One dreadnought and battlegroup. Citadel defences cannot be relied on."

A muscle works in Hackett's jaw. "I assume you are also informing the Third Legion?"

"I have a similar message for the Council, sir. I don't have direct instant comms for the Third Legion, but we have sent a conventional alert."

"Solid copy, SR-1. You may inform Commander Shepard that his message has been received and understood. "

"Yessir. SR-1 out."

The other call, of course, is the one he's been nerving himself for. Hackett might be a hardass but he's a fair one. Speaking directly to the Council on borrowed Spectre authorisation - not so easy. The face he gets here is an asari.

"Esteemed Spectre, the Council is currently in- oh! Please hold. " The image freezes. A moment later and the face morphs into another one.

"SR-1 Normandy?"

"That's correct. I have a message for-"

"SR-1, you are ordered to cease field operations, effective immediately. By direct authority of the Citadel Council under the Treaty of the Citadel, ratified by your government in the Arcturus Accords and the Constitution of the Systems alliance, you are hereby ordered to return to Citadel Station forthwith pending investigation of your actions by the Citadel Council. John Shepard is further ordered to present himself before any Spectre or Councilmember within five days or face condition of sanction and immediate revocation of Spectre status. Spectre authorisation is hereby withdrawn from the Normandy for any purpose beyond immediate return to Citadel Station. Do you understand, Commander?"

"Yes, ma'am. We intend to comply with your orders to the letter, as does Commander Shepard. In fact, I believe he is at this moment attempting to return to the Citadel by the fastest and most direct means he can, and this ship is currently heading for the local mass relay at maximum safe velocity in order to return to the Citadel. I have a message for the Council from Commander Shepard."

"I'm afraid that's not possible, commander. Please either submit your message via your people's ambassador to the Council or place the name of your private representative upon the waiting list for an audience. "

"Saren and his fleet are less than eight hours out from the Citadel, and we just discovered they mean to hit it today. Please convey that information to anyone you feel like, but Shepard wants the Council to know. SR-1 out."

•

Tali's eventual answer? Seven hours, give or take twenty minutes. Liara pulls up an application on her omni-tool and taps in some numbers before self-administering a dose of painkiller from the tank's medical kit that at least takes the bitter frown off her face, then she opens her omni-tool's reader app and starts in on an impenetrable book about Prothean recreational practices. Wrex warns us off coming near him, puts his helmet on and turns off most of its senses, but refuses to drug himself, something about us not having enough to make a real difference. I get the feeling he's suffering nearly as badly as Liara.

Ashley and Garrus finish work - about the only thing about the tank that's working is life support - and we start in with swapping stories to pass the time. Thing about being an N rating is that stories are something you accumulate, faster than medals and slower than scars, as they say, and Garrus has a surprising number of good ones left, and Ashley is one of these people who's just congenitally irrepressible, but Tali's just getting more and more quiet and withdrawn. She wordlessly prints a little hard plastic pack of playing cards when Garrus expresses a regret that he doesn't have one, and she joins in the subsequent game with the exact minimum of interaction and effort. It's not listlessness so much as self-control, like it's taking more and more effort for her to keep a lid on her fear. And I don't have anything to give her.

And yes, my situation isn't immensely comfortable either. My amp insulates me from the worst of the continuous sting of feedback, but neither the amp response nor the feedback is constant. It's like the pain of a trapped nerve, a continuous coruscating clawed numbing kneading ache leavened with occasional spikes of white-hot pain.

Six hours thirty-five and we recycle the pack of cards back into omni-gel and go over our kit, checking first our own then each other's, checking seating of heat sinks and ammunition blocks, running checks on suit computers and omni-tools.

Six hours forty and I look each one of my team in the eye bar Wrex. "This is it. Saren came this way and I really doubt he will be hard to follow. We know what he's after and we know where that is. We know what might be at stake. Number one priority will be getting those defences back online. Number two, take him down. Kill or capture." Swallow. "And if this is the last thing I get to say? It's been an honour to have served alongside you and an honour to have known you." I close my helmet faceplate. Ashley crosses herself. Garrus finally holsters the pistol he was tweaking and laces his fingers together. Liara closes her eyes very very tight and pushes her clenched fists into her lap. And Wrex takes *his* helmet off.

Six hours forty-two and Tali looks up, looks me in the eye. "I regret nothing." And without further warning, preamble or fanfare, the bottom drops out of the world.

\*

Arcturus Station. The President looks the holographic image of Admiral Hackett in the eye and asks whether he trusts his man. Hackett replies that Commodore Anderson threw his whole damn career away to give Shepard this one chance. And yes, N7s are notorious for sticking together like superglue, but he knows Anderson. Shepard is to be trusted. The President looks down, bites her lip. This is a breach of the Treaty of the Citadel. If the fleet arrives without an invitation and

there *isn't* a galactic emergency, this will bring humanity to the edge of becoming a galactic pariah like the quarians or the batarians. She looks away from the holocom. The expression on the face of the Secretary of State says you'd have to be crazy. The expression on the face of Admiral Jameson says this is a bad idea.

She looks back at Hackett and says yes, and may God help them all.

It takes time to assemble a fleet, even one that's supposedly at a high degree of readiness. The emergency readiness call for the Third Fleet found it wanting: only with assistance from the Fifth could they put together a watertight blockade in the time required. The rest of the Fifth, docked at Arcturus Station or deployed throughout the system on patrol, will be ready within four hours. Hackett, aboard the massive and state-of-the-art dreadnought *Paris*, pages through his lists of figures and readiness estimates and makes the fateful decision: the fleet will deploy piecemeal. They cannot risk the delay. *Washington* and her battlegroup are given the go to jump.

Widow Relay. The vast cigar-shaped station hangs silent and alone in the middle distance, visible to most of the Third Legion pilots as an icon labelling a little point of light hanging like the evening star against the vivid purple of the nebula.

Widow Relay never really spins down. It's the hub of the network, the axle on which the galaxy turns: traffic to, from or past it is the lifeblood of civilisation. But today it is spun all the way up. The little traffic-control buoy reports nothing extraordinary on its way, no flight plans that would require megatons of mass translated to Citadel, no emergency requests that have reached it yet, and so its little virtual-intelligence brain reports an inconsistency which by the time it has reached the centurion of the watch is an alarm. The centurion isn't stupid, but neither is he imaginative: it's probably a fleet movement to do with this week's surprise exercise, warships in a hurry rarely bothering to plan their journey in advance like regular people. He sounds a routine yellow alert across the duty sections of the Third Legion, musing that this deployment would have a chance of being really problematic if that were *really* the incoming aggressor that he flags it as.

He will not live to appreciate the irony of that statement.

On Citadel, Matriarch Tevos has been on edge all morning. The Normandy's warning had seemed to be in genuine earnest. Shepard does things in person and in the light or not at all, she thinks, it's one of the things which makes his work refreshing after bloodless technicians like Bau or clipped no-details agents like Nihlus, so if he's not making a report in person it's because he's genuinely absent. So when she gets a routine report of a yellow alert from the Third, she decides to be better safe than sorry. The true danger here is not the geth at all, something that the Spectre just refuses to see: the danger is terrorists or dissidents, activists or protesters, people who would take advantage of a brief period of chaos to make a statement of their own. Or worse, agents of Saren determined to accomplish his true goals while they are distracted. Such people would be trivially and most importantly *effortlessly* prevented from making some kind of statement to or upon the Council by moving the Council's next session aboard the *Destiny Ascension*. After all, the ship will be perfectly safe: a squadron of the Third Legion and a squadron of the Ascension Fleet should be more than a match for a bunch of stolid, predictable virtual intelligences which haven't fought a real enemy for centuries. And there could be no better security than that provided by the hand-picked and individually vetted crew of the flagship.

The first unauthorised vessel through the Widow Relay is the size of a football. It doesn't even have an engine: one is not strictly required for a relay jump. It has only a little core, to be thrown and caught; a battery, holding just enough power; a sensor package, enough for one ping and response; and one end of a chunk of exotic matter that's nonlocal in a quantum kind of a way, the other end of which is safely aboard the ship that launched it. It does not hear the automated challenge sent by the traffic-control buoy. It sends its ping. It does not hear the strident hail of the turian defence platform belonging to the Third Legion, demanding to know whose radar drone that is. All it hears, twelve seconds later, is the response to its ping. It doesn't even process the data locally. It just squirts it back up the nonlocal communications link to the geth fleetmind, using the last of its power, going dead shortly before receiving a warning that it has thirty seconds to respond or be fired upon as a hazard to shipping.

Twelve seconds after that and space around the relay seems to contort and writhe, gravitational lensing as of many, *many* relay catches incoming. The centurion approves the system's request to upgrade the yellow alert to red, and the thought crosses his mind that whoever designed this particular exercise, the Hierarchy isn't paying them enough. This is damned realistic.

The lighting in the ten-minute ready room goes red. Legion pilots discard training equipment, readers and games of cards and make for their fighters at an orderly pace. It's generally observed that this is one of the better exercises they've seen.

The midsystem patrols pause in their endless game of cat-and-mouse with the Widow system's pernicious and chronic bands of smugglers and come to full alert. Arrow-like turian frigates converge upon one another before initiating insystem jump, following procedure to the letter. Whatever that is that has triggered the alert, it will meet the intimidating face of a turian fleet. The captain of the carrier *Varys* decides that dignity and weight of numbers should carry the day over true military force - a tactically sound deployment would be a deployment out of sight, not a particularly effective intimidation strategy - and orders his battlegroup to deploy onto a dead-straight line between the Citadel and the relay, wall formation.

And the geth come out firing. They jumped simultaneously, providing a thick knot of vessels at a point, and the instant relay catch begins they fire their drives on maximum to drive them in different directions. Every target within six light-seconds of the relay is target-locked and fired upon the moment the weapons will bear. The weapons platforms are heavily armed, but their barriers - like any other barrier projected by a computer - are less effective against a large number of small impacts than against a single large one. Two of the eight platforms are destroyed before the crews have time to give the order to fire. One more has its primary weapon crippled. And of the five remaining, three waste their first salvos on large, heavily shielded decoy ships placed in the centre of the formation specifically for the purpose of drawing fire.

The lights in the chamber onboard the *Destiny Ascension* pulse sickly orange. There is silence for a moment. Then Sparatus moves to adjourn, and the other two are out of their seats and moving towards the bridge before he can press the electronic gavel. On the bridge, the captain rubs her eyes and demands - and receives, instantly - an assurance that this is not a drill. She swallows, and orders battle stations.

The relay continues to spin its electronic heart out, unnoticed.

The *Varys* and her battlegroup come out of FTL into a firestorm. Officers across the ships react as

they've been trained to do, years of training and conditioning kicking in: they don't know what's going on, they don't know what the foe is or why, but they know that it's tagged as hostile on their HUD and it's firing at them, so they're firing back and scrambling fighters as per standing orders even while asking their superiors for further direction.

Matriarch Tevos, who never rose higher in the military than huntress-sergeant, begins to realise that perhaps her assessment of the threat was incorrect. Her musing is interrupted by the deep, heavy *thump* of the *Ascension's* axial cannon firing. Irrelevantly, she remembers approving the budget appropriation for this weapon: the committee were divided upon whether a rapid-firing weapon with a seventy-kiloton yield would ever be tactically required, and the question had been solved by her pointing out that whether or not it was ever *tactically* required, the political statement that the asari could and would outfit their vessels with such weapons was worth almost any budgetary allocation. Looking at the image reporting the complete destruction of one of the large, heavily shielded vessels clearly in a protected position in the geth fleet, she realises that it turned out to have been worth every credit.

And a little to one side of the furious close-in battle, out of the diffraction-limited range of shield-penetrating laser weaponry, another area of space seems to bend, twist and fold. Something is coming through. Something big. The sensor officer on the *Varys* retasks one of the orbiting telescopes to look at it, even as the tactical officer yells to the captain that they have to pull back to a safe distance and the captain outright refuses.

And the *Sovereign* drops back into the space of Einstein and Newton. Fully twice the length of the *Destiny Ascension*, absorbing on every frequency anybody's using as a sensor, visible primarily on gravimetrics and visible-light telescopes, apparently emitting nothing at all. The sensor officer relays a snapshot of the giant vessel to the fleet network; it leaps up in the holo-tank of the *Destiny Ascension* and Tevos closes her eyes silently for a moment. The captain asks what in the benighted hells that ship is. The reply, it is not particularly helpful. "Very convincing."

And the *Varys* is gone. One moment it is there, firing on all cylinders, shields holding steady, a bastion of turian solidity in the centre of the line of battle, and the next it is linked to the *Sovereign* by a line of burning blue-white and then it is in two pieces. The first officer of the *Ascension* shouts into the silence that she wants a yield estimate on that weapon, and she gets back an answer that doesn't have an upper bound. The captain turns to her Councilmember and politely requests that the Council move an emergency resolution to close the arms of the Citadel, to make it invulnerable. The resolution is recorded in the annals of the Citadel as having been passed by unanimous public vote.

But when the automated communication is sent, it is not heeded. A second, manual, communication is sent nearly five seconds later: the operator does not pick up the call. Valern's call to his own aide is unanswered. Tevos turns to look out towards the holographic representation of the battle, fast moving towards the Citadel, and she remembers a report she read, and under her breath she swears creatively, extensively and at length.

Arcturus Relay. The last ship in the *Paris's* battlegroup, the heavy cruiser *Devonshire*, finally aligns into formation after insystem jump. Communication from the dreadnought *Moskva* reports that her group is at least another hour from full readiness. Hackett nods and authorises Commodore Terentyeva to follow as soon as she can. Turns to face the big viewscreen in the CIC and grips the rail. And orders the fleet to jump.

And the signal is sent to the mass relay, and *nothing happens*. The core refuses to spin up. Permission denied. Permission denied. Permission denied.

Hackett's fist crashes down on the rail.

•

There isn't any gravity field here, eighteen metres up within the great wheel-like Presidium, and there's remarkably little air. But the little air there is is enough to foster a blue ionised glow around the twisting knot of space that's bright enough to leave shadows. If there were still the usual crowds of people around on this part of the Presidium, then the bright pulse of UV and gamma would be enough to burn skin and damage retinas. But the people have long since fled.

So there isn't really anyone there to see the Mako, still tumbling, as it screams back into physical space and splashes down hard into the ornamental lake. Inside, well, I'm not really sure what's going on; my entire focus is on suppressing the long-taught instincts to bring up biotic barriers to shield myself against the punishing impact, on ignoring the screaming biotic feedback that feels more than anything else like being tazered in the face. Blackness. I'm hearing things, loud clashing sounds that I can't quite grasp or understand. The world is spinning. The world isn't there.

The blackness recedes, the sounds fade. I'm still clamped into my seat. I've bitten my lip hard enough to draw blood. The taste of it is dragging me back to reality. I hear someone unclip a seat harness. A touch on my right arm, someone knocking a gauntleted fist on my vambrace. I open my eyes. Somehow it hurts to see, to think.

They've got the rear hatch open. Something's wrong about the way Ashley is pulling herself half up and out of it, scanning around with her rifle shouldered. Tali is looking at me; she's the one who touched me. "John? We're alive. It's over. We're down?" She sounds like she doesn't quite believe herself.

I nod, painfully. "Is everyone okay?"

She glances nervously to her right, my left, looking in the direction of Liara and Wrex. "Presidium. Ash and Garrus are securing the crash site. Liara and Wrex are still out. And you? Are you hurt?"

"Feels like someone turned the world on its side and hit me with it. How long?"

"Seconds. Your intuition feels funny because the Mako is at ninety degrees to local gravity."

...and suddenly the world turns the right way up. It's my *seat* that's on its side. "Uhh. Right. I'll get these two up and about. Get some drones flying. I want a plan for getting us to the top of the Presidium Tower."

"Aye, sir." She swings herself up after Ashley with impossible alien grace.

Triage: they're both immobile and unresponsive.

I turn to Liara. She's shivering. Her helmet is on and blanked. I say her name and she doesn't respond.

The helmet release is *here*... I actuate it and the faceplate opens. Her eyes are closed. There's a trickle of violet blood coming from the corner of her left eye. "Liara?"

She groans, opens one eye partway. Croaks something that's probably supposed to be "John?"

"We landed in the Presidium Lake. Probably saved our lives. The tank's balanced on its nose."

"Shoulder. Left. Seat harness. Impact. No barrier." She makes a noise that might be a chuckle. "Aren't I good. Medi-gel. Glue my arm to my side. The painkillers in it will help. Either - nnh. Dislocation or a break." I feel a little experimental biotic pulse from her. "Good. Can fight one-handed, nearly as good as with two."

Wrex still hasn't come round by the time I've finished treating Liara. I have *no* idea how to approach an injured krogan and the only help Liara offers is that krogan are famous for having psychotic episodes triggered by serious injury. I help her up and out of the Mako - Tali's got a gun-drone circling, and Garrus gives Liara a hand down to what was once a picturesque walkway.

Hmm. I pull myself onto the back of the Mako, kneeling for a bit of stability, and reach down. A simple biotic pull. He's a tough bastard - it's unlikely he's broken anything. In fact, it's pretty damn unlikely that he's unconscious in the first place. I lift him, dangling as if in free-fall, the chair coming with, sheathed in the deep blue of my antigravity field as I feather it very slightly to bring him drifting over and down onto the walkway.

It's the moment when I release him that jolts him into wakefulness. He drops less than an inch onto the floor and rebounds to his feet with a roar. There's a moment when he's standing there mad-eyed, a warp field gathering in one hand and an omni-blade in the other, and then he pauses, gathers himself, clenches his teeth and looks around. Uncertainty. But his voice is laconic. "Hnh. The Presidium." That smile, that's forced. It's for our benefit. "I haven't been here since they reclassified my face as a permit-required weapon. Feel like going for a walk, Shepard?"

"You know, I think I do. Tali, what's the weather like?"

"The - oh. Yes. Geth troops at roughly company strength. They're the other side of the Tower where snipers couldn't get at them, not that there are any snipers pointed at them, but they don't know that. They made an explosive entrance to the top of the tower. Our best way is up the outside, I think, on this side, with any fire support you can swing."

"Understood; let's move."

•

And as we start to make our way up the outside of the Tower, above us the battle is only getting worse. The Third, fully engaged by the geth, have to pull out of the path of the *Sovereign* or be destroyed. The *Ascension* and its squadron, pouring continuous fire onto the *Sovereign*, are

beginning to face the conclusion that mass-driver shots big enough to level cities are caroming from its barriers like gentle rain. But the Reaper doesn't even seem to be trying to fire on them. Perhaps they are currently out of its accurate range. But repeatedly, the only things upon which the *Sovereign* has fired have been things that were in the *Sovereign's* way.

The captain of the *Ascension* orders her ship to retreat, or that's how Councilmember Sparatus sees it. If they stay where they are, they will come within the range of point-defence lasers on the geth vessels; kinetic barriers cannot deflect lasers, and the resulting battle of power output versus hull armour is called a knife-fight because nobody wins. She orders the ship to fall back to a range at which they can use their superior kinetic weapons and barriers to pound the geth without fear of retribution, simultaneously a decent tactical move and the only sensible one for a ship carrying VIPs; the turian accuses her of cowardice to her face and she has him summarily removed from the bridge. Consequences can wait until they all live through this.

But even so, she might have left it too late. A swarm of lighter geth ships, mostly frigate and lander class, breaks away from the main line. Perhaps they scent the opportunity to deliver a blow to the enemy fleet. Perhaps they have decoded the asari communications, ordering their own frigates to protect the *Ascension* and the Council at any cost. Perhaps it was that this was always their plan. Regardless, as the *Ascension* begins to spin up its FTL drive for a short jump, the geth swarm around and ahead of it, pinning it in place with the threat of a catastrophic high-energy collision.

And around the mass relay, further vessels begin to drop insystem. The hard-pressed battle line of the Third Legion cry out to the computers of the Citadel to provide identification - the geth are too close and too loud - but in the centralised chambers where the Citadel's own sensors are controlled, there's a desperate battle between geth intruders and asari operators unarmed except for their biotics. The Legion's call goes unanswered.

Until the massive blocky silhouette of the *Washington* comes in and its operators hook immediately up to the local command-control network, the dreadnought and its battlegroup suddenly turning Alliance blue on turian and asari screens. Those human ships that have never engaged the geth for real before, did so yesterday in computer simulations based on frontline tactical reports. The first target for the mass-drivers of the *Washington's* massive axial rack is a genuine geth command-control vessel, little more than a flying server, a link in the chain controlling the fighters pressing the Third Legion: the triple impact breaks the back of the unassuming little vessel and the implications of the correctly targeted shot send ripples through the geth offensive.

And unnoticed, a stealthy frigate arrives from another direction entirely, Joker running the ship as hard as she can go and still stay invisible, falling silently towards the Citadel in a gravity well of its own making.

We make our own entrance back into the Presidium Tower - no way I'm trusting the one the geth made. Tali scans for living people the far side of the wall, finds none, and we use breaching charges: quite aside from husbanding biotic power, I want to give them the wrong impression about our capabilities if I can. Our arrival heralded by the shrieking of life-support alarms, we split up: Liara and Garrus and Ashley to the Council chamber and Wrex and Tali and me following the geth. I have no idea where the Citadel's off switch is, but I've got a damn fine hunch that Saren does.

Of course, the Council chamber's empty. Liara declares that if you're going to break the rules you should break them good and hard, sits in Tevos' seat, and uses her mother's personal access codes and a stored copy of her biometric to get the Council's current location, realises that they're not on the Citadel and breathes a little easier. Ashley has found the communications system - there's a setting here marked 'Normandy', what does this do.

A hologram appears, head-and-shoulders, very surprised. "Pressly?"

"Gunner Williams? Where's Shepard?"

"After Saren, sir. How are things up there?"

"Foxtrotted. The Third are being pushed back and Sovereign's pretty much outright ignoring our fire. We're a little ahead of Sovereign right now - we have line of sight on the Tower but if we pull anything then the big guy will clean our clocks but good. He's headed straight for the top of the Tower. And the geth are trying to cut the Ascension out of its fleet for some reason."

Liara swears and pushes in on the conversation. "Commander Pressly, the *Destiny Ascension* has the Council on board. Quite apart from the good of galactic society, every asari will shed their blood in protecting it to the exclusion of the tactical good they might be able to do assisting the fight. If we want to win this battle, we *need* to save that ship."

"Got you, miss, but what am I supposed to do about it?"

"Am I confused, Commander, or is the Normandy not equipped as a strategic reconnaissance vessel with a direct line to Fifth Fleet command?"

Pressly blinks. "It's not the *Paris* here, it's the *Washington*."

"To whom the *Paris* has a direct link?"

Pause. "Making the call. Use this line if you need to call for fire support or exfil, Williams, but be aware that that support will probably be the last thing we ever do."

"Noted, sir."

•

The corridors are narrow and follow funny angles, built as they are for the stick-thin little six-limbed Keepers. Wrex's shoulders brush the walls; Tali's completely at home. We're following a trail of dead Keepers now. Saren can't be-

We break out into a wider chamber. Hexagonal. I realise we're directly above the Council Chamber. The floor is glass, like the floor of the Council Chamber, and the roof is a lens for the light of the local star. Banks of computers, unfamiliar design, unfamiliar interface. Completely unfamiliar, deliberately so. Of course - all our interfaces are based on the one the Reapers built for us, no sense making things easy. And there's Saren, standing in front of the interface console, his expression dark. The geth units to his side are dead.

"Ah, Shepard. I would say 'we meet at last', but we *have* met. You led me quite a dance, and I imagine the reverse is equally true."

"Give it up, Saren. Your fleet is outnumbered, your geth are mostly destroyed, there's three of us and one of you. Give it up and you'll be the only one who suffers for your crimes."

He cocks his head. "Such a very *turian* thing to say, commander. You sure you aren't a Saratayan in a funny hat? You seem to have their sense for things like 'the appropriate' and 'the proportionate' and 'when to give up'. But I don't think I'll be the only one to suffer, this day or any other." He drops his jaw in a smile. "I'm not mad, Shepard, quite the reverse. That's the issue, you see, that's what they won't understand, that's the problem, your problem as well, if you'd only but see it."

"So explain. Tell me. Talk." I can feel Wrex bristle beside me. I don't have much time before the smouldering krogan explodes and we have a fight in the room with the computers that are our only hope of stopping this.

"I mean, look at it. Go on, look." He gestures upwards. "What do you see?"

I don't even shift my gaze. I don't care if my words are true. "I see your fleet being taken to pieces by the turian Third Legion, the asari Ascension Fleet and the Alliance Fifth Fleet."

"Then look again, Commander. I see the *Reaper. Sovereign*. It's invincible to any force we can deploy. It is one of fifty thousand, Shepard, *fiftythousand*. There are *legions* of them in dark space. I have *seen*. I have been *shown*. And their advance is inevitable. It *cannot* be withstood."

"So why are you here?"

"Weren't you listening, Shepard? *Weren't* you? This is *inevitable*. Our only chance for survival as sentient entities is to assist, to appease. To collaborate."

"And yet it's *your* hand on the switch. Why isn't *Sovereign* down here?"

He snorts. "Gibberish. *Sovereign* is a thousand six hundred metres in-"

"In other words, it *needs* you. It requires *you*. It requires a minion, a catspaw. Without you-"

"We only delay the inevitable."

"Oh, for *fuck's* sake, Saren, where the *hell* is your vaunted honour."

"You've done a pretty good job of removing-"

"Shut up. You asked what did I see. You know what I see, Saren? I see a man - one individual - in a position to be a hero. One man who can stop the Reapers. One man who can make *all this* end. One big damn hero. And it's not me, Saren." He blinks, looks at me properly for the first time. "It's not one of us. It's *you*. You are standing there with your hand on the button, your hand on the one link through which *all* of this flows - the one single point of vulnerability, for us as well as for *Sovereign*, and all you need to do is hold it off long enough for the fleet to kill that bastard."

He hesitates. Clenches his mandibles suddenly tight, as if thinking about this gives him pain.

"It's all down to you. Now, you could oppose me. You could give in. And I'm still prepared to die to stop Sovereign, and so are all of my people, and I think we just might have a fighting chance if you don't have the plates to. But I'm saying don't. Resist, Saren. I know you're scared. Don't give in."

He hesitates. A visible, physical wince.

"Resist and we win. It's as simple as that."

He looks down for a moment. Back up. Nods. He turns and sweeps his hand across the control board, inputting a series of commands. Every motion produces a grunt of pain. Turns back, shaking, fists clenched. His voice is ragged. "There. It's done. I've locked Sovereign out. Can't close the arms, too late, but the - unh. The comms system is deactivated and the Citadel Relay is off. The rest of the relays are open. Now get out of here. Get *me* out of here. Get the remaining geth. Get me -" A wave of what looks like agony knocks him to one knee. "No. No. No. Too- unh. Too late. Make my own way."

He draws the gun strapped to his leg. Wrex goes for him but he's too slow. Saren fires straight down, automatic fire, explosive rounds. The toughened glass of the floor shatters into a million pieces like a broken car window and we fall.

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The orders are clear. All ahead, flank speed. Break off firing on the Reaper and hit the geth. Support the asari. Every captain who gets them can see the odds, can see that today is not going to be a good day. The human battlegroup will be slap-bang between two geth swarms. Nowhere to run, no respite, nowhere to go but straight at them. Nelson won Trafalgar, as any fool knows, he won it by the equivalent of a knife fight, but he died there.

The *Ascension* sees her chance and goes for it. She's built for - well, to be truthful she's built for politics and propaganda and species pride, but she's *good* at artillery. But that said, she's not without other abilities. In one of those moves for which asari ships are rightly famed, she takes advantage of her outsized, oversped, underutilised mass-effect core to ignore momentum for a few seconds and reverse velocity vector entirely, surging suddenly *towards* the geth, the beast at bay turning and showing her fangs.

Her outer decks are evacuated, locked down as if already breached, the largest ship in the fleet suddenly becoming by far the toughest by redefining what it takes for her to be hurt. Power is drained from the ridiculous city-killing main gun to run the overengineered crystals of the point-defence lasers at their maximum rate of fire for the only time in their lives. It's not sustainable - at that rate, her power couplings will combust in minutes - but maybe, just maybe, it will be enough. If the humans commit. If the turians hold.

And the humans do commit. The *Washington* and her pair of escorts are the only ships they hold back - and they are busy, sweeping slowly forward, cycling their big guns to puncture anything careless enough or predictable enough to hit. The frigates hunt server-ships, getting in close to the sluggish, underarmed vessels to use them as cover against their own clients. The cruisers move in

to scatter swarms of little gunships like sharks hunting schooling fish.

And the turians do hold. No matter the losses, no matter the odds, no matter the personal cost. Hardly a ship is lost that fails to go out in a collision with a geth ship. And while the geth are far ahead in fighters, they are well behind in larger craft. The men and women of the Third Legion will write the ode of victory in their blood.

And the bright, wounded *Ascension* and the remains of its escorts punch a ragged hole through the heart of the geth fleet, for just a few crucial minutes more power at a point than the geth can handle, and the geth try to pull back to a range at which the fight will be a bit more even and the cruisers of the Fifth Fleet are the jaws of a steel trap. And the *Ascension* jumps - not a long way, just a little, just enough to put her safely in formation with the human capital ship. And in a signal and historic gesture of trust they trust *Washington* to make up for their damaged fire-control, putting more firepower in the hands of one human than has been the case since humanity abandoned its nuclear deterrents.

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It's a private garden, under the Council Chamber. It's meant to symbolise the home for which each Councilmember stands. But right now, as Saren's fire shatters the Council Chamber's toughened glass floor and ceiling, it's a ruin of falling glass. Liara had just enough warning to wrap herself in a slow-fall field, and lands on her feet. Wrex deliberately plummets, landing with a fist down. I land and roll.

Saren falls like roadkill, nerveless, face down. The splintering crack as he lands makes me wince. Wrex and I both have guns on him as I approach to turn him-

He turns his ruined face to look at me. Splintered exoskeleton grinds. He shouldn't be physically capable of that movement. There's blue light in his eyesockets. Cherenkov glow, like around a biotic field. I pull back fast, choosing a barrier over a warp field as I see Wrex doing the reverse.

*Assuming direct control.* Did I hear that? Was that in my head? Saren - or rather, Saren's body - stands itself up. I'm not great at turian physiology, but those wounds look pretty mortal to me and he isn't even favouring them. I can see the edges of broken plates of carapace grinding over one another, spilling blood that's blue like a lobster's. Liara puts her hand over her mouth and backs away nearly into a wall. Up above, in the Council chamber, I can see Garrus circling carefully and quietly around the edge of the hole in the floor. He's got his pistol drawn, drawing a bead on the back of what used to be Saren's head.

What the hell. Let's try talking to it. "Sovereign, I assume?"

The voice is coming out of the turian's throat, but it's also resounding in my bones, making my amp spike and jitter. "You attract the attention of those infinitely your greater. Your self-destructive defiance is not creative enough to be worthy of preservation. We are your salvation through destruction. We shall do this directly. More of your precious civilisation will survive if you do not intervene. Fighting will not damage us, but it will damage you. In a very real sense, John Shepard, surrender or die."

"Hah. I could tell you the same damn thing. Your allies are disintegrating, your turncoat had a sudden outbreak of honour and sanity, and *I* am between *you* and your *goal*. Will you explain yours-"

One moment it's there and the next it leaps, but Wrex is faster. He sees it raise its right hand and grabs it with his own, not trying to match strength for strength but trusting to leverage and momentum, not trying to warp his opponent but to increase his own mass, redirect the energy of the charge, turn its strength in on itself. As the two of them begin to pivot around, Garrus pulls the trigger, lands a heavy EMP round to the spot at the base of the skull where three exoskeletal plates meet. And Wrex follows that up with an open hand against the back of the thing's head, using its own momentum and his to slam its face into the floor.

A voice, a human voice, from over the still-open holocom in the Council chamber. "Holy... Williams, tell Shepard whatever he just did, keep doing it. Sovereign's kinetic barrier just flickered."

...You mean the big bastard up there just manifested itself in a form that we can punch in the face and it'll do some good? Williams just yells "Again!" loud enough that we can hear it as much as Pressly can. The thing that used to be Saren reverses its left arm and hand, the joints moving backwards, and punches Wrex in the forehead with a shockwave that I can feel from eight feet away. He's physically thrown spinning backwards, convulsively hanging on, the leverage only good for the split-second until it somehow compensates, but that's long enough to hold the thing still enough and Ashley, Garrus and I all fire simultaneously into the shattered ruin of its chest. The light in its eyes fluxes wildly as the anti-synthetic rounds wrap it in a brief bright cage of arc discharge.

Aboard the *Washington* the fire-control officer hears one voice clearly above the hubbub. It's actually coming from the station behind him, fleet communications, and later he cannot remember what it was that possessed him in the heat of the moment to hear Pressly yell "Now!" and give fire-authorisation. And across the eight asari cruisers slaved to the *Destiny Ascension* and aboard the *Ascension* herself, as at the *Washington's* gunnery console, the light pulses red and all of the mass drivers fire simultaneously. And it's true that if that man's aim had been off by so much as half a degree, or if the *Sovereign* had chosen that moment to jink, then the top of the Presidium Tower would have been completely obliterated. But it wasn't and it didn't, and the combined shots land within half a second and twenty metres of one another on the *Sovereign's* pitted night-black hull and there's not the blue-violet ripple of a kinetic barrier impact but the bright white bloom of vaporised matter.

And it doesn't take the captains of the *Destiny Ascension* and the *Washington* more than another two seconds to give the next order. All fire onto the *Sovereign*. All weapons, everything that will bear. Get that thing out of their sky.

But of course, down in the garden of broken glass, we can't see those fireworks. All we see is the demonic blue face of the thing that barely even looks like a person any more, pulling its arm out of Wrex's grip by the simple expedient of allowing him to tear off its hand and leaping - well, it meant to leap straight up, but Liara was waiting for exactly this. For just an instant the gravity in here doesn't point towards the nice traditional 'down' of the artificial system, it's whatever she wants it to be. And as far as *she's* concerned, 'down' is towards that wall over there. Just for an instant. Just enough to cause Saren's body to ascend a crazy curve that spirals straight into one of the

reinforcing struts that once supported the ceiling of the garden and rebound down into the room. It doesn't even wait to land before it retaliates, throwing a concussive pulse that meets her barrier with enough force to shake the walls and fill the air with flying cubes of toughened glass; she's driven to one knee by the force of the impact, coughs blood. I hit the thing when it lands; Ashley gets it in her sights and holds down the trigger; Garrus puts a round through the hole the last one left as it falls and then one through its eye as it stands back up. His heat sink, not made for rapid fire, is starting to overload. This time when it tries to go up it's Wrex who interrupts it, going up *behind* it and hitting its barriers with a concussive impact that sends it spinning one way and Wrex the other. Neither of them lands well, but Wrex doesn't get up again - you know what? My turn. I step up in front of it. It's going to have to go through me to get up there.

And it goes for me right enough, straight at me. I don't know whether it's maddened, confused, distracted or whether it's just decided that it's going to have to kill us all to achieve its objective, but it tries to barrel straight through my barrier and my attempt to throw it off course just ends up throwing us both at the wall - a sudden brainwave I don't have time to articulate to anyone else and I put my strength not into bouncing off the wall but into going *into* it -

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Silence. The sound of a battle being won in space is the same silence as anything else. The fourth shot from the *Destiny Ascension's* main gun penetrates all the way through the incomprehensible workings of the ancient *Sovereign* and into the mass-effect core, the titanic physical shock causing a cascade series of stress-fractures that overload the ship's internal powerplant and burn every one of its systems out in an instant. The ship just simply goes dead and the order is given to cease fire on primary target and go back to mopping up the geth.

It's Liara who gets to the hole in the wall first - Wrex will not regain consciousness for some hours, and the others need to pick their way down over broken glass and rubble. She tries for a wide-focus field, something that will let her lift wreckage aside easily, but she can't manage it - she's light-headed, unsteady on her feet, teetering on the edge of shock, no condition for heavy lifting. And someone glued her arm to her side for some reason. She calls my name and there isn't much of an answer that she can hear.

Ashley's next, dropping down from the floor above into a crouch, keeping the area where the bad guy was last seen covered as she walks up. At least she's got the strength to lift the shards of broken metal to see if either I or the bad guy survived.

We're under the second one she lifts. My barrier's down, which makes Liara wince, but as Ashley goes to turn me over I move, try to push myself to my feet, make it as far as my knees. Saren's body is underneath me, utterly motionless, shattered, broken, pierced, dead, and the glow is gone from his eyes. I meet Liara's eyes and match her broad, relieved smile with the best rendition I can do of a crisp, businesslike nod.

We did it.

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"...And now the interstellar news. Admiral Steven Hackett, commanding officer of the Alliance Fifth Fleet, was today presented with the Star of Thessia, the

asari people's highest honour, in recognition of the Fifth Fleet's heroic rescue of the Destiny Ascension at the Battle of the Citadel. Receiving the award from Councilmember Tevos in person, Admiral Hackett had this to say..."

"...And another thing. On the Citadel, there at the end, with that no-good sonofabitch Saren in my claws, he nudded me in the face hard enough to crack his plates clean across and throw me forty feet through two solid bulkheads. I was six inches from bloodrage, upside down, bleeding in fourteen places and I'd lost my gun. But did I panic? Did I flip the fuck out? Did I forget who I was? No. No, I didn't. I didn't because I knew my krannt had my back. And bugger me if it didn't take John Freakin' Shepard to remind me what that word meant, but it damn well did. And I picked myself back up and Shepard got that cyborg turian bastard's attention long enough for me to kick his quad right into orbit. I have great-grandsonsolder than that little guy, but sometimes, you know, that's what it takes to teach you that you've just been learning to ignore the fact that the world could be way-the-hell better than it is. I left because I got sick of it. And I haven't got any less sick since I came back. But maybe I remembered that if you're sick of something, you don't run. You fight. You kick it in the quad till there's no fight left in it. Then you change the damn world. This dive ain't Rahnport any longer. Who the hell's Rahn, anyway? I don't know, John Shepard don't know and you sure as hell don't know. This is Port Urdnot. And I'm Urdnot Wrex. And if you got a problem? You can put up or damn well shut up."

"...Meanwhile Tali'Zorah nar Rayya, daughter of Admiral Rael'Zorah of the Diaspora, today underwent the Rite of Dedication aboard the vessel Neema after a application deferred by two weeks to assist an alien friend of hers in settling a personal score. As some of my listeners might know, the Neema is the most technically sophisticated ship in the Patrol Fleet: while hardly the springboard for a career in command, the expertise that the newly minted Ms. vas Neema acquired as a consultant aboard the joint human-turian vessel Normandy will be invaluable in the maintenance of her vessel's advanced systems. Asked if this meant that she planned to set aside her research interests for the more traditionally feminine field of core maintenance, Tali'Zorah would comment only that she would not have returned with a pilgrimage gift describing geth advances in artificial-intelligence technology if she did not intend to use it..."

"...And after nearly three months of seclusion, Dr. Liara t'Soni was seen in public for the first time after the death of her mother, the well-loved Benezia of Armali. Typically demure to the point of drabness in personal style, the 103-year-old maiden made quite a splash in this daring offering by human couturier Vorozheva Lihacheva: she would not be drawn on speculation that the sudden change in demeanour and dress was due to the tragic loss of her mother's moderating influence, but this is nevertheless seen as a change for the better: perhaps this maiden's will be a career to watch. She was presenting a paper at the 683rd symposium of the Serrice Archaeological Society, purporting to shed

new light upon the long-debunked 'Prothean Reaper Hypothesis'. According to the paper, which relied a great deal upon data gathered via unverifiable personal connections with a member of the Citadel Council's shadowy Special Tactics and Recon group, the giant vessel dubbed 'Sovereign' that played a pivotal role in the attack on Citadel Station was in fact not of geth manufacture at all. After the break, Professor Zyirel, chair of Prothean Studies at Saratay, will be interviewed on this topic on our sister channel Orion Now... "

"...And while I will certainly allow that aspects of the Sovereign, in particular the aesthetic sense behind the design, were very unlike those used by the geth, that simple fact does not automatically become evidential of a Reaper or Reaper-like civilisation. We know that the galaxy has played host to advanced artificially-intelligent species before: indeed, the early Protheans were coeval with a cybernetic race known as the zha'til, depictions of whose vessels could be consistent with the Sovereign. In short, while long on facts - facts that I do not dispute - the good maiden's paper is somewhat short on cool-headed analysis. It is simply most likely that the geth found and reconditioned an ancient vessel, much as we found and reconditioned the Prothean Citadel..."

"And following the announcement of the addition of one of their number to the honorable ranks of the Spectres, humanity's meteoric rise to fame continues with the vindication this morning of rumours that after less than one generation a human would be sought to receive a seat upon the Citadel Council itself. Dire predictions that armistice with the humans would lead to a situation similar to that of the Krogan Uplift are set forever aside today, as the humans have demonstrated not only their willingness to face death on an ally's behalf but also their ability to reach the standards of skill, prowess and honour to which we all aspire. After the break we chat with the C-sec officer Garrus Vakarian, one of the few people who can genuinely say he has encountered both the best and the worst that the prospective new Council race has to offer, as we ask him what this 'Donnell Udina' can bring to the table that a salarian, asari or turian cannot..."

"...And returning to our main news tonight. The first member of the human race ever to be considered for membership of the Council Spectres, a paramilitary law-enforcement organisation granted extraordinary legal powers in the pursuit of the worst scum of the universe, John Shepard was today officially and permanently confirmed in the rank of Spectre in a ceremony on Arcturus Station. This is only the third time in the history of the organisation that an individual has been so honoured by the Council in a location other than Citadel Station: a native of Arcturus Station, Commander Shepard is believed to have been the one to make the suggestion that the ceremony be performed in Square Mile Park..."

The beautiful woman returns a strand of dark brown hair to its proper place in the universe with a perfect hand. Her expression as she surveys the bank of screens that hang in space before her is

that of the Mona Lisa. Her accent, Australian. "You see? With Udina's appointment to the big table, Humanity will never have been in a stronger position. It's not your first choice of solutions, but that doesn't make it a suboptimal one."

A cigar flares. This voice is deep, confident. A man who feels himself in complete control of every aspect of his life and thoroughly enjoys that feeling. "True enough, my girl, true enough. But it's not Udina who has the weight to put in the right place, not Udina at all. No. It's Commander - Spectre - John Shepard who will be pivotal to our place and our enterprise."

She freezes frame on the turian state news channel as it brings up a picture of the man in question, enlarges the mugshot to three feet across. Handsome, she assesses, but not vain. Confident, but not arrogant. Clever, but not an intellectual. Shrewd, but no politician. And the reports of him in action come together to pin most of the credit on his comrades. A leader, not a follower. An inspiration. A hero. An icon. He's just what they might end up needing. "Our single point of failure."

Another drag on the cigar. It's a good one. Of course, she can't smell it: he's not exactly the kind of man who attends in person where telepresence will do. "Then we'll have to take out some *insurance*, then, won't we."